**The Reluctant Santa Belle**

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As Erika turned the final corner on her way to meet Alison for lunch, the old Chevrolet coughed, jerked, and slowed down. The engine roared to life as she pumped the accelerator, then went silent again. She pulled hard on the steering wheel, fairly dragging the car to the curb by sheer force of will. It bumped against the curb and stopped. Now what, she thought futility.

She was just about to call Alison and her mother when she heard the sound of a loud engine. A glance in her rearview mirror showed a large tow truck stopped behind her. Good and bad. She needed help but had no money to pay for it. She watched a man climb out of the truck and approach the car. Short, unshaven, tattooed everywhere she could see, an obvious chaw of tobacco in his cheek, he shuffled up beside her car.

"Havin' trouble, little lady?" he asked through a yellow-toothed smile, his aroma wafting through the open window. She tried not to let her nose turn up at the smell.

"Yes, the car just stopped," she replied, not sure how to describe what had happened.

He spat a stream of dark liquid; just the sound of it passing his lips causing her stomach to recoil. "Try to start it."

She turned the key but there was nothing.

"Pop the hood."

The hood was right there in front of her but she didn't know how to open it.

"Um," she said, bending to look under the dashboard. She knew it had to be there somewhere.

"Watch out," the man said, leaning in through the window and reaching under the dash, bumping her leg as he did. She cringed, wishing she could be in the back seat, or at least in the passenger seat.

He pulled on something, there was a clicking noise and she could see that the hood had popped up. None too soon for her way of thinking, he retreated from the window and shuffled toward the front of the car, one more spat of dark liquid splattering on the street.

She knew she should tell him she didn't have any money but decided to wait till the car was repaired if that was going to be possible.

He was under the hood for about a minute, then reappeared, heading for his truck, winking at her as he passed. She noticed he had a wedding ring ... and wondered. He returned quickly with a little adjustable wrench and disappeared under the hood once more. She heard some scraping, a few tiny squeaks and he slammed the hood.

Back by the window, he said, "Try it now."

She turned the key and as if by magic, the car was running once more. She gave the little man a huge smile. She was glad it was fixed but it was time to face the music, or whatever else she might have to face.

"Loose battery cable," he said, leaning against the door.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "How much do I owe you?"

He turned and leaned both arms against the car door, his face partially inside the car. Erika tried not to tremble but was only partially successful. He was way too close, and the only way to avoid him would be to slide across the seat — she wasn't going to do that. Somehow she'd survive. They were on a side street with no other people or moving cars in sight. That didn't help her nervousness one bit.

"Little lady, I'm guessing you're a college student which means you probably don't have a pot to piss in." Her body wanted to cringe again, but she couldn't help but giggle at his crude analogy.

She nodded.

"You got five bucks?" he asked, shaking his head.

She dug in her purse and found one of the two five-dollar bills she had. She very gingerly handed it to him.

"I don't usually get to fix cars for anyone as pretty as you are," he said, a semi-leering smile on his face "Just looking at you is enough to make up the difference from what I'd usually charge." He stepped back from the window. "An old car like this, you need to have someone who knows cars look it over ever so often. Keep stuff like this from happening." Another splat on the pavement.

"Thank you, you're very kind," she said, and she meant it. He wasn't at all what she'd expected when she first saw him.

He shuffled back to his truck, left one more dark stain on the pavement, and pulled away, tooting his horn as he did. She noted the name on the door as he pulled past her. Willard Towing. Not that she'd need it, she hoped, but perhaps she could recommend him to someone. She made a quick call to Alison to explain why she was late for lunch, then drove away, very content to be moving again.

"Erika, you going home for Thanksgiving?" Alison asked after they had finished eating and Erika had related to her the story of Willard Towing.

"Yeah. Mom's there by herself and we always have Thanksgiving and Christmas together. Have a great break."

"You too, hon," Alison waved as Erika was climbing into the old Chevrolet that she hoped would get her home safely — mostly just get her home. She wasn't sure what she'd do if something went wrong with the car. With only about seventy dollars left in her account, she was hoping to make it to Christmas break when she'd be able to work and improve her balance.

She drove cautiously, staying just under the speed limit, nursing her gasoline and the car. Finally home, she breathed a sigh of relief and went inside to greet her mother.

The following day was Thanksgiving and Erika was looking forward to a quiet dinner with her mother. No other family was living close, so Thanksgiving was not a big family gathering as it had been when she was little. She missed that, but it wasn't likely to happen again with the deaths, moving, and arguments that had taken place in the last few years. It had left Erika and her mother isolated with no support. Thank goodness for the scholarships or Erika would have been stuck in Spencerville, scrounging for work with almost no hope of anything better.

Erika was up early, helping her mother get everything ready for their special dinner.

"Mom, how'd you get all this food?" She knew her mother struggled to have enough money to meet her expenses, and this looked like a full turkey dinner that they were ready to prepare.

"Aw, honey, I just saved and was careful with everything. We don't get to eat together very often now, and I wanted to have a nice meal."

"Mom. You know I'd be happy with baloney sandwiches," she said, laughing.

"But I wouldn't." She hugged her daughter.

"I know, Mom. That's why I love you."

"Do you love me enough to peel potatoes?"

They worked together and got everything going, doing something very old fashioned — stuffing the turkey with carefully prepared dressing from an old recipe her mother had found.

At last, everything was in process and they were able to sit down. Since it was nearly noon, each had a small snack, anticipating filling themselves with the delicious dinner whose odors were already filling the house.

"I think I'll go out tomorrow and look for some Christmas work." Erika watched her mother's expression change. "What?" she questioned.

"Honey, there aren't any jobs here." She shook her head. "My hours were cut two weeks ago, but they promised I'd get them back before long."

"Are you going to be okay?" Erika got a look she didn't expect, a kind of half-smile from her mother.

"You remember Kirk Smith?" She continued without looking at Erika. "He's always asking me to go out with him ... and I've started accepting."

"Mom, are you sure?"

"He's really nice. And he takes me to lunch or dinner every chance he gets. And I give him lots of chances."

"Is that right, Mom?"

"I think he's lonely, and I'm sure I'm lonely most of the time, so it all works out." Her mother giggled. "He gets a new Cadillac every year so ..."

"Sounds like everyone is happy." Erika smiled. From the smile she saw on her mother's face, she suspected that certain other activities were helping solve the loneliness problem.

"But back to where we were ... no jobs here. You may have to stay at school." There was a sad resolve to her voice.

The food was as tasty as It smelled, and the rest of the day went quickly with Erika updating her mother about everything happening at school. She had expected to spend Friday job-hunting, but her mother encouraged her to head back to school and look for her very-necessary Christmas work.

Friday morning came and Erika was in the old Chevrolet, reluctantly doing what her mother had suggested. Once back, her cell phone rang and it was Alison.

"Hey, you at home?"

"Nope, back in my room."

"I thought you were going to look for a job at home," Alison began.

"There are no jobs at home, so I came back here to try. Just filling out a form now."

"What's it for?"

"Looks like they need a Santa Belle at Winegardner's Department Store downtown."

"Didn't know they still had Santa and the kids stuff there. I thought they stopped it a few years ago."

"Me too," Erika replied, "but I guess it's still going." She paused for a few seconds. The application asked for a photo. She picked one from her Facebook page and attached it. "There, sent it off. Ready for lunch."

"Good luck," Alison said. "Meet you at Wendy's."

Erika lived close enough that she could walk to Wendy's, saving her car from even those few miles. She was picturing herself working at Winegardner's, helping the little ones climb up on Santas lap, helping them shop for Mom and Dad and their siblings in the Secret Santa Gift Shop, and comforting the inevitable sobbing ones, deathly afraid of the big guy in the red suit.

Alison was waiting for her when she got to Wendy's.

"So, hope you get that job," she began as they stood in the short line, waiting to order.

"Me too. I need to replenish the bank account. Starvation won't be fun."

Alison looked her up and down. "You don't look like you're about to starve," she said, grinning at Erika.

"Alison," Erika said, rolling her eyes.

"You need to enter the Miss America contest, I keep telling you."

"And I keep reminding you you're full of shit up to the neck and the rest is peanut butter."

"Yeah, well, you're funny, but what does Mason tell you?"

"He'd tell me whatever he thought I wanted to hear ... and then a few things I don't want to hear. He finally gave up."

"Like Nick finally gave up?"

"Haha. Good old Nick. Yeah, he finally figured it out. Probably because of the words I used to explain it to him."

"You're a prize, Erika. Guys don't want to give you up."

"Will you cut it out?" She gave Alison a dirty look.

She had dated Mason since the semester had started, nearly four months before the breakup. He was a very sophisticated senior to her still-a-little-uncertain sophomore status. She had begun to feel he was just a little too smooth, quick with the words but a little short on feelings and emotions. She had used the Nick-talk to set Mason on the right path — the path out of her life.

They nibbled on lunch as they talked and teased, Erika bearing the brunt of most of the teasing, a position she had occupied most of her life due to her proclivity for vivid blushing. Before long, both of them were gigging almost continuously.

"I better get going," Erika said, biting her lower lip, something she did when she was nervous.

"Worried about the job?" Alison questioned.

"A little, I guess. I really need it."

"Keep me posted," Alison said as she stood up.

Back in her room, Erika went to her computer and loaded her email. She was surprised to see a response from Winegardner's. as she was about to click on it she looked at it again. The name she saw on her second look was not Winegardner's but rather Winebrenner's, similar but ... What was Winebrenner's?

She opened the email. The name at the top caused her to inhale sharply. She squinted at it to be sure she was seeing it correctly.

Winebrenner's Men's Club

What the hell? There was a message of course.

Erika, thanks for your quick reply. I think you would fit in perfectly with our Santa Belle team. Give me a call and we'll work out the details. Regards, Zack Winebrenner.

She quickly did some research regarding Winebrenner's. All she could find was that it was a very high-end and exclusive club for both men and women. It had a gourmet chef from Europe and advertised the dining very heavily. No matter what she read, two words kept intruding on those thoughts. The words were Playboy Club. Nothing in the ad mentioned or even intimated Playboy Club. Even though it said "men and women," she could only see the "men" part of it. Maybe she was wrong — but was she willing to find out?

What was she going to do? It was a job and it looked like she had it if she wanted it. Did she want that? High-end dining would mean high-end tipping. That part sounded good. She didn't know for sure but most men's clubs didn't feature Victorian dresses. She wore bikinis all the time. Somehow, this would be different. She stared at the email. If she turned it down, was there another job available? Nothing so far had made her hopeful about that. She could call and find out more. She decided that, with other options nearly nonexistent, she'd call.

She dialed, hoping her voice wouldn't tremble too much. A very pleasant male voice made her feel a tiny bit better.

"Zack Winebrenner."

"Hello. This is Erika Schmidt. Your email said I should call." She was working hard to control the tremble in her voice.

"Erika. So glad you called." He sounded excited. "We'd love to have you join us. Your picture tells me you'd fit right in. Let me ask. Are you, by any chance, a student, looking for Christmas work?"

She hesitated. Why not? "Yes, sir. That's my plan right now." She hoped that last statement left her a little wiggle room.

"That's not a problem," he replied, reassuring her. "You may find that you'll want to keep working after you start back to school. The money is, well, pretty good."

Erika could hear the enthusiasm in his voice.

Zack continued. "Number one, I'm anxious to have you start. We have three blondes and two redheads. The dark hair I see in your picture will contrast nicely with the others. Number two, I'd like to have you stop by as soon as possible so I can talk with you for a couple of minutes, and then Lorelei can fill you in on the details. She's way better at that than I am." He laughed. "She's been here for several years and knows the ins and outs way better than I do." He paused and she knew he was waiting for her answer.

"Let me think a second," Erika said, struggling to make two decisions. Did she want to find out more about the "job," and when was she available.

"Sure, take your time." She could hear him humming quietly.

She quickly decided that she wasn't signing up for slavery, so she could say no to the job any time. That decided, she thought she'd turn it back to Zack.

"When would be a good time to stop by?"

"Both Lorelei and I are here now if you're free. If not, we'll be here tomorrow as well."

"I'm free the rest of the day."

"Super," Zack exclaimed. "Do you know where we're located?"

"No idea."

Zack gave her an address and brief instructions about finding Winebrenner's. Erika made notes, confident she knew about where it was. She thanked Zack and told him she should be there in thirty minutes, giving herself a few minutes to change clothes. She put on a print dress she had that highlighted her figure, surprised that she was "getting into the swing of looking sexy." She decided to go all-out and wore a pair of three-inch heels.

The drive to Winebrenner's was uneventful, as least as far as the driving was concerned. Her brain was a different story, however. Her imagination was in high gear until she finally reigned it in, telling herself she'd know the facts within an hour.

She was impressed as she pulled into the nearly empty parking lot at Winebrenner's. It was an impressive-looking low building, hidden from the main street by trees and carefully landscaped shrubbery. Erika parked, smoothed her dress, and headed for the door. When she was almost there the door swung open.

"Erika, good to see you." She recognized Zack's voice. "Come on in and we can get started."

She followed him into a moderately sized office and he gestured to a comfortable chair. She sat down, ready for whatever.

"The photo you sent didn't lie," Zack began. "Tell me about why you applied." He leaned back in his chair and Erika got the definite impression he was sizing her up, both physically, of course, and mentally when she began to talk.

With the question he had asked, she couldn't suppress a giggle.

"Uh oh. Sounds like a story is on the way." He laughed.

"I'm a little embarrassed, but I didn't read the application carefully and I thought ... well, I thought I was applying to Winegardner's to be a Santa Belle for little kids." She was sure her face was reddening. She met Zack's eyes and saw his smile.

"So, you had a decision to make."

She nodded.

"Since you're here, I guess you've decided."

No reply from Erika.

"Or maybe just deciding?" he questioned. Her look told him he was correct. "Let me start then, with what I hope are encouraging details. Your base rate will be ten dollars an hour. Probably what you would have made at Winegardner's." Another smile. "But, regular serving tips amount to somewhere around a hundred and fifty dollars a night for the six to eleven shift. We're open till one and Lorelei will explain about that when you get with her. So you're looking at a minimum of two hundred dollars for five hours of work or, forty dollars an hour. Sound interesting?"

Hell yes, it sounded interesting to a girl who was trying to earn enough money to get through the rest of the school year.

"Yes, it does," she assured him. "It does." He had her and she knew it.

"Great. Let me get Lorelei and she'll give you the rest of the info." He picked up his phone and punched a button. "Lorelei to the office, please."

In just a few seconds a blonde head poked through the doorway.

"This her?" she asked.

"Lori, this is Erika. Take over."

Lori motioned for Erika to follow her. Outside the office, she said, "Zack is a great guy to work for if you're wondering. You play straight with him and he'll help you to the moon and back. Mess with him, you're in trouble, know what I mean?"

"I do."

They went into the dining room and sat down. "This is where it happens," Lori said, sweeping her arm around. She reached over to the empty chair and held up something red, a Santa Belle outfit that Erika knew would be hers. It was two pieces, a skimpy bikini-like top that would probably expose two-thirds of her breasts, and a tiny skirt that would leave her navel exposed. Also, the traditional Santa hat. She had anticipated something like this but, she was now seeing it, almost exactly as she had imagined. She sighed in resignation.

"Not too bad?" Lori suggested.

"No, not bad." Erika giggled. "I guess I've shown more on lots of occasions."

"Okay, here's the deal. You'd have four tables on a normal night. If things are light, you might have five. You stay at the tables, taking care of things the whole time, except when you get a signal from the kitchen that an order is ready. There's a little Bluetooth thing you wear in your ear to get those notifications.

"From about six when we open until eleven, it's mostly husbands and wives. A few single men and, once in a while, a single woman. This is a gourmet restaurant and the food is always, always the very best. It's not cheap either. If you work from eleven to one, it's almost all men. For the shift that lasts till eleven, you take orders —I'll show you how to do that in a little while—you serve, you keep the drinks, coffee, and water glasses filled, and are always right there to meet their every wish. During that time, you don't flaunt the outfit, those big boobs of yours and you don't flirt with the men. That'll come later.

"Now, from eleven to one, when you get to work that shift, it's almost one hundred percent men. Women are allowed but don't usually stay till then. During this time, flirt with the men, let those boobs tantalize them a little—it helps the tips. The good money-maker from ten to one is the 'cuddle' sessions."

"The what?" Erika questioned, opening her eyes a little wider.

"'Cuddle' sessions. Oh, and I forgot to mention, you're topless from eleven to one." She smiled at Erika who was now chewing on her lower lip. "It's just a name. It involves sitting on their lap, putting your arm around their neck, letting them lay a hand on your leg. If you want to let them gently touch a breast, that's up to you. Most of us do. It's a one-hundred-dollar charge for a session. We don't use egg-timers since a lot depends on how busy you are. If you have to, you can split it into two sessions

"Got it," Erika nervously replied, nodding and trying to picture herself doing that. One of her early boyfriends had enjoyed watching her boobs jiggle, so that was nothing new. He was a boyfriend — this would be with strangers.

Lori jumped up and got one of the order books they used. "See here, at the top, these four little boxes. Just put an X through the block to indicate a 'cuddle' session. Check two if the guy wants two of them. We've never had to use more than the four." She laughed. "Just put more Xs across the top I guess, if you have to."

Erika was thinking ... and calculating. A hundred bucks for what, five minutes work, or however long the session lasted? Not exactly work but ... At Winegardner's, if there was even a job there, she'd be getting eighty dollars for eight hours work. Despite her reservations, this job was beginning to sound very enticing.

"Plus," Lori continued, "if you look them right in the eye the whole time you're doing some of that stuff, you know, make them the center of attention, you may get five or ten dollars more on the food and drinks tip, depending on the guy."

"That sounds like a lot of money, and I do need money to get me through till summer."

"We work year-round, just changing our costumes with the season," Lori assured her.

Erika was thinking about something that had been said earlier and was curious.

"You said something about eleven to one. What's different about that?"

Lori smiled at her. "First let me say, this is not a sex shop of any kind. No sexual activity takes place here. Zack is strict as hell about that. But, the eleven to one shift is where you can make some real money. Stand up a second and turn around."

Erika was puzzled but did as Lori requested.

"Quite a figure you have there. You'll do well from eleven to one."

Erika was having trouble breathing as she pondered all of what Lori had just said. She was picturing, at least trying to picture, some of the things Lori had described. It was all beyond anything she had imagined or could imagine, although she was working at that.

"Just be honest with the guy at the start. You tell them no, it's no. Zack will back it, too. They give you any trouble and they're out on their ass and they know that. These are doctors and lawyers and businessmen, guys with lots of money to spend, but they don't want any trouble. I've never had a problem."

Lori was watching Erika pondering the near overload she had received in the past five minutes. She let her think, smiling as she knew exactly the thoughts that were racing through her mind.

"Wow," Erika finally said. "Not exactly what I was picturing."

"The money isn't what you were picturing either, is it?"

"Not at all." She paused for a moment, obviously doing some calculating. "So, on a good night, a really good night, working from six to one, you can make ... a thousand dollars?" Erika's eyes were very wide as she said that number.

"Sure can." Lori shrugged. "Not as many people here from eleven to one so there's only three of us working that shift. We trade around so everyone gets a chance."

"And you're open seven days a week?" Erika questioned.

"No, just six days. No Sundays. But Monday is slow and Thursday too for some reason. So, on those days there are only four of us working. Still, you get at least four days a week and that's a lot of money."

Erika was still processing, and Lori watched.

"Ready to start tomorrow?" Lori finally said.

"Oh my gosh. It's hard to say no. That's for sure. But tomorrow?"

"Your first day, you'll just observe. Then you'll be ready to go. Let's go tell Zack that tomorrow is the day." She grabbed Erika's arms and directed her toward the office.

Erika wasn't resisting, so the decision was made. It was all happening so fast, but the decision needed to be made fast. Jiggling her boobs ... hand on her bare belly ... probably playing with her navel. It wasn't a sex thing. She kept telling herself that. Guh. She was going to do it and see what happened.

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Erika was at Winebrenner's at five-thirty on Saturday, ready to watch and learn. She'd filled out all the papers yesterday so she was committed, despite the reservations that still lingered. She tried to ignore them and was more successful doing that with each passing hour. The dollar amounts that Lori had mentioned were sweeping her doubts away as she was anticipating having no problems surviving the rest of the academic year.

Today, she wouldn't be wearing the uniform she had taken home yesterday and tried on. The material was a little stretchy and, given that, it fit her reasonably well, if a little tighter than she would have liked. She'd stood in front of her mirror and tried jiggling her boobs. Despite the tightness, the material was flimsy enough that she had plenty of "jiggle" going for her. Lots of stomach and belly visible too, which highlighted her cute innie navel. Plenty of legs showing below the bottom of the short pants.

Lori greeted her and briefed her on what would be happening. She found herself anxious to get started and see what would be happening. Saturday was the busiest night, she had learned, so there'd be plenty to see.

At six o'clock, Zack unlocked the front door and took his place behind the small podium where he'd be directing the guests to their respective tables. He smiled at Erika and gave her a thumbs up. She was tingling with anticipation.

Zack had told her to just roam around and watch what was happening and take some mental notes. He'd pressed her about college and how she was doing and she'd had to admit that she had gotten a B during her first semester of college, but all as since. That seemed to reassure him that she'd have no trouble remembering things.

She watched as the first customers came in, men with their wives, as Lori had said, with just a smattering of single males. She watched Lori and the others taking orders, noting that all but one had five tables. She had already gotten a couple of "can't wait for you to start" from the others. That would allow each to have the normal four tables.

She noticed the servers giving big smiles and often laughter, without overdoing it at all. They weren't doing anything that would be offensive to the women.

A lot more activity, none of it discouraging to Erika, and it was the mysterious eleven o'clock. Amidst her nervousness, she was anxious to see what happened here. Despite that anxiety, particularly as she observed several of the 'cuddle' sessions, she saw nothing she wasn't expecting, nothing that Lori hadn't told her, and certainly nothing that would cause her to change her decision. She was ready for Monday.

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There was no way to avoid lunch with Alison, and Erika was planning what to tell her about the new job. She had decided to leave out as many of the details as possible. Besides, she had never actually done any of those details. Rationalizing had become a common part of her life in the last couple of days.

"I'm dying to hear. You get the job?"

"I got it," Erika confirmed.

"So, you'll be sitting little kids on Santas lap?"

A very pregnant pause.

"Um, what's up with that?" Alison looked genuinely puzzled along with her grin.

"I misread the application, or at least the name on the application."

"I don't understand."

"It wasn't Winegardner's, it's Winebrenner's." She glanced at Alison who still looked puzzled.

"What's that?"

"It's a ... men's club."

Alison stared at her for long seconds. "What the fu ... hell is going on with that?"

"I'm a Santa Belle at a men's club." Erika shrugged. "Think Playboy Club, only not quite the same."

"Holy shit. Little bunny suit with your boobs hanging out?" Alison looked amazed.

"Kinda."

"So, that's all you're going to say?"

"Not much to say. You can picture it." Erika wasn't going to help improve Alison's picture unless she had to.

"Of course, the big question is, do you make good money doing that?" Alison was smiling, a very coy smile.

"Yeah, it's good." Erika shrugged again, not willing to let Alison in on how much she was making ... or rather, was going to make.

"I'll have to come and see you."

"Bring lots of money if you do. The food there is very expensive. Very expensive," she repeated, hoping to deflect Alison's interest.

"I don't need that. No extra money in my account either.

They spent another thirty minutes talking about school, then devoured their burgers, finally heading to their rooms, Alison to get ahead with her studies and Erika to wonder about Monday.

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Despite wanting to sleep in, Erika was awake at seven p.m. and ready, if not anxious, to start the day. She wasn't anxious to start so early, even while being anxious about what the day would be bringing. She fixed a light breakfast, two pop-tarts, and some coffee and tried to look at the first assignments for her January classes. Lori had told her she'd be getting a check for her Saturday work, seven hours at ten dollars an hour. After taxes, about sixty dollars she guessed. Adding that to the seventy she already had would provide her a nice cushion for the coming week until she'd be paid again — the next one considerably larger than sixty dollars she was sure.

If things went like she was anticipating, she'd have to figure a way to tell her mother what she was doing so she could provide her with a little extra money as well. She knew that would be an interesting challenge. She decided, since she had that little bit of extra money, she would wander the mall and see if there was a trinket or two she might like to have.

It was eleven o'clock when she got to the mall, wandering here and there, trying to calm her nerves with the light exercise of walking. She stopped at a cosmetics store, got a couple of things for her hair, some lipstick, and nail polish to match her outfit and, foolishly she thought, two very small sterling silver bracelets, one for her ankle and one for her wrist. She'd heard a couple of guys talking about how cute the ankle bracelets were and she'd decided to try it out.

Back at her room, she wiled away some time, leafing through a school book, not getting much studying done. Finally, she took a shower and carefully shaved her legs, realizing that was going to become a nearly daily regimen. She carefully did her fingernails, marveling at how the color exactly matched her outfit. Lori had suggested she get to the club at five so she could become somewhat familiar with the menu, which wasn't extensive but did change somewhat each night.

She had debated about ironing her outfit but quickly realized the material didn't wrinkle and, at least on the top, was thin enough that her body, i.e., her boobs, would easily smooth out any wrinkles that were there. Finally ready, she dressed, put her two bracelets on, packed the outfit and shoes in a small duffle bag she had, made sure she had her lipstick and headed for Winebrenner's.

She dressed quickly in the room set aside for the servers, deciding she looked pretty good with her bracelets and matching nail polish and lipstick. She went directly to the kitchen where she got a twenty-minute indoctrination on the menu, the food, and how it was prepared. She was usually very good at remembering things — it had gotten her through school thus far, and she would brush up on the details every chance she got.

Zack met her in the dining room, his eyes opening wide when he saw her.

"Um," he said, smiling broadly, "I think you'll do just fine. Quick question, how tall are you?"

"About five-ten," Erika answered, not sure whether to be self-conscious about her height. With the heels she had on, she knew she was over six feet.

"With the dark hair and eyes, and that height, you have an advantage on the others." He smiled again. "Good luck, tonight. But I don't think you'll need luck." He winked and headed toward the front door.

If he was trying to make her feel comfortable on her first night, he was succeeding, at least as much as that was possible.

She saw Lori headed for her at a quick walk.

"We've got a couple of minutes here. Let me show you how to fill out the order. If you have a super memory, you don't need to write anything down, just remember it. We had one server who did that and people were impressed."

Something to consider, Erika thought. She had a good memory and might experiment with it outside the club first. With just two people at a table, it would be easier.

Lori continued with the explanation—nothing too complicated. She took Erika to the computer entry console and showed her how to use that, also not overly complicated as long as you were careful with your entries.

They finished just In time as the door was open and Zack was directing people to their tables, one well-dressed pair to one of Erikas tables.

"Hello," she said, almost before they were completely seated, "and welcome to Winebrenner's."

"Well hello yourself," the man replied, returning Erika's smile. "And, unless I've missed something, you're new."

"I am," she replied. "I'm Erika," she ventured, not having been instructed on whether or not to give out her name.

"I'm Andy Watson and this is my wife, Sandra."

"Hello, Erika," Sandra said, also smiling, then shifting her glance to Andy.

Sensing what was happening, Erika asked, "May I start you out with something to drink?"

Both decided on wine and surprised her by telling her only that it should be red, her choice.

"Are you sure?" Erika asked, glancing from one to the other.

"We do that quite often", Andy assured her, "and we've never been disappointed."

Erika shook her head. "That's a lot of pressure to put on a newcomer," she teased.

"I'm not worried," Andy replied. "You look like you can handle it."

A quick glance at Sandra, who was watching Andy, appraising his gentle teasing of Erika, and then she headed for the bar and some advice as her knowledge of wine was nil.

She returned minutes later with two glasses of red wine.

Both Andy and Sandra took a sip of the wine.

"Ah, it's a zinfandel," Andy quickly remarked, "and a good one too." He looked up at Erika, obviously waiting for more information.

"Yes, it's, and let me see if I can say this correctly, Grgich Hills, 2013." She was proud that she'd remembered the name.

"Well done," Andy said, looking at Sandra.

"Was I being graded?" she asked, laughing.

"Absolutely," Sandra quickly replied. "And I think you passed with flying colors."

"Thank you," Erika smiled. as long as passing equated to tips, she was happy with that.

At about ten-fifteen, she watched a nicely dressed man approach her area and be seated by Zack, who looked at her, gestured to the man with a head nod, and winked. That made her wonder, but she moved quickly to the table.

"Hello," she said, "and welcome to Winebrenner's," her usual greeting.

He lifted his head from the menu to look at her, and a shiver ran up her spine, he was so handsome. Her smile was matched by his even broader smile. He just looked at her for long seconds, until she remembered why she was there.

"May I get you something to drink?" she asked, hoping her voice didn't waver too much.

"Please," he replied, still smiling. "Maybe a glass of chardonnay." He nodded, his eyes never leaving hers.

as she was at the bar getting the glass of wine, Lori sidled up beside her.

"Good luck with that one," she said. "Every one of us had hopes about him. He's so freaking good looking and tips well."

Erika served him the wine and, once again, his eyes never left hers. He asked her a few questions about the night's menu, probing quite a bit, she thought. Finally decided, he ordered. He asked for a refill of the wine a few minutes later and she took care of that. He had finished eating about ten forty-five and he gestured to her. She hurried to the table.

"I'd like to talk to you for a couple of minutes if that's all right."

"Sure, no problem," she said, giving her other tables a quick glance to ensure that everything was in order. This late, only one other of hers was occupied.

He looked up at her, a different look on his face this time. It nearly gave her goosebumps.

"Well, here goes," he began. "I'm just guessing here, but from listening to you talk I'd say you're a college student looking to make a few dollars over Christmas, or a graduate, doing the same thing. Am I way off base?"

"Exactly right on the first count," she said, their eyes meeting again, only much closer now as she had bent over to talk with him. She could smell his cologne, see so very clearly the clear blue of his eyes, the tiny stubble of his beard. She could even feel his breath against her as he spoke.

"I'll tell you that my name is Matt," he said, "on the condition that you tell me yours."

"Since you've already told me yours, you've left me no choice then?"

"True," he replied, chuckling. "I planned that."

"I'm Erika, a college sophomore, trying to get enough money to survive the rest of the school year.

"And what is a sophomore like yourself looking forward to becoming?"

She could hardly keep herself from saying that she was looking forward to becoming a wife to someone like him. This job was bringing out an entirely different side of her.

Instead, she answered, "A nurse. I've wanted to do that for years."

"When you graduate, let me know. I'll hire you."

"What?" she gasped.

"I'm an orthopedic surgeon, and I hire nurses all the time."

"Wow," she exclaimed, a little louder than she'd wanted. "Oops, sorry", she said, shushing herself. "I may hold you to that," she said, a playful grin on her face.

"You won't have to. I'll remember you," he assured her, the look on his face much more serious.

They looked at each other from six inches apart until, once again, that huge smile appeared on Matt's face.

"Put one hundred dollars in your little book or whatever for our conversation here," he said, swallowing her with his smile one more time.

"No, that's too much," she said quickly, and I don't have a book ... plus that should be for after eleven o'clock." She was a little flustered.

"I sort of offered you a choice before, when I asked if we could talk. This time, I'm not offering you a choice."

"You sure?" One-hundred dollars was a lot of money, at least to her it was.

"Yep."

"Thank you," was all she could muster.

"No problem. And, like it or not, you'll be seeing more of me." It was a matter-of-fact statement.

"Not a problem for me," she replied. Not a problem at all she thought. She could get used to a guy like Dr. Matt.

She retrieved his check, he handed her the credit card and she went to Zack to have it taken care of.

"He asked me to talk with him and said he was giving me one hundred dollars for doing that. How do I handle that?" she asked Zack.

"Oh my gosh," was his reply. "I'll take care of it." He smiled at her. "I kind of figured," he added.

She wondered what he'd figured.

Back at his table, she saw Matt adding a tip and his signature. He handed it to her. She was tempted but refused to look at it.

"Have a good rest of your evening," she said, looking at him eye to eye when he stood up.

He glanced at his watch. "Sleep well," he tossed back at her.

A wave of his hand and the good doctor was headed to the front door and out into the cold night. Erika took the completed check and handed it to Zack. He glanced at it and then at Erika, a questioning look on his face.

"Did you look?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head.

"The doctor is a good tipper, but I've never seen him tip quite like this." Erika was now curious. "Fifty bucks, on top of the hundred. You must have treated him well."

She took a deep breath. "He's, well, very easy to treat well."

Zack laughed and nodded at her remark. "On a quiet night, with not too much happening, not unusual for Monday, you made the regular fifty collars in salary, a hundred extra from the doctor, and about three hundred in regular tips. So, four-hundred and fifty dollars

"Unbelievable," was all she could say. "And thank you so much, for the job."

"Hey, no problem." He paused, just looking at her. "You have to realize you're a beautiful woman. When you're here, and men are debating about where to eat, they're going to remember you and choose Winebrenner's."

"You give me too much credit," she said, lowering her head.

Zack smiled. "Get changed and have a great night," he said, turning to greet a pair of men, arriving for the eleven o'clock segment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tuesday night went much as Monday had, with several very pleasant conversations with customers and earning about the same as Monday's, even without the doctor's one hundred dollars.

On Wednesday, she had a familiar customer as Dr. Matt appeared once more, brandishing that intoxicating smile he'd sent Erika's way on Monday. She brought him his wine, then dinner. After dinner, and over another glass of wine, he spoke to her with a gentler tone to his voice.

"I'm offering you your choice again," he began.

She shook her head, unable to surprise a smile.

"I want to talk with you a little more, your chance to say yes or no."

Now she was thinking "working at Winebrenner's" thoughts. If it were after eleven she could have a 'cuddle' session with this wonderfully handsome man. But it wasn't, so she'd have to remain standing. Even doing that she could display a good bit of cleavage and, she was sure, a pleasant swaying of her breasts as well. She knew that if he was a normal male he'd like that.

Matt was waiting, his eyes never leaving hers. It was an almost hypnotic spell he cast when he did that.

"Sure," she answered, eager to talk more with Dr. Matt.

"How are the studies going," he asked.

"Good," she answered.

"That's it?" he teased. "My older sister has a nine-year-old who always says 'fine.'"

"They really are, well, good," she repeated.

"All A's?" he questioned.

A hesitation. "Yes," she said demurely.

"I should have guessed," he said quickly. "Now I know I'm going to hire you. You ever think of being a doctor?"

Too much too fast. From talking with a doctor to becoming one. Matt didn't waste time.

"Oh my gosh, no. I'm lucky to be in school, let alone thinking about becoming a doctor."

"If you're getting all A's, that's not luck. I think there are some brains hiding behind that pretty face." He was eying her from just inches away and, as she had anticipated, she could feel his breath on her cheek when he spoke. And she did enjoy the compliment, coming from him. She twitched just a tiny bit and looked around the room.

"Okay, okay," he said, laughing. "I know I can't keep you here all evening. But I do hate to share you."

Was he sending her signals? Share her? She wanted to think that he was but wasn't about to be that bold. She knew she was pretty and men would enjoy talking with her or 'cuddling' with her. A handsome guy like the doctor could have lots of girls 'cuddle' ... without having to tip them either. If he was going to give her that extra tip again tonight, the money would be helpful, and she needed to leave it at that.

She brought him another glass of chardonnay, then his check which he completed and signed. Erika didn't look at it this time either, difficult as that was. She took care of the remainder of her tables, getting a smile and nod from Matt as he left.

Thursday was her day off so she went to the mall again. She had the money from her one-day paycheck and needed a few things, mostly underthings but she always hated to spend her money on something no one saw. She found herself looking at frilly and lacy things though, afraid to admit where that inclination had originated. But she was very pleased with what she had chosen.

She woke up Friday morning, nervous before she climbed out of bed. Tonight would be her first eleven to one shift. She took a long walk in the morning, her mind drawn to what Lori had told her, and what she had seen on her training night. She tried to put herself into the pictures her mind was generating without much success.

When afternoon came she followed her usual routine, taking a shower, carefully shaving her legs from top to bottom, doing her hair, and double-checking her manicure ... and her pedicure. Lori had told her about one guy who paid extra if she would remove her shoes while she sat on his lap. Erika thought she'd have no trouble doing that.

Then there was the topless part. She'd had the two boyfriends her senior year of high school who had, well, seen her topless a few times and prepared her for the "squeezes" that would be a possibility tonight. There had been the two or three episodes of alcohol-enhanced skinny dipping last year that prepared her for having strangers see her bare breasts. Prepared or not, she wasn't sure she was ready. She told herself she wasn't that special and would just do it ... and smile the whole time.

Her regular shift went much as the first three had gone with nothing out of the ordinary. Her tables were full almost the whole time so she knew she'd do well on regular tips. Just before ten Zack seated an older couple in her area with a whispered warning that the gentleman could be a little cantankerous at times. Sure enough, he complained that there were spots on the silverware, his wine wasn't the proper temperature, that Erika was too tall and it hurt his neck to look up at her. When she bent to talk with him she was tsk-tsked by his wife who was shaking her head, looking at Erika's cleavage. She smiled inwardly, knowing there was no way to win with these two.

The grumpy pair were gone when eleven o'clock arrived and Erika slipped off to the servers dressing room, along with two others, to shed her top. A deep breath and she was back in her area. She got a thumbs-up from one of the leftover customers which brought an embarrassed grin from her. By eleven-thirty, she had done two "cuddles", stopped a leg-rubber was being a little too enthusiastic and thanked a very inebriated older guy for telling her she was the prettiest server he'd ever had.

At eleven forty-five, she gasped as she saw Zack seating Dr. Matt in her area. Her instinct was to hold her arms in front of her breasts, but she couldn't do that, despite the desire that was puzzling her. He caught her eye and smiled.

She moved to his table. "The usual chardonnay?" she asked, knowing her cheeks were very pink, angry at herself that it was happening.

"That's perfect," he replied, looking at her with a very soft and gentle smile, one she hadn't seen before. "And so I'm not hiding anything, I checked with Zack to learn when you were working this shift. Never been to one of these before." She thought his cheeks might have the tiniest pink hue to them when he said that.

Her breath caught in her throat. No way to respond to what he'd said so she left to get his wine. When she returned she bent to sit it in front of him, her breasts swinging teasingly right in front of his face. A part of her wanted to tape those things down, but another part wanted them to torment him even more and to do it more often. She was getting to be a mess when Matt was around.

He ordered, doing a pretty good job of looking her in the eye. A few times his gaze drifted a little south of her face. Embarrassingly, she felt her nipples begin to harden when he did look at her breasts and she was sure he couldn't fail to notice that. What could he be thinking?

He ate, she kept checking to see if he needed anything else, probably more often than she would have normally done with another customer. It was obvious that the part of her that wanted to torment him more often was winning the battle. Her brain kept reminding her that he was a sophisticated surgeon and possibly untormentable. He ordered another glass of wine and when she brought it, he patted his lap.

"Cuddle time," he said.

She took a deep breath, smiled, and swung her leg over, and sat down, her boobs bouncing as she did. He made no bones about looking at them from as close as he was. As her arm went around his shoulders, she felt his arm go around her waist, his hand holding her firmly. He was paying for a "cuddle" and she was willing to cuddle with him. Her other arm lay across her legs. Rather than putting his hand on her leg as she expected him to do, he began playing with the tiny bracelet on her wrist, softly rubbing his finger from one side to the other and then back.

She studied his face as he played, wondering at the sights those blue eyes had seen in the operating room. She was sure that the hand that was playing with her bracelet had worked medical miracles regularly.

"You said you were an orthopedic surgeon, right?" she finally asked, not wanting to interrupt his leisurely touching her bracelet ... and her arm.

"That's right," he replied, not looking away from her arm.

"So, you do replacements and things like that?"

"That, and I'm on emergency call for accidents, falls, things like that too."

"That has to be hard," she said, crinkling her face at the thought of what accidents could do to a human body.

"You'll find out when you're my nurse," he answered, still looking at her arm and his finger tracing the bracelet from side to side.

She was sure she could feel her breathing changing. Just the touch of his finger was entrancing. She never imagined that something so simple could be so intense.

"Long hours?"

"Sometimes, yeah. Not always though."

She could feel his hand tightening slightly on her waist. She involuntarily shifted her arm that was around his shoulders. Her hand was resting on his shoulder, and it wanted to give that shoulder a little squeeze. She let it. His finger stopped tracing its path.

"Is this new?" he asked, sliding his finger under the tiny chain.

"I've had it since I started here."

"I've noticed the one on your ankle. Those things are fascinating, particularly on long legs like yours." He slid his hand under her hand. "You have beautiful hands, you know. It's a surgeon thing I think. We notice hands."

His hand was moving back and forth under hers. His head turned toward her and they locked eyes for a few seconds. Then he was back, looking at her arm and stroking the bracelet

"You finished at one?" he asked.

Her breath caught again. "Yes."

"For a thousand dollars, would you go home with me when you're through?"

Her eyes widened and she stiffened. Was he serious?

"Fifteen hundred?"

What the hell?

"Two thousand?" Still stroking the bracelet. He looked at her again, at the shocked and surprised expression on her face. "Seriously though," he continued almost immediately, laughing. "Instead of that, how about meeting me at Scramblers for breakfast in the morning?"

Those blue eyes, that inviting smile, the hand holding onto the bare skin at her waist, that single finger, stroking her bracelet and her arm. She could feel her nipples hardening even more, a very natural reaction to the way she was feeling and what he was saying.

"Matt, are you serious?" she asked, almost directly into his ear.

"The Scramblers part is very serious. The others were just me being an asshole."

She glanced around quickly. None of her other tables needed service. She was free to sit here for a while longer.

"Since you said that, the cuddling is free tonight." She let her hand squeeze his shoulder again.

"It's complicated," he said, puzzling her once more. "And I hope I can say this right." A little squeeze to her waist. "The tips are ... well, for you but just as much for your schooling, so I'll have a well-trained nurse when I hire you. And some spending money while you're there. I leave you good tips because I want to help. And, you may think I'm kidding about hiring you, but I'm not. I'd hire you today if you had your degree. Of course, I couldn't afford what I'm sure you're making here." That brought a laugh from both of them. "So," he continued, "I told you I was serious about Scramblers, but you didn't say yes or no."

"as long as it's not too early, yes."

"I have rounds. How about ten o'clock?"

"I'll do my best," she laughed.

He took hold of her hand and helped her stand.

"Another glass of wine?" she asked, finding herself unwilling to leave Matt's table.

He laughed. "Haven't finished this one yet," he said, lifting his glass. "But rounds start early in the morning so I better get some sleep." He finished the wine and smiled at her. "Check please," he added with a laugh. She went to the printer, processed the check, and returned to Matt's table. He filled in some numbers, signed it, and returned it to Erika.

"Thank you. Sleep well." A final smile and Dr. Matt was on his way.

The rest of her shift went smoothly with three more "cuddles" and nothing more than that. Until about twelve-fifty, that is, when a regular at the eleven to one shift had far more alcohol than he should have. On his third inadvertent touching of her breasts, she was thinking of calling Zack when he appeared at the table.

"How's your evening going, George?"

A slurred, "Good."

Zack held out his hand and helped her stand. He turned to George.

"Good night, George. We'll call an Uber to get you home." He turned to Erika. "Let me have his check." He winked. "George tips well." Zack and George stumbled toward the front of Winebrenner's

It was one o'clock and she went to the dressing room with the others. As she was dressing, Lori stopped by her locker.

"See you had a pair of them tonight."

"More than a pair."

"I mean harmless George and the doctor."

"George's hands wandered a little."

"We've all been through that." Lori lowered her voice. "You sat on the doc's lap for a freaking hour."

Erika felt her cheeks reddening. "He's paying so ..." She wasn't about to tell Lori about tomorrow morning. She finished dressing and headed for her room, anxious to imagine and then sleep.

Erika had set her alarm for eight-thirty just in case. Just in case happened as the alarm awakened her from a dreamless sleep. A big yawn and she jumped out of bed, anxious for her ten o'clock breakfast. She exercised as she did almost every morning, then took a warm and relaxing shower.

She debated about what to wear, finally deciding on a pair of black workout pants that stopped a few inches above her ankles — she wanted the little ankle bracelet that Matt seemed to like to be visible. The same reasoning for the pullover sweater with three-quarter length sleeves. Ironically, all her underthings were dirty except for the new lacy ones she had just purchased. She put on her Nikes and was ready.

Her timing was good as she arrived at Scramblers just five minutes before ten. She didn't see Matt but went ahead and was seated, ordering a black coffee to occupy herself while she waited. Five past ten slipped by and then ten past. The first twinges of nervousness had just begun when, through one of the big front windows, she saw him jogging across the parking lot toward the door. Relieved, she watched him spot her, smile, and head for her table.

"Sorry," he said, tossing his coat on a chair. "There was an accident and, well, I was right there and helped out on some surgery." He was still in his green scrubs, a Dr. Matthew Kinghorn name tag pinned to his chest. He sat down.

"My gosh," Erika said, "that's way more important than breakfast with me." She watched his smile broaden.

"Both are important," he finally said.

"It's interesting to see you like this, more like Dr. Matt."

"Same with you," he added, "after the special treat last night."

"Oh god," she gasped, looking away.

"Oh shit," he said, immediately taking hold of her chin, pulling her face around to look at him.

She slowly raised her eyes to his, her face very red.

He took a very nervous deep breath. "I ... am ... so ... sorry. That was gross, unkind, and insulting. I ask you to forgive me, but would not blame you if you didn't."

The look on his face was not like any she had seen before. Her heart was pounding and she could still feel the heat in her cheeks.

"That shocked me," she said, "and hurt a little."

She watched his eyes close. Slowly she reached up and moved his hand from her chin, holding onto it.

"Forgiven," she said, laying his hand on the table, the mood broken by the server stopping by to take their order.

They both ordered, and Erika sipped her coffee.

"Thanks," Matt said softly.

"I don't believe you could be nasty," she said.

"Just thoughtless and crude," he added, a dejected look on his face.

Erika had things she could say but hesitated, anxious to see what Matt would do. She did have one thing she was wondering about.

"This is a little awkward but I'm curious —"

Matt interrupted, "About why I talked the stupid thousand dollar stuff and then asked you to meet me for breakfast?"

"Just the breakfast invite but, yeah."

He shook his head. "A little too much wine, an inflated opinion of how clever I was and, finally, a hint of sincerity." He met her eyes.

"I wondered for a few seconds but your face gave you away."

"Thank god for a readable face."

"And here we are," she said.

Breakfast came and they ate. A few comments while they ate but both were hungry and the food tasted good, particularly for Matt who had been up since five-thirty.

When they had finished, Matt wiped his mouth and said very tentatively, "So, is this our first date?"

Erika looked at him, a wry smile forming. "No," she said. "We just met for breakfast."

"Okay, fair enough. Then, I'm asking you for a date — and if I need to I'm willing to beg — to be arranged when we review our busy schedules. But the sooner the better."

She reveled in the very anxious look on his face and smiled.

"Since I forgave you I guess I can't refuse, but I'd be interested in having you beg. Never had that before."

He looked around quickly, stood up, and started to get down on one knee.

"No, no, no," she said, nearly horrified as people were turning to look.

Laughing, he was quickly back in his chair. "Your face is really red now," he said.

"That was horrible," she said through her laughter. But the picture of Matt, kneeling in front of her to beg for anything was making her whole body tingle.

"You said you were interested in having me beg. Just trying to accommodate you."

The smug grin she was getting told her more about what he was thinking than his words could.

"You're terrible," she giggled.

"Since you accepted the date request and we're both adults, give me one of those beautiful hands to hold while we sit here and talk."

"Adults?" she questioned, as she extended her left hand toward him.

"Sometimes I try to think on my feet ... and don't do a very good job of it. If I wanted to see you blush again, I'd just say that you're so beautiful, it sends my brain spinning and I can't think."

She closed her eyes, feeling the crimson returning to her face.

"I'm sure people wonder what's going on here, with my face blinking on and off like a neon sign."

He squeezed her hand. "I'd just explain to them that it's me, trying to sweep you off your feet with my stumbling banter."

"Matt, you barely know me." As she said that, the irony of that statement, compared with the picture of her sitting on his lap, her bare breasts inches from his face struck her. She quickly dismissed it, afraid of where it might lead her.

"I probably know more than you think. Just from the talking we've done and the things you've told me about yourself. But," he said, holding up his hand to silence whatever she was going to say, "learning more will be fascinating."

She couldn't agree with him more about that, and vice-versa too.

"You're about twenty-one I'd guess."

Why did he have to bring that up? Things were going so well. She had no idea how old he was and was almost afraid to find out. You didn't become a capable surgeon at twenty-one.

"No, I'm twenty," she answered hesitantly.

"You could easily pass for twenty-five or older," he assured her.

He was holding her left hand with his left hand and one finger of his right was caressing the thin bracelet, just as he'd been doing last night. She was watching, nearly hypnotized by the gentle back and forth movement of his finger on her wrist, the simple touch of his finger warming her heart beyond reason. She thought that if he leaned forward to kiss her, she'd meet him halfway.

He raised his eyes to hers and she could see them gazing at first one of her eyes and then the other. He was going to say something; she could read that in the way he was looking and thinking.

"I was engaged once," he said quietly, still holding her eyes. "Wow, six years ago now." His expression didn't change. "Bad choice — the engagement, not the breaking up. Really screwed things up. Been doctoring ever since, just doctoring. Until now, until Monday, until last night, until today." He was squeezing her hand with each of the "untils." "Do you know what I'm saying, without me saying it?"

"I think so," she said, searching his eyes for confirmation.

"Think so?" he questioned, twisting his head and giving her an inquisitive look.

"I know what you're saying," she confirmed. "And I'm here. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"You bet." Another squeeze.

"One condition though," she cautioned.

"Oh shit. What do I have to do now?"

"It's what you have to STOP doing."

"You mean being a jerk and stuff like that?"

"Well, yes, of course. But if you keep coming to the club, you have to stop the extra tipping. You can tip for the dinner service, reasonably, but not the other things, which will be my way of tipping you."

"Erika, that isn't right. It's like your education fund."

"No, if we're dating, and you just asked me for a date so we are, then tipping for those things just wouldn't feel right."

"Ugh, I guess I see where you're coming from. I agree, on one condition."

"This is turning into a negotiation session."

"That's how we start I guess, getting everything in place right from the beginning."

"What's your condition?" She tried to look disgusted but wasn't very successful.

"I love this little bracelet. It just fascinates me, partly because your wrist is underneath it. But it's so fine and delicate that it will eventually break and you'll lose it. So, you take it and put it in a little box and stash it away where it won't get lost. I will get you a first-date present, a new bracelet with the letter "E" attached."

"Matt, come on. You don't have to do that."

"Did I have to ask you for a date?"

A hesitation. "No, of course not."

"Then why did I do it."

"Hell if I know," she teased. "Sorry. Because you wanted to and I get what you're saying."

"Good. I still have an hour and you don't work till evening. East Morrow Mall?"

"There's no sense disagreeing is there?"

"Nope."

Coats on, they headed for the parking lot.

"I'll drive if that's okay," he said.

"Fine. My car's a little tentative sometimes."

"I'm right over here," he said, gesturing to a sleek and low silver car.

"What's that?" she asked, eyes wide.

"It's a Porsche 911 Targa, but 911 Targa may not mean anything to you. Does it?" he laughed.

"It will a little later when I look it up on the internet. What year?"

"Smartypants, huh. It's a 2017."

"How fast does it go?"

"Depends on how fast I want to go and who's with me."

"If I'm with you, how fast?"

"We'll soon find out I guess." He noticed that Erika looked a little hesitant "I'm taking good care of you, so not very fast. I want to be sure you last to our first date, whenever that is. But, it can clip off one seventy-five on the right road."

Matt opened the door and helped a rather long Erika wind herself into the low passenger seat of the Porsche. Matt went around the car and slid down into his seat.

"Before we do anything more, let's trade cell numbers," Matt said, pulling his phone from his back pocket. Erika got hers out as well. They each recited their numbers, tapping the other's into their phone.

They drove to the mall, and only one time did Matt hit the accelerator, pinning Erika against the seat. At eighty he let off and the rest of the trip was uneventful, Erika noticing that they got lots of looks from cars they passed, and that passed them.

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"Pick one," he said. "And pick the one you like the very best with no thought to anything else. Remember, you put a condition on getting this bracelet ... the no extra tip thing." She feigned a glare at him, but sighed and began looking at the bracelets. She quickly saw the one she wanted and cringed when she saw the price.

"Hi there, may I help you two?" the man in the suit said. "I'm Barry Doyle," he squinted at Matt, "Dr. Kinghorn."

"You been here long?" Matt asked, looking around.

"About two weeks now."

"I see you have security too." Matt nodded toward the back of the store.

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The laugh Barry got from Officer Timson told Erika and Matt that there was more to that story than they had just heard.

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"Beautiful," he said. "Eileen, look at this."

Matt nudged Erika who had picked up on what had been said.

"Very pretty," Officer Timson ... Eileen ... said.

Matt and Barry moved to the other side of the counter to complete everything.

"A very handsome doctor, isn't he?" Eileen said.

"Barry seems very nice too," Erika countered, watching Eileen's face.

Eileen looked at her and smiled. "More than very nice," she said quietly.

"So is Matt," Erika added.

Eileen smiled and moved around the counter as Matt was headed back to Erika.

"Thank you," Erika said. Before she realized he was moving he had kissed her.

"You're very welcome," he said, taking her hand and leading her out of the store.

\* \* \* \* \*

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"So, your first regular paycheck. How was the week?"

"I could never have imagined," she said, amazement filling her face.

"Here's your check," he said, holding it toward her. "You want to guess?"

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He laughed. "How does two thousand two-hundred-twenty-five dollars sound?"

"Oh my gosh." She was staring at Zack, eyes wide. She couldn't keep from calculating in her mind what she might have made at Winegardner's had she worked there. Her shift would probably have been six hours rather than eight, so sixty dollars a day and three hundred dollars a week. For the five weeks, fifteen hundred dollars. She had made way more than that in her first week at Winebrenner's.

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"You looked at the weather forecast?" Zack asked.

"No, but it looks nasty outside."

"They're predicting a blizzard for this evening." He was looking at her.

She was a little alarmed at what Zack had said. "So, you're thinking it might be a slow night?"

"Yeah, for sure. Already had several cancellations. If you want to play it safe and bug out for tonight, that's fine with me."

She looked at Zack and then out the door. It was already dark outside and she could hear the sound of the wind, already beginning a gentle howl.

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"See ya," Zack said. I'll call you if things are still bad by Monday."

"Thanks." Erika was quickly out the door and to the parking lot, the wind tearing at her coat. She was glad she wasn't dressed in her Santa Belle outfit. She sat in the car debating, then pulled out her phone. A couple of punches and she was sending a text, smiling to herself that she was doing it.

Not working tonight due to blizzard. What are you up to?

In seconds her phone rang.

"No kidding," Matt said, sounding very pleased.

"No kidding. I'm sitting here in the parking lot, trying to decide what to do."

There were a few seconds of silence. "You like pizza?"

"Who doesn't?"

"I'm through and ready to head home. One surgery was canceled — weather you know." He laughed. "Do you know where Weatherly Road is?"

"Yeah, about."

"I live at 1267, just east of Broad. What kind of pizza?"

"Pepperoni and sausage are fine. So wait, are you asking me to meet you at your house?"

"Erika, you're so proper, I love it. Yes, I am asking that, and pray you'll consent to my request."

She couldn't let him get by with that without responding. "Yes, I'm consenting, Dr. Jerk." She held her breath, waiting for his reply.

A howl of laughter from the phone. "I'll get the pizza and have everything ready when you get there. Dr. Jerk. I'm getting a new name tag made." More laughter. "And when you're outside, call or text. I'll put the garage door up and you can park inside."

"Okay."

Park inside ... for how long? A couple of deep breaths.

"Starting to snow. And pretty hard," she said.

"Better hurry then. See you in a few."

"On the way," she replied, laying the phone down and starting the car.

By the time she found Matt's house, it was getting very difficult to see; the headlights just reflecting off the heavy snowfall and blotting out the road. She was fortunate that she knew exactly where Weatherly Road was and she spotted the house, the number barely visible on the curbside mailbox. The porch light was on and the garage door open. She carefully pulled inside and the door came down. All sorts of hidden significance in that but she wasn't quite ready to go there.

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But the smell of hot pizza was drawing her and, as she headed for the couch, his arms were suddenly around her, giving her a very welcoming hug.

"Glad you made it safely. I worried about you." He released her. "Pizza is over by the couch. What do you drink?"

"Diet anything," she replied, digging into her first piece of pizza. "And I know. Why drink diet when you're gorging yourself on pizza?"

"I didn't say a thing. Whatever you do, you do it well because you are gorgeous."

She decided that Matt wasn't wasting any time with preliminaries, which made her a little nervous since she still didn't know what her reactions might be.

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"Better have at least two days' supply of food on hand," the weatherman said. "Looks like we should be getting at least eighteen to twenty-four inches, possibly more, tonight. Plus, with the thirty-mile-per-hour winds, there's going to be a lot of drifting as well. The temperature will be dropping a little below twenty, so not a good night to be outside."

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"Matt, we haven't even had our first date yet."

"Yes, we have. Or yes, we are. I invited you here for pizza and that counts."

"No it doesn't," she said smugly. "We've got to go out somewhere for it to count."

"Let's go then. Snow's not too deep yet. We can find someplace open." He'd decided if she could torment him, he'd work a little on her as well.

"Sit down," she said, sounding disgusted but unable to keep from grinning. "I guess this can count."

"Good," he said. "So what do you allow on first dates." His turn to grin at her.

"What?"

"Just checking. Most girls have stuff they'll do on the first date, then the second, the third. You know. You probably do too."

He was giggling as her cheeks were obviously reddening.

"I guess you'll just have to wait and find out," she said, taking another bite of pizza, wondering just what she would do on a first date with Dr. Matthew Kinghorn. She was afraid she knew but blocked those thoughts from her mind.

"Lord I love it when you blush," he said, getting up and heading to the big front window, Erika right behind.

"Can't even see the street," he said, shielding his eyes against the bright light in the living room.

Erika was beside him, straining to see outside when she felt Matt's kiss on her cheek. She turned toward him, their faces inches apart.

"Is that allowed on the first date?" he asked softly, his blue eyes sparkling in the light reflected off the window.

"I think so," she said, smiling. "So's this," she added, leaning forward and planting a light kiss on his lips. "Listen," she added, her ear toward the window.

The wind was howling, the snow making clicking sounds against the glass.

"Yeah, and you heard the weatherman talk about drifting. If we have two feet of snow, there will be a four-foot deep drift in front of the garage door."

"You trying to convince me I'm stuck here with you for the night."

"It's the snow that should be convincing you."

"I think I could still make it home. Not that deep yet," she teased, not willing to admit, even to herself, that spending the night with Matt was beyond what she could have imagined even earlier today.

Matt just stared at her before he started laughing. "Come on. I bet you'd like a Hallmark movie."

"Oh, Lord. They're so corny, and the acting isn't the best. Having said that, let me mention that I watch them every chance I get ... and cry for the last two minutes. Mother says I inherited that from my dad."

"So, your dad's an emotional guy then?"

Erika looked away, out the window. She was silent for long seconds that seemed to hang in the air between them.

"He was," she said very softly. "At least that's what Mom told me. I never knew him; he was gone before I was three." She felt Matt's arms wrap around her, his head against her hair. It was somehow very soothing.

"Sorry," he said simply, his holding onto her much more precious than anything he could say.

"Let's watch that movie," she said, taking hold of his hand.

Matt searched the menu on the screen, found the Hallmark channel, and switched.

"Obviously not used to watching Hallmark," she giggled.

"Don't watch much of anything."

"How many hours a week do you work?"

"Varies. Usually sixty-five or seventy."

She looked puzzled.

"Go on," he encouraged, seeing her expression.

"You come to the club ..."

"I'm a little flexible with my hours. The three a.m. shift at the hospital knows me." He smiled at her. "Plus, the food's so good I hate to miss it."

She was thinking and calculating, but it didn't make sense. She eyed him curiously.

"So, did you ...?

"I made time," he said, knowing where she was headed, "after that first night I saw you." He shrugged.

"Why me?" she asked, knowing it sounded silly, but also knowing how much the other girls wanted Dr. Matt and how they chased him — and had chased him for several years.

"I've never been to the club three times in one week before." His eyes bored into hers, sending a message she couldn't misunderstand.

She could feel her skin heating, tingling, her nipples hardening, that very unfamiliar feeling between her legs. She didn't know what would happen next but she was ready for it, whatever it was. She bit her lower lip and was sure her nose was flaring with her breathing. She wanted to be grabbed, held ... and whatever happened after that. She'd done some of that before, but she'd never felt like this.

"Would you like some wine?" he asked, a total change of expression on his face.

She was ready for anything ... but that. What the hell?

"Okay," she said huskily, her voice still where the rest of her had been seconds ago.

"Chardonnay, of course," he said, moving past her and toward what had to be the kitchen. She heard a refrigerator door open and close, a cabinet door bang, the tinkle of glassware bumping together. He was back, handing her a glass of the light amber liquid.

She took a sip, thinking of what he had said and what he had done ... or rather hadn't done. She was ready. She wanted him. The look he'd given her said he wanted her. Another sip of wine, questions whirring through her brain. What had happened? What had changed? Was it her? She drained her glass to his surprised look and held it out for more.

"Um," he said softly. "That was a surprise. You want some more?"

"Hell yes," she answered, sure the look on her face wasn't too inviting.

"What's wrong?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong, did I?" She looked away, out the window at the blowing snow ... and the cold air swirling there.

He stepped closer. "You didn't have to."

She was thinking. "What time is it?"

Matt glanced at his watch. "Five after eleven."

"Perfect," she snapped. "Bring me that glass of wine and I'll have a surprise for you." If Matt was backing away for whatever reason, maybe she had something that might encourage him.

He was quickly back, handed her the glass of wine, looking at her with a very puzzled countenance.

She closed her eyes, feeling the crimson returning to her face.

"I'm sure people wonder what's going on here, with my face blinking on and off like a neon sign."

He squeezed her hand. "I'd just explain to them that it's me, trying to sweep you off your feet with my stumbling banter."

"Matt, you barely know me." As she said that, the irony of that statement, compared with the picture of her sitting on his lap, her bare breasts inches from his face struck her. She quickly dismissed it, afraid of where it might lead her.

"I probably know more than you think. Just from the talking we've done and the things you've told me about yourself. But," he said, holding up his hand to silence whatever she was going to say, "learning more will be fascinating."

She couldn't agree with him more about that, and vice-versa too.

"You're about twenty-one I'd guess."

Why did he have to bring that up? Things were going so well. She had no idea how old he was and was almost afraid to find out. You didn't become a capable surgeon at twenty-one.

"No, I'm twenty," she answered hesitantly.

"You could easily pass for twenty-five or older," he assured her.

He was holding her left hand with his left hand and one finger of his right was caressing the thin bracelet, just as he'd been doing last night. She was watching, nearly hypnotized by the gentle back and forth movement of his finger on her wrist, the simple touch of his finger warming her heart beyond reason. She thought that if he leaned forward to kiss her, she'd meet him halfway.

He raised his eyes to hers and she could see them gazing at first one of her eyes and then the other. He was going to say something; she could read that in the way he was looking and thinking.

"I was engaged once," he said quietly, still holding her eyes. "Wow, six years ago now." His expression didn't change. "Bad choice — the engagement, not the breaking up. Really screwed things up. Been doctoring ever since, just doctoring. Until now, until Monday, until last night, until today." He was squeezing her hand with each of the "untils." "Do you know what I'm saying, without me saying it?"

"I think so," she said, searching his eyes for confirmation.

"Think so?" he questioned, twisting his head and giving her an inquisitive look.

"I know what you're saying," she confirmed. "And I'm here. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"You bet." Another squeeze.

"One condition though," she cautioned.

"Oh shit. What do I have to do now?"

"It's what you have to STOP doing."

"You mean being a jerk and stuff like that?"

"Well, yes, of course. But if you keep coming to the club, you have to stop the extra tipping. You can tip for the dinner service, reasonably, but not the other things, which will be my way of tipping you."

"Erika, that isn't right. It's like your education fund."

"No, if we're dating, and you just asked me for a date so we are, then tipping for those things just wouldn't feel right."

"Ugh, I guess I see where you're coming from. I agree, on one condition."

"This is turning into a negotiation session."

"That's how we start I guess, getting everything in place right from the beginning."

"What's your condition?" She tried to look disgusted but wasn't very successful.

"I love this little bracelet. It just fascinates me, partly because your wrist is underneath it. But it's so fine and delicate that it will eventually break and you'll lose it. So, you take it and put it in a little box and stash it away where it won't get lost. I will get you a first-date present, a new bracelet with the letter "E" attached."

"Matt, come on. You don't have to do that."

"Did I have to ask you for a date?"

A hesitation. "No, of course not."

"Then why did I do it."

"Hell if I know," she teased. "Sorry. Because you wanted to and I get what you're saying."

"Good. I still have an hour and you don't work till evening. East Morrow Mall?"

"There's no sense disagreeing is there?"

"Nope."

Coats on, they headed for the parking lot.

"I'll drive if that's okay," he said.

"Fine. My car's a little tentative sometimes."

"I'm right over here," he said, gesturing to a sleek and low silver car.

"What's that?" she asked, eyes wide.

"It's a Porsche 911 Targa, but 911 Targa may not mean anything to you. Does it?" he laughed.

"It will a little later when I look it up on the internet. What year?"

"Smartypants, huh. It's a 2017."

"How fast does it go?"

"Depends on how fast I want to go and who's with me."

"If I'm with you, how fast?"

"We'll soon find out I guess." He noticed that Erika looked a little hesitant "I'm taking good care of you, so not very fast. I want to be sure you last to our first date, whenever that is. But, it can clip off one seventy-five on the right road."

Matt opened the door and helped a rather long Erika wind herself into the low passenger seat of the Porsche. Matt went around the car and slid down into his seat.

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"Go on," he encouraged, seeing her expression.

"You come to the club ..."

"I'm a little flexible with my hours. The three a.m. shift at the hospital knows me." He smiled at her. "Plus, the food's so good I hate to miss it."

She was thinking and calculating, but it didn't make sense. She eyed him curiously.

"So, did you ...?

"I made time," he said, knowing where she was headed, "after that first night I saw you." He shrugged.

"Why me?" she asked, knowing it sounded silly, but also knowing how much the other girls wanted Dr. Matt and how they chased him — and had chased him for several years.

"I've never been to the club three times in one week before." His eyes bored into hers, sending a message she couldn't misunderstand.

She could feel her skin heating, tingling, her nipples hardening, that very unfamiliar feeling between her legs. She didn't know what would happen next but she was ready for it, whatever it was. She bit her lower lip and was sure her nose was flaring with her breathing. She wanted to be grabbed, held ... and whatever happened after that. She'd done some of that before, but she'd never felt like this.

"Would you like some wine?" he asked, a total change of expression on his face.

She was ready for anything ... but that. What the hell?

"Okay," she said huskily, her voice still where the rest of her had been seconds ago.

"Chardonnay, of course," he said, moving past her and toward what had to be the kitchen. She heard a refrigerator door open and close, a cabinet door bang, the tinkle of glassware bumping together. He was back, handing her a glass of the light amber liquid.

She took a sip, thinking of what he had said and what he had done ... or rather hadn't done. She was ready. She wanted him. The look he'd given her said he wanted her. Another sip of wine, questions whirring through her brain. What had happened? What had changed? Was it her? She drained her glass to his surprised look and held it out for more.

"Um," he said softly. "That was a surprise. You want some more?"

"Hell yes," she answered, sure the look on her face wasn't too inviting.

"What's wrong?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong, did I?" She looked away, out the window at the blowing snow ... and the cold air swirling there.

He stepped closer. "You didn't have to."

She was thinking. "What time is it?"

Matt glanced at his watch. "Five after eleven."

"Perfect," she snapped. "Bring me that glass of wine and I'll have a surprise for you." If Matt was backing away for whatever reason, maybe she had something that might encourage him.

He was quickly back, handed her the glass of wine, looking at her with a very puzzled countenance.

Maybe I'll be full of more than that," she answered seductively.

"Oh, shit," was his only reply.

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