

# STILLWATER

## Prologue

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*Fifteen months earlier*

Milo Alvarini pushed his long slender fingers through his mane of black hair as if he were stroking an animal. There was a self-awareness about the movement of his hands, as though he were an actor in a play, and he had an audience watching what he did.

There was a frown on his tanned handsome features, but it didn't extend to his eyes. The frown was aimed at the man seated with him in the wood-paneled office, and was another affectation.

Milo had forgotten what it felt like to experience real emotion, if he had ever known. Since he was a young man he had been aware that other people, especially women, found him attractive. He had, in return, found several sufficiently, and mutually, attractive. In some early skirmishes, one or two with women quite older than himself, he had learned that spending time with them, and appearing to demonstrate some fondness for them, could be financially rewarding.

The other man was older, well dressed, and appeared worldly wise. His name was Clarkson, and this was his office, in Holborn, London, where he was a partner in a well regarded, and successful, legal practice. He had drawn up the terms of the divorce settlement between his client and the soon to be ex-Mrs. Alvarini. Milo was finding out for the first time that the benefits of a marriage were eminently more financially rewarding than his previous arrangements.

Clarkson had arranged matters to his client's advantage. If he felt any twinges of regret about aiding a man he privately considered to be little more than a gigolo then he managed to mask his distaste with a veneer of professional courtesy. And of course extract an inflated fee to soothe his conscience.

Clarkson leaned forward and adjusted the small pile of papers on the glass-topped desk, even though each sheet was already in perfect line with the others. He lined up his Montblanc fountain pen so that it was exactly a half inch from the edge of the paper. He glanced at his watch.

"She won't be long," Alvarini said. "She is never late, not even on the wedding day."

"I understand she is coming alone."

Alvarini made a face that indicated he didn't see the point of the comment.

"She isn't being represented," Clarkson said. "Legally, I mean. She isn't bringing her solicitor."

There was a polite knock and a middle-aged woman opened the door sufficiently to allow her to poke her head and shoulders into the room. "A Mrs. Alvarini to see you, sir."

"Thank you, Alice. Show her in would you?"

Clarkson stood and shook hands politely with the young woman who entered the room. He indicated where she should sit and watched as she walked across to the chair and sat. It fascinated him to watch couples at this stage of proceedings. Would they look at one another? Would they avoid eye contact? Would they even speak to each other?

Elizabeth Alvarini was a lovely-looking woman with close-cropped dark hair. She exuded confidence, and a warmth that immediately made Clarkson think that she was far too

good for his client. His second thought was to wonder what such an impressive woman had seen in Alvarini to not only marry him but to cave in to the demands of the nisi with barely any resistance.

“Beth,” Alvarini purred. “You look...”

“Skip the bullshit, Milo. It hasn’t worked on me for a very long time.”

Beth fixed Clarkson with a glare that would have reduced lesser men to uncertainty. “Where do I sign so that I can get this man out of my life? I’ve been confined to this marriage for far too long.”

Clarkson wasn’t used to people offering themselves up quite so willingly but he pushed papers across to Beth and showed her where to sign. She took his pen from him when he offered it and signed quickly.

“Are you certain you want to do this without your solicitor being present?”

“My solicitor has been about as much use as Milo was as a husband. It’s because of him that I’m giving so much away to a man who deserves much less.”

Alvarini snorted. “Has she signed them all?”

Beth and Clarkson exchanged a look that excluded Alvarini but was all about him.

“It’s all yours,” Beth said.

“Darling, all you have to do is write another best seller and you’ll soon replenish your wallet.”

“How can I possibly do that without...what was it you said? How was it phrased in the divorce papers? ‘Constant support and encouragement in my artistic endeavors’. You’ve never read a word I’ve written.”

“I read the decree nisi.”

Clarkson stood. “Thank you, Mrs. Alvarini...”

“I’m going to be using my married name - at least I’ll keep something out of the marriage,” Beth said.

“Of course. I’ll file the papers, and assuming they still act for you in this regard, I’ll make sure a copy goes to your solicitor.”

Beth stood. She gave a final look to the man she had been married to. What had she seen in him? Friends had warned her against him; perhaps that was part of it, her stubborn streak making her dig her heels in when all sense and caution said stop.

She shook hands with Clarkson but ignored Alvarini.

She walked to the door, down the stairs, and out into the noisy London street where she had parked her car.

A new phase of her life just beginning. She didn’t yet realize that divorce was just the start of it all.

# Chapter One

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*A full moon hung so low that it seemed to float on the still water of the lake.*

*The surface was calm, strewn with weeds, occasional movement, perhaps from a fish or insect. The people gathered at the edge were apparently oblivious to the serenity of the scene.*

*The woman, young and quite beautiful, was wrapped up in herself, that was plain to see, but also immersed in the tableau that was playing out in front of her.*

*Young men, barely into their early twenties, maybe even still in their late teens, were intent on her pleasure. She lay back on the grass, damp from the night air. Her eyes closed as she heard something splash in the water. She thought that one of the men might have slipped into the coldness, was swimming and showing off.*

*She heard a crack as something wooden was snapped; a young tree possibly, or a stout branch. Laughter followed, and water was whipped into frenzy by the beating of the surface. Then a final splash, as the wood was discarded into the lake.*

*And then her hearing was lost, her eyes sealed shut, her mouth open merely to enjoy the moment, as she was joined on the grass by one, two, several young men. Between them they tried to raise color on the pale face of the moon. They tried to drown it as it bowed ever lower, until eventually dawn flicked at the moon, at all of them, and nudged it away.*

Beth pulled herself from the car, and eased her way into the wheelchair. Once settled, she slammed the car door, and lifted her legs onto the footrests.

A man stood watching her, six feet two inches, immaculate in his Italian cut suit, fair hair cut and combed to perfection. "Can I give you a hand?"

She glanced round at him. "No thanks. I can manage. I won't take long." Offers of help were still new and raw enough to irritate. It was hard enough to be confined to the wheelchair without everyone she met confining her boundaries with their sympathy.

"No rush," the man said, with a smile. He was very good looking in a Nordic kind of way, but he didn't appeal to her. She preferred her men rough-hewn, denims and working boots. The suit was a turn-off.

She spun, showing off her dexterity, and wheeled herself up to him. Behind him was the house, Stillwater; her home for the next year. This, the first time she saw it, was a defining moment in her new life, her new beginning.