

Bloody hell! I'd over-slept this afternoon after Darcy had stormed out all pissed off at my suggestion—and of course, my choice of words hadn't helped matters any. I damn near slept through the happy hour of this festivity, getting there just as one lonely female with no mate was standing looking a bit perplexed I imagined, only because I couldn't actually see the majority of her face because of the mask.

I slipped the bloody garter onto her leg, knowing damn well it wasn't Darcy, which meant that some prat had gone and claimed my wife as his. Fuck me.

I was instructed to take 'my lady' to the table with my name on the placard, which was easy to find since everyone else was already seated. As I held the chair out for whomever it was I'd claimed, I heard a recognizable hiss from the table behind ours. I couldn't quite make out the words, but it was definitely Darcy's voice.

"Okay everyone," the lady at the microphone called out. "You may remove your masks now. Someone will be by to collect them and then dinner will be served. We have an open bar here, and champagne for everyone as well. So, feel free to mingle and to start enjoying your evening with your New Year's Eve mate!"

I pulled my mask off, glad to be rid of the bloody thing. My "mate" did the same and I could see she was fairly young and extremely pretty. She looked to be in her late twenties or possibly thirty. She was obviously wearing a wig so I had no idea what her natural hair looked like, but the wig she was wearing was about the same color as Darcy's natural hair.

"Hello," she said, sweetly, holding out her gloved hand. "I guess there must've been a mix-up since you're obviously not my hubby," she laughed. "I'm Carly Bitters."

"Easton Matthews," I said, shaking her hand. "So, should I presume that your husband ended up claiming my wife?" I tried to take the edge out of my voice, but any man that had married the lovely Carly was probably a young, handsome stud as well. I didn't need the aggravation of worrying about Darcy all evening, especially since it was my own damn fault that someone had gotten to her first.

"Well actually, Easton," Carly said coyly, "it was more like *your* wife claimed *my* hubby."

*Do tell?*

"I beg your pardon?"

She laughed, showing her dimples, and then proceeded to replay my wife's antics that had landed her with Carly's husband. I wasn't finding the humour in it whatsoever.

"But you see," she continued, "I bet she thought Roscoe was you because he's every bit as tall as you, and built the same way. I mean he really does look great for his age."

"His age?"

She blushed, turning to the table behind us and waving at whom I could only presume was Roscoe. "Hey sweetie," she called over, blowing him a kiss.

I followed her gaze and saw Darcy sitting next to a man that had to be seventy-five years old if he was a day. His mask now removed, you could see the lines and creases of age, along with a

saggy jowl. His eyebrows were snowy white, and he'd removed his salt and pepper wig, showing that he was nearly bald, sporting a comb-over of what was left of the snowy white hair on his scalp.

*Roscoe must be loaded.*

My eyes quickly averted to my wife, who was fairly fuming now that she realized Roscoe had robbed the cradle and that his wife was a young, beautiful and delightful creature.

Roscoe waved back, blowing Carly a kiss, which then sent him into a coughing spell.

"You know," I said, turning back to Carly, "I have no issue if you'd like to swap mates."

"Absolutely not," she replied. "The rules say we have to enjoy dinner with whoever claimed us. Even though you got me by default, I'm still pretty sure it counts."

"I see," I replied, looking back over at Darcy and giving her a shrug.

Everyone at our table introduced themselves as the waiter took our drink orders. I noticed that Colin and Ronnie had matched up, as well as Taz and Lindsey. There had been an apparent faux pas with Slate and his wife, I realized, as Samantha was actually seated at our table with another man named Luke. She seemed to be taking it in stride; however, Slate was another story. He was constantly making his way over to our table and shooting daggers at poor Luke.

He came over to where I was sitting with Carly; clearly pissed that Samantha wouldn't swap with the mate he had erroneously claimed. My money said she was giving him his due for not being able to stake his claim correctly.

*FBI agent...Pffff!*

"This is a bunch of shit," he said, keeping his voice low. "Sammie says we can't swap back until after dinner, even though the chick I claimed by accident is all for it happening right now."

*No doubt.*

"I see you're in the same predicament, huh, Easton?" he continued, glancing over at Darcy's table. "Who's the old fuck with your wife?"

"My husband," Carly replied, testily. "And *he* seems to be taking it in stride like *everyone* else."

"Oh sorry, ma'am," Slate replied, looking appropriately sheepish. "I have a feeling I'm not going to hear the end of this," he said, glancing over at Sammie who was talking to Luke. "I guess I'll head back to my table. Later."

*On the fifth day of vacay, my true love gave to me...The gift of my being able to laugh my arse off over this for years to come...*