

HOLLYWOOD STARDUST

Supporting Roles

Giselle & Wilson

by

Kim Carmichael

ALSO BY KIM CARMICHAEL

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Supporting Roles: Giselle & Wilson

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Children's Book:
My Daddy Wears His Art

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Dedication

To those who can be themselves and be different and have fun.

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Chapter One

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?” Ivy Vermont pressed her back to the building and put her hand over her eyes.

Giselle Abromowitz wrinkled her nose. Apparently, her best friend needed a recap of their last several hours, even though they’d been together the entire day. “We’re stalking Logan Alexander, the actor you’ve loved since you were twelve and the guy you’re supposed to be working with, but ditched you. Now we’re standing outside his brother’s bar.” She shielded her eyes as she looked up at the sign. “It’s not open though, and I could use a drink.”

Ivy groaned. “I meant what are you doing here with me stalking actors when you are supposed to be at work?”

Rather than answer, Giselle tiptoed over to one of the windows and attempted to peer inside.

“Giselle. What happened to your job?” Ivy joined her and stood on her tiptoes to look in the blackened windows. “This was supposed to be the one.”

With Ivy in her full quirky vintage business regalia, Giselle resisted the urge to lift her fun sized friend. “I don’t think I want to be an assistant.”

“You said you wanted to work in an office.” Ivy pressed her forehead to the glass.

“It has too much paper, my hands got dry from touching all of it, and I got a paper cut.” She held out her hands and studied them and swore she still saw the faint remnant of the cut. “Look.”

“Offices have paper.” Ivy shook her head.

“Not if they’re green.” One day she would best her best friend in the battle of wits.

Ivy huffed.

“Why don’t we take care of your job and stop worrying about mine.” Giselle stomped over to the front door and knocked.

Ivy rushed over and grabbed her arm. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you in the door, that’s the job I’m best at.” Ever since her best friend took on the assignment of reporting on the anniversary of her favorite movie, *Hollywood Stardust*, she had been unlivable. Once Ivy’s crush, Logan Alexander entered the picture and became her co-reporter, she went from unlivable to not fun. Now it had to be fixed. Giselle struck a pose, boobs out, butt popped, hand on hip and waited. The pose hadn’t failed her yet.

Finally, the door opened. At the sight of the man, hot man, really hot man, before her, Giselle added a little lip pout to her guy wrangling stance.

In less than an instant, a smile took over the man’s face. “Please tell me you’re the delivery I’m waiting for.”

She stepped forward and leaned on the doorjamb. “I’m the delivery you’re waiting for.”

The man raised his eyebrows, making his already friendly and fluid features even more likable. He reminded her of the guy in a movie who stood in the background, but every time the camera panned over to him one kept thinking how cute he was, how his blue eyes would steal the show and his smile could make the lead in the movie do almost anything.

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“So you’re the person delivering the glass washer and hooking it up to the existing plumbing?” He tilted his head.

“Do I not look like a plumber?” She turned back to Ivy and nodded, she had this guy, but good.

Ivy put her hand over her eyes.

“Well, considering the person on the way is named Harvey, and last time I saw him he was about quadruple your size and with a lot less hair, I’m going to go with no.” As if waiting for her to confess her deception, he crossed his arms.

“All right, you caught me.” She played along and pressed her hand to her chest. “Actually, I’m here on behalf of my poor friend, Ivy. I have reason to believe one Mr. Logan Alexander may be inside, and she needs him desperately.”

The man raised his eyebrows.

“And by desperate, I mean her work is relying on him, although the poster she had of him on her ceiling when she was thirteen, so she could go to bed looking at him, may speak of a different kind of desperation.” Giselle thought she should lay it all on the table.

The man glanced between the two of them. “So, you’re Ivy. I’m not surprised that you’re here.” He opened the door and stepped back.

Ivy looked up at the man.

“Come on, I got you in.” Giselle motioned for her best friend and trotted inside. The whole place smelled like remodeling, and she smiled at the way the interior was done up to look like a 1920s speakeasy with art deco finishes and dark booths. There was no place in Hollywood like it. “This is cool.”

Gazing up at the man with a slight bit of hope, Ivy followed. "Is he here?"

"I think I may be able to conjure him. Stay right here and check the place out." He put his hand out and leaned forward. "I'm Wilson by the way, Wilson Alexander."

"Alexander. As in Logan Alexander." Rather than shake his hand, Giselle hooked her arms in his.

Ivy took his hand. "I really do need to talk to him for even a second."

"Well, as fun as this all is, I will retrieve my baby brother for you." He glanced down at Giselle, took his time untangling their appendages, and with one last glance in her direction, left and disappeared behind a swinging door. "Logan!"

"See? I told you it would all work out." Giselle put her arm around her friend.

"I wish I could live my life like you do." Ivy patted her and moved away, pacing around the space.

"What do you mean?" Giselle shrugged and took a seat on one of the bar stools. No doubt, the savvy Mr. Alexander chose these to show off a woman's gams. She wondered if she stayed in this position if he would notice.

"You just always go with it. You don't have a job, no worries, you don't know what you're doing tomorrow, not a problem." Ivy put her hand on her stomach. "I can't let go like you do. What's taking them so long?"

"Well, you have to go with it, what other choice do we have?" She continued to assess her legs.

Before Ivy got a chance to say something deep or meaningful, a knock at the front door interrupted them.

They both looked at the door and then back in the direction Wilson took.

The knock came again, but louder.

“What should we do?” Ivy bit her lip.

“Well, when people knock, the normal course of action is to open it.” Though she didn’t want to ruin how awesome her legs looked from the bar stool, she slid down and opened the door, only to be greeted by a huge man with not much hair holding a wrench. “Harvey! We’ve been waiting for you. Come on in.”

The man smiled and trundled inside. “Is Wilson here?”

“Wait! You can’t just let anyone in here. Hold on.” Ivy rushed to the back. “Wilson!”

With a shrug, Giselle stood to the side to let Harvey enter. “So, you’re here to do some installation?”

“Putting in the new glass washer and adjusting some things on the plumbing on the bar.” Almost as if he wanted to prove his identity, he held up a toolbox and a plumber’s wrench.

“Well, time is money, get to it.” She pointed over to the bar.

Harvey grabbed his toolbox and hobbled over to the bar. “And you are?”

With it sort of dark, she grabbed a flashlight from his toolbox, propped herself back up on the stool and aimed it where Harvey was beginning his work. “Giselle, of course.”

Wilson reappeared. “Well, Miss Giselle of course, I’d like to know what you think you’re doing here?”

“My last name is Abromowitz.” She crossed her legs.

“Thank you, but that didn’t answer my question.” He approached, giving her a good look at his form, a bit

more muscular than his younger brother, and it was that bit she liked. “What are you doing here?”

She had now been asked this question multiple times and all in the name of trying to help. If everyone kept asking, it was apparent she needed to be somewhere else. She put the flashlight down and jumped off the stool. “Right now I’m leaving.”

* * * *

DAMN.

The last thing Wilson wanted was for Giselle “of course” Abromowitz to leave. In fact, he had been trying to make her stay. He never did have the savvy swagger his younger brother had when getting the girls.

“I’m going to go get Ivy.” She stomped toward the kitchen door.

Allowing a curvy blonde of her nature to storm away would literally be doing a disservice to his bar before it even opened. Of course, if he followed proper protocol, there wouldn’t be a guest here before he actually opened the doors. For once, he had to screw the protocol and he charged forward. “Stop!”

In a move he didn’t anticipate, she skidded to a halt and raised her hands. “What is it?” Her voice came out more of a screech. “Is there a bug on me?”

Well, he may have lost one opportunity, but another was handed to him on a blonde platter with long legs.

“Hold on, I thought I saw something.” As he went to her, he glanced back at Harvey. The man simply shook his head.

“Please get it off, please.” She didn’t move a muscle.

Fine, he admitted to himself at first he was going to cop a feel. Talk about breaking the rules, but why shouldn't he? She had been the one sitting on the stool with her legs crossed, hiking up her skirt. All he could picture were those legs around him. He stopped behind her and reached out.

"Oh." She shuddered. "Please get it."

Damn a second time. He couldn't do it, not like this. Instead, he bent down and brushed the back of her calf. "There. You're fine, I think it was just a string." He did note he took the time to notice her smooth shaven leg.

"Oh, thank you." She spun around and flung her arms around his neck.

When a gorgeous blonde gave a hug, it would be a sin of the worst kind not to return the gesture, and he wrapped his arms around her.

"I just love a man who will save me from bugs." She kept hold of him, but pulled back to look him in the face.

"Well, consider me at your service." The woman was quite striking with her long blonde hair, perfect features and big eyes. She was the kind of woman other women hated just at the sight of her, and the kind of woman all men wanted.

"Well, what else do you do?" Still, she held on and now she raised her eyebrows.

"I know how to make a mean martini." For once, he had a comeback.

Before she got the chance to answer, Ivy interrupted him. Just his luck.

"What's up?" Ivy furrowed her brow and approached her friend.

As if they belonged together, Giselle kept hold of him. “Wilson got a bug or a string off me, and he’s going to make me a mean martini.” She turned to him. “But something tells me that will make me happy.”

Without a doubt, Wilson knew her having a drink with him would make him happy.

“Is there any way you can be happy and drive my car back later? Logan and I are going to get to work.” Ivy held her keys up.

“Well, if I get too happy I may be sleeping on the bar, but sure.” Giselle swiped Ivy’s keys away. “See? Everything’s fine, it had no other choice.”

“Well, the results remain to be seen, but I better get going.” Ivy gave her a quick hug, waved to him and darted back to the kitchen.

“It’s like my parents left me in the house alone. Let’s check out the bar.” She slipped away from him and skipped back over to her stool. “I’m ready for my mean martini.”

Though he never envisioned making his first official drink in this non-official capacity, there was no way he would refuse the leggy blonde. “I don’t want to keep you waiting.” Finally, he said something that smacked a little of flirting and he made his way behind the bar.

She leaned way over, giving him a perfect eyeful of her cleavage.

“Do you want it dirty?” He put the ingredients in the shaker and got out a glass.

“Always.” She licked her lips and stared him in the eye.

Holy Mother of God. Somehow he managed to add in the bit of olive juice without spilling, shook the drink and pour his concoction into the glass. He topped the

whole thing off with two olives, put a napkin in front of her and presented her with his elixir.

“Aren’t you going to join me?” She ran her finger along the rim of the glass.

“I don’t really drink.” Her beauty and carefree attitude entranced him and he couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Really? Then why own a bar?” Eyes wide, she picked up the toothpick with the two olives and used her teeth to slide one into her mouth.

“I’ve worked in many bars and understand the operation.” Thank the heavens he was standing behind the bar, the erection growing in his pants would be noticeable from every other angle. “Also, you know no matter what the economy, a bar can survive. People want to feel good and get a drink, and a nice place with reasonable prices that develops a following is a good foundation. The timing is perfect with my brother as well.” The twentieth anniversary of Logan’s movie could only help the bar.

“Everyone wants to be associated with a celebrity. Though I have to say I never associated a bar with stability.” She swirled the second olive in the alcohol and held it to his lips. “I have to say I like that way of thinking.”

Without a second thought he took the offering, plucking the little treat off the toothpick using his teeth. The briny tartness filled his mouth. “I must appreciate a woman who will share her olive.”

Staring right into his eyes, she lifted the martini glass and took a sip. “I must appreciate a man who can make a mean martini.”

“Is it mean enough?” He leaned against the bar.

“If it gets any worse, I may have to spank it.” After a low laugh and another sip, she lifted the glass to him. “But since you’re the father of this little baby, you tell me.”

Wondering if he should break his rule, he paused.

“Let loose, it will do you good,” she whispered. “Let’s have some fun.”

His resolve all but gone, especially when it came to the blonde with the big blue eyes, he tasted his own concoction. Spot on. He nodded.

“So, tell me more about you, Mr. Alexander, and I don’t want to hear anything about Logan, I want to hear about you.” Once more, she took a taste of the drink and then fed him.

Never, and he meant not ever, had a woman not asked him about Logan. Even if they didn’t actually say the words, the question lingered right beneath the surface. He opened his mouth to speak, but then realized the tidbit he was going to impart about himself dealt with Logan, and so did the second thing. In fact, once their mother passed, and he had to make sure that Logan got to do his movie, every thought came attached to Logan in some way.

“Take another drink. I’m sure you can conjure a memory or two.” She gave him the last of her beverage.

As he created another dirty martini, his mind went into overdrive and something materialized. “Well, if I tell you that I’ve had a job since I was twelve and I have always been gainfully employed, does that count?”

“Not only does it count, but it doesn’t surprise me. Something tells me that you are very strong and very responsible.” She leaned in closer.

He bent down, meeting her nose to nose. “Something tells me that you are exceptionally smart.”

Before he had time to think about what was happening, she moved forward and caressed her lips against his.

Her kiss stoked his already aroused senses and without second guessing his next move or worrying if he was doing the right thing, he grabbed her shoulders, pulled her closer, and deepened the kiss.

A kiss she whole-heartedly returned.

Lord, lord, lord, he didn't remember the last true kiss he received, or gave for that matter. Especially not one that included tantalizing tongue tangling, little moans and a woman twisting her hands in his collar to bring him closer.

“I think I have to go get a part for the dishwasher.” Out of nowhere, Harvey interrupted their interlude.

They both turned toward the intruder.

“What should I tell him?” Wilson didn't mean to voice the question.

“Tell him to finish tomorrow.” Her laugh vibrated through him.

According to their schedule, they needed to get the plumbing done. Electricity would be tomorrow. Everything had rules and regulations and a method.

Giselle nuzzled his neck.

“Harvey come back tomorrow, I'm suddenly busy.” The schedule could go to hell. “Close the door on your way out.”

They looked at each other, and as if thinking with one mind, they went right back to their make out session. Now their kisses possessed more urgency and passion, her taste filled him, sweet with a tang from the

alcohol, and he had to have more, feel her up against him.

She must have wanted the same thing. Her hands wandered over his chest and she balanced on her knees on the barstool in an attempt to get closer to him.

Not wanting to stop her from doing whatever she wanted, and needing her as well, again he did the unexpected, in a move that even surprised him, swiped everything off the bar and pulled her over.

She continued kissing him and lay right down on the bar. With no hesitation, he joined her and they both turned to their sides to continue their explorations.

They moved fast. In a flash, she helped him pull his shirt off and then leaned up and yanked her own tiny t-shirt over her head, revealing the most magnificent set of breasts he ever had the pleasure of seeing barely contained by a red bra that had to be for decorative purposes only.

The temptation too great, he went for exactly what he craved and lowered his mouth to those incredible mounds.

“Um.” She raked her fingers through his hair.

At her encouragement, he pulled the bra over her breasts and guided one of her tight, pink nipples between his lips.

Beneath him, she squirmed as he flicked his tongue over the little nub and grazed his teeth over her, then giving the same attention to her other side, while his hand snuck under the hem of her skirt. Running his palm up her shapely smooth thigh, he discovered she chose not to wear any panties. He was done for. “God, you’re gorgeous.”

While he tended to her, she rubbed her hand over the outside of his jeans. He couldn't help but let out a groan and sucked in his breath when she quite deftly opened his button fly using only one hand and reached inside his boxer briefs.

"Wilson." She turned to her back and lifted one leg, hiking her skirt up.

"Um." He returned to her lips and his fingers roamed to her center. The woman was as turned on as he was, and he relished how smoothly his fingertips delved into her.

"Break in this bar yet?" As she spoke, her lips grazed his.

"Break in the bar?" He could barely form a coherent sentence.

"You turn me on." She took his chin in her hand and stared into his eyes. "Get a condom."

Never had he heard a woman be so incredibly direct with what she wanted.

Never had he been more turned on.

Never had he cared less about the ramifications of his actions. Anyone could walk in here at any moment, and he wasn't going to go check the doors.

Instead, he got his wallet out of his back pocket, managed to get the condom he dutifully stashed there, and held it up.

She snatched it out of his hand. "Let's see what this bar can do."

"It should be solid." He positioned himself between her legs and watched as she rolled the condom over him.

Right there on his bar, with his pants half down, he sank into the most incredible woman he had ever met.

Her slick tightness surrounded him in what could only be described as pure paradise. In an effort to keep himself in check, he lowered his face to her neck, kissing her and inhaling.

Truthfully, nothing helped, he had to go for it.

She let out a mew and wrapped her legs around his waist. "I'm sure the bar can handle whatever you want to throw at it."

A woman who told him what she wanted. Desire surged through him and he decided to give into both their needs and thrust into her.

"Ah." She nodded and bit her lip. "More."

He went with his own urges let go and plunged into her. The euphoria of simply following what his most primal self wanted overwhelmed him, especially since he was gifted with an active lover, one who moved with him, helped him set the pace, and not only returned touches and kisses, but initiated them as well.

His body burned. Each time he drove into her pushed him closer to combustion. He reached back and lifted her hips, embedding himself deep inside her with every stroke.

"Oh, oh yeah." Giselle panted and fisted the hair at the back of his neck. "I'm going to come."

"Let go, baby." The simple thought of making her orgasm edged him ever closer. The power of their rhythm caused the glasses hanging above them to clink together in time to their pleasure. "I'm with you."

"I'm there." She arched her back.

The ripples from her end were all he needed to be submerged in the most exquisite ecstasy. His muscles tensed, followed by intense waves washing over him as he hit his climax. Their bodies throbbed together, and

he was hit with two more crashes of wild bliss before the perfect calm consumed him. He moved to her side and took her into his arms. "Oh, my God."

"Whoever built this bar should be given a bonus." She laughed, kissed him and propped up on her elbow. "I never come the first time with a guy. I usually end up in the bathroom getting myself off and then wanting to go home."

"And what do you want to do right now?" He had to ask, but if she said she had to go to the bathroom, he swore he was going to go flush his head down the toilet. Somehow, he managed not to ask what happened the second time.

"I'm starving." She raised her eyebrows at him.

"I can fix that." Relief washed over him. He supposed with him, the second time didn't matter. Score. "Can I take you out?"

She shook her head and his heart sank.

"I don't want to move from this spot." To prove her point she stretched out on the bar.

He had to feed her and glanced around the space. "Do you like nuts?"

"I think I just proved I'm a huge fan." Giggles escaped her throat.

With a Cheshire grin, he gently slid off the bar, turned his back to her to deal with the condom and wash his hands, then he retrieved a huge can of mixed nuts and rejoined her.

"Oh, mixed nuts, your bar is going to be fancy." She pulled the lid off the can and proceeded to pick out about ten cashews. "All bars have nuts, but not the mixed kind."

“Yeah, Logan thinks mixed nuts are more classy than peanuts, and they’re a conversation starter, but more expensive. You can get a ton of peanuts for cheap. The salt helps people drink more.” He shrugged and opened his mouth when she parted with one of her cashews and fed it to him. “Did you know the cashew is actually not a nut?” That question precisely was why he had problems with women, and he winced.

“Really? What is it then, and why do they put it into the mixed nuts?” She lifted one of the little curled treats only to drop it right into her cleavage. “Oh.”

“Allow me.” The heady post-orgasmic haze still encompassed him, and he used his tongue to scoop up the disobedient snack. While cashews were delicious on their own, when mixed with Giselle they were a delicacy. “It’s a seed, not a nut.” Somehow he couldn’t shut his mouth up.

“What’s the difference?” She scooped up another handful of nuts and placed an almond on each of her breasts.

Well, he had to give her props for not laughing him off, and actually seeming interested. He nipped up each one of her offerings. “A nut is a fruit and a seed is in a fruit.” One day he would learn to shut up.

“You don’t say.” Now she created a line of walnuts down to her bellybutton.

He followed her trail, only wishing she had gone a little lower, and looked up at her.

“You know there are few things about nuts and seeds that you don’t know.” She grinned, appearing as a girl stuck with her hand in the candy jar.

“Enlighten me.” He had to know what she would come up with next.

“You were right, they are a conversation starter. She stuck out her tongue and fed herself a cashew and chewed it. “All your facts are making me horny again, and nuts are full of calories.”

“Do we need to burn off some of those extra calories?” He put the can of nuts aside.

Her answer was a slow nod.

His erection swelled once more. This woman brought out something in him, something he liked and for once, he was going to take advantage of it. He crawled on top of her. His bar would never be the same. It would be better.



Chapter Two

FIRST DATES.

If Giselle had a list of things she hated, and she did -- along with bugs, orange lipstick, dry shampoo and hazelnuts, she hated first dates.

A first date was more like a job interview rather than a fun romp with someone you wanted to make out with, and the way Wilson formally asked her after they had sex a second time on his bar made her feel like she needed to put on a suit rather than a short tight mini dress with sky-high heels.

Her heart seized when at exactly seven o'clock on the dot the doorbell rang. Didn't the guy even know to be a few minutes late? Keep it casual? Keep it light? They were going out for food and sex, they weren't solving any major problems like trying to rid the world of orange lipstick.

She combed out her hair once more and took her time walking across the apartment. Once she opened the door, she almost slammed it right in her date's face. The guy had the audacity to not only wear a nice suit, but also bring flowers and some sort of wrapped box. Unless that box held tutti-frutti flavored condoms, she didn't want any part of it. Hey wait, that may be a great invention. She had to remember to write that down and ask Ivy about it later.

"I know it's cliché, but I brought you some flowers and candy." Wilson held out the offerings.

Before reaching out for the gifts, she assessed the

man. At least he was as good looking as the night before, maybe even better, but he seemed a little pale, maybe a case of nerves.

This romance stuff belonged to Ivy, not her. She couldn't pine away for anyone, let alone get to the point where she shivered at the thought of someone, wondered what they were doing. No, she watched all her friends go through the misery.

Wilson had that look. The expression on his face that said it could be more. Well, she would be the dream date cause she wouldn't go there, tie him down and make him do anything striking of a commitment.

Now it fell on her to set the tone of the evening. "Do you ever wonder why an orgasm is better with someone else than just doing it alone? I mean you would think it's the same thing with or without someone, but the act of having someone give you an orgasm, rather than just taking one for yourself, is so much more satisfying."

His mouth opened, but he didn't speak.

While he considered her words, she took the flowers, put them on the coffee table and then plucked the box out of his hand. Refusing to be the girl who didn't eat in front of a guy, she tore the wrapping off the box, had one moment of mourning for the fact it wasn't flavored condoms and then smiled at the high-quality handmade chocolate. Without further ado, she shoved one of the treats into her mouth and then did the same to Wilson, especially since his mouth was already open. "You never answered my orgasm question."

He finished chewing his chocolate and swallowed. "Well, I think I would have to say that orgasms are meant to be shared."

At his answer, she nodded and grabbed her purse off the side table. “That’s good, I also hope that’s on the docket for later tonight, or now, I’m a go with the flow kind of girl.” Chocolate in hand, she glanced up at him as she closed the door and walked by him on the way out. If nothing else, they wouldn’t have any of that weird wondering if they were going to have sex or not. They had sex last night, so why should tonight be any different?

He rushed in front of her and opened the door to his SUV.

“Thanks.” She settled into the seat and watched him practically trip on his own feet getting into the driver’s side.

He shut the car door, shoved the key into the ignition and turned to her.

“Did you want to kiss me?” She licked her lips.

“Who are you?” He furrowed his brow, but put his arm around the back of her car seat.

“Giselle Abromowitz.” She told him the obvious.

“Yes, you are.” He lowered his arm to her shoulder and connected their lips.

She took it upon herself to open her mouth and instantly deepen the kiss. There was something about his taste, the way his soft lips molded to hers, or maybe the way he moaned and wrapped his arms around her that spurred her on.

He held her tight and not only took his chance to explore her mouth, but gave her a turn as well.

Above all else, his kisses were genuine. Everything about him was genuine. In a world that played mind games with no directions to follow, he was real. Something told her he lost more games than he won,

and in turn she could do as she pleased, knowing she would get an authentic reaction from him.

She took in the best part of his authentic reaction when she ran her hand over the bulge in his suit only to be met with the full-fledged erection that gave her a hell of a lot of pleasure the night before. Her body flooded at simply taking in the contours, even through the thick denim fabric. When Wilson's hand wandered to her chest, his fingertips going right to her already sensitive nipples, she squirmed.

"God, you're hot." He bucked his hips. "I'm not going to be able to drive to the restaurant."

"Are you hungry?" She kissed his ear, sliding her mouth down to his neck and giving him a little suck. The tang of his aftershave tickled her tongue and made her crave more.

"No, I'm not." He attempted to pull her closer, took her chin and found her lips once again.

Not one to be kept from her goal, she reached over, found the automatic seat adjustments, moved his seat back as far as it would go, and straddled him. "I say we have some fun."

"Oh, yeah." He slid his palms up her thighs, pushing her dress up and revealing the fact she decided to forgo underwear in this evening's ensemble. "Holy shit."

"Is it a throb or a burn?" At his reaction, her arousal amplified. She quickly unbuckled his belt and unfastened his pants, and pulled down his boxer briefs. His erection sprang into her waiting hand and she eagerly gripped him, treating him to a few strong strokes.

"A throb or a burn?" His fingers traveled between her thighs and circled her most sensitive spot.

Before explaining she leaned back and relished in the sensations he created. “You know, your need, does it burn throughout you or is it more of a throb taking over your body?”

He stared into her eyes. “It’s both and with you it’s overwhelming.”

“Strange, from what I feel it’s definitely hot and throbbing.” She continued to rub up and down his length, but went progressively slower. “Am I the only one who can make it better?”

“You’re making me ache.” His answer came in pants, and he attempted to pull her down for another kiss.

“Get me a condom.” Their lips brushed against one another as she spoke.

“Do we need to go inside?” Somehow, he managed to fish his wallet out of his pants, then he flipped it over and fumbled until he found the condom.

“Can you wait to go inside or do you want me to take the ache away right here?” Something told her she needed to push his limits and it had been far too long since she let go and enjoyed herself in this arena.

Once he shook his head, she tore the condom open, sheathed him and since she was more than ready, wasted no time in lowering herself down upon him.

“Ah.” His head fell back hitting the seat. “You’re so tight.”

The way her body stretched to accommodate him was welcomed. She sucked in her breath and took a second to allow her body to adjust to his size.

Finally, her own burning took over and in need of relief she ground against him.

“Like that.” With only what she could describe as a look of bliss on his face, he shut his eyes.

“Or like this.” She braced on his shoulders, raised herself up and stopped with only his very tip inside her.

“Giselle.” His gaze traveled to where they were joined and back up to her face.

In response, she simply raised her eyebrows. She would force him to let go.

“You’re going to make me insane.” At last, he grabbed her hips and pushed her down.

“Yes.” She gasped. “Come on Wilson, take what you want.”

Without any more prodding, he wrapped his arms around her and thrust up into her. Over and over again their bodies met, collided and drove them both closer to their end. This was exactly what she needed, had to have.

“Oh, God, babe. I’m there.” He plunged into her. “Come with me.”

“I’m there.” The burning engulfed her as he burrowed deep inside her and let go. Their climax hit at the same time, and they both yelled out as the bliss encompassed them.

As they caught their breath, she collapsed against him, the last few ripples of her orgasm fading away. “Now, that’s a first date.”

“Giselle, I didn’t want you to think I was this kind of guy.” He combed his fingers through her hair.

“What kind of guy?” At his statement, she sat up.

“The kind that has sex in a car. I didn’t even take you out yet.” He gave her a light kiss.

“Well, what do you think of me? I just had sex in a car, and all I want to do now is go inside and polish off that chocolate with you.” In her own way, she had to make him see this was exactly what she wanted. “Why

shouldn't we have sex in the car if we want to? It was amazing."

"The best." He gave her another kiss. "I've never had sex in a car before."

"Well, then I'm happy to be the one to pop your car cherry." Though she wondered how car sex never happened for him.

"It was a magnificent first time." A vibration radiated out from him.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" When another round of vibrations took over his lower half, she looked down between them.

"Let me make sure everything is okay. Then we'll clean up and I'll take you out." He struggled to get his phone out of his pocket without disturbing them.

Rather than fight the battle of the phone, she untangled her limbs from him and returned to her seat. The man was dead set on some by the book date.

At last, he got to his phone. "Hello."

She straightened out her dress, hoping they could just opt for the chocolate and maybe a drive. The weird silence that happened when someone disconnected from an experience and delved into real life took over the car. All she could do was sit there and stare straight ahead at the fogged up windows waiting to see what was going on. Right here was the perfect example of why things needed to remain light and fun. Had this been Ivy, she would have been overly concerned about what was happening.

"I see. Fine. I'll be there." He hit end on the phone and turned to her.

Of course, there was always the possibility he got what he wanted out of the date and now wanted to bolt.

Then again, she got what she wanted, but she didn't want the night to end. With her fingertip, she drew her signature G in the moisture on the window.

"I had some friends doing some installations on the booths, and there's an issue with electricity and a whole mess." He shook his head and took her hand.

"Well, I understand." At receiving the non-descript work excuse, she pulled away, happy she didn't get in too deep. Her theory was proven yet again. "I'll see you around." No doubt when he wanted sex, he would call. She may or may not answer.

"No." He reclaimed her hand. "I don't want tonight to end. I want to be with you. Can we just check out the club really fast and then we'll go out?"

Torn between wanting to tell him to go, wanting him to stay, and wanting chocolate, she opened the car door. "Let me change and let's not forget the chocolate." First dates sucked, but orgasms were better when they were shared.

* * * *

GISELLE MIGHT BE THE ONLY GIRL on the planet, possibly the universe, who didn't bitch and complain at the mention of him having to go check on his business rather than go out.

In fact, she may also be the only person who wanted sex before a date and wanted chocolate for dinner.

He glanced over at her beauty as he turned into his parking lot. Her blonde hair glowed in the streetlights giving her a halo of sorts.

She glanced over at him and raised her eyebrows. "Do you have any more of those nuts? They'll go

perfect with the chocolate, and something else.”

Though he'd recently experienced an orgasm of epic proportions, the burn Giselle mentioned before could definitely be stoked.

Who was he kidding? He was totally and utterly taken by the little vixen who'd entered his life twenty-four hours ago. For once, his brother's business brought him something wonderful and amazing. He parked the car and continued to stare at her.

“What are you looking at?” She giggled.

Never before had he experienced this total comfort around someone, especially someone of the opposite sex and someone he just met. They just fit, and he wondered if she felt the same thing. He opened his mouth to ask, but stopped.

“Wilson.” She touched her hair. “What are you looking at?”

“I think that's obvious.” Everything about her was luscious.

“Do I look all right to meet your friends?” With wide eyes she straightened up in her seat.

“I'm afraid my friends won't be looking at anything else.” Since he met her, he'd been acting on impulse, and right now his impulse told him to kiss her. He gave her a light kiss more than a peck, just enough to taste her strawberry flavored lip gloss. Talk about a taste sensation. “You are delicious.”

“The best is yet to come. I hope.” After dropping her hint, she opened the car door and hopped out.

“Holy mother of god.” His mouth watered. Didn't every guy want a girl who was blatant about what she wanted? Maybe not Logan. Logan wanted a girl where he could take the lead. Not that it mattered. Wilson

wanted a girl who made innuendos and wasn't shy about what she wanted. Instead of sitting here in the car comparing his sex life to his brother's, he got out and rushed behind Giselle, putting his arm around her waist as he let them both in the back.

The sounds of construction greeted them, the bang of the hammer, a buzz of a saw and some rock music in the background.

"Sounds productive." Giselle took his hand and weaved her way through the kitchen to the main room.

They were met with a complete mess. Booths that were once in place by the walls were now in the middle of the room, chairs were piled up on tables and everything that had a spot seemed displaced. What happened to his bar?

"What happened to Wilson's bar?" Giselle marched right into the thick of things and put her hands on her hips.

Ian and Ned, two of his friends and workers looked up at her. Actually, looked her over, and that was his cue to rush across the space and join her. Fine, he did the possessive move where he put his arm around her. "What's happened to my bar?"

Giselle tapped him, stood on her tiptoes and whispered in his ear, "I just asked that, but by the looks of things, they messed something up."

Her logic did have a certain...logic.

At last, Ian spoke up. "We were finishing up the installation of the booths."

"Then what are they doing in the middle of the room?" Again, Giselle asked the pertinent question.

He let his hand travel down her waist to her backside.

“The booth is supposed to go here, and we need an outlet here as well.” Ian stood.

“Let me see.” She stepped around Ian, went to Ned and stared down at him. With a tilt of her head, she bent down, nodded and then straightened up and examined the booth. “The solution is quite simple.”

“We were just going to put a table and chairs here instead.” Ian furrowed his brow.

Once more, before Wilson could open his mouth, she took over.

“No, that will ruin the whole look of the joint.” She giggled and spun around to him. “Joint, get it? Like in the 1920s”

All he could do was nod and watch.

“Then what would you suggest, little lady?” Ian used a western accent.

“Do you think I’m a bimbo?” She skipped over to Wilson and grabbed his arm. “That’s totally the wrong era.”

Ian shrugged.

“What do you think?” Ned spoke up.

“Just cut a little hole in the bottom of the booth, run the wires through a conduit and make the outlet in the side of the booth. Then once it’s all in place we can plug a lamp in there, or people can use it to charge their phones.” She jumped and faced him, a huge smile gracing her beautiful face. “I think that would be really swell.”

“That’s an excellent idea.” He wrapped his arms around her. “Let me guess, you worked for a contractor?”

“I worked for an electrician. It was during my building phase. I worked for the plumber, the

electrician and the carpenter.” She shook her head. “Oh, by the way, did the plumbing get finished?”

“Yes, earlier.” Unable to resist, he leaned down and gave her a kiss. Also, the act firmly sealed the fact she was taken to the other testosterone laden men in his joint. “I need to put you on the payroll.”

“Interesting thought.” As if getting what he was going for, she wrapped one leg around his, put her arms around his neck and gave him a deep kiss, complete with tongue.

“I have some other thoughts.” He hadn’t sported this many erections in a twenty-four hour period since he could remember, especially erections with potential. “And the thoughts include your gorgeous gams.”

She slid her lips up to his ear. “Then let’s get rid of the buzz kills who don’t know all the hip to the jive talk and we’ll go make whoopee.”

“Do as she says.” He motioned toward his friends and focused on Giselle.

“Yeah, go make some whoopee.” Ned laughed. “Sex and letting loose agrees with you.”

Yes, he was utterly taken by the beautiful tomato in his arms, she defied every rule and made some of her own. She was the proverbial bee’s knees.



Chapter Three

“BYE!” GISELLE WAVED TO IVY, collected her purse, her briefcase and her sunglasses.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Still in her same vintage 1940s pink bathrobe she’d owned since college, Ivy dashed into the tiny living room of their apartment. “Did you get another job?”

Ivy might be her best friend and her roommate, but she wasn’t her mommy. Giselle narrowed her eyes and turned toward the mother hen. “Have you had sex with Logan yet?”

“What does that have to do with your job?” Ivy crossed her arms.

“Exactly.” She lifted her chin.

“Come on.” Ivy did the thing where she pursed her lips.

“Fine.” No man or woman could resist the pursed lips. Thank god, she became immune in junior high. “Everything will work out. I have a job, and I’ll see you later.” Without wanting to explain further, she patted Ivy’s head, spun on her heel and left.

She got in her car, turned up her music and made her way to Hollywood. At this time of day, after the morning rush hour, there was little traffic and within the timespan of five of her favorite songs *du jour*, she arrived at Wilson’s Bar.

Lucky for her, Wilson lived above the bar and his car was in his spot. She slid into the space next to his, wondering if she should ask him if she could have her

name painted on the slot. Maybe she needed to work there a little more first.

Before getting out of the car, she checked her reflection in the mirror and grabbed her things. Satisfied she was ready for this undertaking, she got out and went right to the back door, no doubt the employee's entrance, and knocked.

Yes, she might have had sex with her new boss multiple times, but now she wanted to appear professional, and she straightened up, jutted her chest out and held her briefcase firmly by her side. She waited for quite some time and then knocked again.

At last, the door opened, and she stopped herself from smiling at a disheveled Wilson in a pair of sweats and a tight t-shirt, his hair askew, a little stubble and no shoes.

"You look the same after we have sex, except naked." She let out a laugh.

"Did I forget a day date or something? I thought we were going out tonight." He rubbed his hand over his face and stepped back, motioning for her to come inside.

"Oh, we're going out tonight. I just wanted to hit the ground running." As she passed him, she gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You're cute when you just wake up."

"Well, we could both still be sleeping if you stayed here like I asked you to." He shut the door and stumbled over to the coffeemaker.

Staying there smacked of a little too much relationship for her. "I didn't mean to wake you, but I didn't have a key and didn't know what time to be here."

"You're always welcome here." His voice came out

strained from yawning, and he leaned on the counter.

She joined him at the coffeemaker, poured him a mug, handed it to him and patted his back. “Go do whatever you do, and I’ll get started. Maybe when you’re ready we can have a meeting and go over some of my ideas.”

After taking a big gulp, he nodded. “Have some coffee, and give me a few, I’ll be right back.”

“Okay.” Once more she kissed him. It was just too much fun. “Is it all right if I kiss you in this setting?”

“Babe, you can kiss me in any setting.” He gave her another kiss, took his coffee, and waved as he went back up the stairs.

Thus far, their arrangement worked perfectly. Humming a little tune, she took her drink and her items and went to the front room. She set up for her meeting, getting her monogrammed pad out with her notes and setting out several writing implements.

No sooner had she plugged her phone into the outlet on the side of the booth than the thing rang. A quick glance at the caller ID revealed it was Ivy’s mom. Though she didn’t want to take personal calls at work, she was ready and still waiting for Wilson to get started. “*Hola* momma.”

“How are you Elle? Working?” Ivy’s mom’s parental voice filled her ear. While Ivy’s mom was the type that lived in a house, baked cookies and did homework, Giselle’s own mother was the one who went shopping and lived in a spa. The woman actually lived inside a spa. Seriously. Both types of moms were good.

“Yep. I’m here now just waiting for a big meeting.” She wasn’t going to tell the woman she considered her second mother where she found employment either.

“I called because I want you to come to the Palm Springs house this weekend, but it’s a surprise. You can’t tell Ivy.” Ivy’s mother’s tone took on a warning. “Do you understand? You can’t tell Ivy you’ll be there. I’ll just invite her for the family dinner and such.

Geez, you let the cat out of the bag on one birthday party in high school and you are never trusted again. She frowned. Fine, she might have also mentioned Ivy’s graduation party to Ivy, but that was only because Ivy hated surprises. “I got it, I won’t say anything.”

“All right, I’m trusting you.” Ivy’s mother made a noise into the phone. “Don’t think I forgot about the party when Ivy got her job at *chargge.com*.”

“Okay, I’m guilty, but I won’t be this time.” Right, there were three times, maybe more. “What’s the occasion?”

“I’m hedging my bets.” Mrs. Vermont chuckled into the phone. “You can bring a date. Ivy said you’re seeing someone.”

“Now who’s telling tales out of school?” Giselle put a notepad out for Wilson.

“Are you seeing someone?” The woman point-blank asked the question.

“Technically, I see a lot of people.” In fact, just last night she met Wilson’s friends. “There are people all over the world.”

Ivy’s mother sighed. “So, tell me about your new job.”

No, she wouldn’t be suckered into telling her anything. She and Ivy were most definitely in cahoots. She wondered where cahoots was located, maybe by Area 51.

“Giselle?” Wilson called to her from the kitchen.

“Where are you?”

Saved by the guy... the guy she was seeing. Well, once he walked into the room, he would be the next person she saw.

“My boss is here. I have to go, text me the details. I won’t say a word. Bye!” She hit end on the call and put her phone aside. “In here!”

The door between the kitchen and main room swung open and he entered, appearing much more put together in jeans and a button down and clean-shaven. “There you are.”

“Look, I’m using the charging station.” She motioned toward her creation and decided not to mention her call.

“That’s awesome.” He joined her at the booth, picked up one of her ballpoint pens, and blinked as he tapped the pen against the pad of paper. “So, what are we meeting about?”

“Oh, I made an agenda.” She pulled her paper closer. “First, we need to discuss the opening. I feel before we have the grand gala, we should have a soft opening just to make sure that everything is running smoothly. It can be for just friends and family. Like a practice run.”

“Soft opening?” Once more, he blinked. “I like that idea.”

“Maybe you should write that down.” She motioned toward the pad of paper. “I worked for three event planners, so I’ll take the helm on this.”

“That’s great.” He wrote something down.

“Also, being that this is a speakeasy and in Hollywood, the land of who you know, I think we need to develop a secret menu.” She turned the page on her notes. “We can have The Wilson which would be a very

dirty martini and extra olives.”

He raised his eyebrows at her.

“I thought that was appropriate cause you can be very dirty.” She cupped her hand around her mouth and lowered her voice. “And it’s our secret.”

“I’m happy to demonstrate my dirtiness with you anytime.” A smile took over his face and the corners of his eyes crinkled. “Maybe we need to name one The G-spot for you.”

Her cheeks heated and she lifted her notepad for him to see. She had named her own drink the same thing. “The only thing is, I think you may be the only one able to find it.” If last night was any indication, that was true.

“Well, we have to make that drink especially sweet.” He scooted over and kissed her neck. “I can go searching again anytime.”

“Look at you letting loose.” As tempting as that was, they had work to get done first. “Business before pleasure.”

“All right. Tell me the rest of the menu.” With a bit of possessiveness, he put his hand on her leg and leaned over to read her paper.

“The Stardust can be Logan’s drink. It has to have lemon and club soda in it.” She was now privy to some of Logan’s quirks thanks to Ivy.

“My brother’s drink shouldn’t be a secret. His drink needs to be public to draw people into the bar.” Wilson took her hand and kissed the back.

At Wilson’s odd comment, she turned to him. “Is he going to help with publicity?”

“He doesn’t want to. He wants to stay behind the scenes, but it’s his duty.” Wilson sat up. “What else is

on the list?”

Something didn't set right. "Why is it his duty?"

"I gave up a lot to make sure he got to stay with me after our mother died, and I made sure he got to act and be in *Hollywood Stardust*." As he talked, Wilson played with her fingers. "After all that movie gave and took, it's time for some payback. I spent a lot of time being a parent."

"You know parents aren't supposed to ask for payback from their kids." As soon as the words left her mouth, she turned away. This wasn't her deal, she didn't get involved in things this deep, these types of conversations only dug holes that wanted to take roots.

He looked at her and pressed his palm to the side of her face. "So, what's next on the agenda?"

"Well, I thought I would start by organizing a few things and get started on the soft opening. Unless you needed me to do something else. Let me know if there are any forms I need to fill out for payroll, or if that's something I need to start." She straightened out her papers.

"Payroll?" The word left his mouth right as his phone rang.

"Yes, silly, I took you up on your offer to hire me, but I have a question. Am I allowed to kiss you at work?" She leaned into him.

"I need to get this." He lifted his phone and put it to his ear. "But you are allowed to kiss me at work."

She kissed him.

"Hello." Once more, he took her hand. "No, Nick, you are not allowed to kiss me at work. That is reserved for the woman I'm seeing. She just accepted a job here. I really need her help, and she has some great ideas."

Woman he is seeing. At the end of the day, she knew they were seeing each other, but that's as far as it went. Seeing each other and working together. That was all.

"Why don't you bring over the information on the premium brands? Giselle and I will have a meeting with you." He gave her shoulder a squeeze. "I also need to start hiring a crew now that I have my main person."

His main person. She inhaled and exhaled. It was all good.

Wilson hung up. "Well, we have a meeting later and then tonight our date."

"I can help you hire people, I've been a waitress more times than I can remember." She glanced up at him.

"You can completely be in charge." He gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose.

Her phone vibrated, and she glanced down to see Ivy's mother texted her the information on the Palm Springs trip, with another reminder not to say a word to Ivy. "So, I guess you are the guy I am seeing."

"Yes, I will wear that title with pride." He grabbed her list of drinks and read it once more.

"I have to go to Palm Springs next weekend. Will you go with me?" Yes, she just asked him. "I'm supposed to bring the guy I'm seeing."

"Then I guess I have no choice but to say yes." He winked.

She guessed she had no choice but to give him a title. Damn, she didn't want anyone to have a title. With a title came anxiety and responsibility. "I need to figure out how to hire people for the next big Hollywood hot spot." She slipped out of the booth.

* * * *

THE LINE OF PEOPLE in front of his not yet open bar was Wilson's first clue something strange was going on. The second clue was there was not one parking space in the back, except for the one designated for the owner. He parked his car, grabbed his file folders, and entered the bar through the back, where he received his third and final clue something was amiss at Wilson's in the form of Logan greeting him with a scowl and crossed arms.

"Hey bro, what's cooking?" Wilson put his folders down and waited.

"Not me." Logan crossed the room and stared him down. "Would you like to know why?"

"If you feel it will be cathartic for you." With Logan, one had to act like things weren't a big deal.

"I cannot cook because your girl Friday, or girlfriend, or friend with benefits or whatever she is, has my spoon." His baby brother pointed behind him.

Oh Lord, not Logan's spoon. "Let me see what's going on." As the older brother and the one in charge of the blonde with several titles, he pushed Logan aside and went to the door, opening it only a crack to get the lay of the land, a key strategic move when dealing with Giselle, as he was quickly discovering in the week since he hired her, or she hired him. He wasn't quite sure.

The scene on the other side of the door made him glad he decided to only peek at the goings on in his own bar.

Lined up throughout the space were the people he assumed were coiled around the building. Each person stood perfectly straight holding a paper as Giselle

walked down the line, stopping in front of each one and taking a peek at the paper.

“You’re eliminated.” She handed the paper back to one of the men.

The man took the paper, hung his head down low and exited the bar.

Wilson furrowed his brow and waited.

Giselle repeated this ritual a couple more times and finally stopped in front of a woman. She took the paper, tilted her head from side to side as she read it and then nodded. “You will move forward to the next round.”

The woman beamed at her and went to what seemed to be a designated area by the back booth for those who were moving forward.

Staring, Wilson leaned against the doorjamb and continued to watch what was strangely entertaining. Even Logan came over and spied on the show.

Only then did Wilson notice there were more players to the game. There was also a bartender in full 1920s dress and some people in period costumes at the different tables and booths and at the bar.

Finally, Giselle made her way through all the, dare he say, participants. Once the last person left, she closed the front door and went to her selected few. She lifted Logan’s prized metal spoon off the table and held it up like a microphone.

“There it is.” Logan hit him on the shoulder. “Go save it.”

“Hold on.” Captivated, he really needed to see what would transpire.

“If it gets hurt...” Logan growled.

“I’m sure it will be spared, just wait.” He held up his hand to shut up his brother once Giselle began to talk.

“Okay, we’re going to do a mock service, and I’ll choose who will go to the final elimination.” She corralled her people and continued to talk into her spoon. “You need to take the orders, bring them to the bar, serve the patrons and of course clean up and ring them out.”

Everyone took their respective positions, and Giselle lifted a stopwatch. “All right, on your mark, get set...”

The group seemed to hold their collective breath.

“Go!” With her yell, Giselle jumped, her boobs giving a little bounce.

Neither he nor Logan moved as the group began roaming around the bar taking orders.

A whistle screeched through the space. “Freeze!” Giselle screamed into the spoon.

Every person in the room stopped.

She pointed, stomped over to one of the tables and patted one of the waitresses on the shoulder. “You’re out, you did not ask for an ID.”

The woman stared at her.

“You cannot ever assume anyone’s age, especially in Hollywood. I want to make sure all IDs are checked.” Giselle held the spoon out to the woman. “Do you have any parting words?”

“Is this being filmed?” Logan whispered.

“I have no idea.” Wilson put his finger over his lips. No way could he miss a moment.

“Thank you for this opportunity.” The woman actually bowed and then left by way of the others before her.

“All right, back with it.” Giselle wrangled the whistle

from around her neck and blew it again.

Once more, the crew got to work.

Giselle walked among the would-be waiters and waitresses. By now, a few had their orders and were bringing them back to the customers.

Out of nowhere, Giselle blew her whistle again.

One of the waiters jumped and his glasses fell over, spilling their liquid all over the floor.

Again, everyone froze.

She stalked over to the waiter with the dripping tray. "Please return your tools to the bar and head toward the exit."

"Why did you blow the whistle?" The man shook his head. "Didn't someone else make a mistake?"

"I needed to see who is easily distracted and startled. For today's round, I'm using plastic dishware, but when the bar opens we have expensive glasses and top of the line alcohol, none of which I want wasted." Giselle sighed.

"That was a good twist." Logan elbowed him.

"This has it all, suspense, intrigue, competition." Wilson couldn't take his eyes off the show or his girl.

As Giselle explained her reasoning, a woman scurried over and mopped up the spilled drinks.

Foregoing any more discussion, the man handed the woman his tray and walked out.

"Hey you." Giselle pointed to the cleaning woman.

The woman stopped, held her tray up high and turned toward her.

"You're in the final round, go stand by the bar." Giselle used the spoon to show her the way.

With a grin, the woman nodded. Before taking her position, she put her tray and glasses behind the bar.

“Nice touch.” Again, Giselle blew her whistle. “Game on!”

“Maybe we need to shop this show around.” Logan leaned in further.

“I’m not sure I want anyone to know our secret.” If Wilson couldn’t look away from her, the world wouldn’t be able to either.

With the first person in the final round, the rest of the prospective winners seemed to up their game.

One male went through the bar and refilled the nuts and in return was given a pass to the final round, one woman checked a credit card for fraud, and yet another one helped the bartender organize some glasses.

By the time Giselle was through, she had six people left.

“This is incredible. I’m actually anxious for the end.” Logan shook his head. “What did you tell her to do?”

“I just told her to find some wait staff.” His own voice dripped shock and awe.

“Well, she not only did that, she gave you a whole reality show.” Logan let out a chuckle. “What’s she going to make them do for the finale?”

Before Wilson could answer, he got his answer.

“All right, contestants.” Spoon in hand Giselle paced in front of her selections. “You are the cream of the crop. Are you ready for the last round?”

Her minions nodded.

“What could the last round be?” Logan shifted his weight from one leg to the other.

“I can’t imagine.” With Giselle, everything was a fun mystery. When he told her to help him hire people, he never expected a full-fledged ready for prime time show to play out in his unopened bar.

With no warning, she spun around to them.

Both he and Logan tried to back up, but only succeeded in tripping over each other while the door hit him in the face.

“There you are!” Without even noticing their flub, Giselle skipped over to them. “I need the star of the show to pick the final winners.”

His jaw clenched and on automatic he pushed Logan forward. Now Logan would walk out into his bar and make everyone all starstruck.

“Hi Logan.” Giselle shoved Logan aside and reached for him.

“If I’m not needed, I’m going to reclaim this.” Logan plucked the spoon away from Giselle and replaced it with a baster. “Here you go, it’s wireless so it should work fine.”

“Oh, this is even more authentic.” She held the bulb of the baster up to her mouth. “Wilson Alexander, we have narrowed down our selections. Now we need the man whose name is on the door to make the final call. What do you say?” Now she held the baster out to him.

For the first time, he was the star, at least in Giselle’s eyes. In fact, except for the first time being introduced to Logan, she never really paid much attention to his baby brother, except for a passing hello or to move him out of the way. “I say this.” He grabbed her by the waist, pulled her in and kissed her. Now his staff

would know they were together. It went against every rule in the book, but he didn't care.

She opened her mouth, gave him a little suck on his lower lip and then leaned back, letting out a little chuckle. "Well, I'm not sure that's what your prospective employees want to hear, but I'll take more in a little bit."

Did this woman really not see Logan or anyone else but him? Again, he found himself simply gazing at her, which seemed to be the theme for the afternoon.

"Come on. You need to make the final choice. They're all waiting." With a bit of ownership that only came from couples being together for more than a few dates, she took his hand and dragged him out to greet the public.

Too bad he really just wanted to get Giselle into a private setting. Still, she went through a lot of work to set this all up, and she did an amazing job. He had to give her project and his business his full attention.

"Everyone, this is Wilson Alexander and he will make the final choice." She stood by his side and hooked her arm in his.

He glanced between the hopefuls and bent down to Giselle's ear, breathing in the scent of her shampoo, clean, fresh and fun. "You chose six people."

"Yes, that's how many you said you needed." She shot him a huge smile. "Now they each need to show you a talent that showcase their individuality."

After all she had done, he didn't have the heart to ask how he was supposed to eliminate someone if she chose all the people he needed. Though normally he would cut to the chase, he didn't want to ruin the climax of the show, well reality, well quasi reality,

everything felt unreal. “All right, I’m ready.”

With the baster as her mic, she went to the first person. “All right show us all you have.”

The first man took a bowl of nuts, juggled some and as a finale, he caught them all in his mouth.

Both he and Giselle clapped when he bowed.

“You’re more talented with nuts.” Giselle elbowed him.

One of the women took a tray full of glassware and did a little ballet dance all while balancing the drinks.

“That was good,” Giselle whispered in his ear, giving him some welcome shivers.

They jumped when one of the women burst out into song, and Giselle held on to him when one of the men demonstrated his ability to lift an entire table of drinks without spilling a drop.

As a grand finale, the last woman ran a credit card through the machine using only her cleavage and the last man did an impromptu rap about the bar.

*My name is Clive, I'm glad to be alive,
Wilson's is where I want to work,
Being here with these peeps is the ultimate perk.
Choose me, pick me, I'm at your beck and call,
With me as your waiter, I'll never let you fall.*

“Wow, boobs and a song.” Giselle took him by the shoulders. “Tell me who is your final selection?”

“You.” He winked.

Her cheeks reddened. “What about the staff?”

“Well, I don’t know how I can ever chose from all the amazing candidates. Why don’t we take them all?” Since they needed six people, it really was a no-brainer,

though he didn't know how he would select among them.

"Oh, that would mean we would have all the positions filled!" She turned to him and flung her arms around his neck. "Tell them they all win."

"You are all selected." Wilson glanced at his new staff and then turned his attention back to her.

The crowd went into a round of applause.

"Everyone won." She pressed her body to his and gave him another kiss.

His body took off. Yes, everyone won and he certainly didn't want to be eliminated. In fact, with the way things were going, he might want to make it to the final round.



Chapter Four

“SO, DID YOU EVER FIND out why we are going to Palm Springs?” Wilson drove down Highway 111, the main road through Palm Springs littered with little shops and cafes.

“No, I only know that Ivy is coming for some surprise and they won’t tell me because of my sordid past.” She motioned for Wilson to turn.

“So you never cracked and told her you were coming down?” He chuckled and followed her direction and they made their way into the residential area that housed some of the most amazing mid-century modern homes.

“Well, between Wilson’s and Wilson, I really didn’t get the chance to tell her.” After indicating another turn, she sank down in the seat. Going to the Vermont’s was not unlike going to her mother’s in the fact she would be questioned or interrogated, or basically put on the witness stand. “Third house on the left.”

“Wow.” Wilson stopped the car and stared at the home, the same reaction everyone had the first time they saw this little get-away.

“I have something to tell you.” Thus far, she’d tried to keep talk of this trip to a minimum, not only because she basically admitted this is the man she was seeing and with more than her eyeballs, but also because they would be staying overnight for the first time together like a real couple.

“Uh, oh.” Wilson put the car in park and faced her. “What is it?”

She stared at him. What would it be like if they were a real couple? She never even allowed herself the thought before, but being in this situation, she really had no choice but to try on the shoe. “This is Curtis Raleigh’s home. Ivy’s mom is Curtis Raleigh’s daughter.”

“Curtis Raleigh, the real Curtis Raleigh as in the superstar actor Curtis Raleigh?” He leaned down and took in the home.

“Well, if it was any other Curtis Raleigh it would be stupid to tell you except to mention its not the right Curtis Raleigh.” Ivy’s grandfather famously died of an overdose.

“That does make sense.” He continued to stare at the gorgeous home.

She gazed at the house as well. Yes, it was magnificent.

They both sat there looking for quite a while until the front door opened “Giselle, get in here before Ivy arrives.” One of the Vermont clan came out holding her baby.

She groaned. The woman’s screech rattled through her skull.

“Who’s that?” Wilson got out of the car.

“Fern, the sister. If she’s not careful, we can play hair salon again and this time it will be more than a five inch trim.” Giselle got out of the car wondering if she could use the baby as a shield against Ivy’s weed of a sister. “Everything in this family is a big theatrical production.”

“Well, some families are more dramatic.” Suitcase in

tow, he came around the car and grabbed her hand.

“No, the whole family is actors. Classically trained actors. Everyone but Ivy, who is scared of the stage or camera or anyone looking at her.” In keeping with her own role for the night, she coiled her arm around Wilson’s and stood slightly behind him. He was a much better shield than an infant. “Ivy’s mother hates actors that aren’t trained.”

“Good thing Logan isn’t here. He was actually discovered in the street like people dream of.” Wilson’s laugh was cut off when Fern stomped over to them.

“Fern Vermont Pollack.” The older, faded version of Ivy thrust her hand at Wilson. “Welcome to my family’s home, and you are?”

With their bags in one hand, he went to lift his other hand.

Giselle held him fast. “I can make the introductions.”

“Is that Giselle?” Ivy’s mother came outside, as well as her father and Fern’s husband.

“Well, you’re not making them, so what I am supposed to do?” Fern jutted her jaw out.

“I thought we were in a rush with Ivy on the way, so I was waiting to be efficient.” Like any other horrible chore, the best course of action was to dig right in or save it for later. Saving this for later wouldn’t work, and she dragged Wilson into the center of the group. “Wilson, this is Cecelia Vermont, Ivy’s mother, Dennis Vermont, Ivy’s father, Robert Pollack, Ivy’s brother in law, Little Rose Pollack, Ivy’s niece, and the weed, Ivy’s other relative.” She pointed to each person.

“I’m her sister.” Once more, Fern thrust her hand out.

“Only by a freak chance of DNA.” Still, she restrained

Wilson's arm. "Everyone, this is Wilson Alexander. The last name is not a coincidence. He is Logan Alexander's brother." At last, she let him go.

"Are you an actor?" Cecelia leaned in.

"No. Never stepped one foot in front of a camera." Wilson shook hands with Ivy's father and brother-in-law.

Giselle noticed he didn't shake Fern's hand yet. The guy she was seeing was a fast study.

"You are really Logan Alexander's brother?" Fern kept that hand prone, ready for use.

"I just said he was, they have the same last name." She stopped short of sticking her tongue out at the woman who outted her every time she told Ivy a secret.

"Welcome to my home." Cecelia's face lit up in a smile, and she shook Wilson's hand as well. "Everyone, let's go inside, I want to show Giselle the cake."

In a move that even impressed her, she managed to corral Wilson past Fern and followed Ivy's mom.

"Now with you safely here, and my eyes on you and your cell phone, I will tell you why you are here." Cecelia led them into the kitchen and held her hands out to the cake.

At the words on the cake, she stumbled back, but Wilson caught her. "I don't understand."

"Still unable to read?" Fern came over. "It says, 'Happy Engagement Ivy and Matt.'"

Wilson bent down to her ear. "Who's Matt?"

Of all the times she should have opened the bag and rolled out a red carpet to let the cats out, she stayed quiet.

"Ivy's fiancé." Fern continued to spew her brand of facts. "He's surprising her with the engagement

tonight. That's why we're all here."

Barely realizing it, Giselle shook her head.

"What's wrong?" As if guarding the cake, Cecelia moved in front of the table with her arms out.

"Ivy is not seeing Matt in the same way that I am seeing Wilson." Though she said the words, it sounded as if someone else were speaking.

"Of course not, dear, you and Wilson just started seeing each other. Ivy and Matt have been together for a long time." Cecelia's tone turned parental.

Apparently, this called for further explanation and she leaned in. "Wilson and I have sex, a lot. Ivy and Matt, not a lot." Ivy and Matt were on again off again, mostly off and now with Logan...Logan. Oh no, this was going to get bad.

Ivy's father wiped his brow.

"Well, not that it's anyone's business, but maybe Ivy and Matt aren't as forthcoming about their private activities as you are." Now Cecelia spoke through clenched teeth.

"If anyone is privy to Ivy's private activities aside from the guy she is with, it's me and trust me, it isn't happening, and we don't call it private activities." Above all else she had to get to her best friend. "I need to use the bathroom." She clutched her purse and went to leave.

"Oh no, you don't. Not with this." Cecelia caught her and wrangled her purse away.

Giselle put her hand to her chest and went to plan B. "Well, Wilson and I need to go to the bathroom." She reached out for him.

Ivy's father stepped in front of her. "You go to the bathroom with Wilson?"

Think! “I told you we had sex a lot, I feel the urge coming on right now.”

“Ha!” Fern gave the baby to her husband and dashed to the window. “Your plan has been thwarted, Matt just pulled up in the driveway.”

“Thwarted!” Giselle moved to make a clean getaway, only to be stopped by Ivy’s father. However, she couldn’t go down without a fight, she had to protect her best friend. “Thouest don’t know what you’re doing, it is you who shall be thwarted.” If only she had a sword or that baster microphone.

“Let’s go greet Ivy and Matt with our banner.” Cecelia grabbed a huge roll of paper and some balloons.

The rest of them, including Fern, walked past her and out the door.

She turned back to Wilson.

Wilson winced. “That’s Logan’s car.”

“Life is a very intricate balance, and when one doesn’t play their role, things get off kilter. I should have tattled.” She grabbed on to Wilson’s arm. He made a pretty good life preserver, and she might need it. “Come on, this will be better than the Fourth of July in terms of fireworks.”

By the time they made their way outside, the show was already in full force with Ivy and Logan in one corner and the rest of her family in the other.

“Ivy Raleigh Vermont.” Cecelia let go of her balloon. “What is going on?”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Ivy took Logan’s hand and got out of the car.

“Oh, God! It’s him!” Fern jumped up and down and ran toward them.

“Fern always said she wasn’t starstruck by Logan.” Giselle looked up at Wilson and shrugged.

“It’s always like this the first time.” Wilson shook his head and laughed.

“Fern, calm down!” Cecelia shooed Fern away and went to Ivy. “I ask again. What’s going on?”

“Yes, missy, please explain.” Dennis joined them. “For someone who never liked improvisation, I have to say you have thrown us for a surprise.”

Ivy, her best friend, the same one who once caught Giselle’s throw-up with her shirt in seventh grade, the same one who slapped the first guy who broke Giselle’s heart, and the same one who never called her stupid, needed her help. After over two decades of friendship, Giselle knew by her stance, her bestie was ready to bolt and burst into tears. She needed to help, so she let go of Wilson and ran forward to help clarify. “This isn’t Matt. Um, we may be a bit premature on the engagement.”

Ivy glanced at her and then back to her mother. “Matt was premature on the engagement. We weren’t even dating. We barely had sex!” She stomped her foot. “Where did you get the idea he was proposing to me?”

Giselle stepped back, only to be caught by Wilson. “I told you they didn’t have sex.”

“I take it that means Ivy knows everything about us?” He whispered in her ear.

“Pretty much.” She chuckled.

“You were right about the drama.” Wilson held on to her.

“He was perfect for you.” Cecelia lowered her voice.

“He was perfect for you,” Ivy shot back.

Giselle took a long inhale, filling her lungs with air to

that point where she finally felt satisfied. Why did everyone have to get involved with other people's relationships? Why did the fun have to be taken out of everything?

"I just want you to be happy and have a stable life." Cecelia sighed.

Ivy shook her head. "Is anything really stable?"

Exactly. Giselle fought the urge to let out a big amen at Ivy's statement. Was anything ever stable? Why did people worry so much, bring on the anxiety. This was precisely why she didn't want the relationship with all the trappings.

"Excuse me!" Fern yelled. "Love or not, engagement or not, I think we are all forgetting the sheer fact that Logan Alexander is standing on our driveway."

Everyone there turned to Logan.

At least Giselle could best her nemesis, and she leaned over. "And you didn't believe me."

"You didn't believe this was an engagement party until you saw the cake." Fern shook her head.

Oh, Giselle knew this game. The pile of dried up leaves was trying to get her and Ivy in a fight. "You didn't tell me until I saw the cake." She pursed out her lower lip and turned to Wilson, listening behind the scenes as Ivy's family tried to calm down and sort through this whole thing. People didn't need to be paired up and settled to be happy, they just needed to be happy and do what felt right at the time.

"It's going to be okay." He pressed his hand to the side of her face.

However, there was something to be said for having someone with you at the right time. Wilson reminded her of sexy hot chocolate. All warm and fuzzy, but with

an edge.

“Come on, Giselle.” With the baby in her arms, Ivy trudged passed her.

“I’ll be back.” She knew Ivy’s tone and had no choice but to follow.

Without a glance in her direction, Ivy made her way through the house to one of the back bedrooms. At last, she turned. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I really didn’t know.” She made a face at the baby. “I was sworn to secrecy.”

“You didn’t know something was up when they said you could bring Wilson?” Ivy bounced the baby, but stared her down. “You should have said something.”

“Then have you get upset when I wreck a surprise even though you hate surprises?” She plopped down on the bed. “Everything will work out.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. Logan, Matt, whatever.” Ivy sat next to her. “It’s easier to be you.”

Of course it was easier to be her. Look at her best friend’s misery. The baby started to cry and Giselle stood. “I need to go to the bathroom.”

With sex in the bathroom out of the question for the time being, she went to go freshen up when the sound of male voices in the living room stopped her.

Like a spy, she pressed her back against the wall and listened. Hey, she was a girl after all. If she took one step in there, all conversation would cease.

“I’m thinking of going out on the golf course tomorrow if anyone wants to join me.” Ivy’s father’s voice came through loud and clear once the baby stopped crying.

Giselle wrinkled her nose. Seriously, they were

talking about golfing? After the huge disaster, they were discussing sports? Guys were dumb. Plus, Wilson better not agree to any outing and leave her here.

“Thanks, but Giselle and I have some errands we have to run for the bar tomorrow.” Wilson chimed in.

Fine, she would reward him later.

“Well, according to Giselle, you’ll be having a lot of sex. I wouldn’t golf either.” Fern’s husband let out a low chuckle.

Giselle rolled her eyes, but the truth of the matter was Wilson would be getting sex. Hell, she needed it after all this.

“Well, at least with you she kept her mouth shut, even if it was at Ivy’s expense,” Ivy’s father said.

She balled her hand in a fist. What did they want her to do?

“You put her in a really terrible position. Maybe it would have been better to tell her the truth and let her blow it for the surprise. At the end of the day, Giselle would have looked out for her friend if she knew.” Wilson’s voice took on a hardened tone, one she’d never heard before.

“Who knows with her? Maybe she would have kept quiet to just see what would have happened. You never know what she’s going to do.” Fern’s husband interjected. “I don’t even think she knows what she’s doing.”

Her mouth fell open and she went to charge out there when Wilson spoke up again.

“Excuse me, but trust me when I tell you that Giselle absolutely knows what she is doing, and she would have helped her friend.” Wilson barked. “Also, part of the fun of being with her is you never know what she

will do or say.”

At his words, she had no choice but to join the men. No one, absolutely no one, not even Ivy, ever defended her like that.

The moment she entered the room, Wilson stood. “Hey.”

Without caring about anyone else there, she beelined for him, wrapped her arms around his neck and planted one on him, opening her mouth and pressing her body to his.

He responded accordingly, and she loved how he deepened the kiss.

Finally, she pulled back and wiped a bit of extra lip gloss off his lower lip.

“What did I do to deserve that?” He gave her a light peck.

“I just felt like it.” She wiggled against him. There might be something to be said for having someone around when you needed them. For the first time with Wilson, she wanted him around. Her heart raced at the thought.

* * * *

“I HAVE TO SAY THAT I AM dying to see what you wear to bed.” Wilson called to her from the bedroom.

Giselle glanced at herself in the bathroom mirror, smoothed down her hair and dropped her robe to the floor. “Are you sure? You may be disappointed.” Fine, she teased him a bit.

“I don’t care if you’re wearing a torn up t-shirt, you’ll make it gorgeous,” he answered.

With one last toss of her hair, she prepared to leave

the bathroom in...well, in nothing. She opened the door and revealed only one arm and one leg. In a sultry move, she caressed her hand along the door.

“You have my full attention.” His voice lowered.

She curled around the door, displaying all her naked glory, pressing her back to the door, and spreading her arms and legs to make sure he got a good look. “Did I ever mention I don’t wear pajamas?”

He sat up and pulled off his t-shirt and tossed it off the side of his bed. “I’m quite sure I would have remembered you telling me that.”

“Maybe it slipped my mind.” Her head held high and jutting her breasts out, she made her way into the bedroom. “My, my aren’t we messy. I can’t sleep like this.”

His focus on her, she walked around the room, turned off the main lights and then made a big deal turning her back to him and bending way over to pick up his t-shirt.

“Giselle, come to bed.” His tone became more serious.

“Is something the matter, Wilson?” She looked over her shoulder at him.

He leaned up, pulled off his pants, letting them fall off the side of the bed. Even under the sheet she could make out the clear outline of his erection. “I want you, right now.”

“You know what?” With slow steps she went to the bed and repeated her action from earlier, bending way over and picking up his pants.

“What?” He ran his hand along her backside and down her leg.

“Of any man I have ever known, you’re the one who

deserves to get what you want.” She spun around toward him and got up on the bed, straddling him.

“Then I’m going to do what I want.” In a sudden move, he grabbed her, pulled her down and got her on her back.

Before she had a chance to come up with a line, or take control again, he crushed his lips to hers, treating her to a more passionate kiss than she was used to, and she focused on the way their mouths melded together and their tongues touched. Something about how he kissed her and tended to her always amplified her arousal.

After kicking the sheet away, his hands wandered over her body, brushing over her breasts, her stomach and down to her thighs.

Right as she raised her hips to direct him where she wanted his attention, he skimmed his hand along her side. She let out a whimper and reached for him.

“In time.” He growled in her ear and gently nudged her hand aside. “Relax and let me enjoy you.”

For the first time with him, or really anyone, she let herself become lost. Honestly, she had no choice, not with the way his lips traveled over her, creating shudders and shivers. His soft kisses, licks and nips made her writhe and she arched her back when he finally captured her nipples between his teeth. She was left with no choice but to bite her lip as he kissed his way over her stomach.

Her whole body tingled. She combed her fingers through his hair and moaned as the need he created in her intensified. Right when she was about to beg for any sort of relief, he moved between her legs and lowered his mouth exactly where she needed it most.

“Oh.” She twisted the sheet in her fist as his tongue swirled over her, paying careful consideration to the one spot that drove every woman wild.

Even better than his attention to detail, or what one would call his extraordinary technique, was the way he took his time, never rushing her as he brought her closer and closer to her climax.

“Wilson.” She moved with him, but tried to hold back, hoping he would create his special brand of magic. “God, that’s good.”

Rather than words, he answered her cries by sliding two fingers inside her. In gradual motions, he curled his finger and stroked upwards.

The man had a homing device to find the elusive location every male, and dare she say woman, went searching for, but never honed in on. In Wilson’s case, he seemed to zone right in on it and the second he made contact, she bucked her hips as her need grew, taking over everything.

“That’s right.” With his free hand he pushed her down. “Come on, baby.”

Beneath him, she writhed, her body heading toward the crescendo. “Wilson.” The way he tended to her electrified every one of her nerve endings, the sizzle of pleasure rose and she gasped.

“You’re there.” He lowered his mouth to her once more, coaxing her a little more.

The combination of his hands and mouth and him, didn’t push her over the edge, she basically dived off the cliff. Her body flooded with euphoric pulses. Not one inch of her was spared as the ecstasy washed over her and waves slowly turned to ripples, leaving her weak and panting. What the hell did this guy do to her?

He was magnificent.

Somehow she found the strength to reach out to him. Even though she was still rebounding from that incredible orgasm, she needed him inside her.

The bed bouncing with his movement and the familiar crunch of a condom wrapper opening let her know her wish would happen soon.

“There’s no bigger turn on than making you come.” As he entered her, he took her into his arms and kissed her. “God, you’re so wet.”

Their tastes combined into a delicious elixir, and she had no choice but to hold him tight, relishing in how he took things slow and rocked inside her. Needing him even deeper, she wrapped her legs around him.

“Oh, yeah, like that.” Still, he didn’t slam his body into her. Instead, he kept his thrusts even and fluid allowing her arousal reclaim her until she was moving with him, meeting him stroke for stroke.

His breath quickened, and he sped up. “Giselle.” Once more he found her lips. “I’m close.”

Lord, she wanted him to use her body for his own pleasure, wanted to feel him come, knowing she brought that out in him. With his impending release, his muscles tensed and his rhythm faltered.

Her undoing came when he began to shake and drive into her. “Wilson!” Another orgasm crashed over her, quick, hard throbs that matched his.

“Ah!” He ground his hips to hers as his climax continued. “Damn.”

Then, as their bodies seemed to meld together, he simply held her.

Yes, he held her and kissed her and remained inside her and neither of them seemed all too quick to be

separated. In fact, she didn't want to be separated. She wanted to stay right here in his arms. This was the moment all her girlfriends spoke of, the moment they knew they wanted that person for more than some fun and a romp around the bed, and she understood. In this moment, there was comfort and safety and kisses from familiar lips.

The next moment would be the anxiety and tears and uncertainty, but maybe not for her.

Wait, wasn't that what every girl thought?

She couldn't allow this moment to last, but didn't know how to stop it.



Chapter Five

THE DRIP OF THE WATERFALL, the scent of citrus in the air, the hardening mask on her face. Wrapped in a fluffy white robe, Giselle sat with her toes in the warm water while several technicians attended to her every need. Life at Zen At Last Spa was calm indeed. No wonder her mother chose to live in the specialty residence there. It was total fun.

“Love, I can’t tell you how happy I am to have you stop by. You’ve been so busy lately.” Mariam Abromowitz patted her daughter’s shoulder and then leaned back as some large woman painted some magic elixir on her eyes.

“Every once in a while it’s nice to escape to the spa.” Giselle did not think about Wilson. Nope, she was clearing her mind of all thoughts of her man. Wait, not her man, about the man she was seeing. She glanced behind her. There were a lot of men in the room, all of whom she could see with her own two eyes. In fact, she was a veritable slut on men she saw.

“So, tell me about your work. When does the bar open?” Her mother let out a satisfying sigh as a man started a massage.

Still not thinking about Wilson, Giselle took a sip of her iced green tea. “Well, we’re getting ready for the grand opening, starting with a soft opening. That was my idea.” While she wasn’t thinking about Wilson, she also wasn’t thinking about the bar. It was Wilson’s bar, and he and the bar would be fine. Not that she was

thinking about it. Nor was she thinking about the way she simply didn't show up to work this morning without calling, or texting, or wondering how many times he'd called or texted.

"Is the we, you and the owner?" Her mother's voice hardened as if she just caught her daughter coming in six days past curfew.

"Yes." Giselle swallowed and decided to try something out. "I have sort of been seeing him." She held her breath for the verdict.

Her mother cleared her throat. "What does that mean? You see people all the time."

"You know, we go out and do stuff." Hopefully, her mother would fill in on the stuff without her having to elaborate.

"So you have sex with him?" Her mother turned and opened one eye.

Everyone in the room seemed to stop and stare at her.

Help her. "Yes. We have sex. He's very good at it." She made sure to look at everyone.

"Are you having fun?" her mother asked. "Keeping it light, not getting too attached?"

"Do you ever think that's hard when you sort of like spending time with that person? Maybe even care about that person?" Once more, her mind went to her cell phone in her purse at her mother's studio apartment way far away from the treatment room they were in now. What if Wilson didn't call? Her chest tightened.

The masseuse at her back dug in and kneaded her shoulders. "You are very tense."

Now her mother sat up. “How many times do I have to tell you to keep things light and fun, and then you don’t get hurt? I don’t think my heart will ever heal from your father’s death, and while I got you out of it, I’m always terrified something will happen.”

Giselle sighed. “Didn’t you ever want something with someone else?”

“Oh.” Her mother fanned herself to keep the tears at bay. “I don’t think anyone can ever fill that spot. Honey, it’s just not worth it. Trust me and learn from my mistakes. Keep it fun, and be life of the party, and all will be good.”

“I think you and I need to come out with a line of lampshades and sell them as hats. They’ll be the new party hat and save people a ton on lamps that get broken.” Giselle broke out into a grin, purposely making a silly face.

Her mother let out a laugh. “You know, you’re a visionary, my daughter.”

The red fading from her mother’s face meant the tears were abated. Giselle pressed her back to the chair and wiggled her toes, staring into the water. Just like a bad movie or romance novel, all she saw was Wilson’s face. The last few weeks were the most incredible she’d ever spent with anyone and that included the summer she and Ivy went to summer camp in junior high and she met that really cute guy after hours. Now she’d gone and left him, and he wasn’t like some guys she dated who wouldn’t notice. Wilson personified responsibility. “I sort of didn’t tell him I was taking a day off. Maybe I should call him.” She swore her heart sped, a horrible sensation she didn’t need to keep experiencing every time she thought of him. Damn,

she wasn't supposed to be thinking of him. What if she was the one who ended up at a spa trying not to cry over a memory.

"I'm sure he's figured it out by now." Her mother waived her hand as if this whole thing were nothing but bother. "I can't tell you how many times I haven't shown up for something, and the people get the picture soon enough."

"What if I thought I could just walk away, but I can't?" She just needed to think. The way he held her and kissed her and treated her like a princess scared her. The way she couldn't stop thinking about him terrified her. The way she wanted to be with him almost made her pass out.

"That's the time to walk away. You don't want to end up like me." Her mother motioned for the technicians to continue. "Now lay back and finish your treatments."

With the knot in her stomach ever growing, she forced her back into the chair and squeezed her eyes shut. Wilson was still there no matter how hard she tried to make him go away.

* * * *

FOR MAYBE THE FIFTH TIME that day, Wilson paced around the main room of the bar and glanced at his watch. Somewhere in the course of dropping her off at her apartment last night and right now he managed to misplace his girlfriend.

Girlfriend.

Wait a minute. Did he really just think that word?

He rewound his thoughts.

Yes, he just thought that word. What else could she be? They spent every day together, they spent the better parts of the nights together, they did everything together, even worked together, and he didn't want it to end.

In fact, since he was being completely honest with himself, he admitted he only wanted more.

At the moment, what he wanted more than anything was for her to arrive. Their newly hired staff was on their way for training, and he had a meeting with another alcohol vendor. She should have been here over an hour ago.

Thus far, he had texted her three times and called twice. At what point did he turn from a concerned boyfriend to insane person? Also, at what point did he tell her they were in a formal relationship?

He broke into a sweat and decided to make his texts even with his phone calls and dialed her number once more.

Where before the phone rang a few times indicating she simply didn't answer, this time the call went right to voice mail meaning she was on the phone. Maybe she was calling him and he hung up. After several minutes with no missed calls or voice mails, he ground his teeth together.

He was either upset or worried. Upset if she didn't just quickly call and tell him where she was when she was supposed to be here, and worried if for some reason she couldn't call.

A knock came at the front door right as he was about to make yet another call. "There she is." Though she usually let herself in the back, she had her quirks. He

rushed to the door, practically colliding with the damn thing before opening it.

“Hello boss, we’re here for our training.” One of the men he vaguely recognized saluted him.

He scanned the group of six individuals. They all showed except the one person who mattered. These were her little chickens. She built the coop, how could she not be here? Something must have happened. His chest seized. Why didn’t they just stay together at night? Palm Springs was amazing. They woke up together, made love and had breakfast. That’s how life should be.

“Can we come in or is this part of the training?” The man waved his hand in front of Wilson’s face.

“Yeah, come in.” He stepped back from the door. In the hours they were apart, something dreadful must have taken place. That’s how it always happened. “I’ll be right back.”

Without waiting for them to come in, he dashed into the kitchen. His only luck thus far was nearly banging into his brother.

“Whoa!” Logan stepped back. “What’s your deal?”

He glared into his brother’s eyes.

Logan straightened up. “Talk.”

“Have you heard from Ivy today?” He made an unsuccessful attempt to keep his tone even.

“We texted this morning, and then I called, then she called and texted.” Logan narrowed his eyes, grabbed his phone off the counter and looked at the device. “Now that I think about it, we haven’t spoken much today.”

At finding his opportunity, Wilson cleared his throat. “When you call her next can you ask her if she’s seen

Giselle, and if she may know her whereabouts?” Yes, he tried to sound formal.

Logan peered at him over his phone. “Something the matter in Wilson’s world?”

Not wanting to deal with his baby brother’s teasing, he closed the distance between them and glanced down at Logan. “Unless you answer my question, something is going to go awry in Logan’s land.”

They stared each other down.

“Let me ask the one person who will know.” Logan typed away on his phone. “I told her you were concerned because Giselle is not here yet. Is that accurate?”

“Yes.” Wilson shoved his hands in his pockets.

At the almost instantaneous chime, he ground his teeth together. How come Logan got to have the compliant girlfriend and he had the rebel?

“She said she saw her this morning and then said don’t worry.” Logan turned the phone to him.

Indeed, that’s what Ivy said. “Why should I not worry? Is she on her way here?” Wilson motioned toward the phone.

Once more Logan typed into the phone, once more Ivy responded like a good little girl and once more Logan showed him the screen.

She sometimes disappears to clear her head. Seriously, tell Wilson not to worry, she’ll turn up when she’s ready.

He read the text and yelled at the phone. “What is she clearing her head over?”

“Do you want me to ask that?” Logan got ready to type.

The message was loud and clear, she was either done

or got a better offer. He shook his head and went to join his new crew. "I have work to do, mine and Giselle's, I'm always the one who has to take over."

"Oh, shut it. When she gets back you'll get a piece," Logan called after him.

He flipped his brother off and returned to the front, deciding he wasn't upset or worried, he was pissed.

"Excuse me." One of the women on his newfound team raised her hand the second he entered the room.

"Yes." He pointed at her.

"Do you think we are going to get to see Logan? Will he be part of our training?" She smiled.

Logan. Always Logan. The only person who didn't ask for Logan was Giselle. "If your job here lasts, I'm sure you will see him at some point."

She looked down.

Not meaning to snap, he sighed. "Anyone else have any questions?"

His six minions shook their heads.

In his pocket, his phone vibrated, and he hated the way his stomach jumped at the thought it may be Giselle with a clear mind. Again, he turned away from his employees and retrieved his phone. At it not being his so-called girlfriend, he hit the button and barked into the phone. "What?" Well, he was the only one who called her his girlfriend, but still.

"Hey." Ike, the alcohol vendor, practically screamed into the phone.

Wilson held the device back. "What's up?"

"Are we still on?"

Seriously, the man's voice was way too cheery. Wilson looked over his shoulder at the trainees waiting for him. "I don't know. I'm sort of swamped and a key

person isn't here."

"I can get you some good deals, but it's toward the end of my month and I need to wrap this up." Ike continued to basically scream into the phone.

"Let me call you back." He pressed his hand to his temple and hung up.

"Are we going to start the training now?" Another woman spoke up.

"Why not?" If nothing else, he couldn't stand there all day waiting for something that might or might not happen, as always he had to trudge on. "Let's get to work."

The rest of the day seemed to pass in tense limbo. Between sort of training his staff and then corralling them out the door, the multitude of phone calls from anyone and everyone except Giselle, and trying to deal with the other odds and ends of opening his business, he was a frazzled disaster by the time he sat down with a bottle of whiskey and paperwork well past prime time.

At hearing the door in the back open, he simply took another gulp of his drink. All day long he had jumped at every sound that could be Giselle and he was done. It was probably Logan anyway. He poured some more of the amber liquid and then did the loser thing where he took a swig right out of the bottle.

"I thought you didn't drink." Giselle's voice filled the room.

Relief didn't wash over him, only a fresh batch of anger. "I'm not drinking, I'm sampling, it's one of the perks of owning a bar."

"Oh, did you have your meeting with that vendor?" She tiptoed into the room. "He had some end-of-month

specials.”

“I had a video conference. I’m sure I would have gotten a better deal if I was actually able to see him, but I was too busy training the staff.” He started to write a check and then realized he had no idea what he was paying. All he knew was he had to keep his cool.

“I’m sure you did magnificent. They had to know all about Wilson’s and who better to show them?” She slid in the booth next to him.

“Maybe the woman who hired them?” Finally, he turned to her. Damn if the woman wasn’t gorgeous. “Is this how you quit your other jobs? Will I now end up as one of your stories to your next boss?”

“I never wanted to quit,” she whispered.

“What do you want?” After what she put him through, there had to be a reason.

“I brought you a sandwich.” She lifted her purse and pulled a bag out of it. “I thought we could share, then have some nuts, and maybe something else.”

Seriously? She wasn’t going to offer an explanation? Not even an apology. All she was going to do was make light of the fact she ditched him and then show up like everything was copacetic? He had no words.

“Can I have a sip so I can catch up?” With a smile, she reached for the bottle.

He caught her hand. “I don’t know where those lips have been all day.” So much for keeping his cool.

“Well, I don’t need to tell you where these lips could have been if you didn’t just accuse me of that.” With a laugh, she pulled her hand back and got out of the booth. Before she turned around she bowed.

Every muscle in his body tensed. “Where are you going?”

Her back facing him, she waved.

He watched her go through the swinging door into the kitchen and flinched when the door slammed, indicating she'd left.

That was it?

Did his girlfriend just walk out before he even told her she was his girlfriend?

* * * *

GISELLE MADE SURE TO STOMP her feet, hoping her heels echoed over the tile floor in the kitchen as she made her way out of Wilson's. With dramatic flourish, she pulled the door open and then almost tripped slamming it to make sure the slam resonated through the whole building. Too bad only the guy whose name was on the door was around to hear it.

With the same conviction as her epic door slam, she made her way out to her car, pulled back her foot and squarely kicked the tire of her car. "Ah!" Sharp pain shot up her shin, and she doubled over, grabbing her leg. Why didn't she just get in the car and go like any self-respecting girl?

Instead, she stood there, actually slumped there, holding her leg and waiting for what, she didn't know.

"Are you all right?" Wilson came out.

"Yes, I was just inspecting the asphalt while practicing a yoga pose." Her voice came out convincingly strained.

"Then I must ask. What are you doing? I would have thought you would've drove off by now." He bent down near him.

Still holding her leg, she glanced at him. “You know you ruined my day.”

“Oh really!” He broke out into laughter. The laughter grew, wracking his body until he sat down right on the ground and leaned against the tire that tried to kill her. “I ruined your day? I’d like to know how the hell that happened.”

Her day flashed before her. The spa, her mother trying to brush every painful thing away, and then driving around until she ended up at that place in the valley that had her favorite sandwich. None of it was fun. She faced him. “I tried all day not to think about you and then thought about you all day.”

“We had the same day.” He sighed. “Think what it could have been if we were together.”

Unable to remain in the weird position she got herself into, she sat down next to him. “Well, we could have driven to the valley together to get that sandwich.”

“That’s what people do when they are together.”

Her heart sped. “People could do a lot of things when they are together.”

“Well, maybe some of those things can be returning phone calls and texts. Of course, if those people were together, maybe they would have actually been together and talked about whatever made someone run off for the better part of fourteen hours.” He put his hand out on his leg palm up, a small but significant gesture.

“A man who actually wants to talk? Isn’t that a little against your species?” She focused on his hand.

“Yeah, I’m betraying all mankind.” He wiggled his fingers.

“What if someone needs some alone time just to think?” She put her hand out but stopped.

“Then that person explains. They don’t just vanish.”

At last, she put her hand in his and warmth encompassed her. “I’m sorry. What if I promise if I ever need to think I’ll be home by sunset?”

“I accept your apology and your offer. I didn’t mean to get as upset as I did, but earlier I was thinking about what could have happened to you when you didn’t answer the phone, and I would never want my girlfriend to need me and me not be available.” He intertwined their fingers.

Girlfriend. Was that a step up from together? She thought about him all day, a title didn’t make that any more or less true. “What do we do now that we’re together?”

“Kiss me.” His tone was demanding.

Without hesitation she moved up next to him and connected their lips.

He wrapped his arms around her and deepened the kiss, before pulling back and leaving her breathless.

“Do I need to change my social media status now?” She toyed with his collar.

He hooked his fingers under her chin and prodded her face up. “We can start there, and how about you spend the night?”

“I’ll spend the night with my boyfriend.” At her total acknowledgement she gasped, but she didn’t die, no one did. Actually, the horrible weight she carried with her all day vanished, but left her feeling as if she were floating without a tether and could crash-land at any second.



Chapter Six

GISELLE KNOCKED ON THE DOOR to the front of the club.

The door opened and one of her newly trained, and then retrained just slightly by her, waiters opened the door and stood there with a blank expression and his hand out.

She leaned in and put a key in his hand. “Cashew.”

The waiter gave her one nod and motioned for her to go inside. He closed and locked the door.

“Excellent.” She clapped, scurried around the corner and waited. Wilson should be here any minute, and she asked him to come in through the front.

Only five minutes later, the door handle jiggled. “Giselle!” Wilson knocked and called to her.

The waiter looked over at her.

“Do it.” With calculated steps, she tiptoed over, but stayed out of sight.

Once more, the waiter opened the door and stood with his hand out.

“Excuse me.” Wilson’s voice took on a sarcastic tone.

As instructed, the waiter didn’t move. “The password, sir.”

“What?” Wilson adjusted the bags in his hands. “Get out of the way.”

“Not without the password and the key.” The waiter stood his ground.

“My password is I own this place, and my key is your paycheck,” Wilson growled.

“I’m sorry sir, we will have to deny your entrance.” The waiter’s voice shook a little bit.

Wilson stuck his head inside. “Giselle! Where are you?”

The waiter turned to her.

She needed to let their poor employee off the hook, and she rushed over. “You did great, you weren’t going to let him in.”

“You told me not to let anyone in without the password and the key.” The man smiled at her.

“But since it’s Wilson, we can let him in. Now go practice your tray skills.” She pointed in the direction the waiter needed to take, hooked her arm in Wilson’s and brought him inside.

“May I ask what you are doing?” He guided them to their booth.

“We are a speakeasy, so I thought for the soft opening that we could require people know a password and have a key.” She nodded. “The key could be the invitation.”

“For the soft opening?” He sat at the booth and unloaded the bag. Light bulbs, batteries, some nuts and bolts and hooks for picture frames.

“Yes, and I thought we could hire a guy to look like he’s from the 1920s mob to help people. We also need some photographers. I also thought we should order a cake.” She crawled into the booth beside him, but kept her focus on what he pulled out of the bag. This morning when they woke up she’d rattled off a list at him. How did he remember everything? Fine, they woke up together. In fact, they had every night since they decided they were in a relationship.

No matter how many times she tried to deny it, the fact was, she enjoyed waking up with him right there. Dare she say she loved it? There was comfort to going to sleep with a warm and hot man holding her. Plus, the mornings were stellar. They woke up, had a little AM delight to supercharge their day and then they got to work.

“Cake?” Once more, he reached in the bag, this time revealing the kind of toilet paper she preferred, and mentioned to him the other night.

“Yes, it has a fountain. I thought we could make a big batch of the G-spot and have it flowing under the cake.” As she gathered her pile of papers and squinted in the dim space, she tried to find the flyer for the pastry she wanted.

He opened the package of light bulbs and put one in the little lamp they bought for the center of what they now dubbed their table.

The whole space illuminated.

“You’re magic.” She scooted closer to him.

“How do you figure?” He found the remote control for the music system, put in the batteries, and pressed a button. Some light jazz music filled the club.

“Look at all you can do. You screwed in a light bulb, inserted batteries and made music.” She tilted her head. “Sort of like last night without the light bulb and the batteries.” Truth be told, she didn’t need any batteries with Wilson around. He was economical as well.

“How will I ever outdo myself?” He leaned in and kissed her.

She handed him the documentation on the cake and put a few more flyers in front of him. “I ordered the

napkins with your initial on it, and after everyone is here and we cut the cake, I thought we could send our guests off with little favors of nuts in little miniature martini glasses.”

He glanced at all of the papers. “When is the official ceremony?”

“I wasn’t really planning on an official ceremony.” She bit her bottom lip. “Why?”

“Because you haven’t planned a casual soft opening for thirty of our closest friends, you planned a wedding.” He chuckled.

At the mention of the W word, she froze as if a bucket of ice were thrown on top of her head. “Wedding? Are you asking me to marry you?” Her voice shook.

“Well, I did get you something else at the store that wasn’t on your list.” With only what she would call a gleam in his eye, he put his hand in the bag once again.

Oh, God. The man was going to pull a ring out of the bag from the store. Her heart seized. What would she say? Did she want to marry him? She never pictured herself the marrying type, but they were together and not doing a bad job. But marriage changed people and the fun would go along with the ring. On the other hand, she had thought that about being in a relationship.

“Giselle Abromowitz, will you share your fruity nut bar with me?” He pulled out her favorite candy bar and held it in his palm.

She inhaled, but still felt like she couldn’t take a breath. Before she did the girl thing she hated and said something about weddings or marriages, she bowed her head and put her hand over the candy bar. “Wilson

Alexander, I don't take my fruity nut bars lightly, but I feel I can share this delectable treat with you."

"Excellent." He unwrapped the confection and broke it perfectly in half. "In exchange for this, I promise to always get everything on the list."

"Well, since you are vowing to live in greatness, I must do the same and tell you I will tone down the soft opening from a gala of wedding proportions to merely something of grand soft opening proportions." She tapped her part of the candy bar against his and took a bite.

"Save your ideas for the grand opening, and maybe save the cake for something else." He dug into the treat as well and put his arm around her. "Since we've been working so hard, how about tonight I take you out for a real date?"

She nodded and put her head on his shoulder. In truth, Wilson was incredible, amazing, spectacular even. Any girl would be lucky to marry him. Of course, any girl would be lucky to get a real date. "All right." She wondered what all this entailed.

"Excellent." He polished off his fruity nut bar, kissed her and stood. "Then I shall go finish what was on my list so we can take the night off."

She watched him go. Any other girl would be crying after he didn't pull a ring out of the bag from the convenience store. A twinge of anxiety went through her, still she took the flyer from the cake and tucked it in her purse. They had to have cake at their party after all.

“RAIN? SERIOUSLY?” Wilson turned on the windshield wipers and shook his head. He had everything planned down to the minute, and the rain had the traffic on Wilshire Boulevard down to a crawl. “We live in California, it’s supposed to rain on command, not on our date.”

“The state needs the water and rain is sexy.” Giselle leaned over and put her hand on his shoulder. “It makes everything wet.”

Her mentioning wet did make him less upset about the drips down his nice clean car. “I planned an evening.”

“Rain doesn’t wash away time, plus isn’t the point of a date to make sure you’re going to have sex later on?” She brushed his hair off his forehead. “Well, you know you are getting some, so don’t worry about that. Everything is going to work out. You need to let loose, and I will too.”

“I am a lucky man.” With his energy directed elsewhere, he tried to calm down until he caught a glance at the time and noticed there would be no way they would make their reservations.

“One who is getting lucky that’s for sure.” She put her palm over the time in the dash. “Restaurants understand weather, and they won’t give our reservation away.”

Not wanting to ruin her time or start a lecture on how hard it was to get reservations at a five star restaurant in this city, he took her hand and tried not to think about the moments passing by and all the people clamoring with 100-dollar bills to get his table by the window. He simply wanted to give her the night they deserved. Since they got together, they hadn’t

done any of the traditional couple things, and tonight must be perfect.

They trudged through Los Angeles and at long last made their way into the Golden Triangle of Beverly Hills. The streets here were dotted with the most influential brands and eating establishments in the country. He breathed a sigh of relief at finally getting to the valet in front of their restaurant. The crowd gathered around the notable eatery was sure to give him indigestion.

“Oh la la. Raymond’s of Beverly Hills?” Giselle bounced in her seat. “I’m starving.”

One thing he adored about her was her willingness to eat in front of him. “I want you to order whatever you want. This is our special night.” Two valets came to their car and opened the doors. Giselle grabbed her bag and waited for him to come around the car. He took her hand and with his chest puffed up a bit at the gorgeous woman by his side, he entered the restaurant.

More like he tried to enter the restaurant. Really, he tried to push his way into the restaurant. The crowd in the front made it impossible to get in without forcing his way through.

“Follow me.” Giselle tightened her grip on his hand and basically dove into the people, bobbing and weaving through her path until they somehow emerged in front of the maître d’, or the female version of the maître d’ in a short skirt and tight white top. “See? Right in front of the people in charge.”

“Alexander, party of two.” He wrapped his arm around Giselle’s waist.

The woman nodded and ran her finger over the reservation book. She did it twice more before she

shook her head. "I don't have anything under that name."

"Our reservations were for seven." He leaned over the podium and scanned the book, reading upside down and backward then pointed at his name crossed out with a green sad face near it. "There we are."

"Oh, you were late and didn't show. We had no choice but to give your table away." The woman shrugged.

"We're only twenty minutes late, and I'm sure you see the rain, it backed everything up." Though he attempted to keep his voice even, he didn't do that great of a job. What kind of loser couldn't keep their reservation on a date? Maybe he should have called ahead? No doubt his brother would be at the best table, late or not.

"Yeah, the weather has made everything crazy, but we are booked solid. I'm sorry about your table, I can put you on the walk-in list." She lifted her pen.

He glanced over at Giselle. In her cheery demeanor, she nodded her agreement. "How long is the wait?" he asked.

The woman glanced around the restaurant and down at the book. "No more than an hour and a half."

"Over an hour?" He tensed and raised his voice.

Giselle squeezed his hand. "That's only sixty minutes or more."

Only moments before she told him she was starving. "Are you sure you can't do any better?" He reached into his pocket, found some bills and attempted to slip them to the woman.

The woman plucked the money out of his hand and wrinkled her nose. "How about I get you seated in the

bar? We offer our full menu there.”

“I own a bar. If I wanted to eat at a bar, I would have stayed there.” He balled his hand in a fist.

“That’s fine. We would love to sit at your bar and uncover any trade secrets.” Giselle snapped the bills out of the woman’s claw. “We only give tips when you actually get a real table, not the table reserved for your mess up.”

With narrowed eyes, the woman snatched up a couple of menus and took them to the bar, seating them in the back by a wall in the dark, and not the kind of dark with ambiance, just the kind of dark that told him this was a forgotten corner of the restaurant.

They sat, and with Giselle not complaining, he tried to relax. If they had a flashlight, they may be able to read what was actually printed on the piece of paper. He went to whip out his phone when a shard of light cut through his eyes.

Right as he managed to blink away the glowing stripe in his field of vision, the odor of floral urinal cake and bathroom wafted around him. He didn’t need clear vision to note they were seated by the restrooms, but worse yet, was Giselle winced. In her land, whatever land that might be, it was as good as a complaint, and she should.

“We’re out of here.” His woman would not be treated with bathroom smells and chairs in the darkness. He shot out of his seat and grabbed her hand. Not bothering with any of her niceties to get through the crowd, he shoved his way outside, went over to the valet station, and thrust the ticket to the first man in a red coat. “We’ll go somewhere else.” The words came out of his mouth, though on a Friday night he didn’t

know where in the hell they could go that wasn't a carbon copy of this place.

"Wilson." Giselle stood in front of him and pressed her palm to his cheek.

Yet another huge crowd of people hovered around the valet station and Wilson watched the valet go from looking for his keys to helping the people. "Excuse me." He approached the man.

"I'm a bit busy here, sir." The man brushed him off and tended to the crowd. Among them was someone he vaguely recognized from television.

Before he had a chance to start yelling, Giselle grabbed him and pulled him back. "Wilson, come here."

"Giselle, I'm just trying to get the car, and we'll get out of here and get something better, all right?" He snapped.

"They'll bring the car around and it'll be waiting for us. Right now I'm starving, and I see the place I would love to have dinner." Once more, she yanked on him.

"Giselle." Now he lowered his voice.

She leaned around him and motioned for the valet.

Sure, for the gorgeous blonde the man was right on top of it and scurried over.

"Here." She gave the man the bills she took back from the hostess in the restaurant. "Please have the car waiting for us when we return. We'll be back."

"I will, thank you." He tipped his head.

"Come on. The rain stopped, so we can walk." Giselle guided him away from the noise and the chaos down the block to a little diner with barely anyone inside. The place must have been there since the dawn of the Stone Age.

“This is where you want to eat?” He resisted and stood his ground.

“Take a seat anywhere.” The waitress motioned around.

“Yep. That’s why we’re in here.” She led them to a booth, slid in and kept hold of his hand until he sat next to her. “Two matzo ball soups with noodles please and two cream sodas.”

“I don’t want matzo ball soup.” He put his hand over his eyes. This night was a mess.

“Yes, you do.” She moved his hand away from his face. “Look at me.”

Unable to resist anything she wanted, he stared at her face.

“What’s your deal?” Again, she did that thing where she moved his bangs out of his face. “Everything will work out.” She repeated her mantra.

Thankfully, the waitress delayed his response by putting down two bottles of cream soda and two troughs of matzo ball soup. The ball was so big it was more like a cannon ball. “Our food is here.”

“It needs to cool down, like you do, now speak.” Giselle took his chin in her hand.

“I just wanted you to have a wonderful night and show you the best.” He shrugged. “I wanted to give you caviar, not chicken soup.”

“I want chicken soup, and I hate caviar. You always show me the best, and this can be a wonderful night no matter where we are.” Out of nowhere, she gave him a kiss.

Her words only strengthened his conviction. He broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to hers.

“I know there’s more. Tell me.” Her breath danced

over his lips. “Chicken soup won’t let you hold back from me, it’s a magic truth elixir.”

“I just...” He shook his head. “I want to be able to treat you the way Logan can treat Ivy. They would have never done that to him in a restaurant. This town is obsessed with celebrities.”

“That may be good for Ivy—she wants roses and romance, but I’m not her, and I want fruity nut bars and matzo ball soup.” She gave him a light peck. “I think for all those celebrities out there, there are the big brothers or sisters, or moms or dads who helped them. Without Wilson, there would be no Logan, and if anyone deserves a table anywhere, it’s you.”

He pulled back and stared into her eyes. She was his match. The one. His balance. “Giselle, tell me you want to be with me.” He took her hand and put it to his lips. No matter what, he had to do right by her.

She smiled. “I’m here.”

What would she do if he told her he never wanted her to leave? If he told her he loved her, would she return the words?

Lord help him, he loved her.

Maybe the chicken soup really was a truth serum. “Let’s eat.”



Chapter Seven

“WINE GLASSES, RED AND WHITE, martini glasses, highball glasses, water glasses.” Giselle finished arranging the glassware in the bar. The soft opening was less than two days away, and though they ditched the grand gala or as Wilson would have called it, the wedding theme, and went with something simpler, she still wanted the event to go off without a hitch. In fact, the thought of the soft opening made her sort of sick. Yes, their friends might be coming, but that didn’t mean everyone wouldn’t be looking at everything with narrowed eye scrutiny.

“Giselle.” Laughter in his voice, Wilson joined her and held his phone out to her. “Look who showed up in *The National Reporter*?”

“A man who is willing to hand over the phone. Good trait.” She took the device.

“All you will find there is stuff about you and now this.” He stood next to her and pointed.

Finally, she looked at the screen. Ivy and Logan were sprawled over the tabloid’s website in a story chronicling their love affair right down to the type of birth control they used. Unable to stop herself, she let out a laugh and glanced over at Wilson.

The moment they caught sight of the other they both cracked up. She doubled over and Wilson slung his arm over her shoulder.

“Tell me why you’re laughing.” He gasped to catch his breath.

“Because, Ivy needs this if she’s going to be with Logan.” After forcing the words out, she went into another round of laughter. “What about you?”

“Because I always told my brother to watch out for this stuff, and his mind must be so clouded with his girl, he let his guard down.” Once calming down, he leaned against the bar. “Well, it will give the bar some publicity.”

“Remember, all publicity is good publicity.” She saw both sides on Wilson’s attitude about his brother’s fame. Wilson gave up a lot to ensure his brother had his chance. Still, she wished they could just be brothers. Whatever happened, she had to make sure Wilson was the star of his show at the soft opening, and that started with ensuring everything was perfect. She scanned the area to find the faults. “I think I’m going to run down to the coffee shop and get that smoothie we both like.”

“Do you think it’s weird that I own a bar and you’re going somewhere else to get drinks?” Wilson put his finger on her nose. “What’s with the face?”

“I’m trying to look at the bar through critical eyes.” She returned his phone to him and micro adjusted one of the glasses to bring them all into perfect alignment.

“Everything is going to be fine.” He put his arms around her and bent down to kiss her.

In an effort to remember anything she could have forgotten, she put her nail in her mouth and stared at nothing, at everything. Her focus landed on their can of nuts. “Oh, my God!” Before he made contact, she thrust him away. “Wilson.” She grabbed the can of nuts and hugged it to her chest.

“Those aren’t our nuts, ours are up in our room.” He

attempted to pry the oversized can of salted treats away from her.

“Well, I’m sure there’s a health code for that, so good.” There were certainly a lot of “ours” in his sentence, but it was starting to feel right. All her life she only had hers, but the ours were growing on her. “Actually, I was wondering if I should separate the nuts and sort them so we can make sure that each nut is represented in the proper proportion. Maybe some of the heavier nuts settled or something.”

“Do you know what the proper proportion is?” At last, he succeeded in freeing her of the nut can. He put it aside and resumed his position with his arms around her, his hands traveling down and cupping her backside.

“I could figure it out.” She gave him a little wriggle.

“How would you do that?” Now he gave her butt a squeeze and raised his eyebrows.

“That’s easy. I would separate the nuts, count them, figure out the percentages and then reassemble the nuts into proper portion sizes.” At feeling a little action growing in the front of his pants, she tilted her head.

“Is that all you want to do with nuts?” He pressed her to him.

“Well, I may want to pick all the cashews out as well.” Yes, she purposely avoided his obvious question.

“Your ass in these shorts is making me nuts.” Rather than keep playing the innuendo game, he went right for the topic at hand.

“That’s why I’m wearing them.” In an abrupt move, she pushed him away.

“Let’s take a break.” He motioned toward the bulge in his jeans.

“Later. We have work to do, and I’m going to go get our treats.” If she allowed it, they would spend all day in break mode, and she still needed to decide what to do with the nuts and everything else. Not that she minded break mode in the slightest. At least he was learning to let loose.

“I know you’re right.” He hung his head down.

“I’m always right.” She gave the top of his head a kiss and trotted through the bar and out the back door, where she practically tripped on a can of spray paint. Spray paint?

She stared down at the can and breathed in. The distinctive chemical odor of paint overtook her, and she turned around.

At the sight before her, her throat constricted and her body lurched as if she might vomit right then and there. Some thug or criminal, or ne’er-do-well, or just overall horrible person, had painted graffiti across the back of the building. In black, the words “Hollywood Stardust” was written, then in red someone crossed out the word star. For a finale, someone scrawled the words “go back to rehab” in blue. Whoever did this knew Logan was attached to this place, and they violated not only Logan but Ivy, and above all else, Wilson. “Oh, my God.”

“Wilson.” Frozen to the spot, she willed him to her. Quite sure she would indeed get sick, she put her hand over her mouth and continued to gaze upon the filth.

Almost as if he heard her whisper, the back door opened. “Giselle, you forgot—” He cut himself off and came to her. “What’s wrong?”

Without a word, she pointed to the damage. She couldn’t go down as the person who told him his

building, his work, was ruined.

Wide eyed, he turned. "Holy Hell." He stepped back and put his arm around her. "Are you okay, baby?"

Seriously, the man was looking at how someone defiled his dream, and he asked if she was okay? Even the awful year when her grandmother and father passed away within six months of each other, no one ever bothered asking if she was all right. Her mother was a basket case and Giselle was left to be the one to try to lift everyone's spirits.

She gazed up at him.

"Giselle, are you all right?" He took her into his arms.

A flood, more like a tidal wave of emotion consumed her and out of nowhere, she burst into tears. The kind of cry where she soaked his shirt and couldn't breathe and held on. One second she was talking nuts and smoothies and the next everything felt too big and dangerous.

"It's okay. We're going to fix this. This has happened to him before." He held her tight and took her back inside. "I need to call Logan."

"What do I need to do?" She kept her face in his chest and clutched his shirt in her hands.

"Stand right here with me." He put his hand on the back of her head. "That's all you need to do."

As he spoke to Logan, Wilson's voice rumbled through her. Key words such as damage, unexpected and insurance, stood out in their conversation. Did every bad thing that ever happened read from the same script?

"All right, we're going to wait for Logan to get here." Keeping her in his arms, he backed up and leaned

against the bar. "Since it already happened, we can probably wait to call the police or whatever we need to do."

"I should have thought of that." The idea of this coming into their lives made her shudder.

Wilson's phone chimed. "Hold on, I got a text from Ivy." He adjusted how he held her.

At last, she found the strength to look up at him. "What did she say?" Ivy would make it better. Someone had to make it better.

"With the tabloid and everything, she said don't call in any outsiders. She also sent a list of products, so hopefully we can remove the graffiti ourselves, and I have some paint from when we first renovated the building." He nodded. "Good call."

"I should've thought of that." She shook her head.

"Do you want to stay here while I run to the hardware store?" In a gentle motion, he smoothed her hair down.

"No, I want to go with you." Refusing to let him out of her sight, she clutched his arm. "Is that all right?"

"I always want you with me." Still holding her tight, he kissed her forehead.

"How can you be so calm?" As he gathered his wallet and keys, she stayed close by his side.

He guided her outside. "Sometimes you have no choice."

She should have thought of that.

Time crawled, or maybe it didn't move fast enough. Still, she almost felt as if she were floating on some sick, sad cloud as they went through the everyday motions of driving to the store, purchasing what they needed and driving back, but this was an extraordinary

day, one they would never forget. Those days, good or bad were always scary snippets that couldn't be recaptured, but changed one's life forever.

Neither of them spoke much as they set up to repair the mess.

She needed to say something, do something, be of some use other than the basket case that clutched her boyfriend. This was exactly the woman she didn't want to turn into. "Wilson."

Before he had a chance to answer her, Logan's car sped into the small parking lot.

Ivy got out first, and as if on automatic, she and Wilson ran to her.

Her best friend stared up at the damage. Giselle could already make out the tears glistening in her eyes.

Wilson gave Ivy a hug. "We got what you told us to. I didn't call anyone for help like you asked."

"There's already too much media attention on us. We'll fix it." Ivy shook her head and went toward the back door. "Let me change, and we'll get started."

"Ivy," Logan called to her, his voice curt.

Ivy turned away from him and tilted her head. "Elle, do you want to snoop in Logan's closet?"

At last, she had something she could do other than stand there stunned. She glanced back at Wilson who patted her, then ran after her friend. "You don't have to ask twice."

The two of them made their way up to Logan's room. It was a mirror image of Wilson's, only much more sparsely furnished, as if this place were more of a rest spot rather than a permanent landing pad. She sat right down on the floor and pulled her knees up to her chest "Everything okay with you and Logan?"

“Anytime he can’t control every detail of every situation, he gets really tense, and I’m a little upset.” Ivy changed out of her vintage chic outfit into a pair of Logan’s shorts and a white t-shirt.

“Wilson has been super calm.” She shrugged.

“That sort of fits their personalities.” Ivy sat down by her. “What’s going on?”

“Well, today sucked.” Giselle inspected her nails. “I learned not all publicity is good publicity.”

“Yeah.” Ivy took her hand. “Are you all right?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” With a grunt, she turned to her friend. “This doesn’t even involve me. Not really.”

“You’re such a liar. You know it involves you, and it hurts.” Ivy turned to her and leaned in. “You’ve been crying.”

“It’s the LA smog.” She shook her head.

“It’s a beautiful day out.” Ivy tapped her.

Slowly, she looked over at Ivy.

“You care, admit it. You’ve been crying and you haven’t cracked one joke.” In a best friend move that said she knew more than anyone, Ivy jutted her jaw out.

“I’m more than comedy relief.” The tears started again. “Fine, I care. I didn’t want it to hurt Wilson.”

“See?” Ivy grinned.

“What do I do now?” She swore she sounded like her mother the day her father passed away. “What can I do for Wilson?”

“Why don’t you try loving him?” Ivy gave her a hug.

She cared too much and it would be the end of her, but at this point she had no choice.

She should have thought of that.



Chapter Eight

“ARE YOU READY?” Blindfold in hand, Giselle trotted over to him.

“What am I doing again?” Before she covered his eyes, Wilson took another long look at his gorgeous girlfriend in what he would only call a traditional pink strapless party dress with a short flared skirt. Everything fit with her theme for the soft opening, right down to her.

Her theme...birthday party. Her explanation...it was the birth of the bar. Her idea...genius.

Ike, his liquor vendor, elbowed him. “Do you want us to leave so Giselle can show you how to use that in private?”

“He doesn’t need any lessons.” Giselle pushed Ike away.

A couple of his friends nodded. For the first time in his life, he was the one with the coveted girlfriend. Better yet, she never even glanced in another guy’s direction. Her attention was focused solely on him.

“I told you. We’re playing pin the shot glass on the bar.” She squealed, kissed him, and handed him the little picture of the shot glass with tape on the back.

“That’s right.” Wilson primed himself to play.

Their guests’ laughter resonated way above the ragtime music she chose to fit her theme.

Apparently, she left no detail unattended, from the black and red streamers and balloons decorating the club, to a magician doing a show, and even games.

She spun him around three times, stood in back of him, and took him by the shoulders. "Okay, do your best."

"What do I win if I hit the mark?" Though he felt ridiculous, he lifted his arm with his game piece. All his friends were having a ball, and he certainly didn't want to be the buzz kill. Plus, he wanted to let loose a little.

"You're the host, so you can't win the prize." She slid her hand down to his backside and gave him a pat. "I guess we'll have to get you a special present."

With a newfound sense of competition and his guests cheering him on, he walked forward until he basically collided with the wall and stuck his paper shot glass wherever it landed.

He lifted the blindfold and frowned. Rather than the bar, he managed to get the shot glass near the sink.

"Not even close, my friend." Once more, Ike came over. "At least I made it to a barstool."

"Hey, Ike, one more word and that extra ten percent off you gave me will become fifteen percent, and I'll start shopping around." Once more, Giselle moved the guy out of the way, then kissed Wilson's cheek. "You put your glass away, so you get your present." She motioned to one of the wait staff to have her continue with the game and high fived a couple of his buddies. "Come here." Like a kid at, well at a birthday party, she dragged him through the crowd.

He jumped back when a clown jumped up from behind the bar. "Giselle!" In order to protect his woman at all costs, he grabbed her and pulled her tight.

"This is Floopy!" She jumped and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Floopy, this is Wilson, the owner!"

The clown bowed and handed Giselle a balloon flower.

She took the gift and proceeded to put it to her nose as if it were real.

“Aww.” Several of his guests gathered around to take in the new entertainment. Surprises abounded for this gala.

The clown, complete with creepy hair, red nose and makeup smile held his hand up, then made a gigantic ordeal out of blowing up another few balloons. He proceeded to twist and weave the squeaky rubber into some sort of crown. Floopy gave the monstrosity to Giselle, and she proceeded to put it on top of his head.

After blowing a horn, the clown trundled out from behind his bar and tended to the other guests.

“Do I have to wear the balloon crown?” He wrinkled his nose. Letting loose was one thing, insane was another.

“You are the party king.” Again, she kissed him, and this time he got a little tongue. “If you wear the crown, I promise to use my tongue elsewhere later.”

“Do I still get to be the king later?” A little bargaining was in order.

She fluttered her eyelashes at him. “Anything you want.”

Out of the corner of his eye he spied two of his guests now wearing balloon hats, and Ike high-fived the clown when presented with his balloon tie. “Fine, I’ll wear the crown.”

“Why don’t you see your public, my liege, while I go check on the cake and ice cream and then you can blow out the candles?” She mock curtseyed. “And you don’t need to say the obvious about blowing, you are the

king.”

The best words in the world out of her mouth, or at least some of the best words, she left, turning over her shoulder twice to wave at him.

As he went to go check on the bar, someone tapped him on the shoulder, and he turned to find Ivy standing there with a present.

“For you.” She held out the bright yellow wrapped box with a huge white bow. “Open it.”

“You really didn’t have to.” Like a little kid, he lightly shook the box then took the lid off revealing a vintage martini shaker, chrome and shiny with an art deco flair. “Giselle had everyone bring gifts, but this is the first non-alcoholic present I have received, and it’s beautiful, thank you.”

“You are welcome.” She leaned up and gave him a hug.

“Come with me while I find it an honored space.” He went behind the bar, squeezing in between it and his worker and placed the art piece among the more expensive bottles of liquor he stored back there. “What do you think?”

“I was about to ask you that same question.” She turned the item slightly and gave it a thumbs-up.

Though he knew what she was asking, he still needed to draw it out a little. He turned to the bar and watched the staff pour some drinks.

“Wilson, you are finally behind the bar where you belong. Are you finally going to make something?” Harvey the plumber put his elbow on the bar and lifted his eyebrows.

“You know what I found out since being with your best friend?” Taking the challenge, he slid over and

began collecting some ingredients while continuing to talk with Ivy.

“Tell me.” Ivy watched him.

“Not unlike any drink, you have to have just the right balance.” He took two glasses and began his creation by pouring in some gin, and both dry and sweet vermouth. “Sometimes you want to add more, but you have to stop yourself, for fear of ruining the drink.”

“That is true.” She laughed.

“With Giselle, it’s important to add a little something sweet.” He added some orange juice. “And to pay attention to detail.” For a finale, he stirred the drinks and hung a piece of curled orange peel off the side of each one and handed one glass to his buddy, the other to Ivy.

“So, what do you get in return?” She tilted the glass in his direction and took a sip.

“I get to drink her in, and she makes me happy.” He stopped and considered his words. “I laugh all the time with her.” His voice came out sort of far away.

“This is good, what do you call it?” Harvey chugged his drink down.

“The Bronx, it’s from the 20’s.” Wilson took the empty glass and put it in the sink.

“That’s different, but good.” The man gave him a high five and turned away when Floopy came around with his balloons.

Yes, different, like his girl. At what point did he add more alcohol, up the proof of their relationship?

“With Giselle, you walk the tightrope between drinking enough to get tipsy or getting a hangover,” Ivy noted.

No sooner were the words out of Ivy’s mouth than

the door to the kitchen burst open, and Giselle came out in a burst of candlelight holding a birthday cake. “Everybody sing!” As all their guests and well-wishers went into a round of the traditional Happy Birthday song, she made her way toward him.

At the scene, he had no choice but to smile. More than anyone in his entire life, she made him happy, glad to be around and glad to be alive.

She presented the cake to him before putting it on the bar and taking her place by his side. “Look at you, you’re a star.”

“A king and a star, what more could a guy want?” He knew the answer and put his arm around her.

While the crowd finished their song, she stood on her tiptoes and whispered into his ear. “You don’t need to make a wish. I’ll make sure you get whatever you want.”

Again, he smiled. She brought happiness and laughter into his life and he never wanted it to end. “You’re the only one who can give me my wish.”

* * * *

“HOLD OUT YOUR HAND.” Giselle caught up to Logan right before he followed Ivy into the kitchen. Thus far, she didn’t really have much of a chance to talk to Wilson’s brother, AKA the movie star.

He turned, blinked and did as she requested.

With a huge smile that she got him to comply, she plopped her miniature goodie bag into his palm.

“What is this?” He glanced inside the bag.

“Your party favor. Thank you for attending Wilson’s soft opening.” She used her best game show host voice.

“You do know that I own part of this bar, right?” As he spoke, he used one finger to root around in the gift.

“Unless it’s your name on the door, you’re not the star, so you get a party favor.” Now was as good a time as any to set the record straight with him. Someone needed to be one hundred percent Wilson and then maybe Wilson could follow suit.

“Fair enough.” A smile grew across Logan’s face. There was no doubt why the man had the star power. He possessed that indefinable edge where Wilson had that bit of softness, the part that made him take care of his brother after their mother passed, the part that made sure Logan had the career he wanted, and the part where he let her be her.

“Let’s see what Wilson’s guests took home tonight, shall we?” Somehow, watching Logan dissect her favor bag held some fascination for her. “A miniature fruity nut bar.” He held the little candy up.

“That’s mine and Wilson’s favorite candy.” She decided to offer subtitles.

Once more, he delved inside, this time taking out a little card. “The guide to Wilson’s secret menu, but remember only those in the know get to know.” He read off the card. “Order the G-spot and you are sure to get a sweet treat. I wish I knew before the party ended.”

A laugh escaped her throat.

“Now that you let the secret out it’s not a secret anymore.” He raised his eyebrows.

“Well, those were some close friends, and we sort of want the secret menu to leak to be not so secret.” At her explanation, she pursed her lips in preparation to defend herself once more.

“That makes perfect marketing sense.” Again, he

reached in, this time lifting a little net bag of nuts and glanced over at her. “These aren’t from the can in Wilson’s bedroom, right?”

Rather than answer, she winked at him. “I will have you know that each nut is represented in its proper proportion in those favors.”

“Thank heavens, I would hate to think that Ivy may eat a nut out of proportion.” With a laugh, he dropped the treats back in the bag.

“Well, from what I’ve heard...” She purposely let her voice trail off.

Logan leaned back on his heels and crossed his arms. “Yes...”

“You have nothing on your brother.” At her innuendo she bit her lower lip.

In an unexpected move, he held his hand out. “*Touché*. Thank you for an amazing party. Actually, thank you for everything.”

“You are quite welcome.” As if he’d knighted her, she shook his hand and bowed.

“I have the cake you wanted.” Plate in hand, Wilson came out and joined them.

“Is it the corner piece?” She let go of Logan and went to her own Alexander man.

“With extra frosting.” Wilson lowered the plate to show her.

“I have a bad craving.” She curled her arm around his.

“That is my cue to go take Ivy home and share our party favor.” Logan held up the bag, nodded at her and patted his brother on the back as he left.

For the first time that day, she and Wilson were finally alone. “Are you happy with how the soft opening

turned out?" Waiting for an answer, she looked up at him through her lashes, reached over to the plate, scooped up a big helping of frosting and stuck her finger in her mouth.

Her action had the desired effect as he simply stared at her.

"Wilson, I want to know what you thought of the soft opening." She backed up into the kitchen and toward the stairs.

Once Wilson caught up, she repeated her action of scooping up the frosting only this time twirling her tongue around her finger before placing it in her mouth.

"I couldn't have asked for more." His voice came out ragged and deep.

"Are you sure about that?" In a little game, she darted up the stairs.

With the cake still in his hand, he followed, meeting her in front of the door to his apartment above the bar.

She picked up another helping of the sugary treat, but this time dabbed it on Wilson's lower lip. Her gaze firmly affixed on his, she stood on her tiptoes, braced herself on his shoulder and proceeded to suck the frosting off his mouth. "You are the king, after all."

He put the plate down right on the floor and took hold of her shoulders. "How could I have forgotten?"

"I'm not sure, but in case you need a reminder..." She slid her leg between his, rubbing up and down. "Tonight, I am but your humble servant."

"Now I remember." As he kissed her, he fished his keys out of his pocket, reached behind her and somehow managed to unlock and open the door. He pulled her to him, went inside and, after kicking the

door closed, brought her straight to the bed.

Her favorite part of making love to Wilson came in watching the man come unglued. No matter how many times they were together, he touched her and treated her as if he couldn't believe she were really there. The way he looked at her, taking her all in, was the biggest turn on of everything, and she wanted to give him a bit of a show.

Before leaning back on the bed, she unzipped the back of her dress, then nestled down among the pillows and lifted one leg, allowing the skirt of her dress to ride up to her waist, but the tulle still hid everything. "Tell me what I can do for you." As if offering him an empty canvas to work with, she spread her arms out and waited.

"Keep going." His fingers worked to unbutton his shirt.

"Like this?" With a lot of flourish, she reached under her skirt, pulled off her panties and tossed them off the edge of the bed.

His let his shirt join her panties and nodded.

She ran her hands down her leg until she stopped at her shoe and glanced over at him.

He shook his head.

"Oh, someone wants the stilettos on." With a low laugh, she arched her back and rather than remove her shoes, slid her dress off.

"Don't stop now." Without ever taking his eyes off her, he rubbed his hand over the bulge in his pants and then unfastened his pants. He took them off along with his shoes and socks and kicked them aside.

"Is that a direct order?" Her voice feigning innocence, she glanced down at her bra.

“You heard me.” His voice came out much more forceful than normal.

“Then I must obey.” First, she leaned up on the bed, and then she slowly unhooked her bra. She rid herself of the constrictive garment and spread her arms again, giving him the full view. “What else can I do for you?”

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out.” His erection sprang free when he rid himself of his now tight boxer briefs. In less than an instant, he joined her on the bed, took her into his arms, giving gave her a hard kiss, opening his mouth and tangling their tongues together.

If he truly wanted to leave it to her to figure out what he wanted, she knew what it was in no uncertain terms. She pushed him over to his back and got on top of him, first kissing his lips and then moving to his ear and his neck.

“Baby.” He rubbed her back as she skimmed her lips over his chest and down his stomach. “Yes.”

On her road toward what he really wanted, she moved between his legs.

He sucked in his breath.

Rather than simply going for it, she bent down and proceeded to plant a row of soft kisses up and down his erection.

He moaned his appreciation, and she rewarded him by circling her tongue around his tip, taking in his purely masculine taste.

“Ah.” Now he bucked his hips, telling her he needed more.

Well, he was the king and she would have to comply. There was one move sure way to make any man feel as if he truly was royalty and she encompassed him with her mouth.

“Giselle!” As she took him as deep as she could, he panted her name and tangled his hand in her hair. “Baby!”

She continued, sucking harder and bobbing her head up and down until he moved with her. Something about bringing him here, the whole act so primal, and simply being with Wilson made her hot with need as well.

“Stop!” With a gasp, he sat up and snatched up the vintage cigar tin on the nightstand he kept their condoms in.

Though she wanted to finish him off, she did as he asked. “Is that what you want?”

“I have to be inside you.” Desperation and rushing caused him to open the tin and their whole stash of condoms littered the bed.

The fact he practically shook from needing her only made her own want worse. She chose a condom, ripped the package open and put it on him. Unable to wait, she straddled him once more and lowered herself down on him. He filled her completely, and she closed her eyes, reveling in how her body stretched to accommodate him in just the right way.

“Come here.” His voice hitched and he held his arms out to her.

“No show tonight?” Again, she gave in and lowered her body down on his.

“I want to hold you.” He wrapped his arms around her and found her lips.

Their bodies gyrated together. After their time spent together, they knew how to tend to the other, make their partner go wild, let their desire build at the

perfect pace. His kisses turned more passionate than ever, making her breathless and dizzy.

All too soon, she found herself panting as he thrust up into her. How the man always found the perfect spot still amazed her. Soon, she would have no choice but to explode. “Wilson.”

“Let go. I’m there.” He cupped her bottom and drove into her, his strokes more erratic, his erection swelling.

“Oh.” Her body tensed, and she dug her nails into his shoulder. The build-up was the best part and the worst part. “Oh.”

“I can’t hold back.” He embedded himself inside her.

The combination of him throbbing inside her and his deep kiss was her undoing, and in a rush she was pulsing in time with him. Her orgasm reverberating throughout her being gave her the most delightful shivers as her body clenched down on him, refusing to let go of the source of pleasure.

“Yes.” He held her close. As their bodies came down from the high, he kissed her lightly.

Ready to float away on a cloud, she went limp. Today was a triumph. The soft opening was a success, Wilson’s would be a success, and she was here and safe.

Carefully, he moved her to one side, gave her another kiss and dealt with the condom. Not wanting to fall asleep without him, she waited. Finally, he returned and as he did every night, he gathered her up into his embrace and covered them.

They lay together, his fingers playing with her hair, his heartbeat acting as a lullaby.

“Baby.” His voice came out deep and laced with sleepiness.

“Hmmm.” She hooked her leg over his and settled down.

“Thank you for everything today.”

“You’re welcome.” Sleep wanted to find her.

“You know what I was thinking?” He tickled his hand down her arm, causing her to shiver at the goose bumps he created.

Though her body protested, she managed to move her head enough to glance up at him. “Tell me.”

“We make an amazing team. I think we got what it takes.” The bit of light in the room illuminated his smile.

“That goes without saying.” She patted him and gave him a quick peck.

He pushed himself up a bit. “You know what else goes without saying, but needs to be said?”

She shook her head.

“I love you, and I always want to be with you. You make me happy, I can only pray I do the same for you.” Even in the darkness, she watched his eyes widen in anticipation.

“You make me so happy. I love you too.” The words left her mouth before she even thought about them.

“I’m a lucky man.” He pulled her closer and brushed his lips over hers. Once more, he got them nestled in the bed. “I’ve been wanting to tell you, but tonight felt right. With the business finally taking off and everything, we’ll have a great life.”

No other life preserver an option, she held on to him, lowered her head to his chest and lay without moving while his breath evened out in peaceful sleep.

She stared into the darkness, taking in outlines of all the items in the room. Is this how it started? An “I love

you” blurted in the heat of the moment, a life built? Once it was built, it had no choice but to crumble, she had been taught that lesson over and over again. The moral of the story was to have fun.

Right?

She forced her eyes closed.



Chapter Nine

I LOVE YOU TOO.

For the umpteenth time that day, Giselle's words echoed through Wilson's ears, warming him and making him smile.

Once she returned, he wanted to hear her say them again.

Truth be told, he wasn't all that surprised to find her gone when he woke up. No doubt the I love yous took her by surprise, and knowing how she felt about commitment and relationships, he figured she needed time to clear her head. He simply needed to go about his day and trust she would return by sunset.

After a fast breakfast, he spent the rest of the morning cleaning up the bar. Following lunch, he sat down to catch up on the news, but the moment he got ready to find any trending stories on Wilson's or his brother, he closed his laptop. Without Giselle there making her little one-liners, he decided for once in his life the news could wait, especially since it seemed like he should discover anything about the bar with her.

Unspent energy building up inside him, he dashed back upstairs and straightened up their room, hanging up the clothes from the night before and tossing the appropriate ones in the laundry. He even made the bed.

His whole schedule off by the absence of the woman he loved, he found himself with an overabundance of time. He wanted to call Giselle, text her and just have some sort of contact with her, but like she promised

she would return, he promised he would let her be when she needed to think.

At hearing a knock downstairs, his heart raced and he smiled. Giselle must have forgotten her keys again. He flew downstairs and opened the back door to some dude in a green uniform.

“I have a delivery.” The man held up a box.

Wilson didn’t remember expecting anything. “What is it?”

“Custom stir sticks.” The man thrust the box at him and a clipboard. “Sign here.”

“I have custom stir sticks?” Wilson signed the paper, took the box and went inside. Giselle must have ordered them. Not wanting to do anything with them that she didn’t want done, he put the box with the other bar supplies alongside the napkins and returned upstairs, sitting down on the bed. He supposed the earmark of any good relationship was when the woman bought things without the guy’s knowledge. The thought warmed him, but he wished Giselle were there to make a big stir about the sticks.

He laughed at his own joke, and once more rushed downstairs, this time colliding into his baby brother in the kitchen.

“Whoa!” Logan backed up. “What has you all fired up?”

“I’m just waiting for Giselle.” Wilson ran his hand through his hair. While the day felt like it were crawling, it was already early evening.

“Where is she?” Logan opened the refrigerator.

“Doing her thinking thing.” In hopes his brother was here for a snack, he sat down at the table.

Logan glanced over at him then returned his attention to the fridge.

“After the party last night, things got a little intense between us.” The words left his mouth, and he strummed his fingers on the stainless steel surface.

“Did you get in a fight?” With a pile of food, Logan emerged from the refrigerator and plopped it on the table.

“No, not at all.” To make sure his brother got the hint, he reached behind him and got two plates.

“Then what happened?” Logan began making one of his creations.

How did one tell another man what went on last night? “The soft opening was good, don’t you think?” He tried to snake a pickle out of the jar.

Logan slapped his hand. “Yes, it was awesome, but that’s not what I asked.”

His brother was always smart and attentive to details. Wilson shook his head. “You know, we did the ‘I love you thing, we have a life together thing.’”

Logan took a fork, speared a pickle and handed it to him as if he were handing a child a lollipop. “Oh, really? Strange she’s not here to bask in it.”

“She has her own way of doing things.” He bit into the pickle letting the sourness take over his taste buds.

“You’re telling me.” Logan finished assembling their sandwiches and handed him one of the plates.

“The soft opening went so well, we are in good shape for the real opening. I need to go make some plans.” Dish in hand, Wilson stood, grabbed one of the bottles of water off the table and walked into the front room, sitting down at their booth. Again, he peeked over at the time. They said they loved each other. That didn’t

seem like that warranted all these hours away. Maybe a little time to think, but then shouldn't she be back here and celebrating?

"Hey." Logan came out and joined him. "Are you sure everything's all right?"

"What are you, a woman?" He bit into the sandwich, but with his mind so cluttered, he couldn't tell what he was eating.

"So, everything is not all right." Logan took a swig of his water. "Everything will work out."

"I just have a lot of work to do. You sound like her." Again, he opened his laptop.

His brother continued to chomp away. "Any big plans for the grand opening?"

Wilson polished off his food and clicked on the folder containing the notes for the event, scanning the list of documents. Decorations, invitations, inventory, everything was tied into Giselle, had her touch on it, and he didn't even know where to begin. Like earlier, he slammed the laptop shut. "Can we do this later?"

"Not a problem, I was just trying to make conversation." Logan slapped him on the back.

A pain in his shoulder made him wince, and then he ground his teeth together. His brother managed to catch him right in the same spot where his girlfriend dug her nails into him from the intensity of her orgasm last night. Was she trying to torture him now and why?

He stood and looked around. Even after all the cleaning, there was still an errant streamer in one corner and a party favor bag on the bar. He walked over to the take-home present and wondered who forgot to take their prize? "Has the sun set yet?"

“I don’t know. Let me go consult my sundial.” Logan got out of the booth. “What’s going on?”

Wilson slid his phone out of his pocket, took note of the time, then did a reality check and glanced out the window. “If you told Ivy you loved her, and you woke up and she wasn’t there, what would you do?”

“I would find out where the hell she was and demand an explanation.” Logan stood by his side.

“I need to check something.” Heat building up through his body, he went to the front door and opened it. He didn’t need a sun dial, or a watch or his phone. All he needed was his own two eyes to tell him everything he needed to know.

Only an orange glow lit up the sky at sunset and Giselle was nowhere to be found.

“Wilson.” Logan came outside. “What’s wrong?”

Refusing to have this conversation, he pushed passed his brother and returned inside, going behind the bar and shaking his head at the gorgeous display of premium brands Giselle created. He picked up quite an expensive bottle of whiskey and read the label. Too bad this would be downed in an effort to forget everything. This was the type of bottle that should be savored.

“Wilson?” Logan continued to follow. “Come on. Tell me.”

“You want to know?” Fire taking over him, he spun around and faced his brother. “I spent my life taking care of everyone, making sure I did things right, and the second I think I have something, someone, she breaks her promise and everything else. Just like this!” He took a bottle of vodka and slammed it to the floor.

The bottle shattered, sending thousands of little shards of glass everywhere.

“You clean up the mess for once! I’m done being the parent. I’m going to let loose!” Everywhere he looked, Giselle’s presence was there, but she wasn’t, and she wasn’t coming back. Glass crunching beneath his feet, he made his way around the bar and headed for the back.

“Good!” Logan called after him

Without a glance back, he got into his car and started the engine. He leaned his head back on the seat and turned to what would always be Giselle’s spot. A sick laugh escaped his throat, the G she created in the window created an outline in the sunset.

She was everywhere except where she needed to be.



Chapter Ten

SPRAWLED ON HER BACK in her mother's permanent suite at the Zen At Last Ranch, Giselle was quite certain she would never find Zen again. In fact, the thought of Zen was so far away that she could travel to another planet and still not find the inner peace her mother searched for her entire life.

"Giselle, I insist you stop this crying this instant. You can't come here and mess up the flow of everything. This is a place of tranquility and fun." In what was no doubt an extremely expensive designer robe, her mother stood.

Giselle looked up backward at the woman. She looked like an upside down bizarre butterfly. "I tried to make it fun and it ended up not being so much fun. My heart hurts." She was sure the poor organ would break soon.

"You have been lying on the floor for hours and then nearly had a nervous breakdown when I asked if you wanted some mixed nuts." Her mother came and stood over her. "Now, I insist you get up and stop the crying. Later, you can come with me to our 3:00 a.m. hot tub and hot tamale Zen hour. We don't use tamales though, they're fattening."

Three in the morning? Had she really been rolling around on the floor with nothing to show for it for all these hours? Right now she should be in bed with Wilson. They should have made love then be exhausted.

"I told you to keep things light and look what

happened.” Her mother kneeled down.

“Something always happens.” Giselle stared up at the wood beam ceiling, breathing in the scent of fresh lavender and listening to trickle of the waterfall in the background. No matter how much fun they imparted into things, something always happened.

“Well, what’s going to happen now is that we’re going to get an emergency technician here to get your eyes de-puffed and get you back in shape.” Her mother went to the phone.

“They have people here to give treatments in the middle of the night?” Giselle shook her head.

“Service here is 24/7. Isn’t that fun?” Her mother turned her back and made the arrangements for some treatment Giselle had never heard of before.

“Not as fun as what I should be doing.” She shook her head. Her mother was right, she was going to end up exactly like her.

Her mother hung up the phone. “All right, daughter of mine. I have someone on their way here ASAP and I am going to go meet some friends for some pre-tamale fun. Your crying and complaining is starting to cause me wrinkles.” The woman bent down and patted her head. “I’ll be back.”

Giselle barely waved as her mother flitted out the door. She supposed if the woman couldn’t have inner peace she could have ageless skin. Hell, she lived at a spa.

Waiting for whatever was next, she returned to her rolling around on the floor gig, though in truth that was getting really old, really fast, and it was playing havoc on her back.

The knock on the door indicated her mother's newest quest had arrived.

At the second knock, Giselle crawled over to the door and used all her strength to pull herself up to her knees and turn the handle. A person in sea foam green scrubs and a white coat greeted her.

"I am here for your relaxation treatment."

Normally, at the odd male voice with an accent she couldn't place would have her acting the chatterbox, asking where the guy was from and maybe even trying to learn his different inflections. Instead, she glanced over at the red-haired, mustached man with a sigh.

"It looks like you could use a treatment." He motioned to the padded massage table set up in the room. "Please lie down."

She managed to get up on her feet and trudged over to the table, facing down into the darkness, the abyss like her life. The only good thing was she would get this part over with now and maybe one day have a life without Wilson, without anyone. While he set up for whatever he was going to do to her, to quote unquote make her feel better, she didn't move. The same numbness that traveled with her when she escaped this morning from her warm bed in Wilson's arms seemed to amplify.

"Turn over please." The man's voice came out a little gruff, unusual for someone at the spa.

Not in the mood for this, but not wanting to fight with her mother, she flopped over and let her arms fall off the side of the table. Before she even had a chance to see what was going to happen with her the man shoved two ice-cold cucumber slices on her eyes.

She groaned.

“Is there something the matter?” No sooner had the man asked the question than some gooey stuff fell on her face.

Did he mean aside from the way the crud dripped off the side of her face? “Do you ever wonder if you’re the stupidest or the smartest person on the planet?”

The man used a brush to lap up the stuff and proceeded to paint her face. However, his technique reminded her more of painting a wall than treating a face.

“Every person wonders that.” He answered in a low voice.

The heartache that throbbed around her since she left Wilson turned into a sharp pain cutting through her at remembering how Wilson painted the wall after that whole graffiti nightmare. Even dealing with her meltdown, Logan, and the destruction of his building, the man stayed calm and cool.

Yet another tear snuck out of her eye, tickling its way under the stupid cucumber slice, and she squirmed.

“I don’t think that’s your problem.” He used the brush to wipe away the tear.

“No, everyone thinks I’m stupid, but him.” Another tear fell.

Another dollop of something cold and slimy fell on her face. “Ah, now we get to the real issue. So, he treated you bad, yes?”

“No!” Her outburst jostled the table. “Nothing like that.”

He gently pushed her back down on the table. “All right.”

“You don’t understand.” She sighed. “Last night he told me he loved me.”

The man made a noise acknowledging she spoke and also rolling out the welcome mat to continue.

“So, last night he said he loved me, and it was the most amazing experience. I mean, to know someone loves you and cares for you enough to actually utter the words, it’s like a true melding of spirits, especially if you love them too.” Again, her eyes heated.

“Well, do you?” The man went back to his painting ritual and slathered on another product, this one smelled like fresh vanilla frosting.

Frosting. She couldn’t even go there and chose to continue. “Yes, I love him and look, I’m sitting here in tears, sick to my stomach. This is what happens. It’s all happy and fun and sex and orgasms and I love yous and then the next day it’s divorces or deaths or fights and stomach aches.” She shook her head. “I don’t want to get hurt or even have hurt potential.”

“That sounds like life.” The man’s accent seemed to change.

“Not if you avoid it.” As she heard herself speak the words, she clutched the edge of the table. Her heart sped.

“It seems to me if you love someone and that person loves you that avoiding it isn’t the answer.” The man continued with his treatment, but honestly the stuff he used felt as if it were either melting or becoming hard or set, but his words were spot on.

“What if something happens?” She held her breath, waiting for the answer. If the man used yet another accent she would know it was a sign.

“Something is always going to happen, might as well be with the one you love.” He punctuated his statement

with another plop of whatever crap he was putting on her.

Yes, something always happened. She just said the same thing to her mother. "I love him, we shared everything down to a toothbrush. I have to go to him, and I have to beg him to take me back." She shot up, the cucumbers fell away and the layers and layers of goop dropped into her lap. Gasping at the mess, she licked her lips and swallowed. "Wait, this is frosting."

She froze, the room became eerily quiet, like right before the big reveal on a television show.

Frosting, not stuff for a facial, the ever-changing accent, the paintbrush technique on her face. She shut her eyes. Would Wilson do this? Get into a costume? Take the risk of making a fool of himself? Would he break the rules? "Wilson?"

"We share a toothbrush?" His familiar deep, comforting yet sexy laugh filled her frosted ears.

She spun around shooting the sugar-laden mess all over. Now, as she really looked at the man with the moustache and the red hair, she saw him, saw the eyes, the smile, everything.

"I drove around all night and every path led me to you. I knew I had to do anything I could to get you back." He held his arms out.

"I love you." In a rush, she ran to him, collided her body into his and kissed him.

"I love you." He gave her a deep kiss then pulled back and scooped a bit of the frosting off her face with his finger and took a taste. "You are delicious as always."

"I'm so sorry." She fed him another finger full of frosting.

“Let’s do this for real.” He sucked her finger then gave her another kiss.

“That’s all I want, I just had to realize it. I was scared, but I was more scared without you.” For a long moment she simply stared into his amazing face. This was the man she wanted, no amount of avoiding would make it less true. “From now on, if I need to think, I say we do it together.”

“I have to agree with you.” With a laugh, he motioned toward the window. The sun was just starting to rise. “I say we have some fun and walk off into the sunrise together.”

She held him tight. Everything worked out. “Talk about breaking the rules. We’re going to have a great life.”

The End

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading!

I hope you enjoyed this look in to the world of Hollywood Stardust. If you would be so kind as to remember to rate and review the book, it would be more than appreciated.

If you would like to keep on top of the latest news and releases by signing up for my newsletter here, www.kimcarmichaelnovels.com you will also receive a free short story right in your inbox!

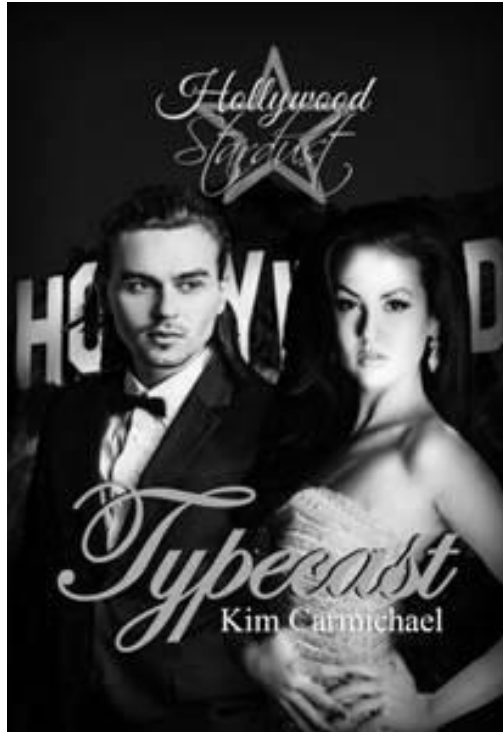
Kim Carmichael

Sneak Peaks!

Here are some sneak peaks into my other books:

Typecast

A HOLLYWOOD STARDUST NOVEL



Available now from Kindle Press

What's Your Fantasy?

Twenty years ago, the movie *Hollywood Stardust* defined a generation of teens and changed the four actors' lives forever.

Typecast as the villain both in front and behind the silver screen, Logan Alexander has purposely allowed his star to fade. Now with the 20th Anniversary of the movie on the horizon, he is the only one fit to step into the spotlight, deal with the unwanted publicity, and make sure that things meant to be left on the cutting room floor remain there.

Ivy Vermont has always longed to be a leading lady, yet her paralyzing stage fright has relegated her to stay behind the scenes as a fact checker for *Charge.com*'s entertainment webcasts. However, when her one-time poster-boy crush walks in to the studio demanding only she be in charge of his story, she knows she must take advantage of her big break.

Now, Logan tightropes between old loyalties and new love, while Ivy struggles to stay in reality with her ultimate fantasy.

An Excerpt

“THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NO WAY I am going out there and interviewing some B-list has-been bad boy.” Julia Davis, the lead entertainment reporter for *Charge.com* crossed her arms. “Your little fact finder

screwed up again. Seriously, Craig, how can I be expected to work this way?"

Heat encompassed Ivy Vermont, but she met Julia's crossed arms with a set of her own and glanced between Craig Stockton, her boss, and Julia. "Technically, Logan Alexander is not a B-lister. He doesn't even act anymore."

"Your ridiculous details mean nothing." Julia's nostrils flared.

"Ivy, what happened to getting Ryder Scott or Erin Holland from *Hollywood Stardust*?" Shaking his head, Craig approached. "It's a little hard to do a story on the twentieth anniversary of the movie without one of the stars. You told me everything was set."

With facts, rather than stature on her side, Ivy stood up straighter and lifted her chin. "Logan Alexander was as much a star in the movie as the other two of them, well three."

"Last week, rather than getting that little boy in the hot dog commercial with the catchy line, you brought me the dog." Julia stared her down. "How can I interview a dog?"

"The trainer was there. Some say dogs have the mentality of a two-year-old, and it did tricks." No one ever saw the potential. If she could talk as eloquently in front of the camera as behind, she would be the reporter. Actually, she would have been an actress and the interviewee. Even the camera on her phone terrified her, not a flattering trait coming from a family of actors. "A few fetches and atta boys would have been perfect for your report."

"I am not doing this interview." The click of Julia's heels on the wood floor of the conference room grew

louder as she approached. “What? Are you scared to face me?”

Though she tried not to look directly at her, Ivy gave in, swallowing back any mention of the tiny mascara smear above her left eye. Julia should meet Mr. Alexander with such an imperfection. “The agent promised me Ryder or Erin. Only, two hours ago, he called to say Logan would be here instead.”

“He was one of the major stars.” Craig wiped his brow.

“Stop defending your personal pet.” Julia turned her back to him.

Ivy held out the note cards she made for the wicked reporter. “Logan Alexander is an excellent person to interview. The villain is always the most interesting. Even after all the scandals, *Hollywood Stardust* is one of the most beloved teen movies ever made, and changed the genre forever.”

“I don’t need your details. Did you spend your life studying this movie?” Julia grabbed the cards out of her hand and tossed them to the floor. “He was arrested and personally responsible for getting the sequel canceled. He is as bad in real life as he was in the movie.”

“Don’t forget that I ran off innocent Drew Fulton and no one has ever heard from him again.”

At the unexpected male voice, Ivy turned. Her breath caught as her ultimate teen fantasy stood before her.

The heat in the room intensified, but she froze. Mr. Logan Alexander leaned in the doorway—more like filled up the doorway. He lifted a cigarette, twirled it between his fingers, and placed it in his mouth.

Unlike someone who lived the hard-knock life of a disgraced actor, time had kissed him, leaving him looking much like his teen dream self, only a little more rugged. While his other two male costars from the movie possessed more of the good and wholesome image, Logan Alexander personified the conniving character. He was the one who lured people with looks that could only be described as remarkable.

As if this whole thing were nothing but a bother, he pushed away from doorjamb and entered the room, glanced at Julia, turned his back to Craig, and faced Ivy. "So, you think the villain is the most interesting?" The cigarette bounced between his lips.

Interesting? Interesting as in the way he pulled his dark blond hair into a ponytail that hit the nape of his neck leaving one long strand to hang down the side of his face? Maybe interesting in the way his light blue eyes seemed almost translucent, half-closed, and definitely naughty? Of course, also interesting in how the slight bit of stubble highlighted the angles of his face, and the way he managed to keep his cigarette balanced. Then the answer was yes, he, or the villain, was the most interesting.

"The villain always needs to go under the most transformation." She managed to squeak out the words and pointed to his cigarette, unsure if she needed to tell him about the no smoking rule. Did fantasies follow rules?

"Don't worry. I'm not going to light it." His gaze scanned down to her shoes and back up to her face.

Interesting. She licked her lips. The man was more glorious in person than on the silver screen.

“What if the villain hasn’t undergone a transformation?” Julia tapped her foot.

Ivy ground her teeth together. If anyone needed to change, it was Julia.

“I suppose I’ll get more hard-hitting questions than asking a dog trainer if Rover, the hot dog hunter, is potty-trained. You sure know how to dig deep.” Though he answered Julia, he continued to look at Ivy. “I liked the dog, a much better choice than the obnoxious little boy.”

Transfixed, she continued to stare at him.

“Just because the villain can change, doesn’t mean they will.” Julia moved over as if trying to get his attention.

He exhaled, but the cigarette stayed in place. “How can I do an interview with you when I know you are team Ryder all the way?”

“*Hollywood Stardust* was the typical love triangle.” Julia raised her chin. “Today’s teen movies are better developed than movies decades ago.”

“Oh, that reference to my age really does pain me.” He pressed his hand to his chest. “Tell me, did the villains of your era wear pompadours and leather jackets, or perhaps suits of armor?”

In an effort to stifle a laugh, Ivy bit the side of her mouth. There was something to be said for the villain getting their comeuppance, and she didn’t mean Mr. Alexander.

Julia narrowed her eyes and spun toward Craig. “I am not playing her game of bait and switch. If Miss Details loves villains so much, Miss Details can do the interview. Call me when you get a real star.” She stormed out.

“Well, that is one thing your runaway hostess and I agree on.” Mr. Alexander’s smile revealed a perfect set of Hollywood teeth.

“What would that be?” Craig wiped his brow.

“Miss Details should do the interview.” In a swoon-worthy move, Mr. Alexander bowed to her.

The spotlight shined down on her and the same stage fright she battled every second of her life took a strong hold over her body, made worse by being presented with her teen idol in the flesh. “Craig.” How she managed to utter even one word was beyond her, but she took it as a good sign.

“Oh, no. No, that won’t do at all.” Craig shook his head. The first and only time she was on camera at Chargge.com, she ended up running off set and throwing up in a trash can. “I am sure Julia will be right back.”

“Don’t bring her back on my account. I’m Team Details all the way.” Logan raised his fist as if he were about to begin cheering and, with a wink, lifted his chin in her direction. “She is clearly an expert on the movie and knows story structure.”

His gesture, though probably insignificant to him, served to ignite her courage as well as her body. She chose to ignore them both. All she needed was to throw up on one of the *Hollywood Stardust* stars.

Craig cupped his hand over his mouth. “She is an expert on every movie.”

Yes, fine, but she was mostly an expert on *Hollywood Stardust*. She remained silent.

“I refuse to be interviewed by anyone who is not an expert in cinema.” Mr. Alexander picked up one of her note cards, gave it a quick scan, and sauntered over to

her. Yes, it was a total saunter. His walk may have also included a bit of a swagger as well. “Miss Details is the only one for me. It seems she has found something to talk about other than drugs, Drew, and sequels, since I won’t answer those questions anyway.”

She fought the need to hug her prepubescent crush, bury her face in his chest, and breathe in what could only be the smell of cologne and cookies. Later, they could go back to her apartment, and she would confess she used to write his name in her notebook and practice kissing him on the back of her hand. In her dreams, she could interview him and then they’d conquer the world together. In reality, she knew he was only playing a role and she would never be able to utter a sentence. Dumb reality.

“Either she interviews me or you can call the company that owns not only *Hollywood Stardust*, but your website as well, and tell them the video blog they expect to make waves won’t air today. I’ll be in the lounge not lighting my cigarette.” He handed her the card and walked out the door.

She leaned forward, bracing herself on her knees. “Oh God, I want to do this.”

Her boss paced across the floor. “You would be the perfect person if you could just learn to calm down. It’s what we hired you for.”

Though Craig never admitted it, she was the bane of his existence. He hired her as a favor to her father, and they gave her the job as a reporter. Technically, her current job as fact-checker and scheduler didn’t even exist. The reporters were supposed to do their own research, but Julia sort of snatched her up as a personal assistant. Both her parents who possessed

multiple acting awards between them, looked at her with wide eyes and pity every time they discussed her career. Even they weren't good enough actors to hide their disappointment.

She crumpled the note card in her fist and straightened up. "I'll do it. I will interview Logan Alexander." Part of her expected a spotlight to shine down on her signifying her strength of conviction. The other part was thrilled she didn't live in a world where spotlights randomly illuminated at key life-changing moments. She would end up living in the bathroom with the lights off, shaking.

Craig shook his head. His skin had turned the most unusual shade of red.

"This is the movie of a generation, the one that spoke to that specific time. The story should be told by someone who truly loves everything it represents." For once, she needed to be her own spotlight. "This is the movie that pushed the boundaries, didn't rely on the happily ever after, asked the questions." Maybe the movie that meant the world to her could also cure her.

"We need this story, Ivy." He crossed his arms. "Seriously, we need the story. Other sites are competing with us. We need something to go viral. The advertising dollars are not coming in as they should, and you know what that means."

Yes, it meant cuts, starting with the person who technically didn't have a title. She might as well go big or go home, literally.

"Do the interview, but make sure you ask about Drew Fulton and the arrest and the sequel."

"He said he wouldn't answer those questions." The swirl of anxiety circled around her stomach.

“Ivy.” He rubbed his hand over his face. “You can do this. You were made for this. Go to wardrobe, ask them for something more contemporary and fashionable, and ask the questions. We need you.”

For once she wouldn’t disappoint. She stopped herself from saluting and gave him a strong nod. “I got this.” As she walked out, she made a mental note to have a trash can put near the set.

Limelight

A HOLLYWOOD STARDUST NOVEL



Coming October 2015
from Irksome Rebel Press

Worth Waiting For...

Twenty years ago, Drew Fulton was made famous in the genre-changing movie, *Hollywood Stardust* and fell in love with his costar, Erin Holland. Left heartbroken and fed up, he played his ultimate role and walked away from his life, taking on an entirely new persona. Now he wants everything back, from his place in the limelight to the love that made him leave. He only needs to make sure he can leave the past in the past.

Known as the spoiled, has-been star of Hollywood, Erin Holland has spent the last two decades pining away for the one love she cannot have. Blindsided when Drew Fulton appears in her life as mysteriously as he disappeared, she is torn between acting on her heart and using Drew's reappearance to relight her star.

Together for the first time in twenty years, their true passion consumes them, but the sparks of old wounds still threaten to burn out of control before they can decide if their love was worth waiting for.

An Excerpt

FLASHES FROM THE CAMERAS created lingering silver, glowing starbursts in Drew Fulton's eyes. The media frenzy started almost instantly, derailing the 20th anniversary screening of the one and only movie he filmed, *Hollywood Stardust*. For someone who

successfully remained hidden for two decades, he chose the ideal subtle moment to come out of his self-imposed exile, or maybe not.

“Drew, where have you been all these years?” called out one of the reporters gathered for the gala.

Once the studio executives realized what happened, they stopped the festivities and with a bit of movie magic, made the stage into a spot fit for a press conference in record time.

Before showing up at the shindig, Drew promised himself to go for it. Now was the time for full disclosure, and he leaned down to the microphone. “To encapsulate two decades into one sentence—I changed my name, went to school, earned my doctorate, and opened up a small nutraceutical laboratory.” All right, it wasn’t the world’s best sentence, but it would suffice. In the next two days he would have to show up at his business and do a lot of explaining, something he sort of pushed aside when he made his snap decision to come here to find her.

A woman waved her hand. “Why did you feel the need to change your name and disappear?”

Drew wasn’t sure if she was part of the media or not, but if he didn’t answer her, someone else would force the issue.

He searched for the only woman he wanted to see in the studio set converted to look like the inside of the Hollywood Stardust Theatre, the destination for the four characters in the movie. In the film, their quest took them across country. The road was a metaphor for the trip one takes to transition between adolescence and adulthood.

In real life he, and the other actors, faced the same challenges.

Once more, he looked for the reason he came tonight. With her knowledge of all things smoke and mirrors, no doubt she managed to squirrel away where she could watch everything, yet not be seen. For the first time since he met her, she shied away from the limelight.

Drew swallowed and took hold of the microphone stand. While he wanted to offer the fans of the movie the truth they sought all these years, the answer as to why he disappeared was better left unspoken, at least in public.

“Sometimes you need to just get away from everything and everyone and start over.” More lights flashed, leaving him blinking to see.

“But how did you hide your identity?” The question came from a male in the crowd.

An easy one. “During the movie I wore prosthetics to appear more like the producers wanted the character and they asked me to stay in costume for public appearances. It was very easy to fade away once the costume came off...and the weight came off.”

Some chuckles went through the audience.

Yes, he was the chubby kid. During filming he lost weight, causing a whole host of issues for the movie. They had to keep adding padding to his costume to retain continuity. He hid for a while, let the fanfare of the movie die down and then went abroad for college. By the time he returned with a different name, no one ever put it together. He still found it incredible that he pulled it off. Maybe he was a real actor after all.

“Have you kept in touch with your cast mates?” Another question barreled toward him.

Drew glanced off to the side of the stage. While he might not be able to find her, his best friend, Logan Alexander, was always there for him. Logan nodded, giving him the okay to answer. “Only Logan Alexander.” The quote unquote villain of both the movie and of real life was one of the best people he knew. One might even say a hero.

Some mumbles went through the crowd.

“Drew, why did you decide to come back now?”

Again, he looked for her. Where did she hide herself? On the other side of the stage he located Ryder Scott, their leading man. The poster boy for a movie star, he always had everything. After the film, Ryder went on to a successful career and now also dabbled in directing and producing. Additionally, he was a complete and total ass. However, Drew couldn’t locate the last of their four. The reason he came out of hiding.

“I have some unfinished business.” He needed to go find her. “I can take one more question before we should probably let you all get back to the movie.”

“Can we get a picture of the four of you together?”

Well, the promise of a picture that would be all over the world should bring her out. He turned left and right. Ryder joined him first, shaking his hand and taking center stage to thunderous applause. Logan, who only moments before proposed to his fiancée on this exact stage, came out next and the clapping grew to the point where it vibrated the building.

Logan shook his hand and raised his eyebrows.

“Where is she?” Drew attempted to ask the question without moving his lips.

“She’ll be here.” Logan patted his back and took his place.

The crowd stilled as if holding its collective breath, waiting for the one female of the group.

Drew ground his teeth together. After everything he just did, would she not reveal herself?

And then she appeared.

Damn him to hell for his breath catching at the sight of her. Though he followed her career, watched her in her movies, her television appearances, and even clips of her in a stage play, nothing compared to her in person.

She stepped to the edge of the stage and the applause began once more. Yes, even with his news of showing up after twenty years, Erin Holland would always steal the spotlight.

The color that overtook her cheeks would be gorgeous in the pictures, but he knew better. He knew the blush came from her being flustered, unsure and taken off guard. If they were alone, away from the scrutiny of the public, she would be crying. Not that it mattered. Crying, flush, with or without makeup, and even with twenty years behind them, he had never seen a more beautiful woman.

Instead of tears, she nodded toward the audience and made her way to her once co-stars. Her silver form-fitting dress moved like liquid metal, fluid and flowing. She wore her blonde hair down, smooth and cascading over one shoulder, but pulled back from her picture-perfect face. Her doe-like blue eyes and heart shaped lips were all natural and the envy of many a teenage girl way back when.

She stared into his eyes, asking questions, shooting accusations. In short, being Erin through and through. The one woman he couldn't stand, but couldn't get out of his mind. He could never move forward if he only looked back, and the second she came within reach, he held his hand out to her.

"Drew." She licked her lips, put her hand in his and gave him a hug. Her trembling betrayed her cool outward demeanor.

"I came here for you." He inhaled. Her perfume might have changed, but the aroma enveloping him was the same. It was just Erin. "We need to talk."

Without a word, she pulled back and took her position between Logan and Ryder. The three made up the love triangle of *Hollywood Stardust* while Drew's character, Charles, was always left standing on the edge, just like him.

Again, the lights flashed and he found himself posing with the rest of them. Old habits returned, subtle changes in his position to catch the light, show off a better angle, allow the photographers to get the ever-important shot.

He needed to get to the person he came here for and raised his hand, the universal signal for stopping the show.

"Drew, one more question before you leave," a woman called over the mumbles, the claps and the oohs and ahhs.

He waited.

"What unfinished business brought you back? Is this a publicity stunt for the movie or was it something, or someone, else?"

“It wasn’t a stunt. In fact, I didn’t even know I was going to do this until about an hour before I arrived.” He turned, wanting to catch Erin before she ran away licking her self-perceived wounds.

As usual, he was too late. Erin had already vanished and he almost fought a laugh. Once more, he changed his life for her, and again she wasn’t around. “As for the rest, stay tuned.”

On The Dotted Line

A Heart Lines Novel



A signature can change everything...

Rather than silver, Randolph Van Ayers III was born with a platinum spoon in his mouth and plenty of strings attached. Faced with a list of specific goals he must achieve in order to earn control of his family's banking empire, he's accomplished each task and triumphed. One item remains on his list. He must

marry by his thirty-third birthday and stay married for one year. However, when his so-called fiancée leaves him on the courtroom steps only hours before his deadline, he realizes he might lose for the first time in his life, and a Van Ayers never fails.

Taught to rely on the universe for answers, Willow Day has always struggled in the material world, specifically her lack of material. With her small holistic store near foreclosure and without a home, she must do anything within her power to make the business work and take care of the woman who raised her. When the rude, yet gorgeous, Randolph the Third offers to fix all her troubles in exchange for one year of her life, she opens her mind and takes a chance.

It's the battle of the mystical over the money. Between a hidden pet who looks more like a cotton ball, performance artists with wings, and a woman who spouts advice like a living fortune cookie, everything from restaurant reservations to a trip to celebrate the winter solstice create clashes for the couple as they learn how to fit into each other's worlds.

With both their futures at stake, they must learn to accept reality, what the fates have dealt them and the consequences of falling in love from the moment they decided to sign on the dotted line.

An Excerpt

“Don’t get married for love.” Randolph Van Ayers III pressed two fingers to his left temple. The throbbing in his head reverberated throughout his body. Though he wanted to go home and lie down, if he came home with anything his mother considered an ailment, he would end up quarantined in one wing of the house no matter how many times he told the woman headaches weren’t contagious. The Mitchell Art Gallery presented him with a definite upgrade to being a medical pariah.

“Maybe you should look inside yourself for love.” The owner of the gallery, Slate Mitchell, stopped in front of a photograph of the back of a man’s head staring out into space. “However, I am still reeling that I didn’t get an invitation to your wedding, love or not.”

“Don’t spew your rhetoric at me.” It took all his effort to shake his head at the oversized, overdone image. The print wouldn’t be worth anything in his lifetime. “I didn’t even want to attend, not that it matters since I didn’t get married today for love or otherwise. However, I do thank you for the party in my honor.”

“Nothing like an impromptu birthday party to blunt being left on the courthouse steps with no bride.” Slate patted him on the back.

“I appreciate how you’ve kept this low key as I asked.” His life had been reduced to a frat party in an art gallery. Earlier a keg was delivered.

“It’s only small if the police don’t get called. I have some better ones over here.” Slate guided him through

the wide-open space designed to be a showcase of the latest local artists. Anyone in the city with seven figures behind their name wanted to be the next person to discover the artist of the second, and the gallery was in the perfect spot in LA to make waves without the cost per square foot of more trendy or upscale areas.

They stopped in front of another wall of photographs. “These would go with the sculpture of the birds you bought last month. Different artist, but similar feel. I can get you a discount for your special day.”

He assessed the black and white photograph of a little bit of nature left in the Greater Los Angeles area. Mountains, clouds and birds in perfect juxtaposition of smog and the city. “A discount. Happy birthday to me.”

“Well, it’s the least I can do for the man whose bank made it possible for me to become the new go-to gallery for poor little rich boys such as yourself.” Slate motioned toward the next photograph.

“Remember until you pay off your mortgage, my bank owns you.” Randolph took a breath in an attempt to focus on the potential of the picture. “Maybe you should default on the loan, after midnight tonight it will no longer be my bank and I will no longer be rich.” While he considered Slate one of his better friends, he knew once the money ran out the friendship would follow.

“Come on, that story you tell is just a pick up line. You can stop now.” Slate stopped and motioned toward the next piece of art, namely his girlfriend, Jade. “And here is a masterpiece.”

“The story is totally true. Randolph told me the story when we were dating, it’s incredible, and true.”

Dressed in a nude body suit with a hat made up of flowers Jade uncoiled her body, stretching her arms out and taking her time standing up. She came over, kissed them both on the cheek and hooked her arm in Slate's. "I'm blooming."

"Baby, it's a story designed to make girls have the expression on their face you have right now. You didn't really date him, you only went as his plus one to that finance event when he was desperate." Slate chuckled and kissed the top of her head. "You make a beautiful flower."

Randolph met the little piece of living art a few years ago at a financial conference when she donned her other persona as a property manager. Her parents owned some select buildings throughout Los Angeles and she took care of them when they retired. He invited her to accompany him to an event, but rather than a kiss goodnight he ended up with a friendship instead. However, the slight blush and smile on her face spoke volumes. Women loved his pathetic all too true story.

If only it were a story.

"Unless he got married by his thirty-third birthday and stayed married for a year, he would lose his inheritance." Jade pressed her hands to her chest. "He signed a contract and everything."

Both he and Slate groaned.

Jade let go of her boyfriend and flung her arms around him. "I'm so sorry. I would help you if I could."

"Can I borrow you for twelve months?" A plus one was better than nothing. He needed to face the fact he was never going to have a relationship for anything

other than money. Hell, he probably got left at the courthouse for a man with a larger trust fund.

“No, you may not. She is not on loan.” Slate pulled her away. “Plus, he doesn’t want to get married for love.”

“Well, he may not want to get married for love, but getting married for money isn’t working for him either.” Jade returned to Slate and wrinkled her nose.

“It doesn’t matter. It’s over unless a bride drops into my lap in the next five minutes.” Since he created the situation, he would live with the repercussions. In the end, his father’s entire scheme had been built around his failure. At least for once he would prove the man right.

“Can we study the art?” Slate walked backward, corralling them to the next piece.

“I need to finish getting ready for the party and Willow’s here. She said she wanted to talk to me so I invited her.” She waved her arm. “Come here and say happy birthday to Randolph.”

An ethereal cloud of yellow and white swirls materialized out of the corner of his eye.

He tightened his jaw and finally did Slate the favor of staring at the next work. Maybe Willow Day would vanish if he didn’t look directly at her. Everyone knew ignoring the problem made it go away.

“It’s Randolph’s birthday?” she asked.

Her voice brushed over him, as soft and supple as her name. If only the rest of her matched. A new tenant in one of Jade’s buildings down the street from the gallery, he crossed paths with her a few times in the last couple of months, but the encounters were always

the same. No, pretending a problem didn't exist never made it go away. He squeezed his hand into a fist.

"We're having a party for him." Jade dragged her over.

With the woman standing directly in his line of sight, he needed to look. The way she gazed at him always made him think she was intrigued or interested. Again, her appearance didn't match her attitude. Long, straight blonde hair literally floated around her as if she managed to get someone with a fan to follow her around. Unlike most women in Los Angeles, she wore little makeup, only enough to enhance her light blue eyes, petite features and glowing skin. He suspected she had a nice little body under all the flowing layers of clothes. She didn't stuff herself into her wardrobe leaving little to the imagination. Someone would have to really search and discover. No, nothing on her was man made or artificial, everything natural. A rare find.

"Well, Happy Birthday." She graced him with a smile.

The same smile sucked him in the first time he met her. Though it lit up her face, he sensed something beneath her upturned lips, something he wanted to get to know until he actually spoke more than two sentences to her. "Thank you."

"Scorpio." She tilted her head. "I should have guessed."

Case in point. He swallowed. "I hardly think a bizarre alignment of planets and stars millions of light years away from me on the day of my birth have anything to do with my personality. Wouldn't that mean anyone born on my birthday should be exactly like me?"

“Let’s hope not.” While her voice came out soft and sweet, her words were hard and cutting. She gave Jade one of her multi-layered smiles. “Sorry I’m late.”

“It’s fine. I’ll meet you back in Slate’s office.” Jade pointed.

Without any more well wishes, Willow walked through the gallery.

Jade glared at him. “I’ll be back for your party.” She spun on the ball of her bare foot and left.

“What’s your poison?” Slate motioned toward the photo.

“I want something different, something with some bite.” Everything presented to him seemed trite, done before. He longed for something unexpected.

“I think you have enough bite for everyone.” Slate shook his head. “Especially Willow.”

He exhaled. “She called me a Scorpio.”

“How dare she call you your own astrological sign?” Slate tucked his notepad back into his pocket. “She’s such a meanie.”

“It was the way she said it.” He stopped in front of the next photo. The artist quite literally took a picture of nothing. A big black square hung on the wall, creating a hole in the middle of the show. With a bit of metallic paint it might have potential, as long as the artist had the vision.

“Aw, did Randy get his feelings hurt?” Slate raised his voice as if he were talking to a baby. “She’s having a hard time.”

“What’s wrong with her?” He stared into the nothing. Maybe the artist was trying to depict potential rather than emptiness.

“Everyone goes through ups and downs, some downs are just lower than others.”

Damn it. He glanced at his friend. The few times he met her, their encounters were always the same. She would materialize, he would try to speak, something strange would come out of her mouth, leaving him no choice but to comment and she would walk away. “She’s back in your office, meeting with Jade.” In his distraction with his own situation, he neglected to pick up on the significance of the Jade meeting, especially if Jade was interrupting one of her art performances.

“Yeah, Jade, her landlord. Go grovel, it will do you some good.”

Money woes, one of the world’s great equalizers. “I’ll take this one. It speaks to me.” He strode through the gallery, stopping short outside Slate’s office at the sound of her voice.

“I don’t have any money left, and you can’t keep extending my rent payment,” Willow whispered. “It’s not right, everything is off balance.”

He put his back to the wall to listen.

“Don’t worry about the rent, it’s fine.” Jade’s tone was one of compassion and authority. “Right now we are working on the barter system. Just keep me in products and tea and we are fine.”

“I can’t do that. I just need to sell a little more at the shop.” Her voice was broken but not destroyed. “I did a little research.”

At the rustling of papers he inched toward the doorjamb trying to spy what she would produce.

“What’s this?” Jade raised one of the documents.

“There are companies who will give loans to people in need.” She let out a nervous chuckle. “Funny the

people who need the loans the most are the ones who can't get them."

"Willow, these are loans designed so that no one ever pays them off." Jade shook her head.

A shudder ran through him at the thought of the interest rates alone. Those loans were no joke and lured in desperate people who needed money fast and under the most dire circumstances.

At his realization, he glanced at the time and resumed his eavesdropping.

"Hey, I didn't mean for you to spy. What are you some kind of creep?" Slate came from the other direction and pushed him into the office. "Look at what I found lurking about."

He stumbled into the room and his head spun. Once he regained his footing, he gave Jade a half-hearted wave and glanced at Willow. If possible, her light complexion was even paler, almost translucent. He recognized her pallor. It was the same look he saw whenever someone honestly needed funds. Somehow he needed to tell her he had her stay of execution, and it would only require one year of her life.

Jade narrowed her eyes at them.

"I wanted to grab something to show our peeping Randolph." Slate went to his desk and picked up his tablet computer.

Both Jade and Willow focused on Randolph.

"I don't believe Willow should take out one of those high interest loans." With all the attention on him, he did the only reasonable thing and brought sanity to an insane situation. The vice around his head seemed to tighten and he rubbed the back of his neck. "She needs to create as much inventory as possible for her shop

because that is the only sure way she will have money coming in.”

“I need the loan to buy the materials to make my inventory.” Willow lifted her chin.

“Not if Jade is letting you take a break on the rent.” He returned his hand to his temple swearing he felt the pulse of pain through his fingertips.

She hugged her papers to her chest. “My supplies are very expensive.”

“Willow’s morning tea actually works. I feel great.” Slate looked up to the ceiling. “What’s it called?”

“Activi-tea.” Jade went to Slate and hooked her arm in his. “We also loved the one you call Boo-tea.”

The vision was a bit too nauseating and he returned to the matter at hand. “There are many grades of materials, just change some of it up to save money. It’s done all the time. I think the issue lies in not knowing your true profitability and not having a focus on your product offering.”

“Some say when you are out of quality you are out of business.” Willow’s eyes widened.

“There are others that say the same about money,” he countered.

Silence encompassed the room.

“Slate,” Jade whispered.

“Hey, I really did want to show you something, and wanted to talk to you about the artistic co-op. Look at this.” Slate basically shoved the tablet in his face. “Remember that artist who creates those murals in the middle of the night in little hidden spots? They call him the Mural Man.”

He nodded and restrained any reaction to the article and the picture. Instead, he kept his focus on Willow.

“Whoever it is struck again last night and painted over some graffiti.” Slate stood next to him and enlarged the picture. “Wonder what this art would be worth. It’s different. I definitely need to get someone like him involved in the project.”

“I may have another way to help you.” Without acknowledging Slate, he lifted his chin toward her. “A different kind of proposal.”

“Honestly, Mr. Van Ayers, I’m not interested in anything you have to offer.” She reached into her bag, pulled out a little jar and held it out to him. “I do believe you need this though. Rub it on your temples for your headache, and later you can tell me if I skimped on my ingredients.”

He took the jar. How did she know he had a headache? “Maybe we should talk in private.”

“Or not at all.” She spun back around to face the desk.

“Come on Birthday Boy, let’s go get your party started.” Slate corralled him out of the office.

“I’ll be right there.” He watched Slate stroll down the hall and resumed his position with his back pressed against the wall, once more glancing at Willow and at his watch. They needed each other and he had only a little more time before his life had insufficient funds.

COME UNDONE:

Romance Stories Inspired by **Duran Duran**

New Moon on Monday

Kim Carmichael



An Excerpt

FROM OUTSIDE THE CLUB, the pound of the deep bass music vibrated through Owen Blakeley's body. Too many years had passed since he ventured to one of these places. The music, the smoke in the air and the general disarray coupled with the kaleidoscope of people would serve as the perfect inspiration.

"You know I need your help." Blake pointed to the renovated old warehouse in the heart of downtown LA flooded in purple lights. "Come on, let's do this."

"Club New Moon. Are you sure?" His head tailor, Sam Palmer, shook his head. "I think this looks like a better place to find a communicable disease rather than inspiration."

"New moons are a sign of change, renewal, a revolution." Blake charged forward, stopping at a tinted window. "Drink some alcohol, it's a natural antiseptic."

The window slid open and a man wearing leather, chains and more makeup than most women donned on the runway barely glanced in his direction. While tempted to ask the man who he was wearing or where he got his particularly interesting jacket with the multitude of buckles and spikes, Blake opted to hand over a hundred dollar bill, and without a word held up two fingers. A moment later two yellow neon wristbands were thrust in his direction. He handed one to Sam and they made their way past an extremely large man who appeared ready to kill and through an oversized door.

At one point this warehouse might have held priceless works of art, maybe machinery, or even

government experiments. Who knew what ghosts, muses and secrets lurked around the space?

As they made their way through the wide-open area, he took in the array of people. Along with the buckles and chains came the denim, women in corsets and lace, boots and heels of every configuration. The fashion industry was missing out. This place was where the trends needed to be set, in the underground, in the unconventional, not by corporations choosing colors and fabrics based on market research and overstock.

“I’m not dancing with you.” Sam elbowed him.

“Quiet.” He needed to absorb the atmosphere.

Sam followed. “Of course, I wouldn’t want to interrupt the peace and quiet.”

For quite some time he wandered around, bobbing and weaving through the crowd until they made their way toward the back with a huge bar and some tables. He spied an empty one and took a seat.

“I can’t sit here.” Sam shoved his hands in his pockets and bent down. “I’m wearing a Blake original.”

“No one told you to wear a suit to a nightclub.” Blake kicked the opposite chair out from under the table to give his employee the hint. “At least you know where you can get another one...at cost.”

“Screw you.” After taking his time to assess the chair, Sam sat and a grimace took over his face.

“You’re not my type.” Blake scanned the area, turning around to make sure he took in everything. What he noticed most about the scene was the creativity. Anything and everything was fair game, from fetish wear to more traditional styles, vintage to what modern could be. The possibilities were a far cry from a suit and a tie. Though his designs were some of

the best around, he could only push the male corporate uniform so far.

“What can I get you?”

A feminine voice broke through his study time and he turned toward it.

He swore a beacon of light shined down upon the woman and the background completely disappeared.

Before him stood the living incarnation of what he envisioned when he decided to start his women’s line. Curves for days were outlined to a tee by a black corset embroidered with blood red roses, while perfectly smooth white skin led up to a heart shaped face with luscious lips and light eyes. Her stark makeup only enhanced her delicate features and gave her that edge he craved. Shining red hair served as the cherry on top of her delicious offering.

“Do you have a wine list?” Sam asked.

“Sure, I know it by heart.” She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “White or red.”

Blake tore his focus away from the bounty bursting forth from her corset and glanced down at her shoes. Stilettos. If she could navigate the club in those shoes, what could she do on a runway? Of course he would have to teach her how to stand.

“Red.” Sam let out a huff.

“And you?” At last, the goddess turned her attention to him. The choker at her neck was interesting, a mix of leather and more roses. Maybe a vintage cameo with a silk ribbon would suit her better, especially if she put her hair up.

“What?” He could deconstruct the choker, make it high end, use some different material, maybe even metal.

“What would you like?” She tapped her foot.

If he answered honestly, he would most likely be rewarded with being impaled on one of those amazing shoes. “You shouldn’t fidget like that. It does nothing for your clothes.” He wanted to take her all in without any distraction. “Wait, let me rephrase that.”

With a glare, she crossed her arms.

“Never cover yourself.” In order to take her in from a different angle, he tilted his head. “My God, you are in perfect proportion.”

She put her hands on her hips, accentuating her hourglass figure. “Hey pal, what are you, some sort of fashion designer?”

“Actually, yes. I am.” All he could do is stare at the beauty.

“What do you want?” Eyes narrowed, she jutted out her jaw.

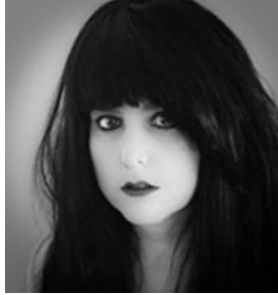
“Your name.” They may as well start with the basics and work their way out from there. He had to get to know her better and flashed her a smile.

“Two red wines.” She spun on her heel and walked away and didn’t trip on those sky-high shoes.

Yes, he found his muse.

About the Author

Kim Carmichael



Kim Carmichael began writing nine years ago when her love of happy endings inspired her to create her own.

A Southern California native, Kim's contemporary romance combines Hollywood magic with pop culture to create quirky characters set against some of the most unique and colorful settings in the world.

With a weakness for designer purses, bad boys and techno geeks, Kim married her own computer whiz after he proved he could keep her all her gadgets running and finally admitted handbags were an investment.

Kim is a PAN member of the Romance Writers of America, as well as some small specialty chapters. A multi-published author, Kim's books can be found all over the world.

When not writing, she can usually be found slathered in sunscreen trolling Los Angeles and helping top doctors build their practices.

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