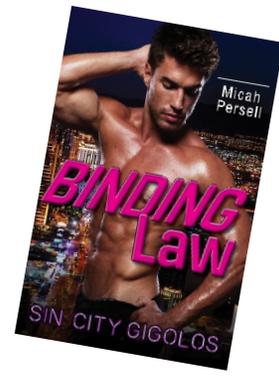


Exclusive Sneak Peek!
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Chapter One



When Ryker Martinez opened the hotel room door after the delicate but deliberate knock, he raised an eyebrow.

A pleasant surprise.

The woman on the other side of the door wore a dress that hugged each curve. Her long hair cascaded down her back. Her eyes were glazed with lust. She was beautiful, and her gaze raking over his body as though she already had plans for it promised paradise.

Just hit the gigolo jackpot. Leaning on the door jamb with a forearm propped at head height—the perfect pose to highlight the flex of his chest beneath his thin button-down—he returned her bold perusal, starting from her sexy peep-toe shoes and ending with eye contact. “Well, hello, *querida.*”

His client met his gaze boldly. “Hello.” She only held his eye contact for a moment before devouring his body again. Her gaze traveled slowly down his chest to the front of his slacks. He didn’t have to glance down himself to know that his quickly stiffening cock was pushing against his meticulously pressed pants. She nibbled her bottom lip and sighed in a way that made her large breasts press against that dress he’d already fallen in love with. Her gaze met his again. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ryker.”

He grinned. *Oh, I will be enjoying tonight.*

The bold ones always made it worth his while.

He opened the door wider and stepped to the side. “Won’t you come in?” He murmured the words, releasing the usually tight hold he kept on his accent now that he was with a client.

The Latin lover experience or the relationship experience—those were what they always paid for when they hired Ryker Martinez.

The first time his agency had billed him as the Latin lover, he’d nearly cracked a molar gnashing his teeth. But pushing back on using his Puerto Rican heritage as a selling point had seemed irrational in light of the fact women paid him for sex. Like, what, was he going to say, *You can forget I’m human and use me for my body, but not because it’s brown?*

He couldn’t afford to be so particular.

“*Gracias*,” she murmured back, her northeastern accent putting harsh angles to the vowels. As she walked past him, he purposefully leaned in.

She stopped, her lovely brown eyes dilating as she gazed up into his face. Reaching up slowly, he crooked his pointer finger beneath her chin and brushed the pad of his thumb along her jaw. He drew in a slow breath, allowing his eyes to go hooded; she would assume he was taking in her scent and liking it. As it turned out, she did smell nice—not always the case in his line of work. Dipping his head, he pressed a soft, lingering kiss to her cheek.

She sucked in an audible breath, and he could feel sudden tension enter her body from the slight touch he maintained on her jawline.

A reaction he’d planned on.

He pulled his lips from her skin, nuzzled her hair from her ear, and whispered, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, too.”

She shivered, and he heard a nearly inaudible moan sound in the back of her throat.

He escorted her with a hand to her lower back the rest of the way into the room. Because he knew she’d like it, he made sure his palm was scandalously low, the beginning curve of her ass pressing against his pinky. Shutting the door behind her, he clasped her hand and pulled her into a slow spin so she was facing him once more.

“Tell me, *corazón*—” He lifted the hand he held to his lips, pressing a kiss across her knuckles. Her gaze was rapt on his mouth. “What is it that you’re wanting tonight?”

She licked her lips. At the same time, he noticed she pressed her thighs together beneath the short dress she’d worn.

Already aroused. He’d barely had to touch her.

“I need to come,” she whispered in a husky voice. “Hard. Three times.”

He wanted to cock an eyebrow again. *Oddly specific.* But who was he to judge? He’d certainly delivered on odder requests. “That will not be a problem.” He stepped into her personal space, and her head tipped back as her hazy gaze stayed locked on his lips. “But are you sure we want to stop at three?” He brushed his thumb across her knuckles as he brought them to his mouth again. “We could go for a much, much higher number.”

Her own lips parted as the tip of his tongue darted out, dabbing between her fingers. She sucked in a breath and swayed toward him. “Three... might be underestimating things.”

His lips curled. “That’s my girl.”

Her eyes dilated at that. Women always liked it when he got proprietary, no matter how superficial it was.

He paused in the middle of kissing her hand as her fingers tightened, indicating she was getting ready to act. It was his job to make sure whatever she tried was successful. “Something you want to say, *querida*?”

She nibbled her plump bottom lip, and it immediately swelled. “Not quite,” she murmured. Changing their grip, she lowered their joined hands. His hint of a smile went full-blown as he realized she was going to put his hand on her body.

He had all the skills he needed to know exactly where this woman—where *any* woman—needed to be touched. But, thank God, this woman seemed more than willing to take all guesswork out of the equation.

She pressed his curled fingers against the front of her dress. Directly at the apex of her thighs.

Her sex sent waves of heat cascading over his hand. She was already so aroused, he’d barely have to touch her to set her off. *Maybe I should get started on the first of those three right now?*

What a pleasant idea.

As soon as she released his hand, he rotated it, cupping her as much as her tight skirt would allow.

She rocked to her toes. “Oh, God, yes.” Her eyes closed. “It’s been too long.”

He *tsked*. “Now who would let an angel like you go untended for long?” He began edging her skirt up with small movements of his fingers. “What a shame.”

Her eyes opened, and they were already unfocused. “I agree.”

He had her skirt bunched before she realized what he’d been doing, just as he’d intended. He heard her gasp as she felt the first waft of air over her sex. Gripping her skirt in his palm, he extended two fingers, finding...

She moaned.

Holy shit. She was completely bare. His fingers slid against her aroused flesh. “Mmm, no panties, *mi corazón*?” He stroked between the lips of her pussy, the tip of his middle finger finding her clitoris. “Perhaps not so much an angel after all, hmmm?”

“No...no.” She shook her head, her long hair falling over her shoulders and down her breasts. “Not an angel—Oh, *shit*, I’m not going to last long.”

Best client ever. There hadn't been that many good nights lately. This one promised to make up for all of them. "Don't fight it, sweet," he crooned, stroking her with a surer touch. "Let me make you come."

"Yes." She reached out for him, gripping the lapels of his jacket with both hands. "Yes, please."

With his free hand, he reached up, snagging her hand and weaving their fingers together. "Feel it for me, beautiful." He stroked again, and at the same time, he raised her hand to kiss it. His gaze flicked down for just a moment, taking in the slim fingers he prepared to kiss and nibble as he sent her over the edge.

He froze.

A distinct tan line traversed her ring finger. The ring finger of her left hand.

He had to lock up his facial features to keep his lips from curling in disgust. Without preamble, he dropped her hand. He barely kept himself from snatching his fingers from between her legs, instead, easing them away. She gasped as her eyes opened. Her eyes were wide. Confused. Her skirt was still rucked up around her thighs, and he could see her naked, aroused sex.

His gaze flicked from her body to her ring finger again, and his stomach lurched. He gritted his teeth and took a deep, calming breath. "You're married."

The immediate tinge to her cheeks was all the confirmation he needed.

Fuck, sometimes he hated this job.

I always hate this job.

He straightened his spine. Despite how unsavory he found infidelity—it was, after all, his one and only hard limit—he had a reputation to maintain. He couldn't be rude, no matter how much this woman deserved it. He was on thin ice at the agency anyway after the last married client he refused to sleep with complained. He couldn't afford another disgruntled client. Forcing himself to move, he reached out and smoothed her skirt back down her thighs.

She frowned. "What are you—?"

"*Florencia*, I'm afraid we are done here. I do not take married women as clients."

The haze in her eyes vanished. She reached for him. Luckily, he didn't have to sidestep to avoid her touch, because she dropped her hand before it made contact. "No, no," she said, the mildest tint of panic tinging her voice. "It's nothing like that. You don't understand. My husband and I—"

He tensed, knowing what she would say next: *Aren't in love anymore.*

“—aren’t in love anymore.” Her eyes begged him to understand. Her body language begged him for something else entirely.

He wanted to pinch the bridge of his nose. *Aren’t in love anymore.* He bit his tongue to keep from saying *that doesn’t matter. Or it’s your fault for letting feelings dictate your marriage in the first place.* Instead, he smiled. “I’m sorry, *querida.*” He could advise her to call the same number she’d used to book him. One of the other guys would not care that she was married, especially since she was so beautiful. Hell, six months ago, Ryker would have texted Gage, before his buddy met Cassidy. They’d often stepped in for each other.

But besides the fact that he didn’t want anyone at the agency knowing he’d turned down another client, he wasn’t going to *help* her cheat on her husband, for Christ’s sake.

Overreacting again, Ryker?

Oh, he was definitely overreacting. He knew it. But this was a sore spot for him.

The woman in front of him had exactly what Ryker wanted—hell, what thousands of people wanted—and he knew he’d never get it. People didn’t marry gigolos and start families. They fucked gigolos and paid them when they were done. And here was this woman discarding what she had like it was nothing.

Okay, granted, Ryker wanted kids more than he wanted marriage—kids were fucking awesome. Marriage, in his experience—experiences like this one right now, as a matter of fact—was not so awesome. But he was damn well going to provide a stable home for his kids one day, and, in his opinion, that required parents who were well and truly committed to each other but who kept their emotions in check. No falling in and out of love like a sap. Marriage was commitment. End of story. That commitment is what kept children from the hellish childhood Ryker himself had endured.

Did this woman have children? He shuddered at the thought. God help them if she did. She seemed fully prepared to ruin their lives for a paid fuck.

Turning his back, he walked to the door and opened it once more. He carefully avoided saying anything else to her, lest one of the things he was holding back with all his might slipped through the leash.

Her lips parted as she gazed at the open door. “You’re really going to make me go? Because I’m *married?*”

Again, he said nothing, even though it’d just become apparent that this was going to turn ugly. The woman’s flashing eyes screamed *Warning: Insulted! Prepare for lashing out!*

She planted her hands on her hips, those flashing eyes narrowing.

And, here we go.

Her upper lip curled. “You’re a hooker, for fuck’s sake! You think you have some sort of moral high ground here?”

God damn it, he really hated this job. He may not have the moral high ground, but he certainly had better manners.

He stepped to the table just inside the door and silently collected his keys and billfold. Turning back toward the door, he paused only to say, “The room’s all yours. Enjoy your evening.”

Her slight blush escalated to rage red as she realized she wasn’t going to get a fucking or provoke a fight tonight. Her lips pinched into a tight little line, all color leeching from them. A second later, however, they opened once more. “I’ll make you regret this, you fucking—”

He closed the door, cutting off whichever insult had surely been the start of an avalanche of them. Not willing to gamble on whether she was a chaser who would fling open the door and try to continue matters, he beat feet, barely keeping himself from breaking into a jog.

When the elevator delivered him to the lobby and he reached the glass doors without further incident, he allowed himself to exhale.

He smoothed fingers through the curls that had fallen over his forehead, raking them back into place.

Ryker Martinez, he promised himself solemnly as he fit his key into his car door and flipped the lock, *you will not have to do this forever.*

As he buckled himself in and steered his car toward the dump of an apartment he called home, he couldn’t help thinking that, surely, forever was how long it had already lasted.

Chapter Two

As Charlotte Moore hung up the phone, she shook her head. “You didn’t really expect this one to turn out differently, Mr. Grabow,” she muttered to her empty office. “Surely, you didn’t.”

The man was going to single-handedly pay her salary in the very near future if he did not stop marrying.

Not that I’m complaining.

She pulled Mr. Grabow’s file closer—the file she’d started ten years ago when he’d divorced his first wife, continued two years ago when he’d divorced his second, and was now revisiting as he divorced his third.

Third marriages had a seventy-three percent divorce rate. She’d told him as much when he’d contacted her for the prenup. Her admonishments had, apparently, fallen on deaf ears.

Again, not that I’m complaining.

She dotted a period on the yellow legal pad with a bit more force than absolutely necessary and closed the file. For now. Mediation would begin tomorrow, so she would be scouring every inch of the notes she’d just taken as soon as she returned from lunch—something she usually didn’t have to do with her steel-trap mind. But as she’d jotted down Mr. Grabow’s myriad complaints and heartaches during their phone conversation, she’d been...distracted.

Even now, she blushed at the internal admission. Charlotte Moore, marriage and family attorney and divorce specialist, worked with all her being to make sure she did not get *distracted*. She couldn’t afford to be. Not when she was gunning for partner.

And therein lay the source of her distraction.

The entire office had been buzzing when she’d arrived at the firm of Miller, Smith, and Lee promptly at nine o’clock this morning. Smith’s receptionist had told Miller’s, who had told Lee’s, who had passed it on to everyone else that Smith was planning to retire this year.

Charlotte pressed her knees together beneath her desk. *This year!* Much sooner than Charlotte or anyone else had anticipated.

There was going to be a new partner.

It had to be her.

There was a noise at her door, and Charlotte found herself leaping into action, fruitlessly rearranging papers on her desk as though she'd been caught in the middle of some monumental task instead of going down the thought rabbit hole on the job.

After a suitable amount of time had passed wherein she'd appeared busy, Charlotte raised her gaze.

Immediately her spine relaxed. *Just Mark.*

"Heya, Charlotte," he said, swinging into her office and collapsing into the chair in front of her desk as though his skeleton had had a sudden and severe systems failure.

She pressed her lips together as she stared at him over the top of her glasses. Her insubordinate clerk. She tried to frown disapprovingly at him, but he stared at her with his guileless, blue eyes, that dimple of his making an appearance in his chin as he gave her a lopsided grin, and she felt her lips twitch and lose their form. He was just so young. Practically a puppy.

"Sorry," he said, taking the rest of the starch out of her frown. "Good morning, Ms. Moore."

"Good morning, Mr. Williams." She returned to shuffling her papers, but not before she caught his grimace at her use of his surname. For some reason, the man-child resisted formalities with every iota of his young, hipster verve. "Are you off to lunch?" He always checked in before heading out with the other clerks while Charlotte ate her take-out lunch at her desk.

"In a bit." He leaned forward in his chair. "I wanted to talk to you first."

Charlotte's hands paused amid refiling a closed-case folder. *Oh, dear.* This didn't bode well. No one ever voluntarily talked to her. She warily raised her gaze again. Mark was still sitting casually in the chair, but there was a shrewd gleam to his eye that put her on edge.

"To me?" she asked.

He raised both eyebrows. "Have you heard the gossip?"

Despite herself, Charlotte's heart gave an extra hard *thump*. She attempted another frown. "You know I abhor gossip." Mostly because whenever it was about her, it...*hurt*. No one had anything nice to say about Charlotte.

Outside of her work.

Which is all that matters.

“You won’t abhor this gossip.” Mark waggled his eyebrows.

To encourage him or... She sighed, giving up the fight before it’d really begun. “What have you heard?”

He propped his elbows on his knees, his eyes sparkling. “There’s going to be a new partner. Smith is leaving.”

She wanted to roll her eyes. She’d compromised her standards for *that*? She reached for a stack of papers to her left. “Of course I know that.”

He grinned. “Did you know there’s already a list of three potential replacements?”

Her fingers clenched, crumpling the papers she held.

When she looked at Mark again, he’d relaxed everything from his posture to his facial expression, triumph oozing from every pore. “Hadn’t heard that yet, huh?”

She cleared her throat. “Oh?” She looked down at her hands in an attempt to appear casual but couldn’t hold the pose for long. Her gaze sprang back toward Mark’s direction. “A list?” *Please let me be on it. Please, please, please.*

“Rumor mill says Carter,” Mark ticked off one finger, “Wesson,” another finger, “and...”

She couldn’t help it; she closed her eyes.

“You.”

Her eyes opened again. Mark was grinning—and not his usual, impish grin. She was terrible at social cues, even after all these years of meticulous study. Was his grin friendly? Or was he laughing at her?

Rabbit hole again. She blinked. The list. Right. Carter, Wesson, and— “Me?”

“You,” he confirmed.

An unfamiliar feeling filled her chest and began to rise. What was this? Hope? Before she could school herself to know better, that hope traveled to her lips, which curled into their own smile, making Mark’s broaden.

But then his grin disappeared far more suddenly than it had appeared. “There’s more, though.”

Of course there is. There always was. “Go on.”

Mark fidgeted in his seat. “They told me there’s some concern over naming you partner.”

She braced herself. It didn’t help. There was a searing burn in the general region of her heart. She didn’t have to ask who *they* were. It’d be almost everybody.

I haven't tried to be liked. She hadn't tried to earn anyone's approval but her parents' since elementary school, when she learned she would be routinely rejected because of her inability to know what was appropriate in any given situation. As an adult, she had something better than being liked. She had the respect of others. That was worth a thousand friendships. She used her work time to *work*, thank you very much.

Speaking of which, it was time to kill this conversation. "Yes, well, thank you very much, Mr. Williams. Enjoy your lunch."

"Oh, no, Charlotte." Mark leaned back in his seat and shook his head. "No dodging. I want you to hear this."

Aghast, she looked his direction, not quite able to meet his gaze, though she'd practiced looking others in the eye since high school when her classmates had made it clear that not doing so made her "odd."

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"Because, I think you're exactly what this firm needs in a partner. You've never lost a case—"

She opened her mouth.

"—and I know you're about to say *nobody wins in a divorce case*," Mark said louder, cutting off her protest before she could voice it. "And you're just proving my point."

She pursed her lips. "Mr. Williams, what I do is not extraordinary. It's merely playing the odds. Knowing the law, knowing the statistics, and studying the judge's decision patterns. It's a simple algorithm. The outcome of any case is never a mystery."

He stared at her for several seconds. "Okay, no one else in this firm thinks that way. This firm needs you, and it'd be tragic if you let a few personality challenges stand between you and what I know is a very important goal of yours."

It wasn't until the tip of her tongue started drying out that she realized her mouth was agape again. This was highly illogical. Subordinates did not talk to their bosses this way. And even she knew it was extremely uncouth to accuse someone of *personality challenges*. Didn't he know that? Unfortunately, her mouth was too dry for her to tell him in case he didn't know. She made an odd, croaking noise in the back of her throat.

"Now," Mark continued, clearly unfazed by how inappropriate he was being, "we both know Carter and Wesson are part of the good ol' boys club that needs to be shaken up around here."

Beyond that, though, they're extremely personable." He gave her a pointed look. "You need all the leg up you can get."

Extremely personable. If there were ever a phrase that described the opposite of Charlotte's personality, there it was. As much as she wished it weren't so, Mark had a point. She braced herself. "All right," she said slowly. "What have *they* said?"

Mark narrowed his eyes as though he were trying to determine if she really wanted him to continue. She waved him on impatiently. He sighed. "I believe the term I've heard is *cold fish*."

She couldn't help it; she winced.

He wasn't done yet. "They think you distance your clients."

Charlotte frowned. "Distance?" That was a good thing! Distance is what made her good at her job. Emotions clouded judgment—and there was plenty of high emotion in divorce court. She needed to be sharp. She opened her mouth to tell him just that.

"No, distance is not a good thing," Mark said.

She closed her mouth again, tempted to glare at the man. How did he always do that? Read people like they were wide-open books? "Why ever not?"

"Because, when you're a partner, relationships are just as important as everything else."

She narrowed her eyes. Drat. She didn't like it when other people had valid points.

He leaned forward. "By the way, what's your secret?"

Her heart stuttered. "Secret?" She forced a laugh.

"Yeah." He waved a hand through the air. "Working so well in a field revolving around relationships without having one of your own."

Now, her palms were sweaty. No relationship of her own. Was that a snag of some kind? Oh, no. Did the partners wonder about her lack of a relationship? Think it was a stumbling block in her ability to relate to her clients? How in the world would she convince them otherwise if they did? She would never marry and have children. For one, relationships were a challenge. She didn't do things she couldn't excel at.

And for two, the idea of having children terrified her. She was too dedicated to her career. What is she was a bad—

"Have I ever told you that my little sister is on the spectrum?" Mark asked as he straightened his wristwatch and looked down at it with singular focus.

Charlotte froze. Mark glanced up at her.

He knows.

She tried to swallow, but it felt like there was a golf ball lodged at the base of her throat.

She wasn't ashamed of herself. Had grown out of that long ago. But her Asperger's was not something she advertised. She wanted to be successful based on actual merit, not "She does so well for someone *like that*."

When she trusted the wrong people with this information, statements like that always followed. So, she didn't trust people with her diagnosis. Ever.

Mark was a horrible gossip. He would tell everyone. Ruin her here at the firm.

She could feel the golf ball in her throat rising. She placed her fingers over the imaginary bulge.

Deflect. Get him off this subject.

Her mouth opened. "It's a shame, really." *What is this you're saying? Stop yourself right now!* "My fiancé will be so disappointed I'm being passed over for partner due to something so silly."

Her lips parted.

Mark's brow furrowed but then immediately straightened. Then, his own lips parted.

Oh, no. Oh, no! She didn't have a fiancé! She didn't even have a *friend*, much less a lover, committed or otherwise.

"A fiancé?" Mark asked.

The words just kept coming. "That's right. I've already texted him this morning about the open spot for partner, and we're both so excited."

"Wait." Mark leaned forward. "You have a *fiance*?"

"Mr. Williams, I am becoming offended."

Immediately, his hands shot up, palms out. "No offense intended, I assure you. I've just never heard you talk about him before."

Her brows drew together. "We're at work. Of course you haven't." If she *did* have a fiancé, she wouldn't discuss him when she was on the clock and should be devoting all her energy to her clients.

It was, apparently, such a Charlotte type of response, it seemed to solidify her asinine claim of having a fiancé, if Mark's suddenly wide eyes were any indication. "Wow." He rubbed the back of his neck with one palm. "Congratulations are in order, I guess. Charlotte Moore is getting married." He shook his head and raised his eyebrows. "Wow," he said again.

She glowered. "Go to lunch, Mr. Williams. Now."

He launched to his feet. “Yes, ma’am.” He took a not nearly quick enough sideways step toward the door. “And, seriously, congratulations. This is great. For a lot of reasons.”

For a lot of reasons. The words hung in the air between them, and she realized what she’d done in her moment of panic. Yes, she’d gotten Mark off of the subject of autism, but she’d made a mess for herself. Not only had she invented a fiancé, but she’d no doubt invented him to make a better impression with Miller and Lee. So that she’d look like a more desirable candidate.

It was incredibly unethical.

It was incredibly un-Charlotte.

Mark’s back was to her as he reached the door. She had just enough time to call him back and correct matters—as embarrassing as such an admission would be.

“Mr. Williams!”

He paused. Turned. “Yes?”

She licked her lips. Opened her mouth. Nothing would come out. No *There’s been a misunderstanding*. No *When I said fiancé, I really meant friend* José.

Nothing.

Mark’s eyebrows rose again.

“H-have a good lunch,” she said, her voice cracking.

“All right,” he said slowly. When he exited the office, she saw him shake his head through the window next to the door, and she cringed.

The cringe took a turn toward shaking hands when she caught sight of Mark snagging one of the other clerks and engaging in a quick, close conversation that entailed several glances at her door, as though they were completely oblivious to the fact that she could see them gossiping about her.

Not oblivious. They just didn’t care.

What had she done?

Her stomach roiled, and all thoughts of digging into the salad she’d picked up for lunch vanished.

What had she been thinking, telling Mark she had a fiancé?

Could have been worse. He could have been gossiping about your Asperger’s.

But now, she had to figure this out. Truly, what was wrong with her? This was quite the pickle she’d gotten herself into.

She snatched a legal pad toward her and plucked a perfectly sharpened pencil from the holder on her desk. She always thought best this way: writing on a legal pad.

Think, Charlotte, think! What was she going to do to get out of this? Within the next five minutes, the entire office would think she was getting married.

At the top of the legal pad, she scrawled *Fiancé Scenarios* in flowing script. And then she began doing what she always did when she had a puzzle to solve: she'd write down each and every possibility, no matter how outrageous, and decide on one she could live with.

Right below the centered title, she made a dash and then wrote *Confess the truth to everybody*. Below that, she wrote *Fall in love immediately and get engaged*. Then the list really started rolling, and the items increased in their craziness: *Hire someone to be my fiancé; Tell everyone we broke up; Pretend the fiancé died in a fiery crash*.

When she reached the bottom of the legal pad, she paused and scanned through the list. With a sigh, she leaned back in her chair and tapped the eraser of her pencil against the legal pad.

She could only live with one of the scenarios. She'd tell Mark that she and her fiancé had broken up.

But she wouldn't tell him for a while. She had explicit experience with lies in her line of business. She knew which ones didn't work, like the one wife number three had told Mr. Grabow: *Oh, honey, he's just a friend*. Charlotte also knew which lies did work. *Oh honey, I'll always love you*. If she had any hope of convincing the office she'd truly had a fiancé, she couldn't suddenly invent their split. Everyone would be suspicious.

She pinched the bridge of her nose, disgusted with herself.

There was a cursory knock on her door, and before waiting for her to say *come in*, whoever had knocked opened it.

Her head shot up, a glare already shaping her eyes—no one came into her office without permission.

She sucked in a breath so hard she nearly coughed. "Mr. Lee!" The Lee of Miller, Smith, and Lee. Without thought, she swept the legal pad containing her list off the side of her desk where it would land in the trash can. Unfortunately, her sweeping arm also caught her can of pencils, her letter opener, and her cell phone.

Items went flying everywhere. A pencil even rolled to rest near Mr. Lee's expensive leather loafers. The legal pad did, however, land in the trash can with a cacophonous *thud*.

When the dust settled and she gathered her wits once more, Mr. Lee was looking down at the pencil right in front of his shoe. Slowly, his gaze rose to meet hers. "Is this a bad time, Charlotte?" he asked, the corner of his lips twitching.

She closed her eyes, pulling in a slow breath. She opened her eyes again, forcing a laugh that sounded just as awkward as she could have ever imagined. Like a cross between a hyena and a barn owl.

Mr. Lee's eyes widened.

She cleared her throat. "It's always a good time for you, sir." Much better. "What can I do for you?"

"Well," he said, striding toward the chair in front of her desk, "I'm sure you've heard by now that we're looking for a new partner." He stopped by the chair but did not sit in it, instead resting his hands on the back. He seemed to tower above her, and she had to crane her head back to maintain eye contact. "Smith is retiring."

"Oh, is he?" Should she stand, too? What was the proper protocol here? "How wonderful for him."

Mr. Lee made a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat. "Yes, well. I'm here to inform you that we're considering you for partner."

Despite knowing this was the case, she still felt a thrill so sharp in her chest it nearly hurt. She was going to laugh again, or something equally abhorrent. "That's great!" She shoved the words out of her mouth so quickly that they emerged at a near shout.

Mr. Lee barely stifled a wince. "I'm glad you think so," he said in a smooth voice. "Are you free tonight?"

Of course. She was always free. "Let me check my calendar, but I'm pretty sure it's open."

"Excellent," he said, as though he didn't suspect she was going home to her empty apartment tonight like she did every night. "We're having a little mixer this evening. Carter and Wesson, the other two candidates we're considering for partner, are bringing their wives. Miller and I will be there with our wives as well. Can you bring your fiancé? We'd like to get to know you—and him—a little better."

Her hand spasmed against the desktop, sending her palm scooting across the lacquered surface with an unpleasant squeak. "My f-fiancé?"

"Yes." He smiled. "We just heard the news. Congratulations, by the way."

She laughed again, and it was even worse this time. Mr. Lee, with all his smooth courtroom polish, wasn't even able to school his wince this time.

No! This couldn't be happening to her. What was she supposed to do? Her gaze slid to the barely visible corner of the legal pad as it protruded from the trash can. Her brain quickly scoured

through her memories, trying to locate another scenario that would work right now. On such short notice, she could really only think of two: confess and most likely kiss partner goodbye or find a fiancé. Stat.

That first option wasn't really an option at all. This was her dream.

She cleared her throat, but the lump was back, and it didn't budge. "My fiancé. Of course. We'll both be there."

Mr. Lee's face cleared. "Wonderful. I'll have my secretary e-mail you the particulars, but you can go ahead and take off for the afternoon so you can get ready."

Her gaze flicked to the clock on her wall. It was only noon. She needed all afternoon to get ready? Just what kind of mixer was this? And why did anxiety always taste bitter? "Yes, that sounds great. I'll see you this evening."

But he was already walking out the door. He closed it behind him, and she sagged in her chair. "What am I going to do?"

Her cell phone chimed from somewhere on the floor, making her jump. She lurched to the side, spotting it under the corner of her desk. Nearly upending her chair in the process, she leaned over and reclaimed her phone.

She had a new e-mail. As she opened it, she discovered it was from Lee's secretary. "Already?" It contained the address and time for tonight's "mixer." Dress was noted as *black-tie formal*.

Right. So, she needed a fiancé and a gown, all in the next few hours. She found both prospects equally intimidating and impossible.

Look at what you've done to your life in a handful of minutes.

This is why it was so important to divorce oneself from emotion. Chaos and emotion were always bedfellows, and she could not afford chaos.

With a sigh, she straightened the items she'd sent flying all over kingdom come, gathered her laptop bag, and retreated. She'd take a cab to a dress shop so she could do what she did best to help rectify the fiancé issue: research.

Everything could be solved with a little research.

Walking past her Cadillac, she made her way down the block until she saw a cab drive by. With a simple raise of her hand, she secured her ride.

She climbed into the back seat.

"Where to?" the cabby asked.

Charlotte waved a hand in the air. “I need a gown.”

The cab driver gave her a look through the rearview mirror, but without another word, he pulled back onto the road and started heading, apparently, somewhere she could purchase black-tie formal attire.

Pulling out her phone, she opened her Google app. Normally, she did voice recognition when she conducted searches, but her question was...delicate. She didn't need any more curious looks from the driver.

Into the search box, she typed *I need a date*.

The first five hits all had the word *escort* in the website name.

An escort? That was perfect! Why hadn't she thought of that? She clicked on the first link that wasn't an ad, and a beautiful website popped up.

Already, she was breathing easier. What a simple solution. She'd hire an escort to pretend to be her fiancé, and after she secured partner, she would tell Mark that she and the fiancé had broken up. He'd spread the word. Done and done.

She scrolled through the website, scanning the escort company's mission statement—because escorts had a mission, apparently—and looking for the company's phone number.

Some text at the bottom caught her attention, however. She slowed down. Re-read.

We serve some of the most prestigious men and women in the world: CEOs, lawyers, educators, and more!

Lawyers. Oh, no. Other lawyers used this escort service? She couldn't have that. Maybe it was a fluke? Maybe only this particular escort service catered to lawyers? She closed the website and clicked on a new one.

Same thing.

Another website: same thing.

Escorts and lawyers apparently went together like carrots and hummus. She never would have guessed that in a thousand years. If she hired an escort, there was a chance that he'd be recognized either tonight at the mixer or in pictures later if they were shared at the office.

She glanced at the clock on her phone. Drat. She'd wasted nearly ten minutes on this! Ten minutes she didn't have. She went back to her Google search, her fingers trembling slightly now. Below the first five hits pertaining to escorts, a different word caught her attention.

Gigolo.

“As in prostitute?” she whispered in the back of the cab.

There was a snort from the driver's seat, and Charlotte felt her cheeks heat. She didn't dignify the sound with a glance. Maybe if they both just pretended she hadn't said the word *prostitute*, it would disappear from real-life occurrences.

Could she hire a gigolo to pretend to be her fiancé? One thing was for certain: there was a better chance her circle wouldn't know him. And if he *was* recognized, who would willingly admit a gigolo looked familiar?

It could work.

Pulling in a slow breath, she wrapped all the courage she could manage around herself and clicked on the link.

Immediately, she winced as techno music filled the back seat, originating from the website, which had video of two men gyrating to the beat in very, very tiny underwear.

She jabbed at the unforgiving glass of her phone so hard, the knuckle of her finger popped. But she managed to exit the website. Bracing herself, she glanced up at the driver. He was smirking at her in the mirror.

"Big night tonight?" he asked.

She narrowed her eyes. She may be embarrassed as hell, but she wasn't going to let him know. "How much farther to the dress shop?"

Her voice was just terse enough to get that smirk to vanish. "About ten more minutes." When she simply stared at him, he added, "Ma'am."

That was more like it.

All right, ten more minutes. She redirected her attention to her phone. This time, however, she made sure to lower her media volume to zero. She clicked on the next website, and when it loaded, she frowned.

The website was...classy. If that wasn't an oxymoron—classy gigolo website—she didn't know what was. It didn't look much different from the escort sites she'd visited. She scrolled through the entire website, and by the time the cab pulled over in front of a dress shop she hadn't known existed, she'd made a decision: she'd call this place.

She paid the driver, tipping him generously but not generously enough to be memorable, and stepped onto the curb, securing her laptop bag over her shoulder.

Before she could lose her courage, she pressed the phone number link. Immediately, it started ringing. Just as quickly, she hung up.

“What am I doing?” She looked around, saw the sidewalk was empty, and repeated the question, louder this time. “What am I doing!”

This was truly the strangest, most ill-advised plan she’d ever devised in one of her moments of panic. Ever. This had bad news written all over it, and even if, by some miracle, she escaped this unscathed, she was still behaving unethically.

She *hated* that.

But do you hate it more than the idea of losing partner?

She stiffened. One moment later, she pressed *redial*.

She fiddled with the top button of her blouse as the phone rang, and rang, and—

“Hello,” a smoldering voice said in her ear.

That voice gnashed against her nerves, sending every single one into annoyance mode. Everything from his tone to the implicit promise of paradise dripped with lies. She should have never placed this call.

“Hello?” the voice asked before she could hang up, this time in a more normal tone.

This more honest voice made her hesitate. Before she knew what she’d decided, she was saying, “Yes...um, hi?”

“Oh, hello, sweetheart.” The fallacious smolder was back, and Charlotte gripped the phone so hard, it creaked. “What can I do for you?”

Sex oozed from that question. Sex and lies. The reason every relationship was doomed from the start. Charlotte recoiled. “I...made a mistake.” She pinched the bridge of her nose. She couldn’t go forward with this. But what was she going to do? “I need a fiancé.”

“Hold on a second,” the voice said.

“No, wait—”

“We got somebody who wants the relationship experience here!” The guy had obviously pulled the phone from his mouth and was shouting this.

Charlotte’s lips parted. “*What?* No! I said I made a mistake.” She shook her head. The relationship experience? That was directly not what she wanted. “I’m hanging up now—”

“Hello?”

All thought of speaking flew from her lips, leaving her mouth simultaneously parched and producing too much drool. The new voice that crossed the line was nothing like the man’s who had first answered. That one simple *hello* felt...genuine. Honest in a way Charlotte had rarely experienced. It put her at ease, but at the same time, goose bumps erupted all over her skin. Her

nipples tightened, chafing against her utilitarian bra. Things that had never happened before at the sound of a man's voice.

"Um—"

A husky chuckle filled her ear, and she shivered. Actually *shivered*. "Hello?" he asked again.

"Hello," she blurted breathlessly.

"Ah, there you are, *querida*. I was hoping I hadn't lost you."

Why did her legs feel weak? As though she was going to sink to the sidewalk at any moment.

"You didn't lose me."

"I'm grateful. What can I do for you?"

It was the same question the first man had asked, and, like the first time she'd heard it, it was full of innuendo. This time, however, she was not repelled. For one, it wasn't just sex that was dripping from this man's voice; it was promise. Whatever she wanted, he would deliver. With a smile.

Charlotte's brain liquefied. *What are words?* Why was she even calling again? Oh, yeah. "I'm supposed to be married."

There was a sudden silence on the other end of the phone.

Charlotte frowned. "Hello?"

"I don't sleep with married women." The words were clipped.

"No! No, I'm not married. Don't hang up!" She was shocked by the desperation tinging her voice. When a man walking past slowed mid-stride and glanced her direction, she realized she'd yelled. She turned her back to him, hoping he would go on his way. She lowered her voice. "And this is not about sex. Not even close. Please." She closed her eyes. "I need your help. I...messed up."

There was another silence on the other end. This time, however, it was much shorter than the first. "*Querida*, why don't you tell me what's happened. From the top."

He hadn't hung up! She didn't know why that felt like a victory, or why she so desperately wanted him to stay on the line in the first place, but... Charlotte peeked around to make sure no one could overhear her again. She was alone. Releasing a breath, she said, "I'm going to be passed over for a promotion because I'm not like everyone else. So...I told the office gossip I have a fiancé so I would appear more personable." She bit back a groan. Yep, it sounded just as bad out loud as she thought it would.

“Are you—?” There was a scoffing noise on the line. “Passed over because you don’t fit inside some sort of box? Jesus, is it 1950?”

Oh, and now I’ve gone and fallen in love. “Exactly!” She threw her free hand in the air. “It’s outrageous!”

“It is. Good for you for sticking it to them.”

She nibbled her bottom lip. “Except now, my fiancé and I have been invited to a mixer this evening to see if I’m a good fit socially.”

“Ah, that’s where I come in. Am I right?”

Thank God, he seemed to understand everything. “Yes!”

“*Florencia*, you said this wasn’t about sex. I think you want an escort, not a gigolo.”

“No! I certainly do not want an escort. Lawyers use escorts, and there’s a chance one would be recognized.”

A brief pause. “You’re a lawyer? Wow. That’s—”

She closed her eyes. Here came the jokes.

“—powerful,” he finished. “Again, good for you.”

She suddenly needed this to work out with a ferocity that startled her. “I just need one night,” she said in a rush. “It will be the easiest job of your career. No sex, but your usual rate. You just have to pretend a little.” She swallowed. “P-please.”

“Of course,” he said immediately, his voice so soothing, all the muscles she hadn’t realized she’d clenched relaxed. “Of course, I’ll be there for you.”

She swayed a bit on the spot and then frowned. *Just relief that my promotion can proceed as planned.*

“What’s your name?” he asked.

She’d hired him to be her fiancé, and they hadn’t even exchanged names. “Charlotte,” she blurted.

“Charlotte,” he repeated. His soft accent curved around her name, seeming to embrace it over the line. “I’m Ryker, and it will be my pleasure to serve you tonight.”

An ache settled low in her belly, shooting pangs of longing straight to the apex of her thighs. She *had* said no sex, right? *Why did you say no sex!*

“But I’m going to need to know when and where to meet you, and what I should wear.”

“Oh!” She flushed. “Yes. It’s black tie.”

“Does that mean you’ll be wearing a gown?” His voice was husky as he asked the question.

“Not that it matters,” she forced herself to bite out when she wanted to melt. “But, yes.”

“It matters, because I can match you. The color. If you’d like. Pocket square. Tie.”

“Oh.” Like high school prom? Yuck. “No, black tie will be fine.” She quickly rattled off the location and time.

“No problem. I’m looking forward to it.”

Not a lie? She licked her lips. She couldn’t believe she was going to say this, but if tonight had any hope of success, he needed to know. “I have Asperger’s.”

A pause. “What was that?”

Oh, drat, she’d whispered. She exhaled. “Asperger’s,” she said again, louder this time. “It’s...uh...I have trouble with knowing what’s expected in relationships, and—”

“Oh. Charlotte”—he cleared his throat—“that’s not going to be a problem. At all,” he said emphatically.

The tight muscle in the back of Charlotte’s neck relaxed. “It’s not?”

“Of course not. Why would it be?”

The question she asked herself every time someone treated her like a leper. But how...alarming to hear someone else voice it. She was going to shut that internal nonsense down right now. She straightened. “Excellent.”

“I’m glad you told me. I’ll make sure I respect any of your boundaries.”

Her brow furrowed. “Boundaries?”

“Yes. Tell me, where do you stand on touching? Anything I should know before tonight? For example, should I kiss you when I greet you or avoid that?”

“Oh.” A man had never asked her that question before. Maybe that’s why she’d never enjoyed dating, come to think of it. “I, uh...” A kiss. Something warm settled in her belly. “A kiss is fine.”

What would Ryker’s kiss be like? Would his lips be as soft on hers as his voice was curling in her ear? He was, no doubt, an excellent kisser. Something she had no experience with. She’d never really enjoyed kissing in the past. Her first boyfriend had always gripped her cheeks between sweaty palms when they kissed.

Even now, her stomach lurched at the thought of that slimy skin on her face. “But I don’t like my face touched.”

She held her breath. This would be the part where he balked. *Don’t touch your face? What kind of freak are you?*

“Okay,” he said immediately. “No problem. Anywhere else I should avoid?”

She was tempted to pull the phone from her ear and stare at it. That was it? No tantrum? She swallowed hard. “I...I don’t know.”

Oh, God, what if he touched her somewhere tonight and she freaked out? She hadn’t done that since she was a small child, but she hadn’t been touched by many people in the last decade or so, either. She was accidentally, and sometimes purposefully, standoffish enough that most people didn’t casually touch her. They especially didn’t touch her intimately. “Charlotte?”

“What?” It felt like she was trying to push her voice through a tight straw.

“I promise everything will be okay tonight. No matter what. If I do anything that makes you uncomfortable, just...talk about the weather.”

She frowned. “The weather?”

“Yeah. It can be a kind of, I don’t know, safe word. You can say anything weather related—Wasn’t it cloudy outside?—and I’ll stop whatever I’m doing immediately. No one will think anything of it.”

“Huh.” She licked her lips. “That...could work.”

“It will work. We’ll make it work.”

She felt herself relaxing. “Okay. That sounds...good.”

“Anything else you want to discuss?”

“No...no, I think that’s sufficient.”

“Good. I won’t let you down, *querida*. See you tonight.”

“Okay. See you tonight.” There was a barely audible *click* in her ear. She lowered the phone to find he’d disconnected the call. Without his delectable voice soothing her, her shoulders immediately crept back up toward her ears. What had she just done? Pursing her lips, she blew a strand of hair out of her eyes. “What have I gotten myself into?”

She’d lost all her sensibilities on the phone with that man. Becoming physically aroused and abandoning logic. How was she possibly going to conduct herself professionally tonight with him beside her in the flesh? *Maybe he’ll be horribly ugly*. “Yeah, right.” She didn’t have that kind of luck.

An hour later—an *hour*, for God’s sake—she emerged with a gown draped over her arm. She hailed another taxi and nibbled her bottom lip the entire drive back to her car at the office and then the even shorter drive to her apartment just one floor below the penthouse. She may not be partner yet, but she did just fine.

The usual sense of arriving home evaded her as she rode the elevator up. She didn't know how to do her hair in anything other than the usual bun she wore. She certainly didn't know how to do makeup.

But she had her fiancé, her gown, and a tenuous plan.
How bad could things be?