
HIS WICKED LOVE

Cuffs and Spurs Book 2

ANYA SUMMERS

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Chapter 1

Late September

Well, if those numbers didn't just chafe his ass. Mason checked and re-checked the account ledgers. He'd been over them more times than any sane person would, but he wanted—needed—to be certain they were correct. The loss they'd sustained three months ago had been substantial. With what was left, they'd be lucky if the Black Elkhorn Lodge and Resort didn't shut its doors by Christmas.

“Are you sure about the numbers?” Cole asked.

Mason glanced across the expanse of his mahogany wooden desk at his brother. There were lines of tension in his shoulders and tanned features that were so much like their dad's, including the dark chocolate shade of his hair that he wore past his shoulders and his brown eyes nearly the color of soot. Whereas Mason took more after their mom, with his lighter shade of brown hair and eye color—in a manly way, of course.

His gut twisted. Despair and dread seized him.

Mason detested himself for their current plight: the lodge was nearly bankrupt. And it was all his fault.

Before all this, Mason had prided himself on reading other people. He'd been cocky about it. As a Dom, he'd considered his ability to size up a person to be top notch. But their last chef had proven him wrong. His arrogance had cost them. Mason hadn't seen the fraud and deceit behind the chef's apron before the no-good piece of trash had embezzled nearly every penny the lodge had.

He could still remember when he'd discovered the theft. The disbelief, the anger. His normal fun-loving personality had vanished overnight. The lodge, the dream their parents had conceptualized and that he and Cole had actualized, had tailspun out of control. They had gone from having excess capital with savings to spare, to barely limping along and teetering on the brink of collapse.

In the last three months, they'd had to liquidate their investment portfolio just to keep their noses above water. But the costs of running the lodge were considerable. It took capital to make this place run.

"I'm sure. We are well and truly fucked. If we make it until Christmas and are able to pack guests in, maybe we can string things along enough to begin rebuilding," Mason replied. But word had spread about their legal woes no matter how much damage control they'd tried to do. Without a functioning restaurant on the property, the Black Elkhorn Lodge and Resort had received cancellations in droves. The once prosperous getaway hemorrhaged funds daily.

"Well, with the restaurant currently closed, we're losing a stream of revenue right there," Cole said, telling Mason something he already knew. Still, he was glad they were both on the same page.

Frustrated, he slammed the account ledgers shut and irritably ran a hand over his face. The irritation was all self-directed. Mason couldn't remember the last time he'd genuinely smiled. In the three months since the bottom had been yanked out of their

business and a person he'd trusted had robbed them blind, there hadn't been much reason to smile. When he observed himself in the mirror every morning, he no longer recognized the person in it. The haggard expression and grim line of his mouth. The permanent scowl and self-loathing.

Life, for Mason, had once been a bountiful banquet, and he'd never given it deeper thought than the fun to be had. Now, it was a steaming pile of horse manure. He replied, "I realize that. While you were leading the fishing expedition trip this past week, I contacted Le Cordon Bleu on the west coast for a recommendation. We need a chef running the restaurant if we have any hope of staving off further losses. I figured we need all the help we can get at this point. Not to mention, it could be a potential draw in our advertising to have a fully trained chef from such a reputable institution. As much as we adore her, Tibby can't handle the load or full responsibility. Not that she's not capable, but she balances her time here with her daughter's needs. I can't make a single mom give me more time than she's able. Our new chef should arrive today."

Mason could only hope that re-opening the restaurant would staunch the flow of cancellations. They'd attempted to keep it open with Tibby and Faith pulling extra shifts here and there. He'd had them pare down the menu to just the basics. And those two had nearly staged a coup—not that he blamed them one iota. The onus was on him, not his employees, to improve the situation at the lodge. They already gave the lodge one hundred and ten percent. The rest had to come from him.

Mason had made the executive decision to close the restaurant temporarily a month ago. He'd directed Tibby and Faith to prepare boxed lunches for sale, limiting their hours, with the promise that it was temporary so he didn't lose them. Mason had made sure their paychecks didn't reflect the loss of hours. Since then, guests had cancelled their reservations in droves.

Mason didn't blame his guests one bit. The Black Elkhorn

Lodge and Resort wasn't close to the downtown hub. Their lodge was about bringing people back to nature. That was one of the premier selling points. And normally, with a fully functioning restaurant on the property, the place tended to thrive. Except most people didn't want to have to drive forty minutes just to grab a bite to eat.

Each of the lodges had a small kitchen with a stovetop, as well as gas grills. But people on vacation liked to eat out. Many wanted to kick back and relax. Re-opening the restaurant would, he hoped, get customers to rebook their stays with them.

"Just like that?" Cole asked, his face filled with concern. Mason was just thankful that when the shit hit the fan, Cole never once pointed the finger at him. He would have deserved it. They both knew who was at fault for their dire situation, but instead of hanging Mason out to dry, his older brother had stood by him.

Mason sighed and said, "Her background check came back clean and, to be honest, we're in a pickle. Tibby and Faith have at least been able to supply boxed lunches for the hikers, but with closing the restaurant, they've been picking up more catering jobs. If we want the slightest chance of keeping the lodge from hemorrhaging even more money, we need the restaurant back open for guests this week. Billie informed me this morning that there were two more cancellations today due to the fact that the restaurant is closed."

"Shit. All right. If you're sure about this new chef..." Cole replied with a grimace. Mason knew Cole would rather be out at his private cabin, avoiding people and surrounded by nature than dealing with the running of the lodge. It's why their partnership had always worked—if not seamlessly, at least without too many blips. He ran the business side and catered to guests, while Cole was in charge of leading hiking, fishing, hunting, and sight-seeing expeditions, away from the bulk of civilization.

"I'm not," Mason admitted with a shrug in an attempt to

ease the anxiety building up. “But the problem is we don’t have much of a choice.”

The only thing that would ease his mind, take him out of his current default state of tension, would be playing with a sub at Cuffs & Spurs. Being balls-deep inside a willing woman was the only cure, even if it was a temporary reprieve. Or, at least, it used to be. Problem was, he’d not had a chance to make it into town and the club since the top blew on his world.

“Any word on the legal proceedings against the culprit?” Cole asked, leaning back in his leather chair, avoiding use of the chef’s name. They both had stopped using the thief’s name. It was easier to use separation, make it feel a little less personal than it had been.

Mason wished that the legal matters had been concluded. Then he would have a definitive answer on when they would get paid for all their accounts. Some weren’t willing to work with them at all and were demanding payment. With a shake of his head, he said, “No. Not yet. Other than they haven’t found what they actually *did* with the stolen funds and that the money was all gone. The prosecutor has assured me that part of the sentencing will include restitution but that the court would most likely allow the defendant to make payments, which doesn’t help us one bit.”

Cole cursed under his breath, his face stern and lines of worry present in his normally calm demeanor. He asked, “When does the new chef arrive?”

“Today at some point, out of Los Angeles,” Mason replied. He could only hope his instincts were better with this one than the last and that they were worth the recommendation. The lodge couldn’t afford another fiasco or for his judgment to be off in the slightest. One wrong move at this point and everything he and Cole had built with their dad would go up in smoke.

Cole snorted. “You mean part of our plan to keep this place open rests on the shoulders of someone from the land of Holly-

wood? Brother, I hate to tell you, but the chances of someone from the west coast willingly trading in for life here is slim.”

Mason understood that all too well. This new chef, an Emily Fox, just needed to stay long enough to get them back into the black. If she didn't work out after that, well, they'd cross that bridge when they came to it. “We just need someone for now. It doesn't have to be permanent. In fact, I mentioned in passing during my conversation with her that it was a temporary arrangement, with a trial run included.”

And the rest of their exchanges had occurred via email. In what little communication they'd had, Miss Fox had been blunt and to the point. For the time being, that was what they needed.

Cole shrugged. “At least that gives us an out. I have a few expeditions to lead this week. Day trips, so I will be around at night to help out.”

“Focus on the trips. I've got the lodge covered. And Alex's trail rides are busy this time of year. So that will help,” Mason added. Their buddy, Alex, used the Black Elkhorn Lodge stables to run his trail riding company. It was profitable for both parties. While Alex had his own employees taking guests on trail rides, if there was any spillover, he or Cole picked up the ride. Likewise, on the lodge, if Cole and Mason needed an extra hand, Alex filled in when he could.

Thankfully their previous chef's sticky fingers hadn't extended to the stables. It didn't hurt that Hunt Trail Rides was a separate company, either.

Didn't mean there wasn't a good chance that they weren't royally fucked.

“Are you sure this new chef can cook?” Cole asked, a pensive expression creasing his brow.

Fuck if I know. “She comes highly recommended. Has a been a sous chef for two years.”

“Actually, it's four years, but who's counting, right?” said a sultry female voice from his office doorway.

Mason glanced up and was glad he was seated. Emily Fox's resume and background checks had provided him with a boatload of facts about his new hire. But they hadn't prepared him for the red-haired siren currently standing in the wooden door frame. The long waves of her hair reminded him of the sunset, the myriad hues of burnt orange and sienna hung over delicate shoulders and more than ample cleavage before ending above her trim waist. Her skin was smooth and the color of iridescent pearls, which only seemed to magnify the natural pale pink hue of her lips that were not overly plump but perfectly formed.

Yet it was her eyes that were the real killer. On top of a voluptuous form that made the Dom in Mason want to weep in thanks, her hazel eyes were large pools that sparkled with lively zest and were surrounded by a wealth of inky lashes. Intelligence flashed in her gaze. The electricity of it zapped through him.

"You must be Emily Fox," Mason said, finding his voice after nearly swallowing his tongue. Standing, now that he'd found his legs, he shoved away the unwanted and rather inconvenient lust she evoked in him.

"You'd be right about that," she said, with a hint of sarcasm that she softened with a grin as she placed her free hand on her denim clad hip. The other clutched the handle of a small leather satchel about the size of his goody bag. He must have been in a mood when they'd briefly talked on the phone because the sound hadn't affected him as it did now. The dulcet tones curled along his spine, into his gut, and made his dick twitch.

"I'm Mason Stewart. This is my brother and business partner, Cole," Mason informed her. His gaze roved over her form. While she was dressed casually, in a pair of well-worn blue jeans and fitted mint green Henley top that accentuated her curves, with a black jacket tied around her waist, Miss Fox was anything but casual. She was stunning—exotic, even. He couldn't help but wonder what she looked like naked.

Yet her demeanor didn't scream *Rodeo Drive*. That was good.

It made her appear accessible and down to earth. As though, perhaps, if he and Cole played their cards right, she wouldn't mind trading in city life for country life in Wyoming.

"Pleasure." Emily smiled and nodded towards Cole, who tipped his hat in her direction in greeting. From the expression on Cole's face, Mason surmised he wasn't the only one a bit taken aback by her looks. It should make him feel better that he wasn't the only who'd been momentarily struck dumb, but it didn't. He couldn't afford to be attracted to the newest chef. The paradox of it, given their current situation, was not lost on him.

"I'm glad you made it early. Hopefully the drive wasn't too hard on you. If you like, I can have the front desk get your belongings to your cabin. Then I can show you the restaurant and where you will be working," Mason said as he emerged from behind his desk and walked toward her. He gestured with his hand outstretched to take the case from her and help her out. Miss Fox really was a small thing. While he was six one, he had to look down to meet her gaze. He hadn't known what to expect—certainly not the vision before him.

Yet instead of handing it over, she shifted the case behind her back and held her other palm up, stalling his forward progression.

"Hold up, cowboy, no one touches my knives without losing body parts. I know I agreed to accept the position over the phone, but I need to see the kitchen first before we go any further," Emily said, her sultry voice making him think of sex. Long, languorous, Tantric style sex before a roaring fire. Sex that left a body boneless and too sated to move. Her voice was sex, plain and simple. And it made his dick hard in his jeans. Mason tempered the unexpected and rather unwanted desire she stirred within him. Or tried to.

Instead he settled on annoyance with a simmering underbelly of lust, which only served to piss him off. It had been way too long since he'd availed himself of the subs at Cuffs & Spurs. And

his knee-jerk reaction to his new chef proved that. If Miss Fox was going to prove to be a mistake, he'd rather know now. And if her bossy attitude didn't end, he would toss her out on her ass. Contract or no.

"If you want to lug a heavy suitcase, be my guest, sweetheart. I think we need a demonstration, a sample of your skills, before we go any further. Don't you?" Mason challenged, letting his annoyance creep into his voice. She'd accepted the position without the clause of needing to see the kitchen first. So she thought she could toss in an extra demand, put a wrench in his plans to bring the lodge back from the brink, test who was in charge? It wasn't her. Miss Fox could try but she would fail. This was his place and he would fight like a rabid dog to save it, to protect it further from outside harm. He wouldn't ever allow the lodge or himself to be overrun by a pretty face.

She smiled. The air was charged between them, electrified, as she stared him down, then said, "Cowboy, once you've had my cooking, you will be my slave and beg me to stay."

An image of Emily, collared, naked, and on her knees begging him to take her, flashed through his mind. The unbidden thought unleashed a windfall of lust and it roared through his bloodstream. Mason tensed, beating back the unsolicited desire. Compartmentalizing the unwanted, erotic images, he narrowed his gaze. "Doubtful. I could take my pick from twenty line cooks today from one of the restaurants in town."

She rolled her eyes in an exasperated fashion and asked, "Then why did you call me?"

"That's what I'm beginning to wonder," Mason retorted, not admitting that he wanted a chef at the top of their game. That he believed if they offered culinary delights not found at other resorts or restaurants, they would attract customers, and maintaining the current menu that was a crowd favorite was paramount.

She was their Hail Mary Pass, even though she didn't know

it. Nor would he tell her that. She already had an overabundance of confidence.

Cole intervened, severing the electric livewire connection as he stepped between them. Mason finally inhaled a deep breath while Cole gave him a brief glance with his brows raised high enough they nearly disappeared beneath his Stetson, and a *what the hell?* expression. Then Cole shifted fully toward Miss Fox, his face calm with the pleasant smile he typically used to win over a sub, and said, “Emily, why don’t I take you over to the restaurant and you can see if it’s to your liking? We updated the kitchen two years ago and have all the latest equipment. Not that I have any idea what all those gadgets do.”

It was the gamine grin, the spread of her pale pink lips exposing her straight, white teeth, and transforming her face into breathtaking. And it was directed at his brother. It shoved Mason toward caveman status. He wanted to snarl at Cole to back off, not to touch her, that she was his. Which was fucking asinine, and only fueled his internal engines to near record levels.

“That would be fabulous. Thank you. Is he always like this?” she asked Cole, indicating Mason with a jaunty tilt of her head. Her hair shifted, making it shimmer.

A half grin spread over Cole’s face and he replied, “No. Sometimes he’s worse.”

Emily’s full-bodied, sexy laugh sucker-punched Mason in the sternum. The sound skittered along his spine and pooled in his groin. The throaty, jazz singer sound made him wonder what she sounded like when she came. It made him yearn to discover whether she was a screamer or issued almost silent, throaty moans. There was a part of him that wanted to bend her over his desk and fuck her until his legs buckled.

“Good to know,” Emily responded with another shake of her head which made the waterfall of red tresses shift and move like flames. The color was so vibrant, Mason ached to feel the strands

in his hands. Would they be as soft as he imagined, or would they singe his flesh?

“It is; better to be armed and prepared. If you’ll follow me,” Cole murmured, diffusing the situation and ignoring Mason.

“Honey, I’d follow you anywhere,” Emily flirted. With his brother. Jealousy gripped Mason, which was idiotic at best. He couldn’t want Emily. Wouldn’t allow himself to desire her. One, she was his employee and there were some roads that were better left untraveled. Two, he wasn’t sure he liked her. She was brash and mouthy, and most likely as vanilla as they came.

But that didn’t seem to matter to his dick, who liked the thought of playing boss and naughty secretary with her a little too much.

Except then Cole picked up the ball Emily had lobbed his way and responded, “Likewise, sweetheart. Mason, you coming?”

Almost.

And from a damn fantasy. He shook his head, attempting to distill the lust raging through his veins. He bit out, “I’ll be right behind you two.”

Mason watched Cole lead Emily from his office. His gaze, trained on her perfectly formed, heart-shaped ass, did nothing to detract from the fantasy. He adjusted himself and winced at the discomfort.

Breathing deeply, he called on his training, on the stalwart control that made him a Master, to corral his needs to a more manageable state. Using that control, he remembered the last time he’d allowed lust to guide his actions. It was akin to dousing himself with a bucket of ice water.

The absolute last thing Mason would do would be to allow his hormones to do his thinking for him. He’d done that once, and look where that had gotten them.