

Chapter 1

Molly

Searching for an escort was not the same as searching for porn.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself as I hit *enter* on my search engine. Holding my breath, I waited as the list of results—*Elite Males*, *Premium Gigolos*, *Stags R Us*—populated my laptop screen. I perched on the edge of my desk chair in my home office overlooking the Seattle harbor. All the entries sounded like adult films. Each one screamed precisely what to expect, making choosing any one in particular impossible.

With one eye shut and a tentative finger, I clicked on the top entry, *Elite Males*. An obscene amount of oiled flesh filled most of my monitor—a close-up photo of a smooth-chested guy flexing his defined muscles while lying on his back. The shot highlighted his torso and prominent tattoos, capturing only his lips and chin; he was clean-shaven and his jaw was also, for some reason, shiny. *Ugh!* The home page wasn't quite as bad as I'd expected but still cringe-worthy: almost laughable. The guy in the image provided what was supposed to be an enticing, yet exaggerated, display which, I assumed—combined with his other “talents” listed in the reviews that read like porn—must have earned him his five-star rating. To each his own.

The parts of the man I could see were conventionally hot. However, after reading the customers' erotic comments, I swallowed back the bitter tang filling my mouth. I felt dirty just looking at his image—and desperate. But I guess, for all intents and purposes, I was. My deadline from my publisher loomed overhead, and I had no manuscript to submit. My stomach rolled.

“It’s been a year, Molly,” Renee had said last week after huffing into the phone. “The editors expect *something* after that advance. Your reputation will only buy you so much time. Can you at least give me the first fifty pages so I can appease them? Try to barter an extension?”

Picturing Renee’s scowl was easy—an otherwise non-existent crinkle above the bridge of her button nose, with her perpetual bold lips in full pout mode.

A cold sweat broke out across my forehead. “I’ll get you something. I promise.” My hollow words sounded more like a question as I brushed off the brittle ends of hair that flaked onto my sweatshirt, an inevitable consequence of straightening my Jamaican locks with my flat iron. However, my hair wouldn’t have done that if I hadn’t fallen asleep at the computer the night before, attempting to muscle out some words that never came. I should have just gone to bed at a decent hour with my silk hair wrap.

“Look, Molly, you’ve been a real trouper since breaking off the engagement with Enrique. But I think gifting your cousin your non-refundable venue for her wedding was...a mistake. Admirable, but a mistake nonetheless.”

As I recalled how all my beautiful wedding decorations had come together for Jenny in the end, I wrapped an arm around myself, fighting the thickness forming in my throat. The bride should have been me.

“All this selflessness and courage has really done a number on you. It’s got you in a funk. I get your love for Enrique inspired you to try your hand at writing a romance. Unfortunately, and I know this will sound harsh, but business is business, and it doesn’t care that your ex cheated. You still need to produce a manuscript.”

I sighed, leaning back in my chair. “I know. But nothing I’m doing is helping. I’ve read loads of rom-coms and watched every chick flick I could find, but I can’t get into the plots.”

“Maybe that’s the problem. You’re just watching; you need to be involved. Have you considered getting back out there? Going on a few dates? Finding a new man?”

I straightened as a half-gag choking noise came out of my mouth.

“Look.” Renee sighed.

She ignored my dramatic response.

“The guy doesn’t have to be anything serious—just someone to clear your mind and rile your senses. Hell, you can even go as far as hiring an escort; I don’t care. You just need to find someone who can get you back into the right headspace.”

Renee wasn’t wrong. As my agent through my last ten thriller novels, she understood what I needed to make this change in genre work, and I was glad she hadn’t held back. I trusted her. Although she probably hadn’t meant for me to take her offhanded suggestion of an escort seriously, either. But with so little time left and no desire to fall in love, hiring a man seemed like my best option. Desperate times and all....

Besides, commissioning a professional as my muse fit right along with my history of unorthodox research methods, like when I wrote to a serial killer on death row—a suggestion made by my biggest supporter, my father. Everyone I was close to was used to my weird processes; however, I believed my taking Renee’s suggestion would have even pushed my dad’s comfort limits. My chest loosened.

A wave of guilt passed over me, and I widened my eyes. I couldn’t believe I was relieved he wasn’t with us anymore to convince me otherwise. I was a terrible daughter. The tightening of my ribcage returned tenfold.

Now, with a two-month deadline to produce *something*, I was desperate, staring at naked torsos and movie knock-off-named websites. The shirtless, playboy homepages were a common

theme for each company, which convinced me each site's primary focus was on their sensual aesthetic. I wrinkled my nose and sighed, resting an elbow on my desk and leaning my forehead on my palm. A sleezy-one-night-stand-kind of guy wouldn't work for my novel. I needed someone who offered different kinds of stimulation, like those of the romantic or intellectual varieties.

I returned to the original search page and glanced at the following few entries. Judging by the play-on-words titles, the websites were all sex-focused. I tapped my lips. My story wasn't supposed to be about sex. If I'd wanted inspiration about that, I could have just gone to a bar. The idea I'd pitched was supposed to be about, well, romance. Love.

Is there another word for an escort who didn't have sex? Like the kind I expect to see in a Hallmark movie?

Clicking at the top of the page, I typed *escort synonyms* into the search bar. A whole list of words populated the screen—*bodyguard, attendant, chaperone, custodian*, and...

Companion.

Yes! That was it. Someone who would talk and spend time with me, show me some romance, and pretend to sweep me off my feet. I gave a little clap before clearing the search bar and trying again with my newfound keyword.

Plus One Companion Agency was the top entry. With a steady hand, I clicked on the link. The home page presented itself as understated and classy, with a gray background and a close-up of a companion in the forefront. The guy, who appeared to be in his early twenties, looked attractive, dressed in a black sweater—thank heavens—lying stomach-down on a white surface with his arms folded and resting his chin on his wrists. *This is more like it.* As I scrolled down

the rest of the screen, the stand-out white lettering across the bottom of the page caught my eye—their *code of ethics*.

Plus One does not provide any form of sexual service. Our gentlemen offer companionship only. Please do not make lewd requests. Any contact of this nature will not receive a response. Furthermore, all personal information from the client and the companion will be held strictly confidential within the guidelines of the Plus One contract.

A no-sex policy and a non-disclosure—*perfect*. I smiled with a sigh—risk-free research.

Opening the tab labeled *companions*, I browsed their gallery of gentlemen. By the fourth page, with seven more to go, I gave up. Drumming my fingers on my desk, I thought hard. *Was there a way to narrow down my search?*

Under their *FAQs* tab, I spotted an entry for *companions willing to travel*. My heart sped. *Bingo!* Because although I hadn't planned on hiding the fact I was going to extremes for research, I also didn't want to bump into whomever I hired at the Seattle Fish Market or a pro football game sometime in the future.

I scrolled through the first page of the twenty remaining companions, making note of a few of the more handsome men. Was I being shallow? Yes, but I reasoned he needed to be more attractive and the complete opposite of Enrique for this whole thing to work. Not because I was looking for a rebound. I wasn't. But if the companion reminded me of my ex, this excursion would be a waste of my money. The idea was to stop wallowing over what could have been and remember the butterflies and excitement that accompanied romantic attraction. I clicked on the next companion.

My throat dried.

Deep-blue eyes jumped off the screen, demanding my attention. Jared Washington was beyond gorgeous with his strong jawline, light scruff, and tan skin. The way his fitted shirt accentuated his lean body clenched my stomach. Even his chic messy, medium-brown hair was a turn-on—a far cry from Enrique’s tidy short black curls. But none of those were even Jared’s best feature. That title belonged to the sexy dimple on his left cheek that complemented his succulent, full lips.

I was surprised by my sudden flush of warmth and the desire to keep scrolling through his other photos. The urge to picture Jared as the hero of my future love story was too hard to resist. The swarm of butterflies assaulting my stomach was a feeling I hadn’t experienced in quite a while. I bit the inside of my cheek to repress a smile. *Yeah, he would do.*

My phone buzzed beside me. I clenched my jaw without taking my gaze off Jared and put the caller on speaker. “This is Molly.”

“Hey, girl. It’s Renee. I’m checking to see how your research is going.”

I sat a little straighter. *Good thing I answered.*

“I know only a week has passed, but have you made any progress?”

Her tone sounded strained. I was happy I had some good news. “Actually, Renee, yes. I’ve decided to do what you suggested and hire a male companion.”

“Wait, what? You’re doing that? You mean like an escort where you can bang out your frustrations?”

“No.” I cringed, like I’d ever do that. “A companion. It’s different. Plus One contracts don’t involve sex.”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

I could picture Renee rolling her eyes as she dismissed my explanation, and I had to bite back my retort.

“I guess I should have expected this from the writer who stays in haunted houses and sits in on murder trials. Of course, you took me seriously when I said to hire a man.”

Her sarcasm was obvious, but *I* liked the idea and did my best to keep the edge out of my tone. “My methods haven’t failed me in the past.”

“Well, let’s hope they don’t this time, either.”

You and me, both. I rubbed my forehead. “I’ll make my deadline. I promise. I’m booking Jared now.” I typed my info into the Plus One website.

“Good. Have fun with your new boy toy.”

I froze, my hands hovering over the keyboard, as my breath whooshed from my lungs. “Renee!”

She laughed and ended the call. While her comment made me blush, a small part of my brain hoped she was right.

I stared at Jared’s face on my screen, and a familiar sensation ran through me—the adrenaline from doing hands-on research. The nitty gritty was what I was good at. If Renee was right, Jared *could* be just the man to get my creative juices flowing again.

With a flutter in my chest, I clicked the *billing information* button on the Plus One website and filled in my account details as I booked the Platinum Getaway. This package included a security deposit, a premium hotel fee, and a travel allowance. Past that, the page menu listed options for all kinds of extras. The list had my head spinning.

Most of the choices listed were self-explanatory, and I skipped past most. Knowing I was doing this for research, I stopped at entry labeled *romantic advantage* and checked the box.

Before the rendezvous, this extra perk allowed an hour's worth of interaction, either in person or via videochat. All other expenses worked as if I was checking into a hotel. The agency would keep my credit card on file and charge me at the end of my experience. But, while Jared and I were together, he would use his business card to pay for anything in conjunction with our contract. The illusion of his independence would appear as though Jared was paying for the date, regardless of the truth of the situation.

The growing subtotal near the bottom of my screen burned my eyes, and I took several rapid blinks. While this was turning out to be one of my most expensive fact-finding adventures, I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Besides, I could justify the cost because I might also learn something I could use in other future novels; perhaps a romantic suspense? I wasn't throwing away my money. Hiring Jared was an investment. Keeping that rationale in mind, I readjusted in my chair and typed out my request.

Hello,

I booked the companionship of Mr. Jared Washington for three days and three nights the week of September twentieth in a location yet to be determined. I have completed the necessary forms and made the initial deposit.

I look forward to hearing from Mr. Washington.

Sincerely,

Molly Covington

Double-checking my info on the application, I stared at the screen for a moment longer wringing my hands, before setting my jaw and tapping *submit*. The website said Jared would contact me directly. All I had to do was wait.

Then it hit me—in all my other research excursions, I'd been an observer; this investigation was the first time I would be a participant. My stomach quivered, and my legs twitched at the idea of spending all that time alone with a complete stranger. *Perhaps, I would feel better knowing more about him.*

I typed his name into FriendBook. Four Jared Washington profiles populated my screen, but as I studied each picture, none matched him. I tried the same on Instapic with similar results. Then a switch flipped in my brain, forming an idea that should have been obvious considering I was hiring a companion and I was a thriller writer—odds were Jared Washington wasn't his real name. Oh well, I guess I'd have to get to know him the old-fashioned way—by talking.

A *ding* indicated I received a new email. Wiping my clammy palm on my sweats, I clicked on the icon. A payment confirmation sat at the top of my inbox, attached to a letter stating Jared would be in touch. Since I wasn't having any luck on social media, I returned to the Plus One website and reviewed Jared's extended profile—

Age: 36.

I'd already verified he was only five years older.

Height: 5'11".

Average for a guy, yet tall enough.

Tattoos: none.

Eh, with a face like that, Jared could have gotten away with it either way.

Piercings: None.

Good. That was one of my personal preferences.

Smoker: no.

Thank goodness.

Hobbies: mountain biking, hiking, white water rafting, traveling, cooking.

No wonder he was in such good shape. And the mental picture of him in an apron...Bonus!

Education: math degree from ASU.

Oh man, my worst subject.

Residence: New York.

Requirement number one previously confirmed.

The site even mentioned Jared had an annual background check. *Perfect. Now, I didn't need to call any of my contacts at the police station.*

Going back to his photos, I inspected them through my writer's lens. The way his hair flopped over his forehead, the full pout of his lips, his strong hands as they gripped the handlebars of his mountain bike in his action shots, and the way his shirts stretched across his back. *What do you think, Molly? Could your future rom-com heroine fall for this guy?*

Hell, yes!