

Making the Match

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Teaser Chapter

Prologue

The Good One

Corey

Decades ago...

He didn't think he'd gain entry.

But when he knocked, the door opened, and one of the groomsmen looked at him, then glanced over his shoulder, he heard the familiar deep voice call, "Let him in."

Corey entered and saw immediately that the groom had prepared for Corey's visit.

As, of course, he would.

He was not stupid.

Corey knew he'd prepared because, with a nod and a look, but not a word, all the groomsmen filed out.

Corey did not see joyous-wedding-day expressions on their faces when each man caught his eye as he left the room.

That wasn't about them having any apprehension about what was to happen that day or the woman their friend was about to tie the rest of his life to.

It was because they all detested Corey and perhaps knew why he was there.

Or they thought they did.

His face void of expression, Corey met every eye.

He was used to this, especially with the male gender. Men never knew what to do when another man was in their orbit who was smarter than them in a way they'd never equal him—and worse for them, richer just the same.

Especially ones with huge egos like these men had.

And on that thought, the door closed behind the last and Corey turned to Tom Pierce.

"I know," Tom started. "If I hurt her—"

“I will have her.”

Tom’s mouth snapped shut and his eyes, annoyingly always filled with wit and intelligence, turned shrewd.

Another annoying thing about Tom Pierce?

Not only was he the most talented tennis player on the planet—a player who turned that wit and intelligence against opponents so that he not only prevailed through physical prowess, he outthought them.

(As an aside, this was, to Corey’s way of thinking, worse than someone humiliating you after serving an ace, then doing it again, and again, and then again, something Pierce did often—his serve was, as one of his rivals put it, like trying to return a bullet.)

He was also one of the most handsome men on the planet.

He was not built like a tennis player. He was built like a football player, his tall body packed with power. This being what made his serve so terrifying, not to mention his return.

Dark hair.

Dark eyes.

Classic looks, square jaw, strong chin, high cheekbones.

The first time Corey heard his name was overhearing office talk. Someone’s assistant was talking about “that tennis guy, Pierce,” who “looks like JFK, Jr., but more handsome.”

When Corey saw a photo of him, he noted she was not wrong.

When Genny phoned him and said, “Corey, I think I’ve met the man I’m going to marry,” and that man was Tom Pierce, Corey’s heart cracked in two.

Last, when Corey had met Tom, he knew what Genny knew.

She would never truly be his.

But Pierce would always be hers.

And he’d be happy with that.

As to the matter at hand...

“You would not be the first to break her, or the best,” Corey jibed.

Pierce, damn the man, didn’t give him anything. Not a sneer, a flinch, or even an eye twitch, his ability to hold his own against Corey was something else he didn’t like about the guy.

Corey carried on, “I put her together before, I’ll put her together again.”

At that, Pierce spoke.

“Let’s not pretend that’s what you’re angling for.”

“And what am I angling for?” Corey pushed.

It was a mistake.

His first for so long, he didn’t realize it, not then.

“You hope this will crash and burn, like she and Holloway crashed and burned, because you hope she’ll eventually give up on men she actually wants and settle for one she doesn’t want, but he wants her.”

Truly.

Corey hated this man.

“Are you saying you don’t want her?” he goaded, purposefully misinterpreting what Pierce said.

Pierce drew in a very long breath.

He let it out, speaking slowly.

“What I’ll make very clear right now is, what I want, what Genny wants, our marriage and the family we’ll create is none of your business, Szabo. I will hurt her, and I’ll hate it, but it’ll happen. She’ll hurt me, and she’ll hate it, but it’ll happen. None of that will be your business. We will fight. We will make up. We will wonder if we made the right choice. We’ll remember that we absolutely did. We will repeat all of this time and again until we’re both dead. And in between times, there will be love that never dies and commitment that will never break. And not one fucking bit of it will have one fucking thing to do with you.”

It was Corey who was quiet then. He needed to be. He had to take that time to fortify his defenses.

“Am I heard?” Pierce prompted.

“I’m important to her,” Corey replied.

“I know you are, that’s why I’ll put up with you,” Pierce retorted.

Corey grew silent again.

“Have I made myself clear, Szabo?” Pierce pressed.

“You will hurt her. Your kind always do.”

“I’m not him.”

“No,” Corey spat, his tone and the expression he allowed to come over his face underlined his words. “You are not.”

Pierce's eyes slightly narrowed.

"You still love him," he said quietly.

He was talking about Duncan.

Duncan Holloway.

The man who broke Genny's heart.

"He's my best friend."

"He tore her apart."

"And this is why my best friend is no longer in my life. I had to choose. I chose her. I will always choose her, Pierce. And I will always be at her side."

"You may always be in her life, but you've never been at her side, Szabo. And you never will. It's only now you won't because I'll be there."

That was the blow that penetrated.

"Yeah," Pierce whispered, not missing he'd drawn blood.

They stood there, staring at each other.

And then it happened.

Never.

Not once since he'd graduated college had he lost such a duel, professionally, cerebrally, creatively or romantically.

So it was no wonder he tasted ash as he broke Tom Pierce's gaze, turned and walked out the door.

That ash nearly choked him forty-five minutes later when Imogen Swan, the woman Corey Szabo loved down to his bones, became the lawfully wedded wife of a man who would become one of the greatest tennis players of all time, known for his physical prowess on the court, but most especially, his intelligence.

Tom Pierce.

* * * *

Tom

A few years later...

“It’s...I don’t know what it is.”

“It’s bullshit, that’s what it is. It’s the creation of a useless woman desperately trying to prove she has something more than long legs, a beautiful head of hair and a golden snatch.”

“Jesus, Andrew.”

“Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know, but Christ.”

“I don’t agree. It makes me feel...”

“Yeah? It makes you feel? Feel what?”

“I don’t know...something.”

“Well, that’s a stellar recommendation for it. Wouldn’t buy it for my house, though, and not just because it’s butt-ugly.”

Tom, the last to have a turn, stepped away from the microscope.

He’d slid two slides under it, slides with white bits stuck between them, and you could only read what they said under the microscope.

The two slides he’d read said SKY and BROTHERHOOD.

He didn’t know what he felt either, except he wanted to see what the other five slides said, and then maybe he’d understand.

A new voice, one he’d never heard, entered their conversation.

“It’s an homage.”

Tom turned and...

Shit.

Mika Stowe stood there.

The woman whose art show they were right then attending.

And whose piece Andrew was right then trashing.

“Or derivative,” she went on, uncrossing her arms from her chest and pressing her hands into the front pockets of her faded jeans. “Depending on how you want to look at it.”

No one said a word, and he didn’t know how he knew, but it was because he understood, as they all did, she’d heard everything they’d said.

She took a step toward them, stopped and spoke on.

“John Lennon went to an art show and there, he saw *Ceiling Painting*. He was in a bad way, significantly depressed. He climbed the ladder at that show, looked through the magnifying

glass, and read the word on the ceiling. It said ‘Yes.’ If it hadn’t said yes, if it hadn’t said something positive, even John himself didn’t know what consequence that would have had on his life. He needed the positivity of that word. And he got it. So he climbed off the ladder and asked to meet the artist. That artist was Yoko Ono.”

Holy hell.

Tom didn’t know that.

Mika wasn’t done.

“There’s a lot of controversy around Yoko, mostly, obviously, based in sexism and racism, of course.”

Tom pressed his lips together, because she was right, but Andrew grunting didn’t come as a surprise, and Tom was torn between thinking her honesty in the face of Andrew’s assholery was hilarious or wishing like fuck he was nowhere near the man when this situation came about.

Tom didn’t know Andrew all that well, except that he was an excellent tennis player and could be a good guy.

But he could also be a colossal ass.

Andrew had tagged along with their group because Patsy was seeing him, and everyone liked Patsy.

“But no matter how you feel about Yoko,” Mika continued, “or the love affair of John and Yoko, one inalienable truth is that if John had not met Yoko that day, there would be no ‘Imagine.’ Yoko herself said that if nothing else, the union of her and John gave the world that song, and the message in that song, and that was meant to be. As that’s the best song of the twentieth century, and the message is the most profound a song has ever delivered, you can’t argue it.”

“I could argue it,” Andrew stated.

This fucking guy.

“Bud,” Tom said under his breath.

When he muttered his one word, Mika turned her gaze to Tom, and it stayed there for an uncomfortably long time.

She eventually returned to Andrew.

“You could argue what?”

“That song is the best of the twentieth century.”

“Name a better one,” she challenged.

Andrew either couldn’t, or he wasn’t fast enough, though she did give him time before she again shifted her gaze to Tom.

“The other words are ‘dreamer,’ ‘join,’ ‘us,’ ‘sharing’ and ‘life,’” she said softly, staring right in his eyes.

Once she’d said that, she walked away.

“Well, at least she wasn’t obvious by adding ‘Imagine,’” Rod mumbled.

“Probably would have sucked you off in the cloakroom, man, you just asked for it,” Andrew said to Tom.

Tom clenched his teeth.

“There a reason you have to be such a huge dick on too frequent of occasions?” Rod asked.

“Yeah, Andrew. As you know, he’s *very* married,” Patsy snapped.

“*She* didn’t care.” Andrew jerked his head in the direction Mika had walked away. “She was gagging for it.”

“No,” Tom said slowly. “She was thinking we were a bunch of dumb jocks who didn’t understand the point she was trying to make with her piece. And she was right.”

“We’re not here to write a dissertation on her *art*.” Andrew said the last word like it tasted bad. “We’re here because we’re in town for that charity thing and because we like Terence Ladrelle’s music, and she’s banging Ladrelle, and we thought he’d be here too,” Andrew pointed out, incorrectly.

At least, that wasn’t why Tom was there, though he did like Ladrelle’s music.

It was that Mika Stowe might be the current It Girl, muse to musicians and artists and photographers, party girl and budding style icon.

But she seemed interesting, and Tom was interested in what she had to say through her art. And from what he’d seen so far of her showing, the microscope now being his favorite part, he felt it proved she was.

“I’m here to see what she’s wearing,” Miranda whispered to Patsy. “And only she could make jeans and a glittery top, with bare feet, look couture.”

“Word,” Patsy replied.

“You do her, don’t let it get to Ladrelle,” Andrew advised Tom. “I bet you can take care of yourself, but Ladrelle is right out of the ghetto.”

Tom saw so much red, he had to blink.

“For fuck’s sake,” Rod bit out.

Miranda lifted her hand, and after dropping her pointer, middle, ring and pinkie finger on her thumb as she spelled the word, “D. O. N. E. Done,” she stormed away.

“I know this ugly is from you trying it on with her, and she told you to go fuck yourself, and you obviously couldn’t take that hit to your manhood, which is majorly unappealing. But the rest of it is a dealbreaker,” Patsy declared. “So now I’ll jump on that action and also tell you to go fuck yourself.”

With that, she followed Miranda.

“Looks like you’re not gonna get laid tonight,” Rod noted to Andrew, watching Patsy go. “Or ever again, at least with Patsy.”

“Are you serious?” Tom was also addressing Andrew. “The reason you’re acting like such an ass is because you crashed and burned with Mika Stowe?”

“That used pussy?” Andrew scoffed.

Tom studied him.

Yeah.

He was being an ass because he’d wanted her, and she hadn’t wanted him.

But also, he was just an asshole.

“Done,” Tom said quietly to his friend who he was glad was more like an acquaintance, because Tom was not bluffing.

He was done.

And then he, too, walked away.

* * * *

Several weeks later...

He didn’t seek it out, but when he noticed it in passing in one of Genny’s magazines, he read the review of Mika’s showing.

It was scathing.

So much so, Tom stood still, holding the magazine in hand, rereading the words because they were so far from what he'd experienced (outside Andrew's horseshit), he couldn't reconcile it.

There was mystery in her show. Poignancy. Thoughtfulness. Hope. Nothing in it was classically beautiful, but all of it made you think.

Which was what art was.

Or at least that was what Tom thought it was.

It was the first time he noticed how Mika, and as an extension of her and what she'd said about Yoko Ono, others in the present and in the past, were dismissed.

It would not be the last.

* * * *

Several years after that...

The look she gave him could have stripped the wallpaper from the walls.

“Do you know Mika?”

“We haven’t formally met,” Tom told his hostess of the evening, Eleanor Ellington, a pompous woman he didn’t like all that much, but she loved tennis, and she personally funded ten scholarships to Tom’s summer camp. Scholarships that included strict criteria which boiled down to one statement she’d made when she’d first offered the money.

“*Arthur can’t be the only one, now can he?*”

“Well, Mika, this is Tom Pierce, normally escort to our darling Imogen Swan, who could not attend this evening,” Eleanor purred. Mika’s expression cleared as she smiled broadly at the introduction, all the while Tom grimaced and shook his head. “He also knows how to play tennis. Tom, this is Mika, she is, quite simply”—she floated a hand through the air—“*everything.*”

Tom dipped his chin to Mika.

She treated him to an expression like she was rolling her eyes, without rolling her eyes.

“Tom is flying solo tonight, as are you, my darling,” Eleanor said to Mika. “So allow him to entertain you. I’m sure he’s capable of doing that for at least half an hour. And then we’ll sit for

dinner, I will seat you close to the brilliance and humor that is me, and you will be saved.” She finished on, “Tra la,” and drifted away.

“Apparently, we’re partners for the evening,” Tom noted when they were alone.

“She’s seventy-eight. She’s lived her whole life thinking that a woman alone needs some sort of companion or guard, if she doesn’t have a significant other, that significant other’s priority purpose, according to Eleanor, being acting as a companion and guard,” Mika replied.

“However, I can assure you that I’m perfectly capable of maneuvering this evening without your aid.”

“I didn’t say you weren’t,” Tom pointed out.

“What *I’m* saying is you shouldn’t feel like you need to stick around. It’s one of my least favorite things to do, mingling. But I’ll be fine.”

“Maybe I’ve heard quite a bit about you and want to get to know you.”

“Maybe *your wife* doesn’t want you to get to know me.”

“Maybe my wife knows I love her down to my soul, so she understands I can have a conversation with another woman, and even be friends with her, without getting jealous or territorial because she knows I would never go there,” Tom drawled.

That shut her up.

“Jesus, does every man you meet hit on you?” he asked.

Her gaze moved through the room, she lifted a hand, pointed and shared, “That one over there hasn’t.”

Tom looked in the direction she was pointing to see literary critic and nonagenarian Niall Greenaway asleep in an armchair.

Tom burst out laughing.

“And I know a fair few homosexuals who aren’t interested in me, though some of them are interested in my closet, which, perversely, I find far more threatening because I carefully curated that closet and even one piece purloined I would consider the end of the world,” she continued.

Tom kept laughing.

When he finished, he noted, “Genny isn’t here because Genny’s pregnant with our third and the doctor doesn’t want her traveling. As for me, I couldn’t get out of this because my camp kids need Eleanor’s scholarships, and Eleanor needs me to kiss her ass. So I’m here, rather than where I should be. With my wife.”

“Poor you,” she murmured, lifting a pink drink in a coupe glass to her lips.

He knew all about pink drinks and coupe glasses, so he felt his lips twitching.

“Pink Lady?” he asked.

“Mary Pickford,” she answered.

“I’ve never heard of that.”

“Rum, pineapple, cherry liqueur, grenadine. Sublime.”

Tom made a face.

“Let me guess. Bourbon,” she surmised.

“Not just, though I like bourbon. It’s that I don’t go too sweet.”

She said nothing.

Which meant, for some reason he didn’t understand, he carried on, “Tart. Bitter. Smoky.

Okay. Sweet, not so much.”

“Fascinating,” she whispered, and if they hadn’t spoken of what they’d just spoken of, he might have thought she was flirting.

Tom maneuvered them out of that lane.

“Maybe we should address the fact that Andrew Winston is an asshole,” he suggested.

That was when she laughed.

Watching her do it was when Tom got it.

Sure, she was attractive. Tall and rounded with a head of golden-blonde hair that could be described as nothing short of extraordinary. She also had an interesting face. Not beautiful, not pretty, *interesting*, with a statement nose, broad lips with a stretched bow up top and brutally honest aquamarine eyes.

On a certain level, he always got why she was attached to some of the most important people of any given moment. It was her unusual looks and how well she carried them. She also had a flair for fashion and clothes looked good on her, or she had acute skill in picking clothes that did.

Most of all, there always seemed something held back with her.

Mystery was hard to deny, it drew you in, and the longer it took to get answers, the more hooked you got.

But it was this, that throaty laugh, the wide mouth exposing perfect teeth and highlighting how full and magnificent her lips were, her eyes lighting to the point they sparkled.

This was not only why she was attached to the most important people of any given moment, it was why she landed the most coveted men of any given moment.

It was, last, the first time since he'd met Genny that he wondered what it would feel like to kiss a woman.

No.

With Mika, he wondered what it would be like to taste her.

"You didn't say anything," she spoke, thankfully taking his mind from that last thought. "When your friend was off on one at the gallery, you didn't say anything. I was worried you were like him. And I was disappointed. I knew who you were, and I thought I knew that on a deeper level, after what you did for your wife."

Tom was confused. "What I did for my wife?"

"That casting couch thing. How you nipped that in the bud." When he silently stared at her, she assured, "It's quiet, Tom, but you must know it got around."

"You're the only one who's ever mentioned it to me."

Her head tipped to the side. "Does that upset you?"

"I don't really give a fuck how many people know that degenerate got called on his bullshit. What I give a fuck about is if it affects my wife and her career, because she's worked very hard to get where she is."

She righted her head and decreed, "So you're a good one. So far, I've only met three. Not including the gays, that is. The gays rocket the numbers into scores."

"Sorry?"

"A good guy, Tom," she explained.

"I hope so."

"Did you like my piece?"

She was talking about her microscope.

"I hadn't decided," he admitted. "I hadn't been able to view all seven of the slides."

"Seven," she said in a strange voice.

"Yes, seven. Aren't I right? There were seven slides?"

"There were, it just touches me that was what? Two, three years ago? One piece in an installation of thirty, and all the life you've lived in between, and you still remember there were seven slides."

“Join. Sharing. Sky. Brotherhood. Dreamer. And...”

“Life and us,” she said softly.

“Sorry, I forgot the last two,” he muttered.

“No, five out of seven isn’t bad.”

“But I would have liked it, if Andrew hadn’t been acting like he was, and I’d been able to experience it without that negativity.”

Constant eye contact from Mika, always, including when she said, “He’s not a good guy.”

“I learned that at the gallery.”

“No, Tom, he is *not* a good guy.”

More eye contact, heavy with meaning, before he murmured, “Fuck.”

“Indeed.”

“You?” he asked, remembering how Patsy noted he’d made a pass at Mika.

She shook her head.

“Someone you know.”

She nodded her head.

“Should I...is there something I should do?” he inquired.

Now there was eye contact, but she was blinking.

“Do?” she queried.

“I’m on the circuit, as is he...but even if I wasn’t.”

“Tom, stop.”

“What?”

“Stop.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re happily married, and I am not.”

He shut up.

“There’s nothing you can do anyway,” she went on. “It’s up to her, and sadly, I don’t think she has the courage. I don’t blame her. If she breathed a word, him and the machine around him would chew her up and spit her out. The caliber of your sponsors is impressive, but his aren’t shoddy.”

Tom felt his neck getting hot.

“It’s a long road we’re on, and while we traverse it, we have to pave the way so the women can speak,” she noted.

“I’ll keep an eye,” Tom stated, the words so heavy, they landed like stones, so she couldn’t have missed it.

And she didn’t.

“He doesn’t do it out in the open.”

Very slowly, Tom repeated, “I’ll keep an eye. And an ear.”

For a moment, she said nothing.

Then she repeated, “Yes. You’re a good one.”

* * * *

Several hours later...

Eleanor’s dinner was done, and considering the fact that Mika and he were younger than anyone there by approximately forty years, after a hurried digestif, the end of dinner ended the party.

This meant now they were in a bar and Mika was laughing.

“It sounds like you’re going to need to keep an eye on her,” she noted.

They were talking about his oldest, Chloe.

“She’s a pistol,” he agreed. “Just like her grandmother, which both believes me, because she’ll suck the marrow out of life and I love that for her, and terrifies me, because she’ll stop at nothing to suck the marrow out of life, no matter who she has to steamroll to do it.”

Mika just smiled at him.

“And Matt is her opposite,” he continued. “Quiet. Watchful. At first, I thought it was because Chloe overshadowed him. She’s such a big personality, his couldn’t shine through. But that’s just how he is. It’s almost a blessing for him. Chloe can grab all the attention, which means he can be off on his own, doing his thing.”

“I can’t say I know you very well, but that doesn’t seem very much like you. Your boy. You’re very outgoing.”

“Matt’s not like anybody, except...”

When Tom trailed off, she prompted, “Except?”

He didn't want to say it, but he did. "His Uncle Corey. He's a lot like Corey."

Her brows drew down over her eyes. "Corey? Corey Szabo?"

"Yes," Tom said shortly.

"I sense you two aren't the best of friends, like he is with your wife."

"I tolerate him. She adores him."

"Which is why you tolerate him."

Tom nodded.

She smiled at him again.

Then she announced, "It's at this juncture I'm going to say something I don't want to say.

Because I want to meet your wife. I'm a fan of her work, she's a very talented actress, but also, it's beautiful, how your face changes when you speak of her. And I want to meet the woman who would make a man like you look like that when she's in his thoughts and on his lips. I want to meet your children, they sound wonderful. I want to know you more, I want to be your friend, Tom. I want you in my life. But I'm afraid we're not going to be friends, you and I."

Tom was so stunned by this unexpected and unwanted declaration, he felt his body jerk with the blow of hearing it.

"Sorry...what?" he asked.

"I'm attracted to you."

Tom said nothing.

"Very," she added a modifier.

Tom remained silent.

"I know you won't go there," she carried on. "I certainly won't go there. But it's such that it'll hurt. And I suspect, the longer I know you, the more that ache will grow."

"Jesus, Mika," he whispered, the compliment registering warmth, but the loss of her coated that warmth in a cold that was bitter.

And he barely knew her.

But she was just that phenomenal.

She shrugged.

He didn't like this decision. "I would never, and if you would never, then..."

"Tom." She wrapped a hand around his forearm, her fingers long and thin with tapered, perfectly lacquered nails at the tips. "I'm already half in love with you. This night has been

perfect. Let's have it, having become friends, and staying friends, all that happy, with none of the hurt."

"You'll find somebody and then we can—"

"I've found a lot of somebodies, but not one like you."

She let him go, took hold of her Mary Pickford and held it his way.

With no choice, he lifted his vodka tonic.

And he didn't like it, but he did it.

They clinked, and with it, before they really began, their end was struck.

And Tom understood the ache she meant.

Because she was attractive, even if he wasn't attracted to her in that way.

But he still missed her now that she was gone.

* * * *

A year and a half later...

He had to force himself to wait a whole week.

Then he used the number his agent acquired for him and called.

It was not a surprise she didn't pick up.

He left a message.

It was a surprise that, within an hour, she called back.

"Tom?" she asked after he said hello.

"Honey," he whispered.

He heard her breath catch, then he heard the sobs.

She wasn't hiding it and she wasn't holding back.

He knew her, but he didn't.

Still, he knew that was so very Mika.

It took a while, but finally, through sniffles, she said, "He wielded drumsticks, not a racket, but he was like you."

"I'm so fucking sorry, Mika."

"I'm pregnant, Tom."

At this news, as a husband, but mostly as a father, he felt a vicious burn sear through his innards.

“Shit,” he bit off.

“No one knows. I’m only ten weeks along.”

“I won’t say anything.”

“She’ll never know her—”

Her voice cracked, and she lost it again.

He waited, his throat tight.

Genny walked in while he did.

When he glanced her way, with one look at his face, his wife knew who he was talking to and she came right to him, fitted herself to his body and wrapped her arms around.

In his ear, Mika got it together again.

“It’s incredibly lovely you called.”

“Of course. If you need anything—”

“The only thing I need is him, so...”

“Yeah,” he said gently.

“Be happy, Tom.”

“It doesn’t seem like it now, Mika, but it’s good he left you with her, or him. Trust me, it’s the best thing in the world.”

“I already know that. And it’s a her. That’s what he wanted. So she has to be.”

“Right.”

“Thanks for calling.”

“Chin up.”

Mika said nothing, no reply, no goodbye.

She just disconnected.

Tom looked down at his pretty wife with her sad eyes as she stared up into her husband’s face.

“Is she a mess?” she asked.

“Yes,” he stated the obvious.

Her gaze slid to his chin as she mumbled, “I can’t even imagine.”

He couldn’t either.

Pete “Rollo” Merriman, the drummer for The Pissed-Off Hippies, had been in the wrong place at the wrong time when someone hit the truck in front of him and the cargo of steel sheets lashed to the back had come untethered.

Merriman had been decapitated.

Mika and Merriman had been married four months. According to anyone, both in the know and through gossip channels, they were a love match.

Like Tom and Genny.

And the photographic evidence played that positive, something Tom had paid attention to hopefully, for Mika.

They weren’t smitten. She wasn’t his muse.

She was the love of his life.

And he was her world.

So, yes.

He couldn’t imagine.

“She’s pregnant,” he told Genny.

He took her weight as it slumped into him.

“Oh God,” she breathed.

“Yeah.”

“And thank God,” she said.

Tom let that go a beat, feeling it for all its heaviness and joy, doing that pulling his wife closer.

And then he said, “Yeah.”

* * * *

Not too long ago...

When he looked through the peephole to see who was at the door, since no one knew where he was, even his children, he still was unsurprised at who he saw.

The man had his ways.

That happened when you were the richest being on the planet.

But Tom thought it was better to get it over with now than deal with his shit later.

He opened the door, looked the man in the eyes, then stepped away, leaving it up to Szabo to catch the door before it closed, then enter.

Szabo did this.

Tom went back to his glass of vodka.

Szabo savored the moment he'd been waiting for for nearly thirty years, not speaking for a long time.

Tom finished his vodka and poured another. Only then did he turn to lift the bottle Szabo's way.

It was the first time he'd looked at him since he came in.

Szabo hadn't taken a seat, and the expression on his face was unexpected.

Tom ignored it.

"Drink?" he offered.

"You know I don't drink, Tom," Szabo said quietly.

Tom put the bottle down and the ice clinked when he picked up the very full glass.

He walked to the couch in the cottage at the Biltmore where he was staying, a space that would be his home for the foreseeable future since he and Genny had agreed to a divorce and he had moved out.

He folded into the couch, raised his glass and rounded it in the air.

"Let's have it," he invited.

"I hate this," Szabo said.

There it was.

The expression on his face.

"For Genny," Tom surmised.

"For Genny. For the kids." Pause then, "For you."

"Right," Tom muttered dubiously and sucked back some vodka.

"Tom—"

"She won't have you," Tom informed him.

"I know," Szabo replied. There was sadness in his tone, resignation, and Tom felt his eyes narrow.

"The great Corey Szabo giving up?"

“You can’t have missed that the time came when I stopped disliking you and started to think of you as family.”

Tom was staggered.

“I can have missed it because I did,” he returned.

Szabo nodded, let that go and moved on.

“Yes, I was pissed when I found out you cheated.”

“I’m sure you were,” Tom sneered, no doubt now, just derision, because he suspected Szabo was thrilled Tom had fucked up so incalculably.

Szabo took in a breath.

Then he snapped, “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“If I knew that, don’t you think I would have shared that with *my wife* so maybe she could find her way past this, and we could move on...together?”

“Fuck that, Tom, and fuck *you* for saying that shit. Come on. You adored her.”

“More than you.”

Szabo’s face pinched.

“Admit it, you know it, don’t you? You know I loved her more than you,” Tom pushed.

“Which makes your actions all the more perplexing,” Szabo shot back, not quite admitting it, not quite denying it.

“She left me.”

“She didn’t leave you,” Szabo countered. “She ended the marriage.”

“No, Corey, she left me *while* we were married. And it’s the biggest fucking copout a cheater can drag into a marriage to blame it on the woman he betrayed, but there it is. She checked out of our marriage. I did all I knew how to do to figure out what was going on. I gave her some space. I asked her what was up. I asked again. And again. I tried to reignite our intimacy. I asked her to go away with me, take a vacation from our lives, find each other again. I got frustrated and impatient and tried to coax it out of her through arguments. And when I admitted I stepped out on her, that was when she reengaged, though that wasn’t why I did it. We had therapy, but how do I say any of that shit to her?”

“I can understand your dilemma because that’s exactly what it is. A pile of complete, stinking shit,” Szabo derided.

“Yup,” Tom agreed, and took another sip of his drink.

“Christ, Tom!” Szabo exploded. “Fucking another woman?”

“I was going to leave her.”

Szabo shot stick straight and stared, mouth hanging open.

Tom wished he was in the mood to take a picture. He sensed Corey Szabo had looked like that never in his life.

Not ever.

Flabbergasted.

As much as he’d like to cherish that look, he didn’t.

In that moment, he preferred what was steeping in ice.

“I should have left her,” Tom murmured into his glass and took another sip. When he was done, he rested the drink on his thigh, looked back at Szabo and repeated, “I should have left her. My weakness wasn’t fucking another woman. My weakness was not leaving my wife before I did it.”

“I disagree,” Szabo said in a strangled voice.

“Phoenix is okay, better than LA. I’d prefer one of the Carolinas or Florida. And when I say that, I mean I’d *vastly* prefer the East Coast.”

They’d moved to Phoenix not long ago. It was what Genny wanted.

It wasn’t what Tom wanted.

They talked, he made his feelings known. She was done with LA. He didn’t know what was going on with her, she wasn’t sharing, but one thing he did know was that he wanted her to be happy, he wanted her to be happy with him, so they moved.

“I didn’t want to live in a condo,” he continued. “I am not at all a condo type of man.”

And he wasn’t. Even though she already knew this, he nevertheless shared that with Genny. She put her foot down. “*The kids are all but gone, Tom, what are we going to do with a huge house when the kids are gone? It’s a waste. We’re not wasteful.*”

And he wanted her to be happy, so they got a huge condo instead.

“I’ve hated LA since we moved into our first house there,” he went on.

“You have a mouth, why didn’t you—?”

Tom cut him off.

“I hate those fucking awards dinners and shows and premieres. Genny does too. They make her tense. They pick apart your outfits. Your shoes. Hair. The fucking jewelry you were given to

wear. The best dressed lists. The worst dressed lists. Dissecting you like you're not a human being. The glee in their hate is despicable. Even if she never landed on the worst dressed lists, her friends did, and you hurt when someone you care about hurts. They ask questions. You know how it is. 'How do you and Tom keep the spark in your marriage, Imogen?' Like it's their fucking business."

"Tom—"

"She hates it, I hate it more. Always did. Having to go through it and watching her have to do the same."

"Seems you married the wrong woman then."

Tom shook his head. "You love someone, you put up with a lot of shit you hate."

"This is fucked up," Szabo hissed. "Excuses. You're a grown man, Tom."

Tom ignored that.

"I'm on her arm during those, Corey. Didn't you notice? I don't think she did. I drop everything. Even if there's a tournament I'm calling, I fly to get to her and fly redeye to get back to my seat at the desk in front of the camera for the next day's matches. We're talking hauling ass from Melbourne or Paris or London. I did that not because she wanted me there. I did it because she *needed* me there. So I was there. Hell and high water, I got my ass in a fucking tux and stood at her side doing something she hated and something I detested, smiling while I did it. When I'm doing my thing, though, Corey, when has Genny dropped everything to be with me? When I'm kissing ass to raise money for my camp or doing my bit for the girls, if Genny's filming, she's on set and not with me. Rod joked a couple of years ago, I'm known as the Lone Wolf. He wasn't wrong, I was alone so often, but only when it was something that mattered to me. Something that had to do with my interests and my career. He didn't mean it ugly, but when he said it, it got under my skin."

"And you didn't talk to your wife about it?"

"Of course I did."

"And Genny, *our* Genny, told you to fuck off?"

"*My* Genny was shocked I didn't understand the way it was in her business after all these years. She was *hurt* that I was hurt. And in the beginning, I didn't mind. Then it got old and one-sided, and I did. In the end, she's right. It was her business, it was what she had to do to maintain

her career, and I knew it. Men have been doing that same thing for centuries, and no one questions it. But she was also wrong.”

“So your response was to fuck someone that wasn’t her,” Szabo stated scathingly.

“No, I got even more hurt when she pulled away and stayed away and I lived in a city I hated, because she needed to live there. Then moved to a city I didn’t want to move to, into a home I didn’t like, because she wanted to move here. Then she wasn’t working as much, but she still didn’t step to my side. She threw herself into our kids, who were grown, for fuck’s sake, and took a break from her marriage without actually taking a break from her marriage.”

“But *she* didn’t fuck someone else.”

“No, you’re right. She didn’t. But I wished she did. God’s honest truth. Because I would have understood that. Silence. Distance. When she’s sleeping beside me in our bed. That I did not get.”

“Did you address this in therapy?”

Tom nodded and took another sip from his drink.

“And what did she say about pulling away?”

“It was what that fucked-up place does to women’s heads. It’s what happens to them when they aren’t twenty-five anymore. It took her to her knees.”

“And you didn’t get that?”

“How could I if she didn’t give it to me?”

“But she did, in therapy. When it was too late,” Corey surmised.

“She did. In therapy. When I’d made it too late,” Tom confirmed.

“And you didn’t explain your issues to her, not even through therapy?”

“Not fully. It makes it sound like I think it’s her fault I had an affair. And it isn’t.”

“You’re right, it isn’t.” Szabo leaned back. “So that’s your Scylla and Charybdis. You had a beef. You can’t share your beef. Because it might be a beef, but it doesn’t explain what you did.”

Since that was precisely it, Tom had no reply.

It was then, Szabo sat on the very edge of a chair across from Tom.

He leaned forward.

And urgently, he said, “Tell her, Tom.”

Tom stared at Genny’s best friend, a man she’d known since she was eight, the closest person to her outside her family and Tom.

They were a miracle, those two. Kids from a small town in the Midwest. He became the richest man in the world, brilliant, genius at computers, anything tech, *and* business. The Midas Touch. She became the most famous woman in the world, beautiful, sweet, talented, smart, and one of the best actresses of her generation.

The third of their friendship posse from that small town, the one who broke their hearts...he didn't do so badly either.

But Szabo was also the man who loved her, not more than Tom, but too much for Tom ever to have been comfortable with.

In other words, this earnestness was a shock.

And he didn't trust it.

"It'll make things worse, and you know it," he replied.

"It might help her understand," Szabo suggested.

"Again, *I* don't even know why *I* did it."

"Not about what you did, but about where you were, and where you both need to be."

"She needs space."

"You need to fight for her."

"I know my wife, and she needs space."

"Tom, I'm telling you. Listen to me right now. *You need to fight for her.*"

Something about that made Tom's skin feel strange. He wasn't certain what it was. The tone. The words. The odd look on Szabo's face.

Or all of it.

It wasn't like he was giving advice.

It was like he was issuing an order.

"Are you going to fight for her?" Szabo pressed.

"I know my wife, Corey. Therapy didn't work not because of what I didn't share, because even if I did share it, she's not in a place to hear it. I have to wait. So I'll wait."

They stared at each other over the coffee table.

And then Szabo said something that snaked down Tom's spine.

"So be it."

He stood.

Tom stood.

Szabo moved to the door.

Tom moved with him.

He turned and looked at Tom.

“I didn’t always like you, but I always admired you. Even when I didn’t want to. But then, I started liking you. And now...” His gaze grew intent. “Now, Tom, I care about you deeply. You. Not Genny. Not the family. *You*. And this hurts.”

Tom didn’t like that either.

There was something wrong about it.

“Corey—”

Szabo cut him off with a nod and a statement.

A statement that was uttered almost like a wish.

Or a plan.

“You’ll be happy again.”

After he delivered that, he walked out the door.

It was the last time Tom saw him.

Within a few months, Corey Szabo blew his brains out.

And set his plans into motion.

When he did, Tom didn’t stand a chance.

Then again, he’d refused a direct order.

And that was what happened when you defied Corey Szabo.

* * * *

Some time later...

When the call came through, since he didn’t know the number, he didn’t take it.

They left a voicemail.

He had all sorts of shit going down, most of it surrounding the YouTube gossipmonger Elsa Cohen and Corey’s bitch of an ex, so he didn’t bother listening to it or clearing it. Not for weeks.

When that time came, and he was set to listen to the first few seconds before he trashed it, and he heard Mika’s voice for the first time in nearly two decades, he did not trash it.

He listened.

And he wished he didn't.

"So you aren't one of the good ones. I'm gutted. Absolutely."

That was it.

All she said.

Genny and her PR team had spun it so no one outside immediate family knew the truth.

But Tom knew in that instant that Mika knew it.

And Tom had recently realized he'd lost his wife forever.

So he was unable to handle the blow of knowing he'd lost Mika too.

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