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Shay

AS THEY ENTERED the grand ballroom of the Plaza hotel, Shay felt as though she were crashing a royal wedding. Columns connected by limestone archways lined either side of the hall filled with linen tablecloths and white rose centerpieces. A series of chandeliers hung majestically over the most elegant crowd she'd ever seen.

Elyse leaned over and whispered in her ear. "You look perfect."

Shay smiled gratefully. She had no idea what to expect. Weeks earlier, Elyse informed them she'd secured invitations to an exclusive party and to arrive dressed to meet some influential people. Given the vague agenda, Shay couldn't stop debating about what to wear.

Elyse, who'd had enough of her anxiety over the matter, promptly sent Shay to her personal stylist. The woman selected a black halter Zhivago cocktail dress and tailored it to fit like a glove. Given the result, she had to agree with Elyse. She did look perfect. Good thing too. She'd never felt

more out of her depth in her life. At least she could pass for rich and cultured at first glance.

From a few yards away, Shay could see a rather tall, muscular blond man in a black tuxedo making his way through the crowd. His gaze fixed squarely on Elyse.

"Hello, my dear!" he said with a low and smooth voice in stunning contrast to the liveliness around them. Elyse smiled and offered two cheek kisses.

"Jack, lovely to see you. What an incredible party. Thank you again for the invitation," she said.

"You kidding? Any chance to get the Ryersons out of Chicago!" he laughed.

"Jack Tolliver, may I introduce Quinn McCourt, curator of the modern collection and Shay Pearson, one of our best publicists," Elyse said.

Shay blushed slightly. She'd hardly proven herself to be one of their best. At least not yet. As he shook her hand, Shay could see him quickly look her up and down.

"Well, you must be. Elyse only surrounds herself with the best of the best," he said with a wink in Elyse's direction.

After a few moments of small talk, Shay teased out that Jack was a well known collector and board member at the Met. By the time the bread basket had been passed, Quinn and Jack were in heated debate over some up-and-coming artist Shay had never heard of. And Elyse had engaged in small talk with every other person at the table before the salads arrived. Shay would have followed her lead, but she was too busy taking notes. She had never seen anyone

master the art of coalition building like Elyse. And by the end of dessert, she was determined to acquire the skill.

"So, Quinn," Jack said, sipping his espresso. "Elyse tells me you have a crazy idea. Let's hear it."

Quinn looked momentarily confused as he dabbed a bit of cappuccino foam from his lip and gave Elyse a sideways glance. Then he smiled and straightened in his seat to face Jack.

"I want to get *Iron Crescent* out of storage and bring it to Chicago," he said.

Jack's laughter was loud enough to startle a nearby table. Quinn laughed along, but Elyse stared at Jack, eyes firm, chin tilted just enough to look down at him.

"Oh," Jack said. "You're serious."

"He is," Elyse said, smiling like a mother boasting about her son's acceptance to Harvard.

As Quinn launched into a short pitch he'd refined that afternoon, Jack's amusement began to fade. His questions were laced with skepticism. But they kept coming. And that was a hopeful sign.

"I don't know, Quinn. If it was too controversial for a city as eclectic as New York, what makes you think it will work in Chicago?" Jack asked.

Just a flicker of irritation crossed Quinn's face before it disappeared but Shay's annoyance lingered. New Yorkers simply couldn't picture a cultural failure of theirs finding success anywhere else. To Quinn's credit, he politely explained that the piece was removed in the eighties, when New York was more conservative than Chicago was today.

"And what do you make of all this?" Jack turned toward Shay.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat. "I think enough time has passed since the controversy to ease tensions but not so long that people have forgotten. That's a good place to be for a publicist."

Jack laughed again. Elyse's proud mama smile returned.

"Fair enough," he said. "But you have two obstacles. And one is headed our way."

Shay looked up to see a man in a tuxedo with his hand already extended toward Jack, who rose to meet him and quickly introduced everyone at the table.

"Everyone, this is Hal Sullen," he said.

"Pleasure." Hal said matter of factly, tilting his glass toward them before turning to a waiter who appeared to be eagerly awaiting his marching orders.

"Linus, if you please, one of your special drinks for my friends."

Shay warmed to him immediately. Curt, not prone to social norms like a handshake, but warm and gracious nonetheless. She had seen this sort in Chicago many times. And they were usually the ones with all the power.

The waiter returned with a ginger whiskey cocktail, which evidently was made especially for him by the bartender at the Plaza whenever he visited. Harold Sullen, she learned, led a financial group in New York but had a personal interest in art. It became a passion after a childhood trip to England where he visited relatives who were knowledgeable collectors. After a few careful, but

clever questions on Elyse's part, the relatives were revealed to be the Rothschilds.

"So, Hal and I met at a Guggenheim fundraiser a while back and we get together now and then to trade industry secrets. He's also Board Chair for the New York Public Design Commission" Jack said.

The stunned looks appeared almost simultaneously around the entire table. Shay was hoping they'd make some headway toward the loan before they left town, but no one was expecting to meet the man who, ultimately, had the final say in the matter.

"And Quinn here may have an interesting item for your next agenda," Jack said.

She looked at Quinn, expecting some stammering or possibly a beet red face, but he looked like a kid waiting to see Santa. Despite the festivities around them and with no warning or opportunity to prepare (or to panic), Quinn shared his pitch. And in one shot, he convinced Hal Sullen that loaning Angled Crescent would give everyone some publicity to be excited about.

"Now," Hal said, taking a sip of his drink. "Persuading me isn't the hard part, you know."

"Yes, I'd imagine convincing the board is going to take some doing." Quinn said.

Hal chuckled. "No, son, they're not your problem. Rigazzo is your problem. Stodgy old asshole."

Elyse, noticing Shay's confusion, leaned over. "The creator of *Iron Crescent*."

"Right," Hal said. "All artists are a pain in the ass, but Paul Rigazzo is in another league. He was irate when the city removed it. Said if it ever left storage it had to go back to the exact same spot or he'd sue. That's why we never attempted to bring it back. If you can convince him to send it to Chicago, I'm sure the board will be all too happy to free up the warehouse space."

As they discussed the personalities of the various board members, Elyse quietly excused herself. Shay watched her exit the ballroom, phone to her ear. What could be more important than this? No one else seemed to notice. After a bit more small talk, Jack spotted a rival collector. He suggested to Hal that they see about any leads she might share. Now that she appeared at least three dirty martinis in.

"Well," Shay said, turning to Quinn. "Who knew we'd get so far on this one project in a single day!"

"I did," he said, smiling. "Momentum just seems to follow Elyse around. When she has her sights set on something, it just magically starts to fall into place around her."

"I'm starting to notice that," she said looking toward the ballroom entrance. Scooting her chair closer to Quinn, she lowered her voice.

"Can I ask you something?"

Quinn nodded.

"Do you ever feel uncomfortable with the money she spends on us? It's not that I don't appreciate it, but between

the hotel and the dress and this party? It's more than my rent," she whispered.

Quinn smiled, taking a bite of his Grand Marnier soufflé.

"No, I can't say I do feel uncomfortable. Money's a resource, Shay. That's all."

She could feel her irritation rise. Comments like this nauseated her. They were always made by people who had endless access to such *resources*. Quinn leaned back in his seat, looking directly in her eyes.

"Let me guess. You're afraid it's going to make you indebted to her. Or that she's doing it just so she can feel less guilty around people who aren't rich," he said.

"Maybe," she admitted.

"You'd be right. But let me tell you something about Elyse Ryerson McArthur. She is the most generous person I know. But only when it suits her interests. When you come from generational wealth, you have to be calculating in how you spend that money. And she's always considering the return on her investment."

"Kind of a cynical view, Quinn," she said. "I thought the two of you were friends."

"We are," he said. "It's not an insult. It's the thing I admire most about her. There's no wondering about her motivations. I make her laugh and she can be herself around me. I expect nothing and appreciate everything. That sort of relationship can be hard to come by when you're surrounded by people who always want something from you."

The thought hadn't occurred to her. All she saw when she looked at Elyse was a life of ease. The idea that wealth made her a target and that true friendship could be hard to come by left her with a hint of sadness.

"She's not spending money on you," he explained. "She's investing. Now you can twist yourself inside out trying to figure out why or you can just relax and enjoy it."

He gently patted her cheek. Then reached across the table filling his glass with the two hundred dollar bottle of champagne meant for midnight. He toasted her and took a sip.

"Personally, I'd go for the latter."