

Chapter One

‘Don’t you agree?’

‘Yes,’ Flick answered absently, watching over the shoulder of her brother-in-law’s brother.

Coming back to her parents’ house, to the Hughes’ family home, hadn’t been on Flick’s list of top ten burning desires. But her sister had reached out to her, included her, and so Flick couldn’t snub this invitation. She and her family had been estranged for more than a year, and other than one brief and dramatic episode, she hadn’t seen any of them in that time.

The Hughes family were old money and well established in society. Flick’s grandparents still inhabited the large estate house that had been in the family for generations, so their present location was the house built by her mother, or rather for her, when she married Charles Hughes the fourth – Flick’s father. Her mother, Beverly, loved to boast about this house because it was her pride and joy. It was everything she wanted, an extravagant display of wealth and taste, and the envy of many other wives in their circle.

‘You weren’t at the wedding, though, were you?’

Flick couldn’t remember this guy’s name, but in fairness she wasn’t sure that they’d ever actually been formally introduced. ‘No.’

‘Are you married?’

The dusk had long since gone but the outdoor lighting kept the decking abuzz with all those gathered to celebrate the wedding anniversaries of both her sisters. The eldest, Lucia, was married on the twenty-second, and the middle daughter Vivian on the twenty-fourth. This was the twenty-third and their joint anniversary celebration.

Groups of people stood around chatting politely, sipping expensive champagne, and admiring the gardens, which had been re-designed especially for this occasion. Flick was less interested in the grounds and more interested in the folding glass door at the back of the house, which served as a gateway between the internal and external.

‘No,’ Flick said.

‘I’m divorced myself.’

‘I’m not in the market.’

The stuttering man with the receding hairline blanched, but Flick’s patience was wearing thin. It wasn’t his fault, she was preoccupied with the door for a reason, and her impatient anticipation was reaching critical mass.

‘Flick?’

Turning in the direction of her name, she saw Robert Morse, the man her father, her whole family, wanted her to marry.

‘Hi,’ she said. Her brother-in-law’s brother walked away, but Flick wasn’t convinced that this encounter with Robert offered any kind of reprieve from the safety of the benign conversation she’d shared with the now retreating man.

Robert’s suave demeanour remained the same, his perfectly coiffed brown hair and baby blue eyes were as she remembered. It had been a shame that she had to hurt him, because he wasn’t a bad guy. But knowing herself as she did now, she could recognise that had been exactly the problem.

‘Look at this,’ Lucia said, rushing in at her side. ‘You two reunited.’

If it wouldn’t be considered impolite, Flick would’ve rolled her eyes. ‘I’ve seen many people tonight that I haven’t seen in a year and a half.’ Since she left.

‘Does it make you nostalgic?’ Lucia asked.

Her tension level rose as Robert maintained eye contact, and Flick didn't know if this was about to get interesting, or if her recent experiences had set her on edge.

'Problem?' This new male voice came from the rear.

Flick had only taken her eyes off the doorway for a few seconds, but it wouldn't have mattered. His arm lolled over her shoulder to rest along her clavicle, meaning his angle of approach was from behind, so he hadn't come from through the house. She should've known better than to expect a conventional entrance from her lover.

'I don't know if you ever met,' Flick said, knowing that they hadn't. 'This is my sister Lucia, and Robert, who has only said one word to me tonight.'

'One word too many.'

Rushe was Rushe, no airs or graces, and certainly no feigned civilities from him. So he didn't acknowledge either of the beautiful people before them any further. While he pressured her to walk backward, Flick smiled in farewell and let Rushe take her in the direction of the walled rose garden. Bringing her body around his, Rushe urged her back against the tree at the garden entrance.

'Did you get it?'

'Yeah,' he said, retrieving a folded piece of paper from his back pocket.

She took it from him and eagerly opened it to read the promised new birth certificate. 'Jones?' she read, and let her disappointment shine. 'I get a new identity and this is the name you give me? Why don't I get your name?'

'Because, Kitten,' he said, removing the sheet of paper to tuck it away again. 'There are folks out there who don't like me. I don't want anyone who looks for me to find you.'

'Maybe you could rescue me this time,' she said. 'You know, for once.'

She teased because she knew he'd let her, and also because the more she pushed the further his brow came down, so the darker his eyes became. He growled at her and she sighed out, letting her hands sink into his pockets now that she'd achieved her aim of riling him a little.

'Couldn't you have gone with something slightly more exotic?'

'Don't want you exotic,' he said. 'Want you plain, boring, and very difficult to trace with any certainty. Your family, and their money, make you a target.'

'Technically so do you, because there are people out to get you. Our job does too, because we don't always make very many friends.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'But you're not going to give up me or the job. I can only limit your vulnerability where you let me.'

Getting over her sulk, Flick knew the more pressing discussion remained pending. 'Did you see him?' she asked.

'I went to the hospital and copied some notes, but he's still out of it. I didn't go near his room, we don't know who is watching.'

'And Serendipity?'

Rushe shook his head. 'She's not there.'

'We have to find her,' Flick said. 'Jansen was there for me when I needed him. He freed you. I would never have been able to—'

'You wouldn't have been there in the first place if it wasn't for him,' Rushe said.

'No, actually, you wouldn't have been there if it wasn't for him. Which means I would've walked into Dell's—'

'Yeah, Kitten.'

Flick knew she'd made her point by that snarl of discontent he bestowed. 'You were never going to leave Serendipity out there alone.'

'She might be dead.'

'You're preparing me,' Flick said.

Rushe could emotionally detach from everything, except her. Over the course of their relationship, Flick had tried to follow his example, but she hadn't managed it yet.

‘Someone put Jansen in the hospital, and they’ve abducted his woman, Serendipity,’ Rushe said. ‘We were just as complicit in fucking up their operation as that couple were. You better be prepared, because we’re next.’

‘If they put you in the hospital and kidnap me—’

‘They’re not gonna pull the same play twice, or if they were they’d have tried it by now,’ Rushe said. ‘They want something else from us.’

The night never felt oppressive when Rushe was around, nothing did. He held the world away from her, at least the evil in it, and if he felt it pushing back all of his senses went on hyper alert.

‘What should we do now?’ Flick asked on a sigh.

The act of bringing her wrists toward each other made her hands, which were still in his pockets, press to his member. It also squeezed her upper arms on either side of her breasts. Rushe’s attention slinked down to her cleavage, so she ensured to push forward and enhance his view as best she could.

‘Move,’ he said, taking grip of her shoulder. He tried to pull her forward, but she didn’t budge, so the position of her hands brought him back.

‘You want to have sex in my parents’ garden?’

‘I don’t give a fuck where.’

They had been separated for more than a day. At lunchtime yesterday, he’d dropped her off at the rear security-gated entrance of the Hughes home. His own destination had been the hospital where Jansen was laid up in critical condition. Right now it had to be closing in on midnight, and the idea of a love-in sounded about perfect to her after the stresses of the day.

‘My bedroom is upstairs,’ she said.

Rushe retrieved her hand from his jeans and linked their fingers to pull her toward the house, but they didn’t get that far because Lucia moved in front of them. Rushe tried to avoid her but Charles Hughes, Flick’s father, approached from the other side, closing in on them in a pincer move. Flick didn’t expect Rushe to be happy about the interception, but she was surprised that he gave up so easily by coming to an abrupt halt.

When she collided with his back she tried to skirt around him, but he got in her way. He was blocking her from something, but she couldn’t begin to know what.

‘Felicity, there’s someone you must meet,’ her father said. ‘He just arrived back here a few minutes ago, and already he seeks an audience with you.’ Rushe gave Flick just enough space to show half of herself. Charles Hughes appeared outright disgusted by Rushe’s presence. ‘Who is this?’

‘This is Flick’s boyfriend,’ Lucia said. ‘I think.’ Flick registered Lucia’s fascination with this feral creature in their staid environment.

‘Her what?’

‘Who do you want me to meet, Father?’ Flick asked.

If it were appropriate, she would personally introduce Rushe to every person here. Flick would willingly fall to her knees in front of them all to prove their relationship. But Rushe thought that the fewer people who knew him, the better... and he wouldn’t share any of their intimacies with anyone.

‘This is Antoine Mercier; he’s a client of Roger’s.’

Flick didn’t need to witness Rushe sizing up the dashing man who reeked of sophistication and arrogance, because she could sense the snarl.

‘Nice to meet you, Mr. Mercier,’ Flick said, taking Rushe’s lead and not attempting to shake hands or to make any physical contact.

‘Call me Antoine,’ he drawled, with an accent that made Flick frown.

‘You’re European?’

‘French,’ he said.

Rushe remained static, not a single hair on his body moved, but she grew rigid. It couldn't be a coincidence that Antoine was the same nationality as the family involved with the human traffickers, who were no doubt responsible for recent events regarding Jansen and Serendipity. The lack of change in Antoine, despite her visible negative reaction, confirmed it.

'Isn't it wonderful?' Lucia said, taking Antoine's arm. 'His family has been here in the States for a decade, but he still has the accent.'

'Roger has been advising Antoine about some tech investment,' Charles said. 'There's a start-up company moving under the umbrella of a larger corporation. They have the prospect, I should say, there's a window and Antoine has the money, but of course, he wants it to grow.'

'We've been spending a lot of time together,' Antoine said, covering Lucia's hand with his while his eyes bored into Flick.

'Excuse me,' Charles said, and left the group.

'Lucia,' Flick said. 'Will you show me the new water feature that you had installed for tonight? I noticed it behind the buffet.'

'What about the—'

'Please,' Flick said, spreading a smile and reaching around Rushe toward her sister, without departing from the defence of her Rushe shield. 'Let the men talk business.'

'Go on,' Antoine said.

Lucia took Flick's hand, and Flick led her sister away. Rushe wanted to be alone with this new acquaintance – she had intuited it. Rushe didn't betray much in outward appearance, but she was getting better at reading, at anticipating, his manoeuvres.

Lucia took her to the new garden feature but didn't say much about it before her own inquisition began.

'He's a brute.'

'Who?' Flick said, with her back to the wall she could observe the partygoers. But her main focus was there on the far side, far removed from the masses, where Rushe and this new associate spoke.

'Your boyfriend. We didn't realise when we sent you the invitation that you would bring a guest. What's his name?'

'How well do you know Mercier?' Flick asked her sister, while maintaining her fixation on Rushe.

Sometimes when there were new developments they had to act quickly. If Rushe needed her, then Flick wanted to be ready.

'Mercier?' Lucia scoffed. 'His name is Antoine. Why would you address him by his last name?'

Habit. 'Sorry, I forgot it,' Flick fibbed. 'How long have you known him?'

'He's been working with Roger for about a month. We were introduced two weeks ago when he began staying here.'

'Here?' Flick asked, losing the subject of her previous attention. 'Why is he staying here?'

'He's having his home built, and there was some sort of delay with construction. I don't know the specifics.'

'And if he has all this money, why couldn't he afford a hotel room?'

'That's so impersonal, he's European.'

'So?' Flick asked.

'They're hospitable, aren't they? Very family oriented. He was the one who encouraged Viv and me to get in touch with you. He thought this rift was just ridiculous, you should be grateful to him. He places a great premium on family, so he couldn't stay in a hotel all alone.'

Flick didn't buy it for a second, and neither would Rushe. 'So his family is staying here as well? Why didn't I meet them last night?'

'His children are living in France,' she said, with her attention floating across the crowd toward Antoine again. 'But he and his wife are divorced.'

Flick didn't like the way Lucia tried to so casually seek out the men they'd left alone to talk. 'I know you're not looking at my boyfriend like that.'

'What? Oh, don't be silly.'

Rushe might intrigue her sisters, but neither would be adventurous enough to attempt to tame the beast. To them, he was a wild cat in the zoo, beautiful to look at and admire but never to touch. Antoine, on the other hand, was the height of good breeding, definitely enough to turn the heads of societies darlings.

'You're married,' Flick said.

'What has that got to do with anything?' Lucia snapped. 'I admire the man, that's all.'

'Just remember to admire him from afar,' Flick said. 'Why didn't I meet him last night?'

'He had business to dispense with.'

'What business?'

'Now who's interested,' Lucia said.

'Does my man look like the type to step out on?'

'Where did you find him?'

'In the last place I ever would've looked,' Flick said. Few people would seek or discover love in the place that she had found it.

'It's not... serious, is it?'

'He's died for me once, and he'd do it again,' Flick said. 'Tell me everything you know about Antoine.'

'Why? What do you—?'

'You don't think it's odd that he showed up, and now he wants to live in your parents' house?'

'Roger and I stay here all the time, Viv too,' Lucia said. 'We all socialise and—'

'He's not family,' Flick said. 'Before a month ago, had any of you ever heard of Antoine Mercier?'

Lucia's always sparkling eyes tapered, but before she garnered a response Flick saw Rushe and Antoine walk away from each other. Unsure if Rushe knew her position, Flick got moving through the groups between them until they united. He immediately took her hand and hooked it into his back pocket.

'We're leaving,' he said, leading her into the house and through the dining room.

'There's a bedroom upstairs for us,' Flick said, struggling to keep up as they wound through the long hallways toward the exit. 'He's staying here. My family could be in danger.'

Rushe stopped in the entry lobby to spin on her. 'Why do you say that?'

'He's been working with Roger for a month,' she said. 'He's living in this house, and you know him. Who is he?'

'Exactly who you think he is.'

'The danger.'

'I don't want you here,' Rushe said.

Flick slipped her hand into his pocket. 'Don't let him see you riled, Lover. You know we have to be here to watch out for them. They have no idea who he really is, and if he gets control of them... We can't risk their safety.'

'And what about yours?' he growled, taking hold of her arm and thrusting her back against the wall, knocking the wind out of her. 'You're asking me to risk you.'

Flick recognised the darkness, the edge that he teetered on so precariously. 'We talked about this,' she whispered. 'You have to let me be a part of your work, risks and all.'

'I don't know if I'm capable,' he admitted on a hushed exhale.

'You're capable of anything, Lover. I've known that since the night we met. As long as I'm with you I'm safe, Rushe.'

Footsteps preceded a new feminine tone. 'Vivian, we won't have...'

Rushe twisted toward her mother's voice but kept his body on hers, her eternal defender. From how Beverly Hughes' voice trailed away, Flick knew Rushe had landed her with that nefarious glare. Her mother must have been calling back to her other daughter because at the moment she remained alone in the entryway.

'What is this?' Beverly asked her daughter, but she couldn't tear her attention away from this alien creature in her lobby.

'We're going to bed,' Flick said.

'We?' This did bring Beverly's focus to her daughter. 'You know this man?'

'No, we just met,' Flick sassed. 'I'm a real slut now, ma.'

Beverly's jaw fell on a croak of indignation, but Rushe crouched to nuzzle his face in Flick's hair. The action was cover meant to misdirect attention from the hand he scooped up under her dress to fondle her ass.

Flick couldn't explain the enjoyment she got out of shocking her family. Vivian came in at Beverly's back, prepared to speak and to see what her mother gawped at. She stopped when she witnessed the unexpected show, and Flick's smile spread.

She didn't know how Rushe read her so well; they'd never been in her family's company together. Playing his role as the animal, he sucked her neck until Flick gasped at the sting, then Rushe drew his mouth higher to trace his teeth along her jaw.

'He gets testy if I don't service him at least five times a day.'

'Felicity!'

'This is the guy with the hands!' Vivian exclaimed. 'You said he did it himself!'

'That's right,' Flick said, stroking a hand up his arm and down his chest. Taking hold of Rushe's belt buckle, Flick sauntered away from the wall and led him toward the staircase.

'You're going to do it in our parents' house?' Vivian gaped like a teenager.

'Several times,' Rushe grumbled, and flopped his arms around Flick.

'Felicity!' Beverly exclaimed.

'Good night!' Flick said, and took Rushe up to her bedroom.

As soon as the door closed, granting them seclusion, Flick turned on Rushe, and out of his arms.

'Why is Antoine Mercier here with my family? This is about Jansen, tell me what they did to him, how he looks.'

Flick couldn't bear to think of Rushe in pain, and the idea that he could go through the same ordeal as Jansen disturbed her.

'I didn't go in,' Rushe said.

'Will he wake up?'

'I don't know.'

The suspense was unbearable. Flick was used to things happening quickly, or at least being able to take action. But now that they knew Antoine was here, and connected with this debacle, things had gotten serious for not only her and her love, but her family as well.

'What about Serendipity? Give me the details.'

'She was last seen at work eight days ago,' he said. 'No one's seen her since then.'

'Eight... after I got the email.'

'You think if we'd mobilised quicker—'

'Don't get defensive,' she said, recognising where his tone was heading. 'I made a statement. I'm not blaming you for anything. We couldn't have foreseen this. It took us nearly three days to verify the facts of what happened to Jansen.'

'We don't know the facts,' Rushe said, shoving her further into the room and turning on the lights to look around.

The space was vast, but basically empty. The bed and the nightstands stood against the head wall with a large window behind it. Looking at it now, Flick was reminded of her prison in Victor's mansion.

She and Rushe had met after a sequence of events leading her into the clutches of gangsters led by a man called Victor. In the end, she discovered that the chain of command actually went higher than him, presumably to the bankrolling Merciers. Victor's job was to capture women for his superiors to sell. Their trade was human trafficking, and Flick had almost been a victim herself.

Rushe had gotten involved with Victor after Victor and his gang had learned that Jansen was actually an undercover cop sent to spy on them. When the jig was up, Victor snatched Jansen's girlfriend in an effort to force the cop to do his bidding. It worked. Serendipity was that girlfriend, and when Jansen had no luck in locating or saving her, he had hired Rushe through a third party to do it for him.

When Victor got paranoid about Flick's relationship with Rushe, and of Rushe's identity, Victor imprisoned her lover. On her journey to be sold, Jansen intercepted the shipment and saved Flick, who then convinced the cop to help her free her lover because by then Flick knew Serendipity's location and had that to barter with.

She and Jansen went in together and saved Serendipity and Rushe in an operation that ended many lives, including Victor's. Only the four of them and one other person walked out of that building alive. The other person was Simone, who Flick now assumed was a relation of Antoine. The French woman was charged with supervising Victor and looking after the women meant to be sold.

'They have Serendipity?'

'Yeah,' he said, sitting on the bed to unlace his boots. 'Mercier just confirmed it.'

'So what now?'

Rushe sat up to stare her down. 'Sex.'