

His Marriage Demand

Two

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“Hello to you, too, Fallon.” Gage closed the door behind him and strode toward her desk.

Fallon regarded him from where she sat. Her blood pumped faster as she took in the sight of him. Time had been very good to Gage Campbell. Immaculate and imposingly masculine, he was utterly breathtaking. With his neatly cropped hair, warm caramel-toned skin, thick, juicy lips, bushy eyebrows and those brandy-colored eyes framed by black lashes that always drew her to them, he was impossible to ignore.

He was even sexier than the last time she’d seen him especially with those broodingly intense eyes. He reeked of money and looked as if he was born to wear the bespoke three-piece designer suit, cream shirt with striped tie and polished designer shoes. Fallon knew he hadn’t always been this way. The Gage of yesteryear was happier in faded jeans and a wife-beater mucking out stables. The man in front of her was far removed from those days. He stood confident and self-assured.

“I hope I pass the mustard,” Gage said after her long perusal.

Fallon blushed at having been caught openly staring and glanced up to find Gage’s eyes trained on her. She blinked to refocus. “My apologies. I’m just surprised to see you after all this time.”

“I’m sure,” Gage responded as he unbuttoned several buttons on his jacket before sitting across from her. Fallon remembered how impossible it had always been to resist those dangerous gleaming eyes of his and

today was no different. He looked intriguing, like a total enigma. “It’s been what—sixteen years—since we last saw each other? You’re all grown up.” He dropped his gaze and used the opportunity to give her a searing once-over.

Fallon was in her usual work mode. Her naturally wavy hair had been tamed with a flat iron until it lay in straight layers down her back while her makeup was simple: coal eyeliner, mascara, blush and lipstick. Having been blessed with her mother’s smooth café-au-lait skin, she required little makeup. And although she was no clothes monger like Nora, Fallon always managed to be fashionable. She was sporting linen trousers with a sleeveless silk top. She’d abandoned the matching jacket earlier in the day. She wondered what Gage thought of her.

“Oh, yes, you’ve definitely matured since I last saw you.”

Fallon noticed his eyes creased at the corners when he spoke. The sly devil was actually staring right at her breasts and she felt her nipples pucker to attention in her blouse. Immediately she rose. “What can I do for you, Gage? I’m sure you didn’t come here for a walk down memory lane.”

His eyes narrowed and she could see she’d touched a nerve. “Now that wouldn’t be pleasant for either of us, would it?”

Fallon flushed. She’d never forgiven herself for the horrible action she’d taken that had caused his mother to lose her job. She wanted— No, she needed to apologize. “Gage, I’m—”

He interrupted her. “I’m here because Stewart Technologies is in financial trouble and I thought I could help.”

Her brow furrowed. “And why would you want to do that?”

Gage laughed without humor. “Is that any way to treat a potential investor? Or don’t you need an influx of capital to save your father’s company?”

“My company now.”

“I stand corrected.” He inclined his head. “I thought perhaps we could discuss the matter over dinner. My afternoon is rather full and I barely managed to squeeze in this reunion.”

“Dinner?” she choked out as she looked at him in bewilderment. Why would he want to break bread with her after their checkered past?

He tilted his head to one side and watched her, waiting for her to speak. “It’s the meal commonly eaten after lunch. Or do you have a problem being seen with the former maid’s son?”

Fallon looked him directly in his eyes and replied coolly, “Of course not. I’m not a snob.”

“Really?”

“You sound surprised.”

“If I recall, back in the day, you wouldn’t be caught dead with me except in the stables or when we were alone.”

“That’s not true.” She felt the flush rise to her cheeks at the memory. “I didn’t want us to be disturbed. If my mother found out, she would have forbidden it because...”

“Because I wasn’t good enough for you.” Gage finished the sentence.

Fallon lowered her head. He was right. It’s what Nora had thought. But never Fallon. She’d been too much in love with Gage to see his class or station in life. Agreeing to dinner would show him, he was

wrong about her and that they were equals. It would also enlighten her as to his true motives.

Several seconds passed and she glanced up to find he'd leaned closer toward her. "Shall I pick you up?"

Fallon shook her head. "No, that's not necessary. I can meet you wherever you like."

"Still not wanting to be seen with me, eh?" Gage uncoiled his tall length, stood and re-buttoned his jacket. A deep chuckle escaped his lips as he made his way to the door. "I'll meet you at the Driskill Grill at seven."

And then he was gone, leaving Fallon to stare at the door. What was his real agenda?

Irritation fueled Gage as he headed for the elevator. He was offering Fallon a lifeline and she refused to even allow him to pick her up for dinner! Her arrogance irked him, but so did her beauty. He'd hoped to find a spoiled, selfish shell of a woman, but instead he'd found a stunning and fierce ice princess. Fallon Stewart wasn't the young teenager he remembered. She was a woman. And it angered him that he still found her so...so damned attractive.

When he'd walked through the door and seen her, blood had stirred in his veins and his belly had clenched instantly. He'd wanted to touch her. To re-familiarize himself with her exquisitely soft skin. To crush those sinfully pink-tinted lips underneath his and lose himself. But Fallon had cast her eyes down and acted as if she was unaffected by him.

But the willful sexy teenager who'd come to his bed in the middle of the night wearing nothing but a teddy was still there. Gage was certain he'd seen a spark flare when her eyes traveled the length of him. Now they

were both grown and consenting adults, and it was time they finished what they'd started sixteen years ago.

Resolve formed deep in the pit of his stomach. A twist of circumstances had turned the tables and the Stewarts were no longer on top and in a position of power. Gage was. Fallon was exposed, vulnerable and his for the taking. Last night he'd come up with a plan for revenge to finally get back at Fallon and the Stewarts for their treatment of him and his mother.

Stewart Technologies needed cash and Gage was the money man. He not only had loads of it himself, he knew how and where to acquire more. He would convince Fallon by-gones were by-gones and *help* the company with an influx of cash. Meanwhile he'd secretly purchase stocks until eventually he owned the lion's share and could take it away from them. The best part in this entire scenario was the chance to bed Fallon, the overindulged princess.

Today when he'd seen her, something indefinable had happened. It was as if the years had melted away. Gage had been hit in the gut with the incredible need to possess her. He didn't want any other man to have her, at least not until he'd had his fill.

When he exited the building and slid into the Bugatti waiting for him at the curb, a new idea began to form in Gage's mind.

What if he married Fallon! For his *help* in saving the company, he would become a member of the acclaimed Stewart family and finally not only have Fallon in his bed, but have the prestige he'd always wanted. Because, try as he might, no matter how much money he made, there was a certain echelon of society that still saw him as the maid's son. Wouldn't it get

their goat to have him rubbing elbows with the lot of them? To show them he wasn't just the underprivileged kid-made-good? It was a brilliant strategy.

Fallon had no idea what was in store for her tonight.

As he started the engine, Gage's cellphone rang. The display read Mom. "Hey, Mama. How are you?"

"I'd be doing a lot better if you came to see me. You've been back for a while and I've yet to see you."

"I'm sorry. I've been a little busy, and you were away on one of your trips. But I'll visit this weekend."

"Good. It's good to have you back in Austin. It's been much too long."

"Yes, it has." He hadn't been home since he'd finished college and they both knew why. The Stewarts. Gage hadn't thought he'd get a fair break in a town where Henry Stewart had so much power. But the tide had changed, providing Gage the opportunity to put a plan in place to give the Stewarts the comeuppance they so richly deserved.

Fallon didn't have time to go home and change if she was going to be on time for dinner with Gage. A departmental meeting ended later than she'd anticipated, leaving her precious little time to shower in the private bathroom in her office and change into one of several dresses she kept on hand for such occasions. She chose a beaded champagne cocktail dress that accentuated her curves. Refreshing her makeup, she added a touch of blush to her cheekbones to go along with the mascara, eyeliner and pale pink lipstick.

Glancing at herself in the mirror, Fallon felt armed and ready for a night in Gage's company. And she felt

like she needed every bit of armor for this unexpected invitation.

Throughout the remainder of the afternoon, Fallon had wondered why Gage wanted to help her family. She'd come up with only one reason: comeuppance. After the way he'd been treated by the Stewarts, he wanted to be the one to come in on the white horse and save the day. Him, the man her father had thrown out of the house because he'd dared to touch his daughter. Gage wanted them to *owe* him.

Fallon didn't much blame him.

Gage had every right to be angry over how he and his mother had been treated. But now the shoe was on the other foot. The Stewarts were the laughingstock of the business community, turned down by every bank in town because of her father's poor decisions and financial mismanagement. Fallon hoped seeing how far they'd fallen from grace would be enough to salve Gage's wounds.

She made it to the restaurant at seven o'clock on the nose.

The hostess led her to a secluded corner booth where Gage was already seated, wearing a fine, tailored suit. Had he booked this? Did he intend for it to be as romantic as it looked? A dark, quiet corner with a table for two?

He stood when she approached. "Fallon, you're looking lovely this evening." She was stunned when he kissed her on the cheek before she slid into the booth.

"Uh, thank you," she returned, her pulse thumping erratically from the contact of his lips.

"I took the liberty of ordering wine," Gage said, pinning her with his razor-sharp gaze. "A Montoya Cabernet. I hope that's all right?"

She nodded, somewhat amazed at how at ease he was in a restaurant of such wealth and sophistication. He poured her a glass. She accepted and tipped her glass to his when he held it up for a toast.

“And what are we toasting?” she asked.

“New beginnings.”

Fallon sipped her wine. “Sounds intriguing.”

He grinned, showing off a pearly white smile, and Fallon’s stomach flip-flopped. “I’ve been away in New York and London the last decade. So, get me up to speed, Fallon. How did you end up as CEO of Stewart Technologies?”

“It’s really quite simple. My father needed an heir apparent,” Fallon said, “and I was the only one willing to step up to claim the throne.”

“You make it sound so medieval,” Gage responded, tasting his wine.

She smiled. “It isn’t that elaborate, I’m afraid. My brother, Dane, wanted nothing to do with the family business, much preferring his acting career to being an active member of the Stewart family.”

“Was it really so horrible growing up in the lap of luxury?” Gage inquired wryly.

Fallon detected the note of derision in his tone. “You’d have to ask him.”

The waiter interrupted them to rattle off the daily specials. They both ordered the soup to start, followed by the spinach salad and fish for their entrée. It was all very civilized and Fallon couldn’t understand Gage’s agenda. Why was he treating her like an old friend when she knew that was far from the case?

Once the waiter left, Gage prompted Fallon. “Please continue with your story, I’m fascinated.”

“After what happened between us all those years ago, my father was very unhappy with me.”

“Explain.”

She sighed softly but didn’t stop. “You have to understand, I was his baby girl.”

“Dressed like you were ready to take me to bed?”

Fallon didn’t rise to the bait. “Seeing me like that made him realize I was growing up too fast and he didn’t like it. And I was desperate to regain his affection.”

“Had you lost it?”

Gage was perceptive, picking up on what she hadn’t said. She didn’t answer. “He sent me to a finishing school to ensure I was exposed to the ‘right’ crowd.”

“And were you?”

Her lips thinned with irritation. “They were the snobbiest, cattiest girls I ever met. The teachers were like prison wardens. The entire experience was unpleasant.

“When I returned home, I started accompanying my father to the office and soon I wanted to learn more. My father put me in the intern program and, much to his surprise, I soaked up everything like a sponge. I was interested in learning what it took to run a multimillion-dollar company, so I majored in business. During breaks, I worked at Stewart Technologies, learning the business from the ground up while earning my MBA. Until, eventually, I proved to all the naysayers I had the chops to run the company.

“And, as it turned out, my father was ready to take a back seat. He’s now chairman of the board. Of course, I had no idea of the financial straits he was leaving me to tend to. He’d leveraged the business and

owed the banks a substantial amount due to projects he'd started but failed to get across the finish line."

"Very intriguing indeed," Gage replied. "And here we are."

Fallon took a generous sip of her wine. She hadn't planned on revealing so much, but Gage was looking at her so intently, as if hanging on her every word.

"And you? Fill me in on your time abroad."

Gage leaned back against the cushions. "I don't think my story is quite as intriguing as yours."

"But it clearly has a happy ending," she replied. "I mean, look at where we are. The roles have been reversed."

"Yes, they have," Gage said quietly. "But I won't sugarcoat it. After my mother and I were kicked off the Stewart estate, she had a hard time finding work, especially because your parents refused to give her a reference."

"Gage..."

"I was young and resilient, with only a year left of college. I worked two and three jobs to keep us afloat. Once I finished school, I struck out on my own. A friend of mine worked on Wall Street and told me I could make a lot of money. The stock market had never really been my cup of tea but, lo and behold, I had a knack for it. From there I went to London, Hong Kong, making money in stocks and foreign trade. Until I settled on mutual funds and started my own business."

"So why come back here?"

"Simply put, I missed home," Gage replied. "I haven't been back since I graduated other than the odd trip. Mostly, I've sent Mom tickets to meet me at some exotic destination. She deserved it, after all her years of menial labor."

Although she'd never experienced the kind of hardship Gage mentioned, Fallon understood his drive to succeed because she shared it.

Over dinner they continued talking about his trading career, lifestyle and trips abroad before returning to the subject of Fallon. It surprised her how easy it was to talk to Gage, considering all that had transpired between them. It felt like a lifetime ago, but she was sure at some point Gage would be getting to the point of the evening.

"Are you having dessert?" Gage asked after they'd polished off nearly two bottles of wine with their meal.

She shook her head. "I couldn't eat another bite." She wiped her mouth with a napkin. "It's been a lovely evening, Gage, but I'm sure that's not the reason you asked me to dinner."

"What do you think the reason is?"

"Payback. What else?" Fallon asked with a shrug of her shoulders. "And although I'm not destitute and put out of the family home, we are in a bind. Surely this must delight you?"

"Not everyone is like you and your family."

Ouch. Fallon took that one on the chin because, after all this time, he deserved to speak his mind. "Why am I here, Gage?"

Gage leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and arresting her with his eyes. "I have a proposition for you."

"And what might that be?"

"Marry me."

Fallon coughed profusely and reached for her water glass. Her hands trembled as she placed the glass to her lips and sipped. With all the wine they'd drunk, she must have taken leave of her faculties because Gage Campbell couldn't possibly have asked her to marry him. *Had he?*

"Are you all right?" Gage asked, his voiced etched with concern.

"Y-yes." Fallon sipped her water again and placed the glass back on the table. "Can you repeat what you said?"

Gage's mouth curved in a smile. "You heard me, Fallon. Marry me and, in exchange, I'll give you the money you need to save your family business."

She had heard correctly. But he was dead wrong if he thought for a second she would take him up on his outrageous offer. "Gage! What you're suggesting is insanity! You didn't even give an expiration date for this union. How long would you expect this to last?"

"It's a business deal that will last as long as needed," he stated calmly. "You get the money you need to save a dying technology firm, while I get a wife from an upstanding Austin family. Think about it, Fallon. Our marriage would legitimize my social standing while simultaneously letting all those pesky bankers who have been hounding you know the Campbell/Stewart family is as solid as ever."

“That’s real vague. Plus there’s any number of society debutantes out there waiting to meet a catch like you, Gage. You don’t have to marry me.

“But it’s you I want,” Gage responded. Within seconds he’d slid closer to her in the booth, until they were thigh-to-thigh.

Fallon flushed. “What are you saying?”

“A caveat to the marriage is it will not be in name only.”

“Meaning?”

“Do you really need me to spell it out?” His piercing look went straight through her. “We would consummate the marriage and share the same bed. Become lovers.”

Fallon sucked in a deep breath. *Sweet Jesus!* She had drunk too much wine because the words coming out of Gage’s mouth didn’t make any sense. She took another small sip of water.

“I think we would be quite good together,” Gage said, picking up her hand and turning it over palm side up.

Immediately she tried to pull it back, but his grip was too strong. “How can you say such a thing? I haven’t seen you in sixteen years.”

“Yet, you still want me.” His hold softened but he didn’t let her go. Instead his thumb began circling the inside of her palm, making her pulse race erratically. “I can see all the signs of arousal in you, Fallon—the way your eyes dilate when you look at me, the way your breath hitches when I come near. Even the way your breasts peak with one look from me.”

Fallon felt her cheeks flame. Was she so obvious that he could read her like a book? It was as though he’d put her under some kind of spell, the same as

when she'd been sixteen. And why oh why wouldn't he stop circling her palm with his thumb? He was teasing her and she didn't like it. She jerked her hand free. "Stop it, Gage."

"Stop what?" he asked so innocently she would have thought he meant it, but she knew better.

"Whatever game it is you're playing."

"No games. Just facts. I'm willing to give you millions to help Stewart Technologies, even though it's been hemorrhaging money. I'm willing to give my money to help save your company. And in return, I offer you the chance to be my wife. I think it's a fair trade."

"Of course, you would." Fallon scooted out of the booth. "But I'm not a stock to be bought and traded. Furthermore, you got your signals wrong. I'm not interested in you in the slightest." She made it as far as the foyer of the restaurant before Gage caught up to her and swung her into a nearby alcove.

"You're not interested in me, eh?" Gage asked, stepping closer into her space. So close, her body was smashed against his. "How about we test that theory, shall we?"

She saw the challenge in his eyes seconds before his head lowered and he sealed his lips to hers. Fallon wanted to refuse him but the thrill of having his lips on hers again was too much to resist. Need unfurled in her, the likes of which she hadn't felt since...since the last time he'd kissed her. No other man had ever come close to making her feel this way.

This hot. This excited.

Gage's arm slid around her waist to the small of her back and he pressed her body even closer to his. Meanwhile his tongue breached her mouth, allowing

him to increase the pressure, demand more and compel her to accept him. The kiss was hard yet soft, but also rough enough to thrill her. Fallon's lips parted of their own accord and his tongue slid in. Teasing, stroking, tasting the soft insides of her mouth.

Fallon whimpered and her stance relaxed as the sheer power of his kiss enflamed her. Sliding her arms around his neck, she held his head to hers, reveling in the deeply carnal kiss. Gage ground his lower half against hers and she felt every inch of his hard body. Her tongue searched his mouth ravenously and he met her stroke for stroke. Her breasts rubbed against his chest and her nipples hardened. Fallon had never felt so desirable and could have gone on kissing him, but Gage pulled away first.

His breathing was ragged but he managed to say, "I've proven you are interested, but I'll give you some time to think about my offer."

Fallon looked up, dazed and confused. "Wait a minute How could he compose himself after that kiss? "How much time?" she croaked out.

"Forty-eight hours."

She shook her head. "I can't make a decision about the rest of my life in two days."

"Well, that's too damn bad because that's my offer," Gage responded. "You can take it or leave it. It's up to you." He tapped the face of his Rolex watch. Then he reached inside his suit jacket and pulled out his business card. "My personal cell. Call me when you're ready to say yes."