

A man and a woman are shown in a romantic embrace. The man, on the left, has dark hair and a beard, and is wearing a dark blue checkered blazer over a white dress shirt. He is looking towards the right. The woman, on the right, has long dark hair and is wearing a dark, off-the-shoulder top. She is leaning her head against the man's cheek. They are positioned in front of a window with a white frame. Outside the window, it is dark blue, suggesting night, with a Christmas tree and lights visible. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

A FAUX LOVE
NOVEL

*Fake it
For Money*

WESTON PARKER

FAKE IT FOR MONEY

WESTON PARKER

BRIXBAXTER PUBLISHING

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FIND WESTON PARKER



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DESCRIPTION



She's willing to fake it for money.

Just my type of lady. But this isn't just one night.

I need twelve dates for a series of Christmas parties to promote my hotels.

Being a forever bachelor means that I don't have time for love or the games it plays.

A fake date from an agency should solve my problems nicely.

Not only is she stunning and everything I would choose if someone gave me a checklist, but she's studying to become a surgeon.

I'd gladly let her play doctor on me. *wink*

But this job isn't an easy one. I need the world to believe this girl is my soul mate.

My billion-dollar resorts all rest on one thing—romance.

So we gotta go in hot and heavy, like heaven and hell couldn't separate the love between us.

I've got the money if she's got the skills.

Now I just need to NOT fall in love.

Introduction



Hey! We're missing you over here at the Parker's Insider Group.

Where you at?!?

Come grab your spot with the best book part in town and let's connect.

Also you get a FREE novel when you join, cause, why not?

See you on the inside...

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DEDICATION

To my amazing readers! I can't thank you enough for the success of Fake it Real Good. We (Ali & I) try hard to watch what you guys enjoy that we've done and to just do it again—better. I hope you love this story as much as I do. It was an absolute blast to write. Merry Christmas!!

-Weston

I put the phone back in the cradle and let out a long, exhausted sigh. It had been a hell of a day. How was talking on the phone so physically draining? It was back-to-back conference calls. This time of year always pushed me to the edge of sanity. I needed a drink. Unfortunately, I still had more to do and needed to have all my faculties about me.

My office door swung open. Nicholas, my assistant stood just inside. Behind him, Christmas lights twinkled against the shiny garland that hung on the walls. “You’re finished with the calls?” he asked.

“Yes. Please tell me that was the last one.”

“It was,” he said. “I have some things we need to go over.”

I lazily gestured to the sofa in my office. I decided I was going to have that drink. I walked to the small bar set up in my very large, opulent office. I poured myself a small amount of scotch and took a seat on the buttery leather chair that faced the couch. Nicholas had his face buried in the large iPad he carried everywhere he went. It even had a strap and handle on the case to keep him from dropping it. The thing was an extension of his hand. I rarely saw him without it.

“Did you hear back from Aspen?” I asked.

“Yes.” He nodded without looking up. “The tree was delivered and is in the process of being decorated.”

“How in the hell is there a delay in Aspen? Isn’t that where Christmas trees come from?”

He finally looked up at me. His hazel eyes and brown curly hair that bordered just on the edge of shaggy gave him a very boyish look. “We selected only the best trees for the lobbies,” he explained. “You instructed the decorators to go big and grand. The tree for the Aspen resort came from somewhere in Oregon.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “It stands at twenty-two feet tall and is about twelve feet around.”

“Good.”

“I have some pictures of the Chicago lobby,” he said. “It was even trending on Twitter for a couple of hours earlier today.”

“Really?”

He detached the tablet from his hand and passed it to me. An image of the lobby of Barlow Chicago was on the screen. “Damn,” I said. “That is pretty amazing.”

I slid my finger across the screen and looked at the images of my lobby. Some were pictures taken off social media and others were from the staff that worked at the resort.

“Have you been to visit the New York location?” he asked.

“Not yet,” I said. “I’ve been working on schmoozing.”

“I’ve been to Barlow New York City, and it is good. It is going to be a romantic destination. Marketing has been putting together some ads to run on social media. The decorator really outdid herself. The fireplace has a fluffy white fur rug in front of it. The couches have been decked out with the faux fur pillows and soft throws. It seriously looks like something out of a Hallmark movie.”

“A what?” I asked.

“You know, one of those Hallmark Christmas movies that the ladies love,” he said as if it was obvious.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’ll take your word for it,” I said.

Nicholas was all about the ladies. Unfortunately, he wasn't quite the Casanova he thought he was. He tried, but most of the time he fell short. "There's green garland hanging from the mantle with a few stockings. Flameless candles are arranged on the tables. You have to check it out."

"I'm heading over there soon," I said.

"We need to go over the final details for the holiday parties," Nicholas said and fell right back into work mode.

"Did you get the guest list finalized?" I asked. "I need to make sure I get the Stackhouse Group on board. They are going to be the major investors. Without them and their investment, it's going to be a hell of a lot harder to get that property in Saint-Tropez. I need that property if this chain is going worldwide."

"Yes, sir." He nodded. "They have not RSVPed, but I will reach out again."

"Good." I nodded. "And the gift bags?"

"I worked out that deal with Tiffany's like you wanted," he said. "We've got some great packages for the ladies."

"And the men? I think golf certificates and maybe some cigars would work."

He had his electronic pen and was scribbling while I talked. "I'll check and see what we can get."

"And my accommodations?"

"We were able to secure the diamond suite in all three hotels," he said.

I knew Nicholas would have me taken care of. The guy was very good at his job. Most people took one look at him and thought he was a cocky kid that got the job as my executive assistant through nepotism. He wasn't related to me in any way. I hired him years ago and I couldn't imagine working with anyone else. "I leave on Friday?" I clarified. The date had changed a few times with the last-minute meetings I had in New York.

“Yes.” He nodded. “I’ve got the pilot scheduled for a nine a.m. takeoff,” he said. “Too early?”

“No, that’s fine.”

“You’ll be touching down in Aspen early enough to take the tour with the hotel manager. I’ve got the event planner meeting with you at three to go over the specifics for the party. Your dinner is left open, just in case there are any last-minute things that need to be taken care of.”

I relied on Nicholas to handle my schedule and tell me where to go next. He made sure to keep me on task. I rarely arrived late anywhere due to his excellent time management. “Okay, just make sure you update my calendar and set the alarms so I don’t miss something.”

“Already done,” he said. He was still looking at his tablet, but he wasn’t tapping or writing.

“Is that it?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said but hesitated just long enough to tell me it wasn’t it. I waited for him to spit it out.

“Nicholas?”

He squirmed a little. “Yes?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said, and it became abundantly clear it was more than nothing.

“Nicholas, how long have we worked together?”

“Almost ten years,” he said.

“In all those years that we’ve worked together, you’ve had that weird expression on your face exactly four times. Once, when the hotel in Chicago caught fire. Another when the chef walked out of the New York location. Then there was the time you forgot to pick up my tux before a grand opening. Lastly, you had this look when you crashed the car I bought you. So, tell me, has a hotel burned down?”

“No.”

“I have three tuxes in case of an emergency, so that’s not it. Did you crash the car again?”

“No,” he answered.

“Why don’t you just tell me?” I said with a sigh.

“I did that survey you asked about,” he said.

“What survey?”

“About the hotel’s reputation.”

I froze, tightening my hand around my glass. “Are you telling me we’ve gotten some bad feedback? Why? We’re rated five stars on just about every travel platform. What the hell could we possibly do better?”

“Not the hotels,” he said. “Reviews are good. Satisfaction is high. The hotel reputations are fine.”

“Then what?”

“As you know, in this day and age, it’s important the owner has a good reputation. People love to cancel businesses they think don’t live up to their moral standards. Investors are watching the public perception temperature.”

“Are you suggesting I have a bad reputation?” I asked.

“No, not exactly.”

“Dammit, Nicholas, spit it out. I’m tired, hungry, and I want more than a shot of liquor. I want to go home. Tell me.”

“You have a reputation as a consummate bachelor.”

“So?”

“Some feel your propensity for bachelorhood is an indication you aren’t really serious,” he said.

“Nicholas, that’s about the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” I said.

“I know and it isn’t fair,” he said. “I’m just telling you your reputation hasn’t changed since you first started in the hotel business.”

“I’m one of the top hotel chains in the country,” I said. “I’m not some cocky kid playing in the business world.”

“I know,” he said. “I’m only passing along the information. You’re one of the younger hotel owners and that is already working against you. Some of these large investors are looking at the old you. When they Google your name, those images of you in your late teens and early twenties come up.”

I rolled my eyes. “I’m not out at the clubs and jumping into pools naked,” I said with disgust. “Who hasn’t done that shit in their youth? Mine just happened to be in the papers because of my last name. I wasn’t the only one jumping naked into the pool. Those guys didn’t have their reputations ruined.”

“Yes, I agree,” he said. “There’s something else, probably the most damning.”

I groaned and leaned my head back. “I’m afraid to ask. What could possibly be worse?”

“People see you as cutthroat, caring only about getting your next dollar. Again, in this current climate, people are not fond of rich people. You’re walking a fine line. You have this air of being untouchable.”

“Untouchable?” I asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Arrogant. Stuck up. A few comments suggested you couldn’t find a girlfriend because you were too picky and demanding. Public opinion is very slowly shifting. They want someone relatable. They want to spend their money in places they feel are deserving.”

“Oh my god,” I groaned. “I’m not deserving because I’m not married?”

“No, not at all,” he said. “They just want to feel like they have something in common with the guy getting rich off their hard-earned money.”

I shook my head. “I’m not even going to pretend to understand.”

“I reached out to a PR consultant. She’s worked with some A-listers that have fallen into scandal. I paid her a consultation fee. She gave me a few tips to help people see you as a mature adult. If it doesn’t help, she’s willing to come on board and help fix your reputation.”

“I don’t need my reputation fixed,” I said irritably.

“The fix is easy,” he said. “Do you care to hear it?”

“If I say no, you’re going to tell me anyway.”

“Right now, Henry Barlow is a bachelor with a reputation as being cold and out of touch with his own humanity,” he said.

“How in the hell does that happen? I work my ass off. I don’t have the time or inclination to go in search of a woman.”

“Rumors, Henry. Rumors are all it takes. Unfortunately, there isn’t any evidence to counter those rumors since you’ve never been out with the same girl more than once. Hell, you’re rarely out with a woman period.”

“Stupid,” I scoffed. “Why does it matter? I don’t have time for someone needing my attention all the time. I’m better alone. That’s when I’m at my best.”

“The Christmas parties are an excellent opportunity to show you have settled down,” he said.

“How?”

“You take a woman, the same woman, to the parties,” he said with a shrug. “It shows you are a solid guy that has a soft side. If anyone asks, you allude to the idea you’ve been seeing the woman for a while and prefer to keep your private life private. That helps erase the rumor while proving you aren’t the guy everyone thinks you are.”

“I’m supposed to find a woman who wants to pretend to love me to prove to my customers and investors that I’m not the asshole they believe I am, even though most of them have never personally met me?” I said with incredulity. “Is that what you’re telling me?”

“In a nutshell, yes,” he said with a nod. “It could go a long way to securing the capital to buy that property you have your eye on. This is the perfect time to do it with the twelve parties. There is going to be a lot of schmoozing and rubbing elbows.”

I put the empty glass on the coffee table. “I’m going home.”

My eyes popped open. “Oh shit!”
I threw off my blanket and hopped out of bed. My feet hit the cold floor. “Eek!”

I stepped a few inches to the left and curled my toes into the faux-fur rug beside my bed. I rubbed my eyes, yawned, and stretched. As usual, I was exhausted. Medical school was kicking my ass. I leaned forward and opened my minifridge to grab a bottle of water. I sucked down the cold water and shivered. I could see frost on the single window of my little home. I loved Aspen, but some days, the cold was a real drag.

I grabbed my phone to check the weather and groaned. “Dammit. I hate the freezing cold.”

I quickly went into the little bathroom of my studio and took a three-minute shower with the faucet turned all the way to hot. I didn’t have time to shave my legs or condition my hair. My life was all about doing what was necessary. No one was going to see my legs and my hair would be in some kind of bun or whatever it was on the top of my head.

I dressed in my standard uniform of joggers and a hoodie. It was either the comfortable sweats I favored or sweats. Being a full-time student didn’t allow for high fashion. It was whatever was relatively clean and comfortable. I remembered the early days when I tried to be cute. I wore the latest styles and actually got up early enough to get ready for class. Those days were long gone.

I slipped my feet into my boots that were barely functional. They were fur lined and wonderfully warm. They were also about seven years old, but they still kept my feet warm on cold, snowy days and that was all that mattered. One of these days I would buy some new ones. I went back into the bathroom to brush my teeth. I'd buy the boots the same day I made it to the hair salon to get my hair dyed again. The dark roots were growing out beyond the fashionable norm. It wasn't my top concern.

I added a little moisturizer to my face and that was it. Makeup was something else I didn't have a lot of time for. I grabbed my coat off the hook and unplugged the lights on my miniature Christmas tree resting atop the small table that also doubled as my desk.

I opened the door and sucked in a cold breath, triggering a cough. My mom would tell me I shouldn't go outside with wet hair. I had tried to explain to her it really wouldn't give me pneumonia, but there was no convincing her. I walked over the cobblestone walkway, opened the back door of my parents' house, and went into the warm living room with a fire popping and cracking in the woodstove.

The Christmas tree in the corner was lit, flashing its lights as I walked through the living room and into the kitchen. The old-fashioned radio that sat on my dad's liquor cart against the wall was pumping out festive Christmas music. My parents were all about Christmas and it showed in every room of the house, right down to the hand towels in the bathroom.

"Good morning," Mom said.

"Please tell me there's coffee," I said.

"Of course," Dad answered from the kitchen table where he was reading the morning paper like he had done every single day I had been on this planet.

"Thank goodness," I said and rushed over to pour a cup in one of the to-go mugs. "I didn't have time to make any this morning. I totally overslept."

"Where are you going?" Mom asked.

I blinked and realized where I was. I remembered what day it was. My brain was still half-asleep. “Oh my gosh.” I laughed. “I was back in undergrad and late for a class there for a minute!”

They exchanged a look. “Did you party last night?” Dad teased. “Get into the wine?”

“No.” I giggled. “My brain is mush.”

“Sweetie, you’re officially on Christmas break,” Mom said gently. “Try and shut all that out.”

“I’m trying,” I said. “Yesterday was a whirlwind. I was temporarily disorientated.”

“Are you okay?” she asked and put her hand to my forehead. “Are you sick? I think you are working way too hard. We worried this would happen.”

I took a second to rewind the last twenty-four hours. “I was having a senior moment.”

“Watch yourself young lady,” my dad joked.

“The kitchen looks amazing by the way,” I said and took in the remodel they’d recently done in the old house I grew up in.

“You’ve been pushing yourself pretty hard lately,” Mom said with concern. “Sit down and I’ll make you something to eat. Something that doesn’t come out of a box or plastic wrap.”

My coat was making me way too hot. I shrugged it off and sat down at the table decked out with the red placemats with Christmas trees printed on them. The salt and pepper set on the table was a set of matching trees. Every inch of the house was decked out for Christmas. The lights strung up around the windows were set to the chase function, which happened to be my dad’s favorite.

“Did you make any plans for the day?” Dad asked over the rim of the mug that looked like a Santa outfit.

“No,” I answered. “I’m going to call Noelle and see what she’s up to.”

“Good, you need to do something fun,” Mom said. “You need to slow down.”

“I’ll relax when I get my first vacation from my surgical practice,” I said. “I’ll relax on a beach somewhere hot with no snow anywhere near me.”

Mom was cracking eggs in a pan while she talked. “I found the baby Jesus for the nativity set. I don’t know how he wasn’t in with the rest of the stuff.”

“He was making a getaway,” Dad teased. “All that straw was poking him in places he didn’t like.”

“Dad!” I laughed. “You can’t talk that way about baby Jesus.”

“I think it’s time to consider buying a new set,” he said. “The wisemen have so much super glue on them they look unnatural.”

“We can’t get a new one,” I told him. “We got that one when I was seven. I remember buying it at Costco. After we went shopping, we went to the diner with the hot chocolate sundaes. It’s one of my childhood memories, dad.”

“We’ll give it to you and your mother, and I will buy a new one.”

“I’m not sure if there’s anywhere to put it in the guest house, Dad,” I told him.

The guest house was just under five-hundred square feet. It was his old toolshed transformed into a little apartment for me. I wanted to move out and be on my own, but with school, I couldn’t afford to work enough to pay rent. This option was the best of both worlds. I got to have my own space and got to be close to my parents.

“I agree with Izzy,” Mom said. “I think it has sentimental value. When she gets her own apartment, we’ll give it to her. It will be a ceremonial act.”

Dad groaned and rolled his eyes. “Of course, it will.”

“I would love that,” I said. “The nativity set and that wooden Santa dad made and painted for me when I was little.”

“It is technically yours already,” he said.

“I know, but it looks better in here with all the other stuff,” I said.

Mom put a plate of scrambled eggs and toast in front of me. “Eat. You need it.”

She was the only one who said that. In the day and age of size two being the gold standard for beauty, my size twelve was something I often took heat for. At least, I used to in college and high school. I found the more mature people I was in medical school with were actually a little more intellectually mature. They understood my weight was fine. I wasn’t unhealthy. I wasn’t at risk of being mistaken for a Beluga whale, contrary to what Rodney in the eleventh grade said.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said and quickly scarfed the food down. I was really hungry. Last night when I had gotten home, I passed out in bed and slept for twelve hours. “What are you guys doing today?”

“You’re looking at it,” Dad said. “Welcome to your future. You work your butt off for nearly fifty years and then you retire and do absolutely nothing.”

“Oh stop,” Mom poopooed. “We’re going to paint the spare room. I plan on making it my craft room. It’s been on the list of things to do for too long. Your dad finally has some spare time. I think retirement has kept him busier than his job did.”

“That’s not true,” Dad protested. “I was just busy taking care of all those little things I didn’t have time to do when I was working.”

“And now I have a list of things for you to do for me,” she said in a chipper tone.

Dad made a big show of sighing. “Yes, dear.”

I finished my breakfast and carried my plate to the sink. I topped off my cup and gave mom a kiss. “I’ll get out of your hair. Good luck, Dad.”

“Will we see you for dinner tonight?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know,” I answered. “Probably not. I owe Noelle some best friend time. I’m going to see if she wants to go shopping with me and maybe grab dinner.”

“You girls have fun,” she said.

I walked back into the cold and across the backyard to my little studio. I shrugged off my coat and sat down in one of the two chairs I had in the place. I wasn’t going to bother turning on the heat and running up the electric bill. My parents covered the utilities, but there was no need to make it harder on them. I wasn’t planning on being home for long anyway.

I grabbed my phone and called Noelle. We’d been best friends since grade school. The last few years it had been difficult to maintain our relationship like it used to be. She was a massage therapist and worked strange hours. With my school dominating my life, it was hard to make time to see each other.

“What’s up?” she answered.

“Are you working today?” I asked.

“I had a client this morning. What’s going on?”

“I’m on break!” I squealed. “Do you want to do some shopping?”

“Does a bear—” She stopped midsentence before we both burst into laughter.

“Got it,” I said.

“Yes, absolutely. Where do you want to go?”

“I was thinking we could hit the Christmas market,” I said. “I need to get my parents their gifts.”

“When?”

“Give me an hour,” I said. “I need to actually get dressed and ready to go into public.” I laughed.

“Yeah! I’m so excited. I miss your face!”

“I miss you too,” I told her. “I’m sorry I’ve been off the radar. I had finals and it damn near killed me.”

“It’s cool,” she said. “You’re working your ass off to fulfill your dreams. That’s pretty damn impressive. I can’t believe I’m going to be best friends with a surgeon soon.”

“From your lips to God’s ears,” I said. “I have to survive my internship.”

“You’ll do fine. Anyone would be lucky to have you slicing and dicing them.”

I burst into laughter. “That’s one way to look at it. I’ll see you in an hour.”

I ended the call and dug through the small closet to find something a little more fashionable than my joggers. It was going to be good to get out and have some downtime without worrying about a paper to do or studying for a test. I felt like I could finally breathe.

“Give me thirty minutes,” I said to the driver before climbing out of the back of the SUV with blacked-out windows.

I stared at the doors of the address Nicholas had sent me to. I still couldn't believe I was actually here. It was a major blow to my ego and pissed me off on so many levels. I was a private person. I didn't like sharing my life with anyone. Nicholas was the only person who knew me and even he didn't really know me. Inviting a woman into my life was the last thing I wanted to do. A woman would demand time and attention. She'd want to talk and hang out and discuss our feelings.

I should just walk away. Impressing people was not who I was. I didn't give a fuck if people thought I was a cold-hearted bastard. It wasn't my fault I preferred my own company over the company of others. One would think that would make people more inclined to invest with me. I was a shrewd businessman who put my hotels first. If I were an investor, I would invest my money with a guy like me.

But I was here. I would see what this place was all about. A dating service seemed to be an extreme measure to take, but Nicholas was insistent. I pulled open the door and stepped into a casual reception area. It wasn't opulent, but it wasn't cheap. A young woman was sitting behind a tall reception desk with a headset on.

“Hi,” she greeted me.

“Hello. I have an appointment.”

“Your name?” she asked with the same friendly smile.

I looked around at the empty chairs. It appeared I was the only person here, and with a little reasoning, I was the only one with an appointment. “Barlow,” I said.

I was slowly dying of embarrassment. This was humiliating. I was a wealthy, powerful man about to grovel for a date. Not only grovel, but I had to pay the person to date me. That was stupid. I could go to any bar or club and have my pick of women. But then those women would expect something of me.

“Henry Barlow,” I said after considering my other option.

“Have a seat,” she said. “Della will be right out.”

Again, I didn’t understand why I had to wait. Just how much business did this place do? Nicholas assured me it was very discreet. He’d heard about it from another executive assistant for a guy that ran a Fortune 500 company. I’d had no idea places like this actually existed. It was a reminder of how small my world was. I lived and breathed my hotels.

I sat down, hiked my left ankle on my right knee, and waited. I wasn’t very good at waiting. It had only been about three minutes, but my patience was wearing thin. If I was going to be paying someone for a service, I expected it to be prompt.

“Mr. Barlow?” a woman said.

I looked up and saw a woman with her hair styled in a beehive straight out of the sixties. Fake eyelashes, heavy makeup, and a dress so tight I wondered how she could breathe stepped in front of me. Her bright red lips curved into a smile. “I’m Della,” she said and extended her hand with red nails that matched the lipstick.

“Henry,” I said and shook her hand.

“Let’s go in my office and get to know each other.”

I suddenly worried if this was a bigger mistake than I initially thought. She was an attractive woman, but she was

quite a bit older than I was and really not my type. Della would walk into a room and every eye would be on her. I wasn't comfortable being the center of attention. If Nicholas had sent me to one of those places that gave massages with happy endings, I was going to kill him.

Reluctantly, I followed her to an office in the back of the building. The moment we stepped through the door, it felt like I walked into an office in one of the high rises in the city that housed CEOs pulling in seven figures a year.

"Have a seat please," she said. "Can I pour you a drink?"

It was ten o'clock in the morning. I could appreciate a little something in the afternoon, but before noon was pushing it for me. I could still taste my toothpaste and didn't think it would go with a stout liquor. "No, thank you."

"Ah, a man that likes to get right down to business," she said with that same wide smile as she took her seat behind the massive desk that dwarfed her.

"I suppose that's true," I agreed.

"What brings you to Faux's?" she asked.

"I suppose I'm here for the same reason everyone else comes here," I answered.

She didn't take offense at my rather abrupt demeanor. I was a little embarrassed and ashamed to be sitting in front of her and I was taking that out on her.

"You need a date." She nodded. I watched as she used her long nails to tap a few buttons on her computer keyboard. "Thirty-three," she murmured and then looked at me. "Obviously attractive."

"I understood this service was just that and none of the other stuff mattered," I complained. "My assistant filled out that online form. I'm not sure why you needed all that information. I don't plan on actually having a relationship. I just need a woman to stand next to me."

"If you simply wanted a woman to stand next to you, you would go to my competitors," she said. "I'm Della Fontenot."

I'm an expert and my clients are always happy. They are happy with my service because I take the time to find the right date for my clients. I don't just send someone over. I have a very keen sense about these things. I find my clients someone that is compatible with them."

"I'm not looking for an actual date," I said and held up my hand. "From what I was told, this is a service, a woman-for-hire kind of arrangement. Am I wrong?"

"No."

"I don't want to be compatible with anyone," I went on. "I don't want to have a relationship with the person."

She laughed softly. "Of course not," she replied. "I am not a dating service. However, my women, and a few men, are professional dates if you will. I find my clients the right woman that would fit into their lifestyle. Isn't the goal to make people believe you *are* dating the escort?"

She made a good point. If I showed up with some flighty woman, no one was going to believe we were in an actual relationship. "I understand."

"Alright, so, tell me the kind of woman you typically date?"

I shrugged. "I don't."

"Oh, I'm sorry, were you looking for a man?"

"No!" I almost choked. "I mean, I don't care if others do, but I'm straight."

She smiled and seemed to be amused by my discomfort. "Let's start with the easy stuff. Blonde? Brunette?"

"I don't care," I said with a shrug. "Seriously, I don't have a type."

She tapped away on the keyboard. "You left the date blank?"

"Excuse me?"

"When will you need the date?" she asked. "That's going to help narrow down who is available. This is a very busy time

of year. The busiest actually.”

“Actually, I need twelve dates.”

She blinked. “You want twelve escorts?”

“No. I need the same escort for twelve different parties. And I need someone who can travel. I have engagements in Aspen, Chicago, and here in New York.”

“Oh my,” she said and turned her eyes back to the screen. “Tell me more. Will these be business functions? I ask because I’m looking for someone who can hold a conversation about whatever it is your business is.”

“I own hotels, and yes, they are technically business functions. I would prefer someone that can hold simple conversations about the weather and current events. I will need to prep the woman about who I am and what I do.”

She was nodding while she typed. “Age preference?”

This felt like dangerous territory. I didn’t want to come off as an asshole by discriminating against a certain age group. I cleared my throat. “Under forty. Only because I need people to believe I’m in a serious relationship with this woman. And now that I’m thinking about it, I would prefer someone mild-mannered and reserved. The story will be I’ve been seeing the woman for a while and kept it under wraps. Someone that is outspoken and likes to share a lot isn’t going to work.”

She smiled and nodded. “Okay, now we’re getting somewhere. Is there a body type you prefer?”

More tricky territory. “I’m not worried about that. Again, I’m not marrying the woman. I just need it to be someone that can be available for the twelve dates. It is imperative it’s the same woman.”

“Understood,” she said and then turned to face me. “Now, let’s talk the cost for this service.”

Cost didn’t matter, but I was a businessman and would not sit idly by and get robbed in the middle of the day by a woman who looked like she ate men for breakfast. “I reviewed the fees on your website.”

“And you read that the fees depended on the service,” she said with another smile. “Some of my escorts have doctorates and some are worthy of walking in a Paris fashion show. Fees vary. You are asking for twelve dates in three states. Most of my escorts have lives outside of this business. Some of them are moms. Others own their own businesses. You are asking for a very specialized service and that costs more.”

She was going to milk me for every penny. “I suppose I could understand there’s an added fee for the travel. Obviously, all accommodations would be covered. I travel by private jet. The woman will be put up in one of my hotels.”

“That helps,” she said. “And when do you need this date?”

“Saturday.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh my.”

“I’ll be in Aspen tomorrow. I’ll need to meet this woman before I agree to take her as my date. If I don’t find her suitable, I’ll take my chances and go single. I don’t want just anyone. The person needs to fit my criteria.”

“You’re asking a lot in a little amount of time.”

“Your website claims you are the best,” I reasoned. “I guess we’re going to find out.”

“Yes, I suppose we are.” She smiled. “I’m always up for a challenge. Now, for the fee.”

“You produce a woman, I’ll meet her, and then we’ll discuss fees,” I said. “I’m not agreeing to pay anything for something I’ve not seen and approved.”

“A shrewd man,” she cooed.

“When can I expect to meet her?”

“I’ll need to do some research. I should have something for you by tomorrow afternoon.”

“That’s cutting it close,” I said.

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “I’ll be in touch.”

“Thanks,” I said and got to my feet.

I stepped outside just in time to see my driver coming up the street. I stepped to the curb and climbed inside.

“Where to, sir?”

“My office,” I answered with my phone to my ear.

Nicholas picked up on the second ring. “You’re done already?” he asked.

“I am and I don’t think this is going to work,” I growled. “That was a waste of my time. People are just going to have to accept me for who I am. If they don’t like it, they can kiss my ass.”

“Look at these!” Noelle squealed and picked up a pair of mittens that had been knit by the purveyor of the booth. “They are so soft.”

“It’s alpaca wool,” the older woman said.

I reached out and ran my hands over them. They were soft, but they weren’t exactly something my mom would wear. I had to mind my pennies. I had a hundred and fifty bucks to buy gifts for my parents and Noelle. It wasn’t going to go far.

“They are very nice,” I said.

Noelle put them back on the table. “You have beautiful work,” she said to the woman.

We meandered to the next booth.

“What are you thinking for your mom?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “She was talking about getting a new nativity set. If I can find one here cheap enough, I want to get it for her.”

“Good plan.”

“I hate being so cheap,” I said with a sigh.

“You know the gifts don’t matter,” she said. “It’s all about getting to spend time with you. That’s what they want. Besides, once you’re a rich and famous surgeon, you can buy them new Teslas for Christmas.”

I laughed and ran my fingers across the ceramic-tile coasters on the table. “We’ll see,” I said. “For now, it’s just you guys that are getting gifts. Mom and I are going to be making shortbread cookies and handing them out with homemade cards.”

“That’s the kind of thing people really want,” she said.

“You’re very sweet,” I said. “I keep telling myself this will all be worth it one day, but it’s hard. I feel like I’m stuck in first gear while everyone else is speeding off into adulthood. You’re making good money and have your own apartment. A real apartment. Everyone we went to high school with is already working on their career or settled down with kids.”

“Because you aimed high,” she said. “You knew how tough this path was going to be. You were meant to do this. You’re already ahead of the game. You start your residency next year. You’re almost there. Three more years, right?”

I sighed and nodded. “It feels like I’ve been in school forever.”

“Damn near eight years.” She laughed. “Kudos to you. I don’t think I would have the dedication to do it.”

“I’m just so excited to get started on my clinical rotation next semester.”

“Enjoy this break,” she said. “Take some time to relax. Don’t worry about studying and all that. You need to give that big ol’ brain of yours a break.”

“I’m going to try,” I vowed.

We meandered through the rows of booths. I stopped at a booth with some pretty wood carvings while Noelle moved on. After inspecting the carvings, I moved on to see what had caught Noelle’s attention. She was holding a brochure and talking to a young woman.

“Check this out,” she said.

I took the brochure. “Faux’s? What’s that?”

I opened it up and looked at pictures of women dressed up at various parties and balls. “It’s an escort service,” Noelle

hissed.

I shoved the brochure back at her. “Noelle!”

“No, I was just talking to Mandy here and she was telling me about how much they get paid. All they have to do is go on dates or attend lavish parties. They get paid five grand a night, sometimes more.”

I rolled my eyes. “I think that’s called a prostitute,” I said. “No offense,” I quickly added.

“We don’t have sex with them,” Mandy said. “Sometimes, we don’t even kiss or anything else. We’re professional plus-ones. It’s all very easy. We get to go to some of the hottest parties in town. We mingle with celebrities and other rich people. We have locations all over the country. My friend just spent a week on a yacht with her client and made more money than most people do in a year.”

“Yeah, sure, no sex,” I said sarcastically. “I know what an escort is.”

“We aren’t those kinds of escorts,” Mandy said with a laugh. “We work for a dating service, but instead of actually dating the clients for real, we’re just there as a companion. Some guys don’t want to go to events alone. I can’t tell you how many weddings I’ve been to. Some of the guys I’ve met have been really nice.”

“Check it out,” Noelle said and handed me the brochure once again.

“The testimonials are real,” Mandy said. “Those women work for Faux’s. It’s not fake. You can Google us. We have a great reputation.”

“I don’t see how this is legal,” I said. “Isn’t this basically selling people?”

“No,” Mandy said with a laugh. “It’s like going out on a date. Period. Except you don’t have to worry about the guy liking you. There is no awkward goodnight kiss. You go along and get to eat expensive food and mingle. Della provides a clothing allowance. We cater to the rich guys, and you’re expected to dress a certain way.”

“No one is going to pay to go on a fake date with me,” I said. I looked at the pictures in the brochure of the beautiful women. I was not that. They were all polished and pretty.

“They absolutely would,” Mandy said.

Noelle continued to talk to Mandy while I read through some of the testimonials. I assumed they were all bogus or paid for. But one stuck out to me.

My name is Ashley Pierce, and I went to Faux's to make some quick cash to deal with a family emergency. I was skeptical at first, but after meeting Della, I felt comfortable with her safety net. I met my client, and at first, I thought it would never work. I reminded myself it was a job, and I needed the money (a lot of money!). Aton turned out to be the man I didn't know I was missing. We spent some time together and quickly realized our arrangement was no longer a professional one. We fell in love and are enjoying our life together.

“Are these real?” I interrupted their conversation.

“Very real,” Mandy said. “I’ve paid off my student loans and am in the process of buying a condo here in Aspen. If you guys are from here, you know how much a house costs. I go on one to two dates a week. That’s it. I’m a certified accountant, but with the money I’m making at Faux’s, I don’t need to work. I have all the free time I want to do the things I want.”

I wanted to believe her. She sounded sincere, but it seemed too good to be true. “In Aspen?” I asked just to be sure.

“Twin Lakes,” she confessed, “but it’s still just as gorgeous and I’m not going to be inundated with tourists.”

That was still more than what I would be able to afford for a long, long time with my own student loans hanging over my head. “Good for you,” I said.

“Do you want to fill out a form for consideration?” she asked.

“For consideration?” I snorted. “I have to apply to be an escort?”

“Della is very picky about who she hires,” she said.

“Then I might as well skip that,” I said. “I don’t look like the girls in the brochure.”

“Honestly, that brochure is not entirely accurate. There are women of all ages, shapes, and sizes that work for her. Not everyone that works for Della wants to advertise it. Trust me, I think Della would be very interested in bringing you on board. She handpicks every date for her clients. You might not get a date for a week or even a month. She’s very good at picking the right date for the right client.”

“Just think what you could do with an extra five to ten grand,” Noelle encouraged. “Maybe more.”

Mandy snorted. “Shoot, five grand is a typical Tuesday,” she said. “You can make fifty grand a month if you get the right clients.”

I literally saw dollar signs in front of my eyes. That would make such a huge difference in my life. It wasn’t like I was being paid to have sex with anyone. It was a date. “Do I get to decline an offer?” I asked. “I’m in med school and I start my clinical rotation next month. I might get stuck on a graveyard.”

“Absolutely,” Mandy said. “Although I wouldn’t recommend making it a habit.” She handed me a tablet. “Fill out the form and there is a section in there about your availability. Della is very understanding. There are a lot of women that have full-time jobs. My friend is in law school. She’s the one who told me about this place. Like I said, you could go a month without a date. It just depends on the demand. Right now, there is high demand with all the head honchos coming into town to attend lavish parties. They don’t want to go alone. I have another friend that went as a certain A-lister’s date.”

“Really?” Noelle asked. “Who?”

Mandy smiled. “There are strict confidentiality clauses and NDAs. But trust me, you would be floored if you found out.”

“I’ll do it,” I said and took the tablet. “What have I got to lose?”

Noelle laughed. “Good attitude.”

“Are you going to do it?” I asked.

She wrinkled her nose. “I’m still on the fence. I’m not hurting for money.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. “Way to rub it in.”

“I love you.” She grinned.

I quickly answered the questions that felt very random and then handed the tablet back to Mandy. “Smile,” she said and held up the tablet to take my picture.

“What? Right now? I’m not dressed up.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said and took the picture. “Della can see a diamond in the rough.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“I’m sending this to her right now,” she said. “You’ll probably hear back sometime this week.”

“Thank you,” Noelle said.

“I need sugar,” I said as we walked away from the booth. “Something chocolate and terrible for me.”

“That’s what Christmas is all about,” Noelle teased. “Let’s go over to the food booths and see what kind of goodies they have.”

I ended up picking up some fudge and a hot chocolate. My blood sugar was going to go through the roof. We sat down at one of the tables in the makeshift food court and did a little people watching. “I think I’m going to go back and tell Mandy never mind,” I said.

“What? Why?”

“I don’t think I’m cut out to be an escort,” I said. “She said they’re professional dates. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve even been on a date? I don’t think I could even pass for a novice date at this point. Look at my roots? I’m a hot mess.”

“You’re gorgeous and you’ll fill the shy introvert role.”

Again, I rolled my eyes. “Yes, because that’s what these rich men are looking for, the mousy, sandy-blonde that hasn’t had a manicure in a year and doesn’t even know what’s trendy anymore.”

“I’m guessing the men that are hiring professional dates aren’t exactly all that concerned about trends,” she said. “These men are older. They want to show off with the young lady on their arm. They don’t want you to have the latest hairstyle and I seriously doubt they care about your dating history.”

“I’m not going to worry about it,” I said. “I doubt I will even be considered. It’s a fantasy. I live in reality. I have student loans and I will be stuck living with roommates I don’t ever see for another three years at least. Probably four if I’m being totally realistic. I’ll be thirty before I actually get my own place. How depressing is that?”

“It isn’t depressing because you’re going to be doing something amazing,” she said. “You’ll be saving lives.”

That was about the only thing driving me. I kept my eyes focused on the goal. There was a light at the end of the tunnel. I had to believe my sacrifices now would make it all worth it.

I opened my mouth and flexed my jaw until my ears popped. Nicholas was sitting a few seats up, working on I didn't know what. My laptop was open, but I found myself distracted. I kept looking out the window of my private jet as we soared through the clouds. Some people zoned out when they looked at a fire. I was entranced by clouds. I couldn't see shit, but that was why it drew me in. It was one of the few times I could clear my mind with no stimuli to trigger thoughts about what I needed to do. I didn't think about what I should be doing at the hotels to be more successful.

The day had gotten off to a rocky start. There'd been an emergency at the hotel restaurant. Apparently, our seafood order had been shorted. The entire menu for the party tomorrow night was in jeopardy. It was hours spent on the phone trying to get the order filled. With a hefty price tag and a comped suite for the owner of the company in Maine, the seafood would be delivered tomorrow.

The disruption meant I had to push my meetings in Aspen. I'd been doing double duty all day. When I wasn't on a conference call, I was working with the chef who'd totally lost his shit and was threatening to quit if he had to redo the menu. It had been a day.

“Sir?”

My daydreaming was interrupted. “Yes?” I asked the single flight attendant that had been flying with me for years.

“Do you want your drink now?”

“Just a coke,” I told her.

Usually, my flights were later in the day. When most people were going to bed, I was hopping on a flight. I was prone to the red eyes. It allowed me to work a full day, sleep on the plane, and hit the ground running. That meant a nice glass of scotch to help settle me down. Not today. I had to work the whole flight and hopefully be able to catch dinner with the hotel manager.

I went back to staring outside once again, and about two minutes in, my phone rang. I sighed and shook my head. Couldn't a guy just stare at nothing without being interrupted? This was why I craved being alone. Most people called Nicholas to get to me, which told me this was a personal call.

“This is Henry Barlow,” I answered in my standard, professional phone tone.

“Henry, good morning, this is Della Fontenot,” the gravelly voice announced.

“What can I do for you?” I asked.

I had given up on the idea. It wasn't my style, and I didn't care what people thought about me. My personal life had no bearing on how good my hotels were. It was stupid and I was guessing a ploy by Nicholas to get me to date. He was always complaining I was cold and uptight and needed to get laid. I didn't see how sex was going to change who I was.

“I think it's more like what I can do for you.” She laughed. “I've got a woman for you.”

It was so strange. My mind immediately went to shopping. It felt like an actual meat market. “You do,” I said and debated telling her to cancel my order.

“I do, and even better, this woman is based in Aspen,” she said. “You did say that's where you would be today, right?”

“I'm on my way now.”

“The first party is tomorrow, correct?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered. I couldn't bring myself to be excited. I was anything but.

“Perfect! I’ve arranged for the two of you to meet at a quiet bar at seven. Will that work for you?”

My schedule was pinned to the corner of my screen. I quickly opened it and grimaced. “I need to make it nine.” Part of me was hoping she would say that wasn’t going to work and the deal was over.

“I’ll let her know.”

“Thanks,” I said and ended the call. It was the last thing I wanted to do after the day I had.

“What was that?” Nicholas asked.

“Your friend,” I said.

“My friend?”

“Della,” I said without elaborating. I didn’t want to get into specifics.

He got up and took the seat across from me. “What’d she say?” he whispered.

“I’m supposed to be meeting someone at nine tonight,” I answered.

“Like Facetime?”

“No, she lives in Aspen,” I said.

He checked his watch and grimaced. “We’re supposed to be landing at seven, and you have the tour with the hotel manager.”

“I know,” I said. “It’s not like I’ve never been to the hotel. It doesn’t need to be a long tour. I’ll have time.”

“Okay.” He nodded. “I’ll make sure to keep things moving.”

“Thanks. Any more from the chef?”

Nicholas shook his head. “No, it looks like the crisis is averted. There was a minor issue with the band, but I think it’s taken care of.”

“What do you mean a minor issue?” I asked with dread.

“The lead singer has the flu.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten. “That’s not a minor issue,” I hissed.

“It is. It was. The band has someone to fill in. They’re sending me a video to approve the change.”

“It’s not like we have a fucking choice, do we?” I snapped. “It’s either the backup or no live band. I can’t throw an extravagant party with Muzak pumping through the speakers.”

“It’s going to be fine,” he said. “We have the DJ option as well.”

“I don’t want a DJ for the kickoff,” I growled. “I want a live band.”

“I’m working on it,” he said.

“Where’s the guest list?” I asked him with my attention back on my laptop screen. “I need to do a little research on the investors.”

With the tablet attached to his hand, he swiped across his screen, tapped, and swiped again. “I just sent it to you. I’ve starred the names of the men that are most likely to invest. Tap on their names and a bullet point list will come up. I’ve listed their interests, family names, and recent projects.”

He was good. He knew he was good. It was why I paid him more than any other assistant on the planet made. He earned every penny. At times, it was like we shared the same brain. He could anticipate what I was thinking and what I needed.

“Thank you.”

“What are you working on now?” he asked.

“I’m reviewing the projections for next quarter,” I said. “I’ve got the bids to upgrade the linens for Chicago. I need to see where we can adjust expectations to make up for the exorbitant cost.”

“There is one bid I forwarded that was willing to offer a steep discount if you upgraded New York at the same time.”

I snorted. “Yeah, they’d love that,” I said. “No thanks. New York was upgraded two quarters ago. I’m not trying to burn through money.”

“Agreed.” He nodded. “That’s basically what I told them, but they gave me a spiel about how theirs was so much better.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it is.”

“Have you thought about the New Year’s events?” he asked.

“What about them?” I asked without looking at him. The numbers were steep. I wasn’t frugal but damn I hated dropping that kind of money. It was a big hit, and sadly, most of my guests wouldn’t even know the difference with the sheets.

“Which one will you be attending?”

I grimaced and actually shuddered with revulsion. “I don’t know. I’m not sure I will be attending.”

“Henry, you have to go to your own party,” he said.

“I’m going to twelve parties in a few short weeks,” I said. “I think that is more than enough. I’m going to be partied out. I don’t think I can do another.”

“All we need is for you to make an appearance.”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t know,” I said. “Probably Aspen. If I can stay home for an extra few weeks, I will.”

“Then I will tentatively plan for you to be in Aspen,” he said and was back to tapping on the screen. “Now, for tomorrow.”

I groaned and looked up at the roof. “Nicholas, I can’t concentrate on numbers if I’m talking.”

“We’ve got a full day and night,” he said. “Today has been a giant cluster and all the last-minute details have been pushed to the backburner. I don’t like going into events like this unprepared.”

“What’s there to prepare for?” I asked. “I show up. I mingle. There’s some jokes and then I go home.”

He scoffed. “If only it was that easy. Do you have any idea how much planning goes into this? Do you know how long I’ve been working on your schedule? There are a lot of moving parts. There are people I need you to make sure you absolutely greet. You need to make the right moves to impress the right people.”

“Nicholas, I appreciate all the work you put into this,” I told him. “I just prefer to play it by ear. I have your very detailed list about who’s who. I will review it and be ready.”

“What about the speech?” he asked. “I have you scheduled to give the speech at eight. Did you review it?”

“I did.” I nodded. “It’s good.”

“You won’t be expected to dance, but it wouldn’t be a terrible thing,” he said.

“No.”

“Fine. This party is the big one. The others will be a little more intimate.”

“Guest list count?” I asked.

“About a hundred,” he answered.

“Okay. Is that it?”

“Yes, for now,” he said. “I’m going to work on the schedule for tomorrow.”

He got up and went back to his seat. The guy knew I liked my space. We spent a lot of time together. A lot. Some people made jokes about us being joined at the hip. I knew there were rumors about just how close we were. Rumors didn’t bother me. It was a necessary evil to spend a lot of time with him. He was like the other half of my brain. Nicholas was the only person I considered to be in my inner circle.

I focused on the work in front of me. There were a string of emails that needed my attention. Then it was all the little things that came up when you owned three hotels. Not just any hotels. Luxury, resort-style hotels that had risen to the top because of the attention to detail I gave to every element of the hotel.

“We’re going to be landing soon,” the flight attendant announced.

That surprised me. “Already?”

“Yes, sir.” She smiled.

One of the benefits to being on a private jet was I didn’t have to put my tray table up. I continued to work, holding my laptop when the plane hit the runway. My fingers never left the keyboard.

“It’s time to go,” Nicholas said.

“What?”

“It’s time to go,” he said.

“I need a few minutes.”

“You’re going to be late,” he insisted. “We’re already running about fifteen minutes behind.”

I sighed and closed the laptop. “Let’s go.”

It was a mad dash to the hotel. I barely made it through the tour before Nicholas was dragging me out the door. “You have to go now,” he said.

“I need to check the dining room,” I said.

“You don’t have time,” he said. “You’re going to be late to the meeting. This is not a meeting you can miss.”

“What’s she going to do, leave?”

“Maybe,” he said. “I’m guessing there aren’t a lot of options available on such short notice. The car is waiting for you. Go.”

I rushed out of the hotel and got into the waiting car. “I’m late,” I said to the driver.

“Understood, sir.”

I looked at the clock on the wall again and felt an unexpected sense of disappointment. The guy probably took one look at my photo and cringed. To be fair, it wasn't my best look. I didn't dress for the day with the assumption I was going to be rated by anyone, nor did I think I was going to be trying to get a date.

It was nine fifteen and the guy hadn't shown. Maybe he did show, took one look at me, and quickly escaped. I should get up and walk away. There was no point in humiliating myself any further. If the guy didn't want to pay me to go out on a date with him, it was no skin off my nose. It was all a fluke anyway. I never should have wasted my time filling out that stupid form.

Last night, I had gone home and felt so ridiculous for doing it at all. But I wasn't going to lie. I thought about the money. That kind of money could go a long way to making my life a little easier. I could help out my parents with some of the renovations they were making in anticipation of selling the house down the road and traveling the world in luxury. I could start making payments toward my student loans. The thought of being able to go into my first year of being an intern without exorbitant loans hanging over my head would be pretty damn awesome.

I sipped the cheap glass of wine in front of me. I would leave once I finished my wine. After all, I paid for the damn thing. I was going to enjoy it. In a way, I was glad I was stood up. I couldn't imagine trying to pretend I was interested in a

man that was likely three times my age. He was probably balding, crass, and overweight. My role was to play the doting date. That would be hard to do. I wasn't an actress. I was a doctor. Almost.

It was a little embarrassing to be stood up. It didn't matter if it was a fake date or not. The guy could at least have the decency to let me know he wasn't interested. It wasn't like my feelings could be really hurt because none of this was real.

But the money.

I had honestly dismissed the whole idea by the time I got home yesterday. And then a woman called this morning and identified herself as the owner, Della Fontenot. She seemed nice enough. A little eccentric, but nice. She dropped a bombshell on me. She had a deal for me I could not refuse.

A hundred grand for three weeks of work. It blew my mind. I thought she was joking. She told me the potential client would give me the details if he was interested in hiring me for the job after we met. Again, I thought she was joking. I actually laughed at the woman. She laughed right back and then got very serious, which brought me here.

My mind had been racing ever since I got the call. I could pay off the bulk of my loans. I spent my summers working and my parents had put away some money for college, so I was in much better shape than some of my peers. I also managed to land some pretty good scholarships. There was a sense of hope blossoming inside me that would not be quelled. What if I could graduate with no student debt? It boggled my mind.

I was seeing green and that was why I was sitting here now. Greed had led to this humility. It served me right. I picked up my wineglass, prepared to down the last of it when I noticed a very tall, dangerously good-looking man walking directly toward me. His eyes were locked on mine, which was making me feel very uncomfortable.

I couldn't look away. I wanted to look away because I felt stupid for ogling him, but I was trapped in a trance. There was a voice in the back of my head telling me this was not my potential client. There was no way in hell this man would need

to pay anyone to be his date. This was the kind of man that would have women falling at his feet.

Why couldn't I look away? He came to stand beside the table I was sitting at. I couldn't breathe. "Are you here for me?" he asked.

I opened my mouth and closed it again. I felt like a fish out of water gasping for air. "What?" I asked.

"Did Della send you?" he asked.

My head was moving up and down, but my eyes were still locked on his stunning green eyes. "Yes."

"Great, then I guess I have the right person," he said. "May I?" He gestured to the empty chair at the table.

"Yes."

I was having an internal battle. The rational, logical part of my brain was trying to tell my eyeballs to look away. Stop staring at the man. He was going to think I was a lunatic! He had hair. That was the first thing I noticed. I'd conjured up a short, pudgy, bald man as my client. Then this guy walked in. Black hair with little wisps of silver just above his ears. He had a square jaw, cleanshaven, even at this late hour. I wondered if he shaved before he came here to meet me.

"I'm Henry," he said in that rich baritone.

"Hi," I squeaked.

He was wearing a suit that probably cost more than my car. Granted, my car was an old Subaru, but still. Money. The man screamed money. He was rich, handsome, and willing to pay me to be his fake date. Something wasn't adding up.

"Is this a prank?" I blurted out. Everything started to fall into place. Noelle just happened to come upon the Faux booth. I filled out a form and less than twenty-four hours later I was meeting a man that was going to pay me a hundred grand to stand beside him and drink champagne. If something sounded too good to be true, it was. I felt like such an idiot.

"A prank?" he asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “If Noelle put you up to this, I’m so, so sorry. I haven’t seen her in a couple of months, and this is exactly the kind of thing she would do.”

“Noelle?” he repeated.

“Yes, I’m sure she’s the one who put you up to this.”

“I don’t know a Noelle, and I assure you, no one put me up to this. Beyond my assistant that is.”

I stared at him. He certainly seemed to be telling the truth. I just couldn’t figure out why? Why was he sitting here under the guise of interviewing me to be his fake date? It didn’t make sense.

“I’m Henry Barlow,” he said his name again and extended his hand across the table.

Instinct kicked in. I took his hand and shook it like I’d been raised with manners. “Isabelle, Izzy, Sharpe,” I said.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said and leaned back in the wooden chair before raising his hand to get the attention of the server.

I didn’t miss the Rolex on his wrist. My initial assumption was right. He was wealthy and handsome and looking to pay for a date. What in the hell was our world coming to? Nothing was right in the world if a man like him had to fork over money for a date with a girl like me.

“You too,” I murmured.

“I’m sorry I’m late,” he said. “It’s been a busy day. I just landed a bit ago and had another appointment.”

He was apologizing and I couldn’t think of anything to say. I felt like such a fool. Where were my words? I had an expansive vocabulary and yet, I could think of nothing to say. And then he really did it. He leaned forward and shrugged out of his suit jacket. I had to remind myself to keep my mouth closed as the baby blue shirt he was wearing tightened across his chest as he moved.

“Scotch, neat,” he said to the server that finally made his way to our table.

“Another glass for you?” the server asked me.

I nodded. “Uh huh.”

“Izzy is it?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“I’m pressed for time, so forgive me for being blunt,” he said and leaned forward with his elbows resting on the table.

I felt him sizing me up. “That’s fine.”

“How old are you?” he asked.

“Twenty-five.”

He slowly nodded like I had passed the first test. I didn’t know why I was cheering inside, but I was. Like I won the race or something. “Are you visiting Aspen for the holidays?”

“No. Yes. I live here. Lived here. My parents live here. I’m currently living in Aurora where I go to med school. I’m home on break.”

He raised an eyebrow and leaned back in the chair. I knew body language. The forward stance was him being slightly aggressive and getting into my space. The leaned back, arms folded across his chest, his very broad chest, was relaxed. “Med school?” he asked.

“Yes. Fourth year.”

“Impressive,” he said with a nod.

“Thank you.”

Our drinks were delivered. He picked his up, and like a man that was used to drinking stout liquor, he sipped without making a face. “Your parents live here in Aspen?” he questioned.

“Yes. This is where I grew up.”

“Again, forgive my bluntness, but I think the question needs to be asked. The money I’m paying isn’t small change. Your family lives here, which tells me you’re from money. Why are you doing this?”

I had to smile. “You’ve made the same assumption so many others have made. My family are locals. My dad grew up here. My parents are not wealthy. They are comfortable, but the only way they could afford to live here is because they own their house. The house was passed down to my father from his family. My family was cool before it was cool to be in Aspen.”

He looked amused. “I see. I’m sorry for the assumption. It’s a beautiful place to live.”

“It really is,” I agreed. “I loved growing up here. I hope I get to move back here and live once I’m done with my residency. Although with the way home prices are, it is going to be more like ten years into my career before I could ever afford a place here.”

“Doesn’t it take a really long time to become a doctor?”

“Yes,” I answered. “I’m on track to be a cardiothoracic surgeon.”

His green eyes widened. His thick black eyelashes fanning out. “Isn’t that a lot of training?”

I nodded. “It is, but I hope it will be worth it.”

“Where will you work while you save up for the home in Aspen?” he asked.

I couldn’t tell if he was joking or being serious. “I’m not sure,” I said. “I might stay in Aurora or go to Denver to get more practice. Ideally, I would like to bring my experience back to Aspen, but I’m just not sure it’ll be possible.”

“How so?”

“It’s a very small hospital here,” I explained. “While it’s nice and they have cutting-edge equipment, most cardiothoracic procedures are sent to one of the larger hospitals. I would love to bring it local. People that live here could benefit from having their heart surgery in their hometown. Family could visit without having to travel hours over dangerous roads to be with their loved ones.”

I couldn't help but infuse my testimony with emotion. I remembered my mom and her white-knuckle grip on the wheel as we made the dangerous journey to Aurora in the middle of January in the middle of the night. I never wanted anyone else to have to experience the agony of not knowing what was happening to their loved one. My father could have passed away and we would have been stuck on the highway trying to get there. He'd been life-flighted, but we had to drive. It was an event that changed my entire life.

She was not what I expected. Nothing like I expected. In my mind, I was picturing one of those women that hung out at the bars wearing way too much makeup and too little clothing in search of a rich man. She seemed very down-to-earth. And smart. A surgeon? Holy shit. I felt like I might have overshot the mark a bit.

“How many times have you done this?” I asked her.

“This?” she questioned.

“Provided this particular service,” I clarified.

She grinned and shook her head. “Never. This is a total fluke. My friend—”

“Noelle?” I interrupted.

“Yes, Noelle, yesterday we were at a fair and she saw a booth for this Faux’s thing,” she said and waved her hand. “The young lady manning the booth was a very good salesman. I thought it was a joke. I filled out a little questionnaire and that was that. I never expected to get a call back.”

Oddly enough, I felt relieved. I couldn’t explain why, but I liked that I was going to be her first. Her only. That wasn’t fair. “Why are you doing this?” I asked. “If that’s an appropriate question to ask.”

She shrugged and sipped her wine. “Like I said, I’m in med school. It isn’t cheap. I won’t be able to really start

earning money until next year when I start my residency. This money will pay off some student debt.”

“Did Della tell you what the job was?” I asked her.

“Not entirely,” she said. “I was under the impression this was an interview. I was supposed to meet you and you would decide if I was up to snuff, so to speak.”

“You understand why I wanted to meet the woman that is set to pose as my serious girlfriend, right?” I asked.

“Of course, and I wanted to make sure I could handle pretending to be a man’s girlfriend,” she countered without missing a beat.

I really liked her wit. “Let me tell you about the job. Then you can decide if you’re up to the task.”

“I’m sure it will be incredibly difficult to pose as your girlfriend.” She smirked. “What did you say your name was?”

“Henry Barlow,” I said.

She drank from her glass and I saw the moment she connected the dots. “As in Barlow Aspen?”

“That would be me,” I answered.

“Ah, now I understand why the fee isn’t a problem for you.”

“I have twelve parties scheduled over the next three weeks,” I explained. “The parties are not just in Aspen. They will be in New York and Chicago as well. Part of the job would entail you traveling to those cities with me. I have a private jet. You’ll be put up in my hotel. Your job would be convincing my business associates and guests that you and I are in a serious relationship. I’ll need you to keep your schedule open for any last-minute plans. There are always people who want to grab dinner or lunch or want to get together for drinks. I’ll need you to attend those things with me. I’ll handle all the little details.”

“Little details?” she asked.

“Yes, I’ll handle your wardrobe,” I said matter-of-factly. “Jeans and cowl neck sweaters won’t do.”

She withdrew, tugging at the collar of her sweater. “Of course,” she murmured. Her eyes didn’t meet mine. She was looking down at her glass of wine. I’d offended her. I sometimes forgot I wasn’t talking to Nicholas. I could be abrasive, according to Nicholas.

“I like the sweater,” I said. “It looks comfortable.”

“It is comfortable,” she said.

“I didn’t mean it to come out the way it did,” I tried to explain. “I just meant, these will be parties that require gowns and sparkly things. Low-key events will require business formal. And I know I’m going to sound like a pompous ass, but the people I associate with tend to expect certain things.”

“Like?”

“Designer clothes,” I said. “I’ll make sure you have everything you need to fit into the part as my partner without anyone questioning anything.”

“Why would they question it?” she asked.

“You’re stepping in as my long-term girlfriend and no one has seen or heard of you,” I said. “You’re essentially ballooning into my life. People are going to have questions.”

“And how are we supposed to explain my sudden appearance in your life?”

“I’m working on that,” I said with a soft smile. “Rather, my assistant, Nicholas, is working on it. Fortunately, I haven’t been out with anyone in a while, so it won’t be hard to convince anyone that I’ve had a secret girlfriend this whole time. People are used to me being extremely private. I rarely talk about my life. I’ve never been involved in any torrid love affairs that have made the front page of a gossip rag.”

Her soft smile told me this was the right choice. She was the right choice. “Good to know,” she said with the same flirty smile. “I would hate to have a jealous ex come at me in the middle of dinner.”

“I can assure you that will not be a problem.”

“Twelve parties?” she asked.

“A couple of big parties with champagne and finger foods,” I answered. “A few smaller, more intimate gatherings and a few average gatherings.”

“And you want me to go to every one of those events?” she questioned.

“And any last-minute invites I’m obligated to attend,” I answered.

“Three weeks of traveling the country,” she said aloud.

“Is that a problem?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You don’t know?” I repeated with surprise and a hint of irritation. I was under the impression she was here to accept the job if I approved of her. She was the one acting like she had to decide if she wanted to take the job.

“I don’t get a lot of time off from school,” she explained. “I came home to see my parents. I want to spend time with them. I don’t get to spend enough time with them as it is.”

“You’re telling me you can’t take the job?”

“I’m not saying that,” she said and shook her head. “It’s just a lot to take in. Can I get back to you tomorrow?”

“No,” I said abruptly. “I have to know now. I fly back to New York first thing in the morning. The first party is tomorrow night. If you aren’t able to take the job, I need to find someone who can.”

“Tomorrow?” she gasped. “Before I give an answer, can you tell me why this is happening now? I’m assuming these parties were scheduled way in advance. Do you have a girlfriend that can’t make it? Did you just break up?”

“I just told you I don’t have a girlfriend,” I said. “I haven’t had a girlfriend. I’ll be honest, this is something my assistant decided I needed.”

“Your assistant, Nicholas,” she clarified.

“Yes.”

“Can I be blunt?” she asked.

“I think given this situation, bluntness is expedient and necessary,” I said.

“Why is your assistant deciding you need a fake girlfriend?” she asked.

I wasn’t prepared to give her the full answer. It didn’t matter. This was a job. Nothing more. “He thinks it will play better in the press and with some investors.”

She nodded like she understood. “I see.”

“Well?”

“I do have a huge student loan debt,” she said.

“And this money would pay that debt,” I surmised.

“A good chunk of it.”

“Damn,” I said. “Medical school must be expensive. Do you mind me asking how much it costs to become a doctor?”

“Surgeon,” she clarified. “It’s about two-hundred thousand for most. I’m not quite there because I’ve earned money and had scholarships.”

“Damn!” I exclaimed. “No wonder doctors charge so much. They have to.”

She laughed. “Exactly. Some don’t start making any real money until a good ten years after they’ve been out of school because of those pesky loans.”

“Cardiology?” I asked. “That’s ambitious. What made you want to go into that field?”

She shrugged instead of answering my question. “Money,” she said.

It was clear she was lying. I knew the trick. I rarely answered questions about my personal life. “I don’t mean to push, but it’s been a long day. It’s almost midnight back in

New York. I'm tired and I have an early morning. I need an answer, Isabelle."

"Please, call me Izzy," she said. "Isabelle is when I'm in trouble."

"Izzy, I need an answer."

"Okay."

I raised an eyebrow. "Okay?"

"Yes, I would like the job," she said.

"Great. Where are you staying?"

"Why?" she frowned.

"I'll send a car to pick you up," I explained.

"Uh, no thank you," she said. "I can meet you somewhere."

"We're flying out in the morning, eight o'clock," I told her.

"So early?"

"We've got a lot to get done and not a lot of time," I said. I wasn't even sure how we were going to get it done, but I would make it happen.

"I'll drive to the airport," she said. "That's where we're flying out from, right?"

"You'd rather pay parking than have me have you picked up?"

"Yes, that's right."

I didn't understand it but whatever. "Fine. Be there by a quarter of."

"Fine."

"Pack light," I told her. "We'll be shopping tomorrow."

"No cowl necks and jeans." She smirked.

"Wear whatever you're comfortable in," I said nonchalantly. "We'll take care of the rest tomorrow."

"Fine."

I pulled out my phone and pulled up the document Nicholas had prepared. “I’ll need you to sign this,” I said and handed her the phone.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a work agreement with a strict nondisclosure,” I said. “All my people are required to sign them. This particular situation is delicate and requires the utmost discretion.”

She rolled her eyes and started to read. I liked that she was reading it before signing. It was something I appreciated. “It’s not like I’m going to go around bragging I’m a date for hire. Maybe I should have *you* sign a nondisclosure.”

I smirked and finished my drink. “I’d be happy to.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said. “My assistant is on vacation, so I’d have to do it myself.”

Again with the witty sense of humor. This might not be as bad as I thought it was going to be. She used her finger to sign the document before sliding the phone back to me. “Thank you,” I said and pocketed the phone. “Can I call you a cab?”

“No, I drove.”

I made a pointed look at the wine glass. “Are you sure?”

“Trust me, this is not going to do me in,” she said. “Besides, I live less than two miles from here. I’m fine. Thank you for asking.”

I left a fifty on the table for the two drinks. “Then I’ll see you in the morning.”

We exchanged phone numbers before I got up, grabbed my jacket, and left the bar. The dread I felt when I walked into the place was appeased. It would be easy to hang out with her. I liked that she was intelligent and fast on her feet. With a little preparation by Nicholas and myself, she’d be able to memorize everything I needed her to know. She’d be able to pass as my girlfriend with no problem.

I called Nicholas as I climbed into the back of the SUV. “It’s done,” I said.

“You make it sound like you just offed her.” He laughed.

“Stop, you know what I mean. She signed the contract. I’ll forward it to you when I get home.”

“She’s going to do it?” he asked with surprise.

“Yes.”

“Wow,” he exclaimed. “I didn’t think you would do it. Or her.”

“Well, we did. She’ll be meeting us at the airport in the morning. I need you to make an appointment at one of those dress places. I need to get her outfitted for this little ruse you’re planning.”

“Hey, you’re going along with it,” he said with a laugh. “It’s going to be good for your image. Trust me.”

“I’m trusting you, but if this thing blows up in our face, I’m holding you responsible.”

“I’m here,” I gasped as I rushed into the small private airport that catered to the rich and famous who flew into Aspen on their private jets.

Henry was talking to another man. The scowl on his face told me he wasn’t happy. Technically, I wasn’t late. I just wasn’t early. I pulled my suitcase behind me and rushed to where they were standing. Henry looked at me, nodded at the man who quickly hurried away, and to my surprise, he actually took my bag.

“I can’t have you being late,” he said and walked through the doors onto the tarmac. “This is a job. Would you be late to any other job?”

“I’m not fifteen minutes early,” I corrected. “I’m three minutes early. I’m not late.”

“I told you to be here fifteen minutes early. Therefore, you are late.”

“I’m sorry,” I told him. “I really am. Things were a little hectic. In my defense, this is all very last minute.”

He gestured for me to take the stairs first. I climbed inside the jet and wanted to take a minute to take it all in, but Henry was right behind me. He practically pushed me down the aisle. The man I’d spotted him talking to earlier was talking to the pilot. He shot me a look of sympathy with a soft smile.

“Sit anywhere,” Henry said. “Except there.”

It was obviously his seat. There was a briefcase in the white leather seat next to his, along with a laptop bag. I took the seat on the other side of the aisle while a flight attendant emerged from the back of the plane and took care of my bag. I was nervous and anxious. I liked flying, but I was a normal person. I'd never been in a private jet. If I let the reality of my situation sink in, I would probably have a full-blown panic attack. I was running away with a man I met yesterday and knew nothing about. This was not my usual MO. I was careful and sensible.

"Hi," the other guy said and sat down in the seat across from mine.

"Hi."

"I'm Nicholas," he said and reached out his hand. "I'm Henry's assistant."

I smiled and shook his hand. "Ah, you're the one who put him up to this."

He laughed and settled into his seat. "He told you."

"In a way."

Henry was already on the phone as the plane began to take off. "So, how much did he tell you about today?" he asked and pulled out a tablet from a leather case.

"Next to nothing," I answered honestly.

Nicholas smiled, his hazel eyes squinting at the corners. I pegged him to be in his late twenties, but he could be younger. The curly brown hair that fell around his face gave him a boyish look. He was wearing a cashmere sweater and slacks with what looked like very expensive shoes.

"We'll land and a car will meet us," he said. "We'll get you your room key and drop off your things. Then you have an appointment at a boutique to get your dress for tonight as well as what you'll need for the rest of the events. You have an appointment at a salon at four. You'll go back to the hotel to change. Henry will meet you in the lobby at six for the party."

I could only stare at him with my mouth agape. “Uh, that’s intense.”

He smiled and nodded. “It will be a busy day.”

“Can we go back to the dress thing?”

“What about it?” he asked.

“You expect me to get how many dresses?”

“Twelve,” Henry chimed in. “Nicholas called ahead. They’ll be ready for us.”

“Us?” I asked.

“I’ll need to approve the dresses,” he replied without looking up from his laptop.

“You’re going to approve the dresses I’m supposed to wear?” I said with my lips tight.

He stopped typing and looked up. “Are you familiar with the New York and Chicago business party scene?”

“No, obviously,” I snapped.

“I’m paying you a great deal of money to make the right impression. I have attended hundreds of these things. I know what is appropriate and I know what people would expect from me when it comes to a woman.”

“You’re worried I’m going to show up in a cowl neck burlap bag?” I teased with just a hint of a smile.

His lips quirked. “Something like that.”

“Fine,” I said and settled in.

The flight attendant brought each of us glasses of orange juice in fancy champagne glasses. Except it wasn’t orange juice. I coughed and sputtered. “What is this?”

“Mimosa,” Nicholas said with a shrug.

“Champagne? In the morning?”

“Trust me honey, you’re going to want this drink.” Nicholas laughed. “You’ve got a day ahead of you.”

The mimosa was followed by some fresh fruit, fluffy croissants, and delicious coffee. I felt like I'd graduated to royalty overnight. The moment we touched down, we literally hit the ground running. I'd never been to New York. I was in absolute awe as the limo driver managed to weave in and out of busy traffic like he was on a bike. The hotel stop was not what I expected. I never got out of the car. A bellhop came to the car and took our bags before he disappeared. The whole time we were in the car, Henry was either on his phone or working on his laptop. I kind of felt like I was alone.

When the car came to a stop, Henry got out first. He reached in the car and helped me out. We walked into a boutique that had a sign announcing it was closed. Apparently, it was closed to everyone else except us. Once again, I felt like I was wearing a tiara.

"Hello, Mr. Barlow," one of the women hovering in a circle greeted. She looked at me and offered a smile. "You must be Isabelle."

I nodded. "That'd be me."

"Come with me," the brunette in back said. "We've pulled a selection of dresses."

"Mr. Barlow, have a seat," the tall blonde said to him. "Would you like a glass of champagne?"

"Coffee, please," he said.

I was escorted into a large dressing room. There were no less than twenty gowns hanging around the room. They were all gorgeous. "We have more we can pull," one of them said. "Let's start with this one."

I stared at the beautiful blue sequined dress with a slit up one side of the skirt. "Uh, I'm not sure about that." I pointed to the slit.

"If it hits too high, it's a quick modification," the saleswoman said. "We can add a sheer sheath to give you the look of sexy while maintaining your modesty. Mr. Barlow had some specifics about what he wanted."

"And what would that be?" I asked.

“He requested classy and elegant,” she answered.

I couldn't help but smile. That sounded about right. “Okay, I am a smalltown girl in med school.” I laughed. “My biggest fashion decision is what color scrubs to wear, and should they have flowers or dots?”

The women both laughed. I didn't feel like they were arrogant or looking down at me. I was undressed, right down to my panties and a strapless bra, before I transformed into a human doll to be dressed and undressed.

“He'll like this one,” the girls said.

I was beginning to think none of them were going to work. “Good.”

“Let's show him and make sure,” one of them said.

“What?”

“He asked for final approval,” the other said.

I was a little embarrassed to be parading in front of a virtual stranger. I walked out of the dressing room to find the blonde practically fawning over Henry. His eyes were immediately on me and he nodded. “That's a keep,” he said.

Just like that, I was ushered back into the dressing room. The dress was put back on the hanger and put to the side. The next two hours were spent dressing and undressing. Each time I walked out in a new dress, Henry scrutinized and gave the yes or no.

“Please tell me this is it,” I finally said to the two girls who were just as exhausted as I was.

“I'm sure he'll love it,” one of them said and adjusted the bodice.

“I think we definitely know what he likes now,” I said with a laugh. “Any idea how many dresses I've tried on?”

“Fifty?” one guessed.

“At least,” the other said.

I looked at myself in the mirror. It was a white dress with silver threads running through it. It was a flattering cut with nothing too sexy. Henry liked the classy look. The cap shoulders had pretty little light feathers that hung down my arms. I felt like a winter princess.

We walked out together. Henry looked up from his phone and, for a moment, said nothing. With all the other dresses, it was an immediate yes or no. This time, he only stared. I slowly turned. "Is it too tight?" I asked. "We could add a soft jacket to cover my arms if you think that's better."

He got to his feet and took a few steps toward me. "Keep," he said.

"Keep?" I repeated.

"Yes."

I turned to the two girls, who looked as relieved as I felt. "We did it!" I exclaimed.

"Have those sent over to the hotel along with the shoes and whatever else she needs," Henry said before turning to me. "We're late for the salon."

"I'll change," I said and rushed back into the dressing room. I was so glad to be done. I usually liked shopping, but this afternoon had been exhausting.

"You're a very lucky woman," one of the girls said.

"Thank you," I said.

I had to keep up the charade. They thought Henry and I were an actual couple. I didn't miss the looks they were giving him. He was a very attractive man. They were envious, which was a strange feeling. No one had ever been envious of me. I didn't exactly live the kind of life anyone envied.

"Ready," I said after putting back on my jeans and sweater.

"Thank you," Henry said to the women.

"Thank you," the blonde that obviously had a real thing for him cooed. "I hope we can help you out again."

Henry opened the door of the limo and I climbed in. “The driver will be taking you to the salon. I have a meeting I need to get to. I’ll meet you in the lobby at six sharp. Please don’t be late.”

“Since you said please,” I said with a laugh.

He wasn’t amused. In fact, he was already burying his face in his phone. On the drive to the salon, I stole a few looks at him. There was a very robotic quality about him. He was a machine with very little emotion. Last night, I had Googled him. I needed to know who I was jetting off with. He wasn’t just rich; he was a billionaire. From what I could find, there had never been a girlfriend, at least not one he advertised. Rumors about his sexuality were pretty rampant. Other rumors claiming he was cold and worse than Scrooge were just as prevalent. I understood why he hired me. I was supposed to soften his image.

The car pulled to a stop. “I’ll see you tonight,” he said and climbed out.

Once I was alone, I grabbed my phone and sent a quick text to my parents, letting them know I’d landed in New York and everything was fine. The guilt I felt for lying to them was pretty strong. They thought I was meeting an old friend from high school. There was no way I was telling them what I was really doing. They would not approve. On the surface, I wouldn’t have approved either, but it seemed like an easy job. And I was being pampered. I was getting to live a life that my real life would never afford. It was just a couple of weeks playing pretend. It was a lot like when I was little and declared myself a princess.

I stepped outside the hotel and crossed the street to get the full view of the lobby. I didn't miss the tourists snapping pictures of the elaborate decorations inside and out. The massive tree in the lobby was visible through the glass doors with the golden B's emblazoned on them. It was pretty damn stunning. The tree was decked out with gold decorations. There were fake gifts piled underneath it. All were wrapped in shimmering gold with elaborate bows of silver and more gold. It definitely sold the idea of luxury and opulence.

I walked back across the street and stepped inside the lobby. Guests for the party had already begun arriving. I stayed out of the way and waited for Izzy to show up. If she was late, we were going to have a very long, stern conversation about her tardiness. It wouldn't be tolerated. It couldn't be tolerated.

My eyes scanned the lobby and noted the expressions on the guests' faces. People were happy. That was a good thing. Out of the corner of my eye, there was a flash of blue. I couldn't explain why, but I had to turn to look at what it was that briefly caught my attention.

"Holy shit," I breathed.

It was her. I barely recognized her. She looked so different than the girl I'd met in the bar last night. I watched her scan the lobby. I knew she was likely looking for me, but I simply stared at her. The dress hugged her curves in the best way. Her

hair was pulled back, revealing a swath of olive skin with a pretty diamond necklace catching the light.

She met my gaze and nervously smiled. I slowly walked to meet her. “You’re on time,” I said.

I should have complimented her. In my defense, she took my breath away. I wasn’t expecting the transformation. “I guess when my travel consists of taking the elevator downstairs, it’s a little easier to be on time.”

“Are you ready to go in?” I asked her.

She took a deep breath, her chest swelling and straining the dress. I purposely chose dresses that weren’t overly revealing, but now I was rethinking that decision. The dress was stretched tight across her chest, revealing no cleavage.

“I think I am,” she said. “We didn’t get a chance to talk very much. Nicholas gave me a paper with some of the basic facts about you, but I don’t feel like I know you like a girlfriend would know you.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” I told her. “No one is going to ask you personal questions about me. Tonight is more about being seen. No one coming here tonight is interested in me. They’re here to drink expensive champagne and eat finger foods with names no one can actually pronounce.”

She nodded. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

I slipped my arm through hers. “Try not to be nervous,” I said as we crossed the lobby. I didn’t miss the looks directed our way. It was her. The way she carried herself and, of course, the dress were hard to ignore. She didn’t look like a lot of the other women milling about in dresses that were skintight on their stick-thin bodies.

“I’m not nervous,” she replied. “I’m excited. I feel like a kid going to Disneyland. Your hotel is stunning. I can’t wait until I get the chance to really check it out. I’m just in awe of that tree. When I got back from the salon, I swear I stood in front of it for a good ten minutes just taking in the beauty. And all the other decorations. It’s gorgeous.”

I knew the tree was pretty, but the rest of the stuff never really registered. We walked to the ballroom with security standing outside the door to make sure only invited guests were allowed entry. They nodded when they recognized me and opened the double doors for us to walk through.

We stepped inside and she pulled to a halt. “Oh my gosh,” she gasped.

“What’s wrong?”

She looked at me with wide eyes. “Do you see this?”

I looked around. I saw fake white birch trees adorned with lights. Silvery strands with snowflakes that glistened against the twinkling lights hung from the ceiling. An archway ahead was adorned with blue and silver garland. “I do. I think.”

“It’s a winter wonderland,” she gasped. “I think I’m going to cry.”

“Why are you going to cry?”

“It’s so pretty,” she said, and we started to move forward again.

We walked into the ballroom that resembled the entry. White fluffy trees with more blue decorations were set up around the room. Gauzy fabric was draped and hanging from the ceiling with more lights creating a cloudy appearance. Sparkling snow was placed around the trees. People were drinking champagne and gathered in small groups of threes and fours. The band was on the erected stage surrounded by more fake snow. They were all dressed in black tuxes and belting out a Christmas song I wasn’t familiar with.

“Did you do all this?” she asked.

“Not personally,” I answered.

“It’s gorgeous,” she said.

I spotted the four men that were the head of an investment firm I was hoping to attract. They were all sipping champagne and talking amongst themselves. I grabbed two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter and handed one to her. “We’re going to start with these gentlemen,” I said.

“Start?”

“They are investors that I’m hoping to get to invest in a new hotel I want to open in the south of France,” I explained.

“Got it,” she said with a nod.

Together, we walked over to the group of men. “Gentlemen,” I interrupted.

“Ah, Henry,” Jack greeted. “You’ve outdone yourself.”

“Thank you,” I said. “This is Izzy.”

They all looked at her with just a little too much admiration. “Hello,” Izzy said with a bright smile.

“This is Jack, Adam, Liam, and Tom,” I introduced.

Izzy shook each of their hands. “I’ll do my best to keep all your names straight, but there are a lot of people here tonight. Have you gentlemen tried the crab cakes?”

“No, we haven’t,” Jack answered.

“The chef is amazing, and you are going to want to make sure you get your hands on those bad boys before they’re all gone,” she said with a laugh. “I just might be the one to make them disappear.”

I had no idea how she knew what was on the menu or if the crab cakes were good. It didn’t really matter. The men were eating it up.

“I’ll do that,” Jack said. “Thanks for the tip.” He winked.

“Do you gentlemen work at the hotel?” she asked.

She knew damn well they didn’t. I opened my mouth to answer, but Jack beat me to it. “Actually, no,” he answered smoothly. “We run an investment firm.”

“Ah.” She nodded. “Are you looking to invest in a sure thing?” she teased. “If so, look around. Look at this place. It is going to be one of the top destinations once pictures get out. I might just get on Yelp myself to brag about how amazing this hotel is. All his hotels.”

She was good. “Gentlemen, I think she might be a little biased,” I said with a laugh and put my arm around her shoulders.

“She has good reason to be,” Liam said. “I like the improvements you’ve made since the last time we were here. Has it been good for business?”

I nodded. “The investment into the property was paid off within the first three quarters, much to my surprise. We’re working on plans to expand the pool area and have been working on a deal with a high-end designer to personally design our suites.”

“I believe guests want luxury, but they want to feel like they are home and free to kick off their shoes and relax,” Izzy said. “His designer is going to blend the two things. Instead of cold, boring decorations that hotels are known for.”

Again, she was talking out of her ass, but the men were eating it up. “A woman’s touch,” Jack said with a nod. “I’ve always said every good man needs the soft touch of a woman. I can see the changes here. All very positive.”

I smiled and nodded, not bothering to refute his assumption. It had been the touch of a woman, but not the woman standing next to me.

“Henry.” I heard my name and turned to see an older couple that had been some of my first investors.

“Will you gentlemen excuse me?” I said and gently touched Izzy’s shoulder as I stepped away. She seemed to have things well in hand. The men were practically eating out of that very same hand. She was a natural. I wasn’t sure if this was her usual way or if this was all for show, but it was good.

By the end of the night, I was ready to retreat to the quiet solitude of my suite. Most of the night, Izzy had been on her own making the rounds. In fact, she had introduced me to people. Everyone seemed to love her. I quietly escorted her out of the ballroom with my hand on the small of her back.

“You did well,” I said as we walked to the elevator.

“Thank you.”

We stepped onto the elevator and I pushed the button for the top floor. Her junior suite was down the hall from my own diamond suite. “I assume you looked me up?”

“I did,” she said. “Last night, I looked you up. I couldn’t be running off with some crazy, creepy dude. While I was getting my hair done, I did a little more research on your hotels. I wanted to make sure I knew something about who you were and what you did. I’m glad I did.”

“You seemed to know a lot about my business,” I commented.

“Honestly, I faked it a lot,” she said with a shrug. “It was easier to talk about the hotels and your vision for the future than it was to talk about me. I wasn’t sure how much I was supposed to say. I kept it vague on all fronts. We really should come up with a cover story.”

“I’ll have Nicholas work on that,” I said.

“You don’t think that’s something you should come up with?”

“No,” I answered and walked out as soon as the elevator doors opened. “This was his idea. He claims to know what it will take to fix my image. He can figure out what it is my image needs.”

“Understood,” she said.

“Thank you,” I said when she stopped at her door. “I know today was hectic, but you did well. Tomorrow will be a more intimate party at my business partner’s house.”

“Okay, I’ll be ready.”

“I’ll have Nicholas get with you in the morning to go over talking points for the dinner tomorrow,” I told her. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Henry.”

I walked to my room and stepped inside. The moment the door was closed, I was able to relax. I was an introvert by nature. Spending long hours with large groups of people was not my idea of a good time. I felt like I had to be Henry

Barlow, billionaire hotel magnate. When I was alone, I got to let down that façade and relax.

While I stripped out of the suit, I thought about her undressing. The image of her in that gown was going to keep me company tonight. It was going to be hard to shake. I didn't want to shake it. In fact, I was looking forward to the coming weeks.

I woke up on the bed I had dubbed a cloud. It was the most comfortable mattress I had ever slept on. It was soft and firm and just perfect. The sheets were amazing. My skin glided over the satiny cotton. It was warm and cozy and I would gladly spend all day in this bed. But I couldn't. There was stuff I needed to get done. But before I did anything, I needed to call Noelle.

I grabbed my phone off the nightstand, and because I couldn't wait to show her just how good it was to be the fake girlfriend of Henry Barlow, I called her on FaceTime.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked.

"Yep," I said. "And remember, I can see you. You're already awake."

"Oh yeah." She laughed.

"What are you doing?"

"Wrapping gifts for my clients," she answered.

"Ah, you're so sweet."

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Are you in bed?"

"I am." I grinned. "I wanted to show you how amazing this room is. He put me up in a suite. This place is ridiculously amazing."

"Show me!" she squealed.

I climbed out of bed and gave her a tour of the suite before flopping down on the sofa. “It’s pretty good being the girlfriend of Henry Barlow.”

“How was the party last night?”

“Incredible,” I said.

“You looked pretty damn hot in that dress,” she said.

“Thank you.” I’d managed to send her a quick selfie before I had to race downstairs. “I was glad I was wearing it. I felt like I was surrounded by money. There were so many rich, powerful people in the room.”

“Were they stuck up?” she asked.

“No, not really. I talked to a lot of people. It was kind of cool getting to play a role.”

“What’s Henry like?”

I wrinkled my nose and tried to think of an appropriate answer. “I’m not sure. He’s just... Henry.”

“What does that mean?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said and shook my head. “He’s a different breed. Like a robot. There is nothing personal about him. I’ve tried to get to know him, but he tells me his assistant will tell me what I need to know. It’s very strange. He’s all about his business. I guess considering the money he is making, that makes sense. I’m not used to being around such stiff, robotic people.”

“I guess we know why he’s single.” She laughed. “I guess he can’t have money, looks, and personality. That’s like lightning striking the same place twice.”

“I suppose you’re right,” I said. “It’s really too bad, because I think he’s probably a nice guy deep down.”

“Or not.”

“Are you going to take the chocolates to my parents today?” I asked.

“Yes, after my client.”

“Thank you and I’m sorry I’m asking you to lie to them,” I said. “I don’t want them to worry, but I’m not about to tell them I’m in New York as an escort. It would probably give my father another heart attack.”

“Your parents are very understanding,” she said. “I’m sure they would feel better if they knew it wasn’t like a sexual thing. You’re there to make some quick money. They know how stressed you’ve been about next semester and your loans.”

“If they think I’m that desperate, they’ll put the house up for sale now,” I said. “I don’t want them to sell it before they are ready. Besides, the money they make is supposed to be for them. My mom has been dreaming about seeing the Louvre and seeing the entire world. I’m not going to take away from that.”

“I get it,” she said. “So, what are you doing today?”

“There is another party tonight,” I told her. “It’s supposed to be a much smaller one, which means I’m going to have to have more intimate conversations. Last night I got away with the general chit chat. There wasn’t a lot of time to get into anything too personal. I’m hoping to get Henry to talk to me today before the party. I don’t know anything about him. His online information is very limited as well. I don’t know who his parents are. There were some pictures of him skinny dipping during his college years, but nothing more. It’s like he hatched from an egg and grew up in a week.”

“You could create a questionnaire,” she offered. “Just the basic information you need.”

“I think I’m going to talk to his assistant,” I said. “He’s a pretty nice guy. He’ll tell me what I need to know beyond the bullet points he gave me.”

“You are in a very weird situation,” she said with a shake of her head.

“I’ll remind you; you are the one that got me into this situation.”

She burst into laughter. “Oh yeah, I did, huh?”

“Yes, you did.”

“I never thought it would end up being this,” she said. “But admittedly, this is pretty cool, right? It’s like the best Christmas gift ever.”

“Speaking of, I only got glimpses of the city yesterday. I’m hoping I get some time today to check it out. I want to go to Time Square.”

“Oh, be careful,” she warned. “I’ve heard it’s pretty dangerous for tourists down there.”

“It’s Christmas,” I objected. “No one would dare accost anyone on Christmas.”

“It’s not Christmas and I don’t think bad guys follow those rules.”

“I’m not even sure if I can,” I said. “I have to check in with my boss. Maybe I can get him to show me around. That’ll be one way to get to know him a little better.”

“Good plan,” she agreed.

“Alright, I better go. I need to text my parents and then get ready to go for the day.”

“Text me later,” she said. “I want another selfie. You are one of the luckiest girls in New York right now. Sexy in the city.”

“Very funny.” I laughed and ended the call.

I quickly tapped out a text to my parents and let them know I was going sightseeing today and would be having dinner with my friend tonight. The lie was difficult to send, but I told myself it was for their own good. They didn’t need to worry about me. They’d been supporting me for far longer than they should have. I knew they were only holding on to the house for my sake. Once they sold and hit the road, I would have nowhere to go home to.

After sending the text, I helped myself to one of the sparkling waters in the minifridge. I needed coffee but first I wanted to shower. I brought my usual jeans and sweaters for

the afternoon. Henry never said anything about my wardrobe for the daytime stuff.

There was nothing from Nicholas or Henry by the time I'd gotten ready for the day. I decided to take matters into my own hands and walked to Henry's room. It was a little forward, but if I didn't try and talk to him, I doubted he was going to search me out.

I knocked on his door and waited. He pulled it open and I found myself speechless. He was wearing black slacks and a white shirt that wasn't tucked in or buttoned up all the way. I got a flash of chest. Not much, just a peek. He pointed to the phone pushed against his ear and mouthed, *do you need something?*

"I was going to go into the city," I whispered. "Do you want to come with me? Or do you need me here for anything?"

He shook his head before covering the phone. "Be back in time to be ready at six," he whispered.

"Okay," I said with disappointment.

He went right back to his conversation and closed the door in my face.

"Okay, then," I muttered.

I went back to my room and grabbed my purse. Before I set out on my grand adventure in the Big Apple, I needed food. Real food. Yesterday had been a whirlwind with my only meal on the plane. The finger foods last night were good, but they weren't exactly a meal. Nicholas had told me I was able to eat or drink anything I wanted in the hotel lounge and restaurant. I was hoping to get something good for breakfast. The moment I gave my name to the hostess, she acted differently. "You're Mr. Barlow's guest," she said.

"Yes, I am," I replied.

"We've got a table over here reserved for him," she explained as we walked. "Will he be joining you?"

“No, I don’t think so,” I said. “He’s got a business meeting.”

I took my seat and ordered coffee and juice. My eyes damn near popped out of my head as I scanned the menu. The menu was not the typical menu I was used to. I didn’t even know what half the dishes were. I decided it was best to stick with what I knew. It wasn’t the time to play around with new foods and risk my stomach revolting in the middle of a fancy dinner while wearing a dress that didn’t afford quick removal in case of bathroom emergency.

“Bacon and eggs,” I said to the waiter wearing a stark white shirt and black pants.

“Toast?”

“Yes, please,” I said.

After answering a series of questions about what kind of bread, how I wanted my eggs, and so on, I was finally left alone to sip my coffee. I took advantage of my view of the restaurant. The tablecloths were crisp white. Each table had a different centerpiece with some assortment of pinecones and small logs. It was the kind of thing me and Mom would struggle to make after seeing it on Pinterest. Whoever made these knew exactly what they were doing.

I leaned down to smell the centerpiece on my table and was rewarded with the fresh scent of pine. It was like being back at home. No detail had been spared when it came to setting the perfect scene. Even the fireplace along one wall of the restaurant was decked out with garland and beautiful candles.

I scarfed down my breakfast. I was genuinely hungry and it was so good. Plus, I was anxious to see the city. I felt safe walking alone. The doorman opened the door for me and wished me a good day as I walked out.

I inhaled deeply and was certain I smelled snow in the air. That was something my dad always said. It was a little difficult to know if it was snow or what smelled like ham in the air. As I walked, I took in all the sights, smells, and

sounds. I was completely overwhelmed and thrilled. I brought along my emergency credit card just in case there was something really cool I wanted to buy. I figured I would have the money at the end of all this. I'd pay off the bill. No harm, no foul.

“Hot chocolate?” a man pushing a food cart asked me.

“Please,” I said and pulled out a dollar bill.

With my warm cup in hand, I walked with no particular destination in mind. I was just so damn happy to be there.

HENRY

I paced the lobby, staring at my phone and replying to Nicholas's texts while I waited for Izzy. She wasn't late —yet. I was anxious to get to the dinner. This was a good chance to talk with some guys I knew who would be very interested in partnering with me to go worldwide. We'd talked via email and occasionally on the phone, but I had not gotten the chance to have a face to face.

"Henry." I heard Izzy say my name.

She was crossing the lobby and walking directly toward me. I put my phone in my pocket. Once again, she looked amazing. Tonight, she was wearing a black cocktail dress with a jacket to ward off the chill. She walked like she was on a runway with her full hips gently swaying.

Nicholas happened to come from my right at the exact same time. "Wow!" he exclaimed. "She cleans up real nice."

"Stop," I hissed.

"Hi, guys," she greeted.

"You look stunning," Nicholas told her. "Absolutely gorgeous."

She blushed a little. "Thank you."

"The car's waiting," I said. I wanted to kick myself. I should have complimented her, yet again. The words just got stuck in my throat. I wasn't that kind of guy. I didn't shower anyone with compliments.

“You kids have fun,” Nicholas teased. “Go have good wine and eat great food. I’ll be here slaving away.”

I ignored him and headed for the door. Izzy said something to him before catching up to me and walking outside. I opened the door of the car and looked away while she climbed in. It was very tempting to stare at her ass. I slid inside with her sitting on the opposite bench seat. “It’s not too cold,” she commented.

“No, I suppose it isn’t.”

“What’d you do today?” she asked.

“Worked,” I answered and pulled my phone out once again. There were a few more emails I needed to reply to.

“I think I walked ten miles,” she gushed. “I found myself in the ritzy shopping area. I was actually on Fifth Avenue! I did a lot of window shopping. Actually, I found the window designs thrilling. I’m pretty sure I saw Sarah Jessica Parker coming out of one of the shops. Hell, I’m sure I was surrounded by all kinds of celebrities. Their stars were not as bright as the gorgeous decorations. I went into Bloomingdales. I’ve always wanted to see what it was all about.”

She was rambling. I nodded occasionally. “It’s a nice place,” I commented.

“Bergdorf’s was where it was at! Their window display was so pretty. It was hard to see it because people were crowded around it. I used my big booty to push my way to the front. I took so many pictures, my phone memory is full. I’m going to have to upload everything to the cloud tonight. Oh, and I stopped at some food truck and had some tacos. So, so good. I wanted to try one of the restaurants, but I felt foolish going in by myself.”

The woman would not stop talking. I was trying to be polite and nod while pretending to care, but my patience was wearing thin.

“Wow!” she said loud and clear.

I looked up to see what had gotten her attention. “What?”

“How old are you?”

I frowned. “Thirty-three, why?”

“Could have fooled me.” She laughed.

“What does that mean?” I asked irritably. I knew I didn’t look any younger than my thirty-three years. If anything, I looked older. I could probably be mistaken for forty. I wasn’t worried about what age I looked. It didn’t mean shit to mean.

“You look like a Gen Z.”

“A what?” I asked.

“Gen Z. The younger generation. The one just behind me.”

I shook my head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Your face is glued to that phone,” she said. “I feel like I’m back in college and surrounded by zombies staring at their phones.”

That pissed me off. I wasn’t a fucking kid playing Candy Crush or watching Tik Tok. I held up my phone. “This phone is how I make millions. This phone is my business. The very business that allows me to pay some rather outrageous fees to Faux’s for a dating service. Without this phone, you wouldn’t be sitting here in a dress I bought. You wouldn’t be starting 2022 with a hundred grand in the bank. If I wasn’t on my phone, responding to emails and running my business, you wouldn’t be paying off your student debt.”

She blinked several times and said nothing. I watched as she turned her face to look out the window. That was probably a little harsh. She didn’t deserve to be scolded like a child. I should apologize. A good man would apologize. I felt guilty for talking down to her. But not guilty enough to apologize.

The limo pulled to a stop in front of the massive townhouse. I climbed out and attempted to help her out. She shrugged off my hand. This was probably not going to go as well as last night had. The moment we walked into the house, her demeanor changed. She was all smiles and very friendly.

After settling her in with the women at the party, I retreated to the den with the other men.

“Gary,” I said to the man that had once been my business partner.

“Henry,” he said and shook my hand.

“How have you been?” I asked him and took a seat.

“Regretting my decision to let you buy me out,” he said.

I shrugged and took the offered drink from the host. “Good,” I said with a smile. “I told you to hang on.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said and shook his head with disgust. “I’ll listen to you next time.”

“Well, actually, I do have an opportunity you might be interested in,” I said.

The other three men in the den were all real estate investors. They were much older and far more seasoned than I was, but that was what I was counting on. Their experience would tell them what I was about to pitch was a good investment.

“What have you got cooking?” Gary asked. “I know the way you work. You never stop moving forward, which scared me. You’ve shown me that without risk, there is no reward.”

“I’m looking to go international,” I said.

“Really?” one of them asked.

This was what excited me. “Yes. I’ve got a location in France I’m looking at. I’m close to getting that deal secured. I also have a handful of properties I’m looking at in Germany, Japan, Italy, and Canada.”

“That’s a big leap,” Gary said. “Even by your standards, that’s a huge investment. That’s a lot of capital.”

“It is, but the payoff is going to be tenfold,” I said. “I’ve got projected numbers already put together. I’ve got costs and profit margins. I will be turning a healthy profit in three years, possibly sooner.”

“That’s ambitious,” one of the men said.

I nodded. “It is, but that’s the way I like to do business. I don’t like to half-ass it. I go in, all in. I have learned a lot with the three hotels I’ve opened in the states. I’ve learned from my mistakes and I now know where I can cut costs. I’ve got some great people on my team. I know they’ll be able to secure everything I need, right down to toilet paper without breaking the bank. I’ve recruited my staff from the best of the best and they stick with me. We’ve had numerous staff meetings about going global. I can tell you my team is on board. They are all anxious to make this happen.”

“Your enthusiasm is evident, but you are talking about a lot of money,” the host said.

“I am. I considered doing it one at a time, but if I want to make a huge impact, it’s got to be big. I’ve got to capitalize on the momentum I have going for me right now. This month is going to earn us a spot at the top of the hotel game.”

“I assume you’re hoping we’ll invest,” Gary said with a small laugh.

I flashed my most winning smile. “I know you guys are the smartest investors in the city. If I can’t get you guys to give me your money, no one will.”

“I’m definitely interested,” Gary said. “I’d like to see the hard numbers.”

“Me too,” one of the others said.

“I’d love to have you guys come by my office tomorrow morning,” I said. “I’m flying back to Aspen in the afternoon. I’ll have everything pulled together for anyone that wants to come by.”

“Eight work for you?” Gary asked.

I liked that he was excited enough to make it the first thing on his schedule. “Absolutely.”

“Alright, enough business,” our host said. “I’ve got a box of cigars from a place that cannot be mentioned.”

We enjoyed the cigars and the scotch that was twenty years old before making our way back into the massive living room where the women were talking. When I first walked in, I didn't see Izzy. A moment of fear washed over me. What if she'd left? What if she'd decided the money wasn't worth it?

Then I heard her soft laughter. I looked over and found her sitting on the floor in front of the massive Christmas tree. She was playing with a doll with our host's two little girls. The women were all seated and chatting while Izzy played with the kids. I found myself walking toward her and watching. She didn't seem to care that no one was talking to her.

She looked up when she saw me. Her eyes were sparkling with laughter. "The girls wanted to show me their new dolls," she said and was suddenly apologetic. She very carefully got to her feet and straightened out her dress. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be," I said.

The hostess came to stand in front of Izzy and grabbed her hands. "Thank you so much for doing that," she said in a quiet voice. "They always feel so left out. You just made their day by giving them your attention."

"Trust me, it was my pleasure," Izzy said. "I don't think a girl ever gets too old to play with dolls."

"Why don't we go into dinner?" she said.

We made our way to the formal dining room with Carly, our hostess, insisting Izzy sit by her. I sat on her other side and listened to her talk. She was very enthusiastic as she talked about her future as a heart surgeon. Everyone was hanging on every word she said. I was learning more about her at dinner than the two days we'd spent together.

After dinner, Izzy insisted on helping clear the table. Gary pulled me to the side. "She's nice," he said. "Nice isn't the right word. She's incredible and I'm not sure you deserve her, but if I were you, I'd hold on to her with both hands."

"I'll keep that in mind," I said.

“She’s too good for you,” he said with a laugh. “She’s certainly too smart for you. A surgeon? I never would have pictured you with a surgeon.”

“Hey,” I protested.

“I’m kidding,” he said. “I’m happy for you. It’s about time you settled down. She’s obviously been a good influence on you. You seem settled. I don’t see that same, twitchy guy chasing the dream.”

I wasn’t going to tell him I was settled on my own and she had nothing to do with it. Bringing her here tonight was to sell the fact that I had settled. I wasn’t the Scrooge McDuck guy counting my billions all alone in my mansion.

“Ready,” Izzy said and joined us near the door.

“I hope we’ll see you soon,” Carly said. “The girls wanted me to tell you they said goodbye.”

“Tell them I had so much fun playing dolls with them,” Izzy said. “Have a good night.”

I put my arm around her waist and guided her out the door to the waiting car. The moment we were in the car, her smile fell away. She was withdrawn. I didn’t know what to say, so I figured it would just be better if I said nothing at all on the way back to the hotel.

I hated waiting. I felt like I was wasting time. I could be doing so many other things, but no, I was waiting for the call to let me know it was time to go home. I supposed that was the benefit of having your own jet. You got to come and go as you pleased. You weren't beholden to the airlines and their flight times.

"Izzy?" I heard my name.

I looked up and saw Nicholas walking into the lounge where I'd been sitting and cooling my jets while my temper heated up. Last night had been a slap in the face. He wasn't my friend. He was my employer. It was my mistake to think he'd be interested in anything I had to say.

"Hi, Nicholas," I said with a sigh.

"We're leaving in ten minutes," he said. "Henry will meet us at the airport."

"Good. I'm so ready to go home. The city is pretty, but I can't wait to sleep in my own bed."

"Um, didn't he tell you?" Nicholas asked uneasily.

"Tell me what?"

"We're going back to Aspen, but he expects you to stay at his place."

My brows shot up. "Excuse me? This is not that. I thought it was all made very clear I was to attend a few parties. That's it. I'm not his live-in girlfriend in any way, shape, or form."

He smiled. “Not like that. We’re shooting a video for the Barlow Hotel social media page. We’d like you to be a part of it. We want to show him at home.”

I rolled my eyes. “Let me guess, this is to show he’s not as cold and out of touch as he seems.”

Nicholas laughed again. “Yes. Exactly right. That’s what your job is. You’re here to soften his image.”

“I’m expected to stay the night with him?” I asked.

“At the house, not with him,” Nicholas clarified.

I was disappointed I wouldn’t be able to go home, but at least I’d be able to see my parents. “Wait, am I going to be able to go home at all before we have to go to Chicago?”

“Yes, I’m sure you will,” he said. “The video isn’t going to take long. We’ll need to get you another outfit.”

“God forbid I wear one of my old ugly sweaters and jeans.”

He smiled again. “We’re working with a stylist,” he explained. “She’s already got a few outfits picked out for both of you. The goal is to coordinate without trying. It’s going to be warm, classy, and yet homey.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I muttered. “I know the look.”

“We should go,” he said. “We don’t want to be late.”

“Definitely not.”

We got into the car, and on the way over, I couldn’t resist trying to learn a little more about the man paying for my company. “Has he always been a bachelor?” I asked.

“Yes,” Nicholas answered without elaborating.

“He said you’re the one who came up with the idea for him to have a girlfriend. Why?”

“Why?” he questioned.

“Yes, why? Do you really think the people that visit his hotel care about his personal life?”

He slowly nodded. “Yes, I do. It’s showing up in surveys. As you probably know, Henry is making moves to open hotels around the world. He needs to secure investment capital. While he has an excellent reputation in the business world, some see him as too young to know better. People in general think he’s a little on the arrogant side. As I explained to him, the climate is different these days. People spend with their heart. They want their money to go to the right places. They don’t want to end up supporting some shady business or a man that might leave a negative impression in general.”

“How dumb,” I muttered. “It’s not about him. It’s about his ability to run a good business. After staying a couple of nights in his hotel, I think that’s what he should be judged on.”

“I agree,” Nicholas replied. “But here we are. Your presence is going to make a difference.”

“I’ll do what I can,” I said.

The flight home was quiet. Henry sat in the back working on his laptop and making phone calls. From the one side of the conversation I heard, his business meeting this morning had gone well. He was working with his lawyers to get paperwork drawn up. I couldn’t pretend that was all on account of me, but I hoped I’d helped a little.

We landed at the airport and the three of us piled into the waiting SUV. It was cold and windy and so much like the weather I was used to. The air was crisp with a feeling of ice droplets in the air. It was strange to think we were on the same continent, but the air was so different here than it had been in New York.

I sat quietly in the far back while Nicholas and Henry talked shop. I understood about half of what they said. They were talking numbers and speaking so fast I couldn’t keep up. We headed out of the city and I couldn’t help but feel a twinge of homesickness. I was so close yet so far.

Fifteen minutes later, we were pulling up to what could only be described as a mountain chalet. When the SUV stopped, I was certain we were picking someone up. There

was no way this could be his place. It was stunning and nothing like the hotel in the bustling city.

The two men got out and then it was my turn to climb out of the SUV. I stared up at the windows that had amazing views of the mountain. It was three stories high, but with the height of the ceilings, it looked like five stories. Windows stretched from top to bottom with a wraparound deck on the middle floor with a smaller deck on the top floor.

Henry was already on the move to the front door. He quickly unlocked it before entering a code into the security system. I watched as he pushed a few buttons on a large electronic pad. Lights turned on all around me. The massive fireplace along the wall roared to life. The polished wood floors and the warming tone of the tongue and groove wood paneling that covered the walls and ceiling did nothing to warm the place up in terms of homey.

It felt cold. Sterile. Like one of his hotel rooms. Henry walked ahead. The driver delivered our bags to the door and left. “Does he actually live here?” I asked Nicholas.

“Yes.”

“This is home?” I asked in case he didn’t understand what I was saying.

“Yes.”

“Yes,” Henry added to let me know he’d heard my question. “I live here.”

I looked around the so-called home. It could have been a VRBO with the lack of personal touches. In fact, the walls were almost bare. The furniture was perfect, like it had never been sat on. Everything felt staged, like it was ready for the camera but not for living.

Henry walked into the massive kitchen that took up one whole side of the ground floor. The kitchen included a huge island with six stools slid under it. There was a dining table at one end and two massive refrigerators. It all felt like a lot for one man.

“Why does it feel like no one has been here for a long time?” I whispered to Nicholas.

He laughed and patted my arm. “I’ll show you to your guest room. The stylist will be here any minute.”

“We’re doing that today?” I gasped.

“Yep. The film crew will be here in two hours. We want it to be dark outside. It will make it look more inviting with the fire going and the lights low.”

I rolled my eyes and followed him up the stairs that were also made of logs that had been sanded and finished to a high shine. “I don’t think there’s anything inviting about this place.”

My guest room was massive with my own adjoining bathroom. The log bed was adorned with what looked like a very warm quilt. There was another fireplace in the room with two chairs situated in front of it.

“I’ll let you get settled,” Nicholas said and left the room.

I walked to the massive windows that overlooked what I assumed was the backyard. It was currently covered in snow. I squinted and strained my eyes when I spotted an attached room on the ground floor. I could see a little through the windows. That was when I realized it was an indoor pool.

“Wow,” I said with a shake of my head. The man really knew how to live.

There was a soft knock on my door. “Isabelle?” I heard a woman call out.

“Yes, come in.”

A woman walked in with several garment bags draped over her arm. “I’m Amy, the stylist. Nicholas told me to come on up.”

“Oh, hi,” I greeted. “Call me Izzy.”

“I’ve brought four outfits to work with,” she said and laid the bags on the bed. “I’m leaning toward this one.” She

unzipped a bag and pulled out a silk button-up shirt in a creamy beige color with a pair of black slacks.

“It’s very pretty,” I said.

“Good, I’m glad you like it,” she said. “I’ve brought a pair of black pumps to go with it. I wasn’t sure what Mr. Barlow had in mind for the video, so I brought a few different ideas. After speaking to him downstairs, it sounds like this is the look he’s going for.”

“What are the other outfits?” I asked out of curiosity.

“Sweaters, boots, leggings,” she said with a wave of her hand.

I laughed. “That’s exactly what I would have chosen for myself, which explains why this is the outfit he chose.”

She smiled and handed me the clothes. “I’ll wait and see what we need to make it work.”

I took the clothes into the bathroom to change. The silk was soft. Once I was dressed and looking at myself in the mirror, I felt like a rich lady that belonged in a house like this. I imagined this was exactly what the wealthy wore when they were being “casual” at home for the day.

I stepped into the room and waited while she tucked and pulled at the clothes before going to the little black case she’d brought in with her. “These will go perfect,” she said and handed me a pair of dangling pearl earrings and a pearl necklace.

I suddenly felt like I was forty. The pearls were pretty, but they weren’t me. I turned to get her approval. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. “You don’t like it and it shows.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’ll do better.”

“No, no, you’re right,” she said. “Let’s try the diamonds.”

I took off the jewelry and took the simple diamond necklace and earrings. “Better,” I said. “I don’t feel like my mom.”

She laughed and handed me a matching tennis bracelet. “There,” she said with a nod. “Perfect. Let’s go see if he’s ready.”

When we walked back downstairs, there was an entire crew in the living room. A Christmas tree had been erected and wrapped with gold ribbon. There were little touches of Christmas all over the room that had not been there when I’d gone upstairs. A camera was being set up in front of the fireplace with the tree standing in front of one of the massive windows. It was a legit production.

“Ready?” Henry asked as he came downstairs.

He was wearing a white shirt and black slacks. It was his usual attire minus the tie. I supposed this was his idea of casual. The next two hours were a whirlwind as we rehearsed our lines before doing six different videos for the production team to pick through. The moment it was done, everything was packed up. To my surprise, I got to keep the clothes but not the jewelry.

It was worth it to recite generic phrases and pretend to be in a happy home with my boyfriend.

I sat down in the recliner I had picked out for myself. I loved being home. Every time I was here, I told myself I was going to spend more time here. It just never seemed to happen. Nicholas had left a short time ago and Izzy was upstairs changing. The quiet was comforting. I liked the quiet.

Izzy came downstairs with her purse slung over her shoulder. She had changed into a pair of black pants and a wool sweater. “I’m going to call a ride and go home for a bit,” she said.

“You can take the Tahoe in the garage,” I said.

“That’s okay. I’ll get a ride.”

“Please, take the Tahoe,” I insisted.

I got up and walked to the small box that held the keys to the vehicles in the garage. That was when I got a glimpse of the weather outside. “It looks like that snowstorm they predicted for later tonight showed up early,” I said.

“What? Why?”

I walked to the living room window and pushed the button to open the internal blinds. It was almost a complete whiteout. My house was outside of town and higher up in the mountains. The road into town would likely be impassable very soon.

“Oh man,” she groaned.

I could hear the disappointment in her voice. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I know you wanted to go home. Maybe tomorrow after

the road has been cleared.”

She nodded and started to head back upstairs. “Nicholas had some groceries delivered,” I told her. “I’ll see if there’s a frozen pizza or something.”

She put her purse on the entry table. “Do you mind if I look for something to make? I’m a little burned out on the restaurant food.”

“Help yourself,” I said. “I’m not sure what’s here. Nicholas usually has the basics delivered. I’m not here enough to have a full pantry or anything like that.”

She smiled and pulled a hair tie from her purse. “I’m used to working with very little. I’ll see what I can find.”

I didn’t know why, but I followed her into the kitchen and pulled up a seat on one of the barstools. I watched as she moved around the kitchen. She inspected the fridges first. Then the big freezer. She pulled open the door to the walk-in pantry and disappeared for several minutes. When she returned, she had a quizzical look on her face.

“Nothing?” I asked.

“I’m thinking,” she said. “Do you like casseroles?”

I shrugged. “Make whatever. I know Nicholas would have had some frozen meals in there.”

She frowned and shook her head. “I’m not a bad cook. You can eat what I make. I promise you won’t die.”

“I’ll eat whatever you cook,” I said. “I’m not really that picky.”

“Great!” She opened the freezer and pulled out some chicken. I watched as she started opening cupboards. “I would ask you where your pots and pans are, but I’m guessing you don’t have a clue.”

I laughed. “You would guess right.”

She pulled out a pot and started cooking. “Do you ever cook for yourself?” she asked.

“Not anymore,” I answered. “I did a long time ago.”

“How often are you really here?” she asked.

“In Aspen?”

“Yes. You said this is your home. Is it like your second home, or do you actually live here?”

“I live here about nine months out of the year,” I told her.

“Do you go into town much?”

“Not really,” I said. “The house sits on ten acres. I find plenty to do without ever leaving.”

“I noticed the pool,” she said. “Do you do a lot of swimming?”

“I wouldn’t say a lot. I do swim. I have a gym. I’ve got a couple of snowmobiles that I like to ride around. But honestly, I don’t have a lot of downtime. I work a lot.”

“Gee, you don’t say?” she teased.

“The hotels don’t build themselves or run themselves,” I said. “It takes a lot to keep them running at the top. I should hire some help, but I guess I’m a bit of a control freak. I like to be in control of everything. I like being involved in all the decisions.”

“How are you going to do that if you get your wish to open the hotels around the world?” she asked.

“I will get those hotels opened,” I asserted. “I will have to hire managers I can trust. Nicholas is already putting out some feelers. Without a good manager, things will fall apart.”

“Do you think you have good managers now?”

“Yes, but it didn’t happen overnight,” I explained. “There were some missteps. The team I have in place now is reliable. They know what I want and what I don’t want. That took some time to get there, which is why I need to start looking for the right people now.”

“Are you from the Aspen area?” she asked. “I mean, how did you settle here?”

“I’m not from here,” I told her. “I came out here to open the hotel and decided I liked the place. I also like being out here and away from everyone. I never have to worry about anyone stopping by.”

“You like to be alone?”

“I do.” I nodded.

“I guess being out here you are definitely alone,” she said. “What if you want to order a pizza or run down to the store to get a gallon of milk?”

I raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know that I would ever need a gallon of milk. My freezer is usually stocked with frozen meals when I’m home. I can cook a few things. Not a lot, but I won’t starve.”

“You confuse me,” she said.

“How so?”

“You have this city slicker thing about you,” she said as she stirred a pot on the stove. “You have a private jet and an assistant. You just seem the type to want to be in the heart of a major city with convenience at your fingertips. People that live in properties like this tend to be independent. They shovel snow, cut firewood, and so on.”

I had to laugh. “I’m independent, but no, I won’t be out chopping wood. The fireplaces are electric.”

“What about when you lose power? Don’t tell me you don’t lose power out here.”

“I do, but I have a backup generator. A very large generator. Several actually.”

She nodded. “Ah, I guess you still have all the amenities of the city with the privacy of a mountain retreat.”

“Exactly.”

She mixed the chicken and rice in a large pan before dumping some cream soup in. It was strangely cathartic to watch her cook in my kitchen. It was like she’d done it a hundred times. When she bent over to put the dish in the oven,

I found myself checking out her ass once again. Once again, she disappeared into the pantry and came back with an armload of ingredients. I didn't know what she was making, but it smelled amazing.

“Are you planning on being here for Christmas?” she asked.

“In Aspen?”

“Yes. This is home, right?”

“Yes, and I'm not sure yet,” I answered. “I need to go over my schedule for the month. Actually, we need to go over our schedule. We've got some events coming up this weekend.”

“But we'll be here for the week?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “After dinner, we'll go over the schedule.”

“Let me get these biscuits in the oven and then we can go over it,” she said.

“Can I pour you a glass of wine?” I asked.

“Shoot, you don't have to ask me twice.” She giggled.

“Any preference?” I asked her.

“I'm not picky,” she said. “Whatever you've got.”

“I have a wine cellar,” I said. “I've got it all.”

“Of course, you do,” she said.

“How about a nice chardonnay?”

“I drink wine out of a box most of the time,” she joked. “Trust me when I say I'm not picky.”

“Got it,” I said and headed downstairs to the cellar.

My wine education came from years of trying to impress the people I dined with. It had taken years of personal taste testing. I felt like I got it right and was really very good at it now. I pulled a bottle from the rack and headed back upstairs. She was just wiping down the counter. I didn't know where all my pots and pans were, but I knew exactly where the wine glasses were.

I poured two glasses and handed her one. She moved to take a seat on one of the stools. "Can I ask you a question?" she asked.

"You can ask, but I make no promise I will answer."

She smirked. "You really are a closed book."

"It's served me well all these years," I answered.

"If you plan on being here for Christmas, why don't you have any decorations?" she asked. "I know you're busy, but if you can have groceries delivered and your house kept squeaky clean, surely you could have hired someone to decorate."

"I don't see the point," I said.

"You don't see the point in decorating for Christmas?" she gasped.

"No, I don't. It's just stuff. It's only me. If I want to see a tree, I can look outside my window."

She seemed absolutely stunned. "It's only you this year?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Do you own any Christmas decorations?" she asked.

"No," I answered honestly. "Like I said, there's no point."

"You mean you're always alone for Christmas?"

"Yes," I said with a shrug.

She was speechless. "Oh. Do you have family? Do they live out of town?"

"I don't," I said without elaborating. "Nicholas is about the closest thing to family I have."

"I bet he would like some Christmas cheer." She smiled.

"He has a family," I said. "I would never ask him to give that up."

"But you saw how nice it looked in here when we were doing the video," she reasoned. "It was all homey and festive."

It was pretty to look at. Even if it is just you, don't you like to look at pretty?"

"I do like looking at pretty," I said and made sure she knew I was looking directly at her.

She didn't seem to catch on. "I think Christmas cheer can go a long way to improving one's mood."

"Maybe so," I said. "But I think my mood is just fine."

She laughed as she slid off the stool. "I guess if you keep your own company, that's all that matters."

I had a feeling that was a very subtle insult. I chose not to question it or defend myself. I knew people thought I was a dick. They assumed I was absorbed with myself and unfeeling. In a way, that was true. I didn't *not* care about people. I just didn't dare risk getting involved with people. People hurt people. People could be cruel. I preferred to keep my own company and dramatically reduce the risk of being hurt by anyone.

Ever.

Period.

ISABELLE

I picked up the dinner plates and carried them to the sink. I knew he liked the chicken and rice dish. It wasn't fancy, but it was comfort food. It was something me and my mom made quite a bit when I was home. Sometimes, we added cranberries to the dish to make it more festive, but there were none of those in his pantry.

He poured us each another glass of wine. I used the button to open the blinds on one of the windows. The lighting around his property provided just enough for me to see the snow falling. It was a heavy snow.

"Do you mind if I open the rest of the blinds?" I asked him.

"Go ahead," he said. "I don't think we have to worry about anyone peeking in."

I opened the rest of the windows and turned off the lights inside. The only light in the living room came from the fireplace. I stood in front of the window and stared outside. It was like being in a snow globe. A warm snow globe.

I turned around to face him and watched him staring at the flames completely lost in thought. "Do you have family and not talk to them?" I asked. I knew it was none of my business, but I was curious.

"I don't have family," he said.

My heart hurt for him. I sat in one of the chairs facing him. "Did your parents pass away?"

“My mom was a junkie and overdosed when I was eleven. My dad was in prison on drug charges when she died. The only aunt I had was in no position to take care of a kid. I would have ended up in another bad situation. I ended up in the system.”

“The system?”

“I was put into foster care,” he said. “I grew up without a lot of rules. My parents weren’t exactly pillars of society. When I went to my first foster home, I was still in a bad way. I had found my mother dead on the couch. I didn’t think it bothered me, but I guess it did more than I realized. The first home was strict, and I didn’t fit well. I was sent back and placed in another home. Needless to say, I spent the next seven years waiting to age out of the system. I was in eighteen different foster homes in those seven years and did a stint in juvie. Trust me when I say I have no family.”

“I’m sorry,” I said with so much sadness for him. “You’ve certainly turned your life around.”

He didn’t look that impressed with his success. “I think you could say I literally pulled myself out of the gutter. Because I couldn’t imagine waiting another six months in yet another foster home, I ran away and stayed out of sight. I lived on the streets, occasionally crashing on the couches of friends and staying in shelters when I could. I got my first job working at a hotel as a dishwasher in the restaurant. I slowly worked my way up the food chain and started to shadow the manager. Every penny I made I put into savings. I started taking some night classes and got an Associate’s in hotel management. I managed another hotel for about a year and got myself settled. I bought my first rundown motel when I was twenty-two.”

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “That is impressive.”

“When you’re hungry, both literally and metaphorically, you make things happen,” he said.

“I’m guessing you didn’t make your motel into a hotel,” I teased.

“No. I held on to it and did some renovations. I did a lot of them myself actually. I turned around and sold it for almost three times what I paid. I bought the hotel in New York with the money. It was nothing like it is today. I managed to attract a business partner, Gary, the one you met at dinner the other night. We made Barlow New York into a luxury destination. With Gary’s money, I was able to buy the property in Chicago. Gary got cold feet when I started talking about buying another property.”

“Aspen?” I asked.

“Yes. I bought him out and bought the property here on my own.”

He was fairly young to have the success he did with basically no help. He’d climbed his way to the top after coming from some pretty harsh circumstances. Few people would be able to overcome like he had. I was impressed.

“I think you should come to my parents’ house for Christmas,” I blurted out. “They would love to have you. We’re all about the festivities. We love to hang out, eat and drink and be merry.”

He was staring at me like I was crazy. “Uh, I—”

I held up my hand. “I’m sorry I just dropped that on you. You don’t have to decide right now. Just know that it’s an option.”

“Thanks.”

I could tell I made him uncomfortable. That was the last thing I wanted to do after he poured his life out for me. I had a feeling that was not something he did often.

“No pressure,” I told him. “I know my parents would love to have you there. No offense, but they aren’t exactly picky about who they invite over. They love company. My dad recently retired, and they spend a lot of time together. *A lot*. They love having big Christmas parties. They just recently redid their whole kitchen and my mom loves to show it off. She was meant to have a big family. She loves to cook big,

elaborate meals. Unfortunately, she just got me. As you can probably see, she fed me well.”

“A woman who eats is always a good thing,” he said with a laugh.

“Well, trust me, I like food. Eating like a bird or rabbit has never been my thing.”

I got up once again. The second glass of wine was going down very easily. I meandered over to the entertainment center that was built into the wall. There was a massive flatscreen television mounted on the wall. There was a remote sitting on a shelf. I picked it up and turned on the TV. As expected, I found the Pandora app. I knew the station I was looking for and put it on.

“What is this?” he asked.

“This is called holiday music,” I said. I sat down on the couch and took off my boots before standing once again. “Can I get you a refill?”

“Please.” He nodded and handed me the glass.

I poured two more glasses, and when I turned around, I was taken aback by how beautiful the scene was. There was a blip of a fantasy. Me, him, and a cozy living room with the same giant tree in the corner in front of the window. The snow falling outside and Silent Night playing in the background. This was better than a Hallmark card.

“Here you go,” I said as I handed him the glass.

“Are you the type to listen to Christmas music before Halloween?” he asked playfully.

I sat down on the couch and crossed my legs. “I am. It’s an inherited gene. My parents are all about Christmas. It’s either go big or go home. Every year they go a little bigger. If you do come over, you’re going to see just how big they go. Every room has something in it to make you feel festive.”

“That’s a lot of Christmas.”

I leaned toward him. “Have you ever put up a Christmas tree?”

“I had one in one of the foster homes I was in,” he said.

“I know you don’t have any family, but you could make your own good memories. Even if it’s sitting around in your PJs and drinking hot chocolate in front of the fire. You could watch one of the many Christmas movies that put you in the feel-good spirit.”

“PJs?” he repeated.

“Pajamas,” I said.

“I don’t wear pajamas.”

For some stupid reason, that flustered me. I could almost feel my cheeks burning. “Oh,” I managed to say.

“Do you?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

“Huh,” he said and sipped his wine. His eyes raked over my body. I could feel him undressing me or dressing me in some sexy pajamas.

“On Christmas we wear Christmas jammies,” I said and felt like a total idiot.

“Christmas jammies,” he said with a quirk of his lips.

“Yes,” I said. “It’s a tradition. Every Christmas Eve we wear our jammies. We drink hot chocolate, eat s’mores, and watch Christmas movies.”

“I’m still stuck on the jammies thing,” he said.

“Ha, ha, it’s not that uncommon,” I told him.

The song switched to one of my favorites. I jumped up because I was a little tipsy and I loved to sing along. I started to sing Baby, It’s Cold Outside.

He stood up. “What are you doing?”

“I love this song,” I said.

“It sounds kind of ridiculous,” he said.

“It’s fun and flirty,” I replied. “When I was about six or seven, I happened to come downstairs on Christmas Eve. I

caught my parents dancing to this song. They were singing the parts and having so much fun. That memory is forever burned into my brain. I decided I wanted to have that same kind of thing when I grew up. Every time I hear it, I think of them that night and I have to sing.”

He inched closer with his eyes locked on mine. “It sounds like the man is pressuring her into staying the night,” he said in a husky voice.

“Only because he wants to spend more time with her,” I said with a smile. “That’s romantic.”

He stepped close and reached out to put his hands on my hips. Before I knew what he was about to do, his lips were on mine. My eyes closed and I leaned into the kiss. His hands grabbed my upper arms and pulled me close. At first, my arms hung limp at my sides. Then something happened in my brain and I found myself wrapping my arms around him. His lips pushed mine open and his tongue pushed inside my mouth. I tasted the wine. Our tongues dueled. My heart was racing and there was a warm feeling low in my belly.

“It’s been so long since I’ve held a woman like this,” he whispered against my lips.

It suddenly felt like I’d been dumped in the snow outside. I dropped my hands and took a step back. He was looking at me in a way that was making me want to step right back into his arms. “What are we doing?” I asked.

“I’m kissing you.”

“No. Why? This is confusing. Is this a business arrangement or something more?”

The heat I’d seen his eyes vanished. “Business,” he said. “This is strictly business.”

I nodded in understanding. “Okay. Then we need to keep it that way. I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

I turned and walked away, practically running up the stairs. That had gotten hot in a hurry. I never meant that to happen. Did he?

I noticed the heat in his eyes. When I was making dinner, he'd been looking at me a little differently. I ignored it, but sitting on the couch tonight with him, there was no ignoring anything. Then he kissed me!

I walked into my room and closed the door behind me. I thought about locking it but stopped myself. Would it be the worst thing in the world if he snuck into my room in the middle of the night?

“Yes, yes it would.”

I couldn't mix this up. This was over in a matter of weeks. Getting caught up in something messy would only make it more difficult to go back to my normally scheduled life. I didn't have a lot of random sex. Hell, I never had random sex. I wasn't that type of girl.

HENRY

I went downstairs and tried to think of what I was going to say to Izzy after making such a huge mistake. I couldn't explain what came over me. She was so beautiful and watching her hips sway as she smiled and sang had been too much. I had to taste her. I craved her kiss.

And I might have just screwed everything up. She wasn't downstairs. There was no sign she'd ever been downstairs. Did she leave in the middle of the night? I walked to the front door and opened it. My heart fell. There were footprints in the snow leading out to tire tracks. She must have gotten a cab after all.

"Fuck," I snapped. "Dammit."

It didn't have to go that way. If I'd told her it wasn't just business, I could have continued kissing her. I might have been able to do a lot more. But I couldn't lie to her. I wasn't going to use her. I was a lot of things, but I wasn't going to stoop to that level.

I made myself a cup of coffee and tried to pinpoint the reason I did that. Why did I go after her like that? Why did I kiss her? It wasn't like I'd never been around beautiful women. It was her. There was something about her that appealed to me on a different level. Something deep down inside me burned for her.

Sitting around and thinking about what I did and how badly I screwed up wasn't going to change anything. What was done was done. I had a lot of work to get finished in a short amount of time if I was going to go global. I carried my

coffee down the hall to the office I often worked out of. The rich brown wood and dark leather furnishings were comforting. It was all very masculine and made me feel powerful.

I sat down behind my desk and opened the laptop. The house felt quieter than it ever had before. After having her in the house last night making all that noise, I wasn't sure it would ever feel quite the same. She added energy and life to the place. Then I reminded myself I didn't like noise. The quiet was when I did my best work.

It was hours later when I heard the sound of an engine. A very loud engine. At first, I dismissed it. It was probably the plows going up the road to the top of the mountain. There were two more properties up the hill from mine. My focus went back to my work.

The truck wasn't passing by. It was growing louder. I heard the sound of a backup alarm and realized it was coming from out front. I got up and went to the window. I pulled back the heavy curtains and saw a white box truck backing up toward my front door.

"What the hell?" I growled.

I wasn't expecting a delivery. I snatched my phone off my desk and called Nicholas while I walked toward the front door. If anything was coming, he would know what it was. He was the only person that would have ordered anything.

"Dammit, call me back," I said when his voicemail picked up.

I jerked open the front door just in time to see Izzy hop out of the passenger seat. The truck shut off and the driver's side opened. Out hopped Nicholas. I wasn't sure what surprised me more, the fact there was a delivery truck at my front door, or the fact Nicholas was driving said truck.

They apparently didn't notice me. They were laughing as Nicholas hopped on the back of the truck and lifted the door. That was when I got my first glimpse of the large tree inside

the truck, along with a ton of bags. I stepped out of the doorway and put my hands on my hips.

“What the hell is this?” I asked.

They both turned around and looks of guilt crossed their faces. “Uh oh,” Nicholas said with a grin. “Busted.”

“Yeah, busted, what the hell is going on?”

Izzy walked up to me and smiled. “You need a little Christmas cheer. I’m here to make it happen.”

“I didn’t ask for this,” I said.

“No, you didn’t, but it’s here,” she said with a shrug. “If it’s the cost you’re worried about, you can take the price out of my fee. I don’t mind. I like Christmas, and if I’m going to spend any time here, I need Christmas cheer.”

“Izzy, I don’t want all that crap in my house,” I growled.

“Here, take these,” Nicholas called out.

“Gotta go.” She winked.

She took the bags he handed her from the back of the truck. I was standing directly in her path when she came back. “No,” I said.

“Excuse me,” she said and stepped around me to go inside.

“Nicholas, is this your idea?” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said and actually held out more bags for me to carry.

I looked at him like he was crazy. “I don’t want this in my house!”

Izzy walked past me, brushing my shoulder as she did. She took the bags and carried them into the house. Nicholas went into the truck and pulled the tree to the edge. “Help me,” he said.

“No.”

“Don’t be a dick and make Izzy carry this thing in,” he said.

I rolled my eyes. “This is so stupid. The thing is going to die. I’m not even going to be here that long and besides I already have one in the house.”

“Good thing it’s already dead,” he said.

“You know what I mean,” I growled. “Trees dry out and become major fire hazards.”

“It’s dead. It’s fake. It isn’t going to dry out.”

“Oh,” I said and took one end. “Holy fuck, it’s heavy!”

“It’s a good quality tree,” he said and hopped out of the truck.

Izzy stood out of the way while we carried the damn thing into my house. There were more bags that she brought in, along with several boxes. By the time they were done unloading the truck, my living room was a mess. I hated mess. I hated clutter. There were bags and boxes everywhere and a massive tree laying on its side. I stared at the mess with disgust. The two of them looked very proud of themselves. They even high-fived.

“What the hell do you expect to do with all this stuff?” I asked.

“I’ll get the eggnog,” Nicholas said without answering me.

“We should put away the groceries first,” Izzy said.

Again, I felt like I wasn’t in the room. They were buzzing as they put the things away before moving to inspect the mess they’d made in my living room.

“What exactly do you plan to do with all this stuff?” I asked.

“Your house is huge,” Izzy replied. “The bigger the house, the more décor you need to drive home the Christmas message.”

“Isn’t Christmas supposed to be all good feelings and crap?” I asked. “Why do you need all this stuff to infuse Christmas cheer?”

She stopped unpacking the bags and looked at me. “Have you met yourself? We could use three truckloads of stuff and I have a feeling we’d barely scrape by in the Christmas cheer department.”

“Very funny.”

“Help me stand up the tree,” Nicholas said to me.

“Wait!” Izzy called out. “Let me clear the area.”

I stood back and watched helplessly as they worked. “Now help me,” Nicholas grunted as he tried to lift the tree on his own.

I should have told him hell no, but I helped his ass. Izzy dropped to the floor and crawled under the tree to adjust the legs. “Alright, let go,” she called up.

“No!” I shouted. “What if it falls on you?”

She was laughing under the tree. “It’s not that heavy and it shouldn’t fall.”

I stepped away but kept my hand up and at the ready in case it started to tip. “It’s good,” Nicholas said.

She scooted back and got to her feet. “It’s so gorgeous!” She clapped her hands.

I didn’t see gorgeous. I saw a giant tree in my living room. “Let’s do this,” Nicholas declared.

They both sprang into action while I watched. “Here,” Izzy handed me a box of silver ornaments. “You’re taller than us. You do the top half.”

I didn’t take the box. “I don’t want to.”

She rolled her eyes. “Remove that stick from your ass and put the damn balls on the tree,” she said and shoved the box into my chest.

I did what she asked, but apparently, I didn’t do it right. I was instructed on the art of the placement of balls. “I think that’s too much,” I said. “That’s a lot of stuff on that tree.”

“It’s almost done,” Izzy declared. “We need just a little more over here.”

“Why?” I complained.

“Scrooge, go drink some eggnog,” Nicholas teased. “Drink the spiked kind.”

I did exactly that and watched as they moved ornaments around the tree. It all seemed like a lot of fuss for nothing. “Lights!” Izzy said.

“Are you sure?” Nicholas teased. “Can you handle this?”

She squealed and jumped up and down. “Do it!”

Nicholas turned on the lights. The tree lit up. I had no idea how many lights were on the thing, but it was pretty. I wasn’t sure I was prepared to scream and jump around like the two of them, but it was nice.

“Okay, next!” Izzy said and started digging through the bags.

“I guess it’s a good thing there is nothing on the mantel,” Nicholas commented.

“It’s a clean slate in here,” Izzy said. “There is nothing to take down.”

“Is that an insult?” I asked as I sipped the eggnog.

“It’s a statement of fact,” Izzy replied. “By the time we’re done, all these empty surfaces are going to be decorated.”

“And then it will all sit here forever,” I complained.

“Help me put up the nativity,” Izzy said.

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” she said.

“A nativity?”

She picked up a box and showed it to me. “This is your first new tradition. Every year you put this up, you’re going to think about this moment. You’re going to remember everything you felt. You’re even going to remember the taste

of the eggnog. We are filling up your Christmas memory bank.”

“My what?”

“You got robbed when you were younger,” she said. “Your bank is empty. We’re making some significant deposits. You can set this up any which way you want or follow the image on the box. I was thinking that table over there would be perfect.”

I got the distinct impression there wasn’t really a question in that statement. She was telling me what to do. That should have irritated me, but I couldn’t bring myself to be pissed. I downed the rest of the eggnog and snatched the box. “I don’t see why I have to fill up my Christmas bank,” I muttered. “You should see the size of my real bank.”

She rolled her eyes. “You did not just say that.”

I smirked and carried the box to the table pushed up against the wall. “I did say it.”

“Watch him flex his money muscles,” Nicholas said.

“You guys are flashing your Christmas memories,” I shot back.

Izzy put her hand on my shoulder. “By the time I’m done with you, your Christmas memory bank is going to be just as big as your other bank.”

I wasn’t sure about that, but deep down, I didn’t hate it.

Izzy flipped on the TV and put on the same Pandora station we’d been listening to last night when I kissed her. She sang along to almost every song with Nicholas jumping in on occasion. If she’d been pissed at me last night, it didn’t show today. She was pretending it never happened, which was probably a good thing. I didn’t want to unpack all that.

I’d kissed her. It was a moment of weakness. I didn’t plan on repeating it.

ISABELLE

I poured us each a glass of eggnog spiked with rum. Henry was in his office. I had a feeling he was trying to hide from the Christmas décor in the living room. Nicholas had left a bit ago. He assured me that Henry wasn't upset. I had a moment of worry when he retreated from the room. Nicholas explained that was just his way. The man needed his quiet time. I could relate. I sometimes needed downtime.

"Can I come in?" I asked from the doorway.

He looked up from his laptop. "Sure."

"I brought you the good eggnog," I said and handed him the cup. "This is the adult version."

"Thank you."

I moved to the bank of windows behind him that looked directly into his backyard area. I had a good view of the indoor pool from this vantage point. Snow was lightly falling. The patio was lit with lights along the edge. Then I spotted a hot tub in the corner.

"Does that work?" I asked and then realized that was a pretty stupid question.

"Does what work?" he asked.

"The hot tub."

"Yes, it should," he said with a shrug. "I haven't been out there to check since we've been here."

"Let's go in," I said.

“No, thanks,” he answered and turned back around to work on the laptop.

“Party pooper,” I teased.

He ignored me, which was my cue to leave him alone. I went back to the kitchen and refilled my glass with eggnog. That was the tricky thing when drinking from small glasses. It was easy to drink it in a hurry. Then it was refilled, and before you knew it, you were halfway through the bowl. Or carton in this case.

I walked around the living room and adjusted little things here and there. The tree was huge. I got a good deal on it because it was a return. I was just thrilled we didn't have to put it together. It came as-is. A few lights didn't work, but there were so many on the tree, it didn't matter. The Grinch song came on the Pandora station I was still playing.

I grabbed another cup, filled it, and carried it back to the office. “I thought you might need a refill,” I said.

As I suspected, his first cup was empty. “Are you trying to get me drunk?” he joked.

“I'm halfway there and they say you should never drink alone,” I said.

“Shit, I've been breaking that rule most of my life.”

“Well, since we're both here, there's no need for either of us to drink alone,” I said, and once again, I was drawn to the windows behind him. The hot tub was beckoning to me. It had been too long since I'd been able to sink into hot water and do nothing.

“Let's get in,” I said.

“Excuse me?”

“I dare you to get in the hot tub with me,” I said again.

“It's freezing outside,” he argued.

“But the water will be warm, hot even,” I said. “Come on. It's been a long day. Decorating takes it out of me.”

“Then why do it?” he asked.

“When you take your little butt back into the living room, you’ll know why,” I teased. “Come on. Don’t be a chicken.”

He turned and looked up at me. “Are you really daring me to get in the hot tub when it’s probably thirty degrees outside?”

I grinned and bobbed my head. “I’ll grab some towels.”

“Did you bring a suit?”

“Nope!”

I walked out of the office and into the guest bathroom. With a few towels in hand, I downed the rest of my eggnog and left the cup sitting on a table in the hall that led to the back. I opened the glass door that led to the back patio. The biting cold was a shock to the system, but I was wearing the armor of rum.

“Are you chickening out?” Henry said from behind me.

I burst into laughter, reenergized to do what I set out to do. “Nope! You?”

“You’ve got me out here.”

I rushed toward the hot tub, pulling off my sweater as I ran. I tossed it in the chair and hopped on one leg to pull off my boot. Then the other. Henry pulled off the cover and dropped it on the cement patio. “Hurry,” I said and danced from one bare foot to the other.

He quickly walked to the wall and turned on the hot tub. “You’re fast,” he said with a laugh.

“I didn’t want to chicken out,” I said.

I was standing in my bra and panties and beginning to realize just how crazy this was. “Get in before you freeze,” he said.

I didn’t have to be told twice. I dipped my toe, felt the heat, and climbed all the way in while he undressed. “Holy shit,” I groaned. “This feels good.”

“It’s fucking cold,” he gasped before climbing over the edge and sinking into the water.

I was giggling like a schoolgirl. I sank down until it was just my head and shoulders above the water. “It’s not cold as long as you stay under the water,” I told him.

“I can’t believe I let you dare me to do this,” he said.

“But it feels good.”

“I have numbers to crunch and plans to make,” he replied.

“And it will all be there when you’re done relaxing,” I told him. “I don’t think any of us take enough downtime. We don’t get to just sit back and really enjoy what we have.”

“I’m too busy making sure I keep what I have,” he said.

“But what’s the point of having this great house with this hot tub and that pool if you never actually take the time to use it?”

“One day I will,” he said.

“You never know when that day will be,” I said. “You never know when your last day would be. Do you want to be going through your life flashback and all you see is laptops and money?”

He shrugged. “I don’t plan on dying anytime soon.”

“None of us do,” I said. “I don’t really have any room to talk. I go to school and then I go home and study. I don’t have a life. I keep telling myself it will pay off soon enough.”

“It always seems like there is more to do,” he said. “The more money I make and the more successful I become, I think about what comes next. I think today is the first day in a long time that I’ve not accomplished much.”

“You accomplished a lot,” I said. “Your house looks very festive. It’s warm and inviting. It just makes a person happier when you see all the pretty decorations.”

“It is nice.” He nodded.

“Nice?” I asked.

“I think I forgot how to relax,” he said. “I forgot how to turn off and just be present in the moment. I’m always

thinking about what needs to happen next. I've become consumed with my business. I got bitten by the money bug and it just won't let go. I eat, breathe, and sleep thinking about my hotels and how I can make them better. So, thank you for making me take a step back. I didn't realize I needed it."

"I'm happy I could help," I told him. "I needed this too. I forget I'm supposed to be living and not just studying. Medical school has truly kicked my ass. I knew it was going to be grueling, but it is far more intense than I could have ever expected. The first couple of years, it was a cakewalk. Then I started med school and had to move to Aurora. My parents are helping me out in a big way with living expenses. I thought I'd be able to have a parttime job like I did when I was doing my pre-med stuff. There's no way. I hate being a burden on them. They want to do all these things, but they are putting it off because they don't want to leave me hanging."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"They worry I will burnout and need to go home," I explained. "They want to take care of me."

"Can I ask what really motivated you to take on such a challenging profession?" he asked. "I can't imagine waking up one day when you're a little kid and deciding you want to operate on people's hearts."

I laughed and shook my head. "It wasn't quite that clear. I knew I wanted to be a doctor after my dad had a close call."

"A close call?"

I figured it wouldn't hurt to tell him the backstory. He told me a lot about himself. "I was twelve years old. My dad had been outside shoveling snow. I remember being in the house with my mom while she cooked dinner. A neighbor burst through our front door shouting to call nine-one-one. My dad had what we thought was a heart attack. A neighbor happened to be on his way home and saw my dad lying in the snow. It was close. Way too close. He had an angina and needed surgery right away. He was life-flighted and me and my mom had to drive to the hospital. The doctors and nurses were so nice. They saved his life. That's when I knew I wanted to do

what they did. It wasn't until I was much older that I really understood the difference between a typical surgeon and a cardiothoracic surgeon. I was almost deterred but I kept remembering how I felt in that moment when they said he was going to be okay."

"That's pretty impressive to make up your mind at that young age," he said.

"I don't think I really understood just what I was getting into," I said. "But once I told my parents what I wanted to do, they were very supportive. My third year in college, I thought about changing course, but I couldn't do it. They were so excited for me to fulfill my dreams. They tell everyone they know that I'm a future heart surgeon. To quit now would be a huge disappointment, so I have to keep pushing on."

"That's ambitious," he said.

He was staring at me with a strange look on his face. Did I have more glitter on my cheek? I reached a finger up to rub across my nose. "What?" I asked. "Glitter?"

He slowly shook his head. "No glitter."

"You're looking at me weird."

"I was just thinking about kissing you again," he said calmly.

My stomach twisted in knots. "Oh."

"You asked."

"I did." I nodded.

The kiss last night had left me shaken. I could still taste him on my lips. It had been a tease. I wanted more, but I told myself I couldn't do it. He was the guy I was working for. But he was sitting there half-naked and asking to kiss me.

One more kiss couldn't hurt, right?

I slowly moved across the hot tub and crawled right into his lap. His arms immediately went around me. I kissed him this time. After last night, I felt like I had to make the first move or it wouldn't happen. I shut him down last night.

Tonight, it was a green light. We had just talked about living in the moment. I was going to be in the moment and take advantage of what was right in front of me. I would deal with the consequences later.

A soft moan escaped my lips. My breasts rubbed against his chest as I wrapped my arms around his neck. My hand slid into his thick black hair that was short in the back and just a little longer on the top. His arms tightened around me as if he was afraid I was going to escape. A shiver raced down my spine.

Her slick body slid against mine. The lace from her bra scratched against my chest. The flimsy barrier did nothing to shield her hard nipples from scraping through to tease me beyond my control. Her soft whimpers and moans were driving me mad with need. My erection was pushing against my briefs, begging to be freed.

I kept telling myself to slow down. She'd shut me down last night. I wasn't ready to give her anything more than right now and a paycheck at the end of the month. Did she understand that? I wasn't dumb enough to ask and stop what was happening, but somewhere deep down, I found the courage.

"This changes nothing," I whispered against her lips.

It wasn't exactly romantic or sweet nothings, but it was all I could offer her. She kissed me in response. "I don't want anything to change," she finally said.

It was all I needed to hear. I slipped my hand up her back and deftly unhooked her bra before jerking it forward. Her voluptuous breasts spilled out and I nearly came. The bra floated away while I concentrated on the breasts begging to be touched. My mouth kissed over the top of the round globes. She arched just enough to raise out of the water enough for me to latch on to one pebbled nipple.

Her sharp cry of pleasure fueled my desire. I sucked harder, giving in to the built-up need. It had been too long since I had a woman. Too long since I heard the sounds of

pleasure washing around me. One hand slid down to push against her back to keep her from falling backward while my other hand cupped and massaged the breast I was suckling. I switched back and forth like a man starving. I couldn't get enough. I could explode at any second.

I pulled away for a half-second with the full intention of slowing things way down. But the moment I looked at her full lips and her heavy-lidded gaze, that thought vanished. I pulled her forward and then shifted her body, forcing her to straddle me.

"Henry," she groaned my name while sliding against my cock. The soaked underwear was nothing more than a nuisance. It wasn't stopping much. I wanted to be inside her more than I wanted the air I was breathing.

With her new position directly in front of me and slightly above, it lined me up perfectly with those breasts that were just too damn good to be true. No straight man could resist burying his face into that cleavage and getting lost. I did exactly that while her hands threaded through my hair. Her hips moved, rocking her core against my swollen cock. If we didn't stop, I was going to lose the very tenuous hold on the orgasm bubbling just under the surface.

"I don't have a condom out here," I groaned with disappointment.

Had one been within reach, I would have been inside her already. She pouted and continued to rub herself against me. I reached under the water and pushed her body back just enough to make room for my hand to slip between her legs. Her lacy panties blocked my way. I tugged once, pulling a gasp from her. I jerked harder, my annoyance at having her entrance blocked making me frustrated.

"Fuck," I growled and pulled again.

The lace tore, but not enough. I grabbed a fistful of the thin fabric and gave one final, hard tug. She cried out. Her head dropped back, and her breasts thrust upward. She was mewling with her hips rocking back and forth. If I didn't know any better, I would guess she was coming. I released the panties

and had to know for sure. I slipped one finger inside her and was convinced I had been right.

Note to self, she liked the aggressive thing. “Damn,” I whispered against her lips. “Did you just...?”

She moaned and dropped her mouth over mine. Her answer was a desperate kiss. Our tongues battled for power as my finger worked inside her. She was just as hungry as I was. Her passion was burning through me. I worked a second finger inside her. Her mouth ripped away from mine with a cry escaping her throat. Once again, the woman was coming over my fingers. Her tight pussy squeezed around my fingers. Little spasms as her body jerked and gyrated against mine.

I couldn't wait another second. I had to have her. I pushed her body off mine and hopped out of the hot tub before reaching for her. The cold air bit my ass, but it wasn't enough to cool the need burning through my body. I wished like hell I had condoms somewhere on the bottom floor. I didn't, which meant it was a breakneck walk over the hard floors. Our wet feet threatened to take us down more than once.

“Now I'm cold,” she said as I practically dragged her up the stairs.

If things weren't so desperate, I would have taken the time to admire her nude body. Stopping to look would likely mean the end of this before I ever got started. We made it into my bedroom and were barely wet anymore after the journey, but the chill was still in the air. I grabbed the remote from my nightstand and turned on the fireplace before jerking open the drawer and grabbing a condom from the unopened box. That was how sad my life was. I stripped out of the soaked underwear and kicked it out of the way.

I ripped the condom open and was putting it on as I turned around. She'd walked to stand in front of the fireplace. Her hair was falling loose down her back. Her round ass was begging to be touched. I walked toward her and stepped behind her. My skin was chilled against her heated skin. I pushed her hair away from her neck and sucked at the base of

her neck while my hands reached up to massage her breasts once again.

She softly moaned with her head falling to the side. I continued to kiss her until the heat and desire I'd felt before we stepped into the cold night air came roaring back. Her head dropped forward as I slid my tongue across the base of her neck. My hands roamed her body, sliding over the curves and occasionally squeezing. "Henry," she whispered my name and it was nearly my undoing.

I grabbed her hands and raised them to rest against the wide, live-edge blue-pine mantel. I pulled her hips back and slipped my hand between her legs once again. I found her wet and wanting. I bent my knees and guided the head of my cock inside her slick pussy. She cried out and bent forward. I slowly pushed myself inside her. I didn't think either of us breathed for a good thirty seconds.

When I was fully seated inside her, I still didn't dare move. I was fighting back the need racing through my body. "Don't move," I said when she did a slight little shimmy that hit me hard.

"I can't," she whimpered. "I need more."

I bit down on her shoulder. "Wait," I growled.

The heat of her slick passage permeated the condom. It was hard not to move, but I didn't trust myself to hold back. I wanted nothing more than to pound inside her.

"Henry," she moaned my name.

That was it. I had to move. I began to go slow and easy at first. It didn't last long. Her gasps and groans were driving me faster and harder. Soon, the slapping of our bodies mixed with both of our cries of pleasure. I could feel the orgasm coming on fast. It was like staring down a speeding freight train and being unable to step off the tracks. I knew it was going to hit hard. I didn't stop.

And then it hit me. I grunted before the breath left my lungs and my body went straight as a rod. She was crying out, her body pushing back against mine with her hips doing a little

shimmy and shake while I dug my fingers into the flesh at her hips and held on for dear life. I was certain this was what it was like to die and go to heaven. There were flashes of light and then suddenly I sucked in a breath.

My forehead dropped and connected with her shoulder. I choked and sputtered as my hips jerked against her. I felt like a rutting animal. Sharp, strong spasms rolled through my body until I felt limp and lightheaded. I worried I was going to pass out.

I stepped away from her and reached out to grab the mantel as well to steady myself. We were both gasping for breath when our eyes met. She burst into laughter. It wasn't exactly the response I was expecting.

“Are you okay?” I asked.

She reached up and pushed my hair off my forehead. “Are you?”

“Honestly, I'm not sure.”

She laughed again and leaned forward to give me a quick kiss. “You do look a little pale.”

“Because all the blood above my waist headed south,” I said dryly.

She smiled again. Then came that moment of awkwardness. With my ardor cooling, reality was creeping in. I had no intention of this going any further than what just happened. Her smile slipped a little. “I better go shut everything off downstairs,” she said. “Get some sleep.”

I nodded and watched her walk out of my bedroom. Yes, that was the wrong thing to do, but sleeping together in the literal sense was a big step. It wasn't something I was prepared to do. I walked into the bathroom, cleaned up, and pulled on a pair of sweats. I headed downstairs to shut off the hot tub and happened to catch her just as she was coming out of the guest room.

“I'll take care of it,” I told her. “Go to bed.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight,” she said and walked back into the room and closed the door.

I hoped tonight didn’t ruin the progress we had made. I wasn’t sure I would call us friends, but we were more than two strangers pretending to be a couple. I did like her. We got along fairly well, even if we had our moments. Tomorrow, I expected she would spend time with her family. Hopefully, any weirdness lingering would dissipate, and by Friday, things would be back to normal. I could hope.

I shut everything off, grabbed our discarded clothes, and made sure the doors were locked and the alarm was set before heading back upstairs. Her bedroom door was still closed so I kept her clothes with me. I walked into my own room tossing them to the side and closed the door behind me. I climbed into bed and stared up at the ceiling. One hour with her and I was rethinking everything about my life. What the hell was I doing? Why in the hell had I cut out sex? Sex was good. Sex with her was amazing.

I wanted more.

I was riding high on life. I'd been worried the little tryst in the hot tub would make things weird between us. It didn't. Things were fine. Better than fine. Granted, we hadn't spent a lot of time together since Tuesday, but the few times I had seen him, things had been normal. There'd been no more kissing or anything like that, but there was a little flirting.

I walked into the coffee shop that was off the beaten path and far enough away from the trendy, expensive shops that normal people could afford it. Noelle was already sitting at a table with a coffee in front of her and her nose in her phone.

"There you are," she said when I sat down with my coffee.

"I tried to get your attention when I walked in, but you were into your phone."

She showed me the screen. "Shopping. I'm slow to draw and trying to finish up."

"I'm done," I said with a shrug.

"Of course, you are," she said. "Where's your keeper?"

"Very funny," I said with a laugh. "I'm back on duty tonight. I've been hanging out with my mom the last two days. We painted my old room. I figured I could take something off my dad's to-do list."

"You're such a good daughter," she teased. "What's on the agenda tonight?"

“It’s a party at a restaurant here in Aspen,” I said. “Tonight and tomorrow night are parties. Sunday, we fly out to Chicago.”

“You’re living the life of a socialite,” she said with a sigh. “I might have to sign up for Faux’s. Maybe I’ll get me a hot rich guy that will spoil me silly.”

“I think I got lucky,” I told her. “When I got that phone call from Della, I was thinking my date was going to be some pudgy, balding old man. She told me his name was Henry and nothing more. I made a lot of assumptions.”

“It is weird a man that looks like him and is filthy rich is single,” she said. “Does he have some creepy habits or something? There has to be a major flaw.”

“None that I’ve seen,” I said with a shrug. I was not telling her or anyone else about what happened between us. That was going to be our little secret.

“It has to be something,” she said.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Maybe not. Maybe he just doesn’t want to settle down.”

“Does he have a brother?” she asked with a grin.

“No, he’s an only child,” I answered. Again, I didn’t feel it was my place to tell his story.

“Bummer.”

“I better scoot,” I said. “I need to go home and get ready for tonight.”

“The life of a socialite,” she said with a sigh.

I drove home and found Mom in the kitchen making fresh bread. The whole house smelled amazing. “You’re making me hungry,” I groaned.

“It won’t be ready for another hour,” she said.

“Bummer. I have to get ready.”

“Izzy, sit,” she ordered.

When she said it like that, it meant I was in trouble. “What’s wrong?” I asked and sat down in one of the high-backed stools.

“Nothing is wrong, but I know you. I’ve known you all your life.”

“Duh, Mom.”

“Who is this friend that lives in New York and now is back in Aspen?” she asked.

“No one you know,” I said and had to look away.

“Isabelle Sharpe,” she said and put both hands on her hips.

There was no point in lying. She was going to find me out eventually. “Okay, okay,” I conceded. “It’s a friend. A guy friend.”

“Yes,” she said and waved her hand.

“We’re seeing each other,” I said. It wasn’t a total lie. It was the job. And we were technically seeing each other.

“Who is this man?” Mom asked.

“What man?” Dad asked as he walked into the kitchen. “The friend in New York?”

I should have known they wouldn’t believe me. “Yes, Dad. He’s here in Aspen. We’ve been seeing each other.”

“Who is this man?” Mom asked.

“His name is Henry,” I answered. “He’s a businessman.”

“Where’d you meet him?”

This was getting into some dangerous territory. We didn’t have a great backstory. The story we were telling his acquaintances was bullshit. My parents would know better. Thankfully, I didn’t have to answer. The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” I said and rushed out of the kitchen.

When I opened the door, a delivery driver with a large white box was standing on the other side. “Are you Izzy?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered with confusion.

“Then this is for you.” He thrust the box into my hands. “Merry Christmas,” he said and walked away.

“What’s that?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Did you guys send me something?”

“No,” she said. “Your gifts will be under the tree, not coming via FedEx. Not unless Santa’s sleigh breaks down.”

My parents still loved to tease me about my belief in Santa until I was thirteen. It wasn’t that I believed in him coming down the chimney, but I believed there was a Santa out there somewhere.

“What is it?” Dad asked.

I carried it to the couch and pulled off the top of the box. Mom and I both gasped when we saw the white gown with a silver sheen overlay over the white fabric. I knew immediately who it was from. This was all Henry. After playing dress-up with him, I knew his taste.

“Let’s see,” Mom said.

I pulled back the tissue paper and carefully lifted the gown from the box and held it up to my body. Tears shimmered in my mom’s eyes. “It’s so pretty,” she said. “I don’t get it. Why?”

“It’s from Henry,” I said. “We’re going to a Christmas party tonight.”

“That’s some party,” Dad said.

“Who is this man?” Mom asked. “How does he know what size?”

“We’ve spent time together,” I said. “We went to a party in New York and he bought me a gown for it.”

“My goodness,” she said. “This is just so damn pretty. I can’t take my eyes off it.”

There was a note in the box. I reached down and grabbed it. “There’s a theme for tonight,” I read aloud. “I just found out and wasn’t sure if you had something that would work.”

“My, my, my,” Dad clucked. “You really got yourself a good one. When do we get to meet him?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “He’s very busy. I invited him to Christmas dinner but I’m not sure he’ll be able to make it.”

“I hope we get to meet this man,” my mom said. “It sounds like it is shaping up to be a wild romance.”

“I have to get ready,” I said. I didn’t want to lie to them any more than necessary. It was better that I just snuck away.

I laid the dress on my bed and hopped in the shower. I was actually excited about tonight. Not only did I want to see him, but I was looking forward to meeting new people. I liked being his wingman. I felt like I was truly helping him achieve his goal of growing his business.

After showering, I went through the process of moisturizing tip to top. I put on the new panties I bought. The strapless gown meant the matching bra would have to stay in the drawer. I wasn’t planning on having sex with him tonight, but if it just happened to go in that direction, I wasn’t going to shut it down. I decided to leave my hair down and spent some time adding volume.

I slipped into the gown, praying it fit. Thankfully, I was able to zip it without splitting the sides. It fit perfectly. The man had very good taste. I stepped in front of the mirror and admired the gown. I felt like a snow princess. The gown I had picked out at the shop was pretty, but this one was stunning. It was going to rock his world.

My phone beeped. I grabbed it and saw it was a text from Henry. He said he was on his way. On his way? Like he was on his way or his driver was on the way? I texted him back and let him know I was ready. I grabbed the silvery shawl I was going to wear with the green dress I originally planned for tonight.

When I walked into the living room, my dad was sitting on the couch with the remote in his hand. “Oh my,” he exclaimed and paused the TV. “You look beautiful.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

“I want to see!” Mom exclaimed and raced into the room with a towel in her hand. She came to a hard stop and gasped. “Oh, Izzy! You look so pretty! Just beautiful. I’m having visions of your wedding day.”

“Thank you, guys,” I said. “I feel pretty.”

There was a knock on the door. The three of us all looked at each other with wide eyes. “Is it him?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I thought it would be his driver.”

“I’ll answer it,” Dad said and got up to do just that.

I felt like I was heading off to prom and my dad was about to grill my date. He opened the door, and to my surprise, Henry was standing there in a white suit with a shimmering silver tie. He was devastatingly handsome.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi,” my mom said and pushed herself right up front to shake his hand. It was a ploy. She grabbed onto his hand and pulled him inside the house.

He gave me a look of fear.

“Mom, Dad, this is my boyfriend Henry,” I said. I purposely left off his last name. I wasn’t sure they knew the Barlow name, but it would be hard to explain how we met. Thankfully, Henry didn’t act the least bit surprised when I introduced him as my boyfriend.

“Henry?” my dad asked.

I should have known he wouldn’t let me get away with vague.

“Henry Barlow, sir,” he answered.

My dad looked at me and then back at Henry. He gave him a firm handshake. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Thank you,” Henry said. “We should go.”

“Goodnight, guys,” I said. “Don’t wait up.”

We climbed into the back of the limo. “Thank you for not freaking out when I introduced you as my boyfriend,” I told him. “They would never understand this.”

“Hey, I suppose it’s the least I can do. It’s part of our cover.”

The limo took us to one of the fanciest restaurants in town. They catered to the elite. No average Joe was allowed entrance. We walked in and I felt like I was walking into an ice palace. “Wow,” I breathed.

“In case you didn’t get the reference, it’s a White Christmas party,” he whispered close to my ear.

White Christmas happened to be one of my favorite movies. There was a band on stage that very much looked like Bing Crosby and gang. Everyone was wearing white with splashes of silver. Henry put his hand on my back and guided me to the open bar before we meandered into the party with the rich and famous.

“This is an elite group of people,” I murmured.

“It’s the movers and shakers,” he said.

“More investors?” I asked.

“A few, but I’m not too worried about getting their money,” he said. “We’re just here to be seen.”

“Ah, we’re officially on.” I nodded with a smile.

“Yep,” he replied and dropped a kiss on my cheek. “Showtime.”

We met the first group of people. Henry introduced me as his girlfriend, which had a pretty good ring to it. It wasn’t long before he was pulled away to meet someone else.

“So, we finally meet the woman behind the man,” a woman who looked to be in her forties said. “My husband told me Henry was one of those guys that didn’t like women. Or men.”

“Henry is a very quiet, reserved person,” I said. “He knows what people say about him. Henry and I enjoy a very private life together. It’s difficult for a man in his position to maintain a separation between his business and personal life.”

It was essentially shutting her down in a polite way. “I hope you aren’t offended by the rumors,” she said.

“Not at all.” I smiled. “We enjoy hearing all the different speculations. Henry lives a public life, but I promise, he’s just a normal guy.”

“So, who are you?” the woman asked.

“Izzy,” I answered. “Henry’s motioning me to join him. Have a good night.”

I walked to him and quietly squeezed his hand before standing beside him as he talked about his hotel in New York. I had never been arm candy before. It was kind of cool to be the envy of the party. We had become the “it” couple at some point. I was enjoying standing by him and accepting his quiet kisses and the occasional brush of his hand down my back. We went together better than peanut butter and jelly.

““W arm,” I said again.

“But no jeans?” Izzy clarified.

“Wear one of the outfit the stylist picked out for the video,” I told her.

“Really?” she said with excitement.

“Yes. It’s going to be outside. They’ll have plenty of heaters, but you’ll still want to be warm.”

“Alright,” she said and seemed hesitant. “Outside in Aspen in the middle of December seems a little risky.”

“I know,” I agreed. “We don’t have to stay long.”

I hung up and gave my attention back to the laptop screen. She was anxious about tonight’s party. She’d made it through last night with flying colors. Our picture had even made the front page of several blogs. I understood why. She looked good in her dress. It wasn’t just her good looks. Everyone could see her positive personality. All night, people had been gravitating toward her. I got more compliments about how lovely she was then I got about my hotel in Aspen, where a good number of the guests at the party were staying. I knew what Charles felt like when his beautiful, young Diana stole the show.

I finished off the email and headed upstairs to change for the night. It had been a long time since I wore anything other than three-piece suits. My instinct was to stick with what I knew, but Nicholas told me these parties were about remaking

my image. Jeans it was. I showered, shaved, and splashed on my usual cologne before getting dressed.

The jeans were some designer brand. I would have preferred a worn pair of Levi's like I used to wear, but Nicholas said no. I couldn't be too low-key. I pulled on the white dress shirt and then the green sweater. We were taking the SUV tonight. It was a slippery night and the limo probably wouldn't make it back up the hill to get me home.

When I knocked on the door of her parents' house this time, I was a lot less nervous. Her father answered the door and gestured for me to come in. "She'll be right in," he said.

"Thank you."

"Are you Henry Barlow, the guy that owns the hotel in town?" he asked.

"Yes."

He slowly nodded. "I looked you up. That's what Izzy was doing in New York."

"Yes, it was," I said again.

He looked pensive. "Treat her right."

"Absolutely."

Izzy came into the house from what looked like a back door. She was carrying a coat over one arm. As usual, she looked gorgeous. "Hi," she greeted and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

"You look warm," I said.

"I'm warm now, but I'm not sure how I'll feel in an hour," she said.

"You two have fun," her father said.

We arrived at the hot springs where the party was being held. There was a path lit with runner lights along the edges and hundreds of string lights hanging from above. They crisscrossed back and forth to create a light ceiling. A white tent was set up on one side where everyone was gathered. I

assumed they were in there because it was freezing fucking cold.

“Let’s get a drink,” I told her.

“I think I’m going to go with something a little stouter than wine or champagne,” she said.

“Good plan. Feeling daring?”

“Always,” she teased.

I ordered us both scotches and carried them back to her. She was already talking to a small group. “Oh, there you are,” she said with a smile. “Guys, this is my boyfriend, Henry Barlow,” she introduced.

A young man that had Silicon Valley written all over him extended his hand. “It’s good to meet you,” he said and bounced my hand up and down. “My company is looking for somewhere cool to have a retreat. We were just talking to Izzy. She said your hotel has a lot to offer.”

She was selling my hotel. That was more than I bargained for. She might just get a tip if she landed me some corporate retreats. “We do offer some amazing packages for corporate groups. I don’t have a brochure with me, but if you go on our website, you can get in touch with our program manager.”

“Thanks, man,” he said. “My team loves the snow. We don’t get a lot of it in San Francisco.”

That was kind of an obvious statement. “We have ski packages that you might be interested in.”

“Hell yeah, man,” he said.

Nicholas appeared out of nowhere. “Henry, there’s some people I’d like you to meet,” he said.

“Where’d you come from?” I asked as he pulled me away.

“I’m everywhere.” He smiled. “You look great, Izzy. Those boots make your ass look amazing.”

I frowned at him. “Thank you,” she said.

He was always so easy to compliment her. That was part of who he was. He liked to play like he was Casanova. He tried, but he never really pulled it off.

“There are some journalists here doing a piece on some of the hotels in the area,” he explained. “I got them to give you a big spot. They want to get some pictures. Izzy, flash that winning smile.”

“You know I will,” she said.

The reporter asked the normal questions, but his attention kept going to Izzy. “Can we get some pictures?” the reporter asked.

“Sure,” I answered.

Izzy and I posed for several pictures. “You guys look great,” the reporter said. “Thanks for your time.”

“I need another drink,” I said. “That kind of thing drains me.”

“Me too,” she said.

I got us two more drinks and once again we made the rounds. We met some guests of the hotel and hopefully secured some future reservations. The tent was fairly closed, and with all the heaters going and the crush of people, things got warm in a hurry.

“I think I’m ready for some fresh air,” she said.

“I was just thinking the same thing.”

We went out the back of the tent to another area that had been decked out with more lights. The springs were just ahead with a few benches for sitting. Heaters were positioned around the area, along with tables set up with full glasses of champagne at the ready.

“Are they actually in the pools?” Izzy asked with surprise.

I looked in the direction she was pointing. Sure enough, there were several people in what appeared to be their underwear soaking in the hot springs. “I guess that’s what happens when people get cold and drink the hard stuff,” I said.

“I guess it’s no worse than getting in the hot tub,” she said.

“I suppose not.”

“Does this kind of thing happen a lot?” she asked as we sat down on one of the benches.

“What kind of thing?”

“Rich people stripping down to their skivvies and playing?” she teased.

“Sadly, it happens more often than anyone will admit,” I told her. “My first few parties with the rich and famous were a real eye opener. Deep down, we’re all the same. The rich just know how to hide it better.”

“Good to know,” she said.

Another couple came out of the tent. When they spotted the parties in the various pools, they started to strip and stepped in. It reminded me of a frat party. “Did you ever do this in college?” she asked.

“I didn’t go to the typical university, but while I was in college, I did attend a few parties,” I admitted. “I might have taken off my clothes at a party or two.”

“Oh, you do have a wild side,” she teased.

“I used to,” I said. “It faded away a very long time ago.”

“Did it?” she asked softly. She slammed the last of the drink and got to her feet.

I watched as she pulled off her scarf. “What are you doing?”

“They look like they are having way too much fun,” she said and unzipped one boot and then the other.

“Izzy,” I said in a warning tone. “Don’t do it.”

Before I could stop her, she pulled off her sweater. She was wearing a black tight tank under it. “Come on,” she said in a soft voice. “We’ve done it before.”

“We’ve done other things before,” I said.

“Yes, we have,” she teased and unbuttoned her skinny jeans. “I’m going in. Do you want me to go in by myself?”

“Izzy.”

She stepped out of the jeans and gave me one last look. “I’m going in, Henry.”

And she did just that. I watched her walk down the stairs into the pool. I didn’t miss the looks she was getting from the other men. That was all I needed to see. I stood up and quickly shucked my clothes. I was keeping my T-shirt on. It was freezing and I wasn’t trying to get naked in front of guests of my hotel.

“I knew you’d join me.” She giggled when I sat down beside her.

“Hey, Henry,” one of the guys I met earlier greeted. “I knew you weren’t quite as uptight as everyone said you were.”

“Thanks,” I muttered. A few of the women wearing nothing but their bras and thongs decided to play. Clearly, they were drunk. They were frolicking and splashing around. While they were attractive enough, it was the woman on my right who had my attention. Someone had the thought to bring the glasses of champagne to the pool.

She was standing and walking through the thigh-high water with two glasses in her hands. “Here you go.” She grinned. “You deserve a reward.”

Out of nowhere, a beach ball was tossed into the pool from one of the neighboring pools. It started into a volleying war. “Hold this,” Izzy said and gave me her glass to hold. She got in on the action, slapping the ball across the cement divide before falling into the water but managing to keep her head above the surface.

The women were all laughing and having a good time. There were plenty of men watching the display. I tried not to be jealous, but there was a green-eyed monster rearing its ugly head. The other scantily clad women were attracting a lot of attention, but it was my fake girlfriend in her tank top and boy

shorts underwear that demanded all of my attention. I couldn't look away.

I was in trouble. To anyone else witnessing my obvious attraction, it seemed normal. They would all assume it was because she was my girlfriend. Flashes from camera phones temporarily blinded me. It wasn't unusual for someone to take pictures. Typically, parties like this were a no-phone-zone. The one reason the rich and elite maintained their perfect images was because they all had something to lose should said pictures get out into the public. Usually, we could count on everyone's discretion. I assumed that would be the case this time as well.

“**T**hanks for the ride,” I said to the driver who dropped me off at my house.

Last night I had been in no shape to go home. Henry insisted I go back to his place, which was much closer than my parents’ house. He’d been the perfect gentleman, much to my disappointment. In hindsight and after sobering up, I realized that was for the best. I had a few hours to pack before the car was coming to pick me up and take me back to the airport.

I hated to leave my parents after only getting to spend a little time with them, but I was hoping at the end of all this, it would be worth the missed time. Instead of going through the front door, I walked through the gate and into the backyard. I wasn’t doing a real walk of shame, but it kind of felt like it. Once inside my little apartment, I quickly showered and dressed before heading into the main house for coffee and hopefully some breakfast.

“Hey, Mom,” I said as I walked into the kitchen. “Is there any coffee left?”

“There’s some in the pot,” she answered without looking at me.

“Where’s Dad?”

“I think he’s in the garage.”

“Mom?” I said and waited for her to actually look at me.

“What, Isabelle?” she said with a sigh.

That was the telltale sign I was in trouble. “What’s wrong?” I asked. It was a little weird to be in trouble when I was this old.

“There are some disturbing pictures in the paper,” she said.

“What does that mean?”

“Why don’t you look for yourself?” she said and pointed to the table.

I walked over and picked up the paper. It wasn’t actually the real newspaper. It was basically the gossip rag that circulated at the height of the season. It was all about the rich and famous and what they were doing in our little town.

Except this time, it wasn’t the rich and famous I was staring at. Technically, most of them were rich and a few were famous. But not me. I was neither. “I—”

“Your father sat down with his morning coffee and saw that,” she said. “You can imagine how he felt seeing pictures of his daughter half-naked splashed all over the front page. How could you?”

“Mom, did you miss the other people in that picture?” I asked dryly. “It’s not like I was alone.”

“You are not them. You are a local girl. You are better than that!”

Headlines touting Henry Barlow’s girlfriend gets naked at party were just a little overblown. “I was wearing more than the others.”

“I don’t like this new you,” she said. “You’ve changed. This Henry is a bad influence on you.”

My father came into the kitchen through the garage. “Izzy,” he said.

“I was just telling her about our disappointment with the pictures,” Mom said.

“Guys, I’m a grown woman. I didn’t do anything all that terrible. I was wearing more than I would if was wearing a bikini on the beach.”

“Who are those people?” my dad asked.

“I don’t know,” I shrugged. “They’re from all over the country.”

“What on earth would possess you to strip down to your underwear and get in those springs?” my mom asked. “We taught you better than that.”

I blew out a breath. “I’ll admit it wasn’t my normal thing, but I swear, it never got any worse than what you see in that picture. We were just having fun.”

“These are the kinds of parties we’ve heard were happening, but I never thought I would have to worry about you attending them,” he said. “It’s this Henry guy, isn’t it?”

“Henry had nothing to do with it,” I said. “I was the one who pressured him into getting into the water.”

“Isabelle!” she shrieked.

I rolled my eyes. “It was fun, Mom. I’ve spent the last eight years of college being the perfect student. I’ve never done anything bad. It’s not like this was terrible. It was a little innocent fun.”

“You could have toilet-papered a house with your clothes on,” she scolded.

“I’m a grown woman,” I said. “A big girl that has always made sound decisions. Can’t I have a little fun?”

“Does it have to be like that?” my dad asked. “Who is this Henry guy? I know he owns some hotels, but is this his usual scene?”

I laughed and shook my head. “No, definitely not.”

“How rich is he?” my mom asked.

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “I never asked for specifics. Why does that matter?”

“Because rich people are different than us,” she said. “They think they have a license to do things that the rest of us can’t do.”

“Like I said, I encouraged him to get into the pool. He wasn’t thrilled about it. Henry is a good guy. He’s very reserved. I was trying to get him to loosen up.”

“You’re the bad influence?” she gasped.

I laughed before quickly wiping away the smirk. “Yes, I suppose I was last night. Please don’t think this is him. It was me. It was all me.”

“What do you have in common with this guy?” my dad asked. “He’s not like you at all.”

“I guess I don’t really have anything in common with him,” I said. “Maybe that’s why we work.”

“Maybe we should get to know him a little better,” my mom said. “We’ve seen him two seconds. That’s not exactly enough time to form an opinion.”

“He’s a busy man.”

“Why don’t you invite him to dinner tonight?” she suggested.

I felt bad that I had to reject the offer. “We’re heading out to Chicago in a few hours,” I said.

“Chicago!” they both said.

I hadn’t gotten around to telling them quite yet. “Yes, he has a party tonight that he’s invited me to go to with him. Actually, there’s one tonight and another tomorrow night.”

“Are you seriously going to jet set around the country your entire break?” my mom asked.

“No. I’m going to be here for Christmas.”

“I thought you didn’t like flying,” my dad said.

I wrinkled my nose. “He has a private jet,” I said. “It’s a little different than hopping on a plane with two-hundred people.”

“I would say so,” my mom said. “You’ve been bit by the rich bug.”

“It’s nice to be spoiled,” I said. “I’m not saying it’s going to last forever, but I like what we have. I like being with him. We have fun together.”

“What about school?” Dad asked.

“What about it?” I asked.

“Don’t get caught up in this world of living fast,” he warned. “I know it’s fun and I know you’re finally getting to sow your wild oats, but don’t forget how much work you’ve put into this. You’ve worked your ass off to get this far. Don’t give that up.”

“I’m not,” I said. “I wouldn’t do that. Like I said, Henry has a jet. If he wants to come see me, he can. He knows I’m in school. I’m not sure this thing is serious anyway. We’re having fun.”

“It certainly seems serious,” Mom said. “I’ve never seen you like this.”

I wished I could tell them it wasn’t what they thought. In a way, I thought it might help alleviate their concerns. They wouldn’t worry I was going to give up my career. But if they knew I was being paid to pretend to be his girlfriend, it might make them feel bad. They’d feel like they couldn’t give me everything they needed.

“I have to pack,” I said. “You guys don’t have to worry I’m going off the deep end. I’m not. I promise. I’m going to get my butt right back to school and pull off good grades. Henry is nice and fun, but I’m not ready to walk down the aisle just yet. I’ve been so focused on school, I haven’t given myself any time to have boyfriends.”

“We know,” my mom said and gave me a hug. “I do worry you’re working too hard. We just don’t want you to hit that breaking point after working so hard for so long. We did encourage you to take a semester off.”

“I appreciate that, but I promise I’m not burnt out,” I assured them both. “It’s Christmas break. Nothing more.”

“Do try and get him to come over for Christmas,” she said. “We would like to get to know him.”

“I will ask him again,” I said. “The man is very busy. Now, I’m going to go pack.”

I quickly left the house and let out a sigh of relief. Only two more weeks and then everything would go back to normal. I only had to lie to them a little longer, which wasn’t really a comfort, but it helped get me by. I picked out a few things and tossed them into my suitcase. I thought about the pictures all over the paper.

That was not something I had expected. Everyone in town was going to see those pictures. They were going to think the same thing my parents did. I embarrassed them. For so long, I’d been their pride and joy. I was the girl that was going on to do great things. They loved to brag about me and now they were going to be ashamed of me.

I should have been smarter. I saw the people taking pictures last night, but it never occurred to me they would publish the damn things. That seemed like they were breaking some kind of code. Even the few parties I had been to had strict rules about posting anything to social media.

I was not prepared for the public scrutiny. I wondered if pictures of us at the other parties had been published. I never bothered to look. It made sense there would be some buzz surrounding one of the wealthiest notorious bachelors hooking up with a woman. He was parading me around with the intention of people seeing him with a girlfriend.

“The breakup is going to be fun,” I groaned.

Hopefully, the breakup could be done on the downlow. If I was lucky, we would breakup and I would fade back into oblivion. I couldn’t handle being chased and hounded. That was something he and I were going to have to talk about. We needed to have a good story about why we were parting ways. I would be pissed if he insisted on making me the bad guy. If he dared to do that, I would insist he had to pay me more to ruin my reputation.

My phone rang. I glanced over and saw Noelle’s face. “Hey,” I answered.

“Hello, hooker!” she exclaimed.

She saw the pictures. “Thanks.”

“Girl, you looked good!” she said. “I would have so stripped down and dove in too.”

“My parents are not happy,” I said. “They are very unhappy. I’ve embarrassed them.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” she said. “You weren’t all that naked.”

“I know, but they published my damn name. Everyone from school is going to see that picture.”

“One good thing is you were put together with Henry Barlow,” she said. “Everyone is going to be jealous of you. You’re hooked up with a gazillionaire. A hot gazillionaire.”

I laughed. “Yeah, there is that. I was just thinking though, what happens when this ends? Am I going to be crucified in the court of public opinion?”

“I’m thinking with your breakup coming to an end sometime around Christmas and New Year’s, there’s bound to be a real celebrity scandal.”

“I hope so,” I said. “My parents will absolutely lose their shit if my face is plastered all over the tabloids again. They cannot deal with that.”

“Who says you have to breakup?” she said. “Just go back to school and don’t be seen together. You said he was a private person. You’re the girlfriend they never knew about. If you guys aren’t seen together, they’ll just assume you went back to your private lives.”

“I hope that works,” I said. “I’m not cut out to be hounded by paparazzi.”

“We’ll figure something out,” she assured me. “I got your back.”

“Thanks.”

“So, are you off to Chicago?” she asked.

“Yes, I’m packing now.”

“When will you be back?”

“I have to check my schedule,” I said.

She let out a laugh. “Look at you, Miss Fancy Pants. Soon, you’re going to have an assistant.”

“Just a couple more weeks,” I repeated the mantra that had been getting me through.

“Have fun while you’re making the big bucks. You deserve it.”

“Thank you. I will. I’ll try and call you from Chicago.”

This party was supposed to be small and low key. I knew a few of the people from past business dealings, but it wasn't really my usual group. I walked down the hall to the junior suite to knock on Izzy's door. The party was being held a few blocks down at a competing hotel. She'd been quiet on the flight over. I had a feeling it was the pictures in the paper. That was unexpected and I already had Nicholas working on finding out who did it.

"Izzy?" I knocked.

"Coming," she called out.

I waited for her to open the door. "I'm almost ready," she said with her hands at an ear. "Come in."

I walked into her room and was surprised by the condition. It looked like a bomb had gone off. Every one of the dresses we bought at the boutique in New York was scattered around the room. "Having trouble picking a gown?"

"I wasn't sure what to wear," she said. "If we're going to be photographed, I want to look good."

"I'm sure there will be some professional photographers milling about," I told her. "There always is."

"Is this okay?"

She was wearing one of my favorite gowns that'd we picked that day. It was blue with gold trim. It was very regal and fitting for a woman of her poise and grace. It gave her the typical hourglass figure. "It's good," I said. "It'll work."

“Thanks,” she said and smoothed a hand over the dress. She looked anxious and uncomfortable.

Again, I wanted to kick myself for not saying she was pretty. She deserved to be complimented. We headed down to the limo for the short ride to the party. The event was being held on the rooftop. A solarium was one of the attracting features of the hotel. I had only seen it once before when I was considering one for my own hotel. I decided it wasn't worth the price and opted out of it.

We rode up in silence. I meant to talk to her about the pictures. I would tomorrow. “Here we go,” I said when the elevator opened directly into the glass-enclosed rooftop.

“It's like a snow globe for real,” she gasped. “I thought being at your house was amazing, but this is incredible.”

“The scent of pine is very strong,” I complained.

“It smells like Christmas.” She smiled. “Look at this place. Did you ever go to those Santa setups in the mall?”

“I've seen them,” I said.

“That's what this feels like,” she said. “It looks like the North Pole. I expect to see Santa come rolling in with some reindeer.”

“I'm glad you like it,” I said.

“Henry,” someone said my name.

It was a man I had met before, but his name escaped me. I flipped through my mental rolodex. “Scott,” I said and remembered just in time.

“I've heard through the grapevine you're getting ready to go global,” he said. “As you know, my firm has been looking for the next big project.”

I didn't even get a chance to introduce Izzy before he was pulling me away. “Go,” she mouthed.

I caught a glimpse of her as she walked away. Nicholas swooped in and joined her. That made me relax. I was able to focus on Scott and what he was saying. He introduced me to

two other men, and with drinks in hand, we separated ourselves from the bulk of the crowd.

“Tell me more about this hotel in Japan you’re thinking about,” Scott said.

“Damn, word travels fast.” I smirked.

“You know you put the word out on purpose,” Scott said. “Japan happens to be an area of interest for us. We’ve got some other commercial properties there. We know how it works. We can be of assistance to you to get this thing off the ground.”

“As you know, I have an excellent legal team,” I said.

“Ah, but we know people in Tokyo that can grease the wheels,” he said.

“That could definitely help,” I said. My eyes scanned the party until I found Izzy and Nicholas once again. I didn’t like leaving her alone. Technically, she wasn’t alone, but I should be with her.

“We’ve been watching your hotels and understand you’re preparing to do some renovations at the Chicago locations,” one of the men said.

That was not news that had been shared. “I’ve made no decisions,” I said. “My team is putting together a cost analysis. I’m more interested in expanding than upgrading what I already have. Honestly, we’re at the top of our game. I think my money would be better used expanding.”

“I agree,” Scott said. “We’d love to sit down and talk about how we can go into business together.”

“I’m in Chicago for a couple of days, but I’ll have to get with my assistant and see what my schedule looks like. It may have to wait until after the first of the year.”

I liked being able to play hard to get. They all wanted to be in business with me. Ten years ago, I couldn’t get these guys to give me a meeting. Nicholas had told me he was being flooded with investors hoping to get a meeting with me. That was what I liked to hear.

“I’ll definitely be calling you,” Scott said.

“I’m looking forward to that,” I said. “If you’ll excuse me.”

Izzy was by herself once again. I started to make my way toward her but was intercepted by someone else wanting my attention. “Henry Barlow, right?” the woman said.

“Yes.”

“I’m Denise Cummings,” she said.

I recognized the name. “Denise,” I said with a nod. “You’re a long way from home.”

She grinned and waved a hand. “I like to get up here and see what the cold is like just long enough to remember I don’t like the cold. I’m heading back to Miami tomorrow.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said.

“You, however, seem to be attracted to the cold. Why are all of your hotels in cold spots?”

“I guess I never looked at it like that,” I said.

“I happen to know of a property for sale in Miami,” she cooed. “A property that could use your magic touch. I’d be willing to invest in the hotel.”

“I have never looked at the Miami market,” I said.

“You should.”

“Isn’t it already saturated with hotels?” I questioned.

“Of course, but we need fresh blood,” she said. “I’ve been looking for something exciting to bring into the city. I like a sure thing and I know a Barlow Miami would be a success.”

I was barely paying attention. My eyes were on Izzy. She was holding a glass of champagne and talking to another woman. She was smiling, but it wasn’t her usual bubbly personality. Something was off. Nicholas happened to be walking by.

“This is my assistant,” I said and practically jerked his collar. “He can set you up with me sometime next week or

January.”

Nicholas smiled and looked up at me. “I can do that,” he said. “I don’t have my iPad, but do you have a card?”

He was not happy to be put on the spot.

“If you’ll excuse me,” I said and extracted myself from the conversation. I finally made my way to Izzy. She was munching on some of the apps that were being served.

“Hey,” she said. “You’re a popular man.”

“I guess this thing is working,” I said.

“What do you mean?”

“Doing the rounds is getting me the attention I needed to attract investors,” I explained. “I’ve got people coming out of the woodwork. All of them want to get in on the ground floor of my new hotels. That woman was just talking to me about opening a hotel in Miami. She seems serious. She already has a property in mind.”

“Congratulations,” she said. “I’m glad you’re getting the attention you need.”

“What about you?” I asked.

“Me?”

“I’ve noticed you talking to a few people,” I said. I was trying to assuage my guilt for ditching her.

“Yes.” She nodded. “I’ve met a couple of nice people. I’ve made sure to talk you up.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I said. “Don’t feel like you have to sell me.”

“I’m not selling you,” she said. “People ask me questions and I answer. Nothing more.” She sipped her champagne. “Looks like you’ve got another fan.”

“What?”

“I’m going to find the ladies’ room,” she said and walked away from me before explaining anything more.

“Mr. Barlow,” I heard my name and turned around to see two men in suits coming at me.

I was forced to sit and listen to another pitch. This was not what I expected. I was being courted. The attention was a little unsettling. I wasn’t used to it. Quite frankly, I wasn’t sure I liked it. Usually, Nicholas handled all this stuff. He filtered through the phone calls and emails. I only got the ones he knew I would be interested in.

I smiled and nodded and pretended to be interested. This group was a no. I knew who they were. They didn’t have the best reputation in the investment world. They were flippers. They bought cheap properties and did cheap remodels and tried to sell high. They’d been sued more times than I could count.

“Nicholas,” I said when I saw him walking by.

“Yes?”

“Will you excuse me?” I said to the men.

I began to walk, with Nicholas falling in step beside me. “What’s up?” he asked.

“Nothing, I just wanted to get away from them,” I said. “Where’s Izzy?”

“I’m not sure,” he said and scanned the area. “I saw her talking to a woman that is apparently a doctor here in Chicago.”

I felt relief. “Thank god.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“She seems out of sorts,” I said.

“How so?” he asked.

“She’s usually very open and bubbly,” I explained. “Tonight, she seems to be subdued.”

“Maybe she’s still hungover,” he said. “She told me she drank quite a bit.”

“Did she tell you anything else?”

“No, not really.” He shrugged. “Why? Did something happen?”

I shook my head. “No, I was just wondering. She was talking to you.”

“We talked about her family and plans for Christmas,” he said. “I didn’t pick up on anything. Maybe it’s just you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Maybe she’s mad at you,” he said with a laugh. “Did you thank her for all that stuff she did at your house?”

“Actually, I did,” I told him.

“No shit?”

“Yes, I did,” I said. “Keep an eye on her, please. I’ve got to nail down a few more investors.”

“I will,” he said. “And I don’t have my tablet. I can’t remember all these names. They need to email me.”

“Got it,” I said and accepted my scolding.

He went one way, and I went another. A few minutes later while I was talking to Scott once again, I happened to see him with Izzy. They were laughing and appeared to be having a good time. Maybe it was me. Tomorrow—maybe tonight—we’d catch up and I would ask what was going on.

If I could escape my glass enclosure, I would. I understood what wild animals in the zoo felt like. I could see freedom. I just couldn't get there. The solarium was beautiful, and the view was amazing, but I just wanted out. I did feel like I was on a movie set made to look like the North Pole. It was all so pretty and festive. The fake snow, the decorated trees, and even the fireplace. I wished my parents could see this place. They would absolutely love it.

I couldn't explain why I felt so trapped. I wanted out. Going home was all I wanted to do. I should be grateful to be experiencing this. My normal life would never allow me to be on top of one of the tallest buildings in the city inside a solarium made to look like the North Pole. People I would never meet in my normal life were all around me. I was surrounded by wealth and opulence. I was drinking fine champagne and munching on appetizers from some five-star restaurant. This was the life people dreamed of and I was longing to go back home to my tiny little studio in my parents' backyard.

"There you are!" Nicholas said. "I've been looking for you."

"It's hard to hide in a glass enclosure," I joked.

"I think another fifty people showed up all at once," he said. "It's so stuffy in here. I feel like I'm in an aquarium."

"I was just thinking the same thing," I told him.

"Let's step outside and get some fresh air," he suggested.

“Can we?” I asked.

“It’s not actually an aquarium,” he said. “There’s a terrace. Come on. We’ll grab some of these fancy foods.”

“I’ll grab the champagne,” I said.

I followed him through the party and out the doors. The moment I stepped outside, I felt like I could finally breathe. There was a light snow falling. I didn’t care that it was cold. It felt good.

“Let’s sit,” he said and gestured toward the bench. There was a patio heater on one side, which Nicholas insisted I sit on.

“Wow,” I said. “Never in a million years would I have imagined I would be sitting on top of a high rise in Chicago. The city looks so quiet.”

“We’re pretty high up,” he said. “I’m guessing it’s just as loud. Look at the flashing red and blue lights. That says noisy.”

“But from up here, it’s peaceful. The snow falling makes it seem so clean and pure.”

“How are you?” he asked.

“What? Fine.”

“No, how are you really?” he asked. “You seem down.”

I smiled and shook my head. “No. I think I’m just feeling a little homesick. I’m not a partier. I know what I signed up for. I don’t think I realized how taxing it would be.”

“It’s the flying,” he said. “If you were in Aspen or if we stayed in New York, it wouldn’t be so hard.”

“True,” I agreed. “I know I have no right to complain. I’m being spoiled beyond my wildest dreams. It’s just kind of a lot.”

“Honestly, I think Henry feels the same way,” he said. “He doesn’t like parties. He doesn’t like socializing.”

“I gathered that,” I said. “I wish I could have the best of both worlds. I came, I saw, and now I’m done. I would love nothing more than to be curled up in that glorious bed in my room with a deep dish and Netflix. No, Hallmark. I want to watch a woman living out her dreams doing what I’m doing right now. Does that make sense?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I love watching people fulfilling their dreams and getting to do exactly this,” I explained. “They get dressed up and mingle with the upper crust.”

“And eventually they find their Prince Charming,” he filled in the rest.

“Yes. I’m not looking for Prince Charming, but I prefer to be an observer rather than a participant. I know that makes me sound old, but I don’t think I’m cut out for this.”

“Neither is Henry,” he said.

“Are you?” I asked.

“I do enjoy mingling and meeting the ladies.” He grinned.

“You are the Yang to Henry’s Yin,” I teased.

“I suppose I am.”

“Have you worked with him for a while?” I asked.

“Almost ten years,” he said. “We work well together. He pays me well. I liked being able to help him. He’s come a long way since the first time we met.”

“He did tell me a little about where he came from,” I said. “He’s certainly come a long way.”

“So, want to tell me what’s really going on?” he asked.

I smiled. “Nothing. I’m just in one of those moods. I’m a woman. These things happen. There is nothing wrong. Everything is perfect. We’re in a beautiful city with the best view possible. I’m wearing a dress that costs more than my car and drinking champagne that probably costs more than my shoes. I have nothing to complain about. Maybe that’s why

I'm bummed. I have everything and now there is nothing to want."

"You're sad because you have everything?" he said.

"I'm not sad. I'm good. I just needed the break. We should probably go back inside before Henry realizes we're missing."

"Too late," Henry said from behind us.

Nicholas and I both jumped up and spun around like we'd been busted doing something wrong. "We just needed some fresh air," I said.

He looked at me, then Nicholas. "I'm going to get a refill," Nicholas said and lifted his empty champagne glass.

He quickly walked away, leaving Henry and I alone. Henry walked around the bench. "Sit, please," he said.

I sat down with him sitting beside me. "It's so pretty out here," I said. "It was getting a little stuffy in there."

"I agree."

"It's a nice party," I said in an attempt to fill the void.

"Can you tell me what's really going on?" he asked.

"What?"

"I can tell something is wrong," he said. "Is this about last week?"

"No," I answered with irritation.

"Something is off," he said. "I won't pretend I know you well, but I think I've gotten to know you a little. You're not your normal self. There's something going on. Did someone say something? Did something happen? Now that I think about it, you've been off since we got on the jet."

Being told I was off wasn't exactly making me feel any better. "I'm fine," I said, and much to my frustration, a tear slid down my cheek. Then another and before I could stop it, I was crying. I looked away. My cheeks burned with embarrassment at my emotional outburst.

“Hey,” he said in a gentle voice and put a hand on my back. “Tell me what happened?”

I was so humiliated. I wiped my cheeks and very carefully dabbed at my eyes to try and avoid smearing my makeup. “Nothing happened per se,” I said and finally looked at him. “It’s me. I didn’t think this thing through.”

“What thing?” he asked.

“This arrangement,” I said. “I didn’t take into account you were mildly famous. I didn’t stop to think about the attention you having a girlfriend was going to garner. I assumed it would be some businesspeople. I’d shake hands, smile, and play along. Once it was over, I would go back to my regularly scheduled life with some extra money in my pocket. No harm, no foul.”

“And now?” he questioned.

“The pictures in the paper were a wakeup call,” I blurted out. “My parents saw them and were not happy. Their friends are going to see them. I’ve embarrassed them.”

“I’m so sorry about that,” he said. “I’ve already made some calls. Someone at the party broke the unspoken rule. They won’t be invited to any more parties.”

“It’s not even that,” I choked out the words. “You’re famous.”

“Not really,” he argued. “I’m only trying to make myself seen to get the investment I need. I’m not famous anywhere outside the hotel world.”

“Not anymore,” I muttered. “You’re famous. What happens in January? End of December, whenever?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“This thing ends after your last Christmas party. You’ll go back to your world and I go back to mine. People are going to notice you’re back to being single. What does that mean for me? Am I going to be the laughingstock of the internet world? Social media people and bloggers are going to dub me the chubby girl that the rich and handsome Henry was fucking

around with before he found something better. Everyone knows you and me would never be an actual thing. They're all laughing at me right now. Come January, the backlash is going to be fierce. I'll be the butt of more jokes than I care to think about."

He was quiet for several seconds. "I'm not sure I know what you're getting at."

"Did you think about how this would affect me when this was all said and done?" I snapped. "Are you going to dump me? Are you going to claim I cheated on you? I need to know what you're going to do to my reputation."

"I didn't," he said with a shake of his head.

"You didn't what?"

"I didn't think about how it ended or what it might mean to you," he said. "You know this is just business, right? I thought you understood this was nothing more than a business arrangement. The other stuff really doesn't matter."

I felt my heart shriveling a little. I wanted to hug myself. If I could somehow deploy an invisibility cloak, I would do it in a heartbeat. I wanted to disappear and hide away from the world. I knew it was just business, but last week felt like it changed things. I wasn't expecting a relationship, but it wasn't too much to ask for him to show some concern. This was all business. The sex was a convenience.

"I understand," I said with a nod and pulled myself together.

"Izzy, the pictures were a mistake," he said. "It's Aspen. Someone will be taking our place on the front page tomorrow and no one is going to remember seeing it."

"I know," I said and lifted my chin. "I'm going to get a cab back to the hotel. I think I've upheld my end of our agreement for tonight. I was seen with you. I made the rounds. I'm going to go back and get some sleep."

"Wait, why?" he asked and jumped to his feet when I stood.

“I’m tired,” I told him. “I don’t think you need me for anything else tonight. You’ve been doing very well on your own.”

“I hope you understand this is important,” he said. “I have to talk to these people.”

“Absolutely,” I said with a forced smile. “But you don’t need me here. They’ve all seen me and know I exist.”

“I’ll go with you, but I can’t leave for a little while. There are still some people I need to talk to.”

“Stay as long as you want,” I told him. “Enjoy and good luck. I hope you make lots of connections. I’ll see you tomorrow. There’s another party, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“Goodnight,” I said and walked away before he could say another word and before I could humiliate myself further by bawling my eyes out.

“Izzy,” I heard Nicholas call my name as I cut through the throngs of people all laughing and enjoying themselves.

I didn’t belong with these people. They only talked to me because they thought I was with Henry. This was all an act. I rushed toward the elevator and slapped my hand against the button. I couldn’t get away fast enough. It took a few minutes to hail a cab, but once inside, I could finally let out the breath I’d been holding. I didn’t want him to chase after me. Henry was a man on a mission. What happened between us meant nothing. All the Christmas stuff meant nothing. He had one goal in mind and that was it. I was the one who thought I was somehow going to change what this arrangement was.

Not everyone wanted to be changed. He was content being the man he was. This was not my world and I didn’t want it.

My ear hurt and my brain was starting to feel like mush. The last week of schmoozing had paid off. I was swamped with emails and phone calls from investors as well as real estate professionals from all around the world. Everyone wanted to sell me something. Sell me or give me something with their own interests at heart.

It was what I wanted. It was what I needed to grow the business. “I just sent you another DocuSign,” Nicholas said from his seat on the couch.

We’d been signing contracts all morning. I knew better than to wait for people to change their mind about their willingness to invest in my hotels. This was everything I wanted. There was real momentum to break ground next year. It was happening fast. I couldn’t get caught up in the excitement. It was imperative I kept my head on straight. One misstep could cost me everything.

“Has Izzy called?” I asked Nicholas.

“No.”

“Have you talked to her this morning?” I pressed.

He looked up at me. “I’ve been here talking to you all morning. If I’m not talking to you, I’m talking to people on the phone that want to give you money. I’m a little busy.”

“You talked to her last night,” I continued.

“Yes, I did.”

“Did she tell you what was wrong?” I asked.

“Henry, if you have questions or concerns, I would recommend you talk to her.”

“Tell me what you guys were doing out there last night,” I said. “What were you talking about?”

He heaved a heavy sigh, acting like he was totally put out. “She was feeling a little homesick,” he said. “It was stuffy and she wanted fresh air.”

“Did she say anything else?” I asked.

He put down the laptop he was working from. “What’s going on?”

“She was upset last night. I fucked up. I don’t know how to fix it.”

“You fucked up?” he repeated. “I can only think of one way you could have fucked up. Considering this arrangement was nothing more than a few fake dates, I don’t see how even you could have screwed that up. Which leads me to think it’s beyond business. Would there be a reason for her to think there is something more than just business between you?”

There was no point in lying. I was pretty sure he already suspected something had happened between us. “Maybe.”

Nicholas shook his head. “I thought so. I am a little surprised. I didn’t think you had it in you.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“We had to rent a woman to be your date,” he said dryly. “Your love life is about as exciting as an eighty-two-year-old man. So, what happened?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “The thing that happened was a week ago. Things were fine until last night.”

“Are you sure they were fine?” he questioned.

I shrugged and tried to think back. “I don’t know. I guess. I didn’t notice until last night.”

“That doesn’t mean it hasn’t been sitting there festering. I don’t know what happened between you or why she is upset now, but I would suggest you talk to her and find out.”

“I did,” I said. “Kind of. You know I don’t talk.”

“No, but if you want to know how someone is feeling or why they are upset, that’s how you find out,” Nicholas explained. “You’re out of practice with the social niceties thing. I usually tell you when I’m pissed or whatever. You never have to try with me, and I think you’ve forgotten how to talk to people on a personal level.”

“I’m not sure I ever had that skill,” I muttered.

“Well, if you want to fix this, you better go talk to her.”

The very idea of talking about feelings and shit damn near made me break out in hives. But I needed her to stick around and I missed the woman I’d been getting to know. She’d been really upset last night. I was up most of the night with the image of her crying flashing through my head. It left me unsettled.

“Fine,” I said. “Hold my calls.”

He snorted. “Yeah. That should be easy.”

I left the suite and walked down the hall to knock on the junior suite she was staying in. I waited for her to come to the door. “Henry!” she gasped.

She looked guilty. “Izzy,” I said her name and noticed she was holding the door closed with just her face visible. Was she actually hiding a man in her room? Jealousy flooded my veins.

“What are you doing here?” she asked in a higher voice than normal.

“Can we talk?”

“Uh, right now?” she asked and looked over her shoulder.

My hands balled into fists. I had no claim to her, but to have her fucking a man in the suite just down the hall from mine while she was supposed to be my girlfriend for all intents

and purposes did not make me happy. It infuriated me. It felt like a direct insult.

“Is someone here?” I asked in a low voice.

“What? No.”

“Can I come in?” I asked as calmly as I could. “I’d like to talk.”

She sighed and pulled the door open. I walked into the room and scanned the place. I saw some of her things on the small table. In the bedroom, her suitcase was sitting open on her bed. She quickly closed the door. “What do you want to talk about?”

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Packing,” she said and flopped onto the couch.

“Packing? Why? We’re here another night.”

“You’re here another night, I’m going home,” she said and refused to look at me.

“What?” I asked with shock and sat down.

“I guess in essence, I quit.” She shrugged. “I can’t do this. I thought I could, but I can’t. I’m booking a flight for this afternoon.”

“You were just going to leave without saying anything?” I asked with genuine shock.

“Like you said, this is just business. I was writing you my resignation letter. I will expect compensation for the few dates we did have, but that’s it. After last night, I think it’s pretty clear your plan worked. You’ve got plenty of interest in your hotels. You’re going to do fine.”

“You signed a contract,” I said.

She wrinkled her nose. “Are you really going to try and hold me to that?” she asked. “I mean, do you want to go to court and complain the woman you paid to pretend to be your girlfriend quit before the agreed time was up?”

She had a point. “Why are you quitting?” I asked the obvious.

“This just isn’t working for me.”

I felt like there were a thousand little jumping beans bouncing around inside me. I was pulled in every direction trying to figure out how to make it stop. I wasn’t used to being confronted with situations that made me feel like this. My life was black and white with numbers in between. Feelings didn’t factor in, but I was certain that was what was happening now. It was weird and uncomfortable.

“Because we had sex,” I blurted out. The moment the words were out, I knew they were wrong. My brain was in overload as I tried to filter through what was going on. “I mean, we had sex and now you’re mad.”

“I’m not mad, Henry,” she said gently. “I just don’t think I’m as good as you at pretending that kind of stuff didn’t happen. It’s all of it. In a few weeks, I’ll go back to school and you’ll go back to your life. Society is cruel. I’m going to have to live with the backlash of this thing. I don’t think I want my life upended for a paycheck. I’m going back to my original plan. I’ll put in the time and one day I’ll be out on top. There is no easy way through it.”

“You are leaving because you are worried about what people will say about you?” I asked.

“No. Yes. I’m leaving because this isn’t healthy for me.”

“Healthy?” I asked with confusion.

“Mentally,” she replied.

“Because of me?” I questioned aloud.

“In a way, but mostly because of me,” she said. “I’m not a robot. I do have feelings, and no matter how hard I try, they get mixed into situations.”

“Are you saying I’m a robot?”

“No.”

She was lying. “Look, I don’t do this feelings thing,” I said and knew that wasn’t coming out right either. “I mean, I have them, but they don’t come out like yours do.”

“Understood.” She nodded.

“No, I—” I shook my head. The jumping beans were the very feelings I was trying to sort through. If they’d stop moving, maybe I could sort through them. “I like you.”

She cocked her head to the side. “I’m not sure what that means,” she said.

“I like spending time with you,” I said and felt the beans bouncing all over start to calm. It was easier to identify and sort them. “It’s been good having you here with me. Not here, but everywhere. The house, the hotel, the jet. All over. It’s business but it’s not. It is, but it’s like almost—I don’t know.”

She was smiling. “Take your time.”

“I don’t usually think about Christmas all that much,” I explained. “It’s just another day. It’s a time when I can get more bookings at my hotels. I never really think about being alone on Christmas. It’s just another day. At least, it used to be. You’ve made it less typical.” I shook my head again. “I mean, it’s been nice. Almost fun.”

She was still smiling and nodding. “I’m happy to hear that. That doesn’t change this. You needed me to help you woo investors. You’ve done that.”

“But I want you to stay!” The words gushed from my mouth. “Last night I should have paid more attention to you. I’m sorry. Don’t go. Stay. Give me one more chance to hang out with you.”

She sighed and looked down at her hands. “I’ll stay for tonight,” she said softly. “I won’t leave you hanging.”

“Thank you,” I said with relief. “We’ll skip the party. We’ll hang out and do whatever you want.”

Her eyes widened. “What? Isn’t that the point of me being here? We’re supposed to go to another party.”

“We’ll skip it,” I said. “I owe you a good time without making you schmooze with people you don’t know and will likely never see again. We’ll go out and see the city. I know you’ve been wanting to check it out. In New York, I sent you out on your own. I should have been there for you. I could have taken a few hours out of my day to show you around.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled. “I’m pretty self-sufficient and used to doing things on my own.”

“Not today,” I said.

“What about the party tonight? Won’t they expect you to be there?”

“I’ll send Nicholas,” I said with a shrug. “I honestly don’t think I could go through another night of pitches. I have more investors than I ever expected. At this rate, I’m set to open another ten. I don’t want to grow too fast. I need a minute to step back. We’ll go out.”

She grinned and leaned forward to touch my knee. “Thank you. I appreciate your time. I know you’ve got a lot on your plate.”

“It’s the least I can do,” I told her. “If it wasn’t for you at that first party, no one would even be looking twice at my hotels. You’re a good luck charm.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll leave you to *unpack*,” I stressed. “I need to clear some things with Nicholas. Give me an hour?”

“Take your time.”

“I’ll be back here in an hour,” I said firmly.

“Then I’ll be ready.” She smiled and walked me to the door.

The urge to kiss her was strong, but I resisted. Things were already muddy enough. I didn’t need to add fuel to the fire.

I didn't know what to think of his sudden change. Was he really that anxious to have me stay? Was it because he was afraid it would look bad to his investors? Or was it because he truly wanted to spend time with me?

"Don't do it," I warned myself as I brushed on mascara.

I could not let myself fall for this man. He was here now, but at the end of the month, it was over. I couldn't let my heart get involved. I was going to enjoy the moment. This month was about making memories I could look back on and tell myself I hadn't wasted my twenties with my nose in a book.

I was going to enjoy the time I did get with him. It was almost an hour to the exact second when I heard the knock on my door again. I found myself laughing as I walked to the door. The man really took his promptness seriously.

"Hi," I answered.

"Ready?" he asked.

"I am," I said. "Let me grab my coat."

We left the hotel and climbed into the waiting car. "Where are we going?" I asked him.

"Nicholas did some research and found some things for us to do," he answered. "I remembered you mentioned a market you went to earlier. He found another one here in the city. It's at Daley Plaza. Christkindl Market, I think the name was."

He could have taken me to Wal-Mart. I didn't care. I was excited to be getting out and seeing things. We got out of the car and walked through the market that was all about a German Christmas with tons of really cool, unique items. I was bubbling over with excitement.

"Why don't we do some of the more traditional shopping?" he suggested. "Have you ever been to Water Tower Place?"

"I don't even know what that is," I said.

"It's a mall. A big ass mall."

"You had me at mall." I sighed. "They're a dying breed. There is nothing prettier than a mall at Christmas."

"I think I'm looking forward to it," he joked. "You have a way of making it seem a lot prettier than I would normally think."

"I'm glad I can help you see the true beauty of the season," I told him. "I know it's about family and people, but there is something to be said for decorations."

He chuckled and looked out the window. The car dropped us off at the mall, which was packed with holiday shoppers. He took my hand. "I don't want to lose you in the crowd," he said when I gave him a funny look.

I was going along with it. We browsed shops on the bottom floor before coming to a small food court. "Let's get some cocoa," I said.

"You do love your hot chocolate," he said.

"You have to have hot chocolate at Christmas," I told him. "Look, they have peppermint cocoa."

"That does not sound good."

"Try it," I encouraged.

"I guess I'm going all in," he said with a shrug.

With our cocoas in hand, we meandered around the mall. I picked up a few things for my parents while he got Nicholas a

tie. "Should we grab dinner?" I asked him once we had exhausted ourselves.

"I want to take you to the Botanical Gardens first," he said. "Nicholas said it was a main attraction and you would especially like it."

"Hell, you don't have to ask me twice." I giggled. "I'm in."

We walked into the gardens and I was breathless. "This is pretty cool," he said as we walked through a tunnel of lights.

"Amazing," I breathed. "So many lights. How many do you think?"

"I couldn't begin to guess," he said with a shake of his head.

"I'm guessing a hundred thousand at least," I said with all the confidence of an expert.

"I'd hate to pay the electric bill," he joked.

It was hard not to feel like we were an actual couple as we strolled through the garden hand in hand. He was different. He seemed a lot more relaxed. This made sticking around worth it. I was naturally inclined to want to help people. If I could help him by showing him life outside his hotel and worrying about making his next million, then I was glad to do it.

"I'm beat," he said with a yawn when we got back into the car. "It was a very late night."

"We can eat at the hotel," I offered.

"I can stay awake long enough to take you to dinner," he said and yawned again.

"I think I would like to change into my sweats and order room service," I told him.

"You're sure?"

"I'm positive," I promised. "Let's just go back to the hotel."

He was dozing off on the ride back. I knew he'd been out late and was probably up early in the morning to start working. Being out was exhausting, especially for a guy who spent most of his days hidden away. Not that he was in bad shape. Definitely not. He was in excellent condition. That was likely the result of a private gym.

We got back to the hotel and he walked me to my room. "Why don't you come in?" I suggested. "I'll order us dinner."

"I'd like that," he replied. "But I think I'm going to change. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

I quickly changed into my sweats and a warm sweatshirt before piling my hair on top of my head. I was scanning the room service menu when he returned. "Anything particular you're interested in?" I asked him.

"You know, I think I'd like Chinese," he said. "It's been a while."

"I'll Doordash it," I told him.

Thirty minutes later, we were settled on the couch in my room and eating straight out of the cartons. "We're here for the week," he said. "I'd like to try and make some time every day to get out and see some of the other stuff. Nicholas left me a list in my room."

"A list of what?" I asked.

"There is a display at the museum of science and industry," he said. "Something like Christmas around the world I think."

"That sounds very exciting."

"There's also the official tree at Millennium Park," he said. "And Nicholas is working on getting us tickets to the Cirque du Soleil show for either tomorrow or the next day."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Really?"

"I wasn't aware he was also a cruise director," he joked.

"Don't feel like you have to do this for me," I said. "I know you have a busy schedule. I don't want to take up your time."

“If it’s anything like today, I want to,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I actually got out and explored the cities I visited.”

“You work a lot,” I said. “I guess if you want that money, you have to.”

“I think I could probably learn to take a step back,” he said. “Nicholas is always on me to take a day off. He wants me to hire more managers and office staff to help out.”

“I can’t believe you don’t have an entire army working for you,” I told him. “I think if I had your money, I would have enough people working for me so I didn’t have to do anything except sign a paper or two.”

“I’m very hands-on,” he said. “I believe if I want anything done right, I have to do it myself.”

“You don’t trust other people,” I said with a nod. I was tapping into that psych class I took.

“I guess I don’t,” he agreed. “I’m a product of my upbringing. I’ve always had to do for myself. I’m not trying to whine, but I have never been able to count on anyone.”

I didn’t get the feeling he was seeking sympathy. He was stating the facts. “Can I ask you a personal question?” I asked. “It isn’t meant to offend.”

“Sure.” He shrugged before sucking a noodle between his lips.

“Do you have any friends that you hang out with? Talk to about stuff at work or whatever?”

“I have Nicholas,” he answered.

That made me feel so bad for him. “When’s the last time you vegged out on the couch eating ice cream or drank beer with a friend?”

“Never. No, not true. I suppose in college there were a few of the beer-drinking nights. It was always a group of friends. More like acquaintances. I don’t make friends easily. I didn’t then, and now that I have money, I’m very leery of anyone trying to start up a friendship or anything else with me. People

didn't care for me when I didn't have money, so why would they care now? The only reason would be the money. I know I sound like a dick, but I really don't like people all that much. They're okay from afar and I like that they visit my hotels, but I can't imagine having a best friend that I told all my secrets to."

"Then who do you tell your secrets to?" I asked with a smile.

"I don't know that I have secrets," he replied. "My life is not that exciting. I work and I go home."

The man needed to unwind. I was in med school and wound pretty tightly, but he made me look like Noelle. Even the most dedicated students in my class weren't as tight as he was. In that moment, I was going to make it my mission to unwind him.

"Have you ever been ice skating?" I asked him.

"What?"

"Ice skating," I said. "Do you know how?"

"One of the homes I was in for about six months, the guy was an ice hockey coach," he said. "He insisted I be on the team. I think he thought he was going to save me from myself. I learned to skate, but I apparently didn't follow directions very well. I was kicked off the team and out of the house. Looking back, I think the guy saw my size and assumed I was going to be an athlete. He was shopping for his golden ticket to the NHL. I learned later he had a revolving door of young, athletic boys through his house."

"What an ass," I hissed.

"Yep. He was."

"But you know how to ice skate."

He nodded.

"We should go tomorrow or whenever you have some time."

“Ice skating?” he asked with disbelief. “That’s what you want to do.”

“Yep.”

“I’ll have Nicholas see if we need tickets or something,” he said.

“I’m sure we can just show up.”

“Okay,” he said with a yawn.

I grabbed the remote and flipped through the channels until I found Miracle on Thirty-fourth Street. “Have you seen it?”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Forever ago. I think I was probably eight. I was staying the night at a friend’s house and his parents made us watch it.”

“It’s a good show,” I insisted.

“Then let’s do it,” he said.

We settled into the movie. I watched while he slept. The poor man was exhausted. I watched him sleep and was tempted to reach out and touch him. I didn’t. I didn’t want him to wake up. He looked so peaceful. The usual strain I saw on his face was gone. He looked much younger in sleep. When the movie was over, I shut off the TV. I wasn’t going to wake him up.

Instead, I got up and went into the bedroom to grab two blankets. I very carefully covered him before settling in on the opposite end of the couch. The curtains were open, giving me a beautiful view of the city beyond. Lights from Christmas lights and decorated trees in the apartment building across the street made me smile. By the time I was done with Henry Barlow, he was going to love Christmas.

It felt like I'd been on vacation all week. I was still keeping up with my workload. I had signed on numerous investors and had already gotten the ball rolling on three properties. Things were moving fast. We all knew it was a hot market and were hoping to take advantage of it. My investors were looking for quick returns. I had to make it happen. I was determined to make it happen.

There was a knock on the door of my suite before it opened. Nicholas walked in with his face glued to the tablet attached to his hand. He stopped walking when he saw me staring at him. "What's up?" I asked him.

"I just got another offer," he said.

"I thought we were done with that," I replied.

"So, did I, but this is different."

"How so?" I asked.

"You mentioned something about Miami," he said while looking at the screen.

"Yes." I nodded. "But that's not really on the table right now. I think we have our hands full."

"You'll want to look at this," he insisted.

"Send it to me," I told him. "I have to finish getting ready for tonight."

That was when he looked at me. "Is there snow in your hair?"

I grinned and reached up to brush it out of my hair. “Yes.”

“Why?” he asked with confusion. “When?”

“She nailed me with a snowball,” I said.

“She? Izzy?”

I nodded and shook out my hair. “Don’t worry. I got her back.”

“You got into a snowball fight with Izzy?” he asked incredulously.

“She started it.”

“I don’t know what to say,” he said with a shake of his head. “You’ve barely worked all week. You went out every night. I don’t know who you are.”

“She wanted to see the city,” I said.

“I’m glad you got out,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“I need to go change for tonight as well,” he said with a sigh. “I’ll send you this Miami information. I really think you might be pleased with it. Basically, it’s your name on the building. There’s very little work involved.”

I shook my head. “No. I’m not doing that. If anything is going to have my name on it, I’m going to be on site to make sure it lives up to my standards. I can’t afford to slip now. Not when we’re going international. I know who is pushing for Miami. She wants to control things and I don’t like that.”

“Trust me, you’ll want to at least give it a chance.”

“We’ll see,” I said. “I’m hitting the shower. I’m cold.”

“I don’t want to know what else you were doing in that snow.” He chuckled.

“Very funny.”

“For real,” he said and got very serious. “What is going on with the two of you?”

“Nothing.” I shrugged. “We went to dinner and a show.”

“And ice skating and shopping and sightseeing,” he reminded me.

“It’s been a good week,” I said like it meant nothing. “We get along. She was tired of the back-to-back parties. Getting out and having fun is good for her.”

“And you.”

“Yes, and me,” I agreed. “Don’t read into it. Now, I’m getting in the shower. I’ll see you down there.”

I didn’t want to think about what was happening between myself and Izzy. If I spent time thinking about it, that would make it into something that *had* to be thought about. It was better that we just hung out and kept it casual. There’d been no kissing. No sex. I held her hand on occasion but nothing too crazy. It was just easy to be with her. Being with her was unlike anything I’d ever experienced in my life. I was still trying to sort through what it meant without trying to add more pressure by putting a label on it.

I hopped in the shower and turned it a little hotter than usual. She’d gotten me good on our way back from the park. A fresh few inches of snow had fallen and she nailed me with a snowball when I was least expecting it.

After dressing in my black suit with the red tie she insisted I buy the other day while we were shopping, I walked down the hall to her suite. When she opened the door, I was taken aback by her beauty. She was wearing a black gown with a red sash. As usual, she looked effortlessly beautiful.

“Ready?”

“I am. I’m excited for tonight.”

“Are you?” I asked as she hooked her arm through mine.

“I am. You said this is a charity event, right?”

“Yes.” I nodded. “We’re collecting gifts for families in the city. They’ll be handed out Christmas Eve. Guests get to eat and drink for free with a donation.”

“Is it an exclusive party?” she asked as we stepped into the elevator.

“It’s not exclusive, but the people invited work with different charitable organizations in the city,” I explained. “There’s also the usual philanthropists. This is a chance for people to ask for money without really asking. The people with the money and time get to decide who they want to give their money to after a night of rubbing elbows.”

“I’m just excited it’s for charity,” she said. “So much better than a bunch of rich people trying to figure out how they can make more money.”

“I’m not going to take offense to that,” I said.

“Sorry!” She giggled. “You know what I mean though. It’s hard to try and be impressive when you’re just a regular girl from a small town.”

“I understand,” I agreed. “Tonight should be much easier and more relaxed.”

“Should I be selling you or are you maxed out?” she teased.

“Just be you,” I told her. “Relax and enjoy yourself.”

“I can do that.” She nodded.

The ballroom of Barlow Chicago was dressed up and looked good. Nothing like the winter wonderland at our other party. This was a family friendly event. The event planner had gone with a classic Christmas theme.

“It’s Santa,” she squealed. “Now this is a Christmas party! Look at all the gifts under the tree!”

Little kids were running around in an area that reminded me of Candy Land in snow. They were all wearing their Sunday finest. Little girls were sporting velvet ribbons in their hair and the boys were wearing shiny shoes.

“This is quite the turnout,” I said as I looked around the packed ballroom.

“The kids are having a great time,” she said with a smile. “Let’s go see Santa.”

“Go see Santa?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said and took my hand.

Santa was sitting on a throne on an elevated platform. There was a line of kids ready to tell him what they wanted for Christmas. We were giving away pictures, but parents were still taking their own with their phones.

“The guy’s good,” I whispered in her ear.

I’d seen a lot of Santas in my day, and this guy was one of the best. He was friendly and laughed easily. The guy had the patience of a saint. He seemed to actually be listening to the kids, which was definitely not normal. The mall Santas I’d seen looked like they were dying for their next drink and would rip the head off the next kid that tugged on the fake beard.

“I think his beard is real,” she whispered.

“Me too,” I agreed.

“Ah, there you two are,” Nicholas said and pulled us away.

“What’s going on?” I asked.

“We got a very large, very unexpected donation,” he said with a huge grin.

“Toys?”

He slowly shook his head. “Better than toys. Money.”

“Good,” I said.

“No, no,” he said. “Huge. Six figures.”

“Six figures?” Izzy gasped.

Nicholas was bobbing his head up and down. “Yes. I’m getting someone to make one of those giant checks.”

“Who?” I asked.

“She’s very, very wealthy,” he said. “Has an empire and lives out west, but her roots are here in Chicago.”

“No kidding?”

“Yep. It’s going to go a long way to making hundreds of families have a very Merry Christmas.”

“That is amazing,” Izzy said. “Good for you guys.”

“Excuse me,” a young woman holding the hand of a young boy said.

“Yes?” I asked.

Nicholas immediately gave her his full attention. “What can I do for you?” he asked in the voice I knew too well. He was attempting to hit on her.

“Someone said there was a place we could sign up to volunteer for various organizations,” she said. “You look like someone that would know.”

“I am definitely that someone,” Nicholas said. “I’d be happy to show you the table.”

“Mommy, you said I could see I Santa,” the boy complained.

Nicholas looked at me like he expected me to do something. Izzy bent down and got eye level with the boy. “Why don’t you and I get in line for Santa while your mom does what she needs to?”

The boy looked up at the woman. “Can I?” he asked.

“Are you sure?” the woman asked Izzy. “I don’t want to take your time.”

“It’s fine,” Izzy said with a bright smile. “I was hoping to talk to Santa myself.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’ll be right back, Damien.”

Nicholas flashed me a smile before walking away with the woman. Izzy looked up at me. “It’s time to get in line.”

“Me?” I asked with surprise.

“You’re free to mingle, but Santa is waiting,” she said.

“That’s not the real Santa,” the boy said.

“What?” I asked and looked to Izzy.

“That’s not really Santa,” he said with a shrug. “Adults think kids are stupid.”

I had no idea what to say. “Uh, why do you think he isn’t Santa?” I asked.

The kid rolled his big eyes. “It’s a suit. Santa isn’t real.”

I couldn’t admit the truth. There were too many little ears around. I was not going to be the guy that ruined Santa for a hundred kids. But this kid was looking at me like I personally came up with the lie. “He is,” I insisted.

“I’m six, not two,” the boy snapped.

I looked over at Izzy. I needed some help. She patted my arm. “Damien, I think it’s okay to believe in Santa,” Izzy said.

“Only for little kids,” he said. “I’m going to sit on this guy’s lap, but I know he isn’t real. He’s not the real Santa.”

“But there is a Santa, right?” I asked with confusion. I didn’t know if the kid believed in Santa or didn’t.

The boy seemed just as confused as I was. “No.”

“But you said this isn’t the *real* Santa, so that means there is a Santa.”

“I think there is,” Izzy said when Damien looked like he was going to argue with me.

“You do?” Damien asked.

“I do,” she said with her eyes wide. “I think Santa is at the North Pole right now. He’s getting ready for Christmas. But you’re right, he’s not sitting up there in that chair. He can’t be everywhere at once. This Santa is his friend, helping him out.”

“How do you know?” Damien asked.

“Because that’s what I believe,” she said.

“But you’re a grownup,” he said.

“Yes, I am, and that’s why I know it’s real,” she said. “I’ve seen lots of Christmas miracles. That’s what Santa does. He might not wear a red suit and slide down chimneys, but he’s out there.”

The boy looked properly impressed. “Okay,” he said and fell in line.

“Thank you,” I murmured close to her ear.

“Anytime.”

Last night had been amazing. I loved watching the kids have so much fun. The idea the party was actually doing good for others was the icing on the cake. Now, we were getting ready for another party. This was number nine. It was kind of sad to think we were close to the end. Our time together was almost done.

Twelve parties. That was it. Then I turned back into a pumpkin. I wasn't sad to be going home and back to my normal life. I was going to miss him a little, but I'd get over it. He was going to go on to be even more successful. I liked the idea that I was a little part of his success. The brief time we spent together was going to have some kind of impact on him. It had to. I had seen the changes in him. He was different. He laughed more. The lines I thought were permanent wrinkles had disappeared from around his eyes. He looked younger and far less stressed. I did that.

There was a knock on the door, which meant it was go time. "Coming," I called out.

The plush carpet under my feet was welcome. In just a minute, it was back into my high heels for another long night. I pulled open the door. "I just need to get my shoes on," I told him.

"You look nice," he said.

I almost tripped. That was the first real compliment. It wasn't flashy, like the kind of thing Nicholas would say. But it was real. I knew Henry well enough to know he didn't say

flowery things. He spoke very little. When he did talk, it was real.

“Thank you,” I said with a smile.

I was wearing a flirty one-shoulder dress in fiery red. There was a silver sequined belt to break up the red and give me some sparkle. Tonight was a fancy one upstairs in the nightclub in the hotel. I was actually looking forward to it. There weren't any kids involved, but according to Henry, the party was in the club and geared toward the younger crowd.

I sat down on the couch and put on the sparkly, strappy heels I'd been using for my other outfits. They were relatively comfortable but not for hours on end. He hooked his arm through mine and we left my room. It was becoming very old hat for us. We were comfortable together.

“How do you get away with a club on the top floor of your hotel?” I asked him as we rode up in the elevator.

“Lots of insulation,” he said. “And the floor below the club is used for storage, maintenance, some offices, and so on. We don't put anyone directly below the club.”

“Ah,” I said. “And how do you keep it from getting too crowded? I would think there would be some safety hazards with a club on the top floor of a tall building.”

“It's exclusive,” he answered. “It's not the kind of club you show up at the door and hope to get in. It's not open seven days a week. We have strict capacity limits. If it was open to everyone, it wouldn't be as popular.”

“How so?”

“Because the idea is to make it exclusive,” he repeated. “Invite only.”

I nodded. “Ahh, the elite.”

He chuckled as the elevator slid open and we were met by security. He wasn't kidding that they made sure to keep out any riffraff. I could hear the music as we crossed a small hallway lined with benches and decorated with fake plants. He

opened heavy doors and the music was in full force. It was dark, like a typical club.

There were some Christmas decorations but nothing like the last few parties. The crowd was definitely younger. “We have a table over here,” he said and guided me through groups of men and women talking and holding colorful drinks.

“Is this the VIP section?” I teased.

“It’s all VIP, but I guess you could say this is the VVIP,” he said with a wink. “Tonight is all about serving festive cocktails. Any preference?”

I pointed to a group of women holding what looked to be red martinis. “I’ll try what they’re having.”

“Sit tight,” he said. “I’m going to check on things and I’ll be right back.”

I scanned the crowd and wondered how this was supposed to benefit his business. The other parties were all about promoting the hotels and encouraging investors. I saw a lot of people my age. I doubted they had a lot of money to be throwing around. Then again, judging by what I guessed were designer clothes and thousand-dollar hairdos, they did have money. Trust-fund babies. Kids of wealthy celebrities and other major players.

I spotted Henry coming through the crowd. Two women, blonde size twos, stopped him. Their flirting was obvious, even from my viewpoint. He nodded at them, barely smiling, and started on his way toward me. The women watched him walk away, obviously checking him out. When they saw him hand me the drink, the jealousy in their eyes was obvious. I smiled at them, letting both of the young women know I noticed them looking.

“So, what exactly is this party for?” I asked him as I sipped the red cranberry drink.

“It’s to showcase what our hotels offer,” he said. He talked loud enough to be heard over the music. “I’m not trying to attract spring breakers, but I would like to attract the young

people looking for a nice vacation where they can actually sleep and relax.”

“Good point.” I nodded.

We watched and drank with people stopping by the table to introduce themselves. Most were complimentary about their hotel stay or saying they hoped they could stay soon. The people dancing had my attention. It was the familiar slow seduction. Bodies gliding together before an upbeat, heavy bass song would come on and the women would shake their ass and slide their bodies against their partner. I was on my second cranberry margarita when a young man came over to ask me to dance.

I looked at Henry, basically asking if it was okay. “Sure,” I said when Henry didn’t protest.

The man took my hand and led me to the dancefloor. “I’m Gabe,” he said close to my ear. “You looked like you were dying to dance.”

“Izzy,” I replied.

“Is that your brother?” he asked.

“Who?”

“The old guy you were with,” he said. “He’s not your dad, is he?”

I burst into laughter. “No. Neither.”

Before I could explain who Henry was, he appeared. “I’m cutting in,” he said in a voice that made it clear he wasn’t about to take no for an answer.

“Dude, that’s not cool,” Gabe protested. “You’ve been sitting with her and not dancing. Shit or get off the pot.”

“I’m off the pot,” Henry growled before putting his hands on my hips and gently pushing me away from Gabe.

A slow song came on. It was almost as if he planned it that way. His arms went around me with mine going around his waist. We swayed back and forth. I began to feel like I was being put into a trance. With every sway of our bodies, I could

feel myself being wrapped up into the cocoon he created with his body wrapped around mine.

Just when I thought we were going to fade away into our own world, the song ended. The music changed and the bodies around us came to life.

“My turn,” Gabe said and tried to step between me and Henry.

“I don’t think so,” Henry snapped.

“Dude, come on,” Gabe complained.

“Call me *dude* again and I’ll have you tossed out of here,” Henry said. “She’s mine. Back off.”

Gabe shot him a look before slinking away. I was still hung up on the “she’s mine” comment. His eyes met mine, and then, to my total surprise, Henry started to bust a move.

He could dance.

I put on my best moves, turning around and backing against him. I slid down, rubbing my ass down his thighs before turning around and sliding my hand down his chest. He wasn’t the old man I thought he was going to be when I first heard his name. This man was hot, sexy, and if I was going off his statement, he was mine.

His hand slipped up and cupped my cheek. I looked into his eyes and saw something familiar. Heat. Desire. All the things that said being on this dance floor right now was wrong. We needed to be somewhere alone.

But I didn’t dare say it. Not after last time. He made it clear this was only business. I pulled my gaze away and kept dancing. We danced and danced and danced some more. The ache in my feet didn’t matter. The rest of me was feeling too damn good to care.

“I think we’ve made our appearance,” he said with his mouth brushing close to my ear.

“Do you want to go?” I asked breathlessly.

“Do you?”

“Yes,” I answered.

I wasn't entirely sure what he was asking, but I was hoping it was what I was thinking. He didn't bother going around the room and saying goodbye. He grabbed my hand and led me out of the club. We stepped into the elevator and were thankfully alone.

“That was fun,” I said.

He crossed the few steps from his side of the elevator and was on me before I could even guess as to what he was going to do. His lips slammed against mine, his hand going to the back of my neck and the other to my hip. There was no wondering what he was thinking. It was very obvious and pressed against my belly.

His body pushed against mine. My butt bumped up against the rail in the elevator while my hands snaked into his hair. I couldn't get close enough. Our bodies were so close I could feel his heart beating. From somewhere far away, I heard a soft ding. It wasn't until he pulled away from me that I realized it was the elevator.

He pulled me down the hall, passing my room and going straight into his suite. I'd been inside the diamond suite a few times this week and knew it was grand and luxurious. His mouth was on mine before the door was even closed.

“I need you,” he whispered against my lips. “Are you okay with this?”

“Yes,” I answered and pushed his jacket open and down his arms.

“All night,” he groaned. “I've been watching and wanting. I'm so hard it fucking hurts.”

“We should take care of that,” I said with a smile against his lips.

He reached behind me and unzipped my dress while I began the tedious process of undoing the buttons on his shirt. I felt my dress loosen. Between the shoes and the belt, this was going to be a much more involved process. Not to mention, the buttons on his shirt were giving me fits.

I pulled my mouth away and pressed my hand against his chest. "I need to sit to take off these shoes," I told him.

"Hurry," he growled.

Instead of giving me a chance to sit, he pulled me into the bedroom and gently pushed me onto the bed. I quickly undid the straps while he stripped down to his briefs in record time. Then, right before my very eyes, he took off the briefs and gave me access to the total package. I took a few moments to admire his perfect body. Me, being an almost doctor, knew a perfect specimen when I saw it. He was perfect.

"Dress. Now."

I stood up and dropped the gown to the floor and quickly shimmed out of my bra and panties. We stood a few feet away from each other, but I could feel the heat and passion radiating from his body. A moment later, he pounced. His aggressive kisses made me dizzy with need. My leg hiked up and wrapped around his thighs as I rubbed myself against his body.

"Fuck me," he hissed. "I want you. You have no idea how bad I want you."

"Show me," I whispered against his lips.

He lifted me up and dropped me onto the bed. I lay back and opened my legs for him. His nostrils flared as he looked down at my body. When his eyes stopped moving, they were locked between my legs. I should have been just a little shy, but I wasn't. Not with him. He ignited a fire inside me that burned away all inhibition, shyness, and hesitation.

"Woman, I'm going to show you in so many different ways, you're going to have a tough time walking tomorrow."

I smiled up at him. "Prove it."

HENRY

I dropped to my knees next to the bed and pulled her forward. “You look good enough to eat,” I whispered a second before I dove in, tongue first. I lapped over her folds, paying special attention to her clit. Her hands threaded through my hair. She tugged at the roots and pulled me against her at the same time. Her sweet cries of ecstasy echoed around me. I continued to nibble and tease the sweet nub that brought her so much pleasure.

I could feel her body winding up and knew she was close. Soon, my efforts would be rewarded. I was going to get my first real taste of her. “Henry,” she moaned.

I used my teeth to scrape over her flesh until she was screaming out my name. I almost lost control. I pulled away and immediately went for a condom. My cock was hard and weeping with need. I needed her more than anything else in that moment. I rolled it on and caught a glimpse of her glistening nether lips. Seeing the evidence of her orgasm and tasting it at the same time damn near pushed me over the edge.

I squeezed my cock while looking down at her. “Just so you know, that was the first time I’ve tasted you, but it won’t be the last.”

She reached up toward me. “Come here.”

I reached under her arms and slid her up the bed before climbing on. I was over her and pushing inside her a second later. I already knew she was wet and ready for me. I didn’t

need to try and prime her. She bucked under me, digging her heels into the bed and thrusting up.

“Damn woman,” I growled.

“I want you to fuck me,” she said and reached up to grab my head. “Hard. Now. Do it like you want me.”

“*Like* I want you?” I said with a laugh. “It’s taking everything I have not to explode right now.”

“Don’t treat me like glass,” she hissed. “I want you to do me like those men tonight with those women.”

I knew what she was talking about. The gyrating and thrusting on the dance floor had been pretty intense at times. It was borderline pornographic. I grabbed her hands and pinned them above her head with one of my own. My other hand swept down her chest and between her cleavage.

I rocked my hips. I thrust hard, rocking her body and shaking her tits. “Again,” she gasped.

I thrust hard, scooting her several inches across the bed. “Like that?”

“Yes,” she gasped and thrust her hips upward.

My dick hit deep. I had to grit my teeth to keep from blowing my wad. I could feel her need for more. She was a wildcat. I let go of her hands as her nails scraped down my back. I flinched with pain before driving deeper inside her. I pounded against her over and over. Just when she was about to find her release, I pulled out and moved away from her.

“What are you doing?” she gasped and went up on her elbows.

I dropped to my back beside her. “Ride me,” I ordered.

She climbed over me with a shit-eating grin on her face. “Oh, I don’t know if you’re ready for this.”

“I’m ready for anything you’ve got,” I told her. “Quit talking and ride me.”

“Pushy, pushy,” she teased.

“You’ve got about two seconds to climb on top of me before I roll you to your stomach and give you the ride of your life,” I said.

She gnawed her lower lip. “Promises, promises,” she said in a sultry voice.

“Tempt me,” I said.

She pressed her hands against my chest before adjusting her hips and sliding down my cock. I sucked in a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

“It feels so good,” she groaned and leaned back. Her hair brushed over my thighs. I reached up and grabbed her breasts. My fingers tweaked her nipples. She cried out and arched her back. Her fingertips dug into my pecs.

“Do you like that?” I asked.

“I do,” she said. “I like it.”

I pinched her nipple before lifting my head to suck it into my mouth. Her pussy was suddenly very wet. “That’s my girl,” I said.

She rotated her hips, sliding left and right before gliding forward. “I like doing this,” she whispered. “I like riding you.”

“I think I like you riding me.”

Her head swayed back and forth. Her sweet pussy clenched my dick with every move she made. It was driving me insane. There was an innocence about her during the day, but when I got her in bed, that innocence was gone. It was downright sinful what she did to my body. My restraint was fading fast. I wanted one thing and one thing only. I needed completion. Only she could make me feel like this. It was so much more than a good lay. It was the best sex. It was sex that touched my very soul.

“Ride me, Izzy,” I demanded. “Do it. Now!”

She shouted and dropped her head forward. She rode hard and fast. The bed bounced against the wall over and over. The rhythm was music to my ears. Her gasps and my grunts filled

the void in between the headboard hitting the wall. Our bodies slapped against one another.

“Henry!”

“Don’t you dare fucking stop,” I said and grabbed her hips.

I propelled her forward and then pushed her back. My hips bucked under her. We were both completely lost in the chase for ecstasy. It was a wild ride at breakneck speed to the finish line. The moment it hit, I shouted something. I was suddenly speaking in tongues. I didn’t even know what I was saying. Everything went blurry, and for a brief moment, I was in heaven. I was floating away with her sweet body clinging to me.

She fell against me, her head slamming against my chest. “Holy shit,” she breathed. “I think we just woke the dead.”

“Thankfully there’s no one on the other side of this wall,” I gasped.

She was giggling as she slid off my body. “I am never going to be able to show my face in this place again.”

I slapped her butt. “You’re fine. Shit, I bet we weren’t the only ones banging headboards against the wall.”

“You really outdid yourself,” she said.

“You did the work,” I said.

“I think I might pass out soon,” she murmured. “I need to get up.”

“Why?”

“I need to go back to my room,” she said on a sigh.

“No, you don’t,” I said. “Stay. Stay with me tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” I said. “Stay. I’ll get some water for us.”

“Should I roll over?” she quipped. “Will you rub my tummy?”

“I’ll rub whatever you want me to rub,” I told her.

She burst into more giggles and burrowed under the blankets. I took care of the condom then grabbed some water and carried it back to her. When I pulled the blanket back, she was already asleep. I took a moment to watch her. She was so pretty. So out of my league. Izzy was like the woman you looked at in magazines but could never have for real.

I climbed into bed and pulled her against me. I didn't want her to go back to her bed. This was getting confusing. The lines were blurred. We weren't just employer and employee. That stupid contract didn't mean shit. I realized I wanted her in my life without me paying her to be. I wanted to believe she wanted that as well, but I couldn't say for certain.

Asking her seemed out of line. What was she going to say? She had an entire life in Aspen. She had a future in front of her. She was pursuing a career and I was just a little bump in the road. Her whole life was planned out and I was not a part of it. She was already putting a lot on the line for this little arrangement.

She was lying to her family. That couldn't be a good thing. It was only a matter of time before this all caught up to her. I didn't want her to pay a price for this arrangement. Being away from her family at a time of year that was very special to them all was a high enough price. I felt horrible for keeping her away from them.

But what if I could somehow convince her to look at me as more than the guy paying her a huge lump sum to pretend to be my date? Would she ever consider dating me without a contract? She murmured something in her sleep and moved closer to me.

No, she wouldn't date me. How could she? She had to start school in a few weeks. I was embarking on a whole new adventure. I would be out of the country for weeks at a time. Whatever I was feeling in this moment of postcoital bliss didn't matter. Not really. Izzy was out of my league. She was going to end up with some brain doctor and have a big house in the suburbs. They'd have cute little kids and go to soccer on Saturdays. There would be big family gatherings. Their children would have loving grandparents on both sides.

I could offer her none of that. I didn't have grandparents or stability. I was always on the move. I didn't have a pedigree. I was some poor orphan that made good for himself. Yes, I could buy her the moon but that wasn't what would impress her.

I pushed away all thoughts of a future with her. It was not going to happen. This arrangement between us was business. It needed to stay that way. I would enjoy the moment and that was that. Feeling settled in my decision, I closed my eyes and tried to go to sleep.

All I could think about was Christmas. Christmas was the end of this. "This is why I fucking hate the holidays," I whispered. They had never done anything good for me.

I still felt tingly after last night. He left me shaken. I didn't know what to think about what happened between us. It was different than just sex. Not that I had a lot to go on, but it felt different. He'd been attentive and aggressive. It felt good to be wanted by a man like him. He lost control, which was not something I expected to ever happen.

I did that. I made him crazy with lust and desire. I put on the simple diamond earrings and fluffed my hair. Today's event was a late lunch, cocktail type of party. It was low key. Another one of the simple but elegant cocktail dresses was lying out on the bed. I put on the black dress with the long sleeves. It felt very regal.

Instead of waiting for Henry to come and get me, I walked to his suite. I knocked on the door and waited. When Nicholas answered, I was a little surprised. "Hey," I said.

"He told me to bring you down," he said.

"Bring me down?" I asked with confusion.

"Yes, he went down to the lounge earlier. I was going to come by and pick you up. You beat me to it."

"Oh," I said and tried to hide my disappointment. "Okay."

He chuckled and stepped out. "Gee, try not to look too bummed to be going with the second-best-looking guy in the hotel."

"Sorry," I said with a smile. "I'm not bummed at all. I'm happy to be going with you."

When we walked into the lounge, there was soft music playing in the background. People were dressed casually, sipping martinis and quietly talking amongst themselves. As I found myself doing way more often than I cared to admit, I searched the area for Henry. I spotted him sitting at a high table with a gorgeous brunette. She was effortlessly beautiful. She was the kind of woman that woke up in the morning looking like she'd spent hours getting ready.

He looked over at us, smiled, and then went back to his conversation with her. I was dismissed. "I need a drink," I muttered.

"You sure you want to start this early?" Nicholas cautioned.

"I—"

"Thanks for bringing her down," Henry appeared at my side. "Sorry, I had a meeting with a vendor, and it ran long."

Relief washed over me. He wasn't totally ditching me. "No problem. Nicholas was an excellent escort."

They both looked at me before the three of us shared a laugh. "Wrong choice of words," Nicholas said. "Do you still want that drink?" he asked me.

"I think I'll stick with a peppermint tea," I answered.

"Henry?" he asked.

"No thanks," Henry replied. "I'll introduce you to a few of the people I'm going to be working with over the next few months."

"Sure," I said with a bright smile. I was wrong to have been worried about being replaced. He was simply paying attention to his guests. I needed to keep my jealousy in check. I had a feeling that would have him turning tail and running.

We made the rounds before he was pulled away once again. Nicholas stuck by my side. "This is much easier than last night, right?" he said.

"What?" I asked guiltily.

“No dancing and loud music,” he answered.

“Oh, yeah, I like the low-key thing,” I said.

I heard tinkling laughter and turned my head to see the same brunette flirting with Henry. They were laughing over a private joke apparently. The woman put her hand on Henry’s arm and leaned in close to say something to him.

“I think it’s late enough to get a drink,” I muttered.

“I agree,” Nicholas said.

We made our way to the bar and sat down on one end. We started with shots of tequila before settling into glasses of wine. My eyes kept going to the table where Henry was huddled up with the mystery woman. He didn’t introduce me to her. I didn’t know if that was on purpose or an oversight.

I watched her flirt with him. I couldn’t really blame her. Henry checked all the boxes. It was nothing short of a miracle he hadn’t been snatched off the market. He was a total gentleman at these things. Despite his somewhat standoffish demeanor, he was always polite. He ordered the ladies drinks, he pulled out chairs and held open doors. He was the perfect gentleman in settings like this but get the man in a bedroom and the inner caveman came out.

I shuddered just thinking about last night. He rocked my world and I was still feeling the aftereffects. The mystery woman laughed, and my warm and fuzzy feeling turned into something very different. I was angry and wanted to lash out at the woman.

I had no business being jealous. He wasn’t mine. I was borrowing him. The brunette was the kind of woman that could travel the world with him. She would be able to dress herself without needing Henry’s help. She would know just what to say and do at fancy parties like this.

“Are you okay?” Nicholas asked.

“What?” I replied and tried to snap back to the here and now.

“You had a bit of a look on your face.”

“A look?”

He nodded and sipped his wine. “You’re watching them. Staring more like it.”

“Who?” I asked like I didn’t know.

“Them. Henry and Rachel.”

“Rachel?” I repeated the name.

“Yes, she’s the daughter of some guy that owns half the world,” Nicholas explained.

“I guess she’s perfect for him,” I muttered.

“They’ve met before,” he explained.

“Yeah, with the way she’s groping him, I would hope so.”

He chuckled and put up a hand to get the bartender’s attention. “Can we have the house special?” he asked.

“Coming right up,” the bartender replied.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Wine just doesn’t feel appropriate for the moment,” he explained.

Two glasses of bubbling red liquid were put in front of us. I stared at it. “What’s this?”

“Champagne,” Nicholas answered.

“Are we celebrating?”

“No, but it’ll help tame that little green-eyed monster trying to rear her ugly little head,” he quipped.

“What are you talking about?” I asked defiantly before taking a healthy drink of the cocktail. It was a little too good. I took another drink. And then another.

“What’s the deal with the two of you?” he asked.

“Who?”

“Woman, we are way past playing innocent,” he said. “I’m not blind. You two have crossed into relationship territory.”

“What?” I gasped. “No.”

“Then what gives?” he asked. “I know steaming-hot chemistry when I see it. I’m kind of an expert in this kind of thing.”

I giggled and waved at the bartender to get another one of the cocktails. They were way too little for how good they tasted. “I forget you’re a Casanova.”

“I am.”

“Did they date?” I asked.

“Who?”

“Rachel and Henry,” I answered with my eyes on them. They were acting like a couple. Everything about the way they talked and interacted screamed couple.

“No,” he said. “Never. Not that I know of.”

I was halfway through my second cocktail. I was feeling a good buzz. “I think they’re going to end up fucking,” I said before slapping my hand over my mouth.

Nicholas looked at me with shock. “Damn. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

“I didn’t mean to say that out loud,” I said with a shake of my head. “That was rude.”

“But honest.”

“I meant with the way they are all over each other, they’re bound to end up in bed,” I said.

Nicholas turned to look in their direction. “There is some heat, huh?”

I slapped his arm. “You’re supposed to be telling me I’m seeing things,” I scolded.

“Why?”

I rolled my eyes. “If Noelle was here, she’d tell me I was jumping to conclusions and everything was fine.”

“I don’t know Noelle, but I would wonder why she would have to tell you everything was fine,” he said.

“You know why,” I hissed before downing the remainder of the cocktail. “Why do they put these things in such small glasses?” I complained. “I mean, honestly.”

“So, if I were reading between the lines, would it be safe to say this little business arrangement has evolved into something more than just a professional relationship?” he asked.

“What makes you say that?” I asked.

“Tell me,” he said.

I greedily accepted the next cocktail and took a long drink that was anything but prim and proper. “Well dammit,” I muttered. “I went and let myself fall for the guy.”

He grinned. “I knew it.”

“Yeah, well, don’t act like it’s a good thing,” I blurted out. “This ends very soon. And then what? What happens? I go home with a broken heart, and he runs off with Rachel. They’ll make cute little babies and live in his big chalet in Aspen. I’ll probably have to see them every time I go home.”

“That’s very imaginative,” he said with a laugh.

“Not really. He sends me back and I turn into a pumpkin.”

Nicholas let out a loud laugh. I looked at him and started laughing as well. “I don’t think you’re going to be a pumpkin. You’re going to marry some rich doctor and have your own babies.”

“I don’t want a doctor’s babies,” I said. “I want *his* babies!”

Nicholas was still laughing when Henry approached us with a scowl on his face. I looked up at him. “Uh oh, Henry is unhappy.”

“You guys are drunk,” Henry hissed.

Nicholas looked at me and we both giggled, proving we were drunk. “These little suckers are too good,” I said and held up my glass.

“You guys are being very loud,” Henry said and was clearly not happy.

I rolled my eyes. “And who’s paying attention to us?”

“People are noticing,” he hissed. “Keep it down.”

“We’re just talking,” Nicholas said with a goofy smile.

“Yeah, someone is talking to me,” I said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Henry snapped.

“Me and Nicky here are having fun,” I said and slapped Nicholas’s hand. “We’re having our own party. I’m surprised you noticed at all.”

“Izzy, you’re drunk,” Henry hissed.

“So? There’s alcohol. It’s not like I’m driving anywhere. No one is talking to me about business or anything else. Why not get drunk?”

“She’s alright,” Nicholas said. “We’re good.”

“Yeah, we’re good,” I chimed in. “You just go back to talking to your Barbie doll.”

Henry went rigid. His eyes narrowed and it was like watching a robot shut down. The Henry I’d been in bed with this morning was gone. The old Henry was back.

“Why don’t you two call it a night?” he said in a stern voice.

“We’re good,” Nicholas said again. “We’ll keep our voices down.”

“I think you’ve said more than enough,” Henry growled. “Get some coffee.”

“Uh oh, did we embarrass you?” I pouted. “I’m sure Rachel is far more ladylike. She knows how to drink with her pinky out like a proper lady.”

Henry shot me a look and I suddenly realized I’d gone too far. He turned his hard gaze on Nicholas. “Get her out of here,” he hissed. “Sober up. Don’t come back here.”

That hurt. Nicholas nodded. “Got it.”

He never looked at me again as he walked away. I slapped a hand to my forehead. “Oh my god,” I groaned. “I can’t

believe I just said that.”

“Oh, but you did and now we’re both in trouble,” he said and slid off of his stool. “Come on. I better get you out of here before we both find ourselves sleeping in a snowbank.”

I glanced over my shoulder. Henry was talking to a man with his back turned to me. I begged him to look in my direction. If he looked at me, it meant he was upset but not furious. If he was upset, that was okay. We could work on that. At least it meant he cared a little bit.

At the doorway, I was still staring over my shoulder. “Let’s go,” Nicholas said gently. “He’s seriously pissed. We need to get out of here before he really loses his shit.”

He wasn’t going to look. My heart hurt. “I’m going to my room,” I said.

“I’ll walk you.”

“I’m fine,” I insisted and only stumbled once.

“I’ll make sure you get there and then I’m going to my room and passing out,” he said.

HENRY

I woke up to someone pounding on my hotel room door. The damn building had better be on fire. I looked at the clock on the nightstand and saw it was just after nine. By the time I'd gotten done with work last night, it was after two before I got into bed.

I pulled on my sweats and made my way to the door. I pulled it open to find Nicholas looking disheveled and worried. He was wearing the same clothes I'd seen him in the night before. I raised an eyebrow. "Let me guess, you locked yourself out of your room?"

"No."

"Just go down to the front desk and get a key," I told him and started to close the door. "I'm sleeping another hour."

"No," he said and stopped the door with his foot.

"What?" I growled. "I'm still pissed at you for that bullshit you pulled last night."

"She's gone," he said.

"What? Who? Did she rob you?"

I assumed he was talking about whatever woman he hooked up with last night. I did go by his room around ten on my way back to my own suite. He wasn't there, which meant he'd found someone to welcome him into their bed. I didn't begrudge him his ability to find a little love wherever we went.

"No! Izzy! Izzy's gone."

“She’s in her room,” I said. “She’s probably sleeping off the hangover you gave her. I can’t believe you let her get that drunk.”

“I didn’t let her do anything,” he shot back and pushed his way into my room. “She’s not in her room. I just came from there.”

I closed the door. “She’s probably asleep and didn’t hear the door.”

“I stayed the night in her room,” he said. “When I got up this morning, she was gone.”

I was going to kill him. I could actually feel my blood boiling. “You fucking did what?” I seethed. “You slept with her?”

“No!” he said and must have picked up on my fury. He took a few steps back. “No, I didn’t sleep *with* her. I slept in her room.”

“Why in the hell were you in her room?” I snapped.

“I need coffee,” he groaned.

“Tell me what the hell you did!”

“Well, after you kicked us out of the party, I walked her back to her room like a gentleman,” he snapped.

“I’m not the one that got her wasted,” I reminded him.

“I walked her to her room, and we decided it was too early to go to bed and we didn’t want to waste our buzz,” he said with a shrug. “We got into the minibar. I don’t know how much we drank, but I passed out on the couch after a few hours. That girl can drink.”

“Anyway, can we get back to the part about her being gone?” I said.

“She’s gone,” he said again.

“Maybe she went to get breakfast,” I said. “Why are you freaking out?”

“Because she’s actually *gone*,” he said again. “Her stuff is gone. Her suitcase. Gone. All gone. I went downstairs to see if she checked out. She did. They said she got a cab to the airport at seven o’clock.”

“What?” I heard myself say. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m sorry,” he said and hung his head. “I should have talked her out of it.”

“You knew she was leaving?”

“No, but last night, we talked a lot and I should have known what she was going to do. I’m sorry, Henry. I shouldn’t have drunk so much. I never let myself drink that much and last night I got a little carried away. I knew she was having a bad night and I didn’t try to stop her. I’m sorry.”

It would have been nice to blame him, but I knew he wasn’t the reason she left. That fell on me. She’d been drunk and honest yesterday. “She’s really gone?” I asked with a sigh.

“Yes.”

“Fuck,” I hissed and walked to the coffeemaker. I didn’t have the patience to wait for room service.

“I’m sorry, Henry,” he said again.

I pulled the cup from under the machine and started a second one for Nicholas. “Why are you sorry exactly?” I asked. “What happened?”

“Nothing happened,” he said. “Not like you’re implying.”

“Something happened at the party,” I said. “You two were cackling like old ladies. I saw the way she was looking at me. She was pissed about something. What did I do?”

Nicholas gave me a dry look before stepping up and taking his coffee. “Are you going to tell me you really don’t know?” he asked.

“She was mad I wasn’t paying enough attention to her?” I questioned.

“You could say that.”

“She knows I had business at this meeting,” I said. “She is used to that.”

“Is she?” he asked.

“Yes, isn’t she?”

“Henry, you can’t really be that naïve,” he said.

“Naïve about what?” I snapped back.

He gave me a look over the rim of his coffee.

“Rachel,” I said with a sigh.

He nodded. “Rachel.”

“Did she say why she had such a problem with me talking to Rachel?”

“Uh, yeah, I suppose she did.”

“And?” I prompted. “What?”

“She had a bit of an epiphany last night,” he said. “Actually, it’s what we were talking about at the bar before you so rudely kicked us out.”

“You guys were being very loud,” I defended. “I heard her talking like I haven’t heard before. She was on her way to making a fool out of herself. Out of all of us. She wouldn’t have wanted to embarrass herself. I was saving her from herself. You were too drunk to notice.”

“I wasn’t that drunk,” he argued.

“So, you say.”

“She has feelings for you, Henry,” Nicholas said.

I almost choked on my coffee. “What?”

“You heard me,” he said softly.

“You’re full of shit,” I said in an attempt to make it go away. I didn’t want her to have feelings for me. That complicated things.

“You know what? Never mind. I shouldn’t have said anything. Forget it. I just thought you should know she was gone. I’m going to shower.”

“Wait, what else did she say?” I asked.

“I’m leaving. I shouldn’t have said anything. She didn’t want me to tell you.”

“Tell me,” I insisted and stepped in front of him.

“Henry, this is woman one-oh-one,” he said. “She knows this is supposed to be a business arrangement, but you keep confusing the matter. Why keep sleeping with her if you’re not going to call her again? I mean, I can certainly understand the novelty of a one-night stand. This is not that. You’re spending time with her and treating her like a girlfriend. You have to understand how that blurs the lines a bit. I know you aren’t well versed in these matters, but if you want a no-strings relationship, you make it no strings. You don’t hang out during the day and go to dinner. You don’t stay the damn night.”

“She told you about that?” I asked guiltily.

“She didn’t have to,” he said. “I’m not an idiot.”

“We aren’t together,” I said. “She knows that.”

“Then you shouldn’t have treated her like you were,” he shot back.

“I was trying to show her a good time,” I said. “She was ready to leave.”

“And you took her out to dinner and gave her some attention to keep her around,” he said. “Because you needed her. You needed to make sure you looked good in front of the investors.”

“Don’t you dare make me into the bad guy,” I said. “This whole thing was your idea. I never would have been able to upset her if I didn’t meet her. You’re the one who told me I had to fix my image. I did what you advised and now you’re going to tell me this is my fault?”

“I didn’t tell you to sleep with her!” he shot back. “I also didn’t expect her to be a good lady. She’s good, Henry. Like really good. She’s not like most of the women you meet. This woman is kind and honest. She genuinely cares about people. I think that’s the only reason she stuck around. She wanted to

help you. She did, and yesterday, well shit, Henry, you didn't treat her very well."

I could always count on Nicholas to tell me like it was, whether I liked it or not. In this case, I didn't like it. Not at all. I was sticking by my belief this was his fault. "I treated her very well," I argued. "We had a business arrangement. I did more than my part. I was generous. I didn't mistreat her. I maintained my end of the contract we signed."

"Yes, you did." He nodded. "Congratulations. When you go to bed tonight, you can tell yourself you were a good businessman. You upheld your contract."

He put down the coffee cup and walked out of the room. It was a dramatic exit but effective. If his goal was to make me feel like shit, it worked. I knew I crossed the line. The first time, it could be explained away as the need to scratch an itch. We were both feeling it and we reacted.

Unfortunately, the other night was different. We both knew it was different. But that didn't matter. In the end, she went back to med school and I was hitting the road. It would never work. We were very different people in different places in our lives. But we did have a signed agreement.

She was the one not living up to her end of the bargain. Her job was not done.

I wiped my eyes and tried not to look as bad as I felt. Sitting in a busy airport made it impossible to get any real privacy, but it was all I had. My flight wouldn't leave for another hour. I so wanted to get out of Chicago. I wanted to leave and never look back. My heart was broken, and the regret was rolling in strong.

I called the one person I knew that could make me feel a little better. He was the only man in my life I could ever really count on. He was my rock. "Hi, Dad." I sniffled when he answered the phone.

"Izzy, what's wrong?"

"I'm coming home," I told him.

"Okay," he said gently. "That's a good thing, right?"

"I suppose." I sniffled. "I'm so sorry."

"What are you sorry for?" he asked.

"All of this," I murmured. "I'm sitting in Chicago by myself a week before Christmas. I should be there with you guys. I get so little time off from school. This was so, so stupid."

"What do you mean you're by yourself?" he asked.

"Oh, Dad." I sighed and shook my head. "I've made such a mess of things. I can't believe I left you guys. This is my month to spend with you guys. I'm supposed to be there

making cookies and watching Christmas movies. This was such a stupid move.”

“What happened with Henry?” he asked gently. “Did you two break up?”

Oh, my poor dad. Mom and Dad thought I was enjoying a leisurely getaway with a man I was dating. “Dad, I have to tell you something,” I said. “I don’t think you’re going to like it.”

“Did he do something?” he asked sternly.

“No, no,” I said and felt like I had to defend him. “Henry isn’t my boyfriend.”

“I’m not sure what you guys call this stuff these days,” he said with a laugh. “Seeing each other, dating, whatever you want to call it.”

“No, Dad,” I said and felt a huge lump in my throat. I couldn’t lie to him. Not anymore. I had to come clean. This whole thing was wrong. I had to get it off my chest. I never lied to my parents. Never. We were very close, and we got along well. “I wasn’t truthful when I told you I was dating Henry.”

“I’m not sure what that means, honey,” he said ever so gently. “What’s going on?”

“Henry was paying me to pretend to be his girlfriend,” I blurted out.

“What?” he asked, and I could hear the surprise in his voice. “Paying you? I don’t understand.”

“I saw this service while I was out with Noelle a couple of weeks ago.” I started my story and made sure no one was listening. “It’s for escorts,” I whispered.

I was probably going to give my father a real heart attack. This was something that should have been said in person. But I was a chicken and I couldn’t bring myself to say it to his face. I was embarrassed and humiliated by my decision to be an escort.

“Izzy, are you telling me you—” He paused. “You’re—”

“No, no, no, Dad, not that,” I said once I realized what he was thinking. “This was all very professional and totally legal. It was just supposed to be for a few weeks. Twelve parties. Twelve dates, if you will. He’s looking to expand his hotel business and needed investors. According to his assistant, his image wasn’t great. They wanted to soften his image. I was supposed to go to twelve parties with him and pretend to be the girlfriend he’s been keeping out of the limelight.”

“Oh, Izzy.” He sighed.

“I know, Dad,” I said. “I know how disappointed you must be. I’m sorry. I saw dollar signs. I was going to make enough money to pay off the bulk of my student loans. I was going to use the money to get my own place. I didn’t want you and Mom to worry. You guys have done so much for me and deserve to travel and do all the things you want to do without worrying about me.”

“We’re your parents,” he said. “We’re supposed to worry about you.”

I smiled and wiped the tears from my cheek. “This is such a mess.”

“Did he, uh, fire you?” he asked.

I laughed through the tears. “No. I think I quit.”

“Why? Did he do something?”

“No, not really.” I sighed. “It was me.”

“Sweetie, I want to help, and I really want to understand, but I can’t do that unless you tell me what’s going on.”

“Oh, Dad,” I groaned. “I messed up.”

“How so?”

“I think I fell for him,” I said. “I wasn’t supposed to. This was strictly business, but dammit, when I got to know him, I liked him. I liked him more than I should have. He’s not really all that uptight. We had so much fun this week. I think I got caught up in the fairytale. I’m a practical girl. I know fairytales aren’t real. I knew none of this was real. I’m not his type. He’s rich and a world traveler. I’m just me.”

“You are amazing and beautiful,” he said. “You’re smart and you have more potential in your little finger than anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Thanks, Dad.” I smiled.

“So, where are you?”

“At the airport,” I told him. “I’ll be home in a couple of hours.”

“On his jet?”

“No. I’m taking a flight.”

“Is he at least paying for it?” he asked.

I couldn’t stop the laugh. “No.”

“Well, I would think that’s part of the business arrangement,” he said.

“He would have flown me back, but he doesn’t know I’m leaving,” I confessed.

“I’m not sure I know what that means,” he said.

I knew I wasn’t making a lot of sense. My brain was scattered. I was still a little drunk. My thoughts were bouncing around my brain with no real direction. “I left,” I said. “He doesn’t know I left. I caught a cab to the airport and I’m coming home. He’ll figure it out eventually.”

“And nothing happened?” he asked again.

My dad was old school. If some guy hurt me, he’d want to hurt him back. “No, this is on me. Henry was only doing what he said he was going to do. He didn’t do anything wrong. I just don’t think I can play pretend anymore. It’s not who I am.”

“Of course, it isn’t,” he said.

“I wish I would have stayed there.” I sobbed. “I got greedy. I saw dollar signs and I forgot what was important. Spending time with you guys is what’s really important. I shouldn’t have run away from home.”

“You were spreading your wings,” he said. “That’s what you’re supposed to do.”

“Well, I think I spread them a little too far.”

“Come home,” he said. “We’ll watch Santa Claus. It used to be your favorite movie. We’ll make popcorn and drink spiked hot chocolate.”

“Hey,” I heard my mom say. “Who’s that? Are you making a date in front of me?”

She was teasing. That was how they were. “It’s Izzy,” Dad replied.

“Oh, am I invited or is this a father-daughter thing?” I heard her ask.

“You’ve got those Christmas cards to fill out,” he said. “And a Cricut begging to be used.”

“Fine, fine, I get the message,” she said.

“I’ll see you soon, Dad,” I told him. “Thank you for being so understanding. Maybe don’t tell Mom about this just yet. I know she has high hopes of me marrying rich. I don’t have the courage to disappoint her.”

“You’ll tell her when you’re ready,” he said.

“Thanks,” I said and felt better. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Have a safe flight.”

I ended the call and put the phone against my chest. I already felt better. Getting all of this off my chest helped. I was ready to go home and put all this behind me. I was ready to move on. I had a week left to make the most of Christmas. I was going to go all-in. There would be cookies and crafts and caroling. I was going to do so much Christmas stuff I wasn’t going to think about him.

I sucked in a deep breath and tried to clear my mind. The only way to get over this was through it. The pain I felt was just going to have to be dealt with. There was still thirty minutes before boarding. It was just enough time to suck down some coffee and finish sobering up.

I got in line with my carry-on slung over my shoulder. Flying commercial was hard after getting to travel via private

jet. I had to check my bag and couldn't take whatever I wanted on the plane. I got my cup of coffee and was about to head back to my seat at the gate when I thought I heard my name. I shook it off. There were probably several people named Izzy waiting at the airport.

I kept going.

"Izzy!"

Something familiar about the voice had me turning around to see if my ears were deceiving me. *Nope*. There he was racing toward me. "Henry?" I said with disbelief.

"Izzy!"

He caught up to me, breathing hard as he reached out to touch my arm. "I can't believe I actually caught up with you."

"What are you doing?" I asked. "How did you find me?"

"Nicholas," he gasped. "Nicholas told me you were gone. The front desk said you caught a cab. It wasn't hard to figure out where you were going."

"How are you in here?" I asked and waved my arms.

He held up a boarding pass. "Yeah, I had to buy that to get back here."

"Oh gosh, I'm sorry."

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm going home, Henry," I said with as much conviction in my voice as I could muster.

"You can't," he blurted out.

I raised an eyebrow. "I can't."

"No," he said and shook his head. "You can't leave."

"I've already called Della and let her know the contract was voided. She was going to talk to you about compensation for the time I put in. She said she would talk to you about everything."

"I don't want to talk to Della," he said angrily.

Just then, I heard them call for boarding for my flight. “I have to go,” I said.

“No! You can’t just leave!”

“Goodbye, Henry,” I said and turned away from him.

I couldn’t look him in the eyes. It was like being stabbed in the heart. I *couldn’t* leave. I couldn’t leave because we still had two more dates. I was done. So done. I held my chin high while I walked toward the gate. I got in line and never looked back. I didn’t care if he was watching me. Last night, he hadn’t given me the courtesy of looking back. His inaction was loud and clear.

Henry was moving on to greener pastures. I was a pitstop along the way. I wasn’t going to let myself think it was ever going to be anything different. It took every ounce of energy I had not to look back. I wanted to know if he was watching me leave. If there was a way to do it without him seeing, I would have done it in a heartbeat.

By the time I’d taken my seat on the plane, I was crying again. “Are you okay?” the man sitting beside me asked.

“Yes.” I smiled through the tears. “Happy tears,” I lied. “I’m going home for Christmas.”

He nodded his head as if it all made sense. “I’m meeting my wife and kids in Aspen,” he said. “We live in LA, but I’ve been working in Chicago for the last three months.”

“Aspen is a beautiful place to spend Christmas,” I said.

“Do you go often?” he asked.

“I’m from there,” I told him. “It’s where I grew up.”

“Wow. You’re very lucky. We get out there whenever we can.”

He was one of the rich and elite. I should have known. “I hope you enjoy your week.”

“Since you’re a local, do you know anything about Barlow Aspen?” he asked. “This is the first time we’re staying there. Locals always have the best gossip and the inside scoop.”

This was some bad karma. How in the hell did I get stuck sitting beside the one man going to Henry's hotel? Then again, everyone on this plane was headed to Aspen. There was a good chance several of them were headed to his hotel.

"It's a great place," I said with a fake smile. "I've been to a couple of events there. It's very comfortable and the rooms are amazing."

"Good." He nodded and settled into his seat. "I spent way too much money booking the rooms. It better be good or I'm siccing my wife on them."

I forced another smile. "You'll have a great stay. Trust me."

I put on my headphones and closed my eyes. The last thing I wanted to do was spend the next couple of hours talking about Henry's hotel. It was like he was following me. There was nowhere to run. His words were on repeat in my brain.

I couldn't leave.

It wasn't "don't leave" or "please stay." It was "you can't leave." He was so worried about that stupid contract. Whatever we had between us was all in my head. It was part of the heat of the moment. There was nothing more to it. He needed a date and I filled the need. The sex was a bonus.

HENRY

I stepped off the plane and walked to the waiting car. The snow was falling, and the air was thin. There was always a sense of freedom whenever I came back to Aspen. Maybe it was the lack of hustle and bustle. The lack of smog. The lack of danger. Or maybe it was because I wanted to call Aspen home. Technically, my address was here, but I was always moving.

“We’ve got a meeting in twenty minutes,” Nicholas said as he jogged along beside my much longer strides.

“I know.”

“After that meeting, you’ve got another meeting with the police chief to go over the details for Christmas Eve. He wants to make sure there are no messy traffic snarls when the party lets out.”

“Fine,” I said.

We got into the SUV and started on our way to the property. The town was in full swing. The streets were lined with people taking advantage of the shopping. The restaurants were packed. The next two weeks were the biggest of the year. The party on Christmas Eve was going to be big. It was *the* party to be at. It sucked that I was going to be going alone.

“Henry?”

“What?” I asked with a sigh.

“I take it you haven’t talked to her,” he said.

“Nope. You?”

“No,” he answered. “Do you want me to reach out?”

“No.”

“Tell me exactly what happened yesterday,” he said.

“No,” I said again.

“You’re very negative,” he replied.

“I’m feeling pretty fucking negative right now, Nicholas,” I snapped. “I’ve got two parties coming up. Two. And I’m going to be fucking single.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of women here that would love to be on your arm,” he said. “I can make a few calls.”

“If you call one fucking woman and ask her to be my date, I swear I will break your fingers,” I sneered.

“Damn, you are cranky.”

“I am,” I agreed. “I’m so not in the mood. For any of this.”

“Just get through the next couple of hours and then you can go home,” he said. “Put on all those pretty lights she put up and you might be able to improve your mood.”

I groaned. I had forgotten about the decorations. I couldn’t look at them and not think about her. “No thanks,” I said.

“She needs some time,” he said.

“For what?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “It just sounded like the right thing to say.”

“Well, it wasn’t,” I said.

“I can text her,” he suggested. “She’ll talk to me.”

“Yeah, why is that, Nicholas? Why would she talk to you and not me? You’re the one who told me she had feelings for me.”

“I did. She does. At least, that’s what she said.”

“And yet when I make a big romantic gesture, she shuts me down,” I said. “What the hell? Are you sure she actually said those words to you? You were pretty drunk.”

“Yes.” He nodded.

I sat in silence. I couldn't worry about her and what she was doing. She made it clear she didn't want to see me. We got to the hotel and Nicholas immediately rushed me into a conference room where the hotel manager was waiting along with the event planner and several other staff members.

“Good morning, everyone,” I said and took my seat at the head of the table. “I'm looking forward to hearing about how things are shaping up.”

We went around the table with everyone giving me their little spiel about their role in the party coming up. I tried to focus on what everyone was saying. It was all a little redundant. They all had something to offer and I appreciated their need to tell me every detail. Normally, I would appreciate the attention to detail. Today, all I could think about was her.

Where was she right now? Was she at home with her parents? Was she out with friends?

Nicholas cleared his throat. “Thank you, everyone,” he said and got to his feet. “Henry will review everything and get back to you if he has questions or changes.”

The room started to clear out. Then it was just the two of us.

“What's going on?” he asked after he closed the door.

“What do you mean?”

“You're not in it,” he said. “I don't think you heard half of what they were saying.”

“I heard them,” I insisted.

“Is this because of her?” he questioned.

“What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about your head not being in the game,” he said. “Let me call her. You two obviously have some stuff to

work out.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Don’t you dare. I have nothing more to say. There is nothing to say. I tried yesterday. She turned her back on me and walked away.”

“She was hurt,” he said.

“Why?” I asked and threw my hands in the air. “What the hell did I do?”

“Nothing,” he said. “It’s complicated.”

“Then un-complicate it,” I told him. “Please. I’m drowning here. I’ve got two dates coming up that I have no date for. She agreed to this. I don’t understand what the problem is.”

“I guess that might be part of the problem,” he said.

“Dammit, Nicholas,” I growled. “You know I don’t know about this shit. I’m not like you or her. I need shit spelled out. I need it said. I can’t read minds. I can’t read emotions like you guys can. Tell me what I’m supposed to fucking do. What the hell did I do that was so bad?”

“Henry, I’d love to help you out here,” he said. “But this is one of those things I can’t. I don’t know what happened or what was said. I don’t know the feelings.”

“Is this really because I was talking to Rachel at the party?” I asked.

He sighed and sat back down. “Okay, I’m going to try and explain what I think might be part of the problem. Mind you, I don’t really know. I’m just going to give you my opinion.”

“Fine. Tell me something. Anything.”

“Izzy is a beautiful woman,” he started. “She’s smart and fun to be around. She laughs easily. She isn’t pretentious. She’s a good egg.”

I was nodding as he spoke. “Yes, I agree.”

“Izzy doesn’t look like Rachel,” he said.

I didn’t understand where he was going. “No. But so? What the hell does that have to do with anything?”

“She doesn’t look like Rachel, who is wealthy and has spent her days being pampered. Rachel is what a lot of people might deem as *pretty*, based on society’s very skewed standards.”

“Man, I have no idea what the hell are you talking about.”

“I’m saying, Izzy doesn’t feel like she belongs in your world,” he said.

“She said that to you?”

“Yes, in a way,” he said.

“In a way?” I asked. “Dammit, Nicholas. I have no time or patience for word games. Just hit me with it. I can take it.”

“She’s a little jealous and possibly a little insecure,” he said. “When she saw you with Rachel, it made her feel like she wasn’t enough.”

“Why in the hell would she think that?” I asked.

“Have you ever told her she was beautiful?”

“You do that enough,” I said.

He groaned and put his head in his hands. “Oh man. You’ve got no game. You’ve got to tell a woman she’s pretty. If you don’t, someone else will. If you don’t, she’s not going to know she is until someone else does. It costs you zero to compliment her.”

I knew he was right. I had known that for a while, but it was hard for me to get the words out. “Okay, so she was jealous. I get that, but I went to the airport to stop her.”

“What did you say when you got to the airport?”

“I told her she couldn’t leave,” I said.

He didn’t look all that convinced. “Let me call her,” he said.

“No.”

“Henry, we need to do something,” he said and got to his feet. “You were much better with her. She was like your other half.”

“Let’s just get this next meeting over with,” I said.

I couldn’t sit around and bellyache about a woman that didn’t want me and yet was jealous. It confused me. She didn’t want me, but she didn’t want me to talk to anyone else. I understood jealousy. I damn well didn’t want her talking to anyone. I couldn’t even begin to think about her fucking around with another man. The very thought turned my stomach.

“Are we done?” I asked at the end of the day.

“We’re done,” Nicholas said. “The car is waiting.”

“And did you get that number for me?”

He handed me a card. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“I’m on the hook for a hundred grand,” I snapped. “Yeah, I want to do this. I need to know what I have to do.”

“Understood,” he said. “I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

I waited until I was home in my big, empty house before I made the call to Della.

“Hello, Mr. Barlow,” she greeted.

“Della,” I said. “I have a bit of a problem.”

“I’m really very sorry,” she said. “I spoke with Isabelle earlier. She told me she was backing out. I don’t understand what happened.”

“That makes two of us,” I said. “What did she tell you?”

“She said she had family obligations and couldn’t fulfill the contract,” she said. “I tried to talk her out of it. I must say, I’ve never had a disgruntled customer. I already have three ladies that are waiting for me to give the word and they can be out there tomorrow.”

“No,” I said a little too quickly. “I don’t need a replacement.”

“Are you sure?” she asked. “I understand you need two more dates.”

“Does this happen often?” I asked.

“Never,” she insisted.

“Did she tell you why?” I pushed.

“Do I need to press her further on why?” she asked in a stern voice. “You were fully aware of the rules. My girls are not to be harmed or abused verbally or otherwise.”

“I swear there was no abuse,” I said. “How much do I owe? Obviously, I shouldn’t have to pay the full hundred thousand.”

“Honestly, Mr. Barlow, nothing.”

“What?” I asked with a scowl.

“Isabelle wants nothing,” she said. “I am still debating whether or not I’m going to require she pay my fee. After all, she broke the contract.”

“You can’t make her pay,” I said quickly.

“She’s putting my good reputation at risk,” she answered.

“Don’t I owe for the ten dates she did make?” I asked. “Ninety thousand?”

“No, Mr. Barlow,” she said again. “Izzy made it explicitly clear she didn’t want your money. She knew she was breaking an agreement.”

“She doesn’t want anything?” I asked.

“No. Nothing. I sent her the paperwork an hour ago. She’s withdrawing from the program.”

I couldn’t believe she was willing to walk away from that kind of money. I knew she needed it. I must have hurt her bad. Really bad.

“Mr. Barlow?”

“Yes?” I asked and snapped my attention back to the conversation.

“I can have a woman there tomorrow,” she said.

“No thank you. I think I’m through with this.”

“Izzy was new,” she said. “She didn’t understand the requirements. I can send you someone who is more experienced and will not disappoint you.”

“No thanks,” I said. “Send over the cancellation paperwork. I’ll sign it.”

“If you change your mind...” she trailed off.

“Thanks, but no thank you,” I said. “I’ll look for the paperwork. Thanks.”

I hung up and stared at the lifeless tree in the living room. The entire house felt empty and shallow without her. The decorations were there, but they looked just the same as anything I’d seen in the stores. It was not the same without her bright smile and energy. The excitement and wonder she felt when she was around the decorations was what made them fun. I felt nothing.

ISABELLE

This was not normal. I loved Christmas. I was born to be festive. I was feeling anything but festive. I was angry and sad. Glum. It seemed impossible to be this out of sorts when I was surrounded by Christmas cheer. I sipped my peppermint cocoa and tried to make it hit the way it should.

“You okay?” my mom asked.

“I’m fine.”

“Izzy, I’m your mother,” she said. “I know you. You came home last night and cried on your dad’s shoulder. I gave you time, but now I see it’s still weighing heavy on your heart.”

I put down the pretty earrings handmade by the young lady sitting at the table. We were at another Christmas fair. This one was at the high school. If I had a hundred grand, I would buy so many things just so I could support the young people trying to make money for school or just to survive.

“I’m fine,” I said again with a smile. “Let’s check out those wooden signs.”

“Isabelle,” she said firmly. “Let’s go to the cafeteria.”

“Mom, I swear, I’m fine,” I insisted.

“I’m not,” she said. “I want some of that potato chowder and a Nanaimo bar.”

That was code for she was going to sit me down and grill me. We walked out of the gym where the tables were set up

and headed for the cafeteria. It was a little strange to be in my old high school. There was a sense of nostalgia as we walked through the halls. I could almost hear the laughter of my fellow students. The complaints of those who bombed a test.

“High school always felt so hard,” I mused aloud. “I remember thinking life was so stressful and difficult. I don’t wish to go back, but I wish I could have the perspective I have now. It would have made things much easier.”

“How so?” she asked.

“Because I wouldn’t have been so stressed out in high school,” I said. “I could have focused on how good it was to have a nice home to go to every night. I would have appreciated having food in the fridge and heat. I feel like I took you guys for granted.”

“You didn’t take us for granted,” she said. “You were a kid. We’re supposed to make sure you have those things.”

We picked up our trays and got in line. “I know. I just think about the things I worry about now versus the things I worried about then. It seems so trivial.”

She offered me a smile. We collected our bowls of soup, crackers, and the fresh cornbread. The Nanaimo bars were at the end. Most people were still out shopping the fair, which meant the cafeteria was relatively empty. We found a table and sat down.

“Tell me about Henry,” she said.

“Mom,” I groaned. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“You know, I’ve had my heart broken before,” she said. “I might have some sound advice. Your father is a good shoulder to lean on, but I have the woman’s perspective.”

I took a deep breath. “Henry and I aren’t a thing. Not anymore. We never were.”

“What do you mean you never were?” she asked.

“Mom, I have to tell you something and I think you’re probably not going to believe it,” I said. “It’s true. I’m ashamed of it, but it’s true.”

“What?”

“I was working as an escort,” I blurted out.

She started choking. She patted on her chest and reached for the bottle of water. “An escort?” she squeaked.

“I’m sure you’re thinking of Julia Roberts right now,” I said. “Not that kind of an escort. It’s actually a very common, professional practice. Men and women work as escorts, sometimes referred to as professional dates.”

“Izzy, you have to give me a second to process this,” she said. “I’m not looking down on you and I’m not ashamed. I’m just trying to get my head around this.”

“It wasn’t a sex thing,” I said. “He wasn’t paying me for sex. I was just supposed to pretend to be his girlfriend. I had my own room and all that.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “Okay. But I think we both know this thing between the two of you went a little farther than a professional date.”

“Yes, it did.” I sighed.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” she said. “Tell me how you met him.”

“We met through a service called Faux’s. He needed a date for twelve parties. He needed to soften his image. His assistant, Nicholas, said he was basically known as a young Scrooge. Henry doesn’t smile a lot or interact with anyone all that much. People were worried his aloof personality would eventually trickle down and turn away guests.”

“That’s stupid,” she said bluntly.

“Yes, probably, but he’s trying to expand his hotel chain and wanted to woo some investors.”

She slowly nodded as she ate her soup. “And that’s where you came in.”

“Yes. He bought me a bunch of fancy dresses. I got dressed up and shook a lot of hands. I smiled and nodded, and

as it turns out, it worked. He's got more investors than he knows what to do with."

"Good job." She smiled.

"Yes, great job," I muttered.

"What else did you guys do?" she asked. "You were gone a week. You weren't always schmoozing, were you?"

I couldn't stop the smile. Once I got started, I couldn't stop. I told her all about our week in Chicago. I showed her the pictures I took. Every time I pulled one up, I was transported back to Chicago and remembered how I felt in each moment.

"It was fun," I said after I told her my story. My cheeks hurt a little from all the smiling.

"And at some point, the professional job turned into something very different," she said.

"I don't know how it happened," I said. "How can I feel like the sun sets and rises with this man? I've only known him a couple of weeks. I don't even really know him all that well. I mean I do, but usually this takes months. I can't explain it."

"Sounds like you fell for him," she said. "Maybe even in love with him. I'm a firm believer in soulmates or a version of it. I think our hearts recognize a kindred soul. When you have that kind of chemistry from the very beginning, it only gets better. You have to work at it sometimes, but you already have the key that so many relationships don't have."

"I don't know," I said with a shake of my head. "I think it was the situation."

"Playing pretend felt a little too real?" she asked.

"Yes. It was so easy."

"Again, that's the chemistry. That is something you can't fake or work at. It is or it isn't."

"But he's him and I'm me," I said. "What good is chemistry if it can't work?"

"Why can't it work?" she asked.

“Because,” I answered. “He’s this rich, successful man with the world at his fingertips. I’m me.”

“What specifically is keeping you from being with him?” she pushed. “Does he feel the same about you?”

“No, I don’t think he does,” I admitted. It hurt to say it, but it was the truth.

“Hon, I saw those pictures and the way he is looking at you in each of them,” she said. “That’s a man enamored with his lady.”

“I’m not his lady,” I reminded her. “He was paying me to be his pretend girlfriend.”

“But something changed,” she said. “Look at those pictures. You two had fun together. I’m guessing other areas of your relationship were just as good.”

She wasn’t naïve. It was pretty clear what happened between us. “Yes,” I confessed. “It confused things. I knew it would. I shouldn’t have.”

“Why not?” She shooed her hand. “You’re young and found a man you can spend time with and have fun.”

“It sucks because even if we wanted to be together, we can’t,” I said.

“Why can’t you?”

“We’re so different,” I said. “We are on two different paths in life.”

“There are always going to be reasons why you can’t be together,” she said. “You can always find an excuse not to work at something.”

“Mom, he’s going to be traveling the world, opening hotels,” I told her. “That’s not exactly conducive to starting a relationship.”

“If you care about him, really care, you find a way to make it work,” she said. “If you love this man, you have to be willing to bend a little. You know what I’ve always said about being a willow and not an oak.”

“Mom, if it’s one-sided, it doesn’t work,” I said. “He told me I couldn’t leave because he didn’t want me to break the contract I signed. That’s all this was to him. He needed me for a job. He was upset I was leaving him hanging.”

“I think you might need to give him a chance to tell you how he feels,” she said. “He might have an opinion.”

“Henry isn’t like that,” I said. “He’s used to being alone. He doesn’t really know how to be in a relationship.”

“It’s not like there’s a manual,” she said. “Well, technically there is but not really. You have to do what your heart tells you to do. Don’t overthink it. Take some time and think about your future. Do you see him in it?”

“I don’t know.” I shook my head. “I haven’t thought about it.”

“I think you have to do that,” she said. “You had a great week and you seemed to be really happy with him. Your father and I were so happy for you. We want you to find your someone special. You give so much to your education that you don’t have anything left for you.”

“I will worry about all that stuff later,” I told her. “I don’t think I have the time or energy to be in a relationship right now. I’m starting clinicals and then residency.”

“Maybe you should take the summer off and explore this thing with him,” she said. “You could travel with him. If it looks like things are going in the right direction, you go for it. You find a way to make it work. It might not be the dream relationship that allows you to spend all your time together, but like you’ve said, your almost through med school. Residency will be hard, but you’ll have a more consistent schedule.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t even know if he’d want something like that. You should see the way women look at him. They’re all so pretty and rich and perfect.”

“Honey! You’re gorgeous and perfect. Money doesn’t matter. If it does, then he isn’t worth it.”

“I don’t think he cares about the money,” I said. “Not really. I just meant they’re all so refined. They are comfortable with the schmoozing. They know everyone. They know what to say. I’m like a duck out of water.”

“I doubt that for a second,” she said. “You’re very good with people.”

“I did do okay,” I said with a smile. “Most of the events were fun, but there were some very uptight people sometimes. I don’t think I fit in with his crowd.”

“It doesn’t sound like he fits in either,” she said.

She made a good point. “I don’t know,” I said. “I think he’s got enough on his plate right now. I don’t want to make it any worse.”

She nodded in understanding. “Okay. We’re here for you.”

HENRY

I climbed out of the SUV and looked toward the front doors of my hotel. I wasn't looking forward to this. I would have preferred to stay home and drink until I passed out. This sucked. Nothing felt the same without her. I had never felt like this before in my life. I'd been through some shit, but this was different. This was all-consuming.

I couldn't sleep. I didn't want to eat. I didn't give a shit about opening a new hotel. Nothing felt right. I even tried turning on the lights on the Christmas tree to see if it made me feel better. It didn't. The lights seemed less bright. They didn't twinkle as brightly. They weren't as pretty as they had been when she was there.

My food didn't taste as good. The pretty-smelling pinecones she put on the table didn't smell right anymore. Nothing was right. I wanted Izzy. Walking into the hotel ballroom by myself absolutely sucked. I missed having her on my arm. Now that I was doing it alone, I realized she made everything better. I kind of liked when people looked at us. I liked that people admired me because she was on my arm.

Nicholas approached me. "You showed," he said.

"Of course."

"You're thirty minutes late," he pointed out. "You're never late. I was worried something happened."

"I'm here now," I said.

"Is everything okay?" he asked.

“No.”

“Is this about Izzy?” he asked.

“Don’t try to shrink me,” I told him. “I’m here. Let’s just get this over with.”

He knew better than to press me. “I’ll get you a drink,” he said and disappeared.

“Henry,” I heard my name.

I turned to see a couple I’d met a couple of weeks ago. Actually, I met them the first night Izzy had been with me. “Hello,” I greeted with a forced smile.

“Where’s Izzy?” the woman asked.

“She’s not here tonight,” I said.

“Oh, that’s too bad,” she said. “I was hoping to talk to her again. She’s a lovely woman and so smart. It’s not often you meet women like her at places like this. It’s so nice to have a conversation with someone about something other than vacationing in the Hamptons or shopping in Paris.”

“I’m sorry. I hope you’ll be able to have a good time without Izzy,” I teased.

She laughed. “I suppose I’ll just have to try.”

Nicholas reappeared with two drinks. He put one in my hand. “Drink. You look like you need it.”

“I’m not staying for long,” I said. “I can’t.”

“I’m going to ask a direct question and you’re going to tell me to fuck off, but hear me out,” he said.

“What?” I growled.

He pulled me away from the crowd. “Did you talk to her?” he asked.

“No.”

“Henry, you need to talk to her. This is not going to work.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“You’re a hot mess,” he said. “You need to settle this.”

“I’m here,” I said. “I’m fine. I’ve done this before. I’m not sniveling in the corner.”

“I’m going to do some preemptive damage control,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“You and Izzy made quite a splash,” he said. “Far more than I realized. People have been talking about you two. You’ve graduated to royalty status. Her not being here tonight is going to cause some rumors. You’re going to be asked about it. We need to come up with a statement or it’s going to start the gossip mill churning and not in a good way.”

“This is so fucking stupid,” I hissed. “I never should have let you talk me into this. It’s blowing up in my face.”

“It was working fine until you pissed her off,” he snapped.

My brow shot up. “Excuse me?”

“Sorry,” he muttered. “Do you want to tell people she’s sick? We could say she had a prior obligation.”

I hated that I had to say anything at all. It was my business. This was why I never got into the social side of business. “The latter,” I said.

“Good plan.” He nodded. “Anyone that did get to meet her knows she was all about family. We’ll say she had plans with her parents.”

“And then what?” I asked. “What happens when she disappears from my life?”

“We’ll deal with that then,” he said. “For now, we’ll keep with the story she’s busy with her residency. It might just go away on its own.”

“Fine.”

“But you can’t look like someone kicked your puppy,” he muttered.

“What?”

“You have to pull yourself together,” he said. “You can be bummed she wasn’t able to be here tonight, but you can’t act like you are crushed. Unless you want to come right out and tell everyone she dumped you. I guess you could work the sympathy angle.”

“I don’t want to work an angle,” I growled. “I don’t want to talk about it or her or whatever. Let’s just get through this night.”

“Drink. I’ll get you another one,” he said as we headed back into the fray.

I made my rounds. I smiled and shook hands and repeated the same lie explaining Izzy’s absence. I never realized how impressive she was. I knew she made an impact on my life but didn’t know her personality impressed everyone.

“Hi, Henry,” Rachel said.

I pulled back. She was the reason I was in this mess. “Hello, Rachel. I didn’t know you were coming.”

“After our conversation in Chicago, I just had to see this place for myself.” She smiled. “It really is stunning.”

“Thank you.”

She made a big show of looking around the room. “I don’t see the girl you were with the other night. Is she here?”

I knew catty when I heard it. Calling her a girl was supposed to somehow diminish who she was in my life.

“Izzy is not here tonight,” I said. “She had plans she couldn’t break.”

“Really? I heard there was trouble in paradise.”

“I don’t know where you would hear that,” I said. “My girlfriend doesn’t have to be by my side all the time. She’s a strong, independent woman with a family that wants her around. I have to share her.”

“Share her?” she asked. “What about you? Does she share you?”

I now understood why Izzy had been so put off by Rachel. She was making her intentions very clear. I missed them the other night, but clearly, Izzy had not. “I want Izzy and only Izzy,” I said.

The words fell out before I could think about them. I did want her. She was mine. I didn’t want Rachel. I didn’t want Izzy to think I wanted Rachel. “Really?” she asked with a wrinkled nose. “I wouldn’t have guessed that.”

She was being a bitch. For the first time in forever, my eyes were clear. There had been a shift in me I didn’t even know was happening until just this very moment. “I don’t think you got the chance to talk to her,” I said. “If you did, you would know she’s an amazing woman. She’s incredibly smart, but she doesn’t make you feel like an idiot. She’s generous and kind. Not fake nice, but truly kind. It’s really unfortunate you two didn’t talk. I think you might be able to see why I want to be with her. She’s the kind of woman that makes a man want to give up everything just to be with her.”

Rachel looked stunned. “You didn’t seem to be that enamored with her earlier this week,” she said.

She wasn’t willing to give up, which was fine. I would make it very clear. “I’m sorry you got that impression.” I shrugged.

“Didn’t she walk out on you in Chicago?” she asked.

“She came home to Aspen,” I said.

“Huh, that night when she left the bar, it looked like you guys had a fight.”

“Rachel, I think you’re misinformed about this and a lot of things as a matter of fact,” I said and didn’t care if she went and told her daddy. I didn’t need her money or his. “We had a conversation based on my needs for my business, but I think I’ve had a change of heart. I’m not interested.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’m not interested in going into business with your family,” I said. “Nothing personal, but I’ve got the capital I need.”

“Are you upset with me because I questioned your relationship with that woman?” she said in a haughty tone.

“Not at all,” I said with no anger. “I don’t care what you think about my relationship with *my* woman. That’s something else you didn’t get to learn about Izzy. She’s nothing like the people in this room. She’s her own woman. She knows what she wants out of life and she’s going after it while making the lives of the people around her just a little better. For a long time, I was stuck behind a desk. I was so focused on crunching numbers and making more money, I forgot I was supposed to be living. She came into my life and shook it all up. That’s why I’m with her. I’m not letting her get away. And she would never be jealous of someone that doesn’t come close to her in every way.”

Rachel sneered. It was a half-smile, half-scowl. “If I didn’t know any better, Henry, I’d think you were insulting me. It almost sounds like you’re suggesting this Izzy person is better than I am.”

I leaned forward. “It wasn’t a suggestion,” I said and walked away.

I was headed for the door. None of this mattered. I didn’t need to stand around and kiss the asses of these people. They didn’t matter. Izzy mattered. I should have seen it before. I hoped like hell I had not totally ruined my chances with her.

“Woah,” Nicholas stepped in front of me. “What the hell just happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“Uh, Rachel looks like she wants to claw your eyes out.”

“I don’t care,” I replied.

“Where are you going?”

“Home.”

“Henry,” he said in a warning tone.

I shook my head. “Nope. I can’t do it. Not anymore. I have to talk to Izzy. I see it now. I didn’t see it before.”

“What do you see now?” he asked.

“All of it. Everything. I’ve been an idiot.”

“I’d like to argue with you on that, but I think I’m going to need context,” he said.

“Rachel,” I said with a shake of my head. “I didn’t see her the same way you guys saw her. I just assumed she was interested in investing some of that trust fund. I can’t believe I let Izzy think there was something going there.”

“And now what?”

“And now I know I want Izzy,” I said and looked at him. “I want her and I’m going to have her.”

“Uh, you might want to clear that with her,” he said.

“I need your help.”

“For what?” he asked.

I pulled his arm and dragged him out of the ballroom. “I need you to find her. I have to talk to her. I need to tell her I want her. Not because of a contract, but I want her.”

He was smiling. “I think that’s something you should tell her.”

“I will.”

“You know where she lives,” he reminded me.

“But it would be better if you could feel things out for me.”

He slowly shook his head. “Nope. Not in this. Sorry, you’re on your own. It’s not going to mean shit if you send me in to soften her up. If you want to talk to her and tell her how you really feel, do it. Do it right. Don’t be a coward.”

“I’m not a coward,” I shot back.

“Then get your shit together and figure out how you fix this,” he said bluntly.

“Tonight?” I asked.

“It’s after ten,” he said with a grimace. “Maybe you try tomorrow. You don’t want to piss off her parents by showing up too late.”

“Good point,” I agreed. “What’s my schedule tomorrow?”

He grinned. “It just cleared up. Except for the party tomorrow. I suppose I could put out some kind of statement you’re sick.”

“No, don’t do that. Not yet. I’d like to take her, assuming she’ll go with me.”

He was still smiling. “Good plan. Good luck. I’m rooting for the two of you.”

“Thanks,” I said and headed for the doors. I had a lot of thinking to do and couldn’t do it surrounded by people. I needed peace.

““Oh no!” I gasped and waved away the cloud of flour that exploded in my face.

“What happened?” my mom asked. Then she looked at me and exploded in laughter. “Oh, my goodness. What did you do?”

“I was opening the bag of flour and I dropped it,” I complained and wiped the flour from my face.

“I see that.” She smiled.

“Do I look like a pastry chef yet?” I asked.

“Between the flour on your face and the apron, you’ve got it nailed,” she said.

“Well good,” I said dryly. “I don’t want to do anything half-assed.”

The oven timer went off, indicating the cookies in the oven were ready. “I’ll get them,” she said.

She grabbed the hot pad and pulled out the tray of sugar cookies. We were in full cookie mode. The plates would be delivered to neighbors and friends this evening. Usually, we did this a little earlier in the holiday, but with all the Henry drama, things had been hectic. Getting back into the normal routine was helpful. I could focus on the cookies and not Henry.

“It smells good in here,” my dad said as he walked into the kitchen. “Glad we got this fancy kitchen so you ladies could

do all this baking.”

He snatched one of the cookies that had been frosted and decorated. “Hey!” Mom protested. “We just finished those!”

“And boy are they good!” he said.

“You get your grubby little hands out of my kitchen,” she scolded.

The doorbell rang and she chased him out while flapping a towel. I was laughing as I measured flour into a large mixing bowl as we started on the next batch of cookies. I could hear my dad talking to someone and assumed it was a neighbor bringing over a tray of cookies. That was how it was. Cookies came in and cookies went out.

“Ladies, we have a guest,” my dad said.

“Oh,” my mom gasped.

I was mixing flour and other dry ingredients and turned to see who it was. My eyes bulged when I saw Henry. I dropped the bowl and flour sprayed all over me once again. “Henry!”

“Oh, Izzy,” my mom chided and quickly came to my aid. She picked up the bowl that fortunately fell straight down and didn’t dump out.

“Hi,” Henry said with a small smile.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“I was hoping we could talk,” he said.

“Go,” Mom said. “I’ll take care of this. You take this.” She handed me a dish towel. “Go. You two go in the living room. Your father will help me in the kitchen.”

I looked at her and tried to tell her no. “Thank you,” Henry said.

I walked toward the living room with my father right behind me. “Mr. Sharpe!” my mother scolded.

My dad stopped walking. “What?”

“Get the broom, please,” she snapped.

“Izzy?” my dad said in a low voice.

“I’m okay,” I assured him.

He nodded and left me and Henry to walk alone into the living room. I wiped away the flour from my face and neck the best I could. I had a feeling I was just spreading it around.

“What are you doing here?” I asked him.

“Can we sit?” he asked.

“I’m not sure I should sit on the furniture,” I muttered.

He sat down on the couch on the end closest to the fireplace my dad had just stoked. I sat down on the opposite end. It was leather and would be easily cleaned.

“How are you?” Henry asked.

“Fine,” I said. “I’m making cookies. It’s part of our traditions. That makes me happy.”

“Good.”

“Henry, what are you doing here?” I asked him. “I told Della it was over. I pulled out of the contract.”

“I’m not here about that,” he said. “I came to apologize.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” I said. “This was all a mistake from the get-go. I’m sorry I couldn’t fulfill my end of the deal. It’s why I told Della I didn’t want any money.”

“I’m apologizing for my behavior Sunday night,” he said. “I wasn’t thinking. It didn’t occur to me at the time, but I see it now.”

“See what?”

“I made you feel like you were just a job,” he said. “I was talking to Rachel and ignoring you. Rachel was flirting but I’m such an idiot, it didn’t dawn on me until last night what she was doing. I don’t pay a lot of attention to people’s mannerisms. I get very focused on the conversation and ignore the other stuff.”

“She’s a pretty woman and you’re a handsome guy,” I said with a shrug. “It’s only natural.”

“I don’t care what she looks like,” he said. “You’re the one I want.”

“What?” I asked with confusion.

“I didn’t treat you like you should have been treated,” he said. “I went into this thing with the sole intention of getting through the month. I never expected anything to come of it. Then things shifted. We decorated the house and spent time together. I felt like I got to know you. I opened up to you like I’ve never opened up to anyone else. Things evolved. I didn’t recognize it until you were gone.”

I stared at him and tried to tell my heart to stop fluttering. “Okay.”

“You’re not just a job,” he said. “That contract doesn’t mean shit. I forgot about that last week. I know we’ve got some stuff to work out, but this thing is real for me.”

“I think it’s complicated,” I said.

“Complicated isn’t a bad thing,” he said. “It’s complicated but not impossible. We have something good here. I know you know it. It would be a shame for us to walk away from this thing without giving it a chance.”

“What is this thing?” I asked him. “You keep saying it’s a thing. Tell me. I need to hear you say it.”

He scooted over a few inches on the sofa and took my hands in his. “You’re making this difficult.”

I offered him a small smile. “I just want to make sure there is no confusion. Last week, I thought I knew what we were doing. Then you made it very clear at the airport.”

“At the airport?” he asked with confusion. “I asked you to stay.”

“No, you said I couldn’t leave.”

“Yeah.” He nodded. “Exactly.”

“You said I couldn’t leave, which I took to mean I couldn’t leave because we had a contract,” I said. “That’s not the same

as asking me to stay because you wanted me to stay for you. You said I couldn't leave, like I was indebted to you."

He dropped his head. "I didn't use the right words," he said. "I wanted you to stay. I didn't want you to leave. It wasn't because of the contract. It was me. I should have chosen my words better."

"Henry, I'm sorry, but I'm having a hard time understanding all this," I told him.

"Let me try to make it very clear," he said. He paused for several seconds. "I think I'm falling in love with you. Hell, I think I already fell. I know this wasn't part of the plan. This whole thing started as a basic contract. I never thought it would go like this. I never knew it was possible to feel like this. It certainly wasn't part of the plan."

"You can say that again," I murmured.

"Plans are never concrete," he said with that soft smile I remembered so well. "I think it's something I've had a hard time accepting. I've been so goal orientated, I forgot how to live. I've put way too much focus on being successful. When you came into my life, I didn't see you for who you were. I saw you as another part of my path to success. This happened. You happened. I'm a little slow, but I'm here now."

"Oh, Henry," I sighed. "I don't know what to say. I don't want to think. It's all so overwhelming."

"I don't want to overwhelm you," he said. "I had to tell you how I felt. I realized a lot a little too late. I don't expect you to say or do anything. I want you to think about it. There's a lot to process. I'm still trying to figure it out. I'm telling you I have feelings for you. Real feelings. I'm falling in love with you. You've had me watching Christmas movies and I guess it inspired me. What better time of year to fall in love than Christmas?"

Tears sprang to my eyes. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. "Are you serious?" I whispered.

"I am."

I couldn't stop myself from lunging at him. I threw my arms around his neck and kissed him. He pulled me into his arms and kissed me back. It would be easy to let this get out of hand on my parents' couch with them in the kitchen. I couldn't let that happen.

I pulled back and put my hand on his cheek. "Thank you for going through the trouble to tell me all of this to my face."

"I wanted to see you," he said. "I had to tell you how I felt."

"Oh gosh!" I gasped.

"What's wrong?"

"Me too!" I blurted out.

"What?" he asked with confusion.

"Me too. I think I have fallen for you. I'm crazy about you."

He grinned. "Good, because this would be really awkward if you didn't."

I laughed and slapped his thigh. "Aren't you supposed to be getting ready for the final party tonight?" I asked.

"We," he said. "We're supposed to be getting ready."

"You want me to go with you?"

"Yes, please." He nodded.

"Is this part of the contract?" I asked.

"I'm asking you to go with me as my date," he said. "As my girlfriend."

"Go!" I heard my dad say.

"Stop it," my mom hushed him.

"Actually, Mr. and Mrs. Sharpe, I'd like to invite you as well," Henry said and got to his feet.

Dad appeared in the living room with mom coming in behind him. "To a Christmas party?" she asked.

“Yes. I’d be honored to have you as my special guests. I know it’s short notice. If you need something to wear, I can make a call and one of the shops in town can have something here within an hour.”

Mom was beaming. “Oh goodness, you don’t have to do that.”

“Will you guys go?” I asked them.

Mom and Dad exchanged a look. “Is it formal?” my dad asked.

“Semi-formal,” Henry answered.

“I suppose we can make cookies any day of the week,” my mom said. “We don’t get out nearly enough.”

I clapped my hands. “You’re going to love it,” I told them before turning to Henry. “Thank you.”

“It’s my pleasure,” he said. “Last night I told people I had to share my girl with her family. I don’t want to share, and I don’t want you to feel like you’re missing out on holiday family time. I want the best of both worlds.”

“We’d love to go,” Mom said again. “Izzy, walk him out and then help me find something to wear.”

I walked Henry out to the waiting SUV and gave him a proper kiss. “Thank you so much,” I told him. “I think you just made their night. Hell, their month. They’ve been curious about your hotel. I’m so glad I get to share this with them.”

“You’re welcome and I feel like a total asshole for not asking you all to join me last night.”

“All of that is in the past,” I told him. “This is a step forward. New beginnings and all that.”

“I’m looking forward to it,” he said. “I’ll send the limo for you in two hours. Is that enough time?”

“Yes.” I nodded and gave him another kiss.

HENRY

I climbed out of the limo and walked along the path lined with snowmen lights. The entire front yard of the Sharpe house was adorned with lights and various figures. I knocked on the door. Her father answered wearing a black suit with a blue tie.

“Henry.” He nodded. “Come in. The ladies will be right out.”

Izzy came out first and walked directly into my arms. “You’re beautiful,” I said. “You take my breath away. I should have told you every other time we did this. I wanted to. I thought it. I just didn’t say it. I’m saying it now.”

“Thank you,” she said. “You’re very handsome.”

“Okay,” her mother said and stepped into the room wearing a pretty green dress.

I watched her parents kiss and hug. This was a normal family. I liked that her parents were so in love. “You both look great,” I said. “Shall we go?”

We got into the limo and opened a bottle of champagne. This was much better. I liked being a part of a group. I could feel the love. This was something I could get used to. We walked through the hotel lobby, but Mrs. Sharpe stopped to take pictures of the tree.

Tonight’s event was in the main ballroom that was generally used for luxurious weddings. The doors were open. We stepped through the arch of white branches wrapped with

lights. It was similar to the other parties we'd been to, but there was a little something extra.

“Snow!” Izzy gasped. “It’s snowing. Warm snow!”

I smiled and pulled her against me. “Is it a winter wonderland?” I asked.

Her mother was in awe. “Can I take pictures in here?” she asked.

“You can, but maybe avoid taking pictures of people,” I suggested.

“Of course,” she said.

“This is so pretty,” Izzy said. “Look at the chandeliers!”

The lights were drizzled in icicles, giving it a very icy appearance. Blue lights aimed at the floor softened the lighting. The fake snow clung to the hems of the ladies’ gowns. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. There was a festiveness in the air that hadn’t been present at the other parties. Or maybe I didn’t feel it. I felt it now. I had the magic of Christmas pumping through my veins.

“Oh look, there’s the Wilsons,” her mother exclaimed. “Do you guys mind?”

“Go, Mom,” Izzy said. “Have fun. Get some of the champagne. It’s amazing.”

“We will,” her dad said. “Thank you for this, Henry. You’ve made her night. We are very grateful for the chance to be here and to see our little girl get to be a princess.”

“You’re welcome,” I said.

I had a feeling we were going to get along very well. Izzy stepped around me with her arms resting around my waist. “You’re amazing,” she said with a smile.

“I am?” I asked and brushed a stray hair away from her cheek.

“You are. Thank you again for inviting them. They can’t invest in your hotels, but they can certainly talk you up around Aspen.”

“I don’t want them to invest,” I said. “Besides, tonight isn’t full of investors. It’s hotel staff and their families. Hotel guests are invited but I don’t expect a lot of them to show up.”

“It’s just beautiful in here tonight,” she said. “Just everything I expect a Christmas Eve to be. It’s better than any movie I’ve ever watched.”

“I’m glad you like it,” I said. “Let’s get a drink.”

I grabbed two glasses from a passing waiter. “Should we toast?” she asked.

“To?”

“Us.” She smiled. “I know we’ve got stuff to work out, but tonight is special. It’s the first real night out for us.”

“Our first date?” I teased just as her parents walked by.

“And we’re chaperoned.” She giggled.

“They look happy, and they appear to know everyone,” I said.

“Yes, they do,” she said. “I should have warned you. You can also be assured they are telling everyone they talk to we are together.”

“I don’t care,” I said with a shake of my head. “I’ll shout it from the rooftops.”

Just then, Rachel drifted by. I felt Izzy stiffen. I leaned down and kissed her to drive home my point. When I lifted my head, Rachel was gone.

“What was that for?” she murmured.

“I just want you to know I only have eyes for you. Only you. There is no other woman that interests me in the slightest. You’re the only woman I want. I’m not tempted in the least.”

“You’re here!” Nicholas interrupted.

“I’m here,” Izzy said. “So are my parents.”

“No way!” he exclaimed. “I can’t wait to meet them.”

“Trust me, you won’t be able to not meet them,” she said. “They’ll find you.”

Nicholas looked at me. “Does this mean you two talked?” he asked with his eyebrows bobbing up and down.

“We talked,” I said.

“Is this a thing?” he pushed.

“It is,” Izzy said.

“I knew it.” Nicholas grinned. “I knew it!”

“Don’t gloat,” I said. “It’s rude.”

“I’m happy for the two of you,” he said. “This means I can officially be off for the night. I don’t have to run interference. I don’t have to make excuses for absences. I’m off. It’s my turn to find myself a lady. I think I might find one in this pool of ladies.”

“Do not embarrass me or the hotel,” I warned.

“Not at all.” He winked and walked away.

“Did I mention how much you were missed last night?” I asked.

“No, you didn’t.”

“It was rough,” I said. “Everyone wanted to know where my better half was. One couple told me you were a breath of fresh air. They said it was nice to talk to someone who could have a conversation about stuff other than vacation houses and shopping.”

She smiled. “I’m glad I could change things up for them.”

“After being here alone last night, I realized how empty my life was without you,” I told her. “Nothing felt right without you to share it with.”

“Ah, I’m sorry,” she said. “I hate that you were feeling bad.”

“Trust me, I think I should have felt bad,” I said. “I had to feel bad in order to get some clarity. I’ve told you before, I’m not good at this kind of thing. I don’t do social interaction very well. I’m an idiot.”

“You’re not an idiot,” she clarified. “You’re a man that has never had the safety net that allowed you to open yourself up to different emotions. I don’t blame you.”

“You should,” I insisted. “I hate that I hurt your feelings.”

“I can be a little sensitive,” she said with a laugh. “Add in the alcohol and I let my feelings get bruised. It was my own insecurities. I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“I’m going to make sure you never feel insecure again,” I told her.

The same couple from the night before approached us. “Izzy,” the woman said. “I’m so happy to see you here tonight. We missed you last night.”

“I’m glad to be here,” Izzy said. “He really outdid himself tonight, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did,” she said.

The couple chatted a few minutes before drifting away. The next hour was spent chatting with new people and familiar faces. Izzy introduced me to a number of the families she knew. Her parents came and went. They were clearly enjoying themselves.

“What do you normally do on Christmas Eve?” I asked her.

“Watch movies and usually we open a gift. We sit around the fire with all the lights on. It’s not fancy but it’s just being able to spend time together.”

“It sounds nice,” I said.

“It is. Sometimes we’ll go to a neighbor’s for a drink or whatever, but we always end up in the living room together.”

She was smiling as she talked. She talked about her parents with such love and respect. That was part of what made her so special and attractive. People were drawn to her down-to-earth demeanor. She was the real girl next door and smart as a whip.

After a couple of hours of merrymaking, I felt like I’d had enough. I needed to get her alone. “Would you like to go back

to my place tonight?" I asked her. "I can have you back to your house first thing in the morning."

"I think my parents will understand if we decide to take some time together," she said.

"I don't want to get in the way of your holiday traditions," I told her.

"It's fine," she said. "Let me talk to them."

"I'll call for a ride," I said.

I found Nicholas flirting with some unsuspecting woman and managed to pull him away. "We're leaving," I told him.

"You and Izzy?"

"Yes." I nodded. "Make sure this gets shut down at midnight. I don't want anyone to work late."

"I will," he said. "Assuming I don't sneak away before then."

I looked at the woman he'd been talking to. She was now talking to another man. "Yeah, good luck with that."

He looked over. "Dammit. I blame you. You interrupted my game."

"Sorry, and good luck," I said. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," he replied. "Although I think your Christmas is going to be a little merrier than mine."

"I know it will be," I said and walked to Izzy.

We said our goodbyes to her parents and left the hotel. The ride out to my house was comfortable. I wished we had the limo. It would have afforded more privacy. When we got to my house, the first thing she did was turn on all the lights. Now it looked festive.

"It's so pretty in here," she said and followed me into the kitchen.

"It's pretty now," I said. "Before you were here, it wasn't."

"I think you should start a fire," she said. "It's cozy."

“Your wish is my command,” I said.

She was leaning with her elbow on the counter and watching me. “I love it in here,” she said. “Your home is gorgeous. A little personal touch would go a long way.”

“I think that’s your job,” I said and shrugged out of my jacket.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she said.

“Wine?” I asked.

“Yes, please,” she answered. “Are you going to take me into your secret lair?”

“Absolutely,” I said and took her hand.

I led her into the cellar and let her look around. “This is insane!” she squealed. “I’ve seen these kinds of things in the movies. I didn’t know they were real.”

“It was part of the house,” I told her. “I didn’t really see the need for it, but it’s pretty cool. I’ve made good use of it.”

She was running her hands across the bottles holstered in the bottle holders. “How do you pick?”

“Honestly, I just go with whatever sounds good,” I said. “I’m not really an aficionado.”

“Let’s go with a red,” she said.

“Help yourself.”

We selected a bottle and carried it upstairs. While I opened the wine, she turned on the TV and went right to the Christmas station. She slipped off her heels and glided toward me. “I’m so happy to be here.”

“It’s snowing,” I said as I stared out the window into the backyard.

“Again?” he asked.

“Yes.” I turned around and smiled. “It’s Christmas Eve. It’s supposed to snow.”

He joined me at the window. “Feeling frisky?” he asked.

I giggled softly. “That’s bold.”

“I meant do you want to get in the hot tub?” he said.

“Oh, I’ve created a monster.”

“I suppose you have,” he said. “I’m thinking a dip in the hot tub with snow falling might be just what we need to end this night.”

“Taking it back to where it all started?” I asked.

“I guess you could look at it like that.”

“Yes,” I said. “I’ll grab the wine.”

“I’ll get a couple of robes. I don’t want you to freeze your cute little ass off when you get out. Oh, and by the way, we’re going *au naturale*.”

“Oh, you are feeling frisky,” I said.

I unzipped my dress and let it fall to the floor before hanging it over the back of a chair. Getting naked in front of him was becoming second nature to me. I liked it. Mostly because I liked when he was naked, and I got to check out his

hot body. Never in my life had I ever really felt sexy, like really sexy. Like most women, I had those moments when I could really be hard on myself. When I was with him, I felt like I was one of the Victoria's Secret angels strutting down the catwalk with nothing but a G-string on.

"Damn, woman!" he exclaimed when he came back into the room. "You didn't waste any time."

"Last one in is a rotten egg," I teased before walking outside.

The cold was a bit of a shock. I gasped and rushed to the hot tub. I was silently scolding myself for not taking off the cover before getting naked. My bare feet danced over the cold cement as I walked to the wall to turn it on. The tub bubbled to life.

"Fuck!" Henry exclaimed. "It's damn cold out here! What are you doing? Get in the water!"

He was running across the patio toward me in all his naked glory. He quickly turned on the patio heater before practically diving into the tub. I was a little more ladylike as I climbed in and sank in all the way to my chin. He pulled me close to him and held me tight.

"Maybe this wasn't my best idea," he said. "I think my little guy crawled way up inside."

I burst into laughter. "We'll work on that. I can't say that's at the top of my mind right now."

It didn't take long for the cold to be pushed away by the hot water. We settled in with our glasses of wine in hand. "Tonight was good," he said.

"It was incredible," I told him. "My parents were having a good time. I'm thinking they are going to be closing the place down."

"I'm glad they enjoyed themselves," he said.

"What about you?" I asked. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

"I did. Last night when I was there alone, I realized I had actually enjoyed myself at several of the parties we attended.

But last night, it sucked. I hated not having you there. I don't want to do it again."

"Do you plan on attending a lot more parties?" I asked him.

"No!" I said vehemently. "I think I'm partied out. I got the investors I needed. I think I'm good."

"I think you've made some new friends," I told him. "Several people I met tonight seemed genuinely interested in you and your career."

"It's weird because I've never had a very high opinion of any of those people. You made me see them differently."

"I'm happy I could help," I said. "I know it's hard, but I think you're ready to start letting down that wall a little. People really do want to know you. It doesn't hurt to have friends. I'm not suggesting you trust everyone, but don't immediately distrust everyone."

"I'll work on it," he said.

We sipped our wine in silence. I could hear the music from inside. The moment was perfect. This was what life was supposed to be about. There was supposed to be these quiet moments that didn't require conversation. It was about reflecting on the day while feeling safe and loved.

"Should we go inside?" he asked.

"Sure," I said with a sigh.

I felt so relaxed. I didn't have a care in the world. I climbed out and was met with a thick robe. He wrapped it around me before quickly putting on his own. We rushed inside and immediately went to the fireplace to get warmed up.

"Warm?" he asked.

"Getting there," I said as I snuggled against him.

"You know what?"

"What?" I asked and turned my head to look at him.

“This is the first Christmas Eve since I was sixteen that I haven’t been alone,” he said.

When he said things like that, it twisted my heart into knots. “You’re with me now,” I said and patted his chest. “I plan on making sure you don’t spend another Christmas Eve alone again.”

“Thanks.”

While we sat and stared at the fire mingling with the twinkling lights, my favorite song came on. “Oh, this is our song,” he said and pushed me up.

“What?”

He stood up, pulled me into his arms, and began to sway. “This is the song you love, right?”

“Yes, it is.” I smiled. “I’m surprised you remember.”

“I don’t forget much of anything. You said you caught your parents dancing to this song, right?”

I smiled and kissed his jawline. “I did.”

He held me close as I quietly sang the words. This was the moment I had always hoped I would have. The first time with him had been a little different. This was the right moment. Being with him tonight was the dream I hoped I would someday get to live.

“Remember when I said I thought I was falling in love with you?” he asked.

“Trust me, that’s not something I plan on forgetting anytime soon.”

“Well, I was wrong,” he said.

We stopped dancing. I took a step back and looked up at him. “You were wrong?”

“I was. I *know* I’m in love with you. I don’t know how I know, but I know.”

My heart damn near burst out of my chest. I went up on my toes and kissed him. I kissed him until I had to pull back

and come up for air. “Let’s go to bed,” he said.

We shut everything off and made our way up to his room. I untied my robe and let it drop to the floor while he did the same. “Lay down,” I said.

He did as I asked with his head propped up on the pillows. I stood next to the bed and gave his body a very thorough inspection. “Are we going to play doctor?” he teased.

“Not tonight, but I’ll keep that in mind for later,” I said. “I get to be the doctor. You get to be the nurse.”

“I’m not sure I’d look all that good in a short skirt,” he joked.

“You’re right.” I nodded. “You can be my patient. I’ll perform some exploratory procedures on you.”

He jerked, his eyes growing heavy lidded. “I don’t know what that means, but I think I like it.”

“Oh, trust me, you’ll like it,” I promised.

I climbed over him and slid my breasts down his stomach before finding myself right where I wanted to be. I encircled his erection with one hand and took a moment to slowly glide up and down the length. My tongue lapped over the head, sliding down the slit before I opened wide and took him deep into my throat. He groaned loudly with his hands sliding into my hair.

I sucked him deeper into my throat and took my sweet time bringing him to the edge. “Babe,” he grunted. “I can’t. I’m going to explode.”

“I want to taste you,” I whispered.

“Iz—” He slapped at the bed as I slid him back, the tip of his cock hitting my tonsils.

His hips jerked once and then he was erupting deep in my throat. His body vibrated and jerked while I sucked down every last drop. I rose above him and went to my knees. His eyes were closed, and his chest heaved up and down. I wiped my mouth and grinned when his eyes opened and caught me staring.

“I think I’m addicted,” I told him.

“Woman, I don’t think I can survive that again,” he groaned. “My eyes literally rolled back in my head.”

I leaned forward and kissed his chest. “They seem to be back in place now.”

“Shit,” he gasped. “I’ve never. That hurt so good.”

“Hurt?” I asked with surprise.

“Not hurt. Like it was so good my little receptors got all twisted and confused. I didn’t know whether to scream for mercy or beg for more.”

I loved hearing how I could turn him inside out. That had been the goal. He sat forward and, in one move, rolled me under him. His forehead rested against mine. His thick thigh was pressed against my wet pussy. I gasped and nearly came with the close contact.

“Henry,” I breathed his name.

“I want to make love to you,” he whispered.

Our eyes were so close my lashes could have tangled with his. “Please.”

He reached out and I knew what he was going for. I grabbed his forearm. “Wait.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing is wrong,” I told him. “Everything is perfect. Better than perfect. I want to be with you in every sense of the word. I want this to be our first real night together. I’m not going to have another man in my bed and definitely not inside me. I’m all about you and you alone.”

“I haven’t, nor will I touch another woman,” he said. “I won’t even look at another woman. I’m in this. All in.”

“Me too,” I said.

“Okay, what does that mean?” he asked, and I could hear the hope in his voice.

“It means that if you’re ready, I’m ready to do it without the condom,” I said.

“What about pregnancy?” he asked.

I wrinkled my nose and shook my head. “I’ve taken care of that. I’m not ready to get pregnant.”

“So, we can?” he asked.

“We can.”

He closed his eyes. “I’m probably going to die, but I guess I’ll die happy.”

“Why are you going to die?” I said.

He went up on his elbows on either side of me. “Don’t laugh.”

“Don’t laugh at what?”

“I’m kind of a virgin in that sense,” he said.

“In what sense?” I teased. “Because you are not fooling me. You are not a virgin.”

“Not a virgin, but there was only one time I was inside a woman without a condom,” he said. “And it was a split second when I was sixteen. The moment it happened, I freaked out and put a condom on.”

“Oh, a virgin.” I smiled. “Then I would love to take your virginity.”

“This is why I might die,” he groaned.

“Lucky for you, I’m almost a doctor.” I giggled. “I’ll revive you so I can take you all over again.”

He kissed me, his mouth hot and desperate. All thoughts of laughing vanished. He was all business. This was all very serious. I opened my mouth and sucked his tongue inside. He kissed me until I was writhing under him. I was desperate to have him inside me.

“Are you ready for this?” he whispered.

“Yes.”

I opened my legs and waited. It took him less than a second to find my opening. The head of his cock flirted with my entrance. I held my breath and waited. When he pushed the tip in, I was lost. I couldn't stop my body from reacting. The rush of excitement flooded through me and over him.

“Oh shit,” he groaned and pulled out.

“No!” I cried out.

“Shhh,” he kissed me through the orgasm.

Once my body relaxed, he kissed over my neck. “Henry, please.”

“I couldn't be inside you for that or it was going to be over before I even got a chance to show off my moves,” he joked.

“Oh,” I gasped as he once again pushed the tip of his cock inside me. “I'll try not to come so fast.”

He didn't talk. His face was twisted in what looked like pain as he slowly pushed inside me. He didn't open his eyes until he was planted balls' deep.

“Fuck me,” he groaned. “Fuck me. I'm so screwed.”

“What's wrong?” I asked and rubbed his back. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he replied. “I don't think I'll ever be just okay again. I can't go back. This is too good.”

His body twitched once and then again. It triggered a series of pussy spasms which in turn sent him into another flurry of grunts and groans.

“Me either,” I murmured.

I was doing everything I could to fight off the orgasm brewing inside me. If I climaxed, he would, and this would be over. I needed this to last just a little longer.

“I have to move,” he groaned. “I have to.”

“Do it, baby,” I encouraged. “We have all night.”

He pushed himself off me. His biceps bulged as he supported his weight above me while his hips rocked and

rolled against me. Every stroke was like being licked by a flame. My body was on fire. Every nerve ending felt like it was being plucked.

“Henry!” I cried out his name when the pleasure became too much for me to fight off.

I exploded, white stars appearing in front of my eyes. It was like being carried away on a cloud of ecstasy. His shouts of pleasure drifted along beside me. When his body collapsed against mine, my arms wrapped around him and held him close. I couldn't open my eyes. I fell asleep covered by his body.

HENRY

I woke up, smelled her, and was immediately hard. Or maybe I was already hard. I opened my eyes and saw that it was still dark. I rolled to my side and pulled the blanket down to expose her beautiful breasts. Every time I was with her, I got so damn eager, I never got to fully explore her body. She made me so hard and needy, I couldn't slow down. I was like a seventeen-year-old boy.

I kissed one nipple and then the other. I watched them harden and heard her soft moans. I lowered my mouth and kissed again, suckling her before sliding my hand under the blanket and nudging her legs open. Her body opened to my searching fingers. First one finger and then a second.

"Henry," she groaned my name.

"Yes?" I whispered against her chin.

She let out a long moan as I probed inside her. It wasn't long before she was writhing and crying out with pleasure. I gave her the first climax before crawling over the top of her and plunging deep inside the wet heat.

"Damn," I groaned. "You are so wet. So hot. I don't know how I'm ever going to get out of this bed."

"I don't want you to get out of this bed," she murmured. "I want you right here inside me."

I moved, stroking deep once and then again. This was what life was supposed to be like. This was what made life worth living. All the money in the world didn't matter. I didn't care if

I made another penny. If we could stay in this bed for the rest of my days, I'd be totally satisfied.

Her hands snaked up my back with her short nails scratching down. I took my time bringing her to pleasure once again before I gave into my own need. I watched her as I felt the buildup inside me. Her eyes were barely open as she ran her hands up my chest.

“Look at me,” I whispered.

Her eyes met mine and I was lost. I tumbled over the edge into sweet ecstasy with her holding me the whole time. I lowered myself beside her once again with my hand cupping her cheek. “Merry Christmas.”

She smiled. “That was definitely a good way to start it off on the right foot.”

I held her for a while. I knew our time was short. She had family obligations. I wouldn't monopolize her time. “I'll make coffee and then get you home,” I told her.

“You're coming with me,” she said.

“No, I can't. I don't want to impose.”

“Oh, please,” she chided. “You know they love you. They want you there. I want you there. I invited you before. You are not going to sit here by yourself.”

“I'll feel weird,” I said. “I don't have any gifts.”

“It's not about gifts,” she said. “My aunts and uncles and some other extended family will be there. We don't exchange gifts with everyone. It's just a good time with some great food. I'll warn you though, my extended family can be a little wild. Some of them are getting up there in years and I don't think they are all there.”

I laughed and rolled to my back. “You're really selling it,” I said.

She rolled on top of me. “You're going to love my mom's pecan pie. I'm going to shower.”

“I should probably come with you,” I said.

“Should?”

“I want to make sure you’re all squeaky clean.” I winked.

“Oh, yes, I am new to this showering thing,” she joked. “I could probably use some instructions.”

We took a long, leisurely shower with each of us making sure the other was clean. “I’ll make coffee,” I told her while she dressed.

“I’m going to have to sneak in through the back gate. This dress screams walk of shame.”

“Your parents knew you were staying the night here,” I reminded her.

“I know, it just feels weird,” she said.

“We’ll have to get you some closet space,” I told her. “Then we can avoid these little embarrassing moments.”

“Oh, are you offering to give me a drawer?” she teased.

“Baby, look around you,” I said. “You’ll get a lot more than a drawer. Hell, you can have a closet. Have you seen the bedroom?”

“I have and I will take you up on that offer,” she said.

“I need to check on Nicholas,” I said.

“Wish him a Merry Christmas from me,” she called out as I walked to grab my phone.

I never left my phone. It was always by my side. I couldn’t risk missing an important call. But last night, I didn’t give a shit who called. She was the only thing on my mind. I had a feeling it was going to be like that for a while.

“Hey,” I said when Nicholas picked up the phone.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Where are you?”

“I’m just walking into my brother’s house,” he answered. “Did something happen?”

“No, I was just checking to make sure everything went okay last night,” I said.

“Everything was fine,” he replied. “Before I left this morning, I made sure the breakfast for the staff would be delivered at eight. We’ve got the dinner slated to arrive at five. Everyone working today will get a big meal.”

“Good, thank you for making sure that all got handled.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” he said.

“You’re not here just for that,” I told him. “You’re far more important than that. You are what keeps this place running. You keep me running.”

“Uh oh,” he said. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“You’re being weird,” he said.

“I’m just letting you know I appreciate you,” I said. “And Merry Christmas. From both of us.”

“Ah, that’s it,” he said. “You’re in love.”

“Actually, I am,” I said.

“Good for you,” he said. “I’m really happy for you. You deserve it. If she makes you this nice, I hope you never let her go.”

“I don’t plan on it,” I said. “I’ve got to go. I’ll talk to you in a few days.”

“A few days?” he repeated.

“Yes, enjoy your family,” I told him. “I don’t plan on doing anything until after the new year. I’m going to be busy myself. Just turn on the automatic reply email and let the calls go to voicemail. Nicholas, we’re on vacation.”

I ended the call and found myself smiling.

“Vacation?” Izzy repeated.

I turned around and nodded. “Yep. I’m taking a vacation.”

“You don’t have to go back to New York?” she asked.

“Nope. There is nothing there I need to do right now. This is where I want to be. I’ll share you with your family, but I don’t plan on being very generous with your time. I want it all.”

She walked into my arms. “It’s yours to have. After today.”

“Alright, then I better get dressed.”

I felt a little awkward to be going to her family’s house empty-handed. I wasn’t brought up with a lot of manners and social nicety training, but even I knew I wasn’t supposed to show up without something. On our way to her house, we happened to pass a market advertising they were open until noon.

“I’m going in here,” I told her.

“I can’t go in looking like this,” she said.

“Sit tight,” I told her. “Any tips on what will impress the family?”

“Henry, you don’t have to bring anything.”

“I’ll find something,” I said and walked into the store. I found myself browsing the aisles in search of something that could pass for a gift. I didn’t want to take food. That might be an insult to the cook. I happened by the deli counter and saw some meat trays. That would work. I grabbed a bouquet of flowers as well.

When I got back to the SUV, she smiled and shook her head. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“I wanted to.”

“Please try and relax,” she said. “They’re good people. They want you there. I want you there. I know this is going to be difficult for you, but I’ll be right there. If you need a break, a moment of fresh air, you just holler.”

She was trying to take care of me. This was what I should have done for her that night she went outside with Nicholas. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“What?”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t aware of your needs when I was dragging you all over the place. That night on the rooftop, you were struggling, and I didn’t notice. At the last party in Chicago, you needed me, and I wasn’t there for you.”

“Don’t do that,” she said gently. “You didn’t know. I should have told you.”

“I wish I could be like you.”

“You want tits?” She giggled.

“I want to be empathetic,” I said. “I like your tits. I don’t want my own. I want to be like you and be able to know what people need to feel better.”

“We’ll work on it, but just know I like you just the way you are.”

““**Y**ou doing okay?” I asked Henry as I moved to sit in his lap.

He was on the couch watching football with my dad and uncles. “I’m doing very okay,” he answered. “I think I’m going to have to call a service to get me home.”

“Stay the night here,” I said.

He raised an eyebrow. “That’s bold.”

“I have my little place out back.”

“We’ll see,” he said.

“Isabelle!” my great aunt exclaimed.

I burst into giggles. “I think I just earned myself a talking-to.”

“Young lady, have your parents not taught you decorum?” she scolded.

I climbed off his lap and found my aunt, who was barely brushing the five-foot mark, standing with her hands on her hips and frowning. “They have taught me many things,” I said. “Have you seen my man?”

“I’m old, not blind,” she shot back. “I don’t care if he looks like Sean Connery, you don’t go climbing all over the man until you’re married.”

“Let’s go Aunt Bertha,” I said. “Mom needs help with the potatoes.”

“You’re going to get yourself knocked up if you keep climbing him like that,” she continued.

I heard choking and turned to see Henry wiping his mouth. The poor man had no idea. Aunt Bertha claimed she could say whatever she wanted because she was over eighty. Sometimes she said things that could make a sailor blush. She looked sweet and innocent, but the woman could be very crass.

“Aunt Bertha!” my mom scolded her. “Izzy is a grown woman. I think she knows how a woman gets pregnant. She’s a semester away from being a doctor.”

“Then she should know better,” she scolded.

“Thank you for looking out for me, Aunt Bertha,” I said. “You’ll be the first to know if I get pregnant after sitting on my boyfriend’s lap.”

“Don’t get smart with me, young lady,” she snapped. “You know damn well what I meant.”

“I love you, Aunt Bertha,” I said.

“Yeah, yeah,” she said. “Is this one a doctor?”

“No. He owns hotels.”

She stopped reaching for a can of beer. Yes, my family was a little on the redneck side. My aunts drank beer right alongside my uncles. I had never quite developed a taste for it, but I didn’t begrudge them their drinking habits.

“Owns hotels?” she repeated.

“Yes, Bertha,” my mom said. “He owns the Barlow chain. He *is* Barlow. Henry Barlow.”

“No kidding?” she said and leaned over to peer at him through the archway separating the kitchen and living room.

“No kidding.” I grinned.

“Shoot, girl, go climb on him and have his babies.” She cackled. “You’ll never want for anything again.”

“Are Tara and Robert coming?” I asked in an attempt to change the conversation.

I had a feeling Henry could hear Aunt Bertha. She wasn't exactly quiet. The poor guy was sitting next to my dad. I couldn't imagine that was a great place to be when they were talking about me getting knocked up.

"They should be here any minute," my mom answered.

My cousins and their three kids showed up five minutes later. The energy in the house went up a hundred percent. The noise level was louder than a nightclub when the rest of the cousins and their kids showed up. Poor Henry had no idea what he was in for. The kids saw him as the shiny new toy in the family.

I checked on him periodically to make sure he wasn't completely drowning. Just before dinner was served, I managed to pry off little Lola, who was three and completely enamored with Henry. She was clinging to him like she was never going to let him out of her sight.

"How are you?" I asked as I pulled him outside into the backyard.

He laughed and wiped his shoulder. "I'm alright. That was one hell of an entrance those kids made."

"Yeah, I warned you about the adults, but I didn't think I had to warn you about the little ones," I said. "They like you."

"Is that why they were glued to me?" he asked sarcastically.

"It's a compliment," I told him. "You've won over the kids, which is a direct route to the adults."

"Except Bertha."

"She likes you," I said.

"She likes my money," he corrected. "Do you know she hit me up for a free stay at the hotel?"

I groaned. "Oh no. I'm so sorry. She can be a little brazen."

"I told her to give you a call and you'd let me know when she was looking to stay," he said. "I told her it had to be on an

off week during the spring.”

“You don’t need to do that,” I told him. “She’s fine. She has no filter. She says whatever pops into her head.”

“It’s fine,” he insisted. “The woman deserves a nice luxurious stay. I told her all about the spa. She’s all about getting naked and getting a massage by a handsome young man.”

I groaned again and covered my face. “She really knows how to make an impression. I’m sorry. She isn’t usually that emboldened.”

“It’s all good,” he said and kissed my cheek. “They’ve welcomed me into the family. That’s far more than I’ve ever had in my life. All the years I spent in foster care, I used to wonder what it was like to have a big family. I truly never thought it would be possible for me to experience something like this. I gave up on the dream of family a long time ago.”

“You should never give up on your dreams,” I told him. “They might not happen overnight, but they will happen.”

“You never fail to impress me,” he said. “You have all these goals and dreams and you’re not deterred by anything. I know you haven’t had a total rosy life.”

“Who has?” I asked. “I think you’ve had a much tougher go than I have. It’s understandable you struggle a bit more to see the end game.”

“I hope your family doesn’t get tired of me anytime soon,” he said and reached down to squeeze my ass. “Because as crazy and crass as they are, I like them.”

“Good, because they like you and we’ve all decided we’re keeping you.”

He kissed me. “We better get back in there before Bertha starts knitting baby booties. I think it’s been a while for her. She might want to brush up on exactly how babies are made.”

I was still laughing when we walked back inside. The tables were set, along with the new kitchen island. Henry and I were seated at the table with the bulk of the adults. I reached

under the table and squeezed his knee to let him know I was there.

After the blessing and the plates were stacked with food, things went a little sideways. My uncle, David, looked Henry over and I knew it was about to get real. I leaned over. “Brace yourself,” I whispered.

“So, Henry,” he started. “Is it true what Walter told me?”

“My dad,” I murmured under my breath.

“I’m not sure what he told you,” Henry said casually.

“He mentioned the fact you owned a few hotels.”

Henry cleared his throat and took a drink from his beer. “It is true. I have a property in New York, Chicago, and here.”

“He’s going to be opening more all around the world,” my mom chimed in.

“Really?” my uncle said with surprise.

“Yes.” Henry nodded.

“What hotel?” one of my aunts asked.

“The Barlow,” my dad answered.

Everything got quiet. “The Barlow?” Uncle Dave repeated.

I smiled. “Yes.”

“Wow.” He nodded. “Good job, Iz.”

“Are you going to travel the world and stay at the hotels?” my aunt asked.

“The hotels aren’t built yet,” I said.

“Are you getting married?” another aunt asked.

“We just started dating,” I answered.

“What about kids?” my uncle asked. “Do you plan on traveling with the kids?”

“I think that’s a little down the road,” I said and could feel my cheeks turning red. This was more than even I expected.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on your way to becoming a doctor?” my cousin asked from the bar.

“I *am* on my way to becoming a surgeon,” I corrected.

“How are you going to travel and keep up with that?” she asked.

“I never said I was going to travel,” I replied.

“If Henry is on the road, won’t that make the relationship difficult?”

I felt like I was being interrogated. It was all starting to pile up. I was looking for a way out when I felt his hand on my knee. I looked up and smiled at him. “Can I field some of these?” he asked.

“Be my guest,” I said.

“As Isabelle said,” Henry started. “We’ve only just gotten together. Things are happening fast as it is. We’re going to spend the next two weeks working out the details. We both have goals and we know there are going to be some challenges. I’m sure Izzy can put out a group text or an email and let everyone know what our plans for the future are.”

“Do you have kids?” my aunt asked.

“Me?” Henry asked with surprise. “No.”

“Been married?”

“No,” he answered.

“Why?” a cousin asked. “You’re hot and rich. Isn’t that like the two most important qualifications in a man? They don’t have single women in New York? Chicago?”

“I’m sure they do,” he answered. “I don’t know and don’t care what their qualifications are. I only care what mine are. Izzy checked the boxes. She’s the one I want. She’s the only one I want and that is what I’m focused on. I’m fortunate to be in a position to work my schedule around my life. She’s the priority.”

There was a long silence. No one ate. No one said a word. Then my mom grabbed her wineglass and raised it. “I, for one,

am very glad my Izzy found Henry or vice versa. Welcome to the family, Henry.”

“Thank you,” he said.

“Thanks, Mom,” I said with a smile.

“If you guys are done interrogating my daughter, I’d like to get back to my dinner,” my dad said.

I was thankful for their intervention. I knew things were going to be a little weird, but I never expected it to be that intense. I forgot how nosey my family could be. We only saw each other a couple of times a year. Catching up on the gossip was usually a little more fun and a lot less intense.

The conversations picked up. The sound level was back to normal with everyone talking to whoever they were sitting next to. “You okay?” I asked Henry.

“I’m a little sweaty, but I think I’m relatively unscathed.”

“Thank you for sitting through that with me,” I said.

“Anytime,” he whispered. “Forged in fire. Doesn’t that make us stronger?”

I gave him a look. “I hope so.”

We got back into the dinner conversation. Things were much lighter, and I found myself having a really good time. Hearing Henry laugh was music to my ears. It wasn’t something I heard very often. I didn’t get him an actual Christmas gift, but I hoped time with my family was enough for him to remember this Christmas with fondness.

HENRY

I walked down the hall from the bathroom. The door to the guest bedroom was cracked open a little. The younger kids were all sleeping in the big king bed with the older kids in sleeping bags on the floor. I quietly made my way back to the kitchen.

“Do you want another beer?” Izzy asked.

“Sure, please,” I said.

She handed me one from the fridge. “You can go sit down in the living room with the rest of the guys.”

“Should I help clean up?” I asked. “I feel weird sitting on my ass when the ladies are in here doing dishes.”

“Trust me, we’re not just doing the dishes,” she said. “We’re gossiping and drinking wine out of sight of the men so they don’t know how much we’re drinking. We don’t want to look like lushes. Guys get away with it, but not ladies.”

“Ah, I understand. Okay then.”

“Unless you’re not comfortable hanging out with the guys,” she said. “I can make my excuses and we can go out to my place.”

“You don’t need to worry about me,” I told her. “I’m good. I like them. I don’t think they hate me. You spend time with your family.”

“Thank you, baby.”

I drifted into the living room where the rest of the men were sitting around. They all looked like they'd been working in the kitchen all day. I supposed that was the side effect of eating way too much.

"Henry," Walter said and got to his feet. "Come with me."

That didn't sound good, but I suspected there was something he needed to get off his mind. "Sure."

He opened the fridge in the garage and pulled out a couple of Heinekens. "We can drink the good stuff out here," he said with a laugh.

"Thank you."

I waited for him to tell me what was on his mind. "So, you and Izzy seem to be one of those matches that only comes along once in a blue moon."

"You seem to have one of those matches," I pointed out.

"We do, but you need to know there are a lot of hurdles. You don't get to where we are without trying. And I mean really, really trying. It takes a lot of time and energy and a whole lot of compromise and patience."

"I understand," I said.

"Izzy has never been the type of girl to do anything halfway," he said. "Her mom and I have worried about her for years. We didn't want her to end up being fifty and alone. She was our only child. We know we aren't going to live forever. We wanted her to have the same thing we had. But our Izzy? Well, we just didn't know what to expect from her. We wondered who the man would be that managed to steal her heart. I have to say, I'm glad it was you. From what I've seen so far, you're alright."

I chuckled. "Good to know, but honestly, sir, I'm not sure I'm good enough for her. You've raised a good woman. She's so much more than I deserve. Every day I know her, she makes me a little better. She shows me how to be good. She has shown me it's okay to care. It's a dumb thing to say, but I didn't really know how to do that before. I know I care for her more than I've ever cared for anyone."

“Where’s your family?” he asked.

I looked at him and felt a little shame. “I don’t have any. My mom died and my dad was in prison. I was in the system and ran away before I aged out. I’m the exact opposite of Izzy. She’s got this great family and loves easily. She’s so strong, but not in the way I’m strong. She teaches me how to be strong in a way I didn’t know was possible. I’m not the same jaded person I was when I first met her. I feel I’ve grown years in the weeks since I’ve known her.”

He was nodding as I talked. “That’s my Izzy,” he said. “She always knows how to help people. I guess that’s why she’s on her way to being a surgeon.”

“I think you’re right,” I said. “The people I’ve introduced her to over the last couple of weeks are enamored with her as well.”

He smiled proudly. “I’m not surprised.”

“She’s a special woman,” I said.

He nodded and got serious. “I know, which is why I wanted to talk to you.”

And here it was. This was the part where he told me I wasn’t good enough for his little girl. He’d be nice about it, but he knew I wasn’t the man for her.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked.

“Izzy knew from a very young age she wanted to be a doctor,” he said.

“She told me about your heart situation,” I said.

“Izzy has spent her entire life working to this one goal,” he said. “She sacrificed so much to get to this point. She’s almost to the finish line. Well, the first finish line. The next part of her education is what she’s been craving. She gets to put all the stuff she’s learned over the last eight years to use. Her mom and I have encouraged her along the way, but I’m not going to lie and say it’s been easy. We’ve worried about her and what would happen if she didn’t cross the finish line. I have to say, we’re concerned now.”

“Why?”

“Izzy’s never been in love before,” he said. “She’s never been close to being in love. Her running off to Chicago with you is out of character for her. You captured her attention. Right now, she’s on break, but what happens in January when she starts that last semester?”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“I love Izzy and I know she’s crazy about you, but I’m worried she might have found a new dream.”

“A new dream?” I asked.

“You,” he said. “You are the road she didn’t choose. You offer love and family and a settled life. I’m not saying she’s settling, but she would be settled, and there’s nothing wrong with feeling comfortable and happy. I’m just not sure it’s the right thing for her. I’m not sure she wouldn’t look back five years down the road and regret her decision. If she quits now, I think she just might regret not seeing this through.”

“I understand,” I said. “I do. I don’t want her to regret anything. I would never ask her to quit school.”

“That’s just the thing,” he said. “You wouldn’t have to ask. She’d want to do it. I see it in her eyes.”

“Are you asking me to walk away from her?” I asked.

“No,” he said. “No, but I am asking you to make sure she’s thinking long term. If she can convince me she really doesn’t want to finish school, then I’ll bless this thing with the two of you.”

“She’s never said she was going to quit,” I said. “Never. I’ve never asked her to.”

“Henry, I know,” he said. “I want her to have it all. She loves you and I get that. I want her to have a family and career if that’s what you guys choose. I’m only looking out for my daughter.”

“And I’m glad you are,” I told him. “I know she told you our story. This thing between us is really only a day old. We’re still figuring things out. We’ll talk about January. I didn’t want

to bring any of that up on Christmas. I know how much she loves this time of year.”

“Thank you.” He nodded. “I appreciate that. I know you’re a good man and you’re going to look out for her best interests.”

“I promise you I will,” I assured him.

He slapped a hand on my shoulder. “Good to know. Now, we better get back in there before Izzy starts working herself up that I’m out here throwing you out of the house.”

“Thanks for the beer,” I said.

We rejoined the group. The ladies were sitting at the table talking. Izzy gave me a look, silently asking me if things were okay. I winked, letting her know it was all good. We spent the next hour talking a little more before Izzy stood up.

“Ready to go out back?” she asked.

I nodded and let her take my hand. We said our goodnights to the remaining crew, and she led me outside and across the lawn. “Be prepared for greatness,” she said as she opened the door.

We stepped into the small space. I looked around and nodded. “This is cool. It’s about the same size as my first apartment.”

“My bed isn’t as big as yours, but with the way we sleep, we don’t really need all that much space, do we?”

“Definitely not,” I said.

We stripped down and climbed into bed. “I want to give you something,” I said.

She giggled and wiggled her ass against my crotch. “I bet you do.”

“Very funny,” I said and stilled her hips. “I didn’t get you a Christmas present, but there is something I want to give you.”

“I didn’t get you a gift either,” she reminded me.

“Will you let me finish this?”

“Sorry,” she said.

“I want to pay off your student loans,” I said.

“No way!”

“I’m serious,” I told her. “You left your family for two weeks when you barely have any time with them. I owe you that much at least.”

“No. I’m not letting you pay me for this. We fell in love. If you pay me, that diminishes it.”

“No, it doesn’t,” I insisted. “I’m not paying you. I’m giving you a gift.”

“No, Henry. I can’t let you do that.”

“I want to do this,” I said. “You help so many people. You probably made me millions, hell maybe even a billion dollars by doing what you did. You earned this money. I want to give you a gift.”

“Henry,” she whispered.

“Listen to me,” I said. “You are special. I’m not just saying that. You are truly a special person. Everyone sees it. I want you to reach your dreams without worrying about debt. I want to support you as you fulfill those dreams.”

“It feels weird to take that kind of money from you,” she said.

“You’re not taking. I’m giving. I can’t wait to see what great things you do. You’re going to save lives. You might just save the life of the future president or the guy that cures cancer. I have zero medical knowledge but if I can help people through you, I’ll do it. I’m certainly not going to be the guy that changes the world, but I can be the guy behind the woman that does.”

“So, what’d you and my dad talk about?” she asked.

“Oh, I can’t tell you that.”

“Did he tell you to offer to pay these loans?”

“Nope,” I answered.

“He said something to you,” she insisted. “You guys were out there a while.”

“We talked about you,” I admitted. “He just wanted to know what we were looking at for the future.”

“My goodness, he moves fast.”

“He basically wanted to know my intentions,” I said. “He wants to make sure you finish school and I absolutely agree with him. You know that, right? At dinner there were a lot of questions thrown around. It was stuff we haven’t talked about, but I think we need to.”

“We will,” she said. “There’s no reason to get ahead of ourselves.”

“Are you suggesting I’m jumping ahead?” I asked. “We don’t have to plan our entire future, but the next two weeks is going to go by fast. No matter what, you have to go back to school.”

“And what about you?”

“Izzy, I do live here in Aspen,” I said. “Now that I have a reason to be here, I’ll be here.”

“I don’t live here,” she said. “I live a couple of hours away from here.”

“Okay, then I’ll rent a house. You’ll come visit when you’re not in class or working. Actually, I’ve got a better idea. I’ll rent a house. You live in it and I’ll stay as often as I can. It’ll cut out the packing. I can show up at two in the morning and you’ll be warm in bed. I’ll slide in and make love to you until you go to class.”

“You’re making me think all kinds of things,” she whispered. “Don’t say it if you don’t mean it.”

“I mean it,” I said. “I’ll call a realtor tomorrow. I’ll just buy a fucking house. You said you have four years there, right?”

She burst into laughter. “You can’t just buy a house.”

I leaned up on my elbow. “I can buy ten houses if I want. We’ll pick something together.”

“You are making some serious leaps here,” she warned.

“I know what I want. I want you. I want you in our bed. I want you making me dinner in our kitchen and I’ll make your breakfast in the morning.”

She pushed me on my back. “You’re making my head spin.”

“Good, because now I’m going to make your toes curl.”

EPILOGUE

One Year later Christmas Day

I woke up early. I felt like I did when I was six. I sat up and stared down at my very handsome man. He'd taken the full week off. It had been so hard to go to work and leave him in bed. But I had the next three days off and I planned on spending every minute with him. We made the drive home to Aspen last night.

The house he bought for us in Aurora was amazing and way too big, but I learned Henry didn't do anything small. He claimed it was a real estate investment. Once I finished my residency and potentially my fellowship, we'd move back to Aspen. For now, we were settled in our spacious four-bedroom home in Aurora. At least, I was settled in Aurora. He was a busy man and only managed to spend a week or two tops a month.

"Babe," I whispered. He didn't budge. "Babe," I whispered-shouted.

His eyes popped open. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I said. "It's Christmas morning."

"But it's dark," he groaned. "What time is it?"

"I don't know, probably five or six."

"Sweetie, I love you to pieces, but we were up late," he groaned.

I bounced up and down on the bed. “I’m going to make coffee. Hurry up or I’m going to open my presents without you.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” he said.

“I just might,” I said as I hopped out of bed. I grabbed my robe and shoved my feet into the fluffy slippers next to our bed.

I headed downstairs, and before I started the coffee, I turned on the lights. The living room lit up. We’d gone overboard this year. I loved every element. He picked out a lot of the decorations on his own. I was so happy to see he’d put everything up on his own.

I started the coffee and turned on the Christmas music. The presents we bought for each other were stacked under the tree. I carried my cup of coffee to the window and pushed the button for the blinds. I smiled at the sight of the fresh snow covering the ground and clinging to the pine and cedar trees.

“It’s hard not to stare at it,” he said from behind me.

I turned and watched him walk into the kitchen wearing just his sweats. He poured himself a cup and came to stand next to me. “It’s so beautiful here,” I said. “I so wished we had more time to stay here together.”

“We will one day,” he said.

“I swear, when I’m on a long seventy-two-hour shift, I dream about being here with you.”

“One day we’re going to be here together,” he said. “We’re already a year closer to the goal.”

I sighed and leaned against him. “It feels like forever.”

“I hate being away from you,” he said. “I’m taking the year off. I’m going to be home a lot more often.”

“Home,” I said with a smile. “I like the sound of that.”

“I thought you might.”

“What about Germany?” I asked.

“I tabled it,” he said.

“Why?” I asked with surprise.

“Babe, I’ve opened three hotels in a year,” he said. “I’m spent. I need to spend some time making the ones I have excellent. Plus, I think Nicholas will appreciate the slower pace.”

“I know I will,” I said. I turned into his arms. “I hate being away from you. I love the perks of the hotels in some amazing places, but whenever I’m there with you, I never want to leave.”

“One day, we are going to spend a month visiting every hotel,” he said. “We’re going to sleep in, go to the best restaurants, and see everything there is to see on this planet. When Mars is ready for colonization, I’ll put a hotel on it, and we’ll visit there.”

“My goodness, you have some serious ambition,” I said.

“I do,” he said. “I absolutely do. I’m just getting started.”

“Before you build on Mars, can we open our gifts?” I asked.

“Hell yeah.”

We sat down and opened our gifts for one another. I was a happy person by nature. My life had been full of happiness. I was lucky. I knew that. But sitting here on the floor in front of the Christmas tree with the man I loved in a home I loved, it was more happiness than I had ever felt in my entire life. I couldn’t imagine being happier than I was right now in this moment. I felt buoyant.

“I love it all,” I said and picked up the new cashmere sweater. I held it close to my cheek and rubbed. “So soft.”

“Thank you for all this,” he said, and I realized he was choking up.

“Babe?” I asked with concern and crawled to his spot on the floor. “What’s wrong? If you don’t like the tie, we can return it.”

He shook his head and wiped his eyes. "I love the tie. I love the sweater and the boots. I love the phone case. I love it all. I love you."

I looked at him and waited. My hand gently stroked over his cheek. "Is everything okay?"

He smiled. "I feel like a girl."

"What? Why?"

"I'm overcome with emotion," he choked out the words. He cleared his throat. "This is the first Christmas that I feel like I've had it all. When my mom was alive, she tried. Not hard, but she attempted to be a good mom on occasion. The gifts were meager and sometimes, she'd be so high she'd wrap up her cigarettes. In foster care, I did have one Christmas with a family. Some charity gave me a few things. I thought that was my best Christmas. Last year with your family, well that took the lead by a mile. Then this. This is the first time I've had it all."

Now I was crying. "I swear, I'm going to make every Christmas from here on out better than the one before. You are loved, Henry. So loved. Not just by me. My family loves you. We all love you."

"Thank you," he said in a gravelly voice. "I have hoped for a lot of things in my life, but I never knew this was an option."

"It's an option." I smiled.

He kissed me. "Thank you. Now, there's one more gift for you."

I bent down and looked under the tree. "If you bought me a new car, I'm not going to be happy. I told you nothing like that."

"It's not a new car," he said.

"Where is it?"

He pointed to an ornament on the tree. It never occurred to me to check the ornaments. I reached up and pulled it off the tree. I flipped it around and expected to see some sweet engraving. There was nothing.

“Um, babe, thank you,” I said.

“Open it, you silly woman.”

That was when I realized the bottom half of the bell came off. I pulled it open and a ring fell out. My heart skipped a beat and the bell was forgotten as I grabbed the ring. It was a huge diamond. Of course, it was. Henry didn't do small or average.

“Henry?” I murmured.

He took my hand and held it. “Izzy, Isabelle Sharpe, you are truly the most amazing woman I have ever met in my life,” he said. “I know I say that to you all the time, but it's true. I think I can safely say you are the most amazing woman in the world. I would know since I've traveled the world this year. I know we've got some crazy schedules to work with, but we're making it work. They say absence makes the heart grow fonder. I think that's true. Whenever I'm away from you, all I can think about is getting back home to you. I wanted to propose to you a year ago, but I wanted to make sure this was right. I didn't want you to think I was rushing you. I think I knew I wanted to marry you that first night in the hot tub.”

I couldn't help but giggle. “I was that good, huh?”

“You were amazing,” he said again. “Please, can we make this official? I want to be your husband. I want you to be my wife. I know I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I beg you to have mercy on this poor orphan and agree to make me your family in an official capacity.”

“Sweet Henry,” I whispered. “I've been waiting for this moment my whole life. I knew we were supposed to be together that same night. I want to be your wife. I'll marry you right now.”

He kissed me. “Thank you. Thank you for making me happy. Meeting you was the best thing I've ever done.”

“I love you, Henry.”

“I love you, Izzy.”

“I have one more gift for you,” I told him with a shy smile.

It was his turn to look under the tree. “Don’t tell me you got me a ring?” he teased.

I got up and reached under the couch. “Not quite.”

I handed him the large, square box. He took it and looked a little confused. “How come this wasn’t under the tree?”

“Because I didn’t want to risk a burglar coming in here and stealing all the gifts and getting his hands on this.”

He laughed as he pulled off the top of the box. “Is it gold?”

“Not quite,” I said nervously.

He pulled out the photo book. “What’s this?”

“You’ll have to find out.”

He opened the book and there I was in a sexy piece of lingerie. “Holy shit,” he gasped.

He turned the page. It was me again in another black two-piece with tassels hanging from my nipples. “Fuck me,” he groaned.

“We spend a lot of time apart and I know that makes for a lot of lonely nights. When you’re halfway around the world and missing me, you can open the book and remember me.”

“I never forget you, but this, holy shit, this is incredible,” he said. “You know I’m going to be beating off to this whenever I can’t have the real thing.”

I burst into laughter. “Tell me how you really feel,” I said.

“I’m serious. This is grade-A spank-bank material,” he said. “When? How?”

“Noelle took the pictures for me,” I said. “I put the book together through an online website. I just hope like hell they don’t know me.”

“I love it,” he said. “This is truly a precious, priceless gift. I will never be without it. It’s going everywhere with me. I understand why you didn’t want a thief getting their hands on it.”

“Now that we’ve got all of this out of the way, I have to make some phone calls,” I said and jumped up.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

“I have to call my mom and Noelle,” I called back as I raced upstairs to get my phone.

“We’re going to be seeing your mom in a few hours!”

“I can’t wait that long! I have to tell her we’re officially engaged!”

I called my mom first and practically screamed the news. We hung up and I called Noelle and let her know before going back downstairs to see my fiancé. This was the best Christmas ever. I thought last Christmas was, but no, this was the best.

I found him still sitting on the floor and looking at the book. “Hey, you don’t need to look at that thing when the real one is standing right in front of you.”

He closed the book and got to his feet. The way he was looking at me? Well, I would never get tired of it.

He was my everything and I was his.

If you loved this book, don’t miss out...

Check out [Fake It Real Good!](#)



**My younger brother hates me...
he’s getting married.**

And of course, my mother is going to have a field day with me still being a bachelor.

But love is for the birds. I don’t have time for that madness.

So, a fake date from an agency will work in a pinch.

Hope this poor damsel in distress is up for having to meet my wretched family.

If she survives, I'll have to give her a bonus. Or hire her for my lonelier nights.

Much to my surprise, she's not at all what I thought she would be.

Curvy, bold, hilarious – everything I want in my life.

This isn't good.

Why in the world would a woman like her sell her time to a man like me?

Surely there's more to her story than meets the eyes.

Not my problem. I just need one thing from the delicious beauty.

Fake it real good, baby. Fake it good.

I gotta have this!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Hey there. I'm Weston.

Have we met? No? Well, it's time to end that tragedy.

I'm a former firefighter/EMS guy who's picked up the proverbial pen and started writing bad boy romance stories. I co-write with my sister, Ali Parker, but live in Texas with my wife, my two little boys, my daughter, a dog, and a turtle.

Yep. A turtle. You read that right. Don't be jealous.

You're going to find Billionaires, Bad Boys, Military Guys, and loads of sexiness. Something for everyone hopefully. I'd love to connect with you. Check out the links below and come find me.

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Fake It For Money

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