



Valentine's Day sucked the big one.

Kate Hamilton lifted a mug of hot buttered rum to her mouth and drained the last drop. On the 'things that suck' scale, it ranked somewhere between falling on her face in public and her great-aunt Edna's bologna pie. One was painful and embarrassing, while the other was an abomination in the eyes of the Lord.

Kate lowered the mug and licked the corners of her mouth. The hot rum heated her up from the inside out, warmed her skin, and cast the room about her in a nice, cozy glow. Yet it did nothing to lift her mood.

She was feeling sorry for herself, and she hated that. She wasn't the sort of woman to sit around and get all weepy. She was the sort to get on with life, but there was nothing like one whole day devoted to lovers to make a single girl feel like a loser.

A whole day of hearts and flowers, chocolate candy and

naughty undies delivered to someone else. Someone undeserving. Someone who wasn't her. Twenty-four hours to remind her that she slept alone, usually in a sloppy T-shirt. A whole day to point out that she was just one bad relationship away from throwing in the towel. From giving up her Fendi pumps for Hush Puppies. From driving to the animal shelter and adopting a cat.

Kate looked around the Duchin Lounge, where she sat on a barstool inside the Sun Valley lodge. Shiny heart garlands decorated the brass rails, while roses and flickering candles sat on each tabletop. Red and pink hearts were taped up behind the bar and on the big windows looking out at snow-covered pines, groomed runs, and night skiers. Spotlights poured down the slopes, washing them in white gold and darker shadow.

Those inside the Duchin were decked out in the latest skiwear chic. Ralph Lauren and Armani sweaters, UGG boots and Patagonia fleece vests. Kate felt a bit like a poor relation in her jeans and dark brown sweater. Her sweater fit well and matched her eyes, but it wasn't a brand name. She'd bought it at Costco, along with a bag of bikini-cut Haines Her Way, a gallon of shampoo, and about five pounds of margarine.

She turned sideways on her stool, and her gaze moved to the big windows across the bar. When had she started buying her underwear in bulk at a warehouse instead of at Victoria's Secret? When had her life become that pathetic? And why had five pounds of margarine ever seemed like a good idea?

Outside the Duchin's windows, downy snowflakes drifted past the outside lights and softly touched the

ground. It had started snowing earlier that afternoon, shortly after Kate had hit the Idaho/Nevada border, and it hadn't let up. As a result of all that snow, the drive to Sun Valley from Las Vegas had taken her almost nine hours instead of the usual seven.

Normally, she would have driven straight through without stopping, but not when it was snowing so hard. Not when it was so dark that one wrong turn in the Sawtooth Wilderness could land a girl in one of those tiny towns where men were men and sheep were nervous. The next morning she planned to drive the last hour to the small town of Gospel, Idaho, where her grandfather lived.

Kate ordered her third hot buttered rum and turned her attention to the bartender. He looked to be in his late twenties with curly dark hair, and he had a wicked little glint in his brown eyes. He wore a white dress shirt and black pants. He was young and cute and wore a wedding ring, too.

'Can I get anything else for you, Kate?' he asked through a smile that oozed boyish charm. He'd remembered her name, a quality that made him a good bartender, but the foremost thought in Kate's head was that the man probably had a few girlfriends on the side. Men like him usually did.

'No thank you,' she answered and purposely shoved her cynical thoughts to the back of her mind. She didn't like that she'd become so negative. She hated the pessimist who'd taken up residence in her head. She wanted the other Kate back. The Kate who wasn't so cynical.

At the tables and booths, couples laughed and talked

and shared kisses over bottles of wine. Kate's Valentine's Day blues sank a little lower.

This time last year, Kate had been having dinner in Las Vegas at Le Cirque with her boyfriend, Manny Ferranti. She'd been thirty-three, Manny thirty-nine. Over shrimp cocktail she'd told him she'd booked them a suite in the Bellagio. Over roasted veal she'd described the crotchless panties and matching cutout bra she was wearing beneath her dress. Over dessert she'd brought up the subject of marriage. They'd been together for two years, and she'd thought it was time to talk about their future. Instead of talking, Manny had dumped her the next morning. After he'd put the hotel suite and those panties to good use.

At the time, Kate had been a little surprised at how fine she'd been with the breakup. Well, maybe not *fine*. She'd been plenty ticked off, but her world hadn't fallen apart. She'd loved Manny, but she was also practical. She didn't know why she hadn't seen it before, but Manny was commitment phobic. Thirty-nine and never married? The man obviously had serious issues, and she didn't want to waste her time with a man who couldn't commit. She'd been there before, with other boyfriends who'd wanted to date for years but never quite commit to more. Good riddance to bad relationships.

At least that's what she'd told herself, until a few months ago when she'd seen Manny's wedding announcement in the newspaper. She'd been in her office, thumbing through the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, looking for the vital records section, seeing if any of her missing persons had turned up dead, and there it'd been. A nice little

announcement with a photo. Manny and some brunette looking in love and happy.

Manny had found someone and married her in less than eight months after breaking things off with Kate. Someone he'd dated for less than eight months, too. He hadn't been opposed to a commitment. Not at all. He'd just been opposed to a commitment with *Kate*. Which hurt more than she'd ever thought possible. More than the breakup. More than him walking out on her after a night of hot sex. It made her chest tight and throat squeeze and confirmed something she could no longer ignore.

There was something wrong with her.

Something more than her height of five-eleven. More than her size ten feet and straight red hair. She was a private investigator. She made a living digging into people's personal lives, seeking motives and agendas. Peering into their backgrounds and private and social patterns, but she'd never stopped to dig into her own life.

Seeing Manny's wedding announcement in the paper had changed that. It had forced her to examine her own life, something she'd always avoided if at all possible. What she'd discovered was that she was drawn to unattainable men. Men with roving eyes or hidden girlfriends or commitment fears.

Maybe she didn't think she deserved better, or maybe she liked the challenge. She didn't know for certain why she always picked unavailable men, but one thing was for sure, she was tired of bad relationships and a broken heart.

The day after seeing Manny's announcement, she'd sworn off bad relationships. She'd vowed to date only

*available*, nice guys without any issues. She'd thrown herself into her work. A job she'd always loved and was damn good at doing.

She'd worked for Intel Inc., one of the most prestigious investigating firms in Vegas. She'd enjoyed everything about being a PI. Everything from spying on lowlifes out to defraud insurance companies or the casinos, to reuniting long-lost loves or separated family members. If she'd had to follow cheating boyfriends or girlfriends or spouses, that had been okay too. Hey, if a man or woman was cheating, then they deserved to get caught. If they weren't (which was *never* the case), then no harm done. Either way, it had not been her problem. Kate had gotten paid for her time and walked away . . .

Until the day Randy Meyers had come to her fourth-floor office. There hadn't been anything remarkable about Randy. He'd been neither handsome nor ugly. Short nor tall. He'd simply been.

He'd come to Intel Inc. and to Kate because his wife had disappeared with their two children. He'd shown Kate the typical family photo. The kind taken at the mall for around thirty bucks. Everything about that photo had been ordinary. Everything from the matching sweaters, to the boy's crew cut and the little girl's missing front tooth.

And everything about Randy had checked out. He'd worked where he'd said he did. He'd had no criminal record. No history of abuse. He'd sold cars at Valley Automall and had been his son's Cub Scout leader. He'd been his daughter's soccer coach, and he and his wife, Doreen, had taken classes together at the community college.

His wife and the children hadn't been hard to find. Not at all. They'd fled to Waynesboro, Tennessee, to stay with Doreen's sister. Kate had given Randy the information, signed off on the case, and never would have given it a second thought if Randy hadn't made the national news twenty-four hours later. The things he'd done to his wife and children before he'd killed himself had stunned the country. It had shocked Kate to her core.

This time, she hadn't been able to remain detached. This time she hadn't been able to tell herself that it wasn't her problem, that she'd just been doing her job. This time she hadn't been able to move on.

A week later, she'd resigned from her job. Then she'd called her grandfather and told him she was coming to visit him for a while. Her grandmother had died two years earlier, and Kate knew that her grandpa, Stanley, was lonely. He could use her company, and she could use a breather. She didn't know how long she would stay, but long enough to figure out what to do now. To take a step back and figure out what she wanted to do next.

She faced the bar and took a drink. The rum slid down easy and added a little kick to her growing buzz. With single-minded determination, she pushed thoughts of the Meyers family from her head and concentrated on the hearts strung along the bar. It was Valentine's Day, and that reminded her that she hadn't been on a good date in months. No sex since the Bellagio and Manny. And while she really didn't miss Manny, she did miss intimacy. She missed the touch of a man's strong hands. Sometimes she wished she were the sort of woman who could pick up a

man in a bar. No regrets. No recriminations. No wanting a criminal background check first.

Sometimes she wished she was more like her friend, Marilyn. Marilyn's motto was, 'If you don't use it, you'll lose it,' as if her vagina had an expiration date.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror behind the bar and wondered if losing the desire for sex was like losing a sock at the Laundromat. Did it just disappear without a trace? By the time you noticed it was gone, was it too late? Was it gone for good?

She didn't want to lose her desire for sex. She was too young. For just one night, she wished she could turn off the interrogator in her head and find the sexiest guy around, grab him by the front of his shirt, and lock lips. For just one night, she wished she were the type of woman who could gorge on wild sex with a man she'd never met and would never see again. His touch would burn her alive, and she'd forget about everything but his mouth on hers. She'd take him to her hotel room, or perhaps they wouldn't even make it to the room and they'd have to do it in the elevator, or a service closet, or maybe she'd do him in the stairwell.

Kate took a drink and turned her attention to the good-looking bartender. He stood at the end of the bar laughing and joking and shaking up martinis. She might have become cynical about people and especially men, but she was still a woman. A woman with dozens of secret fantasies spinning about in her head. Fantasies of being swept up into big strong arms. Of eyes meeting across a crowded room. Of instant attraction. Remorseless lust.

Since her breakup with Manny, all her fantasy men

were the complete opposite of her old boyfriend. They were all bad boys with big hands and bigger . . . feet. The star of her current fantasy was a blond badass with size thirteen biker boots. She'd picked him from a Dolce & Gabbana ad in *Cosmo*, looking all cool and unkempt with his bad self.

Sometimes her fantasy involved him tying her to the back of his Harley and absconding with her to his love shack. Other times she'd see him in different dive bars with names like The Brass Knuckles or Devil's Spawn. Their eyes would meet and they'd only make it as far as the alleyway before they tore at each other's clothes.

Someone took the stool beside Kate and bumped her shoulder. Her drink sloshed, and she cupped her hands around her warm mug.

'Sun Valley Ale,' a masculine voice next to her ordered.

'Draft or bottle?' the bartender asked.

'Bottle's fine.'

As much as Kate would love to live out one of her fantasies, she knew it would never happen because she could not turn off the PI in her head. The one that, at a crucial moment, would decide she needed a background check first.

The scent of crisp night air suddenly surrounded her head, and she slid her gaze from her mug to the green plaid flannel rolled up thick forearms. A gold Rolex was strapped around his left wrist, and a thin silver band circled his middle finger.

'Do you want this on your room tab?' the bartender wanted to know.

'Nah, I'll pay for it now.' His voice was low and a little

rough as he reached for his wallet in the back pocket of his Levi's. His elbow brushed hers as she ran her gaze up the green flannel of his arm to his big shoulders. The ceiling lights above shone down on him and picked out variegated gold in his brown hair. Unruly and finger-combed, his hair covered his collar and the tops of his ears. A Fu Manchu mustache framed his wide mouth, and he'd grown a soul patch just below his full bottom lip.

Her gaze continued upward to a pair of deep green eyes staring back at her across his broad shoulder, past all the greens on his shirt. His lids looked a little heavy, like he was tired or he'd just gotten out of bed.

She swallowed. Hard.

'Hello,' he said, and his voice just seemed to pour through her like her hot buttered rum.

Holy Mary mother of God! Had thinking about her badass fantasy man conjured him up? He wasn't blond, but who cared? 'Hello,' she managed, as if the hair on the back of her neck hadn't started to tingle.

'It's a beautiful night to hit the slopes. Don't you think?' he asked.

'Spectacular,' she answered, although her mind wasn't on skiing. This guy was big. The kind of big that came from genetics and physical labor. She'd guess he was in his mid to late thirties.

'Lots of new powder.'

'That's true.' Kate pressed her fingertips into the warm porcelain mug and fought the urge to play with her hair like she was in the eighth grade. 'Gotta love all that fresh powder.'

He turned on his stool to face her, and her heart just

about stopped. He was even better than her fantasy man, and her fantasy man rocked.

‘So why aren’t you out there?’ he asked.

‘I don’t ski,’ she confessed.

Surprise lifted one brow and the corners of his mouth. ‘You don’t?’

You’d never mistake this man for a male model. Never see his face pushing Dolce & Gabbana or him lying on the beach in a Gucci suit. He was too big. Too masculine. Too male. The full impact of him all too real. ‘No. Just passing through. It’s been snowing so hard, I had to stop for the night.’ He had a tiny white scar just below his soul patch, and his nose looked like it had been broken. It was hardly noticeable really, but Kate was trained to notice everything about a person’s face. And studying this man’s face was pure pleasure.

‘Hope it clears up.’ He snagged the beer bottle in his right hand. ‘I’m heading out for Bogus Basin in the morning.’

‘Are you a ski bum?’

‘During the winter months, pretty much. After Bogus, we’ll hit Targhee and Jackson Hole before heading to Colorado.’

*We’ll?* ‘Are you here with friends?’

‘Yeah, my buddies are still out on the slopes.’ He hooked the heels of his boots on the bottom rung of his stool, and his wide-spread knees brushed the outside of her thigh.

The casual touch did something to her insides. It wasn’t exactly instant, remorseless lust, but it was something. ‘Why aren’t you out there with them?’ Buddies. As in male friends. Men didn’t generally refer to female friends as buddies.

He raised the beer to his lips. ‘Knees acting up,’ he answered and took a long drink.

But there was little doubt in her mind that this guy had a woman in his life. Probably more than one. ‘Skiing with buddies on Valentine’s Day?’

He watched her through those green eyes of his as he lowered the bottle. ‘Is it Valentine’s Day?’ he asked and sucked a drop of beer from his top lip.

Kate smiled. The fact that he didn’t know meant he probably didn’t have anyone serious in his life right now. ‘Every year on the fourteenth of February.’

He looked about the room as if really seeing it for the first time. ‘Ahh. That explains the hearts.’

Her gaze lowered past the mustache framing his mouth and chin, down the wide column of his thick neck to the hollow of his tan throat. ‘I think we’re the only two in here who aren’t a couple.’

‘Don’t tell me you’re here alone?’

Kate returned her gaze to his and laughed. She liked the way he’d said that, as if he found it hard to believe. ‘Yeah, go figure.’ In her favorite fantasy, she was trapped with a hunk of man in Nordstrom’s shoe department. ‘How about you? Anyone going to be angry with you for forgetting Valentine’s Day?’

‘Nope.’

She’d never set a fantasy in a ski lodge, but she was thinking about it now. She couldn’t help it. The man was throwing off pheromones like he was a nuclear reactor at Chernobyl. Sitting so close to ground zero, the fallout was lethal.

He pushed up the sleeves of his flannel shirt and

exposed what appeared to be the tail of a snake or some sort of reptile on his thick left forearm. 'Is that a snake?'

'Yeah. That's Chloe. She's a sweetheart.'

*Right.* The tattoo was dark gold with black-and-white bands and appeared so real she leaned in for a closer look. The scales were perfectly defined, and without giving it a thought, Kate reached out and touched his bare arm. 'What kind of snake is she?' She half expected to feel cool scales instead of warm, smooth flesh.

'An Angolan python.'

*Python. Yikes!* 'How big?' Kate looked back up into his face. Something hot and sensual shimmered within the green depths of his eyes. A need that made her pulse jump and tingles spread up her wrists.

He raised the beer to his mouth and looked away. 'Five feet.' He took a long drink, and when he returned his gaze to her, that flicker of that something was gone, as if it had never been there.

She dropped her hand. 'Are all five feet of her tattooed on your body?'

'Yeah.' He pointed to his forearm with the mouth of the bottle. 'Her tail ends here. She's wrapped around my arm, down my back, and is coiled around my right thigh.'

Kate looked down at his thigh and straight at his groin. Soft worn Levi's covered his legs and cupped the bulge in his crotch. She quickly looked away before he caught her staring. 'I have a tattoo.'

He laughed. A low rumble in his chest that did funny things to *her* chest. 'What? A heart on your ankle?'

She shook her head and took a long drink from her mug. Her temperature shot up and her face felt flushed.

She didn't know if it was the rum or the testosterone cocktail sitting next to her, but she was starting to feel a little light-headed. Not the kind of light-headed that made you faint, but the kind that brought a grin to your face even when you didn't feel like smiling.

'Hmm?' He lowered his gaze down the side of her throat. 'A rose on your shoulder?'

The kind of light-headed that made a girl think of hot sweaty things. Hot sweaty *naked* things she probably shouldn't act upon. 'Nope.'

He looked back into her eyes and speculated, 'A sun around your navel.'

'A moon and a few stars, but not around my navel.' Hot sweaty naked things that no one else would ever know about.

'I knew it would be something girly,' he scoffed as he shook his head. 'Where?'

It couldn't be just her. He had to feel it too, but what if she did proposition him and he turned her down? She didn't think she could handle that kind of humiliation. 'My butt.'

Smile lines crinkled the corners of his eyes, and he laughed again. 'Full or half?'

*Wait, he's a guy*, she thought as she polished off her drink. Guys were guys were guys. He wouldn't turn her down. 'Crescent.'

'A moon on a moon.' He cocked one brow and leaned to one side and looked at her butt as if he could see through her clothing. 'Interesting. I've never seen that before.' He took a drink of his beer and straightened.

Maybe it was the rum and her hot sweaty naked

thoughts. Maybe it was because it was Valentine's Day and she was lonely and didn't want to wear Hush Puppies yet. Maybe for just once she wanted to act on an impulse. Maybe it was all of those things, but before she could stop herself, she asked, 'Wanna see?' The second the words left her lips, her heart seemed to stop along with her breath. Oh God!

He lowered the bottle. 'Are you propositioning me?'

Was she? Yes. No. Maybe. Could she really go through with it? *Don't overanalyze it. Don't think it to death*, she told herself. *You'll never see this guy again. For once in your life, just go for it.* She didn't even know his name. She guessed it didn't matter. 'Are you interested?'

Slowly, as if to make sure he understood her perfectly, he asked, 'Are you talking sex?'

She looked into those eyes staring back at her and tried to breathe past the sudden constriction in her chest. Could she use and abuse him? Could she twist him into a sexual pretzel then toss him out the door when she was through? Was she that kind of person? 'Yes.'

There it was again. That hot, sensual need that flickered and burned. Then in the blink of an eye, his features hardened and his gaze turned cold. 'Afraid not,' he said as if she'd offered him up a fate worse than death. He set his beer on the bar and rose until he towered over her.

Kate managed a stunned, 'Oh,' just before her cheeks caught fire and her ears started to buzz. She raised a hand to her numb face and hoped she didn't pass out.

'Don't take it personal, but I don't fuck women I meet in bars.' Then he walked away, moving from the lounge as fast as his big boots could carry him.