



a Crane Brothers prequel

A CRANE FAMILY
New Year

JESSICA LEMMON

The image features two champagne flutes filled with bubbly champagne, set against a dark background. Gold streamers are draped around the glasses. The text is overlaid on the image.

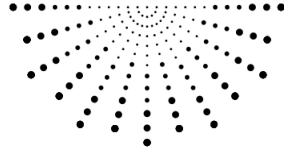
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Published in the United States by Lemmon Ink

ISBN 978-1-963540-00-0

Cover design & concept by Jessica Lemmon

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PRAISE FOR JESSICA LEMMON

“Genuine sizzle.”

— LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Lemmon hits the right emotional buttons with this lavish, indulgence-fueled romance.”

— PUBLISHERS WEEKLY

“Wonderfully entertaining storytelling filled with sharp, sassy banter.”

— RT BOOK REVIEWS ON *THE BILLIONAIRE BACHELOR*

For every reader who begged for more Crane brothers.

This one is for you.

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DEAR READER

I know. I *know*.

For years you've been asking for more Crane brothers and my answer has been the same: The stories were complete with the Billionaire Bad Boys series, including the epilogue I added (*A Crane Family Christmas*) that has been wildly popular among fans. But then something happened...

I picked up *The Bastard Billionaire*, the final full-length book in that series, and read it again for the first time in *years*. As I read, I fell in love with the Crane version of Chicago once again. I remembered just how much I adore this family, and completely related to those of you who were asking for more! But for me the story is done when the romance is solidified. A full book on their lives post-marriage or engagement didn't feel authentic.

However...

Chloe Andrews had an incomplete story.

Suddenly, I wanted more for her. I'd never intended to write a book about Isabella's plucky friend, but as I continued reading, an idea hatched. There might not be any more Chicago Crane brothers...but what if they had *cousins*?

Yes, please!

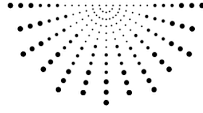
For those of you who are new to the Crane world, welcome. I cannot wait for you to meet these wealthy, sexy heroes, and the tough, kind, down-to-earth women who can handle every bit of them.

For those of you who have returned, a heartfelt *thank you* for continuing to ask for more. Without you, reader, I wouldn't bother writing. *You* are the heartbeat that has kept these stories alive for years after they've been written. I owe you big time for that.

Huge billionaire hugs,

Jessica

CHAPTER ONE



12 HOURS 'TIL MIDNIGHT

Zander Crane stepped out of a rented sleek black Mercedes and onto the curb, head tipping back to take in the luxury warehouse before him. Located in the heart of Chicago, the building was offset by neighboring houses as well as an old cathedral. Inside the structure were his cousin Eli, Eli's wife Isabella, and their baby boy, Aric.

Zander had yet to meet Eli and Isa's son, but he had been in touch with his cousins—call it a long-overdue reunion. Just two days ago, he'd been out with the lot of them: Eli and Isa, Tag and Rachel, and Reese and Merina. It'd been good for his soul to visit with his Chicago relatives.

The move from London was necessary but disorienting. Zander hadn't intended on ever leaving London, but neither had he intended on many things that had happened in the last few years. He was more than ready to leave the past behind and make a go of this city, no matter how foreign it'd become since he'd left it as a young boy.

Returning had been less like coming home and more like landing on a planet that felt familiar but was one he didn't

have a lot of memories of. He'd only known that he'd needed a change. Chicago was the start of that ball rolling.

He straightened his cuff beneath his black wool coat and buzzed at the gate to be let in. The lock disengaged a moment later, and Zander swung the gate inward to enter the property. The building, Eli had told him, had been an old machine shop before it'd been completely renovated into a home. The former concrete parking lot had been recently overhauled. In the spring months, the grass would be green and the small, raised garden beds would be sprouting with flowers and vegetables. Three large sliding doors had been installed on the lower level, enclosing a massive garage.

Zander climbed aboard a creaky factory-style elevator, punched a button, and began his rattling ascent to the house. The heavy metal door slid aside before he could open it.

"Zander." Eli, hand extended, welcomed him into the house. Isa was behind him, a baby in her arms and a tired smile on her face.

"Sorry about the curb parking," she said. "Until we have the driveway poured, there isn't a great parking option."

"No worries. I'm right across the street." Zander looked around the warehouse, which was inexplicably cozy. Exposed brick walls, concrete floors with homey rugs here and there, and a huge slab of wood that acted as a dining room table. Around that table were mismatched chairs, each upholstered in a different style of fabric. The vibe was reminiscent of the pubs back home.

The ache in his heart was less pronounced than he might have expected. When he thought of London, he thought of Emily. She'd passed last year, in February. Since then, London had felt less and less like home. Immediately after she'd died,

the city had seemed like one big cemetery; lately it felt more like an island perched on the River Thames.

“Nice place. It’s incredibly unique. Filled with personality.”

“It’s home,” Eli said simply. “Can I offer you a cup of coffee?”

“Sure. Black.” Zander had never taken to tea despite living in London for the majority of his life. And despite living with a very proper British woman for over five years, his accent was dominantly American.

Eli walked to the kitchen, separated by a half wall. A Marine, Zander’s cousin had been honorably discharged after an accident caused him to lose his right leg. Watching him walk, one would never know that Eli had a prosthetic from the knee down beneath his jeans. He moved like it was a part of him.

Loss was another thing the Crane men had in common. All of them had been touched by loss in one form or another. The Chicago Cranes seemed to have arrived at a place of peace. Each of them was happily married—their unions ushered in by fate, by the sound of their stories, and they’d told some good ones the other night.

“Great to see you again.” Isa kept her voice low so as not to wake the sleeping bundle in her arms, and Zander leaned down to receive her offered kiss to the cheek. Isabella Sawyer-Crane was a beautiful woman with long, dark hair that fell over her shoulders, a wide, generous mouth, and deep chocolate-colored eyes. Her baby boy had a shock of dark hair, taking after both mother and father.

“Hi, Aric. I’m your cousin Zander.” He gently stroked the baby’s fist. “Blue eyes or brown?”

“Brown. I’m the dominant one.”

“She can say that again.” Eli handed over Zander’s coffee and then set another mug on the table. “I brought you a creamed cup, Sable.” He divested his wife of their son, and Isa wasted no time scooping up the mug as if it were a lifeline. She sipped, hummed, and focused caffeine-drunk eyes on Zander.

“I am *so* excited you’re attending the party tonight.” She grinned. “Is Jaylyn coming?”

“She is.” Zander’s younger, and only, sister had come to town for the holiday and was in no hurry to leave. Small as it was, he didn’t mind her being in his apartment—he liked having company. The space was a temporary living situation until he decided which part of Chicago he’d like to settle down in. His cousin Reese owned a stately mansion—where the New Year’s Eve party would be held tonight. Tag had chosen a penthouse in Crane Tower—which he owned. Eli’s warehouse was less traditional, but Zander liked it. As a man who owned a lot of framed art—all of which was in storage at the moment—Zander coveted this amount of wall space.

“I can’t wait to see her again,” Isa said. “We should get together for more than weddings and funerals.”

At the mention of Uncle Alex’s wedding to Rhona, and Zander’s wife’s funeral, he automatically smiled so that Isa wouldn’t feel the need to—

“I’m sorry.” She winced, right on cue. “I’m sleep-deprived. It’s my only excuse.”

“Honestly, it’s fine.” He touched her shoulder. “You are allowed to bring up Emily whenever you like.”

“Thank you. I would have liked to meet her.”

Emily had been very sick when Zander had flown to the private island wedding ceremony for Alex and Rhona, but she’d encouraged him to attend. *Family is of paramount importance*, she’d told him. Only after she’d threatened to come with him if he didn’t RSVP “yes” had he agreed to go. He’d flown in and back out again on the same day rather than stay the night. Now that Emily was gone, he saw that she’d been right. Family *was* of paramount importance. He was grateful for the revived connection with his uncle and cousins.

Isa’s smile returned. “Well, it’s too bad your brothers aren’t going to be there tonight, though I understand. It’s quite a trek to make from either side of the country for one night. I’m sure their lives are plenty busy.”

“They’ll be around soon enough.” Dante was currently in LA, and Brody was living in New York. Isa wasn’t wrong—they stayed busy.

Eli returned from the back of the house, arms empty, and poured himself a cup of coffee. “He’s down. Thank God.” He scrubbed a hand over his facial hair. “Babies don’t sleep, by the way.”

“So I’ve heard.” Zander offered a stiff smile, the talk of babies reminding him of Emily. She’d wanted to have two children: a boy and a girl. She’d wanted to have a lot of things. In the end, she’d passed too soon and had had none of them.

At times, he felt healed. At other times, like tonight, bitterness curled up next to him and reminded him that life hadn’t shaken out the way he’d anticipated.

“Oh! The reason you’re here.” Isa set down her mug. “Be right back.”

“How’s the new place?” Eli asked as his wife tiptoed down the hallway.

“Small.”

Eli chuckled. “Crane Hotel is always an option. Reese made a suite his home away from home for a while.”

“No, thanks. I am looking forward to curating art for Crane Hotels, but living in one is far too impersonal.”

“So was Reese at the time,” Eli deadpanned. “He and Merina are excited that you’re coming tonight. They’ve got the mansion decked out.”

“Will there be a midnight yacht ride?” Zander joked.

“I wouldn’t put it past him, but even with all his resources, my older brother can’t thaw Lake Michigan. No matter how cool of a party trick that’d be.”

Zander cleared his throat, forcing himself to ask, “Do you know if there will be any single women at the party?”

Eli’s eyebrows lifted, likely in surprise. Everyone seemed to have an internal timeline as to when Zander should begin dating again. “Uh, probably. Likely. Merina invited a lot of associates and acquaintances.”

Zander felt his jaw clench. He didn’t particularly want to kiss a woman at midnight, but he’d promised Emily that he would. He had refused to leave his house last New Year’s Eve. Instead, he’d sipped whisky, stoked a fireplace fire, and, in an inelegant moment of grief, loudly cursed her out for asking him to do such a thing.

It was the only promise she'd asked him to make, and at the time he'd been angry with her for making him make it. Now, he didn't feel angry. More...accepting. Progress, he supposed.

"One bowtie, as promised." Isa emerged from the corridor and handed over the strip of silk.

"Thank you. I found the tux, no problem. Where the bowtie went is beyond me. I could have purchased one, but—"

"Don't be silly. Eli has several, and going shopping on New Year's Eve sounds like a nightmare."

"Going shopping, period," Eli grumbled. Isa set a kiss on the corner of his mouth and then lifted her coffee mug again.

"Agreed," Zander said. Tonight would present enough challenges without making what he was wearing one of them.



THIS WASN'T the first time Chloe Andrews had been invited to Isa and Eli's warehouse abode, but it was the first time she'd been asked to park on the street. Isa had mentioned a cracked foundation, and mud. Chloe had assured her that walking to the warehouse elevator from the gate was well within her skill set.

A few years ago, when Isa had been acting as personal assistant to Eli "Cranky Crane," Chloe would have sworn she'd *never* personally set foot into his lair. Since then, things had changed. Cranky Crane had developed a huge soft spot for Isabella Sawyer. They'd fallen in love and had since gotten married and had a baby, for goodness' sake. Chloe could

hardly believe that her best friend-slash-associate had found love with a billionaire. Some girls had all the luck.

Not that Chloe was holding out for a billionaire. The Cranes were resident royalty, and each of the brothers had been claimed—even their father, Alex, had remarried.

Since Chloe had taken the senior management position at Sable Concierge—Isa’s company—she’d been promoted again to president. That she was president of a company was mind-blowing, and she enjoyed the pay bump. She might not be earning *billions*, but she’d done okay for herself *and* had scored Isabella’s coveted apartment above the main office.

She maneuvered down the street, looking for a place to park, and considered that as well as everything was going, her life wasn’t perfect. As much as she loved her friends and her job, she had been lonely for a while. Not that she was in a rush to get married or have a baby, but she’d settle for an end to haphazardly dating on and off like she had been for the last three years.

As of this afternoon, she might as well slot herself into the “lost cause” category. She’d officially blown it. And was here to confess. She’d only told Isa that she was stopping by but hadn’t explained why.

Now Chloe had to face her friend and admit the reason she was here, which boiled down to her being a big ole chicken. *Bok! Bok!*

As luck would have it—at least she still had some—a shiny black Mercedes with tinted windows pulled away from the curb just in time for her to take the primo parking place across the street from the warehouse. At least she wouldn’t have to hoof it a block. On the drive over, the wind had picked up. It was freezing outside.

She zipped her puffer coat up to her chin and pulled the dress bag from the backseat of her green Smart car. By the time the warehouse elevator door slid open, her face was red from windburn—damn her fair skin—and her teeth were chattering.

Eli, who'd opened the door to greet her, frowned. "You should have pulled in through the gate anyway."

"Tell me you have coffee, and all will be forgiven."

"I have coffee." He smiled, the handsome bastard. Dark hair, blue eyes, enough scruff to make him appear dangerous. Not to mention tall and built like a brick shithouse. He kissed Chloe's frozen cheek.

"Hey, Chlo." Isa was in the kitchen, washing a mug in the sink. Aric must have been sleeping. Isa's voice was barely above a whisper.

"Hello to you, Momma."

Isa's eyes went to the dress bag over Chloe's arm, and she frowned. "By the way you just missed—"

"Breakfast," Eli muttered, sending his wife a stern look.

"I ate, but thanks." It was Chloe's turn to frown. What that exchange had been about, she had no idea. She draped the garment bag onto the back of one of the dining room chairs. "Thanks for the dress loan. Sadly, I won't be needing it tonight."

"Why? What happened?" Concern etched onto her face, Isa scurried over while drying her hands on a dishtowel. Eli followed behind her with a cup of steaming coffee.

"I chickened out." Chloe cupped the mug with both hands, warming her fingers. "It's as simple as that."

“Tell me.” Isa sagged into the chair next to Chloe’s, her shoulders slumped as she accepted what Chloe had already known: she was totally a lost cause.

After a delicious sip of hot coffee, Chloe explained, “I’ve dated a lot, and most of the time the guy is not what he seems. Right now, Hopper Fan Zero Two is perfect in my DMs. What if I meet him in person and he’s...not.” She made a face.

“So you told him no.”

“Worse. I didn’t answer him.” Ghosting someone, even an acquaintance, was so not her go-to move.

“Then there’s still time!” Isa sat up straight, invigorated by the idea of salvaging the evening. Eli busied himself in the kitchen, giving them privacy. Such a good guy. “Meeting a mysterious man on New Year’s Eve is romantic.”

“Or it could be the start of a horror movie,” Eli muttered, proving that he was listening after all.

Chloe couldn’t help laughing. He wasn’t wrong.

“Can I at least see the message thread?” Isa held out a hand for Chloe’s phone.

“No. I love you, but I’m not showing you.”

Isa pouted, which only served to make her more beautiful. Chloe, by contrast, was less exotic *va-va-voom* and more... cute. Plucky, in that best-friend-in-a-rom-com kind of way.

“Please?” Isa, hands folded in prayer pose, begged.

Chloe twisted her lips, reconsidering. Then she opened her phone and showed Isa the messages from three days ago.

HOPPERFAN02: MEET ME FOR A NEW YEAR’S EVE PARTY.

CURLYQSUE: YOU WANT TO MEET ME?

HOPPERFAN02: I WANT TO MEET THE WOMAN BEHIND THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF MY FAVORITE CITY AND POSSIBLY GIVE HER A KISS AT MIDNIGHT.

When she was done reading the exchange, Isa needlessly asked, “And you said *nothing*?”

“What was I supposed to say?”

“Um, how about ‘yes, please kiss me at midnight’?”

“What if he’s a toad?” Eli reentered the room and leaned on a chairback at the head of the table. “Or looks like Quasimodo.”

Isa *harrumphed* and waved her hand at him.

“I’m not worried about his looks,” Chloe said honestly. She’d made a friend in Hopper Fan over the last three months, though this was the first time he’d mentioned kissing her. “I’m not sure I want to shatter the illusion. We’ve shared a lot of personal things on that app.”

Eli grimaced.

“Not *photos*,” Chloe amended. “Likes, dislikes, art, childhood stories. That sort of thing. We have a special relationship without complicating it.” She wasn’t averse to kissing a man or doing more with him if the need arose. It was the idea of kissing *this* man, who knew her in an intimate way, that freaked her out.

“Thanks anyway for the dress loan.” Chloe took another quick sip of her coffee. “I should go. I have an exciting day of old movies and laundry ahead of me.”

“I am not letting you spend New Year’s Eve doing laundry and sipping champagne alone.” Isa folded her arms over her breasts in defiance.

“Isa—”

“Reese and Merina are throwing a party at the mansion. Come with us.”

“No, no. I am not crashing your date night. You finally have a night away from sweet baby Aric, and you should enjoy yourself.”

“You won’t stop us from enjoying ourselves,” Eli rumbled. “Come with us.”

“Champagne and caviar.” Isa swept her hand across the room as if painting the picture. “And maybe if you’re lucky, a kiss from an anonymous, handsome stranger at midnight. One who doesn’t know your online persona.”

“No matchmaking,” Eli warned Isa.

“I agree with him. You set me up with three different guys last year and none of them panned out.”

“But—”

“Leave it.” Eli kissed the top of Isa’s head and then leveled his gaze at Chloe. “No midnight kisses required. You’re invited, no strings. We’ll pick you up at eight.”

Chloe touched the dress bag on the chair next to hers. “It really is a beautiful dress.”

“I can’t fit into it since gaining my pregnancy pounds.” Isa shrugged. “It’ll go to waste if you don’t wear it tonight.”

“You look amazing with pregnancy pounds.” Chloe smiled.

“Agree,” came Eli’s approving growl.

Isa shot her husband a saucy grin and then squeezed Chloe’s fingers in hers. “Say yes, Chlo. You deserve a night of

fun.”

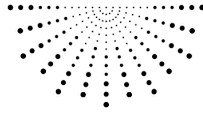
How could Chloe refuse them? She didn't particularly *want* to spend the evening home alone and doing laundry. Plus, she'd never been to Reese and Merina Crane's mansion on the water.

“She's thinking about it,” Isa sang.

Chloe sighed. “Okay. Sure. Why not?”

“Yay!” Isa hugged her friend's neck. Over his wife's shoulder, Eli nodded his approval.

CHAPTER TWO



Zander's sister, Jaylyn, propped one black army boot onto the dashboard of his rented Mercedes and retied the laces. When she didn't move her foot to the floor right away, he scolded her with, "Boot."

With an eye roll he could feel in the center of his ribcage, she dropped her foot to the floorboard. At least she swiped away any dirt that might've transferred to the front of the glove compartment.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome," his little sister said with a surprising lack of sarcasm.

He swallowed a smile at Jaylyn's antics. She was younger than him by eleven years, the unexpected addition to their nontraditional family tree, behind Dante. Each time Zander thought he'd have no more siblings, Dad had announced that his current girlfriend was pregnant with another. The order was: Zander Crane, age thirty-six as of a week ago—on Christmas Day—Brody Crane, age thirty, Dante Crane, twenty-eight, and Jaylyn was twenty-five.

So far, Zander had been the only one of Octavius "O" Crane's four kids to marry, and he'd done that at the ripe old age of twenty-nine. Brody, Dante, and Jaylyn had been in and

out of relationships over the years, none of them having reached the point of “serious.”

His siblings were a lot like their father. O tended to follow his heart, which seemed to have been diagnosed with ADHD. Their dad announced a new love with every full moon. The women he'd had children with were as nontraditional as O about parenting, but it hadn't stopped them from being a family. Each of them saw their mothers, some more often than others, and whenever O had been single, he'd invited all four women over for a Christmas celebration at his chalet in Switzerland.

Somehow, they'd made it work.

“Thank you for coming with me tonight.” At the mouth of Reese Crane's gated driveway, Zander put down his window to show his credentials to the guard. As the glass slid back up, he faced Jaylyn, who was no longer acting or looking like a rebellious, petulant teenager. She arranged her long, sequined black skirt on her lap and then peered up at him through dark brown eyes.

“Even though your original plan didn't work out for tonight, you're going to have to keep your promise to Emily. You skipped a year already. I won't let you do it again.”

“Jay—”

“Look, we both know she's not *actually* checking in on you. This isn't about her so much as it is about you taking a step toward what you want. You are a relationship guy. Going nearly two years without a relationship has been hard on you. We can all see it.”

“I wasn't ready.” He mumbled the half-truth. He hadn't been ready last year at this time, but as of a few months ago,

that had changed. He missed his late wife and always would, but he liked spending time with a partner. He'd been confident that asking out the woman he'd met online would earn him a yes. He hadn't been prepared for rejection—or no answer at all.

He'd blown it by mentioning the kiss. He hadn't gone on a first date in over seven years—sue him for being rusty.

“I love you.” Jaylyn grabbed his free hand in both of hers.

“Love you too.” He sent her a half-smile. It had never mattered that his siblings were half-siblings. They might be scattered geographically, but they were always in each other's hearts and on each other's minds. They came together when it mattered. He'd had so much support from them since Emily had passed, it had been humbling. Right after she died, Brody moved from New York to London for six months to be nearer to Zander, and while on a deadline for his debut book. Dante and Jaylyn hadn't been far behind him.

“Thank you.” He flipped his palm over and kissed the top of one of his sister's hands.

In her sequined gown, coal-black eyeliner, her dark hair pulled up into an elegant twist, she was both beautiful and beguiling. She'd designed the chunky ring on her index finger: a gold and platinum skull wearing a crown, with diamonds for eyes. Add in the combat boots and the moon-and-stars tattoo tucked behind her left ear, and anyone could see that Jaylyn Crane was more gypsy than socialite. As young as she was, she was tough and strong-willed. Her brothers looked out for her, protected her, but also respected her. They never used her age against her. She was an old soul who knew what she knew, and that was more than most.

“I know your internet girlfriend didn't work out—”

“She’s not my girlfriend.” He heard the petulance in his own voice.

“All I’m saying is that you shouldn’t be too fast to dismiss magic if you see it tonight. New Year’s Eve is special.”

“So says your coven?” he teased.

She laughed, accustomed to the witchy references by now.

“I’m not dismissing anything. I’m on a mission. Duty-bound.”

Jaylyn clucked her tongue. “You and I both know why Emily told you to kiss someone else after she died, and it wasn’t so you’d be ‘duty-bound.’”

True. Emily had made him promise because she’d known him through and through. Zander was a loyal and loving husband. He was also a stoic, bordering on rigid man. He made decisions quickly and finished what he started. When Emily got sick, his world had been flipped onto its head. There’d been no plan for what they’d been facing, and so he’d made one.

He’d hated the prognosis almost as much as the open-ended timeline. The doctor gave her “four to six months.” She’d lived eight. Zander had drafted timelines for four months and for six months, but nothing had prepared him for the extra two months. He’d been eternally grateful for the gift of time, and yet each day had been like the swinging of a pendulum. At night he’d lain awake and wondered when it would lose momentum and stop swinging altogether.

“I heard that Reese and Merina stocked this party with lots of snobby rich folks.” Jaylyn’s lips twisted. “I hope it’s not dull.”

“Stocked? It’s a party, not a koi pond.”

“Well, there had better be a cute guy in there for me to flirt with, or else I’m leaving.” She climbed out of the car and slammed the passenger door shut.

On a sigh, he followed, bracing against the sharp wind lifting off the surface of frigid Lake Michigan. He palmed the valet his keys and jogged to catch up to his sister.

“Holy shit,” she said as he offered his arm. “This is the biggest fucking house I’ve ever seen.”

Zander allowed himself to smile rather than remind her of manners. His sister’s colorful language was nothing new, and he was her brother, not her father. Not that O would have scolded her either.

They walked around a fountain, empty, since water would turn to ice in this weather, and then paced up a stone walkway littered with salt to prevent freezing.

“It’s a beautiful house, though. I could see myself staying in this town for longer than a few weeks.” Jaylyn found beauty in a lot of places. She’d lived in Italy, Spain the year before that, and, after a brief stint in London, had squatted in Brody’s New York penthouse for a while. The evening she’d arrived in Chicago to visit Zander, she’d been talking about moving again.

Zander and wanderlust weren’t acquainted. He liked predictability. It was rare to count on...well, much of anything. He supposed that in and of itself was something to count on. Ironically.

An aggressive breeze caused them to quicken their steps to an enormous red front door, which was opened by a formal butler wearing pristine white gloves.

“Rich people, am I right?” Jaylyn snorted as she stepped inside ahead of him. Zander offered the butler a nod of apology, but the other man’s rigid upper lip didn’t so much as twitch.

“Takes one to know one,” he muttered to Jaylyn as he followed her inside. Her pointing out that their cousins were rich was the epitome of the pot calling the kettle black. Octavius Crane’s children might not be running a hotel chain that spanned the globe, but none of them had worried about money growing up, or now.

Zander handed off his long, black wool coat to the coat check attendant. Jaylyn followed suit and then began fussing over Zander’s bowtie for the fourth time tonight. Well, *Eli’s* bowtie.

He wondered if Eli and Isabella had arrived yet...



ISABELLA WAS at least four inches taller than Chloe, which made Chloe wonder just how short her loaner dress would have been if Isa had worn it instead.

Tugging on the hemline as she walked next to Isa and Eli, Chloe considered, and not for the first time, keeping her coat on tonight. The puffer jacket was far from appropriate for a swanky Crane party but would at least keep her from accidentally flashing unsuspecting guests.

She gaped at the Crane mansion as she stepped carefully along the stone path. *Opulence* was the only word that sprang to mind. Reese and Merina’s home was massive, with a fountain out front and a cobblestone driveway. It wasn’t hard to imagine colorful flowers in the gardens and the adjacent

fountain bubbling and splashing happily in the summer sunshine.

The porch was adorned with pine garland—real, from the looks of it—and fat red and gold bows. Each window lining the front of the house glowed warm yellow thanks to battery-operated candles perched inside on the sills.

They checked their coats—Chloe had lost the argument to hide beneath it with Isa on the ride over—and then Eli, Chloe and Isa on each of his arms, led them into the formal dining room off the foyer. The room was large and ornately decorated in gold and silver, a pair of doors leading into another room where a band played fancy-party-appropriate music.

Twenty-five to thirty guests mingled in this room alone, not enough to congest the space. No, rather than bodies, the room was choked with the air of money. Chloe could practically smell it.

“Bro!” The loud bellow came from Tag Crane, youngest of the Crane crew. He hadn’t changed much since Chloe had first met him. Towering at six-five, caramel-colored hair down to nearly his elbows, he was impossible to miss. He grinned around a neatly trimmed beard and then enveloped Isa in a bear hug. “Hey, sis.”

Isa’s “hello” was muffled as she embraced her brother-in-law.

“You are too refined for my grouchy brother,” Tag concluded. “How’s my nephew?”

“Sleeping better than he was last week. And he’s home with a sitter, which makes me feel like I should be home with him instead of here.” Isa offered a guilty-mom smile.

Tag leaned in, a twinkle in his eye. “You gotta let ’em go sometime, Cap’n.” When his blue gaze landed on Chloe, she clenched her knees together so that she didn’t lose strength in them. He was married but also charming, tall, and gorgeous. His potency was undeniable.

“You remember my friend, Chloe,” Isa introduced. “*President of Sable Concierge.*”

“President. Damn.” Tag’s brows rose.

“I do what I’ve always done.” Chloe offered a headshake of humility.

“And of course I remember Chloe. She can put tequila away like a champ.” He leaned in and brushed her cheek with a soft, bearded kiss. “You look beautiful in silver. Where have you been hiding those legs?”

Chloe felt her cheeks grow warm. She opened her mouth to explain that the dress was borrowed when Tag’s wife joined their little circle.

“Ignore him.” Rachel looped her arm around his muscular biceps. “He’s incorrigible, and it’s worsening with age.”

“I’m not wrong. Look at her.” He gestured to Chloe.

Rachel sized her up. “He’s *not* wrong. You look stunning, Chlo.”

“It’s Isa’s dress, and it’s terribly short.”

“It’s perfect, and you clearly have the body to wear it.” Rachel traded Tag’s arm for Chloe’s and, like her husband had a moment ago, pressed a kiss to Chloe’s cheek. “I love your hair like this. All those luscious waves. Hell, *I* might kiss you at midnight.”

“I get the first kiss from you, Dimples,” Tag stated, one eyebrow high on his forehead. “She can have the one after that.”

Chloe laughed. They were too much. She’d become more acquainted with Rachel and Merina over the last year. Isa had included Chloe in a few girls’ nights out. The other two ladies hadn’t *quite* made it onto a text loop on her phone, but it was nice to know that Rachel had accepted her.

“I will take all the kisses I can steal since I won’t be drinking.” Rachel smoothed her hand over her very round, pregnant belly. Tag and Rachel were expecting their first. “Two weeks to go.”

“I’m so excited!” Isa clapped her hands, her gold dress shimmering in the warm chandelier lighting. True to her style, she had worn a form-fitting dress that hugged each one of her hairpin-turn curves. Chloe’s loaner dress was a sheath with long sleeves and a billion sparkling crystal beads.

Come to think of it, the dress Chloe wore was suspiciously her size and *not* Isa’s style. Hmm.

“I can’t wait to meet my kid,” Tag said with a hey-dude, surfer-style grin. “She’s gonna be gorgeous like her mom.”

“Like her dad.” Rachel accepted a lengthy kiss from him, her cheeks glowing despite the lack of alcohol.

A waiter swept by with a tray of pink champagne. Chloe plucked a crystal flute and said “cheers” before drinking half of it down. Easing into a party like this one was going to require a bit of fortification.

“It’s understandable that you’re nervous,” Rachel told Chloe. “Reese Crane seems intimidating and, before I knew

Merina, so did she. Put them together in this incredibly stunning monstrosity of a house, and *yikes*.”

Rachel and Chloe had talked about growing up in middle-class families. Their upbringings had been modest, and their allowances a far cry from the billion-dollar bankroll the Cranes enjoyed.

Isa had been raised by the founders of Sawyer Financial Group, so she hadn't exactly struggled. Chloe didn't know how Merina was raised, but the other woman did own the Van Heusen Hotel, a landmark in downtown Chicago, which was impressive on any resume.

“Chloe's not nervous.” Isa waved a hand of dismissal. “She is a vivacious, bubbly redhead who livens up any party.”

Chloe snorted. “Lay it on thick.”

“Okay.” Isa smiled in challenge and then announced, “And she will *require* a kiss at midnight.”

“I assume by someone other than me?” Rachel asked.

“You're spoken for,” Isa answered.

“Let's see...” Rachel tapped the corner of her mouth with one finger as she assessed the well-dressed crowd. “Whose lips are available this evening?”

“I do not *require* a kiss at midnight,” Chloe interjected.

“Ignore her. She's just upset because she ghosted her internet crush,” Isa said, rattling Chloe out.

“You have an internet crush?” Rachel's eyes rounded with interest.

“Isa. I swear—”

“Rachel is a safe space,” Isa insisted as Rachel stepped closer. “I’ll tell you what I know, but I will warn you it isn’t much...”

Chloe drank down the remaining champagne and slid away from the group. Eli and Tag were deep in conversation, so her getaway was clean. She was going to need more than that wimpy pour of wine to get her through tonight—especially if Isa was bent on matchmaking.

She crossed the room and set her glass on an empty tray. When she turned around, two full glasses of pink champagne materialized in front of her. The waitstaff here was truly second to none.

“Perfect timing, thank you so much.” Chloe snagged one of the glasses of bubbly and swallowed down a hearty gulp. As the bubbles tickled her throat, she sighed in relief. Maybe she would find a handsome stranger to kiss tonight. Maybe she should let Isa do her thing and be open to whatever might...

Her thoughts stalled as she stared at the man she’d taken the champagne from. The lapels of his tuxedo jacket were silk, as was the pocket square in matching black. His pristine white shirt had been recently pressed, and a bowtie was knotted at his neck.

Silk? Tuxedo? Bowtie?

Crap.

Her gaze wandered up to a granite jawline without a single bit of stubble pressing through. He was tall. Not Tag tall, but *tall*. His dark blond hair was longer on top, shaved closely at his neck. A pair of thick eyebrows that were a shade darker than his hair lifted in surprise. Her gaze bounced from his

perfect nose to a set of pursed lips, and then met his piercing blue eyes.

So, yeah. *Not* the waiter.

Her mouth dropped open. “I am so, so sorry.” She regarded the glass in her hand, now half-empty with red lipstick decorating the rim. “Give me a moment and I’ll find you another glass.”

“That’s not necessary.” His voice was deep and rich, sending a ripple of awareness over her bare legs. His mouth didn’t smile, but the crow’s feet at the corners of his eyes hinted that he had more often than not. “It seems you needed that more than I did.”

“Really, I can find you a fresh glass and—”

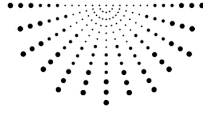
“If you’ll excuse me.” With a regal tilt of his head, he walked away.

She watched as he crossed the room to meet a dark-haired woman in a stunning floor-length black sparkling gown. He handed over the remaining glass of pink champagne at the same moment Reese and Merina Crane leaned in to greet them.

Shit.

Chloe would never be invited back.

CHAPTER THREE



Zander had never been struck by lightning before, but he imagined it was similar to the way he felt now. When he'd been crossing the room, a flash of silver had caught his eye. Followed by auburn waves that flowed like silk. He'd been pulled in as if by tractor beam—especially when his eyes had locked onto legs ending in a pair of high-heeled shoes. She was undeniably woman from the back, and when she'd turned and stolen his drink, he'd lost his breath. She was stunning—exquisite. Possibly the most beautiful woman he'd seen, maybe ever.

His mind was fuzzy and his fingers were numb when he'd handed the pink champagne to his sister. Now, he stood stock still, his neck prickling with an odd sort of premonition. He wanted nothing more than to turn and take her in again. To allow his eyes to feast on the gorgeous creature he'd encountered...but not until he was out from under Merina Crane's assessing stare.

“...so glad you both could make it,” she was saying. “Jaylyn, I love your ring. One of your designs?”

“Yes, actually. Thank you.” Jaylyn's smile was genuinely proud.

“Zander.” Reese gave his cousin’s palm a firm squeeze. “Good to see you.”

“And you.” Reese and Zander had formality in common. They were both firstborns, both had managed to turn *serious* into an art form. The difference between them was that Reese was the CEO of a burgeoning hotel business whereas Zander Crane had made a name in the art world on his own. Yes, he employed a team and in no way was a one-man show, but there was no board of directors to please. His wasn’t a publicly traded company, which was the way he liked it. There was a certain amount of freedom to being self-contained.

“How is the apartment treating you?” Reese asked while Merina and Jaylyn made light conversation. “Plenty of space to work from home?”

“Hardly. I’m considering taking on a separate office space.” There was only so much he could do from his kitchen table. When Emily had been alive, he’d worked from his laptop. That allowed him to have lunch with her, to enjoy a pick-me-up coffee—tea for her—and talk about his work and hers. Emily had been a painter, and he a curator. Theirs had been a match made in heaven.

“I understand that.”

Zander enjoyed traveling for work, but the instances had become rarer and rarer. Most companies merely sent photos or did live video walk-throughs of their spaces. Plus, now that he was in the States, he could send his UK-based team to anywhere requiring an in-person visit overseas.

“I am eager for the art update to the Crane in Chicago. Art isn’t my forte.”

“I’ll say,” Merina chimed in. She pressed manicured nails to her decollate. “*I’m* the hotel owner with the eye for style, bohemian though it may be.”

Reese leaned over to place a kiss on his wife’s mouth, and Jaylyn smirked up at Zander. They had been talking about Reese and Merina last night over dinner—about how the media had made their marriage—and divorce—to each other a circus, and their second marriage more like the Second Coming. The situation had been ripe for fodder: Reese Crane, CEO of the modern glass Crane Hotels, and Merina Van Heusen, who owned the artsy boutique Van Heusen Hotel that had quite literally risen from the ashes of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871.

“I’m happy to help.” Zander had been itching to update Crane Hotels for years. Its clean, sharp modern lines and whitewashed lobbies and rooms were the perfect blank canvas for art that was both modern and colorful. He’d already gathered a few pieces for Reese’s approval—Zander wanted to be involved personally in this upgrade. “We can meet up after the holiday. Whenever you’re available.”

“I’m available now.” Reese shrugged.

“No, he isn’t. *No* work tonight.” Merina’s eyebrow twitched in warning. “It’s an evening of celebration, and no one should be on the clock. Zander, we’ll have to introduce you around.”

He turned to look over his shoulder to where the redhead had been standing moments ago. She wasn’t there any longer.

“But first, a scotch,” Reese interjected. “I notice you don’t have a drink yet.”

“A woman mistook me for the waitstaff and relieved me of my glass.” Zander smoothed a hand over the front of his shirt. “I can’t say I minded giving it up to her.”

“Is that so?” Reese asked.

“Who stole your drink?” Merina asked, sounding far more inquisitive than her husband.

Zander didn’t have to look hard before spotting her again. The light hit the crystals on her silver dress, making her sparkle. The frock was tasteful, and she was mostly covered, but there was no missing her curves. Upon a second look, he saw that her hair was deep red with brown undertones, curling around small but strong shoulders. She had a heart-shaped face, wide, hazel eyes—at least they’d appeared wide with embarrassment the moment she’d realized he wasn’t a waiter.

She’d drawn him in when he’d least expected. There’d been a jolt of mutual attraction between them if he wasn’t mistaken. And damn, had that felt *good*. Especially after not having felt it for so long.

“The woman with the red hair. Silver dress,” he answered.

From across the room, she laughed, a tinkling chime of a sound. She moved one of the waves off her shoulder, the movement shifting his attention to a long, elegant, pale neck. His pulse spiked.

“That’s Chloe Andrews,” Merina said. “She runs Isa’s agency. She’s probably over there telling Isa and Rachel how embarrassed she is that she stole your drink. And she’s here alone tonight.”

“Is that so,” he said, repeating Reese’s words from earlier. Chloe had stolen more than Zander’s drink—his attention had been on her ever since. After Emily had passed, he hadn’t been

trying not to notice other women. He just...hadn't. And while he'd decided long before he'd arrived that he would kiss a woman at midnight tonight, he hadn't begun to assess his options when Chloe Andrews entered the picture.

At that moment, she turned her head and caught him watching her. Even from this distance, he could see her lips flinch into a tight smile as a tinge of red stole up her neck to her cheeks. She surprised him by holding up the glass she'd taken from him in a silent *cheers*.

"No need for a polite glass of champagne when I have aged scotch," Reese said.

"Scotch," Zander said. "And then you'll introduce us."

"Of course." Reese clapped Zander on the shoulder.

As they made their way to the bar, Zander kept Chloe in his periphery. He knew, in some unseen part of him, that she was the woman he was destined to kiss at midnight.

Now to figure out how to convince her.



"I COULD DIE," Chloe said after she'd turned her attention away from the hot guy in the tuxedo. "No doubt he's telling his date about the ditzy red-haired girl who stole his champagne. Hopefully, Merina made up an excuse that didn't make me sound like a stunted idiot."

"That's not his date. That's his sister," Isa said. "The way he was looking over here at you doesn't suggest that he thinks you're a stunted *anything*. He was watching you like he wanted to—"

"Make out with you," Rachel finished.

“I was going to say like he wanted to meet her.” Then Isa added on an afterthought, “But you’re not wrong. He was checking Chloe out.”

“Who is he?” Chloe was dying to know. The man had an air of regality to him that was undeniable. She’d probably insulted him down to his expensive leather shoes by mistaking him for a waiter.

“Eli’s cousin,” Isa said at the same time Rachel answered, “Tag’s cousin.”

“Zander Crane,” Rachel elaborated.

“Zander... *Crane*?” Chloe repeated. When Isa and Eli had gotten engaged, she’d teased Isa about digging up a Crane brother for her. It only seemed fair, she’d said, for each of them to have a billionaire of their own. They’d laughed it off, but Isa had never mentioned a cousin.

“Alex’s brother has four kids,” Isa answered conversationally. “They have lived all over but only recently became reacquainted with our branch of the Crane family. Zander is Eli’s age, but that is where the similarities end.”

From looks alone, they were opposite. Eli was dark-haired with a muscular build and a broody demeanor. Zander was fairer, his hair a brownish shade of blond, and while he was in amazing shape, his body was more lean and long than bulky.

“He’s tall,” Chloe muttered, remembering how she’d had to tip her chin to find his eyes. Those blue, blue eyes... “I assumed the other woman was his date, but you said that’s his sister? They don’t look alike.”

“Jaylyn is his half-sister. Zander, his sister, and his brothers have different mothers. Their father is unorthodox,” Rachel

whispered. Then she grabbed Chloe's arm. "He's heading this way. Get ready."

"What?" The glass in Chloe's hand began to shake. She wasn't ready to officially meet him. In fact, she had toyed with the idea of hiding behind the bass player in the neighboring room until the party was over.

"Isa, Rachel," came Reese Crane's smooth greeting.

"Hi, Reese," Isa and Rachel chimed.

"Chloe. Good to see you." Reese gave her a formal nod.

Aware her cheeks were still warm, Chloe didn't dare make eye contact with the man to Reese's left. "Hi."

"Good to see you again, Zander." Rachel's grin was cat-got-the-cream.

"Hello, Rachel."

That voice again. Chloe could listen to it all night. It was like silk. That had been dipped in chocolate. And then wrapped in velvet.

"I saw Tag at the bar," Zander said.

"That sounds right." Rachel cocked her head. Tag was in charge of Crane Hotel's Restaurant Services. He was the party guy, so the title fit him perfectly. Rachel had been bartending when she'd met Tag. She'd wound up advising him on one of the Crane Hotel bars in Hawaii. That was where she and Tag, whom Rachel had affectionately nicknamed "Tarzan," had fallen in love.

Merina and Reese. Rachel and Tag. Isa and Eli. Each of them had settled down with a Crane man. What were the odds of lightning striking a fourth time, and that bungled drink mix-up being Chloe and Zander's meet-cute?

Astronomical, she silently answered herself.

“Chloe Andrews, meet Zander Crane.” Isa gestured between them when it became obvious they hadn’t been officially acquainted.

Zander dipped his head in a subtle hello rather than speaking. Chloe took the opportunity to apologize. Again.

“Sorry I stole your drink. You don’t look like a waiter. I was wishing for a refill and then I turned around, and there they were! Two floating champagne flutes right in front of me. You’re lucky I didn’t take both of them.” She let out a loud, nervous squawk of a laugh she wished she could take back. “Anyway. I am truly sorry. I was in the wrong place at exactly the right time.”

Reese’s eyebrows were at the top of his forehead.

Zander narrowed his eyes.

So. This was going well.

“I, uh...will you excuse me? I’m going to find a ladies’ room. If one of you could point me toward...” She pointed around the room, past Zander and then Isa. She had no idea where the hell anything was in this gargantuan house, but she couldn’t stand here another second. “You know what? I’ll find it myself. I’m like a bloodhound. I can find anything.”

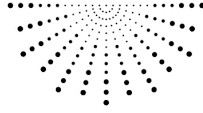
OMG. Shut. Up. Chloe.

Rachel opened her mouth, probably to help, but Chloe didn’t wait to hear her friend out before fleeing the scene. She couldn’t stand in front of Zander Crane any longer without dissolving, or worse. She might keep *talking*.

She scurried past the double doors and into the foyer, and then clipped past the kitchen as fast as her three-inch heels

would carry her. She didn't care if she found a bathroom or not. Any room with a locking door would suffice.

CHAPTER FOUR



I'll go and find her," Rachel said.

"Wait a sec, Dimples." Tag stepped up behind her. "I want to introduce you to someone. Who needs finding?"

"I'll find her." Isa waved them off. "You two mingle."

"You have to meet him too, Cap'n," Tag told Isa. "Eli's already over there. Who's lost in the house?"

"Reese, when we first moved in." Merina joined them, wrapping her arm around her husband's. "This place is massive. Took me months to learn the layout."

"I still don't know it," Reese muttered, earning a chuckle from everyone.

"Why don't I look for her?" Zander offered.

Every pair of eyes landed on him with curious interest, and so he filled the empty air with a not-entirely-untrue excuse. "I've been wanting to look around since I arrived. I'm in the market for buying a house in the near future. A meandering tour might give me an idea of what to look for." He offered an affable smile. "If I get lost, I'll call you."

"If you're sure..." Reese said, obviously uncertain why Zander would offer.

“He’s sure.” Merina smiled, then added in a butchered British accent, “Do find her, won’t you?”

“You have my word.” Zander polished off his scotch in one burning swallow, relinquished the glass to the bar, and set out to find Chloe.

A few twists and turns later, he’d visited the kitchen, a library, an empty room that appeared to be an ode to antique furniture, and two guest bedrooms. Apart from the kitchen, each room he’d checked had been dark and silent.

Where had Chloe run off to? And she had *run*. Away from him, yes, but he suspected it was nerves that carried her to parts unknown rather than intimidation. She had no reason to be nervous around him. Her swiping his champagne had given him an excuse to meet the most captivating woman here tonight.

On the way to the staircase to check the second floor, he paused in front of a line of photographs hanging on the wall. Each in gilded frames, the black-and-white photos featured various parts of downtown Chicago. There were shots of the iconic Bean, the Crane, and the Van Heusen Hotel.

He leaned in and studied the composition, the light and dark shadows. Though he had no memory of seeing these before, each one was oddly familiar. Maybe because of their memorable subjects?

But then he spotted a photo he *had* seen before. This photo, he knew.

He pulled his cell phone from his jacket pocket and opened the app where he’d met a woman who took photos of Chicago—the same woman he’d invited out for New Year’s Eve. After several months of back-and-forth direct messages discussing

art, photography, the city, and even more personal topics, she'd vanished.

He'd never received an answer to his invitation to her tonight, and that in and of itself had told him what he needed to know: Chatting on the app was fine with her, but a meetup was out of the question.

He scrolled through her account now, past myriad black-and-white photos, and—*bingo*. A plate of snickerdoodle cookies at the front desk of the Van Heusen Hotel, with a cheeky sign next to it reading “eat me.” The photo was an exact match of the framed one hanging in Merina and Reese Crane's corridor.

“I'll be damned.” What were the odds?

CURLYQSUE had turned him down when he'd asked if she would sell some of her photos to him, and yet here they were. He'd been browsing for a client—Crane Hotels, as it'd turned out. She'd politely declined, stating that she was merely a hobbyist.

He peered closer at each of the framed photos. No signature on any of them. He'd bet his bank account—and it wasn't small—that the photographer who'd taken that snickerdoodle photo had taken every photo hanging here.

If Emily were standing next to him right now, she would scold him and remind him that not every artist wanted to turn their artwork into a “marketing scheme.”

He smiled a sad smile. He and Emily had argued about the buying and selling of art when she'd been alive. He would argue that artists deserved to make money on their passion, and Emily would say that art should be free for the masses.

He hadn't thought of that in a long while.

He stepped back and admired the row of frames one last time before taking the stairs that wound up and around to another corridor. He searched two rooms—both bedrooms, both dark and empty. The third door revealed an office. Reese’s, judging by the mahogany shelves and leatherbound books.

He stood at the wide window at the back of the room. Snow had begun to fall, tender flakes that floated down silently and slowly. There, in the shadows, he allowed the peace of the moment to engulf him while he figured out where to check next.



“YOU CAN’T HIDE in here all night,” Chloe whispered as she checked her work email on her phone. She *shouldn’t* be checking email. She had turned on “vacation mode” so that she wouldn’t be tempted to log in until after the holiday.

She tucked her phone into her silver clutch and snapped it closed, then pushed herself to standing from the edge of the massive garden bathtub.

She’d managed to find a bathroom—upstairs and far away from the party below. If facing Zander had been difficult before, it was damn near impossible now. She didn’t know what had been worse: the attack of word vomit, or that she had to literally flee the room to shut herself up.

“You can’t hide in here all night, but you can hide in here for another few minutes,” she murmured as she opened the app where she shared her photography.

She’d created the account over the summer. Since she’d started snapping photos of Chicago for fun last year, she’d

longed to share them. The app offered a safe space for artists to showcase their work without the pressure of connecting with family and friends or giving updates on their personal lives.

Her handle, CURLYQSUE, was the nickname her younger brother had given her, an ode to her curly hair. Curls that she'd smoothed into plump, tamed waves for the evening. After liking a few comments, her finger hesitated over the Message icon for a second before she gave in and tapped it. Then she reread the messages from HOPPERFAN02 for the fourteenth time.

Had she said yes to his invitation, where would they have met up? A fancy, elite bar? A museum for a night of fine art, champagne, and dancing? If she were with him now, would they be chatting away, having fallen into a similar rhythm to their shared months of online messages?

It was a safe bet that she wouldn't be hiding in a bathroom if she had said yes. Only she hadn't said yes. She hadn't said anything at all, she thought with a sigh.

She'd been on so many disastrous dates over the last few years, she was surprised to have a single positive thought about HOPPERFAN02. She'd been out with seemingly normal men she'd met on dating apps, through friends, and even one random coffee-shop encounter.

As hapless as her dating life was, she had held out hope for decent sex this year. Her New Year's resolution had been to pursue a man for a one-night stand rather than a relationship and see if her luck improved. Alas, whenever she'd met an attractive man who she could have taken to bed, she hadn't been able to go through with it. Turned out she needed to be

able to have a conversation—a connection—before she disrobed for anyone.

How inconvenient.

With time ticking eagerly away until midnight, her chances of keeping her resolution were practically zero. So, here she was, without having had a single sexual experience this year, and then when she did meet a handsome stranger, managed to embarrass herself half to death.

If she'd driven herself here tonight, she could have messaged Isa from the driveway that she wasn't feeling well and hightailed it out of here. Then again, Eli and Isa would never allow her to get away with that. Isa might even follow Chloe home to make sure she was all right.

No, ruining Eli and Isa's New Year's Eve was out of the question. Chloe would have to tough out the two hours left until midnight. Though she wasn't sure she'd be able to dodge Zander Crane the entire evening. The house was massive, but the party was intimate. She'd likely be under his shrewd, sexy, blue-eyed stare again tonight...if he didn't think she was bonkers for running away from him.

One thing was certain, she was *not* apologizing again. It'd been an honest mistake and he'd told her an apology wasn't necessary. If she had a chance to speak to him again, she'd behave like a normal human being, find common ground, and share a bit of small talk. He was a Crane, and she knew several Cranes. They could start there.

She smoothed her dress, carefully, as there were a zillion crystals sewn into it, and checked her reflection in the mirror. It was shorter than she would have chosen for herself, but she had to admit her legs did look amazing. Plus, sparkling was fun. She deserved to have some fun tonight rather than linger

in a bathroom lamenting that she'd gone an entire calendar year without sex.

Who cared about stupid resolutions anyway?

After reapplying her favorite lipstick called *Ch-ch-ch-cherry Bomb!*, she fluffed her hair and stepped out of the bathroom. Halfway down the hallway, however, she realized she'd turned in the wrong direction for the stairs. She turned the opposite direction, or what she'd *thought* was the opposite direction, and...

Nope.

She rerouted once more, her focus on a corridor she hadn't walked down yet—this house really was a maze—when she stubbed the toe of her high heel on the edge of a rug and tripped. She caught herself on the doorway, letting out a little yelp of surprise.

Hand over her racing heart, she closed her eyes and sucked in a breath. When she blew it out, she said, “Here lies Chloe Andrews. Death by face-plant.”

“I doubt the fall would have killed you,” came a deep voice from her left.

She slowly turned her head to find Zander silhouetted by a snowy window in the cozy, dark office. Because of course he'd witnessed her tripping.

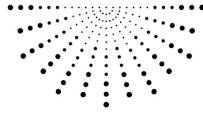
“Are you all right?” he asked, crossing the room to come to her.

The sharp angles of his face were highlighted by moonlight, his lips elegant and masculine at the same time. He was fantastically good-looking. The genes in the Crane family were insane.

“F-fine. I’m lost.”

“Lucky for you, they sent me to find you.” He gave her a small smile that made her knees turn to jelly. “Unlucky for you, I’m lost too.”

CHAPTER FIVE



2 HOURS 'TIL MIDNIGHT

*L*ike that, Zander had found Chloe.

Or, well, she had found him.

She placed her hand delicately onto his waiting arm. He could feel how cool her fingers were through his tuxedo jacket.

“You’re cold. May I?” He reached for the buttons on his jacket.

Her red mouth popped into a little *O* of surprise. “If you’re sure...”

“I’m sure.” He unbuttoned his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. She pulled it around her, humming softly.

“Thank you. It’s chilly up here.”

“It is.” The conversation stalled momentarily as they walked the corridor, their steps lining up in sync.

“So—”

“So—” she said at the same time.

“Go ahead.” He dipped his head for her to go on.

“You’re a Crane.”

“I am.”

“I thought we’d run out of Cranes here in the city.”

“You had. Until I arrived.”

“You and your sister.”

“She’s visiting temporarily, but yes, she has also upped the number of Cranes in this zip code.”

Chloe laughed, a sound that lightened his chest. It was nice to see what she was like when she wasn’t flustered.

“Are you *involved* with Crane Hotels?” she asked. “I figure there is a good chance you’re running part of the hotel empire.”

He placed his hand at her lower back as he guided her down the corridor. “Reese and I are working on a project together.”

“Sounds clandestine.”

“Not exactly. And you run Isabella’s concierge company, I hear.”

“I don’t know if I *run* it. I mean, she is still involved, even as a new mom.”

“Aric is a beautiful baby.”

“Isn’t he?” Her entire face softened. “Isa and Eli had some hurdles at the beginning, which makes Aric’s arrival that much more special.” After a beat, she said, “I used to refer to Eli as Cranky Crane—not to his face.”

“Ha.” Zander grinned. The moniker suited his cousin. “Appropriate. So, you’re a manager?”

“President, technically. Ugh, I don’t know if I earned it. That’s a big title.”

“It’s an honor. Don’t be humble about it. Most people are stuck in middle management for their entire career. You’re at the top.”

“Thanks. I guess it feels like cheating. I love what I do, and it comes easy. Not many people are so lucky.”

“Hardly any, in fact.” He’d left his corporate job to start his own company because he didn’t enjoy working for an entity.

“I used to be a personal assistant before I started working with Isa as her PA. Almost immediately she gave me more responsibility. I took to it, management. I like helping others, but the corporate dicks I worked for wore on me, you know?” Her eyes jerked to his and then away as her fair skin turned a lovely pink color.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to infer that you or your cousins were corporate dicks.” She squeezed her eyes closed and gave an adorable headshake. “Also, sorry I said the word dicks. What’s that, three times now?”

“I wasn’t counting.” He chuckled.

“Actually, I’m *not* sorry. I promised myself I wouldn’t apologize to you again.”

He was at once bemused by her and eager to learn more about her. She was so unlike the woman he’d been married to for five years. Emily had been proper and quiet, her comments thought out thoroughly before spoken. He’d loved that about her.

Contrarily, Chloe seemed to blurt out whatever was on her mind before she’d thought about it only to backpedal later. He

would have thought that attribute wouldn't appeal, but he'd been nothing short of intrigued by her since she'd swiped his champagne flute.

"You're right. There is no need to apologize for anything. Not for stealing my drink, or saying the word dicks."

"Look who's not as proper as they seem."

"Only on the outside." He was enjoying speaking with her immensely. She wasn't overly flirtatious, but even this tepid conversation held the potential for more.

"So, you mentioned recently moving here."

"Technically I moved back. I was born in Chicago. Were you born and raised here?"

"East Coast." She threaded her arms through his coat and then rested her hand on his forearm once again. He liked that she was comfortable touching him. And she smelled incredible—a spicy scent that reminded him of fruit and cinnamon. They arrived at a staircase that descended into murky darkness. "I think we're lost again. Should we call for help?"

He was enjoying himself far too much to suggest returning to the party. He suspected she'd clam up again, or worse, avoid him, if they went back now. "We could, or..."

"Or?" Her reddish-brown eyebrows lifted with the corners of her lush mouth. He instantly wondered if her lips felt as soft as they looked.

"Or." He cleared his throat. "We can snoop a bit. We might find treasure."

"I can't resist the temptation to lurk around. I've never been here before." Her grin, filled with mischief, sent his heart

into his throat. What was it about this woman that pulled him in? “Shameless, aren’t I?”

One can hope.

“But since you suggested it, I can assuage my guilt,” she said. “You’re related to him. He can’t be mad at you, right?”

“I will take full responsibility if we are busted for trespassing.”

“In that case, shall we descend into the unknown?” She bit her bottom lip as she peered at the darkened staircase.

“I’m sure they’ll send a search party if things don’t work out.”

“Oh, good.” She found and flipped on a light switch that illuminated the stairwell. “I really like dogs.”

A visual of a search party with a pack of baying hounds popped into his mind, making him laugh again. She was clever in addition to being beautiful. And those plush, red lips were looking more kissable by the moment.

“I’m from Maryland originally,” she said as they took the stairs arm in arm. “My parents and my brother still live there. I go home as much as I can, which doesn’t amount to much. But Isa is generous with vacation time, so it’s more than if I worked anywhere else.” She pressed her lips together before asking him a question. “What about you? Are you close to your parents?”

“My mother lives in France. We see each other a few times a year—holidays and such. My dad has a serious case of wanderlust, so our visits are spontaneous. Although we’ve seen each other more often since Emily...”

He hadn't planned on bringing up his late wife, but here they were. Now that he'd blurted out her name he might as well explain. "Emily is my wife. *Was* my wife. She died last year, in February."

"I'm so sorry." Chloe stopped short on the stairs—two steps from the bottom. Sincerity swam in her hazel eyes when she asked, "How long were you married?"

"Five years. She was sick for eight months, which sort of fucked up that last year." He shook his head the moment he heard the note of bitterness. "Sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Navigating that sort of heartbreak and breathing in and out must have taken everything you had."

He stared at her for a moment, humbled. His siblings and his father had gathered around him after Emily's death. He'd had an outpouring of help and casseroles and unsolicited advice from family and friends alike. He couldn't have survived without his father and brothers, who had taken it upon themselves to ensure that his career didn't go down the drain. Jaylyn had handled the daunting but necessary task of clearing out Emily's closet and art studio. His mother had been there to facilitate the household, to make sure he was eating, and that the lights had stayed on.

Then after a few weeks, they'd returned to their lives—at Zander's insistence. Even Brody, who'd moved to London, had gone back to his rented flat. The months that followed had been challenging. Chloe was right, it had been difficult for him to breathe in and out once everyone returned to their normally scheduled lives.

"It's been a process. She was sick for a long time," he said dismissively, not wanting to rope Chloe into a deeper discussion than she'd intended.

She ignored his detour attempts. “But that doesn’t make it any easier.”

“No. It doesn’t.” He pulled in a breath. “We had London. And after she’d gone, London no longer appealed.”

Chloe squeezed his fingers, her hands warmer than they were earlier. “You moved back home to Chicago. Windy, cold—”

“Beautiful.” Like the photos of Chicago hanging on the wall downstairs, and like the woman holding his hand now.

“I’m sorry your wife passed away.” She averted her gaze momentarily before meeting his eyes again. “I guess I don’t know what else to say.”

“Not many do.” He’d heard it all. *Sorry for your loss. How are you holding up. Let me know if there is anything you need.* The problem was that no one could bring Emily back—not with all the empty, well-meaning platitudes in the world.

“Shall we?” He gestured.

She nodded.

They walked down the remaining stairs. She dropped his hand.

“Let’s see what we’ve stumbled into.” He felt for a light switch, flipped it on, and nearly jumped out of his skin when Chloe’s sharp shriek pierced the air.



CHLOE, hand on her heart, closed her eyes and caught her breath. “That scared me.”

“Me too,” Zander admitted. “But only half as much as your scream. Are you all right?”

When she opened her eyes, she could read two things on his handsome face: concern and amusement.

“I didn’t expect to see *that*.” She approached the giant metal suit of armor standing sentry at the foot of the stairs. At its back was a thick wooden column, and in its closed fists was a battle axe.

What in the Medieval Archives?

“If you would have bet me a thousand dollars that there was a literal knight in shining armor at the entrance to this room, I would have gone double or nothing.” She peered up at the dented armor in wonder, studying the various mars and dings in the metal. A shiver climbed her spine as she considered that there had once been living human beings who’d worn suits like these—possibly this one in particular.

“It really is something,” Zander said as he looked with her.

She took her first good look around the room. Merina and Reese’s modern style had been blended with medieval pieces, including a tapestry hanging on a wall of stacked stones. There was an ornate bar to the left, with richly colored wood and rows of gleaming glassware. The backless stools were red leather with metal studs at the edges.

“This room is very distinct.” Zander smoothed his hand over a leather seat.

“I’m sure the decor is Merina’s doing. She’s the more eclectic of the two.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” He tugged his sleeve down, and she noticed a diamond wink from a black onyx cufflink. There was something sure and strong about his presence. Safe too,

though she'd only just met him. She turned away before he caught her staring at him.

Opposite the bar was a pool table. Beyond that, a TV room. A massive sectional sofa sat cozily in front of the screen, a chair, reading lamp, and bronzed globe statue in one corner.

She moved to a pair of double doors leading outside to a covered seating area with a built-in grill and a stone outdoor kitchen. "Wow. The parties they must have in the summer."

The sky was dark and windy, snow blowing and swirling on the stamped concrete. In warmer weather Lake Michigan with its sparkling surface would be a sight.

A gust of wind howled, pressing against the glass. She folded her arms over her chest, snuggling deeper into Zander's suit jacket. She inhaled sandalwood and another exotic scent she couldn't name. The man not only looked incredible, but he also smelled like heaven.

"Jackpot," she heard behind her.

Zander was standing inside a glass-walled wine cellar. The bottles were displayed on shelves stacked to the ceiling. A rolling ladder was hooked on the edge of one shelf, a thermostat mounted on the wall to ensure the perfect temperature.

"It's like a library, but with wine." Awed, she stared as she approached the sleek room filled with gleaming bottles.

"Let's check it out." He tipped his head, inviting her in with him.

She stepped inside the slightly cool room and then tenderly touched a foil-covered tip of one bottle. Zander was inspecting bottles, sliding them from their homes one by one.

“Ah. Here we are.” He slipped a bottle of white wine from its cradle.

“*The Big O*,” she read aloud from the label. “That name is setting high expectations.”

Zander’s grin wasn’t far behind hers. “O is my father’s nickname, short for Octavius.” He handed her the bottle.

“I would also shorten my name if it were Octavius.” She spun the bottle, admiring the golden color of the liquid inside. The label, with the embossed image of a big top tent and the circus-style font, was both classic and cheeky. “Does he also go by Big, or was that nickname solely reserved for your uncle Alex? Can’t there only be one Big Crane?”

“With a nickname like O, how does he not tack ‘Big’ onto the front of it?” Zander raised one eyebrow, which added a dash of playfulness to his regal expression.

Chloe wasn’t unaccustomed to flirting but rarely was the man she was flirting with this refined. She’d had plenty of interactions where men eagerly tried to get her to smile—sometimes they told her outright that she *should* smile, which she found incredibly irritating. But the smiles and banter she’d shared with Zander had come naturally.

She was growing more and more curious about him. A widower Crane from the UK who’d offered his jacket when he noticed she was cold, and who, like her, found Chicago beautiful.

What made him laugh, way down in his belly? What did he do when he was alone? What was his favorite kind of food? Did he like action movies or romantic comedies?

“So, your father’s a vintner?” she asked when those questions seemed too personal.

“My father’s a bit of everything.” He took the bottle from her. “He’s been practically everywhere and has found business opportunities wherever he’s gone.”

“And wives?” she joked. “Sorry. Rachel mentioned that your siblings each had different mothers. Anyway, I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“You promised not to apologize to me anymore, remember?” He leaned down to ask that, bringing his handsome face closer to hers. In the still air, she felt a tentative pull toward him. He straightened away from her, but that pull remained, bringing her to her toes for a moment. “And for the record, my father never married. Not even in his tender youth when my mother was pregnant.”

“Do your parents get along?”

“Better than you’d think. He marches to his own beat, but so does she. They’re still very close friends.”

She shrugged with her mouth. “Impressive.”

“To answer your question, no. Dad is not a vintner.” He tucked the bottle under one elbow, and they left the cellar. Once she was out, the door whispered shut behind them. “He knows who to partner with for a great bottle of wine. And for children too, for that matter.”

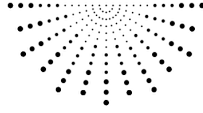
“Yes, I can see that.” Zander’s parents must be the equivalent of Brad Pitt and Jennifer Aniston.

“Ready to go back to the party? I can ask the bartender to pour us glasses of The Big O.”

She thought about mentioning that it was the only “Big O” she’d have tonight, but that was a touch too forward.

Instead, she looped her arm in his and said, “After you.”

CHAPTER SIX



Finally, they found their way back to the party. Mostly thanks to Zander, who clearly hadn't needed a search party to help him find his way.

"I've been through here before," she told him as he started to angle down a familiar corridor.

"Not this way." Zander, his hand in hers, tugged her toward what she thought was a room but was the entrance to another wing.

By the time they reached the main staircase, she breathed a sigh of both relief and disappointment. They'd been in a bubble for the last half hour, and she had to admit it'd been the best thirty minutes she'd spent with a man in ages.

She handed over his tuxedo jacket, and he mentioned that he'd enjoyed being lost with her if she'd like to do it again sometime.

They mutually released each other's hands when they stepped into the main foyer. Zander, palm on her back, followed her into the party.

"There you are!" Jaylyn Crane swished toward them, a pair of chunky leather army boots appearing beneath her long, black sparkling dress. She gave Chloe a perfunctory glance

before looking up at her brother. “I was about to send out a search and rescue.”

“With dogs?” he asked with a completely straight face. Chloe snorted, hiding a laugh behind one hand.

“Uh, no.” Jaylyn shifted a look between them.

“What do you need?”

“I wanted to make sure you didn’t leave.”

“Of course I didn’t leave.”

“Okay.” She twisted her lips, and for a brief moment, Jaylyn appeared vulnerable. Then she snapped out of it in a blink. With a flip of her dark hair, her tough-girl demeanor returned. “I’ll take a glass of Dad’s wine. Champagne is tiresome.”

Chloe didn’t know how expensive pink champagne could *ever* be tiresome, but then she hadn’t been raised by a billionaire. It wasn’t hard to imagine a young Jaylyn drinking nonalcoholic pink bubbly from a diamond-studded sippy cup.

“I’ll have the bartender crack this open. Chloe, a glass for you as well?”

“After the adventure we had excavating it? Hell, yeah.”

“Very well. I’ll return shortly.”

In a silent exchange, Jaylyn rolled her eyes at her brother, who gave her a slow blink. Once he was gone, Jaylyn spoke to Chloe directly for the first time. “He’s so formal.”

Chloe had noticed that, but she hadn’t found him unapproachable. There was something sexy about his air of appropriateness—a façade that fell away the moment she made a slightly naughty reference.

“You two disappeared from the party to steal a bottle of the good stuff?” Jaylyn asked. “Was that all you were up to, or do you have the good silver tucked into your dress?”

“Silverware doesn’t resell as well as vintage lederhosen. I was delightfully surprised to find some in Reese’s sock drawer.”

Unlike her brother’s laugh, Jaylyn’s was loud and boisterous. “You’re fun. We should do shots later.”

While Chloe wasn’t opposed to doing shots, she wasn’t going to down tequila at Reese and Merina’s house. She’d already stuck her foot into her mouth multiple times, and she’d drunk two small glasses of champagne. Plus, she didn’t want to forget a single moment with Zander—tonight might be the only chance she had to flirt with a Crane.

“Second thought, I have my eye on a guy in the band, so no shots tonight. I don’t want to be hammered when I approach him.” Jaylyn’s gaze went toward the next room where a jazz band was arranged on a raised platform.

“The bass player?” The gray-haired gentleman looked a good twenty years older than Jaylyn.

“No, no.” Jaylyn pulled Chloe close and pointed. “The keyboardist.”

“Ohh.” That was a different story. He wore a fedora, sunglasses, and a stylish brown suit. “He’s handsome.”

“He’s *hot*. I’ve been over there once already to confirm he’s not wearing a wedding band. I also did some reconnaissance with the waitstaff to ask if he was involved with anyone here. He’s not.” She sang the word *not*, giving it two syllables. “He was watching me dance. He’s the one I’m kissing at midnight. I mean, if you can’t rustle up someone to

kiss at midnight, what the hell's the point of being at a New Year's Eve party?"

"Right." Chloe thought of her odds of kissing Zander as Jaylyn's intense gaze burrowed a hole into her brain.

"You should kiss my brother!" Jaylyn blurted out. "You two were looking at each other like...well, I don't want to think about it."

"What? I didn't—I don't—"

"Of course you did, and do. I have a sixth sense about things. I already know you're going to kiss him."

Chloe did a surreptitious search for Rachel or Isa. Even Merina, who she wasn't as close to, would do in a pinch. She didn't want to admit to Jaylyn that she'd *already* decided to kiss Zander Crane at midnight.

"Admit it." Jaylyn smirked.

"I only met your brother tonight." Which was no answer at all. The thought of kissing him thrilled her down to her pearlescent pink painted toenails.

"He's not as fragile as everyone thinks, and he likes you. I can tell. He hasn't smiled at another woman the way he was smiling at you for a long, long time."

"He told me about his wife. Late wife."

"Really." Jaylyn's tone suggested he didn't talk about it often. "Well then, he must really like you."

"I appreciate the sisterly stamp of approval. I guess I'll have to see where the night takes me."

"My night is taking me back to the keyboardist. Any advice for approaching a musician who's in the middle of a

set?”

“Ha! If you’re looking for dating advice, I’m the wrongest person you could ask.”

“I might have you beat in that contest, Chloe... I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your last name.”

“Andrews.”

“Chloe Andrews. Jaylyn Crane. Youngest of the Octavius Crane brood. My mother owns a small clinic that specializes in Reiki and acupuncture in Colorado, which is where I inherited my witchy vibes.” She wiggled her fingers, causing the diamond eyes in her skull ring to twinkle.

Chloe was liking Jaylyn more by the minute. “Zander and I talked about your father, O. He sounds very interesting.” To say the least.

“He’s a bit of a legend. Broke the mold with me.” The other woman propped her hands onto her own shoulders and did a little dance. “Indulge me, Chloe Andrews, while we wait on our appropriated wine.”

Behind them at the bar, Zander was chatting with the bartender. Chloe couldn’t help admiring his long, lean form. His straight back. His impressive height. There was simply no way *not* to notice him. He must have felt her eyes on him, because next he turned his head. She was engulfed with awareness as thick as smoke. It clogged her throat and sent her heart racing. It was like she could physically feel his gaze, even from far away.

Intense.

“Holy shit. *I* felt that.” Jaylyn’s eyebrows were raised as she flicked a glance from her brother to Chloe and back again. “I’d be grossed out if I wasn’t rooting for him so much.”

“You were saying?” Chloe was eager to change the subject.

“Right! I’m going to be very, very frank.” Jaylyn rubbed her hands together, her grin cartoon-villain evil.

Chloe’s heart raced for a different reason, and for a good reason as it turned out.

“When,” Jaylyn asked and then paused dramatically, “was the last time you had sex?”



ONE GLANCE at Chloe across the room and Zander felt like he’d had his ears boxed by a heavyweight boxer.

His head rang.

His vision blurred.

Nothing romantic had happened between them on their short trek through the mansion, and yet *something* had definitely happened. He didn’t wrestle with distraction by a woman he’d just met—not ever.

“I see you found the cellar.” Reese sidled up to the bar with an empty lowball glass in one hand.

Zander, who had tuned out everyone and everything, jerked his attention to his cousin. “Uh, yes.”

“Good. I have more than I can drink in a lifetime.” Reese ordered a scotch refill.

“Chloe and I found ourselves in a room with a bar, a wine cellar, and oddly, a suit of armor.”

“That’s Clyde.” Reese’s mouth turned down. “Merina insisted on naming him.”

“And she named him Clyde?” Zander’s shoulders jumped in amusement.

“She’s a rare woman.” Reese’s eyes warmed at the mention of his wife.

Zander knew that look. It was love—the real, lasting kind. He’d had that with Emily, and Reese obviously had it with Merina.

Last year, memories of Emily had haunted him—*she* had haunted him. As if she’d donned a white sheet and hovered in the corner of every room in the house. This year, the loss hadn’t felt as sharp. That lessening of his sadness had introduced guilt, but over time that had faded as well. He was still sad. He still missed her, but the memories were more tea-stained sepia rather than stark vivid color, which made looking at them easier.

“What do you know about Chloe?” Zander tried to make asking sound conversational, but there was no disguising the note of interest in his own voice. Across the room, Jaylyn was holding on to Chloe’s arm, her head thrown back in bawdy laughter. Misbehaving herself, he thought with concern.

“Chloe? She’s around Isa’s age. Efficient, hardworking. President of Sable Concierge, but also Isa’s best friend. Chloe has been invited to girls’ night a few times with Merina, Rachel, and Isa. Merina has nothing but great things to say about her. In fact, she recently commissioned Chloe for some photos of the Van Heusen.”

Zander snapped to attention. “What’s that?”

“Chloe takes photos of the city. We had her take some shots of the Van Heusen and the Crane as well. Stylish black

and whites. She has a good eye. She can make bustling midtown look sexy. You'll have to see them."

"I believe I already have," he said, his lips going numb. "In the corridor behind the staircase? All in a row, gold frames?"

"Them are those," Reese said casually.

"And you said that *Chloe* took those photos?" How was that possible?

"She did."

"You're certain."

Reese frowned at the odd question. "Yes. I guess Chloe picked up a camera and started snapping photos as a hobby. Hard to believe those shots are by an amateur, isn't it?"

It wasn't as hard to believe as the fact that those photos were taken by the same woman he'd met online three months ago. The same woman he'd asked out via direct messaging who had ignored him ever since. The same woman who'd gotten lost in Reese's home at Zander's side and was now talking to his sister.

Chloe Andrews *was* CURLYQSUE.

Unbelievable.

"I don't think she makes a habit of selling her photos," Reese said. "She refused to let Merina pay her, so Merina has been sending anonymous gifts to Chloe so that she can't return them. Gift certificates to restaurants. Expensive perfume. Chloe's getting suspicious. Or Isa has already told her the gifts are from us. Secrets don't last long between those women, trust me."

Zander wondered what, if anything, Merina, Isa, or Rachel knew about Chloe's photography account online, or about HOPPERFAN02.

"She has an exquisite eye for details." Exquisite eyes, a mouth that was driving him to distraction, and hair he longed to thread through his fingers.

"Maybe now that she's allowed us to commission her skills, you can talk her into taking photos for Crane Hotels."

"I'll ask her." Zander was still wrapping his head around the fact that Chloe Andrews was the woman he'd asked out. That she'd ghosted him and then somehow appeared at the same party where she'd stolen his champagne.

"Your scotch, Mister Crane," the bartender handed Reese a glass.

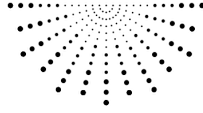
"Thanks, Brett." As he sipped, Reese sent a glance over to Jaylyn and Chloe. "What do you think they're talking about?"

By the looks of them—Jaylyn's arms were folded over her chest while Chloe gesticulated madly—Zander was almost afraid to ask.

"Whatever it is, I should probably rescue Chloe." Zander palmed two glasses of chardonnay in one hand. He reached for the third, but Reese beat him to it.

Gesturing to the women, Reese said, "After you. This, I gotta see."

CHAPTER SEVEN



1½ HOURS 'TIL MIDNIGHT

Chloe, her hand wrapped around Jaylyn's wrist, felt her jaw drop open. "You lie! Tell me that did *not* happen."

"It's true." Jaylyn raised her other arm toward the heavens. "Hand to God."

"That's a dating *nightmare*," Chloe said through laughter. Jaylyn joined her and soon they were both laughing harder than they had before.

Jaylyn's dating horror story was a doozy, involving goat yoga, too much prosecco, and Jaylyn's date leaving her in the barn to make out with the instructor. Unbelievable. And yet, Chloe 100 percent believed her.

She wasn't sure how, but within minutes of Jaylyn trampling over polite boundaries and asking when Chloe had last had sex, she had bonded with the other woman. And, for whatever reason, she had told Jaylyn the truth. Last year, over the summer. With a guy she'd gone out with five or six times.

"Then he stopped calling me. When I finally received a text from him, it was to tell me he'd reconciled with his ex-girlfriend," Chloe had said with a wan smile.

Jaylyn had responded appropriately. “Nooooo!” Then she’d agreed that it was hard to truly connect with any man on this “godforsaken planet.” Chloe had shared her New Year’s resolution for this past year: to have a one-night stand.

“I thought it would be easier to have sex with a virtual stranger, you know?” Chloe had said. “But it turns out it wasn’t easier. Anonymous sex is harder for me for some reason.”

“You’re an old-fashioned girl, Chlo.”

Chloe had been inclined to agree.

From there, they’d shared more dating horror stories, blessedly free of actual atrocities. Sobering from her most recent bout of belly laughter, Chloe dabbed the corners of her lashes. “Is my mascara in place?”

Jaylyn swiped away what Chloe guessed was an incriminating smudge. “You’re good now. Me?”

“Completely unruffled.”

Presumably, Jaylyn Crane’s baseline.

“I’m not telling you that you should have sex with my brother,” Jaylyn said, causing Chloe’s eyes to round. “But he wouldn’t ghost you, either.”

Chloe felt a ping of guilt at the fact that she’d ghosted HOPPERFAN02 a few days ago. If that was any clue as to how inept she was at relationships, then... “The kiss might be a long shot.”

“That’ll happen,” Jaylyn said with certainty. “What happens after—well, that is up to you.”

“You mean there’s still time to keep my resolution?” Chloe said, and then tacked on a deliberate, “Ha-ha.”

“Absolutely.” Jaylyn sounded serious. “The ball doesn’t drop for nearly an hour and a half. That’s plenty of time.”

Not for Chloe. She’d always been more of a slow-go kind of girl. Which was one of the reasons she’d made that resolution. She’d decided it was high time she shook off her old dating habits and did something wild. Only, she *hadn’t*.

“Plus, time is an agreed-upon human manifestation,” Jaylyn said.

“A what?”

“Time doesn’t exist in a linear way. It’s more like a circle.” Jaylyn drew an invisible circle in the air between them.

“Oh-kay.”

“Point being, don’t give up on your resolution yet. Fate may have more in store for you than you think.”

Chloe let out a weak laugh. Sex with Zander Crane was... well, it was *insane* was what it was. Certifiable.

Although...

Chloe would die before she admitted it to his sister, but she felt almost as if she knew Zander. Even though they’d just met. Maybe because he’d shared about Emily, or that she already knew three of his cousins. She trusted him already, which made Jaylyn’s suggestion seem that much more probable.

“By the way, here he comes,” Jaylyn whispered.

Chloe’s stomach dropped to her toes, and she wobbled on the spikes of her heels a little. “Don’t tell him what we talked about.”

“Of course not!” Jaylyn grinned. “You can tell him yourself. Hey, big bro.”

“Hello, Jaylyn.” Zander’s rich voice seeped into Chloe’s skin in the most sensual way possible. “Chloe.”

“Hi,” she said a bit breathlessly.

Reese stood next to him, a glass of scotch and a wineglass in his hands. Jaylyn divested him of the wine.

“I demand you show me around this expansive manor!” She looped her arm around her cousin’s. “I’m bored.”

“Jaylyn,” Zander growled.

Reese, his voice hushed, said, “So am I.”

Chloe laughed. He was so damn likable.

“If you’ll excuse us.” Reese led Jaylyn out of the formal dining room.

“Why do I feel the need to apologize for my sister?” Zander asked as soon as they’d gone.

“Do you apologize for her often?” Chloe hedged.

“I’m rarely around anyone who doesn’t know her well, so...actually, no.” He handed Chloe a wineglass. “But she just met you, so it’s hard telling what she said.”

“She proclaimed to be psychic. Sort of.” If prognosticating that Chloe would kiss Zander counted.

“She is eerily perceptive. Intuitive. Do I want to know what she foretold?”

“Probably not.” Chloe held up her glass. “To The Big O.”

His firm mouth flinched into a smile. She allowed herself a moment to imagine what it might feel like against her lips.

“I’ll drink to that.”

The wine was delicious. Buttery and smooth. It slid down her throat and warmed her belly.

“I like your sister. She seems tough but also very sweet.” She had the idea that Jaylyn hid the more vulnerable version of herself behind coal-black eyeliner and combat boots.

“She’s the best.” He smiled, proud.

“I feel the same way about my brother, but then there are only the two of us. Are you close with your other brothers?”

“Geographically, no. In every other way, yes. We’d take a bullet for each other.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Let’s hope.” He tapped her wineglass with his in agreement.

Her own family was close. Her father and mother were very much in love. Her brother could be immature at times, but he was a good guy. There wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do for his family. And Chloe was the same way.

“I’m sure Jaylyn keeps you and your brothers on your toes. I heard some of her dating stories.”

“It’s virtually impossible not to worry about her. I don’t typically hear the story until after she’s castrated the guy who wronged her.”

“Figuratively speaking?”

“Let’s hope,” he said again.

“My brother’s an adult, but he’s younger than me, so I’ve taken on the role of big, bad protector.”

“That’s kind of you, but I’m guessing he can fight his own battles.”

“Yes. I’m still protective though.”

“Same. I try to be laid-back about it, but ‘laid-back’ isn’t really my style.” His dry delivery made her smile. “I’m sure your brother would gladly kick someone’s ass if they broke your heart.”

“I’ve had my fair share of bad dates but haven’t been close enough to anyone to have suffered a broken heart.”

“That’s very lucky.” He cocked his head. “And also unlucky.”

“To have loved and lost...” she started.

“Trite, but true.”

She could understand why he felt that way. “The last guy I dated was hung up on someone else.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I didn’t like him that much anyway,” she surprised herself by saying.

She’d gone to bed with him out of obligation more than attraction. They’d seen each other for most of the summer, she’d justified. At the beginning of this year, she’d wondered why she’d felt the need to justify it. Shouldn’t attraction be natural?

“I’ve dated enough disappointing men that I’m tempted to swear off dating forever.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” He scratched his cheek. “I think our date’s going well, don’t you?”

She felt her eyebrows lift. “Is this a date?”

“Well, so far you’ve swiped my champagne, sent me on a wild goose chase to find you, and have met a good chunk of my family. I’m woefully out of practice, but that sounds like a date to me.”

“Maybe in a romantic comedy.”

“I like romantic comedies.”

“I wondered.”

His eyes held a question, but he didn’t ask her to elaborate. After he took another drink of his wine, he set his glass on a neighboring table. “Would you like to dance, Chloe Andrews?”

“I’d love to.” She set aside her own wineglass and then slipped her hand into his offered palm. His fingers were warm and strong as they closed over hers.



ZANDER HAD VOWED to kiss a woman at midnight tonight—any woman, so long as she wasn’t married or on a date with someone else. Now, with Chloe Andrews-slash-CURLYQSUE’s hand in his, that tall order was suddenly within reach.

He was going to tell her that he knew her secret identity. He couldn’t continue lying by omission. It wasn’t right. On the other hand, she’d ghosted him once before. When she found out he was HOPPERFAN02, would she reject him again?

He sure as hell hoped not.

In the adjoining room, three couples swayed on the dance floor, including Tag and a very pregnant Rachel. He was curled over his wife protectively, her round belly between

them. They didn't look in Zander's direction, having eyes only for each other—at least for the moment.

Zander was happy for them. While he and Emily had discussed children when they were first married, her actually getting pregnant hadn't been on their radar. They'd both been busy—and of course, had believed they'd had plenty of time.

“Bear with me,” he murmured against the shell of Chloe's ear as he pulled in a breath. Her cinnamon scent tingled his nostrils and made him hungry for more of her. “I'm not much of a dancer.”

“You're in good hands. She tipped her head to look up at him, her red lips parting into a confident smile. “I've been in a lot of weddings and have guided more than one hapless groomsman.”

Zander would just bet they were hapless. He would also bet that they'd been gobsmacked by Chloe, who had no idea how alluring she was. “Perfect. You can lead.”

She'd loosened up since she'd fled from him earlier tonight. To be fair, he was also more comfortable around her. She'd sneaked past his defenses before he'd realized there were any.

“Since we are calling this a date, what's the plan for tonight?” Her tone was playful and, if he wasn't mistaken, hopeful.

“I'm a bit rusty. Isn't small talk the norm?”

“It is, but we sort of blew past that barrier already.” Her smile was kind.

“Right. Mentioning my late wife probably wasn't the best conversation starter.”

Her hand on his shoulder squeezed gently. “I like to talk about things that are real. Big talk. Small talk. Any of it, as long as it’s the truth.”

Guilt poked him in the ribs. He was going to have to come clean with her soon.

“I’ll start.” She rolled her eyes to the ceiling as if searching for a topic. “What’s your favorite food?”

“That’s safe.”

“Well, we are on a first date.”

He liked that she’d gone along with that idea.

“Let’s see, my favorite food...” Little did she know that she’d asked him something similar via DM. She’d mentioned how boring she found still-life paintings, and he’d been compelled to show her one that he’d found dynamic and interesting. She’d cheekily admitted that the berry compote looked “scrumptious.” Then she’d asked if he had a favorite breakfast food.

“Nothing beats a fat, buttery croissant,” he said now, giving her a very big hint as to how they knew each other.

Recollection sparked in her eyes but faded when she blinked. So close.

“A *chocolate* croissant, maybe. But a plain old buttered croissant?” She wrinkled her nose.

“There’s nothing plain about a good croissant.”

“With tea?”

“Coffee. Never was able to stomach tea. What did Ted Lasso call it?”

“Garbage water.”

That was another hint—he'd mentioned the show once or twice on the app too.

"Coffee is the best thing in the whole world," she said. "Iced or hot?"

"Hot. There's no other way."

"Agree. Black or creamed?"

"Black."

"Sugar?"

"Yes, darling?"

"Fancy yourself clever, don't you, Zander?"

"I could accuse you of the same, Chloe."

A beat of not-uncomfortable silence curled in between them. Her hand was warm in his, the sexual tension escalating with each breath. He could feel it humming like a live wire.

"I know how you take your coffee." One of her eyebrows rose in challenge. "If we ever have coffee together."

"How about tomorrow morning?"

Her mouth fell open but only for a moment before she blinked and then studied him beneath her lashes. "I'm not an early riser."

"I'm flexible," he rumbled.

"That remains to be seen," she purred. She batted her lashes, clearly flirting with him. Maybe he wasn't as rusty at this as he thought.

He gingerly guided her on the dance floor, trying not to step on her toes and trying to decide when to tell her how they knew each other. He was loathe to break the spell they were

under but couldn't let them go too far before he told her the truth.

Well. Here went nothing.

“When I told you I worked for Crane Hotels,” he started, “I didn't share in what capacity.”

“I assumed you were in charge of something somewhere.”

“How very specific.”

“You know what I mean.” She nudged his shoulder playfully. “I assume you have a plaque with your name on it, and below that a very long, very complicated title. Like... Director of Human Resources and Marketability. Or Chief Counsel of...Financial Endeavors.”

God, she was cute.

“Are those actual positions?”

“No idea. I'm not the corporate type.”

“Says the President of Sable Concierge.”

“It's a vanity title.”

He let her have the moment of humility, but in the future, and once he knew her better, he wouldn't allow her to downgrade her accomplishments. Even though he couldn't help arguing, “I doubt Isabella Sawyer-Crane would hand out pity titles.”

Chloe blushed prettily.

“I'm not very corporate either. I am allergic to going to meetings.” He shuddered for effect. “I, ah, I work for myself.”

“An entrepreneur. Impressive.”

“More like a contractor.”

She tipped her head. “Like a builder?”

“No. More like a...*purveyor*.”

“A purveyor?” Her expression shifted into an adorable look of confusion.

His palms grew slick as he relived the same sinking, rotting-gut feeling as when he’d pressed Send on the invitation he’d sent her—the one she’d never responded to online.

Just say it.

“I procure art for businesses. Paintings. Photography. It’s lucrative, and I can operate from anywhere in the world.” He cleared his throat and then opened the bag to let the cat out. “I have been chatting with a woman online who posts exquisite black-and-white photos of Chicago. I was enamored by her work. Still am. She refused to sell to me. I was very disappointed.”

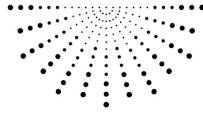
Her hand on his shoulder slipped a few inches. “That sounds...very familiar.”

“That’s what I thought when I saw your photos hanging in the hallway in this very mansion, Chloe.”

He saw the exact moment when the truth dawned on her face—her eyes widened, and she blinked, stunned.

“Or should I call you *Curly Q Sue*?”

CHAPTER EIGHT



Her mind scrambled to make sense of the information that Zander had shared.

“You—you’re Hopper Fan...?”

“Zero two,” he finished when she didn’t. Or rather, *couldn’t*.

No way could she process that and concentrate on dancing. She released him and left the parquet flooring while keeping a cordial smile on her face so that no one—namely Tag or Rachel who were canoodling nearby—would notice that there was something wrong.

Not that there was anything *wrong*.

She was just...surprised.

She’d chatted with HOPPERFAN02 online over the past few months, but she’d never expected to meet him in person. She certainly hadn’t been *prepared* to meet him in person. Especially after ignoring his invitation.

Ugh. Why had she done that?

“Chloe.” Zander followed behind her but thankfully kept his voice down.

She had no intention of running away from him again, and so she turned and clasped his hand. Pulling him closer, she led them to a dim corner of the room, near a tall cocktail table with empty glasses on its surface.

“You’re really him.” She was still wrapping her mind around the fact that the man who curated art and photographed it for the app was Zander Crane. The same man who’d been lost in Reese Crane’s mansion with her. The man with his hand in hers now.

“Believe me, I was as surprised as you are when I found out.”

“I don’t understand how—”

“Like I said, I saw your photos framed and hanging in the hallway. I recognized the style, specifically the snickerdoodle photo. It’s the same one you posted on our app. *The app.*”

Our app.

Chloe had posted that photo. She’d been so proud of it. Not that she’d been trying to remain incognito, but she hadn’t been remotely ready to let *the world* know she was a photographer. The app was a safe space. She could test out her work and field reactions without commitment.

No one had been more taken aback than she when she’d learned that Merina and Reese were interested in her work. Chloe had shown Isa a few shots one evening, and Isa, who’d recently taken up matchmaking—it applied to dates, friends, and apparently clients as well—had mentioned the photos to Merina.

“This is so awkward.” Chloe put her hand to her forehead. She felt exposed. Outed. What must Zander think of her after

she'd ghosted his online persona and then flirted with him the entire evening?

"I'm sorry." His eyebrows bent in apology.

She was already shaking her head. He had nothing to be sorry about.

"I knew it was a risk to tell you the truth after not hearing from you via message," he continued, "but it didn't seem right to keep it from you. At least not on our first date." His smile was crooked.

Adorably crooked.

She clucked her tongue. How genuinely nice. The men she'd dated in the past would have been more than happy to leave in her in the dark if they thought it would have boded well for their chances with her. Jaylyn was right. Zander was a good guy...

Unless he arranged this entire evening to corner me, her pesky brain put in.

"Not to be overly suspicious of your intentions, but...did you know I was going to be here?"

"No. Not at all." His answer was quick enough that she believed him.

"So, when you invited me out...you weren't planning on coming here?"

"No. I was going to take you to the Vancouver Hotel for a dinner party. It was very public and safe. I wouldn't have thrust you into my family's house when we'd never met." His lips flinched into a brief smile. "And yet here we are."

"Here we are." A true kismet moment.

“If you don’t mind my asking...”

She nodded for him to go ahead.

“Why didn’t you respond to my invitation? Even if it was to tell me no?”

“I...wasn’t ready.”

“You weren’t ready to say yes to a date, or you weren’t ready to say yes to a date with *me*?”

“I’m not—” She hesitated, unsure how honest to be with him. The truth would leave her tender underbelly exposed.

“It’s all right, Chloe. Honestly. If anyone understands not being ready, it’s me. I have been damn near reclusive for two years. Then you come along—you as in Curly Q Sue—and woo me out of my doldrums.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “I *wooed* you?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Through your photographs first, and then in person tonight. Seeing this city through your eyes reminded me that the world was bigger than the small, gray city I lived in. I hadn’t been traveling, or leaving the house more than to run necessary errands, since Emily passed. The way you see Chicago reminded me that there was a life beyond my tiny corner of the world—and that you were living a rich, full, exquisite one.”

“My photos said that?” She was passionate about the city, and her main goal had been to capture the romance of it. When he’d reached out on the app to compliment her, she’d been overjoyed that he shared her vision.

“And more,” he answered. “You gave me the courage to admit it was time to start over.” He winced, a subtle tensing of one cheek, but she’d noticed. “That sounds bad, doesn’t it?”

“Not to me. It sounds healthy.”

“You made me fall in love with this city anew, and that’s the truth.” He pulled in a breath that lifted his shoulders. “Listen, I would never pressure you in any way. If tonight never goes further than this moment, I will always owe you a debt for that gift.”

Her heart softened like room-temperature butter. She’d posted her photos for fun but had never expected someone to fall in love with the city through them—at least not enough to pick up and move here from the UK. It was...

“Amazing,” she heard herself say. He was watching her with such bald sincerity she could hardly breathe. “Will you show me the framed photos?”

“I’d love to.” In that regal way he had, he offered his arm and she accepted. Then he escorted her from the room.



IN THE CORRIDOR directly behind the staircase, Zander stopped in front of the row of photos. The party was going strong behind them, the sounds of music and laughter having grown fainter with every step they took.

Chloe’s hand was in his, her body pressed against him. He wasn’t exactly sure where he stood with her, but the fact that she hadn’t left him alone on the dance floor seemed promising.

“I never saw them framed. They look great.” Her smile was cautious but proud as she studied her work. She should be proud. The photographs were unique. Incredible. “Not to brag.”

“It’s not bragging if it’s true.”

“I’m not a professional.”

“As a man who purchases fine art *for* professionals, trust me when I say that your photos are exquisite.” He faced her. “Like the woman who took them.”

Her eyes turned up to his as her teeth dragged along her bottom lip. When he thought she might argue with the compliment, she instead accepted it with a “thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” When he’d asked out CURLYQSUE online, he’d been angling for a New Year’s Eve kiss. She was, in his mind, the best option. He hadn’t been dating and didn’t have any woman friends in the States. He figured after spending a pleasant night with her, they could kiss and then return to chatting online. Not so anonymously, this time around. Beyond that, he’d made no plans.

Meeting Chloe in person had been an entirely unexpected experience. He hadn’t been prepared for her to be this beautiful. This charming. This captivating.

“You asked why I didn’t respond,” she said, her gaze on a photo of the Crane Hotel’s entryway.

“I did.” He wasn’t sure he wanted to know now. He didn’t want their night to end quite yet.

“The truth is...” She peered up at him, her red lips pursed.

Preparing to give him bad news? Possibly. She hadn’t leapt for joy when he’d asked her out online. Had that changed for her? Or was she rethinking everything now that she knew his true identity—and how closely involved he was with her friends, who happened to be his family.

“Go on.” He dipped his chin, prepared to hear what she had to say. She had a right to react now that she had all of the information.

“I didn’t respond because I was afraid I would be disappointed. You wouldn’t have been my first internet date, and in the past, they haven’t been great. I didn’t even know your real name. I didn’t want to know it.”

He took the blow harder than he’d anticipated. Maybe because this was his first date since his wife had passed. Maybe because he felt a connection with Chloe. Or maybe, like Jaylyn had said, because he’d believed that Chloe and CURLYQSUE being one and the same had been nothing short of magical.

Oh, how he’d needed a dash of magic tonight.

“I understand,” he said anyway.

He’d asked her out blindly, and on a whim. It’d been late, he’d been sipping a second glass of pinot noir... He hadn’t thought it through. Perhaps he should have.

He might be inexperienced in the dating world, but he knew when a woman was about to let him down easily. That he hadn’t been more careful with his approach to her—online and in person—would be something he regretted for a long, long while.

“I’m truly sorry to have disappointed you. It wasn’t my intention,” he murmured. Her hand still rested in his. He brushed her fingers with the pad of his thumb. “I asked you out because we had so much in common. I thought— You know what, it doesn’t matter what I thought. I’m sorry.”

A small laugh exited her lips. “You’re sorry?”

“Yes, I—I never wanted to disappoint you.”

“I’m not disappointed,” she whispered.

“No?”

“No.” She still wore a smile. A good sign. “Are you?”

“No.” His head gave an adamant shake. “The opposite. You here tonight is nothing short of—”

“Magic,” they said at the same time.

“Yes.” He smiled, relieved. Maybe this wasn’t going as badly as he’d first assumed.

“You offered to kiss me at midnight.”

He zeroed in on her lips. “Yes.”

Her mouth opened to take in a quick breath before she whispered, “Do we have to wait until midnight to kiss?”

“No.” The word was a growl that ended when he set his lips on hers.

She shifted one hand to the back of his neck and pulled his mouth tightly to hers. He grunted, adjusted his weight so that he didn’t topple over, and looped his free arm around her waist. He tugged her body against his—every sparkling inch of it. Willing, she fell against him.

Her lips were as soft and inviting as they looked—and he’d been looking. She raked her fingernails upward into his hair and pulled. The move brought his mouth away from hers. Enough that he sucked in a cool breath before diving in again—this time with tongue.

She held onto him, one hand in his hair, one fisted on his jacket. As her tongue stroked his, his mind left the planet. She tasted like champagne and smelled of cinnamon. She was every hot sex dream his fevered mind had concocted. Only better. Because she was in his arms right now, right here, and turning him inside out.

It took some doing but he ended the kiss. He dropped his forehead to hers so that he could catch his breath. “Goddamn.”

She let out a husky giggle. “My sentiments exactly.”

He hadn’t kissed a woman other than Emily in years. Kissing this woman had sent his pulse skittering into a dangerous rhythm. His body had been on high alert for hours, and now it was nearing a meltdown.

She gripped his forearms with her palms and gave him a light shake. “This is crazy.”

“Is it?” He had no idea how he’d pushed those two words from his tight throat. His body was rigid and tense as he held himself in check. Never before had he wanted to hike a woman’s dress to her waist and take her against the nearest wall.

He wanted that with Chloe.

“I like crazy with you. It feels strangely safe.”

His smile went wonky. He liked that he made her feel safe. That she trusted him. From some uncharted place inside of him came the question, “Want to do something crazier?”

Her eyes sparked with interest, her auburn eyebrows lifting. “Does it involve more of those kisses?”

He lowered his voice, came even closer to her plump, red lips, and said, “So many more.”

“I, um. I haven’t had sex in a very long time.”

Lust flooded his bloodstream. He’d offered more kisses, and it sounded like she was planning on more than that.

“I haven’t met anyone worthy of considering having sex *with*,” she said.

“Until now?” He cocked his head and waited for her answer. He wasn’t disappointed.

“Until now.”

Before she could take the words back, he dove in and kissed her again. This time she looped her arms around his neck as she tangled her tongue with his. After she’d sent him on another interstellar trip, she lowered to her heels and shook her head. But not to tell him no—thank Christ.

“Where?” she whispered against his mouth.

“Great question.” His mind raced. Right here in the hallway seemed irrational. He blinked hard. His place or hers meant leaving the mansion, and then he’d have to find his sister and she’d have to tell Isa... Plus they would be inserting a lot of awkward time and space in between that kiss and their next one. Hadn’t they both waited too long for a physical connection already?

“Follow me.” He took her hand and tried to remember which room was which on this floor. Then he figured it probably didn’t matter as long as they didn’t end up in the antique furniture room. Any room with a bed would do.

He went right, walking so fast that Chloe had to jog to keep up. Her laughter rang out behind him, causing his heart rate to soar and his own laughter to follow. When was the last time he’d felt this free?

Too long.

He turned another corner and found a few closed doors. “Which one should we try?”

She considered briefly before letting go of his hand. She opened the door at the end of the hall, revealing an unoccupied guest room with a very large bed. “Is this okay?”

“No.” Her smile fell but recovered when he added, “It’s perfect.”

She bit her bottom lip and tugged him into the room by his lapels. Every thought apart from pleasing her drained out of his head. He kicked the door closed behind him.

She plopped onto the bed, her breasts bouncing beneath the shiny material of her dress. Her hair was a halo around her sweetheart face. Her eyes on his, she reached for her shoe.

He tugged at his bowtie.

She removed her other shoe.

He tore off his jacket.

When she stood and approached him, he met her halfway.

Threading his fingers through auburn hair every bit as soft as he’d imagined, he held her face in his palms and was far more honest than he’d planned. “I don’t want to fuck this up.”

“You won’t.”

“If at any moment you’re not in ecstasy, put me in my place, will you?” He didn’t know what had happened to his voice, but he didn’t sound like himself. Rather than his usual carefully modulated tone, his vocal cords were strung tight. There’d been a slight shake in the word *ecstasy*.

“You have my word.” Her voice was raspy and sensual. Everything about her turned him on. Especially now that he had her alone in a bedroom. “Help me out of this dress.”

His confidence returned full force. “My pleasure.”



FOR YEARS, Chloe hadn't been what she'd consider "lucky in love." She certainly wasn't going to turn down the gift the universe had sent her on December 31. Zander Crane might as well have been wrapped in a big red bow.

Standing in front of those photos earlier, she'd had to let it sink in that HOPPERFAN02 was holding her hand. She didn't give karma more than a passing thought on any given day, but who could deny the unbelievable coincidence that they'd run into each other tonight?

"I can't believe it's you." He held both of her hands now, his blue eyes drilling into hers.

"Me neither. But I'm glad it is."

"So am I." He lowered his handsome face for a kiss that she returned. They made out long and slow, no worries of being caught now that they were behind a closed door. His hands moved from her shoulders to her waist, sliding up and down the crystal beads and sending shivers along her entire body. He paused, his fingers toying with the closure of her dress. "Is this okay?"

"Really okay." She nodded eagerly.

Slowly, he drew down the zipper. He traced her spine with his knuckles, causing goosebumps to crop up on her arms.

Once her dress was open, he smoothed his warm palms over her back and up to her shoulders. His eyes on hers, he slid the garment down and off. She fought to keep breathing but only so she didn't pass out and miss a single second of what came next.

"How am I doing so far? On a scale of one to ten?"

"Ten," she said.

He chuckled. “Don’t make this too easy on me. I may not have impressed you on the dance floor but impressing you in here is a must.” He ran his fingers along the lace band of her black panties and then up to the sheer cups of her bra. She hadn’t expected to show anyone her lingerie tonight but was glad she’d worn her sexiest set.

“Damn.” He brushed the firm tip of her nipple with his thumb. It’d been too long since anyone had touched her intimately. She dropped her head back and sighed. Cool air greeted her bared breasts when he took off her bra. He set his mouth to her nipple, his tongue doing a dirty dance against her tender flesh.

“Oh, God.” She cupped his head as a keening moan exited her throat. *Yes, yes.* This felt so much better than touching herself. When he moved to the other nipple, her knees disintegrated. He must have sensed when she’d lost strength. He set her on the bed and braced one arm behind her. Then he stamped her mouth with a brief kiss on the lips before hauling her body up the mattress.

“On a scale of one to ten—” he started.

“Shut up.”

The smile he gave her was sinister. “I’ll occupy my mouth elsewhere. How’s that sound?”

A surge of warmth pooled between her legs.

“I’d hate to beg on our first date.” Her voice was hoarse, which might have struck her as funny if he hadn’t been tugging at her panties with his teeth. As it was, her concentration was solely on what he was about to do to her. Her underwear joined her dress on the floor. He spread her

legs and peered up from between her open thighs—a sight she'd forever remember.

There was fire in his gaze when he said, “Suddenly, I’m starving.”

No words came when he set his mouth on her most sensitive part. He licked. He *sucked*. All while her shaking thighs clamped his shoulders. It was too much and not enough all at once. The view of his head bobbing up and down paired with the intense feeling of his laving tongue stroking her was almost too much to take. By the time his crisp shirt brushed against her inner thighs, she'd filled her lungs with air to cry out.

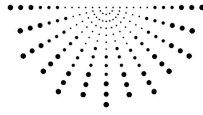
She came so hard that neon lights zipped across the insides of her eyelids like stray comets. Then they relocated to dance along her belly and chest, skittering down each of her limbs. She sank into the pillow, her chest heaving, her mind stuffed with cotton. The pulsing sensation between her legs gradually began to lessen.

“Mmm,” was the only sound she was capable of uttering.

He tenderly kissed the inside of one of her knees while she floated back to earth. When she heard him inhale, she knew what he was going to ask next.

“One hundred.” She answered without hesitation, her arm shielding her eyes. “One hundred on a scale of one to ten.”

CHAPTER NINE



*H*e couldn't help it, he laughed out loud.

Pleasing Chloe had been its own reward, though he'd take the compliment. Her peach-colored nipples were turgid, goosebumps rising on her porcelain skin. He'd thought her legs were perfect—and they were—but those breasts were beyond. He placed a kiss on the center of her chest and then nuzzled her neck.

“You taste fantastic.” He closed his lips over her pulse point. “Better than the finest pink champagne.”

She moved her arm from her face and grinned over at him. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyelids half open, her eyes slightly dazed. Something in his chest gave way—something that had been there for a while, firm and unyielding. The ache there was also very real. So real, he put a hand over his heart and massaged.

It'd been ages since he'd pleased a woman, and the last woman he'd pleased had been his wife. His sacred duty had been to love her as she died. He'd been responsible for caring for her, for worrying over her needs. It'd been an honor to care for her, but he'd missed pleasing her sexually.

Meanwhile, Chloe was looking at him like he'd hung the moon—which made him feel like a hero. A foreign feeling,

but a welcome one.

She reached up and fingered a button on his shirt. “How is it that I wound up completely nude and you’ve only taken off your tie and jacket?”

He glanced down at his suit, for the most part intact. “I guess I was in a hurry to start on you.”

“Mmm.” Her eyes sank closed. “I was in a hurry to finish, apparently.”

“Finish? I’m sure there is another one in there. Or two.” He’d work as hard as he needed tonight to ensure that she enjoyed herself. “Your pleasure is my pleasure, Ms. Andrews.”

“Your formality is weirdly sexy.” She laughed as she asked, “Are you going to carry me out of here afterward?”

“If you leave me with enough strength.”

“Don’t count on it.” A flash lit her eyes as she slipped a button free on his shirt. When she pushed on his chest, he gave in and lay on his back. She set her mouth to his while pulling open the remainder of his buttons.

As their mouths mated, he lost himself in the sensation of kissing her. Her tongue was wild and hot, her breaths shallow pants of excitement. He could barely contain his own.

Her nails scraped down his chest, landing on his belt. His hands shook as he helped her slip the leather through the belt loops.

She unfastened his pants and cupped his cock over his boxers. He was rock hard and ready. Eight solid inches of steel jerked against her palm, silently begging for more. When she kissed his chest, he dropped his head helplessly to the bed. The word *yes* on repeat pounded his skull.

“Every part of you is gorgeous,” she said as she yanked his briefs and pants off his legs.

A cocky smile on his mouth, he propped himself up on his elbows and watched her. He didn’t want to miss a single second of what came next.

She didn’t disappoint.

Her eyes on him, her long auburn hair tickling his legs, she finally placed her soft lips over the head of his dick. He sucked in a breath when she took him in completely. And then his mouth went bone dry.

He had to concentrate harder than he would have liked not to come on contact. It’d been he had no idea how long since he’d received a blowjob. Chloe’s mouth was heaven. Suctioning, licking, sucking. She took him deep and then released him. The moan escaping his mouth was completely unexpected—*she* was completely unexpected.

Hand resting on her head, he fought to keep his hips pinned to the mattress so that he didn’t thrust too much or too hard. He wanted this to be good for her too.

“Jesus,” he said on an exhale. “What was that?”

“Just a little trick,” she breathed against his damp flesh before she took him deep into her mouth again.

Her breasts brushed his thighs as she worked. Damn, it was nearly impossible not to give in to what he wanted and fuck her mouth. But. He was far too close to the edge to let her continue.

He pulled her mouth off him and reversed their positions. When she was on her back, he paused long enough to put a kiss on the center of her lips.

“I can’t let you finish me off. I have work to do.”

“If you must.” Her impish expression in the low lamplight hinted that she didn’t mind.

He imagined his own expression was half drunk with lust. He peeled off his socks and then returned to the bed completely naked.

No words were needed, even if he could have spoken them. Instead, he kissed her, working his way along her neck and then to those perfect breasts he hadn’t had enough of yet.

“Zander.” She sounded as lost in the moment as he felt.

He loved hearing his name on her lips, especially with a pleading, desperate quality that told him he was doing exactly what she liked. When he didn’t stop kissing her chest, she tightened her hold on his hair and repeated his name, this time firmly.

He dragged his gaze to hers to find her lust-blown pupils wide and black. She offered a smile before she said, “We need a condom.”

“Right.” It took some effort to bring his brain back online.

A condom. He’d forgotten that necessary detail. Also, he didn’t have one. He heard the hope in his voice when he asked, “I don’t suppose you planned ahead?”

“I have one in my purse.” She shoved his shoulder. “On the floor next to my shoes.”

He climbed off the bed to rifle through their discarded clothing on the floor. He finally spotted a corner of the silver sequined clutch that blended in with the fabric of her dress. He handed her the small bag, and she fished a gold packet out of its recesses.

She gave him a saucy smile. “Good thing I packed the big one.”

“Indeed.” He kissed her, grateful for her preparedness. He was completely out of his element, following her lead and fumbling his way through the evening.

She tore the packet and sat up in bed, pausing for so long that he had to ask, “Change your mind?”

“No! Oh my God, no. I just...” She bit her lip briefly. “You’re okay, right? With this.”

It was sweet of her to ask, but he wasn’t fragile. Not any longer. He didn’t want her to worry over him—to worry about anything other than herself tonight. He had the impression that she didn’t often put herself first.

That changed now.

“Chloe.” He took her free hand and placed it over his aching hard-on. “Feel that?”

The concern bled out of her eyes, leaving nothing but want in their depths. “Yes.”

“*This* is because of you. Because of your incredible body in that dress. Your hot, talented mouth. The sweet look in your eyes right now. You’re trying to worry about me instead of worrying about yourself, and I can’t have that.” He kissed her softly. “Trust me, beautiful. I couldn’t be more okay with this.”

She nodded her understanding and then whispered, “Let me.”

He allowed her to roll on the condom, enjoying the feel of her slender cool fingers touching him through the latex. She stroked once, twice... He lost track.

“That’s enough.” With one swift motion, he pinned her hand onto the bed next to her ear. “*Stay.*”

She licked her lips—to tease him, no doubt. He lifted her other hand and trapped that one as well. His body blanketed hers, and his cock found her center without trying. The moment he swiped her slick folds with the tip, she gasped.

“Concentrate, honey,” he reminded her. “You have a job to do.”

“I do?”

“Yes.” With one powerful thrust, he slid in to the hilt. “Come for me.”

Her neck arched as she accepted every inch of him. He released her wrists but kept moving, his sole focus on making her shout his name on a sated cry.

He slid forward with one rough motion and then drew out slow. So slowly he wasn’t sure if he was teasing her or himself. He might lose his mind before all was said and done.

Every sensation in his body had been dialed up to eleven, as if this were his first time having a woman—as if he’d been reborn into this moment. Each second ticked by in slow motion. He soaked in each and every detail.

The feel of her soft skin against his.

Her breasts flattened against his chest.

The taste of the salt on her neck when he kissed her.

The way she clawed his back, sending twin trails of awareness down his spine.

“Chloe.” He hadn’t meant to call her name, but he hadn’t been able to stop himself. She’d consumed him—body and

soul.

“There, Zander. *There.*”

At her command, he lifted her leg, hooked her ankle around his ass, and drove deep. She called his name once more and then her inner muscles clamped down onto him.

“*Fuck,*” he breathed. Had he ever felt anything better?

But then she buried her face into his neck and came as he’d commanded, and he decided *that* was even better.

He absorbed her orgasm as it reverberated through her body and rippled outward into his. He wasn’t far behind, allowing his own release—a mind-blanking tidal wave that engulfed him entirely.



HER BODY BEGAN to cool far too soon. A shiver tickled its way up her spine as goosebumps appeared on her arms. Zander must have noticed, because he reached over and grabbed the duvet they were on top of and yanked it over her body.

Then he curled around her, his nose tucked behind her ear. A low, satisfied hum worked its way up his throat.

“On a scale of one to ten...” she started.

“A million,” his rough voice answered.

It felt good to laugh with him. The last time she’d laughed in bed she’d been alone, and that had been due to her rotten luck on a dating app. The humorless chuckle had followed her deleting her account permanently.

She’d had fun and fantastic sex. A miracle!

“What’s so funny?” Curiosity lined his face.

“I can’t decide if you helped me keep or break my resolution.”

“Which one was that?”

“I swore I’d have a one-night stand this year. I’m not sure if this qualifies.”

“It doesn’t qualify. We’re meeting for coffee tomorrow, remember?” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“Right. How could I forget?” She couldn’t. She *hadn’t*. But she also wasn’t sure if he had changed his mind. He might be ready to run now that they’d slept together.

“Is there an ensuite?”

“Over your shoulder.” She tipped her chin toward the attached bathroom behind him.

“I was too focused on you to notice. Give me a second.” He gave her a peck and then rolled out of bed.

She folded her arm under her head and watched his lean form. Zander was muscular and strong, with impressive biceps and calf muscles. Not to mention his stomach. She’d played her tongue along his abs earlier, and then lower to a penis that had far exceeded her expectations.

Yowza.

She covered her mouth to smother a giggle. A literal *giggle*.

Fortune had finally smiled upon her, and in the least likely place. She hadn’t expected to do more than show up, drink a glass of champagne, and ride home happy that the year was behind her. Now she’d had sex with the hottest guy she’d ever laid eyes on, *and* they were having coffee tomorrow.

Her smile fell. She shouldn't get too far ahead of herself. No matter how much flirting they'd done about coffee and breakfast, there was a chance that tonight ended up *only* being tonight.

What she and Zander shared, aside from mind-blowing sex, was an online relationship that surpassed casual chatting. Of course, they'd covered the basics: paintings and photography, and their favorite foods, but they'd also shared stories from their childhoods, and what scared them most. They were friends, in a sense.

Even though they'd shared a friendship and a few intimate secrets, she had no reason to believe that the man who'd just blown her mind in bed was interested in starting an *actual* relationship. He'd moved to this city, what, two minutes ago? He hadn't found his footing yet.

And what about her? She had been a sassy single for a long, long time. As much as she enjoyed his company, tonight had been a champagne-fueled whirlwind wrapped in a New Year's Eve spell. There was no guarantee any of it would last past the stroke of midnight.

"One step at a time, girl," she warned herself.

Holding the duvet over her body, she sat up in bed and ruffled her hair. Behind the closed bathroom door, the sink turned on and then off.

They should probably go back to the party and make an appearance before too long. Not that they had chaperones, but Chloe knew that Isa had been keeping an eye on her. Hell, Rachel had probably noticed when Chloe and Zander ran off the dance floor. And what about Jaylyn? Maybe she'd given up on the keyboardist and was currently searching for her brother.

Hand to her forehead, Chloe sighed. Reality hadn't wasted any time crashing into her fantasy world, had it?

The bathroom door opened and out walked Zander, completely naked. The man was as glorious from the front as he'd been from the back.

"Uh-oh." He eased down on the edge of the bed and touched the space between her eyebrows. "What happened? I left you sated and smiling and now you look worried."

"Is there anything you don't notice?"

"Plenty." He pulled in a breath, and she fully expected him to say something like *This was fun, but...* Instead, he said, "I like you, Chloe Andrews."

"I like you too," she confessed. They shared a not-uncomfortable moment of eye contact. "I was thinking we should show our faces at the party. And I should probably check mine." She swiped her finger beneath her eyes where no doubt her mascara had transferred.

"Your face," he said, taking her hand and kissing it, "is even more beautiful than before we came in here. Trust me."

She had trusted him tonight with her body. She wasn't sure if she could trust him with more than that. They'd both been swept up in the moment—the glamour of the holiday and the temptation of a fresh start. As much as she wanted to be swept off her feet by her very own Crane, perhaps it was best to manage her expectations.

Gathering the duvet, she roll-scooted off the bed, palmed her clutch, and dragged the blanket with her to the bathroom. "I'll meet you out there. If you don't mind."

He briefly shook his head. "I can wait."

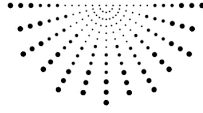
“I’m worried if we reenter the room together...” She was unsure how to finish that sentence. First off, she sounded ridiculous. They were consenting adults and in no way owed anyone an explanation. Though borrowing a guest bedroom because they couldn’t wait a single second longer to tear off each other’s clothes sounded more like *horny-teenager* behavior.

But the idea of multiple pairs of prying eyes on her and Zander when they reentered the party made her nervous. She didn’t want to answer any more questions than strictly necessary. She had plenty of unanswered questions of her own.

“If you’re certain,” he said, looking as if he didn’t want to say it at all.

“Positive. I’ll meet you at the bar for a glass of champagne in a minute.” She pulled the blanket into the bathroom. Before she shut the door, she added, “And then we’ll kiss at midnight.”

CHAPTER TEN



30 MINUTES 'TIL MIDNIGHT

All that and a kiss at midnight.

Zander had been given far more than he'd expected tonight from Chloe, but he'd be lying if he said that sleeping with her hadn't been exactly what he'd needed.

It was like a strong breeze had blown away a thick cloud of debris, and he could finally see clearly. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. The sex had been surprising, even more so was the intensity he'd experienced. Had she felt it too?

He didn't want to leave her behind in the bedroom, but she'd insisted. The last thing he wanted to do was overstay his welcome or pressure her in any way. In the end, she hadn't left him with much of a choice.

In the corridor behind the staircase, he paused once again to admire her photos. They were, at a glance, minimalist black-and-white buildings on a city block, but he saw beneath the exterior to the beauty within them. Beauty made more evident now that he knew the woman behind the camera.

Hands in his pockets, he strolled toward the party, resisting the urge to whistle. His mind was clear, his body humming

from the intense release. He couldn't keep the smile from his face, nor the flashbacks of naked Chloe from his brain—not that he tried.

The sound of chitchat and laughter from the party was louder than earlier. Everyone was feeling the spirit of the season...likely from the spirits they'd imbibed.

"There you are!" Before he'd reached the doorway, his sister rushed out into the hallway to greet him, her cell phone in the air. To the phone, she said, "I found him."

"I told you that wasn't necessary," Brody responded.

"You should tell him in person! He wants to hear it from you." Jaylyn thrust the phone at Zander's chest. "Here."

Zander held the phone in front of his face and said hello to his brother, feeling slightly awkward about having a video conversation in public. This was Jaylyn's preferred way of communicating.

"Happy Almost New Year, big brother." Brody, a patch of a mustache over thick scruff, offered an easygoing grin. He wore a jaunty paisley button-down shirt and a suede jacket over top. No doubt with a pair of jeans—he preferred to wear denim, and could. He was a writer, so no dress code.

"Happy New Year, Brody. Quiet night tonight?"

Brody stood outside on a balcony, a chilly-looking New York cityscape behind him. "No ball drop for me this year."

"Getting too old for that shit?" Zander asked with a smile.

"Never old, big brother. Times Square isn't my scene. I'm at a friend's penthouse." He checked over his shoulder and blew out a visible breath. "I'm freezing my nuts off out here, even standing next to the space heaters."

Zander moved farther from the party to loiter in the hallway. At that moment, Chloe appeared around the corner, spotted him, and stopped short. She offered a shy smile, ducked her head, and then stepped into the party. His heart thumped against his ribcage.

“What the fuck was that?”

When Zander looked back at the phone’s screen, his brother wore a sideways smile, and one brown eyebrow was raised into his disheveled hair.

“What was what?”

“You.” Brody squinted. “You look different. You look... *mussed.*”

Zander ran a hand through his hair in irritation and began pacing. Was he that transparent? “No, I don’t.”

“Yeah, you do.” Brody’s smile widened. “You did it, didn’t you? You met someone.”

“Uh—”

“Son of a bitch, you did!” His brother let out a whoop loud enough for the entire city to hear. He was an urban cowboy. A young Indiana Jones. He’d always been adventuresome—not one for formality or appropriateness. Sometimes Zander envied that quality, but not now, when he was being called out.

“Goddamn, Zan. I fucking love that. Who is she?”

And he wasn’t letting it go.

“I met her online. In person for the first time tonight.” What the hell, might as well tell him what he wanted to know. Jaylyn would if Zander didn’t. “She takes these amazing black and whites of Chicago.”

“A photographer. That’s apt.”

“Yes, I suppose it is.” As if drawn to them, Zander found himself standing in front of the framed photos once again. “She’s incredible— Uh, incredibly talented.”

“Sure, she is.” One arm wrapped around his chest, Brody was still grinning. “And you asked her out. I’m impressed. Emily wanted that for you.”

A smile pulled the side of his mouth. Brody wasn’t wrong. Emily had wanted him “taken care of,” as she used to say. She hadn’t been proprietary at the end, only adamant that he find happiness without her. It’d taken him a long time to accept that, but, like she’d been so often when she’d been alive, Emily was right. Staying alone for the rest of his days would make him miserable.

“You gonna kiss her at midnight? Get that task scratched off your list?” Brody knew about that too. What Jaylyn knew, his brothers soon found out about.

“We scratched that off already.”

“Shiiiiit. Nicely done.” Abruptly, Brody’s smile disappeared. “Listen, don’t do anything stupid like ask her to move in with you. Take your time. Keep chatting with her online. Get your rocks off, but don’t turn this into something permanent. You just got back out there.”

“Brody—”

“I’m serious. You can’t settle down. Not yet.”

The warning wasn’t surprising considering its source. Brody wasn’t terminally single, but close. Time to change the subject.

“Jaylyn said you had something to tell me.”

“I have good news.” His brother’s mustache shifted as he smiled again. “I am moving to Chicago. Not in a penthouse or a high-rise.” He gestured around him generally. “I’m over this. I want to live in a house. With a yard. I want to mow the lawn.”

“You want to mow a lawn?”

“Yeah. My lawn. And I want a mailman who comes to my door. I want to say hi to my neighbor instead of taping a note on the door telling them to keep the noise down.”

“Does this have anything to do with your novel? The one you’re six months late turning in to your editor?” He couldn’t help needling him a bit. If Zander was that late on anything involving his work, he wouldn’t have a career.

“I need a change of scenery,” Brody hedged. “Somewhere I can concentrate.”

“Well, you can’t stay with me. Jaylyn said she’s staying for a few more weeks, and we’re on top of each other. I need to find a bigger apartment. Or a warehouse like Eli’s.”

“A warehouse?” Brody shook his head. “That’s not your style. You need a property that is more audacious. Ask Tag if there’s availability in Crane Tower.”

Tag owned Crane Tower and lived on the entire top floor of the building. Zander had thought about asking him about it. “I’ll figure it out. How soon are you coming to town?”

“Brody!” a woman’s voice called out.

“Just a second, sweetheart.” His brother’s syrupy delivery suggested that he wouldn’t be going home alone tonight. No surprise there. To Zander, he said, “Not sure yet, but you’ll be my second call—after my Realtor.”

“I look forward to seeing you more.”

“I’m looking forward to seeing you out and about. Seriously, man. Hearing that you kissed a woman on New Year’s Eve is some good fucking news. Just—”

“Be careful. Got it,” Zander said for his brother’s benefit.

“I gotta go. Someone was asking for me.”

“I heard. Have fun.”

“I always do. Tell J to stay away from the band. She’s got her eye on one of them, and I don’t want to have to make a Chicago house call to kick some dude’s ass.”

Zander opened his mouth to respond, but Brody had ended the call.

When he lowered the phone and turned around, Jaylyn was standing behind him, her arms folded over her chest.

“I wondered where you and Chloe disappeared to.” She shifted her weight onto one hip and gave him her sternest expression. “I need details.”



CHLOE HAD NEVER DONE an actual walk of shame, so it seemed unfair that her foray would be into a room filled with billionaires. Maybe they wouldn’t notice. She’d taken a few extra minutes to fluff her hair and reapply her lipstick. Other than a few missing crystals on her dress, she looked virtually the same as when she’d arrived.

She accepted the glass of water from the bartender. She was parched after the bedroom acrobatics with Zander. There hadn’t been any eyes on her when she reentered the room—

everyone had been involved in their own conversations, but there was at least one pair on her now.

Rachel parted the crowd with her pregnant belly, her blond hair bouncing around her small shoulders.

“Well, well, well.” The other woman collected her own glass of water from the bartender. “Where have you been? Take yourself on another tour?”

Chloe sipped from her glass to bide time. Rachel did the same, her blue eyes expectant. Since Rachel was stone sober thanks to the baby incubating her belly, her senses were keener than most.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Chloe angled away from the bartender.

Rachel followed, and then dropped the act. “Please, *please* tell me what happened.” She went as far as to fold her hands in prayer pose around her glass. She offered a dazzling smile. “Please?”

Chloe stole a look over her shoulder. Far as she could tell, Zander hadn’t reentered the party yet. He’d been talking to someone on the phone when she’d bypassed him. “Zander and I—”

“I knew it,” a different voice, this one over Chloe’s left shoulder, said. Isabella stepped around her to stand next to Rachel. “I knew you two were going to hit it off. I told you I’d find you someone.”

Even though meeting Zander had nothing to do with Isa, Chloe smiled.

“What happened?” Isa asked.

“That’s what I’m in the process of finding out,” Rachel told Isa with a note of impatience.

“What are we finding out?” Merina glided over, entered the circle, and arched one perfectly plucked eyebrow.

“Zander and Chloe sneaked off the dance floor earlier. Then they vanished.” Rachel wiggled her fingers dramatically. “That was nearly forty minutes ago.”

“Forty minutes,” Isa trilled. “That’s enough time to get up to something fun.”

“Chloe. We are going to think the worst unless you tell us what happened.” Rachel leveled with her.

“Or the *best*,” Merina added.

Chloe typically told Isa everything, so her asking was no surprise. She wasn’t used to telling all to Rachel and Merina, but she didn’t doubt for a second that they had her best intentions in mind. Plus, she needed to talk about what she was feeling and thinking. She had no earthly clue how to handle this situation, or what to say to him when she saw him again... which would happen sooner than later.

“Okay, but not here.” Chloe grabbed Isa’s arm and walked with her to the far wall. Rachel and Merina scuttled after them. Once their huddle had moved away from the bulk of the crowd to a quiet corner, Chloe confessed. “We know each other.”

“You mean, like *biblically*?” Rachel joked.

“Tag is rubbing off on you,” Isa said with a chuckle.

“All they do is rub *on* each other.” Merina pointed to Rachel’s belly. Rachel’s cheeks glowed a happy shade of pink. Merina gestured to Chloe. “Go on.”

Chloe inhaled and said a silent prayer that the ladies understood where she was coming from. “We met online—on an app for artists. He posts paintings, and I share my photos.”

Isa gasped. “Zander is the guy who asked you out tonight? The one you ghosted?”

Chloe nodded. “Reese and Merina have my photos hanging in their hallway. Zander recognized them, and Reese told him that I was the photographer.”

“That could be good for you, professionally speaking. Reese hired Zander’s company to redo the art in every Crane Hotel in the country.” Merina sent a look around to the other women when they stopped to stare at her. “What?”

“We’re talking romance, not business,” Rachel said.

“Damn. You’re right. I already warned Reese not to talk shop. Sorry, Chloe.”

“It’s okay. I appreciate the support.” Chloe meant it. “The point is, I didn’t jump into bed with a stranger. I have been talking to him online for months.”

“*OhmyGod.*” That was Rachel, eyes wide.

“Which bed did you jump on?” Isa’s grin was wily.

“One of Merina’s guest beds.” She sent Merina an apologetic smile, not sure what reaction to expect. “Sorry about that.”

“Guest rooms are for guests. And Zander’s a great guy.” Merina sounded pleased.

“I know, which might be the problem.” Chloe leaned in. Her friends did the same. “When you first had sex with your guys, did you feel...more?”

Isa's eyebrows jumped. "More what?"

"More...than you should," Chloe said.

Rather than answer her, Rachel, Isa, and Merina offered sincere looks of compassion.

"I've had a short-lived relationship or two," Chloe continued explaining. "I've never felt this level of..." She motioned, not knowing what word she needed.

"Connection?" Rachel finished for her.

"Yeah." Chloe's chest loosened some. Rachel understood.

"It throws you when you're not expecting to find it," Isa said.

"Especially when it's with a man you once referred to as a suited sewer rat." Merina nodded.

"You told Reese he was a suited sewer rat?" Chloe said on a laugh.

Merina raised her right palm. "To his face."

Rachel gave Chloe's shoulder a gentle shake. "It's New Year's Eve! You met a mysterious, attractive man, and then found out that you know each other. How can you *not* tumble into bed with him when the mutual attraction was already there?"

"It's sort of magical," Isa said.

Chloe had to admit that tonight had been nothing short of magical. "That stuff doesn't usually happen to me."

"Hello?" Merina said. "A billionaire bachelor waltzed into my hotel to propose."

"I agreed to dog sit and ended up being flown to Hawaii," Rachel said.

“Mile High Club?” Merina smirked.

“Duh.” Rachel shrugged.

Chloe was still laughing when Isa added, “That it isn’t commonplace is a good sign for you and Zander.”

“So I should...”

“Enjoy yourself, and don’t overthink it,” Merina said. “Let things unfold naturally. Sounds like that’s what’s been happening already.”

“Let things unfold,” Chloe repeated. Sounded passive to her, which wasn’t her normal speed. She liked to muck around in it. Get her hands dirty.

“I’m going to make sure the band knows precisely when to start ‘Auld Lang Syne.’ If you’ll excuse me. Congratulations.” Merina winked at Chloe.

“I should probably find Tag. Hard telling what kind of trouble he’s gotten himself into, and I want to dance some more!” Rachel said.

“Eli is probably hiding somewhere. If I don’t flush him out for the ball drop, who knows who I’ll wind up kissing.” Isa watched Chloe for a beat. “Want to come with Rachel and me?”

Chloe sent another look to the doorway. “I should probably say hi to Zander when he comes back in.”

“At the very least.” Rachel waggled her blond eyebrows. “See you on the dance floor!”

Chloe felt her smile fall as the three Crane wives wove their way through the crowd. *Don’t overthink it. Let things unfold.* It was good advice. Chloe didn’t know Zander well enough to know if he expected the bedroom tryst to turn into

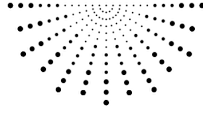
more. There was a chance he wasn't ready for more. Maybe he was still grieving, or he perceived Chloe as a rebound of sorts. And if so, wouldn't that be for the best? She hadn't been thinking of the future when she'd stripped naked for him...

So why are you thinking about the future now?

“Great question.” She drained her water glass and then headed for the bar.

She needed a stronger drink.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



No way would Zander share details of what had happened between Chloe and himself with his sister, but he knew Jaylyn wouldn't let up unless he shared *something*.

"Brody doesn't know what he's talking about," she was saying. "*I'm* a woman. I know what a woman wants, and Chloe won't appreciate you playing a silly mind game."

"You believe I need that advice, do you?"

Jaylyn hesitated, considering. "No."

He handed over her cell phone. She tucked it into a pocket of her long, sparkly skirt.

"Come on." He tipped his head toward the kitchen. She followed.

Other than the catering staff, who were packing up bins and plates on the other side of the room, the large eat-in kitchen was empty. He sat down at the table and crossed one leg ankle to knee. Jaylyn leaned on the table with both hands like a cop performing an interrogation.

"Jaylyn. Sit down."

She let out a sigh but did as he asked.

"Chloe and I are...acquainted."

“I’ll bet.”

He briefly explained finding Chloe’s photos on the mansion’s wall.

“Oh. Wow.”

“I expected to meet a woman tonight. To kiss her. To politely bow out after wishing her Happy New Year. I didn’t expect to meet a woman I knew. Or to feel...I don’t know what I feel.” He pushed his fingers through his hair and leaned back in the chair. “I don’t remember how to date. I thought I’d be married to Emily until I was ninety-four years old.”

“That’s specific.” Jaylyn’s lips twisted. “Do you feel... disloyal to her?”

“No.” He didn’t have to think about his answer. He didn’t feel disloyal. “I liked being in a relationship. I know that’s hard for the rest of you—Dante and Brody included—to understand.”

“We know that about you.” She waved his comment off.

“After spending time with Chloe tonight, I felt...” He shook his head, unsure how much to admit. Then he blurted out, “I don’t want to tell her Happy New Year and then send her on her way.”

Jaylyn smiled. “You like her.”

“Of course.” He wouldn’t have slept with her if he didn’t like her. Although, he supposed that was an old-fashioned way to think.

He fell silent when a server bustled into the kitchen to collect a few trays for the party. Thankfully, she was gone as quickly as she’d come.

“I’m not built for a casual relationship,” he finished, keeping his voice down.

“For casual sex, you mean.”

“That either,” he mumbled.

“That’s a good thing.” His sister squeezed his wrist. “Men who want anything other than casual sex are hard to find. Trust me.”

He placed his other hand on top of hers. “The keyboardist was a bust, then?”

“No, he’s great. I have plans come midnight. I assume you’ll find Chloe?”

“She asked me to return to the party without her.” He frowned. “I’m not sure what she’s thinking.”

“Well, ask her! Clearly, you two have shared something special.”

“What if she isn’t interested in seeing me again?” That was the real reason he was sitting here spilling his guts to his younger sister.

“Why wouldn’t she be interested? Was it...bad?” She appeared pained to ask.

“Hell no.” He couldn’t help defending himself. “Everyone was...very satisfied.”

“Then what’s the problem? Go tell her how you feel!”

“And risk scaring her off permanently? I’m not that stupid.” He scrubbed his forehead where a small headache was blooming. He wasn’t used to overthinking when it came to women. “This isn’t your problem, Jaylyn. Drink champagne

and enjoy the party. You're twenty-five, not middle-aged like I am."

"Thirty-six isn't middle-aged."

"It technically is."

She frowned as she did the math. "That's an unsavory thought. Anyway, you said you'd live until ninety-four."

He gave her a sad smile. "We don't get to choose."

"Exactly. That's why you have to confess your feelings to Chloe before it's too late."

She had him there.

"I need a minute to myself. Have fun, and find me after the ball drops. Okay?" He had to wait longer than he liked for her answer.

"Fine." She stood.

He stood as well, crossed the kitchen, and ate a cracker topped with caviar that he didn't want. He had to think about what to say to Chloe when he saw her. He didn't want to come on too strong, but he didn't want her to think he was disinterested.

Jaylyn swiped a cracker as well. Around a big bite, she said, "If you're not back in fifteen minutes, I'm coming to get you. No way am I letting you miss the ball drop."

"Fair enough."

"I love you." She blew him a kiss and then left the kitchen.

When he was finally alone, he pulled out his cellphone, cued up the app where he'd met CURLYQSUE, and began scrolling through their messages from the beginning. There had to be a clue in their conversations over the last few months

as to what she expected from him. When he found it, he could make a plan.

More than a kiss at midnight, Zander needed a plan.

He refused to allow tonight to be the last time he and Chloe saw each other.



“THANK YOU,” Chloe told the bartender as she palmed the glass of pink champagne.

She hadn’t seen Zander reenter the party, which was... concerning. What if he’d left? She supposed it’d serve her right for ghosting him, but he didn’t strike her as the revenge type.

On the other hand, his leaving without telling her would be par for the course when it came to the men she’d dated in the past.

But Zander wasn’t a rando off the street. He was Reese, Tag, and Eli Crane’s *cousin*, for goodness’ sake. He couldn’t come with a bigger seal of approval. If he was a creeper, he’d hidden it well over the last three months they’d messaged. They’d gone beyond mere small talk. The anonymity of the internet had allowed them to share personal stories and genuine fears. She’d fostered a real connection with HOPPERFAN02.

At least she’d thought so.

Doubt simmered in her chest like a potion in a bubbling cauldron. Her sex-warmed body had cooled, and the man she’d slept with minutes ago had gone missing. That made bolstering her own confidence a challenge.

She meandered through the crowd sipping her champagne. She'd be smart to accept the possibility that Zander and Jaylyn had left early. At least then Chloe could prepare to be alone for the ball drop, to receive a pity kiss on the cheek from Tag—which, honestly, wouldn't be a bad way to end an evening. She could certainly do worse.

But no matter how much she tried to prepare herself, her chest grew heavier and heavier. Being left by the man she'd had amazing sex with was a crappy way to start the new year no matter how she tried to justify it.

Then her hopes were buoyed when she scanned the crowd and spotted Jaylyn. She was standing amidst the crowd chatting with Eli, but Chloe couldn't hear what she was saying. She'd have to sneak closer.

Chloe sidled up behind Zander's sister, facing the opposite direction. Practically back-to-back, she could hear Jaylyn perfectly. Especially now that the bulk of the party guests had abandoned this room for the dance floor.

“Emily told him to what?” came Eli's low baritone.

“She made him promise to kiss a woman at midnight on New Year's Eve!” The words burst from Jaylyn's lips. “She wanted to make sure Zander didn't stay stuck after she passed. She was selfless like that. Anyway, he didn't do it last year. He's been a monk for nearly two years. It's not healthy.”

“Grief takes as long as it takes, Jaylyn,” Eli said pragmatically. “You can't rush him.”

“I didn't rush him. He already went *all in*, if you know what I mean.”

Chloe suppressed a gasp. He'd told his sister?

Eli said nothing. Chloe was dying to see the expression on his face. Was he shocked? Mortified? It was hard to imagine him smiling.

“Zander thought he’d be with Emily until he died, you know?” Jaylyn was saying. “I can’t imagine how he feels after fulfilling his promise to her. He told me he wasn’t built for a casual relationship. He’s in the kitchen, trying to figure out what to say to Chloe.”

“That’s understandable,” Eli said.

Chloe winced. It was completely understandable. From what Jaylyn was saying, Zander had been carried away and was regretting the time he’d spent with Chloe. Or, if he wasn’t regretting it, he was at least devising a way to break the bad news.

Ugh. This was a nightmare.

Chloe downed her champagne in one gulp and dropped the glass off at the bar. She tried not to think about what tonight would bring for everyone else. Dancing, counting down to the new year, and then the kiss for good luck as confetti rained from the ceiling.

Tears pooled on her lower lashes, but she blinked them back. She’d had no idea what to expect tonight and refused to regret what had happened. In her heart, she knew there was a silver lining. She just couldn’t see it yet. She had to get out of here; collect herself somewhere away from prying eyes. And she refused to corner Zander. He didn’t owe her anything—whether he’d been planning to offer an excuse or an explanation.

She’d connected with him, but that feeling hadn’t been mutual. If he was already lamenting a “casual” relationship,

Chloe's question of whether or not to expect more had been well and truly answered.

The connection between them was one-sided—on her side.

While she'd been talking to her friends about feeling more than she had bargained for, Zander had been reeling that he'd crossed a line. Chloe couldn't be angry at him for it. They'd been caught up in the magic of the evening—and the massive coincidence of knowing each other.

Maybe there'd been no avoiding sleeping together.

Eyes misted over—yeah, there was no way to avoid crying—she clipped toward the exit as fast as her silver sparkly heels would carry her. She'd grab her coat from coat check, call an Uber, and text Isa on her way home. Maybe she'd use the excuse of not feeling well—it would be the truth.

She didn't want to see the look of regret on Zander's face, or feel the crack in her chest grow wider when he felt the need to explain that sex between them *hadn't* rocked the foundation of his world. She didn't want weak promises that they could remain friendly and continue to chat online. Even if that's where they ended up, she just couldn't hear it tonight.

In the hallway, she clumsily opened her clutch. The ticket was there, next to her compact, right behind the pocket where she'd stashed the lone condom in case a miracle occurred tonight. She grabbed the ticket, thrust it to the attendant, and pushed past the lump in her throat to ask, "Do you have a tissue?"

A man's hand appeared in front of her face, a silver pocket square pressed between his fingers. "Leaving so soon?"

She accepted the offered fabric and sucked in a deep breath. Then she turned to greet the man who'd offered. Eli's

mouth was flat beneath heavy dark scruff, his blue eyes both hard and kind at the same time.

“Hi, Eli.” When he didn’t respond, she continued. “I was going to text Isa to let her know I was going home. So that she wouldn’t worry. I’m not feeling well.”

He scanned her briefly as if checking for injury.

“I’m fine calling a car, honestly.”

“Ms. Andrews.” The attendant offered Chloe’s puffer coat, but before she could accept it, Eli held up a fifty-dollar bill.

“Rehang it, please. *Ms. Andrews* and I need a moment.”

When the attendant hesitated, Chloe nodded. Only then did the other woman take the offered cash and put the coat back where she’d found it.

“I saw you in there. Hiding behind Jaylyn.” Eli sank both hands into his front pockets and watched her. “I am guessing you overheard Zander’s marching orders for the evening. The kiss. And you’ve come to some conclusion about the two of you—*without* talking to him.”

“There’s nothing to talk about. He regrets it. I don’t want him to feel as if he has to explain himself.”

“Aren’t you owed at least that?”

Chloe was so surprised by his comment that she didn’t know what to say. She’d been thinking how she wasn’t owed anything. Could she be wrong?

“Listen, I won’t pretend to know exactly how Zander feels.” Eli’s piercing blue eyes froze her in place. She wanted to run away but was paralyzed under that stare. “I’ve suffered loss. Unimaginable loss. He’s dealing with that and has been for a few years now.”

She knew about Eli's losses. He had lost his leg and two fellow Marines who'd been his close friends. When he'd been younger, he'd lost his mother too.

"But I do understand where Zander is coming from."

"So do I." Her shoulders slumped as fatigue engulfed her. "Why do you think I'm sneaking out?"

"So you admit that you're sneaking out."

"He's going to break up with me, and we're not even going out. I don't want to make him feel worse. What he's gone through—losing his wife—has been hard enough without me piling on."

Eli's head jerked on his neck. He blinked.

"I won't make him explain himself. It's okay if he's not ready to move on. I agree with you. He's entitled to grieve for as long as he needs. I don't want to cause any more problems. And I certainly don't want to stand in the way of him enjoying his evening."

"Sounds like you've figured it all out." Eli's tone was understated sarcasm.

"Just let me leave. It's easier."

"You believe you're in some way sparing him, don't you?"

"Sorry?"

"You're in the way. You don't want to be a problem. That's what you said."

"Third wheel, reporting for duty." She offered a weak salute.

The frown lines on his forehead deepened. "I can't let you do that, Chloe. You're coming with me."

“I appreciate the attempt, Eli, honestly—”

“Chloe.” He bent to look her in the eye, so close that when he exhaled, his breath stirred her hair. “I *can't* let you do this. Isabella will kill me.”

Chloe felt her lips curve. He wasn't wrong. Isa was one tough customer.

“If she doesn't succeed, I have a feeling Zander will finish what she started. I'm man enough to admit that I don't know what he's feeling. I think you owe him that courtesy as well.”

“But Jaylyn said—”

“Jaylyn is not Zander. You've been a great friend to Isabella over the years. You've run her business and given her good advice. You're there for her. Always.”

A tear trickled out of her eye, and she swiped it with the pocket square.

“She'd return the favor if she knew what you were wrestling with tonight. As it is, you're stuck with me.” He squeezed her shoulder gently. “You are never, ever in the way, do you hear me? And if my cousin says you are, tell me so that I can set him straight.”

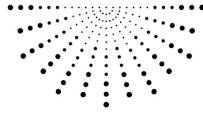
She felt her bottom lip tremble. Not only was what Eli was saying sincere, it was also the best advice she'd received tonight.

“Now pull yourself together. You can't greet the new year in tears.” He hugged her around the shoulders with one strong arm and then pressed a kiss to her temple. “I won't allow it.”

“I guess I can stay another ten minutes.”

“Lucky for you.” He walked with her down the hallway toward the party. “That's all we've got.”

CHAPTER TWELVE



10 MINUTES 'TIL MIDNIGHT

Zander slipped his cell phone into his inside jacket pocket as he stepped into the party. He did a quick search for Chloe but came up empty. The room was choked with guests either leaning on high-top tables or dancing—but he didn't see her sparkling silver dress among them.

He spotted Jaylyn first, or rather she spotted him. She was sharing the bench with the keyboardist. She shot her arm into the air for an exuberant wave, and he instantly forgave her for not coming to check on him as promised. He'd meant it when he said he didn't want her worrying about him.

"Zander!" He turned to find Isa rushing over to him. "Have you seen Eli?"

"No. Have you seen Chloe?"

"No." Her forehead scrunched as she scanned the room. Suddenly a slow smile pulled her full lips. "Yes."

He turned and spotted Chloe arm in arm with Eli, who was tucking a pocket square into his jacket. She smiled up at Eli, but Zander could see that she was nervous. Her hands were clenched together tightly, her purse wedged under one arm.

“Why don’t we say hello?” Before he could answer, Isa had grabbed his hand and was dragging him toward the doorway. Eli and Chloe met them halfway.

“Hello,” Zander said to Chloe. Her cheeks were pink. Her eyes were sad. What had happened during the time he’d spotted her in the hallway until now?

“Hi.” The brief smile she offered was insincere.

“Sable.” Eli slipped one arm around his wife’s waist. “Look who I found wandering around the mansion.”

A loud male laugh lifted on the air, and they all turned toward the dance floor. Eli was the first to speak. “Is that Dad?”

Zander looked over to where Uncle Alex was indeed dancing with his wife, Rhona. Cheek to cheek, the two looked cozy.

“They sneaked in about twenty minutes ago. They came from another party,” Isa said. “Wild kids.”

“Well. We can’t let them show us up.” Eli turned to Zander and Chloe. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m going to dance with my wife.”

“And then he’s going to kiss me at midnight,” Isa said. “We won’t be leaving right away. Take all the time you need.”

“Thank you,” Zander said, even though he assumed Isa wasn’t talking to him. He might need more time.

Eli and Isa joined Merina and Reese, Rachel and Tag, and other couples on the dance floor. They crushed in with Alex and Rhona, all laughing and smiling.

“The perfect way to end the year,” Zander said to himself. Happy—the way every year should end...and begin.

“I was on my way out,” Chloe admitted. “Eli encouraged me to stay.”

“I’m glad you stayed.” Zander licked his bottom lip, more nervous than he should have been. She had made it clear tonight that she needed distance, but he’d assumed she’d need only a few minutes. If she’d been on her way out... Shit. She was done with him, wasn’t she?

“We could have had this conversation via direct message online, but that didn’t seem fair.”

He swallowed thickly. Waited. The band announced that it was five minutes until the new year.

“I don’t want you to feel like you need to explain yourself.” She unfolded her hands to take one of his. “I understand if I’m expecting more than you’re ready for, and I don’t expect you to move on if it’s too soon.”

Wait. What?

Was she saying—?

“Are you under the impression that you...took advantage of me?”

“Not exactly. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t use my wiles to drag you into bed.”

“Chloe, you didn’t drag me.” Quite the opposite. He’d been leading her down the hallway the moment he’d learned she was interested in kissing him some more.

“The point is,” she continued, “I didn’t think about what sex might mean for *you*. I don’t want to cause problems in your life, Zander. You moved here, but it doesn’t mean you’ve moved on.”

“What are you—?”

“You don’t have to let me down easy. Or let me down at all. Just because I’m ready for more with you...” Her mouth dropped open as if she hadn’t meant to confess that. “I didn’t want to ruin your evening.”

Ruin his evening? Her leaving before he had a chance to tell her what he’d found was what would have ruined the evening. He nearly smiled in relief. This beautiful woman had him so, so wrong. He was going to set her straight.

“In that case”—he offered a hand—“perhaps one final dance? We can seal the night with a kiss.”

“You don’t have to do that.” The sad acceptance on her cherubic face threatened to crush him. How could she believe he’d sleep with her and then toss her aside?

“I’m asking, Chloe. Please dance with me?”

After a brief hesitation, she slid her hand into his. He walked her to the dance floor, certainty in each footfall. He’d had no idea what to say to her earlier, but now he *knew*.

He pulled her close, bent his neck, and looked into her wide hazel eyes. She deserved to hear the truth, not the story she’d made up in her head.

And he was going to tell her.



So, he’d saved the last dance of the year for her.

She was glad Eli had stopped her from leaving. That wouldn’t have been fair to Zander. She saw that now. He was more to her than a dialogue bubble on a cell phone screen. He was a real, complex human being. He was strong and capable, quiet and thoughtful. Exceedingly fair. He’d given her the

benefit of the doubt over and over tonight. She owed him a goodbye, at the very least.

Maybe staying friends would work out...

A heavy sigh worked its way from her lungs to her lips. She didn't want to only be Zander's friend, but she would accept it if that's what was left.

"Back when we first met online—" he started, his lips brushing the shell of her ear.

On the inside, she shuddered as she remembered the moments they'd spent together in that bedroom. She arched closer, soaking in his body heat.

"—we talked about the city," he continued. "And art. Whether or not enjoying a mixed drink before noon was a bad idea."

She smiled at those early interactions. When she'd known him only as HOPPERFAN02—named for his favorite painter, Edward Hopper. Before she'd seen his face. He hadn't mentioned his late wife or that his last name was Crane. She understood now why he'd left that out.

"You were easy to talk to," he said.

"So were you."

"Then we shared what scared us the most. It was Halloween night—for you anyway."

"I remember. When I found out you were up at four a.m., I asked if you'd just gotten up or hadn't gone to bed yet." He'd told her he'd stayed up most of the night watching old black-and-white horror films but admitted to taking a catnap or two. He'd woken up for water and happened to check his phone.

“You confessed that leaving home to move in with a friend in Chicago had scared you more than anything.”

It had. She’d visited a friend who lived in an apartment in the city. At twenty-six years old, she’d moved out of her parents’ house but still didn’t feel as if she were on her own. Though she’d visited other cities—Atlanta, New York City, Miami—it was Chicago that had felt most like home.

“That was a big leap for you,” he said.

“Huge. If I’d known how well everything would have fallen into place—the job, the apartment, friends, I would have moved here sooner.” Though the *significant other* box remained unchecked, she’d found most of what she needed here.

“I’m happy for you, Chloe.”

Since that comment sounded like a prelude to goodbye, she wasn’t able to smile. “I was honest with you about what scared me, and you told me a half-truth.”

His eyebrows met over his nose. “How do you mean?”

“You told me that leaving your job to start your own company had scared you more than anything. I imagine losing Emily was scarier than that. I understand why you didn’t mention her, though.”

He pulled in a breath that puffed up his chest. After licking his lips, he spoke, almost like he was leveling with her. “Losing someone you love probably seems like the scariest part of life, but Emily’s passing was strangely beautiful. It’s the anticipation of it that hurts most.”

She swam in the blue of his eyes, her heart aching for the pain he’d suffered. He met her gaze unerringly.

“I didn’t sleep when she was sick. That’s what no one tells you. You don’t sleep when someone you love could die at any moment. What if you miss their last breath? The anticipation of what will come, and how and *when*, is scarier than the actual moment they leave. It was eight months of crippling insomnia and anxiety.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“It wasn’t all bad. We laughed a lot during those days.”

She hadn’t expected him to say that.

“She was in good spirits toward the end—before the *very* end.” He shook his head. “I’m sorry if I’m oversharing.”

“Don’t apologize.” She flattened her hand over his heart, where it beat strong against her palm. “I don’t expect more from you than you’re ready to give. I really understand.”

“That’s just it, Chloe. You *don’t* understand me.” His expression bordered on stern. “That time of my life is behind me. I’ll never forget her, and I’ll always love her. But that doesn’t mean I’m not ready for more.”

She blinked up at him and tried to process what he was saying.

“I’ve been hiding out in this house deciding if it was too soon to tell you that I *am* ready for more. With you, if that’s not crazy. Is that crazy?” A sliver of doubt had crept onto his face.

“It should be crazy.” She whispered the words. But they’d met months ago. Technically. She’d truly connected with him, both on the app and in person tonight.

“When you messaged me to ask me out—”

“I scared you.”

“Yes. I didn’t handle it well, I admit. What if, despite how great you seemed, you wound up being like other men I’ve dated?”

“The ones who disappointed you.” His mouth pulled into a deeper frown.

“I overheard Jaylyn say that Emily made you promise to kiss a woman on New Year’s Eve. I assume that’s why you sent me that message. So that you could kiss me and fulfill your promise.”

“Initially, yes.” His nostrils flared as he looked over his shoulder to where Jaylyn was snuggled up to the keyboardist.

“It’s my fault. She and Eli were talking. I was eavesdropping. I was desperate to find out how you were feeling. When she said that you didn’t want a casual relationship, I assumed you were done with me entirely.”

“That’s not true.” Honest blue eyes found hers. “I connected with you on a level so strongly, I wasn’t sure what to do next. You were the one who ghosted me and then asked me to leave the bedroom without you.”

“Well, it sounds bad when you say it like that.”

“You have every right to take things as slowly as you need to...but you have to admit, we have stumbled into something special.”

He wasn’t wrong.

“Hell, Chloe. I wasn’t supposed to be here. At this party. In this state. In this *country*. But here I am. Thanks to Curly Q Sue.”

They shared a long moment of eye contact before he raised their joined hands and weaved their fingers together. Each

point of contact tingled, from her fingertips to her elbow, as if she'd been plugged in to a wall socket.

They did have something special. An almost instant connection that defied explanation. Magic, kismet, fate...no matter how they defined it, they'd found each other. Twice, it seemed.

"You leapt and landed in Chicago." Zander's smile was confident. "Then your photographs reached me in London. Photographs that helped me envision a life that was different from the one I'd been living. You made me brave, Chloe Andrews. Brave enough to sell my house, move to America, and ask a woman out, sight unseen. We found each other on the cusp of a brand-new year. Perhaps it's time for you to take another leap."

Her heart had been leaping as he spoke. Now it thrashed against her ribcage, unwilling to stay caged for much longer. "What are you saying?"

"Leap *with me*. I don't want to miss out on our life. Whether we date for a few months and then end up friends or wind up getting married and living to be ninety-four years old."

"M-married?"

"What I'm trying to say is that anything is possible. I want more. If you're ready...for more." His Adam's apple bobbed when he swallowed. "I feel like I'm saying too much, but what the hell? If you can't lay your heart out moments before the ball drops, when can you? Your photos made me fall in love with this city, but it's you, Chloe, who is making me fall in love with you."

There it was. Everything she'd been feeling, everything she'd been tamping down, out in the open. It was scary and crazy and exciting and...right. She didn't know why, but this felt so damn *right*. And she wasn't the only one—Zander felt it too. Which made it seem less scary and crazy.

“Sixty seconds!” a man at the microphone announced. “Time to find who you'll be kissing at midnight.”

“We're a step ahead of him.” Zander loosened his grip on her hands to wrap his arms around her waist. With her clutch in one hand, she draped her forearms on his shoulders and admired the face she would be happy to look at for months, even years, to come.

“Would Emily have liked me?”

“She would have loved you.” He gave Chloe a tender squeeze. “She would have admired what I admire about you—the way you speak before you think, and how kind you are. How you put others before yourself. Although, you've overcorrected. I can't believe you were going to leave without saying goodbye.”

“Forgive me?”

“Hmm.” He feigned indecision. “All right, but this habit you have of running away when you think you're too much or that you're in the way isn't going to be something I support going forward.”

“No?” She was at once flattered by how much he cared and intrigued by what he might say next.

“Absolutely not. You will have to accept how valuable and important you are if you're with me. And how much you mean to the people around you. You will also have to accept that you are a terrible mind reader. You'll have to talk to me instead.

Preferably with your head on a pillow next to mine during the wee hours of the night.”

Each promise oozed down her body like warm honey. She relaxed in his arms. “That sounds wonderful.”

“It will be. You have my word.”

The countdown from twenty began and the crowd joined in.

She leaned closer to Zander, her lips a breath away from his. “My place or yours? There’s a cafe down the street from my apartment. They have the most buttery croissants.”

His grin was full of wicked promises when he said, “My favorite. What about coffee?”

“I make the best coffee.”

“Twelve, eleven...” the chanting continued.

“I don’t see how it could be better than mine, but my coffee pot is still packed, so I can’t prove it to you.”

“What about the big stuff?”

“Six, five...!” came the countdown.

“We’ll take it as it comes,” he said, and that sounded perfectly reasonable to her. “Deal?”

“Deal.”

“Four, three, two!”

“Seal it with a kiss?” she asked.

“At least one,” he said, and then he set his lips on hers.

UP NEXT

Brody Crane is coming to Chicago!

Stay tuned for Book 1 in the Crane Brothers series.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Huge thanks to Shannon Richard for being the best plotting partner ever. I truly cherish our friendship.

Thank you to Jill Wymer for everything you do—including being Eli Crane’s biggest cheerleader. Your excitement over an early version of this book spurred me on.

To my editor Jennifer Miller, you made this process an absolute delight. Thank you for being willing to take on this project at breakneck speed when I came up with an idea for a New Year’s book in November.

And to you, dear reader. Huge hugs to you for joining me (or rejoining me!) on this journey. Years ago I made a promise to keep writing if you kept reading. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for continuing to support and champion my work.



ONCE UPON A BILLIONAIRE
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CHAPTER ONE

VIVIAN

Vivian Vandemark isn't my real name.

It sounds fancy, though, doesn't it? That alliteration of both Vs is to die for and reminds me of a classy label on clothing. Vandemark could have been the next Gucci. Maybe in another life.

I changed my name because my actual last name has been tainted by the man who gave it to me. My father is a criminal. Was. *Was* a criminal. It's hard to get used to the idea that he's no longer living. One would think since he was in prison for the last several years he'd be easy to forget, but that's only because I haven't told you who he is yet.

Walter Steele.

Yes, *that* Walter Steele.

The man who robbed his investors of millions and millions of dollars to line his own pockets. That man is my father.

Was. Damn. That really is hard to wrap my head around.

The trial was bananas. It lasted one hundred days, and during that time my mother, brother, and I were harassed nonstop by the press. That was six years ago. Since then I've fallen off the radar.

My mother quite literally fell off the radar when she swallowed a lot of pain relievers and chased them with a lot of

vodka. That was the day my father was sentenced. By then I was twenty-three and out of the house. My younger brother, Walt, was twenty. He's been trying to finish what booze my mother didn't since then. He'd been an addict most of his young life. I've never enjoyed escapism as a hobby.

Until now, I suppose.

Chicago is a far cry from Clear Ridge, Ohio. Clear Ridge has an unassuming Midwest vibe. The town is mostly shopping malls and chain restaurants, tall maple trees, and fences surrounding green, grassy yards. The live-work site currently being built is unique to this area. It's impressive, even if the company building it is the bane of my boss's existence.

I'm employed in a government office in this aspiring city. The building I walk into each day is half the size of my father's former summer home. *Half.*

I used to be a high-powered executive. All my faith, trust, time, and savings were wrapped up in our family's company. And then it all turned out to be a sham. On my watch, everything fell apart. Steele Investments toppled like a house of cards, taking my position with it. My father went down with the ship, the rest of my family "spared," if you could say that.

I've never felt more powerless. Watching my life crumble reminded me of TV footage of the World Trade Center vanishing in a plume of smoke on 9/11. When I left that life behind, I swore *never again*.

I'll never again stand by, unwittingly, while someone steals (steal/Steele—how about that for irony?) people's life savings and retirement funds. I thought I was living the good life, but it was blood money.

Now, I buy my clothes at department stores or Target—they have some really nice clothes, by the way. I also cook at home a lot—not well, but I’m learning. And I endure the office coffee even though I pass a drool-worthy Starbucks each and every morning on my way to work.

I’m paying penance for a life I never chose. *Thanks, Dad.*

The second I set foot in the office, I’m met with raised voices. The loudest of the two is Gary, an otherwise mild-mannered inspector at our bureau. I don’t think I’ve ever heard him raise his voice. My boss, Daniel, however, has a well-known temper. His blood pressure often runs high—you can tell by his reddened face.

Gary and Daniel are in Daniel’s office, and while I can’t make out what they’re saying, it’s obvious they’re having a disagreement.

“Amber.” I lean into my coworker’s cubicle. “What’s going on?”

She looks over her shoulder and gives me a smile that is half amused, half surprised. “Gary is fit to be tied.”

“Yeah, I hear that. What’s it about?”

“Who do you think?” She raises one prim, blond eyebrow.

“Nathaniel Owen,” I answer. The billionaire in charge of the live-work project has been mentioned about a *billion* times since I started working here, and never favorably.

“The one and only.” Amber, still smiling, stands and leans a shoulder on the cubicle wall. We’re both facing Daniel’s closed door where the “conversation” is going strong. Nathaniel Owen’s name is used like a curse word in this place. I’ve never interacted with him personally, but I’m familiar with the type.

Rich. Entitled. The kind of man who believes he's above the law.

The door swings open and Gary steps out, his mouth a firm line of disapproval. He huffs past Amber's cubicle and we brace ourselves for Daniel's wrath when he looks at us. No, wait.

Looks at *me*.

"Vandemark. Get in here." He vanishes into his office.

Daniel is in charge of my paycheck, a paycheck I need very badly, since I refuse to touch the money in an account I set up after Dad's trial. That money is for my brother's rehabilitation. Those places aren't cheap, and I'll drain every dime out of it if it makes him better. I failed him once—I won't fail him again. He's the only family I have left.

Anyway, my paycheck. It's all that stands between me and homelessness, so I tend to be more gracious to my boss than he deserves.

Amber whispers "good luck" as I leave her side and enter the lion's den, aka Daniel's office.

"Good morning." I try to sound breezy.

"Not even close." He's pacing the floor, hands on his hips, frown marring his receding hairline. "Nathaniel Owen is a burr in my ass."

That should be the motto of the Clear Ridge Bureau of Inspection.

"I need you to go to the Grand Marin site," he tells me. "Owen's crew is there today, and I have it on good authority he has a meeting with the mayor which means he'll likely be onsite. I don't care if the mayor is in Owen's pocket. We are

not. At least we aren't any longer." He mutters that last part while looking out the window facing the alley.

"Not Gary?" I can't imagine a scenario where Gary would do anything short of aboveboard.

"Owen paid off Gary. He had to have." Daniel's face turns beet red. "That electrical inspection paperwork flew in here on wings for my approval. It was way too fast. Gary was bribed. Mark my words."

I'm not a conspiracy theorist, but in this case Daniel makes a great point. Nothing happens fast in our little government bureau, and it's particularly suspicious that Owen seems to make things happen at lightning speed compared to everyone else.

"Did Gary quit?"

"I fired him." Daniel puffs up his chest, proud.

"Seriously?"

"No one at CRBI accepts bribes and remains on my payroll." He ices me with a glare. "You'll do well to remember that since you're heading over there."

My blood heats. I'd never accept a bribe. Especially one from a stubborn billionaire.

"We have a narrow window to teach Owen a lesson. You're just the woman to do it."

"I hope you understand that I will not falsify paperwork in order to shut him down, either. I respect your mission, Daniel, but I'm not going to stoop to Owen's level."

My boss's grin is a tad creepy, but approving. "I know you won't. All you have to do is ask Owen for proof of a passed electrical inspection. He won't be able to show you one

because he doesn't *have* one—not legally, anyway. I never signed off on it. Therefore, you can shut him down.”

“Wouldn't you be a better candidate?” I don't do site visits. In my six months as chief desk jockey, I haven't been to a single construction site. It's part of my plan to lay low. If I'm not in charge of anything I can't fuck it up. Not to mention I'd have no idea what to do once I got there. “We both know how much you'd enjoy nailing his ass to the wall.”

“More than you can imagine, but my schedule is full. Since Gary was fired, the next inspector in line handles their shit-show. Our other inspectors are busy, and frankly, I don't want to wait another second. So, you get a raise. Congratulations. This project is a nightmare.”

Did he say raise? My ears perk. Despite wanting to lay low, an increase in my income would be nice. Given that I refuse to touch my brother's and my nest egg, I have to keep the lights on at home somehow.

“If Owen isn't there when you get there, let the site manager know you mean business.”

Nathaniel Owen has a reputation for completing projects on time, which is a rare and coveted quality in a builder. He also sidesteps rules and does things his way rather than follow the letter of the law. The city of Clear Ridge doesn't take kindly to rule-benders, and Daniel hates them. Look at that, my boss and I have something in common.

“No problem,” I assure Daniel.

Maybe delivering justice will be cathartic. I can't go back in time and keep my father in line, or recoup the money of the people who trusted him, but I can prevent Nathaniel Owen from lining his pockets with even more money. The Owen

name is stamped on nearly every new build within a thousand miles. How much more can the guy possibly need?

That's the thing about greed. It knows no bounds.

"I have a meeting in five minutes and they'll probably keep me for the afternoon." Daniel swipes his sweaty brow. He's a good seventy pounds overweight and even on his tall frame, it's too much girth. "Can I count on you not to fuck this up?"

I force a smile. His wasn't the most wholehearted vote of confidence, but I'll take it. "Of course."

"He's cocky, strong-willed and needs a knot tied in his tail," Daniel says, not quite finished with his tirade. "You're strong. Smart. The perfect candidate to take him on, Viv." His voice gentles, and I feel an odd catch in my chest at the compliment.

The last man who praised me was my father. When I learned I couldn't trust him at the end, I wondered if every ounce of praise he gave me before was a lie. There are two versions of him in my head. The man who encouraged me to believe in myself and never give up, and the man who told me those things while stealing money from innocent people.

Disgusting.

"Shut him down," my boss repeats. "Let's teach him a lesson."

I draw my chin up at those words. Owen needs taught that you can't do what you want and give the rules the finger.

"Grab a hardhat from the back. Don't want you busting that pretty noggin of yours and then suing me."

Aaaand...moment over.

“Sure thing,” I reply blithely.

I grab a hardhat from the back and walk outside to my 2014 Hyundai the car salesman assured me was “reliable.” I don’t even miss the sleek black Audi RS I used to own. Okay, I do *a little*. But a car is a car. This gem will deliver me to Grand Marin just as well as that Audi.

Grand Marin is a soon-to-be massive live-work community. An open-air style shopping, dining, and retail area interspersed with offices for professionals as well as apartments for young, vibrant tenants who want to live in the middle of—or above—the action.

Live-works have been growing in popularity, and whenever there’s a trend, I’ve noticed the Owen family has their mitts all over it. I’ve never had any personal dealings with Owen, but I know rich people. They’re not that great.

As a former rich person, I speak from experience.

I also know that Gary, the city’s former mild-mannered inspector, came into the office with his bottom lip dragging the ground each and every time he had to deal with this site. Gary was a softie, and we all liked him. He was rocking a five-foot-three frame and had a shy way of watching his shoes when he talked. Then he blows up at Daniel? I wouldn’t have guessed he’d raised his voice a day in his life before today.

People can surprise you, though, and for me that should come as no surprise.

Gary’s despondence, and the possibility that he took a bribe, proves what a bulldog this Owen guy can be.

Bring it on, buddy. I’ve already been through the wringer.

Daniel’s grumping about the mayor isn’t totally inaccurate. Rumor has it the Owens grease palms. Mayor Dick Dolans

might well be their pet.

I come to a stop the moment I merge onto the highway. So much for taking a shortcut. I-70 is a parking lot, and the heat index on the car's thermometer reads 97° F.

Worse, I'm wearing a synthetic-but-made-to-look-like-real-silk shirt and it's sticking to me like a second skin. Waves of heat waft off the road as if the cars are in the process of being melted down into one big metal glob. The month of June is going out like it has a score to settle.

Again: *relate*.

I crank the A/C down and rest a hand on the steering wheel. I refuse to panic. I'll get to Grand Marin when I get there. I wish I would have dug up some much-needed intel about the site before Daniel rushed me out of there. I know next to nothing about it.

At least I'm wearing my nicest, most slimming pencil skirt and high heels. Not the best getup for tromping around a construction site, but it's a good look when wanting to bust some billionaire balls. I smile to myself, straightening my shoulders.

I'm out for a win for the good guys. A win for justice. I picture myself as Wonder Woman and lift my chin. If she did it in a bustier and panties, I can do it in a pencil skirt and knockoff silk.

Ready or not, Nathaniel Owen, here I come.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jessica Lemmon is a former job-hopper who resides in Ohio with her husband and rescue dogs. She holds a degree in graphic design currently gathering dust in an impressive frame. When she's not writing emotionally-charged stories, she spends her time drawing, drinking coffee, and laughing with friends. Her motto is *Read for fun*, and she believes we all should do more of what makes us happy.



Jessica Lemmon's romance novels have been praised as "purely delicious fun" and "lavish, indulgence-fueled romance" by *Publisher's Weekly*, as well as "wonderfully entertaining" and "a whole lot of fun!" by *RT Book Reviews*. She is the bestselling author of over forty books that have been translated into a dozen languages and sold in over 30 different countries worldwide, with her debut novel releasing in January of 2013.

Her work has been honored with awards such as a *Library Journal* starred review, an *RT Top Pick!*, *Apple Books Best Book of the Month*, and *Amazon Best Book of the Month*. She has been recommended by *USA Today* and *NPR.com*, and has achieved the rank of #1 bestseller on *Nook* as well as earned a seal of excellence nomination from *RT Book Reviews*.

Through witty banter and fun, realistic situations and characters you'll want to "sit down and have a drink with," Jessica tackles tough relationship issues and

complicated human emotions while delivering a deep, satisfying experience for readers.



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