

UNHOLY
Matrimony

A MARRIED TO THE MOB NOVEL
INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LINZI BASSETT

Unholy Matrimony

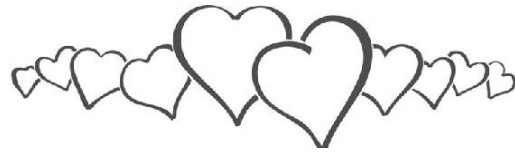
A Forced Married to the Mob Novella



A Contemporary Romance

By

Linzi Basset



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UNHOLY MATRIMONY

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Author's Note & Blurb



Dear Reader,

This is a marriage to the mob romance novella, second chances, later-in-life story with a touch of humor I hope you'll enjoy.

“Now, you listen to me, Mr. Spidey, if you know what's good for you. You'll turn your big ass around and sashay out the door again!”

You might wonder what a successful, sought-after New York fashion designer was doing in the Australian Outback. A question Tamara Rhodes had asked herself numerous times since she arrived, especially since she just realized those Amazon-sized spiders were real and not photoshopped pics on the web. If only the damn beady-eyed monster would listen and mosey outside. But no... just like its namesake asshole human counterpart, Spider, who she came to give a piece of her mind, he just sat there... waiting and watching.

“You stepped into my web, and now, you'll never get out.”

She was exactly what Hudson Turner didn't want but became the only thing he needed. It was a conundrum, a serious one, especially since he had returned to Australia to step into the role his father had been priming him for since childhood—mafioso extraordinaire. A responsibility he did with as much

gusto as everything else in life. Now, he was the big bad spider who caught all the crime world Down Under in his web of power.

Soon, Tamara became entangled in the most destructive web Hudson weaved—seduction—and before she knew it, she said *I do* to his proposal of Unholy Matrimony.

I trust you will enjoy this story. It was originally published in the With Love from Sydney Anthology.

Warm regards,

Linzi Basset

Chapter One



Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney, Australia...

“Good lord, that feels delicious,” Tamara Rhodes purred as she stepped out of the shower into a thick Turkish cotton bath towel.

The twenty-four-hour in-the-air first class flight from JFK to Kingsford Smith Airport in Sydney, Australia, had been a marathon, even with the luxurious bed chamber fitted with a thousand thread count Italian linen and all the best Champagne one could drink. Even so, it had left her exhausted. To try her exceedingly thin patience, upon arriving at her lodgings, she found that the hotel overlooking the Harbor and Opera House, had made an absolute hash of her booking. It had taken another hour to sort out the mess and move around guests before she was settled in the penthouse unit she had originally booked.

“Holy Mary Mother of God! Oh, good Lord! Jesus Christ! Freaking HELL!”

Tamara wasn't Catholic, but perhaps if she kept crossing herself, it would chase the giant spider watching her through eight beady eyes out the door.

“Eek!” she shrieked and skidded around the breakfast nook into the kitchen to glare at the monstrosity as her husky voice generated the opposite effect. She moaned at the stridulation coming from the corner and stared with wide eyes at the flashes of particles in the sunlight. “Did you just throw those... those...” Tamara searched her memory for the right wording. She’d read an article on the plane about the undesired inhabitants—according to her, at least—on the continent. “Barbed hairs out of your abdomen at me?”

She had learned those urticating hairs were a severe irritant to the skin and mucous membranes, making her warier since they were potentially harmful to humans. She definitely didn’t want to start an already challenging trip with those spiky weapons poking at her skin.

Tamara hunched lower behind the counter as another warning hiss came from Mister Spider, who, if she was right, was a badass, oversized Goliath bird eater or Australian Tarantula, as the air hostess had referred to it. She had laughingly tried to soothe Tamara’s mind—rather unsuccessfully, if her current reaction coming face-to-face with the mafioso of spiders was anything to go by.

“Now you listen to me, Mr. Spidey, if you know what’s good for you, you’ll turn your big ass around and sashay out the door again!”

She pointed a shaking finger at the arachnid as he tugged his legs in closer to his body. Her frayed mind already envisioned him lunging at her from all the way across the room.

“You know, it’s an attitude such as yours that chases off visitors. If this place closes down, mister, it’ll be your fault!”

Mr. Spider reacted by scuttling closer, eliciting a husky shriek to entice an even louder thrilling hiss from the monstrosity.

“Oh, crap!” This time, when his legs moved, Tamara didn’t wait to see his intent. She hightailed it to the front door and only took a breath when she slammed it closed behind her.

“Thank God,” she gasped, with her forehead pressed against the door. Her fingers cramped from the tight hold she had on the towel between her breasts, the only protection, however feeble, she used as a filter for the fear of being attacked.

Ah, shit! I’m as good as naked ... out in the open.

The thought registered as she surreptitiously glanced left and right. “At least there’s no one around to ogle and laugh at me.”

“Ahem.”

Tamara spun around at the sound of a deep throat clearing behind her.

“You!” Her fingers tightened on the towel as she came face-to-face with the human version of the devil that had chased her out of the apartment. Hudson Turner—the reason for the trip. He stared at her with one eyebrow crawling higher in amusement as he lowered the hand that had obviously been raised to knock on the door.

A shiver ran down her spine, and her breath stuttered in her throat as she looked into deep midnight-blue eyes rimmed with a flash of silver. Judging by the way she was drooling over the tall, masculine frame, one would swear she didn't know this man. Dressed in a formal charcoal suit, pristine white shirt, and silver tie, he exuded power and confidence. She forced a breath into her lungs, all too aware he hadn't stepped back, deliberately invading her personal space. From the day they had met, she had been a goner. He was tall, muscled, and as attractive as sin—needless to say, she was a lamb to the slaughter.

“Wh-What...” she stammered as she stared dumbstruck at the handsome face illuminated by streaks of sunlight. The strong architecture of his cheeks and jaw appeared indifferent and stern, but those eyes burned right into her soul. Her skin tingled in response to the languid gaze that studied her scantily covered body. She swallowed with difficulty, salving her suddenly dry lips with a moist tongue.

With difficulty, she bit back a moan at the shard of heat piercing her loins as the huge man's gaze fixed upon the glistening film left in its wake. Self-consciously, she tossed back the mane of dark hair and squared her shoulders, taking a deep, calming breath. No way would she allow him to strike her mum, not this time.

“What are you doing here?”

A veritable Hercules and gloriously fuckalicious, he made it difficult for her to remember she was angry with him, furious actually, but come hell or high water, she would not

cower in front of him. She came here to give him a piece of her mind, which was exactly what she intended to do.

Eventually... not while being subjected to his leering gaze with her covered in nothing but a fluffy towel.

“Had I known you were this eager to see me, I’d have met you at the airport.”

“I’m not... don’t flatter yourself! This is not for your benefit, asshole.” She pointed over her shoulder. “An eight-legged cretin invaded my apartment while I was in the shower.”

“Indeed.” He crossed his arms over his chest, drawing her eyes to the rippling strength straining against the shirt. “Exactly how big is this cretin?”

“Big enough to swallow my entire face,” she snapped. “You live in this country, so don’t pretend you don’t know the size those monsters get.”

“Hmm ... and how did the poor cretin gain entrance?”

“Well, it was stuffy in the room, so I left the balcony sliding door open while I took a shower and...” The rest of the sentence dissolved before it formed, with the look of amusement flashing across his face. “Don’t you dare laugh at me, Hudson Turner!”

“You left the door open, Miss Rhodes, and to them, it’s an invitation they can’t resist. You have only yourself to blame since I’m relatively sure the staff would have warned you to keep the doors and windows closed.”

Tamara opened her mouth but clamped it shut again. They warned her, but as usual, she had followed her own head,

and look where it got her. All but naked under the openly seductive leer of the Adonis of sexual indulgence.

“Thanks for the reminder. I’ll just ask them to get rid of it.” She stepped sideways to avoid touching him. “Oh shit!” she cried as her movement robbed her of the only protection she had. The edge of the towel had been caught in the door when she slammed it shut. She hunched over and was all hands as she attempted to cover her nakedness from his roaming gaze. The heat in his eyes sparked fire over her skin as he watched her measly attempt at saved modesty, warning her the attempt was unsuccessful.

“Don’t just stand there! Get my towel loose!”

The eyebrow crawling toward his hairline was derisive and screamed his amusement at her predicament.

She heaved in a breath, forcing her ire down.

“Please.”

“Why don’t I just ask Mister Cretin to leave? For all we know, he has already left.” He shrugged. “At least I can check, but if you’d rather wait for—”

“No, no.” She waved her fingers toward the door without lifting them from her breasts. “You check.”

“Since you’re asking so nicely.” He grasped the towel and opened the door.

“Oh, thank you,” she breathed, holding out a hand. Her eyes widened as he wrapped the one end around his fist. “Give me my towel!”

“Hell, no. If the cretin is one of those monster spiders, I’ll need protection.” He waved the towel in the air. “This will come in handy.”

“Oooh!” she hissed and looked around, relieved there was still no one around to witness her embarrassment. “Be careful,” she said as he pushed open the door. “He might be waiting for you above the door!”

He chuckled—the damn man actually laughed at her for worrying about him.

“Ah, your concern for my safety is so heartwarming.” He dutifully looked up before winking at her. “Nope, not there. Stay here.”

“Like hell am I staying out here a moment longer, naked as a jaybird,” she clipped and gingerly followed him inside, her eyes flashing left and right in search of Mister Spidey. She closed the door and sagged against it in relief when he was nowhere to be seen.

“Stop ogling me, damn it!” she snapped and covered her exposed bits when her husky sigh drifted toward him, inviting his eyes to take a leisurely gander once more up and down her body.

“No man would be able to resist a gloriously naked woman.” His teeth flashed white against his tanned skin. “And you, love, are absolutely breathtaking.”

“May I please have my towel back now?”

His gaze flitted around the large open room from where he stood farther in the hallway.

“Nope, my weapon, remember.”

This time, Tamara didn't have to be told to stay put. She'd leave the exodus of the uninvited guest to him... especially since he was twice her size and would be much better equipped should the arachnid attack and bite him.

Right? Damn right! Even if he wasn't bitten, he deserved to suffer. If Mister Spidey could understand human language, she'd ask him very nicely, of course, to use his powerful fangs to bring the mighty Hudson Turner down a notch or two.

Chapter Two



Hudson's attention was split between searching for the spider and the thoughts rummaging through his mind. He was at the hotel because he had known she was on the way. Oscar King, consigliere of the Maroubra Crew Crime Organization, who was tasked to keep him safe, always kept a look out for anything that could disrupt his life. He knew of every person in his life—past and present. Something Hudson still struggled to get used to. Oscar had warned him that Tamara had booked a plane ticket to Australia—the woman he had been involved with for the last year of his life in New York City before returning home nine months ago. At first, he'd been dubious she'd even arrive, especially since he'd up and left her with no more than a: *"It's over, Tamara. I have to return home to run the family business, and I won't be back. Take care."*

Not that he'd had a choice in the matter. His father had decided it was time to retire and his son to take over the family business—the Italian-Australian Mafia organization from Maroubra, Sydney. The mighty Christopher Castello had formed the group in the late 1970s and named it after the suburb where it was based. At the demand of Aurora, Hudson's mother, who was adamant about protecting her sons, he had changed their surnames to Turner before he was born. Due to the disassociation his mother demanded to ensure their

safety growing up, they had lived a protective life apart from the crime world. Their father had conceded, but that hadn't stopped the Don from priming his oldest son to one day take over the reins.

He grudgingly allowed Hudson to spend the past ten years building his own empire as a world-renowned architect based in the U.S. He had believed his father would cave in and hand over the responsibility of the Organization to his younger brother, Dario, who lived and breathed the mafia lifestyle. Christopher was old school, and no matter how Hudson and his mother had tried to sway him, he had refused to budge. As the oldest son, Hudson owed his loyalty to the family. Therefore, for the past nine months, he'd stepped up and taken over. In that short time, he'd earned the moniker, Spider, the dark and dangerous Don, who weaved a web of power and control across the continent in all things relating to financial crime, cybercrime, white-collar crime, and corruption. He had stood firm and refused to be involved in the much darker side of the Mafia. Christopher had grudgingly agreed to hand over the responsibility of managing the cartels involved in drug, human, and sex trafficking to Dario, as long as Hudson took overall control of the Organization.

So far, it had worked well for all of them. Christopher got to spend time with Aurora in their home in Brisbane where they had grown up, and Dario reveled in the power he had been given, albeit without the exalted title of Don.

“Well? Do you see him?”

The husky voice yanked his attention back to the task at hand. He caught movement from the corner of his eye and

slowly turned his head.

“Rather hard to miss such a big creepy crawly.”

“Creepy crawly? Good Lord, Hudson! That’s a goddamn monster spider.”

“Keep your voice down,” he said in a deep, soothing tone as the stridulation intensified from the beady-eyed spider rubbing his legs together. “Your high-pitched shrieks are probably what upset him.”

“My high-pitched shrieks?” He smiled at the indignant snort behind him. “I’ll have you know, Mr. Asshole, I’ve been told numerous times I have an enticingly husky tone in my voice, anything but—eek!”

“Told you to keep quiet,” he smirked as he watched with mirth when she attempted to merge her quivering and still gloriously naked form with the door behind her at the sight of the spider’s feet appearing around the corner above his head.

His cock twitched in his pants at the sight of the pink tip of her tongue appearing from between her pouty lips as her eyes fixated on the spider. He was transfixed by the fullness of her lips, remembering what they used to feel like under his. The thought quickly grew to an almost uncontrollable urge to taste them again. A bright pink flush suffused her cheeks, testimony she was aware of his scrutiny of her naked form—the rounded hips, the cute curve of her ass, and full, perfectly rounded breasts. If he wasn’t careful, this sassy redhead could once again become the ruler of his thoughts.

“Don’t just stand there, damn it,” she whispered in a low voice. “Do something!”

No matter her cheeky demeanor, she was drop-dead gorgeous and wicked-smart, both attributes a natural aphrodisiac. He smiled as her forest-green eyes glinted angrily under his scrutiny.

“You’re a pervert, Hudson Turner,” she snapped as she belatedly realized she had dropped her guard and quickly covered the necessary bits from his leering gaze.

“Spoilsport.”

“I’m warning you, if that spider attacks me while you’re leering at me, you’ll be sorry!”

He cast a brief glance upward. The Australian tarantulas were very aggressive, and this one had a leg span of over a foot wide. It was running toward them, which meant he was excited or scared. He’d been bitten by one, and it wasn’t an experience he wished on anyone, least of all the gorgeous redhead. Still, this was the perfect opportunity to press her for answers.

“I’ll only be too happy to guide him outside as soon as you tell me what you’re doing in Australia.”

“Really?” She glared at him in disbelief. “Now isn’t the time, dickhead. That damn thing is hungry, and from the look in his eyes and how he’s stalking me, he’s chosen me as his prey.”

“Can’t say I blame him.”

“This is not funny!” She kept one eye on the monster spider all the time.

“To the contrary, you should be flattered, even a spider’s testosterone spikes at the sight of your gorgeous,

alluring curves.”

“A spider doesn’t have testosterone, you asshole! Oh, crap, he’s coming closer,” she wailed as Mister Spider started prowling in her direction.

“Then maybe your high-frequency squeaks are awakening his need to mate.”

“You’re fucking demented,” she growled, trying to flatten herself against the door with her eyes on the approaching spider.

“So, answer the question, and I’ll gently request him to leave.”

“For God’s sake. Why I’m here is hardly relevant to chasing your eight-legged namesake out the... No! Eek! Help!” she screamed as the spider lunged from the wall directly at her face. She went down on her knees and covered her head, whimpering pitifully as she waited for the claws to bury into her soft skin.

It never happened. Hunter quickly caught the spider mid-air in a parachute he created with the towel and quickly walked to the outside balcony to release it. He was back inside with the door closed before the hissing tarantula could react or follow him.

His smile was a mixture of amusement and empathy as he walked to where Tamara was huddled and moaning in the corner at the front door.

“You can relax. Your stalker has been disposed of.”

She peeked at him through her arms, still covering her head.

“What do you mean disposed of? Don’t tell me you killed the poor defenseless little spider?”

“Good lord, there’s just no satisfying you, is there?” He took her by the arm and helped her up.

“You’re a dickhead!” Tamara stamped her foot and planted her fists on her hips. “All I meant... Oh!” she gasped as his eyes dropped to her jiggling breasts. In her ire, she forgot she was naked. She covered her breasts and crossed her legs to preserve some modicum of modesty. “I repeat, you’re a pervert!”

“Just checking there are no spiky hairs embedded in your silky skin.” He chuckled. “Besides, he was anything but a defenseless little spider. That insect can cause some serious damage to a human.”

“The way you’re leering at me makes me think I should’ve taken my chances with him,” she muttered as she marched toward the bedroom. She stopped in her tracks just outside the door.

“I ... ehm ... perhaps you should check the room and the bathroom as well. Just in case Mister Spidey came looking for Missus Spidey, and she’s waiting in there.”

“They’re loners and don’t travel in packs. I’m sure all is...” He shook his head as she glared at him. “Very well.” He yanked the towel back as she reached for it. “I wouldn’t if I were you. You never know if some of those spiky hairs he was spitting are stuck on it. Besides, if Missus Spidey is in there, I need a weapon.”

Tamara stepped out of the way as he searched the rooms and returned within moments.

“All secure.”

“Thank you.” She quickly skirted around him into the bedroom and closed the door. “I need to get dressed,” she explained, not that she had to, but her mother taught her to always be polite, no matter the circumstances.

Her secret wish that he'd leave while she was in the bedroom was doused when she walked out a short while later in a flowery sundress and sandals to find him staring out the glass sliding door, a bottle of water in his hand. She was rooted to the spot as she ogled at him. Her mental acuity was nearing meltdown when her eyes brushed over his muscled physique. He absolutely rocked a formal suit.

As always, he looked good enough to eat!

The snug pants hugged his muscled thighs as if they were tailored to fit. She swallowed hard. Her eyes devoured the rippling muscles of his arms, and his chest strained against a white cotton shirt since he'd removed his jacket and rolled back the sleeves. The contrast to his tanned skin was striking. She must have made a noise to alert him of her presence as suddenly his eyes locked with hers.

“I'm waiting, Tamara. Why did you come looking for me?”

“I guess I shouldn't be surprised you're that vain to believe you're the reason I'm here.” Her eyes narrowed as the anger of his betrayal during their year-long relationship unfurled inside her. “For that matter, Mr. Turner, how the hell

was I supposed to know you lived here? Or did you conveniently forget you never told me that *home* wasn't New York?"

"Hmm, except you like solving puzzles, and I know you well enough to realize you would've made a point of finding out. And don't forget, I know your BFF, Pamela Harding, is a DOJ agent."

Tamara wasn't as good as he was at hiding her thoughts, especially as the gleam in his gaze ridiculed her measly effort. She straightened her shoulders. Hiding wasn't an option, nor was lying. It was his lies that had brought her here. She deserved an explanation, and come hell or high water, he was going to deliver... and it better be good enough to satisfy the hurt that had refused to dissolve the past nine months.

Chapter Three



The desire to take him to task died a quick death as she stared into his piercing eyes. This wasn't the man she had fallen in love with and definitely not the one who had sworn he reciprocated her feelings.

No shit, Sherlock! Of course, he's not that man. He's the one who broke your heart.

Yes, and even with that knowledge, you jumped on a plane and came looking for him.

I guess I didn't think it through.

As you said, no shit, Sherlock.

The conversation with her inner self didn't set her mind at ease.

"You're right. I love puzzles, but here's the thing, Mr. Turner. You leaving without any regard for my feelings killed any desire I had at playing PI."

"Yet, you didn't seem surprised to see me."

"I think we recall my initial reaction a little differently. Besides, I had a much bigger problem at the time, in case you forgot." She fetched a bottle of water from the fridge, very tempted to bolt out the door and hide from the all-too-knowing look in his eyes.

“Come now, Tamara. What did Pamela tell you about me?”

“Nothing, because I didn’t ask her to find out anything about you. You left, and that was the end of it. Why would I bother and further humiliate myself with a man who clearly didn’t want me? Or do you need verification that she told me you’re as much a jerk today as you were nine months ago when you walked away from me without a proper explanation?”

“I suppose I deserve that.”

“You suppose?” She snorted and walked to the front door, her nose in the air. “You know what?” Flinging it open, she projected a glare at him in rebuke as much as it was a warning that she had reached the end of her patience. “Thank you for getting rid of the spider, but it’s time for you to leave.”

“Is that really what you want?” He sauntered closer, clearly not intimidated by her ire.

“I wouldn’t have demanded you leave otherwise,” she spat cantankerously, eyeing him with trepidation as he reached her. The glint in his eyes spelled danger.

“Ooh!” Her breath puffed from her lips when suddenly he pressed her against the wall, causing goosebumps to flash over her body with the unyielding and hot hardness of his physique. “What are you doing?” She flicked her tongue over unexpectedly dry lips, shivering at the warmth of his breath teasing her temple.

“I believe it would be exceedingly rude not to properly welcome you to my home country.”

She was besieged with an eruption of sensations traveling through her frame everywhere where his body touched hers. The dulcet tones of his voice found resonance deep inside her as he whispered against her ear, “Don’t you agree?”

It was disorienting that he had such an effect on her, especially since she hated him for breaking her heart... or did she?

“As a matter of fact, no, I don’t. In case you forgot, I’m not here because of you.”

Tamara quivered under the feathery brush of his palms down her arms and over the curve of a hip while he placed butterfly nibbles on her throat. He still had the magic touch, the power to make her tremble with no more than a tender touch—the most potent of any seduction.

“I was right. I haven’t forgotten the taste of you... you still taste like heaven.”

Her eyes closed under the spell he weaved as his words sucked the air out of the room.

Good Lord, Tamara. You’re furious with the damn man. Don’t allow him to seduce you into complacency.

Her resistance gradually crumbled, although she tried to tell herself to react differently. He had always known how to reach deep inside her with words, and with the aid of the tenderness of his touch, he infiltrated her soul with a promise of intimacy and understanding that surpassed all expectations she had when deciding to come here.

“You have to stop,” she whimpered, desperate to make him listen since she seemed incapable of standing firm and pushing him away. Instead, she shivered when his wicked lips found the sweet spot behind her ear. His hands curved around her shoulders as he nibbled on her ear.

“I have cherished every memory I have of you over the past nine months, love. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get you out of my mind.”

Every word he uttered in those euphonious tones tasted like the smoothest whiskey on her tongue. Delicious, so hot, and so damn decadent, she stood in awe of the profound craving unfurling inside her. It was useless to deny it. He was the only man who could reach her soul by touch and word alone. He always would be, which was why she was there. To make him realize, as much as he was her happily-ever-after, she was his as well... no matter that she had no idea who and what he really was.

“You are like an addictive elixir to my soul,” he whispered as he sucked her earlobe into his warm mouth. “I don’t think I will ever get enough of you.”

Tamara shook like a leaf at the luxuriant layer of burgeoning desire that draped itself around the nerve endings in her loins. She was rocked by the shards of heat piercing through her core.

“Tell me, Tamara, why are you here?”

His question was like a deluge of ice water, dousing the heat inside her. Her body grew stiff as she stepped out of his embrace, doing her best to avoid his eyes.

“You really are a fucking asshole, you know that?” she clipped in a sharp voice as she attempted to regain her composure—well aware that next to his towering, and oh, so temptingly delicious body condensing the size of the entry hallway, it was a useless venture. She pointed to the door as she took another step back to put more space between them.

“I want you to leave... now.”

“Not until I get the answers I’m after.”

“And seducing me is your way of getting them? Now, why am I not surprised?”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Let’s just say the magazine and newspaper articles on the plane were rather enlightening about the sexual prowess of the latest billionaire entrepreneur in Australia. Imagine my surprise to find out who it was and recognize your face in all those pictures... with a different woman hanging onto your dick like leeches in every one of them.” Her voice turned husky. “At least it made me realize something I should’ve accepted the day you left me.”

“Which was?”

“That you never loved me. Within a month after you left, you hit the tabloids with your seductive prowling.”

“I didn’t realize the airlines kept such old magazines on board.” His eyes narrowed in suspicion.

Tamara realized her faux pas as soon as the words left her mouth but was prepared for the searching gaze. It was easy since just thinking about how quickly he had moved on sparked renewed anger.

“Oh, they don’t, but one of the air hostesses is one of your... how shall I put it... conquests. She couldn’t stop raving about your date and the amazing stamina you had to *go at it all night*... her words.”

“Tamara...”

“Don’t Tamara me. If I ever harbored a smidgen of remaining feeling for you, it died on that plane, listening to her and reading about your sexual exploits since you arrived here.”

Lazily leaning against the wall, he shook his head as a smile flashed across his face that caused a chill to race down her back. He didn’t bother to hide who he was at that moment—a predator, or more accurately, the human arachnid known as Spider in the crime world of Down Under. She retreated at the smirk on his lips. The damn man saw right through her.

“Now, that sounds suspiciously like jealousy to me, love.” His smile widened. “You shouldn’t let those stories bother you... you will always be my favorite.”

“Your favorite? Your fucking favorite?” She stamped her foot, the swell of fear forgotten that Hudson might suspect she knew more than she let on.

“Get your horny and self-righteous ass out of my apartment, Hudson Turner. I will never be anyone’s second choice or fight for the front spot in a line of women stretching around the entire continent... not ever. Get the hell out of—No! Get your hands off me, you bastard!” She slapped at his hands as he reached for her, which he easily avoided by yanking her against his chest.

His voice turned dark and his eyes glacial as he growled in a gravelly voice, “You overplayed your hand, love. You know more than you’re willing to admit, and since I can’t allow you to run around spreading rumors about me, I have to take you with me.”

“Like hell. Let me go, I said!”

“I’m afraid that isn’t an option. You stepped into my web, and now, you’ll never get out.”

“You don’t scare me, you self-righteous asshole. I repeat. Let me go!”

“As I said, you’re coming with me.”

One moment, Tamara was kicking and attempting to fight him off, and the next, her eyes rolled back in their sockets when in a Dim Mak move, he snapped the side of his palm against the sensitive area at her lower neck with just enough force to render her unconscious.

“We could’ve done it the easy way, love,” he murmured with a grim expression as he caught her in his arms. “But I am looking forward to the tongue-lashing when you come to.” Hudson laid her on the sofa as he made a call on his cell phone. “Pick me up at the south side entrance in the alley, mate. Make sure there’s no one around.”

The confirmation that all was clear came in less than five minutes. Lifting her in his arms, he was lucky enough to use the service elevator without being seen and then headed outside to gently settle her on the back seat of the parked black GMC SUV.

“Get Marko to pack her bags and bring them to the airport.”

“Where are we going?” Oscar King asked as his gaze drifted over the unconscious woman. It was easy to see why the Don hadn’t been able to forget about her since his arrival.

“To the Ranch. Tell him to hurry. I want wings in the air in thirty minutes.”

Chapter Four



“I have five million Australian Dollars to turn, Mr. Walker, and I’m not interested in any excuses. I suggest you remember I financed the shopping mall development with the sole purpose of laundering money.”

Jacob Walker was silent for a few moments, which Hudson accommodated. It wasn’t the first time he experienced resistance from the resident property mogul, but it was becoming tedious. The time had come to teach him a lesson.

“I’m aware of that, but I am now in the position to pay you back. Look, Mr. Turner, I appreciate everything you and your father did for me over the years, but it’s time to pull away from... from...”

“Yes?” Hudson’s voice echoed his amusement as Walker faltered. In the short time since being awarded the moniker Spider, as the Don of the Maroubra Crime Organization, he had become as feared as his father had been. Everyone who he spun into a cocoon in the venomous web of crime and corruption knew better than to challenge him or deny him anything. That Jacob Walker dared was commendable—stupid, but commendable.

His eyes drifted to the prone body of the beautiful redhead fast asleep on the comfortable sofa. Her arrival made

a mockery of the strong belief he had no feelings for her, that it had been easy to walk away from her. Yet, here she was, adding a problem her presence brought to the equation of his already difficult life. It made him vulnerable, and since he was still settling into the top kingpin position, it was a luxury he couldn't afford.

He sighed as he leaned back into the comfortable seat. It had been the first thing he had invested in as his position as the Don—a luxurious Challenger Jet, converted to his specifications, sporting eight plush seats and a four-place divan, a small kitchen with a bar, a private study, and a bedroom with an ensuite bathroom. He took various flights across the globe as well as Australia and monthly ones to Brisbane to visit his parents. He preferred to do so in the privacy of his own plane, where he could relax and work without curious eyes.

He suppressed the thought that for a man who had fought for years against being drawn into the *Family Business*, he had taken to the position with more ease than he'd ever imagined he would... or wanted to.

“You're wasting my time, Walker. Say what you want to say,” he snapped, forcing his attention back to the problem at hand.

“You know what I mean. I... my business and my family... I simply cannot continue to be associated with you and—”

“I didn't believe a man of your stature could be that naive or stupid.” His voice droned with a dark undertone, undeniable of the threat it carried.

“Look, I have many associates who would be all too happy to—”

“I don’t need you to find me business associates, Walker. I am more than capable of doing that myself. You have been associated with our Organization for five years and know how it works. We made a deal, in writing and with a legal seal upon it. I’m not interested in you paying me back the money I invested in the development. I suggest you read your contract again. There is no *out* for you.” His voice lowered dangerously. “You have five days to move the money, Walker... or I will send someone to pay your lovely wife a visit.”

“Please! Leave my family out of this!”

“Your family is safe as long as you honor the arrangement we made and the association to the Organization. Five days, Walker, or your wife will not be as lovely anymore.”

Hudson ended the call, annoyed after five years of dealing with the Maroubra Crime Organization, Jacob Walker believed he had the power to negotiate his way out. No one walked away from the mafia organization—not any of its members, and most definitely not any of its business associates.

“Is he going to cause problems?” Oscar asked as he handed Hudson a drink.

“Possibly, but you’re going to gently remind him of the repercussions of even considering going to the authorities with the knowledge he has about us.” Hudson took a long sip of the soothing bourbon.

“His wife?”

“No. His immediate family will be the hold we have over him if he doesn’t conform back to being a good boy. I believe his brother is in town visiting. Rough him up, but don’t kill him. Make sure Walker receives the message and knows every move he makes is being watched.”

Oscar disappeared into the study to make a call to give the order to the captain in charge of the soldiers.

Hudson’s gaze drifted back to the woman as she shifted on the sofa. He had given her a sedative once they boarded the plane to ensure she would stay asleep until they arrived at their destination. The dress had moved up over her hips. It was inevitable that he ended up leering at her long legs, all the way to the heart-shaped aperture covered by tiny, white lace panties. He grunted as the space in his pants shrunk significantly with the lecherous swelling of his cock. The thought of possessing the jewel it cradled was avaricious. Visions of her untethered sensual responses to his touch in the past were exquisite torment. The prospect of unleashing her unbound passions once again was a drug that surged through his veins.

“Yes, I will have you again, my beauty.” His lips barely moved as the words slipped out in a vow that inadvertently settled in his mind, jolting through him like a tsunami on the rise. He tugged on his pants that were becoming increasingly uncomfortable. “You shouldn’t have come here, my sweet. You stepped into the Spider’s web, and I’ll be damned if I allow you to escape.” A Cheshire-like smile turned his

expression evil. “You will be mine as my wife, Tamara Rhodes... whether or not you want to.”

Chapter Five



The sky was a brilliance of golden light coating the green foliage covering the ground with a glow of beauty as if night and day had become one beautiful moment. Dawn had come.

Tamara never woke up suddenly. To her, it came slowly and relaxed, treasuring the moment where the day was kind enough to come softly into focus. In the soft white-gold light of the new day, the hues of the bedroom moved from impressionist pastels to brilliant pop art.

“Hmm.” She sighed at the end of a lazy catlike stretch. A soft, throaty moan crawled from her lips as her eyes fluttered open to greet the sunshine, her heart and lungs expanding at the beauty that met her gaze through the wall of windows.

“Wait! This isn’t the hotel apartment.” No matter the utter and raw beauty of the lush garden on the backdrop of green foothills in the distance, it wasn’t the view of the bay she had insisted upon. Her heart missed a beat. “Where the hell am I?” She forced her fuzzy brain to replay the last few scenes before she’d fallen asleep. “Except I didn’t fall asleep. That asshole Hudson Turner knocked me out.”

An errant hand lifted to caress the side of her neck where his palm had connected, but she couldn’t detect even a

twinge of pain. She frowned.

“But that was mid-morning yesterday. There’s no way I could be out for that long from just that.”

She sat up in bed, blinking as she focused on her surroundings. The colors of the room spoke of the ocean, wave-kissed land, and rock, yet silently sang of the movement of water, its sound, and aroma. It offered a perfect array of homey hues, albeit somewhat whimsical, giving her a sense of home away from home, a place of nurturing safety.

The smell of bacon teasing her nostrils and the hunger pangs in the form of a growling stomach reminded her she had eaten nothing since breakfast the previous day. She loved food and never counted calories. When she was hungry, she ate. When she craved something sweet, she indulged in chocolates and cakes. Luckily for her, she had a healthy metabolism and to date, hadn’t struggled to keep her weight down.

“Ah, you’re awake.”

Tamara froze at the guttural voice that floated toward her from the doorway. The hand she ran over her eyes to settle her frayed mind trembled. She had come to Sydney with the sole purpose of confronting the very man leaning lazily against the doorframe but not like this... not with her at a disadvantage and on the backfoot.

“I brought you some coffee.” Hudson approached with a steaming mug, and the aroma of the decadent flavors of roasted beans softened her ire. “I remember you couldn’t function until you’ve had a cup to flush your system with liquid energy.”

She leaned against the headboard, pulling down the rumpled t-shirt. *Wait! This isn't what I wore yesterday.* She glowered at him in aggravation, no matter that she was still somewhat sleepy-eyed to lambaste him with a chilling voice.

“How did I get into this shirt?”

He smiled brightly. “I could tell you my housekeeper changed you into it, but why lie? Especially when it offered me another look at your sensational body.”

“Give me that,” she snapped, doing her best to ignore the vision of the Adonis, who looked all too fuckalicious. The black cargo shorts hugged his hips, and her eyes were drawn to the white shirt that hung open, offering an enticing view of his rippling chest and washboard stomach. She took a sip of the decadent French Roast, attempting to rationalize why even his manly feet looked sexy. Now wasn't the time to drool over the damn man, especially since it was obvious he had kidnapped her and was holding her God knows where in a foreign country.

“You can button up your shirt,” she said in an acerbic tone. “I assure you I won't be seduced by your oversized muscles to admit to something that isn't true.”

“In case you missed it, it's as hot as hell out here.” He cast an amused look at her as he gestured to the outside. “I generally don't even wear a shirt when I'm here.” He tugged at the edge of the shirt. “This is in your honor. You know, to preserve your modesty.”

“And where exactly is here, pray tell?” She had difficulty keeping her composure as her eyes dropped to the square architecture of his jaw. It took all of her willpower not

to crawl to the end of the bed, yank him closer, and flick her tongue against the dimple in his chin that sat as an invitation. *Gmphf*, she snorted to herself. Even that focal point on his face stood out in its confident yet diminutive stature.

“My ranch in the Outback.”

“Th-The Outback?!” The mug clanked on the glass bedside table as her eyes drifted out the window. She pointed to the green lushness that met her gaze. “That doesn’t look anything like the barren Outback, Hudson Turner. What kind of fool do you think I am?”

“It’s a common misconception that all the Outback is red sand and dust. The ranch is called Turner Park Station, situated at the foothills of the lush Flinders Ranges, less than two-hundred and seventy miles from Adelaide.” He looked through the window. “The area is famous for the denseness of the bush and rock paintings from ancient Aboriginals. It’s also scattered with quaint tiny towns.” He smiled at her. “Turner Park Station is rather sought after for the heli-swag experience we offer.”

“Are you telling me this is a tourist ranch?”

“More a combination of the two. We’re a working cattle and sheep station. On the other hand, it allows adventure to visitors.”

“Adventure? In the Outback? You’re kidding, right?”

“You clearly have no concept of the beauty of this area. Visitors can explore the property by quad bike, or we transport them via helicopter to remote waterholes if they want to fish. The area is especially known for barramundi. We even offer

sessions on whip cracking and mustering cattle. Others just relax, read, or swim at either the visitors' lodge or a secluded billabong." He sauntered closer to the window as he stared outside. "This is the one place I missed the most in the years abroad." His voice was thick and raw before he shrugged off whatever emotions had hijacked his thoughts.

"To the more adventurous guests, we transport them by helicopter over the Turner Bluff and Wilpena Pound for a once-in-a-lifetime experience of a breathtaking sunset. We set up camp on the bank of the pond and offer them a campsite feast. After dinner, they are left to their own devices until we pick them up the following morning after a decadent barbeque breakfast."

"So, if you had all of this, why the lies? Why live in New York if you hated it so much? Why..." Her voice thinned. "Why become involved in a serious relationship with me, knowing you weren't going to stay there?"

"I didn't hate it, Tamara, and believe me, if I had any other choice, I would still be there."

"Bullshit! Choices are the one thing every individual is the owner of. You are the man you are because of the choices you make in life, as much as I am the woman I am for those I make." She licked her lips. "The difference between us is that I am true to the ones I choose, whereas you..." She shook her head sadly. "You lived a lie all those years, didn't you? The man I came to know isn't who you really are." Her lips twitched scornfully. "In fact, now that I realize exactly how many lies you told, I'm glad you walked away when you did."

“Then why are you here, Tamara?” His frown turned his face thunderous. “And don’t lie to me. If there’s one thing about the man I am, it is that I can smell untruths a mile off.”

“Pity I didn’t have that ability when we met.” She shifted on the bed, not ready to admit she had come to see if he truly didn’t have any feelings for her. More so, to find a way to move on without having him as a constant companion in her mind. “I need to go to the bathroom, and I’d like you to leave my room.”

“Very well.” He gestured at the walk-in closet. “Your clothes are in there. Get dressed and meet me downstairs for breakfast.” His eyes turned glacial. “Don’t make me come back up here to fetch you because if I do, I’m not leaving until I’ve fucked you so well, you’ll be walking bowlegged for a week.”

Chapter Six



“More coffee?”

“Yes, please.” Her voice was surly as she settled at the wrought-iron table on the back patio where it had been set for breakfast. She was within the five-minute grace he’d given her. She wasn’t about to take a chance angering him, not when she was after honesty—of the emotional kind, at least. Her gaze skimmed the lush garden as she breathed in the generous perfume plumes drifting from the colorful flowers.

“Thanks.” Taking the mug from him, she took a generous sip to build much-needed energy. He placed a plate in front of her as he sat down opposite her. She breathed in the aroma of sunny-side-up eggs, crispy bacon, fried tomatoes, mushrooms, and a potato rosti.

“There are some banana pancakes as well.”

“Don’t tell me you did all of this?” She stared at the amount of food on the plate, wondering how she would finish it all.

He cast an amused look at her. “Not that I’m not capable, should I put my mind to it, but no, my housekeeper did the honors.”

“Lucky you to afford such luxury,” she mumbled around a bite of buttery mushrooms. “Mmmm, she sure can

cook,” she cooed. The perfectly crisped bacon exploded in her mouth like a piquant bomb. Since she tended to oversleep, she rarely bothered with a cooked breakfast, gobbling down cereal and coffee before she rushed out the door in the mornings. This decadent meal was a real treat.

Contrary to what she expected, the silence between them wasn't strained as they ate. Still, the atmosphere was wrought with confusion, anger, and hurt—all the emotions swirling inside her—but a quick peek at him didn't disclose what was going through his mind. His expression remained stoic and impassive, closed off. There was very little left of the lovable man who went out of his way to make her happy and see her laugh.

“So, you left a lucrative global architect company you built from scratch to become a rancher?” The question fell unchecked from her lips as she pushed the plate away and looked at him. He didn't respond, concentrating on his food rather than looking at her. She bit back irritation as he continued to avoid her eyes.

“For a man who demands honesty, you're full of shit, you know that?” Her voice drifted in the air like a chilled December breeze, a taunt to draw his gaze. That was where she'd be able to see what was going on inside that complex brain of his. Except, when he raised a glacial look at her, it shattered that expectation to pieces. There was nothing to see. His eyes definitely weren't the window to his soul... not anymore.

“That's the thing with a global footprint, love. You can do it from anywhere,” he said cryptically, but the glint

coruscating in his eyes made her believe he hadn't been near a drafting table since he left New York. He finished his meal and stretched out lazily. "Why don't you answer the question I've been asking for the past day? Then I'll see if your answer warrants a response."

"Why am I here? Surely, you know my designs are sought after worldwide, and I get invited to design for numerous fashion shows?"

"So, you came to Sydney to attend a fashion show?" His eyes narrowed at the telling rosy blush that spread over her cheeks and bloomed across her chest. "Yeah, I didn't think so."

"This is a free country. I don't have to explain my presence to you, of all people." She stabbed two pancakes with the fork and plonked them in her plate, generously dousing them in honey.

Hudson's chuckle drifted toward her as she popped her mouth full to stay further attempts to make her talk.

"Your suspicion is confirmed, Boss."

Tamara started at the deep voice sounding behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, going cold at the sight of the huge man, who had the look of a dangerous criminal oozing from every line of his body.

"Tamara, meet Oscar King. Oscar, Tamara Rhodes." His lips twitched as he said in a sardonic drawl, "My ex-fiancé."

"Ex-fiancé?" Her eyes turned hazy. "I suppose we remember our last conversation significantly different," she

murmured under her breath.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Rhodes.”

Tamara nodded, incapable of forcing words past her mouth as her mind got stuck in the past, remembering the day he had placed the most breathtaking diamond ring on her finger—one she still carried with her every day.

“This is my pledge to love you and treasure your heart as mine until the end of time. I will never remove it from your finger, love. It’s yours, a token of my forever love as much as my heart belongs to you.”

“Any instructions, Boss?”

“No, thank you, Oscar. I will handle this personally.”

Oscar nodded, and as silently as he had appeared, walked away.

“Boss?” Her voice was strangled as she battled to get past the fact that even when Hudson told her he was leaving, he hadn’t taken the ring off her finger, rather squeezed her hand and kissed it. That had been what she’d clung to. That moment when he’d looked lost and begged for understanding. Maybe that was what had finally brought her here to reach out and find that part of him. No matter how hard she had tried, she couldn’t get over him and accept their love story had ended. She cleared her throat. “That sounds rather subjugating. What are you? A politician of sorts?”

“Cut the crap, Tamara. Oscar just confirmed Pamela dug into my past, which coincides too conveniently with your sudden presence here, wouldn’t you say?”

“So, what if she told me you live here? What if I came here to give you a piece of my mind? You sure as hell didn’t offer me the opportunity to put my case forward. No. You just turned and walked out of my life. Well, tough shit, Hudson Turner. It doesn’t work that way.” She tapped her ring finger. “You never took off my ring. You said you never would, and the way you looked at me that day... You can deny it all you want, Hudson, but you didn’t want to leave me behind.”

“Would you have come with me had I asked you?”

“It’s a moot question. You never did, so what my response would’ve been is hardly relevant.”

“What else did she tell you?”

“I... she said something about family business, but I was too angry to ask, especially once she showed me all the pictures of you whoring all over Australia.” Her eyes glowed with anger. “Is that it? You suddenly decided you were bored and not ready for monogamy? For marriage? Is that why you never told me you had a family?”

“I told you the truth. I left because I had to take over the family business.”

“Which is what exactly? Running this ranch? I don’t fucking believe it, Hudson. You were too passionate about architecture. It was your life. You loved designing. I refuse to believe you’d walk away from it to bury yourself in the Outback.”

“This is my ranch and has nothing to do with the family.” He looked out over the hillside, his gaze dark and stormy. “My one escape from the life I now live.”

“Which is what?” Her eyes sharpened as she recalled Oscar calling him Boss in such a respectful tone. It triggered memories of watching the movie Godfather with her dad when she was young. “Boss... he called you Boss.” Her voice cracked. “Oh, God. Don’t tell me you’re a mobster, Hudson!?”

“Mobster is such a degrading term. I prefer Sir, Boss, or Don.”

“You... you’re not seriously telling me you’re in the mob?”

“I’m not *in* the mob, Tamara. I *am* the mob, or as we prefer to say, the Family Business, or more accurately, the Mafia.” His expression remained stoic as he watched the blood drain from her face. “You shouldn’t have come here, Tamara.”

“I... guess I shouldn’t,” she whispered, battling to compute the information her brain refused to accept.

“Since you now know who and what I am, I can’t let you go.” If at all possible, her skin went pastier. He smirked. “You should’ve remembered there are consequences for every action.”

“I didn’t know!” She looked around like a rabbit caught in the headlights. “Y-You can’t keep me here indefinitely.”

“Oh, I have no intention of living on the ranch. We’ll come here often, but we’ll spend most of our time at my house in Point Paper in Sydney. It’s on the beach and a beautiful

house, but I don't mind if you want to redecorate." He shrugged. "Or my homes in Adelaide and Brisbane, where we will stay at least five months each year."

"You're demented. I'm not going to live with you. Got that, Boss! I am going back to the States."

"As I said, I'm afraid that won't be possible. And you *will* live with me, Tamara... as my wife."

"Like hell, I will."

How her legs moved, she had no idea, but she ran inside toward the stairs. Hudson caught her on the second step and with a hard tug, yanked her into his arms.

"Enough!" he growled as she kicked and struggled for freedom. He pressed her against the wall, one hand easily capturing both of hers above her head while the strength and hardness of his body kept her prisoner. His leer threatened to suck the life out of her.

"I'll ask again. Why did you come here, Tamara?"

"I wanted to... I needed to..." She gulped back the confession about to spring unheeded from her lips. The man had such an effect on her, she couldn't think straight. She'd be damned if she admitted, knowing what she did now, she still loved him and wanted him in her life. She gulped down the fear curdling deep inside with every intentional slow blink of his eyes. Her chin inched confidently higher.

"I wanted to look you in the eye and tell you what a fucking asshole and unfeeling rat you are. That you broke my heart and maybe, just maybe leave you feeling a little guilty." She attempted to push him away, but he didn't budge. "What a

joke, right? A man like you, the mighty *Boss* of the Australian Mafia wouldn't give a rat's ass about the pain he causes." Her throat contracted as she desperately swallowed back the sob that threatened to spill from her lips.

"Now, let me the fuck go!"

"I didn't ask to be born into the family, Tamara, but since I am the oldest son, my future, my life, doesn't belong to me. I did what was best for you when I walked away."

"Why then? Why did you ask me to marry you, knowing you would have to come back here?"

"I had..." He bit back the response, his lips compressing into a thin line. "It's in the past and doesn't matter." His eyes changed color as he wove a hand through her dark red tresses, grazing the back of her neck. A shiver followed as the downy vellus hair stood up.

"Lovely," he murmured, watching the thick locks cascade through his fingers. "I have to admit, Tamara... I missed you."

This time, the hot shard that tore into her loins and made her eyelashes flutter offered him the cue to explore further. His hand gently fisted a shock of hair and pulled her head back to stare into her eyes, gauging her emotions.

Tamara bit her lip as she ineffectively attempted to tame the burgeoning lust that burst to life beneath his touch. It had always been like this—his touch, his tenderness. He knew just how to awaken her passion.

"No, you have to... Hmmm." The protest ended in a moan as he pressed her harder against the immovable wall.

The rippling strength of his chest under her hands was slowly becoming her undoing. She never could resist touching him, feeling his warmth against her palms. He was gentle, but the firmness of his hands warned her he wouldn't heed her demand for release.

“Such decadence,” he rasped as he bit into her lower lip and sucked it.

A flash of heat raced down and unleashed a warm flush of essence, forcing her to clench against a suffusion of pheromones that lingered between her thighs.

Oh my God. He still has the Midas touch!

His eyes darkened as he stared into her eyes, lazily tracing the tip of his finger down her aquiline nose to caress the depression beneath. His gaze lowered to fixate on the fullness of her mouth, the yearning to once again taste the swollen succulence that he had never been able to forget. The need intensified as her lips glistened from a tentative lick of her tongue.

“I want to kiss you, Tamara.”

The unexpectedness of his words shook her. Not only because it sounded like a plea but at the untethered desire to lose herself in his embrace. She was shaken at the intensity of the coil tightening inside her loins. If she didn't quickly get hold of her emotions, she'd make a complete fool of herself.

“Then kiss me, Hudson.” She was shocked at the sound of her husky voice. She'd just given herself a talking-to, and what did she do? Exactly the opposite.

Her hand lifted to touch the softness of his lips. She might not want to believe he was bad, but she couldn't deny the magnetism he exuded. The effect of the warmth of his breath connected with her mind, sending it swirling in a sensual state of intoxication.

"I always found you irresistible," he said as he lowered his head and placed hard, open-mouth kisses along the side of her throat, nibbling and sucking as he went. "Sensually inviting without trying."

Good Lord, I want him to fuck me!

The carnal thought broke through to rid her of the disjunction of suppressed lust that had plagued her mind and body from the moment she'd first faced him the day before.

"Oh, sweet lord." The husky moan pulsed deep within her throat, racing up, then choked off as she clenched her jaw. Her neck arched, and she gave herself over to the flash of heat that surged through her stomach when Hudson lifted her skirt. He pushed aside the flimsy lace panties and probed a thick finger deep inside her pussy.

"Ah, just like I remember, my love. As hot as a furnace and wet, so gorgeously soaked." His eyes darkened as he watched her struggle to find something to cling to while begging for more.

"Hudson," she croaked, surrendering in a staccato of moans as he lazily swirled his fingers inside her, teasingly tapping the nub of nerves on the inside of her vaginal wall. "We can't... I can't do this," she gasped as he twisted his hand to brush his thumb over her clit in tandem with his teasing fingers inside her pussy. The combined stimulation triggered a

series of jagged tremors that tore through and shook loose the bonds of her starved sexuality. It was becoming impossible to hold on to a token of sensibility.

“You’re right.” He sighed regretfully. “We can’t... at least not until you agree to marry me.”

Tamara stared at him in disbelief as he stepped away from her, a smile tiptoeing across his lips as he watched her struggle to compose herself.

“I say it again. You are a fucking asshole. If you think for one minute, you’re going to bulldoze me into,”— she grappled for the right words— “into an unholy matrimony, you’re sadly mistaken!”

His mocking laughter chased after her as she ascended the stairs on rubbery legs, cursing him and her libido for making her fall into a trap of lust so profound, it was difficult to breathe.

Chapter Seven



“Time to get up.”

Tamara blinked, disoriented as the deep voice resonated through her soporiferous mind. She had battled to fall asleep, and it felt like she had barely closed her eyes. She struggled to shake off the slumberous state keeping her captive.

“Come on, Tamara. Either wake up and get dressed, or I’m carrying you to the chopper in your pjs.” His gaze flashed heatedly over the naked flesh of her chest as he stood rigid, paralyzed with a feeling of being winded, struggling to breathe. Through parted lips, he drew a breath. “I wouldn’t mind since I see you still prefer to sleep in your birthday suit.

A shard of unwanted heat pierced her loins as her eyes fluttered open to find her vision impaired by the man, she now realized she didn’t know at all. The way his eyes darkened, and his jaw locked was a clear sign he was impatient. She blinked again and looked outside. The sunrise illuminated the darkened sky as if it were igniting the most perfect flame.

“What do you want, Hudson? The sun isn’t even up yet.”

“We’re leaving.”

She froze for the briefest moment at the thought he would soon be out of her life for good. She slowly pushed upright against the headboard.

“Back to Sydney?”

“We have a lot to discuss before that happens. I’m taking you to my private luxury tent at Kangaroo Creek, a couple of miles from here. Perhaps a change in scenery will assist in making you see reason,” he said with a wry smile.

“Bombarding me with luxury and gorgeous sights of nature won’t change my mind. I am not marrying you, Hudson, and that’s the end of it.”

“We’re leaving in ten minutes. If you don’t want to spend the next few days naked, I suggest you get dressed and packed.”

She bristled as she watched him walk to the door. The man he had proved to be, she had no doubt he would do as promised.

“I should have taken my chances with that monster spider,” she mumbled as she flipped back the sheet and got up. “At least with him, I would’ve known what to expect since he is true to his nature, not projecting a facade of the perfect mate.”

Hudson’s step faltered, but he didn’t respond and soon disappeared from sight. Tamara sighed, not sure why she wasn’t happy that she finally managed to crack his icy demeanor.

She stretched his patience by descending the stairs exactly ten minutes later, dressed in a pair of denim shorts and

a crop top she'd paired with white lace sneakers. Although it was early, it was already hot, and she expected the day to turn scorching soon. She had no intention of suffering in the heat by covering up her body to avoid his leering gaze. Besides, it filled her with feminine satisfaction to notice the bulge rising in his shorts. *Good!* It was his just desserts to be in the clasp of such an affliction, even if only from physical discomfort.

“I suppose I shouldn't be surprised you're a pilot.” She secured the safety belt as she watched him confidently settle in the driver's seat of the sleek black and silver HX50 helicopter. “What I am surprised by is all the displays of money and luxury,” she said in a quiet voice. “It was the one thing I used to love about you. Although you became a billionaire from the success of the global footprint of your company, combined with your investments, you never cared about showing it off.”

“Leave the past where it belongs, Tamara. For both our sakes, it's better to accept me for the man I am today.” He cast a sharp sideways look at her as he opened the throttle, pulled the collective up, and lifted the chopper off the ground with the effortless precision he seemed to do everything nowadays. “The sooner, the better.”

“Oh, I accepted it already, believe me. What you need to realize is my mind is made up. Nothing you do or say is going to sway me. I stand by my decision, Hudson. I will not marry you. In fact, this entire trip is a waste of time. Why don't you just take me back to Sydney so I can carry on with my life, and you with yours, whatever the hell that entails.”

“Hmm, as Shakespeare's Hamlet said, ‘The lady doth protest too much,’” he mocked as he smoothly took the

chopper over the hillside. “If not for that, I might have believed you.”

“I see it’s pointless even trying to get through to you.” As she stared down at the vast landscape below, she offered him a cold shoulder, indicating she had no interest in further discussion. The patches of green were in sharp contrast to the red, sandy wasteland that covered most of the area they flew over.

“Kangaroo Creek runs through my property. I chose the specific spot for my private breakaway at the widest bend in the river, a couple of miles away from the camping grounds and cabins we rent out, so no one will bother us. It’s beautiful there, peaceful and calming.”

Tamara inched her nose higher but refused to respond. It was decidedly difficult to maintain an air of indifference when she could hear traces of loneliness in his voice.

It’s only my imagination. That’s all it is. He has scores of women keeping him company. Besides, why should I feel sorry for him? He’s a Mafioso, for God’s sakes.



Hudson was all too aware of the battle raging inside Tamara since the same war was at play within him. A feared man across the Australian continent, it would be the easiest thing to do to force her into compliance and marry him.

Still, there was the part deep inside him, the remnants of the man he used to be, the one she fell in love with, that wanted her to say yes to a proposal of marriage—of her own

free will. Even as Don of the Maroubra Crew Crime Organization, he still had his pride. She was the only woman he had ever wanted to marry. Since he'd walked away from her, that much hadn't changed. He still wanted her as his wife. Her unexpected arrival in his homeland had sparked back to life the desire to call her his.

The question he struggled with was whether he'd be able to let her go if she kept insisting she wouldn't marry him. A marriage, for him, was a sacred institution, one that would last a lifetime. To start it off by forcing her into what she had referred to as *unholy matrimony* would be the beginning of the end. He knew her well enough to realize that would be the fastest way for her to lose the love he believed was the reason for the glimmer he could see in the depth of her eyes.

He understood her anger, had expected it the day he'd left, but at the time, he had to get away from her as soon as possible. If she had cried or forced him to explain his reasons, he would have faltered and either told her more than he should, or he would have stayed. He couldn't afford either, and to ensure the confidentiality and safety of his own family, he had kept it short and left before she could react. It had been harsh, but the only way he could walk away from her.

The one thing that would severely affect her decision was the women he had indulged in since his return, no matter that it had been a desperate attempt to forget about her.

Yeah, and I failed miserably.

No matter how many he had sex with, he never made the same emotional connection he had with her, and he knew why. He had loved her with soul depth. He still did and

suspected he always would. Becoming involved with the Family Business hadn't changed that.

That's why we won't leave here until she accepts the only way forward is for her to marry me.

The flight took less than fifteen minutes. With the icy silence emanating from her, it was a relief to land the chopper. Tamara jumped out and walked toward the creek as soon as the motor was cut while he was left to secure it in the hangar behind the campground.

Dropping their bags inside the luxury tent, which appeared to be an extension of the rocky hillside, he went outside and silently watched her. Standing on the bank of the creek, she looked like a wood nymph. Beautiful, poised, and so damn sensual, she threatened to blow his control over his demanding testosterone to smithereens.

“How is it that Pamela found nothing of your shady life anywhere?”

The question drifted to him like a strike of lightning—accusing yet pleading, as if she wanted him to deny everything and assure her it was all a misunderstanding. The muted sigh crawling from his chest carried the years of wishing away what he had always known he wouldn't be able to change—being drawn into the world of crime. No one went against their father when it came to this business, especially not one as powerful as Christopher Castello, aka Christopher Turner.

The decision to tell all came without thought. It was the only way he could secure their future. Keeping her in the dark would only exacerbate her mistrust of him. He sat on a boulder and patted a spot beside him.

“Join me. It’s not an easy story to tell.”

If she was surprised by his capitulation to disclose all, she hid it well. He waited until she was settled, with legs stretched out and her hands folded demurely on her lap but wasn’t fooled by her relaxed stature. She expected him to spin a tall tale, but this time, there was too much on the line to hide anything. He had walked away from her once. He’d be damned if she was the one walking away from him this time around.

“Some people join the life of crime by choice. Others are born into it.” He smiled wryly. “The Castello family has been leaders in mafia circles around the world for centuries. Initially, the family business was kept within the confines of Europe—Sicily and Italy, to be more exact. My father and grandfather were at loggerheads from when he was a youngster. He had modern ideas of where he wanted to take the business, and the old geezer refused to budge. Hence, the decision to move to Australia in 1970, and where the Italian-Australian Mafia organization from Maroubra, Sydney, was born. Our Organization is known as Maroubra Crew Crime Organization.”

“Castello? I don’t understand. Your surname is Turner.”

“My mother demanded my father change their name when she became pregnant. She grew up as a mafia princess and knew all too well the dangers involved when your true identity is known. She was adamant about protecting us and ensuring we always lived a very protected life apart from the crime world.” He shrugged.

“It suited me since all I ever wanted was to design buildings. She used the influence she had with my father to get him to agree to me living in the U.S. and building a career. Dario, my brother, is the one who lived and dreamed of the Mafia and the power it offered. He is a true blue blood Mafioso.”

“Then why didn’t your father offer it to him?”

“I’m the oldest. In that, my father is old school. He refused to budge. I wasn’t given a choice, and since part of me always remembered the protocol of the Mafia, drilled into me from when I was a little boy, I couldn’t walk away from the responsibility.”

“So, you kill people.” She took a deep breath. “And sell drugs, women... and... and God knows what else.”

“No, Tamara. The Mafia nowadays are more about controlling powers. What you’re describing is what crime syndicates are known for. Personally, I’m only involved with controlling financial crime, cybercrime, white-collar crime, and corruption. Dario has the portfolio for the rest.” He didn’t see the need to expand on what that entailed.

“Who are you trying to fool, Hudson? You might not be directly responsible, but you are the leader of the Organization... the Boss or Don, right? So, no matter how you try to sugarcoat it, you are at the core of everything that is wrong. You are a criminal. That’s the beginning and end of it.”

“Yes, I am.” His voice was dull and lifeless, but his eyes glowed as he looked at her. “I am what I am, Tamara. It will never change. I’ll never go back to living a clean, wholesome life, not as long as I’m in charge of the MCCO.

One day, when our son is old enough to take over, I'll be able to relax and become—”

“Forget it. There is no way I'll ever consent to marry you, let alone bring a child into the world with the knowledge he'll be primed to become a criminal.”

“I would prefer you accept we will be married, but know one thing, my love. You are going to be my wife, willing or unwilling ... it doesn't matter.”

“Stop calling me your love! We both know you feel shit about me. All this is, is your way of gaining control over me. To keep my mouth shut, so I don't rat you out to the authorities.”

“That's where you're wrong, Tamara. I always loved you. I did the day I walked away, and to this day, I still do.”

She jumped from the boulder, kicked off her sneakers, and looked at him over her shoulder.

“I'd be the biggest fool if I believed that, and I assure you, Hudson Turner, I am anything but.” She did a clean dive into the clear creek water.

He watched her slice through the water like a fish, his mind in turmoil. No matter what she said, he had seen the same flash in her eyes as he had so many times in the past.

“No, my love, you're no fool, and you can deny it all you want, but you still love me.”

He followed her into the clear creek with a precision dive, wearing only his shorts. One way or another, he was going to crack the veneer of denial she'd woven around her heart.

Chapter Eight



It was a relief when Hudson didn't push her the rest of the day. Instead, they spend the day sightseeing on quad bikes, swimming, and just talking. Fishing for their dinner was the highlight, especially since she was the one to catch it.

Now, with the night burying the landscape in a cloak of darkness, she was bogged down by the weight of emotional tension that had been at the back of her mind the entire day. Hudson telling her he still loved her had angered her, but she couldn't shake the memory of the honesty sparking in the depths of his eyes when he'd uttered the words.

It doesn't matter, Tamara. He's a criminal... a mafioso, for heaven's sake. There is no future for you with him. Accept it.

That might be easier said than done, especially since she had been fighting the same feeling from the moment she'd laid eyes on him again. The heart didn't ask to fall in love, and true love refused to be denied. She had no idea what she was going to do, but one thing she knew without a doubt. Marrying into a family of crime went against every principle she had.

"I'm going to take a shower," she mumbled as she got up. Walking inside the tent, she was once again stumped at the luxury and beauty. It might be a tent against the backdrop of

the rocky hill, but it had it all. A huge king-sized bed with a white net cover stood against one side. A posh sofa and chairs with side tables and various sizes of lanterns created an intimate lounge area. There was even a small kitchenette and bathroom built into the rocky side of the mountain. The bathroom was big, covered in rustic marble tiles, with a large bathtub, a toilet, and marble his-and-her counter basins. All in all, it had all the comforts and beauty of a five-star hotel room.

“Money is clearly not a factor.” Well, it never had been, but he had never flaunted it as he did now, which is probably why there were so many women vying for his attention. She cringed at the unexpected thought as she quickly undressed and stepped into the shower. That was the one thing she struggled with the most. She had been celibate since the day he left, whereas he had indulged like a teenager on a sexual rampage.

Tamara tilted her head and leaned back against the sandstone shower wall, forcing her mind to go blank. She sighed as the lukewarm water cascaded over her curvy body to lull the tension from her body. With her eyes closed, she luxuriated as the water eased her tired muscles.

“Ah, this is heaven.”

Tamara wasn't too surprised when the shower door opened. If she was honest with herself, she had hoped he would join her. Her breathing faltered as she looked at him through the droplets of running water.

It wasn't fair. Life wasn't fair, not at this moment. There was no way she could deny him anything, looking as debonair and as dangerous as he did. His broad shoulders, his

upper chest matted with dark hair, combined with bulging arms and thick neck, were a study in masculinity. She drooled as her eyes took a leisurely gander over his washboard stomach.

“I see some things haven’t changed,” she whispered in a gasp suffused with excitement. Drinking in the sight of the deep dorsal vein swelling his shaft and engorging its fleshy cap, she tilted her head, the dark red tresses shimmering and cascading in lustrous waves over her shoulders. He seemed even bigger than she remembered, sparking a familiar tingling heat in her pussy.

Gawd. How is it possible to be this sexually affected, knowing he’s such a bad man?

Watching her with a nebulous gaze, he stepped into the shower. Tamara didn’t move, caught by the intense heat of his gaze scorching over her skin.

“You shouldn’t be surprised. Clearly, you don’t know what you do to me.”

Struck mum as he moved closer, she shivered under the water caressing her skin, almost as if he was their maestro, directing the beat of every droplet. He was different, yet the same—at least as far as being a sensualist male was concerned—except there was more. He was sexually more demanding... dominating. She trembled as the thought surfaced and couldn’t shake the rush of emotions it left surging through her. Much to her chagrin, she was excited.

Maybe I’ll play his game and be a sweet submissive.

She shrugged off the thought as it formed. Not a single bone in her body would ever willingly submit to another, not even sexually. Equal power—that was what she believed in. Then why did the thought thrill her so much? Did she want to be dominated by him, sexually and in life, even to the extent of forcing her to marry him?

Tamara had shied away from men since Hudson left. She'd been hurt and wanted to keep her heart intact, safe from further pain. Her career came first now. She had given up on wedded bliss—right up to the moment she had looked into his face at the hotel.

“Sharing a shower with you was always the highlight of my day.”

She watched his mouth form the words but couldn't concentrate on what they meant. Instinct drove her as she lifted a hand to cup his cheek. Her voice was husky and insecure, but the sensual smile said it all.

“I want you to kiss me.”

“Ah, Tamara, love, that's the one thing I can never deny you,” he said against her lips as his hands glided over her water-slicked body, pulling her close. He captured her lips with a feral growl.

Tamara trembled at the rawness in the sound as she savored the way the chords vibrated against her lips. Blood coursed through her veins, hot and thick, as her skin bloomed under his expert touch.

“Stop moving,” he growled when she tried to get closer by orbiting her hips against his. “You're in my world now,

love, and we're going to do it my way.”

His command settled deep inside her, stirring the desire to submit to his every command. She moaned, but instinct kept her immobile.

“What do you want from me, love? Shall I wash your back?” Hudson asked with a salacious lick around the outside of her ear. She shivered when he tugged on the lobe with his lips before sucking it. The memory of those same lips sucking and licking her pussy caused her loins to clench in expectation. The need to feel his hardness slide deep inside her turned into a pulsing need throughout her body.

“For one thing, I don't need foreplay,” she whimpered. It had been too long. She needed him now... inside her.

Tamara had never been too forward sexually, but she wasn't shy to show her desires. Now, when he exerted a dominance that was new to her—a stranger—was too much to comprehend. She shivered as his lips trailed over her shoulder to nibble on the soft skin of her throat. That he gave her the power to decide what happened next was like a heady rhythm inside her mind. She was equally overwhelmed by how badly she wanted him to just take her, to demand she blindly follow his every command.

What the hell is happening to me?

“Then tell me what you need, baby.”

“I need... oh, please fuck me. I... Shit!” she screamed when he thrust into her with such force, her feet lifted off the tiled floor. Clutching his shoulders, she desperately gasped to fill her lungs. She was filled with such fullness, it took

command of her entire body, albeit surprisingly with no discomfort.

“Well, Tamara? Do you want me to continue? Let me warn you, I’m a different man than the one you used to know—in more ways than one. If the answer is yes, there will be no gentleness when I fuck you. It’s going to be rough and hard.” His eyes glimmered darkly. “By the time I’m done the shape of the rocky wall will be imprinted on your skin.” He forced her gaze to his, his voice lowering dangerously. “From this moment forward, I am in control of your body, and you will only come when I tell you to and I’m going to keep triggering your climaxes for as long as I want to watch you fall apart. You might be begging me to fuck you but eventually, you will beg me to stop.”

Tamara didn’t respond, although she doubted that would ever happen. She loved sex too much. A moan drifted from her lips as he feathered his fingers over her clit. Incapable of keeping still, she pushed her hips against him, reveling in the ecstasy of his tactile caress.

“Hudson... I,” she rasped huskily, her desire spiking. An electric spark surged through her core, intense and intoxicating. Her breasts rose and fell under the dim light that painted the arousal of their rose-colored tips. His eyes roamed over the sharp lines that defined the shallow, scalloped slopes of her hips and pelvis.

“Yes, love ... you what?” He smiled wickedly as she gasped when he twitched his cock deep inside her. His tongue trailed a path of hot, wet lashes along her jaw, down the side of her neck to trace the curve of her breasts. Her cries echoed

around them as he pulled a nipple into his mouth and sucked with greedy fervor.

“I’m waiting,” he demanded roughly. His whispered breath tickled and played over her skin, setting fire to the rage deep inside her.

“I need all of you, Hudson—criminal or not—to possess me more than anything,” she pleaded in a voice raw with lust. Her breasts, with nipples swollen taut, surged against his chest.

He fisted a tuft of her hair to force her back. His eyes glowed in the tint of the lights, and the warning glimmer thrilled her with anticipation of what was to come.

“Even with the warning I gave you?”

“I don’t care! Fuck me,” she moaned. She’d never felt such raw passion, unlike anything she had ever experienced. It threatened to consume her, rippling inside her, bordering on primal lust.

“Then so be it.” His eyes seared into her, surprising her, as contrary to his growled warning, he rocked into her. Slow, deep thrusts that made her body weep for more. He fisted his fingers in her hair and forced her gaze to his. It was dreamlike, looking into his eyes while he made love to her.

“Oh,” she gasped in surprise at the unexpected sensation surging through her as his cock found that special trigger pulse inside her. The Cheshire-like grin warned her, his easy possession had a defined purpose... and he just found it.

“Ah, that’s what I was after. Now, it’s time to soar,” he said as he pulled back and pounded into her.

Tamara threw caution to the wind, forgetting his warning as she bucked and thrashed with his every thrust. A low guttural cry crawled from the depths of her throat and erupted in a hollow cacophony as he powered into her. The wild and roughness of his possession didn't scare her, rather the opposite. It sparked a lust for more.

“Please, Hudson,” she begged, not knowing what she was after. She was desperate for something to give her that final push into oblivion, which remained just out of reach. She was caught in his hooded gaze watching her like a hawk. She realized he did it to keep edging her, pushing her to the edge only to retreat when she was about to soar. Her loins throbbed with pressure and demanded release, yet he kept denying her that small nudge to fall into the blissful abyss.

“You are as sensual as I remembered... and much stronger than I imagined you would be,” he said with rampant lust on his face.

“Ohh Lord,” she wailed as he hooked her left knee over his arm, opening her to his hard thrusts as they became wilder, rougher. A groan of pain slipped from her lips as the wall bit into the skin of her back when he forced her leg farther up. She had never felt as vulnerable in her life while at the same time drowning in sexual euphoria. She stood helpless against the lust suffusing her lower body, turning her limbs rubbery and weak. She was racked by a prickling sensation low in her back as goosebumps rippled across her skin.

“Oh, gawd!” She tried stifling her cries, but they broke free in husky puffs.

“That’s what I want, Tamara. You, completely at my mercy.”

Her clitoris throbbed with the need to climax as he reached down to strum it like a tight string, and she lost herself completely.

“Now, my love. Come for me.”

“Gaawd,” she cried as he hooked her ankle over his shoulder for added leverage to pound her. She bucked and thrashed wildly on his cock, her eyes flashing with lust, screaming as a climax shattered her equilibrium.

“You’re not done, love. I want more,” Hudson drawled. She was like a puppet on a string, powerless as he possessed her like a mad man, sparking a wantonness she didn’t know existed as he drew climax after climax from her.

“Oh God, I can’t... please. No more,” she whimpered as her body shuddered once more. She was running ragged as she came again, her legs threatening to give way. She gasped for breath, in awe of the way Hudson consumed her. Her passion spiked with every powerful thrust into her fiery loins. “I beg you... no more,” she cried in a raw voice. Her body was drawn taut in the throes of the orgasm.

Hudson pulled back and pounded her in a frenzy of powerful thrusts, desperate to push her over the edge with him. He rode her high, the excitement of watching her luscious body was present in the dark blush on his cheeks. He came unhinged by lust, deprived of all control as he pounded into her. With a carnal roar, he ejaculated into the heated depths of her body.

Tamara crumbled under the wondrous sensations swamping her brain. She was limbless as Hudson washed and dried her once he could move, then carried her to the bed.

The physical and emotional demands left her frayed, lulling her into a deep sleep, incognizant of the hands tenderly massaging her legs. One thought kept repeating inside her mind until she lost herself to the arms of Morpheus.

I love him. I can't walk away from him, no matter who and what he has become. I love him too much.

Chapter Nine



“How is a marriage going to work between us, Hudson?”

About to prepare breakfast, he froze at the husky voice floating through his mind and suppressed the feeling of joy with difficulty. There was no guarantee the question was an indication she was ready to indulge in wedded bliss with him. He had to tread lightly and choose his words carefully. He switched off the gas before turning to face her.

She looked beautiful. Her skin was flushed a sensual rose from sleep, and with her hair gloriously tousled, she oozed sensual passion.

“Our marriage will be no different from any other or than we intended when we got engaged.”

“Don’t patronize me, Hudson. You know as well as I do, everything has changed.”

“Why do you ask? You made it clear you’re not going to... how did you put it? Indulge in unholy matrimony.”

She stared at him for long moments.

“Did you mean what you said yesterday?”

“Yes, Tamara. I love you. I always have, and I always will.”

“Well, there’s your answer.”

“Meaning?”

“I came here because I couldn’t get you out of my mind... or my heart. I love you, Hudson. I always have, and I always will.”

“But you hate the man I’ve become. How will you balance that and not come to resent me over time?” He couldn’t blindly accept her declaration, even though his heart sang at the words. She needed to be sure. The day she said I do, it had to be forever, with no regrets later to hound their happiness.

“I can never hate you, not the man you were or the one you are now. I may hate what you do, but you? All I can do is love you and believe your love is strong enough to ensure we will live the same life your mother insisted you did, growing up. Will I readily accept my children will be primed to become your successors? Hell no, and you need to realize, Hudson, I will fight you on that every day of my life. But I will love you while I do it and endeavor to be the wife you deserve in your life. One who sees the man behind the facade of the feared Spider, the Boss, who makes others quiver in their boots. I will demand you love me with as much passion and commitment as I do you.”

“You won’t ever have to demand that, my love, since I already do and have no intention of changing. As far as everything else is concerned, yes, you and our children will always be kept safe, and no one will know who and what I am outside of our associates and members. The rest, we will deal with as it arises.”

Tamara didn't miss the fact he avoided the subject of their children and the family business but was comfortable he knew her well enough to realize she meant every word she said.

“Well, I guess I'll wait for you to make a proper marriage proposal to clinch the deal.” She gestured at the gas stove. “In the meantime, why don't you continue with what you were doing? For some reason, I'm starving this morning.”

“Oh, hell no. If you think I'm going to let you get away with just saying yes, love, after that passionate speech, you don't know me very well.”

He leered at her as he slowly dragged the sheet from her body, leaving her rosy body open to his gaze.

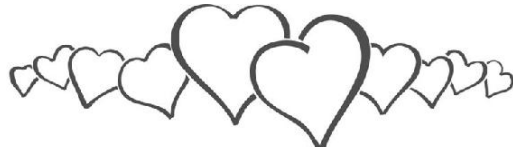
“You unman me when you look like this, love. Last night proved one thing I have been trying to deny for the past nine months.”

“Which is?”

“I can't get enough of you... I don't think I ever will.”

“Now, that's what a girl wants to hear.” She anchored her arms around his neck as he settled between her thighs. “So, Mr. Spider, what are you waiting for?”

He growled low in his throat as he caught her lips in a demanding and passionate kiss. How he got so lucky, he would never know, but he thanked his lucky stars. Tamara was the strong one of the two of them to have come looking for him and securing their happiness.



Two weeks later, their wedding day...

“All I can say is wow! You look absolutely sensational.” Pamela beamed at Tamara as she twirled in front of the mirror. “Not to say I’m not still in shock you forgave that scoundrel so quickly, but I am thrilled for you.”

Tamara’s eyes glimmered with happiness as she stared at the reflection in the mirror. She had chosen a classic yet timelessly elegant wedding gown with an added twist of modern design. It was a sleek mother of pearl silk sheath dress with a delicate chiffon and tulle overlay at the waist, covered with intricate beading and embroidery. The illusion sweetheart neckline was decadent, designed for a killer décolletage, set off by the sumptuous Chantilly lace that adorned the delicate lace sleeves. The long, detachable chiffon trail added to the old-world charm of the dress and was perfectly suited for her figure. The corseted bodice added an extra touch of allure, complemented by the low, open back, a sensational contrast to her tanned skin.

“Love is what matters, Pam, and I love him, as much as I know he loves me.” She glanced at her over her shoulder. “Has my mother survived the shock?”

“Only just.” Pamela laughed. “It was inconceivable that she wouldn’t be here to arrange her only daughter’s wedding.” One hand fluttered through the air. “Lavish as it is. Your parents are over the moon that you and Hudson got back

together.” She walked closer and tugged an errant curl back into the loose hairdo Tamara had decided on. “Besides, it seems they like your soon-to-be in-laws. They were chatting up a storm when I left to assist you.”

“Thank you, my friend, for taking the brunt of everything.” She hugged her briefly. “I am going to miss you so much.”

“Oh, never fear. You’ll see me often enough. Don’t think because you’re opening a design house over here, I’ll let you off the hook. We’ll continue running the business as a team, which means we’ll take turns traveling back and forth to discuss designs and development. You’re not getting rid of me that easily.”

“That sounds perfect.” A knock on the door warned them the time had come. “Well, I guess I’m about to take my final steps as a single woman.”

“Into a happy future.” Pamela held out her arm. “Come. Your father is waiting at the entrance of the chapel.”

Tamara couldn’t stop smiling as they made their way there. Pamela handed her over to her father, who smiled at her with pride shining in his eyes.

“You look lovely, my little princess.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

The melodious sound of the wedding march prompted Pamela to open the doors and make her way to the front of the church. Tamara took a deep, calming breath, smiled at her father, then took the first step to her future life.

The tulle material of the skirt flowed softly around her legs as they walked down the aisle. Warmth sparked to life inside her when Hudson's eyes trailed over the tight lace bodice that lovingly hugged her breasts.

Tamara couldn't tear her eyes from his. She was overwhelmed by the look on his face. Gone was the impassive and inscrutable expression she'd become used to. She blinked, realizing he made no effort to hide his candor from their guests, leaving her breathless as she halted a step from him. Hudson didn't move, just stared at her.

"Do you have any idea how beautiful you are, my love?" he murmured quietly.

A becoming blush bloomed over her cheeks at the compliment that echoed through the sudden quiet as the chords of the wedding march died away.

"And I'm the luckiest woman to have you as my groom. You look very debonair, my love."

He leaned in and cupped her cheeks, capturing her misty gaze with an incomprehensible stare. They shared an intimate exhale, their breath meshing in that split second before he kissed her. The kind she now craved from him—deep, with demanding strokes, laying claim to her mind and soul. Tamara thawed into his ripped body, clinging to his back as she returned the kiss with all the love and passion in her body.

"Ahem... it seems Mr. Turner skipped to the end of the ceremony," the minister's amused voice broke them apart.

Hudson chuckled as he brushed a finger over her glowing cheeks. The smile they shared was one of tenderness and mutual affection. Turning, he drew her hand through the hook of his arm, keeping it clasped in his as they faced the minister.

“Indeed... what better way to commence a union of unholy matrimony?”

The End.

Excerpt: Claimed Bride



THE BRIDE SERIES

CHAPTER ONE

“Drew Carver was killed in a motor vehicle accident last night.”

Alexander Sinclair didn’t react visually apart from his narrowing eyes. His steely gaze remained glued to the cityscape horizon. He stood in front of large picture windows—his usual spot when strategizing—in his luxurious office in Columbus Circle, New York.

“How sure are you it was an accident?”

His deep voice carried to Blake Harper, his friend as well as one of the shareholders in the company. Alex was a property mogul. He was the chairman and majority stakeholder in the Allied Group, a global property development firm he had founded at the young age of twenty-five. The company was best known for developing Time Warner Center, where their HQ was situated, as well as for the new Manhattan Redevelopment Project. According to Forbes magazine, Alex had a net worth of \$5.5 billion. Alex was a philanthropist and a sports team owner too. He had recently bought a large stake in the NY Giants and the MetLife Stadium in East Rutherford. His generous donations and

support to various welfare organizations had made him a sought-after businessman.

“According to the reports, he lost control of his vehicle as he approached the curve onto the Tappan Zee Bridge on Route 287. He went through the rails and into the Hudson river.”

“Don’t tell me. They couldn’t recover the body?” Alex said cynically.

“No. They found his body. He’s confirmed dead—drowned. It seems he was on his way back to New York.”

“Very convenient, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes. I also have my doubts whether it was an accident but the witnesses on the scene couldn’t confirm either way. It apparently happened too fast.”

Alex sat down behind his desk. The dark mahogany surface gleamed in the sunlight streaking through the window.

“Who is the beneficiary of his life insurance?”

It was one of the fringe benefits all Alex’s employees enjoyed—a lucrative pension fund and life insurance, differing with specific job level of each person. Drew Carver had been a top-level project manager at the firm and his beneficiary would receive about five million dollars.

“His wife, Penelope Carver.”

Alex’s brows drew together. “The same woman he claimed was the mastermind behind his fraudulent scheme?”

Blake shrugged. “If he was to be believed, yes but according to rumors I’ve just overheard, they’ve been

separated for over a year.”

“Based on what we know, it was probably a front to give their scheme more authenticity.” Alex shook his head. The expression on his face turned dark. “How did we not see him for the con artist that he was, Blake? Normally our instincts are on point. I completely misjudged Drew Carver.”

“He was a pathological liar, Alex. He manipulated everyone by burying his true self-expression and replaced it with a highly developed compensatory false self-confidence. We should’ve caught him earlier. He often came across as grandiose, self-absorbed, and conceited. I only realized it once we uncovered the fraud. He *lived* his lies, believed every word he said as true. We all fell for it.”

“He was reasonably successful with all the projects he handled, so we had no reason to doubt him. The clients preferred to deal with him above other Project Managers. We missed it because those traits never came to light when he was dealing with business. It was only outside of the office.”

“And greed was the final contributor to his fall from grace. He thought he would be far away by the time we found out about it, especially as his reports indicated the deposits by the investors hadn’t been paid yet.”

“Which we had no reason to doubt. It was a stroke of luck that I bumped into Logan Burroughs at the airport. If not for that, we wouldn’t have known the contracts for the development had been signed prematurely and deposits paid.”

“Yeah, Drew was fucking clever, I’ll give him that.” Blake shifted in the chair. “What are we going to do? Drew

disappeared with fifty-million dollars. That's not small change."

"No, it's not but at the time we restructured and upgraded our system, it opened a risk of security breach. You do recall that we invested in Crime Insurance four years ago to provide effective risk transfer against internal fraud."

Blake dragged his hand through his long hair. "I know," he said. "Still, are we just going to let it go like that? Allow little Mrs. Penelope Carver to live in the lap of luxury on our money? Just because her scheming husband got killed?"

"No, we're not. The Internal Forensic Team is already busy with an investigation. One way or the other, we'll track that money."

"What do we tell the investors?"

"Nothing. They don't need to know. We go ahead with the project. This time, I want you to take charge. It's a huge project. One we can't afford to fuck up." Alex picked up the folder his assistant had placed on his desk earlier. He uncapped his Mont Blanc. The signature he penned on the contract conveyed the silent fury that was curling deep inside him. "You'll have to inform his clients of his death and re-allocate his projects."

"Even the Chi Fung Foundation?"

Alex looked up. "Fuck! I forgot about that. It's one of our key re-development projects. One, I have personally already invested a lot of time and money in."

“Drew was the only one they were prepared to work with.”

“Yeah.” Alex dragged out the word, his expression turned pensive. “Because he was a ‘happily married man’ with a baby on the way. Family is inherently important to Zhang Wei Chén. He wouldn’t think twice before tearing up that contract if he doesn’t like Drew’s replacement.”

“We are the only ones who can handle this deal. Neither one of us is married nor, heaven forbid, have little brats running around our feet.”

“That presents a problem.” Alex replaced the cap on the pen and leaned back in the chair. “Ask Drew’s PA to bring me all the data they have on the Chinese project. Leave Zhang Wei Chén to me to deal with. In the meantime, find out everything you can about Penelope Carver and keep me up to date on funeral arrangements. We need to show our respect to our dearly departed employee and offer condolences to his grieving widow.”



“May his soul rest in peace.”

The somber tone of the priest droned on in the background. Penny had stopped listening when he began singing Drew Carver’s praises. Her ex-husband, who she hadn’t seen in over six months—ever since she’d obtained a restraining order against him. Their two-year marriage had been over for eighteen months already. The same amount of time they had been separated. She’d filed for divorce the day she’d realized what a scam artist he was, but he had refused to

sign the papers. Instead, he'd begun hounding her, calling her, begging her to forgive him and take him back. He had suddenly had an epiphany that he'd been wrong and all that mattered was their love for each other.

Yeah, right, only you never loved me, you asshole. You were in love with my gran's money.

When he realized that Penny wasn't going to budge, he'd finally signed the papers. She had been a free woman a short two-weeks when she'd received the news that he'd been killed in a motor vehicle accident.

Penny had been shocked, but at the time, couldn't dredge up any sorrow over his death.

She still couldn't, even now ... standing beside his grave. Bitterness flooded her as she watched the coffin being lowered into the ground. She'd invested her heart and soul into their relationship. For a year he'd wooed her, treated her like a princess and she'd believed that she had found her soulmate.

Like hell I did. I wasted three years of my life!

She had been so stupid, so much in love that she'd blindly believed all his honey coated lies of love and devotion. When he'd proposed they get married in Gran's hospital room, she never questioned his intentions. Her thoughts drifted back two years.

"Do you know what your gran's biggest wish is, darling?" Drew asked. He kissed the palm of her hand. His eyes were warm and engaging.

Penny felt tears burn behind her eyes. Her grandmother was the only family she had left and was on her

deathbed, finally having lost the battle against lung cancer.

“I know what my wish for her is,” she said in a trembling voice. Penny couldn’t envision life without her. The woman had given up so much to support and look after her grandchild after Penny’s parents had died in a boating accident. Penny had been eight years old.

Drew pulled her into his arms. “I know it’s difficult, darling, but you have to be strong for her.” He tilted back her head with a finger under her chin. “The only thing she desires right now is to see you wed.”

Penny frowned. “She hasn’t said anything to me.”

“Because she doesn’t want to push you. How about it, Penny? We are planning to get married at some point, so why not now? At least you’ll get to see how happy it makes Gran Erin.”

Penny chewed on her lip as she considered Drew’s proposal. She wasn’t ready for marriage. Yes, she loved him and wanted to be his wife, but not yet. It was too soon.

“Maybe. But, you know I want my company in the black before we get married. I don’t want to work long hours at the cost of our marriage.”

“Don’t you think I’ll understand and support you, Penny? Isn’t that what marriage is all about?” Drew kissed her deeply and gazed lovingly into her eyes. “I adore you, my Penelope, and neither of us is getting any younger. Will you please marry me?”

“Mrs. Carver?”

The priest's subdued tone yanked her from her musings.

"Yes, Father?"

He gestured toward the grave. Penny hesitated. Honoring Drew Carver, even in death, was something she didn't want to do. He'd killed any love or respect she had for him when he'd demanded half her inheritance the moment Gran's estate had been finalized. He'd turned into a greedy, uncaring, and selfish man overnight. He'd finally admitted why he'd pursued and married her, when she refused to part with her inheritance.

"Why do you think I married you before she died, Penelope? As your husband it's my right!"

"No, Drew, it's not. Gran made sure of that. There's a stipulation in her will that my spouse has no claim to my inheritance, married or divorced, unless I willingly give it to them."

Drew had been furious. She cringed at the memory of his rage exploding. He'd hit her, cursing, and accusing her of lying to him

"I fucking wasted my time. A year! My skin crawled every time I touched you." He snorted. "I hate petite women and you ... without your grandmother's money, you're worthless to me."

Penny shook off the dreary thoughts and walked closer to the grave. She picked up a handful of dirt.

"May your soul fry in hell, Drew Carver," she said sotto voce as she flung the dirt onto the descending coffin.

Penny turned and strode toward her car, her head held high. She didn't know anyone at the funeral, apart from Drew's cousin, who she'd only met once. She had no desire for small talk with any of them. The urge to get as far away from Drew Carver, even in death, was overwhelming.

He'd killed her spirit. The words, that she was worthless as a woman, had stuck in her mind. She'd lost all self-confidence then and hardly ever gone out since. It took her almost a year to realize what she was doing before she managed to pull herself out of the muck of unworthiness he'd buried her under.

Now, finally, she was free. Now, she could live life to the fullest.

“Mrs. Carver, one moment, please.”

Penny stumbled to a halt. “Yes ... *oh.*” Her lips formed a delightful round O as she pivoted around to face the man with a deep baritone dripping with self-confidence and power.

And promptly lost her breath.

She looked at his sinful mouth and couldn't take her eyes off the full lips that turned up a fraction. The words were already floating at her before she realized he was speaking again. She visibly shook herself.

Good lord, Penelope, get a grip. One would swear you've never seen an attractive man before.

Attractive maybe, but this man was drop-dead gorgeous, and his voice tingled her nether regions. Entirely inappropriate, considering they were in a cemetery.

Penny took his proffered hand unconsciously. His fingers locked around hers, completely engulfing them in his own. His eyes flickered with interest when her lips opened in a gasping breath.

“I’m Alexander Sinclair. Drew worked for my company. I’d like to offer my condolences for your loss.” He gestured toward her stomach. “I suppose the shock caused you to have a miscarriage?”

“A what?” Penny silently wondered if he had lost his marbles. She stared at him, still feeling the touch of his skin against her hand, tingling in a crackling frenzy.

“Drew told us you were pregnant,” Alex drawled. His tone was laced with subdued bitterness and incredulity as he made the only assumption he could—another lie. He stared at her with quiet intensity. He didn’t move; hadn’t moved since the moment her soft, melodious voice had tantalized his senses. He found it difficult to wrap his mind around the knowledge that this petite, gorgeous and sexy-as-fuck woman, was a fraud.

“I’m afraid you have been misinformed, Mr. Sinclair,” Penny said coldly.

She’d recognized the realization that dawned after the initial disbelief in his eyes. He was livid. Penny grimaced as he incinerated her with his fiery blue gaze. She couldn’t look away, enraptured by the shade of his eyes—blue—like the sky, right before the sun disappeared; a dark, rich indigo, with specks of wild colors flashing due to the anger he didn’t bother to hide.

His vision cleared seconds before his eyes narrowed to slits. Penny had an uncomfortable feeling that his anger was directed at her, which only enhanced the fascination she had for the drool worthy specimen that he was.

He was tall, dark, and handsome in a magnetic way. He was probably close to six feet, which made her feel even smaller. His dark brown hair was cut short on the sides but were longer at the top, giving him a naturally tousled look. He stared at her, down a straight aristocratic nose that sat over a wide sensual mouth with a lush bottom lip. She licked her own lips as the thought, of what his mouth would feel like, crossed her mind. His tall frame was set off by wide shoulders that filled the dark suit beautifully, probably hand tailored for him. She shivered at the thought of his strong arms, wrapped around her, dragging her against his hard torso. The thought evoked a ripple of excitement inside her throbbing loins.

Damn, this man looks good enough to eat.

Penelope! Concentrate!

“Ahem,” Alex cleared his throat. The gruff sound was soaked with irritation.

Penny jerked her eyes back to his face from where her gaze had inadvertently gravitated toward the slight bulge in his pants. Her cheeks bloomed; caught staring at his crown jewels.

He took a step closer, his deep voice, low and muted, “Were we misinformed, Mrs. Carver, or was your husband?”

She stiffened visibly. The flash of heat directed his way was as sharp as a dagger, cutting through his resolve. Her voice clipped icily.

“I don’t know what you’re implying, Mr. Sinclair, but let me set you straight. Firstly, you should direct your condolences to Drew’s cousin. He might care. I don’t. Secondly,” she held up her hand when his mouth opened. “Drew Carver wasn’t my husband. I left him when I found out...” Her lips thinned. She tossed her hair back. “It took me eighteen months, but the divorce was finalized two weeks ago. Thirdly, I wouldn’t have Drew’s child even if he paid me ten million dollars.”

“How about fifty million, Mrs. Carver.”

Penny’s eyes flashed to the man now standing next to Alexander Sinclair. Equally tall and just as attractive, she’d been too enraptured to pay him any attention until now.

“What are you implying and who the hell are you?”

“Blake Harper, Alex’s partner.”

“You know what, I don’t care who or what either of you are. I don’t owe you any explanation. Drew wasn’t my responsibility, and I don’t want any part in the trouble he got himself into. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I—”

“Mrs. Carver—”

“Oh, for goodness sake! Not another one,” Penny snapped and spun around. “What do *you* want?”

She was too annoyed to be intimidated by the mammoth man facing her.

“I’m Agent Mark Farrow, FBI. I need you to come with me.”

“Why? I haven’t done anything wrong.” Penny suddenly felt the world spinning around her.

“Then you have nothing to worry about. Shall we?” He stood to the side and gestured toward the black SUV standing at the curb.

“No, we shall not. Not until you tell me why the Federal Bureau is taking me into custody.” Penny refused to budge. She might be petite, but she knew how to stand her ground.

“I am the senior agent in charge of the Corporate Criminal Fraud division of the FBI. Misuse of corporate property for personal gain and resultant tax violations are seen in a very serious light, Mrs. Carver. We have reason to believe that you were involved—”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I can assure you, Mrs. Carver, corporate fraud has the potential to cause immeasurable damage to U.S. economy and investor confidence. Now, please, let’s go,” Mark’s voice deepened with authority.

“I’ll follow you in my own car, Agent Farrow,” Penny asserted. She dug out her keys from her bag.

“I’m afraid I must insist that you drive with me.”

“Insist all you want. Unless you have a warrant to arrest me, I will follow you. I have done nothing wrong and being accused of criminal activity hasn’t improved my day. Now, let’s go. You’re wasting my time.”

Penny ignored the two men who were watching the interlude silently. From what Blake Harper had said, she had

no doubt they knew exactly what was going on.

Which was a hell of a lot more than she did.

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“Isn’t it a universal truth that it’s our singular experiences and passion, for whatever thing or things, which molds us all into the individuals we become? Whether it’s hidden in the depths of our soul or exposed for all to see?”

Linzi Basset is a South African born animal rights supporter with a poet’s heart, and she is also a bestselling fiction writer of suspense filled romance books; who as the latter, refuses to be bound to any one sub-genre. She prefers instead to stretch herself as a storyteller which has resulted in her researching and writing historical and even paranormal themed works. Her initial offering: Club Alpha Cove, a BDSM club suspense series released back in 2015, reached Amazon’s Bestseller list, and she has been on those lists ever since. Labeling her as prolific is a gross understatement as just a few short years later she has now been published over a hundred times; a total which includes published works of her nom de plume: Isabel James who co-authors, and penname, Kimila Taylor.

“I write from the inside out. My stories are both inside me and a part of me so it can be either pleasurable to release them or painful to carve them out. I live every moment of every story I write. So, if you’re looking for spicy and suspenseful, I’m your girl... woman... writer... you know what I mean!”

Linzi believes that by telling stories in her own voice, she can better share with her readers the essence of her being: her passionate nature; her motivations; and her wildest fantasies. She feels every touch as she writes, every kiss, every harsh word uttered, and this to her is the key to a never-ending love of writing.

Ultimately, all books by Linzi Basset are about passion. To her, passion is the driving force of all emotion; whether it be lust, desire, hate, trust, or love. This is the underlying message contained in her books. Her advice: “Believe in the passions driving your desires; live them; enjoy them; and allow them to bring you happiness.”

Learn more about Linzi on her website and while you're there, subscribe to her newsletter: www.linzibassetauthor.com

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