

Chapter One

Standing in a room filled to capacity with the expensively dressed men and women of New York City's social elite, Dean Maxwell was in the midst of contemplating creative ways to torture the eldest sister who'd wheedled him into attending this event when he saw *her*. Petite, dark-haired, stunning, and looking like she wanted escape as much as he did. Without a second thought, Dean made his excuses to the trio of women who'd cornered him upon his arrival and subsequent desertion by his dear sister.

He made his way across the crowded room. His target turned to talk to someone who drew her attention and Dean stopped completely for a moment, his breath trapped in his chest. The woman wasn't wearing a bra. The calf-length, silky, black gown wrapped around that slender body plunged dramatically in the rear to the small of her back, exposing nothing but a long expanse of smooth, pale skin that he alternately wanted to touch and to cover from other male eyes at the same time.

The primitive possessiveness startled him, but he didn't question it. When his heart started beating again, Dean had to force the white-knuckled hand gripping the champagne flute to relax before he snapped the stem in two. Five more feet and he was able to overhear the conversation between her and her apparently unwanted companion.

"No, really, I'm fine right here," she was saying, her voice low but insistent. Dean could hear the underlying note of frustration in her cool tone.

"Babe, you're looking flushed," her companion countered as he snaked a hand down to her hip with ease and familiarity. Anger flickered hotly through Dean. "Let's just step out onto the balcony for a bit. The fresh air'll do you good. Clear your head. And we'll be able to talk privately."

"Ty—"

"Here's the champagne you asked for," Dean interjected firmly, stepping forward. She spun around and he found himself staring into eyes the color of good Scotch whisky. For the second time that night, breathing was forgotten.

Parker Quinn couldn't look away from the intense blue eyes boring into hers. She couldn't so much as blink, let alone do something as complicated as properly coordinate her muscles to turn away. The room and the people in it receded, leaving only the man filling her vision. She was very aware of the heavy thudding of her heart against her ribs as she searched those darkened eyes, looking for something to which she couldn't put a name but knew existed just the same.

"Listen, buddy, this is a private conversation."

Tyler's irate voice broke the spell and Parker blinked. Her gaze fell on the champagne flute being held out to her. It took a moment for the gears in her brain to start revolving again. She grasped the flute gratefully and moved a step away from Tyler and a step closer to the man unexpectedly coming to her rescue.

"Thank you," she murmured. She brought the flute to her lips and sipped, the champagne startlingly cool as it traveled down her esophagus. "I was wondering where you took off to."

"Sorry, but I was delayed on the way back," her rescuer murmured in return, splaying a hand across the small of her back and subtly moving her out of Tyler's reach. Normally, she wouldn't have allowed a total stranger such familiarity with her person, but the feel of his warm, roughened palm on her bare skin made the gears in her head slow down again as ribbons of

delicious heat curled through her. His voice lowered even more, as if they were in a far more intimate setting than a room filled with a couple hundred people. "I'm back now."

Tyler loudly and deliberately cleared his throat. Parker glanced back at him, honestly unaware that he was still standing there.

"Who's he?" her ex-lover demanded, sounding and looking like an upset little boy. Why in the world had she gotten involved with him in the first place?

Parker took another sip of champagne as she weighed her options. "My date."

"What?"

"I told you we were through over a month ago."

"But you didn't mean it," Tyler insisted, a faint and very unbecoming whine in his voice.

Parker quelled the urge to roll her eyes. "Tyler, please."

"And you can't seriously want him over me!"

Parker's response to Tyler's outburst was smothered on her lips as they were covered by male lips that were softer than they appeared to be. And warmer. A lot warmer. More like hot. Searing, even. They gently rubbed against hers, enticing her to part her lips so the tip of his tongue could trace along the shallow edge inside her bottom lip, and all coherent thoughts dissipated and ceased.

She moaned—oh, so softly—into his mouth, her fingers clenching and unclenching on the champagne flute in her hand. She wanted to clutch at his shoulders, bury her fingers in his hair, press for something deeper, but knew she shouldn't.

It was a second or two before Parker realized the kiss had ended. Her lashes fluttered open and glittering eyes met hers, promising things that made heat pool low in her body.

Parker sucked in a breath and focused on not allowing her knees to buckle.

"That should answer your question," said the man still staring at her for Tyler's benefit.

Still a little senseless from the kiss, she blinked at her former not-so-significant other, not quite sure what she could add. An angry flush stained Tyler's boyishly handsome face. His mouth opened, then snapped shut again. He looked like he wanted to throw a world-class temper tantrum, at which, she'd learned early in their relationship, he excelled, but he seemed to think better of it and wheeled around and stomped away.

"Thank you." She managed to sound only a tad breathless as she studied the man before her. The white knight who'd come to rescue her from Tyler wasn't conventionally good-looking. His bold features were too rough, too unrefined. Dark blond hair, sun-darkened skin, deep-set eyes, broad cheekbones, hawkish nose, hard mouth and strong jaw. He wasn't handsome like Tyler but, Parker thought as another wave of heat washed over her, he was more sensually appealing than her former lover could ever hope to be. And his sheer physical presence dominated all her senses and made her want to do things that were probably illegal in several states.

"My pleasure," he murmured, his voice rumbling in her ears, sending a ribbon of heat curling through her.

She should step back now, break physical contact with this man before she gave in to her baser urges and yanked his body hard against hers and rubbed herself against him like a cat in heat. A single step back and he would drop his hand, would stop skimming the rough pad of his thumb over the hollow near the base of her spine. But she enjoyed the scorching tingles of sensation that radiated from his touch too much.

"I have to go," she said softly, making no move to leave.

The long arm nearly encircling her waist tightened, pulling her infinitesimally closer.

"Unless you want your ex to know we just pulled a fast one on him, you should stay by my side

for the rest of the night.”

For the first time in a long time, she was feeling a little reckless and enjoying it more than was wise. She suggestively arched a brow. “And just how long would that be?”

His eyes darkened to midnight and the tips of his fingers dug into her back. “My butler makes excellent French toast and bacon.”

Her body temperature went up another degree. Parker took a healthy swallow of champagne, but the chilled liquid did nothing to cool her.

Masculine laughter, low and evocative, caressed her ears. “Maybe we should take a couple of steps back and introduce ourselves.” He moved back a pace, his hand sliding from the middle of her back to cup a hip. “Dean Maxwell.”

That name did what the champagne couldn’t; everything inside Parker froze even as her head cleared. For a long, drawn-out moment, nothing registered except for the heavy weight that settled in her stomach as all her muscles went rigid. Despite herself, a sharp stab of disappointment pierced her more deeply than she cared to admit.

Distance. She desperately needed distance.

With great effort, she swallowed and allowed a chill to frost her words. “Once again, thank you for your assistance with Tyler, Mr. Maxwell,” she said stiffly. “However, there are a few things that require my attention.”

Before she could step away from him, his other hand came up and encircled her upper arm, holding her in place.

“Care to tell me what just happened?” he asked in a dangerous undertone.

Parker tipped her head back and met his gaze. “I don’t get involved with men like you.” Her mouth tightened briefly. “And especially not *you* in particular.”

His hand squeezed as he pulled her in a fraction closer, his head bent down low to hers. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t owe you an explanation.”

His jaw tightened, lips thinning.

“Don’t,” she warned, her voice equally low, equally dangerous. “I just got rid of one man who doesn’t understand the word *no*. I don’t intend to repeat my mistake.”

She discreetly jerked her arm from his hold, backed up two steps, then whirled on her heel and hurried away, somehow feeling very much like she was running from a predator.

She was out of sight by the time Dean recovered from her one-eighty. After fruitlessly searching for fifteen minutes for the woman who filled him with equal parts lust and frustration, Dean decided to regroup. He tracked down his sister at a table situated in front of the low stage set up in the dining area. She was alone and chatting on her cell phone. Noticing him, she ended the conversation and put the device back in her miniscule evening bag.

He pulled out the chair next to hers and sat down. “Vanessa.”

She grinned widely at him. “That was quite a show you and Parker Quinn put on out there. Very unlike your normal reserved, elusive self.” She planted an elbow on the table, rested her chin on a closed fist, and studied him with unabashed amusement dancing in her eyes. “Should I book you for an appointment?”

Parker Quinn. He now had a name. It was the first step. Parker. He repeated the name several times silently in his head. It was unconventional, like her effect on him, and he decided it suited her. Then the rest of his sister’s words registered and he grimaced. His forty-year-old sister supported herself and her teenage daughter rather comfortably as half owner of one of the

most successful event planning agencies in Manhattan. Vanessa mainly handled weddings. Since he'd turned thirty-five three years ago, his dad and sisters constantly bombarded him with the subject of marriage. After the first year, he'd learned that the best tactic was to ignore them.

"What can you tell me about her?"

The grin faltered. "What happened?"

"I introduced myself, the temperature dropped to subzero, and she couldn't run away from me fast enough," Dean explained, unable to keep a note of annoyance from his voice. His tone turned wry. "I get the distinct feeling she has a personal grudge against me, but I sure as hell don't know what I did to her. I don't remember ever meeting her—and trust me, I wouldn't forget."

"Wait." Vanessa held up a hand, palm out. "You told her your name *after* you kissed her in front of God and a room full of gossipy witnesses?"

The consequences hadn't even entered his mind. He'd been operating on pure instinct. "It's complicated."

"I see," Vanessa said thoughtfully.

"What do you know about her?"

Vanessa sat back in her seat, her brow furrowed. "Not much. Just that she's a senior editor for *Femme* and the brains behind the auction tonight."

The magazine's fourth annual charity event raised money for several women's aid organizations in the city by auctioning off dates with various members of the magazine's staff and the professional models, male and female, who posed within its pages throughout the past year. Needless to say, the event had been a stellar success since year one in terms of both media coverage and dollars raised.

"Is she on the auction block tonight?"

Vanessa shook her head. "She just organizes it. From what I gather, she doesn't like the spotlight too much. Very much like you." The corners of his sister's mouth curled upward, like she was enjoying something thoroughly delicious. "Although, when you two got together, you both seemed to forget that."

Dean shot her a look that made it clear the observation wasn't appreciated.

She laughed, sounding a little too gleeful in his opinion, and patted his arm consolingly. "Since Parker organizes this event, every year she makes a brief speech at the end of the auction to thank the contributors. Stick around and you can corner her before she pulls another disappearing act."

His resolve hardened. Despite what she'd said earlier, Parker Quinn *did* owe him an explanation and he was going to get it out of her one way or another. There was no way in hell he was walking away from her. A primal hunger had ripped through him at the first touch of her lips. He couldn't imagine what it would feel like to bury himself inside her body, fill her with him—and then push until she came apart in his arms.

Parker's skin prickled with awareness. Dean Maxwell was watching her, silently challenging her to turn around and meet his eyes. She didn't dare, didn't allow her eyes to stray from the auction on stage. She was a coward, but that was better than the reckless fool she'd been earlier. She'd been moments away from repeating her sister's mistake. Cold rippled over her skin. With the buffer of distance, the full impact of what Dean Maxwell had done to her sister hit her. Parker pressed a fist to her abdomen, trying to massage away the lump lodged there.

The man used women to satisfy his sexual needs, then discarded them like yesterday's

paper. And if there were consequences, well, he always made sure to lay out the ground rules at the start. Or so she'd heard. She wasn't planning on giving him a chance to share his ground rules with her personally.

Two tables away, Tyler smirked at her as a tall, slim but amply endowed, platinum blonde known for her ultra-racy lingerie ads cooed God-knows-what in his ear and trailed her crimson-tipped fingers up and down the nape of his neck. Even though she knew he'd bought the woman to make her jealous, Parker fervently wished them the best. The sooner Tyler fixated on another woman, the sooner he'd stop being a nuisance to her. When they'd first met, she'd never thought he would be the obsessive type. Frankly, she hadn't thought his attention span could last that long.

Parker mentally shook her head. She had a penchant for choosing the wrong men. Or rather, her libido did. Thoughts of her libido brought back thoughts of Dean Maxwell and Parker felt an uncontrollable flush of warmth.

Brenda. She reached for the water goblet, needing the chill of ice water against her skin.
Think of Brenda.

Twenty more minutes, then she could escape for real.

Parker listened with half an ear as the master of ceremonies-cum-auctioneer made coy remarks about the latest model to be auctioned off. The Brazilian beauty was tall, tanned, gorgeous and blessed with spectacular curves rarely seen in the industry. Despite being one of the most famous and highest paid supermodels in the world, her ego wasn't nearly as big as it could be. Parker couldn't help but like the younger woman for her humor, easy-going personality and generosity.

The spirited bidding started high and quickly topped all the previous winning bids. With a playful flick of her finger, the model pushed the skinny strap of her gown off her shoulder, then teasingly gathered up the hem of her baby-doll dress, an inch at a time, and the crowd went wild. In the end, another twenty-something Greek shipping heir escorted his prize off the stage to the congratulatory hoots and hollers from his entourage in the crowd.

Hearing the emcee introduce her, Parker gracefully rose to her feet and made her way up the stage to polite applause. She accepted the microphone from the other woman and smiled at the crowd, deliberately avoiding glancing in Dean Maxwell's direction.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for your generosity tonight." Her smile became slightly crooked. "Although, some of you high-bidders, especially our last one, will agree it was money *very* well spent." Laughter rippled through the crowd. "Once again, you have broken the previous year's record," Parker announced, at ease on the stage despite her preference to remain in the background. She went on to briefly list the charities that would benefit from the evening's fundraising, not going into any detail. She'd learned that short and sweet would keep the audience happy. Anyone who wanted to know more about the charities would contact her personally.

Parker tucked back a stray wavy strand of hair that escaped her loose upswept hairdo behind her ear. "On behalf of *Femme*—"

Parker broke off when the emcee tapped her on the shoulder. The other woman was waving a small piece of paper in one hand and holding out the other, empty-handed, to Parker. Parker raised a questioning brow, but she handed over the microphone.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the emcee began in an amused tone, "it appears the closing speech is premature. An audience member has made a silent bid for the beautiful organizer standing before you!"

Parker's smile froze on her face. Dread and something disturbingly close to excitement stirred in the pit of her stomach. After a moment, she managed to laugh along with the audience, hoping she didn't sound as forced to them as she did to her own ears.

"At twenty thousand dollars, the bid is extremely generous," the emcee continued when the room quieted again. "However, since Parker is not listed on tonight's program, it will be her decision whether or not to accept her not-so-secret—" she winked knowingly at the audience, who obliged with discreet laughter and chuckles, "—admirer's bid."

Heat crawled up Parker's cheeks as she reminded herself she needed to breathe. Her brain needed oxygen. Damn Dean Maxwell for putting her on the spot. The arrogance of the man!

Realizing that she was standing there doing a damned good imitation of Silent Bob while every person in the room waited anxiously for her answer, Parker shifted her features into an expression of indulgent amusement and said into the microphone, "As you know, unlike the other bachelors and bachelorettes, I don't have an outing planned, so it would be wrong to accept the bid."

Fuming inside, Parker waited for the crowd's vocal dissatisfaction with her response to die down. "However, I would be more than happy to personally donate the bid amount to tonight's charities."

The emcee's smile bordered on a smirk. "I believe the gentleman in question would be even happier to put together something for the both of you. Something more private, perhaps?"

Parker felt as if a clay mask had hardened on her face. "I'm more than willing to save him the trouble."

The emcee draped an arm across Parker's shoulders, like she was moving to the next level of cajoling. "Parker—"

Dean Maxwell's deep voice cleanly cut through the buzz of the crowd and cut off the emcee. "I'll double the bid."

Astonished gasps, then loud applause and more laughter broke out. However, Parker didn't hear any of it. A roaring filled her ears and she was sure she swayed on her feet. For the first time since she'd run from him, she stared directly at Dean Maxwell. He looked every inch the victor, and she was the prize he was going to claim.

Filled with an elation better than any he'd ever felt, whether with another woman or when closing a multimillion dollar deal, Dean went to collect the woman he'd just bought before she could give in to the impulse he had read in her eyes and elude him yet again. She hadn't waited for him to escort her off the stage, but he hadn't expected her to do so.

Dean followed her behind the stage area. He saw her narrow back stiffen as he closed the distance between them, as if she could sense his nearness like he did hers. He waited for her to finish doling out instructions to the group of people around her. When they took off to take care of whatever tasks she'd assigned them, Parker slowly, stiffly pivoted on her delicate heel and faced him.

"It's a date, not a death sentence," he quipped, taking in her less-than-pleased expression. "Think of all the good my money's going to do for your charities." He took a step closer, close enough to touch her, close enough to breathe in her warm, citrus-like scent. Blood surged even more heavily to his lower body. He hardened and wanted to close the distance between them, wanted to find out just how good it would feel to rub himself against the yielding softness of her body.

Before she could protest, Dean reached out and curled his fingers around her slender wrist.

He brought her hand up to his mouth and pressed his lips into the center of her soft palm, all the while locking her eyes with his. A delicate shiver ran through her as her lashes lowered. The involuntary reaction was almost everything he hoped for. Then in the space of two breaths, she regained her senses and tried to tug free of his hold. He only pulled her in closer.

“Let go, Mr. Maxwell.” She pushed the words out through gritted teeth.

He lifted a mocking brow at her address, then a corner of his mouth curved wickedly. “You should practice saying my first name.” His voice lowered seductively. “Mr. Maxwell is going to sound awkward when you come apart in my arms.”

She inhaled sharply and her slim brows slammed together. “Listen, you Neanderthal, you paid for my time, not use of my body.”

Instead of being provoked as she’d obviously intended, he chuckled. The coldness earlier was not really her nature. She was like a little bundle of fire and he couldn’t wait to let her burn for him.

He brushed the pad of his thumb over the inside of her wrist, enjoying the way her pulse raced and belied her words. “I did pay for the former, and with it, I’m going to convince you into allowing me the latter.”

She looked at him as if he’d lost his mind. “Do you enjoy failure?”

“No, and I work damn hard to avoid it.”

“Then you should be avoiding me.” She tried to discreetly free herself from his hold once more.

He released her, but before she could hurry away, he caught the lock of hair that had escaped her updo. He rubbed the fine strands between his thumb and forefinger, fanning them. They had the softness and silky texture of untreated hair. He had a sudden mental picture of her running her hair down the length of his body and his low-level arousal flared up and became painful. His hand fisted.

“When can you leave?” he demanded, all teasing gone.

She batted at his hand and he let it drop only to land on her bare shoulder. Her pale skin was even softer than her hair. His other hand cupped her opposite shoulder. He wanted to push down the tiny spaghetti straps until he uncovered the soft, tempting mounds hidden by black silk. Then he wanted to taste them, lick them, take them in his mouth and suckle.

“Don’t...please.”

The soft-spoken entreaty stopped him, making him aware that his thumbs were hooked underneath the tiny straps and he had been about to undress her and make his desire a reality. There was currently no one around, but anyone could’ve walked in on them. He realized he wouldn’t have cared.

He stared down into her small face and his grip tightened. She wanted him. She couldn’t hide that, but along with the lust, her eyes held a trace of fear. He wanted a lot from her, but fear wasn’t one of them. He silently cursed himself.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized, his voice a little tight, a little harsh. She glanced away from him, not saying a word, silently rejecting him, and he couldn’t let that happen. “Let me take you home. I promise not to...persuade you into anything else.”

More silence, her eyes still on his shirt front.

“Parker?” he prompted.

Her response was barely more than a whisper. “All right.”

Dean pulled out his cell phone and left a message for his driver to wait to take Vanessa home. Then he held out his hand to the woman before him. “Ready?”

Outside, the air was nippy and Parker pulled the wrap more tightly about her. It was thin, but it was silk so it was warmer than it looked. Still, she couldn't suppress a shiver. A large tuxedo jacket settled over her shoulders, dwarfing her. However, it still retained its owner's warmth, so Parker didn't complain.

"Think you're up to walking two blocks?" he asked, standing close to her so he could be heard over the constant noise of traffic and people.

"I live further away from here than two blocks."

"I want to stop by The Four Seasons."

She went still as warmth spread through her body. She swallowed, tipped her head back so she could eye him warily and said, "You said you'd take me home."

A small smile played around his mouth, like he knew exactly what her thoughts had been.

"The restaurant. I will take you home after you get something to eat. I watched you all through dinner. You had maybe one canapé."

"I had something before I came."

"And that meal is called lunch. Or was it breakfast?"

He was right, but she wasn't going to let him know that. And now that her duties were completed, she was feeling a little hungry.

She nodded at the hotel they'd just exited. "Why don't we go back inside?"

He lifted a brow. "The restaurants inside will be crawling with people who attended the auction. I thought you'd want to get away from that crowd."

She sighed, suddenly exhausted. "I just want to go home and forget I met you."

"Ouch." He winced, but not convincingly. "But you got an extra forty thousand for your cause."

"I can donate that amount instead and we can forget the date," she suggested, already mentally sorting through her portfolio and trying to decide which equity investments would be most advantageous to donate.

He ignored that, placed a hand on the small of her back, and steered her toward the crosswalk. They covered the two blocks in silence. At The Four Seasons, she shrugged off the jacket and handed it back to him. The coolly elegant restaurant was busy with the after-theater crowd, as it usually was in the evenings. Despite not having one of the *de rigueur* reservations, they managed to wrangle a table in The Pool Room near the windows. The dining room was airy and, to Parker's dismay, rather romantic with its twenty-foot windows and subtle lighting. Water babbled in the white marble pool in the center of the room, but the sound quickly fell into the background to blend with the other white noise. It drowned out the other diners' conversations and the *clink* of their silverware against china.

They ordered drinks, with Parker cautiously sticking to iced tea, and looked over the menu. Having made her decision, she put the menu down and looked up at the canopy of trees. "I haven't been here in ages. How did you get a table? This room is always fully booked for dinner."

"I had a little help."

It took her a second to decipher his meaning. Then she queried dryly, "Do you always buy what you want?"

The waiter stopped by, slid their drinks on the table, and took their food order.

"Money has to be good for something," he said after the waiter left. "I work hard for it and I can't take it with me when I die." He took note of her frown and chuckled. "I heard you when

you said you're not for sale."

She picked up the iced tea. "Good of you to remember," she muttered behind the tall glass.

He caught her gaze and held it. "I remember everything you said," he murmured as he swirled the scotch in his glass, ice clinking musically.

Getting oxygen into her lungs was suddenly labor intensive. Parker swiftly swallowed a mouthful of iced tea and prayed she didn't choke. Of course, if she spewed iced tea all over him, they might have to call it an early night.

"Didn't the woman you came with tonight get upset with you?" she asked before he could voice the question she saw in his eyes.

His mouth twisted wryly and he allowed her the reprieve.

"No. She was amused."

Parker was genuinely bemused. "She was?"

"My sister thought it was hilarious. She'll be telling this story to everyone she knows. And that's a lot of people."

"Oh, God." She picked up the iced tea, made a face and put it back down. "I need something stronger."

He offered her his Scotch and, after a brief hesitation, she accepted the glass. Trying not to think of how intimate it seemed to drink from his glass, she took a sip of the amber liquid. It burned its way down her esophagus and she shivered slightly.

"Better?"

"Not yet," she said, and took another sip. The warmth blossomed in her stomach, washing away the sick feeling.

"Look on the bright side."

"What bright side?" she asked, sounding a little forlorn. She noticed the lipstick marks on the glass and rubbed at it with her thumb.

"Your ex won't be bothering you anymore."

"Please." She made a face, an uneven mix of misery and hopefulness. "He's probably figured out we were faking in front of him."

He took back the Scotch, brought it to his lips, and drained it, watching her out of darkened, enigmatic eyes. "It felt pretty real to me."

Parker froze, then wisely decided to ignore his remark.

"But he did buy that Russian model. She should have no problems making him forget about me." She took a deep breath. "And there was only minimal press. The auction won't be anything more than a side note."

He caught the attention of a passing waiter and gestured for another Scotch.

"Who has you so worried?"

"My mother," she blurted out. She glared at him. "Stop laughing."

He swallowed his laughter and cleared his throat. "Sorry. She wouldn't approve of what happened tonight?"

"No," she replied emphatically. "Definitely not."

"Because of what happened or because of this reputation you seem to think I have?"

She hesitated, then said, "Men like you always have a reputation."

"Men like me?"

"Insanely wealthy, under forty, sexy."

Those sexy, sculpted lips stretched into a slow smile that made her feel like she had another sip of Scotch. "I'm glad you find me sexy."

“I’d be dead not to,” she admitted truthfully. “But I stopped allowing my hormones to make my decisions for me after I became old enough to drive.”

“So, you were attracted to your ex’s intelligence? His sense of humor, perhaps?”

Busted.

“Okay, I had a temporary lapse in judgment. It happens. I’m not perfect.” She arched a brow. “Are you going to sit there and tell me all the women you date are for their brains and personality?”

The waiter arrived and swapped the empty Scotch glass with a fresh one.

“I never said otherwise,” he said, after nodding his thanks and the waiter retreated.

Uncharitably, she wondered if he normally dated women whose names ended with an *i*.

“However, since I enjoy intelligent conversation, I generally want an IQ that’s larger than the bra size.”

“So, if I’m a drooling idiot, you’ll leave me alone?”

His low laugh sent heat rippling over her skin. “Too late for you to fake it with me.”

She blew out a breath. “It’s only one date. I can do it. And you’ll probably lose interest afterward.”

“No other woman’s ever needed to give herself a pep talk to spend time with me.”

“That you know of,” she qualified.

He nodded once, conceding her point.

The waiter returned with their food. Grateful for the distraction, Parker picked up her fork and studied her artfully arranged pistachio-crusting tuna ahi. “It’s almost too pretty to eat.”

He looked up from his bison filet. “Want to split mine so you can take yours home to admire?”

“I said ‘almost,’” she reminded him, and speared off a small chunk of raw tuna, touched a tip in the chocolate sauce and popped it in her mouth.

They had snippets of conversation while they ate, mainly about the upcoming mayoral election and the slim chances of newcomers against the incumbent. When they finished, the scarily efficient waiter came by to clear the table and inquire about coffee and dessert.

Parker shook her head. “It’s getting late,” she said. “I need to get home.”

He took care of the bill and they headed for the exit to the foyer. They stepped outside, where an attendant waved down a taxi for them. They climbed in the back and Parker gave the driver her address. As the taxi merged into heavy traffic, Parker crossed her arms over her chest and hugged herself, and the man sitting next to her started to shrug out of his jacket.

“No, please don’t bother. I’m fine.”

“I can see the goose bumps on your arms,” he told her, but kept his jacket on. “Come here.”

Without waiting for her to comply, he slipped an arm around her waist and dragged her toward him. His body heat too enticing to rebuff, Parker remained pressed up against him. His fingers stroked the length of her upper arm.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” he asked quietly.

“If I agree, will you count that as the date I owe you?”

He pressed his mouth into her hair and she could feel his smile. “Think of it as the trial run.”