

CHASING A BRIGHTER BLUE

Gerri Hill



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## CHAPTER ONE

“Isn’t Christmas the most wonderful time of the year?”

Shelby Sutton slipped out of her coat and shook the snow from her hair. “Yes, it is. Only I wouldn’t have picked it for a wedding,” she said as she sat down at the bar. “There’s a freakin’ blizzard going on.”

“It’s not a blizzard. They said we won’t get much more than an inch or two. Denver’s getting slammed though. Aren’t you glad we’re not still there?”

“Well, there’s that,” she said dryly. “But it’s winter, Steph. It’s cold. Not wedding weather.”

“Josh and I met at a Christmas party two years ago,” her sister reminded her. “And he proposed last Christmas.”

“Right. So get married in July like normal people do.”

Stephanie stared at her with a quick shake of her head. “You love the snow, Shelby. Quit complaining.”

“I love to ski. I don’t love to drive in it.” Shelby held her hand up, signaling Zach, the bartender. He was there in an instant. One of the perks of the family owning the hotel was

getting prompt service. “Gin and tonic,” she said. She glanced at Steph. “You?”

“Wine. Red. A merlot is fine. And you should have flown up with us yesterday before the storm hit.”

“You know I don’t like flying with Dad in that little tin can he calls a plane,” she said.

“That’s an excuse,” Stephanie said. “I know you had a date. What was her name?”

Shelby slowly shook her head as she recalled her dinner date last night. “Jenna. And it was a disaster.”

“Blind date again?”

“Yes. I can’t understand why Brooke thought we would hit it off. We had nothing in common and struggled most of the night to keep the conversation going.” She nodded her thanks at the bartender. “To top it off, she wanted to sleep with me. Can you believe that?”

“They always want to sleep with you. Who could blame her? You’re gorgeous. Blond hair and blue eyes, I’m sure you’re every lesbian’s dream. You’re also apparently every *man*’s dream. You get hit on more than I do.”

“Well, if I’m every lesbian’s dream then, why am I still single at thirty?”

“Because you’re looking for perfection and you’re not going to find it. Besides, you’re too suspicious. You think they’re only after the family money.”

Shelby nodded. “You’re right on both counts.” She held her glass up in a toast and touched it to Stephanie’s wineglass. “To my baby sister. May you and Josh be blissfully happy.”

“Thank you. This is going to be a wonderful two weeks. I’m so glad you’re sharing it with me.”

Shelby poked the lime wedge down with the tiny straw. Yes, nearly two weeks at the family hotel in Estes Park, Colorado. Nearly two weeks of wedding planning, parties and Christmas activities. Stephanie had always loved Christmas, loved the lights and decorations, loved gaudy trees and lots of gifts. Shelby was usually indifferent to the holiday, even today. She rarely bothered to put up a tree. If she wanted to soak in the Christmas spirit,

she could always go to Stephanie's house, where every room was adorned with something. It was as if a slew of Christmas elves had invaded the place and redecorated at will.

"So a Christmas wedding and a beach honeymoon. Hardly seems fair to the rest of us who have to stay behind," she said.

"You're not going to Hawaii with us," Stephanie said with a laugh. "You have to stay in Denver and run the office."

"Don't remind me."

It was a late Tuesday afternoon, eleven days before Christmas, and the bar was filling with people and laughter. Shelby recognized one of her cousins whom she hadn't seen in years.

"Is that Holly? You invited *everyone* for the whole two weeks?"

"It was Mother's idea. And not everyone. Just family. Most of them aren't coming until next week though. Even *they* aren't crazy enough to spend two weeks here."

"Mother only wants to show off the hotel and gloat that she married money," she said. "You'd think she'd be over that by now."

"I know. Her excuse is that it'll be a big family Christmas party, even though we hardly ever see our cousins. Oh, and Josh's sister is supposed to come for the whole two weeks too," Stephanie said. "And about her. We need a favor."

"What kind of favor?"

Stephanie leaned closer. "Something's happened and Josh doesn't know what. Her name is Reagan. She's a photojournalist. She's not here in the States much. Most recently in Afghanistan. Before that, I think she spent a whole year in Colombia."

"Who does she work for?"

"I think she freelances. But Josh says she's really talented." Stephanie smiled. "Of course, he could be biased. Anyway, she showed up about two weeks ago, out of the blue."

"Where?"

"At her parents' farm in Nebraska. Her mother called Josh, said Reagan was acting really weird—depressed, reclusive. Josh said she was always very outgoing and friendly, never depressed.

So they wanted him to come there, but we had so much going on with getting ready for the wedding,” she said with a wave of her hand. “He called her, but he said she was not herself at all. So something’s going on with her.”

“And you want me to do what? Babysit?”

“She’s a little old for that. She’s your age, if not older.” Stephanie shrugged. “I’ve only seen her twice and both times, she was very nice. Pleasant to be around.”

“Maybe her boyfriend broke up with her,” she said. And wouldn’t that be fun—consoling a straight woman.

“I’m fairly certain that’s not the case,” Stephanie said pointedly. “You both have the same taste in dates, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, great. She’s gay?” Shelby pointed her finger at Stephanie. “I swear, if you’re trying to set me up with Josh’s sister, I’ll kill you.”

“Of course not. She’s not your type, anyway. She’s...well, really out.”

Shelby frowned. “And I’m not?”

“You don’t go out of your way to advertise it. She’s kinda...manly. It’s very obvious she’s a lesbian, unlike you.”

“Manly? You mean butch?”

“Whatever you want to call it,” she said with a shake of her head. “But can you try to make friends with her? Maybe find out what’s going on with her? They’re really worried and I don’t want anything to spoil the wedding.”

Shelby sighed. “Okay. I’ll try to make friends with her. But it doesn’t sound like we have anything in common.”

Stephanie squeezed her arm. “Thank you. I assume she’s coming up tomorrow with her parents. They’re staying outside of Denver tonight, waiting until the storm passes.”

Shelby sighed again. “Okay. Can’t wait,” she said with a fake smile.

“You’re the best.” She glanced at her watch. “I need to go meet the florist. You want to come with me? It shouldn’t take long.”

Shelby shook her head. “I think I’ll stay in the bar. Come find me when you’re done. We’ll have dinner in town somewhere.” she offered.

Stephanie stood. “Trying to sneak away from Mother? You know she’s already got every meal planned. Why else would she bring in her own chefs?”

“I know. And I hate that.”

“Josh hates it too.” She bent down and hugged her quickly. “I’ll be back.”

She nodded when Zach pointed at her empty glass. Two weeks of being pampered by the hotel staff would spoil her by the time she got back to Denver. She and Stephanie had been working for her father ever since they’d finished college. He owned three hotel resorts in Colorado and the corporate office was still in Denver. Lately, her mother had been hinting at moving the operation to Aspen since her father spent so much time there. So far, her father had resisted. For that, Shelby was thankful. Not that she didn’t like Aspen—she did. Only she couldn’t see herself living there full-time. It was far too pretentious for her taste. If anywhere, here at Estes Park would be her choice. She loved it here. But she knew her mother would never go for that. Estes Park was too tame, too...*normal*.

The massive mirror behind the bar reflected the activity behind her and she watched as a woman approached the bar. She was attractive, her dark hair cut short in a boyish style. As if feeling her watching, the woman glanced at her, their gazes meeting in the mirror. Their eyes held for a long moment, and Shelby was shocked by the profound sadness she saw in the woman’s dark eyes. As if trying to chase the sadness away, Shelby offered a slow smile. The woman’s handsome face lightened some as she returned the smile. Shelby finally pulled her eyes away, wondering at the haunted look on the stranger’s face. To her surprise, the woman walked over.

“Is this chair taken?”

Shelby glanced at it, as well as at the other three empty chairs along the bar. She shook her head. “No.”



“Thanks,” the woman said as she sat down. She motioned for the bartender. “Scotch on the rocks,” she said. She turned to Shelby. “Your eyes are...incredibly blue.” She paused only a few seconds. “Your room or mine?”

Shelby stared at her, shocked. “Wow. You just dive right in, don’t you? No foreplay?”

The woman’s eyes held hers. “Once we’re naked, I’ll give you so much foreplay you’ll be begging me for release.” Her voice lowered to a whisper. “Again and again. I promise.”

As Shelby stared into her haunted, dark brown eyes, she felt a tremor travel over her body, landing squarely between her thighs. *Oh...wow.*

She cleared her throat before speaking, hoping her voice didn’t fail her. “I think you have set the record for the quickest come-on I’ve ever had,” she said.

The woman laughed quickly, showing off even, white teeth, although the smile never reached her eyes. “I doubt that.” Her smile faded altogether. “So? How about it?”

Shelby shook her head quickly. “No. I don’t pick up strangers in a bar.”

The woman nodded as she sipped from her drink. “I don’t blame you, I guess. I wouldn’t be great company anyway.”

Shelby felt oddly disappointed that the woman had given up so quickly. Not that she had any intention of taking her up on her offer, of course. Because she *never* slept with strangers. That thought amused her. She tried to remember the last time she *had* slept with someone. Was it Katherine? God, that had to have been over a year ago.

She looked past the woman, seeing Stephanie returning.

“As usual, Mother had the flower arrangements already set up. I was allowed to pick a few colors.” Stephanie turned to the woman, her eyes widening. “Oh, you’ve already met. Great.”

Shelby frowned. “What? Who?”

“Hello, Stephanie.”

Stephanie looked between them. “Oh, God. Were you *bitting* on my sister?”

Shelby narrowed her eyes at the woman. “Who are you?”

“This is Josh’s sister,” Stephanie explained.

The woman arched an eyebrow as she held her hand out. “Reagan Bryant,” she said.

Shelby blew out her breath. “Josh’s sister,” she murmured. She took the offered hand and squeezed it quickly. “Shelby Sutton. Stephanie’s sister.”

The woman’s eyes shadowed even more. “Well, don’t I feel like an ass.”

Stephanie sat down beside her. “You really were hitting on her?” She laughed. “That’s too funny.”

Shelby turned and glared at her, causing Stephanie’s smile to fade.

“So when did you get in?” Stephanie asked. “I thought you were coming with your parents.”

Reagan shrugged. “I’ve been in Denver the last few days. I came up early to beat the storm,” she said. “Got here about six this morning.”

“Does Josh know you’re here already? He didn’t say anything to me.”

“No. I crashed when I got here. I haven’t seen him yet.” She sipped from her drink. “Have my parents gotten in?”

Stephanie shook her head. “They’re coming up tomorrow.”

“I hear your father offered to fly down to the farm and pick them up,” Reagan said.

Stephanie laughed. “Yes. I think he thought he could land the plane in a cornfield or something.”

Shelby knew that Josh’s parents still had a working farm in Nebraska, but she could not picture this woman—Reagan—in that setting. She could see her on a horse, maybe working on a cattle ranch in the mountains somewhere. But not on a farm. She was attractive in a nearly handsome way. Taller than most women but not overly so—she appeared to be lean and rugged, strong and agile. But no way would she have used Stephanie’s description of “manly.” She was too attractive, too pretty for that.

Stephanie elbowed her. “You’re staring,” she whispered.

Shelby pulled her eyes away but not before she caught the sad smile on Reagan’s face. “I should apologize for earlier,” Reagan said. “I had no idea you were Stephanie’s sister.”

Shelby nodded. “No problem.” She shoved her empty glass away and looked at Stephanie. “I’m going to go shower. Dinner still on or did Mother demand our presence?”

“She didn’t mention it,” Stephanie said. “Let me find Josh and we’ll sneak away. We can walk and take in the sights.”

Shelby nodded again. “That’s fine.” She turned to Reagan, debating on whether to invite her or not. It would be rude not to include her, but something told her not to issue an invite. “Drinks are on the house,” she said instead. She turned to Zach, motioning to Reagan, and he gave a quick nod.

“Well, thanks.” Reagan held her glass up. “I’ll try not to abuse it.” She smiled slightly. “Enjoy your dinner, Shelby.”

“You should come with us,” Stephanie offered. “You and Josh haven’t seen each other in months. I’m sure he’ll want to visit.”

Leave it to Stephanie *not* to be rude. And of course, Reagan accepted the invitation.

“I’d love to join you. Thank you for asking.”

Reagan sounded sincere, making Shelby regret her earlier snub. She was supposed to make friends with her after all.

## CHAPTER TWO

The snow on the sidewalks of the quaint downtown area of Estes Park positively glowed from the assorted lights that were overflowing from every available pole, railing and storefront. Reagan soaked it all in, thinking it looked like the perfect scene for a Christmas card. It was with sadness that she realized she had no itch to grab a camera and record the sight. She pushed that thought away, instead absorbing the ambience around her. While cold, it wasn't bitterly so. She found it refreshing after spending so many months in the desert.

When Josh had said the wedding would be a two-week affair, she'd thought he—and Stephanie—were crazy. Who did that? Well, apparently people who owned resort hotels and had more money than they knew what to do with. But it had come at a good time. After what had happened in Afghanistan...well, she needed a break. Her other option would have been to remain at the family farm for a while longer, but she knew she wouldn't be able to escape her mother's questions indefinitely. Her mother had always had a knack for knowing when something

was bothering her, no matter how hard she tried to hide it. And this was something she was not ready to talk about. She wasn't even sure she could explain why she was feeling the way she was, explain the pain that she felt.

Josh and Stephanie walked ahead of them and she glanced over at the woman walking quietly beside her. Shelby's boots, like Reagan's, made the icy snow crunch with every step. She was dressed similarly in jeans and hiking boots and a thick, warm sweater. She had a wool cap on her head, covering most of her blond hair. As if feeling her staring, Shelby gave her a curious—and guarded—look. Reagan turned away, instead taking in the sights and sounds of Christmas that flooded the streets around them.

Had she known the beautiful blonde sitting at the bar was Stephanie's sister, she would never have been quite so brazen. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd walked up to a stranger and propositioned her. Maybe it was simply being back in the States after so long. Or maybe it was that she was lonely and still trying to come to grips with the tragedy that had chased her from Afghanistan. When she'd seen Shelby at the bar, her first thought had been waking up in her arms after a night of lovemaking. But was it sex she was after or comfort?

"Have you been here before?"

Shelby's voice broke the stillness, and Reagan looked at her quickly, wondering if perhaps the silence was uncomfortable for her.

"No. First time. I assume you come often?"

Shelby nodded. "It's my favorite of the three that we own," she said. "I come mostly spring and fall. I like to hike in Rocky Mountain National Park. The summers are too busy. It's like a parking lot out there then."

"I wouldn't have taken you for a hiker," she said honestly.

Shelby shrugged. "Looks can be deceiving."

Reagan simply nodded. At the bar, Shelby had looked exactly like what she was—the daughter of a very wealthy businessman. While not overly dressed, it was obvious the clothes were expensive and stylish. Enough makeup to know she wore it but not so much that it took away from her natural beauty. Even

the jewelry was understated, yet diamonds twinkled in the lights. Now, though, as they walked along the snowy street, she was dressed for the elements and not for fashion. Unlike Stephanie, who wore high-heeled boots and tights and a thigh-length sweater over a silk blouse. She clung to Josh's arm to keep from slipping on the ice. Reagan had learned from Josh that Stephanie had only followed her sister into the family business out of obligation. What she really wanted to do was be an interior designer. Reagan shook her head as Stephanie's heel got stuck in an ice patch once again.

"I know," Shelby said quietly beside her. "She wouldn't be caught dead in hiking boots."

"I heard that," Stephanie said. She stopped and turned around. "How about here? I know it's Shelby's favorite place. They have, like, thirty varieties of burgers."

Reagan looked at Shelby. "Breaking all the stereotypes tonight, aren't you?"

"Meaning what?" Shelby asked.

"Oh, I thought we'd end up at a fancy restaurant where I wouldn't know which fork to use," she said.

"Quit acting like you grew up on a farm," Josh said with a laugh as he held the door open.

"The fancy restaurant in town is at the hotel. Mother brought in three extra chefs from Denver just for the wedding party. And I will avoid it as often as I can," Shelby said.

"I love eating gourmet meals with five or six courses," Stephanie said. "Shelby would rather eat at places like this."

While they waited to be seated, Reagan leaned closer to Shelby. "So how did these two hook up anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"He's a farm boy. Stephanie's probably never even seen a farm."

Shelby looked at the man who was about to become her brother-in-law. "He is *so* not a farm boy," Shelby said with a smile. "Are you still a farm girl?"

"Hardly." Then she shrugged. "Well, I could probably still milk a cow if I had to."

\* \* \*

“So let me get this straight,” Reagan said. “Your grandparents had a shitload of money, and your father needed something to do.”

Shelby glanced at Josh with raised eyebrows. A blush lit his handsome face.

“I’m sure I didn’t say shitload of money,” he said.

Reagan waved her hand at him. “Whatever. So, he takes the money and builds a resort in Aspen. And of course, it’s a success.”

“Why do you say it like that?” Shelby asked. “You act as if there’s no work involved in making something a success.”

Reagan finished off her beer and slid the empty glass toward Josh, who refilled it from the pitcher they’d ordered. “So then he built another one.”

“Yes. This one,” Shelby said. “And then one in Steamboat Springs.”

“And they’re all successful?”

“Yes. And seasonal, to some extent,” she said. “Estes Park is booked solid summer and fall. Less so during the winter. Steamboat Springs is booked solid winter and spring, for skiing. Aspen is pretty much booked solid all year.”

“It’s a resort, so the prices are—”

“Outrageous,” Shelby said, saving Reagan the trouble. “Especially in Aspen.”

“And the rich get richer,” Reagan murmured.

Shelby leaned her elbows on the table. “Why do I get the feeling that you have an issue with money?”

“I don’t have an issue with money. I like it as much as the next person,” Reagan said. “But I’ve been in countries where poverty is commonplace. Putting a meal on the table is a big deal.” She shrugged. “I come back here and see all of the excess, the waste, and it’s such a contrast. People don’t know how lucky we have it here.”

“Let’s don’t get into a political discussion, please,” Josh said. “We’re celebrating. Nothing more.” Then he smiled. “So did you really hit on Shelby in the bar?”

Shelby was surprised by the slight blush on Reagan's face. "I did. I was an arrogant ass. And I apologized."

"And I accepted," Shelby said.

Reagan smiled, breaking some of the tension that had crept into the conversation. "You don't really look alike. How was I to know you were sisters?"

"We do look alike," Stephanie said. "Only I like makeup more than she does."

"And high heels," Shelby added.

"How did you even know she was gay?" Stephanie asked. "She always gets hit on by men. They normally don't have a clue."

Reagan looked at her and Shelby held her gaze. The dark, haunted look in her eyes was still there but not nearly as profound as when she'd seen her that first time in the bar. Maybe the dinner, being with her brother, had lightened her some. She was skeptical, though, that they could be friends. Despite that, Reagan's words at the bar echoed in her brain. *I'll give you so much foreplay you'll be begging me for release.* Shelby pulled her eyes away, wondering if that would indeed be the case.

Reagan was saved answering Stephanie's question by the arrival of their burgers. They were as big and delicious-looking as always and Shelby swiped at the cheese melting on the side.

"You weren't kidding," Reagan said. "They're huge."

"And so good you'll finish the whole thing."

"This is kinda what I meant by excess," Reagan said. Then she took a bite and moaned. "God, that's good. You're right. I'll finish the whole damn thing."



## CHAPTER THREE

Shelby sipped her coffee as she browsed through the local newspaper. She wasn't surprised that there was an article about the upcoming nuptials. Her mother's doing, no doubt.

"There you are."

Shelby looked up, finding her mother approaching in all her usual flair. Hair and makeup done to perfection, her dress and heels matching impeccably—Shelby wondered if she'd brought her wardrobe manager along with her.

"Good morning," she said.

"We have a fitting in ten minutes," her mother said, clapping her hands together. "What are you doing?"

"Breakfast."

"There's no time for breakfast." She looked around. "And where is Josh's sister?"

Shelby shrugged. "Haven't seen her this morning." She frowned. "Wait. What fitting?"

"For the dresses."

“Dresses? Oh, God. You *did* bring Bernie?”

“Of course I brought Bernie. Who else do you think I would trust with the dresses?”

Shelby signed. “There are only two of us. I thought Stephanie didn’t want traditional bridesmaid dresses,” she said.

Her mother gave a quick smile. “She didn’t. I did.”

“Does she know?”

“Does it matter?”

Shelby shook her head. “Mother, you can’t keep planning everything. It’s *her* wedding.”

“Of which she has no concept of how to do things the proper way.”

“No wonder she wanted to elope.”

Her mother gasped. “*Elope?*”

Shelby saw a familiar figure walk in. Reagan was dressed in jeans and a Colorado sweatshirt that looked brand new. Most likely she’d picked it up at the gift shop in the lobby. She motioned with her head. “That’s Josh’s sister.”

Reagan was headed to the bar when she saw Shelby. She raised her eyebrows questioningly and Shelby waved her over.

“Reagan Bryant, meet my mother, Christine Sutton.”

Reagan stuck her hand out. “Nice to meet you, Mrs. Sutton.”

“Nice to finally meet you, Reagan. You and Josh favor each other.” She dropped her hand. “And please, call me Christine.”

“Thank you.” Reagan glanced at Shelby. “Have you eaten? After that burger last night, I don’t think I even want breakfast.”

“I know. I only had coffee and a piece of toast.”

“Well, good,” her mother said. “Because there’s really no time for breakfast. We have a fitting. Come along, girls.”

Reagan’s eyebrows shot up. “A fitting?”

“For the dresses,” Shelby said as she headed after her mother.

Reagan stopped in her tracks. “Oh, no. No. No. No,” she said with a shake of her head. “I don’t do dresses.”

Shelby’s mother spun around and stared at her. “What do you mean, you don’t *do* dresses?”

“I don’t wear dresses. Ever,” she said. “Well, not since I was about twelve or so.”

Shelby hid her smile as her mother's face transformed from shock to indignation. "Twelve? You are in the wedding party. You will be in a dress like everyone else."

"No, ma'am, I won't."

Oh, well, this should throw a kink in her mother's plans, Shelby thought. She wondered if Josh had relayed the "no dress" rule to Stephanie.

"We can't have the bridesmaids dressed differently," her mother insisted. "How will that look in pictures?"

"Don't care," Reagan said with a shrug. "I'll wear a tux if you want me to."

The look of horror on her mother's face caused Shelby to laugh out loud. Her mother looked at her sharply, and Shelby tried unsuccessfully to hide her amusement. Her mother then fixed her gaze on Reagan.

"You will *not* wear a tux."

Reagan simply shrugged. "Okay. And I also won't wear a dress."

Her mother looked at Shelby with pleading eyes. "Will you *please* do something?"

"What should I do?" Shelby asked. "I can't make her wear a dress."

"*You're* going to wear a dress," she said pointedly.

Shelby put her hands on her hips. "Okay, so you're trying to lump all the lesbians together?"

"I'm simply saying, if you can wear—"

"I'm not wearing a dress," Reagan said again. "I don't care what scenarios you come up with. Not doing it."

Shelby's mother let out a frustrated sigh. "We'll see about that," she said as she stormed off.

Shelby was still grinning. "Oh, that was awesome. It's not often my mother doesn't get her way."

Reagan again headed to the bar. "I'm no longer in the mood for coffee," she said. "How about a Bloody Mary?"

Shelby shook her head. "No. But I will have a mimosa," she said as Reagan sat down beside her. "So, haven't worn a dress since you were twelve?"

“If that,” Reagan said. The bartender came over. Ty. He’d worked there for years and he gave Shelby a friendly smile. “Bloody Mary for me and she’ll have a mimosa,” Reagan said.

Ty nodded. “I have your favorite champagne, Shelby.”

“Thank you. You must have known how stressful these two weeks were going to be.”

“Stephanie warned me,” he said as he walked away.

“You seem to know the staff,” Reagan said. “How often do you come here?”

“I actually stay here for most of May, into June and most of September, into October,” she said. “Like I said last night, the summer months are way too busy.”

“So you work from here or just take the months off?”

“Yes, I have an office here.” She smiled at Ty as he brought their drinks over. “Thank you.”

“Put it on the house tab?”

She nodded. “Yes. Reagan is with the wedding party.” She turned to Reagan. “They *did* tell you what that meant, right?”

“Josh said he wanted me to be a part of the wedding, that’s all. He knows damn well I’m not going to be a bridesmaid.”

Before Shelby could comment, she saw Stephanie and Josh heading their way. “Here come the troops,” she warned.

Stephanie put her hands on her hips. “A *tux*?”

Reagan glanced at Josh. “You didn’t tell her?”

“I think you’d look cute in a dress,” he teased.

“No. Not happening.”

Stephanie looked at Shelby. “Can’t you do something?”

“Me? What am I supposed to do?”

“Mother is about to have a breakdown and we still have ten days to go before the ceremony.”

“You didn’t even want bridesmaid dresses to begin with,” she reminded her.

“I don’t. But Mother is adamant.”

Reagan stood up. “Look, it’s not going to hurt my feelings,” she said. “Replace me with a cousin or something. I’m not wearing a dress.” She paused. “Unless you want me to be your best man,” she said to Josh with a hint of a smile.

She walked out with her Bloody Mary in hand and did not look back. Shelby wasn't exactly crazy about being a bridesmaid either, but she would never be as audacious as Reagan and refuse to wear a dress. She turned her gaze from Reagan's retreating back and looked at Stephanie.

"Well?" Stephanie asked.

"Well, what?"

"Do your lesbian bonding thing with her and get her in a dress," Stephanie said.

"Look, you wanted me to try to make friends with her and I will. But that's as far as it will go. I'm not planning to *bond* with her enough to get her in a dress." She looked at Josh. "Surely you knew this ahead of time."

He shrugged. "Stephanie said there wasn't going to be a big deal with the bridesmaids. I just wanted Reagan to be a part of the wedding too."

"Please do something. Please?" Stephanie pleaded. "For me?"

Shelby rolled her eyes, but nodded. "Okay. I don't think it'll do any good, but I'll talk to her."

Stephanie clapped her hands together. "Great! Now, come with me. I want you to meet Josh's cousin, Doug. He's the best man. Your partner."

"I thought Mother wanted us to do a fitting."

"She's too distraught. She went back to her suite."

Shelby shook her head. "She normally thrives off drama. What's the deal?"

"She seems really stressed. Maybe the two-week celebration was a bit much," Stephanie mused as she linked arms with her.

"You think?"

Stephanie nodded. "Again, it was not my idea. I wanted a Christmas wedding, that's all. I didn't want all this," she said with a wave of her hand toward the nearly thirty-foot-tall tree that took up most of the lobby.

"I warned you it would be too much," Josh said as he walked beside them.

"You know how Mother is. Everything has to be a production," Stephanie said. "Oh, there he is. He's *so* cute."

Shelby followed her gaze, landing on a very handsome man who was smiling as he headed their way. He had just enough stubble of a beard to be fashionable, and he surprised her by pulling her into a hug.

He laughed as she pulled away. "You *are* Shelby, right?"  
"I am."

"And you are as beautiful as Josh said you were. I've got to be the luckiest man here," he said, still smiling. "Doug Bryant. Pleased to meet you."

Shelby returned his smile, albeit with not quite as much enthusiasm as he exhibited. "Nice to meet you too," she said politely.

"Doug is a professor," Stephanie explained. "University of Nebraska."

"Really?"

"My alma mater so it's extra special to be able to teach there," Doug said.

Shelby looked at Josh. "You grew up together?"

"Yes. More like brothers than cousins. Same age, same grade in school," he said.

"My family's farm is right down the road from theirs," Doug said.

"So you're close with Reagan too?" she asked.

"Reagan? I didn't expect her here," he said to Josh. "I'm surprised she took time out from her career to make your wedding."

"No, she wouldn't miss it," Josh said. "She's a bridesmaid."

Doug laughed out loud. "No way. Ray Ray? A bridesmaid? This I gotta see."

*Ray Ray?* Childhood nickname, no doubt, Shelby thought. But from his tone, she assumed there was no love lost between Doug and Reagan. She wondered what the story was with them.

"Speaking of that," Stephanie said. "Don't you need to go find her?"

Oh, yeah. She was supposed to talk her into wearing a dress, wasn't she? Well, at least it would give her an excuse to escape the over eager best man.

“Yes, I do need to find her.” She held her hand out to Doug. “It was nice to meet you.”

He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he brought it to his mouth and kissed the back. She didn’t know why, but the stubble of his beard irritated her and she barely resisted wiping her hand where his lips had touched.

“I understand there’s a sleigh ride tonight out in the park,” he said. “As best man and maid of honor, it will be a privilege for me to share it with you.” He smiled into her eyes. “I’m looking forward to getting to know you better, Shelby.”

Oh, God. Surely they’d told him she was gay. She forced a smile. “I’m looking forward to the sleigh ride too. Perhaps I’ll see you there.”

“Of course you’ll see me. I’ll save you a seat.”

She took Stephanie’s arm and pulled her to the side. “Excuse us one moment,” she said quickly to the guys. As soon as they were far enough away, she glared at her. “Really?”

“What?” Stephanie shrugged. “He likes you.”

“You didn’t tell him?”

“You always say there’s no need to forewarn people when I introduce you.”

“Yes. *People*. Not men who think they’re going to spend the next two weeks trying to get into my bed,” she said as quietly as possible.

“Oh, he’ll figure it out,” Stephanie said with a wave of her hand. “But he’s so nice. Please don’t be rude to him.”

“I won’t be rude to him,” she said.

“Good. Now go find Reagan. Sweet-talk her if you have to.”

“I will *not* sweet-talk her,” she murmured as she walked off.