

Chapter 1

"I can't believe Edward proposed." Molly caught Angie's hand and studied the radiant-cut diamond in the bright lights in front of New York's hottest strip club, Jewel's. "Did you know about this?" She looked at her former roommate Lexa, who was dating Edward's brother Jack.

"I heard a rumor." Lexa leaned in to sneak a glance at the ring. "No hard facts. Until now."

"Wait, what? Engaged?" Kaycee sidled closer. "Are you saying this is your *bachelorette* party and you didn't tell us?"

"Someone didn't want to wear the standard inflatable pecker on their head." Lizzie waggled her eyebrows.

"That's not it." Angie had the decency to look sheepish. "I was going to tell you about the wedding. Truly, I was. See, here?" She dug in her handbag to pull out a stack of embossed invitations and started handing them out one by one. "Things just happened so quickly."

"No shit." Tracy slid the white card with bold black and gold writing into her bag. "I'll check my calendar when I get home."

"I'm sure it's packed with social engagements." Lizzie rolled her eyes. "Can I bring a second plus one if Tracy RSVPs 'with regrets'?"

"She won't." Lexa sent Tracy a warning glance, who stared back with a defiant gleam in her eyes.

"I just think it's ridiculous to hook up, get engaged, then get married in such short succession."

"Forget timelines." Emily stared longingly at the gemstone on Angie's hand. "When you know, you know. And what *I* want to know is how he proposed? Did he kneel? Was there champagne? Oh, oh, oh, don't tell me. I bet he baked this fantastic cake."

"Actually—"

"Molly, hide. Now!" Kaycee's sudden outcry was almost lost over the excitement that had gripped their little group, but Molly had been waiting for exactly such a warning since she stepped out of her two-bedroom apartment less than an hour ago.

She slid behind Lizzie's voluptuous figure, pulling the designer hair piece slash hat that she couldn't pass up while out shopping on Fifth Avenue last month because it worked perfectly with her honey-blond curls further over her eyes.

"Smooth move." Angie, aspiring painter by passion, well of motivational encouragement by natural aptitude and *fiancée* by evidence of the beautiful sparkler on her fourth finger, nodded appreciatively. "I knew there was a reason why you kept shunning our pole dance classes. You know how to

work your body, no lessons required. Good reaction time, too." She gave Molly a thumbs-up, but was interrupted by Lexa.

"Not good enough." Lexa studied the narrow-eyed male who tried to stare a hole through Lizzie's body. The worried expression on her face said it all. "I think he recognized you, Mol. Dammit. This was supposed to be a relaxing, *anonymous* evening."

Molly shot her friend a surprised look. It wasn't often that she heard Lexa swearing out loud, a single character trait they shared although the reasons for their reserve were vastly different.

While Molly had been drilled by her mother from a young age to watch her tongue—a survival skill on the political parquet that was Molly's nursery and one that she seemed to forget only in the presence of a single obnoxious male, Lexa was simply too self-conscious to raise her voice much.

Until she met the love of her life, Jack Daniels, earlier in the year, Lexa had been the epitome of an introvert personality with the social skills of a hermit. Since then, she had learned to resort to stronger language when the occasion called for it, had taken to dressing more sexily and had generally come out of her wallflower-y shell. All signs of her budding self-confidence. Molly was happy for her friend. Even if all the changes in Lexa's life had meant that she had moved out of their shared apartment to live with her new boyfriend.

Molly missed having Lexa as a roommate. Phone calls and the occasional Sunday morning coffee catch-up just didn't cut it when life called for an emergency BFF session.

Molly blew out a breath to shake off the feeling of melancholy that tried to grip her at the thought and instead stole another look at the guy Kaycee had spotted first.

"Any chance he will go away quietly?" she asked.

Tracy didn't waste a second to share her gloomy two cents worth. "Nah! He'll definitely call it in."

Molly ignored their little group's perpetual troublemaker in favor of the quiet anthropology student to her right. "Emily?"

"Sorry, Molly, he looks like a geek. Persistent, too."

"Not that we're judging him or anything." Lizzie snorted.

Emily shrugged her shoulders. "He has 'political activist' basically tattooed on his forehead. I can't believe you spotted him before I did." She pushed her glasses further up on her nose and regarded Kaycee with new admiration. "How did you know?"

"Takes one to know one, I guess." Kaycee's lips tilted in a lopsided grin.

"You're a political activist?" Angie whistled. "Looks *and* brains. Are you sure you're still single?"

"Fraid so." Kaycee went on tiptoe to look over Lizzie's shoulder at Molly. "I concur with Emily. He's not going anywhere. He'll want to make sure he gets his fifteen minutes of fame. He'll call the papers as soon as we're out of

sight. I assume he'll even feel proud doing his part keeping the public informed of where their tax dollar is going. The potential to earn a little cash on the side for a newsworthy story won't make him change his mind. Tomorrow the whole nation will know that Molly Rogers, lawyer-to-be and daughter of Joana and Harold Rogers, political powerhouse couple of the new millennium, has visited a strip club."

Molly groaned.

"Look at the bright side." Lizzie turned to give Molly an encouraging smile." At least we're not wearing penis headpieces to match."

"That could actually have been an advantage," Lexa mused. "Bachelorette gear would have made it clear we *are* visiting, not working,"

Sheesh. Worse and worse. Molly had to make sure they at least got that part right.

Even without the ridiculous exaggeration, the headlines would no doubt be scathing.

If past experiences were anything to go by, the scandal sheets would first speculate if she was finally going off the deep end like so many of her rich kid peers. The opinions on whether her Friday night extravaganza was going to hurt her career going forward would pour in soon thereafter. As would the questions on how her parents could claim to lobby for the empowerment of the female sex when their own and only daughter visited an establishment that went against everything that the emancipated modern woman strived for?

Of course, none of this would be a problem if Molly wasn't missing one crucial part of her anatomy that could be blamed for nearly every salacious impulse known to mankind and that—no matter how insignificant in some individuals—somehow safeguarded the bearer from public scrutiny through its existence alone. Men were almost *expected* to spend their last day of the week staring at a naked piece of ass. Talk about gender equality.

Not that Molly was a stickler for the buzz phrase. She had accepted a long time ago that she had to work harder than her XY counterparts to be afforded the same respect.

There was a crossroads to consider for every woman, where to focus her efforts in life. For Molly, keeping bad people off the street had taken precedence over the fight for the right to pay for her half of the bill. Sure, she hoped the scales would balance out eventually. In the meantime she wasn't going to sweat it if her future boyfriend slash husband insisted on forking out for dinner. She was going to earn comparatively less than the man anyway.

Not that Molly could ever voice this opinion anywhere near her parents' supporters. They would immediately label her as the ignorant brat that they had suspected her to be for years. According to their secret—not so secret—opinion, she enjoyed the easy life living off her family's considerable fortune and connections. Little did they know that Molly's parents were determined to make Molly earn her own place in the world and that Molly was contending against

people on a daily basis who thought that she had already been handed that place on a silver platter and threw obstacles her way just to 'make her feel some of the pain that everyone else went through.'

Molly liked to think that she was a better person for not holding *their* ignorance against them, or pointing out that they were wasting precious resources meddling with the fairly unimportant life of a young woman rather than using their time and energy to make the world a better place. But it was hard to bite her tongue, to turn a deaf ear when hateful comments were hurled her way and spiteful interference messed with her right to live a quiet life.

It was the kind of judgmental prejudice she had experienced before when dealing with political activists before. Only the lawyer in her was reluctant to throw the young man Kaycee had spotted into the same "jerkist" category, until she had undeniable proof. To obtain that proof, however, meant to risk her good name and that of her family.

Molly weighed her options. She could run right now, act as if she had met her friends in passing and never had any intention entering the club. Or, she could go ahead with the night as planned and deal with a potential fallout later.

Personally, she couldn't care less what any self-righteous prick thought of her. Or what the entire nation would think of her if the news hit. The only opinion she cared about was her parents' who, thanks to their political influence, had a professional obligation to care about polls and votes. Which meant there was really no escape for Molly from the consequences of her actions tonight and she would feel the full force of her mother's disappointment come morning.

Molly mashed her lips together. Well, she could at least make it worth her while, because she was not missing out on this evening with her friends. Political activist or not.

Stepping out from behind the relative shield of Lizzie's back, Molly cut through the queue to the entrance of the club, causing the clatter of twelve high-heeled feet to scurry after her, one pair faster than the rest.

"You really want to do this?" Lexa caught up with her in time to watch Molly flash her ID card at the bouncer who, after a quick double take, lifted the red cutoff rope to let them into the hallowed halls of Jewel's, one of New York's most sought after, and if rumor was to be believed, most refined strip clubs.

Molly shrugged. Refined or not, she had just blown every chance to safeguard her reputation by refusing to mislead the young man who was still watching her with undue interest from the sidelines as to her intended destination.

"You said he wasn't going to go away. What do you want me to do?"

"We could have tried to sneak you in," Lexa suggested.

Molly tilted her head at the curious glances their group received from the predominantly male clientele. "Not a chance. Apart from the strippers, we are the only women in this place."

Lexa faltered at the truth in Molly's statement.

"So, what?" Emily asked. "Keep calm and carry on?"

"Exactly that." Molly blew out a breath, counseling herself to take her own advice. "Anyone have an idea how to blend in here?"

"I do." Angie pointed at a medium-sized reception desk where a scantily clad woman sold wads of flashy paper money to new arrivals.

"What on earth?" Lizzie plucked a colorful note from the back pocket of a guy standing close.

Emily slapped a hand in front of her mouth. "I can't believe you just stole a stripper dollar."

"Borrowed. And how do you know what these are called?"

Red swept up Emily's neck. "I did some research."

"Yet you have the audacity to lecture me on doing the same?" Lizzie raised a brow.

"Internet research," Emily murmured, embarrassed.

"Pha! Who wants to ask a search engine for answers when the hands-on approach is so much more preferable?" Lizzie asked, returning the dollar to its owner, but not without patting the guy's backside and copping a feel. "Tight," she whispered.

Emily buried her face in her hands. "Theft and a sexual harassment charge."

"He didn't mind." Lizzie flashed a brilliant smile at her victim, who had turned and was hesitantly returning the favor. "I wonder what he's doing here. With a face like his I wouldn't make him pay."

"Don't even think about it," Lexa warned, hooking an arm through Lizzie's. "We're trying to blend in, remember?"

"You are trying to blend in," Lizzie said. "I'm simply trying to enjoy myself."

"Not with the clientele."

"But—"

"No but."

"And obviously also no 'butt.'" Lizzie sighed, giving the tight behind a last appreciative glance. "So you want to buy fake money?" she asked Angie. "Why?"

"It's the only currency allowed in the club."

"Like the tokens in a casino?" Kaycee was catching on quick.

"Exactly right." Angie pointed at one of the strippers. Multiple dollar notes were sticking out of her G-string. "Tipping the dancers is appreciated by Jewel's staff and management," she explained. "More important, it's our only way to help Gigi out tonight."

"Done." At the mention of their friend's name, Molly slapped a wad of cash into Angie's palm.

She didn't usually throw money around. Well, maybe for clothes. And shoes. And accessories, at times. But she *tried* to live a modest lifestyle despite her parents' immodest wealth. Only sometimes, like today, in situations like this one was she willing to splash out.

Because Molly, Tracy, Kaycee, Angie, Lexa, Emily and Lizzie weren't here just for fun. They had actual work to do. They were acting as the unwavering support group for Gigi Valentino, shy mouse and stripping novice. What a combination.

Gigi, like the rest of the group except for Molly, had been taking pole dancing lessons at New York's hip pole dance studio Crystal's for the past six months. Unlike the rest of the girls, the lessons had been business for Gigi, rather than pleasure. Because the strip club's management had threatened her with dismissal if she didn't learn how to work a rod.

Today was Gigi's stripping debut and considering their friend's timid nature, Gigi was going to need all the help she could get. Emotional and monetary. Hence seven girls and stripper dollars.

"Awesome." Angie added up the collective sum before handing it over to the receptionist. "Maybe I'll top up my share and get a couple dollars extra to give to Edward, to slip into my panties on our wedding night when we—"

"TMI." Emily covered her ears and mumbled under her breath when heads swiveled to openly stare in their direction, more than one dropping in the general vicinity of Angie's crotch. "Gosh, this is so embarrassing."

Molly felt her lips twitch. Her decision to let fun rule this night rather than reason was growing on her. It wasn't often that she pushed the unspoken boundaries of society. Other than indulging in the odd one-night stand, she usually barely nudged at them. Even that little bit of freedom had lost its attraction in recent months for reasons she didn't want to examine too closely.

It felt good to take a break from being "Molly Goody Two Shoes" and be "Molly Good Times" instead. She was going out tonight. *All out*. She had earned this celebration after finishing her law degree summa cum laude. The serious side of life would have to wait for once. It was going to catch up with her again soon enough.

"Oh my God. You're here."

At the squeaky squeal behind them, Molly turned to see Gigi—their charge for the evening—teeter toward them in a pair of fuchsia and black stripper heels, her long-limbed figure highlighted by some sexy *négligée* ensemble, temporarily made half-decent by a wide fur stole wrapped around her neck that dropped halfway down her thighs.

"Of course we are." Lexa moved to wrap her arms around the slim girl in a comforting hug, careful not to disturb the shiny mass of dark brown hair that looked sleek and chic and not at all like it belonged to a girl whose lap dance services could be bought for the night. "We wouldn't miss your debut for the world."

"Debut?" Tracy frowned, taking a second to process the unsurprised expressions around her. "I'm the only one who doesn't know?"

"Are you surprised, Grouchy?" Lizzie jumped to Gigi's rescue.

Only Molly saw the fractional tightening of Tracy's jaw at the unflattering nickname. After a moment, the European shrugged. "Just curious. I thought you'd been employed here for months."

Gigi blushed. "I never made it out from behind the bar."

"Stage fright?" Emily guessed, laying a comforting hand on Gigi's arm.

"Stage terror, more like. That's why I started taking the classes. To get used to dancing in front of people. Today's my last chance."

"You'll do great." Kaycee squeezed Gigi's shoulder.

Gigi twisted her hands in front of her body. "I hope so."

Molly considered the girl. How the timid mouse thought she was going to drop her clothes in front of a bunch of strange men was beyond her.

"Just imagine them naked," Tracy suggested, earning more than one outraged glance.

"Not while she's giving them a lap dance." Emily glared. "There has to be a better strategy. How do *you* cope with scrutiny from strangers, Molly? You're used to being in the limelight."

"Uh, I'm not sure that's quite the same." Molly saw Gigi's hopeful expression falter. "Then again, I guess it's worth a shot. I usually look for an audience member who gives me positive vibes. You know, the cute guy in the front row who's smiling. A nice gentleman who keeps nodding. Anybody who makes you feel more comfortable. Speak, uh, dance for them and forget the rest of the crowd."

"You're right. It's not quite the same." Gigi nibbled on her lip. "It's not even the dancing that worries me most. After my set is up, I'm supposed to work the floor, talk to the guys to get them to book me for a private performance." Gigi stared at the tips of her shoes, her voice shaking. "I'm not good at talking, girls. How am I ever going to make enough money for the club to keep me on?"

"Don't worry. We've got you covered." Angie waved a fistful of the dollars she had just exchanged. "You're going to make a killing tonight."

Gigi's eyes widened, her smile tremulous but genuine. "You are the best friends in the world, you know that right?"

"Sure we do," Lizzie patted Gigi's mostly uncovered butt. "Now off with you. I, for one, want to see a proper show for my money." She winked.

Half an hour later, Lizzie's request was being fulfilled as Gigi twirled like a pro on the pole. Molly didn't have much experience except for what Lexa had told her about the classes, but compared to the other strippers in the club, Gigi sure rocked the metal. It didn't hurt that she had a killer body.

Molly could barely believe that the seductress on stage was the same girl who could barely string three sentences together in front of strangers.

Gigi was definitely going to make a killing. Even without their help and her lack of conversational skills she was going to be busy private dancing for the rest of the night.

Molly narrowed her eyes.

If the guy clenching and unclenching his fists in the shadowed corner of the club had anything to say about it, it would probably be with him.

Molly let her eyes drift across the room. He would have a lot of competition. There wasn't a man at the club who wasn't eating Gigi up with his eyes.

No. Wrong. There were a couple of guys sitting with their backs to the stage. Molly snorted when she recognized their faces. She leaned across the table to shout over the beat of the music. "Lexa. Angie. Did you know Jack and Edward are here?"

Two pairs of eyes snapped away from Gigi's performance toward her, then followed her gaze. Her friends' mouths dropped open.

"They didn't..." Lexa growled.

"They did," Angie huffed. "They better have a good explanation." She jumped up when a dancer off stage approached the table. "If she touches him—"

"Calm down, girlfriend." Lizzie patted Angie's arm. "He's blown off the last three who tried to strike up a conversation." She looked at Lexa. "As did Jack. From what I can see, they are here for you. They haven't let you out of their sight since we arrived. Haven't even looked once at all the naked woman-flesh prancing around here."

"Woman-flesh? Ew." Tracy wrinkled her nose in disgust.

"You knew?" Lexa asked, outraged, as Angie slowly sank back into her chair.

Lizzie lifted her eyebrows. "You mean, did I notice their presence when every guy who tries to approach our table swerves past us at the last moment and quickly heads in a different direction? I was hoping to get lucky tonight, you know."

Emily groaned. "Oh no, Liz. Not in a strip club."

"Why not?"

"*Because.*"

Gigi's set came to an end at that moment and Molly's attention was diverted away from her bickering friends toward the good-looking stranger who had been holding on to his temper through sheer force of will. He peeled away from the wall to stalk toward the back of the round stage where Gigi was descending a couple of stairs, her head bent until the guy grabbed her arm.

"Hey!"

It was the first time Molly heard Gigi squeak above a whisper.

A security guard materialized from the shadows with impressive speed, but Gigi didn't look frightened. Her expression was one of...anger? Molly did a double-take. Could the timid girl indeed be furious?

Gigi was full of surprises tonight. She told the security guard to stand down with an almost imperceptible shake of her hand, before very deliberately extracting her wrist from the possessive clasp of the stranger, who reluctantly let her go. But only after Gigi indicated that they were going to continue their conversation in a slightly more private area of the room.

Molly craned her neck to see whether Gigi was truly okay, or if she needed an intervention from her friends. But a cone of light settling on the next dancer climbing the stage blinded her momentarily before it swung toward the audience over the heads of Jack and Edward, who were cracking jokes at a third man who had arrived from the bar and who was setting down drinks at their table. For an instant, Molly's gaze lingered on the broad back, the strange familiarity of the man's movement.

His thick hair was just long enough to curl at his nape and Molly thought she could make out the distinct shape of a strong nose and full lips.

Molly sucked in a breath.

It couldn't be. Life couldn't be this cruel to allow *him* to choose the same night to accompany his brothers that Molly was here too.

She pushed back in her chair, then thought better of it and chugged the rest of the frilly, neon green cocktail that the well-endowed waitress had delivered to their table some time ago. Her eyes were stuck like glue to what simply couldn't be the profile of someone whose profile she had no business remembering.

Michael Daniels. Her arch enemy and the one man who certainly *wasn't* making all her lady parts sit up and take notice.

Molly watched as he turned toward the stage, his head moving in the distinct fashion that all men seemed to adopt whenever they followed a nice piece of ass with their eyes.

Molly told herself she didn't care. She didn't care that he liked what he saw. She *didn't* care that he was salivating after a nameless stripper.

She repeated the words right up to the point where jealousy sucker punched her in the gut and she fled to the bar to escape the infuriating sight.

Thank god the performance was over.

Michael set down the two beers and one soda that he had ordered at the bar rather than instructing the waitress servicing their table and watched as a new dancer climbed the stage.

Nothing. His brow furrowed in annoyance when the traitor below his belt didn't even give a twitch of appreciation for the seriously attractive redhead. She was exactly his type. Curvaceous...

Michael huffed. Wasn't it just a sad reflection of his state of mind that he could still think in politically correct terms sitting in a strip club on a Friday night?

"Let me guess. From the lack of excitement on your face, she's not a blonde."

His brother Edward grinned as Michael pushed one of the beer glasses in his direction forcefully enough to make the frothy liquid slosh over the rim.

"Aw, not the right eye color either?" Jack, his other brother, chimed in.

"Fuck off." Michael growled. "The woman's fine."

At least Michael would be able to watch this one dance without feeling like a dirty bastard. Something he hadn't been able to do with Gigi Valentino. Not because he was a good person, or because he didn't like strippers as much as

the next guy. Hell, he wouldn't be here if he hadn't at least at some point enjoyed the chance to stare at tits and ass all night.

No, watching Lexa's friend perform her sexy routine had felt wrong for other reasons. Not only was Lexa practically family, but how was Michael supposed to look Gigi in the eye the next time they happened to cross paths, knowing he had seen her flash her barely clad crotch at a roomful of blue-balled men? Knowing she *knew* he had seen her flash her crotch. But that wasn't the only reason. The girl reminded him too much of his younger sister, Sophie. Long-limbed. Delicate. *Vulnerable*.

Not the manufactured vulnerability that some strippers seemed to cultivate to try and deceive men into thinking they were watching a virgin perform instead of a master manipulator, but the vulnerability that came from being too young, too sheltered. And wasn't that a contradiction in terms for someone who worked in this profession?

It begged the question of what Gigi was doing here. And did *she* even know what she was doing here? Did she know that her innocence stood out in this dimly lit room like a beacon of light? And like moths to the light Gigi had drawn way more than her fair share of looks. Good for business. Troublesome for the slender beauty, who Michael couldn't help but worry about in an entirely big-brotherly kind of way and who he suspected was further out of her element than even she realized.

Knowing it was none of his business but unable to shake the feeling that Gigi wasn't half as confident as she wanted everyone to believe, Michael had found himself hard-pressed not to climb the stage and wrap his suit jacket around the girl when she had dropped that fur thing that had served as a half-assed cover-up at the beginning of her set. It was only after he realized that he was halfway out of his seat that he had used his brothers' comments about another round of drinks as an excuse to escape the unsettling view.

At the bar, he had spent his waiting time trying to come up with a way to suggest a different kind of profession to the girl. If it was money that Gigi needed, a paid internship at his own company, Corporate Calls, could tide her over until she found a job she wanted to stick with long term. He had once before taken a chance on one of her friends. Lexa had gone on to become a permanent employee. With such a great success to look back upon, he was more than willing to take another chance on an inexperienced candidate.

But when he returned to the table, drinks in hand, he realized that his intervention would not be needed. Someone else had already taken over the task of rescuing the girl.

Michael shot another look at the very tall, very pissed-off male who had snagged Gigi's arm as soon as the girl stepped off the stage and who was currently staring down the six-foot-plus security guard without even looking at the man. Talk about skill. Of course, security would have to take him on anyway, if it wasn't for the almost imperceptible shake of Gigi's head. She obviously knew the guy well enough to allow him to manhandle her. And she

knew enough about the club's policies to realize that making a scene—even one that wasn't her fault—would mean the end of her stint at Jewel's.

Men didn't come here for drama. They came here for the illusion of willing and able women. They thought it was their prerogative to treat the strippers like objects of desire that could star in their dirtiest, filthiest fantasies, if they just had the right amount of cash in their wallets.

Michael should know. He was a regular. Or at least he had been until a few months ago, because recently he could barely dredge up the motivation to come to his favorite strip club on his usual Friday night.

Ever since he first saw *her*—a fuck-up of epic proportions—he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind. And the only fantasies he had starred a certain blonde bombshell. Damn it all to hell.

The woman who his brothers were talking about was irritating as all get out. And that was as politically correct as he was going to get about Molly Rogers.

Michael's mouth set into a thin, flat line as the thought of her name alone made excitement pump through his blood without warning. Excitement that had persistently eluded him over the last half hour.

He didn't *want* his body to react this way. Nothing would ever come from lusting after the woman. He was as likely to get his hands on her as he was to catch a puff of the special-effect smoke that rolled around the stripper stage and that was part of the club's carefully crafted reality of haze, low lighting and significant amounts of alcohol that was supposed to turn the ordinary into extraordinary and loosen the male clientele's inhibitions along with their wallets. Too bad Michael was stone-cold sober. Another epic fail. One he had brought on himself.

Who in their right mind took their car to a strip club? Only him. Only because he hated commuting in overcrowded subways, was successful enough as senior partner of his own company to not have to settle for public transportation, and didn't actually plan to spend his Friday night in this fine establishment, until he learned of his brothers' plan for the evening. Car or no car, Michael couldn't pass up the opportunity to watch his brothers explain to their girlfriends what they were doing in a strip club. The fireworks were going to be epic.

Ready to pour some oil onto the kindling and hopefully distract himself from the one face that stuck in his mind like glue, he let his gaze stray back to the dancer on stage. He gave the curvy redhead in her minuscule baby-doll dress a lingering look he didn't feel. "I changed my mind. She's actually pretty fucking amazing. As you would see for yourself if you weren't too chickenshit to turn around."

Edward gave a laugh. "Forget it, man. I know you. I'm not going to fall for that. Much better view from this angle."

"Safer, you mean," Michael needled him, not bothering to follow Edward's gaze. He could hear the female party at his back in all its noisy glory. They had arrived at some point after Michael and his brothers and their laughter was

piercing the music that was pumping around them at regular intervals. It seemed that Lexa, Angie and their pole-dancing friends were enjoying the night of their lives.

Edward shrugged his shoulders. "That, too."

"You know what you two are, right?" Michael tilted the neck of his soda bottle in a silent toast. "Pussy-whipped."

Neither of his brothers dignified him with a response. As if either of them could dispute the fact. *Ha*. The only reason Edward and Jack had even dared to set foot in the strip club was to keep an eye on their girlfriends. And Michael understood the sentiment behind the move—any woman entering a strip club was likely to be subjected to a lot of unwanted scrutiny, not something Jack and Edward wanted to let happen. But the fact that they kept their backs turned toward the stage and their eyes firmly away from the dancers spoke volumes about who was wearing the pants in their relationships.

"I feel sorry for you." Michael sighed.

"No need," Edward drawled. "At least we weren't too *chickenshit* to go after what we wanted."

Michael tried hard not to glare. His brother had it all wrong. He did *not* want Molly Rogers. His body just hadn't gotten the memo yet.

He decided to play dumb. "I don't know who you're talking about."

"Oh, good." Edward leaned back, steepling his fingers over his stomach. "Then you won't be interested that *you don't know who I'm talking about* is part of the girls group and currently being propositioned by two guys at the bar."

Michael didn't even hear his brother's laugh, or Jack's *must have forgotten the coasters*, until he was already halfway to said bar.

Chapter 2

“When are you up, sugar?”

Not in this lifetime. Molly mustered her mother’s best “don't fuck with me, I'm royalty” look for the straw blond, middle-aged guy and his goatee-sporting friend who had swaggered up to her.

Joana Rogers had perfected the art of dressing down people with nothing more than a raised eyebrow and a ramrod straight spine. It was a necessity in the social spotlight that she and her husband, Molly’s father, had stood in for the last twenty-odd years. Even though Joana was “only” the strong woman behind Harold Rogers, political wunderkind and media darling, Molly’s parents were usually referred to as the political power *couple*. Because politics was conducted as much outside of the Capitol as it was inside, and as the daughter of a senator Joana was well aware of that. Soirees, pre-election parties and the insidious rumors opposition leaders and rivals liked to spread all year around—mostly about fictitious affairs and purported corruption—Molly’s mother faced it all with stoic calm. Confidence was key. As was family. Even in this day and age, when divorce numbers were higher than ever. Or maybe it was key exactly because of that. Everyone wanted their political figures to be well-adjusted individuals with supportive spouses and demure children. Children like Molly had once been.

She could spell the word *duty* before she could walk, and ever since her first day at school her mother had worked hard to turn her daughter into the perfect social butterfly.

The measure of her mother’s success where Molly was concerned was debatable. Although Molly had perfected her appearance the way her mother had drilled into her since the day Molly could hold mascara steady, Molly didn’t quite manage to pull off Joana 2.0 with her behavior. She was too fun-loving. Too extroverted. And tonight too far removed from any decent behavior—demure daughters of well-adjusted individuals did not spend their Friday nights in strip clubs—for the two guys to take her seriously.

“My friend asked you a question, honey-cheeks.” A heavy hand landed on her butt, before goatee-guy stuck a stripper dollar down her cleavage.

Molly hesitated only for a split second. *Demure daughters...* Oh, whatever. She tossed her freshly ordered drink into the guy’s face.

“What the... *Bitch.*” He lunged at her.

Molly reared back and braced to be backhanded, yanked forward, or simply crushed against the counter behind her, but the security guard who had tried to save Gigi earlier materialized beside her, freezing the man in place with his presence alone.

“Sorry, ma’am.” The guard placed his body strategically to shield her in case her attacker tried to pounce a second time. “We do instruct our patrons that only the girls with the golden wristbands work here.” He cast a meaningful glance at the bartender, who obediently flashed the clearly fake piece of jewelry before continuing to mix a new drink for Molly.

“It seems these men have forgotten the policy.” The guard gave the guys a hard look that made the men flush with embarrassment. “I shall remove them from the premises, if that is your wish.”

Molly looked at the chastised men. “I don’t think that’s n—”

“Oh, it is. Making friends again, Princess?”

Molly gritted her teeth at the ridiculous nickname. Just when she thought her evening couldn’t get any crappier. Hadn’t Michael just bought a new round of drinks? What was he doing at the bar again?

She turned to tell him to mind his own business. She hadn’t needed his help the first time they met when he thought he should rescue her from a guy’s—only partially—unwelcome advances. She certainly didn’t need his help now.

But the words got stuck in her throat when she saw his face.

“Don’t,” he said. His demeanor was calm, but his voice held a dangerous edge as he considered the still dripping man and his companion. His fist clenched at his side, telling Molly just how close he was to sending a message that didn’t need words.

Molly tried her best to ignore the unsettling feeling that stole through her body. She did *not* find his protective streak sexy.

Next to her, the guard inclined his head. “Indeed, Mr. Daniels. I apologize again for the way the men treated your, uh, friend.

Molly snorted. *Ha*, she and Michael were the furthest thing from friends.

Then another thought struck.

“He knows your name?” She regarded her nemesis with renewed speculation. “Just how much time and money do you spend in this club?”

“Enough to have these two jokers put on the blacklist for the rest of the month.”

“Certainly.” The guard didn’t waste time relaying the request through his earpiece to whoever was sitting at the other end.

Molly folded her arms over her chest, telling herself she shouldn’t feel anything but indifference at the knowledge he was a regular. She should certainly not feel jealous that her sex life had spiraled into nonexistence since they first met, while *his* was apparently all but swinging from the chandeliers.

What had she expected? That he had suddenly become celibate, because they had hurled insults at each other’s head a few times? The single cocktail she had imbibed must have been stronger than she thought.

Molly ignored the new glass of fruity concoction that the bartender set in front of her and pushed past Michael, determined to get as far away from him as possible. Determined to extract herself gracefully while she still could.

“How about a ‘thank you’?”

His voice behind her was distinct, despite the pumping music.

Molly turned, a tart retort on her tongue, only to realize that he had shifted his focus from the two men to follow closely behind her. *Very close. Body-heat-sharing close.*

Molly propped a hand on her hip. "Why should I thank *you*?" she asked, trying to ignore the way his nearness made her just a little bit breathless. "The situation was handled. It really wasn't necessary to ban them from the club."

He glowered at her. "They looked at you like a piece of meat."

"As did you not so long ago." She poked a finger at his chest. "You, sir, are a hypocrite."

"They touched you."

Molly dropped her gaze to where his hand had caught her wrist to keep her from poking him again and raised an eyebrow. When he simply raised his eyebrow back at her but didn't let her go, Molly snuffled in exasperation. The way the heat from his palm burned into her skin was distracting her. "I've been groped worse in 'normal' nightclubs."

The comment didn't have the desired effect. If anything, Michael looked even more thunderous than before.

"They wouldn't have been satisfied with patting your delectable butt if I hadn't intervened, Princess." His hand clenched on hers and a tingle ran down Molly's spine. Dammit. She wasn't supposed to react to him like this. He wasn't supposed to use words like "delectable" when describing any of her body parts.

Molly tugged on her arm until he let go. "You mean if the security guard hadn't intervened," she corrected, berating herself for continuing the argument when clearly the smart thing to do was to end this conversation and get the hell back to her friends. She doubted even the mighty Michael Daniels would feel comfortable confronting her while a whole table of women looked on.

As if reading her intentions right, Michael moved to block her escape route. "Who do you think called the security guard?"

Molly let her eyes go wide. "No way. You actually showed the presence of mind to ask for help instead of charging into battle like a, uh, knight in shining armor?" she asked, keeping with his ridiculous fairy tale theme of him calling her Princess, even though he was the last person she associated with a happy ever after. She tilted her head. "Or was it cowardice?" She could swear she could hear his molars crack. The thought gave her some insane satisfaction.

Michael got in her face before Molly could analyze why winding up the man seemed to charge her like a live wire.

"Let me make one thing very clear," he grated. "If not for the security guard the outcome for those two would have been a lot worse."

Molly didn't doubt it. She could see the truth in his eyes. Although Michael was more bulk than muscle, there was something in his movement that suggested he knew exactly how to use his body in a fight...or for sex.

The sudden image of Michael half-naked and sweating from physical exertion short-circuited Molly's thoughts. She squeezed her eyes shut. What was wrong with her tonight? She didn't even like the man.

Time to remind herself—and him—of that fact.

She smacked her lips together. "Savior of the fair maiden, huh?" she mocked.

Michael snorted. "Fair, maybe." He caught a strand of her hair, letting it coil around his finger. Although Molly couldn't feel the touch, the shiver racing under her skin was real. He looked up and their eyes locked. The ghost of a smile played around his lips. "A maiden?" He hummed under his breath.

Molly narrowed her eyes. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Michael shrugged, rubbing the curl between his thumb and forefinger as if to test its texture. "You're not an innocent."

Molly's jaw set. "That didn't take long," she said, wishing he would let go of her hair. Wishing she had stalked off in a huff when she still could.

"What didn't take long?" Michael asked, his head tilting, his eyes strangely intent on hers.

"You insulting me."

He looked genuinely surprised. "Who said it was an insult?" He gently tugged on the curl until she had no choice but to move closer to him.

How typical that he would make her come closer. Not the other way around.

He pushed the strand behind her ear, holding her gaze in an uncomfortable stalemate. "Innocence is overrated." His knuckles trailed over the sensitive skin just below her jawline and over her throat.

She should go. Just take a step—

"I like my woman to know what she is doing."

My woman. Of all the presumptuous things to say.

Molly tried to pull back. She truly did. But then Michael hooked a finger under her chin and lifted her face. And she knew.

He was going to kiss her. He was going to—

His lips touched hers and panic flared. Panic and something else. Liquid heat curled in the pit of her stomach.

Without conscious thought her hands came up to fist in his shirt. But instead of pushing him away as she had intended to, she ended up pulling him closer. Her hands flattened against his chest and—yes, his body definitely knew how to move against hers.

Michael growled and the sound sent another frisson of heat to her core. His tongue pushed into her mouth, his teeth nipping at her bottom lip when she didn't immediately open for him and for some reason the small sting was what pushed Molly over the edge.

She nipped back, harder than him, and let go of her inhibitions. If he insisted on unleashing this unnerving storm of emotions inside of her, she would make damn sure he was right there with her.

She slanted her mouth to deepen the kiss, pressing her body against his larger frame.

His arousal pushed hard against her belly and Molly couldn't help the rush of excitement at the power she held over him.

Until she heard his low chuckle, felt his lips form words against hers. "See, that's what I mean." He clutched her nape in a possessive grip, his forehead pressing against hers, while his other hand glided to her butt to press her lower half flush against his body. "An innocent woman wouldn't try to jump my bones in the middle of a strip club."

Molly jerked back as if he'd slapped her.

Thank fuck for the woman's predictable temper.

Lord knew he hadn't been able to tear himself away.

Michael swallowed hard against the dryness in his mouth and tried to catch his breath. His little show of *don't fuck with her* had certainly gotten out of hand fast. But who could have predicted that the Ice Princess would burn up in his arms like he was fire to her kindling? Certainly not him. Certainly not after she had put up more stop signs than all of the city's DOT employees combined.

But seeing two assholes proposition her in a strip club...well, he needed to make sure it didn't happen again.

Michael took a look around, grateful for the opportunity to escape her scathing glare.

Good. Most of the guys had seen his little territorial pissing contest.

Fuck off, gentlemen. She's mine.

Or at least she's not yours, he corrected when he turned back and was once more confronted with the murderous look on her face.

"That's what you mean?" she asked incredulously. "You can't stand me, but you kiss me to prove a point?"

Michael shrugged, trying his best to look unfazed by her anger. Better to let her think it had all been calculation on his part. She certainly wouldn't appreciate the truth. Him trying to save her from the vultures. Him barely being able to stop from dragging her into one of the private rooms and ruffling all of that irritating perfection she displayed in any situation.

What he wouldn't give to see that flawlessly coiffed hair of hers all untidy for once. How he itched to be the reason for it to look like bed head. He wanted nothing more than to mess up her near-indecent dress, push it up those mile-long legs. Kiss her some more until that fucking red lipstick was gone and the only red left behind on her lips was from his own lips, tongue and teeth.

Michael had had fantasies about those red lips wrapped around his cock for what seemed like forever. So, yeah, it was probably better for her to think he was simply proving a point.

Her hazel eyes narrowed at his placid expression and she launched into another tirade that had Michael biting back a grin. It was almost unbelievable that he had felt insulted the first few times she had come at him all irate temper and sharp claws. She was stunning when she was angry. Incandescent.

She was incandescent a lot. Because angry seemed her only frame of mind when she had to deal with him. If only she knew the effect she had on him when she got all prissy like this. She'd shut up faster than he could say "please." God, he was a sorry ass. Enjoying a verbal tongue lashing because he couldn't have the real deal. Then again, they had come pretty close mere minutes ago.

"What do you want, Michael?"

She had reached the end of her rant and was now looking at him expectantly. Shame he didn't have a clue what she had flung at his head while he was zoned out imagining her giving him head.

What to say? What to say? He opted for the truth. "You."

She snorted.

"In my car. I want to drive you home."

If his theory held true and he was the only fool driving to a strip club, Molly and her friends had probably taken a cab. At least Michael hoped they had. God forbid any of them intended to catch the subway home in the middle of the night.

"Why?"

"This isn't working." He gestured between them.

"Your observation skills are unsurpassed. So why spend more time with me?"

Why, indeed? He had to think fast or chance losing her. His salvation came in from of another bout of laughter from the women's table. "Jack and Edward are my brothers. Lexa and Angie are your friends. We're bound to bump into each other at times." He'd prefer they'd bump into each other a lot more frequently. And a lot more physically. But that was never going to happen. She wouldn't allow it.

Molly may enjoy kissing him. She would also enjoy fucking him. Any heterosexual man who didn't know how to please a willing woman by the age of thirty-five had to be blind, deaf and a tactile idiot. But at the end of the night their animal attraction wouldn't be enough. Because Molly and Michael would never work long term and he avoided fishing where he couldn't cut and run. He didn't have the finesse or the time to manage a scorned woman's expectations. He didn't have the laid-back attitude that allowed him to stay on good terms with a woman who scorned him.

In this particular case, the second scenario was much more likely than the first. Because Molly Rogers was American royalty and there wasn't a thing Michael could offer her that she didn't already have. Money. Status. Academic achievements. She had it all, and a body to die for.

Michael, on the other hand, was small-time. Self-made. His company only recently landed its first big client. He was usually proud of what he had built from nothing while putting his siblings through college and doing his damndest to keep his parents living in style. But he knew his achievements were a mere pittance for someone like Molly and—call him old-school or chauvinistic—a man was supposed to support his girlfriend, not be a millstone around her neck. That didn't mean they couldn't get along. Platonically. "We should call a truce."

“Fine. Truce,” she said.

Michael awarded her another point for stubbornness. But he could be stubborn, too. “It’s not that easy.” And then he played his trump. “I owe you an apology.”

She had been ready to leave, but at his words she stopped and eyed him suspiciously. “I’m listening.”

Michael smiled inwardly. *Gotcha, Princess.*

Now, to keep her. Hell, was he really doing this?

Was he really trying to turn Molly from foe to friend? He sure hadn’t anticipated his Friday night to end this way. But he would be damned if he backed down now. “I want to apologize for the way I looked at you all those months ago,” he said, remembering the day they had been introduced by Lexa in one of New York’s trendier bars. The situation back then had been eerily similar. Molly in a beautiful dress. A dickhead with shit for brains hitting on her. Michael making a fool of himself trying to rescue the supposed damsel in distress. Except the damsel hadn’t appreciated his interference. Still didn’t.

“Like a piece of meat?” she challenged, clearly intent to milk his apology for all it was worth. He had to reluctantly admire her for it.

“Like someone I couldn’t help but picture naked,” he conceded.

“Couldn’t help yourself, huh?”

Was he imagining it or did she just blush? Dammit, he wished the lighting in this damn club was better.

“Of course, I could have *tried* a little harder,” he allowed.

“Of course, you could have,” she mocked. “But you didn’t want to, did you? Because back then you were also proving a point.”

“Exactly.” He remembered thinking *if she doesn’t mind this idiot ogling her, then why am I holding myself back?* And he hadn’t. Not at all. He had taken in each luscious curve of her body.

Her expression turned dark again and he wondered what he had said now to piss her off. It was damn difficult to keep his mind on their conversation when she was so close to him.

He could feel the heat radiating from her body, could still feel where her softness had pressed against his hardness. Off limits or not, he was a man, not a saint.

“I’m glad we established that.” She turned on her heel and stalked back to her table.

Michael blinked. “I wasn’t fini—. Goddammit.” *Two seconds.* Two seconds of inattention and she was halfway across the floor. Michael stared after her. Agreeing on something with his rival firm’s CEO was easier than peace talks with Molly Rogers.

He considered following her, but he swerved toward his brothers instead. Following her once from the bar to ask for some gratitude that she *refused* to give him was bad enough. If he now trailed her through the entire club begging for her attention, that would be just sad.

“Well handled, bro.” Edward chuckled, lifting his beer in a silent toast. “I see your charm’s still working on her.”

“Mind your own.” Michael usually didn’t allow his brother’s good-natured teasing to rile him up. He gave Edward shit all the time. Only fair to be a good sport about it.

He didn’t feel like being a good sport right now.

He gave his soda a disgusted look. He couldn’t even get drunk.

His back felt like it was burning up from the curious glances he knew Molly’s friends were sending his way and he finally repositioned his chair to glower back at them.

Five pairs of eyes slid guiltily away. Only Lexa kept studying him, her lip pulled between her teeth in what Jack called her “thinking face.”

“Your girlfriend’s not going to go meddling in my affairs, is she?” Michael growled at his youngest brother, who fidgeted until Lexa’s gaze shifted to him then blew her a kiss like the sappy idiot he was.

“I didn’t know you had any affairs.” Jack waggled his eyebrows. He caught Lexa’s return kiss, making Michael roll his eyes.

“Seriously, dude?”

His brother shot him a cheeky grin. “Jealous?”

“No way. *Some* of us still have a pair.”

“Nothing wrong with my balls, pal. Ask my girlfriend.”

“No way. Not going there. She’s my employee, for Christ’s sake.”

Edward scratched his chin. “Angie’s not your employee. Does that mean you would consider talking to her about *my* balls? Because I don’t think I’d be okay with that.”

“How the fuck would your balls *ever* come up in a conversation between your girlfriend and me?”

“*Fiancée*. I showed you the ring, remember?”

“Not the point.”

Edward hummed under his breath. “Hmm. Just making sure. Tact’s not your forte.” He tossed back the last of his beer, ignoring Michael’s glare. “Well, this is fun,” he said after a moment, looking pointedly between the three of them shunning the action on stage. “Just what strip clubs were made for. No ogling of half-naked women, just comparing family jewels with the family.”

“Very civilized,” Jack agreed.

Michael dragged a weary hand over his face. There was so much wrong with this conversation—with this whole evening—he didn’t even know where to start. The thing that irked him most was that Molly had gotten away once again. They needed to sort out their differences if he didn’t want their every meeting to continue to be a head-butting contest.

If she wasn’t willing to provide any suggestions on how to get along, fine. He would simply lay down the law for the newly graduated lawyer.

At the thought Michael's mood picked up. She would hate being told...pretty much anything, which meant *he* was going to enjoy every second of their conversation.

Michael grinned. "Fuck civilized," he said, flicking the bottle cap he had been rolling between his fingers onto the table. "I'm going after her."

Chapter 3

"We're having this out tonight." Michael ignored the open scrutiny of Molly's friends as he held out his hand, palm facing up. He didn't know why he made the gesture. He certainly didn't think Molly would accept the invitation. Not after she had left him standing in the middle of the club five minutes earlier. Not after the barbs they had traded every time they'd met so far.

Except, after a second, Molly *did* place her small hand in his and the surprise must have shown on his face.

"For convenience's sake," she clarified and Michael wondered whether she was referring to less hostility between them during their future encounters, or to the fact that she could better dig her nails into him in warning this way if she didn't like what he was saying.

Whatever her reason, her slender fingers fluttered against the rough skin of his palm and Michael quickly closed his hand over hers before she could change her mind.

He tugged lightly, pulling her easily to her feet until her sky-high heels brought them almost eye to eye.

"Where to?" she asked, clearly relishing the fact that he couldn't look down at her. Her gaze snagged on one of the private rooms.

No way. This was a bad idea.

But they could hardly hash out the details of their truce shouting over the pumping music in front of a backdrop of bare-breasted dancers. Too much naked flesh could fry a man's brain. And with the events of the evening, Michael's was already at its limit.

"My car." He steered her toward the exit of the club, going with his original idea of driving her home. Shooting her a sideways glance when she came along without complaint. "You don't mind cutting your girls night short? What changed your mind all of a sudden?" he asked, ignoring the crush of the late evening crowd as they passed the reception desk. Ignoring, too, how small and vulnerable Molly's hand felt in his, how the light fragrance of her hair managed to penetrate the clogging smell of the heavier perfumes used by the girls in the club. *Friends*, he reminded himself. Whatever had possessed him to make that decision?

"You were right."

Michael cocked a brow, withstanding the urge to point out that, yes, he did have his moments, although he had no idea what she was referring to right then.

"I was?" he asked.

Molly shrugged. "We *will* continue to be thrown into these situations where we have to deal with each other. I'd rather there wasn't another misunderstanding next time."

“Another misunderstanding?” he repeated slowly. “Didn’t know we had one.”

“I don’t want you taking liberties again.”

Michael snorted. “Me taking liberties? What happened at the bar was hardly one-sided.”

“You kissed me.”

“You wanted me to,” he shot back, feeling his good intentions about getting them on more friendly terms waver. If she was going to play the victim...

Molly tugged her hand away, her eyes flashing in the dim light. “Maybe I did. Fact is I don’t want you to do it again.”

“Bullshit.” Michael pulled her closer when a couple of rowdy newcomers shouldered their way past them and felt a telltale shiver run through her body at his touch. “You want it to happen again just as badly as I do.”

Molly wasn’t ready to give in. “Probably the alcohol,” she murmured, her eyes sliding away.

Michael ground his teeth together. “You are not drunk. You weren’t here long enough to have more than one drink. Maybe two. You didn’t even touch that girly brew the bartender mixed for you.”

Her gaze came back to his. “Paid attention, did you?”

“Hard to miss when you throw your drink into someone’s face.”

Molly’s chin jutted forward. “I don’t like strange men touching me.”

“Neither do I,” Michael agreed.

Molly glared. “See, this right here is you taking liberties. You don’t get to tell me what you like and don’t like.”

“I don’t?” He leaned in, his tone mocking. “Princess, last time I checked we still had freedom of speech in this country.”

Molly huffed. “You know what I mean.”

He stopped inside the entrance to look at her, feeling his temper slip. “No, Molly. Honestly, I don’t. You’re sending me more mixed signals than a broken traffic light. From the first time we met you’ve been trying to convince me that I wasn’t fit to lick your shoes. But just a few minutes ago you were happy enough to stick your tongue down my throat. Which one is it?”

“*You kissed me.*” She was as agitated as he had ever seen her. But Michael was beyond his own breaking point. This time, he refused to let her take the easy way out.

He looked her square in the eye. “You could have said ‘no.’”

Molly mashed her lips together.

Michael shoved a hand through his hair. “You can’t even admit you’re attracted to me, can you?” Damn that stung.

He turned to leave. Let the woman return to her friends if she wanted to. This thing between them, whatever it was, was going nowhere. Certainly not in a more friendly direction.

“Wait.” Her fingers came to rest on his arm.

Michael ignored her. They had nothing more to talk about.

He lengthened his stride, trying to shake her off. He had to get out of here. Away. This place was giving him a headache. As was the woman beside him.

Molly grabbed his arm. "Hold on."

"If you have something to say, talk. You can talk while you're walking, can't you?" He was through with this bullshit.

"That's not...I can." She scurried after him. "Don't go out there. I just remembered—"

Click.

He registered the unmistakable sound of a camera shutter releasing at the same time Molly dug her heels into the ground, but it was too late. His momentum propelled them forward, Molly half stumbling after him. Michael automatically tried to steady her with a hand on her elbow as cameras flashed in his face.

Click. Click. Click.

Behind the blinding light Michael made out a mob of paparazzi. A babble of voices greeted them.

Molly, Molly. Over here, Molly. A comment please. Are you a regular at Jewel's? Do you frequent other strip clubs? Do your parents know what you are doing? Who is your companion? Is he your boyfriend? Was your visit business or...pleasure?

"What. The. Fuck."

Molly regained her feet with admirable quickness. "That's what I've been trying to tell you," she said, exasperation evident in her voice. "Someone called the news stations. They've been waiting for me."

"They are here for you?"

Molly pursed her lips. "No, must be another Molly they're talking about. Let's see who else just left the club with a guy. Look over there. Maybe her."

"Ha-ha."

She gave an imperceptible shake of her head and pasted a bland expression on her face. "Just do me a favor and keep walking okay? Ignore them."

"Igno—?"

She didn't let him finish. "If you feel at all inclined to not ruin my evening completely, act as if everything is normal. Don't look at them, they aren't even here."

Jesus. Michael tried to run a hand over his face, but Molly caught it and linked it with her own. Her eyes held a warning edge.

"Michael," she said under her breath, and despite their current situation—despite the fact that he had been about to leave her standing and head home alone—he couldn't help the tightening of his body at his name on her tongue. "This is bigger than you and me. You know that, right? Get your shit together."

The order snapped him out of his stupor. He wasn't one of her half-witted one-night stands that she had to counsel on how to act in front of the media.

But hell, he'd had no idea her life was like this. No wonder she always looked perfectly put together. No wonder she had tried to stop him dead in the shadows of the door. She probably didn't want to be seen with him.

Michael tried to let go of her, but her fingers tightened around his.

"Don't," she hissed, nodding at the bouncer to clear a path for them. "Try to hide something and they dig ten times deeper. If you have a skeleton in your house, forget the closet. Make sure you prop it up right there in the middle of the room for everyone to see."

Great. Now he was a skeleton? Michael ignored the unexpected pang of hurt her comment caused and allowed her to pull him out of the melee, the chorus of voices slowly fading behind them.

When they reached the parking lot, she let go of his hand, her camera-face falling away. She released a pent-up breath.

Michael ran a hand through his shaggy hair. "You could have warned me," he said.

She whirled around, crossing her arms in front of her chest, the last of her calm evaporating. "I tried. You were like a bulldozer on a mission, running out of that place. Next time you may want to pay attention when a woman tries to put on the brakes. Now the media is involved. God knows what they are going to write about us tomorrow."

"Who cares what they write," he bit out, annoyed that she made it sound as if it was all his fault. *Again*. "Everyone knows it's just sensationalism."

She came at him with sparking temper. "Sensationalism has the potential to destroy careers. To destroy lives."

He harrumphed. "So, they saw a couple leave a strip club. Big deal. I'll handle it."

Molly laughed. "For someone who has dealt with journalists for the launch of his business you are entirely too optimistic. The pictures are already sent. The articles will be drafted shortly. *Molly Rogers visits strip club with boyfriend*, if we are lucky. If we're not—" Molly shrugged. "I guess something like *Boyfriend drags Showgirl Rogers out of strip club*."

He glared. "I didn't drag you."

"That's what you would object to with this headline?" Molly glared at him incredulously. "It doesn't matter anyway," she said, before he could respond. "As you pointed out, it's sensationalism and people crave a good headline far more than the truth."

She had a point there. Michael felt a muscle ticking in his jaw. He was used to being in control. The fact that he was powerless in this situation frustrated him to no end. "So, how do we handle this situation?" he asked after a moment.

Molly tilted her head. "The infallible Michael Daniels is asking me for advice?"

"Don't be a smartass about it. I never said I was infallible. And you clearly have more experience with situations like these."

Astonishingly, she dropped the snark. "There is nothing to handle, really." Molly shrugged her shoulders. "The damage is done. You wait to see what they print. You ignore it. It'll all blow over eventually."

"Not good enough."

"You don't even know what they're going to write yet."

"I know I don't like them dragging you through the mud."

He could tell his statement had surprised her, but she simply shook her head. "You can't dictate the press. You said it yourself. Freedom of speech."

"What about your parents?"

"What about them? My father's career will survive the blow. It always does. The Rogers family tree has been far too integral to the political landscape for far too long for his power stance to be seriously threatened by something as minor as a fun night out by the daughter who has no political ambitions. As to them being disappointed in me, it won't be the first time they don't agree with my choices. Nor will it be the last. I love my parents, but I'm not like them."

He saw her jaw clench, and knew there had to be more to the statement than he realized.

Michael didn't pry. He didn't appreciate anyone intruding on his family's business. He wasn't going to intrude on hers.

"Why didn't they follow you the first time we met?" he asked instead, unlocking the car door on the passenger side and motioning for her to slide in. The mob was gaining on them and Michael wanted to be out of there before they could get another picture of the two of them driving off together.

Molly waited until he had rounded the car and was sliding the key into the ignition before she answered.

"I'm a politician's daughter, not a Hollywood A-lister. Gossip needs to be juicy to sell. Sex scandals, alcohol rampages...a wild night in a strip club are all ticking the right boxes. Our first meeting happened in a perfectly respectable wine bar."

He contemplated her statement while navigating their way out of the parking lot. "If you knew your visit tonight would be trouble, why didn't you take precautions?" Michael checked the wing mirror, noting with relief that the gathered crowd had disappeared in the distance.

"Surely you're not suggesting I should have passed up a night out with my girlfriends because of society's misguided notion that a woman doesn't belong in a strip club unless she's dancing on the tables?" she challenged.

"Precautions, Princess."

"An invisibility cloak, then?"

Michael ignored her sarcasm. "I'm sure the club has a back entrance."

"For dancers, yes." Just imagine one lucky reporter taking *that* shot.

Michael pressed his lips together. "We could have at least left separately. If you had told me—"

"I told you, I *tried*—"

"*Before* I was halfway out the door."

"I forgot. Okay?"

He took his eyes off the road to look at her. "No, not okay. How can you forget something that is supposedly so important to you?"

Molly folded her arms over her chest and pushed defensively into the seat cushion. "It's your fault."

Of course.

But she wasn't finished. "You make me forget a lot of things. Decency. Common sense." She shook her head. "The fact that you hate me."

He frowned at her. "I don't hate you."

"No?" she asked. "You could have fooled me."

Michael lifted a brow. "Really?" he asked. "When exactly did I give you the impression that I couldn't stand you? Was that when I saved you from a couple of gropers, or when I tried to kiss you within an inch of your life?"

Molly snapped her mouth shut, feeling defensive and more than just a little bit vulnerable. "I'm talking about our history. There isn't a single time we met when we didn't get into an argument."

At least Michael hadn't used his dislike of her to let the media situation get completely out of control. Of course that wouldn't keep the papers from printing a juicy story. The questions they had fired at her gave her a pretty good indication of what she could expect.

Molly sighed. Her mother was going to have an aneurysm. Maybe Molly should consider buying that god-awful dress her mother insisted would make her look like a "real doll" and wear it to schmooze some of her parents' supporters at the fundraiser tomorrow night. Talk about false advertising. Then again, if it saved her from listening to one of her mother's lectures. *Not likely.*

She closed her eyes in resignation. Why did she have to let herself get caught unawares leaving a gentlemen's establishment? She should have known better than to make her exit this...remarkable. She *did* know better. Unfortunately, everything had become a little bit of a blur after that kiss at the bar.

Molly resisted the urge to touch her fingers to her lips. Michael Daniels had kissed her. And she had liked it way too much. How inconvenient. How unsurprising.

If she was honest with herself, she had feared this was going to happen if they ever got closer than arm's length. She just hadn't expected it to happen tonight.

Now she had no idea where to go from here. Because Michael was right. She couldn't admit that she was attracted to him. Not unless she was willing to act on that attraction. Because once she gave him the green light there was nothing stopping them from giving in to their animal magnetism. And with their history, giving in spelled only one thing. *Disaster.*

"As I recall, *you* called *me* an asshole the first time we met." Michael's statement pulled her out of her thoughts.

"I apologized for that."

“Nuh-uh, Princess. You apologized to your friend because you thought I was going to fire her for your blunder. You never apologized to me.”

Molly refused to take the bait. “Details.”

“Said the lawyer.”

She threw her hands into the air. “Fine. I’m apologizing now. Can we move on?”

Michael barked a laugh. “I thought we were talking about me hating *you*. All I’ve heard so far points in a rather different direction.”

“What about the time you insulted my baking skills?” she asked.

Michael shot her an amused glance. “That’s your best piece of evidence? I simply pointed out that your cake wasn’t as good as my brother’s. He’s a pastry chef for God’s sake. What do you expect? That he can’t do better than an amateur?”

“Aaand you just did it again. You truly have no idea how to deliver an apology.”

“I wasn’t apologizing.”

“Clearly,” Molly scoffed.

Michael huffed. “Just for the record, you weren’t even supposed to hear what I said back then.”

“But I did.”

“But you did,” he sighed. There was a beat of silence in the car then, “You were flirting with him.”

Molly narrowed her eyes. “Who? Edward? I was making conversation.”

“Looked a lot like flirting to me.”

“And you care because...?”

Michael’s fingers flexed once. Twice. “Because I can barely look at you without wanting to fuck you, okay? I was jealous.”

Molly’s mouth snapped shut.

“Yeah. That’s what I thought.” Michael focused back on the road, his jaw clenched.

“You were jealous of your own brother, who, I’d like to point out, had only eyes for one person at that gathering and it sure wasn’t me.”

“I didn’t say it made sense.”

“No, it doesn’t,” she agreed. “Neither does you insulting me, because you want to, uh, fuck me?”

Michael’s brows drew together. “Women are not supposed to say the ‘F’ word.”

“Really? Where do you get this crap from?”

“You’re also not supposed to say crap,” he grumbled.

“And I’m only supposed to enjoy making love in missionary position, I know. Tell me, Michael, would it surprise you to know I like to be fucked hard?”

She didn’t know who was more stunned by the statement—him or her—as the car jerked to a stop in front of her apartment.

“Jesus, Molly. You are out of control.”

Yes, she clearly was. This was *not* her. Yet, she didn't seem to be able to stop. Not after what he had just admitted.

Jealousy. Of all the things.

Molly licked her lips. "What about blow jobs? Would you be shocked to know I enjoy giving head?"

A groan was her only answer. "Why are you doing this?" he asked.

Molly shrugged. If only she knew. "You started it."

He closed his eyes, whimpering as if he was in physical pain. "I take it back. I take everything back."

Molly giggled. She *never* giggled. "Unbelievable," she said, when she got herself back under control. "Here I was waiting for an apology from you for all this time, and the only thing it took was some dirty talking." She leaned in, unable to resist pushing him just a little bit further now that she had him this far. "Tell me, Michael. What would you do if I *actually* let you fuck me?"

He was silent for so long she thought he wasn't going to answer. When he did his voice was dead serious. "I'd worship the ground you walk on, Princess."

The growl sent a shiver through Molly's body. Who could resist such a promise? Certainly not her. Certainly not tonight.

"Then what are you waiting for?" Her voice came out barely more than a whisper.

Michael's eyes opened a tiny slit and the heat in his gaze seared Molly to her toes. "What are you saying?"

"What you wanted to hear. I'm attracted to you. *I want you.*"

His knuckles turned white around the steering wheel. "Not funny."

"Not a joke."

"This is a bad idea."

"I think it's the best idea I've had in a long time. You said you wanted to have this out with me. I don't think talking is going to do the trick."

"So, what? You want to work it out between the sheets?"

She shrugged. "The press already thinks we're doing the dirty. Might as well get the benefit. One night," she said, determined to set some clear expectations. Determined to nip any ambiguity in the bud. With overachievers like Michael—overachievers like her father, her mother, her brother—it was control or be controlled. "We'll get this," she said, gesturing between them. "Whatever this is, out of our systems. After that, I want you to promise me we'll be civil in each other's company."

She looked at him expectantly, but faltered slightly when she realized that at some point during her little speech he had gone preternaturally quiet.

"No."

"No?"

He regarded her with unreadable eyes and Molly lost it. "After all these grand statements you say 'No'?"

"I say no," he confirmed.

Damn the man to hell and back. "Why?"