

BREAKING LOVE



MJ SUMMERS

ONE

London—New Year's Eve

Rain nightclub exploded with the sounds of champagne corks popping all around as the crowd finished their countdown. As off-key strains of “Auld Lang Syne” filled the room, Luc Chevalier stood silently looking out the window to the balcony, where Claire Hatley and the love of her life, Cole Mitchell, held each other and kissed passionately. It was obvious Cole had just proposed as they embraced and when she stared down at her now-adorned ring finger. Luc felt a little like a voyeur, watching their tender exchange, but he couldn't look away. Why would anyone ever want to do such a thing? What would it be like to love someone so much that you lost all sense of good judgment and tied yourself down for the rest of your days? He had heard that being in love created the same chemical reaction in one's brain as heroin, which was the only thing that made sense to him about the whole affair.

His thoughts were interrupted by Simone Pelletier, his long-time friend and assistant, as she handed him a flute of champagne.

“*Tiens . . .*” she said. “You look lost in thought.” She had noticed him staring at the romantic scene unfolding on the balcony outside.

Luc shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. “I was just thinking we should put tables out there for the warmer months.”

Simone gave him a skeptical look. “Are you sure you aren't watching the happy couple out there? It looks more like you're starting to regret not settling down to domestic boredom.”

“You know me much better than that, Simone. I should go check on the kitchen. I want them to bring around more hors d'oeuvres.” Luc gave Simone a quick peck on the cheek and moved briskly away.

Simone's heart fluttered at his kiss, as it did each time she saw him. She had fallen for him at her job interview six years ago, but the feeling wasn't reciprocated by her boss. Simone exhaled sharply as she watched his powerful frame make its way through the crowd. In her time as his assistant, she had felt like she had one foot in heaven and one in hell at all times. She was closer to him than any other woman ever would be; he shared his days, dreams and plans with her, but never his bed. She had watched helplessly as he courted other women, falling in and out of lust with them, each time wishing she would be next.

Two years earlier, Simone had gotten extremely drunk at a staff Christmas party and made her move, but Luc had turned her down, saying he would never take advantage of a drunken woman. When they came back to work three days later, she had slunk into the office, fully mortified. Luc had done his best to ease her mind while also managing to make it clear that she was far too important as his assistant and friend to ruin things by becoming lovers. Simone's heart had cracked at his words, although she managed to laugh it off, making it seem like the other night had been a momentary lapse in judgment brought on by too much wine. She tried to tell herself eventually he would realize they were meant for each other and they would be together forever. But after so many years of pretending she also was anti-marriage, nothing had changed between them. She was starting to lose hope anything ever would.

* * *

A few minutes later as he exited the kitchen, Luc saw Claire and Cole walking to the front door, arms wrapped around each other. Luc was surprised by an unfamiliar feeling creeping over him. He couldn't quite place it, but he realized it had something to do with not getting what he wanted. This was a new experience for him and not a welcome one at that. Luc knew Claire only

slightly, having first met her on a flight from New York to London two months earlier. He had gone out with her only once, and she had left after only a few minutes, having been highly offended by his views on her previous relationship with Cole. Now that relationship was whisking her out the door. As much as he regretted not sleeping with her, he hoped for Claire's sake things would work out between them.

He needed to distract himself from this unsettling feeling. He was a man who was used to being in control of everything, including his emotions. He was used to feeling one of two ways: satisfied or restless. Most of the time, he was exceedingly gratified by his choices and his success, but there was always an undercurrent of restlessness that he attributed his wealth to. He was always ready for the next challenge, the next conquest, never one to sit back and enjoy his accomplishments but rather ever spurred on to the next challenge.

Luc quickly shifted his thinking to the successful nightclub empire he was building, with rain as the crown jewel. Of the eight clubs he owned, this one was by far the most profitable. Everything had come together beautifully to create this enormous success. Rain had the right location and the right decor, and he had hired the right people to run it for him. He had learned the hard way, through trial and error, how to make a business thrive. Between his clubs and his real estate holdings, his fortune at age forty-one was large enough for him to have shed any concerns about price tags years ago. He had almost forgotten what it was like to grow up poor.

His lifestyle was fast-paced—full of travel, sex, parties and very little sleep; it was a life he never intended to give up. Luc was always going somewhere and rarely stayed more than two weeks at a time at home in Paris. His was not exactly a lifestyle that would allow a long-term relationship to thrive. He had been with a succession of beautiful women but it always ended the same way. Eventually they wanted more than he could give. He wasn't home enough, he wasn't attentive enough and once they realized he really *didn't* want to get married and have children, they would leave to go find their dreams. He wasn't a man who was ever going to become transformed into husband material. Luc Chevalier was going to remain unattached; he had yet to meet his match and he doubted her existence. When he *did* find a woman he admired enough to see on a regular basis, she would inevitably become jealous of all the women he was surrounded by at work, and they would start fighting. It had all grown so predictable that it bored him to tears at times.

* * *

Three hours later, Luc sat alone in his office, sipping a Scotch and regretting that he had given up smoking over a decade ago. He could use a cigarette right now as he pondered his reaction to seeing Claire again. He chalked it up to being tired and having not slept enough recently. Deciding to give up on his attempts at getting paperwork done, he finished his Scotch in one unceremonious gulp and grabbed his long wool coat. He shut his office door behind him and walked across the nightclub to the front door. It now looked like a typhoon had hit—party favours, confetti, napkins and glasses strewn everywhere. A few balloons floated along the floor as he strode past them, creating a breeze. Luc had let the staff go home without cleaning up; they had worked hard and deserved the time off. The considerable mess could be handled the next day. As he stepped into the cold night air and locked up the club, he became aware of how quiet the world seemed. It was the start of a new year and Luc couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that something was about to change.

Boulder, Colorado

Megan Sullivan, having just added another log to the coals, flopped down onto the couch in front of her fireplace. Elliott was now asleep in his bed. He had been fighting to stay awake until midnight but had finally lost the battle and nodded off on the couch. She had carried him

up the stairs to his room and tucked him in with his favourite blue teddy bear. Now back in the living room, Megan picked up the bowl of popcorn she had made earlier in the evening and flipped the TV on, looking for something to distract her.

This was the worst time of the day for her—right after Elliott went to sleep. It was when the loneliness would wash over her like a wave during high tide. In the past five and a half years since she had left Ian, this time of day hadn't gotten easier, and there were times when she was surprised by just how empty she still felt. She and Elliott were better off without him, a fact Ian himself would agree with. His addiction to OxyContin and alcohol had ended not only his marriage but his baseball career as well. What had started as relief for a painful shoulder injury and subsequent surgery had taken over his life, changing it forever. Megan had tried desperately to get him help, but he had spiralled out of control in spite of her best efforts. She had been horrified to discover that no amount of love would fix him. Unless Ian wanted to get better, he never would—and until he did, he wasn't fit to be a father to their son.

Megan had pushed forward with her life without Ian, raising their son with the help of her mother, Helen. She picked up the phone to call her mother, who was visiting Megan's older brother, Mark, in Portland.

Her mother answered the phone on the third ring. "Hi, sweetie! Happy new year!"

"Happy new year, Mom. How is Portland?"

"It's been terrific, except that I miss you and Elliott terribly. I sure wish you had come with me."

"I know, Mom. I would have loved to have been there, but Mark and Lenna and the kids need to have you all to themselves for a while. We get you all the time."

"It probably sounds silly, but a week just feels like so long not to see you both. How's Elliott?"

"He's fine. I took him tobogganing with a few of the boys from his class today, so that was fun."

"Any of those boys have single dads?"

Megan groaned. "No, Mom. They are all married, and even if they weren't, I'm not looking, remember? I'm really, *really* not looking for a man. I'm starting to worry about your memory because you keep asking me that. We might need to take you in to the doctor to have you checked."

"Okay, I get it. You want me to back off. A mother can hope, can't she? I just want to see you happy."

"Oh, please! You just want more grandkids."

"Is there anything wrong with that?"

"Yes, and I seriously need you to drop it. Bug Mark and Lenna if you want more grandkids. I'm done. I've been burned once and I'm not going to let it happen again."

"You act like it isn't even *possible* for you to find the right man. It's ridiculous. You are letting one bad apple spoil the bunch. There are plenty of wonderful men out there who would be happy to be with a beautiful girl like you."

Megan let out a loud sigh. "Mom, can you just let it go already? I'm *so* sick of this conversation. We've been having it for years and you haven't been able to convince me yet."

"Is it so wrong for a mother to want to see her daughter happy?"

"I *am* happy, Mom. Trust me. I have a very full life."

"Oh, really? Then why are you in your flannel pyjamas already and sitting there alone, watching TV on New Year's Eve?" Helen asked, not willing to give up yet.

Megan looked down at her plaid PJs. *Damn it.* "Because I *want* to be at home watching TV rather than out on some blind date with a guy who is going to text me a photo of his penis while we're having appetizers."

"That happened once, Megan, and you need to let it go. That guy was an idiot but that doesn't mean they all are."

“You know, Mom, I didn’t call to hear the ‘you need a man’ speech. I called to wish you a happy new year.”

“Alright, I’m sorry. Happy new year, my girl.”

“Love you, even though you make me nuts.”

“I love you, even though you won’t give me more grandkids.”

“I’m hanging up now, Helen.”

“See you in two days.”

“Safe journey, Mom.”

“Good night, sweetie,” Helen said as she hung up.

Megan sighed as she got up and wandered over to the kitchen. She opened a box of Turtles that was sitting on the counter and shoved one into her mouth, followed quickly by another, filling each cheek with gooey chocolate. *I couldn’t do that with a man standing in front of me.*

Staring out the window at the falling snow, Megan was suddenly overcome with a deep sense of frustration. The snow meant she would have to shovel her large driveway and long sidewalk again the next morning, a chore she hated. It was one thing that always made her feel so *single*, and not in the independently sexy way her best friend Harper was. Megan was single as the result of a tragedy. Her dream of raising a family and growing old with her husband had been stolen out from under her before she had gotten little more than a taste of it. For the most part, she had managed to forget how she got where she was and instead made the best of the life she had now.

However, the snow piling up outside reminded her of that tragedy. It was just one of the small ways that having a husband would have made her life easier. There were lots of things she had learned to manage on her own over the years. Jobs she had no interest in learning but had to do anyway. She had taught herself how to change the oil in her lawn mower and the battery in her car. Each autumn found her shakily climbing a ladder to clean out the gutters. But it was more than that. She no longer had that person with whom to share everything. All of her hopes, dreams, failures and successes were handled alone, as were the joys and burdens of parenthood. She had no one to share her financial worries with, either. Ian worked sporadically as a baseball coach for various minor league teams. He sent some money when he could, but it was never much. They had taken a huge fall—from living the dreams a major league baseball player’s salary afforded them to living a much more humble existence. When Ian did manage to convince someone he could work, his drug addiction ate up much of what he earned, leaving little for him to send to Megan and Elliott.

As she stared out the window, she made a resolution. She would find a way to make enough money in the coming year to hire out some of the jobs she hated doing. Shovelling was first on her list. She had long ago stopped wishing for the companionship of a man, but she could sure as hell pay someone to do all the minor things she couldn’t stand doing anymore. Yes, that would help take the sting out of it a little.

As she bit down into another chocolate, causing caramel to drip over her bottom lip and onto her chin, her mind wandered back to her conversation with her mother. She was completely fed up with everyone she knew trying to set her up or talk her into dating again. If it wasn’t her mom or a friend, it was an insecure married acquaintance who wanted her husband nowhere near Megan, even though Megan was certainly never going to be a threat to anyone’s marriage. She wasn’t interested in dating a single man, let alone starting up with a married one and adding an incredible mound of complications to her already overburdened existence.

On nights like tonight she was still furious at Ian for needing the drugs more than he had needed her and their son. She was sick to death of her mom pressuring her to get married again and have more kids. As much as Megan loved her, it was a conversation she would happily never have again.

Her mom was one to talk, anyway, having had virtually no dating experience herself. She had married Megan’s dad straight out of high school, and they had quickly had three kids. He

worked for the post office, and she stayed at home. He had retired at fifty-five and they had spent four years travelling until he died suddenly of a heart attack. In the three years since his death, Helen had made no moves of her own to find love. She busied herself helping Meg with Elliott and volunteering as a literacy coach, insisting that she was too old to start over with a new man.

Megan reached for another chocolate in the now-empty top tray. She had polished it off without noticing.

“Shit,” she muttered as she put the lid back on the box. She decided to leave the bottom tray intact until tomorrow.

She poured herself a glass of red wine and checked to make sure the back door was locked before making her way up to her bedroom, turning off lights as she went. She decided a nice, long hot bath was the way to ring in the New Year. Setting the wine glass down on the edge of the tub, she ran the water and added some lavender bath oil, then lit a few candles and switched off the light before getting undressed.

She caught her reflection in the mirror as she walked over to the tub. At thirty-five, she still looked much closer to thirty than forty. She was tall and slender, with angel-blond hair cut just above her shoulders in a classic bob. Her skin was ivory, her face heart-shaped, lending a fullness to her otherwise slender frame. Her body showed hardly any signs of her having had a child, other than a now-faded line across her lower abdomen from the C-section incision. She had been lucky enough not to gain much weight when she was pregnant with Elliott, and her breasts had remained relatively perky. She knew that she was attractive, having received her fair share of male attention since she was a teenager. None of that mattered to her anymore, however. Whatever currency her beauty had earned her as a younger woman was now irrelevant. Megan would just as soon be utterly plain in order to avoid advances from the opposite sex.

Her looks had gotten her into the arms of a major league baseball player; her fun-loving and caring nature had secured her there. In the end, relying on a man to take care of her had ended in disaster. If the experience with Ian had taught her anything, it was to stand on her own two feet, to support herself and to never again rely on someone else to look after her. There was no trace of the carefree, quick-to-laugh woman she once had been. Megan had replaced her with someone strong, independent and hardened.

She had books, wine, baths and BOB, her battery-operated boyfriend, to keep her company. None of them would ever leave the toilet seat up, forget to call when they were out of town or develop a serious drug problem. She had already gone years without a man, and she preferred to keep it that way. As she slid into the soothingly hot water, she felt her frustrations start to dissolve and her body begin to relax. She would find a way to pay for what she wanted from a husband—help around the house. The rest she would leave for women who still believed in fairy tales.

Two

“What do you think? Does it look a little bit like a cat?”

“Nope. I think you made Mickey Mouse again, Mom,” answered Elliott, who was standing on a stool beside the stove.

Megan stared down at the large pancake in the pan. “I think you’re right, buddy. You know, if you would just ask for Mickey every time, I’d have an almost one-hundred-percent accuracy rate.” Elliott grinned at his mother. “What would be the fun in that?”

“The fun would be in the feeling of victory I would have at getting it right every time. Now, go rinse the raspberries, already. They’ve been sitting in the sink calling your name for ten minutes now.”

“Okey-dokey. But I get extra syrup because it’s a new year,” Elliott proclaimed as he climbed down and moved his stool to the kitchen sink.

“Since when is that a tradition? Besides, I decided your New Year’s resolution should be to give up sugar.”

“What?! No way! Sugar is my favourite food group. I can’t live without it.” His eyes were wide, showing his distress at the thought.

Megan smiled at him. “That’s because you are exactly like your mother. Alright, extra syrup, but only because you’re going to help me shovel us out of here today.”

The phone rang before Elliott could start complaining. “I’ll get it!”

Each time the phone rang, it broke Megan’s heart a little. She knew Elliott was secretly hoping it was his dad, even though he would deny it if she asked. They hadn’t heard from Ian over Christmas, even though he had promised to come up from Florida to see Elliott during the holiday. Megan could tell it wasn’t him as soon as Elliott heard the voice on the other end. She watched as his face fell a little, wishing she hadn’t allowed her son to hold out so much hope that his father would ever be a bigger part of his life.

“Hi, Auntie Harper,” he said, trying to sound enthusiastic. “Where are you today?”

There was a pause, and then Elliott said, “Good. Santa brought me a new toboggan and Lego Hobbit stuff.”

“Thank her for the Wii game,” Megan whispered to her son.

“Oh, my mom said I have to thank you for the Wii game.” He paused again. “Yeah, she is bossy. She says that’s how moms are supposed to be.”

Megan took the phone from him. “Go wash the berries,” she whispered to him. “Hello, Harper! How was your New Year’s eve extravaganza?”

Harper Young, who had been Megan’s best friend since high school, spoke in her usual lively tone. “It was great until some total ass-hat lawyer got a little too handsy. Other than that, New Year’s Eve in New York is amazing. How was yours?”

“Pretty quiet, just the way I like it.”

“Liar. You’re trying to convince yourself that you like it quiet. I know better. I saw you as a teenager.”

“Well, I grew up—unlike some people,” Megan replied, cradling the phone against her neck so she could pour another scoop of batter into the pan.

“You didn’t grow up. You got old. You’re like an eighty-year-old in a hot, young body. Which brings me to my New Year’s resolution— to get you laid.”

“Oh, for . . .” Megan wanted to swear but had to censor herself with Elliott in the room. “Seriously, not necessary. Thank you for the offer, though.”

“Oh, it’s happening, lady! You are coming with me to Paris! I’m running a photo shoot there in three weeks and you’re coming with me. Anita Wolfe is shooting. I told her about you and she said to bring you along and she’d be happy to give you a few pointers! Seriously, Megs, you’ll learn a *ton* watching her!”

“Okay, first of all, you seem to be forgetting I have a child, so I can’t just up and leave for Paris whenever the whim strikes me. Second, I don’t exactly have a lot of money to spend on trips. Third, I’m not a fashion photographer; I do weddings and family stuff, which is completely different.”

“You’re coming. I already talked to your mom. She’s going to stay at your place. It’s only four days. Elliott will be just fine without you. As far as money is concerned, you’re staying in my suite and your flight will be covered because I told the magazine I’m trialling you as my new assistant, so the trip is virtually free. I’ve taken away all of your excuses.”

“You talked to my mom? Harper . . . I really can’t.”

“Meg, you haven’t gone anywhere with me in, like, forever! You always say you will and then you never do. The only time we see each other is when I come to your place. I miss my best friend. Please come. Please, please, please . . .”

Despite Megan’s slight annoyance with her friend, she couldn’t help but smile a little at her perseverance. “Harper, you’re making me feel guilty. I just can’t. Three weeks from now Elliott has a class field trip I volunteered for, and he needs me here.”

“Grandma can come,” Elliott interjected. “You should go have fun, Mom.”

Megan gave her son an exasperated look.

Harper could hear his loud voice and chimed in. “See, even *your son* has more sense than you. He knows you need a break. Four days and then I promise to deposit you right back into Dullsville.”

“How long of a reprieve will I get from the guilt trips if I agree to come?”

“A year.”

“Two.”

“One and a half, no guilt or trying to get you laid. Pinky swear.”

“No deal. Four days and then you stay off my back about both things for two full years.”

“Oh my God! I can’t believe you agreed to it!” Harper shrieked into the phone.

Elliott heard and started dancing around the kitchen, yelling, “Four days of TV and junk food and staying up late!”

Megan held the phone away from her ear and rolled her eyes at the pair of them.

Three

Paris—Two weeks Later

Luc walked into his apartment and tossed his car keys onto the table in the entranceway. He had just gotten home from a long dinner with friends and even though it was late, he was wide awake. He wandered from room to room in his expansive penthouse, trying to find something to do. He was restless in a way that he hadn't been in years. Somehow, lately his business ventures weren't holding his interest like they used to. He walked over to the bar in the living room and poured himself a Scotch. Standing by the window, staring out at one of the best views in Paris, he sipped his drink.

He wandered over to his bedroom, taking off his tie and shirt as he walked. He finished undressing and took a long, hot shower, letting the water rush over his muscular body. There was no reason for him to feel dissatisfied with his life. He had everything a man could want—money, power, excitement, women. So why was he feeling so edgy? He towelled off and made his way over to the bed, slipping under the covers completely nude. He decided that the next morning he would schedule a kickboxing session. It had been a few days since he had been to the gym. Exercising always made him feel better.

Maybe he needed to find another woman to be with. It had been a while since he had shared his bed with anyone, and it felt large and empty to him as he tossed and turned. He lay awake for another hour, reminding himself of all the reasons he intended to remain single.

Boulder

Megan rushed to her son's school to pick him up. She had been at a client's house, photographing their new baby all afternoon. The baby girl was tiny, having been born three weeks early. Megan had felt a stab of yearning as she picked her up and positioned her in different poses. She would have liked to have had more children, especially a little girl of her own. As she drove, she thought about what her life would have been like if Ian hadn't gotten injured. Would they still be together? Maybe with more children?

One thing was for certain—they would have more money. As it was, Megan got by, but there wasn't enough for any extras. As soon as she had realized the extent of Ian's addiction, she had convinced him to put their large home in Atlanta up for sale. They had split the proceeds and she had moved back to Colorado to be with her family, purchasing a modest home for herself and Elliott. Ian had stayed in Atlanta and ridden out the remainder of his contract before being let go by the ball club.

She knew it was pointless to think about what could have been. Nothing was going to change what had happened. Ian had been a hard drinker before his injury and it was possible they wouldn't have made it anyway. As she stopped in front of the school, she saw her little boy's face light up. He waved enthusiastically at her, not seeming to be at all upset that she was a few minutes late. She grinned back at him and all her self-pity dissolved in an instant.

* * *

That night as she stared into her closet, a sudden sense of dread came over Megan. She realized she had nothing to wear that would allow her to fit in with the fashion-conscious Parisians. She was going to stick out like a sore thumb—or rather, a frumpy one. There was no way she could justify new clothes for just a short trip. Her entire wardrobe had been purchased to be comfortable and functional. She had a classic style, but it was on a tight budget and was far too casual for Paris. Her closet consisted mainly of black shirts and jeans. She definitely didn't have the right shoes, boots or coats to wear, and her only purse looked tattered to her as she stared down at it on her bed. She normally didn't give much thought to what she wore, but now that she was going to the fashion capital of the world, her heart sank at the thought of how out of place she was going to feel.

Shit, she thought, *I do not want to do this.*

She was second-guessing her decision to even go to France in the first place. In the week before her trip, in addition to packing, she needed to stock up on food for her mom and Elliott, clean the house and make sure the laundry was done, and find a neighbour to shovel the driveway. It was a week's worth of work just to go on a trip for four nights. At the moment, it seemed like a bit too much. She decided to go to bed early and tackle the wardrobe issue after a good night's sleep.

Paris—One week Later

Megan walked down the long hall to the arrivals area at Charles de Gaulle Airport, pulling her suitcase behind her, finally allowing a little flicker of excitement to start building inside her. She knew that Harper would be here to greet her, having insisted on taking time away from her meetings at the Paris office. Even though Harper had tried to brush it off as no big deal, Megan knew that as a fashion director stationed at *Style's* head office in New York, her friend's time when she was here was precious. As she scanned the waiting crowd, she spotted Harper rushing over with her arms open. Megan broke into a huge grin at seeing her best friend, and the two gave each other a long hug.

"Oh, I missed my friend," Harper said as she pulled back from Megan. She was the picture of sophistication in her black riding boots and fitted tan pants. She wore a short black-velvet riding jacket and her auburn hair fell in curls down her back. She was as tall as Megan but with generous curves accented by her choice of clothing.

Megan felt horribly underdressed in her best jeans, scuffed low-heeled boots and old wool coat. "I missed you too. God, look at you. You are so fashion-forward compared to my fashion-flawed. I am not going to fit in here very well, am I?"

Harper grabbed Megan's arm with both hands and squealed in delight. "Oh, yes you are! Our first stop is the *Style* office. I have to go pick up the wardrobe for the shoot. We're going shopping in *Style's* closet, only it is *so* much better because it's free and the world's best will be there to dress you."

"I'm size eight, Harper, not size zero. Nothing there is going to fit me."

"You're a six, not an eight—none of your clothes fit you properly. It doesn't matter anyway. They have lots of sizes for celebrity shoots. This is going to be the most fun ever!" Harper linked arms with Megan and they started walking to the exit.

* * *

Four hours later, they arrived at the hotel. Megan was too exhilarated by her new wardrobe to feel any exhaustion from the long trip. Harper had managed to sneak her five new outfits, complete with coats, purses, jewellery and footwear. As they stepped out of the cab, Megan felt

like a new woman in a full-length, dark red wool coat; black, wide-leg pants; and a sexy pair of pointed-toe, high-heeled black boots. She wore a chunky gold necklace and her hands were cozy in long, ruched black lambskin gloves.

Everyone at *Style* had been incredibly kind to Megan. Harper had even managed to find a new set of hard-sided luggage for her, left over from a shoot several weeks earlier. They had managed to cram it with Megan's new clothes as well as most of what she had brought from home. Harper had given Megan's well-worn purse, suitcase and carry-on to an intern to dispose of. She had practically screamed with disgust when she saw the ratty white cotton briefs and beige bra Megan had packed.

"What. The. Fuck. Are. These?" she asked, holding up a pair of panties with one finger, as if they were diseased.

"Put those back!" Megan hissed. "They're very comfortable."

"And they're garbage. Our next stop is to get you some good lingerie, my friend. Matching, lacy, underwire, push-up, sexy stuff. You're going to feel like a whole new woman."

After a stop at an upscale lingerie shop, they made their way to the hotel. As Megan looked up at the tall old hotel, she realized Harper had been right. It was as though the world was full of possibilities again. Today, Megan was no longer just an ordinary single mom with another average day to look forward to. She was a young, sexy woman in Paris, of all places! For once in her life, she had the right wardrobe and she had four luxurious days to be whoever she wanted to be—four days without any responsibilities whatsoever, and she intended to make them count.

Once they were inside, the hotel manager met them at the elevator. He turned to Harper. "Bonjour, Mademoiselle Young. You will let me know if you need anything."

"As always. Thank you." She smiled.

When they got into the elevator, Megan turned to her friend. "He knows you by name. Did you ever imagine you'd have this life when we were in Mr. Dumphy's math class?"

"Honey, that's all I did in his class. That's why I barely passed tenth grade." Harper laughed.

"Well, my friend, you have arrived and I can tell you that this whole life is a world apart from mine. We aren't even on the same planet, as far as I can tell," Megan replied with a smile.

As they walked down the long hall to Harper's suite, Megan couldn't help but savour the feeling of the incredibly plush carpet that lined the corridor. Excitement built in her, anticipation at what the room would be like if the hall had such a sense of grandeur. "So, what's on the agenda tonight?"

"We're going to hit a club tonight for a work thing I have to go to. Should be fun. Loads of hot guys. I thought you might want to rest first. Maybe we can order some room service for dinner and chill for a while?" Harper unlocked the double doors to the suite and pulled one of Megan's suitcases inside.

Megan grinned. "I'm up for the party but I have no intention of resting. Now that I'm here, I think I should make the most of it. *Really* have some fun."

"Well, look at you! Ms. Responsibility has done a one-eighty to Party Girl! I love it! Come on, let's put your things in your room."

Megan was too busy gawking at the incredible room to respond to what her friend was saying. "Wow! Do you get this suite each time you come to Paris?"

"I used to, but not anymore. Budgets have tightened up big time. I had to pull a few strings for this. I wanted to give you the full glamour experience."

The suite was bright and airy, with an expansive living room in the centre and French doors leading out to a large balcony. Classic French furnishings, including a white couch, loveseat and chairs, were scattered throughout the room, creating several seating areas. A round dining table sat in the corner with a huge bouquet of flowers on top. Two hallways flanked the entrance, each leading to a bedroom with its own ensuite. Oversized bouquets of white flowers could be found in each room.

“Oh my God, Harper! This is too much. I mean, I love it—it is complete luxury—but you really didn’t have to go to such trouble, seriously,” Megan exclaimed as they deposited her bags in what was to be her bedroom.

“Honestly, it was no big deal. Just a little sweet talking when I checked in last night and a couple of tiny favours for the hotel manager.”

When they reached the living room again, Megan wandered over to the balcony doors to admire the view. “Ack! You can see the Eiffel Tower from here! I’m really here! In friggin’ Paris! With you!”

“I know! I’ve been as giddy as a schoolgirl for days, knowing you were coming,” Harper replied, matching her friend’s enthusiasm. Grabbing a bottle of champagne from the mini-bar, Harper held it up. “Shall we?”

“I believe we shall,” Megan answered, clapping her hands with delight.

Two hours later, the pair were sitting at the dining table, eating supper and giggling hysterically.

“God, I’ve missed you, Megan,” Harper said, after she finally recovered from their latest bout of laughter.

“I’ve missed you too,” Megan answered. “I can’t remember the last time I laughed this hard. I bet it was when you came to visit in the summer.”

“Me too. I just never get this silly with my new friends. They just aren’t the same, somehow,” Harper said. As she spoke, her cell phone buzzed. “Speaking of new friends, I think we should start getting ready. I wish we could hang out here, but I have to put in an appearance tonight.”

Megan wrinkled her nose. “Should I really go with you? I could just stay here and hit the sack early.”

“Are you kidding me? No way! It’ll be fun, I promise.”

“It’s just that it’s a work function for you and I don’t want you to feel like you have to babysit me all night.”

“I will be happy to have you with me! Besides, I could never live with myself if I let you miss out on all the men!” Harper gave her a wide-eyed grin.

“I am NOT interested in the guys, so give it up already,” Megan responded.

“Oh, fuuuck! Don’t go all dull on me now.”

“Hey, I’m here to dance and drink and laugh and fully enjoy not being responsible for anyone, but I *really* don’t need to bone some stranger while I’m here.”

“Yeah, you do!”

“Oh, fuck off!” Megan exclaimed, pushing Harper playfully on the arm as they stood to get ready.

“Oh, you’re *so* going to get laid while you are here. That’s a promise!” Harper laughed as she walked down the hall to her room.

“Am not! So forget about it already!” Megan called back to her.

Megan opened the new suitcases and selected a sleeveless, black, jersey-knit mini-dress with an asymmetrical neckline that showed off her shoulders and willowy arms. She tossed it on the bed and quickly took a shower, then dried her hair. She put it up in a twist at the back, leaving a few pieces framing her face. A minute later, Harper walked in, fully dressed and ready to go.

“You’re fast!” Megan exclaimed.

“You learn to be when you’re in my line of work. Let me do your makeup,” Harper said, holding up her cosmetics case.

“Okay, thanks.” Megan smiled at her friend.

She sat on the bed while Harper worked on her quietly, paying careful attention to every detail.

“You really are beautiful, Meg,” she commented. “You totally could have been a model if you had wanted.”

Megan rolled her eyes. “Sure, sure.”

“I’m serious. I know what I’m talking about. You’re gorgeous and you have a smokin’ hot bod too.”

Megan shrugged. “I know. I’m the shit.” The pair giggled at her tongue-in-cheek response.

“Okay, time for the big reveal. Go look in the mirror!” Harper watched excitedly as her friend turned to see herself.

“Wow! How did you *do* that? I look hot!” Megan turned back to her friend, her face shining with pride. “I never knew I could wear red lipstick. I thought I’d look like a clown.”

Harper handed her the lipstick, then started to pack up her makeup case. “You just need the right shade. Keep it.”

“Well, I’ll use it for tonight, anyway.” Megan dropped it into the clutch she had been given earlier in the day, then looked up at her friend. “Harper, thank you *so much* for this trip and the clothes and the luggage. I hate to admit you were right, but I really did need this. It’s been a long time since I’ve treated myself to more than a good book and some cheap wine,” Megan said as she put her cell phone into her clutch.

Harper put her arm around her friend and gave her a squeeze. “I know, sweetie. If anyone needs to be spoiled, it’s you. You’ve worked so hard being everything for Elliott for the past seven years. You need to find Megan the woman again, not just Megan the mom.”

“I do,” she agreed. “Now let’s see if she’s at whatever club we’re going to!”

A note from MJ:

Thank you for reading the excerpt! I sincerely hope you enjoyed it.

Guess who she meets in Chapter 4? Things are about to heat up in Megan's life...