

K I M A N I TM R O M A N C E

His
SOUTHERN
Sweetheart

Once Upon a Tiara



Carolyn Hector



Carolyn Hector
His Southern Sweetheart

«HarperCollins»

Hector C.

His Southern Sweetheart / C. Hector — «HarperCollins»,

Seduction, Southern style! Reality show producer Amelia Marlow has a score to settle with sexy Nate Reyes—and buying him at a bachelor auction promises sweet satisfaction. After all, it's thanks to him that workaholic Amelia is on temporary leave in her sleepy Georgia hometown. The least he can do is help her while she's stuck there! But the forty hours of community service Nate owes soon turn into sensual and sizzling overtime...Nate wants to make things right with the gorgeous Amelia. Through sultry days and even hotter nights, Nate's surprised to find she's slowly turning his "no complications wanted" attitude into intense attraction. And he soon discovers that he'll do anything to prove that there's only one perfect place for Amelia—in his arms!

© Hector C.

© HarperCollins

Seduction, Southern style!

Reality show producer Amelia Marlow has a score to settle with sexy Nate Reyes—and buying him at a bachelor auction promises sweet satisfaction. After all, it’s thanks to him that workaholic Amelia is on temporary leave in her sleepy Georgia hometown. The least he can do is help her while she’s stuck there! But the forty hours of community service Nate owes soon turn into sensual and sizzling overtime...

Nate wants to make things right with the gorgeous Amelia. Through sultry days and even hotter nights, Nate’s surprised to find she’s slowly turning his “no complications wanted” attitude into intense attraction. And he soon discovers that he’ll do anything to prove that there’s only one perfect place for Amelia—in his arms!

“What are you doing here?”

“Getting a start on whatever it is you want me to do to you.” The light in her car died off, leaving them alone in the night air. An owl hooted off in the distance over the sound of a diesel truck entering one of the back roads. With all the nighttime orchestra, Nate still heard her gulp, not in fear but uncertainty. Had she bitten off more than she could chew by bidding on him tonight?

“Are you going to tell me what you have in store for me now?” Nate asked. His eyes focused on her plump lips. She’d reapplied a layer of gloss during the ride over here because he knew he’d kissed off the strawberry flavor back at the club.

“In a rush to get back to Brittany?” Amelia countered. She pressed her manicured hand against his chest in a seeming attempt to put some space between them, but he felt the way her fingers lingered against his pecs.

Nate cocked his head to the side to study her face for a moment under the half-moon’s light. “Babe, you’ve got me for a full week.”

“And then?”

He grinned.

[Dear Reader,](#)

Welcome back to Southwood, Georgia. These are a few words Amelia Marlow never thought she’d hear.

R & R means something a little different in His Southern Sweetheart. For Amelia it stands for Reyes & Revenge. How can anyone want to seek revenge on such a hottie like Nate Reyes? Every time he did something sweet for Amelia, I just wanted to scream at her for being so mean.

Have I mentioned how I can take any situation and turn it into a love story? Combine this gift (as my friends and family validate this with a begrudging sigh) and my love for reality TV, and I thought I’d stir up a little romance for those who work behind the scenes.

His Southern Sweetheart came out of my love for reality TV and the unsung heroes—the television crew.

Carolyn Hector

Having your story read out loud as a teen by your brother in Julia Child’s voice might scare some folks from ever sharing their work. But **CAROLYN HECTOR** rose above her fear. She currently resides in Tallahassee, Florida, where there is never a dull moment. School functions, politics, football, Southern charm and sizzling heat help fuel her knack for putting a romantic spin on everything she comes across. Find out what she’s up to on Twitter: [@Carolyn32303](#).

His Southern Sweetheart

Carolyn Hector



I would like to dedicate this book to my one and only daughter, Haley, who binge-watches all of my inspirational reality shows with me. Thanks, Schmoopie!

[Acknowledgments](#)

Without the peace and quiet given to me by my son and four nephews (coordinated by my husband), I must acknowledge that without their cooperation, I wouldn't get any writing done!

[Contents](#)

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Introduction](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Extract](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

With the four-hundred-thread-count eggshell-colored Egyptian cotton sheets tangled around her feet, Amelia Marlow kicked the material off the edge of the bed and wrapped her legs around the muscular calves of her partner. Their chests rose and fell in unison in the afterglow of their phenomenal evening of marathon lovemaking.

“So,” they both breathed at the same time.

A sly grin spread across her face at the way the two of them had hit it off, from the time they met at the bar to the last wave of their orgasms. If she didn't know any better, she would have expected their first meeting to have been scripted. Six-foot-two with golden-bronze skin poured over steel muscles that no T-shirt could hide. His eyes were emerald green and had been focused on her the moment he filled the bar doorway. Hot didn't even begin to describe this man. Like every woman there, he'd caught her attention the minute he walked in. Who knew a couple of hours ago, when he'd walked directly over to her and offered to buy her a drink, that they'd end up with a nightcap in her hotel room? The first few moments, their conversation had been a string of flirty awkwardness and now here they were, speaking at the same time.

“You first,” he said.

“Didn't I already?” Amelia replied with a purr.

He turned his head and pressed his lips against her bare shoulder. “I thought we might want to exchange names.”

The point of a one-night stand meant no need to exchange names. She raised her brows. “You first.”

“Nate,” he said, squaring his jaw. “Nate Reyes.”

The roll of his R across his tongue set a ripple of a reminder of his talents a few moments ago. “Amelia, Amelia Marlow.”

Nate Reyes rolled to his right side, rested his head against his propped-up elbow and began to trace a pattern down from her chin to the center between her breasts with his forefinger. Subconsciously Amelia rested her hands against her stomach in attempt to make her breasts perky. The point of her elbow brushed against the hard contours of his ripped abs.

“And may I further say,” she began, despite the heat rising up from her chest across her cheekbones, “this honestly isn’t the type of thing I go around doing.”

His response came in a casual shrug. “Whatever the reason, I’m glad you did. I enjoyed myself this evening.”

“Me, too.”

The last time Amelia took a break from her job was probably never. Ever since the world had become enamored with reality shows, being on top of her game had become a necessity. As a field producer for MET, she’d found that personal relationships dwindled. Right now she was on the fast track for a seat on the throne as one of Multi-Ethnic Television’s future showrunners. Amelia busted her ass as a runner, becoming a field producer, following around the station’s biggest reality celebrities as they tweeted across the globe. Some days her current job seemed more like a glorified babysitter. Reality TV celebrity Natalia Ruiz was becoming bored with being followed 24/7 for her hit show, Azúcar. When a star was bored, so were the viewers. Amelia shook her head to get her job out of her mind. Why think about work when a smoking-hot man lay naked beside her?

“I want to see you again.”

“I am only in Atlanta for the weekend. I’m checking out tomorrow.” Amelia shook her head left to right. Strands of hair brushed against her dewy skin. The cute flip hairstyle she’d gotten done today now flopped. He was worth it.

“So am I.” Nate rolled onto his back. “We need to do this again, soon.”

Amelia shifted to her side and faced him. She wished she hadn’t kicked the sheets to the floor. Instead of hiding her not-so-toned frame with covers, she curled her knees up to her chest as much as her non-yoga-perfected body would allow. Why hadn’t she taken some lessons during the Azúcar episode with Natalia?

“My schedule is demanding,” Amelia began. She had no time for relationships with her jet-setting schedule. The red light of the digital clock on the nightstand on the other side of the bed read sometime after midnight. She was surprised she hadn’t heard from her executive producer or the cameramen. Did she seriously get a few hours to herself? Well, she countered herself, not all by herself.

Nate lifted his almond-shaped eyes to hers. The faint smell of coconut rum lingered on his full lips. He had a low Caesar-style haircut and the most delectable caramel skin. A half sleeve of petroglyphs or a tribal tattoo decorated the length of his muscular bicep. Thanks to interning as a part of the camera crew for MET’s show featuring tattoo artists, she understood the sun design to be part of a Taíno Indian culture. Amelia’s heart fluttered with excitement for remembering the detail.

“So this is seriously going to be a one-night stand?”

“I believe we need to think of tonight as one special moment.” Amelia sighed. “I need to get back to work.”

“It’s after midnight.” Nate propped himself up on his elbow and raised his brows.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, contorting the upper half of her body over the side of the bed. Her hands searched around on the floor for the slacks she’d kicked out of and came across her navy, polka-dot bra and panties. As she tucked the undergarments in, her fingertips brushed across the soft beige

carpet, reading it like braille for the pants until she found the hem strewn halfway across her hotel floor. The material of her pants was rolled over a shoe or a heel. She was glad the lamp lights were off. She'd have hated to see clearly what the room looked like. As it was, the full moon's light spilled from the balcony's open drapes and offered a view of the wreckage they'd created from tearing off each other's clothes. She was sure they'd knocked everything off the dresser in their state of passion.

"What kind of work forces you out after midnight?" asked Nate before choking on a stifled laugh. "Wait, do I want to know?"

From her awkward angle, Amelia playfully tapped her foot against his broad chest. He captured her by the heel and kissed her big toe. Amelia jumped forward, found her cell phone and sat upright in the bed. She swore as the blue light indicating a message flashed furiously. The mattress behind her dipped and the heat from Nate's body warmed her backside when he pulled her into his arms. As she tried to read her messages on her phone, his arms caressed the swell of her breasts. Amelia sunk into the warmth of him. Perhaps she had a few more minutes to respond to the swelling erection pressed against her backside. A rueful smile crept across her face, knowing she probably needed to stock up on sex. Lord only knew when she'd meet a man like this again.

The trail of kisses he left on her collarbone sizzled against her skin. Desire throbbed through every inch of her body. The shrill of her phone filled the silent room, shocking her system much like a bucket of ice dumped on her.

"Do you need to answer your phone?" he asked, kissing the tip of her earlobe and moving toward the side of her mouth. His large hands moved down her rib cage to the V of her thighs.

"No," she gasped. The phone stopped ringing. A half second later someone banged on her hotel door. Amelia turned the lights on by the switch beside her bed. "But I must answer that."

"Should I hide?" he asked, making no move to do so or effort to cover his naked and ready body.

The pounding on the door rattled the frame, the extra lock jingling against the bolt. Amelia jumped into her slacks, sans undergarments, turning her back to him as she zipped and buttoned herself. She cast a glance over her shoulder and raised a brow. "Are you in the habit of finding women who make you hide afterward?"

"Touché."

Her phone began to ring again and this time when she glanced Natalia's face appeared on the caller ID. From the other side of the door, her current boss banged and began to yell her name. Amelia's eyes cringed with embarrassment as William Vickers cursed.

"Oh, hell no." Nate moved from the bed. Naked, he stormed toward the door with his hand stretched outward for the doorknob. "Boyfriend or not, no man should speak to you this way."

"Wait!" Partly panicked and partly impressed with Nate's chivalry, Amelia rolled her eyes and sighed. She missed the gallantry of men these days. In the production world, manners were seriously lacking. "He's kind of my boss, not my boyfriend, and if you don't mind, I need you to step into the bathroom."

"Why?"

Amelia's eyes drifted to his naked, hard frame. It'd be a shame to have to cover or hide a beautiful body such as his. "Whatever's going on with my job, I don't want him thinking it was because of a romp in the hay."

For half a minute, while William continued to knock, Nate stood in front of her, staring her down. Reluctantly he turned to head toward the bathroom. The view from behind was just as beautiful. "And it's a bed, not hay," he mumbled before closing the door.

Once the other door clicked closed, Amelia crossed the room and opened the door just a crack. "Are you crazy?"

William, mobile showrunner of MET, stood stock-still, hand raised in the air. Still dressed in a pin-striped business suit from the editing dinner, he narrowed his dark eyes at Amelia. He craned his

neck to try and peer in through the crack she kept open. “What the hell are you up to?” His bulbous nostrils flared with his question.

“Sleeping?”

“You’re a field producer of a reality show where it is your job to follow your star around.”

“And she’s asleep,” Amelia gritted out between her teeth.

Of all the people to come and tell her how to do her job, William standing here irritated her the most. They’d both started out at MET as runners for cable television reality shows, doing errands for the directors, showrunners and field producers. They’d both vied for the same executive producer opening. And while William might have been the mobile showrunner with all the power to make creative and directive decisions, everyone on set listened to Amelia. She and her group of cameramen had their jobs down pat. William wanted this assignment for the chance to work with the Caribbean royal family, the Ruizes. Everyone at MET wanted the chance to head over to the Ruiz compound in San Juan, Puerto Rico, to film footage for Azúcar. Thanks to the quick friendship she and Natalia had forged, Amelia had earned the honors to work with the icon for the commercial.

“You sure?” William bared his teeth while his upper lip curled. His puffy hand thrust forward, shoving his cell phone toward her face. Amelia’s already blown-out back ached from the base of her spine as she leaned backward to focus on the picture of Natalia having an intimate dinner with a bearded stranger. The corners of William’s mouth turned upward and his eyes roamed the part of her body visible through the door. Amelia reached for the phone but William pulled it away. “You dropped the ball in order to get your beauty rest.”

“She said she was going to bed and I am allowed some personal time.”

“For as long as you’ve been babysitting her,” William gritted, “when did she say she wanted a quiet evening?”

Jesus, no wonder Natalia had been so sweet this evening. How long had she been planning this rendezvous? And who was this mystery man? Amelia documented Natalia’s life practically twenty-four hours out of the day. She’d never seen the man on the screen. Only the side of his face showed from William’s phone, but Amelia knew if she waited long enough, more pictures would be plastered over the internet. “Where is she now?”

“Hell if I know. Whoever is blogging said the two of them parted and went their separate ways after dinner. Damn shame we didn’t get any of this on film. Do you understand what our ratings would be like? If Natalia’s ready to start dating, we could have a bachelorette spin-off.”

Ratings were not an issue for Amelia as long as Natalia stayed interested in being in the public eye. Lately, however, she hadn’t enjoyed it too much—neither of them. The closer she grew to Natalia, the more Amelia liked her. They were friends. Unlike Natalia, Amelia was a far cry from an heiress.

“Are you even listening to me?” William’s bark snapped Amelia out of her pity party.

She straightened her spine and shook her head while closing her door. “Give me a minute and I’ll go find her.” The door clicked closed, locking William out of her life for a brief moment.

“She’s not in her room,” William shouted from the other side of the door.

Dressed, Nate stepped out from the bathroom. Amelia’s heart sunk with disappointment. She gave him a half smile and inhaled deeply as he crossed the room toward her.

“I take it you’ve got to go?”

“Sorry,” she mumbled, her eyes focused on the center of his defined chest. The maroon V-neck T-shirt he wore hugged his pecs and arms. The first thing about him she’d spotted was his bicep when he reached across the bar downstairs to pay for a round of drinks. She’d always adored a man with nice arms.

“Did you at least enjoy yourself?” Nate asked, stopping inches from her. His gaze focused on her lips.

“Hell yeah.” Amelia anticipated his hug and opened her arms. Somehow being in his embrace she felt safe, warm, as if everything was going to be okay—but it wasn’t. Her tryst this evening might

come with a cost—her job. Was he worth it? Nate’s arms closed tighter around her waist and he effortlessly lifted her into the air while planting a stream of kisses along her collarbone. Goose bumps began to swarm her forearms. A wicked wave of passion fluttered between her legs. Dear Lord Jesus, yes, this man was worth it.

“I plan on seeing you again,” Nate declared, setting her on her feet.

“I wouldn’t bet the farm.” Amelia half smiled. “I am a pretty busy woman.”

“I like farms.” Nate perked up. His emerald green eyes lit up with curiosity. “What do you know about farms?”

“Boy, please,” she said, pushing at his chest playfully. “We may have just met, but don’t be fooled by the manicure. Trust me, I spent my summers on my grandmamma’s farm in rural Georgia eating peaches straight from the tree.”

“How rural?” Her body moved forward when Nate tugged at the button of her slacks. “I love me a country girl.”

“We’re talking one streetlight downtown, you blink and you miss it.”

“Keep talking.” He stroked his long index finger against her earlobe and down the curve of her jaw. “You’re turning me on.”

“I wish I had the time.”

“We have to do this again,” he said, leaving a trail of kisses where his fingers had touched moments ago.

Flames of desire flickered in the pit of her stomach. A television pitch popped into her head:

Dear MET executives,

Instead of airing a highlight segment on the best fights of our reality shows, how about the best hookups of seasons past? Better yet, best one-night stands, complete with a where-is-he-now segment.

Sincerely,

Amelia

The phone in her hand began to ring. This time, instead of Natalia’s face, Amelia’s mother’s face appeared. Amelia’s heart thumped against her rib cage. Cynthia Marlow never called after nine. “Maybe. I’ll leave my info at the desk, but right now I’ve got to take this call.”

“Heavy is the head that wears the crown,” he teased, leaning forward to brush a kiss against her cheek. Any other given time, Amelia would have extracted her business card, her real one, and encouraged him to definitely use the number. But right now, for her mama to call after midnight, something was up.

“I’ll let you take your call,” he said as he reached behind her to open the door, “and get some coffee for us.”

Amelia half smiled while watching him walk away, appreciating the view. She closed the door behind her and exhaled a deep breath. What on earth had she been thinking tonight?

“Amelia? Amelia, darling, are you there?”

For a moment Amelia had forgotten her mother until she heard her father, Howard Marlow, question whether or not she was on the line. She tapped the speaker button and fanned her face with her free hand. “Hi, Mama, it’s late, what’s going on?”

“Amelia, honey, it’s your grandmamma.”

* * *

Nate Reyes stood by his motto, No complications. Yet, since his encounter with the reality show producer a week ago, his life seemed anything but. He wasn’t supposed to daydream about what she was doing. He wasn’t supposed to stop being interested in other women. Yet she consumed him.

“Can we stop this now, Uncle Nate?”

The words registered in Nate’s brain, but he did not acknowledge them until his niece Kimber exhaled a droll sigh. As he tried not to laugh at Kimber’s irritation, the pink feathers of the boa he wore around his neck flittered and stuck to the pink lip gloss he’d worn at the insistence of his other

niece, five-year-old Philly. Nate glanced up from the tiny pink porcelain cup of air-tea in time for the dramatic eye roll. For the last forty minutes, Kimber had refused to partake in the semiformal tea party her sister had set up for them.

“Sorry, Tío Nate,” Kimber corrected herself with a heavy Spanish accent and clearer sarcasm.

In the span of eight months, Nate had uprooted his life to move from Atlanta to settle down in Southwood, Georgia, to raise his two nieces in their childhood home after his brother Ken and sister-in-law, Betty, had passed away. Named legal guardians, Nate and his older brother, Stephen, didn’t have a fight on their hands for custody of their nieces. Betty’s parents were too old to take care of the girls and Nate’s parents lived on Villa San Juan, a small island off the northwest coast of Florida.

Between him and Stephen, they’d seamlessly transitioned themselves into a daily part of the girls’ lives by bringing their real estate and contracting business down South. With the help of Stephen’s soon-to-be fiancée, Lexi Pendergrass, the clan now had a stable touch of femininity. They’d even managed to take Kimber and Philly on an overdue visit to their paternal grandmother when Nate’s mother had noticed the lack of Puerto Rican cultural influence in the way the girls were growing up. And somehow the blame was placed on Nate and Stephen.

“My bad,” Nate said, setting the dainty cup on its matching saucer with a clatter. He shifted in the small pink seat. Truth be told, he wanted to end this activity but he’d promised Philly a tea party if she could spend one full day without wearing her well-earned tiara from her beauty pageant last weekend. People in Southwood thought Philly waltzing around town with her pageant crown was cute, but if she scratched the back windows of his SUV any more he was going to have to replace them. Thanks to the heaviness of the twelve-inch Swarovski tiara, the walls in the house leading up the stairs were scraped. Everyone in the family had scratches on their arms from Philly standing too close and turning her head. Even the wooden headboard of Philly’s twin bed suffered from deep grooves because she slept with the crown.

“May I be excused now?” asked Kimber.

“Are you finished with your tea?” Nate asked with a lopsided grin. He leaned forward to peer into his oldest niece’s cup, which she angled toward him with another eye roll.

“You didn’t finish your cookies.” Philly pointed out the stack of burnt premade desserts the woman in the grocery store had promised would be easy to make.

Nate cleared his throat and nodded his head toward the cookies. Kimber’s mouth widened with disbelief.

“This is beyond punishment,” Kimber mumbled. “This is cruel and unusual.”

Burning the cookies had totally been his fault. His mind had been elsewhere—in Atlanta and on the sexy producer who’d fled the minute she had the chance. Of course, finding her wouldn’t be hard. He knew Natalia Ruiz personally and if he didn’t his media connections at MET would have come in handy.

Nate’s mind breezed over Amelia once again. Tomorrow would make a week since being with her and she still hadn’t gotten out of his system. The original plan in Atlanta had been to distract her at the bar, buy her a drink or something in order for Stephen to speak with a potential client. Taking her to bed the same night—well, those were the perks of being a great wingman.

A set of keys jingled at the front door and automatically Philly’s face lit up with excitement. A deep “aha” came from Stephen Reyes at the bar separating the dining room and kitchen. He entered; the front door slammed shut and moments later in walked the future Mrs. Stephen Reyes, Lexi Pendergrass, who shook her head in preparation at the banter.

“I expected you to teach them how to gamble,” said Stephen, standing at the bar and staring into the breakfast nook in a two-piece gray suit with a gray-and-blue paisley tie loosened at the throat, “but a tea party?”

“C’mon, bruh, you know when a five-year-old asks you to play tea party, you damn well better play tea party.”

“Oooh,” Kimber and Philly chorused.

“Go ahead and put your cash in the swear jar,” ordered Lexi.

For a split second Nate scowled in Lexi’s direction as she pulled Philly’s chair away from the table. Thanks to the rule Lexi had installed in her pageant dress shop, the swear jar had now made its way to the marble kitchen counter. Nate stood and stepped over his mini chair. Stephen followed him into the kitchen as if to make sure Nate extracted a dollar for the jar. So far they had enough money to take a trip down to Puerto Rico.

“I expected more from you,” Stephen pretended to scold.

“Really?” Nate raised a brow. “You expected more even after asking me for a favor last week?” Albeit, Stephen never asked Nate to go such the distance.

Screwing the top back on the jar he replaced it back on the counter before reaching into the fridge for a cold beer. Lexi appeared in the doorway with Philly on her hip and let out a low whistle. “Do I even want to know?”

“No,” Stephen and Nate chorused.

“Sounds like my cue to leave.” Kimber pushed away from the small table. “Uncle Stephen?”

Stephen made an elaborate show of ignoring his niece and keeping his focus straight ahead on Nate, who bit the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing. Kimber had Stephen wrapped around her finger.

Sucking her teeth, Kimber remembered. “Tío Stephen?”

“Yes, darling?”

Nate refused to be putty in Kimber’s hand and wasn’t remotely fooled by the sugary tone in her voice. He gave her the props for having the nerve to sweet-talk Stephen after all the scheming she’d done this summer. Recently, Kimber thought she could get away with the bait-and-switch boyfriend trick, saying she was dating an overly studious classmate instead of a football player jock, for fear they wouldn’t approve. They didn’t at first, but Nate and Stephen were growing fond of Philip. On top of the boyfriend issue, Kimber stole a racy dress from Lexi’s Grits and Glam Gowns boutique in order to impress the jock. He already knew what Kimber was going to ask. Stephen may have laid down the law, but Nate made sure she followed it.

“Am I still grounded?”

“Yes.”

Kimber grunted and balled up her fists as she spun around to stomp up the kitchen steps. The glass patio door leading out to the pool shook. Only when Kimber’s door slammed shut did Nate and Stephen start to laugh.

“That’s your niece,” said Stephen as he shook his head.

“Oh, sure.” Nate sighed. “When they’re good, they’re your nieces, but when they’re bad, they’re mine. This is the thanks I get for staying home with them all day long cooking and cleaning?”

Stephen turned and faced Lexi. “Here we go.”

“Look, I am the one getting the kids ready for school, making sure they have their breakfast—”

“Is your cooking really a selling point?” asked Stephen.

Nate restrained the urge to flip his brother the middle finger. “Let’s not forget all the back-to-school forms I’ve been filling out all day long. I swear I provided this same information back in January. We have two kids in the school system. Why can’t there be one form online for them? My damn hand hurts.”

“Well.” Lexi chuckled. “Good luck trying to reform Southwood. In the meantime, I’m going to put our beauty queen to bed. Tomorrow, Nate, you and I can get a mani-pedi. Sound good?”

“Funny,” Nate said, realizing being a third wheel was becoming a nuisance.

“You may want to take her up on her offer, Nate,” said Stephen. “Do something together tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is Thursday. I’ve got to take the girls school shopping so I’m not fighting the crowds who also waited until the last minute.”

“I can do it,” offered Lexi. She gave Stephen a wink and Nate rolled his eyes. The main reason the two of them had first met was because Stephen had jumped the gun over the racy dress Kimber wore. He assumed when Kimber said she got the dress from Lexi’s boutique that Lexi had sold it to her. “You guys discuss it. The queen and I are going upstairs.”

As Lexi passed by Stephen, he reached out and swatted her behind. “Later, I get to put my beauty queen to bed.”

Nate pretended to gag. Stephen did not show as much constraint with flipping him off. “Domestic life looks good on you, bruh,” Nate teased, passing through the kitchen to the open French doors to the dining room. He sat down at the large maple table.

“Thanks. You ought to try it someday.”

The image of a pair of copper-hued legs wrapping around his waist entered his mind. “One day.”

“So for now you’re still on the market?”

Nate did not like the tone in his brother’s voice. They might not be twins, but Nate understood how Stephen’s mind worked. First he’d try to talk about how something was a great idea and the next thing Nate knew, he’d be volunteering to do his bidding. Nate already knew the stakes.

Earlier today at the grocery store, a few of the ladies he lunched with after church had asked if he planned on doing the fall bachelor auction Saturday night. Proceeds from the benefit went toward supplies for the local schools in four counties, affectionately referred to as Four Points. This fall marked the first time his nieces started school without their parents. The kids had adjusted to their new life and Nate liked to take the credit for their stability.

He also saw himself as the charitable type in most cases, but something about being on stage and having women bid on him frightened him. Since being here the last few months, he’d been the shiny new toy all the single ladies—and not all single—wanted to play with. The last thing he wanted was for any of these Southern belles to have to expose themselves by making a spectacle while bidding on him. Lord knew these ladies were not quite proper behind closed doors.

“Slow your roll,” Nate half grinned. “I know where you’re going with this.”

“Then you’ll understand the money you’ll bring in will go toward the school.”

“And time,” Nate added. “This auction offers up services of forty hours of my time. God only knows what will be expected of me if certain people bid on me.”

“So you’ll fix things here and there,” said Stephen. “Business is slow and it’s only forty hours. I am sure I can handle things.”

Nate didn’t have much to do besides refurnishing Lexi’s shop, which she was in no rush to open. He took a seat. “I’ve been in town a lot longer than you. All of a sudden you care?”

“If I plan on staying here and raising my family,” Stephen said with a sly smile.

“Are you trying to tell me Lexi’s pregnant?” Nate asked, leaning forward and widening his eyes. He lowered his voice in case Lexi could hear from upstairs in Philly’s room. “You sly old dog.”

“No.” Stephen frowned, then shook his bald head back and forth. “I am talking about the future. Our future.”

Prior to Ken and Betty passing away, Nate had worked alongside his brothers in a lucrative real estate and contracting business based in California. They provided the perfect homes and locations for Hollywood directors to film movie scenes. When Ken met his wife and started their family, he moved to Betty’s hometown in Southwood, Georgia. Nate and Stephen, wanting to be near their brother, then moved Reyes Realty and Contracting closer without actually being in Southwood. Atlanta, a rising home for television and film, was a perfect location. When Ken passed away, they realized that, in order to better care for their nieces, they had to commit to moving to Southwood.

“Whatever you’re planning, stop.”

“Don’t you want to be a part of the community?” asked Stephen.

“I am, more so than you.” Nate shuffled cards one good time, then stacked them in the center of the table. The back of the chair supported his weight when he leaned backward to reach in his pocket for his cell phone. Four missed texts in the last hour from three different women, one a bit antsy than the others. Brittany Foley, his after-school special. Nate grinned. The pre-K teacher had worked with Philly during the transition after Ken died. She also worked on Nate in a more intimate way. He scratched his chin and the hairs where the beard he hadn’t bothered to shave away all week tickled his fingers.

Stephen sighed. “Hooking up with all the ladies in town is not considered being part of the community.”

“Whatever,” he mused. None of the women seemed to compare to Amelia. He dodged them at after-school pickup, went different directions down the aisle in the grocery store and hadn’t paid attention to any of his text messages. Prior to Amelia, his messages never went unread. Now, eh. What was wrong with him?

“Speaking of your service...” Stephen cleared his throat before folding his arms across his chest. “You’ve been staying in all week. Something you need to tell me?”

“Like what?” Leave it to Stephen to pay attention to this part of his personal life. When they were kids, Nate had been the nosy one.

“Like something about the woman you distracted for Natalia.”

“Yeah, so much for the private conversation. You two were blasted all over the internet.” The corners of Nate’s mouth turned upside down. The checkout lines were filled with photographs of Stephen and their childhood-friend-turned-reality-star. The guys knew Natalia way before she and her family became household names.

Stephen waved off the Nate’s guilt. “Lexi’s fine and we’ve never been better. I have you to thank. Natalia’s looking to leave show business and we’re in charge of finding a remote place for her.”

“You’re welcome, I guess.”

“Want to talk about the woman on your mind?”

“Hell no,” Nate snapped and pushed away from the table.

Stephen threw his hands in the air in surrender. “Sorry, don’t bite my head off.”

Nate waved his cell phone in the air and offered a cocky grin. “I am going to get back into the swing of things.”

“Attaboy.” Stephen began to give a slow clap. “I’m proud of you.”

Lexi bounced down the stairs. Her eyes looked between the two brothers. “Great. You agreed to do it.”

“Do what?” asked Nate. His eyes cut between his brother and Lexi.

Stephen pushed away from the wall and cleared his throat. “We hadn’t gotten around to that part yet.”

“What haven’t we gotten around to, big brother?” Nate leaned into the back of the chair, resting his long legs on the seat of the chair across from him.

Lexi stepped forward and flashed her tiara-winning smile. “We signed you up for the bachelor auction Saturday.”

[Chapter 2](#)

Grandmamma was ornery as ever, complaining every time the nurses brought a meal. The broken leg she’d sustained while trying to climb the stairs at her house did not improve her sour disposition. Either the food lacked seasoning or it had been cooked too long. After receiving the news of her grandmother’s fall down the steps, Amelia requested a few days off from work. Amelia had spent her first two days in Southwood at the Four Points General Hospital, listening to her complain about her leg not needing to be in traction and inquiring about the ages of the doctors coming into her hospital room. If she wasn’t at the hospital Amelia had been moving things around at Grandmamma’s

home, where she'd stayed. She'd seen no need in looking up old friends: she had none. Her cousin Cay would be back from her family vacation this weekend and would be able to help with the house. Grandmamma needed to accept the fact that she was getting old and the steps were too much for her. As much as she'd dreaded being called in to the head office in Orlando, Florida, she'd almost welcomed the chance to get away from the hospital.

Seated on the black leather couch in front of the receptionist's desk at MET Studios, Amelia crossed one leg over the other. The drive from Southwood to Orlando took four hours, but the day trip barely wrinkled her clothes. The black pencil skirt she wore today stretched against the back of her thighs as her foot began to twitch back and forth. She wore her brown hair in a French twist; she'd limited the amount of mascara she wore in case she cried today, and wore a light yellow, opal-colored blouse guaranteed to not allow her to sweat in this oppressive, never-ending, Southern summer heat. Thanks to a layer of anti-bite nail polish, she at least did not gnaw on her fingernails. Unlike the other sixteen floors below, which moved at the speed of light with reporters, producers, editing rooms, writers all trying to get their say and test kitchens, the top floor of Kelly Towers remained quiet. A light laughter filtered from the office next door to the boss. Amelia focused on the executive assistant, Rory Montgomery, who was seated at her desk and circling her index finger in the air to wind up her phone call with whomever was on the other line.

When she finished with her call, Rory opened the glass door to her own office and inclined her head for Amelia to enter.

"Jesus, Amelia, I've never seen you so nervous," Rory commented.

In their ten years of knowing each other since freshman year at Florida A&M University, Rory might not have seen Amelia in too many nervous situations. As a budding young journalism major, Amelia had never found the time to think about her nerves. There's always a first for everything. Amelia offered a half smile to the young receptionist at the desk as she passed by her circular desk and prayed her bundles of nerves weren't so obvious.

Amelia had been on this floor when she came in for a job interview. After learning Amelia had earned her master's in journalism from the University of Alabama, Rory had insisted on her friend applying for one of the producing jobs. Tired of being a glorified coffee girl for various production crews, Amelia took Rory up on the suggestion. Since being hired, Amelia had avoided the boss's floor like a juvenile avoided the principal's office. The friends never met in Rory's office and now today they were going to have a casual meeting in here: Rory, Amelia and Christopher Kelly—the head man in charge.

"Relax." Rory closed the door behind them and waved toward the two empty seats in front of her large black cherrywood desk. "You act like you're about to walk the plank."

The familiar diploma hung over the crimson wall above Rory's computer. A black cherrywood bookshelf held several books, but Amelia mainly focused on the old photographs of Rory's accolades from her time at MET. There was even a photograph of the two of them, arm in arm the first day of their freshman year, right next to one of the two of them at graduation. Looking at the pictures now, Amelia saw a resemblance between them. They had the same bobbed hairstyle popular at the time, and they both shared the same dark brown locks. Everyone always asked if they were related. Both women were athletically built, though neither of them played a sport, and had the same pecan skin color. Amelia liked to party, whereas Rory stayed in the dorm room to study.

"I'm not?" Amelia shook her head.

"You're my girl." Rory winked. "I'm not going to let you get thrown under the bus." Because of her genuineness, professionalism and commonsensical approach to work, Rory enjoyed her—technically, their—boss's trust and wielded a certain influence over him.

"William's already called?" Amelia asked. Of course the mobile showrunner ratted her out in order to kiss up to MET execs.

“He called the minute he left your hotel room.” Rory rolled her eyes with disdain for William. “I warned Christopher about leaving his phone on at night.”

“Oh?” Amelia’s brows rose and a side grin began to form. “William didn’t interrupt anything between you two, did he?”

“Don’t start.” Rory laughed. “We are strictly platonic.”

As a person who observed people for a living, Amelia had picked up on some of the kind things Christopher Kelly did for Rory, but she decided to keep her thoughts to herself. She’d never heard of many bosses who randomly surprised their assistants with their favorite flowers or took them to family retreats. Of the few boyfriends Amelia had had in life, she’d only met the parents of one of them once and that wasn’t by choice—they’d lived across the street from her family for a while.

“Okay.” Amelia decided to drop it. Thinking of Rory’s perfect life only shined a light on Amelia’s glaringly imperfect one.

“Care to tell me who the guy was?” Rory asked.

“A lady doesn’t kiss and tell.”

Rory peered around Amelia’s frame. “I don’t see one, so dish.”

“His name is Nate.” Amelia relaxed in her seat, spreading her fingers around the cushion of the blush chair.

“Okay,” Rory said slowly. “Nate what? And what does he do?”

“Reyes.” Amelia rolled her R the way he did.

A squeal escaped Rory’s mouth. “You naughty girl!”

“Whatever. I was due a night.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more.” Rory nodded. “He must have been something special, huh?”

For some reason Amelia didn’t want to reveal too much, not even to her margarita gal pal. “I don’t know, and I’m not even sure if I am going to ever see him again. I got the call about my grandmamma and pretty much hightailed it out of the room.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie.”

Amelia shrugged her shoulders. “It is what it is, and I am not cut out for relationships.”

“Because you love your job so much?”

A coy smile spread across Amelia’s face; she resisted emitting a maniacal laugh accompanied with a sinister rubbing of hands together. “I was going to say because I get to manipulate people’s lives, but let’s go with your answer.”

A cool breeze touched the back of Amelia’s neck and the sound of the phones ringing amplified behind her. The door opened and before she had the chance to turn around, Christopher Kelly stood beside her, hand stretched out. Amelia rose, not sure if she needed to curtsy or bow. The Kelly family was famous around the state. Cal Kelly, Christopher’s father, was an unchallenged state senator. His brother Mason was climbing the political ladder; another brother, Drew, was a doctor in the military and a hero for saving lives, and then there was Jared, the playboy war vet who worked for the DEA. Christopher’s mother, Maggie Kelly, was the only daughter of a pioneering movie producer who’d made the multicultural films Hollywood wouldn’t. Amelia had always admired Maggie Kelly for taking over her father’s business and building it into a multimillion-dollar corporation. To say Amelia was starstruck was an understatement.

“Mr. Kelly,” Amelia said as she decided to stand, misjudged his tall height and ended up hitting him in the lower abdomen with the top of her head as she stood up. “I’m so sorry,” she squealed with a flinch. Tears of embarrassment threatened to test her waterproof mascara.

“Amelia.” Rory sighed. “Relax. Chris, you remember meeting Amelia Marlow. Amelia, this is obviously Christopher Kelly.”

“Yes, I recall our interview,” Christopher said with a charming smile. He kept one hand in the left pocket of his light gray slacks while he shook her hand with the right. A crisp white Oxford was unbuttoned at this throat. “You’re one of our promising producers.”

“Thank you for noticing. And I’ve admired all of your work, too.”

“Well, let’s save some of that admiration until after this meeting.”

* * *

After her visit with her boss, Amelia went back to her studio apartment to pack a few things. Who ever heard of mandatory sick leave? Instead of being suspended, the boss strongly insisted Amelia take the time off to care for her grandmother in Southwood, away from Orlando and the studio. In a way, she should have been relieved for not having a suspension on her spotless work record.

Mr. Kelly chalked up the missed opportunity for this golden moment of reality TV due to her being overworked. He told her to take this opportunity to spend quality time with her grandmother and not concern herself with work—at least not for a few weeks or until she got her grandmother situated. He meant well, but work was her life. To top things off, the landlord caught her coming down the steps and stopped her to let her know about the impending increase in rent. So in four months she needed to decide if she wanted to renew her soon-to-be expensive apartment, where she rarely spent more than four days in a row, or take part of her time off to try and find a new place to move. Right now, she had enough to do.

Apparently, her starlet, Natalia, had refused to come out of the bathroom to be filmed. This latest incident in Azúcar only validated Amelia’s standing in the company. The commercial shoot for their number one show was on hold without Amelia being there to lay down the law. Natalia had refused to be filmed and spent her days in the bathroom, where the cameramen would not follow. They’d originally come to Atlanta to shoot a commercial, and the management team for the ad agency hired to create the latest business adventure, Azúcar Perfume, was gravely behind schedule. Amelia had granted one last favor to MET by making the trip back to Atlanta to explain to her star why she wouldn’t be able to work with her for a while.

“You’re so sweet for coming to see me face-to-face.” Natalia unclipped her thumbtack-sized microphone off the collar of her yellow blouse.

Amelia’s eyes glanced toward the mini-microphone and cringed. Her life’s work had been catching every moment for reality TV. How in the hell was she going to last in Southwood for the duration of her grandmother’s rehabilitation? “Of course I came to see you face-to-face. We’re friends and I firmly believe an explanation is best that way.”

“Well, I for one I can’t begin to tell you how sorry I am,” Natalia wailed as she fell against the oversize makeup chair in her Atlanta hotel suite. The stylist applying the black eyeliner messed up and left a streak of makeup along Natalia’s temple. According to William’s snide remarks, today was the first day Natalia had decided to put on makeup, thanks to the heads-up of Amelia’s arrival. Since Natalia had gone on her impromptu strike, there had been no grand openings or appearances to promote Azúcar Perfume, the latest business project for the Ruiz family, so filming was at a standstill.

Even with no formal announcement, Amelia still knew the show was about to go on. Most people, like Amelia, dressed down in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, but not Natalia. Amelia had learned early on of Natalia’s addiction to makeup and heels. She never went anywhere without having her faux lashes attached or stilettos on her stems, and she never allowed the film crew to catch her bare-faced. Natalia getting her makeup done was a good start.

“I’m sorry!” the young artist cried.

Natalia reached for a napkin from the makeup-covered vanity in front of her and shooed her away before turning her attention back to Amelia. “Don’t worry,” she said, smiling sweetly. “How about you go take a break while I talk to my friend here? You can let the cameramen know I’m almost ready.”

Amelia leaned forward, her mouth gaping in disbelief. Natalia Ruiz lived up to every stereotype of being a diva. Amelia didn’t take her crap, which probably made them such close friends, but others quaked when Natalia was upset. “What happened at your dinner to bring out this softer side in you?”

“Whatever.” Natalia rolled her eyes and waited until the doors closed, leaving them alone. “All right fine. Is your mic on?”

“No,” Amelia said with a sigh. “Have you forgotten? I’m suspended.”

“Suspended?”

“A strongly suggested vacation to take care of my grandmother, same thing.” Amelia shrugged her shoulders.

“Wait.” Natalia’s eyes widened. “For how long?”

“A month.”

Natalia’s mouth gaped open. “I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be.” Amelia waved off the apology and forced a toothy smile across her face. “I get to spend some time with my grandmother.”

“When I couldn’t find you Friday morning to explain—” Natalia patted Amelia’s shoulder “—you were still upset about getting the call about your grandmother. It’s horrible. How is she now?”

With a sigh, Amelia updated Natalia with what had gone wrong. Grandmamma had fallen down the stairs of her two-story farmhouse down in Southwood. She lived so far out in the country it was a miracle someone had found her. She’d lain on the floor with a broken leg until Pastor Rivers had stopped by randomly—thank God—to check on her on Thursday evening. Amelia couldn’t imagine how painful it must’ve been for her elderly grandmother to come tumbling down the stairs. As a child, she herself had found the stairs too steep for her little legs and had loved sliding down the banister as a shortcut.

“A broken leg,” Amelia concluded. “My mama wants the downstairs office for her to live in so she won’t have to climb the stairs.”

“Is your mom going to move back home?”

Amelia frowned and shook her head. “No way. My grandmamma’s home is nothing like your mansion.”

“What?” Natalia asked with a pout.

“She has a barn attached to the side of her home, but that’s the extent of privacy. Nothing like your place where your whole family lives under the same roof, but you guys can go days without running into one another.”

“The grass isn’t always greener,” Natalia said, glancing down at her hands in her lap.

“I like my privacy, Natalia. I grew up in Southwood, a pretty much one-streetlight town. Everyone knows everyone.”

“Sounds cozy.”

“Not when you’re the one person everyone hates.”

Natalia glanced up, her features softened. “What?”

“Never mind. Look, I have a month to get everything ready. Mr. Kelly said as soon as I take care of things back home, I can come back to work. I am going to get the porch steps lowered or put a ramp in there. Grandmamma will have a fit either way, so while she’s recuperating in the hospital, I’ll take this time to go down South for repairs.”

“Good thing MET hosts a bunch of remodeling shows,” said Natalia. “You can get any of those guys to fix up the place for free. Hell, you should even turn it into a show.”

“We’ve been spending too much time together,” Amelia said with a grin, rubbing her hands on the front of her dark-wash denim jeans, “trying to find the television angle for everything.”

“Well, I have to come up with something. I am afraid to ask, but is this my fault?” Natalia pouted her glossy bottom lip again.

Although her friend was wearing so much makeup, Amelia chewed her naked bottom lip. Normally she brushed her lashes a few times with black mascara and maybe a colored, flavored lip gloss and called it a day. “Sweetie, it is,” Amelia said dryly. Then Natalia’s frown deepened and Amelia let her off with a half smile and a slight push against her shoulder. “I’m kidding.”

“I’m so sorry about your grandmother.”

“You’re not to blame for what happened to her or what happened with my job,” Amelia sniffed, pushing the pity party out of her head. Christopher claimed he wanted Amelia to use her hours upon hours of leave time wisely. Just as she’d proven herself in the past to be a dedicated employee at MET, family meant everything to him. Mr. Kelly made it clear for her to enjoy her time with her family and to not be distracted by anything at work. Amelia was prohibited from contacting anyone from the network, so the idea of having help was null and void. Southwood was small enough she could find someone to assist, provided she was allowed to tell her folks what had happened. But Grandmamma wanted to keep the incident a secret. Amelia inhaled deeply. “I am to blame. You were my responsibility.”

“But still,” Natalia whined. “I do apologize.”

Amelia liked to think of herself as a forgiving kind of gal. “Make it up to me by telling me who this mystery man is?”

A part of Amelia wished she had gotten the conversation on film. When Natalia’s aunt, Yadira, had approached MET about getting the network involved with their lives, Natalia had already turned eighteen. So there wasn’t much that was known of her teen years.

“Stephen and I go back, way back,” Natalia explained as her heavy lashes fluttered dreamily. “He’s an ex who is practically Villa San Juan royalty. I was glad when his brother contacted me and said he needed to talk,” Natalia moaned.

“What happened?”

“Let’s just say if Tía Yadira had the ability to arrange a marriage, it would have been between us.”

“A marriage made in Puerto Rican heaven,” Amelia teased as her eyes glazed over, imagining the ratings they would have received. This would have been a perfect angle for a reality show for MET. A multicultural wedding was right up their alley. She pictured in her mind the memo she’d have written:

Dear MET executives,

We’ve watched her grow up; now let’s follow the road to the Ruiz wedding.

Sincerely,

Amelia

“Hey, didn’t a mass school shooting happen there about ten years ago?” Other than the tragic ending to a school year, Amelia had heard nothing but good things about Villa San Juan, the small island off the coast of Florida. It was on her lists of places to visit once she gathered some vacation time. Maybe once she made sure Grandmamma was okay, she’d check it out and come back to MET with a follow-up story on the tragedy. For a moment Amelia’s eyes glazed over. She wondered if anyone had done a follow-up story. Where were the students now? Had they gotten over the trauma?

“Thirteen years ago, and it was right after Stephen graduated, but his brother and cousins were affected by it. As for me and Stephen, clearly, things did not end well with us, and so I supposed he somehow blamed me for his mistrust in women.” Natalia went on about her relationship with Stephen while Amelia made a mental list of who to contact for a follow-up report.

“Oh, sure,” said Amelia, her voice elevated with sarcasm. “You’d never do anything to hurt a man’s feelings.”

Natalia rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Stephen happened before I became famous.” She added air quotes with her French-manicured hands.

“Well, don’t you have that effect on people,” said Amelia. “I’ve been producing you for a while now and you do have a way with leading men on for your own entertainment.”

“Speaking of leading men on,” Natalia said, blatantly averting the subject, “I may have told you I was taking a nap, but how did things turn out for you and Nate?”

As if a needle scratched an album off a record player, Amelia's thoughts screeched to a halt. She cocked her head to the side as her heart slammed against her chest and the image of the one-night-stand hottie filtered through her head. Quickly, visions of the night she'd met Nate began to play like a movie on a screen. The ending became all too clear now. The only reason she'd gone down to the bar instead of hanging out with the film crew was because she'd given everyone the night off since Natalia had said she was going to bed. Amelia had gone downstairs to get a well-earned drink.

After years of following Natalia around, Amelia knew when the girl blurted out more than she wanted, especially when she pressed her glossy lips together as if to stop further words. To make things more obvious, Natalia clamped her hands over her mouth.

"I never said anything about who I was with." Amelia raised a brow and crossed her legs in preparation of an interrogation. The gold flowers on her flip-flops caught the lighting in the room.

"Okay, fine," Natalia huffed. "Nate Reyes met you on purpose. He knew I needed to speak with Stephen alone. I knew it would be impossible because of the crew but he helped me out."

A sickening feel gurgled in the pit of Amelia's stomach. The room became hot. The five-bulb vanity-mirror lights began to heat her face. "It was a setup?"

"No!" Natalia said, apparently panicking. "I mean. He was just distracting you for a minute."

He'd ended up with a lot more than conversation over a drink. Amelia swallowed past the bile in the back of her throat. Nate used her. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror. Always around the glamorous Natalia, she might come off a bit of a plain Jane, but when Nate had picked her up in the bar, she'd felt like the star. Everyone in the bar, men and women alike, had stood taller at the sight of him. And now to learn he'd distracted her on purpose? The whole thing had been engineered. Because of him, she'd been suspended from her job. He needed to pay.

"So he's from Villa San Juan, you say?"

Now Natalia cocked her head to the side as she spoke. "Actually, it's kind of funny you mentioned your hometown. I swear he mentioned living in a Southwood but he never described it as drab as you have. Must be a different one."

"Georgia?" Her mind recalled Nate asking her about her Southern upbringing and how he liked farms. Turned him on, didn't he say?

"Yeah, but don't take it too seriously if he flirted with you and bought you a drink," said Natalia.

"Of course not," Amelia mused. Her mind calculated how far her family's farmhouse was from the downtown Southwood. Not far at all, she thought. Perhaps while taking care of Grandmamma, she'd pay him a visit.

"This is going to bug me. Let me find my emails." Natalia reached for her phone in her pocket and began swiping across the screen, mumbling as she searched her listings. "Nate is a big ol' flirt. He didn't mean any harm, but as a matter of fact, I think his playboy ways are about to catch up with the green-eyed god. Oh, look! Southwood is saved in my searches. This is your hometown, right?"

Amelia leaned forward to read the location: Southwood, Georgia, population six thousand. She nodded.

"Cool," said Natalia. "Look, he's up for a bachelor auction. Karma is going to catch up with him because I am sure he's got a handful of women down there. All his women are going to try and cash in."

Seemed like the visit would be sooner than expected. For once Amelia couldn't wait to get back to Southwood—population six thousand, or about to be five-thousand-nine-hundred-ninety-nine.

* * *

Despite wearing a black tailored suit, a green Oxford shirt and argyle tie with various blends of green, Nate had never felt more naked than on the night of the bachelor auction. Women groped his pecs, his biceps, and he swore one of the church ladies pinched his butt.

The nightlife at the usual watering hole in Southwood had come out with a roaring blast. The community seemed to have pulled together for this charity event and crawled out of the woodworks at Southern Charm.

Who would purposely come up with the idea of a bachelor auction? If Nate didn't know any better, he'd swear his brother had, just to piss him off. Some of the bachelors he met backstage were already set to be purchased by their wives. Briefly, Nate wondered if the wives did it just to ensure the tasks around their homes would be taken care of. Another part of Nate wondered if the women he'd spent time with in the last few months had gotten together to test his rule of No complications. With Southwood being such a small town, Nate understood gossip happened, but he always made sure he never gave the wrong impression. Maybe some of the women felt forty hours of time together could dissuade him. Thank God Pastor Rivers warned everyone about the sin of premarital sex. Nate wasn't usually a religious man, but it was good to know his boundaries.

"Remember, this is for a good cause," Lexi whispered, nudging her shoulder against Nate's as he waited at the bar for the bartender to return with his longneck bottle of beer.

"I keep telling myself the same thing," he said with a sigh.

The DJ in the elevated booth next to the stage put on a new song, which drafted a lot of ladies to the dance floor. Tonight's event had brought out the old and the young alike. Four-top tables draped in white linen and centered around a single candle circled the dance floor and the second level. A dozen or so silver catering trays showed off some of the traditional hot hors d'oeuvres. He'd peeked earlier and found sweet corn cupcakes, fried green tomatoes, pimento cheese sandwiches and a few trays of deviled eggs sprinkled with smoked paprika. Nate had grown up on traditional Puerto Rican cuisine, which meant a lot of sofrito, pork, rice and beans. He enjoyed Southern meals—perhaps a little too much. Thank God for Southwood's gym.

He looked around. He was at a bar filled with women and yet not one appealed to him. Ever since the night he'd met that beauty from Atlanta he'd found no woman who could compare to her. He figured he must be going crazy, because prior to the Atlanta trip, drinking and morally loose ladies were his thing.

His eyes scanned the room for a glimpse of his brother, who'd nominated him for the auction. The bastard hadn't shown up yet.

"Stephen's finishing up some work in his office," Lexi said, reading his mind.

Nate half nodded. "Have you taken a look at the work I did on yours?"

Lexi beamed. "I have! You're fantastic!"

"And cheap labor, too," he joked. For the past few weeks he'd been helping Lexi extend her dress shop. Guilt stemming from the way his brother had treated her when the two of them first met had swayed Nate's decision to help. Thanks to Stephen's spiteful impulse buy, Grits and Glam Gowns and Reyes Realty and Contracting were next-door neighbors. Lexi had been making a pitch for expansion the day Stephen barged into her office.

"I am going to pay you," Lexi said.

"Whatever. I am having fun. Since Stephen decided to move down here, he's contracted many plantation-style homes in southern Georgia to all of Hollywood. And, of course, the kids are getting ready to go back to school. Like my brother said the other day, business is slow. I have nothing but free time on my hands."

The bartender appeared with a longneck bottle of beer and a tumbler of cognac. Nate's eyes darted downward. "I didn't order this."

"The lady at the end of the bar did."

Nate craned his neck, hoping excitedly for some crazy reason to find Amelia Marlow standing there. He grabbed the top of the bottle with two fingers and sipped while glancing down the end of the bar. He prayed he masked his disappointment well. Brittany Foley offered him a wide, toothy grin, swinging her shoulders suggestively to the techno music pounding away. Through each white laser

beam flashing through the air, Brittany winked and licked her lips. The tongue. Nate willed his body to respond to her nonverbal invitation. When the hell did he need to will himself? Brittany's body rivaled all the covers of every swimsuit magazine out there, but in order to keep her job she needed to wear dowdy drab sweaters and long pants and quite often wore her hair up. Away from school, she was a complete knockout. The other men standing around her saw her for the siren she aimed to be.

"You have an admirer." Lexi nudged his shoulder again.

"Don't remind me."

"I thought you two were getting along great at the end of the summer?" Lexi said, casting a glance at the end of the bar. "Philly says you two went out on a few dates."

Nate half grinned. "Yeah, well, Philly is five years old."

"Five going on eighteen," mumbled Lexi. "So what's the deal with you two?"

"No deal." Nate shrugged.

"Will you bring her to the Keaton wedding?"

"Hell no!" Nate all but shrieked. At Lexi's bemused smirk he explained, "She's in a different place than I am."

"Meaning she wants you in her bedroom?"

"Meaning," Nate said with a sigh, trying to come up with what he meant, "she wants things I'm not sure I can provide."

The word bedroom only conjured up the image of Amelia Marlow. In retrospect, he did have her phone number and knew how to take the first step. Beside him Lexi pretended to sway. Her fruity pink drink sloshed onto the bar top.

"Nathaniel Reyes does not have the right stuff to give a woman?"

The other women lingering around the two of them began gawking at him with their brows raised. "Keep your voice down."

"Oh, yeah," she said teasing, "we don't want the bidding ladies to think the merchandise is broken."

Nate fought against the impulse to cover his groin as all eyes went toward his lower half. "Will you keep your voice down?"

"Oh, trust me, I don't think anything will stop a bidding war. As a matter of fact, I heard some of the ladies in the church choir comment on how they've pooled their money together and are going to divide up your weeklong stay amongst them."

"What did your future fiancé get me into?"

"A sleazy way to do a good cause," Lexi joked.

Nate turned to her and grabbed her arm. "You've got to do me a favor. Lexi, I need you to bid on me."

"I didn't bring any cash." Lexi stretched her eyes wide with such surprise, Nate believed her.

"I will give you everything in my wallet." Nate reached for his back pocket but a heavy hand patted his arm down. He turned in time to see his smug big brother grinning.

"You're not trying to get my lady to buy you?" Stephen asked, siding up to Lexi with a protective arm around her waist. "You wouldn't want to start any rumors, would you?"

Tight-lipped, Nate shook his head back and forth. Lexi had spent most of her life dealing with rumors about herself, her family and her brother-in-law. Being born a blonde to a family of brunettes was enough to get the townspeople talking. The former beauty queen had had to deal with vicious lies about relationships and of course the clincher—when she left the pageant world and her parents turned their backs on her. Nate admired Lexi. "Funny, considering you're the one who—"

"Another round for my brother!" Stephen interjected himself verbally and physically. He tapped the top of the bar for attention, probably to avoid Nate bringing up the unfortunate topic of how he'd met Lexi. "What are you drinking? Beer or cognac?"

“He ordered a beer,” Lexi said, saddling up to Stephen, “but Philly’s teacher down there sent this drink over.”

Kill me now, Nate thought.

Amused, Stephen saluted Brittany down at the other end of the bar. “A potential buyer? Nate, dance with the woman so she can see what she might be getting.”

“Man, in a minute I’m leaving this place.”

“You can’t go now,” Lexi wailed. “Think of the children.”

“I’m rich, Lexi,” Nate countered with a cocky smile. “I will write a check for a sizable amount.”

Another hand snaked around his free arm. Nate turned to the side and flashed a grin at Donna Jean, secretary of the First Baptist Church. She took notes for the pastor and all the board meetings, but in the bedroom, she loved to give dictation. He bent close to give her a side hug.

“You’re not thinking about backing out?” Donna said with a wicked grin. Her long nails slipped under his jacket and drew circles down the center of his back. “I emptied my savings account.”

“Donna Jean!” Lexi gasped.

“What? I know what I’m getting and I’m not about to let this one slip through my fingers.” Donna Jean’s note-taking fingers slipped down to pinch his bottom.

Nate tried not to make an obvious gesture to get out of the way. He chuckled and drained his beer. “Well, if you all will excuse me, I think I’ll go check out my competition.”

Never before had he felt so much like a piece of meat. As he made his way toward the stage, women reached out to whisper in his ears how much money they were willing to spend in order to buy him. If only he had someone he trusted to make the purchase. Too bad a majority of the women in attendance tonight had already sampled a bit of him. It appeared as if every woman he’d told about his no-commitment rule was willing to accept forty hours of his time.

As if to make matters worse, Stephen slapped him on the tail before Nate entered the lionesses’ den and shouted, “No competition here, little brother.”

Chapter 3

Amelia Marlow smoothed her fingers across the white cloth of her table. The siren-red nail polish matched the body-hugging dress she wore for tonight’s activities. Earlier today she had driven east of Four Points to Black Wolf Creek to get a quick mani-pedi before heading off to the bachelor auction. Natalia had offered to make things up to her by getting her pampered for the day, but Amelia did not want to overdo her appearance for her return to the South. Not too many folks would be happy to see her.

Thanks to a high school exposé on peach farmers, Amelia had accidentally, yet singlehandedly, destroyed the town’s income. Her intentions came from a good place. She’d wanted to show how her town, and other parts of Four Points, were all connected. Most of the townsmen in Four Points were migrant workers from Southwood, Peachville, Black Wolf Creek and Samaritan. They all worked on the farms for cheap wages, being illegal migrants. Amelia had ended up uncovering a deeper secret about the most of the farmers’ tax evasions. Workers were deported and without their help farms had struggled to harvest their crops, then family businesses had perished. Her exposé had had a trickle-down effect, and everyone in Southwood with a peach orchard farm had suffered. Because she felt so horrible for her part in the demise of the town, Amelia never wanted to come back. Instead of wallowing in her guilt, she avoided reunions like the plague and let her love of exposés propel her into studying journalism in college.

The salon in Black Wolf Creek had done an excellent job styling her shoulder-length hair. Her dark tresses flipped off her shoulders, bared in her red strapless body-hugging dress. In her four-inch heels, she was like a panther out on the prowl. Her eyes scanned the tops of the heads of the patrons at tonight’s bachelor auction. Her elevated view gave her the ideal spot to prey on the man of the hour. As expected, a crowd of women followed him wherever he went. The corners of her lips tugged downward, as she realized she, too, was part of the admiring crowd. The man certainly knew

how to fill out a suit. A close-cropped black beard covered the square jaw she'd stroked during their lovemaking. The palms of her fingers tingled with desire to touch its texture.

The tall single white candle in the center of their table flickered when Amelia's cousin as well as best friend, Cayla Marlow-Beaumont, bumped the table with her hip when she returned with two glasses of red wine. Amelia took her eyes off the bar where Nate stood as the center of attention.

"Thank you," Amelia said, circling her finger around the rim of her glass. "I didn't want to risk being seen."

"Is the dating world this hard?" asked Cayla.

Amelia pressed her lips together and frowned. "This is not about dating. This is about revenge. Nate Reyes used me."

"From what you told me, you used him, too," Cay reminded her. "You left without giving him your information."

Why did she always tell her cousin everything? Cay lived vicariously through Amelia and in return acted as Amelia's conscience. "Information he clearly had since he stalked me at the bar and seduced me in order to distract me from my job."

Across the table Cay rolled her eyes. "You're really going to go through with this?"

"I kid you not. Angels sang when Pastor Rivers announced the charity event."

Cay squinted her hazel eyes. "Somehow I do not think you understand what the word charity means."

Amelia's eyes widened with surprise. "Are you kidding me? I donate all the time."

"So you'll donate your time and services for next month's Hardware Hottie Bachelorette Auction?"

"What?" Amelia frowned.

"Kind of like this, but women are auctioning their time. Greg is threatening to nominate me," Cay said with a giggle. "I might need to do some sexy lingerie shopping. Pastor Rivers's guilt speech does not apply to husbands and wives."

Giving her cousin the side-eye, Amelia shook her head. Tonight's event offered forty hours of service from these handymen. The time put in could mean a couple hours of community service here and there. Amelia planned on cashing in her winnings this week. Once she got her grandmamma settled, she was out of here. So any sort of volunteering of her time was out of the question—especially not in this area.

"No, thanks." Amelia's frown deepened. "Besides, I am dropping enough cash tonight that all the schools in four counties should name a gym after me." As she spoke, her cousin shook her head, not convinced of Amelia's pledge. "What?"

"You can afford to hire someone else to fix Grandmamma's place."

"Principle, Cayla, principle." Amelia cut her eyes back down to the bar where one woman blatantly ran her hands underneath the hem of his jacket. If everything went according to plan tonight, she'd prefer to not have him manhandled and cluttered with cheap perfume. He actually had the nerve to stand at the bar and pretended to push off one woman's hand. "Nate Reyes used his wealth and connections to influence my job and get me suspended."

"Did he make you turn your cell phone off?"

"It wasn't off," Amelia confessed before biting the corner of her lip to withhold the wanton grin spreading across her face. "More like underneath a pile of clothes." Under the techno lights, she felt her face warm with the memory of her behavior. With each bright beam striking across her face, she feared her blush would be exposed.

"See," Cay said, her frown turning up into a grin, "this is the point where I am going to change the subject." Her eyes wandered around the open floor space while Amelia cut her eyes toward her cousin's no-nonsense black slacks, white collared shirt and Great-Grandma Marlow's pearls. Far be it for Amelia to judge. Standing next to the Ruiz family she screamed frumpy, but her cousin—six

months older than Amelia—took the cake tonight. Cay's idea of dressing to kill meant something completely different; her attempt to dress sexy tonight could not have gone more wrong, if Amelia said so herself. When Amelia had arrived at her house, Cayla had met her on the porch before her three children realized Auntie Amelia was in town. With no children of her own or nieces or nephews, Amelia looked at Cay's kids as hers, which went along with the right to spoil them.

"I can't believe we're here again," Amelia said, looking around once they found their table at the club. Southern Charm had been around for years. As a rebellious child, she and her high school friends had snuck into the bar with fake ID's and drank warm beer. The establishment back in the day barely ID'd kids, as long as you were with someone you knew or you slipped the bouncers a few bucks. One of the first shows Amelia pitched was called Faking It. The show hadn't taken off because every audience targeted had thought she meant something else, like sexual struggles some women faced in the bedroom.

Nowadays, security was tight and the entry fee to get in was astounding, though tonight's auction didn't make things better. To drag her cousin away from her boring couch with the husband she'd married directly after high school had cost Amelia an extra hundred bucks just to come to tonight's event. She could have possibly shown her credentials from the network, if William hadn't insisted on Amelia leaving them in the Orlando office. A badge from MET was like having a golden key to every event. Everyone wanted to be on television. All Amelia needed was to suggest her new ideas for reality shows and the floodgates opened. Family members told lifelong secrets and the most interesting part of her job was capturing people's behavior when a camera was on them.

The lights dimmed and Amelia sipped on her wine with her auction paddle in her hand. Not letting anyone in on her profession might be the smartest thing she could do. The way all the women groped Nate, word might spread around, and their behavior might become more blatantly obnoxious. Somewhere in the amount of time Amelia took to look her cousin in the eyes while they spoke, Nate's tall, dark head had disappeared. Women lined the foot of the stage in anticipation, much like singles did at a wedding waiting to catch the bouquet.

Amelia sneered at the desperation and the gall of these women. This bid was hers. For one whole week, the purchased bachelors would do the bidding of the buyer. Everyone else probably had their bachelor in mind and had planned all sorts of sexual events. From the brochure handed out at the door, a few of the men appeared to be married. Amelia didn't think a wife would allow some other woman to buy her husband for the week. She knew good and well the wife would be in the front of the crowd.

The music died down as a handsome man in a black tuxedo stepped onto the stage. The lights in the large club turned off except for the circular bright light on the emcee. Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back" beat pounded off the walls as the deep, rich baritone voice of the emcee spoke into the silver-capped microphone.

"Ladies and ladies," he yelled into the microphone. "I cannot tell you what a thrill it is to find all of you here tonight on a Saturday evening, when there are thousands of other places you could be."

Another noise pierced the room and a light flashed down on the DJ who leaned in closer to clear his throat. "What?"

Laughter bubbled through the crowd. The emcee stood corrected and nodded his head. "Ah, yes, where else would we find such fine ladies but at our lovely Southern Charm?"

The self-promotion received a few catcalls and some bold shouts from a woman in the back, urging the emcee to get on with the show in a colorful yet vulgar way.

"Well, without keeping you ladies waiting, let's start with bachelor number one."

Bachelor number one strutted out onto the stage, now covered with a red carpet, in a pair of black fireman's boots, suspenders and a jacket, no shirt. He could have been carved from rich dark chocolate. Not surprisingly, women hollered, but judging from the only woman at the front of the

pack holding her paddle in the air, Amelia guessed the sexy fireman was her husband. Knowledge of marital rights didn't stop the catcalls. He went for a hundred dollars.

The next bachelor on the stage, whether he was a real policeman or not, clearly was not married. The woman at the table next to Amelia's began fanning her paddle so fast the Brazilian blowout Amelia had gotten earlier today began to poof. A brief bidding war got the amount up to five hundred dollars.

Overall, each bachelor chosen went for a high price. A lot of them Amelia found very tasty, but her paddle was ready for one bachelor and one bachelor only. The emcee teased the audience of women when after an hour of sexy men walking back and forth he began to close the auction down, thanking everyone for coming. For a moment Amelia feared there might a riot of unsatisfied women. Boos and hisses erupted, and there was even the noise of a broken bottle.

"Ladies, ladies, please." The auctioneer patted the air in attempt to calm the crowd. "I'm kidding. I believe we have one final bachelor of the night. He's a bit shy, so put your hands together. Let's welcome Mr. Nate Reyes to the stage."

Amelia gripped her paddle and almost came out of her seat when the spotlight shined down on what was most definitely the man of the hour.

* * *

He tried to keep his expression cool as hell, but deep down inside Nate dreaded the next few moments. An hour ago he'd wanted the right person to buy him so he wouldn't be forced into being a weeklong sex slave. Now, after seeing how much money the crowd had spent on the men before him, he worried everyone had used up their money. The emcee, a deacon from one of the local churches, oversold him with flattering and inflated adjectives.

The acoustics behind the black curtain emphasized the cheering of the women out front, causing difficulties when they tried to hear everything the emcee said. Four of the nearing principals gave Nate the thumbs-up as they pulled either side of the curtain. Salt-N-Pepa's "What a Man" pumped through the man-size speakers to his left and his right. The single spotlight momentarily blinded him. He refused to take a step forward for fear he'd fall off the stage; instead he stood stock-still with his hands folded in front of him. For some reason, no movement at all caused a bigger ruckus.

"Clearly this man needs no introduction," the emcee joked. "Coming from Berkeley Lakes, Georgia, in case you've been living with your head in the sand for the last eight months, this Latino lover is Southwood's newest resident. Judging from the applause, there might not be any need for him to walk the stage."

"Get out here and take it off!" a woman yelled.

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.