

NYT & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AND 2019 RITA® AWARD WINNER

Minx MALONE



THE BACHELOR PARTY

M. MALONE

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About this Short Story

Bennett has been invited to the bachelor party of family friend Tank Marshall. If you think Ben's awkward now, imagine how he'll react in a strip club. LOL :>

WARNING

This is a companion short story to the novel *Just One Thing*. If you haven't read the full novel yet, **click here to get your copy.**

The Bachelor Party

Bennett gripped the handle of his beer bottle so tightly it was a wonder the glass didn't crack. He glanced around the dim interior of the club, wondering as always how he managed to get himself into these situations.

Trying to be cool. Trying to be like everyone else.

Well, being cool had really landed him in hot water this time. He'd gotten an invitation to a bachelor party and his girlfriend had encouraged him to go. Now he was stuck at a table with a bunch of other men watching while half-naked women danced about twenty feet away.

Bennett sighed and resisted the urge to glance at his watch. He'd done that three times since they'd arrived. When Katie had encouraged him to go, he doubted she'd known the party would be at a strip club.

He was lucky, he knew that. Most men didn't have a lady secure enough to be completely fine with them attending any kind of bachelor party. But Katie hadn't seemed worried at all. On the contrary, she'd been excited for him to get out of his lab and spend some time with his friends and brothers.

Bennett grimaced. While her optimism and belief in him was always refreshing, in this case he thought perhaps her love was making her blind. He was most comfortable in his lab, testing soil conditions or puttering around his family's farm.

Not hanging out, drinking beer while half-naked women danced on a stage.

"You look like you're afraid you'll turn to stone if you accidentally see another woman naked. Relax, bro." His youngest brother, Jackson, nudged him in the arm, making some of his beer spill out.

Laughter broke out as the rest of his brothers laughed. Bennett mopped up the spill with a napkin. "I'm not sure why our parents didn't stop after one child," he wondered aloud.

But as always, he didn't really mean it. His brothers were his best friends and he honestly didn't know how he'd have gotten along in the world so far without them.

Eli, the next oldest after him, leaned closer. "Hey, don't include me in that. *Those two* are the ones with

issues,” he said pointing at Jackson and their other brother, Nick. “I think Mom was just tired at that point and dropped them both on their heads.”

The other guys at the table watched them with amused grins on their faces, not at all alarmed by the exchange. Although they wouldn't be since they were brothers as well, albeit in a strange way. Tank and Finn Marshall had grown up together but through a strange sequence of events, they had only recently come to know their three half-brothers, Gabe, Zack and Luke.

Finn raised his beer in tribute. “I always say the same thing about Tank. Although I'm pretty sure my mom actually did drop him at one point. Not her fault. He was a frickin' huge baby.”

They all chuckled again. Tank was easily the biggest person at the table, even taller than Bennett's own six foot four, which didn't happen often. Finn's smile faded when he noticed that Tank didn't even crack a smile.

“You okay?” Finn leaned forward, pinning his brother with a stare.

Tank startled, like he'd been deep in thought and paying no attention to anything around him. Bennett wasn't sure how the other man could hear himself think over the pulsing techno beat of the music and the chatter of all their voices. He already had the beginning of a headache.

Tank shrugged. “Nothing. I was just... nothing. Hey, did you hear anything about Emma’s party? I heard the girls were getting her a stripper.” Tank scowled, his expression going from *don’t fuck with me* to *murder is imminent*.

Finn rolled his eyes, obviously immune to his brother’s lightning fast mood changes.

“I have no idea. Plus, in case you haven’t noticed, we’re at a strip club. I know you’re not mad about Emma having a stripper at her party.”

“No, of course I’m not mad. She can do whatever she wants.” Tank took a sip of the beer in his hand. It was still almost full.

Finn crossed his arms. “Are you *serious* right now? This is your bachelor party. You’re not supposed to be thinking about Emma. This is your last chance to let loose and she agreed to it! Do you know how lucky you are?”

Tank nodded emphatically. “Yes, I do. That’s why—”

“No. I don’t want to hear anything else other than *I want another beer* or *Yes, Finn, I’m having an awesome time at my bachelor party*. We have all been completely whipped by our women. We’re not so old that we can’t still go out and raise a little hell, right?”

There was a chorus of rowdy male agreement around the table. Finn raised a hand to signal to the passing waitress that they needed another round.

“The only rule Emma had was that we not get you

completely drunk tonight. So we are going to get you *slightly* drunk and then toast to the end of your bachelor days.”

“Hear, hear!” Nick called out and hooted loud enough to be heard over the music. The rest of the guys joined in, except for Bennett and Tank. The other man met his eyes and smiled.

Bennett chuckled. Apparently he wasn’t the only one not excited by the prospect of drinking and watching naked women dance.

A waitress appeared next to Finn with a tray full of drinks. Even Bennett wasn’t so green that he didn’t know what a tray full of shot glasses looked like. He took a deep breath. He could hold his liquor just fine, so that wasn’t an issue. And Finn had arranged for a fleet of limousines to take them all home at the end of the night to make sure no one was drinking and driving. Maybe he should take his brother’s advice and relax a little. The dancing women weren’t that close to them after all, so it wasn’t any worse than seeing women in skimpy bikinis at the beach.

In theory, anyway.

“To Tank!” Finn held up his shot glass in a toast.

Everyone took a shot from the grouping of glasses on the table and toasted to Tank. Bennett looked at his with trepidation before figuring *what the hell* and tossing it back.

“Finally! I was worried we’d lost you already.” Nick handed him another drink. “Do you know how long it’s been since you hung out with us and got drunk?”

Bennett thought about it hard. Seeing his look of confusion, Nick made a face. “It was a trick question. You’ve never gotten drunk with us. Which means you’re long overdue, buddy. Have another.”

For the next hour, they talked about everything from their respective careers to how the local sports teams were doing. Bennett didn’t understand a lot of it but after four shots, he was feeling much better. Loose. He was starting to see the appeal of hanging out and *shooting the shit* as Nick called it.

“I’m having fun!” he yelled over the music.

Nick pumped a fist in the air. “He’s having fun!” he yelled over to Jackson, who looked like he was turning a little green.

“Is he okay?” Bennett asked.

“Yeah, he’s fine. He’s lost his tolerance, that’s all. He didn’t drink much while Ridley was pregnant since she couldn’t have it. Now that the baby’s born, she’s nursing so she still can’t drink. He’s just out of practice. I’ll get him some water.”

Nick stood to flag down the waitress again and that’s when Bennett saw it. Or rather, saw them. Three women stood right behind Finn. They were wearing tiny shorts

with spangles on them that reflected the light and bikini tops made from some kind of string. Bennett's mouth fell open.

"Are you ready yet, Mr. Marshall?" The closest one, a tiny blonde with huge dark eyes, asked Finn with a big smile.

"Sure thing. Guys, these ladies are here to give us a private show. And a lap dance for Tank!"

Tank spit out his drink, spraying everyone next to him. "Wait, what?"

"Come on, pick up. Pick up."

Bennett clutched the phone to his ear while simultaneously listening to make sure no one had followed him into the bathroom. He doubted anyone had even noticed his departure since they were all being currently mesmerized by the abundance of swinging naked breasts everywhere.

"Hello?" Katie's voice came over the line and Bennett's relief was so great, he sagged against the bathroom stall door.

"Katie! Good. You're there."

"Um, of course I'm here. Where else would I be? Are you okay?"

“Fine. I’m totally fine.” Bennett froze when he heard the door to the bathroom bang open followed by loud voices.

“What was that? Bennett? Aren’t you supposed to be at Tank’s bachelor party right now?”

“Um, yeah. I’m here.”

When he didn’t say anything else, Katie was silent. She was good at that, not rushing him when he was off-kilter, just giving him the time and space to figure out what he wanted to say. God, he loved this woman.

“I’m at the party. In the bathroom.”

Her voice, when she finally spoke again was warm with compassion. And a little bit of amusement.

“Bennett. Baby, are you hiding in the bathroom because there are naked women around?”

He gulped. “Um, am I in trouble if I say yes?”

Katie’s laugh was like the tinkle of music. It instantly made him smile. Even when he was stressed out about something, her laugh could always make him feel better.

“You’re not in trouble. And neither is Tank. Emma knew that there would be strippers because Finn told her beforehand.”

“Really?” Bennett didn’t bother trying to hide his shock. Even though Finn had said that Emma agreed to this party, he’d assumed that she hadn’t been told the true nature of it.

When he'd accepted the invitation to the bachelor party, he'd done so because he didn't want to be rude. Tank Marshall was a long-time employee of his brother Eli's and considered by them all to be a close family friend. But it hadn't occurred to him until he'd arrived and seen just what kind of "club" was hosting the party that there would be nudity. He'd assumed the party would be a more modern take on the stag party such as a poker night.

"Of course," Katie replied. "Tank and Emma are solid. Finn wouldn't want to do anything behind her back that might embarrass her. Besides, Emma's party is tonight as well and since her sister planned it, I'm pretty sure they have strippers, too!"

The tension he'd felt for the past hour bled out leaving Bennett exhausted and missing her so much he wished he could teleport through the phone.

"Did you think I would be mad?" Katie asked.

He wasn't sure what was the right answer. His mind worked in different ways from everyone else's and women spoke an entirely different language. More difficult than the four languages he currently spoke fluently.

"Not really."

"Well, I'm not. I trust you completely."

"You should. Because I would rather be with you anyway."

Her warm chuckle made him feel a little silly but no

less loved. “You are a sweetheart, Bennett Alexander. Now go out there and ogle some boobies. But don’t touch!”

“Of course I won’t be touching! The only ones I want to touch are yours.” He figured out belatedly that she was joking when she dissolved into laughter. “Whatever. I don’t know why I called you.”

“Yes, you do. Because you love me. Just as much as I love you.”

That made Bennett grin. He might not be the best at reading between the lines but apparently he was smart enough to score a woman who didn’t want him to. He loved that Katie put her feelings right out there with no hesitation.

“I do love you. I can’t wait to get home. I miss you.”

His heartfelt declaration was interrupted by a loud knock on the door of the stall Bennett was currently occupying. Horrified, he shrank back and almost fell into the toilet.

“Uh, who is it?” he asked, feeling instantly ridiculous. The feeling was compounded by the sound of a familiar voice coming through the door.

“The crypt keeper,” a droll voice answered. “Who do you think it is?”

Bennett spoke directly into the phone. “I have to go. Nick is here.”

“Okay, go. And try to have fun.”

After Katie hung up, Bennett reluctantly unlatched the stall door. When it swung open, Nick was over by the sink checking out his reflection in the mirror. He was dressed casually in a T-shirt and jeans but still managed to look stylish. His brother always looked great, even when he'd been partying for hours in a seedy nightclub.

"You can stop hiding now, Ben. The strippers left our table."

"I wasn't hiding," Bennett protested but stopped at Nick's incredulous look.

"Whatever, come on. Finn asked me to fetch you. We need your help."

"Why would he need my help?"

Bennett followed him out of the bathroom, squinting as they stepped back into the dark club. He followed Nick back to the VIP table reserved for their party. It took a minute for his eyes to adjust in the dim light to what he was seeing. But once he understood what he was looking at, he glanced over at Nick for an explanation.

"Remember how Finn told us Emma only had one rule for tonight?"

"Yes, I remember."

Finn had reminded them at the table but before they'd even left for the club, he'd made it clear that the only rule Emma had for tonight was to keep Tank from getting drunk. Apparently he was a little difficult to handle when

he was intoxicated and since he was such a big guy, that was a big deal.

Suddenly Bennett understood why Finn had asked for him. His help was definitely going to be needed if his eyes were to be believed. Because Tank was sprawled across the booth with one hand flung over his face, looking for all the world like he was blackout drunk.

“Sorry to ask for your help,” Finn said. “But Gabe and Zack had to leave and obviously I can’t carry his big ass.” He looked down pointedly at his cane. He’d injured his leg overseas while in the military.

“I’m not much help either,” Luke chimed in. The youngest Marshall was tall as well but had the slight build betraying his young age. He was legally old enough to drink, Bennett knew that, but looked like he was much younger.

“It’s no problem. Come on guys,” Bennett gestured to his brothers to come and help.

Eli took one leg and Nick took the other. Bennett put both of his arms under Tank’s shoulders to lift his torso. He stirred slightly, mumbling something. Then he pushed Bennett’s hands away.

“Don’t you touch me. I’m getting married,” Tank mumbled.

All the guys laughed.

Finn pulled out his camera. “He is never living this down.”

Even Bennett had to smother a smile. “Sorry Tank but we’ve got to get you home to your lady now.”

He leaned over and tried to hoist the big guy up again but whatever alcohol-induced stupor Tank had been in was no match for his outrage at being pawed by what he thought was a woman on a mission.

“Take your hands off me. I don’t want anybody’s hands but Emma’s. Emma!” he bellowed.

Luckily it was so loud in the club no one paid any attention to a drunk guy yelling.

“Okay we’ve got to get him out of here before he does something crazy.” Finn stated. “Just throw him over your shoulder in a fireman’s hold if you have to.”

Bennett grimaced. He’d end up in traction if he tried to carry two hundred pounds over his shoulder. “Alright, help me out here, Tank.”

Done with being delicate, Bennett readjusted his grip and on the count of three, they lifted Tank in unison. People moved out of the way as they carried him towards the front door of the club. When they were about halfway there, Tank roused again. He struggled in Bennett’s arms.

“Get off me. I have a wife, you horny bitch!”

Nick laughed so hard he lost his grip and the next thing Bennett knew there was a fist hitting him in the face.

He fell backward, barely missing crashing into a waitress but still landed square on his back staring up at the ceiling.

He rested there for a minute until Eli came over and extended a hand to help him up. "Can I go home now?"

*K*atie rolled over and blinked, unsure of what had awakened her. For a moment, she was disoriented. She never woke up in the middle of the night like this.

Then she moved her hand and felt the empty space next to her. It was empty. Bennett wasn't home yet. That's when it all came back to her, the earlier panicked phone call. Then a soft breeze moved through the room.

She smiled. "You made it back in one piece, I see."

"Barely," came the soft reply.

Katie sat up quickly and then turned on the light. Bennett squinted in the sudden bright light. Her eyes took in his disheveled appearance. His shirt was torn at the collar and was that... she gasped.

"What happened to you? Why is your face bruised?"

He shrugged. "Tank Marshall happened to me."

"Tank hit you? What kind of bachelor party was this? Was it a fight club theme?"

Bennett chuckled and sat on the edge of the bed. He'd paid his contractor a bonus to accelerate the construction on their new house, but until it was ready, they spent most nights at Katie's place. It was a little weird at first, having Bennett in the same house where her ex-husband had once lived but as in all things, her man was practical. They needed a place to live until their house was ready and this would do.

"Tank was three sheets to the wind and pining for his woman. He was so drunk that when I tried to lift him, he mistook that for an amorous advance. You know," he glanced over at Katie thoughtfully, "Emma's a lucky woman. Not many men are quite so principled, even when sober."

Katie narrowed her eyes. "Wait, let me see if I have this correct. Tank was drunk?"

"Yep." Bennett yanked off his shoes and placed them carefully out of the way so neither of them would trip on them in the morning.

"And you were trying to help him up because he was too drunk to walk?"

Bennett held up a finger. "I was nominated to help him up because I'm the only one as big as he is. But otherwise, correct."

Katie stifled a smile as a picture of the night's events started to form in her mind. "Then as you were helping

him up, Tank mistakenly assumed you were a random chick feeling him up?”

“Yep.”

“And he clocked you in the face?”

Now Bennett looked sheepish. “Of course not. Tank would never hit a woman, even drunk. He just kept saying ‘I’m getting married, you horny bitch!’ and Nick laughed so hard he dropped one of Tank’s legs. That started a domino effect where we all ended up falling and one of Tank’s fists hit me accidentally. Of course they all thought that was even *more* hilarious.”

Katie bit the inside of her cheek. But he noticed the small movement.

“Are you... laughing? You are, aren’t you?” He glared at her.

“No, of course not. You did a very nice thing tonight.” Katie could feel the laughter rising and tried desperately to think of something to stop it. But a giggle escaped before she could clamp her lips shut.

Bennett stiffened, his spine as straight as a ruler. “You are laughing!”

“I’m sorry,” Katie sputtered, laughing so hard now she could hardly breathe. “But the whole thing is so ridiculous. You’re supposed to be out carousing and doing morally questionable things and instead Tank is pining

away for his fiancée and sucker punching his friends. You have to admit it's pretty funny."

His lips twitched. "Okay it was a little funny. But only because he accidentally kicked Nick in the nuts, too!"

They both collapsed into laughter, before remembering that it was the middle of the night. Katie put a pillow over her face.

"Shhh, woman before you wake up our kids."

Bennett had become very close to Katie's two sons lately and it always made her so happy when he referred to them as "their" kids.

"I know. I'm trying." She stood on her knees so she could get closer. "Anyway, shiner aside, I'm glad you had fun."

All of her earlier exhaustion was gone now. Katie climbed into his lap, noting how his breath caught as she straddled him. He made her feel so beautiful, just by the way he reacted to her. It was too good to be believed.

"Not sure I'd call that fun but it was interesting, anyway. This," he looked down at her nightgown which barely covered her thighs, "is my idea of fun. All I could think about all night was coming back to you."

She wiggled on his lap and kissed him softly. "Really?"

"Yes. Tank was so cranky all night but I could understand why. Certain events in a man's life make him really

appreciate what he has. Tonight hit me the same way. All I wanted to do was get home to you and say thank you.”

Katie pulled back. “Thank you? For what?”

Bennett took the opportunity to kiss her neck, and Katie closed her eyes, enjoying the sensation. The man wasn’t just brilliant in the lab.

“So many things. Not running away when you found out the real reason I hired you. Having patience when I zone out or get so involved with my research that I forget what day it is or that the trash hasn’t been taken out. For reading to me every night and smiling at me every morning.”

When she spoke again, her voice was thick. Every time she thought of how close she’d come to missing the love of her life, Katie was moved to tears.

“That’s no hardship, Bennett. I’m smiling because you make me so happy. I’m smiling because I love you.”

Bennett rubbed his nose against hers gently.

“I know. That’s why I’m thanking you. For loving me as I am.”

THE END

Thanks for reading *The Bachelor Party*! If you haven't read Bennett & Katie's full-length book yet, **click here to find out more about JUST ONE THING.**

Have you read the rest of the Alexanders series?

Meet Jackson & Ridley in “One More Day” :

“Good girl” Ridley has always attracted bad guys. Now she's on the run and has nowhere to hide. So when Jackson Alexander mistakes her for her twin, she decides to do something she knows is wrong. *She lies.*

Watch Nick try to win over Raina in “The Things I Do for You” : Nicholas Alexander finally has something the woman of his dreams needs. He'll give Raina a baby if she gives him what he wants. *Her.*

Hi guys!

I hope you enjoyed *The Bachelor Party!*

Author's Request: I love writing these extra scenes and I especially love being able to release them for FREE.

It helps me a ton if you **REVIEW** the related book *Just One Thing* (especially on Amazon and Apple). It only takes a minute and it doesn't cost you anything! xoxo, minx

Join my VIP list!

VIP members get access to all the bonus material and FREE books!

Okay, now back to the steamy stuff :) Do you love Romantic Comedy? Turn the page for an excerpt of the most inappropriate office romance ever!

Excerpt of Beg Me

Did you miss Milo & Mya's story?



***F*OR THE FIRST TIME EVER MY
ROOSTER WON'T CROW.**

. . .

I can't believe it either. It's a tragedy.

Years of perfect performance and now this traitor decides to get picky. And the only woman who makes little Milo stand up and *c-ck a doodle doo* is my co-worker, Mya Taylor, a.k.a. my competition for the biggest ad account this side of the Atlantic.

Our client wants a wedding expert so I'm suddenly fake-engaged to a woman who hates me AND would gladly put my balls in her purse. But when I find out she's never taken a trip to O-town, we make a little wager.

Not only will I win the client, but I'll prove to her that multiples are NOT a myth. We work together all day and fight between the sheets all night. But at the end of the day, it's still a competition.

May the best man win.

BEG ME is a frenemies to lovers, completely inappropriate romantic comedy. Side effects may include clutching your pearls and laughing until you almost choke.

Laugh out Loud Romantic Comedy

Office Romance / Frenemies to Lovers

Download BEG ME now
at minxmalone.com/begme

Excerpt of *Beg Me* © 2018 M. Malone

MILO

Time to get our game faces on.

As we approach the table, everyone stands, and the introductions are made all around. Maybe it's because I'm watching Mr. Lavin so closely that I see how his eyes follow Mya after she shakes his hand and then walks around the table to greet the other members of his team. She knows all of their names, as do I. Then she takes a seat right next to me.

Before I can even sit down, James is already ordering a scotch from the waitress. Then I see why.

Elizabeth is sitting two tables away.

She raises her glass of wine in our direction. I turn to see James give a begrudging wave. I'm not sure if anyone else has noticed her yet, but she's already accomplished her goal. There's no way James can focus completely on the client tonight with his ex-wife sitting right in his line of vision.

Christ.

"Thank you all for traveling to meet with me. I've had

this week scheduled with potential investors for months, so it's been helpful that you could come to me while I'm already in the States."

"When do you go back to Italy?" Wallace asks. "I follow you on Instagram. You guys, his page is *lit*. Fast cars, beautiful clothes. You're living the dream, man." He sighs before digging into his salad course enthusiastically.

Andre just laughs. "Thank you. This is our goal, to be as the kids say, *fire*. Why is all of the American slang centered around temperature, I wonder? It used to be that things were *cool*, now they're *hot*, *fire*, *bomb* or *lit*. Fascinating. I have an entire team of people who study the social media trends."

James looks like he has no idea what is happening. But I strongly suspect that Wallace in his own unique, bumbling way has just broken the ice for us.

Well, if he's broken the ice, I might as well jump in first. "Mirage employs a lot of talented young designers. It's why our ad campaigns are so on trend. We combine years of experience in understanding what makes people buy with the fresh perspective of different generations."

Mya grins over at me. "Wallace is on Milo's team. He's been with us for almost a year now and graduated from Columbia with honors. He's also an amateur photographer and is pretty popular on Instagram, too."

I glance over at her. *He is?* How does she know all

that? Maybe there is something to paying attention in those bullshit icebreaker sessions at work after all.

Wallace looks shocked, too. “My account has nowhere near the numbers some of my friends have, but I just passed ten thousand.”

Mr. Lavin actually looks impressed. “That’s quite an accomplishment, especially for a hobbyist.” He clears his throat. “I’m happy to meet with you all in person after hearing about you from Mr. Lawson.”

James gives him a tight smile. “I’m extremely proud of my team.”

“It shows,” Andre replies.

Dinner proceeds with the typical pleasantries. Wallace looks a little confused, but I can only pray the kid can hold his tongue. With these types of clients, you never rush right into business. You need to woo them, almost like a woman you’re trying to convince to come back to your place after dinner. She’s not just going to come with you if you ask within the first ten minutes. She needs you to show her that you’re worth her time. Are you going to savor her the same way you do the ten-inch porterhouse on your plate? Or will you rush through the act like a kid scarfing down an ice cream cone?

I can’t imagine a man like Andre Lavin scarfing anything. He needs to see that we’re not only the best

team to take over his marketing but also that we're people he can work with.

We need him to *like* us.

As the waitress is clearing the entrees, Andre looks around the table with satisfaction. "Perhaps it is old-fashioned, but I care to meet with any agencies that work on our marketing directly. It's important that the people crafting our image understand what we're about here at Lavin Fashions."

Everyone instantly ceases their side conversations and pays attention. Now we're getting to the good stuff. The reason we're all here.

"What is your vision of Lavin Fashions, Mr. Lavin?" Mya asks. "I've read the official company mission statement, but I would love to hear it from you."

"Please, call me Andre."

The way he's looking at her makes it seem like he just wants to hear her say his name. My hand sitting on top of the table curls into a fist. It's unsettling that this bothers me. He's just a client, throwing a little charm at the pretty ad executive. I've seen it plenty of times, and I've had my fair share of clients, male and female, attempt to flirt with me.

None of those made me want to growl in frustration. Or made me worry that Mya might actually want to flirt back.

“It’s much more than just the clothes,” Andre begins after a brief pause. “Our brand creates the garments that become part of people’s memories. And for our newest venture, we’re looking for a partner that understands the importance of family, friendship, love.”

The woman sitting next to him sniffs. *Cristiane Laveque*. From my research on the Lavin team, I know that she’s a top designer for Lavin Fashions.

“Apologies, but this is not a strength of American companies, we have found. So few understand *l’amore*.” She shakes her head ruefully as if the vulgar ways of the American market are just too much.

Mentally, I’m rolling my eyes, but this could be a real obstacle to winning their business. If they think that we’re not cultured enough, it will be difficult to change that opinion. Granted, Mirage does plenty of “American” commercials and brands, but it’s not like we’re all racecars and beer. We have plenty of upper-echelon brands in the jewelry, hotel and entertainment industries.

“I believe Mirage can handle anything. We have such a diverse workforce that all of our clients find someone they can relate to. We also have more women in leadership roles than many of our competitors.”

Maybe that’ll calm her fears that we don’t get *l’amore*. Mya in particular handles a lot of brands that cater to women, including a high-profile lingerie line.

Andre sits back in his chair and seems to be considering her words. “I must admit we’ve been approached by other firms that are run by people who are married. They understand what brides want.”

James sits up straighter. “So, it is a bridal line?”

Andre laughs lightly. “Yes, the rumors are true. Lavin Fashions will introduce a new line called Lavin Bridal next year. It will be a separate division of the company which is why I’m meeting with investors. I didn’t want word to get out until it was all finalized.”

James looks like he’s going to be sick. This is why Elizabeth has been so smug. She must have heard the Lavin group wanted someone who has been through the process of planning a wedding. Just another way for her to rub her recent marriage in James’s face.

“I’m sure all the women on our team have mentally planned their dream wedding, even if they aren’t married.” I send a panicked glance at Mya.

This would be a really good fucking time for her to pipe in with some story of how she’s been dreaming of her wedding dress since she was a little girl.

Unfortunately, Andre seems to be following my line of thought because he turns directly to Mya, too. “If you were planning a wedding, for example,” he says, “wouldn’t you want a wedding planner who was married?”

Mya pauses with her water glass halfway to her mouth. “Well, yes. I suppose I would.”

James just blinks. Wallace pauses mid-chew with a piece of iceberg lettuce hanging from his lip. The whole table seems stunned into silence. She didn’t mean to say that, and everyone can see it on her face. But in a rare, caught-off-guard moment, Mya has done the unforgivable.

She’s been honest.

An awkward silence descends over the table. James takes another gulp from his scotch. Across from me, members of the Lavin team exchange significant glances before taking an interest in their plates. Worst of all, Andre Lavin just looks amused.

While Mya looks devastated.

You know how sometimes you can look back and identify the precise moment you fucked up? Well, later tonight I’m sure I’ll be remembering the exact second I pushed us all off the cliff together.

“I agree,” I state loudly.

James chokes slightly, and Wallace pounds him on the back. I ignore his panicked look and keep my eyes on Mr. Lavin.

“I agree with Mya,” I repeat in case anyone at the table missed it the first time I pushed my career in front of a bus. “Having a married wedding planner would be great. Although I’d be more concerned about the people

actually doing the work. That's really what sets Mirage apart."

By now, everyone is staring at me, especially James, probably wondering where the hell I'm going with this.

Mya, however, is watching me with a small, tremulous smile on her face. Like she can't believe that I'm backing her up right now. And damn if that smile isn't what does me in. Because I don't just bet on distracting Mr. Lavin; I double down and take it all the way to the bank.

"Mirage is really the best fit for anything to do with weddings. After all, it's the only agency I know with two team leads that are in love and engaged to be married." I turn to Mya and whisper, "Just go with it."

Then I tilt my head slightly and brush my lips over hers.

MYA Everyone is staring. I can feel the heat of their eyes on the side of my face. But even that isn't enough to take me out of this moment. This sweet, thrilling moment. My eyes drift closed, and the world falls away.

Milo is kissing me.

If you'd asked me just an hour ago what kind of kisser

I thought Milo would be, I'd have said aggressive. He's all about going all-in and getting to the finish line. I would have assumed that he wouldn't care much about the process but rather only about the end game.

I would have been completely and utterly wrong.

His lips are soft, and he feathers them over mine gently, barely touching me. The result is a whispery soft touch that sends chills up and down my spine. Then he lays his mouth over mine and kisses me properly, his tongue brushing softly against mine.

After what feels like several hours but is probably only several seconds, he pulls back. But he doesn't just stop. No, Milo can't do anything simply, not even shocking me to my core with a kiss. Because right after he pulls away, he does this soft little nuzzle, rubbing his nose back and forth against mine.

Why is that my kryptonite? That completely unnecessary little snuggle just takes all the indignation I was building up to and scatters it into the wind. Along with all rational thought.

A throat clears and it's like jumping into an ice bath. If we'd been standing, we'd have probably sprung apart, but instead I grope the table blindly until my hand connects with my water glass. The icy liquid cools my throat but not my lust.

What the hell was that?

Everyone at the table is still eating and talking softly amongst themselves, almost like the last thirty seconds didn't just change the rotational orbit of the planet. Isn't it funny how a certain event can knock you off your feet but seems to have no effect on anyone else? It's like experiencing an earthquake while everyone around you goes on with their lives unaware. Well, everyone isn't unaware. Andre Lavin is watching us carefully.

So is James.

Oh shit.

This is where I should speak up. Tell Mr. Lavin that I cannot wait to see his newest designs, that women everywhere are going to be clamoring for the chance to wear one of his dresses. But I can't because my mind is still muddled, and I can still feel the imprint of Milo's lips against mine.

"You make an interesting point, Mr. Hamilton. Being married is one thing, but to have a couple who are currently planning a wedding designing my campaign would be ideal." Mr. Lavin nods in satisfaction. "I had a good feeling about this firm, but I can see that your reputation is accurate. Professional, innovative and discreet. Exactly what I need."

James looks slightly dazed, the same expression you might wear after you narrowly miss being hit by a cab. He

looks between me and Milo and then back to Mr. Lavin, but nothing comes out of his mouth.

Once again, Wallace comes to the rescue. “You can’t go wrong with those two in charge, if you’re looking for discretion. They’ve been dating in secret for ages and nobody knew except for me. I mean, I could tell. He stares at her ass whenever she walks away.”

The water I just sipped comes back up my nose.

Milo hands me a napkin without missing a beat. “Thank you, Wallace. So, Mr. Lavin, tell us about your vision for Lavin Bridal in particular.”

And so it goes. Milo manages to carry the conversation all the way through the dessert course and then through coffee. Personally, I’ve never understood the practice of drinking coffee after dessert, but when the waitress comes around, I order some anyway. Maybe the extra caffeine will wake me the hell up.

But I still feel like I’m sleepwalking as James bids the members of the Lavin team goodnight and they promise to be in touch. Wallace is the first to scamper off, probably to go post the selfie he took with Mr. Lavin to Instagram. The thought makes me chuckle, but my throat instantly turns to sandpaper when James approaches.

This entire time, Milo and I have been sitting in silence. I couldn’t take the chance of asking any questions where the Lavin team might overhear. But now I wish I’d

thought to text him or something so I'd know how we're handling this.

But James doesn't look upset at all. He's practically glowing. It could be all the scotch, but either way, he looks thrilled.

"You two, ah, I should have known. You've done an amazing job keeping your relationship out of the office. Good work. Knew I could count on you." He claps Milo on the shoulder and gifts me with a wide, loopy grin.

Even if I knew what to say to him right now, I don't think I'd have the heart to wipe that smile off his face. Tomorrow is soon enough for him to realize that we've screwed up this deal. Maybe a good night's sleep will make him more lenient when he's deciding whether to fire us.

Milo pulls out my chair for me as I stand, and I follow wordlessly as we leave the restaurant. It's a Thursday night, but as we walk back through the casino to reach the elevators to the rooms, there are so many people out you'd never think it was a weekday. Time seems to move differently here. I notice an older lady with a purple fanny pack methodically feeding coins into a slot machine. She looks like she's been at it for a while. Maybe I should just stay down here, living off the free drinks and the adrenaline of gambling. It would probably be better than what's waiting for me when we get back to DC.

I'm so deep in my thoughts that I'm not paying atten-

tion when we get on the elevator. It's only when it stops that I realize we didn't push the button for my floor. But Milo loops his arm around my waist and guides me out of the elevator anyway.

"But my room—"

"Not here," he murmurs in my ear. The deep rumble of his voice so close sends a shiver down my spine. "Some of the Lavin team are on this floor. Wait until we get inside."

"Inside what?" Belatedly, I realize he means inside his room. He has his key card out and the door open before I can say, *No way in hell*.

The door slams shut behind us, and all the things I was getting ready to say get stuck in my throat.

Trying to gather my thoughts, I look around the room. The layout is the same as the one I was given, TV, big window directly across from the door, except he has a king-size bed instead of two doubles. Behind him, there are several dress shirts scattered on the bed, and the covers are all tangled, like he took a nap before coming down to dinner. Just like that I have a mental image of Milo naked in those sheets, and being alone with him in this room seems like a *very* bad idea.

Completely at ease with the idea of the two of us being alone, he shrugs out of his suit jacket and loosens his tie. I'm instantly distracted by the small patch of skin

revealed at the top of his shirt where it's unbuttoned. "I know you must have a million questions," he says finally.

But I don't. Truthfully, I only have one.

"What the hell just happened?"

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BEG ME : My cock a doodle doo is on strike. Yeah I know, I can't believe it either. But he'll only crow for one woman. Spoiler Alert
she hates me

ASK ME : Am I arrogant? Maybe. Do women still want me?
Abso-F'ing-lutely. Then I meet the one woman who isn't
impressed.

WANT ME : No strings attached. Sounds good, right? Until I realize that if I'm not her boyfriend ... the position is open for someone else.

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Bad King: My parents just put a gold diggers target on my back. But if all they want is a wedding, I can do that. I'll find the fiancée of their nightmares. *Who Wants to Marry a Billionaire?*
Must be completely inappropriate.

Bad Blood : I'd do anything for my best friend's little sister. Until she asks for the one thing I can't give. One night. No rules.

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About the Author

M. Malone is a 2019 RITA® Award winner and a NYT & USA Today Bestselling author of completely inappropriate romantic comedy. She spends most days wearing Wonder Woman leggings and T-shirts that she's embarrassed for anyone to see while she plays with her imaginary friends.

She lives with her husband and their two sons in the picturesque mountains of Northern Virginia even though she is afraid of insects, birds, butterflies and other humans.

She also holds a Master's degree in Business from a prestigious college that would no doubt be scandalized at how she's using her expensive education.



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