

Chapter 53

Michael and Ophelia Talk

About an hour after Mr. Weaselton left with the marriage contract, Michael was working on his paperwork but was distracted by the fact that he had to give up a copy of the original contract for an obviously doctored one. As he sat there brooding, his desk telephone rang. He lifted the receiver and said, "CIT Department. This is Michael Thomson speaking. How may I help you?"

A somewhat familiar voice said, "Michael, this is Daniel Fedorenta in the Legal Department. I understand you had a visit from Thomas Weaselton a short while ago. Is this true?"

"Yes, it is. Why do you ask?"

"Did he bring you a copy of the marriage contract that Mr. Rooikat brought to us?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Would you mind if I came to visit with you for a few minutes?"

Intrigued, Michael replied, "Please do. You've got my curiosity piqued. I'm interested in why you want to speak with me."

"Good. I'll be there in a few minutes."

About five minutes later, Michael heard someone rapping on the window in his door. He looked up and saw an eastern spotted skunk wearing a dark gray 3-piece business suit standing outside of his office. He was immaculately dressed and groomed. Michael knew this had to be Daniel Fedorenta. Michael waved him in as he stood and extended his hand. "You must be Mr. Fedorenta."

"And you, obviously are Mr. Thomson."

"Yes, sir. What did you wish to discuss with me?"

"First of all, I'd like to say you have a bit of a reputation in the Legal Department."

Michael laughed nervously and said, "Really? Why?"

"Because, Mr. Thomson, you did something that no lawyer has ever been able to do." Michael gave him a curious look before he continued with, "You beat the unbeatable Thomas Weaselton in a court case."

"I don't think I did anything spectacular. I just sat next to the prosecuting attorney, listened to the testimony of the witnesses, asked questions when I was allowed to, and made suggestions to the prosecutor."

"But, Weaselton tried to convince the jury that you had requested the room to be built. He

even had a request form that was signed by you.”

Michael laughed and said, “Oh, that.” He laughed again. “When my great-grandparents were going to school, copying machines were used to make copies of documents. If you pasted a piece of paper to the original and made copies, a faint line could be seen around the part that was pasted to the original. Since I knew I had never made the request that I was being accused of making, I looked at the signature and found that faint line. I pointed it out to the judge and Mr. Weaselton.”

“I bet Mr. Weaselton was angry.”

“He was but not for the reason you might imagine.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I pointed it out to him, and demonstrated with a copier brought into the courtroom, I heard him say, ‘That bastard lied to me. He assured me that someone had found that request form.’”

“Oh, my.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t believe that Weaselton used that kind of language.”

“What’s wrong? Is cursing taboo among Humanimals?”

Laughing quietly, Mr. Fedorenta said, “Oh, no. It’s a matter of preference. A lot of people would have used a more descriptive phrase. I’m surprised because Weaselton is known for not talking like that.

“Well, here’s a copy of the contract Mr. Weaselton brought you Monday.” He handed Michael the contract.

“But, Mr. Weaselton said it was a preliminary contract until Mrs. Fuchs approved it and she wanted about five pages of the contract removed.”

Turning to the last page of the contract, Mr. Fedorenta pointed and said, “Then, why did she, Mr. Reynard, and Reginald all sign and date this one. You don’t sign a preliminary contract, Michael.”

Michael looked at the signatures and said, “Oh, my.

“Thank you, Mr. Fedorenta. This is going to be very helpful.”

“Good luck, Michael. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Me, too, Mr. Fedorenta. Me, too.”

Mr. Fedorenta left and Michael thumbed through the contract reading a few paragraphs to get an idea as to why it was so important to convince him that this “preliminary” contract had to be ignored. After a few minutes, he was jarred back to reality when he looked up and saw Mrs. Impisi

about to knock on his door. He glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it was time for the mid-week meeting with Mr. Blaid, all of the department managers and all of the vice-presidents. After giving Dana the “give me a minute” sign, he quickly gathered all of his paperwork, quickly joined her and they headed toward the elevators and the twelfth floor conference room.

As they walked toward the elevator, Dana looked at Michael and said, “You looked pretty intent on what you were reading. Was it important?”

“Was and is, Dana.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“It was a seventeen page long Arrange Marriage Contract.”

“Did you say, ‘seventeen pages’?”

“Yes.”

“Something isn’t right about that.”

“I know That’s why I was so intent on it when you arrived.”

“Wait. Is that Amanda’s Arranged Marriage Contract?”

“Yep.”

“Why are you looking at it?”

“Every contract has an escape clause. I want to find it and get Amanda out of a marriage she doesn’t want to be in.”

“Well, don’t let that interfere with your work.”

“I’m not.”

The mid-week meeting lasted until 0600 and everyone broke for lunch. As was Michael’s custom, he visited the food court that had been installed at his suggestion. He rarely ate at the same establishment twice in the same week although he was particularly fond of Chownese, Carpanese, Itailian, local cuisines, seafood, chicken, and hamburgers.

After purchasing his lunch, Michael went straight back to his office so he could eat and study

the contract. He had barely taken his seat when he saw Albert at his door. He waved Albert inside and indicated a chair for him to sit in.

After seating himself, Albert said, “Well, did someone come and claim you had the wrong contract?”

“Just as sure as you warned me it would happen.”

“Did you play difficult?”

“Yes. I didn't give in to Mr. Weaselton very easily.”

“Weaselton!? Boy, Mr. Reynard must really have something in that contract he wants to hide.”

“He does. Amanda’s dowry.”

“Amanda’s dowry?”

“Yes. Her dowry is controlling interest in SoGa Industries.”

“My God! He disguised a hostile takeover as the dowry in an Arranged Marriage Contract! Unfortunately, it might actually be legal since it’s an arranged marriage and arranged marriages always have a dowry of some kind.”

Michael said, “That’s all the more reason to find that escape clause.”

Albert pulled an envelope from his lunchbox and showed it to Michael. “Is that . . .” Michael started to say.

“It is and don’t you dare tell anyone that I have it.”

“I won’t but why?”

“The only reason it’s legal for you to have that copy is because you signed a release form.”

“Really? Well . . .”

“Uh-uh. You aren’t authorized to allow anyone a copy of the contract. Therefore, this copy is contraband and, when we’re finished with it, it should and will be shredded. If Mr. Reynard found out about this copy, he would sue us into oblivion in less time than it takes to tell it. Contract confidentiality is very important to us Humanimals.”

“I see. Why are you so willing to help me with this?”

“Michael, you helped me with Michelle. You helped me to show her that I’m not a bad guy and soon, I’m going to be a father and marry the woman that I love.

Michael smiled and said, “Well, let’s start studying this contract to find that escape clause.”

“You read my mind, Michael.”

At 0700, Michael and Albert finished reading the contract. Michael took his thumb and forefinger and pinched and rubbed the bridge of his nose. Then, he took a deep breath and exhaled sounding like a sigh. Albert rubbed the area between his eyes with three fingers. They both sat there for several seconds before either spoke.

Albert spoke first. “A Humanimal contract is supposed to be written in layman’s language so anyone can understand it. But, Mr. Reynard pushed the envelope here.”

“Yeah. Even without the therefores, wherefores, whereases, and parties of the X part, I had a hard time understanding this contract. Maybe tomorrow we’ll be a little more clearheaded as we read it.”

“Maybe. I’ll see you later, Michael.”

“See you, Albert.

“Oh! I heard that Michelle asked you to move in with her. Is that true?”

“Yes! After she found out that she was pregnant and she finally understood that I really was in love with her and wanted her to be my wife, she decided that I needed to meet her mother and stepfather. They were a little worried since I’m a caracal and she was raped by one when she was 14 but, when she and Janet explained that I had always treated her with love and respect, they relented. Of course, when Michelle dropped the other shoe, they went ballistic until Michelle told them that I had resisted having a sexual relationship with her until she practically raped me. They actually laughed at the thought of Michelle being the aggressive one.”

Michael snickered as he said, “Yeah, that does seem a bit out of character for her. Well, tell Michelle I said, ‘Hello’.”

“If I have time, I will. She wants sex more now than she did before she got pregnant. I wonder why?”

“I can’t say for sure but I remember reading that the higher level of hormones during pregnancy can make a woman moody or have a higher appetite for sex.”

“Well, either way, I’ll see you tomorrow, Michael.”

“I’ll be here.”

After work, Michael went home, showered, got dressed, fed the kittens, ate, and went to visit Amanda. When he arrived, Amanda smiled happily and, even though it was still a bit painful, she moved to make room for him to sit on the bed. She even patted the bed indicating where she wanted him to sit. Michael smiled, walked over to the chifforobe and retrieved one of the books he had stashed there shortly after Amanda had been admitted. He climbed into the bed and got comfortable. Then, Amanda snuggled up to him with her head on his shoulder and her eyes looking at the book Michael was holding.

Before Michael could start reading, Amanda said, “Have you had a chance to read the contract, Michael?”

“Read it? No. I have glanced through it, though. It seems rather long for an Arranged Marriage Contract. Albert looked at it and was shocked. He said that arranged marriage contracts are rarely over two pages long and never more than three pages long. So, there’s more to that contract than meets the eyes.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I’m not sure. Sweetheart. I just think Mr. Reynard, Senior, has it in for SoGa Industries.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I spoke with Mr. Weaselton the day he brought the contract to my office. He told me that Senior had told him to defend Mr. Tushkan. He also said that Senior was more than a little irate that he had lost the case and threatened to fire him because of it. I don’t understand such hatred of a competitor.”

“Maybe when you have time to read the contract, you’ll figure it out.”

“Well, it has to be soon. I’ve only got about three months to find it and find the escape clause. As complicated as that contract is that might be a tall order.

“Well, let’s get back to” “The Tschanalan Princess’.”

Michael started reading the book. As was his wont, he tried to read in voices that were the voices of each character as well as a voice of a narrator. Amanda loved this because it made it easier for her to envision what was happening in the story. Michael had read three pages when he noticed that Amanda had become relaxed and her breathing was shallow and regular. He looked down at her and smiled when he realized that she had fallen asleep. He bent down and kissed the top of her head. As he kissed Amanda, he heard a woman clearing her throat. He looked toward the door and saw someone he never expected to see, Ophelia Fuchs.

Ophelia said, “What are you doing lying in bed with my daughter?”

Michael was amazed that Ophelia had spoken so calmly. In fact, he was so amazed that he couldn’t think of what to say.

Ophelia, once again, spoke calmly, “Well?”

“She asked me to join her while I read to her.”

“I see. Do you intend to sleep there?”

“No ma’am. As soon as she’s completely asleep, I’m going to move over there.” He indicated the sofa.

“Why do you insist on visiting her? You know she’s engaged to marry someone else.”

“Against her will.”

“Nevertheless, she is engaged to Reginald Reynard, III.”

“You know, Mrs. Fuchs, normally, someone has an interest in someone else before the two of them get married. Mr. Fuchs told me that you two had an arranged marriage but, you had decided that you wanted to get married before your marriage was arranged.”

“That’s irrelevant.”

“No, ma’am. It’s quite relevant. I’ve spoken to several people who’d had arranged marriages, including Bertha Karhu. Bertha was the only one of them who had never met her husband before their wedding day. Amanda has only a slight advantage over Bertha in that respect having met Reginald, what was it, twice including the Engagement Party.”

“So?”

“So, she told me the day she received the invitation to the party that she didn’t want to go. She also told me that she had no idea why she was receiving the invitation since she’d only met him once.”

“It doesn’t matter. Amanda will be happier with him than with you.”

Things got rather quiet for a few seconds before Ophelia spoke again. “Tell me the truth. Did you sleep with my daughter when the two of you were in Jaguarville last year?”

“We slept in the same bed but we had a reason.”

“And that was?”

“She was in heat and needed me to comfort her.”

“Did you force yourself on her?” Michael glared at Ophelia and refused to answer her. After a few seconds of this standoff, Ophelia reworded her question. “Did you have sexual relations with her during that time?”

“No, ma’am. I told her not long after we met that I wouldn’t do nor ask that of her.”

“Why not? Don’t you think she’s attractive? Jacob told me that he told you he would understand and accept it.”

"I do think she's attractive. As a matter of fact, I think she's absolutely beautiful. The reason I refused is because I love and respect her too much to ask that from her before we get married."

"Even if she begged you?"

"Especially if she begged me."

Ophelia had sat down during the previous exchange. As she sat there, she was thinking. Finally, she said, "Do you think I'm a bigot?"

That question caught Michael flat-footed. In a surprised voice, Michael said, "What?"

"Do you think I'm a bigot?"

"I'll ask you a few questions and let you answer that question yourself. Do you hate just me or all humans?"

"All."

"Have you ever judged me on anything I've actually said or done to you or did you judge me based on a preconceived notion about humans in general?"

Ophelia paused for a moment before she said, "Preconceived notions, I guess."

"Did you listen to any facts about me or did you decide that, because of things that happened hundreds or thousands of years ago, I was a bad person?"

Now, Michael was hitting perilously close to home but Ophelia refused to refuse to answer his questions. "What happened in the past."

"Are you willing to consider that you jumped to a conclusion about me based on a notion that was disproved long ago?"

"No."

"Then, based on this definition of a bigot, 'My mind is made up; don't confuse me with the facts', you are a bigot, Mrs. Fuchs."

Ophelia looked at Michael for a long time before she said, "What would it take to make you give up Amanda and allow her to be happy married to Reginald?"

Anger welled up in Michael. He started to let Ophelia have it with both barrels. However, he took control of his emotions and said, "Mrs. Fuchs, money doesn't buy happiness. The best it can do is ease misery. I've seen some wealthy couples happy and other wealthy couples that never said a nice word about each other. I've seen some poor couples that couldn't be happier if they tried and other poor couples that didn't want to live in the same city as their spouse."

"When you and Mr. Fuchs got married, were you rich?"

“No.”

“Were you happy?”

Ophelia smiled at the memory and said, “Yes.”

“Do you believe you could have been happier if you had been rich?”

Ophelia paused and thought about her life since she and Jacob had gotten married. She thought about how she and Jacob had struggled to make ends meet when they were first married and how the addition of Amanda after eight months of marriage had been an added burden on their lives and their already stretched finances and how they struggled to feed Amanda and themselves. Then, she thought about her current life and how she didn't want for anything and she realized that she was happier now than she was twenty years ago but, her happiness wasn't because she had all the material things she could ever want but because she had a loving husband who she knew would come home to her every night, unless he was out of town, and be there for her whenever she needed him, her current pregnancy, number seven, was proof of that. She also realized that her six kits made her happier than money ever could.

Michael interrupted her train of thought by saying, “Well?”

“I doubt I would have been happier when Jacob and I got married twenty years ago if we had been rich.”

“I know you've got more money now simply because Mr. Fuchs has been working for 20 years. Are you happier now?”

“Yes, but not because of the money. Jacob is my soul mate. I know he'll be there for me. I've got six, soon to be seven, kits and, despite what you may think, I love all of them equally.”

“Mrs. Fuchs, I don't doubt that you love Amanda. She's the one that doubts it.”

“Why do you love Amanda?”

“Why? That, Mrs. Fuchs, is a good question. All I know is as we've worked together and gotten to know each other better and better, I came to realize that I was thinking of her on a regular basis everyday. When we were in Jaguarville, she was in heat. The first night she wanted to sleep with me, but, I asked her to try to sleep by herself. About three hours later, the front desk clerk called me and said that she was disturbing the other guests by crying for me. I got up, opened the connecting door and found her lying on the floor and crying for me. When I picked her up, she put her arms around my neck and reminded me of my promise to let her sleep with me if she couldn't sleep. I carried her to my bed, put her in it, and covered her. When I got in, she cuddled up to me and continued crying and apologizing for being such a problem to me. I felt sorry for her and scratched the top of her head like her grandmother, your mother, used to do. I think that's when I realized that I was falling in love with her.”

“So, you love her because she loves you? That's rather shallow, don't you think?”

“You're right, that is shallow but, that isn't the only reason I love her. She's beautiful, warm,

caring, intelligent, and, most importantly, forgiving. She's also fun to pick on. I joke with her all the time about eating chicken and she goes along with the joke. Of course, she threatens to bite me about it and, sometimes, she follows through with the threat."

Ophelia laughed quietly at what Michael said before she said, "And you enjoy that?"

"Of course, I do. Mrs. Fuchs, do you know why I left the Engagement Party?"

Ophelia was caught off-guard by the seeming change of subject. "Because you were angry?"

"No. When I was a young man, I started dating. I cared about each girl I dated but they couldn't have cared less about me. Every one of them was hoping to attract some other guy and, when the object of their desires became interested in them, they dropped dropped me like a hot rock. When Reginald announced that Amanda was his fiancée, for a short while, I thought that Amanda had done the same thing. So, I was hurt, not angry."

"I suppose you hate me because of what I did."

"No ma'am. I don't hate you. But, I am going to find the escape clause in that contract and I'm going to exploit it. I don't care if it make you angry or not. So, be prepared, Mrs. Fuchs, because it will happen."

Rather than become angry, Ophelia started to appreciate Michael's fortitude. She started to realize how much like Jacob Michael really was. She remembered how it was when she and Jacob had first gotten married. All they had was their name, his poor paying job and his desire to improve their lot in life. One thing that Jacob would say after promising to improve their life was, "Be prepared, Ophelia, because it will happen." That one statement out of Michael's mouth made her understand why Amanda had fallen so hard for Michael. Still, she would prefer to see Amanda married to Reginald although it was no longer because Michael was a human. She even started to question her attitude toward him when she had first met him thinking that she had let the past color her attitude toward him a little too much.

After several seconds, Michael said, "You're pretty quiet over there, Mrs. Fuchs. I can't help but think that you're about to launch into another anti-human tirade against me."

She looked at him with a wistful look in her eyes as he said, "No. No more anti-human tirades against you. You brought back memories of the times when Jacob and I first married. We weren't rich by any stretch of the imagination but Jacob was determined to improve our lot in life and every time he made me a promise to that end, he would say, "Be prepared, Ophelia, because it will happen.

"I need to go home. I told Jacob I wouldn't be gone long."

She stood up, walked over to the bed and looked at how Amanda was clinging to Michael which reminded her of how she used to sleep next to Jacob. She even ran her fingernails through Amanda's hair causing her to moan softly in pleasure. Michael noted tears glistening in Ophelia's eyes as she turned toward him. He could tell she was fighting an internal battle which Michael ended by taking her hand, holding it to his mouth, kissed the back of her hand, and smiled sheepishly after he released it. Ophelia's tears started falling from her eyes as she turned and quickly left Amanda's hospital room.

After Ophelia left the room, Michael started thinking. “We talked for over 10 minutes and she never called me human once. She never called me Michael but I guess it’s progress. Perhaps she’s starting to realize that I’m not a danger to Amanda and that I really do love her. Maybe if I can get Amanda out of that damned ‘Arranged Marriage Contract’, she’ll finally understand that she’s been wrong about me all this time. Eh! Probably not.”

About half-a-minute after Ophelia left the room, Amanda opened her eyes, looked at Michael and smiled at him. “I had the strangest dream just now, Michael.”

“Really? What did you dream?”

“I dreamed that mother was here and talking to you but, she wasn’t yelling or fussing about you being here. She was actually cordial.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Princess, after all, it was just a dream. I’m still here and your mother isn’t. Go back to sleep, I’ll go over to the couch and go to sleep.”

Amanda raised up and kissed Michael good night. She lay back down and watched him as he moved over to the couch. They smiled at one another as they fell asleep.