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**AT YOUR
SERVICE**

A.C. ARTHUR



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SERVICE**

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He's fashion royalty. She's a gorgeous techie. During this fake engagement, practice makes wicked passion in this steamy read by A.C. Arthur!

App entrepreneur Nina Fuller's having a hellish day. And it just got worse. *So much worse*. She just ran smack into someone tall, dark and delicious. And so, so hard. A man whose smooth, tantalizing voice slides across her skin, stroking her libido. Making her want things she's not allowed to want...

Which is a problem, since fashion exec Major Gold isn't just a dish of mouthwateringly hot proportions. Known as the Fashion House Playboy, he's the one who can make Nina's newest accessory app a roaring success. Or not. But Major wants something else from Nina. An arrangement that means they could *both* get what they want.

Provided, of course, Nina is willing to spend the next six weeks pretending to be his fiancée.

Nina is a woman who knows exactly what she wants—and that includes Major. His touch unleashes a sexual force unlike anything she's ever known. Explosive. *Addictive*.

And when it comes to tempting Nina, Major is definitely *not* going to be good as gold...

Step into stories of provocative romance where sexual fantasies come true. Let your inhibitions run wild with Harlequin DARE.

A.C. Arthur is an award-winning author who lives in Baltimore, Maryland, with her husband, three children, grandson and English bulldog named Vader. An active imagination and a love for reading encouraged her to begin writing in high school and she hasn't stopped since.

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AT YOUR SERVICE

A.C. ARTHUR

 **HARLEQUIN**
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To my law clerks: Vanessa, Manti, Gita, Beatrice and Ashley.

Thanks so much for your endless support.

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CHAPTER ONE

LET'S DO THIS.

Whispering the mantra as she stepped out of the ladies' room, Nina smoothed her palms down the front of her navy-blue pencil skirt. With her portfolio tucked under one arm and her black leather purse hanging on the opposite shoulder, she walked easily in four-inch black pumps. Until she turned the corner and collided with something hard and delicious-smelling.

Her portfolio hit the ground as she threw her hands up and felt a strong grip on her upper arms.

“Whoa, there.”

His voice was deep but smooth and made her feel like warm water was streaming down her body, easing to her core.

“Sorry,” she mumbled with a shake of her head.

Nina pulled out of his grasp and went down on her knees to snap up the pages that had escaped from her folder. As if in rebellion, or just because they wanted her to look like a complete idiot, the papers had scattered across the dark-carpeted floor a distance away from where she was standing.

“Here, let me help,” he was saying, but Nina didn't reply.

And she didn't look up, just continued to gather the wayward sheets, cursing herself and what had been a horrific start to this very important day. Clutching a handful of pages, she started to stand when her purse decided to slip from her shoulder. *Oh no, I'm not dropping anything else today.* She lifted her hands and caught the bag as Mr. Helpful came closer.

Anxious to just get this uncomfortable encounter over with and to make it to the meeting she was already in danger of being late for, Nina glanced up to meet his gaze. Warm root beer-brown eyes stared back at her while lips of medium thickness parted slightly as if he were ready to speak again. His words were halted when her hands took that moment to

continue moving upward, brushing over this gorgeous guy's pants on the way.

No, not just his pants but his...

Nina's jaw dropped, heat immediately fusing her cheeks as her eyes widened and she yanked her hands back against her chest so hard she almost lost her breath.

"Are you all right?"

Hell no!

Nina was on her way to a meeting that would make or break her business and she was standing here touching a man she didn't know. A man who was the epitome of tall, bronzed, handsome and apparently very aroused.

"I'm fine," she managed to croak and then cleared her throat. Stuffing the papers under her arm, she reached for the black case he held. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Can I help you get your belongings together?"

"No. Really. I have it. It's no problem," she said because the problem was obviously her. Or it could have been the train from York to Manhattan that was late because something had spilled on the tracks, or the gigantic rip in her stockings from when she'd slid across the torn seat of the taxi upon finally arriving at the Ronald Gold Fashions headquarters. Either way, this day was not getting better.

Nina stepped around the man, hoping he wouldn't say anything else to her. She walked as quickly as she could without running and appearing more like a crazy person. Not knowing exactly where she was going, she continued down the long hallway, turning the moment she saw an opening on the right and then moving just as fast in that direction.

Her phone buzzed and she stopped to dig into her purse to retrieve it.

"Hey, Angie," she answered after seeing her sister's name on the screen.

“Hey. I won’t be able to run past Dad’s tonight to check on him and Daisy’s got a photo shoot so she doesn’t think she’ll get there until after eight.”

Nina closed her eyes as her fingers tightened on the phone. She didn’t scream the way she wanted to because everything that could go wrong today had already gone wrong. She inhaled deeply once more and let the breath out slowly before replying. “I’m in New York for a meeting, as I told everyone at dinner last night. I won’t be back until tomorrow morning. So somebody’s gonna have to go over there and make sure Dad takes his medications as directed and doesn’t end up passed out on the floor.”

It was, to Nina, as simple as that. But to her sisters what she’d just said wouldn’t make any sense. Younger than her by four and six years, Angie and Daisy were so used to Nina taking care of everything—from their father to them when they were young girls—that the idea of doing some of the grown-up heavy lifting was too much for them to fathom. They’d much rather continue to dump it all on Nina’s shoulders. Well, not today.

“I thought you were coming back tonight,” Angie argued.

“No. I changed my mind. I don’t get away from home often so I’m going to spend the evening in New York. I told you that also, in the reminder text I sent earlier when I was on my way to the train station.” Nina lifted a hand to touch her hair, double-checking to make sure it was smooth and neat after her run-in with the hot guy.

“Well, that’s not fair, Nina. Daisy and I are busy tonight and you’re gonna be in New York living it up. You know Dad needs to be checked on daily.”

Yes, she did know that, mainly because it was something she said on a routine basis to her sisters.

“It’s one night, Angie. You and Daisy can figure something out for just one night.” Her temples started that slow, persistent thumping that signaled a migraine, which wasn’t good.

“Look, it is what it is. And I have to hang up because I need to get into this meeting. I’ll call Dad to check on him as soon as the meeting is done, but you and Daisy are responsible for him tonight.”

“But—”

“But nothing. Goodbye, Angie.”

Nina pushed the button to disconnect the call. Technically she hadn’t hung up on her, even though sometimes Angie and Daisy deserved just that. They were beyond old enough to handle a night without Nina giving detailed outlines of what they needed to do. And having just celebrated her thirtieth birthday last month, Nina deserved one night in New York, the fashion capital of the United States.

First, she needed to get to this meeting, make her presentation and grab this account. Everything was riding on this—having the money to get her father into an assisted-living facility and giving her app the boost it needed to compete in the big leagues of the fashion industry.

You can do this. It’s what you’ve been working so hard for these last two years. You’re going to get this account and everything else will fall into place. You’ve got this!

Nodding to herself, Nina dropped her phone back into her purse.

It took her another five minutes to walk all the way to the other side of the floor where there was a set of glass doors with the gold letters RGF on the front. Once she pulled the door open and stepped inside, the rapid beat of her heart ceased. The heat that had still burned her cheeks subsided and she walked toward the reception desk, her shoulders squared, chin held high.

After introducing herself to the receptionist—a pretty woman with coal-black hair that fell down her back—Nina was directed down another hallway to the last door on the right. Nina entered the room with her ready-to-take-on-the-world attitude and superstar smile, only to have it falter the

minute she locked gazes with the man sitting at the far end of the table.

The same man she'd bumped into only moments ago. The man whose hard dick she'd felt...inadvertently, of course.

Damn.

* * *

Major sat back in the leather conference room chair with one hand on his thigh, the other rubbing the shaved skin of his jaw. He couldn't take his eyes off her throughout her presentation. Nor could he stop the erection that had sprung so quickly when they'd first met in the hallway and he'd watched her bend over in that tight skirt. Of course, that hadn't been their official meeting. No, that awkward moment had come the second she'd walked into the conference room where he was seated with his brothers and two of his tech department staffers.

Nina Fuller, owner and operator of the At Your Service fashion accessorizing app, was beautiful with toffee-brown-colored hair hanging past her shoulders and cinnamon-hued skin. Not only did her skirt fit the round curve of her ass and the stretch of her thighs just right, but the pale blue blouse she wore with it was tucked neatly into a high-waist skirt, the blouse's sheer material hanging alluringly over her breasts. Major's palms itched with the thought of cupping them and watching as they spilled over his fingers.

His dick jumped again and he eased his hand up higher on his thigh to give the pulsating shaft a gentle push. *Get it together!*

"What's the traffic like on this app?" RJ asked. "Is there so much that it could possibly become inundated and freeze? Customer complaints spread like wildfire online and an app crashing could be a PR catastrophe."

As the director of sales for the family business, Major's older brother RJ—Ronald Gold III—was always concerned about the customers and how much merchandise they were

buying. RJ's comment solicited a nod from Maurice, Major's younger twin brother. But since this presentation was for a tech product, Major—the company's technical developer—was front and center on the decision making. That meant he should stop gawking at this woman like he was a horny teenager and get his head in the game.

His fingers involuntarily moved closer to cup his hardened dick. *Not that head!*

“What he means is...how are your configurations designed?” he asked. “Will the overflow in use cause the app's algorithms to go haywire?”

Technical speak was Major's thing and apparently so was getting turned on by a woman he barely knew.

Her gaze found his, and her tongue slipped out to lick her lips for just a second. Long enough for him to swallow. Hard.

She clicked the button on the small control device cushioned in the palm of her hand. The images on the screen across the room flipped back to one of the previous presentation slides where she'd outlined the beginning sketches of her app.

“Two years ago, when the first thoughts of At Your Service entered my mind, I planned exactly what I wanted it to do. Match accessories to outfits. Nothing more, nothing less. By staying focused on what the app absolutely needed to do to succeed, I was able to avoid many common pitfalls in new app development—overreaching ideas. With that said, during the first two years of the app's startup, I've fine-tuned and streamlined its function so that even with high volume it still functions as seamlessly as if there were only ten to twelve users.”

Confident. Knowledgeable. Intriguing.

All things that were required for a good sales pitch. And things that aroused Major on a level he hadn't quite explored before.

Sure, he'd been dubbed the Fashion House Playboy three months ago by the press, but as the last thing on his busy

schedule was to deal with the lies that oftentimes floated through the tabloids and online gossip sites, Major hadn't given the title or its implications the time of day. The executives in RGF's marketing department, on the other hand, had. It was now an actual agenda item to be dealt with when this meeting was over.

At the moment, however, he was staring into the lovely topaz-brown eyes of a woman who wanted RGF to integrate her app on its website. In essence, this was business. Not pleasure. He took another second to try to send that message to his aching dick.

"Your plans look detailed and well thought out. And you say this has been up and running for two years. How many clients do you currently have?"

"The first year was for planning, developing and trial runs," she said. "The second year was for getting all the licenses required and finding vendors to facilitate the app's main function. Three independent fashion designers have been satisfied with the application in the last five months. Letters of recommendation are included in the information packets I passed out. But my goal is expansion. This app in its current state is primarily designed to be a corporate plug-in. Eventually, as my brand gains visibility, I'll be expanding to target individual customers." She stood a few inches away from the projector screen, hands clasped in front of her, shoulders back.

A light layer of makeup covered a very pretty face, and hair that looked silky and shiny made his fingers itch to touch the long tresses.

"Amelia Jewelers is one of the vendors we work with for showings along the East Coast," RJ said, looking down at the papers Nina had referred to.

"Yes, they're reputable and reliable. I trust Amelia Cane's words implicitly." That came from Jenner Carlson, the lead tech developer in Major's department. "And the layout you've created is simple, yet efficient. All a customer has to do is

upload the clothes they've purchased and accessory ideas are immediately assembled."

"Correct." Nina continued, "This is after they've set up their user profile, which collects pertinent information like body type, style preferences and budget. The customer will have a seventy-two-hour period to consider their selections before either being directed to purchase via third-party sites or to re-accessorize. A schedule of gentle reminders in that time frame keeps the app and the clothes just purchased prevalent in the customer's mind."

"But this app doesn't drive customers to the RGF site. We would essentially have to bring the customers to you, which makes this a winning opportunity for you and just an added benefit for us," RJ noted, leaning back in his chair, hands clasped in his lap. This was the not-so-impressed stance his brother took just before he was about to shoot down an idea.

"But what if there was a widget for the app on the RGF site telling the customer that we care about their overall look and not just the garment they purchase from us," Major said. "Then everyone benefits from the sale we've secured because we were savvy and compassionate enough to consider our customers' overall needs, bringing us even more customers who will like the idea of a sort of one-stop shop."

His comment was rewarded with a slow smile and nod from Nina. An action that sealed the deal—his hard-on wasn't ceasing anytime soon.

The part of his brain that was determined to focus on work tried to press through. After all, he'd originally intended to shoot this idea down. He could admit it was partially a selfish act since some of the things Nina's app offered were in direct competition with what he wanted to feature through his own company—the company he'd be launching soon, which his family still didn't know about.

Discussion continued for a few moments more, ending when RJ mentioned he had another meeting to get to. "You're in that meeting, also, Major. So, Ms. Fuller, we'll be in touch."

Nina didn't falter even though Major recognized the dismal tone of rejection in RJ's voice.

"Thank you so much for your time, gentlemen," she said, clicking the button on the remote to clear the screen.

Major took his time tucking the packet she'd provided into his padfolio before closing and zipping it shut. He slipped his phone out of his pocket and quickly checked it for text messages.

"Ten minutes," RJ said. "Don't be late, we've got a tight schedule. Major? Are you listening?"

Lifting his gaze from his phone, Major found both his brothers staring at him. "Yes. I'll be there in ten minutes. Just have to rearrange my schedule a bit."

Landra, his assistant, had had to postpone the meeting with the agent and actresses Major was scheduled to meet with this afternoon so that he could attend yet another meeting with the marketing department to talk about the very reason he needed to hire an actress in the first place.

His brothers headed out of the conference room along with Jenner and Ken, leaving Major alone with Nina Fuller and that very tight skirt, which continued to make his mouth water.

CHAPTER TWO

HE WAS STARING at her and she liked it.

The warmth that had thankfully moved from her cheeks had spread down her neck and pooled in her breasts so that they now felt full. With every move she'd made during the presentation she'd felt his gaze on her and had reveled in it. Feeling attractive and wanted wasn't the norm for Nina and she'd forgotten how much she enjoyed it.

Now, she would enjoy him offering her a contract much more, but since she'd likely have to wait a couple days or possibly weeks for that answer, she was content with just feeling sexy beneath his intent gaze.

"Your bio says you're from York, Pennsylvania. Did you move to New York when you started this business?"

He'd shaved his beard, that's why she hadn't immediately recognized him in the hallway before the meeting. But she was certain she was never going to forget his voice. Not the way the rich, deep timbre eased over her skin like a massage, or the spurt of awareness it brought to every part of her body each time she heard it.

"No. I still live in York," she replied as she gathered the last of her documents and slid them into her portfolio.

Out of the corner of her eye she could see that he'd moved from the end of the table to stand closer to her, but she kept her gaze averted. Instead she zipped the case and picked her purse up from the chair then placed it on the table beside her portfolio. At that point there was nothing stopping her from looking at him and she sucked in a breath before turning to face him.

"But I can commute when necessary. However, one of the great things about this app is that it's a mobile function. Once my system has been integrated with RGF's, we'll be all set and I won't have to request any more meetings that will clog up your busy schedule."

He held his phone in one hand and the black-leather padfolio under his arm. She hadn't seen either of those things when she'd collided with him in the hallway. Then again, she hadn't been looking for them. Nor had she been planning to feel the guy up. Considering who he was in the company, she wondered if she should apologize for that now.

"I would gladly make time in my schedule for you," he said.

The easy tilt of his mouth into a smile came with a punch of desire that Nina was certain she'd never felt before. Not that she was a prude or inexperienced where men were concerned, it was just that none had ever affected her the way this one did.

But she wasn't going to let that distract her. "That's nice to hear. Do you have any other questions about the app?"

"I do, but unfortunately I have another meeting to get to. Are you heading back to York right away?"

"No. I'm actually going to stay and enjoy the city tonight. My train leaves tomorrow morning at eleven." She gave the specific time just in case he wanted to schedule a follow-up meeting sooner rather than later.

He was nodding slowly as he kept staring at her with those warm disrupting eyes. But she wasn't supposed to be looking at this man's eyes and thinking that way. She could, however, admire the fit of the black suit he wore and the purple tie that added a splash of color and highlighted his tawny-hued skin.

"That's great. I've gotta head out, but I definitely want to speak with you again. Do you have a business card with your contact information?"

That request came with him taking a step closer to her. Instinct told her to step back, to keep a safe, professional distance between them. But hell, she'd already somewhat fondled him earlier, what harm could it do to have him up close and personal again? Besides, she loved the way he smelled. That cologne had to be an expensive designer fragrance. Possibly even European. It was a heady, spicy scent mixed with something rugged and yet unique. It made her think of cold winter nights cuddled in front of a roaring fire.

But back to business. “Yes. All of my contact information is on the packet I passed out, but I do have cards.”

She pulled her purse open and reached inside for the sky blue card case her father had given her last Christmas. She removed one embossed ivory-colored card, handed it to him and wasn't at all surprised when he touched more of her hand than was necessary to retrieve it. There was definitely some flirtation going on here in what should have been a simple business meeting. Maybe he thought she was easy considering what had happened in the hallway. But that had been an accident—surely he recognized that. And the question still remained: Why had he been aroused while walking down a hallway? Who had he been thinking of?

“I'll call you,” he said in that delicious tone that this time had her thighs trembling.

How bad would it be if he tossed her on this table and she opened her legs to him in invitation?

Very, very bad.

“I'll answer,” she replied before snapping her lips closed because maybe that sounded a bit too coy.

But there was no lie in the two words. If Major Gold called her phone, Nina was definitely going to answer on the first ring and there was absolutely no shame in that. After all, this was her career she was talking about.

“Good,” he said with another nod.

His hand was still on hers. Nina knew the connection was lasting too long and she thought about letting it linger until it wore itself out or led to them climbing up on that conference table. But she had to be professional. If she were misreading his signals—even though she was certain she wasn't—she still needed to play this like the only thing either of them was considering was this business deal.

She eased her hand from his grasp. “I hope you make it to your meeting on time,” she said, turning to pick up her things.

She was heading toward the door when he fell into step beside her. “I'll walk you to the elevator.”

“Thanks, but I think I can find it.” *This time*. She left that part out and continued walking, knowing that once again, he was staring at her ass.

This really was a totally different feeling for Nina. Back in York there’d been no suave and debonair businessman who could make her feel desired and wanted—on a business and a personal front. Not that she’d craved this type of attention; relationships weren’t on her radar because they could abruptly leave a trail of pain that lingered. No, she was just fine focusing on work and her family. But, as strange as these new physical reactions were, they were exhilarating, too.

“How do you plan to enjoy the city?” he asked when they stood in front of a bank of elevators. “Catch a Broadway play? Visit the museums? Go shopping?”

“I actually don’t have a plan, but all of your suggestions sound fun. It’s almost five now, so I don’t have much time, but once I get to the hotel I’ll figure it out.”

“Which hotel are you staying at?”

“The Hilton Midtown.” She was giving him a ton of information that at any other time may have been considered unsafe. There was no explanation for why she didn’t think that was the case now.

“Not too far from here,” he said with another nod.

What was he thinking?

He’d tucked her business card into his inside jacket pocket and still stood abnormally close to her for someone she’d just met.

The elevator dinged and the door opened. Nina stepped into the car and leaned to the side to push the lobby button. She gave him another smile before saying, “Thanks again for your time. I hope to hear from you soon about the project.”

His response was a broader smile. “Oh, you’ll definitely be hearing from me very soon.”

* * *

“You want to do what?”

Major ignored the shock lacing RJ’s tone and stared directly at Desta Henner, the marketing director who was working closely with Maurice, the company’s public relations manager, and his team. Desta stared back at Major with expressive dark brown eyes, arms crossed and resting on her desk.

“Let me get this straight. You’re suggesting we bring this woman, whom we haven’t decided to do other business with, into a meeting regarding a secret marketing strategy and use her as your fake fiancée?” Desta raised a perfectly arched brow in what was known as her signature questioning glare.

Major had seen that look many times before in the five years Desta had worked for RGF. He pushed on regardless.

“She’s perfect,” he said, feeling those words take on a very different meaning inside his head than what he’d meant to convey to everyone seated in the room. He cleared his throat. “A fresh face. She’s not a model, which was your idea. And neither is she an actress, my first idea. Instead, she’s a woman from York, Pennsylvania, that no one in the fashion industry has ever seen before. That makes her just like every other woman in the world, precisely who the Golden Bride Collection was created for. A career-focused woman earning a paycheck she hopes can cover the amount of her dream wedding gown.”

“And she’s never been seen with Major before,” Maurice chimed in.

Major shot a quick look in his brother’s direction but held back the “Thanks for your support.”

Desta immediately glanced in Maurice’s direction, as well. “Pot calling the kettle...” she quipped with a half grin. “But I think I see where you’re going with this. If we’re going to have Major plan a fake wedding so we can generate buzz and promote the Golden Bride Collection, using a fresh face as his fake fiancée does make sense.”

“What he’s not saying is that she’s created an app she wants us to sign a contract to work with,” RJ said.

Major had thought about that on the elevator ride up to Desta's office. The immediate physical draw he'd felt toward Nina still puzzled him. As a thirty-three-year-old man with a sizable bank account and high visibility in the fashion industry, Major had been on his share of dates and had had a number of lovers. None of them had ever hit him like a bulldozer the second they'd bent over in a tight skirt. But what had really impressed him about the woman was the way she'd confidently stood in that conference room and made a slam dunk presentation just minutes after touching his hard dick.

Desta sat back in her chair, rubbing a finger over her chin. "You want to make a bargain with her that concerns her app and this marketing plan, don't you?"

Major slipped both hands into the front pockets of his slacks and smiled. "If she pretends to be my fiancée for six weeks, we'll use her app, exclusively, for six weeks."

RJ shook his head. "You're crazy. That woman's looking for a much longer connection to RGF than six weeks and she didn't look at all interested in anything else, let alone hanging around you for the next month and a half."

"I don't know, RJ," Desta said. She kept her gaze on Major, that smile she'd given Maurice just a few minutes ago now aimed at him. "He is the Fashion House Playboy."

"A completely bogus title that I wish we'd all stop referring to around here," he added, exasperation clear in his tone. The press had given him that name when they took the three dates he'd had in succession with three different models in the span of three nights as a sign that he was actually sleeping with each of those women.

If ever a label were unwarranted, it was that one.

"We took the Fashion House Playboy course the press has been on into consideration when talks about a campaign to heighten sales for Golden Bride began. Right now, a lot of fashion media is focused on you and who you'll date next, so we'll build on that momentum with the announcement of your engagement," Desta said.

Major folded his arms across his chest as he stood there staring at the people in the room. He spent more time with them than any woman, but nobody reported that to the tabloids.

“I wasn’t the only option,” he countered.

Desta shook her head. “To be fair, no, we considered RJ, but you know—” she nodded in RJ’s direction “—he’s RJ. He only talks about the company to the press and nobody’s ever seen him on a date. I think he must sneak women into the basement of his brownstone.”

“It’s called being discreet. Nobody’s entitled to the details of my private life but me. A very simple concept that people should learn to accept,” RJ said in his very cordial but non-sense tone.

Desta shrugged his comment off. “And Maurice is with so many women all the time that making it believable that he’s settling down was going to be an uphill battle.”

“But it’s more believable that ten seconds after I’m given the silly name of Fashion House Playboy, I’d mysteriously pop up married?” He’d entertained all these questions before and the outcome hadn’t changed.

“Look,” Desta said, lifting that brow. “You guys flat-out told me not to approach Riley with this plan even though she’s dating a guy from RGF’s rival fashion house. But I definitely understand you’re her big brothers and you wanted to protect Riley from any more tabloid assaults. She’s definitely had more than her share. But that just put the three of you on the hot seat, and Major, honey, as I said, your current media attention will work so well with this fake fiancée plan.”

Actually, he’d acquiesced without putting up too much of a fight because now was not the time to ruffle feathers in his family. He already had a bombshell he was waiting to drop when he announced he was leaving the company. If agreeing to this marketing plan was going to keep things chill until he was ready to go public with his solo business venture, Brand Integrated Technologies, then so be it. He could endure for six weeks.

He nodded. "I'm fine with that. But this is the woman I want for the job of my fake fiancée." Each time he said those words he felt ridiculous.

"I just don't know about that," RJ said.

Desta stared at Major, considering everything he'd said. Plans were already rolling around in her head. That's how she worked. Silent thinking and then, *poof!* great marketing idea, which is why she'd risen to the top of the department in such a short time.

"I say go for it," Maurice added. "If she says no, there's nobody better to convince her than Major with his brash good looks and unexpected heart."

The last was their family secret. Major was nothing like the press portrayed; his twin was the flamboyant lover of the Gold men. Major was the quiet computer geek.

"Do it," Desta said. "Get her to say yes by noon tomorrow and we can add your engagement announcement to the lineup at our annual Summer Sip 'n' Chat tomorrow evening," she told him. "Let me know when the agreement is made and I'll take care of everything else."

He resisted the urge to do a fist pump as he immediately turned and headed for the door. The sobering voice that resembled their father's stopped him.

"Get the agreement in writing. And this app better work to our advantage," RJ said.

Major looked over his shoulder at his older brother. "No worries, bro. I've got this."

CHAPTER THREE

MAJOR GOLD LOOKED worried that Nina's answer would be a resounding no. As he damn well should have been. What an arrogant thought to assume she'd fall over herself in a hurry to be his fake fiancée for six weeks in exchange for the biggest career break she'd ever imagined. Just who the hell did he think he was?

"Have a seat. I need to hear more details about this proposed arrangement," she said.

He'd showed up at her hotel room half an hour after she'd returned from seeing *Ain't Too Proud* on Broadway. She'd invited him in, anxious to hear what he had to say and if it involved a contract with RGF. She'd changed into black skinny jeans and a red camisole. The ballet flats she'd worn to the theater were still on her feet and the high ponytail she'd pulled her hair into was still intact. Now he was standing—well, he'd just hiked his slacks up a bit before taking a seat on the couch—looking even sexier than he had when she'd bumped into him at his building.

"I'm offering you a six-week contract to work exclusively with RGF. Think of it as sort of a test run for a possibly longer contract. Our marketing team will get started on a formal announcement to let our current customers know we're adding a new feature to their shopping experience. You'll be in touch with members of my tech team on linking At Your Service to our online store. After customers make a purchase, they'll be immediately routed to your app to open an account and get started with accessorizing their outfit. Win-win for both of us."

She didn't have to force herself to keep her gaze trained on him. Major Gold was a lovely man to look at. Six feet two and a half inches of lean muscle and gorgeous man. The light mustache accentuated the medium thickness of his lips. Dark low-cropped hair gave his tawny skin a bronze glow, while the Italian suit he wore fit every inch of his well-toned body to

perfection. And he still smelled good at almost ten-thirty at night.

Nina cleared her throat. “First, regarding exclusivity. I already have contracts with two designers. They’re small and in no way competition to RGF.”

His hands looked strong, thick veins roped across the backs as they rested on his thighs. “We can probably work with that as long as you don’t sign any other clients for the six-week term.”

“Second. You also said something along the lines of me pretending to be your fiancée for six weeks. That’s the part I’m not sold on, Mr. Gold—”

Actually, that was the part that confused the hell out of her.

“Major,” he interrupted.

Fine. She could call him by his first name. He was sitting just a few inches away from her, in a hotel room. This was a pretty familiar setting, so first names made sense. Or at least she wanted all of this to make sense.

“Why do you need a fake fiancée, Major? And why do you think I’d fit that role?”

Because she didn’t. Before her meeting, she’d done preliminary research on the family executives at Ronald Gold Fashions. She knew the father, Ron Gold, Jr., in addition to being CEO, was also the chief designer at RGF. She knew what his three sons did for the company, and that the youngest, and only girl in the family, was Riley, chief executive of market research and product development. She’d read about the matriarch, Marva Gold, who held a master’s degree in education, served on RGF’s board of directors and was currently developing several scholarship programs for underprivileged students across the US.

Nina’s focus on the family had been solely on where they’d gone to college, what job they did, and how much the company made in just clothing sales last year. She hadn’t bothered with any of the tabloid stories that had come up in the search; they didn’t matter to RGF’s bottom line. And she’d

paid even less attention to the many pictures of each of the Gold children that filled the internet. It didn't matter how they looked—all Nina needed was for them to agree to work with her. It was that simple.

Yet now, Major was sitting too close and the task of focusing on business was becoming much more difficult than it had ever been before.

“Look, I'll be totally honest with you. The reason I want you to do this is because of how you look.”

Okay, he was going to be candid. Well, that was refreshing.

“And how do I look?”

“Great.” He said the word as if she should have already known.

“I'm not the only great-looking woman in the world. Not even in New York. And you of all people surely know that. You can have any woman you want.”

“I want you,” he said. “I want someone who doesn't want me and isn't trying to fool me into getting what she really wants.”

“I would like to work with RGF on a long-term basis, but if I can work with your company, for even six weeks, other larger fashion houses will take that as a gleaming recommendation. My business will take off. That's all I've ever wanted.” Because she could be candid, too.

“Then say you'll be my fake fiancée for six weeks. Agree to take this assignment and I'll have contracts ready for you to sign first thing tomorrow morning.”

He was serious. She'd been sitting there waiting for him to tell her this was all a joke and just go back to talking about her app, but that's not what was happening. This was real. His offer—every part of it was real.

“What do I have to do? As your fake fiancée, I mean?”

She sat back against the couch and crossed one leg over the other.

“Attend some functions with me, act as if you’re planning a real wedding. Try on lots of gowns from the Golden Bride line, select bridesmaids gowns, and a host of other wedding stuff that our marketing department has planned.”

“That’s all. No kissing. No touching. No...nothing?” She needed to know all the terms, especially since she’d decided earlier that he had very kissable lips. Now, with him talking about fake engagements, kissing him had quickly popped into her mind again.

He paused and chuckled. Then he rubbed a hand over his mustache, down to his clean-shaved jaw, as he shook his head slowly.

“Ah, no, I don’t think any of that’s on the agenda.”

“Then how will people believe we’re really engaged? I’m guessing you want this to be believable. I mean, if not, then what’s the point?”

A few seconds of him giving her a very heated glare only increased Nina’s awareness of the sexual attraction buzzing between them since the first moment they’d met.

“The point of this arrangement is to boost sales for the new line. Our marketing department is convinced that seeing a Gold actually planning their wedding and selecting items from the bridal collection will encourage others to check it out for themselves,” he said.

“And what happens at the end of the six-week period? After this wedding has been planned?”

He shrugged. “I’m told we’ll have a huge and very public argument, followed by a press release the next morning announcing the unfortunate demise of the relationship. In this industry, negative publicity can sometimes work just as well as positive, as I’m sure you saw a few months ago when that ridiculous story about RGF stealing a design from King Designs surfaced. Marketing and sales are convinced that story, even after it was debunked, was partially responsible for the Golden Bride’s phenomenal debut.”

She was the one nodding now as the concept of “any publicity is good publicity” came to mind. “How very dramatic. Suits the Gold brand perfectly. So, like I said, you’re banking on people buying this act, without kissing or touching. Do you not like to kiss and touch, Major?”

His gaze immediately moved to her lips. As if they were suddenly under pressure, she licked them slowly before clearing her throat. She should think of something else to say, to ease this awkward moment... Too late, he’d found her eyes again and now they were staring at each other, speaking that silent but knowing language of physical attraction.

“To the contrary, Nina. I like kissing and touching very much. I especially enjoyed the way you touched me earlier today.”

She swallowed as the combination of his proximity, the silky tone of his voice and the blatant memory of her hand brushing over his magnificent erection shot to mind.

“Is that the type of touching you’re referring to?”

“I’m not convinced we have to go that far,” she said, because that was definitely going too far with a man she’d be entering into a business deal with. “But something along the lines of holding hands in public, perhaps a few chaste kisses... those might go a long way to creating the façade your company is banking on.”

His hands had been resting on his thighs, but she could now see them moving to his knees, his fingers clenching slowly and releasing. If she dared to trace her gaze back just a little more she was certain that erection she’d felt earlier was making another appearance. Her breasts had begun to feel full and she barely resisted the urge to clamp her thighs together to keep the throbbing that had increased in her center at bay.

“I think—” he cleared his throat “—we’d just play it by ear in that regard. See what’s needed and when. Go with the flow.”

“Is that what the contract is going to say?” She prayed disappointment wasn’t apparent in her tone.

“What would you like the contract to say? That we’ll kiss five times in six weeks, hold hands ten times, hug twice?”

“If you think five kisses will be enough.” Nina wasn’t so sure anything would be enough where this man was concerned.

This time he licked his lips at her words. She did the same.

“Maybe we leave out a number. I wouldn’t want us to be committed before we’ve considered how much we may like it.”

“You think I’ll like kissing you?” There was absolutely no doubt in her mind that she would.

“No,” he replied. “I *know* I’m gonna like kissing you.”

* * *

Nina couldn’t stop thinking about kissing him and she had no idea why she’d even brought up holding hands or kissing in public. Especially since she wasn’t a fan of PDA. Holding hands, touching, ogling, and yes, kissing, were reserved for behind closed doors. That’s the way she’d been brought up and it was a rule she’d stuck to.

Your personal business is your personal business. Nobody else’s.

Jacoby Fuller had said that more times than Nina or her sisters could count. But not for the same reasons that Nina had decided to adopt them. Her father didn’t like public displays of affection because it reminded him of how much he still loved and missed his wife. Nina didn’t like them because it reminded her of how quickly a happy couple could become a lonely man raising three daughters on his own.

Which was precisely why she didn’t do relationships. The thought of investing her time, emotions and trust into one person who could potentially walk away without a care in the world, wasn’t something she liked to entertain. But that wasn’t what this was.

Major Gold had come to her with a business proposal, one she'd spent the bulk of last night contemplating. If this fake wedding was going to bring publicity—good and bad—to RGF, then what was she going to get out of it? Besides the six weeks to work with the company and the possibility of a longer contract, there was a measure of exposure here that Nina couldn't ignore. For every public appearance she made with Major, she was adding a face to her brand. The Nina Fuller behind At Your Service would be up close and personal with the industry she'd dreamed of working in all her life. And while she totally understood that any publicity was good publicity, she wanted as much of her exposure to this industry to be as positive as she could manage. Creating the most believable fake relationship possible was a must.

Her traveling outfit was jeans and a T-shirt with her school mascot—a mustang—on the front. She couldn't wear that to what technically was her second interview at RGF, where she knew she would be receiving and accepting a job offer. After a quick run to Macy's and the purchase of a gray pantsuit and white blouse, at exactly nine forty-five in the morning, she walked through the glass doors of RGF again.

Major was already seated at the same end of the conference room table as yesterday. Across from him was Maurice. Twins, not identical, but who favored each other enough that she hadn't needed Google to tell her they'd been born together. But the internet had informed her that Major was older and, while he wasn't as brash and indiscriminate as his younger brother, he was still quite popular with women. A fact that made no difference to her—this was a temporary assignment. One she'd spent some time plotting out.

She'd used RGF's online sales figures—retrieved from an article in a top financial magazine that had compared the fashion industry's growth from five years ago to the present—to approximate how many new accounts At Your Service would obtain and the percentage she would earn from each of her vendors once the app had successfully accessorized each customer. It would bring her more than enough to pay for her father to move into an assisted-living facility and remain there for at least two years. In that time, she would land more

clients. King Designs, RGF's biggest rival, was next on her list to approach, and there were others. All of which would be impressed by her work with RGF and would pay her even more for the use of her app.

"Good morning, Ms. Fuller," Maurice was the first to speak when she entered the boardroom.

"Good morning. Please call me Nina," she said and watched as he stood and walked to her. When he extended his hand, Nina accepted it for a quick shake.

"Thank you for agreeing to meet with us again on such short notice," he said.

"It was no problem," she lied. She was going to miss her train and the ticket was nonrefundable.

"Yes. Thank you very much for coming back. Now, let's get down to business. We don't have a lot of time before our first event."

The woman who talked while entering the room hadn't been in the meeting yesterday. She wasn't as tall as Nina's five-foot-eight height, but she was dressed just as sharply. Probably sharper since Nina was certain the woman's skirt and jacket were RGF originals from their Make the Woman professional-wear line. The outfit was a bold royal blue and she wore a pale yellow blouse beneath the fitted jacket and patent leather slingback pumps. The blond-frosted tips of her black hair fell in big curls to her shoulders as she gave Nina a quick look and then closed the door behind her.

"This is Desta Henner, our marketing director," Major said.

Nina looked from the focused woman to Major. He wore another black suit today—this one with a more casual jacket that zipped—and in place of a dress shirt and tie he was wearing a butter-colored pullover that molded against his muscled chest.

"Our legal department worked double-time to get these two contracts drawn up," Desta announced. "Have a seat, please, and we'll go over everything."

Maurice had returned to his seat and this time Major was the one to stand, pulling out the chair next to him.

Nina took the seat, dropping her purse into the empty chair to the other side. “Yes,” she said in a voice she knew sounded as levelheaded and professional as Desta’s. “Let’s go over everything.”

* * *

She’d signed both contracts.

A part of Major hadn’t thought she would.

Nina Fuller was an entrepreneur. She’d graduated top of her class from the Harrisburg Area Community College in York, and had taken additional online classes to obtain her master’s in computer technology and engineering. She’d used those degrees to build a sophisticated app that could be groundbreaking in the fashion industry. That is, if it didn’t almost mimic some of Brand Integrated Technologies’ functions, a fact that could potentially become a conflict of interest between them. Initially, he’d felt the urge to be honest with her about the possible overlap of their companies, but then he considered that by the time this fake engagement and her trial period at RGF were over, they could go their separate ways and their companies could exist as a form of healthy competition. At least, that’s what he was telling himself.

Major had spent most of last night going through her app as a user, easily figuring out every step she’d taken from coding to debugging and creating the user interface. It was intricate, but Major had a master’s degree in computer technology and engineering, as well. A degree he’d also used to help keep RGF three steps ahead of their competitors where technology was concerned.

“Well, that’s done,” he said when they were the only two remaining in the conference room.

“Yes, it is.” She’d stored her copies of the contracts in her case and now stood a few feet away from him. “So, are we heading to the tech department to get started on the integration now?”

He couldn't help but notice that the suit she wore fit her nicely. The pants flawlessly molded the natural curve of her hips, accentuating thighs that were thicker than the models he was used to seeing. The jacket was an acceptable fit, the wrap blouse beneath hugging her full breasts tightly. But it wasn't an RGF ensemble.

"Ah, no, not just yet. My assistant, Landra, will be emailing you a copy of our itinerary for the upcoming weeks. There's a cocktail party scheduled for tonight at the Midtown Loft & Terrace. I believe you'll be assigned a stylist, but I'm not sure who that will be. Landra or possibly Desta will take care of that."

She nodded slowly.

Her hair was pulled back from her face again, this time held at the nape of her neck with a black band so that she looked almost demure. A look that was perfect for this campaign but didn't begin to touch the fiery passion he'd seen brimming in her eyes last night. Heat instantly began to stir through his veins as he thought about sitting on that couch with her in the hotel talking casually about how she'd felt him up only hours before. If he was half the Fashion House Playboy he was dubbed to be, there was no doubt Major would have spent the night in her bed, bringing them both the pleasure he knew they'd been thinking about.

"An itinerary. A stylist," she said and exhaled slowly. "I guess that's part of the agreement. Should I just wait here or return to my hotel? How do we play this?"

Major stepped closer to her.

"I think we start by getting this out of the way."

His hands, which had itched to touch her all night and throughout this morning's meeting, rested on the tops of her arms as he pulled her against him. The motion was quick and her hands came up to slap against his biceps as she tilted her chin to meet his gaze.

"You asked about kissing last night?" His voice sounded unfamiliarly gruff.

She blinked, long, natural lashes brushing her skin before he was afforded the sight of her gold-flecked eyes once more. “You said it wasn’t required.”

“Not required,” he whispered. “Desired. At least on my part. If you’re not interested, say so now.” Before he combusted from the desire that had boiled inside him all through the night.

“I’m interested.”

The words were barely out of her mouth before his lips crashed down over hers, heat soaring through their connection, a force unlike anything Major could have ever imagined taking over every part of his body.

CHAPTER FOUR

NEVER BEEN KISSED.

The three words floated around in her mind as his tongue moved salaciously over hers. *Not like this, anyway.*

Major's hands had slipped from the tops of her arms to her waist until he was holding her tightly against him. It was a stern and commanding hold. A you're-not-going-anywhere type of hold that she actually enjoyed. So much so, that Nina laced her arms around his neck, pulling his head down farther so that she could sink deeper into the kiss. A kiss they probably shouldn't be sharing since there was no one to see them and hence wasn't moving their fake relationship forward.

But hell, she wasn't complaining.

When they finally broke contact, both breathing as if they'd just run a race, he rested his forehead against hers and Nina let her eyes remain closed for a few seconds more.

What the hell is going on? Twenty-four hours ago, she'd been preparing for a meeting she'd known could change her life. Never in her wildest dreams had she thought of how drastically things would change in such a short amount of time.

"Okay, that was..." He paused, searching for the words.

They popped into her mind effortlessly. *Explosive. Delicious. Addictive!*

"It was the kiss that sealed the deal" was what she actually said before pushing away from him and smoothing her hands down the front of her clothes.

He ran his hand across the back of his head while nodding. "Yeah, I guess we could say that."

As if on cue, her phone chimed and she moved much too quickly to retrieve it from her purse. "Itinerary!" she said, her

pitch higher than normal as she held up her phone as if to explain what she meant.

Major cleared his throat. “Right. I’m going to head downstairs because I have a couple of things to take care of before tonight. There’s a car waiting out front for you. The driver’s name is Claude. He’s great and he’ll get you wherever you need to go in the city. He’s at your disposal for the next six weeks. Landra will be sending you all of his contact information.”

She’d been reading the first of a five-page document attached to the email sent by his assistant. Today was already jam-packed with things to do.

“Oh, okay. Um, I guess I’ll be invoiced for all of this.”

“All of this” meaning drivers, tips, clothes—their seemed to be a ton of fittings and makeup sessions scheduled and she’d only bought this one suit just a couple of hours ago. The only other thing in her hotel closet was the skirt suit she’d worn yesterday and her train-ride outfit. None of which would be acceptable for the events listed in the itinerary document.

“Everything you need will be taken care of and, if we miss something, just let me know.”

She looked up at him, her gaze automatically going to his lips before she scolded herself and forced her eyes up to meet his.

“You’re going to take care of all of my expenses?”

“Yes, for the next six weeks. That’s part of the deal.”

It made sense. The only reason she was staying in New York longer was this fake fiancée assignment. So why shouldn’t he completely accommodate her? Making sense was totally different from being comfortable, and Nina wasn’t comfortable with the thought of this guy she’d only met yesterday paying her way. Thinking back now, she recalled the contract vaguely mentioning expenses, but she’d been so focused on the language pertaining to her business functioning with RGF’s that she hadn’t considered the implications. No worries, it was all good, she’d get used to it, because again she

had no other choice. There was no way she could afford to stay here and buy all the things she'd need before she began seeing any profit from doing business with RGF.

She took a deep breath and released it slowly, telling herself to let go of the trepidation and take this situation for what it was at the moment.

“Then I'll head out now. It seems I have a spa appointment and a fitting this afternoon.”

For what seemed like endless moments, they both stood still, staring at each other.

“Thank you,” he said when the silence stretched between them. “For doing this, I mean. I know it seems like an unusual arrangement.”

“If the rhythm of the drumbeat changes, the dance step must adjust.”

He frowned. “What?”

She shook her head as she grabbed her purse. “Sorry, it's just an old African proverb my father used to say.”

“Your father is African?”

“Yes. His mother came to America when he was five years old. When she remarried, her husband adopted my father and so his last name was changed, but he was born in Sierra Leone.”

“Interesting,” he said, still staring at her.

“Yes. It's always interesting to know where you come from and it helps in determining where you're going.”

And she had no idea why they were talking about this. He had work to do and she had a spa appointment to get to.

“Anyway, we'd better get started with this. Today's going to be a busy day.”

He walked with her to the door. “You're right. I'll speak with my team this afternoon and arrange for you to meet with them tomorrow morning. If there's time on your schedule, Landra will coordinate everything. But I'd like to get you set

up quickly. If this fake wedding works out, we should see an immediate bump in sales, especially since we're at the peak of wedding season."

"Then maybe we should have gotten engaged earlier this year," she said as they walked to the elevators in what felt like a moment of *déjà vu*. "We're already in the first week of May. If a woman's getting married this season, she likely already has her gown."

"Until she sees a Golden Bride original being tried on by a real-life bride who's also going to be a member of the Gold family," he said before leaning in to push the button to summon the elevator.

Except there was nothing "real" about this arrangement.

"So we're hoping for the impromptu bride. Or the indecisive one." She nodded as she thought about her vendors who specialized in bridal items.

"Or the one who's just been swept off her feet with a wildly romantic proposal and can't wait to be married. She plans a quick wedding but wants all the bells and whistles, starting with a couture gown." He talked while she stepped into the elevator car. Following her inside, he pushed the buttons for his floor and the lobby.

"Not couture, RGF already has their wealthy customers on lock," she said. "Think about the average woman who's looking for something fancy, unique, but economical. I'll do some research on the bridal line, see what budget-friendly gowns you have."

"But you don't need to select budget friendly. I told you I'll take care of everything for you," he insisted.

Was that a look of pity she saw flash quickly in his eyes? Lord, she hoped not.

"The rich won't care about the Fashion House Playboy being engaged," she pointed out. "It won't seem romantic and dazzling to them because they're already living their own dazzling lives. But the woman who picks up the fashion magazines in the supermarket and runs her fingers over the

glossy pages full of designer gowns? She's the one who'll appreciate this whole charade and she's the one you should be targeting."

"You're a techie like me, how do you know all this stuff about marketing bridal gowns?"

"I'm that 'regular' woman. Wasn't that what Desta said in the meeting earlier? That's why you chose me and that's how I know what I'm talking about."

The elevator door opened on his floor, but Major didn't immediately move to get out.

"You should go, you have a lot of work to do today," she told him even though she sensed he wanted to stay.

She, on the other hand, needed some space. That kiss, her mentioning her father to him, and then the talk of weddings had her feeling a bit unsteady. Considering the old proverb, she'd just experienced a giant misstep in her dance routine and she needed to regroup.

"I'll see you later," he said finally as the door began to close and he extended his arm to stop it.

Nina nodded. "I'll be ready."

* * *

Every muscle in her body felt limp. In fact, when Nina flopped down onto her stomach on her hotel room couch, she felt as if she might melt into the upholstery. That guy at the spa had massaged every muscle in her body until they were like jelly. And she'd never felt better!

She'd need to hold on to this feeling when she made the call to her family to tell them she'd be here much longer than anticipated. Her text earlier today saying that she'd missed her train wasn't going to be enough. But she'd been putting that off, instead deciding to enjoy the luxurious offerings of the Tranquil Mornings Day Spa. From champagne to sparkling water, fruit to decadent chocolates, and a menu to order lunch or dinner, the place had accommodated all her needs—even the ones she hadn't realized she'd had.

Claude was waiting to take her to her dress fittings, but she'd wanted to stop and grab her laptop before heading out again. She was just about to push herself up from the couch, grab it and head back downstairs when someone knocked at the door. She moved across the room much faster than her very relaxed body wanted to.

"Hello," she said when she pulled the door open to see a woman standing there.

"Hello," the woman replied before stepping inside unannounced. "Bring the racks in and put them over there. Have makeup set up near the window so Natalia will have the best light. We have a couple hours until it's time to head to the venue, but I want to make sure everything is perfect, and we may have to go through a couple outfits first."

The woman—dressed in gray pants tapered at the bottom, bright yellow pumps and a white high-low blouse with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows—breezed into the room.

"Excuse me?" Nina asked, taking a step behind the three racks of clothes that had been wheeled into her hotel room. "I think there might be some mistake."

"There's no mistake."

Another woman spoke and Nina turned around to see her closing the door.

"Hi, I'm Riley Gold and you're Nina Fuller. It's a pleasure to meet you."

Yes, this was Riley Gold, the Ice Princess of RGF as the press had called her for years, until she'd started dating Chaz—Chadwick Warren. Her beauty far surpassed any of the pictures Nina had seen of her online.

As realization immediately set in, Nina accepted the outstretched hand and calmed down just a bit. "Hi. It's nice to meet you, Riley. I thought I was being driven to the fittings."

Riley nodded, her dark brown hair falling in deep waves over her shoulders. She wore a black, round-necked shift dress with gold stripes at the end of the three-quarter sleeves and across the hem, and cute strappy black sandals.

“I thought you’d be more comfortable here,” Riley said. “As comfortable as you can get in this situation.”

She was right about that. Nina’s fingers clenched the strap of her laptop bag as she stood amid so much action not really knowing what to do. There were now seven people in her not-so-big hotel room. The stylist, whom she presumed was the woman giving all the instructions, four people moving clothing racks, shoe boxes, bags and hat boxes, a woman with super-long eyelashes, and a man wearing dark shades and dime-size diamond earrings in both ears. He was on his phone and carrying a huge clear bag with flat irons, combs, brushes and other hair paraphernalia inside. Nina and Riley made nine—enough for a softball team.

“Thanks for that,” Nina said and set her laptop bag on the floor next to the nearest chair. “As much as I’ve always loved fashion, computers are my first love. Besides, the last twenty-four hours has been a bit of a whirlwind. I mean I haven’t thought of what clothes I’d wear beyond the initial meeting.”

Riley nodded again. “I can imagine. You look great in this suit, by the way, but I’m here to dress you up. I work with numbers and charts primarily, but clothes are my business and Lila over there, she *knows* clothes. She’s one of the best stylists in New York and works with many of our high-end customers.”

Looks by Lila, owned by Lila Cantone. Nina had heard of her, but she’d never imagined the woman was probably no more than five foot two without her heels and moved like an Energizer Bunny.

“Tonight, we want chic but grab-you-by-the-throat elegant. The annual Sip ’n’ Chat is one of RGF’s most notable functions where fashion critics, photographers, reps from modeling agencies and specially selected members of the press are going to get the surprise of the year with this engagement announcement.” That was Lila giving her crew a pep talk. “She’s being presented to the fashion world tonight. Let’s make her dazzle so that every single woman that’s still breathing will wish she were her.”

Riley wrapped an arm around Nina's shoulders. "I know she seems scary, but I promise you this is the way to go. Major wanted the best and I assured him I would get it for you."

So he'd sent his sister to work with her. Nina didn't know how she felt about that. Did he not think she could pick out a suitable outfit on her own? So many questions whirled through her mind but she had no time to entertain any of them because Lila was heading straight for her.

"Okay, I was told size twelve or fourteen, so I brought both." Riley's arm had slipped from around Nina, leaving space for Lila to step in and touch her shoulders. "Turn," Lila directed Nina.

"I'm Nina, by the way. It's nice to be working with you, Lila," Nina said before moving because no matter how important this agreement was, there was absolutely no excuse for rudeness.

Lila blinked, wide gray eyes flanked by long lashes that looked natural. Her hair was shaved on one side and layered in perfectly glossy auburn strands with pink tips on the other.

"Hello, Nina. We'll see how nice you think this is when it's all over. I can be a real bitch."

Well then, honesty was going to be the name of all her dealings with RGF and the Golds. Nina smiled, because in her mind that was a good thing. Dishonesty, secrets and lies had played a big part in the demise of her parents' relationship and Nina had promised herself she'd steer clear of those things in business and in pleasure.

"Now, let's get started. You have nice curves, let's show them off, make some men as envious as all the women will be."

The comment was followed by Nina being whisked off into the bedroom to try on dresses.

The first was a black-and-blue, A-line, round-necked dress with a beaded waist.

"Hmm," Riley said. "Major's wearing a navy-blue suit, Excellence in Men line. Single button and a pale gray shirt."

She should complement him, but they shouldn't be too matchy.”

Nina glanced in the full-length mirror that had been brought in and propped against the wall in the living room. She looked like she was going to the prom and shook her head to express her dislike.

“I agree,” Lila said, waving a hand to signal she needed to go and change into another dress.

Seven dresses and forty-five minutes later, Nina stepped in front of that mirror once more.

This one was an asymmetric panel of overlays with a one-shoulder fitted bodice and straight skirt of dark blue sequins. Her breasts looked amazing thanks to the strapless shaper Lila's assistant had brought into the room while Nina was changing. Thankfully, no undergarment lines showed and when she turned to glimpse the dress from the back, she smiled at the admirable, definitive curve of her ass.

The dress was gorgeous and more expensive than anything she'd ever worn before. She knew because there was no price attached. The only tag on these clothes was RGF Style or RGold Original, which equated to expensive because those were the signature lines at the fashion house. RGolden Label was their couture line and all other lines simply had the RGF logo attached somewhere on the inside of the garment.

The material of the dress was impossibly soft and hung decadently over her usually too-curved butt and hips. Her body looked great in this dress, even with the slight pouch of a belly that on bloated days could push her into the next pant size.

Garen, the hair stylist came over and pulled Nina's hair up, leaving out a few tendrils.

Lila stood behind her to one side and Riley was on the other.

“I think this is it,” Nina said as she continued to look at the shimmering material.

“With these shoes and the pounded-metal cuff. Cheree!” Lila yelled to one of her assistants and set a pair of silver, five-inch-heel slingbacks next to Nina's feet.

One by one, Nina slipped her feet into the shoes and waited while Anya, another assistant, buckled the straps.

Cheree placed the pounded-metal bracelet on her right wrist.

“Classy and retro. Not only will folk in the industry not have a clue who you are, they’re gonna fall over themselves trying to label your style. We’re gonna use this moment to set the stage for a whirlwind of different looks that will put you at the top of the fashion game.” Lila was obviously excited as she nodded her head, hair swaying over one shoulder.

For a moment Nina didn’t know who she was. This wasn’t why she’d come to New York. But it was beginning to be a hell of a lot of fun!

CHAPTER FIVE

“WHAT ARE YOU laughing at?”

Major frowned as Maurice chuckled.

“You and this crazy situation you’ve gotten yourself into,” his brother responded.

“First, I didn’t get myself into this situation, it just happened.”

Maurice frowned now, his full brows tilting downward, which added a more ominous look to the thick beard he sported.

“You’re the one who suggested this tech woman become your fake fiancée.”

“Yeah, but I’m not the one who came up with the whole fake fiancée idea in the first place. Oh no, that was Desta’s brilliance, which you happily cosigned.” Major walked around the king-size four-poster in his room, trying his best to ignore the suit, shirt and tie that had been laid out neatly on one side of the mattress.

Maurice had left the office and followed him to his penthouse. For what reason, Major didn’t know. But considering what his brother was doing at this moment—lounging with one leg draped over the arm of a leather recliner across the room, staring at him and making irritating comments—he would assume his presence was meant to antagonize him to no end. If that were the case, he was doing a damn good job.

“We needed a plan, something that would grab the customer’s attention and keep it riveted on the Golden Bride line.”

Major shook his head as he yanked his shirt out of his pants before pulling it over his head and off. “And I look like the one to do that?”

“Your reputation—” Maurice started, but Major quickly cut him off.

“I’m not the one with a reputation, man. You know that’s all you. You’re the one who flaunts every affair you have. Hell, you pose for pictures for all those photographers and tabloid workers. You give them so much ammunition.”

“I wasn’t named the Fashion House Playboy. A snub, I might add, I’m still considering being salty about.” Maurice gave a fake pout.

Major tossed his shirt into the hamper a few feet away and sat heavily on the bed—his back to the clothes. “Those dates were a coincidence. And, actually, one was a favor to Mom and Dad. I couldn’t say anything about it because it would have embarrassed poor Hannah Lincoln, whose parents didn’t want her to go out in public alone because her jet-setting, race-car-driving boyfriend had just dumped her.”

Major’s head fell back and he groaned. He loved his mother above all else in this world, but if she ever called his cell phone and started the conversation with, “Hi, my favorite son,” again, he was hanging up on her. She’d made that sugary-sweet request for him to take Hannah out so she wouldn’t appear depressed and lonely over the breakup and he’d agreed.

Hannah had spent the entire evening talking about her ex and how she was being super strong and not crying over her ex, and how her ex was the love of her life, but how glad she was to be rid of her ex. It was a long and insufferable evening that had capped off the three-day stint earning him the ever so wonderful title in the fashion industry. The tabloids loved to take any snippet of information and run with it. That was their job, and while Major could totally respect someone being dedicated to a job, he didn’t have to like being caught up in it.

“But you still selected the woman to be your fake fiancée,” his twin pointed out.

“That, right there—” Major turned to see that his brother had grabbed a beer out of his refrigerator on his way to the room and was now twisting the top off so he could take a long

swallow. After a shake of his head, he continued. “That’s the best part of this stupid stunt. At least she’s someone I have something in common with and won’t die of boredom or irritation from when I’m alone with her.”

“So you like her?”

Major blinked and then shook his head. “That’s not what I said. But yeah, I like that we’re both IT techies and that she’s smart and courageous enough to start her own business.” Thoughts of how their companies overlapped popped into his mind and Major instantly pushed them back.

“Like you did,” Maurice said.

Major leaned over and untied his Tom Ford leather sneakers, but he sat up before taking them off. “Yeah, like I did.”

Maurice was the only person in his family who knew about Brand Integrated. Being fraternal twins came with a certain amount of closeness that didn’t resonate with his other two siblings. And while he and Maurice weren’t constantly on the phone or, notwithstanding this present moment, sitting in each other’s bedroom talking the night away, he and Maurice told each other pretty much everything.

So when Major had started to feel a little itchy working solely for RGF, Maurice was the first to notice. And when Major confided in his brother about the idea for his new business venture, Maurice had stood firmly in his corner. As a matter of fact, Maurice hadn’t agreed with Major keeping his business a secret from the family. He believed that Major should be proud of himself and bold enough to step away from the Gold fashion house, especially considering none of the other siblings had been able to do that.

“You’ve signed the lease in the building, started hiring staff, and have your first marketing plan ready to roll out on day one. I’d say you’re set to do this,” Maurice said before taking another drink.

“Yeah, I am,” Major said. “But first, I’ve gotta get this fake wedding on a roll. After that, I’m out.”

“Not out,” Maurice said. “You’ll always be a Gold, no matter what building you walk into for work each day.”

“Dad’s probably not going to feel that way. You know how he is about loyalty. That was the crux of the whole family feud that almost threatened Riley’s happiness.” He sighed heavily, reliving how his sister’s plunge into love a couple months ago had only made his decision to move on to other things in his career another sticky family issue to cope with. “But I’m through thinking about that. It’s what I’m doing, so they can either accept it or disown me.”

“You know Mom’s never gonna let him disown you. She didn’t let him disown Riley.”

Major stood and took the sneakers into his closet. “That was never going to happen, I don’t care who she slept with. Dad would have seriously considered shooting Chaz and Tobias before he’d ever thought about firing Riley.”

Even though the news of his sister’s affair with Chaz, whose uncle Tobias King was head of King Designs, had spread like wildfire through the industry, bringing old assumptions about the Gold/King feud back to the surface. While Major secretly hoped his engagement façade would help take the residual bad press from Riley’s saga away, part of him knew that the subsequent announcement of his leaving RGF to run Brand Integrated Technologies would fuel its own fire.

“And look at them now,” Maurice said. “Riley and Chaz are inseparable. When he’s not at her place, she’s at his. He’s at Sunday dinner with the family and she’s seen out at parties with him and Tobias. They’re really in love, whatever the hell that is.”

Oh yeah, in addition to being the twin who actually loved going on dates with different women and getting attention for it, Maurice was the one who hated, loathed and despised the word *love*. Major didn’t let the word get that deep under his skin, although he didn’t imagine himself feeling it any time soon. His new company, as well as continuing to help with RGF’s technology development, were his priorities right now. The one time he’d ventured to believe he might be feeling

something like love, Stacia Hudgins had given him a hard-and-fast lesson—love wasn't worth a damn.

“I gotta get home. If we don't get ready, Riley, Chaz and the rest of the family are going to be at the cocktail party before us,” Maurice said.

Major stood and was about to walk toward the bathroom when he looked back at the clothes on the bed. “I still can't believe Riley picked out clothes for me.”

Maurice eased his tall frame from the chair, tilted his head back to swallow the remaining dregs of beer from the bottle and then shook his head. “You know Riley's in control of everything that concerns the Golden Bride line. Whether or not you gave her permission to be involved with your fake fiancée, she was going to do it. And she's damn sure gonna make certain she controls everything you do and say regarding this engagement.”

Major groaned. “That's what I'm afraid of.”

* * *

No, what Major Gold was actually afraid of, an hour and a half later when he stood near the bar at the Midtown Loft & Terrace and glanced toward the door, was swallowing his tongue or otherwise making a fool of himself as Nina Fuller walked in.

She smiled when she met his gaze and began walking toward him. Major stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his pants, forcing them to remain still and not move toward the center to soothe the growing ache that was happening there.

Nina looked stunning in blue, the dark hue playing expertly against the lightness of her complexion. Her hair was pulled up, loose pieces hanging at each ear just brushing the skin of her neck. He'd bet every dollar in all four of his bank accounts the skin right there was soft to the touch and sweet to the taste. Silver earrings sparkled at her ears and matched the chunky bracelet on her wrist. His gaze lifted from that wrist up her arm to where her bare shoulder was showcased. A shoulder he wanted to rub his fingers over and drop featherlight kisses

against. Her shoes were silver but her legs were really the clincher, grabbing his full attention. They looked long and luscious, coated with some type of glistening oil.

She walked like a temptress across the mahogany floor, her hips swaying from side to side, healthy breasts held high to tempt him and most likely every other guy with good vision in this room. He swallowed hard and tried not to think of the word *hard*. Not that it was going to help; his dick was well on its way to another stunning erection at just seeing this woman. He wished for a drink but didn't want to turn away from her to request one from the bartender.

"You look fantastic," he said the moment she was close enough to hear because he had to get those words out of his head.

"Thanks. I tried on so many dresses today, I'm glad to be standing in just one at this moment."

"This is definitely the best dress. Ever," he confessed and swallowed again.

She tilted her head, her smile wavering slightly. "Are you okay?"

For a few seconds he clamped his lips shut. He wasn't totally sure he could resist asking her to find some private place for them to hang out tonight.

"I'm good," he said and gave himself a good mental kick. It'd been a long time since he'd been a horny teenager chasing after models at fashion shows. Most of them had been around his age, even though they'd hit the runways in outfits that made them appear much older.

"Well, I'm not. I mean I'm a little nervous. I've never been to a Sip 'n' Chat before."

She was looking around as she spoke and Major finally managed to pull his gaze from her long enough to do the same.

"We rely on the media, but we can't always control what goes into print. The Sip 'n' Chat is our way of having an informal press conference where we release only the

information we want the media to have, at the exact moment we want them to have it.”

She nodded. “Smart.”

“Yeah, just like me.” He winked.

“You? I thought we were talking about your team who came up with this very smart idea.” She smiled and he enjoyed the light that came into her eyes. A jolt of awareness hit him as he realized she really was different from the other women he’d met.

“I’m talking about how smart I was to have finally agreed to meeting with you when I did. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be standing here with you.” He’d stepped closer to her as he said those words. Another step or two and he would be on top of her, which wasn’t a bad idea—except he wasn’t down for an audience.

“Hi! You made it! That dress looks fabulous on you. Doesn’t it, Major?” Riley asked when she approached, Chaz right beside her.

Why she was asking him the obvious, Major had no idea, but he gladly answered. “It does.”

“Thanks,” Nina said, holding a silver clutch in front of her as she nodded at Riley and Chaz. “I hope it photos well. I came up on the elevator with three reporters and two photographers.”

“Nina, this is Chaz Warren, my boyfriend.” Riley smiled as she glanced at Chaz and he returned the look before extending his hand to Nina.

“Hello, Nina. It’s nice to meet you. Riley’s told me all about you, your company and, ah, this marketing plan.”

Major wasn’t sure how he felt about that. While his first instinct was to be happy for Riley—who seemed more relaxed and content with Chaz than he’d ever recalled—there was still a small part of him that was on guard. Telling Chaz about their marketing strategies when he was still working—even if only on a part-time basis—with his uncle, didn’t seem like the best idea. But tonight, Major had other things to worry about.

“King Designs is doing great this season. I’ve been keeping up with your shows and sales,” Nina said.

“Ah, yeah. Wow, you’re keeping tabs on us,” Chaz replied. “Not sure if I should be worried or impressed by that. But, um, our line is doing really well after the relaunch and we’re hoping for the same success with a couple other lines.”

“That’s good to know. And yes, in my line of business, I try to keep my eye on the top companies in the industry,” she told him.

Okay, add another thing to the list of things for Major to ponder. Was Nina really going to stand there and pitch her company to their biggest competitor?

“It’s almost time for the announcement,” Desta said when she joined them.

Thankful for the interruption, Major slipped his arm around Nina’s waist and gently led her in the direction Desta was now speed-walking.

“We’re going to begin with pictures. The family has already started, but you two are up next. Reporters are chomping at the bit trying to figure out what’s going on.” Desta talked as she walked and Major followed, enjoying the feel of his hand resting at the small of Nina’s back.

The venue was crowded with people, most of whom he knew from the industry, some of whom he’d never seen before in his life. He supposed he should feel some measure of nervousness or possibly anxiety, but all he felt was anticipation.

“There are so many people here,” Nina said when they made their way to the other side of the terrace.

It was a gorgeous night for a terrace party, not too humid and the sky full of stars.

Major came around behind her, his hand still at her waist as they moved through a group of people, one of whom did a double take when she saw him. It wasn’t someone he knew, but he could tell the buzz around tonight’s announcement was

growing because the woman's gaze had immediately shifted from him to Nina with an inquisitive quirk of her brow.

"Are they normally like this?" Nina asked.

"Like what?"

"So hungry for whatever is going to happen next. Surely they've been to this event before, so they know what you're going to be talking about—your fashion house. But their anticipation is almost palpable."

That question came when they were just a few steps from an arch covered in white flowers made to look purple by the up-lighting positioned on the floor.

"Everyone here was sent a private invitation that spoke of a big announcement," he said. "Are you all right? Is it too much for you?"

He wanted to say he'd take her out of here if it was, but he knew Desta would probably have a cardiac episode if he even thought about doing that. Even though RGF still held its title as the US's top fashion house, keeping a comfortable lead over their competitors was their marketing director's priority.

"No. I'm fine," she said. "Just wondering how this is all going to play out."

Major stood beside Nina, waiting for Desta's signal to step forward for pictures. He'd reluctantly moved his hand from her waist when his fingers had begun to tingle with the desire to either slide to the generous curve of her ass or up to the bare skin of her shoulder. Both, he was certain, were inappropriate movements on so many levels.

"As soon as the announcement is made, we can leave. Maurice and his team can field all the questions. All we have to do is stand here and smile for the cameras," he said.

She looked surprised at that comment. "You're not making the announcement?"

"No. My father's going to handle that. Is that a problem?"

There was a slight hesitation then a small shrug of her shoulders. "If this were real, I'd think you'd be so excited

about getting married to the woman you love that you'd be bursting with the need to announce it to the world," she said, but then held up a hand and shook her head. "Don't get me wrong, I'm no expert. It just seems like the sort of thing they'd do in one of those romance movies."

Romance movies that she was obviously watching and paying close attention to.

"I don't know that this was planned for romance," he said. "It's just a hoax, remember."

He really needed her to remember that. Nothing personal or real was going to come of this six-week plan. That's not what he was in the market for and he was banking on them being so focused on their business goals that there'd be no risk of losing sight of the goal.

She nodded her agreement and in the next moment they were being moved to stand under the arch and positioned for one pose after another.

The photographer hired specifically to commemorate the event had been given a list of names and pictures Desta wanted. The guy, who was dressed in all black, directed Major to stand behind Nina and put his hands around her waist. It was the dreaded prom picture pose. He was inclined to frown once he realized it, but as her body settled back against his, Major felt something else entirely.

In addition to the warmth spreading throughout his body at her proximity to him, there was a rush of something akin to joy, excitement or—no, it was more intense, possibly ownership. As he looked toward the photographer, ready for the guy to snap the picture, Major was acutely aware of the men in the room staring his way. Surely they weren't looking at him, so they had to be staring at Nina, whom he already knew looked phenomenal in the blue dress.

He tried valiantly to keep from frowning as he realized he was the one forgetting this was all a hoax and that Nina wasn't his to feel jealous, protective or anything else about.

“Now, you stand still and, Ms. Fuller, you turn around.” The photographer had moved on to another instruction that Nina dutifully followed.

She turned until she was facing him.

“Put your hands on his shoulders and turn your head to me,” the guy said.

Again, she obeyed.

Now her front was pressed into his and Major’s hands immediately went around her waist once more. Without instruction.

He could smell the floral scent of her shampoo and felt the curve of her breasts even through the material of his jacket and shirt. His fingers tightened at her waist before sliding down slightly until he could feel the curve of her ass. This time when the flash of the camera erupted, Major was clenching his teeth. He was holding so still he thought his bones might crack from inactivity. But that was preferable to giving in to the heat spreading through his veins like wildfire and pressing her closer to him.

Several pictures were taken in that pose and he was about to complain or pull away—anything to stop the assault his arousal had taken on his body when she looked up at him.

“You don’t like holding poses for pictures, do you?” she asked with a smile.

“Not really,” he replied while staring down into eyes that appeared to have more yellow highlights than he’d noticed before. “But I enjoy holding you.”

She blinked as if trying to figure out if she should smile at his words or feel something deeper, something more potent than he’d assumed either of them would feel. When she remained silent, he lifted a hand to brush the backs of his fingers lightly over the line of her jaw. She continued to smile and surprised him by leaning her head into his touch. It was a quick and impromptu movement, one that had his breath catching seconds before more pictures were snapped.

With the warm air around them and the sound of violins, harps—or whatever instruments the quartet at the other end of the room was playing—echoing toward the sky, he was locked in her gaze, wrapped in this blissful attraction. She must have felt it, too, because she suddenly looked puzzled. He wanted to say something reassuring, to convince them both that they were simply beginning their series of acting assignments for the next six weeks, but Riley’s voice interrupted the music and stopped his thoughts.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for joining us tonight. While we have a few upcoming things happening within the fashion house that we’ll also be talking about tonight, we don’t want to keep you in suspense any longer about the big reveal. As always, the patriarch of our family, my father, Mr. Ron Gold, will start the announcements.”

Major had taken Nina’s hand without thought, moving them until they stood to the side with Riley. The white podium where his sister had introduced their father was alight with the same purple accent as the flowered arch, lounge chairs and high-boy tables throughout the space. On the other side of the podium stood Maurice and RJ, watching as his father stepped up to the microphone.

A tall, distinguished-looking man with a bald head and stern facial features, Ron Gold was the epitome of fashion dressed in an original RGF chocolate-brown suit, crisp white shirt and canary yellow silk tie.

“I’ll echo my daughter’s gratitude for your attendance tonight. We know you’re normally ready for a few industry announcements at this event, but this year we have something a little more special,” he began. “As you know, we’ve had a very successful launch into this year’s Fashion Weeks with the unveiling of our Golden Bride Collection in February. Well, tonight the Gold family is pleased to announce that not only are we celebrating a phenomenal episode in bridal fashion, we’re also overjoyed with the engagement of our son Major to the lovely Ms. Nina Fuller.”

At first there were gasps followed by the low buzz of murmurs before multiple camera flashes lit up the room.

Applause began with a quick burst and Nina's fingers trembled in his. Major gave her hand a little squeeze and then lifted it to his lips to kiss. Another impromptu action that sent the crowd into more clapping and more picture-snapping.

Normally, this would be the point where Major would turn away, leaving the beast of pictures and questions behind. If it wasn't after an RGF show, where Ron liked for each of his children to make comments to demonstrate they were all personally and professionally vested in the presentations, then Major didn't deal with the tabloids or the press. Yet tonight, he stood a little straighter and squared his shoulders. For the first time, he didn't mind having pictures taken with this woman beside him. Perhaps because this time he—meaning the marketing team—was orchestrating the response of every reporter and photographer in this space.

It was a surreal moment, one he'd never thought he'd experience. The announcement of his wedding. He reminded himself it was fake and shook off the feeling of excitement that had started to blossom in the pit of his stomach. Instead, he turned to look at Nina, who was smiling—no, she was beaming as she looked from one camera to another, the tilt of her head and easy movement of her body as if she'd practiced for this moment all her life. She appeared so natural, her hand so comfortable in his. That odd stirring he'd had when they first stood under the arch moved through him again and this time he knew it wasn't solely arousal. Desire was a definite between them and very easy to acknowledge and understand. This other thing, not so much.

When she returned her gaze to Major's, he immediately felt at ease. So, when the first question came directly to him from a reporter, he didn't think twice before responding.

“This is all so exciting and fast, Major. Where and when did you and Ms. Fuller meet?”

“We met earlier this year and I wasn't aware there was a time clock ticking on love.” He had no idea where that response had come from, but it seemed like a good answer. And, if he wasn't mistaken, it made Nina's smile a little brighter.

Another reporter took advantage of the fact that Major was actually answering questions, even though it hadn't been announced that he would.

“So how did he sweep you off your feet, Ms. Fuller?”

She didn't look at him to gauge his response, she simply continued to smile and began a story that sounded very real.

“It was Valentine's Day and neither of us had a date. We ended up at the same bar, *not* crying in our drinks.” Nina chuckled and so did the reporter. “Next thing I know, we're having dinner on a rooftop like this one, talking about all the people who put too much emphasis on Valentine's Day. After that we were together every weekend, either here in the city or in Pennsylvania where I'm from. So if you count quiet walks in Central Park and sitting in rocking chairs on my dad's back porch as being swept off my feet, then yeah, that's just what he did.”

“Aww, that's so sweet,” the woman reporter said.

“So you're the Fashion House Romantic instead of the Fashion House Playboy. That's not as good a headline,” the guy said, chuckling when the woman elbowed him.

“These lovebirds have lots of planning to do,” Ron interrupted. “And we're going to keep you up to date with those plans. But for now, we have more announcements.”

Thankful for the reprieve, Major offered the press another smile, before leaning in to whisper in Nina's ear, “Our part's done. Let's get out of here.”

Her quick nod and the instant look of relief that washed over her face also reminded him the smile and natural movements he'd just glimpsed were part of the sham. She didn't want to be there any more than he did.

* * *

If Cinderella hadn't run away from the ball at the stroke of midnight, she may have walked into a room with Prince Charming following closely behind, feeling the quick jolt of excitement, anticipation and lust.

Nina was feeling every one of those things and then some as she slid the card over the panel on the door and walked into her hotel room. Just twenty-four hours ago she'd entered this same room, but she hadn't been wearing a designer dress that sparkled with what she'd now identified as success, nor had there been a great-looking guy standing just a few feet behind her.

"Would you like a drink?" It sounded cliché but polite nonetheless.

"Sure. I'll pour," he said as they moved into the living area of the suite. Just a few feet away stood a large round table with two chairs on either side. It sat in front of the only window with a view of one of the New York streets. Buildings, people and lots of cars were below even at almost eleven at night.

"I'll be back in a sec." She made her way into the bedroom when she heard her phone ringing inside her purse.

"Hey," she answered as she sat on the bed.

"Where are you? I've been texting and calling you all night," Angie said. "Dad's worried sick and ready to call the police to file a missing person report, and Daisy wants to get in the car to drive up there to bring you home."

Nina sighed. She hadn't called them back after telling them this morning that she'd missed her train. So much had happened in those twelve hours that she hadn't completely forgotten about her family, but she had put them on the back burner for a change.

"Sorry. I meant to call you sooner to explain what's going on."

"Okay. Well, explain now."

Right. Explain how the deal she'd finally been able to land had somehow morphed into a six-week assignment that could either make or break her experience in the fashion industry. She glanced over at the window, to the night sky in the big city, still in awe of where she was and how she'd come to be there.

“They offered me a project for six weeks. It’s kind of like a trial run for the business with a few other duties.” There, that didn’t sound so crazy.

“What do you mean ‘other duties’? Are they going to use your app or not? And why’d you have to stay longer just to get the job? Dad’s been asking for you and I can’t spend another night here. I’ve got the night shift for the next five days at the hotel.”

Angie worked at a casino hotel and often had the night shift, which meant Nina had the night shift with their father because Daisy was the most unreliable of the Fuller sisters.

“You and Daisy will have to work out a schedule. I’m going to be here for the next six weeks as part of this deal I’ve accepted.”

“What are you talking about? It’s just an app. Either they’re using it or they’re not—and if they are, it’s not necessary for you to stay there during some trial period.”

“It’s necessary if I’m also pretending to be the guy’s fiancée to help their company boost sales,” she blurted.

After only a couple seconds’ hesitation, Angie all but yelled through the phone, “What? Are you serious? You’re like some escort?”

“I am not an escort,” she snapped. She wasn’t aware of escorts wearing designer gowns and getting a personal driver. Although she could be mistaken, considering she’d never made it her business to know what escorts did or didn’t do, or have or didn’t have.

“Look, this is the biggest opportunity of my life and I’m taking it. So for the next six weeks, I’ll be Major Gold’s fake fiancée and his company will be featuring my app on all of its web sites.”

Angie was silent for a moment. “And what happens after that? He offers to put you up in an apartment and you continue to be at his beck and call?”

Nina rolled her eyes even though Angie wasn’t there to see how exasperating her comments were. “This isn’t *Pretty*

Woman,” she said, referring to one of the Fuller sisters’ favorite movies. “It’s a job that I plan to do to put my business in a better position in this industry.”

“This is insane and Dad’s not gonna like it.”

“He’ll like it when it provides a way for me to take care of him on a long-term basis,” she quipped. “Look, I gotta go. Just figure out a new schedule with you and Daisy and keep me posted. I’ll be home as soon as this is over.”

Angie wasn’t happy when she hung up and Nina wasn’t nearly as giddy as she’d been when she’d first walked into the room. In fact, as she disconnected the call and let her hands drop into her lap, she wondered briefly if Cinderella’s coach had just turned into a pumpkin.

Ten minutes later, she walked back into the living area. Major had removed his jacket and tie, and was sitting on the couch, surfing TV channels.

“Everything okay?” he asked when she took a seat beside him.

She nodded. “It’s fine. My sister called, so I had to give her an update on the change in plans.”

“Do you live with your sister?”

“Ah, no. I have two sisters and we each have our own apartments, but we take care of my dad, so we’re in constant contact with each other about schedules and such.”

“Is your father sick?”

The immediate hint of concern in his tone initially surprised her, but that was because Angie’s comments about escorts were still rambling in her mind.

“COPD. He was diagnosed years ago, but it’s getting worse.” To the point where he was almost debilitated, although Jacoby would never admit that.

Major’s expression turned thoughtful, his brow furrowing a bit. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

She shook her head, wanting to think of something else and feeling slightly guilty for admitting that fact.

“Thanks. Actually, that brings up something I was thinking on the ride over here.”

He muted the television and dropped the remote on the cushion between them. “What’s that?”

“If we want this charade to be believable, we should get to know each other better. We managed to do pretty good tonight, but what if I’m asked some personal questions about you? How will I know what to say?”

He frowned, thick brows slanted over brown eyes. The top button of his shirt was undone and Nina could see not only the tawny hue of his skin but also the slight ridge of his Adam’s apple. She licked her lips quickly as a flash of thought—her tongue gliding over that ridge—soared through her mind.

“I don’t give interviews unless it’s right after a show. You aren’t required to give interviews, either. Take pictures, attend parties or whatever events are on the itinerary, and that’s it.”

Like arm candy. She’d often looked through fashion magazines or watched shows where dashing industry big shots had gorgeous women on their arms. Those women never spoke, just smiled for the camera and looked beautiful.

“That’s not going to work,” she said. Late last night and well into the early morning hours, she’d decided that if this was going to be her first big introduction to the industry, she wanted it to look good. Playing the part of his fiancée as convincingly as possible would lessen the chance that someone might find out it was fake, and thus damage her credibility. “We need to be convincing.”

For a few quiet seconds Major just stared at her. In those moments, she breathed in the scent of his cologne, loving the spicy edge to the fragrance. She let her gaze linger over the breadth of his shoulders and the way his pale gray dress shirt molded his biceps and chest. His hands were resting on his thighs, a gold watch on his wrist, a chunky gold ring on his third right-hand finger.

“Are you saying you want to kiss me again?”

Noooo, that wasn't what she was saying, but now that he'd mentioned it...

“I'm saying that we should take this time to get our story straight. We improvised how we met and the whirlwind love affair, but I'm betting word will spread fast that you actually talked to the press without being at a show and that's going to give every other reporter even more guts to ask both of us questions.”

“Questions like when was our first kiss?” he asked with a lift of a brow.

“You're obsessed with kissing.”

“I didn't used to be,” he said with a shake of his head. “But I can admit that I've been thinking a lot about kissing you again.”

She swallowed and wondered if Prince Charming had thought about kissing Cinderella. *Most definitely!* Hadn't he gone through an entire village using a shoe to try to find her? That wasn't just so he could ask her name and make sure she was wearing both shoes...

“The kiss was very nice, but I'm referring more to how we'll make our appearances seem believable.”

He sat straighter, seeming to shake off whatever was preoccupying him. “You may have a point. So let me ask you this, how did you like feeling my hands on you tonight?”

Oh, she hadn't thought of that. He had kept an arm around her for most of the time they'd been at the cocktail party and it had felt...good. Before the announcement, it had also drawn lots of attention from the women in the room. For a few moments, her mind had wondered if Major had been romantically linked to any of them before. She'd told herself then that it was a silly thought and reminded herself again at this moment. Worrying about Major running off and leaving her for whatever reason or doing something else to break their trust wasn't something she had to worry about, because none of this was real.

“I liked it,” she admitted.

“Good, because there were lots of pictures being taken. I fully expect to see us on the front page of one or two tabloids in the morning.”

Even after her personal admonishment, she couldn't help thinking back to how his hand had stayed fixed at the small of her back, her side flush against his. There were also the tight embraces while they'd posed for pictures, the embraces that had left her feeling warm all over. The physical attraction between them was off the charts and there was no use trying to deny that.

“That's, uh, good, right?” She sounded hopeful, even though she prayed he couldn't hear that.

“In this instance, yes. You want to know what else was good?”

“What?”

“Feeling your body against mine. Do you think we should practice more of that to be more convincing to the public?”

CHAPTER SIX

“YES.”

It was a simple word. She could have begged off and talked more, sticking to them rattling off facts about each other, but she didn't want to. Tonight she'd worn a gorgeous dress and attended a lavish rooftop party in New York City, something she'd dreamed of happening once her position in the industry was solidified.

Well, if this were really her dream then Nina was going to make it the best damn dream ever!

“What I mean is, if we were really engaged, what would we be doing right now?”

He eased closer to her, his eyes going just a bit darker as he kept them focused on her. “Do you really want the answer to that question?”

“I do.” Because she suspected his answer was similar to hers.

Nina couldn't even remember the last date she'd been on, which meant that the last time she'd had sex was even further back than she'd first imagined. It had been too long and here was Major, looking handsome and smelling like a slice of heaven. They were pretending they were involved in a relationship, why not pretend a little more?

“Well, if we were really engaged, I'd probably be ready to get you out of that dress.”

She'd crossed one leg over the other when she'd sat a few minutes ago and now she was thankful because she could press her thighs together tighter this way. The timbre of his voice combined with the idea of his hands moving over her body to remove the dress was deliciously enticing.

“Then, once you were naked, I'd bend you over this couch so that I could taste you.”

She didn't reply, thinking if she remained silent, he'd keep talking and the warmth of desire spreading through her veins like wildfire would continue. Her tongue wasn't as obedient and it snaked out to move over her bottom lip. His gaze immediately dropped, following the action.

"Do you know how you taste, Nina? You're licking your lips like you recall. Tell me, are you as sweet as I believe you are?"

He was inside her mind. It was an eerie feeling to believe that he could see into her deepest thoughts. Share her memories of when she was alone in the bedroom of her small apartment in York, using her favorite vibrator to find her pleasure. And afterward, when a deep urging inside had her lifting that vibrator to her lips so that she could taste herself.

"Sweet and spicy, like a delicious drink that leaves you feeling just a little light-headed and a lot addicted," she said with the same confidence she'd felt when she'd presented her app to him.

Now he was licking his lips. She recalled those lips pressing into hers and wanted to feel them again.

"I'll bet you're slick and warm right now."

"And I'll bet you're growing just as hard as you were the first time I met you."

He'd been very hard, like her hand was brushing over steel, warm and enticing steel. The memory had her clenching her thighs together again, but this time the pulsating continued to the point of throbbing.

"If we were really engaged, I'd fuck you on this couch. In that bed. Over that table. Against that wall."

His voice was gruff as he moved close enough that the side of his body touched hers. Initial contact sent sparks soaring through her, to the point she thought she might just combust with the friction.

"If we were really engaged, we'd have been unable to keep our hands off each other while we were riding in the car." Because, yeah, she'd wanted to reach out and touch him then,

but she'd refrained. Now, she wasn't so sure they were going to keep playing by those same rules.

Seconds later she had her answer when Major reached out a hand to cup her jaw. He leaned in closer, his gaze once again on her mouth.

"This is the beginning," he whispered, his breath warm as it fanned over her face. "If you don't tell me right now that this is not what you want, that you're only down for the façade we put on in public, I'm going to continue."

Her hand came up from her lap to press against his toned chest where his heart thumped persistently beneath.

"I won't object if you continue." In fact, she might be at the point of begging.

He closed the distance between them, taking her mouth in what she knew was going to be a heated and hungry kiss.

It was delicious, the way her tongue instantly moved to meet his, the way his tangled with hers in a hot duel that felt at once familiar and decadent. He tilted her face as he leaned in closer, deepening the kiss. She moaned and wrapped an arm around his neck. The hand on his chest flattened against his taut pectoral.

"As beautiful as it is, I want this dress off." The words were a ragged whisper as he briefly pulled his lips from hers. His teeth scraped along her jawline as she tilted her head back to give him better access.

In seconds his tongue was stroking up and down the line of her neck while his words tumbled through her mind. Was he asking permission to take her dress off? Had she already answered him?

She couldn't think beyond the heated path of moisture moving along her neck and the feel of his hands on her shoulders, going down her arms until they brushed the sides of her breasts. She sucked in a breath and released it on a ragged moan.

The zipper to the dress was on her right side. She could reach it, but she'd have to move her hands from where they'd

flattened on his chest and the back of his head. She didn't want to, but the urge to be naked beneath him was quickly taking charge.

"Now..." he grumbled, lifting her right arm to join the other one locked around his neck.

Whatever he'd said before that one word led to his fingers nimbly easing her zipper down, until the dress felt loose against her chest. He eased away from her and stood, his breath coming in heavy pants that matched hers. Taking her hands, he pulled her to her feet and removed the dress.

For what seemed like much longer than a few seconds, he simply stared at her body. She'd decided against wearing the uncomfortable shaper Lila and her crew had provided earlier. Now she wore only the black strapless bra and matching thin wisp of lace that constituted panties, which had come from the small suitcase the crew had also left in her room. In those seconds, a quick spurt of insecurity shot through her. Did he like what he saw? Was her stomach too round? Were any stretch marks visible?

Swallowing and squaring her shoulders, she said, "Your turn," and reached for the buttons on his shirt.

He kept his gaze locked on her fingers as she worked along his torso and then to each wrist until she could push his shirt off. She wasted no time lifting the undershirt up and over his head, wanting to touch his warm skin as quickly as possible. Just a shade darker than his complexion, her fingers looked as if they belonged splayed over his muscled chest. She slid her hands across smooth skin, letting the tip of her pointer finger linger on the tight nub of his nipple before moving down to the cut of his abs. When her hands went lower and brushed his belt buckle, he grabbed each wrist.

"Turn around." The words were gruff and a bit more forceful than anything else he'd ever said to her, sending a rush of pleasure through her body.

She stepped out of the dress and turned until she was facing the couch, her backside vulnerable to his perusal.

“What is this?”

His fingers touched her waist, raising one of six rows of waist beads she wore.

She'd almost forgotten she was wearing them. It was something she'd worn since she was a teenager, changing the colors to match whatever mood she was in at the time. She always wore them as a sign of femininity and also as a way of keeping an eye on her weight.

“African waist beads,” she told him and left off the complete history and function of the beads because his hands were moving around her waist, lifting the beads and caressing the skin beneath.

“I've never seen anything so sexy before in my life,” he whispered.

Sensuality was another effect of the beads, so while she'd had a moment of insecurity over the appearance of her body to him, it had quickly been replaced by her own assurance that she was a sensual and desirable woman. Hearing his confirmation that he was feeling the same way was only a boost to the confidence she already possessed.

When his exploration of the beads was over, his hands moved down farther, until his fingers were slipping beneath the lace panties. He pushed them past her hips and down her legs, keeping an arm around her waist to steady her as she stepped free of them. His hand cupped her juncture and he pulled her hard against his body.

“Soft, wet, hot.” He leaned his face down and whispered into the crook of her neck. “Just how I knew you'd feel.”

His fingers separated her folds, easing between to feel the moisture of her arousal.

“So good.” He groaned. “So damn good.”

He wasn't lying. His fingers, moving so intimately between her legs, felt better than anything she could have ever imagined. When he thrust a finger inside her, she hissed, coming up on the tips of her toes as pleasure shot through her like fireworks.

Her head fell back against his shoulder and she cupped her breasts.

“Let me see ’em,” he mumbled as his teeth nipped her neck.

She pushed the bra down and her breasts were bared. Squeezing them in her hands, she kept her eyes closed while knowing that he was looking down at her ministrations. This position felt wickedly erotic, with him behind her, his finger thrusting inside her, his mouth at her neck and his gaze zeroing in on her breasts. She kneaded them harder, being sure to play with her nipples. He groaned, his dick getting harder as it pressed against the slit of her ass.

“I can’t do this,” he said, stepping back from her.

For a second Nina felt confused and incomplete, thinking this interlude might be over before it had really begun.

He pulled his hands from her and, just when she was going to turn and ask what was going on, she heard his belt buckle as he undid it and then dragged down the zipper of his pants. Okay, well, that answered her question. He wasn’t done with her yet, and she was glad. Twisting her arms around her back, she unhooked her bra. She had no idea where he’d gotten it from, but the next thing she heard was the tear of the condom packet. Barely a minute later, he bent her over the couch, her hands planted on the soft cushions as he spread her legs.

“It’s not going to be slow, but it’ll be good. Damn, I can’t wait, it’s gonna be so good.”

“I’m ready for good,” she said and nodded her agreement before sinking her teeth into her bottom lip as desire and anticipation gripped her throat.

He didn’t lie. He thrust into her in one fast, deep stroke that almost sent her soaring over the couch. But she’d planted her feet on the floor and clenched the cushion in her fingers. She did gasp as her body stretched and acclimated to his presence.

“My fiancée,” he said as he pulled out slightly and thrust back in. “You’re my fiancée.”

He pumped fast, in and out, until she was breathless, full and so wet her essence dripped down to her inner thighs.

“Fiancé,” she whispered. “You’re my fiancé.”

They were trying to convince each other and themselves. Taking the charade they’d agreed upon to a level neither of them had anticipated.

“Mine,” he groaned.

“Mine!” she screamed when his hand came around to toy with her clit as he continued to pump into her.

Hard and fast and damn delicious, that’s what this was. Fake engagements, contracts for app usage, bumping into him in the hallway, showing him her waist beads—none of it mattered. Not in these seconds, because there was only this. Only the pleasure that was soaring through her.

When her legs were through shaking, he eased out of her, maneuvering them until this time he sat and she straddled his lap. He ran his fingers over the beads again as she settled onto his length.

“These are driving me crazy. Do you wear them all the time?”

She sighed at the sensation of him filling her once more and circled her hips until his balls pressed against her wet lips. “Mmm-hmm,” she replied.

“All day. Every day.” He talked while he pumped and she gripped her breasts, kneading them as pleasure built inside her once more.

“Let them go,” he told her. “I want to see them bounce.”

She did as he requested and clamped her hands onto his shoulders, bracing herself as his thrusts increased. She matched his movements, riding him until the sound of their joining echoed in the air. He leaned in until the movement of her breasts could slap against his cheeks.

“So good,” he mumbled. “So damn good.”

“Yes!” she yelled when she knew another release was imminent. “Yes!”

“Yes, so...damn...good.” He held her close, his face buried so thoroughly between her breasts she wondered if he could breathe. She came at the exact moment her thighs trembled around him once more.

* * *

She wasn't his.

This was an arrangement; one designed for their mutual benefit. And since it was a business agreement, there should have been boundaries. Lines that they would not cross. Things they would not do that could interfere with the goals they'd each set.

An hour after leaving her hotel, Major rested his elbows on the desk in his home office and dropped his head with a heavy sigh. He'd messed up big-time.

But he could fix it before his slip endangered the arrangement. The last thing he wanted was for Nina to think he was taking advantage of their business deal, using it as an opportunity to have sex with her. So, he sat straighter in the chair and put his fingers on the keyboard. Nina's email address was already typed and now he added the subject line:
GUIDELINES.

He shook his head and pressed the backspace button. Then he typed again: **RULES.**

No, that wasn't going to work, so he deleted that, too.

In all his years, he'd never had to type an email like this. He'd also never left a woman almost immediately after having sex with her.

“I'll see you in the office at ten,” he'd said after coming out of the bathroom.

She'd been sitting on the couch. While he'd been in the bathroom, she must have gone into the bedroom to grab her robe because it was belted tightly at her waist as she sat with her hands in her lap.

“Right,” she’d replied. “I received the email adding that to the itinerary.”

“Good. Okay. Well then, good night.” The words had come in a clipped tone and he’d walked out of her hotel room, closing the door soundly behind him.

Now he was at his desk, preparing to tell her that what had happened would never happen again. Via email. It struck him then that this might be a tad immature, or perhaps even unnecessary. What if she was having the same never-again conversation with herself right at this moment? What if...he’d really messed up. It never occurred to him that sex with her would be so...so fantastic and intense and, damn, he’d messed up bad. Yeah, he was definitely sending her an email because in person this might turn into a discussion and the boundaries he needed to set for his own sanity weren’t up for negotiation.

FOLLOW-UP.

He stared at the letters for a moment before deleting them, too.

This was ridiculous. Was he really going to tell this grown and exceptionally attractive woman that they couldn’t touch each other again? Because that’s what it was going to take. He’d decided on the ride back to his penthouse that touching her—in any capacity—was only going to make him want her more. There were plenty of couples who didn’t engage in PDA, so that wasn’t out of the ordinary.

But he and Nina weren’t a real couple. They never would be after Stacia’s conniving ways. Major had learned his lesson about being a Gold and trying to have a real relationship.

With that thought, Riley and Chaz immediately sprang to mind. His sister and her boyfriend were always touching—holding hands, Chaz touching her arm, Riley leaning in to him as he said something. All acts that, as Riley’s big brother, made Major uncomfortable to see. But his parents were no different. How many times had he seen his father squeeze his mother’s ass while growing up? He closed his eyes tightly and groaned. The answer was too many for his comfort. But Ron Gold loved his wife Marva without reservation. They were a

partnership in love and in business and still going strong after thirty-seven years of marriage.

ADDENDUM.

Major typed the letters and this time didn't stop typing until a five-item list and two paragraphs were complete.

He hit Send and closed his computer before he could think better of the action. Sex with Nina had been great—if he were inclined to be specific, it was jolting, surprising, tantalizing—but it wasn't part of the plan. The plan that Major had worked on for far too long to be curtailed by a beautiful woman wearing colorful and sexy-as-hell waist beads that he knew would forever stay on his mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I RECEIVED YOUR EMAIL” was the first thing Nina said when she walked into Major’s office the next morning.

He was sitting behind his desk and had looked up the moment he heard her voice.

“Landra told me to come right in since you were expecting me.” She set her bag on the floor next to one of the guest chairs across from his desk but didn’t take a seat.

Before getting started with business, she had to say what she’d rehearsed since reading his message at two this morning.

“What happened last night was consensual, just in case you may be thinking you used your Fashion House Playboy vibes to seduce me. You didn’t. I do what I want when I want.”

That came out much better than the dozen or so times she’d said it to the bathroom mirror.

“I’m aware of that,” he replied as he put down the pen he was holding and stared at her. “I just thought it would be a good idea to outline some rules.”

“Rules to outline a charade.” She nodded. “Okay, I can get with that.” She didn’t really have a choice. She wasn’t walking away from this deal and she’d had him once, that would suffice. “I’ve noted each of the rules you’ve set—from the ‘no kissing’ all the way down to the ‘no standing too close to each other in private’—and replied to the questions about my basic likes and dislikes.”

“I saw them.”

But he hadn’t responded. So they were going for the cordial coolness. She could do that, too.

“Good. Now if we’re questioned on the basics of our family, where we came from, schools we went to and future goals, we’ve got that covered.” By habit, she smoothed the gunmetal-gray pencil skirt down before sitting, even though it was so

tight it wasn't moving anywhere without some assistance on her part. This was definitely one of her size-fourteen days.

"They won't ask us questions like that. All they're really concerned about is the wedding date and who'll be designing your gown."

And yet his email had asked questions like "What's your favorite movie?" and "Do you read while sitting on your father's back porch?"

"Well, I'd think that would be obvious," she said and tried her best not to think of how handsome he looked sitting behind his cherrywood desk in that mammoth burgundy office chair.

He was just a guy and there was no need for her to act any differently because she'd thought about this guy all night long.

"The others on my team will be here in a few moments. After I make the introductions, they'll take you to an office we had set up for you and get you started on the integration."

"But you're going to stay here," she said slowly. "You have other work to do. More important work."

He ran a hand over his chin and sat back in his chair. For endless moments he didn't speak, only stared at her as if he were memorizing everything about her. It made her wonder if he was possibly reconsidering this distance he'd decided to put between them, but then he cleared his throat and shook his head.

"I run an entire department as well as a few outside projects. I can't be at every meeting."

Nor did she need him at every meeting with her. She was being silly when she was supposed to be presenting a strong and unshakable front. That had to stop now.

"Great. I'm ready to get started. There's nothing on our agenda for tonight, so I'll make some plans to take in another play or possibly do some shopping to pick up something nice for my dad." And he didn't need to know all of that.

"Sounds good," he told her and went back to staring at whatever papers were on his desk.

Well, that hadn't been awkward at all. Except, yeah, it had.

Obviously, Major wasn't as good as she was about being calm, cool and collected. When Ken and Jenner, who'd been in her first meeting, came into the room, she stood and shook their hands. Major made more formal introductions and they ushered her out of his office. He didn't say another word to her and she didn't bother to look back at him or say anything else to him, either. If this was how they were to conduct their working relationship, so be it. She hadn't signed up for anything more, anyway.

* * *

Three days later, Nina sat in the backseat of the town car looking out the window while Claude drove through traffic. This afternoon her style was sexy bohemian. At least, that's what Lila had told her three hours ago when she'd entered Nina's hotel room as if she were a runway model.

"You're going to look subtly sexy in this, honey!"

Nina had smiled at the woman's exaggeration as she spoke. She was getting used to how the woman talked and worked. And since this was the first runway show she'd ever attended in person, Nina figured she'd trust the stylist's directive. Riley had also told Nina she could decline to wear anything Lila suggested if she truly didn't like it or felt uncomfortable, but Nina was finding it pretty easy to trust the woman's judgment.

And true to form, Lila had been correct. The light material fell over her body like a soft breath, the muted-color stripes complementing her complexion. The plunging halter neckline was super sexy. She wondered how Major would react to seeing her in the dress.

Number three on his list of things they weren't going to do anymore was "touch each other sexually." And he hadn't, not since the night they'd had the hard, fast and totally titillating sex in her hotel room.

Of course, not touching had been much easier since they'd only been together one other time following the meeting in his office the day after their sexcapade.

Yesterday's lunch had been at Sarabeth's Central Park South, a restaurant where Desta knew they would retain maximum visibility. And she'd been right; they'd been stared at the entire time they were eating by other guests at the restaurant and even some of the staff. Nina was certain that a few people snuck pictures on their cell phones. But there'd been no touching. In fact, Major seemed to have gone out of his way to be as reserved as he possibly could—a fact that was slowly starting to bug her.

Not for the obvious reasons. She wasn't falling for him and didn't need him to reciprocate feelings that weren't there. But they did need to appear comfortable with each other for their charade to be believable.

Nina brushed those ideas from her mind as the car came to a stop in front of what looked like an industrial building. The itinerary stated she would be attending an intimate showing of RGF's couture gowns with Major.

"I'll walk you inside," Claude said when he opened the door for her.

Nina stepped out onto a quiet sidewalk in the Financial District, which was in stark contrast to the streets around her hotel or the RGF building. Claude closed the car door and walked with her a few feet until he could open a huge steel door for her to enter.

Inside, the place looked very different. Golden lights hung in large circles from an exposed-beam ceiling, creating soft light that mingled with the natural light pouring in from a wall of paned windows. Bleached hardwood floors stretched throughout and up the wide staircase.

"I'll call when I'm ready," she told Claude after she'd looked around, but he was already shaking his head.

"No need. Mr. Gold informed me that he would take care of your transportation for the remainder of the evening."

Oh he did, did he? Well she wondered what that meant.

But it was too late to think too hard on that because Maurice came up to her, devilishly handsome smile already in place.

“Hey, Nina. How are you?”

“I’m great. How’s everything going here? Is there anything I can do to help?”

His thick brows furrowed, an action she’d seen Major do on a few occasions. It was amazing how much alike the two of them were without being identical. There was, of course, a resemblance—but there were differences, as well. While Major seemed to always be in control of his thoughts and actions, Maurice gave off a more relaxed demeanor. His ready smile, and that twinkle in his eyes she knew women were most likely dying for, identified him as the more extroverted twin.

“Not at all. We’ve got a great event staff and they’re taking care of everything. How’ve your first few days been at the fashion house?”

“So far, so good,” she replied. “The integration went better than expected and we’ve already started to see sales.”

“Cool. That sounds like a good sign.”

“It is. And this place is great, so I know the show will be terrific. I’m really excited to be here.” And that wasn’t a part of the charade.

“The production team has put a lot of planning into it, so I’m sure you’re right and it’ll be terrific. But we’re about to start and I was told to escort you to your seat.”

He extended his arm to her and she accepted it, telling herself there was no need to ask who’d sent him. It was Major, who was obviously still trying to keep his distance.

The room they entered was full of photographers standing with cameras in hand, and she was willing to bet there were several reporters, bloggers and fashion journalist seated in the chairs positioned in rows around a glossy white runway.

The show started seconds after she sat, and she crossed her legs, trying to ignore the empty seat beside her. Maurice had walked behind a black curtain and, when Nina looked around, she didn’t notice anyone else. But there were many eyes on her, so instead of looking the way she felt—confused and teetering on angry—she smiled and pushed one heavy curl of

hair behind her ear. Anything was better than the obvious—that Major wasn't with her.

The music was hip-hop, the models were amazing and the gowns exquisite. When the show was over, Nina stood, clapping just as loudly as anyone else in the room. Until Major stepped up beside her.

“Glad you're enjoying yourself,” he said when he leaned in to whisper in her ear.

“Glad you could finally join me,” she replied without turning to look at him.

Maurice and two other men stepped through the black curtain with smiles and partial bows as the crowd continued to applaud in appreciation of the twelve gowns they'd just been treated to. Cameras were busy clicking throughout the space.

“We're going to go out this side door before the crowd begins to disperse. The room is set up for a press conference, but Maurice and the designers from today's collection are prepared to deal with it. We're just here to be seen.”

He spoke to her like he would to any other employee and Nina tried her best to accept his cool demeanor as the new norm.

“Fine. Shall we go now?”

This time she did look at him, but she ignored the way the beige jacket hung enticingly on his broad shoulders. The white shirt that molded to his chest and the matching beige slacks completed what should have been a bland outfit choice but instead, on him, was just another symbol of how attractive this man really was. He nodded at her and she stepped in front of him, walking toward the only exit she saw and praying he was following closely behind her. Otherwise it might appear that she was angry and walking away from him, something that would most likely set tongues to wagging.

“It should only take twenty minutes, then we have reservations for dinner. After that we'll be done for the night.”

“I read the itinerary, Major. I know what we have to do tonight.”

He snapped his lips shut tightly and when she thought he might give a different retort, the first of the reporters filed into the room. Maurice came up behind them and Major clapped one hand on his brother's shoulder while shaking the other.

"Another slam dunk," he said.

"You bet your ass!" Maurice replied. "Cordell and Expo are phenomenal designers. This limited Spring in the City line is going to do great, especially once it hits the overseas market."

As if to magnify his words, Cordell Spriggs and Expo—one name only—the designers who had walked the runway and taken their bows with Maurice, came up to join them.

"Congratulations," Nina said, looking at each of them. "The dresses were fabulous."

"Thanks," Cordell said. "You should wear one to something. Maybe as your second outfit at the reception. We can make some changes, cater it specifically to you and your theme. Have you selected a theme for the wedding yet?"

Her mouth opened then shut, and then she simply shrugged. "Not just yet. But your gowns have definitely given me some ideas."

"It's time to get the press conference started," Major interjected. "We don't want to mess up our timeline."

"He's right," Maurice added after a questioning look between Major and Nina.

Maurice stepped up to the podium, an act that quieted the crowd already assembled in the room.

"Thank you for coming this afternoon. Now, as promised, for the next fifteen minutes, we're going to take a few questions."

A woman in the front row raised her hand and immediately stood.

"I have a question for the new addition to the Gold family, Nina Fuller," she said pointedly. "What's it like working with your fiancé? You've joined the Gold family on two levels—business and pleasure. How did you and Major manage to

keep not only your engagement but also your new business partnership a secret for so long?”

Silence filled the room as all eyes rested on her. For a few seconds, Nina wondered if she should speak and, if so, what she would say. Maurice came to the rescue.

“Let me clarify, Cordell, Expo and myself will accept questions about today’s show.”

“Then why are they here?” the reporter persisted with a nod of her head at Nina and Major. “Are they just showpieces for the company?”

She was brash and persistent, wearing a black jumpsuit and red mules on her feet. The way she was staring at Nina said she knew something that nobody else knew. Or that she was making an assumption that maybe others were too afraid to make.

“If the Fashion House Playboy is actually getting married, why can’t we talk to him or his fiancée about it? Why wasn’t the business collaboration announced the other night at the Sip ‘n’ Chat? Oh, and the most important question, where’s her engagement ring?”

It took every ounce of control Nina possessed to not look down at her left hand or the finger she knew was missing an engagement ring. Dammit! Why hadn’t she thought of that in her quest to make this fake plan seem as real as possible?

A better question: Why should they have to talk about anything they didn’t want to, or that wasn’t directly related to this show? But then, that’s how this marketing plan was supposed to work—to spark interest and keep the buzz going around the Golds and their new bridal collection. It was her debut in the industry and its very public lifestyle, so if she didn’t like invasive questions about an engagement ring she probably should’ve been wearing, well then, she’d just have to get over it.

“I’m not in the habit of answering questions about my personal life,” Nina said to the shock of everyone in the room, except maybe the reporter.

Nina moved until she was behind the podium, multiple microphones banked on the edge to point directly at her.

“But I recognize your need to intrude, especially since we made such a bold and exciting announcement just a few days ago.”

“Exactly,” the reporter replied with a look of measured satisfaction. “Shall I repeat my question?”

Nina held her gaze and smiled. “That’s not necessary. Major and I believe in keeping our personal relationship to ourselves. So while we’ve announced our engagement, and you’ll probably be hearing a lot more about the upcoming wedding plans, everything else between us, including the ring, will stay that way. Regardless of how many surprise questions are tossed at us. And on the business front, the At Your Service app is designed to work alongside fashion houses to offer customers a complete experience. There was an announcement on the home pages of RGF’s domestic and international websites a few days ago, which is how I presume you found out, so that hardly qualifies as a secret.”

The woman’s smirk faltered a bit at Nina’s words and, out of the corner of her eye, Nina could see Maurice grinning. She didn’t bother to try to see Major’s reaction. He probably wasn’t having any.

“So you’ve been dating for four months and now you’re getting married. How nice. When’s the big day? Have you picked out a dress? Will Riley be one of your bridesmaids? I must admit I thought if there were going to be a wedding in the Gold family, it would be Riley. But then again, she is dating the company’s biggest competitor, so making that union legal would probably be a stretch.”

This woman is a piece of work. Correction, she’s an ass.

“So glad you mentioned Riley. She’s been such a great sister-in-law-to-be these past few days. You’re correct in assuming she’ll be in the wedding, along with my sisters, and we’ll all be wearing dresses from the Golden Bride Collection. I’m very excited about selecting the perfect gowns. Are there any more questions about the wedding plans, or should I turn

this over to the talented men who made today's show possible?"

Another reporter thankfully spoke up, directing a question to Expo and the phenomenal—his word, not hers—turquoise gown they'd just seen in the show's finale.

As Nina stepped away from the podium, Major reached for her hand. She hesitated just a second, looking up at him in question. His facial expression was still grim and he didn't offer any explanation, but she placed her hand in his and stood beside him for the remainder of the press conference. If he'd thought them not touching for the past few days was in any way going to dull their attraction to each other, he was wrong.

Warmth instantly spread through her body at his touch and her fingers clung to his as they walked. He didn't say a word until they were in the backseat of the car, and that was when he pulled her so close her lips parted on instinct in preparation for his kiss.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“I’M NOT GOING to kiss you, not again.” The words hurt his throat as they came out in a scratchy growl.

His chest was heaving as anger poured through him. How dare that annoying Morgana McCloud question Nina the way she did? Major should have known this would happen. There were some reporters and bloggers who hated that he never gave them the comments or interviews they requested. Morgana hated that he’d never accommodated her and that he’d never accepted any of the advances she’d made toward him. If he were the loneliest man on earth, he wouldn’t have sought the company of such a woman. He’d known a woman like her before and had sworn to never again get sucked into their clutches.

Now the news about At Your Service was out and that had him wondering once again about the division of Brand Integrated that involved accessorizing for fashion house designs that was very similar to Nina’s. When Brand Integrated made its appearance in the fashion world, there was no doubt that very fact would be mentioned. But their charade would be over by then.

“I...um, I didn’t ask you to kiss me,” she said and then licked her lips.

But she didn’t pull away from him. They were in the backseat of the limo he’d reserved for tonight. He released the grasp on her arm and extended one hand to press the button that would close the privacy barrier between them and the front seat.

“It’s what got me in trouble the first time. The kiss.” He shook his head because he knew he sounded irrational, but that was exactly how he was feeling. It was how he’d been feeling for the past few days, the longer he’d stayed away from her. “Kissing is too intimate. I’m not going to do it again,” he

stated, trying to calm his tone because her eyes had grown a little wider.

“I’m not going to ask you to kiss me, or to do anything with me, Major.” She looked down to where his other hand still gripped her arm and then back up to him in question.

He pulled back as if he’d been burned, cursing at the mere sight of his fingers pressing into her arm. “I’m sorry,” he said and sat back against the seat. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

And that was the truth. He didn’t know what was happening to him because whatever it was had never happened before. So he’d slept with her, big deal. He’d slept with other women before, and he and Nina were pretending to be a couple, so it should’ve been fair game. Everything that had happened between them up to this point had been consensual, so why had he needed to write that list creating rules to separate them? And if he’d thought that list was the best plan for them to move forward without any threat of entanglements later, then why had he spent these past few days feeling like crap and needing desperately to be alone with her, to see her, to touch her?

Nina cleared her throat. She sat back and smoothed the skirt of her dress, letting her hands rest in her lap. “Look, maybe you don’t have to take this seriously, but I do. Everything we do from the night of the Sip ’n’ Chat to the day we have our fake argument is part of my first impression to the fashion industry.

“My work so far has been on a much smaller scale, but this is my opportunity to show the industry who I am and what my business can do for them. We’re supposed to be an engaged couple. But I’ve gotta tell you, we need to do better. That reporter in there was intentional in her questions. There’s doubt about this relationship. For whatever reason, she doesn’t believe us and if one person doesn’t, then others may be wondering, as well.”

She was right. Appearances were everything, especially in this industry. Wasn’t that why Desta and Riley had come up with this idea in the first place? It’s why they knew including a

Gold in the campaign would ensure its success. And now, this woman who had no stake in his family company was essentially telling him he wasn't pulling his weight.

“What do you think we should do?” If she said get naked in the back of this limo right now, he'd do it. Damn him, he would.

“First, you've gotta relax and you've gotta act like a man in love.”

His head snapped to hers and he saw that she was staring at him. She looked spectacular today. He'd noticed the moment he'd peeked through the curtain and seen her walking in on Maurice's arm. A spurt of jealousy had pierced his chest before he'd cursed and pushed it away. But he hadn't been able to look away from her, not for minutes after she'd taken her seat.

The dress wasn't formfitting but flowing breezily down past her ankles. The halter top cupped her breasts the same way his hands had before. And the muted colors complemented everything from her skin tone to her eye color, to the soft, barrel curls that fell past her shoulders.

“I'm not going to give the press the innermost details of my life, they're not entitled to that.” No one was.

“But you'll agree to a stunt that has the prime purpose of playing to the public? Look, whatever we say to them is a lie. It's all a lie.” She shrugged as if it were that simple. “We're not engaged. We're not a happily-in-love couple and we never will be. This is a means to an end for both of us.”

He wouldn't kiss her. Major had sworn he wouldn't kiss her again. But the touching rule? That was out the window. So he closed the slight distance between them on the seat and he reached for her. She came willingly, sitting across his lap.

“This...” he said quietly. “The tug you feel between us? The one that starts deep in your gut and reaches out, wanting to cling to something, someone... We cannot deny this. You can't deny it.”

She shook her head. “No. I can’t. I’m not. But I’m also not going to play this game with you. I’m okay with taking our façade into the bedroom. I can separate work from personal. But I’m not going to be at your call. Either we stick by your rules implicitly for the duration of this agreement or we don’t. There’s no in between and there’s no up and down.”

Basically, she was telling him to get it together. As she had every right to since he was being a jerk with this hands-off, hands-on situation.

He was impressed. He’d thought watching her masterfully handle Morgana in that press conference was awe-inspiring, but holding her on his lap while she fundamentally just ripped him a new one was damn commendable. He cupped her face in his hands and leaned in. Her lips parted and he almost... Major tilted his head and kissed her neck, suckling slightly, creating a path to the skin between her breasts, which was the softest he’d ever touched.

When her arms came around his shoulders and she arched into him, he sighed with relief and with resolution. He was going to play this game by her rules, but first, he was going to have her again.

He continued running his tongue and lips over her skin, moving his hands so that one was at the nape of her neck, pulling her hair gently to tilt her head back. The line of her neck was bare to him and Major stared down as if he were a vampire, hungry for the taste of her. He licked a straight path from between her breasts up to her chin and back down again. She hissed and arched further in his arms. He loved kissing her. It was a fact he could not deny.

To push that thought out of his mind, he eased a hand beneath the halter top of her dress, cupping her bare breasts and sucking in a breath at how good it felt.

“Why do I want you so much?”

Had he said that aloud? He’d been thinking it so much, he no longer knew whether or not it was in his head or if he finally was ready to hear an answer.

“Take what you want,” she whispered, bringing her hand up to cover his, moving it so they were both squeezing her breast. “Take what we both want.”

Permission. She’d given it before and she was giving it again. Another woman may have walked away from him and this arrangement because of the ridiculous way he’d been acting these past few days. Stacia had walked away from him for less. Any other woman certainly wouldn’t have come to his rescue at the press conference, after he’d asked for answers to his questions in that juvenile email he’d sent her. And she damn sure wouldn’t be in his arms right now, asking him to give her what she needed.

What he *desperately* needed.

He pulled his hand away, running it down her torso and to her legs where he could pull the material of the dress up. Her legs were bare, and she opened them the moment he touched her skin.

“I’m gonna give you what you need, baby.”

“Please,” she whispered. “Please give it to me.”

It took almost no effort to push the thin silk material of her panties to the side and slip his fingers along the warm folds of her pussy.

She moaned, the arm wrapped around his shoulders tightening against him.

“Yes, baby. You’re so hot and ready for me. Ready for this pleasure.”

He was, too. His jaw clenched with the need to sink himself so deep inside her that he could no longer think of his past mistakes with women, the present situation he found himself in, or the future that seemed to rest on this beautiful woman in his arms.

She gyrated against his fingers even before he could press them inside her.

“You’re ready and you’re hot.”

“You’re talking too much and not doing enough,” she said, grabbing his hand with her free one and pressing it into her juncture.

He needed no further encouragement but eased two fingers deep into her, loving the feel of her inner muscles tightening against his intrusion. It was like a cave, a hot cavern of deliciousness that only he could taste, only he could have at this moment. It took him seconds to twist her around until she was lying flat on the seat. He dragged the panties down her legs, dropped them to the floor and propped her legs up onto his shoulders before dipping his head low. His mouth was on her in seconds, tongue stroking over the plump folds of her pussy, lapping up the thick nectar that tasted sweet sliding down the back of his throat.

She yelled out at the contact and he continued, reveling in the sound of her taking the pleasure he offered and the feel of her soft inner thighs rubbing against his face. He suckled her clit, taking the tight bud into his mouth and holding it there until she squirmed beneath him. When her hands went to the back of his head, pushing him further, he groaned and whispered, “Greedy little goddess.”

But he gave her what she wanted, thrusting his tongue inside her and moving it with the same urgency he would have moved his dick if he were pounding into her.

“Yessssss.”

He would never get tired of that hissing sound in her voice. Never get tired of the scent or taste of her. The taste that was melting all over his mouth at this moment. She moved with his motions, undulating her hips as she held him to her, giving as good as she was getting.

He worked his mouth over her until he thought his chest would explode with desire. Pulling back slightly, he sank his fingers into her again before dragging them out and letting one slide back to her rear. This time she sucked in a breath and held completely still. He rubbed his finger over the tight sphincter, using her juices to ease only the tip of his finger into her.

“Major, I don’t... I can’t,” she whimpered.

He knew the feeling. He couldn’t think, either, not past the need and the hunger. His mouth was on her again, tongue easing deep into her just as his finger moved slowly into her other opening. She shivered beneath him, and yelled out until he was certain anyone on the street would hear her. And with that cry came her release, pouring like liquid heaven into his mouth. Major swallowed and he held on tight to the sensation moving through his body along with her essence.

He’d never felt anything like this before and he knew he never would again.

* * *

If somebody had told Nina that she’d have a backseat sexcapade in a black limousine, she would have called them a bald-faced liar. Yet, here she sat, closer to the window this time than she had before, staring out at the New York skyline while they drove to her hotel. They’d decided to skip the restaurant and Major was on his phone arranging for dinner to be brought to them there.

She had an elbow propped up on the door, her cheek leaning against a closed fist while thoughts of what they’d done in the back of this limo ran through her mind. Her inner thighs still tingled, and thoughts about whether or not she was doing the right thing ran rampant while her hormones continued to take charge.

There simply was no more right thing to do other than what she was doing. For too long she’d sacrificed everything for someone else, namely her family. Her father hadn’t been the same after her mother had left seventeen years ago. And while only twelve at the time, Nina had known that it would be up to her to help Jacoby in any way she could. And so she had. It had never occurred to her to do anything else. It had also never occurred to her that at almost thirty years old, she’d still be dedicating so much of her time to her father and her sisters. But not for the next five weeks. This time was for her, while all that she was doing would ultimately help her family, these

days in this city, with this man, doing this job, were for her. And she planned to make the best of every minute.

Even if that meant spending every minute irrevocably aroused by a man she'd never imagined being with.

"The food will be there shortly after we arrive."

His voice jolted her out of her thoughts, and she sighed before looking over at him with a wan smile. "Thanks. I didn't really feel like being out in public again."

"That makes two of us," he said with a nod. "It's been a pretty long day."

"I bet. How long does it normally take to get ready for a show?" She'd been learning more about the inner workings of the industry while working with RGF. The business aspect of the design house seemed to be a smooth-running machine, but it definitely took the skill and expertise of every one of its three-hundred-plus employees. Before this week, it had been easy to believe her app's target was just the Gold family because they called all the shots and had made what was one of the world's most influential and successful Black-owned-and-operated fashion houses what it was today. But this past week she'd definitely learned differently.

"I don't personally do much with the planning of the shows. I make sure all the technology they need to facilitate them is up to par."

"A man of my heart," she said and then clapped her lips shut. It was probably best not to talk about her heart where he was concerned. This wasn't that type of party and she didn't want it to be. Watching her father nurse a broken heart was enough to swear her off any type of emotional connection with a man.

"The programs you've put in place at the fashion house are innovative and seem to be helping to keep things running smoothly," she continued, trying to stay focused.

He stuffed his phone into his pocket and looked over at her. "Technology is the way of the future. And nobody else in my

family has the patience for it, so that became my contribution to the company.”

Nina felt the same way.

Her sisters worked and sometimes—when berated and guilted to no end—contributed to the expenses associated with taking care of their father when his savings and insurance didn’t meet the need. Her love of computers and desire to create had landed her a few contractual jobs that pulled them out of a financial bind a time or two, but she wanted something more stable, something that would allow them to live more comfortably without having to go through the guilt and arguments with her sisters.

“Everyone in your family seems to have found their niche,” she said.

“Yeah. I think so.”

“Did your parents always expect you’d go into the family business?” She figured if she talked more about his family, she’d feel less depressed about her own.

“Ah, yeah, I think so. I mean we didn’t grow up with sketch pads in our hands or fashion magazines instead of literature for reading time. But we learned how much the company meant to our father and my grandfather at a very early age. We all went to college and selected a major with the notion that we’d bring that knowledge back to RGF. It was like an unspoken expectation.”

“And none of you strayed. That’s amazing and commendable. There’s something to be said about family loyalty.” Jacoby had taught her and her sisters that when they were young. While Nina knew it was her father’s not-so-subtle jab at her mother’s leaving, she could also see the overall value in the lesson.

Major didn’t reply, but it didn’t matter, they were already pulling up in front of her hotel.

Minutes later they were walking into her room.

“I’m just gonna go freshen up a bit. I’ll be right back.” She headed to the bedroom, did a quick washup and changed into

leggings and a bright yellow shirt that hung past her hips, its black-sequined letters spelling “QUEEN” across her chest.

An hour later Major had removed his jacket and they’d finished the most delicious stuffed cheeseburgers, fresh-cut fries and chocolate milkshakes she’d ever tasted. When he’d suggested they order from the burger place instead of some fancy restaurant, she’d almost hugged him. Now, full from the good food and amiable conversation, she sat back against the cushions and sighed.

“I’m sorry for being such a jerk these past few days.” He was sitting with his head resting on the back of the couch, just like her, both with hands folded over now full stomachs.

“It wasn’t how I intended to start this agreement between us,” he continued.

“Me, either,” she admitted. “I mean I really hadn’t thought our pretending would lead to actual sex, but I wasn’t totally bothered by it.”

“I wasn’t, either.” He paused for a second. “At least, not while it was happening.”

“What bothered you about it afterward?” Why she wanted to know, she had no clue. If Major Gold, the reputed Fashion House Playboy had some hang-ups about sex in real life, that was none of her concern.

“I didn’t want to seem like I was taking advantage of the situation or mislead you in any way.”

“Oh.” She hadn’t expected that answer. Truthfully, she didn’t know what to expect from Major from one minute to the next, but this solemn, compassionate admission definitely wasn’t it.

“Despite what the press says, I never want any woman I’m with to have misconceptions about what our relationship is or what it isn’t. Even though our connection is more rooted in business, I feel obligated by the same standard.”

“That’s understandable. But so is being physically attracted to someone.”

“I agree.”

“So how did you manage to get this reputation that follows you around like a lost puppy, if you’re so careful about how the women you date perceive your relationship?”

“When people don’t have enough information, they make things up.”

“And you don’t care to give them more information,” she said, thinking back to the way he’d refused to speak at the press conference.

“They’re not entitled to know every aspect of my life. Nobody is unless I want it to be so. Just because my family is notable and our business is in the spotlight, doesn’t mean I have to personally be there, as well.”

She was quiet while she digested those words. Being in the spotlight had never been a problem for her, but she wondered if there was something to the thought that her family wasn’t entitled to every aspect of her life, either.

“But you did date three different women in three days. That’s gotta mean something.” She chuckled lightly after the statement because the pang in her chest as she’d thought about her relationship with her family was far more uncomfortable than ever before.

“One was a distribution rep that was in town from London and was having problems with her laptop. Another was a family friend and a favor to my mother. The other was a real date that I’d scheduled weeks before and didn’t feel comfortable backing out of at the last minute. Does that sound like the life of a playboy?”

It didn’t. It actually sounded kind of lonely, because at no point had he said he “wanted” to be on a date with any of those women. At least Nina made the choice when and who she dated and, for the most part, she was active in that date. Major sounded as if he were just along for the ride.

“Well, you’ve got yourself a fiancée now, Major Gold.” She reached out and grabbed his hand, lifting their arms up over their heads in a combined fist pump.

He laughed. It was the first time she'd heard the sound and she immediately liked it. She liked it a lot.

“Yeah, I guess I do. And she's a pretty terrific fiancée if I must say so.”

“Oh, yes,” she said when she'd lowered their hands.
“Definitely say so. Frequently.”

They both laughed then, and in that moment Nina realized she'd never felt as at ease with another man before. They weren't thinking about having sex—or at least she wasn't—and they weren't discussing work. They were just talking, just being, and she just liked it. A lot.

CHAPTER NINE

THE DUPLEX ON the Upper East Side was bigger than two of her apartments back in York. The stripped-wood flooring and private rooftop terrace were amazing. Nina loved it and she'd told Major so when he'd brought her yesterday to stay here for the remaining month of their agreement.

Today was the first bridal dress fitting. Last week, she and Riley had gone to lunch and afterward sat in Riley's office for the duration of the afternoon going through sketches of wedding gowns, fabric swatches and color wheels. By the time they were finished, six sketches had been selected for Nina, there were three color-scheme finalists and she'd discovered that when it was her turn, Riley didn't want a big wedding.

"Something small, maybe on an island, with just our family and closest friends. That's the perfect wedding for me," Riley had said.

Nina had noted the light in her eyes when she'd spoken about her wedding ideas. A spark that Nina presumed was from being in love and actually believing that a wedding was on the horizon at some point. Nina didn't have that type of imagination.

But she was ready for today. Sitting at the table next to the biggest set of windows with the best northern view of the city, she monitored the activity on her app in correlation to the sales directly from RGF. All the numbers were up. This trial run was going well so far. She clapped her hands together and reached for her mug, frowning when she sipped very cold coffee.

Minutes later she walked out of the gorgeous gray-and-white kitchen with a bottled water and a banana when she heard the doorbell ring.

Somebody was early.

Nina went to the door and smiled when she saw Riley looking fashionably chic in dark jeans, a tan blouse and heels

that were way too high for a Saturday afternoon. After greeting Riley and stepping to the side so she could come in, Nina looked down at her weekend attire: gray sweatpants with a matching sweatshirt that was a couple sizes too big, so she looked like a sack of potatoes.

“Sorry I’m so early. I was just eager to get this started and Chaz is out of town until Wednesday. This place is great,” she said as she walked straight through the living room/dining room and into the kitchen.

Nina followed.

“Yes, it is. I know Major wanted to make sure we were in a nice place for the fitting and photo shoot, but this might be a little above and beyond.” She’d been thinking that ever since last night when Claude had carried her bags from the hotel to the car and driven her over here.

Riley leaned on the island. The eight-foot-long, gray-and-white-marble waterfall island had a stainless steel sink in its center and five clear-backed stools along one side. Nina slid onto one and set her water bottle on the marble top before peeling back the layers of her banana.

“You think he rented this apartment just for the photo shoot?” Riley asked.

“Of course he did. Why else would he rent it?” She took a bite of the fruit and chewed it slowly.

Riley watched her and slipped a grape from the fruit bowl into her mouth.

“I suggested we do the fitting at the office, where we normally have our sample showings. There’s a runway there and space to do anything else we wanted.”

“That would’ve been a good option, too,” Nina said and seconds later realized the point Riley was trying to make.

“The office is only ten minutes from here and, just like the rest of us, Major spends most of his time there. So this apartment was kinda extra effort.”

Nina chewed on another piece of her banana, knowing the woman watched and waited for her next comment to refute the assumption that there was a personal reason Major had gotten this place specifically for her.

“Well, your brother is smart, I can tell you that. The light in this place is amazing. Pictures are going to come out great. How soon do you think they’ll show up in a newspaper or tabloid?” Nina took her last bite of the banana before throwing the peel in the garbage.

Riley was still moving with deliberate slowness, putting one grape at a time into her mouth while watching Nina as if she thought some different words were about to spout out of her mouth. If Major’s sister thought she was about to tell her that they were lovers, she was mistaken. While Nina enjoyed Riley’s company and had secretly wished her own sisters were as mature and business-minded, there was no way she was telling Riley that there were aspects of this fake engagement that she and Major had decided to make come true.

“We only hire the most reputable photographers in the industry and they’ve each signed a privacy agreement. We’ll get first look and final approval of any pictures to be published and have already sold them to *Infinity* magazine. It’s not a fashion-only magazine, but it’s Black-owned and respectable. My father is good friends with the owners, Reginald and Bruce Donovan. They’re doing a complete spread on the engagement.”

It made sense that they would contact a reputable magazine for a story about this engagement. Calling that magazine respectable, however, flew rudely in the face of the fact that the Golds knew this engagement was a sham. So they were asking this great Black-owned magazine to lie. Nina twisted the top off her water and took a gulp to get the bad taste of that idea out of her mouth.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Riley said. “And remember the argument and breakup that’s planned for the end of this campaign. Nobody will know that it wasn’t ever real to start with.”

“Morgana McCloud doesn’t think it’s real.” Nina couldn’t believe she was still thinking about that reporter after Major had explained the woman’s fixation with him.

Morgana had written two stories since the one after that show that featured her, Major, the engagement and the mention of the At Your Service/RGF business venture. In each she’d placed a lot of emphasis on where Nina had come from and how she was apparently “marrying up.” The words stung because Nina knew she wasn’t getting married at all. The only consolation was that other tabloids had run with Morgana’s lead but were actually highlighting the innovative idea that the two businesses connect. Still, Nina couldn’t shake the feeling that Morgana was specifically feeling some type of way about her.

“She’s fishing and has no source that will tell her any different,” Riley stated.

It had been suggested that Nina bring her sisters to the fitting since Morgana had mentioned her quote about who was going to be in the bridal party, but Nina had been vehemently against that. She wished she’d thought about what she was saying when she’d said it, but there was no way she would bring Daisy and Angie into this farce. As much as she wanted this to seem believable, she hadn’t considered that it would put her family in the spotlight. Now, with Morgana hot on her trail, she wasn’t sure how long she’d be able to stop that from happening.

The doorbell rang again and Nina quickly slid off the stool to go answer it. She usually liked talking to Riley but she couldn’t shake the feeling that their conversation was about to shift in a direction Nina didn’t want to go. When she opened the door this time she fully expected to see Lila and her crew, but instead Marva Gold smiled at her.

“Mrs. Gold. Ah, hello. I wasn’t expecting you to attend the fitting.” And now she was a little more uncomfortable, not just because of the conversation with Riley, but because there were two Gold women in the room with her.

“Hello, Nina. When Riley told me about today’s events, I thought it only right that I be here. Do you mind?”

The woman was Black royalty with her tawny-brown complexion and thick silver-streaked hair that was curled and pulled back from her face with a thin black band. She wore a white pantsuit with a pale pink blouse beneath it. Diamond studs dotted her ears and a thin bracelet cuffed her left arm. On her left ring finger was a massive diamond. Nina instantly balled her hands into fists, hoping nobody would see that she still wasn’t wearing an engagement ring. Major hadn’t mentioned it since Morgana’s comment about it—or the lack of it—at the fashion show, and there was no way Nina was asking him to get her a ring. Her pride just wouldn’t allow it, not even to make this fake engagement look good.

“No, of course not, I don’t mind at all. Come on in,” she said and stepped out of the way to let the woman in. She was about to close the door but heard someone clearing their throat.

Nina pulled the door open again and Lila came in with the crew, clothing racks, bags, boxes and her normal flair. By the time Nina closed the door this time she was breathing a sigh of relief that a buffer—or rather a whole group of buffers—had arrived. This should definitely take the pressure off.

It didn’t.

Two hours later and the fitting was in full swing. Three photographers from *Infinity* had arrived. Anya and Cheree were pulling the gowns and matching them with shoes and veils while Riley and her mother sat on the couch giving their opinions as Nina walked out into the living room. Garen would quickly give her hair a new look each time she tried on a gown, talking her to death while he worked. And Lila was announcing each gown as if she were the emcee of her own fashion show.

“Now this long-sleeved nude gown includes a pleated tulle overlay and a dusting of shimmering gold Chantilly lace,” Lila stated the moment Nina entered the living room.

The photographers immediately moved in, each capturing a picture from a different angle.

“I’m not sure about this one,” Nina said as she moved closer. “It might be a little too nude. My father would have a conniption if he saw this.”

Growing up, her father had been extremely strict about his daughters’ clothes—how much showed through sheer or tight-fitted items. Although Nina believed she possessed her own style and appreciated clothes that made her feel sexy, some of Jacoby’s teachings had stayed with her into adulthood.

“I can understand that,” Marva added. She’d risen from the couch and was now standing next to Nina, lifting the tulle out so that it flared even more from her waist down.

“But this is a classic look. It’s formfitting but gives the illusion of being natural,” Riley added when she joined her mother, standing on the opposite side of Nina.

“And it’s so sexy. There’s just a hint of innocence in that it covers her completely, but that punch of desire as it hugs her natural curves,” Lila added.

“I agree,” Marva said. “I love how each of the gowns complements a diverse body type. That’s one thing this line does very well.”

Riley, who wasn’t nearly as curvy as Nina, stood back, one arm across her chest, a hand to her chin while she continued to survey Nina. “Definitely something we were aiming for,” she said. “But I can see what she’s saying. If I wore this, Dad would have solid opinions about the almost sheerness.”

Marva chuckled. “You’re right about that. Fathers can be very particular about their girls.”

“Too particular,” Riley quipped.

“You can say that again,” Nina added.

“Okay, let’s try another one,” Lila prompted.

The photographers had snapped photos of the two Gold women standing with her, adjusting and commenting on the gown. In her mind, Nina could visualize how it would look in

print. Normal. Sentimental. A slice of time a woman and her family would remember for the rest of their lives. A pang of unexpected sadness hit her.

They went to the next dress and the next, repeating the process until deciding on a gown that evening. While Nina's personal favorite had been a wine-colored tulle over an ivory fitted bodice and A-line skirt, they'd collectively chosen the classic white trumpet dress with bias-cut organza tiers and rosettes that Garen called romantic.

"I'm exhausted," Nina said when she returned to the living room once again, this time back in her comfortable sweats as she dropped down onto the cushioned chair across from the couch.

"We should grab some dinner," Riley suggested.

"Oh no, I have to get back home," Marva said. "Your father and I have an engagement this evening."

Riley nodded. "That's right, the Rutherford Gala is tonight."

"Yes. You and your brothers should be there, as well. You know your father likes to present a united front at these gatherings," Marva said as she reached for her purse.

"The Rutherfords are old friends of yours and Dad's. They have nothing to do with us or the company, so we figured we could skip."

"Yes." Marva nodded. "The four of you like to team up whenever possible."

The words weren't spoken with any sting, just a mother's love for her children.

Riley stood with her mother and hugged her. "But we still love you lots," she said with a huge smile just before kissing Marva's cheek.

The sadness that had punched Nina in the gut earlier this afternoon now draped her body like a horrific plague. Lynn Fuller had left her family seventeen years ago, so why did it feel like it was only yesterday?

Nina was just standing when Marva came over and pulled her in for a hug.

“You look tired and we’ve monopolized your entire day. We’ll get out of your hair now so you can get some rest.”

Nina had been thinking of doing that and probably squeezing some work in while she ate something quick, like a chicken salad sandwich, in bed. Now, however, a hot bath and burying herself beneath the covers for the next few hours seemed like a better plan.

“Thank you,” Nina said without mentioning how good that brief hug felt.

“We’re going to have a girls’ night soon before we get too crazy with planning and appearances.” This time it was Riley who stepped up to pull Nina into a hug.

How did these women know exactly what she needed right now?

“But you’ll join us tomorrow for Sunday dinner,” Marva said and turned to walk toward the door.

“Oh yes. That’s a good idea, Mom.” Riley had picked up her purse and was now walking behind her mother.

Nina followed them, not sure what was happening. She’d been here for two weeks and hadn’t attended any private family gatherings. “Ah, tomorrow? Dinner?”

“Yes,” Riley said, looking over her shoulder at her. “Sunday dinner is a Gold family tradition. It takes place at six every Sunday evening, unless we’re all out of town. Then it’s usually a phone call from wherever we are in the world.”

“Because, above all else, family is first,” Marva said.

Nina looked at her and could almost hear her father quoting another African proverb. Jacoby did that often, especially after Lynn had left them. It was as if he’d thought by pouring the teachings of the importance of family from his ancestors into their heads, they would never make the same mistakes.

“Nina, are you okay? You seem so different now. Would you like me to order you something to eat before I go?” Riley

asked after her mother had opened the door and they'd walked through.

Nina stayed in the apartment, placing her hand on the doorknob to steady herself. "No. Thanks, really, for being so kind to me, but I'm okay. I have some stuff in the refrigerator and I'm going to have a bath and just chill for the evening." Or wallow in how much she'd missed by not having a mother-daughter relationship to lean on, or even a sister relationship that didn't feel like everyone was leaning on *her* all the time.

Marva stepped close, cupping Nina's cheek. "All will seem better in the morning," she said before kissing Nina's forehead. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Riley smiled at Nina. "Yes, tomorrow. But call me tonight if you just want to chat."

"I will," she said with a nod, really believing that she would reach out to Riley if she could no longer bear the silence or her thoughts tonight.

* * *

Nina was lying in bed two hours later, watching some old movie on the television, when her cell phone rang. She glanced over at the phone and saw her father's name on the screen. It was as if Jacoby had somehow known she needed her family tonight.

Nina smiled as she answered. "Hi, Dad. How are you?" She sat up, the pillows behind her back.

"Not too good since I found out my daughter's been lying to me."

Oh no, what had Daisy or Angie done now?

"Who's been lying to you and about what?"

"You and you know what."

Okay, she had to refrain from replying with a "what" because her father wouldn't like that. Instead she rephrased her question.

“I don’t understand what you’re saying, Dad. What’s going on?”

“How’s it possible that my oldest child is getting married and I didn’t know about it? Just who is giving you away and to what type of man? I don’t understand these young folks that don’t respect any kind of tradition. He couldn’t come ask me for your hand in marriage? Or maybe you didn’t want him to.”

CHAPTER TEN

“IT’S NOT WHAT you think, Dad,” she replied after the silence had stretched too long and she knew her father was getting antsy for a response.

“Well now, I think I can still read pretty well. Daisy brought me my papers when she went to the market for me the other day. And I sat out on the back porch like I always do and read them. Damn near choked on my coffee when I saw those pictures of you and some guy named Major Gold announcing your engagement. What kind of name is that for a man, anyway? And now you’re in that big city planning some fancy wedding when you know I’ve always told you girls that you should have a traditional African wedding. It’s what your grandparents always wanted.”

Damn, he was bringing up the African wedding.

After going on permanent disability leave from the hospital where he’d worked in the maintenance department seven years ago, Jacoby had developed a routine of fixing a pot of fresh-ground coffee every morning. He’d pour that coffee into the old, stained, white carafe with the faded flowers on the front and take it to the back porch with him. There he’d sit from eight to ten, listening to the birds and smelling the fresh morning air—at least that’s how he explained it.

She should be pissed at Daisy for taking him the paper with her picture on it, but then again, at least her sister was doing her part to help take care of him.

“It’s my job,” she said and then wanted to snatch the words back.

“You’re working as some man’s fiancée?”

That sounded awful.

“His family’s company is the one I came here to meet with. They’ve agreed to give me a six-week trial period.” She paused and took a deep breath. “In exchange for this

opportunity, I agreed to be the guy's fake fiancée. It's to help with a sales campaign they're running. That's all, Dad. It's not real."

And that somehow didn't make it sound better. She was sure her father would feel the same way, which was precisely why she hadn't told him these details.

"Why would you agree to such foolishness? Running around with some man you're not in love with, trying to fool the world into believing you're something that you're not."

"I need this deal to work, Dad." It was as simple as she could explain her reason for being there.

"Why? You were doing just fine here starting your business. You can't always put the cart before the horse, Nina. Growing a business takes time. I don't know why my girls always want everything with such urgency. Never want to take the time to see how things will turn out, just like..." His words trailed off and Nina tried not to feel the bite of the comparison he'd almost made between her and her mother.

"I'm not doing this just for me. I want you to be able to move into that facility we looked at a few months ago."

He was quiet for too long and she braced herself for an explosion of temper. Although it didn't happen frequently, Jacoby could yell and argue just like his daughters.

"If I wanted to go into that facility, I could. I've got some money saved up. You don't need to worry about me. I want you to be happy. That's all I've ever wanted was for all of my girls to be happy."

And by "all" of his girls, Nina knew he was including her mother. Lynn hadn't been happy with the man she'd married and the three children she'd given birth to. But that wasn't their fault. Nina only wished her father would finally come to that conclusion. She also wished that everything her mother had done didn't affect everything she was doing now. Nina needed to believe that if she wanted a relationship for herself it could flourish. But the demise of her parents' marriage had a

much bigger impact on her than she'd ever believed before she'd met Major.

“Your savings isn't enough, Dad. There are ongoing expenses and we have the portions of your medical bills that the insurance doesn't cover. I'm just trying to do what's necessary for my family. If relatives help each other, what evil can hurt them? You taught me that.” Tossing old proverbs back at her father might not be the best idea, but it was all she had. She wasn't going to let him talk her out of what she'd started.

“I don't want to be a burden,” he said quietly. “And I definitely don't want you degrading yourself in any way to help me.”

“I'm not. I promise. Major is a good guy and this is a wonderful opportunity for my business to get the exposure it needs.”

“If he's such a good guy, why can't he find himself a real wife?”

Nina didn't have an answer for that. In fact, hours after the conversation with her father while she lay in the dark bedroom, she let herself think about Major finding his real wife and how she would ultimately feel knowing it wasn't her.

Maybe if she were a different type of woman, one who hadn't been showed so early in life the devastation that failed love could bring. Perhaps then she could allow herself the dream of falling in love with a man like Major and him falling in love with her. But that barrier she'd had no choice but to build around her heart just wouldn't allow her to trust those types of thoughts. It wouldn't allow her to hope for something that just couldn't be.

* * *

“I wasn't expecting to see you here,” Major said when Nina was escorted into the den at his parents' house on Sunday evening.

He hadn't been avoiding her this time. Something had come up at Brand Integrated that had taken him all weekend to deal

with. But he'd wanted to see her.

Major had also been dealing with the engagement ring. Among all the other plans, that detail had somehow fallen to the wayside. It had taken six days for the ring Major wanted for Nina to be ready and it had been delivered to his apartment yesterday morning. He'd refused to address why he felt a jewelry designer was required for a fake engagement, but he wanted the ring on Nina's finger before their next public appearance.

Now, she was here, in the house he'd grown up in, looking around the room, one hand to her chest before she settled her gaze on him. "Sorry, still trying to catch my breath from that magnificent foyer I just walked through. That staircase is breathtaking, and I've never seen anything like the brown-and-gold marble floor." She gave her head a little shake and then cleared her throat, dropping her arm to her side. "But yeah, your mother invited me to dinner while we were at the fitting yesterday," she said, waving to Maurice and RJ who were sitting in chairs behind him.

"She was at the fitting?" Was that on the itinerary?

"Yes, Mom was at the fitting. Everything doesn't have to be on the itinerary, Major. It's all right to be impulsive sometimes," Riley said as she entered the room. The smile on his sister's face solidified the feeling of dread in the pit of Major's stomach. "We had a wonderful afternoon. The gowns were all so beautiful on Nina. We had a terrible time deciding on the final one."

RJ stood and went to the bar in the far corner of the room to fix himself a drink. "Why? It's not like there's really going to be a wedding."

The room went silent for a few seconds and Riley chimed in again.

"The name of the game is to get customers to buy into the whole process, which is why we have *Infinity* doing the six-page spread for June. The dress is the center of any wedding, so it made sense that we start there. Next week there will be coverage of our venue hunt and talking to artists about the

reception.” Riley, wearing a long, pleated green skirt and casual T-shirt, sat on the coal-colored couch, leaning back on its huge fluffy pillows.

RJ shook his head as he dropped ice cubes into his glass. “For all this effort, I sure hope this fake wedding campaign works to our advantage.”

“Oh come on, RJ. Man, you were just talking about the bump in orders in the casual wear sections,” Maurice said.

“I saw that, too,” Nina added, excitement clear in her voice. “Since the media has decided that, in addition to the wedding, they want to do stories on who I am and our business partnership, I took a chance and ran a digital ad on some of the fashion blogs and did numerous posts on my Instagram page, tagging fashion groups and other influencers.”

Major noted how lovely she looked in a long animal-print skirt. He wondered if she and Riley had conferred on their attire for tonight. Her plain tan T-shirt was also on the casual side, as well as the three-quarter dark denim jacket she wore over it. For a few seconds he wondered about the beads riding low on her hips beneath the clothes she wore.

“That was a great idea,” Maurice continued. “Customer service reported some mentions in their feedback box when we met with them Friday morning.”

“That’s in the area of the app. I’m talking about this engagement sham,” RJ continued before taking a swallow of the vodka he’d just poured.

Marva wouldn’t like that he was drinking before dinner, but Ron would defend his oldest son, claiming if a man worked hard he had every right to drink hard whenever he wanted to. As long as the work was done and above reproach—that was always the unspoken part of anything their father said to defend them. He could condone just about anything if RGF came first. A fact that had Major’s jaw tightening.

Nina moved around him to take a seat in one of three brightly colored and mildly disgusting salon chairs his mother had added to this space a couple years ago. He realized he

hadn't offered her a seat and had basically left her hanging in a room full of siblings. To compensate, he moved over to the chair as soon as she sat. "Can I get you something to drink while we wait for dinner?"

"That would be great. I'll have a—"

"Cranberry juice with lime," he said before she could get the words out, and the room went silent once more.

She smiled up at him and, in that moment, it didn't matter what his siblings were doing or saying behind him. Major smiled in return and went to the bar thinking of the ring in a black-velvet bag in his pocket. Before learning she'd been invited tonight, his plan had been to take it to her after dinner. Now he was thinking there didn't need to be any special moment or perfect words said; he should just give it to her. That idea was tabled when RJ moved to the side while Major reached for a glass.

"Ain't that cute, you know what she likes to drink," RJ jokingly whispered until Major elbowed him and continued.

He did know what she liked to drink and that she only liked extra cheese and onions on her pizza. When he kissed her neck and palmed her breasts, she melted in his arms. And on the two occasions he'd spent the night at her hotel over these past two weeks, he noticed she liked to sleep on the right side of the bed. But none of that meant anything—it couldn't.

"It's a drink, don't get it twisted," he replied, keeping his voice low, as well.

"I think I should be saying the same to you."

Major frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Where've you been spending the bulk of your evenings? At your place or at her hotel? And before you answer, think about why you really got that apartment for her. After that, think about how this is going to end when the six weeks are up."

"Dinner is served," Kemp, the Golds' longtime butler, announced just in time for Major to slip away from his brother and the assumptions he was making.

* * *

“You were very quiet during dinner,” Nina said later as they walked along one of the many stone pathways outside the main house.

He’d needed some air after sitting at the table listening to the talk about work and wedding plans. Major wasn’t usually the quiet one of the family—laid-back, but not quiet. Riley had taken that torch and held it for years. Now that she was in love, that seemed to have changed.

“I know, sorry. I’ve got a lot on my mind.”

“About the fake engagement? Because, really, I think that’s going well.”

She was right. The charade was going well. Desta’s last email to him asking that they keep up whatever they were doing had confirmed that. What had they been doing? In the last few weeks they’d been dating. That was the simplest way of putting it. Dinner out, even more dinners in, watching movies, laughing, touching, sleeping together—all the things a dating couple would do. All things that had tabloids abuzz with wedding speculation, which always included comments about Nina’s wedding gown. He was pretty sure they were doing a great job as far as the campaign was considered.

“It’s not that,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets as he walked.

It was a warm evening, not humid as it had been earlier. A summer thunderstorm had rolled through while they’d been inside having dinner, cooling the air down slightly.

“But whatever it is, you don’t want to talk about it.” She didn’t pose that as a question, just a simple statement she let hang in the air like bait.

After another few steps, Major gave up the pretense. He didn’t know what it was about her, but whenever they were together he was always changing his mind about something, doing more than he’d anticipated, adjusting. It wasn’t something he did often, there wasn’t usually a need. He knew

what he wanted and he did whatever it took to get it. Simple. But not this time—at least not when she was around.

“It’s business, but not RGF business,” he said, feeling a bit uneasy about what was on his mind.

“Okay.”

That one word didn’t seem like enough and, after a few seconds, he realized he wanted Nina to ask the question so that it wouldn’t seem like he was giving her the information. To the contrary, she seemed content to give him space to decide when and if he wanted to tell her more.

“I’m starting my own company. It’s called Brand Integrated Technologies.” And it might be your biggest competitor. For some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to say that part.

“Good for you,” she said when they took the curve that would lead to the garage or down farther to his mother’s gardens. “Starting a business can be a mixed bag—exciting and daunting.”

“You’re right about that.” He managed a light chuckle. “Launch day is a few weeks away, so we’re just ironing out some final things. But the last couple days, there’ve been some wrinkles.”

She nodded, her hair, which she’d left alone so that it lay straight down her back, swished a little with the movement.

“That’s always the case. And it probably won’t get better after launch. I know I was troubleshooting almost 24/7 in my first couple of weeks. But what got me through was knowing that it was all mine—my concept, my execution, everything. That motivated me to keep going and to get it right.”

Looking over at her, he saw the light in her eyes as she talked about her business. He’d seen it before and realized it was always there when they talked about work.

“My dream,” he said and only briefly wondered why he’d found it so easy to admit that to her. “I’ve wanted to do something like this for a long time and now that it’s happening, I just want it to be perfect.”

“Perfection is a myth.” There was an edge to her tone, but when she glanced over at him and caught him watching her, she smiled. “It’s designed to pull every bit of action and reaction from you until you’re either spinning in circles in search of more, or falling flat on your face from exhaustion. Completion is a more attainable goal.”

He thought about that for a second and eventually decided there might be some truth to her words. “Brand Integrated is a consulting and design firm. We’ll assess the technological needs of a fashion house and design unique software to facilitate their growth. Kind of what I’ve been doing at RGF, but on a larger scale.”

“That sounds amazing, Major. And there’s definitely a need. The shield program you’ve developed to seamlessly combine all aspects of RGF is phenomenal.”

So far so good. He gave her a tentative smile.

“Thanks. At Brand Integrated, all of that would be expanded. We have plans for more personalized technological development such as fabric generators, accessory hubs, data extrapolators and more. The idea is to get into a company and create a skeleton that will support the entire body of its work.”

“Yes! I can see that. There’s certainly a demand for that type of technological support, especially in the fashion industry. This way it lets designers focus on just the clothes. Are you targeting smaller houses? Because I feel like they’re the ones who could really benefit from programs like this. It would position them to be competitors.”

“Exactly,” he admitted. How was it that she got him so completely and so quickly?

A light drizzle of rain started to fall and Major led them toward the garage.

“So, anyway, the past couple days have been filled with little problems. I feel like it’s some type of conspiracy designed to make me think of turning back.”

“You getting cold feet, Major?” She chuckled. “I wouldn’t have expected that of you.”

Her tone was light but the fact that she had any type of expectations of him on a level outside of their fake engagement was a little surprising. And a lot intriguing.

They approached the garage. There was an automated keypad on the wall beside the door and he pressed the code. When the locks disengaged, he pulled the door open and held it so that she could walk past, giving off a hint of her perfume as she did—warm, floral, charming.

“So wait—you said accessory hubs. You have plans for programs that will accessorize? Sort of like my app?”

Major had just pulled the door closed behind him and was about to reach for the light switch when she asked that question.

“Ah, yeah, that’s in the portfolio. I mean, we wouldn’t contract with any vendors, we’re solely technology focused. But a simulator that takes the designer from sketch to prototype to runway, complete with suggested accessories, is on the menu.”

He found the switch for the lights and the fluorescent bulbs across the large, open ceiling came on, bringing thirty vintage cars and motorcycles into view.

“Oh,” she said and looked around. “Well, I guess a little healthy competition is good.”

Of course he’d known about this similarity since the day she’d pitched *At Your Service*; what he hadn’t wanted to consider was whether or not it would mean anything at the end of these six weeks.

Logically, she could go her own way with her company and continue doing business. He could do the same and they’d just be two people working in the industry, same as RGF’s competition with any other fashion house. But this was different—the deal he’d made with her, having Sunday dinner with her at his parents’ house, a seventy-five-thousand-dollar ring in his pocket, talking and walking with her on a quiet summer’s night... He couldn’t help but admit things were totally different now.

She walked farther into the space. “These are amazing. Whose are they?”

The place was set up almost like a runway with vehicles parked along the two sides of the structure, leaving a wide walkway in the center to be used for perusal.

“My Dad and RJ have always been into vintage cars. Another thing they have in common.”

“But you don’t like them?”

“I didn’t say that. They’re nice, but just not my thing. I’m more impressed by the room of control boards and digital infrastructure at my place.”

“I’m sure that’s impressive, but since I haven’t been invited to your place yet, I’ll just have to enjoy these cars.” She walked toward a sage-green Jaguar, running her hand over the shining hood. “My dad would get such a kick out of this. He loves cars.”

“I do, too. They get you from place to place.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “Ha.”

He chuckled.

It was so easy being with her, much easier than he’d ever thought it would be with another woman. Stacia was the only other woman he’d ever brought to his parents’ home and the whole time she’d been there that night, all she’d wanted to do was talk about the fashion house. Major’s technology ideas or anything about their future together had seemed to be off-limits.

“This one reminds me of *Grease*. You know, the movie with Danny Zuko and the T-Birds? Every time I see an old Thunderbird, I think about it.”

He was grateful for her question, disliking the turn his thoughts had taken. “No, I don’t know the movie, but I do know this car. It’s probably from the fifties or sixties as my Dad is fixated with that time frame. This one used to be my grandfather’s, I believe.”

They'd stopped by the red convertible and she walked down to the driver's side, leaning over to look at the steering wheel and the white-leather interior.

"Ever made out in one of these?"

The question was so off topic from what they'd been discussing. It was also more than a little arousing.

"If you mean any car, uh, yeah. A couple weeks ago with this really hot chick who came to one of our shows and took over the press conference." The memory of that day would forever be etched in his mind. How beautiful and amazing she'd looked while taking Morgana down a notch and then how sweet she'd tasted as he'd feasted on her in the back of the limo.

She blushed, heat fusing her high cheekbones to add a sexy flash of color to her face. A more enticing sight he'd never seen.

"I meant a T-Bird," she told him as she shook her head and looked away. "In the movie they go to this drive-in and all these cars are lined up. Only a handful of people are watching the screen, the rest are necking in the back of the car."

Her hand caressed the soft leather of the seat and then moved to the side of the door. Major watched that hand, growing hard at the thought of it running over him that way.

"Let's do it," he said.

Her head popped up from where she'd been looking at the sideview mirror. "Do what?"

"Do *it*." He nodded toward the backseat of the T-Bird. "In here."

She followed his gaze, a smile spreading across her face. "*It*? Now? Here?"

His dick was hard and the hint of intrigue in her tone was encouraging.

"Hell yeah. Right now. Right here."

He stood at the passenger side of the car and, for a few seconds, their gazes held, his heart beating just a little faster as he waited for her response.

She pursed her lips—sweet, suckable lips—and shrugged.
“Let’s do it!”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“SO ARE WE going for seduction here, or just hard-core reach-for-the-orgasm as quickly as possible?”

Her question only made him harder—if that was even possible. Major already felt as if he were going to explode from the force of the arousal or go into some type of coma from the most painful erection ever. They’d both opened the doors of the car and climbed inside. He dug out his wallet and found a condom, dropping it onto the seat between them as she watched. Then he reached for her, clasping his hand at the back of her head and pulling her close. She licked her lips and he parted his, moving in closer, prepared to answer her question.

“I need to be inside you right now,” he whispered, the words rough.

“Say no more.” She pushed him back on the seat and undid his belt and the snap of his jeans.

He reached for the jacket, pushing it off her shoulders and down her arms. She paused so that he could pull it off and it fell to the floor. The zipper to his jeans made a loud sound as she eased it down, her fingers brushing over his thick erection just like the first day they’d met. Without wasting a second, she reached through the slit of his boxers and wrapped her hands around his dick, pulling his full length out.

The groan that rumbled in his chest and ripped through his throat was savage. Her hands were too warm around him, rubbing along his skin and sending rivulets of pleasure throughout his body.

“You said you want to be inside me.” Her voice was a throaty whisper as she lowered her body to fit between his spread legs.

She wasn’t going to... He would never make it if she did. When her head was bent over his groin, Major let his head fall

back, his eyes closing slowly. She was going to and he was definitely going to explode.

The moment her mouth closed over the head of his dick, his hips jutted forward, his hands falling first to the seat where his fingers dug into the upholstery. As her tongue circled his tip, he moved his hands, burying them in her hair.

“I’m gonna take you all the way inside,” she whispered, her breath warm and teasing over him.

He simply nodded in agreement, rubbing his fingers along her scalp before wrapping her hair around his hand in preparation. There was an explosion—not the one he’d been predicting—but another one, as sparks burst behind his closed lids. She had one hand on his balls, massaging them until they tingled. The other hand was wrapped around the base of his dick as she held him upright and lowered her mouth down his length.

Gasping for air—that’s the sensation he first felt. It was immediately followed by an insatiable thirst for more. He applied light pressure to the back of her head, his body aching to be fully ensconced in her. The tip of his dick touched the back of her throat and air burst from his lungs, coming through his mouth in a ragged moan.

He cursed and his fingers tightened in her hair, somewhere in the back of his mind, cautioning against hurting her. She lifted her head, dragging her tongue along the underside of his erection, causing it to jerk and release pre-cum that she immediately licked away.

“I didn’t imagine.” The words were rough and tumbled free of his thoughts. He hadn’t imagined being inside her this way. Thrusting in and out of her pussy was one level; it was erotic and good as hell. But this, being drenched in the heat of her mouth, touched by the stroke of her tongue, it was more and it was intense, pulling him in a direction he’d never thought he’d go.

She eased her head down again, until she was actively sucking him, applying pressure so that he felt as if she might

actually drain his release from him the second he came. But before she could do that, she pulled her mouth away.

“I need more,” she said through panting breaths. “Now.”

Without wasting another second, Major reached for the condom. She took it from him, ripped the packet open and sheathed him. Major pushed her skirt up around her waist, feeling those colorful beads moments before he ripped the flimsy strings of the thong she wore straight from her hips.

“You keep destroying my underwear,” she said as she climbed on top to straddle him.

He cupped her ass cheeks, kneading them as she positioned herself over him and then, when she'd aimed his tip at her center, he pressed her down until she was completely impaled. “I'll buy you more,” he groaned, and she moaned as she settled over him.

The only other sound throughout the garage was that of their skin slapping together. He groaned as he dropped his face into her cleavage and she screamed as she cupped the back of his head and bounced on top of him. Minutes later her thighs tightened around his waist and his fingers gripped her ass harder.

“Yessssss,” she moaned.

“Yes!” He followed her lead, gasping as his release pulsed and poured into the condom.

For endless moments they just sat there, both struggling to catch a breath. She leaned forward with her hands on his chest, her head resting on his shoulder. Major turned his face to hers, letting his chin rest against her forehead as thoughts flailed around in his mind.

What was he doing? Why was this happening? And when had it happened—when had this arrangement started to feel like so much more?

He'd opened up to her about his business, something he hadn't done with anyone else besides his twin, and he wanted her to feel free to do the same with him. To tell her his secrets and know that they were safe with him, to come to him when

she was feeling conflicted, worried, even happy. This was a new feeling, an eerie and confusing one, and he didn't know what to do with it.

His hand slid from where he'd been rubbing it up and down her back, until he could reach his pants and fumble to get his hand into the front pocket. The black-velvet bag almost slipped from his fingers to fall on the leather-covered seat, but he held on to it, bringing it up to his other hand. Her eyes were still closed, lips slightly parted as her panting began to slow.

With the fingers of one hand, Major pulled the strings of the pouch apart and reached inside to pull out the ring. He dropped the bag to the seat and grasped for her left hand.

“What...not yet—” she started to say and then stopped as she pulled back to look at what he was doing.

Major slid the ring slowly onto her third finger and frowned as he watched her hand shake. When the ring was on and she didn't speak, just stared down at it, he did the same, watching the sparkle of the four-carat, emerald-cut diamond set in platinum with tapered baguette side stones. That was the complete description the jeweler had given him, but all Major saw as he looked down at her slender fingers and manicured nails was a memory.

His gaze moved up to her face. When he saw that she was still staring down at the ring, he lifted a hand to touch his finger to her chin and tilted her head up. There was a bit of confusion in her eyes, but a lot of light, like a shield had been raised. Warmth spread in the center of his chest and one side of his mouth lifted in a smile.

“You can't be engaged without a ring,” he said while his throat felt tight and his hand still shook a little while holding hers.

She smiled, a slow and dazzling smile that reached into his chest and squeezed so tight he struggled to breathe.

“And this is one beautiful ring,” she said, her voice hitching on the last words.

“I would say for a beautiful woman, but that seems so cliché and there’s nothing cliché about you, Nina. Not one single thing.” This was the part where he should kiss her. And damn he wanted to. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and drown in her kiss, feel the warmth of her surrounding him until all his cares and worries disappeared and there was just her.

She looked like she wanted to say something or to do something. Their gazes held but hesitancy hung between them like a blockade.

“I think I like doing it in the backseat of a T-Bird,” she said playfully, then eased her left hand away from his and lifted it into the air to wiggle her fingers. “You get great gifts!”

Major chuckled, part of him appreciating the way she’d broken that uncomfortable tension between them, another part wishing the moment would have ended differently.

“I like doing it in the backseat of a T-Bird with you.”

* * *

Two hours later Nina was at Major’s penthouse, stepping out of his shower. If her legs weren’t so sore from their second backseat sexcapade and her mind wasn’t filled with new questions about the huge diamond on her finger and the foreign emotions sifting through her soul, she might have been overwhelmed by being here in Major’s private space.

“Here, let me help,” he said when he stepped out behind her.

She’d already grabbed a towel from the shelf near the dual vanity but had been holding it in her hands while she struggled to get a hold on what was happening. And letting the water drip from her naked body pool onto the heated gray-slate floor.

Major reached for another towel and wrapped it around her, turning her to face him when he was done.

“I suppose you’ll want me to dry you off in return.” It was easier to joke than to put words to what she was really feeling.

“Of course. That’s how this works,” he said and proceeded to move the towel over her body. He eased the soft, fluffy material along her arms, over and under her breasts and down her stomach.

“These beads are going to be the death of me,” he said while rubbing the towel past her hips, down and between her thighs.

“I’ve got some aunts back in Sierra Leone who could probably use their skills to add death as a result of looking at the beads. Or, most likely, loss of a limb, impotence or something along those lines.”

He hissed and pulled back, looking up at her from where he’d knelt down with a horrified expression. “That’s not funny.”

She chuckled. She couldn’t help it. He was adorable when he was scared. “Yeah, it is.”

He shook his head and eased the towel between her legs, lifting one off the floor to rub down to her feet, then up again. He did the same with the other and before he stood, eased the towel between her legs taking special care to dry her there.

“Your turn,” she said when those stirrings of desire started to buzz.

How could she be so turned on by him, so frequently and so soon? The tryst in his father’s vintage car was different from the limo on so many levels she didn’t know where to begin. Perhaps at the part where she was certain his family would despise her if they knew she’d just disrespected their dinner invitation in such a way.

The moment he stood to his full six-two-and-a-half inches stark naked in front of her, she knew that what she was feeling had nothing to do with what his family thought of her and everything to do with him. Drops of water still rolled over his tawny-hued skin and he stared down at her with dark brown eyes that held more warmth than any she’d ever seen.

She raised the towel and rubbed his chest then moved down each of his arms before returning to his torso, all while that

diamond on her left hand sparkled like a bright reminder of what this could never be.

“I don’t think this was in either of our job descriptions,” she said, her voice hollow to her own ears. They weren’t supposed to be doing any of this and yet they were doing it, and she suspected they were doing it as well as any real couple.

He caught her hands just as she was about to drag the towel past his waist. “That’s because there’s really no accurate way to describe you.”

And what exactly was that supposed to mean?

Maybe he was just as confused as she was about what was happening between them, or what she thought might be happening. She’d never felt this way before and wasn’t sure if she was ready to take it from lust to love, but knew for certain it was more than what their fake scenario called for.

“Yes, that’s me.” She dabbed the towel over his hips. “The indescribable fake fiancée.” Reminding herself that keeping things light between them was for the best, she bent down to dry his thighs—strong and fit—then his calves and his feet, which were a lot prettier than she’d imagined. Coming up again, she rubbed the towel over what could arguably be one of the best parts of him. To say this part of Major felt the same way about her might have been an understatement if it hadn’t begun to stiffen at her ministrations.

He took her by the shoulders and pulled her up to stand in front of him. “Come on, Fake Fiancée. Let’s get ready for bed.”

She hadn’t realized she’d frowned until he asked, “Whoa, what’s that look for? You don’t want to sleep with me in my bed? Should we have gone back to your apartment instead?”

“Oh no, that’s not it.” In fact, she’d been flattered when he’d announced during the drive from his parents’ house that they would be coming to his place. She’d refused to ask why he hadn’t brought her here before, chalking it up to their little charade instead of any other personal reason he might not want her there.

He looked at her strangely, a brow lifting in question. “Then what is it?”

“I’m hungry,” she said, because it was true and because she wasn’t sure what she was feeling for him at this moment. Or what he was really feeling for her.

“I mean no offense to your mother’s dinner. It was a wonderful spread, but I’m used to a little more than soup, salad and the smallest portions of beef rib tips and asparagus that I’ve ever seen.”

That’s right, insult his mother instead of telling him she was afraid she was really falling for him.

When he threw back his head and laughed, Nina relaxed. Laughter was definitely better than his ordering her to get dressed and get out.

“I planned to wait until you were asleep before sneaking into the kitchen to grab something else to eat.”

It was her turn to laugh. “Why didn’t you say something? I thought that’s the way your family was used to eating, so I didn’t want to comment.”

“My mother doesn’t cook, so dinners are always catered. The only time we get loads of food is on Thanksgiving and Christmas. My father says that’s the best time of the year.”

He continued to laugh while they finished with the towels and dropped them into the hamper by the door.

“You go on into the bedroom and find something to sleep in. I mean, I’m good with you staying just the way you are, but I’m guessing you’d like to be dressed to eat.”

They were still naked. Yet they’d been standing there talking as if they showered and talked in the nude every day.

“Oh, are you going to order something?”

“No. I’m going to cook us something.”

“You cook?”

She knew she was frowning this time because she couldn’t believe that Major was good in the kitchen.

As it turned out, twenty minutes later, when they were sitting on stools in his kitchen, he could bake a homemade pizza that tasted just as good as any pizzeria she'd ever been to, if not better.

"What's on this?" she asked as she took another bite.

"Alfredo sauce, ricotta and mozzarella cheeses, plenty of black pepper and oregano."

"It's delicious," she said over the mouthful, and wasn't lying. "Where'd you learn how to cook if your mother hires caterers?"

"In college. I didn't like going out much, so I figured it was best to not starve for four years."

"Why didn't you like to go out?"

He hesitated, took another bite of his pizza, chewed and then used a napkin to wipe his mouth.

Nina hadn't realized she was waiting for his response until he looked at her and shook his head.

"It's not such a big deal now since I've learned how to deal with it. But it was because of a girl."

Never in a million years would she have guessed he'd say that. "What? A girl had you holed up in your dorm for four years?"

"Not exactly. It was during my sophomore year. I thought it was love. Stacia Hudgins poured it on real thick, was talking marriage, kids, the whole package. Come to find out she and her parents had it all set up. They knew who I was, who my family was, and they wanted in. A fake pregnancy scare, lots of tears and then a threat of scandal, and it was over by the time I came home for the summer. That's when I knew relationships weren't for me."

Nina chewed another bite all the while thinking she'd like to have been at school with Stacia Hudgins so she could serve the girl a good dose of "get a life." Or, as Nina and her sisters would have called it, "whoop ass."

“Yeah, I’m not into the ‘happy-ever-after’ thing, either.” She was almost positive that was still true. “But not because of any guy in particular. My culprit was my mother. She left when I was twelve. Had enough of the family life and decided there was something better away from the home she’d built. Left my dad with three girls and a broken heart that he’s still nursing. Probably why he’s gotten so sick, but I guess that’s not medically possible.”

“Broken heart” had likely never been listed on anybody’s death certificate.

“Your father has COPD, right?”

She nodded. “Yes. It wasn’t so bad at first, but seven years ago he had to stop working and go on disability because it had gotten to the severe point. He’s weak most of the time, has intermittent swelling in his legs and ankles, and gets confused easily. The confusion isn’t a symptom of COPD, I think it’s more from loneliness. Anyway, my sisters and I have been taking care of him up to this point, but the doctor suggested he might need more assistance to make sure he’s taking his medications and to help him do some of the daily getting around.”

It had been a hard conversation to have as a family, but they’d had it. Her father didn’t want to be a burden to his children, insisting he could take care of his own arrangements when the time came.

“That’s a tough situation,” Major said. “Do you have a facility in mind?”

“We’ve visited a few and there’s one that he favors.” She drank from the glass of wine he’d poured for her. “This boost in business from partnering with RGF will be just what I need to get him into the care home.”

She took another bite of pizza because she’d had enough of talking about herself.

“Maybe I could help. I can make some calls, maybe find a place for your father here in New York.” When she only stared at him, he cleared his throat and continued, “I mean, that way

you'll be close to two of the biggest fashion houses in the States, stylists, models and plenty of other industry people that could talk up your app and provide endorsements."

"But I live in York. That's where my family and everything I know is." That was the truth, but there was suddenly something sad about the way it sounded.

"Right," he said with a curt nod and a quick smile. "If you're done, we should clean this up and get to bed."

"Right. I can take care of the mess since you cooked."

"Nonsense, we'll do it together."

Like a couple did things together. Nina didn't say that but went along with his suggestion until the kitchen was clean and they headed off to bed...to Major's bed where she would lie all night wondering if he was the man to make her think twice about happy-ever-after.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE WINE-COLORED tulle was even more beautiful as it swayed around them on the dance floor. With Major's arms wrapped securely around her waist, Nina's arms remained locked at his neck as they danced. The screens positioned around the banquet room, having earlier displayed a lovely video of their childhood years all the way up to their engagement party, now showed them dancing. Even the people at the back of the four-hundred-seat room could see them close-up.

A slow song played, one that was a favorite of theirs. But she couldn't hear the lyrics. She just swayed to the rhythm and stared up into his face, remembering the exact moment that she'd agreed to become Mrs. Major Gold.

They danced until the scene changed and she was once again walking through the doors of the RGF building, with a determined smile on her face as she approached the now familiar pretty receptionist with the coal-black hair.

"Good morning, Mrs. Gold. Are you here to see your husband?"

The question startled her and Nina looked down to see the huge emerald-cut diamond on her ring finger.

"Uh, no. I'm actually here to work. I need to check in with a few vendors and make sure that products are being shipped on time." She continued to talk even though the woman was frowning at her. "There were a couple complaints on the website and I need to get things ironed out."

"I don't understand. Maybe you want to report some issues with the company site to your husband?"

"No. I want to take care of the issues—they're with my company, At Your Service."

The woman was shaking her head, her silky hair moving from side to side. "You're welcome to go see your husband. But I've never heard of At Your Service..."

Nina's eyes opened wide into a room filled with slashes of moonlight coming through the partially closed blinds. She pressed a hand to her chest, her heart beating wildly. A few blinks later and she swallowed hard, her gaze falling on the nightstand beside the bed where a clock flashed bright white numbers: 3:54. Beside the clock was her phone, plugged into its charger. She'd put it there just before joining Major in the shower.

She was at Major's penthouse... He'd fixed her pizza...

A sigh of relief rushed from her as she realized it had only been a dream. The wedding, going to RGF...it was all a dream. A strange and alarming dream that now had her sitting up in the bed.

The sheet slid to her waist and she rubbed her hands over her face. That dream was strange and it left her feeling even stranger. Full of emotion and empty at the same time. But it wasn't real, nothing about being with Major was real, even this moment.

She glanced over her shoulder to see him sleeping. One arm was thrown above his head while the other lay across his bare stomach. The sheet was riding dangerously close to revealing what she already knew was a delicious part of him.

He seemed real.

Leaning back and propping herself up on one elbow, she stared down at him. He had thick eyebrows that she wished she had. Hers were thin and most times she penciled them in. His nose was straight, wide and proportional with his face, his squared jaw and average ears. Her gaze fell on his lips and her own parted. They were usually warm when they met hers. And soft. Did men like being told they had soft lips?

She was leaning over before she thought better of the action. But when her lips hovered just seconds away from his, Major's eyes opened, and she froze.

His response was to move the arm that had been resting over his abs, snake it around her waist and pull her on top of

him. She licked his bottom lip as his hands splayed over her ass. Then her tongue stroked his top lip. Their gazes held.

He parted his lips slightly, just enough so that his tongue inched out, and she pounced, sucking it deep into her mouth. He groaned and pressed her bare mound into his thickening erection. Only the thin sheet separated them, but she sucked on his tongue like it was his dick, and desire pierced through her, falling with clever accuracy in her center. She spread her legs so that she was now straddling him, rubbing her pussy over the sheet. He thrust his hips up to meet hers, his hands moving upward to bury themselves in her hair.

He pulled her back then, her mouth reluctantly releasing him. For endless moments, they just stared at each other.

She didn't know what he was thinking. The only thing running through her mind right now was that this felt real. From the throbbing in her center to the tightening in her chest, as she continued to stare down at him, it felt very real.

"I don't know what this is," he said, his voice cracking slightly.

"Neither do I," she admitted. "But I don't want it to stop."

It was an admission she hadn't planned to make. That made sense because she hadn't planned for him.

In response, he pulled her head down and took her mouth in a kiss that was as achingly slow and sweet as it was deliciously tempting and erotic.

He rolled her over and kicked the sheets aside before reaching over her to the nightstand and pulling open the top drawer. He tossed the condom to her and she caught it, ripping the paper and retrieving the latex. Coming up on his knees, he whispered in a hungry voice, "Put it on."

She sat up, rubbing her hand along his thick length as her mouth watered. She couldn't resist dipping her head and taking him in deep.

"Dammit," he cursed loudly. "You're killing me."

And he had awakened an insatiable need in her.

With deep suction, she slid her mouth from his base to his tip before easing down once more. This had never been a favorite of hers during sex. It was more intimate than she'd ever wanted to be with anyone else, but she loved the taste of him. Loved the feel of him in her mouth, pressing at the back of her throat, sliding over her tongue and easing past her lips.

“Put it on. Now!”

She let him slip from her mouth with a popping sound and inched the condom on until he was covered. He pushed her back onto the pillows before leaning his head down to drag his tongue along the first row of beads at her waist.

“Yesssss.” She let her hands fall to his head. He captured the beads between his teeth and lifted his head slightly to watch her as she looked down at him.

With a quick yank he ripped the beads free. At any other time, with someone different, this may have upset her. Tonight, coupled with the roller coaster of emotions she'd been feeling about him, the touch of the beads that empowered her sensuality rolling over her skin mixed with the passion swirling between them and the anticipation of more, caused her to come with a fierceness that left her breathless and trembling. Before she could recuperate, he'd moved up the length of her and was inside her, thrusting wildly.

The rush of sensations swirled through Nina like a tornado, twisting and hitting every part of her, even the part she'd never wanted to be touched. When he leaned forward, flattening his hands on either side of her to brace himself, her hands pressed against his chest. Her mouth opened as if she were going to say something. Tell him to stop because she felt overwhelmed with sensation and emotion? Or beg him to continue because it all felt so damn good?

It felt real. Too real.

She raised her legs and wrapped them around him, locking them in place.

“You,” he whispered before dropping his head to take her mouth. She slid her arms from his chest to cup his face and

hold him to her, dragging her tongue over his, tilting her head to take the kiss deeper.

You. The one word echoed in her mind. *You.* Him. It was him. This warm feeling spreading throughout her chest was all because of *him*.

On a ragged moan, he pulled his mouth from hers as he moved in and out of her at a slower pace. The change was fast and intense, pleasure now building with his strokes in a slow, methodical rhythm that had her biting her bottom lip and dropping her arms to the bed and gripping the sheets. He eased over her again, this time scooping his arms beneath her to hold her firmly to him. His lips were right next to her ear as he thrust into her repeatedly. She wrapped her arms around him, holding him just as tightly as he was holding her, as if they were each afraid to let go.

“I want you, Nina.” He whispered those words over and over again.

She closed her eyes tight, savoring every syllable. “I want you, too.” It was a quiet admission, but an admission nonetheless. And it was real—his comment, her response, it was all real.

They came together in a storm of moans and sighs, bodies trembling and pressing together as if being any other way was not an option.

* * *

By Wednesday afternoon the following week Major was in a pretty foul mood.

In a month, Brand Integrated would go public and he still hadn't told the rest of his family that he was significantly cutting his time at RGF and branching out on his own. The fake fiancée proposal would also be over. Desta had just sent an updated itinerary for the last activities he and Nina would complete together.

He sat back in his desk chair, moving his feet so the chair would spin slowly while he stared out the wall of windows in

his office. With his hands clasped and resting on his lap, his mind whirled with the most pressing issues in his life at the moment. The fact that there should only be one pressing issue didn't escape his notice.

But Nina Fuller was intertwined in his every thought in a way that he hadn't anticipated. She'd been at his place, in his bed, since attending her first Gold family dinner. At night they fell asleep, cuddled in his bed, and in the morning, they awoke and moved around his bedroom and bathroom like a couple getting ready for work.

Each day had become a repeat of wake up, sex somewhere between the bedroom and bathroom, traveling to work together, then home again in the evening.

Home.

That's what it'd felt like for the past week and a half, until now, it seemed permanent.

He spun the chair until he was once again facing his desk and could see the dual monitors with the business plan for Brand Integrated on one and the services offered by At Your Service on the other. Nina had pointed out what he'd already known and what had been floating in the back of his mind since before their first meeting.

The accessory hub Brand Integrated would offer was very similar to what her app provided. The only difference—and the one thing Major had repeatedly reminded himself of—was that his company did not retain vendors, nor did it plan to sell anything directly to the consumer. Their product—software and consultation services—was exclusively designed to benefit fashion houses.

But the similarity was still there, and it had been nagging at him for days. Their businesses were poised to clash big-time. His brow furrowed with the thought and he let out a little huff as he once again searched for a viable solution. There had to be one. There had to be a way for his business to coexist with hers without compromise or confusion, and he needed to find it before their planned breakup.

Or it could be the reason for the breakup. That thought came with a sharp sting to the center of his chest as he stopped moving in the chair and his frown deepened. Desta still hadn't outlined what the final argument would be. The end of their engagement was coming quickly and he had no idea what it would be like. So what if it was the realization that their businesses would clash? Did that make sense? Was it believable? He sighed at the irony. It was the one thing that had come of their time together that was actually the truth.

A knock at the door jolted him out of his thoughts just as that pain in his chest started to spread.

"Hey, what's up? Got a minute?" RJ opened the door without consent and walked in talking. He hiked up his slacks and took a seat in one of the chairs across from Major's desk. "I need you to do something for me. You and Nina."

His brother had his full attention the moment he mentioned her name.

"What?"

"Riley wants to meet with Dad and me in an hour at a proposed location for this expansion idea she's got," RJ said.

Deciding it was probably best for the moment to wrap his mind around something else, Major sat forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "Yeah, she copied me and Maurice on an email she sent earlier this week outlining her proposal. Her research and data pan out. An RGF-exclusive storefront in the city is a good idea. Lots of other fashion houses have one, especially overseas."

"Look, I'm not totally opposed to the idea. So, Riley doesn't need you to be her cheerleader," RJ said with a sigh.

"That may be the one thing our sister has never needed. She's always been capable of being her own biggest supporter, which is probably why she was able to fall in love with the family enemy and not bat an eye when we approached her about it." Why his thoughts always returned to Riley and her relationship with Chaz, Major didn't know. Perhaps he

admired the fact that she'd found love, even though he didn't believe in the concept himself.

"Ugh, that's the last thing I want to talk about."

Major chuckled, more so to keep his mind from drifting from the word *love* to the woman who would soon be meeting him in his office to go home. Or, rather, to his apartment.

"Fine, then what do you want, man? You come barging into my office at the end of the day like it's some big emergency."

"It is." RJ leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I was supposed to go to this trade show tonight to check out some new vendors for the Paris and Milan Fashion Weeks coming up, but now I can't go, so I'd like you and Nina to go instead."

"Isn't that the production department's responsibility? And did you say you want Nina to go?"

"Riley's not the only one thinking about taking RGF to the next level. I've had some thoughts about expanding in the area of accessories. We already have purses and luggage. Why not create a full line, accessorize our customers from head to toe? So, yeah, I've been looking into Nina's business a little more and watching the numbers from our temporary collaboration closely. If anybody should be checking out new vendors and giving her thoughts on specific items for the company, I think it should be her."

"Wait, you weren't even certain making this temporary arrangement with Nina was a good idea. What changed your mind?"

"You're right. I wasn't sure about her in the beginning because she was some woman from Pennsylvania who we'd never heard of until you agreed to meet with her and she presented this new app that would tap into our existing and new customer base. She had no experience with large fashion houses. So, yes, I was skeptical." RJ took a breath and shook his head. "And I definitely didn't think she was a good pick for this marketing plan. Hell, I wasn't even certain this marketing plan was a good idea on its own."

That was something Major could agree with. The moment Desta and Riley had come to him with the idea, he'd been doubtful and had wanted to beg off, to push it onto Maurice who would have loved spending a few weeks in the company of some random woman. But then he'd thought about the fact that he was planning to jump ship on RGF and figured the least he could do was submit to his family, and this company, one more time. His father would appreciate that in the end.

"But I've seen her at the office every day, working diligently, and I've heard of how she's been handling the press," RJ continued. "Then, after seeing the two of you together at Mom and Dad's house, I changed my mind."

RJ Gold never changed his mind. Ever. He was a decisive man with a proven track record in everything from commanding the sales force at RGF to building his own unique brand as the next head of the company. He was a debonair young businessman and unapologetic bachelor.

"It's her job, and that was just dinner." Major didn't believe these words so he only half expected his brother to believe them.

RJ laughed. "Yeah, keep telling yourself that. Look, here's the info and your passes. You, Nina and I will grab some lunch tomorrow and we can talk about her thoughts."

Major accepted the envelope RJ had stood to hand him. "She doesn't work here. I mean, she has her own company, and her own goals. Do you really think we should have her making decisions on behalf of the company?"

"You're going to be with her," RJ said. "And something tells me she's gonna be around long after this fake scheme you've got going. So get yourself together, stop brooding, put your game face on. Do all that, grab your woman and get to that show."

RJ walked out the same way he'd come in: quick, unannounced, without taking any questions, comments or concerns.

“She’s not my woman,” Major mumbled into the quiet office as he sat back in his chair once more.

Was she?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“LOOK AT THIS PICTURE! He’s with another woman and this was just last week,” Daisy said, her lips pursed, head tilted as she stared at Nina through the computer screen.

Nina had been on this Skype call with her sisters for approximately six minutes and already her temples throbbed with an incoming migraine.

“This woman looks like a model. There was a fashion show that day and I was there,” Nina said as she glanced at the tabloid Angie so helpfully held close to the camera for her to see.

She remembered the beige outfit Major had worn that day and the model. Of course, the girl, wearing a very short skirt and a gold-lamé blouse that barely covered her tits with its plunging neckline, had draped her slim body over Major’s shoulder as if she were somehow physically attached to him.

“You were there but he was taking pictures with her? I thought you were supposed to be his arm candy for six weeks.” Angie, the matter-of-fact sister, dropped the paper and stared pointedly through the screen.

How rude would it be if she slammed the laptop closed and went on about her business?

“That’s pretty rude of him. But then again, he is the Fashion House Playboy,” Daisy quipped.

“Is there a point to this conversation?” Nina asked because she did have other things to do. And none of those things included thinking about Major leaving her for another woman. Even though he’d have to actually be with her to leave her. And he wasn’t... Or, rather, they weren’t really together.

“Aren’t you bothered by this?” Angie asked.

“Why should I be? This was a business arrangement and it’s almost over.” In seventeen days.

“What were you doing while he was feeling up on this model?” Daisy asked.

“I was probably with his brother, Maurice, or seated in the audience where the reporters could see me—or rather, Major’s fiancée. Look, if you two don’t have anything better to do, I do have work to take care of.”

“Work? That looks like a new dress you’re wearing. And by the looks of the pictures you’re showing up in with him, it seems like you’re living one big shopping spree,” Angie said.

“And going to lavish restaurants and Broadway shows. I read somewhere that you even met Michelle Obama at one of her appearances in the city. You’re having the best time there and it’s not fair!” Daisy whined.

“First, I got both of you a signed book from Michelle Obama when I met her. And I am working. The app is doing great numbers for me and for RGF. I’m certain they’re going to extend a formal contract for me to keep working with them at the end of the six weeks.” She huffed. “Besides all of that, the press I’m getting personally as a result of this business deal will have my name firmly set within the industry. And from there I’ll be able to move on to other companies. But I’ll be home soon and then we can get Dad moved into the assisted-living facility and all of our lives will get a little easier.”

That had been the plan from the start. So why did saying it aloud now make her feel unsettled?

“Are you really coming back here after the six weeks are up?” Angie asked.

“Of course I am. Why would you ask me that?”

Daisy rolled her eyes. “Because you look like you’re having the time of your life.”

Angie elbowed her sister. “Because you look like you might be taking this business a little more personally than you planned.”

“Knock, knock.” Nina looked up from the screen to see Major standing in the doorway. “Hey, we’ve got a change of plans for this evening. You ready to go?”

“Yeah. I’m done here, so we can go now,” she replied and then looked back to the screen. “I’ll call you tomorrow.” She hurriedly disconnected the chat and closed her laptop.

“You okay? Did I interrupt something?” he asked as he entered the office.

She shook her head, trying to clear it of her sisters’ accusations and the picture of him and that model that still floated there.

“No. Nothing. Just my sisters calling with an update.”

“Oh yeah, how’s your dad doing?”

“He’s good.” She stood and grabbed her purse, adding, “He has a doctor’s appointment in the morning and Angie’s going to take him, so I’ll check in with her tomorrow afternoon to see how that goes.”

“I had my assistant get a list of all the facilities in York and two of them are owned by people my dad’s done business with at some point. I wanted to run it by you first, but if you approve, I could reach out to them and see if we can get your dad in sooner and without any big payments on your behalf.”

She put her purse strap on her shoulder, slipped her laptop into her bag and stepped around the desk. Coming to a stop in front of him, she looked up in surprise. “What? You would get my dad into a facility for me?”

“Yeah, I want to help you in any way I can. You want your father to be well taken care of and you said you didn’t plan to move to New York, so I found some places in York.”

He was talking as if he’d just told her he’d selected something off the menu for them to eat. His tone was nonchalant as he stood with one hand in his pocket. He reached out the other hand to tuck some strands of hair that had escaped her messy bun back behind her ear.

“Thanks,” she managed to finally say. “I mean...really. You didn’t have to do that, but thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “I wanted to do it.”

“But why? You didn’t have to take time out of your busy schedule or ask Landra to do that. It’s not your responsibility. But, again, I really appreciate you doing it.” She smiled at him then because she wasn’t sure what else to do. Part of her wanted to throw her arms around him and hug him tight, but she wasn’t going to do that. Since her admission that night after the family dinner that she wanted him, and the subsequent nights she’d spent in his arms, she’d been trying to rein in her emotions where he was concerned.

“This is why,” he said, tracing a finger along her cheek and down below her lips. “Because I like seeing you smile. And when you talk about taking care of your dad, you always frown with the stress of it.”

And now she thought she might break with the force of her growing feelings for this man.

“What’s the change in plans?” she asked when the silence stretched between them.

He dropped his hand and pulled an envelope from the inside pocket of his suit jacket. “Accessory trade show at the Javits Center. RJ needs us to go and check it out. He specifically wants your input on new vendors.”

RJ. The one who hadn’t been sure of her after their first meeting in the conference room.

“Sure. I’d love to provide input. Let’s go.” Now this, she could do. Work. Focus on her company and her most prominent client so far. The rest—her sisters, the way that picture had made her feel and the subsequent reaction of Major’s soft touch and sweet words—she could deal with later.

* * *

The convention center was full of booths with vendors displaying everything from earrings to nose piercings, belts to custom-designed hats and patterned socks.

“This is going to be great,” Nina said, pulling her phone out of her purse. “I want to take some pictures. You said Major

wanted to get my thoughts on items for the upcoming shows overseas? Do you know if he's looking for anything specific?"

From the moment he'd mentioned this show, her spirits seemed to have lifted. When Major had walked into her office earlier, he'd been afraid something had happened to her father because she'd looked so distressed. He'd been glad to share his news about assisting in her facility search, even though it was in York and not here in the city...with him.

"He's actually looking for two things—items for the upcoming shows and your thoughts on specific pieces."

"Why specific pieces? Does he need a gift for someone? Does RJ have a girlfriend?"

He chuckled as they moved further into the exhibit hall. "Not hardly. The very last thing RJ's interested in is a girlfriend or any other type of commitment other than the company."

"Is that true of all the Gold men? Because Maurice makes it known he loves his player status and isn't looking to stop anytime soon. And you..."

Her words drifted off, but he filled in the blanks.

"I've been focused on Brand Integrated and making my personal mark on the fashion industry."

"Everyone has a reason," she said with a shrug. "I have mine."

She didn't want to be abandoned again. A completely understandable reason, but one that made him much sadder than he thought anything ever could.

"Anyway, no, RJ's other reason for this outing is based on this preliminary idea he has about adding a full accessory line to RGF."

"Oh." She took a few steps farther before stopping at an earring vendor. She picked up a set of gold hoops that were almost as big as her hand. There were flecks of sapphire around each hoop and she held them up, staring, he presumed, at the color in the light.

“A full accessory line will eliminate the need for an app like mine.” She put the earrings down and continued walking.

“It’s not my idea,” he said because he felt the need to defend himself against the suddenly bland tone of her voice.

She waved a hand and crossed in front of him to get to another table. This one had more earrings, but these were made with feathers. He watched, entranced by her fingers as they moved lightly over a deep burgundy feather earring.

“It’s a smart idea,” she said, moving to investigate another pair of earrings. These were of peacock feathers and she picked them up, holding them to her ear while she stepped over to a large oval mirror sitting on a glass case. “If RGF is making their own accessories, they’d be cutting out the middleman and making a bigger profit, all while catering to their customers in a one-stop fashion shop.”

“Which was exactly what your app offered,” he said. He was standing behind her, so she could see him staring at her through the mirror. When he shook his head, she nodded her agreement and put the earrings back on the table.

“Everybody wants the complete effect. RJ’s thinking of gaining a competitive edge. There are plenty of other designers that have already ventured into accessories. And there are some accessory designers who’re trying to dip their feet into the high fashion arena.” She shrugged. “That’s business.”

“Are we business?” He had no idea where that question had come from.

No, that was wrong and he knew it. The idea came from the myriad emotions playing throughout his mind since the night at his parents’ house.

She turned to him and smiled. That genuine one he looked forward to seeing every second of the day.

“We—” She corrected herself. “What we’re doing is probably one of the most innovative ideas I’ve ever come across. Riley says the uptick in searches on the Golden Bride website is in direct correlation to our engagement

announcement and each time a picture of us is printed in a tabloid, they get even more hits. Orders are trickling in.” She paused when a woman bumped into her and then continued, “There’s even one from an R&B singer. She already had a dress but when two of the designers appeared on one of those stylist reality shows and mentioned they were working on my gown, she had to have an original design for her wedding that’s coming up in four weeks.”

“And you said people who already had their gowns wouldn’t buy another one,” he replied with a smirk.

“Yeah, I did say that. I was wrong.”

And so was he. This was no longer just business between them. Thinking back to their first meeting, he wondered if there ever had been.

They walked for a few more minutes, passing other stalls. She stayed a bit ahead of him and he took that time to watch her walk, not in a way that aroused him, but more in a way that amazed him. She’d come all the way to this city just to meet with him and pitch her business, and had ended up staying as part of a business deal and to begin an affair that neither of them had been prepared for.

“Do you design and manufacture these?”

He snapped out of his reverie when he saw Nina had stopped and was holding up a leather handbag. She was talking to a tall man with gold, wire-framed glasses perched on his nose, his hair styled in locks.

The man walked over to the end of the table. “Yes,” he replied in a heavily accented voice. “The bags, necklaces and earrings. I design and make them all. Do you like this tote?”

Nina continued to glide her hand over the dark purple bag.

“This is great craftsmanship,” she said.

“It is called the Mawu, named after the African goddess of creativity,” he told her.

Major stood at the other end of the table, watching the exchange, curious as to what she was thinking.

“Yes, I’m aware of who she is. The leather is supple, sustainable.”

He nodded. “From the Karoo region of South Africa.”

She seemed pleased to hear that and left the bag to pick up a necklace from another section of the table.

“And this is an African talisman,” she said.

“Yes, you are familiar. It is the Springbok Horn and it is believed to bring good luck to those who wear it.”

“It’s simple and beautiful, whimsical and magical,” she whispered.

“We’ll take it,” Major said, reaching into his back pocket for his wallet as he stepped up to the display table.

“Oh no,” she said, shaking her head. “I didn’t mean for you to buy it. I was just admiring it.”

Major passed his credit card to the man and waited while it was being swiped. “It’s pretty. You like it. You should have it.” He ended with a shrug because he wanted everything with her to be that simple.

She didn’t argue. Instead she handed it to him and turned around, lifting her hair from her neck. Major stepped closer to her, reaching around so that he could fit the necklace at her neck and clasp it. His fingers lingered at her nape, gliding along the soft skin as he inhaled the fresh floral scent she always carried. He stepped back, prepared to leave the table.

“Do you have a business card?” she asked and thanked the man when he handed her one.

“What are you thinking?” Major asked when they stepped away.

“How do you know I’m thinking something?”

“You get all crinkly right here when you’ve got an idea or something on your mind.” He pressed a finger to the center of her forehead and she immediately relaxed until the crinkle was gone.

She smiled. “I do not.”

He laughed. “Liar.”

It wasn't until two hours later, when they were in the backseat of the car, that she decided to tell him what she was thinking. Even though she wore a seatbelt, she turned sideways, lifting one leg to rest on the seat.

“What would be really great to see is a complete line of African-inspired accessories from an African American fashion house. Let's uplift and display our heritage. RGF did a collection a few years back where they worked with a Nigerian designer. Maybe it's time for a new collection, find some new, talented African designers, and this time stretch it beyond the clothes to include accessories. This could be the kickoff to the accessory division and you could probably create an entire show based around these collections.”

Major didn't miss the excitement in her voice as she talked. He could see where she was going with this.

“It has appeal,” he said. “A lot of appeal.”

“Right! Unique pieces like this one could be included,” she said, reaching up to feel the necklace he'd bought her. “Maybe something inspired by your mother's grace and beauty and your father's strength and leadership.”

“And your tenacity,” he said before unhooking his seatbelt and sliding across the seat until he was touching her. One hand went to her leg that was on the seat while the other reached around to cup her face. “Your beauty and your independence. Your intelligence and compassion.”

“No,” she said softly, blinking quickly. “This would be about your family, the Golds, and everything they've built. It would be a direct reflection of all that your family has come to mean in the fashion industry.”

“A reflection of love, loyalty, family—all things that are important to you.”

She was shaking her head again and he didn't want to hear her denial because he knew better now. He could see it so clearly. Everything she really wanted in this world and all she would deny herself so that her family could have it instead.

Before she could speak, Major leaned in to touch his lips to hers. The kiss was soft, slow, lingering, and before long she was moaning and leaning in to him.

“It’s my turn to thank you,” he said when he was finally able to pull his mouth from hers.

She looked as dazed and off balance as he felt at this moment. “Thank me for what?”

“For coming into my life and opening a door I thought I’d bolted shut.”

She was about to say something else but the car came to a stop. Minutes later they were climbing out and walking through the lobby to the elevators that would take them to his penthouse.

They walked in silence and, for the second time tonight, he wondered what she was thinking. Had what he just said been too much? Were they never going to talk about how this arrangement had changed both their lives?

It wasn’t until after they’d prepared dinner together, eaten and then moved to the couch in his living room, that he broached the subject again.

“We have a little over two weeks before the public breakup is scheduled.” He’d thought about this during the meal and wanted to see how she was feeling about it first. Then he’d drift into the muddy waters of feelings.

She tucked her legs under her and draped an arm over the back of the couch, tilting her head as she looked at him. “I was thinking about that earlier today. We could always say I caught you cheating. I saw a picture of you with another woman in a tabloid and decided this is not the life for me.”

“Wow, that’s all it would take? A picture and you’d walk out on me?”

He’d exaggerated his reaction on purpose but the insinuation that he’d cheat on her prickled.

She shrugged. “I mean, it plays right into your title, so at the end of the engagement you’d just go back to being the Fashion

House Playboy again. We both walk away unscathed.”

That wasn't likely. He was already feeling the effects of being with her and doubted that would get better when she was no longer in this city with him.

“What if it's just a picture? And you're overreacting?”

“But what if it's not? What if settling down with one woman isn't going to work for you?” She seemed so adamant about this, a little more than he liked. “I mean... Look, you've been scorned before, so I wouldn't blame you. We've already gone over my trust issues, so if anybody understands, you know I do.”

But he didn't want her to understand and, for the life of him, Major didn't know how to best get that point across to her without possibly scaring both of them to death with some mushy declaration of love.

Was he in love with her?

“Look, it's been a really long day. Can we talk about this tomorrow?” She uncurled her legs and stood. The nightshirt she wore was like a football jersey but it was hot-pink with double zeroes on the front and “Sexy” written on the back.

“Yeah, sure. We've got time.”

She nodded. “Right, seventeen days.”

So she was counting, too. Major stood and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her. She hesitated but eventually gave in to the hug. He didn't know how long they stood there like that, his face buried in her neck, hers buried in his, their arms holding on tight because the time to let go was getting close.

Too close and he had to do something about it.

After she'd gone to bed, he went into his office to think about how he could keep Nina in his life. Because suddenly the thought of her not being there was more important than anything else, including his new business.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“COME IN!” MAJOR called and straightened his tie seconds before the door to his office at RGF opened.

“Hey, what’s up man?” Maurice said as he walked in.

Major frowned.

“What’d I do? I just got here.”

“I was expecting someone else,” Major said, shaking his head.

The huge grin that immediately spread across Maurice’s face was annoying.

“Oh. Let me guess. Nina?” he asked because Maurice obviously couldn’t resist being in a position to pick on the older twin for a change.

“Yes, Nina. I sent her a text asking her to come down, so she should be on her way. What do you want?”

“Just checking on you. Is everything ready for the big launch? I’m ready to start passing out Brand Integrated cards.”

“Not quite,” he said. “And before you start, it has nothing to do with Dad. In fact, I’m going to talk to him tonight. I should have done this a long time ago, but better late than never.”

Major had been thinking along those lines all night long. By the time he’d gone to bed, Nina had been asleep, and he’d eased into the bed so he wouldn’t disturb her. But she’d awakened anyway and had rolled over to where he’d been waiting with open arms. They slept cuddled together all night. Or rather, she’d slept and he’d rested his chin on top of her head, going over the plan he’d made and praying it would work.

“Good. And, yeah, you should have done it a long time ago. Anyway, I also wanted to give you a heads-up that Mom wants to talk to you.”

“About what?” Major asked, not looking at his brother but reading the latest email Ruben, his lawyer, had sent him. They’d been going back and forth all day.

“Don’t know. She wasn’t specific when she questioned me about why you weren’t answering your phone and sent me to find you.”

Major had asked Landra to hold his calls today and he hadn’t paid much attention to his cell if he glanced at the screen and it wasn’t Nina or Ruben. “I’ve been working on something important and time sensitive,” he replied.

“Okay, well you can tell Mom that when she finally catches up with you. But I’ll get out of your hair right now and let you handle whatever it is that’s got you so focused.”

He looked up to see that Maurice was standing but wasn’t walking out of the office. Instead his brother was looking at him closely, as if he could see through the words Major wasn’t offering. It was moments like these that he hated being a twin.

Major sat back in his chair and rubbed a hand over his chin.

“I did something I swore I’d never do.”

Maurice crossed his arms over his chest. “And that is?”

“I want her to stay so I needed to figure out a way to make that happen,” he told him.

There was no clear reaction from Maurice, which was usually the case. Only those who knew him very well could tell what he was thinking or feeling; that’s how good he was at keeping his poker face. To let Maurice tell it, that’s the way it had to be in the world they lived in. After his college years, Major agreed with the characterization to an extent.

“So is she staying?” Maurice asked after a few seconds of silence.

“Not sure yet,” Major admitted with a shake of his head. He swiped his hands down his pant legs because he was worried about the answer to that question. “Gonna tell her when she gets here.”

“What if she doesn’t want to stay? Or if she doesn’t want to stay to be with you? How’re you gonna handle that?”

“Like we handle everything else—we move on to the next thing,” he said, praying that wouldn’t be the outcome.

“I got a feeling she isn’t like anything else you’ve ever dealt with before.”

“How do you know?”

Maurice shook his head then turned to start for the door. “I know you better than you know yourself, bro. And that probably goes the same for you with me. I knew you’d fallen for her that first day in Desta’s office.”

And that’s exactly when it had happened—that day she’d bumped into him. That had been the start of it all.

“If you were her, would you stay here and continue to build your business?” he asked when Maurice was at the door. “If it was a great business opportunity and helped you achieve all your goals, but you’d be leaving your hometown and your family...would you stay?”

“If it were just about business, yeah, I’d stay.”

That was cryptic even for Maurice and Major was left staring at the empty doorway because his twin was gone before Major could ask him to explain.

She still wasn’t here yet and he’d texted her fifteen minutes ago. Major stood and paced his office second-guessing himself and hating that feeling. He never second-guessed, always knew the right thing to do for himself. But now there was someone else. And what if she didn’t want to stay?

There wasn’t time to explore the issue for the billionth time because his cell phone rang. He leaned over to grab the phone and saw that it was Ruben.

“Yeah?”

“Okay, I’m working on these new contracts and there are a few places that have to remain blank until you get me more information,” Ruben said.

“Fine. Can you just email them over to me now? I need them like ten minutes ago.” His tone was testy, and he didn’t want to admit it was because he was so nervous.

“Are you sure this is what you want to do? I mean, it seems sort of sudden and Brand Integrated has been your project for a while.”

Major pinched the bridge of his nose and let his head fall back. He’d thought about this all last night and had decided it was the best solution.

Next to her family, Nina’s business was everything to her. So, if he could make it that she had access to the best technology and equipment while continuing to build on the platform she’d created, she’d definitely think twice before turning down the opportunity. She was too good a businessperson to not at least give it sincere consideration. For Major, the decision was about making it easier for them to be together as a real couple. And because he didn’t know if she’d readily accept that, this business plan was his best option.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he said to Ruben. “Bringing Nina into Brand Integrated takes care of the problem of our businesses overlapping each other. She can just oversee the accessory hub division, combining that with her app, and we’ll still be able to offer fashion houses the same benefits. In fact, bringing At Your Service under the Brand Integrated umbrella will benefit her, too, because she’ll get immediate recognition instead of having to build her name.”

“What are you doing?”

Major spun around at the sound of her voice. She was standing in the doorway, looking every bit as good as she had when she’d walked out of his penthouse an hour before him this morning.

“Hey,” he said to her and then, “Ruben, I’ll call you back. Send the papers over now.”

He disconnected the call, slipping the phone into his pocket just as Nina stepped all the way into the office.

“If the papers you’re referring to involve At Your Service coming under the Brand Integrated umbrella, you won’t need them because I’m not selling my company to you,” she said, her voice even, cool and very angry.

* * *

“Just hear me out,” Major started after he circled around her to close the door to his office.

But Nina was already shaking her head. “I know what I heard, Major. And I’m telling you now it’s not going to happen.”

“It can be a great thing,” he said.

She whirled around and he was right there just inches away from her.

“For who? And how long have you been thinking about this?” Her heart was thumping in her chest, her fingers clenching and releasing at her sides.

“Not long—but just let me explain. There’s so much more I want to say.” He ran a hand across the back of his neck and sighed heavily. “This isn’t how I wanted to start off. Let’s take a seat.”

“No,” she said, yanking her arm away when he reached for her hand. “I don’t want to sit.”

She’d rather be standing when he tried to stab her in her back. Just as her mother had done to her husband and children. The comparison came quick, slicing through her with white-hot pain.

“How could you even suggest something like this?” Because, dammit, she’d started trusting him. She’d started to feel things for him even when she knew she shouldn’t. But she wasn’t going to fall apart in front of him. She wasn’t going to let the ridiculous fantasy she’d begun to weave in her head make her look like a fool in front of him. Not the way her father had cried over her mother’s leaving.

Instead she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin before asking, “What gave you the impression that I’d ever want to come under the umbrella of your business to gain recognition?”

“Nina, that’s not what I said. You only heard part of the conversation. What I’m proposing is much bigger. It means so much more than just you gaining recognition for your little app.”

“My ‘little app’?” She backed away because on top of the pain freely flowing now, fury bubbled in her stomach and her entire body began to shake. “Is that how you see my company? Haven’t you seen the bump in sales RGF has gotten since we linked my ‘little app’ to your website?”

Sales in three of their key casual clothing lines had jumped forty-three percent since the partnership began. RJ had even sent her an email this morning requesting they get together to discuss how they could make the arrangement permanent. She’d spent the bulk of the afternoon preparing a report on drafting terms for a formal permanent agreement. On top of that, RJ had asked her to be prepared to share her thoughts about the trade show with him. She’d outlined her complete idea for the African-inspired accessory line for RGF and how they could link its launch to At Your Service.

But Major wanted to take her company and make it part of his. He wanted to take every ounce of trust and genuine rapport they’d built in these past weeks and treat it as if it were nothing, as if they were nothing.

“I didn’t mean to say it that way. I know your app is doing well. That’s part of the reason I thought of this. Could you just calm down for a second and let me explain everything?” He’d dropped his arms to his sides, giving up on trying to touch her.

That was a good thing because she wasn’t sure how well that was going to go if he tried again.

“How dare you?” she began, trying like hell to keep her anger under control. She needed to move or she was certain she would explode. She’d trusted him. Dammit, she’d

promised herself to never trust anyone, not on this level. People broke your heart, always.

“Was this your plan all along? Was the whole trial period and fake engagement all a part of some diabolical takeover of the company I’ve worked so hard to build because it was similar to your own?” The words stung her throat, hurt and some other emotion swirling to form a sour mix deep in her chest.

“Nina,” he said, his tone stronger than he’d ever used on her before. So strong it stopped her in her tracks where she now stood close to the window. “I’m in love with you.”

Her hands began to shake. A sign of weakness. She was breaking, just like her mother’s departure had broken her father. Jacoby’s drinking and smoking had increased in the months after Lynn left. Twelve-year-old Nina recalled the extra packs of cigarettes she saw in his bedroom trash can and the bottles of vodka that appeared throughout the house.

“Don’t.” She whispered the word as if it were her last breath. “Don’t say that to me.”

“I need to say it.” He took a step toward her and she shook her head to warn him away. He stopped, sighed and then started again. “I don’t want you to go. Last night we were talking about the fake breakup and you had a plan for how it would go, but I was hastily thinking of a plan to make you stay.”

“You can’t make me do anything, Major.”

He closed his eyes, the eyes she’d been staring into every night for the past few weeks. Eyes she thought she’d come to know and to lo—Now, she was shaking her head.

“I know I can’t. But I was hoping, I thought we were feeling the same thing.”

“When did I ever give you the impression that I’d be willing to sell my business to be part of your world?” She wasn’t part of his world. Angie and Daisy had tried to tell her that yesterday. All these weeks she’d not only been part of a fake engagement, she’d been living a fake life. A life she’d never

imagined for herself because it wasn't who she was or who she wanted to be.

“This isn't just about business, Nina. It's so much more than that, and I dare you to stand there and truthfully tell me it's different.”

She couldn't and he knew it. Damn him, he knew how she felt about him. Just as Lynn had known how much Jacoby had loved her and yet she'd still walked out.

“My business is not for sale. *I* am not for sale!”

“Is that what you think this is?” he asked her quietly. “You think I'm so desperate for a fiancée that I'd try to buy your love in a mutually beneficial business deal?”

“You obtained a fake fiancée in a mutually beneficial business deal,” she snapped back.

His brow furrowed and, for the first time, she thought he looked as angry as she felt. Good, he could be angry. She didn't care. He wasn't going to run over her and take what he wanted just because he was one of the fabulous Golds! His money and prestige in the fashion industry wasn't enough to take the life she'd worked so hard for away from her without a fight.

She was just about to say that and tell him exactly what he could do with his business deal and any other collaboration between her and RGF, when her phone rang. It was tucked into the back pocket of the pants she wore because she'd left her purse in her office.

“Please,” Major said solemnly. “Can we just sit down and talk about this like levelheaded adults? I could be wrong—this may not work. We should just talk it over and see how we can fix this.”

Her cell rang again and she yanked it out of her pocket, staring down at the screen. It was Angie. Nina turned her back to him and answered the phone.

“What is it?”

“It’s Dad,” Angie replied. “He fell. It’s bad, Nina. You’ve gotta come now.”

Her heart dropped and the room seemed to spin around her. Nina held tight to the phone as if that could ground her and keep her from falling. She took a deep breath and released it as slowly and as evenly as she could. “Okay. I’ll be right there.”

Disconnecting the call, she turned back to see Major staring at her. He looked so good in his gray suit pants and white dress shirt. The tie was a deep purple; she’d seen it hanging in his closet on the tie rack full of over one hundred others in different colors and patterns. He looked stricken, but maybe that was just because she was feeling that way. Maybe he’d looked so good and appealed to her so quickly because a part of her had wanted to see him that way. Perhaps everything she’d wanted to see and believe about this man and the situation he’d offered her was just a fantasy, a dream she hadn’t known she wanted to live, even if temporarily.

None of that mattered now.

“I have to go.”

“Nina—” he started to say.

“No!” Now it was time for her tone to be strong, for her to take the control her father had lost the day her mother walked out on them. “I’m leaving now, Major, and you need to let me go.”

“Please, just... Okay, let me take you wherever you need to go. If it’s back to your apartment, I’m okay with that, just don’t walk out of here without... I don’t know, Nina, just don’t.”

He couldn’t get his words out and she thought that was strange. Major always knew what to say. Well, that was fine. She knew what needed to be said.

“I have to go and Claude will drive me.” She didn’t wait for another response as she started for the door. This time when he reached for her, Nina didn’t pull away, she couldn’t find the strength to do so.

He touched her elbow lightly at first and then let his fingers trail to her wrist and finally lace with hers. "I messed this up," he said quietly. "Let me fix it."

She looked over her shoulder at him.

"There's nothing for you to fix because I never planned to let you break me." She let her hand slip from his grasp and walked out of the office.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

MAJOR HAD NO idea what time it was or how long he'd sat in the dark on the couch in his living room glaring at the city skyline. He'd stood in his office for endless minutes staring at the open door that Nina had walked through before cursing fluently and grabbing his jacket and phone and leaving, too. He'd thought he'd find her at his place, gathering her clothes, but she'd been there and gone. The engagement ring he'd given her left in the center of the coffee table. So he'd just dropped down onto the couch where, coincidentally, twelve hours before they'd sat talking about their impending breakup.

He leaned forward, letting his elbows rest on his knees and feeling his head drop down. Where was she? How was she feeling? What could he say or do to make this better? Or, at the very least, to make the burning pain that had spread throughout his chest and settled there like an impending storm go away.

The doorbell rang and he ignored it. Whoever was on the other side wasn't going to make this better. Because no matter who it was, it wouldn't be Nina. He was certain of that.

She wasn't coming back, not to him, and definitely not to RGF. RJ was going to be pissed about the latter but Major didn't care. Once upon a time, business—his family's and the one he'd built for himself—had been all he'd cared about. But that was before the marketing plan. Before Nina.

The bell rang again and this time it was followed by a familiar voice.

“Major Frederick Gold, if you don't open this door, I'm going to take it off its hinges.”

He lifted his head at the sound of his mother's voice.

When he was seven years old, he and Maurice had spread peanut butter over the floors in one of Riley's dollhouses. When Riley had seen it, she'd been hysterical for hours. Maurice had laughed it off and taken his punishment in the

nonchalant way he always did. But Major had been devastated by the pain in Riley's cries as well as the fury and disappointment in his mother's voice. He'd locked himself in his bedroom to get away from it all and Marva had stood outside the door, knocking for a few moments before repeating the same threat she'd just stated.

Major stood and walked to the door. Moments later he found not just his mother but Riley, too, standing on the other side.

"Silly boy," Marva said as she entered, stroking him on the cheek.

Riley shook her head as she walked past him.

He closed the door and prepared himself for the barrage from the only two women he'd ever thought he'd love.

Riley sat in one of the side chairs, placing her purse on the end table. Marva sat, too, and patted the cushion beside her as a signal for Major to take a seat.

"Are you done sulking?" she asked once he settled beside her.

"I'm a grown man, Mom. I don't sulk," he said.

"Ha!"

That came from Riley and Major chose to ignore it.

"What did you do to mess things up with her?" Marva asked.

He didn't even bother to question how she knew. Somehow his mother always knew everything, and he suspected Landra may have overheard the last portion of his argument with Nina. His assistant didn't miss much that went on in the office.

"She overheard me talking to Ruben about combining our businesses so that she wouldn't have to work to get recognition in the industry."

"Dumb ass," Riley quipped.

Major glared at his sister.

“Well, you have to admit that wasn’t very smart,” Marva said.

He sighed. “In retrospect, I can see that. But at the time—”

“You thought you were doing her a favor,” Marva finished for him.

“You thought you were saving her,” Riley added. “Men are so dense sometimes.”

He should have left them in the hallway.

“If you wanted her to stay with you, Major, why didn’t you just ask her?”

“I didn’t know how.”

“Oh, it’s simple. ‘Nina, I love you. Please don’t go.’ Seven measly little words,” Riley said.

Times like these Major hated having a sister, especially one as smart as Riley.

“Again, at the time, I didn’t think to start it off that way. But I did tell her I loved her. She didn’t seem to care,” he admitted, feeling a renewed wave of pain soar through his chest.

“It’s hard to believe someone loves you when they try to take what you’ve worked hard for. Isn’t that what you thought your father would do if he found out about you wanting to leave RGF to start your own business?”

Major straightened and stared at his mother.

“Your father and I’ve known for some time that you were itching to move beyond RGF,” she replied in answer to his unspoken question. “You and Maurice always thought you were keeping your little twin secrets, but you forget Ruben’s mother and office manager is a longtime friend of mine.”

He sighed again because he hadn’t forgotten that, but he *had* instead relied on confidentiality from his attorney’s office. While that professional courtesy should’ve stretched to Ruben’s staff, Marva didn’t play when it came to her children and if Ruben’s mother had let anything slip about Brand Integrated, Marva would’ve pried the full story out of her.

“Look, I’m not here to talk about your business. You know I love and believe in you, whatever you do and wherever you do it,” Riley said. “But Nina’s a good woman and I’m really pissed off that you pushed her out of your life. Out of our lives.”

It was hard for any of them to have real friends, unless they’d been there since childhood like Ruben had been for Major. But for Riley, with all that she’d been through with her past scandals involving idiotic men, it was doubly hard for her to form bonds with people other than family. She’d obviously bonded with Nina.

“I didn’t want her to go, Riley. I tried to get her to stay.”

“Well, now it’s time to try to get her back,” Marva said as if that were as simple as making a phone call.

“I don’t know how,” he said, dragging his hands down his face. “She’s got so much on her plate right now. I don’t want to be another issue in her life. If this isn’t what she wants, I have no right trying to force it on her.”

“Did she say it wasn’t what she wanted?” Riley asked. “I don’t think having you in her life is adding a responsibility. To the contrary, I think the time she was here may have been the most relaxed she’s been in years.”

Just last night she’d been in her element at the trade show. The moment she’d found those African pieces, she’d lit up like a Christmas tree, all bright and giddy with her idea. And it was a brilliant idea, one that had sparked the plan he’d eventually come up with.

Major stood and walked over to the window. He folded his arms across his chest and stared into the night, wishing it were as simple as reaching out into the big city and touching her.

“There are probably trains leaving for York as early as seven tomorrow morning,” he said more to himself than to his mom and sister. “Or I could just drive. Be there first thing in the morning, ready to grovel if need be. Anything, just so long as I get the chance to apologize to her and to tell her how much I love her.”

He didn't wait for a response from anyone, just went into his bedroom and started to pack.

* * *

Jacoby yelled out in agony as he sat up in his bed.

"I told you to wait and let me help you," Nina said, coming around to the side of the bed and slipping her arm under his to help bear his weight so he could stand. "And you need to use the crutches, like the doctor told you."

"Well, I want to go sit out on the back porch. That pain pill had me sleeping so long this morning, I missed my normal coffee time."

That was true, but Nina had appreciated those three hours of solitude. It had been the first time she'd been able to sit with her thoughts since she'd raced home yesterday morning.

"I got some iced tea in the refrigerator. I want a glass and some cookies while I sit outside," Jacoby said.

"Okay, I'll get you settled outside and then I'll get your tea and cookies," she told him.

"Where're your sisters? Did they run out the moment you got here? Those two stay busy."

Nina sighed and concentrated on easing her father to the crutches so that she could get his weight properly distributed and keep them both upright. His fall down the last four stairs in the basement had left him with a broken left ankle and a gash on his head that had to be sutured. He was now sporting a white patch of gauze over his right eye to match the white cast on his ankle.

She settled him on her right side and worked her way around him with the other crutch, tucking it under his left arm.

"There, now take it slow. I'll get your snack and sit on the porch with you and go through my emails."

Since she was certain her deal with RGF was over.

Jacoby huffed and mumbled some more as she stayed a few steps behind him to offer support should he need it. Her father

was a proud man; a stubborn and opinionated man who loved his girls more than he loved life at this moment.

“I want the Oreo cookies, not those dry butter ones Daisy keeps buying,” he said when they finally made it into the kitchen.

The master bedroom of the ranch-style house was closer to the kitchen than the other two rooms, so their trek had been short. Nina immediately went to the cabinet to grab a glass and filled it with the crushed ice her father preferred from the ice machine on the refrigerator.

“The butter cookies have less sugar,” she told him even though she knew he couldn’t care less.

“Yeah, well all the baked goods and snacks could cause elevated cholesterol or diabetes. Everything does something bad and something good. So with the time I have left, I’m doing whatever makes me feel good. I want eight cookies. Count ’em and put them in a napkin for me.”

He was already heading for the back door, which Nina had left open when she’d gone out onto the porch to sit while he slept. After this morning, she now knew why her father liked to sit on that porch so much. It was quiet, peaceful, revealing. She’d come to terms with a few things about herself and her life while sitting in one of the twin rocking chairs just staring out toward the sky.

With the glass in one hand, his eight cookies folded into a napkin in the other, and her laptop tucked under her arm, she walked out onto the porch just as her dad was trying to settle himself into a chair. She hurried over to him, placing the glass, cookies and laptop on the small wooden table between the rocking chairs that looked as if they were on their last legs.

“Here, let me help you,” she said and eased the crutches from one arm and then the next.

Standing in front of him, she put both her arms under his and then bent her knees as he reclined into the chair.

Jacoby huffed when he was finally seated. “Your sisters should have stayed here to help,” he grumbled.

She ignored him because she was glad Angie and Daisy had left. They'd been a nagging, arguing pain in her ass from the time she'd arrived yesterday, until the moment she'd told them to go late last night. They weren't being helpful, just judgmental and annoying, traits they'd spent most of their lives perfecting.

"It's okay, Dad. We're fine," she told him, sitting in the chair next to him before grabbing her laptop from the table.

"Not okay," he said when he reached for his cookies.

She could hear him crunching on the first one as she booted up her laptop and waited to log in to her inbox.

"You should be in New York working," Jacoby said after a few moments.

"You weren't happy that I'd stayed in New York, remember?"

"No, I wasn't happy if you were in New York pimping yourself out to some rich dude," he snapped. "But you said that's not what you were doing."

"It's not," she replied, clicking on an email from RJ Gold, wondering if this was his message telling her she'd breached her contract with them by leaving town.

"And that guy you were in New York with? He was helping you with your business?"

She was only half listening to her father now, but she replied, "Yeah, his family's company was taking a chance on my app."

If you're reading this right now, I'm on my way to you and it's too late for you to stop me.

That's what the first line of the email read and her heartbeat had immediately picked up its pace.

I hope you'll hear me out this time and once you do, whatever you want, whatever you tell me to do, I will.

RJ hadn't written this email. Her eyes shot up to the subject line of the message again as she read the oldest Gold brother's name and email address.

"He sounds like a good guy. You should hear him out."

Her head snapped up at her father's words and she looked over at him and then past him.

Major walked around from the side of the house and her laptop almost slipped off her lap. He wore dark blue jeans and a crisp, white polo shirt. His hair looked freshly cut and his shape-up was sharp, his thin mustache trimmed. Her pulse rate quickened as her mind whirled with questions.

"Hello, Mr. Fuller. It's nice to meet you in person, sir."

She watched as Major walked up onto the porch and immediately went to her father, extending a hand for Jacoby to shake. Her father, the surly old grouch that he'd become, accepted that hand and looked up at Major.

"You mess this up again and I'll beat you with my crutches."

Major nodded. "I understand, sir."

"What's going on? You two know each other?" She put her laptop on the table because she couldn't afford to pay for another one and if one more surprise popped off, she was sure to drop this one.

Her father answered. "Got a call from this gentleman early this morning while you were sitting out here rocking in my chair like you thought you could find the answers to your problems."

"I thought you were asleep," she said.

"Not with my chair squeaking the way it does when it's being rocked too fast. And then that cell phone you and your sisters insist I keep close to me started ringing."

She looked to Major then. "You called my father?"

Before he could answer, Jacoby spoke. "You got something for me, young man?"

“Ah, yeah. I have it right here.” Major reached around to his back pocket and pulled out some folded papers. “All you need to do is read over the lease and sign it. I can take it back to the facility today and you can move in as early as tomorrow.”

Nina stood. “Move? What facility? Will somebody please tell me what’s going on?” Her hands were trembling and her heart was about to pump right out of her chest.

Jacoby took the papers Major handed him and then waved his free hand. “Go on, take her in the house and say your piece before she flips out. She never did like not knowing or controlling everything. Gets that from me, I suppose.”

Major stepped closer to her. “Can we go inside and talk for a minute?”

She didn’t know what to say and still couldn’t believe he was there. “I guess that’s what we’re supposed to do at this point.”

Before Major or her father could say another word, Nina walked into the house. She passed through the kitchen and stopped in the center of the living room, turning to see Major as he followed her inside.

“What are you doing? You got my father into that facility you were talking about, without consulting me?”

“I consulted your father,” he said with a nod. “And before you go off telling me I had no right to do that, I wasn’t going to. When I called your father this morning, it was strictly to ask him if he would mind me coming by to see you. He brought up the facility, asking if I knew of any places in New York that he could afford on his budget.”

“No,” she said, her voice cracking slightly. “That’s impossible. His budget isn’t enough to hardly cover the expenses in this house. And his home...our home...is here in York.”

“I wish it could be in New York with me,” he said quietly.

“Major—”

“Wait,” he said, holding up a hand. “Just give me five minutes. Let me just get this out the right way this time and then you can react. You can tell me to kick rocks and leave you alone forever, if that’s what you want. But please, just listen.”

She folded her arms over her chest because the warmth that was now swelling there alarmed her. This wasn’t supposed to be happening. Early this morning she’d sat on that porch resigning herself to having fallen in love when that hadn’t been her plan and to making the best of the help she’d gleaned working with his family’s company for the short time she’d been blessed to do so. She hadn’t thought of contacting Major again or going back to New York to see him. She would deal with whatever legal repercussions were brought on by her breaching the contract, but her new plan was to move on.

“I love you,” he said when she nodded for him to continue.

“I didn’t plan on falling in love and neither did you. We planned to do what was best for our businesses. And to be totally honest with you, Nina, I believe in my heart that you and I partnering together in a consulting and development firm that will cater to a full scale of technological needs to the fashion industry is the best career move for us.”

She opened her mouth to speak and Major stepped closer, touching a finger softly to her lips.

“I’m not here to save you, your father or your business. Because you don’t need to be saved. You’re a brilliant, beautiful woman with a bright future ahead of you whether or not you take me up on this offer. But I don’t know how to move forward without you, Nina. You walked into that building all those weeks ago and the moment you bumped into me, *you saved me.*”

He slid his finger away.

“You saved me from the lonely life I’d resigned myself to because I refused to trust again. You agreed to do what was a crazy job from the start and, every step of the way, all you were concerned with was doing your very best to make that crazy job work, for my family’s company as well as for your

own. I can't thank you enough for your help and I couldn't let you go without admitting to you that I need you. I want you, for real this time."

Tears welled in her eyes but she refused to let them fall.

"You knew all I wanted was to take care of my father." Her voice was shaky and she wanted to stop. She wanted to turn away from him and go somewhere alone to break down under the pressure of emotions that had steadily built with each word he'd spoken.

"You've taken care of your family for so long. You thought it was your job, but it wasn't. Your father asked me to find him a place in New York because he feels that's the only way you'll follow your dreams. I did it because I love you and I want your dreams to be my dreams. I want us to do this business thing and the family thing together."

The first tear rolled down her cheek and she cursed the warm, wet feel of it.

Major used his thumb to brush that tear away.

"You weren't planning to buy my business," she said slowly. "You wanted us to be partners all along?"

He nodded. "I would never take anything away from you. I believe what you've built can enhance what I've started. And my father and RJ loved your ideas about the accessory line for RGF. I told them about it when I was hijacking RJ's email account to schedule that message you received."

She chuckled and shook her head. "I knew RJ hadn't written that."

"No, but he had a good time saying he told me so while I typed it. My dad appreciated my groveling to you a bit more than I expected, as well."

He used both hands to cup her face now, tilting her head up to his. "I'm dying to kiss you."

"Kisses aren't part of the negotiations this time, Major."

He froze at her words.

“I want more,” she said, coming up on the tips of her toes to touch her lips to his briefly. “I want a real engagement party where you’ll officially slip my ring back onto my finger, and a huge wedding and when we launch *our* business, I want it to be called the Gold Service.”

His smile spread slowly and warm tendrils wrapped around her heart. “I think that can be arranged,” he replied.

* * * * *

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Wild Wedding Hookup

by Jamie K. Schmidt

CHAPTER ONE

MIKELINA PRESLEY WALKED through the five-bedroom beach house, making sure everything was perfect for the bachelor party. Checking the list on her phone, she confirmed that the sheets were five-hundred-thread-count Italian percale. The fridge was stocked with steaks and seafood, and the freezer with several bottles of Russian Standard vodka. The bar was tricked out with top shelf liquor, and the bathrooms all had condoms.

The housecleaning team was putting the finishing touches on the toilet paper by folding the edges into neat triangles on the roll, and then spritzing the air with their signature lime and verbena room spray. Mikelina was confident that Bastien Ainsworth would find everything to his satisfaction for his two-week stay.

As she was locking up, she had the customary pang of fear that a group of selfish rich boys would trash the place for good this time.

She was more than just the concierge for this house. This had been her family's vacation home until her father's fraudulent stock market trades landed him in prison and her parents' assets were seized. Luckily, the beach house had been in Mikelina's name for several years. So when her parents lost their house, her mother stayed here for a while. When her mother needed more money to pay off her father's lawyer fees, Mikelina should have put the house on the market. It would have solved all their problems. They would have been millionaires.

But she hadn't been able to let it go. There had been a lot of happy vacations here. Growing up, her father had worked sixty-hour weeks while her mother concentrated on her charities and social events. But when they came to South Beach on vacation, they had been a family.

Mikelina's phone rang as she was entering the security code to lock up. It was her boss.

"The house is all set," she said by way of greeting. Kirk Diamonte didn't waste time with pleasantries like hello and goodbye, and if you let him start off the call, he'd never let you get in a word edgewise. He was the CEO of the global Five Diamond Resorts Vacation Club. You'd think he'd want to check in and get off the phone as soon as possible. But he gossiped worse than her mother. In fact, the only reason Mikelina had been able to convince her mother to move out so she could rent the house was because of the "nice" conversation she had with Kirk where he had spilled the tea about all their mutual friends.

"Good. The Ainsworth family has booked us for the wedding and honeymoon, too, so we want to start them off with an excellent impression."

Mikelina had chosen to do a rental contract with the Five Diamond Resorts vacation club because her friend Selena worked as a chef for them. Selena got to travel all over the world cooking for the members of the club in whatever home they decided to rent for their vacation. Mikelina, stuck behind a desk in Manhattan, had thought that sounded glamorous and exotic.

When she contacted Kirk about the property, he had been impressed by the house's wraparound porch and its proximity to the beach, but even more so by Mikelina's hotel background. When she lost her New York job because she was spending too much time flying out here to keep her mother calm and centered, Kirk had overlooked her father's scandal and hired her to be the client liaison for his Florida properties. He also gave her a large percentage of the money that came from renting out her family's home and she gave that money to her mother to live on.

"I think they'll be satisfied," she said. "I was able to scrounge up tickets to Christian Dibiasi's jam session tomorrow night. Very exclusive. It's one of South Beach's best kept secrets."

Kirk whistled. “Nice score. That’s what I’m talking about. Try to anticipate their needs. The Ainsworth family is one of our biggest clients.”

“The bar is stocked, the fridge is packed, and the sound system is keyed up to *caliente*,” she said. She only hoped they wouldn’t puke in the pool or throw lamps at each other.

It had been hard enough to convince her mother that renting out the house was the best option. The fact that strangers would be touching their things and living in their space made her mother cringe. Mikelina wasn’t too happy about it either, but her father hadn’t left them much of a choice. Either they sold the house or rented it out. And in the long run, they’d still have their house once her father got out of prison in ten years. Reluctantly, her mother had moved in with her sister in Boca Raton, which was a far cry from Miami.

The worst was when her parents’ antique four-poster bed had been broken by an enthusiastic couple. It hadn’t mattered that they paid for the damages, as well as a hefty penalty fee. It hadn’t mattered that Kirk allowed her to ban them from ever renting the house again. Mikelina had to tell her mother that her grandparents’ bed was kindling.

“I’ve given Bastien Ainsworth your direct number,” Kirk said.

Mikelina hated when he gave clients her cell.

“He’ll be calling you shortly. He had a last-minute request, and you weren’t answering your email.”

“That’s because I was at the house.” Mikelina tried not to sound defensive. Bastien had been emailing daily her for the past six weeks. He wanted everything to be perfect for the bachelor party and was determined to micromanage every second. He didn’t even have the decency to foist the responsibility off on a secretary. No, he had to handle this personally.

Mikelina had become accustomed to his 10:00 a.m. emails and even though he was anal-retentive about his schedule, they sometimes shared a joke or some meme. She supposed it was

sweet that he wanted everything to be perfect for his brother-in-law, but she had a feeling that some of the activities wouldn't appeal to a younger groom. Of course, Bastien wouldn't take any of her suggestions, so what did she know? This was just her job.

“Whatever he wants, get it for him,” Kirk said. “Money is no object. His credit is good.”

Must be nice.

“They're spending a fortune with us for this wedding, so everything has to be perfect. I'm only stressing this because I need you to be available 24/7 for this party. No matter how outrageous, make it happen. Give them anything they ask for.”

“I'm not providing them hookers or blow,” she joked. Bastien hadn't even hinted at anything remotely wild. They were going to do day trips and hang out by the pool. And while that sounded great for a group of older businessmen, it wasn't what made Miami bachelor parties famous.

Although, she would kill to have Bastien's planned vacation. Mikelina missed lying out in a lounge chair with a good book. She missed this house. Patting the door affectionately, she turned to get into her car. She had been working killer hours this past year. She was determined that Kirk would never regret hiring her. She wanted to make sure no one thought she was a cheat and a con artist like her father was. It was exhausting, though.

Kirk snorted. “Trust me, these guys don't have to pay for it. And for the most part, they're gentlemen, so you don't have to worry about them getting handsy.”

That was something. Although Mikelina had become rather adept at the step-and-avoid technique. “You've got nothing to worry about. I'll keep my phone on.”

“I'm a little nervous. Rumor has it, the groom is getting cold feet. His name is Jace Benjamin, from the Reigning Benjamins clothing line. It's a good marriage between the two families. But from what I hear, he's still looking to sow some wild oats

and his future bride, Kitty Ainsworth, has been keeping him on a short leash.”

Mikelina couldn't care less. She had enough drama in her life. She didn't need any more. “I'm not sure what I can do about that.”

“Just keep an eye on him. No groom, no wedding. And while Five Diamond would still get to keep the fat deposit, I'd rather have the wedding and the honeymoon at our properties.”

“I think that's more his future brother-in-law's job.” And Bastien Ainsworth was welcome to it.

“You know the area. Steer him away from trouble when you can.”

Great. Now, she was a glorified babysitter to spoiled rich boys. While she was trying not to sputter into the phone, Kirk hung up.

Her phone rang almost immediately afterward.

It was the client, and she answered it on the first ring. “Yes, Mr. Ainsworth?”

“Bastien,” he corrected smoothly.

There was a smokiness to his voice that made Mikelina's toes curl. He didn't sound how she had expected him to. His emails sometimes had been curt and borderline rude. She couldn't wait to see what he really looked like when she met him to give him the tour of the house.

Over the past several weeks, she'd gone back and forth picturing him as a trust fund, Ivy League slacker with nothing better to do than make her job difficult, or as the son of a rock star with too much money and not enough people telling him no. She hadn't so much as found a picture of him on social media or gotten an idea on what he was really like, but she knew his type. She had gone to high school and college with men like him.

“I have a few more requests,” he went on.

“Of course,” she said brightly, even though her fingers tightened on her purse strap. He was arriving tomorrow morning and she could only hope he didn’t ask for something ridiculous like a bowl full of M&M’s—but only the green ones.

“I’d like to have enough beach towels to last us the week.”

“You’ll have two per person and the maids will launder them daily.” *And if you had read the paperwork you were sent a month ago, you’d already know that.* “Is that sufficient?”

“Make it three per person. What about bathing suits?” he barked.

“What about them?” she snapped, before she could stop herself. Mikelina recovered quickly, though. “Do you need me to have an assortment available?” She looked at her watch. She could just get to her friend Abbie’s surf shop before it closed. It would be a good score for her. Five Diamond Resorts would buy them and add the cost to Bastien Ainsworth’s bill—with a significant markup, of course.

“Yes. Ten male board shorts, size large.”

“Not a problem. I’ll have a selection put in each bedroom as well as the extra towels. Any female sizes?” Abbie had gorgeous hand-painted batik bikinis.

“No,” he said curtly.

Right. Bachelor party. Who needed bikinis?

“Very well,” Mikelina said smoothly. “Was there anything else?”

“Not at the moment.”

Oh goody.

“Please don’t hesitate to call me if something comes up,” she added. “Otherwise, I’ll meet you at the property tomorrow around eleven.”

“Make it ten.”

She rolled her eyes. The contract specified eleven. But whatever. “I’ll see you then.” After hanging up with him, she

tossed her phone into her gigantic shoulder bag and headed over to South Beach Surf. It was a quick walk down the quiet, residential area streets.

Mikelina kept her head up high as people looked the other way or glared at her as she passed. She had nothing to do with her father's schemes. She had been in New York, but Tanner Presley had hurt a lot of people in this neighborhood. Of course, he had hurt his family most of all.

Her phone rang again. Now what?

"Yes, Mr. Ainsworth?" She forced sweetness and light into her tone.

"I would like to review the schedule for the next two weeks with you."

"Of course," she said through her teeth. She had it memorized. "I have double-checked all your reservations and I emailed you the confirmation numbers yesterday. You're all set."

"Have lunch prepared for us on Friday."

Thanks for the short notice.

"What would you like?"

"Something light and healthy. We're going to want something substantial, but nothing heavy."

That was clear as mud. But she knew they were going parasailing in the late afternoon, so she'd probably have the catering company Selena recommended make them an assortment of deli salads. The shrimp and quinoa one was divine. Mikelina's stomach growled just thinking about it.

"I'll take care of it," she said.

"I was also considering changing Sunday's plans. Can we switch the Segway tour to Monday? I think Sunday we should just hang around the house."

"That's a good idea." He had really overscheduled the bachelor party.

“I appreciate all your help. I couldn’t have set this up by myself. You have made this very easy and I’ll make sure Kirk knows how much you’ve put into this.”

Mikelina blinked at the warmth in his voice. “I’m delighted to help.” That was a stretch, but it was nice of him to acknowledge that she was on top of things. Maybe he wouldn’t be such an entitled snot in person.

“And two of the groomsmen are lactose intolerant, so if you could replace half of the ice cream with nondairy, that should be sufficient.”

And then he had to go and ruin it. She suppressed a sigh. “I’ll make sure it’s done.” Of course, there had been a section in the paperwork on dietary restrictions and that hadn’t been marked off. But at least he was telling her now. She didn’t want anyone sick on her watch.

“See you tomorrow, Mikelina.”

She got a shiver up her spine at the way he said her name. It tickled at her ear and she shook her head to get rid of the feeling. He had a sexy voice. Too bad he was a pain-in-the-ass perfectionist.

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