

FLAME DAME CHRONICLES

CHAPTER ONE

A NEW BEGINNING

Ingots of morning light invaded the bedroom forcing my eyes open earlier than I would have liked. Apparently, the brown paper covering the floor to ceiling sliding glass doors wasn't adequate. Gradually, I remembered.... *I'm not in Milwaukee anymore*, where the only balmy place in December is beneath a bundle of feather down. I leapt out of bed, ran out onto the balcony and looked up, searching.

It was there! A hazy, mostly full moon hovering in the morning sky. Like me, unwilling to succumb to darkness; defiant in its violation of curfew. I winked at my fellow rebel. Bending over the twelfth story railing, tropical Florida air swaddled my bare legs. Boats bobbed in the waters of the intracoastal, sunlight raining on their bows. To my right, fair weather clouds played above the Atlantic Ocean and joggers crowded the beachfront sidewalk.

As I perused the lush landscape, my fingers curled in tentative greeting to a palm frond bending my way. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee overwhelmed the salty smell of the ocean and coaxed me inside to the kitchen.

I'd barely mixed the dollop of milk into a steaming mugful when I heard the front door open. I closed my eyes and waited for it, a smile tickling my stomach. His arm snaked around my waist and I shivered as his lips brushed the nape of my neck.

“Good morning Grace Gunn,” he whispered. Merrick Forester, the new man in my life.

“How are you today, Sugar?” he drawled. Though born in Miami, Florida, a stint in North Carolina would tinge his language for a lifetime.

I turned, wanting the warmth of his smile. Merrick is taller than my ex-husband and I like having to stand on tip-toe to capture his neck. I buried my face in his chest and giggled...unsophisticated, girlish. I felt his strained zipper against my belly as he walked me backwards into the bedroom.

Dampness materialized between my legs and my cheeks instantly warmed with the flush. Who knew anyone named Merrick could do that? My short nightie fell to the floor just before he gently lifted me onto the unmade bed. It's not just the bright sun that reminded me, *I'm not in Milwaukee anymore.*

I'd been married sixteen years, together with my ex eighteen. It was mugging, really. I'd been sucker punched from behind and robbed of my financial security, social acceptance and less tangible things like my swagger. Divorce, for me, was comparable to falling into a dark well. At the bottom, depression had embraced me like a lover.

There was a long ladder, whose rungs are marked. Betrayal of vows. Betrayal of trust. He won all the friends; of course...he picks up the check. I'd been climbing and climbing but the treads are slippery in the dark.

“It's not a question of rescue,” my therapist Greg said. “You're not alone, but you do have to climb out. What would you do otherwise?”

I was aghast. “No choices?”

“None worth talking about,” he replied. “You’re strong! You can do it!” Like my trainer asking for one more crunch.

I’d been alone just over a year, moved away from the frozen tundra after burying decade’s long friendships beneath it, and was nearly out of the shaft. There’s only one rung left, but it’s by far the slimiest ... *it wasn't entirely his fault...I should have been paying attention.*

Greg's comforting baritone filtered through my mind urging, “You can do it! Just one more!” Oh, to be the coach instead of the running back. No strained hamstrings, only a sore throat.

“I have to go, Sugar,” Merrick said. “It’s almost seven o’clock.”

I tugged him back. “Excuse me... your office is three stories below. Are the elevators broken or something? And it’s so early.”

He chuckled. “The crew gets here at seven o’clock, you know that.”

“You’re the boss. Being vice-president of construction should have some perks. Who cares if you’re a little late?”

“We can do this again, I promise.” His laugh was contagious and I laughed too. “I don’t think we should go out tonight, Sug.”

“Are we still hiding?” I asked.

Merrick’s eyes softened as he cupped my chin in his massive hand. “You’re about to be elected President of the condo board. I work for the developer. Some folks might see that as a conflict of interest.”

Propped on one elbow, I watched him lumber towards the bathroom. I like that he walks slowly. Seventeen challenging years in sales, followed by sixteen industrious years as a corporate wife is a lot of time running flat out. I'd felt asthmatic at the end.

Slow is good, when you're laddering up, trying to catch your breath.

ONE MONTH EARLIER

It was September in Fort Lauderdale, a typical hot, breathless day. He'd been in his office, head buried in the construction budget when his walkie-talkie squawked, "Mr. Merrick, I need you on the loading dock ASAP!"

He locked the office door behind him and took the long way.

They didn't see him at first. Tom, supervisor of construction for the condominium building was shaking his head, arms crossed, and lips drawn in a straight line.

"Sorry Ms. Gunn, I can't allow you to move in today. It's the rules."

"I was told I could move in today. I have nowhere to go...don't you get that?"

Merrick was familiar with her body language – hands on hips, chin thrust forward. All three of his ex-wives had used the same lingo.

"Who makes the damn rules? Get me that guy. Right now!" She was up in Tom's face.

Merrick moved around the idling moving truck and approached slowly, so he could get a better look at her. She wasn't much, maybe five-foot three and a hundred pounds soaking wet. Looked like five foot of her was leg, and all of it was showing under her very short shorts. High heeled mules aren't recommended in a construction zone.

Perspiration ran down both sides of her slender face and her jaws were so tightly clenched, parallel cords distorted the smooth skin of her neck. SForester, there was something. Maybe the bare legs... maybe the red hair...he couldn't help wondering if the carpet matched the drapes.

“Help you?”

“Only if you're in charge. Are you?” she demanded.

“That would be me,” he grinned. “Merrick Forester.”

“Look, Silvio, my designer said he cleared this. I have to move in today. I have nowhere to go and now this...*person*” she cocked her head towards Tom, “says no way...the rules...what rules...?” her breath dissipated into the heat.

“He's right. The building rules say that no one can move in after hours, meaning four o' clock.” He studied his watch. “It's three thirty-five. Not near enough time—”

“You're joking right? Nobody lives here! I'm the first to move in...who the hell am I disturbing...are you kidding me?”

“Miss Gunn, can they come back in the morning? Otherwise the developer would have to pay Tom here to stay and oversee the whole operation.” He spoke softly, offering “Would you like me to talk to the driver for you?”

“But they'll charge me!”

Her eyes were enormous. Brown, flecked with green, wide. Her clenched fists began barreling circles in front of her.

“Here's the deal...Merrick.” A light quiver in her voice negated her intended sarcasm. Like a cat who tries to hiss and chokes on a hairball. “You can either pay Tom to stay for a few hours or you can pay for this truck to return to the warehouse, come back tomorrow, unload, and

you can pay to put me up in a suite on the beach. I think the Ritz is only a few blocks from here and make no mistake about it... I'm a Ritz kind of lady. You do the math."

When he recognized panic behind the fury, he began to soften. Merrick suddenly liked the idea of rescuing this scrappy little banty rooster. Something in him wanted to see those wide eyes smile.

"Would it be too much trouble for you to stay Tom? Looks like the lady needs a place to sleep tonight."

"No sir. Happy to," he said.

"If you'll excuse me now, *I'll* talk to *my* driver," she snapped.

Maybe she meant to say, thank you. But in case she didn't, he swallowed *you're welcome*

It was eight o'clock that evening when he rapped on Grace's propped open door.

"Who is it?"

"Merrick Forester, Miss Gunn. Just checking to see if everything went okay."

Her stiletto mules scuffed the floor as though she was too exhausted to pick up her feet entirely. "I'm in, that's what counts," she said. "I suppose I should thank you for bending the rules."

"You suppose?" he had to laugh.

"No I'm grateful, truly. I'm not usually so...it's just that I don't have anywhere to go."

"So you said," he replied. "Welcome home, Ms. Gunn."

"Please call me Grace," she was suddenly demure. "Can I at least offer you a beer?"

“Oh, I don’t want to impose...Grace.”

“Probably have to get home to your family...”

“No, not that...no family, no pets. Figured you be tired is all.”

She reached into the refrigerator, grabbed a long neck Corona, twisted off the top, and handed it to him. Around a cold bottle of brew, their fingers touched and ignited an unexpected spark.

Human desire can often be errantly inconvenient. But it was a beginning.