

Chapter One

Callista Sheridan pulled at the hem of her dress, wishing she'd chosen something else for this ill-advised trip. But there was no help for it. She wanted to get a peek at the kind of man this fiancé of hers was, and he'd been remarkably adept at avoiding her attempts to meet so they could get each other's measure. After two weeks of his dodging her calls and his father digging in his heels, she was forced to take matters into her own hands.

The only time Brendan Halloran left that compound he called home was to come to Tit for Tat, which was why she was here in this seedy neighborhood, in a building that was most definitely not up to code.

She wrinkled her nose as she moved down the hallway of private rooms. It might claim to be nothing more than a strip club and bar—albeit a trashy one—but there was no mistaking the sounds coming from behind those doors. Dread wormed through her, climbing higher with each step. It had been child's play slipping past the men Brendan had posted at the bottom of each stairway—they were looking for threats, not just another stripper. Wearing much more makeup than normal and a bright red wig, that was exactly what Callie looked like.

She stopped before the last door, her heart in her throat. This is where the girls had said Brendan would be. It wasn't too late to back out. No matter what kind of man he was, no matter how against the marriage she'd originally been, the truth was that the Sheridans needed the Halloran alliance—and that alliance came at the price of her marriage to the Halloran heir. She knew Brendan's father, Victor, by reputation, and it wasn't one she wanted to be associated with, let alone link her family's future to, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

And surely the sins of the father weren't shared by the son?

If there were any other option, she would have readily taken it. There wasn't. When her brother, Ronan, died, it left a gaping hole in the power structure. It didn't matter if she was more than capable of moving forward as the heir, even if she mourned the cause for the necessity. Their enemies wouldn't see that, and they certainly wouldn't care—all they cared about was the perceived weakness.

The only way to fix that perception was an alliance...and so here she was, stalling in an effort to avoid going through a battered door where her fiancé was most definitely in the middle of doing something she didn't want to witness.

Taking a fortifying breath, she cracked open the door before she could talk herself out of it. All it would take was a quick conversation to hash out their respective expectations for this “marriage,” and then she'd be out of this place that made her skin crawl and on her way home. If he'd just agreed to meet her in the first place, this disguise wouldn't be necessary. But if any of his people had recognized her walking through the strip club door, they would have kicked her out—which meant her disguise was necessary.

She'd made it a full two steps into the room before her brain caught up to her eyes and understood what she was seeing.

The room was nothing fancy—just a bed and a small side table—but it was what was happening on that bed that rooted her in place. Brendan—because who else could it be with that massive body wound about with tattoos?—thrust into a woman, his big hands around her throat.

In those first five seconds, Callie tried to tell herself that it was some kind of kink play, but then he shifted and she saw the woman's face. Bruises blackened both her eyes, and her lip was split, leaving a trail of blood down her cheek. *Holy mother of God, is she even breathing?*

She reached blindly behind her for the door, but missed it, smacking into the wall. He froze, turning his head and pinning her with eerie blue eyes. If she'd had any doubts about his identity before, she didn't now. All the Halloran family had eyes that color. Even as she slid sideways along the wall, wanting nothing more than to escape and bleach this whole thing from her mind, he smiled. "Another present for me? You shouldn't have."

Breathe, Callie. Breathe and brazen your way through this. Her hand closed on the door handle. She had a split second to make a decision—come clean or try to lie her way back through the door. It was no contest. "Sorry, wrong room."

"I don't think so." He was up and on her before she had the door open, moving faster than any man his size had right to. Even in her ridiculous heels, he dwarfed her. "You're prettier than their norm here. You must be new." He licked his lips. "I love breaking in the new ones."

Oh God, oh God, oh God. No one knew she was here. He could do to her what he'd done to that other woman—who still wasn't moving—and no one would know. Fear tried to blank her mind, but she'd been trained better than that. *Show no weakness.* She tried for a smile. "There's been a mistake."

He laughed, hooking an arm around her waist and hauling her against him. "Then it's my lucky day twice over."

Having his big hands on her, restraining her even as he backed toward the bed with the girl she was starting to fear would never wake up, blanked out all her thoughts, her training, her years of holding perfect poise under pressure. Panic clawed its way up her throat, but she bit back the scream and fought him, going for his eyes.

The monster laughed. "You *are* new." With one hand, he pushed the woman off the bed, maintaining his hold on Callie with a hand around her neck. He stopped and watched her face,

squeezing until black spots danced behind her eyes. *Do not black out. Don't you dare black out.* What had she thought she'd accomplish by coming here? Talking? Even if she had the right words to put a stop to this, she couldn't force them past his fingers digging into her throat. This was all a mistake. A terrible mistake.

He moved, pinning her against the wall, his voice detached as he looked her over. "Kind of skinny, but you got some tits on you." As if she were a cow he was considering buying.

She kept struggling, because there was nothing else she could do—giving in was not an option. Callie ignored the way he seemed to enjoy it, and kned him between the legs like her brother had taught her years ago. Brendan cursed, but his grip barely loosened. She tried again, but he blocked her, and tossed her into the wall like she was nothing more than a pile of rags.

She hit the floor, knocking over the table. Pain lanced over her back and every breath was fire through her throat. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the sight of his big feet moving toward her. She pushed away from him, scrambling until her back once again hit the wall.

Then her gaze landed on the gun.

A Desert Eagle, which would have been laughable under any other circumstances. The only men who carried those guns were the ones who had something to prove—they were too big and bulky for everyday use.

But it might just save her life tonight.

She dove for it, snatching it up before Brendan got to her. The safety was so stiff, she had to switch hands to disengage it—a sign he hadn't shot this thing often. She raised it, fighting to keep the heavy weight from wavering. "Stop."

Brendan laughed. "What would a pretty little thing like you know about a big ole gun like that? Now put it down before you hurt yourself."

Hadn't he seen her switch off the safety? She straightened her arms, knowing full well that she couldn't hold this position for long. "Just back up and let me leave." She'd find a way out of the marriage later, when she was back in the safety of her own home. Her family might need an alliance, but she'd find some other way—a way that didn't involve her spending another second alone with this man.

"I don't think so."

He reached for her, already far too close for her to escape, and she pulled the trigger. The gun practically leaped from her hands, but it was too late for Brendan. He hit the bed and went down, thrown back by the impact.

Callie didn't wait around for someone to hear the gunshot. She used the bottom of her dress to wipe off the gun and then fled, her heart pounding so loud, it was a wonder the entire club didn't hear it. She stumbled down the stairs and out the back door, mere feet from one of the men who was supposed to be guarding Brendan with his life.

Her thoughts went round and round even as she reached the car she'd parked in the back lot and climbed inside. *Oh God, he's dead. I killed him. I killed someone. But maybe he's not dead? Maybe I just winged him?* She cranked up the heat despite what had earlier felt like a warm July night. Now she couldn't seem to get warm. *Shock. That's what it is.*

She made it out onto the main street before she noticed the blood spatter on her dress. Her chest tried to close up, and she narrowly avoiding crashing the car into a light post as she scrubbed at the fabric. That almost impact jarred her back to herself. "I am Callista goddamn Sheridan. I'm better than this."

Better than what? Than murdering a man? She could argue self-defense until she was blue in the face, but the truth was that she'd gone to that club with the sole purpose to see Brendan in his natural environment. She'd been the catalyst that caused the confrontation.

Scenes flashed behind her eyes. Brendan's hands around that poor girl's neck. The maniacal gleam in his eyes at the thought of doing the same to Callie. The way the girl's body had hit the floor with a sick thump.

"Enough." She concentrated on breathing as she made her way across town, the tight muscles along the top of her shoulders loosening just a little as she crossed into Sheridan territory. "What's done is done. Didn't Papa teach you that? Now all that's left is to clean up the mess." Literally, in this case.

She parked in the garage, and spent the next thirty minutes scrubbing down every part of the car she'd touched with cleaner. Then she stripped off her wig, heels, and pathetic excuse for a dress, and threw them into the furnace in the basement. This early, there was no one else about, and things had been quiet on the illegal front as well, so she was able to slip on a pair of coveralls and make it back to her room without having to explain her presence.

Callie turned her shower as hot as it'd go and stepped in. Then, and only then, did she bury her head in her hands and let loose the hysterical sobs that had been threatening ever since Brendan Halloran wrapped his hands around her neck. With the water running over her head and down her face, she could almost pretend she hadn't broken her father's cardinal rule.

Callista was a Sheridan, and Sheridans didn't cry.

"Brendan Halloran is dead."

Teague O'Malley didn't look up from the book he was reading. "And?" But he already knew where his brother was going with dropping that tidbit out of nowhere. And the death of an heir was a game changer, more so because the Sheridans had lost their heir less than six months ago. There was a potential power vacuum created as a result, and he had no doubt his father and brother would be racing to fill it.

Aiden dropped onto the coffee table and swatted the book from his hands. "And you know what that means."

"Shouldn't you be talking to our father about this?"

"I'm talking about it with you." His brother turned those guileless green eyes on him, a trick he'd learned from their oldest sister. It had gotten both Carrigan and Aiden out of a shit-ton of trouble while they were growing up—trouble then never failed to fall squarely into Teague's lap.

The prickling at his neck signaled that he was about to be on the receiving end of another round, and he wanted no part of it. "Go away."

"Not until you hear me out." Aiden and Teague both looked up as Carrigan came into the library and closed the door behind her. Fuck. He really was about to get into deep shit if these two were settling down to plot. Aiden must have known he was about to bolt, because he slapped a hand down on Teague's shoulder, holding him in place. "Until you hear us both out."

He wasn't going to get out of this room until he did just that. "You have five minutes."

Carrigan crossed the room, her long dress swishing around her feet, and perched on the arm of the couch. "That's all we need." She looked particularly virginal today in the white dress with her dark hair falling loose around her face. It was a part she liked to play when it suited her—the devout Catholic good girl—and it had kept their father from pushing too hard for her to

be married. Teague suspected their father thought a nun in the family would somehow magically balance the scales for all the evil shit he did, so he'd been pushing her hard in that direction.

After all, he had two more daughters he could use to secure a general's allegiance in marriage.

Only Teague knew she was anything but innocent when away from the watchful family protection, but he wasn't about to out her. Every one of them dealt with living in the O'Malley cage in their own ways. If her way of dealing helped her hold on to sanity, he wasn't going to judge the means. Not when he had just as many secrets.

His sister patted his foot. "With that despicable Halloran monster put out of his misery, we have an opportunity if we move fast."

Giving up the pretense of being relaxed, Teague straightened and swung his feet to the ground—and out of the reach of his sister. "The next words out of your mouth had better not be that we should take this chance to eliminate the Hallorans."

Aiden huffed. "Are you scared?"

"No, but I'm also not suicidal, either." He glared at his brother. "And that taunt stopped working on me when I was ten." It had taken months for his broken leg to heal from jumping off that bridge into the creek on their Connecticut property, and he still had the scar and fear of drowning from the result.

Carrigan laughed. "We're not suicidal."

That remained to be seen. "Then stop dicking around and tell me."

"The Sheridan daughter, the only one in the immediate family left, was set to marry Brendan Halloran. They were going to announce the engagement today." Carrigan twisted a lock of her dark hair around her finger.

That got Teague's attention. "I hadn't heard anything."

“No one did. That’s the point. They brokered the deal in secret—or as secret as anything is these days. You already know the name of the game. They were consolidating power.” Her tone told him her thoughts on *that*.

A deal between the Hallorans and the Sheridans would have sunk them. They held territory on either side of the O’Malleys, and he had no doubt that it wouldn’t take long for them to start eating away at the edges, with the aim of crushing Teague’s family and their business between them. The Boston underworld was a fat purse, but that kind of money only went so far when split three ways. Take out the largest competitor and... Yeah, he could see the reasoning behind Sheridan selling his daughter off to the Hallorans.

But, shit, everyone knew what a sadistic fuck Brendan was. His family didn’t draw the same lines the other two did, and he had no problem exploiting the human trafficking they dabbled in and creating his own little harem. Word had it that when Brendan played with those girls, most of the time he broke them beyond repair.

What kind of man would knowingly sentence his daughter to that?

And why the hell were his two older siblings bringing this information to *him*? He glanced between them. “It sounds like the girl dodged a bullet.”

“Most definitely.” Now apparently it was Aiden’s turn to talk. “She’s the heir to the Sheridan fortune—and all their territory—which means she’s going to be the most sought-after woman in Boston. The vultures will be circling by the end of the day.”

“Which is bullshit.”

Aiden glanced at Carrigan, his expression shuttered. “Which is bullshit, sure. But we’d be stupid to sit back and let someone else swoop in and snatch up this opportunity.”

Teague's stomach twisted, and he couldn't shake the feeling that he was standing on the train tracks and feeling the rumble of an incoming engine. "I'm not seeing what this shit has to do with me."

"That's the thing." Aiden shifted. "If someone's going to secure an alliance with the Sheridan family, why not one of us?"

The twisting in his stomach developed teeth, but he fought to keep his voice light. "Then I suppose I should congratulate you on your impending nuptials."

"Actually, we're here to congratulate *you*." Aiden held up a hand. "Just hear me out. I can't marry her. Our father already has a couple candidates in mind for me, and any of them would expand our territory exponentially."

"Then what about Cillian? He's old enough to play husband to the Sheridan girl."

Carrigan shook her head. "That won't work and you know it. The Sheridans might forgive our passing over Aiden and offering you, but it would be insulting to go to any of our younger siblings."

Jesus Christ. Teague looked at the alcohol cabinet on the far wall. Surely it wasn't too early to start drinking? Even as the thought crossed his mind, he pushed to his feet. It might be too early, but this wasn't a conversation he was willing to have stone-cold sober. "No."

"Don't say no. You haven't even heard us out."

He didn't have to. He knew what they would say. *It's your duty to your family. Father has given you excessive freedom to mess around with your interests. It's time to repay all those favors you tallied up.* He poured himself a splash of whiskey and then kept pouring until the glass was full. "Didn't arranged marriages go the way of the dinosaurs a couple decades ago?"

"Maybe for other families. Not for ours."

He knew that. Fuck, he wished he *didn't* know it so well. The rules of polite society were different for his family than they were for your average Joe. He'd learned a long time ago that the money and connections came with more strings than a spider's web. And walking away wasn't an option, because that same money and those connections would be ruthlessly deployed to bring any prodigal sons or daughters back into the fold—whether they wanted to come or not.

Teague took a healthy swallow of the whiskey. “You can't seriously be asking me to marry some woman I've never met from a family we were raised to hate.”

“I'm not.” Aiden paused, and it was like the whole room held its breath. “Father is.”

Just like that, the fight went out of him. He could argue his brother and sister to a standstill and even, occasionally, come out on top. Their father? His word was law, and he had no problem ruthlessly playing upon his children's weak spots to get what he wanted. Teague had learned that the hard way when he was still young enough to believe that there was another life—another option—out there for him. “I need some time to think.”

“You don't have much.”

Teague didn't turn at the sound of the library door opening and closing, because he knew both siblings hadn't left. “This is bullshit and you know it.”

“I know.” Carrigan plucked the glass out of his hand and took a sip. It was only then that he saw her hand was shaking. “You know Father made an offhand comment last night at the dinner you conveniently missed? He thinks it's time for me to shit or get off the pot.” She laughed softly at the look on his face. “He didn't say it in so many words, but the meaning was the same. My goddamn biological clock is ticking away in his ear, and the man wants heirs.”

He watched her finish the whiskey. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” She set the glass down with the care of someone who wanted to throw it across the room. “I’m as much in a cage as you are—as we all are—but I can’t talk to anyone about it.”

He knew the feeling. It all came down to the bottom line—family. It didn’t matter what was good for the individual as long as the family’s interests as a whole were served. “You can talk to me.”

Her smile was so sad, it would have broken his heart if he had anything left to break. “No, Teague, I really can’t.” With that, she turned and floated out of the room, leaving him alone in his misery.

He refilled his glass and went back to his seat on the couch. It was tempting to shoot the whole thing back and chase oblivion, but he needed his wits about him if he was going to get through this in the best position possible. The idea was absurd. The best position possible? He was a drowning man with no land in sight and the sharks were circling. There was nothing to do but pick the best way to die.

Each sip, carefully controlled, gave him some much-needed distance. He mentally stepped to the side and forced himself to look at the situation without the tangled mess of emotions in his chest. There might be no way out, but he could make the best of it regardless. The Sheridans had been a thorn in the family’s side for as long as there had been both Sheridans and O’Malleys in Boston. They might be looking to bolster their strength, but it wouldn’t take much to weaken their position.

He took another drink. No, it wouldn’t take much at all. And if he were with the Sheridans, he wouldn’t be *here*, so there was something to be said for that as well. The further he got from his father’s grasp, the easier it would be to slip free when the time came.

Slip free? The pipe dream of a child. He knew better by now...but that didn't stop the tiny flare of hope inside him. It was a mistake not to crush it—if he didn't now, then someone else would, and it would hurt more that way. Reality had a nasty way of intruding on pipe dreams, and the reality was that marrying into the Sheridan family wasn't likely to give him an out. It would entangle him further in the type of life he wanted to escape. They may have a different last name and territory, but the type of beast was identical to the O'Malleys.

But if there was a chance to be free—truly free—wouldn't he be a fool not to take it?

He picked up the book his brother had knocked to the floor, and carefully marked his page before closing it. He couldn't leave Carrigan behind. Hell, he'd be a selfish prick to leave *any* of his sisters behind. And his youngest brother, Devlin, was the least suited of all of them for this life. The thought of hauling three women and Devlin into hiding with him...Teague shuddered. It was impossible. He couldn't run without them, and he couldn't run *with* them.

So what the fuck was he going to do?

He laughed, the sound harsh from his throat. He was going to do exactly what he was told, like a good little piece-of-shit son. He was going to marry the Sheridan woman.