

Chapter One

"Chloe played with Prada. That's a fierce outfit you're almost wearing. Very, Shut your mouth, I'm not and uptight lawyer freaked out about being the main draw at the party of the season!"

"It's not a party," Felicia Gallo corrected her best friend, over the rim of the champagne flute Willard had kept filled with Cristal during their winding drive from the airport. "It's a—"

"It's a freaking dream weekend, girlfriend." His discriminating eye catalogued one of the many designer outfits her last-minute shopping spree had produced. "And you're going to take advantage of every second of it."

"What do you care?"

Felicia hadn't cuddled up with champagne in ages. When would she have found the time? She'd forgotten the warm, golden glow of it. The expensive bubbles that effervesced into her thoughts,

making it more trouble than it was worth to obsess too much about anything.

"As long as you get to swap lip gloss secrets with Maddy Lov," she snarked, "you'll be the talk of every Diva in Manhattan."

"You're the only diva I care about this weekend, my dear." Willard caught her tugging at the fur-trimmed neckline of the purple snow suit that fit her like a second skin. His eye-roll of frustration admonished some of the champagne's golden magic. "You agreed to take some chances again. Let me catch you slinking back into your shell, and mama's going to slap your hand—or some other part of your anatomy."

The threat came with an affectionate wink.

Felicia laughed.

Laughing with Willard always called to the creative, exuberant parts of her. The parts she covered up with Chanel suits and St. John dresses, even though she secretly loved Cloe and Roberto Cavalli.

Willard was tall and pretty-boy-meets-gym thin. An outlandish risk-taker in both business and expressing his personal style. Unabashed about relishing the success he'd willed into reality. Midwest born and bred, he owned three of the top restaurants in New York. He traded on his connections to power players from industries as varied as entertainment and sports, as a child swapped baseball cards. Effortless should have been

Willard's drag name—then again, his current moniker, Vivid, wasn't far off the mark.

"To fun." She raised her glass in a toast that the wine kept her from questioning.

"To my goddess friend embracing her fabulous self." Willard clinked and drank. "And, to you propositioning the first gorgeous hunk of man you see."

She sputtered at the challenging arch of his eyebrow.

"No more dares." She sighed when Willard emptied the rest of the bottle into her glass. "Dares and booze are what got me into this mess in the first place."

Her gay husband, as Felicia's friends affectionately referred to Willard, chucked her under the chin with his forefinger.

"You're confusing being drunk," he said, "with hiding behind your brains and daddy's legal empire for five years."

"Six." She stared at her empty glass.

Six years already?

"That's right. The asshole with the teeny, tiny penis was your big mistake of 2003."

"And 2002. And 2001." She raised her champagne flute in an empty salute to Phillip Rhalston Bowen IV, a man of sizable ego and ambition. And equally sizable genitalia, no matter the rationalizations she'd needed to survive their breakup. "Hell, we'll just call him my big mistake of the millennium."

"Nonsense." Willard popped the cork on more Cristal and poured for both of them. "You have much better mistakes in you. This weekend for instance. You agreed—"

"No holding back," she recited. "I know."

The mantra had been her talisman for weeks. Without it, she'd have called off the first vacation she'd planned since nixing her engagement to the asshole with the teeny, tiny penis. It had gotten her and all her new clothes into her father's Towncar and to the airport. Then on the plane, when she'd almost bailed on Willard in the Crown Room.

Too bad it wasn't silencing the second-guessing now.

"Hiding's not for you, darling," Willard insisted. "What a waste of that mind and refined sass of yours."

"You couldn't care less about my sass. If it weren't for Maddy Lov, you—"

"Hiding's beneath you." Willard's glibness evaporated. He set his drink aside. "It's definitely beneath me, and we're supposed to be attached at the hip for this romantic getaway in the snow. It's time to live the exciting, lust-filled life a successful woman like you deserves—and a successful man like me."

"And what kind of woman would that be?"

Intelligent?

Sophisticated?

Stylishly unapproachable? A force to be reckoned with in the boardroom? Or lonely as hell—every night she crawled into her

king sized bed alone, aching for a man's hardness next to her?

Willard took her glass.

"A woman who should be blasting out of her comfort zone," he said. "Not tiptoeing around inside it, following all your stupid rules and locking your heart away. Screw how badly no-nads took you for granted. "

Felicia watched the Colorado scenery whiz by. The complimentary limo that had retrieved them from the airport had been steadily climbing toward the their resort ski destination ever since. The quiet, isolating snow that covered the world outside her window called to Felicia, not the excitement that supposedly lay ahead.

Had Phillip simply been taking her for granted, when she'd caught him sampling the leggy brunette who manned the coat check at Willard's East Village Italian trattoria, Viva!? Or had Felicia just not been enough to keep his attention?

You're a tiger in the boardroom, Fe, he'd said. But sometimes a man needs more...

"Kick that shell to the curb this weekend, gorgeous." Willard motioned over her shoulder. They were pulling up to Winter Pass Lodge. "Remember, you're going after the first hunk you set eyes on. I'll accept nothing less from you than a total weekend meltdown."

"I promise, you'll have the romantic getaway reputation

you've paid me to guarantee." The confident smile Tony Rossi flashed Tom Walker was as charming as his churning stomach would allow.

A whoop went up from the lobby's oak bar, where rock star Maddy Lov was holding court. Lov had been A-List Publicity's bright idea. The lodge's floundering PR firm had figured, what better high-profile way to grab Winter Pass an Internet full of free publicity, than to invite the country's pop princess du jour? Except the ensuing chaos was coming dangerously close to running off the romantic couples the Walkers wanted drawn to their lovely jewel in the mountains.

"A Weekend of Poetry and Romance, huh?" Walker asked, reciting the theme Tony had been implementing and promoting nonstop since he'd come on board to counter A-Lists' mis-steps. Tom watched a blond ski bunny prance by in a snow suit that was unzipped so close to nirvana, Lov's contingent of the paparazzi had the bunny under constant surveillance. "Well, you're our closer, Rossi. Good luck!"

With a glad I'm not you clap on the back, Tom headed behind the Tuscan-inspired registration desk and disappeared into the lodge's offices.

"No luck to it," Tony reminded himself. The vagaries of luck had become known to him at a tender age. So had the value of making his own success, no matter the odds against him.

Maddy Lov had been watching Tony's exchange with his boss.

She smiled from the epicenter of her sea of admirers, as if she'd heard every word. Tony's requests for the vixen to tone down her girls-gone-wild approach to ski resort chic had once again fallen on deaf ears.

The day just kept getting better and better.

The first set of winners of the grand opening's love sonnet contest, Josh Dempsy and Tracy Bingham, weren't showing much promise in the Hallmark Couples Moment department. Liz Song, the author of the second selected poem, was MIA. But there was still Felicia Gallo, who was on her way in from the airport. And Tony was convinced she was the real deal the Walkers needed for the weekend to start off right.

Not being a lover of literature by any stretch of the imagination, he could still appreciate the PR reality that poetry was the language of lovers. And he was being paid to lure those lovers to Winter Pass. A-List might have come up with the idea for the contest. But they'd bungled everything since. The Walkers were counting on Tony to make sure the contest prize winners and romantic poetry weekend he'd packaged and sold to twenty other couples came off without a hitch. Especially since he'd publicized the event in every available travel magazine.

Thanks to his advance work, the lodge's couples bookings had caught up with the flurry of singles coming to Party with Lov. A job well done, even if he did say so himself. Except Felicia Gallo was starting to feel like his plan's last hope for opening

night, and Tony wasn't the kind of man to leave anything about his business up to hope.

He jerked at his lapels to resettle his black wool sports coat on his shoulders. As settled as jacket could look, anyway, considering the distressed finish of the shirt he wore beneath--without a tie. The value of appearance was an essential part of the PR game, so he'd do his job and keep the wrinkles at bay. But he'd be damned if he'd go the conservative shirt and tie route.

Not his style.

Neither was getting excited about the arrival of a romance-obsessed woman. But as he headed for the carved wood and stained glass doors that opened onto the lodge's portico, he caught himself smoothing down the front of his tailored slacks.

Damn, man!

She's coming with her guy. She's got a poet's soul. Get her settled, give her the itinerary for the weekend, then get back to Maddy Lov before one of her groupies torches the lobby!

Except all day, while he'd been keeping an eye on Maddy's boom-baby curves, it was Felicia Gallo's soft features he couldn't get out of his mind. He'd studied her head shot countless times as he'd designed and distributed press releases. Her smile was sugar-sweet. So why did it make him think of wicked sex and satin sheets? Why did he keep imagining the warmth radiating from her eyes, smoldering into nuclear waves that could melt even a frigid, January day in Colorado?

Standing at the curb, Tony checked the time on his Tag Heuer Manaco. Then he checked himself while he gazed at the snow-covered landscape he'd hyped for months to anyone who'd listen. Ms. Gallo, and the sensitive intelligence dripping from every word of her poetry, were due to arrive any minute. He'd read her bio many times. Because his job was to work her pedigreed success and romantic heart to the lodge's advantage, he mentally added. Not because he planned to sample any of her warmth for himself.

Winter Pass was going to make an international splash as a luxury couples retreat, no matter how many missteps A-List made. He'd staked his professional reputation on it. He had no business focusing on anything else.

A speck on the frozen horizon crept closer--one of the Town Car's Tony had reserved for the weekend's VIP's. The corporate lawyer with a lover's dool would be inside, along with the man Felicia Gallo had invited to share her romantic prize package with.

Except the expressive, poignant Ms. Gallo from her biopic didn't emerge from the luxury car. Instead, out teetered a high-maintenance fashionista wearing four inch heels and the kind of severe style that belonged on Madison Avenue--not the rustic snow peaks the lodge was nestled within. The sophisticated makeup up, the enticing way she made being obviously half-drunk look...

Nothing turned Tony off more, than the brittle kind of bombshell striding toward him.

Her hips swayed as if she was on a mission to captivate every man in sight—because she knew she could. Her smile zeroed in on Tony, as if she were playing a role, and his part in her production was to do her bidding. She wrapped a hand around his neck, meeting him eye-to-eye, and leaned in to whisper, "Hello," with both her wicked perfume and a husky, sensual voice.

Turned off or not, Tony's body instantly helloed right back.

Then he was sipping the taste of champagne from her lips, groaning while she licked, then sucked, at his tongue. Her bottom wiggled beneath the vibrant purple of the catsuit-cum-snowsuit she'd worn with skyscraper stilettos. Actually, one firm cheek was beneath each of his hands now.

His fingers skimmed across the softest female flesh imaginable, and kept right on skimming, encountering not the barest trace of panties.

Damn!

Her breath hitched as his fingers clenched. The rough sound brimmed with wicked promise. Then she jerked away, shock vibrating through her body, her pupils expanding, her head slowly shaking.

Tony's body screamed for more. Reason argued that his hands were better off in his pockets. His palms settled the matter by pulling the enticing globes of her ass closer. She squirmed, but in the next second her resistance evaporated as her body brushed his hardness. She burrowed her head against his neck, her teeth

nipping. Lost in the rush, he settled her against his straining flesh and lost what was left of his mind. A fist in her wildly curling hair, he pulled until he had her lips again. Her taste.

"Good Lord, Fe," a masculine voice chided. "Get a room before you devour the beautiful man for dinner."

Tony opened one eye, then the other. The woman in his arm's panted, her legs sliding down his thighs and calves until the toes of her outlandish shoes touched the sidewalk, then the heels. A wave of uncharacteristic protectiveness had him wrapping his hand around the back of her head, shielding her face, while she pulled together whatever wits she still possessed.

It took him longer than was comfortable to do the same. Then he took stock of the man the wanton in his arms had arrived with. A man dressed as expensively, and as vividly, as Ms. Gallo herself.

Tony made his hands drop to his side.

"I suppose," he said, "that this is the muse for your words of enduring love."

"Wh... What?" The last of the afternoon's sun shone fire-red in the deep blond of her hair. In the growing shadows, her features softening in confusion, something of the woman in the picture he'd studied re-emerging.

"Your new boy toy wants to know if he has competition for the weekend." Gallo's flamboyant friend winked at Tony, his gaze skimming from Tony's laced-up dress shoes to his untamable hair.

"And I want to know if you plan to share the wealth."

A strobing flash of light momentarily blinded them.

"Kiss her again, Rossi," demanded one of the photogs constantly cruising the place. "That was hot!"

More flashes followed, attracting the attention of passers by, who otherwise might not have noticed Tony's insane reaction to the kind of female he wanted nothing to do with. The poster child for his romantic retreat PR.

Yeah, he was all over staying focused on nothing but business!

"Rossi?" The hard-core sex goddess he'd been mauling blushed from the diamonds winking in her earlobes, to the tantalizing cleavage spilling from her top's plunging neckline. "Oh-My-God!"