

TITANS

CAPTIVATED

THEIRS TO WED

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SIERRA CARTWRIGHT

THEIRS TO WED

TITANS CAPTIVATED

BOOK THREE

SIERRA CARTWRIGHT

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Come to Me

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Also by Sierra Cartwright

THEIRS TO WED

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First E-book Publication: October 2022

Line Editing by GG Royale

Proofing by Bev Albin

Layout Design by Once Upon an Alpha

Cover Design by Once Upon an Alpha

Photo provided by Depositphotos.com

Promotion by Once Upon An Alpha, Shannon Hunt

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DEDICATION

*To the ever-enduring power of love. For the women who've
inspired me and that I love. Mom. Granny Ruth. Angie.
Whitney. My life is better because of you.*

PROLOGUE



“Marrying a rich man would solve all your problems.”

A shudder traced down Amelia Ryan’s spine as she glanced at her business partner and friend. Out of anyone in her life, Lexi knew just how abhorrent the idea of being trapped in a relationship was to Amelia.

She’d given everything she had to escape from her former Dominant’s clutches. Even now, months later, she still had nightmares about how close she’d come to totally losing her freedom to Douglas. The last thing she wanted in her life was a man. “We’re here to work, not plan a trip down the aisle.”

“Speak for yourself.” Lexi grinned. “I’m an excellent multitasker. I can do both.”

The elevator whooshed to a stop. A little dizzy, Amelia bent her knees and placed her hand on the wall to steady herself. “Wow.” Surely they couldn’t be on the sixty-first floor already?

The doors slid open, and she followed Lexi into a massive lobby area that gleamed with marble and floor-to-ceiling windows.

The observation deck of 1 International Plaza was one of the most spectacular places in Houston, or so Amelia had been told. Since she had nothing to compare it to, she glanced around, half in shock, half in awe, taking in the splendor.

It wasn’t just the majestic view of the city and the ship channel that stole her breath; it was the way it was showcased. Nothing obstructed the windows. And the space itself had

been decorated in a gorgeous, minimalistic way with amazing flower displays and several large pieces of modern art.

The bar-height tables in the gigantic reception area were spread far apart so that people wouldn't be crowded. A DJ near the far wall spun a popular tune. Champagne flowed from a fountain that was surrounded by a dizzying array of appetizers and bite-size desserts.

Since she and Lexi owned a catering business, Amelia appreciated the quality of the ingredients and the creativity behind the display. Colors were artfully utilized, as was height. The company had used large, beautiful flowers as garnish. But her focus was single-minded. "Wonder how we can get Prestige's future orders?" This spread was impressive, but Tastefully Yours was up for the challenge.

"You're always thinking about business."

Amelia wished she could be more like her friend and separate work from pleasure. But the truth was, her dire financial situation drove every decision and occupied her mind every waking moment. More often than not, worry also kept her awake at night.

Skyler Morrison, a matchmaker with the Prestige Group who also happened to be the host of this evening's soiree, hurried over to greet them each with a warm hug.

"I'm so glad you came."

Amelia still couldn't believe she was here. If Lexi hadn't insisted on needing moral support, Amelia would be at the assisted living center visiting Francine, her grandmother. As it was, she'd go there later, which meant her day would be even longer.

"Wouldn't have missed the opportunity to find Mr. Right." Lexi flipped her hair over her shoulder. "Or even Mr. Right Now."

Skyler laughed. "You know there are no promises." She'd explained everything in detail at the women's networking breakfast where they'd met.

Though Skyler had listened to Amelia's practiced thirty-second pitch for their catering company, Lexi had quickly started asking questions of Skyler, a matchmaker.

While the company used a proprietary—and outrageously expensive—method to find their clients the perfect spouse, love sometimes blossomed on its own. After all, as Skyler had explained, chemistry was one of the three essential ingredients for a perfect union. To that end, Prestige arranged numerous informal gatherings with other singles.

In Amelia's mind, there was nothing casual about this environment. Everything, from the venue down to the décor, screamed money...and plenty of it.

As others arrived, she wished she'd dashed home to change. She'd worn business casual, slacks and a nice blouse, but she was woefully underdressed. Many gentlemen wore well-tailored suits, and most of the ladies had been poured into teeny-tiny cocktail dresses that hugged their curves. As if that wasn't intimidating enough, their hair was perfect. And most of them could have come straight from having their makeup professionally applied.

She didn't belong here, and coming had been a mistake. This wasn't a place to hand out her business cards, as she'd hoped. It was a meat market.

"There's no formal agenda." Skyler smiled. Though she was being polite, she'd turned her head toward the elevator when it dinged, and she obviously wanted to say hello to the new arrivals. "Feel free to chat with anyone and to enjoy some of the exquisite bubbly."

"We will!" Lexi clearly had her sights on the rosé.

But Amelia couldn't resist the opportunity to try to accomplish her goals. "Before you dash off... Who provides your catering?"

Though Lexi elbowed Amelia, she stood her ground.

"We only meet here at the International Club a few times a year. Most of our gatherings are held at hotels, restaurants, or private clubs where we have to use their in-house people."

“We’d love the opportunity to compete for your business.”

“Absolutely.” Skyler brushed her pink-streaked hair over her shoulder. “Send me a proposal. Approximately one hundred people. We charge our clients a bomb for our services, and they expect top-notch events.”

“And that’s exactly what you’ll get from us.” Amelia’s response was more bravado than confidence, and she held her breath as Skyler moved away.

“Damn, girl.” Lexi’s eyes were wide. “That was ballsy.”

It was. They’d never handled an event of this caliber.

Though Lexi was a professional chef, Amelia was more of a hobbyist. But she was the one with the business degree.

They’d launched late last year, after Amelia had been fired from her job. Because her grandma demanded so much attention, she’d missed too much work. Working for herself gave her more flexibility. Or so she’d believed.

Because they’d hustled hard for business around the holidays, they’d ended up working sixteen-to-eighteen-hour days.

It’d been exhausting but rewarding...until business had dropped off dramatically in January. Bookings had picked up again for early summer, but now that autumn approached, a long dry spell loomed in front of them.

Even though they’d done fairly well financially, it wasn’t enough. She needed money fast to get her grandmother into a different facility, one that provided better care.

Landing a contract with Prestige would introduce Tastefully Yours to a more elite group of clients, a boost they needed.

“Shall we mingle?”

Amelia would rather have a root canal.

Still, she followed Lexi to the champagne fountain and placed a glass beneath the flow of rosé.

When they both had a beverage, they moved to the table farthest away from the windows. From here, they had a view of the comings and goings. And Amelia keenly watched the food, seeing which items the guests preferred.

Not surprisingly most passed on the messy appetizers, such as the meatballs dipped in marinara sauce.

A lot of men loaded up on cheese and meat, while many of the ladies skipped food entirely or focused on the vegetables. The bubbly, however, had to be refilled. Social lubricant, she supposed.

A gentleman crossed the room, carrying champagne, his sights set on Lexi.

Amelia knew one of the two glasses was not for her. Not that she blamed him. She was accustomed to this. While Amelia considered herself ordinary, her friend was gorgeous. Much taller than Amelia, Lexi was curvy with gorgeously long, thick brunette hair that shined in the overhead light. Her quick smile and adventurous nature drew men in and kept them intrigued until she grew tired of them.

And Lexi had had the foresight to wear a little black dress that left one shoulder bare.

Because manners dictated he be considerate, he introduced himself as Graham, gave Amelia a quick smile but angled his body so that he faced Lexi, and he focused his star-power on her.

He was good looking, Amelia admitted. Dressed well. But he was too polished. If he wasn't careful, the veneer might chip off.

Since her friend accepted the drink he'd brought to her, Amelia figured she should make herself scarce. "I'll be right back." Then she paused. "Do you want something to eat?"

"Thanks, no." She shook her head. Then she added, "I'm good."

Which was their code for being comfortable with the male attention she was receiving.

Because she was there to work, Amelia took advantage of the opportunity to take a closer look at the catering competition.

The cheese board was beautiful, even if the choices were a little pedestrian. She might add a soft French triple cream cheese with some fine herbs. Parsley for sure. Dill for its earthiness. Perhaps round out the flavor with some chives.

Then she was drawn to the dessert display. Honestly, even though she wanted to be critical, it was magnificent.

There were several different arrangements of mini-scones and tartlets, arranged on tiered plates like she'd seen served at a high tea her Grandma Fancy had taken Amelia to when she was ten.

The memory brought tears to her eyes but a smile to her face.

Amelia's mother resented her birth, but her grandmother stepped in. Because she'd been unable to pronounce her real name—Francine—Amelia had called her Grandma Fancy. And the nickname stayed with them both. Because the woman had always been there for her, Amelia was willing to work twenty hours a day if necessary to provide the care her relative needed.

After placing an almond petit fours on her plate, Amelia moved on to the section that was filled with berries and assorted chocolates. Though overly sweet things were not usually her downfall, she couldn't resist selecting a pecan-filled chocolate bar that was drizzled with caramel. To make it healthier, or that was how she rationalized skipping dinner, she dropped a couple of berries on her plate.

She glanced over her shoulder to find Lexi still engaged in conversation with Graham. Rather than disturbing them, Amelia found an empty table, then took a bite of the most tempting treat.

God above. The confection was pure decadence. It had every element put together perfectly. Crunchy and chewy, with both bittersweet and milk chocolates, making it rich and well-

balanced. And how would she top this when she put her proposal together?

Rather than intimidating her, the challenge made her imagination gallop. Tastefully Yours generally sourced desserts from a local bakery. But maybe it was time to hire their own pastry chef to create specialties unique to their company. Which was another expense they truly couldn't afford.

A few moments later, Skyler wandered over, another man with her. "This is Tony. He's an associate of mine at Prestige."

The handsome Black man was dapper in tailored slacks, a vest, and an obnoxious yellow tie.

"Nice to meet you. I understand you're a caterer."

Delighted Skyler had mentioned that fact, Amelia shook his hand.

"What are you eating?" Skyler asked. "It looks amazing."

"It is. Seriously." The sugar rush had hit her, making her crave more. "I shouldn't have a second one, but I'm considering it."

Skyler wrinkled her nose. "I need to stick with the veggies."

"That's what she says." Tony rolled his eyes. "The way to her heart is through chocolate."

"As if you should talk."

"Me?" Tony tugged down on the bottom of his vest. "I don't eat sweets."

As muscular and lean as he was, Amelia believed him.

"Please. There's not an M&M in the world that is safe around you."

He shook his head. "Lies. All lies, I tell you."

Muttering that Amelia was a bad influence, Skyler headed toward the food. Amelia grinned when she saw the woman bypass the veggies in favor of a piece of heaven.

Amelia had just picked up her scone when her phone rang. She dug the device from her small purse and checked the display.

The assisted living residence. *Crap*. Seeing that number was never a good thing.

Abandoning her plate and heading toward the exit, Amelia answered the call.

Her grandmother was agitated, insisting she wanted to go home. "I'll be there in less than twenty minutes."

Amelia gave Lexi an update and quick hug, promising to be at the office by eight, then continued toward the elevator.

"Miss?"

A well-dressed man stepped in front of her and held up his hand. *Condescending, much?*

"Fetch me a bourbon on the rocks, will you? Can't abide that damn champagne they ordered. Make it a good one. And quick."

"Ask someone who works here." Impatience gnawed at her. Because she was in slacks, he assumed she was a worker? Or maybe it was because she was a woman? "Like you, I'm a guest."

He scowled. Without an apology, seemingly put out by her refusal, he turned away.

Annoyed to be delayed on her way to see her grandmother, Amelia shook her head.

Lexi might be looking for a rich husband, but Amelia was determined to work her ass off and solve her own problems. The last thing she wanted or needed was another wealthy man. Especially one who was as demanding as he was arrogant.

CHAPTER ONE



Three Months Later

“YOU NEED TO GET MARRIED.”

Ah. Fuck. This conversation. *Again.* “Nice to see you too, Gran.” Cormac had pulled into the driveway of her Houston home less than two minutes ago. The moment he’d walked through the front door, her butler had informed him that Kathleen was waiting for him in the study.

She’d responded to his greeting with her usual refrain about his personal life.

Shaking his head, and with a smile of genuine affection, he crossed the room to kiss her cheek. “Happy eightieth birthday.”

“As if I need to be reminded.”

“No one would believe it.”

“Go on with you.”

Kathleen Murphy stood just under six feet tall, and tonight she was regal in a flowing, long, gold-colored gown. When he was growing up, he’d been convinced she was a princess in a previous life. In fact, if family legend were to be believed, she was a descendant of the O’Brien dynasty.

Even though he was now nearing thirty, way past the impressionable age, Cormac’s opinion hadn’t changed. His

grandmother was as elegant as she was formidable. He easily pictured her as the daughter of a medieval king.

From inside his suit pocket, he pulled out a small box and offered it to her.

She inclined her head. “There’s only one present I require, Cormac.”

“As you remember, my last attempt at matrimony failed.” He’d made a valiant effort to fall in love and waltz down the aisle, but his ex-fiancée’s web of lies and deceit had shattered his trust and destroyed his belief in all women.

At first, his grandmother had been sympathetic to his heartache. But after giving him a year to deal with his pain, she was back to her familiar refrain.

With a small smile of acknowledgment, she accepted the gift and immediately placed it on the side table.

“You’re not going to open it?”

“I’m sure it’s lovely. Give it to your wife. No doubt she’ll inherit it soon.”

“First of all, you’re going to live many more years.”

“God willing.”

“And the present is not meant to be an heirloom. It’s something I chose that has meaning to you.”

“How very thoughtful.” Still, she didn’t even glance at the box.

Exercising the restraint he was known for, Cormac bit back a frustrated sigh.

“It’s time, Cormac. You know it as well as I do. It’s time to exercise your duty.”

His grandparents—and to a lesser extent his mother, Stella—had ingrained that in him. “*Duty is the only nobility*,” had been the first words he recalled hearing from Grandfather Fergus. And those were his final words as he lay on his deathbed.

“The will says...”

Cormac’s hold on his temper beginning to fray, he waved off the rest of her comment. He’d heard it week in and week out for the year and a half since his grandfather had passed. “That if I’m not married six months from now”—actually five months, twenty-eight days, and five hours, not that he was counting—the entirety of Fergus’s money goes to the local animal shelter.” Cormac couldn’t think of a better use for it. He’d write the check today if it were legally possible.

“You are now the de facto head of the Murphy clan.”

Fergus and Kathleen Murphy had been blessed with three girls but no boys. And since Cormac was the oldest son of the oldest daughter, his grandfather had made him the sole heir. It didn’t much matter that Cormac would have preferred the role go to someone better suited. Petty family dramas exhausted him.

“I’d like to see you married within the next ninety days.”

He blinked.

“My husband put considerable trust in you to do the right thing.” She paused. “The only thing.”

“You know my answer.”

“Circumstances alter cases.”

How many times had he heard that while growing up?

“Things change, Cormac. New details come to light.”

Ready to make his escape, he wished her a happy birthday again.

“Thank you for the party.”

“I’m sorry?”

For the first time, a real smile made her blue eyes twinkle. “Your Aunt Gail told me you were hosting the soiree as your gift to me.”

“It’s my pleasure.” And it was, of course. He just wished someone had warned him in advance that he’d been

volunteered to pay the bill.

“I assume that’s not a problem?”

“Absolutely not. It’s my pleasure.”

“Go.” She waved him away. “Enjoy your evening.”

Dismissed. Not that he was sorry to end the conversation, even though it meant he had to spend the next several hours interacting with people he didn’t care to engage with.

If all went well, he could escape no later than ten. By then festivities at his favorite BDSM club, the Retreat, would be in full swing. And if he were fortunate, he’d find a beautiful submissive who yearned for what he had to offer: pleasure with no future obligations.

Cormac made his way to the ballroom. With a wall of windows overlooking the beautifully landscaped backyard, the space was inviting. Though it wasn’t original to the house, his grandmother loved to dance and entertain, so Fergus had hired an architect for the three-thousand-square-foot addition.

Caterers had set up an impressive fruit-and-cheese display along with chafing dishes waiting to be filled. A large cake, decorated with real roses, dominated the far corner.

A place had been designated for dancing, and a jazz quartet provided background music. Of course, party goers were sipping champagne or lined up at one of the two temporary bars. That looked like a hell of an idea.

Before he’d taken ten steps into the room, he was accosted by one of Texas’s senators, a brash, arrogant bastard who thought everyone wanted to hear what he had to say. The man flashed a smile and extended his hand. “Cormac. Wonderful to see you!”

Since good manners were ingrained—to some degree—Cormac returned the greeting. “Cecil.”

The politician’s smile faded.

Though Cecil was his actual first name, few people knew that. And no doubt he preferred to be addressed as *Senator*. “I understand you have a primary challenger.”

With a small snarl, Cecil adjusted his Stetson. “She’s wasting her time and money.”

Not if Cormac and several of his friends had any say in the matter. The senator might be a Titan—a member of the secret society that Cormac also belonged to—but Cecil had made too many unkept promises and collected plenty of enemies in the last two terms. The time for change had arrived. “You’re not worried about the polls?”

“They’re wrong more often than they’re right.”

“Are they?” From everything Cormac had heard, the politician’s days were numbered.

“Senator!” A woman made a beeline toward Cecil.

“You’ll have to excuse me. Constituents want me.” Cecil turned on his smile and breezed away, Cormac seemingly forgotten.

Suited him fine.

Thank God there were people here he enjoyed and respected. The room was a veritable who’s who of the country’s elite. Which was hardly surprising. His grandparents had both been actively involved in the Titans organization. In their forties and fifties, they’d served on the steering committee. Kathleen remained a beloved member of the organization. From a personal standpoint, he felt the same way. When his parents had been busy with their obligations, Kathleen always found time for him. And she’d managed to smooth the edges off Fergus’s demanding, impatient ways.

Celeste Fallon, owner of a company that specialized in fixing problems, joined him. She was one of the people he considered a true friend.

Without preamble, she spoke. “I want him gone.” She shot Cecil a vexed frown.

“You’re not alone.”

“Good.” She kissed Cormac’s cheek. Though she held a glass of bubbly, it didn’t appear as if she’d taken a sip. “Have you made a campaign donation to his opponent?”

“What do you think?” Cormac grinned.

“That you didn’t have a choice?”

“Exactly.” Celeste had hired one of the best campaign managers in the industry to unseat the senator. And since that person—Everett Parker—was in a threesome with one of his best friends, Cormac had been one of the first people they’d hit up for a contribution.

Having a senator who was obligated to Cormac’s group of friends could only be an advantage in upcoming years.

“And how are you, Cormac?”

He studied her. Celeste was a current member of the Titans steering committee, and somehow she always seemed to know things others didn’t. “Wonderful.” As long as he didn’t think about the news his grandmother had dropped on him at the beginning of the evening. “Thank you.”

“I’m always at your service if there’s anything Fallon and Associates can do for you.”

Had she been talking to Kathleen?

Gracefully she moved away to greet Rafe Sterling and his wife, Hope.

After shaking his head, Cormac saw that Altair Montgomery was alone. His friend was the owner of the upscale BDSM club Cormac frequented. Not just for the delightful submissives but often for the opportunity to visit Altair’s private lair.

“I’ve made progress on the development project. If you’d like to stop by for an update. I have a VR rendering.”

“Sounds fascinating.” Cormac nodded. Altair had a master touch, an uncanny knack for choosing projects worth looking at. That he was close friends with Julien Bonds—the Genius himself—gave Altair even greater insight into the future. Having something to look forward to later would make it easier to endure the rest of the party.

Drake, Everett, and Rylee—their new, soon-to-be wife—joined them. Cormac considered Drake, his attorney, to be one

of his closest friends. He was genuinely glad to see them.

“I was telling Cormac that we have an update on the project. I’m happy to meet you all at my place later.”

The threesome nodded, and Everett spoke on their behalf. “We’re planning to be at the Retreat later anyway.”

“As long as I don’t take too much away from your play time?”

To all of them, including the wickedly smart Rylee that he’d gotten to know, business was play time.

Other people joined them, and a server passed with champagne. Since he wasn’t in a celebratory mood, Cormac shook his head. “Thank you. No.”

A quick glance showed there was no line at the temporary bar closest to the rear exit.

With a polite nod, he told the small group to enjoy their evening and moved on. He dodged a couple of Titans who no doubt wanted to indulge in mindless, repetitive small talk. Instead, he kept his gaze on his objective.

A distinctive and expensive bottle of whiskey on a shelf caught his eye. *Nice*. “The Bonds.” After all, he’d been informed he was paying for it.

“Very well, sir.” With a sharp nod, the bartender reached for a crystal glass.

Ordering a double was tempting, but since he planned to head to the Retreat later, he opted for a single. Though he was planning to meet Altair, Cormac didn’t rule out scening afterward. Alcohol and playing didn’t mix.

He dropped a twenty-dollar bill in the tip jar and reached for the glass.

“Not so fast.” A strong hand clamped down on his shoulder.

“What the...?” Biting back a curse as he curled his free hand into a fist, he shrugged off the unwelcome touch and pivoted.

As realization dawned, Cormac smiled. “Well, fuck me.”

Ethan Slater—his cousin, an American hero, a man who’d dedicated his life to keeping the free world safe—stood there, grinning widely. “What the hell are you doing here?” Cormac asked.

“Heard there were Houston ladies with needs. And I’m a generous man.”

“You are indeed.” Happier than he recalled being in months, he offered his hand.

“Screw that.”

They exchanged a hug of genuine affection before each took a step back

With a keen eye, Cormac studied his cousin. “You look good, man.”

“None the worse for wear.”

“Last I heard, you were recovering in a hospital in Germany.”

“What’s a flesh wound when it’s your grandmother’s birthday?”

“You received a royal summons?”

Ethan shrugged. “I understand Gran spoke to a senator on the Intelligence Committee. And here I am. Duty—”

Cormac finished the sentence. “Is the only nobility.”

“It is indeed.”

Ethan lived the motto. Breathed it. Risked his life for it.

“Something to drink, sir?”

The bartender’s words shook Cormac out of his reverie. In the last minute or so, a line had formed behind them.

Ethan looked at Cormac’s glass. “What’re you having?”

“Bonds.”

“Good choice.” Ethan smiled at the woman. “I’ll have what he’s having.”

Cormac and Ethan had been born in the same month and the same year and had all but been raised together. All the way through college, they'd attended the same schools. After that, Cormac had started his own consulting business, but he'd agreed to help his grandfather run the Murphy organization. Duty to family, whereas Ethan had opted to serve the country, just like his father before him.

Ethan leaned forward to accept his drink. "Thank you, ma'am."

The woman, focused entirely on Ethan, sloshed some of the whiskey over the side of the glass. "Oh God. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." He slipped a twenty of his own into the tip jar. Then he grinned as he turned away from the bar. "I've still got it."

As if the other half of the Dastardly Duo had ever lost it.

They moved away from the bar, and Cormac surveyed the room. His mother was busy chatting with Ethan's mom. "Does she know you're here?"

"No one does." Ethan grinned. "I'd like to keep it that way as long as possible."

How well Cormac understood that. Their family dynamics were some sort of fucked-up.

By unspoken accord, they exited through the back door onto the patio. They continued away from the house, then over the bridge that crossed the water feature and led to the pool. The deck was empty, and they grabbed a table at the farthest end.

Not surprising Cormac, Ethan surveyed the area. Then he positioned his chair so he had the best view possible of his surroundings.

Because the evening was sultry, Cormac shrugged out of his jacket and tossed it on the table before taking his own seat. Then he studied Ethan. "Welcome home." Too much time had passed since they'd seen each other.

“This is the life.” Ethan lifted his glass, and the two tapped their rims together.

Cormac took an appreciative sip. “You going to tell me what happened that you got your ass blasted?”

“Friendly fire during a training mission.” Fatalistically Ethan shrugged. “Shouldn’t have been a live round.”

“The fuck?”

“Investigation is ongoing.” He downed his drink. “And lucky for me, I got to be here for the birthday party.”

Cormac wasn’t sure exactly what his cousin did in the army. Ethan was an officer—a captain—who led a special forces team. But he didn’t discuss his deployments.

They spent the next few minutes catching up before Ethan sat up a little taller. “Incoming.”

Scowling, Cormac glanced toward the bridge. His uncle Richard approached. Well, uncle by marriage, not by blood. He was married to Gail, the youngest of Kathleen and Fergus’s three girls. He was a waste of a human being, and his two kids weren’t much better.

“The hell you doing here?” Richard demanded of Ethan.

Ethan stared at the man until he cleared his throat. Then he pulled back a chair.

“You weren’t invited.” Ethan’s voice held a chill. If Richard were smart, he’d heed the unspoken warning.

“Not here to talk to you.”

“Too bad. I’m not leaving.”

Richard looked at Cormac as if for backup. “We have a private matter to discuss.”

“You heard the man.” Cormac shrugged. “He’s not leaving.”

“The situation is somewhat...unsavory.”

Ethan stretched his legs in front of him, then crossed them at the ankle. “My favorite.”

As if he didn't know the inevitable answer, Cormac looked up at his uncle. "What is it this time?"

Richard licked his lips. "You need to turn over my money."

His? "Any hypothetical inheritance belongs to Aunt Gail."

Snarling, Richard placed his hands on the tabletop and leaned toward Cormac. "Same fucking difference. I want my money."

"I am afraid I can't help you."

"Because you're a selfish prick. Always have been. Self-important. Better than the rest of us."

Still casual, Ethan looked at Cormac. "Would you like to kill him? Or should I?" His smile was quick and feral. "An accidental drowning would be easy to arrange."

Richard choked on his next breath, then backed up a bit.

"I've been called worse." Cormac shrugged. In the last twenty-four hours even. "Since it's not happening, I suggest you find a job. Put your fancy Ivy League degree to work." Everyone knew Richard had gotten into the university the old-fashioned way: on a legacy admission and a generous donation from his father to the school's endowment fund.

With his day trading and numerous failed entrepreneurial attempts, he'd blown through his seven-figure trust fund, leaving his family in dire straits. Because of the man's arrogance, Cormac's sympathy was in short supply.

"You don't give a fuck about anyone but yourself, do you?"

Ethan uncrossed his ankles, and Cormac put a restraining hand on his cousin's wrist.

"Not even your own mother."

The hell? Stunned and confused, Cormac blinked.

"Oh. Imagine that. You didn't know, did you?" Richard grinned with pure, satisfied malice.

Cormac scowled.

“I hate to be the one to tell you, but someone should. She’s going to lose your family’s house.”

“*What?*” Angry that this little bastard knew something he didn’t, Cormac shoved back his chair and stood. Ethan immediately followed suit.

Not heeding the danger swirling around him, Richard rubbed his hands together and went on. “Stella didn’t tell you about the second mortgage she took out to pay off your father? They didn’t have a prenuptial agreement. Surely you knew at least that much?” He shook his head. “Apparently not.”

Though anger reverberated through him, Cormac schooled his face to show no emotion.

“Once everything was settled, there wasn’t much left. She’s been draining her funds to provide for your sister.”

The words landed as a sucker punch to Cormac’s gut. His own mother was struggling.

“That you don’t give a shit about any of us isn’t a surprise. But your own mother...?” He tutted and wagged his finger. “Duty and all that. Does it actually mean anything to you? Or was the old man’s saying just bullshit? Meaningless?”

“One more word...” Ethan took a step toward Richard. “Just one. And I’ll knock your fucking teeth down your throat.”

Blinking, Richard dropped his hands to his sides.

“Go find a rock to crawl under.” Ethan took a second step. “I don’t want to see you again for the rest of the night.”

Richard opened his mouth as if to speak. Then he quickly turned and headed back the way he’d come.

“First smart thing he did all night.”

Cormac shook his head to clear it. *Jesus.*

A server carrying champagne walked onto the pool deck.

“Make it worth your while to go get us a couple of shots of Bonds whiskey.” Ethan pulled out a fifty, folded it, and then offered it to the man.

“Yes, sir. Right away.”

Grateful they were alone, Cormac dropped back into his chair, and Ethan followed suit.

“The man’s a swine and a liar. Don’t believe anything he says.”

But there had been confidence in his words. Cormac had been working ridiculous hours during his parents’ divorce, and he hadn’t given the terms more than a passing thought.

“Other than him and his greedy wife, none of us expects you to get married so that we can have money.”

“Except Gran.”

The server returned with the drinks, which contained a very generous pour of the alcohol Cormac was footing the bill for.

Ethan steepled his hands. “You need intel. Talk to your mom.”

Cormac wrapped his hands around his glass.

“You have to put up with this shit all the time. Better you than me.”

Back in college, he’d asked Ethan if he resented that Cormac was their grandfather’s heir. His response had been emphatic. “*Fuck no.*”

Ethan despised family drama more than Cormac did. And his future involved the military, foreign lands, lots of adventure.

For long minutes, the two were silent before Ethan spoke. “I’ve put off saying hello to my mother and the birthday girl for as long as I can. Meet back up after Gran cuts her cake?”

If there was truth to what Richard said, the night promised to be long, and unfortunately didn’t include the Retreat. “Altair invited us to see his rendering in VR.”

“Fascinating.”

They'd been involved in the project from the beginning, and it promised to make them all a pile of money. "I'll have to pass. My hands are full with family dynamics."

Ethan shook his head. "I'm in town for two days before I rejoin my team, and we're not letting the old man's Draconian will ruin my visit. After all, I could have died. YOLO."

"Yeah." *You only live once.* "YOLO."

Putting down his drink, barely touched, Ethan walked away, leaving Cormac alone in the setting sun.

Ironic.

The day was ending. And perhaps, so, too, were his days as a bachelor.

Ignoring the whiskey—fine as it was—in favor of keeping a clear head, he reentered the ballroom in search of his mom.

One thing was certain. He would never allow his mother or sister to suffer.

The music was a little louder than it had been earlier. Conversation buzzed, and at least two dozen more guests had arrived. Servers now walked through the crowd, offering a dizzying array of appetizers.

He found his mother in the far corner, standing with his little sister, Paisley. Though she was only fifteen, trouble would soon find her. She took after her grandmother and already stood five feet nine. Her hair flowed down her back, and her eyes were the striking blue associated with the Murphy clan. According to what she'd said last week, she wanted to take modeling classes. He didn't envy their mother.

"Cormac!" Paisley turned toward them. "Mom's being unreasonable *again.*"

"Is she?" He glanced at his mom who shook her head.

"Tell her it's okay for me to leave with Jonathan and Oliver."

"And who are they?"

Paisley waved her hand in the direction of two young men standing about twenty feet away, looking at her. “They play football.”

“I see.” All too well. “I’d like to meet them.”

“Cormac!” She gasped.

Their mother cleared her throat to cover her laugh.

“I’ll die of embarrassment. *Die.*”

“Then I’ll have to vote with Mom.”

Paisley huffed a long-suffering sigh. “Fine.”

She grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the young men. Both put down their beverages to greet him as Paisley performed the introductions.

Acting on a hunch, he ignored both outstretched hands in favor of picking up Jonathan’s drink and smelling it. “How old are you, young man?”

He shuffled a little. “Uhm. Seventeen, sir.”

“You?” Cormac looked at the other kid.

“Sixteen.”

“Which one of you is planning to drive?”

The trio looked at one another.

“I asked a question.”

Finally Oliver spoke. “Me.”

“And your parents are...?”

“Cormac.” Fury flared in Paisley’s eyes. “Don’t you damn well dare.”

A server passed by, and he placed both drinks on her tray.

“Go stand with Mom while I handle this.”

She stamped her foot. “You’re the worst big brother ever! You’re ruining my life.”

Or saving it. A couple of nearby people turned toward them.

“Look, Paise...” Jonathan ran a finger beneath his tie. “We’ll, er, catch you later.”

“I’d like to meet your parents.”

Both boys pointed to the foursome who stood around a table, chatting. Not surprisingly he knew them.

With tears spilling from her eyes, Paisley fled back to their mom’s side.

Cormac strode to the indicated table to have a little chat. After saying hello, he turned somber, informing them all what he’d discovered. “Handle this as you see fit. But if anything had happened to my little sister...”

“Understood.” Jonathan’s father frowned furiously. “It will be dealt with.”

Oliver’s parents demanded his car keys.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening.” Not that the teenagers were having fun.

Wondering how many other people he could piss off before the night was over, Cormac rejoined his mother. “Where’s Paisely? Or Paise, as I understand she’s called.”

“Upstairs in my old room. No doubt sobbing into a pillow.”

“You were right not to let her leave with them. They’re trouble.”

“Thanks for handling that. Sometimes I wish she had a dad who was involved in her life.”

Cormac had been twenty when he learned the truth about his father, that he’d married his mom for her money. But he’d been thwarted by his father-in-law.

Fergus decided not to release any of the trust funds until he died. With each year that Fergus enjoyed excellent health, Barnabus’s dreams of spending his wife’s millions faded. When he was finally tired of waiting for the old bastard to die, Barnabus filed for a divorce.

Earlier, Richard had been correct. There had been no prenuptial agreement between them. After all, it was the first broken marriage in the family's history.

Cormac wasn't sure his mom had ever recovered from the shock of seeing her husband waltzing away with another heiress, forgetting about her and their children. "It can't be easy. But you do a hell of a job."

"I wish that were true."

He studied his mother intently. She'd always seemed so competent, but how had he missed noticing how tired she looked? "I had an interesting chat with Richard." He no longer deserved the honor of being called *uncle*. "Something about the house?"

"It's too big for me and Paisley."

Her answer was quick. Too quick. Too practiced. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She shook her head. "It's not your concern."

"Not my...?" He raked his hand into his hair. Was everything that Richard said true? "What the hell, Mom?"

"Language." Her smile fell before it fully formed. "It can't be helped."

"You need your inheritance."

She shook her head. "I'll sort it all out. Don't waste a second thought on it."

Of course she would never ask for help. That fact chipped away at his resolve to remain single. "You're not in this alone."

"Cormac. You do too much for all of us as it is. Let the money go to the animal shelter. Your grandfather would be fine with that."

Though he appreciated her words, they both knew they weren't true. Fergus had made generous contributions to the animal fund while he was alive. Fergus had fully intended to pressure Cormac into doing his duty.

“But while you’re here...”

He raised an eyebrow.

“Your Aunt Gail told my mother you were planning to host the party.”

“I saw Gran. She asked if I brought my checkbook.”

His mom winced. “We decided to have it here to save money. All of us sisters were supposed to share the cost, but Gail doesn’t have the funds to help. And honestly neither do I.”

“I’m glad to do it.”

“I...” She sighed. “Thank you.”

One of her friends walked over, effectively ending the conversation.

For the next hour, he chatted with people he otherwise wouldn’t give the time of day to. Then finally, the bandleader acknowledged Kathleen and her birthday. After a couple of toasts, the family—including Paisely with her puffy eyes—all gathered for requisite photos.

As soon as the obligations were complete, Ethan inclined his head, then went out the back door. Cormac quickly followed suit.

“The Retreat?” Ethan asked. “Altair, and then the ladies await us.”

“Soon as I pay the caterers.”

“I’ll go with you.”

People had been drinking for hours, the dancing had started. The pair were able to make their way across the patio without being seen, and they re-entered the house through a door leading to a mud room.

In the kitchen beyond, activity and conversation hummed.

“So you have to admit, they’re gorgeous,” a brunette said.

“Who?” A petite blonde grabbed a pan from the counter.

“The Dastardly Duo.”

At the mention of the nickname, Ethan and he stopped. Instead of announcing their presence, Cormac folded his arms and leaned against a wall.

“You know why they’re called that, right?”

The blonde grabbed a large cookie sheet. “No idea.”

“I read about it in *Scandalicious*. It’s because they team up together. They like to sleep with the same woman at the same time.”

The two men looked at each other and shrugged. It was true.

“And they’re cousins.”

A woman at the sink laughed. “Sign me up.”

“Ask me why they’re called dastardly.” The brunette picked up a chocolate-covered strawberry and popped it in her mouth.

The blonde seemed to have tuned out of the conversation, but the worker now rinsing plates played along. “Tell us.”

“Because women fall in love with them, but they move on to the next target. They’ve left a trail of broken hearts all over the country.”

“*The country?*” Ethan mouthed.

Surely it was just the state.

“I’d risk a broken heart for one great night.” The brunette sighed. “Hell, even a few hours of sexual bliss.”

“Lexi!” the blonde scolded.

“It’s true.”

The blonde finished loading her cart, then closed a door to seal everything inside. After straightening, she stretched. Even from across the room, exhaustion was etched in her every move.

“How about you, Amelia?” Lexi asked. “You up for two men at once?”

“Absolutely.” The blonde—Amelia—grabbed a metal chafing dish and placed a lid on it.

Nice name. The syllables all but caressed Cormac’s tongue.

“One of them can draw me a bath while the other one rubs my feet.”

They both grinned. Over the years, they’d perfected their killer approach. It was all about timing and knowing what to say when.

Ethan remained silent while Cormac pushed away from the entrance and spoke. “I rather enjoy rubbing a lady’s feet. How about you, Ethan?”

CHAPTER TWO



Amelia dropped the warming pan.

Metal crashed against the tile floor, shattering the sudden silence. Mortified, she spun and came face-to-face with one half of the Dastardly Duo. He was the most devastatingly handsome man she'd ever seen. Tall, over six feet, and so, so broad. No doubt he worked out. His scent was dangerously spicy and inviting. "Oh my... I mean... *God*. I'm..." At a loss for words, she pressed her hand to her chest and gulped in a breath to steady her nerves.

Heat flooded her face, no doubt turning her cheeks red. She'd never been so humiliated in her entire life.

Legs spread, he crossed his arms over his chest. He tipped his head to one side as if very much enjoying watching her squirm and stutter.

"So very sorry."

"For talking about us? Or for being caught?" Despite his words, mirth twinkled in his rich blue eyes. The color was shockingly deep, a shade close to azure.

"For being caught." *Lord*. How could she have said that aloud? She shook her head. What was it about him—about being the focus of his gaze—that made her admit that? "I meant to say for talking about you. It's unforgivable."

"I'm sure there's something you can do to earn your way back into my good graces."

Like what? “I...” No. Refusing to ask, to go along with the darkly tempting invitation in his low, secretive tone, she shook her head.

Amelia had been involved with a man like him before, confident and arrogant. She wouldn't fall into that trap a second time.

Cormac addressed his companion. “What do you think, Ethan?”

She cast a quick glance at the other man. He was grinning widely. Obviously he too was enjoying this little exchange.

“Potentially. I'm sure she'll have to earn it.”

Thoughts jumbling one on top of the other, she bent to pick up the tray. But so too did her nemesis. “Honestly Mr....”

“Flanagan. Anyone who calls me Dastardly and invites me to rub her feet can call me Cormac.”

The night was getting worse by the minute. And she had no idea how to dig herself out of the mess she'd found herself in. “That was in jest.”

He studied her. “Was it?”

“It's been a long week.” She hadn't intended to reveal that. “We're tired. Just a little levity.”

A lock of her hair fell forward to cover her eye, and he gently brushed it back. The tenderness in his touch made her catch her breath. “Mr.—”

“Cormac,” he corrected gently.

Though she tried to look away, her gaze was focused on the man dominating every one of her senses. “I'd like to apologize again.”

“Not necessary. We're aware of our reputation. And it's well-deserved.”

Heeding his warning, she moved her face away from his hand, then picked up the pan while he grabbed the lid.

Afraid of losing her grip again, she slid the metal onto the counter where it would be safe. He placed his part on top.

Thankfully Lexi seemed to find her equilibrium faster than Amelia did. “Was there something we could help you gentlemen with? A to-go plate, perhaps?”

Her no-nonsense tone gave Amelia a second to compose herself. Generally she was the more professional of the two, but no man had ever unraveled her the way Cormac Flanagan did.

Marla, their assistant, turned the sink water on full blast, restoring a sense of normalcy.

“I was looking for you so I could pay the bill.”

As if she were a deer in the headlights, Amelia froze and blinked. “The, uhm...bill?”

“On behalf of my grandmother.”

Cormac himself was their client?

The evening had officially become a disaster.

Lexi gaped, and Amelia’s business mind, now engaged, spun. “By way of apology, we’d like to offer you a ten percent discount.” She smiled, an act that was as forced as it was brittle.

“As I said, I’m sure you can earn my forgiveness. But it won’t be through an adjustment to my bill.”

This couldn’t be happening.

“Everyone seemed pleased with how the event went. And the food was excellent.”

“And so was the Bonds whiskey,” Ethan added. “Good call.”

“I’ll send you a bottle.” It would cost her a week’s salary, but it would be worth it.

“I’ll be out of the country after tomorrow.” He shrugged. “Duty calls. Send it to Cormac. He’ll enjoy it.”

“Happy to.”

“Whiskey wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.” Cormac reached for his wallet. “But it’s a start. It’s better if it’s shared.”

Anxious to get this screwed-up evening over as soon as possible, she pulled out her phone, opened the payment app, and swiped his black-colored credit card.

“Place for a tip?”

His question surprised her. “That’s really not necessary.”

“I insist.”

“Just scroll down.”

He tapped one of the buttons, a place to customize the amount rather than select a preassigned percentage.

The amount he keyed in made her gasp. “Mr. Flanagan—”

“Get a massage for yourself, and it looks as if your entire team could use one as well.” With his fingertip, he scrawled his signature.

After handing back the phone, he gave her his contact information. “For the whiskey.” He grinned. “Or a foot rub.”

Ethan gave a long-suffering sigh. “Guess I’ll be the one filling the bathtub.”

Then Cormac captured her gaze again. “I’ll look forward to hearing from you, Amelia.”

The two men exited through the side door.

She remained where she was, watching him go.

Seconds later, she shook her head.

“Holy shit.” Lexi shivered. “Did that just happen?”

Marla turned off the water and faced them. “Girl. That man wanted you.”

“Just a sec.” Amelia quietly moved through into the mud room to ensure they really had left.

When she returned, Amelia exhaled all the stress of the last few minutes. Too bad her heart was still thundering.

“How much was that tip?”

Amelia shook her head. “Fifteen thousand dollars.”

Marla gasped.

“What?” Lexi blinked.

Considerably more than twenty percent, and enough for the three of them to get those much-needed massages.

“No way.” Marla picked up a dishrag and began wiping down the counters. “He was smitten.”

“She’s right.”

That wasn’t possible. Though she’d had one terrible relationship, men weren’t ordinarily drawn to her.

“I think the Dastardly Duo is a terrible name for them.” Marla wrung out her rag. “More like the Dashing Duo. Or the Darling Duo. You know, something like that. Yummy.”

Amelia grinned. “Which is exactly why they’re called that. You saw them in action. They’re charming.” And so good-looking it should be illegal. “They wear down your defenses. You begin to think they care. Then they vanish.”

Lexi fanned herself. “The broken heart might be worth it.”

In Amelia’s opinion, nothing was worth that. Escaping and then trying to put the pieces back together was too damn difficult.

With practiced efficiency, they loaded up and headed back to the shop.

They carried everything inside but didn’t bother to arrange it all.

She’d tackle it tomorrow when she wasn’t as exhausted.

After saying goodnight to Marla, she and Lexi slid into Lexi’s older car. Since they shared an apartment, they often rode together.

“How are you going to spend your part of the tip?” Lexi turned on the radio. “I’m thinking about a spa day. Massage and mimosas.”

After divvying it up between all the people who'd worked to ensure the evening was a success, the amount was still generous. But Amelia didn't dare spend her part. Every extra penny she had was going to take care of her grandmother.

Last week, the care center had called to say she needed more attention than they could provide. Amelia had less than two months to find an alternate placement.

For days, Amelia had visited different sites. She found a couple she liked, and Grandma Fancy was on the waitlist.

Amelia spent her waking hours praying for a spot to open up, but at night, she tossed and turned, worrying about how she'd pay for it.

Well after one a.m. they finally arrived home and flipped on a light.

An unholy scream rent the air. Amelia winced. *Siren*.

"Even when I'm prepared for it, that cat's cries scare the hell out of me." Lexi shuddered.

"Me too." Knowing Siren wouldn't settle until he received exactly what he wanted, Amelia headed for the kitchen.

Siren—a beautiful, if extraordinarily generously proportioned, cat—sat in front of his food dish, head tipped back, crying as if he'd never been fed before. Shaking her head, Amelia stroked the precious Lilac Point Siamese behind his ears. "Sorry, big guy. Are you out of food?" There were a few pieces of kibble in the bowl. But he could see the bottom, and that was enough to trigger his plaintive wails.

Siren belonged to Grandma Fancy, but the care center didn't allow animals, so Amelia had inherited him.

Since she and Lexi were gone so often, Siren was probably a bit lonely and bored. Though he had dozens of toys and Amelia spent as much time with him as she could, it wasn't enough. Grandma Fancy had played with him constantly.

After taking care of Siren, Amelia opened the refrigerator and poured her and Lexi each a glass of chardonnay from the bottle they'd uncorked last weekend.

They both plopped onto the second-hand couch in their living room, kicked off their shoes, and then lifted their feet onto the coffee table.

Lexi sighed. “I don’t know about you, but I sure could go for that bathtub right about now.”

Unfortunately their apartment didn’t have one.

“We should get pedicures.” Before Amelia could utter a word of automatic protest, Lexi held up her hand. “Even though you’re playing along, I know you’re not going to spend even a cent taking care of yourself, so I’m paying.”

Amelia shook her head. “You know I can’t allow you to do that.”

“I’m being selfish. I don’t want to go alone.” Warming to her theme, Lexi nodded. “And if you get blisters, you won’t be able to work as hard.”

Amelia laughed.

“See how selfish I am? I just want you to keep showing up to the jobs.”

“How do you always get what you want?”

“I’m smart.” Lexi tapped her temple. “Say yes. Please. It’s the only spot of brightness in our dark, dank, overworked lives.”

At the ridiculous, dramatic words, Amelia laughed.

“You might as well give in before I pester you to death.”

The truth was, the idea sounded heavenly. She leveled a cold stare at her friend. “You’re not paying for it.”

“That means you’re going?”

Amelia nodded.

“*Yes!*” With her glass, Lexi offered a toast.

Surprisingly light on his feet, considering his girth, Siren padded into the room, then leaped onto the empty cushion between Lexi and Amelia. Immediately he began to purr. *Peace.* Thank goodness.

Closing her eyes, Amelia tipped back her head to rest it on the top of the couch. “Do you know what my worst nightmare is right now?”

“Yeah. A call from Skyler telling us we blew it.”

Suddenly awake, she sat up straight to study Lexi. Her friend was always the optimist. “You’re nervous about that too?”

“No. But I know how much you worry about even the smallest things.”

“It was so unprofessional to talk about them. Especially at their own party.” Amelia took another quick sip. “Who could have known the Dastardly Due was our actual client?”

“Brilliant suggestion about the Bonds whiskey by the way.”

Crap. She had forgotten about that. At the shop, she’d taken off her apron—with Cormac’s card still in it— and tossed it in the laundry bin.

“It was another one of your brilliant maneuvers.”

Only because her brain never shut off.

Following the Prestige mixer, Amelia had sent over her formal proposal. But as part of the package, she had included a box of confections and a chocolate sculpture that she’d had crafted in the form of the company’s logo to impress Hope, the company’s owner.

Not quite satisfied, Amelia had also sent over a tall, antique gumball dispenser and filled it with M&M’s for Tony.

Within an hour of the special delivery, Skyler had called. One of her clients needed to book a private dinner so he could propose to his match. It was short notice, and Skyler wondered if Tastefully Yours wanted the business.

Though she was internally jumping up and down, Amelia remained professional as she and Skyler agreed to terms.

The couple had raved about the food and service, and they’d hired Tastefully Yours to host their engagement party.

That had been the jumpstart they'd needed. But they were experiencing problems growing the business. They didn't have the funds to hire the employees they needed. And their one van was often not enough, which left them using rental services and praying they had a vehicle available. A dozen banks had turned down loan applications to help them scale the business.

Still, these problems were better than having no money and no business on the books.

"You know, Marla was right. Cormac seemed taken with you."

"Stop." Amelia shook her head. "They were just having fun at our expense." She'd heard of more than just his reputation. Cormac Flanagan was a billionaire who could have any woman on the planet. No way in hell would he ever choose someone like her.

"You're welcome to pass his contact information on to me. I'm sure there's a bathtub in his house."

"No chance." Grinning, Amelia closed her eyes once more.

"I think you should give him a call and let him rub your feet."

She couldn't say the gorgeous man wasn't an unholy temptation, one that a younger, naiver version of herself would have found irresistible. Fortunately—or maybe unfortunately—she was wiser now.

After sending him the whiskey, she'd forget she'd ever met him.



"YOU LOOK LIKE SHIT."

Cormac blinked. Coming from Ethan, who spent time in the nastiest, gloomiest places on the planet, that said something. "Good morning to you too, cousin."

With an unapologetic grin, Ethan grabbed a towel from a wooden table in the fitness center of the Braes, a country club owned by the Titans. Only members of the society were allowed to apply for membership.

And since it was early on Sunday morning, few people were in the building. Which made it the ideal place for him and Ethan to talk.

“Been up all night?”

Ethan’s correct guess annoyed the fuck out of Cormac. Even more annoying, Ethan looked fresh and ready for battle despite their late night.

After escaping from his grandmother’s birthday party, they’d driven to the Retreat. They’d spent a couple of hours with Altair, Drake, Everett, and Rylee, then headed downstairs to the club. Though he and Ethan had watched a few different scenes—ones that generally interested Cormac—they hadn’t participated in any.

The truth was, he was fucking smitten with the beautiful, petite, wide-eyed caterer.

He’d enjoyed the sight of horror on her face when he’d first spoken, offering to give her a foot rub.

Her reaction—dropping the pan—had been priceless.

And then... Their gazes had collided.

In those silent few seconds, something had passed between them. She’d been momentarily vulnerable, and he wanted to take away her burdens.

The thought had stunned him.

Had he ever really connected with someone so quickly and deeply?

Though he’d tucked her hair behind her ear, he’d yearned to do so much more. Enfold her in his arms, tight against his chest.

She was tiny enough to fit beneath his chin and press her cheek to his heart.

A wicked thought immediately followed. He'd hold her while Ethan took her from behind. She'd forget about everything except the pleasure they offered her.

As if reading Cormac's mind, Ethan spoke. "Been a while since a woman distracted us from our pursuits."

Since Cormac's disastrous engagement.

"You were thinking about Amelia." He didn't wait for an answer. "So was I."

Not a surprise. The cousins had similar tastes in women.

"The whiskey would be a good excuse to get with her..." Ethan allowed the rest of the statement to hang in the air.

If you didn't need to get married.

Cormac lifted a shoulder. Last night, while they were in Altair's lair, Cormac had cornered Drake. Previously Cormac had sent his friend a copy of his grandfather's will. Ironclad, yes. But it didn't specify how long Cormac had to stay married. "It won't be forever. At worst, a year. Get a prenuptial in place, making every detail clear ahead of time. And call Celeste to find you a suitable wife."

The plan—such as it was—suited Cormac.

If his bride wanted to continue to live her own life, he would be agreeable as long as she was discreet. After all, he and Ethan would only attend the clubs with strict nondisclosure agreements in place.

"Gonna grind." Ethan draped his towel around his neck and strode toward the weight room. "Focus on the shit I can control. Getting back to my team."

Cormac opted to pound out some miles on the treadmill.

Though each machine had its own video display, the view out the windows was spectacular. Magnolias and palm trees, lush landscaping, a pond where a blue heron stealthily stalked its breakfast.

He connected his phone to the audio system, blasted his preprogrammed running mix, and then hit the start button.

Thirty minutes later, his pulse rate was pushing up against his maximum, as it had for some time. Though he was drenched in sweat, his mind was still as cluttered as it had been since his discussion with his grandmother. Realizing the workout wasn't helping, he began his cooldown.

Ethan was pressing iron.

After stepping off the treadmill, Cormac wiped it down, then headed for the refreshment station where he uncapped a bottle of water and grabbed a towel.

Heart rate dropping, he walked to the weight room. "Need me to spot you?"

"Fuck no." Ethan lowered the bar. Judging by the number of plates on it, he had to be benching at least one-and-a-half times his body weight. "If I drop it and kill myself, I deserve to die."

Cormac shook his head. In most ways, he and his cousin thought alike. But when it came to working out, Ethan was a monster.

For the first time, Cormac noticed the shockingly ugly wound on Ethan's thigh. "You supposed to be working out this hard, man?"

"Use it or lose it. Ready to get back to the field."

"Doctors agree?"

Ethan lifted a middle finger. "They know what's right for most people."

"But not for you."

He scowled his annoyance. "I know my body and what it's capable of."

"Maybe not after muscles and sinew have been torn apart by a bullet."

As if Cormac had never spoken, Ethan continued to lift.

"Your funeral." After a quick shower and dressing in clothes he planned to wear to the office, Cormac headed to the fitness center's juice bar and found a table near the window.

A server appeared almost instantly, and he ordered a nutrient-dense green smoothie. He'd rather have waffles, but this would do for now.

His beverage arrived, and he took a drink. He shook his head, following up with a gulp of water. There was no truth in advertising. The offering sounded much more appealing on paper than in reality. The bitter aftertaste reminded him of his relationship with Priscilla.

He'd almost finished choking it down when Ethan joined him. "Order me one of those."

"It's vile."

Ethan grinned. "Then make it two." He strode to the locker room.

The extra-large cups were waiting when Ethan returned, his dark hair still damp. He downed half of one in a single gulp. Unlike Cormac, his cousin didn't wince.

Once he drained that cup, he studied Cormac. "You need to call Celeste." His tone was flat, matter-of-fact. No doubt Ethan had studied the problem, assessed the solutions, and decided on the most strategic course of action.

"Drake said the same thing."

"Great minds."

Cormac admired Celeste's resourcefulness. Her company, Fallon and Associates, had been under her family's control for over a hundred years. Though she claimed the business was a PR firm, it wasn't the truth. Celeste and her team were world-class fixers. No matter how untidy the mess, Fallon and Associates made it disappear.

But finding him a wife, especially one who met all his criteria—and on short notice—was a particular challenge.

The server came over again, interrupting his musings. She had a bright smile, and a bouncing ponytail, reminding Cormac of Amelia.

"Anything else I can do for you gentlemen?"

Though she was offering much more than food and drinks, both men shook their heads. Even if he wasn't suddenly taken with the caterer, Cormac had strict rules. No fucking around with employees or people who worked at places he frequented.

While Cormac was about to send her away rather than order some of their healthy food offerings, Ethan spoke up, "Is it possible to get breakfast without going to one of the restaurants?"

"The buffet is open, but it's in one of the dining rooms. But I could fill a plate for you."

Ethan started on his second chalk-like smoothie. Already he'd had enough calories to power a platoon through a day.

"Bacon. Eggs. Cheese." He paused. "Is there a carving station?"

She smiled. "There is."

"Ham. Prime rib. Side of horseradish." He sat back. "And shrimp."

"Is that all, sir?"

"For starters." Ethan dazzled her with a cheeky grin. "Thanks."

"Anything for you?" she asked Cormac.

After that, he didn't have the guts to order carbs he craved. "Coffee?"

Ethan leaned forward. "I'll have one as well."

"Cream?"

"The real stuff. Not half and half."

"Got it." She moved away, then stopped at the bar to look wistfully over her shoulder at Ethan.

"You definitely haven't lost it."

When they had coffee in front of them, Cormac considered his cousin. "The injury change anything for you?"

"Potentially." Ethan dragged his mug closer to him. "Dodged that last promotion. Maybe as long as I can."

They'd had this discussion before. Ethan loved being part of his special ops team. But command wanted him to ride a desk. People in his position generally didn't get to serve as long as he already had.

"All they need is a doctor to sign a slip, and my time is done." He poured a dollop of cream into the coffee. "Not that I can play this game much longer."

"And if they move you up?"

He shrugged. "Operating is what I know and love. What the fuck-all else am I going to do?"

His food was delivered on three plates. Instead of protesting the obscene amount, Ethan smiled. "Excellent. Thank you."

"My pleasure." She all but dropped a little curtsy.

When they were alone, Ethan shot a glance her direction. "I think I'm in love. You sure you want to pass?"

"One hundred percent."

Before Ethan had a chance to cut off a piece of his prime rib, they were interrupted again.

Ethan dropped his knife. "Holy hell." He stood. "Hawkeye! What are they thinking, letting riffraff in here?"

They two men hugged, and then Ethan performed the introductions. "Hawkeye, my cousin, Cormac Flanagan."

Cormac shook the man's hand. Of course he knew of Hawkeye Security by reputation. Cormac's offices were protected by the organization.

"What are you doing here?" Ethan asked.

"Looking for you."

"News travels fast. I've only been stateside for twelve hours."

"Two for me."

"Ah. You *were* looking for me." He tipped his hand in unspoken invitation.

With a sharp nod, Hawkeye grabbed a nearby chair, turned it backward, and then took a seat.

The server hurried over to take Hawkeye's order. "Sunshine Dream with a wellness boost."

Sounded nothing like the stuff Cormac had choked down.

Ethan wasted no time. "You looking for information?"

"Rumor has it you're good at what you do."

Ethan shrugged, not agreeing, not disagreeing.

"You're injured—"

"I'm a hundred percent. If you'd have arrived twenty minutes ago—"

Hawkeye held up his hand to forestall the protest. "I did, and I agree with your assessment. You're fit for duty. But will command agree?" He leveled a gaze at Ethan. "You and I both know you're nearing your expiration date. Maybe you roll again. But for how long?"

Ethan sat back and lapsed into a thoughtful silence, regarding the man across from him.

"Got an opportunity for you."

"I'm listening."

The server delivered Hawkeye's drink. He took a sip. "Damn. It's good."

At least Cormac knew what to try next time.

"I see the value in keeping our elite teams together. I've taken what works best from the military, from the Company —"

Cormac had been around Ethan long enough to know Hawkeye was referencing the CIA.

"And tweaked it. I'm offering you a command position on a team. Pay's better. All the action you want, and you'll get to choose your own guys."

Ethan's face was stone, betraying no emotion. This was a side of him that Cormac didn't normally witness.

“Find me when you’re ready.” Hawkeye stood, dropped a large bill on the table, and then left.

Cormac shook his head.

Ethan drummed his fingers on the table. “Wasn’t considering leaving the Army.”

“Among other things, I’m guessing he’s also a private contractor?”

“Yeah. He was talking paramilitary. Can be structured a lot like the regular service, and Hawkeye’s elite teams are comprised of former operators.” He drained his coffee. “Black ops.”

“Christ, Ethan.”

A slow, satisfied smile crossed Ethan’s face. “May give me a chance to extend my career. Keep rolling with a team.”

In the most dangerous places on the planet and on an unsanctioned mission. Meaning that if something went wrong, the US would disavow any knowledge of what happened.

“It’s my lifeblood. Need it with every beat of my heart.” Ethan devoured his meal.

He knew his cousin was considering the offer. Taking risks. Mainlining adrenaline.

Once the bill arrived, Ethan grabbed it and scrawled his signature on the bottom. “Let me know the wedding date. And if you need any help on your honeymoon.”

“Wouldn’t think of leaving you out.”

They said their goodbyes, and Ethan promised to stay in touch as he could. They both knew that was bullshit. Once he was in the field, his job became his life.

Cormac drove to the downtown Houston building that housed his suite of offices.

After greeting the on-duty security guard, he headed through the empty marble lobby toward the bank of elevators. At least he’d had the foresight years ago to arrange space on the floors just above his grandfather. Now that Cormac was

exclusively running both businesses, being close was a necessity.

He pressed his fingertip to a pad that unlocked the main office door as well as the one to his private suite.

When he entered, he paused and grinned.

A bottle of Bonds whiskey sat in the middle of his desk.

How she'd accomplished that, he had no idea. Finding a private-label bottle and getting into his office before eight on a Sunday morning was impressive.

It was the kind of resourcefulness that he admired and wanted in his life. *Fair play, Amelia.*

As he took a step inside the room, he noticed a small cream-colored envelope beneath the bottle. He expected the note to be on company stationery, but it wasn't. Instead, the front had a very scripted, gold-embossed *A* on it.

Mr. Flanagan,

I hope you enjoy the whiskey. Thank you for doing business with Tastefully Yours.

~A

She'd underlined the *Yours*.

He was sure she hadn't done that on purpose, but the word rolled around in his mind. *Yours*. He wanted to hear that word on her lips as she was on her knees with her head tipped back so she could meet his gaze.

He'd fist her hair, then take her, claim her.

The image was powerful, so damn evocative that he clenched his back teeth together.

What the fuck was it about her? Her innocence? Her vulnerability?

He shook his head to clear it.

Cormac had come here to work, and he had an urgent piece of business.

But first he picked up the note, tucked it back inside the envelope, and then placed it in his top desk drawer. That done, he moved the whiskey to his credenza before dropping into his black leather executive chair.

He picked up his phone. Had he ever had a more distasteful task?

Not surprising him, despite the early hour, Celeste answered on the first ring. “Been expecting you.”

He appreciated that she didn’t waste time on niceties. So he dispensed with them also. “I need a wife.”

“Within ninety days, I understand?”

So she *had* spoken to his grandmother.

“Any special...requirements?”

“I want it to look real. Prenup. One-year agreement.”

“Shouldn’t be difficult.”

“I want her to be into BDSM.”

“Marginally more challenging.”

He waited for a moment before adding his last caveat. “She needs to be okay with being shared.”

“Ah. Adds a layer of complexity.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Not at all. Just costly.”

Cormac could imagine her smile. “How much?”

“Whatever amount you’ve budgeted, it’s considerably more.”

What choice did he have? “Make it happen.”

“Consider it done. And Cormac? Let me be the first to congratulate you on your upcoming wedding.”

CHAPTER THREE



Lexi ended the call she had been on. “The van will be ready for pick up at three o’clock.”

Amelia checked her watch, the one that was constantly reminding her that she was several thousand steps away from her daily target. The trip to the rental store would take at least twenty minutes, and the drive back would take even longer since rush-hour traffic would be building. Once again, they would be under a time crunch.

Typical Monday afternoon.

Amelia nodded. Until they could afford to buy a van, they had to make do with what was available.

“I’ll drop you off over there, Lexi,” Marla volunteered.

“You want to stop for a boba tea, don’t you?” Amelia grinned.

“And I’m guessing you want me to bring you one,” Marla countered.

“I’d love you forever.” A sweet, caffeinated pick-me-up would power Amelia through the afternoon.

While the two of them were gone, Amelia could put the finishing touches on the entrees and then start loading their lone company vehicle. At least that would increase her step count and burn some calories, which justified the boba tea.

On the other side of the kitchen, her phone danced across the metal prep table. She shot a scowl at the device as if it would make it stop ringing. At this time of the day, it was

either another obligation or a telemarketer. She had time for neither.

With a sigh, she took the few steps necessary to snatch up her phone.

When she read the display, her heart momentarily stopped. “Oh crap.”

“Everything okay?” Lexi asked.

“It’s the Prestige Group.”

Lexi frowned. “It’s not necessarily bad news. Right?”

On Saturday night, Amelia had said a call from Skyler was her worst nightmare. And now it was coming true.

Amelia’s first instinct was to ignore the summons, but that wasn’t how she generally dealt with things.

After a steadying breath, she tried for a professional air as she answered. “Tastefully Yours.”

“Amelia? It’s Skyler. From Prestige. I understand you had an eventful Saturday night.”

Amelia momentarily squeezed her eyes shut.

“I heard favorable comments about the food.”

“That’s terrific.”

No matter how hard she tried, Amelia couldn’t decipher Skyler’s tone.

“Do you mind coming by and visiting with me?”

“Come by your office?” she repeated so that Lexi could follow the conversation. “Of course. When?”

Lexi began to pace.

“This afternoon?”

Even though she was desperate to know what this was about, getting this job done would already take a miracle. A big one. “I’m afraid we’re booked solid today. How about tomorrow?”

Skyler paused. “We’ll make it work.”

“Is morning okay?” At least that way it would impact business less. “Early? How about nine o’clock?”

“See you then.”

After Skyler rang off, Amelia slowly lowered the phone.

“What was that about?” Lexi asked, freezing in place.

Marla had stopped what she was doing, and they all stood in a semi-circle.

Amelia shrugged. “To be honest, I couldn’t tell.”

“Now none of us will sleep tonight.” Lexi resumed pacing.

“Well, we have a job in front of us. And no one has cancelled.” *So far.*

“You’re right.” Marla resumed her task, removing stems from mushrooms. “So I’m going to keep working.”

Lexi nodded. “Same.”

Amelia hoped that the whiskey she’d delivered yesterday morning would buy Cormac’s silence. Getting it to him had taken a lot of creativity.

Yesterday she’d woken up early. Lexi had been sleeping in, and since Amelia was restless, she’d headed for the shop. After rescuing Cormac’s contact information from her apron pocket, she’d gone through their stash of expensive liquors and found one lone bottle of Bonds. Even though had been a Sunday and she had no idea how she’d get into his office, she’d driven to the address listed on the business card.

The security guard had no interest in the bribe she offered him. The nearby cleaning crew wasn’t as hesitant. They offered to help her out for fifty dollars. She was hoping twenty would do the job, but she’d have paid more to impress the billionaire who’d teased her dreams all night long.

Afterward, she’d visited Grandma Fancy.

Obligations out of the way, Amelia had arrived back at the apartment to find Lexi had been dragged out of bed by Siren, who’d loudly demanded second breakfast.

Later on Sunday, while they were getting their pedicures, Amelia received a phone call from Like Family. It was the elder care center that she desperately wanted to get Grandma Fancy into.

They let her know she needed a deposit—a very large one—in order to get Grandma Fancy’s name on the waitlist.

She’d shaken her head. Every moment that passed only seemed to bring her closer to disaster.



EXHAUSTION HAD CURED Amelia’s insomnia. On Tuesday morning, she managed to sleep until her phone alarm shattered the silence.

She swiped the snooze button, but it was too late.

Siren pounced on her chest and began to purr loudly.

Amelia groaned. “You need a companion. Someone else to talk to.”

But Siren walked up and down her body, and when she swept him aside, he jumped back on her tummy. Her breath whooshed out. “That’s it. I’m putting you back on the diet kibble.”

He flicked his tail in her face.

“Okay. I’m coming.”

As if he comprehended every word, he leaped off the bed with surprising grace and landed on the floor silently. At the door, he paused and looked back toward her.

“I promise.” With a reluctant sigh, she tossed back the blankets and followed him to the pantry before he started howling.

After he was taken care of, she showered and walked to her closet. What to wear to the meeting with Skyler? Since it seemed odd to wear a polo with the Tastefully Yours logo on it, Amelia opted for a nice blouse and slacks.

Because she didn't want to show up empty handed, she stopped at the bakery and loaded a box with goodies to take with her. Before leaving, she ordered herself an extra-large frappe with a fourth shot of espresso.

She arrived five minutes early, and Skyler was already in the reception area waiting for her.

"Shall I take that from you?" Miriam, the very efficient office manager, rounded her desk and accepted the gift while Skyler and Amelia chatted.

Instead of carrying the box to the small kitchenette or conference room, Miriam placed it on her desk and popped open the lid. Using a piece of wax paper, she selected the lone chocolate éclair.

"No fair!" Skyler scowled at the scandalous behavior. "You knew I'd go for that one."

"Yep." Miriam was unapologetic. "That's why I was quick."

Amelia grinned. At least this meeting wasn't starting out as awful as she'd feared.

Tony emerged from his office. "What's all the fuss?"

"Nothing for you to worry about," Skyler fired back. "You don't eat sweets."

Amelia glanced at the M&M's-filled gumball dispenser. It had only a small layer of candy remaining.

"You're right." Tony straightened his sunshine yellow tie and wandered over. "Morning, Amelia." He picked out a spinach quiche bite. "This is savory."

"But not healthy."

"It has green in it." He shrugged. Then he started to reach for a chocolate-glazed cruller, but Skyler snatched it up.

She grinned and took a bite.

"That was mean." He shook his head.

“Actually you should thank me. I’m saving you from yourself. And extra time at the gym.”

A few minutes later, after finishing her treat, Skyler rubbed her hands together. “Shall we get down to business?” She inclined her head toward the conference room, and Amelia followed, her pulse turning a bit thready.

“Coffee?” Skyler offered.

The conference room had a small refrigerator and a coffee maker that used pods. And there were boxes and boxes to choose from. “I’m good. Thank you.” The last thing she needed was more caffeine humming in her veins.

“Water?”

“Yes, please.”

“Coming right up. Make yourself comfortable.”

A handful of file folders sat in a neatly stacked pile at the head of the long, polished table. Skyler’s place? Or for a later meeting?

Amelia took a nearby chair.

While the coffee maker made an impressive number of hissing and splashing sounds, Skyler handed Amelia a bottle of imported water. “Thanks.” She placed it on a coaster, unopened. After all she wasn’t even sure how long she’d be here.

Cup of coffee in hand, Skyler joined her. “Thanks for coming in.”

“I’ll have to admit, I’m curious. If it’s about Saturday night, I can explain.”

“Saturday night?” Skyler blinked. “Hope told me Tastefully Yours slayed.”

Hope Sterling, no doubt. Amelia had no recollection of seeing Prestige’s owner at the party. But of course, she spent most of the night in the kitchen.

“Evidently Mrs. Murphy—the birthday girl—loved her cake. Said it was the most scrumptious she’d ever tasted.”

Amelia exhaled but then blinked in confusion. *So why am I here?* Maybe Skyler had another event to discuss? But last time, they'd made all the arrangements over the phone.

"But now you have to dish. What did you expect to have to explain?"

"Nothing." She shook her head. "Everything was great."

"Not sure I believe you. We'll meet for drinks, and then I'll get it out of you."

Amelia laughed. There wasn't enough wine on the planet to make her confess she'd flirted with the idea of Cormac Flanagan rubbing her feet while his stunning, rugged companion ran her a bath.

Last night, when she couldn't sleep, she'd grabbed her phone and googled both of their names.

Since Cormac was a prominent force in the business world and heir to the Murphy business empire, there were dozens, maybe hundreds of articles about him.

Ethan was a different story. She learned he and Cormac were cousins, and that Ethan was a captain in the Army.

Memories from their Saturday evening meeting had teased her.

What would it be like to be with them? An officer. And a gentleman.

At that point, she'd put down her phone and shaken her head at her ridiculous thoughts. Ethan might be a decorated officer, but instinct warned her that Cormac was no gentleman.

Skyler took a drink of her coffee. Then she set it on a saucer and drew her files toward her. "I have a potential match for you."

"*What?*" Horror and shock collided deep inside Amelia, racing through her body, chilling her. "That's not possible."

"I assure you, it is."

No. No. Unable to process what she was hearing, Amelia shook her head. "But I'm not even your client."

“True. *Technically.*”

Needing something to do with her hands, she reached for her water bottle, but she was shaking so hard that she was unable to twist off the lid. Frustrated, she gave up. “I don’t understand.”

“Before the mixer at the International Club, you filled in an interest form.”

“*Oh no!*” She’d done that on a lark. In order to attend with Lexi, Amelia had gone through the required steps.

She’d received a secure link from the Prestige Group website, and the sheer number of questions had been overwhelming. Nothing remained sacred: from the languages she spoke, to her interests and hobbies, to her education, to what kind of relationship she was interested in. *None of the above* hadn’t been a choice.

“I never thought you’d even look at my answers.”

“On Monday mornings, we go through all our new intake information.”

Intake?

“Of course we have a program with a sophisticated algorithm that’s looking for the ideal matchup of our three C’s: compatibility, chemistry, and commitment.”

Intellectually she registered Skyler’s words, but emotionally panic seized her throat and urged her to run. “But...” The second part of the quiz had been more intrusive.

How many children do you want, if any?

What’s important about your potential match? She squeezed her eyes shut. Her flippant response went through her mind. *That he’s handsome and ultra-wealthy.* After all, Lexi had kept saying that all of Amelia’s problems could be solved if she married a rich man.

How could she have written that down? And how shallow did Skyler think she was?

Then her mind reeled. A third section had been scandalously probing.

Are you willing to consider a marriage of convenience? Or is love critical? She'd given her honest reaction. *Love is not important.* After all, when she'd offered her heart, Douglas, her ex, had also wanted to take away her freedom. Maybe love wasn't always like that, but she wasn't taking any more chances.

Then came a slew of really personal inquiries. *Are you into BDSM?* It had been so long since she'd played, and part of her had been wistful. And she'd ticked the Yes box.

After all, if Prestige found her a rich, gorgeous man who wanted to spank her ass at a club, she was all for it.

But now...?

As Skyler studied her, Amelia squirmed.

"At our meeting yesterday, our computer matched you with one of our clients."

"I'm sorry..." She blew out a breath. "I didn't really realize that I was signing up." Maybe she should have read all the fine print about consent.

"Please. Don't worry." Skyler took a drink of her coffee. "You're under no obligation whatsoever. The clients who come to us pay a large fee for our services. The computer can only do so much. It's pretty freaking amazing at assessing two of the three C's: compatibility and commitment."

Amelia told herself to end the conversation and escape, but she stayed where she was.

"It's not as great at chemistry. A match may look perfect, but until the people meet, nothing is certain."

"Does it work the other way also?"

"Meaning that chemistry can render the rest meaningless?" Skyler put down her cup. "Not necessarily. There can be combustion, for sure. But in the long term, we've found that to be unsustainable. We try to advise our clients against making those attractions permanent." She shrugged. "We're not

always successful. But when those relationships end, as they often do, we are blamed.”

Amelia understood. Unaccountably thoughts of Cormac and Ethan once again flitted through her mind. From her perspective, there'd been unbelievable attraction. But they were from different worlds.

“Our business model is simple. We occasionally hold large mixers like the one you attended. All our unattached clients are invited, along with a good number of guests who are single but who have passed our initial assessment. Our standards are quite high.”

And she'd passed?

“But we excel in arranging smaller functions where a client can meet the most promising matches in a casual environment.”

“I'm still not quite sure what you're trying to say. Do you want me to meet someone at one of your events?” In her slacks, next to the women who were perfectly relaxed while mingling with the world's elite?

“Not exactly.” Skyler shook her head. “As I said, we have a bona fide match for you.”

The morning becoming more and more surreal, she waited for Skyler to go on.

“We have a client who is strictly looking for a marriage of convenience.”

Her thoughts swam. And she'd jokingly said she'd consider one. “Skyler, I'm sorry. There's been a misunderstanding. I can't possibly...” She couldn't think of what to say. “I've wasted your time.”

“Hear me out?”

This was ridiculous, and Amelia needed to get back to her day. But because Skyler had been so helpful in getting Tastefully Yours some bookings, she nodded. Five minutes, and then she could escape.

“The client in question needs a wife for a year.”

Though she didn't respond, this was still a no.

"You'd be free to live your own life, except for some obligations...social and otherwise."

Before she could ask for clarification, Skyler continued. "He's into BDSM."

Amelia shook her head. *No way.*

"You indicated you were all right with that?"

She crossed her legs. "When it was hypothetical, it was different."

"The client would be agreeable with foregoing that part of the relationship as long as you were okay with him having his needs met in another city. New Orleans for example."

At the Quarter, no doubt. A place she'd heard of but never visited. "I see." How much time remained on the clock?

"And he often participates in menage relationships."

Had she ever been involved in a conversation more bizarre than this one? "Meaning I'd share him with another woman?"

"Not exactly. He and a friend enjoy playing with the same woman."

She glanced at her watch, then stood. "Thank you for thinking about me. Really. I appreciate it. I'm afraid I can't help you."

"He's offering a million dollars."

The words, electrified with danger and intrigue, hung in the air.

"The first two-hundred-fifty thousand would be payable upon a verbal agreement."

"Are you...?" This had to be a joke.

"That could happen as soon as today."

"You have to be kidding me."

"Time is of the essence. The next payment would be upon completion of the prenuptial agreement and BDSM

negotiation. The next deposit to your account would happen on your wedding night. The remaining funds would be released at the conclusion of your arrangement.”

No longer able to stand, Amelia dropped back into her seat.

That kind of money would take care of Grandma Fancy potentially for the rest of her life. And she could use some of the funds to grow Tastefully Yours, hiring staff and purchasing a second vehicle. “Are you serious about this?”

“I am.”

This made no sense. “Why me?”

“You’re a match.” Skyler held up a finger, then added a second. “Marriage of convenience. BDSM. Okay with being shared. Interested in pursuing your own life. He’d indicated a preference for an entrepreneur. Not someone who would be clingy.” She tapped one of the file folders. “The algo got it right, I’d say.”

“I...” *Does he look like a toad?* He had to look like a toad if he was willing to pay that much money for an elaborate charade.

But still... Grandma Fancy’s future was at stake. And nothing mattered more than taking care of the woman who’d sacrificed everything for Amelia.

It didn’t really matter if the man wasn’t Prince Charming, did it? The arrangement was only for a year. She could close her eyes in bed, if necessary. Maybe wear a blindfold during a scene.

The ridiculousness of the idea made her scoff.

“Are you interested in meeting him?”

“How much time do I have to think about it?”

“Unfortunately none. We were hoping to have this wrapped up already, but I insisted on waiting until we could talk to you.”

She recalled the urgency in Skyler's voice on yesterday's call.

Skyler's phone signaled an incoming text message. "I have another potential coming in. She's not as perfect as you are. But..." She shrugged as she trailed off.

Amelia had arrived expecting to defend the events at Kathleen Murphy's eightieth birthday party, and now Skyler wanted to introduce Amelia to a man she'd never seen but might marry?

"So this meeting... When would it take place?" This week? Maybe a quiet afternoon after she'd had a chance to visit a hair stylist and buy something suitable to wear.

"Now."

Amelia blinked.

"He's here and wants to meet you. It's up to you as to whether I should have him sent in or not."

To steady herself, she gripped the arms of her chair.

"If you're interested at all in the financial part of the arrangement, it can't hurt to consider his proposal."

Skyler might as well have said, "*If you want to be a millionaire and have all your financial problems solved, you may want to say yes.*"

"How does this work?"

"It's up to you. I will perform the introductions, and I can stay, or I can leave you two alone." She shrugged. "Whatever makes you comfortable. Of course you're welcome to leave anytime if you're not interested in moving forward. No explanations necessary."

Even an hour ago, she would not have been able to believe her life could change so dramatically. "I'm ready." *Am I?*

Nodding, Skyler picked up her phone.

Amelia exhaled. What on earth was she supposed to say to the man she might marry?

“Would you like me to stay?”

Part of her was still unable to process the fact this was happening at all. “No.” After all, it was really a business transaction, right? Just like meeting a catering client for the first time.

A moment later, before she was ready—not that she ever would be—the door opened.

She stood and turned, and her knees buckled.

Cormac Flanagan entered the room, his gaze focused on her.

With his broad shoulders, he filled the space and overwhelmed her senses. His scent was of confidence and masculine spice. He too was dressed for business in a well-tailored suit with a striking red tie.

His raven-dark hair was raked back from his square forehead, emphasizing his piercing, deep-blue eyes.

Her ears ringing, she barely registered the fact that introductions were being performed.

“Thanks.” Cormac glanced pointedly at Skyler. “I’ve got it from here.”

Skyler blinked. But then she cleared her throat and nodded.

Cormac followed her to the door. Then he closed it with a firm click before facing Amelia.

His smile was intense, and then it turned predatory as he took a step toward her.

“Hello, wife.”

Frantically she shook her head. “I think there’s been a mistake.”

“I assure you, there hasn’t been.”

“This...” The floor shifted beneath her, leaving her wobbly. “You knew?”

“That I would find you in here? Yes. Out of all the women in the world, you’re the one I want.”

“Me?” Her voice cracked. So much for this being a business arrangement. “Why?”

“I think you know.”

“No. I assure you, I don’t, Mr. Flanagan.”

“Cormac.” As he had Saturday night, he corrected her. “I’m told there are three C’s that go into a match.”

Regaining her equilibrium by small measures, she shook her head. “We’re not compatible.”

He dropped into the seat that Skyler had vacated.

Now that there was some distance between them, she should seize the opportunity to flee. But she didn’t.

This wasn’t about her; it was about taking care of Grandma Fancy. Or that was the lie Amelia whispered to herself.

“Tell me how we’re not compatible.”

“We’re from different worlds.”

“And...?” When she didn’t respond, he went on. “We both like moonlit walks on the beach.”

“Who doesn’t?”

He lifted a shoulder in agreement. “Strolling around Buffalo Bayou. Good food. People who work hard. Travel.”

That had been wishful thinking. Other than occasional trips to Galveston which was a coastal city less than two hours from her apartment, she rarely left Houston. Because she wanted to be close to her grandmother, Amelia had attended a local college. She’d worked as a server while going to school, then immediately started a fulltime position afterward. Her obligations left her no time—or funds—for a lot of fun activities.

“As for commitment, I would expect you to be loyal to me and our marriage for as long as the arrangement lasted.”

She brought up her chin. “I’m no cheater, Mr. Flanagan.”

“Nor am I.”

“Except you want to be free to visit a BDSM club in New Orleans.” Why had she said that?

“Only if my wife was not into that particular kink. But it’s my understanding that you are.” He steepled his hands in a way that was thoroughly, deliciously, devastatingly Dominant.

No longer able to stand, she took a chair but not the one she’d previously occupied. She moved farther away, keeping some much-needed distance between them. “I have experience. Yes.”

“So compatibility is not a problem.”

His eyes were compelling, irresistible. Though he was a complete gentleman on the outside, his tone rang with authority. Part of her instinctively responded to him.

“Is it, Amelia?”

“Compatibility?” She twisted her hands together, hoping he didn’t notice the way he unnerved her.

But he flicked his gaze toward her lap.

He’d noticed, all right.

“There’s only one way to find out.”

“A trip to the club? A visit to my dungeon?”

She sucked in a breath. Did he really have a dungeon? Digging deep for false bravado, she replied, “Or a moonlit walk on the beach.”

“Touché.”

Amelia struggled to keep this about business. She had a horrible, uncomfortable sensation that if he crooked his finger, she’d go to him despite her resolve. “I’ll be honest. I’m interested in the business arrangement. When is it convenient to discuss that? I’m rather busy with work and family obligations.”

“Right now.”

His answer startled her, and there was no way that was possible. She replied with her own counter. “I suggest Sunday

afternoon.”

“I want to be married as soon as possible. The quicker it happens, the faster you receive your money.”

“Until ten minutes ago, I didn’t even know I was a match for someone.”

For long, uncomfortable seconds, he didn’t reply, allowing the tension to stretch. “Unless we can reach some sort of verbal arrangement immediately, I’ll move on to the next candidate.”

“Do you always get what you want, Mr. Flanagan?”

“To be honest, Ms. Ryan, I don’t want to get married any more than you do. I have my reasons just as you have yours. I believe we have the foundations that will enable us to make a marriage work for a year.”

“You’re more confident than I am.”

“Deny that you’re thinking about the way I tucked your hair behind your ear on Saturday night.”

Amelia remained silent.

“Or that you’re wondering what it might be like if I kissed you.”

She gasped. “I most certainly am not.”

“Little liar.” His smile took the heat out of his word. “In the future, I won’t put up with that. Consider yourself warned.”

His Dominant sternness shot ripples of awareness through her. For a wicked moment, she was tempted to push him. If they were at a club, talking about a scene, she’d be confident in teasing him, asking what he meant. But if they moved forward, her immediate future would be tied to his, and she needed to tread with caution.

“Do you want to be spanked, Amelia?”

Her response was immediate. *Yes, Sir.* But she refused to utter the words aloud.

“If you do, that’s two of us.”

Heat danced across her cheeks.

“I’d be happy to indulge you as often as you wanted. Every night before bed, even.”

The idea of going to sleep with him, waking up next to him... “You’d want me to live with you?”

“Of course. You could have your own suite. But I’d prefer you share mine. Be clear, Amelia, I am a man with needs.”

She nodded. “I’d have marital responsibilities.”

“Which I would do my best to ensure you enjoyed.” He swept his gaze over her, pausing on the swell of her breasts, then lingering on her face.

In that moment, she believed she was the woman he wanted. It was a shockingly powerful sensation.

“Say you’ll marry me. I’ve got a check already made out to you.” From a pocket inside his suit coat, he pulled out a piece of paper. Then he unfolded it and slid it toward her.

She’d never seen that many zeroes on a check with her name on it.

It didn’t represent cash to her; it meant comfort for her grandmother, and a much-needed cash infusion for Tastefully Yours. “What if we can’t come to terms on the prenuptial agreement?”

“I expect we’ll manage.”

“But if we don’t?”

“The first payment is yours to keep, as per our verbal agreement.”

She was so, so tempted. “This prenuptial meeting...I’d want my own representative.”

He leaned back, as if not expecting her counter. “Go on.”

“My choice. And you pay his or her fee.”

“That’s rather aggressive negotiating, Ms. Ryan.”

“It’s the cost of doing business. You want to be sure you’re protected. So do I.”

“As long as your representative is comfortable discussing BDSM. And me spanking your ass when you’re not completely honest.”

Her stomach plummeted, and she gasped. “You wouldn’t!”

But the truth smoldered in his gaze. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you, my sweet? You want to drape yourself over my lap as you turn yourself over to me.”

“Certainly not.”

“That’s the second time you’ve been less than transparent. You have a tell, Amelia. You’d make a crappy poker player. You’re curious. Nervous but curious.”

“I—”

“Do you want to go for three?”

Amelia clamped back the confession that had almost spilled out.

“So we’re agreed? We’ll find a time to meet with our attorneys. In the meantime, I’d like you to meet my family this weekend. We’ll get married in the next sixty days.”

“It’s too, too fast. There are hundreds of details we’ll need to handle.”

“No doubt Hope and her team know people who can organize everything. You’ll need to get fitted for your gown and then show up for the ceremony. Simple.”

Nothing about this, or him, was simple. “You’ll need to know that I have a cat. He’ll be moving in with me. Don’t worry. He’s a perfect angel.”

“We have plenty of space. Anything else?”

His scrutiny made her thoughts flee.

“In that case...” Cormac stood and offered his hand.

The perfect gentleman. Except he wasn’t

“Let’s test the final C, compatibility, and seal this deal with a kiss.”

“No need.” She shook her head. With the way her pulse was humming, compatibility was there. “Besides, I don’t do that.”

“You don’t kiss?” Cormac’s piercing, azure eyes darkened purposefully. “Too bad.” He paused. “Because I do.”

The sensual intent engraved on his face compelled her to take an instinctive step back.

To protect herself from his devastating determination, she pressed her hand to her heart.

“Open your mouth for me, Amelia.”

Frantically she shook her head. *Not now. Not ever.*

He advanced on her.

Amelia retreated until her back hit the wall. But it never occurred to her to summon Skyler.

A feral grin on his features, Cormac devoured the distance between them. “It wasn’t a suggestion. Open your mouth for me, wife.”

But they weren’t married. Not yet. Emotionally she could never give herself to him.

Then with velvet steeliness, he ensnared her wrists, effortlessly trapping them above her head, effortlessly holding her in place with one of his hands.

Her heart galloped. “Cormac...”

He feathered his index finger across her lips. “There’ll be no denying me.”

This wasn’t about him. It was about protecting herself from future hurt.

With even more tenderness, he again traced her lips.

A display of aggressive male prowess, she could have resisted. But his gentleness was her undoing.

As if he knew that, he leaned in closer to capture her chin.

He filled her vision and overwhelmed her senses. His determination hung in the air, a dance of irresistible pheromones.

Cormac, stunningly handsome billionaire, the man would be her groom, kissed her forehead as if she were the most precious thing in his life. “You’re going to give me everything I want.”

Futilely she shook her head.

“Oh yes.” He pressed his body against hers, his masculine heat searing her belly.

With exquisite pressure, his gaze holding hers captive, he squeezed her jaw.

In protest, she opened her mouth.

He seized the opportunity, seeking entrance, demanding surrender.

She tried to hold out. Tried with every bit of her determination.

But when his hot tongue touched hers, and she tasted herself on him, her knees buckled in surrender.

From the moment Amelia had first seen him, their passion had been inevitable.

Terrible. Unwanted. But inevitable...

CHAPTER FOUR



Unable to believe this was now her life, Amelia pulled up in front of one of Houston’s most highly rated hotels. The Sterling Uptown was brand new, and from what she’d heard, the room rates were classified as luxurious. Even with her first check from Cormac safely in the bank, she wouldn’t consider an overnight stay.

The valet dashed around the front of her older-model car. She gave a little grimace. The vehicle that pulled in behind her was a bright red Lamborghini.

Before the valet could open her door, Cormac appeared and waved him away.

Her heart leaped into her throat.

As she was accustomed to, he wore an exquisitely tailored suit with a crisp white shirt. Today his tie was a light blue that made his eyes even more vibrant.

Though she knew he was one of the most gorgeous men she’d ever met, every time she saw him, her reaction was even more potent. Desire raced through her, urging her to capitulate to the power he held over her.

He offered his hand and assisted her from the vehicle.

Always so polite. But now—having been kissed by him—she knew what lay beneath the veneer. Yet that was the part of him that intrigued her the most.

“Thank you for coming. You’re a few minutes early even. Impressive.”

On her behalf, he dealt with the valet, then took her hand and led her into the stunning lobby. A spectacular chandelier stole her breath. The area was enormous, and straight through was a swimming pool with private cabanas all around it.

Because of her busy work week, they'd agreed to spend most of Sunday together. At eleven, they were meeting his mother and grandmother for brunch, but she and Cormac had chosen to meet early to discuss the details the ladies would want to know.

"We have a couple of options. We could have a glass of champagne at the bar or here in the lobby."

There were plenty of comfortable-looking seating arrangements, but if she had alcohol at ten o'clock in the morning, she might need a nap. "Do they have a coffee shop, by chance?"

"They do. And I think you'll like it."

Last night, she and Lexi hadn't gotten home until after midnight. Despite her tiredness, Amelia hadn't been able to sleep. She'd tossed and turned, thinking about Cormac and his kiss and the fact she was well and truly starting the pretense of being his bride.

And not that it was an actual charade. He wanted her to be his wife in all possible ways. The difference was, this was a temporary arrangement.

They veered to the left, away from the bustling lobby area, past a gift shop and a luxury car dealership. Seeing expensive, gleaming cars in the hotel was a little surreal.

They soon reached a small French bakery.

"How's this?"

The shop enchanted her. A hand-lettered sign, reminding her of movies set in Europe, hung in front of a plate-glass window. La Patisserie. Scents of sugar and yeast made her mouth water.

The café itself was bright and airy with half-round booths. No detail had been overlooked. The fabrics were bright pink.

The scattered tables had fanciful feet and legs, and striped-fabric chairs were pushed beneath them. Apothecary jars of various shapes and sizes had been used to decorate the glass shelves. This was so her, more so than the ostentatious display of wealth in the other areas of the hotel.

She ordered a quad Americano with steamed half and half while he opted for a latte.

The woman behind the counter nodded. “Would you like a pastry to go with that?”

Everything looked divine. Many of the choices were adorned with the shop’s scrawled logo. Though she was tempted, she shook her head. “Thanks, but no. We’re having brunch later.”

“You can always stop back by for dessert.”

Which she might be tempted to do.

Cormac wasn’t as hesitant. He went straight for a raspberry cream cheese Danish.

The choice surprised her. Her future husband was fit and lean. She expected him to be more of the green power veggie smoothie type.

“Would you like that warmed up, sir?”

He nodded.

After he paid the bill and dropped a generous tip in the jar on the counter, he asked Amelia to choose a table.

Since she didn’t want their conversation to be overheard, she selected the booth that was the farthest away from the entrance. “Thanks for the coffee.”

“You’ll find I enjoy spoiling you.”

She didn’t point out that she could have afforded to pay for her own, thanks to him.

“Please, allow me to do so.”

Going back to her normal life after this would be a challenge.

She took a sip of the heavenly brew and then sighed. Since she'd only had a few hours of sleep and had already stopped by the shop to do their bookkeeping, the caffeine and cream were lifeblood.

“How is it?”

“Magical. Like this place.”

“I thought you might like it.” Picking up his fork, he grinned.

“I’ll be honest; I didn’t think you ate sweets. I mean...” She shouldn’t have started.

With seemingly infinite patience, he waited.

“Sorry. None of my business.”

“Go on. Please.” He seemed to enjoy watching her shift uncomfortably while he ate.

“You’re... It appears you work out and take care of yourself.”

“Are you saying you like my physique?” He grinned.

“Fishing for compliments, Mr. Flanagan?” *Oh heavens.* “It was just an observation.”

“Was it?”

They both knew it was so much more than that.

“Since we’re making observations, I was remiss in not telling you how beautiful you look.”

Today was the first time he’d seen her in something other than business attire.

“The dress could have been made for you. The color is perfect. The cut highlights your curves.”

“This old thing?” Her light words were an automatic deflection and a total lie.

On Thursday, when they had a few hours between jobs, Lexi had insisted they go shopping. Her friend wouldn’t let Amelia go to her favorite discount store. Instead Lexi googled the best boutique in Houston, drove straight there, and told the

owner that Amelia had an important meet-the-billionaire's-family brunch at the posh Sterling Uptown.

The owner had immediately selected a midlength, pleated, yellow-gold dress. Amelia had protested she was too short to wear it.

“Trust me.”

The shop owner had been right. It was a petite cut, and Amelia twirled around, feeling like a princess. And then she'd seen the tag. Gasping, her enthusiasm vanished. “We could make a down payment on a new van for this much money!”

“It's perfect.” Lexi had been unmoved. “Think of it this way. You need to make a good impression on his family. That means something elegant and conservative. And when you get married, our business is going into the stratosphere. It's an investment.”

Cormac spoke, bringing her back to the present. “You should order it in every color.”

“I may need to add a clothing allowance to our prenuptial agreement.” Her closet was filled with practical slacks and a few blouses. For the weekends and her infrequent trips to the yoga studio, she had leggings and oversize tops.

“Sounds reasonable.”

“No, actually it's not.” Amelia shook her head. “It's a waste.”

Confection finished, he slid his plate to the side. “In what way?”

“This whole thing—” She waved her hand. “To fit in to your life, I'll need shoes and outfits... But I'll have no need for them a year from now. I'll end up donating them to charity.”

“You'll have them forever.”

He didn't understand, and she wasn't sure he'd ever see the disconnect. “I'll go back to the real world.” The clock would strike midnight, and Cinderella would flee from the ball.

“Or your life will change forever.”

“Maybe.” If it did, she’d just be busier than she was right now. Reminding herself that she and Cormac had a business deal, that he was a job and nothing more, she pulled back her shoulders. “What do I need to know before we meet your mom and grandmother?”

“They will be delighted by this turn of events. My grandmother particularly.”

“Are they aware of the...situation?”

“No. Gran will most likely suspect something, but she’ll go along with it for family reasons. I’d like my mother to think I’ve found someone special.”

“Oh?” That might be tricky. “Why?” She knew he needed a wife immediately, but there had to be a reason. And since she was curious, she asked him about it.

“Grandfather’s will. He was an old-fashioned gentleman and a damn manipulator. He believed in passing business—and money—to male heirs. He and my gran had three girls. And I’m the oldest grandson.” He took a drink of his coffee. “I’ll make this quick. His will was interesting. I inherited the businesses. But as for all the money? If I don’t get married, all his wealth goes to the animal shelter.”

“And you’re tempted to let it?”

“If it were up to me...?” He shrugged. “Yes. But it’s not that simple.”

“It never is.”

“My mother is in danger of losing her house. I had no idea. And she won’t allow me to give her money.”

Amelia winced. How well she understood the sacrifices for family.

“I have a younger sister to be concerned with. Aunts. A jackass uncle. Cousins.”

“Including Ethan?”

He nodded, then went on to explain. “But his family isn’t dependent on receiving family money. His father’s family has its own wealth, and they have a long history of service to the country.”

Which she knew from her nighttime internet searches. Nodding, she got serious, aware that their time was dwindling. “How did we meet?”

“Let’s stay as close to the truth as possible. It was at Gran’s party. She’ll love that. My story is that I was smitten and tracked you down.”

He had a talent for saying things that made her feel good—even if they weren’t true.

“And we’ve been in touch since.”

Which they had been. Every morning since they’d reached an agreement, he’d texted her, asking how she was and if she needed anything. He’d also confirmed the details for today’s event and their upcoming prenuptial meeting.

His attorney had already sent over a sheaf of paperwork that was as thick and complicated as it was mindboggling.

Overwhelmed, she’d called Skyler and asked for an attorney. Happily she’d supplied the name of Celeste Fallon. And she’d added that the woman was tough as nails and had been somewhat involved in this whole process.

Though nervous, Amelia had called Celeste who’d immediately answered and agreed to represent her. Her first comment was that a million dollars was an excellent place to start the negotiation, but it wouldn’t end there. It mattered not one bit that Amelia had already agreed to those terms.

Aware that Cormac was still speaking, she shook her head and refocused.

“Because I’ll be seeing more of you in the future, I wanted you to meet them.”

“Is that something you do often? Introduce women to your family?”

For a moment, he hesitated, and something ghosted through his startling eyes. Pain? Regret? It shouldn't matter, but it did. She wanted to know him on a deeper, more meaningful level, which made no sense. That would create a bond that she might have difficulty severing.

After a few seconds, he answered. "No. It's been a long time."

So this brunch was meaningful on a lot of levels. "Will you be mentioning marriage?"

"Not yet. That will remain between us for a couple of weeks."

"How will we keep it a secret?"

"Everyone we meet with will sign a non-disclosure if they want our business."

Would she ever become accustomed to the way he effortlessly controlled his part of the universe?

"Your turn, Amelia. What will you say when they ask when we met?"

Of course they'd be curious to hear from her as well. "Mutual attraction." *That* was an understatement.

"You sound sincere."

Embarrassed, she distracted herself by picking up her cup. "Fishing again?"

"Absolutely." His quick grin was teasing, devastating, making him so much more accessible.

At no point had she expected to actually like him.

"Now to wedding plans."

Skyler had sent over a file containing everything Amelia needed to know. She'd scrolled to the catering recommendations and had done a silent happy dance when she found Tastefully Yours on the list. That called for more chocolate, for sure.

“We’re meeting the wedding planner tomorrow morning at your office.”

He pulled out his phone to confirm the details. “Nine a.m.”

“I want a small ceremony. No need for a ridiculously expensive affair.”

“Done.”

Amelia regarded him. “You’re being agreeable. Maybe too much so.”

“As you said, it’s business.” When she nodded, he went on. “We’ll talk to the planner about venues and officiants. Our marriage has to look real, but I’d rather focus on the honeymoon.”

Her fingers turned nerveless, and her coffee sloshed over the rim of the cup.

With a smile, he offered a napkin.

“You want to go on a honeymoon?”

“Of course. Do you have a passport?”

“No. I’ve never needed one.” And how would she handle her responsibilities while she was gone?

“We’ll make the arrangements tomorrow. Have it expedited.”

As she was learning, once he made a decision, nothing would stand in his way.

He checked his very expensive watch. A Bonds, if her guess was correct. “It’s almost eleven. Are you ready?”

“I’m not sure I ever will be.”

“You’ll do fine.”

Hand in hand, they strolled to the restaurant and checked in at the podium.

“Welcome, Mr. Flanagan. Would you like me to show you to your table?”

Cormac glanced at Amelia as if her opinion mattered. “I’d prefer to meet them in a more private setting.”

“Very good.”

“May I bring you a glass of champagne?”

Suddenly needing the fortification, Amelia nodded.

“Please,” he responded on their behalf, naming an expensive brand. “Two glasses.”

“My pleasure, sir. You’re welcome to have a seat in our lounge.”

In Amelia’s experience, people waited in bars, not this type of relaxing luxury. Once again, she was uncomfortable. “It’s strange. I was at the party, but I was the help. Unnoticed. Cormac, maybe this is a mistake.”

He shook his head. “You’re fierce, Amelia. Show it.”

The hostess arrived with their bubbly, and a single sip went straight to her head. “Wow. That’s... *Wow.*”

He smiled. “See? You have an affinity for fine wine.”

After the next tiny drink, she sat back, a little more relaxed.

A few minutes later, he stood. “Here they are.”

He offered his hand, and she took it, standing by his side as if she belonged there.

With genuine affection in his eyes, he greeted Kathleen. “Your necklace is beautiful, Gran.”

“I appreciate the gift.” Kathleen touched her pendant.

Amelia had the sense she was missing something.

“It’s my family’s crest,” she explained. “Cormac had it made for me. He’s always such a dutiful grandson.”

“I’m sure you’re both anxious to meet Amelia.” Cormac performed the formal introductions.

“Delighted, dear one.” Kathleen clasped Amelia’s hands in hers.

Cormac's mother, on the other hand, swept Amelia into a hug. "I'm so pleased to meet you, Mrs. Flanagan."

"Stella, please."

"You're every bit as lovely as Cormac said."

The game was on. He'd said nothing of the sort.

"Did he?" She shot a glance at her son. "Well, he didn't say much about you, except that you're beautiful. And he's right."

She blushed. "You're too kind. But I see where he gets his charm."

The hostess offered to show them to their table.

"This is going to be wonderful," Stella said.

Easily Cormac dropped his arm around Amelia's shoulder and drew her close to kiss her forehead. Against her ear, he whispered reassuring words. "You've already impressed them. Thank you."

Cormac held Amelia's seat and ensured the others were comfortable.

The server offered champagne, which everyone except Amelia wanted. She ordered coffee. Kathleen was too perceptive for Amelia to slip up even a little bit.

The moment they were alone, the questions started. And none of them were directed toward Cormac.

He sat back, watching, seeming to enjoy her interactions with his family.

"You met at my party? You're the one responsible for making it such a grand success?"

"I respectfully disagree, ma'am. It was all due to you. You were the star and such a great hostess. Even if everything had been a disaster, people would have considered it a fabulous event just because they got to spend time with you."

"I see why you chose her, Cormac."

He lifted his glass in a salute to Amelia.

A basket of bread and pastries was delivered to the table, and their orders were taken. Amelia guided the conversation back to the ladies, asking them questions, trying to get to know them better.

She hazarded a glance at her future husband, and he was looking at her with a predatory gleam in his eyes. With a little shiver, she refocused on the conversation. Even in a roomful of people, he unnerved her completely.

By the time the after-meal beverages were delivered—tea for Kathleen and Stella, coffee for Cormac and Amelia—she knew a lot about their family dynamics and Stella’s horrible divorce. She confessed her husband left her when he discovered her money wouldn’t be released to her until her father saw fit. He’d left her with a daughter still at home, and she needed a home equity line of credit to buy him out.

More and more, Amelia empathized with Cormac and his need for a wife.

Once he’d handled the bill, he escorted his mother and grandmother to the valet stand where Kathleen’s driver picked them up.

Then he returned to where Amelia was waiting in the lobby.

He gently took her shoulders and kissed her. “I need to be alone with you. You did well. Even I was convinced you want to be in a relationship with me.”

At this moment, so was she.

“Shall we?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Visiting a jeweler, perhaps?”

“For?” She frowned.

“An engagement ring. And maybe our wedding sets.”

Before she could respond, her phone rang, and she dug the device from the bottom of her purse. *Grandma Fancy*. For a

moment, she hesitated. But always, her responsibilities came first. “I need to take this. I’m sorry.”

“Of course.”

She moved closer to a side wall for privacy. “Hi, Granny.”

“Where are you?”

At least five times, Amelia had explained that she would stop by this evening.

“They haven’t fed me lunch.”

Squeezing her eyes shut, she exhaled. Though Amelia could call the care center’s front desk, she wasn’t sure she’d get an accurate answer. This was another reason she wanted to get her grandma into a place that had more staff members per resident.

Even though Amelia had put down a deposit at Like Family, she still hadn’t heard back about an actual move-in date. She’d been told it could be weeks, if not longer.

For a minute, Cormac had been chatting with a man who stopped to say hello, but he looked her direction and then began walking toward her.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can, Grandma Fancy.”

“I love you, Lia. I’m hungry.”

The last words breaking her heart, Amelia ended the call.

“Is everything okay?”

She lowered her phone. “I’m sorry. I need to go.”

“Oh?”

In his place, she might be skeptical. But he appeared inquisitive rather than annoyed. “It’s my grandmother.”

He waited.

“She’s in a care home. And she says they didn’t feed her lunch.”

“Is there someone you can ask?”

“They have a lot of residents. And sometimes she forgets.”

“Then let’s go.”

Eyes wide, she looked at him. “But—”

“We’ll stop in at La Patisserie and get several of their light meals to take with us.”

“Cormac, really. This is—”

“It’s what husbands do.”

“But—”

“Would you like to stand here and argue with me? Or do you prefer to take care of your grandmother?”

“Honestly...” She was equal parts stunned and exasperated. “I can handle it and meet up with you later.”

“We agreed to spend the day together. And that’s what we’re doing.” He rubbed her shoulders. “You’re not in this alone.”

Had she ever heard those words before?

“Besides, I owe you after the way you dealt with my side of the family.”

She gave a half smile.

Her phone rang again. Grandma Fancy once more. With a soft sigh, she answered.

“Lia? I’m hungry.”

“I know, Grandma. I’m on my way with food.”

“You’re an angel. Always have been.”

She and Cormac went to the pastry shop together. He ordered every different croissant sandwich that they had, along with chips, apples, soup, juice, and bottled water.

Her mind reeled.

“Does she like sweets?”

“Chocolate cake.”

He nodded at the counter person, indicating that should be added to the bill.

In total, they had four bags by the time they arrived back at the valet stand.

Cormac's ride, a sleek SUV, was already waiting for them. How he'd arranged that, she had no idea.

After merging onto the 610, he glanced her direction. "Tell me about your gran."

"She's my entire world."

"I understand the sentiment."

"My parents..." How did she even begin to explain her embarrassment? "My dad abandoned my mom before I was born. I guess he didn't want a screaming child or a pregnant girlfriend." She shrugged. "I have no idea who he is."

"That has to be difficult."

Because his tone invited further discussion, she told him more. "My mother wasn't much better."

He winced.

"Drugs that got progressively worse. So we lived with Grandma Fancy."

"Fancy?" He smiled. "That's her name?"

"Francine, but I couldn't pronounce it when I was little. And it stuck. Anyway, Mom's a real piece of...work. She and her current druggie boyfriend swindled my grandmother's life savings."

"Jesus."

"So..."

"You're stepping in when no one else would?"

"It's the right thing to do. She raised me, protected me. Worked well into her seventies to make sure I had a roof over my head. I'd do anything for her."

He drove confidently but not too aggressively, but he threaded traffic in a way that had them close to the west loop in record time. "You mentioned the center has a lot of residents."

“I’m trying to move her to another facility. The one I love is expensive, and they don’t accept people with limited financial means. I managed to put down a deposit this week, and now I’m waiting on availability.”

“What’s the name of it?”

“Like Family.”

They reached their destination, and he pulled to a stop beneath the portico. “Would you like me to go in with you?”

“It may be more confusing to her.”

“Understood.” Still, he carried the bags to the door, then turned them over to her. “Take your time. There’s no hurry.”

“I can’t thank you enough.”

“You don’t need to.”

In the reception area, she signed in.

“Your grandmother is in the social room, Ms. Ryan.”

Amelia nodded her thanks and found Grandma Fancy in front of the television, laughing along to an old Lucille Ball show. When Amelia sat down next to her, Granny barely acknowledged her. “I brought you food.” She held up one of the pretty pink bags.

“What an angel.” She smiled. “I’ll save it for later.”

Amelia exhaled. “So you’re not hungry?”

“Oh no, Lia. I had lunch.” The lady sitting next to her laughed at one of Lucy’s antics on the television, seizing Fancy’s attention.

“I’ll, ah, put your food in your refrigerator.”

“Thank you. I’m sure I’ll enjoy it.”

By the time Amelia returned after organizing the meals, Granny was asleep in her chair.

A caregiver walked over. “I’ll make sure she gets to her bed for her nap.”

“Thank you.”

So often, these visits were difficult. And her grandmother was generally more alert and focused earlier in the day.

Her heart a little battered, she returned to the lobby. Cormac was in his car, talking on the phone. But he ended the call to open her door for her.

“Rough visit?”

“She thanked me for the food, but said she ate lunch.”

“It can’t be easy.”

She shook her head. “Some days are more difficult than others.”

“I’ll share the load.”

Unfortunately it didn’t work that way. “Sorry to interrupt our day.” She took a couple of deep breaths to try to control her emotions. “Where do you want to go next?”

“I’d suggested engagement ring shopping, but I’m guessing you’d rather not do that today?”

“Thank you. Yes.”

He pulled out of the parking lot.

“Where are we going?”

“I have an idea.”

Intrigued, she settled back.

He drove to a restaurant on Buffalo Bayou and turned the vehicle over to the valet.

“Why are we here? Unlike Grandma Fancy, I remember eating a big brunch.”

“Just trust me.”

He guided her inside, chatted with the host, then followed him to a quiet spot on a patio overlooking the park. “Figured you could use a reset.”

“This is...so very thoughtful of you.” Who was he? She knew him to be arrogant, charming, highly sexy, determined. And now? Caring. Complex enough to be confusing.

They ordered dessert, and because she dare not have more caffeine, she opted for sparkling mineral water.

He couldn't have selected a more perfect venue. Watching the slow-moving water and people riding bikes, walking dogs, or jogging with strollers soothed her.

Since he seemed to be in no hurry, they chatted and hung out for over an hour, until all her worries disappeared. They'd be there tomorrow, but for now she allowed them to drift away. "This is exactly what I needed."

"Good."

After another leisurely half hour, they were back in his car, driving to a house just north of Memorial Drive, only a couple of minutes away. "You do like this area," she said. She recalled him saying that in Prestige's conference room. "You're close enough to ride a bike or walk."

"Helps me keep the physique you've commented on."

She slid him a teasing smile. "You said that. Not me."

"So I did."

His three-story home stole her breath. It was sleekly modern with glass everywhere, showcasing views of his courtyard with its pool and cascading waterfall. "It's stunning." Artwork hung from the soaring walls. And every detail was exquisite with gorgeous wood and beautiful stonework.

"It's an escape in a busy city." He pulled off his tie and tossed it on the kitchen island. "Feel free to make yourself at home. Sparkling water? Wine?"

"I'm fine. Thank you." Since he'd offered, she kicked off her shoes. Her footwear was always sensible, and the heels she'd worn today were anything but.

After shrugging off his suit coat, he offered a tour of the home. He had five bedrooms, one which he used as an office.

He skipped the middle floor to show her the top level, and it was a dream. Half was a media center with comfy couches

and lots of workout equipment. “I get bored watching television, so I row or ride while I do.”

“And that’s why your physique looks so good.”

“Ah! You finally admit it.”

Still grinning, he showed her the rooftop deck. Potted plants thrived under fabric sails that provided shade. In addition to patio furniture, he had a bar and a hot tub. “You have to feel like the king of the world up here.”

“This was the feature that sealed the deal. I turned in an offer significantly above asking price.”

“I see why.”

“Now the second level.”

Where his bedroom was, no doubt. And his dungeon?

“Did we want to talk first? You know...”

He so completely unraveled her ability to think straight, but this mattered to her. “BDSM.”

“Of course.”

Better now than in the heat of the moment when she might agree to anything.

“Would you like to sit here? Or outside?”

Since it was a humid afternoon, she voted in favor of air-conditioning.

He fetched them each a bottle of sparkling water from the media room’s minifridge before joining her on the far end of the leather couch.

Amelia curled up, tucking her legs beneath her, wanting to keep some distance between them.

Turning toward her, he remained silent, giving her the space to take the lead.

And her first question wasn’t what she wanted it to be. “Do you really have a dungeon?”

“Yes.”

Part of her had been hoping he was kidding when he'd mentioned it at the Prestige offices. And a more wicked part of her had been craving the relaxing release she only found in a scene. "And you'd like us to use it?"

His eyes were smoky with desire. "Yes."

"I see." At the club, she handled negotiations with ease. But this was more than a one-time fling, and he wasn't a random Dominant.

Since she lapsed into silence but twisted her hands in her lap, Cormac stepped in. "Is there something I need to know?" His gentle tone invited conversation. "A bad experience perhaps?"

How was he so perceptive? "My last relationship."

He waited.

Amelia struggled for the right words. "He was jealous, obsessively controlling. He hated me visiting my grandmother because it took away from his time." She hadn't shared her story with anyone except Lexi. "He wanted to know where I was every moment of the day. Didn't want me going out with my friends unless he was invited along. If I insisted on going, like to a friend's birthday party or bridal shower, he'd show up and watch to be sure I wasn't behaving in a way he didn't like. He wouldn't let me know he was there, but I'd see him at a different part of the restaurant or bar."

Cormac continued to regard her with quiet support

"Then afterward..." She exhaled. "When I got home, he'd punish me. With a cane."

He winced. "We will never use one."

"Even when I safe worded, he kept going. It wasn't about BDSM, which I enjoy."

"You need a relationship that's about consent and honoring boundaries."

"Don't get me wrong. There's heat. There's passion. And that's exciting."

“Abuse is not.”

Amelia nodded. “But I won’t give up my life, even for a year. My job and my friends matter to me.”

“Agreed.” He opened his bottle. “And back to spankings.”

Her tummy fluttered. “A hot spanking...” She smiled. “Even in the heat of passion? To me, that’s different.”

“BDSM is about pleasure. Arousal that crescendos into satisfaction.”

She squirmed. How could he arouse her with his voice and his words?

“I want you to ask for spankings. But I have rules of my own. I don’t deal in half-truths.”

“That’s fair.”

He nodded. “What’s on your limits list?”

“I don’t want permanent marks. Nothing that breaks my skin.”

“Any toy in addition to canes? Crops, perhaps?”

Amelia nodded. “And Lexan paddles.”

“How about you get to choose the instruments for impact play?”

She couldn’t have asked for anything better.

“What is your safe word?”

“Red. Yellow for slow.” She leveled her gaze at him. “I expect you to honor them, or I will be gone.”

“As you should.”

Confusing her, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed a number. Because they were so close, she could make out what the other man was saying.

“Cormac. To what do I owe this honor?”

“There’s a beautiful woman who has captured my interest.” Cormac kept his gaze on her. “We’re planning to have our first scene.”

“Ah. And how can I be of assistance?”

“I’d appreciate your recommendation.”

“Of course.”

She’d been asked for a recommendation before, so this didn’t surprise her entirely, and she appreciated that he cared enough to take this step.

“May I put her on?”

“Please do.”

With a tight nod, Cormac offered the device to her. “Altair Montgomery.”

Because she was overwhelmed, the phone slipped from her fingers. Altair owned the Retreat, her favorite club. And he was reported to be one of the wealthiest, most mysterious men in Texas, if not the country. He was reverently whispered about at the club, but his appearances were rare.

Grinning, Cormac picked up the phone and gave it to her a second time. After clearing her throat, she tried to speak. “Your Grace.”

“So you’ve been to my club?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

“I’ll vouch for my friend. And if you have any trouble, find me.”

“Yes, Sir. Thank you.”

“I’d be delighted to meet you on your next visit. Enjoy your evening.” He ended the call.

Reeling that she’d spoken to the mysterious Altair, she returned Cormac’s phone.

“I know that doesn’t assuage all doubts and fears. But I hope it helped some.”

She nodded.

He stood and offered his hand to help her up.

With the same tenderness he'd shown the first time they'd met, he tucked her hair behind her ear. "From the moment you bent to pick up that pan and your beautiful rear stuck up in the air, I've wanted to spank your ass."

"Yes."

"I liked what you said to Altair, the way you said it... Yes, Sir."

Licking her suddenly dry lip, she tried again. "Yes, Sir."

"Is your preference my dungeon? Or my bedroom?" His eyes gleamed with purposeful intent. "Make a decision now, Amelia. Before I make it for you."

CHAPTER FIVE



Amelia's heart became a frantic butterfly in her throat. She'd never been so excited and nervous at the same time.

"The dungeon it is."

It had been her answer, but the authoritative note in his voice sent skitters of desire up her spine. If he had approached her at the Retreat, she would have unhesitatingly scened with him. But knowing this was the first of many, many times made the moment so much more important.

"Second floor. I'll follow you."

Aware of his hot gaze on her, she walked down the stairs, keeping her hand on the banister for balance.

"The third door on the left."

Outside it, she paused to look back over her shoulder, seeking direction.

"Enter."

Inside was a wonderland as amazing as Altair's club.

Cormac had obviously spared no expense when it came to his equipment. He had a Saint Andrew's cross, a beautiful spanking bench, a wide platform, about a foot tall. He also had a large, high-back chair that could have come from an actual club. The final item was an oversize chaise longue. For cuddling? Aftercare? Not that he seemed like the type. Of course, how well did she really know him?

Metal cuffs were attached to the side wall. And because he obviously didn't want to leave the dungeon unless it was necessary, there was a bathroom and a table with bottled water.

"Push the button on the wall." He inclined his head to the side, indicating a panel.

As he closed the door behind them, she did as he instructed. The blinds slid closed.

"The room is soundproofed. So even if we have company, I can make you scream, and no one will be the wiser."

"You're not serious." *Are you?* As she looked into his eyes, she knew the answer. Not only would he, but he planned to.

Her future husband had a wide, wide diabolical streak.

"Now the button next to it."

Curious, she pressed it. Wood paneling slid to the side, opening to reveal a room within the room. There was a short rod with hangers for clothing and a mind-boggling number of BDSM toys, along with a metal rolling cart that would keep everything he needed close by. "Wow." She tried to take it all in. "This is impressive."

"Have a closer look."

She was as terrified as she was fascinated.

He had an artful arrangement of floggers: leather, suede, rubber thin falls, thick ones. Even some with roses attached to the end. His paddles were every bit as impressive. Some were wooden. Others were covered in a soft leather material that didn't fool her. Their bite would still be powerful.

There were several drawers which he encouraged her to explore.

As she expected, all of the items were meticulously organized. One contained butt plugs; another held various lengths of rope. Then came blindfolds, long tapered candles, spreader bars, and nipple clamps. He even had several different bottles of lubricant and a few blankets of various thicknesses. "You seem to have thought of everything."

“They are all yours. I’ve never brought another woman here.”

She turned to face him. “I don’t understand.”

“The Dastardly Duo has been happy visiting the Retreat.” He shrugged. “Of course I’ve wanted to meet someone I wanted to play with here. Now I have.”

So he meant it was hers. For the moment.

“You’ll be free to take anything you wish with you.”

His words were wonderful, on the surface. But they came with the reminder that this wouldn’t last forever.

“I want you to undress for me.”

Since nudity was prohibited at the club, she always kept on her outfit, generally a short skirt with panties and a demi-cup bra that barely covered her nipples.

“No secrets, Amelia. Nothing between us.”

Searching for confidence, she captured the hem of her dress, then drew it up and off.

He extended a hand to accept the garment from her. Then he carried it to the closet and hung it up before returning to her.

Now, standing in front of him, she was grateful Lexi had talked her into buying matching lingerie.

“Exquisite taste. I approve.”

His words emboldening her, Amelia shimmied out of her panties, then removed her bra. Instinctively she started to cover herself. But remembering his words, she exhaled and lowered her hands to her sides before tipping back her chin.

Approval simmered in his eyes.

Her ex often told her she was too skinny, yet Cormac showed nothing but appreciation.

“Lovely.”

Beneath his gaze, her nipples hardened.

“They’re so pouty. As if they want to be clamped?”

Though nerves attacked her, she didn’t dodge his question. “Light ones to start with, Sir. Until I am really turned on. Then I like a little more pressure.”

He made a twirling motion with his index finger. “Please turn around. I want to see your backside.”

Though she wasn’t as elegant as she wanted to be, she followed his command.

“I’ve been dreaming about this moment for over a week.”

No other Dominant—or man—had ever been so forthcoming in expressing himself. Now that she’d had a taste, she wanted more.

“So very spankable.”

She wished she could read his expression.

“I want my hands all over you: pinching, prodding, teasing.”

His voice was hoarse. With need? Now she realized she didn’t need to see him to know what he was thinking.

Cormac Flanagan—big, bad-ass Dominant—desired her as much as she wanted him.

“Step onto the platform, Amelia.” He joined her to help her into place. “Perfect. Now show me your cunt.”

His use of that word had been intentional, shocking her, searing the atmosphere, hurling her into a submissive mindset.

He had mad Dominant skills.

“Spread your legs wide and grab hold of your ankles.”

She did as he commanded, and her hair fell forward to brush the top of the platform.

“Absolutely stunning.”

His footfall echoed off the hardwood floor, and she had no idea where he was in the room.

“Are you wet for me Amelia? No hiding from the truth; we both know I’ll find out for myself.”

She breathed out the answer on a heated confession. “Yes, Sir.”

“Rub yourself.”

Suddenly grateful she couldn’t see him, she reached one hand between her legs and stroked her pussy.

The need to come was electric, making the room spin. Quickly she dropped her hand and placed it on the platform in front of her so she didn’t topple over.

“Could you come from just that?”

It was more than the touch; it was knowing that she was doing it for him and that he was watching.

“Stay where you are.”

His next step split the sudden silence.

Desperately she wanted to know where he was, what he was doing, what he was thinking.

Her tension grew, stretching until her resolve almost snapped.

Faint sounds seemed to come from everywhere. Or was that her senses playing a trick on her?

Suddenly sensual thrill rocked her as he spanked her butt cheeks. *Oh my God*. She might have been close to an orgasm a few minutes ago, but now she teetered on the edge.

“Your labia are glistening.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“So pretty.” He stroked her clit.

“Mmm...” Silently seeking more, she pressed her body toward him.

“I’m not ready for you to orgasm yet, my sweet.”

Hopelessly she wiggled around.

“Your disobedience in a scene will certainly not be rewarded.”

Meaning if she came without his permission, her next orgasm might be a long, long time in the future.

“Do you understand me?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I love the way those words sound on your lips.”

They were natural, maybe inevitable.

“I’m going to slip my finger inside you.” He continued to stroke her. “You remember my warning?”

“Yes, Sir.” Desperate to control her responses, she squeezed her eyes shut, but the act didn’t diminish his power over her.

He entered her and found her G-spot. Gently he touched it.

She sucked in a frantic breath.

Before she came, he pulled out, and she exhaled a small, grateful sigh.

But he wasn’t done tormenting her. He slipped back inside, this time with a second finger. “Your pretty pussy is begging for an orgasm, isn’t it?”

Her entire body demanded it.

“And your tight little asshole wants to be filled.”

In that moment, spread wide open and surrendered, it was the next natural step. She wanted to be his. “Yes.”

After moistening a finger with her juices, he pressed against her anal whorl.

She gasped, panting for breath as he possessively claimed her.

“Every part of you belongs to me, and I want you to know it.”

How could he have any doubt?

“And now, sexy submissive, you can come. But if you don’t within thirty seconds, you’ll lose the opportunity to climax for the rest of the evening.”

Hormones rampaged through her, demanding release. She would give him anything he asked for. “Yes. Please. Please, Sir,” she whispered, whimpered.

He dug the fingers of his free hand into the flesh of her buttocks, and he finger-fucked both of her holes deeply.

With each of his thrusts, she quivered, losing herself in him.

“Come for me, my sweet.” He inserted a second finger in her rear, widening her.

Lights exploded behind her eyelids, and she screamed as she shattered.

“Ride it. Give me your juices.”

He continued to please her relentlessly until she could no longer support her own weight.

Taking charge of her body, he swept her from the platform and carried her to the chaise longue. After gently placing her on it and covering her with a light blanket, he went into the bathroom.

She yawned and floated, snuggling beneath the material, listening to his sounds. Water running, then silence.

He returned a couple minutes later with a damp washcloth.

“Raise your knees and lift your bottom, presenting your pussy to me.”

Swallowing the embarrassment she should no longer feel, she moved aside the cozy blanket and did as he asked.

“Now part your labia.”

Her Dominant compelled her to remain in that position while he bathed her.

Then he kissed her clit, arousing her all over again. “I’m anxious to make love to you.”

After being so vulnerable, she yearned for that connection, physically as well as emotionally. “Yes, please.”

This time, after he scooped her up, he carried her to his suite at the far end of the hall.

His room suited him. Modern and sleek with strong, powerful lines. His art choices were bold, moody in a way that invited deep thoughts. Against one wall was his king-size bed that was flanked by nightstands, each with its own lamp. Opposite of that was a gas fireplace with two chairs and a table in front of it. A glass door opened onto a small balcony. It couldn't be more perfect.

He set her on the edge of the bed, then began to unfasten his shirt. Rolling onto her side, she thirstily watched him.

She'd never paid much attention to the way a man undressed, and the way he did it was sexy as hell. By slow measures, she saw his chest, bronzed and with the perfect smattering of masculine hair.

When he was naked from the waist up, she took him in. His biceps bulged with power, and his abs were as lean as they were chiseled. All that meant he worked out and watched his diet with more attention than she had imagined. She had no doubt he could take care of himself, and her if necessary. Though she was an empowered woman capable of making her own decisions, the realization was still mouthwateringly sexy. “Your physique truly is amazing, Sir.”

“Glad you approve.”

Approve? He could be a model.

He finished removing his clothing and stood in front of her with his thick cock erect. She shouldn't be surprised by how massive he was, but still, he made her swoon. So much power and demand. “I...”

“We'll go slow. And I have lubricant.” He stalked toward her. “Look at my eyes, Amelia.”

Probably better than fixating on the worry that she wouldn't be able to take him.

“Trust me.” When she nodded, he smiled. “Now lie on your back and open for me.”

She sucked in a breath. No way was she ready.

He opened a nightstand drawer and pulled out a condom and lubricant before kneeling between her thighs.

Instead of entering her, he surprised her by devouring her mouth with a kiss that vanquished her apprehensions. Then, when she wrapped her arms around him, he moved lower to lave her nipples, sucking on one, then the other.

In surrender, she closed her eyes.

“That’s it. Let go.”

Gently he squeezed her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers as he trailed tiny kisses down her body, over her belly, and then her pussy. Licking, sucking, until she was writhing, begging for his possession.

But he continued until she was on the verge of a climax. Then and only then did he ease into her with slow, measured strokes.

“You’re so responsive. We’re meant for each other.”

For a dizzy moment, she believed him.

She dug her hands into his hair, holding him close. As she accommodated him, he increased the intensity, fucking her hard, the way she wanted. They moved together in perfect synchronicity as if they’d done this a thousand times.

Then when he claimed her mouth once more, the tangy taste of her satisfaction was on his tongue.

Expertly he maneuvered his body so that his cockhead pressed against her G-spot. Since the embers from earlier were still stoked, she cried out, an orgasm barely out of reach.

He kept her there, teetering on the edge, denying her, denying himself.

Finally he relented. “Play with your pussy, my sweet.”

Amelia managed to work her hand between them, and the brief touch of her fingertip to her already-swollen clit was enough to rocket her over the edge.

Gasping, crying out his name, she came, her internal muscles closing around his cock.

“*Fuck, Amelia!*” Moments later, he came hard, his jaw clenched and a pulse throbbing in his temple.

Finally, at least a minute later, he shook his head, then kissed her again. “I’ll never be able to get enough of you.”

She smiled, feathering her fingers into his hair. Once she recovered, she’d want him again and again also.

They dozed together before heading for the shower where he lathered soap and trailed the bubbles across her body in sensual worship. She’d never had this kind of exquisite attention before.

“In your closet, you’ll find some clothes. I hope you don’t mind I took the liberty, but I want you to be comfortable. T-shirts, lounge pants, that kind of thing.”

She blinked in surprise. “That was thoughtful.”

“It’s part of my plan to make you want to be here more often.”

“Oh?”

“You can move in anytime. There’s no need to wait until we’re married.”

He was moving too fast, and she froze.

Reading her accurately, he backed off. Something that couldn’t be easy for an alpha like him. “You’re welcome to come here after work, anytime you want. I’ll give you the code to the gate and the house.”

“Thank you.”

After he rinsed her, she stepped out of the shower and toweled off.

“I also got you a robe.”

The first door she opened was clearly his since it was filled with suits and shallow drawers that she presumed held ties.

Her closet was stuffed to overflowing. A few things? Dresses, yoga pants—a brand she admired but had never been able to afford—dozens of T-shirts, even some that were flannel. He'd gone overboard. But did he do anything by half measures?

The robe was long, thick, fuzzy. There were even slippers and sandals to go with it.

She met him back in the bedroom. He was wearing loose-fitting pants and nothing more. Suddenly everything that was happening was overwhelming.

“I thought we'd order dinner and eat here. Or we can drive back to the Sterling Uptown now and eat there.”

Remembering they'd left her car there, she nodded. “I'd like that. Is there something informal?”

“As casual as it gets for the Uptown, yes. A sports bar.”

“Sounds good.”

An hour later, they were walking into the lobby again, and she was in her dress. She might have been tempted to wear something less fancy, but she only had one pair of shoes, something he promised they'd take care of right away.

She enjoyed a burger as they cheered on the Astros baseball team.

As soon as dinner was over, she thanked him and said she needed to get home, anxious to make her escape.

He walked outside with her and handed the claim check to the valet.

“I'll see you in the morning at my office.”

She nodded. Meeting their wedding planner. Each moment made things so much more real.

The valet opened the driver's side door. Cormac offered a tip, then sent the man on his way.

He handed her into the car, then leaned in. “Think of me.”

How could she not?

“And Amelia? Do not come unless you call me first and ask for permission.” With a smile, not waiting for her response, he closed her door.

Hands trembling, she started the engine, then drove away, glancing in the rearview mirror.

He stood there, hands in his pocket, his eyebrows furrowed together, utterly alpha. What had she gotten herself into?

CHAPTER SIX



Amelia keyed in the code to open the gate at Cormac's house. How was this her life? For the third night in a row, she'd returned to his home after work. And she was starting to look forward to seeing him and being spoiled.

She drove onto his property and parked in the driveway.

His home was a welcome respite from her whirlwind life.

Business had never been crazier. Despite that, she wasn't sure she'd ever been happier.

Monday morning, they'd met with Myrna Henderson, their wedding planner. Among the dozens of details to be handled, Amelia and Lexi had an appointment to look at wedding gowns next week. After that, Cormac had taken Amelia to get her passport application handled.

Tuesday she and Lexi had purchased a new van for Tastefully Yours. Wednesday, since business was seeming to snowball, they'd called the local culinary school to post a job opening. Additionally they'd made Marla into a full-time employee.

After Amelia had all-but moved in with Cormac, Lexi had agreed to keep Siren until a Sunday when Amelia had time to pick him up and get him settled, something she knew would be a challenge.

Next week, she and Lexi had also agreed to go apartment hunting. Now that Amelia's finances had improved, they could sign a lease on a bigger place—and they agreed that they each

wanted their own bathtub. After enjoying that little luxury at Cormac's, she had no intention of giving it up.

Lexi had asked if Amelia was sure she wanted to keep paying half. After all, she'd be at Cormac's place more often than not.

But as always, Amelia had one eye on the future. It would be nice to know where she was going to sleep once her marriage ended. Something she was no longer looking forward to.

Before going inside, she paused for a moment to enjoy the sounds of his backyard oasis. Water cascading over rocks, frogs serenading each other. The lighting was sufficient for safety but dim enough to be relaxing.

Perfect.

When she opened the back door, he was waiting in the kitchen for her. The last couple of evenings, he'd already worked out and was in casual clothing. Tonight he'd removed his suitcoat and turned back his shirtsleeves. His tie was loose around his throat.

"You know, I already look forward to you coming home at the end of the day."

Home. She reminded herself it really wasn't. But the image still appealed to her, and it teased her senses with its bright invitation.

He crooked his finger, and she went to him.

For a moment he held her tight, fitting her beneath his chin.

Resting her cheek against his chest, she drank in his steady tenderness.

A few moments later, he kissed her, claimed her. She knew she'd never belong to anyone the way she did him. "Long day?"

"Just got home." He waved a hand as if it wasn't important.

“You listen to the details of my day. I’m curious about yours.” She grabbed a sparkling water from the refrigerator and then leaned back against the counter, waiting for him to go on.

“Family meeting. With all of them, including the vultures.”

From what he’d said, he was talking about his Aunt Gail, Uncle Richard, and their children.

“I was told I’m a fucking selfish prick for not thinking about anyone but myself.”

She winced. “All while you’re making moves to take care of them, even though you don’t have to.”

“Yeah.”

Over the last couple of nights, after they’d made love or scened, they shared wine and sometimes relaxed in the hot tub and learned about each other.

Though he’d inherited his grandfather’s business, Cormac also had his own consulting firm. Now he was juggling both obligations solo.

And she’d learned his family’s motto. “*Duty is the only nobility.*” He’d taken over the payments for his little sister’s modeling classes. And he’d paid off his mother’s second mortgage despite her protests.

Even if it wasn’t about duty, he would never allow his mother to suffer. And he was still pissed she’d never mentioned how dire her financial situation was. He’d reassured her she could never be a burden. Cormac’s useless, heartless father was the bastard. Still, ensuring she had millions of dollars of her own, money she was rightfully entitled to, would help Cormac sleep better at night.

“Anyway, you’re here now. And so am I.” His eyes turned smoky.

And already she knew what that meant.

“How about a slow, sexy spanking?”

His words were hypnotic, relaxing her. “I need a shower first.”

He nodded. “Use the one in my bathroom. I’ll take one in the guest room.”

“You go first. I can wait.” It would be no hardship to sit outside for a few minutes, shoes off, sipping her sparkling water. “Not kicking you out of your own bedroom.” With its steam shower and oversize luxury.

“Certain things I’m not open to discussion about, Amelia.”

As she was learning. Since Douglas, she’d had an aversion to controlling men. And when Cormac made up his mind about something, there was no dissuading him.

After such a long day, she wasn’t in the mood to argue. “You win.”

“No need to dress. I’ll meet you in the dungeon.”

In her own quiet rebellion, she took an extra-long shower, enjoying a citrus-scented sugar scrub that she’d brought from home.

Her skin was pink and glowing, and damp tendrils of her hair had curled against her cheeks when she finally emerged.

Once she’d dried off, she wrapped herself in her robe and padded down the hallway.

The door was closed. *Odd.* He usually left it open for her.

Intrigued, if a little nervous, she turned the knob. Then breath whooshed out of her.

In lightweight slacks, arms folded across his bare chest, Cormac stood there, shoulder-to-shoulder with his cousin, Ethan, who was dressed in full uniform.

Heaven save me.

“Come to us.” With two fingers, Ethan beckoned her.

When she first met him, he was charming, his voice filled with a light teasing. But this military officer was in total command.

Being with two men at the same time was a total fantasy, but the reality was overwhelmingly intimidating.

She had no idea what to do, how to react, so she remained rooted to the spot.

“Do you need me to repeat my request?” His voice was a little lighter, more reminiscent of the Ethan from the party.

“I think our submissive is a little surprised.” Cormac’s words might be for Ethan, but the reassurance in his azure eyes was all for her.

How had she not noticed their resemblance until now? Both had dark hair and similar eyes. Ethan was bigger, more hardened, maybe the result of the years he’d served the country. But there was no doubt they were related.

“You were promised a spanking, our little sweet.” Cormac’s voice was edged with command. “The longer you hesitate, the less you’re likely to enjoy it.”

Nodding, she walked toward them, stopping a couple of feet away.

“I’ve told Ethan your safe word is *red*.”

At Cormac’s statement, she nodded her agreement.

“Your slow word is *yellow*. It’s our intent to fully please you. If you can walk out of here under your own power later, we have failed you.”

Even now, she wasn’t sure she could remain standing much longer.

“Is there anything you want to say?” Ethan asked. “Any questions for me? Requests? Anything you’re nervous about?”

If she could find her voice, she might answer.

When she remained quiet, he went on. “Have you had two men before?”

“No.” When he raised an eyebrow, she tried again. “No, Sir. I have not.”

“So she does know something about being a submissive.”

A smile teased Ethan's beautiful mouth, helping her to relax.

"But you're open to it? If not, just use your safe word."

"I want to try."

"All of your wishes will be honored. Stop any time."

"Thank you."

"I've been looking forward to this."

She flushed with embarrassment. "That's kind."

Immediately he countered her. "It's true."

"I'm not quite sure how the mechanics work."

"We'll all uncover it together. The journey is joy."

Except it wasn't his body that might have something inserted into it.

Cormac drummed his fingers on his thigh. "I'm going to start by spanking you while Ethan watches. I want you to choose three implements for tonight's play, along with two sets of clamps."

Things had suddenly become very real.

Ethan strode to the wall and pushed the button to open the closet door.

Aware of both men watching her, she crossed the room to do as her Dominant said. She selected a leather paddle, one without any holes or wording on it. After all, it would hurt less than others.

Then she picked out two different floggers: a short one with thick suede strands and the one Cormac had used on her last night, with long, biting falls.

Yesterday he'd had her select her toys and add them to the metal rolling cart. Today she did so without his prompting.

"And the clamps?"

Not that she needed Cormac's reminder.

The first were alligators. The second set had a tweezer-type tip. Those she dropped on the top shelf.

“Fair play.”

From their short time together, she knew that was Irish slang for *well done*. It wasn't often that his heritage showed, but he'd clearly picked up some things from being Fergus Murphy's grandson.

“Please stand on the platform. Then remove your robe.”

Though Amelia didn't consider herself an exhibitionist, this wasn't much different than someone watching her scene at the Retreat. The difference was, at the club, she was an anonymous sub, and here Ethan was taking in her every move.

Once she was naked, she tossed her head to spill her hair down her back.

“Please place your hands behind your neck.”

Searching for confidence that had suddenly vanished, she did as Cormac told her. The act thrust out her breasts a little and left her exposed.

Cormac remained where he was, but Ethan strode toward her, then circled her. She needed every bit of her control not to turn her head to watch him.

“You're as exquisite as Cormac said.” Approval wound through each word. “Maybe more so. There are no words to describe how utterly perfect you are.”

The man she intended to marry nodded. “Well said.”

Finally Ethan stopped in front of her. “I'm planning to clamp your nipples. It's one of my kinks. I love to fondle a woman's breasts.”

Douglas had complained that her tits were tiny, but her two Dominants expressed nothing but pleasure in her body.

“Any objections?”

She hadn't selected the clovers that tightened when pulled on, so she shook her head. “No, Sir.”

“Good.” He stopped in front of her. “Come toward me a little, and then cup your breasts, bringing them together.”

Doing as he said, she whispered her assent.

He was as demanding as Cormac. Neither of them just did things to her. Instead, they wanted her full involvement.

“Ask me to suck on your nipples until they’re hard and throbbing. Beg me to gently bite them.”

Desire and fear collided, drying her mouth.

“You can safe word.” The reminder was gentle, said without judgement. “Or please do as I said.”

She looked toward Cormac. An erection pressed against his trousers, and the sight of him turned her on as well. Gaining confidence from him, she nodded. “Please, Master Ethan. Suck on my nipples. Bite them.” *Gently.*

“Stay in position. Don’t pull back from me.”

That she wasn’t sure she could do.

He placed his palms on her breasts, over hers, and lightly squeezed. The touch was amazing, just enough pressure to ease her fear.

“How’s that?” He caught her gaze.

“Wonderful.”

He moved a little to capture her nipples and brush them with his thumbs.

It wasn’t enough.

“Harder?”

“Yes.”

“That’s my sub.”

Over and over, he repeated his movement, ratcheting up her need and desire.

“Now ask me to suck.”

“Please.” She was going out of her mind. “Please suck my nipples, Sir.”

Through his pants, Cormac stroked his dick.

Amelia closed her eyes, imagining him licking her pussy while Ethan tormented her breasts.

Without meaning to, she moaned.

Ethan sucked her, harder and harder, and light pain crashed into desire.

“Oh, Sir!”

“Are you getting turned on?”

She’d never come from nipple play before, but she was close. “It’s a lot,” she confessed.

“You don’t have permission to come, Amelia.”

The whiplash of authority in Cormac’s words forced her to struggle against the need building inside her.

Heedless of his part in her misery, Ethan persisted in his torment.

Cormac strode toward them to stand next to his cousin. “Spread your legs.”

He couldn’t be asking this of her.

Cormac walked behind her and spanked her ass hard, twice. The motion forced her forward, and Ethan sucked harder.

“Sirs!” Amelia wailed her protest.

“I told you to spread your legs, and unless you want me to start your paddling right this moment, you will do as I say.”

She was helpless. *Trapped*. If she did what he said, she knew the relentless Dominant would play with her pussy, pushing her harder and faster toward and orgasm.

But if she refused, he’d spank her until she came.

The two men made her sensually miserable.

Reinforcing his words, Cormac spanked her again. Then he pinched the fleshiest part of her butt cheek, making her jump and yelp.

He left her long enough to bring the cart closer to them. Then he picked up the leather paddle.

Ethan continued to please her, driving her mad.

Cormac blazed her bottom with the toy.

“Damn!”

“Spread your legs.”

She did, a little. Just enough for him to insert the paddle so that he could tap the insides of her thighs, urging them apart.

Between them, they refused to give her even a moment’s break.

“We’ll do this the hard way.”

Cormac’s paddle clattered onto the top shelf. The hard way? As if this wasn’t difficult enough?

Ethan looked up at her and stopped long enough to say, “Oh-oh” before grinning and once again lowering his head.

Trepidation seized her.

When Cormac returned, he was carrying a vibrator. He turned it on...to the highest setting.

“Cormac.” Frantically she shook her head.

He climbed onto the platform behind her, inserted his foot between hers, then used his masculine power to spread her legs.

The vibrator’s buzzing rang in her ears.

Leaning in, he caressed her pussy. “You’re drenched.”

And using every bit of her self-control not to careen over the edge that she teetered on. “Sir. Please. I’m trying to be obedient.”

“And not come?” His voice was diabolically Dominant.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl.”

Ethan squeezed her breasts hard as Cormac feathered the toy across her clit. Helplessly she whimpered.

She couldn't hold on much longer, and her frantic prayers for them to stop went unheeded.

Cormac, the awful tease that he was, slid a finger inside her, finding her G-spot as he pressed the vibrator between her labia.

Fighting the inevitable, Amelia squeezed her eyes shut, but then her imagination spiraled out of control as she pictured what they were doing. Instead, she reopened her eyes and struggled to focus on the far wall.

“Don't come.” He combined his command with a gentle bite to the back of her neck.

A mind-blowing orgasm blasted through her, making her pitch forward.

Ethan was there for her, supporting her, soothing her, telling her how proud they were of her for lasting as long as she did.

When she managed to catch her breath, she was no longer on the platform, and she was sandwiched between the two Dominants. She was holding onto Ethan while he pushed his fingers into her hair. Cormac's cock insistently pressed against her back, and he stroked the side of her neck, soothing the tiny bite mark.

“And now for your spanking.”

There was more?

“After all, you came without permission.”

She started to protest, but when Ethan raised an eyebrow, she clamped her mouth shut, knowing any objection would only add to her required number of strokes. “Yes, Sirs.”

“Those words are like music to my soul.”

Since when had Cormac been poetic?

He released her to cross to the Dominant's chair. “Bring the cart to me.”

Ethan let her go so she could do as instructed. Then he followed her. “Since your nipples are so elongated and pouty, I’m going to clamp them.”

Why had she not expected that? “Anything you say, Sir.”

“Mmm.” He glanced at Cormac. “You were right about how well she behaves.”

“Amelia, offer your breasts to Ethan again, please.”

When he picked up the alligator clamps, she pressed her lips together to hide her wince. As tender as she was, the sharp, little serrated edges were going to hurt.

Bastard smiled as he placed them.

“I’m going to enjoy watching the chain sway, pulling on you as Cormac spans your bottom.”

“Over my lap, Amelia.”

Moving as delicately as she could, she lowered herself into position. Ethan was right; the chain swayed and even the tiniest movement made her whimper.

“Please hand me the paddle.”

With a nod, Ethan offered the implement to his cousin.

Cormac jostled her so that she pitched forward, pressing her fingertips to the hardwood floor for balance. Then he raised one leg slightly so that her butt cheeks were higher in the air.

And again the chain swayed. Were they intentionally moving her around?

“Now spread your legs.”

She had no idea what they were thinking, but she had no doubt it would be mind-blowing.

“Are you ready?”

Rather than giving her time to respond, Cormac brought the paddle down hard on her buttocks. “Ouch!”

Ethan slid his fingers into her damp pussy and teased her for endless seconds. Then he pulled out while Cormac spanked

her again.

On and on they went, in perfect rhythm. Her breasts swayed, and the clamps began to slip, causing a harsher bite. But because she was so turned on, the gnawing pain blazed into pleasure.

Every time Cormac paddled her ass and Ethan finger-fucked her, she moaned, sinking into a state of bliss. The moments blurred, and she surrendered herself to blindingly white light where she floated away from her body. She was aware of reality, while simultaneously disconnected from it. Amelia wasn't sure where she was, and all she knew was deep, peaceful relaxation. If she never returned, she'd be happy enough.

When she climaxed, it was with a soft sigh as she reached an entirely new level of happiness.

She had no idea how long the spanking lasted. But when it was over, Ethan helped her up, then gently removed the clamps, sucking on each nipple in turn to diminish the pain as blood rushed back into the tips.

Then he led her to the chaise longue, and she curled against him.

Cormac joined them and smoothed her hair away from her face.

Now she understood why the piece of furniture was so large. It fit all of them comfortably.

The two men talked quietly, about what she wasn't sure. She was just content to be with them, basking in the intimacy.

Long minutes later, they took her to bed.

Ethan undressed, and the sight of his wound made her gasp, making her want to soothe him.

“Takes more than a bullet to keep me from serving.”

His words were light. No doubt he meant to downplay the injury. Yet the evidence was angry and visceral. That he walked without a limp was amazing. And the Army considered him fit to serve?

“Duty—”

“Is the only nobility,” she finished for him.

To acknowledge her statement, he inclined his head. “Could be your motto also. You’re marrying Cormac to help your grandmother. Would you have done it otherwise?”

“We’ll never know.” She wasn’t even sure how to answer that. Perhaps to get Tastefully Yours to the next level. *But otherwise...?* Would she have become a billionaire’s play toy?

Cormac pulled a handful of condoms and lube from the nightstand drawer. “I want you to ride Ethan while you masturbate me.”

She nodded.

Cormac went down on her to ensure she was aroused once more, slick for his cousin’s penetration.

Having Ethan inside her was a totally different sensation than making love with Cormac. While they were both exceptional lovers, Ethan wasn’t as restrained. He lived on the edge, and the way he had sex reflected that. He communicated an urgency, as if each moment might be his last.

Again, she ached to give him whatever it was that his soul needed to feel safe. She wasn’t sure that was possible. If the injury didn’t prevent him from continuing on, would anything?

Amelia curled her hand around Cormac’s thick length and stroked him in time with Ethan’s thrusts.

The rhythm and passion consumed them, and Cormac gently moved her aside, and fisted himself, jacking off until he came with a guttural cry.

Ethan began to fill her again, this time at a slow, leisurely pace, making certain she was satisfied before he sought his own pleasure.

He pressed himself up, keeping his weight off her as he impaled his length inside her. His cock throbbed as he gritted his teeth, then lost himself completely to cry out her name.

Afterward, they laid in a tangled heap, breathing heavily, with each of the men keeping a hand on her. Possession? Or comfort?

She drifted off to sleep, and she awakened to a room with only lamps blazing and the sound of water running.

Naked, she slipped off the bed and padded to the bathroom.

Cormac lazed in the tub, while Ethan showered.

“There’s room for you,” Cormac invited. “Ethan poured you a glass of wine.”

“Thank you.” She sank into the tub with him, and then tipped her head back.

Ethan shut off the shower faucet and wrapped a towel around his waist. “How was your experience?”

“Amazing. I could get used to this.” She shifted. “Except I may need a short break from nipple play.”

Ethan reached over to cup one of her breasts. “Or more so that you build up a tolerance.”

She shook her head.

Mercifully he didn’t torment her any further.

He left them, and she stretched, lazily taking a sip of wine, then resting her head on the tub’s rim.

A few minutes later, Ethan was back, fully dressed. He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

She sat up so fast that water sloshed onto the floor. “You’re leaving? But...” She looked between the two men. “You just got here.”

“Cormac will fill you in.” Without another word, he was gone.

She blinked. “What...?”

“He’s negotiating a job.”

“Like a real one?” She shook her head. “That sounded ridiculous. I mean in the civilian sector?”

“More or less.”

“What does that mean?”

“Leaving the military, yes. But not for a nine-to-five job.”

She frowned. “Police work? Security?”

“You won’t like it.”

What Ethan planned to do really wasn’t any of her business. She wasn’t marrying him, and he owed her no explanations.

“Black ops.”

Her breath whooshed out, and she grabbed her glass. Cormac was right. She didn’t like it. She might not know a lot about what that meant, but it was shadowy and dangerous. Maybe even more so than what he was currently doing, however impossible that seemed.

“The military wants to promote him. He wants to be active with a team. He’ll do anything to make it happen.”

“You were right. I’m not sure how to deal with this.”

Cormac finished his wine. “Ethan walks a tightrope made of razors. He can’t imagine life any other way.”

“Don’t you worry about him?”

“Every damn day. We’re close in age, grew up together, went to the same boarding schools, even college. We were roommates. Did everything together.”

“What made him join the service?”

“It’s the expectation of the oldest son in his family. His father, grandfather, great-grandfather. Our motto—”

“About duty?”

“That comes from our mothers’ side. So Ethan got that from his mother and responsibility from his father’s.”

Still, he seemed to thrive on the danger.

“His father was killed in action. A true war hero. Full-on military burial with honors. A flag was presented to his

mother, but Ethan asked for it. He carries it with him.”

“He’s trying to live up to his father’s reputation?” Maybe be better? Was that why he was so driven?

“I don’t psychoanalyze him.” Cormac shrugged. “Fuck, I don’t even know myself as well as I should.”

“Do any of us?” Did she ever stop moving for long enough to really look in the mirror? “So what are you hoping for? That he gets this job? Or that he stays in the military?”

“Much as the new job scares the piss out me, if he’s assigned to desk duty, he will be miserable. I don’t wish that on anyone, especially a man I love like a brother.”

She took another sip of wine. Then he plucked the glass from her hand. “I’m ready to take you back to bed.”

The way his eyes turned smoky made her nipples pebble.

“Watching Ethan fill you turned me on. I’m a greedy man, Amelia. I’m going to fuck you all night. I meant what I said earlier. If you can walk out of here under your own power later, we have failed you.”

Her body already tingled from the myriad ways they’d pleased her. “I have remarkable resilience, Sir. It will take a considerable amount of energy. And you had a long day.”

“Is that a challenge, my sweet?”

She met his gaze. “It most certainly is. Sir.”

He exited the bath, then helped her out. Instead of placing her on the floor, he carried her to the bed, then tossed her on it.

She landed with a startled squeal.

His cock already hard, he advanced on her, grabbed her wrists, and pinned them above her head. “Challenge accepted, my darling wife to be.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



“Oh dear God.”

“What?” Frowning, Amelia glanced up from the computer screen where she was updating the Tastefully Yours accounting program and looked at Lexi who stood in the doorway, mouth open, phone in hand. “What’s the matter?”

“Have you... I take it you haven’t seen *Scandalicious*?”

She shook her head. Amelia didn’t read gossip magazines, even ones that were supposedly reputable. Even if she had time, it wasn’t something she had interest in. “Let me guess, your favorite actor was photographed in his underwear.”

“Ah... No. It’s you.”

Not following what her friend was saying, Amelia drew in a breath and tried to rein in her impatience. After all, Lexi—along with Marla—had been nothing but supportive, and they’d both put in a lot of extra hours to make up for all the time that Amelia was missing from work.

“You’re in *Scandalicious*.”

“*Me?*”

“Well, and your handsome, soon-to-be fiancé.”

Her body went cold.

Lexi dropped into the chair next to Amelia’s desk and showed her the phone screen. There were pictures beneath a large headline that screamed: LOCAL CATERER IS DISHING UP LOVE.

“Oh no.”

They were all from the afternoon they'd been at the Sterling Uptown hotel. One snapshot showed her and Cormac at brunch with his family. A second was of him holding her shoulders and leaning toward her, a hazy intensity in his eyes. There was no doubt as to what he was thinking or the attraction he held for her. A third showed them in La Patisserie, leaning toward each other.

How could she not have seen the photographer?

When Skyler had suggested the marriage of convenience, Amelia had not comprehended the hundreds of ways it would impact her, including the invasion of her privacy.

Right now, she was frantically trying to catch up a few work obligations before hurrying off to meet with Celeste Fallon. She'd suggested they get together to chat before going into the prenuptial negotiations.

The office phone rang, and Lexi answered it.

It was a gossip magazine asking for an interview.

This was exactly what she didn't need.

The next call was from a potential client who'd seen the article.

After the call ended, Amelia shook her head. “I'm so sorry, Lexi.”

“We wanted attention, right? We'll figure out how to turn this into some serious money.” Lexi grinned. “I'll text Marla and tell her we need her to come in right away.”

“Thanks.” Because of course, Amelia had to be across town within half an hour.

With an apologetic wave, she grabbed her purse and headed out to a coffee shop near the Prestige offices.

The moment she walked in, a blonde waved her over. She hadn't been sure what to expect, but Celeste was tall, gorgeous, in a business suit, and with a no-nonsense demeanor that demanded respect.

When Amelia drew close to the table, the attorney stood and offered her hand. “You’re Amelia. The caterer who’s dishing up love.”

Did everyone but her read the online magazine? “I don’t even know what to say about that.”

“I’ve got a few ideas.”

“Do you mind if I order a coffee? I think I need it.”

“You do. It will be a long morning. We may need to order lunch in.”

She smiled. “Love isn’t the only thing on my menu. We already delivered a continental breakfast and a cheese board. For lunch, we’re having assorted sandwiches and salads and desserts.”

“You’ve thought of everything.”

“Only when it comes to food.”

“Which is why I’m here.”

“Can I get you anything while I’m ordering?”

“Thanks. No.”

Less than five minutes later, she was seated across from Celeste.

“You don’t know what you got yourself into.”

“I...” She started to protest. “No. Not even a little bit.”

“And your future husband hasn’t enlightened you.”

She frowned. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“He’s no ordinary man.”

That much, Amelia did know. He was beyond rich, in a way she’d never comprehend. And that was without his grandfather’s money. He was a Dominant, an alpha, a tycoon, and an entrepreneur.

“Have you heard of the Titans?”

Amelia frowned. “As far as I know, it’s fictional.” *Isn’t it?* She’d seen documentaries about secret societies, including a

famous one at an Ivy League university. At least two former presidents had belonged to it. But there'd never been anything other than rumor and conjecture about the Titans. "Are you telling me it's real?" And then the rest of Celeste's meaning dawned. "And that Cormac belongs?"

"As does his grandmother."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because he hasn't." As she picked up her drink, Celeste's ring winked in the light. The top was an owl with two emeralds for eyes.

Amelia had seen a similar looking one at Kathleen's house. "So it *is* real."

"Your future husband, no matter how temporary, does nothing without careful consideration. Including the pictures in *Scandalicious*."

She blinked. "He did that?"

"I recognize Marcella's work. She's the best. And expensive. There are paparazzi who troll places that celebrities hang out, but they're always escorted out of Sterling properties."

"Cormac said he wants it to look real."

"Which is why he's going to agree to pay you what we're asking."

After all the time they spent together, the pillow talk, deep intimacy, the late-night conversations over wine in the hot tub, and she didn't know any of this? Shocked and hurt, she struggled to understand. "Why would he do this?"

"You'll have to ask him. In the meantime..." After quickly checking her Bonds watch, Celeste finished her coffee, then sat back. "Drake can be a jackass. He won't want to give up anything." She smiled. "I do enjoy besting him."

"I don't want to jeopardize what I already have in place. Yesterday I got my grandmother settled in a care home that seems focused on its clients." She wondered if Cormac had anything to do with that. The wait was supposedly a long time,

and once she'd given him the name, a spot had opened up right away. "My company is having growing pains. We need to make some investments so we can keep up with demand."

"Cormac is going nowhere. I assure you he worked too hard to get to this place with you."

The place that half the world now knew they were involved in a relationship?

"We'll use it to our advantage. I'm going to ask you to trust me. Don't give in to fear and nerves. And don't let either of those men intimidate you. We're looking out for your interests. As you say, your company needs to expand, and your grandmother deserves the very best care you can give her. Keep your mind focused on that, no matter what they toss your direction."

Amelia nodded.

"Shall we?" Celeste grabbed her oversize bag, and together they walked to the Prestige offices.

For the first time in months, there was a tease of cooler weather in the air. Not that it would last. Onshore flow from the Gulf would resume soon, bringing back heat and humidity.

They visited with Miriam and Skyler, and both thanked her for the goodies she'd sent to them.

Skyler provided a quick update. "Marla came by earlier and set up in the conference room. And lunch is in the refrigerator. Just let us know when you're ready for it."

"Perfect."

"Mr. Flanagan is already here."

Amelia's heart hammered. They'd shared so many tender moments, and now they'd be seated on opposite sides of the table as adversaries. For the first time, she dreaded seeing him. Now she wished they'd taken care of this part before she'd started to fall for him.

That thought stopped her heart. Forcefully she shook her head. She couldn't—wouldn't—fall for the gentleman

billionaire. This was a temporary arrangement. She had to guard her heart or in a year it would break forever.

“Are you all right, Amelia?” Celeste’s voice held a concerned note.

“I’m fine.”

When she entered the conference room, Cormac immediately stood.

His facial features softened from chiseled granite to genuine warmth as he smiled. His eyes became a little lighter as he crossed to her and took her shoulders. “Amelia.”

It was the same expression he wore in one of the *Scandalicious* photos, and she stiffened her spine. Unlike her, he clearly kept business separate from pleasure. He could spank her and fuck her while arranging for a photographer to follow them around.

Even if she hadn’t already decided to keep some emotional distance between them, she would have done so in that moment. He was part of the Dastardly Duo. He’d happily enjoy all of their physical pleasures, but he’d never risk his emotions.

“Ah! Cormac!” Celeste breezed in. “Always a pleasure to see you.”

He loosened his grip on Amelia’s shoulders. “Celeste? What are you doing here?”

“Representing Amelia.”

“You’re acting as her lawyer?”

She looked down her nose at him. “I do have my degree.”

“Yeah.”

Fascinated, Amelia watched the interplay.

Another man, carrying a leather briefcase with an owl on the side, strode in, full of confidence and bravado. “Well, well. Good morning, everyone. I see we have a conflict of interest here. And that won’t do.”

She was glad she had the foresight to have asked for a lawyer. No way would she have survived facing these two lions all by herself.

“You must be the lovely Amelia. Since everyone here seems to have forgotten their basic manners, I’m Drake Griffin, adviser to Mr. Flanagan.”

She shook his hand, then looked at her future spouse. “Is everyone here now? We seem to be missing a photographer.”

He dragged a hand through his hair, dislodging a lock that fell forward, across his forehead. “*Fuck.*”

“Marcella’s work is always amazing.” Though Celeste’s words were conversational, her tone was pure barracuda. “I understand she’s now shooting covers for a major magazine and hanging her work in a DC gallery.”

Cormac hadn’t denied anything.

Apparently unruffled by any of the events, Drake dropped a pod in the coffee maker. After it gave its final hiss, he grabbed the cup and rejoined them. “Let’s sort things through, shall we?”

“Have your turn.” Celeste waved as if he were a pesky fly. “Then I’ll have the final word.”

Acknowledging her sword-like repartee, Drake continued to address her. “Is Ms. Ryan aware of your involvement in this arrangement?”

Celeste didn’t blink. “She’s here. Ask her.”

Cormac and Drake exchanged glances. It was fun watching these alphas be rocked back on their heels a bit.

“Ms. Ryan, are you aware that Mr. Flanagan engaged the services of Fallon and Associates when he needed to find a wife?”

“I understand time was of the essence, and he knew Celeste would be discreet and assist him. For quite a fee.”

He nodded. “You’re not concerned that her loyalties might be divided?”

“Are you implying that Ms. Fallon isn’t the best? Or trustworthy? After just admitting she is both? Do you realize how ludicrous your objection is...Drake?” Because he’d been so formal, she purposefully used his first name. “I think you’re more concerned that I have a damn good representative who has informed me that your client’s offer was ridiculously low given the disruption to my life. And I think you’ve realized that the next few hours will cost him a shitpile of money.” Amelia took her seat. “Shall we begin? I have a rather full day.”

The looks that Cormac and Drake exchanged were almost comical.

Even she couldn’t believe she’d acted this way, but everything Celeste had said over coffee was accurate. And Amelia planned to remind herself of it, every day if necessary.

Three hours later, they were still on opposite sides of the table, battling over minute details. An amendment toward the end was humiliating, details outlining the fact he was into BDSM and the fact she might potentially be shared with Ethan. She understood the reasons. He didn’t want her making claims that their relationship hadn’t been consensual. She never would. But others might.

Then they discussed a clothing allowance. Celeste asked for triple the amount that Cormac had suggested. Drake countered, and then they settled on a budget that was double what Amelia thought was reasonable.

Playing on the win, Celeste made her biggest ask. “As Amelia mentioned, she had no idea the disruption to her life that being in a relationship with Cormac would entail. Our new amount is three million dollars.”

Though she didn’t blink, Amelia twisted her hands together in her lap. *Three million?* She’d been thinking Celeste would ask for an additional hundred thousand dollars.

Drake laughed.

A tactic, no doubt. But Celeste remained unmoved. “And because you’re wasting our time, we can go to four.”

He dropped his pen.

Cormac sought and found Amelia's gaze.

This morning, they'd been making wedding plans, talking about flowers and venues and cakes. And they hadn't said two words to each other in the last few hours. How did they regain what had suddenly vanished? Was it even possible? Or were things like they were supposed to be? Transactional? And if that were the case, how could she so completely give herself over to him ever again?

"Courts would agree that Amelia has a reasonable expectation of privacy in her life." She left her words hanging. "Paparazzi shots are a gross invasion of that."

Drake raised an immediate protest. "Celeste—"

"She didn't know she was marrying a Titan." Celeste leaned forward. "And the two of you with your protests about me having a conflict of interest? And being trustworthy? When Cormac didn't tell her what she was getting into? Be grateful her ask isn't five million."

"Give her the money."

Blinking, Amelia looked at Cormac. His gaze was on hers, and his eyes were indecipherable. Maybe a touch of frustration? Resignation?

Drake started to protest, but Cormac waved him off. "Fair play. They're right."

"To be clear—" Drake started.

"Three million. The clothing. All the details about the dissolution date and provisions for a moving company."

"Cormac, I can't in good conscience advise you to make all of these concessions."

He looked at his lawyer. "Do it. I want everyone out. I need a few minutes alone with my future wife."

"I'm not going anywhere." Celeste crossed her legs and picked up her water glass. "I will not allow you to use any type of persuasion on my client."

Amelia's heart thundered. She appreciated Celeste championing her. But it would only delay the inevitable. Soon, it would just be her and Cormac.

Drake pulled out his laptop computer and made numerous entries, then sent a file to Celeste for review.

She showed the offer to Amelia. Most of the money was up front, but the last million was payable on the day of their divorce.

Even the thought was terrible.

Celeste broke the silence. "We'd like a moment to confer."

The two men stood and left the room.

Amelia fully exhaled for the first time in hours.

"Let them think we might not take it."

Needing to stretch, she walked to the far end of the room and selected a pumpkin scone with a layer of icing. She broke off a piece but didn't put it in her mouth. Truthfully she had no appetite.

"Are you all right?"

"I thought I was prepared." But she'd never experienced anything like this. The fires of hell. She'd stick to catering contracts from now on.

"Their fault for thinking their initial offer was good enough and that you wouldn't engage representation."

"I don't know how to thank you."

She waved. "This has been the most fun I've had in a long time."

Dropping the pastry into the trash can, Amelia returned to her seat.

"Are you agreeable?"

"It's more than I imagined."

"Make no mistake, you're going to earn every penny." Celeste opened the door and summoned the men.

They took their seats, and Amelia avoided Cormac's gaze.

"Do we have a deal?" Drake asked.

"We're close."

Amelia tried not to betray her shock.

Cormac sighed.

"Amelia keeps the engagement ring. Texas case law provides that once a couple is married—"

"Is it a family heirloom?" Drake asked Cormac.

"No. She will choose her own."

"Are you amenable?"

Cormac inhaled sharply. "I want this fucking done."

Drake made further amendments to the file then resent it to Celeste.

A few moments later, she nodded. "We have reached a satisfactory agreement, gentleman."

Drake and Celeste stood to shake hands.

"Now will the two of you get the fuck out of here?"

Earlier, Cormac's eyes had been unreadable. But now his emotions were clear, and dangerous, sending molten desire through her.

Once the door clicked closed, he stood, locked it, and then rounded the desk to pull back her chair. Every action obviously controlled and deliberate, he turned her to face him. Then he grasped the arms, caging her in place with his large body.

"You're a damn worthy opponent, Amelia. I'm so hot for you. I want to fuck you, and I want to spank your ass."

He leaned closer, and she breathed in his raw, feral heat.

"But since I'm a gentleman, I'll let you decide which I do first."

CHAPTER EIGHT



Amelia couldn't find her voice.

“No response? Then we'll start with the fucking.” He took her shoulders and pulled her to her feet. His grip was just short of painful.

He couldn't be serious. Not here.

“You want to play to win, sweetheart?” His words were clipped with passion.

In hiring Celeste, Amelia had bested him. He knew it. Their lawyers knew it.

“So do I.”

He was demanding she pay for her victory. And why was her body suddenly flooded with hormonal response?

Fisting his hand in her hair, he tugged back her head. Lust blazed in spikes of azure.

He claimed her lips with a shockingly penetrating kiss.

The layers of emotion between them, the battle and bravado, combusted as he devoured her, hungrily tongue-fucking her mouth. A simulation of the way he intended to take her?

God help her. *Yes.*

When her breathing was ragged, her head spinning, he abruptly released her.

Looking at him, she pressed her hand to the lips she was sure he'd bruised.

"You're getting the idea."

Her reprieve was temporary. Cormac spun her around, forcing her down, over the table, her cheek pressed to the smooth wood. Her prenuptial file, filled with dozens of pieces of paper, evidence of their fight, thudded to the floor.

In a terrifyingly quick move, he bunched her skirt around her waist. Then he yanked her panties down to her ankles.

His wallet thumped onto the table, landing next to her face.

He kept one hand pressed to the middle of her back, holding her prisoner while he fished a condom from the wallet.

This couldn't be happening. And she'd never wanted anything more.

Cormac forced a hand between her legs. "*Jesus*. You're wet."

Everything about him turned her on.

A sharp smack landed on her right ass cheek. She clamped her mouth shut. If she cried out, everyone would hear her, including her clients. "Damn you." He'd placed her in an untenable situation.

"You could have talked to me at any time." He stroked her pussy.

She struggled not to push her hips back, demanding more.

"We could have talked."

No way was she letting him get away with that. She'd played his game by his rules. "You wanted the prenup."

He spanked her again.

"I would have been satisfied—" She broke off as he delivered another smack, then slid a finger inside her. *Fuck*. "Satisfied..."

"With what?"

God. He knew her body, her responses so perfectly. “A simple contract.”

“Instead we had hours of negotiations.”

And he had three million reasons to be frustrated. “When you’re rich as hell, nothing is easy, is it?” Her former naivete was unbelievable. At first, she thought they simply moved in different financial brackets. After meeting with Celeste and then seeing the endless list of assets he needed to protect, she realized they were from different universes. “Including hiring paparazzi so the world knows we’re involved.”

He pressed his sheathed cockhead to her pussy.

“And you’re a Titan. Never thought to mention that?” *Damn it.* She hated how much she craved him.

“Take my cock, sweetheart.”

After this terrible morning, she needed him and their connection.

He wasn’t slow or gentle, instead he buried himself to the hilt in a single, forceful thrust that made her moan his name.

Cormac Flanagan owned her and her responses. She might want to deny that fact, but her heart knew the truth.

Well and truly, she’d fallen in love with him.

He rode her hard. “Your pussy is clenching around me. You’re going to come, aren’t you?”

She ached. Throbbled.

He dug a hand into her hair and leaned over her. “I asked you a question.”

“*Yes.*” She hissed the word, hating that he knew the truth.

He changed his angle slightly, so he was teasing her G-spot.

The world spinning beneath her, she squeezed her eyes shut. “*Cormac.*” She was begging, pleading, but she wasn’t sure what for.

“Come, Amelia. Shatter. Don’t you dare hold back on me.”

His words freed her.

As much as possible with the way his thighs were pressed against hers, she thrust her hips back, offering her surrender.

“That’s better. You’re mine.”

“Yes.” Every part.

“Say it.”

“*Yours*, Cormac.”

He dragged his fingertips down her spine, igniting nerve endings. Then he grabbed her hips, holding her while he drove harder.

Any remaining struggle fled as a climax ripped through her, obliterating all thought. Silently she sobbed, spent, complete in a way she’d never been. This was right.

As energy left her body, she stretched out a hand, fingers splayed.

In silent reassurance, he placed his on top.

Moments later, he called out her name on a jagged whisper.

Cormac had uncovered layers of her that she hadn’t known existed, and today’s experience had left her shaken and changed. She was never again going to be the same.

She had no idea how long she remained there, but finally he moved back, then helped her up.

Before straightening his clothes, he took care of her, then turned her to face him. “You’re stunning, Amelia. And I’m proud you’re mine.” He kissed her once more, not with the passion he’d shown earlier but with a new possessiveness.

Not just physically, but emotionally, she met him where he was, rising on her tiptoes to pull his head down toward her. She kissed him back with demand of her own. She wanted all of him as well. No holding back.

A knock on the door made them both take a step back.

Had someone overheard them?

“Amelia?”

She exhaled. It was Celeste. Of course she'd be looking out for her client. “Everything's fine. We'll be right out.”

“I'll be in the lobby.”

Amelia exhaled. Her pulse still raced, and her jerky thoughts made her motions awkward as she shimmied her panties back into place. With lipstick and her fingers, she tried to repair the havoc that the tumultuous lovemaking had wrought on her hair and makeup.

A quick glance in her compact mirror proved it didn't help. Her eyes were wide, and slightly swollen from her unexpected tears, and her hair was mussed.

Everyone would know her fiancé had fucked her hard.

Cormac picked up the scattered pages from the hardwood floor and tucked them back into the file folder and returned it to the table.

After smoothing the front of her skirt and adjusting her blouse, she pulled back her shoulders.

He nodded his approval. “Ready?”

She gathered her belongings, then before leaving, took a moment to straighten his tie.

As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, they walked to the reception area.

Drake and Celeste were visiting with Skyler and Hope, owner of the Prestige Group and Rafe Sterling's wife.

Cormac shook hands with Hope. “Thank you for allowing us to use your conference room.”

“Of course. Part of our services.”

“There's a lot of leftover food,” Amelia told Skyler. “We didn't even touch lunch.”

“Always thinking about business. But Tony will appreciate dessert.”

From his office, he called out, “I don't eat sweets!”

Amelia offered Celeste a hug. “Thank you for everything.”

“Happy to officiate your wedding, if you’d like.” But her words and grin were for Cormac. No doubt she was a woman who enjoyed strategic play.

After Drake and Cormac shook hands, Drake once again extended his, in Amelia’s direction. “No hard feelings?”

She smiled. “Why would there be? Your team lost.”

In warning, Cormac growled her name.

He took her hand and guided her to the door.

Celeste’s final words reached Amelia. “We should have gone for the five million.”

Drake chuckled. “Judging by the expression on Cormac’s face, you might have gotten it.”



“PRENUP SIGNED AND SEALED?”

Earbuds in place, talking to Ethan, glass of Bonds whiskey on the counter, Cormac paced the kitchen, occasionally looking toward the driveway. It was after eleven. His fiancée wasn’t home from work, and all his calls went straight to voicemail. None of his numerous text messages had been returned. He was getting more agitated by the minute. Though she often worked late, as agreed, she let him know.

He was worried. And worse, concerned. Suspicious, even?

The hell?

“Cormac? Is it done?”

“Yeah.” He took a drink of his whiskey. “Cost me three fucking million dollars and a clothing allowance.”

Ethan chuckled. “Quite a jump from where you started.”

“She hired Celeste to represent her.”

“She...?” Ethan trailed off and whistled. “Damn. Even more impressed now than I was.”

“Drake threw a flag on the field, saying it was conflict of interest.”

“Let me guess, Celeste was having none of it.”

“Countered with Amelia’s loss of privacy, no idea what she was getting herself into.” To be fair, that part was true. Celeste had no doubt guessed that keeping things simple was one of the reasons he’d chosen Amelia over women in his social circles.

“You don’t like to lose.”

Immediately Cormac countered. “No one does.”

“You’re worse than most.” He let the silence grow. “How did you react?”

“I got fucked.”

“So you got even?”

“Yeah.” Energy had seethed between them, crackling until it consumed them both. Cormac had never made love like that before. Never had it meant so much. Never had he been with a woman like Amelia.

Then after, she’d kissed him, taking the lead, rocking his world.

He glanced out the window again. *Where the hell are you?*

“How are things now?”

“Fine.” Or at least he’d thought so.

After leaving Prestige, he’d walked her to her car. They’d kissed again, and he’d told her to hurry back to him.

It occurred to him she hadn’t responded.

“I’ll be in town tomorrow.”

“Hawkeye?”

“The promotion I don’t want is looming, and I can’t dodge it any longer. I’m not ready to give up what I do.”

“You’ll have your own team that will stay together, and you’ll roll with them?”

“If we can reach an agreement.”

What did that mean for Ethan? And for their relationship with Amelia?

“Amount of time in the field and on deployments is the sticking point.”

Apparently they’d gotten the financial negotiations out of the way. “The more time, the better?”

“You know it. He’d like me to do some teaching at their training facility in Nevada. While I understand his position, I’m not inclined to do that until my body gives up. Good news is, we’ll be based out of Texas.”

“Since I’m a selfish prick, I’m happy about that.” He’d never understand Ethan’s need to charge toward danger and continually risk his life for his country and the people he served with. Of course, Ethan said the idea of living Cormac’s life gave him hives.

“If it’s Houston, I’ll find a place near yours.”

“Fuck off. You can bunk here.”

“There you go again, selfish as fuck.”

They spoke for another few minutes before ending the call.

An hour later, Cormac had finished a second drink, and Amelia still wasn’t home. Even knowing it was pointless, he redialed her number.

In frustration, he slammed his phone down on the counter.

Why the hell was he prowling the house like a caged animal? He’d never been this uptight before. Even when he found out that Priscilla was in love with another man and only marrying him for his money, Cormac had been relieved that he could end the engagement he hadn’t wanted.

But Amelia was different. He’d never cared this much about a lover before.

Lover?

Was that what she was?

Lover? Submissive? Temporary fiancée? Future wife?

Unsettling thoughts crashing through him, Cormac headed to the third-floor workout room and cranked up some music. He set the television to show a live feed of the driveway and backyard. Then he got on the rower.

His usual pace did nothing to distract him, so he adjusted the flywheel's damper setting, increasing the resistance.

It still didn't help.

Nothing helped him vanquish his thoughts.

This morning, during their negotiations, something had changed.

It should have been a straightforward business deal, but from his side of the table, it was anything but. Because of his damn emotions.

A regular prenuptial agreement presumed both parties wanted to be married and enjoy a future together, and the legal contract existed to cover a worst-case scenario.

But he and Amelia had already agreed to the date of their divorce.

That—right there—was the problem.

Throughout the entire negotiation, his frustration had built as he'd fought not to admit the truth to himself.

He'd been trying to deny it, outrun it, but there wasn't enough alcohol on the planet or enough sets or reps of exercise that would allow him to hide from the truth.

She was his. He hungered for her in a way he'd never experienced before.

Cormac stopped rowing.

Earlier Celeste had jested that she should have asked for five million dollars. Drake's guess that Cormac might have paid it was correct.

He wanted to care for her, ensure she had everything she needed to be happy. And every moment that passed meant he

was closer to losing her.

Motion on the screen caught his attention.

She was home. He checked his watch that had calculated his workout and heart rate and now showed the time. Almost one. About damn time.

He jogged down the stairs to meet Amelia in the kitchen.

In the entry, he stopped.

Memories of spanking her, fucking her over the conference table punched his gut. And she looked exhausted. Most of her hair had escaped its ponytail, and soft smudges lay beneath her tired eyes. She rolled her head from side to side, then kicked off her shoes. “You’re late.”

“Long day.” She sighed. “Did I keep you awake?”

“Clearly.”

Frowning, she looked at him. “You could have gone to bed.”

“And you could have called.” He folded his arms. “Or texted.”

“We had one of our busiest evenings yet. Three different events, all in different parts of town. I didn’t even think about it.”

Didn’t think about me? After what had happened earlier in the day? And despite her promises to stay in touch? “I think we should share our locations with each other.”

“What?” Shaking her head, she poured herself a glass of wine, then took a seat at the island. “No. And I can’t believe you’re even asking me to do this.”

He knew he had crossed a line, and his own messed up feelings were fucking this up.

“I’ve told you I won’t be controlled. No matter how hard we fuck.”

He had to make her understand how much this mattered to him. “Being considerate is too much for you?”

“Cormac, I was *working*. My thoughts were on our events, and I also needed to see my grandma and my cat. I have obligations and responsibilities outside of this, of us.”

“Amelia—”

“What happens after our divorce? You won’t be concerned about where I am, what I’m doing, or who I’m with. You seem to be forgetting this is a short-term arrangement. And I won’t change who I am to suit your whims.”

“Don’t push me, Amelia.”

But her own lines were drawn, and the set of her jaw told him she didn’t care how pissed he was.

“Look.” She took a sip of her wine. “I’ll try to remember to text if I’ll be later than midnight.”

He wanted more. So much more. “That’s not enough.”

“It’s the best I’m willing to do.”

“Goddamn it.” He sighed his exasperation.

“Take it or leave it.” She slipped off her stool. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m tired. I’m ready to take a bath and go to bed.”

He dragged a hand through his hair. “We’re not done talking about this.”

“We most certainly are.” She grabbed her glass of wine and continued past him without stopping.

Confounding, frustrating woman.

Most nights, they met in the kitchen, kissed, caught up, and discussed wedding plans. Now, his actions had built a wall between them. She had a point about the future, about not wanting to be tracked. But nothing about his emotions made any damn sense. He knew what he wanted, and he refused to settle for less.

He cleaned up the kitchen, instructed the whole-house computer to go into nighttime mode, and then followed her upstairs.

He'd half expected that Amelia might use the guest bathroom, but she was in his with only half the lights on.

Quietly, unsure exactly what he was going to say, he walked in. Her wine was on the counter, and she was asleep in the tub.

She worked too damn hard.

He grabbed a large towel, then crouched low to trace her forehead. He whispered her name, and her eyes fluttered open. "Let's get you to bed."

She didn't protest as he cared for her, lifting her out of the water, drying her off, and then carrying her to bed.

Sometime in the middle of the night, they made love. Afterward, she snuggled into his chest. Where she belonged.

The next morning, when he woke up, she wasn't in bed.

Had she left for work without saying anything?

After throwing back the covers, he pulled on a long-sleeve T-shirt and lounge pants, then headed downstairs.

He found her in the kitchen, in a pair of shorts and loose-fitting top, her hair pulled into a messy, sexy bun. She stood in front of the stove, and fluffy pancakes browned in a pan. On the counter was a pile of bacon. And coffee splattered into the carafe. He knew heaven. And this was it. "Morning."

A spatula in hand, she turned to face him. She smiled, the way she might have last night if he'd have been capable of a different greeting when she arrived home.

He stalked her to claim a kiss.

Afterward, laughing, she pointed to the backyard. "We have company."

"Oh?"

"Ethan got here about half an hour ago. He's in the hot tub right now."

And since Ethan wouldn't let a carb pass his lips, that meant the pancakes were for him. Cormac grabbed a cup of

coffee. “Need a refill?”

“Please.” She plated the pancakes and started the next batch while he set the table.

He’d never considered himself a man who might enjoy a simple morning like this, but suddenly every part of him longed for it.

Ethan came inside, then took a quick shower while Amelia made scrambled eggs and warmed some syrup.

Because it was a workday, they didn’t linger as Cormac might have liked, but once the kitchen was cleaned, no one moved.

“Amelia...”

The passion that had been there yesterday reignited.

Inhaling sharply, he swept off her shirt to find she was braless, and her nipples tightened beneath his touch. He dropped to his knees to pull off her shorts and lick her pussy while Ethan kissed her.

Cormac tasted her nectar, so much sweeter for the way she surrendered to him, jerking her hips closer to his mouth in invitation, maybe in demand.

He teased her, fingered her, ensuring she was wet and aroused.

The need for them all to immortalize this moment driving him, he stood to grab a condom from his wallet. After tossing it Ethan’s direction, Cormac started to undress, but Amelia moved his hands aside.

“Let me, Sir.”

Everything was as it should be.

Early on, he’d imagined holding her while Ethan took her from behind. Now Cormac intended to turn the fantasy into a reality.

Once he was naked, he kissed her, then held her close, her nipples pressing into him, the musky scent of her arousal filling the air, making his cock hard.

After Ethan stripped and rolled on the protection, he got in position behind Amelia.

“You’ll need to be on your tiptoes,” Ethan told her.

“Remind me to buy you some tall platform shoes to make this easier in the future.”

“Boots,” she countered, meeting Cormac’s gaze. Her eyes were mysteriously inviting. “I’ve always wanted some shiny, black, patent-leather thigh-highs.”

Her words made his cock even harder.

Ethan moved behind her, then bent his knees so the angle worked. Good thing the man did a ridiculous number of squats every day. He’d be counting on that conditioning to help him manage this position.

Cormac played with her clit, ensuring she was still on the edge while Ethan nudged his cockhead inside her entrance.

“I want you to look at me, my sweet.”

She followed his command, and her lips were slightly parted. “This is...amazing.”

With a soft groan, Ethan filled her.

Cormac held her shoulders for support while Ethan fucked her.

“Yes! *More.*”

Ethan complied, driving deeper and harder.

She’d become more confident, and Cormac appreciated that about her, and he was anxious to uncover even greater depths.

“Oh, Sirs...”

After looking at Ethan, who nodded, Cormac gave his permission. “Come for us, Amelia.”

Crying out, her body rocking back and forth, she tossed her head and shattered between them.

“Perfect.” Cormac kissed the top of her head. Their Amelia couldn’t be any more perfect.

But Ethan wasn't finished. He continued to thrust, bringing her off again before taking his own release.

They stayed together for a long time, Cormac and Ethan both holding Amelia, the sound of her soft, gentle breaths mingling with Ethan's more ragged exhalations.

Long before Cormac was ready, reality intruded in the form of a blaring alarm on Ethan's watch. *Duty*. As always.

"I've got to get going." He pressed a kiss to the side of Amelia's neck as he pulled himself from inside her. "I'm ready to be based out of Texas."

She managed to wiggle around so that she faced Ethan. "I'd like you to be home more often."

Home. Was she thinking in the same terms Cormac was?

She kissed Ethan, and he threw away the condom before heading back upstairs for another quick shower, leaving Cormac alone with Amelia.

"Cormac, I..." On the counter, her phone rang, and she went to check the display. "It's work. I need to answer."

He nodded, wishing he'd heard what she'd intended to say. For a moment he'd glimpsed life the way he wanted it to be. Now it was gone as if it never existed.

Cormac wanted it back.

He just wished she did also.

CHAPTER NINE



“Someone doesn’t look happy.”

Eyes wide, unable to believe what she was seeing, Amelia shook her head to clear it. “Oh my God.”

Lexi had just turned the Tastefully Yours van into their parking lot, and the vehicle’s headlights illuminated Cormac, arms folded, resting against the fender of his SUV.

What the hell was he doing here?

“It’s after midnight. You must have turned back into a pumpkin or something.”

Though she appreciated Lexi’s humor, Amelia didn’t find the situation funny in the least.

“Or you missed your curfew.”

Most evenings, she remembered to text, but tonight her phone battery had died, and she’d left her charger at the shop.

Lexi parked their vehicle. “Look. I’ll unload while you deal with your future husband.”

“Absolutely not.” She refused to leave her partner to tackle that chore alone even though Cormac was staring them down. Because of him and all their upcoming wedding demands, Amelia was already shirking most of her work obligations. “Why don’t you go home, and I’ll handle it?”

“How about we do it together in the morning? I’ll just take in the leftovers.”

“Thanks. Again.” Amelia was saying that a lot lately.

“Stop worrying.” Lexi shot a glance toward Cormac who was now heading their direction. “Besides you have your hands full with Mr. Grumpy. He’s serious about you having to punch the clock with him, isn’t he?”

He was.

When things were good between them, they were great. But since he’d fucked her over Prestige’s conference room table a couple of weeks ago, he’d become more controlling.

Tonight he’d gone too far, and she’d had enough.

“Speaking of grumpy, Siren is almost out of food. Want me to pick some up?”

When wasn’t the feline almost out of kibble? Though Amelia had meant to move him in with her, time hadn’t permitted as she hoped. “I’ll bring him some tomorrow. And I hope to get him this Sunday.” After catching up paperwork and turning in food orders.

“I’m actually kind of getting used to him.”

“Really?”

“No.” Lexi grinned. “There’s nothing that can prepare you for his piercing cry when he can see the bottom of the food dish.”

Despite the tension growing inside her, Amelia laughed.

“You’d better deal with Cormac. His scowl is getting deeper by the second.”

While Lexi escaped to unlock the shop, Amelia drew a steadying breath and reached for the door handle.

He was there first, offering a hand to help her out of the vehicle.

She didn’t accept. “Cormac.”

“Forget something?”

Frowning, she tilted back her head to meet his gaze.

“Our appointment with the jeweler.”

“I told you I didn’t think I could make it. And I gave you my size.”

“I wanted you to have a say in the selection. You’re going to be wearing the ring every day.”

Lexi came back out for a large container, then took it inside.

Amelia couldn’t believe she and Cormac were standing in a parking lot after midnight having an argument. “As long as the diamond isn’t too big, I don’t care what it looks like.”

“I care.”

“Why?” She blew out a disbelieving breath. “It’s a piece of jewelry.” Despite what the prenuptial said, she didn’t intend to keep it. “It’s not like any of this is real anyway.”

A frightening pulse ticked in his temple. Recklessly she pushed on. “All of that is beside the point. What the hell are you doing here?”

“I have certain expectations of my wife.”

“Do you?” She’d had enough of his high-handedness. “Well maybe you should find one who can meet them because that woman is not me.”

He took a step toward her. Menace radiated from his eyes, making her doubly determined not to back down.

“We have a binding agreement.”

“You can have every damn penny back, Cormac. I’ve told you I won’t be controlled. Three million isn’t enough to put up with—” she breathed in and indicated his car— “you showing up at my workplace.” Her heart thundered. Her words were strong, but her bravado came at a cost.

“Don’t try me, sweetheart. We’re getting married, Amelia, and it will be soon.”

She shook her head. “I’ll sign your damn piece of paper, but that’s it.” What was it about him, about their dynamic?

Amelia had never met a man like him. Though she had been in love with Douglas, he’d never managed to get such an

emotional reaction out of her. With Cormac, she was on a constant roller coaster. Dizzying highs but plummeting lows.

Lovemaking with him was spectacular. Their BDSM scenes rocked her world. And on those rare occasions where Ethan was home to join them, their sex was even more amazing.

“You agreed to one evening event with me per week and to a wedding that’s attended by family.”

She rose onto her tiptoes, meeting his resolution with determination of her own. “You think you can use money as a weapon against me.” Fortunately her payments were scheduled at various intervals. “You can’t. I intend to be sure you get every penny back. But honestly? I like your mom and your grandmother, and I want them to have their inheritances, so I’ll marry you with only a couple of witnesses, whatever the law requires. Win all around, Cormac. You get married, a tidy divorce, and you keep all of your cash safely in your account.”

“*Goddamn* it, Amelia.” He dragged a hand into his hair. His words were tight, showing that his hold on his temper was fraying. “This isn’t about money.”

“I know. It’s about you bending me to your will. And I won’t do it.”

He took hold of her shoulders. “Damn it. It’s about doing what you say you will do.”

“Duty, right? As if nothing else matters.”

“What else is there?”

“There are things much, much more important than responsibility and obligation...reasons for doing the right thing that have nothing to do with some sort of moral high ground that has been drilled into you since birth.” *Love*. Her heart was breaking. She’d realized she’d fallen in love with him, and that he’d never return the feeling. The only thing he wanted was for her to behave in a way he approved of. She wanted so much more from him, for them.

Living with him, enduring their pretense, was suddenly more than she could bear.

Lexi exited the building and locked the door. She hesitated, looking at them. As if realizing what he was doing, Cormac released Amelia's shoulders and took a step back.

As always, passion churned between them, threatening to engulf them at any time.

When Lexi remained where she was, Amelia called out their arranged phrase. "I'm good."

Taking her time, Lexi climbed behind the wheel of her car and slowly left the parking lot, keeping her gaze locked on the rearview mirror.

"Let's go home, Amelia. We'll talk more there."

"No." She shook her head. "I'm going back to my place. You can quit worrying about me and where I am or what time I'll be home." She gulped. If this was the right thing, why was it so hard? "I'd be going back to my own life in a few months anyway. Why prolong the arguments?"

"Fuck this, Amelia. You need to come home with me, where you belong."

Where she'd fall back under his spell and even deeper in love with him? If her heart was breaking now, how much worse would it be when they actually divorced? "Good night, Cormac. Let me know when you need me to sign that paper."



MUSIC THUMPING THROUGH THE ROOM, and the resistance on the flywheel as high as it would go, Cormac again and again pulled back on the rower's handle, setting a punishing pace through his workout. No matter how hard he pushed himself, he was unable to shut off his self-recrimination.

Over the last five days, he'd had picked up his phone dozens of times to send Amelia a text message or call her. He managed to stop himself. Rejection wasn't his favorite thing.

But every time his damn Bonds device chimed or rang, he lunged for it.

Without her in his life, the bed was too big. The house was too empty. And his life was fucking miserable. He'd taken to spending sixteen or more hours a day at work in the hopes he'd arrive home tired enough that he didn't have the energy to think for too long.

His efforts had been unsuccessful

On the television screen, motion caught his attention. A car. Turning into the driveway.

Amelia?

Pulse higher than it had been even a moment ago, Cormac stopped rowing and grabbed a towel that he draped around his neck, then started down the stairs.

In the distance, a faint beeping sound reached him, indicating the code being keyed into the back door.

A moment later he heard the door opening and then closing.

Hopeful, nervous, he reached the kitchen as Ethan placed a very expensive bottle of champagne on the kitchen island.

Though he was glad to see his cousin, disappointment thumped him. "Ethan."

"Figured I'd celebrate with my two favorite people." He strode to a cabinet and pulled out three crystal flutes before turning around to look at Cormac. "Where's Amelia?"

"Gone."

The pained admission hung frigidly in the air.

"Gone? The fuck you talking about, gone?"

"As in not coming back."

"Jesus, man."

He noticed Ethan hadn't said he was sorry or ask how Cormac was doing. Ethan's silence was an indictment.

He placed the stemware back in the cupboard, then shoved the champagne onto a shelf in the refrigerator. "Where's the Bonds? Or did you drown yourself in it?"

“My study. I’ll get it.”

When he returned to the kitchen, his cousin wasn’t there. The outside lights were on, illuminating the pool.

Cormac glanced out the window to see Ethan’s muscular body plowing through the water.

After picking up the bottle and two glasses to go with it, Cormac headed outside.

Ethan continued to lap the pool, traversing most of the distance underwater. When ordinary humans would have exhausted themselves, Ethan went into beast mode and relentlessly kept going.

Cormac made himself comfortable and sipped two fingers of the fine whiskey.

Finally Ethan pulled himself out of the pool, then grabbed a towel from the deck box that Cormac kept nearby.

Still dripping water, Ethan dropped into a chair and poured some of the amber liquid into his own glass. “I had to clear my head. I walked through your door and heard some of the stupidest words ever uttered. So I figured maybe my mind was playing tricks on me.”

Cormac didn’t bother responding.

“What the hell happened? And if you try to blame any of this on her, I will lay your ass out.”

Ethan knew him better than anyone, maybe better than Cormac knew himself. He’d been there during Priscilla’s disgusting deception, and he always spoke the truth.

In a few sentences, Cormac outlined what had happened.

“You went to her workplace?”

“Look, she didn’t answer. Calls went straight to voicemail.”

“This isn’t the first time you’ve been a world-class asshole with her. That she lasted as long as she did is a small miracle.”

He winced. But since Ethan was right, he didn't bother answering.

"I never thought you were a fucking idiot. Until tonight."

Though he wanted to, Cormac didn't dodge the criticism. No doubt it was deserved. "Got any advice? Words of wisdom?"

"Yeah. Maybe try not being a damn Neanderthal. Does she have any idea that you care about her?" Ethan dressed and finger-combed his hair.

Cormac scowled. He'd shown her he was worried about her in the only way he knew.

"Pull your head out of your ass and figure out what it is about Amelia that turns you into a fucking idiot. Until you do, no one can help you. Later, Cousin."

Cormac scowled. "Where the hell are you going?"

"To see Amelia." He paused, letting his words sink in. "Someplace you're not invited."

"Wait. You brought champagne for a reason. What's going on?"

"Finally thinking about someone other than yourself?" Ethan didn't wait for an answer. "No longer feeling celebratory. Keep it. Another reminder of what you've lost." With those words, he pivoted and walked away.

Jesus. "Fuck." Cormac hurled his glass at the house. The crystal crunched and shattered satisfyingly on the bricks. The man who had been by his side, through every trial and tribulation in his life, had just walked out.



DESPITE THE HOUR, Amelia answered his call on the first ring. Her voice was rough with sleepiness.

"Ethan?" Alertness now laced her tone. "Is everything okay?"

“Flew home hoping to celebrate with the two of you. Bought a bottle of bubbly and headed to Cormac’s to share my news.”

“Tell me. I want to know everything.”

He held it to himself, knowing her curiosity would grow. He’d use that to his advantage.

“Mind if I drop by?”

She hesitated. “It’s late.”

His patience was legendary. So he said nothing. Instead, he waited her out.

Finally she relented with the softest of sighs. “I’ve missed you, and I’d like to see you.”

He’d listened to her words and their nuances deeply enough to hear her hesitation. “You have terms and conditions. Lay them on me.”

“Before I say anything else... Did Cormac put you up to this?”

“I’m my own man, Amelia. I’m not his errand boy. If he’d have asked, I’d have told him to fuck off.”

“Sorry. I had to be sure.”

“Understood.”

“If you come over, I don’t want to talk about him. It’s too painful.”

More than likely, she had things she needed to process. Since he understood their dynamic—and was part of it—he was the person best suited to listen and maybe offer advice. Still, he’d respect her boundaries. “You have my word. If you change your mind, I’m always available.”

“And...please don’t try to pressure me into going back to him.”

“Hell no.” In her place, he’d have left also. His cousin was behaving like a dick. If losing Amelia didn’t wake him up to a few things, nothing would. “That’s a personal guarantee.”

“Thank you.” She gave him her address, then asked him to text when he arrived. Lexi was sleeping, and Amelia didn’t want her disturbed.

The drive took less than twenty minutes, and once Ethan was inside her apartment, she was in his arms, her silent tears soaking his shirt.

He held her tight, letting her know he was there for her, for as long as she needed. From here, though, things would never be the same. He loved Amelia. Yet he’d never betray Cormac, no matter how selfish a prick he was.

“Will you stay?”

“Of course.”

She led him to her bedroom. He unknotted her robe, then slipped it off her shoulders. “I never get enough of you.”

While she climbed into bed, he pulled off his clothes.

“Tell me your news.” Amelia turned on her side and propped her head on her upturned hand.

Of course her first thought was to be interested in him. He slid onto the mattress next to her. “I’m joining Hawkeye.”

“Oh my God. Congratulations, Ethan.” She smiled. “I know how much this means to you. Doing what you love.”

He nodded.

“I’d love to see you anytime you’re home.”

He traced a fingertip across her lips. “Count on it.” Then he tenderly pulled her against him, cradling her, holding her tight.

“I’m glad you’re here.” She wiggled around until she was faced away from him, then snuggled back in. His hard cock pressed against her buttocks, but he made no move to make love to her.

Once during the night, she woke up, crying out a little. “Nightmare, darlin’?”

She didn't respond, but he pulled a blanket over her and stroked her arm until she settled back against him.

He dozed fitfully, one eye open, like he always did in unfamiliar places. As the sun edged over the horizon, a horrid screech rent the air.

Wide awake, he bolted upright, reaching for his gun.

Amelia gently placed a hand on him. "Stand down, soldier. Everything's okay."

"What the hell is that?"

"That's a Siren."

"I can tell it's a damn siren, but what kind?" Intruder alert? Fire alarm?

"Come with me." She showed no sense of urgency, helping to modify his pulse rate. "This happens all the time."

"You need to do something about it."

She slipped from the bed and donned a short robe. "You're a big, strong man. Maybe you have an idea or two."

And he knew people in security. Whatever the hell the issue was, he'd fix it.

The siren peeled again. "This happens every thirty seconds?"

She smiled, seemingly enjoying herself. "Like clockwork."

"How do you sleep?" He yanked on his pants, zipped them, but left the waistband unfastened.

"Either Lexi or I have to get up and...reset it."

Pulling a black T-shirt over his head, he followed her into the kitchen. The biggest cat he'd ever seen in his life sat in front of a food bowl.

The feline tipped its head back to howl again.

"That's a Siren."

"Have you not fed it in weeks? Make it stop." No wonder she'd been grinning at his concern about an alarm. "Hit its

reset button.”

She picked up the dish and showed it to Ethan; it still had kibble in it. “If there’s the barest hint of the bottom, he’s afraid of going hungry.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think he needs to be afraid of that.”

“Neither do I.” She filled the bowl. “He was a rescue, and he was so skinny and malnourished, we didn’t think he’d make it. He was my grandma’s cat. And, well, she made sure he was reassured.” Amelia gave a light smile. “The vet recommended a diet kibble.”

“How’d that work out?”

“He ate more than twice what he usually did.” She lifted her shoulders. “So he gained weight on the diet.”

“Maybe he needs to go for a run with us.”

“If you suggest that again, I will start howling also.” She smiled, and his heart melted.

Cormac might be a best-in-class idiot, but Ethan wasn’t. He crossed to her, took her in his arms, then kissed her forehead.

They stayed together for a few moments, neither saying anything, enjoying a moment that wouldn’t last forever and may never happen again. The contradiction was bittersweet.

Finally, after swallowing deeply, she moved away and offered to make coffee.

“Please.”

After setting the machine to brew, she turned and faced him, resting her hips against the cabinets. “How long will the transition to civilian life take? I mean...” She brushed stray strands of hair away from her face. “Not that you’ll be living a civilian life.”

He nodded.

“It’s riskier than what you were doing?”

“Operating comes with danger.” He shrugged. It was difficult for those who hadn’t served to understand. “We do everything we can to ensure success. Strategy. Tactics. Planning.”

“But shit happens?”

He grinned. On some level, she did understand. “It does.”

“I always want you to be safe. To come home. But this is your life, isn’t it?”

He nodded. “Just as it was my father’s, and his before him. All the way back to the Revolutionary War. If family lore can be believed, well before that.”

“Legend comes from somewhere, right? Then it manifests as the Magnificent Ethan.”

“You’re good for my ego. You make me want to come home.” Too bad Cormac was so far up his own ass that he didn’t understand something so simple.

“I’ll leave a light on for you.”

“And keep the damn cat fed.” Now seemingly content, the furball wandered toward the living room. Then realizing he hadn’t answered her earlier question, Ethan circled back to it. “I don’t have an official start date. Military moves at its own pace.”

“As long as you’re happy, I’ll be cheering for you.”

The coffee maker doled out its final drops, and she reached for two cups. “How long do you have?”

“This morning?” He didn’t need to check his watch to know the time. “An hour.” He tipped his head to study her.

“He must have told you. Cormac, I mean, about what happened.”

That she’d changed her mind and wanted to open up surprised him, pleasantly so. “I heard his version, yes. Or parts of it anyway. Told him he was an idiot and walked out.”

Her eyes widened. “You didn’t!”

“I’ve never known life without Cormac in it. But he has failings, as do I.”

“Do you mind if we go for a walk or a drive? I don’t want to wake Lexi up.”

“If she slept through Siren...”

She smiled.

“I’m up for either one. Whatever you need, Amelia.”

“You know, I believe you.” She poured the coffee into travel cups.

While he enjoyed his first cup, then reached for a refill, she got dressed. In under five minutes, they were on the road.

“Buffalo Bayou?”

“Memorial Park?” she countered. “Not as close to Cormac’s house.”

“Got it.”

As he drove, she talked. “I had a boyfriend. Our relationship started out so very ordinary, and then it devolved as he became controlling.” She took a drink of her coffee.

He parked the car, then turned off the engine and faced her.

“Let’s walk,” she said.

They exited the car and headed down the trail he’d selected, one with an exercise station along the way.

After falling in step together, she picked up the threads of their conversation.

“Douglas, that was his name. He installed cameras on the house so he could watch my comings-and-goings during the day. But that wasn’t enough for him, so he put a tracking device on my car. When I had my tires replaced, the service technician found it, and I asked him to remove it.”

By unspoken accord, they stopped at a bench near the work out area.

“I left. When I agreed to marry Cormac, I told him I wouldn’t be controlled.”

And he still couldn't get out of his own way. Ethan looked deeply into her eyes and saw the pain in them. And the truth. "Did you fall in love with him?"

"I did. Stupid, right?" She wrapped her arms around herself. "It's complicated. There's never been anyone like him. The depth of emotion..."

He nodded.

"To be fair, he never promised anything. It was a temporary arrangement, which makes me a fool."

"Not in the least. You can't control how you feel about him. And the thing is, I think he loves you in return."

She shook her head.

"He can't admit it to himself, much less you. He's trying to show it, but he mucks it up every time. The man is no saint. But he's not your ex, either."

"Of course you'd defend him."

"Oh I'm happy to let him dig his own grave, but he's not a snake."

She studied the lid of her coffee container as if it held all the answers.

While he was here, he repped out a few dozen pull-ups, then rejoined her. He didn't think she'd noticed he was gone.

Finally she shook her head. "Are you ready to head back?"

He'd never be ready to leave her.

But duty called.

CHAPTER TEN



A week later, Amelia squared her shoulders and walked into Celeste's office.

The receptionist smiled. "I'll let her know you're here."

Amelia refused to take a seat. If Cormac showed up, she didn't want him to have an advantage.

Moments later, Celeste swept in, wearing a slim skirt and blouse. Amelia had opted for a suit—armor more than anything. A concerned frown was furrowed between Celeste's eyebrows. "Are you sure you want to go through with this?"

"I made a commitment."

"No judge will force you to marry him."

"Let's get the will settled, then the divorce handled."

"Amelia—"

"My mind is made up."

Celeste nodded. "Cormac is already here with Drake and his partner, Everett. I had them shown to the conference room. When you're ready, we'll go in."

"Can we skip anything except what's necessary?"

"I'd already planned on it. The only real necessity is asking each party if they want to get married. Declaration of intent. The rest is superfluous."

"As soon as the license is signed, I'm leaving."

“Of course. I’ll be sure Cormac doesn’t follow you, and I’ll start divorce proceedings at the earliest possible date. As your counsel, I’m informing you that I intend for you to keep as much money as you can.”

Amelia brought her chin up. “He can shove it up his ass. I won’t allow him to manipulate me.”

“That’s the spirit.” Celeste smiled. “You won’t walk away with nothing, Amelia. You earned your money.”

“I broke the agreement.”

“You’re here. Technically you didn’t.”

She nodded, only half listening. The pounding of her pulse drowned out all sound. “Since everyone is here, let’s get this over with.”

Even though she’d steeled herself, her breath vaporized at the sight of Cormac. He was devastating in a charcoal-colored suit and an azure tie that very nearly matched his eyes.

For the first time ever, he looked tired, a little haggard, and lighter, as if he’d lost weight.

Immediately she tamped down her concern. They weren’t a couple and never had been.

He held out a hand in unspoken invitation. “Amelia—”

“Shall we get started?” Celeste interrupted.

Amelia acknowledged Drake and the other man, Everett, she imagined. The three men were seated on one side of the table—a true business transaction.

She took a seat to Celeste’s left, closest to the door.

As Celeste had promised, she said nothing about love or commitment or happiness. Instead, she skipped straight to the point. “Amelia Ryan, do you agree to marry Cormac Flanagan?”

“I do.” This was never how she imagined uttering those words. Despite her resolve, tears stung her eyes.

In clipped tones, Celeste continued. “Cormac, do you agree to marry Amelia?”

“I do.”

Beneath the table, Amelia dug her fingernails into her palms.

More times than she could count, she’d heard the phrase that it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. For her, the adage was a lie. Her life would have been so much happier if she had never met Cormac.

“Then we’ll consider it done.” Celeste reached into a file folder and pulled out the wedding license that she and Cormac had gotten the previous week.

Celeste slid the document to Amelia, and she scrawled her name.

Cormac hesitated but followed suit. Then, silently, Everett and Drake added their names. How was the scratch of a pen on paper so loud?

Amelia grabbed hold of her purse, then stood and thanked Celeste.

If she met Cormac’s gaze, her resolve to keep her distance might waver.

Without a backward glance, she strode toward the door.

Behind her, Celeste spoke.

“Cormac, if you please, take your seat again.”

“Goddamn it.”

Drake’s voice added to the warning. “Do as she says.”

The fear that Cormac might follow urging her to hurry, Amelia decided not to wait for the elevator. Instead, she headed for the stairwell and fled as quickly as her shoes allowed.

When she emerged, she pushed through the revolving glass door and hurried to the street where her Uber was waiting.

From beginning to end, the entire sham couldn't have lasted ten minutes, and yet each second had been interminable.

The driver took her to the Tastefully Yours building. Once inside, the emotions she'd struggled to keep at bay finally caught up to her and plowed her down. Her knees gave out, and with a sob, she collapsed into her office chair.

She'd never be whole again.



“MOTHER. To what do I owe this pleasure?” Cormac rounded his desk to kiss her on the cheek.

“Can't I drop in on my son to see how he is?”

“You're always welcome, and you know it.” But she rarely visited him during the workday. The last time she'd stopped by, it was to let him know she was getting divorced. Perhaps she was having more problems with Paisley. “Coffee? Tea? Water?” *Wine?* And would he need whiskey?

“Thanks. Linda already asked.”

Of course she had. Linda was the best executive assistant in the world.

Because he often liked to have informal meetings with staff members, he had a small seating area off to one side—complete with four comfortable chairs and a couch with oversize pillows. A square table sat in the middle. The space was intentionally designed to be cozy.

They took seats at an angle to one another, and he settled in to wait.

“How's Amelia?”

Cormac frowned. What had she heard? If Ethan said anything to his own mother, Maeve would no doubt have immediately called Cormac's mom. “I'm afraid I don't know.”

She blinked. The shock in her eyes was real. His mother was so honest, there was no way to fake that. “But... You got

married.” Then she slowly nodded as realization seemed to dawn. “You did it for the family.”

“Grandmother’s suggestion.”

“Cormac...I...I don’t know what to say. You didn’t need to do that.”

“Actually I did. It was the right thing.” From a duty perspective anyway. For his heart? For Amelia’s well-being? Maybe not. Everything had a cost.

“She was lovely. You seemed happy together. It was nice to see you smile and be so relaxed. I really thought you’d found happiness.” She sighed. “Finally put the gold-digging Priscilla behind you.”

“It was an important lesson.”

“One maybe you took too seriously?”

He doubted that. At least Amelia had only negotiated for three million dollars. If he hadn’t caught Priscilla’s deception when he did, it could have cost him ten times that amount to get away.

His mother fidgeted with her purse, then seemingly realizing she was doing so, she placed it on the table. “I wanted you to know I’m seeing someone.”

“You’re...?” Maybe he should have poured himself a drink when he’d thought about it. “Mom.” He tried to proceed with caution, but he wasn’t sure he knew how. “You’ve just become a very wealthy woman.”

She scowled. “Why do you always do this? Jump to the worst possible conclusion without asking questions?”

Her sharp words and scolding tone knocked him back in his seat. He wasn’t sure she’d ever spoken to him in that way.

“Try asking how we met or how long we’ve known each other. Or what he’s like, and most importantly, does he make me happy?”

When he didn’t respond, she went on. “Even though you may not be curious, I’ll tell you anyway because I want you to

know. Paul and I met at a divorce support group.”

Cormac had no idea such a thing existed or that his mother attended. Maybe he should have known. He’d been so wrapped up in his life and running his businesses that he’d been oblivious to the pain his mother had endured. Maybe there was some truth behind the accusations that he was a selfish prick.

“He met me when I had nothing.” She paused as if remembering. “Less than nothing, really. Mostly a mountain of debt.”

If he had known, Cormac would have solved her problems immediately.

“You know how Paul responded when I told him I might lose my house?” Now that she was talking about the man she was seeing, her tone changed. She was no longer chastising Cormac; she was inviting him to see through her eyes. “He offered to help me out.”

“Generous.”

“He’s a mechanic, Cormac. You make more in interest every day than he makes in a year. And he offered everything he has without hesitation. Even now, he has no idea that I have money. He’s a man worthy of knowing.”

Unspoken words hung between them. *See what happens when you make assumptions?*

“And I’d like you to meet him.”

“I’d be pleased.” He meant it.

“Also, I want you to be the first to know that I’m thinking about selling the house.”

“You’re...” Even after they’d saved it from foreclosure? Nothing could have prepared him for today’s conversation.

“I don’t need it, do I? It’s just me and Paisley right now.”

“Moving is a big step.”

“One I’m ready for. I want something smaller. And if it wasn’t for Paisley, I’d happily give all my money to that

animal fund your grandfather loved. I don't need fancy cars or designer everything. I never did. Those were status symbols that mattered to your father. And now it's time I made decisions that are right for me."

She'd piqued his curiosity, and he was genuinely interested in what she had to say.

"It's taken me a long time to get here. But I fell for your father with his sweet-talking ways. He was so handsome, charming. So when he proposed with a magnificent ring, I was swept away." She shook her head ruefully. "I had no idea he'd asked my father for my hand in marriage and that Daddy said no."

This was his first time he'd heard this part of the story.

"After I brought Barnabus home and showed off my ring, my father warned me not to do it. But I wouldn't listen, and once we were married, and I discovered he didn't love me, I stayed with him out of a sense of duty. Your grandfather drilled that one into all of us girls also. After all, we had a house, you, Paisley. But staying married was one of the biggest mistakes I've ever made, and I will regret it forever. That misplaced sense of obligation cost me decades of happiness."

"There were reasons Grandfather structured his will the way he did?"

"Most definitely," she replied. "He saw everyone's flaws, including Gail's and Richard's. I love my sister dearly, but she has always believed that money is to be spent, that more will magically show up. Your grandfather made sure it did. He knew he spoiled her, but she was his favorite. His baby girl."

"They will be broke again in a couple of years."

"And looking for more handouts from you."

Next time they wouldn't find him as accommodating.

"Anyway, if you'll excuse me, I'm meeting Paul and we are heading to an afternoon concert on the Kemah boardwalk." She gathered her purse and stood. Then she kissed his cheek. "Money doesn't bring happiness, Cormac. If Amelia matters

to you, don't let the ghosts of the past haunt you. I want you to be happy."

He wasn't sure what that meant. Ever since Amelia had shut him out of her life, he had been lost. Lonely. He hadn't even heard from Ethan.

Long after his mother left, he stared at the closed door, her words tumbling through his mind.



"IF YOU WANT to run the credit card settlement, I'll put away the leftovers," Lexi offered.

Amelia instantly agreed. Though it was only ten, earlier than many nights, she was ready to finish up, get off her feet, and relax.

She headed into her office, then paused at the sight of a box on her desk. Her name was on the label, but there was no return address. "Hey, Lex! Do you know anything about this package?"

"Marla texted that something was delivered for you this afternoon." Lexi walked over and stood in the doorway. "Since it seemed private, rather than a delivery we were expecting, she left it for you. I meant to mention it earlier."

Curious, Amelia grabbed a pair of scissors to slice through the sealing tape, then she opened the box and frowned. *Shredded paper?*

"What's in there?" Lexi angled her head for a better look.

"I have no idea." Then she noticed a hint of blue, then another.

The pages would be impossible to put back together, but she saw letters that meant something to her.

She sank onto her chair.

"Amelia?"

Though she knew exactly what she was seeing, she didn't understand why. "It's my prenuptial agreement."

Lexi scowled. "What the hell?"

Not wanting it sitting around, she picked up the box to dump the paper into the recycle bin, but the package seemed heavier than it should have been. With a frown, she felt around and found an envelope.

"I can do that for you."

Shaking her head, she tore off a strip at the end. Breath whooshed out her as a piece of paper fluttered to her desk.

"What?"

It was a check for five million dollars, along with a handwritten note.

Celeste was right. I'd have given you anything you asked for. This is a good place to start.

~C

The envelope slipped from her nerveless fingers.

Cormac was waging a full-out war on her, but it would never change things between them.

Lexi whistled at the sight of the number of zeros on the check. "Is there anything else in there?"

Surely there couldn't be.

Just in case, Amelia fished around to discover one more item, and her heart careened to a stop as she pulled it out.

"Holy shit, Lia. That looks like..."

Amelia nodded. "Yeah." *A ring box.*

"Do you want me to deal with this for you?"

Every instinct screamed at Amelia to say yes. Whatever the hell was happening had already gone too far.

Unable to stop herself, she opened the lid.

A massive oval stone—surrounded by a countless number of tiny diamonds, winked at her.

Instantly she recognized that it was not a modern setting. Did that mean she was looking at a Murphy clan heirloom?

“You should send it back now, Lia. Right now.”

Once again, her friend was right. Knowing her heart might shatter even worse than it already had, Amelia gave into the temptation and pulled out the gorgeous piece.

A tiny piece of paper was wrapped around the band, and she pulled it off to read the print.

It matters to me.

“Danger, danger. Red alert. Stop right here.”

Ignoring Lexi’s warning, Amelia slipped the ring onto her finger. The fit was perfect.

“Nothing has changed.” As always, Lexi provided the voice of reason. “He’s still the same man. Maybe a little smarter than I gave him credit for. But still the same. I was wrong all those months ago. Being married to a rich man is not a way to solve all your problems.”

Tears burned Amelia’s eyes.

Lexi had been right. She should never have tried it on. But there was no way Amelia could have anticipated the dozens of emotions that assailed her at the sight of his ring on her finger: disappointment, regret, recrimination, the devastation of falling in love with the Dastardly Duo. She’d known from the beginning that he didn’t want her heart.

“Oh, Lia. I’m so sorry. He’s a total jerk.”

After removing the exquisite piece of jewelry, Amelia tucked it back inside the box and closed the lid.

“Don’t respond to him. Let him wonder. I’ll take the package back to the post office tomorrow.”

Amelia needed to handle this once and for all. After picking up her phone, she sent Cormac a text. *I’ll insure it and send it back.*

Within seconds he sent a response. *Keep it. It’s yours.*

Her fingers shaking so hard she could barely hold the phone, she typed her response. *It's not enough to fix things.*

I know.

What did that mean?

Step outside. I'll prove it to you.

Lexi was reading over her shoulder. "Stay strong. He's out there waiting for you."

If he was, she could give him the ring and the check back in person.

"Damn it. You're going to meet him, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Fine." Lexi blew out a long-suffering sigh. "I can't let you do it alone."

"You're the best friend ever."

"I expect you to save me from myself at some point in the future."

Amelia struggled to find a smile, but she couldn't summon one.

Arm in arm, they walked out of the building. Though it was night, the parking lot was well lit.

She and Lexi exchanged puzzled glances when Cormac's car was not there.

A boom exploded in the near distance, then light flared. Startled, they both looked up. Red and white fireworks filled the night sky. As the puffs of clouds cleared, hundreds of drones appeared overhead. "What the...?"

The small crafts formed the shape of a pink heart.

In disbelief, Amelia shook her head.

"Even I have to admit this is over the top." Lexi pulled out her phone and began to snap pictures.

With only a small hum, the drones broke formation and rearranged into the words *I love you.*

He loved her?

Did he mean it?

Shocked and awed, her heart pounding a hopeful staccato beat, she grabbed her phone from her back pocket. *Where are you?*

Close. But I will not come near you without an invitation.

The drones hovered in place, for half of Houston to see.

She typed back a single word. *Yes.*

It was a full three minutes later when he pulled into the parking lot. After killing his car engine, Cormac climbed out of the SUV, and made his way to her.

Amelia couldn't breathe or think, and she fought to hold herself together.

"I was a total fucking fool."

"Yes, you were." Lexi responded on Amelia's behalf.

Showing no offense, Cormac acknowledged her friend. "Hello, Lexi." Then he met Amelia's eyes. "It took losing you for me to wake up and realize the truth: that I love everything about you. I was too much of an arrogant bastard to admit it to myself or to you."

"And now...?" He still hadn't touched her.

Weeks ago, when they'd gotten married, he'd look looked gaunt. And now the lines around his eyes were even more pronounced, and he seemed to have lost even more weight.

"I can't live without you. Amelia, I love you. I can't promise that I will be perfect, but I will promise to do my best every damn day."

She pressed her lips together.

"The prenuptial is null and void unless you want to enforce it."

Then, beneath the words *I love you*, he lowered himself to one knee.

“Oh-oh. I think we’re gonna need something.” Lexi dashed back toward the building, leaving Amelia alone with Cormac.

“Do you really mean this?”

“More than I’ve meant anything in my life.”

When he reached for her hand, she gave it.

“Amelia Ryan. I love you. If you will have me, I swear I will spend the rest of my life trying to be the husband you deserve.”

This was the moment her heart had yearned for. And yet...
“What about Ethan?”

“He’s skeptical that I can convince you to have me. And he still thinks I don’t deserve you. He could be right.”

In a crisp military uniform, Ethan exited the car and walked toward them, taking her next breath away.

“Seems my cousin finally pulled his head out of his ass.”

She smiled. Trust Ethan to keep things real.

“If you will have him, I’m afraid you’re stuck with me as well.”

“I can’t think of anything better.”

“Except having your feet rubbed?” Ethan teased.

Still on one knee, Cormac added his part. “Or having your bath drawn?”

Her officer. Her gentleman. The Dastardly Duo. And they were hers for keeps. “I can’t think of anything better.”

Lexi returned with the ring.

Thanking her, Cormac accepted the heirloom. “This belonged to my great-grandmother. From what I understand, their union was a total love match. Their marriage lasted fifty-seven years, until his death.”

“It’s gorgeous.”

He grinned. “The fifty-seven years is a good place to start. I intend for us to celebrate many more than that.”

Hardly able to see through her happy tears, she nodded.

“Please say you’ll be mine, until the end of time.”

“Yes, *yes!*”

He slipped the ring into place. It was perfect. Just like the relationship between the three of them.

Cormac stood, and laughter flowed as easily as her tears. “I love you Cormac.” She looked at Ethan. “And I love you.”

Her husband claimed her mouth in a kiss that dreams were made of, leaving her weak. Then Ethan kissed her to seal their agreement.

Overhead, the drones took a little bow, and their lights blinked. As they moved away, more fireworks filled the sky.

“Let’s get started on forever.” Cormac took her hand. “And plans for a real wedding. I want the entire world to know that I love you and I will never stop.”

Lexi waved Amelia away, telling her to leave. Amelia mouthed her thanks, then looked at her men. “I’m ready. Let’s go home.”

EPILOGUE



“Ethan!” Doing a happy dance, Amelia dropped her dishrag and ran toward the back door. “Welcome home!” She threw her arms around him before he even managed to close the door behind him.

As he lifted her and spun her around, she giggled uncontrollably. Nothing made her happier than having her small family together. “Oh my God, I’ve missed you so much.” Since it didn’t happen often, she cherished every moment.

“I recognize that squeal.” Cormac walked into the kitchen, and enveloped Ethan in a bear hug.

Ethan finally closed the door and dropped his duffel bag.

The bottle of champagne that Ethan had left in the fridge so long ago was still there, and Amelia pulled it out. “Let’s get our celebration started.”

“I’ll handle that.” Cormac plucked the bubbly from her hands.

She wrinkled her nose. “There are certain things you never get over.”

“You’re right.”

The last time she’d opened a bottle, the cork had exploded upward. There was still a dent in the kitchen ceiling. “Spoilsport.”

Ethan grabbed three glasses, and Amelia took the open bottle back from Cormac and poured them each a small

amount.

They had a lot to celebrate. Ethan was out of the military. He'd finalized the deal with Hawkeye, but he had two weeks before his official start date.

In an unconventional manner that suited them all fine, the threesome had decided to celebrate the honeymoon now, while they could, even before the grand wedding celebration.

Cormac proposed a toast. "To our happily ever after."

At one time, those weren't words she could have imagined hearing from him. Since they were legally married, they were jointly working on a post-nuptial agreement. Over her protests, he'd guaranteed her half of his wealth. He'd also provided a trust for her and any children they might have. Though Ethan had his own family wealth, Cormac had included him in their plans.

Ethan nodded in agreement. "Here, here."

They clinked their glasses together.

After they'd taken a sip, they all moved to the kitchen table.

Amelia put down her glass. "Tell us all the details."

"I'll be spending a month at Hawkeye's training center in Nevada."

Not as an instructor, she knew. He'd be there to select his team, and they'd learn to work together.

"We'll come see you," she pronounced.

"I'll warn you, its rustic. No five-star hotels within hours."

"Cabins, maybe?" Amelia asked. "Where we can be alone?" Which was all that mattered to her.

"That much I can arrange."

Ethan only had a couple of free weeks, and the trio planned to spend most of their time at home with only a couple of quick overnight getaways. She didn't want to be away from her business for too long. They'd never been

busier, and they now had five employees—including a pastry chef—and three vans.

Siren had to be contended with as well. Even though they'd found a reliable pet sitter, the cat preferred his humans, and he'd taken a liking to Cormac, often following him around the house.

Amelia had been surprised to discover her husband had a soft spot for his new pet. He'd even suggested they look for another rescue so that Siren had a companion.

One day while Amelia was in Cormac's office, she'd found a letter thanking him for his generous donation to the animal shelter in his grandfather's name. While there was no dollar amount listed, the president of the organization was happy to announce that their new building would be named the Murphy Center.

She'd fallen a little more in love in that instant, especially since he'd told no one what he'd done.

The most important reason to stay close by was Grandma Fancy. Since her move to Like Family, she was doing better, with more lucid moments. Amelia looked forward to their visits as much as her grandma seemed to. And Amelia didn't want to miss a single opportunity to spend time together.

"Either of you have any ideas on how you'd like to spend the first couple of hours together?" Ethan asked, sweeping his gaze over her.

Desire made her reel, leaving her dizzy. She'd fantasized about taking them both at the same time. When she'd confessed that to Cormac, he'd grinned and said she needed lots of practice. And he'd been wonderfully, patiently accommodating.

"Are you ready, Amelia?" Cormac asked.

She nodded.

Upstairs, they barely made it to the bedroom. And their abandoned clothing lay where it fell, strewn behind them.

Cormac pulled back the bed covers, then rearranged some of the pillows.

A few weeks ago, she and Cormac had visited the doctor's office, and she had gotten a prescription for birth control pills. When they made love, he wanted no barriers between them.

Ethan went into the dungeon for condoms and lubricant before rejoining them.

Her lovers spent a long time arousing her, bringing her to orgasm after orgasm, playing with her nipples, kissing her, gently spanking her ass.

When she'd first met Cormac at Prestige, she'd had no idea she could be this deliriously happy.

Cormac lay on his back, his cock hard, precum leaking from the slit. That she aroused him so much filled her with feminine pleasure.

Ethan helped her into place. As she straddled her husband, Ethan pinched and tormented her nipples.

She closed her eyes as she pitched forward, and he moved in behind her.

Always a considerate lover, Ethan spent a long, leisurely time sliding a lubricated finger in and out of her rear. When her breathing slowed, he inserted another, stretching out her tightest channel, preparing her for his entry.

The world spinning around her, she begged for him to take her.

Slowly he pressed himself against her entrance. She cried out at the unbearable sensation. With the way that Cormac already filled her, Ethan's penetration would be impossible.

"We've got you, my sweet."

She hung onto Cormac's promise, drawing comfort from his words as he pulled her down on top of him and kissed her.

Inexorably Ethan pushed forward. She was so stretched she couldn't breathe.

Ethan dug his hands into her hips and moved her back and forth.

Cormac was pressed against her G-spot, and Ethan seated himself all the way inside her. In pleasure, in torment, she cried out. This was what she'd wanted, but she'd had no idea how difficult it would be.

Whispering soft reassurances, Cormac soothed her while Ethan released one hand to trail his fingers down her back, tracing little shapes that her mind scrambled to decipher.

The combination of touch and words was enough to distract her and get her out of her head and into the scene.

Suddenly they moved as one, and Ethan pulled back to surge forward in a single, powerful stroke.

Cormac changed angles a little, causing the tiniest friction against her clit. In that instant, ecstasy chased away discomfort.

Ethan stroked faster, and her lovers guided her to the most sensational climax she'd ever experienced.

Stunned, she screamed out her capitulation.

Ethan came inside her. Not long afterward, Cormac followed, filling her with his hot seed. She'd never been more complete.

After snuggling and dozing together, the three lazily showered together. While Ethan soaped her body, Cormac inspected her to make sure she wasn't bruised or too sore.

A full ten minutes later, Cormac turned off the faucet.

"Nice appetizer," Ethan observed. "Any ideas for round two?"

"Round two?" she echoed in shocked disbelief, looking at each man in turn as she dried off.

"We'll give you some time to rest."

"Thanks." She laughed. "Generous of you, Ethan."

Cormac suggested they finish the champagne in the hot tub, an idea she wholeheartedly endorsed.

“Then we can go out to dinner. Make no mistake, we’ve got plans for you, Amelia, and we can’t get enough.”

His words undid her. “What are we waiting for, Sirs? Bring it on.”

“Sassy.” Ethan tugged off her towel, making her gasp.

Cormac pulled her into his arms, then lifted her from the ground and slung her over his shoulder, spanking her ass as he walked back into their room. “I’ve been wanting to do this for a long, long time.”

He stopped next to their bed and tossed her onto it.

Instinctively she tried to scoot away, but Cormac pinned her to the mattress, covering her body with his.

Ethan knelt on the bed and pulled her arms over her head, shackling her wrists with one of his hands. With the other, he squeezed his fingers into the soft flesh of her breast, making her gasp and whimper.

“Be careful what you start, my sweet wife.” Cormac’s sensual promise wrapped her in comfort. “Your men will always finish it.”

Yes, please. Smiling, she arched her back in sweet, sweet surrender. The only thoughts in her mind were of pure joy and complete contentment with her men and her life.

“You’re ours.”

Forever.



Thank you for reading *Theirs to Wed*. I hope you fell in love with Cormac and Ethan (an officer and a gentleman) as much as I did. Cormac was a tough alpha, but the way he came to love Amelia melted my heart.

I hope you enjoyed *Siren* too. He is inspired by my daughter’s cat, Arrow. Arrow is much like *Siren*, but Arrow is

honestly the sweetest fur baby ever. He's kind and gentle. And if you're not feeling well, he won't leave your side.

The menage heroes in Titans Captivated have a very special place in my heart. Thank you for allowing me to share them with you.

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If you can't get enough alpha males who are protectors, I invite you to read Come to Me, a BDSM romantic suspense that also happens to be a menage. (Or as I call them, Mmmenage!)

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If you like the mysterious and Dominant Titans, I invite you to discover more about their world, starting with Billionaire's Matchmaker.

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Continue reading for an exciting excerpt from COME TO ME

COME TO ME



HAWKEYE

Shit.

Nate Davidson opened his eyes and tried to shake away the stars that had exploded in his head and stolen his vision. It took several tries before the image of strong, tall, dark, and dangerous Wolf Stone blinked into focus. And when it did, Nate was certain he'd never seen anything better.

It'd been a long time. Too damn long.

“You're lucky I didn't tear your fool head off.”

Nate flexed his jaw to make sure it still worked. “Feels to me like you did.”

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Stone's voice was deep and ragged, cut glass on velvet.

“You're not glad to see me? I thought you'd start looking for a fattened calf.” Nate knew what real danger was. It had nothing to do with his battered body or the nasty storm snarling its way over the Rocky Mountains. Danger was Wolf Stone. And Nate was in the bigger, stronger man's sights.

Nate struggled to get his elbows behind him. Damn mountains were made of rock, not the best pillow under any circumstances. Downright painful when you'd had your clock cleaned by a tank of a man. “Mind if I sit up?”

“Stay where you are.”

Lying on the ground, looking well over six feet up into Stone's cold blue eyes left Nate at a disadvantage—or, rather,

at a greater disadvantage than he usually was around Stone. “Hospitable as always, aren’t you, boss?”

“All trespassers get the same treatment.”

No matter how hard either of them tried to pretend otherwise, they both knew Nate was no ordinary trespasser.

And Stone was no ordinary property owner.

He’d commanded several missions that Nate had been assigned to. Every person selected had to meet rigorous physical standards. By any measure, Nate was a good-size man, an inch over six feet, two hundred seven pounds of lean muscle.

Still, Stone had him by two inches and at least twenty pounds. Even now, recouping from injuries, Stone had effortlessly brought Nate down. Well, that was an understatement. Stone had tossed Nate like an old magazine.

“Still waiting for an answer to my question, Davidson.”

Sometimes, only the truth would do. “When you refused protection, Hawkeye sent me.”

“You’re here,” Stone demanded incredulously, “to protect *me*?” He raised a dark eyebrow in a way that made grown men cower. Nate had seen it happen, and he refused to admit to himself that it made him cower as well.

“Who’d have imagined?” *Ludicrous.*

Stone sheathed his knife. The weapon was overkill. He only needed his hands in order to tear a strip out of someone’s hide.

“Tell Hawkeye I said thanks, but no thanks. You can find your own way off the ranch.” Stone turned.

If he hadn’t been looking for it, Nate might not have noticed Stone’s slight limp. *Stubborn man.* The threat against his life was real and imminent. He was the only eyewitness to the hit that had taken out Elliott and Lisa Mulgrew. Word on the street was that some lucky bastard would get a cool million dollars if Stone didn’t make it to court to testify against Michael Huffman, the murderer.

While Stone was holed up in his fortress, he was safe enough. But once he left Cold Creek Ranch, he'd need the backup.

“So,” Nate called out when Stone got about ten paces away, “you’re not interested in knowing how I breached the perimeter?”

“You got exactly nowhere before your ass was mine.” He continued on without looking back.

“Storm’s brewing, man!”

“You’ll get wet.”

Well, hell. Nate collapsed back onto the unforgiving ground. That’d gone well.

Stone disappeared over a ridge, vanishing into thick Ponderosa pines.

In a nearby tree, a hairy woodpecker—nasty little bastard—beat out a staccato that matched the throbbing headache in Nate’s temples.

Under any circumstances, he deferred to Stone. The man exuded a palpable loyalty-inspiring authority. Even now, when Stone didn’t want assistance, didn’t want to be protected, Nate had no intention of leaving. Stone was as determined as the mountains were rugged. Then again, so was Nate.

Hawkeye hadn’t recruited Nate for this job. He, plus the helicopter pilot and copilot, had volunteered. It had taken days of planning, and he refused to admit failure.

Half a dozen raindrops pelted his cheeks.

Even in the past few minutes, the storm had gathered clouds and whipped them together with wind to descend the eastern slope of the Continental Divide.

Could this get any worse?

Lightning slashed through the swollen gray sky, igniting a path of cloud-to-cloud strikes.

Yeah. It had gotten worse.



WOLF STONE, no matter how drop-dead gorgeous he was, was out of his freaking mind. And an asshole to boot. “You left Nate out there?” Kayla Fagan demanded. “Have you seen the weather?”

“He’s not made of sugar.”

“Meaning he won’t melt?”

“Exactly.”

“If this is how you treat your fellow operatives, what do you do to your enemies?”

He shrugged. “None of them left alive to tell.” He smiled, and it did nothing to soften his features. The quick curve was more wicked than anything, making his eyes darken, reminding her of those few moments of twilight before the sky devoured the sun.

He strode from the kitchen, and she followed. “Mr. Stone —”

“Wolf, or just Stone.” He didn’t slow down. “And I’m not worried about how I’ll sleep tonight.” He crouched in front of the hearth, tossing kindling into the empty fireplace grate.

When she first heard he was holing up in a log house on a ranch, she’d pictured a remote, barely inhabitable two-room cabin.

She couldn’t have been more wrong.

Wolf Stone enjoyed luxury, and his home was the intersection of comfort and high-tech. This room, more than any other, gave a nod to his heritage. A rug, painstakingly woven by his grandmother, hung from one of the walls. Another rug, not crafted by his family, dominated the area near the fireplace.

In other rooms, he flicked a switch to ignite the gas fireplaces, but in this one, he obviously preferred to build it himself.

Even though she was stunned by his bad behavior, she couldn't help her fascination as she watched him. His shoulders were impossibly broad. Long black hair, as wild as he was, was cinched back with a thin strip of leather. And Lord, he had the hottest ass she'd ever seen, and a cock with plenty of potential.

Not that she'd actually seen it full-length.

But at night, when he thought she was asleep, he walked around the house in the buff.

Last night, his dick had been partially erect, and the darkened view had inspired her dreams and nearly made her forget her job.

Lucky for her, at least part of the time, she was required to have her hands on him. She just hadn't quite figured out how to professionally get him to take off all his clothes to touch his naked body.

Thunder cracked, and she worried about Nate. "I think you should at least invite him in until the storm passes." Even though it was summer, weather could be extreme at this elevation.

"You going to nag me?"

"Convince you to change your mind, using my excellent powers of verbal persuasion."

"Save your breath. Hawkeye doesn't need to squander its resources on me."

Hawkeye Security. The company they all worked for was named after the man who'd founded it, a man she, and most others, had never met. Wolf, she'd heard, was one of his closest advisors.

With their highly trained men and women, Hawkeye provided world-renowned protection. They recruited former Special Forces operators, ex-cops, bodyguards, lots of IT people, and other brainiacs, including some who worked remotely out of small, private offices. The higher the stakes, the likelier it was that Hawkeye would be the firm of choice.

Her teammates were the best in the world. She was proud to be one of them. “Hawkeye brought me in as well,” she reminded him. “Maybe he would go to these extraordinary lengths for any one of us, but maybe he wouldn’t. All I can say is he obviously considers you important.”

Stone struck a match, filling the room with the sharpness of sulfur. “My mind is made up.”

“But—”

“I told Hawkeye not to send anyone. I meant it.”

“You can have a heart, just until the weather clears. Then you can go back to your regularly scheduled...” She stopped short of saying assholeishness. “Grumpiness.”

His mouth was set, brooking no argument. “Let it be.”

Huge splatters of rain hit the floor-to-ceiling windowpanes.

Wolf might be able to sleep at night if he left his comrade out there, but she would toss and turn with worry.

Decision made, Kayla crossed to the hallway closet, pulled open the gigantic golden oak doors, and took out a raincoat. She also grabbed her gun and checked it before tucking it into her waistband. She snatched up a pair of compact binoculars and a compass and was shoving her arms in the sleeves of the yellow slicker as she walked through the great room on the way to the back door.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Exactly what you said. I’m saving my breath.” Kayla spared him a glance. “I decided not to argue with you.”

“Stop right there.”

He spoke softly, but his voice snapped with whiplash force. Despite herself, she froze. She’d faced untold danger, but this man, unarmed, unnerved her. A funny little knot formed in the pit of her stomach.

Kindling crackled as fire gnawed its edges.

“Turn around.” His voice was terrifying in its quietness. “Look at me, Fagan.”

Struggling not to show the way she was trembling, she turned.

He stood. “I will be very clear, Ms. Fagan. You are here at my pleasure.” He took a single step toward her. “I will not be disobeyed.”

His statement was loaded with threat.

Wildly she thought of the room in the basement, the one with crops and paddles hanging from the walls. The one she’d been forbidden to enter, and the door she’d opened the first time he’d left the house.

She locked her knees so she didn’t waver. “I’ve never been much for obedience.”

“Nathaniel Davidson is far from helpless.”

“He’s a fellow member of Hawkeye. I’m not allowed to leave him out there. And I won’t.” She met his gaze and ignored the fury blazing there. “Really, Mr. Stone, I don’t care if it gets me fired.” *Or worse.* She pivoted and walked away.

The wind whipped at the door, nearly snatching it from her hand.

She turned up the collar of her ineffective raincoat. There was never anything friendly about a Rocky Mountain storm.

She’d grown up in Tucson where torrential rains were common during the monsoon season. They cooled the weather to bearable seventy-degree temperatures, but this—it was freaking like winter.

Fortunately, she didn’t have far to trudge. From her conversations with headquarters, she had a pretty good idea of where the insertion was supposed to happen. And in less than fifteen minutes, the ground beneath her sizzling with electrical ferociousness, she saw a streak of orange.

She grinned.

Members of her team were smart. Nate had donned a reflective safety vest. That would, at least, stop friendly fire.

“Davidson!” When she got no response, she called out a second time.

He started toward her. “Come to rescue me, have you?” he shouted above the roar of the wind. “Bet Stone told you to come.”

“He sends his regards and invites you to sit next to the fire while he pours you a cognac.”

Nate laughed. “How much trouble are you in for coming after me?”

“He didn’t threaten to flay the skin from my hide.”

“Doesn’t mean he won’t.”

“Thanks. That’s a comforting thought.”

“He doesn’t know?”

“Who I am? No.” She shook her head. “He thinks Hawkeye sent him a physical therapist.”

Nate grinned. “Do you know enough about that to do no harm, doc?”

“Uh... I watched a special on the internet.”

Thunder crashed.

“I ought to write both of you up.”

Wolf. Her breath threatened to choke her. How much had he overheard? It shouldn’t have surprised her that he’d followed, that he’d effortlessly covered the same ground she had in far less time. The man was in shape, and he kept himself sharp.

Over the lash of the summer storm, his voice laden with command, he said, “Both of you, back to the house.”

DISCOVER COME TO ME

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I invite you to be the very first to know all the news by subscribing to my very special **VIP Reader newsletter**! You'll find exclusive excerpts, bonus reads, and insider information.

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Sierra's Super Stars

And for a current booklist, please visit my **website**.

USA Today bestselling author Sierra Cartwright was born in England, and she spent her early childhood traipsing through castles and dreaming of happily-ever afters. She has two wonderful kids and four amazing grand-kitties. She now calls Galveston, Texas home and loves to connect with her readers. Please do drop her a note.



ALSO BY SIERRA CARTWRIGHT

Titans

Sexiest Billionaire
Billionaire's Matchmaker
Billionaire's Christmas
Determined Billionaire
Scandalous Billionaire
Ruthless Billionaire

Titans Quarter

His to Claim
His to Love
His to Cherish

Titans Quarter Holidays

His Christmas Gift
His Christmas Wish

Titans Sin City

Hard Hand
Slow Burn
All-In

Titans: Reserve

Tease Me

Titans Captivated

Theirs to Hold
Theirs to Love
Theirs to Wed

Hawkeye

Come to Me
Trust in Me
Meant For Me
Hold On To Me
Believe in Me

Hawkeye: Denver

Initiation
Temptation
Determination

Bonds

Crave
Claim
Command

Donovan Dynasty

Bind
Brand
Boss

Mastered

With This Collar
On His Terms
Over The Line
In His Cuffs
For The Sub
In The Den

Collections

Titans Series

Titans Billionaires: Firsts
Titans Billionaires: Volume 1
Billionaires' Quarter: Titans Quarter Boxset
Risking It All: Titans Sin City Boxset

Hawkeye Series

Here for Me: Volume One
Beg For Me: Volume Two