

2 *in* 1
GREAT
VALUE



Desire™

HIS BLACK
SHEEP BRIDE

Anna DePalo

THE BILLIONAIRE
BABY BOMBSHELL

Paula Roe

Anna DePalo

**His Black Sheep Bride / The
Billionaire Baby Bombshell:
His Black Sheep Bride / The
Billionaire Baby Bombshell**

«HarperCollins»

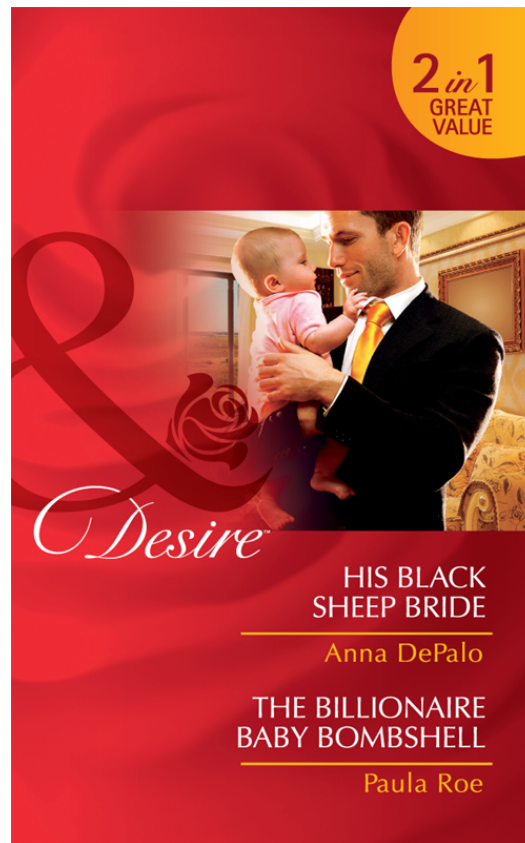
DePalo A.

His Black Sheep Bride / The Billionaire Baby Bombshell: His Black Sheep Bride / The Billionaire Baby Bombshell / A. DePalo — «HarperCollins»,

Be swept away by passion... with intense drama and compelling plots, these emotionally powerful reads will keep you captivated from beginning to end. His Black Sheep Bride Sawyer Langsford, Earl of Melton, was building his media empire. If he had to marry Tamara Kincaid to close a merger with her father, he would. And Tamara had her own desperate reasons for signing on to this sham marriage. But then her father upped the ante, demanding that a child come of the union! The Billionaire Baby Bombshell Billionaire businessman Alex Rush had no idea the woman he'd once loved was now a mother. Yelena must have already been pregnant – with another man's child – when she was declaring her love for Alex. Although he'd tracked her down for an entirely different reason, determining the paternity of her baby girl became Alex's top priority. It could destroy a relationship just about to ignite...

Содержание

About the Author	6
One	7
Two	13
Three	21
Four	26
Five	31
Six	37
Seven	45
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	49



HIS BLACK SHEEP BRIDE

ANNA DEPALO

THE BILLIONAIRE BABY BOMBSHELL

PAULA ROE



www.millsandboon.co.uk

HIS BLACK SHEEP BRIDE

ANNA DEPALO

“Your father wants a dynastic marriage. Real but—”

“Loveless,” she finished for him before he could spell it out for her.

He nodded. “It’s been done for generations.”

Of course, it was centuries of ruthless breeding that had produced Sawyer Langsford—a man’s man, a captain of industry, a guy who seemed capable of impregnating a woman just by looking at her.

“I’m suggesting a short-term arrangement for our mutual benefit,” Sawyer stated.

“A short-term marriage of convenience?” she asked incredulously.

“Well, I know what you would get out of the arrangement,” she shot back.

“Do you?” he said smoothly.

About the Author

A former intellectual property attorney, **ANNA DEPALO** lives with her husband, son and daughter in New York City. Her books have consistently hit the Waldenbooks bestseller list and Nielsen BookScan's list of top 100 bestselling romances. Her books have won an *RT Book Reviews* Reviewers' Choice Award for Best First Series Romance and have been published in over a dozen countries. Readers are invited to surf to www.annadepalo.com, where they can join Anna's mailing list.

Dear Reader,

I've always wanted to write a series with aristocratic grooms. This one draws upon my wonderful New York City as well as the English countryside, which I grew to love while studying abroad after college.

I hope you're entertained (and have a laugh or two) while reading Tamara and Sawyer's romance. It was fun watching my tart-tongued, nonconformist heroine loosen up the conservative (or so she thinks) hero. Tamara may have made a devil's bargain, but Sawyer may wind up losing his heart!

I also hope you enjoy reading about Tamara and Sawyer's friends—Pia and Belinda, and Hawk and Colin. Watch for their stories, coming soon from Desire!

Warmly,

Anna

For Olivia

One

Serving as maid of honor at a wedding was hard enough. If you were trying to avoid someone—such as your intended fiancé—it could be unbearable.

From across The Plaza's crowded reception room, Tamara eyed Sawyer Langsford—or as he was more grandly known in some quarters, the Twelfth Earl of Melton.

She reflected that some things—say, an uncaged lion—were best considered at a distance. Sawyer was an unpleasant reminder of the match her father and his had given voice to making for years. And then, Sawyer had never vocalized *his* thoughts about marrying her, leaving her in a perpetual state of unease.

If she was wary and even hostile, it was also because her personality and Sawyer's were so different—he being so much like her tradition-bound but ambitious, aristocratic father.

Damn Sawyer for being here today. Didn't he have a drafty English castle somewhere that needed his attention? Or at least a moldering dungeon where he could sit and brood?

What was he doing playing the part of one of Tod Dillingham's debonair groomsmen?

If only he looked like a dark, unhappy aristocrat fighting private demons. Instead, he was all golden leonine prowess, owning his domain and topping most people in the room.

If she were being fair, she'd say a society wedding wasn't all that surprising a place for her to run into Sawyer. Almost unavoidable, really, since Sawyer spent a great deal of time in New York for his media business.

But she wasn't in the mood to be fair. Today, as Belinda Wentworth's maid of honor, she'd had to stand at the altar, a smile pasted on her face, aware of Sawyer mere feet away among the other groomsmen.

As the Episcopal priest had intoned the words that would join Belinda and Tod in wedlock, Sawyer's gaze had come to rest on her. He'd looked every inch the aristocrat in white tie and tails, his black tuxedo accentuating his masculinity and air of command. His light-brown hair had reflected gold, caught in a beam of light filtering through one of the church's stained-glass windows, as if some deity in a whimsical mood had decided to spotlight a naughty angel.

Shortly after that moment, the Wentworth-Dillingham nuptials had gone hopelessly awry.

Tamara would have been consoling Belinda at the moment, if the bride were anywhere to be found. But Belinda had disappeared along with Colin Granville, Marquess of Easterbridge—the man who had interrupted the wedding ceremony with the shocking news that his Las Vegas marriage to Belinda two years earlier had never been annulled.

Now, from across the room, Tamara watched with a sinking heart as her father, Viscount Kincaid, approached Sawyer and the two men began to chat.

After a moment, Sawyer looked across the room, and his gaze locked with hers.

His face was handsome but unyielding—the stamp of generations of conquerors and rulers on his face. His physique was lean and solid, like a soccer star in his prime.

Just then, the side of Sawyer's mouth lifted in silent amusement, and Tamara felt her pulse pick up.

Disconcerted, she quickly looked away. She told herself her reaction had nothing to do with physical attraction, and everything to do with annoyance.

To bolster that thought, she wondered whether Sawyer had had advance notice of what Colin had intended—and perhaps more, had been feeding Colin inside information. She hadn't seen Sawyer near Colin earlier at St. Bartholomew's Church. But she'd seen them speaking at social functions in the past, so she knew them to be friendly.

Tamara's lips compressed.

Trust Sawyer to be friends with a villain like Colin Granville, Marquess of Easterbridge, who'd just acquired another title: wedding crasher extraordinaire.

She looked around, careful not to glance in Sawyer's direction. She couldn't find Pia Lumley, either. She wondered whether the wedding planner—part of her and Belinda's trio of girlfriends—had managed to catch up with the bride after encouraging all the guests to repair to a show-must-go-on reception at The Plaza. Or whether Pia was closeted somewhere, in fits over the nuptial disaster that had befallen them all today.

The last time she'd seen Pia, the pixie blonde had been walking away from James Carsdale, Duke of Hawkshire, another friend of Sawyer's, and toward the swinging doors that admitted the waitstaff. Perhaps right now someone in the kitchen was waving smelling salts under her friend's nose, trying to revive her from a dead faint.

Tamara sighed, but then her gaze landed on Sawyer again, and their eyes connected.

His mouth lifted sardonically, and then he turned his head to exchange a few words with her father before both men glanced at her.

A moment later, she realized with horror that Sawyer and her father were heading in her direction.

For a split second, she thought about trying to get away. *Run! Duck! Disappear!*

But Sawyer was advancing on her with a mocking look in his brown eyes, and her spine straightened.

If the media baron was searching for a story, she'd give him one.

Of course, a delicious scandal had just landed in his lap with the Wentworth-Dillingham almost-wedding, but she could always add icing to the cake for him.

After all, didn't a number of his newspapers publish the pseudonymously-authored Pink Pages of Mrs. Jane Hollings—bane of society hostesses and tart-tongued nemesis of social climbers everywhere?

Tamara pressed her lips into a thin line.

"Tamara, my dear," her father said, his expression hearty, "you remember Sawyer, don't you?" He chuckled. "No introductions are necessary, I assume."

Tamara felt her face stiffen until it resembled a frozen tundra. "Quite."

Sawyer inclined his head. "Tamara ... it's a pleasure. It's been a long time."

Not nearly long enough, she thought, before gesturing around them. "It looks as if you'll be the subject of your own newspapers after the wedding debacle today." She arched a brow. "Mrs. Jane Hollings is one of your columnists, isn't she?"

A ghost of a smile crossed Sawyer's lips. "I believe so."

She smiled back thinly. "I can't imagine being the topic of your own gossip would sit well with you."

His lips curved easily this time. "I don't believe in press censorship."

"How practically democratic of you."

Rather than looking offended by her jab, he seemed amused. "The earldom is hereditary, but the title of media baron was acquired in the court of public opinion."

It was on the tip of her tongue to ask what else was hereditary—his arrogance, perhaps?

Her father cleared his throat. "Let's turn to a more pleasant subject, shall we?"

"Yes, let's," she agreed.

Her father's gaze swung between her and Sawyer. "It seems like only yesterday the previous earl and I were sitting in his library, sipping fine bourbon and speculating over the happy possibility our children might one day unite our families through marriage."

There it was again. As far as hints went, it was about as subtle as a sledgehammer.

She resisted the urge to close her eyes and groan, and she was careful not to look at Sawyer.

Apparently, just as she'd feared, seeing her and Sawyer as part of the bridal party had been giving her father ideas—or rather, bringing back old ideas. *Very* old ideas.

She'd grown up hearing the story told and retold. Years ago, before Sawyer's father had passed away, her father and the Eleventh Earl of Melton had already been chummy enough to talk about a dynastic marriage between their two families—one that would unite their respective media empires, as well.

Unfortunately for her, as the eldest of three female half siblings—each the product of one of the viscount's successively brief marriages—she was the logical selection to fulfill dynastic aspirations.

And, likewise, Sawyer, as the successor to the earldom, since his father had died five years ago, was the natural choice on the other side.

Fortunately, both her younger sisters weren't in attendance today, but instead were tucked away at their respective universities. She knew she could withstand Sawyer Langsford. She didn't want to worry about her younger and more impressionable sisters.

After all, she conceded somewhat grudgingly, Sawyer had massive appeal for the opposite sex. She'd seen evidence of that herself over the years, which served as yet another on her very long list of reasons to dislike Sawyer.

"Not that silly story again," she said, attempting to laugh off her father's words.

She looked at Sawyer for confirmation, but realized he was regarding her thoughtfully.

He nodded toward the band, which was playing a romantic tune. "Would you like to dance?"

"Are you joking?" she blurted.

He arched a brow. "Isn't it our job as members of the wedding party to make sure the show goes on?"

Well, he had her there, she admitted. She certainly had some obligations as the maid of honor. And assuming he wasn't a double agent for Colin Granville, erstwhile wedding interloper, she supposed he did, too.

"Splendid idea!" her father said. "I'm sure Tamara would be delighted."

She shot Sawyer a speaking look, but he just gestured pleasantly, as if to say, after you.

She preceded him to the dance floor.

She held herself stiffly in his arms, and the side of Sawyer's mouth quirked up in acknowledgment.

Her smooth, upswept red hair contrasted with her peaches- and-cream complexion, and the difference hinted at the dual sides of her personality: fiery, but poised.

She reminded him of the American actress with the fairytale role—what was her name? Amy Adams.

But with attitude. A lot of attitude. And he had a feeling this Cinderella or Snow White wasn't waiting for a prince on a white steed to come save her.

Tamara had always marched to the beat of her own drummer. Viscount Kincaid's wild child. The bohemian jewelry designer with an apartment in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood.

In fact, today she looked about as demure as he could ever remember her appearing. She wore a formfitting strapless ivory gown with a black satin sash.

But instead of the Kincaid family jewels, she wore a star-burst necklace accented with black onyx, along with similarly styled drop earrings. He'd guess the jewelry was one of her own designs.

As she moved, a small rose tattoo peeked and disappeared above the bodice of her gown, right over the outside slope of her left breast—beckoning him, tantalizing him ... reminding him why the two of them were like oil and water.

Her eyelashes swept upward, and she pinned him with a crystal-clear green gaze.

"What game are you playing?" she asked without preamble.

"Game?" he responded, his expression mild.

She looked annoyed. “My father refers to an arranged marriage, and in response, you ask me to dance?”

“Ah, that.”

“I’d call that stoking the fire.”

“I guess I should be relieved you aren’t accusing me of a more sinister deed than asking you to dance.”

She didn’t seem to find his response the least bit amusing.

“Since you mention it,” she said crossly, “I wouldn’t be surprised if you had advance notice of Colin Granville’s wedding escapade.”

“Wouldn’t you?” Interesting.

Their movements sent them skirting past another couple.

“Everyone knows you and the Marquess of Easterbridge are friends.” She wrinkled her nose. “The aristocratic secret handshake, and all that.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Colin is his own agent. And for the record, there’s no secret handshake. It’s a blood covenant—knives, thumbs, a full moon. You understand.”

She didn’t even bat an eyelash at his attempt at humor. “Your friendship doesn’t extend to plotting society scandals?”

“No.”

“It would help sell newspapers,” she pointed out.

What would help him sell newspapers would be getting his hands on her father’s media empire, he thought.

“Let’s get back to the subject of my so-called game,” he said smoothly. He exerted subtle pressure at the small of her back to guide them in a different direction.

“You’re feeding the beast,” she said emphatically.

By tacit agreement, over the years they’d avoided each other as much as possible whenever they’d had occasion to be at the same social function. The expectation of marriage had been like the white elephant in the room.

Until now.

“Maybe I want to feed the beast.” He’d always tolerated the older generation’s wedding machinations, but lately things had taken a different turn.

She looked startled. “You can’t be serious.”

He shrugged. “Why not? We’ll probably both marry someday, so why not to each other? A dynastic marriage is likely to be as good as any other.”

“I have a boyfriend.”

He scanned the crowd. “Really? Where’s the lucky man?”

Her chin jutted out. “He could not attend today.”

“Tell me you’re not dating another sad sack.” *What a waste.*

She gave him a withering look.

“So that’s why you’re attending the wedding without a date,” he continued, knowing he proceeded at the risk of incurring her wrath.

“It hasn’t escaped my notice you’re here alone, as well,” she shot back.

“Ah, but there’s a reason.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Which is ...?”

“I’m interested in merging Kincaid News into Melton Media. Your father is happy to oblige ... if I marry his daughter.” He cocked his head, and then echoed Viscount Kincaid’s words with mock seriousness. “Keep everything in the family, you see.”

Her eyes widened, and then she said something under her breath.

“Exactly,” Sawyer agreed, and then his lips quirked up. “After all, look at all the trouble you and your sisters have given him so far. You’ve all refused to fall in line. Your father’s pinning his hopes on the third generation.”

The song ended, and she made to pull away from him, but he tightened his arm around her waist. He sensed her resistance for a moment, but then he swung her deftly in a semicircle as the band moved into the next song.

He wasn’t ready to let her end their conversation just yet.

And then, she felt good in his arms, he admitted, as delicious curves pressed against him.

If she were anyone else, he’d have been charming her into giving him her phone number—and maybe more. He’d have looked forward to sleeping with her.

He’d have to play his cards more carefully with Tamara, but the end reward would be infinitely greater.

Tamara gave him an artificial smile. “You sound like my father. Are you sure you’re not the same person?”

Sawyer returned her smile with a feral one of his own. Tamara’s father was fit and trim for a man of seventy, but that’s where the physical similarity between the two of them ended. However, the viscount’s salt-and-pepper hair and grandfatherly visage disguised a sharp mind and cutthroat business instincts.

“We’ve both got the stomach for high stakes,” Sawyer responded finally.

“Yes, how can I forget?” she retorted. “Business before pleasure and family.”

He shook his head. “So bitter for someone whose lifestyle has been bankrolled by the family fortune.”

“It’s been at least a decade since I was young enough to be bankrolled, as you put it,” she countered. “I support myself these days—by choice.”

He raised his eyebrows. So Tamara’s image of an independent woman was more than mere show.

“I think the word *bitter* applies to different circumstances—like going through three divorces,” she said pointedly.

“And yet, the viscount strikes me as someone who’s far from unhappy with life. In fact, he’s such a romantic, he’s trying to get you to walk down the aisle.”

“With you?” she scoffed. “I think not.”

His eyes crinkled with reluctant admiration, even if it was at his expense. “You’re a blunt-spoken New Yorker.”

She arched a brow. “A woman after your own heart, you mean? Don’t you wish!”

“My first marriage proposal, and turned down flat.”

“I’m sure it’ll do no damage to your reputation,” she replied. “You media tycoons do know how to spin a story.”

After a moment, he gave a bark of laughter. “For the record, what makes me an undesirable marriage partner?”

“Where do I begin? Let me count the ways ...”

“Give me the five-second news bite.”

“I understand why my father would want a son-in-law like you ...”

He looked at her inquiringly.

“You’re both peers of the realm and press barons,” she elaborated.

“And those are bad characteristics?”

“But I also know why I don’t want a husband like you,” she went on without answering him. “You’re too much like my father.”

Back to that topic, were they? “Would it help to point out I don’t have three ex-wives?”

She shook her head. “You’re wedded to your media empire. The news business is your first love. You live and breathe for wheeling and dealing.”

“I suppose the existence of ex-girlfriends isn’t enough proof to the contrary?” he asked wryly.

“And what reduced them to ex status?” she probed.

He cocked a brow. “Maybe things just didn’t work out.”

“The key word there being *work*,” she returned. “Namely yours, I assume. My father lives and breathes the media business, even at the expense of people who love him.”

He let the conversation lapse then, since it was clear they were at loggerheads. She hadn’t said it, but it was clear she included herself among the victims who’d fallen by the wayside on the road of her father’s ambition.

They danced in silence, but from time to time he glanced down at her averted face as she scanned the dancing and milling guests, looking as if she was searching for some escape.

She was quite a challenge. She was obviously marked by her parents’ long-ago divorce and her father’s overweening ambition, and unwilling to repeat her parents’ mistakes.

He might have admired her unwillingness to sell herself short in the romance department. But as it happened, in these circumstances, he was the man who was being judged as not quite up to snuff.

With little effort, Tamara evoked all his latent ambivalence. He himself was the product of an ill-fated marriage between a British lord and an American socialite. So he had firsthand experience with free-spirited women who didn’t adapt well to marrying into the tradition-bound British aristocracy.

His mother had named him after Mark Twain’s most famous character, for God’s sake. Who’d ever heard of a British earl named for someone conjured by a quintessential American author?

For a moment, Tamara made him doubt what he needed to do in order to get his hands on Viscount Kincaid’s media holdings.

Then his jaw hardened. He’d be damned if he’d worked this hard to get to where he was only to be stymied by a few inconvenient conditions—including the existence of a sad-sack boyfriend.

When the music faded away, Tamara made to pull away, and he let her break free of his hold.

“We’re done,” she said, a challenge in her voice.

He let one side of his mouth quirk up. “Not nearly, but it’s been a pleasure so far.”

He watched as her green eyes widened. Then she whirled away and stalked off.

Two

The three-way conference call might as well have been invented for the girlfriend gab fest, Tamara thought.

She'd just dialed Belinda and Pia from her office phone. After Saturday's wedding disaster, she'd held off on calling. It was somewhat uncharacteristic behavior for her after a girlfriend crisis, but the truth was she'd been nursing a proverbial hangover herself. Plus, let's face it, this wasn't any old run-of-the-mill crisis involving men, money or bad bosses. It wasn't every day a woman had a bomb land on her wedding in the form of a heretofore unknown husband.

But now it was Monday morning. It was past time, Tamara thought, that she checked in and saw how her friends were holding up.

"Well, Mrs. Hollings is all over this one," she began without preamble after putting her girlfriends on speaker phone. "I swear if I ever get my hands on that woman ..."

The thought that the old dragon of gossip was in Sawyer's employ only made her more irate.

Turning her mind in a different direction, she softened her tone. "Are you okay, Belinda?"

"I'll live through this," her friend responded. "I think."

"Are you still, ah, married to Colin Granville?" Pia asked, voicing the question Tamara herself wanted to ask.

"I'm afraid so," Belinda admitted. "But not for long. Just as soon as I get the *marquess*—" she stressed Colin's title sarcastically "—to agree to a valid annulment, everything will be all right."

"A quick end to a quick marriage ..." Pia said brightly before trailing off uncertainly.

None of them needed a reminder of Belinda's ill-fated run to a Las Vegas wedding chapel.

Tamara knew that the Wentworths and Granvilles had been neighbors and rivals in the Berkshire countryside for generations. It was likely why Belinda had wanted her marriage to the Marquess of Easterbridge undone quietly, and had kept mum to everyone, including even her closest girlfriends, about the apparently short-lived elopement.

"Colin isn't giving you a hard time about the annulment, is he?" Tamara asked.

"Of course not!" Belinda replied. "Why would he? After all, it's not as if we had a real marriage. We dashed into a Las Vegas wedding chapel. The next morning we regretted our mistake. Colin said he'd take care of the annulment!"

"Let's back up to the part where you went into the chapel," Tamara said drily. "How did it happen? You dash to the airport to avoid missing a flight. You dash into a supermarket for some milk."

"You might even dash into Louis Vuitton to grab their latest it bag," Pia suggested.

"Exactly," Tamara went on. "But you do not dash into a wedding chapel to get hitched on the fly."

Belinda sighed. "You do if it's Vegas, and you've just run into someone ... unexpected. And you've had a drink or two that have gone straight to your head."

Pia's groan of commiseration sounded over the phone.

Tamara wondered how much blame to place on a couple of drinks, and how much on Colin himself. Her meticulous friend wasn't the type to get tipsy, at least not without a reason.

"You didn't change your name to Granville, did you?" Tamara asked. "Because if you did—"

Pia gasped. "Oh, Belinda, tell me you didn't! Tell me you didn't legally become one of the enemy!"

"Not to mention you would have been misrepresenting yourself as Belinda Wentworth for the past two years," Tamara commented.

She cringed for her friend. It looked as if Belinda, who was always so self-possessed, had dug herself a hole.

"Don't worry, I didn't change my last name," Belinda responded drily.

“So it was okay to marry a Granville, but not to become one?” Tamara quipped. “I love the way the tipsy you thinks.”

“Thanks,” Belinda retorted. “And don’t worry—the tipsy me is not getting out of her locked and padded cell again.”

Tamara laughed, but then quickly sobered. What was it about a man with a title that made a woman lose her head? Her thoughts drifted to Sawyer, and then, annoyed with herself, she focused on the topic at hand again.

Among their trio of friends, Belinda had always been the levelheaded, responsible one. After getting her degree in the history of art from Oxford, she’d begun a respectable career working at a series of auction houses. Tamara just couldn’t picture Belinda eloping in Vegas with her family’s nemesis. Pia, maybe, Belinda, no.

“There wasn’t an Elvis impersonator involved, by chance, was there?” she heard herself ask.

Pia stifled a giggle.

“No!” Belinda said. “And I just want this headache to disappear!”

“Not likely,” Tamara remarked. “I don’t see Colin going away quietly.”

“He will,” Belinda replied adamantly. “What would make him want to stay in this ridiculous marriage?”

Now there was the million-dollar question, Tamara thought. Belinda sounded as if she was trying to convince herself as much as anyone else.

Tamara decided to turn the conversation in a different direction, to take the pressure off Belinda.

“Pia, I saw you stalking off to the kitchen at one point,” she said. “You looked upset.”

“I wasn’t upset about Colin crashing the wedding,” Pia responded. “Well, I was upset for Belinda. But I had s-someone—ah, other things on my mind.”

Pia’s slight stutter was in evidence, and Tamara knew it only came out these days when her friend was agitated about something.

Tamara decided to probe delicately. “Ah, Pia ... these other things wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain very toff British duke-turned-financier, would it?”

Pia gasped. “That didn’t make Mrs. Hollings’s column, too, did it?”

“I’m afraid so, sweetie.”

Pia moaned. “I’m doomed.”

According to the Jane Hollings column that had appeared in Sawyer’s newspaper that morning, there had been an argument at Belinda’s wedding reception between Pia and the Duke of Hawkshire. Reportedly, Pia had discovered at the reception that the duke was none other than the man she’d known only as Mr. James Fielding when she’d been involved with him a few years before. Upon the discovery of how she’d been mislead, Pia had apparently smashed some hors d’oeuvres into the duke’s face.

“Pia, please,” Belinda said, obviously trying to lighten the mood. “Doomed is committing bigamy.”

“Which you didn’t!”

“Almost.”

“N-no one will want to hire a wedding planner who’s a security risk to wealthy and titled guests!” Pia wailed.

“Did you really sleep with Hawkshire?” Belinda asked.

“He was Mr. Fielding at the time!”

“Oh, Pia.”

“Oh, sweetie,” Tamara said at the same time.

Naturally, Tamara thought darkly, Sawyer was friends with the duke as well as with Belinda’s yet-to-be-annulled husband. Of course both of Sawyer’s good friends would be disreputable.

“Well, it seems like we all had a *great* wedding,” Tamara said. “Sorry, Belinda.”

A sigh sounded over the phone. “No apologies necessary,” Belinda said. “Not even the best spin doctor could put a good face on Saturday’s disaster. It’s not every day a bride almost acquires two husbands.”

They all shared in some self-conscious laughter.

“Well, what made Saturday so bad for you, Tamara?” Belinda asked.

“In short?”

“Yes.”

“Sawyer Langsford. Lord Odious himself.”

Pia giggled.

“Oh, I don’t think Sawyer is so terrible,” Belinda remarked.

“Putting aside his friendship with Colin, you mean?” Tamara asked.

“Okay, I see your point,” Belinda conceded.

“Sawyer is good-looking,” Pia said. “Those topaz eyes, and all that rich, burnished hair—”

Tamara made a face. “Whose side are you on?”

“Well, yours.”

“Good.”

“What about Sawyer’s presence put you out?” Belinda asked. “You’ve socialized before without any problem, as far as I could tell.”

“Because we’ve always ignored each other,” Tamara replied. “But my father seeing the both of us in the wedding procession reminded him of the cherished idea that he and the previous earl had of having their children marry each other.”

Pia spluttered. “You and Sawyer?”

“Hilarious, I know,” Tamara responded.

“Oh, rats,” Belinda said. “If I’d known, I’d have suggested to Tod that he pick another groomsman.”

Tamara grimaced. “It’s not something I like to talk about. In fact, it’s an idea I’ve been hoping was dead and buried. But then Sawyer made it clear on Saturday that he’s willing to entertain the idea.”

Pia and Belinda gasped.

Exactly, Tamara thought.

When she’d heard Sawyer was to be in the wedding party, she’d figured she was a big enough girl to handle it. But she hadn’t foreseen Sawyer’s proposal.

“You and Sawyer are so different!” Pia said. “You’re the Bridget Jones to his Mr. Darcy.”

Tamara closed her eyes in existential pain. “Please. Bridget and Darcy ended up together.”

“Oops, sorry!”

Tamara knew Pia was a romantic. Being a wedding planner suited her friend’s personality. The only surprising thing was that Pia herself wasn’t married. But then, Pia had had her own experience with an odious man.

“So what’s next for you two?” Tamara asked, wanting to change the subject.

“I’m flying to England for a few days on business.”

“And I’ll be in Atlanta to consult with a client on a wedding.”

“Abandoning the field of battle?” Tamara couldn’t resist joking.

“Never!” Belinda declared.

“In a sense,” Pia said at the same time.

“I’m regrouping and marshalling my forces,” Belinda went on, “including getting a lawyer.”

“In meantime,” Pia said, “I’ll be coming up with some spectacular ideas for Belinda’s second act as a bride.” She added uncertainly, “Or should I say, third act ...?”

There was a pause as everyone seemed to wince.

Then Tamara noticed a light flashing on her phone. “On that note, I think I have a call coming in.”

As Tamara ended the call with Belinda and Pia, she wondered for which of the three of them Saturday would prove to be most portentous.

Her parting exchange with Sawyer came back to her.

She’d told him they were done, and he, damn him, had just replied insouciantly, “Not nearly, but it’s been a pleasure so far.”

One week later, Tamara wondered at her rotten luck.

Sawyer, again.

Usually she ran into him only once every few months. Maybe a couple of times a year.

But here he was—at a big fashion party taking place in a large TriBeCa loft. Minor celebrities, socialites and journalists were here to appreciate an up-and-coming designer.

But what was Sawyer doing here?

Tamara had seen a reporter for Sawyer’s newspaper, *The New York Intelligencer*, at the party. Sawyer’s own presence certainly was not necessary.

She knew he attended his share of parties, but this one was not the type he usually attended. Last time she checked, he didn’t have a particular interest in fashion. In fact, she was sure his suits came from an old and stuffy Savile Row tailor with a warrant from the queen.

Sawyer’s presence was a reason to keep up her guard, but at least she had body armor tonight in the form of a date.

She looked around. Tom hadn’t yet returned with their drinks.

As she scanned the room, however, she noticed Sawyer walking toward her.

Rats.

She turned, but just as she ducked behind the heavy velvet curtain that encircled the perimeter of the room—obviously in place to hide blank walls and elevator doors from the view of the assembled guests—a familiar voice reached her.

“Leaving the field of battle?”

She halted, irritated that his words echoed her own to Belinda, but unwilling to show him any reaction.

Squaring her shoulders, she swung back toward him. “Never.”

He gave a predatory smile. “Good.”

She waved her hand toward the curtain to indicate the crowd on the other side. “I was simply trying to avoid getting blood on the designer labels in our latest skirmish.”

“Thoughtful of you.”

She tilted her lips in the semblance of a smile. “You might try it sometime.”

After a moment, he had the indecency to chuckle.

“What are you doing here?” she blurted.

“I received an invitation, I accepted.”

She frowned. “I’ve never seen you at a fashion event before.”

“There’s always a first time. Otherwise life would be boring.”

She felt heat stain her cheeks, and shook off the feeling he was making a sexual suggestion about her ... them.

“I suppose,” she responded coolly, “though I also know there are certain things I don’t care to try.”

She tried to ignore the fact that her pulse had begun to skitter and skip the minute she’d heard his deep voice resonating behind her.

Her reaction both puzzled and annoyed her. Was it because he’d admitted to entertaining the idea of wedding her? It was only that she felt pursued, she insisted to herself. Surely she hadn’t sunk so low as to feel flattered by his attention.

This was Sawyer, the man she'd spent a lifetime avoiding and disdaining. She wasn't like some medieval bride, content to be betrothed from birth.

Still, she couldn't help noticing he made his own fashion statement of sorts tonight. He looked model-perfect in a tieless tan suit and open-collar green shirt. It was about as fashion-forward as she could ever remember him looking. Had it been a long while since her recent encounters with Sawyer, or had he begun relaxing his sartorial standards and she simply hadn't noticed?

As if conducting his own wardrobe assessment, Sawyer gave her a sweeping look that ran up from her peep-toe slingbacks to her knee-length sheath dress, held up by spaghetti straps.

His eyes paused for a moment at her chest, before he raised them to her annoyed expression. "A redhead who isn't afraid to wear red. You never disappoint."

"I'm so glad you approve!" She couldn't help feeling there was an element of disapproval in his words. He was of her father's world, after all. Bohemian jewelry designers didn't fit.

In the next instant, however, he surprised her by reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

She stilled as he paused to finger a teardrop peridot earring. The contact was intimate—erotic, even—though he wasn't touching her directly.

"I'm interested in having some jewelry pieces designed," he said, his deep voice sending an involuntary thrill through her.

Pushing aside how very aware of him she was, she asked, making her voice sugary, "For your current love interest?"

He took his time answering. "You could say that."

She looked at him with exaggerated disbelief. "Am I to assume that's why you arranged to intercept me at a fashion event? Because you're looking for a jewelry designer?"

"Among other things."

She held on to her irritation because it was easier to deal with than how disturbing his nearness was. "Let's get back to what you're doing here. Or should I say, how you knew I'd be here?"

He gave her a level look. "One guess."

"My father," she said flatly.

"Correct."

Her lips tightened. "When I see him again ..."

She castigated herself now for revealing to her father some of the details of her social and business schedule in response to his seemingly casual questions a couple of weeks ago when they'd met for lunch.

No question she and her father needed to have a serious conversation. One that included the reasons why he shouldn't interfere in her life. It apparently wasn't enough she was based in New York and he was often in London, putting the breadth of the Atlantic Ocean between them.

Sawyer regarded her with an unreadable expression. "Marriage is not such a crazy idea."

"Don't tell me you're still considering this!"

"The idea has its merits."

"And here I was thinking you sought me out to have a trinket designed for your current flame! Instead, you hauled yourself here in order to make a marriage proposal. Now there's a good, solid reason to attend a froufrou fashion event, when everyone knows you have zero interest in fashion!"

Thank goodness they were in a semiprivate area of the room, Tamara thought. The last thing she needed was for their argument to be witnessed by avid onlookers.

"Are you done?" he asked, his topaz eyes glittering.

Not by a mile. "How efficient of you. Well, you can erase the marriage proposal from your BlackBerry calendar! Good luck with the rest of your day."

She turned away, but she'd taken only two steps when he grasped her arm and swung her back toward him.

“You have to be the most prickly woman I know,” Sawyer muttered.

“Yet another reason I wouldn’t make a suitable wife,” she flung back. “I can bring home the sarcasm, serve up your ego in a pan and never let you forget you’re a—”

“Damn.”

In the next moment, Sawyer’s lips came down on hers.

Tamara stilled.

Sawyer’s lips were soft but firm, and in the next instant, Tamara became aware that he tasted sweet but heady and carried the warm scent of man.

Sensation coursed through her, and her body hummed to life. She’d been kissed before, of course, but kissing Sawyer, she was discovering, was like doing vodka shots when she was used to beer.

Time slowed. She felt the heavy thump of her heart, and became aware of his lean, muscular strength pressed against her.

She reached up to clutch Sawyer’s shoulders, and in response, he made a low, growling sound and deepened the kiss.

Her brain radioed the message that she’d been right to steer clear of him in the past. The man was pure testosterone poured into a suit—and he was sending her pheromones into chaos.

Help.

And then the sound of laughter came through the heavy, thick curtains. And just like that, she felt jolted from his sexual spell.

Tearing her lips from Sawyer’s, she opened her eyes and shoved him away.

Her heart hammered as he rocked back a half step. But after a moment, his face went smooth and cool.

It was as if the hot lover of a moment ago who had caused her senses to riot had morphed back into the tycoon with an implacable facade.

“Well,” Sawyer said slowly, “I guess we answered one question.”

A question? She was thinking more in terms of exclamation points. Lots of them.

“Which is?” she huffed.

“We have no problem with sexual chemistry.”

Her eyes widened. “Get over yourself.”

He gave her a sweeping look, and muttered, “It’s you I think I need to get over.”

A wave of heat washed over her. An image of Sawyer, naked and looming over her in bed, flashed through her mind.

“You need to come with a warning label!” she shot back.

His smile was rather wolfish. “Isn’t that what I’m proposing?” he asked. “Make the world safe for other women. Take me off the market.”

“I’m a jewelry designer, not a lion tamer.”

“You could be both,” he said, his voice smooth as honey.

She cursed herself for finding his sexual banter seductive. Wasn’t she an educated, independent woman of the twenty-first century?

Sawyer, on the other hand, was a throwback to feudal lords—and thanks to his ancestors, he had a real, present-day title to match.

Well, he’d have to look for his countess elsewhere. She didn’t know where—though she supposed a fashion event with plenty of beautiful, pedigreed women tottering around in four-inch heels wasn’t a half-bad bet—but she knew she wasn’t in the running.

“In any case,” Sawyer said, breaking into her thoughts, “I’m not proposing what your father has in mind.”

“Oh?” she asked with false smoothness. “Then what are you proposing?”

“Your father wants a dynastic marriage. Real but—”

“Loveless,” she finished for him before he could spell it out for her.

He nodded. “It’s been done for generations.”

“This is the twenty-first century.”

Of course, it was centuries of ruthless breeding that had produced Sawyer Langsford—a man’s man, a captain of industry, a guy who seemed capable of impregnating a woman just by looking at her.

“I’m suggesting a short-term arrangement for our mutual benefit,” Sawyer stated.

“A short-term marriage of convenience?” she asked incredulously.

“Right.”

“Well, I know what you would get out of the arrangement,” she shot back.

“Do you?” he said smoothly.

She ignored the subtext of sexual suggestion. “You’d get control of Kincaid News. But what in the world would be the incentive for me?”

“You’d be doing the right thing for your family,” he said, unperturbed. “The majority of your father’s media business is in the United Kingdom, while most of my company is in the United States. With corporate synergies, both our companies can continue to prosper. Your father needs a successor for the family firm, and I know the media business.”

He added with a quirk of the lips, “Your father would stop trying to interfere in your life. He’d be forever in your debt.”

She frowned. “Only because I’d be married to you!”

The price was too high.

“We’d seem to be married for a short while,” Sawyer allowed. “But we’d both know the truth.”

She felt an unexpected twinge, and then despite herself, she asked, “What about divorce? What happens to the companies then?”

“Once the companies have merged, I’m betting there’ll be no turning back. Your father will have his money, and he’ll be forced to concede the efficacy of the deal.”

“How convenient for you,” she responded. “You get your hands on Kincaid holdings without the long-term baggage of a Kincaid bride.”

Sawyer’s lips quirked again, and this time, she itched to wipe the smile off his face.

“I wouldn’t call you a piece of baggage,” he said.

“I’m not marrying you.”

“There’d be additional benefits for you.”

“Those being what?” she retorted.

“I’m in a position to help you move your jewelry business to the next level,” he said. “In a way your father hasn’t been.”

Her spine stiffened. “There are too many strings attached,” she said warily. “Anyway, what do you know about my design business?”

“I know Kincaid has refused to become an investor.”

Tamara relaxed. It was apparent Sawyer’s only clue about her business had come through her father.

She conceded that Sawyer’s persistence was a valuable business trait. But she wasn’t going to base her married life on a business deal—especially one where she had little to gain and all of her hard-won independence to lose.

“No thanks,” she retorted. “I’ve got the situation well in hand.”

“There you are!”

At the sound of a familiar voice, Tamara turned around and discovered Tom making his way toward them along the line of draped curtains, one champagne flute in each hand.

How had Tom thought to look for her here? Still, she was grateful for the rescue.

“Sorry, babe,” Tom said. “I was intercepted by someone I knew. He was a guy who used to play some of the same gigs as Zero Sum.”

Tom was the quintessential yet-to-make-it-big rocker. He was slightly unkempt, his brown hair curling at the neck of a black T-shirt and matching jacket. He and his band, Zero Sum, hadn't given up on looking for their big break.

Tom had been her occasional date for the past year, whenever he was in town. But right now, Tamara couldn't help contrasting him to Sawyer, who stood about half a head taller, and a world of difference away in smoothness.

Tamara considered herself tall—or at least, not short—at five-seven, but Sawyer had a considerable height advantage on her.

"Tom, you know his lordship, the Earl of Melton, don't you?" she asked, using Sawyer's title in order to strive for some emotional distance between them.

Sawyer's look said he saw right through her ploy.

She ignored him. "My lord, may I present Tom Vance?"

She watched as Sawyer and Tom shook hands and took each other's measure.

"Melton as in Melton Media?" Tom asked.

"One and the same," Sawyer replied.

Tom's face brightened. "Pleasure to meet you, ah—"

"My lord," Tamara supplied, trying not to roll her eyes.

"My lord," Tom repeated, and then shot a grateful look at her. "Thanks, Tam."

"Tam?" Sawyer queried sardonically. "Like Tom and Tam?"

"You've got it." Tom grinned, happy as a puppy.

Tamara could see the wheels turning in Tom's head. To Tom, meeting Sawyer was like hitting the networking jackpot. Sawyer's media outlets presented limitless opportunities. Free publicity! Advertising! Name recognition! In short, the kind of opportunity that Tamara's father refused to provide to Zero Sum.

Sawyer glanced at her. "Tam—Ms. Kincaid, excuse me, won't you? There's someone who's expecting me."

Tamara had no doubt Sawyer had switched from *Tam* to her surname in order to mock her. Still, she was grateful their encounter was at an end.

Unfortunately, she didn't think they'd also put an end to the subject of a dynastic merger—marital, corporate or otherwise.

Three

The bar of the Carlyle Hotel was as good a place as any for three notorious bachelors to lie low. Or rather, two notorious bachelors and one notorious groom, Sawyer amended.

It was ironic for him to lie low, since he was the press. But these were his friends.

Like his two fellow aristocrats, he'd grown up here, there and everywhere. Still, despite their peripatetic existence, he and his bar companions had managed to become friends.

And now they had another thing in common. Ever since the wedding fiasco at St. Bart's nearly two weeks ago, they were imbrued by the scandal of the moment.

The bar, with its dark woods and mellow lighting, was masculine and clubby and the perfect atmosphere to come together and commiserate.

It was also discreet without being sequestered. Because Sawyer would be damned if he was going to tuck in his tail and hide.

"Hell of way to crash a wedding, Easterbridge," James Carsdale, Duke of Hawkshire, said, going straight to the heart of the matter.

"You could have given us some warning," Sawyer added drily.

Sawyer had to admire Colin's sangfroid. Of the three of them, the marquess was the most reserved and enigmatic. And now he'd just thrown not one, but two ancient British families into upheaval with his surprising news at the wedding—and his shock-maximizing method of delivery.

In response, Colin Granville, Marquess of Easterbridge, who'd been the last to arrive, took a swallow of his Scotch on the rocks.

They were sitting at one corner of the bar, away from the few other patrons. Since it was a hot and sunny day, and still a couple of hours from sunset, the dark bar was not even half-full.

"You're the media, Melton, and you were a groomsman," Colin finally pointed out lazily. "A double conflict of interest. You'll understand why I didn't take you into my confidence."

Sawyer took issue. "You know I was picked as a groomsman because Dillingham and I are distantly related through our mothers. We're not friendly in a true sense."

"Yes," Colin responded wryly, "but that fact, along with your role as one of the world's most famous press barons, made you dynamite for the wedding party. The expectation of glowing press coverage was likely more than Dillingham could pass up. Not to mention cementing the extended family relationship."

Sawyer shook his head. "As it turned out, the only dynamite at the wedding was you, and Dillingham got more media coverage than he bargained for."

In response, Colin raised his glass in mock salute.

"If you couldn't confide in Melton," Hawk said, resting his elbow on the back of his chair so he could lean back in his position between his companions, "you could've at least told me."

"Spoken like a true international man of mystery, Mr. Fielding," Colin returned.

Sawyer smothered a laugh. He couldn't picture their carefree, sandy-haired friend trying to pass himself off as a mere mister. Nor did he understand why Hawk would have wanted to.

"Right, and what's going on there Hawk?" Sawyer asked. "The rumor mill, and pardon me for reading my own newspapers, has it that you were more than friendly with a certain lovely wedding planner—"

Hawk grimaced. "What's going on is a private matter."

"Precisely my point," Colin said.

"A private matter, Your Grace?" Sawyer quizzed. "You mean between you and your alias, James Fielding?"

"Put a sock in it, Melton," the duke growled.

“Yes, Melton,” Colin said, siding with Hawk, “unless you’d like us to quiz you on your pursuit of the fair Ms. Kincaid.”

It was Sawyer’s turn to grimace. His friends knew his acquisition of Kincaid News was tied up with Tamara’s hand in marriage. Fortunately, they *didn’t* know the particulars about his most recent interactions with Tamara. She’d gotten under his skin—so much so that he’d kissed her. And it had been some kiss—hot and wonderful enough to leave a man thirsting for more.

“I’ve seen Kincaid’s daughter with a date,” Hawk commented, arching a brow. “Always the same one.”

Sawyer shrugged. “She takes a date from time to time.”

“A date who’s not you,” Colin pointed out.

“Just an occasional date?” Hawk probed. “And you know this how?”

Sawyer gave a Cheshire-cat grin. “From the man himself, Mr. Tom Vance, lately of the rock band Zero Sum, and perhaps soon to be the recipient of some very good career news.”

Colin quirked an eyebrow, for once betraying a hint of surprise.

Hawk started to shake his head. “Don’t go there ...”

Since he already had, Sawyer gave both of them a bland look. “Know of any good West Coast record producers?”

She was sunk.

Or more accurately, practically destitute.

Tamara stared at the letter in her hand. Her bid for investors had fallen flat. Financing was tight these days, and people apparently weren’t lining up to give money to a lone jewelry designer with a big idea and not much else to her name.

She’d maxed out her credit cards and had already gobbled up her allotment of small business loans.

She looked around her loft from her seat at a workbench cluttered with pliers, clasps and assorted gemstones. Her business had a name, Pink Teddy Designs, and not much else these days. Yesterday, she’d received notice her rent would be increasing, so soon even the four walls around her would cease to exist—as far as she and her business went, anyway.

She’d have to find another place to live and work. There was no way she could afford a ten percent rent increase—not with things the way they were.

She’d never have admitted this to Sawyer when she’d encountered him last week at the fashion party in TriBeCa, but these days she was hanging by a thread—one that was becoming very frayed very fast, ever since she’d left her salaried position two years ago at a top jewelry design firm to strike out on her own.

Rats.

She was desperate—and Sawyer’s words reverberated through her mind. *I’m in a position to help you move your jewelry business to the next level.*

No, she wouldn’t let herself go there.

And with any luck, Sawyer didn’t have a clue as to just how dire her current financial situation was. He hadn’t seemed as if he did. In fact, his words to her that night indicated he thought she was looking to expand her business, not merely survive.

She hoped her appearance had also served to throw him off the scent. She’d dressed to project an image of success. She’d worn expensive earrings of her own design to the fashion party—as much for advertising as for anything else, though the earrings were worth much more than the typical Pink Teddy piece of semiprecious jewelry.

Yes, she dreamed of expanding her business and having her name added to the roster of top celebrity jewelry designers. But she’d also had to start small, given her financing, or rather lack thereof. And now she was nearly broke.

People assumed she had money—or at least connections—as the daughter of a millionaire Scottish viscount. In fact, she was entitled to be addressed as the Honourable Tamara Kincaid and not much else. After her parents' divorce when she was seven, she'd gone to reside in the United States with her mother, who had been able to maintain a respectable, but not settled, lifestyle. Instead, thanks to child-support payments, Tamara had been entrusted to the care of a series of babysitters, schools and summer camps while her peripatetic mother had continued to travel and move them within the United States.

Her mother resided in Houston now with husband number three, the owner of a trio of car dealerships, having finally achieved a measure of stability.

Tamara sighed. Partly because of the physical distance, she and her mother weren't very close, but a fringe benefit was that her mother didn't interfere much in her life.

Of course, she could hardly claim the same benefit with respect to her father, who owned an apartment in New York City.

But unlike her mother, she'd thumbed her nose at her father's money. Because the strings attached had been more than she'd been able to accept. As she'd grown older, her father had made his opinions known, and her artsy tendencies, her penchant for the bohemian and her taste for the unconventional had not gone over well.

Her father's attempts to meddle had, of course, reached their zenith in his crazy plan to marry her off to Sawyer.

Really, that scheme was beyond ridiculous.

Sure, her parents' marriage had been an ill-advised union between an American and a British aristocrat—a still-naïve girl from Houston on the one hand, and the young and ambitious heir to a viscountcy on the other. But her starry-eyed mother, who'd imagined herself in love, had been thrilled by the prospect of residing in a British manor house.

In contrast, Tamara prided herself on being a worldly-wise New Yorker. And much as she hated to admit it, she had her father's skeptical nature. She'd inherited her mother's coloring and features, but that's where similarities ended.

She liked her life just fine. She was bohemian with an edge.

A marriage between her and Sawyer Langsford was laughable. They barely spoke the same language, though she had been known to read his paper, *The New York Intelligencer*, and occasionally watch the Mercury News channel.

To Sawyer's credit, Tamara acknowledged, his media outlets didn't stoop to petty sensationalism. And she had to admit he'd built an international media empire from the two British radio stations and the regional newspaper he'd inherited from his father. At thirty-eight, he'd stuffed a lifetime's worth of career accomplishments into a mere fifteen years or so.

At twenty-eight, she was a decade behind Sawyer in experience and worlds away in outlook. Yes, she wanted her design business to float instead of sinking into the great abyss, and yes, she dreamed of becoming successful. But she didn't aspire to the same lofty heights of empire building that her father and Sawyer did.

She'd effectively been abandoned twice by her father—once, in a transatlantic divorce, and then again by Viscount Kincaid's devotion to his media company. She couldn't—wouldn't—risk acquiring a husband who was from the same mold.

It would be beyond foolhardy, notwithstanding the kiss the other night.

Still, the kiss had repeatedly sneaked into her thoughts over the past few days. Sawyer had made her toes curl. And embarrassingly, she'd clearly responded to him.

But she knew why Sawyer had kissed her. He'd been trying to convince her to agree to a marriage of convenience.

If Sawyer thought she was a pushover for his seduction techniques, however, he had another thing coming. So she'd had a brief and primitive response to his air of raw power and sexuality. She

was still well past the age of gullibility—of being swayed by a momentary attraction into a relationship with someone who was so very wrong for her.

In contrast, she and Tom were alike. They enjoyed prowling SoHo at night, appreciated the city, and were both artistic. They were friends, first and foremost.

They weren't two people from very different backgrounds united by lust. In other words, to her relief, they were definitely *not* her parents.

As if on cue, her cell phone rang, and it was Tom.

"You'll never guess what's fallen in my lap," Tom said.

"Okay, I give up. What?" she replied.

"I'm flying out to L.A. to meet with a big music producer. He heard one of our demos and is interested in signing the band."

"Tom, that's wonderful!" Tamara exclaimed. "I didn't even know you were in touch with a producer out in L.A."

Tom laughed. "I wasn't. The guy got his hands on the demo from a friend of a friend."

"See, networking works."

Tom gave an exaggerated sigh. "Here's the thing, babe. I'll be gone. Physically, existentially and in every other way."

She picked up on his meaning.

"What?" she said with mock offense. "You'll no longer be available to be my standby date?"

It was easy for her to adopt a lighthearted tone, she realized. Tom had never been more than a casual, occasional date for her—a reliable escort when she had to attend one social function or another. He was nothing more, despite their Tom- and-Tam epithet, and that was the reason she could be happy for him without rancor.

"Afraid not," Tom responded now. "Will you ever forgive me?"

"If I don't, you could always write a song about it," she teased.

Tom laughed. "You're a pal, Tam."

Tom's words summed up their relationship, Tamara acknowledged. It had always been easy and casual. Such a contrast, she thought darkly, from her fraught interactions with—

No, she wouldn't go there.

"It was a lucky break running into your friend the Earl of Melton."

Tamara started guiltily. "He's not my friend."

"Well, friend or acquaintance—"

"And what do you mean it was a lucky break?" she asked, even as she was touched by a feeling of foreboding.

"Well, this music producer has a friend who socializes with the earl. Seems the earl had heard my music—"

She'd just *bet* Sawyer was a fan of Zero Sum.

"—and had talked it up to a friend of his, who passed along the recommendation to his music industry connection."

Tamara felt a wave of heat wash up her face. He didn't ... He wouldn't ...

And yet, it was all too convenient.

When she found Sawyer, she was going to let him have it, and then some.

For Tom's sake, however, she forced herself to sound cheerful. There was no reason to rain on Tom's parade by imparting her suspicions about how his lucky break was more than mere luck.

Besides, from Tom's perspective, it didn't matter how his intro to a top music producer had come about. The bottom line was that he was getting his chance to hit it big.

"I owe this all to you, Tam," Tom said gratefully. "I don't need to tell you how tough things have been in the music industry lately, so getting someone to take a chance on Zero Sum is a big deal."

If only Tom knew *exactly* what he owed to her, Tamara thought.

“I’ll keep my fingers crossed for you,” Tamara said. “Blow them away.”

“Thanks, babe. You’re the best.”

When she ended her call with Tom, she set down the phone and stared at it unseeingly, her brows knitting as she contemplated Sawyer’s skullduggery.

She’d barely begun to get herself worked up over Sawyer’s fiendishness, however, when the intercom sounded.

After she pressed the intercom button by the front door, she jumped as she heard Sawyer’s voice.

She took a deep breath. Apparently her confrontation with Sawyer would occur sooner than she’d expected.

“Come on up,” she said with a semblance of serenity, and buzzed him in.

Four

Trust Tamara to name her company something ridiculous and suggestive like Pink Teddy Designs, Sawyer thought as he rode the elevator up to the third floor.

The name had been emblazoned next to the buzzer for Tamara's apartment in a cast-iron warehouse building that had long ago been converted into lofts. Located along one of SoHo's narrow side streets, the sidewalk in front of Tamara's building had nevertheless been almost as crowded with pedestrians and street vendors peddling everything from paintings to T-shirts as SoHo's main commercial strips, Broadway and Prince and Spring Streets.

It looked as if Tamara had rented one of the cheaper apartments she could find in one of Manhattan's priciest boho neighborhoods. Factories and warehouses had long since given way to high-end retailers such as Prada, Marc Jacobs and Chanel, though some artists who had bought their lofts when they were cheap still held on.

Of course, Sawyer thought, the businessman in him could appreciate that Tamara's choice of location made sense. Any business had a certain image to project, and location was part of it. But it seemed as if Tamara had cut corners where she could, starting with choosing a side street and a lower floor, closer to street noises.

He stepped out of the elevator and found Tamara's apartment. But just as he was about to hit the bell, the door opened.

As a first impression, Tamara made quite an impact. In two seconds flat, he registered a short V-neck purple dress, black peep-toe sandals with bows and an opal pendant nestled on the pillow of her cleavage.

His body hummed to life.

"What are you doing here?" Tamara asked, her voice cool and clipped, though her eyes flashed fire.

He twisted his lips sardonically. "That makes twice. Is that the way you greet all your clients?"

"Only the ones who aren't welcome." Then belying her words, she stepped aside. "What do you mean by *client*?"

Sawyer walked into the boxy but airy loft. "I want to have a piece of jewelry designed, if you'll recall."

Tamara's face registered disbelief before her eyes flashed fire again. "You can't be serious."

"That makes twice again. I seem to have a knack for eliciting the same reactions from you." Then he added, in answer to her question, "In fact, I am serious, and I thought you'd be happy about the offer of business."

He watched as she clamped her mouth shut. *Splendid*. He'd stopped her adamancy with a tantalizing lure—a reminder of what he had to offer, and what she stood to lose.

Sawyer scanned the loft. It looked like what his prior investigation had revealed: an apartment that also served as an office and business headquarters.

Near the back, he could see a partition that appeared to section off a sleeping area. To his right, near the entry door, there was a kitchen with light wood cabinets and black appliances. In front of him, the space was dominated by a comfy work area—a deep-red velour couch and armchair, a few potted plants and a large glass-topped table cluttered with what looked, at a glance, like the tools of the jewelry-making trade. A workbench stood off to one side.

The entire space was marked by a high ceiling and accentuated by large, inverted-U-shaped windows that let in plenty of natural light—a precious commodity in Manhattan's pricey real estate market.

Hearing a click as Tamara shut the door behind him, he walked with deliberate casualness to a nearby waist-high glass display case.

He let his eyes scan the bracelets, necklaces and earrings on display, all made from some type of green gemstone.

“It’s green agate, in case you’re wondering,” Tamara said crisply as she stopped beside him.

He looked up from the case, and she regarded him challengingly, almost defensively.

“I was reading your stare,” she explained.

“You have a unique style.”

“Thank you, I think.”

His lips quirked up. “You’re welcome.”

She looked pointedly at his custom-made business suit, as if making a silent judgment about the contrast in their two styles.

Perhaps she was also wondering why he’d bothered to fit a visit with her into his busy work schedule.

He wasn’t about to accommodate her unspoken question, however. Because the truth was, though it was late Wednesday afternoon and the middle of his workweek, he’d cleared his schedule in order to come downtown and find her. And if Tamara knew the importance he’d attached to his visit, she’d clam up and retreat. Or more likely, it would raise her hackles again.

“What sort of commission do you have in mind?” she asked finally, saving him from a response.

He figured it was too much to hope she’d had an abrupt change of heart about creating jewelry for him. More likely, her curiosity was simply piqued. But he’d work with that for now.

“A coordinated set,” he said blandly. “Earrings and a necklace.”

“Of course,” she responded with a corresponding lack of inflection. “Do you prefer a particular type of stone?”

He looked into her eyes. “Emeralds.”

“A popular choice—” she gave him a saccharine smile “—but I can’t help you. I focus on bridge jewelry made with semiprecious stones—”

“Designing fine jewelry with precious stones can’t be much different,” he countered.

Tamara hesitated before conceding grudgingly, “No, it’s not.”

“Great, then there’s no problem,” he responded smoothly. “Which stones do you like?”

She frowned. “I don’t see how that enters—”

“You’re a professional designer,” he diverted. “I’d like to know what you think. What stones do you prefer, assuming money isn’t an issue?”

She clenched her jaw. “Emeralds. Dark-toned ones.”

He gave a satisfied smile. “Then we’re in agreement. Make them big, and surrounded by diamonds.”

She pursed her lips. “Has it ever occurred to you that I simply might not like a commission from you?”

“Never.” He flashed a smile. “You’re in business to sell jewelry, and I’m here prepared to spend six figures.”

With an oblique reference, he cast another lure for her. He was a seasoned player at the negotiation table and now he brought his skills to bear.

She looked exasperated. “You are decisive.”

“Yes, I am.” He hid his satisfaction in the chink in her armor. “Aren’t most of your clients?”

“I don’t usually do custom orders,” she responded. “It’s not how I operate. The people who buy my jewelry appreciate something offbeat.”

He grinned. “Not your usual high-society bling bling.”

At her nod, he added, “Then I hope you can ... accommodate me.”

It was sexual banter, but he was careful to keep his expression innocent. Nevertheless, she regarded him with suspicious displeasure for a moment.

“No request is too unusual,” she replied finally.

“What a relief.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I’ll need a deposit, and you’ll have to give me time to contact my suppliers and find the right stones. Fat emeralds are not among my usual orders.”

Touché. Still, he was happy to have her think of him as gaudy and tasteless as long as it got him one step closer to his goal. “Naturally, I understand. I hope I’m not putting you out.”

“Not any more than the unexpected appearance of a persistent would-be client,” she shot back.

The shadow of a smile touched his lips. Tamara certainly knew how to give as good as she got. What a waste she would have been on Tom. Sawyer was not the least bit repentant about his ruthless maneuvering.

Rather than respond directly to her jab, he turned the conversation in the direction he wanted it to go. “I thought you’d be happy about an expensive order.” He glanced around at their surroundings. “I understand you could use some help.”

Now that he had her on the hook, he could afford to drive his point home.

Tamara hesitated. “What makes you think so?”

“I have my sources.”

She scowled suddenly. “Have you been talking to my father?” She held up a hand, as if to stop him. “No, wait. Don’t bother answering that question.”

“For the record, it was through my own digging. But what I didn’t find out on my own, your friend Tom was happy to volunteer.”

She ignored the reference to Tom and braced one hand on her hip, her eyes narrowing. “You had me investigated?”

He let his lips quirk up on one side. “I like to know who I’m doing business with. Avoids nasty surprises.”

“So I should be flattered?” she demanded, looking outraged. “Is it a compliment that I merited the same full-blown investigation you might accord to a prospective business partner?”

“In or out of bed,” he added to get a rise out of her.

Her face flushed with color. “I see.” She gave him a sweeping look. “And I suppose none of your ... girlfriends were infuriated by having to pass muster? Was the privilege of sleeping with you just too great a prize?”

He gave her a slow grin designed to incense. “No complaints yet.”

“Oh!”

For a moment, she looked as if she was speechless with outrage, fishing around for the right words for a proverbial clobbering.

Finally, she bit out, “I suppose that’s why you’re here today—to order a trinket for one of the lucky winners?”

He cocked his head to the side, and then raised his hand to slowly brush a tendril back from her face.

She stilled.

“You could characterize it that way,” he said in a deep voice that held just a hint of laughter.

She brushed his hand aside. “Fine,” she huffed, her voice nonetheless holding a hint of breathlessness. “It’s not my business why my clients come to me—or how.”

“Not too discriminating to do business with the devil?” he baited her.

She gave him a narrow-eyed look. “Let’s step over to my desk to discuss what you’re looking for.” She paused, and then added emphatically, almost warningly, “In a necklace and earrings coordinate set, of course.”

He gave a low laugh as he followed her.

This sale was costing her, but she was gritting her teeth and bearing it since she needed the money. Pink Teddy Designs meant a great deal to her, and he planned to exploit the attachment to his every advantage.

Shamelessly ... ruthlessly ... unrepentantly.

Because if there was one thing he knew, Sawyer acknowledged as he admired Tamara's backside and shapely legs, it was that Kincaid News was worth the effort ... and so was Tamara. And certainly, it would be no hardship to bed Tamara along the way to getting what he wanted.

At her desk—which was actually the large, glass-topped table he'd seen earlier—he sat in a bar-height chair at a right angle to her.

"So describe to me what you're looking for." She set aside some metal boxes so they sat out of her way, and added belatedly, "In earrings and a necklace."

"In earrings and a necklace, of course," he murmured, echoing her words.

In fact, he'd love to describe what he was looking for—in and out of bed.

The truth was, he acknowledged to himself with some degree of surprise, if he'd ever let himself really look over the years, he'd have said Tamara wasn't too far off the mark from what he usually looked for in a woman, though he'd never dated a redhead.

She had inherited her mother's model looks and figure. She had generous breasts and hips, but still managed to look willowy and statuesque. And she had amazing bone structure. Her lips were full, balanced by an aquiline nose and delicately arched brows over crystalline green eyes. She was good enough to grace the cover of any glamour magazine, if she chose. That she *didn't* choose said a lot about her.

Physically, she fit his type. But he'd always envisioned someone who embraced his aristocratic heritage as his bride.

Tamara pulled a white paper pad in front of her, and then reached for a pencil. "Describe to me what you're looking for. If the design isn't to your liking, we can always play around with it. Computerized design technology is an amazing thing these days, but I prefer to start with an old-fashioned sketch."

He cocked his head and regarded her. "Something unique. Something that will have people take a second look."

"That's a wide universe," she replied archly, her pencil hovering.

He shrugged. "Let your imagination run wild."

She gave him another narrow-eyed look, as if she was thinking of hitting him over the head, or wondering at his audacity—the equivalent of asking the wife to pick out a gift for the mistress.

"I'm thinking of a choker," she said sweetly.

He laughed softly, and she put down her pencil and reached for a three-ring binder.

"Here," she said. "These might give you some ideas. They're some computerized drawings I've done."

"Great," he said, taking the binder from her.

While he paged through her drawings, she occupied herself with arranging objects on her desk and pointedly ignoring his study of her designs.

Finally, he set the binder on the table with deliberate casualness. He wasn't going to let her off the hook too easily. He knew what he wanted, and he wasn't going to stop until he got it.

"These are good, but I need more," he said.

She looked nonplussed. "More?"

"Yes. It would be better if you modeled some of your designs for me."

It took a moment for his words to sink in, but then her eyes flared, and their gazes clashed.

He shrugged, a smile playing at his lips. "Call it a singular lack of imagination."

He watched as she seemed to grit her teeth. How much was she willing to do for a lucrative commission?

He could practically see the wheels turning in her head. How far would she go to indulge his whims?

"Which one?" she finally asked with exaggerated patience.

He had little doubt her use of the singular was deliberate. She had no intention of modeling any more than the bare minimum for him.

Ignoring her hint of impatience, he picked up the binder again and thumbed through it.

Her designs were good. Better than good. He'd inherited the Langsford family jewels, and in addition, he'd bought his share of pricey jewelry over the years, so he was no novice buyer. And to his practiced eye, these designs looked fresh and different.

"This one," he said, stopping at a page and showing it to her.

She shook her head. "That piece has been sold. I don't have another one here like it."

Unperturbed, he moved on to another page. "What about this one?"

"That's topaz. The yellow gold setting wouldn't be right for diamonds and emer—"

"Humor me," he said with all the assurance of someone used to calling the shots—and being right. "I'm not looking at the metal but at the design."

"Right. Of course."

He hid a smile. *The client was always right.* She couldn't argue there, much as she obviously wanted to.

Tamara pushed back her chair and marched over to a safe across the width of the loft. After opening the safe door, she removed two velvet boxes.

Sawyer watched her intently, his body stirring.

Without looking at him, she stepped over to the gilded full-length mirror mounted on the nearby wall.

From the smaller of the two boxes, she retrieved one earring and then another, putting them on one by one.

Sawyer shifted in his chair.

"You need to put your hair up in order to show them off properly," he said, his voice resonating in the quiet room.

Tamara compressed her lips, but then, with a show of impatience, as if she found all this ridiculous, and still refusing to look at him, she reached into a nearby drawer. She removed a plastic clip, and proceeded to put up her hair.

Sawyer parted his lips and sucked in a deep breath as heat shot through him.

The image in the mirror was enticing, enchanting even. When was the last time he'd seen Tamara with her hair up?

The earrings were about two inches long, the large, multifaceted topaz stones at the ends of them catching the light. They moved fluidly along with Tamara, brushing the tendrils of hair that had failed to find a home in her plastic clip.

Sawyer resisted the urge to go to her and press his lips to the tender curve of her neck. He knew he was playing a dangerous game that he was at risk of getting caught up in himself.

Tamara bent to the larger of the two velvet boxes and lifted out an exquisite and elaborate fringelike necklace with topaz stones.

Sawyer stood up abruptly. "Let me help you."

Before she could argue, he was behind her, taking the necklace from her unresisting fingers.

"I'm an expert at doing and undoing clasps," she protested weakly.

"Nevertheless, let me make the gallant gesture."

"Practicing for the real moment?" Tamara tossed out, her words belying her response of sexual awareness, her nipples outlined against the fabric of her dress.

Sawyer let his lips curve lazily. "If I were, then I'd do this next."

He didn't think. He just gave in to temptation.

Fortunately, in this case, business and pleasure were one and the same.

Five

Tamara felt a sizzle shoot through her as Sawyer nuzzled her ear, and then bit down gently on her earlobe, the large topaz stone of her earring rocking between them as he did so.

She swallowed, holding back a small gasp. Sawyer's body, hard and unyielding, brushed against hers, igniting a simmering heat in her.

Tamara was mesmerized by their image in the mirror.

Sawyer toyed with the delicate shell of her ear, and then his mouth closed over her earlobe again and gave a gentle tug. All the while, his breath sent small shivers coursing through her.

Tamara closed her eyes. It was her only defense. The image in the mirror was just too erotic.

Sawyer's hands gently kneaded her shoulders.

"Relax," he said in a low voice.

Tamara struggled against the undertow of his seduction.

She already knew the power of his kiss, and a part of her couldn't believe she'd allowed him to get this close—again. What had she been thinking?

She'd reached with greedy hands when he'd offered the enticement of a hefty sale. His down payment alone would be enough to cover her monthly rent. But then what?

This was the road to ruin.

"Sawyer ..."

But before she could say more, he turned her to face him, and his mouth came down on hers.

His lips were warm and supple, and he deepened the kiss before she had time to marshal her forces.

The kiss washed over her like a warm summer rain, making her feel vital and alive. In her head, she was spinning, her head thrown back with laughter, her nipples plastered to her wet clothes.

Sawyer kissed the way he did everything—confidently, decisively ... persuasively. And more importantly, the effect of his kiss on her was powerful and shocking.

His hips pressed against her, making her want to rub against him. With very little effort, he had her restless and aroused.

The kiss that Sawyer had stolen at the fashion party *hadn't* been a fluke. And wasn't that the real explanation for why she'd let things progress to this point? Because the question had been dogging her?

He was in the wrong field, she thought absently. He should be hawking kisses instead of news. Then he'd be even richer than he was.

Sawyer's arms, all hard muscle, banded around her, and one hand settled on her backside, molding their bodies together. Her arms crept around his neck, drawing him to her. She wiggled closer, brushing against his arousal and eliciting a throaty growl from Sawyer.

Tamara knew if she was honest with herself, she'd admit she'd never experienced a kiss like Sawyer's. But then forbidden fruit was a powerful aphrodisiac.

Still, a shred of reason intervened. *This was her last chance.*

With a last bit of resolve, she tore her mouth from his. "Wait a minute!"

She flattened her hand on his chest, but the steady, strong beat of his heart, his warmth and solidness, seemed to brand her, and she snatched back her hand.

Sawyer's eyes glittered with golden fire.

Summoning a determination she didn't feel, Tamara opened her mouth.

"Don't lie to yourself, and don't lie to me," Sawyer said softly, his tone nevertheless conveying a note of implacability.

Her brows snapped together. Well, she wasn't going to engage in any hollow denials. But she didn't like the way he'd thrown her off balance.

“What do you want?” she said.

“I think you already know.”

“You came in here for a necklace,” she persisted.

“Among other things.”

How could he seem so rational when she was still trying to recover from the effect of their kiss?

“Don’t think you can seduce me into changing my mind about your proposal.”

“Fine,” he said, gimlet-eyed. “But I’m offering a way for you to save Pink Teddy Designs. I thought that would appeal to the small-business owner in you.”

She hated that he knew what straits she was in. She hated that he had well-honed instincts and knew her weak spots.

“I see,” she said coolly, striving to match her tone to his. “I suppose if you’re going to torpedo my social life, you feel you owe it to me to at least help me professionally?”

He arched a brow. “Are you talking about Tom?”

“Yes!”

“There was no passion there.”

“How do you know?” she retorted.

“The cutesy moniker says it all. ‘Tam and Tom.’ You sounded like pals.”

“Meaning you’d never be caught dead dating someone who was worthy of a cutesy little tandem name?”

“Correct,” he said, and then added bluntly, “Did you sleep with him?”

A note of belligerence had entered his tone. She knew Sawyer’s purpose was to dismiss Tom as inconsequential.

“It’s none of your business,” she snapped.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Sawyer said. “Poor bastard. I thought so.”

She wanted to wipe the satisfied expression off his face. “Tom is one of the good guys. He isn’t after control of my father’s company.”

“Don’t kid yourself, sweetheart. Tom isn’t a saint.” Sawyer’s eyes swept over her. “On the other hand, since he kept his hands off of you, maybe he is.”

Tamara felt a strange thrill. Had Sawyer just admitted to finding her hard to resist?

She pushed the question away. She reminded herself that Sawyer was simply trying to get his way. He’d say or do *anything* to sway her. He was ruthless. Just like her father.

With that thought, she scoffed, “What could you possibly have to pin on Tom?”

Sawyer looked her in the eye. “Maybe he was dating you because of your connection to Kincaid News.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re despicable!”

“He jumped at the opportunity to go to L.A., didn’t he?”

“Only because you arranged to make him an irresistible offer!”

Tamara reluctantly recalled that Tom had asked her about Kincaid News, even after she’d explained to him that help was unlikely to come for his band from that quarter. Still, she refused to see his interest in her as less than genuine.

“He was quick to sell you out with information about your current financial situation,” Sawyer pointed out ruthlessly. “When it became clear how I could help his career, he was eager as a puppy.”

“And you’re a puppy in need of obedience training!”

Sawyer’s lips quirked with amusement. “Volunteering for the job?”

“No, thank you.”

Sawyer’s expression became enigmatic. “At least I’ve been clear about what I want.”

“Yes,” she retorted disdainfully. “Kincaid News.”

“No, you and Kincaid News,” he contradicted, and then his look softened. “I’m offering you a final chance to salvage your dream. Isn’t becoming a jewelry designer what you’ve always wanted to do?”

She was like Eve being tempted by the apple, Tamara thought. How had he known she’d always wanted to be a designer? Even though she knew it was part of his persuasive ploy, it was refreshing to have someone at least pretend to take her dream seriously.

“I remember visiting Dunnyhead once,” he mused, naming her father’s estate in Scotland. “You were wearing a bead bracelet that you’d made yourself.”

Tamara was surprised Sawyer remembered. Her father had given her a jewelry-making kit during her stay at Dunnyhead. She’d just turned twelve, and it had been one of the few times after her parents’ divorce her father had seemed aware of her interests and hobbies.

She’d strung together translucent green beads from the kit into a fair semblance of a hippie bracelet. Her father, she recalled, hadn’t been particularly impressed. Still, she’d kept her beaded creation for years afterward.

During that stay at Dunnyhead, she recalled she’d played with her younger sisters, Julia and Arabella, who’d been five and two. But until this moment, she hadn’t remembered Sawyer’s visit.

“Who did you want to be when you grew up?” Sawyer probed, his tone inviting. “You must have had someone you aspired to be like.”

“I wanted to be an original,” she replied, her defenses lowering a notch.

Sawyer gave a low laugh. “Of course. I should have guessed. Tamara Kincaid has always been unique.”

Despite herself, a smile of shared amusement rose to her lips. “After the divorce,” she divulged, “my mother kept some pieces from Bulgari, Cartier and Harry Winston that my father had given her.”

“And I bet you loved putting them on,” he guessed.

“My father wouldn’t let me play in the family vault,” she deadpanned.

“I’d let you play with the Melton jewels,” he joked, but his eyes gleamed like polished stones. “Hell, you could wear them to your heart’s content.”

“Trying to bribe me?” she said lightly.

“Whatever works.”

Her eyes came to rest beyond Sawyer. She saw her workbench scattered with the implements of a jeweler’s trade.

All of it, however, was in danger of disappearing from her life. And suddenly, inexplicably, what Sawyer offered was so very tempting.

Would it be so bad?

“It wouldn’t be terrible,” he said, as if reading her mind. “A short-term marriage of convenience gets us what we both want, and then we go our separate ways.”

“As opposed to my father’s proposal of a real but bloodless and indefinite dynastic marriage?”

Sawyer inclined his head.

“You’re proposing that we double-cross my father?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way,” Sawyer replied, “but one rascal deserves another, don’t you think?”

The image that his words conjured brought an involuntary smile to her lips. Would it matter to her father what type of marriage she and Sawyer contracted if the bottom line was that he got what he wanted—seeing Kincaid News into capable hands?

And yet. “We’ll never convince my father that we have a real marriage.”

Sawyer arched a brow. “We’ve just proven we’ll have no problem convincing people the passion is real.”

She felt a rippling warmth suffuse her.

When had she turned so hot and bothered where Sawyer was concerned? Perhaps when she’d discovered their kisses had her seeing a kaleidoscope of colors.

Still, she hedged. “You said this would be a marriage of convenience.”

He gave her a bland look. “Are you asking whether I’d expect you to share my bed?”

She kept her expression unchanged, but at her sides, her fingers curled into her palms. “I just want us to be clear.”

He smiled lazily. “The answer is no. That is, unless you decide you’d like to be in my bed.”

“Hardly,” she replied tartly.

His eyes laughed at her. “A man can dream.”

She felt a quiver in response to his compelling magnetism. She turned away to hide her reaction, surveying her domain, and then hugging herself. What was she willing to give up to save this?

Not too discriminating to do business with the devil.

Sawyer’s words came back to her, and now she knew he was right.

“Six months,” she said without looking at him. “That should be more than enough time—”

“However long it takes.”

“You said it would be short-term,” she countered, her tone faintly accusatory.

He settled his hands on her shoulders, warm and caressing. “I’m looking forward to it.”

When he bent and nuzzled her neck, she closed her eyes. He kissed her throat, and she couldn’t help thinking he was sealing the deal.

And then a moment later, he was gone, out the door.

With her fingertips, she touched the still warm and tingly spot where he’d kissed her.

What had she done by bargaining with the devil?

“I’m going to marry Sawyer Langsford.”

Her statement was met with a joint gasp.

Tamara looked from one to the other of her friends. Pia’s eyes had gone wide, while Belinda just looked at her in frozen silence, her coffee cup halfway to her lips.

They were sitting in Contadini having a casual Sunday brunch, but her announcement blew the relaxed atmosphere right out of the water.

Tamara glanced at Pia. “Any chance you can squeeze a small and hasty English wedding into your schedule for next month?”

“Oh, dear Lord,” Belinda breathed, rolling her eyes. “Tell me you’re not pregnant!”

Tamara looked at her friend in alarm. “Of course not!”

Was it her use of the word *hasty* that had made Belinda jump straight to pregnancy?

Belinda set down her cup. “Well, we can rule out drunk, since it’s Sunday morning and you’re sipping orange juice, so ... what is going on?”

“She looks sane to me,” Pia murmured to Belinda, who nodded in agreement.

Belinda and Pia were both back in New York for the moment, and Tamara had decided that now, at one of their regular brunches, was as good a time as any to spring her momentous news on them.

“Of course I haven’t lost my mind,” she said.

At least, she didn’t think she had.

Belinda gave her a penetrating look. “Has your father strong-armed you into this? I know he saw you and Sawyer together at the wedding reception—”

“Oh, Tamara,” Pia jumped in, her brow puckered, “there has to be a way out!”

“And it’s easier to find a way out before the wedding than after,” Belinda muttered.

Tamara took a fortifying breath. “My father hasn’t pressed anything.” *Sort of.* If it hadn’t been for her father’s conditions on the merger of Kincaid News with Melton Media, Sawyer would never have proposed. It was a humiliating way to have received her first marriage proposal, but a humiliation that brought salvation for her business. “In fact, I’ve hardly ever given a decision this much calculated thinking.”

“Uh-oh,” Pia breathed. “Calculated thinking for a wedding? Oh, Tamara!”

Tamara repressed a sigh. Of course, Pia, the eternal romantic, would be shocked and alarmed at the idea of a marriage of convenience.

“Beats the opposite,” Belinda put in. “I don’t recommend the impetuous elopement.”

Tamara raised her hand. “Hear me out.”

“I’m all ears,” Belinda replied. “This I have to hear.”

Tamara steadied herself. “You both know Pink Teddy Designs has been in financial difficulty for some time.” It was a painful admission. Her business was everything to her—her dream, her quest for validation. “But what you don’t know is that recently things have come to a head. My rent is set to increase and I’ve tapped out my credit.”

Belinda’s eyes narrowed. “So you’re marrying Sawyer for financial reasons?” she guessed. “Can I just weigh in with the fact that money is on my list of bad reasons to get married?”

Pia shook her head. “It’ll never last.”

Tamara pushed at her breakfast plate. “I don’t want it to last!”

Pia’s eyes rounded. “And what about poor Tom?”

“Poor Tom is on his way to Los Angeles, hot on the trail of a record deal, thanks to Sawyer.”

“Wonderful,” Belinda remarked sarcastically.

“I mentioned my father had a long-cherished wish to unite the Kincaid and Langsford families,” Tamara said. “But what I didn’t mention is that he’s made his agreement to Melton Media’s merger with Kincaid News conditional on Sawyer convincing me to marry him.”

Pia gasped, her hand briefly covering her mouth. “You’re willing to throw away your chance to marry for love?”

Tamara was tempted to say she was a bit cynical about love after the examples set by her parents, but she stifled her reply. She supposed in Pia’s business, it was helpful—maybe even necessary—to believe in true love. Why disabuse her friend?

And, truth be told, Tamara conceded, she wasn’t a *hardened* cynic. Her secret indulgence was chick flicks that made her misty-eyed. She’d wonder whether it was possible to find a man who set her pulse racing *and* held her close to his heart. She’d wonder if, despite her parents’ example, a happily-ever-after was attainable for her.

She pasted a smile on her face. “No, don’t worry. I’m not giving up the chance of love forever. With any luck—” her lips twisted self-deprecatingly “—a second marriage will be the charm.”

“Or third,” Belinda muttered.

“Or third,” she agreed, since it was clear her friend was hoping for a third wedding.

Thrusting aside the fact that her own father had been married three times, Tamara quickly explained the terms of her agreement with Sawyer for a short-term marriage of convenience: Kincaid News in return for the money to save Pink Teddy Designs.

“I don’t know,” Pia said doubtfully when she’d finished, shaking her head.

“What could go wrong?” Tamara asked. “In six months, a year at most, we both go our separate ways.”

“Famous last words,” Belinda said. “It’s taken me more than two years to get an annulment.”

Tamara needed to know her friends were behind her. More importantly, she needed both her friends’ help if she was to convince her father that she and Sawyer had succumbed to dynastic expectations rather than come up with a plan of their own.

“I need you both to act as if you believe Sawyer and I have finally decided to do our family duty,” she said baldly. “Otherwise I’ll never convince my father.”

Pia’s eyes widened, and Belinda snorted disbelievingly.

“Your father will never buy it,” Belinda said.

“It’s my only hope.”

Her only hope, and Pink Teddy’s.

Neither Belinda nor Pia had a ready reply, but Tamara could tell from their expressions that they reluctantly understood her predicament.

She sucked in a breath. “So will you do it? Will you show up when I marry—” she stumbled over the word, and Belinda looked at her keenly “—Sawyer? Even if it turns out to be in a drafty British castle?”

Belinda sighed. “I’ll bring my Wellingtons.”

“And I’ll help coordinate,” Pia chimed in.

Tamara glanced from one to the other of her friends. “Even if Colin and Hawk are almost certainly going to be there at Sawyer’s invitation?”

There was a palpable pause.

Pia grimaced. “You know you can count on me. Just keep me away from the hors d’oeuvres.”

“I’ll bring my attorney,” Belinda added grimly.

Tamara laughed.

For a moment, thanks to her friends, she could forget just how complicated a situation she was getting into. Still, this was surely going to be some wedding.

Six

“Tell him to come in,” Sawyer said into the speakerphone, and then rose from behind his desk.

Floor-to-ceiling windows revealed a spectacular view of the Hudson River. The corporate offices of Melton Media were located on the upper floors of a gleaming midtown Manhattan building.

Sawyer had taken several strides when his office door opened and Viscount Kincaid strolled in.

“Melton,” the viscount acknowledged jovially as he came forward and shook hands.

Sawyer wasn’t fooled for a second. Though Tamara’s father was a couple of inches shorter than his own six-two, the older man had an air of prepossession and command that only someone born into authority or accustomed to it for a long time could exude.

In Kincaid, diabolically, the genial visage of a Santa Claus was joined to the shrewd mind of a Machiavelli—a trap for the unwary.

“Shall we proceed down to the executive dining room?” Sawyer asked.

It was well before the daily news deadline for East Coast newspapers going to press, but they were both busy men.

“I’m ready whenever you are,” Kincaid said, nevertheless reaching into the inner pocket of his suit jacket for his buzzing BlackBerry.

Kincaid kept up his end of the phone conversation as they made their way downstairs via the suspended metal staircase that joined the executive floors of Melton Media. They were far from the chaos of the newsroom. Melton Media’s corporate offices were housed in a separate building from *The New York Intelligencer*.

Sawyer listened as, apparently, Kincaid attempted to verify by phone a juicy rumor that he’d heard at a cocktail party the night before. Clearly, the viscount had the news business in his blood and wasn’t averse to rolling up his sleeves and working the phones himself when necessary.

Tellingly, though, Sawyer couldn’t discern from Kincaid’s end of the conversation what the rumor was or whom the older man was talking to. Sawyer felt the competitive juices start to flow in his blood.

Kincaid was a worthy adversary and would be a worthy business partner.

“Rumor confirmed?” Sawyer asked with feigned idle curiosity when the viscount finished his call.

“Yes,” Kincaid replied with a note of satisfaction.

“I thought we were on the same team,” Sawyer said with mock reproof.

“Not yet. Not until the merger goes through.”

Sawyer’s chuckle held an element of respect. Viscount Kincaid might be a family friend, but he was a fierce competitor.

When Sawyer had asked for this meeting, he’d suggested he pay a call to Kincaid headquarters, but the viscount had gainsaid him. Perhaps Kincaid wanted another opportunity to take a look around the company that would soon merge with Kincaid News.

Sawyer had inherited an already significant company from his father and had built it up, branching out internationally from the British newspapers and radio station that his father and grandfather had run. His grandfather had married into the newspaper business by wedding a publishing heiress, but he’d taken to it like a natural.

Kincaid was a different animal altogether. He’d labored in the trenches of the news business, selling family real estate in Scotland to build up his company. His gamble had paid off handsomely, but Kincaid was no fool. He knew that, in order to survive, Kincaid News needed fresh blood—someone well positioned and savvy enough to take advantage of the new mediums of communication out there, from online sites and streaming to smartphones.

Namely, the viscount needed Sawyer.

And Sawyer was eager to absorb a competitor at a relative bargain.

At that thought, Sawyer paused and mentally grimaced. Correction: a relative bargain and a bargaining relative. Kincaid had turned the business into a family legacy, and he wasn't going to let it pass into other hands without a familial tie.

He and the viscount entered the executive dining room, which was one floor below Sawyer's office and had an equally impressive view of the Hudson. The long table had been set for two.

They dined on steak frites accompanied by iced tea. The conversation moved idly from politics and the upcoming elections to the doings of various business associates, until, finally, Viscount Kincaid set aside his fork and fixed Sawyer with a piercing look.

"Well, I know you didn't invite me here to discuss golf," Kincaid said gruffly, "so out with it, Melton."

Unperturbed, Sawyer took his time wiping his mouth and setting aside his napkin. Then he looked at the other man squarely.

"I'd like to ask for Tamara's hand in marriage."

Kincaid's eyebrows rose. "Bloody hell, you've done it."

Sawyer nodded.

"How?"

Sawyer gave a ghost of a smile. "I don't suppose it could be my charm and persuasiveness."

Kincaid shook his head. "Hogwash. Tamara would never fall for it."

"I have been wooing her." It wasn't far from the truth. He *had* been trying to convince Tamara to see things his way.

Kincaid's eyebrows drew together. "Since when?"

"We preferred to conduct our relationship away from prying eyes."

Sawyer thought back to his last private encounter with Tamara. She'd been so responsive in his arms, her luscious female curves pressed into him. And he—he'd wanted to tumble her backward and have hot, sweaty sex with her right there in her studio, her red hair fanning out on that damnable red velour couch.

Sawyer felt his body tighten at the memory, and shifted in his seat. "I think you'll find that Tamara isn't unaware of her familial obligations."

His last statement was met with a pause, but then Kincaid waved it away with one hand. "Certainly not in character," the viscount growled. "She's shown nothing but disregard until now." Kincaid shook his head. "Her sisters, too. Three daughters and not a one with an appreciation of what it took to built Kincaid News or how I footed the bill for those fine prep school educations."

"She does bear you some affection, you know."

Sawyer would bet that beneath Tamara's tartness and Viscount Kincaid's bluster lay a genuine—if oftentimes fraught—bond between father and daughter.

A light appeared in Viscount Kincaid's eyes, but it was quickly replaced by a look of cloaked cunning. "Is that so? Then I'll expect a grandchild to be in the cards in the not too distant future."

Sawyer schooled his expression—this was a complication that he hadn't foreseen. "Perhaps Tamara and I would like to enjoy ourselves first."

"Enjoy yourselves later." Kincaid settled back in his chair. "In fact, I like the idea of a grandchild so much I fancy I'll make it a condition of the merger."

Cagey bastard.

"My daughter *enceinte* before the merger goes through."

"That wasn't part of the agreement."

"How much do you want this merger?"

"As much as you do, I would have thought," Sawyer replied drily.

"I can wait," Kincaid returned. "I've got some life in me yet, and God knows I've long since pinned my hopes on a third generation taking over the reins of Kincaid News." Kincaid leaned

forward. “The question is, will you or someone else be a worthy caretaker for Kincaid News in the meantime?”

Sawyer said nothing. He’d learned long ago that a tough bargainer didn’t jump in with his next best offer right away. He stayed cool and deliberated his options.

In this case, he supposed he could call the older man’s bluff. *Good luck convincing Tamara or either of her sisters to marry another newsman.*

But an image suddenly flashed through his mind of Tamara being bedded by some faceless pretender to the throne of Kincaid News, attempting to conceive the sought-for grandchild. He discovered that the thought of some other man fathering Tamara’s child didn’t sit well with him.

Better me than some faceless bastard, Sawyer thought.

Kincaid sat back in his seat, a smile hovering at his lips, seemingly satisfied by Sawyer’s reaction, or at least lack of immediate objection. “Marrying Tamara is the first step. I’ll do everything in my power to see that you actually make it to the altar, including making all the necessary public pronouncements that I’m overjoyed.”

“Naturally,” Sawyer said sardonically.

Kincaid leaned forward again, apparently warming to his subject. “I’ve done all I can up till now to help you, including—” Kincaid looked suddenly sly “—sharing all I know about Tamara’s comings and goings.”

Sawyer had to admit Kincaid had been helpful in that respect. Without inside knowledge, he’d have had a harder time.

“But the second step, the necessary step before I sign over Kincaid News, is getting Tamara pregnant,” Kincaid went on, quirking a brow. “And for that, you’re on your own.”

“Of course,” Sawyer said drily.

Kincaid couldn’t have put it more baldly. Sawyer would have to entice Tamara into his bed.

“Naturally,” Kincaid said, “I won’t breathe a word to Tamara about this new condition to the merger.”

“Thanks for the small favor.”

Kincaid chuckled. “I wouldn’t want her to lock you out of the bedroom just out of spite.”

“Thwarting you has been a favorite pastime of hers,” Sawyer observed with a jab.

The viscount’s face darkened briefly. “Yes, but those days are past now ... as long as you get her to the altar.”

Kincaid’s new condition on the merger presented a complication that Sawyer hadn’t anticipated. He’d bargained with Tamara for a marriage of short duration. Once they both got what they wanted, they could go their separate ways. A baby had never been part of the equation.

He wasn’t thrilled at the prospect of having a child with a divorce envisioned in the future. But then again, he was thirty-eight, his life was destined to become only busier after the business merger with Kincaid News, and he had a duty to the earldom to produce an heir. Sure, he could wait for a woman suitable for the duties of a countess, but right now that prospect seemed highly indeterminate.

On the other side, there was the very concrete reality of *Tamara*, who, however unsuited and averse she might be to being a countess, made his blood sizzle.

His body tightened as images flashed through his mind of just how pleasurable it could be to try to conceive an heir with Tamara.

“So, do you agree to the terms?”

Viscount Kincaid’s voice brought Sawyer back from his mental calculations.

Sawyer knew without hesitation what his answer was. “Yes.” He reached for his glass and raised it in mock salute. “To the merger of the Kincaid and Melton lines, corporate and otherwise.”

Tamara waltzed into Balthazar at noon. It had been an easy walk from her loft. She’d been surprised when Sawyer had called and proposed that they meet at a restaurant in her area.

Now, inside the restaurant entrance, she spotted Sawyer immediately. He looked impeccable, as always, in a red tie and pinstripe suit, even if his hair was a little tousled from the wind outside.

Unconsciously, she smoothed her own hair as he approached her.

“You look fine,” he said, his deep voice flowing over her like warm honey.

When she stopped in midmovement, Sawyer’s mouth lifted.

“More than fine,” he amended. “You look great.”

The frank male appreciation that suddenly fired his gaze sent sexual awareness washing over her.

“You don’t look too shabby yourself,” she responded, surprised at the hint of breathlessness that crept into her voice.

She’d tried not to care when dressing this morning, but she’d given up and finally settled on a short-sleeved heather-gray sweater dress cinched by a thin purple belt and paired with magenta patent platform heels.

She was a rebel with a cause, she’d thought defiantly. She didn’t care what a countess was supposed to look like. This is what she looked like.

Sawyer clasped her hand and brushed his lips across hers.

At her surprised reaction, he murmured, “We have to make it look good in public.”

Of course. She steadied herself. “I’m surprised you came downtown. I’d have thought Michael’s or 21 was more your taste.”

Michael’s was favored by the media crowd, and 21 was a clubby bastion famous for the jockey figures that adorned its facade.

“I was looking for a place that was a little off the beaten trail,” Sawyer returned equably, and then winked. “And I thought I’d show you I can be flexible.”

“Well, don’t expect me to convene at La Grenouille with the ladies who lunch.”

“Perish the thought,” he said with mock solemnity, and then smiled. “But I’ll turn you into an uptown girl yet.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she returned drily, even as a frisson of electricity danced across her skin at their repartee.

“It may be pleasurable, too,” he murmured with a glint in his eye, and then cupped her elbow and steered her forward.

She was disconcerted by how attuned she was to Sawyer and their most casual contact. Had the sexual awareness been caused by their recent kisses, or had it always been there—the unacknowledged reason she’d always kept her distance from him?

A restaurant hostess materialized beside them, and without a word, they were guided to a quiet corner table.

This, Tamara thought, was the kind of service Sawyer was used to by virtue of his wealth, title and high profile. It was the type of service she’d likely be accorded as his wife. She was afraid she could easily become accustomed to the red-carpet treatment.

Tamara slid into her booth seat, Sawyer’s lingering touch at her elbow facilitating her way, and Sawyer followed, sitting to her left.

“I’m assuming this meeting is to settle details?” she asked without preamble, settling herself more comfortably on her seat.

“You could say that.”

She studied him. “I could—but would it be correct?”

Sawyer’s lips twitched. “You mean your father hasn’t called you to celebrate his Machiavellian victory?”

She shook her head. “Amazingly, no.”

“An admirable and uncharacteristic show of restraint.”

She looked at him shrewdly. “Perhaps he was afraid of undermining you.”

Sawyer merely laughed, and then reached up to smooth back the hair that had fallen over her shoulder.

She stilled as he touched one of her dangling earrings, set with amethyst stones and Swarovski crystals.

“Is this another of your creations?”

She nodded, and then asked boldly, “Examining your investment?”

He caressed the line of her jaw. “Yes, and it’s lovely.”

Oh.

Tamara looked away in confusion, and was saved by the approach of a waiter who asked if they would like anything to drink.

After inquiring if wine was her preference, Sawyer smoothly narrowed the choices with the waiter to one, and then turned back to her and settled his hand on her thigh beneath the table. “Does that meet with your approval?”

Feeling the warm weight of Sawyer’s hand moving along her thigh, she stuttered assent.

Sawyer looked at her innocently. “Is there something else you’d like, Tamara?”

“What?”

Sawyer’s eyes laughed at her. “Is there something else you’d like to drink?”

She looked up at the waiter. “No—thank you.”

When they were alone again, Tamara frowned at Sawyer. “What are you doing?”

“You mean this?” Underneath the table, Sawyer’s hand clasped hers, and then with his other hand, he slid a ring on her finger.

Tamara felt her heart slow and beat louder.

“A gift from the family vault,” Sawyer said. “I hope you like it.”

She swallowed and searched Sawyer’s gaze, but she read nothing but unadulterated desire there.

She knew, of course, that she and Sawyer were engaged—in a manner of speaking. But the weight of the ring brought the reality of it forcefully back to her.

Slowly, she lifted her hand and rested it on the tablecloth. A beautiful diamond ring in an open-work setting twinkled in the light. Two sapphire baguettes and two accent diamonds adorned either side.

It was a breathtaking piece of jewelry. The diamond was large and undoubtedly flawless, and the open design gave the ring a deceptively modern feel.

“It’s a good complement to the earrings you’re wearing,” Sawyer said with studied solemnity. “It’s not a modern piece, but I hope you like it.”

She looked up. “Really, it isn’t necessary for a pretend marriage—”

“Yes, it is,” he said firmly. “The only question is whether you like the ring. I know your tastes tend to the contemporary.”

“I love it,” she confessed. “It’s a creation that any designer would be proud of. The lattice work is timeless and beautiful.”

Her response seemed to satisfy him. “I’m glad. The ring was a gift to my great-grandmother, but I had it reset. The original center stone was a sapphire.”

Tamara looked down at her hand again. The ring was a tangible sign of her bargain with Sawyer.

“You’ll get used to it,” he said.

Startled, she glanced up.

He appeared amused for a moment. “I meant the ring. You’ll get used to the weight of the ring.”

Tamara rued the fact that Sawyer looked as if he’d guessed what was on her mind.

She angled her hand back and forth. “It’s exquisite.”

“As is its wearer.”

She shifted in her seat. She was uncertain how to handle Sawyer. Was he just practicing his romantic technique for the benefit of onlookers?

She wanted to make some acerbic reply about leaving his false devotion for an occasion when they had a real audience, but somehow the words stuck in her throat. Instead, she found herself succumbing to the effect of his nearness and seductive words more than she cared to admit.

“What was the occasion for the gift originally?” she asked, striving to keep the conversation on an even keel.

Sawyer looked suddenly mischievous. “Do you really want to know?”

She raised her brows inquiringly.

“The birth of my great-grandmother’s sixth and last child.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, well ...”

“Quite.” His eyes laughed at her. “One doesn’t get to be the twelfth in a direct line of successive earls without ample fertility along the way.”

“Perhaps you should be seeking a woman who will better accommodate you in the ... fecundity department.”

His eyes crinkled. “Perhaps you suit my needs just fine.”

She was unsettled by his cryptic reply, but before she could respond, he picked up her ring hand and raised it to his mouth, kissing the pad of each finger individually.

Her eyes widened as a shiver chased through her.

“Someone I know just walked into the restaurant,” he murmured, a twinkle in his eyes.

She shot him a skeptical look. “Of course.”

“You doubt me?”

She extracted her hand from his loose grip. “Should I?”

Sawyer chuckled, and just then a waiter materialized with a bread basket, followed by their regular server with their wine.

When they were both sipping Pinot Grigio, Tamara attempted to put their conversation on a more businesslike footing. “Tell me about the details that you’ve obviously called me here to discuss.”

He arched a brow. “Your patience has run out? Very well, let’s start with Pink Teddy Designs. How much is your lease costing you?”

She relaxed a little, lowering her shoulders. So Sawyer had come here to make good on his promises.

“Too much,” she repeated.

“It’s a fashionable address—an astute business move.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll cosign your lease renewal.”

Her eyes widened. “How did—?”

He looked at her quizzically. “How did I know the lease was your most pressing concern, you mean? A few discreet inquiries to the landlord netted information on current rents—and the fact that they were going up.”

“Lovely,” she said acerbically. “I didn’t realize my lease was information available to the press!”

Sawyer’s lips twisted wryly. “It’s not, but I happen to know the head of Rockridge Management.”

She made a disgruntled reply.

“You’ll also need a cash infusion.”

Tamara compressed her lips. Knowing it was best not to look a gift horse in the mouth, however, she forced herself to hold her tongue.

Sawyer considered her. “How does two million dollars for initial financing sound?”

Tamara swallowed. She’d only fantasized about having that kind of cash on hand.

“No strings attached?” she queried.

Sawyer inclined his head in acknowledgment.

Of course, she reminded herself, they both knew that Sawyer wouldn't expect repayment of the money. She had bargained away something else. She'd agreed to a sham marriage.

She cleared her throat. "Thank you . . . I think. I can promise I'll put the money to good use." And then because she didn't want him to have the impression that she was completely without resources, she added, "I just met with a client this morning, actually."

When Sawyer looked at her inquiringly, she elaborated, "It was a hedge-fund wife who recently opened her own boutique in the Hamptons. She bought a bracelet for herself and selected a few other pieces to carry in her store."

Just then their waiter reappeared, and asked if they were ready to order.

Tamara belatedly realized she hadn't even looked at the menu, but because she'd been to Balthazar before, she ordered the smoked salmon from memory. Sawyer, after a few idle inquiries of their waiter, ordered the grilled branzini.

Afterward, Tamara braced herself and looked at Sawyer squarely. "I suppose we should discuss the wedding itself."

He smiled faintly. "I'll leave the details to you. I understand many women have preconceived ideas of what their wedding should look like."

Yes, and in her case, the idea had never been a sham marriage contracted to a very proper British earl.

On top of it all, Sawyer was also a press baron in her father's mold. She could hardly get any closer to exactly what she *didn't* want.

Sawyer studied her. "It seems only fitting, though, that the marriage of the Earl and Countess of Melton occur at Gantswood Hall, the ancestral home of the earls of Melton."

Tamara resisted pointing out that it was hardly necessary to go to such trouble for what would be a short-lived marriage. But then again, she'd been half expecting Sawyer's proposition of a proper British wedding. "Very well. I suppose the sooner, the better."

Sawyer's lips quirked. "Anxious, are you?"

"The sooner we begin, the sooner the corporate merger will occur and we can be done with this."

"How about next week then?"

Tamara shook her head. "Pia would have a heart attack. I already asked her to help plan the wedding. Three weeks."

"You and Pia Lumley are close."

It wasn't a question, but a statement. Tamara nodded anyway. "Pia is a dear friend and one of the best bridal consultants around. She also needs all the help that she can get now that—" her voice darkened "—your fiendish friend the Marquess of Easterbridge ruined Belinda's wedding day."

Sawyer laughed. "Fiendish friend? You certainly have a way with alliteration."

"Don't change the subject," Tamara snapped back. "Your friends seem to come in one stripe only—namely, villainous."

Sawyer arched a brow.

"I suppose you're chummy with the Duke of Hawkshire, too?"

"Yes, but not with his alias, Mr. Fielding."

"Very funny."

"Since we're on the subject of our marriage," Sawyer said drily, "what have you told your friends?"

"Pia and Belinda?" Tamara responded. "They know the truth, and they've already said they'll be at any wedding to support me."

"Splendid."

"We'll need a referee if, as I assume, your titled compatriots will make an appearance, too."

Sawyer inclined his head. "I imagine Hawk and Colin will be there, schedules permitting."

“Everyone else, including my mother and sisters,” Tamara said determinedly, “will believe that for reasons known only to me, I’ve decided that you are Mr. Right.”

“Since Hawk has already claimed the moniker Mr. Fielding, I’ll settle for Mr. Right without qualm,” Sawyer quipped.

Tamara eyed him doubtfully. “Well, I’m glad that’s all resolved—anything else?”

“Since you mention it—”

Tamara tensed. “Yes?”

“There is the small matter of where we’ll reside after the wedding.”

Tamara felt her stomach plummet. Why hadn’t she thought of such an obvious and all too important detail?

“I’ll keep my business in SoHo,” she said automatically.

“Right,” Sawyer agreed, “but we won’t convince anyone that we’re serious about this marriage unless you move into my town house after the wedding.”

Share a roof with Sawyer? They could barely share a *meal* without sparks flying.

“I suppose I can bear it for a short while,” she responded in a disgruntled tone. “Will I have my own wing?”

Sawyer laughed at her sudden hopefulness. “Why don’t you come see? It occurs to me you’ve never been to my home, and that’s a detail that should be rectified as early as possible. In fact, what are you doing the rest of the afternoon?”

She wanted to lie. She wanted to say she had a slew of meetings. But if Sawyer could make time in his busy CEO schedule, her demurral would hardly ring true. And besides, he had a point about her becoming familiar with the place where she’d soon be living.

“I’m free,” she disclosed reluctantly.

Sawyer smiled. “Fantastic. We’ll ride up there right after lunch. My car is outside.”

The waiter arrived with their food, and as the conversation turned to more mundane topics, Tamara had time at leisure to reflect on what she’d gotten herself into.

Was it too late to back out now?

Seven

Tamara wanted to hate everything about Sawyer's life, but she was finding it impossible to do so. Instead, she clung tenaciously to indifference—was it too much to ask?

It was bad enough that Sawyer himself was demonstrating remarkable skill at seduction. Must his lifestyle be an added lure?

Tamara discovered that Sawyer's town house was a four-story structure on a prime block in the East 80s. The limestone facade was set off by black wrought-iron flower boxes at the windows and a matching black front gate. Shrubbery concealed from prying eyes the garden that ran along one side of the residence.

And in an unusual setup for Manhattan, Sawyer's town house boasted its own garage, enabled by the residence's prime corner location.

Except for a few minor details, the house might have been a transplant from London's fashionable Mayfair district—just like its owner.

A middle-aged, uniformed employee came hurrying out the front door and down the front steps of the town house, and Sawyer handed his car keys to him.

"You might as well garage the car, Lloyd," Sawyer said. "I don't know how long I'll be home."

The man inclined his head. "Very well, my lord."

Sawyer glanced from Lloyd to Tamara and back. "Lloyd, this is Ms. Tamara Kincaid, my fiancée."

Without missing a beat, Lloyd said gravely, "Welcome, Ms. Kincaid. May I offer my utmost felicitations on your engagement?"

Tamara stopped herself from saying that felicitations weren't necessary. Instead, she shook Lloyd's hand and accepted his congratulations before he got into Sawyer's black Porsche Cayenne.

She turned to Sawyer. "What? No Bentley? No valet named Jeeves?"

Sawyer smiled briefly. "The Bentley is at my country estate. I sometimes prefer to drive myself, so Lloyd has time on his hands. There's also a butler, housekeeper and part-time chef, whom you'll soon meet, but no valet."

He added teasingly, "I like to keep things a little democratic when I'm stateside."

Tamara nodded at the house. "I'd have assumed a bachelor like you would prefer a penthouse co-op."

"I find it hard to completely shake the habits of an English country gentleman, even in New York," Sawyer said as his hand cupped her elbow and he guided her toward the front steps. "I hope you like the town house nevertheless."

"It has an understated elegance," she said. "It's ... very attractive."

Understated elegance shouldn't appeal to her, but it did. Sawyer was obviously rich as Croesus, and it was hard to withstand the beauty that money sometimes bought.

In Sawyer's case, Tamara grudgingly admitted, generations of wealth came with good taste that meant he didn't flaunt his money, so beauty didn't shade into gaudiness.

When had she developed an appreciation for low-key charm? Her mind went back to her meeting this morning with the hedge-fund wife. *The bigger, the better* appeared to be that client's motto. Sawyer just seemed appealing in comparison, she told herself.

When she and Sawyer stepped inside the town house's cool foyer, she took in the gilded mirror on one wall, the crystal chandelier overhead and the black-and-white tiled floor.

Sawyer's cell phone rang, and he fished it out of the inside pocket of his suit jacket. "Excuse me a moment. It's work, I'm sure."

Tamara turned away. She was grateful for the interruption actually. She needed the reminder that like her father, Sawyer was tethered to a demanding business—a business for which he was marrying her.

A middle-aged woman stepped from the back of the house, an inquiring look on her face as she took in the tableau before her.

Tamara extended her hand. “Hello, I’m Tamara, Sawyer’s fiancée.”

She didn’t care what the proper etiquette was for a future countess. This one greeted the household help with her first name.

Tamara watched as the chestnut-haired woman briefly looked surprised before her face settled back into a pleasant expression.

Were all the members of Sawyer’s household so well trained? Or perhaps, Tamara thought hopefully, they were inured to shock by his various escapades.

“Oooh, gracious!” the woman before her said with a British accent as she shook Tamara’s hand. “We thought Lord Melton would never settle down. A crafty one, he is!”

“So true,” Tamara responded.

Sawyer sauntered out of the foyer and into a nearby room, still with his cell phone pressed to his ear.

“I’m Beatrice, the housekeeper,” the woman said. “The butler—”

“Alfred?” Tamara inquired drolly.

Beatrice hesitated, looking momentarily perplexed. “No, Richard, my husband. He’s running an errand at the moment.”

Tamara gave a studied sigh. No Jeeves the valet, no superhero’s butler named Alfred.

Beatrice clasped her hands together in front of her chest. “I’ve been praying that Lord Melton would finally find happiness and settle down.”

Tamara didn’t know about the finding happiness part, but Sawyer had definitely decided to acquire a countess. “Lord Melton is certainly fortunate that those nearest to him have him in their prayers.”

The devil.

Beatrice threw her a surprisingly perceptive look. “And why not? He’s been a fair, kind and generous employer.”

“Have you thought about writing ad copy, Beatrice?” Tamara quipped.

Beatrice laughed lightly. “Oh, you’re simply perfect! Exactly the person I’ve been praying for. You’ll do very well here, miss.”

“It’s Tamara, please.”

Tamara wanted to protest that she wasn’t perfect at all. And, she wouldn’t be around long enough to need to worry about how she’d fare.

She wasn’t the answer to Sawyer’s prayers in any way but one—namely, the bride who would net him Kincaid News.

Beatrice leaned forward conspiratorially. “We use the name Sawyer when we’re not around guests.”

Wonderful, Tamara thought. She’d made jabs about Sawyer’s loftiness, but he was turning out to have egalitarian tendencies to rival any new money Silicon Valley plutocrat. And his housekeeper *liked* him.

She grasped at any straw she could think of. “Tell me he owns a custom-built submarine and employs someone just to shine his shoes.”

Beatrice shook her head, her expression sympathetic. “He’s been known to toss his own clothes in the washing machine.”

At that moment, Sawyer reentered the foyer, pocketing his cell phone. “Ah, Tamara, I see you’ve met my indomitable housekeeper.”

“Yes.”

Beatrice smiled. “And I’ve met your lovely fiancée. I’m absolutely delighted to offer my congratulations, my lord—”

“Sawyer,” Tamara corrected sardonically.

“I’m going to give Tamara a tour of the house, Beatrice.”

“Of course.” Beatrice turned to Tamara. “I hope you’ll feel readily at home here. Please don’t hesitate to let me know if there’s anything you need.”

After Beatrice departed, Tamara discovered on her tour with Sawyer that his house was decorated in an English style, with furniture from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries blended with more modern pieces. Lively flower patterns on the upholstery contrasted with stripes and solids.

She wanted to hate everything, but unfortunately she was too knowledgeable not to appreciate tastefulness and elegance.

And the house was intimate. Yes, she could identify several valuable objets d’art and a couple of Matisse—Belinda would love them—but the Gainsborough portraits of family ancestors and the Ming dynasty vases had obviously been kept at the historic family home set among thousands of rolling acres in the English countryside. But even with its nod to English décor, this town house was more the home of a twenty-first century entrepreneur than of an aristocrat with a centuries-old title.

After she and Sawyer had passed through the front parlor and dining room, they went downstairs to the kitchen and servants’ rooms. There, she was introduced to André, the chef.

Thank goodness, Tamara thought, for the French chef. At least one person lived up to stereotype.

Afterward, she and Sawyer took a private elevator to the upper floors.

“There are six bedrooms on two floors here,” Sawyer said.

“I’ll take the one farthest from you,” Tamara replied. “In fact, since I won’t be here for long, and I’d really prefer to remain inconspicuous. What about the maid’s room in the attic?”

Sawyer grinned, but Tamara didn’t like his too-knowing expression.

“There is no servant’s bedroom in the attic. That’s only on my Gloucestershire estate,” Sawyer deadpanned.

“How unfortunate.”

A smile continued to play at Sawyer’s lips. “Wouldn’t you like to judge all the rooms and decide which one is to your liking?”

Suddenly, Tamara became acutely aware that she and Sawyer were on this floor of the house all by themselves, and Sawyer was surveying her with lazy amusement, a gleam in his eye.

She raised her chin. “Like Goldilocks, you mean? No, thank you!”

Especially since one of those rooms belonged to Sawyer himself. She didn’t intend to be his latest sexual conquest—even if she was married to him.

“One bowl of porridge may be too hot, another may be too cold,” Sawyer teased. “One bed may be too big, another may be too small and another may be ... just right.”

His eyes laughed at her, and he murmured, “Am I remembering the story correctly?”

Damn Sawyer. He’d somehow injected sexual innuendo into a fairy tale.

“I’m not so discriminating,” she said, tight-lipped.

Sawyer quirked a brow. “Really? Let’s put it to the test.”

His hand enveloped hers, and he gently tugged her forward as he pushed open the bedroom door closest to them.

“What are you doing?” she demanded, her voice only slightly breathless.

Peripherally, she noticed they’d stepped into a room with a four-poster queen-size bed and furniture in a gleaming walnut.

Sawyer spun her forward in a dancelike move, and she landed, sitting, on the side of the bed.

Sawyer smiled. “What about this one, Goldilocks?”

“You’re ridiculous!”

“Not me, the bed. Too firm, or too soft?”

She bounced off the bed. “Neither!”

“Just right, then?” he said, irrepressibly. “Are you quite sure?”

Before Tamara could react, Sawyer sat on the bed himself, and pulled her back down to him, his mouth settling on hers.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.