

THE
DOORWAY

N. S. HOWARD

Catherine was in full control of life, both professionally and personally. She dominated those who approached her and made sure they played under her rules. Then Daniel showed up, offering her a proposition so outrageous she didn't believe he was serious at first. But she found he was not only serious, but was beating her at her own game. Her rules suddenly weren't protecting her from a very determined hunter, a master at games himself.

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By

N.S. Howard

Chapter Two

She put on her underwear slowly, annoyed at herself for having trouble deciding what dress to wear. She took a blue dress out of her closet and held it front of her as she stood in front of the full-length mirror. She grimaced at her reflection and turned to toss the dress angrily on her bed.

“What the hell is the matter with me? It’s just a dinner date. Just pick a damn dress to wear. It’s his problem if he doesn’t like what I wear, not mine.”

The last sentence sounded hollow to her and she went to the kitchen to pour herself a glass from a half-full bottle of red wine. She leaned against the kitchen counter as she drank, trying to rationalize why he had her so upset. She was used to having her way with men, used to making them second-guess what she wanted. Suddenly, that control had vanished. He had led the conversation and made her guess what he was going to do.

Okay so he’s been able to take control so far. But he

won't intimidate me.

After she finished her wine, she went back to her bedroom, took a deep breath and grabbed a black dress with a simple neckline and a small slit to just above the knee. As she put on a pearl necklace, she wondered why she was dressing rather conservatively. Usually, she would wear something that would have her date stumbling over himself. That wouldn't work on Daniel, she decided. Besides, he already knew too much about her. The dress would keep some of her physical attributes hidden for a while.

He arrived in a well-tailored black suit, looking larger than she remembered when she opened the door. When he complimented her on her dress, she felt her cheeks flush and quickly looked away from him. He led the way, escorting her down to the lobby where a taxi waited for them. The cab ride took them to one of the better restaurants.

He chose a red wine for the meal, which reminded her that he was still ahead of her in the game she imagined they were playing.

"Why did you ask me to have dinner tonight and not the weekend?"

"I have to fly out to Bermuda tomorrow."

"Business?"

He laughed. "When I go to Bermuda, it's never really work. Have you ever been there?"

"No."

“You must go there sometime. Where do you like to holiday at?”

So it goes, she thought.

He continued to weave around her questions while learning more about her. She still didn't know why he was going to Bermuda, but he now knew she preferred going to Europe for vacations. She became more intrigued about him, deciding that if open questions didn't work, perhaps bold, more direct questions would give her better footing.

“So do you believe relationships should be equal?” She didn't herself and until now, considered herself the one in control of a relationship. She wondered how he saw himself and if he considered her his equal.

“Equal? I don't think that term applies to relationships. Relationships are balanced. Each gives and takes something to maintain the balance. If one partner is unsatisfied with the way it is balanced, then it falls apart.”

She almost squeezed her hands into fists in exasperation that he danced around her question and then immediately calmed herself. He still hadn't answered her question about whether he thought she was his equal. She tried again. “What about us? What do you see as our balanced relationship?”

He swirled the wine in his glass and took a

drink. "Are you wanting to know what my intentions are with you?"

"Yes." She was taken back by his use of the word *intentions*, almost as if it was sinister. That, she reflected, made him even more interesting.

He laughed a deep chuckle. "Perhaps all I want to do is to seduce you."

"Seduce me to what end? To bed me and then just walk away? I hope you're not serious about that." She gave a smile that flashed her teeth to show he didn't intimidate her.

"Oh, no. The seduction I'm thinking of goes far beyond physical gratification." He returned her smile. "You're not upset with me for wanting to claim you, are you?"

"No, it's what you men do, isn't it? I suppose you can try, but I'm not easily —"

"Dominated?"

"Dominated? Never." She felt his eyes peer into her own, searching for more. She blinked, feeling as if he had just glimpsed a deeper truth in her soul that she didn't even know about herself. Now, she felt uncomfortable, uncertain. There was a lie in the word "never." She knew it now, but the when or how stayed hidden.

"Perhaps I could be allowed to try."

"I suppose you can, but you'll be in for a disappointment. Why waste your time?"

"Because the reward will be so great for both of

us.”

That was just a clever line she thought at first, but when her gaze met his again, she saw he was sincere. It scared her enough that she quickly reached for her wine glass, hoping he didn't see her uncertainty.

She was too astonished to speak for a moment and when she did make a retort, she felt disappointed in her own reply. To her it sounded less like the *go to hell* response she wanted and more like a question to a sales pitch. “And what possible benefits would there be to me being dominated by you?” She crossed her arms and leaned back into her chair. She hoped her body language would convey what her words didn't.

“You get to give up this control you wave about like a flag. You'll be happier and truly feel like you're alive.”

Catherine was taken aback as she considered the thought of her being under his control. *And what did he mean by me waving my control like a flag?* “I don't think so.” Her voice found its mark—strong clear and direct. “You see—” Now she was getting ready to put him in his place and set him straight on whom he was dealing with.

He held up his hand. “You asked me what I wanted so don't get upset at the truth. I merely ask you just to consider the possibility.”

Now she felt flustered again and took another

drink of wine, now not sure how to respond. "It won't work." She wished she said it more defiantly, surprised how quiet her voice was.

He gave her an engaging smile.

She forced herself to return his smile. "Though I suppose you can try." She thought that at least now she knew what they were playing for. He could try to seduce her, to make her his own, but she wasn't going to be a pushover. He was in for a disappointment.

The cab waited for him as he walked her to apartment. She was disappointed and surprised that Daniel had turned down her suggestion of a nightcap in her apartment, stating he had to be at the airport by six the next morning.

He placed both his hands on her shoulders, lightly squeezing them. "I'll see you when I get back." He moved closer to her and his hands slid down her arms to her elbows.

"When will that be?" She began to tilt her head for a kiss.

"Middle of next week." His hands closed around her forearms and pushed them behind her back as his lips met hers.

She took a final deep breath, her back slightly bent as he leaned into her, kissing her deeply. She felt him push her arms enough that both her wrists came together behind her. Then one of his

hands enclosed on both of them, holding them tightly as his other hand came free to slide up her ribcage and on to her breast.

She didn't struggle and her own lack of resistance at his obvious dominance surprised her, deciding maybe it was the amount of wine she drank. She gasped when he released her, not knowing what to do or say. She mumbled goodnight as he waited for her to disappear into the elevator, smiling and saying something she couldn't remember.

The next day in her office a dozen red roses were delivered for her. Her secretary placed them in a vase for her as she read the attached card.

A door has opened for you to take. Don't let fear stop you from doing what you desire.

Daniel

"Is everything alright?"

Catherine looked up from reading the card a third time. Her secretary was peering at her with a mixture of concern and amusement.

"Huh? Oh, yes. I'm fine, just fine." She didn't feel fine. She felt like a nervous schoolgirl the day before the big dance. She hadn't resisted when he pushed her arms behind her back and it wasn't just from being surprised.