

JUST BUSINESS

by
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PROLOGUE

I now pronounce you married in the eyes of the Lord, your friends, and family. You may kiss the bride.”

Dillon turned from the elderly gentleman wearing a white collar to the woman in the pale blue dress who stood beside her. Callie Sheffield was arguably the most beautiful woman Dillon had ever seen. Crystal-clear blue eyes looked at her expectantly. A shy smile she had come to know over these past few months held her attention, while a warm hand cupped her face.

“You’re supposed to kiss me now.”

The voice was soft and melodious, teasing in its inflection. Callie—insightful, intuitive, and always right—was one of the few people Dillon Matthews allowed to actually tell her what to do. She knew how to listen to those around her, especially when they knew more about something than she did.

She bent her head and kissed the red lips as instructed, and a wave of heat practically welded her feet to the floor. The taste of Callie’s lips made her forget where she was and how long she stood there.

Finally, she released them and faced the crowd of people who sat in the church’s hard-backed pews. Some were friends, others were business associates, and dozens were people she had never seen before.

She took a deep, shaky breath. By all accounts this should have

been the happiest day of her life, but as she gazed at the sixty faces that stared back at her, all she could think was, “How in the hell did I get here?”

CHAPTER ONE

He what?" Dillon Matthews was dumbfounded. "You heard me. He's not sure he wants you to have his property. Bill Franklin is a crotchety old man, Dillon. It's his land, and he can sell it to whomever he wants for whatever reason."

"Does he know who I am? How much money I'm offering him? For God's sake. I'm one of the richest women in America. His land holdings are nothing, compared to mine."

"Yes, he does, and that's why he's digging in his heels. Price isn't the sticking point."

"Then what is? I'm offering more than three times what that land is worth, which is more than anyone else will give him for it." Dillon paced the large conference room located on the fiftieth floor of the Matthews Building. The plush carpet muffled her footsteps, and the triple-pane glass kept the cold spring day outside.

She turned her back on the ragged skyline of Chicago and walked across her spacious office to the three-dimensional scale replica of her largest land-development project yet. Gateway was to be built on twelve acres of lakefront property running parallel to Lake Michigan along Lake Shore Drive. It consisted of four hundred thousand feet of retail and office space, flanked by two high-end residential towers.

"Greg, I need this parcel of land. Bill Franklin is the last thing standing between me and Gateway. I can't build without his measly four acres. Well, I can, but a much smaller version that will end up

looking choppy and like every other commercial-use property in the country. We have a reputation to maintain, and boring buildings are not part of it.”

Properties designed and built by Matthews Holdings were anything but conventional and boring. They were splashes of color projected over aggressive designs that mirrored their architect/owner. Dillon’s thumbprint was easily recognizable around the world. The bold, daring design of her buildings usually stretched the bounds of engineering capability with a mixture of glass, steel, light, shadow, and texture, all intricately woven together in a well-choreographed dance. Often her designs formed the cornerstone of major redevelopment projects, and recently she not only owned the buildings she designed but the land on which they stood. Nothing stood in the way of her creativity or her desire to make a name for herself in the land-development community. Nothing until seventy-eight-year-old Bill Franklin blocked her path.

“He’s invited you to his house for dinner two weeks from Saturday.”

“Dinner? This is a business deal, not a social event.”

In the early years of her career, Dillon was the deal maker, the one who set the terms, negotiated every detail. Now she had people to take care of that chore. As a matter of fact, she had people to take care of almost everything. She rarely became involved in the negotiations other than to sign the contract and the check.

She shook her head at the idiosyncrasies of an old man. “All right, I’ll do whatever it takes to convince him to sell to me.”

Dillon had to have this property. Gateway would be the culmination of everything she had dreamed of. And she had worked hard to get it. After putting herself through college, she had traveled to France and graduated at the top of her class from Le Solamonde, the world’s most prestigious architectural school. She could have worked at any firm she chose, but she decided to venture out on her own, knowing that any boss other than herself would squelch her style and creativity.

In the past ten years she had made a name for herself, and the architectural community anticipated Gateway. But most important,

she expected herself to stun everyone. She needed this project to make her father finally look at her with something other than disappointment.

“Oh, and Dillon.” Greg hesitated.

Dillon was already moving on to the pile of papers on her desk but looked up at the pause.

“It is a social call. Bring a date.”

Dillon cocked her head. “I don’t *date*.” She was perplexed by Greg’s last statement. He knew very well that she preferred the women in her life to be gorgeous and temporary.

“Then you’d better hire someone. Franklin is expecting you and a date at his house for dinner. This is *not* a business meeting, Dillon. I get the impression that a healthy balance between work and life is important to him. I think he wants to see that there’s more to you than your business persona.”

Dillon dropped the folder she was examining onto her desk. “Oh, for God’s sake, Greg. It’s a piece of land, not my ticket to heaven. The only thing he should care about is how fast my check clears the bank.”

“That’s the way you and I think, Dillon. Evidently that’s not how Franklin sees things.”

“Does he know I’m a lesbian? I’ll do a lot of things for a deal, but pretending I’m straight isn’t one of them. I’m way past that crap.”

In the early years of Dillon’s career she had not openly discussed the fact that she was a lesbian, preferring to attend social functions alone rather than draw attention to herself by taking a woman as her date. She wasn’t hiding anything. She simply didn’t want to be judged by who she brought with her. At least she didn’t try to pretend to be someone she wasn’t by arriving with a man. But this evening was different. She had practically been told to invite someone, and she didn’t like being told what to do. As important as this dinner was with Franklin, she was just maverick enough to choose who *she* wanted.

“As a matter of fact, he said something about looking forward to being surrounded by intelligent, beautiful women at the dinner

table.” Dillon slumped back in her chair. “Look, Dillon, for some reason he considers this more than just a business deal. If you want this piece of land, you’d better show up with June Cleaver on your arm.”

Greg closed the door behind him, leaving Dillon alone. The image of the 1960s television sitcom *Leave it to Beaver* flashed into her mind. Interestingly, she had stumbled across the old show last week on a business trip while flipping through the channels on the hotel television in search of CNN. June Cleaver was every man’s dream of a wife—always perfectly coiffed, performing her domestic duties in high heels and a dress. Dillon wondered if June wore her pearls when she performed her other wifely duties.

Shaking that image away, Dillon reached for her Rolodex, but stopped. She knew dozens of women more than willing to accompany her for the evening. The women she went out with were poised, smart, sophisticated, and refined. In other words, everything she needed for an audition dinner with Franklin, but for some reason none of them felt right.

Her phone rang, drawing her attention back to the pile of work on her desk. She finished the call in minutes and spun her chair around to face the window, lifting her feet to the top of the credenza that ran the length of the desk behind her. This was her favorite position—hands locked behind her head, gazing at the sky as if it were her canvas to sculpt and create. Each season provided different inspiration, the changing weather guiding her pencil strokes on the thick pad she always kept nearby. Summer brought blue sky and an openness to her designs that often captured the essence of light. Winter, with its drab days and cold, bitter wind, transformed itself into structures full of oversized columns, archways, and deep corridors. Days like today, early spring with just enough chill in the air to remind her that winter was not yet ready to give up but enough warmth to give her hope, often gave birth to her most creative, cutting-edge designs. Gateway was born two years ago in the very position she was in now.

She shifted her gaze to the ground below, watching the people in the city carry on their everyday lives fifty stories below. They

probably passed the same familiar faces on the street every day but never stopped to say hello or exchange anything other than a polite, cursory greeting.

Dillon could relate—she worked hard, played hard, but, with the exception of her sister, she didn't really connect to people. Early on in her career she often wondered if something was wrong with her, if she was missing the connection gene, the DNA that drove people to link up with others. She wasn't a social person, didn't need to be around people, but preferred to concentrate on her work. At times she felt more related to her buildings, structures, and designs than to humanity.

However, Greg was an exception. He was more than her assistant. He was her friend, and they usually had dinner together a couple of times a month. She could easily count her other friends on the same hand with a finger or two missing. Her sister Laura probably knew her best, her parents often distant and aloof.

Dillon shook her head as she pictured her father's face years ago when she told him she wanted to be an architect and not crawl up the corporate ladder as he had at Chicago's most conservative law firm. She didn't know which he considered worse—coming out of the closet or not wanting her name in gold-embossed letters on the front door. He had never looked at her the same, and Dillon had never looked back.

Swinging her feet to the floor, she turned her attention to the current task, however distasteful. *A date?* She began to outline her plan of attack to find Ms. Right. Certainly within two weeks she could find the perfect woman, couldn't she?