

Ivy's Hot Shots

By Dana Littlejohn

Ivy York had always been a hot commodity among young airmen. She tried not to date them, but having an air force general for a father gave her a challenging social life. Her mother's only goal in life seemed to be to get her to settle her down with the next available pilot and birth as many babies as possible. Just as Ivy let her mother set her up with an extremely handsome tech sergeant name Steven Jones, she met Jonathan Hayes. Having spent time with both men, Ivy can't help but wonder if her mother finally got lucky in choosing Tech Sergeant Jones...or is Jonathan Hayes a better match for her after all?

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the young men and women looking to find their own way in the shadow of “great” parents.

Inspired by my oldest son’s time in the Air Force, I came up with Ivy’s Hot Shots. When Lattie returned home, I asked him how his time in the service was. My question sparked this book about how I think life could be growing up with powerful parents in the service. I enjoyed writing it. I hope you enjoy reading it.

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Chapter One



Ivy York climbed inside and slumped, half asleep, in the back of a cab. The driver turned to look at her expectantly.

“Central Park West and sixth, please. The Vanderbilt building.”

“You got it, lady.”

After taking the long ride to the twentieth floor, she dragged her bags and herself into her apartment and plopped on the couch, exhausted. Looking across the room, she managed a smile and walked over to her fish tank, tapping it. The two angelfish inside swam behind the little castle on the bottom.

“Hi, babies, Mommy’s home. Did you miss Mommy? Mommy missed you,” she said in baby talk, leaning against the glass. Walking back to the couch, Ivy pulled her phone from her purse and hit the speaker button.

Hey girl! This bouncing from state to state is wreaking havoc on our Saturday morning ritual, said a happy female voice. What’s a best friend got to do to get some time? Let me know when you get home, girl. I’ve got something for you, okay? Love ya! Ciao!

Ivy kicked off her shoes and chuckled.

Ivy, it’s your boss, a monotone feminine voice began. Call me when you get back to town and settle in. I have your next assignment ready. Oh, and just a reminder, your Indiana article is due on the twenty-seventh. That’s this Monday, Ivy, so get you some rest and I’ll see you then.

“Ughh! I just got in the door and already she’s trying to send me off again.” Ivy laid back on the couch and pulled the cushion over her head as the next message began.

Hello, Sweetheart. You know I hate to talk on these things, but you’re never home. The male voice cleared his throat before continuing. Your mother and I worry about you when you go gallivanting off from place to place. One minute you’re here, the next you’re there. We can hardly keep up. Your mother doesn’t understand why you find this job necessary. We’re your parents, Ivy. If you need anything, you only have to ask and we’d be more than happy to give it to you. What did you say, honey? Tell her what? Oh, yes, and Ivy, we’d like to see more of you, too. We speak to your brother more than we speak to you and he’s on duty in Germany at the moment. Call us when you get home, dear.

She nodded under the cushion.

Hi, Ivy, it’s Robert. You’re not still angry with me, are you? I thought that if I gave you a little time to cool off, you’d call me, and we could talk about this. It’s been, well, we’ve been playing phone tag for almost eight months. I gotta tell you, Ivy. I’m starting to think that you’re ducking me, he added with a chuckle. Call me so we can talk things over.

She rose to her elbow to delete the messages. “Wow, and here I am thinking that I was pretty clear about not wanting to talk to him again. I guess when I said, *go to hell, drop dead, and fuck you and the horse you rode*

in on wasn't plain enough for him to understand that I didn't want to see him anymore. Huh, who knew he was that dumb. Perhaps the use of weapons along with words might do the trick next time."

Ivy settled onto the couch to sleep but was startled awake by the phone a short time later.

"So much for a nap. Yes, hello."

"Ivy, dear. Are you alright? Where are you?"

"I'm fine, Mom. I'm home. My flight came in earlier this afternoon. I must have fallen asleep," she said, rubbing her eyes. "How's everything?"

"Everything is fine, sweetheart, just fine. Your father will be home around six if you'd like to talk to him."

"That's cool."

"Is everything all right, honey?"

"Yeah, Ma. I'm just tired."

"Are you dating anyone now?"

Ivy sat up with a groan. "No, Mom, I'm not and can we not go there."

"We're not going anywhere, Ivy."

"Mom..."

"I just think you're getting a little old to be alone, that's all."

"I'm not alone, Mom. I'm single. There's a difference."

"Well, I think that at thirty years old you should be married with children already not *single*."

Ivy scoffed and pulled a discarded pillow onto her lap as she sat up. "I'm going to be *twenty-six*, Mother, not thirty. That's my brother. You're mixing your children up," she told her. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't pack the years on me just yet, okay?"

"I know how old you are, Ivy. I was just rounding off. All I'm saying is—"

"Mom, please, I know what you're saying. You say it all the time. You say, *Ivy, you need to get married so you can stay home and give me some grandkids*," she told her mimicking her in a high pitch voice. "Then I say, for the one-hundredth time, *Mom, I like my job and I'm not ready to have kids yet*."

"I don't sound like that, Ivy."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Yes Mom, you do. Besides, you need a man to make these wonderful grandkids you want so badly. At the moment I am very much *man-less*. The good thing is I'm cool with that. It's by choice that I'm single."

"Yes, Ivy. I'm aware of that, but I know plenty of eligible young airmen that are bachelors. If you want me to I—"

"Thanks, Ma, but no. I can find my own dull, boring, career-building husband serving in the air force if that was what I was looking for," Ivy said, rolling her eyes.

"That's very funny, Ivy, but every woman needs a husband and children to keep her in high spirits. You, your brother, and your father made my life extremely content," her mother said undeterred.

"Mom, I *am* happy. You act as though I hate my life like I don't even *have* a life without a man." Ivy threw the pillow to the side and walked across the room to the small bar in the corner. "I do like my life, you know. Why is that so hard for you to grasp?"

She pulled out a glass from underneath, dropped in two ice cubes, and pulled a bottle of dark liquor from the small fridge.

"It isn't, Ivy. It's just that every woman needs a husband to give us direction and children to keep us focused," her mother insisted. "It's part of what we do as women. It's who we are."

Ivy stared at the phone, flabbergasted. "Mom, that statement is straight from the dark ages. It scares me that you even believe it." She reached under the bar and removed a can of diet cola, poured it into the glass on top of the alcohol and ice then stirred the mixture with her finger. "What makes you think I don't have any direction? I have direction. I *directed* myself to college, then into an internship at Hot. When I started at Hot, we were both brand new. Now it's a widely circulated magazine and I'm a full time and a well-known writer in my field...remember?" Ivy lifted the cup and took two big gulps. "I think that shows some type of *direction*. Don't you?"

"Yes, yes, Ivy. Your achievements are very nice, admirable even, but you still need a husband and children to feel totally complete. We all do."

Ivy stared at the phone again with a raised brow. Shaking her head, she gulped down the rest of her drink and quickly made another.

"Okay, Ma, you know what? I have to go. I'll call back when dad comes home."

"All right, Ivy. I love you."

"Love you, too, Ma. Bye." Ivy hung up and shook her head. "How could she have spent most of her life over here and still manage to live in the dark ages at the same time? Unbelievable." She sipped her drink. "Huh, I might consider having a boyfriend—hell, maybe even a husband—if she wasn't trying to throw a bunch of crazy airmen at me all the time." She thought for a moment then shook her head and dialed another number. "Nah!"

"Hey, Kell. What's up?"

"Ivy! Girl, tell me you're back. I have got some great news for you," came the excited reply.

"Yes, I'm back. I got in earlier this afternoon."

"Are you free for an early dinner?"

"Sure. What time?"

"How about an hour, at Mama Leone's?"

"An hour? Girl, I thought you were talking about seven o'clock, maybe even seven-thirtyish. I haven't even been up for an hour, Kelley, and I just got off the phone with my mother."

"Hmm, you guys had that *married with children* talk again?"

"Yup."

"Well, you're probably in need of a good drink."

Ivy paused in mid-sip and toasted the air. "Oh yeah. I'm already having it."

Kelley chuckled. "Come on, Ivy. I'm trying to find a way to get you out of the house. I haven't seen you in three weeks. I miss you, man. It's not as much fun playing handball by yourself, you know."

"Kelley..." she whined.

"Oh, come on. You gotta eat, right? I know how much you like to eat. Hey, I'll buy it."

She sighed. "Okay, okay. I'll be there."

"Great, and look cute, too, okay? Bye!"

“What? Look cute? Kell...ugggh!” She slid the phone across the coffee table and finished her drink. “I swear. Between Kell and my mother, I can’t take another aggravating ass woman in my life.”

Ivy put her empty glass next to the phone and went back to her room. Passing the long mirror on the wall that separated the closet and her dresser, she stopped and viewed herself turning to and fro.

“Well, I guess she didn’t mean my jammies when she said cute, so...” She pulled open the closet doors and pushed past several business type suits, skirts, dresses, and pants, before coming to the black jeans she was looking for. After adding a sleeveless, light brown sweater, black boots, and a little makeup, she brushed her hair and stepped back in front of the mirror. Ivy was often told while growing up that she looked like her mother because of her strong Asian features, but she didn’t think so. Of course, she thought her mother was beautiful, but she was small and petite. Ivy was taller and curvier, more like the women in her father’s family. It was true that Ivy shared her mother’s dark Asian eyes, long dark hair, and high cheekbones, but there was a natural curl to her hair and her skin was light brown, thanks to her father’s contribution to her gene pool. She turned this way and that, smiling.

“I’ll have to call Tina and tell her she was right about this little outfit.” The view of the back of her outfit made a face. “Hmm, a little more butt to fill out the back view wouldn’t kill me, though.”

With a shrug, she went into the living room and dragged one of her bags to her bedroom. Digging through it, she stuffed several items into a plastic bag, transferred her personal effects from one pocketbook to another, and left her apartment in search of a cab.

Arriving at Mama Leone’s, a popular Italian eatery on Broadway and Forty-Third Street, Ivy quickly spotted her best friend. Kelley Kingsley stood out in the crowd. They were opposites in almost every feature. Kelley’s tall voluptuous body, large almond eyes, flawless, dark skin, and her extravagant use of jewelry made her appear to be some sort of African royalty. She rose with her arms wide and a pleasant smile as Ivy approached. As her friend bent low to hug her, Ivy chuckled to herself. She was used to the staring eyes when she and her friend were together.

“Kelley, you look fantastic and your hair is laid, as usual.”

“Thanks, girl. You know when you ain’t here. I gotta call your girl Tina to keep me hooked up with what’s in style.” Kelley pushed one of the long braids that framed her face behind her ear. “You know I got to have my braids, girl,” her friend said with a tilted head. “Okay, Ivy, what is this?” She flicked a hand at her. “I thought I said give me cute.”

Ivy looked down at herself. “I thought this was cute.”

“Okay, I’ll give you that, but it’s *casual* cute. I wanted *sexy*-cute.”

Ivy lifted a brow. “*Sexy*-cute?”

“Yeah, girl. You know you always gotta come prepared because you never know who you might meet. Oh! Speaking of cute girl, do you like the shoes? I just got them.”

Kelley flung her foot from under the table, showing off a black patent leather shoe with a little pink bow around the edge.

“Ooo very cute.” Ivy chuckled. “What does that make, like, your five *hundredth* pair of *cute* shoes?”

“Not yet, girl, but I’m working on it. Okay, so I guess I need to be a little more specific with the level of cuteness I be requiring of you, huh? That was my fault, but damn, Ivy, get with the program. When I said it,

you should have known where I was coming from. You could have at least worn a sweater that showed off your boobs better. You've got nice ones and they're *real*. You need to flaunt them more. You can't find a man by keeping the *girls* covered up," Kelley told her.

"What is with you?" Ivy sent a quick look around the restaurant. "You better not have some fool jumping from out of the shadows, meeting us here. I'm not in the mood for any blind dates. What I really want to do is just jump in my pajamas and crash, but you swayed me with the offer of food." She chuckled. "I did just get back from Indiana, you know."

"How was Indiana?" Kelley asked, ignoring her mini outburst.

"It was a blast, man. Indianapolis is a nice city."

"Good evening, ladies, and welcome to Mama Leone's. I'm Eric, and I'll be taking care of you."

Ivy looked up at their waiter as he handed her and Kelley their menus. His clean-shaven face had boyish good looks and deep dimples.

"Can I get you something to drink to start off with or maybe an appetizer?"

"Are you old enough to serve drinks, Eric?" Kelley asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Kelley, stop that," Ivy said with false sternness, but she was inclined to agree.

"What? I'm just checking. I'd hate to be arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

Ivy hid her laughter behind her menu.

"Yes ma'am, I'm old enough to serve *and* buy alcohol," he answered with a smile.

"Is that a southern accent I hear, Eric?" Ivy asked.

Before Eric could answer, Kelley's finger went up.

"Wait! Let me guess. You've come to the big city to be a famous model. Right?"

"No, ma'am, I'm not a model. I am an actor," he told them with a smile.

"Hmm..." Kelley pulled out a card and handed it to him. "Forget acting for now. Think modeling, sweetie, and call me. I know some people. Trust me," she added with a wink then picked up the menu. "Okay, Eric, you can bring me a Bahama Mama. Ivy?"

"Rum and cola, please," Ivy replied, letting a few giggles slip out.

"Thank you. I'll bring those right back."

Eric shoved the card into his apron pocket and walked away, writing on his pad. They watched him and Ivy let her laughter fall out freely. "You are such a hoe."

Kelley wagged her finger. "Uh-uh, Ivy. We do not say the H-word. I am an independent, single woman that likes sex with single men."

Ivy laughed harder.

"It's very liberating. You should try it, Ivy." She lifted her menu to block her view of Ivy. "Besides, I'm just trying to help the boy."

Kelley peeked over her menu to see Ivy's twisted lip expression. They both burst into fits of laughter. Eric returned with their drinks and took their order. A short time later Ivy pulled a from under the table.

"Ooo, you know how much I love gifts. Thanks, girl," Kelley squealed.

Kelley sat back and pulled out a cigarette. At her first puff, a different waiter appeared by her side.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. We no longer allow smoking in this restaurant."

"Oh, shit, that's right."

"It's only been like that for the last few years," Ivy reminded her.

"Well, when I go out it's not that often for dinner. How the hell did they get a big ass city like New York to go smoke-free, anyway?"

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Must be all those pain in the neck people, like myself, who enjoy breathing clean air."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

Kelley scanned the floor around the table then looked back on top of the table before dropping the cigarette into her water goblet. Ivy made a face.

"What? I wasn't going to drink it anyway. Hey, I almost forgot why I wanted you to come out." She slid an envelope across the table. "Here you go."

"What's this?"

"It's your cut, Ivy. Not an equal cut, but it's a nice one all the same."

"Come on, Kell. I don't even help with the business anymore."

"Ivy, we both know that if it weren't for you I wouldn't even have this little business at all. Let me give you a percentage of the profits every quarter. It's the least I can do."

"*Little?* Girl, please. Spotless is hardly a *little* business anymore. It's number one in this city."

"Yeah, but it started with just me and you. Don't you want to know where the money came from?"

Ivy nodded, picking up the envelope. "Sure, enlighten me."

"We got the Triton-Millennium account," Kelley said, excitedly.

"Get outta here?"

"For real, I got the call last week. We beat out three other companies. That's from the down payment and we get to go to the meet and greet they're holding there next Saturday night."

"Congratulations, Kell. I remember you put a bid in for it, but with so many other companies bidding, I knew it would be hard so I just wished you luck. I should have known better."

"Yes, you should have," Kelley, said smugly.

Ivy finally looked in the envelope. "Whoa...and to think, all this came about because you were too lazy to clean that room by yourself," she said with a chuckle.

"Hey, don't knock my methods. They work. Soon as you couldn't help me anymore, I hired someone else, and so, and so on."

Ivy continued laughing.

"By the way, I sent Penny to your house while you were gone."

"Thanks, man. I swear, if it wasn't for her, I think my poor little Minnie and Mickey would've been floating upside down a long time ago." She folded the envelope and stuffed it in her pocket.

Kelley looked at her watch and stood. "Girl, I gotta get outta here. I need a damn cigarette. Besides, I got Dexter coming over to give me a message, later."

"Dexter! Are you still seeing him?" She stood and grabbed her jacket.

"Only for the massages, Ivy," Kelley assured her. With a giggle "He hasn't gotten any in a long time."

"Yeah, right."

Kelley put some money in the black book on the table with the bill. As she gathered her things, she sent Eric a wink and headed for the door.

“Call me, Ivy, and I’ll get you a massage with Dex, too. Ooo there’s a cab.” She swung the cab door open. “Okay, I’m out, girl. Call me, okay?” She gave Ivy a hug. “We’re still on for our Saturday thing, right? Bring your clothes for the party with you. Love you, call me. Bye!” She slammed the door and waved out the window.

Ivy shook her head laughing. “Imagine that. I couldn’t get a word in at that time either.”

Chapter Two



“So, why am I going to this party again?” Ivy asked.

“You’re my plus one and, you obviously keep forgetting, you’re also my partner. A silent, lesser paid partner, but a partner never-the-less,” Kelley clarified.

“Right, right.”

“Not everyone gets invited to these kinds of things, Ivy. We got our invite because we just got the Triton-Millennium cleaning account. Lots of big money people are going to be there. You might meet someone you can interview. Speaking of, did you finish your story?”

“It’s not a story, it’s an *article*, and yes, I did. I printed it last night and stuffed it in the envelope so I can take it to Sherri on Monday.”

“When can I get a copy of the magazine?”

“A couple of weeks. Every department has turned in their articles then it will go to print.”

“Fine, fine. Okay, let’s lay the ground rules before we get there.”

Ivy rolled her eyes and let her head fall against the window. “Here we go.”

“Now look, you look super sexy, so try not to act so damn smart and scare away any of the good ones, okay?”

Ivy’s head snapped upright. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Oh come on, Ivy. You know how you do.”

She sputtered. “So you’re saying I’m supposed to act stupid on purpose? What kind of guy is that gonna get me?”

“Now you’re overreacting.”

“No, I’m not. I’ll tell you what kind. Some puffed-up idiot who gets off on feeling smarter and more dominant than his woman, that’s what! Thanks, but no thanks. Been there, done that. You know who would put up with a man who can’t hold an intelligent conversation? Hoes, gold-diggers, and dingbats, because they’re there for another reason anyway. No offense.”

“None taken,” Kelley said with a flippant wave.

“I’ll pass this go around. I’m just here for moral support.”

“Now, Ivy, you know that’s not what I was trying to say at all.” Kelley looked out the window briefly before continuing. “But, if he’s got some real money, you would consider toning it down a little bit, right?”

She sucked her teeth. “Girl, shut up.”

The driver dropped them at the hotel and a doorman stepped up promptly. Kelley extended a satiny burgundy stiletto at the end of a long shapely leg out of the car. Ivy couldn’t help but smile when her friend stood up to tower over the doorman. The doorman helped next and she followed Kelley inside.

Another doorman showed them to the Chelsea Ballroom where all the conference rooms were adjoined and almost filled to capacity. They stood beside him as he introduced Kelley and their company in a loud voice. All eyes were on them as they walked in smiling and moved smoothly through the crowd. Ivy scanned the crowd

and saw a group of people waving at her. She was taken aback until she saw Kelley returning the people's waves. Kelley ordered a drink for them both from a passing waitress and then led the way across the room.

"Kelley, you look fabulous, as always, darlin," an older woman with bright red hair said as she approached.

"Thanks, Paula. You look nice, too."

"I love it when your hair is up like that. It's all twisty, turny, and such, and the little pearls are just darling, dear. I wish I could do all that with my hair," she added fingering her curls.

"Oh please, Paula. We all thank God that you can't do that with your hair. It would be all greasy and matted and downright disgusting in less than two days flat."

Ivy turned. The small circle laughed at the older, well-dressed man's comment.

"So, who's your friend, Kelley?" he asked, leaning closer to her.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Let me introduce you all. Guys, this is my best friend, Ivy York. She's a writer at Hot Magazine. Ivy, this is Art Livingston. He's the owner of Apple of my Eye art gallery on Forty-Sixth and Avenue of the Americas."

Art, a cute but balding white man greeted her. "Nice to meet you, Ivy. You have fabulous skin and excellent bone structure. Has anyone ever painted you?"

"Umm, no, but thank you."

"This is Paula Radcliff. She's Manhattan's top interior designer. She designed this very room and all the other ballrooms here."

Ivy turned to Manhattan's finest designer. Everything about her had shock value. Her twisted and spiked bright red hair had no certain pattern, the make-up around her eyes was a similar red and her lipstick was even brighter making her pale skin even paler in comparison. Even the woman's outfit was an eclectic blend of satins and wool in various shades of blue. The combination of it all left Ivy questioning her sanity.

"Oh stop, Kelley. I'm not the—Oh, who am I kidding? I am the best! By the way, I did all the specialty rooms here, too." She laughed with a snort then bit the olive off the toothpick in her glass.

"Nice to meet you," Ivy said in greeting.

Kelley laughed with her and nudged Ivy. "Modest, isn't she?" she whispered.

Ivy held her smile, managing not to let any giggles slip.

"Okay, this guy right here is Jason Rogers. He owns one of the top security companies in the city, and this is Isaiah Johnson. Isaiah owns a restaurant called the Greasy Spoon. There's one down here near City Hall and one in Queens. The best breakfast ever, girl." She leaned down to her ear again. "We thought when the Towers fell, his business would be damaged or maybe go under since it was so close, but he got lucky. Now he's raking in the dough from the Financial District and the students at Pace University because two other restaurants close by were damaged."

"Hi," Jason, the large, blonde-haired and blue-eyed security company owner said. He offered her his hand, but before she could take it, Isaiah sidestepped him and took her hand. Ivy had to raise her eyes to make eye contact with him. He was a nicely built man with muscles evident even in the expensive tux he wore. His hair was cut close to his head and lined neatly.

Ivy watched her hand slowly rise up his torso. His eyes were large and almond-shaped with long sweeping lashes. The lustful fire that burned in the honey-colored orbs was obvious as they stared into hers. Isaiah was the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome.

"Hellloo, Ivy," he said in a singing voice and brought her hand to his wet lips. "So, Ivy, what is it that you do, again?"

Ivy made a face as she slid her hand out of his, discreetly checking it for slime before slowly sliding it down her dress.

"I'm a writer at Hot Magazine."

"Hot, huh?"

"I've seen that magazine, but I hardly ever have time to read, though. I never have time for myself. I'm always out spending someone else's money," Paula chimed in, laughing again as she traded her empty glass for a full one from a passing waiter.

"Do you have a card, honey? You'll want people to know who you're representing. I might need to get in touch with you in case I find someone to paint you."

"No, Art, she doesn't. I have all the cards. Ivy is here as my *plus one*. She is here to have a good time and look good doing it, just like all the other dates, while I work the crowd," Kelley explained.

"Well, she's damn sure doing that," Isaiah said, stepping closer. "So, Ivy, how long have you been hot?"

She turned a frown toward him. "Excuse me?"

"I mean, *at* Hot?" Isaiah corrected quickly. "How long have you been working at your magazine?"

She saw the lecherous look in his eye and took a step back before answering. "Since I was an intern in college."

"I love a woman that has that wicked combination of what I like to call the four B's." He counted them on his fingers, "Brains, beauty and..." he licked his lips, stepped closer again, and emphasized the B's in the last two words. "A *bangin' body*...like yours, girl. Damn you're fine."

"Ick," she said under her breath. With a roll of her eyes, she moved to the other side of her friend. "Kelley, I think I'll circulate a little bit, okay?"

"Okay, I'll be right here."

Ivy walked by the dance floor, bobbing her head to the music. Just as she put her glass on a passing waiter's tray, someone grabbed her hand and yanked her to the dance floor.

"Hey! What the—"

"Shh! Here, turn your back this way. You gotta dance with me. Can you step?"

"What? Excuse you, but—"

"Shh! Please, help me out. I'm trying to hide over here."

"*Hide?*" She looked around quickly, letting him pull her around the dance floor. "Hide from what?"

"Not a what, a *who*. I don't know who she is, but she's been following me around since I got here." He ducked behind her and twirled her around. She moved stiffly in his arms and spoke crisply.

"Look, I didn't come to this party to do protection work."

"Okay, then why did you come to this party?"

He lowered himself again. His body folded almost in half in an attempt to hide behind Ivy's smaller frame.

"Shit, don't move. There she is," he whispered urgently.

The man retreated, pulling Ivy with him, closer to the center of the dance floor. She was impressed that he somehow managed to keep the beat with the fast-paced music as he slipped by the dancers. He kept his face down and her back turned to the woman, using her as a shield, but he had piqued Ivy's curiosity. She peered over her left shoulder, trying to spy who the man was hiding from.

Several people separated them from a beautiful, young black woman who appeared to be scanning the crowded dance floor. Her bottle-blond hair bobbed up and down, poking out between the shifting shoulders of the people as she shimmied among them in her search. He readjusted their position to keep Ivy between him. Ivy only caught glimpses of the tiny yellow curls and the red dress that her top-heavy body was stuffed into as she pushed her way through the sea of dancers. The small woman was clearly having difficulty maneuvering through the dance floor. To her partner's obvious relief, she finally gave up her search and he stood to his full height.

"What was the problem? She's, umm...pretty."

He chuckled. "Yeah, the problem is she's only pretty on the outside. It took ten minutes of conversing with her for me to figure that out. She kept telling me everything her man could do for her, and buy for her, and how she'd spend all her days and nights going out of her way to be pretty for him. Check this out. She asked me what time it was, right? I said it's a quarter to seven. Guess what she said next?" He twirled her and went on, not waiting for an answer. "Oh, that's great! I've got twenty-five minutes before my friend comes," he told her in her high pitched, cartoonish voice. "What does that tell you?"

Ivy laughed. "I don't know. These millennials use their phones too much to tell time?"

The man laughed too. "Yeah, okay. You know, you dance good for someone who got dragged out to the dance floor."

"It's *well*."

"What's well?" he asked, sending a quick look over his shoulder.

"It's, you dance *well* for someone who got dragged to the dance floor."

His brows scrunched as he twirled her again. "That's what I said."

Ivy shook her head, careful not to miss the beat. "No, that's not what you said. You said good."

"So good is bad?" he asked with a raised brow.

Ivy continued to stare at his feet to stay in step with him. "No, good isn't bad, it's just not right."

"So, good is wrong, but not bad?" he asked in a teasing tone.

"No, good isn't—" Suddenly she stopped moving and looked up at him. "Are you doing that on purpose?"

"Doing what? I'm learning," the man assured her with a laughing grin.

Ivy lifted a brow as people continued to dance around them. "Whatever."

Her mystery man laughed aloud and then gripped her waist to bring her back into step with him.

"So, tell me. Why did you come to this party?"

"I came with my friend. I'm her date."

"*Her* date? Your friend is *female*? Well, this conversation just got interesting," he said with a growing smile.

She laughed. "Down boy, it ain't that kind of party. She came to this party to meet people for her company, like everyone else," Ivy explained, starting to relax.

"What's her company?"

"*Spotless Cleaning Services*, her name is Kelley Kingsley."

He nodded. "That's cool, I'll remember that. So what's your name?"

Ivy twisted her lips at first, staring at him, but then offered him a slow smile. "My name is Ivy York."

He returned her smile. "How you doing, Ivy York? I'm Johnnie Hayes."

Johnnie turned her to him while they danced, holding her firmly against his chest, with his arm around her waist. Ivy realized how tall the man was when her head rested against his face. Suddenly she pulled away from him.

"Wait. *Johnnie* Hayes? As in *Jonathan* Hayes? The one that bought the Rayburn Suite Inn? *That* Jonathan Hayes?"

"Yup, but I like my friends to call me Johnnie. Wanna be my friend?" he asked close to her ear before he spun her around.

She chuckled. "Wow."

"No, there's no wow. It's just work," Johnnie said modestly. "How'd you know about that?"

She danced more fluidly in his arms. "Well, I'm a writer at Hot Magazine. It's my job to keep up with what's *hot*."

"Hot Magazine, huh? It's that bright red one with the big fire blazing behind the title, right?"

"Yes, that's it."

"So, if I made it to your magazine, does that mean I'm considered hot?"

"Well, you did make a huge purchase buying the Rayburn Suites Inn. If the data in the article is true, the purchase sent your net worth skyward. It landed you on the top ten on the list of most eligible African-American bachelors in the United States. Number three, if I remember correctly. So, yeah, I guess that might make you a little hot," she answered with a giggle.

The music stopped and Ivy clapped along with everyone else.

"Thanks for the dance and the protection, Ivy. I felt extremely safe in your arms," Johnnie said with a laughing grin.

"No problem." She turned to walk away, but he grabbed her hand.

"Umm, can I buy you a thank you drink?"

Ivy wrapped her arms across her chest, tapped her foot, and openly looked him over. Johnnie's sparkling ebony eyes stared back at her. The black, double-breasted tuxedo accentuated his wide chest, broad shoulders, and slim waist excellently. A small grin touched his full lips. Johnnie glided a hand over his clean-shaven face and held out his arms out wide.

"Should I do a spin move so you can get a better look?"

Ivy smiled. "No, need. I've seen enough, but thanks for the offer, and yes. I think I will take you up on that drink."

Johnnie offered his arm. They walked off the floor as another song started to fill the dance floor again.

"Rum and cola, please," Ivy told the bartender.

"I'll have a brandy, my man," Johnnie said when the bartender turned his way. He swiveled his stool toward Ivy. "So, now that I have the Rayburn Suites, I'm thinking the cleaning contracts might be negotiable. Maybe I

can use your friend's cleaning service for my hotels. Do you have a company card? I can check out her website later."

The bartender handed her a drink. "Thank you. Nope, Kelley has all the cards with her."

"Thanks, man. Well, do you have a card for you?"

She chuckled and took a sip. "You're very smooth, Mr. Hayes. I'll give you that."

He sipped his drink, not taking his eyes off her. She raised her glass to take another drink but stopped midway.

"You're serious?"

He swirled his glass swishing the ice around. "Why wouldn't I be?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I would think that being the third most eligible bachelor in twenty nineteen you would have women everywhere you go falling at your feet."

He scoffed. "Really?"

She nodded. "Uh-huh. A man with your kind of juice could surely have a woman in every city he went to if he wanted—probably two at home." She shrugged and her glass finally reached her lips. "

"You think so, huh? How did someone so beautiful become so cynical?"

"I'm not trying to be a cynic. I'm just a realist."

"Okay, I can accept that. Well, I don't know about everyone else, but I don't have the kind of time it takes to be entertaining a bunch of different women and contrary to what you may hear men say, we don't have that kind of stamina either," he added under his breath with a chuckle.

"Uh-huh."

"Besides, I don't need a bunch of women to make me happy, nor do I want them." Johnnie finished his drink and set his glass down with a clunk. "I'm just looking for one. One I can make super happy and grow old with and in return, she will make me happy."

"Mmm-hmm, that's nice." She finished her drink, clunking her glass next to his, and slid off the stool. "Well, thanks for the drink and it was nice meeting you, Johnnie."

Ivy walked away, sending him a smile over her shoulder. She retraced her trail around the dance floor to find her way back to Kelley. She stopped abruptly spotting Isaiah through the crowd. With an about-face, she rushed back the other way. A quick look over her shoulder let her know he had spotted her as well and was in hot pursuit, closing in fast. Ivy cut another way and bumped into Johnnie, literally.

"Oh! Johnnie! Thank goodness. Look, it's your turn to save me now. Come on!"

"Okay, but—"

She pulled him onto the dance floor and right into Isaiah.

"Hey, Ivy, I was just looking for you. You want to dance? I'd love to hold that luscious body of yours, nice and close to mine."

She backed up and tried not to make a face. "Thanks, but no. Johnnie and I are having this dance."

Isaiah stepped in front of them, blocking their path to the dance floor. "I don't think I've met Johnnie and since this is a meet and greet..." He offered his hand. "Isaiah Johnson, owner of the Greasy Spoon."

"How you doing, man? Johnnie Hayes."

Ivy looked between the two men. Isaiah's very proper look, long and elegant in his suit was handsome in a classic kind of way. He would look good on anyone's arm, but his slimy personality made him extremely unappealing to be around. Johnnie had rugged good looks, like a man who was more comfortable in jeans and a t-shirt. Ivy chuckled to herself.

"*Johnnie Hayes*," Isaiah repeated the name much slower as his head tilted. "Jonathan Hayes! Yeah!" he said, pointing at him. "You're the dude that bought the Rayburn, right?"

Johnnie smiled. "Yup, that's me."

"Yeah. So, that's you, huh?"

Johnnie shrugged. "What's up?"

"I don't know, man. I guess I thought you were some old white dude. I pictured someone that looked like the Monopoly guy or something."

"Really? Well, sorry to disappoint."

"Okay, now that we've all met, we're going to take that dance now." Ivy took Johnnie's hand back from Isaiah. "Let's go, Johnnie."

"Okay, Johnnie, it was nice meeting you, man. Maybe we can talk about putting one of my restaurants in one of your hotels," Isaiah called out as Ivy pulled Johnnie away.

"Yeah, nice meeting you, too, and good luck with the Greasy Sponge," Johnnie yelled over his shoulder.

"It's *spoon*, man. *Greasy Spoon!*" Isaiah yelled.

Johnnie pulled close as they began to dance. "So what's wrong with that guy? He seems...nice."

"Whatever. He's a jerk. I bet he has lots of jerk friends, too. Pigs like himself. They run in packs, you know."

He chuckled. "You don't think he has *women* friends, too?"

She sputtered. "Not likely. I'm sure he knows a lot of women because he's cute and all. That is if you're into the smug, over-confident, jerk-type cuties, but any woman with even an average intelligence couldn't stand to be around him for longer than two minutes."

"Just two minutes, huh?"

"Yup. It would take about a minute and a half for you to soak in his good looks and only thirty seconds for him to mess it up by opening his mouth. Humph, he's probably a Virgo, too."

"All that *and* a Virgo? Is being a Virgo really that bad?" he questioned in a humorous tone.

Ivy shrugged. "I just don't get along with Virgos."

Johnnie nodded. "Uh-huh. You really are a great dancer, you know."

She smiled. "Thanks. So, what's your sign, Johnnie?"

He dipped her. "I'm a Virgo," he said with a straight face.

She gasped and fumbled for her voice as he brought her back to her feet, but he spoke first.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding. I'm an Aries."

Ivy let out a relieved laugh. "Very funny, Johnnie. Hmm, Aries, huh?"

"What? Is that a good hmm, or a bad hmm?"

She shrugged. "It's just that I'm a Sagittarius and, well, astrologically speaking, we're compatible."

"Ahh, so it's in the stars that we'll be together. I like that."

She let him twirl her and they moved smoothly across the floor as she laughed.

"Now, hold up. I didn't say all that."

He smiled. "Oh, but that's what I heard."

Johnnie twirled her one last time and they clapped as the song ended and a slower one began.

"I guess it's my turn to say thanks to you, Johnnie."

"Anytime."

She turned to leave and he caught her hand again.

"You're not leaving me again, are you?"

"Well, yeah, unless you want me to buy you a thank you drink, too."

"Nope, for my thank you, I'll take this dance right here. Dance one more with me."

Johnnie pulled her close to him, holding her hands by her sides, rocking her into a slow rhythm. Her forehead brushed against his nose as he pulled her even closer. A whiff of his warm, musky cologne filled her nose. The smell intoxicated her more than the drinks she'd consumed. Her body started to tingle for the first time in a long time and her knees weakened. She took a step back to clear her head.

"I—I was going to find my friend...get that card you wanted."

Johnnie pulled her arms up and slowly wrapped them around his neck, and then returned his hands to her waist. His gaze never left hers.

"That can wait until after this song ends, can't it?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess it can."

She let him lead her across the floor and let her body lead her mind as it took pleasure in being held again. Their dance seemed to last forever and her mind escaped to a place it hadn't been in a long time...contentment. Johnnie brought his face down to her throat, bringing her even closer to him.

"Mmm, your scent is incredible. What are you wearing?"

His hot breath on her neck gave her goosebumps. Ivy rested her cheek on his shoulder. His heavy man scent mixed with the cologne engulfed her. Her body seemed to move closer to him wanting more of it. She started to enjoy the feel of her body parts against him as well as his erection rising between them.

"Ivy?"

She smiled enjoying the shiver his soft, sultry voice sent down her back.

"Hmm."

"Your perfume, what is it?" Reality crept in and she lifted her head.

"What? Oh. My perfume. Umm, it's, uh...hmm. Oh! It's called Angelique. It's from Endora's Closet. Kelley gave it to me for my birthday last year."

He nodded and sniffed her shoulder again. "Mmm, it smells fantastic on you."

The song stopped and the clapping began, but Johnnie didn't release her. She looked around.

"Well, I guess we're even now."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Johnnie, the music has stopped."

"Has it? I didn't notice."

She laughed nervously and stepped out of his embrace. "Umm, yes, well, thank you for saving me from Isaiah, and, uh, it was nice meeting you...again."

“At your service, Ivy York.”

He gave her a slight bow and she hurried off before he could say another word.

“Hey, girl. Look at what a busy beaver I’ve been,” Kelley said when she appeared at her side and handed her the business cardholder. “I’ve met seven new prospects and I’ve gotten cards from *eleven* others besides. This meet and greet is turning out better than I thought it would.” She chuckled, taking the cardholder back before Ivy could open it. “I also met a few prospects for myself, too. I put those cards in my purse,” she added in a softer voice. “Did you see Isaiah? He went looking for you.”

“Mmm-hmm, the slimeball. I also ran into Johnnie Hayes.”

“Johnnie Hayes? As in *Jonathan* Hayes, the superfine and sexy millionaire?”

“Yup.”

“Damn. You go, girl. I told you that dress was the bomb.”

“Uh-huh. So, how long are we staying?”

“What? It’s still early. Come on let’s see if I can find any more friends up in here. If not, we’ll pass out some cards, introduce ourselves and *make* some new friends,” Kelley informed her then pulled Ivy through the crowd.

* * *

“Not a bad night, right? I even had a good time. How about you?” Kelley asked closing the cab door.

“It was okay, even though I spent the night ducking your weird friend Isaiah.” She chuckled.

“What was he doing?”

“Every time I saw him he’d licked those big pink lips. He looked like some sick, drunken snake,” Ivy explained, rolling her eyes.

“Girl, Isaiah isn’t so bad. He likes you. Just give him a chance.”

“Girl, please.”

Kelley gave her a dismissive wave. “I swear, you are so picky. Isaiah is cute, strong, and independent, plus he has his own business. What more can you ask for?”

“Gee, I don’t know. How about a little less slime and a lot more personality? The man is a letch, Kell.”

Kelley laughed. “I’ve known him for a while and I don’t think he’s that bad. Fine, forget Isaiah. There were a few good ones out tonight. What about Richard? Did you like him? He was a cutie, too.”

“Richard? The reporter? Kelley, you’re getting worse, girl. If I date that man, all of my business will be on the front page of the rag he writes for just so someone will buy the thing. You can keep that one for yourself if you think he’s so cute.”

She turned to the window. Kelley laughed again.

“Okay, no Richard. What about the Marriott guy, Roger Cool? He’s got his own money and he was kind of cute. I mean, you have to be into bony, rich white guys, but to each his own, right?” she asked with a shrug.

Ivy sent her a narrowed eye look, twisted her lips, and then made a noise before turning back to the window.

“You know, I’m not too picky in the looks department, but he’s got to have his own change to come my way so I don’t have to worry about him clocking mine. But don’t you just love his name? Just wear it for a second—*Ivy Cool*.”

Ivy’s head snapped back to her friend and she wrapped her arms around her chest.

"Not! Let's do Kelley *Cool* instead."

Kelley gasped wide-eyed. "Damn girl, you didn't like him either?"

Ivy dropped her arms and sighed. "Roger was okay, I guess. He just spent the whole time we talked letting me know that he'll soon have enough money in the next year or so he'll have more money than *The Donald* himself. They'll be making an apprentice show for him soon."

"Yeah, that would get on my nerves, too. Besides, he was a Libra. You know I don't mess around with Libras anymore...not after Robert," she added and turned back to the window.

"All right, forget all of those guys. What about that Johnnie Hayes? I caught him peeking through the crowd at you all night so I know you saw him, too."

She shrugged, still looking out the window. "Sounds like he's got stalker tendencies if you ask me."

"Yeah, right."

"I mean, he was okay."

"Okay? Just okay? Girl, please. Who do you think you're talking to? That man is fine as hell. Tall, dark, handsome and they say he's a really good businessman so he must be smart. You know how that smart thing is important to you and with the kind of money that man has he don't need good credit, Ivy," Kelley pointed out with a laugh. "He's got all kinds of kudos going for him if one is to believe what one reads in all the magazines."

"Yeah, well, you can't believe everything you read, now can you?"

"Seriously, Ivy. I don't see the problem with that one at all."

She looked at Kelley then back out the window but said nothing. Kelley gasped.

"Ooo..."

Ivy turned back to her friend. "Ooo, what?"

"Don't play games with me, Ivy Renee. I know you. That man has done something to you. You're feeling him!" she said in amazement. "That arrow hit you right between the eyes, didn't it? *Didn't it?* Admit it!"

Kelley leaned toward her with an accusing finger, grinning. Ivy leaned as far as she could from the finger.

"Whatever. I haven't the slightest idea on what you're talking about," she stated as she gazed back out the window.

"Really? That's how we're doing it. All right, what's his sign? I know you asked," Kelley asked with her arms wrapped around her chest.

Ivy glanced at her again, hesitating a few seconds before answering. "He's an Aries, okay...but that doesn't mean anything," she added quickly.

"Uh-huh. Come on, Ivy, you can't let this one slip by you. He looked interested, so why not go for it? Every man you come across isn't going to be a lousy, cheating skank like Robert Owens."

Ivy turned a raised eyebrow to her friend. "I thought we decided not to speak his name out loud."

"No. We decided not to speak his name unless it was attached to his title: the lousy, cheating skank."

"Oh, that's right. Okay, carry on."

"Come on, Ivy. Johnnie Hayes is a once in a lifetime catch."

Ivy sighed and turned to her friend. "Kelley, men like that don't have normal lives. Men with Johnnie Hayes's kind of money are international lover types with women at their beck and call all the time, wherever they go. They don't have time for any type of real relationship, regardless of what they say."

She stared at the passing streetlights for a few moments then turned back to her friend.

“Besides, you know I have the tendency to only meet two kinds of men. The ones that want me to be an arm bracelet, a pretty airhead that looks good enough to be seen and never heard, that speaks when spoken to and doesn’t leave the designated spot he puts her in. Or it’s the ones that want me because I’m *General York’s* daughter,” Ivy said, doing air quotes. “Oh, yeah, they’re my favorites. The ones who aren’t satisfied with whatever position they hold in the Air Force so they want to use me to connect them to a general, so they can become somebody. Yeah, as lovely and fulfilling as all that sounds, I’m gonna have to pass. Thanks, but no thanks. I’m doing fine with having a few friends, jumping their bones every now and then and putting them out before I can light up a cigarette.”

“Girl, you don’t smoke,” Kelley reminded her.

“You know what I mean.”

“Well if those are the only options it sounds like to me that we need to broaden our list of men. All men can’t be that bad.”

“Girl, if I had a dime for every time you’ve said that—no not even a dime. A nickel. If I had a nickel for every time—”

“Oh, stop it. You’re just being gun shy.”

Ivy turned a raised brow to her friend. “Really? You want to put your money where your mouth is?”

“Whatever. I’m just saying maybe *this* guy doesn’t fit into either of your crazy guy categories. Besides, you don’t even have a consistent booty call to call on.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

“Not really a bad thing, but you know how you get.”

“No, how do I get?”

“Well, you tend to be snappish when you haven’t been laid for a while.”

Ivy gasped. “What?”

Kelley nodded. “Yup and to be honest, my friend, you been snappy for a long time. In fact, you have actually moved full force into *bitch* mode,” she told her with a laugh.

Ivy laughed too, as the cab stopped and the door swung open.

“Girl, shut up and get out of my cab.”

Kelley pointed at her. “See, bitchy.”

“Good evening, Ms. Kingsley. Did you have a nice evening?”

“Yes, Bill, we had a blast,” Kelley said to the doorman then turned back to Ivy.

“So, are you coming over tomorrow? We can go for a jog and grab some lunch. It’s gonna be nice out. Indian summer is still holding on.”

“No, I can’t. I told my parents I’d be over for their brunch. You know that might be an all-day thing unless I can find a way out.”

“Well, if you need an escape you know the code. Just call me.”

Chapter Three



“Hey, hey, hey! I’m up. I’m up!”

Ivy reached over smacking the top of her nightstand until she reached the clock. When the noise did not stop, she reached around until she grabbed her phone.

“Yeah, hello.”

“Good morning, Ivy.”

“Oh. Hi, Mom. What’s up?” she asked, yawning loudly.

“I was just calling to make sure you were still coming over for brunch, dear.”

“Yeah, Ma. Give me about an hour and a half and I’ll be there, okay?”

“That’s fine, dear. What are you wearing?”

Ivy looked down. “Uh, pajamas.”

“Not now, Ivy, to the brunch.”

“Oh. I don’t know, Ma. I’m just waking up. Is there a dress code I should know about?”

“You don’t have to be snappy, Ivy. I was just wondering.”

“I’m sorry, Ma. I just don’t know yet. Do you want me to call you or something when I figure it out?”

“No, Ivy, just be on time for once.”

“Okay, Ma. I’ll be there soon.” She scratched her head. “Damn, I guess I am getting a little bitchy.”

After a wake-up shower, she dressed in jeans and a button front blue plaid shirt. As she blow-dried her hair, the phone rang again.

“Hello.”

“Hi, Ivy, you got a minute to talk?”

“Robert?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I didn’t think I’d catch you. We’ve been playing phone tag for a while.”

“Robert, we have *not* been playing phone tag. You’ve been calling me and I haven’t been calling you back.”

“Well, I took a chance on catching you early. I remember you like to sleep in since it’s Sunday.”

She stopped brushing her hair. “Robert, don’t reminisce about me. It turns my stomach. What do you want?”

“I just wanted to know if we…”

“*We?* There is no *we*, Robert. What part of *go to hell* made you think that we even had a chance at being a *we* anymore? You didn’t get that impression when I said I hope you and that bitch get hit by a bus. That would’ve been crystal clear to anyone else.”

“Well, I figured you would be angry after our confrontation, so I really didn’t take anything you said seriously at the time. I thought everything would be okay once you calmed down. People say things in the heat of anger all the time.”

“You thought that, huh?”

"Ivy, I'm not even with her anymore. It didn't last long."

"Imagine that."

"Yes, so I thought—"

"You thought what, Robert? That I would instantly take you back because you made a mistake?"

"Well, yeah, actually. I plan to make it up to you of course. I want to—"

"I don't care, Robert! You are no longer my concern. I'm not interested in your make up plan or you."

"I can tell that you're still angry, Ivy. Listen, I think that as two responsible adults we should be able to discuss your anger and move forward," he said after a while.

She stared at the phone in disbelief before replying. "Really? Here's a newsflash for you, Robert. I'm not angry anymore. In fact, I've been over it *and you* for a long time now."

"Ivy, let me—"

"No, enough!" She rubbed her temples and continued. "Let me try to communicate this to you, again, in simple terms so that you can understand. I will try to be *crystal* clear this time." She held the phone in front of her face and yelled into it. "I want you to go away. Forget you ever met me. It's over between us. We are done. There is no more us. Finito. So stop calling me!" She brought the phone back to her ear. "Now, I hope that makes it clear enough for you because I'd hate to waste more of my time talking to you after today."

She pressed the end button and threw the cell on her bed to finish getting ready. Dropping food in the tank, she said goodbye to Mickey and Minnie, grabbed a jacket, and left.

"Hi, Jack, what are you doing here?" she asked the man standing in the lobby.

"Your mother sent me to pick you up."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Great."

She sighed and followed him outside to her parent's hunter green and tan colored Lincoln Town car. Jack took the short drive to the Upper Eastside to the Rockefeller Building. Soon as Jack let her out of the car, she made her way to her parent's penthouse apartment. General York, an intimidating looking, giant of a man greeted her at the door when the maid let her in.

"There's my little girl. How are you, Ivy darling?" He swallowed her smaller frame with his hug. "I miss you so much when you go rushing off on all these assignments of yours. Come into the living room and tell me all about this last trip."

"Dad, you always say you don't like me working."

He waved away her words. "Sweetheart, you know I only say those things when your mother is around feeding me the lines. Her people raised her with the old traditions and she still tries to impress them on you and your brother. The youth today aren't like that. I understand that, but..." He looked around conspiratorially. "Let that be our little secret," he said with a wink.

She giggled as he kissed her forehead and they sat together in the den. Her father listened attentively as she told him about her trip to Indiana.

"So where do you go next?" he asked when she finished her tale.

"I find out tomorrow when I turn in my article."

"Sounds great, I look forward to reading the next issue. Now, let's go find your mother."

Her father scanned the living room when they entered and then he pointed toward the kitchen and went the opposite way.

"Hi, Mom," Ivy said, walking into the kitchen.

"Ivy, I'm so glad you finally made it, but you're late, darling, again. You look terrible. You have bags under your eyes, have you been getting enough sleep? I called you in plenty of time, honey and all you could find to wear were those ratty, faded looking jeans?"

Ivy shook her head and hugged her mother. "Missed you, too, Ma, and my jeans are faded on purpose. Thanks for noticing. You didn't have to send the car for me. I was going to take the bus."

"What's the point of having a car and driver if you don't use them, Ivy? Besides, Jack likes to pick you up. I think he's got a crush on you."

"Oh please." She opened the refrigerator.

"Rhonda, can you take those sandwiches out to the main dining room? Thank you," Mrs. York said when a maid walked into the kitchen. "

"Yes, Mrs. York."

"Come along, Ivy. It's time to meet the others."

Wide-eyed she looked over the refrigerator door. "Others? What others?" she asked, biting a pickle.

Her mother ushered her by the arm into the crowded banquet room where people were milling about talking, drinking, and listening to music.

"Mom..." she mumbled, stuffing the last of her pickle in her mouth.

"Hello everyone!" Mrs. York announced. "This is our daughter, Ivy, for those of you who don't know. Ivy, speak to the ones you know and I'll introduce you to the ones you don't."

Ivy forced a smile and swallowed with a loud gulp. "Mom, you said nothing about all these people being here," she said through gritted teeth. "I thought I was just coming for brunch."

"Ivy, you know the general's wives host brunches every Sunday," her mother explained. "This was my week. Now come."

Ivy and her mother walked through the crowd. She spoke to all the people she recognized as instructed and then waited for her mother to introduce her to the ones she didn't.

"Okay, dear, there's one more person I'd like you to meet." Her mother sighed, pulling her across the room.

"Oh, Ivy, I wish you would have worn something more flattering than this sweater and jeans ensemble."

Kimiko cleared her throat and then smiled. "This is Technical Sergeant Steven Jones."

She patted Ivy's hand then gave it to him before leaving them alone.

Ivy had to step back to get a better look at this Steven Jones. He looked more like a bodybuilder than a pilot. Large muscles were evident under his crisp, spotless blue uniform. He stood erect, staring down at her, shaking her hand. He had the prettiest caramel brown eyes she had ever seen. He was so polished and neat with his perfectly clipped mustache and expertly lined box haircut, he could have been the poster boy for the armed forces. She had never seen such an extremely attractive man before and was stunned into silence. His voice was smooth and silky when he greeted her.

"Hello, Ivy. You don't have to use my title. I won't always be a *Tech Sergeant*. You may call me Steven."

Still staring at him, she shook his hand numbly for a few seconds more before she found her voice.

“Okay. Hi, Steven.”

He shrugged and smiled. “Or Steven, I guess. Well, I have to tell you, it’s a pleasure to finally meet General York’s daughter. Everything I’ve heard about you is true. You are very beautiful, an excellent combination of your mother and father.”

“Uh...thanks.”

Steven chuckled softly. “But I guess you hear that all the time. People must compliment you often on your beauty.”

“Well, I have had people compliment me, but they usually just say I’m pretty.”

“That is such a base understatement of your beauty. With your smooth, natural tanned coloring, curly black hair, and exotic features combined with my own looks we will make superior looking children.”

Ivy quenched the urge to roll her eyes. Men have been throwing similar lines at her since she was a little girl. They all wanted the same thing, to get closer to her father rather than to her. She had learned a long time ago how to deal with them and she would handle Steven the same way as she had done the rest. When she spied her mother across the room fluttering about from person to person, she threw mental daggers at her back.

“Ivy—”

“Would you excuse me, Steve? I mean Steven,” she said, cutting him off.

“Leaving already? You just got here.”

“Actually, I was just going into the main dining room to get something to eat.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I’ll go with you.”

“Oh. Okay.”

He followed her to the dining room and watched her pile food high onto her plate and empty it three times while he picked over the fruit on his own.

“Can you grab me another Mimosa, please?”

He nodded and retrieved one from a table across the room. Handing her a Mikasa crystal glass and several napkins, he returned to his seat beside her.

“Do you always eat like that?” he asked hesitantly.

She drank half the flute before answering. “Only when I’m hungry.”

“Okay.” He pushed his plate away.

“So, Ivy, your mother says you work.”

She nodded and continued eating. “Mmm-hmm.”

“What do you do?”

She gulped her drink again before answering. “I’m a writer at Hot Magazine. Have you seen it?”

“Yes, I’ve seen it. Why?”

She finished her drink. “Why what? Why did I ask you if you’ve seen it?”

“No. I guess I’m just confused about why you work at all?”

She stopped eating long enough to search his face for sarcasm. Not seeing any, she answered.

“What kind of question is that, Steven? Everyone works. I work to support myself. Don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but most people work because they have to, not because they want to. I’m wondering why you would elect to work when clearly you don’t have to.”

Her brows furrowed. "Why wouldn't I have to work?"

"Because your father is General York," he said as if she'd forgotten. "He's what every young airman dreams of being one day. He's a living legend," he said excitedly.

She nodded and continued eating. "Got a little man crush going on, Steven?"

"What's not to crush on? He goes to colleges and universities all over the country to speak to the youth. Every time you turn on the T.V., he's on CNN. He had a picture-perfect military career that he retired from just to have another excellent career with the U.N. where he put in another twenty years as a military liaison between them and the air force," Steven finished triumphantly. "He's an extraordinary man."

"Yes, yes, I know these things. He's my father. We've met."

He chuckled. "Surely he has the means to support you with two high five-digit incomes coming in yearly."

She leaned back in her chair and slid her plate across the table. "Why are you all in my father's pockets?"

"I'm not. All of that is common knowledge."

"Uh-huh. Well, my father's money has nothing to do with me. He worked for his money and I'm working for mine."

"Well, I just thought that since your brother is riding high off of just being James York, Jr. that you might want a piece of that name game action, too."

She slid her empty glass across the table. "What makes you think my brother is riding off of his name?"

He shrugged and leaned on the table. "Because anybody would. I would."

"Well, I don't know anything about that, but I doubt that Jim is riding on my father's coattails like you're suggesting. He's worked hard to get to his position. And, as I said, I don't have anything to do with my father's money."

"Well, even if he is doing it on his own, people are letting him slide so they get whatever cool points they can from your father. You can put money on that."

"I'm sorry, maybe I missed it, but what's this got to do with me again?"

"Well, you *are* his daughter," he said, poking his finger into her arm. "You know, his little princess," Steven added, doing quotations in the air. "Fathers always spoil their little girls. I'm sure General York is no different than any other father in that aspect."

She sucked her teeth and rolled her eyes.

Steven laughed and continued. "He's always going to take care of you and give you anything you want, no matter how old you get. So, again, why bother working if you know that?"

Ivy crossed her arms over her chest. "If you must know, I don't like things just handed to me. I find that I like and value things much better when I have worked to get them for myself."

He gave her a disbelieving look then mimicked her movements. "Oh, come on. Are you saying you bought everything you have on your own? No parental help at all?"

She thought for a moment. "Almost everything, yes. My father bought my condo for me, that's true. He felt better knowing that it was paid for while I was in college, so I wouldn't have to worry about having a place to live. I pay him a mortgage every month instead of a bank."

He sat back. "Uh-huh."

“He’s my father. All fathers would do that for their kids if they could. Besides, I pay him on time every month, sometimes early, and—” She stopped abruptly and scoffed. “What am I doing? I don’t owe you any explanations. Why are you questioning me anyway?”

Steven held his hands up. “Just trying to get a feel for who you are, Ivy. That’s all. Your beauty is extraordinary on the outside. I had to see if you were just as extraordinary on the inside.”

“Uh-huh, and what is your conclusion, Sergeant Jones, after your brief interrogation?”

Smiling, he shrugged. “I don’t know. I think I may need more time to investigate further. It would make me very happy if you’d give me that time, Ms. York.”

Ivy laughed lightly, but before she could answer him, he jumped to his feet to attention. Startled, she jumped, almost falling off the edge of the small sofa.

“What the—”

“Hello, General York, sir!”

“Good day, Jones. Relax, son. We’re off duty. This is a social gathering.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll try to relax, sir,” Steven said slowly returning to the couch.

“That’s good. I see you’re keeping my Ivy occupied.”

“Yes, sir. I hope you don’t—”

“No, no, Jones, that’s fine, but I would like to borrow her for a moment if you don’t mind.”

“No, sir, take your time.”

“Walk with me, sweetheart.”

She gave Steven a quick look over her shoulder then took her father’s arm. Together they walked through the house into a larger room and out onto the balcony.

“This is my favorite view in the house, Daddy. From the library, you can see all of Central Park. It’s so beautiful this time of year.”

“Yes, I know. It’s my favorite, too. The trees are still full, but that will change soon with fall right around the corner.” He leaned on the railing. “So, how do you like young Jones, Ivy?”

“He seems all right. He’s cute and all, but we really just started talking.”

He nodded. “Would you consider dating him?”

“Daddy...” she whined.

“Now, Ivy, just hear me out. I don’t make it a practice to go butting into your private life, you know that, but your mother seems to have taken a real shine to young Jones. I know him to be a good airman, but I don’t know him as a man.

“Daddy, mom doesn’t have a good track record at picking guys for me.”

He chuckled. “Yes, dear, I know.”

“Don’t laugh. That last one was certifiable.”

Her father laughed harder. “Yes, I remember Morris. Great soldier, but you’re right. Not a man I would pick to marry my daughter.”

“He thought he could do without his meds, but it caught up with him.”

“Okay, your mother definitely missed the mark with that one, but she’s only been wrong twice.”

Ivy made a face. “Twice? No, Dad, try *four* times.”

The general scratched his chin. "Hmm, has it been four?"

Ivy nodded and waved four fingers at him. "Yup, four."

"Hmm, I'm losing count. Well, Jones does have some good points. He has a good reputation on duty and off, he's about your age and he has a very good future ahead of him. I think he will be a good match for you if you end up liking him. Would you at least consider going out with him a couple of times to see? It would make your mother very happy and it would keep her off your back for a little while, too," he added, nudging her.

She sighed and leaned against him. "Okay, Daddy, I'll go out with him. He better not turn out to be some kind of crazed maniac or I'm going into a convent and you guys can forget grandkids from me," she said jokingly.

He laughed. "Fair enough."

The general dropped a kiss on her forehead and went back into the house. Ivy hesitated for a moment and dialed Kelley's number before going back inside to look for Steven. She spotted him on another patio outside the living room, hunched over the railing. Closing the French-style doors behind her she stood beside him.

"Hi, Steven, I'm back."

He smiled at her. "Welcome. I was hoping you would come back."

"Yeah, well, we had just started talking when my father came along so..."

She walked toward the small bistro table on the patio. Steven came toward her and pulled the chair out.

"Thank you. So, tell me a little about yourself, Steven."

He sat in the other chair at the table. "What would you like to know?"

"I don't know. Do you have any hobbies?"

"No, I don't really have any hobbies. I like my job so I spend a lot of time at work."

"Is that because you don't have the time for hobbies or you'd just rather be working?"

Steven thought for a few seconds and then shrugged. "I guess it's because I'm single and don't have anything else to do with my time. Now if I had a girlfriend..." He left his sentence unfinished with a smile.

"Oh, well, perhaps we could find a way to merge both of our coming calendars and get to know each other. Maybe we could fix that for you."

Steven leaned forward across the table to her. "I'd like that, Ivy."

The doorman opened the door of the cab.

"Hi, Bill. Is Kelley still here?"

He walked with her to the building and opened the door. "I believe so, Ms. York. Ms. Kingsley hasn't had me call for a cab today. Shall I announce you?"

"Nah, she knows I'm coming. Thanks," Ivy said as the elevator closed.

As soon as Ivy stepped out of the elevator, her phone rang. Pulling it from her pocketbook, she looked at the name, sucked her teeth, and let it ring. At the end of the long hallway, she knocked on Kelley's door.

Kelley swung the door open wearing a pink satin kimono robe with the phone pressed against her head. Ivy held her phone out showing Kelley's name on the screen.

"Your escape call is a little late, don't you think? I only sent the *help me* code over two hours ago."

“Sorry, I got a little sidetracked. I didn’t get your message until a little while ago.”

“Uh-huh. Sidetracked doing what?” Ivy walked in and closed the door behind her. A young man sitting on the couch hurried into his shoes. “Oh, I see. Umm, maybe I should—”

“Don’t be stupid. Eric was just leaving. Isn’t that right, Eric?”

Eric jumped up grabbing his jacket. “Yes, ma’am. It was nice to see you again,” he said to Ivy as he slipped out the door behind her.

Ivy turned to Kelley with her hand on her hip. “*Eric?* As in the waiter from Mama’s? *That Eric?*”

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you having a Stella moment or something?”

“What are you talking about?”

Ivy shook her head laughing. “You’re going to jail. That’s what I’m talking about.”

Kelley waved off her comment. “Okay, he’s young. I’ll give you that, but certainly not *jail-scare* young. Believe me, girl, he’s got more experience than age, that’s for damn sure. I smoked *two* cigarettes when we were done.”

Ivy sat on the couch. “You are such a hoe.”

“Now, now, Ivy. Remember what we said about the H-word. I am simply someone who...” She paused, searching for the right words. “Someone who expresses her sexual needs *aggressively*.” She laughed again and walked to the bar in the corner. “I need a drink. You want one?”

“What do you think? I just spent the whole morning with my mother peeking around corners at me.”

“Sounds like fun.”

“Oh, yeah, it was a barrel of laughs,” Ivy said, rolling her eyes.

“Hmm, sounds like you might need a double.”

Kelley added a little more to Ivy’s glass, put another glass and a bottle onto a tray, and joined her on the couch. “So how was it? Did you really need to escape?”

Ivy removed her drink. “No, I guess it wasn’t *that* bad this time. They had some sergeant there for me to meet. A guy named Steven Jones.”

Kelley swirled the ice around in her glass. “Hmm, Ivy Jones. Not bad. Was he a cutie?”

“Oh no, girl, not cute. This man was *fine*. In fact, he was *beautiful*. Beautiful eyes, beautiful smile, all clipped, neat and proper, and super sexy in his spotless blue uniform.”

Kelley filled her shot glass and drank it. “Mmm, I love a man in uniform.”

“Whatever. You like them better *out* of their uniforms.”

Kelley shrugged and gulped at her juice. “Yeah, but they look good in them, too.” She laughed and slid her glass across the coffee table. “Come on, after my workout with young Eric, I need to sweat in the steam room.”

Ivy almost choked on the last sip. “What? You didn’t sweat? You’re getting old.”

Kelley giggled leading the way out of the living room. “Never that, girl! I just didn’t want to kill the boy.”

Ivy followed her friend. Kelley grabbed two water bottles before they entered the steam room.

“I’ve got a surprise for you, Ivy. A kind of a welcome home thing,” Kelley said after a while.

“Ooo, sounds mysterious.”

“You’re going to love it, too. When do you leave town again? Do you know?”

"No. When I go in tomorrow, Sherri will let me know about my next assignment."

"Well, let me know so I can plan your gift accordingly."

"Ooo, an ongoing gift. Those are the best kind. I like it already." A flashing light in the corner caught her eye. "Someone's at the door, Kell."

"It's probably your gift. Go get in the shower. I'll get the door."

When she stepped out, Kelley appeared with a robe for her.

"Ready?"

"Shouldn't I get dressed?"

"Nope, the fewer clothes the better. Trust me."

"I don't think I've ever heard scarier words," Ivy muttered as she followed her friend.

"Voila!"

Kelley extended her hand as they stepped into the living room. Two extremely handsome men, dressed only in black loincloths similar to what Tarzan would wear, stood beside two massage tables. Ivy's hand went to her chest.

"Now see, this is a gift. Only a true friend could come up with a gift like this." She walked closer to them. "Can I keep them?"

Kelley laughed. "I'm afraid not. They're borrowed, but I can get one on call for you this week if you want."

"Hmm, so they're from Dexter's place?"

"Yes and no. This one is Jason. He's one of Dexter's."

Kelley ran her hand across the hairy chest of the taller of the two. Long black hair pulled fell past large muscular shoulders. She sighed, lingering for a minute, before moving on to the other guy.

"Ryan, here, is from Dexter's other place out in Atlanta. He's just visiting."

Ivy took in his masculine beauty. From his spiky, brown hair, clean-shaven face, and penetrating brown eyes, down his tight, rippled stomach and tree stump-like legs he was awesome to look upon.

"Dex assures me we'll love his place in Atlanta as much as we love his Manhattan spot. So you know what that means."

"Yup, a road trip to Atlanta!" She laughed with her friend.

"You know it, girl. I'll let you choose the one you want since it's your gift."

Ivy looked between the two and though Jason's smile was warm and inviting, the look in Ryan's eye pierced her right between the legs.

"I want Ryan."

Kelley giggled. "I bet you do."

Ryan scooped Ivy up and sat her on the table.

"Okay Jason, let's go."

Jason nodded and lifted a box from under the table and took the table with him.

"Hey! Where are you going?"

"Girl, the massage these guys give is the ultimate. You'll feel better than you've ever felt. I don't want mine fucked up by hearing you scream. Besides, I'm familiar with Jason. I may even get me a happy ending."

Kelley left her with a wink and turned off the lights as she left.

“Hmm, okay, Ryan. Make me a believer.”

He smiled and turned her gently to her stomach. Without a word, he lit candles that were laid across the bar then helped her out of her robe. He covered her bottom with a small towel.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered near her ear.

His sultry accent and husky voice vibrated over her body as she watched over her shoulder as he went into the kitchen.

“Mmm, nice booty.”

Upon his return, Ryan handed her a bright red drink in a tall glass that was topped with whip cream and had a large strawberry on its side.

“This is a natural drink that will give you back all the nutrients you may have lost sweating in the steam room.”

She looked between him and the glass. He smiled.

“Trust me.” She sighed and took the glass to her lips, finishing it in three long slurps. “Ahh! Tasty.”

She licked her lips, handed him the empty glass, and settled down on the table again. Soon his oily hands were on her kneading the muscles on her shoulders working away the stress of her day. Her muscles turned to pudding with his skilled hands. The tension eased from her body and she found herself wondering if Johnnie’s hands would be as strong. Upon further reflection, she figured Steven’s larger hands would be more like a masseuse. Ivy visualized them kneading her back instead.

“Mmm...”

Warm, spicy scents permeated the air. The soft, seductive music soothed her mind and spirit. Ivy could see Steven vividly standing beside her, working the kinks from her upper body. It felt wonderful. Perhaps he wouldn’t be bad to get to know after all. Ivy turned her head, hoping to get another peek of his strong muscular legs. She thought she would see him in his freshly pressed uniform, but jumped when she saw the music dancing before her eyes instead.

Squeezing her eyes together, she opened them a few times, but the music notes were still there, bouncing in the air in bright rainbow colors. Her shock turned quickly to amusement as she giggled.

Kelley was right. This is definitely rushing to the top of the list of best massages I’ve had.

The pressure moved away from her shoulders down to her lower back and butt. The towel that was placed there was pushed to her thighs.

Ooo, that feels good. Oh! Maybe he’ll knead it enough to make it grow...like bread!

She fixed her head on her arms and laughed aloud. The fingers continued lower pushing into the backs of her legs.

“Mmm...”

Who knew Steven would be so talented with his hands.

They moved back and forth from the inside muscles to the outer, then higher and higher between her legs. His fingers, so close to her most carnal area, ignited the core of her body, setting her loins on fire. She reached up and gripped the edge of the table as her breath caught. The wonderful feelings left that part of her body only to reappear more slippery on her calves. Working his way down the left leg, he massaged her foot, showing special

attention to the arch before repeating the movements on her other leg and foot. Suddenly, in one smooth and quick scoop, Steven slid his big hands under her and gently flipped her over.

“Whoa.”

A small breeze blew over her heated skin as a towel found its way back to cover her pelvis and her breast. The slick appendages continued to massage, stroke, and rub the front of her legs, consistently going higher and higher under her towel. The fingers skirted the hairs beneath the towel before sliding over her hip bones. Opening wide, the slick palms glided across her pelvis and up to her breasts.

Ivy's chest rose and fell, faster and faster, and a delightful shiver went down her back when she felt a long stream of oil run between the valley of her breasts. Her back arched as she rose from the table.

“Ooooh...”

One hand after the other moved back and forth between breasts and continued sliding up and down her belly, gliding across her pelvis. Soon her entire torso was covered in the sweet-smelling almond-scented oil. The combination of his touch and the scent intoxicated her. His hands moved across her body almost lovingly, and she could smell her own arousal. Her skin was on fire, blazing with sensations from within that began erupting on the surface. Volcanic internal combustion was imminent. His hands were everywhere at once, touching her, kneading her, caressing her. Her thighs, her nipples, and everywhere in between, she couldn't pinpoint anything.

Everything felt good everywhere. Her body teetered between pulsing and vibrating so intensely that with one last pass across her highly sensitive nipples, she erupted from within. She squeezed her legs tightly together and a long, high-pitched squeal filled the room as she turned into a firecracker of pleasure, exploding into a million pieces of ecstasy. Ivy was glad that the movements had stopped. She needed time for her body's inner turbulence to end. Her breathing finally slowed from erratic to calm before she felt his hand again on her shoulders. Expertly they took away the tightness left behind by the intensity of her orgasm.

“Holy shit!”

Ivy breathed out after she regained her control. Her eyes finally opened. She was surprised to see Ryan instead of Steven. She laughed and shook her head, realizing she'd been daydreaming about Steven.

“Ryan, you are an amazing masseuse. You definitely have proved me wrong on my earlier assumption,” she told him. “That was truly the best massage I have ever had.”

Ryan smiled. “Glad to hear it. You really should come out to Atlanta. You can get the full effect of our Tantric massage there.”

“Wow! If this was the travel version, I don't know if I'd be able to handle the real one.” She chuckled again as he continued to rub her a little longer.

“Your Tantric massage is over, Ivy. You can take your shower now.”

She smiled and stretched, resembling a cat after a long nap in the sun. “Thanks, Ryan. I don't know what Kelley is paying you, but you're worth every penny.” She sat up and stretched again, rolling her neck. “Man, all the stress from the day is gone from my neck.” She jumped down, letting the towel fall as he helped her into her robe. “Mmm, I feel fantastic.” She rolled her shoulders. “No tension in my shoulders...” She tied her robe as she walked away. “My legs feel good... Shoot, I just feel good, all over. I'm walking on air.”

She continued mumbling as she left the room, leaving Ryan's chuckles behind.

Ivy returned from a long hot shower to find only Kelley sitting on the couch across from a smorgasbord of snacks.

“Come sit down and eat, girl. I’m starving, so I know you are,” Kelley said, patting the seat beside her.

“You are too good to me.”

Kelley handed her a plate. “So, do I still need to feel guilty about not returning your phone call?”

“No, just forget about it. It really wasn’t as bad as the last time they tried to set me up. You remember that one, don’t you?”

Kelley shrugged.

“My mom had her sights on some master sergeant named Jerry Mason.”

Kelley shook her head as she nibbled on a piece of bread.

“Come on you have to remember him. He turned out to be a womanizing creep.”

“The name isn’t ringing any bells.”

Ivy filled her plate. “The one that wanted his woman to be seen and not heard.”

Kelley sipped her drink. “Still no clue.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. “The dark-skinned guy, Kell. You called him hot cocoa or something”

“Mmm, oh yeah. Hot chocolate on a cold winter’s night. Oh yesss, I remember him now.”

“Yeah, well, that hot chocolate had sour milk in it.”

“Whatever happened to him anyway?”

“They sent him out to the Kadena Airbase in Okinawa for a while, but my dad says they finally gave him an honorable discharge.”

“He’ll be all right once they get him back on his meds.”

“I guess. Anyway, this time my mom had a tech sergeant to throw at me.”

“A tech sergeant? That’s not bad, right?” She bit a breadstick.

“No, not bad at all, but he assured me, several times, that he is on the rise. According to him, General Jackson has taken him under his wing and has told him that wherever he goes, he’s going to take Steven with him. In a nutshell, he’s fine, very cocky, and very full of himself.”

Kelley chuckled. “Most men are, Ivy. What else?”

“Well, he’s big, too.”

“Who’s bigger, him or Johnnie?”

Ivy dunked her breadstick and finished it as she pretended to think. “That would be Steven. Johnnie looked nice and toned in his tux, but Steven... Girl, even in his uniform you couldn’t miss the bulges everywhere.” She laughed.

“Hmm, bulges everywhere, you say?” Kelley asked with a laughing grin and put her empty plate on the table.

Ivy laughed, filling her plate with spaghetti. “Oh shut up, I didn’t look there. My mom was peeking at me around corners the whole time.”

Kelley twisted her lips. “Mmm-hmm.”

She smiled. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t look...I said I didn’t.”

"Okay, so what do you think? Boxers or briefs?"

"For Steven?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. I'm hoping for boxers. Tightie whities under a uniform would be wrong on so many levels."

Kelley laughed harder. "Okay, I'm getting my visual. Light or dark?"

"What difference does that make?"

"Ivy, you know it doesn't matter to me one way or another. It all works the same way no matter the shade it comes in," Kelley told her with a flippant wave. "I'm trying to get a visual so I can think of a good name for him. You know everyone gets a name, girl."

Ivy chuckled. "Whatever. Well, he's light-skinned, lighter than me."

Kelley tapped her chin in thought. "Hmm, lighter than you, super cute with bodybuilder's muscles... I'll have to think of something good for him."

"You're crazy."

"Yeah, yeah. Common knowledge. Now, what did he smell like? I know that smell thing is important to you. Did he wear any cologne?"

"Yeah, but it was kind of flowery and a little loud," she said making a face.

"Doesn't sound like you liked it to me. You had that look in your eye when you were telling me how good Johnnie smelled last night."

"Yeah, Johnnie did smell good, but let's stick to one guy at a time please."

"Okay, you're right, back to— What's his name again? Steven?"

"Yeah, but I don't know, Kelley. He's a real cutie pie and he seems interested, but girl, my mom has no experience picking men. I mean, for real, what does she know? She's been with my dad since she was a kid."

"True, but you talked to the man, didn't you? Did you like him? Does he have a brain to go with his pretty face? I know how that brain thing is important to you."

"He was cool, but he's so disciplined, you know? Very straight and narrow. He's one of those *tie-all-tight on your neck* type of guys. I'm hoping he turns out to be a little more fun when he's out of his uniform," Ivy told her between bites.

"Uh-oh, what happened?" Kell asked, filling her cup.

"Nothing happened really. He just looked like he was at attention the whole time we were together, even when he was sitting."

Kelley's eyes widened over her cup. "Really? Huh, sounds like a man who needs to be told what to do. When to relax, when to eat, when to kiss, where to kiss. That's not always a bad thing, Ivy."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Can't you keep your mind out of the gutter for five minutes?"

Kelley paused from drinking to sigh. "Five minutes is a long time, sister, but I'll see what I can do."

Ivy shook her head.

"I don't know what to tell you, Ivy. Maybe the uniform transforms him or something. I've heard that some men are like that. Their uniforms make them feel all-powerful and everything. Cops are like that," she added with a shrug then finished her drink. "Let's just hope your boy is different when you get him out of his uniform and into a pair of jeans."

Ivy chuckled and refilled her cup. "I'd be surprised if he even owns a pair. I wouldn't be surprised if he *slept* in that uniform."

Kelley laughed. "That would be just weird. Okay, now, enough about that one. Let's move on to that fine ass Johnnie Hayes. You gonna call him, right?"

"What? No way. A man with that much charm, charisma, and that damn fine...smells that good... Uh-uh, nope, not this time. Not going there again. He's probably the most skirt-chasing, chauvinistic pig there is. Thanks, but no thanks. I've had enough of dating cute slime."

"Hmm, sounds like fun to me," her friend said with a laugh.

"That's because you're crazy," Ivy said, pointing at her. "Besides, my dad asked me to give ole Stevie a chance. He says he's a good airman and according to my mom, he's a good man."

"Well, what the hell. Give him a call. See what he's about."

"I didn't get his number."

"Did you give him yours?"

"Nope."

"Oh yeah, Ivy. All your synapses be popping when you're at your parent's house," Kelley told her with an eye roll.

"Hey! In my defense, my senses are on guard for other things when my mom is about."

"Well, it ain't like you don't know where to find him. I'm sure your mom has his number. Call her tomorrow."

Ivy looked at her wrist then frantically around her. "Damn, where's my watch? What time is it?"

Kelley looked over her shoulder at the clock behind the bar. "Just after seven-thirty. What's up?"

"I have to go. I've got to be at work early and I've still got stuff to do. Thanks for dinner and thanks a bunch for Ryan. You were right, girl, that massage was the bomb. I'll call you when I have time to use him again." She gave her a quick hug and grabbed her jacket. "Put my watch up for me when you find it. I left it somewhere. Love you, bye."

Downstairs, she left the building and ran into Bill who held open the door to a cab.

"Thanks, Bill. How'd you—"

"Ms. Kingsley gave me a heads up. Have a good evening, Ms. York."

Chapter Four



Sherri Wilson, a plain but pretty older woman, sat at her desk flipping through papers in a folder. Her jet-black pixie haircut and non-makeup face made her skin look very pale. Ivy knocked on the open door. Acknowledging her with a nod, Sherri pointed to a chair with a paper cup.

“Good morning, boss,” Ivy, said in a singing voice taking a seat.

Sherri took a sip and shook her head. “Uh-uh, Ivy. You know I’m not much of a talker until after my second white chocolate mocha Frappuccino.”

“Just a *regular* white chocolate Frappuccino today, not affogato style?” Ivy asked in an amused tone.

Sherri looked up over her cup. “Not just yet.”

“But it’s Monday and it’s still early, right?”

Sherri’s brow rose as she continued flipping. “What’d I say about me and talking?”

Ivy held her hands up. After a few moments, Sherri stuffed the papers back into the folder.

“Okay.” Sherri walked around the desk finishing her coffee and threw the cup on top of several others in the trashcan next to her desk. Sitting on the edge of her desk, she stretched her long legs beside Ivy. “So, whatcha got for me?”

Ivy handed her an envelope. Sherri opened it and inspected its contents. Nodding her approval she put the papers back inside and turned back to Ivy.

“Looks good. So, how was Indy? Did Kyle get some good pictures?”

“Indy was great. Nice looking city, good food, too. Kyle said he took some really cool pics, but I haven’t seen them yet.”

“Good, good.”

Sherri leaned back enough to open the top drawer. She slipped the envelope Ivy gave her inside and retrieved another.

“Your next assignment is in New Orleans,” Sherri said, handing her the envelope.

“*New Orleans*? Isn’t it a little late in the year for Mardi Gras?”

Sherri pointed at her. “*That* assumption is the very purpose behind your assignment. You’re going to New Orleans to cover their *Halloween* celebration, not Mardi Gras.”

“Uh-huh.”

“As soon as someone mentions New Orleans, the first thing that comes to mind is Mardi Gras, but they throw a kick-ass Halloween party, too. Halloween doesn’t get the hype that it deserves because it’s overshadowed by the craziness and popularity of Mardi Gras. I want your article to change all that.”

Ivy nodded as she flipped through the papers in the envelope.

"Kyle is going to take pictures for you again, but he's only going to be there the day of the celebration. He won't be on your return flight either because I want pictures of the aftereffect of Halloween to compare it to Mardi Gras. So don't look for him. Okay, your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to put their Halloween celebration on the map. With your article and Kyle's pictures, people won't know when to come down to party in the city in February or October," Sherri concluded.

"Hmm, New Orleans for a few days, huh? Good food, great music, warm temps... Yeah, I could do that."

"I'm sending you a few days before the party so you can get a feel on how they prepare and people's reaction to their Halloween celebration. Some friends of mine live there. I've let them know that you're coming, in case you need any help from the locals. Beverly isn't a native, but she's lived there for many, many years." Sherri went back to her chair. "You don't have to leave until the twenty-seventh, okay? You've got some downtime, so I suggest you go hang out with that crazy friend of yours and for Pete's sake, go get laid, will you? You really need to lighten up. Be back here on the twenty-sixth for your info pack and tickets, all right? Now be gone. I have work to do."

"Yes, ma'am."

She saluted her and left smiling. Going one floor down to her office and gasped when she walked in. Vases of yellow, pink, peach, white, and red roses were on the floor, the desk, the chair, and on the windowsill, blocking her view of Lexington Avenue. She walked to her desk and saw several cards around a small basket that held perfume, bubble bath, and bath beads and one sticking out of it. She pulled it out and read it aloud.

"I sniffed all these flowers trying to figure out the scent you left on me. I sent you the losers that couldn't compare to you. Call me if you can do lunch. Johnnie."

"Miss Ivy?" a voice said behind her.

"Yes, George. Come in."

"All of these flowers started arriving around seven o'clock. The first man was waiting when I got here. I was running out of spots to put them all."

"Yes, I noticed. I appreciate the path you left me to my desk."

George moved the vase in the chair opposite her desk to the next. "So, who're they from?"

She opened the rest of the cards. "Jonathan Hayes. We met at a meet and greet."

"Jonathan Hayes!" He looked around the room and back to her. "You must have been doing some serious meetin' and greetin'. Should we be expecting diamonds next?"

She chuckled. "No, I just met the man on Saturday."

"Well, that must have been some outfit you were meetin' and greetin' in then."

"Shut up, George." She handed him the small bag she carried. "A little something for the world's best assistant."

"Ooo, thank you." He put the bag in the other chair beside the vase and pulled a pen from the pocket on his shirt. "So, where's our next assignment?" he added clicking the top of the pen.

"New Orleans." She handed him the folder. "Apparently they throw a kick-ass Halloween party according to Sherri so Hot is going to put it on everyone's things-to-do list. So I'll need restaurants, costume shops, and hotels in and out of the French Quarter and costs over a five-day period. Okay?"

George scribbled on his pad, nodding. "Gotcha." He grabbed his bag and continued writing as he walked to the door. "I'll have it on Sherri's desk by the end of the week."

"Oh and George?"

George stopped at the door and turned. "Yes?"

"Can you call a messenger and have some of these delivered to my house?"

George smiled. "Sure."

Ivy leaned forward to sniff the pink roses at the edge of her desk. "But leave this one on my desk," she added with a grin.

George nodded and continued out the door.

Ivy waved at his back and updated the large calendar on her desktop then pulled out her phone and did the same.

"Miss Ivy? Jesse is on the phone," George told her over the phone intercom.

Ivy picked up the phone. "Hi, Jesse, are you ready for me?" she asked cheerfully and waited a moment. "Okay. I'm on my way."

She returned the phone to its cradle then headed out the door. Jesse had a mock of her article and Kyle's pictures on clear plastic laid across the drawing board when she walked in.

"Hey, Ivy. Welcome back."

"Hey. Whatcha got for me?"

"This is just the clear line mockup, of course, but I have it matted for pages three, four, and five. You have to tell me which one of Kyle's pics you like for the opener since it's your article." He pushed one to her. "This one is my favorite. He took this great flick of a white on white nineteen sixty-four drop-top Chevy Impala. It's got a plushed out dash, leather interior and is sitting on gold Spreewells," he said in crescendo as his excitement grew. "It's a thing of beauty. Isn't it?"

Ivy laughed. "Damn Jesse, do you need a cigarette? Maybe you should have gone to the car show in Indianapolis instead of me."

"Nah man, I'm cool. These people spend an arm and a leg on refurbishing these cars. I admire the kind of hobby that takes that much time, energy, and money. I have this one in my collection, but a different color."

Ivy's eyes widened. "You have an antique car collection?"

"Yeah, but mine are model cars. That's more in my price range," he confessed with a wink.

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Can I see the rest of the pictures?"

Jesse laughed and pushed the stack to her. She sifted through the pictures and dropped two in front of him.

"These two are cute."

"*Cute?* Girl, these cars aren't in the cute category. That is the picture of a hundred thousand dollar car," he explained tapping the photo.

Ivy shrugged.

"See these rims," he asked, pointing to the picture.

Ivy shrugged again. "Yeah."

"Those damn rims probably cost more than my monthly rent."

"I wouldn't know a hundred thousand dollar car from a hundred dollar car unless you told me."

Jesse took in a breath and shook his head. "You're killing me, girl. So why did you pick this one?" She looked down at the picture again and smiled. "I've got shoes that color."

Jesse groaned.

"I mean, I like the rims. They're cute, too. They're from Marqi Wheels. I remember them from the car show."

He laughed harder. "Ivy, you are too much. I've got your input. Go back to your office, girl, so I can work my magic."

* * * *

"Yeah, this is Jonathan Hayes. Talk to me."

"Hi, Johnnie. It's Ivy."

"Hey, girl. How are you? Did you get the flowers?"

"Yes, I did. Thank you. They're beautiful."

"I did it all for selfish reasons. Your smell left a lasting impression on me. None of those smelled as good as you did. . Are you free for lunch?"

"Sure, when can you leave?"

He chuckled. "I'm the boss, Ivy. I can take lunch whenever I get ready. The question is, when can *you* leave?"

"Must be nice. Well, it so happens that I can take lunch right now."

"Great! I'll pick you up in fifteen minutes out front."

"Okay, I'll be there." She hung up and spun around in her chair. "Yeah, I can do lunch with him. He is an Aries, after all."

After a while, Ivy grabbed a jacket and rushed downstairs. She stopped at the door and her jaw dropped.

"Hey, sexy, wanna ride?"

Johnnie sat on a beautiful motorcycle offering her an extra helmet. Ivy laughed as she moved closer to him.

"Why am I not surprised that you ride a motorcycle?"

"I have no clue. So you coming?"

"You're serious? You want to ride around the busy streets of Manhattan at lunchtime? There are a million people all over the place."

He waved the helmet at her. "I'm a really good driver," he assured her in a singing voice. "Come on. Live a little. I have the perfect place for lunch. Trust me."

Ivy bit her lip, torn between riding the back of a motorbike like she always wanted to and getting back from lunch alive. Finally, she took the helmet and jumped on.

"Ha! Who doesn't love an adventurous woman?"

Johnnie pulled off into traffic. The bike bobbed and weaved between the cars and buses on the road with great precision. Johnnie had complete control over the powerful machine blasting forward between their legs. The vibrations were incredible, both thrilling and sexually stimulating. Ivy closed her eyes, pressed her helmet against his back, and held onto Johnnie's waist to enjoy the feel of him and the ride. It was over too soon.

"All right, Ivy we're here," he announced, bringing the motorcycle to a stop.

Ivy removed her helmet and looked around. "We're in the park."

"Yup," he confirmed, kicking the stand into place.

Johnnie hung his helmet on one of the handlebars and took her's to do the same.

"Come on," he said, offering his hand.

"I thought you said we were going to get lunch."

Johnnie pulled her down the path and chuckled. "Yeah, and we are." He stopped in front of a hot dog vendor a few feet away. "We're going to have the best sausages New York has to offer," he told her and extended his hand behind the vendor.

Ivy followed his gesture. A bright white cloth, matching napkins, and champagne flutes covered one of the wooden picnic tables the park offered.

"I hoped you might like a picnic lunch with a few upgrades," Johnnie told her, handing her a sausage wrapped in foil.

Ivy was stunned to silence.

"Thanks for watching the spot for me, Pete," Johnnie said to the vendor.

"Not a problem, Mr. Hayes. Anytime," he replied, with a tip of his hat to Ivy.

Johnnie smiled and stopped at the table. "Don't worry. There's Sprite instead of champagne in the glasses since we have to go back to work. Shall we?"

* * * *

"Hello?"

"Hi, Ivy, it's Steven. How are you this evening?"

"*Steven?*" She sat up from her reclined position. "How'd you get my number?"

"Don't be angry with me, Ivy. I asked your mother for it. I told her I left it in my other uniform."

"Well, I guess that's okay. I was going to call your office tomorrow anyway. What's up?"

"I just wanted to see how your day went."

"Oh. Well, it was okay. We'll be working on the next issue for a while, so that will keep me busy. I also found out today that my next assignment will take me out of town again." She kicked her shoes off and lay on the couch again.

"Hmm, sounds interesting. How soon will you have to leave?"

"Not for a while."

"Great. So I've got a little time to get you to fall for me, quit your job, and prepare yourself to have our two children, a dog, and a condo on Main Street, huh?"

"Yeah, good luck with that," she said with a laugh.

"Do you travel a lot with this magazine?"

"Sometimes. It just depends on what's hot in the world." She laughed adjusting the pillow behind her back. "You get it?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, I get it. That should be your magazine's motto."

She laughed harder. "I will pitch that at our next staff meeting."

"Let me know how that turns out. So, can I take you out to dinner tonight?"

Her smile faded. "Steven, I just got home a little while ago. I'm tired."

"Come on, Ivy. I sent a Lyft to pick you up."

She bolted upright again. “You already sent the Lyft?” she asked, alarmed. “What if I had said no?”

“You still have to eat, don’t you?”

She paused in thought. “Well, yeah, but—”

“Okay, so you can just eat with me. Come on, Ivy. Would you rather eat alone?”

“Well, I guess not.”

“I’ll say please,” he said, in a whining tone.

“All right, it won’t take me but a minute to change clothes.”

“Don’t bother. The app says the car should be there any minute,” he told her confidently.

She sighed and her shoulders slumped. “Fine. Where am I going?”

“A restaurant in Midtown called Jericho. Go downstairs. I’ll screenshot the driver info and send it to you. I’ll be there when you get there,” he told her then hung up.

Ivy looked at the phone and sputtered. “What the—Fine! Bye!” She let out a frustrated noise. “Boy, my mother sure can pick them. He’s going to get this one date so she can leave me alone and that’s it!”

* * * *

“Welcome, Ms. York. Your party is already inside waiting for you. Please follow me.”

“Oh. Umm, thank you.”

Ivy followed the waiter to a private room at the back of the restaurant. Middle Eastern washed over her when he opened the door. Inside the room, strings of small white lights covered the ceiling reminding her of a dark starry night. Dancers dressed in genie-like clothes caught her eye as they moved around the room swishing their hips and clapping tiny cymbals on their fingers. She spotted Steven across the room as he came toward her.

“Hi. Glad you could make it,” he said cheerfully, hugging her.

“Yes, well, you didn’t leave me much of a choice, did you?”

He ushered her by her elbow to a table where several other officers were seated. He pulled out her chair.

“Ivy, honey, you remember the generals.”

She paused, giving Steven a raised brow.

Honey? Uh-uh, it is definitely too soon for pet names. I’ll have to check him on that later.

Clearing her throat softly, she turned a smile to the generals. “Of course I do. General Jackson, Dixon, Franklin, Majors, Clark.” She nodded at each of them in turn. “How are you all?”

They all nodded and mumbled a greeting to her as they took turns rising from their seats and returning quickly to them. Steven sat beside her.

“These are the general’s aides, Tech Sergeant St. John, Tech Sergeant Rojas, Master Sergeant Doss, and Master Sergeant Washington.” He pointed to each in turn, as they nodded a greeting to her.

She offered them a smile and a nod, as well. “Gentlemen.”

“Look at you, Ivy,” General Jackson said. “York’s little girl is all grown up.” He burst into a hearty deep laugh that everyone at the table joined in on. “Jones here tells me that you’ve become quite the item. He’s known of you for the longest time and has an enormous crush on you, you know.”

“Really? Well, uh, that’s all news to me, General.” She gave him a fake laugh and a smile.

"Now, General, that was deemed classified information," he said, jokingly. "I didn't want Ivy to know about my previous crush on her."

Ivy spotted the waitress coming her way dressed in an opaque, genie-like outfit. When she reached her side, she pulled a pen from behind her ear hidden behind her veil.

"Good evening, ma'am. Can I bring you a drink?"

"Yes, Lord. Bring me a—" she began, but Steven cut her off.

"You can bring the lady a white wine spritzer.

She turned a raised brow to him.

"I hear the general's wives say they taste great," Steven said close to her ear.

"But I don't drink those," she whispered back.

"You can have one. We're celebrating," he replied, patting her hand.

The waitress wrote the order down and left.

"Umm, okay. So, what are we celebrating?"

"Us, Ivy," he said gleefully. "The general is very happy that we're a *'we'*," he added in another whisper.

She leaned closer to him.

"So, Ivy, how do you feel about your father retiring, again?"

She turned from Steven to the general. "What?"

"Yes. It will be Jackson, here, who takes his place. He will do the CNN spots and be the official liaison between the Department of Defense and the UN."

"Yes, I will do the official stuff, but I believe your father will continue to make appearances at universities and colleges. He likes that sort of thing," General Jackson confirmed with a flippant wave.

Ivy managed to hide her shock. "Really? My dad doesn't usually discuss things like that with me, General Franklin. So, it's a done deal then, General Jackson?"

"Oh yes, as of the first of the year, I believe. He's to make his announcement just after Christmas. We're already planning the old boy's retirement party." He chuckled.

"That means your boy Jones here is going to do some big things very soon," General Dixon said with a laugh.

The other generals and aides that were close to Steven patted him on the back. The waitress brought Ivy her drink and she chugged it down, barely tasting it.

"Ivy and I are still fairly new, General Dixon. The dating game is very fresh. We don't want to scare her off with any premonitions or promises just yet," Steven replied with a chuckle.

"Oh, it'll be fine. We were all there. Soon she'll be having lunch twice a week with our wives and having brunch on Sundays with us." General Jackson laughed his booming, hearty laugh again.

The general's words made Ivy cringed inside.

This is the life her mother wanted for her?

The longer she sat beside Steven, the more she wanted to smash his pretty face with his salad plate. Instead, Ivy put her best smile in place and attempted to comment, but the general held up his hand to stop her.

"Now, Ivy, this is my protégé. I handpicked him as a young flyer. I see him as the son I didn't have," the general explained, sending a proud smile their way. "Trust me. I see great things in Jones. Where I go, he'll go and

you should feel lucky to have him. All of my daughter's married airmen, you know, and they're very well taken care of. I know your father wants the same for you," he added and went back to his food.

"Yes, sir, I imagine he does. I'm sure Steven may have a bright future, but—"

"See here, Ivy. Jackson has already said that Jones is worthy of you. There is no shame in having him. The women speak highly of his pleasant features. Your children should be very attractive," General Dixon added with a soft smirk.

"Children?"

She looked at Steven who beamed and the general continued as if he hadn't heard her.

"His rank is the same as your brother's and he has the potential to be a lot more under Jackson's tutelage. A girl can do worse, you know."

"Yes, General Dixon, I know, but—"

The waitress reappeared with several other waitresses. They spread out, putting plates across the table. The conversation took a small pause before General Jackson picked it up again after a little while.

"Now, now, all you young people say the same thing. It's just nerves." General Jackson pushed an empty plate to the side and picked up his drink. "Why don't you hang out, as you young people say, with our wives and see what it's like firsthand to be an airman's wife?"

"But, sir..." She sent a look to Steven hoping he would step in. "Steven and I—"

The general cut her off. "Yes, yes, I know. It's still early in the relationship. Jennifer!" he yelled, looking down at the table. "

"Yes, dear."

"Why don't you and the other wives take Ivy and spend some time with her so she can see what it's like. If she's going to be with Jones, here, she'll be spending lots of time with you ladies anyway."

He slapped Steven on that back, laughing again. Ivy looked at Steven, watching him almost explode with pride, and threw mental daggers at his head, hoping it would burst. Mrs. Jackson's voice pulled her back to reality.

"Of course, dear. We'll take good care of Ivy."

Ivy looked down at the table and Mrs. Jackson winked at her. More waitresses appeared at the table with the rest of their dinners and the conversation died again as they ate silently.

"I think it's time for us to pick up our conversations away from the table," General Dixon said as the waitress appeared to clear the table a short time later. "Wouldn't you agree, Jackson?"

General Jackson nodded and wiped his mouth. "Ivy, why don't you move on down to the end of the table with the other women. Jones will meet up with you later."

Before she could respond, Steven stood and pulled her chair out and escorted her toward Jennifer Jackson's outstretched hand. She opened her mouth to protest, but he was already leaving with the other generals and their aides.

"Don't let those old warhorses get to you, darling. You'll have much more fun with us. Let me introduce you to our seconds." Jennifer pulled Ivy into a chair next to her own.

"Seconds?"

"Yes, dear. The general's wives live by a similar hierarchy as the generals. The generals have their aides and we have seconds. Now, you know all the general's wives, right? Emily, Barbara, Helen, and Rita."

She waved a hand toward them. Ivy nodded.

"These are the non-commission's wives. Kim Doss, sitting to the left. Christine St. John is next to her. Jackie Rojas and Regina Richardson are down at the end," Jennifer explained, pointing to each one of them. "Now our little Regina here is not a wife yet, but she has been chosen. She's to marry Washington next summer," she added nodding to a young woman waving at her.

They all greeted Ivy simultaneously as Jennifer looked for the generals. As soon as the men and their aides went through a door on the other side of the room, Mrs. Jackson turned a grin to her.

"Okay ladies, it's time to go."

They rose one by one giddy to be leaving. They gently pushed Ivy along with them.

"Where are we going now?"

Jennifer pulled her to the back of the restaurant. A waitress appeared to open a door to a back room for them. The large rectangular room had its own music playing, a bar, and a couch that stretched around the room along the wall, and a small stage with a belly dancer already dancing upon it.

"What kind of place is this?"

"Jericho's is an armed forces friendly establishment. They extend a certain courtesy to us that we wouldn't get anywhere else and since they do, we keep coming back, giving them continuous business." She sat down and patted the couch next to her. She looked around watching the wives pair up with their seconds as they sat along the couch. Ivy had never seen a sofa that long. It was an extra-long sectional with the same angles and curves. The surface was covered in red, soft-looking plush material and the seat had three large cushions that looked extremely comfortable. It was beautiful and had to be custom made.

"Um, Mrs. Jackson..."

"Please, Ivy, feel free to call me Jennifer. Here we can relax and do whatever we want. There are no yes sirs or no sirs. In fact, if you haven't noticed, there are no sirs at all, just us wives."

"But I'm not a wife."

"Oh, but you will be. You've been chosen, just like our little Regina." She nodded toward Regina who was swaying to the music, watching the belly dancer. "I know your mother wants you to be an airman's wife. Besides, you could do a lot worse than Steven Jones, dear."

A waitress came to them dressed in the same outfit as the other waitresses in the restaurant, except hers was very transparent. Ivy was stunned at the difference in her attire and wondered why hers was different but said nothing.

"Order anything you want. Everything back here is a courtesy for us. The entertainment is great and no questions are asked."

"Great, give me rum and cola." The waitress nodded, writing it down. "The usual for you, Mrs. Jackson?"

"Yes, Saleem, and make our Ivy's rum and cola from the special stock."

"Yes, ma'am."

She bowed and left. Ivy watched everyone talk, drink, and watch the stage where there were two dancers now. She did a mental shrug and leaned back. Saleem returned with the drinks, putting them on a small table she carried with her.

"Everything is ready, Mrs. Jackson."

"Excellent. Let's toast, Ivy. To you having a good time tonight."

"Okay what the hell." She raised her glass and took a long drink, swirled her ice, and finished it.

"Ahh, that was good. I could have used that earlier." Jennifer smiled.

"I'm sure. Bring us another drink, Saleem, and carry on."

"This is the highlight of our week, Ivy. We meet here every Monday for dinner, lunch on Wednesdays, and at my house every other Friday. We eat a little something, but we mainly sit around drinking and talking."

"Talking? What, like, a book club or something?"

"No, dear. We mainly talk about...that."

She pointed to the stage. Ivy took a deep breath, enjoying the warm feeling that enveloped her as her gaze followed Jennifer's finger and she accepted another drink from Saleem. The spritzer drink she had earlier tasted like seltzer water to her, and the first rum and cola didn't seem to have a kick, but now, suddenly it seemed like everything came to a head all at once. The music was loud and eclectic with lots of tambourines, bells, triangles, chimes, and bongos, gaining everyone's attention. There were several dancers on stage, wearing multiple layers of gold and red sheer scarves on their bodies and across their faces. Ivy swayed to the music as she mentally danced with them.

Jennifer toasted Ivy's glass, urging her to drink. Looking around the room, Ivy smiled to herself as the relaxed atmosphere started to change to a more sensual one. She took another sip from her glass.

"How often do you guys come here, Jennifer? It's nice being away from the men for a while."

"Yes, sweetheart. We meet here every Monday for dinner, but the wives meet at least three times a week just to be together."

"Three times a week and dinner on Mondays with the men? That seems like a lot of time together."

"Of course, that's the point. We are a very close-knit group. We practically do everything together."

"Yeah, I see. Between you guys and work I wouldn't be able to do anything else let alone hang out with Kelley."

"Who is Kelley, dear?"

"She's my friend. We grew up together. We have this Saturday thing we—"

"Oh no, dear. You wouldn't have time for her. Whatever you're doing with her you could do with one of the air force wives. Do you like the show so far?" Jennifer asked, lifting the glass to Ivy's lips.

"Uh yeah." She finished her drink. "I don't think I've seen anything that compares. It's so, well, seductive." She slumped back, swirling her ice again.

Jennifer smiled. "You ain't seen anything yet."

She leaned back, putting her arm around Ivy's shoulders, and finished her own drink. Ivy rested on the arm and closed her eyes. It felt reassuring and nurturing. The physical contact made the dancers seem more real to her. She swayed to the music again.

“Mmm, Saleem sure knows how to make a drink. I’m buzzing already. Mmm, I feel good, too, wait...I feel better than good. I feel... I feel...smooth...like silk. Silky smooth...silky smooth, silly silk,” Ivy mumbled and giggled to herself.

Jennifer swayed with Ivy to the music and then whispered in her ear. “The men are coming out now.”

“Ooo, men.” She opened her eyes to see bright yellow and orange swirls dancing before them. “Whoa, now that’s cool.”

“Yes, they are.”

The men danced with the belly dancers and it quickly changed from belly dancing to sexual, erotic dancing. The loincloths covering their genitals matched the sheer gold and red material the women wore. A soft breath was released throughout the room as the lights were lowered and the music changed to soft bongos and recorded jungle sounds. The women quickly disappeared leaving just the men to entertain them. Each one limber, agile, and seductively in control of all parts of his body. They were mesmerizing.

“Mmm...”

“How are you enjoying the show?”

“This is awesome.”

“Good. Perhaps you will want to partake in the extracurricular activities as well.”

“Extracurricular?”

Jennifer patted her knee. “Don’t worry dear. That’s for another night. Don’t want to give you too much your first night out. Let’s just enjoy the show.”

Chapter Five



Banging the top of the clock twice, without the result of noise reduction, Ivy slapped it across the room.

“I’m up! Stupid clock.”

Her forehead barely came off the pillow as she took a deep breath and pushed her hair back out of her face, to look around. She held her head with both hands and groaned in pain.

“Damn, my head hasn’t banged like this since me and Kelley crashed that frat party in college.” She stood and stretched. “Ugh. Everything hurts. This was the hangover from hell! Those must have been some serious rum and colas Saleem made.”

She shuffled into the bathroom pulling off her t-shirt and shorts and let the warm water run over her.

“Okay, Jennifer took us to that back room. I had two drinks, hmm, maybe three, and...” She shook her head to concentrate and then sucked her teeth. “Shit! I hate it when I can’t remember anything.” She wet her face again, shaking her head. “I hope I didn’t give it up to Steven last night. That would really suck.” She sighed, finished her shower, and her morning routine, before leaving for work.

Ivy had hoped the water would have its normal refreshing effect on her, but this morning it did not. She arrived exhausted and still a bit groggy. George was in her office rearranging things, trying to find room for a vase of flowers.

“Good morning, Miss Ivy. You must tell me your secret, honey.”

“Morning. And George, I have many secrets. Which one are you referring to?”

“You’ve got another gift, Ivy. Is it from Jonathan Hayes again?” He handed her the small envelope.

“I didn’t go out with Johnnie last night. I went out with Tech Sergeant Steven Jones,” she said, using her best snobby voice.

“Ooo, an airman. I thought you said they weren’t your type.”

“They usually aren’t. They spend all their time sucking up to my dad instead of getting into me, but my father asked me to at least give the man a chance. He’s a good man, a good airman,” she said, mimicking her father’s voice.

He laughed. “Well, I guess we’ll see if dear ole dad was right then, huh? So, all these flowers are from him, huh?”

“Yup, they’re from Steven. Okay let’s see, he thanks me for letting him take me to dinner. He had a great time,” she said reading the accompanying card on the desk. George picked it up.

“Uh-oh.”

“What?”

“Does he always put *love Steven* in his correspondence?”

She sputtered. “I don’t know. This is the first thing he’s sent me. I just met him on Sunday.”

He gasped with false shock and smiled. “Why you little tramp. You gave him some, didn’t you?”

“What! No.” She sent him a look out the corner of her eye. “Oh George, I don’t know. I don’t remember.” She dropped her head on the desk.

He laughed. “Too much to drink, huh?”

She lifted her head and shrugged. “I didn’t think so. A couple of white wine spritzers with dinner, a few rum, and colas after dinner...” She shrugged again. “I don’t even remember how I got home.”

“Hmm, sounds like too much to drink to me. Well, on the bright side, you know you were good. This is a beautiful and expensive basket of flowers.”

“Humph, well he couldn’t have been that great. I don’t remember a thing.” She chuckled, turning on her computer. “Let’s get to work.”

* * *

“This is Ivy York. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Ivy, it’s Johnnie. You busy?”

“Hey. I’m just packing up to leave, Johnnie. What’s up?”

“Nothing really. I just wanted to know if you felt like cooking for two tonight?”

“*Cooking?* Oh no. Johnnie, I’m the last person you’d want cooking for you, trust me,” she said with a light laugh. “I only make two things that are even remotely worth eating without seeking some kind of medical attention afterward.”

“Wow. So do you eat out every night? That can’t be healthy.”

“No, I don’t do that. I order those already prepared meals. They come right to the house and I just pop them in the microwave. Super healthy, super good, and cooked by someone who knows how to actually cook. So no downside.”

He laughed. “Okay, so cooking isn’t your forte. What’s say you come over to my house and I cook for you, then?”

“I don’t know if I’m ready to be inside your apartment just yet.”

“Okay, that’s cool. I get that. How about a compromise? We eat at your place and I’ll pick up the food? I’ll even find a movie to watch while we eat.”

“Hmm, okay. That’ll work.”

“Okay give me the address and I’ll get some food on my way. You like Italian?”

“Love it.”

“Great!”

* * * *

“Hi.”

“Hi, Johnnie. You want me to grab one of those?”

Johnnie lifted the two overstuffed shopping bags closer to him. “Nope, I got it. Where do you want them?”

Ivy walked around the couch to the coffee table. “Over here is fine.”

He looked around her apartment as she unloaded one of the bags. "So, how long you been collecting your dolls?"

Ivy turned to him. "Huh?"

"Well, you've got a slew of porcelain dolls sitting on those shelves over there," he said with a nod to the wall across the room. "With so many, I can only guess that you supply dolls to your friends for a playdate or you're a collector."

She giggled and continued to empty the bag. "Yes, I collect them, but I could have just liked dolls, you know."

"Yeah, but your dolls aren't just random pretty dolls. They have significance to you."

Ivy tilted her head. "What makes you think that?"

Johnnie pointed to the shelves. "Well, you have six Asian dolls over there and six African dolls over there on two separate shelves. Not only are they totally different and very specific, but they are also up high. I think if they were really *toys* they might have been on a lower shelf."

Ivy grinned. "Wow. That's impressive. You got all that from checking out my dolls?"

He shrugged. "You can tell a lot about a person by looking around the place."

"Okay, tell me what else do you see?"

Johnnie walked over to stand in front of the wall of pictures. He wrapped his arms around his chest and let his face rest on his fingers in thought. He took a step back and then turned to her.

"Okay, first you've got the pictures together in stacks of four with some kind of theme-thing going on," he told her, waving his arms around in front of the pictures. "Which is a little OCD, but cool looking nonetheless," he added, giving her a wink before turning back to the wall. "I'll tackle them by groups, okay?"

Ivy extended her arm and sat back on the couch. "Sure, knock yourself out."

"Hmm, this first group, I'm gonna say is you and your brother back in the day." He tapped the four pictures set in a diamond formation on the left. "This dude looks just like you," he added with a laugh.

Young Ivy sat on the shoulders of a teenage boy in a pool dunking a basketball in a hoop. Under that was another of Ivy and the boy sitting in a lifeguard chair on a beach smiling down at the person taking the picture. Side by side were pictures of Ivy as a very young girl sitting back to back with the boy on top of giant blocks smiling brightly, and another of Ivy as a teenager on the boy's back straddling him like a horse with a big smile on her face.

Johnnie looked at her expectantly.

"Yes, that's my brother Jim. He is a few years older than I am, but we are very close."

Johnnie clapped his hands. "Ha! I'm getting good at this. This group is even easier. These are your parents of course. I love the before and after thing. This one was obviously taken way before they had you guys," he added with a chuckle.

The top photo her father, a young airman dressed in his uniform, and her mother, even younger, wearing a traditional red satin dress, sat next to each other, cheek-to-cheek, smiling brightly. Looking at it always made her smile.

"I had that picture restored a few years ago. I got a beautiful silver frame and gave it to them as an anniversary gift."

He turned a raised brow to her. "So did you take it back?"

Ivy giggled. "No, I just had a copy made for herself at the same time."

Johnnie nodded. "Got it. How long ago was this one taken?"

In the photo beneath, her parents were much older, but in the same pose.

"That was two years ago. We took the other two at the same time. It was right before Jim was deployed."

Johnnie turned back to the pictures. "Your mama still looks good, Ivy. Your father's a lucky man," he mentioned with a wink.

Ivy laughed again then pointed to the other wall. "Thanks, Johnnie. I'm sure he knows that."

Your brother looks like he was born to wear that uniform. How long has he been in service?"

"I think this is his sixth year."

"You've got a good looking family, Ivy."

"Thanks. I'm pretty proud of them. Now, what about those pictures over there?"

Johnnie followed her to the other wall. "This must be your friend Kelley." He pointed to the photos in turn. "This one looks like you were in high school. This is when you graduated from college and this one is when you guys opened your business. Nice."

Ivy pointed to the last picture in the cluster. She and Kelley were dressed up, sitting on the edge of a table toasting with champagne glasses.

"What about the last one?"

Johnnie shrugged. "I don't know what was going on with you guys in this picture, but you look damn good while it was happening. Do you still have that dress?"

Ivy laughed. "You're so crazy. That was really great. You're like a modern-day Sherlock Holmes."

Johnnie smiled and rejoined her on the sofa. "Well, after checking out your pictures I have come to the conclusion that you love your family enough to want them around you always, but not up in your face physically. You and your girlfriend are very close. You got a lot of love for her, too."

Ivy smiled. "Yeah, she's the sister I never had. She drives me crazy, but according to my brother that's what sisters do."

"I wouldn't know. I only have a little brother. This really is a nice place you got here, cozy even. Is it a condo?"

"Yep. The top five floors went condo three years ago. What movie did you get?"

"Well, I didn't know what you like, so I grabbed a drama, an adventure, and a comedy," he said, pulling the movies out of the other bag.

"What? No cartoon?"

He looked at her with wide eyes. "You do cartoons?"

"Who doesn't love animated movies?" Ivy asked in a teasing tone.

He chuckled. "Okay. I'll have to remember that."

Johnnie pulled one of the cushions off her black and beige couch and sat on the floor staring up at her.

"What?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. I was just noting how good you look in anything you wear. I've seen you all gussied up at the meet and greet, at work in your little business type suits and now..." A sly grin spread across his face and he shrugged again. "I think I like the jeans and t-shirt on you best."

"Thanks, Johnnie, but you don't have to schmooze me to impress me. The food will do for now." She giggled. "You did excellent with the food, by the way. Silvio's is one of my favorites." She handed him a plate of lasagna.

He laughed. "So the way to a woman's heart is through the stomach, too, huh?"

"Well, this woman anyway. Besides, someone's got to cook the food you eat and since it's not going to be me, Silvio's will do."

"Oh, and FYI, I can cook."

She pulled a bottle of red wine from the bag and looked it over. "You can cook, huh? You don't have someone who comes in to cook for you and you just warm it up?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Because you're rich. Don't all rich people have a cook, a butler, a valet, and a maid?" She pulled out a corkscrew. "Hmm, you've thought of everything."

He smiled, taking the bottle from her. "I try." He pulled two glasses from the other bag and clicked them together. "And no, I don't have any of those people. My mother worked a lot when I was young. I had to learn to cook so I could feed myself and my brother and have dinner ready when my mom came home from work."

He paused long enough to open the wine.

"So, I cook, I clean, and I dress by myself on a daily basis, thank you very much. Besides, I don't like that many people coming and going in my house."

"Uh-huh." She slid a tray of breadsticks across the table.

"But I do have a driver to take me where I need to go. I found out that driving in New York traffic requires a skill that I do not have. I hired an ex-cab driver for that."

Ivy laughed. "Yeah, it seems like they're the only ones who have that skill."

"I know right. So, if you had me pegged for one of those terrible rich guys who's only interested in getting in your drawers, sorry to disappoint you. Now go rinse these so we can drink this wine while we eat."

"Terrible rich guy after my drawers, huh? The thought never crossed my mind."

She threw her nose into the air and walked to the kitchen with his laughter following her.

Chapter Six



“Sorry, I’m late.” Ivy shrugged out of her jacket out of breath. “Lunchtime in the city, I swear. Do you know how hard it is to speed walk through a zillion people who are just strolling along?”

Johnnie chuckled and pulled out her chair. “You didn’t have to walk, Ivy. I could have sent my car for you.”

She shook her head. “Uh-uh. It would’ve taken you all day to get those four blocks in lunchtime traffic. So, have you been waiting long?”

“Nah, not too long. I only ordered my drink.”

“Oh good. I can’t hang out. I’ve got a meeting right after lunch.”

“That’s cool. I’ll try not to keep you too long and if I do, I’ll make it up to you...later.” He winked.

“Don’t worry about it. Let’s order.”

He nodded and waved down their waitress.

“So, tell me, what’s it like being a big hotel mogul?”

Johnnie chuckled. “I wouldn’t say I was all that, but I like it. A downside, though, is they come to me for every little thing, sometimes the stupidest little things.”

“Really? Like what?”

He sipped his drink. “Well, just this morning I found out that the head of the banquet department feels it’s necessary to redecorate the three banquet rooms because they’re outdated. They haven’t been changed since two thousand. That’s almost twenty years.”

She chuckled. “You gave them the okay, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, but that just opened up the floodgates. Now I’ve got, like, a billion swatches sitting on my desk for carpets, wallpaper, curtains, all kinds of stuff.” He chuckled. “I don’t have a clue what to do with that crap.”

She laughed.

“Yeah, well, you can laugh if you want because I was gonna ask you to help me pick some of that stuff out.”

“No biggie, I’ll help you. It sounds kinda—”

“Excuse me.”

They both looked up into the face of a young woman. “I’m sorry to interrupt, but are you, Jonathan Hayes?”

He looked at Ivy then back to the woman hesitantly. “Uh, yeah.”

The girl jumped up and down with excitement. “Oh my God! Gail! Gail, come here! I told you it was him! It’s Jonathan Hayes!”

“Jonathan Hayes?” a voice said from across the room.

“Are you sure that’s Jonathan Hayes?” came another voice.

The young woman dug in her purse, rambling. “My name is Penny, Mr. Hayes. I’ve read all the articles on you, Mr. Hayes. I’ve read the two that were in *Essence*, the two in *Ebony*, and the one in *Ebony Man*. I even read the one in that *Esquire* magazine. Well, not really. I just ripped the pictures out of it to put on my wall. I do think they made a huge mistake in picking that Usher as the most eligible African-American bachelor over you.

You were flat out robbed, don't you think? You should have been number one easily. I would've picked you for number one. Can I get your autograph?"

She smiled and abruptly shoved a pen at Johnnie. He took it hesitantly.

"Umm..."

The woman yanked her shirt down exposing her breast. "You can put it right here."

"Uh..." Johnnie sat back, stunned. Two other women came over to the table.

"Oh my God, it *is* him. It's Jonathan Hayes!"

"Ooo, me too, Mr. Hayes. Sign my chest, too!"

"Back up off me! He's doing me first!" Penny yelled.

A shirt flew over Penny's head landing on their table. Ivy stared at the shirt in front of her.

"Johnnie?"

"Uh, I, uh..."

Screams came from all over the room.

"Me too!"

"No, me first!"

A bra landed on the table next. "Sign my bra, Jonathan!"

Ivy's mouth dropped open. She and Johnnie stared at the bra. Three other women pushed up against their table. Ivy looked at the crowd forming around them.

"Okay, umm, Johnnie..."

"I—I—" He chuckled, throwing his hands up.

The crowd began to grow and the commotion grew as the women attempted to surround their table and close them in.

"This way Mr. Hayes, quickly!" a man said, parting the crowd.

Johnnie jumped up and grabbed Ivy's hand then followed the guy as he bulldozed his way through the crowd. Once outside, the driver opened the door of the burgundy Cadillac Sedan Deville, allowing them easy access and drove them away just as a mob of screaming females reached the car. Ivy turned to Johnnie and smiled.

"So...that was different."

He shook his head. "I'm so sorry. It was my first time at Ritchie's. I didn't think anyone would recognize me."

"Does that happen to you a lot when you go out in public?"

"Sometimes, but more now since the articles appeared."

"Must be nice having women falling at your feet and all. Any man's dream, huh?"

He sputtered. "Whatever. It's kind of a pain in the ass."

"Uh-huh. So, where are we going?"

"We're about five minutes away from Piccolo's, Mr. Hayes," the driver said, making a turn.

"Piccolo's?"

Johnnie smiled. "That's the restaurant inside the Rayburn Suites. We'll be able to eat in peace there. I have a table in the back."

* * *

“Hello?”

“Hi, Ivy, it’s Johnnie.”

She pulled her jacket off and dropped it on the couch. “Oh, hi Johnnie.”

He sighed. “I’m sorry about this afternoon, Ivy.”

“It’s fine, Johnnie, really. That’s just life hanging out with Jonathan Hayes, right?”

He chuckled. “I hope not. Were you late for your meeting?”

“Yup.”

“Damn.”

“No worries. George had my back. He caught me up. I got my work done by the end of the day. So I’m good.”

“I’d like to try the lunch thing again, with less drama this time.”

She sat on the sofa. “Hmm, I don’t know. Our lunch history hasn’t been great so far.”

“Hey, by my count we’re one and one.”

She chuckled. “Okay, just to clarify, you have to be more good than bad to be good.”

“Well, yeah, if you want to be technical about it. What’s say you think about it over dinner?”

“Tonight? Oh, no, Johnnie. I just walked in the door and—” Abruptly she looked over her shoulder. Kicking off her shoes, she stood. “Hold on, okay? Someone’s at the door.”

“Sure.”

She put the phone down and went to the door. A young delivery boy stood in her doorway.

“Yes?”

“Ms. York?”

“Yeah.”

“We have your delivery from Piccolo’s.”

“My what?”

He lifted two large paper bags with the bright red letters of Piccolo’s printed on the front. Wide-eyed, Ivy stepped to the side letting him pass her. Another man followed the delivery guy into the house. They went to work setting up her table with a bright red tablecloth, candles, paper plates, utensils, and the food. When they were done, the two men tipped their hats and went to the door.

“Enjoy your meal, Ms. York,” the first delivery boy said and followed the other man out.

“Uh, thanks.” She closed the door and retrieved her phone. “Johnnie?”

“So, the food arrived?”

“Yes. Why’d you send me food? Not that I’m upset, but—”

“Well, I wanted us to eat dinner together, but I figured you’d be too tired to go back out, so I thought this would be the next best thing. We can talk on the phone and have dinner together, but in the privacy of our own homes.”

“That’s a great idea. It will make dinner a lot less dramatic than lunch.”

“And no flying clothes either. So, what do you say? Will you let me redeem myself with lunch tomorrow?”

Ivy smiled and sat at the table. "Sure, might as well end the week with a bang."

* * * *

"Miss Ivy!" a voice called over the speakerphone.

"Yes?"

"You have a visitor! Should I send him down?"

"Yup, send him on down."

Smiling, she hit the speaker button and stretched. As she stood straightening herself, the knock came at her door.

"Yes, come in."

"Hi, Ivy."

"Steven!" she called. "What are you—?"

"I'm here to pick you up for our lunch date today."

Her stunned reaction didn't change as she walked around her desk.

"Ivy, don't you remember? After dinner Monday, I said I'd be out of town until the end of the week and I'd take you to lunch on Friday." He smiled and walked closer to hug her. "It's Friday."

Ivy flipped through her mental Rolodex, going over everything she could remember, but none of what he said came to mind. She shook her head, disgusted with herself.

"Look, Steven, I'm sorry, but I don't remember that conversation. In fact, I don't have much memory of anything that happened on Monday. Why didn't you call me or something to confirm or at least remind me? I haven't heard from you all this week."

"Umm, Miss Ivy!"

"Yes, George."

"Uh, you have another visitor here to see you. Should I send him down, too?"

She sighed. "Just a second, George."

Steven sat in one of the chairs across from her desk. "Another visitor?"

"He's a friend. We met at a meet and greet I went to with Kelley," she answered cautiously, sitting on the edge of her desk.

"A friend, huh? Okay, well, send him in. Let's all be friends."

Ivy frowned at his tone and her eyes narrowed toward him. She turned and pushed the button again.

"George, go ahead and send Johnnie down here," she said pleasantly, then turned back to Steven. "Look, Steven, you should have called me or something. I don't remember our lunch date and you should know that I already have plans for lunch with Johnnie today."

"Oh. So, I guess you don't remember your dinner date plans with the general's wives tonight either?"

"Dinner with the general's wives? *Tonight?*"

Steven scoffed. "Yes, Ivy. What *do* you remember about Monday?"

Ivy concentrated and a few images slowly came back to her mind, Jennifer giving her a drink...music, dancers...she felt good, really good... A loud knock on the door startled her back to reality.

"Yes, come in."

“Hi, Beautiful, you ready to go? Oh, my bad. You got company.”

Steven stood, smoothing his uniform, and approached him with his hand extended. “Tech Sergeant Steven Jones.”

“How you doing, man? Johnnie Hayes.”

They shook hands slowly, eying one another.

“So, Hayes...” Steven started going back to his chair. “*Johnnie* Hayes? You mean *Jonathan* Hayes?” he added looking over his shoulder.

Johnnie sat in the other chair and smiled. “That’s the one.”

“Hmm, so you’re a big-shot millionaire.”

He shrugged. “I’ve got a little something, something. You’re a big shot airman, huh?”

Steven’s smile took a sinister edge. “Yes, I am. So, you know our Ivy from a party, huh?”

“Yup, and you?”

“From a weekend function at her parent’s house,” Steven answered smugly. “So, are you guys dating or what?”

“We’re friends. Are you two dating?”

“Okay, that’s enough. I’d appreciate it if you guys would talk like I’m still here,” Ivy said, holding her hands up.

She shook her head and looked at the two men vying for her attention. They were totally different in every way. One handpicked by her mother, the other brought to her by...fate? She shook her head again and turned to Steven.

“Steven, Johnnie and I are going to lunch. I’m sorry, but I guess I forgot about our date. That was my fault, but you didn’t call to remind me or even communicate with me all week. So you have to take some of the blame for the miscommunication, too.”

“I told you, I was busy...out of town,” Steven protested.

“Well, I was busy, too, but not so much that I couldn’t answer my phone if you would’ve called. We’ll just have to take a rain check,” she said, reaching for her purse.

Johnnie jumped up to help her with her jacket.

Steven stood. “Okay, Ivy. I understand, but what about dinner? Will you at least keep your date with the general’s wives? They were really looking forward to seeing you again.”

She sighed. “I don’t think so, but I’ll call to let her know.”

“Okay, now that we got that all squared up, we’ll see you around, Jones. It was nice meeting you, man.”

Steven gave him a Cheshire cat grin as he shook Johnnie’s hand, again.

“Oh yes, I’m sure we’ll see each other again.”

* * *

Ivy closed her door. “Hello?”

“Ivy, dear, it’s Jennifer.”

“Oh, hi, Jennifer.”

"Is something wrong, dear? Jones tells us you might not come tonight. We were all looking forward to seeing you again."

"Everything is fine. I just—" She sighed. "Well, I just didn't remember we had plans tonight, and I made plans with another friend."

"Yes, Jones mentioned him, too. The other man. Look, Ivy, we were just gonna have some girl time. I was having people come over to give us a mani-pedi session and maybe a massage. Won't you come, dear?"

"I'm sorry, Jennifer, I can't. Maybe another time."

"Very well, Ivy, I won't pressure you. I'm sure the girls will be as sad as I am, but I'll give you a raincheck. Good night."

"Bye."

The disappointment in Jennifer's voice made her feel guilty. She laid on the couch and dialed another number.

"Yeah, hello."

"Kelley, is my open massage still, well, open?"

"Yeah, man, but you haven't called all week. I thought you might have forgotten about him."

Ivy smiled. "Girl, please, how can I forget a massage like that?"

Kelley chuckled. "You want me to send him to your house?"

"Yes, girl, I need another massage badly."

"Uh-huh, what you really need to do is get laid and stop pacifying the urge."

"Yeah, well, you need a man for all that. Are we still on for tomorrow?"

"Handball and jogging. Same bat time, same bat channel."

"You're so crazy. See you in the morning."

"Oh, wait Ivy."

"Yeah."

"You want to come over Sunday for lunch? I think I feel the urge to cook coming on again."

Ivy laughed. "Umm, I think I'll pass. Your cooking skills are just a hair above mine"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Ivy scoffed. "That means we just don't have to call poison control as often when you cook."

"I'll try not to take that personally, Ivy."

"It is what it is, girl. I think I'll just crash my mom and dad's house again. You think you can keep your phone a little closer to you this time?"

"I'll keep that in mind. Bye."

"Bye." She hung up and dialed another number.

"Hello."

"Hi, Johnnie. I just wanted to let you know that I got your message earlier. I'm not going with the general's wives."

His muffled laughter filtered through. "Hey, I was just trying to keep the peace. I didn't want your boy, *G.I. Joe*, to get all crazy on me."

"Well, don't have to worry about that. We're just friends."

“It’s cool. I’m not afraid of a little competition. In fact, I welcome it. Anything worth having is worth fighting for and anything worth fighting for is worth having.”

“What is that? Your motto for living life?”

“I read it on a fortune cookie when I was a kid so I adopted it.”

Ivy laughed. “Okay. So, you don’t mind if I spend a little time with him, too?”

“Nah, he don’t scare me. As long as I’m in the mix somewhere, that’s all that matters to me. Besides, you don’t owe me anything. We’re just friends too, right?”

She smiled. “Right.”

Chapter Seven



“It’s open! I’m in the kitchen!” Ivy screamed out the doorway.

Moments later, Johnnie pushed open the swinging door. “Hi. Mmm, something sure smells good. What’s for dinner?”

“Well, I’ve made some mashed potatoes from scratch, some string beans, they’re from a can and,” She paused to pull the pan out of the oven and put it on top of the stove. “I made a baked chicken.”

Johnnie dropped a chaste kiss on her cheek and leaned against the refrigerator. “Ooo, I’m impressed, and you said you didn’t cook. It looks great.”

“Well, I’m not promising anything. My freezer is full of those already prepared chef meals. I can still warm up a couple of those if you want.”

“Nope. I said I wanted to taste your cooking. I think you’re just being too hard on yourself.”

“I’m no Betty Crocker by far, so consider yourself warned.”

He chuckled. “Well, if it’s that bad, I’ve got a couple of bottles of wine to wash it down,” he said holding up the bottles.

“Good because it’s done.”

Ivy took off her apron and handed him a plate of food. They sat down at the table and she waited for his reaction. Johnnie smiled and took a fork full of mashed potatoes.

“Mmm, these are really good, Ivy. See, I knew you were just pulling my leg when you said you couldn’t cook.”

He picked up his chicken leg and took a big bite. She smiled and took a bite of her chicken at the same time. After three chews, they stopped simultaneously and looked up into each other’s eyes. Johnnie smiled at her. She smiled back as they both attempted to chew meat. Johnnie persevered and swallowed, taking a big gulp of his wine afterward.

“Wow, Ivy that was, umm, hmm, it was...” He gulped his wine again, swishing it around his mouth before swallowing. “It was—”

Ivy finally swallowed. “Oh God, that was horrible! Ugggh!” She grabbed her glass and chugged her wine down.

Johnnie deflated with relief. “Thank God! I thought it was me.”

“It’s like a super salty Emory board!”

Johnnie nodded. “That’s surprisingly accurate,” he said with a laugh.

I hate to say I told you so, you know it’s bad if I can’t even eat it and I made it.”

“But the potatoes were really good,” Johnnie mentioned poking the food with his fork.

Ivy leaned on the table with a slight tilt to her head. “Johnnie, for real? Who can’t boil and mash a potato?” she asked.

He laughed. "I see your point."

"So, it falls to you. Do we stay here, drink the wine and I continue to poison you, or are you going to take me out for some real food?"

Johnnie pulled out his phone. "Roger, be downstairs in front of Ivy's building in ten minutes. We're going out to eat." He returned the phone to his pocket. "So, where do you want to go?"

* * * *

"Hi, Johnnie, I'm almost ready," Ivy, said, opening the door.

"That's cool. No rush. We've got time."

"You look very nice, Mr. Hayes."

He closed the door behind him and sat down on the couch. "Thanks. The party started about an hour ago, so we're going to be fashionably late."

Ivy returned to her bedroom. "Okay. I just have to put my dress on!"

"Aww, man. You're not going to wear that pretty little white satin robe you've got on? I kinda like it."

Her laughter drifted from the bedroom. "No, not this time. Where are we going anyway?"

"It's just a little cocktail party over in Jersey."

"Okay. So, how do I look?"

Ivy spun around, giving him an overall view. The loose curls on her head swung around her face before bouncing back into place. Johnnie's mouth had fallen open and his eyes widened as they scanned her slowly.

"Wow, you look fantastic."

Her shoulders sagged in relief. "Thanks, I got this dress from Kelley a couple of birthdays ago." She gripped the large ruby necklace resting between her breasts. "You don't think the necklace is too gaudy, do you?"

"No, no, it looks good. Matches the dress very nicely. Red looks good on you. Your girl Kelley gives great gifts."

"Yes, she does. They are usually on the sexy side, but that's just her."

He helped her into her coat and then held the door open. "I like her already. So, when does all this gift-giving take place?"

She chuckled. "You mean my birthday? It's on December nineteenth. What about you?"

"April fourteenth."

Ivy nodded. "Oh, that's right. You're an Aries."

They walked out of the elevator into the lobby.

"So will I ever meet this Kelley of yours?"

"One day ...maybe. So, where are you parked?"

"The car should be right out front," he told her, extending his hand.

* * *

"Announcing Jonathan Hayes, owner of the Rayburn Suites Inn and his date, Ivy York!"

As Ivy walked through the crowd of tuxedos and slinky, shimmering black dresses, she pulled Johnnie closer.

"I think we might be a little *under-dressed*, Johnnie. Why didn't you tell me this was a black-tie thing?" He shrugged. "I didn't know. I only looked at the invitation long enough to put your name on it."

"Johnnie, you should've shown me the invite," she said panicked. "I could have guessed it was a black-tie affair."

"Don't worry about it. We're here now."

She felt like all eyes were on her. Squeezing Johnnie's arm, she slowed down.

"I think we're standing out a little too much. Don't you think we're standing out too much?"

Johnnie tucked her arm under his and patted her hand. "As beautiful as you look tonight, you would stand out in *any* crowd." He lifted her hand and kissed it softly. "Now, let's go mingle."

She snatched a drink off the tray of a passing waiter and nodded.

"Hayes! Hayes! Ahh, I thought that was you."

Ivy watched Johnnie as he followed the voice calling his name. The genuine smile and pleasant demeanor he displayed for the last hour with everyone he interacted with instantly disappeared. A quick look of annoyance touched his handsome face before an empty smile took its place.

A tall man appeared through the crowd. His cocky stride seemed practiced and on purpose. He was dark with a tanning parlor tan with perfectly styled, light brown hair. Johnnie took his extended hand. They stood staring and shaking hands for so long, she thought they would turn around, draw pistols, and start counting at any minute.

"That suit is top-notch. Should we assume that your tux fell apart in the wash, Hayes?"

He laughed, a hollow, echoey sound Ivy didn't like. She gave the stranger a quick once over.

This man has no business trying to make fun of Johnnie for not wearing a tux. He looks far better in his tailored black suit than this guy does in his tux.

"As always, you're just too funny, Dickerson," Johnnie responded, plain-faced. "I just didn't check the details of the invitation."

"Of course, that must be it. So what brings you to Jersey?"

He shrugged. "I'm interested in the Bridgewall...came to check the place out. You?"

"Well, I'm here for the same thing, ole boy. So I guess we're in battle again. This time, I think, the end result will be different. It'll be me adding the Bridgewall Hotel to my holdings when the time comes."

"Is that your prediction, Dickerson?"

"Oh no, Hayes. That's a fact."

Dickerson's grin seemed darker, but when his gaze shifted to Ivy it quickly returned to its practiced glory.

"Surely this woman is not with you, Hayes. She's exquisite."

A real smile warmed Johnnie's handsome features. "This is my lady friend, Ivy York. Ivy, this is Chad Dickerson, the Third. He owns the Bentley Hotel. He has hotels here in Jersey and a few in Pennsylvania. We were rivals in the Rayburn Suites deal."

"Yeah, I figured as much," Ivy murmured. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Dickerson."

"One can never have too much in one's holdings," Chad said to her. He kissed her outstretched hand. "And please, you call me Chad."

"Hi, Chad."

“The pleasure is all mine Ivy. That’s such a beautiful and unique name.”

“Thank you.”

He openly looked her over. “Hayes, this woman is phenomenal. She’s way out of your league. Wherever did you find her?”

“We met at the meet and greet for the Triton-Millennium Hotel in Manhattan. She’s a writer for Hot Magazine.”

“Fantastic! Who doesn’t love a woman with brains and beauty, eh? If you ask me, I think she’s too good for you,” he added with his practiced laugh.

Johnnie copied his laugh. “To *that* statement, I totally agree, but nobody asked you.”

Chad’s laugh stopped as quickly as it started. “See, Ivy, this is what happens when you barely make it through high school—you’re not educated enough to take a joke. Whenever you’re ready to upgrade, Ivy darling, to someone with some real money, a real diploma, like my degree from Stanford...” He sent a smug look to Johnnie. “You can always contact me at one of my hotels,” Chad added, offering her a business card.

Ivy took the card but said nothing.

“Yeah, well, as wonderful and *real* as your Stanford degree is, it still didn’t get you the Rayburn Suites, did it? Nope, I did that with my stinking ass, little G.E.D.”

He emphasized each letter, gave him a quick smile, and took Ivy’s hand from him, tucking her arm through his. He turned Ivy toward him, caressed her face, and kissed her lips.

“Come on, baby. I see better people we could be talking to. Dickerson,” Johnnie said, ending their conversation.

“Hayes,” Chad hissed through gritted teeth.

Ivy waited until they were out of Chad’s hearing range before she spoke again. “I thought only women got into catfights. Is it always like that when you two get together?”

“Like what?”

“Like *that*,” she said again with a nod in Chad’s direction.

“Oh, that? That was nothing. We were just talking.”

“Come on, Johnnie. I know a fight for the Alpha dog spot when I see one.”

He chuckled. “Okay, okay. It’s just that Chad comes from old money and I guess it pisses him off that this boy from the hood got the Rayburn Suites instead of him.”

“So this frozen tension between you two is normal?”

“As normal as it’s ever gonna be.”

“Fair enough. And the kiss? Was that for his benefit, too?”

Johnnie smiled. “Yes and no. I’ve been wanting to kiss you since I saw you on the dance floor, and I wanted to stick it to Dickerson. I couldn’t pass up the opportunity to kill two birds with one stone. I hope you didn’t mind.”

“No, no, it was fine. In fact, I kinda—”

Johnnie guided her backward to the nearest wall and kissed her again ending her sentence short. Goosebumps rose on Ivy’s skin as Johnnie’s body and lips stroked her excitement.

“That one was because I enjoyed the first one so much,” he said softly, brushing his lips across hers.

The intense look in his eyes made her quiver with desire. She licked her lips and cleared her throat.

“So, are you really thinking about bidding for this place, or was that just for his benefit, too?”

He stepped back and walked her back toward the conference room. “Actually, I had forgotten that I had an invitation to this party. When you said you wanted to celebrate that you guys were done and ready for production, I figured what better place to celebrate than a place that passes out an unlimited amount of champagne.” He took two glasses from a passing waiter’s tray and handed her one. “But since we’re here, do you want to check it out?”

She took a sip and smiled. “Sure, why not.”

* * *

“So, you like him. I told you he didn’t seem all that bad,” Kelley said, serving the ball. “There’s nothing on the grapevine about him either...and I’ve been asking.”

“Yeah, he’s okay, but I’m still feeling him out,” Ivy huffed, running for the ball.

“You sound tired, girl. Don’t let my conversation throw your game.” Kelley slapped the ball, laughing.

Ivy ran to the other side of the court and stopped. “That was out and you can’t throw my game.”

“Okay, you got that. It’s still twenty-fourteen, your favor. What’s going on with the airman?”

Ivy served the ball. “I haven’t seen Steven for a couple of days. Not since dinner with the generals on Monday which was way weird, by the way. I did talk to him on Wednesday, though. You think I should give him a call?”

“What? No way! He’s only called you once all week. What were you supposed to do, wait around staring at the phone, putting everything else on hold? Let him call if he wants to see you. They always do, especially when he knows you’re dating Johnnie, too.”

Ivy shrugged. “I’m not really tripping. I mean, he’s okay, but he’s my parent’s choice so...”

Ivy swatted the ball. Kelley ran for it. She missed the ball as it bounced inbounds then out.

“Uh, that, that was out,” Kelley said, not making eye contact.

Ivy’s hands went to her hips. “Whatever. That was in and that’s game.”

Kelley pointed to the floor just over the line. “No, no, that was out, Ivy, for real.”

Ivy laughed, dismissing her comment with a wave of her hand and shook her head.

Kelley threw her hands up in defeat. “Okay, okay, fine. It was in. Come on, two out of three.”

“Nope, I’m hungry and you’re buying.”

Ivy hugged her friend and walked off the court laughing.

“You suck, man. Next week, you’re mine.”

“Same line of crap, different week. Come on, feed me. I’m going to the movies with Johnnie later.”

Chapter Eight



“Mom, I’m here!”

“That’s wonderful, Ivy,” her mother said, walking toward her as her father helped her into her coat. “I’m very glad you’re on time this time.”

“Wait, where are you going?”

“To brunch, Ivy. That’s why you’re here, dear.”

She looked around. “Well, yeah, so where is everybody? Aren’t we having brunch here?”

Ivy kissed her dad as they walked by her to the door.

“No dear, this week General Jackson is having brunch at their house, so come along.”

Her mother walked out, waving for her to follow. Her father pushed her gently out the door, closing it behind them.

“If I have to go, so do you,” he whispered with a teasing laugh.

Jack had the door open and quickly drove them through the park and uptown. They arrived at the John F. Kennedy building on the Upper West Side a short time later.

“You know how much I hate coming here, James,” her mother said as they entered the building. “I know she spends her days and nights thinking of new ways to get one up on me, or simply get on my nerves.”

“No one does that, sweetheart.”

“Why do we have to go anyway? We’re not even in the same grouping,” Kimiko huffed, stepping out of the elevator.

“Now, Kimmie, you know after I retire we’ll be a part of *everyone’s* group, so we might as well start showing up to functions as they ask. Why does it always have to be some kind of competition between you and Jennifer?”

Ivy shook her head as she followed behind her parents.

“Because James, it just is...but it’s not me,” she added quickly.

Ivy muffled her giggles when she saw the look her father gave her mother. Her mother huffed and remained silent as they went down the hall.

“You know she got this condo just to try and outdo me,” she mentioned when they reached the door.

General York gave his wife another look.

“Don’t you look at me like that, James. Just think about it for a second. They seemed perfectly happy out on Long Island in that magnificent little mansion they had, but as soon as we left Queens and came out to Manhattan, they followed us less than a year later getting a bigger, and, they think better, condo.”

“Hmm, maybe you’re right, darling. I mean it couldn’t possibly have anything to do with their three children being grown and out of the house and Jackson thinking they could do with a smaller place, closer to his job. You’re probably right, honey. It wouldn’t have anything to do with any of that stuff.”

Kimiko’s eyes narrowed as she looked up into her husband’s laughing grin. Ivy snickered behind her hand. A maid opened the door and delivered them to the Jacksons.

“York, how are you?”

“I’m good, Jackson. Jennifer, how are you?” her father said.

“I’m just fine, James. And you?”

Jennifer sounded excited and jovial when she responded to her father’s greeting, but when she turned to address her mother, her smile faded quickly. Her voice was flat and seemed forced when Jennifer gave her mother a one-word monotone greeting.

“Kim.”

“Jennifer.”

Ivy’s brow rose. Her mother replied to Jennifer’s greeting in the same monotone voice as they walked away together. She wondered what had gone on between them, but they were gone when she reached General Jackson.

“Ivy, how are you? You look lovely today.”

“I’m good, General Jackson. Thank you.”

“Make yourself at home, Ivy. We’re going to take your parents off to mingle with the old folk,” he said with a chuckle.

Ivy nodded to the general and left to find the buffet.

“I’m glad I got the chance to see you. I’ve missed you.”

Ivy didn’t bother to turn around but continued to pile her plate with hors-d’oeuvres. “Mmm, well, you might have been able to see me sooner if you would have just called.” She turned and looked into Steven’s grin.

“I’m a very busy man, Ivy. The general’s business keeps me on my toes and I have personal business to take care of as well.”

She twisted her lips. “Uh-huh.”

“Why don’t you let me make it up to you?”

Ivy lifted a brow. She stared at him for a moment silently before she turned on her heel and left the room without a word. He followed and sat next to her on a couch. Still not speaking, she took her time building a sandwich with the crackers and the ham and cheese.

“Okay, I’m listening,” she said.

“Well, I could...umm, so you’re just gonna shove that in your— Oh, okay.”

He watched her repeat the action two more times before he sighed and rubbed his temple.

“Uh, I could take you to lunch tomorrow.”

She shook her head. “No, not lunch, dinner.”

“Dinner tonight?”

“No, dinner tomorrow.”

“We do dinner with the generals on Mondays at Jericho’s, remember?”

“No, *they* do dinner every Monday. We don’t have to do dinner with them, do we?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes widened. “What if I don’t want to?”

“It’s what we do.”

She shrugged and kept eating. “FYI, I don’t have to do anything. I’m not in the Air Force.”

"Okay, what about dinner on Tuesday?"

Ivy pondered for a moment as she crunched. "That's cool. I can do that."

"Great, dinner on Monday and Tuesday."

She put another sandwich in her mouth and held up one finger. Steven rolled his eyes as he waited.

"No, not both days, just Tuesday. I'll have dinner with *you* but not them."

"We have to go to Jericho's on Monday," he said anxiously.

"Steven, we're supposed to be trying to get to know *each other*. How are we supposed to do that if we're not together? I don't want all our dates to be around a whole bunch of people and I don't want to date all the generals and their wives along with you."

"I understand and we can do that just not on Mondays."

She sighed. "Then I don't know if we can kick it at all if you're going to try to make it mandatory that I do the Monday thing. I've already said I don't want to."

She stood to go back to the dining room and he grabbed her arm.

"Ivy, we're not done."

"Excuse *you*?" she snapped, staring at his hand.

He released her quickly. "I apologize. What I meant was I'd still like to take you out on Tuesday for dinner. I'm sure the generals will understand if you can't make it on Monday."

He followed her to a smaller room, away from the loud music.

"Ivy, I think you should know. I don't like pushy women. Women shouldn't chase men."

Ivy glared at him. "Are you serious? I'm pushy if I bring up the conversation of us spending some alone time together?"

"Well, I think—"

"Unbelievable. I suggest something and you have an issue with that."

"Call me old fashioned, Ivy, but yes. I'm the man and I should be the aggressive one."

She rolled her eyes dramatically, throwing her hands up. "Damn, Steven, lighten up. Does everything have to be so rigid with you? I'm just talking about you coming to my house and playing little cards...maybe even having a drink or two."

"Mmm-hmm..."

Ivy returned to the dining room with Steven one-step behind her. A maid took her plate and she took a Mimosa in a flute from another maid passing by.

"Wow, these are beautiful," she said twirling the glass. "It's going to piss my Mom off when she sees Jennifer's crystal is nicer than hers," she mumbled, giggling softly.

"Well, you know, Ivy, I just live to piss your mother off."

Ivy turned to see Jennifer's smiling face.

"As soon as I found out your mother had Mikasa, I gave all my Mikasa crystal to Goodwill and replaced it with Waterford's top line. Waterford crystal is just a little better. Don't you think?" Jennifer explained smugly.

Ivy returned her smile but ignored the question. "How are you, Jennifer?"

"Fine, dear, just fine. I'm very glad to see you made it. I didn't see you with your parents when they arrived."

"They were ahead of me. I saw you and my mom go into the living room."

“You missed another one of our girl’s night out functions on Wednesday. You would have had a phenomenal time.”

“Yeah, well, I had to work late and I was really tired.”

“Yes, Jones told us. Since we didn’t get to see you during the week dear, I look forward to seeing you tomorrow at Jericho’s.”

“Well, Jennifer, Steven, and I were just talking about that. I’m not going tomorrow. Steven is taking me to dinner on Tuesday night instead.”

“What? But we always meet for dinner on Mondays at Jericho’s. Jones, didn’t you tell her this?”

“Yes ma’am, I did, but—”

“Is there something wrong, Ivy? A prior commitment or something?”

What is it with these people? Steven can’t make any decisions on his own? Jennifer’s all up in our business and it’s okay with him!

Ivy swallowed and took a slow breath. “No, Jennifer, it’s nothing like that. It’s just that I think if Steven and I are going to date or at least make the attempt, we need to spend some time alone getting to know each other.”

A light seemed to come on behind her eyes and she switched gears.

“She’s absolutely right, Jones. You’re very lucky to have such a brilliant and beautiful woman by your side.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Steven agreed readily with a smile.

Ivy sent him a quick look.

“Well, nothing’s official yet, uh, we’re still working on it. We’re not like a couple or anything, but—”

“Wonderful news,” Jennifer said, cutting Ivy off. “I have a feeling about you two...” She slapped Steven’s shoulder playfully. “And Jones, be sure when you pick her up for your dinner date that you don’t come empty-handed. A woman loves a man that brings gifts when he comes a-callin’.”

She sent Ivy an exaggerated wink and walked away. Steven smiled excitedly, almost jumping up and down.

“The general’s wife approves of us, too. This is great!”

“Whoop-tee-do,” Ivy muttered, twirling her finger in the air.

“She said to buy you something, a gift. What should I buy?”

“Whatever you want. Look, I’m going to find my parents and tell them I’m leaving, okay? I’ll see you on Tuesday.” She rushed off, not waiting for an answer.

* * *

“Well, at this time of year, you guys know we do the holiday thing and knock out January at the same time. So, tell me whatcha got real quick. You know I have a meeting with the fun guys next,” Linda, the managing editor, said.

“The fun people are the ones who do the cover,” her assistant Marcia explained.

“All right, hop to it. Ivy, talk to me.”

“Well, Sherri doesn’t usually send me anywhere during the holidays. She says New York is hot enough during the Thanksgiving and Christmas season. So I’ll be doing my article on something here, but she hasn’t told me what yet.”

“Me, either. We usually work together around this time of the year,” Becky, another writer added.

"At the very least we'll be in the same city," Ivy said giving the woman a nudge.

"All right then, keep me posted. Joe, what do you have?"

"Our department will be doing a spread on the food and drink of the season and maybe some wines, too. Since everybody is so carb-conscious or low fat this or vegan that nowadays, we'll have to really dig around and do our homework to be PC," chef Joe answered with a chuckle.

Linda nodded and looked at Tina expectedly.

"This time of year is really no different than any other. The only thing that really changes for us is the color scheme for the year. Kyle and I went to a fashion show last week and we've got another on Wednesday and two more for next week to see what's out there this year," Tina answered, readily.

A knock came to the door and George's head appeared. "Sorry to interrupt but can I have a quick word with Miss Ivy?"

"Do make it quick, George, we're in a meeting."

"Thanks."

George walked in and leaned close to Ivy's ear. She let out an exasperated noise.

"Just tell him I'm in a meeting."

George nodded and tiptoed from the room, holding up one finger.

"Okay. How about you, Ty? What are you guys doing?" Linda asked.

"Well, not too many people in this city have the holiday spirit like back in the day. I don't think we should spend a lot of space on Hot Decorating Tips this month. I mean, hardly anyone even decorates at all anymore, except for a tree and maybe some lights on a window."

"Okay, Ty, that leaves us space for something new. So, does anyone have any ideas?"

"Well, what about a dating thing?"

Linda turned to the voice of La-Kasha.

"Go ahead."

"New Yorkers complain about never having time for anything, including dating. So, what if we find a few single people, match them up, and send them out on dates throughout the holidays. We can mix and match them and do some kind of poll letting the readers choose who goes out with who and then they can pick who they want to be together at the end of the holidays. It'll be like a reality show kind of thing. You know how much the public is sucking that up nowadays," La-Kasha explained with a laugh.

George peeked in again. "I'm so sorry, Linda, but, uh, can I get just one more quick minute with Miss Ivy?"

Linda let out a heavy sigh. "Last time, George."

He nodded then whispered in Ivy's ear again.

"Tell him no. I am in a meeting," Ivy stressed through clenched teeth.

"Is there a problem Ivy?"

"No, Linda, no problem. Everything's cool."

"Mmm-hmm. Anyway, I think you might be onto something, La-Kasha. I don't think I've seen anything like that in another magazine before. T.V., yeah, but not in a magazine. I like it. Okay, guys, I think we've got a good start. La-Kasha, start the search for your singles. Let's say, umm, at least four wom—?"

"No! I told you, she's in a meeting and she cannot be disturbed!"

Everyone at the conference table turned to the door.

“What the hell is going on out there? Is that George yelling?” Linda said, coming to her feet.

Ivy stood, but before she could say anything Steven burst into the room.

“Ivy, I tried to tell him, but he—”

She held her hand up. “It’s okay, George. Steven, I’m in a meeting. What’s so important that it can’t wait until I’m done?”

“I have to talk to you, Ivy. You went—”

Ivy held up her hand and turned to her boss. “I’m sorry, Linda, I—”

Linda waved her out of the room. “Go.”

Ivy grabbed Steven by the arm and dragged him back into the hall. George closed the door behind them. She continued to pull him down the hall.

“Have you lost your mind! You come up to my job and make a scene? What the hell can be so important?” she yelled, pacing the floor.

“Ivy, you went out with Johnnie last week,” Steven said accusingly.

Ivy spun on him. “What? How do you know that?”

“You did, didn’t you?”

Ivy’s eyes narrowed and she wrapped her arms around her chest, as she looked him up and down.

“Yeah. We went out. So what.”

“Ivy, sweetheart, we are supposed to be dating. You said you and Johnnie were just friends. If that is the case, I need to know what you did. Where did he take you?”

His calm, controlled tone irritated her more. “Actually, I haven’t said I am exclusive with either of you,” she told him.

Something in his eyes when he heard her statement continued to annoy her.

“Look, I’m not comfortable having this conversation at my job. This could have waited until I got home.”

Steven stepped closer and took her hands. “Sweetheart, I just want to take you out. We did have plans to do that, you know.”

“No Steven. We don’t have a lunch date today. We have a dinner date tomorrow.”

They both turned when the door to the conference room swung open.

“Ivy, deal with this. I don’t want any drama after lunch,” Linda told her as she passed by them.

Ivy nodded as her boss and the rest of her colleagues walked down the hall.

“Let’s go to my office. Now!” she said through clenched teeth. She dragged him along, pushed him inside, and slammed the door behind them. “I cannot believe that you come up here and would embarrass me like that. You could have waited with this and called me later.” She leaned on her desk with her arms crossed over her chest.

“Ivy, what’s wrong? Why are you so angry? I just want to take you to lunch. Is that a bad thing?”

“What?” she asked in amazement. “You’re not being serious right now, right? Are you honestly telling me you don’t see the problem here?”

“Okay, look, I’m sorry if I got you in trouble. I just couldn’t wait to see you. I thought about you all night and if I wasn’t going to see you tonight, I had to see you today. There was no malice in my actions, I promise.”

He walked closer to her, flashing his best smile. She groaned and shook her head.

“Steven, you can’t pop up on me unexpectedly, not at my job or my house. All right? You have to call or text, something. That’s just common courtesy. I shouldn’t even have to say that out loud.”

He stepped even closer and took her hands in his. “Okay, I got it. No more surprise visits, I promise.”

She sighed. “Okay.”

He kissed her cheek. “So, where did Johnnie take you?”

“Steven...”

“Fine, fine, nevermind. Can we go to lunch now?”

Chapter Nine



“Yeah,” Ivy said into her phone.

“What’s up, girl? Whatcha doing?”

“Hey, Kelley. Nothing just listening to some music. I was supposed to be having a date night with Steven, but apparently, he blew me off.”

“When was the last time you talked to him?”

“We made these plans yesterday.”

“Fuck him, girl. Call Johnnie.”

“No, I’m cool. I’m taking advantage and getting some me-time in. I painted my toes and had a glass of wine. What’s up with you?”

“Dex left here a little earlier. I felt good when he left, but something was still missing, so I called little Eric to handle that for me.” She giggled.

“You get closer and closer to serving jail time every time you see that boy. You do know that, right?”

“Whatever. The boy said he’s twenty-f years old and that’s older than what I thought. Shit, I’m doing good...even got some grace period in there.”

Ivy looked over her shoulder. “I have to go, Kell, somebody’s at the door. I think Steven finally made up his mind to come after all. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“All right, bye.”

She put the phone down on the cushion next to her and opened the door. “I started to think you weren’t coming. You’re incredibly late,” she said with her hands on her hips.

“Sorry. I just had to rearrange a few things so I can go out of town sooner.”

“Sooner like when?”

“On Wednesday.” He walked in and pointed to the couch. “Can I sit down?”

“Sure, sit.”

“You’ve got a nice place. It’s very feminine looking. I like that.”

“Thanks.” She sat next to him and he moved over.

“I was just listening to some music. Do you want to watch a movie instead?”

“No, your music is fine.”

She sat back and snickered.

“What?”

“I think I’m just surprised to see you out of your uniform. I was actually looking for jeans and a t-shirt, but, umm, the slacks and tie are...nice. A little overdressed for just sitting around the house, but nice. You still sit like you’re wearing your uniform, though.”

"Thanks. So, do you have people over a lot?"

"People?" she asked, turning a raised brow on him. "No, not too many people even know where I live. Why'd you ask that?"

"Well, Johnnie does. You said he sent you food one night. Does he come over a lot?"

Uhh, not this crap again.

She quenched the urge to roll her eyes before answering him. "No, not a lot, but he's been here."

"Really? How many times?"

She scoffed. "What?"

"What do you guys do?"

She sat up, putting her hands out to the sides.

"Do?"

"Well, you said you guys were just friends, so I'm just trying to see how much time friends get to spend at your place and what goes on here between friends."

Ivy shook her head and held up her hand. "Wait, that's enough. We're not going to talk about Johnnie the whole time we're together. Why do you even care? I would think you would be more concerned with what's going on or not going between us," she added, motioning her fingers between them.

He sat up straighter. "I was just making conversation, Ivy."

She stood up. "I'm going to make myself a drink. Do you want something?"

"What do you have?"

She walked across the room and looked under the bar. "Well, I have a bottle of wine, an ample supply of rum and I keep some gin around because my friend likes—"

"Do you have anything that's *non*-alcoholic?"

She sputtered.

"Let's see, umm, diet, orange juice, and water," she announced. "Choose your poison."

"Water is fine."

She eyed him over the bar for a few seconds, rolled her eyes again, and grabbed a bottle of water.

If he knew he wanted water, why not just ask for the damn water in the first place?

"Do you have ice?" he asked as she approached with the bottle.

She turned and walked into the kitchen returning with a tall glass of ice. Handing him the bottle and the cup, she took her seat next to him again.

"Okay, I have an idea. Let's play twenty questions. It will help us get to know each other better."

"How?"

She sighed. "Because the questions will spark a conversation so we can get to know each other better."

He sipped his water and shrugged. "Okay."

"I'll answer first. Pick a topic and ask whatever you want."

She sipped her drink and sat back again, resting her leg against his. He tried to scoot over but was up against the arm of the sofa already.

"Well, uh, I know so much about you already that, I umm, I don't know what to ask."

He fidgeted next to her, sipping his water.

“Hmm, okay, well, and then I’ll ask you something. Since you know all about my family, what is up with yours? Do you have brothers or sisters?”

He nodded. “I have an older brother, but no sisters.”

“Really? What does he do? Is he in the Air Force, too?”

“No, he’s not. My father didn’t think it was a good idea to join the Air Force. If you enter the armed forces, real men would join the Marines,” he said cynically. “If they stay home, they would learn a trade that could make them enough money to take care of themselves and their family.”

Okay. So he’s got daddy issues.

“Okay. So what do your father and brother do for a living?”

Continuing to fidget next to her, he stumbled out a reply. “My father is a, uh, an electrician, and my brother is a carpenter.” He couldn’t hide the scowl that settled onto his handsome features.

“Oh, well, I guess those are manly type jobs, suitable for real men, huh?”

He finished his water and put the empty glass on the coffee table. “Can we change the subject?”

“Sure. We can talk about your mom. What does she do?”

“My mother died when I was seven. My father raised us alone. He never remarried.”

“Oh. I’m sorry, Steven.” She leaned over to hug him but he jumped to his feet.

“What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothing, I-I just—”

“You’ve been all jumpy since you got here,” she accused, standing up. “Every time I try to get close, you move further away from me. I have put more time and energy than I would normally use in dating you. When you finally get to my house, you can hardly sit still!”

“I’m sorry. I, well, let’s just change the subject okay?”

She picked up her drink and walked around the couch. “Maybe you should just leave, Steven.”

Without hesitation, he moved toward the door. “I guess I just have some stuff on my mind. Look, why don’t you get some sleep and I’ll see you tomorrow. When I come, I’ll bring some cards and a six-pack of soda or something. All right?”

He kissed her forehead and left without waiting for a reply. She leaned on the door and shook her head, letting out an exasperated breath.

“Weird,” she mumbled and swallowed the rest of her drink.

Chapter Ten



“That’s game, Give it up, girl. This just isn’t your month. That’s game, Kell.” Ivy laughed, out of breath.

Kelley wiped the sweat from her face with a small towel. “You just got lucky on that last one. Come on, best of seven.”

“How many are you willing to lose in one day?” Ivy asked in an amused tone. “Nope, can’t do it. I’m meeting Johnnie this afternoon. So I’m even going to take a rain check on the lunch you owe me.”

“Oh, all right. I don’t know, Ivy, I think I’m losing my oomph. You know, once that’s gone, my mojo won’t be far behind. I might have to give little Eric a call to lift my spirits,” Kelley explained as she gathered her things.

Ivy laughed. “Girl, please, it’s probably little Eric that’s sucking the oomph out of you.”

Kelley opened her mouth to reply but stopped when one of the personal trainers walked by. He caught Ivy’s eye as well.

“Mmm-hmm. Now if you were smart, you’d be getting with something like that and leave that little Eric alone,” Ivy mentioned when he walked by.

“Really? Why don’t you want him?”

“Dewayne’s nice looking and everything, but he’s too big.”

“Oh, girl, please, there’s no such thing as too big.”

Ivy shook her head. “Uh-uh, I prefer my men to look more realistic. Dewayne looks like a hard cloud in all that spandex.”

Kelley laughed, watching him go into the weight room. “Mmm, well, you know what, I’m feeling smarter already. Give me a call later and I’ll let you know if he’s as hard as he looks.”

She winked at her friend and headed to the weight room.

Ivy shook her head. “Such a hoe.” She continued out of the building and stopped wide-eyed at the door.

“Hey Johnnie, what are you doing here? I thought we were meeting later?”

“Well, it’s like the old saying goes, Ivy. I just happened to be in the neighborhood and, blah, blah, blah.”

“Yeah, right. So, what’s up?”

He pretended to consider it. “Hmm, how do you feel about running away with me?”

She tilted her head. “Run away with you?”

“Yeah, I figured we could hit up a movie, go to the hotel for the night, and in the morning go out to Harlem for brunch at the Jazz Joint. Their salmon cakes are delicious.”

“Sounds nice, but I thought they closed that place down last month.”

“They did, but only to renovate it. It reopened yesterday. Shall we?” he extended his hand, indicating inside the car.

“Okay, but I’ll need to go to my house for a shower and some clothes.”

“We can do that.”

“Sunday brunch should prove to be different. You know, without the yelling and the flying bras and everything,” she said in a teasing tone, moving closer to the automobile.

“Ivy!” he said with a laugh joining her in the back seat. “I thought we were passed all that.”

She covered her mouth to muffle her laughter. “Okay, okay, I’ll let it go.”

“Good, then let’s go.” Johnnie tapped the window separating them from the driver. “We’re ready.”

* * *

“We just keep meeting up in the strangest of places,” the voice said behind her.

Ivy sighed and continued filling her plate. “Mmm, is that right?”

“Yes, and I enjoy seeing you each time.”

“You know, I’ve been thinking. We’ve been trying to really hook up for, what? Two weeks? Three? I don’t remember exactly, but it’s been a good minute now, hasn’t it Steven?” She turned to him.

“Yes, but we’ve seen each other a few times. I thought we were doing fine.”

Ivy tore off a chunk of sweet bread and stuck it into a small bowl of dip as she picked up her plate and shook her head.

“Not really, Steve. I think we need more time together to get to know each other. What are you doing this week?”

He sat next to her shaking his head. “I don’t know..”

Ivy let out a frustrated grunt and slumped back onto the couch. “Steven, relax.” She sipped her Mimosa and put the glass on the floor. “I just want to have alone time with you. We are always out with people or in a restaurant or something. I just want to see you out of that damn uniform. Do you ever take it off? I mean, damn. Do you even own a pair of Levi’s?” She giggled and shoved another piece of bread with dip into her mouth. “I’d love to see you in some black jeans and a t-shirt.”

“I have to go out of town this week. I don’t think I’ll have—”

She let out a loud groan and put her plate on the couch next to her.

“Look, Steven, you know what? I can’t do this. I said I’d try to give us a chance, but dating shouldn’t be this hard. I feel like I’m bending over backward doing this on my own and you’re all like whatever.” She picked up her plate and glass and walked away.

“Wait, Ivy, where are you going?”

“I’m done talking to you. I only show up for these things at my mother’s request and for the food. Today I came because my other plans fell through, but this is the last one that I’m coming too. I’m not going to take the chance of running into you again.”

He grabbed her arm, stopping her. “Wait, Ivy. Look, you’re right. Maybe I could come over and play some cards with you.”

She turned. “When?”

He exhaled. “Uh, how about Tuesday again?”

“Hmm, how about Monday *and* Tuesday this time?”

“But we eat at Jericho’s on Monday.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. "We've had that discussion. Look, if you find it to be some form of torture to spend some quality time with me, just say so."

"No, Ivy, I don't find it to be torture."

"Well if you really want something to happen between us then you'll have to find a way to blend the business part and pleasure into your life."

Steven nodded. "You're right. I guess I can postpone my trip for a few days and spend some time with you. I'm sure if I told the other generals that we wanted to spend some quality time together, they wouldn't object. General Jackson thinks I'm leaving town in the morning, so he shouldn't miss me," he said with a hesitant laugh.

"Great, so you can come over when I get off work tomorrow. We'll watch a movie and just hang out, okay? What do you want to drink?"

"I don't drink."

She shrugged. "Oh yeah. Fine, I'm sure I'll be drinking enough for the both of us."

He followed her back to the couch. "Ivy, I don't think—"

"Damn, Steven, I was joking. Shit, maybe you should take a drink. It might loosen you up some."

Charter Eleven



Ivy caught the bottle Kelley tossed at her from the other end of the couch.

“Ivy, if I were you I’d keep dating both of them. You ain’t married and there ain’t any harm in dating more than one man at a time. Are you sexing them both?”

“Girl, no. Neither of them is getting any.”

Kelley sputtered. “You good then. Date them both.”

“I know, but Steven’s so iffy. One minute he’s so into me the next he’s missing in action. He calls and sends me mega gifts— Oh, did I show you my bracelet? It was delivered on Thursday.”

“Delivered?”

“He’s been out of town since last week.”

Ivy leaned forward, extending her left arm. Dangling from her wrist was a gold link charm bracelet with three charms swinging from it.

“This one is my birthstone, of course. This garnet is his birthstone and I just got this one from him,” she explained, presenting each one for her inspection.

Kelley squinted at the last one. “Does that say my boyfriend is an airman?”

Ivy slouched into the corner and nodded. “Yeah.”

“Cute. Everyone’s wearing those now.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think I should take expensive gifts from him.”

Her eyes widened. “What? Ivy, you never give back the gifts. That’s a female carnal sin. Have you lost your mind? You better not give that bracelet back,” she added with a scoff.

“Yeah, but I don’t know about Steven. One minute he seems interested and the next, he doesn’t. Remember last week when I told you he was supposed to come over and kick it with me on Tuesday?”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Sunday, when I asked him, it was like pulling teeth. On Monday, he finally made it over, but he was so late I thought he had blown me off.”

“I remember. I was on the phone when he showed up.”

“Yeah.” She shot another stream into her mouth. “He was at my house all of five minutes before he was interrogating me about Johnnie. Then after I put an end to all that, it was like he’d run out of things to talk about and he was all fidgety, too. Like a scared kid or something.” She paused to take another drink. “That lasted another fifteen minutes and then I just sent his ass home. He was getting on my nerves. He called me as soon as he got home and apologized. Girl, he said he didn’t know what was wrong with him and I must make him nervous or something, then he promised me when he came over on Tuesday, he would feel better and would even bring a deck of cards.”

“Pitiful.”

"Steven's okay and I like the gifts because, you know, who wouldn't, but he's still a pain in the ass. First, I have to practically beg him to hang out with me, and then when he finally gets there, he spends the whole time interrogating me. He's cool when he's not trippin' off of Johnnie."

"What's wrong with a man who wants to outdo the competition?"

"Nothing, I guess." She shot another long stream in her mouth.

"So, what about Johnnie? Is he putting his best foot forward?"

"Oh yes, and when I'm with him, it's all about me and him. Steven doesn't even exist."

Kelley reached over and pulled a bowl of popcorn into her lap. "So, are they, like, total opposites?"

"Kinda, but they've got a lot in common, too. Both are cute, in two totally different ways. Both are nice, gentlemanly, and proud men. Romantic, generous..." She sighed.

Kelley's finger shot into the air. "There it is, *the but*. Who gets the *but*?"

"Johnnie does. I don't want to be a bracelet, Kelley. I don't want to be the arm candy that he takes to all the little functions he goes to."

"That's crazy talk. Has he given you any reason to believe that?"

"Well, no, he's been great."

"Then what's your problem? You're jumping to conclusions for no reason."

"I know." She shrugged. "I don't know."

"Girl, you're just gun shy, I told you that before. What about Steven? Is he okay? Or does he get a *but* too?"

She sputtered. "I think that man has got other issues altogether."

"Really? What?"

"Something about him is... I don't know... off. He's so, I don't know, it's like he's trying to keep his distance from me. I don't know, he acts like a virgin or something."

"A *virgin*? Girl, please. He's a grown man in twenty nineteen, almost twenty-twenty. That's hardly likely, you know."

She finished her water and tapped the empty bottle on her leg. "Okay, listen to this and you tell me. He has been over to my house to play cards a few times. Apparently, it's our thing now. We have a great time when it's just me and him and no Johnnie talk at all. Last week I asked him if he wanted to play strip poker instead of our usual five-hundred game. I was joking but of course, I would've played if he said yes. You know what he said?"

"Enlighten me."

Ivy sat up and mimicked his proper tone. "He said, I don't think we should be doing things like that until after we're married."

Kelley burst into laughter. "No, he didn't!"

"Oh yes, he did, girl. He also said that since our alone time was obviously raising my sexual tension levels too much, he thought it best that we continue to see each other with other people around. Uh-huh, and then he got up and left!"

Kelley fell over the side of the couch laughing, spitting out her water.

"That shit ain't funny, Kell," Ivy protested, trying to stifle her own laughter. "I think I sat at the table for about half an hour staring at the door, wondering what the hell just happened."

She rolled the empty bottle back and forth in her hands, letting a few giggles slip.

Kelley composed herself. "Girl, I don't know what to say about that one. He's like a throwback from another time or maybe he's just weird. You should ask Johnnie, just to see what he'd say"

"I did, just "

"And?"

Ivy smiled. "I barely got the words out before he started coming out of his clothes talking about playing reverse strip poker."

Kelley laughed again. "Does Steven at least kiss you?"

"Sure he does. He hugs me a lot and kisses me with a quick peck on the lips or the cheek."

"Yuck...and Johnnie?"

Ivy let her head fall back against the arm of the sofa and sighed dreamily. "Woo! That's a whole different story. When Johnnie kisses me, it's me that wants to come out of my clothes."

"Ooo, that sounds promising. It also sounds like you've made your decision, or at least your body has and it's always the tiebreaker."

She lifted her head and sighed. "Yeah, but my parents really like...I mean, I like him, too, but I don't think we have the same connection as Johnnie and I do."

"Be careful, Ivy. You don't wanna get caught up in all that virgin mess. If you give him some and he really is a virgin, it'll be like feeding a stray cat. You'll never get rid of him."

"Yeah, but—"

"Look, Ivy, you know I'm all for you dating both men, but when it comes time to make a decision on which one to keep, you'd better have thought it over. That one-way teaching gets tiring. At best, we want it to be some mutual teaching going on."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. I'll just date them both and see who irks me the most. I'll worry about Steven's extra drama when I get back from New Orleans."

"How long will you be gone this time?"

"Just until Monday."

"Okay, I'll send Paula to tidy up and feed Minnie and Mickey."

"That's cool."

Ivy wrapped her arms around her chest contemplating. "You know, Johnnie is sexy, not at all pushy and he can really kiss. I think I'm gonna give him some tonight."

"Now that's what I'm talking about. Check the man out. See what he's working with. You need some, too. It's long overdue."

She glared at her friend. "All of us are not footloose and fancy-free with sex, Kell." She looked at her watch. "Damn, I gotta go. I haven't even packed yet and Johnnie's stopping by to say goodbye."

"What about Steven?"

Ivy narrowed her eyes. "Huh, what about him? He said he'd be back by Monday for his stupid dinner at Jericho's, but I haven't heard from him. I called his cell and left him messages so..." She shrugged.

Kelley stood and walked her friend to the door. "Alright Ivy. You be careful and don't forget to bring me something back," she said with a light laugh.

Ivy chuckled and hugged her friend. "Do I ever? I'll call you as soon as I get home."

* * *

"Coming!" Ivy dropped the shirt in the suitcase on the bed and ran to the door. "Hi, Johnnie."

"Hi yourself." Johnnie kissed her and shut the door behind him. "Done packing?"

"Almost." She walked back to her room with him in her wake.

"How long will you be gone?"

"Until Monday."

"Hmm, that's five whole days." He chuckled. "I think I'm going to miss you." He stood in the doorway.

"Nice size room. I wondered if I'd ever get to see this room."

Johnnie attempted to sit beside the suitcase, but just as his bottom hit the bed, she pulled him to his feet.

"Nope, get up." She pushed him into the chair in front of her vanity. "We don't sit on the bed."

"We don't?"

She shook her head. "No."

"What's wrong with sitting on the bed?"

"That's not what the bed is for." Ivy went back and forth between the dresser and the bag. "Chairs are for sitting."

"And the bed is for...?"

She zipped the small suitcase and looked at him over her shoulder with a teasing grin. "The bed is for sleeping and other recreational activities."

She put the bag next to the door. Johnnie rose to follow her out of the room, but she put a hand on his chest to stop him when he reached her.

"My flight leaves early enough for you to leave here with me and get to work on time." She wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him. "Unless you have other plans..."

She motioned him backward until they fell on the bed with her on top. His stunned look melted away quickly and a wide happy smile took its place.

"I can't think of anything else I'd rather be doing." She looked down at him and returned his smile.

"Good, because if you think you were going to miss me before, just wait until I'm done saying goodbye."

Chapter Twelve



Walking through the terminal, Ivy spotted a large sign with her name on it lifted above the crowd. Continuing toward it, she found a beautiful, young woman with wispy, honey blonde hair, and large sky blue eyes barely tall enough to be seen among all the people.

“Hi, that’s me. I’m Ivy York.”

“Hi, Ivy, my name is Silvie Fontaine. I’m Sherri’s friend.” She took Ivy’s shoulder bag. “Come, cher, my car’s out front.”

Silvie drove erratically down the highway. She pointed out the outstanding sights of the city as they passed them, but Ivy was more concerned with making sure her seatbelt worked.

“This is almost as bad as New York traffic,” she mentioned, checking her belt again.

Silvie chuckled. “Yeah, but mostly it’s your cab drivers with the bad driving reputation, cher. Here it’s everyone but them.”

Ivy sighed with relief when they pulled in front of the Hotel Provincial. Silvie helped her settle in before taking her out.

“This is a cute little spot, all tucked away and everything. Are they open?”

“Only just. Welcome to The Kitty Cafe. Beverly and I own it. Have a seat, cher. She’s just in the back.”

Silvie hit the bell on the counter. Moments later a woman appeared from around the corner behind the counter. Streaks of gray blended evenly within each curl of her short, brown hair, but her body and face showed lesser signs of age. She walked over to Silvie, smiling, and kissed her firmly on the lips.

“Hi, Sweetie.”

For a moment, Ivy stared at the two women kissing and thoughts of her, and Johnnie’s night returned to the forefront of her mind. A smile touched her lips as she visualized his hands gliding over her heated skin stimulating her even more. His lips were gentle and tantalizing as they devoured her all over.

“You must be Ivy. Hi, I’m Beverly.”

Beverly’s voice brought her out of her flashback. Her focus shifted to the woman before her and she shook her outstretched hand.

“Sherri asked us to look after you while you’re here.”

Beverly pulled out a chair for Silvie.

“How well do you guys know Sherri?”

“Oh, Sherri and I go way back. We met back in the eighties, in San Francisco. We were at spring break during our sophomore year in college. That, of course, was before my Silvie’s time.”

She chuckled, patting Silvie’s hand. “Hey, I was in the eighties. I was born in March of nineteen eighty so I was here for all of it except January and February.” Silvie laughed lightly.

Ivy laughed, too.

"Me too, man. I was born in December of seventy-nine."

"Yes, dear." Beverly smiled, patting Silvie's hand again. "Anyway, Sherri and I met at a party and when Spring break was over, we kept in touch. We wrote letters at first, then we progressed to email and over the years, we've remained close friends. We go to New York, she comes here, and once a year we meet up in San Francisco with other friends."

"That's so cool, from pen-pals to best friends."

"Come, cher, you must be hungry from your flight. Let me make you something to eat real quick."

As others came through the door, Beverly and Silvie both left the table. Silvie took care of the customers and Beverly disappeared to the back again. Beverly came to her table with a plate and a drink.

"I need to help Silvie with the customers but when you're done eating Silvie will walk you to your hotel."

"Walk? I thought we were driving back."

"Oh no, cher, everyone walks around here or they take the trolley, but you're close enough to walk."

Ivy nodded and watched her tend to the customers for a few minutes before returning her attention to her plate.

"What the hell is this crap?" She flipped the food across the plate. Looking around, her gaze focused on the menu board, and she let out a horrified gasp. "Damn, this is a vegetarian joint," she acknowledged.

Ivy played with the leaves and tofu and some other things she didn't recognize on her plate a little longer, making a face. Looking around, she watched other customers interact and eat and looked back at her own plate frowning.

"So, do you like it?" Silvie asked, appearing out of nowhere.

Ivy jumped in her chair. "Oh, umm, yeah, it's, uh, great. What is it?"

"It's called a Chicky Bean Salad."

Silvie bounced off leaving Ivy alone flipping the food around with her fork.

"Damn! I hate everything on this plate."

Ivy looked around the restaurant again in a conspiratorial way then put a napkin in her pocket and slid the salad into it and leaned back, sipping her lemonade.

"I can take you back to your room since you're done eating," Silvie said appearing at the table.

Ivy stood and followed her. "Yes, thanks."

"I've got some free time. Would you like to see some of the sights in the area?"

"Thanks, Silvie, but I'd like to catch a nap before I do that."

Silvie nodded. "You must be exhausted from your flight. If you need anything, give us a ring at the restaurant."

Silvie handed her a piece of paper and gave her a quick hug before leaving. Ivy watched Silvie leave the building before leaning on the counter to consult the person at the desk.

"Tell me where I can get some food, some *real* food, the kind with some meat in it."

“Hey Ivy,” Silvie hugged her when she opened the door. “I brought you another Chicky-Bean Salad since you liked it so much yesterday.”

Silvie handed her a shopping bag. “Oh, umm, thanks.” She dropped it on the desk. “My assistant made this list of places where I could go shopping for a costume. I’d imagine at this late date the pickings are pretty slim. So, if you have any other ideas, I’m all for it.”

Silvie chuckled looking over the list. “These are good, but they’re all tourist traps. I’m sure they’ll still have something but I know a few spots that you could get something really cool and for way cheaper.”

Ivy threw her hands up. “I’m in your capable hands.”

The sun shined bright and hot on Bourbon Street. The amusement park-like festivities brought hundreds, maybe thousands, of people, in and out of costume to the streets. Ivy followed Silvie from store to store, trying on what seemed like hundreds of costumes before choosing one. Ivy returned to the cafe dressed for the evening.

“Wow! That dress was made for you, Ivy. You look fantastic. I think you were born in the wrong century,” Beverly said, putting in her vampire’s teeth.

Ivy smoothed out the velvety material of her emerald green and black satin and smiled.

“Thanks, you think so?” She picked up the wide skirt and spun around. “It’s really pretty but kinda heavy. I can’t believe women used to wear all this dress back in the eighteen hundreds. You don’t think it’s too much, do you?”

“No, I think it looks fabulous on you,” Beverly said then turned to Silvie. “And you, my lovely, are you the virgin I am to feast upon tonight?” she added doing her best Dracula impression.

Silvie giggled and spun, showing off a long, white, simple gauze sheath dress with a high bodice and short sleeves.

“Yes, ma’am.” She curtsied, barely holding back her laughter.

“Then come to me!”

Beverly grabbed her by the waist and pulled her into a deep dip, kissing her on the neck while making growling noises. Ivy laughed at them then looked out the door. Shortly they went out to join the party on Bourbon Street, which raged on into the night. The costumes ranged from the macabre to the elaborate, from cartoon characters to non-fictional characters. Sitting at a table with Albert Einstein, Frankenstein and his bride, and Cinderella, Ivy listened and tapped her foot along with them, eating and drinking. After a while, she finished her fifth drink, said goodnight to her companions, and went to find her friends. Spotting a vampire and victim dancing in the street, she went to them.

“Hey guys, will one of you walk me back to my hotel? I think it’s time I went to bed,” Ivy said, throwing her arms around both of their shoulders.

“What? You ready for bed already, cher?” a male voice said from behind the black mask and vampire teeth. She dropped her arms. “Hey, you ain’t Beverly, and you, you ain’t even blonde.”

“Nope, sorry, cher. You goin’ have to look over there. I saw another vampire dancing with a blonde.” He turned back to his victim.

“Oh, thanks.”

She pushed through the crowd, waving off people trying to get her to dance. Reaching the other couple, she realized they were two men and huffed herself into the nearest seat to scan the crowd.

"Hi, honey."

She looked up to see an angel, but not your conventional looking angel, all white with white fluffy wings, and a halo. This angel wore a short rainbow dress with a sparkly rainbow halo and fluffy rainbow wings.

"Uh, hi."

"That dress looks absolutely stunning on you, cher. Here, this will get you free drinks at Oz. Straight down this street, you can't miss it. Okay?"

The angel lowered rainbow-colored lei around her neck, pointed the way, and bounced off.

"Okay, that was weird... but hey, frees drinks! I'll just look for them along the way."

Slowly and staggering slightly, she walked down the street through the crowd stopping vampires along the way, none of which were Beverly. As she walked down Bourbon street, the music began to change from upbeat jazz to disco and pop and the crowd started to thin out. She bobbed her head, snapped her fingers, and noticed the costumes changed, too. The macabre was mostly left behind and the humorous type seemed to reign. Mickey and Minnie were dancing alongside The Captain and Tennille, and Bert and Ernie sat at the bar outside of Oz with Jessica and Roger Rabbit. She smiled and headed across the street.

"Hi. I saw a rainbow angel that said I could get free drinks here with this lei." She lifted it showing the pirate who was bartending.

"Of course, cher. That was Roxie. He owns this place. He gives free drinks on Halloween all the time. He must have really liked your dress."

"That was a guy? Wow, great costume," she said with a giggle.

"You must be a tourist, huh, cher? You make sure to get yourself in there to see that there show, okay? Now, name your poison."

"Just give me the bar's signature drink."

"You got it."

Taking her drink, she walked inside, passing a pregnant nun, Cher, Diana Ross, and two sailors who wore white biker shorts instead of the bellbottoms, where a laser light show that would put Las Vegas to shame was going on. Ivy found a table off in the corner to watch the show and was joined shortly by Fred, Barney, and Madonna. The show consisted of can-can girls that she wasn't sure were all girls, Prince and Beyoncé impersonators, and a group doing the Madonna blonde ambition tour.

After the show and a few more drinks, she danced with Fred and Barney a few times and tucked some money into a go-go dancing boy's pants that danced on the bar before leaving.

"Come on, cher, the night is still young. Don't you go yet," the pirate bartender pleaded.

"Yeah, I gotta. I lost my friends hours ago and I really have to catch a plane tomorrow. Can you point me to my hotel?"

"There she is the one in the fabulous dress. Didn't I tell you, Alex? Fabulous," the rainbow angel said in awe, walking up to them.

"Yes, Roxie, it is fabulous, but our little Victorian beauty is leaving."

"What? No. Why, cher?"

"I have to go. I have a plane to catch tomorrow."

"Oh, shoot." He stomped his foot. "Well, if you must."

She stared at him. "Can you tell me where my hotel is?"

"Sure, cher, which one?"

"Umm, it's uh, hmm..." Ivy sat on the stool and laughed. "I don't remember the name of it."

Roxie looked at Alex and leaned on the bar.

"Okay, cher, do you remember what's around it, then?" Roxie asked.

"Uh..." She shook her head laughing again. "Oh, oh, it's next to that convent."

"The convent? Cher, please, you goin' have to do better than that. There are about five hotels near that there old convent." Roxie chuckled.

"Do you know it when you see it, cher?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, I think so."

"You ain't staying at that there haunted one, are you, cher?"

"Haunted?"

"The one with that triangle pool out front?"

"Yeah, now I remember. I've never seen a triangle pool before." She giggled, rocking back and forth off balance.

"Well, cher, I can point you right to that there one. Look, you go on down Bourbon three blocks that way and turn right until you see the convent. When that convent be on your left, look to your right. Okay, cher? You be seeing your hotel right on that corner," Alex said.

"Okay."

"You all right, now?" Roxie asked.

She nodded rapidly. "Yeah, yeah, I'm cool." She started down the block, swaying as she walked.

"Well, okay, cher, bye-bye."

Ivy went the direction she was given.

"One," she said loudly strolling down the street. "Two! Damn, this walk is further than I thought."

Going to the third corner with a loud three, Ivy turned right. The music faded behind her, but she continued humming and walking. Crossing the third street, she saw the convent on her left.

"Okay, there's the convent. See, I'm not that drunk. I found the convent," she said confidently. "I can at least count to three." As she neared the next corner, voices made her look left. "It's almost two o'clock in the morning, who's out and not out on Bourbon Street?" she wondered looking at her watch.

A woman's scream made her gasp. Ivy lifted her skirt and tiptoed across the street following the sound.

Who would be screaming at a convent?

She walked around the fence of the convent trying to find a spot to peek inside. Turning another corner, she found a small area where the wood had rotted away, and someone in the past had created a peephole to see inside the yard. Pressing her eye as close as she dared, she could see a woman holding her face as she cried. The petite woman wore a dress similar to hers. A massive man, in comparison to the woman, stood with his back to the fence. Slowly he lifted the woman's face and then abruptly slapped her.

Startled, Ivy jumped and fell back onto the ground. Seconds passed into minutes before Ivy could bring herself to return her eye back to the hole.

The man gripped the front of the woman's dress as he spoke softly with his finger pointed into her face.

Ivy couldn't make out what was being said, but the malice in his body language clearly said he was angry.

When he released her, the girl turned away from him to pick up a mask that fell not too far from her. Although she did not speak, her stance said defiance when she stood to face him again.

The man seemed to puff up in response to the woman's reaction. He suddenly snatched the woman up, struck her with a deafening smack, and then dropped her to the ground. Ivy could see her visibly quaking before him. She attempted to crawl away from him. He watched for a moment then stomped across the ground to retrieve her. Ivy watched the scene in awe, realizing that the woman needed help. Terror gripped her senses. She knew she was in no condition to do something herself to save the woman. Ivy gathered her dress and used the fence to pull herself from the ground then ran down the street, looking for help. The streets remained deserted. Not knowing what else to do, she returned to the fence.

To rest her eye, Ivy shifted and pressed her ear to the hole instead. The abrasive tone of the man's voice had no change. Another loud slap resonated in the air making Ivy jumped again. Breathing hard and shaking, she returned her eye to the hole. Watched as the woman swiped at her face, wiping away blood or tears. Firecrackers exploded in the air. She looked to the sky. The celebration for All Hallows Eve was far from over. The distraction made her wonder how many people were still out on Bourbon Street. When she looked back, the dangerous man had his hands on the woman again. A surprised gasp left her mouth when what looked like a small black gun was pointed at the woman who cowered in his grip. Ivy closed her eyes, wondering what she could do to help without putting herself in harm's way. She took to the streets again in a desperate attempt to find a savior, but still, there was no one around.

Fear and morbid curiosity brought her back to the fence. She shifted her position to help relieve the pressure on her knees but the new position obscured her view. Moving over she kneeled again to press her ear to the hole instead. Straining her hearing made little difference. The sounds that carried across the area, though muffled were frightening.

What was that?

The more she thought about what the sound could be, the more her skin crawled. Needing to see how the young woman fared, she returned to the first position again. The man paced erratically beside the woman as she lay very still on the ground.

"Dammit, Lisa! Shit!" the man screamed.

Ivy gasped as she caught the man's voice again. Her heart thumped fitfully in her chest. She covered her mouth to silence her hysterical cries. Quickly, she scanned the area. Hoisting her dress around her waist, Ivy took off in a dead run across the street. She stood on the corner for a moment to get her bearings before going around the corner toward her hotel. Grateful that no one was at the front desk, she continued to her room, stripped off her clothes, and cried herself to sleep.

* * *

"Are you just getting up? You're going to be late, cher," Silvie said perkily when Ivy let her in.

"My flight doesn't leave until ten o'clock, you know." She closed the door and dragged herself to the bathroom.

"Yes, but you know how our traffic is. Are you packed?"

“Yes, yes, I’m packed. I knew I’d be out late so I packed before I met you guys for the party,” she yelled through the door.

“About yesterday, cher, I’m sorry we got separated,” Silvie said through the cracked door.

“No biggie, I had a blast. I partied up and down the street and met some interesting people. I ended up at some bar called Oz,” Ivy yelled over the noise of the shower.

“You know, cher, Oz is a *gay* bar,” Silvie told her when she appeared at the table dressed.

“I know now.” She chuckled, drying her head with one hand and holding her forehead with the other. “Hey, could you grab me some aspirin and juice from downstairs? My head is banging.”

“Sure.”

Upon Silvie’s return, they set off for the airport. Ivy gave her one last hug.

“Thanks, Silvie, for everything.”

“No problem. I’m glad you had a good time, cher, and I can’t wait to read your article. Here, I made you a salad in case you got hungry on the plane.”

Ivy accepted the box with a smile and watched Silvie drive away. On her way to the newsstand, she dropped it in the closest garbage can and picked up every newspaper the city offered. On the plane, she read each of the different publications cover to cover relieved that she didn’t find anything about a dead girl, on the convent grounds, or anywhere else. Chalking it up to a drunken hallucination, she leaned back and catnapped for the rest of her flight.

Chapter Thirteen



Ivy stretched and reached for her phone.

Hi, Ivy, it's Johnnie. Well, you were right, I miss you like crazy. I would have missed you anyway but after such a nice goodbye... He chuckled. Well, you know... Anyway, I was just wondering if you were back yet. Call me when you get home.

Smiling, she dialed a number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom."

"Ivy, sweetheart, are you back?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm back. How are you?"

"Just fine, dear. How was New Orleans?"

Flashes of the night before played before her eyes, but she was still unsure if it really did happen.

"Ivy? Are you still there?"

Ivy jumped when her mother's questioning voice. She shook her head.

"Yes, Mom, I'm here. It was cool. It's a beautiful city. Reminded me of home, except hotter," she said, with a forced laugh. "It was mostly summer-like temperatures while I was there. Could you imagine New York like that in November? People would be freaking out, thinking it was the end of the world or something."

"Well, that's nice. Have you called Sergeant Jones, yet? You know, I really like that young man, Ivy. He reminds me of James when he was a young airman. He's going places, you know."

"No, Ma, I haven't called anyone but you."

"Oh, well, that's fine dear. I talked to him today. I told him your flight was due at ten forty-five, so he knows you're home. Why didn't you tell him you were going out of town?"

She sucked her teeth. "Ma, I wish you would stop doing that. Steven and I are just friends and we're just starting that. He doesn't have to know my every move. Besides, I tried to call him, but I couldn't get a hold of him."

"Well, he said he had some business to take care of. Men always have some kind of business to take care of dear."

"Ma..." she whined.

"What Ivy? I'm just trying to help. He likes you a lot, you know."

She held her head, shaking it. "Ma, please, can we not have *that* conversation every time we talk."

Her mother sighed in her ear. "Ivy, I'm only trying to help," she repeated.

"Look Ma, I gotta go. I love you and I'll call later." Before she could reply, Ivy hung up. "Uhhggg! That woman is too much!" Shaking her head, Ivy dialed another number. "Hey Kell, what's up?"

"Hey girl, what time did you get home?"

"I don't know, sometime today. I fell asleep. What time is it?"

"It's a quarter to seven. Have you called your mother?"

She fell back onto the couch and pulled the back cushion over her head. "Yes, Kell. It always amazes me how someone could be so calm, sweet, and docile with my father and such a pain in the ass to me at the same time?"

"Mothers have a knack for that. Are you under the cushion again?"

"No," she lied.

Her friend gave a knowing laugh. "Yeah, okay. Did you call Johnnie?"

"No, not yet. I called my mom and then you. He called *me* though while I was asleep. He left a voicemail."

"You sound tense, girl. You want me to send Ryan over?"

Ivy could almost see her friend's mischievous smile in her mind's eye and laughed.

"Girl, you know that's my natural state when I get off the phone with my mom. Thanks for the offer, but no. I said goodbye to Johnnie in a *very* nice way. I think I'll call him and let him reciprocate and let him welcome me home."

"Well, hurry up and call the man back, girl, and call me later. I want to know how New Orleans was *and* Johnnie."

Kelley laughed and then the line went dead. Ivy smiled under the pillow and called Johnnie.

"Yeah, Hayes here."

"Hi, Johnnie, it's Ivy."

"Hey, baby. Where are you? You sound like you're in the tunnel or something."

"No, I'm home, on the couch...under the cushion."

He laughed. "Damn, was New Orleans that bad?"

"No, no, it was great, but... I don't know." She sighed. "I just got off the phone with my mother and well..."

"Ahh, I get it now."

"Yeah. So I really need to talk. Can you come over?"

"Of course."

"Can you bring some food, too? I just want to hang out and, I don't know, maybe talk you into a mercy hump while you're here."

Johnnie laughed. "*A mercy hump?* Trust me, girl. It'll be nothing like that."

"Well, just get here soon, okay?"

"Baby, you sound so strange. You sure you don't want to talk now?"

She sighed. "I need your opinion on something I may have seen, but I don't want to talk about it on the phone. I'll tell you all about it when you get here, okay? Oh, and don't forget the drink."

"Okay, see you soon."

She put the phone on the table and again dragged herself to the bathroom for another wake-up shower.

"Damn, was that the door?" she muttered leaving the bathroom.

She checked her watch then pulled on a pair of sweats. "Hold on! Coming!" she called out. "Now who could this be? Johnnie couldn't have gotten here so fast."

Slipping a t-shirt over her head, she grabbed a ponytail holder and walked to the door. "If that damn Kelley sent Ryan anyway, I'm gonna—" she muttered, swinging the door open.

"Hi, Ivy."

“Steven! Uh, hi. What are you doing here?”

He shrugged and pushed past her. “I came to welcome you home. When did you get back?”

“Uh, earlier this afternoon. I kinda lost track of time when I fell asleep.”

Closing the door with her foot, she tightened her ponytail then leaned against it.

“S-so, what’s up?”

“Yes, I spoke to your mom. She told me you were home. Pity I had no clue that you even *left* town in the first place.”

“Well, I tried to call you so we could spend time together before I left on Wednesday, but couldn’t reach you.”

She walked to the table and leaned on the back of the chair.

“Well, I thought you would come to Jericho’s on Monday like we usually do. Imagine my embarrassment when you didn’t show,” he said crisply and moved the garment bag over to lean on the back of the couch, opposite her. “Why didn’t you come?”

Ivy wrapped her arms around her chest. “I’ve told you before, Steven, I don’t like hanging out with the generals and the wife club or whatever they are. They’re too weird.”

Steven gave her a quick smile and rested his hand on the garment bag. “Okay. So, where did you go?”

“Go?” she asked nervously.

His voice was calm, almost soothing. “Yes, Ivy, where did you go for this latest assignment?”

She dropped her arms and gripped the chair behind her. “Oh, to, umm, New Orleans.”

“Really? I’ve been there a few times on business for General Jackson. Great city, good food. So, did you see anything worth writing about?”

“I was there to cover Th-the Halloween celebration. It was supposed to be as grand as Mardi Gras.” She swallowed, working to keep her voice calm.

“Well? Was it?”

She paused, willing her heart to slow down, and tried to sound calmer than she was.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, it was great. I partied, saw lots of stuff, and some great costumes, too.”

“Did you? Is that what this is?” He patted the garment bag. “Your costume?”

“Uh, yeah.” She walked over and picked the bag up. “I’ll just put it in the room. It seems to be in your way.”

He held up his hand, stopping her short. “Not yet. I’d like to see it. Did you go scary or funny?”

“Uh, no, it’s dirty. I can show you later when it’s cleaned.” She turned to walk away, but he grabbed her arm.

“No, I want to see it,” he said more urgently and snatched the bag from her. Returning it to the couch, he tore the zipper in his eagerness to open it.

“Ahh, I see now that you went for elegant.” He touched the dress gently and then in an instant, pulled his gun. “It’s beautiful. Just as beautiful as the last time I saw it when you ran down the street away from the convent.”

Ivy’s eyes widened. Confirmation and fear gripped her heart almost simultaneously when she raised her hands.

“Steven, what are you doing?”

"It *was* you. The funny thing is, I knew it was you. As far fetched as it was, from the quick glimpse I had, I still knew it was you. My beautiful Ivy, with her Japanese mother and black father—beauty and power rolled into one—the perfect wife. But you were supposed to be back in New York, so how could that be you running down the street away from me? So I watched her..." He paused to point at her. "You. I watched *you* run down the street. When her—your—mask fell off into the street, right before she turned the corner, that's when I caught a glimpse of her beautiful face. *Your face.*"

Steven smiled into her stunned face and chuckled.

"You're going to be my wife, Ivy. Even if you hadn't lost the mask, I'd have known it was you. Do you think after watching you play handball with your friend Kelley at the gym or jogging in the park for the last eight months, that I wouldn't know how you moved?"

Ivy stepped back, pushing the chair with her. The smile on his face made her skin crawl.

Oh my God. This fool has been watching me too.

Steven sat on the back of the couch again, holding the gun up by the side of his head.

"When I came home, the first thing I did was speak to your mother. She told me you were in New Orleans this past weekend and, well, that was all the confirmation I needed. The nail in the coffin, if you will. I just knew I had to see you then," he added with a chuckle.

Ivy rolled her eyes. *He could've used a different analogy than that while he's holding the damn gun.*

"Steven, you killed that girl."

"I didn't mean to kill her!" he snapped, jumping to his feet.

Ivy gasped and took a step back.

Steven cleared his throat, then slowly sat back down and spoke softly again. "I'm sorry for yelling, sweetheart. " He eased back down to sit before speaking in a calmer tone. "I didn't mean to kill her, Ivy. I just meant to shut her up. Her yelling reminded me of Sabrina. I hated it when she yelled. Lisa is a lot smaller than Sabrina, but how was I supposed to know I would smother her?"

Ivy made a face. She looked at Steven's large hands and then back at him. "Yeah, but Lisa was a small woman. You probably covered half her face. Didn't you think something was wrong when she stopped struggling?" Her voice dripped with disgust.

He shrugged. "I liked it when she was still like that."

Ivy rolled her eyes.

"But Ivy, I'd never do anything like that to you," he added quickly.

"Uh-huh. Who's Sabrina?" she asked with a raised brow.

"She's no one. Just a woman I knew," he told her with a flippant wave.

"*Knew?* What does that mean?"

Steven signed dramatically. "Let's not talk about Sabrina. She's not an issue for me anymore. I got rid of her. Dealing with her was going against my plans."

"What plans?" She dropped her hands to her hips.

"The plans I've made for *us.*"

She sputtered, her irritation overriding her fear. "There is no us, Steven. We've dated, yeah, but I've dated other people, too, remember? We were never exclusive."

"Everyone is entitled to sow their wild oats, honey. I can accept that. It's about to be a new millennium, after all, but it's time to stop and make your choice known."

"Really? Well, then, I choose Johnnie. I didn't have to bend over backward to get him to spend time with me. He has far less drama coming with him and no stinking ass, general's wives club, either," she said, letting her fury topple over.

A quick grimace came and went on his face before he smiled at her.

"That's too bad, Ivy. I guess we're just going to have to remove ole Johnnie from the scene then, so we can move forward with the plan. Eliminate the competition, if you will."

She leaned on the chair again. "Look, Steven, let me be frank. You're cool and all—Well, I thought you were, before all of this, but anyway. I'm not trying to be with you."

"I told you this thing with Sabrina was an accident."

Ivy narrowed her eyes. "*Sabrina?*"

"What? No, Lisa."

"You said, Sabrina."

He thought for a moment then shook his head. "Well, Sabrina was an accident too."

Ivy's eyes widened. "*Too?*"

"Look, all I'm saying is don't let that be the basis of your decision."

She stood up. "*Basis?* It was hardly the basis of anything. It was more like the icing on the cake. I wasn't trying to be with you before all this jumped off. I had already made my decision."

"Ivy—"

"You weren't around enough, Steven. If you were trying to be my man, I couldn't tell. Granted, when we did hang out and do stuff we had a good time, but overall it was hard to keep in touch with you," she said with a frustrated huff.

Steven shook his head. "Ivy, you don't understand."

"Steven, even when you were around you had to clear everything we did through the general. I did not want to date the whole damn air force!" She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest challengingly. "So what are you going to do, kill me because I don't want you?"

"Yes, you do."

"What?" Her annoyance stirred up again as she dropped her arms and stood. "No, I don't and how are you going to tell me what I want? I'm going to continue to date Johnnie, not you."

He cocked his gun and extended his arm toward her.

"I said you do. Look, Lisa and Sabrina had their purpose. They took care of my libido so that you would stay pure until we were married."

Ivy scoffed and her hands went up. "Hold up. I know you're not saying you messed around with those girls because you think I'm *pure?*" She sucked her teeth. "Well, I hate to break it to you, but that ship has sailed," she added with an eye roll.

"I'm not stupid, Ivy. I know you're not an actual virgin, but your mother said you hadn't dated anyone in almost a year. The last guy you did date, you were with him for only three months. You didn't sleep with him because he turned out to be a jerk. So, by my calculations, that's more than a year without sex."

Ivy blew out a breath. *For real, Mom.* She swallowed the scream that bubbled to the surface. *I'll have to remember to invite her over for some chicken to thank her for providing Steven with too much information.*

Ivy put up a hand. "Hold on. You were messing with two girls and you were having a fit about me seeing Johnnie? That's kind of hypocritical, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "It is what it is. Do you use toys?"

Ivy's jaw dropped. "Wha—?"

"It doesn't matter. I've been told that toys don't really count. I think you would qualify as a second virgin by today's standards and that's good enough for me."

Ivy shook her head. "So, what do you do, Steven, pump my mother for info about me whenever you have free time?"

"I don't have to. She has her own general's wives club, as you call them. All the wives talk, you know. You just have to know the right wife to speak to and you can get the kind of information you're looking for."

She let out an exasperated breath. *So, all my damn business is floating through the whole air force!*

"General York's group is just as big as General Jackson's, just in a different area of the city."

Her attention snapped back to Steven. "What are you saying? My parents hang out at Jericho's, too?"

"Of course, they do. Just on a different day of the week."

She shook her head hard. "Uh-uh, no way. My mother doesn't hang out with a bunch of... of *generals' wives*. She spends her time doing charities, and benefits, and, and—"

Steven's eyes widened. "Who do you think she does those things with, Ivy? Your mother has been an airman's wife almost all her life. She's been a *general's wife* for over twenty years. That's the life she lives and so will you, so I suggest you get used to it."

She was losing the fight to keep her temper in check. "I don't have to get used to anything. I'm not my mother and I'm *not* an airman's wife," she told him through a clenched jaw.

He flashed that grin she used to think was cute. "You will be."

"Oh, no I won't," she assured him defiantly.

His smile widened and he raised the gun near his head again.

"Being an airman's wife has perks, you know. Lots of perks come with being the right-hand man of the general who's the military liaison to the U.N."

She sputtered. "That's my father's position and you're not his aide."

"Not anymore, remember? He's going to retire from his position right after the New Year. General Jackson will become his successor."

Ivy opened her mouth to correct him but closed it just as quickly. He had her on that point and it pissed her off more.

"General Jackson will promote me to the rank of master sergeant when he's official and then we will set a date. That's got a nice ring to it, don't you think? *Master Sergeant Steven Jones*. I'm finally gonna be somebody and no one will be able to take that from me," he added, barely loud enough for her to hear.

She frowned at the goofy expression on his face. "Hold the phone, Steven. You can't really believe this crap?"

Her question seemed to bring him out of his daze long enough to look at her.

"What?"

She shook her head. "You know, all you weird-ass Scorpios are the same. All of you have power issues. Huh, I have to remember to add Scorpios to the list with those Virgos," she said thoughtfully.

His brow furrowed as he wrapped his arms around his chest tucking the gun under his arm. "What list? What the hell are you talking about?"

Ivy sucked her teeth and counted on her fingers.

"It's always power, loyalty, and complete obedience with you guys. You're never gonna be happy or satisfied because you'll never have enough of either," she told him. "A person could work themselves to the grave trying to make you happy and it wouldn't make a difference."

He used the gun to scratch his temple. "You know, sometimes you just go off on something and I'll have no clue what the hell—"

"Fine, fine, never mind! It doesn't matter. What does any of this have to do with me anyway? I'm sure you'll be able to find yourself another girl, Mr. *I'm gonna be a master sergeant one day.*"

"Oh no, sweetheart, you're special. You're a *general's* daughter. Marrying you would put another general in my pocket. That and my own position will give me the momentum to move up and become a general myself one day."

She chuckled. *I knew it. I should've bet Kelley some money.*

"That's some power trip you're on, Steven. You just move all your little people pawns around where you want them until you get what you want, huh?"

"Something like that. Now all I need is a beautiful, obedient, and docile wife on my arm."

There was no humor in the laugh she let out. "Well, that sure the hell ain't me."

"Not yet."

She sputtered and locked on his gaze. "Not ever."

"I beg to differ."

He raised his gun again, but this time before he could point it at her, she charged him, knocking him over the back of the couch. His hand hit the edge of the coffee table, setting the gun off. The bullet hit the fish tank, smashing it, splashing water everywhere.

"No!"

She crawled over the couch toward the tank. Steven turned over, grabbed her by the ponytail, and yanked hard.

"Oww!" she cried, reaching for her hair.

"You bitch!" he yelled, dragging her across the wet carpet.

"Oh, hell no! I know you did not just call me a *bitch!*"

She scrambled to her knees, grabbed his forearm, and pulled it to her mouth.

"Ahh! Shit! You bit me!" he screamed, releasing her.

"Yeah, you fucking freak!" She jumped up and kicked him in the side. "He folded over in pain.

And I kicked you, too!"

Ivy leaned across the coffee table for the gun, but he kicked the table leg, breaking it and knocked her and the gun onto the wet floor. Unable to reach it, she grabbed her phone instead. He snatched her back by her shirt

and threw her onto the couch, holding her down by the neck. She smashed the phone on the side of his head several times.

“Ahh, shit! Stop it!”

Steven grabbed his head and fell on the couch next to her, but was only slightly stunned. He reached for her shirt again to stop her from crawling away. She attempted to kick him and beat his arms to break his grip, but his superior strength won out. He yanked her toward him with both hands and rolled over on top of her.

Scratching, punching, and kicking him, Ivy continued to fight him as she scooted across the cushions.

Steven kept pace with her, unwilling to free his victim.

Ivy struggled beneath him for what seemed like an eternity until a knock on the door made them both jump.

Chapter Fourteen



Ivy opened her mouth to scream, but Steven covered it.

“Don’t you dare. This is between me and you.”

Pounding his forearms with her fists, Ivy continued fighting and trying to kick him, but her efforts got slower and slower until finally, they stopped. The knock came again. Steven looked down at her. Ivy closed her eyes and held her breath. Abruptly Steven snatched his hand away as if he were burned.

“Oh, shit!”

As soon Steven lifted his hand, Ivy’s eyes popped open. She grabbed his fingers and pulled them to her mouth.

“Ahh!”

“You think I’d let you kill me like you did that Lisa girl? You really are crazy. Johnnie! Johnnie! Help!”

Almost instantly, the door was kicked open and a tall, young, muscular black man came inside. Ivy tried to get up, but Steven grabbed her by the throat and pushed her down into the cushions.

“No!” she squeaked out.

She kicked him hard between the legs and moved as he began to fall, but before he landed on the couch, holding himself, the young man reached over the broken table and punched Steven. She rubbed her throat, watching them as another man lifted her off the couch.

“Hey! What the—” She fought against him as he carried her across the room. “Johnnie! Oh, thank God!” She hugged him as he cradled her in his arms.

“Ivy, baby, what the hell happened? What’s going on?”

He put her on her feet and hugged her back. Breathing hard she kissed him and then slapped him on the side of the head.

“Oww! What was that for?”

“What the hell took you so long? Did you go to China for the damn food?” she screamed. “We had a date for a mercy hump. Will it always take you that long to come over and hump me?”

He chuckled. “No, baby, I went to Silvio’s.”

“Which one, Johnnie? The original in Italy?” She leaned back into his arms, pouting.

Johnnie pulled her into his embrace. “I’m sorry, babe. Next time I will just come over and we will order food.”

Steven grunted as Marcus pulled him off the floor and tossed him face-first to the couch.

“I can’t believe you left me here to fight this fool all by myself.”

“Had I known the fool was coming over here, I’d have been here sooner to whip his ass myself.”

Ivy’s narrowed eyed look disappeared in the face of his laughing grin. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“I’ve called the police, Mr. Hayes. They’ll be here any minute,” the man that carried her to Johnnie said.

“Thanks, Jeff.”

“Are you okay, ma’am? Do you need a doctor?”

She rubbed her throat. “No, umm, Jeff. I’m fine.”

Jeff nodded and went back to his partner guarding Steven. Ivy turned to Johnnie.

“So who are these guys?”

“Those are my bodyguards, Jeff and Marcus.”

“Bodyguards? Why do you need bodyguards?”

“Well, I am a millionaire, so sometimes I need someone to guard my body. Marcus was the one who helped us get out of Ritchie’s that day.”

“Really? I could barely see who that was through the crowd. I thought it was the restaurant manager.”

“Nope, it was Marcus. They’re with me all the time.”

“*All* the time? How come I’ve never seen them before?”

“I prefer them to be discreet so I can still have a life. I’m a millionaire, not a rapper,” he said with a light laugh.

She laughed with him and leaned back into his arms. “Well, I sure am glad they were with you today.”

“They’re with me *every* day. They’ll take good care of us.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and rocked her.

* * *

Ivy and Johnnie returned to her apartment. Marcus and Jeff stood up from the table.

“The place is secure Mr. Hayes. No one has been here since you and Ms. York left with the police,” Marcus reported.

Ivy walked around the couch to pick up her fish. “Mickey and Minnie are dead.” She wiped away a tear and looked around. “The carpet is ruined, my table is broken and look,” she lifted the cushion for his inspection. “His stupid knee went right through it. And my phone...” Ivy dropped the cushion to gather up the pieces then tossed them into the air. “Bastard.” She sat on the arm of the sofa and let out a sad laugh. “I guess it’s time to redecorate, huh?”

“Cheer up, sweetheart. We can fix this. I got a little money to spare, remember? I can help you get some new stuff if you let me.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks. I have to call Sherri and let her know what’s happened.” Ivy looked at her watch. “It’s way late and by the time I get done cleaning...” She sighed again. “I can’t go to work with my place looking like this. The door is kicked in, the living room is all messed up, there’s water every—” She stopped and turned to him. “Will you stay and help me?”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Of course. Anything you need from me is yours.”

“Thanks, Johnnie.”

Ivy wiped her eyes again and attempted a smile. “Well, I’m done crying about all this. It’s time to give Mickey and Minnie the traditional fish burial and then we can start cleaning up.”

* * *

"Uhg. Johnnie your phone is ringing," Ivy said sleepily.

"Yeah. I got it. Hello."

"Yes, I'd like to speak to Ivy York, please."

"Yes, ma'am. Hold on." Johnnie leaned over and dropped a kiss on Ivy's shoulder. "Ivy, the phone. It's for you."

Ivy turned over and yawned. "Okay. Hello?"

"Ivy, what the hell is going on? Who is that man? Why did you leave this number to reach you?"

"Oh. Good morning to you too, Mom."

"Don't be cheeky with me Ivy. Tell me what's going on."

Ivy lay back on her pillow and covered her eyes with her arm. "I just got up, Mom. Why not help me out and you tell *me* what's going on."

"Jennifer just called me and said that Derrick got a call to bail Jones from jail...and it was you that sent him there!"

"Oh."

"*Oh?* Is that all you can say is *oh?*" her mother asked frantically.

She rolled her eyes. "What would you like me to say, Mother?"

"You can start by telling me what happened, Ivy. Why did you send Jones to jail?"

She sighed. "Do you even care, Ma?"

"Of course I do. I only want what's best for you, honey."

"*Really?* Is that why you tried to set me up with a lunatic?"

Johnnie scooted toward the edge of the bed. Ivy touched his shoulder then held up a finger.

"Sergeant Jones is a good airman, Ivy. He's going places being in General Jackson's charge. He will be able to take care of you."

Ivy eased back down to the pillow and waved Johnnie forward.

"Yeah, Ma, so he said, but you know what? Your *good airman* sucks in the real world and that's where I live. Out here, Steven Jones is a crazed stalker maniac and a killer. Is that the kind of man you want for me? Is that what you think is *best* for me? Well, you can have him and all that other crazy shit that comes with him and your stupid ass generals wives club, too."

"Ivy Michele York, I am still your mother. Don't you use that language or that tone with me."

"Ma is that the only reason you called because I'm fine, you know. In case you were wondering."

Her mother's flustered voice screeched in her ear. "Ivy!"

"Did it ever occur to you, *Mother* that I sent him to jail for a reason? For something he actually did to me?"

Ivy could hear her mother sputtering into the phone, her shock obviously overwhelming her ability to speak. She sighed again.

"Okay, Ma, calm down. I'm sorry. I don't mean to upset you. Look, I've got a lot of stuff to do today, okay? I'll call you later."

She hung up without waiting for an answer and dropped the phone behind Johnnie's back.

"Brother!"

"There's no point in doing that," Johnnie said.

Ivy turned to look at him. "Doing what?"

"Dropping the phone back there."

"Why not?"

He scoffed and lifted his head to look at her. "You just smarted off to your mother, Ivy. That pretty much guarantees you a call from your father."

"Shit!" she screamed at the ceiling.

"Why are you so mad at your mom anyway?"

"What?" She leaned up on her elbow. "Hell-lo! That woman set me up with a crazy man. Shit, she practically gift-wrapped me and handed me over to him. She pushed me at Steven every chance she got, hand-fed him *way* too much information about me, and basically raised him on a pedestal." Ivy dropped back to her pillow. "He was stalking me! Can you believe that? He knew when I worked out, when I played handball with Kelley, when and where I went jogging—" She blew out a breath. "She didn't even bother to ask if I was okay," Ivy added, then chuckled disbelievingly. "All she seems to care about is the grandkids she doesn't have."

"Grandkids, huh?" Johnnie rolled over on top of her. "Maybe I can help her with that part."

Ivy chuckled, looking up into his mischievous grin. "Oh no, you can't. No babies are coming from here no time soon, mister." She wrapped her arms around his neck. "But feel free to go through the motions as many times as you'd like."

Johnnie moved closer to kiss her, but before his lips could reach hers, the phone rang. Ivy squeezed her eyes together and held her finger up again.

"Don't you say a word."

He returned to his spot beside her and handed her the phone, smiling. "Wouldn't dream of it."

She pulled his pillow over her head before he could lay on it.

He chuckled. "You can't hide, Ivy. He knows you're here, remember?"

Johnnie removed the pillow and shook the phone at her.

She huffed. "I was trying to get me some, Johnnie."

"Oh, you're going to get some, as soon as you're off the phone."

She sighed. "You drive a hard bargain, Mr. Hayes. You'd better be worth the wait. I'll be pretty stressed out after talking to both of them back-to-back."

Johnnie laughed. "I guarantee it'll be worth every minute," he added with a wink.

Ivy read the tone in his voice and saw the undeniable lust in his eyes. It spoke to her very core and her body responded readily.

"You expect me to carry on a conversation with my *father* after a statement like that?"

Johnnie smiled. "The longer it takes you to answer the phone, the longer he's going to talk. Don't worry. I'll be right here when you're done. I'm your own personal stress reliever," he told her, leaving a quick kiss on her forehead.

She smiled then took a deep breath before taking the phone from him. "Hello."

"Ivy, is everything okay? What took you so long to answer the phone?"

"Just gearing up for your phone call, Dad."

"Are you alright, sweetheart? I heard what happened with young Jones."

The concern in his voice comforted her. "I'm a little shook up, Daddy, but I'll be okay."

"Are you sure, honey? Your mother is beside herself about this whole situation."

Ivy could hear her mother talking in the background to her father, catching a few words here and there, about what the other wives will say to her at the next meeting and scoffed.

"She's not beside herself with concern for me, Dad. She's worried about how all this will make her look bad to everyone else," she said with an eye roll.

"Ivy, I will not have you talk about your mother like that. You have the right to be angry, but you will not be disrespectful in your anger. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," she said, feeling like she was ten years old again.

"Now listen to me, these things have a way of working themselves out, darling. You'll see."

"Yes, Dad."

"All right. I love you and we'll speak to you later."

"Love you too."

Ivy rested her arm across her eyes for a few minutes before screaming her frustration to the ceiling. She turned to Johnnie.

"See, it's moments like that is why I don't plug my phone in my bedroom. I keep it out in the living room for some peace."

Ivy turned over and dropped the phone on the floor then looked over her shoulder. "Don't you owe me some much-needed stress relief?"

Johnnie laughed and laid her on her back to roll over on top of her again. "Absolutely."

His kiss finally made it to her lips and with it came a maelstrom of turbulent emotions. All her senses were awakened and every inch of her skin felt electrified. Ivy could feel his touch everywhere at once. She was putty in his hands feeling hot and cold at the same time. Starbursts exploding behind her eyes with each touch. The erratic sounds of his breathing filled her ears.

"I could make love to you forever if you let me."

The promise in his words sent shivers up her spine. Johnnie took her back and forth to the brink of ecstasy with his mouth, his words, and his touch over and over before finally letting her tumble over. Moments later, he happily joined her. Exhausted, they held onto each other until sleep captured them both.

"Honey, the doorman just called. Someone's coming up. Can you get the door?" Johnnie called from the kitchen.

"Okay."

Ivy gathered the paperwork at her makeshift workstation into a pile and hit save on the computer. She was halfway across the floor when someone knocked on the door.

"Officer Grant, how are you?"

"Ms. York, how are you? I hope this isn't a bad time."

She stepped back to let him in. "Not at all. Please come in."

The officer walked to a chair. "I got the message that you could be reached through Mr. Hayes while your apartment is under renovation. May I?"

Ivy sat on the couch. "Of course. Yeah, my place is way too messed up to stay there safely."

He flipped out his notebook and started writing. "So if we need to contact you again..."

"Yes, you can contact me here. Thanksgiving is next week. I'll definitely be here until after that. I have a new phone now so you can call me as well."

Johnnie came out of the kitchen drying his hands on a dishtowel. "Officer Grant, this is a surprise. How are you?"

The police officer stood and shook Johnnie's outstretched hand. "Just fine, Mr. Hayes, just fine. I was just about to give Ms. York some new information I had on the case."

Johnnie sat down beside Ivy's and put his arm around her shoulder. "Please, carry on, then."

"Well, a general from the Air Force, a, uh..." he paused, flipping through his notebook. "Oh, a General Jackson came down to bail Sergeant Jones out of jail the day after the incident."

"Yeah, my mother told me about that."

"Well, they didn't set bail for him. Bail was denied," the officer concluded.

"It was? Why?" Johnnie asked.

"He has several charges against him... battery, criminal confinement, intimidation, and Ms. York has also indicated that he was allegedly involved in killing someone in New Orleans. The courts determined him a flight risk because he's still an active member of the Air Force and that decision gave us time to check out those accusations."

"So, he'll stay in there until his court date," Johnnie assessed, relief filling his voice. "That's good. I thought he was out and was just being smart enough not to come near her again."

"It's not that simple, Mr. Hayes. General Jackson has petitioned the courts to have them release Sergeant Jones into military custody."

"Can they do that?" Ivy asked, alarmed.

"Not until a full investigation is conducted on the accusations in New Orleans."

"And?" Johnnie stressed.

"And I'm sure they are doing just that and we are as well," the officer answered.

"Yeah, but even without this murder in New Orleans—" Johnnie started.

"*Alleged* murder," Officer Grant said correcting him.

Johnnie gave him a quick smile. "Whatever. Even without it, he attacked my Ivy. He held her at gunpoint and choked her. He tried to kill her. Can't you guys lock him up on that alone?" he asked, his voice rising with agitation.

"Oh yes, we're getting him on those. That's where all the charges come in, but New Orleans has asked us to extradite him to where the first crime took place."

"Can the generals stop that from happening and try to get him into a military court instead?" Ivy asked.

Officer Grant sighed. "I'm sorry, Ms. York, but I just don't know yet. We've never dealt with the military like this. We don't know what kind of power they have in the civilian world."

"What are the charges against him, again?" Johnnie asked.

Officer Grant looked at his pad. "Criminal confinement, battery, and intima—"

"*Battery*? Why not attempted murder?"

"We don't know if he went to Ms. York's house with the intent to kill her when he got there."

Johnnie scoffed incredulously. "He came with a *gun*. Doesn't that say *intent* to kill?"

"He's licensed to carry that gun. He can easily say that he carries the gun at all times and during a momentary lapse of anger and he pulled it out. A good lawyer can get that thrown out, but—"

Johnnie's obvious anger made his words slow and deliberate when he interrupted the officer. "He came to her house, with his gun, knowing that she was the one that saw him kill that girl. What the hell else could be on his mind?"

Officer Grant shrugged. "That's for the lawyers to prove or disprove."

"The *lawyers*? Man, you can't be—"

Johnnie's outburst stopped abruptly when Ivy put a hand on his knee. He threw his hands up and swallowed his outburst with a huff.

"Officer Grant, you said they checked out my story in New Orleans? What did they find?" Ivy asked.

"It seems that there was a dead girl and your accusations appear to be true."

"No shit?" Johnnie interjected sarcastically.

"Johnnie, please. Go ahead, Officer Grant."

"After we received confirmation, New Orleans asked us to hold him. We contacted the general to let him know of the new charges and told him it was out of our hands. If he wants to continue with his petition, he'll have to deal with the courts in New Orleans."

She looked at Johnnie then back to the officer.

"What are you telling me?"

"They have a ten-day window to pick him up. If he's convicted in New Orleans, he'll have to serve whatever sentence they give him before he can be tried for his crimes here in New York. They're not as bogged down in their court systems like New York City is, so you may have been subpoenaed to testify already."

"And?" Johnnie asked.

The officer shrugged. "I don't know the circumstances of the case, but if he gets first-degree murder, New Orleans still has the death penalty. They may push for it."

"And what happens if the military gets him?" Johnnie asked with a raised brow.

Officer Grant shrugged again. "I don't know. He might get a slap on the wrist, a stripe took, community service, who knows? They tend to take care of their own, you know."

"Yeah, much like cops, huh?" Johnnie muttered with an eye roll.

Officer Grant smiled. "Something like that."

Ivy jumped up, blocking Johnnie's view of the police officer.

"Okay. Thank you, Officer Grant. Please keep us posted on any changes."

Chapter Fifteen



“You’re still angry aren’t you?”

Ivy led the way into her building. “No, Johnnie, not really. I think I’m just disappointed. I was at your house for over two weeks and my parents didn’t visit not one time. You made such a wonderful dinner for Thanksgiving and invited them and they didn’t even come to that.”

“Maybe they thought you were doing the cooking.”

Ivy turned narrowed eyes to his laughing grin. “Whatever.”

“You know I’m just kidding. Your parents made plans before we asked, Ivy. They couldn’t just drop them and come over to have dinner with us.”

She left the elevator. “Yeah well, my mom sounded way too happy to say they had other plans.” She pulled her keys from her pocket. “I was just thinking, now that they’ve finished the renovations to my apartment I can start buying furniture next week. I can get in all the Cyber Monday sales. I want to get a new coffee table and then build the living furniture around it,” she chatted going down the hall toward her condo.

He chuckled. “Okay.”

Ivy pulled out her keys. She took the bags from Johnnie and pushed the door open. Just inside she stopped short and gasped.

“Do you like it? I couldn’t let you come home to that carpet. I mean, they did a pretty good job cleaning it, but with water damage, it would’ve never been the same. Once the carpet was changed, none of the furniture you had went with it, so I just changed it all,” Johnnie explained, coming in behind her. “I hope you don’t mind.”

Ivy stepped in a little further, barely hearing his explanation. The plush burgundy carpet she stood on had replaced the ruined matte brown carpet she remembered. The couch matched its rich shade perfectly. The new dining table looked good in the corner of the room and its mini version in front of the sofa did as well, but it wasn’t until she saw the new tank across the room did the tears form in her eyes.

“Oh, Johnnie,” she whispered.

“I know they’re not Mickey and Minnie, but I hope you like them. I don’t know what kind of fish they are but the lady in the store said they are really easy to take care of. The female fish has some orange on her head so I named them Fred and Wilma. I hope you don’t mind.”

She bent over to tap the tank. “Hi guys, I’m your new mommy.”

Johnnie walked up behind her. “So, do you like it?”

Standing, she wiped her eyes and turned to hug him. “Thank you so much, Johnnie. I love them. I love it all and I love you.” She gasped and stepped back, covering her mouth.

He grabbed her by the waist, pulling her back into his arms. His smile was warm and inviting.

“That’s good because I love you, too.” He leaned in to kiss her but was interrupted by the phone ringing.

Ivy held up a finger. “Hold that thought. Hello.”

“Hello, Ivy.”

“Hi Mom, how are you?” She sat on the couch, sliding her hand across the back cushion.

“Well, dear, I guess I’m still a little upset that you didn’t want to spend Thanksgiving with your family and the other generals, but it seems I will have to get over it.”

“Mom, I don’t feel comfortable being around the generals and their wives, especially now. You knew I’d be at Johnnie’s house and you were more than welcomed. We hoped you would come by at least for dessert.”

Johnnie bounced on the couch next to her. “Ooo, bouncy. We’ll have to christen it,” he whispered in her other ear.

She giggled pushing him away and threw a black throw pillow at him.

“Did you get one?”

“Huh? What was that, Mom?”

“Ivy, are you listening to me?”

“Yes, Mom, I’m listening.”

She hit Johnnie with a burgundy pillow. “Stop it, you got me in trouble,” she whispered, covering the phone. He dodged it and scooted closer to her.

“I just missed that last bit, Mom,” she said, into the phone.

Johnnie kissed her neck and she turned the phone out, laughing.

“I said, Jennifer, told me she and Derrick are going down to New Orleans for Jones’s trial on Monday. Did you get a summons?”

“I don’t know, Ma. I just got back a little while ago. Let me check my mail and call you back to let you know.”

“All right, Ivy, and I want to know what’s going on.”

“Yes, Mother. Bye.” She pushed Johnnie away playfully and put the phone on the coffee table. “Go grab the mail for me while I put my stuff away. I told Marcus to just pile it on my bed.”

“Oh, all right,” he said with false disappointment.

Johnnie went to her room and returned with an armful of mail, dumping it on the couch between them.

“This looks like it could be it,” she said after sifting through several envelopes. “Yup, it’s a summons, all right. I have to be there on Tuesday and they even sent me a bus ticket.” She looked at him. “They sent me a bus ticket to go to New Orleans from New York? Are they crazy?”

“Don’t sweat that ticket, baby. I’ve got a private plane we can take. We’ll fly out on Monday if you want. This way you’ll be there the day before and will have time to chill before the court on Tuesday.”

She blinked a few times. “You have your own plane?”

He laughed. “Didn’t I mention the perks that come with being a millionaire?”

“Yeah, yeah, you mentioned the perks.”

“When I leave for work, that doesn’t always mean I’m here. Sometimes it means Pennsylvania. I do have hotels out there, you know.”

“I think I can get used to this perk thing you got going on.”

Johnnie snickered. “You get a lot of magazines,” he mentioned pushing them over the cushion.

“Well, yeah. I have to keep up with the competition and see what they’re putting out.”

“Hmm, how come this one is in a silver bag?”

She snatched it away from him. “Give me that. It’s nothing.”

He took it back just as quick, raising it over his head.

"Oh no! Now I really want to check it out."

She jumped on top of him, still trying to grab it as he ripped it open.

"Ahh! So, you read Babe magazine, huh? Is that for research too or is it personal?"

She sat up, throwing her nose in the air. "It might be a little of both. Some of those moves you liked so much came from the Babe challenges in there."

"Really?" He flipped through the pages. "Well, we're definitely going to have to renew your subscription, that's for sure. Maybe upgrade you to a lifetime membership." He chuckled. "Wow, there's some, uh, gifted guys up in here. A brother is starting to feel a little inadequate."

"Trust me. You have nothing to worry about in that department."

He moved the magazine to the side so he could see her. "Really?"

She smiled. "Really, really."

He threw the book over his head onto the floor. "Well, if that's the case, let's get this weekend started." He pulled her back on top of him. "I've got an idea. What's say we order some food, stay in bed all weekend, and do some of your Babe challenges?"

Ivy wrapped her arms around his neck. "Or, we can make up a few of our own."

"I like that idea way better."

"Hi guys, look who's back?" Ivy said walking into Kitty cafe'.

Beverly came from around the counter. "Well, well, that was quick. Is it the weather or our food you missed?" she asked, giving Ivy a hug.

"Neither. It was you guys, of course, and some business. This is my friend Johnnie."

Beverly hit the bell and came around the counter. "Your friend, huh? I see how you could be friends with him. He's a cutie. I'm Beverly."

Ivy's jaw dropped. Beverly shook Johnnie's outstretched hand and laughed.

"Just because I don't partake, Ivy, that doesn't mean I can't appreciate male beauty when I see it."

"Thanks, Beverly. Nice to meet you," Johnnie said.

"Ivy!" Silvie said, coming from the back. "Welcome back, cher. It seems like you just left and here you are already visiting."

Silvie hugged her and shook Johnnie's hand too. "I'm Silvie."

Ivy walked over to a table. "I wish I could tell you guys I was here just to visit and hang out, but I'm not. I'm here to testify in court for a girl that got killed the last time I was out here."

"Oh, yeah, cher, that's been all over the news. The one they found at the convent, right?" Silvie asked.

"Yeah, I saw it happen, when we were separated on Halloween."

"So, no hanging out this time, huh?"

Ivy chuckled. "Nah, Beverly, not this time. I just popped in to say hi, since I was back in town."

"Not even if we promise to keep a better track of you and not let you walk onto any more killing scenes?" Beverly teased.

"Tempting as that sounds, still gotta say no, but thanks. Johnnie and I are just going to go back to the hotel, maybe grab a bite to eat and chill out."

Ivy's hand went to her mouth as Silvie jumped to her feet.

"Oh! If you're hungry I can make you the Chicky Bean Salad that you like," she offered cheerily.

Ivy stood up with her hand out. "No! I mean, no thank you. That's okay," she amended in a softer tone. "You don't have to go through the trouble, Silvie."

Silvie walked away from the table. "Oh, it's no trouble, cher. I'll just—"

"No!" Ivy yelled again as she tripped over her chair, reaching for her. "Thanks, Silvie, but, uh, Johnnie is really tired so we're just going to leave."

"Oh. Okay, well, if you get hungry you know you can pop right on over. Where are you staying?"

"We're at the Rayburn Suites Plaza on Bourbon."

"Ooo, snazzy," Beverly said. "Maybe we'll visit you and have room service with you guys." She walked over to Silvie and draped an arm around her shoulder. "We'll be here if you need us, Ivy."

"Thanks, Beverly." She hugged Silvie and then Beverly before leaving.

"Well, it was nice meeting you guys," Johnnie, said with a wave as he followed her out. "So, why don't we want that Chicky Bean thing?" he asked.

"Uhg, don't ask. Let's go find some real food. I'm starving."

Ivy walked into the courthouse with Johnnie close by.

"Hello. My name is Ivy York. I'm supposed to meet with the district attorney," she told the woman at the help desk.

"Yes, ma'am." The woman tapped away on her computer. "Okay, Ms. York I have sent a message to Mr. Roxinford. He will meet you down the hall by courtroom C."

"Thanks," Ivy said and followed her finger.

It wasn't long before a young man approached. She admired his classic look in a camel brown, double-breasted suit, but loved the boldness of the yellow, purple, and red paisley tie.

"Excuse me, cher, are you Ivy York?"

"Yes, I am. Are you Mr. Roxinford?"

"Yes."

"How'd you know who I was?" she asked, shaking his hand.

"I told them to send you in here to wait for me, cher. Too many people running through here for me to track one person," he said with a chuckle then gazed at Johnnie.

"Oh, I'm sorry. This is—"

"I'm her boyfriend, Jonathan Hayes." He extended his hand.

"Jack Roxinford pleased to meet you."

Ivy stared at the lawyer for a while then leaned forward. "Roxinford? Roxie, is that you?" she whispered conspiratorially.

Mr. Roxinford's brow lifted quizzically. "Only my friends call me Roxie. Have we met, cher?"

"Yes, but only briefly. We met on Halloween. I was the woman in the nineteenth-century dress that you liked. I hung out with you and your pirate friend for a while at Oz."

"Oh, yes," he said excitedly. "Now I remember you. You did look fabulous in that dress, cher." Roxie pulled her over to a nearby bench. "Yes, yes, that night is all coming back to me, now. What a way to ruin a fabulous celebration, eh?"

"Yes, it was."

"Now, I've read the file on this case and I guess this all happened after you left us, huh cher?"

"Yes. As I said in the statement I gave in New York, I was walking back to my hotel, to go to bed, when I first heard the yelling. That was after you guys pointed the way for me."

"Uh-huh, uh-huh, and you are absolutely sure about what you saw that night? Now that I recall, you were very tipsy, cher, and the lawyer of the accused will play on that. He may try to say things like you were too intoxicated to remember anything coherently or you were flat out drunk and hallucinated the whole thing. I don't know which angle he's going to take so we'll have to be prepared for anything."

Ivy nodded. "I was definitely feeling good that night, I know that but I gotta tell you, just watching what he did to that girl..." She shuttered visibly. "Believe me. It sobered me up real quick. I was wishing it was a hallucination."

The lawyer nodded his agreement. "Well, here's how it will go, cher. It's the state versus the accused because the victim is dead. We're asking for murder—"

"Murder! But I thought that murder had to be premeditated."

"That's true, cher, but when you kill someone in commission with another crime, a felony, then it's murder as well."

"Oh." Roxie opened the file in his lap. "Yes, so, we'll be asking for the maximum penalty for both of the crimes, the rape, and her death. That's when the defense will jump in. They're going to try to bring up Sergeant Jones's exemplary military career and probably say that the crime was an accident, something that happened during rough sex," he added with a flip of his hand. "If the jury buys that defense, they could ask that the charges come down to involuntary manslaughter. The penalty for that can range anywhere between probation and twenty years."

Ivy felt sick. She reached out for Johnnie's hand. He accepted it and moved closer, slipping his arm around her shoulder.

"Because you're the only witness to the crime, cher. It's basically your word against his on what actually happened," Roxie continued as he flipped through various pages.

"The jury will have to decide who's telling the truth by that and the little evidence presented. Jones's lawyers will definitely be attacking your credibility." He closed the folder and looked at her. "So, with that in mind, is there anything I should know about? You know some deep dark secret that the defense may be able to use against you?"

She shook her head as she squeezed Johnnie's hand. "Nope, no secrets."

He raised his eyebrow and looked between them. "Are you sure, Ivy? I mean, you were with us at Oz and..."

She chuckled. "Don't worry, Roxie—I'm sorry, I mean, Mr. Roxinford. Johnnie knows about everything that happened that night. Really, there are no secrets."

“All right, well, that’s good enough for me. Are you ready?”

She took a deep breath and nodded.

He smiled. “Let’s go, cher.”

They walked into courtroom B where Roxie took his place at the table and Johnnie and Ivy sat two rows behind him. The court filled quickly and just before it hit capacity, the bailiff walked in.

“All rise! The honorable Judge Maxwell Hamilton is now presiding!” he said in a loud voice.

The judge took his seat. “You may be seated. Bailiff, have the accused brought in.”

The bailiff opened the small door he came through and two sheriffs walked Steven through the door. He wore a bright orange jumpsuit. A connecting chain in the middle of his body, forming an X that made it difficult for him to walk, chained his hands and feet together. General Jackson, followed by Generals Dixon and Franklin, walked into the courtroom as the sheriffs sat Steven next to his lawyer. Steven noted their entrance and a small smile touched his lips. A soft murmur rose among the audience in the courtroom. The judge banged his gavel.

“Order! Mr. Jordan, the charges against your client are two counts of murder. How does your client plead?”

Steven’s lawyer stood and cleared his throat. “My client pleads not guilty, Your Honor. Sergeant Jones is a noted man of honor in his community and a decorated member of the United States Air Force. He’s very sorry and remorseful over the death of Lisa Mapleton, sir. He wishes the whole thing never happened, Your Honor, but it did. My client doesn’t deny that fact, but it was not murder. What this was, sir was a simple case of rough sex gone bad. A horrible accident. We ask that the charges be dropped to involuntary manslaughter with probation and...” He held up one finger and paused for emphasis. “...because of his own personal pain and anguish at unintentionally taking someone’s life, someone that he was growing to care for, I might add, we also ask for mandatory grief counseling as well to help him with his grieving process.”

The murmuring in the audience started up again as Mr. Jordan took his seat. The judge banged his gavel again and wrote on his pad before addressing Roxie.

“We’ll hear from the state now.”

Roxie stood and straightened his tie before commenting. “Your Honor, we have an eye witness to this crime. She is willing to testify against Mr. Jordan’s claim of rough sex gone bad,” he said, making quotation marks in the air. “Sergeant Jones was, in fact, in the process of one felony—the rape of Ms. Mapleton—when he caused another, the even more heinous act of smothering her. The state would like to see Sergeant Jones charged with the murder and the rape of Ms. Mapleton. We are asking for the maximum sentences for both to be served consecutively. We believe only that will give the Mapleton family the peace and closure they need to move forward and justice will be served.”

The audience began to clap loudly as Roxie took his seat. The judge banged his gavel twice, leveling a fierce look across the crowd.

“If the audience cannot control these outbursts, I will clear this courtroom and it will remain clear for the duration of these proceedings. Is that understood?” He sifted through papers in a folder when no comment came. “Now, I have the paperwork here requesting that Sergeant Jones be relinquished into Air Force custody. Is there a representative present?”

General Jackson stood. “Yes, Your Honor.”

Steven smiled and nudged his lawyer.

“And who are you, sir?”

“I am General Jackson. Sergeant Jones was my NCOIC...that's a non-commissioned officer in charge.”

The judge's head tilted to the left.

“He was my right-hand man if you will,” he clarified.

The judge nodded and the general continued.

“And this is Master Sergeant Dillion. He is the JAG representative.”

“Is it still the wish of the United States Air Force to, if you will forgive the pun, take your man under your wing? I must say, under the circumstances—”

“No sir, it is not,” Master Sergeant Dillion said.

“Excuse me?”

Steven held up a hand to silence his lawyer as he whispered to him and directed his attention to the general.

“No, Your Honor. We, respectfully, would like to withdraw our request.”

The judge scribbled something on the papers and then addressed the general. “So honored.”

“Wait! What the hell is going on? Say something!” Steven yelled at this lawyer.

“Your Honor, I believe an explanation is needed for these actions. We were under the impression that my client would be returning to Air Force custody,” Mr. Jordan said.

“Your Honor, I can give that explanation if it's alright with you,” General Jackson offered.

“You may.”

“Thank you. Sergeant Jones was handpicked and groomed by myself to take a very important position at the start of the New Year. With his recent behavior, he has not only disgraced himself but also the Air Force,” the general explained with a huff on his voice. “Whatever the outcome of this trial, Your Honor, he will be charged with conduct unbecoming of an NCO, dereliction of duty, A.W.O.L, an article one forty-nine and then be dishonorably discharged,” he concluded.

General Jackson's booming voice resonated in the courtroom as if he wore a microphone. A universal shocked breath went across the crowd like the wave. Ivy's gaze shifted to Steven. His eyes widened. The heart-break and anguish at the general's statements were apparent on his handsome face. He struggled at first to find his voice, finally choked on the words he managed.

“What? What are you saying?”

“Sergeant Jones, please direct your questions through your lawyer,” the judge demanded.

Ignoring the judge, Steven jumped to his feet screaming frantically at the general.

“You can't do that! I've done everything you asked of me!” He clutched his chest. “I protected your secrets and cleaned up your mess! I—I gave up my, my life—I am an airman! You can't turn your backs on me! The Air Force is my life!”

Mr. Jordan touched Steven's shoulder, but he shook him off.

“Jones, you have tarnished yourself and the uniform with your conduct and we will no longer have anything to do with you,” General Jackson told him.

The general's words were calm and final before he walked out of the courtroom with the other generals and the JAG officer in his wake.

“No! You can’t do this! Come back here!” Sergeant Jones screamed hysterically.

The judge banged his gavel. “Control your client, Mr. Jordan. He is very close to being in contempt of court.”

Steven scanned the courtroom. “You! This is all your fault!”

Ivy gasped, staring at the menacing finger pointed at her.

“I didn’t mean to kill her! I told you that! It was an accident!”

Steven’s lawyer tried to restrain him, but he elbowed him roughly, pushing him over his chair.

“This is your fault! You were supposed to be my wife! A wife shouldn’t testify against her husband! She can’t!”

He dove over the small wall with his chains clanking into the crowd, trying to reach Ivy, but Marcus and Jeff appeared out of nowhere in front of her and Johnnie, surprising her again.

The judge banged his gavel several times. “Sergeant Jones, you are in contempt of court and will be remanded into the custody of the sheriffs for no less than forty-five days! Bailiff! Remove him!”

The bailiff along with the sheriffs, who walked him in, pulled him back over the wall and dragged him kicking and screaming through the door again.

“No! Stop! Get off me! Ivy! You were going to be my wife! Ivy!”

Johnnie hugged Ivy close to him and she hid her face against his shoulder as her name faded behind the door.

The judge cleared his throat, bringing her attention back to him. He flipped through his calendar and tapped a page before he spoke.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, you are excused with the thanks of this court. We are adjourned until January twenty-third at ten o’clock. Mr. Roxinford, the court thanks you as well. Please advise your witness to return when the court reconvenes.” He banged his gavel and stood.

“All rise!”

Chapter Sixteen



“So, do we know what we’re doing for your birthday yet?” Kelley asked, leaning back against the sauna wall.

Ivy sat next to her. “Nope, not yet. I know I have to spend the rest of the holidays with my family. After not spending Thanksgiving with them, my mom is planning to disown me if I don’t or have me shot by a firing squad whichever is faster.” She chuckled and wiped her face.

“Prepare for the firing squad, girl. You know how Miss Kim is.”

“Yeah, I know that’s why you’re coming, so I don’t have to be tortured alone. So plan on spending Christmas with us.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be there. So, did you ask your Johnnie about what to do for your birthday?”

“Uh-uh.”

“He might have some good ideas. Speaking of Johnnie...” She took the towel off her face and sat up. “Now that he’s officially your man when do I get to meet him?”

“Well, you want to go to dinner on Tuesday?”

“Hmm, okay, that’ll work.” She sat back and covered her face again. “Did I tell you I made a few calls and got my little Eric his first modeling gig?”

“Eric? That young waiter from Mama’s? Girl, I know you are not still messing with him?”

She shrugged. “Only on Thursdays. He put his time in. He deserves to be rewarded. You should see his face on a few billboards in midtown early in the New Year.”

“You know you need to leave that boy be,” Ivy said with a laugh. “What time is it?”

“We should have a few minutes left before the buzzer. It goes off at two o’clock.”

“That’s cool. I’m meeting Johnnie for dinner.”

“I’m glad you picked Johnnie. That Steven turned out to be a bad seed.”

“Nooo? You think?”

“Don’t be like that.”

“How convenient that you change your position now.”

Kelley sat up again, catching the towel that covered her face. “What are you talking about?”

“As I recall, you were pushing for Steven along with my mom and dad.”

“Uh-uh, Ivy, I was pushing for you to *have* a man. I wanted you to date them both, remember? Your mom and dad were for Steven, so I was for him, but I also encouraged you to jump on Johnnie. He was fine and loaded and if you hadn’t jumped on him, I would’ve. So in my defense, I’m one for two.”

Ivy shook her head. “I’m just glad I didn’t follow my first impulse and ended up giving Johnnie a chance. If there were no Johnnie on the scene and just Steven...” She shuttered despite the heat. “I’d hate to think of where I’d be right now.” She wiped her face again.

"Yeah, I would have hated to have someone as pretty as Steven end up at the bottom of the Hudson. I still got friends who do that, you know," she pointed out covering her face again.

Ivy laughed. "Whatever, girl. So what about my birthday?"

"Why don't you have your parents over for dinner Saturday night? They haven't seen your place since Johnnie did it over, right?"

"Why do you have a death wish for my parents, Kelley? You know I can't cook."

Kelley chuckled. "Yes, Ivy, I'm aware, but I was thinking you could put your boy Johnnie in the kitchen. You said he cooks good, right?"

"*Well*, Kelley. He cooks well."

"Whatever!" Kelley snapped, throwing her hands up.

"Hmm, that might work. I'll ask him."

"Yup, and it'll give us an excuse to go shopping. You know you'll need something cute to wear, girl."

Ivy rolled her eyes. "Yeah, like you need an excuse to go shopping."

The buzzer went off and Ivy jumped to her feet.

"Woo! Come on, girl, let's get outta here. I'm dying of thirst."

* * *

Ivy slammed the door and tossed her coat on the back of the couch on her way to the kitchen.

"I'm sorry I'm late. I had some last-minute things to do for the January edition. I know I should've called to see if you needed anything from the store, but I rushed home. You know I suck at this domesticated stuff. Can I do anything to help?"

"No, baby, everything is almost done. You've been working over every night. I didn't think tonight would be different." He put the lid back on the pot he was stirring and turned the fire down. "It just made sense to pick up everything I needed on my way over here."

She kissed him. "Everything smells so good. I'll set the table."

Johnnie nodded and followed her into the living room. He watched Ivy set the silverware on the table crooked with shaking hands.

"Relax, honey, everything is going to be fine."

"My mom and dad haven't even mentioned Steven's name or anything else about him since we've been back. I think they're feeling a little guilty about what could've happened. Besides, you're the first real boyfriend I've had in a long time."

"So, all your other boyfriends were mannequins?" he asked with a teasing smile.

She threw a napkin at him. "Shut up, you know what I mean."

"Relax, Ivy. I've always done well with parents. Now, what I found tough is getting past your girl, Kelley," he admitted with a chuckle.

"What? Kelley wasn't that bad."

"That bad? Ivy, that woman's interrogation process would have put any spy organization in the world to shame. She plucked me like a damn chicken," he added with a laugh. "Parents are far easier to impress than

friends. They just want to know if you can take care of their little pumpkin and make her happy," he said dramatically and laughed his way back to the kitchen.

"Well, I don't know about *pumpkin*, but I see your point!" she yelled and finished the table before returning to the kitchen. Walking in, she sniffed and smiled. "Mmm, I'm so glad you can cook," she mentioned, hugging him from behind. "Poisoning my parents so close to Christmas would've been a horrible way to spend the holidays. How close is everything being done?"

"Very soon. I just took the chicken out and put it in the microwave and this stuff on the stove just needs a few more minutes. What time are they coming?"

"Well, I told my dad to be here at seven o'clock, but he's always ten minutes early." She looked at her watch. "So that gives us about ten minutes."

He pulled the towel off his shoulder, wiped his hands on it, and tossed it on the counter.

"Well, you better go change and relax." He kissed her. "Everything will be fine."

"I know. I just want them to like you and see how wonderful you are and why I love you."

"Don't worry. I'm a likable kind of guy...and I'm cute," he added with a wink.

She sucked her teeth and stepped back. "Oh brother, here we go."

"And charming, did I mention how charming I am?"

She walked to the bedroom. "Uh-huh, and rich, don't leave out rich."

"That's right and that's a plus when it comes to the mothers. I'll have you know..." He leaned on the wall in the doorway. "Statistically, I'm a great catch, Ivy."

She laughed as she quickly changed clothes. Johnnie's smile widened even more as he watched. A knock at the door made her gasp. Johnnie looked over his shoulder then back at her.

"It's showtime."

"Dinner was delicious, Jonathan. You're a very good cook. Thank you."

"Thank you, Mrs. York, and please, feel free to call me Johnnie."

"So, Hayes, Ivy tells me you're the man that took over the Rayburn Suites Inn earlier this year."

"Yes, sir, I did."

"Damn good move, a bold and daring move. How old are you, son?"

"I'll be thirty-two in April, sir."

The general nodded and sipped his drink. "That's young for such a big responsibility. Running such a large company will take a lot of time and dedication. Will you have time for a personal life?"

Johnnie grabbed the bottle of wine off the table. He refilled her glass and then her mother's before returning to his chair.

"Well, I plan to, sir. Since Ivy and I started dating, exclusively I have modified my schedule and hired an assistant to create more time to be with her. I see no point in being a workaholic anymore."

Ivy smiled and picked up her glass and her mother patted her leg, sipping her own. The general nodded and swirled the ice in his drink.

"Do you have other plans for your future?"

Johnnie sipped from his own glass and smiled. "Yes, actually, I do, sir. I recently got word that I now own the Bridgewall Hotel chain in New Jersey and the one in Connecticut."

The general slapped his knee and laughed. "Another damn good move, my boy, a power move. Kim, I like this young man. He thinks ahead and makes bold business moves for his future. He's strong, smart and he's got balls!"

Ivy's mother let out a shocked noise and muffled a giggle. "James, stop talking like that."

"Are you sure you were never a soldier, son?" the general added in a teasing voice, his eyes dancing with amusement.

Johnnie chuckled. "Yes, sir, I'm sure. I was just a broke kid growing up in the South Bronx who got tired of being broke." He sipped his drink and leaned back. "I did some nickel and dime gambling as a kid, way before I was old enough, but as soon as I was old enough, I put some money out there and got lucky."

"What about family, Jonathan? Where are your parents?" her mother asked.

"Well, it was only my mother growing up. My father died in a car crash just after my little brother was born."

"Oh my goodness. I'm sorry, Jonathan."

"Thank you, Mrs. York. I was young and don't remember a lot about him. My uncle stepped in to help my mother with us."

"Well, they did a wonderful job of raising you. You seem to be a well-mannered and respectable young man," her mother said with a smile. "Where are your family members now?"

"Well, they are both retired now. My uncle lives near Orlando and spends most days fishing. I put my mother out in a house in Georgia so she's near her sister. They visit each other twice a year I think. My brother is still here. He's one of the lawyers that look out for my companies."

Ivy's mother sent a smile her way.

"A self-made man with humble beginnings," the general murmured with a nod. "I can respect that."

"I'm really glad to hear that, sir. I know how much you wanted your daughter to marry an airman."

General York sighed, put his glass on the table, and rested on his knees. "Son, one day, when you're a father, the thing you'll realize is that all you want most for your children is their happiness. I only wanted Ivy to marry an airman because *I'm* an airman, and Kim and I are happy. That's what I know works." He smiled at Ivy and reached for her hand. "But, it would seem that when your children become adults, you need to trust their judgment and let them choose what and *who* will make them happy."

He squeezed her hand and winked at her. Ivy smiled.

"Thanks, Daddy."

Ivy dropped his hand and looked at her mother.

"I'm sorry, too, sweetheart."

Ivy nodded and hugged her mother.

"As long as the man loves my little girl and can take care of her, I'm happy," the general told Johnnie before turning to his wife. "So, Kim, what do you think of young Hayes here?" he asked, picking up his drink.

"Well, he's very attractive... and rich, that's always good," she added with a giggle. "Every mother wants her daughter to be happy and taken care of."

Ivy rolled her eyes at the laughing grin Johnnie sent to her.

"But even without all that, it's plain to see that he cares for Ivy very much, James."

"I love her, Mrs. York," Johnnie confirmed.

"Please, call me Kim. I'm very pleased to hear that...Johnnie."

"So, Hayes, where do you see this going with you and my daughter?"

"Well, sir, I do have a five-year plan I've been thinking about." He stood, digging in his pocket. "First I was going to ask Ivy to marry me, give her this ring, and give you and your wife at least three, strong and healthy grandkids. That should fill the next five years nicely I think."

Ivy choked on the sip of wine she was about to swallow and, to her surprise, stopped herself from spitting it out across the table. She looked at the stunned look on her mother's face, turned to look at her father whose eyes were smiling over his drink, and then looked up at Johnnie.

"What?"

He pushed the coffee table over and knelt before her, opening the black box. "Look, Ivy, some may think our time together is way too early in our relationship to talk about marriage. I am not known to follow the masses in anything that I do. I follow my own path. I have never been happier since you came into my life those months ago."

"Johnnie, I—"

"Look, Ivy, I have enough money to buy myself just about anything I want, but without someone to share it with, it doesn't mean anything. If you marry me and share my life, I know all will be good with us." He stood and pulled her to her feet. "I love you, Ivy. You know that. Will you marry me?"

Ivy stared at the large, sparkling princess cut diamond he slid onto her finger and smiled.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

She wrapped her arms around him and jumped into his arms. He caught her, laughing.

"Whoa! Well, I know I'm not an airman, but—"

She kissed him silent. "You don't ever have to worry about that, Johnnie. I never wanted to live my life behind the wings," she said excitedly and hugged him again. "Oh, and umm, Johnnie, you know it's *well*, right? All will be well with us."

The End

About Dana Littlejohn

Where sensual erotic romance is always waiting for you.

I am Dana Littlejohn, author of sensual erotic romance. You will find that I write contemporary romances with just a hint of another genre to take it away from the ordinary. My stories will touch your heart and your soul and make your body feel like it's being touched, too.

Imagination will take you places your money can not. I invite you into my world with open arms to see my imagination run wild...

Come along for the ride as I go on an imaginary trip into my world. You'll enjoy every minute of this wild ride.

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