

COME AND GET ME

by
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CHAPTER ONE

Okay, what the hell is it now?" Elliott Foster shouted from her closet.

She was trying to get dressed, and in the past hour she had received three sales calls and one wrong number. At the sound of her doorbell she was prepared to tear into the poor soul on the other side. Fuming, she strode through the house and flung open the door.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" She'd known it was only a matter of time before *this* woman showed up on her doorstep.

"Do you greet all your lovers this rudely?"

"You're not my lover, Rebecca," Elliott growled in frustration. *I don't need this shit right now.*

Several months ago she and Rebecca Alsip had spent a long, snowy weekend in Aspen between the flannel sheets, which Elliott would hardly classify as making them "lovers." They'd hooked up for a few weeks, but when Rebecca started making demands, including the right to have Elliott exclusively, Elliott ended it. However, her short-term fling did not go quietly.

Rebecca batted her hard blue eyes and turned on her best Daddy's girl smile. "We could very easily remedy that, Elliott. You know I'm more than willing to pick up where we left off." This invitation was accented by a slow perusal of Elliott's body as she moved a step closer.

Elliott blocked the door. "I'd be more than happy to pick up where we left off. As I recall, I was telling you that anything you have to say to me, you can say to my lawyer."

She had never wanted their disagreement to go as far as to involve attorneys, but Rebecca's erratic behavior over the past few months had forced her hand. Conflicting emotions battled in her head. She didn't know if she was furious because this woman refused to accept the fact that their affair was over or because she was here, standing on her porch. She settled on the former and demanded, "What do you want, Rebecca?"

Elliott watched with a certain detached fascination as Rebecca's demeanor changed in an instant from using sex appeal as an enticement to sex as a weapon. It had been inevitable, she supposed, that sooner or later her sexual interludes would catch up with her. From the moment she met Rebecca, she'd sensed danger, but one look at the drop-dead gorgeous body in front of her had banished her caution to the wind. It wasn't a mistake she made in business. She'd spent the past three years getting to the top by being a good judge of people and of risk. The fact that she failed to heed her own instincts with Rebecca made her feel like an idiot, and even worse, an idiot who could still be tempted to touch the flame that was burning her.

Irritated, she forced her gaze away from the cleavage displayed by Rebecca's provocative blouse and reminded herself of the dozens of phone calls she'd received from the manipulative blonde. Rebecca had tried everything from coy sexual teasing to pleading to see her again and, lately, outright threats if she continued to refuse. Now a flash of triumph in Rebecca's eyes made it clear that she had caught Elliott looking.

Her confidence growing, she said with a sensuous smile, "I know what you want, baby."

"Don't kid yourself," Elliott retorted coldly. "You don't know the first thing about what I want."

"Maybe that's true. But I know what you don't want." A sneer of contempt sapped Rebecca's face of its superficial prettiness, revealing a woman who would probably pimp her grandmother. "You don't want everyone knowing you're a queer. And for three hundred thousand dollars, they won't have to."

Years of self-control in the boardroom did not fail Elliott. Her heart was racing and her mind whirling, but as calm as if Rebecca had asked for the butter, she replied, "I'm not following you."

“I’m saying three hundred thousand makes me go away.” Rebecca’s voice dripped sarcasm. Evidently, she believed she had Elliott by the short hairs. She had already threatened to out Elliott in an ugly, explicit manner to the board of directors of Foster McKenzie, and Elliott had already told her that since the board already knew she was gay, they would not give a damn. The demand for cash was new and completely unexpected.

Elliott took several deep, calming breaths before she spoke. She didn’t like being threatened, least of all by a woman who was supposed to be just a pretty face. “That’s roughly fifty thousand dollars a fuck,” she said with a trace of amusement. “I don’t know who you’ve been talking to, Rebecca, but you were definitely not worth it.”

Rebecca’s eyes filled with fury and her face turned a deep crimson, ready to explode. “How dare you! Just wait till I’m through with you. What will your adoring big shots think about you when I expose you as preying on and seducing innocent, defenseless straight women?” Her voice seethed with hatred. “You’ll be disgraced and out on the street with nothing.”

An eerie calmness settled over Elliott as she changed her perspective on this problem. The truth was that Rebecca had blatantly propositioned *her* and was far from the innocent lesbian virgin. But now, this was no longer personal; it was business, and Elliott knew how to handle business.

“Let me guess who my board will believe. Me, the owner of the company, or you, a woman who plays around behind her husband’s back and is trying to extort money.”

“You think you’re so smart!” Rebecca responded shrilly. “Well, your business friends might be cool with you being queer behind closed doors, but just wait till your dirty secrets are all over the tabloids. You know, in your position it’s really dumb to let women send you pornographic e-mails with photos in them. They can fall into the wrong hands.”

It took all of Elliott’s willpower not to show a reaction beyond cool contempt. Was it even possible that Rebecca could have accessed her e-mail? Elliott felt weak at the thought. Her business communications were in a separate account she never left open. But

she had been using her laptop when they were in Aspen, and it was possible that she hadn't signed out of her personal e-mail. She could think of several very candid e-mails Rebecca might have found there. Two were from the closeted daughter of a family-values politician, a story the media would eat up. Elliott had recently deleted them. Not soon enough, it seemed.

Masking her concern with a tone of brazen unconcern, she said, "Don't fuck with me, Rebecca, because I'll eat you for lunch. Now get out of here or you'll need a lawyer for more than threatening me." Elliott slammed the door on a very big mistake. "Jesus, Ryan is going to bust my chops over this one," she said to no one as she walked down the hall to resume dressing.

Getting involved with Rebecca had been the biggest mistake of her life, and Ryan Smith, her attorney, had given her strict instructions not to speak to her. That was the problem—Elliott seemed to have very little control over her actions when it came to the blond bombshell, and she was definitely going to pay for it. She wondered if Rebecca was really serious about selling her story to the tabloids. If so, maybe three hundred thousand was a small price to make it all go away. The politician's daughter was a charming young woman who had been foolish. She should never have sent indiscreet e-mails, and Elliott had told her so. They had both agreed to delete all their communications, but Elliott had been careless.

It wasn't as if she'd miss the money, she thought; it would simply be another line item in her checkbook. Elliott could already hear Ryan laughing at that idea. It would just be the start; blackmailers didn't stop asking for money. But they had to do something. This was her fault and she could not allow a closeted ex to be outed in these circumstances, let alone put up with sordid publicity no one in her position needed, gay or straight.

She finished securing her cufflinks, slipped on her jacket, and stood in front of the mirror as she adjusted her collar and lapels. The woman staring back at her looked every bit as successful as she was, from the knot of her silk tie to the toes of her Bruno Magli loafers. The impeccably tailored Armani tuxedo only enhanced her lean form and made her seem taller than she really was. Her unruly dark hair had been cut recently and she continued to decline the

rinse that her hairdresser, Randall, guaranteed would hide the few strands of silver beginning to pepper her temples. Elliott refused to be anything other than what she was.

At thirty-four, she was the chairman of the board and CEO of Foster McKenzie, a venture capital firm with billions of dollars invested in business and economies around the world. Until she took the helm three years ago, the most important thing in her life had been the next big adventure under the covers. She drove expensive cars, indulged in what she termed “the celebration of life,” had friends all around the world, and never lacked for female companionship. It had all come crashing down when her father died and her uncle subsequently drove the company into near bankruptcy. Her younger sister, Stephanie, was neither qualified nor interested enough to run the business, so Elliott had been forced to reconsider her blithe existence and take on the responsibility that was rightfully hers.

Along with that responsibility came power and fame, both of which led to a never-ending supply of attractive women willing to share her bed. Elliott never knew if they were attracted to her or her money and, frankly, most of the time she didn’t care. She always made very clear that she was not interested in monogamy or a relationship, and she cut the strings if they started to tighten. So far, no one had complained. Elliott always made sure to choose as her partners women who knew the score. *So how did I go so wrong with this one?*

The sharply dressed woman in the mirror said, “She’s got some nerve trying to blackmail me into coughing up cash for our little roll in the sack. I’ll be damned if I give that bitch one red cent.”

Elliott combed her hair. And speaking of a bitch, this charity event was the last thing she wanted to go to tonight. Why didn’t she just say no?

The tanned face scowled at her. “Yeah, right.”

Without a backward glance, Elliott spun on her heel, turned off the light, and walked out the door, heading for her garage.

Just as she’d expected, traffic was at a standstill three blocks from her destination, the Lincoln Grand Hotel. This added another layer of anger to her already short fuse. The public responsibilities of her position at Foster McKenzie were onerous, and sometimes

it seemed like they were more social than managerial. Tonight was one of those occasions. Elliott knew her presence mattered to the organizers, and her closest friend Victoria had insisted she attend so they could be each other's "date" for the evening, a strategy that usually served them well; Elliott would blow smoke if Victoria wanted to leave early, and her friend always did the same for her.

Cars crept forward until she was finally able to swing into the driveway of her destination. She handed her keys to the valet and entered the lobby of the historic hotel, in search of a stiff drink. Electricity was in the air and the throngs of people milling around set her teeth on edge. Small talk was a skill she excelled in, especially at these types of social affairs, but in her foul mood, benign chatter was not going to come easily. She straightened her posture as if preparing for battle and approached one of the members of her board.

CHAPTER TWO

Lauren Collier tuned out the voice of the balding man speaking from the podium. Her date for the evening was equally dull, and it took all of her willpower to pay attention to either man. As the sole female on the executive team of Bradley & Taylor, not to mention the *only* single female executive, she had been assigned the task of escorting the boss's nephew that evening. Lauren had been incensed by the assumption that she would not only give up her time for the event but be grateful for the opportunity to spend the evening with a marriageable, well-connected male. She was still pissed several hours later when the perfectly groomed, pompous Princeton MBA continued to treat her like *she* was the eye candy on his arm, instead of understanding that *he* was the guy who had to have an arranged date.

There's gotta be a law against this shit. The funny thing was, Lauren knew the law inside and out, as the chief legal counsel of a Fortune 500 company. Two years ago, she had been surprised when a headhunter contacted her as a potential candidate to fill the position soon to be vacated by the retiring counsel. She was never sure who had put the recruiter on her tail, since she was only a relatively successful midlevel attorney at a local law firm. Seven interviews and eight months later, she was in a job she loved with a high six-figure salary, an office with a view, and a secretary, and she was being ignored by the "eligible" Mr. GQ.

Her gaze swept the exquisitely decorated ballroom of the Lincoln Grand. Handsome men and beautiful women were rising

in applause from tables topped with white linen tablecloths and Wedgwood china. Black tie was the dress of the evening, and by the looks of the women, and some of the men, every safe deposit box in San Diego had been emptied of its contents for this event.

The rich, famous, and powerful of her city were gathered en masse to be seen and to raise money for the Children's Education Fund of Greater San Diego County. Lauren had been to several such galas in the past year and she was convinced that these people were more interested in the tax deduction and the distinction of having their name on the benefactor list than they were with actually helping the underprivileged kids in her hometown.

The president of the Chamber of Commerce and his wife occupied the table directly in front of the podium along with the bishop of the archdiocese. Adjacent to them was the CEO of the largest bank in town, who was eyeing a platinum blonde with surgically enhanced breasts while his wife of twenty-two years glared at him over her empty glass of Chardonnay. At the mayor's table was his wife and Steven Stark, an aging movie star in town to promote his latest flick. Stark's trophy wife sat next to him wearing an expression that said that she would rather be anywhere other than here.

Lauren's gaze halted on a woman at a table on the other side of the expansive room. She was taller than everyone at her table, and even from this distance Lauren could discern a long, lean form that was evident under her formal attire as she stood and applauded the award winner. Lauren was intrigued by the fact that she was the only woman in the room in a tuxedo, and she wore it comfortably. She looked vaguely familiar, but Lauren could not quite place where she had seen her before. She would definitely have remembered if they had met.

She realized she was staring when her escort leaned over and whispered something unintelligible in her ear. She nodded vaguely and made a socially appropriate comment, thankful this farce would soon be over and she could go home and watch old reruns of *I Love Lucy*. Throughout the appeals for money, her eyes kept returning to the woman in the tux, who sat comfortably in her chair, twirling her

half-empty wineglass in her hand. She looked preoccupied, Lauren thought, unhappy to be here but hiding it well.

Elliott allowed the long-winded speeches to wash over her as she mapped out her options and planned what she was going to tell her attorney this time. What was the worst thing that could happen if they just told Rebecca to go fuck herself? Elliott's sexuality was not a closely guarded secret, but she didn't want it to be a topic of daily conversation either, and Rebecca could be trouble. Elliott could handle any fallout in her personal life—her family had long ago accepted the fact that she was a lesbian—but she was more concerned with the embarrassment this could bring to her firm.

She had worked nonstop to return the company to its previous level of trust, respect, and impeccable ethical standards, the principles set by her father so many years ago. It would be a major distraction if her clients even suspected she had seduced an unwilling woman. Through some very hard lessons, she had learned that you cannot change what people think and she had stopped trying many years ago. She was well aware that the focus would quickly move from her brilliant mind and how much money she made, to their crotches, as seemed to be the case for most men when they fantasized about two women together. Various clients came to mind, conservatives she was certain she would lose if Rebecca started rumors, and there were associates who would begin to distance themselves from her firm. She was in final negotiations with the largest software developer in the country, trying to secure additional venture capital funding, and she knew without a doubt that that deal would come to a crashing halt if there was any bad “morals” publicity.

The faces of her employees flashed in front of her. These were the people who would be hurt the most in a scandal. If clients and investment managers took their business elsewhere, she would be forced to lay off people associated with those accounts. Foster McKenzie employees had already suffered under the disastrous reign of her uncle. She had been able to rehire many as the firm got back on its feet, and she now had an outstanding staff. Elliott swallowed at the thought of letting them down.

As she contemplated the tricky possibilities, the hairs on the

back of her neck rose and she was distracted by the familiar sense that someone was staring at her. Elliott was used to being the subject of inquisitive eyes at company meetings, or during a speech she was delivering, or in a bar. The latter was generally the only time she paid any attention, as it was typically the prelude to an evening of delightful entertainment in the arms of a beautiful woman. But tonight a casual encounter was the last thing she was interested in. Her run-in with Rebecca was still fresh in her mind, and she didn't feel up to conducting the cross-examination that would ensure the woman cruising her shared the same ideas about sex without strings. At this moment, all Elliott wanted was the opportunity to escape after she'd paid her dues, and go home to soak in a long, hot bath.

As the speech droned on, she subtly scanned the crowd. Faces, equally bored, dotted the landscape of tables, and a head or two nodded in slumber. Finally, her eyes landed on a face carefully schooled to glazed concentration, as if the man speaking into the microphone truly commanded attention. Elliott recognized the expression. *She's as thrilled to be here as I am, and hiding it better than most. I wonder whose shit list she's on.* A split second later their eyes met.

Lauren blushed. She knew she had been caught looking. The woman in the tux held her gaze for a long, unwavering moment, and the expression on her face shifted from bored indifference and annoyance to faint interest, then she looked away. Lauren felt as though she had just been considered for something important, then cast aside as not worth the effort. *Well, piss on you too.* She returned her focus to the front of the stage and valiantly resumed her phony interest.

Twenty minutes later the speeches were over and the dancing was in full swing. A group of musicians played a mix of classical music and light jazz, which was obviously well received judging by the number of couples on the dance floor. The tables had been cleared of all evidence of the dinner enthusiastically consumed by the guests, and white tablecloths had been replaced with red.

Lauren ditched her "date" and went in search of a fresh cocktail, since she figured she would die of thirst if she waited for him to notice her empty glass. Once her mission was accomplished,

she spotted an area where she knew she could hide from the crowd without being too far out of sight of the festivities if her presence was needed. Ensuring she didn't make eye contact with anyone who would want to chitchat, she headed quickly for the safe haven. As she rounded the corner, she ran almost headlong into the tall woman in the tux and froze, mumbling an apology that was ignored. The woman was so preoccupied, she barely seemed to notice.

"I know what you told me, Ryan, but I'm telling you again, I am not going to give her one goddamn cent. Yes, I know my reputation is not the only thing at stake." Elliott blinked as she virtually stepped on a guest standing in her path. Aggravated, she informed the stranger by way of greeting, "Excuse me, I'm having a private conversation here."

Lauren had to tilt her head up to look into the cold, almost black eyes of the woman who stood several inches taller than her own 5'6". It was then that she noticed the cell phone next to her ear and the telltale signs of anger on her face. Earlier that evening it had seemed a very attractive face, but right now the scathing look directed at her marred its appeal.

"Just a minute, Ryan." Elliott lifted the phone from her ear and pierced Lauren with a look that usually turned grown men into sniveling, apologetic buffoons. "Hello! Didn't you hear me? I'm on the phone having a private conversation." She emphasized the word *private* to make her point.

Lauren recovered from the initial shock of their near collision and lifted her chin in response to the challenge. "I heard you. But this isn't your private terrace, and there's no need for you to be such an ass. Perhaps if you were paying more attention to your surroundings, you might not run into strangers and find it necessary to blame them for your own clumsiness."

Lauren didn't have to raise her voice to get her point across. She was an expert in cutting people off at the knees with her tone and inflection. She gave the woman a withering look and walked away. She was still fuming from the encounter when she spotted her escort heading toward her. Quickly, she looked around and found that she did not have an appropriate escape route. Holding back a grimace, she steeled herself for whatever he wanted now.