

The book cover features a black and white photograph of a man and a woman in a close embrace, nearly kissing. The woman is on the left, with her hair styled in waves. The man is on the right, with a short beard and mustache. The background is dark, and the overall mood is romantic and sensual. A red geometric pattern is visible in the top left corner.

H HARLEQUIN

DARE

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MORE**

A.C. ARTHUR

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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CHAPTER ONE

UNPACK. SHOWER. MASTURBATE.

Those were the top three tasks on Grace Hopkins's agenda for her first night in Saint Lucia. She lifted her suitcase onto the bed and opened it, then got straight to business removing clothes she'd folded neatly and stacked inside three days ago.

Her thoughts went to the same replay reel that had been running through her mind for days now, prompting all kinds of memories: Ronald Martin Gold III, thirty-five years old, six feet three inches tall with a bodybuilder physique, rich umber-hued skin, velvety brown eyes, a deep voice that sent a warm tendril down her spine each time she heard it. Of course there was more about the man than that—he was ridiculously rich, heir to a fashion empire, one of the smartest men she'd ever met...and her ex-boyfriend.

She dropped a pile of tank tops and bras into the first dresser drawer and slammed it shut. RJ was going to be at this resort for the next two weeks. They would see each other again for the first time in ten years. To be clear, she'd seen him since their breakup, on television, in magazines and in the framed picture she still kept beneath her bed, which featured him posed in a very rare laid-back position. She'd left that photo back at her apartment in Harlem because it would've been ridiculous to pack it into her suitcase. RJ was no longer her man. In fact, as far as she could tell—even though she wasn't really making it her business—he hadn't been seriously involved with anyone in a very long time. Like since the night she turned down his marriage proposal.

Shaking her head, she walked back to the bed, grabbed more clothes, went to the dresser again and proceeded to open the drawer, dump clothes in, and close it again. She wandered back to her suitcase.

It was going to be fine. These next two weeks were about work, about finessing the final piece of her career goal with the story of a lifetime. A rough outline of the story was on her laptop and as soon as she settled in for the night, she'd pull out the additional notes she'd gathered and put in some work before going to sleep. That was on her list to do after the shower and the—Her hand closed over what was arguably one of her best investments. Just holding the vibrator sent sparks of desire zinging through her body.

She wasn't some horny sex addict. Sex wasn't something she craved or even needed on a regular basis, but when the mood hit she had to soothe it—immediately, or she turned into a cranky nightmare. That was the last thing she needed while she was here. Being around RJ and his family again was going to take all her people skills, smiles and endurance. Her pussy pulsed at that last word as a memory of RJ between her legs, moving as if he owned her body and its pleasure with every stroke, resurfaced.

Her fingers tightened around the wand, which was big and clunkier than some of the newer, more modern versions, but she liked this one. She liked its size and durability, the same traits she'd treasured during the year and a half that RJ was her lover. It didn't occur to her that she was now moving her hand up and down the length of the sex toy as if it were a real dick—*his* dick—until her phone rang.

She grabbed her phone off the bed with her free hand and pressed it to her ear.

“Grace Hopkins.”

“Hey, Grace. It's Eddie, just checking in to see how it's going.”

She rolled her eyes skyward at the sound of his voice. “Hey, Eddie. I'm just getting settled in at the resort.”

“You wouldn't be getting settled in with RJ Gold, by chance? You know, the guy you neglected to tell me you dated.” There was no missing the irritation in Eddie's tone or the instant alarm she felt at his words. She'd known it was not only wrong to leave out her past connection to RJ, but it was also highly unethical for her to even consider writing this story because of that connection. But she desperately wanted Eddie to accept her pitch and to tell this story.

“It was a very long time ago. We haven't seen or spoken to each other in ten years.” She frowned, knowing he wasn't going to let that thin excuse stand.

“Don't give me that crap!” Eddie had a reputation as a yeller with a keen eye for detail. Right now, he was giving Grace her first taste of both. “You came to me pitching a story about the feud between Ron Gold and Tobias King. You said there was dirt there and you could dig it up, put it in black and white, and expose the dominating duo for their sordid backgrounds amid the impeccable designs that made them the best in the fashion industry. You said this was going to be the scoop that all fashion magazines, digital and print, wanted and would boost our print circulation. What you didn't say was

that you'd be cuddling up with your ex at the same time!"

Grace was certain Eddie had taken her story pitch way out of context, but she wouldn't risk telling him that at the moment. The feud between RJ's father, Ron Gold, CEO and lead designer at RGFashions, and Tobias King, owner and designer at King Designs, was nothing new. It had been going on for more than thirty years and began with the two men working at RGF when Ron's father was still alive. Ron and Tobias grew up attending private schools and then college together, carrying their friendship into the fashion industry while being groomed by Ron's father. Then one day, that was over. Tobias left RGF and started King Designs. Before Tobias's first runway show, news surfaced that Ron had accused Tobias of stealing RGF designs to open his own fashion house. After his initial denial, Tobias never spoke of the design debacle again, until earlier this year when a similar situation occurred, only this time it was found to be true.

As Eddie continued to grumble, Grace thought back to the most recent development in the Gold/King feud.

A disgruntled designer from King Designs, Lenzo Fuchetti, coerced a receptionist from RGF to steal a design for a couture wedding gown. Once pictures of the King Designs gown were featured in a tabloid alongside RGF's gown with the headline accusing Ron Gold of stealing, Tobias and Ron went to the police to request a full investigation. When that was complete Tobias was the first to submit a public apology to Ron. Since that was also the time the men learned that Tobias's nephew Chaz was dating Ron's daughter, Riley, the two men decided it was time for the feud to end.

Grace wasn't convinced that was the whole story or that these two families were actually burying the hatchet they'd been swinging at each other for so long. Which was why she'd gone to Eddie with the idea for this in-depth exposé. Now Eddie knew she had a personal connection to the story as well, having dated Ron Gold's son. There was no need for her to ask how he'd found out. News was Eddie's business and the *Daily Gazette*, where he was editor in chief, had a big entertainment section. The Golds and figures in fashion often appeared there.

"Look, you're right I should've told you about being involved with RJ, regardless of how long ago it was. But I promise you I can be unbiased. I can get this story and the boost in your circulation, Eddie. And when I do, you're going to return the favor by giving me a byline and a permanent column because I'm a great investigative reporter and you know it." She'd graduated

from the Columbia School of Journalism and had built her career so far writing freelance. It was all that mattered to her. She already had a couple interviews lined up for this story, and coming here to the island where Riley Gold was about to get married would put her in close proximity with all the players.

His frustrated huff was loud and he mumbled a few curses before continuing. “Hell, I don’t even remember who I was sleeping with ten years ago, so I guess that could be considered a long time. But you listen here, if I let this slide and you stay on this story, I don’t want a watered-down version of what Ron Gold’s been peddling to the media for the last thirty years. I want the truth mixed with some juicy scandal. You think your boyfriend’s going to give you that scoop?”

“First, he’s not my boyfriend...anymore. RJ and I are incredibly old news and besides that, this is business. I’m dedicated to my career, just as RJ’s dedicated to his. He’ll respect that I have a job to do.” At least that’s how she hoped it would go down. For the past few days, thoughts of how RJ would react to seeing her after all this time had been mingling with memories of the deeply emotional relationship they’d shared. A relationship she’d walked away from and promised herself to never look back on—until now.

“Yeah, those are some nice words you’re shooting me. Just like that pitch you sent me a couple weeks ago. But I need more. You’ve got twenty days to deliver that story or I’ll make sure no syndication ever takes a pitch from you again. Got it?”

“Got it,” she replied through clenched teeth, and disconnected the call.

How dare he speak to her that way? She wasn’t some newbie in the field of journalism. She’d been building her portfolio with stories in a variety of industries, on blogs and in magazines, and she’d even done a review in the *New York Times* two years ago. Of course, her name had been buried at the end of the article with more credit going to the new cosmetics product she’d been endorsing, but it was still a shining moment in her portfolio.

This story was going to be her crowning glory. Yes, the moment she’d thought of it, she’d immediately recognized the conflict of having once been involved with RJ. But what better way to prove how much she’d grown as a journalist than to write a story that she was close to, with integrity and honesty. This story was going to get her permanently on the staff at the *Daily Gazette* and she’d finally have proof that her career as a journalist was just as real and noteworthy as her sisters’ careers as concert pianist, psychologist

and obstetrician. Eddie Kane and his threats weren't going to throw her off track. To solidify that statement, Grace tossed the phone toward the bed but heard it roll across the floor.

Wait, roll?

A quick glance toward the sound had her looking back at the phone still in her hand. "Dammit!" She dropped the phone and hurried toward the vibrator on the move, hoping to get to it before it passed through the patio doors she'd opened upon first entering the room.

She chased it, another curse about to pass her lips, when to her horror the stupid thing picked up speed and eased under the railing, right over the edge of the balcony. "Great," she muttered. "Just great!"

Stomping back into the room, she grabbed the key card off the dresser, stuffed it into the back pocket of her denim shorts and yanked open the door. It was nearing eleven at night, but the last thing she wanted was for someone to come across her vibrator on the sidewalk first thing tomorrow morning.

The Marina Bay was a gorgeous luxury resort perched on a hilltop. The views would be stunning in the daylight. As it was getting late, there weren't many people out, at least not in the part of the resort where her room was located. The penthouses, suites and private villas were on the other side of the hill. Regular rooms for people uninterested or unable to cough up five-hundred-plus dollars per night were in the two buildings on her side.

She stepped outside. The tropical air mixed with the light scent of chlorine, as she'd noticed when she'd opened her balcony doors earlier. She suspected her room faced one of the resort's many outdoor pools. Cursing because she should've brought her phone so she could use the flashlight, but she headed towards where she thought the vibrator might've fallen. Stone pavers created a walkway amid plush green grass, and she inhaled deeply as she continued to move about in the dark.

The balmy evening breeze was soothing and the island scent was comforting. If only she were in her room, showered after her travels and lying on the queen-size bed. But no, her first night on the island couldn't go that well. Instead, she was walking around, dragging her feet over the grass and keeping her gaze down in search of her trusty sex toy.

"Ha! Maybe that's the story I should be writing. 'Woman on a twilight search for runaway vibrator.'"

And now she was talking to herself!

Wow. Grace hoped the rest of her trip turned out better than this.

* * *

Insomnia was his worst enemy and it apparently planned to stalk him even while he was on this forced vacation. RJ walked with assured steps. He pulled his phone out of the side pocket of the sweatpants he'd slipped on and made his way downstairs to explore the resort.

The brochure boasted five sections of Marina Bay, all situated amid the tropical hills of the very scenic Saint Lucia. He had to give it to Riley and Chaz—they'd definitely picked a gorgeous place to get married. It was also a great spot to insist their family spend the two weeks leading up to their wedding together. RJ had one of the many private villas at the top of the hills. The view from every angle of the space was nothing less than spectacular. Room service was phenomenal, and the bed was just the right amount of soft and firm. So why the hell wasn't he tucked into it drifting into a blissful slumber?

Because he rarely ever slept. If he was sleeping, he wasn't working and if he wasn't working, things weren't getting done. It was a simple enough equation.

Tonight, he was walking instead of sleeping, checking emails and trying like hell to push thoughts of couples, love and wedding vows to the furthest corner of his mind. As his sister had put it last week, when she'd been in his office giving him more information than he needed to know about her wedding, "love is in the air." Frowning, he swiped his thumb over his phone with a little more force than was necessary.

There was to be no working for the next fourteen days—that decree had come directly from his mother. RJ loved Marva Gold with every breath in his body, but he had no intention of totally refraining from work. Six months ago, Riley and Chaz had agreed to allow certain aspects of their wedding planning to be available for the media as part of their continuing marketing plan for the Golden Bride collection. So far, sales had been on an upswing as a result of two Gold siblings' weddings—Riley's and their brother Major's. Major had been first when he'd married Nina Fuller. The head of RGF's marketing department, Desta Henner, had created an ingenious strategy to plan a fake engagement to boost sales—and it had led to Nina and Major's actual wedding. Desta would be planning her own wedding soon. She was engaged to RJ's other brother, Maurice, after a ski trip last winter had brought them closer together. That left all his siblings paired up, and RGF

sales—which was his department—shattering records during wedding season. A smile ghosted his lips as he silently congratulated his siblings on a job well done. Though he accepted that their newfound happiness had increased his workload.

As for him, the solitary life worked just fine. A fact that was helpful tonight as he continued walking along the property, lifting his gaze up from his phone every few seconds so he wouldn't trip and fall on his face. That or be scared by something going bump in the night. Another smile formed as he glanced at the time on his phone. Just after eleven and here he was—a relatively good-looking man—opting to entertain himself with a walk instead of cuddling in bed with a nice warm body, as all his siblings undoubtedly were.

He didn't even want to think about why his choice to remain single had begun to bother him lately. It was a decision he'd had to make, to protect not only his heart, but also his sanity. For the life of him, he still didn't understand how the one relationship he'd once cherished had gone so horribly wrong.

The pinging notification sound pulled him from his thoughts, and he watched as two new emails from reporters appeared. They were each looking for any family member who'd tell them the location and date of the wedding, or at the very least provide a Zoom link so they could offer their readership first-look snapshots. The answer was a resounding no, as he, his staff and his relatives had stated so many times before. While Riley and Chaz had given the media access to some of their wedding plans as part of RGF's ongoing marketing campaign, the wedding date and location was private. He deleted the emails. Seconds later, he nearly lost his footing as something rolled beneath his feet.

“Oh, no! Dammit!”

RJ heard the woman's voice but he was too busy trying to regain his balance to really look at her. She'd bent down and scooped something up from the ground—the object that had almost led to him busting his ass.

“I'm so sorry. That was my fault. I apologize,” she continued, pushing her arms behind her back.

Shaking his head now, trying to hold on to all the curse words running rampant through his mind, he glared at her instead. “What the hell is th—” The rest of his words died in his throat as he stared into familiar whiskey-brown eyes.

He tried blinking repeatedly, hoping that when he focused his gaze again, he'd be mistaken, but that hadn't worked. Now the air froze in his lungs, causing his chest to constrict, and one strangled word tumbled from his lips. "Grace?"

She took a step back, her mouth opening slightly, then closing without a word. That's how they stood for the next...he didn't even know how many seconds had passed, and he didn't dare speak again. As if she'd figured that out, she cleared her throat and finally spoke. "Hello, RJ."

No, this couldn't be. Was he sleepwalking? Hadn't he just thought about his past relationship? Yes, and he'd pushed that memory way back to the place he'd buried it for the last ten years. Only now, it was right here, just a couple feet away from him.

Grace Hopkins. *His Grace*.

The first and only woman he'd ever loved, the woman he'd wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Dragging a hand down his face, RJ shook his head as if that were going to clear all this away. She was still standing there wearing very short shorts that showed off the rich mocha complexion of her long, gorgeous legs. A white T-shirt fit perfectly against the curve of her breasts and a gold heart pendant dangling from a choker necklace brushed over the hollow of her throat.

"It's good to see you again," she said when it seemed she might be the only one capable of speaking at this time.

Memories tangled and fought inside his mind. Grace had been his everything. She was the first and only woman to claim his heart. A heart she'd held so tightly in the palm of her hand that she'd been able to crush it with one, simple word—*no*. Muted pain rested in the center of his chest.

He hadn't seen her since that awful night years ago, but now she was here. It was Grace's voice he heard, her smile he saw as her lips tilted slowly. She eased an arm from behind her back to wave her hand at him as if they were long-lost friends. He didn't know what to say or do, which was uncharacteristically strange for him. Trying to get his mind right and act like he had some semblance of brain function, he gripped his phone tightly in one hand and nodded.

"What are you doing wandering around out here in the dark?" It wasn't the most pressing question at the moment, but he was still working up the nerve to ask the other one.

She shrugged, shifting her weight from one foot to the next, and dropped

her arms to her side. “Going for a walk, which actually seems like the same thing you were doing.” He should’ve expected the quick and snappy response. It was her signature and matched her ambitious and flirtatious personality perfectly. She loved to talk. Where some women might like cuddling after sex, Grace had been a talker. Those were the nights he’d learned so much about her. Unfortunately, the one time he’d needed her to be chatty, she’d clammed up and walked away from him for what he thought was going to be forever.

He had to ask her. It made the most sense that this next question come, he just didn’t know how he was going to feel about her answer. “It’s been a long time.” He dodged the bullet again.

“Yeah. It has.”

“You look...um...you look—” He noticed something else that made this entire scenario stranger. “Is that a vibrator?”

CHAPTER TWO

GRACE DID THE exact opposite of what he expected. She lifted her arms, extending them in front of her so the vibrator—he now had no doubt of what it was—was pointing directly at him. “This? Um, yeah. It is. But it’s not what you think,” she said in an obviously flustered tone.

This night couldn’t possibly get any more confusing. Not only was he standing there staring at the woman who’d turned down his wedding proposal, but that woman was also holding a vibrator in a way that had his dick pulsing with need. If he weren’t suffering from mild shock and experiencing a steady buzz of arousal, he might’ve laughed.

“Did you find that out here?” If she had, he was going to have some strong words for the management at Marina Bay.

“No.” She huffed, this time reaching her free hand up to tuck strands of hair behind her ear. “Like I said, it’s not what you think.”

“What exactly do you think I think?” Every question he asked caused some level of anxiety because he wasn’t sure if he really wanted to know the answer.

She tilted her head, giving him a knowing look. “That I’m out here looking for pleasure.”

He lifted a brow in question, and he had to shift his stance a bit when his dick jumped at that salacious thought, but he wasn’t going to state the obvious. “You’re out here holding a vibrator.” Okay, he’d just stated the obvious. “Is it yours? How’d it get out here?” *And can I please watch you use it?* Those words floated dangerously in the forefront of his mind.

“No. I mean, yes.” She paused, shook her head and huffed again. “It is mine. It rolled off my balcony and I had to come get it.”

Her arm moved as she spoke, and he was barely able to focus on her words because he was staring at that toy and the way her nipples were now pressing against the material of her T-shirt. “So you were gonna use the vibrator in your room, but somehow it rolled off your balcony. I stepped on it and almost busted my ass, now you’re standing here holding it like—”

Like she was giving it a hand job, which made him uncharacteristically jealous.

“Yes,” she replied, and squared her shoulders as if trying to find some

semblance of control in this very awkward situation. She licked her lips and RJ couldn't help it—he groaned.

Her eyes widened and dammit, she licked her lips again. At least this time she figured out the error of her ways and dropped her gaze from him, looking down at the vibrator again. With a shake of her head she folded her arms across her chest. Now he could only see the globular top of the sex toy tucked between the warmth of her arms.

He swallowed, hard, and then cleared his throat.

“This is a crazy way for us to meet again.” Her chuckle sounded nervous, but Grace was the most courageous woman he'd ever known. “It's good to see you.”

It was great to see her, too. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed looking into her eyes until right this moment. When they lived together he'd spent his days at work looking forward to walking through the door into his penthouse and seeing her sitting at her desk typing, or lounging on the couch watching one of her favorite sitcoms, laughing heartily at some line she'd heard a billion times before.

“Yes. It's really nice to see you, too.” After all this time...and after she walked out on him. He sighed. It was time to stop letting confusion rule this conversation. “Strange that we grew up in the same city, lived together for a year and now we're running into each other here, when we've managed not to see each other for the last ten years.”

The memory of her walking away from him in that crowded restaurant was still so fresh in his mind. He gritted his teeth to keep the pain and irritation at bay. It annoyed him how quickly he could flip from heartwarming memories of their time together to simmering rage for the gaping hole she'd left in his heart.

She nodded. “You're right. It's been that long. And I'm still living in New York.”

“Yet we haven't seen each other until now.” He knew he was repeating himself. It was hard not to. He was still grappling with everything that had happened in the past few minutes.

“Well, that's not actually by chance.” She cleared her throat and shifted so that her arms moved a little. The action pushed her breasts up higher and his throat tightened.

“What do you mean?” It occurred to him then that Grace was a journalist. “Did you find out from one of your colleagues in the press that we were

here?” Although, no one in the media was supposed to have that information.

“Not exactly. I’m writing a story and when I reached out for an interview, I was told you’d be here.”

Damn, this night just kept getting better. Standing a few feet away from his ex, who was still gripping a vibrator, wasn’t going to be the worst part of this night. He could feel it in the lump that had just formed in the pit of his stomach. “You’re writing a story about what or who? And who exactly told you I was here?”

“Well, not you, specifically.” She tilted her head again, and strands of her hair brushed along the line of her neck, touching that soft spot just above her collarbone he used to love kissing. The jolt to his already burning desire wasn’t enough to keep his mind from churning over each word she was saying.

“Why don’t you just tell me *specifically* what you’re talking about?” Even though he had a sinking suspicion he wasn’t going to like it.

She dropped her arms to her sides and lifted her chin. This time his gaze focused on hers.

“I’m writing a story about the fashion house rivalry between RGF and King Designs.” His fingers fisted the moment she named his company. “More precisely, it’s a story about Ron Gold and Tobias King. I have an interview with Veronica King. She’s the one who told me this is where I could find the entire family in one place. To make it easier to speak to everyone integrally involved in the feud.”

RJ’s nostrils flared and the temper he was typically good at holding at bay was on the brink of implosion. “Are you serious? Why would Veronica tell you we’re here? She knows Chaz and Riley wanted the location of their wedding kept secret.” She couldn’t really mean what she’d just said. Of all the people in this world, Grace knew how he felt about the feud, and she knew how protective he was of his family. This had to be a cruel joke, like the manner in which they’d reunited.

“I’m very serious about this and I don’t know why Veronica gave me the information instead of just granting me an interview back in New York. And listen, before you go off about this, I’m the best person to write this story and you know it. I know you and your family, and I—”

“You,” he said in a tone that was deathly calm, but as lethal as he’d ever sounded in his life, “will go back to your room, pack your stuff and get the hell off this island. And there will be no story. I’ll see to that.”

If he had to burn down whichever newspaper, magazine or other outlet had authorized it, he would do just that. Nobody was going to write about his family's past for purposes of embarrassing or exploiting them in the media. Especially not the woman he used to love.

* * *

It was RJ's turn to walk away from her, and he'd turned so fast, Grace almost let him go without saying another word.

"I'm not leaving," she said before he could get too far away.

When he stopped, she knew this conversation was about to go as badly as was possible. RJ was not a man who took no for an answer, not easily, anyway. Even though he'd surprised her when he'd let her walk out of that restaurant ten years ago and never tried to contact her again. She told herself it wouldn't have changed anything if he had come after her; she'd made up her mind, but for a while the realization that he hadn't even tried had stung. She'd gotten over that, just like she'd gotten over him.

His shoulders were broad and looked strong in the tight-fitted shirt he now wore. His sweatpants, hanging low on his waist, had done nothing to cover the semi-erection she'd glimpsed before he turned away. It had her mind wandering to all the passionate nights she'd spent in his arms.

"This is my job, RJ, and it's an important story, one that needs to be told." He didn't move, so she couldn't see his face, but it didn't matter—she'd never forget how he looked. His head was bald now, a new look from the last time she'd seen his photo in the media, but he still had the goatee, neatly maintained as always. He also still had thicker and fuller eyebrows than she could ever hope for, and his eyes were the deepest pools of dark brown she'd ever seen. Despite being an excellent swimmer, this was a place she'd drowned more times than she could count. She'd stared into RJ's eyes on so many occasions, and into his heart. Those glimpses had made her fall in love with him in the first place, that rare access he'd given her to the man beneath the gruff exterior.

Why that thought made her chest ache now, she didn't want to explore, so she continued, "What happened between Ron and Tobias set the stage for what the fashion industry is experiencing now for the first time. An intense rivalry and professional face-off between the top two designers in the game. The top two *Black* designers. You know that's groundbreaking."

“No!” he yelled, turning around, and she almost jumped back. It was exceedingly rare to see RJ this angry. He took his reputation and that of his family very seriously, so he always tried to maintain decorum, regardless of the situation. “That’s my family and you know I don’t tolerate any bullshit when it comes to them.”

“This is my career” was her firm and resounding retort. He wasn’t the only one who could be passionate about something. “Writing this story will give me the chance at a byline. I’ve worked extremely hard for this, and I’m not going to let you stop me from achieving it.” The same way she hadn’t let his marriage proposal deter her from going after her goals. It just wasn’t in her to back down, even though watching him look at her with disdain in his eyes was breaking something deep inside her.

He closed the space between them quickly, and she momentarily considered stepping back. But no, if RJ wanted to go toe-to-toe with her that’s what they’d do. She had just as much to lose here as he thought he did.

“That feud has been blown out of proportion for years and it’s none of anybody’s business how or why it started.”

“It’s everyone’s business if it became a blueprint for their success. Don’t you see that? What Ron and Tobias have done is historic and without that feud propelling the competitive edge that’s formed two fashion empires, it might never have happened. You can’t deny that.”

“I can’t condone anyone profiting from it and I’ll never consent to my family’s name being dragged through the mud.” He clamped his lips down tight and gave her a stony expression. “How can you do this? You know my family. I thought you cared about them. You were so close to them at one time.”

Oh no, he was not going to guilt her. Becoming part of his family back then had been easy and heartwarming. Knowing she’d been leaving them the night she walked away from RJ had been crushing. “Don’t insult me like that. I did care about your family, and you—although now I’m wondering why, considering you’re acting like a domineering brute right now.”

He looked at her incredulously. “I’m acting like a man who’s been blindsided. Again.”

This was turning out to be more difficult than she’d thought. She knew reuniting here and under these circumstances wasn’t going to be simple for either of them, but she had hoped for cordial and with the least amount of emotional impact as possible. That may have been too optimistic.

“You’re acting like a guy not used to getting his way.” And that wasn’t as easy to say as it should’ve been. She didn’t want this to be about their past, but there really was no way of doing this without walking that path. “If you’re still angry with me about the proposal, that’s one thing. But don’t try to stand in the way of my career as retaliation.”

He came even closer, his gaze following the strands of hair resting on her shoulder. Her body was a traitorous trickster, immediately forgetting the anger and instead letting the sneaky tendrils of need ease down her spine. She didn’t want to yearn for RJ again, not for one second. But there was no denying the attraction was still there between them, as strong as ever. How was she supposed to get this job done if all he had to do was look at her and her mind filled with memories of how great things had been with him?

When his eyes moved from her hair to her lips, she sucked in a breath. Her breasts ached with need for him to touch them and her fingers tightened around the vibrator she still held. The memory of how she’d planned to use it was still fresh in her mind.

“You shouldn’t have based your climb to success on my family.” His gaze dropped and he stepped away before her mind could register that he was no longer near her. Unfortunately, her body had gotten the message and protested the loss of warmth with a shiver that made her teeth chatter. Before he turned to leave, he said, “You’d better come up with a plan B for your career, Grace, because I’m going to kill this story.”

CHAPTER THREE

WELP, THE VIBRATOR was done.

She dropped it—along with her optimism about a polite reunion with RJ—into the trash can the moment she returned to her room. The base where the batteries were inserted was cracked—maybe from RJ stepping on it—so that the batteries wouldn't stay in. After closing the patio doors with a thud, she moved through the space, yanking off her clothes and tossing them into the bag she'd designated for her dirty laundry. It wasn't the patio's fault. It was Eddie's fault for calling her with that nonsense about her ability to write an unbiased story. Of course she could—that's precisely what she'd been doing her entire career. The audacity of him to think that just because she'd slept with RJ ten years ago...

Damn, even the thought of that man being inside her induced a reaction from her body. A flush of warmth spread throughout her as she recalled watching his eyes go dark while staring at the vibrator in her hand. She'd tried to convince herself it was the obvious erotic mood created by the presence of a sex toy, but the moment he'd stepped close to her, she'd known that was just an excuse. There'd never been another man who sparked the intense and immediate physical response in her that RJ did. It had been foolish to believe that the years they were separated might've proved that statement false.

Just as foolish as thinking that because she'd convinced herself she'd done the right thing by refusing to marry him, the deep emotion she'd felt for him would somehow vanish, the way she had from his life. She didn't call it love anymore; she couldn't. It wouldn't make sense for her to still be in love with the man she knew she couldn't have. Her career had to come first. She'd needed to become Grace Hopkins the journalist before she could ever accept being Grace Hopkins Gold, a member of the fabulous Gold family. RJ was an all-in kind of guy, and family was extremely important to him. She knew not only from witnessing him with his parents and siblings, but also because of the talks they'd had in the wee hours of the morning about the future home and family they'd create. Things Grace knew she wanted at some point in her life, just not when RJ had proposed. His proposal wasn't a total surprise to her, and it hadn't been totally unwanted. The timing had just been off. But

she'd been sure that wasn't what RJ wanted to hear. His career had been decided and approved by his family; there was never any struggle to find his place. For her, it was the opposite, and he wouldn't have understood if she'd tried to offer her explanation. Now they were here.

The odds of RJ being out for a walk at the same time she was were phenomenally low, yet that scenario had played out like an episode of one of her favorite old shows, *Sex and the City*. Shaking her head, she entered the bathroom and immediately turned on the shower, then adjusted the water to lukewarm. For a brief moment earlier, when he'd moved closer to her, she'd thought RJ was going to kiss her. Would she have let him? After all this time? The mere thought had her sighing with pent-up need. What was it about his lips that used to make kissing him feel like she was being turned inside out? Was it the thickness of them, the way they could be soft and gentle one moment, hungry and persistent the next? No, it had to be a combination of skill and intention. RJ was intentionally sexy as hell, smooth in a dominating sort of way, and mouthwateringly handsome.

And she was out of her everlasting mind for thinking of him along these lines again. They were never getting back together. Ever. She'd made sure of that when she'd left him and tried her best to forget about him over the years. Of course, forgetting him completely hadn't worked, but she'd finally gotten to a point where she was at least comfortable with knowing he'd always have a place in her heart. As for RJ, he wasn't a man who moved backward—he'd surely locked her and the life they once had firmly in his past.

She went back to the room and grabbed her toiletry bag, then returned to the bathroom to put her shampoo, conditioner and other personal items on the large built-in shelf inside the shower. The stall was huge, or at least it was bigger than the one in her apartment. In fact, the bathroom itself was bigger than two rooms of her apartment put together. She may have been staying in what they deemed the "regular" rooms at Marina Bay, but there was nothing regular about this bathroom. There was as much marble in here as was in the lobby at the only five-star hotel she'd ever visited in Manhattan. Dual vanities beneath a large mirror, freestanding tub, plush white towels in several locations so she wouldn't have to run around trying to find one. Rectangular light fixtures hung from silver cords in the ceiling, which matched all the chrome fittings throughout the space. It was elegant and lavish and exactly the type of place where the Golds would hold a wedding.

With a soft sigh, she opened the glass door again and stepped inside. Okay,

there were two showerheads in here, one at the ceiling with dual recessed lighting and one on the wall in the usual spot. There was enough space in here for her to have at least four friends over and, thank all the deities, there was also a bench. After washing her body and hair she was tempted to get out and fall onto the bed—to possibly cry over the disaster the night had been—but thoughts of RJ held her still.

He used to love washing her, dragging the soapy loofah over her skin in movements so slow and decadent she thought she'd died and gone to the best spa in heaven. His big hands could provide such a gentle and soothing touch, and the way he stared at her while he was doing it... She sighed and dragged her tongue slowly across her bottom lip. The water was getting cool so she turned the nozzle until more hot water pounded against her skin. Lifting her face to the spray until it cascaded over her, she moaned at the warmth flooding her.

RJ always washed every other part of her body before easing his hands between her legs. On a ragged moan she resisted the urge to push her hands in that direction. Instead she reached up and grabbed the handheld showerhead from its base on the wall. Lifting her leg, she placed one foot on the bench and edged the shower head down between her thighs, letting the warm spray of water pelt her there.

A soft sigh slipped free at how good the water felt on her sensitive skin, and she let her head fall back, eyes closing. She recalled the many times RJ had rinsed her body free of all soap, moving his hands over her slick skin. His complexion was just a shade or two darker than hers, their melanin always shining bright in pictures they took, leaving her with snapshots of the Black love they celebrated so freely. She missed him.

She put her leg down and turned so she could sit on the bench, then leaned back against the marble wall, lifting the showerhead to her breasts now. She missed everything about RJ, from his tongue on her nipples to the way his thick fingers pushed possessively inside her pussy. Both her legs came up this time, feet planted on the bench as she let her knees fall to the side. With one hand she aimed the showerhead at her clit; with the other she pressed a finger to the same tightened bud and began to rub.

She moaned loudly, the sound echoing throughout the stall as she worked herself into a fevered frenzy. He'd looked good tonight, even in simple sweats and a T-shirt. His arms were still strong and muscled, and his thighs—damn that man had thick, sexy thighs and those sweatpants did nothing to

hide that fact. Something else the pants didn't hide was the impression of what she knew was a long, heavy dick. On that memory she slid her fingers over the slick flesh of her pussy, easing two into her opening. Crying out with the pleasure, she then bit down gently on her bottom lip and began to pump her fingers inside while the hot water rained down over her skin.

RJ used to go so deep inside her she felt like they were connected. And that's exactly what he'd whisper to her: "You're a part of me now." Over and over he'd say those words, and she'd believed them. She'd wanted to be a part of him, a part of the love that had blossomed so wildly between them. She'd wanted it all. Until it became clear that she couldn't have it.

With that last thought her fingers moved faster, pressing her body to find the release she needed so desperately. Circling her hips, she matched her own rhythm, chest heaving, breasts jiggling with the motion. Water still rained down from the showerhead in the ceiling, pelting the floor of the shower like background music to this personal seduction. Her body tingled as pleasure surged through every crevice, edging her closer to the precipice. Sliding her fingers out of her opening, she went back to working her clit, circling it frantically, panting, waiting, wanting, needing this release like she needed to live. When her climax came it was strong, seizing her entire body and snatching her breath for the seconds it took for her to fall.

Moments later she was sated, tired, pissed about her broken vibrator and still totally confused as to what her next steps with RJ would be.

* * *

The first thing RJ did upon returning to his suite was boot up his laptop and search: *Grace Hopkins, journalist, New York*. He'd tried not to keep close tabs on her over the years, figuring it was counterproductive to continue longing for a woman who didn't want him. Now, since that woman had decided to step back into his—or rather, his family's life—he wanted to know everything.

Pictures of her appeared on the screen and he sat back in the chair rubbing a finger over his chin. She was still fine as ever. Her skin was like the smoothest chocolate covering her svelte body, with curvy hips and more than ample breasts. She'd always worn her hair long, and tonight it had hung in waves past her shoulders. Her breasts had looked amazing in the tight T-shirt, nipples so hard he'd wanted desperately to rub his fingers over them. He

licked his lips, knowing he'd never get that image of her looking so damn alluring out of his head. From the laptop screen her whiskey-brown eyes stared back at him, tauntingly, seductively. One hand curled into a fist while the other fingers continued to worry over the hair on his chin.

High cheekbones, slender nose, plump lips. Need pulsed through his body like a sickness, and he furrowed his brow. Closing his eyes, he hoped for more restrained thoughts. He had to think about this clearly, to see beyond the face he'd once thought he would look at every day of his life. But with his eyes closed, memories of her laugh—the light giggle that inevitably morphed into a throaty chuckle—made him want to repeat whatever he used to do to bring it out, again and again. The way her hair always tickled his face and chest when she leaned over while riding him. The straightness of her back and the way her glasses slid down on her nose whenever she was sitting at her desk typing on her computer. How she chewed spoonfuls of Raisin Bran as if it were the best cereal in the world—which it was not. Her scent, soft and sweet like honey. The feel of her fingers as she massaged his shoulders after a long day at the office.

“Dammit!” His eyes shot open and he pounded his fists on the desk, shaking the laptop. Why'd she have to come back, and why now of all times?

He released his fingers, put them over the keyboard and began scrolling through articles she'd written. There were pictures of her at charity functions, one with the ASPCA. She'd always had a soft spot for dogs but had said she wanted a house in the suburbs with a large yard and kids before owning one. Hadn't he tried to give her that house, kids and a dog? Anything. He would've given her anything she wanted as long as he could go home to her every night and wake up beside her each morning.

Apparently, she hadn't wanted those things with him. It'd felt as if she'd ripped his heart from his chest and carried it out the door as she'd left the restaurant that night. The velvet blue Tiffany box open with a Soleste cushion-cut diamond engagement ring had sparkled up at him from the table where she'd left it. He didn't recall how long he'd sat there—twenty, forty, another sixty minutes, perhaps. He'd been unable to move, every part of his body shocked into stillness, covered in embarrassment. Eventually he'd left and taken the ring with him, carrying it home to his penthouse in Manhattan and throwing it across the room. Anger, heartbreak, betrayal all soared through his body that night and in the days that followed. Major said he'd been as mean as a rattlesnake for the following month. His mother had been a

little easier with her words, declaring him sullen and temporarily displaced. He'd just wanted to break something, anything, everything in his house for starters. Everything Grace touched, from the door handles to the pots in the kitchen. On a rage one night he'd ripped the sheets from his bed and tossed out every set he had, only to have to go through the annoying task of ordering new ones the next day. But eventually, he'd gotten over her.

At least he'd thought he had.

Staring at her on the screen now, seeing the accolades she'd garnered over the years, he noted her smile, the flecks of deep amber in her eyes, that little scar on her chin where she'd fallen down the steps at eight while trying to be a majorette.

She shouldn't be here, and she definitely shouldn't be writing about his family. Dragging his hands down his face now, he wondered what to do. How could he handle this so that no one in his family had to know what was going on? Bringing up this feud now, days before Riley and Chaz's marriage, would ruin everything. His sister had fought long and hard for her happiness, and Chaz was the one for her. Ron and Tobias had put that grudge to rest, deciding that their children—Tobias had raised Chaz after his sister died in a car accident—deserved to be happy and unhampered by mistakes of the past. It had been a valiant stance for both men to take, and RJ had been extremely proud of his father for giving Riley his blessing. Not that Riley needed it—she was going to be with Chaz whether or not anyone in either family approved. RJ loved his sister's tenacity.

He loved his family, period. His parents would celebrate their thirty-sixth wedding anniversary in four months. His father was retiring and the new plaque on RJ's office door would soon read Ronald Gold III, Chief Executive Officer. The position he'd been groomed for his entire life was in arm's reach, and he was eager to step into the big, impressive shoes his father would be leaving.

What he wasn't about to do was let Grace and whatever words she planned to write hurt them. If that meant he had to go head-to-head with the woman who'd crushed his heart and made it impossible for him to ever love again, then so be it. First thing tomorrow morning he was going to find Grace Hopkins and send her on her way. If she protested—which she would because Grace was as ambitious and ruthless as him when it came to her career—then he'd resort to other measures. Pulling up his email, he started a message to his assistant instructing her to find out who Grace was working

for and whom she'd already contacted within the fashion industry in the last few weeks. He wanted to know everything she'd done in the last decade, everywhere she'd been, every guy she'd been with...gritting his teeth, he took that last part back. He didn't need to know who Grace had been involved with. Even ten years later, his heart couldn't take that pain.

CHAPTER FOUR

RJ AWOKE THE next morning to thoughts of Grace. Aside from the obvious physical attraction—as noted by the semi-erection he'd returned to his hotel room with last night—memories circled in his mind. After dating for a year and a half, RJ had weighed all his options, he'd listed the pros and cons, and considered every possible factor of proposing to Grace, except the one where her answer was no. They were in love, of that he'd never had a moment's doubt. Nine months after their first date, they'd moved in together. He knew everything about her, and she knew everything about him. They meshed well with the other's family. Everything was in sync, and yet she'd still walked away without explanation.

To be fair, he hadn't asked for one. Not that night or any time after. If she could walk away without looking back, he'd decided he could, too. And in not looking back, he'd never allowed himself to trust or seek out love again. He wasn't giving another woman the opportunity to break his heart. Besides, he'd known there was never going to be another woman like Grace. Not for him, anyway.

Now, after a restless night's sleep, he still had no idea how he was going to deal with her arrival on the island. As the upcoming CEO of RGF he had to consider how this story would ultimately affect the company. The feud was no secret. In fact, RJ was certain that a portion of the media coverage RGF and King Designs had received over the years was a direct result of the known conflict between them. Since the initial whispers of the feud—which had come from Ron's accusing Tobias of stealing and someone in the office overhearing that argument and leaking it to the media—reporters had taken every opportunity they could to ask Ron and Tobias about it. Whenever a new line was launched by one company all eyes would immediately turn to the other to see what they would do to up the competition. Ron and Tobias never had to speak another word about the feud because the media and those in the fashion industry did enough talking and speculating about it to keep it afloat year after year. To RJ's way of thinking, his father and Tobias had simply sat back and let it work to their advantage. When he became CEO, RJ planned to take a more preemptive approach. And since the time for him to take over was in the near future, he decided he might as well get started now.

Grace was back.

At this resort, which had been reserved for family and one hundred wedding guests—close friends and business associates—for the next two weeks. So how had she gotten a reservation? Veronica. He needed to speak to Chaz's aunt as soon as possible and as discreetly as he could manage. He didn't want Chaz or Riley to find out about this.

And he wanted Grace gone.

She'd been gone for so long already, and he'd told himself that was fine, that he'd built an even better life without her. Sure, he'd known all along that was a lie, but nobody else had to know that. Keeping his private life private, even from his family, was something RJ had always done well. While Maurice and Major were media favorites, Riley spent her time dodging reporters and the like. RJ could go about his business without too much fanfare because his siblings provided enough conversation about their personal lives to keep the attention off him. That suited him and his preference of retaining all his intimate feelings, fears and desires to himself.

Grace was leaving this island today, no matter how much he'd been turned on by seeing her again. It was as simple as that.

As if to solidify those words and cut off any further thought about the situation, his phone chimed from the nightstand where he'd plugged it into the charger last night.

"Yeah?" he answered gruffly and immediately, as if whoever was calling might somehow know that he'd been thinking about how to get his ex-girlfriend away from here.

"Mornin', sunshine," Maurice's all-too-chipper voice sounded through the phone.

"Make it fast," he told his jovial younger brother. "It's barely seven."

Maurice's response was a hearty chuckle. "Hey, man, I get it. You and I aren't the morning people in the family. But Riley is and she has this crazy itinerary we're all supposed to be following."

RJ closed his eyes, bringing his free hand up to squeeze the bridge of his nose. "Let me guess, your highly organized and punctual fiancée told you to call me. But we all know that I'm better at staying on schedule than you are."

"Truth. However, we've never all been on vacation at the same time, so assuming the rules that apply in the city are now tossed out the window, I'm doing what my lovely Desta asked, and reminding you that we're scheduled for lunch and a hike up the mountain at noon. This means we all need to meet

at whatever destination is printed on the itinerary, which you also have as an email attachment, at eleven thirty.”

This was insane, or cruel, or whatever the word was for something he couldn't believe he was involved in. His mother had mandated this a vacation and yet he still felt like he was on the clock. His life was normally dictated by his Outlook calendar, which was carefully coordinated with his assistant and linked to the company executives' schedules. He'd planned to do work while he was here anyway; he just didn't like that work being traded for social outings he was sure he could do without.

“I'll be there,” RJ grumbled, because what else was he going to say.

“Cool. Don't be late,” Maurice joked before disconnecting the call.

RJ frowned, but his irritation quickly dissipated as he put his phone back on the nightstand. He loved hearing his brother sound so relaxed and happy. Even though Maurice had always been the jokester of the siblings—certainly more outgoing than his twin, Major—he'd had a traumatic experience during his early college years and had only recently moved past the guilt it had left with him. Part of that moving on had come from Desta, who'd worked for their family for years but had just claimed Maurice's heart a little over six months ago.

And just like that his mind went back to couples, love, happiness. All things he'd reached for at one time but had lost just the same. Tossing the sheets to the side, he eased his naked body out of the bed and went directly to the bathroom to shower, shave, brush his teeth and otherwise get his mind right for the task to come.

An hour later, after he'd dressed and checked his emails, RJ was once again walking around the resort. His conversation with Grace last night hadn't led to her telling him what room she was in and while he could've easily asked registration, he felt that was walking a very thin line toward creepy. Instead, he went back to the spot he'd found her last night. Her room had to be close, considering her story about her vibrator falling off the balcony. He hadn't even let himself think about how or why that could've possibly happened.

RJ walked behind the same building again. This time, in daylight—and without the distraction of his ex and her infamous sex toy—he noticed the expansive pool area cluttered with lounge chairs on one side and cabanas on the other. There was a bar and light island music playing. As he walked toward the bar with the singular focus of grabbing a drink, regardless of what

time it was, his phone vibrated in his pocket. He didn't reach for it but kept walking because he'd just spotted the only person he'd let distract him right now.

Grace was sitting at the bar. Veronica King had been seated beside her but was just slipping off her stool. Veronica smiled at Grace, said something and walked away. RJ gritted his teeth but didn't speed up toward her. He didn't want to speak to Grace with Veronica close by. What he needed to say was private.

"We need to talk." He leaned over to whisper in Grace's ear the moment he was close enough. "Now."

She hesitated only briefly before picking up the tablet sitting on the bar and dropping it into the large blue plaid tote bag hanging on her stool. He waited while she eased off the seat with much slower movements than Veronica.

Even though RJ had seen her from a distance and had chosen to come up close behind her, he hadn't been prepared to come face-to-face with her again. When she turned, the air was knocked from his lungs as he stared at her once again.

Her hair was styled differently today, pulled up into a messy bun, leaving her neck and shoulders bare. She wore a strapless high-low dress with a black-and-white paisley print. Bangles circled her left wrist, and long silver earrings in an abstract geometric shape dangled from her ears. There was nothing spectacular about her wardrobe choice or the light makeup she wore. In his business he was accustomed to seeing women dressed more fashionably or sexy. He was certain Grace's goal wasn't to attain that look—it never had been. And yet she'd always been the best-looking woman in the room—or, in this case, at the pool—without a doubt.

"Well, good morning to you, too, RJ." Her tone was easy, the smile that followed cordial as she slipped the straps of the tote onto her shoulder. "Shall we take this discussion someplace a little quieter?"

"Gladly," he replied tersely before reaching out to touch her elbow.

To anyone looking at them the action seemed normal, probably inconsequential, but he'd seen the quick flash of light in her eyes and the way her easy smile had faltered just a bit. He had his own reaction to touching her again, a fierce punch of lust that almost had him gasping, but for a quick clearing of his throat. She didn't pull away but fell into step beside him as he began walking them toward the private cabanas. There were six of them lined in a row about twenty feet from the bar. A second row stood at the other end

of the pool. He directed them to the center one, then untied the sashes at each of the four corners. The beige-and-white curtains fell around them, enclosing them in the space. They were completely blocked from view.

“I want you off this island,” he said.

“Well, tell me how you really feel.” Her derisive reply came as he turned to face her.

She dropped her bag onto the light gray cushion of the sectional sofa and stood with one hand on her hip, a prickly expression on her face.

“I told you last night,” he snapped, and moved across the spacious area. If he were here under different circumstances, he’d certainly compliment the resort on the calming color scheme that traveled from the draping fabric that surrounded them to the sofa and the rug beneath their feet. Exquisitely designed lanterns were on each of the three glass-topped tables, while a matching one hung from the ceiling. An ice bucket and complementary water bottles—still and sparkling—sat in the center of a longer table, and a television was mounted to the thick column above it.

“You need to leave and drop this story, Grace. I’m giving you a chance to do it on your own before I make the call to your newspaper and have it pulled.”

Her one hand fisted at her side. “You wouldn’t dare,” she said through gritted teeth, but the look in her eyes said she knew he would.

“Whatever it takes to protect my family,” he replied. “You know that’s how I roll.”

“I know you’re being unnecessarily unrelenting in this matter.” She sighed, dropping her hand from her hip. “You know me, RJ. I know you and your family. I would never intentionally harm any of you.”

“But your words could harm us all and I’m not willing to take that risk.” Especially not since he was soon to be running the company. The personal consequences aside, RGF may be at the top of the industry presently, but he knew all too well how easily the tide could shift. Scandal, whether based in truth or manufactured, was one of the top game changers.

She opened her mouth to say something else, but then clapped her lips shut and took a deep breath. Releasing it slowly through her nose, he watched her shoulders relax as she tried to gather her emotions. Grace didn’t play games. A person always knew where they stood with her because she was often brutally honest. Right now, she was trying to remain calm, likely trying to think of a way to convince him she could write this story without damaging

his family's reputation. He should probably tell her right now it was a futile mission.

"I'm not going to leave," she said, her voice as calm as the soothing colors in this space. "I have a job to do and I know you can relate to that. All your life you've done nothing but work toward the goals you set for yourself, and now the position your father groomed you for is waiting for you to claim." She nodded. "Yeah, I've heard the whispers about Ron possibly retiring this year. That's not news—your father alluded to it in one of his press conferences about the wedding a few months ago."

"That has nothing to do with this." He had no idea why he bothered with the denial. Grace knew him just as well as he knew her.

"It has everything to do with this, and I'm here to reassure you there's nothing to worry about. The story I plan to write will only shed light on the past and uplift two powerful men for the generations coming after them. For Black professionals like you and the generation after that, to show that despite the odds they can succeed. *We* can overcome the odds and shine just as bright as anyone else." She sounded like a motivational speaker, her tone uplifting and poignant.

"They're already trailblazers in the fashion industry, role models for others coming up in the trenches. You bringing up the past can only hurt them now." He was positive of that, because while other reporters had mentioned the feud, he knew Grace. She worked better than that. She wasn't going to write a snippet about the feud; she'd dive deep, add every detail she could find and print a thought-provoking story that he feared might harm his family more than help them this time around.

"Why won't you just leave?" he implored, frustration and lingering pain etched in his tone. "You did it before, you can do it again."

* * *

His words were meant to sting, to anger her and push her away.

Instead of acknowledging the momentary slap of irritation, Grace took a step closer to him. She squared her shoulders and tilted her chin, holding his gaze. "This isn't like before. And I'm not leaving. If you call my editor, I can assure you he'll buckle down on this story. He might even print something about your threat to stop it, spinning that to suggest some type of guilt or cover-up on behalf of the Golds."

Eddie would also undoubtedly have something to say about her personal relationship with RJ already interfering with her job. The very thing he'd warned her about.

When RJ lifted his hands and dragged them down the back of his head in the way that told her he was frustrated but listening, she pressed on. "This is an important story and you're too good at what you do to not consider the positive implications it could have on your company. Any exposure is good exposure."

"Don't do that." He moved closer so that only one of the square tables stood between them. "Don't try to put a sales spin on this."

"Why not? You know it's a proven tactic. Just like Riley and her fiancé allowed the media into certain aspects of their wedding planning. And Major and Nina were part of that fake engagement promotion before actually falling in love. It all increased your bottom line, putting RGF well ahead of King Designs for the last two quarters."

Yeah, she'd kept tabs on RGF and the family she'd once been a part of, because she cared about them almost as much as her own family. She'd grown up the youngest of four sisters. Hope, the newly engaged concert pianist, was the oldest; Charity, the happily married psychologist with four children, was second; and Trinity, the obstetrician who'd been married for three and a half years, had yet to give their parents, Milton and Videtta Hopkins, any grandchildren. Trinity was just two years older than Grace at thirty-six. Grace had come from a big, loving family, but there'd always been sibling rivalry. Her relationship with Riley Gold had been totally different from what she'd experienced growing up in Westchester. With Riley, there'd been no competition, just a normal friendship with the young introverted Gold daughter who would go on to become one of the most talented and influential women in the fashion industry.

"Why did you keep track of what was happening in my family?" RJ's gaze was pointed, his proximity suddenly intense.

RJ stepped around that table to stand just a couple feet away from her, and suddenly the space felt small. "I'm a reporter," she said with a shrug. "And our no longer being a couple didn't mean I stopped caring about them."

If her tone was a little huskier than it had been, she totally planned to ignore it. Writing this story was her goal, and getting past RJ's gatekeeping was an obstacle she had to overcome. Neither of those things could afford the interruption of her body's immediate response to his.

He looked way too good standing there with a suspicious expression on his beautiful face. Today he wore khaki shorts and a crisp white polo, like a *GQ* cover model at the beach. Her breasts immediately felt fuller, her pussy aching with need even after that shattering orgasm she'd had last night. Nothing about this situation was simple, but the past wasn't something she wanted to keep dwelling on.

She could write this story with or without RJ, but because of the past she should've known would be this prevalent between them, the small measure of guilt she still felt from walking away from him, and the love he'd so freely offered her long ago, she wanted his approval.

That thought had occurred to her late last night as she'd lain in bed thinking of their impromptu reunion. She'd left him to pursue her goals on her own. To be here now, in this place, wanting him to accept her as a journalist, was a bit ironic.

"Keep your enemies close. Remember you used to say that?" She knew he not only recalled one of his favorite quotes, but that he'd probably already been thinking it. "Since you already know who my sources for the story will be, what if I give you a summary of my meetings with them so you have some idea of what's being said?"

It was an olive branch, one she didn't have to offer. One she probably shouldn't have offered because it could be construed as showing bias and if Eddie found out he'd definitely yank her off this story and probably never hire her again. Yet she wanted RJ to believe that she'd protect his family with the same fervor and loyalty as him. She wanted to make amends.

He tilted his head, contemplating her words. RJ considered a situation from every angle before making a decision. He possessed a brilliant analytical mind that some overlooked because they were too in awe of his handsome features, deep umber-toned skin and muscled physique.

"You expect me to trust you?"

"I expect you to remember." Even though she kept telling herself not to focus on the past. "To reach deep down inside to that time when we both trusted each other implicitly. You knew back then when I was covering some of the Fashion Week shows that I'd never write anything false or harmful about your family."

Of course, that had also been the time they'd been sleeping together every night, cuddling in each other's arms in the early morning and promising to love each other forever.

“You sure you want me to remember, Gracie?”

He closed the space between them with one quick movement, standing only a breath away from her now as he lifted a strong hand and cupped her neck. She moved with the action, didn't have much choice over her faithless body, stepping into him and the intense partial embrace. He'd begun calling her Gracie a few months after they'd started dating and she'd taken it as an endearment, her heart fluttering each time she heard it. Today was no different.

“I want you to...” She paused, the next words lodging in her throat. What the hell did she want at this moment? So many things were flying through her mind. Snippets from their past, touches, kisses, declarations of feelings she hadn't felt in far too long. She couldn't concentrate.

“You want me to what?” His question was a mere whisper as he lowered his face to hers. “To kiss you? To touch you?”

His lips were only inches away when she opened her mouth to speak, their gazes locked, bodies touching. “Trust me.” The two words were a breathy whisper.

He brushed his lips over hers and she gasped, needing more than just that teasing touch and hating how clear that thought was in her mind now.

“You trust me, Gracie?” he asked while lacing his other arm around her back, pressing her to him. “Say you do.”

Right now she'd say about anything if he'd just kiss her. Urgency, that's all she could think about. The feel of her breasts pressed against his hard chest, the strength of his touch engulfing her, the throbbing of his dick against her, they were all taking center stage. With that knowledge it occurred to her that this may not be such a good idea, that mixing business with what she was certain would be fantastic pleasure held the potential to go horribly wrong. Grace didn't give a damn; she'd never been one to deny herself pleasure. “I do,” she whispered before cursing and closing that breath of space between their lips.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT ONLY TOOK seconds for the years they'd been apart to melt away. They were right back in his penthouse, on one of the many evenings he'd come home from work and they'd been unable to keep their hands off each other. But something told RJ this was going to be different.

His mouth slanted over hers; she leaned into him, touching her tongue to his. Every cell in his body came alive again, filling him from the inside out with warmth, need and satisfaction. He moaned into her, keeping his eyes closed, because if this was a dream he didn't want to wake up. She felt just like she used to, fitting into his embrace as if they'd been specially made for each other. Moving his hand down her back, he crushed her against him until they both moaned. She'd lifted her arms, wrapping them around his neck, and now her hands were pressed to the back of his head.

Tongues and teeth, gasps and groans, mingled fiercely. All he could think was that he wanted more. It only took one step forward from him, one back from her, and she was near the sofa again. He eased his hands down past her plump ass to the backs of her thighs so he could lift her legs and wrap them around his waist. He used to love entering her this way, pumping deep and fast inside her until she cried out his name. As if he were taking that memory seriously, his hips were thrusting, his thick erection pressing against her like they'd already removed their clothes and decided to have sex.

But they hadn't. It wasn't even something he'd considered when he found her at the bar a while ago. He'd only searched her out to tell her that she had to leave, because that's what he wanted, for Grace to go away. Again...didn't he?

She tore her mouth from his, and both of them breathed heavily at the temporary respite. He continued nibbling along her chin, dragging his tongue down the line of her throat when she tilted her head back. Last night that heart pendant had been right there, at this hollow spot. He licked there feverishly, loving the faint hint of the floral-scented perfume she'd no doubt sprayed on her neck after showering this morning. Her ass was so soft beneath his hands, and he squeezed each cheek loving the way she pressed her pussy into him as if she was as hungry for him as he was for her.

As if she wanted him again. When she hadn't before. That thought had him

going still. The sound of their heavy breathing almost beat out the sound of his thumping heart as every word she'd spoken to him last night and just moments ago circled like a brewing storm in his mind. Grace was back, but not for him. She'd come to this island to write a story about his family, not to pick up where they left off. She was a journalist, so that made sense. This—his hands on her ass, mouth on her skin, the same pulsing need for her he'd always had—did not.

She must've been thinking the same thing because as he slowly released his hold on her, she hurried to put distance between them, smoothing down her dress as he turned away, trying desperately to calm the rage of emotion soaring through him.

* * *

Nowhere in her planner did it say “kiss RJ,” or rather, “let RJ make you weak with need.” No, Grace was absolutely certain she'd never written any such thing.

She was meticulous about her schedule, jotting down every step of her day in one of her many planners. She scheduled everything from the time she would wake up to how many USB drives she packed as backups for her backups. She could, admittedly, be a little intense about planning and more than a little wanton when it came to RJ Gold.

He had his back to her now as he stood across the room opening a bottle of water. She felt like a schoolgirl who'd been sneaking around, hoping the principal wouldn't open the door and catch her. Because she'd been caught skipping class more times than she could remember during high school, there was real mortification to the thought that someone could have come into the cabana while RJ's very clever mouth had been making her moan.

“I've gotta get going. Riley has us scheduled for a lunch and hiking thing.” He didn't turn to face her but took a deep swallow from the water bottle.

Okay, so they weren't going to talk about what just happened. Cool. Great. That worked for her.

“Yeah, I should get going, too. I have another interview scheduled with Veronica later this afternoon, just before dinner with the family, I guess. And I need to go back to my room to do some more research.”

“What did she tell you?” He did turn to face her then.

She'd been about to lift a hand to check her hair but now that he was

staring at her, she changed her mind. “We only had a short time to speak this morning because Tobias woke up early and wanted to have breakfast with her. So we just talked about how she and Tobias met.”

“How did you link up with her? Do you two know each other?” RJ looked pretty perplexed as he questioned her, and she wondered if his confusion was solely related to meeting with Veronica.

“Her stepson from a previous marriage is a freelance photographer I’ve worked with on stories a couple times. He gave me her number and I called her.”

“And she agreed to tell you all of her husband’s business, just like that?” He sounded incredulous, and she had to admit it did seem unbelievable, but it was true.

“I told her exactly what I wanted and she agreed. She said it was high time people knew what they were talking about when they referred to the feud.” And Grace had been elated at having the close, personal insight into Tobias King.

“I’m gonna talk to her,” he said, and Grace eyed him cautiously.

“If I don’t write this story, RJ, someone else will. And if Veronica has something to say, she’ll say it to me or the next person.”

He didn’t immediately respond.

“You know I’m right,” she said after a few seconds of silence.

The heated glare he’d given her just before that kiss was gone. Now he was giving her the look he most often carried during business hours. The scrutinizing facial expression that said he was determined to be in control and there was nothing she could do about it. But Grace had already offered RJ all the control she could give him. He could either take it or leave it.

With that thought she grabbed her bag and pushed the straps up onto her shoulder. “I’d gladly show you my work, let you in on this story every step of the way, but if you don’t want that, it’s fine. Just know that I’m not backing down. No matter how good that kiss felt.”

She started toward the front of the cabana, but his hand on her arm stopped her from reaching for the material to let herself out.

“It felt good for me, too.”

It was a quiet admission that sent a flush of warmth over her skin. Telling her that wasn’t easy for him. RJ didn’t like admitting any weakness—and kissing her when he was angry with her for being here in the first place was definitely a weakness. One she hadn’t counted on.

Maybe it was time for her to make a partial admission as well. “I don’t want to hurt you. I never did.”

He shook his head with a quick jerking motion. “I don’t want to talk about the past anymore.” She was happy to hear him say that. “And I don’t want you writing this story. But—” he turned her slowly until she faced him again “—I know how much your career means to you. I also know how tenacious you can be, and while I’m certain I could shut this down even if it cost us a little backlash in the press, I’m not going to do that.” He shook his head again. “I’m no stranger to ambition.”

That was an understatement. She didn’t say that, but simply gave him a tentative smile. “We can meet tomorrow morning and go over my notes from Veronica.” There—she was putting the offer out there again. She told herself this was how she’d deal with any possible source in a story, giving them a little so that they’d eventually offer her a lot. But it was probably a big fat lie. A part of her had always wanted to give RJ everything, just not at the risk of losing herself and all she wanted to become. She told herself that was then and this was now. Could she give him everything now? Was there a place in his life for her after all they’d been through? Of course not. They weren’t the same people, too much time had passed, he was about to become CEO of RGF, an even bigger and more high-profile position than he’d had before. And she was writing a story that would undoubtedly expose some of his family’s deepest and darkest secrets. Ambition had once been their biggest commonality; now it was probably their greatest obstacle.

His hand still touched her arm lightly. “I have to check my schedule.”

“Me, too.” Moving her free arm, she reached into her bag and found the business cards she’d tucked in the side pocket.

“We’re quite a pair,” he said.

She looked up at him again just as he clapped his mouth shut.

“I mean, what other two people would come to a beautiful island like this and still keep scheduled appointments.” He finished the statement with an uneasy look.

“You’re right about that. But I definitely plan to take some R & R time while I’m here. I mean, who knows when I’ll be back here again?”

Probably never, since traveling alone wasn’t high on her list of things to do and after walking away from RJ. The extent of her dating life since had been dinner-and-a-movie dates, and occasionally sex before getting in her car and driving home. Work was her priority and it created an easy excuse for those

parameters. An excuse that didn't allow her to admit she didn't want to do any fun social activities without RJ in her life.

"Yeah, well, at least you're not being forced to do that. Riley's got us booked mostly every day up until the wedding." He pulled his hand from her arm to look at his watch. "Speaking of which, I really have to get going."

"Sure, no problem. Here, take my card." She pushed it at him and he accepted it. "I'll be around tomorrow if you want to hear about my interview. Just call or text me and we can set up a place and time to meet."

He nodded, glanced down at the card he now held and then back up at her. "I'd like that," he said. "I'd like to hear what Veronica says."

"Good." She almost said "it's a date" but wisely kept her mouth shut. She and RJ weren't dating.

"I'll see you tomorrow then," he said after a few more uncomfortably silent moments.

"Right. Tomorrow." Then, because she couldn't stand this awkwardness that had replaced the desire brewing between them, she turned and lifted the curtain before stepping out of the cabana.

Nobody paid attention to her as she walked toward the building where her room was located, and she didn't look back to see RJ again. It was smarter to play this as a business dealing, not any type of rebooted affair. She and RJ as a couple were over. No matter how much her body wanted that statement to be false.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS A little after ten the next morning when RJ knocked on the door of Grace's room. While waiting for her to answer, he adjusted the tray containing two cups of coffee he held in one hand and clenched his fingers over the bag of doughnuts in the other.

"Hey," Grace said brightly when she opened the door. "Oh, wow, you brought coffee. Bless you!"

She stepped back out of the way before he could respond, so RJ walked into the room saying, "Yeah, I was hungry so I figured you might be, too."

"I thought you might've had something on the schedule for today, so I was surprised when you texted me a while ago."

Today she wore another pair of those barely-there shorts, the ones that seemed to make her legs appear miles longer than normal, giving him way too many ideas about traveling up and between those legs. Yesterday's kiss had rattled him. It had felt like they'd never parted ways and yet, things were drastically different now. With a shake of his head to rid his mind of the thoughts of Grace that'd plagued him during the hike yesterday afternoon and well into the evening, he walked through her room, toward the table near the open patio door. She had her laptop set up on the table. Two spiral books and a handful of pens were scattered around as well.

"Nah, I got out of it. Well, to be fair, the women are having dress fittings."

Grace was already lifting one of the coffee cups to her mouth, pausing only to say, "And you don't need to try on your tux?"

He shrugged. "I've tried that tux on three times already. If it doesn't fit by now it never will."

She chuckled and then sipped from the coffee. "Still the defiant one."

He watched the way her lips pressed over the lid of the cup, then forced himself to stop being a horny fool and reached for his own cup. "No, that's still Maurice. He's the one who suggested we all skip the fitting and go do something fun."

She'd taken a seat in the chair near her laptop, so RJ sat in the one across from her.

"And this is your idea of something fun? Bringing doughnuts and coffee to my room while I work?"

For a second, he could only stare at her. She had no idea how lovely she looked with her hair in a messy ponytail, her oversized T-shirt hanging off one shoulder and her face scrubbed totally free of makeup. “Maurice’s idea of fun was scuba diving, which interested me even less than trying on that tux. Besides, you love doughnuts.”

She sat back in the chair, both hands wrapped around the cup she now held close to her face. “Coffee and doughnuts are the breakfast of champions,” she said, her tone a little more wistful than it had been just seconds ago.

“So you always said.” He grinned because he couldn’t help it. There’d been so many mornings when they’d had this discussion.

Where RJ preferred something from a more traditional breakfast menu—eggs, bacon, pancakes—Grace wasn’t as formal with the meal and claimed the caffeine and sugar mixture she loved worked much better for her throughout the day. He could never vouch for how the combo improved her productivity, but it never failed to bring about that glorious grin on her face. The one that almost matched her look of being well-pleased in bed. How many times had he lost himself in that particular look? The one where she was heavy-lidded, a slow smile spreading across her face just before she’d drag her tongue over her teeth and say something sexy like how much she loved being with him.

“RJ?”

“Huh?” he responded to the raised tone of her voice, clearing his throat in hope that the thoughts he’d just had would dissipate. He felt like a total ass for thinking about getting her in bed at ten in the morning.

“I asked if you and the family had a good time on the hike yesterday.”

He sipped his coffee and watched as she reached for the bag of doughnuts, taking the Bavarian cream-filled one that had been dusted with powdered sugar. Deciding it was smarter not to watch her bite into it, he fished into the bag for one of his own. He grabbed a chocolate frosted one and a napkin, then set his coffee on the table.

“I’m not a hiking kind of guy,” he started. The memory of yesterday afternoon with the rest of the bridal party was still a hilarious scene in his mind.

“Oh no, what’d you do? You’re on an island, not at some snowcapped mountain. From what I can see of the resort it’s beautiful up there.”

Chewing the bite he’d taken only allowed him to shrug initially. “It’s a big rock. A steep rock. And it was about two hundred degrees outside by the time

we finished lunch at the beachside café and started walking.” He left out the part about Nina and Desta being attacked by a bug and Major and Maurice bumping into each other trying to swat it away until they looked like a scene from a comedy sketch. They’d eventually tumbled into the waterfall they’d been exploring.

“Yeah, it was pretty warm out yesterday. I’d been hoping to get a chance to go for a swim, but I fell down so many rabbit holes while doing my research.” She was taking another bite of her doughnut, licking the cream from her finger.

The second he caught himself groaning he stuffed the last bite of his doughnut into his mouth. “You still enjoy swimming,” he said when he was finished chewing. It was a statement, not a question, because when they were dating, Grace had used the pool in his apartment building more than he had.

“You know it.” She reached for a napkin after finishing her doughnut. “And whenever I get around to buying a house, that’s going to be a prerequisite.”

A pool and at least four bathrooms because she didn’t want to have to share a bathroom with guests or anyone else. There’d been a few discussions about what type of home they might like to have together. Those conversations about their future had seemed so natural after the first year of their relationship, leading him to believe that they’d been on the same page about their trajectory.

“Your parents have a pool at their house. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind you moving back just to use it on a daily basis.” He liked Grace’s parents, Milton and Videtta. They were both professors of Black studies at a local college and he’d had the pleasure of meeting them multiple times during the year and a half he’d dated their daughter. He’d even called Milton and asked for his blessing before proposing to Grace.

“Yeah, they do, and so do Charity and her family of five, who’re still in Westchester with my parents. They have a house on an acre of land with a massive pool that I’m in each summer when I go home for vacation.” She grinned like an excited child just talking about swimming. It was her favorite hobby.

“That’s right, Charity and Bret, that’s his name, right? They’d just gotten engaged when—” He couldn’t finish that sentence. “You said she has a family of five, so she’s got three kids now?”

“That’s right.” Her hand was already in the bag for another doughnut—

powdered and cream-filled again. He knew exactly what she liked. “Two girls and a boy. Trinity and her husband, Randall, don’t have any kids yet, to my mother’s dismay. But they’ve got a huge aquarium full of brilliantly colored fish.”

He nodded and smiled. Major just had a custom aquarium built in the basement of the house he and Nina purchased a few months ago. RJ thought it was a clever addition to the space but he wasn’t a pet person, at least not after the idea of having a dog with Grace had fizzled.

“And how’s Hope?” The oldest Hopkins sister had a chilly personality.

Grace’s raised brow and half smile hinted that she knew exactly what he was thinking about her sister. “Just got engaged three weeks ago,” she said with a smirk that surprised him almost as much her announcement.

“Really?”

So Grace was the last single sister. Did that bother her? During the time they were together she’d shared with him the pressure she’d always felt to be just as good as her parents and sisters were in their careers. The weight of that task had sparked her competitive and tenacious nature. He’d been able to relate as the oldest Gold sibling—it was expected that he’d one day helm the company and he’d strived to prove he was up to the task. As he was also the last single sibling in his family, it occurred to him that while successful in business, he and Grace had fallen short in the area of love.

“Yeah, somebody finally cracked that stiff exterior of hers.” She laughed. “And my mom’s ecstatic that the majority of her daughters are about to be married. ’Cause you know, the more who’re married, the greater the possibility of that houseful of grandchildren she wants.”

There was a hint of something in her tone, irritation, sarcasm. The relationship among the Hopkins women had been a close-knit but still strained one, if he recalled correctly. From the sound of Grace’s voice and the look on her face, it still was. What if problems with her family dynamic had influenced her decision to not accept his proposal? Frustration threatened to push to the surface. If anyone knew about juggling different personalities and expectations within a family, it was RJ, and Grace knew that.

“Well, I guess you can’t blame her. My mom hasn’t said anything yet but I know she’s waiting very impatiently for her first grandchild.” RJ obviously wouldn’t be giving her any since that was another idea that had drifted away when Grace left. He hadn’t imagined how much that realization bothered him until this very moment.

Grace wiped her hands against each other, sending remnants of powdered sugar floating in the air. As if she hadn't thought that would happen, she reached for a napkin.

“At least your mom isn't sending text messages to you, the only unattached child, saying things like ‘the clock's ticking.’ I got one just a couple days ago saying ‘maybe you'll meet a hot guy on the beach. You don't need a marriage certificate to have a baby.’ Can you believe that? Now she's even telling me to get pregnant before I get married. What parent does that?”

Obviously, Videtta Hopkins did. And apparently, Grace didn't like it. RJ didn't like how this conversation was going. The tendrils of resentment mixed with unsettling desire created an enormous weight in his chest. He took a gulp of his significantly cooled-down coffee and prayed it would relieve some of the pressure. It had been an awfully long time since he'd thought about children, or rather the ones he wouldn't have because he'd decided not to ever let another woman into his heart again. And unlike Grace's mother's stance on reproducing, if the woman wasn't in his heart, she certainly wasn't having his baby.

“How'd you respond to her?” Again, this wasn't the question RJ really wanted to ask.

What he wanted to know was so simple—why the hell had she walked away from him and the love he thought they'd shared? But really, what did it matter now? He knew that some people needed closure for things like this, but not him. Nothing she said was going to change the fact that his heart had been broken and he could never trust giving it to anyone, especially Grace, again. Nobody knew how much strength it had taken for him to move past her leaving before; if it happened again, he wasn't certain he'd survive.

She shrugged. “I ignored the text. Which I know really pisses her off and maybe borders on disrespect or some other parental rule, but I just can't think about any of that right now. I've got other stuff on my mind.” She put her hands on her keyboard then and tapped a few keys. “Speaking of which, I know you really came here to talk about my meeting with Veronica, so let's get to it.”

He sat there for a few moments while he presumed she pulled up her notes up. The war going on within him—one side warning he keep a safe distance, the other edging him toward her like a magnet, drawing them together in spite of everything that made sense—continued until he finally sighed wearily. Then he stood and walked over to her. She jumped when he touched

a finger to the corner of her lip.

“You missed a spot,” he said softly, and wiped the powdered sugar away.

* * *

Well, damn. Moments after that very intimate touch, Grace’s voice was surprisingly steady as she briefed him on her notes. She silently commended herself for not leaping across the table to straddle him. She’d wanted to. Oh man, had she wanted to.

She’d spent the twenty minutes after he’d sent her that text in the bathroom, brushing her teeth and running her fingers through her hair. She’d slept in a tank top and panties and hadn’t yet decided what her outfit for the day was going to be. The shorts and T-shirt were on the top of the pile in the drawer so they were it. And he still hadn’t mentioned yesterday’s kiss.

Neither had she, for that matter. The memory was startlingly clear in her mind and the desire between them was very much still a real thing. Case in point, the way her pussy had throbbed the second his finger touched her lip and the subsequent dampness of her panties thereafter. It was insane, yet undeniable—she still wanted RJ.

At least, she wanted to have sex with him. Anything beyond that was out of the question. That ship had long since sailed and there was no going back. Not that she wanted to anyway. This current situation reminded her that walking away from RJ had been the right decision. The Gold and King families had rented an entire resort for a wedding. Reporters and fashion bloggers all over the world were clamoring for any clue about this very event because they desperately wanted to be the ones reporting on what promised to be a glamorous spectacle. Not because they wanted to see Riley and Chaz commit to their love and each other. No, that was buried beneath the prestige of being in this family, the same way she knew she would’ve been.

“So Veronica wants you to write her book?” RJ’s brow wrinkled, his eyes narrowed.

“Is that all you got from my notes?”

He angled his head and frowned. “It was the biggest bullet point, yeah. Are you kidding me?”

Now the cursing came.

“What’s she thinking?”

“If you ask me, she’s thinking that it’s just a matter of time before she

becomes the ex-Mrs. Tobias King number eight and she's trying to get her ducks in a row."

In addition to the feud with Ron, Tobias was known for his many marriages. And Veronica, who'd been married twice before herself, was known for burying her husbands and keeping control of their estate. So Grace figured the two were in a standoff of sorts and in the meantime having "hot monkey sex," as Veronica had described it.

"It's unacceptable, and she definitely left that little detail out of the conversation I had with her last night after dinner," RJ said.

This piqued Grace's interest because she hadn't really thought RJ was going to discuss the article with Veronica. She probably should've, though. RJ wasn't known to mince words with anyone, for any reason. And as ticked off as he'd been about this story combined with Veronica's open invitation to Grace, it made sense that he'd want a confrontation with the woman.

"What'd she say to you?" Grace opened a new document and kept her fingers poised over the keys, ready to take notes.

RJ's brief hesitation and the leery look on his face she spied when she lifted her gaze from the screen said he noticed her actions and wasn't sure about proceeding.

"Look, last night I had a thought." She cleared her throat and sat up straighter. "What if I tell the story of Ron and Tobias, pioneers and visionaries reshaping the fashion industry. I start from the beginning—the best friends throughout grade school and college, the grooming of two dynamic leaders at the hand of Ronald Gold Sr. There's a stumble in their path that ultimately spurs them on to the top of their industry. What were the steps they took to get there?" She'd started toying with the idea after she'd thought about what happened between her and RJ in the cabana for the billionth time yesterday.

He rubbed a finger over his chin, the hair of his goatee causing a rasping sound. "Focus more on everything they did to get where they are instead of the cause of the feud."

Well, put that way it sounded like she'd gloss right over the feud, which wasn't totally her goal. "The feud wouldn't be the focus of the story. Your father and Tobias would be. The families they both built and oftentimes put before their fashion houses. The secret to their success. How these two, who were once best friends, became enemies and competitors, the best of the best, and now are becoming family once again."

That sounded really good. She hurried to type it before she forgot the exact wording.

“Veronica said she didn’t see a problem inviting you here because the media would write what they wanted about us otherwise. This way, we had a semblance of control over the dialogue.” He made a sound that had her looking up at him. “I guess what she said makes sense.”

Grace agreed. “I mean, you’re sitting here right now sharing your conversation with her and I’m sharing my ideas for the story with you.”

“That doesn’t mean I have control over what you write.”

“Why would I go through all this if I planned to lie to you?”

She could see the moment his mind took that question in a completely different direction. The slow lifting of his brow said he probably believed she’d lied to him before about loving him when she had no intention of marrying him. That had always been her fear, that he’d believe everything they had together was a lie just because she refused his proposal.

“This is about business for me,” she hurriedly said. “It’s about me getting to the next step in my career. I’m going to write the very best story I can, revealing things about the families that no other journalist has revealed before while remaining in the parameters I’ve set. That’s all that matters to me.”

Not the past or the feeling that there was something totally new buzzing between them now.

“Yeah,” he said with a nod. “I know that’s all that matters to you. And all that matters to me is that my family doesn’t get hurt in the process of you tending to your goals. So we’ll keep checking in while you’re here.”

“Great!” She wasn’t able to hide her excitement at the agreement they’d come to.

“But first, answer this question for me,” he said.

“Sure, what is it?” She typed a note of his agreement but looked up when he hadn’t spoken for a few seconds.

“What’s the plan for dealing with this other thing between us?”

The way his gaze had grown darker, causing her heart to immediately thump wildly, told her the *other thing* was that scorching hot kiss from yesterday.

“It’s in the past,” she said quickly. Too quickly.

The blank expression he now wore didn’t tell her if he was okay with that or not, but she wasn’t going to elaborate on her answer. She couldn’t.

Not only had she and RJ moved on with their lives; there was still another

bit of contention she'd just broached in their conversation about her family. While Grace was achieving her goal of being just as successful in her career as her sisters were in theirs, being a wife and mother was still a bit daunting, and her mother's persistence wasn't helping. Videtta and Charity had made having a career and a family seem so easy. Trinity didn't have kids yet but she was married, and Hope never failed at anything. Grace knew the minute they both had children, the bar of Hopkins perfection would be even higher and even more unobtainable for her.

Sitting here like this with him—as if nothing had happened between them ten years ago or even twenty-four hours ago—was one of the hardest things she'd ever had to do. It ranked right up there with the day she'd walked out of his life, because this morning she'd had to reconcile with herself that she still had feelings for RJ Gold. Really significant feelings that she feared could easily carry her down a path she couldn't afford to venture on again.

She had no idea why she'd shared the content of her mother's text messages with him, or any of the specifics about her sisters and their families. Well, he'd actually asked her about the latter, but still, she needed to keep this as cordial and emotion-free as possible.

"We're having dinner at the Sienne Club tonight. You should come. It'll give you a chance to see the family again." He was already standing before he finished.

She cleared her throat and stood as well, rubbing her now slightly shaking hands down the front of her clothes. "You want me to come to dinner with you and your family?"

If she sounded shocked and confused it was because she was. RJ wasn't down for this story, and while she'd been ready to interview as many people in the family as she could, sitting at a table and having dinner with them was a totally different ball game. She knew this because she recalled the Gold family dinners and how close their family was. That was the part she wasn't ready for.

He shrugged. "You're the one hell-bent on doing this. The least you can do is sit down and have a meal with the people you plan to write about."

His words made her seem ungrateful or rude, neither of which she wanted to be considered. "Sure. I can come to dinner," she said as she followed him to the door.

He opened it and stepped into the hallway.

"Thanks for the doughnuts and coffee."

“No problem. You needed breakfast and I needed to catch up with you. So, as we agreed, we’ll meet daily after your interviews for an update on what you’ve been told and what you’re writing. We’re here for another twelve days, so you have that time to wrap this up because I don’t want any of my family disturbed on the day of Riley’s wedding.”

“I’d never do that,” she replied, getting a little annoyed that he felt it necessary to remind her not to be a jerk.

“Good to know. I’ll see you tonight.” He walked away before she could say anything else.

That was fine; she didn’t have anything else to say to him. After closing and locking the door, Grace moved back to the table. She sat in the chair again and stared at the coffee cup for what felt like an eternity. When her phone chimed with a text she checked it and read yet another message from her mother, this one giving her the link to an IVF clinic. She groaned and rolled her eyes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“GRACE IS BACK.” RJ said the words quickly, knowing that whoever heard him would immediately command the rest of them already seated at the table to ditch their current conversation and turn all their attention to him.

Everyone at the table went silent in less than three seconds. That worked better than he’d planned.

“Excuse me?” Riley asked, resting her elbows on the table across from him.

“Grace as in Grace Hopkins?” was his mother’s follow-up question. She was seated at the end of the table with his father at the head beside her.

Major was apparently up next. “Can you clarify ‘back’? Is she back from a trip? Back in your life?” He moved his hands to indicate he could go on but would rather RJ just tell them more.

RJ decided to do that. “She’s here on the island because Veronica invited her.” He’d timed his announcement just right because so far on this trip, Veronica and Tobias had been late to dinner every night. The only one currently at the table who wasn’t part of the Gold family was Chaz, who was glaring at RJ with a frown on his face.

“I’m gonna have to echo Major and ask for clarification,” Chaz said.

RJ could totally relate to the irritation he saw building in his future brother-in-law. “I ran into Grace the night before last and she told me the reason she’s here is to write a story about Dad and your uncle and the feud between them. When I asked how she knew where we were and was able to book a room, she said Veronica had given her the information.”

Chaz leaned back in his chair. “Dammit!”

Riley rubbed a hand over his arm.

“So, wait,” Nina started, “you’re saying that your ex-girlfriend is here to write a story about our families and his aunt is responsible?”

The basis of that statement was true, but the minute RJ noticed his father frowning in Chaz’s direction he knew he definitely needed to say more. “Grace was already set to write the story. She had a contact who put her in touch with Veronica.” And before anyone else could speak, he added, “She’s agreed to focus the story on Dad and Tobias and how they’ve built their empires and not the details of the feud. I’ll be paying close attention to her

progress.”

“You negotiated a way for her to write the story?” Maurice asked. “And you’re going to be, for lack of a better word, *working* with her on this?”

While Major looked almost as peeved as Chaz, Maurice’s tone was light. His question was definitely aimed more at RJ on a personal level than the impact of this story on the family.

“Calling the paper insisting that the story be dropped could’ve backfired on us. Eddie Kane, her editor, is known for his exposés and he’s meticulous with details. Fighting him would’ve no doubt been very public and even if we’d won on that front, Grace is a freelance journalist—she could’ve easily taken the story to another paper.” And she would’ve. RJ had no doubt about that. Grace thought this story was going to get her a full-time position, and she was probably right. It was a huge story and if she pulled it off, she’d definitely reap amazing accolades. He wasn’t prepared to take that from her, but his family didn’t need to know that.

“I think it’s a fine idea,” Marva said.

RJ’s attention immediately went to his mother. She wore a white dress with a bold fuchsia floral print tonight, her hair pulled back into a neat bun. She was the epitome of style and grace to RJ, a college graduate and an esteemed philanthropist. When his mother caught his gaze, she smiled and his chest warmed. There was nothing like his mother’s smile—her happiness meant the world to him. Always had.

“Grace is a wonderful journalist,” Marva continued. “She’s always handled her stories with tact and decorum that too many in the media lack. If she’s here to write a story about us, then we should be sure to give her all the facts. It may be our only chance to have a story told the way we want it.”

“Those were my exact thoughts,” Veronica said as she and Tobias arrived.

Tobias King was a tall man who commanded attention with his deep, raspy voice and snow-white beard against a sepia complexion. He was the same age as Ron, who’d decided to go bald and completely shaved his face when his gray had started growing in. Veronica was twelve years younger than Tobias, and the purple dress she wore tonight was a little tighter than the one she’d worn last night. Her golden-hued skin tone complemented the honey-blond curls that fell over her left shoulder.

“I figured it’s good to know what people are saying about you, but it’s even better when you can put the words in their mouth.” Veronica smiled around the table at everyone.

“You should’ve asked me before inviting someone to my wedding,” Chaz snapped, and then turned his attention to his uncle. “Did you know about this?”

Tobias looked grim but added a half-hearted smile to Chaz. “Not until last night, and believe me I told her exactly what I thought about her duplicity.”

“It’s not duplicitous if I came clean.” Veronica signaled for the server.

RJ wasn’t sure where the conversation was about to go but it didn’t matter, because Grace walked up to the table at that moment.

“Good evening,” she said, her tone clear and even, her gaze immediately finding his.

She wore a boho-style maxi dress tonight in a royal blue tone that made her deep mocha skin glisten. He’d always loved jewel tones on her, and she looked amazing tonight with her hair held back behind her ear with a sparkly clip, the rest left flowing in deep waves. He suddenly wished that this was a dinner for two and that there was no story as the topic of conversation, just the two of them having a normal reunion. That thought was interrupted by the sound of his mother’s voice.

“Grace.” Marva immediately rose from her seat. “It’s wonderful to see you again.”

RJ stood and watched his ex-girlfriend walk past him to greet his mother. The hug they shared was genuine. He could tell by the way his mother closed her eyes the moment Grace was locked in her embrace, and how Grace held on to Marva as if she’d been waiting forever for that moment. The sight caused in him an uneasy flicker of sorrow, and he breathed a sigh of relief when they finally pulled away from each other.

“Here, Grace, I’ll move down a seat.” Nina also stood, and RJ’s attention went from the hug to his sister-in-law, who’d been sitting next to him and was now doing the unexpected.

When Grace passed him again it was to smile at Nina. “Thank you.”

“No problem. I’m Nina, by the way. Major’s wife.”

Grace shook Nina’s offered hand and took the seat beside RJ. “Oh yes, I’ve seen a few pictures of the two of you. On your website, of course.” Nina and Major ran the Gold Service, a company geared toward app integration and tech development for the fashion industry. They had amazing new ventures on the horizon. “Congratulations to you and to you, too, Major,” she said.

Major smiled at her. “Thanks, Grace. It’s good to see you again.”

Eventually RJ sat down and more pleasantries ensued as Grace was introduced to Chaz and Tobias King. Ron remained quiet through the ordering of their meal, but as they all sipped their drinks, he finally settled his gaze on Grace to ask his first question of her.

“Why now?” He sat back in his chair.

The senior member of the Gold family wore a tan linen suit tonight, which fit expertly over his expansive build. RJ and his father shared not only the same body type, but their skin tone and deep voices were almost identical, as well.

Desta and Riley had been discussing something while his mother and Veronica were sharing a strained but cordial conversation. All of that stopped with Ron’s question and everyone at the table waited expectantly for Grace’s reply.

RJ waited for some sign that Grace was in distress or felt uncomfortable in any way. The instinctive spurt of protectiveness startled him. He was prepared to jump in and say whatever was necessary to smooth things over between her and his family, but when he glanced at her she was just setting her wineglass on the table. Turning her attention to his father, she met Ron’s gaze and smiled.

“Why not now, sir? What better time than now to focus on a success story, when Black people and so many other marginalized groups are feeling the repeated sting of racism and baseless disdain in this country and oftentimes abroad as well.” Her brows arched as she spoke. “This story has the potential to build hope by showing how you and Mr. King were able to overcome adversity both within your inner circle and from the outside to build two of the most influential empires in the fashion industry.”

Across the table, Tobias took a breadstick, tearing a small piece from its corner before stuffing it into his mouth. He stared at Grace while he chewed.

“I think she’s right,” Riley said while Ron remained silent. “Chaz and I were determined not to carry the brunt of a feud that didn’t involve us and yet it still hung over us until the moment you and Tobias stepped up and called a truce. Both companies have experienced a steady bump in sales since that announcement, and I know it’s partially because of the unity the two of you showed within the industry when it mattered most.”

“What do you need from us?” Marva asked Grace while placing a hand over her husband’s.

RJ watched as his father glanced down at his wife’s hand. When Ron

looked up again there was an expression of calm on his face that hadn't been there moments ago.

"I'd like to interview each of you to get your thoughts on not only the feud but how you think it's influenced who you are personally." She paused and looked at Desta and Nina. "Or in your case, Desta and Nina, how you believe it shaped those you ultimately decided to love and commit to," Grace said.

Grace believed that Desta and Nina *decided* to love and commit to Maurice and Major, the way she'd decided *not* to do those things with him. RJ hated that her walking away from him still bothered him so much. It was taking more strength than he thought he had to not confront her with all the questions that circled his mind about that long-ago night. He just wasn't certain he was ready to hear the answers. "Be careful what you wish for" was a very real mantra in his mind, and if Grace told him something like she'd wanted to be with someone else or she'd fallen out of love with him, he didn't know how he'd respond to that.

Desta gave a light chuckle. "Well, I don't know about the deciding to love part. I'm not sure any of us made the decision to love, rather than having love find us and basically beat us over the head until we came to our senses."

While Nina and Riley nodded their agreement, Tobias spoke up. "I don't know about that. Once love is in the picture it can influence many decisions, good and bad."

Now Grace did tense. RJ sensed it in her silence and when he glanced at her, the slight falter of her smile. The servers arrived with their food then, and the meal proceeded with much lighter topics of conversation. RJ appreciated the interruption. Love wasn't something he wanted to hear about, especially not when the woman he'd considered the love of his life was sitting right beside him, *not* wearing his wedding ring. They survived the meal and were just finishing dessert when the next blow to the precarious state of his and Grace's personal life came.

"So why'd you two break up?" Veronica asked. "You're so lovely together."

This time Grace visibly stiffened. There was no smile on her face and her wineglass was empty, so she couldn't reach for it as a refuge—which RJ knew she wanted to do because he wanted to grab his glass and ask for another shot of vodka. Without hesitation he eased a hand beneath the table to where she'd dropped hers into her lap. He clasped her wrist and she relaxed enough that he could lace his fingers with hers.

“Let’s keep the past in the past,” Ron intervened. “And instead we can talk about this volleyball game that’s scheduled for tomorrow.”

Chatter around them began again and RJ leaned over to whisper in Grace’s ear. “Sorry about that.”

“No. Don’t be. I expected it,” she replied.

She was lying. He knew from the crinkle in her nose when she attempted to smile afterward.

“Oh, volleyball is going to be so much fun,” Riley said. “And now that Grace is here, we’ll be evenly matched.”

“What?” RJ blurted. He’d been hoping the uncomfortable part of this evening was nearing an end.

“She’s right,” Maurice chimed in. “Now it all works out, we’ll be evenly matched with Grace joining us tomorrow.”

“But Grace isn’t joining us tomorrow,” RJ replied, releasing Grace as if their entwined hands were the cause of his siblings’ suggestion.

“Why not?” Riley asked.

“It does make sense,” Desta said. “She evens out the women versus the men and if she’s here to interview all of us, it stands to reason that she’d also hang out with all of us.”

No, that definitely didn’t make sense. RJ had spent the better part of the day kicking himself for letting the “keep your enemies close” philosophy goad him into making this arrangement with Grace. He’d been especially annoyed with himself for kissing her because in the end—i.e., this morning—she’d simply turned him down again. She’d brushed off what had happened between them in the cabana as being “in the past.” Each time he saw Grace he felt as if he were locked into a front-row seat on a roller coaster of emotions. One minute he couldn’t resist remembering how good they’d been together, leading to the persistent need to touch her, kiss her and protect her from all harm. And the next minute, fresh anger churned in the pit of his stomach at the confusion that still plagued him over her abrupt departure. Now they had an agreement and he couldn’t back out. Though he wanted access to her story, he’d planned to check in with her during quick coffee breaks, not spend every second together doing every insane item on Riley’s itinerary.

“I played a little volleyball in high school,” Grace replied. “I’d love to join you tomorrow.”

His head whipped around so fast it was a wonder he didn’t injure himself.

What the hell was she doing? This morning she hadn't made a move to stop him from leaving her room, but now she was suddenly keen on spending a few hours out of her day with him tomorrow. Or had the chance to spend time with his family in order to gain more info for her story prompted the change?

"Maybe I could schedule some time to meet with Desta and Nina a little before the game?" Grace asked by way of follow-up. "That way I'll be totally focused on playing later."

RJ hated the spike of hope he experienced with her suggestion to handle business first, as if she'd somehow heard his question about her true motivation for participating in the game.

"Sure," Nina replied, and Desta also agreed.

"Well, tomorrow sounds like it'll be fun," Ron said. "But tonight, I'd like to walk along the beach with my wife."

RJ watched his father get up from the table and stand by his mother while she did the same. Ron's hand went to the small of his wife's back and Marva smiled at him, the love they still shared obvious in their expressions.

"Awww, that's so romantic," Nina said to Major after Marva and Ron had bid their good-nights and walked away. "When we've been married for thirty-six years, I hope we still look like that."

"They're definitely relationship goals," Riley told Chaz, who lifted her hand to his lips for a soft kiss.

Tobias stood then, taking Veronica's hand. "Well, that's the cue for the other set of old heads at this table to also say good-night."

Veronica waved at Grace before leaving.

"They're going on three years in case anyone was wondering," Chaz said.

Nobody at the table commented, even though they were all probably trying to figure out how much longer Tobias's latest union was going to last. Chaz had shared his uncle's philosophy on being married so many times—"never be afraid of falling in love"—with the Gold brothers months ago. RJ begged to differ with Tobias's words. Love was definitely something to be afraid of, which was why he'd steered clear of it since getting burned the first time.

"Nightcaps by the pool?" Maurice suggested. "Which building are you staying in, Grace? Well, it doesn't matter, I'm sure RJ will escort you to your room so you can change into your bathing suit and then bring you back to the pool with us."

RJ couldn't go to the other side of the table and slap Maurice against the

back of his head like he'd often done when they were younger and his brother said something foolish. Like he so desperately wanted to do now.

"You're still the clever one, Maurice," Grace said lightheartedly. "But I can walk myself back to my room."

She was standing and moving away from the table before he had a chance to catch her. Probably because he was too busy sending Maurice a sour look. Moments later he caught up with her just as she was about to walk out of the restaurant.

"So you're coming to nightcaps by the pool, too?" He didn't know what else to say but noted that his tone was a mixture of surprise and irritation.

Grace kept going through the doorway, stepping out into the evening with its balmy breeze. He followed and stopped when she did the same.

"Yes, I'm going to change and then join you and your family at the pool because, like Desta said, I'll get a much better idea of how everyone was affected by Ron and Tobias if I'm spending a lot of time with them. Is that a problem for you?"

Words didn't immediately come as RJ realized the real problem here was staring him directly in the face. He *wanted* to spend a lot of time with Grace. Whether or not it made sense, or if it was smart, didn't really matter. What he discovered after sitting beside her and hearing her talk to his family as if she hadn't been gone for the last ten years, after holding her hand when he thought she needed support, was that he really wanted to be with her. Despite the story and even if it was temporary.

"No. It's no problem at all." He cleared his throat. "I'll walk you back to your room."

Her face remained blank, so he couldn't tell if she was relieved or worried about his response. "I wasn't joking when I told Maurice I'll be fine walking by myself."

He nodded and started moving. "Yeah, well, I know Maurice is the jokester of our family, but he was spot-on when he said I'd want to walk you to your room and back. C'mon, let's go."

She fell into step beside him without argument, and marveled at how differently this night was turning out to be.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THIS WAS A shocking change from how Grace thought she'd spend her evening. She'd planned to enjoy the pool at the resort when she had a chance, had even said as much to RJ when they'd talked about it this morning, but she hadn't imagined visiting the massive pool available to guests in the private villas.

During the walk over, RJ had explained the layout of the resort, as if she'd needed to know this was where the people with the big bucks stayed. It was the exclusive area of the resort—not for those like her who'd put a slight dent in her savings to afford the airfare and two-week room stay. The pool outside her building was a nice size, and the cabanas around the bar area were large, as well. But this pool, with its cabanas the size of her apartment, was phenomenal.

“You sure you're gonna be okay doing this?” RJ asked as they came to stand at the edge of the gated swimming area.

They'd stopped at his suite after hers, and he'd changed out of the navy-blue slacks and button-front shirt he'd worn at dinner. Now he wore light gray board shorts and a loose-fitting white tank top. On his feet were leather flip-flops, and he carried a black travel kit she'd watched him drop his phone, wallet and room key into.

She'd dumped the contents of the small clutch purse she'd carried at dinner into her tote bag and tossed in a pair of shorts in case the sarong she was wearing got too wet. “I'll be fine. You don't have to worry about me, you know. I've been around your family before.”

This was something she'd repeated to herself throughout the day in preparation for tonight's dinner. But as it turned out, being around the Golds again had been easier than she'd thought it would be. While she'd expected anger and demands for her to explain what happened between her and RJ, none of that had occurred. Instead, Marva had been her wonderfully warm self and Maurice, Major and Riley had talked to her as if she hadn't been away all this time. Desta and Nina had also been welcoming. Chaz and Tobias hadn't said a lot to her directly, but they'd both seemed comfortable by the middle of dinner. Veronica had been her normal chatty self, annoying Grace only when she'd asked what happened between her and RJ.

Grace suspected they'd all been thinking that, but no one except Veronica had the guts to ask. She would be forever grateful to Ron for circumventing that question and changing the subject.

Things were different between her and RJ now, but that didn't mean her mind never slipped back to a time when they'd been a couple, too.

As they'd all sat paired up at dinner, it had been so easy to let herself believe it was once again true. Good food, easy conversation—even when RJ reached for her hand in a way he often used to while they were out—she'd accepted and let herself believe, if only for that brief time.

"There they are. We were wondering what was taking you two so long," Maurice said, winking at RJ when he looked Maurice's way.

They'd taken the cabana at the farthest end of the pool. The one that was only about twenty feet away from the hot tub she was dying to get into.

"We saved you the two lounge chairs over here." Desta directed Grace to the seat beside her.

It was strategic placement, she immediately noted. The four guys were sitting on the outside of the square setup while the women were in the center. Easier for them to talk to her without interruption. She might've been a little concerned if it didn't work to her advantage as well. For as many questions as she was certain Riley, Nina and Desta were planning to ask her, she'd decided to ask them plenty more.

Grace put her bag beside the designated lounge chair and RJ dropped his on the one behind hers.

"Let's get a drink," he said, and waited while she walked around her chair to join him.

There'd been a larger bar when they first entered the pool area, but it was closed. The one a couple feet from their cabana was smaller, completely stocked and self-serve. No doubt something the Golds had arranged.

"What can I get you?" Chaz asked as she approached. "I'm the designated bartender for the moment, so keep it simple." His smile came quick, giving her the impression that his ire during dinner hadn't been directed at her after all.

"She prefers a martini, but keeping it simple, watermelon vodka or a glass of pinot noir," RJ said before Grace could speak.

This morning he'd remembered she liked doughnuts and coffee for breakfast. Now he was recalling her favorite drinks. How she managed to smile when something like a billion butterflies fluttered in the pit of her

stomach, she had no idea. “He’s right,” she told Chaz, and shrugged when Riley’s fiancé raised a brow in question.

“Okay, here you go,” Chaz said after pouring the watermelon-infused vodka into a glass over crushed ice.

“I’ll grab my own,” RJ said, stepping behind the bar with Chaz.

“Cranberry and vodka’s your comfort drink, but I saw you drinking it straight at dinner.” She had memories, too.

Chaz looked at RJ, who’d already grabbed the bottle of cranberry juice, then back to Grace. “You two are really something.”

We were. The wistful thought fluttered through her mind as Chaz walked away, leaving her and RJ alone at the bar.

“We’ve got good memories.” RJ finished fixing his drink.

“Yeah, glad the good ones stuck around.”

“Did we have bad memories?” He came back around to her side of the bar.

“Everybody’s got bad memories.” She lifted her drink for a sip.

“True,” he said. “But tonight, can we just talk about the good ones?”

Her every instinct said to scream no. They couldn’t talk about anything that involved their past. It had to stay off-limits, just like Ron had said earlier. But if that were true, she wouldn’t be here. Wanting to leave her time with RJ in the past but coming here to dig back through the years of Ron and Tobias’s early life was more than hypocritical of her. She had to make a choice.

“You used to enjoy sitting in the hot tub first, before going for a swim.” And in the years since they’d been apart, she’d grown accustomed to doing the same whenever possible.

He nodded in the direction they were walking. “Exactly where I’m headed now,” he said, looking over at her with a grin.

“Oh, we aren’t going back to the cabana with the others?” She’d been so busy trying to ignore the jitters in her stomach, hold on to this drink and keep her composure while being near RJ on a casual basis again, she hadn’t even noticed they’d changed course.

“They’re not going anywhere. Besides, I’d like a few minutes alone before we have to be part of the couples’ corner.”

She silently agreed. When they were at the hot tub, she placed her drink near the edge and stood to remove her sarong and flip-flops. He rounded the tub and did the same with his drink, then lifted his shirt over his head before kicking off his own sandals. They both stepped into the hot tub from opposite sides and eased down onto the bench.

“You still give those killer massages?” RJ asked, spreading his arms over the lip of the tub like wings.

Damn he looked good. Like really sexy delicious good lounging there with his naked chest and smoldering dark brown eyes.

“Haven’t given anyone a massage in a very long time.” She reached for her drink. She should’ve gotten it straight, or better yet, asked for whiskey instead. Brown liquor hit her harder and usually knocked her on her ass pretty quickly, which was why she didn’t have it while out in public. But tonight, she probably needed to be knocked out. Otherwise she had no idea how she was going to get through the rest of this night with RJ so close and so damn alluring.

“No boyfriend?” he asked.

She tilted her head and eyed him sarcastically. “Fine time to ask that question, don’t you think?” He’d been the one to bring up yesterday’s cabana tryst earlier this morning; now it was her turn.

“Touché,” he said with a sly grin. “So no boyfriend at the moment. That’s good.”

“Why’s that good? Because you don’t have a girlfriend at the moment?” She hadn’t recalled any tabloids saying RJ had a girlfriend.

“That, and because I don’t poach on another man’s property.”

She tossed her head back and laughed. “Now you know damn well I’d never allow myself to be considered someone’s property.”

“You know what I mean. If you’re seeing someone, you’re not doing anything with me. Period.”

She sobered. “I wasn’t aware that I was doing something with you now?”

Silence. As sure as the water bubbling around them was warm and the night was dark.

He reached for his glass, wrapped his long fingers around it and brought it to his lips. “I meant what I said about enjoying our kiss in the cabana,” he said after taking a drink.

She’d enjoyed it, too, which was why she was still staring at his fingers on that glass instead of responding to his comment immediately. Remembering the feel of his hands on her was taking a quick and potent toll on her body.

“Did you like when I kissed you?”

First, she had to take another drink herself—a gulp was more like it—and she really wished for that whiskey now. Surely the dark liquor would’ve been strong enough to wash away the feeling that her body was more than a little

prepared to totally betray her once again. “I wouldn’t have said I did if it wasn’t true. I always like when you kiss me.” She looked down into her glass. Her drink was half gone and she already wanted another. Anything to stop this burning need from attacking her.

“I liked how you tasted.” He took another drink before placing his glass on the rim of the pool again. “Smooth and sweet just like that drink.” When he nodded toward the glass, she followed the action with her gaze.

He was just about finished with his drink as well; just a few cubes of ice and barely a finger of red liquid was left.

“Your mouth was so warm and welcoming,” he continued. “I remember all the sweet, sexy things you used to do with your lips on me. So that quick, hot taste of you again made me feel drunker than I ever have from consuming any amount of alcohol.”

As she’d thought a few minutes ago, Grace had memories, too. Of the impromptu blow jobs she’d given him while he’d been driving, which could’ve easily ended with them veering off the road. Of kissing over each hardened nipple of his pecs, tangling her tongue in his mouth until they both moaned for more. She licked her lips and crossed one leg over the other, pressing one thigh down tightly over the other. “Why’re you doing this?” Her voice sounded low, quiet, pitiful.

“I want to kiss you again,” he said simply. “And more. How do you feel about that?”

RJ wanted to kiss her again. Her gaze flew to his mouth. His bottom lip was heavier than the top. She used to like sucking on it, dragging her tongue along the soft plumpness of his skin. That mouth, neatly framed by his goatee, was the most dangerous part of this beautiful man. His hands were another enticing feature, followed by the thick long dick that she knew from experience would rival any vibrator ever created.

Grace finished her drink, put her glass down and looked him directly in the eye. “I feel like that’s probably inevitable.” That was the damn truth. It would’ve been nice to say “Hell no, we’re not going there. We’re going to keep this just business and that’s all.” But every word of that would’ve been a lie, and if there was one thing Grace had never done, it was lie to RJ.

The next move was on him. Sure, she could simply stand up, cross the hot tub and straddle him, but he’d initiated this conversation. She wanted to see where exactly he planned to take it.

Before that could happen, someone called to RJ from the pool and just like

that, the thick haze of desire that had cocooned them in the warmth of the bubbling water was cracked.

RJ didn't speak right away but the immediate furrow of his brow said he was irritated. Well, good, 'cause now thanks to him she was hornier than she'd been in she didn't know how long. If she had to suffer, so the hell did he. With that thought she stood and climbed out of the tub, knowing he watched the sway of her ass as she made her retreat.

"C'mon, you don't want to miss nightcaps by the pool, do you?" She said over her shoulder, knowing she was playing with fire, teasing him and alluding to what was to come. It was something she'd always done well, something he'd always made sure she paid for later. A slither of excitement inched down her spine at the memory.

RJ got out of the water, too, grabbing his shirt and shoes in one hand before catching up with her. His gaze was hot and intent when he said, "They get half an hour, then you're coming with me."

CHAPTER NINE

RJ WAS TRUE to his word. Thirty minutes and another drink later, they were walking away from the pool and heading toward the villas. From what she could see through the darkness, there were at least four in this area, some a little larger, which she presumed meant they had more than one bedroom. RJ's, she recalled, was on the far left and looked to be a smaller unit.

When they'd come here so he could change earlier, she'd opted not to go inside, instead sitting on one of the lounge chairs outside the floor-to-ceiling wall of glass patio doors. Now he was using his room card to swipe over the security panel, and she watched those doors slide open. He'd left the light on and the drapes partially drawn.

Her flip-flops were still a little wet as she stepped onto the natural-colored wood flooring. The room was bathed in golden light, the walls and furniture a pretty neutral tone. For her, the most intriguing part of this space was the high ceiling, accented with thick beams painted a rich chocolate brown.

"Do you want another drink?" he asked from behind her.

She could hear him moving about as she walked farther into what she presumed was the living room. He'd closed the door and then she heard a swishing sound she assumed was the curtains being closed. Turning slightly, she saw a table with four cushioned chairs surrounding it. A bottle of wine with four wineglasses was in the center.

"Not if you want me to remain coherent," she said before turning to face him.

He startled her with how close he was, and his arms immediately went around her waist to pull her up to him. "Oh, you definitely want to be wide awake for this."

There wasn't a moment to respond before he came in for a kiss, his mouth taking hers in a fierce sweep of lips and tongues. The action took her breath away but she was quick to fall into the groove, lifting her arms to place her hands at the back of his head. His hands were everywhere, up and down her back, cupping her ass, pressing her into his already-hardened dick.

She'd known it was going to be like this. As they'd frolicked in the pool with his family, playing an impromptu game of water volleyball, the sexual tension between them had been ratcheted up to an almost explosive level.

Each time he'd brushed past her in the water, his palms moving over her ass or down her spine, she'd felt a little more breathless with desire. When she'd lost her footing and gone underwater unexpectedly, he'd been right there, arms around her waist as they both floated, bodies pressed together. She'd wrapped her legs around him that time and he'd slid a finger between her legs and beneath her bikini bottom for a quick touch to her pussy. Already on the edge of need, Grace had almost come right that second. Luckily for them they weren't alone in the pool, and the women had a point to prove by beating the men.

But that was over now.

With his palms planted on the cheeks of her ass, he hoisted her up until she was again wrapping her legs around his waist. He broke the kiss and she let her head fall back while he used his teeth to nip along the line of her jaw and down her neck.

"How many bathing suits did you pack?"

The question floated through the haze of heavy arousal in her mind as he began walking.

"Three, no, four, I think." Truthfully, Grace couldn't think. Not beyond how good his mouth felt on her skin, or how badly she wanted him inside her at this moment.

"I'll replace this one," he grumbled, and seconds later when they were in the bedroom, he set her down.

The sarong and bikini bottom went first. He yanked at both until she heard a tearing sound and all the material fell from her body. To be fair, the sarong was nothing more than a gauzy strip of fabric, and the bikini bottom was even less—two triangles and ties at her hips. She'd picked the sexiest one to wear tonight when she realized RJ would be seeing her in it. The ones remaining in her suitcase were pretty basic one-pieces, because this trip hadn't been planned to catch a guy and get laid.

His hands were busy on her top now, yanking at the strings until it fell from her breasts to join its companions on the floor. He lifted her again, this time dropping her onto the bed where she did a little bounce before scooting to the center of the king-size mattress.

The bed was in the center of the room facing another wall of windows with the curtains already drawn. More beams adorned the ceiling but she didn't look at them long. Not when RJ was pushing his board shorts down past his thighs to step out of them. He hadn't bothered putting his tank top on as

they'd walked from the hot tub, so she'd had an unfettered view of his muscled chest for the past hour. She hadn't realized how much she missed seeing him up close and naked, not until he climbed onto the bed with her.

She pulled him to her so she could get her mouth on his again. This kiss was hotter, slower, wetter as feelings of familiarity engulfed her. Kissing RJ had always been like a journey for her. Whether it was a small kiss or a full-mouth exploration, her body and her soul had always delved deep into it, as if she were made only to kiss him. At first, she'd thought that was a weird thing to consider—one woman, one man, one kiss, forever. But that's precisely how it felt. He knew just how to drag his tongue over hers until she moaned with longing. With her eyes closed, it always felt as if the moment their lips met, she stepped into another place, a smaller space where there was only room for the two of them.

He came down with her, covering her body with his as she lay against the mattress once more. Lacing his arms around her back, he held her close in an embrace not so much constricting as possessive, as if he had no plans to let her go. That worked well because she had no plans to go anywhere. The kiss went on for what seemed like forever and then, the second he pulled back, leaving both of them breathless, it didn't seem like long enough.

For endless moments he just stared down at her and she stared up at him, their gazes locked, some silent communication hovering between them. She rubbed her palms against the back of his head, gliding over the smooth skin. Their chests remained melded together, both rising and falling quickly with the intense pattern of their breathing. His hands were in her still damp hair and she lifted a leg to wrap around his waist.

The groan rumbled deep in his chest as the action opened her wider, so that the length of his dick pressed against the warm folds of her pussy.

"You love teasing me, don't you?" The question was a rough growl that sent waves of pleasure along her skin.

"I love feeling you against me," she replied, and lifted her ass a little to thrust into his hardness.

He sucked air through his clenched teeth, closing his eyes as she continued to rub against him. The friction, the heat, his dick sliding along her already slick core, was tantalizing and she couldn't stop. She enjoyed pushing him to edge, taking them both there until they could barely think, or breathe, before coming together. Pulling his face down to hers again, she licked his lips. Tucking her tongue against the corners of his mouth, dragging it along the

outline of his lips, feeling the crisp edges of his mustache.

She could hear him breathing, a heavy rumble starting from the center of his chest and rolling up until it was released in a barely restrained huff. She continued to move her tongue along his lips, stopping at the bottom one only seconds before sucking it into her mouth. He leaned into the action, moving his hips now to maintain the rhythm of his dick against her pussy. She was so wet his thickness simply slid along the path, creating a sound that was driving her insane.

Holding his head in her hands, his lip in her mouth, it was all so familiar. Memories of so many nights like this flooded her like a tidal wave and she shuddered with their intensity.

Helpless. That's how he'd said he felt when she was sucking on his lips, helplessly drawn to her in a way he could never explain with any other word. Well, tonight it was her turn to feel that way. She couldn't stop this if she wanted to, if her career, hell, if her life depended on it.

When he groaned the next time, he moved to take her into another kiss, this one painfully slow and deep. She couldn't hold him any tighter against her, couldn't whisper his name in her mind any louder. His hands moving in her hair, fingers grazing her scalp, body moving with infinite slowness over hers. She was drowning.

He pulled away, breaking the kiss and her hold on him as he moved from the bed. She watched him walk, his taut ass, his muscled thighs and his gorgeous hard dick jutting out from his body. Her mouth watered and her pussy pulsed. He pulled a box of condoms out of a bag sitting on the floor, ripped it open and took out a packet. Her gaze was trained on his every movement as he tore that packet open and pulled out the latex.

"You still love to watch." It was a statement spoken as he put the latex to the tip of his dick and rolled it slowly down his length.

There wasn't an ounce of shame to her truth. "Hell yeah, when you're the show."

He grinned, that sexy-as-hell RJ grin that she'd like to think was meant only for her. Then he was on the bed again, lifting her legs until her ankles rested on his shoulders. Turning his face from side to side, he kissed each ankle, brushed his hands down her calves and looked at her.

"You sure?" he asked quietly.

She lifted her hands to her breasts, cupping them before touching her fingers to each nipple. "I need."

It was all the permission required, and in the next moment he was pressing his dick into her, stretching her, filling her, completing her.

* * *

Dying.

That was RJ's new word for how he felt when he was inside Grace.

It was like dying and being reborn into something he knew he could never be without her.

Grasping her ankles, he spread her legs and continued to move in and out of her, his teeth clenching, eyes closing with the pleasure ripping through him with each stroke. The sound of her whispering his name had his eyes gradually opening. She was gorgeous with her damp hair spread out around her face, hands slipping slowly from her breasts to grasp the comforter beneath her. The dark tone of her skin was luminous against the pale hue of the bedding. Her deep brown nipples were taut as her breasts jiggled with the force of his thrusts.

It took concerted effort—and the fact that he didn't want to pass out from lack of oxygen and miss this glorious pleasure—to remind himself to breathe. “Damn.” The one word came out in a whoosh when his gaze fell lower and he watched his dick sinking deep inside her.

How had he gone so long without feeling the tightness of her muscles grasping him, sucking him back in the moment he dared to pull away?

“Ronald.” She sighed his name. His full name, as she always did during sex.

Nobody called him that, not even his parents. In fact, no Gold with that name had ever been called that—his grandfather had gone by Ronnie. So hearing her say it always made him feel like he was special to her. But that couldn't be, not anymore.

The thought spurred a need to stake his claim, even if only in this bedroom. Tonight she would be his, and he would show her once again how it felt when they were together. Pulling out of her, he ignored her moans of protest and eased off the bed. The way she shot up told him she thought he was finished and she wasn't happy about it. Her eyes widened and she opened her mouth to speak.

“Shhhhh.” He noted the instant rise of her brow, a look that clearly asked if he was out of his mind for basically telling her to shut up.

Grace was a beauty, there was no doubt. She was also confident, brilliant and feisty as hell when provoked. He didn't verbally respond to her expression but stood at the end of the bed and reached for her legs again, easing her to the end of the bed as well. When she was there, he took her hands and pulled her to her feet. With a hand to the back of her head and one slipping behind her to cup her ass, he kissed her again.

This time the hungry exchange included his teeth running over the line of her jaw when they gasped for breath, only to return to dueling tongues again when her arms came up to wrap around his neck. That hand on her ass moved until he touched her tight sphincter and she jumped in his arms. He wouldn't break the kiss, but took in her pleased moans and joined with a guttural groan of his own.

It'd been a very long time since he'd taken her in that place. Too damn long by his estimation, and he knew he wouldn't go there tonight, but he would remind her how it'd felt when they'd both explored something they'd never done with anyone else before. She clung to him as he applied more pressure, not enough to enter her but just enough to drive them both crazy with need.

"Now who's teasing?" She breathed the question as her head fell back and he licked along the line of her jaw.

"Oh, I'm not teasing," he groaned. "I definitely plan to deliver."

And with that statement he eased his hand from between her legs and turned her away from him. With a hand to the small of her back he pushed her over until her palms were flat on the bed. "Arch your back, babe," he instructed, and she complied until her legs were spread, ass lifted up to him in offering.

He smacked each plump mound, the sound echoing throughout the room and sending spikes of desire straight to his dick. Gripping her ass cheeks then, he spread them slowly until he could drive into her core with one quick thrust. She screamed and he almost came right then and there. Fueled by their shared desire he pumped fiercely in and out of her until her legs shook and she yelled his name. The warmth of her essence covering him as she came was enough to push him straight over the edge, and in the next seconds he was gripping her hips as his body shook with his release.

In another time, once their breathing had returned to normal and he was certain he wasn't going to collapse over her, RJ would've carried her to the shower or run them a warm bath. Tonight, they each moved in and out of the

bathroom solo. He'd let her go first so when he came out of the bathroom she was standing with a pair of shorts on and her sarong tied around her upper body like a tube top.

"I had to improvise," she said with a shrug when he was obviously staring at her in question.

He grinned. "Maybe you should come work for us at RGF as a designer."

She smiled back, but the easy conversation between them had dissipated. Now there was an uncomfortable tension that he sensed neither of them knew how to deal with. Did she think this was a mistake? Did he? She'd said it was inevitable. After yesterday's kiss and the hours spent thinking about taking that kiss further, which had plagued him all day and night, he wholeheartedly agreed with her. Just like yesterday in the cabana, being alone with her tonight had been great. He was starkly aware of the fact that he'd thought he and Grace were great together before, too.

Despite their obvious history, there was a part of him—a very big part that he was having a hell of a time battling with—that wanted to ask her to stay. That part of him wanted to lie and cuddle with her the way they often had after sex, in the comfort of his penthouse in Manhattan. That part had never wanted to let her go, and while RJ had respected those feelings all this time, the look of determination on Grace's face dictated he keep a tight lid on those emotions.

"I'll walk you back to your room," he said, and moved to the dresser to grab fresh clothes.

She was quiet as he pulled out basketball shorts and a T-shirt, slipping them both on and then going to find his flip-flops. When he faced her again, he wanted desperately to take her in his arms and tell her that he...what? What would he say? How did he feel now? Was he still in love with her?

"You don't have to," she said when they'd stood in silence for a while.

He gave her a "don't be ridiculous" look and headed out of the room. They walked along the property in silence and minutes later, when they arrived at the front of her building, she turned to him.

"We can do this here," she said, and he looked at her quizzically.

His thoughts had been all over the place as they'd walked. Reminiscing on their time together, searching for when and where it could've gone wrong, just as he'd done for weeks after she'd first left him. This current effort was just as futile as the others, because he still had no clue what had happened between them. And yes, he could've just asked the question and let her tell

him, but there was a very real part of him that wanted her to trust him enough to open up to him. She hadn't before so it was probably foolish to want that now, but he did.

"We can do what here?" he asked.

"Say good-night," she said with a shrug. "I mean, we don't have to feel like it's that uncomfortable moment of a first date."

That wasn't how he felt at all. He was so beyond the nervous expectation of a first date with Grace, but he was also tired of the emotional back-and-forth tonight had brought.

"Well then, good night," he said.

"Good night, RJ," she whispered.

And neither of them moved.

Their gazes remained locked as he inhaled the tropical air mixed with the scent of chlorine they both carried from their time in the pool. A light breeze blew, lifting the ends of her hair, sending a few strands into her face. She tucked them behind one ear.

She stepped close to him then, coming up on the tips of her toes to kiss him lightly on the lips. "I'll see you tomorrow."

He wrapped one arm around her waist and held her close, kissing her again, dipping his tongue into her mouth to tangle with hers. There'd been no consideration of making this move, no weighing options, just the persistent need to act. A need he suspected he was going to feel for the rest of their time on this island. With that resolution, he finally broke the kiss, said, "See you tomorrow, Gracie," and walked away.

CHAPTER TEN

SHE'D HAD SEX with RJ. The man she'd once loved with all her heart.

Standing beneath the shower spray at just after nine the next morning, she let that resonate in her mind. The physical act had already taken its toll on her body, leaving her limbs languid and relaxed, her lips still tingling from all the hungry kisses, a dull ache deep in her center as she anticipated it happening again.

There'd never been any issues for her and RJ when it came to the physical. She could safely say that remained true. Another truth glaring in the forefront of her mind was anxiety. The spikes of uncertainty that had barreled into her with a rampage when RJ had proposed years ago.

Marry me, Gracie. That's what he'd said that night at the restaurant. He came around to her side of the table, went down on one knee and opened that lovely blue box.

She'd looked into his face, familiar with his every expression, and noted the hope and love filling his smile. If she'd said yes, that smile would've grown bigger, excitement lighting his eyes. He would've hugged her close before putting the ring on her finger and whispering how much he loved her. And she would've whispered how much she loved him back. If she hadn't felt as if her chest would explode from the assault of questions and concerns that assailed her in those moments.

"No." The softly spoken word had come quick. It was knee-jerk and for days afterward she'd wished she could take it back, say it in a different way, something. Anything to erase the broken and rejected look that instantly followed on his face. That memory had been more painful than anything she'd ever experienced.

He hadn't spoken after her reply and she couldn't find the words to follow up that solemn answer. He wanted to know why; she could tell by the way his eyes continued to search her, silently begging for explanation. She had words. Her career was based on finding the right words to present the best story. So of course she knew the words to say. Yet she hadn't said them. Would he have believed her? Would he have thought she was out of her mind, afraid, a coward?

No matter how many words she'd thought she had, no explanation had

come that night. Instead, she'd stood, grabbed her purse and walked away.

With a heavy sigh at the memory, Grace dropped her head, letting the warm water trickle down her back. Tears stung her eyes as regret lodged in her throat.

What if she'd had the guts to explain to him that night? What if he'd said, "I still love you and want to be with you, Gracie"? What if she'd made a big mistake walking away?

And why did any of that matter now? It was years ago, water under the bridge, a closed chapter of their past. Except everything that did and didn't happen that night stood between them each time they were together now. Even last night as they'd enjoyed each other physically, the questions had been there. The what-ifs and whys lingering in the air around them.

What if she'd just said yes? Would they have children by now? Probably. And would she have failed at both motherhood and being a wife by now?

That had always been the deeper issue, even beyond her desire to stand firm in her career. That niggling doubt that had lived with her every second of her life as the youngest sister, the baby of the family, the one with all those big shoes ahead of her to fill. The one who'd failed at filling those big shoes so many times before. Sure, she'd only been eight when her teacher had made a comment about Grace not reading at the same level as Trinity had when she'd been in that class. And she'd only been fifteen with short arms and legs when she'd been cut from the high school majorette squad that each of her sisters had been on. But by the time she'd entered college and decided on a career in journalism—only to have her mother scoff as if that were nothing compared to being a scholar or any of the occupations her sisters had chosen—the seeds of doubt had been firmly planted in her mind. She'd decided then that she'd prove herself to them by succeeding in her career no matter what.

Not that any of that made a difference now. Grace didn't have any more answers today than she had ten years ago. And because that was a hard truth to face, she did what she always did—pushed it aside.

An hour later, when she was dressed in blue shorts, a white T-shirt and white sandals, Grace walked into the café where she, Nina and Desta had planned to meet. She'd styled her hair in a simple ponytail and packed a notepad, pens and her tablet into her bag. As she was the first to arrive, she grabbed a table near the window and ordered a cup of coffee and another one of those great doughnuts RJ had brought her yesterday. She checked her phone while she waited, reading text messages from her sisters' group chat.

Hope wanted to know what they thought about a fall wedding and Charity announced that Skye, her oldest daughter, had lost one of her front teeth. The picture of her niece missing that one tooth made Grace smile. She hadn't been home since her mother's birthday celebration in March, and she missed seeing her family. The immediate longing to be with them now had to be spurred by what had happened between her and RJ last night and all the thoughts it brought to mind this morning. Thoughts of what might've been if she hadn't turned down RJ's proposal.

"Hey, what're you in such deep thought about?" Nina asked when she appeared. She pulled out the chair across from Grace and took a seat.

Nina was absolutely lovely, with her cinnamon-hued complexion and alluring curves in the hot pink romper she wore.

"Oh, hey, nothing. Just checking text messages," Grace said, and closed the screen on her phone, pushing it to the side.

Nina frowned. "You sure?"

Grace nodded. "Positive. Where's Desta?"

"Oh, she's coming. She and Riley wanted daiquiris so they stopped at the bar by the pool." Nina signaled the server and when the young lady appeared, she ordered water and a fruit bowl.

"Taking the healthy route, I see," Grace noted. Nina had also opted for bottled water over alcoholic beverages last night at the pool.

"Trying," Nina replied with a shrug.

"Did you say Riley was coming?"

"Yes. We just figured we'd help save you time with the interviews and that way you could spend more time doing...other things."

Before Grace could ask about the "other things," Desta and Riley joined them. Desta wore black Bermuda shorts and a yellow tank top, her dark hair styled in two braids that hung down her back. Riley wore her hair in a ponytail, her entrancing hazel eyes highlighted with a nude eyeshadow that matched the color of her shorts and the stripes in her halter top.

"Mornin'!" Desta said cheerfully while taking a seat next to Nina.

Riley pulled out the chair beside Grace and sat. "Hey. How're you feeling this morning? You and RJ were taking those vodka drinks down last night."

Yeah, they had been drinking but not enough that either of them was drunk, which she thought could've been an excuse for what they'd done after the pool party. But Grace definitely didn't want to think about that right now.

"Oh, that was nothing. I'm fine. Shall we get started?" They were

scheduled to play volleyball at eleven thirty and since she was now interviewing three people, Grace wanted to make sure she had enough time to get everything in.

“Sure,” Riley said. “But first, if you don’t mind, I wanted to ask you something.”

Grace had been digging her notepad and pen out of her bag and looked up to see that all three women were staring at her.

“Ah, no, ask away,” Grace said, trying to hide the fact that she was more than a little leery about what Riley wanted to know.

It didn’t escape her that she was sitting next to RJ’s younger sister, a woman whom she’d been close to a long time ago and who undoubtedly wanted answers to the same questions her brother probably had.

“I know you don’t know Desta and Nina as well as you used to know me, but since we’re all related by marriage, and outside of that we’re all women, I figure it’s okay to speak candidly.” Riley didn’t wait for Grace to agree or disagree. “What happened between you and RJ? I thought you two were the perfect couple. I mean, coming from me, who at the time wasn’t even considering being in a relationship, I thought next to my parents, you and RJ were exactly what love was supposed to look like. And then you were just gone.”

Riley sipped from her straw when she was finished. Her expression was one of innocent curiosity, while Grace grappled with whether to speak just as candidly around this group of women.

The server returned with Grace’s coffee and doughnut and Nina’s water and fruit. Grace reached for the cream and poured it into her coffee, then added sugar, all while knowing they waited for her response.

“Nothing happened,” she replied, figuring if she expected these women to be honest with her, she owed them the same courtesy. “I needed something different in my life at the time, so I left to find it.”

“Did you find it?” Desta asked. “What you went looking for?”

Well, if this story did what she was hoping it would, the answer to that question would be yes. “I think so. Which leads me to this interview.”

“But you did love him, right?” Riley asked. “I mean the two of you seemed so perfect together. I just remember wondering if you loved him, how could you have left him?” She clearly didn’t want to let this topic go. “I guess what I’m really concerned about now is that you’re not here to hurt my brother again.”

There was no heat to Riley's words, but an air of tension settled over them and Nina acted quickly to resolve it. "Well, I can kinda see walking away from someone you love, if you have a good enough reason," she said. "I mean, I loved Major but when I thought he'd used me and my company for his benefit and was then trying to take over everything I'd worked hard to build, I had to get away from him."

Grace didn't have all the details, but she suspected these were the events that led up to Nina and Major's fake engagement turning into the real thing.

Desta nodded. "She's speaking the truth. Sometimes walking away is what you need to get things straight in your mind, to make sure what you're feeling is the best thing for you. Despite what people say, love isn't always the only answer."

Grace wanted to high-five Desta for saying almost exactly what she'd been thinking so long ago.

"I know," Riley started. "Don't get me wrong, Chaz and I definitely went through some things before we got it right and my first inclination was to let it all go. But you and RJ didn't seem to be having any problems. Like, I really thought things were perfect between you guys."

It was clear that her breakup with RJ had hit Riley hard. When she'd walked away back then, Grace had thought a clean break was best. And as certain as she'd been that she was making the right decision about leaving, there'd been many times in the past years that the guilt over not saying goodbye to his family had assailed her.

"I never meant to hurt RJ or any of you." Grace sighed and shook her head. "And I'm not here to cause any more pain. But you should know that 'perfect' can be misleading." Nothing in her life had ever been perfect. Not when she always felt like she was fighting to find her place. Her relationship with RJ hadn't made her feel that way in the beginning, but the moment he mentioned marriage, she'd seen all the possibilities run through her mind like a movie trailer and she'd known she had to go. "Sort of like Ron and Tobias working together at RGF. They were seemingly the perfect duo of fresh new talent, set to take the fashion world by storm. Then something happened and it all fell apart."

The conversation, thankfully, took a turn with her words and the interview questions she'd planned were asked and answered. The three women gave her insight into so many aspects of the two men and their impact on the fashion industry. Nina spoke of how she'd wanted desperately to work with

one of the two top fashion houses to build on the app she'd created. Desta talked about working at RGF and learning from Ron's work ethic and dedication to his family. She didn't know much about Tobias except for how his company was positioned as RGF's biggest competitor, but she liked Chaz and thought he was bringing a dynamic edge to King Designs and their new branding.

It was Riley who pricked Grace's heart with the story of her parents and how they'd met at a party sponsored by RGF and fallen in love. From Riley's perspective her father had been driven by Tobias's betrayal, pushed to work harder to make RGF bigger and better than any other company. She spoke of how everything RJ did was in his father's image and how much RJ was looking forward to taking over the company in just a few months.

"He'll be the CEO at around the same age my father was at his peak in the industry. My parents were newly married and my mother was about to have RJ. My father says that's when he first realized he had everything he needed to succeed in life. When he had his wife beside him, a baby about to be born, and he sat in the CEO's chair for the first time."

Riley's words resonated with Grace well into the time they walked along the beach in preparation for the volleyball game. Ron Gold ran his company and built a family. Now his children were doing the same thing—Riley and Chaz, Nina and Major, Desta and Maurice. RJ was the only one who wasn't married. Just as she was the only one in her family who wasn't. What did that mean? Nothing, and then again, to Grace, everything.

It reinforced the pressure she'd already felt about what her life should and shouldn't be. Could she have been the wife that Marva Gold was to Ron? Or that her mother was to her father? Could she be a wife, period? All the fears that had lain dormant these past ten years were bubbling to the surface now, until the next question she had to ask was: What if coming here was a mistake?

The answer came the moment she saw RJ walking toward her. The sun was at his back, framing his muscled body in golden light. He wore black shorts and a white T-shirt. His feet were bare and dark sunglasses covered his eyes. But she knew he was watching her; she could feel the warmth of his gaze as it filled her body, circling around to clench her chest.

A mixture of anxiety and need settled there as he came closer. No, coming here hadn't been a mistake. She'd needed to see RJ again, to touch him and hold him in her arms as a reminder that she had loved him and he had loved

her. Where those past emotions were taking them now, she had no idea.

* * *

The way Grace was looking at him had RJ's heart racing. She'd been on his mind all night, starting from the second he watched her walk into her building until just about an hour ago, when some of his family had barged into his villa demanding answers to their questions.

"Did you really think it was better to strike some sort of deal with her instead of coming to me and discussing this beforehand?" His father had spoken first, while Major, Maurice and Chaz had found seats in the living area.

RJ had just gotten out of bed and was on his way to take a shower when he'd heard them at the door. He'd pulled on a pair of shorts but was otherwise undressed for what turned out to be an intervention of sorts.

"You're turning the company over to me in a few months. Don't you think I'm capable of dealing with issues on my own?" He'd asked his father that question, even though he knew this situation was different from anything RGF was liable to face in the future. Still, he needed his father to understand his position.

"I don't doubt your abilities, son. But I know you realize this is a sensitive subject," Ron had replied.

"Which is exactly why I decided to handle it the way I did. Keep her close, keep my eye on what's being discussed. Having control of the situation cuts down on the chances that it'll cause more harm than good." With all that said, the "keep her close" part was what resonated with him most this morning.

"Are you sure you're the right one to try to control Grace, considering your history?" Major asked.

RJ had sent his brother a death glare for that remark. "Don't go there."

"We kinda have to go there, man. She's writing a story about us. She knows us better than any other reporter out there. She broke your heart." Leave it to Maurice to put that last nail in the coffin.

"All that might be true but our relationship is in the past. I can handle this." He'd told them that a few more times during the exchange, but now seeing Grace at this moment on the beach, he wasn't quite sure.

He stopped walking toward her and she closed the rest of the distance between them. "Hey." She spoke with a light cheeriness to her tone.

“Hey.”

“You ready for part two of the butt-whoopin’ we served y’all last night?” Desta asked as she walked past them.

“Oh, she’s talking smack already,” Major said. “Mo, come get your lady!”

RJ couldn’t help it—he chuckled. His brothers were just as competitive as he was, but it was pretty comical to see them this way with the women they loved. It was fun watching them straddle the fence between being full-on obnoxious about winning and distractingly apologetic to their significant others at the same time.

“Guess we better get ready to play,” Grace said.

He shrugged. “I guess we better.” He watched her walk away, staring at her legs and remembering them being wrapped around him last night.

“You gonna be able to play without drooling?” Chaz asked him.

RJ frowned at his soon-to-be brother-in-law. “I’m not the one who just finished kissing and groping all over the competition.” He’d watched his sister greet Chaz as he’d been walking toward Grace. Months ago the site of his sister hugging and kissing any guy disturbed the hell out of him. Now that he’d gotten to know Chaz and trusted the guy wasn’t going to break Riley’s heart like the last asshole she’d been engaged to, he was sort of okay with them touching.

“Yeah, that’s because I’m marrying her next week and we’re getting in all the practice we can leading up to our honeymoon.”

RJ frowned. “TMI, man! TMI!”

The second game of volleyball between the guys and the girls went a lot better than last night’s water version. The guys claimed victory and boasted about it all the way through lunch. After that Chaz wanted the guys to join him for a few rounds of golf, and since RJ had already bailed on the fitting yesterday, he figured he should go, even though he really wanted to spend more time with Grace.

“I’m meeting with Tobias this afternoon,” she’d told him when he asked what she was doing for the duration of the day. “Then I’ll probably write for the rest of the evening. I have a lot I want to get done.”

“Cool, then I guess we’ll figure out another time to check in.” He hadn’t bothered to try to hide the disappointment in his tone.

Watching her run back and forth during the game, hearing her laughter, seeing the genuine fun she was having, had touched something in him. To be honest, it enhanced the same something he’d felt when he was inside her last

night. The feeling of incompleteness that he knew was only assuaged when they were together.

“Sure, ah, breakfast tomorrow?” she suggested.

Tomorrow seemed like a decade away, and he didn’t want to wait another decade to see her. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

He wasn’t desperate and he wasn’t going to allow her to think he was. They were on this island together for just under two weeks—certainly he’d see her again. In the meantime, he needed to get himself together. Acting like a lovesick puppy wasn’t his thing. It felt odd and demoralizing and he didn’t like it. Still, when Grace walked away, he stared at her until she was out of sight, missing her the second she was gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“OKAY, WE’VE GOTTA build a better sandcastle than them, or I’m never gonna live this down,” RJ said. Three days later, they were on their knees on the beach for another family activity.

They’d been divided up as couples this time, so Grace was on his team. He’d convinced himself that it did make sense for Grace to participate in Riley’s itinerary, as had been pointed out the other night at dinner. As a result, he’d seen her every day for the past few days. Often that was due to their story status updates, but on other occasions Riley and his mother had invited her to join in whatever they were doing. And he was okay with all of that. He could be around her and not want what they used to have. Or at least he was trying his best not to.

She wore a coral one-piece bathing suit today, as evidenced by her low-riding denim shorts. Her sandals had been dropped into that mammoth bag she always carried, and she was now barefoot as she unhooked the stack of buckets they’d been given.

“Let’s get started,” she said. “What type of design do you want to make?”

He frowned. “It’s a sandcastle. We’re making it look like a sandcastle.”

She glared at him then with her lips turned up. “Are you serious? That’s not gonna work. We have to have a game plan. Are we going for a real royal castle, or something brooding and creepy?”

Each team was spaced about ten feet apart down the beach and the others were already packing sand and getting started with their structure. “We’re doing whatever’s going to win,” he replied. He wasn’t prepared when she scooped up a handful of sand and threw it at him.

Stunned for a few seconds, he contemplated what his next move should be. Yet his teammate had just done the unspeakable so really there was only one option. He tossed a handful of sand back. She frowned and then brushed the sand off the front of her. Bits of it had fallen between the lovely cleavage she was sporting today.

“Need me to help you get that?” he asked with a sexy grin.

The way her eyes cut over at him after that question was a cross between hilarious and deadly, so he held his hands up in defeat just in case.

“What I need is for you to get out of my way. I can do this,” she said after

brushing away the rest of the sand and picking up a bucket.

“Wait, we’re a team. We’re both supposed to be doing this.”

“Then you need to get yourself together and stop fooling around,” she said sternly.

He nodded. “Okay, well, for the record, you started it.”

She cut another raised-brow look at him and turned over the bucket she’d just filled with sand. He’d better get started doing the same—so he did. In no time they had a semblance of a castle under way. When Grace leaned over to use a tool that looked like a spatula to carve into one of the mounds they’d created, he couldn’t help but follow her movements.

Her shorts weren’t just low riding, they were also very short. After seeing her these past few days, he wondered if she had any shorts that came below her upper thigh. Probably not, and for that he should definitely thank every deity there was. But the way she was leaning over today he could see a bit more of her cheeks than he suspected anybody else could. More like, he hoped nobody else could. The thought of another man looking at her and thinking the things he was thinking right now didn’t sit well with him.

“Taking another break?” she asked without moving from her spot.

“Nah, just enjoying the view.” It was the truth.

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I think the correct word is horny.”

With that Grace turned to look over her shoulder at him. He winked at her and grinned. They hadn’t been physical since the night of the pool party. Considering how awkwardly that had ended, they seemed to have made a conscious effort not to touch each other since then. Not that he didn’t want Grace—he did, there was no doubt about that. He just wasn’t sure what sleeping with her now would mean once this island trip was over.

“I’m really confused,” she said, and continued her work on what he now saw was going to be a fin. “You want to win this competition. You want to win every competition, actually, yet you haven’t been working very hard over here.”

He reluctantly grabbed another bucket. “Something’s distracting me,” he told her as he stuffed more sand into it. He really didn’t like this activity and planned to share those thoughts with Riley when it was done. She wouldn’t care—she’d just laugh at him as she’d been doing a lot these days.

He knew his sister had spoken to Grace but when he asked Grace about their conversation, she’d only told him about the parts that were related to the

feud or his family. Nothing about their breakup, even though RJ was certain that would've been one of the first questions Riley asked. His sister had been really upset when he'd announced that Grace was gone. So much so that he'd been tempted to reach out to Grace just for the purpose of telling her she needed to talk to Riley, but he hadn't. And in time, just like him, Riley had moved on without Grace. Now his sister looked almost elated anytime she saw the two of them together.

"Are you calling me a distraction?" she asked without even looking at him.

The way she was able to control her feelings, whether it was desire to have sex or tension about their past, was unnerving to him. He was certain she was feeling the pain of withdrawal the same way he was. Last night when he'd been sitting on the balcony in her room, he'd caught her staring at his crotch. His dick had never gotten so hard so fast, but as soon as it did, she looked away.

"No, I'm calling this weird sexual truce we seem to have initiated a distraction."

She paused then and pushed up from the sand to sit back on her legs.

"What are you talking about?"

"I think you know."

She shook her head.

"Okay, look, neither of us was ever known to give in to our circumstances. So why are we tiptoeing around each other now?"

"What would happen when it ends?" she asked.

He had and hadn't come up with an answer, or rather he hadn't come up with an answer he wanted to accept.

"Let's have dinner tonight," he said. "Not a meeting to discuss the story. Just dinner at seven, you and me. I'll make all the arrangements."

She looked skeptical. "Are we going to talk about this at dinner?"

He shook his head. "We're going to have a nice meal like we used to do. I miss that." He'd also missed times like this, when they were just doing stuff together. Sure, he wasn't going to like the sand that was already sneaking into places he didn't want to think about, but he wasn't going to lie about enjoying being with her.

"Yeah," she said with a slow nod. "I do, too. But I'd really like to win this sandcastle contest first."

They both grinned. Competitiveness, ambition, tenacity—all traits they shared. "You're right. Let's do this."

And do it they did. An hour later they were being crowned the winners for their underwater castle with all the intricate aquatic life that Grace had managed to design. RJ let her take the gift shop sandcastle they were awarded as a prize. When she went off to an interview with Major and Maurice, he returned to his room to make plans for tonight.

* * *

Grace stepped up onto the yacht, the balmy evening breeze blowing her hair and the light material of her full skirt.

“Good evening,” RJ said as he stood from the table at the far end of the deck.

“Good evening,” she replied. “We’re having dinner here?”

“Yes.” He came closer and took her hand, leading her toward the table. “Dinner and a sunset sail. You still like to watch the sunset, don’t you?”

“I love to,” she answered softly. She’d dated RJ for a year and a half and in that time, she’d been on the Gold private jet and had attended numerous A-list parties, from LA to Milan. RJ had given her pearls for her birthday, couture gowns for Christmas, and commissioned artwork for their first anniversary. She’d been privy to fine things, but she’d never been on a private yacht to watch the sun set in Saint Lucia.

“I heard it was beautiful out here on the water, so I wanted to make sure you had a chance to see it before you leave.” He held out a chair for her and she sat down.

It was silly—her legs were a little wobbly and butterflies danced in her stomach as if this were her first date. Not just with RJ, but ever.

“You look really nice,” she said, fighting for some semblance of calm. And it was true. He’d changed from the swim trunks and tank top and now wore dark brown linen pants and a matching button-front shirt.

“Not nearly as nice as you,” he replied.

She glanced down at the hunter-green wrap dress she wore. A good portion of her leg was visible through the side slit and she eased the material over to cover it, suddenly feeling more than a little exposed.

“What are you doing?” she asked when she looked at him again. “This seems like more than just dinner.”

The table was covered with a white cloth, and plates with gold rims were set next to sparkling silverware and crystal glasses. A bottle of wine was

sitting inside a silver ice bucket; two long white candles were lit and centered.

Everything was set almost identically to the way it had been the night he'd proposed to her.

"What is this? Why'd you do all this?" She was already standing to leave, but RJ stood, too, touching a hand to her arm to hold her still.

"It's just dinner," he said. "I wanted it to be special, but if you don't like it, all you have to do is say the word and we can go back to the café or order something to your room. I really just wanted to have some time with you tonight, away from everyone else."

He sounded earnest and his hand on her arm loosened so that if she did really want to leave, she knew he wouldn't stop her. "I'm fine with an evening sail." Over RJ's shoulder she glimpsed a guy dressed in all white. He gave a hand signal to someone she couldn't see and the yacht began to move.

After a few seconds, she said, "You created this to look like that night at the restaurant. The night you proposed."

He dropped his hand from her arm and slipped it into his front pocket. "You're right," he said.

"Why?"

"Because I haven't been able to move forward since that night, Grace." He shook his head. "Yeah, I've gotten up every day and I've gone about my business doing my job, and being with my family, but that's it."

She took a step back from him, realizing now that in addition to wanting to do something special, this dinner was an attempt to find closure. "Don't say you haven't moved on, because you've dated, RJ. I've seen pictures of you in the tabloids with dates." But not girlfriends. There'd only been about three or four times that she could recall that there'd ever been any mention of RJ with a date, and those few times were usually during some big high-profile function on the company's behalf. She'd told herself to let it go at the time, but now, tonight, it felt like they were both still holding on to everything that did or didn't happen in the last ten years.

"And I'm sure you've dated, too, although thank all that's holy I didn't have to see any pictures of that."

His tone was grim and she knew why. RJ wasn't a jealous man, but he did protect what he deemed to be his, and those he cared for deeply. Seeing him in pictures with those women, despite how few, hadn't been a joyful experience for her, either.

“Okay, so we did move on.”

“I want to know why we had to, Grace.” He walked to the railing and stared out at the water. “I told myself I wasn’t going to ask you this question and so far I’ve resisted the urge over a dozen times. But then we were together the other night and it felt like no time had passed between us. It felt good and right.”

She didn’t respond because there was truth to his words. That night every touch, every kiss and stroke between them, had felt more than good and better than right.

Truth was, she’d wanted to be with him in any way she could for any amount of time possible. If that was wrong, then she was definitely guilty.

“Why didn’t you accept my proposal?” He asked the question she knew had been on his mind all this time.

“I couldn’t,” she said simply. He wanted to hear more; he deserved to hear it all. She cleared her throat and continued. “I couldn’t marry you and become Mrs. Ronald Gold III, when Grace Hopkins hadn’t made a name for herself yet. Can you understand that?”

He ran a hand over his beard and then folded his arms across his chest. “You didn’t want to marry me because you thought my name would overshadow yours? You could’ve kept your last name, Grace.”

“No, RJ. It’s not that simple.” She took a step toward him. “I could’ve kept my last name but the world still would’ve known me only as your wife. Another member of the Gold family. Part of the fashion industry. I would’ve been all those things and somewhere in the footnotes it would’ve said, ‘Oh yeah, and she writes stories sometimes.’ That’s not what I wanted my life to be.”

“I thought you wanted your life to be with me.” His voice was bereft and a tiny part of her crumbled at the sound. “We’d talked so many times about where we’d live, the kids, the dog. All of it. We’d planned our whole future together and then when I thought I was giving it to you, you threw it back in my face and left without a word.”

And the hurt from that night filled every word he’d just spoken. She wanted to cry or better yet, to scream in frustration. “I handled that badly, I know. There were so many times in those first few weeks that I thought about coming back to tell you how sorry I was for not being honest with you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

She shrugged. “I thought it was too late.”

“I loved you,” he said quietly. “I never stopped loving you.”

If words could totally demolish a person’s spirit, RJ would get an award for casting a death blow right now. “I never stopped loving you, either.” She spoke a lot softer than he did and with much more doubt than she’d heard in his tone. But that wasn’t because she doubted that she loved him—that was the truest thing she’d ever known in her life—but that also didn’t seem like enough.

“Then tell me why, Grace. Because your last name, my last name, what was printed about you in the tabloids, I don’t give a damn about any of that and I know you don’t either. Now I’m not saying that I don’t respect you wanting to make your mark in your career, you know I understand that better than anybody, but you had to know I’d always support you and your career. Always.”

She walked to railing now, standing there next to him and staring out at the water. The sun was just beginning to lower in the distance. The sky was a brilliant mix of orange, blue and golden-yellow stripes, shimmering over the water.

“I wanted to be a good investigative journalist and I knew I could do that. I just needed a little more time.” She sighed. “I didn’t know if I could be a wife and mother. Not like my mother and my sisters planned to be. My mother had her career and her family and she made it all look so easy. And my sisters were eager to do the same, but I couldn’t stop thinking about my career. So didn’t that mean I couldn’t do the same? Or at least not at that time. Hope, Charity and Trinity, they’d all made marks in their careers by the time they started thinking about having it all. I needed to do the same. I needed to make my mark first and then perhaps I would’ve been ready for the family.”

When he didn’t speak, she was certain he thought she’d lost her mind. He came to stand closer to her, until their arms touched but they both continued to stare out at the water.

“Why didn’t you tell me that’s what was going on? You threw away everything we had because you were afraid?”

She’d never, not once in ten years, said it that way. It had always been a choice for her—career over family. Establish who and what she was before becoming the other half of someone else. Admitting she was afraid would’ve been just like accepting that she’d always been the least accomplished of the Hopkins sisters, a burden she’d carried on her shoulders all her life.

“I threw it all away because I didn’t think it was for me at the time.” Her

chest ached with the realization that she'd succumbed to her fear of not being enough. Again.

“And now...how do you feel about us now?”

She didn't know how to answer that question. How could she explain that she still loved and cared for him, but she hadn't yet done the most important thing in her life? How did she admit that the fear still gnawed at her?

“I don't know,” she whispered, wishing like hell that wasn't the truth.

CHAPTER TWELVE

RJ HAD NO IDEA how to deal with what she'd just told him. After a few minutes of silence he finally decided on leading her to the table and telling the chef on board to serve their dinner. A flurry of emotions filled him—anger, hurt, confusion, longing—and he couldn't focus on just one. He didn't want to focus on any of them. What he really wanted, and what seemed like the most important thing right now, was to just be with Grace.

"You even told them to fix my favorite, spaghetti and meatballs," she said when he sat across from her.

"With extra meat sauce of course." He liked doing things for her. Recalling all the things she liked and what made her smile had come naturally from the moment he saw her on the island.

"I told you, I remember things about you, too," she said, and removed the silver ring from her napkin. "Like, you prefer a mixed drink with dinner over wine and that you hog the TV remote."

RJ tossed his head back and chuckled, he couldn't help it. The TV remote had been an ongoing debate in the penthouse. "You don't even watch television in bed. You usually have something to read."

"I like the background noise."

"Right, so it shouldn't matter if I change the channel or not."

"It matters when you change it to that sports channel. It's noisy and distracting."

He shook his head slowly. "Isn't that considered background noise?"

She paused and then frowned. "You're not funny."

RJ laughed again, this time feeling the joy deep down in his soul. Why couldn't it always be like this? The carefree ease that was between them right now. Why couldn't they have this forever? Probably because she hadn't trusted him with her truth ten years ago, and now he wasn't certain he could trust her to not choose something over them again. And yet he couldn't bring himself to stay away from her.

"This is delicious," she said after she'd tasted her first bite.

It was, but he enjoyed watching her much more than he did the taste of the food.

They were halfway through the meal when she said, "Riley mentioned

you'd be taking over the company in a few months. I know you're excited about that."

"I wouldn't say excited," he told her before taking a gulp of his rum and Coke. "It's like I've been anticipating this for so long, now that it's getting closer I'm a little numb."

"You're going to be great as CEO. You were born for this job."

"More than that," he said. "I really want this job. My grandfather and my father have done a phenomenal job carving out a space for us, but I'm ready to take it to the next level. I'm looking forward to working with our designers on creating new and exciting pieces that tell our full story. We have such a diverse and rich history and I want to see it flourish into everything we touch from clothes to handbags, jewelry and even as far as the philanthropy efforts we take on. Even though that's creeping into my mom's domain."

"That sounds amazing," she said with a look of admiration on her face, and his chest swelled with pride. "Your family is so rooted in this company. I was shocked when I read about Major and Nina starting their own. Not just because he was stepping away from RGF but also because he was taking a partner. It just seemed so out of character from the Major I knew," she told him.

The reminder that she'd had a relationship with everyone in his family warmed him.

"I think that decision surprised him, too. But Nina's a great developer. Her app was amazing before Major ever came along and since he'd already been planning his own business, I guess it made sense for them to be partners. Especially since they'd fallen in love and decided to get married."

That word brought down a veil of silence and they finished dinner before having their drinks refilled. Grace picked up her glass of wine and stood. He took a gulp from his own glass and left it on the table before following her to the railing once more.

"This is an amazing place to have a wedding," she said.

"Riley wanted it private and my mom suggested someplace tropical. Dad said he's just signing the checks." They both laughed at that.

"Hope wants a fall wedding. Fifty guests, outside venue and candy corn instead of wedding cake for dessert." She shook her head and sipped her wine while RJ grinned.

"Sounds like Hope." She was her most eccentric sister. But none of the Hopkins sisters were like Grace. He could see that from the first time he'd

been to Westchester to meet her family. It was no wonder she'd always felt like she was different.

"We would've had a nice wedding," she said quietly, and finished the wine.

RJ had no doubt that was true, and while his goal tonight had been to talk about their past, he was through with the regret and sadness now.

"Dance with me." He took the glass from her and put it on the table.

When he turned back, she had a hand on one hip and a quizzical look on her face. "There's no music."

He shrugged and took her hand, pulling her to him. "We'll make our own music." With that he wrapped his other arm around her waist and started singing the lyrics to Bruno Mars's "Just the Way You Are." It was her favorite song and even though he was singing horribly off-key, he moved his body to the melody.

Grace laughed at his efforts but joined in with him until they were dancing around the deck, singing as loud as they could. In the distance the sunlight faded, dropping down into the water, and a deep magenta and blue color filled the sky. Their movements slowed as they came to the end of the song until they were both still staring into each other's eyes as they'd done so many times before. Only this was different, and they both knew it.

It seemed as natural as breathing to lean in and touch his lips to hers, and when she tilted her head and joined in the kiss everything that happened in the past, every obstacle, every worry, disappeared. There was only him and Grace now, the sweet tenderness of their kiss, the powerful yearning in their embrace.

Breaking the kiss was difficult, but when he twined his fingers in hers and began walking them toward the stairs that would take them below deck, she followed. He led her down to the master bedroom and closed the door behind them. Earlier he'd been in awe of this space himself. He'd rented the yacht so it'd been his first time touring it, but this bedroom had been amazing. The king-size bed was against one wall facing windows that brought the ocean inside with unfettered panoramic views.

She walked to the bed and sat, patting the space beside her.

"I've got something for you," he said.

"I know. That's why I'm telling you to come here." Her smile was sexy and alluring and his heart thumped wildly in his chest.

The dress she wore was sexy as hell, that slit up the side a dangerous threat

to his senses. But he could restrain himself, at least for a little while longer. He went to the nightstand and pulled out the top drawer. In it was a black velvet box, too big to be another engagement ring, so her smile remained in place when he carried it toward her.

“You know I love presents,” she said, her expression changing from teasing to giddy with excitement. She even lifted her hands to do a quick clap.

He couldn’t help it; he chuckled. “You’re such a kid when it comes to gifts.”

“I know. My mom used to say I acted like it was Christmas whenever somebody gave me a gift.”

“She’s right,” he told her, and walked closer, still holding the box just out of her reach.

She was practically bouncing on the edge of the bed and when that became too much for her she just reached out and grabbed it. RJ laughed, enjoying the authentically happy look on her face more than she would ever know.

She opened the box quickly and then stopped to stare up at him. “When did you get this?”

His words almost faltered when she reached her hand into the box. “I ordered it when I went back to my room the first night I saw you here. I requested express delivery.” Because he’d needed to see her with it.

She lifted the new vibrator out of the box, her fingers wrapped securely around the apparatus in a way that made his dick jump.

“I want to watch you this time,” he said, and began unbuttoning his shirt.

“You sure you’re just gonna watch?” she asked as she rubbed the tip of the vibrator over her cleavage.

He struggled to breathe but managed to keep his fingers on the buttons instead of reaching to pull the straps of her dress down so he could see her breasts completely. “Absolutely. I’m going to enjoy the show.”

With a smirk, she set the vibrator down and stood to remove her clothes. When she was done, she leaned over to pull some of the pillows together and set them up at the head of the bed. It was an elaborate act, giving him an unfettered view of her delectable ass.

True to his word, RJ removed the rest of his clothing and pulled one of the cushioned chairs from the corner closer to the bed. He sat and waited for the performance to begin.

“Show me what you planned to do with the one that got away from you the

other night.”

“You mean the one you broke,” she said as she lay back on the bed.

He figured it had broken after he stepped on it, even though she hadn’t given him an update. “This replacement’s better.”

She adjusted herself on the bed and switched the vibrator on. “We’ll see.”

RJ swore he’d died and gone to heaven. The sight of Grace lying gorgeously naked on that bed, legs lifted so that her feet were planted on the mattress, knees spread, was more than he’d ever imagined. When he expected her to slide the apparatus between her legs, she lifted it to her lips instead, licking it up and down until his fingers gripped the arms of the chair.

He recalled her tongue moving over his dick just like that in the past, and he dropped one hand down to soothe his aching erection. She took the toy deep into her mouth and he began jerking his dick, wanting to be inside her mouth the same way that vibrator was. She removed it from her mouth with a plopping sound that had him moaning. Then she rubbed it over her breasts, circling her nipples and going down her torso to her stomach. He licked his lips when he knew what would happen next.

Grace glanced at him before switching the vibrator on, the low buzzing sound much louder in the otherwise quiet room.

“Now,” he whispered, his throat hoarse with need. It was possible he hadn’t quite thought this through, because now watching her seemed like torture.

She obliged, slipping the vibrator down until it eased inside her. On a long deep moan, she arched her back from the bed, her head sinking into the pillows. With one hand she moved the vibrator in and out of her pussy, while the other hand toyed with her breasts. RJ jerked his dick like he was ready to come at any moment—which he probably was.

He was entranced by her moaning, the thrusting of her hips that matched the motion of her hand, the sound of that vibrator and the jiggle of her breasts. And then he was done. Done with the watching part.

He stood from the chair, grabbed a condom from his wallet and hurriedly rolled it on. Climbing onto the bed, he grabbed her wrist and eased the vibrator out of her. He took it from her hand and turned it off. Then he was between those long legs, lifting them onto his shoulders and glancing up at her once more.

“Do you trust me?” When she only blinked at the question, he hurried to make himself clear. “Trust me to make you feel good,” he whispered. He saw

her nod just before he lowered his head.

His mouth touched her warm folds and he moaned. On a deep inhale he let her scent permeate every part of his body, and as she shook with the intensity of the pleasure ripping through him, he licked her. Tender strokes over her pussy, a quick, clever flick to tease her hardened clit. She bucked beneath him and he gripped her bare ass in his hands, lifting her lower half off the bed so she was closer to his face, feeding him.

“Dammit.” The one clipped word from her spurred him on.

“So sweet. Just like I remember.” It was the truth—she tasted heavenly. With each caress of his tongue over her soft flesh, he could think of nothing in his life that had ever tasted better. And it was just like he remembered. The feel of her thighs against his cheeks, the throbbing of his dick each time his tongue stroked along her damp skin. It was all as good as before, a part of the memories he’d cherished and secretly longed for again.

“I want more,” he groaned. “More of you.”

She was pumping into his mouth now, trying to give him what he wanted so he’d provide the release he knew she so desperately needed. He planned to give it to her. Easing two fingers between the crease of her ass, he let one linger momentarily over her anus before continuing on to sink inside her entrance. She bucked again, a mixture of curses and moans softly filling the air.

He slid another finger inside her, feeling the contraction of her body around him. This was it right here. The silken honey that seeped onto his fingers and eventually his tongue as he continued to lick her pussy was addictive. So much so he had no idea what he was going to do from this moment on. The need for her was going to be too great to watch her walk away again. Not this time. Even if all he got from her was this physical gratification, that’s what he wanted. What he’d needed for far too long.

Pumping his fingers in and out of her while flicking his tongue over her clit had her body jerking wildly beneath him. She whispered his name.

“Ronald,” she said again and again and he thrust his hips, wishing it was his dick buried to the hilt inside her instead.

“Gracie.” He said her name softly when he let his mouth leave her, his fingers still moving. “My sweet Gracie.”

Her body tensed the second her climax hit and he hungrily put his mouth over her once more to catch every drop of her release. Moments later he was easing away from her, lifting his body so he could drop a tender kiss on her

mouth. She clapped her hands to the back of his neck and dragged him down for a deeper kiss, one that fused them together in a thick haze of longing, need and something more, something he wasn't sure either of them was ready to name.

Instead of thinking too much on that, RJ positioned himself between her legs, sliding easily into her. She gasped when he entered her, bowing up off the bed. He massaged her breasts and began moving inside her, losing himself in the glorious warmth that always welcomed him. This is where he belonged, there was no longer any doubt in his mind. It was only Grace for him, now and forever.

He couldn't get enough, and he totally lost himself in the feel of her muscles holding him tight, the sound of her voice whispering his name. When she wrapped her legs around his waist, he leaned forward, putting his arms around her back before changing their position. He sat on the edge of the bed while she straddled him, bouncing up and down over his dick until her name ripped from his throat. "Grace. My sweet Gracie."

"Yes." It was the smallest whisper from her that played over and over again as she moved her hips to match his upward thrusts. "Yes, Ronald. Yes."

And that's what RJ continued to hear in the next seconds when she arched in his arms, her second climax causing her body to tremble around him. He came right behind her, shuddering not only with the pleasure tearing through him, but with the love that followed that brilliant explosion. That was it, that was the name of the emotion he'd felt earlier. Love. It was what had been pulling him toward her from the moment he'd first seen her on this island. The love that hadn't died in the ten years they'd been apart. The love he prayed she wanted to accept this time around.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

FOUR DAYS LATER, Grace rolled over in the bed, going still the moment she realized she was alone. Lying on her stomach, she extended her arm over the rumpled sheets where RJ had lain for a while last night. It had been just a little while longer than the previous nights, and she'd thought he might stay until morning. He hadn't done that on any of the nights he'd come to her room.

After their tryst on the yacht, they'd returned to the shore much later that evening. He'd taken her to her room and stepped inside for just long enough to take her in his arms one more time. The embrace had been long, each of them holding on to the other as if they thought it might be their last opportunity.

"I wish you'd trusted me ten years ago," he'd whispered just before pulling back slightly. "Part of the reason I admired you so much was because of your work ethic and your tenacity to pursue your goals no matter what. There's no way I would've ever asked you to give that up."

She'd let her forehead rest on his chest as regret filled every crevice of her being. "I should've told you that night. I don't know why I didn't." Or rather she had known. Fear was a cruel bastard that she wholeheartedly despised.

He'd lifted his hands to cup her cheeks, tilting her face up to him. "Everything I just said is still true. I still admire you and wholly support your career goals."

Grace knew that; otherwise his father and possibly the rest of his family wouldn't have been so open to her being here and writing the story. "I appreciate that, RJ. I really do."

He'd kissed her again, a very soft and lingering kiss that had left her dreamy-eyed and hopeful. In the days that followed she'd continued with her interviews, speaking to Chaz and then conducting a third interview with Veronica. She and RJ had also continued with their evening trysts, most times after the family dinner that Grace no longer needed an invitation to attend. During the days when she wasn't writing, she had an unspoken invite to everything on Riley's itinerary. In fact, Riley had taken to texting Grace daily reminders so she wouldn't forget and stay in her room working. But Grace liked being in her room, especially during the time that RJ was there

with her.

That's what scared her.

After talking about what happened that long-ago night, she and RJ seemed to be of one accord, just like they'd been before. In Manhattan, their private space had been RJ's penthouse, because it was away from the RGF offices and his parents' palatial home. It was where RJ could relax and be himself instead of being one of the top executives at the company, or the oldest son of the family. It was the one place where Grace could feel comfortable and not like she was in constant competition with her sisters.

Here, on the island, the villas that RJ and his family were staying in were much larger than Grace's room, but in her room they had privacy. For all intents and purposes, her room was now like his penthouse had been, all except for RJ spending the night. She never asked him why he didn't. She hated the thought that she was once again allowing fear to take up space in her life.

Her vibrating phone disrupted her thoughts and she rolled over in the bed again, catching herself before she tumbled over the edge. With a shake of her head, she reached for the phone on the nightstand and removed it from the charger. The notification was a text message from Riley.

Truth or dare at 2 p.m. in the café.

Grace groaned and buried her head in the pillow. Did she really want to play truth or dare with Riley and the gang, which was the name Maurice had given the group of four couples? Were she and RJ a couple again? Another groan escaped at the question because she was so confused. She was beginning to believe that was her natural state of being now—at least it had been since setting foot on this island.

Her phone vibrated and chimed in her hand. She startled and then lifted her head from the pillow to stare at the screen. "Dammit."

She answered it with a bland, "Hi, Eddie." Eddie's gravelly voice was the last thing she wanted to hear this morning.

"What's going on? Is the story almost done? I was thinking of sending Tiege down to get some pictures of the wedding. He says he has a connection that could get him onto the property without any detection," he rattled off without pause.

She bolted up in the bed. "Absolutely not!" Shaking her head as if she

thought he could see her, Grace frowned. “I mean, why would I need Tiege here if I’m just doing interviews?”

Tiege was Veronica’s former stepson, so Grace knew exactly how the guy would get in undetected. Veronica really was planning her exit strategy if she’d told him about the wedding being here this week.

“Don’t try that stunt with me,” he replied. “The only reason I’m sitting on the fact that Riley Gold’s wedding is taking place this week is because this story is a lot bigger.”

“Look, I’m getting a lot of good material. The story is coming along nicely and will be in your inbox early next week.”

The wedding was Saturday, three days away, and her flight out was already booked for early Sunday morning. She planned to give the story one final pass on Monday and send it off to Eddie that afternoon.

“Send me what you’ve got so far. I want to make sure you’re on the right track.”

“Not a chance. That’s not how I work. I’ll send you the complete story when it’s done and *no* pictures.”

“Do you have any idea how much circulation we’d get if we landed the first and only wedding photos?”

“Do you have any idea how powerful both these families are? You sneak into this venue to get pictures and they’ll come after you. I mean, they’ll go over your head to the owner of the paper and they’ll make his life a living hell as payback. How do you think he’s gonna react when he finds out you’re the one who brought that type of heat to his doorstep?” She was bluffing, sort of.

Grace really had no idea how RJ, his family or Tobias dealt with the media when they overstepped boundaries. That wasn’t a conversation she and RJ ever needed to have, because up until this point she’d represented his family and their business with the utmost respect on the few occasions she’d written about them. Sure, this story was a totally different ball game, and she’d taken a very calculated risk in coming here to do it in the first place. But she did know that after several recent debacles—the blogger who’d printed those designs from King Designs and insinuated Riley had stolen them from Chaz, the reporter who’d revealed Nina and Major’s business connection, and the woman who’d made a fake video depicting Maurice as an absentee dad—the Golds had met their quota of dealing peacefully with the media. Any intrusion into Riley’s wedding wasn’t going to go over well, Grace knew that

for certain.

“Look, I’ll meet my deadline. That’s all you need to worry about.”

“You’d better, or you’re through. Not only will I never work with you again, but if I’m ever asked about you—”

“Okay, I get it, Eddie. Like I said, the story will be in your inbox by close of business on Monday.” She didn’t wait for Eddie to say another word, but disconnected the call on her own terms. Having him threaten her when the sun was barely up wasn’t her idea of good morning conversation.

She fell back onto the bed, feeling the urge to toss her phone again. But recalling how that had turned out last time, she simply dropped it onto the mattress and closed her eyes. She was definitely going to have a story for Eddie come Monday morning. Unfortunately, it wasn’t the story she’d pitched to him. Well, not exactly. The new angle she’d told RJ she would take on the story had turned out to be a great call. What she’d written so far was informative and enlightening; it was inspirational and touching. Not surprisingly each of the Gold siblings and Chaz spoke not only highly of Ron and Tobias, but also of what the two companies meant to them, to the people they’d ultimately become. She’d felt motivated just writing it, pressed to take everything her parents had taught her about resilience and courage to be the very best reporter she could be. She didn’t want to toss that aside.

She climbed off the bed, went to the table where her laptop was and opened it. Plopping down into the chair, she waited for it to boot up and clicked on the file with her story draft. After reading over what she had so far, Grace knew she couldn’t change it. Not just because she really liked it, but also because it was exactly what she’d promised RJ she would write. It wasn’t the juicy exposé she’d promised the *Daily Gazette*. It was a story about how RJ’s family had broken the mold of all fashion houses and become number one all while facing adversity. No, she wasn’t going to change a word, not even if it meant Eddie would probably try to ruin her career.

* * *

“I dare you to kiss RJ.” Maurice chuckled heartily after saying those words.

Grace froze, obviously regretting choosing a dare over the truth. RJ didn’t move either, but not for the same reason. He’d come into this game knowing exactly what his siblings would try to do. They’d each been on him about what happened in the past between him and Grace. Riley had been especially

emotional, which he totally chalked up to her impending nuptials and new outlook on love.

“I don’t think she’s here by mistake,” she’d said a couple nights ago when they were the last two at the table after dinner.

“She’s not. She’s writing a story about our family, remember?” he’d replied, and Riley had smirked.

“You’re a goof, but you’re not stupid. She could’ve stayed in New York and written that story.”

“We’re all here—what better time to come and interview us?” he’d countered.

“There’s such a thing as a phone. Zoom, Skype, email. Besides those other options, she wasn’t guaranteed an interview with any of us. She had no idea we would agree to this story. Yet she used money from her savings to pay for the room and airfare just to spend two weeks on this island.”

“How do you know she used her savings?” Because of everything Riley had just said, that was the most important part to RJ. Grace hadn’t cared that she didn’t make a lot of money being a reporter. Even when her parents had compared her salary range to that of her sisters’, she’d argued that she made enough to live comfortably and that she was following her passion, doing what she was meant to do. And he’d championed her courage and determination. But the thought of her taking any type of financial hit because of this trip didn’t sit well with him.

“She mentioned it the other day when we were having drinks,” Riley had said with a wave of her hand. “But what I’m really saying is that I don’t think she’s here just to write this story and I’m hoping my big brother is smart enough to figure that out himself.”

Riley had left him to stew over that information and he’d been letting it ruminate in his mind since. On more than one occasion when he’d been with Grace at night, he’d thought about bringing it up, but since the night on the yacht, he’d liked the new low-stress caliber of their relationship. They’d been simply enjoying themselves, rekindling the things they enjoyed most about being together. Rocking the boat with questions and talk of where this was or wasn’t going was something he’d decided not to do.

Today, this truth-or-dare game that was meant to pass the time and entertain them may just be propelling them in another direction entirely. It made what they were doing much more public than either of them had probably considered.

“Well, alrighty then,” Grace said and stood from her seat.

She wore white capri pants and a yellow top. Her hair was out today, wavy and hanging past her shoulders. When she walked over to him he wanted to jump up and say something, do something that might take them out of the spotlight. But that would’ve been counterproductive.

Riley and Nina clapped while Major whistled and Maurice stood pumping a fist in the air. They were being ridiculous, and RJ looked at Grace with what he hoped she’d take as his apology for his wacky family. He made a move to stand when she was closer, but she stopped him by putting her hands on his shoulders.

“You don’t have to do this. We can leave,” he said.

She shook her head. “I’m not a sore loser,” she told him. “Besides, they want a show, I’ll definitely give them one.”

And with that she shocked them all, but mostly RJ, by straddling him and wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Yeaahh!” Maurice yelled.

“Get ’em, Grace!” Nina followed with a whooping laugh.

Riley whistled this time and he heard Chaz chuckling as well.

RJ couldn’t take his eyes off Grace, or his hands—which had a mind of their own and were now cupping her ass. “You sure you know what you’re doing?”

She sucked her bottom lip between her teeth and nodded. In the next seconds she was moving in, tilting her head before touching her lips gently to his. RJ was sure this was supposed to be just a peck. Maurice hadn’t specified what type of kiss she needed to give him in his dare, but to hell with that. Like Grace had said, if they wanted a show, they were going to get one. Especially since pulling away from kissing Grace wasn’t something RJ was able to do.

His hands moved up her back as he took the kiss deeper. She followed his lead, hugging him tighter and pressing her body into his. For a moment he almost forgot his family was there staring at them and cheering them on. All he could think about was how good she felt in his arms, how perfect and right it felt kissing her and holding her.

Grace broke the kiss—he was positive he wouldn’t have been able to do it. The cheers and comments in the room grew loud again, reminding him that they weren’t alone. Yet their gazes remained locked. Something was happening, some form of communication passed between them, which RJ

didn't think either of them had expected. It was a silent acknowledgment of sorts, but now was neither the time nor place to explore.

Grace apparently realized that as well because she pulled back from him, easing off his lap to stand and look at him for a few seconds before turning away. When she walked back to her seat it was with her arms raised in triumph, like she'd just run a marathon instead of kissed him senseless. As for RJ, he couldn't get out of that chair if somebody paid him. His legs felt weak, his chest full of heat and emotion. All he could do was clear his throat to try to get himself together. When his brothers responded to that with more crude comments and guffaws, he replied by giving each of them the middle finger.

Later that evening, after the dinner Grace had decided to skip, RJ walked along the pathway that had taken him to her room so many nights before. The first time he'd walked this way, over a week ago, he'd had no idea what—or rather, who—he was going to find. His lips tilted into a smile as he recalled stepping on the vibrator she'd been looking for, even though at the time, laughter had been the furthest thing from his mind.

There'd been an instant mixture of confusion and elation at seeing her again after so long. Of course that'd been combined with a potent punch of lust once she held the sex toy in her hand. That lust hadn't abated in the days since that night and the many times he'd slept with her. It never would, apparently. Neither would the feelings he'd been harboring all this time.

His mother had tried to talk to him about it; even his brothers had tried to broach the subject with him over the years, and RJ had shot each of them down, not wanting to admit what was definitely still there. He was still in love with Grace.

What did that even mean now? In the past he'd thought those feelings meant the next step was marriage. Now, after all that had happened, all that he'd learned, did it make sense to hope for a second chance?

“Hey,” Grace said when she opened the door.

He'd been so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't remember knocking.

“Hey,” he replied. “Missed you at dinner.” He punctuated that statement by stepping toward her, slipping a hand around to the nape of her neck. “I missed you a lot.” He pulled her closer, sweeping his tongue along her lips before diving in for a deep kiss right there in her doorway.

When he was finally able to release her, she blinked up at him. His ego inflated at the obvious staggering effects of his kiss on her. RJ grinned and

said, "Hello."

She cleared her throat and shook her head. "Hello, yourself." Moving out of the way, she let him into her room, then closed and locked the door behind him.

"I have a lot of writing to get done," she started as he moved farther into the room. "I met with your mother this afternoon and tomorrow I'm meeting with your father and Tobias. Both before the bachelor and bachelorette parties are scheduled to start."

Stopping near the table where she had her laptop and notepads scattered, he turned back to face her. "The last three interviews."

She nodded. "And then it'll be done."

He stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his shorts. "You didn't interview me." Truth be told he hadn't wanted to be interviewed. After agreeing to this story and spending more time with Grace, he hadn't wanted to be bothered with any of its details. He'd only wanted to focus on her, but he had a job to do.

She came closer to where he stood, lifting her hands to tuck wayward strands of her hair behind her ears. She wore a nightshirt, legs and feet bare, hair pulled back into a messy ponytail.

"I didn't think you'd want to be interviewed. Besides, I know how everything your father did affected your life. And I know you've always had a distaste for the feud between him and Tobias."

It was an inherited distaste, he could admit, since he'd never asked questions about what his father said had happened. Those were the facts, and as Ron's son RJ had acted accordingly. That meant keeping a close eye on their competition. RJ could follow his parents' decree that there was now a truce between the families, but he still intended to pay close attention to Tobias and his fashion house. Starting with Veronica and this book she planned to write.

"I might have something new to add," he told Grace, even though he really didn't. He just wanted her to interview him, or at least say she'd stop working to interview him, and then he could easily maneuver that into something else.

He closed the distance between them, pushing his hands under her nightshirt to run along her hips. "You can start by asking me whatever questions you want to ask."

She let him pull her to him, already shaking her head. "Nah, buddy. Not yet anyway. Just let me get these notes typed up and then you'll have my

undivided attention.”

That last word was followed by her hand cupping his burgeoning erection, and he grinned at her to keep from moaning. “I can respect that,” he said, dropping a quick kiss on her lips. “I’ll just be over here waiting.”

When he didn’t move but kept his hands on her delectable body, she pushed him away, laughing. He chuckled, too, going over to sit on the bed. He took off his shoes and reached for the television remote. There wasn’t usually much on these hotel televisions with limited satellite channels, but he wasn’t really watching anyway. No, when RJ lay back against the pillows, one arm tucked behind his head, his gaze shifted over to the table where Grace sat.

He had no idea how long he watched her staring at the laptop screen, fingers moving over the keyboard. Every now and then she’d turn her attention to the notes on the many pads laid out, and then she’d go right back to typing again. He loved to see her work, enjoyed wondering how her brilliant mind came up with so many words. Her stories were always meaningful and poignant in some way. Even when she was talking about makeup comparisons, upcoming style changes, the lack of books in a public library. Regardless of what she wrote he could always find the heart and empathy she’d put into each word. While they were dating, he’d read every one of her articles, had even saved many of them on his home computer. She was the love of his life and everything about her was important to him.

So when he dozed off, it was to thoughts of how she would work in the home office of the house they’d purchase together one day. He’d stand in the doorway watching her until he was too tired. Then he’d head to their bedroom and wait for her to finish and join him. He wouldn’t sleep soundly until the moment she was lying in bed beside him, where she belonged.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE NEXT MORNING when Grace awoke and rolled over in bed, she again went immediately still. This time, it was because she'd bumped into something, or she should say someone. Opening her eyes very slowly, she saw RJ lying on his back, one arm on the pillow above his head, the other hand buried beneath the sheet that straddled his waist. A smile ghosted her lips and she propped herself up on an elbow to stare at him.

Sunlight poured in from the partially closed drapes at the patio door, a slash of gold cutting across his deep umber-hued skin. Tucking her bottom lip between her teeth, she stared at his muscled biceps and chest. There was no part of this man that wasn't heavenly to look at. If he turned over on his stomach, which he often did when he slept, she'd have a view of his firm ass and strong shoulders. As it stood now, she dragged her gaze back up to his face. He looked so peaceful in his sleep. No concerns about the company marring his forehead with lines, no private jokes from his brothers ruffling his mood, no worries about the wedding going perfectly for Riley. In the past few days, she and RJ had talked about a lot of things—his family, hers, his job and hers. Those conversations coupled with this morning wake-up view was just another reminder of old times.

Last night after she'd finished writing, her thoughts had begun to focus on what the future held not just for the two fashion houses, but also for her and RJ. For whatever reason, she'd been able to keep what they were doing here on the island compartmentalized, or at least that had been her goal. But that was before truth or dare, and it was before her conversation with Marva Gold.

"Why did you really want to write this story?" That had been the first question Marva asked after Grace was seated in the living room area of their villa.

There'd been a level of comfort in all the interviews she'd conducted up to this point. She used to have a really good relationship with Marva but this was the first time she'd been in a room alone with the woman after turning down her son's proposal.

"Because it'll be good for my career," Grace had replied.

Marva had seemed to accept that response by giving a slight nod. "Or was it because you knew it would bring you back to RJ? You wanted to right the

wrong you knew you'd done by leaving all those years ago."

Well, clearly, Marva had some things she wanted to say about their breakup. Grace had figured this was fair. In fact, she'd given each of the Gold siblings a chance to voice their feelings about that situation during their interviews. For the way she'd left everyone high and dry, she figured she owed them that much. "I wasn't wrong for making a decision to follow my dreams. Men do it every day. They sacrifice it all for their careers and they're given a pat on the back. Why was I supposed to do something different?"

"So that's the reason you decided not to marry my son?" Marva nodded after she spoke again. "I see. You thought you wouldn't be able to continue on your career path while being married to such a high-profile man. Oh, I definitely see now."

While Grace wanted to tell Marva that she couldn't possibly know what Grace had been feeling then or what was motivating her now, she didn't. The irony of the situation was, if anyone in the Gold family could relate to what she'd gone through with RJ, Marva was the one. She'd attended college and worked briefly as an educator before marrying Ron and becoming the legendary man's partner. In the years she'd been a Gold, she'd also become a very notable philanthropist, starting several initiatives to aid schools specifically in underrepresented communities.

"Ron was that man for me," Marva went on. "His big personality, the company, the fortune, even that fancy Rolls-Royce he rode around in, was a lot for a girl like me who'd come from much humbler beginnings in Baltimore."

"I know you were able to build a separate life and identity for yourself within the marriage," Grace said in the hope that they could speed past this part of the conversation. She knew Marva's backstory, had done all her research prior to this interview. They didn't need to rehash any of it.

"Then why didn't you believe you could do the same?"

"I didn't want to," Grace immediately replied, realizing then that it had boiled down to that simple fact. Grace hadn't wanted to re-create herself under the Gold name; she'd wanted to have her own name personified first and was certain there was nothing wrong with that.

"That makes sense. But how do you feel now? Are you certain you became fixated on doing this story because you believe you're the one to tell it, or was it partially because you knew it would bring you face-to-face with RJ again?"

Hours after that very long conversation with his mother, Grace stared down at RJ next to her, wondering if some of Marva's observations might be accurate.

"If you keep staring at me like that, you're never gonna make it to your last interviews and I'll be late for a call I have scheduled with the office." He didn't open his eyes when he spoke, and she wondered if he knew she used to stare at him every morning like this.

With a grin, she shook her head, figuring he probably did know and had enjoyed it. RJ may not seem interested in the personal attention the media always wanted to offer the Golds, but he enjoyed any attention she gave him. The thought warmed her heart.

"I can't believe you're here. That you stayed." That wasn't what she'd planned to say to him, but the words had tumbled free anyway. "I mean, when I finished working it was really late and I just climbed into bed." She'd known he was there, had even cuddled up to him for a while, intending her touch to initiate foreplay. Then they'd get to the business of sex like they'd been doing each night and afterward he would return to his villa. But the sex hadn't happened and he hadn't left.

His eyes were open now, holding her gaze intently. "You were sleeping pretty soundly when I woke up. I didn't want to disturb you."

"So you undressed and joined me in the bed instead of leaving?" It was obvious that's what happened, but she wanted to him to tell her why he'd done it.

He reached over to take her free hand, weaving his fingers through hers. "I didn't want to leave last night." He looked at their hands and then returned his gaze to hers. "I didn't want to be without you again. For ten extremely long years I vowed to sleep alone and I intended to honor that decree forever. I wasn't going to let anybody else in, Grace. Not into the space that was reserved solely for you."

In that moment her heart felt like it was breaking again, but this time for the sadness so easily detected in his tone. "I never meant to hurt you."

With an easy smile, RJ brought her hand up to his lips, kissing each of her fingers. "I know. I understand what you did and why you did it."

"I'm so sorry," she said, because she was. She was sorry that she hadn't talked to him about what she was feeling, sorry that she hadn't given their relationship the respect it deserved by ending it better.

He reached for her then, pulling her until she was on top of him. He

hugged her close, whispering, “Don’t apologize, baby. It’s in the past. We’re here now and that’s all that matters.”

Grace held on to him for what felt like hours. She inhaled the fading remnants of his cologne, felt the steady strength of his body beneath her. This wasn’t a memory. She felt everything—the overwhelming sense of remorse mixed with the undeniable push of hope. Easing away slowly, she placed her palms on his chest and adjusted herself until she was sitting over him, her legs spread, her pussy flush against his dick.

His arms had fallen to his side but he continued to look up at her, not speaking, just watching and, she suspected, waiting to see what she would do next. She grabbed the hem of her nightshirt, pulling it up and over her head before tossing it onto the floor. He waited a beat before lifting his hands to cup her breasts, kneading them gently. She leaned into the touch, arching her back to give him better access. Then she lifted slightly off him, just enough so she could reach a hand behind her, lowering it to rub along his dick.

He didn’t make a sound, but in the early morning light she could see a muscle tightening in his jaw. She eased her hand into the slit of his boxers and touched his dick skin to skin. His hands stiffened on her breasts until she wanted to scream with the mixture of pleasure and pain. When he lowered one hand to push beneath the band of her panties and down further until he was rubbing her clit, she bucked over him and gasped.

A tidal wave of desire washed over her and she shook her head to try to find some clarity, but there was none. There was only her and RJ.

“More,” she whispered as she moved. “Give me more.”

Grace wanted it all. Every inch of him, every part of his soul, every emotion he possessed. She needed it desperately. The sheet went first when she pushed at it until it his legs were free. Then she attacked his boxers, yanking them down his legs until they were flying across the room to land wherever. Her hands were on his dick again, this time holding and stroking it until she could close her mouth over the tip.

RJ sucked in a breath, his hands immediately going to the back of her head, gripping her hair as he spoke through clenched teeth.

Grace obliged, lowering her head until the better portion of his length was in her mouth, touching the back of her throat. She pulled up slightly and began to suck while he guided her head, lifting his hips slightly off the bed to meet her.

There was nothing else, not here on this island and not in New York, that

could ever compare to this, to him. The taste of him, the feel of his hands in her hair, the sound of her name in his voice.

“Gracie, baby,” he whispered.

Yes, she wanted to reply, she was his Gracie and only his. Even after years apart there was no denying a part of her still belonged to this man.

He was the one to move fast this time, easing her away, then hurriedly sliding off the bed to find a condom and put it on. The second he was sheathed he reached for her, turning her over and then pulling her up onto her knees.

“I thought about you every day,” he said as he positioned himself behind her, then thrust deep inside her.

Grace arched her back and yelled with the explosive pressure of his quick entrance. He didn’t waste another moment but began pumping into her fiercely. “Every. Damn. Day. Gracie. I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

“I know,” she breathed, her fingers clenching the sheets. “I thought about you, too. All the time. So much. I missed you so much.”

She could say that now and not feel as if she were going back on her word. The decision to walk away from him had been made, and they’d both served that ten-year sentence of being apart. Now was no time for regrets.

“Missed you more,” he declared. “More and more.”

There was no use holding back; he felt too good inside her and she’d needed this too much. Her legs trembled and her arms shook until she had no choice but to lower the top half of her body to the bed, moaning into the mattress as her release took her.

He stayed deep inside her while her muscles gripped him, rubbing a hand up and down her back and over her ass while his other hand still held her hip.

“I need more, Gracie.”

The second she heard him whisper those words she knew what he was asking. “Yes,” she immediately whispered. “Yes.”

When he eased out of her she felt an immediate sense of loss but she knew it wouldn’t last long. During one of their many nights together, he’d come across her toiletry bag where she’d stored the new vibrator and a few other pleasure items. It was in the bathroom in plain sight and she wasn’t the least bit embarrassed by him seeing it. Most of the items in that bag they’d explored when they were together. So she knew he’d gone into the bathroom to grab the lube and when he returned, touching his fingers to her anus with the cool product, she felt desire bubbling deep in the pit of her stomach once

more.

“Gracie,” he moaned while moving his finger over the tight area, pressing inside slowly.

Her nipples were pebble hard, her pussy clenching with need. She wanted to tell him to hurry and to take it slow and to give her more all at once. Instead she bit down on her bottom lip, closing her eyes to the delightful sensations rippling through her at his touch. The moment he moved his hand and pressed his dick there she let her hips relax and breathed in deep. His hands were on her ass now, holding her open.

“I missed this,” he whispered. “Missed it so much.”

She had, too. There was never going to be another man she allowed to have her this way, never going to be anyone she trusted the way she trusted RJ. He eased into her slowly until she felt full and on fire with need.

“Please,” she moaned. “Now.”

He gave her what she wanted, pumping in and out of her with slow measured strokes, until they were both gasping with satisfaction, breathing hard and loud as the need built into a crescendo between them.

* * *

Now was exactly what RJ wanted to give her. Except there was even more to it. He wanted to give Grace now *and* forever.

Leaning over her slightly, he reached a hand around between her legs until he found her clit and rubbed simultaneously with his thrusts into her. She moaned long and deep and he felt her body shaking beneath him. He was so tightly embedded in her he could hardly think straight. This connection they had when they were together like this was deeper than anything he’d ever experienced with anyone before, and more than he ever wanted to give anyone else.

This was for them only; it was their shared moment, the time when they were the most connected intimately and emotionally, and he’d thought he would never experience it again.

“I love you, Gracie.” The words came before his mind could process whether or not it was wise to say them. “I love you so damn much.”

She made a sound that was too close to a whimper and he paused.

“Please, don’t stop, Ronald. Please.”

He continued, loving the sound of his name on her lips, the feel of his dick

being gripped by her muscles, the warm dampness of her pussy. It was everything and still on some level not enough. Until she bucked beneath him, her body going still, his name a litany on her lips.

“Never stopped loving you, Ronald.” She gasped and shook her head. “Only you. I only love you.”

As if that was what he needed to take that leap into pleasure, he pumped into her a couple times more before his body jerked, his release coming with such force he lost his breath.

The moments felt like hours before he could ease out of her and fall flat on his back on the bed. She collapsed onto her stomach and he reached out to take her hand, bringing her fingers to his lips once more. “I love you, Grace.”

She turned her head toward him, touching her lips to his biceps before whispering, “I love you, RJ.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE AIR WAS warm even though the sun had already set. It was the night before the wedding. The family was gathered outside on a grassy area, with the magnificent mountains and water as a backdrop. The ceremony would take place here tomorrow morning at eleven.

Grace stood off to the side, admiring the work Riley's event planner and her massive team had created. A gazebo covered in peach, orange and white roses was at the end of a twenty-foot aisle flanked by rows of white chairs. White silk was draped from one chair to the next, and gold lanterns with peach ribbons hung from iron shepherd's hooks at the end of every other row. Tomorrow the floor of the aisle would be covered in fresh white rose petals.

She'd seen the gowns that Nina, Desta, Marva and Veronica would be wearing. While Marva and Veronica would don original designs by their husbands, made of the same cream-colored fabric, Nina and Desta had signature dresses from the RGold line in the palest peach hue. Riley's wedding gown consisted of over seventy yards of pure white bias-cut organza tiers that hung beneath a tight bodice, creating a gorgeous fantasy-looking piece that Ron Gold was more than a little proud of designing. They were all going to look amazing. Even the guys, who would wear specially designed cream-colored tuxedos.

When Veronica had invited Grace to the island, Grace knew it was going to be for Riley's wedding, but she hadn't given any thought to whether or not she'd be invited to attend. For tonight's dress rehearsal, she'd been asked to stand in for Riley, as the family believed it was bad luck for the bride to walk down the aisle before her wedding day. Grace's family believed that same superstition, so this wasn't Grace's first time as a fill-in. It was, however, the first time she would walk down an aisle and see RJ standing at the altar. The implications of that were huge and not easily ignored.

"You all right?" She jumped at the voice and turned to see Riley standing next to her.

Grace knew she'd never seen a happier smile. Riley was ecstatic to be marrying Chaz. There was no doubt the two of them were madly in love, and if there had been a doubt, they'd both dispelled it during their separate interviews with Grace. Riley and Chaz had fallen in love against all odds and

under the scrutiny of the media. Yet each day Grace watched them in this tropical setting surrounded by family, she saw how tight their bond truly was.

“I’m fine. Just daydreaming, I guess.” Grace shrugged in the hope that it would help downplay the surge of longing she felt when thinking about walking down that aisle toward RJ.

“Daydreaming of a wedding possibly?”

Obviously, she hadn’t convinced either Riley or herself.

Grace shook her head. “No. We’re not ready for that.” Which was exactly what she would’ve said ten years ago. She’d really had no clue that RJ had been ready to propose to her. Sure, they’d talked about their future, but that was just talk. Conversations they’d had in the middle of the night, ideas for a shared life she’d thought was further away than RJ did.

“I don’t know,” Riley said. “RJ really wants to be married. And I’m not just saying that because I’m getting married tomorrow. He never talked of not getting married or not committing to one woman for the rest of his life until after you left. Now he’s not frowning whenever one of us holds hands or kisses or says anything about being a couple. He’s been doing that for the last decade and we were all wondering when he’d snap out of it.” Riley touched Grace’s shoulder. “The minute he saw you again, he did. How amazing is that, that even after all this time the two of you are still in love.”

The event planner arrived with her clipboard and two assistants by her side. “Let’s get started. We want to be at the rehearsal dinner on time,” she said.

From that point on, everybody followed her directions, until the moment it was time for Grace to walk down the aisle.

Ron stepped up and extended his arm to her. Their interview had gone as well as could be expected, but she knew he still wasn’t happy about the story. When she only stared at him, the edge of his mouth tilted up in a smile that looked so much like RJ’s she couldn’t help but smile back. She linked her arm in his, and when the event planner gave the signal they started walking slowly down the aisle.

“You’ve put a smile back on my son’s face,” Ron said to her.

He hadn’t spoken about her and RJ during their interview yesterday morning. He’d only answered her questions and made sure to tell her what he didn’t want to see in the story. She’d agreed to not print the personal stuff about him and Marva.

“I missed him, too,” she admitted.

Ron reached his other hand over to place it on top of hers. "Don't waste any more time," he told her. "Life's too short."

Grace looked at Ron and then because they were still walking, she looked straight ahead toward the altar, where RJ was smiling at her.

* * *

Ten years ago, he'd asked her to be his wife. Tonight, RJ wanted to ask her again. He wanted this trip to be the beginning of their future. But how could he tell her that here, in the middle of Riley's rehearsal dinner? He couldn't, that was the bottom line. This was Riley's time, and his sister deserved every bit of happiness in the spotlight that she'd created for herself. He wasn't going to upstage that or even interrupt it with an impromptu proposal of his own.

"She looks happy," his mother said when she came to sit beside him.

They'd finished dinner and dessert about fifteen minutes ago. Grace had been called over to take pictures near the fireplace with Nina, Desta and Riley.

"Yeah, Riley can't wait to be married tomorrow," he said, keeping his eye on the photo session.

"I wasn't talking about Riley," Marva said. She touched RJ's hand. "You look happy, too."

He glanced down at his mother's hand covering his and then over to her. "I am," he admitted and then took a deep breath. "I didn't realize how unhappy I was until she was back."

"I told you to go after her."

"I know you did," he said, remembering his mother had come to visit him the week after Grace had left. "I didn't because of my pride. But as it turns out, I think the space was exactly what Grace needed to do the things she wanted to do."

"I told her she could've done those things while being married to you."

He grinned. "I told her that, too. She's stubborn."

Marva chuckled. "Like somebody else I know. My grandchildren are going to be a handful if they take after you and her."

Two hours later, RJ was still thinking about his mother's words. He was also thinking that, before he jumped the gun and went shopping for another engagement ring, he wanted to talk to Grace, to see where her head was with

all this. They'd admitted their love for each other again and weren't opposed to showing it in public, but that had been the extent of their new relationship. Day after tomorrow they'd be heading back to New York and to their normal lives; he wanted to get some things straight before then.

That was one of the reasons he was on his way to her room again—the other was that they'd already arranged to meet at ten. She'd volunteered to help decorate Riley's room with Desta and Nina so they hadn't left the restaurant together after dinner. He'd gone to his room first and changed into shorts and a T-shirt. He'd also wanted some time alone to think about what he was going to say to her. Now he was almost to her suite and his phone was vibrating. He pulled it out of his pocket and read the text from Grace.

Got a little sweaty so I'm grabbing a shower. Door's open.

Wishing she'd waited for him to get in the shower, RJ smiled as he entered her room. He locked the door behind him and walked to the small refrigerator where he knew there were bottled waters and a couple vodka and rum miniatures, which he'd put there a few nights ago. He took one out, opened it and went to the table where room service had left a clean set of glasses and coffee cups. He poured his vodka into one and he took a seat, waiting for Grace to get out of the shower.

Her laptop was open and he glanced at it while taking his first sip. His mother's name caught his attention and in that second he realized this must be Grace's story. He turned away slowly, setting his glass on the table. *Don't read it.* The words floated into his mind and he kept his gaze averted. There was no reason to read it; he and Grace had talked about all her interviews, he knew what everyone was going to say. Still, he was going to read it eventually. He used to always read Grace's work and he'd enjoyed that. So all he had to do was turn his attention back to the laptop and read. And when he did, fury deep and red-hot boiled in the pit of his gut.

The Golds and the Kings have come full circle. From a feud that started with a love triangle featuring the major players, Ron Gold Jr., Tobias King and Marva Gold, to these powerhouse men taking the fashion industry by storm.

RJ had to set his cup on the table. His fingers immediately clenched into a fist as he continued to read.

Marva Gold recalls meeting Tobias first and marveling at how focused and

talented he was. It was a totally different feeling when Tobias introduced Marva to Ron at an RGF holiday party. "I knew Ron was the man I would marry from the first moment I saw him," Marva said.

That night Marva had no idea that meeting the man who would turn out to be the love of her life would destroy a friendship and create a second fashion house. That's precisely what happened when Tobias saw Ron and Marva kissing weeks after the party.

"Hey," Grace said from behind him.

RJ stood, whirling around until he faced her. "What the hell is this?"

"What—"

"I thought we discussed this. You said you weren't going to write anything but the truth. That you weren't interested in slandering my family." His temples throbbed and his heart raced. She was standing there with a towel wrapped around her looking as if she'd just been caught with her hand in the cookie jar.

"Wait a minute, just calm down and let me explain."

"There's nothing to explain, Grace! I told you what I expected and you lied to me. I specifically said what would be allowed and what wouldn't, and you went against our agreement and wrote this crap! What the hell is wrong with you?"

He was yelling, his hands were clenched into fists, and for the life of him he couldn't find the strength to calm down. How could she do this? How could she lie to him every day of this trip, every night that they'd lain together, when he'd held her in his arms and told her he loved her, how had she been able to do all that knowing she'd planned to betray him with this story all along?

"I think you should calm down," she said, and took a step toward him.

"I'm not gonna calm down while you destroy my family. How dare you create this lie about my mother! She had nothing to do with this feud. You promised me you wouldn't do this and I trusted you, Grace." He huffed and ran a hand down the back of his head. "After everything we've been through I trusted you to write a story that focused more on the companies, not the personal trials of my family. And you did it all just to get a promotion!"

She jerked back as if he'd made a move toward her, and RJ felt like crap. He'd never put his hands on a woman, had never even yelled at one the way he was yelling at Grace now.

"It's not what you think," she said before clearing her throat. "If you would

just sit down and let me explain.”

He didn't sit, nor did his anger abate, but he did lower his voice. “Explain what? That you're not telling lies to glorify a feud that I told you was quashed months ago? I read it right there on your computer, Grace. That's the story you're planning to send to your editor. It'll end up on the fashion page of some newspaper.”

“Lies? RJ, everything I write is factual. I'm meticulous about fact-checking everything. I've conducted lengthy interviews and transcribed my notes myself.”

“You never shared this with me during any of our meetings!” He pointed to the laptop. “I never heard about any of this, and I never would've approved of it if I had. So you have to delete it. You shut this whole story down, Grace, or I swear you'll never work on another article for any paper again.”

* * *

Grace walked away. She went back into the bathroom and shut the door. Leaning against it, she closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she opened her eyes again, she dared a single tear to fall. She could feel that they'd welled up in her eyes but she wouldn't let any fall. She couldn't. Instead she picked up her robe from the duffel bag she kept in the bathroom and pushed her arms through it. She removed the towel wrapped around her, belted the robe and took a deep breath before reaching for the doorknob.

RJ was upset. Given what he thought the circumstances were, he had a right to be upset. He didn't, however, have a right to read her unpublished story without her permission, and, in turn, threaten her job. And that's exactly what she would've said if he were anyone else.

She opened the door and went back into the room where he was still standing near the table. He had both arms up, hands on the back of his head, and when he saw her return the look on his face said he was still angry. But he was still there, which meant he either wanted her to explain or he wanted her to tell him she was pulling the story. He wasn't going to like what she had to say.

“Everything you read on that screen is the absolute truth. Your mother told me how the feud started. She dated Tobias first, then she met your father and fell in love with him. Tobias was pissed and that's why he left RGF and refused to speak to your father or mother again.” RJ took a couple steps back,

until the back of his legs bumped against a chair. “The design that it was said Tobias stole back then, that sketch belonged to Tobias. He’d worked on it while he was at RGF, but it was all his work. So there was some question as to whether the sketch was RGF’s work product or if Tobias as the creator owned the IP rights. But the real issue was that love triangle.” She paused, took a breath and folded her arms over her chest. “Your father and Tobias corroborated the story.”

RJ sat down with a thump and dropped his head. “All this time,” he said softly.

“Yes,” she replied. “All this time your parents and Tobias let the world believe the reason for the feud was the stolen dress. That’s how they protected their privacy. Despite her breaking his heart, Tobias loved your mother and he didn’t want her name dragged through the mud for dating best friends.”

“And that’s why my father never spoke of the details of the feud. But he harbored it. He told us that King Designs was the enemy.” RJ was visibly shaken, his voice rough as he tried to come to terms with what she was saying.

“Because Tobias left. He broke the pact that he and your father made to run RGF together. Tobias couldn’t work with the man who he felt had stolen his girl. And your mother, she swore she never had romantic feelings for Tobias and they’d only gone out on three dates. She admits she should’ve handled the situation better, especially since Tobias and Ron were friends, but she never meant to hurt Tobias.” Grace recalled feeling the overwhelming sorrow and regret in every one of Marva’s words as she’d shared that story with her.

“You can’t put this story out there, Grace. I’m begging you,” RJ said.

“Stop.” She held up a hand. “That’s not the story that’s going to my editor. I always start with an outline and from there I work in a draft mode. That’s what you just read. I was checking it earlier to make sure I didn’t leave out anything important in the final copy.”

There was no turning back now. So many rules had already been broken. She went to the laptop and pulled up another document before turning the screen to face RJ. “Here’s the real story.”

After staring at her a few seconds more, he reluctantly shifted his attention to the screen. Grace took the seat across from him at the table. Moments later, when he looked up at her again, it was with a look of sadness and regret.

“I didn’t know there were two stories,” he said quietly.

She shook her head. “And you didn’t trust me. I told you I wouldn’t write anything to hurt you or your family and I meant it. But you didn’t believe me. You didn’t trust that I’d protect you and the ones you love.”

“Grace—”

“No, let me finish. I’m not angry that you didn’t trust me. A long time ago I didn’t trust you.” She sighed. “I guess that’s our shortcoming, RJ. We have this amazing sexual connection and all these emotions for each other that we can’t seem to turn off. But we don’t have that one basic thing—trust.”

“Look, I’m sorry about my outburst. I thought you were betraying my family. But you can’t compare this to what happened to us before. They’re two entirely different scenarios,” he argued.

“I know what you thought, RJ. But I’d already promised you I wouldn’t write anything detrimental. I shouldn’t even have been writing this story because of our previous connection, I could’ve lost this job and possibly any future hope of being a respected journalist. I even changed the scope of the story and shared some of my interview notes with you. Yet you still stood here and jumped to the worst conclusion possible, which tells me you never trusted me to do what I said I would.” She used both hands to cover her face and breathe in and out deeply. “That night you proposed, I said no. Then I got up from that table and walked away. I never trusted you to understand my reasons for not wanting to marry you at that time.”

When he didn’t speak right away, she shrugged and lifted her hands as if in surrender. “The lack of trust between us is obvious.”

He sat back in the chair, shaking his head. “It was right there on the screen, Grace. What’d you expect me to think?”

She didn’t break eye contact. “I would’ve expected you to ask me for an explanation and then wait until I provided it to decide how you were going to react.”

He dragged a hand down the back of his head. “Well, it’s done. I apologized and we can move on.”

“Yes, we can,” she said. “We can move on.” Grace stood from the chair and went to the door. “I’m really tired now and I told Nina that I’d meet the girls in Riley’s room by seven tomorrow.”

RJ didn’t stand immediately, but he did look at her. For an instant she thought it was the same shocked and confused look he’d given her that night at the restaurant, but no, this look was different. It was disappointment and

despondence. She wasn't sure how much of that was attributed to her or what he'd just found out about his parents, but the fact still remained that everything between them was different now.

"You're angry," he said when he finally came to stand in front of her.

"No," she said, and to prove her point she smiled. "I just don't want to make the same mistakes I made before, so I'm telling you how I feel this time." Against the incessant pounding of her heart, and the panic of losing what just hours ago she'd been ecstatic to find with him again, her brain insisted she keep going. "We should take some time to figure out if this is what we really want. This forever love the people around us seem to have. Because I don't know, RJ. I don't feel like I know anything about this anymore."

He stepped closer to her. "You're afraid."

Irritated that he continued to blame everything she did or said on fear, she snapped, "And so are you! Which is why you could so quickly jump to the wrong conclusions about me. You're afraid that what we've been doing these last two weeks and all that it's made you feel might've been a mistake. You want what your brothers and sister have, but you're afraid it won't work out that way for you again. So yelling at me and threatening me came as your natural defense."

And it had cut through her like a hot blade, leaving her to deal with the hurt she supposed she'd inflicted on him all those years ago.

His eyes glittered with intensity, his lips forming a tight line. "I wasn't lying about how I feel about you and that has nothing to do with two weeks or ten damn years. I loved you then and I love you now."

He was standing close, so close she could reach up and touch his face, put her finger on that muscle in his jaw that jumped as he clenched his teeth.

"I didn't lie about my feelings, either. But you know what, RJ? We were in love before. And that wasn't enough."

"Grace—"

"This time, before we go any further, we should make sure we have what it takes to make it work. Because if not, we shouldn't put each other through another ten years of heartbreak."

He looked like he didn't know how to respond to that. She didn't really know what else to say, either. There was a dull ache in her chest and she was still feeling like a breakdown was imminent. She needed to get him out of here because the last thing she wanted was for RJ to see how badly he'd hurt

her.

“I don’t want to lose you, Grace. Not again.” His words were so sincere, and Grace wanted nothing more than to fall into his arms and say that all was well, but it wasn’t.

When he was gone, she locked the door and sat on the couch, dropping her head into her hands. She hadn’t trusted him with her feelings about her career in the past, and tonight he hadn’t trusted her to keep her word. Did that mean they shouldn’t be together? She didn’t know. Was she overreacting? She wasn’t sure. Was everything she was feeling in this place, amid all the wedding excitement, wreaking havoc with her emotions and the commitment she’d made to her career? Possibly.

It was all so confusing and exhausting. All Grace knew for certain was that the man she loved had just walked out that door and she was sitting here feeling like he probably had years ago—that love was a cruel joke and she no longer wanted any part of it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Four months later
Manhattan, New York

“I CAN’T BELIEVE you’re still acting like this,” Maurice said. He was standing near the door of the suite RJ had reserved at the Park Lane Hotel, where Ron and Marva’s anniversary party was being held.

RJ looked in the mirror one last time, adjusting his bow tie and then smoothing his hand over his beard. “I got this,” he told his brother.

Major, who was lounging in the chair across the room, laughed. “You always say that.”

RJ turned to face both of them. “And I always mean it.”

“Yeah, but we haven’t seen Grace since Saint Lucia and we know the two of you are in love, so what gives? Are you getting her back or are you just gonna sit on your ass like you did before and let her get away again?”

Maurice wasn’t known to mince words.

“My love life is none of your business,” RJ said, enjoying the perplexed look on Maurice’s face.

“I mean, you can’t still be upset with her,” Major interjected. “The story that appeared in the paper was touching and painted Dad and Tobias as trailblazers and role models. It even spotlighted how much influence Mom had on the business in the early years. We’ve received nothing but good press behind it.”

That was true. The week after Riley’s wedding, the story had been printed in the *Daily Gazette* and posted on all digital media outlets. The Golds and the Kings were making headlines once more, but this time it was in a way that would ensure their story would go down in history. To RJ and the rest of the family’s surprise, a few photos from their outings in Saint Lucia and one photo of both families together at the wedding were also released with the story. Riley had called from her honeymoon in Venice to tell them she and Chaz had approved the pictures and worked out an agreement with Grace to have them released with her story.

“The good press made up for that mind-blowing admission Mom gave just before the wedding,” Maurice added with a rare frown on his face.

Major sat up in the chair then, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Yeah, I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that Mom dated Tobias first.”

RJ agreed with his brothers; that part of the story had been a shock to his system and had also taught him one of the most important lessons of his life—to fight for love, no matter the circumstances. “I’m glad she told us,” he said, even though a part of him wished Marva and Ron had told them the full story a long time ago. Preferably before he blew up at Grace about it.

“And I don’t blame Tobias for being pissed,” RJ continued. “If I were in his position I would’ve been angry enough to quit as well.”

“Yeah,” Maurice agreed. “Me, too. If Major had dated Desta after me and then ended up marrying her, I’d be ready to strangle him.”

Major smirked. “I beat your fiancée at poker last week and you were ready to bite my head off, so believe me, man, I know.”

The brothers shared a laugh at the memory of their monthly poker game. Desta was still the only woman who attended and she routinely beat the brakes off each of them, so Major had really celebrated his win last week. Until Maurice had threatened to stuff him in the closet if he didn’t pipe down. RJ had enjoyed seeing his family happy.

Riley and Chaz had bought another house, this one in the country as a getaway for when they wanted to leave all the hustle and bustle of the city. Maurice and Desta were now planning their upcoming winter wedding at the ski resort where they’d learned they’d been email pen pals. Major and Nina were over the moon with excitement in anticipation of their son, who was expected in December. And RJ, well, he was doing just fine, too, despite what his brothers thought.

“We should get downstairs. The party’s about to start and you know how Mom is about being late.” RJ walked toward the door and Major stood from his chair to follow him.

“You really aren’t going to go after her, man? You two are meant to be together,” Major said when the three Gold brothers walked out of the suite.

They each wore RGold black tuxedos with gold satin vests and ties. Tonight, Ron and Marva were celebrating their thirty-sixth wedding anniversary and the announcement of Ron’s retirement at a lavish gold-and-white-themed party.

“I know Grace and I are meant to be together,” RJ said when they were finally in the elevator.

Maurice punched him in the shoulder. “Then why isn’t she here? Why hasn’t she moved back into your penthouse so the two of you can start making wedding plans?”

RJ laughed. “You just want to share the misery you’re going through with Desta, her mother, her grandmother and Mom planning your big day.”

Major chuckled. “Yeah, he is.”

The brothers stepped off the elevator and walked down the white marble hallway toward the ballroom. Guests had already begun to arrive, and music from the band hired to play for the first half of the event flowed out into the hallway. After dinner and the big announcement, the DJ would facilitate his parents’ plan to dance the night away.

RJ hoped his intentions for this evening would go off without a hitch as well.

* * *

Grace traced the embossed gold letters on the white invitation, reading the words one more time. *You are cordially invited to share in the celebration of thirty-six years of love between Ronald Gold Jr. and Marva Westing Gold.*

“He’s gonna die when he sees you in that dress,” Hope said from her perch on Grace’s bed. She’d been sitting there, with her legs crossed at the ankle and pillows propped at her back, for the last hour watching Grace get ready.

“It’s just a dress,” Grace replied. She stood in front of the full-length mirror on the inside of her closet door surveying the final product.

She’d lied. The rose-gold-sequined two-piece gown was stunning. The halter-style top hugged her bodice before stopping to leave her midriff bare, and the skirt fit her tightly from her waist to mid-thigh on the right where it opened into a split. The soft and elegant material fell to the floor with a short train behind her. She’d worked on her hair all day and was now thoroughly pleased with the shorter length and bouncy spiral curls that rested on her shoulders.

“Are you sure you’re supposed to be eating like that?” Grace asked her older sister when Hope put yet another chocolate frosted doughnut hole into her mouth. Grace bought those especially for when she wasn’t able to get to a bakery to buy her favorite whole doughnut.

Hope was seven months pregnant, hence the reason she’d wanted a very quick fall wedding. The nuptials were scheduled to take place next weekend

at their parents' house, and Hope seemed to be eating away all her nerves.

"This may be the only time I can eat guilt-free, and I plan to take full advantage of it." Hope grinned after she finished chewing. "And don't get off topic. You and RJ have been writing letters and having long phone conversations like teenagers for the past four months. I sure hope tonight he's gonna put a ring on it."

Grace's stomach churned at the thought.

"Oh, and I hope you keep the ring on it this time," her sister added.

"We really don't have to talk about this again." She moved from the mirror and grabbed her purse.

After her return from Saint Lucia, Grace had gone directly to her parents' house in need of a safe haven. Of course, she hadn't found it there. Videtta had been beside herself once Grace explained that she and RJ had rekindled and then snuffed out their chances at love during the trip. Her sisters had come to her rescue, taking her on a girls' trip where they let her confess about all the competitiveness and validation issues she'd harbored all her life. And then they'd promptly read her the riot act for assuming she was less than anything but brilliant and competent just like they were.

With her new job at the paper and a newfound bond between her and her sisters, Grace had begun to feel better about herself and in doing so, she'd been better able to deal with RJ. Which turned out to be a good thing because when she returned to her apartment after the girls' trip it was to find two letters from him. She'd read each letter a dozen times before deciding to respond, and since then they'd been communicating either by old-school snail mail or telephone calls at least four times a week. She'd made the mistake of sharing all those details with her sisters.

"I'm just sayin', you've had the great sex and now you've done the—what did Grandma used to call it—the 'courtin' thing'? So there's only one obvious next step," Hope said.

"Well, that might be obvious for some people, but for others, it might take a while to get to that point." Grace left her sister in her apartment then. Hope had a key since she was the only relative of Grace's who lived in the city. When her sister was done eating she'd let herself out.

An hour later, Grace walked into the ballroom at the Park Lane Hotel. Marva had sent her an invitation and RJ had confirmed she'd received it, so if there'd been any doubt in attending tonight, she'd pushed it aside. She didn't want either of them calling her to find out why she hadn't shown up. And

truth be told there'd been no doubt. Tonight, Grace was feeling more in control and focused than she'd ever felt before.

She was late. After taking the time to get ready and chatting with Hope, she'd left her apartment a lot later than she'd planned and then, of course, there'd been traffic. She'd arrived just in time to hear Ron's retirement announcement and to see RJ stepping up behind the lectern.

"It's an honor," he began after the lengthy applause from the room full of what looked to be three hundred guests. "Not only to stand here and accept this position, but to share in this momentous evening with my parents. Mom, Dad." He paused and looked over to where Ron and Marva sat at a private table draped in white linen with a gold candelabra at its center.

The entire room was decorated with white table coverings and gold pots full of white flowers. Candlelight illuminated the place, along with the one dark-painted wall that was alight with tiny white lights.

"I've learned so much from you," RJ went on, "and not just about the business. But about love and tolerance. And compromise. You've shown Riley, Major, Maurice and me what it means to be a couple, to cherish someone and to hold their heart as tenderly as if it were precious as gold. For that I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you both and wish you nothing but happiness for the next thirty-six years and beyond."

Tears filled Grace's eyes as the crowd came to their feet, lifting their glasses in a toast to Ron and Marva. Her chest felt full and she struggled to breathe as emotion overwhelmed her. She needed air. Turning, she started to move toward the door when she bumped into Chaz.

"Hey, there. You okay?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yeah. I mean, yes, I'm fine. Just need to get a little air. I'll be right back."

And then she was on the move again, not stopping until she was in the hallway, her fingers clenching her purse tightly. She didn't know how long she stood there staring at the marble walls, trying to get her thoughts together, but the moment she felt a hand on her shoulder she knew who it was. Chaz had no doubt hurried to tell him she was there.

"Hi," RJ said when she turned to face him.

"Hi. Sorry I was late."

"No. I'm just glad you made it." He laced his fingers with hers. "Let's go over here and sit down."

She followed him to a row of red velvet benches.

“It’s really good to see you,” he said when they were seated.

Grace took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Yes, it’s good to see you again, too. I have something I want to say to you and I’m just gonna say it now before I lose my nerve.” Because she was in danger of totally losing it right now. Hearing RJ’s words, the sound of undeniable love in his voice as he spoke of his parents and all they’d taught him, had triggered something in her that she’d been waiting to feel for a very long time.

“Okay,” he said. “I have something I want to say to you, too, but I’ll let you go first.”

“Good. Thanks.” She smiled nervously and stared into his beautiful brown eyes. “I love you. I’ve loved you for longer than I can remember and it’s still here.” She reached up and rubbed her fingers over her heart. “I didn’t know before. I didn’t believe I was ready to be a wife and a journalist at the same time. I really believed I had to make a choice, and I made the right choice for me at that time.”

“Grace—”

“No,” she shook her head earnestly. “Let me finish. After we returned from the island, I still wasn’t sure. I thought, ‘See, you were right not to marry him,’ after our last argument and the realization that we didn’t trust each other.”

“I know, baby, and that was my fault. I should’ve trusted you. I just thought about my parents and I reacted.”

She lifted two fingers to touch to his lips. “Your love and dedication to your family is one of the many things I adore about you, Ronald Gold III. I also love the way you never asked me to be anything but myself. The way you supported my goal as a journalist, reading all my articles and even keeping some of them.” She was filled with awe and complete reverence remembering the times he’d done that.

“I know that I can be myself whenever I’m with you and that’s enough. It’s enough for you and for me. And in the end, that’s all that matters, isn’t it? What you and I feel and what we have together?” She let her hand fall from his lips and pressed it to her purse, which was sitting in her lap. “I knew what I wanted to say to you when I came here tonight but then when I heard you talking, I actually felt it. I felt that thing that I think has sustained your parents and my parents in their marriages all these years.” Hurriedly, she opened her purse and pulled out a black velvet box before lifting her gaze up to him again. “I love you, RJ, and I need to know if you’d still like to marry

me.”

RJ glanced down at the box and back up to her, his expression perplexed and then animated as he shook his head.

Her heart sank. “You’re turning me down?”

He reached into the inside pocket of his tuxedo jacket and pulled out another black velvet box. “No, baby. I was gonna ask you to marry me again.”

Grace stared at the ring box he held and then pushed hers until the boxes clinked together like champagne glasses. “Then I guess we’re getting married.”

RJ smiled and leaned in closer to her. “I guess we are,” he said before taking her mouth in a soft kiss.

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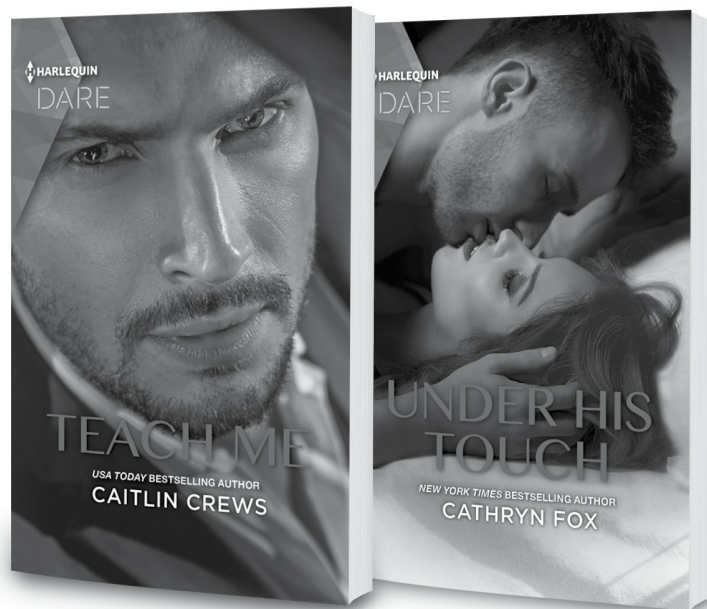
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Skin Deep

by Lauren Hawkeye

PROLOGUE ONE

Five years ago

FRED VAUGHAN LOVED AMSTERDAM.

It was the last stop on the European trip he and his twin, Frank, had taken to celebrate the end of their undergraduate degrees. In the fall they would both be back at school—Frank for a master’s in business, and he to law school—and the trip had been a graduation gift from their parents, albeit a begrudging one on his father’s part. Frederick Vaughan Sr., had expected both of his sons to spend the summer working at Vaughan Enterprises, the massive development conglomerate that his own father had started, but he’d been overruled by his wife.

Fred was grateful. As a Vaughan, his future was set in stone, and he’d known that since childhood. He hadn’t ever thought he’d minded, either, until he’d had his undergrad diploma in hand and realized that, after four years of killing himself studying while his peers partied, he was about to head right back into the grind. The weight of expectation had started to wrap thin tendrils around him, to tug at his limbs, his skin. Tendrils he thought he could break free of, but the more he pulled against them, the further into the morass he sank.

So really, he would have loved anywhere that wasn’t school, or home. Anywhere he felt free. But...he really did love Amsterdam. He loved the history, so rich and old that it made the roots of Boston feel shallow. He loved the beaches and the confidence that the European women wore like a second skin.

He loved the culture, the clubs. And tonight, their last night there, he loved the throb of the dance music in his veins, the rumble of the bass beneath his feet. He loved the icy chill of the beer in his hand and the writhing mass of bodies on the dance floor. He wasn’t much of a dancer himself, but he could watch the movement all night. The people. The connections—friends and love and, best of all, lust. People coming together for a moment or an hour or a night.

“You like to watch?”

The voice was husky, pitched lower than the din of the club. He looked down—he and Frank always had to look down, because they were each six feet four inches tall—and found himself on the receiving end of an assessing gaze from a pair of bright blue eyes. Those captivating eyes were set in a fairy-tale princess face, though he had the instant certainty that she wouldn't appreciate the comparison.

Caught by the question and the intensity of those eyes, he took a moment to reply, a single impression working its way through his brain to his mouth. “Is that a Boston accent I hear?”

“Ten points for the pretty boy.” She grinned up at him, a saucy curve of full lips painted bright pink, and his eyes tracked the movement. “You expected something else? You sound surprised.”

He had been, in fact, and by more than the surprise of finding someone from his faraway hometown here in Amsterdam. Though her face was delicate and feminine enough to have fit in among the pedigreed women he'd left back home in Boston, it was surrounded by long, wild black curls. A silver ring pierced her right eyebrow, and thick black eyeliner accentuated that deep blue of her gaze. In short, she looked wild. Untamed. Like she'd sprung from the earth right here in Amsterdam, a magical creature wrought from his wildest dreams.

Looking down into fierce eyes, he felt something stirring inside him. Some kind of primal need awakened, unspooling from a tight knot in his gut, answering her call.

“You're staring,” She waved an arm in the air and leaned on the bar to catch the attention of the bartender, who came running the second he caught a glimpse of her lush cleavage. This gave Fred a moment to admire the tattoos that decorated her arms, which were bare, revealed by a simple white tank top. “Didn't your mama ever tell you that's rude?”

He'd never really liked tattoos before. No, that wasn't entirely true—he'd never given them much thought, especially not as applied to women. He was pretty sure he didn't know any women who had one.

“Is it rude if I'm admiring you?” He wasn't sure where the words came from. He did well enough with women, but his brother was the player—a player he'd forgotten was standing right at his elbow.

“Smooth, Fred.” Frank grinned at him. Fred scowled as his brother stepped forward, drawing the attention of the ethereal creature in front of them. “Hi,

I'm Frank. If you're interested in the looks without the corny lines, I'm your man."

This wasn't a new scene—Frank had been cockblocking him since they'd both hit puberty—but this time Fred felt irritation flickering little fingers into his veins. He was the easygoing twin, and usually he just shrugged it off when his brother swiped a woman out from under his nose. There were plenty of fish in the sea, after all, and he attracted plenty of his own.

This woman, though? He was intrigued. He'd punch his own twin in the face before he let her go with Frank.

The woman had looked from Fred to Frank, her lips curving with amusement.

"Nice to meet you, Frank." The woman smiled up at his twin, that sexy voice curving like smoke around her words. Fred puffed his chest out, about to tell his brother to beat it, but he quickly discovered that there was no need. "Wanna go away now and let me hit on your brother?"

Both twins choked out a startled laugh. Frank looked at Fred, and Fred had a tense moment in which he wondered if his twin was going to push his point. Instead, Frank shrugged before wandering off into the dancing throng of people.

"Are you always so..." He trailed off as he searched for the correct word. She grinned, the smile like lightning in a dark sky.

"Forward? Abrupt? Rude?" She accepted one of the shot glasses the bartender handed her. As she wrapped her fingers around the small glass, Fred noticed that she had a delicate black rose tattooed on the top of each of her four fingers, excluding her thumb.

"Assertive," he countered. He had a sudden vision of that hand, those roses, wrapped around his cock. Heat licked up his spine when she handed him a matching shot glass.

"Generally, yes." She studied the golden liquid in the shot glasses for a moment before shooting him a challenging glance. "Does that offend your delicate sensibilities? Are you one of those men who needs to be in charge?"

He thought about this for a moment. Thought about the men he knew back home. This woman's overt confidence would rub them all the wrong way, he knew that without a doubt. Probably because they didn't have much of their own. They were used to women with good family names, women who'd been raised to support the men in their lives. Women who didn't challenge.

He'd never been overly interested in those women, at least not for longer

than one night. Now, as if she'd just appeared, was a woman he found fascinating, and he wasn't interested in anything except being honest.

"I like being in charge." He tapped his shot glass against hers. "I like it even more when a woman knows exactly what she wants."

He watched as something sparked in her eyes, a deep blue glitter. He couldn't hear her sharp inhalation of breath, not over the thundering music, but he saw it. Watched the swells of her high, tight breasts press against the thin fabric of her top.

She wasn't wearing a bra. Through the translucent fabric, he could make out the dusky circles of her areolas, the tight pucker of her nipples, which were hard—hard for him?

He could also see that some kind of jewelry adorned each of those taut buds. He'd never seen anything like it, not in real life, and he felt a sharp, physical ache with the need to touch.

Silently, they each tossed back their shots. Fred's eyes tracked the delicate lines of the woman's throat as she swallowed, then the path of her tongue as she swiped it over her lips to catch the last drop.

"What's your name?" He caught the shot glass from her hands, set it and his aside, using the gesture as an excuse to brush his fingers over hers. He tangled his own large hand in her small one, tugging her closer to him, close enough that the tips of those adorned breasts brushed against his wide chest. He felt fire in the wake of the touch.

"Why?" She rubbed her thumb over his knuckles, looking up at him from beneath long, tangled lashes.

"What do you mean, why?" He frowned. "You know mine."

"Yes." She nodded to punctuate her point. "But what does knowing your name is Fred tell me? Does it tell me what your favorite color is? Does it tell me how your skin smells? Does it tell me what you'll do when I touch you?"

With her free hand, she traced a finger down the center of his chest, awakening nerve endings as she went. He caught it just before she reached his belt, holding it in place.

"Right now, my favorite color is pink. This pink, right here." He lifted his other hand to cup her face, traced his thumb over those pillowy lips. "I'd love to find out what other shades of pink you have."

He felt her exhalation, the damp heat fanning out over his thumb as she spoke. "Pretty words, Boston boy."

"Here are a few more." He leaned forward, felt the heat radiating outward

from her body. “Come with me. Somewhere, anywhere. Let me find out.”

“Mmm. Tempting.” She looked up at him, considering, then shook her head. Before he could feel the punch of disappointment, she pivoted. “Dance with me.”

Fred did not dance.

He’d actually never willingly joined a dance floor, not once...well, not unless he counted that time he and Frank had sneaked their father’s whiskey into a flask for their cousin Sarah’s wedding, which had turned out about as expected.

Still, he let this woman—damn, but he wished he knew her name—lead him onto the dance floor. There, she turned in his arms, her back to his front, and cast an utterly bewitching glance over her shoulder. Enticing him.

Daring him.

When she released his hand, he placed it on her shoulder, tracing the strong curve. He slid it down, following the graceful line of her arm, the swell of her hip, then back up. He grazed the bottom of her tank, then tucked his hand inside, his palm flat on her stomach. Her skin was soft, hot as silk as she pressed into the touch.

It was impossible to stay still with this woman rocking gently back against him, with the sea of people around them swaying. The music vibrated along his skin, through his body, driving the thoughts right out of his mind. Leaving room for him to just experience the moment.

She pressed that tight little body back against him, swaying sinuously. She was tall enough that his pelvis was flush with the curves of her ass, and he felt himself harden as a result of her movements. He felt rather than heard her purr with approval as she noticed, pressing herself back against his growing erection.

He wanted her like he’d never wanted a woman before. Dipping his head, he inhaled the aroma of her hair, something sweet and green and fresh, before pressing his lips to her temple.

Her skin was hot beneath his kiss.

“Come with me.” He nipped at the top of her ear, his teeth grazing the pink shell as he whispered hotly.

“Where would you take me?” Turning in his arms, she leaned forward and slowly, deliberately rubbed her breasts against his chest. His cock, already swollen, became rock-hard against the stiff denim of his jeans.

“Wherever you want to go.” He was serious. He and Frank had a room at a

hotel nearby—his father had consented to this trip, but no way were his sons staying in some hostel like peons. He could take her there, but a woman might not want to go to a hotel alone with a strange man. A car, a tree in a park, right here, right now—it didn't matter to him, not as long as he could taste her.

She didn't reply. Instead, she sank her teeth into her lower lip and looked up at him through that wild tangle of her long lashes. With one hand, she hooked two fingers into the waistband of his jeans, pulling him close, then closer still, flush against his body.

With the other she slowly, tantalizingly, brushed the tips of her fingers over the rigid length of his erection. Stars exploded in his vision, and he exhaled hard, his warm breath misting over the long coils of her black hair.

“Stop.” He caught her hand, stilled it. “This should be about you.”

“It is.” She arched an eyebrow, expression flirtatious. “This is what I want.”

Far be it from him to argue with a determined woman. A groan caught in his throat as she repeated the gesture, brushing her knuckles over his rigid length again, this time more firmly. Without even glancing around to see who was watching, she danced her fingers up, then worked them past the waistband of his jeans, rubbing her thumb over the head of his cock.

In the split second before his brain short-circuited, he thought that they couldn't do this, not here in public. Then he realized that the only reason he cared was if she did, which she clearly did not.

She swiped over the head of his cock again, sampling the bead of moisture there before working down farther. As she gripped him with a firm hand, he imagined those roses inked on her fingers, all brushing against the steel rod of his erection.

He couldn't hold back the growl when she closed her fist around him. Her fingers didn't quite reach—he was lucky enough to be big everywhere—so she clamped tightly around him, creating exquisite friction as she moved her hand up and down with a twist of her wrist.

People rocked in close around them. He didn't know if anyone could see what they were doing, and he didn't particularly care. Emboldened by this realization, he moved one of his hands to cup her breast. She pressed against him with a needy roll of her hips as he sampled the plump mound with his hand, stroking outward to the tip. There he toyed experimentally with the nipple, the bar running through it. He knew he didn't imagine the sharp jerk

of response as he tugged on it gently, so he did it again, rolling the tip and the jewelry between his long fingers. In response she worked him faster, harder. He hadn't come from a hand job since he was a teenager, but as the pleasure from her hand coursed through him and his vision started to blur, he knew that he was about to make a mess of himself against the soft white skin of her palm, right here, right now.

It wasn't enough. He didn't want to come in her hand, but in the heated cradle between her long, slim thighs. He wanted her naked and spread before him as he sampled her wet heat. He wanted those pretty nipples, tight as rosebuds in his mouth.

Reaching down, he wrapped his hand around her wrist, slowly pulling her busy fingers out of his pants. Sliding his free hand around to the small of her back, he tugged her against him, hard. His erection thickened even further when he felt her lush curves, right there against him.

When she looked up, sharp need in those blue eyes, he claimed her mouth in a kiss. He'd meant to go in gentle, but she gave way so enthusiastically, lips parting for his tongue, that he couldn't help but accept the gift she'd given. He sipped at her, explored, the kiss somehow as dirty as fucking, and when they broke apart a moment later, both gasping for breath, he couldn't think, only feel.

"Come with me," he said for the second time that night.

This time, she did.

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