

TANGLED MEMORIES

CHAPTER ONE

His eyes were gray. I had never noticed before. They weren't the color of slate, but smoky and mysterious. Down the silent aisle, I walked confidently toward him—chin high, very lady-like in posture and demeanor, a trace of smile upon my lips. Inside I didn't feel confident, swallowing the hard knot of dread that had surfaced in my throat. A cloying scent of gardenias assaulted my heightened senses. How curious the delicate white flowers should be so overpowering. Just like the man in front of me. Just like the deep, heady gray of his eyes.

I extended my hand. As he took it, I drew a breath and held it, the firm feel of his fingers surprising me.

"Friends, we are gathered together in the sight of God to witness and bless the joining together of Mary and Alexander in Christian marriage."

He was tall, so tall I was forced to look up into those mesmerizing eyes. My breathing started again—erratic and shallow. I didn't understand the sense of familiarity I felt about him, because I certainly didn't know this man. How ironic. I was marrying again for the second time in my life, and for the second time, my reasons were more practical than romantic.

I glanced briefly at the Methodist minister. Although he wore a white stole symbolic of purity and love, his black robes matched my intensely somber mood.

"I ask you now," he said, "in the presence of God and these people, to declare your intention to enter into a union with one another."

To enter into a union. Heaven help me. Would it be a union? How could it be? It was a business arrangement, plain and simple. I understood that. Somehow though, sadness clutched at my heart.

Reverend Watts looked at me. "Mary, will you have Alexander to be your husband to live together in holy marriage? Will you love him, comfort him, honor and keep him, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others, be faithful to him as long as you both shall live?"

My stomach burned. I felt Alex's gray penetrating gaze upon my upturned face as I concentrated on the minister's receding hairline. "I will."

"Alexander, will you have Mary to be your wife?"

From underneath my lashes, I watched him. He wore his jet black hair swept back and

long and curling at his neck. A stray lock touched his forehead and set off his eyes. His high cheekbones and jawline gave him a classic look. His lips were full and inviting. Enigmatic in his formal black tuxedo, crisp white shirt and bow tie, he seemed a brooding Byronic hero. Handsome, though austere, his masculine good looks belonged on the cover of a romantic novel.

I often wondered how different my life might have been if I hadn't become pregnant at eighteen . . . if I hadn't married Bill . . . if I hadn't miscarried. What if I had met Alexander Dominican under different circumstances, before life had touched me so harshly?

"I will." His deep and resonant voice grabbed my attention.

Turning from the minister to me, his eyes brightened as his gaze captured mine. Out of habit, I licked my lips, but nothing eased the tension I felt, which I knew I somehow communicated to the self-assured man who held my hand. Did he feel the hypocrisy of our oath? Or was he simply content with a marriage of convenience? Daring him with my stare, I narrowed my own eyes in challenge to his casual acceptance of our deceit before God. His black brow lifted to meet my dare. He cocked his head to the side as if to tell me I could still back out. I could walk away a single woman. Poor, but single. I shifted my gaze, unable to continue our silent joust, knowing full well I couldn't back out. Bill's death had made sure of that.

"Let us pray. Eternal God, creator and preserver of all life."

I bowed my head, but I couldn't shut my eyes. It didn't seem right. Nothing seemed right these last few weeks. Not since the dark-clad police officer had come to my door, telling me my husband had been killed in a car accident.

When the prayer ended, the minister motioned us to face each other and join our hands. I gave my bouquet to my friend Gail, who took it with hesitation. Alex's grasp was warm and determined. The grip of his fingers transmitted a vibrant fire through my arms coursing straight to my heart. Trite as it sounds, I felt my heart skip a beat. Had I read my emotions correctly? It had been a long time since I had felt sexual attraction, and I certainly had not expected to feel ardor toward this tall man I was about to marry. What good would it do? We had an arrangement. A platonic arrangement. I'd mother his infant daughter. He'd pay my debts. I berated myself because our stark and concise agreement left no room for this unexpected play of emotion.

"I, Alexander, take you, Mary to be my wife."

To be my wife. My throat constricted. I had met Dr. Alexander Dominican eight years

ago. The partner of my doctor, Alex had been on call the night I had lost my baby. I had been such a foolish teenager. Straightening my shoulders at the thought, I caught the slight narrowing of his eyes, and turned self-consciously from his scrutiny. What did he really think about me? Did he remember that scared child-patient of eight years ago? I had changed. At twenty-six I was now a woman. Did he know that?

The minister nodded. Summoning all my willpower, I looked at Alex and in a hushed voice, repeated the same vows. My hands were damp when he released them to turn to Dr. Bramwell, his partner and best man. At the same time, Gail handed me a thin gold band. Unable to meet Alex's gaze, I took his left hand, and slid the band across the third finger. In a different time, I believed he would have bowed and kissed the back of my hand. As it was, he held onto it, and firmly slipped my own wedding band into place. Hastily, I glanced up to find his eyes appraising me. As I tightened my lips, my returning gaze did not falter. The weight of the ornate, gold ring nudged into my flesh, and created a link between us I was hard-pressed to comprehend.

"Bless, O Lord, the giving of these rings, that they who wear them may live in your peace and continue in your favor all the days of their lives."

Alex smiled a slow, half smile, as if he understood something I had failed to discern. The smile softened his stern features, bringing back my recollection of the gentle doctor who had once comforted and cared for me. I offered a smile in return, and was gratified to see his eyes lighten in response.

The minister joined our hands together again, and symbolically wrapped his white stole around them.

"Now that Alexander and Mary have given themselves to each other by solemn vows," he said, "with the joining of hands, and the giving and receiving of rings, I announce to you that they are husband and wife; in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Those whom God has joined together, let no one put asunder."

A surprising disquiet pricked my scalp and traced down the back of my neck. I swallowed once, to ease the dryness in my mouth and then looked away from our joined hands. We were husband and wife. It seemed so appropriate, so right. As if it were meant to be. But how could it? Under the strained circumstances of our compact, we were nothing but business partners.

"Are you going to kiss the bride?" I heard amusement in the minister's voice, because he expected us to be a conventional couple.

Alex released my hands. I felt oddly bereft. When I looked up at him, I found him staring down at me, his eyes shadowed by coal-colored lashes. I read the speculation in them. He lifted his hands, and I fixed my gaze upon them, charmed by the beauty of his tapered fingers. His hands lingered in the air briefly, and then I felt them raise the thin veil from my face. His breath touched me. My gaze now held spellbound by his, I watched his eyes as he gently elevated my chin with a fingertip, and caressed my cheek with his thumb. My heart hung suspended in my chest, for an instant, and then dropped into a relentless beat. For some reason, I welcomed the touch of his hand upon my skin. Dreamily, I smiled.

His focus was only on the mere movement of my lips. He stood so very close. I could see the flecks of dark in the lighter gray of his eyes. My own eyes widened in dismay as Alex lowered his lips to mine, tenderly touching them with a kiss so poignant that it pierced into my soul.

The kiss startled us both. I could tell by the way he hesitated, seeming to gasp for breath. With his left hand, he still caressed my face, connecting us to each other in an untold way. I found it hard to breathe. I found it hard to move. In the recesses of my mind, warning bells clamored.

I straightened my shoulders and lifted my chin away from his touch. We may be married, but his kiss was not appropriate for two people with a business arrangement. Awkwardly separating, we held each other's gaze an instant. I felt dazed, swaying from side to side. Alex set his jaw, and glanced away.

"Congratulations." Reverend Watts pumped Alex's hand.

Gail gave me back my bouquet, and offered me a swift hug. Her face was strained, her lips pursed. "I hope you'll be happy, Mary."

"Thank you." Holding on to Gail's hug longer than was necessary, I then stepped back, embarrassed. I knew she was still upset with me for doing this. My friend had tried to talk me out of remarrying so soon after Bill's death. My reasons were wrong she had said. I was being purchased like a broodmare for the price of a gambling debt. A significant gambling debt, I had tried to remind her. Bill had charged more than fifty thousand dollars, and I had no other way out. Gail and I had argued. I wasn't surprised we now had so little to say to each other—that

Gail and I treated each other like birds ready to take flight.

Dr. Bramwell warmly congratulated Alex. Dr. Hilliard, Alex's other partner and our only other guest, came forward and loudly slapped Alex on his back. "How do you capture the pretty ones, my man? How do you do it? You've got a beauty here for a wife. I ought to know. . . ." He finished his sentence with a meaningful wink.

I thought his remark crude. He was my gynecologist, after all, and of course "knew" me as no other. But I overlooked it, and allowed him to congratulate me with the obligatory kiss for the bride.

Tasting bourbon in his mouth, I ended the kiss abruptly, tossing my head as if to fling the flush from my heated face. "Why, Dr. Hilliard, you certainly have a knack for exploratory surgery. Did they teach you that in medical school?"

He laughed. "Yes, Alex, I love a woman with spunk."

"Or is it just *my* woman you love, John?" My husband's tone was slick ice.

Blinking with astonishment, I tried to assess the undercurrents swirling around me, but found Alex's staid demeanor unreadable.

"Please step into my office to sign the marriage certificate." Reverend Watts interrupted our conversation to lead us out of the quiet sanctuary.

Alex took me possessively by the hand and tucked it under his arm to place it on his sleeve. He kept hold of my fingers, his own hand warm and sure. I had no trouble keeping up with his deliberate pace. There was something strangely comfortable about the way our strides matched.

"He's been my doctor for eight years," I muttered, "but I never realized Dr. Hilliard could be so obnoxious."

"You've only seen him on his best behavior at the office. Thank goodness my esteemed partner doesn't usually come to work under the influence of Maker's Mark."

I glanced at his firm features. "He's not an alcoholic, is he?" I asked, thinking about my late husband.

Alex's fingers pinched through the fabric of my simple, linen wedding dress. "Let's just say he's walking a fine line where I'm concerned. Dr. Bramwell and I've been watching him. For some reason, he's gotten a lot worse in the past three months since Allison's death."

The minister's office was hot. Summer sunshine strayed through open drapes. We all

crowded inside while Reverend Watts went to the window air conditioner and flipped it on. A blast of cool air erupted into the room. Returning to his desk, the minister shuffled papers for what seemed an eternity, finally producing a formal-looking document. When he nodded at us, Alex released me and stepped forward. Standing slightly away from him, I watched my new husband bend over the minister's desk and put his signature on the paper. It all seemed so unreal. My best friend was upset with me. I had just learned my trusted doctor had a drinking problem, and I was married. *Again.*

A high-pitched ringing sound shrilled loudly in my ears. I wondered if something was wrong with the air-conditioning unit. The noise grew in intensity, blocking out all other sounds. Alex turned toward me, offering me the pen. His mouth moved, but I couldn't hear him speak. Sweat beaded on my upper lip. I felt so light — as if I was floating. Somehow the stuffy little office was growing hazy. Like Fourth of July fireworks, pulsating lights of exploding colors shot before my eyes. I closed them. In the distance behind my shut eyes, I saw a young girl dressed in a strange yellow gown. The room vibrated. . . .

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ENGLAND, 1327

Mary de Mandeville confronted her father. Frowning in anger, she placed her hands on her hips.

"I will not go!"

Sir Robert regarded her. "Ye have no choice in the matter, my girl," he said quietly, looking down at the offer he held in his hand. "The deal has been struck, and you are to leave on the morrow. This marriage proposed by the earl is fair and well-met."

"No! I will not marry that old man. All he wants from me is to produce an heir." Mary twirled around to gaze glumly into the fire.

"It's the way of the world, Mary. Perhaps if your mother had lived, she could have made you understand."

Mary didn't answer. She understood all too well. Her throat tightened with hopelessness.

"You are already fifteen. I've been sympathetic long enough."

Sir Robert's firm word spoke her doom. Mary knew she had lost, but she didn't want to admit it. She didn't want to leave her home or the father she held so close to her heart. Yet she wasn't blind. Her father had grown gaunt with disease these past months. Gellis had told her she

must face the unavoidable truth. He was dying and he had to provide for her. Yet why would he send her away? Why would he not want her with him during these last days? Her heart ached with the dismissal, for she knew it meant her father held her in scarce regard. Why else would he make her leave when he needed her so?

"The earl will permit you to bring Gellis," Sir Robert offered hopefully.

"Allow me to bring my maid! Wonderful! I'm to be at the man's very beck and call!"

Disheartened, she struck out once more.

Mary heard her father sigh. "The lord is a very comely man. He is but seventeen years my junior, and not so very old." When Mary didn't respond, he tried another tactic. "I know you had your heart set on the Warwick boy. But for the terrible accident at the lists, you would already be his bride. Because of his death, I've been generous with you, not pressing you because of your grief. Yet the time is nigh when you will make a marriage, and do as I bid."

She turned to face him, her unnaturally dry eyes desolate in despair. Lifting her chin, she looked straight at her father and nodded in submission.

The strange vision shifted.

It was her wedding night, but Mary felt none of the excitement a young girl should feel. Instead, her emotion bordered on dread. Thank goodness they all were gone, those women who had witnessed her wedding. And her dreadful mother-in-law. They had stripped her naked, shaming her with their wanton talk, as they had prepared her for bed. Her servant Gellis had brushed her long blond hair until it snapped and sparkled. Then the good maid had touched her body with scented water, and while the other women watched and gossiped, tucked her securely into bed draping her flowing hair over her shoulders and breasts to cover them.

For some time Mary had sat alone in the lord's great cold bed, her fingers clutching the linen sheets. Her father had only been trying to provide for her. Unfortunately, this was the way of the world. Mary was realist enough to understand. Besides, what did it matter whom she married since she couldn't have Richard Warwick?

Lowering her lashes, she squeezed her eyes as if to shut off the tears threatening to spill down her cheeks. It worked, for by the time she heard her husband and his men coming toward the solar, her eyes were dry.

"Now, my good fellows. You have seen me safely to my chamber where my little bride awaits me. Pray you, take your leave so I may go alone inside."

Outside the raucous laughter of the male wedding guests drifted through the shut door. A couple's wedding night was known for the bedding ritual, and that, among other baser things, was scaring Mary to death. She listened intently to her husband's voice, for she could hear him clearly. Was he not drunk like the others? He didn't sound it.

"Yea, yea," her lord was saying. "But I'm not a green lad going with wobbly legs to my wedding bed. You forget. Many of you have ushered me to this same room some twenty years past. Humor me now, as I try to honor my young bride. She's newly come from her home, inexperienced and frightened. Let me go alone so as to spare her sensibilities."

Amazingly, the noise of the celebrants faded as they apparently retreated to the great hall where they could continue their merry-making. Mary knew they would let their lord make merry in his own way, for there was good wine to be had and wagers to be won and their own women to be bedded.

He came to her then, across the quiet chamber. Mary heard him undress and slowly approach the great bed. When he pulled back the linen hanging, cold air washed over her face before she turned her gaze away from him. His great weight sank the side of the feather mattress as he lifted the fur coverlet and crawled in beside her. He smelled of good Bordeaux wine and mustard. She could hear him breathing regularly.

"Look at me, my wife," he said, touching her chin with a forefinger, and drawing her head around.

Wide-eyed, Mary gazed at him as she was told. He was still very good looking for a man of thirty-five. His arms were muscular and his chest full of dark, thick hair. Thankfully, Mary couldn't see the rest of his body, but she could feel the heavy weight of his hairy leg resting against her own. His head was bare. She'd never realized the blackness of his hair. Even in the candle-lit gloom of the solar, she could see it shine with a luster of its own as it fell to his shoulders. His nose was straight, his face classically drawn. Most importantly, his soft gray eyes were kind. They spoke a gentleness she had never associated with the great lord she had been forced to wed.

"I know you are frightened," he said to her. "I'm not a randy youth. I will not hurry our union, for it is much too important."

Her pale lashes lowered over her eyes as Mary remembered the reason for their marriage. Her warrior husband had failed to get his first wife with child. Success on the battlefield

certainly did not herald success in the bedroom. Her great lord needed an heir, and just months after the death of his first wife, he had contracted with her father, hoping his child-bride would prove a good breeder. Mary shivered as she envisioned him running his hands down her legs, and pulling back her lips to check her teeth. She didn't want to be a broodmare. She wanted to love and be loved.

"I've left the curtains parted so I can see you," he explained in a hushed voice. "For tonight I am content just to look at you and hold you—to let you grow accustomed to having me near you."

Mary was dumbfounded. How could she be so fortunate? She had expected the very worst, knowing it was her duty to submit, if not willingly then passively. Now she had a reprieve and she was indebted to this man by her side.

Still averting her gaze, Mary spoke quietly. "I thank you, my lord, for granting to me more than I deserve."

When she looked at him again, he was smiling, his eyes lit with approval. Charmed, she reached up and touched the dimple that graced his chin. The touch startled them both, but he caught her hand and reverently kissed her palm. Then he wrapped her in his arms, and drew her down in the bed, and just held her. He was so warm, and after the first awkward moments, Mary felt so safe and good in his bear-like embrace. Hearts beating as one, the rising and falling of their breasts in unison, they snuggled together, and after such an eventful wedding day, fell asleep.