



With a sharp tipped pen Danica James stabbed at the date printed February 14 on her desk calendar. Crimson-colored ink dirtied the page. She released a grunt. Just like last year, and the year before, and the year before that, she'd be spending Valentine's Day alone.

Who needed high-calorie candy and flowers that would last only a few days? Her head eased against the brown leather chair. She did, that's who. She wanted chocolate. Wanted flowers. Wanted dinner and dancing with a sexy man who had the ability to take her breath away with a simple glance. She wanted the complete Valentine's Day experience.

Releasing a long, drawn out sigh, she lifted her head and snatched up the invitation her best friend placed on the corner of her desk earlier that afternoon.

"Cupid's Arrow Valentine's Day Charity Event."

Danica bit at the corner of her lip. *Hmmm*. It wasn't like she'd be *paying* for a date. Ha. Who was she kidding? That's exactly what she would be doing. Was she really that desperate? It took a beat too long to answer. Maybe she could better respond to the question when she wasn't in the need of some serious sexual healing. Not that she would sleep with some complete stranger on the first date. Well, it couldn't actually be called a date when you're paying for it, right?

She laughed and tossed the thick, red cardstock aside, abandoning the idea of Cupid's Arrow. "Looks like it's going to be me and Mr. Wiggles again this year." She thought about her trusty vibrator. That reminded her, she needed to stock up on batteries.

"Danica?"

Danica glanced up to see her assistant, Lizzy, standing in the doorway. Lizzy twirled a lock of her auburn hair around her finger, something she did when she really didn't want to intrude but had to. The woman was as timid as a sheltered six-year-old, but worth her weight in gold. No one could organize a hectic schedule like Lizzy.

"What is it, Lizzy?"

Lizzy glanced over her shoulder, then back to Danica. "There's someone—a man—here to see you. He doesn't have an appointment but is very insistent."

A man enthusiastic to see her? That would be a first. "Did he say what he wanted?"

“No.” She tossed another quick glance. Her voice fell to a whisper. “But I don’t think it’s business related.”

*Not business related?* If he wasn’t there to utilize her services, what could he possibly want? A sinking feeling washed over her, and her instincts kicked into overdrive. The last time a man showed up at her staffing agency—unannounced—he delivered divorce papers.

“What do you want me to tell him?” Lizzy asked in a hushed tone.

With the words cutting into Danica’s thoughts, she pushed away from her glass and wood desk, shooing the memory of that dreadful day she’d been served. Coming to a stand, she ironed her hands over her houndstooth pencil skirt, sucked in a deep breath, released it slowly, and said, “Okay. Let’s just see what Mr. Mystery wants, shall we?”

Danica stopped dead in her tracks the second her eyes settled on the tuxedo-clad gentleman in front of her. When she’d wished for a tall, dark, handsome man to stroll into her life, she hadn’t actually expected it to happen. Maybe next she should wish to hit the lottery.

Handsome held a frosted glass tray with a gold envelope nestled on top of a bed of red roses. The envelope sparkled as if it’d been dipped in glitter. What in the heck was going on?

Gathering her senses, she approached the man. “I’m Danica James. May… I help you?”

The lofty man didn’t utter a word as he pushed the tray toward her. Assuming he wanted her to retrieve the envelope, she did. She recognized the emblem pressed into the red wax that sealed the envelope. “Cupid’s Arrow?” she asked to no one in particular. She tore into the wrapping.

*Dear Ms. James,*

*On behalf of Cupid’s Arrow, I’d like to personally thank you for your generous contribution.*

*Contribution?* “What contribution?” She glanced up at her stone-faced messenger. Yeah, she wasn’t going to get any answers out of him, so she continued to read.

*Many lives will be touched by your gift. You may not know this, but feeding the hungry has always been a passion of mine. Thanks to you, one less man, woman, or child will go hungry.*

*I sincerely hope you are looking forward to your Valentine’s Day experience with us. It will be an evening you won’t soon forget. This, I promise you.*

An evening she won’t soon forget? Okay. Seriously, what was going on here?

*Your Cupid’s Fellow will arrive promptly at six o’clock p.m. on Valentine’s Day. An evening of fine dining awaits you at the exquisite Avion Shea Steak House. This will be followed by a trip to North Carolina’s renowned dessert bar, Chocolate Couture, where you will get the opportunity to custom craft a variety of gourmet items. Afterwards, you’ll be whisked to the unrivaled, five-*

*star De Lore Hotel in downtown Raleigh to wrap up the evening with drinks and dancing inside the coveted Horatio Ballroom.*

*We look forward to making your Valentine's Day one to remember.*

*Yours sincerely,*

*Alicia Raven*

Danica glanced up from the letter and rubbed the wrinkles that etched themselves in her forehead. "But I didn't—" Of course. This had her best friend Savannah's name written all over it. Thanking Handsome, Danica watched the man stroll away. His pristine physique reminded her of just how long it'd been since she'd had an intimate night. *Far, far too long.*

After sending Lizzy to the coffee shop on the corner, Danica returned to her office to call Dead Woman Walking.

"Savannah Washington," danced over the phone line.

"Really? You really bought me a man."

Savannah's laughter poured into the phone. "What are best friends for?"

"To keep each other from doing reckless shit. Like spending an evening with a male gigolo."

"I beg your pardon? Cupid's Arrow is *not* a gigolo service. They are the *elite* in matchmaking, as well as providing distinguished clientele with companions for social events, or whatever the need might be. Anyway, your Valentine's Day experience isn't about either. It's about you not spending another Valentine's Day alone. Plus, it's for a good cause."

Savannah's heart was in the right place, but Danica wasn't sure her mind was. The *minimum* donation for this so-called charity event was five thousand dollars.

Savannah continued. "It's one night, Dani," she said, using the name she dubbed Danica when they met freshman year at North Carolina A&T University. "You won't have to see this man ever again. You're thirty-two years old, but for the past year you've acted more like you're sixty. My grandmother gets more action than you do. Live a little. Be spontaneous. And if he's sexy-as-hell, feel free to take him home and screw his brains out. You have got to have short-circuited Mr. Wiggles by now."

"You are scandalous," Danica said with a chuckle.

Giving it some thought, it actually sounded like a lot of fun. And the De Lore Hotel... She'd wanted to check that place out for forever, but doubted she could even afford a glass of orange juice there, let alone a room. Maybe this wasn't such an atrocious idea after all. She waited for her instincts to shoot off red flags. Nothing. That was a good sign, right? Or maybe the idea was

so foolish that her instincts couldn't process it. "Okay, okay. I'll go. You did go through all the trouble. I should at least *appear* grateful."

Savannah squealed over the line. "Yaaay. But you really didn't have a choice. I would have hounded you until you caved."

Danica rested her palm against her forehead. "Do you realize how long it's been since I've gone on a date? Can I even call this a date?"

"It's been far too long, and yes, you can."

"I have absolutely nothing to wear. Especially to a formal event such as this."

"Say no more. We have two days to hit every store in the 919 area code. You'll have every man in the place wanting to slip you their number, or their tongue."

Danica chortled. *As if*. "But—"

"I don't want to hear any buts. I gotta go. My next client is here. Love you. And we'll talk later."

"But—"

"Kisses."

The line went dead. "Ugh. I hate when she does that."

Danica lowered her head to the desk and moaned. "But what if I make a total ass of myself?"