

Claim You're Mine

Chapter One

Winter

“You look like you could use something stronger than this.” My sister, January, sets a large pumpkin spice latte on the table and slides onto the seat across from me with her own cup.

I groan and reach for the coffee. “You’re not wrong.” Taking a big sip, I allow the heat and spice to settle my nerves and finally find a smile.

Arcane Brew has the best coffee in the French Quarter, and their beignets are to die for. Lincoln, one of the owners, likes to joke that there’s magic in the mix. I swear the man’s a marketing genius, because if you even whisper magic, the tourists come running in this town. Add in the slick black couches, mercury glass light fixtures, marble floors, and the Gothic gargoye corbels, and you have a coffee shop that’s perfect for a city like New Orleans. Along with Double Tap, the bar next door where I work, it’s practically my second home.

Especially when I need distance from my boss.

Keane Easton is all the things I want and everything I can’t have wrapped up in one sexy as hell package. Life is not fair.

“Winter?” January prompts in a tone that tells me she’s said it more than once.

“Sorry. I feel like I should be offering you the stiff drink. You’re the one getting married next week.” Not that you’d know by looking at her. No frazzled soon-to-be bride here. January is as put together as ever. Her dark, chestnut brown hair is pinned up in a stylish low bun, and her green silk shirt and black pencil skirt don’t have a wrinkle on them. We couldn’t be more different. I look like I rolled out of bed five minutes ago, wearing the same pair of jeans I wore yesterday, a faded Last Sanctuary summer tour t-shirt, and Chucks.

“We’ll get to that. But first, why do you look like you’re on a deserted island circled by sharks?”

The mental image makes me laugh, because one of those sharks looks a lot like our mother. “Mom’s driving me crazy. She sent me a text message at six this morning to say that I’m

the one who should be getting married since I'm the oldest, and the least I can do is bring an *acceptable* date to your wedding." I'm not even sure what makes a date "acceptable" in her eyes. Probably a law degree and a three-piece suit.

January cringes. "That's my fault. Ethan and I had dinner with Mom and Dad last night. Mr. Barton and his son, Wesley, were there too."

The coffee turns to acid in my stomach, and suddenly I know where this conversation is headed. Mom has been on me for months to be more like her. Like January. I sigh.

"Since Wesley is one of Ethan's groomsmen, the conversation naturally turned to the wedding. I guess Wesley's date fell through, so naturally, Mom pounced. She suggested he ask you to be his date."

A light shudder slides through me. She thinks Wesley is perfect. But there's something about him... Maybe it's just the fact that Mom likes him so much. That's usually enough reason for me to feel the opposite. Besides, "What makes everyone think I don't have a date?"

January sips her coffee and eyes me. "Maybe because you haven't dated anyone in like, two years? There're dry spells, and then there's establishing residency in the Sahara. Since you started working at Double Tap, have you been on a single date?"

Guilty. I rub my thumb over the brown cardboard coffee sleeve and try to figure out a way out of this conversation. I love my sister, but anything I say eventually gets back to my parents. It's not her fault. Mom is a master interrogator. A skill she learned by cracking open trial witnesses on the stand. I certainly won't admit to pining after a man who avoids me at every turn.

A man who's totally off-limits because he's my boss.

But that's exactly what I'm doing.

Every night as I close up Double Tap, I imagine Keane finally looking at me the way I look at him. Seeing a hunger burn in his eyes as he offers to help me or feeling the warmth of his hand on my skin as he takes my tray and our fingers make contact.

I ache to see that look *just once*.

Ugh. I guzzle the rest of my coffee and consider the line at the counter. Should I get another? I might need it for the rest of this conversation.

January leans forward. "You like someone!"

Nope. Not going there. "When's the dress rehearsal again?"

“Oh no. You are *not* getting out of this. Spill the tea. Who is this mystery man?”

Before I can deflect, my phone pings with a text message. I pull it out of my pocket, grateful for the interruption until I see who it’s from.

Wesley: Hey Winter, since we’re both in the wedding, I’m thinking dinner this week. Just a chance to get to know each other before we dance together. I’ll pick the place.

“How the hell did Wesley get my number?”

“Have you met our mother?” January shakes her head. “She wants you to be happy, Winter.”

“I am happy.”

“Settled, then. You know, with a husband and a decent career that’s not waiting tables for drunken tourists.”

There’s no judgment in January’s voice. She’s the only one in our family who doesn’t care whether I’m a waitress, a bag lady, or the governor. To my parents, I’m an embarrassment. The hot mess daughter who, at twenty-six, hasn’t figured out what she wants to be when she grows up and can barely pay her bills.

I’m not cut out to be a lawyer like them, or a publicist like January. I don’t need a fancy house and car to be happy. Or even a nine-to-five job. I like making customers happy. What’s wrong with that?

“Maybe you should give Wesley a chance?”

“Whose side are you on?”

My sister laughs. “Then there’s only one other thing you can do because you’re *not* ditching my wedding. Find a date.”

“I can’t ditch your wedding. I’m the Maid of Honor. Why do I need a date at all?”

“Technically, you don’t, I suppose. But that only leaves the floor *wide open* for Mom to introduce you to every single man she finds suitable. Your choice though.” The breezy tone of her last comment matches the twinkle in her eye.

“You’re evil and enjoying this too much.” I massage my neck, feeling the tension build

the more we talk. It's not just that my mom wants me to bring a date. It's that I can't think of a single person who'd *want* to go with me. How can I find a date in a week when I haven't been able to find one in two years? "What should I do?"

"Ask your mystery man."

I shake my head. Nope. "That's not an option."

"Why not?"

"Because." It kills me to admit this. "It's not just that he doesn't even look my way, January. I think he avoids me."

"If he can't see how great you are, Sis, then he's not worth your time anyway."

Tell my heart that. It doesn't seem to care that Keane isn't interested in me. All I can think about is him. From the moment we met, I haven't seen anyone else. Meanwhile, he probably just sees the same hot mess my family does. "Can you help me?"

January rolls her eyes and sighs like I'm hopeless. Maybe I am.

"Winter, you work with five of the hottest guys in New Orleans, and they're *all* single. Bring one of them." She holds up a hand to stall my protest. "Bring one as a fake date if you don't want to make it complicated. Or suck it up and go with Wesley. It's just for a few hours. Either way, you are not missing my wedding."

Mixing work with dating is never a good idea. All the more reason for me not to obsess over Keane. But a fake date? Would one of the guys go for that? "You think it would really appease Mom?" Because this isn't just a wedding date. It's my mom's version of a performance review. Can her oldest daughter finally be polished like the rest of the family, with good life prospects and the right type of man on her arm?

No pressure or anything.

January shrugs. "If you sell it right. I can tell them you've been keeping your relationship under wraps while you see how things go, and that's why no one knew about him. Then have a fake breakup after the wedding. You'd be off the hook with Mom for at least... a week."

We laugh. "Yeah, okay. A fake date." The idea grows, and the more I think about it, the more sense it makes.

Mom will think I've found someone, and no one will know the truth.

The bell over the door jingles as it opens, letting in a wave of sticky summer heat. Lincoln Wolf walks in and every woman in the shop takes notice, including January.

“Mom may not understand why you work here, but I do. Damn, he’s fine.” She fans herself with her paper napkin.

I hide a grin. Linc, like the rest of the guys at Citadel Securities, is former special ops. He keeps his body in top shape, as evident by the tight black Arcane Brew t-shirt that clings to his chest and his fully inked muscular arms.

He, along with Keane, Gideon, Derek, Sol, and Caleb discharged out two years ago and came to New Orleans to start a high-profile security group. In their off hours, they also run Arcane Brew and the Double Tap Bar. Each of the guys cycle through the businesses, but Linc prefers to run Arcane because he loves coffee so much.

I wish I knew why Keane prefers Double Tap.

I wish I knew a lot of things about him.

Linc scans the room and stops in his tracks when he sees the baristas. His gaze lingers, then he spots me and heads toward our table.

“Winter. How’s my favorite waitress?” His large hand lands affectionately on my shoulder. He reaches for my coffee, probably intending to steal a sip, but it’s empty after I guzzled it.

I chuckle and grab my cup back. “You’re too late. Gonna have to get your own. Linc, this is my sister, January.”

“Your parents had a thing for cold weather, huh?” he says as he shakes her hand.

“Or it was easier to remember our birthdays,” I mutter. January is a New Year’s baby, and I was born on the Winter Solstice. For a couple of busy lawyers, the dates must have been ideal.

Linc snorts and nods toward the counter. “Who’s the new girl?”

I glance around him to see Clara training Darcy how to run the espresso machine. “You didn’t hire her? That’s Darcy. She started this morning.”

He stares at them for a beat longer than normal. “No. I’ve been out of town for a few days. This looks like Derek’s work.”

I don’t know what that means. Sometimes I swear they speak in code.

January nudges me with her foot.

When I catch her gaze, she mouths, “Fake date.”

My stomach knots. This is such a dumb idea. But it’s either a fake date or a real disaster,

and if I have to hear my mother praise Wesley one more time, I might lose my mind. I can do this.

I clear my throat. “Um, Linc?”

One dark eyebrow raises as he looks down at me.

“January is getting married next week and... I was wondering...” Gah, this is hard.

“Wouldyoubemyfakedate?” The words rush out, almost unintelligible.

My sister rolls her eyes and hides her smile behind her coffee cup.

“You want me to be *what*?” he asks.

I blow out a breath and try again. “My fake date for my sister’s wedding?”

He coughs a laugh.

This is the worst idea January’s ever had. I shake my head, intending to tell him to forget it, but my sister breaks in.

“Our mom gave her number to one of the groomsmen because Winter doesn’t have a date to the wedding. She’s trying to get out of it by taking someone else. And since she’s not dating anyone... you’d get a free meal and open bar.” January gives him a blinding smile that usually gets men to do what she wants.

Sometimes I wish I had that kind of charm. Maybe Keane would look at me the way I wish he would. Like last night, when I caught him looking at me. I couldn’t read his expression but having his attention for even that short of time made my heart stumble.

“Sorry, darlin’. I had to fire the nanny, so I don’t have anyone to watch Gracie.”

“Another?” He’s had at least four in the last six months.

His fist clenches, and his jaw works. “Found her fucking her boyfriend on my couch ten minutes after she put my daughter to bed. Gracie never goes to sleep right away. God only knows what she heard.”

What is wrong with people? I shake my head. “If I hear of anyone, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks.” Linc eyes me a moment, then a slow smile spreads over his lips. “Why don’t you ask Keane?”

I swear his eyes twinkle as he makes the suggestion. *Gulp*. Does he know about my obsession with my boss? Am I that transparent? I can feel the heat creeping up my cheeks, so mortified. I must be the world’s worst at hiding my crush. My ever-observant sister notices and pounces. She and Mom are far too much alike.

“Keane? Is that the guy?”

I cover my face with my hands and hear Linc’s rough chuckle.

“Busted,” he murmurs.

“I hate you both,” I grumble. “And it doesn’t matter. He won’t talk to me.”

“Just ask him,” Linc says.

“I’ll think about it.” Showing up at my sister’s wedding with my boss as my date would make my mother hyperventilate with the inappropriateness of it. But I wouldn’t care. Seeing him in a suit? Maybe sharing a slow dance while he gazes down at me? I’d give anything for that.

Linc squeezes my shoulder again, glances back at Darcy, then strides to his office and closes the door.

January leans on the table. “So... are you going to tell me why you turned into a tomato when Linc mentioned this guy, Keane?”

“Definitely not.”

“Tell me, or I’ll sick mom on you,” she counters.

“You play dirty.”

She grins and settles back in her chair.

I run my hand through my messy bob and feel my chest constrict. “Like you said, I work with the hottest men in Nola. Keane doesn’t talk to me unless he has to.”

“You like him. I can’t believe you’ve been holding out on me. How did I not know you had a crush?”

“It’s not like that.”

“I’m coming by later to see him for myself.”

“No, you’re not.” If January is anywhere near me, there’s no way Keane would look my direction. My sister is gorgeous.

She laughs. “I’ll stay away as long as you promise to ask him to be your fake date. Sometimes men can’t read our signals. Maybe he’s not sure how you feel.”

“Maybe he can’t stand me.” My heart thumps a hard beat. I’m afraid to know why he avoids me. The truth of his rejection would hurt too much.

She slaps my arm lightly. “Stop. Everyone loves you. Ask him or I’ll be there tonight.”

“Okay, okay. I’ll ask. And when he says no, or worse, walks away without a word like normal, I’ll be humiliated and have my answer. Will that satisfy your twisted heart?”

January grins. “Yep. But I have a feeling he’ll say yes.”

I can’t let myself hope for that. Not when he turns away anytime I come near. But January will hold me to my word, so somehow, I’ll muster up the courage to ask Keane to be my fake date. And when he says no, I’ll pretend it doesn’t gut me and try to find someone else. Maybe Sol. He knows what it’s like to want someone you can’t have.

How hard it is to breathe when you’re around them, wishing for something that will never be.

Read the book here: <https://geni.us/ASH-Claim>