

SHERI
WHITEFEATHER

MARRIAGE
OF REVENGE



Desire

Sheri WhiteFeather
Marriage of Revenge

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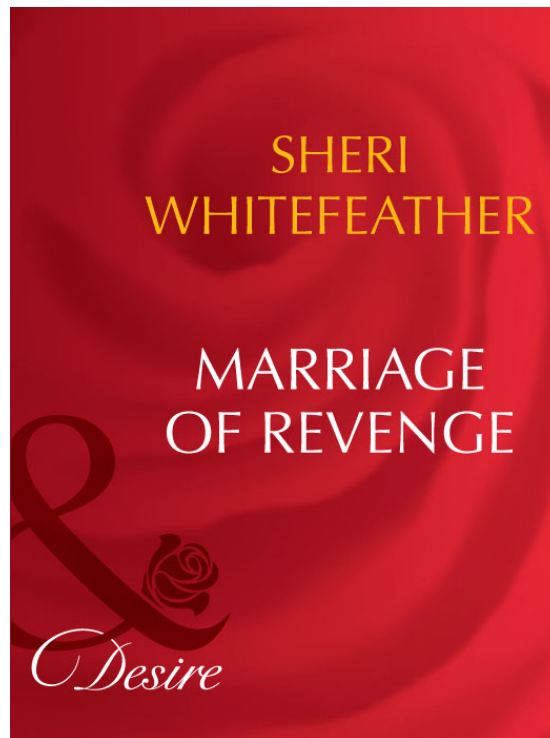
THE PROPOSAL PRICE He'd married another woman and destroyed her heart. Talia Gibson never believed she'd forgive Aaron Trueno his devastating deception. Then the newly eligible millionaire asked her to finally be his wife. The reasons not to marry still seemed insurmountable. Talia would never truly belong in Aaron's world. And she knew revenge against his family played a part in his unexpected proposal. But how could she deny herself the opportunity to become a Trueno bride...and a last chance at vengeance of her own?

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Содержание

Sheri Whitefeather	6
Contents	7
One	8
Two	14
Three	19
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	23



Sheri Whitefeather Marriage of Revenge



To Dolly Halty and Zena Jeans for the wonderful denims. You made me feel like a star.

Contents

Chapter One
Chapter Two
Chapter Three
Chapter Four
Chapter Five
Chapter Six
Chapter Seven
Chapter Eight
Chapter Nine
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Twelve
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Coming Next Month

One

“I should have fired you a long time ago,” Aaron Trueno said to Talia Gibson. He’d loved her. He’d hated her. And deep inside, he knew that he’d screwed her over. But she’d screwed him over, too.

She gave him a confused look. “Why are you going off about the past? Here? Now?” She made a grand gesture at the office they were seated in. “While we’re working?”

“Because I felt like it.”

She huffed out a breath. “You have no right to blame me.”

“Oh, yeah?” He shifted in his chair and glared at her from across his desk. “You’re the one who ended it.”

“And you’re the one who hooked up with Jeannie.”

“Yeah, after you called it quits.”

“Don’t twist the facts.” Talia was attired in a designer suit and gold jewelry, with her stiletto-heeled legs crossed, looking as dangerously beautiful as she’d always been. “I gave you your chance, and you married her instead of me.”

“My chance?” he snapped, his office closing in on him, even with its floor-to-ceiling windows and spectacular view of Los Angeles. Although he’d made a vow to Jeannie, he’d never really loved her, at least not the way he should have. They’d been divorced for a little over a year, but their marriage had disintegrated soon after their son was born. “It was more like an ultimatum.”

“I wanted a commitment.”

“By nagging me every time I turned around? By trying to force me to propose?”

“I didn’t do that.”

“The hell you didn’t.”

“So that’s why you married Jeannie? Because I pressured you and she didn’t? Get real, Aaron.”

Frustrated, he thought about his ex-wife. “At least Jeannie is remarried now.”

“Yes, and to a non-Native man. Imagine that? She found a way to be happy with someone from outside her culture.”

“Her husband isn’t like you, Talia. He respects her heritage.”

Her blue eyes bore into his. “You didn’t give me a chance to respect yours.”

He stared right back at her. “You and I were together for five years. How much more time did you need?”

“It wasn’t a matter of time.” When she angled her head, a shimmer of sunlight caught her hair, enhancing the golden color. “It was a matter of principle. You never introduced me to your family.”

“You’re well acquainted with Thunder,” he shot back, referring to his cousin and business partner. “You work for both of us.”

“Thunder doesn’t count. He isn’t a traditional Indian. And neither is Dylan,” she added, bringing up Thunder’s younger brother.

Aaron didn’t respond. What was he supposed to say? That when he was a boy, he’d promised his dying father that he would marry someone from his mother’s tribe? Talia knew all of that. She knew what had been expected of him.

Of course that was water under the bridge. Or it should be, he thought. Only Talia still drove him crazy.

He glanced at the file on his desk. They were supposed to be discussing a case. Aaron co-owned SPEC, a company that offered a variety of personal protection and investigative services, and Talia had been his top P.I. for eleven years. During that time, they hadn’t allowed their emotions to get in the way. Or so they told themselves. But it was lie, a burden they both had to bear. Every so often, they battled their feelings.

Like today.

Aaron knew he shouldn't have gotten involved with her in the first place. But eleven years ago, when she'd walked into SPEC with her resume, he'd wanted her.

Instantly.

So he'd hired her, intent on seducing her, even though Thunder had warned him that he was treading on perilous ground. Talia wasn't the sort of woman a man could seduce, at least not without repercussions. But Aaron had done it anyway, ignoring his cousin's foreboding advice.

"It was just supposed to be an affair," he said, narrowing his gaze at Talia.

"And it was," she quipped. "Until we were stupid enough to fall in love."

"Yeah, stupid." Aaron frowned. Sometimes he wished he had married her. And other times he cursed himself for giving a damn.

"How's Danny?" she asked, tossing him an emotional curveball by mentioning his son.

"He's fine. He's turning five on Saturday." Aaron paused, throwing her a curveball, too. "Do you want to go to his party?"

She flinched. "I know when his birthday is."

"Of course you do." But that didn't stop her from avoiding the invitation. "Danny still has that fluffy lamb you sent to the hospital."

"He does?" Her expression softened. "I remember how scared you were. Worried about how premature he was."

Aaron nodded, knowing that Talia had prayed for his child. But he didn't want to think about her kindness, not while he'd been married to someone else. Instead he wanted to grab Talia, to bruise her lips with his, to punish her with his passion.

"We should get to work," she said, morphing into business mode.

Aaron couldn't seem to switch gears. He was still thinking about kissing her.

"The Julia Alcott case," she reiterated, reminding him that Julia and her mother, Miriam, had disappeared purposely, running from the loan sharks Miriam had borrowed money from, then neglected to pay.

But what Julia and Miriam didn't know was that the loan sharks had hired a hit man to find them.

And kill them, Aaron thought.

"You're right," he said, forcing himself to think about something other than Talia, to allow the missing women to take precedence in his mind. "We should get to work."

Talia studied her ex-lover, grateful that he'd quit looking at her with a deep-seated hunger in his eyes. She needed to stay focused on her job, not fall prey to the past.

Of course Julia's past was relevant. Talia was anxious to make a break in her case, to do whatever she could to help the FBI locate Julia and Miriam before the unidentified assassin did. "Thunder suggested that we devise an undercover operation."

"He told me that, too."

"Are you okay with it?"

He shrugged. "You and I have always worked well together."

She wanted to disagree, but she couldn't. His comment about firing her had been ludicrous. She and Aaron were cut from the same career-minded cloth. "We'll have to let the FBI know what we come up with. They're the primary law enforcement investigators in this case, and we agreed to share information with them."

"We should concentrate on the personality profiles the feds created on Julia and Miriam." He indicated the file on his desk. "That should help us with the operation."

Talia picked up the folder, but she didn't need to open it. The report had arrived yesterday, and by now she and Aaron had memorized it. "According to this," she said, fingering the manila edge, "Miriam probably convinced Julia to hide out in Nevada so she could sneak off and gamble."

“Yes, but it also states that Julia would probably be wise to her mother’s tricks.” He took the file from her. “Why don’t we start with Gamblers Anonymous and see if Julia talked her mother into attending any meetings.”

Talia sat forward in her chair. “I’ll get a list of GA locations in Nevada.”

“I think we should focus on the open meetings, the ones family and friends can attend. I doubt Julia would trust Miriam to go alone. Who knows? Maybe we’ll get lucky and come across Miriam and Julia at a meeting. Or the hit man,” he added.

“So this is it,” she said. “This is our cover. We can poke around without causing any suspicion. Of course there is a privacy policy.”

“To protect the members? We’re not going to expose anyone’s secrets. Besides, you know how people love to talk. Privacy policy or not, someone will open up about Julia and Miriam if they’ve been there.”

“Especially if the other participants trust us. One of us can pose as a gambler, and the other can be a family member.”

“How about spouses?” he asked, snaring her gaze.

“Spouses?” she parroted.

“We can take on the role of a married couple.”

Talia forced herself to breathe. “That’s not funny, Aaron.”

The hunger in his eyes returned. “Do I look as though I’m kidding?”

No, she thought. He looked as though he was capable of seducing her, of making her fall in love with him all over again.

“I don’t want to be your wife. Not anymore,” she added, memories floating too close to the surface. In spite of his ultimatum claim, there was a time when marrying him had been her agenda, the very thing she’d wanted most.

“That’s exactly why this cover will work. Our marriage can be in trouble.” The hunger got deeper, darker, much more intense. “We can use the chemistry between us. The heat. The anger.”

He was right. Their cover would ring true. No one, not even the hit man—if they happened to cross his path—would believe otherwise. “Then you should be the gambler. The one who screwed up our marriage.”

“Sure. Why not? I’m good at that.” Cynicism sharpened his voice. “Just ask Jeannie. She’ll tell you what a lousy husband I was.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” At this point, she was doing her damndest to protect herself. Talia had grown up with a house full of men, with a blue-collar father and three testosterone-pumped brothers. She was used to fighting for her rights. But battling her way out of love was a whole other ball game. “I’d rather not think about what kind of husband you were.”

“You better get used to my lousy disposition if you’re going to be my undercover wife.” He dragged his hand through his hair, pulling a loose strand off his forehead. Aaron had sexy hair, dark and straight and unyieldingly thick.

She frowned at him. Everything about him was sexy, right down to the slashing cheekbones that boasted his heritage. Aaron was from two nations: White Mountain Apache and the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians.

He frowned at her, too. “Speaking of marriage...has Thunder mentioned his upcoming wedding to you?”

“Yes, but it’s still in the planning stages.” Her mind drifted back to Aaron’s wedding and the woman with whom he’d exchanged vows.

Aaron continued to scowl. “I think Thunder is going to ask me to be his best man.”

Talia steadied her voice. “I’m not surprised. I think Carrie is going to ask me to be her maid of honor.”

“That means we’ll be paired up at the ceremony.”

She squared her shoulders. "I can handle it."

"Can you, Tai?"

She wanted to kick him. He used to call her Tai when they were in bed, when they were kissing and touching and making each other deliriously crazy. "Of course I can."

"What about Danny's party?"

"What about it?"

"Can you handle that, too?" He reached into the top drawer of his desk and handed her an invitation with a cartoon character on it, announcing his son's fifth birthday, with directions to his ex-wife's house. "Or are you going to refuse to go?"

Although Talia didn't respond, she wondered if Aaron's family would be there, if he was giving her the opportunity to meet them.

She knew it shouldn't matter after all this time.

But it did. Somehow it did.

The following morning, Talia stood at the chopping block counter in her kitchen and poured a cup of coffee. Except for her shoes, the high heels she favored, she was already dressed for the office.

The doorbell sounded and she took the hot drink with her, expecting to see her mail carrier or someone equally nonintrusive.

But she was wrong.

She opened the door and came face-to-face with Aaron.

He didn't say a word. He just gave her an eye roaming once-over.

Talia cursed the shoes she wasn't wearing. At five-one, she was nearly a foot shorter than her former lover. It had never bothered her when they were in bed, when she was sprawled across his lap. But when he stood tall, towering over her with that lord-and-master expression, she fought the intimidation of him being her boss.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Getting a jump on our day." His lips tilted in a smart-aleck smile. "Would you prefer that I came by to jump your bones?"

Yes, Talia thought. She wanted to have sex. She wanted to make him desperate for her, then kick him to the curb, where his hundred-thousand-dollar Porsche was parked. Between the success of SPEC and the financial strength of the Pechanga Band, Aaron was sitting pretty. He divided his time between a sprawling loft in the city and a costly house on tribal land. Not that she'd been privy to his Indian home. He'd never taken her there.

"I should sue you for sexual harassment," she said, finally commenting on his jump-her-bones remark.

"And I should sue you for all of my hot-blooded memories."

"You pursued me, Aaron."

"And you enjoyed every minute of it."

Yes, she'd enjoyed being his lover. But she hadn't enjoyed the longing, the hope, the horrible need to be his wife.

"I could use some coffee," he said.

"Then get it yourself."

"Thanks, I will." He swept past her, making himself comfortable in her cozy kitchen.

Talia followed him. She lived in a two-bedroom house from the 1930s that she'd decorated with retro furniture. She rented it because of its vintage style. The sinks were pedestal, and the doorknobs were crystal.

Chantilly Lace, her favorite Bengal, came into the kitchen and meowed at Aaron.

"Hey, Lacy." He quit pouring his coffee and picked up the cat.

Lacy rubbed her head against his shirt, and Talia wanted to call her pet a traitor. All of her cats had always adored Aaron. He had a sleek, strong, animalistic charm that drew them near. Them and their babies. Talia bred Bengals, felines that were originally created by crossing a domestic cat with an Asian Leopard Cat, giving the breed a striking resemblance to their wild ancestor.

“Do you have any kittens?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I sold the last litter. Thunder bought one of them.”

“Oh, that’s right. He named the poor thing Spot.” Aaron stroked a hand over Lacy’s leopard-like rosettes. “But what does Thunder know?”

“A lot more than you do.”

He raised his eyebrows. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” She was enamored of the way Thunder was conducting his life. He’d settled down with the woman he loved and was eagerly awaiting the birth of their child.

Aaron placed Lacy on the floor and glanced at Talia’s stocking feet. “Do you have on those thigh-high hose? God, I love those things.”

Suddenly she felt naked. More exposed than just being shoeless. “You’re annoying me.”

“I’m preparing you for the husband-and-wife caper.”

“That’s what you meant by getting a jump on our day?”

“Yep.” He finished pouring his coffee. “We need to get comfortable in a domestic setting again.”

“We’ve never lived together.”

“No, but I’ve spent a lot of time here. That’s close enough.” He sat at the dining room table, an ancient oak piece that she’d refinished herself. “Why don’t you fix me breakfast?”

“Eggs and arsenic?” she offered.

He chuckled. “See? We’re married already.”

She wasn’t about to laugh. “In that case, I want half of everything you own.”

“Spoken like a true wife.” He sipped his coffee. “I was serious about breakfast.”

And she was serious about having sex and kicking him to the curb. Her coffee had already gone cold. As cold as her he-married-another-woman heart. She wondered what he would do if she hiked up her skirt, exposed her thigh-highs and climbed onto his lap.

He would probably love every screw-you stroke. She would do well to keep her urges to herself.

“Come on, Tai, I’m hungry.”

Was that a double entendre? She gauged his expression and got a deliberately bland look in return.

Bastard. He’d probably read her mind.

Giving up on her, he began preparing the breakfast he wanted, raiding her fridge and the copper pots she kept above her stove.

Aaron was an enigma, she thought. A city-slick investigator, a traditional Indian and a former Special Operations soldier.

He fixed enough eggs and bacon for both of them. He managed to stay immaculate, too. He didn’t get a spatter of grease on his white shirt or gunmetal gray tie.

“Did you compile a list of the Gamblers Anonymous locations in Nevada?” he asked.

“Yes.” She considered adding vodka to the orange juice he’d poured. To dull her senses. To keep her from craving him. They used to make love in her cramped kitchen, pressed against the counter, getting hot and wicked.

“You could be a brunette.”

She cleared her mind. “What?”

“While we’re on the case.”

“Why?” she asked, thinking about the dark-haired, dark-skinned woman he’d married.

He moved closer, then lifted a strand of her natural blond hair, letting it trail through his fingers. “Because it would change how you look, and we’re going undercover.”

His touch made her shiver, right down to the bone. She pulled away, refusing to let him make her weak. “Maybe I’ll be a redhead.”

He smothered the eggs, his and hers, with grated cheddar and jalapeno-spiked salsa. Then he sat down to eat his food. “That’d be sexy.”

She sat at the table too, irritated that he hadn’t consulted her about her eggs, even if he knew how she liked them. “A dowdy redhead.”

“Fat chance of that.” He dived into his breakfast, then changed the subject. “You better show up to the party on Saturday.”

“What for?” she challenged, wishing he would let sleeping dogs lie. “We’re not a couple anymore.”

“Sure we are.” He snared her gaze, pinning her in place. “You’re my new wife.”

Her irritation worsened. “Fake wife.”

“I wonder if my family will think you’re fake. Or if you’ll be able to impress them.”

She didn’t respond. She knew he was baiting her to attend his son’s birthday.

A bait she was sure to take.

Two

Saturday came too soon. Talia climbed in her sports car, a less expensive model than Aaron owned, and drove to Temecula, a vineyard-covered region in Southwest California, where the Pechanga Resort and Casino was located, an enterprise that provided revenues for tribal members.

She passed the impressive resort and followed the directions on the invitation to Jeannie's house, a two-story structure with a white fence and a spray of colorful flowers.

Before Talia removed Danny's gift from the trunk and ventured to the door, she smoothed her chic yet casual ensemble. She'd paired a trendy blouse with designer jeans and chunky-heeled boots that added four inches to her petite frame. She needed to pack a punch today.

She'd never been so nervous.

When she glanced at the other vehicles parked on the street, she noticed Aaron's Porsche. It shined like a silver bullet with its custom wheels and convertible top. Talia's car was black, like the onyx pendant around her neck.

She looked around for Thunder's Hummer, but she didn't see it. Apparently he and Carrie, his lovely fiancée, hadn't arrived yet. The interesting thing about Carrie was that she was also Thunder's ex-wife. They'd been married when they were teenagers, and after an emotional divorce, they'd reunited twenty years later.

Speaking of ex-wives...

She hoped Aaron had warned Jeannie that she was coming. Not that Jeannie wouldn't be a gracious hostess. She and Talia had been uncomfortably polite to each other at first, but after Jeannie had given up on her troubled marriage and left Aaron, the women weren't quite so uncomfortable.

After all, they'd ditched the same man.

Then again, Jeannie had moved on with someone else. Talia rarely dated. Instead she focused on her career. Which could be misinterpreted, she supposed, considering that Aaron was her boss. But she'd stayed at SPEC because remaining there had made her stronger. Seeing Aaron every day, especially while he'd been married to another woman, had shaped Talia into the femme fatale she'd always wanted to be. Of course sometimes she faltered.

Like now, she thought.

Finally, she got her emotions in check and removed Danny's present from her trunk, hoping he was an artistic child. She'd bought him a slew of crayons, markers and kid-inspired paint sets.

She knocked on the door and a fair-haired man answered. He wore a polo-style shirt and slightly faded Levi's. Medium built and casually attractive, he smiled at her.

"I'm Jim," he said. "Jeannie's husband."

"I'm Talia." She smiled, too. He seemed kind and genuine. She'd heard that he was a carpenter. To her, it seemed like an honest profession.

"Aaron told us you were coming."

Thank goodness, she thought. Jim invited her inside, then escorted her to the backyard, where the party was already underway. She took a quick look around and noticed that she and Jim were the only non-Native people there.

Suddenly she wanted to cling to him, but she realized how stupid that was. He was Jeannie's spouse and Danny's stepfather. He wasn't an outsider.

She caught sight of the birthday boy jumping on a trampoline with his friends. She saw Danny every so often at the office. When Aaron, the weekend dad, was swamped with overtime on Friday nights, he brought his son to work, letting him play P.I. at an empty desk.

Jim accepted Danny's present and put it with the rest of the festively wrapped gifts. Then he offered Talia a soda and directed her to a group of tables where the adult guests were gathered, snacking on chips and dip and waiting for the main entrees to be served.

Talia tried to relax, but she couldn't. This party had Indian written all over it. In the center of the grass was a big round object, covered with a blanket. She assumed it was a drum.

Aaron spotted her, and their gazes locked from across the yard. He stood and came toward her with long, deliberate strides. He was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt with the casino logo. By the time he reached her, her heart was pounding. He looked deep and dark and ethnic. His raven-colored hair was combed away from his forehead, and his eyes seemed more black than brown.

No wonder his culture was so foreign to her. Until today, she'd never been remotely close, emotionally or physically, to his Apache or Pechanga roots. He'd never offered to bring her into that part of his life.

"You made it," he said.

"Yes." She clutched the soda Jim had given her. Was this Aaron's attempt to make amends for the past? To draw her into his world? Or was he proving, firsthand, that she didn't belong here? That she would never fit in?

None of the other guests were staring at her, but she could feel their curiosity. An older woman in a brightly colored dress and silver jewelry was scowling. Was she Aaron's mother?

"I can introduce you to everyone," he said.

"I already know Jeannie." She glanced up and saw Aaron's ex-wife coming out of the house and carrying a casserole dish. Jeannie was graced with a noticeable figure and a braid that flowed to the middle of her back. She wasn't classically pretty, not by Anglo standards. But Talia thought she was stunning.

"Jeannie isn't everyone," he said.

She used to be, Talia thought, recalling how envious she had been of the other woman.

Regardless, Jeannie greeted her first. She thanked Talia for coming, and they gazed at each other in a moment of silence.

Then Jim appeared at his wife's side, and Talia realized how hard he must have worked to fit in, to be accepted as Danny's stepfather.

To Talia, it didn't seem worth it. Especially when she met Aaron's family. The scowling woman wasn't his mother. She was his disapproving aunt. His mother was more reserved, offering a proper hello. By no means was she rude. But she didn't make Talia feel welcome, either.

Her name was Roberta, and she looked about sixty, with mildly graying hair, strong features and pale lipstick. At thirty-nine, Aaron was an only child. He'd given Roberta a grandson she adored, but he hadn't been a good husband to the boy's mother. Talia could tell that Roberta wasn't pleased about that. She'd wanted Aaron and Jeannie to stay together forever.

A short while later, Roberta and her sister engaged in a conversation in their Native tongue, and Talia assumed this was commonplace. That most of the people at the party spoke some sort of Indian language.

Aaron sat closer to Talia than he should have. His shoulder kept bumping hers, and she wanted to push him away. He was bandying around Native words, too. Something she'd never heard him do before.

By the time all of the entrées were served by Jeannie and the women in her family, the kids had been rounded up to eat. Aaron led the group in a blessing of thanks, and Talia remained still. Why hadn't he ever prayed in front of her before? Why hadn't he ever blessed the food just the two of them had shared?

Talia picked up her fork. The meal was a combination of Mexican and Native dishes. She ate tamales and enchiladas, with beans and rice on the side. She was curious to try the Native food, but she decided not to indulge, not with Aaron sitting so deliberately close, the heat from his body radiating next to hers.

Finally, Thunder and Carrie arrived. He held his pregnant fiancée's hand and apologized for being late. Then he greeted everyone individually, hugging his relatives and scooping the birthday boy into his arms.

Danny laughed, and Thunder winked at Carrie. They looked incredible together, Talia thought. It didn't matter that she was Anglo. Thunder had always dated non-Native women. But his side of the family was open to mixed relationships. His parents, who lived in Arizona, loved Carrie as if she were their own. Of course, Carrie had a miniscule amount of Cherokee blood. But she wasn't registered with the tribe, so to most Indians, that made her white.

Thunder and Carrie sat at the same table as Aaron and Talia, for which Talia was grateful. Carrie was her ally, a newfound friend. They'd gotten close while the other woman had been struggling to reunite with Thunder.

"It's good to see you," Carrie said, her highlighted hair blowing softly around her face.

"You, too." Talia tried not to let down her guard, to make everyone aware of how much Carrie's presence meant to her. But she sensed that Carrie knew. They'd confided in each other about the men they loved.

Or used to love, Talia corrected in regard to herself. She wouldn't dare feel that way about Aaron again.

After the meal, the gathering turned traditional. Talia was right; the blanketed object was a drum. Aaron uncovered it, and he and a group of men sat in a circle around it and burned a fragrant herb.

A burning bundle of the same herb was passed among the guests, too. "It's sage," Carrie whispered to her. "You can purify yourself with it. Or you can choose not to. No one will be offended."

"Because I'm not one of them?" she whispered back.

Carrie gave her a sympathetic look, and when the sage came Talia's way, she didn't fan the smoke over herself the way everyone else did. She was too uncomfortable to try to fit in, so she passed the small, yarn-wrapped bundle to the person beside her without participating. Aaron chose that moment to glance up at her. Talia held his gaze for as long as she could. And then he blinked and looked away, as though he shouldn't have been watching her from his sacred spot at the drum.

Soon the men were singing. They started with "Happy Birthday," honoring Aaron's young son with a thumping beat. He grinned like the sweet child he was.

Talia's heart reacted with a maternal ache. She used to imagine having children with Aaron. Danny, with his silky dark hair and warm brown eyes, should have been their little boy.

The songs that followed sounded like chants. Most of the partygoers danced, moving in a rhythmic circle. Thunder and Carrie offered to teach Talia the steps, but she declined, concerned about drawing attention to herself.

When the singers took a break, the cake was served and Danny opened his gifts, with friends and family gathered around him. He thanked everyone, going from guest to guest, doling out hugs. When he embraced Talia, she wanted to cry. But she forced a smile instead, keeping her ache deep inside.

After the singers, including Aaron, returned to the drum, Talia decided it was time for her to leave. She said goodbye to Thunder, Carrie and Danny, then she thanked Jeannie and Jim for their hospitality. They were gracious, and their kindness made the ache inside her grow even deeper.

When she walked away, she wondered if Aaron was watching her again. She wasn't about to turn around and find out.

Talia left without looking back, even though the sound of his voice and the tribal song he was singing stayed with her.

Long after she went to bed that night.

Aaron didn't bother to knock. On Monday morning, he walked straight into Talia's office, knowing he would tick her off.

With the phone pressed to her ear, she looked up and glared at him. He ignored her polarized expression and sat in a chair that faced her desk. Her office wasn't as upscale as his, but she'd added feminine touches. Pretty dust collectors, he supposed. He'd always been aroused by the ladylike things she kept around. The gun she carried, a pearl-handled pistol, turned him on but good. Not that it should. The snub-nosed .38 was a weapon she would probably like to use on him.

Aaron cringed at the thought, imagining her aiming it at his fly.

She finished her call, and he slid a paper plate covered in aluminum foil toward her.

"What's that?"

"Open it and find out."

"Fine." She lifted a corner of the foil. "Indian food?"

"Fry bread left over from the party."

"If I didn't eat it there, why would I want it now?"

He tore off a chunk and tried to feed it to her. The powdered sugar had caramelized. "Because it's greasy and good."

She waved him away. "Knock it off."

"And you wonder why I didn't marry you. My aunt thought you were a bitch."

"Really?" That got her goat. "Well, I thought she was a bitch, too."

Sometimes she was, but he kept that thought to himself. He ate the piece of fry bread Talia had refused, and she shifted in her chair.

"What did your mother think of me?" she asked.

"She didn't trust you. You're too La Femme Nikita for her tastes."

She flipped her hair. "I try."

"Don't I know." He wanted to make breathless love to her. Today she was wearing a blouse that rivaled the cobalt color of her eyes, and her skirt exposed just the right amount of thigh.

"Why did you invite me, Aaron?"

"To the party?" He caught a glimpse of lacy camisole beneath her blouse. "Because you complained about not meeting my family."

"And now I have."

"Yes, you have." He covered the fry bread. "And it didn't make a difference, did it?"

"Which means what? That you're off the hook for hurting me? Nice try, but life doesn't work that way."

He smiled, keeping it thin and sharp. "You're not over me, Tai."

Her skin almost paled. "You wish."

He argued his point. "If you didn't care about me, you wouldn't be holding a grudge." He picked up a glass figurine from her desk. It was shaped like a butterfly. He traced each fragile wing, memories assaulting his mind. Talia had a tattoo of a butterfly on her bikini line. He'd been with her when she'd gotten it.

"Put that down," she told him.

"Why?"

"So you don't break it."

"I'm being careful."

"You don't know the meaning of the word."

Part of him wanted to shatter the butterfly. Talia hadn't made the slightest effort at the party. She hadn't even tried to make a favorable impression.

He set down the figurine. If he didn't, he would break it, snap its delicate wings in half. "Where's the Gamblers Anonymous list?"

She opened a file on her computer. "I hate it when you do that."

“Do what? Change the subject without warning you? Would you rather talk about how not-over-me you are?”

“Go to hell.”

As if he hadn't been there already. After Talia walked out on him, he'd saddled up with Satan too many times to count.

She activated her printer and handed him a copy of the Nevada GA list she'd compiled. “Happy?”

“Are you?” he shot back.

“Ecstatic,” she droned. “I can't wait to become your phony wife.”

“We're going to sleep in the same room.”

“Over my dead body.”

“That can be arranged.”

“How? Are you going to contract Julia and Miriam's hit man to do me in?”

“If only I could. We don't even know who he is.” Suddenly he thought about the person who'd asked them to help the FBI find Julia and Miriam. Thunder's brother, Dylan, was the concerned party. Dylan had inadvertently rescued Julia from a kidnapping just days before she and her mother had disappeared, and now he was tangled up in their lives. Dylan even felt guilty about the assassin, but that was a long story.

“I don't need to hire someone to take you out,” Talia said. “I could do it myself.”

“Go ahead and try,” he retorted. “Better yet, you can do it while we're sharing a room.”

“I'm serious about that, Aaron.”

“So am I. It's part of our cover.”

“Bull.”

“If we're going to pull this off, if we're going to become a married couple, then we have to behave accordingly, to get into character, to make our cover believable.” He glanced at the fragile butterfly, itching to touch it again, to threaten to break it. “We're not going to blow this, Talia. We're not going to put our lives on the line.”

She gave him a cynical look. “No matter how much we want to waste each other?”

Touché, Aaron thought, recalling her pearl-handled gun. “We're going to pose as a couple on vacation in Nevada. I've been working on the details.” He paused, explained further. “I've got a makeup man on the payroll who will teach us how to change the way we look, just to be sure that the assassin doesn't recognize us. We don't know who he is, but he might know who we are.”

“I don't mind changing my appearance.”

He took an unabashed gander at her. “I'm still deciding on the color of your hair.”

“Red,” she told him.

“We'll see.” He wanted to tug her head back, to use her hair to rein her in. “SPEC will provide us with new identities, but I'll make sure the feds approve them.”

“How long will we be gone?”

“Two weeks. Three if we need more time. I'll make the travel arrangements.”

“I'll be there with wedding bells on.” She fluttered her lashes, then mocked him with a breathy seduction. “I can't wait to shack up with my husband.”

He didn't appreciate her rotten-tempered wit. He stood and left her office, wanting to choke himself with his tie, right before he strangled her with it.

There was nothing funny about how badly he wanted to check into a hotel with her.

Nothing at all.

Three

Less than a week later, Talia sat next to Aaron on a flight that took them to Reno. Silent, she sipped apple juice and picked at the snack the flight attendant had distributed.

As specified, Aaron had created their cover, right down to her auburn wig. The chin-length hairstyle he'd chosen for her was straight and sleek. The designer clothes he'd suggested were from last season's collection. He'd told her that she was going to play an elegant thirtysomething wife who stood by the man she'd married. Or that was the impression she gave. In truth, she was struggling to hold her emotions together, to remain loyal to a gambler who maxed out their credit cards, drove a car that was beyond his means and insisted on the finest foods and best hotels.

A pretentious Californian, she thought.

The trip to Nevada was the husband's idea. He wanted to hit Reno, Carson City, Las Vegas and Laughlin, sightseeing in between. But his wife had other ideas. Once their vacation was under way, she was going to threaten him with divorce if he didn't get some help.

According to Aaron, they loved each other. Deeply, desperately. So her threat was going to work. But not without a struggle. He didn't want to lose his wife, but he didn't want to admit that he was a compulsive gambler. That he was ill. That his actions were destroying their lives.

Talia glanced at Aaron. He'd changed his appearance, too. He'd added threads of gray to his hair, making him seem a bit older than he was. He'd changed the color of his eyes with greenish-gold contacts and dusted his skin with an amber-hued bronzer, softening the deep, dark tone. Like Talia, his features had been altered with carefully applied prosthetics. Although he still carried an ethnic flair, his heritage wasn't easy to define. To her, he looked like a suntanned American with European roots.

He toasted her with his cocktail, and Talia wished that his non-Native genetics were real. If his culture hadn't been an issue, he would have married her all those years ago. Their relationship would have worked.

After their plane touched down in Reno, Aaron rented a luxury car, which they would use on the remainder of their trip.

His new name was Andy Torres, and hers was Tina. They lived in Los Angeles, and he was a real estate agent who gambled away most of his commissions, chasing his dream to win big and maintain the lifestyle he craved. She ran a successful Internet business, but his losses were cutting into her hard-earned endeavors and putting them deeper in debt.

Once they arrived at the Reno hotel, Talia's nerves kicked in. She was going to spend the next two to three weeks posing as Aaron's wife, sharing rooms with him at night, waking up each morning with the shower running, watching him emerge with a towel wrapped around his waist.

This was too close for comfort, she thought. A job she should have refused. But she wanted to find Julia and her mother. She wanted to help them survive, to turn them over to the FBI for safekeeping.

Julia and Miriam didn't know a hit man had been contracted to kill them. Originally Julia had been kidnapped as a threat, as a means to force Miriam into paying her interest-bearing debt. Only Miriam hadn't complied. After Julia was rescued, she and her daughter had run away.

Then came the hired assassin.

Aaron handed Talia a key card. "We're on the fourth floor. Poolside."

She merely nodded. The hotel was big and brightly lit, with a maze of slot machines and gaming tables at its disposal.

Her husband, as she was forcing herself to think of him for the sake of their cover, had an anxious gleam in his eye. He looked like the gambler he was supposed to be.

But he wasn't, of course. He was the former lover who'd yanked out her heart, who was reaching for her hand while the busy bellhop tagged their luggage.

She wanted to tell him to leave her alone, but Tina, the wife she was portraying, wouldn't cause a scene in public. So she let him hold her hand.

In the crowded elevator, he lifted it to his lips, brushing it with a barely there kiss.

Gallant, sexy.

Her entire body went warm.

When he smiled, she leaned into his ear and called him a jerk. He kept smiling, as though she'd just whispered something soft and sweet.

Once they were alone in the room, she ripped her hand from his.

"Don't get testy," he said, looking tall and tanned and much too smug.

"Then don't get so affectionate." She fought the sensual chill he'd given her. "Andy doesn't need to be all over his wife."

"Did I tell you that Tina and Andy have a great sex life?" He sat on the edge of the bed and waited for the bellhop. "After they fight, they make love."

"Like we used to?" The solitary bed was a problem, she thought. A major obstacle. "I'll be giving you a pillow and a blanket, and you'll be sleeping on the floor, Romeo."

"No way, Juliet. I'm going to—"

A knock sounded at the door, and Aaron quit talking and answered the summons, allowing the bellhop to enter. He tipped the young man generously, playing his Andy Torres part with ease. Andy wouldn't let anyone at the hotel call him cheap. He wanted the employees to think he was rich.

After the bellhop left, he turned to Talia. "Change into a pretty dress, and we'll haunt the casino. And after I win some money, I'll take you out for a candlelit dinner."

"We're not here to play."

"Andy is."

She narrowed her eyes. "Andy is going to lose his shirt."

"Not tonight. Tonight he feels lucky. Besides, Aaron is a hell of a craps player."

"I'm not interested in a candlelit dinner."

"Yeah, but Tina is. She needs to be close to Andy. She needs to pretend their lives are normal before she threatens to divorce him."

"I'm looking forward to that part. I can't wait to burst Andy's bubble."

"We can fake a fight tomorrow." Aaron unzipped Talia's suitcase and removed a black dress that was stitched in silver, then tossed it to her. "Now be a good girl and get dolled up for your husband. He's going to put on some nice duds, too."

Before he stripped in front of her, she headed for the bathroom to get away from him and slip on her dress, knowing that Andy was going to romance his wife this evening.

And Talia was going to suffer for it.

Aaron was a hell of a craps player. Either that or Talia was his lucky charm. Every time it was his turn to roll the dice, he asked her to blow on them. It was cheesy, she thought. But it was working.

They'd been in the casino for hours, and he was racking up a stack of chips. She didn't understand the game, not completely. But it was thrilling to watch him win.

"I told you," he said, dropping a hundred-dollar chip down the front of her dress, where a scooped neckline revealed a hint of cleavage.

Stunned, she felt the cool metal object fall between her breasts and settle in her bra. "A husband shouldn't do that to his wife."

"Even if he's married to Lady Luck?" He pulled her tight against him. Then he kissed her, deep and slow and hot.

She nearly stumbled, even in the medium-heeled pumps she wore. There they were, standing at the craps table, his tongue coaching hers. Suddenly she couldn't think straight. She had no idea what Tina was supposed to do. So she let her husband make a sexual spectacle of her, with other male players cheering him on.

Andy Torres knew exactly what he was doing. Or was it Aaron Trueno? The lines were blurring between real life and the roles they were playing.

He tasted like the whiskey sour he'd drunk, like the intoxication that spilled through her blood. When he let her go, she knew she was in trouble. That he would con his way into her bed.

But not into her pants, she decided, struggling to come to her senses. "You promised me dinner."
"Now? While I'm winning?"

"Yes." Anything to get him away from the table, from the seduction that was ringing in her ears.

"Women." He laughed, playing his part to perfection. Then he leaned toward her and whispered, "That was some blow job. On the dice," he added, much too softly.

She wanted to punish him, to put him in his place, but she couldn't think of a sharp-tongued reply.

He waited for her to respond, and when she didn't, he touched her cheek. "I love you, Tina."

Talia, she thought, her brain horribly befuddled. My name is Talia.

He led her through the casino and into a seafood restaurant on the lobby floor, where he gave the hostess their name and they waited to be seated.

"You're not playing fair," she said.

"Because I'm good at what I do?"

"Yes." The pain of pretending to be his wife hit her like a fist. She even clenched her stomach to sustain the impact. "I shouldn't have taken this trip with you."

"It's too late now." He rubbed his thumb over the showy diamond she wore, a wedding ring that didn't really belong to her.

She hated that he was staying in character, not missing a beat. Yet he'd managed to speak between the lines, too. To say what he meant.

Everything except the I love you part.

The hostess called their phony last name, and they were escorted to a dimly lit corner. Aaron sat beside her in the cozy booth, and she looked into the greenish-gold color of his eyes, the contact lenses that helped change his appearance.

He studied the changes in her, as well, touching the ends of her hair, treating her wig as though it were real.

"I used to date a blonde who looked a lot like you," he said.

"Then maybe you should have married her."

"She wasn't lucky for me."

"Neither am I."

He reached down the front of her dress and removed the hundred-dollar chip. "Sure you are."

"It was a fluke." Her pulse picked up speed. "I'm not going to blow on the dice again."

He smiled, grazing her with the metal token. "Then what are you going to blow?"

"My temper," she told him, wishing he wasn't so appealing. The candlelight he'd promised was flickering across his skin.

He continued to smile, taking the position of power. "Redheads are supposed to be fiery."

"And blondes are dumb?"

"Not the blonde I knew. She was as sharp as a machete."

"Did she cut you?" she asked, hoping he would say yes.

His smile fell. "Yeah, she sliced me open. Right here." He indicated his heart. "Where it hurts."

Good for her, she thought. For me.

Their waitress arrived to take their orders, but they'd forgotten to look at their menus.

“Will you give us a minute?” Aaron asked. His hand was still covering his heart. “We got a little lost. In each other,” he added, making Talia’s pulse pick up speed again.

Now she knew why Tina was supposed to love him.

Their server left, and by the time she returned, Aaron was ready for another whiskey sour. Talia decided to have one, too. To relive the flavor of his kiss. For Tina.

For the woman who would be threatening to divorce him.

They ordered the same meal, choosing the special, a seafood combination that included poached salmon and baked oysters. When their platters arrived, she adjusted the linen napkin on her lap.

He caught her gaze, looking at her over the rim of his glass. “Do you think they’re really an aphrodisiac?”

She knew he meant the oysters. “No.” And now she wished she’d ordered something else. She didn’t want to talk about foods that made people sexual.

“Too bad.” He finished his drink. “Of course you could be wrong.”

“I’m not.”

“You won’t know until after you eat them.”

“I’ve eaten them before.”

“Not while you’ve been sitting so close to me.”

He brushed her arm, then reached for his fork, leaving her staring at the oysters on her plate. She wasn’t about to put them in her mouth.

“Afraid?” he asked.

Terrified, she thought.

And it only got worse when dinner ended and they went upstairs to their room, where he locked the door.

And waited for her to get ready for bed.

Aaron watched Talia rifle through her suitcase.

She glanced up at him and frowned. “Quit looking at me like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like you’re going to get lucky.”

“I just want to see what you’re going to wear to bed.” He knew he was making her nervous, and he was enjoying the show.

She squinted at him. “I brought a flannel nightgown.”

“Yeah, right. A femme fatale in flannel.” He was already hard, thinking about sleeping next to her. She grabbed a silky garment from her suitcase, and he grinned.

“Get over yourself, Aaron. I wear this when I’m alone. I didn’t bring it for you.”

“Can I watch you change?”

“No.” She removed her wig and threw it at him. Then she released her hair from a nylon cap, letting the blond locks flow free.

He caught the wig. “Are you sure I can’t watch you take off your clothes?”

“No.” She walked past him and into the bathroom, closing the door with a kiss-my-butt thud.

“Witch,” he said to the wig.

“I heard that,” Talia called out from behind the door.

“Because you’ve got bat ears.” And a pretty little tattoo that turned him on. He was dying to see her naked, to relish all of those sweet, soft curves.

Talia took forever in the bathroom, but he knew she would. She always soaked in the tub at night. Aaron preferred brisk morning showers.

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