

Naïve in love and life, Izzy arrives in NYC with a suitcase full of dance shoes and dreams. Ultimately she must choose between true love, financial security and even her career.

# OPENING ACT

## Pirouettes and Promises: Book One

by Deborah Wynne

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# *Opening Act*

DEBORAH WYNNE

PIROQUETTES AND PROMISES, BOOK ONE

## Praise for *Opening Act*

“*Opening Act* is one of the best debut novels I’ve read. Wynne is a talented author who writes with the depth and maturity of a seasoned novelist. As an avid reader, it’s not often a debut novel grabs me and won’t let go, but this one did. In *Opening Act*, Izzy is a woman we can all relate to and most of us will see a bit of Izzy in ourselves. She’s real—there’s not much more you can say.

Her move to New York City is only the beginning of her journey and what a journey it is. Her joy is infectious and the reader will be uplifted by her ability to always see the positive side. But when she’s down, the reader will be equally affected. Wynne’s descriptions of emotions, actions, and interactions are just that good. Izzy’s life takes many twists and turns; some you’ll appreciate and some will be upsetting. But as in the real world, life is seldom one long smooth ride and Wynne’s mastery of the written word tells of a life we can all relate to.

*Opening Act* is a book I’ll be recommending to everyone and I’m looking forward to reading the next chapter in Izzy’s life. I’m also eager to see what the future (after Izzy) has in store for this wonderful new author.”

—Linda Thompson, *Host of*: TheAuthorsShow.com

“As a young girl, I always had the dream of running off to New York City and pursuing my life’s ambitions. *Opening Act* allowed me to live vicariously through Izzy’s adventures. The story line and characters kept me engaged and captivated. With the descriptive narrative, I was able to be totally absorbed into this great tale of love, chasing dreams, and coming of age. Life is full of surprises and the ending mirrored life in a twist I was not expecting. *Opening Act* is heartfelt and satisfying and I can’t wait to read about Izzy’s next adventures.

—AJ Bueno, *Paralegal*

“*Opening Act* will open your heart and mind to dreams and new beginnings. Wynne takes us on a journey of love, passion and loss where Isabella Joy Roccine, aka Izzy, leaves her past behind on the tail winds of Colorado to embrace her destiny as a dancer on life’s biggest stage—New York City. Where all things are possible, even love.

Prepare to laugh, cry, cheer, and console, as Izzy discovers love and romance. You’ll fly with her as she reaches for the stars under the white-hot lights of stage and dance. You will feel your heart pump, your palms sweat, and the electricity lick your skin as the curtain rises to the rafters as Izzy takes center stage. I could literally feel a lump in my throat, holding my breath, while my eyes moved over each word hoping and praying she hit each mark and performed each pirouette perfectly. It was all on the line. Career, success, and love.

But with all great heights, every mountain climbed, the view from the top is breathtaking but treacherous. It can be a long fall.”

—*Tan VanHuizen, Author and Poet*

“I enjoyed *Opening Act* immensely. To put it in perspective, I was reading the latest of a popular author’s book and found it to have a tedious beginning. I received *Opening Act* and it was completely different! It caught my attention from the very beginning and continued to hold my attention; the kind of book you don’t want to put down.

Wynne’s description of the characters and scenery are great and I don’t mean just the sex scenes. The descriptions are just right and not overdone, so the book never bogs down. Also, the story line is cohesive and flows very well. It’s nice to read an adult book with a little ‘kick’ to it. *Opening Act* is well done!”

—*Carolyn Brown, Retired Library Director*

“I couldn’t put *Opening Act* down. It was riveting, suspenseful, and spell-binding. I felt a strong connection and relationship with the characters. I can’t wait for the next book to see where Izzy goes from here. *Opening Act* is an unforgettable story of love, loss, and hope.”

—*Kathleen Allen, Retired Educator*

“I normally read psychological thrillers so I would have overlooked this book, which would have been a shame. I love how descriptive Wynne is when describing things or places; you can easily envision them. I thoroughly enjoyed *Opening Act* and can’t wait for the next installment in Izzy’s life.”

—*Amy Sorensen, Avid Reader*

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## CHAPTER 1

Izzy felt a bump and awakened abruptly. The passenger in front of her had pushed his seat nearly into her lap and opened his window cover allowing the early morning sun to stream through the airplane cabin. She slid her cover open and looked outside. She could see water below her and given their decline in altitude, was certain they were crashing. She sucked in her breath awaiting the impact and her demise. She always dreamed of fame as a successful dancer, but knew she was making this journey to also find everything else missing in her life. Even if she only found a respite for her recent loss and grief, then her pilgrimage would still be worth the effort. Her imagination was in overdrive. Her dreams would not end in a fiery splash today.

At the last moment, when it seemed like the plane was certain to plunge into the water, the runway appeared out of nowhere and she felt another bump as the plane made contact with the runway. In all probability, the first bump was the landing gear engaging and waking her. As a relieved giggle escaped her lips, she rubbed the back of her neck vigorously, not to soothe the crick which had developed over the long flight, but to self-chastise her exaggerated drama.

The flight attendant said cheerily, “Welcome to La Guardia Airport and New York City,” before beginning a spiel on connecting flights that regressed quickly into background garble. Izzy felt the return of anticipation in her stomach as the plane taxied to the concourse.

She double checked her new keys in her pocket and retrieved her phone from the seat pouch in front of her. As they rolled to the gate, she pulled her enormous purple tote out from underneath the

seat. Unzipping it, she pulled out a tiny purse on a long strap and hung it around her neck.

It was hard to wait her turn as the passengers were leaving the plane. After what seemed like hours instead of minutes, she stepped into the aisle and retrieved her carry-on from the overhead bin. Her tote bag bumped every seat as she exited and she told herself to slow down and breathe. When she was out of the plane, she disengaged the handle of her carry-on and started walking down the concourse. Her smile was involuntary. This was the most exciting thing she'd ever experienced. The hair on her arms stood at attention as small receptors to everything around her.

After a trip to the restroom she dashed inside one of the small airport shops and grabbed a bottle of water and an energy bar. On a whim she picked up an "I heart NY" mug in bright turquoise. It was a touristy move that gave her away as a rookie, but it was early morning and nobody was watching.

Finding her way to the baggage wing was simple, she just followed the crowds. She fed some dollars into the machine to release a luggage cart and pushed it over to the carousel. She fingered her short brown curls and tugged her plaid shirt down over her narrow hips, as the empty ellipse circled in front of her. A creature of rudimentary habits, she confirmed several times that her keys and phone were still in her pockets.

Finally, the luggage started tumbling and clunking onto the motorized carrier. She recognized one out of the chute as hers and carefully edged her way through the crowd to retrieve it. Wrestling it out, she placed it on her cart with her carry-on. After repeating the process three more times; she struggled to get them all stacked and balanced on the cart.

She was grateful her mom's longtime boyfriend, Robert, had given her some nylon straps right before she'd left Colorado. She meticulously wrapped the straps around her enormous stack of bags. She glanced around at the crowd and realized her smile was clearly out of place since she only saw sober or grimacing expressions. Her smile even larger, she pushed the behemoth cart down the hallway.

## *Opening Act*

As she careened around a corner, she looked for signs on where to catch a cab and made her way to the curb. The sun was still low in the sky, but she already felt its warmth.

She took a deep breath of air; rich with diesel, burnt jet fuel, and cigarette smoke from passengers desperate to elevate their nicotine levels after a long flight. Others might've wrinkled their noses, but Izzy thought she'd never smelled anything so wonderful. It smelled like adventure to her. She waited her turn in the line for taxis; yellow, green, and black cars oozing forward slowly and methodically, also awaiting their turns.

Then it was her turn. A newer taxi stopped in front of her and a beautiful tall black woman bearing an effervescent smile, jumped out of the driver's seat. She had an elegant long dancer's neck and endless sinewy legs. Izzy had expected a paunchy older man, gruff and sweaty. Relief washed over her and she smiled.

"I have four big bags and a smaller one, will they all fit?" Izzy asked.

"Of course," the cabbie answered, "where're you heading?"

"Lower mid-town," Izzy said, "Is that okay for you?" Suddenly, for no reason other than her own naiveté, she was worried the driver wouldn't be able take her to her destination.

The driver, still smiling brightly, said, "Yes ma'am. Let's get your bags loaded. I'm Jazmin."

"Thanks, I'm Izzy."

"Perfect, we both have Z's in our name," Jazmin said and after a quick release of the straps and with one swift motion; she opened her trunk and placed two of the large suitcases and Izzy's smaller carry-on inside. She placed another in the front seat, and the final one on the driver's side back seat all while Izzy stood speechless on the curb.

Jazmin chuckled at her impatiently. "C'mon girl, climb in. Let's get you to your address."

Izzy handed Jazmin a small card imprinted with only her address, and settled back into the seat. Her friend Marcie had explained to Izzy that many cabbies spoke fractured English, and

listened even less clearly, so Marcie told her to have cards made with only her street address to hand to them.

Marcie apparently ended up on several confusing (and ultimately expensive) taxi rides when the driver couldn't understand her accent and she devised the method and swore it was foolproof. Izzy wondered if the cards were necessary, but Marcie was originally from Louisiana and spoke with a strong southern drawl, which meant Izzy had sometimes taken a minute to understand what she was saying. So it kind of made sense. Izzy had always lived in Colorado and felt she was virtually accent-free, but surprisingly, the gesture didn't seem foreign or weird to Jazmin. She glanced at the card and nodded before tossing it on the dash and pulling out into traffic.

Izzy felt the warmth of the seat through her shirt and jeans and also felt heat coming up through the floor in the cab. The car smelled like fake pine and hairspray as well as the distinct undertone of a locker room. She noticed the pine tree shaped air freshener hanging on the rear view mirror and appreciated the effort.

Jazmin turned around and asked, "You moving here? That's a lot of luggage for a vacation."

Izzy giggled in agreement, "Yes, I'm moving here. I've only been to New York City once before and that was just for an overnight. I got a job here."

"Izzy, if you're going to live here, you can just call it the City. No one says all three words," Jazmin chuckled then asked, "What kind of job?"

"On Broadway. We start rehearsals next week." Izzy couldn't quite believe it herself as she told Jazmin. It all didn't seem real yet. "The show opens the first part of November."

Jazmin seemed impressed and low whistled through pursed lips, "Wow. That's cool. You sing and dance, then?"

Izzy laughed, "Yes, a bit of both." She was half-expecting for Jazmin to ask her to provide a sample of her talents, but fortunately Jazmin seemed, all at once, pre-occupied with traffic.

She noticed Jazmin had turned the radio up and Neil Diamond was singing *America*. Since New York City was the

## Opening Act

epitome of America and Neil Diamond was her favorite; it all seemed perfect.

Izzy took advantage of the break in conversation to begin rereading the letter Marcie had included when she mailed the apartment keys to her.

*“Dear Izzy,*

*“Here are keys to the apartment. The giant key is for the building. The one marked with pale pink (yes its fingernail polish!) is for your main lock. There are two deadbolts. The first one up is marked with hot pink, and the top one with bright red. Only the main door lock is locked right now; the building manager requires access to an empty apartment. He only has a key to that main lock. The two deadbolts are private. Use all three locks as soon as you put anything in the apartment. Don’t want to scare you, but it’s just a good habit to get into.*

*“The larger key marked blue is for the laundry room in the basement. The smaller blue key is for your laundry locker. The lockers are tiny; just enough for supplies, hangers, and maybe an iron. There’s an ironing board in the laundry room if you need one.*

*“There are two more keys on the ring. The teeny tiny key is to your mailbox. Anything that won’t fit in the box goes to Nancy in Apt 102 on the first floor. She’ll leave you a little note in your box telling you to pick it up. Anything large—like the boxes you shipped—are left in the downstairs lobby. Just a warning, if anything stays too long, you’ll get a nasty-gram from Nancy.*

*“In the coat closet you’ll see a big safe. My aunt had it installed when she lived there. I left you a survival kit in the safe, so open it as soon as you get there. Use the combination I already gave you; it may still feel locked but give it a tug straight out and it’ll open. It’s great for valuables and important papers because it’s also fire proof. The property manager does not have the combo. Here’s the number for the*

*best locksmith in the city in case you can't get it open or you want to change the locks on the deadbolts."*

Izzy already had put the combination for the safe and locksmith's number in her phone; so she looked up from reading because she didn't want to miss another minute of the drive. She was mesmerized by the sights and had never seen so many tall buildings. The sun was still low in the sky so the shadows showed off every detail on the buildings. The unfinished letter was resting in her lap and Izzy felt torn between soothing her compulsion to finish reading it or feeding her curiosity by paying attention to every detail speeding by her.

Jazmin was looking over her shoulder at her. "You doin' okay back there, Izzy? You're really quiet. Red-eyes knock ya out, don't they? Feel free to snooze if you want, I'll let you know when we get there."

"I was just re-reading instructions for my apartment," Izzy replied. "But I'm also trying to sight-see as you drive." Izzy was actually wide awake with anticipation. Her excitement was overruling all the doubts and fears about this bold new direction in her life. Jazmin was bopping her head enthusiastically to Bruno Mars. So far, she was enjoying Jazmin's music choices as she gazed out the window, but when they stopped for traffic she impatiently fingered the letter and picked it up to finish reading it.

*"The sofa is disgusting, so don't sit on it until you get my slipcover. I had it laundered and left it with LuEllen in Apt 308. You have her number. She also has the microwave, Wi-Fi router, cable box, and window fan. Give her a call and let her know you're coming before you head to her apartment. She has kids and is nearly always home, but she may not answer the door if she doesn't know who's knocking."*

*"The apartment was leased with the sofa, entertainment center, dining table with two chairs, dresser, and headboard with a box spring and metal bed frame. If anything is missing when you get there, it's because the property manager poached it. Let me know and I'll give him hell and get whatever is missing back for you. If you decide*

*you want to replace anything, you either have to leave the new piece when you leave or have the old one stored to put back later.*

*“There’s a big cage in the laundry room that has stacks of free stuff—things that other residents don’t need or want any more. There are also tools, ladders, and fold-up tables etc., which can be checked out. The fold out tables are wonderful for dinner parties.”*

Izzy couldn’t help but laugh. It was doubtful she’d ever have a dinner party. She didn’t know anyone yet in the city and her friendship history was not strong. Between the long hours of working or rehearsing, all of her past friendships had been based on convenience and were, at best, superficial. Her dating life had been non-existent.

She’d never had a real boyfriend, had only ever gone out on a few dates and had never experienced a real kiss. She was certain the word ‘naïve’ flashed in neon on her forehead, impacting any potential relationship with every living and breathing heterosexual male she encountered.

Not wanting to miss more of her ride, she compulsively read the last few lines on her letter.

*“Best of luck Sweetie, let me know when you get in. Call or text anytime. Can’t wait to meet you the next time I’m in the City. Hugs and love, Marcie.”*

The irony didn’t escape Izzy that the closest friendship she had in her life was with someone she’d never met in person and that the friendship developed over the phone in just a few weeks. She treasured the hours and hours of phone calls with Marcie.

Marcie’s voice was sultry and silky; her boisterous laugh made Izzy giggle. She was fascinated with Marcie; her fantastic life, her fiancé Sam and of course, the star trajectory with her career. Marcie even had her own Wikipedia page. Marcie was colorful and audacious; both were qualities Izzy aspired to, but failed miserably to achieve. She was grateful Opal Theater facilitated their introduction.

Izzy looked outside and tried to take it all in; the color of the sky, the architecture, and the charm of all the little stores and shops.

It was only six in the morning, so cages were still locked down over storefronts and sidewalks were nearly empty. Only a few people were out including a lone dog walker, a couple of joggers, and a handful of business people in suits with briefcases hurrying to get an early start to their day.

Jazmin, aware Izzy was now at full attention to their trip, was chatting away about landmarks while interspersing creative language to any driver operating a vehicle near them. Izzy thought she was delightful and leaned forward in her seat to hear every word.

Izzy was surprised when Jazmin told her they were getting close. The ride seemed much too short.

“When we get there if there’s a loading zone, I’ll park and help you get your bags inside. If there isn’t a loading zone, I’ll only be able to get them onto the sidewalk for you.”

“Well then, let’s hope for a loading zone.” Izzy answered and both laughed.

Within moments, Jazmin pulled up into a generous loading zone in front of a very old building. It was made of brick with carved stone accents, corbels, and keystones. There were two large oak trees growing through big ornamental grates in the sidewalk. A pair of gigantic urns, filled with pink impatiens and graceful trailing ivies, framed the doorway. The door was massive and seemed to be ten feet tall and at least four feet wide. It had a worn spot above the giant door handle where thousands of hands over the years had rubbed the finish raw. Izzy thought the door was, quite simply, spectacular. A corner rip in the bright blue awning fluttered softly in the breeze, drawing attention to the burnished gold letters on the building.

She could feel her heart racing as she leaned over the seat and gave Jazmin one of her pre-paid VISA cards. She was using a pre-paid card because Marcie told her to “never-ever” use a real card and by now she fully subscribed to the gospel of Marcie, following her every suggestion.

Her knees were wobbly as she got out of the taxi and with her heavy tote back on her shoulder, she crossed the sidewalk. After fumbling with her new keys, she placed the big key into the lock.

## *Opening Act*

With luck it opened on the first try and she pulled the heavy door open before leaning against it to keep it open.

As she turned around Jazmin brushed past her and was already loading the first two suitcases onto the polished terrazzo floor in the little lobby.

“Good girl! Just keep that door open Izzy. I can get ‘em all.”

Jazmin brought the next two and ran back to the car to retrieve the smaller carry-on. She rolled it through the doorway and flashed a sincere and broad smile.

“Good luck to you Izzy. Here’s my card in case you ever need a ride somewhere. I drive Tuesday through Saturday. It was nice to have you as my first passenger of the day and my first passenger of my week.”

She quickly pressed the card and Izzy’s receipt into her hand and jogged out to the taxi, turning around with a last moment wave. She jumped into the taxi, slammed the door, and Izzy couldn’t help but laugh as she roared back into the street while using her middle finger to gesture to a driver attempting to cut her off.

Izzy stepped inside and let the heavy door close slowly behind her. The lobby smelled of dust and lemon oil and as she inhaled the fragrance, Izzy collapsed on a bench by a tall bank of antique mailboxes.

As she looked around at the grand history represented in the lobby with its gleaming mahogany paneled walls and dripping crystal chandeliers, she wondered how many people had walked across this lobby. How many people used this fortress as their home? Lovers joined and separated, babies born, children growing, and lives passing on to a better place. She leaned over and traced her finger on one of the antique mailboxes and thought of the love letters, Christmas and birthday cards, and everyday bills filling the openings. Imagining this building’s history was at once overwhelming and reassuring. She wondered what her contribution to the history might be.

She pulled out her water bottle and took a long drink. Finally she stood up and walked over to the back wall of the lobby where six cardboard boxes and a wooden crate were stacked. She recognized

them as the ones she'd shipped last week; all neatly marked with her apartment number "402". Her eyes took another quick survey around the entire lobby and it hit her at once the meaning of the phrase 'fourth floor walk-up'. She groaned to herself since it finally made sense. There was no elevator.

She repeated quietly to herself, "There's no elevator." She glanced up the tall flight of stairs, took another drink of the water and retrieved her tote and carry-on. "I can do this." She whispered with determination, mostly to reassure herself she could. As she had packed and readied herself for this move, the same four words had been her moment-to-moment mantra.

She carried the tote and the carry-on up to the first floor landing and put them on the floor. Then she went down the stairs and rolled the larger suitcases to the bottom of the stairs and attempted to lift one to carry. She'd packed all of them within ounces to the airline limit. She realized she wasn't tall or strong enough to carry it up by the side handle. The only way she'd be able to get them upstairs was to roll each one upright to the first step and tug and roll up every step. Each step made a loud hollow thump. She decided it wasn't too difficult but would take time. Her plan was to get all the suitcases to the first landing and then repeat the process on each flight. She worried about her stack of boxes, but knew she'd figure out a solution after the suitcases were upstairs.

Slowly, she continued to thump the first bag on every step as she made her way up. When she was a few steps from the top of the first flight, she was startled out of her concentration.

"Whatcha doin'?" A voice in a sing-song whisper asked. She looked up to see a wild head of red hair on a tall well-built man with glimmering green eyes. He was only wearing blue pin-striped boxer shorts. Unfortunately the boxers were right at eye-level and she felt her face flush.

His voice stopped her dead in her tracks. She tightly gripped the tall handle of her suitcase so it wouldn't go tumbling down the stairs, while trying to look up and focus on his face and not his boxers.

## *Opening Act*

“Uh, I’m moving my suitcases upstairs. I didn’t see an elevator. Is there one?” She answered, immediately hopeful she’d missed seeing one.

“Nope. No elevator,” he said. She could tell he was trying not to laugh at her. “You’re making quite the noise out here. Other residents might not be as amicable as I am. It looks like you might be moving in.” He sighed deeply and dramatically. “Not the way to make an impression when you’re moving in.” He couldn’t hide his amusement. He glanced down at the remaining suitcases lined up neatly at the bottom of the stairs and said, “You gonna do that with all of those?”

She nodded. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t figure out any other way to get them up. I’ll try to be quiet.”

He laughed heartily. “Somehow I don’t think that’ll be possible.” He leaned over nearly brushing his briefs in her face, making her face even hotter, and easily picked up the suitcase she was holding. “Come up here and just wait a minute.”

With her bright red face, she stepped up onto the landing and he disappeared into the apartment. As she waited for him, she nervously ran her fingers through her bangs and rubbed her shoulder where the strap of her tote had created a sore spot. He emerged in a few minutes wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and an old pair of running shoes. It looked like he’d made a half-hearted attempt to smooth his bed-head.

“What apartment are you in?” He cocked an eyebrow and flashed an eager smile.

She answered quietly, “402.”

“That’s at least four floors of angry people very early in the morning.” She knew he was teasing her. “Take that giant purple purse of yours and head up to get your apartment open. I’ll bring ‘em all up.”

She watched as he went down the stairs, grabbed two of the remaining suitcases, tucked one under each arm and then galloped up the stairs two at a time.

As he reached the landing he said, “What are you waiting for Curly? Get going now and leave everything but that enormous purple

purse.” He smiled broadly. When she still seemed hesitant to move he reassured her, “Don’t worry so much. I’ll get ‘em all for you.”

“It’s a tote...not a purse,” she corrected him while grinning and walked up all the stairs without pausing to the fourth floor. She attempted to open the lock and heard him behind her. He put down two suitcases in the hallway before she heard him running back down the stairs. She was still fumbling with the lock when he arrived with the last two suitcases and her carry-on tucked under his arm.

He leaned across her and pulled back on the doorknob and the key turned in the tumbler. She turned the knob and opened the door. She couldn’t help but notice he smelled wonderful, like limes and toothpaste. He also didn’t seem winded after his multiple climbs on the stairs.

“I guess I have much to thank you for this morning,” she said grinning. “I really appreciate you carrying my suitcases up for me. You’re right, I would’ve had everyone in the building irritated at me. I can handle it from here.” She leaned down and rolled the first suitcase over the threshold.

“Not so fast, Curly. Can’t get rid of me that easily. I’m assuming those boxes downstairs cluttering up our lobby are yours too?”

She nodded. “Yes, but I’ll find a way to get them up here. You’ve already done so much to help me.” She tried to sound earnest, but secretly hoped he’d protest and bring up her boxes; mostly because she didn’t want him to leave.

“Can’t take a chance you’re going to drag ‘em up the steps.” He was laughing as he jogged back down the stairs.

Without really looking inside the apartment; she stepped in and shoved a rubber stopper under the door. Then she began to move her suitcases in from the hallway.

He appeared at the doorway with two boxes stacked on top of each other just as she stepped back outside into the hall to get another bag.

“What did you pack in these?” He asked with a sideways grin. “Rocks? We have plenty of rocks here, no need to bring ‘em from somewhere else.”

## *Opening Act*

Taking the bait she said, "I'm from Colorado. We have the best rocks ever. They're so special we have a whole mountain range named after them," she said seriously as she lowered her chin and looked him in the eyes. "I needed to bring some with me." The twitch of her slight smile betrayed her pretend seriousness.

"You're downright sassy first thing in the morning," he said as he disappeared down the stairs again.

She was giggling as she shoved the first two boxes out of the doorway and stepped back out into the hall.

He appeared with two more stacked boxes balanced on one arm and the other was holding the wooden crate to his hip. She followed him in and helped him ease the wooden crate to the floor. He then used both hands to get the boxes onto the floor.

"Pretty heavy chickens in that crate. Let me guess, special Colorado chickens? Do you have a mountain range named after them too?" He turned and went out the door and once again she could hear him jogging down the stairs.

Surprisingly he still didn't seem even slightly winded as he arrived with the last load, but she noticed a tiny drop of sweat on his forehead. She wanted to use her fingers to wipe it away and squeezed her hands together to rid herself of the urge.

After he came inside and put the last ones on the floor, she extended her hand, "Hi, I'm Izzy." She hoped her hand wasn't as shaky as her nerves.

He took her hand, "Nice to meet you Izzy. I'm Brandon."

"A pleasure Brandon. Thanks again so very much. I'd offer you a cup of coffee or some warm muffins, but as you can see I only have rocks and chickens so far."

"Wow," he said looking around at the apartment. "Great colors."

Izzy had been so distracted by him she hadn't even really looked at the apartment yet. She walked into the middle of the living room and turned around slowly. The whole room was bathed in Pepto Bismol pink. She burst out laughing, "Wow is right," she said. "I guess I have some painting to do."

“Hold that thought *Curly*,” he said while going out the door. “I’ll be right back.”

She had no idea what he was doing now and she walked into the small kitchen area while continuing to laugh. With her hands on her hips, she surveyed the room. The cabinets were painted bright purple with flashy hot pink crystal Lucite pulls. The counter tops were indeed new, as Marcie had promised, and were a tasteful steely gray. She opened up the tall, skinny stainless refrigerator and was delighted to find an ice maker in the freezer. The fridge was so sleek and beautiful; it looked out of place next to the garish cabinets.

The narrow stove, with just two burners, was also new. It didn’t look like it had ever seen a pan. Next to it was the smallest, narrowest dishwasher she’d ever seen. Inside, a plastic bag holding the warranty was still taped to the rack. An enormous deep porcelain sink, big enough to bathe a child, was dropped into the new counter tops. She thought it was probably as old as the apartment. It appeared to have been well loved because it was clean and buffed to a soft shine. Cooking was going to be challenging because there was less than three square feet of actual counter space.

She glanced over to the dining area and saw a bright brassy yellow table. Two straight back chairs were tucked underneath. One was lime green; the other the same hue as the cabinets.

She was still taking it all in when Brandon appeared in the doorway with: a ladder; some empty paint rollers; a long broom-handle looking stick she assumed was a roller extender; and a travel mug with a slight drift of steam. He handed her the mug, brushing her hand with his thumb, sending a shiver up her back.

“Thought you could use some coffee. Wasn’t sure how you like it, but I added a bit of vanilla creamer for you.” He smiled. “I can’t drink it black any more. The guys make fun of me at the station house. They call it my magic milk.”

“I love vanilla creamer. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me; but this is the best.” She tapped her finger on the coffee mug. “Coffee was exactly what I needed. When I get settled I thought I could bake you some cookies as a thank you, but that doesn’t seem adequate for all your help.” She paused before

continuing, “You said station house, are you a police officer or maybe a firefighter?”

“A fireman. So bringing up your stuff was just keeping me in shape. But I’d never turn down cookies. That’d be great.”

He walked a bit closer to her and casually crossed his arms and leaned on the wall next to the fridge. She liked that he seemed comfortable and making himself at home. He watched her sip the coffee and close her eyes in pleasure.

“Did you bring a coffee maker with you, in one of those boxes? Or did you just bring rocks and chickens?”

She giggled. “Nope, the rocks and chickens took up too much room. I thought I would just buy one once I got here.”

His expression showed he thought her giggle was adorable. Her whole face lit up and her short soft curls bounced rhythmically as if they were timed perfectly with her humor. Her enormous round blue eyes brimmed with unabashed glee.

“I have an extra, I’d be happy to give you. My ex-girlfriend,” he emphasized the ‘ex’ part of the word, “left hers behind. It’s fancier than I need and has a little espresso machine on the side. I still use my old Mr. Coffee.”

Standing in a rolling sea of pink walls and purple cabinets, Izzy attempted to process what was happening with him before answering. He’d just told her he was single. He was kind, thoughtful, and funny. He was absolutely the most handsome man she’d ever seen. She surmised the perceived universal romanticizing of a fireman was a bonus. She had no experience with guys at all, and she wasn’t sure, but she thought he might be hitting on her—or maybe at least he might be interested in her. That both excited and terrified her. She absentmindedly rubbed her forehead to calm her I-know-nothing-about-men thoughts.

She wondered if he could hear her pounding heart as she said, “I’d be happy to take it off your hands, since you seem to think an antique coffee maker is preferable.”

He pretended to wince at her comment about his beloved Mr. Coffee.

“But if she decides she wants it back, I’ll give it back. Thanks.”

“Great,” he said. “I have some errands to run and I’m sure you have some things to go purchase...,” he then mouthed the word ‘paint’ in a loud sarcastic whisper, “but I’ll bring it up later. If you aren’t home, I’ll just leave it outside your door.”

He pushed himself off of the wall and took a single step toward the door. “I should probably let you start settling in before shopping. Or taking a nap.” He raised one eyebrow and smiled warmly. “But I was thinking you shouldn’t spend your first night in a new city trying to figure out where to eat. I know a little restaurant I visit a couple times a month. You up for an adventure?” He looked at her for her response.

“Sure. Sounds great,” she said.

“Perfect,” he nodded. “Meet you in the lobby at about six. Will that work?”

She nodded again and giggled. “I think I can clear my schedule. Thanks.” She reached out and touched his forearm with the palm of her hand, trying to ignore his soft fuzzy warmth and the butterflies in her stomach reacting to the physical contact, “I really appreciate your help this morning. It was a kind and wonderful welcome to a new city.”

He patted her hand softly in acknowledgement, “It was no biggie,” he said and started walking briskly towards the door. “See ya later, Curly. Better free those chickens and feed ‘em.”

She laughed as she followed him to the door and closed it behind him. It was too early to know if it was fortuitous in meeting Brandon, but something felt different. It felt like the earth had shifted and her life was going to change much more than she’d anticipated.

## CHAPTER 2

Pushing premature expectations of a potential future love from her mind, the first thing Izzy needed to do was use the bathroom. She walked the little hallway and there it was. To her relief the whole room was white. White tile, white walls, white sink, and a gorgeous old claw foot tub, perfectly restored in white. The tub boasted shiny silver feet and the faucets and hardware were a mirror chrome finish. The bathroom was actually beautiful and even though the plaster had tiny cracks, there was nothing wrong that a coat of fresh paint wouldn't fix. She looked up and was amazed to see a small crystal chandelier in the bathroom. She decided the bathroom was perfect.

As she finished relieving herself, she realized there was no toilet paper. Not much she could do but wait a few moments and pull up her jeans. She stepped over to the sink and rinsed her hands with water, drying them by running her hands down her jeans. There was no mirror over the sink. She made a mental note she'd have to buy one. And some toilet paper.

She crossed the hallway to the bedroom and peeked in. It was bigger than she'd anticipated and had been painted a hideous bright fuchsia. It didn't look like a single coat of paint would suffice on any wall in the house except the bathroom. The room had an enormous closet, an old brown headboard, and a metal bed frame with newer looking box springs. A small dresser was painted yet a different color of pink. Marcie clearly had an obsession with pink.

A large window looked onto the building next door. There were no windows directly across the chasm, so at least there was a fair bit of privacy. Looking up she noticed no overhead light fixture and was grateful she'd decided to ship her antique Tiffany table lamp. It was one less thing to purchase.

It was only a few steps back into the hall. At the left end of the hallway there were floor to ceiling cabinets; four large upper cupboards over a tall cabinet and five wide, deep drawers. The wall of storage was impressive.

Walking into the living room she took a quick inventory. The entry wall was filled with floor to ceiling shelves. Fortunately the shelves were white. The wall to her right had a long barre, which Izzy thought just might be the coolest thing in the apartment. The smooth oak parquet floors throughout the apartment were perfect for dancing, and after some buffing would glow. A long low entertainment center was on the shared wall with the bedroom. Blessedly, it was also white.

She looked up to the ceiling and realized how tall it was. It had a few surface cracks like in the bathroom, but again, only enough to give the room character. A massive and ornate crystal chandelier hung from the center, caught light from the window in the dining area, and threw dancing rainbows around the room. She was relieved the ceiling was still white. Her first apartment and the first home only for her was glorious—pink paint and all.

Taking another long drink of the coffee, she walked to the coat closet and opened it. She looked for a light and found a pull string. When the light didn't come on, she was able to discern through the dark there wasn't a light bulb in the socket. Even in the dark she couldn't miss the safe since it took up nearly the entire floor of the small closet.

She put down her coffee and memorized the combination she'd stored in her phone. Once back in the closet, she lowered herself and turned on her phone's flashlight. Pointing it at the dial, she carefully turned the tumbler. When she got to the last number she paused, pulled the lever down and gave the lever a sharp tug. The door swung open. She pointed her phone into the safe's opening and started laughing. The first thing she saw was two rolls of toilet paper. A pink Post-it on one roll read: *"Just in case the property manager took the TP"*.

The next item was a bottle of wine. Again there was a pink Post-it attached: *"I'm sure you'll need this soon."* She pulled out a

flashlight, a cork screw, and a can of air freshener. All had cute little pink Post-it notes with Marcie's flowery handwriting. The safe still looked full and she proceeded to retrieve an assortment of mundane or thoughtful items including a plastic bag filled with small airline sized bottles of alcohol—mostly vodka; and the cable TV remote.

She also pulled out a box of gourmet waffle mix, maple syrup (still sealed with red wax), and a shiny upscale waffle maker. The note on the waffle maker read: *"Sam may hate my waffles, but loves me and bought me a bigger one for his place. Thought you might like."* Marcie had told her she was making the formal move into her fiancé Sam's penthouse located on the top floor of the apartment building when she finished making a movie in LA. Everything in Marcie's life was fabulous right now. Izzy was convinced that all-things-pink might be auspicious.

Marcie also left a stack of menus with little notes on each one pointing out the best things on the menu, delivery times, and costs. There were envelopes attached to the menus with an oversized pink clip that contained gift certificates for neighborhood restaurants.

At the very bottom of the safe, there was a folded oversized sheet of paper with an intricate hand drawn map. It showed where the hardware store, restaurants, dry cleaners, banks, drug store, and a plethora of retail stores were located in the neighborhood. She also had circled bodegas and liquor stores. She'd outlined two detailed routes to the Opal Theater via subways or busses with tiny little hand-drawn feet. The most impressive thing, however, was on the back side of the map she'd listed everything shown on the map with phone numbers and names of people working at each place. She'd even included recommended tips for delivery people and other services.

Overall, she'd included a list of everything Izzy would need. Hair stylists, nail salons, cleaning services, shoe repair, dance apparel sources, doctors, dentists, office supplies, jewelry repair, and caterers; all complete with phone numbers, addresses, and directions from the apartment. Izzy smiled when she noticed the names of two lawyers and a security service. She doubted she'd need the last

entries, but Marcie clearly spent hours compiling everything and Izzy was grateful.

Marcie finished filling the back side with a list of nearly all the apartment building's residents, complete with their numbers and short comments. Some entries had bright pink stars next to the names indicating ones Izzy could feel free to ask questions or for help.

One of those starred was Brandon's name and number, and she'd commented, *"Super nice guy. A fireman. Always willing to help with anything. His girlfriend's name is Jenna and she gives a great massage."*

Izzy said to herself, "I may have to find someone different for a massage," and giggled.

The last thing she pulled out was a small silver framed picture of Marcie with a note, *"Just so you know you always have me as a friend."* She traced the glass with her finger and smiled. Marcie was even more beautiful than she'd imagined. Marcie's smile conveyed she knew secrets about life and love. She carried it reverently to the shelves.

Next to unpack was her tote. She removed her Bose and assorted electronics, and placed them on the shelves to get them out of the way. She had an antique McCoy vase wrapped in a silk scarf and she'd stuffed it solid with small little velvet and taffeta bags of 'good' jewelry. Some had been her mother's and some she'd received as gifts through the years.

She put the jewelry into the safe and placed the vase in the center of the table. The 'I heart NY' mug and two of her favorite pottery mugs went to the kitchen. A big manila envelope of important papers went to the safe.

She had a smaller manila envelope holding cashier's checks for the next three months' rent, several prepaid VISA cards at five-hundred dollars each, two regular bank credit cards, and another very large cashier check she'd use to start new bank accounts. She had nearly five grand in cash. She peeled off some bigger bills and a few twenties from the stack as well as one of the regular credit cards and put them in her small purse. The rest went into the safe.

## *Opening Act*

When pre-planning her finances, she'd calculated she'd be good for years and years with a steady theater job, even if she was just in the chorus, but only about six to nine months without a job. The city's rent and expenses were astronomical. The envelope held her entire life savings and her small inheritance.

Her tote also held four framed pictures. One was of her mother and Robert, smiling at each other in dress-up clothes standing next to a pine tree. Another was a picture of the three of them on a trip to Yellowstone. Old Faithful was spouting enthusiastically behind them and they had huge laughing smiles as they held on to each other. The picture brought tears to Izzy's eyes. It represented everything wonderful about her small family.

A third picture was with her mother. She was about four when the picture was taken, and her mother was holding her tight on her lap. Her mom's cheek was next to hers and they both were smiling. She felt a lump in her throat and quickly swallowed a few times to force her grief to the back of her mind.

The last picture was of her father. A solemn young man in an Air Force uniform stared back at her, with eyes identical to hers. She had no memories of him since he'd been killed in a training exercise when she was just two. She placed all four on the shelves next to Marcie's portrait. She stood back and admired her family. She felt truly fortunate. Even without her father, her upbringing had been loving and caring and full of laughter.

Her tote was now nearly empty except for a handful of crystal and sentimental Christmas ornaments wrapped in tissue; her makeup bag; battery chargers; and a miniature square crystal clock tucked into a winter hat. She removed a handful of pens and pencils from the small zippered compartment and propped those up in her brand new souvenir mug.

Scraping the bottom of the tote with her hand, she pulled out a satin bag stuffed with thumb drives and homemade DVD's. Those contained many of her previous dance performances and some old homemade family movies. She put those in the safe and closed it. She rolled the dial around a few times and tugged to make sure it was

locked. The rest of her stuff was piled on the shelves next to her photos or on the floor.

She sat at the little table to finish her coffee and eat her protein bar from the airport. Her stomach was growling. She was used to more sustenance first thing in the morning. Mostly, she couldn't stop thinking about meeting Brandon and wondering if he liked her. She didn't know if he'd asked her out to dinner as a date or whether he was just being neighborly.

Suddenly she felt exhausted and yearned to flop on the sofa for a long nap. Looking at the dark stains on the cushions she remembered Marcie's words about the sofa cover. She scrolled through her numbers and found the one for LuEllen. Checking the time, it was now after seven-thirty and Marcie had said she'd be up.

She hit the call button on her phone and before she could even say 'Hello', there was a loud scream. "Izzy! Are you here? I've been waiting for your call." Once again Marcie had paved the way. Obviously, she'd given LuEllen her phone number since she knew who was calling.

LuEllen didn't let Izzy get a word in edgewise. She gushed how excited she was and in between squeals she kept repeating, "I can't wait to meet you. I can't believe you're finally here."

"That's so kind of you, LuEllen." Izzy finally managed to say, laughingly, in between the squeals and non-stop chatter. "I know Marcie left a few things with you for me. Would it be okay if I pop by now and get the cover for the sofa and the fan?" Izzy could feel the apartment starting to warm and she wanted to get a head start on moving air around. She finished with, "I can get the rest later on and maybe we can find a time when we can have a long visit to get to know each other better. Marcie had many wonderful things to say about you."

"Of course, Izzy," she answered. "I don't have any plans today, but I know you probably have a ton of things to do to get settled. Come on down and get what you want. I'll have my husband Walter bring the rest to you when he gets off of work. He works nightshift and should be home in an hour or so. "

“Thanks, LuEllen. I’ll be there in about ten minutes,” Izzy said. “Can’t wait to meet you.”

She disconnected the call and started laughing again. Marcie had just waved her magic ‘Marcie Wand’ everywhere. She sent a quick text to her thanking her for everything. She knew Marcie was still asleep and wouldn’t see the text until later, but she wanted her to know how much she appreciated her efforts.

She texted Robert to let him know she was in her new apartment safe and sound. She’d attached a picture of the bright pink living room. Within a few moments Robert called her. He’d apparently been up all night, worried about her trip and anxious to hear she’d arrived safely. They chatted for a few minutes, he gave her some tips on painting—“use primer on those walls”—and then with a promise to call later and a quick round of teary I-love-you’s he was gone. Izzy knew he’d jump on a plane in a heartbeat and come help her, but it was important to her that she do this on her own and he respected her wishes.

Embarrassed she might be jumping to conclusions, she hadn’t mentioned Brandon to either of them. Her head was reeling. The vision of blue boxer shorts when he found her on the stairs and how his green eyes danced when he was talking to her was all she could think about. The electricity she felt when she touched his arm was surely the imagination of an immature schoolgirl.

In an effort to get her bearings aligned she took a deep breath, put her phone in her pocket, and retrieved her keys. She dashed downstairs to LuEllen’s apartment afraid if she didn’t keep moving, she’d melt down in the corner, resembling the frightened, out-of-her-comfort-zone and love-starved wallflower she’d become.

Fifteen minutes later she was fumbling with her locks again to get back in her apartment. She’d managed to get the bag holding the sofa cover; the internet router and cable box; a big box window fan; and a zip-lock baggie with homemade cookies all in one trip. She sported a bright red kiss mark on her cheek and a glittery macaroni bracelet that one of LuEllen’s little girls made for her, was on her wrist.

She noticed an enormous stainless steel coffee maker on the floor next to her door. Her heart did a little flutter when she realized she'd missed Brandon.

After getting everything inside, she put Brandon's phone number from Marcie's list, in her phone and texted him. *"Hi this is Izzy. Got the coffee maker. Sorry I missed you. Thanks so much. It looks awesome."*

Immediately she got a response, *"You're welcome. Kind of curious, how'd you get my number? Are you the Colorado psychic I've read about?"*

She responded, *"Marcie left it for me. Told me you were kind and helpful. I let her know she didn't know what she was talking about."*

She heard the ding of a return message. *"Still sassy, I see."*

She typed, *"I have no idea what you're talking about."*

Brandon sent her an emoji with the tongue stuck out. She laughed, and now feeling energized, pulled an index card from her purse and started making a list of what she needed to buy. The organized and capable woman she'd always been resumed ownership of her body.

## CHAPTER 3

Eleven blocks straight north of Izzy's apartment, Ashe stripped off his clothes and climbed in the shower. This morning he'd taken a longer run than normal and his calf muscles felt tight. Tuesday was the first of his work week and he knew Zak would have at least three girls lined up for him today. As he lathered up, he felt a familiar knot of dread thinking about the day. He knew he needed to get out of this line of work and go back to his roots in finance, but he'd gotten used to the money this gig provided. He filmed three days and spent a partial day at the studio on Friday for film editing, leaving the rest of the week to himself.

He'd started the job after his wife Katie died. She left behind medical bills and an enormous student loan. Ashe had been born with several silver spoons in his mouth and would have an enormous trust fund coming to him on his next birthday; but it was important to him to make it on his own. It was one of his foundational principals never to ask for anything from his parents—money, affection, or approval. His parents often offered blank checks to him and he always declined the offers. They had no idea what he was actually doing for a living and he hoped they never found out. It would shatter them.

Rubbing his ring finger he could still feel the now invisible dent where he'd worn his wedding ring for six years. Even over two years later he missed having it on. He wasn't sure that even Katie would understand why he was doing this and she'd always understood everything about him.

Since her death he'd cut off nearly all his friends and limited the time he spent with his parents. He felt an obligation for perfunctory visits and contact, particularly since he was an only child, but fortunately his parents traveled extensively for months at a

time. When they were home they kept themselves extraordinarily busy with charities and the arts.

He adored both his parents but felt uncomfortable spending too much time with them. His mother hovered and worried about him which was very sweet, but he still didn't want to talk about anything after Katie's death. His mother invariably would question, "How are you doing and are you dating again yet?" His father just asked questions about his finances and about how he could afford the loft and expensive car. Ashe lied and told him he enjoyed working with Zak because it was interesting work, and it was extremely lucrative. Since his father only thought Zak owned an independent film company and had no inkling of what those films actually were, it was easy to maintain the ruse.

Zak was Ashe's college roommate and always talked about his dream of producing tasteful adult films and, in an ironic twist, asked Ashe's father for startup funds. He'd paid back fifty-thousand dollars in six months and his father thought Zak must be very talented to quickly become so successful.

Zak approached Ashe a few days after Katie's funeral and offered him a job. "You can do it buddy," he'd said. "You're good looking and you seem gentle. That's exactly what I'm looking for as I start a new branch of the company." Ashe tuned him out until he continued with, "You probably can make three to six-thousand a day, depending on your stamina." He then had Ashe's full attention.

He'd worked with Zak to help write the protocol for a specialized program and then Ashe had felt obligated to help him get it established. He'd worked for Zak for twenty-two months now. He told himself he was doing something worthwhile, but deep down he knew he'd sold out for cash, and there was absolutely nothing worthwhile about being filmed having sex.

At first he worked six to seven days a week and pulled in an average of ten grand a day. There were also residuals he received each month. Three months after beginning with Zak, he received a residual check of over one hundred-thousand. The old bills all were paid within a few months. He also paid off his loft, furnished it, bought a few pieces of art, made some long term investments, and

bought a Lamborghini. A few months ago he cut back his schedule but since the residuals were still building, he still made more money than he could spend.

Ashe's films were the most popular of the company and appeared on many web sites as well as full length features distributed worldwide. He grimaced thinking about the purple or red painted alley stores with too many glaring neon lights, beckoning a specific and needy crowd to enter and peruse the sex themed merchandise. He was embarrassed that portions of his naked body were plastered on plastic DVD covers waiting for grubby fingers to purchase in those very stores.

He'd tried to spread the wealth. He helped Katie's sister with college tuition. He gave freely to his mother's charities. His CPA, attorney, and stock trader had benefitted. On Mondays he spent all day at a spa where he was waxed, buffed, and groomed. He had regular massages, including late night home visits. Twice a month he had a manicure and a pedicure. He tipped all his grooming ladies generously and gave them huge cash gifts last Christmas. He paid his taxes and all his bills early.

He should've felt rich and fulfilled, but he felt poor and empty. The hole in his soul, from the loss of his beloved Katie, could not be filled. He had to admit to himself he also continued the job because he viewed it as a better distraction than alcohol, gambling, expensive hobbies, or even therapy. And he was certain he had to keep moving and working to survive his very dark wormhole of grief.

He ran his hand over his head feeling the soft growth of his buzz cut. He was virtually hairless all over his body now. Even his armpit hair was closely trimmed. He shaved his face and neck two or three times on film days. When he went out in public he always wore long sleeves since he had no hair on his arms. Wearing shorts was still okay, he reasoned, because people seeing his shaved and smooth legs always just assumed he was a cyclist.

He rinsed his body a final time and with a steady resolve he climbed out of the shower, grabbed a fluffy Turkish cotton towel from the towel warmer and dried off. A non-scented lotion was

smoothed on his arms, legs, chest, and buttocks. His face was baby smooth without a trace of stubble after he shaved. He brushed his teeth and tongue and used his Waterpik to get into every crevice in his teeth. Lip balm on his lips and a quick swish of q-tips in his ears finished his preparations for the day.

A pair of cotton boxers, a clean t-shirt, and a faded pair of jeans was his normal work clothing. He'd packed his work bag last night and he had several other nearly identical outfits in the bag along with his tablet, chargers, nuts and dried fruit. After spraying his feet and shoes with foot deodorant he was ready to leave.

He grabbed his keys and phone, stuffed them in his pockets and walked out the door and climbed into the elevator. When he reached the street his driver, Lawrence, pulled up in a black SUV and he climbed in as if he was going to some corporate office.

Upon arriving at the studio, he went through the side door and walked on the polished linoleum floor to the general staff office. He involuntarily sniffed as the odor of Lysol permeated the building. As he passed two of the filming studios he could hear unremarkable 'canned' instrumental music, muffled voices, and exaggerated moans. Another one of the actors approached him in the hall and they greeted each other without stopping. One coming on shift, one leaving. Zak had his operation running like a precise military academy.

Denise, the attractive young office manager, saw Ashe and smiled brightly. "Good morning Jamie! I have your folders for today."

Ashe used 'Jamie Johns' as his stage name and never revealed his real name to the girls or anyone else at the studio. He knew it sounded lame and contrived but was no worse than some of the really sappy names all the other guys had chosen.

He nodded as he took them from her and inquired, "Three today? Castings or Privates?"

"We originally scheduled three, all Castings, but Doc disqualified one at the exam this morning. So just two. The first will be ready in about forty-five minutes, and then the second at two-

thirty this afternoon” she said. “Derek has four today so Zak said if you want another we will transfer his last one to you,” she continued.

“No thanks. I can really use a short shift today. This job is wearing me out,” Ashe said.

“I thought you might want to know why your third was disqualified,” she said in a teasing and excited voice.

“Actually, Denise, I don’t think I care anymore. I trust Doc to make those decisions. Zak and I set up pretty strict protocols when he was getting this started. I like it when the system works.”

He’d already heard all the reasons some girls weren’t accepted. Some were eliminated before they even saw Doc. Vetting might show that they weren’t actually eighteen, been convicted of a felony, or had been confined at one time in a mental health or recovery facility.

Doc’s list was even more extensive. He inspected the hymen to ensure it was intact and not too thick. A partial pelvic exam checked for menses or discharges. He checked general hygiene and ensured the pubic hair was shaved or properly trimmed. He examined fingernails and toe nails to ensure they weren’t too long and smoothly filed. Tattoos and piercings were inspected to make sure they were free of infection and not too offensive for a general audience. A regular physical checked for infectious diseases, body temp too high or too low, or elevated blood pressure. Anything Doc didn’t feel comfortable with resulted in him not signing the *Cleared to Film* form.

Doc also did his best to identify bona fide medical conditions such as diabetes, heart murmurs, epilepsy and even mental illness and always made formal referrals of those girls to specialists in the city. Ashe thought Doc was just about the best connection Zak ever made.

“She had an abscessed tooth!” Denise said as if it was the most unusual thing she’d ever heard. “Doc said her cheek was swollen like a chipmunk and it was so bad it was starting to drain out of her nose.” She wrinkled her own nose in reaction. “He said one eye was nearly swollen shut.”

Ashe suppressed a grimace and instead smiled kindly, "Aw, poor thing," he said easily. "Well, she can get it taken care of and come back. And Denise, you aren't supposed to be reading the reports and talking about them." He chastised with a smile. Doc would be furious with any violation of confidentiality.

Denise laughed, "I don't think talking about an abscessed tooth will get the book thrown at me."

"Probably not," he agreed, "but just the same, be careful." He shook his head as he was walking to his dressing room, with the folders tucked under his arm, realizing for the first time Denise read every word in every file.

At the end of the hallway, he opened a door marked with his name and turned on the light. The room was small and windowless. It reminded him of Doc's office. White and sterile and completely devoid of any personality. He'd attempted to bring a little life into the room he spent so many hours in, so he'd brought in a couple of colorful paintings and a large leather chair with matching ottoman. Collapsing into his chair; he opened the top folder.

A pretty face peered back at him. The intake sheet indicated she'd turned eighteen last week. She'd written, by hand, a short essay on why she wanted to become an actress for adult films and he noticed she put little hearts instead of dots on top of her 'I's, and he sighed loudly. He didn't bother to read the essay since most girls idolized something which was a tough business. It took its toll on the girls. He privately hoped she'd wash out and that this experience and audition would be her last appearance in the industry.

Ashe willingly agreed to establish and film casting auditions for the Defloration Division, the deflowering of virgins, partially for selfish reasons. He'd never become attached to any of the girls because he'd only be with each girl once. He lessened the chance of catching anything from them because they'd never been with anyone else. He also felt he could make the experience good for them, no matter how well or ill-suited they were for film.

Another portion of the Defloration Division involved private deflorations. Amongst some groups of girls, usually affluent, some decided they wanted to lose their virginity with a professional. In

some social circles it replaced the debutante ball as the coming-of-age ritual.

During Privates, since there was no ear bud with a director whispering instructions; he often spent more time with the debts and the sessions were more relaxing. There were no cameras in the room. He was able to work with the girls on developing some confidence, teaching them to stand up for their own needs, as well as showing them what men often liked and wanted.

These sessions were his favorite type, because he made a very large flat fee from them and there was no film of the encounter to edit. At times, he was able to relieve his own primal urges, through the debutante's mouths or hands, but only if the girl was open to it and he felt comfortable with her.

The blue light went on above his door. They were ready to start. He walked to his sink and swished a bit of mouthwash in his mouth, rinsed, and took a drink of cold water. Tucking the folder under his arm, he walked into the hall and down to Filming Room #3. He opened the door and saw two cameramen and the sound man. Brian was directing today and was already fussing with some of the props. As he greeted them all warmly, Brian handed him the ear bud.

Ashe put his folder on a table as he put the ear bud in his right ear. The camera would film from his left side and when they needed a different angle, they'd either cut away from his head or he'd inconspicuously switch the ear bud to the other ear.

He walked over to the obviously scared girl sitting on the settee and extended his hand to her. Her hair was long and blonde and she'd obviously spent hours straightening it until it hung smoothly down her back in a continuous sheet of gold. With bronze brown eyes looking up at him, she didn't blink as she stared. He was relieved she didn't have piercings in her nose or lip. He always needed to be careful when a girl had piercings so he didn't accidentally catch them with his fingers or tongue.

"Hi, I'm Jamie, you must be Trudy."

She nodded her head and smiled weakly. "It's nice to meet you Jamie."

Sitting down next to her, he took one of her hands into both of his and looked at her kindly. "Did Brian already fill you in on what's going to happen today?" She nodded and he continued, "You seem a bit frightened. Is there anything I can talk to you about to relieve some of your fears?"

"Will it hurt badly?" She answered his question with one of her own.

He squeezed her hand softly, "It may hurt a bit, but if I do my job well and you promise to relax and also allow yourself to feel the pleasure, it'll be over quickly and you should enjoy the experience," he said quietly with a gentle smile.

Her face seemed to brighten and her smile became more relaxed. "Okay, I can do that."

"Good," he said smoothly. "Why do you want to become an adult film actress?"

"I wanna go to college and I don't want to spend my life paying off student loans. I was told films could be lucrative if I'm good." She smiled broadly now. "I hope I'm good," she managed a small embarrassed laugh.

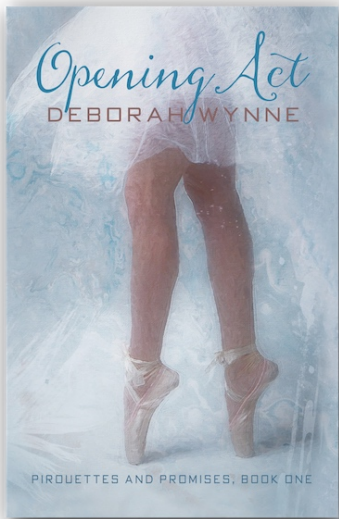
He knew adult film actresses were usually significantly under paid unless they caught the attention of some sort of fan base but now he felt guilty about his earlier thoughts of wanting her to wash out. Instead he genuinely wanted her to be good so she could go to college and do something wonderful with her life. "I'm sure you'll be fine, just be yourself. Be natural. Forget about the cameras," he said. "Tell me, do you have a boyfriend?"

She nodded, smiled, and blushed.

"And how far have you gone with your boyfriend?"

"Just kissing and some messing around with my breasts," she replied.

Ashe turned slightly to the cameras and gave a small imperceptible nod so they would begin filming, then turned his attention back to Trudy and asked, "Can you show me how you kiss him?"



Naïve in love and life, Izzy arrives in NYC with a suitcase full of dance shoes and dreams. Ultimately she must choose between true love, financial security and even her career.

# OPENING ACT

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