

Amelia

Midnight Magic Series

by

Danielle Stewart

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Chapter One

"I am not a prostitute," Amelia groaned for the hundredth time. "I am an escort. There is a big difference."

"Don't all prostitutes claim that?" Merle Sullivan retorted with a dismissive roll of his eyes. "This article I'm writing is going to need to be juicier than this. I told you that I'd keep you anonymous. I thought that might make you spill the beans. Now you're a pretty girl. You've got the long blonde hair, the blue eyes under those fluttering lashes, and the pearly white smile and rosy lips. I don't blame you for using those assets to your advantage. I'm just hoping you have something headline worthy to tell me."

"And I told you I am not a prostitute. I don't sleep with men in exchange for anything. I date them for money. That's all. If that's not spicy enough for your newspaper then you're wasting my time. I thought we were going to have a meaningful conversation about the business I'm in to make a living," Amelia snapped.

"What's meaningful about it? Desperate dudes paying hot women to act as if they like them. That sounds pathetic at best."

"What makes them dial that phone? What makes them search for an escort in the first place? There are moments of this job that are absolutely heartbreaking. There are moments that are poetic and symbolic. There is depth here," Amelia explained. But like usual it fell on deaf ears.

Merle laughed off her argument and rose from the table. "Sorry sweetheart. You can save all your psychobabble nonsense for someone else. I'm looking for a story people will actually read. You ever consider giving me the real stuff, some names of high powered clients or something I can work with, then give me a call." He tossed his card down on the coffee house table that sat between them and was already focused on his phone by the time he turned away.

"Jackass," she muttered as she ripped up his business card.

"Let me guess, blind date?" an attractive man asked as he slipped into the seat that Merle had just left.

"Excuse me?" Amelia questioned, not hiding how presumptuous she felt this man was to just sit with her.

"I've been on some really bad dates lately. There was the girl who wanted to know the address of my ex-wife so she could scope her out. Then there was the one who knew my family medical history somehow. It's a jungle out there."

"That wasn't a date. It was a waste of my time. You'll have to excuse me, I've got to get to a meeting."

"Can I get your number?" he asked boldly, standing when Amelia did and angling himself so he blocked the door.

"I don't date," she said curtly.

"What does that mean? You're married?"

"No, I'm single with the intention of staying that way."

"That's not a thing," he countered, blocking her advance by him.

"It is a thing. Do you know why? It's because of men like you. I did not invite you to sit down with me. I didn't give you any inclination that I was interested in discussing why I am here. That man could have been delivering me terrible news about a death in my family, yet you felt it appropriate to interject. You didn't ask my name, you asked for

my number. You're using your body to block me from leaving even though I clearly would like to. You haven't taken into consideration my body language, my words, or my personal space. You don't care if I even feel safe right now. And do you know what? When I do walk out this door and walk the five blocks I need to in order to get to my meeting, I'll come in contact with about three more guys just like you. They call out to me. They'll call me a bitch when I don't respond. Maybe it'll be one of the days that one guy starts walking with me for a few blocks, asking me incredibly inappropriate things while I wonder if he's just rude or dangerous. So, I think that clears this up. I don't date."

"Bitch," the man growled as he turned to let her pass. The look of disgust on his face made it apparent that he was not planning to own up to anything she'd just said.

"Exactly," Amelia huffed as she headed for the door. "I'm the bitch."

Chapter Two

She'd been right; the walk to her downtown Atlanta office was filled with whistles and catcalls the way it usually was. But she didn't let that get to her. She had extra time before her meeting and made some stops in spite of the annoying people she passed. It had been nearly three years since she'd given up the ridiculous fantasy that was dating. This was not to be confused with hooking up. She had a couple men, old friends really, that she called upon when the mood struck her. But to say there were no strings attached was an understatement. She wanted nothing from them except a night or two of passion every once in a while. They both understood that and seemed happy to oblige.

The only dates she went on were ones she was hired to go on. Working for Midnight Magic Services had been almost a joke at first but now she couldn't imagine doing anything else. Her degree in psychology was something she worked incredibly hard for but landing a job had proved difficult. The people collecting on her college loans didn't care that she'd been to nearly twenty interviews without any luck. They wanted their money. So when Clara Shaw approached her about a job opportunity, Amelia was so excited that she'd forgotten to ask what she'd be doing.

Once the nature of the job came to light, Amelia's convictions had her turning down the chance to make two thousand dollars a week. But she came crawling back a little over a month later when she was about to be evicted from her apartment. Convictions didn't put a roof over your head or food in your belly. Now she couldn't be happier.

"Hello, Doll," the bubbly receptionist called as she buzzed Amelia through the glass doors. "Clara is waiting for you."

"I wasn't expecting her call yesterday. Do you know what this meeting is about?" Amelia asked with a little desperation in her voice?

"No clue, sorry," the girl shrugged as she gestured for Amelia to go down the hall toward Clara's enormous corner office.

She hadn't been in any trouble since starting here, which was practically unheard of. Amelia has heard all the stories. Girls got themselves into all sorts of compromising positions and Clara has low tolerance for nonsense. There is a *one strike and you're out* policy at Midnight Magic, and it seems to work. The only people who really stick around are people like Amelia who play by the rules. The rest are weeded out pretty quickly.

But with sweaty palms and shaking legs, Amelia braced herself for what she might have done to make this meeting necessary.

"Amelia, you're right on time, like usual. Thanks for coming in today." Clara was a short woman with boobs so big she looked like she could tip over. The only thing bigger was her bleached blonde hair that had been teased up to an unnatural height. She was more of a character than a person, with her bright blue mascara and hot pink lips. But Amelia didn't care about any of that. All she saw was a brilliant business woman building an empire. People might judge Clara but they'd certainly be underestimating her.

"Of course. What can I do for you?"

"You've been with Midnight Magic for over three years now. In all that time you've never stepped a toe out of line. You don't break the rules. That's getting harder to find in an escort these days. The girls coming up now, they're all dense, greedy, or plain reckless. But not you. Why is that?"

“Um, that’s a hard question to answer. I’d have to give it some thought.” Amelia shifted her weight from side to side, feeling like squirming was her only option.

“Don’t stall, just answer honestly. What keeps you in line?”

“I’ve got a degree in psychology. I spent years learning to read body language and behavior as well as understating people’s motivation. I want this job, so I’ve made it a point to understand what’s important to you.”

“So simple, but brilliant. I’ve got a handful of girls that can’t seem to understand the same logic though. It’s as if their brains shut down and they just start being idiots. I’m getting too old and too tired to be wrangling these girls all the time.”

“You’re not old,” Amelia laughed.

“In this business I’m ancient, and I hate to break it to you, but at twenty eight, you’re pretty close to being outdated too. But that’s what I want to talk to you about. I think it’s time you get promoted. How would you like to be my second-in-command? I could train you on the business side of this industry and some day you could even take over this place.” Clara stood and rounded her large glass desk, putting one hand on Amelia’s shoulder. “I’m ready to let go of the reins a bit, but only if there is someone here who I can trust. Are you interested?”

“Yes,” Amelia said without much thought. She knew enough to not keep Clara waiting while she pondered the pros and cons. It was better to come back and have reconsidered than to appear wishy-washy to a woman like Clara.

“Great. We’ll start off fresh with a new month. Just keep doing what you’re doing until the first. Sound good?”

Amelia’s practical side had a million questions. What would this mean for her income? Would she have a title? What would change? But again, knowing Clara now was not the time to talk details. “That sounds great. I’ll be back on the first.”

With a quick wave goodbye, Amelia knew she was being dismissed. A wave of pride flooded her. Being an escort didn’t get you many accolades out in the world so hearing she was appreciated and thought of positively was a victory for her. All she had to do was keep tamping down the logic that was creeping up and telling her this might not be the best move.

Over the years she’d convinced her mother back in Ohio that she was applying her degree daily and working her way up the ladder in her field. If she took on more responsibility at Midnight Magic surely she’d eventually need to tell her mother and other people in her family the truth. Maybe she’d just mail them a business card of hers. Amelia Shipley, *Second-in-Command, Midnight Magic Escort Service*. They might not take that news so well.

There is a definite stigma around escorts that is widely established because the lines often get blurred between escorts and prostitutes. A true escort is meant for companionship. Nothing more.

Stepping back onto the elevator, she felt her phone vibrating in her oversized purse. Digging it out, she read the screen. She had a date tonight. He was a last minute VIP client who needed all-star treatment. He requires all the bells and whistles. “Great,” she sighed as she looked down at her watch. She had a lunch date with a client she saw every week. Will was a great guy. He’d lost his wife to cancer three years ago and his kids were off at college. His fortune was made in oil investments and now all he wanted was to break up his week with good company. Every Monday they tried a new restaurant and

talked for hours about the food, the atmosphere, and the service. They compared notes and rated how it compared to the last place or the time before that. Will knew there was never going to be anything romantic between them and that was fine by him. Amelia had to admit she enjoyed the time they spent together; despite the fact he was nearly old enough to be her father the age gap never slowed their conversations down. Although he only paid for two hours they often ended up sitting longer than that and enjoying a sweet Sangria or sipping a perfectly aged whisky.

Not today, however. She'd need to have an expedited version of her date with Will in order to be ready for a VIP tonight. The criteria for a customer like that usually meant they were top one percent wealthy, had very extravagant tastes, and were not looking for the run of the mill arm candy. This usually required you to be well read, comfortable in various social circles, and able to adapt to many situations. Amelia was one of only three girls at Midnight Magic who were qualified for VIP's. The problem? They were normally pretentious jerks who assumed the rules of engagement didn't apply to them. When they got handsy, and they often did, the VIP's couldn't be dealt with and turned down the same way you could a lower level customer.

It required tact and a clear head. Amelia had been able to navigate these kinds of men before so she wasn't worried about doing it again, but it wasn't her favorite date. Some girls at the agency begged to get VIP dates. They wanted to be on the fancy boat or at the gala on the arm of a man so wealthy he could buy himself an island. They had the pipedream that maybe the relationship could some day turn into love. The reason Amelia was so good at her job was because she wasn't delusional enough to ever imagine that could happen. She'd take ten restaurant dates with Will over a VIP any night.

Chapter Three

Disappointing Will was a downer. That was one of the problems with regular customers - they tended to grow accustomed to things, and any time you fell short of that they got upset. The sad, droopy eyes she was met with when telling Will she had to leave early tugged at her. She was part of his routine. That was something he needed for his sanity and mental health. Meeting with her was important to him and when that balance was disrupted it impacted him. She could appreciate that. But at the end of the day she had a job to do.

Zippping up the black cocktail dress she always saved for VIP customers, Amelia gave her makeup one last check. A smoky eye, cherry red lips, and her long blonde hair pulled into a perfect bun. Now all she had to do was head to the agreed upon location to meet the client's limo.

The hardest part about a VIP customer was the anonymity leading up to the date. Besides dress code and price, Amelia was told nothing. She'd shown up to a banquet with an African prince, gone line dancing with a southern guy who'd won the lottery a month before, and dined alone in a cabin with a man who was once a relatively famous actor turned recluse. Each of those nights required a significant amount of adapting in order to make sure they were a success, but she'd managed. Understanding the men was always the first job. Why did they need her there? How could she help them? She liked to think, in one small way, the lies she told her mother held some version of the truth. She did use the skills she'd learned in grad school to help people. They paid her for it. They just didn't know she was doing it.

As she rounded the corner and made her way to the agreed upon corner she saw a flashy sports car flash its lights at her twice. That was the sign they'd discussed but she hadn't expected the showy two-seater car. That meant no chauffer.

The driver side door swung open and out stepped a man who didn't seem real. He had this perfectly heart shaped face, thick dark brows over icy blue eyes, and a head of tussled blond-brown hair that had whispers of gray at the temples.

"Amelia?" he asked, opening the passenger door to let her in.

"Yes, thank you. I didn't realize you'd be driving us tonight. I expected a limo."

"That's what I had originally planned, but I so rarely get to drive. Being up in New York it's all town cars and limos. I thought I'd rent something completely impractical and enjoy myself for the night."

"Are you talking about me or the car," Amelia joked, flashing him a smile. These were all tests. To know the man and understand his motivation, his mood and his overall demeanor was essential to her job. When he let out a hearty laugh she took note of it and realized he'd appreciate a quick wit tonight. That was important to know. Some men wanted her quiet. Some men wanted her serious and mysterious, but she always felt most comfortable with the men who could laugh at the whole situation.

"Well, the car gets terrible gas mileage and something is clunking under the hood. Hopefully you're less trouble."

"I'll do my best," Amelia smirked as her client closed the door and rounded in front of the car. The headlights beamed against his cheek and she scrutinized his jaw line and the wide shoulders beneath his thousand dollar gray suit.

“You look beautiful,” he offered as he put the car in gear, fiddled with the clutch and launched them forward.

This would normally be where Amelia would reiterate the fact that she is not a prostitute. She’d do it tactfully, reminding the client everything they’d agreed to when obtaining her services. Though some companies portrayed themselves as one thing and then in person offered something else that was not how Midnight Magic did business. Some men would end the date there and get their money back, a completely acceptable option. But most understood the rules and were genuinely just looking for nonsexual companionship that night. A VIP client, however, would not be read the terms and conditions so casually. They needed to be handled differently.

“So you know my name, but I don’t know anything about you,” Amelia probed, peeking down into her small clutch bag.

“Hudson Bower. I’m just in town for a couple of days and I was looking for some company. Your agency came highly recommended.”

“Where are we off to?” Amelia asked as she pulled her lipstick out and began to reapply.

“My hotel room,” Hudson explained as he sped up, weaving in and out of traffic the way any man would when driving a car with such power.

“I thought the dress code was formal. Are you having an event in the lobby?”

“No, the event will be in my room,” he smiled and let go of the gear shift just long enough to brush a hand over her knee.

“I’m sorry for the misunderstanding, Hudson. Midnight Magic only provides women for the purposes of non-physical dates where the only thing exchanged is my time and company. I can completely understand if you’d like your money back, and I can recommend a service for what you’re looking for.” Amelia knew this was not the way to address a VIP client, but something was different about Hudson. She actually felt the tug of attraction toward him, and that was never a good thing. Ending this now would be the best for everyone.

“You’re being a little presumptuous don’t you think? I wasn’t soliciting sex from you.”

“You weren’t?” She studied his face and was surprised to see that it seemed he was telling the truth. She tried to recover quickly. “You’re absolutely right. It was wrong of me to assume anything. I just wanted to make sure you were clear on why I’m here.”

“I’m not clear. That’s why I did this in the first place. I’m considering starting up a similar business in New York, but I need to better understand what it entails. I want to pick your brain. The dress code was just to see what level of professionalism I could expect. I give you an A+ on formal wear and presentation, but accusing me of looking for a prostitute bumps your grade down.”

“I’m very sorry about that. Can I be honest with you?”

“Of course.”

“Normally customers such as yourself are handled with kid gloves. I’d never address someone of your caliber with such a curt delivery usually.”

“So why did you?”

She stumbled over her words for a moment as she tried to think through the implications. “You’re above average in the attractiveness department and I was a little

taken off guard. I didn't want this to go any further than it should. I just wanted it to be crystal clear. My mistake."

His mouth rose with the hint of a gloating smile, but his cheeks blushed as though he were embarrassed. "I appreciate your candor, Amelia. I guess I should be honest as well. When you walked up to the car I realized how hard it would be to focus on the task at hand. I underestimated the type of woman that would be meeting me. I had an image of a big-breasted, bleached blonde with an IQ not much above her shoe size. What's your background, if you don't mind my asking?"

"I have a masters degree in psychology."

"What in the world are you doing at Midnight Magic then? You could certainly be working in your own field."

"Student loans snuck up on me and the math just doesn't work out. What I'm doing right now is more lucrative than anything I could start out doing in my field. I used to tell myself I'd do this for just one more month. Then I'd change it to, just until the end of the year. But now I've simply accepted the fact that this is my career. I enjoy it and I like to think I'm good at it." Amelia shifted uncomfortably in the rigid sports car seat as this began to feel more like an interview than a date.

"What do you enjoy about it?"

"It's not at all what people think. The clichés are all nonsense. I help people, and that's really what I've always wanted to do. One night I might be going with a man to his high school reunion and pretending we're married. The next night I could be warming up a guy's TV dinner and hanging out on his couch while we watch a whole season of some show he loves. All the while, when they think I'm just there to show off or be a warm body, I'm talking to them. I'm listening and engaging them in real conversation. They are important to me at that moment."

"Because they pay you?"

"Because they are human and so am I. Midnight Magic might be the catalyst that brings these people into my lives but I choose how to spend my time with them. Some of the girls just hang out and put on an act. I try to really connect. I've had men break down in tears talking about their ex-wives cheating or how empty their nest feels now that their kids have moved out. I like to believe that we're actually connecting. But I guess at the end of the day, I don't really know."

"Do you have a lot of repeat business?"

"Yes, I do have regulars."

"Then you must be doing something right. But you're telling me you don't sleep with any of them. Isn't that kind of the old joke about "escorts?" Isn't that just a cover?"

"Some places, well most actually, but Clara doesn't mess around. If any of the girls get caught breaking that rules they are fired on the spot. We have a detailed list of cardinal rules and we're trained on how to navigate all different kinds of scenarios. Most girls don't make it long, but some of us manage. But that's enough about me. Tell me, what has you thinking this could be a good business to start up? I don't know many of them that are run by men."

"Are you willing to come back to my hotel room and talk to me? I'll leave that completely up to you."

"I think we're both clear on the rules at this point. It's your date. I'm a bit overdressed."

“You know what? I’m pulling an audible. I want you to tell me your perfect idea of a date. You’re very interesting to me and if I’m going to pick your brain for hours I can at least make it worth your while.” Hudson pulled the car over to the curb and put it in park. Shifting in his seat, he stared at Amelia with his ocean color eyes.

“That’s very nice of you, but not at all necessary. This is your night. I’m happy to talk about whatever you like. You don’t owe me anything more than what you’ve paid.”

“I know I don’t, but let’s say that this goes to my research. Tell me your idea of a perfect date. What’s the last really great one you went on outside of work?”

“I don’t date outside of work. I’m single and really content with that. This job doesn’t lend itself to being accepted by boyfriends no matter how many times I explain I’m not a prostitute. Not to mention, and I mean no offense by this, but men as a whole are repugnant, entitled, and selfish. I have a hard time seeing past that. So I haven’t had “the perfect date” because I don’t go out in search of something that doesn’t exist.”

“I guess there is something you should know about me. I hear everything like it’s a challenge and, Amelia, you just threw down the gauntlet. I will give you the perfect date tonight in exchange for some open dialog around what you do and why. Deal?” Hudson extended his hand for her to shake and seal the deal.

“Alright,” she acquiesced, but only to indulge his ego, which was still the most important part of her job.

“So tell me Amelia, how would your perfect date go? Spare no detail. I like a challenge.” The way his bright eyes lit at the excitement told her so much about him. The idea of giving her exactly what she wanted enticed him. He was a pleaser, another one of her favorite personality traits. It usually made for accommodating people who went out of their way to make sure you got what you needed out of life. The downfall was on occasion they give so much of themselves that they become unsure of who they are. But the glimmer in Hudson’s eye put that worry to rest. There was nothing in this man that suggested he was anything but sure of himself.

“We could go have dinner at one of the really posh places on the west side and then maybe walk through the park. It’s quiet there to talk.” She was throwing him a softball. The cookie cutter date that no man could screw up. Dinner and a stroll.

“I’m sorry, I’m going to need to call bullshit on that. You’re going to have to come up with something very convincing and genuine now that I know you’re trying to sandbag this. Lay it on thick or I might just call it a night now.”

That would be bad for business. A VIP date that lasts less than an hour wouldn’t reflect well on her. “Let me give it some real thought then.”

“No, no thinking it over. Just spout off the first thing that comes to mind. What does a perfect date look like to you?”

“More comfortable clothes. Like sweat pants and a ratty old shirt. I’d want to be completely relaxed. Do you know how hard it is to pull your hair back this tight? It shouldn’t be called a bun, it should be called the promise of a migraine.” Being blunt was what he was requesting. Just like the man who asked her to sing him a song from his childhood or the man who liked her to trim his hair because he didn’t leave his house, she would adapt. If he wanted honesty she’d give it to him.

“Step one, lose the updo and go get some casual clothes. What else? Come on, don’t stop now.”

“Well,” Amelia started as she thought it over. “I’m usually counting calories so if I’m on the perfect, one time only date I’d want junk food like something greasy and really bad for me. Washed down with a root beer and a giant bag of that candy you go and pick out yourself at the mall. I’d want them to weigh it at the end and look at me like I just broke some kind of record.” She was laying it on thick now, giving in to what he was asking. But this fantasy was rooted in reality for her. These were things she never did, and if she were creating perfection, it would include nonsensical indulgence.

“I love it. This is perfect. What else?”

“A movie. Like a real classic that doesn’t have relevance today. You know, something from the thirties or forties where no one was staring at their cell phone or acting like a punk. Just something to get lost in and forget how crappy things can be today.”

“Perfect. Very doable.”

Feeling caught up in the idea of a perfect date, the dream of it all, Amelia accidentally went one step too far. “And at the end of the night I’d crawl into bed and just be held. You’re a man so you don’t know that side of it. But when a guy holds you the right way, the right mix of squeeze and tenderness can be perfection. I’m a big fan of women’s rights and equality, but I’m not ashamed to admit sometimes the safest, most comforting place to be is in a man’s arms.” As she turned toward Hudson it dawned on her. That was too much. It was too intimate and personal. She wasn’t chatting with a friend, she was working with a client, and although Hudson’s bright smile and inviting eyes made her feel comfortable, they might have worked too well.

“That does sound pretty perfect,” he winked and then raised an eyebrow at her.

“I got carried away there for a minute, you’ll have to pardon me. Can we just remember everything up through the classic movie and forget the cuddling part?” She wasn’t afraid to plead with her eyes. She needed him to let it go, rather than highlighting and exploiting her mistake. Luckily he did, nodding almost imperceptibly and generously changing the subject.

“Let’s go find some giant footed pajamas and raid the candy store. I just have to figure out where to park this two hundred thousand dollar vehicle outside a department store and hope it will still be here when we get out.”

Chapter Four

Amelia wasn't sure if she'd lost control of the night or not. In the business it was called tail spinning. It meant that your date was more in control than you were, and it was heading down a path that didn't align with the rules. You normally had two choices: continue to work to gain control back or pull the ripcord. In three years she'd never done the latter. It was a contingency plan that required hitting something of a panic button on her phone that would trigger some form of excuse, distraction, or intervention from someone at Midnight Magic.

Nothing yet warranted such drastic measures. Hudson wasn't doing anything wrong, he was just being charming and compelling which was something she wasn't particularly accustomed to. Her clients normally fell into two categories. Some were painfully awkward, and therefore unable to really navigate the social norms required to get real dates. The others were so arrogant and off putting that they were hardly tolerable. It made sense; the "normal" men were all out dating the normal way. She ended up with the damaged guys, but she always tried to find the good in them.

Hudson was proving different though. He reminded Amelia of a boy she dated in college. Easygoing, funny, and charismatic, Hudson kept finding new ways to make the night interesting. He'd done just as he'd promised. In a big bag on her lap was every type of sugary sweet candy offering that the Sweeties Bag in the center of the mall had. Tucked between her feet on the floor were the clothes they'd just bought. Completely ridiculous matching flannel pajamas that zipped up from the ankle all the way to the neck. The sexiest man alive could not rock these things. Or maybe he could. Amelia was finding herself anxious to find out.

"We've got cheap wine, old movies, candy, comfy clothes and Chinese take out. Do you think we've covered it all?" Hudson pulled his car up to the valet in front of his posh boutique style hotel and threw her a charming smile.

"This should cover it. I just want to give you one more out. We don't have to do this. This is your night, not mine."

"It's too late now. I can't go the rest of my night without knowing what you look like in those pajamas while suffering from a sugar high. I'm committed."

A few minutes later when the bell hop had helped them bring their supplies up to the room, Hudson pushed open the door to the presidential suite. Amelia had seen every kind of hotel in the city. She had spent time in the fancy ones, the dives, and the pay by the hour ones.

"You go get out of that dress," Hudson suggested, tossing her over the flannel pajamas. He pulled the tags off his own and held them up to his body. Neither of them could refrain from laughing. "Why am I so excited about these? I can wear five hundred dollar silk pajamas if I want to but I can't wait to get into this cheap onesie. I'll get the fireplace going."

"Don't get too close with those pajamas, I bet you'd go up like a torch." Amelia disappeared into the luxurious bathroom and turned the dial on the wall that kicked on the heating lamps above her and the tile warmer below her feet. While she tried to find the good in every person and enjoy something about each date, realistically she had to admit rich people knew how to live. They avoided discomfort and minor inconveniences at every turn.

As she slipped out of her dress, unpinned her hair, and washed away the majority of her make up, she asked herself again, *has this night gotten away from me?* Her guard felt down, she could admit that. She was also enjoying herself without much effort. To top it off, she was wildly attracted to Hudson. It wasn't just because of his tan cheeks covered by a stubbly beard or the way his hair fell down into his eyes so that he had to push it back all the time. He was just easy to be around. That wasn't something she came across often anymore.

When she pulled up the zipper to her pajamas she couldn't help but laugh a bit. She turned to the full-length mirror and for a second was transported back to Christmas morning a couple decades ago when she'd probably worn the same type of pajamas. It felt amazing to be out of that dress, like she'd just dropped a heavy cumbersome suit of armor that squeezed and pinched her everywhere. She could breathe again and her scalp was beginning to forgive her for the torturously tight bun that had perched atop her head. She was peeling back the layers that this job required.

Stepping out of the bathroom, she hadn't taken time to think of what Hudson might be doing. He'd slipped out of his own clothes and was currently down to his boxer shorts as he stepped into the silly pajamas. He froze at the sight of her, and she did the same. Staring at his perfectly sculpted pecks, she couldn't bring herself to look away. It wasn't as if she'd never seen an attractive man before. Her occasional friends-with-benefits were in great shape. But there was something unique about his body and the way it called to her. She soaked it up for another long moment. There was the scar, a jagged raised mark on the right side of his abdomen. His arms were rigid and so well defined.

"Sorry," she finally whispered as she turned around abruptly and fixed her eyes on the wall. "I should have thought before just coming out like that. Are you dressed?"

"I'm all zipped up," he teased, and she turned in time to see his big grin. "I hope I didn't offend you with my half nakedness. I know that's not what you're here for tonight. Neither am I. Let's forget that happened and move on to the rest of this perfect date."

"Agreed." She liked knowing there wouldn't be a chance in hell that she'd forget what she'd just seen.

The fire is roaring, the wine is poured, and the movie is queued up. Should we eat the Chinese food right out of the carton? Let's just throw the napkins away - I feel like the sleeves of these pajamas will be plenty absorbent."

"This is getting a little out of control now. I'm not positive it's a good idea to indulge all these fantasies. Maybe we should just be civilized." Amelia was continuing to give him an out. He could say this night was all about her but in the end she was still trying to be protective of what he wanted. "This can't be all about me. You choose something."

"Fine, that's fair. I say we eat the fortune cookies first. This way we know what kind of luck the rest of our evening will have." He pulled open the paper bag that held the food and dug to the bottom for the cookies. The aroma that filled the room was so comforting to Amelia. She never ordered take out anymore because when she hit her late twenties her metabolism changed. For her job she needed to look the part. Finding time to exercise wasn't always easy with her schedule so she found it easier to cut out the temptations. Her mouth watered at the feast that was about to come.

Hudson handed her a fortune cookie and immediately cracked his open. "Open your mind and you will learn the truth," he read aloud. "I guess you'll have to enlighten me on some things tonight. My mind is wide open."

Slipping the tiny white paper out of its cookie shell, she prayed her fortune wouldn't be quite so deep. Maybe just something silly about how a cat has nine lives or something. But she wasn't that lucky. "Tomorrow isn't promised, enjoy today." *Dammit.*

"Cosmic advice that we shouldn't ignore. Let's eat." He passed her a set of chopsticks and a few of the nearly twenty containers of food they'd ordered.

"This might be the reason tomorrow isn't promised. If we eat all this we might actually die," Amelia joked and felt her body tingle when the corners of Hudson's eyes crinkled from such a wide smile.

"I'm opening my mind and my mouth," Hudson retorted as he shoveled in some lo mein noodles.

Feeling absolutely famished and completely obsessed with the idea of indulging in one of her favorite meals, Amelia gave in. She split her wooden chopsticks and started sampling the food as though she'd never eat like this again.

Hudson pressed play on the movie and leaned back on the couch. He was close enough to touch if she reached out for him, but far enough away that she wouldn't accidentally come in contact with his body. She didn't want to. She was afraid, like smelling the take out food, she would become intoxicated, unable to resist.

Chapter Five

"Have you seen that movie before?" Amelia asked as the credits rolled. She curled her silly pajama clad body up into a ball on the couch and took the blanket Hudson offered her.

"I have. I'm a little bit of a sucker for a black and white movie. I didn't want to seem all *we have so much in common*, when you mentioned it earlier. But this is one of my favorites."

"What do you like about it?" Amelia asked, taking another long sip of her wine.

"I love how simple it all is."

"Simple? The woman is a dancer who will die if she doesn't give up her craft. The only place she's happy is on stage but her body can't support that. She has to choose between life and never feeling alive again. All while the man she thinks she loves is feeding her fears. How is that simple?" Amelia sat up straighter on the couch, ready for a good debate.

"The plot isn't simple but the choices are. She'd rather die up there on stage feeling alive than live and feel dead. And the only man she can actually love, the one she ends up with in the end, is the one who allows her the freedom to choose her own path. He'll love her forever even if that's cut short. It's about accepting who you are and not fighting against it."

"I suppose you could look at it that way. I'd like to think the wiser choice would be self-preservation. She was so young. I've never loved anything enough to risk my life for it. Maybe I just lack that passion."

"I doubt it. You might not have found it yet, that's all. You're still young. I've got about ten years on you and I'm still looking."

"How could you still be looking? You seem to have everything figured out. Now you're about to start a new chapter of your life and open up a whole new line of business."

"Wealth shouldn't be confused with fulfillment. They are very separate things. I didn't grow up particularly close to anyone and I haven't had a lot of luck at learning the skill as an adult. I tend to keep my relationships more casual. Again, that is not fulfillment. But I'm still holding out hope that I'll find it some day. But you, I'm surprised you don't have that one thing in your life that you'd fight for."

"I mostly just play by the rules. If someone told me not to dance because my heart might explode, I wouldn't."

"That's what's made you so successful in your business then? Playing by the rules? I'm wondering if most of the women are you like you?"

"They aren't, but they don't last particularly long at Midnight Magic."

"Haven't you ever wanted to break the rules?"

"Not more than I've wanted my job, no. When you look at it through that lens it's easy. It's important to me that I make money and can support myself. This is the best way I've found to do it, so I do what is necessary to stay working. And I enjoy it."

"You said that earlier. If I'm going to get a sense of this business, about keeping my employees happy I'd like to hear more." Hudson shifted his body so that he, too, now had his legs up on the couch. Their feet were touching due to a lack of space. Amelia knew she should pull hers away, but she couldn't make herself.

"I enjoy what I'm doing because I see the difference it makes. People need other people. It's how the world works. If I go with a man who's feeling terrible about himself to his company's Christmas party and it goes well, then I've made an impact. I talk him up. I look at him with pride in my face and let him know that his knowledge of his field is impressive. I stand beside him when he hasn't been able to get anyone else to on his own."

"Do you touch him?" Hudson asked, locking his eyes with mine.

"Some touching is permitted. I'm sure that was discussed with you upon signing the contract for this evening. I might hook my arm with his as we walk around the room. I may dust some lint off his shoulder or adjust his bow tie affectionately."

"Do you kiss him?"

"No, at most we might hug. But even that I rarely do. I don't like to give clients false hope that there is more between us than there is. It's irresponsible and shortsighted to do that. Many girls do, however, and it always bites them in the ass. I want to help someone, not confuse them."

"That must happen though, right? I can imagine some men must read the signs wrong and think that it's ok to touch you and 'get what they paid for?' Aren't you ever afraid?"

"I always feel in control of the situation. It's a skill, one I've worked on for years. And if that fails I'm trained in self-defense. I've got mace in my bag and a rape whistle. But I don't get myself into situations where either have been necessary so far."

"You're incredible," Hudson responded with a seriousness that had Amelia looking away. "I know we've been joking around all night and this date is a little off the rails, but I'm serious about that. I can't remember the last time I've been so relaxed and so comfortable."

Deflecting, in the way she knew how, Amelia made a joke. "It's these pajamas. You'll have to invest in a bunch more."

"That's not what I'm talking about, Amelia. You're something else. Tonight has been completely different than I thought it would be. I don't want it to end."

"Do you know where our company name comes from? It's a play on the fairytale. At midnight the ball ends and the princess has to leave. The magic is over. It works like that for a reason. It's to keep this all clean and working for everyone."

"It's only eleven," Hudson said, looking down at his watch. "I guess that means we still have time to finish this night up the right way."

"What way is that?"

"You said you wanted a good old fashion cuddle fest."

"Cuddle fest? That's not really a thing. And it's not going to happen tonight."

"You said hugging was allowed. It seems like kind of a gray area. It wouldn't really be breaking a rule. I wouldn't put you in a position to do anything wrong." Hudson stood and extended his hands, and she reluctantly took them. He pulled her to her feet and led her over toward the oversized four post mahogany bed. "We only have an hour," he whispered as he pulled back the thick down comforter and gestured for her to slide in.

This would be the ripcord moment if there ever was one. She could hit one button and some great excuse would arise for her to have to leave right now. But instead she slipped into the obscenely comfortable bed and made room for him to join her.

“I really can’t,” she whispered, looking at him with pleading eyes. Saying no to him seemed impossible so she’d have to rely on him not asking instead.

“It’s just a hug,” he whispered back as he slid in beside her. In an instant their bodies were tangled in each other. Legs woven together, his chin planted on her head, her ear pressed to his chest, hearing the thumping of his heart. “You feel so good,” he murmured.

“It’s the pajamas,” she teased again and melted as he squeezed her tightly. “Only fifty-four more minutes.”

“Don’t remind me.” Hudson brushed back her hair so that he could look down into her face and try to read her mind. “If this isn’t what you want though, please don’t feel like this is some kind of obligation. I should have made that clearer. I’m sorry if you feel like-”

She cut him off with a brush of her fingers across his lips. “I want to be here. I just shouldn’t be. The gray area is fading fast and I’m not sure exactly what territory we’re heading for. I don’t want to compromise myself.”

“I don’t want that either. But I don’t want to let you go.” Hudson reached back over his shoulder and grabbed a small remote. Clicking on some music and dimming the lights, he curled back against her.

The music was so soothing, his scent so intoxicating and the wine so lull inducing that she found her eyelids growing heavy. She fought it for a few minutes and then eventually gave in. She’d only nod off for a minute or two. Then she’d stick to the rules and be gone by midnight.

Chapter Six

A low moan in her ear stirred Amelia from her sleep. It took a moment to remember where she was and whose arms she was in, but then suddenly it flooded back. “Hudson?” she questioned, running her hand up his large bicep. He groaned again and when she opened her mouth to tell him it was time for her to go he kissed her passionately. His hands moved down her body, cupping her curves and she felt his firmness grind into her. The right thing to do would be to stop him. It had to be midnight by now. She had to go. But her body was responding faster than her mind could.

She met his grinding motion with her own, her hips moving frantically to his rhythm. When she reached her hand down passively to grip his firmness he pulled away. “Jesus, I’m sorry,” he breathed out. “I was dreaming or half awake and you were in my arms still and I just couldn’t help myself. That’s on me. It’s not your fault.”

Left panting and confused, Amelia shimmied her tingly body to a sitting position. “What time is it?” she asked nervously, seeing a very slight glow of sunshine peeking in through the blackout curtains.

Rolling to his side and trying to get himself under control he checked the clock. “It’s nine thirty.”

“That’s not possible, it was just eleven. Did the clock stop or something?”

“It’s nine thirty in the morning,” he explained, wiping the sleep from his eyes. “I guess I’m not catching my flight home after all.”

“I stayed here all night? I couldn’t have. I had somewhere to be. Cliff, he’s a regular of mine and we meet for coffee at eight am two days a week. He’ll have been worried sick and called Clara and she’ll know that I screwed up. I’ve got to go.” Amelia rolled out of the bed and hurried toward the bathroom.

“The damn zipper is stuck on these pajama’s,” she cried as she fought with them until Hudson appeared.

“Slow down. You’re not going to be in any trouble. I promise. I have to tell you something. But promise you’ll try to keep an open mind,” Hudson pleaded as he rested his hands on her shoulders and stared into her eyes.

“I’m friends with Clara. She and I go way back and she called me out here to pay back a favor I owed her from years ago. She asked me to vet you. She wanted me to see if you were as trustworthy as she hoped considering she wanted to start training you for more work at Midnight Magic. I’m sorry that I misled you, but I promise I won’t say anything about what happened last night. I’ll cover for you this morning, too. But please calm down. I don’t want you to walk out of here right now and never get the chance to see you again. I need to know that I will.” His eyes shifted back and forth nervously.

“I’m sorry, what?” Amelia asked, abandoning her effort to get the pajamas off of her. “You were here testing me?”

“I know it sounds slimy. You aren’t what I was expecting. I didn’t think we’d connect so much. Talking to you last night, being with you, I knew right away I wasn’t going to report back to Clara. It didn’t seem right. I was just going to tell her she’d have to find some other favor to call in with me. Like I said, I’ll cover for you. I just want to see you again.”

“You won’t. I can’t believe Clara thought I needed to be tested. But I guess she’s right, because I failed.” Amelia hastily gathered up her dress and stormed toward the door.

“You can’t leave in those pajamas. I’ll call a car for you and have them bring you some clothes. Just talk to me for a minute, please. You have to understand that Clara put everything she’s ever had into Midnight Magic. She didn’t know how else to make sure she was making the right choice.”

“You’re right. In this business the only way she could know for sure would be to trick me and test me. You can’t exactly hire a legitimate third party to evaluate my competency. There is no review process or comment box for clients. That’s the point. Who am I kidding thinking I can follow in Clara’s footsteps? Its not for me.”

“You’re going to turn the job down?”

“I’m going to quit. I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep pretending that this is the industry I was born to work in.”

“Don’t do this, Amelia, please. I’m really sorry. I broke my agreement with Clara in telling you, but I like you and I didn’t want to lie to you.”

“I won’t blow your cover with Clara. If you don’t want to say anything neither will I. But that doesn’t change anything. Last night was…” Amelia trailed off as she gave serious thought to what exactly she felt about last night. It had been nice to spend time with Hudson. They’d both talked on a genuinely intellectual level and laughed at themselves. It had truly been the best date she’d ever been on, and she’d had her share of elaborate and exciting dates. This one was simple and it had felt as though she’d known Hudson for years. But now, knowing what his motives were, she was sure it had all been an act. She knew better than most how easy it was to make someone feel connected even when it wasn’t nearly as deep as they presumed. “Last night was nothing. I was hired to spend time with you. All we did is fulfill a contract, apparently on both sides. We each had a job to do last night. Now that’s done.”

“Fine, even if you want to discount how awesome last night was, you can’t deny that kiss. This morning in bed, you can’t pretend you didn’t feel what I felt. There is something between us.” Hudson reached for Amelia’s hand and rubbed his thumb across her knuckles.

She couldn’t muster the words to tell him he was wrong. It would be a lie and she thought saying anything and sounding unconvincing would be worse than just saying nothing about it at all. “I think you’re probably a nice man and I’m sorry that you were put in this position. It’s obviously conflicting for you. I need go home, change, and then to go meet my client that I let down this morning and apologize. Then I’ll be talking to Clara. Just be smart and preserve your relationship with her. I’m not worth throwing that away.”

“You’re still in those pajamas,” Hudson muttered, releasing her hand and touching the flannel fabric around her neck.

“The zipper is stuck,” she groaned, struggling again to get it open.

“I guess we know why they were buy one get one free,” he joked and she reluctantly flashed a fleeting smile. He reached up and replaced her fumbling hands with his own as he worked to get the zipper free. After a few good tugs it broke away from the fabric it was stuck on and slid down a few inches, exposing the top of her lace bra. Pulling his hands back quickly he averted his eyes.

“I’ll get you something of mine to wear. Maybe like a t-shirt and some sweatpants or something if you tie them up good.”

“My dress is fine. I’ll go put it on. Thank you for helping with the zipper.” She rounded the corner to the bathroom and closed the door tightly behind her. Rather than slipping right into her dress she rested her swirling head against the bathroom door. She wanted to curl up on the floor and cry, mourning the loss of her job and whatever small ember of hope that burned for something happening between her and Hudson. Instead she slipped out of the warm fuzzy pajamas and back into her black dress.

If a new chapter in her life was about to start she sure as hell wasn’t going to let anyone else write it. It was up to her how she handled herself in this moment. She tucked the crazy feelings away and replaced them with dignity and grace as she stepped out of the bathroom. Hudson was still there by the door looking as though his mind was spinning for the right thing to say.

“Bye, Hudson,” Amelia said, leaning in and kissing him on the cheek.

“I hope you find it, Amelia,” Hudson replied, wrapping his arms around her in a powerful yet gentle embrace. She didn’t pull away. She just let him hold her and pretended it didn’t warm her to the core.

“Find what?”

“That thing that’s worth having your heart explode for. The stage you can’t help but stand on even if it kills you.”

With a nod into his shoulder she stepped backwards and headed out the door.

“There’s a car waiting downstairs for you. It’ll take you home.” Hudson leaned his head against the frame of the open door and watched her walk away.

Damn him. He’d turned out to be perfectly imperfect.

Chapter Seven

“Good morning, Clara,” Amelia croaked out as she answered her phone. She was dreading this conversation, but every minute that had ticked by solidified her resolve to move on in her life.

“I was worried about you. Your early morning client said you didn’t show up. That’s not like you at all so I thought something had happened. But I just heard from your VIP last night apologizing for the bad seafood that got you sick.”

“Hudson Bower? He called this morning?” Part of her wanted Clara to fess up and tell her it had all been a test, but, from a business standpoint, it wouldn’t make any sense for Clara to do this. At the end of the day, that’s what mattered. This woman had built an empire with her own blood, sweat, and tears. Whatever tactics she had to use to keep it afloat should be excused.

“He did and he sounded like he felt terrible for getting you sick. Are you better now?”

“I’m starting to get my feet back under me. Is there anyway I can come in and talk with you this afternoon? I’ve been giving the position we discussed some more thought.”

“Sure, I’ll be here until four-thirty if you think you’re up for it. Just stop in and we can chat.”

After disconnecting from Clara and tossing her phone down onto her kitchen table, Amelia flopped, face down onto her bed. Her stomach was in knots thinking about how disappointed Clara would be to hear she was quitting. Her explanations wouldn’t make any sense to a business genius like Clara. How do you look a woman like that in the eye and tell her you’re quitting because you wouldn’t die in order to do this job? Should she go into the analogy of the dancer from the movie who risked her life for just one more chance on stage? Or would that make her sound even less sane?

She had the rest of the afternoon to think through her talking points and even start to plan what she might do with her life after this. Some of the women she worked with had become friends, and there was sadness in seeing that end. Some of her clients had become as much a part of her routine as she was of theirs. But what she did this morning with Hudson told her it was time to move on. There would be no normal in her life as long as she kept doing this job. There would be no real passion if she kept hiding herself away from it.

Yes, all of that sounded perfectly logical, right up until hours later when she was standing outside the entrance to the office for Midnight Magic feeling like she’d vomit. Now nothing made sense. Sure, she’d paid off all her student loans and saved up a nice nest egg. She could certainly take her time finding her passion, but what the hell does that even mean? Who really lives her life like that stupid dancing girl in the movie?

“Amelia,” she heard Hudson call out from the corner as he raced toward her. He looked completely out of breath as he reached her. He dropped his hands to his knees and began composing himself. “Sorry, I ran ten blocks to get here because my driver was running late and I wanted to catch you before your meeting with Clara.”

“How did you even know I had a meeting with her?”

“She told me. She asked if I knew what it was about. She thinks I must have done something last night to screw you up besides food poisoning. Nothing really gets by her.”

"I already told you I won't bring you in to this at all. It has nothing to do with you. It's a choice I'm making. I've been thinking about it. It's not that I'm not happy with what I do, I'm just not sure its what I should be doing for the next ten years. Last night, this morning, that was just a tipping point." She was starting to feel like she was getting traction to her argument again and felt as though she was ready to go upstairs to face Clara.

"Can you hear me out for a minute first? Last night we were talking about what we loved, what we'd die for if it came down to it. I should have told you that I've already found that."

"Oh gosh, Hudson, please don't say you're talking about me. I'll bash you in the head just hoping to knock sense into you. We had a really great night, I'll admit that. I'm even willing to admit what happened this morning was something. But I'm not your passion."

"No, you aren't. That's not what I was going to say. I want to tell you a story about how I found the one thing that I'd fight to keep doing. Because I think that's what you're trying to figure out in your own life. Will you hear me out?"

She was genuinely curious about not only what it was but how he had found it. Because she wasn't sure she knew where to begin for herself after she quit her job in a few minutes.

"I grew up wildly rich. So rich that it's relatively impossible to be well rounded and normal. When I was twelve I traveled to Africa with my parents. My father was brokering some kind of deal. It was for ivory I'm pretty sure which was already banned in the U.S. But that was how my father operated. Laws were just obstacles, not road blocks. To say I hated him would be a pretty fair statement. Long story short, not knowing a thing about the dangers in the region of Africa we were in, I ran away. I hopped on this truck carrying chickens and just decided this would be my new way of life. In retrospect it was short-sighted."

"That's an understatement. More like dangerous and selfish."

"Well the selfish trait was handed down through generations of my family. It was in my blood."

"So what happened? Where did you end up?"

"The truck stopped in this small village at sundown and by this point I was thoroughly regretting my choice and terrified. I hopped out of the truck and started walking towards these shacks. The first one I got to I knocked on the door, which apparently is not a custom in this tiny village because the woman who came to the slanted and barely standing door looked at me like I was crazy. When she saw I was just a boy she pulled me into the shack. We didn't speak the same language, but she could tell how afraid I was. She let me sleep there on the floor. They all slept on the floor. The woman, her son who was about my age, and two toddler aged kids. I didn't think I'd actually sleep but eventually I did. When I got up the next morning I was so hungry and thirsty. But that's when my eyes were opened to this entirely different world. They walked three miles for water that I can't say was clean. The food was so scarce that I felt too guilty to eat anything. It was like taking food out of the babies' mouths. All I could do was cry. I cried for them. I cried for myself. Later that day the oldest boy came back from the market with a flyer in his hand that had my picture on it and an address for where to find my father.

“His mother sent him off to go there but told me to stay put. I didn’t know at the time what she was afraid of but later I realized if any of the men had seen me I’d have been taken for ransom, especially once they knew someone was looking for me. A couple hours later a caravan of my father’s men arrived to fetch me. They gave the boy some money, pocket change really, and told me to get into the car. My father couldn’t even be bothered to come on the car ride to get me.”

“That’s an incredible story,” Amelia interjected, reaching her hand out and touching his forearm.

“I never forgot what they did for me. The older I got the more I realized how much they risked to protect me, a stranger. They had nothing yet they were willing to share it with me. They didn’t know me but they were willing to help. That became a louder dialog in my head than anything my father was telling me. When I turned eighteen I went back to the village. They were all dead. The woman was named Mika, and I don’t know the names of her children, but according to my interpreter who took me around the village, they’d all died of different hardships. Starvation. Disease. Dehydration. The life expectancy for anyone in the village was twenty eight years old.”

“That’s how old I am,” Amelia said, grasping the gravity of the situation.

“So I went to my friend Clara who was running a business up in Boston. She graduated a few years before me and had jumped head first into some start-up company that I heard was doing well. I was three years away from getting access to my trust fund but I knew I couldn’t wait that long to help these people. She fronted me the money to start a foundation I named Mika’s Heart. It started small. But over the course of the next five years we transformed the village into a place where people could not just survive but thrive. There was sanitation and medicine.”

“That’s an incredible accomplishment. For someone so young you really were able to make an impact. You should be proud of that.”

“It all fell. Rebels came through four years ago and destroyed it all. The men were forced to join them or be killed. The women and children were treated like animals. The atrocity of it all still keeps me up at night. I couldn’t get back there. They wouldn’t let me or any of my people in even for aid. But it’s changed. It’s been eighteen months since the rebels were beaten back and there is no sign of them returning. My team has been cleared to go back. At the beginning of next month the first round of us will hit the ground over there and finally be able to assess the damage and begin rebuilding everything that was lost. I want them to know that we haven’t given up on them.”

“I appreciate you telling me this. You’re right, part of me moving on is the desire to find something that gives me the feeling you must get when you think of your foundation.”

“I felt like we had a lot in common when we were talking last night. It got me thinking this morning about your skills. On my team I have construction workers, engineers, medical doctors, and first aid professionals. What I don’t have is someone to address the mental health issues that will be running rampant in the village. They’ve been through hell. Most of my team is men. The women that are left there will have little to no trust of us, and who can blame them? But you, you have a gift. You could do so much good over there.”

“Wait a second,” Amelia scoffed. “You can’t honestly think that I could go offer any help to these people. I’ve kept my license up to date, sure. But I don’t have the experience to deal with the issues you’re talking about.”

“You’ve spent the last three years trying to make people happy and comfortable. You’re an expert at adapting, at being what people need when they need it. You gain their trust and you show them compassion. Those are the skills I need on my team. Please just consider coming with us.”

“Is this because you felt some kind of spark with me? Are you angling for us to fall in love, like this is some kind of ride into the sunset fairytale?”

“Unfortunately I’ve spent enough time there to know there isn’t much you’d consider romantic in this village unless you could be imaginative and enjoy the buzz of the giant mosquitos or the stink of going weeks between showers. I’m not propositioning you as a prospective girlfriend. Does part of me hope that happens? It really does. But if together we make an impact on this small part of the world and then we go our separate ways, I’d still call that a victory.”

“Won’t Clara want to kill you? She considers me one of her best girls and she’ll see you swooping in and stealing me.”

“Clara has very few soft spots, but this charity is one of them. She believes in it the same way I do. The last couple years of sitting here in the dark, not sure how to help them, has been hell. But besides me, no one was happier than Clara to get the news that we’d been granted clearance to return. This is the thing that I’d fight for. Maybe it’s not yours and that’s ok. But I wanted to put it out there for you.”

“You actually think I could help people?”

“I think you could save peoples lives. You could be the one glimmer of sparkling light at the end of a very long and very lonely tunnel.”

“That’s a hard pitch to turn down.”

“I hope it is.”

“I’ve got to go talk to Clara. I’m already late for our meeting. I don’t want to keep her waiting.” Amelia knew she didn’t have a set time to meet with Clara but the pressure of this conversation was making her want to escape.

“I’m not saying you need to answer me tonight or anything. I mean there is paperwork and medical evaluations and vaccines that need to be done if you do decide, but you have a little bit of time.”

“If only I had another fortune cookie to tell me what to do,” Amelia joked, always looking for a moment of levity when things got too heavy around her.

“You’ve got your own fortune cookie, right here,” Hudson said, pointing his finger at her heart.

“Wow, that was profoundly cheesy.”

“Epically bad. That was like eighties sitcom dad advice.”

“Cue the sappy music and the freeze frame.” Amelia brushed her hair out of her eyes and let her face fall serious. “This is a really big decision, Hudson. I’ve never had to commit to something like this before. My fortune cookie heart is coming up dry.”

“You can always do what I do when making a really hard choice.”

“What’s that?”

“I flip a coin. Heads you go to Africa, tails you stay here and regret not going to Africa.” He fished a coin out of his pocket and rested on his thumb as though he was about to flip it into the air.

“Don’t,” she begged snatching the coin from him and looking him straight in his crystal blue eyes.

“Why not?”

“Because I’m afraid it might be tails.”

“Then it sounds like you already have your answer. Here’s my card. Good luck with Clara and call me whenever.”

Hudson turned on his heels and strode down the street and around the corner. Taking in a deep centering breath Amelia pulled open the door and made her way toward Clara’s office. She finally had her talking points worked out. Suddenly she knew exactly what she’d say. It was all perfectly clear now.

Chapter Eight

Nine Months Later

"I'd like to propose a toast to the amazing things this team has been able to achieve." Hudson raised his metal canteen in the air and continued. "Many of you have never experienced the grief and struggle that existed here upon our arrival and I applaud the grace and strength with which each of you processed that. You all have done your part in changing the lives of so many people. Here's to two more months of even more progress." Hudson took a swig from the canteen and others in the group who were all gathered in the small metal sided structure they'd erected did the same.

As the group dispersed, all heading to their tents to sleep, Amelia stayed behind.

"I can't believe we only have two more months here. I'm just finally getting used to the bug bites and the frizzy hair. I'm not sure how I'll go back to civilization."

"This place will be here when you're ready come back. The relief team will come in behind us and maintain everything while we get a break back home for a while. I don't know about you, but I'm dying for some take out food, an old black and white movie, and giant bag of candy."

"Funny," she said with a roll of her eyes. "You mean our most recent dates haven't been doing it for you? I mean just yesterday I was putting medicine on that heat rash of yours. That's pretty romantic."

Hudson pulled her into his arms and kissed her cheek softly, his bristly beard tickling her. "There is something I've been meaning to ask you," he whispered into her ear.

"Yes, I do want you to shave your beard," she teased.

"No, this is serious. In two months when we go back state side I'm wondering what your plans are. I've got to get back to things in New York. Is there any chance you'd consider making the city your home base?"

"You really have to ask? I followed you out to the middle of nowhere with no running water or curling irons. I think I could survive with you in New York. I was thinking maybe I could get a place close to one of the hospitals and see about working there."

"My place is close to the hospital," Hudson said, gripping both her cheeks lightly with his fingers. "Come live with me,"

"We tried that. It didn't work out," Clara reminded him.

"We tried living in a one person tent during the hottest season here. I think we could survive my two thousand square foot penthouse apartment."

"That depends. Do you suddenly not snore in New York?" she teased.

"I don't know, will you clip those toe nails so you don't nearly chop my leg off with one of them?"

"Well hopefully you do a better job cleaning your apartment than you do keeping up with the trash here." Amelia ran her fingers up his ribs in that way that she knew would tickle him and quiet his argument.

"You are exhausting, Amelia," Hudson sighed.

"You're infuriating, Hudson. But you're that thing I'd fight for. I'd let my heart explode before I gave you up."

“Luckily we’ll never have to make that choice. You can have me and your heart won’t blow up,” Hudson laughed.

“But you should know if it would, I’d still choose you,” she said seriously wanting him to know how deeply she cared for him.

“So we’re discounting the time two weeks ago when you thought you saw a lion and you shoved me toward it and ran the other way?”

“Heart explosions are quick and painless. I’m pretty sure being mauled by a lion would take a while. I mean, talk to me again when we’re married maybe.”

“Ok I’ll bring it up next year.”

“You think we’ll be married next year?”

“If you don’t feed me to a lion to save yourself we might be.”

“Good point. I won’t get my hopes up then. Let’s just see how the lion thing pans out,” she joked with a wink.

“You’re an interesting woman Amelia.”

“Is that a lion?” she teased as she shoved him away from her again. “False alarm.”

They slipped back into each other’s arms and walked out toward the setting sun. There was nothing in the world that could have prepared Amelia for what she would find on this journey. She found despair that morphed into hope, challenges that changed into victories and friends that grew into soul mates. She didn’t regret her time at Midnight Magic because in so many ways it shaped her into the person she needed to be. It put Hudson into her life. She knew they had a long road of love ahead of them. Barring any lions.

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