

A romantic couple in a wedding scene. The woman, with blonde hair, is wearing a dark strapless dress and looking over her shoulder. The man, in a tuxedo, is leaning in to kiss her cheek. The background is softly lit with warm, golden light, suggesting an indoor wedding reception.

*Blaze®*

# THE HONEYMOON THAT WASN'T

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DEBBI RAWLINS



Debbi Rawlins

**The Honeymoon That Wasn't**

«HarperCollins»

## **Rawlins D.**

The Honeymoon That Wasn't / D. Rawlins — «HarperCollins»,

Hijack another couple's honeymoon? Manhattan lawyer Dakota Shea can't believe she's done just that—and with someone like Tony San Angelo. Not that she's a snob, but let's face it, blue-collar Tony is, well, blue collar. And as much as she hates to admit it, he'd never fit into her world. Still, Dakota wants wild, mindless sex. One night. Maybe two. And she's pretty certain Tony is willing to agree to her terms. So who could have guessed that the surf, the sunsets and those incredible steamy nights would tempt her to make it all legal?

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**“I’m serious. Guys at my club spend hours there  
and they don’t look nearly as good as you.”**

Tony scoffed at Dakota’s remark. “Too much sitting behind desks. All they need to do is get off their backsides and do some manual work once in a while.”

Although there was nothing wrong with her backside, he thought, so round and firm, and her breasts... He had to look away.

“You don’t use weights?” she asked, shifting on the hotel bed, cupping a hand over his biceps, almost reverently following the curve of the muscle.

His ego shot up a notch. “I have a couple of dumbbells at home, mostly to help me loosen up. That’s it.”

She smiled at him. “We’re supposed to order room service for dinner.”

“Hungry?”

She reached for him. “Not for anything on the menu.”

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Dear Reader,

Some of you will recognize the heroine’s sister, Dallas, and her new husband, Eric, from *A Glimpse of Fire*.

In that book Tony San Angelo, our new hero, worked with Dallas. I enjoyed him so much that I knew he had to have his own book. Choosing a heroine for him was a no-brainer. Like they say, opposites attract. And Dakota sure is attracted to Tony. In fact, this steamy chemistry is infectious as they can’t keep their hands off each other.

I’ve always loved revisiting characters in my books.

Even secondary ones, who can be especially fun and outrageous. I hated parting with them all in *The Honeymoon That Wasn’t*, but hope you enjoy the read.

Warm wishes,

Debbi Rawlins

## **The Honeymoon that Wasn't**

### **Debbi Rawlins**



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Even after swearing she'd never move again, Debbi Rawlins recently relocated to central Utah with her husband, Karl, where she adopted Dugly, a half tabby–half Siamese cat, and a puppy named Maile. When she's not writing she can be found feeding apples to the deer, who are too numerous to name. So she calls them all Piggy.

This is for Logan, the newest addition to our extended family. The cutest baby in the world.



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## Prologue

To: The Gang at Eve's Apple  
From: LegallyNuts@EvesApple.com  
Subject: Insanity

I'm not sure why I'm writing to you guys. Besides the fact that it's three in the morning and I can't sleep. I know the reason for the insomnia, which doesn't help one bit. Tomorrow night, no, <sigh> I guess technically tonight, is my sister's wedding rehearsal dinner. That part's great. She's met this terrific guy and I'm really happy for her.

The problem is that I'll see Tony again. A friend of my sister's. He's part of the wedding party. I met him only once, almost a year ago at the job site where they worked. He was wearing a tight white T-shirt and, my, oh, my, what a chest.

He's tall, too, at least six feet, broad shoulders, dark wavy hair, chocolate-brown eyes and a kind of square jaw. You get the picture. The guy is hot.

So why am I dreading tonight like I would a trip to the dentist? But I'm also looking forward to it. Does that make sense? If so, explain it to me, would you?

Oh, by the way, I'm not new to the group but I've been lurking for a while. To be honest, I never thought I'd post anything. Too busy. And besides, it's not my style. Or so I thought. This guy has my brain going in circles.

Frankly, if I were by myself and met him at a bar, it would be a no-brainer. I'm not into one-night stands though for him I'd make an exception. But that he knows my sister, and will be meeting my parents and brother tonight, complicates everything. I'm definitely not interested in anything long-term. Anyway, he's not someone who's in the game plan. No one is, really. I've been lucky. My career is taking off. A social life? What's that?

I'm a lawyer and due in court in six hours. I'm so tired. I truly wish I could sleep. But that's not going to happen. And now I'm rambling. Enough. If anyone is out there with some advice or even to confirm that I'm totally out of my mind, I'd appreciate it.

Thanks for reading this.

D

DAKOTA STARED at her laptop's screen for a moment. She was tempted to erase the e-mail. Writing it had been therapeutic—she didn't need to send it. Nor did she really need a reply. Nothing anyone could write would make her act on her impulse to spend a carte blanche night with Tony. She was too chicken to do anything like that. Not to mention that her family knew him. Or they would by tonight.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. What did she have to lose? If she were to get a response, at least it would be something to do since she couldn't sleep anyway. Besides, what would it hurt to get some feedback? She pressed the send button before she could change her mind again.

After setting the laptop on her nightstand, she got rid of one of the pillows she'd stacked behind her back and plumped the remaining one before sliding down, cradling her head in it and staring at the shadowy ceiling.

How totally bizarre was it to e-mail a bunch of women she didn't know—well, in a way she knew them. After hours and hours of reading their uncensored, heartfelt outpourings, she knew them, all right. Maybe even better than their friends and family.

Sheer genius had inspired the concept for the Eve's Apple Web site. Membership was simple. If there's a guy you're hot after you qualify. Not the right guy, in fact, more likely the one you absolutely wouldn't take home to Daddy. But he's also the guy you can't stop thinking about. You know you have to have him just so that life can get back on track. So that you could eventually settle down with Mr. Right and not have to wonder. Posting was like going to a twelve-step meeting. Anonymous

so you could really vent, and everyone there really got it. They shared experiences, and gave advice when asked. Kind of like free therapy.

Odd how she could put it all out there for these strangers, but not talk to Dallas about Tony. Not that her sister would disapprove. On the contrary, she'd likely urge Dakota to go for it. But that was the difference between them. Dallas did whatever she wanted. Family expectations meant little to her. Not Dakota. Always the good girl, she'd even followed in her father's and brother's footsteps.

But it wasn't a sacrifice. She loved the law. In fact, she adored everything about her job. Dakota Shea for the defense, Your Honor—was her favorite expression. She wouldn't change any of it. Her social life, on the other hand, was a joke. If she could even call having a drink once every other week at the local lawyers' hangout a social life. Oh, and dinner at her parents' Tarrytown house one Saturday a month.

She closed her eyes, praying for sleep. When it wouldn't come, she tried thinking about work, mentally preparing herself for her court appearance in a few hours. But the distraction only lasted a few minutes before her thoughts drifted back to tonight. Back to Tony.

Groaning, she rolled over onto her side and grabbed the pillow she'd discarded. Comfortably sitting up again, she placed her laptop in front of her. She turned it on and saw she had a new e-mail. Good God, someone from Eve's Apple had already replied.

To: LegallyNuts@EvesApple.com

From: BabyBlu@EvesApple.com

Subject: Losing it

Hey, D, just read your post. Yeah, I'm an insomniac, too. And we share another similar problem. A guy. Go figure. While it's not too late for you though, I've already blown my chance.

You see, I was once exactly where you are. Worried about my career, worried about what my parents thought (I'm Jewish, he isn't), worried about having all the right accoutrements to my upwardly mobile life.

Dakota stopped reading. Similar problem? Where had this woman—Dakota glanced down at the name—Carson, gotten all this crap? Rather large assumption. Dakota hadn't mentioned anything of this nature. None of it applied. Not really. Okay, so maybe her parents were an issue, to the extent that they'd had a vision for her early on, encouraging her to study law and now strongly hoped that she'd eventually become a judge. Just a minor issue. It wasn't as if she allowed them to govern her life. Sure, she relished their approval but what child didn't?

As far as her career went, well, she was sufficiently secure. No worries there. Not that she wanted to test the waters... But that didn't mean she was anything like Carson.

Her gaze was drawn back to the e-mail. She couldn't help herself and resumed reading.

And to my parents' delight, I became wildly successful. Mainly thanks to the real estate boom, doncha know? Yep, I'm a realtor, commercial sales mostly—high end. And that's how I met Larry. He was a finish carpenter working on one of the buildings I was showing to a client.

Dakota abruptly stopped reading. A carpenter? That was creepy. Tony wasn't a carpenter but a construction worker. Close enough. Professional woman meets blue-collar guy. Sounded like one of those awful talk shows on television with everyone screaming at each other.

She shuddered. Fatigue was really doing a number on her imagination. She left the rest of the e-mail unread and then skimmed a couple more that had popped up, both encouraging her to go for it. Then she signed off. She needed sleep. Not just for her court appearance, but to get through this evening. Without making an ass out of herself.

# 1

“SHE’S GOING TO BE LATE.”

Tony San Angelo looked at his friend Dallas. “Who?”

She smiled and sipped her martini. “Dakota’s always late on Friday nights. Too much happening at the office.”

“Hey, you’re getting married. It’s a big thing. She can’t make it to her only sister’s rehearsal dinner on time?”

“As long as she’s not late to the church tomorrow, I don’t care.” She elbowed him. “Relax. She’ll be here.”

“Like I care.”

“Uh-huh.” Dallas took another sip, trying to hide her smile.

“Nice place,” he said, pretending interest in the private dining room of the swank Manhattan restaurant. Hadn’t Dallas already told him he had zero chance with her sister? Not that he believed that. “I hope you and Eric didn’t have to spring for this little soiree.”

“Eric insisted on it because my parents are paying for the wedding. My father did try to argue because Eric’s parents are gone. Yada, yada. You know how all that male posturing goes.”

“What are you looking at me like that for?”

She grinned.

“Hey, I’m wounded.”

“Kidding,” she quipped. “You’re the least macho guy I know.”

“Ah, man. Now I’m irreparably wounded.”

“Okay, I’ll try this again. You’re macho without the macho mind-set. Better?”

“Hey, hey, break it up. People are talking.” Eric joined them and clapped Tony on the arm. “Good to see you.”

“I wouldn’t miss this. Our little Dallas getting married. Hope you plan on keeping her barefoot and pregnant.”

She socked him in the arm.

Eric chuckled. “Now, now, children.”

Tony liked him. Great guy for Dallas, even if he was a suit who worked off Madison Avenue.

A waiter came in, and said something to Dallas’s father. He nodded and then called for everyone’s attention, giving them a two-minute warning before dinner would be served.

The rest of the bridal party was already there, nibbling on shrimp and imported cheeses, and guzzling drinks, all the really premium stuff. Even Dallas’s snobby brother had made it on time, and he was one of the head honchos at the law firm where Dakota worked.

Tony drained his beer, the trusty domestic kind, and sat at the far end of the long, elegantly set table. The seat gave him an excellent view of the door, not that he was that anxious to see Dakota again. Okay, maybe he was. The woman was totally beautiful. Light brown hair, gray-blue eyes, incredible legs. But his strategy had more to do with keeping his distance from the senior Sheas.

Dallas’s parents had been cordial enough, but that didn’t mean he’d like to make small talk with them. They were different, too serious in his opinion; both scholars, he a judge, she a professor. Tony was strictly blue-collar. A college dropout. No regrets. He liked his no-headache job, liked living life on his own terms, not getting calls in the middle of the night like his pop did.

Nancy sat next to him. She was the only other person here he knew besides Dallas because they’d all worked on the same construction crew at one time.

At first he thought Nancy had bumped his knee by mistake when she scooted her chair closer to the table, but then she did it again. He looked over at her.

“Why do we have so many forks?” she murmured, her lips barely moving.

“Beats me. But I know you’re supposed to work from the outside in.”

“Okay.” She dubiously glanced around at everyone else and, mimicking them, placed her white linen napkin on her lap.

“The hell with it, I’m eating with my fingers.”

Her stricken gaze flew to him.

“That was a joke.”

She gave him a reproachful look, and then smiled at the white-gloved waiter as he set her Caesar salad in front of her.

Tony sighed. That was the trouble with these high-class places. You couldn’t relax. Have fun. Of course he’d keep his opinion to himself. He’d never hurt Dallas. This wasn’t just her wedding—these were her people.

His attention strayed to the door. Still no Dakota. No one seemed concerned. Not even Mr. and Mrs. Shea. In fact, from what Dallas had told him, they probably approved that she put work ahead of everything else.

Man, he didn’t understand these people. His parents would’ve given him or any of his three siblings a lecture right then and there. In front of everyone. The deal had always been, if the kids were willing to screw up in public, then they got reprimanded likewise. Even though none of them were kids anymore.

While being on time for a party in the San Angelo family was never a problem. When his older sister had gotten married the party had started two days before the wedding and didn’t end until three the morning after the reception.

The salad plates were cleared and the rack of lamb was just being served when Dakota showed up. Still dressed in her navy-blue power suit, she had her hair pulled back in an awful, matronly style. Nancy and the other bridesmaid were all gussied up, Dallas more causally elegant in a simple cream-colored silk dress.

Dakota looked directly at him, and he smiled. Her gaze fluttered away and his smile broadened.

“I’ve never had lamb before,” Nancy whispered. “Have you?”

“Yeah.” He briefly glanced over to see her skeptically staring at her plate, and then his attention went right back to Dakota.

She took the vacant seat Dallas had saved next to her, and damned if Dakota didn’t slide him another look.

“Tony?”

“What?”

Nancy made a face. “Are you listening to me?”

“What did you say?”

“I want to know what this green stuff is. It looks like jelly.”

“It is. Mint jelly. It goes with the lamb.”

“Right.” Nancy snorted. “Come on. If you don’t know just—what are you looking at?” Until Nancy followed his gaze, he hadn’t realized he’d been staring. “Oh, Dakota’s here.” She waved excitedly, and Dakota waved back.

Only at Nancy. Not at him. Good sign.

He smiled, thinking about the first day they’d met. The only day they’d met. She’d appeared at the job site to see Dallas. It was love at first sight for him. Okay, more like lust. Dallas had noticed his interest. Told him to forget it. But the eye contact he’d made with Dakota told him otherwise. If it had lasted one second less, it would have been a different story. And when she got to the end of the block and turned around, he knew.

“How do you know her?” he asked Nancy.

“Well, duh. She’s the one who helped us with all our legal stuff to scare Capshaw into taking our harassment complaints seriously. For free, too.”

Tony’s gaze returned to Dakota. A woman full of surprises. He thought she’d be too busy to help a group of women fight discrimination against the state’s second largest construction company.

“You haven’t met her.” Nancy leaned closer, eyeballing him with far too much interest. “Have you?”

“Why?”

“Have you?” She darted a look at Dakota, probably wondering why she hadn’t acknowledged Tony. Nancy seemed to arrive at her own conclusion, judging by the smirk on her face as she settled back in her chair. “She shot you down.”

“What?”

“There’s actually a woman in this city who isn’t gaga over you.”

“Get out.” He grabbed his beer and took a deep pull.

“Tell me you don’t know that all the women at work are in heat over you.”

“Yeah, right. Especially Jan.”

Nancy rolled her eyes. “I meant the straight ones. So what happened?”

“I met her once for about forty seconds.”

“You must be slipping.” She grinned. “It usually takes only ten for women to start getting stupid over you.”

“That how long it took you?”

Her grin disappeared and her cheeks got pink. He knew that would shut her up. What he didn’t know was that he’d been the subject of gossip.,

Shit.

Hadn’t he been the only guy on the work crew who’d been willing to speak up on the women’s behalf? Although most of the other guys were guilty of the harassment management chose to ignore. Still, he could’ve kept his mouth shut. But he hadn’t. And now he wasn’t working for Capshaw Construction anymore.

Fine by him. Being discussed by a bunch of chatty women wasn’t.

Through the rest of dinner, he and Nancy didn’t speak much.

She was busy choosing forks and eating, and he was busy trying not to stare at Dakota. The woman really needed to smile more. She looked too damn serious. The way she wore her hair pulled back didn’t help.

All of a sudden, her gaze swept toward him, meeting his eyes dead-on. She locked into him for one long hypnotic moment, and then blinked and looked away.

Excitement thrummed through him. The awareness in her gray-blue eyes was like a vice around his neck, restricting air, making it hard to breathe. To say nothing of the effect she was having on him south of the border. The woman definitely had him by the balls. What did she intend to do with them?...was the question.

“DID MOTHER TALK to you about the photographer?” Dakota foolishly asked her sister, in a vain effort to keep her mind and eyes off Tony.

“No.” Dallas frowned, immediately setting down her wineglass. “What about him?”

“Oh, nothing. I mean she wants to make sure the wedding party knows they don’t have to stop at his studio before the reception.”

“Right,” Dallas said slowly, her frown deepening. “I knew that.”

“Good. Just checking.” Dakota gave her a weak smile and then finished off the rest of her chardonnay.

The corners of Dallas's mouth twitched and she glanced toward the far corner of the table. At Tony.

Damn.

Dakota clenched her teeth. Was she really that absurdly obvious? Probably. Her sister knew her better than anyone. Which also meant Dallas should understand that Tony was unquestionably the wrong kind of guy for her.

The thought struck like a bolt of lightning, coming from some dark void and stunning her. Shaming her. She glanced around worried that someone could read her ugly thoughts.

Her parents were chatting with Eric's friend Tom and his wife Serena, both of whom were in the wedding party. Nancy, a woman who'd worked with Dallas, and Dallas's roommate, Wendy, both sat on the other side of Eric.

And then there was Tony. Looking directly at her, his dark eyes sparkling in the mellow glow of the crystal chandelier. His lips curved slightly, and then he winked.

She lowered her gaze, removed the white linen napkin from her lap and brought it to her lips. Even though she'd yet to take a bite of her entree. The others were already being served dessert and coffee, and she could have easily skipped eating altogether except she didn't want to upset her mother.

Sighing, she picked up her fork and knife. At least while she ate she could politely ignore Tony. Dallas and Eric were tête-à-tête and Cody had vacated the seat to Dakota's left five minutes ago to make a phone call. Not that she had much to say to him. Being with her brother at the office for twelve hours a day was quite enough.

She slid a glance toward Tony. The chair next to Nancy was empty. Dakota jumped at the hand on her shoulder and swung her gaze around.

Tony grinned, his teeth brilliantly white against his tanned face. "Dakota, right? Dallas's sister?"

"Yes, we've met once before, haven't we?"

The corners of his mouth quirked up slightly and he gestured to Cody's vacant chair. "You mind?"

"Suit yourself." She cringed at the defensive lilt to her voice.

He didn't seem to notice, just lowered himself into the chair, mindless of the way his thigh brushed hers. How when he angled toward her, his knee touched her knee. When he stretched his arm along the back of her chair and leaned close, her heart nearly exploded through her chest.

"I have a question."

"Yes?" She inched back to look at him without coming nose to nose. Bad enough his warm sweet breath managed to caress her chin. God, he had such thick dark lashes. So not fair. And his smile as he got closer...

"It's kind of personal."

She swallowed. What could he possibly—

"Ah, Tony." Dallas leaned over. "Glad you decided to slum it."

"Right." They exchanged the look of longtime friends.

"You remember Dakota," Dallas said, the impish gleam in her eyes all too familiar.

"Yeah, we were just getting reacquainted until you butted in."

Dallas laughed. "So charming, isn't he?" She glanced briefly at Dakota and then turned a more serious expression toward Tony. "I need to talk to you before you disappear tonight."

"Disappear?" He grinned at Dakota. "My motor is just getting revved."

She tried to keep a straight face. Tried not to look around to see if anyone heard. Especially not her mother. She picked the napkin off her lap again and pushed back her chair. "Excuse me, please. I have to make a phone call."

"Something I said?" Tony asked, his amused dark eyes watching her rise, lingering briefly on her breasts. Not long enough to be rude, but long enough to make her feel as if she were twelve

again, awkward, nervous and wanting to suddenly disappear rather than face her parents' reaction, her mother's accusing eyes because Dakota had put herself on display.

She dropped the napkin over her plate and pushed in her chair.

"Aren't you going to finish your dinner?" Tony couldn't quite keep his amusement in check. "No dessert unless you clean your plate."

She ignored him and addressed Dallas. "You two go ahead and have your talk."

"Come on, Dakota. You just got here. Besides, I need to talk to you, too." Dallas gave her a pleading look that almost had her caving. After all, tomorrow was Dallas's big day....

As hard as it was to say no to her sister, Dakota shook her head and picked up her briefcase. Tony was headed someplace she didn't want to go. At least not here. Certainly not with an audience. "I'm leaving."

"I'll have them bring your bananas Foster."

"Think I'll pass." In spite of herself, Dakota glanced at Tony.

"Hmm, that's what you call that stuff. Some guy named Foster must have come up with it, huh?"

Dallas laughed.

Dakota couldn't tell if he was kidding or not.

"They're supposed to offer cognac and then we're done here," Dallas said, looking over her shoulder at the headwaiter, who'd already brought out the bottles of brandy. "So if you can't stay—"

"What?" Tony spread his hands. "No dancing?"

"Down, boy. That's tomorrow night," Dallas quipped. "As if you can dance."

"You talkin' to me?" Tony scoffed. "Do you have any idea who taught Travolta his moves for Saturday Night Fever?"

"What were you, about three?"

He shrugged, a grin curving his mouth. "I'm just saying..."

Dakota shook her head, a little envious of their easy camaraderie. "As I said, I'm leaving."

Tony stuck out his chin in acknowledgment. "See ya tomorrow."

"Right." Everyone at the table seemed preoccupied so she skipped a farewell and headed for the door.

"Don't be late," he added.

Dallas half groaned, half laughed.

Annoyed, Dakota stopped, but then thought better of turning around and calling attention to them. She kept walking, wondering how in the hell she'd ever found this man attractive.

WATCHING HER SISTER walk out in that ramrod straight I'd-better-get-out-of-here-before-I-kill-somebody posture Dallas knew too well, she sighed. "Why do you have to antagonize her?"

Tony dragged his gaze away from the empty doorway. "I think she likes me."

"You're impossible."

He smiled. "A little wine, a little tango tomorrow night..." He flattened a hand to his belly and made a swaying dance move. "She'll be ripe for the picking."

"Excuse me? We're talking about my sister here."

"Hey, I'm just talking about asking her out. Where's your mind at?"

She gave him a mock glare. Tony was a great guy. Perfect for Dakota if she'd give him a chance. But she wouldn't. Too many expectations blocked the way. Father wanted her to be a judge, and Cody, a senior partner at the law firm where Dakota worked, not only expected her to rake in the dough but attract high-end clients. Mother, well, she always expected too much of everyone.

"Seriously, Tony, I need a favor."

"Shoot."



She glanced over at Eric's friend to be sure he wasn't listening, and then leaned closer to Tony. "Remember how I met Eric. Through a prank his friend Tom pulled?"

"Yeah."

"We think he's up to something again. Like sabotaging our honeymoon."

"No way." Tony gave Tom a harsh look. "Not your honeymoon."

"You don't know Tom. He lives to create the perfect practical joke."

"Want me to talk to him?"

"No, no. I don't even want him to know we suspect anything. What I would like you to do is act as a decoy." Dallas felt Eric stirring behind her. Obviously he'd heard, or at least knew what she was doing. They'd discussed the ploy. He didn't agree with her interference. But of course he didn't understand the complexities of growing up a Shea.

"Decoy? How?"

"You can take a long weekend, right?"

"Uh, yeah," he said slowly.

"Ever been to Bermuda?"

Tony frowned in disbelief. "You're not saying—you're kidding."

"The plane leaves right after the reception. The hotel is already booked and paid for."

"Do you know how crazy this is?"

Eric's cheek touched hers as he leaned close enough for them to hear. "That's what I told her."

She elbowed him. "Be quiet."

"Just tell him you're going to Hawaii." Tony chuckled.

"He heard Eric making the arrangements but he doesn't know that we decided to go on a cruise instead. I want to keep it that way."

"This still sounds crazy. It's not like he's gonna follow you to Bermuda."

"Have I ever asked you for anything?"

"Wow, Dallas, go ahead and turn the screws, why don't you?"

"It's a free vacation, for goodness' sake."

"You realize there's one huge hole in this plan," Tony said, giving Eric that smug condescending male look she hated. "Don't two people normally go on a honeymoon?"

It was her turn to look smug. "Of course. That's why Dakota will be going with you."

Hell, why didn't she say that in the first place?

## 2

“I NOW PRONOUNCE YOU man and wife.”

Tony watched Dallas and Eric embrace, and then looked at Dakota. Her eyes were glassy, blinking rapidly, and her smile quivered slightly as she gazed at her sister.

Today was the first time he'd seen her with her hair down, longer than he'd expected, hanging just below her shoulders, light brown and full of honey-colored highlights. And really shiny. Outside he'd caught a glimpse of her entering the chapel, her hair a brilliant silky mass floating around her shoulders.

He was one of those suckers for women with long hair and Dakota was way up there on the perfect scale. His groin tightened, thinking about tomorrow, Dakota, a sunny beach, a skimpy bikini and all that hair.

Assuming she'd agreed to the plan. Dallas was supposed to have talked to her this morning. Him, he already had a small bag packed, waiting in his car to be transferred to the limo. Dallas didn't think there'd be a problem with Dakota, only that she might not want to stay the whole weekend. Just turn around and come back to Manhattan tonight. That's where he'd have some convincing to do.

She looked over at him just then and he smiled. Her lips curved ever so slightly. Ah, progress. But she gave up eye contact, her gaze going back to her sister as the cello music started, signaling them to leave the altar and start down the aisle. Dallas and Eric went first and then everyone else in the wedding party followed in no particular order. The men wore tuxedos and the women long dresses. The way Dakota filled out the dark red dress made it hard to keep his eyes on Dallas and Eric. The neckline wasn't too low but it showed off a tempting amount of pale satiny skin and a hint of cleavage. He was lucky enough to walk behind her, or maybe unlucky, because the gentle sway of her hips and the way the dress cupped her curvy backside got a reaction from him that he had trouble hiding.

They got outside and pews of friends and family followed, hugging, kissing cheeks, shaking hands, but not a single grain of rice was thrown. Probably not a custom at high-class weddings. When his sister had gotten married, his pop distributed a whole twenty-pound bag of rice. Made a special trip to Chinatown to get it.

“Okay, everyone.” After the initial commotion, the photographer motioned the wedding party to stand in front of one of the large stained-glass windows.

The Union Church of Pocantico Hills was really something. Even tourists stopped to see the stained-glass windows created by two modern artists, Matisse and Chagall. Not that Tony knew squat about either of them, but he'd read the literature put out for tourists. Today the place was off-limits on account of the wedding. The Sheas obviously had some major clout in Tarrytown.

Impressive circle of friends, too, who stood off to the side in their expensive suits and silk dresses and pearls. Tony recognized several faces from the legal community. Couldn't place their names. He'd seen them on the news or in the newspaper.

“Excuse me, sir. Stand here, please.” The tall, thin hawkish-looking photographer gestured for Tony to stand beside Dakota.

The guy didn't have to ask him twice. Tony sidled up beside her, their arms and hips touching, and inhaled her mysterious scent. Maybe he'd sniffed a little too enthusiastically because she gave him an annoyed look. Or maybe it was the touching part she didn't like.

“Dallas looks beautiful,” he whispered while the photographer got everyone else into place.

Dakota immediately softened. “And happy.”

“Is it gonna seem weird that she's married?”

“Not really.” She shrugged, her arm rubbing his. “Nothing will change.”

Tempted to ask about tonight's plan, he kept his mouth shut while the photographer finished positioning everyone. Tom stood too close to risk him hearing of the counterattack.

“Everyone ready?” The photographer clicked off two shots.

For the next twenty minutes, they were separated, pushed back together, coupled, shuffled from one stained-glass window to the next, the entire time the photographer muttering how difficult this was with everyone chatting and laughing.

Mrs. Shea stood back, commiserating, shaking her head and sliding her husband long-suffering looks. The honorable Judge Shea didn't seem to give a crap. Good for him.

Once the photographer was satisfied, or maybe because Dallas had whispered something to him, they disbanded and got into the waiting limos. The guests followed in their separate cars and everyone headed for the reception at the Shea's country club.

Tony was lucky enough to share a limo with Dakota. Too bad Nancy, Trudie and Wendy climbed in behind them. Could've been worse. He could've gotten stuck with Mr. and Mrs. Shea, and Cody and his snotty society date.

“Hey, how do you like being surrounded by all these women?” Wendy asked, while trying to get her long legs into a suitable position. She was a dancer, an extra on Broadway if he remembered correctly.

He stretched an arm out along the back of the seat and got comfortable, then gave her a cocky grin. “I can handle it.”

“I bet you can.” She gave him an inviting smile he wished Dakota had given him.

But she sat across from him with her face turned toward the window and didn't even react to what was going on.

Until Wendy said, “Hey, Dakota, I guess you're next.”

“Next?”

“To bite the dust.” Wendy grinned at Dakota's wide-eyed expression. “Tie the knot. Whatever they say these days.”

“Why me? You're older.”

“Ouch.”

Dakota grinned. “Shouldn't you be the one getting antsy? Watching that biological clock.”

“Ruthless, aren't you?”

Trudie laughed. “That's what makes her a good lawyer.”

Dakota's grin tapered off.

No one seemed to notice but Tony. They all kept teasing each other back and forth while Dakota shrank back against the seat. Good to know she was touchy about the lawyer thing. Not that he was stupid enough to repeat the jokes he'd heard. Okay, so maybe he would've let a couple slip, but now he knew.

“So is like everybody gonna stay dressed like this, or can we change?” Wendy asked as they turned off the street and onto the lush country club grounds.

“I don't know, but I was hoping somebody would ask.” Nancy looked to the others, and then focused on Dakota.

“I doubt Dallas cares one way or the other,” she said, “but we'd better wait until after dinner so the photographer can get the rest of the pictures.”

“Yeah, we don't want your mom freaking out.” Wendy tugged at her dress. “The same moron who invented high heels must have come up with this gem.”

“Fair is fair.” Tony couldn't resist. Not that he was particularly fond of ties. In fact, he hardly ever wore them—only when he absolutely had to.

Wendy smiled at him. “You are so damn cute. I can't believe Dallas kept you from us all these years.”

Heat crawled up Tony's neck. Thankfully he knew he wouldn't turn red. He didn't embarrass easily but Wendy was something else.

"Now that Dallas has ditched me, I'm looking for a roommate if you're interested." Wendy gave him an impish grin, shifting so that their legs touched.

"Hey, he's already taken," Nancy said, rubbing a familiar shoulder against his.

He gave her a sharp look. So did Dakota.

Nancy laughed. "My six-year-old thinks he's it. She lights up like the Fourth of July every time she sees him."

Tony reared his head back. "Megan's six already?"

"Yep, she had a birthday two months ago."

"Man, then I haven't seen her in almost a year."

"You should come by sometime." Nancy smiled. "It would make her day."

"Yeah, maybe next weekend. I owe her a teddy bear for her birthday."

Wendy spoke up. "Nanc, I didn't know you were married. I thought you were one of us." When she frowned, Wendy added, "You know, single."

"I'm divorced," Nancy replied. "Does that count?"

"Oh, yeah. Definitely." Wendy peered out the window at the impeccably manicured greens and small man-made lakes, stretching on for acres. "Wow, this place is awesome." She looked at Dakota. "Do you know if any Broadway people were invited?"

Dakota shrugged. "I don't think so."

"Just the boring legal types, huh?"

Trudie groaned and darted a look at Dakota. "Wendy, would you shut up?"

Dakota just laughed. "I know what you mean." She faked a yawn. "Bunch of long-winded, pontificating blowhards."

Everyone got quiet and stared at her.

Tilting her head to the side and smiling, Dakota added, "With a few exceptions, of course."

God, she was gorgeous. Tony just stared. He couldn't look away. With that soft smile on her peach-tinted lips, the way the late-afternoon sun filtered into the windows and lit her hair, she should have been spread out across a billboard. Wouldn't matter what product she peddled. Hell, even nail clippers. Any red-blooded guy would buy it.

Obviously he wasn't the only one with that opinion because Wendy said, "Jeez, Dakota, why aren't you modeling like Dallas?"

"I like what I do."

"You can practice law later. Make the easy bucks now while you still have the looks."

Trudie shook her head with disgust. Apparently she also noticed Dakota's defensive posture. "What part of keep quiet don't you understand?"

"Come on, Trudie, I'm just saying—"

"Hey, we're here. There's Dallas and Eric." Tony's timely interruption was met by a quick smile from Dakota. He winked back and she abruptly turned away, and he could've sworn her cheeks had started to pinken.

But she hid it while stepping out of the limo and leading them to the foyer to stand in the reception line where people were already waiting to congratulate the bride and groom.

Why the rest of the wedding party had to stand there was beyond him. Nobody cared if they were there or not. But now wasn't the time to question the tradition so he obediently positioned himself between Nancy and Trudie as Mrs. Shea instructed.

After more pictures were taken and everyone had had a crack at Dallas and Eric, the wedding party was finally allowed to enter the private dining room. More like a ballroom with tables and chairs for at least a hundred and fifty guests. Fresh flower arrangements, mostly orchids, were everywhere. Two bars were set up on either side of the room, manned by bartenders wearing tuxedos. He couldn't imagine how much this had set the Sheas back. Of course that kind of money was no sweat to them.

"Hey, where are the balloons?" he asked Dakota.

She gave him a weird look as if she hoped he was kidding but wasn't sure. And then surprised him by asking, "Do you want a drink?"

"Sure."

"Come on."

He followed as she led him around the guests who had already lined up in front of the bars. Several white-gloved waiters stood to the side and she whispered something to the short husky one who nodded and smiled ecstatically as if she'd just agreed to have his children.

Tony watched the guy abruptly turn around and then disappear through a side door that blended with the wall and had been invisible to Tony. "Where's he going?"

"To get our drinks."

"Ah." He nodded. "Come here often, do you?"

She arched a brow at him. "You want to wait in that line?"

"No, ma'am."

"All right then."

"Do we stay right here and wait or is there a rendezvous point?"

A smile tugged at her lips. "Don't worry. You won't get mobbed. This is a very civil bunch. They'll only complain to management."

"That I can handle. By the way, tell me you didn't order me champagne."

"I didn't order you champagne."

"Not to sound ungrateful."

"Uh-huh."

The waiter reappeared holding a small tray in one hand, and used the other to hand Dakota a glass of white wine and Tony a bottle of beer, his usual. Without a glass, too. Obviously she'd noticed what he was drinking last night.

The weekend was starting to look up.

Maybe she planned on taking Dallas up on her offer of a free minivacation with him. Before bringing it up, he glanced over his shoulder to make sure Tom wasn't around. No, but Wendy was headed their way.

Damn.

The only consolation was that Dakota looked just as disappointed.

Her red hair windblown, Wendy smelled faintly of tobacco as she approached. She looked from the glasses in their hands to the increasingly long line at the bar. "Where did you get the drinks?"

Dakota gestured vaguely over her shoulder. "A waiter was walking around with a tray."

"Cool." Wendy wandered off in the direction Dakota had sent her.

Tony chuckled.

"I didn't lie."

He didn't care. She'd gotten rid of Wendy. That's what counted. Not that he didn't like Wendy, but he wanted Dakota to himself. He wanted to lose himself in those sexy gray-blue eyes, and bask in the anticipation of tonight. Miles away from here. Alone. Nothing to do but get to know one another. Spend long leisurely hours of exploring each other's bodies.

That line of thinking had to stop. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, trying to stop the blood from rushing south. He took a healthy gulp of icy cold beer and then met Dakota's amused eyes.

Dakota smiled and took another sip, her lashes long and thick resting on her cheeks. She barely wore any makeup, didn't have to. Her features were almost perfect. High cheekbones, a pert nose, full lips, her skin so flawless it was almost translucent. Her eyes were smaller than Dallas's, more gray than blue and deeper set, but she was every bit as gorgeous.

Man, he'd like to see the faces of everyone the first time she walked into a courtroom. Not the typical lawyer, that's for sure. Unless she always dressed for work the way she had last night, conservative and drab.

A trio of violinists in the corner started playing elevator music, but at least they kept it low-key. Up front there were two stages, one slightly elevated with band equipment and the other a parquet dance floor.

"Uh-oh." Tony saw Mrs. Shea heading toward them with obvious purpose. "I think we're about to be summoned."

Dakota looked over her shoulder, immediately tensing. "I have a feeling she wants me."

Interesting how tense she got at the mention of her mother. He knew a little bit from Dallas about the formidable Mrs. Shea, prominent college professor and demanding mother. The woman had done one really good thing for her girls. She'd encouraged them to go for an education instead of trade on their extraordinary looks. Had to give her credit for that.

Dakota sighed. "I'd better go see what she wants."

"I have a better idea. Let's take a walk."

She looked at him, the disbelief in her eyes slowly fading to uncertainty. "We just got here."

"So. Do you want to ditch her or not?"

Her lips parted in indignation, but a flicker of excitement sparked in her eyes. She briefly glanced over her shoulder again, caught her mother gaining on them and said, "Let's go."

### 3

DAKOTA LED Tony out of the banquet room to a side patio, knowing she'd pay hell for the disappearing act. In fact, she wouldn't put it past her mother to hunt them down. Except it was getting cold outside, with nothing on the fairway to block the biting wind, enough that it might insure them some privacy.

She swallowed. Was that what she wanted? To be out here alone with him? This was foolish. She knew how it would turn out. They wouldn't just talk. Facing him, she smiled. "Bad idea. It's a little too cool."

"Here." He shrugged out of his jacket, the white dress shirt straining against his broad chest. "Put this on."

"No, really, that's okay. Then you'll be cold. Let's go back—"

He slipped the jacket over her shoulders, and then turned her to face him. Unfortunately, she couldn't see his expression. The patio was very dimly lit by a pale blue glow, courtesy of the parade of solar lights staked along the perimeter. The thought infused her with a dangerous excitement that made her nipples tighten and her resolve weaken.

"This should keep you warm." He pulled the lapels together and she stumbled toward him, steadying herself with her palms against his chest.

"Sorry," she whispered and straightened, reluctantly letting her hands fall away.

He released the lapels and cupped her shoulders, then ran his palms down her arms. "You smell good."

She shivered when his warm breath fanned her cheek, and he took her cold hands, sandwiching them between his slightly callused ones. She'd never been with a man with work-roughened hands. How would they feel touching the tenderest part of her body? Stroking the area around her nipples? The soft skin between her thighs?

He lowered his head and her breath caught when his lips brushed hers. But only briefly before he whispered, "I can't wait for later."

"Later?"

The sound of the French doors opening had them guiltily jumping apart. Thankfully it was Dallas, the long white gown obvious even in the dim light.

"Hey, you guys, dinner is going to be served in twenty minutes."

Dakota sighed. "You came out here to tell us that?"

"Better me than Mother. Anyway, Dakota, I need to talk to you."

"Now?"

"Yep. Sorry, Tony. I need her for five minutes."

He gestured with his hand. "I'll see you inside."

"Here's your jacket," Dakota said, pushing it off her shoulders and then handing it to him.

"Keep it while you're outside."

"I'm not staying out here. It's cold."

"Trust me," Dallas said, "it would be better if we talked out here."

Dakota didn't like the sound of that. Even Tony frowned as he tried to give her back his jacket. She shook her head. "I'm okay."

After shooting Dallas a curious look, he left them alone. Dakota was pretty curious herself. "What's going on?"

"I have a favor to ask of you."

"Okay."

"It's kind of big, but I really, really need you to do this for me," Dallas said. "Okay?"

"Well, what is it?"

“Promise me you’ll do it first.”

Dakota snorted. “Right.”

“Come on, Dakota, have I ever asked you for anything? You’re my sister. It’s my wedding, and I need this favor badly.”

“What already?” She waited, but Dallas’s chin stubbornly went up, and the truth was Dakota would never refuse her sister anything. “All right. I promise.”

“I need you to play decoy for me tonight after the reception.”

“Why?”

“You know how Eric’s friend Tom likes to play practical jokes. We’re pretty sure he’s going to try and sabotage our honeymoon.”

Dakota shook her head at her sister’s paranoia. “He wouldn’t do something so juvenile.”

“He’d think it was hilarious. I know him, and you need to help me out.” Dallas rubbed her bare arms. “It is cold out here.”

“So you want me to do what exactly?” Dakota asked as her sister linked an arm through hers and steered her toward the entry into the banquet room.

Dallas opened the door and the light inside illuminated her smile. “Go on my honeymoon for me. With Tony.”

DAMN THAT Dallas. As soon as they got inside someone called to her sister and she was off with no further explanation other than she’d already packed a bag for Dakota. As if the matter were settled.

Dakota headed straight for the bathroom, her thoughts spinning so quickly she literally felt dizzy. Or maybe it was the excitement of what lay ahead? The whole idea was crazy. And perfect. A weekend with Tony? She couldn’t have come up with a better plan herself. Except she had a lot going on at work, and it wasn’t as if she could just not show up on Monday.

Two older women, colleagues of her mother whom she vaguely knew, stood at the mirror talking and applying lipstick. Dakota smiled at them and then hurried into a stall, put the seat down and sat on the john. She hadn’t even asked her sister if Tony knew about the plan and if he’d agreed to go. Is that what he’d meant by “later”? She straightened. If he’d known about this before she had that would really tick her off.

She took a deep breath. Dallas had purposely waited to tell her. Just so she wouldn’t have time to come up with an excuse not to go. She was a coward. She admitted it.

Dallas was the independent one. She did as she pleased. Dakota, however, was the good little lamb. Always doing what she was told.

She still didn’t like it that Dallas had conspired with Tony. For that reason alone she ought to tell her sister to find some other flunky. Yeah, right. Like she wasn’t ready to leave the reception right now, get him alone and rip off his clothes.

Feeling a little flushed, she bent over, crossing her arms over her knees and breathing deeply. She was crazy for even considering doing this. But she’d be even crazier for refusing the opportunity. The ladies’ room door opened and she heard someone murmur about dinner starting. She had to go or someone would surely come looking for her.

Straightening, she smoothed back her hair, and then checked the front of her dress. Smiling, she stood, ready for the games to begin. She’d go but that didn’t mean she’d go easily.

“Guess what Mother wants.” Dallas met her partway.

Tony followed Dallas, who gave him an exasperated look.

Dakota sensed an undercurrent but they didn’t seem angry with each other. “What?”

“To change the seating.”

“I would’ve guessed that.”

Dallas snorted. “I’m having the big formal wedding like she wanted, and I kept my mouth shut when she invited half the legal and academic communities, most of whom I don’t know. But that’s it.”



"Calm down." Tony slipped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed lightly. "That's one of the first rules of weddings. Mothers get to show off their kids and put their husbands in the poorhouse. Just ask my pop."

Dallas rolled her eyes. "Gee, if I'd known that was a rule I wouldn't have gotten upset."

"Now you know."

Sighing, she smiled and kissed Tony on the cheek. "Entertain my sister, okay?"

"I don't need entertaining," Dakota said, but Dallas had already flitted over to another couple Dakota didn't recognize. She turned toward Tony. "I don't—"

"I know." His mouth curved in a sexy grin that made her heart skip a beat. "So entertain me instead."

"BETTER TAKE IT EASY with that stuff." Tony eyed the brandy snifter in Dakota's hand, her second cognac as far as he could tell. And that was after several glasses of wine with dinner. A different variety was served with each course. Him, he stuck to his beer. Two glasses of wine and he'd be kissing the floor. For some reason, the stuff really got to him.

"One mother is all I can handle, thank you very much." She took a deliberate sip, smiled and said, "I'm fine. Really."

"Okay," he said without conviction. The fact that she'd said that a little too loudly was proof enough she better give the booze a rest.

Although he had to admit she wasn't sloppy. If he hadn't been sitting next to her at dinner he wouldn't have known she'd had that much wine. Plus each course had been spaced out so that dinner had ended up being the longest, most quiet meal in history. At least for his family. When the San Angelos got together for a party, talking, eating and dancing were not mutually exclusive.

They'd finally finished dessert a half hour ago, and people had started dancing the moment the band struck the first note. He wanted to ask Dakota to dance but the song had to be just the right one. Despite his mouthing off, he wasn't all that swift on the dance floor. The beat had to be slow and easy so he didn't have to think too much about what his feet were doing.

He'd skip the idea altogether, but the way Mrs. Shea had been giving him the eye, he figured dancing with Dakota would be the only way he'd get close to her. Dallas and Eric were already out there and so were Trudie and Wendy who'd pulled Tom along with them. At the end of the table, Serena and Nancy seemed deep in conversation.

The song ended and the band eased into another, slower, moodier one he could handle. He turned to Dakota but her father beat him to it.

Mr. Shea was taking her by the hand. "Hope you saved a dance for your old man," he said, smiling fondly at his daughter.

"Save a dance? No one's asked me yet," she said, with a teasing smile at Tony as she set down her brandy.

"My mistake." He met her eyes. "I claim the next one."

Laughing, she got to her feet and allowed her father to lead her to the dance floor. The way that dress hugged her curves bordered on illegal. Her hips moved with a little extra enthusiasm almost as if for his benefit. Hard not to stare, but he sensed someone over his shoulder and looked up.

"Mind if I sit with you for a moment?" Mrs. Shea didn't wait for an answer. She lowered herself gracefully into Dakota's chair.

"Gee, here I thought you were going to ask me to dance."

She smiled and gazed out toward the dance floor. "Everyone seems to be having a good time."

"Yes, ma'am. Free liquor does it every time."

Annoyance flickered in her eyes. One blink and it was gone.

He tried not to smile and sipped his beer.

"Didn't you like the wine we selected?"

"I'm sure it was just fine. I prefer beer."

“Ah.” She turned again to watch the dancers.

The woman hardly looked as if she could have three adult children. Tall, blond and trim, she didn't look much over forty. In fact, she could've passed for Dallas and Dakota's sister.

She caught him staring.

Tony coughed. “I was just thinking how you look more like your daughters' sister. They'll be lucky to look like you in twenty years,” he said and meant it. She was a very attractive woman.

She looked annoyed again, her pinched expression adding a decade to her face. “Looks hardly make the person.”

“Couldn't agree more.” Tony took another sip of beer to avoid saying something sarcastic. Like her being a perfect example.

“Take Dakota.” Mrs. Shea's gaze went to her daughter. “She could have had a successful modeling career. But she was smart enough to realize the foolhardiness of such a move. Wisely she chose to further her education, secure her future.” She looked at him then, steadily meeting his gaze. “Did you know she's got a good shot at a judgeship?”

“Yeah, I heard something about it from Dallas. The thing I don't understand is that she's only been out of law school for what—three, four years? I'm sure she's really bright and I don't know how the system works but isn't that kind of fast?” He smiled and brought his beer to his lips. “But then again your husband probably has connections if that's what you two want for Dakota,” he said before taking a long pull.

He had to give the woman credit for keeping a straight face. Maybe she should've been the attorney. The only sign that he'd dented her composure was that it took her a few moments to come back with, “Where did you attend college, Mr. San Angelo?”

“NYU. And call me Tony.” He enjoyed the surprise on her face. Probably figured he hadn't made it through high school. Yet she wouldn't be disappointed for long.

“What was your degree in?”

Ah, well, the fun lasted all of thirty seconds. “I dropped out the middle of my sophomore year.”

Her eyebrows went up. “Really?” He didn't think he imagined an inkling of satisfaction on her face. “May I ask why?”

He shook his head. “School just wasn't for me. I like working with my hands.”

“Yes, but—”

He held up a hand. “No offense, Professor Shea, I understand where you're coming from but that's the way it is. I like what I do. I'm not going to change my mind.”

“Forgive me. I didn't mean to sound as if I'm interfering. We all make our own choices.”

The song ended and Dakota and her father headed back toward them. Even from this distance he could see the alarm on Dakota's face, and surprisingly what looked like disapproval in her father's.

Mrs. Shea pushed back her chair. “I suppose we were lucky all of our children valued their education.” She smiled at him as she rose to her feet. “Nice chatting with you, Tony.”

Tempted to remind her of Dallas's detour he decided to keep his mouth shut. It didn't matter. He got the message. He lived on the wrong side of the fence.

She slipped away a second before Dakota returned to her seat. Her father nodded at Tony and then followed his wife back to their table.

Frowning, Dakota watched until they both sat down. “What was that about?”

“What?”

She fixed him with a pretty intimidating glare. One she'd probably perfected in court. “What did my mother want?”

He grinned and got up, pulling her with him. “She wanted me to dance with you.”

“Right.”

He was lucky. The song was slow. He shouldn't have too much trouble keeping up. They got to the center of the floor and he guided them to the middle for some privacy. Not much, but better

than having her mother's gaze boring into his back as he slid both his arms around Dakota, his hands resting just above the curve of her sweet little backside. No holding one hand out in the air crap. He wanted to feel her chest pressed against him. Feel her thighs move with his.

She sighed softly, and then tilted her head back to look at him. "Come on. What did she want?"

No way was he getting into this conversation with her. He couldn't without bad-mouthing her mother, and he wasn't doing that. "Why isn't your brother being groomed to be a judge?"

Her lips parted slightly as she hesitated, and if they were anywhere else, he would've accepted the invitation. And if she didn't quit soon...

"Cody is far too mercenary, hardly civil servant material." She laughed softly and swept a quick glance around. "Oops, did I say that?"

Civil servant? That stopped Tony. He hadn't thought of it that way. "Defense attorneys make more money, huh?"

"Oh, please." She chuckled and then squinted at him. "Are you kidding?"

He shrugged. "How would I know?"

"Defense attorneys can make oodles of money. Especially defending white-collar clients." She whispered. "My brother's favorite kind of criminal."

"What happened to innocent until proven guilty?"

"I wasn't referring to the innocent ones." She paused thoughtfully. "Although they usually end up racking up a lot more legal fees."

"You're so cute when you're being materialistic."

"Hey." She lightly pinched his shoulder. "I was being analytical."

"Oh." He smiled and brought her closer so that she pressed her cheek against the base of his throat. His lips were touching her forehead. This is where he wanted her. Not leaning away from him analyzing the legal profession.

Besides, the dance floor had gotten more crowded. Good for him. It gave him an excuse to draw her closer. Bad for her in that she could be overheard and, since half the people there were either lawyers, judges or somehow related, she'd be better off zipping it.

Her arms tightened around his neck and she rubbed her cheek against his jaw. His body immediately reacted. If the song suddenly ended and he had to walk back to the table, he'd be screwed.

"Hello, Dakota."

She lifted her head and smiled at the distinguished-looking older man dancing beside them with a much younger blond woman. "Hi, Judge Hawkins."

He nodded to Tony and then said to Dakota, "We're not in the courtroom. I think it would be okay to call me David."

"That would feel a little too strange."

He smiled, nodded and they moved apart, but not before the man gave Tony a sizing up.

Tony ignored him. "Is that his wife?"

"Nope. He's divorced. Three times now."

"He looks old enough to be her father."

"Probably is. He likes them young."

He obviously liked Dakota, but Tony didn't point that out. The song wound down and he hoped like hell the band would stick to a slow beat. They did and everyone on the dance floor stayed. Several other couples crowded in and damned if they didn't all seem to know Dakota. Their once-private area was getting to be as bad as Grand Central Station.

When it was announced that it was time to cut the cake, he didn't even mind. Maybe after that they could get out of here. Even if he and Dakota just rode to the airport together, alone, no parents, no coworkers, and the evening ended there, he'd be okay with that. Not happy, but okay.

Glasses of champagne were passed out while Dallas and Eric got ready to cut the cake. Dallas got a little impatient when the photographer kept trying to reposition them and she dug into the cake

with her fingers and offered the piece to Eric. Everyone laughed. Except Mrs. Shea, but that was no surprise.

In Tony's experience, shortly after the cake was cut the bride and groom usually left the reception. That meant he and Dakota would be leaving, too. He glanced at his watch. No matter, they'd have to leave within half an hour to get to LaGuardia in time for their flight.

An older, distinguished-looking man had intercepted Dakota right before the cake cutting, and Tony scanned the room locating her in time to see her drain a flute of champagne and exchange it for another. She caught his eye and smiled, then raised the glass to him before gulping down half the contents.

What the hell? Was she on some kind of mission to get plastered? Maybe she didn't like flying? A lot of people didn't. Better that be the reason than anything personal. He wanted to be with her this weekend, but not if she had to get loaded to be with him.

"We're going to have to leave soon." Dallas dabbed at the white frosting clinging to the corner of her mouth. "Where's Dakota?"

"Over there."

"Ah, she's talking to Judge Mayfield and his wife. She shouldn't be long. We'll meet at the door in fifteen minutes. Eric is having the limo brought around front."

"Is she okay?" he asked.

Dallas smiled "Yes. Trust me."

That's about all he could do. "I'll be ready." His gaze went to Dakota.

She was laughing at something the judge said, her face slightly flushed. She tossed her hair back over her shoulder, the honey-colored strands catching the light from the chandelier. The red dress shimmered as she moved, emphasizing the tempting curve of her backside. Yeah, he was ready all right. He had been from the first time he saw her.

"WHO EVER HEARD of a limo without champagne?" Dakota sighed, hiked her dress up to her thighs and then swung her legs up on the seat where she sat opposite Tony. Predictably his gaze went straight to the hem of her dress, and then ran down the length of her legs. "We'll simply have to have the driver stop for some." She lifted her fist to knock on the dividing glass, but Tony lunged from his seat and captured her wrist.

"Don't you think you've had enough to drink?" He got up and joined her on her seat, using his hip to nudge her legs aside.

"Excuse me?" She indignantly lifted her chin, and slightly slurred her words then asked, "Do you think I'm drunk?"

He hesitated, exhaling in exasperation, and she had to really struggle to keep a straight face. "Look, we can't stop. We'll miss our plane."

"Plane? What plane?"

He stared at her. "You're kidding, right?"

"Of course I'm kidding." She pulled her hem up a little higher and used her pointed toes to trace a path across his back. "Remind me."

"Oh, God," he muttered, passing a hand over his face, and then covering his mouth and exhaling loudly.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Why are you still holding my wrist?"

"What? Oh, sorry."

As soon as he let go, she knocked on the dividing glass.

"Yes, ma'am?" The driver's voice immediately came over the intercom.

Tony pressed the response button. "Sorry, my mistake. We're fine."

"Hey, I wanted—"

Tony cut her off with a brief kiss, and then whispered, "When we get on the plane you can have all the champagne you want."

She slipped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer. "What if I want something else?"

His breath warm and uneven against her cheek, he said, "Such as?"

She shifted so that her hip rubbed him right where it counted, and he tensed. She made him wait a few seconds and then whispered, "Chocolate."

"Ah..." He chuckled softly. "When we get to the airport you can have that, too."

"For now I'll settle for a kiss."

"You will, huh?"

She nodded, and then waited, surprised by the uncertainty in his eyes. Maybe it was a trick of the shadows, or maybe he didn't want to take advantage of her because he thought she was drunk. The idea softened her and she tightened her arms around his neck, bringing him close enough that their noses touched. She slanted her head and met his lips.

His reluctance lasted all of a second before he kissed her back, going down with her when she laid back against the cushioned seat. The tinted dividing window prevented the driver from seeing anything and it would be easy to get carried away. Especially with Tony's broad chest pressed to her breasts, his arousal growing against her lower belly. But they were too close to the airport and if she really wanted to torment him, now was the time.

He'd conspired with Dallas and deserved a helping of torture. Just a little before they got down to the good stuff, she reminded herself, when he parted her lips with his tongue and her determination started to evaporate. She moved her left thigh to rub his hard-on and he groaned against her mouth.

She hadn't planned on torturing herself, too, but every pore in her body had come alive, her nipples so ripe they ached, and it was a good thing she'd opened her eyes in time to see the first sign for LaGuardia. Knowing they were about to be interrupted, she reached for his zipper. And then secretly smiled when he groaned, and stilled her hand.

"THE CAPTAIN HAS turned off the seat belt sign and you're free to move around the cabin. However, if you remain in your seat, we ask that you keep your seat belt fastened. Thank you."

The flight attendant had barely finished her spiel and Dakota reached for her seat belt.

Tony stopped her. "Where are you going?"

She gave him a sleepy smile and twisted around in her seat to face him. "Nowhere."

Neither of them had a coat so he'd given her his jacket to wear over the dress but this particular position gave him a sneak preview that he didn't need right now. She'd gotten him so damn worked up in the limo that he didn't trust his cock anymore.

Getting checked in had cooled him off. Replaying the scene in his head helped do it again. The ticket agent looked as if she thought he was kidnapping Dakota. Fortunately she pulled it together long enough to provide her identification and tell everyone who'd listen that they were on their honeymoon.

"Where are we going?" she asked, and promptly covered a yawn.

"Dakota. You know where we're going. Dallas talked to you, remember?"

She blinked at him. "Sort of."

God, he didn't like this. He cleared his throat. "What exactly do you remember?"

"She packed a bag for me, right?"

He nodded.

"Did she remember my toothbrush?" She yawned again. "My electric one."

"I'm sure she did."

"I think I'll take a nap now."

"Good idea."

She shifted so that she could lay her head on his shoulder, and with one hand he shook out a blanket the flight attendant had given them earlier. He draped it over her, and she snuggled closer.

Man, he sure hoped Dallas knew what she was doing. She swore Dakota wasn't drunk. Just a little tipsy. That she understood exactly where she was going. And who she was with. Because if she didn't, this weekend or any chance they might have had was going to be so messed up.

## 4

“THANKS, OTIS. I’ll take it from here.”

“May I get you some ice, sir?”

Tony shook his head. “Nah, we’re okay.” He tipped the bellman three times what he normally would, hoping the guy didn’t call security. Or worse, the police. All the way up on the elevator ride, he’d eyed Tony as if he were Jack the Ripper. Not that he blamed the older man. The way Dakota was acting, everyone from the flight attendant to the cab driver had to be wondering if Tony had drugged her.

He’d practically had to hold her up just to get her off the plane. And then she was so disoriented she kept asking where she was up until three minutes ago when they’d arrived at the suite.

“Do I have any clothes?” Dakota asked, yawned and then stretched, before sinking onto the couch.

Otis stopped on his way to the door and slowly turned around. “May I assist you in any way, miss?” he asked solemnly, his gaze steadily on her and deliberately away from Tony.

She’d taken off his jacket in the taxi and the way she sat, her dress slightly askew, exposed a lot of cleavage. Her lips curved in a teasing smile. “I don’t think so. We’re on our honeymoon.”

The relief on the man’s face was almost laughable. “Ah, I see. Very good.” Backing toward the door, he looked approvingly at Tony. “Very good, sir. I’ll bid you good-night then.”

“See ya, Otis.” Tony hurried to double lock the door as soon as the man was gone. When he turned back to Dakota, she had her eyes closed.

She looked pale against the navy-blue-and-cream floral cushions. But a couple of days on a sunny beach would fix that. The problem now was whether he should leave her here in the living room.

“Dakota,” he said low enough not to wake her if she was sleeping.

She sighed and snuggled down deeper into the cushions, letting one of her high heels slide off her foot. Her feet were long, narrow but dainty, and shining through the sheer black hose her toenails were a bright red.

Her tousled hair looked more sexy than messy, and thinking of how soft and warm and willing she’d been in the limo had him itching to get down to business. But not when she was like this. Coffee. Strong and black. He wondered if that really worked.

He looked away and studied the living room. The tropic-styled suite had to have cost a small fortune. Tony was no expert on decorating or art but he knew about wood and carpentry and the hardwood floors alone had set the owner back a year’s rent for a Queens apartment. Anyone could tell that the rattan furniture was of the highest quality and the artwork on the walls and interesting native pieces casually set on corner pedestals weren’t cheap knockoffs. Expensive knockoffs maybe.

Even the bar area was no afterthought. At least ten feet across against a mirrored wall, the back shelf was stocked with full-size bottles of premium brands and not the miniature version. The refrigerator was full size, too, and loaded with different varieties of beer, according to Otis. Four bar stools with blue-and-cream-colored seats that matched the couch were arranged around the tall, curved rattan bar.

No fake plants either. Eight-foot palms stood on either side of the sliding glass door to the balcony. It was dark but he knew they faced the ocean. Not just because the front desk clerk had told him. Tony could hear the waves lapping the shore.

Man, it sucked that Dallas and Eric had spent all this money and Tom was screwing up their plans. No doubt they had something equally nice someplace else but that wasn’t the point. It wasn’t even about the money. Tony had already decided he’d pay for the suite and everything else this weekend. He didn’t care what Dallas said. But it was all the hassle she’d gone through to counter Tom’s prank that irritated Tony.

He couldn't think about that right now. It pissed him off too much and he had another problem to consider...sobering up Dakota. His gaze went back to Dakota. For a second he thought he saw her eyes open, but as he moved closer he realized it had to have been a trick of the light.

He'd already lost the bow tie and shrugged out of the jacket. He draped it over the rattan chair that matched the couch and bar stools, and then grabbed their bags and carried them to the bedroom.

The friggin' bedroom was almost as big as the living room, with a canopied king-size bed and one of those white nettings you only see in movies draped over it and tied back to the bedposts. There was another couch and another sliding glass door that led to a separate balcony. More palms, more paintings.

He found the large walk-in closet and placed their bags on the built-in luggage racks. Kicking off his shoes, he unfastened his belt at the same time and then hung it on a gold-plated hook behind the door. He pulled his shirt from the waistband of his pants and started unbuttoning it as he walked out into the bedroom.

Dakota stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame. Frowning slightly, she tried to smooth her hair. A few curls sprang back to rest on her cheek. "Tony?"

"Yeah?"

"Where are we?"

He cleared his throat. "You don't remember anything."

"Well, yes, of course I do." Her gaze slid down to his exposed chest, lingered for a long satisfying moment.

"What exactly do you remember?"

"The wedding."

"I hope so." He chuckled. "And?"

She put two fingers to her temple. "Wow, do I have a headache."

"Yeah, a vat of wine will do that."

She gave him a glare that was immensely reassuring. Yup, she was definitely coming around.



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