

AN ACCEPTABLE WOMAN

Tully's walk was slow and deliberate. Head erect and shoulders back. He looked down his nose with disdain at anyone whom he believed to be below him, except for anyone who was working for him, because you could always judge a person's character by the way they treated the help.

He reeked of money. Old money. The money of estates with names and formal gardens. His family's name was recognizable anywhere in the world. And he was accustomed to being treated like he was different. Above the masses. Superior to the average person due to his birth, and his name, and his money.

He liked to kill things. Big game hunting. Liked trophies. Hated dogs.

He wanted to get married because he thought it was time for him to settle down and have a wife that would help him throw parties for Republican candidates. He thought it would be easy, but it wasn't. He just couldn't find an acceptable woman.

His family still had money, although it was dwindling. Generations had passed since the money was earned, and it had been passed down and divided among the descendants. Now, his family was not one of the richest in the country. They didn't make the Forbes list as they had

twenty years ago. Silicon Valley billionaires elbowed out the old industrial families and his like were becoming relics of the past. Soon, their descendants would have to go to work and make a living. They would become one of the masses and have to dirty their hands. The proletariat. The thought made him sneer with contempt. That would not happen. Not to him.

The special dating service for millionaires set up a meeting for Kathryn with a man from a dynasty family. She had to fly from Charlotte to Sarasota, but he was picking up the cost of the plane and hotel. It was February, and the weather in Sarasota was forecasted for highs in the mid-70s, clear skies, and no wind. At least she would have a little vacation, even if the date didn't go well. Although, she was planning to turn on her charm and make sure that she was this man's drug of choice. She was planning to turn him into an addict, as she was always able to do with any man, but she had held out for the prize. And Mr. Old Money Millionaire was what she had been waiting for. She was going to be rich.

Kathryn was tall and model beautiful, with long blond hair and blue eyes. When she walked down the street, people would stare, and when she walked into a room, conversation stopped. This did not bother Kathryn because it had always been this way. She was accustomed to being treated special because of her good looks. It was her way of life. The way things should be.

Kathryn never met her father. Her mother had had a one-night stand with a Scandinavian merchant sailor and Kathryn's blond hair and blue eyes were his contribution to her identity. According to her mother, her father was so handsome, she felt compelled to take him to bed and

was happy to bear his child. She didn't care who he was and didn't mind that she would never again see him. Her mother's memory was fuzzy when it came to remembering his name, it was either Ulf or Viggo, she was unsure, after all, she had had a couple of drinks before taking him home.

Kathryn took a taxi from the Sarasota-Bradenton airport to her hotel, the Ritz-Carlton, a Mediterranean style castle resting on the banks of Sarasota Bay, with travertine floors and soaring ceilings, the opulence of hotel was worthy of the name "Ritz". Her luxurious room overlooked the marina, and she smiled with satisfaction as her thoughts traveled to her future of living this lifestyle.

She had a couple of free hours before she needed to start preparing for her date so she availed herself of the pool and spa facilities. Kathryn knew her benefactor wouldn't mind if she charged some spa services to her room, so she scheduled a facial and massage.

After returning to her room, she showered, shaved her legs, moisturized, conditioned, exfoliated, perfumed, and primed. She straightened her hair for a refined well-groomed look, and when she finished, not a stray hair could be seen. Her skin was soft to the touch and smelled like cassis, vanilla, freesia, May rose and patchouli.

The dress she selected for her date was simple, sleeveless, royal blue, and form-fitting, hugging her curves and accenting her figure. The blue of the dress played with the color of her eyes and made them shine like pools of Caribbean water. She took care applying her makeup, wanting it to be understated, classy, to look like she belonged, not too much, just enough. Expensive jewelry, it had to be real, no costume jewelry would work. She borrowed her mother's pearl necklace and earrings. Simple, elegant, and understated.

Tully was meeting her in the lobby of the hotel to take her to dinner. She stepped out of the elevator, six o'clock on the dot, and saw him waiting for her. He was nice-looking. Tall, lean, with the clean cut, scrubbed look of money.

As soon as he saw her, his eyes flashed with recognition, and he walked toward her. She smiled a small smile, and demurely looked down. He came to her and took her hand.

"You are as beautiful as your picture," he said, holding her hand gently.

"Thank you," she said.

His appearance and actions took her by surprise. She had actually expected to meet an unattractive man looking for a trophy wife, not someone well-mannered and nice-looking.

"You look acceptable," Tully said with a smirk. "From the photos the agency sent me, I was expecting someone dressed a little lower-class."

"Well thank you, I guess," Kathryn said after a pause. His comment surprising her, and while a thank you was not the response she wanted to give, her mind had not caught up to the insult before her mouth responded.

"I have dinner reservations at a nice steakhouse in downtown Sarasota. The food is excellent and I'm sure you'll like it," Tully said, as he turned toward the lobby door. "My car is parked just outside."

Kathryn followed like a puppy feeling a sense of shame tinged with anger. Ordinarily, she would have put any man in his place for such a comment, but she wanted to make a good impression. She wanted the status, and the money, and she wasn't going to blow her chance because of a little insult. Surely he didn't mean what he had said.

Kathryn scanned the cars outside the Ritz, there was a Bentley and a couple of BMWs. She was hoping the Bentley was his, but he walked past it, to an older silver Toyota Camry and

opened the passenger side door. She smiled up at him, trying not to let the disappointment show in her face.

The Toyota was immaculate, not a speck of dust or lint, the car of someone who protects his investments. He must spend his money on other luxuries, she thought. Maybe, when she had him hooked, he would buy her that little Porsche she always wanted. She would look great behind the wheel of a little red sports car. Now, all she needed to do was make him want to buy it for her. This line of thought mellowed her mood and kept her tongue still.

He pulled the car up to the valet station at the restaurant and the valet opened her car door. She stepped out and he came around the car and took her arm.

"I hope you like this restaurant. It's one of my favorite places in Sarasota," he said.

"It looks really nice. I'm sure I'll love it," Kathryn answered as she scanned the outside of the premises. It was an upscale steakhouse, probably one of the most expensive restaurants in the city, so yes, she would probably like it.

The hostess was an attractive young woman with jet black hair and large raven eyes. She smiled at Tully in recognition as he approached her.

"It'll be a couple of minutes. They're getting your table ready now," she said.

The girl's teeth were brilliant white and perfect, and Kathryn felt a pang of insecurity and jealousy as she watched her date respond.

Tully started a conversation with the hostess and Kathryn was completely ignored. She stood, waiting for him to end the exchange, but the conversation was expanding rather than coming to a conclusion.

Kathryn left her date and went to sit on the oversized dark-brown leather sofa by the restaurant entrance. As she studied the interaction happening before her eyes, her anger level

nudged up a couple of notches. The nerve of the man. She never tolerated this treatment from anyone. He was ignoring her and flirting with a young girl right before her eyes. If this had been a normal date, she would leave. Right now. End the suffering. But how many opportunities would she get to meet and potentially marry into such wealth and privilege? Not many. Best to shut up and wait. She didn't know him well enough to let her temper show.

One of the wait staff approached the hostess and whispered something to her. She grabbed a couple of menus, and Tully looked at Kathryn, indicating to her that the table was ready. He didn't seem to notice her irritation at being ignored. In fact, he was oblivious to her mood. He smiled at her as she walked toward him and they both were led to the table.

The restaurant was elegant, with white tablecloths and crystal, the subdued lighting romantic, and the setting intimate. Kathryn's mood perked up and she momentarily forgot the perceived insults. Maybe this date was not beyond redemption.

"I'm trying to help the hostess with a real estate deal," he said.

"Oh really. I didn't think restaurant hostesses did many real estate deals."

"She's renting and that's such a waste of money. She needs to buy a condo," he said, with the voice of authority.

"But can she afford to do so on a hostess' salary?" Kathryn asked, thinking this would be a highly improbable outcome for the young woman.

"I don't see why not," he said, lifting his chin with a small sneer.

Kathryn looked down at her menu, thinking about how to change the subject. Arguing with the man over who could qualify for a home loan didn't seem like the correct tack to take.

"Everything looks really good. What do you recommend?" she asked.

"You can't go wrong with anything on the menu. Order anything you like," he said with a

smile, the politeness returning to his demeanor.

"Okay. The filet it is."

"Good choice."

"How long have you lived in Sarasota?" Kathryn asked.

"I moved here about five years ago. It's a beautiful place and a great place to live."

"It really is a beautiful place. I enjoyed the hotel this afternoon."

"That's good. If you are ready to order, you need to close your menu."

"Pardon?"

"Close your menu so the waiter will know that you're ready to order."

"Okay." Kathryn said, as she complied with his request, feeling a little chagrined at being scolded.

The conversation started with Tully talking about his boarding school antics and progressed to a discussion of how he and his friends obtained pornography. Kathryn unsuccessfully tried to change the subject a few times, but he meandered back to the boarding school. She wanted to find a subject that she could discuss, something that they had in common, and boarding school experiences did not meet that criteria.

"Do you have any hobbies?" she asked.

"I like big game hunting," he said.

"Oh. That's nice," she said thinking that if he wasn't worth at least ten million, she would get up now and leave the restaurant. Not only was he an inconsiderate bore, he liked to kill animals for fun, and she found that activity abhorrent.

The waiter came with their food. Both she and Tully had ordered filets and decided to share sides of mashed potatoes and creamed spinach. The steaks were cooked to perfection, hers

medium with a pink center, and his medium-rare.

Kathryn bit into her steak and closed her eyes, savoring the flavor of the meat.

“You are right,” she said. “The food is excellent.”

“Nothing but the best,” he said.

They both settled in to the meal and the conversation lulled. Tully started surveying the restaurant like he was looking for someone.

“Is everything okay?” Kathryn asked.

“Of course. I was just seeing if anyone I know is here tonight.”

She knew she was losing him. If she had any hope of salvaging the date, she had better come up with something that would pique his interest.

“Tell me a little more about your boarding school,” she asked, inwardly cringing.

Tully smiled and eagerly complied with her request. The remainder of the meal was consumed with Tully’s boyish memories. The conversation once again fell into an awkward silence and Kathryn scrambled to find a suitable topic of conversation.

“Do you read?” she asked, thinking that maybe she could get him talking about his book preferences.

“No. Not really. It bores me.”

“I just finished the Stieg Larsson series and they’re really great. You might like those books, they’re not boring at all.”

“I don’t think so. Are you finished?” he asked.

“Yes. It was delicious.”

“You need to put your fork and knife next to each other at five o’clock. Just like mine. Then the waiter will know you’re done.”

"Okay."

Kathryn did as he asked, but her annoyance with the man was growing, and she was working to tap down her anger. She composed herself and then asked, "Why have you never married?"

"I came close a couple of times but they wouldn't sign the prenuptial agreement."

"Really?"

"Yes. And I refuse to marry anyone without one."

"Prenuptial agreements are quite common nowadays. That seems strange they wouldn't sign."

"They both agreed to sign, but when I gave them the actual document, they backed out."

Kathryn looked at his smug expression and knew that this date was an exercise in futility. The only reason she put up with this man was his money, and the prenuptial agreement would probably be as unacceptable to her as it was to her predecessors. At least she gleaned this information before wasting more of her time.

"I would like to show you my condo. It has a great view of Sarasota Bay. We could have a glass of wine and talk a little before I take you back to the hotel."

"Sure," Kathryn said with resignation. The man had paid for her trip and she wasn't ready to go to sleep just yet, but if he thought anything else was going to happen, he was in for a surprise.

"If you ever go to the Century Club with me, you're going to have to improve your table manners," Tully said, as he signed his credit card receipt and reached for his wallet. "They would kick you out."

Kathryn stared at the man, momentarily speechless. She had put her napkin in her lap, did

not talk with a mouth full of food, and as far as she could tell, the only errors made were not closing her menu or placing her silverware at five o'clock. Why would he react in such a way? And he was obnoxious. Really intolerable, and if she couldn't stomach being with him one hour, she couldn't imagine being married to the man. Maybe there were limits to marrying for money.

His condo was close, the car ride short, and he smiled and pointed out different restaurants and buildings, talking as if he would take her to these venues, talking like he believed they would be together in the future. She had not spoken a word but nodded affirmatively whenever he looked at her.

The doorman greeted them at the condo entrance and they went to the waiting elevator, the doorman following and holding the elevator door, pressing the button for the penthouse floor for them. The lobby was dark wood and oriental carpets, spacious and quiet, with the look and smell of money. Kathryn liked the feel of the place but the cost for her to stay here was too dear. Her apartment in North Carolina was preferable if it meant she had to endure hours with this man.

The elevator door opened, and as she stood in the entryway to the condo, she was awed by the magnificent view of Sarasota Bay. She could feel herself living here, waking each morning to the view, planning her full day of tennis matches and lunch at the country club. Entertaining guests. Being photographed for the society newspaper. Maybe he wasn't as bad as she thought.

"You need to take off your shoes," Tully said.

Kathryn stared at him, at first not comprehending.

"I really mean it. If you don't take off your shoes, you will not be allowed inside," he said more sternly, his head tipping up and lips forming a tight sneer.

Kathryn looked down at her feet and then up at his face. She didn't like his face, that sneer, the pretentious manner he projected. He was a bore and a bully and she didn't want to be with him another minute.

"Fuck you," she said under her breath.

"Pardon?"

"I said FUCK YOU."

Her words caught him like a hard slap in the face and he stood silent, staring at her, his complexion becoming a bright crimson.

"I will not tolerate such behavior," he said in a clipped voice. "You can leave now. You're not welcome here."

"Fine. Thank you for dinner but please don't call," she said as she turned toward the front door. "I can find my own way out."

She pushed the button for the elevator and was grateful that the door opened immediately. As she stepped in and turned, she saw Tully standing in his doorway, staring at her, his eyes blazing with anger. The door closed, and when he was no longer in sight, she felt a release of tension. No more pretending, no more holding her tongue, freedom.

Her hotel was a couple blocks away, and as she started her walk, she bent down, and took off her shoes.