



THE MARRIAGE
OF INCONVENIENCE

Nina Singh

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Her lawfully wedded husband...again? When Angeline Scott's business is in trouble, she turns to the one man who can help—RJ Davet. She needs him to pose as her husband to secure a vital deal. Surely that shouldn't be too difficult, seeing as RJ played that role spectacularly well until their marriage fell apart! Opening the door to RJ again makes Angel realize something immediately: she's never gotten over him. But can she convince him of that before this deal is struck and he walks out of her life once more?

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And then he was kissing her.

Dizziness assaulted her and she knew he must have noticed. He lowered his hands to her arms and held her closer. The sweet contact with his lips never wavered.

Angel didn't know why he was suddenly doing this—didn't care. All that mattered now was that he did not stop.

She noticed movement from the corner of her eye. It hit her then. Tavov had stepped onto the balcony; he was watching them. RJ was putting on a show. He was only kissing her for Tavov's benefit.

Hurt opened fire on her heart. All of a sudden it was too much: their arguments, his demands, the tension. And the taste of him... his heat up against her.

Something snapped. She pulled her arms out of his grasp and lifted them around his neck. His sharp intake of breath didn't even make her hesitate. She stepped closer to him, feeling the rock of muscle that lined his frame.

She spoke low into his ear. "Oh, we need to be *so* much more convincing than that..."

The Marriage of Inconvenience

Nina Singh



www.millsandboon.co.uk

NINA SINGH lives just outside of Boston, USA, with her husband, children, and a very rambunctious Yorkie. After several years in the corporate world she finally followed the advice of family and friends to 'give the writing a go, already'. She's oh-so-happy she did. When not at her keyboard she likes to spend time on the tennis court or golf course. Or immersed in a good read.

For my generous, kind-hearted, and encouraging husband. And for my amazing, wonderful children, who make me proud every day.

Also Barb, Dee and Deb. You've been there every step of the way and I am thankful beyond words.

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[CHAPTER ONE](#)

SO NOW SHE needed his help.

R. J. Davet shifted in his chair and looked down for the third time at the email message waiting for him on his laptop. Even if she hadn't signed the message, he would have known whom it was from. Brief and to the point, apologetic yet demanding at the same time. All the characteristics of the woman he had known better than anyone else on earth. He almost laughed at the thought. He had known her intimately once. And it had cost him.

Outside his hotel window, the crowded street in London's East End bustled with activity. Delivery trucks skirted around the road. Morning commuters rushed to work, and cafés were filling with caffeine-hungry customers.

A silver tea tray with steaming scones sat untouched on the antique table next to him. He was oblivious to all of it. His appointment with the investors in a few minutes, the importance of this trip, the weeks of preparation. He couldn't bring himself to think of any of that now. After all this time, and all the pretenses, she was asking for his help.

A fleeting impulse to ignore the request entered his mind. After all, she hadn't indicated it was urgent. Every self-preserving instinct told him to pretend he'd never received it.

But that thought was gone in a second. He would go to her. Of course he would. Even with the little information the message provided, he couldn't ignore a plea from her. Besides, the past was behind them now. There was no reason he couldn't assist her professionally. He was the best. Arrogance or immodesty had nothing to do with it. He knew his strengths and he knew his shortcomings. He knew his reputation within the field had compelled celebrity and politician alike to seek out his expertise, even this early in his business. He'd worked his butt off since leaving college.

Now his skills were being sought by the one woman who could have had that and a lot more at her disposal. The bitter tang of memory formed an unpleasant taste in his mouth before he swallowed it.

Rubbing his eyes, he stood and read the email once more.

R.J.

It's been a while. I find myself in the unexpected position of requiring your assistance. Only you have the background. Let's discuss at your earliest convenience.

She'd included a small icon of a dancing couple at the end: What do you say, Princess? Shall we dance?

He leaned forward to reply to her and stopped himself. There was no reason they couldn't interact like the true professionals they were, but there was also no reason to be hasty either. He wasn't going to jump the instant she snapped her fingers. No doubt that's what she expected. Surprise for her, he'd changed.

He powered off the laptop and packed it into his briefcase, making sure hard copies of the financial spreadsheets were there. He had a lot to do in the few short hours before his flight back to the States. He didn't need a distraction like her just now.

His estranged wife would get his answer soon enough.

* * *

“He’s here, you know.”

Angeline Scott jumped at the announcement, then tried to calm herself before turning away from the window. She leveled a gaze at her assistant, who was also her dearest friend.

“He’s here,” Shanna repeated. “R.J. just signed in downstairs. He’s on his way up.”

Angeline managed a nod in acknowledgement. She couldn’t go through with this.

“Shan, I think we should just forget this whole thing. I’m not even going to tell him why I asked him here. I’ve changed my mind.”

“Are you going to ask your father, then? For the money?”

Angeline gave her friend the side eye for that question. “You know that’s out of the question. I refuse.”

Shanna rewarded her with a look of pride. “That would only be a temporary fix anyway.”

“But to ask R.J. to do this...” Angeline let herself trail off.

“We really have no choice, do we?”

“I guess not. But I know him. He’s going to look at me like I have two heads, pop a hand on his hip—” she fisted her hand and set it on her hip in demonstration. “And then he’s going to laugh. Then he’ll become angry because he’ll think it’s a joke. At his expense. That’s exactly what will happen.” She blew a stray strand of hair off her forehead, then added, “Not necessarily in that order.”

“Then why did you ask him in the first place?”

“Because he’s the only one who really qualifies, isn’t he?”

“True. Technically he’s still your husband.”

Angel sighed. Yes, R.J. was still her husband. In name only. The only reason being that they had never gotten around to finalizing their divorce. And now, after close to three years apart, she had to demean herself by asking him to pretend they’d never split up at all.

Shanna smiled at her. “Go straighten yourself out, Angel. Your cheeks are flushed. It’s just not becoming on someone with your olive skin tone. And those curls.” She held a hand up in frustration to the mass of unruly hair Angeline knew was spilling out of her loose bun. “We can do this. Just pull yourself together. It’s the only way.”

Angeline plunked herself into the wide leather chair behind her. Shanna was right, of course. They had gone through every other feasible option.

“Fine,” she said, then looked up in defiance. “But I refuse to straighten myself out.”

Shanna stole a quick glance into the outer room. “Looks like you don’t have time for it anyway. Our fella just walked in.”

Angeline gripped the armrests on the chair and tried to assume a perfect poker face. Her heart was in her throat, and adrenaline coursed through her veins like a river during a storm. But she was certain none of it showed. R. J. Davet might turn her insides to lava, but she knew how to mask emotion well.

Shanna gave her a reassuring wink and went to show him in.

Angeline took advantage of the time to try to calm her nerves. She was a mature businesswoman now. Not a foolish young college student. She’d graduated top of her class, even with the distraction that was R. J. Davet.

He wouldn’t affect her the way he used to. She was much wiser with a good head on her shoulders. She was over her once all-consuming attraction to him. She was over him.

Angeline stood up to greet him, feeling much more certain of herself. It was ridiculous to think he could still hurt her.

But then he walked in. And it hurt just to look at him.

She managed to curve her lips into a smile. “Hello, R.J. Long time, no see.” She cringed as soon as she said it. Nothing like dazzling him with witty conversation.

He didn’t say anything for a long moment, merely looked at her. Just for an instant, the hurt fell away and she was staring into hypnotic, deep chocolate eyes that were so familiar. There was nothing

between them, there was nothing around them. As if sensing her thoughts, his expression suddenly became aloof and guarded.

“Hello, Angel.” He smiled when he said it, but his eyes remained distant.

He made his way toward her with the same confident gait she remembered. Except now there was so much more polish. In a dark Italian-cut suit, he had the elusive manner that only self-made successful people have. He looked like the powerhouse he’d always wanted to be, had always talked about becoming. He looked like the man he had left her to become.

She checked the impulse to step back as he approached, afraid of her reaction. His wavy black hair reflected almost navy where the light hit it. The strong set of his jaw lent a hardened austerity to his face.

Her dreams had not done him justice.

She cleared her throat. “So, I hear your business is doing well. You’re trying to expand Davet Corporate Security into Europe, aren’t you?”

“That’s the intent, yes.” His voice rang clear with impatience.

“I can’t believe all you’ve accomplished in the short time since college.”

He gave a slight nod in her direction. “Likewise.”

Angeline felt herself shiver. R.J. wasn’t interested in small talk. “It must have been a surprise to hear from me after all this time,” she said in a lower voice.

“Getting your message was a few notches higher than surprise. Closer to shock, actually.”

She tried not to bristle at the hostility in his voice.

R.J. shoved his hands into his pants pockets. “Let’s cut to the chase here, shall we? We’re both busy people. You didn’t call me to play catch-up. What can I do for the reigning tea queen of the Western Hemisphere? I imagine you have some type of corporate security concern. Were your systems hacked or something? Is that it?”

Regret washed through her. He was obviously not thrilled about being here. While he couldn’t wait to leave, she was aching inside at seeing him again. Yep, she was a fool one hundred times over. “Not exactly. Please, have a seat.” She motioned him to the red brocade chair across from her desk and waited for him to sit down.

Swallowing past the lump of apprehension in her throat, she began, “I’d like to discuss a business proposition with you. An alliance, so to speak.”

She saw the curiosity flash in his eyes before he managed to suppress it. “What type of an alliance would the head of a thriving tea retail and distribution business form with the CEO of a corporate security firm?”

“I need your help. But not in the way you think.”

He lifted a brow in question. “I’m listening.”

Angeline walked over to the large window overlooking metro Boston. Past the traffic, the Charles River gleamed like liquid gemstone as the sun reflected off the water. Her back to him, she could feel the intensity of his gaze and imagined his eyes roaming over her. The way his hands had not so long ago. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Somehow she managed to find her voice again. “I’m in some trouble and it could affect other people. A lot of other people.”

He was up and behind her in an instant. She recognized the poignantly familiar scent. That same distinctive cologne coupled with the aroma that was purely male and purely his. She tried to still the shaking in her hands and clasped them together in front of her. Heavens, this meeting was playing havoc on her senses. Pure attraction. Attraction that in the end hadn’t been enough to keep them together. But the flames of desire apparently still burned strong.

For her anyway.

“Angeline,” she heard him say. “Are you in some kind of danger?”

She took a moment to answer. Technically she wasn't. But in every other sense she was. Without warning, a firm set of hands gripped her by the shoulders and turned her around.

"Answer me."

"N-no, I'm not in any danger," she managed to stutter while fighting the urge to lean into the strong, masculine chest that was so close.

He dropped his hands. Disappointment pummeled her. He clearly wasn't as interested in touching her as he had been once.

Better to get this over with. "It's the business, R.J. The TeaLC chain. I'm worried that if I don't expand soon, we may not survive."

He quirked an eyebrow. "But I thought your business was flaring."

"It's also very costly. The distribution end brings in a good amount, but the retail chains aren't terribly profitable. Plus, I have some very expensive overhead. I need a sales spurt, soon." She took a deep breath. "And I think I just may have come up with a way to achieve some growth."

"But?"

"But it won't be easy."

He narrowed his eyes. "Go on."

Here it was, the tough part. She braced herself for the certain embarrassment and decided to just blurt it out. "We never signed the papers to finalize our divorce."

A dark shadow flashed in his eyes. "Is that what all this is about? You want to take care of the divorce finally?"

"No! No, that's not it at all." This was even harder than she would have imagined. "Actually, it's kind of the exact opposite."

Silence. He searched her face for clarification.

"I need to act like I'm happily married. Just for one night. I need you to pretend we're still a fully married couple who never separated." Oh, man, she was making a complete and utter mess of this whole proposal. But there was no way to back out now.

She lifted her palms in appeal. "It wouldn't be for long. I realize what I'm asking and—"

He cut her off with a quick raise of his hand. "Let me get this straight. You have to act like you're still happily married to grow your business."

Before she could answer, he turned around and walked toward the center of the large room.

She stepped toward him, afraid he was going to leave without hearing her out. She'd gone too far to back out now. As difficult as this was, she had to see it through.

"R.J., wait. Can I just explain?"

He didn't answer. Angeline rubbed her arms to calm herself. He was so angry he couldn't even speak!

And then he turned around, looked into her eyes and broke into laughter.

* * *

She really was too much.

R.J. didn't know if he was laughing more from amusement or the unsettling experience of seeing her again. This had to be some kind of joke.

He didn't feel much like laughing, though, when she lifted those deep brown eyes up to his. She looked like a wounded doe.

His breath caught in his throat. "Wait a minute. You're serious."

"I wouldn't have asked you to come all the way out here if I wasn't serious."

"I think I'm missing something here."

"This isn't some attempt at a reconciliation. I know things are over between us."

"You're right about that."

She flinched. "I just need you to do some convincing acting for a day or so."

“You want me to pretend we’re still completely together? That I’m still your husband in every way.” He’d done everything he could for the past three years to try to forget what that was like. “What kind of game are you playing?”

“It’s not a game, it’s a business proposition,” she said in a firm, official voice.

A what? He had to try to calm down. No one else could ever get him so riled up. Taking a deep breath, he concentrated his gaze on her face.

He wouldn’t have believed she could have become more attractive. The girlish, soft qualities had been replaced with the maturity of a beautiful woman. Breeding and class were etched in every inch of her. It had thrown him off so many years ago, the passion that lay beneath her proper demeanor. Just thinking about it now was throwing him off again. Three years hadn’t made enough of a difference, apparently.

“Maybe we better start from the beginning.”

“It shouldn’t take more than a day or so of your time,” she began, becoming animated.

He lifted his hand to stop her. “Before we get too far with this scheme, suppose you fill me in on the details. What happened? Last I heard, you’d grown the business tremendously since you started it.” She’d done an impressive job, too. Angeline had moved quickly on the sudden popularity of tea and had become a leading distributor in no time. She was one of the youngest successful CEOs in the United States. Like him.

“It all stemmed from such a terrific idea.”

Her tongue darted to lick her lips, and he lost his concentration for a moment. Her dark features were drawn tight. Slight dark circles shadowed her eyes. Even so, her regal grace never left her. It was that quality that had knocked him senseless when they’d met freshman year at university. He’d fallen hard for the contradictory mix of private school breeding and wanton boldness. Not to mention the drop-dead body that had turned his gut to fire every time he’d laid eyes on her.

“What idea?” he asked, turning back to the conversation.

“I thought there would be some opportunity for growth given the big wave in the herbal tea market. Lots of people swear by the healing benefits of some of the herbs and plants found in tisanes. I thought we’d stress that to set us apart from the competition.”

“What has that got to do with being married?”

“Well, I started doing some research. It led me to a variety of plants. It’s mainly grown along the Black Sea, on a small island nation called Mondolavia.”

“I’ve heard of it.”

“I traveled there with Shanna to check it out, and true enough, the stuff is invigorating. They’ve been drinking it in that part of the world for years. Anyone who’s tried it insists it’s like a magical potion. And it tastes great. Like nothing we can compare to in this hemisphere. If TeaLC was the first chain to bring it here, it would put us in a whole other category. This could be the start of a whole new product assimilation. And we’d be the one to start it all.”

“So far, so good.”

She nodded with excitement, clearly taken with the idea. “We were all ready to arrange for the supplier to start shipping. Even drew up a contract for exclusive distribution rights for the next several years.”

“That’s fantastic. I still don’t see why you’d have to be married.”

She shut her eyes tightly and let out a deep breath. “That area is a completely different part of the world. The plants are all grown and processed by a very traditional Mondol family. Mila and Tavov Bay have been married for decades. They’re very particular about how their product is being sold and positioned. And they don’t believe it’s good to do business with a single woman. They’d much rather deal with a so-called stable, family operation.”

Now he understood. “And you figured you had a way to accommodate them.” He didn’t care that his voice was thick with sarcasm. All this time had gone by without a word from her. But suddenly she was reaching out. And for what? A business deal.

She cleared her throat. “We didn’t start that way. Shanna and I initially tried to protest. But it didn’t look like they were willing to hear any arguments. Then things just seemed to spiral.” She leaned back on the edge of the desk. “Next thing we knew, I was talking about my ‘silent partner’ husband.”

“I see.”

“Except for the silent partner part, it’s not technically a lie.”

“Is that how you see it?”

“We didn’t mean to be deceptive or anything. You have to believe that. I just mentioned that I had gotten married young and was about to explain that it hadn’t made me a better businesswoman. But they just latched on to the married part and asked why I hadn’t said so before. I just found myself not denying it.”

He was having trouble coming up with an adequate response. This was the last thing he’d been expecting when he finally heard from her again.

“It started as a language issue,” she continued, near to pleading. “Though they’re fluent, their English is a bit broken. Then we just had to go with it.” She stepped toward him and touched his arm, her eyes imploring him to understand. “It’s just that we’d gotten so far. And then it just seemed to steamroll. I found myself telling them all about your accomplishments, that you’ve built your own computer security services company.”

Her gaze dropped to where she’d touched him, and R.J. expected to see sparks from the contact. She removed her hand and stepped back.

“And it almost worked,” she added. “They said they would be glad to do business with us. But not before they came to the States to check out the operation. And to meet the husband they’d heard so much about.”

He’d heard enough. For such a smart, savvy businesswoman, Angeline had somehow put herself in an utterly ridiculous position. And had managed to take him along with her. “What in heaven’s name were you thinking?” Perhaps he was being a bit too forceful, but what she’d just told him was so profoundly absurd. “I’ve heard of adapting to the global marketplace, but what you did is borderline slapstick.”

“Listen, I’m not proud of it, but I did what I thought I had to do.” A hard glint appeared in her eyes.

“Why doesn’t that surprise me?”

She crossed her arms in front of her chest. “That sounds like condemnation.”

“More like characterization.”

Her eyes narrowed on him. “I don’t know what that’s supposed to mean. I do know that I’ve done a darn good job with this company. Don’t you think I should fight for it if that’s what I have to do?”

He rubbed a palm over his face. She was a fighter. They both were. That part he understood. He’d fought hard for everything he’d wanted. Except once. But then he’d had no choice.

He took a deep breath and tried to calm down. This was getting them nowhere. “Angel, you don’t need to convince me on that score. Ever since I started hearing about your success I’ve known this was the perfect outlet for your abilities. I just don’t understand how you plan to pull this off.”

“Well, it’s quite simple. You just have to pose as my husband for the day or so that they’re up here.” She flashed him a smile that nearly crumpled his knees.

“You’re the only one who’s ever had any kind of practice in the role.”

And practice they had. Long, steamy nights had often turned into languid, satisfying mornings. He cursed himself as his body started to respond to the memories.

She went on. “A few weeks after they leave, I’m scheduled to go back to their orchards to sign the deal. Right before the harvest. By then they’ll have realized how mutually beneficial the partnership is. And in return for your assistance, I help you expand Davet Computer Security Services to Europe. I read somewhere you were trying to find overseas clients. I present you as our security firm and help convince all our European partners to consider hiring you. And you have your expansion.”

He was about to tell her his latest trip had done just that. That he’d left London just last week with a deal to become the leading provider for a major British jewelry chain. Something stopped the words from forming on his tongue. It would be the simplest way to end this nonsense idea of hers. So why didn’t he just tell her she couldn’t help him?

Because he couldn’t deny the fact that a lot of this was indirectly his fault. Angeline’s current state of financial shortage and her lack of resources were in large part due to him and their marriage.

But he just couldn’t do what she was proposing. His soul would not be able to take such a pretense. He would help her, but he’d find another way.

Angel continued to smile. Man, it was hard to deny her anything when she looked at him like that. But this was too much, he just couldn’t go through with something like this.

“Angel. I’m sorry. I just can’t. What you’re suggesting, it’s just too far-fetched. Too much of a charade. Too much could go wrong.”

She lifted her palms in appeal. “But—”

“Angel, no. I’m sorry.”

She looked down at the floor. All the light seemed to have gone out of her. “Then I’m sorry to have wasted your time. I see now what a mistake it was to try to involve you.”

R.J. cursed silently. Nothing like a good dose of guilt to start out the day. He found himself selfishly replacing it with anger. “How could you even consider it, Angel? The two of us acting like a real couple?”

She looked up, a wealth of emotion in her eyes. Anger? “R.J. This isn’t about you and me.”

“It isn’t?”

“It’s a business deal. Nothing more.”

He tried not to flinch at that. “A deal where we have to pretend we’re still devoted to each other and together in every sense.”

“Just for one lousy night. I’m not asking for eternity.”

He rubbed a hand down his face in an effort to calm down.

“Listen, I’m sorry. But it’s just too ridiculous. The idea of us acting married again.”

Her gaze dropped to the floor once again. “Yes, I suppose it is.”

“How about we set aside some time? You, me and Shanna. We’ll put our heads together and come up with a plan.” Without thinking, he reached out and took her hand in his. Her skin was soft, silky. Experience reminded him she felt that way all over. He quickly let go.

Angeline sighed. “I’m afraid there’s no more time for that. It took you a bit longer to get back to me than I thought.”

She wasn’t looking at him. He had to strain to hear her. “The supplier will be here in less than a day. If you won’t do it, I’ll have to come up with something else. And fast.”

Like another man to play the part maybe? That thought had his gut tightening. Of course there had to be other men in her life. She was probably just too embarrassed to approach someone she cared about with something like this. Maybe she would even rush the divorce now so that she could go to someone else with her plea.

He knew what her response to his next question was going to be before he even asked it. “Let me put some money in the company, then. Consider it an investment. Or even a loan if you’d prefer.”

As he’d guessed, she started to shake her head before all the words even left his mouth. “I can’t let you do that. I know you’re trying to grow as well and need those funds for your own firm.”

He was about to protest when she stopped him. “And anyway, that would only be a temporary fix. This deal would actually make TeaLC profitable for years to come. We’d become sole retailer in the United States for a revolutionary beverage.”

She was right. No amount of money he could extend would make up for the loss of that kind of opportunity. “Angel, I’ll come up with something.”

Her eyes softened, but she didn’t reply. Instead, she opened the door and leaned into the outside foyer. “Shanna, would you mind seeing R.J. out, please?”

Turning back to face him, she gave him a tight smile. “Thanks for coming, R.J. It was nice seeing you again. Sorry to have wasted your time.” She stepped aside to let him out of her office. And out of her life once more.

CHAPTER TWO

SHANNA SEEMED TO be taking her time summoning the elevator. And R.J. wanted nothing more than to get out of the building fast. Away from the memories, away from his ex. Only she wasn’t really his ex. Not yet.

“Did you grab a cup of tea on your way up?” Shanna asked while they waited.

“Uh, no.” He tried to sound polite. “That looks like quite an operation you have on the first floor, though.”

Shanna nodded. “It’s one of our biggest cafés.”

He didn’t respond. His mind was still reeling. The shock of seeing Angel again after all this time—he had to get out of here and find a punching bag or a weight bench. Anything to help him vent the frustration of not being able to touch her. Or help her. He had to think, to try to come up with a different solution. One that didn’t involve the disaster she was floating.

“You should stop in.” Shanna interrupted his thoughts. “The pastries are to die for. And the tea of the day is an Indian Spicy Chai that will curl your toes.” She lifted a pencil to her chin and looked him over. “Then again, you might want to order something decaffeinated.”

He had to laugh at her reference to his agitation. “Angel’s lucky to have an assistant with such a flair for advertising. I think I will stop down for a cup.”

“Great. Make sure to tip the server well. She’s in a bit of dire straits.”

“Yeah?” R.J. asked with mild curiosity as the elevator doors opened. He stepped aside as Shanna stepped in and then followed.

“Yes, a single mother with a toddler to support. We’re one of the highest payers. But toddlers can be expensive.”

“I’ll tip handsomely, then.”

“Good.”

Shanna continued. “Our store manager has a lot on her mind, too. A young child with severe asthma. The medical insurance she gets through her job at TeaLC is absolutely crucial. Then there’s Suzan. She’s a college student who has to save every penny.”

R.J. stilled as understanding dawned. He refused to be manipulated. “Why are you telling me all this?” he demanded, knowing it was wrong to take his agitation out on her.

Shanna whirled on him. “Because those are the kind of people who are going to be affected if this business doesn’t stay profitable.”

R.J. blinked at her suddenness. This was getting ridiculous. “Shanna, you know me well enough to realize I’d do anything I can to prevent that, but... But this isn’t a plan, it’s a fiasco. I’ll find a way to help. Just not this.”

Shanna actually snorted. “Shame. This deal would have been the perfect way to grow our company and secure our employees’ futures. She sank her whole trust fund into this place. There’s not a penny of it left. And she won’t even consider going to her father.”

R.J. clamped down on the anger that surged through his chest at the mention of the man who'd sired Angeline. Water under the bridge now, but it still stung. As for Shanna, he wasn't sure what to say to her.

Shanna blew out a breath. "Unlike the rest of her wealthy family, Angeline cares about giving back to the community. It's one of the major reasons she's fighting so hard to keep this place going."

He had no reason to, but he felt a sense of pride nevertheless. "How?"

"We work with the local women's shelters, try to place those ladies when an opening comes up. Single mothers, ladies trying to figure out how to stand on their own two feet. Sometimes the money we can offer isn't great, but it's better than nothing. And it gives them a chance to be productive and useful. But it's an expensive business strategy. We spend the time and money to train regardless of past experience. And turnover's higher than standard for the industry. It's the primary reason we're not as profitable as we could be. But it's worth it. Just to be able to give those women a chance to move on."

A chance to move on. Would his own childhood have turned out differently if his own family had had such a chance? If his mother had found a way to get them away from his abusive, alcoholic mess of a father?

He shook off the memories, focusing on what Shanna had just said. He'd stopped reading about Angeline and TeaLC in the business journals because it had just become too painful. Seeing her beautiful smiling face in print. So confident, so content. Content to be without him.

"I didn't know. How many TeaLC employees fall into this category?"

"About twenty to thirty percent. A few in every store in the States."

"It does sound like a costly program." Another unsettling thought occurred to him. "Have there been threats? Ex-husbands or past boyfriends?" A lot of women in shelters had to be running from abusive partners. Something he had firsthand knowledge of.

Shanna smiled. She looked pretty proud, too. "Sure there have. Angeline won't let that stop her. There's a security presence in every store, and each one is alarmed to the hilt. The public knows we won't take any chances with our employees, so nobody's tried anything."

"She's not one to back down, is she?"

"No, she's not. And you have no idea how much it took for her to ask you this."

R.J. bit out another oath. He looked up at the ceiling and exhaled slowly, wearily. So much for not being manipulated. He fished his phone out of his pocket.

"What are you doing?" Shanna asked as the elevator jolted to a stop.

He started dialing. "I have to call my secretary and tell her my schedule has changed for the next couple of days. Where's the nearest jewelry store?"

Shanna's dark brows lifted over her piercing blue eyes. "Why?"

"Married people wear rings."

* * *

"That feels good doesn't it, sweetie? I know it feels good." Angeline stroked a loving hand over the warm, eager body nestling closer to her.

"You've missed me haven't you?" Moist, soft eyes looked back at her with enthusiasm. Here was total acceptance, unconditional love. Right now it was exactly what she needed.

"I saw him again today, you know," she continued.

A knowing grunt responded.

"He came back, Max. He came back and he's going to do it." She stopped and took a deep sigh. "I didn't want him to know about the women. He wasn't supposed to want to do it because of them. But he knows now, and he's going to help."

The brown eyes staring at her started to droop with sleepiness. "Anyway, he did that thing he always does, where he just sort of takes command and handles all the details with efficiency and haste. He studied all the sales projections and started doing some research on Mondolavia. The whole office

was eating out of his hand.” She frowned. “Especially my female crew. They couldn’t do enough for him.

“Still, I didn’t realize how much I’d missed that. To be able to rely on someone else without worrying about appearing weak or out of control. I’ve always loved the take-charge quality about him. And, of course, he’s still as handsome as I remember.”

She stopped for a long sigh. “Oh, Max, I think I might be making a huge mistake here.

“Anyway.” Angeline shifted. “He’s on his way over.”

Max lifted his head at the announcement.

“That’s right.” She looked around the plush, Eastern decor of her condo. Would he like it? She was surprised to realize that it mattered to her. A burgundy-and-black patterned Oriental rug adorned the hardwood floor. It matched the draperies that hung from the bay windows on each wall. The full-floor condominium had a large kitchen and two bedrooms positioned on opposite sides. A far cry from the one-bedroom apartment they’d shared off campus for their brief union as man and wife.

“He’s bringing over some of his stuff,” she continued to her captive audience of one. “We have to look like a genuine married couple.”

The chime of the doorbell interrupted them. Max moved himself off the sofa and made a mad dash to the door.

“Traitor,” Angeline mumbled.

On shaky legs, she went to let R.J. in. As soon as she opened the door, Max barreled into him.

R.J. laughed in surprise. Bracing himself, he looked across the threshold at her. “I can’t believe he remembers me.”

She smiled. Max had been the poor soul to hear all about her foolish pining since R.J. had left. She hadn’t given him a chance to forget R.J.’s name.

“Is he still chewing the rugs?” R.J. asked as he picked up the dog.

Angeline nodded. “Yeah, the vet says it’s just something some breeds do.”

She stepped aside to let him in. He was dressed casual, black tailored pants with a V-neck beige sweater that showed just a triangle of dark chest hair. Even with the lanky dog still in his arms, he looked like the phenomenal success that he was.

“I didn’t know he had a breed,” R.J. said and carried the dog in. “I thought he was just a small furry black mutt.”

“He is,” she replied. “But somewhere in that confusion is a breed that feasts on fabric fibers.”

Angeline watched as he playfully wrestled Max to the floor. His tan skin reminded her of the bronze statues she’d studied while in Europe. His large shoulders shook with laughter as Max nipped at his face. A hint of sorrow hit her as she realized he’d missed their hound but resented having to see her again.

He straightened after several moments of playful tussling. A slight sheen of perspiration dampened his brow.

The amusement faded from his face as he looked at her. It was replaced by something foreign, something she couldn’t name. But it had her quaking.

She cleared her throat. “So, I see you found the place okay?”

He nodded.

“It’s pretty humid out there, isn’t it?” Lord, she hated small talk.

“Yeah, I guess there’s a huge storm on its way east.”

“I hope the Bays’ flight doesn’t get canceled.” She forced a smile. “Logan still shuts down at the hint of a raindrop.”

He nodded, his stare intense.

She closed the door and turned to face him.

“Here.” He held out his hand to her. A large stone glittered in his palm. “Your ring.”

She reached for it. “I—I didn’t realize you were going to get a ring. It’s lovely.”

“I tried to find a large one,” he said. “In case Tavov and Mila are wondering why you don’t always wear it, they’ll just assume it’s because of its large size.”

“Well, it is a big stone.” She picked it up, a part of her wishing he’d slip it on her finger himself.

“We have to look authentic. I rented it, along with a band for myself.”

A lump formed in her throat. “I still have my original wedding ring,” she admitted, unsure why.

“Oh.” He cleared his throat. “Well, I needed to get one. Besides, a large diamond is far more suited to you. Always has been.”

She wasn’t sure how to respond to that. An uncomfortable silence settled between them. He hadn’t even held on to that small symbol of their marriage. It shouldn’t have disappointed her, but it did.

“Anyway,” R.J. continued, “I brought over a few things so it looks like I live here when your guests arrive tomorrow.” He lifted the leather carrying case in his hand. “The rest will be delivered in the morning. Just show me where I can put it and I’ll have to be on my way.” He was brusque, to the point. R.J. clearly didn’t want to spend any more time alone with her than he had to.

“I emptied part of the closet. It’s through those doors,” she directed him.

She wanted him to stay. It had been so long since they had talked to each other.

“Can I get you something to drink? Some tea? Or wine? I happen to have some of the red I know you like.” She happened to have it because she’d searched all of the North End’s Italian district for it.

“Used to like,” he corrected her. “I don’t drink that anymore.”

“Oh.” A dull ache nestled in her chest. She didn’t even know what he liked anymore.

So much for having him stay awhile.

An idea began to form. “Well. That might be a problem,” she said with more enthusiasm than she should have.

“What? That I don’t drink the same wine I used to?”

“No, that we’re supposed to be happily married still and we don’t know anything about each other now. I think we need to discuss this. Get our stories straight for the dinner conversation tomorrow night.”

She started pacing along the long coffee table in the middle of the room. Max walked with her a few steps before settling himself near the fireplace.

“There are all sorts of things I need to know about you, all kinds of questions I should ask, and vice versa.”

R.J. looked uncomfortable for a moment. Letting out a deep breath, he rubbed his palm over his face. “I suppose you’re right.” He sat down on the sofa. “Looks like I’ll need some of that wine after all,” he added with a dry tone.

An almost giddy relief washed over her. He would stay. “I’ll be right back,” she said and ran into the kitchen.

When she returned, Max was snoring and R.J. had settled himself comfortably on the sofa.

“All right, let’s start easy. How hard was it to start your firm?” she asked as she poured the glasses.

He lifted his head to look at her. “That’s easy?”

“No? Okay, we’ll get back to that one. What’s your favorite dish now?”

“Franks and beans.”

She felt her stomach turn over. “I’ve always hated franks and beans.”

“I know.”

She waved her hand. “Okay, what do you like to drink? I know it’s not this anymore.” She indicated the glass she was handing him.

“Ouzo. I like ouzo.”

“Ouzo? Isn’t that a bit hard-core?” Although it made sense, because so was he. He’d always been a firm man, but now he seemed harsher somehow, colder and more distant.

“I just got back from the Mediterranean and found I’d acquired an appreciation for it. It tastes like liquid licorice with a punch.”

She tried not to turn up her nose. “I’ve always hated licorice.”

He waited a beat. “I know.”

“All right, let’s move on. What music are you listening to these days?”

“A little bit of everything, really. Except Armstrong. I don’t like Louis Armstrong at all. Much too lax and easy for me.”

This wasn’t going well. “I love Louis Armstrong.”

“I know.”

It dawned on her suddenly. “You’re teasing me.”

The corner of his mouth lifted.

She leaned a knee next to him on the couch and gave him a useless shove on the shoulder. “Robert James Davet, you’ve been teasing me all this time with contradictory pretend answers.”

He reached up and tapped a playful finger on her nose. “I guess I must know more about you than you think.”

Electricity crackled between them. She had the sudden urge to ask him the questions that were running through her mind. The same ones she’d been seeking the answers to every day for the past three years.

Is there someone special in your life now?

Has someone been lucky enough to snare your interest and attention the way I used to?

She cleared her throat. “What’s the last book you’ve read?”

He told her, but it didn’t register.

She nodded. “What do you do in your spare time?”

Do you still like to linger in bed Saturday mornings?

“Work,” he answered.

That much she should have guessed. “What’s been your proudest achievement?”

“The phenomenal growth of Davet Security Services.”

Ditto.

“And your greatest failure?”

He hesitated, staring at her, almost looking right through her. His eyes were full of meaning. A gust of wind rattled the windows outside. Understanding dawned on her, and she felt a wrenching ache start around the area of her heart.

He was thinking about the two of them. She knew it. He was thinking their marriage was his biggest mistake.

She tried to pretend the world hadn’t crashed in around her. Slowly seating herself on the ottoman in front of him, she tried to change the direction of the conversation. She would somehow get past the burning pain. “I bet you haven’t changed the way you drink your coffee. Or the predawn workouts you never skipped.”

He nodded.

She decided to go on. “And I’m guessing you can still ride a motorcycle like a daredevil. I bet your pool game is as smooth as it used to be. And something tells me your poker hand has lightened casino coffers all over the world these past couple of years.” She looked up to see a muscle twitch in the hard set of his jaw.

He leaned toward her, a scant inches from her face. “That’s right, Angel. I still have all the characteristics that made me an unfit son-in-law for the Scott dynasty.”

She bit her lip. “That’s not what I was getting at.” Looking away, she added, “I’m so sorry for everything you were put through. My father can be a ruthless man.”

R.J. sniffed an ironic laugh. “A ruthless man who had definite ideas about whom you should marry. And it wasn’t anyone like me.”

She should have been prepared for this, should have seen it coming. Damn her father and his ideals for her future. He'd done everything he could to make sure R.J. knew he thought he wasn't good enough. "Maybe this isn't the time to get into all this."

"Why not? Don't talk about my background? Don't talk about who I am? Who I've always been."

"That's not what I mean." He was putting words in her mouth.

"What do you mean, then?" he asked. "You know me well enough, Angel. You know I'm South End litter, from the part of Boston people like you avoid."

"That's not true. I've always been impressed with what you've managed to accomplish despite everything. You know that."

He let out a sarcastic laugh. "Is that why you came on to me that night at the campus party? Was it some type of debutante bet? To see who could win a token from the wrong side of the city?"

She lifted her chin. "I came on to you because I wanted to. Because of the way you were looking at me."

"But we both should have known better. It was against all the rules, you were out of my league." He let out a weary sigh. "I should have stayed away from you. As your father made crystal clear."

Like it could have been so easy. "What about what we were starting to feel?"

His sharp features seemed to take on an even more angular set. She felt compelled to continue, perhaps foolishly. "I know it wasn't my imagination, R.J. I know I saw attraction in your face those first few times we ran into each other." Her voice came out in a whisper. An imaginary fist had wrapped itself around her throat, its fingers strong and relentless.

He leaned back into the cushions, putting some distance between them. "I remember you've never had a problem being bold."

She cleared her throat. "Then we have changed after all. Because I certainly don't feel that way now."

"Perhaps I'd better go."

"Are you walking out on me? Just because the conversation has gotten a little serious? Again?"

His laugh was sharp. "Now, that's an interesting question. If I recall, I asked you to come with me. As long as we're remembering, we may as well be accurate."

She sighed, trying to find a way to explain how difficult such a move would have been for her back then. "There was no easy way for me to do that. You don't understand. And you didn't then either." She noticed his fingers tighten around the glass and worried it might snap in his hand.

"So it would appear."

"Besides," she continued, "things had gotten bad for us way before you took the physical steps out the door. We had my father set against our union from the very beginning. And we were both much too focused on our professional careers. I regret that." She decided to take a chance and move forward with her next question. "Why didn't we try harder, R.J.? Why did we let outside forces drive such a wedge between us?"

He stiffened ever so slightly and set the glass down hard on the coffee table. "What does it matter now? We have to take care of this one scenario, and then the past will be dead and buried." He paused, then added, "Once again."

Angeline felt the mask of neutrality she'd put up begin to crumble, and she tried to hold on to some semblance of control. Why did his nonchalance hurt so much? It didn't take a genius to realize he wanted out as things had gotten difficult. Granted, her father's behavior toward him had been reprehensible, down to promising to cut her off entirely if they did get married. A threat her father had followed through on. Well, she'd prove to Richard Scott that she didn't need his money to be successful. He didn't have a right to meddle in her life the way he had with R.J. She couldn't let him get away with what he'd done to alienate her husband from the very beginning.

In the end, her father had won. Her marriage had crumbled. R.J. had walked away.

Angel hadn't seen or spoken to her only parent since. Unable to forgive and forget, she refused to contact her father. Not that he'd bothered to make any contact either. Apparently they were stuck in a stubborn standoff to see who would blink first. She vowed that it wouldn't be her.

In a daze, she nodded. "You're right, R.J. I agree," she lied. Her voice sounded strained even to her own ears, and she glanced at him to see if he'd noticed.

A wave of sorrow struck her for what she'd lost. Her eyes moved over his face of their own volition. Nostalgia for days gone by engulfed her, and she found herself moving closer toward him into the sofa.

His low voice reached her through a dense fog. "It was nice while it lasted. But it's ancient history now. It doesn't make sense to dwell on the past. We got married way too young. Neither one of us was ready for such a commitment."

The words barely registered. "Mmm, it was nice, though, wasn't it?" Just for a moment she allowed herself to remember the sweet, not the bitter.

Nice was a drastic understatement for the way things had been between them. They'd had everything a young couple could want. Almost.

"We were good together, weren't we?" She wanted him to say it, needed to hear him agree.

She saw something flare in his eyes and instantly recognized the familiarity of old longings.

So much time had passed, and she'd missed him. Her mind may have ignored it, but her heart had ached all the while he'd been gone. But he was here now, and he was so close. She could smell the sweet woody scent of the imported wine on his breath. His familiar cologne triggered long-forgotten memories in the back recesses of her brain.

Her gaze settled on his lips. Firm and full, the way she'd remembered. Would they taste the same? Would his skin hold the same texture and warmth it had years ago?

The pounding of her heart grew painful. She watched as he lifted his hands up to reach for her. What would it be like to feel his touch again? She knew the reality would blow away even the dreams she'd had every night since she'd last seen him.

The heat of his hands burned through her silk blouse as they settled around her shoulders, his touch gentle, yet strong. She moistened her lips and moved into him. All she'd have to do was reach for his mouth with hers. She inclined her head, mindless now, and ready to take what she so desperately wanted.

He started to speak, and anticipation assaulted her. He had to acknowledge the magic their marriage had once held. Despite the bitter and swift ending, despite the searing pain of loss, he had to agree that they had been happy together as man and wife once.

She wanted to taste him again, wanted his mouth on hers like they'd never been apart. She reached for him.

His lips moved. "Don't."

He said it in a strained, barely audible whisper, but the single word struck her with the force of a physical blow.

His command echoed through her desire-fogged mind, and she froze. Yanking herself out of his grasp, she turned away from the tightness in his face.

Shaking with embarrassment, she kept her back to him. Dear heavens, she'd just tried to kiss her estranged husband. And he'd literally pushed her away. "Perhaps you had better leave after all."

There was rustling behind her as he stood.

"Angel, you don't—"

She didn't let him continue. "I'll see you tomorrow, R.J. Thanks for taking time to come out tonight. By this time tomorrow, it will all be over and we can both pretend this never happened. None of it." Was she trying to reassure R.J. or herself?

She heard him let out a deep breath and moved her head sideways but couldn't bring herself to face him. He patted the sleeping dog, then made his way to the door.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” he said.

For one final time, she thought, and a sharp hurt sliced her heart.

CHAPTER THREE

TIME ZERO. AND it was going to be a very trying night. R.J. braced himself in the hallway and tried to prepare for the upcoming evening. Stalling, he was definitely stalling.

He squeezed his eyes shut. It was one night. How hard could it be? After all, it hadn’t been that long ago since he’d lived the part he was being required to play. Surely, he could act out a role he’d already experienced. So why was his head pounding?

Because he had no business even being in the same room with Angeline Scott. This was insanity, an affront to any sense of equilibrium. Hell, she’d tried to kiss him last night. How could she taunt him like that? Did she think he could be immune to her twice in one lifetime? For her own good, he swore he’d try to stay unmoved throughout this whole charade. He couldn’t toy with rekindling their affections. He’d tried too hard to stay away. Angel deserved better. Because of him, her father had severed all contact with her and cut her off financially.

And any hope that the man may have changed had been shattered last year when they’d run into each other at an international business symposium. Richard Scott had made it very clear that, CEO or not, R.J. would never be in the same league as his daughter.

R.J. knew Angel had no hope of reconciling with her father unless R.J. remained out of the picture. Then maybe she’d have a chance to regain all Richard was keeping from her.

She was the sole Scott heir. How could R.J. allow himself to be the reason she lost that? In fact, if it wasn’t for him, Angel would have access to all the financial resources she needed right now to ensure her company survived. But she’d lost it all. For him.

He had to make that right.

He also had to purge all of that from his thoughts at the moment. It only served to agitate him further, and he couldn’t afford that right now. Tonight, it was all for show.

He used the key she’d given him to enter the apartment. The aroma of home cooking and a bristling fire hit him as he stepped in. Sudden, almost painful nostalgia overwhelmed his senses. He had entered their studio apartment countless times like this. Back then the various scents from the kitchen had been more mundane. Usually plain pasta or some meat roasting in the oven. Angel’s culinary skills weren’t quite enviable at that point, but she’d tried and he’d loved the attempts. He’d loved her for trying.

Without warning, she breezed into the living room through the swing door of the kitchen. As she spotted him, the silver tray in her hand slightly tilted off balance.

“You’re here,” she stated.

“Just walked in.”

She set her load down on the cocktail table. “The Bays are set to arrive in a few minutes.”

He took in the snug fit of her feminine tuxedo-cut black suit. The form-fitting jacket accented her waist. The lace camisole she had underneath peaked at the V below her neck and practically screamed temptation. His hand tightened around the wine bottle he was holding.

“You can set that in the kitchen,” she ordered, and then moved with catlike grace to the mantel and lifted the silver candle set.

Without responding, R.J. made his way into the kitchen. This night was not going to be over soon enough. She’d always been stunning, but he realized that now she was in her element. He set the wine bottle down and braced his palms on the counter in front of him. Dark, thick clouds moved through the window above the sink.

The storm was moving closer. He would have to make sure to still the one brewing inside him.

This was why he couldn’t be around her. This burning need to touch her, to claim her as his. It was the same insanity that had nearly destroyed both of them in the past, when they’d let physical desire rule their better judgment. By the time he found out how mismatched they were, the damage

had been done. The memory of that pain should have been enough to guarantee he'd keep his distance tonight.

He walked back out into the living room just as the doorbell rang. Angel froze in the act of lighting a candle. The fiery glow of the forgotten match threw shadows over her face. Her eyes sparkled before the flame.

He took her palm and blew the match out. "We better let them in, don't you think?"

"I—I guess so."

"You guess so? It's kind of late to back out now, Angel." He was still trying to ascertain just how far they had come and how he would manage to recover.

"Why would I want to back out? I just need to tell them this little white lie until I can prove to them what good hands their tea plants are in. By then they won't care anymore."

"And if they do care?"

She gave a quick shake of her head. "I can't worry about that now. I'll need to think about it later." She threw a slight Southern accent in imitation of the famous *Gone with the Wind* line.

He smiled. "In that case, Scarlett, I'll go let the Yankees in."

She nodded and swallowed. It was surprising to see her so nervous. She'd been the most self-assured woman he'd ever known. Granted, the circumstances were a little unusual, but something was throwing Angel off like he'd never witnessed before.

He had to wonder—could it have anything to do with him?

Of course not. She was worried about her business. She was worried about failing to continue the jobs program for all the women who worked for her.

He took a deep breath as he went to answer the door then yanked it open. A smiling, middle-aged couple stared up at him. Both of them had dark hair, hers a shade less brown. They both smiled wide, warmth exuding their features.

"Good evening," R.J. said as he stepped aside to let them in. "I'm Angeline's husband." He nearly choked on the last word.

Angel strode toward them, beaming a warm, welcoming smile. She seemed to have recovered from her earlier nervousness. "Tavov. Mila. So nice to see you again. Please come in."

R.J. felt her hand on his arm and flinched. He tried not to look affected. There was nothing unusual about a wife taking her husband by the arm as they greeted guests.

Man, it was going to be the longest night of his life.

"Nice to see you, too, dear. And very nice to finally meet you." The older man flashed a wide, friendly grin as he turned to R.J. He stretched out his free hand, giving R.J. a welcome excuse to free his own arm. "We weren't sure we'd ever catch up to you," he continued.

"Tavov, Mila. Very nice to meet you both," R.J. spoke over Angel's head as Mrs. Bay had her in an affectionate hug. "I'm R.J."

"Did you have any trouble getting here?" Angel inquired, still locked in the embrace.

"None at all. The driver was waiting for us right at the gate where we landed," Tavov replied.

Before R.J. knew what was happening, Mila moved toward him and he found himself in the same bear hug he'd just witnessed. A stab of guilt hit him at the way he was deceiving such warm, genuine people.

One look at Angel's pale face told him she was thinking the same thing. For one insane moment he wished with all his heart that it could have been different. That the charade had not been necessary.

Where had that thought come from? He didn't have time to speculate. An awkward silence had settled around the foursome. Angel appeared to be frozen in her spot. So far, they weren't doing a very good job of personifying the perfect American couple.

"Why don't we move inside?" He guided the older couple in front of him. Waiting a beat for Angel to catch up, he cupped her elbow and pulled her to his side.

She was shaking. A sheen of perspiration had formed above her lip. He remembered that to be a bad sign. At this rate she wasn't going to be able to go through with it. He gave her hand what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze. She leaned into him, and without thinking, he moved his arm around her waist.

He just held her, close to him, as if his closeness could absorb her anxiety somehow. In a moment, her breathing seemed to even, and he started to lead her toward the living room, where the other couple had seated themselves.

"It's all right," he whispered in her ear. "It will all be over soon."

"I know, it's just—I'd almost forgotten what nice people they were." She wrung her hands. "I wish it hadn't come to this."

He dropped his arm. A sudden sense of loss hit him as soon as he did so. She felt so right near him, up against him. She always had.

"You'll tell them the truth soon enough. For now, let's go take care of business, all right?" He gave her a small nudge forward and followed her in.

Angel composed herself enough to start serving the hors d'oeuvres.

"Tavov, Mila," she began. "It's so lovely to have you here finally. How was your trip?" she asked over her shoulder as she held the tray out to R.J. He shook his head to decline. Somehow he couldn't quite summon up an appetite.

"Oh, it was pretty uneventful," Mila answered. "But it's always so exciting when we come to the States. So much changes, yet it's always the same. The energy level you Americans have, it's just harrowing."

"We should all slow down a little bit. It can get a little tiring to be on the go all the time."

"Yes, my goodness, dear. I can imagine it can be exhausting," Mila agreed.

"What we could use is that soothing herbal tea in this part of the world," Angel said as she set the tray down and sat. He had to hand it to her. She knew how to segue.

"I can't argue with you there, young lady," Tavov stated. "That's why we're here."

"Well, I'm anxious to start talking about it myself. How is the latest crop of Mila's Bloom faring?"

"She hasn't stopped talking about it since she got back," R.J. added. He was pretty certain it was true enough.

She looked up and sent him a smile. A jolt of pleasure shot through clear to his toes. How adolescent of him, he thought.

"Well, it is turning into a pretty impressive crop." Tavov nodded.

Angel jumped up in her seat. "Excellent. So we'll be ready to start shipping when I come down for the harvest?"

Mila squinted her eyes and smiled. "That's what I love about you, Angeline. Always assuming the sale."

Angel had the decency to look sheepish. Then she lifted her head and gave R.J. a pointed look full of meaning. "I've managed to acquire some invaluable things that way."

For an instant, silence took over the small room as the two of them just stared at each other. R.J. couldn't seem to pull his eyes away. When he finally did, he watched as Mila's smile turned into a wide grin.

"How romantic." Mila laughed. "And to think, you gave us the impression originally that you were a staunch businesswoman with no mind for family or roots. And it's so confusing that your last names aren't the same."

"That's not uncommon in the States, Mila," R.J. responded. "A lot of women prefer to keep their birth names for professional reasons."

Tavov swallowed the last bit of his shrimp cocktail. “Well, we make it a point to deal only with family-run operations. We’ve found things are much more stable that way. Remember the last fiasco with that European businessman?” he asked his wife as he patted her knee.

Mila nodded. “Oh, it was awful. That man was much more concerned with turning a fast profit than nurturing a business. All the more resources to buy his bachelor toys. We swore we wouldn’t make that mistake again.”

“That’s why we’re so glad to see how happy the two of you are together,” Tavov said. R.J. noticed Angel’s slight cringe.

“You know, dear, they remind me of another young couple,” Mila spoke to her husband.

“They do.” Tavov beamed as he turned back to her and R.J. “We happen to have a major event to look forward to. Our groundskeeper’s son is marrying our cropper’s daughter. Two of the sweetest kids. So in love. We’re holding the ceremony right on our estate.”

“That’s quite generous of you,” Angel said.

“Nonsense,” Tavov retorted. “We’re almost more excited than they are about it. The ceremony will fall right on the week that you’re visiting us, Angel. I’m sure they’d love it if you could join us. Practically the whole town will be there.”

Angel’s expression became wistful, but it disappeared an instant later. “I would be honored. And I wish them every happiness together,” she said.

Mila nodded. “They seem very happy to have found each other. Those two are very committed, as if they just know they were meant for each other.”

Then they’d be rare exceptions, R.J. thought. A sudden flash of lightning tore through the sky in the window behind the Bays. The storm was going to be a furious one.

Mila leaned closer to him. “So tell me, R.J., what’s your secret?”

“Uh, secret?”

She smiled. “Yes, how did you know that Angeline was the one for you?”

* * *

Angel prayed for a strong gust of wind to tear the roof off and suck her right out of the apartment. This was excruciating. Mila Bay was actually asking R.J. about their relationship. R.J., the same man who hadn’t even held on to his wedding band.

She stood up quickly, sparing him the discomfort of having to answer.

“What’s wrong with me? You two must be starving after such a long journey. Let’s get started with dinner. R.J., would you show our guests to the table?”

He moved toward the dining table and pulled out Mila’s chair. Then he motioned for Tavov to sit down. Just as if he was the true man of the house.

“Excuse me while I start to serve.”

R.J. cleared his throat behind her. “I’ll help you.”

They both moved into the kitchen. Angeline couldn’t get to the sink fast enough. Splashing water on her face, she turned to catch R.J. watching her, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

“What?”

“Why are you getting so nervous? It’s going great.”

“Great? You think this is going great? Our guest just asked you to tell her what makes us such a great couple.”

He grinned. “I could have come up with something.”

She walked over to him, entranced by the way his smile transformed his face. “Oh? And what would you have said?”

“I would have said that you fell madly in love with me on sight and I couldn’t get rid of you for anything.”

Angel opened her mouth wide in shock, then saw his mischievous grin. She poked his chest with her index finger. “You wouldn’t have dared.”

He grabbed her wrist playfully and pulled her toward him. “Wouldn’t I?”

“R.J., if you had said something ridiculous like that, I’d, I’d—”

He pulled her closer, an amused glint dancing in his eyes. “You’d what?”

“I’d have laughed in your face.”

He gave an exaggerated shudder. “Ooh, violent.”

His sarcasm was not lost on her. “Then, I would have pretended to accidentally spill hot soup into your lap.”

The grin faded. “You wouldn’t.”

She shrugged. “You sure about that?”

“That would hurt.”

“That’s the point.”

He seemed to contemplate that for a moment, then let go of her hand. “All right, I’ll try not to make any snide comments.”

She laughed when he gave her a painfully put-upon look. “Why, thank you.”

He returned the smile, and it was so easy to remember all the reasons she’d fallen so hard for him. Nothing she’d experienced before or since had even come close to what they’d shared.

“Just be careful with that soup.” R.J.’s mock reprimand pulled her back into the present. “Actually,” he said as he moved toward the stove, “I think I’ll serve it.”

Angel watched him walk back out to the dining area carrying the serving dish. Still giggling, she was only vaguely aware that their little exchange had lessened her anxiety.

Minutes later they were all seated around the table, the aroma of cream of asparagus wafting up from the plates.

“Angel mentioned that you own a corporate security firm,” Mila directed to R.J., then blew on her spoonful of hot soup.

“Yes, that’s my primary focus right now. Angel heads most of the operations for TeaLC.”

He had managed to answer the question without one lie.

“Such a dynamic field, network security,” Tavov said. “I imagine something as trivial as tea distribution isn’t very exciting to you.”

Uh-oh. Angel swallowed. “More soup for anyone? R.J., I see you’re done already.” She started to stand.

“No, Angel. I’ll hold off until the main course.” He braced his elbows on the table and leaned toward the other man. “On the contrary, Tavov. I find my wife’s side of the business fascinating. But I would never presume to understand as much about it as she does. She’s the brains behind TeaLC. She always has been. I can only be impressed by her tremendous success.”

Angel blinked at R.J.’s answer. He was impressed with her as a businesswoman? She gave a mental shake of her head and spread her napkin back on her lap.

R.J. was playing his part as the doting husband. And he was doing it quite well. It was no more than that. He might sound convincing, but she couldn’t forget how fictional all this was.

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