

ALL THE *Jingle* LADIES



Hired BY THE
SINGLE DAD

ELLEN BROOKS

HIRED BY THE SINGLE
DAD

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HIRED BY THE SINGLE DAD INFO

He's a widowed single dad who doesn't believe he'll ever fall in love again. She's resigned to making other people's weddings beautiful after being burned in the past. How could one Christmas Eve wedding possibly turn into forever for the bride's dad and the florist he hired?

Veronica

Opening a box from Tiffany's on Christmas morning was a dream come true. Until it turned out the earrings were meant as an apology. Which led to a nasty divorce.

Luckily I kept my business and, thanks to years of hard work, have become the premier floral designer in the city.

I'm finally going to take the holidays off when a last minute no-expense-spared wedding changes my plans.

The rich father-of-the-bride is a man in his prime who's easy on the eyes so I don't mind until he wants to be hands-on with the prep. And show me everything I'm missing.

But it's not like I'm going to fall for a client on Christmas Eve, right?

Garrett

I'm fortunate to have loved once, even if I lost her way too soon.

Which is why, now that my daughter's grown up and ready to say I do, I'm determined to celebrate her wedding, even in the middle of the holiday bustle.

She's encouraged me to find love again but I don't believe lightning can strike twice.

Until the florist breezes in and turns my world upside down.

Veronica is stunning, and an accomplished young professional. But she's also sworn off love.

I'm willing to put in the work to prove I'm all in, but can she move on from the past and embrace a future together?

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CHAPTER 1



VERONICA

REORDER YOUR FAVORITES?

I scoff at the screen. They have it all wrong. If I was ordering my favorites, my online cart would be full of truffle mac and cheese and filet mignon with a porcini mushroom glaze. My order history would show slices of key lime pie and pints of dark chocolate gelato with a bottle or two of fine Cabernet thrown in for good measure. Oh, and salt and vinegar chips. Definitely those.

Instead, its power green chia smoothies, unsweetened almond milk yogurt, gluten-free seaweed crackers, and roasted red pepper hummus. Yup, I sigh, just the usual.

But instead of clicking to add my favorites to the delivery order, my mouse hovers over the big green button. I look up from my desk and glance out past the lush, vibrant evergreen and festive poinsettias in our famous holiday window display—and the bundled up tourists stopping to snap a picture at New York City’s premier floral boutique studio—to the thick, wet snow that’s blanketed the city over the past twenty-four hours with no end in sight.

The forecast is calling for a white Christmas which, for the first time in four years, I’m not dreading because I have finally followed my best friend’s advice. I’ve arranged for my team of senior floral designers to handle the usual Christmas Eve and Christmas Day events and am taking what she insists is a much needed vacation. Or at least forty-eight hours where I’ve promised not to pop into the design studio, the workshop, stop by any event, or check my email.

Despite the below zero wind chill, West Forty-Eighth Street is bustling with holiday shoppers rushing to Bergdorf Goodman's for a last-minute gift or to Rockefeller Plaza to see the tree and go ice skating. Surely, there are some men dropping into Tiffany's, too, for a little something sparkly that either says, I love you, or please marry me, or, as in my case four Christmas mornings ago, forgive me.

As if.

I reach up to finger the diamond earrings that aren't anywhere in the orbit of my style but which I still wear regularly because...well that's a good question, but I suppose it's because there's no reason two carat teardrops should sit in a jewelry box. Especially when, thanks to a divorce attorney friend of his mistress, my ex walked away with everything. Everything except my business, that is, which was a win on par with the Superbowl because it was the only thing I fought tooth and nail for.

A pop-up on the screen pulls my attention back to the order. Need more time? Why yes, I do need more time.

Five minutes later, in addition to my usual order, I've added some indulgences to my cart. Not only the decadent food items but also a Dreamy Lavender bath bomb, the hot new best-selling novel everyone's been talking about—who knew this gourmet food store carried books—and a honeycomb beeswax candle. Between this cart and a Netflix subscription I'll have to reset the password for, I should be set for my forty-eight hour mandatory sentence, er...vacation.

What's the earliest delivery time I can get? I'm usually up with the sun and run nonstop until I crash close to midnight. Ten o'clock tomorrow morning is the best I can do. Just as I click Place Order, my cell phone buzzes. One glance at the name and I answer on the second ring. Tierney Roberts is not only my best friend but also the go to wedding planner in Manhattan. We met three years ago when we were both named to the annual Thirty under Thirty Women to Watch in New York City list and our businesses have blossomed along with our friendship ever since.

“Business or personal?” I ask, using our customary shorthand for cutting to the chase about the intent of any call, while simultaneously running through the weddings she has booked over the next two days in my mind.

“Business,” she confirms. “Buuuut, not on the schedule.”

I snap to attention at her tone. As if she’s warning me, she’s about to call in a favor.

“For when?”

“If you do it, you’ll be able to buy that upstart competitor you’ve been eyeing.” The one that’s ripe for a takeover? Man, Tierney really knows how to speak my language.

“When?” I press.

“The twenty-fourth.”

“December twenty-fourth?” No. No way is she calling now with an event in three days. I know the kind of weddings clients of Roberts Events expect and they are not affairs that can be pulled off in three days. Not even close.

“It’s a small ceremony and reception...intimate.”

I can just imagine the way her freckled nose is wrinkling.

“Intimate like two or intimate like two hundred?”

“Since when do you know about intimate for two other than you need a piece of that action?”

We’ve had this conversation over Moscow Mules with extra lime a dozen times. Despite her encouragement to get back out there, Tierney knows my sole focus is my business, especially after a messy divorce I’d rather forget. Plus, her dates, men in their late twenties, like the two of us, are either working a hundred hours a week trying to make it on Wall Street or still figuring their shit out, i.e., not worth my time. Plus, they’re not running multi-million-dollar businesses like we are.

I ignore her attempt at distraction. “How many, Tierney?”

“Twenty-five-ish and no expense spared. Maybe you could push your vacation back a few days. Take off between

Christmas and New Year's instead.”

Maybe. “Location?”

“Private residence on the Upper East Side. Chef Tomas is already on board.”

“Open order or specifics?” The first would be easy. The second, not so much.

“You know how much I love you, right?”

“If you tell me this is another Polynesian luau in the middle of a New York blizzard—”

“No, at least I don't think so. I don't have the details yet, but am scheduled to meet with the client first thing in the morning. Apparently, he wants to be very hands on—or so his PA said. I was hoping you could be there.”

He? Usually Tierney deals with the bride directly, or if not her, then the mother-of-the-bride.

“Groom?” I ask, opening our inventory tracker to review the options I could offer on such short notice. Amaryllis, of course, and orchids. Maybe ranunculus and sweet pea, too.

“Father-of-the-Bride.”

I still. “Really?”

“Yes, Garrett Hillstone. I'm sending you his client profile now.”

“I didn't say yes.”

“You never say no.”

Damn, she knows me well. I click on my email to open the attachment, which could easily double as an FBI dossier, based on the details Tierney's team usually tracks down. But, in our business, information is power and the more we delight our customers with small touches and unexpected whimsy, the better for our reputations and word-of-mouth recommendations, which is everything. “Hillstone,” I murmur. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

I lean into the screen, my jaw dropping. The man is striking, with silver-gray eyes that match the hair around his temples, and somehow remind me I haven't had a date in over a year. His name sounds like one I recognize, but I've never seen Garrett Hillstone before. If I had, there's no way I would have forgotten.

"He funded the Kerry Hillstone Center for Children's Literacy at the New York Public Library."

An interesting choice of philanthropy. "His wife's doing?" I ask, swallowing the twinge of jealousy for Kerry Hillstone that snakes through my chest and tightens like a boa constrictor.

"No," Tierney replies. "He's single."

Single? Really? I zoom in on the document and study his features as if they're suddenly going to reveal a clue as to his personality flaw because, certainly, he must have a blaring one. It's the only explanation for his single status when his net worth is a single digit with a capital B. But those sexy, smoke-gray eyes give nothing away.

"Divorced?" I ask.

"Widowed."

Oh. I'm tempted to ask how long, but bite my tongue. Surely a single dad, especially one who wants to be hands on and is about to see his daughter married, is experiencing some emotions. I'd be wise to steer clear, no matter how hot he is. "And planning his daughter's wedding?" I ask instead.

"His only child and according to the PA, Kendall Hillstone and her fiancé are currently on their way back to the country after a year with the Peace Corps that got extended thanks to a cholera outbreak in Malawi."

My back straightens. "Cholera's not contagious, is it?"

"Hell if I know. But you'll be there, right? At the client meeting tomorrow?"

"What time?"

"Ten o'clock."

I click on the tab for the food delivery and reopen the order to edit it. With this last-minute job on Christmas Eve, which I'll have to handle personally, I could maybe still swing Christmas Day and the day after off, but why bother? Might as well just stick to my usual routine and work. After all, I may be acquiring another company in the New Year. "I'll be there."

CHAPTER 2



GARRETT

“ARE YOU SERIOUSLY WORKING OUT RIGHT NOW? ISN’T IT LIKE five a.m. there right now?”

Kendall’s face takes up most of the flat screen on the wall, but I can see enough behind her to tell she’s at an airport and not the straw hut she’s called home for the last thirteen months. “First of all, it’s five fifteen and second, you’re the one who just texted.”

“Just to say call me when you get up.”

“I’m up.” I wave a hand around my home gym as if she can’t see I’m in the middle of a set. After all, what else is there to do first thing in the morning?

“I see that.”

“Do you have your arrival details?”

Her face scrunches up. “About that.”

“Don’t tell me you’re delayed again.” I grab a cucumber mint water from the mini fridge and take a swig. “I would have chartered you and Justin—hell, the whole corps, a flight, you know, honey.”

“I know, Dad.” Kendall gives me a wry smile as an airport announcement blares in the background. “But don’t worry,” she adds. “As long as they don’t close LaGuardia, I’ll still be home tonight.”

Water rivulets stream down the window outside. The Upper East Side is blanketed in white. From my vantage point,

the city looks like a snow globe that's been turned upside down and shaken. Central Park might as well be the North Pole.

"If they do, I can get you into Teterboro on the company jet. I know it's in Jersey, but—"

"If LaGuardia is closed, then it wouldn't be safe, and I know you wouldn't want me to take the risk."

"No," I admit, running a hand through my hair. "You're right. Especially not when you're finally coming home."

"Only for a few weeks."

"Don't remind me."

Kendall is off to Stanford for her master's in education, along with her—as of two days ago—fiancé, Justin, who's going to be starting med school there in January. I was hoping they'd pick Columbia or even NYU, but no, they had to choose a school across the country. As if Africa hadn't been far enough. But I can't blame them. They're young and in love and want nothing more than to be together—just like Kerry and I at their age.

"I heard you had a date last week." Kendall's abrupt change of topic along with the subject snaps my attention back to the present. "How'd it go?"

"Terrible." And that's putting it mildly.

"I'm sure it wasn't that bad." She sounds just like her mother, always looking on the bright side.

I drop onto the weight bench. "You weren't there."

"Thank goodness."

I would smile, but the memory of my date is still too fresh. "She was a socialite who could barely hold a conversation. And that's being generous."

Seriously. What kind of woman do my friends think I'd be into? It's like they don't even know me. But then again, the one who set me up this time around never met Kerry. He never

had the pleasure of getting to know the feisty, passionate woman I loved with all my heart.

“Worse than that date last summer, who did nothing but talk about herself?”

“Believe it or not, yes. And I’ll thank you never to remind me of that dreadful date ever again.”

Kendall smiles but doesn’t relent. “I’m just glad you’re finally getting back out there. It’s about time, you know.”

“You keep telling me that, Ken, but it’s not the same.”

“It’s not going to be the same, and that’s okay. What you two had was special, but mom would want you to be happy, to find someone else to love.”

Kendall has always been wise beyond her years. She got that from her mother, too. And she’s right. Kerry would want me to be happy and find someone else to love. But what she doesn’t understand is that once you’ve had a taste of love as deep as what I had with my wife, anything less seems almost...pointless. I rise and make my way to the window, lifting my gaze to the sky, and sigh. “I know.”

“When you meet the one, you’ll know. You just have to be open to it.”

Lightning doesn’t strike twice. Falling in love at first sight once in a lifetime was a blessing. A second time would be a miracle. “Don’t get your hopes up, honey.” I’m certainly not.

“This isn’t getting my hopes up,” she says, wincing. “But Susie was thinking of bringing her mom as a plus one and I—”

“Kendall!” It was bad enough when friends were setting me up, but now my daughter, too?

“Your PA said you’ve been working nonstop again.” As if that’s a good enough reason.

“My PA should mind her own business.”

“Don’t blame her. I asked. Plus, I don’t want to be all the way over in California worrying about you all alone.”

She emphasizes *alone* as if it's a disease. I've been alone for almost a decade now and am more than used to it. After all, Kendall was my priority once Kerry passed.

"You don't have to worry about me. But speaking of wanting the best," I say, seizing my chance to change the subject. "I'm meeting with the wedding planner and a few vendors this morning."

"Dad," she says in that tone I met when she turned fourteen. The one often accompanied by an exaggerated eye roll.

"Any requests? Anything for your special day?" I'm asking as if I don't already know the answer. Kendall cares about money even less than Kerry did, which worked out because when Kerry and I eloped three weeks after we met, she was a kindergarten teacher making next to nothing and I was flat broke.

Kendall fiddles with the end of her braid. "Besides you and Justin and a justice of the peace? No."

"You know I promised." I don't have to elaborate. Kendall knows as well as I do that seeing our daughter married was one of the things Kerry was most upset about missing out on once the specialist told us the cancer had metastasized and time was running out.

"I know, and that's why I'm letting you handle the details. Whatever you select will be fine, I promise. As long as you're there to walk me down the aisle, that's all I need."

"I love you, honey."

"Love you, too, Dad. But I gotta go," she says, glancing up from the phone. "I'll be home soon."

"Have a safe flight," I say, but she doesn't hear. The call has already ended.



“WE’LL BE ABLE TO USE YOUR BAR,” THE WEDDING PLANNER says, waving a hand at the mahogany wet bar that runs along the west wall of the living room. “One bartender should be enough for an event this size. We could do blood orange mimosas as the signature drink, or maybe cranberry bellinis. Either, or both, would work well with the eleven a.m. Christmas Eve morning timeframe.”

“Both sounds good.”

“Perfect.”

She spins toward the floor to ceiling windows that overlook Central Park. I trail behind and stuff my hands in my pockets. “We’ll remove the snow and bring in heat lamps and high-tops for the patio. That view is something to capitalize on, so I’m thinking garland for the railing, but we can ask Veronica. She’ll no doubt have some suggestions once she sees this space.”

“Veronica?”

“The owner of White Glove Florist,” Tierney Roberts explains, tapping away on a tablet. “Best in the city and simply amazing at transforming spaces. I have no doubt you’ll find her work flawless. She should be here any minute.”

Just then. “Sir, Ms. Roberts, I’m sorry to interrupt, but Ms. Charles has arrived.”

“Thank you,” I murmur to my housekeeper, who steps aside for Ms. Charles.

The tall, willowy florist is obscured by a lush, colorful bouquet as she steps down the two shallow stairs to the sunken living room. But once her heels hit the beige carpet, she lowers the blooms and looks up with fathomless green eyes and a smile as wide as the Hudson.

The force of her presence—of her pure magnetism—socks me in the gut and wrenches with an odd twist, rendering me speechless.

“Veronica, right on time. I’d like you to meet Garrett Hillstone.”

“A pleasure, Mr. Hillstone.”

The gorgeous brunette sets the vase on the coffee table and extends a warm, slim hand that fits perfectly in mine. The soft touch tightens the twist until it turns into a knot.

“Garrett, please.” I clear my throat and swallow the turmoil clouding my thoughts like a dense fog. “And I assure you, Ms. Charles, the pleasure is all mine.”

Her grip is firm and confident. It lingers, as if she too is reluctant to release our contact.

“Garrett then, and please, call me Veronica. Congratulations on your daughter’s engagement. I’m thrilled to be part of the team making the event one to remember.”

Her lips are mesmerizing. Lush, and cherry red, and kissable. I haven’t thought of kissing a woman in years and yet here I am staring at Veronica’s smile like some hormone-filled sixteen-year-old, rather than a widowed single dad in his forties. I shake my head to clear the wayward thoughts and grab at the first thing that comes to mind.

“You’re beautiful, Veronica. Um, I mean your flowers. Your flowers are beautiful.”

Smooth Garrett, real smooth.

CHAPTER 3



VERONICA

“JINGLE BELL ROCK” IS BLARING FROM THE SPEAKERS AT THE White Glove Florist workshop and staging center six blocks from my brownstone in Brooklyn when I walk in sipping my nonfat eggnog latte. I stomp the slush off my boots and say a little prayer of thanks that I didn’t have to fight the never-ending snowfall across the East River into Manhattan.

The fast tempo of the song is nothing compared to the pace of my floral designers and assistants rushing to prepare the thousands of bouquets, wreaths, garlands, arches, centerpieces, corsages, place settings, cake decor, and tie backs we need for the many weddings, holiday parties, and events booked over the next few days.

A few curious looks are covertly slung in my direction as I claim an empty workstation to prep the items for Garrett’s daughter’s wedding. Two hours later, I’m wondering why I don’t get hands on more often. I’d forgotten how soothing cutting and preparing flowers and greens could be. How relaxing the cadence of creating the base, selecting the focal flowers, and adding the filler was. How satisfying creating something beautiful, one bit at a time, is.

And the way working with your hands allows your mind to wander. Like to a client meeting with a man who, rather than being a stuffy older billionaire financial type, was laid back with a heart-stopping lopsided grin in the prime of his life. A man who could easily be splashed on an ad four stories high on Fifth Avenue in the sexy ass-hugging Kiton jeans and navy cashmere sweater he was wearing. Not that I was looking.

After overcoming the awkwardness of that initial unexpected compliment, Garrett was gracious and self-deprecating. He assured Tierney and I at least five times that we were the experts and he trusted us completely with every last detail, which was music to my ears. A man who can relinquish complete control to a woman is a rare find indeed.

Maybe that's why I'm taking care to place every bloom just so and hide every wire from sight, all the while thinking about the widower who lives all alone in a penthouse in the sky. The single dad whose interest pounded in my chest as keenly as if he'd professed it aloud.

But surely, I was hallucinating. Too bad I canceled that vacation because maybe I need it more than I thought. Or at least a good night's sleep. I finish off the last of my now cold latte and pull myself together. What I need is to forget I ever met Garrett Hillstone and felt the heady weight of his gaze send a school-girl blush creeping up my skin.

I get back on task with a deep, focused breath, but the fragrant smell in the workshop—earthy pine, spicy cinnamon, a dash of clove, and bright citrus—sends me back to that first holiday season when I launched White Glove. The year I prepped every single arrangement myself in my seven hundred square foot studio in Queens and dreamed of a spot with space for a window display near Fifth Avenue.

My company is everything I want and need. My life is complete without a man. After all, I've been there, done that, and it's not something I need to repeat. Especially with a single dad whose daughter can't be more than five years younger than me. A Wall Street guy who has a towering artificial Christmas tree in the corner of his living room.

I'm trimming a stargazer amaryllis and humming along to "I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus" when Cassie, one of my lead designers, approaches. "Um, Veronica," she says, shooting a look over my shoulder. "You have a guest."

A guest? At the workshop? But before I can spin to see who it is, Garrett Hillstone sidles up to the vacant spot across the workbench and pins me with smoky gray eyes laced with

flashes of silver that just might be doubling as delight. A dusting of snowflakes is melting away on the shoulders of his dark wool coat, which he shrugs off.

“Veronica, so nice to see you again. Need a hand?”

My stomach drops as if I’m riding a roller coaster that just looped. The frenetic pace around us slows to a crawl with this turn of events, but I can’t spare a thought for anyone but the man across the three-foot butcher block. “Garrett, how did you —” I stammer as Cassie slips away, leaving the two of us alone.

“I asked your staff at the Design Studio.”

I must look like a deer in the headlights because he adds, “On Forty-Eighth Street,” as if I don’t know the address of my company’s flagship location.

“And they just gave you the address here? No questions asked?” They know this location is strictly staff only.

He picks up a red bloom streaked with white and lifts it to his nose, his eyes never straying from my face. “I can be very persuasive.”

Damn, the potent combination of his words and low tone hit me square in the chest. And maybe a bit lower, too. “Is that so?”

“Yes.”

Are we still talking about what I think we’re talking about? “But why were you at the studio to begin with? You could have called directly, or even gotten a hold of me through Tierney.” I left my business card with him yesterday, I’m sure of it. The sear of his fingers as they brushed mine when I handed it over was still fresh in my mind.

“You mean besides stopping by to see if you had a fresh Christmas tree for my place?”

I still, and he rests a wool slacks covered hip against the counter and holds up his hands. “Yes, I noticed you didn’t seem keen on the fake one.”

“And you wanted to switch it out on December twenty-third because I gave it a side-eye?”

He places both hands flat on the counter and leans toward me. “And because I wanted to see you again.”

I nearly drop the stem in my hand while he pauses to let the words sink in. “Plus,” he adds, the corner of his lip curling up, “I realized I had a personal request after all. Besides the tree, of course.”

I have a personal request too. Or more like a fantasy. That Garrett leans forward another foot or so and just kiss me already. Kiss me hard enough to erase every rational thought I’ve ever had. I have no doubt he could do it. And that I’d like it.

It takes focus and effort to put together a coherent sentence. “And what’s that?” I whisper.

“We’ll get to that soon enough. But first, you haven’t answered my question.”

“What question?”

With a flick of his wrist, he releases one monogrammed silver cuff link, then the other. He drops them into his pocket and rolls up the sleeves of his white oxford shirt. “Do you need a hand?”



I DRAG MY GAZE AWAY FROM GARRET’S TONED FOREARMS; THE muscles flexing each time he forces a ranunculus stem into the ten-inch floral foam ball. “The wedding is going to be beautiful. You must be so excited.”

“I am,” he says, a small V forming in between his brows as he concentrates on the task at hand. “It’ll be a whirlwind few days, especially with Christmas, but the holiday isn’t what it used to be.”

“Amen to that.”

He lifts his gaze to search out my face. “Not a fan of Christmas?”

I snip a sharp end of floral wire off and wave the pliers around in the air. “I used to love the holiday season. The music, the decorations, the smells, the good cheer buzzing in the air from Thanksgiving through New Year’s. My parents would take me on a horse-drawn carriage ride through Central Park every year, but that was forever ago. Before I became old and jaded.”

Garrett’s eyebrow quirks up, and it’s a beat before I realize my mistake. “I’m sorry, I just meant—”

“I’m the one who’s old enough to have a daughter getting married.”

I want to ask about Kendall, but something tells me now’s not the time. “I hope she loves the flowers.”

“Do you love the flowers?”

“Of course.” He realizes I’m the florist, right?

“Enough to choose them if you were to get married again?”

My eyes fly to his. What? Seriously? This man knows my marital status? Before my mind can blast off like a space shuttle to another world where theories and speculation float through the air like bubbles as to why he’s asking, I set the record straight. Just in case. “I’m not getting married again.”

“No?” He seems to temper his surprise.

“Let’s just say after what I went through, I’m no longer keen on the institution of marriage.”

A beat as he studies me, and then, “Good to know.” And with that he goes back to work and so do I, my grip on the pliers ten times tighter.

After a few minutes of silence, we turn to small talk, like what my favorite flower is and why, but at least this time the topics are appropriate for a florist and her client because, after all, that’s exactly what we are.

“You know,” I say, an hour later, after Garrett passes me another gold satin bow which I straighten. “If you weren’t going to take no for an answer, then why ask the question in the first place?”

“The question about if you needed help?”

“Yes.”

“Questions invite conversation.” He measures out another length of ribbon. “Even if I know exactly where the discussion will go.”

I attach the bow to the last arrangement with three twists of green floral wire and straighten it. “Where you want the discussion to go, you mean.”

A low chuckle sounds from deep in his chest, and he rubs his hand across the dark stubble covering his cheeks. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean I’m not open to new perspectives or fresh ideas to accomplish the goal.”

I’m tempted to ask what the goal is at the moment but bite my tongue. Before I can come up with something witty to say instead, he continues. “You can’t tell me you’re not the same. You don’t become CEO of a multi-million-dollar business in this city in less than five years without knowing exactly what you want and need out of every transaction.”

I’m wide-eyed as I meet his gaze across the workbench. A sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach tells me any research he did on me or my business wasn’t out of due diligence for his event tomorrow. But two can play this game.

“White Glove has succeeded not because of what I want and need, and not because of a single event or transaction. We’ve come this far because of the relationships I’ve forged over time and the fact I make sure every single thing we do exceeds customer expectations.”

“I’m glad we’re on the same page then.”

My brow furrows as I move the finished crystal vase to the cart at my side and clear the station now that we’re done. “I’m not sure we are.”

A devilish smile graces his face. “We are.”

My head falls to the side as I study him. A man used to getting exactly what he wants. But, first and foremost, Garrett is a client, so rather than question him, I defer. “If you say so.”

He must not have liked that answer because he circles the workbench and stops my cart with two firm hands on the end. “Give me a chance to prove it?”

I should be checking on my staff, making sure our orders are ready to go, but somehow the fact he wants to prove we’re on the same page seems much more important at the moment. “How?”

“You’ll need a coat.”

CHAPTER 4



GARRETT

I HOPE VERONICA'S NOT A POKER PLAYER BECAUSE HER RICH mahogany eyes are a tell. One I'm thankful I can read like a fourth quarter market forecast, because otherwise her professional facade is locked tighter than a safe with a biometric key required. A key I don't have. At least not yet.

But just like yesterday when the mask slipped for just a second when I complimented her instead of her flowers, this glimpse into her inner thoughts buoys my hopes that I'm on the right path and it's only a matter of time before Veronica's mine. Or, more accurately, I'm hers.

Not that it's going to be easy. She's been through a lot. But so have I, and age brings a double-edged sword when it comes to patience. On one hand, I'm willing to strike fast when I've made up my mind, but on the other, I've learned how a certain finesse when it comes to timing can make all the difference.

Within minutes of being introduced yesterday, I knew, just like I did all those years ago, Veronica Charles was the woman I didn't even know I'd been searching for. And, if the sensual smile she tried to disguise as a purse of her lips when I mentioned convincing her we're on the same page is any indication, she feels it, too.

Time to get to know this beauty. And break down her defenses one holiday delight at a time.



TWO MAGNIFICENT HORSES WHO, AS KENDALL WOULD SAY, are sporting their holiday finest, are hitched to a carriage decked out in twinkle lights on East Drive just inside Central Park. Feathery white snowflakes land on Veronica's long dark hair, dust the shoulders of her black bubble jacket, and melt on her rosy red cheeks as I clasp her gloved hand and help her up the step. I'm cursing the layers of leather and lining between our fingers, but her delighted smile as she sinks onto the thick cranberry velvet-lined cushioned bench more than makes up for the lack of contact.

I'd give anything to kiss the dewy moisture on those cheeks. I'd sell my soul to press my lips to that smile, stealing the taste of this woman I've craved since yesterday. The irony isn't lost on me that after ten years of being alone, of barely giving any woman a second thought—in a romantic sense—the universe seems hell bent on teaching me self-restraint after less than twenty-four hours of Veronica in my life.

Her denim clad thigh brushes mine as I climb up and settle in next to her. She stares down at the connection, and I drink in the sight of her dark eyes as they study the length of her warm thigh pressed along mine from hip to knee. A holiday horse-drawn carriage ride is either the best idea I've had in a long time or the worst, but when Veronica tugs the red and green plaid blanket over our laps and tucks it snugly around us, I'm thankful for the coverage. The next hour with this woman cuddled up at my side is going to be torture in the best possible sense of the word.

"Perfect afternoon for a romantic Christmas ride for two," our gray-haired driver says with a wink as he passes back two steaming cups of hot chocolate. I'm not about to correct him and breathe a sigh of relief when Veronica opens her mouth to clarify, but then closes it again without a word.

There's the briefest pause and I wonder what she's thinking, but she slings me a sidelong glance and murmurs, "You're still my client," as the driver lumbers up to his perch and grabs the reins.

I can't help it. "Until tomorrow," I murmur back, and the catch of her breath in her throat is like music to my ears.

The horses start to move, and we're rocked against the back of the carriage. A moment later, it's like we've passed through a magical portal, leaving the hustle and bustle of a city in full holiday panic mode behind, and emerging into a snowy, peaceful white winter wonderland.

My heart thunders in my chest when Veronica looks around, delighted, and sinks against me. Her delicate frame, just like her, is so strong and yet somehow vulnerable. I can't shake the feeling that this ride is just the beginning of something between us if I play my cards right and am the lucky bastard who wins her heart.



“WHAT WAS IT YOU NEEDED?” SHE ASKS, TURNING TO ME A few minutes later. “The personal request you ventured all the way out to Brooklyn in the snow for?”

Does this woman ever relax? Does she ever think about anything that isn't business? Does she let her mind wander, as I do when I study the clouds from my favorite spot on the balcony? Hell, I haven't given my inbox a single thought since yesterday. No, I've been occupied wondering how her long silky hair would feel running through my fingers. How she would kiss hello after a long Tuesday apart. How she would look on Sunday mornings without makeup when I come back to bed with the Times and fresh coffee.

With effort, I focus on the conversation. “Dying to know, are you?”

Her chin lifts. “I'm just doing my job. Plus, it's not like I didn't warn you.”

“Warn me?”

“White Glove is what it is today because we exceed customer expectations and if you, as my client, have a wish, it's my command to make it happen.”

Maybe it's the reminder that I'm her client, but I can't help myself. I've seen enough princess movies for a lifetime. “So,

you're like my own personal genie?"

Her eyebrows nearly touch her hairline and I would point out that the daggers her gorgeous eyes are hurling in my direction are probably not appropriate for a client, but I don't because then she might stop and that would be a million times worse.

"And here I was thinking you were a rare species."

I nearly choke at her tone as she crosses her arms over her chest. I clear my throat, doing my best to hide my amusement, but can't resist. "So you admit you were thinking about me?"

The carriage sways as one wheel rolls over a rock on the path and we're jostled together. Veronica's hand grips my thigh and I wrap an arm around her shoulder under the pretense of keeping her secure. She doesn't protest but is tight-lipped, not giving me the satisfaction of an answer because it would be yes. Her eyes tell the truth. The blood runs hot in my veins.

"And what kind of rare species would I be?" I ask, careful to keep my tone neutral.

A pause, and then, "A man who can give complete control to a woman."

I lean close enough the subtle scent of flowers that clings to her skin floats up to meet my nose and this time I don't mince words. "Oh, I don't have a problem ceding control to a woman, but I also know when and how to employ it to yield the best possible...outcome."



IT'S BEEN A FEW MINUTES OF AGONIZING SILENCE AS THE carriage passed the Great Lawn and the Reservoir heading toward the North Meadow. Veronica's been noticeably silent since a perfect "O" formed on her lips, followed closely by similarly large round eyes.

Did I go too far? Did I move too fast? Did I cross a line and ruin the progress I've made so far? My free hand around

her shoulder curls into a fist and I would crush the paper cup in my other hand, but Veronica, with four little words, erases my concern.

“Tell me about Kendall.”

I drag my gaze away from the red lipstick stain on the lid of her hot chocolate and meet her eyes.

“Kendall is...headstrong. A firecracker with a mind of her own but a heart of gold.”

“And recently served in the Peace Corps?”

My lips curl into a wry smile. “Is there anything about the bride and groom you weren’t briefed on?”

It’s hard to tell under all the layers she has on, but I think Veronica shrugs her shoulders. “Don’t tell me you didn’t do your homework. You already gave yourself away earlier.”

“How’s that?”

“You knew exactly how long I’ve been in business and could probably quote my annual revenue right now.”

“My research didn’t provide any of the most important details, though.”

She seems almost afraid to ask, but after another sip of steaming hot chocolate says, “Like what?”

She asked, and I’ve never been one to hold back. “Like how in the world you’re single, what brings you joy, and, most importantly, what you dream about at night.”

A black wool scarf hides her neck, but I can imagine the way the long, creamy expanse works as she swallows hard. Instead of answering, Veronica glances off toward a towering Laurel Oak, its branches weighed down with thousands of shimmering icicles.

“Is he good for her? Justin, I mean? Does he complement Kendall?”

“He completes her.” Before I can stop myself, I continue as the click-clack of the horses’ hooves rap against the sidewalk in a steady rhythm. “I know better than most how

hard it is to love someone with every fiber of your being. How life would be so much easier if you didn't love unconditionally and weren't so utterly vulnerable. But I also know how sweet the journey is and how every day is a precious gift. And that's," I say, with a sigh, "What I wish for the two of them as they take their vows tomorrow."

Veronica looks up at me through long, dark lashes. "Kendall is lucky to have a father like you. A man who loves so deeply despite the ultimate loss. You almost give me faith in the institution of marriage again."

The blood in my veins warms. Progress. Marriage is what I want and I'm not sure I'm willing to settle for less. Vows forged for a lifetime mean something, even if they're just words. "Almost?"

Her hand slips from her cup and her fingers twist the red and green plaid blanket. "Almost."

I'll take it. It's enough for now.

"Thank you for this ride," she adds. "It's gorgeous and festive, but how exactly is it proving we're on the same page?"

I'm glad she asked. "Because, just like you, I also believe in the importance of forging relationships and exceeding expectations."

Our eyes meet and I hold her gaze for a moment, studying those grass green eyes. A shiver runs through her, shaking her body, and she turns away.

"Tell me, Garrett," she says, clearing her throat and straightening. "What was your personal request? What was it I could do for you?"

We're back to this again. Back to business. There are a million things I'd like to do for her, but I don't go there, not yet. Instead, I answer honestly. "Mistletoe."

Surprise registers on her face before her eyes narrow, and she regards me with suspicion. "Mistletoe?"

"Yes," I confirm. "I'd like a sprig of mistletoe for tomorrow."

CHAPTER 5



VERONICA

“BUSINESS OR PERSONAL?” TIERNEY ASKS WHEN SHE ANSWERS my call on the second ring.

I dump the cold items from my grocery order in the empty fridge and bite my lip, taking a beat too long to answer. “Both.”

“I had a feeling you were going to say that. Business first?”

Thank God for friends who just get you. “Yes.” Always business first, no matter the way my heart’s been clunking around in my chest like a baby chick trying to peck its way out of a shell.

Plus, I’m not quite ready to admit that Garrett Hillstone, our client, has been living rent-free in my mind ever since the elevator doors closed when I left his magazine-spread worthy penthouse yesterday. Especially when he showed up this morning unannounced.

“Shoot.”

I open my pantry door and stash the seaweed crackers on a shelf next to some rice cakes. “We didn’t discuss aisle markers for the ceremony, but I think they would be a nice touch.”

“Agreed. Do it. You heard what Garrett said. We have free rein to use our best judgment, remember?”

Oh, I remember all right. Complete control. Which, apparently, he knows how to wield to produce the best possible outcome.

When he uttered those words, the tingle that shot all the way down in between my legs set me on fire. The very idea should repel me right off the side of a very tall cliff, but it didn't, er, doesn't. Nope, I have to squeeze my thighs together even now, as a delicious sensation floods my lady parts when I think about the sexy way those words fell from his lips.

“Veronica? Did I lose you?”

“No, I'm still here. And I'll go ahead with the aisle markers. I have enough extra blooms to make it work.”

“You finished the prep already?”

“Yes.” With a little help.

“That was fast.”

“I'm sorry I forgot to send pictures over,” I say, hanging the cloth delivery bags on the hook in the laundry room. “Things were a little crazy at the workshop this morning.”

“No worries. It's that time of year, right?”

“Something like that. Everything good for the event tomorrow?” I ask, biding my time.

“A few hiccups, but nothing I can't handle.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Soo, personal?” Tierney says, and I can't tell if she's in a hurry or just curious. Probably both.

“Personal,” I confirm, wondering what to say. I mean, I could start with, ‘Hey Tierney, I'm attracted to our client who, obviously, is automatically off limits. Oh, and he's over a decade older than me, and an uber-rich widower. A guy whose daughter's wedding I should be focusing on rather than wondering if the planes of his abs are sculpted after studying the way his broad chest fills out his white dress shirt as if he's a personal trainer.’

“Is this about Garrett?”

Is it that obvious? I could try to fib my way past it, but Tierney's already onto me like a hound on a fox's scent.

I hedge my bets. “Maybe.”

“I think he likes you.”

Pleasure, like a cozy warm blanket on a snowy afternoon, floods my veins. “You think?” Ugh, I sound like a tween with a crush.

“He asked about you after you left the meeting yesterday and we were wrapping up.”

“And you didn’t tell me?” At least a text, Tierney, come on.

“I meant to text you, but I was on the phone with my team to get them going on what we’ll need for the event the second I left.”

I twirl my finger in my hair. “What did he say?”

“He asked if you were going to be at the wedding and stay for the ceremony. I assured him we’re both very hands on and will be present until the end of the reception.”

“What’d he say to that?”

“He seemed pleased.”

“Oh.”

“You like him, too. I knew it.” Her accusation hits the center of the bullseye.

“Was it that obvious? During the meeting, I mean?”

“Of course not. You were a complete professional, as always, but there was something there between you two. Even I could tell.”

“He’s a client.”

“Only until tomorrow.”

That’s what he said. But I don’t blurt that out. Instead, I tick through all the reasons why not Garrett Hillstone. “He has a daughter who’s only four years younger than us.”

“So? It’s not like you want children or to get married again. You’re basically hitched to White Glove and, from what I can tell, he’s just as occupied. I say bang it out and enjoy.”

“Tierney!” If only it were that simple.

“What?”

“He showed up at the workshop this morning.”

That shuts her up. “The workshop?”

“Mmm-hmm.” I slip onto a stool at my kitchen island.

“Why?”

Good question. “To help.”

“Help?” She repeats the word as if it’s a foreign language.

“Yes.” I don’t mention the rolled-up sleeves or the way I picked up on his cologne with hints of cedar and sandalwood, even with dozens of flowers laid out between us.

“Then what?”

My forehead drops to the cool granite countertop. “We went on a horse-drawn carriage ride through Central Park.”

“What?”

“You can say that again,” I mumble.

“Doesn’t sound like he just wants to bang it out.”

“I don’t get that impression either.”

“Did he kiss you?”

No, damn him. Garrett helped me down from the carriage, his large hands clasped around my waist. When my feet touched the ground, I thought he’d release me, but he didn’t. His hold lingered, and I wanted to melt into him, to feel a man’s strength against me again.

I glanced up to meet his eyes, and he was so close his warm breath, almost visible in the frigid afternoon air, skated against my skin. He wanted to kiss me. I could see it in his smoky eyes, but he didn’t follow through. He pulled back and cleared his throat, a muscle in his jaw working.

“No.”

“Oh.”

I rise and pace back and forth across my kitchen, the frustrated energy from that moment surging through my veins. “But it’s a good thing. I mean, like I said, he’s a client.”

“And what’s your excuse going to be tomorrow at two o’clock?”

“He’s...he’s not my type.” Garrett wants to get married again. At least I think he does, and I don’t. I am happy with my life exactly the way it is.

“If you say so.”

I say so. And later, when I’m craving a pint of dark chocolate gelato, I grab an unsweetened almond milk yogurt instead. After all, I know what’s good for me.

CHAPTER 6



GARRETT

VERONICA STOPS SHORT ON HER WAY TO THE PATIO, THE length of evergreen garland in her arms swaying, and eyes the corner of my living room. “Nice tree.”

It was the best I could find when I scoured the city last night as the temperature plummeted after dropping Veronica off at her brownstone back in Brooklyn. The oversized star on top is disproportionately large for the scrawny fir that barely reaches the crown of my head, but the tree is real, natural, and there’s something to be said for the smell of fresh pine to make a place smell like Christmas.

“I was going for traditional and...wispy.” That’s better than sparse and sad looking, right?

“Traditional,” she murmurs, as if weighing the word on her tongue, testing its sound, and considering its meaning.

She studies the tree, decorated with some ornaments and ribbons I pulled off the artificial one before I asked my housekeeper to dispose of it. The new one’s a little crooked, but I can’t bother to straighten it now. Veronica’s brow is furrowed and those ridges demand my full attention. And send a shiver down my spine.

“You did this for me?” she asks quietly.

Hired staff are buzzing all around us, carrying folding chairs and rattling glassware over at the bar. I step closer to Veronica, close enough the sweet vanilla of her shampoo replaces the scent of evergreen in the air. I could easily rest a hand on the small of her back, but I don’t. I’m still a client—at

least for a few more hours. To my consternation, the proximity doesn't provide the clarity I was hoping for. I still can't tell if the answer she's looking for is yes or no.

I play it safe. "I enjoyed it last night, after I got it decorated, of course. I had a fire crackling in the fireplace and a nice glass of Cabernet."

Her eyes flit to the hearth and then skate over to the massive sectional my housekeeper tidied up this morning, refolding the blanket and straightening the pillows. Veronica's lower lip tucks between her teeth and it's a good thing she doesn't glance my way because she'd catch me staring. Instead, her gaze lands back on the tree. "Next year I'll get you one that's a better fit for the space. Fuller and at least two feet taller."

A tingle starts in my core and spreads to my limbs. "Next year?"

She must pick up on the unmistakable pleasure in my voice because she straightens and is all business once again. "Yes, I have a contact—a former White Glove designer—who relocated to a Christmas tree farm in Vermont. My clients always love the Noble firs we get direct from them."

I give in to the desire and let my palm skim the small of her back, my fingers trailing over the soft cashmere of her hunter green sweater. "I can't wait."

Veronica's eyes fall shut for a beat longer than a blink as she releases a breath, but then seems to catch herself. "I need to get these hung." She adjusts the thick garland draped across her arms and scurries away toward the sliding glass door at the far end of the room.

"Need a hand?" I call after her.

"No, thanks. I've got it," she answers quickly over her shoulder and my bliss evaporates faster than raindrops from a sun shower on a blistering hot sidewalk on a scorching August afternoon.

Veronica couldn't wait to put distance between us and I bet she'd put miles rather than yards if she could. I curse myself

for giving in to my urge to touch her, but the desire is like a hex, the universe's way of once more playing with my heart after I let it wither for years, telling myself there were other, more important things to do than love someone again.

With a long sigh, I turn on my heel and head toward the east wing of the apartment. There I'll find the one person I shouldn't bother at the moment, but who's also the only one in my life who will tell me to my face if I've gone completely mad.

CHAPTER 7



VERONICA

“NEED A HAND?”

The question is the same, but the voice is different. It draws me from my wayward thoughts—and the perfectly arranged bouquet I was fussing over while my mind ran wild—to find Kendall Hillstone at my side. There are pictures of her sprinkled throughout the penthouse, but they don’t do her justice. She’s beautiful with creamy, flawless skin and Garrett’s smoke-gray eyes. Her hair, pulled up in a low, casual bun, is the same chestnut hue as his, minus the gray around his temples, that is.

“You sound just like your father.”

Her smile widens, and I remember my manners. “I’m sorry. I mean, Merry Christmas Eve...and congratulations. You must be excited about your special day.”

She leans in and, in a conspiratorial whisper, says, “To be honest, I’ll be glad when it’s over.”

“Really?”

She lays a gentle hand on my arm as if we’re old friends. “My dad’s going to all this trouble to make everything perfect, and I understand why. I also appreciate it, really, I do. But I don’t need all this fuss...” She waves a hand around, but then seems to catch herself. “I’m sorry, that didn’t come out quite like I meant it. Thank you for all of your work. Veronica Charles, right?”

The interested way she confirms my name gives me the impression Kendall isn't going around introducing herself to all the vendors here setting up for the event. Just me. The jury's still out on whether that's a good thing.

"Yes. Kendall, right?" I say, squirreling away the warring debate in my mind so I can focus on Garrett's daughter.

"The one and only." She does a little bow and I notice the pink high-top Converse she's rocking. I have a pair just like it in my closet.

"I have your bouquet. Would you like to see it?" I ask, remembering a second too late that she could probably care less.

Her eyebrow quirks up, and it makes me think of Garrett and the delicious looks he gives me, like I'm a feast and he's starving. I swallow hard and hope that by sticking to the official reason I'm here, I might not confess the fact I'm falling for her dad when she's only a few years younger than me.

Thankfully, she takes it easy on me. "Sure."

I head toward the far corner of the massive, pristine kitchen. The one section Chef Tomas hasn't taken over where I stashed a few boxes of the last-minute items. I set the two sprigs of mistletoe I prepared, each tied with a red ribbon, on the counter and reach for the vase holding her bouquet.

"Is this mistletoe?" she asks, picking up the felt version and turning it over in her hand.

"It's supposed to be. It's...a private joke."

"Oh."

Before she can ask questions, I draw out the vase with her bouquet, a muted, understated clutch with tallow berries and silver dusty miller.

"Veronica, it's gorgeous!" She sets down the mistletoe and plucks the bouquet right from the water, ignoring the water drops from the stems that drip onto her cream romper.

I covertly slip the two sprigs back into the box and smile at her pleasure. “I’ll still need to wrap the base with a ribbon before it’s ready to use but...” I trail off, as her engagement ring, a shimmering pearl, catches my eye. “Your ring, it’s gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” She lifts her hand so I can examine it more closely. The luster is iridescent, morphing in the light from ivory to silver to champagne. The ring is understated, elegant, and, most of all, unique. I barely know Kendall Hillstone, but her engagement ring seems to fit her well.

“It’s unconventional, I know,” she says, adjusting it on her finger. “But from the day I met Justin, we forged our own path, made things work our way. We’re polar opposites in some ways, but so alike in others, it’s uncanny.”

Her explanation resonates deep in my chest, like a gong that’s been struck and the sound waves rippling out for a long moment after. I’m so distracted I barely hear what she says next. “Plus, it’s sustainable. Unlike the bouquet which, while lovely, is fleeting.”

“No,” I insist, meeting her eyes. “I mean yes, the bouquet won’t last forever, but White Glove is a proud partner of a citywide non-profit. With the last-minute rush of this event I didn’t think to ask Garrett if he wanted to take part but if he does—if you do—the flowers from this event will be sent to a hospital or a nursing home for a patient or resident to enjoy for a few more days.”

Kendall sets the bouquet back in the vase and takes both of my hands in her soft grip. “That,” she says, with a tear in her eye, “Sounds like the perfect way to spread the joy of my wedding day.”

“I’ll make it happen.” I squeeze her hands and relish the ease that has emerged between us. Kendall exudes kindness and generosity and is exactly the type of woman I’d love to call a friend. It’s hard to believe she was a stranger only moments ago, and I can’t make sense of the feeling deep in my gut, but it seems that Garrett’s daughter is someone who was brought into my life for a reason.

“I know another way you can make me happy.”

“Anything.” I respond automatically, although I instantly regret it when a mischievous look crosses her face.

“Save a dance for my dad.”

I walked into that one, but after meeting Kendall, the bright soul Garrett raised once his wife passed away, and getting her unspoken blessing, it somehow feels like the first day of spring instead of the middle of a cold, harsh winter.

“I will.”

CHAPTER 8



GARRETT

THE DOOR TO KENDALL'S CHILDHOOD BEDROOM IS CLOSED, but she says, "Come in," in her familiar sing-song voice when I knock. She is standing tall in her dress in front of a full-length mirror that came from God knows where. My eyes find hers in the reflection and my heart leaps into my throat.

I pull at my suddenly way too tight collar as a roller coaster of emotions renders me speechless. My little girl is getting married in a matter of minutes. For years, it seemed like this day would never come, like it was far off in the distant future, something only to daydream about. But here we are and now that she's all grown up and ready to take the next step, it feels like just yesterday she was a baby I could cradle in my arms.

Two of her best friends are flopped on the bed sipping champagne, but they excuse themselves and slip past me out the door. I'm grateful for the privacy. "Kendall," I start, but my voice is croaky and strangled. I clear my throat and start again, stepping further into the room. "Kendall—"

"Dad."

The single word is my undoing. My brilliant, beautiful, compassionate, fun-loving little girl will always be mine, but she's about to officially have another man in her life. She'll take him to be her lawfully wedded husband, and she's not even batting an eye. She's calm and strong and certain. Her mother would be so proud.

She spins and slips into my arms, still fitting perfectly under my chin. I clasp her to me, not giving one lick if her makeup smudges my suit or if the hug wrinkles her dress. She wouldn't care either and that's another reason I love her so. Because Kendall, despite suffering a loss just like I did, never stopped loving with her whole heart and soul.

"Don't worry," she mumbles against me with a sniffle. "The photographer you no doubt overpaid for already took my pictures."

I chuckle and close my eyes, taking a deep breath and trying to burn this moment in my mind. A moment I'm blessed to have and never want to forget. "Justin is a lucky man."

She squeezes tight and then pulls back enough to look up at me. Her gray eyes, the one feature she got from me, are sparkling with delight. "Either that or he's completely bananas, but let's go with lucky."

I laugh and shake my head and with that the tension is gone, flowing from my shoulders like a balloon slowly losing its helium. "I have something for you."

"Is it a pony?"

"I'd get you ten ponies if you'd like, but that's not what I have for you now."

I reach into both pockets and hold out my hands, fists closed, face down like I've done a thousand times before. "This one," she says, tapping my left knuckles. I turn my hand over and open it to reveal...nothing.

"This one," she says with a giggle, tapping my right knuckles. This time, when I flip my hand and unfurl my fingers, her shiny gold wedding band is in my palm.

"I wanted you to see this before I gave it to Justin, or whoever's going to hold the rings for the two of you."

She picks it up and examines it, turning it over in her fingers and bringing it close to her face. "Forever and always," she whispers, reading the inscription. "Just like mom used to say. I love you Kendall and will forever and always."

Every muscle in my body tenses at the words I haven't heard in ten years. Kerry used to say the same thing to me. I love you Garrett and will forever and always. I brush away the moisture from the corner of my eye. "It was exactly what she used to say. And it's engraved on her wedding band."

"Oh, Dad," Kendall says, fighting back her own tears.

She comes in for another hug and I'm choked up but admit, "It's days like this I miss her most."

"Me too, Dad. Me too."

A soft knock on the door interrupts us and Tierney Roberts, wearing a black floor length dress rather than the pants she had on earlier for set up, peeks in. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but it's almost time. Are you ready?"

"Yes," Kendall replies, straightening at the same time I stall.

"Not yet."

Tierney glances between the two of us and nods. "Let me know when you are. Everything is set." She backs up and starts to close the door, but I stop her.

"Wait," I say, as Kendall hands me back the ring. "Can you make sure Justin gets this? It's Kendall's wedding band."

"Of course." Tierney's nod and the instant assurance make me think of Veronica and how she'll go to any length to please a client.

"Dad," Kendall says, drawing out the word as if she's fourteen again and pulling my attention back to the present. "You're ready. I know you are."

I thought I was ready, but it's all happened so fast, a whirlwind for the past seventy-two hours. Not that in a million years I thought I'd be facing down watching my daughter say her vows and professing my feelings to a woman who isn't the mother of my child on the same day, but here we are. "Am I?"

She steps back and reaches up to straighten my tie. "Do you love me?"

“Of course.”

She pats my chest, and a smile plays on her lips as I cover her hand with mine. “Do you love her?”

“I do.” There is no hesitation, no doubt in my mind. Just like I knew immediately with Kerry, the feelings I have for Veronica, the certainty in my soul, are crystal clear.

“Good. Then you have something to look forward to.”

“Besides watching my little girl marry the man of her dreams?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that?”

“Kissing Veronica.”

Not what I was expecting. “I want to kiss her, but what makes you think she’ll kiss me back?”

“Oh, she will, believe me.” Kendall picks up her bouquet from the nightstand and winks at me. “Maybe more.”

“Kendall,” I chide, but she’s immune to my admonishment. Has been for years.

“What? It’s about time. Plus, you’re not getting any younger, you know.”

Kendall must not mind that Veronica is only a few years older than her, which eases a worry I didn’t even realize was weighing on me until now. “First things first. Let’s get you married, okay?”

She links her arm through mine. “Okay.”

CHAPTER 9



VERONICA

“YOU, BY FAR, ARE THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CREATURE HERE.” Garrett’s low, husky voice only inches behind me sends an exquisite shiver down my spine. He steps up to my bare back, his proximity heating my skin without even touching it.

Guests mingle only feet from us. I smile and lift a chilled flute of cranberry bellini to my lips. “I’ll go change. I wouldn’t want to outshine the bride.”

“Don’t you dare,” he growls. “Unless I’m there to help.”

So that’s how this is going to go. A flush creeps up my cheeks and desire unfurls in my low belly. Garrett’s been clear for days once he’s no longer my client all bets are off. It’s debatable when exactly that is, but two things are certain. It’s soon and I can’t wait despite the questions that still hang between us.

“You seemed to do a pretty good job of undressing me with your eyes before the ceremony.”

I’d been waiting with Tierney, the two of us hovering just inside the living room as the groom, officiant, and guests waited patiently outside. The sun, which rose in a bright, clear sky this Christmas Eve morning, bathed the patio in warm golden rays. The two-hundred-and-eighty-degree view of the city, blanketed in shimmering white, was the perfect backdrop for the ceremony.

Tierney, as usual, nailed it and I told her so under my breath. She smiled as a string quartet played “The First Noel,” stalling as everyone waited for the bride to make her way to

the wide open wall of sliding glass doors and down the aisle. “You’re not wearing your diamonds,” she’d murmured back, her gaze trailing to my earrings. No, I didn’t wear the teardrops today. I’d reached for them, but something stopped me, and I put them back in their little black case and snapped it shut.

Finally, from a hallway on our left, the bride and her father emerged. Garrett wore a tailored suit cut so well it fit like a glove. A sexy glove I wanted to peel off. The boutonniere he helped make yesterday was pinned to his lapel.

His steps faltered when he caught sight of my long-sleeved backless gown and his gaze drifted back in my direction at least twice, while Tierney helped Kendall slip into a faux fur, ivory wrap before he focused on walking the beautiful bride down the aisle.

A chuckle rumbles from deep in his chest and brings my thoughts back to the present. “Catch that, did you?” He drags a single finger across my low back, just above the twist of silk gathered at my tailbone. My breath hitches.

“Half of New York caught that look. You’re not very sly, you know.”

“Good thing I’m not trying to be. Especially now that I’m no longer your client.”

My grip tightens on the near empty flute in my hand. “What are you then?”

A beat and then, “What do you want me to be?” Garrett’s voice catches, ever so slightly, showing the first sign of vulnerability, the first crack in his confident suit of armor I’ve seen so far and it’s...endearing.

His entire palm presses against my back as if forging a physical connection between us will help tether us together. It does, although I still can’t articulate an answer to his question right now, in the middle of the reception before the cake has even been cut.

I dip my chin toward the bride and groom, both with wide smiles as they talk with a few guests. “Kendall said she and

Justin forged their own path, made things work their way.”

“Kendall has always been wise beyond her years.”

As if she can tell we’re talking about her, Kendall glances toward us and winks, lifting her glass in our direction. I return the gesture, then down the last sip of the sweet, bubbly concoction. Garrett plucks the empty flute from my hand and sets it on the tray of a server passing by. “How about a dance?”



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I’M A SWIRLING MESS OF HORMONES and my panties are wet despite the fact Garrett’s been a perfect gentleman as we’ve danced. No wandering hands or anything. Damn him.

But I shouldn’t complain. He’s a smooth dancer which, combined with two cocktails on an empty stomach, the festive atmosphere, and the twinkle lights, has me convinced that being wrapped up in this man’s arms is exactly what I want later today. And maybe every day for the rest of my life.

Garrett fills me in on the guests, who have given us a wide berth on the dance floor, along with not-so-subtle delighted glances.

“Have you really not dated anyone since Kerry passed?” I ask, finding it impossible to believe.

“Not seriously,” he says with the slightest shake of his head. “There was never anyone who stole my heart. Until you.”

I’m not ready to profess my love for this man, yet to say anything else seems inadequate, but I have to give him something. “I haven’t dated either.” I focus on the white rose pinned to his lapel at my eye level. “Since my divorce, I mean. I know it’s not the same as losing a spouse, but it was...messy and wrecked me. After that, I threw myself into my business.”

He squeezes my hand. “I never used to believe everything in life happened for a reason, but the longer I’ve lived, the

more I've found it to be true.”

I can't help it. I bite back a giggle. “Maybe someday, when I'm as old as you, I'll feel the same.”

He eyes me, and finally, his hand slides down over the silk to cup my ass. He pulls me against him and an unmistakable rock-hard length meets my belly. “Happy to prove anytime how some things improve with age.”

I shimmy against him. “Have you been hard this whole time?”

“Sweetheart,” he says, leaning so close his hot breath skims my neck. “I've been hard since the moment you waltzed in here the other day and turned my world upside down.”

Oh. Well, then. “I have something for you, but I should add a warning that it's likely not going to help your...er situation.”

“I want it.” It's a declaration of fact if I ever heard one. No hesitation, no questions asked. I love it.

“Come with me.” I break off our embrace and grab his hand, tugging him from the dance floor down the hallway and swear he murmurs, ‘That's what she said,’ under his breath.



“WERE YOU SNOOPING AROUND MY PLACE?” GARRETT EYES the sprig of fresh mistletoe suspended by its red ribbon from the ceiling where I hung it only moments before the ceremony. It's directly in front of a set of solid white doors that Kendall informed me led to Garrett's bedroom.

“No.”

He shoots me a sidelong glance full of suspicion. I lift a shoulder. “I might have had a little help.”

“In that case,” he says, and moves so fast I barely see him coming. Before I know it, I'm pressed against the wall, pinned by his hips.

One large hand rests on my waist as the other coasts up my side to cup the back of my head. He descends, pausing only when his lips are millimeters from mine. “Is this what you want?”

I nod, my lips parted as my chest, pleasantly crushed between a broad wall of muscle and the wall, heaves.

“Tell me, Veronica,” he growls. “Tell me what you want.”

It’s not a question and invites no discussion. He’s in complete control, but I’m more than willing to surrender. I grip his belt and tug him even closer. “I want you.”

Those three little words let loose an avalanche. A deluge of lips and tongue and hands and everything I crave. The moan that escapes from my throat as my hands explore every inch of him I can reach is primal, needy. His answering grunt hums against my nipples, and my back arches in response. My fingernails dig into his back through his shirt. Damn these clothes.

“You’re mine,” he growls against my lips. “Mine.”

Without warning, he scoops me up into his arms. I clasp his neck. “What are you doing?”

His lips, smeared with my red lipstick, curve into a slow, sexy smile. “Proving it.”

“Now?”

“Now. I’ve waited long enough.”

But just as he reaches for the door handle, Tierney comes around the corner. “Oh, there you are—” she starts, stopping short. She recovers quickly and straightens her shoulders, her expression carefully neutral as if I’m not in the arms of the father-of-the-bride. “It’s time to cut the cake.”

CHAPTER 10



GARRETT

“NOT HUNGRY?”

The fork Veronica’s been using to toy with her slice of chocolate wedding cake stills and she glances at me from the corner of her eye. “Oh, I’m hungry alright, but not for this.”

“Usually it’s the bride and groom who can’t wait to slip away.” I enjoy another bite of my piece of moist, decadent chocolate cake.

“Usually,” she agrees, reaching over to swipe a finger through the peppermint filling on my slice. She raises it to her lips and, through long, dark lashes, watches my face as she sucks the mousse off, leaving a clean finger. Then she flashes a wicked smile. Fuck.

“Veronica,” I say, the warning in my tone clear.

“Yes?” Her smile transforms to innocent and playful. Unlike the serious Veronica I’ve gotten to know over the past few days, this is another glimpse of her. One I love. But that doesn’t mean I wouldn’t rather have her screaming my name as I pound her in my bed at the moment instead.

Okay, maybe not screaming. There are still guests here, after all. But moaning as I bury my face between her legs? That would work, too.

“Go to my room. Wait for me there.”

Her tongue darts out to wet her lips. “Now?” Rather than being shocked, she seems...relieved. As if she’s craving me as much as I’m lusting after her.

“Now.”

She wastes no time setting down her plate, then spins, rubbing her palms down the sides of her thighs as she beelines to the hallway that leads to my bedroom. I don't know how I thought dismissing her wouldn't catch the attention of at least a handful of guests whose eyes trail after her.

Veronica's been getting more than her fair share of notice today thanks to her sexy black dress and the fact I've been glued to her side. But to hell with what anyone thinks. She wants me and that's all that matters. If I want to pleasure her while folks whisper about our absence, I will.

But I'll be quick. Lick her now and save the lovemaking—and the hours I want to tangle in the sheets with her—for later.

Veronica is standing in the middle of my bedroom, her heels kicked off next to her on the carpet. She pivots as the lock clicks into place under my fingertips.

“You did all of this for me?” She waves a hand around at the four-poster bed sprinkled with red rose petals and the dozens of votive candles set on every surface I could find. They're not lit, but I had to improvise, and I'm not about to press pause on this freight train now to find the matches.

“This?” I say, stepping up to her and brushing my thumb down her cheek. “Is nothing compared to what I want to do for you every day for the rest of my life.”

A flutter of emotions trip across her face, but the final one, a serene, peaceful smile, sets my pounding heart at ease. “Garrett,” she says, “I have something for you, and it might be silly, but—”

“I want it.” Desperately. Whatever it is.

“I knew you were going to say that.” She raises her hand and opens it to reveal a sprig of mistletoe just like the one hanging in the hallway outside, but different.

I lift it, letting the green felt petals and tiny white felt balls hang from my finger by the red ribbon. “It's mistletoe.” My brow furrows as I try to make sense of this gift.

“I know it’s not real,” she says, lifting a shoulder as if she feels the need to apologize. “But this way, it will last...forever. And I can get a kiss whenever I want.”

Is she serious? Does this mean what I think it does? What I hope it does? I test the water, pinning her with my gaze. “Forever is a long time.”

She presses up on her bare toes and circles my neck with her arms. Her forehead meets mine, and she holds my gaze as if to ensure there could be no doubt. “It might not be long enough.”

It’s not. Not even close. My heart threatens to beat right out of my chest. I thought I wanted Veronica Charles before, knew she was the one for me the instant we met, but confirmation she feels the same, that she’s not just someone I’ve hired—that she’s mine? There’s no comparison. Love, pure and simple, fills my heart.

I lift her off her feet and kiss her soundly. She melts against me and slides down my chest as I deepen the kiss. Her toes touch down as I taste her, thoroughly exploring every inch of her mouth.

My hands skim down her sides, and her back arches, her breasts thrusting against my chest. My cock throbs. I tear my mouth away from hers to kiss my way over to her ear and down her long, slender neck.

Her breaths are choppy gasps as she reaches for my belt, fiddling with the buckle. “You’re still dressed.”

I clasp her hands in mine. “And you, my dear, aren’t ceding control. Let go, Veronica. Trust me to give you exactly what you want, what you need.”

“Okay,” she whispers after a long beat, her hands dropping to her sides.

I capture her lips once more in a kiss that leaves us both breathless. I drag myself away and drop to my knees, sliding the hem of her dress slowly up her thighs, and don’t stop until her panties, black and lacy, inch into view.

But rather than give her what she wants, I start on the inside of her thigh, so soft and smooth against my lips. I lick and suck my way over to her core and inhale her unique scent, burning it in my mind as my forehead rests against her belly.

“Garrett,” she pleads, widening her stance and holding my head in place.

“Patience, my dear.” Screw the fact that guests are surely wondering what the two of us are up to. They’re smart enough to figure it out...and leave us alone. Especially Tierney.

I run a finger just under the edge of fabric, starting at her hip bone and heading south, swiping easily through her slick folds.

“Ah,” she cries out when I keep going, my finger slipping along between her ass cheeks under her thong. My tongue dances over her slit through the lace as her fingers weave through my hair, nails scraping my scalp. It feels so good, so right.

“Veronica,” I say, leaning back on my heels and drawing her thong down until it slides to the floor. “Lie down on the bed.”

She opens her mouth as if to protest but catches sight of my look and snaps it shut. She follows my directions, her eyes dark when I stalk toward her, slip my jacket off, and toss it aside.

I couldn’t care less about what the guests think, but Veronica is a business owner, and as much as I don’t like it, the reception is still part of her job. I bend over her and pin her with a hand on either side of her arms. “As much as I want to make love to you right now, I’m going to settle for the taste of you I’ve been craving. There’ll be time later, after the party—all the time in the world—for me to explore every inch of your body.” To memorize every spot that makes her fingers twist in the sheets, every move that makes her toes curl. I can’t wait.

She lifts a hand, rubbing my cock through my slacks. My head drops and I close my eyes, succumbing to the sensation

and allowing myself to enjoy her touch for just a minute. I can't help it. It's been so long.

"You probably taste better than that peppermint mousse," she murmurs, adding a second hand to stroke my length and surfacing the image of her red lips sucking her finger only minutes ago.

I summon every ounce of effort I can muster and pull away, my breath coming in ragged gasps. What the hell happened to me being in control?

"Spread your legs." The words come out harsher than I intended, but she flashes a wicked smile as she follows my command.

"Yes, sir," she drawls, and damn it, the minx knows she has me wrapped around her little finger. It's obvious I'm on the brink and she's really the one in control. And the worst part...or maybe the best, is that she loves it.

That just won't do.

"Wider," I rasp out, sinking to my knees on the floor next to the bed. I grab each ankle and drag her across the comforter, pulling her toward me until her pussy, pink and glistening, is only inches from my face. It's ready for the tongue lashing it deserves, the one I'm about to release on it.

"Oh God," she cries, her breath hitching as I lick her slit from ass to clit, my stubble scraping her skin. I'm glad I didn't shave this morning.

My palms on each warm inner thigh hold her wide open. Her muscles quiver under my fingertips, even though I'm barely getting started. I flick my tongue over her bud and am rewarded with a low moan as her body arches.

I capture her clit between my lips and suck. Her hips lift off the bed and her legs strain to close, but I don't give her an inch. Using the flat of my tongue, I swipe up her length again, burying my face deeper. Her scent, her taste, the feel of her finally relinquishing the control she holds on to so tight, it's a heady combination and my cock twitches.

“Garrett,” she breathes, her fingers weaving through my hair, but I ignore the plea and continue to lavish attention on her pussy. I circle her entrance with my tongue, dipping inside as she clenches around me.

I swore to myself I was just going to taste her, but I can't resist. I slide two fingers inside her tight channel. She contracts around me, her body clenching. It pushes her over the edge and she detonates.

An orgasm rips through her, every muscle in her body flexing as she cries my name. Her thighs squeeze my head and she squirms when I don't stop, when I flick her clit again and again. But her sounds, the little sighs and groans, and murmurs I'm learning, and memorizing as fast as humanly possible, confirm she's relishing every second.

CHAPTER 11



VERONICA

I WADE THROUGH THE FOG OF A DEEP SLEEP AND CRACK OPEN A single eye. Too bright. Wincing, I roll over, dragging the thousand-count Egyptian cotton sheets and comforter with me. Some of my muscles are smarting as if I've just run the NYC marathon in record time, but others are so limp I could have just finished an hour-long Swedish massage.

It's so cozy in this bed I feel like a hibernating bear who was woken up weeks before the first signs of spring. I have no idea what time it is, although the wall of windows reveals it's well past dawn and snowing.

I haven't slept this hard in years. Must have been thanks to the long evening of passionate sex with a man in his prime. A man who, although he claimed to be out-of-practice, knew his way around my body and exactly how to pleasure me over and over and over again. A man who was insatiable and wouldn't stop until I was satisfied.

I'm naked and not surprised, but the effort of hunting for something to slip into seems so insurmountable at the moment I snuggle back into the warm cocoon and close my eyes. But my attempt to snooze is fruitless. I toss and turn, unable to drift off when the memories of yesterday, and last night, are a million times better than any dream.

I'm completely gone for him. And not just because he's great in bed, although that certainly doesn't hurt. Garrett is open and straightforward. He knows what he wants and isn't afraid to go after it.

He's lived and loved and lost and now wants me. And I want him. It's that much sweeter because I didn't think I'd ever feel this way about someone again, but I do.

Garrett's not in here, but he can't be far. The dozens of votives sprinkled around the spacious room are lit, casting their dancing shadows on the walls and ceiling. They smell like Christmas, and with a start, I remember it's Christmas morning.

But rather than the dread that normally accompanies this holiday, my spirit is light. I'm optimistic about the future. For the chance to build a relationship with the single dad who hired me only days ago. My one hesitation remains what he wants. Garrett loves me, I have no doubt about that, but he wants marriage and I'm not there. Not yet, and honestly, I don't know if I'll ever be.

But dwelling on my concern is not how I want to spend Christmas morning. I yawn and stretch from head to toe, my neck cracking when I roll my head from side to side. The instinct to reach for my phone and check in with work is strong, but my phone's not in here. Plus, the urge isn't as intense as usual. I've got other things on my mind. Starting with tracking down a certain tall, dark, and handsome man whose bed I'm in.

Reluctantly, I throw back the covers and tug the sheet off to wrap around me as I pad into the bathroom. The space, twice the size of my bedroom, is a well-appointed oasis. It eclipses the spa on Fifth Avenue where Tierney and I treat ourselves to a day to celebrate our birthdays together every April by a mile.

The marble tiles are cool under my bare feet, but I pull up short at the sight of an enormous freestanding oval soaking tub, big enough for two. It's surrounded by plush white towels and a basket of amenities. I perch on the edge and tuck the sheet under my arms so I can examine the assortment of bath bombs and salts, oils and loofahs, plus a selection of bubble baths that at first glance look like fine wine.

“I can draw you a bath.” Garrett’s low voice catches me off guard and I spin to find him leaning against the arched doorway in a t-shirt and jeans, sporting a sexy smile.

Automatically, I protest. I could do it myself. “Oh, you don’t have—”

“Let me,” he says, pushing off from the wall to come to my side. “I want to.” He brushes my hair behind my shoulder. “That is, unless you’d like coffee first.”

My ears perk up. “Coffee?”

“And breakfast.”

“You’ve had a busy morning.”

“Actually,” he says, rubbing his stubble. “I slept in and skipped my workout. I should tell Kendall. She’d be proud.”

Why? “Because it’s Christmas?”

“Because,” he says, pressing a kiss to my hair. “I had better things to do.”

“Like make me coffee and breakfast?”

He nods. “In bed.”

I rise and press against him to hold the sheet up so I can slip my arms around his waist. “You’re like Santa, only better.” His left eyebrow lifts and I’m quick to clarify. “A sexy, younger, fit Santa who brings presents.”

“I’m not sure fresh coffee and warmed up leftovers qualify as presents.”

“In my world they do, believe me.” It’s more than any man has done for me in a long, long time.

“Does that mean you don’t want the real present I have for you?”

“You got me a present?” Somehow, I’m not surprised.

He presses a kiss to my lips. “I did.”

“I want it.” If it’s from Garrett, it will be perfect, I know.

His eyes study me for a moment, and while I wait, my stomach rumbles. He bites back a smile. “Okay, but first some breakfast for you.”

“Deal.”



THE BREAKFAST TRAY IS PILED HIGH WITH ALL MANNER OF delectable nibbles from yesterday’s brunch menu. They smell divine, but after I stir a generous splash of cream into my steaming mug of dark roast, I set it on the nightstand and reach for the thick slice of chocolate cake. Garrett, propped up on one elbow across the bed, chuckles and takes a sip from his mug.

I savor the first bite and my eyelids fall shut as the dark chocolate ganache melts on my tongue. First the hot sex and now this? Why don’t I indulge more often? It feels so...

“Good?” Garrett asks as my head drops back and I moan.

“So good.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

I surface and open my eyes, cutting another small piece off with my fork. “I can’t remember the last time I tasted anything this delicious.”

“I can.”

I meet his gaze and the unspoken tether between us thrums with electricity. We both know what he’s talking about and the words land directly between my legs. A shiver runs down my spine and despite the multiple orgasms last night—or maybe because of them—I want more.

“Are you sure?” I ask, biting back a smile. “Maybe you should try a taste of this.” I offer him the nibble on my fork and he eats it off the tines, but a bit of frosting remains.

“Still sure,” he says, swiping his lip with his thumb.

I lick the bit of frosting off the fork while he watches, his eyes darkening, but just then voices filter through from down the hall. My gaze flits to the door, and I set the fork down. “Expecting visitors?”

He takes a sip of coffee. “I heard they’re with you.”

“With me?”

“Here to collect the flowers.”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” Cassie’s team of volunteers. “I—” Did I tell him? I didn’t think I had.

“Kendall told me.”

“And you’re okay with it?”

“More than okay.” His lips press together. “Although I did tell her, and my housekeeper, everything’s fair game to donate except for the mistletoe. That’s mine.”

I reach for my coffee. “After yesterday and last night, I don’t think you need the mistletoe.”

“No?”

“No.”

“Good to know. By the way, what are you doing for the next few days?”

You. But rather than say that, I ask, “Why?”

“Because I’ve cleared my schedule until after the New Year.”

After the New Year? That’s a week away. I’ll need to check in with work at least once or twice between now and then, but an extended vacation is looking much more attractive now with this man gazing at me across the bed. I lift a shoulder. “I could help you fill the hours.”

His lips curl into a slow, sexy smile. “I like the sound of that.”

After I finish off most of the slice of cake and pour a second cup of coffee, Garrett eyes me. “Ready for that present now?”

“I have nothing for you.”

“You’re in my bed,” he says, setting the breakfast tray aside and bending down to kiss me. “In my life. And that’s the best Christmas present I could ask for.”

Before I can respond, he slides open a drawer on the nightstand and pulls out a small, fern green velvet ring box. My lips form a perfect “O” as I stare at it in his hands. Panic surges in my chest, a wave of heat rising from my belly as he settles on the bed next to me.

“It’s not an engagement ring, Veronica,” he says, apparently picking up on my line of thinking. “But it is a question.”

I meet his steady gaze. “You’re the one who said questions invite conversation.”

“I did.”

“Even if you know exactly where the discussion will go.”

“Yes,” he says, with a rueful smile. “But I also said I’m open to new perspectives.”

“Fresh ideas.”

He dips his chin, then lifts his eyes to look at me through his long lashes. “Forging our own path. At our own pace.”

My heartbeat slows, still pounding, but now, with trust. He’s meeting me where I am even while making his end goal perfectly clear. My hand is shaking as I reach for the box. My fingers brush his and the sensation reminds me of when I passed him my business card two days ago. Forty-eight hours that seem like forever.

The box is heavy for its size and I cradle it for a moment and take a deep breath before lifting off the top. Instead of the diamond I feared was there, nestled in the slit is an exquisite ruby solitaire. A fiery, striking, brilliant gemstone that transforms in the light from deep garnet to enchanting crimson.

It’s breathtaking and exactly what I would have selected if given the chance.

Garrett shifts at my side and clears his throat while I stare at the ring, the lump in my throat growing. “It reminded me of you,” he says. “Vibrant and captivating and elegant. Plus, it’s as close as I could get to the shade of a Chocolate Cosmo.”

My favorite flower. How he remembered that offhand remark from a few days ago, I’m not sure, but he’s right. The gorgeous jewel is the same hue as the rare flower. And it reminds me of Christmas. In an instant, the heartbreak of Christmas morning is replaced with love.

I look up to meet his warm gaze. “It’s perfect.”

“So, it’s a yes? To wherever this goes? You’re in?”

My chest expands even as my voice quivers. “With my whole heart.”

He withdraws the ring from the box and slips it on my left ring finger. Cradling both of my hands in his, Garrett meets my eyes. “I mean it, Veronica. This is my vow, right here, right now. I’m yours forever, even if we never officially say I do.”

EPILOGUE



GARRETT

ONE YEAR AND SIX DAYS LATER

“DON’T COUPLES USUALLY WANT PRIVACY FOR THEIR anniversary celebration?”

Veronica glances up from the novel she’s been absorbed in since takeoff and follows my line of vision to Justin and Kendall. The happy couple is cozying up in adjacent bucket seats watching a movie on the big screen I usually use for video conferences when I’m in the air. “They celebrated last week in the Sierra Madre mountains,” she says.

“Spending Christmas providing basic medical care in a remote region in Mexico isn’t an anniversary celebration.”

She gives me a side-eye. “Forging their own path, remember?”

“Just like us.”

Her lips curve into a smile. “Exactly.”

“So, this trip, then, is...”

“Family time. You always say how you don’t get to see enough of Kendall.”

This is true. “And Tierney?”

The wedding planner is pacing up and down the aisle between the galley and the cockpit. She’s been on the phone for at least twenty minutes and has taken a half dozen calls.

Why she agreed to escape the city with us for three nights in the middle of a busy holiday season is beyond me.

“Tierney wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

What? Sure, an all-expenses paid trip to a private island in the Caribbean with friends is great, but it’s not like Tierney couldn’t afford something similar on her own. Her business has grown exponentially, along with Veronica’s, over the past year, and they’re both well on their way to multi-seven figure annual revenue.

Veronica sets her book aside and slips her hand into mind. “I just mean that I don’t spend enough quality time with Tierney. I thought inviting her to tag along would be good for her. She needs a break and maybe she’ll meet a handsome stranger who’ll sweep her off her feet. Or at least keep her company in bed.”

I press a kiss to Veronica’s pink lips. “How private are these individual beachfront casitas? They’re not open air with palm fronds for a roof, are they?”

“No,” she says, her eyebrows coming together. “At least I don’t think so. But don’t worry, no one would think twice if they heard anything coming from our rooms.”

“Why’s that?”

She straightens, and with a wave of her hand, is quick to brush off my question. Too quick. “I just meant that no one will be paying any attention to us. They’ll all be absorbed in relaxing and enjoying the beach and the sun and the cocktails. Lots of cocktails.”

Suddenly she’s very thirsty and the seltzer with lime she’s been nursing for half an hour is finished off in one long sip.

“Hmm.” Something is up. I’m not sure exactly what, but I’ll figure it out. From day one I’ve been able to read my lovely girlfriend like a book. Over the past year, I’ve gotten to know every inch of her, inside and out, and fallen more deeply in love with her than even I could have imagined. I can usually perceive her needs and determine her wants before she realizes

them herself. But at the moment, I'm drawing a blank. And it seems she wants it that way.

“Plus,” she murmurs, trailing a finger down my arm. “I brought the blindfold.”

My cock twitches, but I see right through her attempt at distraction. “I'll put it to good use,” I promise her, not letting on that I suspect a thing.

With a dazzling smile Veronica picks her novel back up as Tierney reassures a client the revised table assignments have been taken care of. Kendall smiles at me from across the plane and I could be imagining things, but there seems to be a glimmer of delight in her eyes. The whisper of a secret I'm not privy to.

I lean back and close my eyes as we soar over the Atlantic. I'm a patient man and can bide my time until whatever's going on reveals itself.



IT DOESN'T TAKE LONG. BARELY SIX HOURS LATER, ONCE we're settled into the spacious casitas suspended over crystal clear turquoise waters, Justin invites me for a beer on their patio. Veronica pretends to be pleasantly surprised by the suggestion but proceeds to suggest a pale blue linen short sleeve button down and navy chino shorts I don't remember packing, to wear.

There's a meandering path across the white, sandy beach to get to Justin and Kendall's casita, which is thankfully out of earshot of mine. But just as I arrive, rather than join us, Kendall excuses herself to get ready for our New Year's Eve dinner with the girls. On her way out, she grabs a makeup case and slings a garment bag over one shoulder.

Justin and I are on our second beer when the sun's long rays cast the sky, all the way to the horizon, in gorgeous swaths of color. I'm about to comment on the view when Kendall, in a long floral dress and sandals, her hair twisted up

at the back of her neck, breezes up the path. She gives a little nod to her husband, who takes his leave.

“Kendall,” I say, trying to get a read on her as my hunch as to what’s really going on tonight grows stronger.

“Dad,” she replies, trying to hide a wide smile. “Are you ready?”

“For dinner?”

She eyes me closely. “You know, don’t you?”

“That we’re gathered here tonight for a New Year’s Eve wedding?”

She nods.

I knew it. “I know.”

“Veronica wanted it to be a surprise.”

I lean in as a warm, tropical wind that smells like the ocean skates past. “I’ll pretend to be surprised. Honestly, I am. I didn’t know if this day would ever come.” I’d hoped it would, even after my vow last Christmas morning.

“She loves you very much.”

“And I her.”

Kendall pats my chest, and a smile plays on her lips as I cover her hand with mine. “Veronica’s good for you.”

I couldn’t agree more. “She completes me.”

She takes both of my hands in hers. “I’m glad you’re not alone.”

“Me too.”

Kendall’s gray eyes rise to meet mine. “Do you think it was the mistletoe?” she asks, with a smirk.

For a second, I think she’s talking about the mistletoe I hung up last week. The sprigs that lead to a treasure hunt of pleasure all around the house on Christmas Eve. But she must think I don’t know what she’s talking about because she adds, “Remember, from last year?”

I bite back a smile. “It didn’t hurt.”

She glances up at the sky. “We’d better go. Let’s get you married, okay?”

I link her arm through mine and rest my palm on her hand. “Okay.”

Minutes later, my toes sink into the warm white sand when I stop short at the sight of Veronica, barefoot, in a curve-hugging pale blue dress with a single white bloom in her hair, waiting for me at the edge of the water. She flashes a wide smile in my direction and my heart pounds in response.

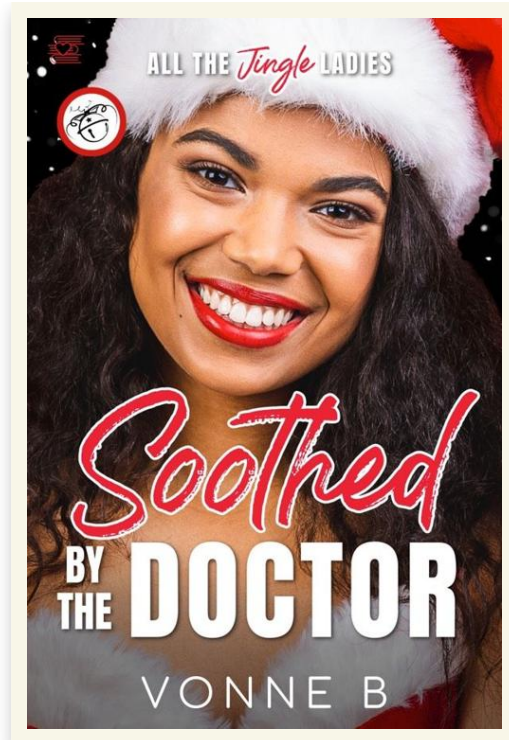
I’m eternally grateful to have found this woman who loves me as deeply as I love her. And I realize I’m a believer now. Lightning really can strike twice. And miracles can happen anytime, especially when you’re least expecting them.

Want to know what’s happening with our lovely couple? Find the bonus epilogue, here- [Bonus Epilogue](#).

Thank you for reading. We’d love to hear what you thought in a review! [Hired by the Single Dad](#).

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Click the picture to find out more about the next in the All the Jingle Ladies series!



She doesn't have time for games, especially with a playboy like him. He's young, cocky, and used to playing the field but he see what he wants and it's her. With his heart in his hand, he's asking her to trust that what they have is real. Will she let him in or will she show him door?

Velma

Do I believe in love at first sight? Yes. But it's not for me and certainly not with CJ.

I love my job as Customer Relations Manager at Coldwater Cabin Resorts, ensuring that all our guests have the vacation of their dreams is what I excel at.

But there's one who's making my job and life difficult - CJ Jacobs.

He's got it in his head that I belong to him and it's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard.

He's only here temporarily and I'm not into flings. Plus, he's way too young for me.

But then I discover his visit is anything but temporary. Not only is he our town's new vet but he plans on staying here for good.

Now my lips and hands keep winding up places they shouldn't be and I'm having a hard time remembering why any of this is wrong.

CJ

Do I believe in love at first sight? No. But I do believe in my gut and it's screaming that Velma is the one.

This move to Coldwater Ridge was supposed to be temporary. A year or two max so I could get the hands-on training I needed to open my own large animal veterinary office.

All that changed when I met Velma. One look at her and tossing aside my playboy ways and planning on a future in this small mountain town.

There's only one roadblock in my way and it's the woman herself.

Velma's not on the same page. She thinks I'm too young and nothing but a bed warmer.

But I never give up and definitely not this time.

Determination has always been my strongest trait and I will use every ounce I have to show Velma that we're meant to be together.

If you enjoy safe reads with instalove perfection, strong men, spicy scenes, and a solid happily ever after with no cheating or cliffhangers, then this series fits your wish list.

Grab a mug of hot chocolate and settle into your favorite reading place to fall in love with All the Jingle Ladies.