

FALLING  
FOR  
WHISKEY  
*book one*

WHISKEY  
*Wes*

BRITTANÉE NICOLE

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## **Dedication**

This is for anyone who has ever felt like they weren't enough. Or they were too much. That they had to fit themselves into a box, follow certain rules, play a certain role, just to be loved. For anyone who has ever wondered if they took a chance, if they'd be happier than staying with the status quo.

You are enough. Just as you are. And there is nothing wrong with wanting more.

And to Jamie, Elyse, and Daphne, who literally embody the above, thank you. You eased me out of my comfort zone and told me you can never put enough 'happy' in a book—this one's for you.

Now be a good girl and enjoy.

Xoxo,

Brittanee

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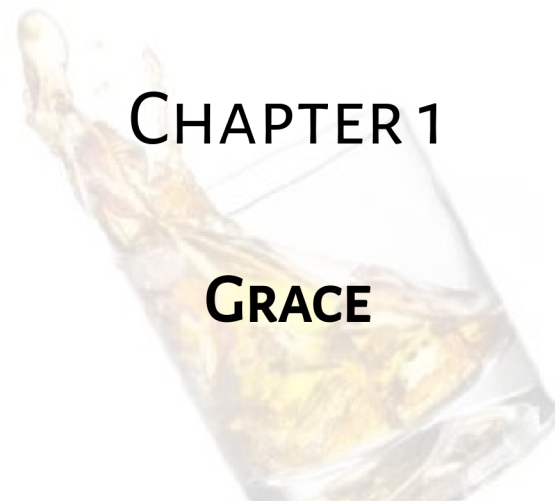
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## **Whiskey Lies Playlist**

1. Glamorous by Fergie
2. Bam Bam by Camilla Cabello
3. That's What I Want by Lil Nas X
4. Oh My God by Adele
5. Jungle by Emma Louise
6. Illicit Affairs by Taylor Swift
7. As It Was by Harry Styles
8. This Love by Taylor Swift
9. It's About Damn Time by Lizzo
10. Flames by Donzell
11. The Heart Wants What It Wants by Selena Gomez
12. First Class by Jack Harlow
13. Rewrite The Stars from The Greatest Showman
14. Dancing in the Dark by Bruce Springsteen
15. Closer to You by Carly Pearce
16. Dancing in the Moonlight by Toploader
17. The Way You Look Tonight by Frank Sinatra
18. Uncover by Zara Larsson
19. I'll melt with you by Modern English
20. Him by Harry Styles
21. Love in the Dark by Adele



**G** -L-A-M-O-R-O-U-S...I can't get the lyrics to Fergie's song out of my head. For the first time since my honeymoon, I am flying first class, and the irony of that is not lost on me. I stare down at the rings on my finger, and their weight is debilitating.

*Why didn't I leave them at home?*

As men walk past me, they barely give me a second glance. Although, it's probably wishful thinking that the matrimonial symbol on my finger is the reason why.

I let myself go. I got comfortable. *That's* why Steven strayed.

I close my eyes and breathe. I am not thinking about that this weekend. I have three days to enjoy the sun. To sit on the beach, sip a cocktail, and read a book. Okay, maybe it's more likely that I'll spend the time crying myself to sleep, but at least I'll go home with a tan.

Steven had been so calculated last week when he told me he wanted a divorce.

"Excuse me," a voice interrupts my memories. I look up and find the most delicious whiskey-colored eyes I've ever seen. His voice is as smooth



as the drink. “I’m in the window seat. Unless, of course, you want it,” he says, motioning to the space I’m currently occupying.

Steven always wanted the aisle. I’d gotten so used to deferring to his wishes that I’d taken someone else’s seat. *I’m pathetic.* I rush to stand up and get yanked back abruptly because I’m strapped in. “Shoot, I’m sorry.”

The man’s eyes soften, and he holds up his hands. “It’s fine. Honestly, I like the aisle, but you may have picked it for a reason. Whatever you prefer?”

His lips tip up in a kind smile, and I almost cry.

I almost cry because someone is being nice to me. A complete stranger is being nicer to me than my own husband.

*See? Pathetic.*

“You can take the aisle,” I offer.

He smiles brightly and begins to get situated. My rings beckon to me again.

*Girl, slip us off. There is a hot man sitting next to you.*

I roll my eyes at my inner dialogue but feel my fingers twisting the diamonds to face down. My inner dialogue is a ho and apparently my body’s listening.

“Traveling for business or pleasure?” my seatmate asks.

*Oh, we’ve got a talkative one.*

Truthfully, I’m not sure this trip could be categorized as either. My boss saw that I was hitting a wall and told me to take the weekend off. “*All-expenses-paid trip to the Keys with Steven. You both deserve it.*”

I couldn’t very well tell her that my husband had left me last week. As a dating coach and matchmaker for the rich and famous, I don’t exactly want to broadcast that I can’t keep my own husband happy. I had asked for a

ridiculous arrangement to stay with Steven until I get my promotion. Until I become partner in the firm—which I am one project away from—we’ll keep up the appearance of being married. I can swallow my pride for my career, considering it’s the only thing I have left.

I bite my lip. “Pleasure. You?”

A dimple pops out as he smiles even brighter. “Me too.” He lifts his hand and motions to the flight attendant. “Two champagnes, please.” He doesn’t say it as if it’s a request. There is an air about him, a way he carries himself that says he’s going to get what he wants.

In all honesty, it’s hot.

While he’s facing the flight attendant, I slip the rings off my finger and into my pocket. I’m a hussy. Or at least that’s how I feel. We’ve been separated for a week and already I’m looking at another man like he’s a snack.

*No, you are not a hussy. Your husband is a hussy. He didn’t even wait for you to separate.*

I breathe and tell my mind to stop arguing with itself. This is getting ridiculous. When Whiskey Eyes turns to hand me a glass, I try to plaster on some semblance of a smile. I feel like I’m showing too many teeth. God, I’m bad at this.

*This* being communicating with another human. It’s not like he’s actually flirting with me. He probably just feels bad for the poor divorcée in 1A who looks like she needs to get drunk to survive.

“Thank you,” I mumble before he clinks my glass and takes a sip, his eyes never leaving mine.

*Salute*, I think, as I tip the glass back against my lips.

The bubbles hit my tongue, and before I can focus on how the alcohol is going to go straight to my head since it's so early and I haven't eaten breakfast, my attention is stolen to where Whiskey Eyes has placed his fingers—on my wrist—so lightly it feels like a soft caress.

My pulse skyrockets.

“Maybe I'm being forward...” he says, pausing as he stares at me. *Oh, be as forward as you want, Whiskey. My body hasn't been touched by a man like that in years.* “You probably shouldn't chug that. It will go straight to your head.”

My body registers the rejection before my mind does, my shoulders slumping backward in defeat.

I'm like a wounded freaking puppy, and I hate it. Before Steven—*before his affair that made me feel as small as a mouse*—I was a lion. In my office, in my life, everywhere that it mattered. But a week after learning that my husband was screwing his secretary—annoyingly cliché—I am withering at the sight of a good-looking man having the decency to tell me to not down a glass of champagne in one sip at eight a.m.

I sit up taller, remembering how many good-looking men I've dealt with over the last ten years. I started working with Marion right out of college. She groomed me—teaching me how to hold a fork, which side of the plate my water glass properly sits, how to properly smoke a cigarette. She even taught me how to fold my freaking legs.

Most importantly though, she taught me how to stick my chest out, hold my head up high, and not take shit from anyone. I'd become so good at being her, but I did it with a smile, whereas my boss always looked like she was plotting a murder.

I deal with the clients, and she works in the background. She can see from a mile away if a couple is meant to be. She arranges the perfect meet-cute, works in the background to ensure that families get along, and guarantees that no one gets in the way of her perfect pairing. Sometimes, I'll believe I've found a woman that would be more suited for one of our clients, and she just purses her lips and looks the other way.

She's *never* wrong.

Whiskey stares at me with a smirk pulling at his top lip. I'd totally zoned out during my inner pep talk. "I'm Cash." He holds out his hand, and the gold Rolex on his wrist grabs my attention.

A laugh escapes my throat. "Of course you are."

I take his hand in mine, and his brow quirks up. His hand is smooth, but the size of it envelops mine and leaves me imagining the way it would feel if it slid up my throat.

*Down girl.* I don't know what is with my mind today. I've never been someone into that kind of kink, and yet the way this man is owning me with just a stare is turning my insides to mush.

"Why do you say 'of course you are'?" His lips are perpetually caught in that curl, as if he's constantly in on life's jokes. Men like him always are—above the crowd, surveying everything, and taking what they want.

"It's the way you carry yourself. The smoothness of your shirt, *your Rolex.*" My eyes dip down to his watch, and he nods.

"Go on. Tell me what else you see when you look at me." The mischievous glint in his eye sends a zing down to my toes. Or perhaps it's just the champagne doing its job.

I tap my manicured nail against my lips. Forget what I see when I look at him. What must he see when he looks at me? A desperate divorcée past her

prime? Or maybe, just maybe, I can salvage the next few hours and remember the woman I used to be. Put together, wise, a smart-ass when necessary. That's the me I like to think that I am when I'm not standing in Steven's shadow.

"Well, from the way your hair is cut I'd guess you didn't go to the mall for a trim. You likely spend more on product and the barber than I do."

Laughter crinkles his eyes. It's a deep laugh, and I crave to hear it again. "Keep going."

Emboldened by his obvious enjoyment, I continue, "Your shirt is pressed and there isn't a wrinkle in your dark jeans. They are tailored perfectly to your legs. And your skin color—that serene, tanned olive complexion—makes it clear that you spend quite a bit of time on pleasurable trips rather than in the office."

I quirk my brow to see if I'm right. He shakes his head as he smiles. "Anything else?"

Before I can stop myself, I reply, "And you have your pick of women wherever you go, but you're selective with whom you spend your time. It's not breasts and short skirts that interest you. You like a challenge."

Cash's arm takes up the entire armrest, and he leans his chin on his hand, staring at me. He's so close I can feel his warm breath. And his cologne, which smells like fresh-cut wood with a hint of fire, dances around me. "Are you a challenge, Ms....?" He waits for me to provide my name.

I almost correct him and say Missus, but why would I do that? Just to sass him? I smile. "Grace."

The whiskey in his eyes turns a deep bourbon as his face softens. "Grace," he repeats, as if trying it out on his tongue. My chest constricts at

the sound, and I imagine what it would sound like if he whispered it in my ear while making me come. “So, are you?” he asks.

*Am I what?* My mind is blank. I’ve completely left the public plane we are seated in and moved us into a fantasy of my own making.

“Hm?” I quirk my head in confusion.

He smiles again. “Are you a challenge, Grace?”

I bite my lip and summon my inner hussy before lifting my champagne glass with a promise, “Not for the next three days.”

Cash laughs. “Then I guess you’re wrong about me, Grace.”

“Hm?” I ask, with a twinkle in my eye.

*Am I flirting?* Oh, yes, I definitely am.

“I’m not interested in challenging women...at least not for the next few days.”

Our banter is interrupted by the flight attendant running through safety protocols. The brilliance of first class is that as soon as we are in the air, our glasses are refilled and a plane ride that might have been awkward sitting next to this flirtatious man has turned into foreplay.

Every few seconds I feel his gaze traveling my skin; there’s a perpetual warmth to his eyes that makes me tingle as if he is dragging a match against my body.

I open up a magazine, trying to distract myself. This has been fun, but let’s be honest, nothing is going to happen. We’ll get off this plane and he’ll spot his next conquest. Someone he actually wants to spend time with. Not me—the woman he’s forced to endure for the next few hours. It’s obviously the forced proximity that is making him talk to me.

Although, why is he leaning closer and darting glances at me every few seconds? *That’s* not explained just by our seat choices.

He *seems* interested.

But what the hell do I know? I haven't flirted with a man in years. Although, men have certainly flirted with me. My clients, who quite honestly are very similar to Cash—wealthy playboys—always flirt with me. But it's in their nature. They don't know how to turn it off. Until I teach them, that is.

You can't decide to change your playboy ways and seek out a future wife if you still talk to every woman like you're going to fuck them. It's part of the service we offer. We don't only find these men their match, we train them on how to be in a monogamous relationship, how to treat a woman. It's the reason *Vanity Fair* did a piece on our firm last year.

*The Happily Ever After Makers.*

We earned the title. Every match Marion has orchestrated has resulted in long, monogamous, happy marriages. There are no headlines about Mr. Daniels being caught with his mistress.

Which is precisely why my husband's affair cannot be divulged. How would it look if the partner of Boston's most prestigious matchmaking company couldn't train her own husband to remain faithful?

I dart a glance at the man next to me. Maybe he's not purposefully sitting close. His shoulders are broad, and his long legs jut out into the aisle, even with the extra leg room that the first row provides. He's definitely over six feet tall. His nails are all the same length, more evidence of the money he obviously comes from. His olive skin tone and dark, almost wind-swept hair, à la Patrick Dempsey, makes me want to tangle my hands through it.

He's easily one of the best-looking men I've ever seen. I stare at the left finger, the tell-tale one, looking for a hint of a wedding ring. So many men

take them off when they travel. But the color on that finger is even. No indentation at all.

*Likely single.*

I stare down at the obvious indentation on my own finger. I haven't been in the sun in months so there is no line to hide. But it feels bare. I feel like the finger keeps lifting, as if taunting me; it's lighter than normal and foreign. Or maybe it's just the champagne.

The captain announces that we've hit the appropriate altitude and we can take off our seatbelts. I adjust myself but leave mine in place, always prepared for worst-case scenarios.

Not surprisingly, Cash undoes his seatbelt and stands up to stretch. Of course, he would never be worried about worst-case scenarios. Men like him don't have bad things happen to them. They control everything.

*Not that I'd mind being controlled by him for a few hours.*

Slutty, slutty mind. Get yourself under control.

While Cash looks toward the back of the plane, I take my time looking him up and down. I was right, he is definitely taller than six feet, and his shoulders look even broader up there. His size blocks the entire aisle. He's definitely younger than I am. Hopefully not by a lot.

*Maybe he's into older women, my dirty mind taunts.*

I'm thirty-six. That can't be considered an older woman. Can it? Although, I feel forty. Or older. I feel ancient if I'm honest. Like my lower bits have dried up and I'm past my prime.

I always thought I'd have more time. Later we'll have kids, I told myself. Later we'll take vacations. Later we'll have sex. What I didn't realize was that my husband was preparing to do those things with someone else.



Later was eight p.m. when I thought he was still in the office, but instead he was sleeping with his secretary.

*Stop! You are not thinking about this. Focus on the hot guy who keeps flirting with you.*

“Grace,” he whispers into my ear, jolting me from my thoughts. I hadn’t even realized he’d sat back down. His warm breath sends a shiver down my spine, precisely as I knew it would.

I turn my head slowly and meet his penetrating gaze. “Yes?”

“What are your plans for your pleasurable trip?” The smirk is back, and I’m like putty in his hands.

“Forgetting who I am...”—I hold up my glass to him—“and drinking lots of champagne.”

His eyes turn quizzical. “Why forgetting?”

I snap before I can hold back, “Oh Cash, let’s not do this.”

His eyes soften. “Do what?”

“Pretend we care. You’re good-looking, I’m clearly interested, and like I said, I’m forgetting this week. So, if you’re trying to find out if I will spend the next three days in bed with you, we can talk. If you’re going to try to *talk* to me and pretend you want to get to know me, I can go back to sipping my champagne and reading.”

My eyes don’t leave his as I speak. I have summoned my inner hussy, and in another life I might be embarrassed by my forwardness, but in this moment, after my heart and my self-worth have been trampled by my ex, I feel no shame.

His eyes hold mine for a beat, and then he raises his hand and grazes his fingers against the side of my face until he’s cradling it. My eyes close from

the gentleness of his touch. When I open them again his face is closer to mine, only inches really.

“I’d like to help you forget,” he says smoothly, and then he moves closer and kisses me. It shocks me completely. I’ve never kissed someone this quickly, let alone a stranger on a plane, and definitely not someone as good-looking, smooth, and dare I say, kind as this man. It’s just a brush of our lips against one another, and then he moves back, but in that moment I feel a stirring that I haven’t felt in a long time.

Lust? No. Want? No.

*Hope.*

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes is shown in a dynamic, tilted position, with the liquid splashing upwards. The text 'CHAPTER 2' is centered above the glass, and 'CASH' is centered within the glass.

## CHAPTER 2

### CASH

**T**his week has been a complete shit show. My entire life fell apart, and then before I could even wrap my mind around what it all meant, my grandmother directed my driver to take me to the airport. I didn't even know where I was going, just that I have this one weekend to relax before my family's needs will control my every move, including the women I date. If not for the fact that the brunette who occupied my seat on the plane looked more lost than I felt, I'd probably have ignored her. But I'm quickly learning that you don't ignore a woman like Grace.

And she is all woman. With curves, and sass, and this attitude that tells me she won't put up with bullshit. Mine or anyone else's. For a man who has to control everything in his life, it was nice for a few moments to be told what to do.

For years I'd been planning to take over my family's company. I'd always known this day was coming; it's honestly been a dream. But now that it's here—now that the reason is because my grandfather doesn't have all his faculties and I *have* to take over—I'm not sure I'm ready at all.

But I'm the only one in my family who can handle this. Sure, Carter is older, but he's got too short of a fuse to be in charge. And he doesn't want it. He prefers to handle the deals, to take the risks, but he doesn't want the pressure of running the family company into the ground.

*We need you*, my grandmother had said, her pale blue eyes beckoning me to grow up. *You're ready, Cassius*.

I stare down at the small hand which is engulfed in mine, and I squeeze. I may not be ready to take over my company, but I am ready to get lost in this woman. In fact it's exactly what I need. I need to hand over my control, lose myself in her body, and just forget everything else for the next few days.

"The car should be right out front," I say to her as we walk through the airport hand in hand.

She raises her eyes to mine—they are a mixture of brown and purple, and I've never seen anything quite like them. Violet eyes. She's as rare as the color. "Of course, you have a car picking you up," she teases.

Grace seems to have me pegged as a rich playboy. She's not wrong. It's endearing how right she is about me. The honesty, the directness, and also the raw vulnerability I see when I look at her drew me in almost immediately.

I'm surprised when Grace tells me she doesn't have anything but her carry-on. But not nearly as surprised as when she tells me she's staying at the same hotel as I am.

Coincidence? Perhaps. All I know is that this weekend away, my last hurrah, is looking up.

She looked at me strangely when I took her hand as we walked down the airport corridor, but I just acted as if I was in a rush and wanted her to keep up. Truthfully, I couldn't stand being a few feet away from her now that I'd

had three hours sitting so close to her coconut scent. It surrounded me and made me want to sink against her. She has this way about her, this *I'm older and wiser than you, naughty boy*, which is doing something crazy to me.

I've always been the one in control, even in my family though I'm not the oldest. Carter is thirty-seven, Catherine, or Cat as we call her, is thirty-four, then me, and Chase is the baby and he's twenty-seven.

I'm thirty and almost positive Grace is older than I am.

It's rude to ask a woman how old she is, and I feel like she'll scold me if I do—not that I'd mind—but I'm sure she's over thirty. If I had to guess I'd peg her at Cat's age.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks, while pulling her hand from mine and pushing her hair out of her face. I watch as she pulls an elastic off her wrist and lifts her hair off her neck and into a ponytail. Visions of pulling on it while she's on her knees flood my brain. I can't wait to taste her, to see her writhing below me, and hear her moaning my name.

“How am I looking at you, Grace?” My lips tip up in a smirk. I can't help it, I love when she calls me on bullshit, and I've only just met her.

“Like you want to devour me.” She looks at me as if she's the librarian and she just caught me jacking off in the aisles.

*Please tell me she owns a pair of glasses.*

With my tongue in the side of my mouth, I look down at her, making her wait for my response. “Because that's exactly what I intend to do, Gracie.” I tip her chin up as she attempts to look away. “And you're going to enjoy it.”

Her eyes dart between my own, as if she's trying to find her way out of this situation. I don't give her the opportunity to second-guess her decision. “Look, there's our ride.” I point to the sign with my name on it.

She laughs. “Oh, thank God it’s just a car and not a limo. I was beginning to think I was in over my head.”

I smirk as I take her bag and hand it to my driver. “And if it was a limo, you’d be in over your head?”

She sighs. “The men I deal with at home...” She pauses and looks away. “Forget it.”

The thing is I don’t want to forget anything she says. I store it all away, waiting for the right time to ask her about these things. Maybe once I’ve fucked her, as she’s lying in my arms, satisfied and calm, she’ll open up to me. Right now, she’s a ball of nerves, sass, and control. She’s got herself so tightly wound, I know when she breaks it will be an explosion, and I want to be the one that puts her over the edge.

“So, what do you do for a living?” I ask as we settle into the backseat.

Grace shakes her head. “Off-limits.”

A surprised chuckle escapes. “Do you want to know what I do?”

She raises her brow and shakes her head. “Nope.”

A grin spreads across my face. “I’m beginning to think the only thing you’re interested in is my body.” I feign offense.

Without breaking eye contact she replies, “I’m actually just interested in the free ride.”

I laugh loudly. “So does that mean you won’t have dinner with me tonight?”

She purses her lips as if considering it. *Considering it!* I’ve been fawning over her since I sat down next to her, and I still haven’t even wrapped up a date out of this?

“We’ll see how the day goes.” She looks out the window, and I see the smile tugging on her lips.

We arrive at the hotel too quickly, and as the driver places our bags on the sidewalk leading to the lobby of the hotel, I scramble to find a reason to make her spend time with me. “I’m sure the rooms aren’t ready yet. Would you like to grab lunch while we wait?”

I know my room is available because my grandmother told me my assistant checked me in yesterday. I always book the night before wherever I stay so I never have to wait for a room to be ready.

“I’m actually going to try to check in. If they aren’t ready, I’ll just have them take my stuff and go down to the beach with my book.” She holds up a book as if trying to prove she’s not blowing me off, despite the fact that is precisely what she’s doing.

I want to spend time with her, but I’m not desperate. I know for a fact that if I sat down at the bar right now, I’d have a date for tonight within the hour. I just happen to want to have dinner with the stunning brunette next to me instead. The fact that she’s playing hard to get is making me want her more.

I always get what I want, and right now, what I want is her.

She pushes her hand forward in my direction. “Thank you for the ride. It was very nice meeting you, Cash.”

She’s dismissing me. Although surprising, I do know how to handle rejection. “It was nice meeting you too, Grace. If you change your mind about dinner, I’ll be at the bar at six p.m.”

She nods and takes off, leaving me both perplexed and intrigued.



## CHAPTER 3

### GRACE

**F**ortunately, my room was ready, and there was even a bottle of champagne waiting there for me. I pick up the card next to it and smile.

*Enjoy your time off. You've earned it.*

*XOXO, Marion*

Truthfully, I spend more time with my boss than I do with my own husband.

*Perhaps that's why you're getting a divorce.*

A deep sigh escapes my lips, and I flop down onto the soft white comforter. The room is beautiful—pink walls, white bedding, and an insane view of the turquoise ocean. Although I know Marion arranged the trip because she thought it would be good for Steven and me, it is precisely what *I* needed. Screw my no-good ex. He doesn't deserve this type of treatment.

The stress has already begun to ease in my shoulders, and I feel lighter than I have in weeks. Getting rid of two hundred pounds of useless man can do that to you. If Steven were here he'd have us signed up for volleyball or



touring ruins that I don't care to see. He would never take a nap when the sun was out or just sit on the beach with a book. Which meant I never did either.

As my eyes close, I try to convince myself that the smile on my lips is from this newfound freedom and not from the three hours I just spent flirting with a stranger.



When I wake, the sun is lower, the sky a brilliant shade of pink, and the room is lit in a soft glow. I turn to the clock and see it's already past seven p.m.

*Great, I wasted my first day of sun by sleeping inside.*

But wait, I *wanted* to sleep. And I liked my nap. And I feel rested. It's going to take some time to decondition myself from Steven's voice in my head, but I'm intent on not living my life for him any longer.

I stretch my arms out and extend my legs over the entire length of the bed. There is just something about having all this space to myself. Although, I guess that is going to be my life going forward.

A pinch of nervous excitement fills me. Will I keep the house? Or will Steven and his hussy move in?

Without even thinking about it, I know I'll give it up. I can't live in a space where I thought we'd be raising children. I remember when we first saw the house, how we had walked from room to room, and I'd laid out my visions to Steven and the realtor. Dreams of a nursery and a playroom in the

basement. I'll never be able to erase those memories, and I don't want to live in the past.

Mentally I tick that off my list of things to discuss in the divorce settlement. For the time being, I can stay in the city at the apartment Marion keeps. She no longer uses it as she prefers to be at home with her husband, Asher, and she's offered it to me time and again when I have late client meetings.

I'm guessing those nights when I was too exhausted to drive home to the suburbs were the same nights my husband was seducing a woman in my house. The thought makes my stomach turn. Or maybe it's the fact that I haven't eaten since I woke up this morning. The only thing I've put in my body all day was champagne. I probably drank a bottle myself this morning.

Memories of my delicious neighbor on the plane bring a smile to my face. I haven't felt that alive, *or that brave*, in a long time. But the fun ended as soon as we got to the hotel. I'm a chickenshit. There was no way I was really going to sleep with him—I was just a tease.

For a second, I hoped he would have grabbed my hand and told me he wasn't taking no for an answer. I want to be dominated, for him to want me so badly that he can't control his movements. That's not real life though. He simply said goodbye like a gentleman. I know that scenario I had concocted in my mind is nothing more than a fantasy—something that will keep me warm at night, but not at all real.

As I get up and imagine him waiting at the bar earlier, wondering if I was going to show, I laugh at myself. I'm sure he found someone while sitting at lunch and hasn't thought about me since. As disappointing as the thought is, it's the reality of my life. He's too young, too good-looking, and clearly too much of a playboy for me. I'm not what he wants, and he certainly isn't

what I'm looking for. Which is nothing. I'm looking to enjoy a few days, recharge, and get ready for my next assignment. Once I've matched this last couple, I will get my promotion, my divorce, and then I can think about moving on with my life.

I pull a black wrap dress from my bag and set it out to remove the wrinkles while I take a quick shower. When I get out, I blow-dry my hair and let it fall in soft waves against my shoulders. I've always loved my thick, long hair that tumbles halfway down my back. It's easily one of my best attributes, next to my eyes.

*Violet eyes.* They really are more brown in the dark, but in the right lighting they take on the deep purple color which always has people commenting. Interestingly, Cash said nothing about them. Obviously, he wasn't as interested as he acted. I apply a smoky purple shadow which enhances the color and leave my lips their natural peach with only a gloss.

Pleased with my appearance, and not really worried about impressing anyone but myself, I set off for the bar. Earlier, I noticed there was one located in the restaurant so I won't have to sit at a table alone. Just in case, I grab my book so I have something to do while waiting for my food.

I'm no stranger to eating alone. In my profession, with late nights and events I often have to attend, I spend plenty of evenings alone at a bar eating dinner. I don't even mind. Half the time when Steven and I would be at a restaurant he'd be looking at his phone or we'd be sitting across from each other with nothing to say. And to be honest, I just thought that was normal. What does that say about my expectations of marriage?

I've seen couples with chemistry. I *created* the chemistry. I'd sat in the corner and watched them on dates and the men didn't stare at their phones

—I'd trained them to never do that.

There weren't lulls in their conversation unless the date was a dud. Which, once again, didn't happen because Marion didn't find duds. Even people that weren't perfect matches had enough in common to make conversation through a meal.

But not Steven and me.

I wonder if Marion noticed. Did she think we were a perfect match? Or did she purse her lips. I try to remember what she thought of him when I introduced them, but I think I was so enamored with him, and so in awe of my boss, that I wasn't astute enough to look for the signs. It certainly felt like she'd given us her blessing; she hosted the bridal shower and doted on me like a proud aunt. As my mother's best friend and my Godmother, it's a role she relished. Somehow, she's now become one of my closest friends too. I hate thinking how disappointed she'll be once she knows the truth.

Spotting an empty seat at the bar, I sit down and order a drink. As soon as the cocktail is pushed forward—a dirty martini with extra blue-cheese olives—I slide the stick into my mouth and moan as the bursts of flavor hit my tongue. I'm starving, and these olives are giving me life.

“I thought you said I didn't like women with big breasts and skirts?” Cash's smooth voice whispers against my neck. I arch my back, surprised by the way his voice alone sends a thrill straight between my legs.

Without missing a beat, I turn around. “I said *short* skirts.”

He smiles as his eyes drift to my legs. The black wrap dress I'm wearing has parted, and the fabric has fallen to a dangerous angle which exposes almost my entire leg up to my panty line. I quickly pull the fabric over my legs and feel a blush creep onto my cheeks.

“Ah, but you were right about me liking a challenge. Strangely enough, I thought you said you weren’t going to be one for the next few days.”

I bat my lashes. “That’s the thing about challenging girls; they tend to change their minds.”

He nods and looks down the bar. Perhaps looking for the date that he’d found to keep him company when I didn’t appear. If he even showed up in the first place. “Well, I’d ask if this seat was taken but a man can tell when he’s being given the brush-off. It was nice to see you, Grace. Enjoy your dinner.”

Before I can stop myself, I reach for him. “Wait, Cash, I’m sorry.” I look up sheepishly into his devastatingly handsome face.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” he asks, his eyes taking on that quizzical look he gave me when I turned down his offer to get to know me in the car.

“I didn’t show up. Not because I didn’t want to, but I fell asleep,” I admit with a sigh. “I think you might have been right to tell me that I would regret drinking that champagne too quickly. It went straight to my head.”

His face softens. “You don’t need to apologize. You never agreed to show up. And it’s your pleasure trip…” His lips turn up in a teasing smile. “You should find pleasure in whatever way you can.”

What I want to say—what my inner hussy is begging me to say—is I’d like to find pleasure with you. But the nagging voice inside me doesn’t let me respond that way. I could flirt on the plane when I thought it was only a few hours, but knowing that we are now in a hotel where things could escalate quickly, I need to watch what I promise.

I nibble at my bottom lip and dip my eyes to the seat next to me in an invitation. Cash raises his brow to me. “If you want something from me,

Grace, you have to ask for it. I have made it very clear I'm interested in spending time with you, and you've blown me off every chance you could. You're in control, Grace. Tell me what you want."

He reprimands me with his stare, and something stirs inside me. It's that control again. Even when he wants something, and he knows he's going to get it, he wants to control how he takes it. But in a way he is also giving me the control that I've been lacking for so long. Although I'm not someone who enjoys games, I find myself drawn to the way he speaks.

"Please join me for a drink, Cash?" I ask sweetly.

His eyes sweep up and down my body, and then he sits down on the stool next to me. "Fine, but you're buying."

A laugh escapes my throat, and I nod. "Whatever you want, Cash."

He orders a whiskey, and I stifle a giggle. "What's so funny?" he asks.

I shake my head, trying to keep my thoughts to myself, but then remember I don't have to do that anymore. I'll say what I think, and everyone else can just deal with it. "When I first saw you, that's what I thought of—whiskey."

"Whiskey? How come?"

"Your eyes. Although I'm beginning to realize all of you is kind of like that."

His dimple pokes out again. "Like what?"

"Smooth." I hum to myself as I imagine how smooth he would feel pressed against me.

Cash sips his whiskey as he considers my comment. Or maybe he's just taking a drink. I honestly have no idea what he sees in me and why he's pursuing this. I haven't made it easy, and I likely will continue to make it difficult. I don't do one-night stands. Or vacation flings. I'm a married

woman. Even if it's only on paper, it still feels wrong. I've been with one man for nearly the last decade.

I've always done things by the book. After graduating from college and getting a job, I moved into an apartment with friends, dated several men, and spent time with my girlfriends on the weekends. When I turned twenty-six I decided it was time to settle down. Then I started dating Steven. I waited until we were together for six months and after we'd exchanged *I love yous* to have sex with him. Then on our one-year anniversary he proposed, and we were married a year later.

We even lived together during the engagement to make sure that we got along.

I did *everything* right. I checked off all the boxes. And yet I still ended up as a thirty-six-year-old woman who is about to be divorced.

What the hell did doing the right things get me? I never strayed. I never even paid attention to the clients who flirted with me. And there were plenty. It's in those men's genes.

I dart my eyes down to Cash's lap and imagine what sits inside his jeans. He's just like the rest of them. Probably just like Steven, too.

No thank you. I don't need it. What I need is a stiff drink, a delicious steak, and a dessert that is filled with too many carbohydrates for me to even consider getting naked after eating it.

"So, tell me, Grace, what did you want to be when you grew up?"

I laugh at his odd question. "What? Is there a dating questionnaire that you have hidden under that glass?"

He chuckles softly into his whiskey glass and then meets my eyes. "No, you told me what you really do is off-limits, but I want to know something

about you. So, what would you be doing if you were doing what you really wanted to do?"

I smile at his question. "I wanted to be a ballerina."

His gaze slides down my legs again, and I laugh. "I clearly don't have the body for it. Nor the grace, despite my name."

Cash's eyes snap to my own. "I happen to be infatuated with your body."

I don't look away, but I am completely floored by his boldness, and by the way it makes me feel. The blush creeps up my chest, and I divert the conversation away from my looks. "I actually am doing precisely what I want. No regrets. Living my dream."

I tell myself that this is true. I love my job. I love working with Marion. The fact that I enjoyed my job more than my marriage probably makes it impossible that I was living a dream, but I wouldn't change my job for anything.

"That's lucky. Most people work to live, not the other way around."

"Are you saying you think I live to work?"

He's not wrong, but the way he's pegged me so quickly is unnerving. I am good at my job. It gives me purpose, and I enjoy it. And I enjoy so few things lately.

"I only rephrased what you said. I don't know you, and you have made it clear you don't want me to, so I couldn't tell you how you choose to live. But do you?"

"Do I what?" I practically pant. I need to eat before the alcohol goes to my head again and I end up in bed with this stranger.

Cash tips his head down. "Do you live to work?"

I nod, unable to voice the truth. *It's all I have.*

He sighs. "Such a pity. Me too, but not by choice."



My eyes scrunch as I consider his response. This man looks like he could do anything he wants. Could *have* anyone he wants. Why would he be living to work, and it not be by choice?

“Well, Cash, if you’re not happy in life, then you should make a change.” It’d be humorous if he knew how unqualified I was to give this opinion.

Cash bites his lip and looks at me again. “I know something that would make me happy. I’m just working out how to get it.”

I smile and shake my head. He’s such a playboy. “I’m not something for you to get, Cash. I’m a person. *A woman*. Not a thing you can acquire.”

He doesn’t react, his eyes laser focused on me. “Who says I was talking about you?”

I blush at my forwardness. My inner hussy backfired. He raises his brows as he watches me squirm. He’s waiting for me to respond, but I can’t possibly think of a single thing to say. I’m mortified.

“Relax, Gracie.” He rests his hand on my thigh and squeezes. The nickname is sweet, and I like the way he says it with such gentle humor.

My steak arrives, and we are momentarily distracted from my embarrassment. “Have you eaten?” I ask before cutting into my steak. I don’t want to add rudeness as another trait, along with the laundry list of embarrassing ones I’ve already conveyed today.

*A drunk hussy who fails to show up during the assigned date time, flirts as if she’s actually going to follow through, and then embarrasses herself by assuming that everyone, or at least the hot man seated beside her, wants her.*

That about sums up my day.

*Oh, let’s not forget that I’m currently lying to my boss and godmother and am apparently such a good wife that my husband left me for his*

*secretary.*

Much better.

“Yes. I already ate. Go ahead.”

I dig into my steak because I’m starving, and I’d do anything to avoid conversing with the human next to me. Everything that comes out of my mouth is wrong or ridiculous, and I’m tired of wearing my embarrassment like a scarlet letter on my chest.

He lets me eat in relative silence, making conversation with the bartender instead. I appreciate it immensely. I can barely focus when he’s this close to me, let alone when I don’t have food in my stomach. But now that I’ve finished my steak and a glass of pinot noir and the crowd at the bar is dissipating, I’m afraid it’s time to say goodnight.

My bill arrives and Cash slips the bartender his card before I can even grab the billfold. “Cash, stop, you don’t have to buy me dinner.” He gives me a look that tells me he’s insulted that I’m arguing. I clear my throat. “Thank you. Very much.” I fiddle with my napkin uncomfortably.

“Would you walk with me on the beach?” he asks, surprising me. I meet his eyes and see that he’s holding his breath as he waits for me to respond.

Seeing as how the man has gone out of his way multiple times for me today and bought my dinner even after I failed to show up for our date, I relent. “Sure, I’d love to.”

He smiles as he signs the check, and when we both stand up, he takes my hand. It feels oddly comforting. “Will you be cold?” he asks before we walk outside.

At this point I’m warm from the drinks and feel quite flushed from being so close to him. The air will do me good. “I’ll be fine.”

We walk in companionable silence. I'm trying so hard to keep things impersonal that I don't even know what to talk about. What topic is safe? Certainly, not our real jobs.

"Where are you from?" he asks, as if sensing my conundrum.

"I was born in New Jersey but moved to Boston for college. I live in the suburbs now and work in Boston but I'm considering getting an apartment so I don't have to commute any longer." I hadn't actually decided that until this moment but now that I've said it, I know it's true. I'm sure Marion will let me stay at her apartment until I figure things out, but after that I think living in the city will be good for me.

*Also talk about word vomit. Why did I just tell him that?*

"Ah, a Jersey Girl. I should have known." His eyes twinkle as he looks at me.

I nudge him with my arm. "What's that supposed to mean?"

His eyes crinkle. "Oh, all that sauciness you were giving me earlier makes more sense now."

I laugh out loud and people around us turn and stare. I cover my mouth and shake my head. "You're something else, you know that?"

"Good, I don't want to be like any of the men you've met before." His eyes meet mine again, and I inhale as if I've just come up for air after diving into the ocean. That's how it feels with him. Dizzying, intoxicating, and free.

I'm honest. "You're not."

I stare up at the stars. It's warm outside and the breeze sways the palm trees around us. I can hear the ocean, but it's a mere shadow only highlighted by the moon. Warm fire dances on tiki torches lining the path that we walk.

Cash stops walking and stares down at me. “Dance with me?” he says smoothly, holding out his hand.

“What?”

His dimple pops again. “Dance with me.”

I look around. “But there’s no music. And people will stare.”

He shrugs his eyebrows, unconcerned. “Fuck ’em.”

A surprised laugh leaves my throat, and I lean into his embrace, surprising even myself. “Do you always woo girls by dancing with them?”

His laughter tickles my ear, his warm breath caressing my soft sensitive skin. We start to move slowly, my hand in one of his hands, my other arm around his neck—proper dancing, not like we’re in middle school. I find myself caring less about the people around us than I normally would. “I don’t normally have to work this hard,” he says in a low voice near my ear.

“Where do you live?” I ask, breaking one of my rules. If I’m not careful, I’ll have incinerated the rule book by the time this dance is over.

Cash’s thumb moves back and forth over my hand, and his other one holds the small of my back tightly, his five fingers splayed flat against my back warming me. “In the city. Grew up there actually.”

“That must have been fun.”

He laughs softly in my ear. “My brothers and I certainly had a good time.”

“You have brothers?”

“Yup, Carter, my older brother, and Chase is younger. I also have a sister, but she was in boarding school for a while, so she didn’t run around with us as much.”

I smile and his grip on my back tightens. “What are you smiling about?”

“Just that I was clearly right.”

He raises his eyes. "About?"

"That you come from money." I look at him pointedly and he shrugs his shoulders.

"Something like that. So, what are you running away from this weekend?"

My shoulders stiffen. "Why do you think I'm running from something? Are you?"

He sighs. "Isn't it obvious? Why else would both of us be on vacation in this beautiful place alone?"

He looks at me like he's tired of dancing around the truth, but I have no intention of divulging mine. I don't even know him.

"Maybe I just needed a break. I wanted to get some sun, and my friends couldn't get away from their jobs."

His brow lifts. "Is that true? What about your boyfriend?"

I laugh. "Oh, nice way to slip that question in." I shake my head. "No boyfriend."

I'm glad he didn't ask about a husband. That lie would have been harder to swallow.

His lip curls up. "Good, I don't like to share."

My shoulders fall, and I release his neck as I breathe out through my mouth. "You really are something. Who says anything is happening between us?"

Cash yanks my hand and pulls me flush against his chest. My breathing gets heavy, and I fear looking up. With my chin between his fingers, he forces my gaze up to meet his own. "Don't tell me you don't feel this?"

My eyes dart between his. "Wh-what?" I manage to stutter.

His jaw tightens. “Don’t. Don’t lie to me. I know you feel this. It’s impossible that you don’t. Since we locked eyes on the plane there’s been a pull. It’s insane, and *I’ve* certainly never felt it before. You don’t have to do anything about it, but please don’t lie to me and tell me you don’t *feel* it.”

I feel every ridge in his chest and the unmistakable bulge in his pants. And as much as everything feels wrong—because I’m a woman who hasn’t thought of another man in years—it also feels right. And I can’t tell him he’s not right because the truth is I’ve been hit on by plenty of men over the years and I never batted an eye, but I think even if I was still cluelessly married to my cheating husband I would be drawn to this man.

“I can’t,” I pant.

His eyes sag. “Can’t what?”

“I can’t deny that I feel it too.”

His eyes light up and he lowers his lips to mine, the taste of whiskey caressing my tongue. Cash isn’t a gentle kisser; his hand goes behind my head as his fingers pull tightly on my hair, leaving me moaning into his mouth. He nips at my bottom lip and holds it between his teeth as his eyes meet mine. I’m breathless with need, and yet I keep going back for more. This is a panty-soaking, knee-shaking, whiskey-tasting kiss, and I never want it to end.

“Spend the night with me,” he whispers into my lips.

I shake my head. I’m not sleeping with him. Everything is happening too quickly. Just the mention of it has me pulling back.

“Not for that,” he says, meeting my eyes. “I just want to hold you, kiss you, *talk* to you.”

Confusion laces my face. “But why?”

He cradles my cheek and looks at me as if I'm spun from gold. "Because now that I've found you, I can't let you go."



## CHAPTER 4

### CASH

**W**e enter my room like teenagers who've just discovered an empty bedroom at a high school party. Nervous but excited. That's basically how I feel about her. With any other woman, if I'd been stood up, I wouldn't have gone out of my way to pursue her again. But there's something about her. I'm infatuated, drawn to her in an unexplainable way.

As the glow of the moon lights up her face, I'm left momentarily breathless. She's beautiful.

Classically beautiful. *Gracefully beautiful.*

Her violet eyes look to me as if waiting for my touch. She may be the older one but there is something innocent about her. Precious. And I have an innate need to protect that.

Thoughts of pulling her hair while she's on her knees are long gone. She deserves so much more than that tonight. She deserves a gentle touch, to be held, to be worshipped. I hold her face with both my hands, my thumb rubbing her cheek in wonder.

"You need to stop looking at me like that," she says softly, searching my eyes.



“Not going to happen,” I reply, taking her lips hostage. She leans into my arms and moans again. I walk her backward to my bed, and she falls as we hit it. She sits up on her elbows staring at me, and I marvel at her.

With her lip between her teeth, she points to my shirt. “Off,” she whispers.

I lift my shirt over my head and hear her hiss as she spots my abs. I slip off my jeans as well but leave my boxers on. I intend on keeping my promise to her. I am just going to sleep next to her tonight. “Do you want a T-shirt to sleep in?”

She shakes her head as she pulls the string on her wrap dress. It falls open and I’m silent, watching as the fabric slips slowly off her skin, down her shoulders, and onto the floor. She’s left in only a matching black bra and panties. I’m not surprised at all. She’s wound so tight that I would expect nothing less than a perfect manicure, matching lingerie, and a woman who is always freshly waxed.

She probably normally sleeps in a silk nightie and has matching robes for each one. As if reading my mind, she smiles devilishly. “I sleep in underwear.” She snaps the back of her bra, freeing herself, before staring at me with a pout that springs me to life.

“Fuck, Gracie, you are making it very difficult to keep my promise.”

She laughs and pats the spot next to her in bed. I try to pull my eyes away from her perfect pink nipples which point toward me as if they are begging for my lips. Her breasts are heavy, and I want to lay my head against them. I want to fondle, kiss, and bite them. I give myself one more second to stare and then I lie next to her but keep my hands to myself. If she wants me to touch her, she needs to ask for it. I’m keeping my word.

Grace eyes me as I lie with my hand behind my head. It only takes her a moment, and she curls up onto my chest, pressing her breasts into my side and wrapping her legs around my own. “What are you running from, Cash?”

I slip my hand through her hair, stroking as I talk. “I’m taking over as the CEO of my family’s business next week. This is my last big hurrah.” I laugh softly. Before, I thought this would be a weekend of drinking too much and maybe finding someone to lose myself in, but now I’m ready to drag this girl back to the city with me and convince her to stay by my side. She grounds me and makes me feel like I’m not so alone. It feels like she *gets* me.

*What is happening to me?*

“Do you not want to be CEO?” she asks softly as her fingers slide delicately across my chest in circles. I close my eyes at her touch, memorizing how she feels in my arms.

“I do.”

“But?” she asks knowingly.

I smile to myself. “But I thought we’d have more time. The reason I’m stepping in is because of my grandfather. He’s fading. I liked working in our distribution centers, traveling, dealing with people on the ground floor of our business. But the CEO belongs in the office. It’s just...” I falter for an explanation.

“The person you looked up to is disappearing and you have to grow up,” she says softly, understanding precisely how I feel without me having to voice it.

I kiss the top of her head and pull her up closer to me so that I can see her face. When we’re nose to nose I rub mine against hers, and her eyes crease

in happiness.

“Yes. And now I’ve met this beautiful girl who I somehow need to convince to spend more time with me. She’s making it very difficult.”

Her lips curl up. “I thought you liked a challenge.”

I bite her bottom lip, holding it hostage, and my thumb moves across her nipple. Her eyes grow wide and then close as she hisses out a breath. “I’d love it whether you were easy or difficult. It’s you that I like.”

Grace melts against me, her tongue pushes open my mouth, and her hands roam my chest. I keep my hands high, keeping my word, and kiss her until we are both left panting. “Cash...I don’t...” She tries to explain.

I nod into her lips. “I know, Gracie, you don’t do this. I’m just going to hold you.”

She whimpers against my lips. “But I want to.”

I shake my head and kiss down her neck. “The first time there will be no question whether you think it’s right. We’re waiting.”

“Who are you and where were you eight years ago?”

I chuckle. “Well, I was a twenty-two-year-old dumbass so I don’t think you would have been interested.”

She bumps her head against my chest. “Ugh, you’re such a baby.”

I pull her chin up to look at me. “I’m thirty. How old are you?”

She rolls her eyes. “You’re not supposed to ask a woman that.”

I grin. “I knew you were going to say that. Tell me anyway.”

“I’m thirty-six. An old spinster.”

I laugh loudly and pull her close. “My old spinster.”

She sighs against me. “I kind of like the sound of that.”

“Good night, old maid,” I tease.

“Night, Whiskey,” she says softly as she drifts off to sleep. I look down at her and marvel. *Whiskey...how did she know?*



“Oh no you don’t,” I say, grabbing Grace before she can sneak out of my bed as the morning light filters across her skin, leaving her looking golden.

It seems she’s snapped back into her shy self, just like she did when we left the plane. Because I’m not a dick, I jump up and grab her a robe.

Grace sighs before taking the robe and wrapping it tightly around her body. “Any chance you’re going to let me leave to get a coffee?”

“I’m not holding you hostage, Gracie. You can leave whenever you’d like. But I’d be happy to order you a coffee and then tell you all about the day I have planned.”

She looks at me pensively. I know I’m pushing, but it feels like that is the only way I can get anywhere with her. And I really want to spend the day with her.

“I was planning on sitting by the beach and reading,” she says, but even as she says it, I can see I have her interest piqued. She wants to know what her other option is, and I have to make it too good to turn down.

“Or...and just hear me out...you could not live in your book for the day and actually experience your vacation.”

She frowns. Apparently, that wasn’t the right thing to say. “But what if I like reading?”

“Then we’ll sit next to each other, and I’ll stare at you while you read.”

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “You aren’t very good at the whole hard to get thing, are you?”

“You’re good enough at it for the both of us.”

She bites her lip trying to pull the smile down. “What did you have in mind?”

“I was thinking we could snorkel...and then I could take you out to dinner.”

She shakes her head. “You really are something.”

“I’m a man who knows what I want.”

“So it seems. Okay, well if I am going to be spending the day with you, I am going to need to go back to my room to change. What time do you want me to meet you? And where?”

“An hour work?”

“Perfectly.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you by the front desk.” I’m not surprised that she doesn’t lean down to kiss me goodbye. Instead she takes her dress and her robe and disappears into the bathroom before sneaking out of my room like we didn’t spend the entire night wrapped in each other’s arms. She’s like a scared kitten, easily spooked. If I have any hope of repeating the night we shared, I’ll have to go slow.



With my Ray-Bans, a white T-shirt, and board shorts, I leave my room in search of coffee. Once I have two cups, I sit down and dial my sister’s

number. She answers on the second ring. “Hey Cash Money, how’s vacation?”

“It’s pretty good, Kit Cat. Everything okay at home?”

“Yes, everything is under control. The doctor says Pa”—our name for our grandfather—“looks better than he did last week, and Grandmother isn’t letting the nurses out of his room. Honestly, I feel bad for the poor guy; he’s not gotten a moment of rest with her staring at him every minute of the day.”

I kind of know the feeling. “She’s just worried about him.”

My sister lets out an obnoxious laugh. “She’s unbearable and she’s going to direct all this attention on you as soon as you’re home.”

Don’t I know it. Which is exactly why for the next forty-eight hours I’m not going to focus on that. “Be good to her. I’ll see you when I get back to Boston.”

“Wait a second. Don’t get off the phone before telling me how it’s really going on your last big hurrah. How come you didn’t have Carter and Chase meet you? I’m sure they could take the plane if you’re bored.”

Across the lobby, I watch Grace walk toward me, her hips swaying and a shy smile on her lips. “Promise I’m not bored. I have to go though. Later, Kit Cat.” I hit end and put the phone down without taking my eyes off her.

“One of those mine, Whiskey?” she asks, pointing to the coffee.

“Didn’t know how you take it, but we can grab sweetener if you like.”

She takes the cup and sips it. “Black’s fine. Thank you.”

“So tell me, are we snorkeling or sitting on the beach with a book?”

Grace pauses as she stares at me, the wheels in her mind spinning. I wish I knew what she was thinking—what has her so guarded. It’s probably half

the reason I'm interested in her. The chase—the challenge as she puts it. She's a puzzle whose pieces I can't quite figure out.

Shocking the hell out of me, she replies, “Snorkeling. We can read on the beach tomorrow.” Her eyes rise in challenge, and I accept without letting the surprise show on my face. Offering me the next two days is more than I expected and exactly what I want.

For the next twenty-four hours we snorkel while holding hands, eat breakfast, lunch, and dinner together, and talk about everything and nothing. I learn she's an only child, that she's extremely close with her godmother and has basically no relationship with her parents. She has a best friend named Tessa who is like family, and she paints as a hobby.

The painting thing I learned after watching her face light up when she saw a caricature painter. Her eyes were alight with excitement as she watched a little girl drip ice cream down her face while her mother kept cleaning her up. The ice cream was the only thing that kept the girl still for so long. Afterwards, we grabbed ice cream and Grace shared her love of painting. The grin never left my face as I listened.

On our last day we sit side by side at the pool—her reading, me staring out toward the ocean, in companionable silence. It's nice finding someone you're comfortable not talking with. Sitting beside someone and not trying to think of something to say. It's a rare gift and one I've never had. I've honestly never witnessed it or thought about it before. I turn my body to face her, and her lips lift in a small smile as she flips down the page of her book, closes it, and turns to me. “You're doing it again,” she says.

The grin tugs at my lips. “Doing what?”

“Staring at me like you're making plans.”

*Fuck, am I making plans.*

“Oh, I’ve got plans, Gracie,” I admit.

“Do they involve me naked in the shower? Because right about now that’s my plan.”

Before I can respond, she grabs her things, and with her damn lip between her teeth shoots me a look that lets me know the time for talking is over. As is the time for silence. Our bodies are in control now.

I grab her by the waist, pick her up, and start running back to my room as her laughter dances through the air. We get quite a few gawkers, but my attention is lost to Grace. To the way she screeches, the way she feels in my arms, and the pure joy that rockets through my body when she’s close.

I haven’t had much time to stress about what is going on at home because she’s occupied my every thought for the last forty-eight hours. More specifically, how she’ll taste has taken up an inordinate amount of brain power. I have a feeling I’m finally going to find out.

As we reach the lobby, I right her onto her toes and she laughs as she smacks my chest. But before she can do too much damage, I have her lips in a bruising kiss and she moans, leaning in to my embrace.

Upstairs we stumble into my room, walking backward to the shower, holding one another up as we strip until we are standing bare.

As I reach into the shower to turn it on, Grace stares down at my erection and mumbles, “Oh fuck, Cash.” My cock bobs under her gaze. “You’re so...*fuck*,” she mutters again.

My smirk grows as I pull her against me, the steam billowing around us. “Gracie, please let me taste you,” I beg as I run my lips down her chest but stop before reaching her nipple. Grace looks down at me and nods, and as soon as I bite down, her head falls back in a moan.



“May I?” I ask as my fingers skirt down her stomach. I refuse to move another inch without her express consent. She’s the one who says she doesn’t do this. Despite the fact that I know she wants it, I want her to be sure.

“Yes, Cash, please, I need you to touch me.”

My fingers slip in and we both groan at the same time. She’s warm and tight and the sensation of her on my fingers leaves my cock dripping with need. Grace’s fingers circle the head of my cock, and when she tightens her grip I jolt forward, my hand landing against the cold tile, right before taking her lips in mine, hungry—*fuck that, starved*—for more.

When I feel my balls start to tighten, I pull her away from me. “Not here. When I come I want to be inside you. Turn around.”

Grace hesitates. “Cash, I…”

“No, Angel, I’m not going in bare. I’m going to wash your hair, dry you off, then make you come on my tongue.”

Grace’s lips pull to the side in an amused smirk, and she obliges my request. Even though my cock strains against me in anger, I move slowly, taking my time to soap up every inch of Grace and her hair. She leans her head against my chest as I rinse out the conditioner and moans as my hands work her head over in a teasing massage.

Whether I’m touching her ass or her hair doesn’t matter to me; it’s the ability to touch her without her pulling away that leaves me heady and wanting more. Every moment with Grace feels like a gift. I never thought I’d appreciate a woman holding back, but the fact that she waited, that she didn’t give in the first night, makes this feel like so much more.

We move to the bed, and Grace’s shyness reappears. On her back with her elbows keeping her upright, she leaves a towel covering her as she waits

for me to make my next move.

“I’ve never been so fascinated with making a woman come as I am with you. How do you like it, Grace?”

She rolls her eyes as she looks away from me.

“Don’t do that, Angel. I’m being serious. All I want is to pleasure you. Show me how you touch yourself when you’re alone.”

“Cash, I’m not like that...” She sighs in frustration. “I’m sure other women—”

I stop her by holding up my hand. “I don’t care about other women. I want to watch you come. I want your excitement to drip down my face. I want *you* to lose control...or take control...whatever it is that you like, you tell me.”

Grace’s eyes lift and I know what she needs.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I say, lying down next to her. “Do me a favor; sit on my face.”

Grace’s head whips in my direction in shock.

“Please,” I beg.

She rolls her eyes again, but she lets the towel go. “I can’t believe I’m doing this,” she grumbles.

My fucking smile grows as she sits up and positions herself over me. I press warm open-mouthed kisses against her inner thigh and feel her body shudder as she begins to relax into my touch. Then I slide my tongue across her pubic bone, lightly teasing her, and instinct appears to take over as she lowers herself and actually sits down on my face.

“Fuck, yes, Angel, that’s what I’m talking about.” I inhale her, pressing my mouth against her wetness and blowing my warm breath against her,

making her buck up in surprise. “Now, grab the headboard and don’t let go.”

I push her legs a little bit farther apart so that she’s all I can taste and then I get to work. She tastes like fucking sin. Like candy that’s been stolen. Sweeter and more delicious because she held back. Something I never thought I’d have.

And yet, within seconds, she’s riding me, unable to stop herself from taking control. It’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever experienced. As soon as she starts moaning my name and pulsing, I pull her down and kiss her so she can experience just how good she tastes.

Like the good girl I knew she was, she moans as she licks my tongue. “Oh, Whiskey, I need to feel you inside me,” she begs.

I don’t need to be told twice. I need to be inside of her more than my next breath. After sliding on a condom, I position her above me and give her the control again. “Ride me, beautiful. Ride my cock just like you rode my face.”

Grace’s eyes light up, but she stares at me nervously. “You’re really big, Cash.”

I groan watching her stare down at me. “You can take it, baby. Just go nice and slow. I want to watch that pretty pussy swallow me inch by inch.”

She bites her lip and I almost fucking lose it as she lifts herself over me and sinks down slowly, crying out as I stretch her. It feels like heaven. Like I’m home. My eyes meet hers and I’m about to convey what I’m thinking—*that I’m losing my damn mind from just being inside her*—when she starts to move. She leans against my chest and lifts herself up and then slams back down, laughing when I grunt.

“Oh, that’s how you want to play this,” I tease, lifting my hips up to meet her thrusts. We both chase our orgasms, pushing deeper until she takes over completely by bouncing too much for me to fight it. She just feels too damn good. I’m still holding on to some semblance of control, but I lose it all when she shifts back and drops her hand down to her clit, rubbing circles as her pussy grips my cock tighter.

The sight of her, twerking her hips as her tits bounce heavily and her mouth falls open as she cries out my name, is my undoing.

She doesn’t stop even as I pulse inside her, groaning and cursing. She continues taking everything she wants, all the pleasure hers and mine, until I’m practically crying from how her pussy throbs around me.

“Holy fuck,” I pant as Grace collapses on top of me. “Holy fuck!”

She laughs through her own panting. “Yeah...”

“No, Grace, what the hell was that?”

She smiles shyly up at me. “Was it okay?”

Running my hands through my hair I grunt. “Okay? *Okay?* That was fucking incredible...that was...Fuck, Grace, what the fuck!”

I’m destroyed. Ruined. That wasn’t just the best sex I’ve ever had because I like this woman. It was the best sex period. The way she owned me. Took what she wanted. Watching her fucking lose whatever baggage she had and take control of her own pleasure...I’m speechless. And I also can’t shut the fuck up about it. I know I have to gain control of this situation. I’m not a fucking teenager who just lost his virginity, I’m fucking Cassius James. I don’t get emotional over sex.

When she whispers, “It was good for me too, Cash,” looking up at me and pressing a kiss against my chin, I know I’m a goner.



We spend the night in bed, refusing to leave even for dinner. After another round of sex which is slower and still fucking fantastic, I rub circles on her back while we cuddle.

“Ugh, I don’t want to go back,” she says glumly.

“Well, obviously, it won’t be as amazing as spending every hour together here, but we’ll figure it out.” She hums into my chest, and I pause uncomfortably. “We’ll still see each other, Grace,” I say more than ask.

She lifts her head to mine. “Kiss me, Whiskey.”

I can’t turn her down. Even with the unease I feel, I can’t deny her request.



I feel the brush of lips against mine, and a blur passes by my sleepy eyes. Words are murmured that I can’t quite make out, and I reach to pull her closer to me and fall back to sleep. I wake a few hours later and reach for her again, but my hand only hits the empty bed. “Grace,” I murmur, opening my eyes and looking around for her. I wipe the sleep from my eyes and am met with an empty room. Although in my gut I know she’s gone, I jump out of bed and check the bathroom and the closet before accepting the truth.

*Where the fuck did you go, Grace?*

I pull at my hair and stare at the phone. I don't even have her number to call her. I lift up the receiver and call the front desk. "Hello, Mr. James, how can I help you this morning?"

"I'm looking for another guest, Grace..." I pause, scratching my head. Fuck, I didn't get her last name. How did I spend seventy-two hours with the woman, sleep with her, basically breathe only her air and not get her last name?

*Because she didn't want you to know her. Because she intentionally hid who she was for the last few days, and she told you that information was off-limits, and you still fell for her. Even though she told you not to.*

I slam down the phone.

*Fuck.*



## CHAPTER 5

### GRACE

**A**s I get ready for work, I brush the tear that slides down my face. This has happened every time I think of how I left Cash, how I disappeared and simply ghosted him.

It's not supposed to feel like this. He wasn't supposed to be anything more than a distraction. A fling. A *Grace got her groove back* moment.

I wasn't supposed to fall for him. I shouldn't miss him. I barely know him.

It was just sex. Mind-blowing, explosive, incredible sex...*but just sex*. The popping of my divorce cherry. Or separation cherry, because obviously I'm not divorced yet.

I'm probably making more of it in my head. Even if it felt like more—like it was real—like we could actually be something...I had no choice but to leave.

“You just have to get through the next month. Then you can find him, explain everything, and work it out,” I say to my reflection.

The words are hollow in my throat.

I need to finish this last project, set up this last couple, and get my promotion. Then I can officially separate from Steven and openly date.

But not before then.

I couldn't possibly ask Cash to wait. I know him. Well, I know *guys like* him. They don't like to share. He'd so much as said that.

Having a husband who I have to fake date for the next month would definitely count as sharing. It's too complicated. Men like Cash don't do complicated. Unlike me, he's probably already moved on.

I *need* to move on.

I spin my hair into a bun and drop it back down to my shoulders. Nothing seems to be right. I slip on my black tortoiseshell glasses, paint my lips red, and stare at my reflection. Another tear sneaks down my face, and I blow out a slow breath. This is going to be a long month.



“Sweets, you’re absolutely glowing,” Marion says as she kisses both my cheeks and squeezes me. I sink into the soft burgundy chair opposite her desk, and she returns to her seat. “How was your trip? Did Steven enjoy himself?”

I can't lie about this part. I'll definitely get caught. The only way lies work is if you bake them in half-truths. “He couldn't make it. Work commitment. But I went on my own and it was very refreshing. Thank you so much for arranging it. Everything was amazing.”

She removes her glasses and looks at me. “Everything okay with Steven?”



I paint on a happy smile. “Of course. You know us, we are happy as can be.” The words taste like acid on my tongue.

“Good,” she says, placing her glasses on the desk. She basks in the light of the sun which pours in through two large windows. In between the windows the bright word Love, which is painted on a picture, taunts me in red. *What the hell do I know about love?*

And yet, for a few moments this weekend, I actually felt more like I knew what it meant than all the years I was married to Steven.

*What is wrong with me?*

“So, our new client is quite the up-and-coming bachelor. He’s about to take over his family’s whiskey business, although the James family is known for a lot more than just whiskey now. But that is where the money originally came from, and apparently that remains Cassius’s passion.”

I nod as I listen and wait for her to slip me the paper with the information on our client.

“His grandmother would like him to settle down now that he will be the head of the family, and she’s tasked us with finding his future wife. I don’t have to tell you what a big project this is for you. Not only will this client bring attention from the media, but as promised, it’s your ticket to partner.”

I smile. That is all I care about. Every other fact is just a means to an end. “I’m ready for this, Marion. I’m going to make you proud.”

Her lips curl. “I have no doubt.” She places the paper down and looks at me. “Look, Sweets, Asher wants me to take a step back. He’s tired of me commuting to the city, and we both believe that you’re the person to take over. You know we don’t have children, and well, we’ve always thought of you as a daughter.”

My eyes burn from the betrayal. Dammit, this is harder than I thought.  
“Marion, I’m honored.”

“So I’m leaving this one to you. Prove to me you have the ability to find Cassius his match. That you have *it*, and you won’t only be partner, the company will be yours.”

I inhale sharply and shake my head. “That’s not what I want, Mare. I love working with you. I *need* you.”

Marion smiles. “No, you don’t, darling. But you’ll always have me. Now let’s go meet your newest client.”



“So what else do you know about Mr. James?” I ask as we walk into the office building. There’s brick on the interior walls which I find so refreshing and proper for a whiskey company.

“Well, interestingly, he’s not the oldest of the siblings. He’s also not the correct generation to be taking over.”

I look at her quizzically.

“Remember how I said it was the grandmother that was pulling the strings? Well, the son is MIA. Gambling or drugs or something or other. The grandparents raised the four children and Cassius is third in line. Not the likely heir, as one would say.”

Something about that sounds familiar, but I’m not sure why. Almost sounds like a lifetime movie I might have watched. Or the plot of the latest bestseller.

We ride the elevator, and I spin the rings on my finger. They feel foreign after not wearing them all weekend. But I have to keep up appearances.

On the 33<sup>rd</sup> floor, we are greeted by oak barrels strategically placed throughout the office. The entire space smells familiar but I can't quite place why. Brick runs the entire back wall, but the room is bright from the floor-to-ceiling windows which encase the entire office.

A woman greets us with a smile. "Welcome to James Spirits. Do you have an appointment?"

Marion responds as I allow my eyes to wander through the office. "Grace, she's going to bring you to meet with the client while I meet with his grandmother. We'll grab lunch all together afterward if necessary. Will you be okay to handle him on your own?"

This is my time to shine—to prove to her that I can handle this—and will move me one step closer to my freedom. "Of course. I've got it covered."

"Great," the receptionist responds. "Follow me this way." As I walk off, Marion looks on with a twinkle in her eye and gives me a small wave.

I follow behind the receptionist and focus on my shoes. I'm wearing black Manolo Blahnik heels with an emerald-green silk wrap dress which hugs my curves and brings out the color of my eyes. I left my hair down but curled it at the ends, and it looks a bit lighter from the sun. Paired with my black glasses, I carry myself tall and detached.

This look is exactly what men like Cassius James need. Someone who is above reproach, not sexy, and not likely to fall for their charms.

The receptionist knocks on the door, and a man's voice summons us in. I walk behind her with my head held high and a smile on my face. "Mr. James, this is Mrs. Kensington. Your grandmother scheduled her to meet with you."

Cassius lifts his eyes, and I practically collide into the receptionist when I meet his whiskey ones.

“Cash,” I whisper, a sense of dread washing over me.

His eyes hold mine, and he addresses his receptionist. “Lucy, that will be all. I’ll take it from here.” She nods and walks out without a glance in my direction. Before the door has even hit the latch, Cash stalks to my position and pulls me to his chest. “Grace, I can’t believe you’re here. How did you find me?”

I allow myself a few seconds to be held and inhale his natural scent, closing my eyes and pretending this isn’t the scenario we’ve found ourselves in. I know when I look up at him and tell him why I’m here, he’ll never look at me the same. Before I can respond, he moves his hands to my cheeks and cradles my face, kissing me softly. It’s like it’s second nature. A kiss between two people who expect to do it regularly—and it reminds me why it all felt so real.

*It was real. It wasn’t just sex.*

Cash pulls his lips away and meets my eyes. “God, I’ve missed you. What the hell happened? Where did you go?”

I bite my lip, tasting him on me. “Can we sit?”

“Of course, baby, come over here.” He points to the two chairs in front of his desk, and he takes one and turns it toward mine. I fold my dress down as I sit and leave my hands below my hips, afraid for him to see my left ring finger.

*God, could this be any more awkward?*

Cash is the man I need to set up with a wife so that I can get my promotion and free myself from my husband. *How is this possible?*

Cash pulls my chair closer until his legs are on either side of me and then squeezes my thighs in excitement. “I cannot believe you’re here. This is incredible. I thought I’d lost you.”

I look away from his expectant gaze. My chest grows tight, and it feels difficult to breathe.

“Relax, Grace.” He squeezes me again and pulls my attention back to his face. He’s so achingly perfect. How am I going to watch him fall in love with someone else? How am I going to break his heart and mine in this moment?

*Please, Grace, you spent one weekend together. He’s not going to be heartbroken. Pissed, yes. But he didn’t fall in love with you. Get over yourself.*

I steady my voice as I say, “I’m not Grace.” His eyebrow quirks up, and he stiffens. “I’m Mrs. Kensington, your ten o’clock.”

I blow out a breath and place my hands in my lap. His eyes move straight to my left hand, and I watch as he studies my rings. A frown tugs at his lips. Lips I know taste like whiskey and desire. That feel like sin and saving grace when pressed against my own. That know precisely how to nip, nibble, and suck with the right amount of pressure to make my toes curl in my Manolo Blahniks right now.

This man is everything I want and nothing I can have.

His jaw tics and he leans back in his chair, pushing it away from me. “You’re married?” he asks as his eyebrows knit together in disbelief.

I nod once, afraid my voice will crack if I speak. A tremor dances across my skin, the chill from the icy stare he delivers reaching my bones.

“Fuck!” he roars. “Fucking fuck!”

I flinch at his anger but don't avert my eyes. I deserve this. I didn't tell him the truth before and now I have to deal with the consequences.

Cash stands and paces the room. "You're married! You're fucking married!"

I shrink a little in my chair. I'm not fearful of him, and his anger is completely justified, but seeing the hurt I've caused is almost too much to bear.

I want to whisper the truth. I want to tell him everything. But Marion's words dance before me.

*Find him a wife and the firm is yours.*

I've picked my career over my love life ten times out of ten for the last ten years. Why stop now?

"I'm a matchmaker. Your grandmother has hired my firm to find you a wife. I'm your ten o'clock," I say again, staring down at my shoes.

He laughs bitterly. "This doesn't make sense." Then in desperation he gets in front of me and pulls my face to look at him. "Grace, baby, this doesn't make sense. What is going on? Tell me this is all a misunderstanding. *Tell me something.*"

I lift my shoulders in a helpless shrug. "What do you want me to say? I told you it was going nowhere."

Cash's face twists in pain. "Tell me anything but that. *Fuck*, tell me anything that will make this hurt less."

Unable to stop myself, I lift my hand to his cheek, and he grimaces. I want to tell him it was real to me too. That this is killing me too. But I can't.

"So that's why you left? Why you didn't leave a number. Why you didn't say goodbye. Because you're married?" My hand is still on his cheek, and he turns into it, inhaling as if he needs my touch to breathe.

I die a little inside.

“Yes,” I choke out.

He drops his head into his hands and rakes his hand through his hair, and I feel the loss immediately. “Fuck,” he rasps, as he looks up at me and then with a voice that scratches my heart, he asks “Are you leaving him?”

I tilt my head in a surprised sigh. “Cash, I’ve been hired to find you a wife. Married women aren’t wife material.” I try to reason with us both.

“I don’t want a fucking wife. I want *you*. Are you leaving him?”

“No,” I manage to whisper, keeping the shakiness from my voice.

His eyes harden. The man who was so desperate for me only moments before disappears before my very eyes. I barely recognize the face he wears, and it kills me to know that I’m the one who is changing him. Altering his being, just by refusing to return his feelings. By keeping the truth from him. If love were the antidote, I just handed him poison.

Turning away from me, he points to the door. “Then get out.”

“Cash,” I say softly.

The splintering of his bellowing cry makes me jump. “Get out!”

I attempt to stand and wobble on my heels. I grab the side of the chair before I go sideways, but Cash doesn’t lift a hand to help. He doesn’t even look at me. That’s how disgusted he is. That’s how *done* he is.

I take a breath and steady myself. This is going off the rails. “Cash, we had a wonderful weekend. Now we both have a job to do. We both knew our time was limited. *Please*, let me do my job.”

He raises his eyes to meet mine, the hurt evident in his every movement. “We had a wonderful weekend? *Really?* That’s all you have to say about it?”

Irritated at how badly this is all going, and really just overwhelmed by the fact that my luck is so horrible that this is the scenario we're in, I snap, "What would you like me to say? I tried to stay away from you. I didn't show up for our date and you sought me out at the bar, pushed yourself on me by the beach, and practically stuck your tongue down my throat. What was I supposed to do? You're gorgeous, we were both seeking a release and a break, and we had one. We had a wonderful weekend, but now it's time to grow up and deal with real life."

He shakes his head and says bewilderedly, "I don't even know who you are."

"Precisely my point!" I say shrilly. "You don't know me. That was intentional. I suggest we take a breather, and we can meet for lunch to discuss the details of my job."

I run my hands down my dress, straightening it out, and Cash's eyes fall to my rings. I see the pain flash in his eyes, but it's gone just as quickly and is replaced with a cold detachment.

"I don't want to work with you...I don't want to see you again. If my grandmother wants me to find a wife, she'll have to find someone else to do it."

Fear grabs at my chest. I *can't* lose this job. Because then this entire conversation—hurting Cash, breaking us both—will have been for nothing. Without this, I won't get the promotion anyway and then I might as well have just told him the truth.

"Cash, I'm excellent at my job. There's no one better. I'll find someone for you that will make you forget I exist."

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head, and for a moment I think he's going to tell me to just leave.



I hold my breath, waiting for his reply.

“You know what, you’re right. If you cared about me even an inkling as much as I cared about you, then it will kill you to watch me find my future wife.” He meets my eyes, and knowing he’s hurting me, knowing how much this is going to gut me, he replies, “You’re hired.”

A clear glass tumbler filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly to the right. The word "CASH" is printed in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the glass. The background is a plain, light color.

## CHAPTER 6

### CASH

“So good news,” my sister, Cat, says as she walks into my office without knocking. Her black hair swings as she plops down into the office chair that Grace had just relinquished. My sister has dark soulful eyes, and against her light, creamy skin, even I have to admit that she is what others would call a knockout. Right now though, as she sits in the chair across from me with an excited glint in her eye, I only see the older sister who is fiercely protective and my best friend.

“What’s that?” I ask dryly, not in the mood for anything good.

“I found her!”

I sit up straighter in my chair. Fuck, now Cat will know I fooled around with a married woman. Cheating is something we don’t tolerate. We watched our father cheat regularly, on our mother, at life, and on his time with us. It’s not something we’d ever tolerate from any one of us, and I’m ashamed I’ve found myself in this position—even if it was unknowingly.

I stand up and cross the room to the bar which sits by the window. Without asking, I pour whiskey into two of the glass tumblers.

“What are you doing?” Cat asks as she watches me cross the room to hand it back to her. “Why are we drinking? I found her! Your mystery woman! Your Grace!”

I sip the liquid and allow both the drink and her words to burn everything in its path. *My Grace*. Two words that will never be true. And that never were.

Wanting to delay the inevitable, I just raise my eyes. “How?”

She smiles, proud of herself and believing she discovered the magic bullet that will make me happy. “Okay, well Frank found her,” she says just as my traitorous best friend enters the office.

*I* had asked Frank to find her. *I* had given him all the information necessary.

“Really, Frank?” I ask as he sits down without a care in the world. Frank has been my best friend since high school, but now he’s also my driver and right-hand man. Or at least I thought he was until he betrayed me.

“What? I found her like you asked. Don’t look at me like that,” he says as he rolls his green eyes. Frank is one hundred percent Irish, and his shaved head and tattoos give off the vibe that he doesn’t give a fuck. And he doesn’t.

Gripping my drink in my hand, I glare at him. “Yeah, I asked you to give me the information. Not involve my sister.”

He shrugs as he looks over at the victorious Cat. “She’s better looking than you.”

Cat smiles and turns back to me. “Cash, why don’t you seem more excited? We found her!”

Cat flings a piece of paper onto my desk with a picture of Grace and a biography from her company website. I don’t pick it up. I can’t bear to look

at her image, to read about her life, or to know anything more than I already do.

*“You don’t know me. That was intentional.”*

The memory of Grace’s words cut like a machete.

With no way around it, I plow forward with the truth. “I found her too. Unfortunately, I also discovered she’s married. So, that ends that.”

I look at my computer screen, avoiding my sister’s penetrating gaze and Frank’s inhale. Not for nothing, if he was going to find her and present her to my sister, the least he could have done was vet her as well. *Why the fuck do I pay him so much?*

“That doesn’t…” my sister starts but then falters, “but…No, that’s not right.”

I understand how she feels. It took me a few minutes to wrap my brain around what Grace had done as well. I’d been so convinced she was good. So good that she wouldn’t have a one-night stand. She wanted to get to know me. She wanted to take it slow. I thought we had time. I thought she was *the one*.

And like a fool, I’d shared all those feelings with Cat. She knew exactly how I felt because I’d detailed our entire weekend. There is nothing I don’t tell Cat. We were always like that—inseparable, each other’s champions, and we hide nothing.

I take another sip of my whiskey. “It’s fine. It’s done.”

Cat’s brown eyes plead with mine. “Don’t do that. Don’t shut down. You’re hurt. You can be hurt and take the time to feel this for a minute. You don’t always have to keep it all together.”

I laugh bitterly and sweep my arms around the office. “Actually, I do. I just took over the reins of this company. I don’t have the time or the luxury

to worry about a woman who doesn't care about me." The pressure mounts on my shoulders. I don't have time to wallow. I don't even have time for this conversation or this drink. It's too early in the day for me to be losing myself in alcohol. I push the glass away from me and buzz my secretary. "Lucy, can you bring me a coffee? Get one for Cat and Frank too."

"Of course, Mr. James."

Frank is oddly silent. Likely embarrassed that he fucked this up so bad. Good, let him stew. Meanwhile, Cat watches me like a hawk. "Why don't we grab lunch rather than having a coffee? Or I think Carter is back from visiting the distillery. Why don't we all grab dinner tonight? Maybe I can even get Chase to come."

I don't entertain the idea. I'd be terrible company. Somehow, I have to go home tonight, forget all my feelings for Grace, and prepare myself to meet with her tomorrow to get this ridiculous dog and pony show over with. All while running my family's company and preserving the ship that provides for all of them. "Rain check?"

Cat gives me a look that lets me know she knows I'm blowing her off and why. But because she loves me, she lets it go. "Fine. But you and I are doing lunch tomorrow! Put it in your calendar now. I need to make sure you're eating and not working through lunch every day, little brother."

I grind my teeth over the knowledge of where I'll be having lunch tomorrow. Or more accurately, with whom. I avoided lunch with Grace today but agreed to meet her tomorrow. "Can't. I have a lunch appointment."

"Fine. Dinner tomorrow then. And don't you dare tell me you have another appointment. You only just took over the company; it's impossible you're already booked up."

I laugh at her insistence. Cat knows how to get what she wants, and if she doesn't she'll bang you over the head with her persistence until you agree. "Fine. Dinner tomorrow. But don't bother Carter and Chase with this. I don't want them knowing I was fooled as well."

Cat stands up and walks around the desk and kisses me on the cheek. "*She* did the wrong thing. Not you. Don't beat yourself up about this. You're not *him*," she says, referring to our dirtbag of a father.

No, I'm not. But part of me wonders how long it will take me to become him.

"And Cash, don't be too hard on Frank. We both thought we were doing the right thing."

I nod at her and look to Frank, who accepts a kiss on the cheek from Cat and then waits for her to leave. He and I both know that is not the end of this conversation. Not by a long shot.

He clears his throat when Cat walks out. "Get on with it."

I laugh and roll my eyes. "I need everything you can dig up on Grace Kensington." I slide the piece of paper that Cat gave me across the desk and then remember that it came from Brutus himself.

"Already done," he says, handing me a manila folder with a quirk of his brow.

I shake my head. "Thanks. I guess you're not fired yet."

"If you remember, I didn't want this job to begin with."

I shrug. "And yet you took it."

"Because you need me."

It's true. I really do. Especially now that I know I really am on my own. With no Grace, and nothing to look forward to outside of these four walls, my best friend by my side is the least of my necessities.



I last until nine p.m. before opening the folder. Honestly, it's not a bad run. But at this point I can't help myself. Before I sit down with her tomorrow, I need to see proof of her marriage. I need to know everything about her real life so I can get over the fantasy I've created in my mind.

The first thing I find is information on her job. She works with a woman named Marion who founded the company. I wonder what their relationship is like. Does she know her star employee is a cheater? The company focuses on the long-lasting forever kind of love. There are testimonials from committed couples, and an explanation of their "tried and true" method to finding happily ever afters.

Rolling my eyes, I flip to the next page titled *About Us*.

And there she is. Grace Kensington. Graduated in 2007. That would make her thirty-six. At least she didn't lie about that.

Interestingly enough, there is nothing about her marriage. Odd. You'd think she'd want to advertise that—like her clients—she is happily married.

Next is her Instagram profile. I pull it up on my phone and find it's public and consists completely of work updates. Nothing from last week. No pictures of the beach and definitely nothing of me.

Of course, why would there be? She couldn't let her husband know she'd been with another man. I wonder if he even knew she'd been away on vacation. Maybe she told him she was traveling to a convention in Denver or some other boring place he wouldn't want to go.

*How often does she do this?*

My skin crawls as I imagine her with other men, which is ridiculous because she is probably at home with another man right now. *Her husband.*

Nothing on Instagram indicates she's married. There are a few pictures of her with friends but nothing recent. Tossing my phone, I go back to the folder. Next up is an article from *Vanity Fair* which mentions Grace by name and sings the praises of the company she works for.

But nothing about her marriage.

I don't know if I should be happy or annoyed. I need to see her husband—to see her happily married—to convince myself this is real. Something about it all seems so off. The person in my office today was cold and detached, and nothing like the woman I spent the weekend with. Something doesn't add up, and as unhealthy as it is, that just makes me more intrigued.





## CHAPTER 7

### GRACE

**F**or the last few days I have been able to avoid going back to the home I shared with Steven, but I'm running out of clothes. Now that I'm going to be dealing with setting up my dream man with someone else, I at least need the comfort of some really hot outfits to make me feel better.

Oh, let's be honest, nothing is going to make me feel better. Cash hates me and I don't even blame him. I hate me, too, and I know the truth.

I'm not a cheater. I fell for Cash just as hard as he did for me. But if life has taught me anything it's that you can't pin all your hopes and dreams on a man. I need to stand on my own two feet, in business and in life, and in order to do that I need this promotion. I *need* this company. It's all I have left.

I blow out a breath before sticking my key in the lock. Fortunately, the house is dark. Steven isn't home.

It's weird walking into a home I've shared with a man for the last six years that I always imagined growing old in and knowing that all those dreams evaporated after one conversation.

*“Grace, you and I haven’t been happy for a long time; this shouldn’t come as a shock to you.”*

See, the problem with Steven’s words is that it presupposes that when you’re unhappy in a marriage you just decide to look elsewhere. That wasn’t ever a thought that crossed my mind. Even if I was unhappy—which I’m not admitting I was—I didn’t look to another man to make me happy. I focused on *things* that made me happy. Or considered what I could do for Steven to make us *both* happy.

Although, if I’m being totally honest—which I suppose there is no reason not to be now that we’re getting a divorce—I hadn’t thought about how to make Steven happy in a long time. Maybe he’s right; I gave up. I stopped trying. What did I expect him to do?

My designer kitchen taunts me like I knew that it would. The beautiful white cabinets and shiny gold hardware are picture-perfect on the outside. But if you open the cabinets, you wouldn’t even find a box of old pasta. I’d spent months designing this spot, and we never even had a home-cooked meal here. Of course, there would be beautiful pots and pans, and gorgeous dishes which had matching serving platters, but I was never home at night to enjoy them.

I really had abandoned my husband. Or at least our marriage. We’d both been more interested in work than trying to make it work.

Why are these thoughts running through my head now? Is this what happens when you end your marriage? You take stock of everything you did wrong. Maybe so you don’t do it again.

I hope one day I meet a man that I can look back and appreciate these lessons for, but right now it just feels more like an autopsy of my life. Not something I particularly want to look too closely at.

Seeing all my flaws as a wife—my flaws as a woman and a partner—almost makes me understand why Steven fell for someone else. And right now, I'm so angry at him for putting me in this position, and I just want to focus on my anger. Because of him, not only am I losing all of these dreams but now I'm losing the possibility of making them with someone else. Someone who maybe could have been the silver lining.

*Foolish Grace.* You barely know him. It probably wouldn't have worked out with Cash anyway. It was just sex. Hot, amazing sex.

As I walk up the stairs to my bedroom, my fingers trace the wall. I can't stop touching everything that I see, as if committing it all to memory. I suppose I'm trying to say goodbye. It's as if my body has already made the decision that my mind hadn't quite reached—I'm going to let Steven buy me out of the house. I can't live here. I can't live within my memories. I need a fresh start.

Sliding my cell phone out of my pocket, I dial Marion. She picks up on the first ring.

"Hi Sweets, is everything alright?" Just the sound of her smooth voice makes me feel like I've sat down with a cup of tea and a warm blanket. That's what she's always been to me. My safe place. When I was a teenager and had to get away from my mother. As I got older and had no idea what to do for a career. Even now as an almost divorcée, she's once again my safe haven and she doesn't even know it.

I plop myself onto my bed and curl up under the covers as I speak. "Yes. I was just wondering if you would mind if I stayed at the condo for the next few weeks. With all the work to find Mr. James his match, I'm going to be out late every night, and Steven doesn't want me driving back and forth."

The lie stings but the truth would be so much more painful to admit. My marriage is over. The matchmaker couldn't even pick her own match. It's pathetic. And certainly not a story befitting the future owner of her company.

Marion hums into the phone as she pours herself a glass of wine. I know this because I hear the tell-tale sign of the glass being set down on the counter, the cork being removed, and the glug, glug, glugging as it fills her glass. "Of course you can. Use your key and feel free to stay as long as you like. Asher made me promise that I wouldn't stay in the city past three every day, so you'll definitely have more on your plate with this client. I'm sorry I can't be more help."

I pull the covers up to my face, creating a faux pillow that props up my chin and comforts me in a way nothing else will. "That's okay. You've earned this. You can count on me."

"I know that, Sweets. That's why I want to leave the company to you. I know you can handle it and I know you will flourish. Like me, you have it. You can spot the couples; you can create your own happily ever after. I'm proud of you, Grace. You've worked very hard for this."

The tears burn the back of my eyes, and I swallow my sorrow.

Proud.

There's nothing to be proud of. I don't deserve her pride, nor do I deserve her trust. But like the parent she's always been to me, she gives it anyway. For that I'm grateful. And because of that I will work ten times harder to make her proud, even if it kills me to do it. I will find Cash a wife, and they will be so well-matched that Marion will know without a doubt that she left the company in the right hands.

“Thanks, Mare.” I smile into the phone at my nickname for her. No one calls her anything but Marion. Not even Asher. Although, maybe at home he calls her something like darling.

Marion clears her throat. “Is everything alright, Sweets? You know you can tell me anything.”

I wipe a stray tear from my face. “I think I’m just a little tired from all the travel. Who knew taking a fancy vacation could be so draining?” I try joking.

“Of course. I’ll see you in the office tomorrow. Have a good night.”

I let the phone slide from my fingers without even hitting end. Closing my eyes, I inhale the smell of my bed, relishing in the feel of the sheets below my fingers, and the memories that all of it conjures. I know without a doubt this will be the last time I sit in this exact spot. I don’t even want to bring my pillow which I’ve carted with me everywhere I’ve gone for the last some odd years. I had a strange attachment to that thing—it was perfectly soft and firm at the same time, and I slept like crap on anything else.

Other than when I slept with Cash.

Huffing out a breath, I try to forget how it felt to be in his arms. To be held by someone who I could feel radiated a warmth for me. It wasn’t love. Obviously, that would have been too soon. But it was just the way that he held me, the way he looked at me, that I could tell he cared. He warmed me from within without even saying a word.

“Stop, Grace. You’re a grown woman and you don’t have time to think about this anymore.” I hope that by saying the words out loud I can actually make my mind understand. Cash is off-limits. Feeling bad for myself is pointless. And crying is not allowed.

I take one last inhale of my old life, throw the covers off my legs, and twist them off the bed. It's time to pack.

An hour later and three suitcases full, I really regret the fact that I can't at least have a glass of wine while I pack up the last eight years of my life. What was I thinking driving here? I should have arranged a car service.

After putting the last of my *can't live without* things into the car, I look around the house and breathe in a silent goodbye. When I turn to the door, I regretfully notice that the doorknob is turning.

Steven is home.

*Fuck.*

He seems as surprised to see me as I am annoyed to see him. Couldn't I have had just a few more minutes to remove myself from this life without having to face him? Seriously!

"Grace, I didn't expect to see you here. How are you..." He pauses as he dances around the topic. "How are you doing?"

When he meets my eyes, I see that this pains him. I almost feel compassion for him. I'd surprised him. Although, it is *our* house. And I hadn't been the one to cheat.

I nod my head. "I'm good. Just picking up some stuff so that I can get through the next few weeks. New client means lots of dinners."

Steven sighs and looks off toward the kitchen. "Don't I know it."

*What is that supposed to mean?*

My hackles go up. Is he really going to blame this on me and my career? I mean, sure, I was mature enough to look in the mirror and see how I contributed to the demise of our relationship, but he is not going to pin this on me. I narrow my eyes and glare at him.

Steven holds up his hands as if he knows what's coming. "Forget I said anything. So, the new client—how long do you think this will take?"

Rolling my eyes, I look toward the door. "As soon as the media discovers him, he'll be the hottest bachelor the city has seen in a long time. Young, head of his family's business, and looking to settle down. It shouldn't take long to get a line of women dying to be his wife." The bitterness drips from my voice. I could have been in that line. I could have been in the front of it.

"Great. So are we thinking another month or what?"

I laugh. It's not that I find any of this funny, but my husband is asking how long he has to pretend being married to me so that I can set up my would-be boyfriend with his future wife. I mean at least it's comical. If I don't laugh about it, I'll most certainly cry.

The skin between Steven's eyes pinches together. "What is so funny? You and I can barely have a conversation, and I'd just like to know how long we have to pretend you even *like* me."

My eyes go to the ceiling. "Right. Or you just want to know how long until you can move your skank, I mean secretary, into our house. Sorry the S word is difficult for me like the M word was for you."

Steven looks at me quizzically. "M word?"

I laugh again. "Monogamy. Marriage. Take your pick; either one of them was a problem for you."

He shifts uncomfortably in the doorway. He still hasn't moved past the entrance. "Why don't you stay for a glass of wine and we can talk?"

I give him my best *you've got to be fucking kidding me* look and flit my hand in front of him as if asking him to move. "No thanks. Aside from you letting me know whether you want to buy me out of this house or sell it, we don't have much to discuss."

“You don’t want the house?” he asks incredulously.

“No. I figured Candace probably wanted it. I’m sure she’s already picked out new sheets and everything,” I pan dryly.

Steven shifts nervously. “I mean, yes, she’s mentioned it, but I figured you would want the house. I mean you’re the one who picked out the kitchen. It took you hours to pick out those damn faucets. You’re really going to walk away from it all?”

I shake my head. “No, Steven, I am walking away from *you*. The house is just collateral damage. I have to go.”

As I begin to walk past him, he grabs my arm, holding me close before I can move through the door. “Wait.”

I sigh. “What? What more do you want? You’ve taken my pride, my money, and my time. What *more* could you possibly want?”

He releases my arm, but his eyes travel slowly up my face, pausing for a moment on my lips, before he licks his own. My skin crawls from the way he looks at me. “Won’t you need me for events? Or dinner with Marion?”

I flick my eyes away from his. “If I need you, I’ll let you know. Goodbye, Steven.” I stroll out of the house and feel a sense of closure. It may not be over, but the first step toward my freedom is underway.





## CHAPTER 8

### GRACE

**T**he decision to meet Cash at a restaurant was both strategic and typical. While most men want to meet in their office, on their turf, and where they feel most powerful, they rarely open up in that space. An office is where they have to keep themselves most put together—the spot where emotions are stifled, where flirting is frowned upon, and relaxation is never found. Whereas, lunch, normally with a drink to loosen them up, always does the trick.

In Cash's instance, the restaurant is even more important. Aside from the fact that he was angry yesterday, I could also see the waves of stress coming off his body. He is just taking over one of the biggest liquor companies in the world. At thirty years old, this is no small feat, and there are many, maybe even his older siblings, who want him to fail. It certainly begs the question why he was chosen over his older brother. Or even his sister.

I read up on the entire family last night after I unpacked my things. Over a glass of wine, I learned as much as I possibly could about the James family, and there is surprisingly not a lot for the amount of wealth they have.

How had these kids not gotten in trouble in college? There was no bad media coverage; there was barely any coverage at all. The only thing stranger than the fact that his older siblings aren't in charge is the fact that his father isn't. He is the proper heir to the company after all. But I couldn't find a thing on him. They are either the most straitlaced family to ever come into money or they are insanely good at hiding things. I have a feeling it's the latter.

Normally, this meeting would be the introduction. It's the time for me to ask a bunch of questions so I can learn as much as possible about my new bachelor. But really it's the things the client doesn't say that provide the most information.

For instance, the man who goes on and on about his friends often doesn't have many, and the one who keeps glancing at his phone and wearing a fake smile is often stressed and probably trying to find his next dose of quick entertainment. He's not the guy that wants to settle down. Someone is forcing it upon him. The guy who is quiet isn't necessarily that way in the bedroom, and setting him up with someone who is equally as quiet probably won't work. You have to figure out their personalities because people don't normally tell you who they are—they show you.

With Cash, I am going to have to change it up a bit. I already asked a lot of the questions I would have asked in the vetting process because I'd been vetting him for myself. I'd studied him. I know who he is. I'm assuming I know what he's looking for in a partner. The important part of today is earning Cash's trust.

In all honesty, I have no idea how I am going to do that.

When I spot him as I walk into the restaurant, I curse myself for being late. Or not exactly late but not as early as him. I wanted to get here first. I

wanted to take my time studying him before he saw me.

Apparently, he had the same idea. I feel the fire of his eyes on me. The hairs on the back of my neck stand, my stomach flips, and then I meet his eyes.

I think it takes him a few seconds to even realize I materialized, and then a few more for him to remember that he hates me, because for a few brief seconds, his whiskey eyes light up all for me.

They caramelize with heat, reminding me of the way he looked at me as he sank into me, his eyes holding mine the moment we became one, telling truths we'd never have had the decency to whisper—that this was more, that it felt too right, that he never wanted to be inside someone else.

But just like that he lowers the lids, shutting out both his emotions and his warmth, and when he opens them again, with a grit of his teeth, his eyes scorch me with anger. I can practically taste the bitterness in the air.

Ever the gentleman, he stands when I approach the table and waits for me to sit before he does as well. “Mrs. Kensington.”

“Mr. James,” I reply, trying to keep my hands from shaking. Or even worse, from reaching out and wiping the scowl from his face. *How could I feel such affection for a man I barely know?* “Thank you for agreeing to meet me here. I know you’re very busy—”

Before I can finish, Cash holds up his hand. “Let’s stop with the pleasantries and acting as if we barely know each other.”

I force a smile. “Wonderful. So, tell me, Cash, what made you decide that you were ready to settle down?”

He laughs, but it comes out scratchy and angry. “That’s not what I meant. Don’t call me Cash. I’m not your friend; I’m your client. Just don’t...” He holds up his hands and waves them in my direction, motioning up and

down, with a scowl pulling his eyes tight and his lips jutting downward. “Don’t do whatever it is you were just doing. Don’t pretend we don’t know each other and don’t pretend we’re friends. I don’t like fake people, and I have very little interest in spending any more time with you. Just tell me what I need to do, where I need to be, and we can be rid of one another quickly.”

I bite the inside of my mouth to keep the sting from moving to my eyes. His coldness, his anger, and the hard way he stares make me want to curl up in a ball and hide under the covers for the rest of my life. And I don’t even have my own comfortable bed to do that anymore. I’ve lost all my comfort, all the things that would soften this blow. All I have left is my career.

I nod, unable to address his anger right away. Fortunately, the waitress chooses this moment to approach and take our order. When I order a dirty martini, Cash gives me a look but then he asks for a whiskey.

After the waitress disappears, I look anywhere but at him, hoping to buy time until the drinks arrive. I need alcohol to handle him. And lots of it.

When I look up, I catch Cash staring at my rings. I dart my eyes away again.

*Fuck, this is difficult.*

“So how does this work?” he finally asks, breaking the proverbial ice.

Fortunately, I am very good at my job, so I can handle describing the process without any real thought.

“Normally, I do my research ahead of time and obtain basic information to prepare. Then, at the initial meeting, this one, I have a list of questions that I go through to get to know the client. This will help me create the profile of who the client is. Then, ordinarily, I would go on a few dates with the client,”—his eyes dart to mine in confusion, and I hold up my hand to

tell him to relax— “just so I can see how the client is on a date. What does he like? How does he treat a woman? What is he maybe doing wrong that is causing him to not find a long-term partner? I take all those observations and utilize them to create not only a profile of what the client is looking for, but what he brings to the table, and the type of woman that maybe would be interested in him. I not only interview potential partners, but I train the client how to be a good partner. Then I observe the dates with the potential partners. I can normally tell whether or not it’s working pretty quickly and what needs to be adjusted to find the right match.”

Cash’s lips quirk into an almost smirk. “So, what you’re telling me is that the Keys were part of this elaborate plan? Your husband allows you to cheat on him with other men on a regular basis and then you advise the men what they’re doing wrong before setting them up with their, as you put it, ‘perfect partner.’”

I blow out a breath and thank my lucky stars that our drinks have arrived before I have to answer *that*. I sip the liquid far too quickly and bite into an olive before looking back at Cash. “Despite what you may think, you know nothing about my life or my marriage, and I think it would be better for our working relationship if we kept it that way.”

Cash laughs. “I couldn’t have stated it better myself. I knew nothing of your marriage. If I had, I wouldn’t have gone near you.”

My fingers trail the side of my head and I rub slow circles against my temple. I can feel a migraine coming on already. He is going to make this impossible. “Cash,” I say before he looks up at me with a glare, “excuse me, *Mr. James*, there is a reason that your grandmother hired our firm. It’s because we are the best. And there is a reason she wants you to settle down. I imagine it’s because the amount of stress you will have at work will make

it so that having a partner you can lean on and rely upon, and use for other stress-reducing activities, will be good for you. And it's probably necessary."

In other words, what he needs is to get laid. On the regular. The man is a ticking time bomb.

*And God bless the woman who gets to be on the receiving end of it on the regular. Lucky bitch.*

"Is that what you do for your husband?" he asks as his eyes graze over my hands.

What is he picturing? Is he remembering the way these hands moved up against his abdomen in the shower, softly strumming across his hot skin and leaving a trail of want and need? Or the way they dug into his back, my nails leaving marks when he delivered the most insane orgasm of my life.

My eyes burn into his chest, remembering the way it felt when I leaned against him and our naked bodies held one another. It was more intimate than sex. More sensual. More erotic. The way he made me sit on his face. Giving me all the control.

And don't even get me started on the actual sex. Freaking mind-blowing.

I was sure that within weeks he'd be sliding into me again, digging his fingers into my hips and kissing the life from me.

Instead, we are sitting across from one another with bitterness and anger, and—in all honesty—a bit of heat between us. But his constant need to remind me of Steven, a man I despise, is going to drive me berserk.

Seeing as how answering his question will get us nowhere, I move on. "Since you and I have already been on a few dates and I've gotten to know you, I'm pretty sure we can just skip ahead to the portion of you telling me what you're looking for in a partner. I can then begin my search."

Jumpstarting the process, and bypassing at least two weeks, will get me to the finish line faster, and unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, get Cash a girlfriend before I have a chance to blow up my entire life for him.

Cash's jaw tics and he sits quietly for a moment as if he's studying me.

*What is he thinking? What does he see?*

It's the same thing I thought the first time I saw him. But then he knew nothing. Then he didn't have all these preconceived thoughts. Then he hadn't held me bare, kissed me raw, and whispered promises into the night sky that made me wish I had a shooting star, or that I was someone who had a chance at the life I knew he would provide.

Finally, his smooth voice sweeps across the table and sends a shiver down my spine. "No."

The command he holds over the English language was never more apparent than in that one word because I understand exactly what he wants, what he will demand, and what he'll make me endure, without explanation. But I make him say it anyway.

Furrowing my brow, I quip, "No?" The way I say it, as if daring him to put me in my place, makes me physically shake with need.

This is the dance that Cash and I so effortlessly tango, the giving and taking of control.

For the briefest of moments, a shadow of a smile crosses his face. "No."

"You're going to have to be more specific. No, you don't want me to find you a match?"

The words I want to hear, that he has already found one, never materialize.

"No, I want you to find me a match. But I want to do it the proper way. No skipping steps, no rushing this along. You say you're the best in the biz,

so show me. I don't want some half-ass job because you can't handle sitting across from me for a few meals."

I know if I continue to shrink under his commands this will never work. My need for this to work, for me to take over the company, is greater than my lust for him. Or at least I hope it is.

I reach my hand across the table and sweep my fingernails over his hand, making circles on it just as I had done to his stomach in the shower. "Cash, it's not me I'm worried about."

If I had to guess, his pants grow tighter because he immediately removes his hand and adjusts himself. His eyes, which I could have swum laps in over the weekend, narrow and appear almost as dark as the bourbon in his glass. "Don't you worry about me, *Mrs. Kensington*. As I said, I don't touch married women. Just put me through your little obstacle course; I'll pass with flying colors. Find me a woman who will make me forget about you and we'll be even."

My resolve weakens. I flick my eyes to the ceiling, looking anywhere but into the face that makes me want to upend my entire life. "It's your future. I'm happy to do whatever you wish."

Cash stands up from the table, places his napkin down, and starts to walk away. Before he passes me, he grabs my shoulder and faces away from me as he whispers into my ear, "Don't say things like that."

Without flinching I reply, "What? Why?"

His fingers slide across my skin, almost as if he forgot for a moment that he shouldn't touch me, and I feel him breathe me in. "Because the things I wish for, you can't give me."





## CHAPTER 9

### CASH

The afternoon is so packed with meetings that I almost forget that I'm meeting my sister for dinner. I say almost because Cat would never let me forget, even if I did.

“Okay, little bro, head of the family, and prodigal child, are you ready for dinner with your wiser, much better-looking, and sweet sister who intends to make sure you have a good night and are fed like the king that you are?”

I laugh for what feels like the first time today. “Do you ever get tired of being so ridiculous?”

She taps her chin for a few seconds in mock thought and then stands up straight. “Nope. Now come on, your chariot awaits.” She holds out her elbow for me to grab, and I shake my head as I walk toward her. There is no one in the world that can make me as happy as Cat. She's been like that since we were kids. My protector, my best friend, and my favorite person in the world. I just wish she treated herself as well as she treats me.

We walk out of the building, and the warm air hits me like a shot to the lungs. It's fucking hot for New England—even if it is August. I'm dying for the weather to turn over. Fall in Boston is magical. Not quite as magical as

Christmas—because Quincy Market is all lit up then and there’s roasted walnuts and well, who doesn’t love roasted walnuts. But fall definitely has a special spot for New Englanders. It’s the season of baseball and football, and if there is one thing that New Englanders enjoy, it’s Boston Sports. The Pats and the Red Sox. It’s sacrilegious not to.

“So, where are you taking me, big sis?” My mood is exponentially lighter. Even I’m surprised by how good it feels to be out and about with Cat.

Cat hums beside me as we walk, or more accurately, as she skips next to me. A grown woman who is five feet eight, with dark hair almost the color of midnight and eyes the color of Hershey chocolate, is skipping down a street in Boston. It’s quite the sight, and since she’s standing next to me, a man with broad shoulders, dark hair, and light-brown eyes, we are drawing quite a few stares.

“Oh, I’ve got just the spot. And before you get upset, *don’t*. I invited Carter and Chase.”

I stop moving forward and Cat catapults backwards before muttering, “Rude!”

I glare at her. “I specifically told you yesterday, I’m *fine*.”

Cat gives me the side-eye and then starts moving forward again. “And as we all know, fine is the universal language for I’m spiraling. Either way, they are our brothers, pains in the asses though they be, and we are all they have and vice versa.”

I grumble under my breath, “We have more than each other. Don’t be so melodramatic.”

“You know what I mean. Come on, Cash, you just took over the company. Life threw you for a loop, or at least that bitch did, and we need

family time.” Cat was always a master manipulator when it came to us boys, and she pulls the puppy-dog eyes as she looks up at me, making me crumble in my spot.

I look down at her before we start walking again. “She’s not a bitch.”

Cat pulls my arm back. “Excuse me. The woman tricked you into dating her for the weekend, ditched you without saying goodbye, and somehow forgot to mention that she was married. Yeah, she’s awful. *Horrible*. I hate her. And if I ever see her, that’s precisely what I will tell her. And then I’ll squash her like a bug.”

Cat holds her fingers up and squeezes her thumb and forefinger together, then she meets my eye, seemingly proving her point and looking for applause.

I sigh. I wish any of it were that simple. I despise what Grace did. More than that, it hurts. But I still can’t get myself to hate her. It’s enraging. I have this need to defend her even though there is nothing I can say to justify what she did. And defending her to Cat, after what happened with our parents, would not go over well.

“Let’s just go meet our brothers. No bug squashing for you tonight.” I take her arm in mine and we continue down the street.

The restaurant Cat picked is a sushi and hibachi place. I should have known this is what she’d choose. Growing up we didn’t have parents who baked us a cake on our birthdays or surprised us with pancakes for breakfast followed by presents and a special day filled with all our favorite things. Or at least not when we were old enough to remember.

But we did have hibachi. Every year without fail, my grandparents would ask what we wanted to do for our birthdays and it was always the same answer. There was something about sitting around a table with other normal

families, having the chef toss uncooked zucchini into our mouths or spray us with the peeing-man water bottle. It gave us a night to simply be kids. Even when we were teenagers. Hell, every birthday I can remember, we go back to hibachi for all four of our birthdays. Normally, it's reserved for those four days a year, but I understand why my sister wanted to come tonight. I pull her close to me before we walk in and give her a side hug. "Thanks, Cat."

She leans into my hug. "This is a big deal, Cash. You're taking over the company. And I can't think of a better person to do it."

I lower my eyes to see if she's serious. I was not the obvious choice, being third in line and all.

"I'm serious," she says, meeting my gaze. "Carter could never handle the job, and I honestly don't want it. I'm happy with less stress and more freedom. Just promise me if you get overwhelmed, you'll call us, and we'll all meet here to keep your head from growing too big."

I laugh.

"Laugh now, little brother, you're about to become the most eligible bachelor in Boston. I can see that going straight to your noggin."

Behind me I hear a deep voice interrupt. "Most eligible bachelor. Damn, I knew I should have fought harder for that job."

I spin around to see Carter standing with a smile on his face. My older brother is lanky. He doesn't have broad shoulders like me; he's got long legs, a crew cut, and a clean-shaven good boy look. While Cat and I look like our mother, with our dark hair and brown eyes, Carter looks just like our dad. We embrace, then he hugs Cat. "How's the first week going?"

I nod my head. "Pretty good. Just getting a handle on things. I don't start real meetings until next week."

Carter smiles. “Then I guess I’ll be back in the office just in time.”

I laugh. “I thought you were supposed to be in Vegas for your week off. Why are you home?”

Carter shrugs. “Honestly, figured with Pa out of commission you might need some support. And it appears I was right because I was summoned by our beautiful sister to cheer you up.”

Cat glares at him. “I said nothing about cheering up.” She turns to me. “I swear, I didn’t. I said this was a celebration. Carter, don’t twist my words.”

Carter and I both laugh. He’s always busting our balls and she always gets herself in a tizzy over it. I put my arm on her shoulder and squeeze. “Relax. I’m good. And I appreciate this. Now where the heck is Chase? I’m starving.”

“Someone call my name?” Chase says, walking in with a wide grin. Although Chase is shorter than both my brother and I, he is more muscular and still has a boyish face. He has blue eyes—unlike the rest of us—and dimples which pop like our grandfather has.

We do another round of hugs and then move to our table.

Being with my brothers and Cat always brings a smile to my face. Chase entertains us with his ridiculous stories of the women he’s chasing. Cat teases each of us relentlessly but is also the one who knows exactly how every one of our days have been because she is always checking in on us. And Carter always has a wiseass remark that makes you laugh three seconds after he says it, because you can never be sure if he is serious or not.

Shots of sake are consumed, along with Japanese beer that tastes like a hoppy lemon. I excuse myself to the bathroom while we wait for dessert—fried ice cream per Chase’s demand.

As I round the corner of the restaurant, my attention is drawn to a beautiful woman sitting at the bar with a book in her hand. Around her people are coupled off, chatting and eating and generally enjoying their night, but this woman has her nose in her book, her hair acting like a chestnut curtain, hiding her face and whatever she's reading.

She reminds me of how I found Grace in the bar in Florida, sitting by herself, reading a book, completely content. I want to keep walking, but I'm drawn to her in an inexplicable way.

She probably wants to be left alone, which is why she's holding the book, and yet that doesn't stop me. An empty seat next to her beckons and I sit down, waiting for her eyes to find mine. The bartender walks over and greets me. "What can I get you?"

*Just the woman's attention.* "I'll take a whiskey neat," I reply instead. The bartender nods and walks off.

When I feel her gaze on me, I turn and find Grace, her mouth open in shock and her eyes almost fearful. "Cash, I mean, Mr. James, what are you doing here?" She drops her book out of her hands and looks away nervously.

"Did you check what page you were on?"

"Huh?"

"Your book. You shut it without folding down the page. Do you know what page you were on?"

Grace looks down at the book as if she's shocked to find it there. She's so stiff, which agitates me because only moments earlier she looked so relaxed. *I did that. I made her feel this way.* And yet I can't stop. I can't leave her alone.

I should get up and walk away. I don't want to spend time that I could be enjoying with my siblings with a woman I've come to despise. As it is, I have to deal with her tomorrow.

"Um, I'll find the spot again. Nothing to worry about."

I grunt and she narrows her eyes. "What?"

"Nothing, it just seems that you're pretty lackadaisical about everything in your life." I know I'm being an ass and yet I can't stop myself.

Grace flinches. "That's really none of your concern." She looks back toward her book.

"But it is, isn't it? I mean you're going to be the one charged with finding me a wife. I'm wondering how good you could possibly be at that if this is how you approach your own life. I mean, I don't want to end up with a woman who dates multiple men while married to me. With you in charge of the dating pool, how am I to know that you even have the sense to find someone who is honest and ethical?"

Grace frowns and pushes her hair behind her ear. "That's fair."

It's not and I know it. I've researched both her and her company. There's no reason to believe she's not good at her job, but I keep finding myself with this overwhelming need to lash out at her. To hurt her like she hurt me. I give her a look that tells her to explain.

"I take my job very seriously. It's why I go through such a long vetting process with not only my clients but the women as well. I promise you'll be very pleased with the women I select. And none of them will be like me. I promise you that too."

A knot forms in my stomach. None of them will be like her. And yet she's the one I want. Fucking fantastic. I return to dick mode and focus on

her shortfalls again. “Do you fuck them too and then find them a wife? Is that part of the program?”

Her cheeks grow red, but she maintains a calm exterior. It would actually be impressive if I wasn’t so angry. She knows how to handle herself when it comes to business. Then again, balancing multiple men in your life probably makes you that way.

“I fucked you, didn’t I?” Her smooth voice slides over the curse. On most women the word sounds crass. Hard. Inappropriate. But, of course, as with everything she does, it’s graceful, which only angers me more.

“Answer the question,” I grit out. “Have you ever slept with a client?”

Grace’s violet eyes are somber. They are missing the sparkle that I’m sure was there in the Keys. Or maybe I made it all up in my head.

“Would it make it easier if I said yes or no? What do you want me to say? I’ll say whatever will make this easier for you.”

“I just want the goddamn truth. Was what we had any different from the dates you went on with past clients?”

Grace’s eyes soften, and I almost think she’s going to crack—that I have her, and she’s finally going to admit the truth. I can’t possibly believe that everything I felt was fake—that it was one-sided and that she didn’t feel that connection too. That a happily married woman would be able to experience *that* with someone else. I have to believe that there is more to the story.

But just as quickly, she shifts her chair away from me, pushes her hair behind her ear, and the mask returns to her eyes.

“I was more open with my other clients.”

*Fuck.*

My fist tightens around the drink the bartender placed in front of me when I wasn’t paying attention. “Well, it’s a good thing that we’re doing



this the right way then, huh? Now I can get to know you better. Just like all those other clients did.”

She sighs. “Cash, you’re intentionally hurting us both. This makes no sense. I have enough information to move to the next step. There’s no reason for us to go on these dates. You and I both know it’s unnecessary, and whatever you think you are going to get out of it, I promise it won’t be worth it. *I’m* not worth it.”

I hear her pleas and see her desperation, but I’m not satisfied. And I don’t know how I will be. *What will it take for me to feel better about this?*

“I don’t have enough information. *I* want to do this right. We date, you go through your process, and then we move on to the next step. Understood?” I grind out.

Her shoulders sag in defeat. “Fine.”

“Where is he anyway?” I ask, looking around the bar, making sure no one is coming toward us.

“Who?” Grace’s eyes scan the bar with a confused look.

“*Mr. Kensington*. You’re having dinner with me tomorrow, and you spent the weekend with me in Florida. Doesn’t your husband ever want to see you?”

She rolls her eyes and lets out a bitter laugh. “You’d think,” she replies, then her eyes grow wide, and she looks at me. “I mean, he’s busy with work.”

“Does he know?” I grit out.

“Does who know?” she asks, confused again.

I’m getting tired of saying his name. But I refuse to say, *your husband*, so I reply, “*Mr. Kensington*. Does he know what you do? That you date other men. That you *sleep* with other men.”

Grace's eyes close and she rubs her fingers over her temples. She pauses, then opens her eyes and looks at me. "Cash, it was only you. I've *never*... and we..."

In a voice barely above a whisper, I bite out, "Don't you dare tell me it was just sex. You fucking came on my tongue. You rode my face and had the best orgasm of your life. Don't tell me it was just fucking. I've fucked before, Grace. I know the difference. What we did was more, and you know it. You can lie to yourself but we both know what happened in Florida wasn't normal. You felt it too, I know you did. And now you'll have to live with knowing that we're both missing out on that connection because of your lies." The anger and venom in my voice cannot be disguised even though I speak quietly, not wanting to draw a crowd.

Grace doesn't break eye contact. I have to give her credit; she handles my anger with poise.

A tear slides down her cheek, but she doesn't move to wipe it, and neither do I. I'm annoyed that my fingers itch to touch her, that I have to physically wrap my hand around the glass with an almost viselike grip to keep from comforting her. "I'm so sorry, Cash. I really am so sorry."

"Does he know?" I growl.

She looks up and nods, her chin bobbing up and down in innocence. "We have an agreement."

The words slice me, and I move close to her face, giving up my war at staying far away from her. "Any man who would let you stray has no goddamn idea what he has."

I pour back the rest of my whiskey, throw a twenty on the bar, and walk off. I'm afraid that if I don't get away from her, I won't be able to control my actions. I just want to pull her face into mine, hold her tight, and explain

to her how wrong her marriage is. She shouldn't be with someone who doesn't care enough that she's with other men. Likely that means he's with other women. Why would she settle for that? Why would she *want* that?

If she were mine, I wouldn't be able to handle having other men even looking at her, let alone knowing they were intimate with her.

*If she were mine...*

Absurd words...she never will be.



## CHAPTER 10

### GRACE

“I have no idea what to do; he completely hates me.” I stare down at my choice of outfits for my *date* and shake my head at every option.

“He doesn’t hate you. He’s upset. Those are two very different things,” my best friend, Tessa, says over the phone. I have her on speaker, and it feels so good to finally be honest with someone. She was not shocked in the least when I told her about Steven’s affair.

*“I knew that bastard was no good,”* she uttered.

*“Well perhaps you could have used your award-winning journalism degree to report on my husband’s misdeeds before I married him,”* I retorted.

Tessa works for *Vanity Fair*. We went to college together, lived together in our first apartment following graduation, and remained close even when I traitorously moved to the suburbs after I got married.

“You weren’t there, T. He hates me.” I filled her in on my not-so-innocent weekend with Cash before I found out he was my client. She was thrilled. She’s already titled my return to the city as our women on the prowl series. She thinks she can write a weekly column on us. She’s

ridiculous. Fortunately, for her, I no longer have someone that I was looking forward to dating, so I would probably be available to drink martinis with her nightly once I got through this contract.

“That’s it, I’m coming over,” Tessa says into the phone, and I almost jump. It’s eleven p.m. and I need to get to bed. If she comes over, we will be up all night with me whining about Cash and her filling me with liquid courage. I need to get my rest tonight so I am in peak shape tomorrow. I need a second skin to handle all of Cash’s glares and barbs.

“I appreciate the offer, T, but I’m going to bed. I’ll call you after dinner tomorrow. I’m sure we’ll be done rather early, and you can meet me out for a drink.”

She hums over the phone. “Fine, but make sure you wear sexy panties.”

I laugh sarcastically. “Right, because the man that wants nothing to do with me really cares what my underwear looks like.”

“It’s not for him, it’s for you. New panties, especially a matching sexy set, gives you confidence. Which is what you need. Remember, Grace, you are not a cheater, you are not a liar, and you did nothing wrong. You are a woman who has been treated badly, and you are making the best out of a bad situation. If you were a man no one would bat an eye, but because you’re a woman, putting your career first is taboo. Well fuck that.”

I love Tessa Sanderson more than I can say. Her anthem fills me with emotion, and I can’t help but agree. I’d been apologizing to Steven for putting my career first for years, but it was my career that allowed us to afford the house in the suburbs, the upgrades to the kitchen, and his fancy BMW. At least now all of that money will be mine and I won’t be splitting it with a man who doesn’t even appreciate my hard work. “Thanks, T, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Don’t forget the hot panties!” she sings as she hangs up the phone. I find myself laughing as I fall into bed.



The next morning I take my time getting dressed. More tired than I’d like to be—probably due to the lack of sleep, tossing and turning over a certain man’s scowl—I blot under my eyes excessively with cream. The bottle promises to get rid of bags and circles, to turn back time so to speak. If only it could actually take me back in time to the moment before I met Cash. Although what I would do differently, I’m not really sure.

I can’t imagine a world in which I don’t know him. Or where I am *only* his dating coach. And yet that is the world I’m in now. We are nothing. He’s not mine and soon enough he’ll be someone else’s. He’ll belong to them.

*Her.*

Whoever she is, she will be the one to feel his warm gaze, to kiss those incredible lips, and feel his hard body against her while they sleep at night.

Is he always a cuddler? I never was in my marriage. I hated when Steven spooned me— not that he ever did—but that was because we both didn’t like it. Or so I thought. It seems there’s nothing I don’t like when it comes to Cash.

I walk into my office feeling the tension with every step I take. Rachel, our receptionist, smiles at me. She has blonde hair and brilliant blue eyes that honestly take me by surprise every time I see her. I can’t quite figure out why she’s still single at twenty-eight. She’s kind, beautiful, and outgoing. “Morning, Rachel. How are you today?”

She stands up and follows me to my office. “Oh, just great. I have the research on Cassius James for you.” She pauses as she waits for me to put my purse down and then slips the folder across my desk. “Grace, he’s gorgeous. Like, insanely good-looking.”

I meet her eyes and hope that my cheeks don’t give away how much I agree with her. But even without his looks, Cash is droolworthy. Soon I will have to sit across the desk from potential partners and listen to them gush over him. I honestly don’t know if I can do it.

“He is very dreamy,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady and my hands from shaking.

“Any chance I can get on his list?” She smiles at me so genuinely that I feel sick. What if Cash ends up falling in love with Rachel and I have to listen to her go on and on about how wonderful he is? Besides, Cash would definitely feel that he had to disclose what happened between us to her, and then Marion would find out. Even though I feel terrible lying, I have no choice. Not only can I not imagine watching Cash sail off into the sunset with Rachel, I also can’t take the chance that it would hurt my career.

“He’s into older women. Going to be a bit of a different search.” I don’t know why I said it, or how I came up with it so quickly, but I immediately know I’m right.

Cash needs an older woman. Someone mature, in her thirties, who can help guide Cash in his new career.

It doesn’t hurt that we don’t have anyone in that age group in our backlist of matches which means it will take me longer to vet each new person, thus resulting in a longer time of Cash being single. Which is *good*, I think. On the one hand, it delays the inevitable. On the other hand, it delays my divorce and my promotion.

Rachel's face falls but she recovers quickly. "Okay, I will start putting together a list of eligible women then. How old are we thinking?"

I look away from her as I think. "I'm meeting him tonight for dinner. I'll have a better understanding after that. But I'm thinking thirty and up. Probably no older than thirty-eight but I'll run that by him. I also think a professional woman. No Instagram models or influencers. He needs someone serious and someone who is on his level. A true partner."

Rachel nods as she takes notes. "Got it. Can I get you a coffee?"

"Yes, please. And thank you, Rachel. Sorry he's not the one for you, but I will definitely find you someone if you are serious."

She blushes. "Oh, I was just joking."

I reach my hand across my desk and place it on hers. "You deserve someone wonderful. Let me put out some feelers, okay? It would make me happy to see you with a good guy."

Smiling, she replies, "If you insist. How was your trip by the way? Did you and Steven enjoy the resort? It looked so romantic!"

"Steven actually couldn't come. But it was very relaxing. Just what I needed. Thanks for asking."

She nods and leaves me to my lies. I don't feel good about anything I'm doing lately. Ever since I found out about Steven's affair I've turned into someone I don't recognize. It makes me sick, and I have to figure out a way to change it. I just don't know how.

Moments later, as I am reading through the research Rachel put together on Cash, Marion walks in wearing a red cashmere dress which stands out brightly against her white hair. She has the type of beauty where even as she ages with dignity one would question her age. Her skin is smooth, likely a result of copious amounts of sunscreen whether she's on vacation or



walking through the city. Her hair is cut in a stylish bob, but it is all a silverish white. The hair hanging over her face is slightly longer than the back.

Her light-blue eyes study my office, as if she's taking stock of every inch. *Is it tidy enough?* Unlike Marion, I am not impeccably perfect, in looks or in life. I've only ever had one picture of Steven in the office, and it pains me to see her staring at it.

Our wedding photo.

What a fool I'd been, believing we had the kind of magic that Marion came to expect from her love connections.

"How is everything in the apartment?" she asks, as she moves her eyes from my wedding picture to me. I watch as she studies my face and wonder if she can see my nervousness, my sorrow, and my pain at a failed marriage at the ripe age of thirty-six.

"It's wonderful. Thank you so much. I'll start looking for places of my own this week." The words leave my mouth before I can think about how they sound. Why would I be looking for a place long-term after I just spent a fortune to remodel my dream home in the suburbs? "I mean..." I falter for an explanation.

Marion levels me with a stare. "Stay at the apartment as long as you need. Have I ever told you *why* I bought that apartment?"

Marion sits in one of the purple velvet seats across from my desk. They were a gift from her after my first year working here. She took me to a boutique shop and told me to pick out new furniture for my office.

*"A professional woman needs a professional office, and you, Sweets, have what it takes to go far in my business."*

I'd been blown away at the time. The furniture was more than my monthly salary, and I'd never imagined that I'd become a professional matchmaker. But Marion always believed in me.

"No, I just assumed it was because of your late nights with clients."

Marion crosses her legs, and the sweater dress hikes up over her knee, revealing toned legs. Even at sixty-five, Marion could turn heads. She probably still worked out daily. I should use the gym in her apartment now that I have to go back out into the dating scene.

Men in their thirties expect a certain look. Oh God, what if I have to date men in their forties instead? I mean men in their thirties want twenty-somethings. Just the thought of dating turns my stomach. And then my mind turns to Cash. He didn't seem bothered at all by the few extra pounds I have. There had been plenty of twenty-year-old women walking around the resort in tiny bikinis, and Cash never batted an eye in their direction. He'd been completely transfixed with me. To a point that made my insides squeeze tight.

"Asher and I separated."

I can't contain my gasp. "What? When?"

Marion shakes her head. "No, Sweets, not now. When we were younger. He wanted a certain kind of wife—or so he thought—and I wasn't going to change for anyone. I told him to take time to figure out what he wanted. But while he was doing that I wasn't going to sit around in our house and twiddle my thumbs. I bought myself an apartment, moved to the city full-time, and lived my life as I wanted."

"Marion, I...I had no idea. Asher's crazy about you. What happened?"

Marion laughs. "He followed me to the city and told me he'd made a mistake. The day after I left."

I smile. That sounds more like the Asher I know. “So you took him back and kept the apartment?”

A sly smile crosses her face, and she’s quiet for a moment. “No. I told him he should go home. I told him to date the kind of woman he thought he wanted, someone who would have his babies, raise his children, and cook him dinner every night. In the meantime, I was going to date as well. I had a few dalliances, and I assume Asher did too. We didn’t talk during that time. I told him to take six months, and if he felt differently after our time apart, we would talk.”

The idea of Marion sleeping with men other than Asher blew my mind. Setting him free to do the same and having no concern that he would come back—only a woman with as much confidence as Marion could do that. “So, what happened?”

“On the six-month mark, to the day, he showed up at the apartment, at midnight, with a suitcase, a bottle of our favorite red wine, and an engagement ring. I remember I heard the doorbell ring, opened it up to find Asher on both his knees, and he looked up at me and said he didn’t want to live another moment without me. He wanted my life, Boston, the suburbs, whatever I wanted, that’s what he wanted. All that mattered was us. I took him back on the spot and we never looked back. We don’t speak about the six-month break; we both knew we needed it. And we kept the apartment.”

I smile imagining the entire scenario, not surprised at all. “Why are you telling me this?”

Marion lets out a long sigh. “I know you, Grace. Asher and I love you like a daughter. You are the only child we’ve ever had. I want to give you what I had. What Asher had. A place to become who you’re meant to be, or to realize where home is, and what that term even means to you. You don’t

need to tell me what is going on with you and Steven; the apartment is yours, without question.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep myself from crying. I want to tell Marion everything. I want to collapse into her comfort. But I want the promotion more.

If she knows that I married a cheater—that I missed all the signs—why would she ever turn her business over to me? If I have that bad of a radar when it comes to my own love life, why would she trust me with others? It’s better that she thinks we are just taking a breather like she did. Because as much as her situation may mirror what I am going through, it’s not the same.

*She* walked away from Asher and stood on her own two feet. I on the other hand got kicked out of my own marriage without even realizing it.

It’s not the same, and I can’t risk losing her respect on top of my marriage.

“I appreciate it. Work’s just busy for Steven, and since he’s getting home late it seems pointless for me to be rushing home at night during the week.”

“You’re not hearing me, Grace. Asher and I are gifting you the apartment. You will be running this business soon. I don’t *need* it anymore.”

I shake my head. “Marion, that’s insane. It’s an apartment in Boston. And not just an apartment. It’s beautiful...it’s too much.”

Marion’s blue eyes shine. “Asher and I agree; we would rather see you enjoy the things we are going to leave you while we are alive. You, my dear girl, are the light of our lives. You’ve made us so proud. Accepting this will be a gift to us. Please, let us do this for you.”

No longer able to contain the emotion, the tears flow down my cheeks. I stand up, walk to the other side of the desk, lower myself next to Marion,

and embrace her. She rubs circles on my back as I cry against her shoulder. She doesn't know that I'm crying because this is going to give me the freedom to walk away from Steven without looking back.

Financial freedom, financial security, and a place to call my own. A place for me to start my next chapter.

"Thank you," I whisper, the words burning my throat. I straighten myself and wipe the tears from my eyes, trying to regain my composure.

"Thank you," Marion says, her controlled face returning. "So, tell me about our newest client, Cassius. What do you think of him?"

I glance down at the papers on my desk. What I think is that he's a dream come true and also a nightmare. Finding him a match will be my own personal nightmare in the making. "He seems like quite the catch. I'm meeting him for dinner tonight to go through the vetting process. I suggested to Rachel that I think he needs someone older. Definitely thirty and up."

Marion bites back a smile, and I know she approves. "That's an interesting idea. What else do you think?"

I settle into my analysis. This I'm good at. This is how I need to shine to show Marion that she is right to leave her business in my hands.

"Someone who has her own career. A woman who is an equal. He will have his hands full taking over a family business when two of his siblings are older and may be vying for the position. And let's not forget the competition. Jonathan is going to give him a run for his money."

Marion nods. The Hanson family owns another big liquor company and has an office in Boston as well. They have also been trying to break into the tech business like the Jameses. The research Rachel provided detailed the rivalry between the two families.

“Wonder how long it takes for Jonathan to call you about this.” She purses her lips to stifle a laugh.

I dated Jonathan in college. He’s actually a friend of Steven’s, and while things were never serious with Jonathan, he can be very possessive when it comes to me. We remained friends after dating and he introduced Steven and me, unintentionally.

In the beginning he tried to stop our relationship, but I sat him down and pointed out very gently that he wasn’t interested in a serious relationship and Steven was. To this day he would still flirt with me in front of Steven, driving my husband mad, but I know it’s all superficial. He just enjoyed teasing Steven.

“I doubt Jonathan will even hear about us working with Cash,” I reply. Although, I know damn well he probably will. The most eligible bachelor in Boston, and Jonathan’s rival, will be someone that he is monitoring. He’ll definitely find out and he’ll probably storm into my office to complain. The idea doesn’t really bother me. Perhaps I can drive Steven mad by dating Jonathan for a bit. Once the divorce is finalized, obviously.

“Where are you going for dinner tonight?”

Again, I find myself biting back a smile. Certainly not somewhere inconspicuous. “Lucia’s.”

Marion nods. “Good. Then word will get out that we are handling the James family business. Good job, Grace. It’s exactly where I would have selected.”

I smile. “Cash actually suggested it. But I would have if he hadn’t.”

Marion hums to herself. “Looks like Cash is trying to make a statement as well. Good for him. I wonder if he knows about your history with Jonathan.”

I shake my head. “That’s highly unlikely. He’s a lot younger than we are. Besides, why would he concern himself with *my* past boyfriends?”

“Maybe it’s more that he’s concerned himself with his enemy’s past girlfriends.” She eyes me, almost as if she’s surprised the thought hadn’t crossed my mind. And it should have.

Suddenly, my mind spins. Is it possible that Cash knew who I was all along? I mean, he’s managed to steal the position of CEO of a family business when he was third in line. Someone who has the wherewithal to do that would definitely have a list of weaknesses of their enemies. Not that I’m a *weakness* of Jonathan’s. It’s not like I’m some prize. But I was probably Jonathan’s only significant girlfriend.

And we *are* still friendly.

The entire thing seems almost a little *too* convenient. Maybe I put too much stock in the feelings Cash claims to have for me. Maybe his anger over my marriage is just an annoyance that he can’t one-up Jonathan. It certainly makes more sense than him falling for me so quickly.

My mind moves through these uncomfortable thoughts. The reality is that I should hope it’s true. It will keep me angry and allow my feelings for Cash to cool. He isn’t the romantic idea of a man that I’ve conjured up in my mind; he’s a coldhearted businessman. Obviously.

“Maybe you’re right, Marion. Well, it will work to both of our advantages then. I’m going to finalize my research and prepare for tonight. Thank you again. *For everything.*”

Marion stands and begins to walk out of my office. I look down at my file, but when I look back up, she’s at the door staring at me.

“Everything okay?” I ask.

She pauses and meets my eyes. “Yes. Enjoy yourself tonight.”

I smile, and she walks out. I don't think anything will be enjoyable about tonight. But if I can remind myself of the end goal and convince myself of Cash's shrewdness, perhaps I can walk away from this entire situation unscathed.





## CHAPTER 11

### CASH

“Who is Grace Kensington, and why are you staring at her picture?” Carter asks as he leans over my shoulder, shocking me from my quiet study of the woman I’m having dinner with in two hours.

I don’t know what I hope to learn by staring at her Instagram. Instead of helping my steely resolve, I find myself weakening as I read her witty captions and memorize her favorite restaurants. I hate her and yet I’m infatuated with her. I’m spending more time studying what makes Grace happy than I am learning how to manage my new position as CEO.

I slam my laptop shut, hoping Carter didn’t get too good of a look at Grace. I don’t want to hear his opinion. He’ll have no qualms telling me if he finds Grace hot. And he’d have to be blind not to.

“She’s handling the matchmaking scheme that Grandmother planned.” I try to appear irritated, attempting to establish that this is a problem for me and not something I’m looking forward to. I shouldn’t look forward to spending time with Grace. I should want nothing to do with her. I should push her to set me up with other women so I can move on.

Instead, I'm torturing myself by spending more time with a woman I'm infatuated with. A woman I can't have and who is like my father. A man I despise.

"She's a smoke show. You sure you're not trying to date *her*?" Carter's eyes lift up as he smirks. Can't bullshit a bullshitter, and he's the best in the game.

I grumble, "She's married. Don't even think about it."

Carter holds up his hands and laughs. "Believe me, I'm not going after anything that you set your sights on. Never works out for me anyway." He motions around the room as if to say that he wanted this job.

He didn't. That's *the only reason* I'm sitting where I'm sitting.

I bark out a laugh. "Fuck off. You and I both know you want nothing to do with this job."

He laughs too. "Damn right. This job sucks. So why are you drooling over the married lady?"

I rub my hand over my face, trying to erase Grace's smile from my mind. Or her hips, or her breasts. But all I keep seeing is her naked in the shower, kissing me, looking up at me with trepidation as I run my hands down her body, causing goosebumps to pimple her skin. My pants grow tight.

"Because I'm a glutton for punishment," I answer honestly.

Carter levels me with a stare. He points his finger at me. "Don't. Do not get involved with a married woman. You'll hate yourself and you'll never win. She's not something for you to conquer or fix. If she even needs fixing. Whatever it is you see in her, look the other way."

I meet my brother's eyes. He may be a player—quick with a comeback and sometimes an ass—but he cares more than most people, and he's

always been here for me. “I am. Looking the other way that is. She’s setting me up with a future wife, remember?”

Knowing I would never involve myself with a married woman, Carter relaxes and laughs. “Better you than me.”

I shrug. Truthfully, it will be good to have someone to go home to at night. “How was your meeting with Sintac?”

Carter smiles. “Pretty sure we’ve got it in the bag.”

Sintac does business in every arena that you can think of. Partnering with them would bring James Spirits to new heights.

I hold back my smile. “I heard Hanson was meeting with them as well. You sure it went well?”

Carter stares me dead in the eye. “Do you really think Hanson could do a better job sweet-talking Landry? *Please*. When I say we have it in the bag, I mean we have it in the bag. I’m not letting that family take more than they already have from us.” Carter’s eyes twitch in anger, and I have to keep myself from grinding my teeth.

“After what Sintac went through with that law firm and their board members, I’m sure Landry is leery of partnering with anyone. We need to show him we are a trustworthy company. Doing business with us isn’t like doing business with other corporations. We have values, honesty, and integrity.”

Carter nods his head. “I know. And that’s why you’re our leader. Because no one is more honest than you.” Carter winks at me, and I bite back a laugh. He isn’t as bad as he likes to pretend, but his playboy attitude is one of the reasons I was selected for this position. It’s the reason my grandmother wants me to settle down. We have an image to protect. A history to preserve. One that my father almost destroyed.

Carter stands. “Well, enjoy your matchmaking session.”

I grip the pen in my hand. “Right. Put together a rundown of what you and Landry discussed so we can review it with Chase and Cat.”

Carter nods as he walks out of my office. “Whatever you say, boss.”

Laughing, I shake my head. This is what I need to focus on.

Business. Expansion. Family.

Grace Kensington will be nothing but a distraction. Perhaps she was right. It’s time to move past this step. After tonight I’ll let her know I’m ready for her to work on the matches. The last thing I need is to spend more time with her.



I suggested Lucia’s because it is *the* place to be in Boston right now. Bloggers, Instagrammers, celebrities, and investors say it’s the place to be seen. Which is precisely what I need. I’m establishing the new reign of James Spirits, and the only way for people to take me, a thirty-year-old nobody, seriously is by being in the places where somebodies are seen.

It’s ridiculous that I can’t just do my job, but if my younger brother, Chase, has taught us anything it’s that we can’t do things just like our grandfather did. He built one hell of a company, but he let it get stuck. He didn’t invest in advertising, and our online presence was minimal until Chase graduated and took over the social media portion of the company. It was Chase who forwarded me the article on Lucia’s and told me to find a way to be spotted here.

Going there with Grace Kensington on my arm—a woman that no one will recognize but will instantly be curious about due to her age, her curves, and the insane eyes—will give me credibility that a younger woman just won't. Hopefully, it will show a man like Landry that I'm serious. As long as he doesn't realize that she also happens to be married.

I arrive at the restaurant twenty minutes early. I need a drink before seeing Grace. Unfortunately, she appears to have had the same idea. I spot her sitting at the bar and brace myself. The slit on the side of her goddamn skirt practically hits her panty line, exposing her entire left leg.

Normally Grace is dressed conservatively; in the Keys she wore sundresses and nothing clingy. It's like she did this on purpose. After last night I don't exactly blame her. I'd been a complete ass, promising to torture us both. Pretty sure I'm the only one who will be paying for that transgression.

Fortunately, she hasn't seen me yet, so I give myself a few moments to really study her, to allow my eyes to run from her black heels up to the soft skin that meets her hips, an area I'm itching to run my fingers against. Her chestnut hair hangs down her back, and she's layered soft curls throughout.

I walk with determination to the bar. The room is lit by flickering candles and low lights. The smell of warm bread and garlic filters through the air, and a soft sensual beat plays low in the background. The tables are all on the perimeter of the restaurant, black booths with black tables giving the look of a dark club. The bar sits in the center as the focal point.

Surrounding Grace are several men in dark suits. I watch as they eye her, but no one approaches. She has an air to her that says she's taken. Or maybe it's the wedding rings. A natural deterrent. Although I'm sure many men

would fuck her if given the chance, married or not. Hell, I'm struggling not to do it, and I find the entire idea abhorrent.

A possessiveness comes over me as I watch someone attempt to walk up to her, offering to buy her a drink.

"Gracie, I'm so sorry I'm late," I say as I place my hand on the bare skin of her thigh. Grace's leg jumps slightly, and she turns to meet my eyes. I'm sure she sees the fiery jealousy reflected in them.

"Not a problem, Whiskey. Would you like a drink?" The word slips so naturally off her tongue, reminding me of how easy things were between us in Florida.

Fuck it. I want to taste her, and if this is the only way how—in this fake universe where I'm pretending to save her from the unwanted attention of another man—I'm taking the opportunity.

With the pressure of my hand still on her thigh, I step in between her and the other man and use my other hand to pull her face toward mine, my thumb gripping the soft divot in her chin. Before I go in for the kiss, I meet her eyes, letting her know I'm taking what I want, and that I'm angry as fuck at myself for doing it.

The pain of being unable to do this daily makes this the least gentle kiss I've ever experienced. My lips crash to hers, and I'm so lost in the feel of hers against mine that I don't even realize when her hand slips behind my head and her fingers dig into my hair as she angles for a better grip. She moans against my lips, and then bites my bottom lip before slipping her tongue into my mouth.

I'm in an alternate universe—one where this isn't a sin, where kissing Grace should be a daily activity, a way to worship, to celebrate life, rather

than the forbidden thing that I know it is. *How could kissing her ever be wrong?*

She tastes like red wine and bad decisions with just a hint of betrayal which leaves me simultaneously hating myself and wanting more. My fingers dig into the flesh on her thigh, and I pull her closer. I kiss her gently and pull away slightly, my thumb holding her bottom lip to keep myself from kissing her again. When her lashes flutter open, I'm met with shock in her violet eyes which are brighter than I remember. I lean my forehead against hers, panting from this overstep and yet too weak to completely pull away.

"Hey," she whispers as her eyes search mine.

The man beside us has retreated from his advance, and I push myself back as reality sets in. I adjust my tie and look away from Grace, as shame rolls over me in waves.

Before, when I kissed Grace, I had no idea she was another man's wife. Now I have no excuse. I took something that wasn't mine.

"Our table should be ready. I'll go check with the hostess," I say before stalking off.

Even breathing is difficult. I have to actively remind myself to put air into my lungs and to not look back at Grace and see if she's as overwhelmed as I am.

It's not possible that she has *that* with her husband. I've never had that with any woman I've been with and there have certainly been plenty. I speak to the hostess and keep my focus off the bar. I just need a few moments to remind myself of my goals.

Tonight, I end whatever this is between Grace and me. The hate that consumes me for feeling this way about a married woman is not worth

whatever I feel for Grace. It's a betrayal of who I am.

Besides, my family doesn't need any scandals right now, and pursuing someone who isn't available would be an incredibly stupid scandal.

A hand presses into my shoulder, and I turn to find Grace staring at me, her face as flushed and bewildered as mine. "You okay?" she says softly, meeting my eyes.

Just her presence soothes me. Which is the exact opposite effect she should have on me. The truth is, I need this connection. With all the other things in my life changing, she feels like home, and it's as enraging as it is baffling. I don't want to lash out at her and tell her not to touch me. I want to fold her tiny hand into my own and lead her to our table. I want to sit on the same side as her and allow my hand to roam up her thigh while no one else sees. I want to take her home and hold her and fall asleep in her arms like we did for three perfect nights.

I straighten my shoulders, knowing none of those things can occur. "I'm fine. Let's sit down."

Without looking back at her, I follow the hostess. We reach the corner table which has several candles to provide a romantic glow. I want to ask for a table with a little more light, but then I'd have to stare at Grace's every angle. At least in the dim lighting it will be harder to read her expressions.

I pause, waiting for her to slip into the bench seating, and then sit across from her. At the tables around us couples sit in the center of the booths, their legs likely touching, as they look out onto the crowd. Not us. We sit directly across from one another so that not an inch of our bodies can interact.

"It's a beautiful restaurant," Grace says cautiously, her voice quiet and a bit shaky. *Good, the kiss affected her as much as it did me.* I'm not sure



why that gives me reassurance, but it does. “Do you come here often?”

I look at the wine menu, keeping my eyes anywhere but on her. “No,” I say in a clipped tone. “Before this week I spent most of my time in Tennessee where our distillery is.”

“Oh, I’ve always wanted to go to Nashville. My girlfriends suggested it for a bachelorette party, but we ended up going to the Bahamas.”

I look up at her. “*Your* bachelorette party?”

Grace’s shoulders sag. “No.”

“Where did you go for yours?” This isn’t information I need. And yet I want to know everything about her life.

“Uh, Steven didn’t believe in overnight bachelor and bachelorette parties. Said there was too much room for things to go wrong.”

She mumbles something sarcastically under her breath which I can’t quite make out.

*Steven*. So that’s the husband’s name. Steven Kensington. He sounds like a complete ass.

“Seems a bit ironic seeing as now he sends you to Florida to do whatever you want. Or out on dates with other men,” I say pointedly, lifting my eyebrow to hers in disapproval.

She laughs softly. “Yeah, he’s not all that concerned about my whereabouts anymore.”

Shocked by the first honest admission she’s given me since she disappeared from my bed, I stare at her face. There is a sadness about her that I had previously seen as standoffishness. As uncaring. It wasn’t that though.

Before I have a chance to react to this revelation, the waiter arrives and pours water into our glasses. I keep my eyes on Grace, studying her and

trying to figure out what is really going on with her marriage. She looks in every direction but mine.

“What can I get you to drink?” the waiter asks as he stands waiting, clearly not giving me the time I need with Grace.

“Red wine work?” I ask.

She nods, and I select a bottle of Pinot Noir, remembering it’s what she drank in Florida.

“So, Cash, give me an example of what a normal week looks like for you.”

Thrown off by the change in topic, and not quite ready to move on from discussing her marriage, I stare at her blankly. “What?”

Grace pushes her hair behind her ear, and I stare at her hand. The wedding bands are missing. She catches where my eyes are focused and puts her hands down in her lap. “Whoever you pick to spend your life with should be someone who is compatible with your lifestyle. Is this how you spend your evenings? Fancy restaurants where you can be spotted by Boston columnists?”

She doesn’t sound judgmental, but my back goes stiff anyway. She knows precisely why I picked this restaurant.

“I’m taking over as CEO of one of the biggest companies in New England. It’s important that I’m seen right now.”

Grace shrugs. “No judgment here. It’s precisely what you should be doing. I would have suggested this spot if you hadn’t. I’m just asking what you want long-term. Is this the lifestyle you want? Different restaurants each night of the week? Late Saturday mornings spent in bed making love? An afternoon walk in the Common perhaps, followed by whatever event you have to attend in the evening?”

She paints a life I never imagined and yet one I see so vividly with her. She's coloring outside the lines, and I want to live along the edges.

I exhale a long breath of air and think of the life I always imagined. "Actually, I always pictured myself in Tennessee—managing the distillery, handling sales, and raising my kids in a large house on a farm. Riding horses on a Saturday, little league games, too many tiny bodies in bed to make love on a Saturday morning but Saturday nights would be solely for my wife. Red wine by the fire and hours in bed."

Grace's eyes flutter closed, and she hums as if the idea doesn't sound wrong at all. The waiter arrives with our bottle and pours her a sip to try. She swirls the liquid around in the glass, meets my eyes, and takes a sip. I swear if a look could communicate a sentiment, hers just told me that she sees that life and she wants it too.

And for a moment I consider what I could do to make it happen. How far I would go to remove any obstacles to make her mine.

She nods at the waiter, and he pours us both a glass and then leaves us to review the menu. I haven't given food a moment's thought, so I look down, trying to remind myself that this is all fake.

We are fake dating so she can figure out who I am and what I want because this is her job, to find me a wife. To find me someone else to live the dreams that I'm only picturing with her by my side. She can't be the one because she's already someone else's.

The waiter returns, and we place our orders as he drops off bread that smells like garlic and rosemary onto the table with oil for dipping. When Grace takes a piece and offers it to me, I smile. I love that she enjoys food as much as her wine.

She pours a generous amount of oil on her plate, adds a little red pepper and parmesan, and mixes it together. I watch as she dips the bread into the mixture, brings it to her lips and closes her eyes as she takes a bite, moaning quietly. My dick jumps as I remember how she moaned like that while I slid in and out of her.

I remember looking down and staring at our connection, watching the way she swallowed me and commanding that she watch as I fucked her. Her lip between her teeth, she watched and the same moan fell from her lips.

*Fuck, I need to stop thinking like this.*

I attempt a topic change. “How do you spend your Saturdays? With your husband, I mean?”

Grace pauses midbite and looks at me. I can’t read her expression, but to me it appears like she’s working through something in her mind. To lie or not to lie.

“I need the truth, Grace.”

Dropping the bread onto her plate, she picks up her napkin and wipes her hand. Then she takes a sip of her wine. When she finally places the glass down and meets my gaze, I see what I think is an honest expression. “I haven’t spent a Saturday with my husband in a long time.”

*I fucking knew it.*

“Why?” I ask with more excitement than I’d like to admit.

She shrugs her shoulders. “We are both busy. Stopped making time for each other.”

“That’s not the type of marriage I want,” I say quickly, as if I’m in a competition with her damn husband. Trying to show her I could be better. *We* could be better.

Grace lets out a breathy sigh type laugh and rolls her eyes. “No, I don’t think anyone would willingly sign up for my marriage.”

“What do you do on a Saturday then?”

She bites her lip. “Meet friends for lunch, go for walks, read, paint.”

Involuntarily, I feel my lips curve up in a smile. “Paint?”

Grace’s face relaxes. “Yes, as you know I enjoy painting.”

I’m taken back to the Keys. To watching the caricaturist. To the little girl with the ice cream. “What kind of painting do you do?”

She shrugs. “Any kind really. I love watercolors. Sitting outside on the weekend with an easel and capturing what I see. Or what I wish I saw. My memories.”

“Do you think you’ll paint anything from Florida?” I sip my wine as I watch her, fascinated with every breath she takes and every thought that comes out of her mouth.

Grace’s smile grows bigger. “I have a few things in my mind that I have memorized that I’d like to take a shot at.”

I raise my eyebrow. “Anything that you need a refresher on?”

Grace closes her eyes and touches her lips. I’m not even sure she realizes she’s doing it, but the gesture makes me want to move closer so that I can place my lips against hers. “Couldn’t forget it if I tried,” she murmurs.

“Are you happy, Grace?”

Her eyes fly open, and she stares at me, before replying, “Almost.”

“Almost?” I can feel the excitement bubble in my stomach; it’s the same feeling I get when I’m closing a deal at work—I’ve finally gotten through to her. “What would make you happy? What are you waiting for?”

She sighs and bites her lip. “This project to be over. Finding you a wife. Once I do that my boss is giving me the company. It’s what I’ve been

working toward for years. The reason I missed dozens of dinners with my husband.”

And there it is. Her ability to be happy relies upon me being with someone else. It’s cold water on the heat that has been burning between us, or at least what I thought was burning. A reminder that she’s a married woman whose goal is to fix her marriage, not walk off into the sunset with me.

The waiter returns with our food and quiet takes over the table while we eat. I don’t have much to say any longer. If anything, I’m ready to finish this meal and get out of here.

I can’t be around her. I can’t watch her find happiness with her husband. My frustration at the entire situation has taken on a new tenor because I know without a doubt that she doesn’t have the type of connection with her husband that we have. And I can’t imagine anyone she sets me up with will compare to her either.

What we have is special, and it sucks that I didn’t meet her first, because if I had, she wouldn’t be sitting with another man having dinner and talking about how she’s almost happy. And I wouldn’t be sitting at a table with a woman wondering how far I’ll go to make her mine.



## CHAPTER 12

### GACE

I'm getting dangerously close to telling Cash the truth. It is almost impossible to lie to him. He sees right through me. Asks the questions that peer into my heart and he knows the answers without me revealing them. What's the point of lying? The result either way is the same. Whatever it is we could have had is an impossibility because I'm damaged goods.

I have a history, a failed marriage, and now I'm his matchmaker. How would that look to the press? He's got enough on his plate with his new job. As he's pointed out, that is where his focus must lie. That's what matters. My divorce, the misdeeds of my husband, those will be nothing more than a distraction. Fodder for the press and those looking to take him down.

But his eyes pull me in—the hope I see when he asks me questions, and the piercing disappointment that flashed across his face when I admitted I'll be happy once he finds a wife. It pains me that it's true. Because then, and only then, will I be able to stand on my own two feet without Steven. And that is something to be happy about. Even if it's killing me to let him go.

I reach my hand out to touch his, and Cash lifts his gaze in surprise. I squeeze, and he gives me a halfhearted smile. He's like a schoolboy that I want to pull onto my lap and comfort. Which is odd because he's one of the best-looking men I've ever laid eyes on. He could probably bench press two of me, and clearly, he's a leader when it comes to business. But there is a softness to him, a vulnerability that he offers when we're alone, like he has been looking for someone to love him his entire life. It breaks me open.

"Gracie bear," a man's voice says from my side. Cash flinches and pulls his hand away from mine, and I turn to see Jonathan Hanson standing with a bemused smirk on his face. "I'd heard the rumors, but I believed you would have given me a heads-up before you started dating."

I roll my eyes and stand. "Jay, good to see you." I offer him my cheek, but he pulls me against his chest and hugs me as if we are long-lost lovers. Which I suppose isn't totally off base, but it's been ten years since we broke up. I whisper against him, "Give it a rest; this is business."

I turn to introduce Cash, but he is already standing. "Hanson, good to see you." He holds out his hand, and Jonathan takes it.

*Of course, they know each other.*

"I hear congratulations are in order. Good luck with the takeover."

Cash gives a refined smile. It's not a soft one or even one of the truly joyful ones he's given me when we are alone, but his lips are curved in the right direction. "Thank you. So how do you know Grace?"

Cash shoots me a questioning look as he waits for one of us to answer.

"Oh, Gracie was the one that got away. But maybe not for long." He turns to me and winks. "I really was sad to hear about you and Steven. He's a bastard. If I had known how it would have turned out, I would have fought harder to keep you." Jonathan's hand wraps around my waist



possessively, and I feel impermissibly trapped. He's giving away my secret and sending the completely wrong message about our relationship to Cash.

Cash clears his throat. "So, you and Grace dated? When?"

I pull myself out of Jonathan's embrace and slap him on the shoulder. "Oh, don't let him fool you. Jay has never been the type to settle down. Saying we dated is a bit of a stretch."

Jonathan's eyes meet mine, and he looks almost hurt. "For me it was as real as it got."

I feel a sense of nostalgia for the man he's become. He wasn't the greatest boyfriend back then, but he never led me on, and he always took care of me. "It's good to see you," I say, running my thumb against his cheek before I return to my seat.

Cash watches us closely but doesn't say anything.

"Where are you staying, Grace? Tell me you didn't let him keep the house after all the renovations you funded."

I feel my cheeks heat. If it wasn't obvious before, there is no denying at this point that Cash now has a complete picture of what my marriage was like and that it's over.

"Staying in the city. The suburbs weren't for me, I suppose. Besides, with work I have lots of client dinners, as you can see." I motion to Cash as if to explain that is all this is.

Jonathan nods in understanding. "Right. Well, I won't keep you. But since you are back in the city and done playing the dutiful wife, when can I take you out on the town?"

I laugh. "Does anyone really talk like that?"

Jonathan leans down close and whispers in my ear, "I don't think you want me to say what I really want to do with you." My eyes flick to Cash's,

and I see he is holding his temper by a thread, his jaw clenched so tightly he may break a tooth.

“I’m having dinner with Tessa tomorrow, but maybe we can meet for drinks after. I’ll text you.”

I have no intention of following up with Jonathan. Not because it wouldn’t be fun, but the kind of fun he’s alluding to is not something I’m ready for. At least not with him. It’s in this moment that I finally realize that I want the man having dinner with me more than I want anything else. And just maybe now that he knows my marriage is a farce, we’ll be able to figure it all out.

“Great, it will be wonderful to have the gang back together.” He looks to Cash. “It was good to see you, James. Tell Carter I said hello. Good luck finding a mate; if there is one thing this girl is good at, it’s that.” He turns back to me and winks, and I want to sink farther into my seat. *Way to make it obvious that we slept together.*

When Jonathan is gone, I meet Cash’s eyes, ready to tell him everything. But he doesn’t even look at me. Instead, he picks up his wine glass with a hard movement and brings it to his lips, gulping the entire glass in one sip. He sets it down and looks back to his plate.

“Cash,” I say, trying to reach my hand out to him.

He pulls back and holds his hand up to stop me from speaking. “Please don’t.” His voice is clipped, and he still hasn’t looked at me.

“But you—” I try again.

“I said *don’t*.”

I close my eyes and nod. I just need to give him a moment. It’s a lot to process. Jonathan, my divorce, the lies that I told.

The waiter returns to clear our plates and Cash asks for the check. I try to slip the company card out and Cash gives me a scathing look.

“Can I please say something?” I beg.

Cash finally meets my eyes. “There is nothing left to say. You told me you were married. You are clearly getting a divorce. If you wanted something real with me, you would have told me that, so I guess it was all one-sided after all. And I appear to be just one of many men you string along.” I wince at his insult. That’s not who I am and he knows that. But he is so lost in his anger he doesn’t even see my reaction. “It’s fine. I don’t play sloppy seconds to husbands or Jonathan Hanson.” His mouth twists in disgust. “Fuck, I thought you were different,” he mutters almost under his breath. Then he looks back up at me, and it’s like the mask is back in place again. “This will be our last date, Grace. Send me a list of the women you have when you’re ready, and aside from that, I don’t think we have anything left to say to one another.”

Cash signs the check, stands up, and leaves before I can wrap my head around the insults he just hurled at me.

I don’t know what I expected from him once he found out I was getting a divorce, but that certainly wasn’t it.



## CHAPTER 13

### GRACE

**S**aturday morning I wake up and stare at the ceiling. It's my first Saturday by myself. The first Saturday of my new life. For the last ten years I've woken up beside someone. At least most Saturdays. Whether it was in my apartment with Tessa right out of college, or my first apartment with Steven when we were engaged, or the house after we were married. Even last weekend I woke up next to Cash.

And although I would love to live in an alternate reality where he was the one I met first all those years ago—or even now but under the right circumstances—I'm glad that today I am doing this on my own. Standing on my own two feet—or lying on my own butt I guess is more appropriate. Either way, a sense of pride fills me. I *can* do this.

I refuse to remind myself of the disaster that was last night. It's impossible to live a life of regret. In the end every decision I have made has been done with the utmost care and dignity that I can muster under the circumstances. If Cash can't understand that or doesn't even want to give me the opportunity to clarify, then quite frankly, it's not my obligation to make him understand.

I was never a woman who lived in my husband's shadow so it's not like I don't know what to do with myself today. I always did what I wanted. Made a pot of coffee, added the sweet cream and cinnamon, sipped it while scrolling through TikToks, and relaxed in whatever way I felt necessary.

None of that changes now that I'm on my own because I always lived my life for me. That is certainly something I can be proud of. Maybe not changing myself for my husband's whims cost me my marriage. But, in all honesty, what kind of marriage was it if that's what was required to keep him happy? If he needs a woman to be at his beck and call, to hang on his every word, and sit at home pining for him, well then I'm not the woman for him.

Slipping on my royal-blue cashmere robe, I laugh to myself. Steven didn't understand why I loved this thing. It feels like a soft hug, but it certainly isn't the sexiest thing to wear around the house.

I tie it around my waist and squeeze my arms around myself.

A soft hug is extra necessary this morning.

My new apartment already feels like home. I'm still sleeping in the guest bedroom, but when I get around to it later today I will buy new pillows and sheets for the master bed and move my stuff into the bigger room. Marion already emptied the closets, a fact I missed when I came to stay here at the beginning of the week. It appears she set this plan in motion before I went to Florida. Who knows how long she's known something was wrong with Steven.

Now that word is spreading enough to have reached Jonathan, I will have to let her know the truth. But not today. Today I am going to focus on enjoying the beautiful summer weather in Boston.

Marion's apartment...my apartment...has a large living room with high ceilings. Two windows bookend a fireplace and there is a wall that is just bookshelves, filled with books in all different colors. I was surprised to find them filled with romance novels. Apparently, my boss and mentor has quite the fetish for all things sexy. I guess it explains how she and Asher have kept their spark all these years and also why she's so focused on the happily ever after.

Or maybe she loves her job because she's always loved romance novels. Kind of like the chicken and the egg argument. Which came first?

I laugh to myself as I skim my fingers across the spines of the books and select one to curl up with on the soft gray couch as I sip my cup of coffee under a blanket. There's plenty of time to enjoy the summer day. For now, I'll just get lost in a good book.

I refill my coffee three times, and by the time I look up from my book to check the clock I see it's after lunchtime. I'm not disappointed in the slightest. It's not a waste of time. Instead, I feel refreshed. And a bit annoyed at the characters who keep causing their own problems.

*Just talk to him!* I want to scream at the female. *She's not a china doll; stop trying to control her every move,* I chastise the man.

Romances are so funny and yet addicting in that way.

The buzzer in the apartment sounds, and I smile to myself. There's my best friend. I run to the door, hit the button to allow her up, and sprint to my room to quickly get dressed so she doesn't know that I've been slumming it all morning.

"Grace," Tessa shouts from the living room, walking into my apartment with the energy of a teenager. "If you are lying in bed crying, I'm dragging you out of here by your pigtails!" She rounds the corner into my bedroom

holding a bottle of champagne in one hand and a bottle of tequila in the other.

“Wow, you came prepared,” I tease, looking at her as I slip on a pair of jeans, doing a little jig as I pull them over my hips. I may have overindulged in Florida. These feel a bit tighter than they were a few weeks ago.

Tessa drops the bottles onto the bed and flops down herself, giving me a once-over. Her auburn hair is up in a ponytail, and with the freckles on her face she looks far younger than her thirty-six years. *Bitch.*

“Why do you always look so fresh?” I ask in an annoyed tone. I love my friend dearly, but it really is trying that I have to spend time putting on makeup and doing my hair and she can just waltz out of the shower and look like *that*.

“Oh stop. Last time I checked I don’t have any millionaires banging down my door to date me.”

I laugh and motion around the room, then put my hand up to my ear. “Hmm, I’m not hearing anyone knocking and there definitely isn’t anyone hiding in the bathroom. No millionaires. No men at all.”

Tessa sits up and grabs her large messenger bag. She reaches in and pulls out her phone. “Well according to page six you were seen with not one but two millionaires last night.”

I grab the phone from her hand and pull it to my face, grimacing when I see a photograph of me standing between a smiling Jonathan and a menacing Cash. It was precisely when Jonathan had snaked his arm around my waist, and I can now see that Cash’s hands were balled into fists. It’s not a good look. *For them or me.* Although, fortunately, it only identifies me as the mystery woman.

“Oh God, this caption is absurd!” I laugh.

*Business Isn't the Only Thing that Cassius James and Jonathan Hanson Fight Over.*

Ha. As if. The real news would be that neither man is actually interested in Grace Kensington and oh, by the way, she's married.

“How is this considered news?” I ask in disgust as I toss the phone back in my friend's direction.

She shrugs her shoulders and turns over onto her back, opening the article to read the commentary. “Grace, you knew by agreeing to go to Lucia's, the hottest restaurant in Boston right now, *with the hottest bachelor in Boston*, that you would end up in the gossip columns.” She looks at me pointedly and I stifle a grin.

“*Perhaps* I was aware that could be a possibility.” I move into the bathroom to work on my makeup. “I mean it is my job to make sure Cash is seen and to get buzz around his name. I need to find him the perfect woman.”

Tessa follows me into the bathroom and looks at me in the mirror. “And you just happened to make sure that you didn't wear your wedding rings so no one knows that you're married. Least of all so they could serve as a reminder to the man you are currently crushing on.”

I roll my eyes. That was so not my plan.

“No, I'm a professional, and I knew it would look bad if he was pictured with a woman with rings. Can you imagine the headlines then? Cash James, heir to the James Spirits fortune, having an affair with a married woman. That is not the press he needs.”

Tessa just stares at me. “But that *is* what's happening.”

“No, it isn't. There is no affair. I'm doing my job. That's all.”



Tessa puts her phone on the bathroom counter and points to the screen. “Then what is this?”

My eyes grow as I see a picture of me and Cash kissing. It is the most indecent picture I’ve ever seen of two people fully clothed. The way my hand holds the back of his neck, and his fingers dig into the flesh of my thigh, one finger breaching the top of my skirt. And how my teeth hold his lip as we stare at each other as if we are in our own private oasis. It’s the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. I throb remembering just how it felt to be possessed by him, and my throat grows dry.

*I will never feel like that again.*

It is a startling and unwelcome thought. And likely true. No one has ever made me feel the way Cash does and it’s likely no one else ever will.

*Shit.*

“Where did you get this?”

“Photographer I know through *Vanity Fair*. He knows we’re friends. He snapped the pics but told me he wasn’t selling them or publishing them. Your secret is safe. *For now*. So spill. What the fuck is going on with the two of you? And don’t tell me he is your client because that shit is bull and we both know it. I wasn’t even part of that kiss and my fucking vag is throbbing. How are you still standing, and please tell me if he is not hiding somewhere in this apartment now that you at least brought him back here for a good time last night?”

My shoulders fall. “No, T, no affair. No sex. Nothing more than that hot—okay, *panty-melting, sizzling-hot*—kiss that I will probably be reliving for the rest of my life.”

“But why? Why won’t you just let yourself be happy with him? I mean look at the way he was looking at you when Jonathan so much as touched

you? He looked like he was eating glass. And this...” Tessa says, picking the phone up and sticking it in my face. “This isn’t how a man kisses a woman he’s not crazy about. He is ready to devour you. And from the way you’re pulling on his neck, it appears the feeling is mutual. So, what gives?”

Sighing, I look away from the phone. “He found out I’m getting a divorce and he didn’t seem interested. Maybe the idea of me was more exciting than the reality. The whole I-can’t-have-her vibe I was giving off, *the forbidden*, maybe that turned him on. But the going through a bitter divorce and starting over? That’s not hot. That’s not what a young, yes *millionaire* as you like to point out, needs or wants in his life.”

Tessa chews on her lower lip. “Well, shit. That’s depressing.”

A single laugh hits my throat. “Yeah.” I try to roll my eyes to show it doesn’t matter, but I feel the disappointment plaguing my face. “I don’t want to talk about this. I’ve already emailed Rachel. I’m going to have her handle communication with Cash going forward. He doesn’t want to deal with me, so I’ll work behind the scenes, give him his space and time to find what he is looking for, and then I’ll get my promotion and move on with my life. I mean, come on, that type of passion doesn’t last.” I point to the phone again shaking my head.

Tessa huffs in disappointment. “Fine. So, I’m thinking it’s a tequila day, huh?”

I offer her a real laugh this time and squeeze her against me. “God, I love you.”

She squeezes me back. “I love you too, G. And you are going to make someone very happy. Or ya know, I’m still offering to marry you and be

your lesbian lover.” She raises her eyebrows in suggestion. “I mean, I would totally do you if I could live in this apartment.”

I smack her away from me. “You like dick too much.”

She laughs. “True. But I could at least be your live-in partner who sleeps with men.”

“You’re ridiculous; you know that?”

“But you love me,” she says in a sing-song voice.

“You’re damn right I do. Now let’s go get food, I’m starving.”

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 14" are written in a similar bold, black, sans-serif font.

## CHAPTER 14

### CASH

“**H**oly shit, what has you all worked up?” Chase asks after I slam my fist into his face for the fourth hit today. He holds up his hands to stop me from continuing, and Carter jumps in with waters for us both.

I open my mouth and he squirts the liquid in, providing me with momentary relief. I wish it was vodka. Nothing is touching the anger I feel. Not the boxing, not the five miles I ran this morning, and certainly not this fucking water. I slip my boxing gloves off, handing them to Carter, and take out my mouthguard. “I need a drink.”

Carter points to the water. “That’s what this is.”

I glare at him. “A real drink. Alcohol. I need to go out tonight. Where are we going?”

Chase smiles. He’s been trying to get us to go to some new club for the last few weeks and I’ve shot him down each time. Carter prefers to only go out when we are out of the city. He doesn’t want to run into the women he screws. Or more like screws over. I, on the other hand, decided to hang up that lifestyle when Pa made me CEO. Lot of good that did me. I’m still

being photographed in magazines and dragged into drama. Might as well enjoy myself at least.

“This is about the married chick, isn’t it?” Carter asks, pointing to the edge of the ring.

We hop over the ropes and give the next duo their shot. I focus on slipping off my boxing gloves and ignore my brothers.

Chase raises his eyebrows. “What married chick?” Carter pulls out his phone and tosses it to Chase while I continue to fume next to them. “Wow, you’re fighting over a married chick with Hanson? Never thought I’d see the day.”

I toss my gloves on the ground. “Stop calling her the married chick.”

Chase holds up his hands. “That’s what he said. If you give me her name, I’d be happy to call her whatever she wants.”

He really should know better than to shoot me a wink right now, but apparently he’s ready for another round.

Carter puts up his hand, blocking me from attacking my brother. “Tell us what’s going on. Why does this woman have you all worked up? We’re clearly missing something.”

The tension in my back builds and I try massaging my neck for release, but I’m afraid nothing other than Grace will fix this. Which is crazy because she’s also the cause of it. “I met her in Florida.”

Carter laughs. “Wait. This was the woman you spent the weekend with?”

Chase looks at us both. When I got back, all strung out over Grace disappearing without a trace, Carter had been there. By the time I saw Chase, I’d already discovered who Grace really was so I never shared with him what happened in Florida. I grind my teeth. “Yes. I met her in Florida.

She told me repeatedly we couldn't be anything more than a few nights but I fell fucking hard. I've never met someone like her."

Chase nods. "So, she was married, and you didn't know it?"

I run my teeth along my lips. "That's just the thing. She told me she was married when I met her again. At the office. Grandmother hired her to find me a wife."

Chase laughs loudly now. "Wait, you're working with a matchmaker? You want to get married? What the—?"

My death stare stops him from talking. "Unlike you two morons, I have a reputation to uphold for this company. That's why this one didn't want the position." I point in Carter's direction, and he nods.

"I'm not the settling-down type," he says, shrugging as if this shouldn't be news to anyone. And it's not.

Chase shakes his head. "So what happened? She's a married matchmaker and you still decided to pursue her? Have you lost your damn mind? I mean I'm supposed to be the screwup, not you."

I roll my eyes. "If you guys would let me finish—"

Carter cuts me off. "We keep trying to, but you're taking forever to get to the point. Why were you out with her when I told you to stay away from her? And why is Hanson's arm around her? Please tell me he's not her husband." Carter runs his hand over his face as if this is his problem.

Every one of us hates Jonathan Hanson for good reason. He's an ass. Our shared history—the threats he lobbed years ago—are the reason I lost it last night. I'm not proud of how I handled everything with Grace. But fuck, I hate that guy. And watching the way he talked to her, and the way she smiled at him, and the way she so easily agreed to go out with him the next night—it fucking burned, and I snapped.

Not that it matters. She had plenty of opportunities to tell me the truth about her marriage and she didn't. Obviously, I made more out of our connection than it was. It's time to move on.

"No. Apparently, she and Hanson used to date. Or at least that's the impression I got. I didn't stick around to listen to her explanations."

Carter nods in understanding. "Got it. So you've learned your lesson and you'll stay away from the married chick. Excellent."

I throw my head back in aggravation. If only any of this was that easy. "She's not married. Or she was, or is, but she's getting a divorce. And from what Hanson said it sounds like it was the husband's fault. Not hers. So, I guess she didn't cheat on him with me."

Chase shakes his head. "I'm so confused. So, do you like this girl or what?"

"She's not a girl; she's a woman," Carter says, pointing to her picture again. My eyes are drawn to the slit of her skirt and the flesh that flashes me from below. My mind keeps replaying the kiss we shared and the way her skin felt below my fingertips.

*Thank God they didn't get a picture of that.*

"It doesn't matter how I feel. It's too complicated."

Hanson and I are already battling in business—our families have been feuding for years—so the last thing I need is to be caught up with a woman he's also pursuing. And if she's interested in a guy like Hanson, she's not who I thought she was.

Carter slaps me on the back. "Now we're talking some sense. Sure, she's good-looking, but there are plenty of older women you could go after."

I bite my lip in aggravation. "She's not that old."

Carter smirks. “For me she’s not. I’m guessing she’s only a few years younger than I am. But I like ’em younger, and you should too. Someone like that is ready for kids, and you do not have time for that right now.”

I massage the back of my neck, trying hard to work out the tension this conversation is bringing to my shoulders. “What I need is a drink. A night out with my brothers. Can you arrange that and keep your thoughts on everything else to yourself?”

Chase smiles. “Now that I can handle.”





## CHAPTER 15

### GRACE

“Jeez, Grace, your boy gets around,” Tessa says in a raspy voice, throwing her phone at me. We are lying together in my bed after drinking an insane amount of alcohol yesterday. We spent the day drinking and laughing, and then she surprised me with dinner at one of our friend’s restaurants with women I hadn’t seen in years—Mallory, Eliza, and Luna. We shared a townhouse during college, but I’d lost touch with them when I moved to the suburbs.

Apparently, they all get together every Sunday for brunch and sometimes during the week for dinner. I’ve been part of a couple for so long that I never wondered what women my age did, especially those who had not found the person they wanted to settle down with.

We’re still young. This city is the perfect place to continue our youth—to not conform to the minivans dropping kids off at soccer practices and Friday night dinners with the neighbors that would bore you to tears.

And somehow single people think *they* are missing out on something.

After laughing until I cried at dinner, and then being convinced to go dancing at a club that was cooler than anywhere I’d been in my life, we

came back here, ordered a pizza, and laughed until we fell asleep. I'm pretty sure society has life backwards. This is way better than marriage.

The sunlight from the window pierces my head like a knife, and I cover my face with my hand. "Can't open my eyes; just read it to me." Hesitating, I feel the drinks stirring in my stomach. "On second thought, don't. I don't need to know."

Tessa groans. "Babe, he's your client. This is kind of your job."

My groans match hers. She's right. "Okay, go."

*"Bachelor Cassius James spotted at club with not one, but two women under his arms.* The pictures are doozies. Those James brothers really know how to play hard."

I shake my head. I don't want to see the pictures, but I need to see them. *This is good*, I remind myself. He's moving on and so am I. It's exactly what should happen. What *needs* to happen.

Why, if it's so good, do I feel like I'm going to be sick? Probably the mix of vodka, tequila, champagne, and red and white wine from the day before doesn't help.

The reminder has me running to the bathroom.

After a few minutes, I feel Tessa's hand taking my hair and rubbing my back in circles. Unfortunately, nothing is coming out. "So this is rock bottom," I mutter into the white bowl.

Tessa chuckles and lets out a long breath. "Oh babe, you know how it is with these things. It's just pictures. He probably didn't sleep with them."

*Them.*

Not just one, but two. The idea does the job, and I release all the alcohol from the night before.



We don't make it to brunch. I can't bear the idea of facing the public or our friends, and even if I hadn't seen the pictures of Cash with two beautiful, tall, young, gorgeous women, strolling out of the club and getting into a car together, I still would not have been able to move off my couch due to my hangover.

But I did see the pictures. And now I can't stop imagining how his night ended.

*Is he currently lying in bed with both of them? Exploring their bodies?*

This is all too much. And it makes no sense. I wasn't this upset finding out my husband was sleeping with his secretary. A man I was with for eight years. I've only known Cash for a couple of weeks. This is beyond pathetic.

Honestly, it's better that it happened this way. If this is how I feel now, I can't even imagine what would have happened if we had actually dated. Who wants to feel this kind of attraction, this insane jealousy and chemistry, with someone? It brings you to your knees. Who the hell wants that?

I've always prided myself on being a professional, on putting my needs, *my career*, first. Remaining detached.

I apparently did such a good job at feeling that way that I didn't even flinch when Steven left me. I was prepared.

But this, *this feeling*, it's enraging. I want to down a bottle of NyQuil and sleep until it passes.

“Get up,” Tessa says, pulling the cozy blanket off me. “You need to shower and then we are going to dinner.”

“Tessa, I love you, but I can’t. I *just* can’t.”

She smiles sadly at me. “And that’s exactly why you have to. I know you’ve been through a lot lately, and this entire thing is totally unfair. But babe, this is dating. Men seem like they are one thing, and you have a good weekend, maybe even a few insane months, and then it falls apart. Sometimes for good reason, and sometimes for no reason at all. And you gotta brush your knees off, get up, and try again.”

I huff. “But why? Why do I have to try again? I don’t even want to date. I wasn’t looking for anything. And then I found *it*.”

She squeezes my hand as her red hair falls in front of her face. How does she look so beautiful after the disaster of a night we had? I look like death. I’m sure of it.

“You *think* you found it. Babe, if I called you every time I had an amazing weekend with a guy that I thought was going to lead to something...well, we’d have had a hell of a lot more of these days than you could imagine.”

I can’t imagine that she ever felt what I felt for Cash and let it go. But I don’t want to transpose my feelings onto her. If she says she’s felt *this* before, perhaps she has. Maybe she’s just stronger than I am.

“So how do you know when it’s real?” I ask in a whisper. Because I really thought this was.

She shakes her head and shrugs her shoulders as a lone tear trails her cheek. “Got me. I’ve thought it plenty of times and then when the relationship got tested in the real world, or with time, it just”—she pauses, sucking in a breath—“falls apart. But that doesn’t mean I don’t believe that

one day it will happen. Or it won't. That's okay too. I have a good life and so do you. And like I said last night, if we don't find our happily ever afters we can always get married to each other."

She winks at me, and I laugh through my tears. "Fine, but you have to promise that we can have kids."

"Oh, babe, we will have the cutest kids. Can you even imagine? Your good looks, my charm."

I roll my eyes. "You do realize we can't combine our DNA, weirdo."

She raises her eyebrow. "Oh fuck, it's totally nurture over nature. I refuse to believe that you are anything like your mother. You are all Marion—glorious, perfect Marion. So if she could make you like this," Tessa says as she motions to me like I'm a freaking board on Wheel of Fortune, "then I know we could make our kids like us."

Reaching over, I pull Tessa into my arms, hugging her fiercely. "You're my best friend."

She laughs and I hear emotion hit her throat. My hard-ass, sassy, bitchy best friend is getting emotional, and I love it. "I love you, G, you got this. Now get up, go shower, and let's go out. You stink."

She pushes me back and I roll my eyes. "I so do not smell. I showered earlier."

"I promise you, there's a smell coming off you. Shower again, get pretty, and let me take you out on a date."

I smile and stand up as I shake my head at her. "You're nuts. And I love you too."



## CHAPTER 16

### GRACE

**M**onday morning when I walk into the office, Rachel has a smile on her face and a coffee in her hand. “You had quite the weekend, boss; I thought a coffee would be in order.” Her lips tip up in a smile and I think back to the texts I sent her Saturday night. I may have been a teensy bit drunk when I told her to put together a list for Cash ASAP so that I could get over him quickly. I immediately texted her again saying “get this contract over with, I mean.” Clearly, my texting was useless because she knows precisely what I meant.

I roll my eyes and take the coffee. “The list?” I ask, holding out my hand in annoyance.

She follows after me as I walk into my office. “I emailed it to you this morning. There is also a copy on your desk. And the first three women will be here to meet with you this afternoon.”

Taken aback by her hard work, I stop and turn toward her. “Thank you, Rachel, I really appreciate that.”

She smiles sheepishly. “Anything for you, Grace.”

I get a sense from her tone she knows how much this means to me. I swallow my pride and sit down at my desk, prepared to move on with my life.

I make it through all three of the interviews feeling good about the list Rachel put together. The women are all professionals, with rich lives and strong friendships, or so they make it seem. All they are missing in their lives is someone to share it with.

Honestly, I could see sharing a cocktail with any one of them. I feel good about introducing them to Cash. They'll make a good match, or at least be able to hold conversation through a date.

I'm rubbing my head, annoyed that I skipped lunch, when I hear a familiar voice in reception.

“Marion, it's good to see you. How is Asher doing?”

I haven't spoken to Steven since I walked out of our house last week, and he is quite frankly the last person I expect.

I listen to Marion make small talk with him while I try to decide what to do.

What is there to do? I can't run and hide. What does he want? He never showed up here when we were happily married, so why now?

Out of habit, I flip open my cosmetic mirror and smooth my hair. Then I grab my tube of lip gloss and coat my lips, pinching them together and making a pop sound before shrugging in acceptance of my appearance. I don't *really* care how I look for him.

Or maybe I do.

Steven leans into my office, knocking on the door, despite the fact that I can see him, and the door is wide open. “Hey Grace,” he says with a warm

smile. It's jarring how charming it is coming from him. I can't remember the last time he looked at me that way.

I pull a fake smile. "Steven, to what do I owe the pleasure?" I motion to the chairs for him to sit, and he looks at them tentatively before choosing one.

He looks good. He's got dark hair and a strong jaw and pale-blue eyes that I used to get lost in. His shirt fits a bit tighter as if he's been hitting the gym. Probably to impress the secretary.

After leaving me, he starts working out and I go and binge eat so that my clothes can fit more snug. *How fucking fair.*

"Thought maybe we could grab dinner?"

A laugh escapes my throat, and he looks at me surprised.

"I'm sorry, you're serious?"

The tic in his jaw shows me that the old Steven is still there—as if my bitchiness summoned him. We are clearly toxic for one another. "Yes. We have things to discuss."

I look down at my hands, trying to maintain my cool. The idea of dinner with Steven is ludicrous. Pure idiocy. He came into the city without calling and assumed I'd just agree to dinner at his command.

"Why?"

I'm genuinely curious. Why now?

And then I remember the photographs. The pictures of me with Jonathan's arm around my waist. He must have heard about them. Or *seen* them. I feel a slight thrill imagining his reaction. I'm clearly childish.

He cocks his head, studying me. There's not much to see. Or at least not much that interested him. He had me to himself for eight years and decided



he wanted something else. “Grace, I made a mistake. Is that what you want to hear? I made a fucking mistake and I’m so damn sorry.”

My brain can’t compute what he’s saying.

He’s *sorry*. He made a *mistake*.

“How does one make a mistake of slipping their penis into a woman who isn’t their wife? Seriously, explain that to me. Is it like you fell and tripped into her?”

Steven’s eyes narrow. “Don’t be crude.”

I laugh loudly. Bitterly. “Crude? I’m sorry. Did you or did you not fuck someone else?”

“Well, it looks like you’ve done the same thing, Grace. And I’m willing to look past it and work on our marriage. We’ve both had our kicks. Gotten it out of our system. Now we can settle down, have kids, and move past all this.”

I put my face in my hands; I’m at a complete loss over this conversation. I can’t even respond. Quite frankly, I don’t want to. I don’t owe him an explanation and yet I want to set the record straight.

*I have slept with someone, and it’s not Hanson, and it was the best sex of my life. The best orgasm of my life. I’d love to rub that in my ex’s face because unlike him I waited until after he kicked me out of our bed. He did it while I was still at home sleeping in it.*

But obviously I am not going to admit to that.

“Get out,” I whisper, not bothering to look up.

As I hear him shuffle out of the chair, my shoulders relax, believing he’s finally listening to me. Until I feel him beside me, on his knees, pulling my chair in his direction and placing his head in my lap. “Grace, I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. This is why I wanted to take you to dinner. To

apologize. To talk. To do this right. My temper...I just...fuck, Grace, I'm trying here."

I look down at him with little emotion. A month ago I would have hoped for this situation. I mean who wouldn't want their cheating husband to grovel? But in that time I've come to realize that he did me a favor. I don't *want* this. I don't want him. And at least he had the balls to realize that we didn't have what it takes for a happy marriage.

I shake my head and run my hands over his hair, pushing his head off me. Steven looks up at me hopefully, as if he thinks I'm touching him for my own pleasure and not just to remove him from my lap.

"You were right before," I say. He smiles. "No, before, before. Last month when you said we didn't make each other happy. *You were right*. I'm happier without you. And I'm sorry if that hurts, but you were right."

Steven eyes me with disgust and stands up. "Is this because of him? Because of Jonathan? Are you with him now?"

I roll my eyes. "No, Steven, it's because you and I weren't good together. I'm with no one. I'm learning to stand on my own two feet and spending time by myself."

He scoffs. "That's not what the pictures look like."

Breathing out my annoyance, I shrug. "Believe what you want. I ran into Jonathan with a client. But yes, I'll probably go out with Jonathan. And other men. Because we aren't together. And I will let Marion know that. I shouldn't have tried to hide our divorce. It's nothing to be ashamed of. We just didn't...work."

It feels good finally admitting it to myself. Letting myself off the hook for having a failed marriage. Acknowledging that his affair may have ended

us, but it wasn't what broke us. We weren't right to begin with and that's okay.

Steven eyes me and then reaches out, pushing my hair out of my face, a thing he used to do when we were dating. The nostalgia pulls at me, but only a little. "I really am sorry, Grace."

I smile sadly. "I know. And I appreciate it. For what it's worth, I'm sorry too. I wasn't a great wife, and I can see that now. But I think it's because I knew something was missing. I'm just happy we realized it now, before..." I don't finish the sentence as we both know what I mean.

Before we brought kids into this. I'm so utterly grateful that we didn't do that.

"After I talk to Marion, I'll reach out to an attorney and we can get the process started," I offer.

He shakes his head. "I know you say we're done. And that you're happier. But can we just pause on the divorce? I..." He hesitates, and I wonder what he's thinking. "It's a big deal, Grace; one we can't undo. I just want to make sure we approach this the right way. Take your time, stand on your own two feet, and make sure this is what you want."

I shake my head, knowing what I want, but his pleading eyes give me pause. *Really, what does it hurt holding off on signing? I'm sure the entire process will take a while anyway.*

I give him a curt nod. "Fine. I'll be in touch."

"Six weeks, Grace. Give it at least six weeks."

I sigh. "I'll think about it." I nod toward the door, ready for him to leave.

"Thanks for hearing me out, Grace," he says, pausing at the door. "You look good, by the way." He walks out before I can respond, and I find

myself staring off after him, wondering what the hell just happened and what I just agreed to.



I'm so glad I agreed to meet the girls for dinner and drinks tonight. Originally, I told Tessa I was going to skip, but as soon as Steven left my office and Marion gave me a look like she knew we'd just had a big discussion, I knew I needed to escape before I told her everything. Feigning being late for dinner with the girls, I hightailed it out of the office and texted Tessa that I was on my way.

Now as I sit in the hip restaurant across from my friends while Luna tells us a story about her latest hookup's curved penis, I smile in delight at my decision.

"You girls don't understand, it hits you right *there!* It's magic. A fucking magical penis." Luna grins as she curves her finger in explanation.

Laughing, I choke on my drink. "Well, fuck, now I want one of those!"

Tessa bobs her head in agreement and holds up her drink. "Here's to magical penises!"

We all giggle as the waiter arrives and stares at us in straight-up fear. Poor kid is in his early twenties and probably scared for his life with us. I shake my head in embarrassment. "Sorry, we'll keep it down."

He laughs, apparently not as nervous as I thought. "Don't do it on my account," he says with a wink in my direction. I pinch back a laugh when he walks away.

“Oh my God! Maybe *he* has a magical penis!” Tessa says, hitting my arm. “And he totally wants to show it to you!”

I almost spit out my drink. “He’s like *twelve*.”

From behind me, I hear, “I’m twenty-four.” All of us burst out again in laughter and I cover my face, mortified.

“We are children. Absolute children,” Mallory says, looking between her fingers over at the waiter who has retreated back to the kitchen. “But damn, I do think he was checking you out, Grace.”

“I’ve had enough man problems for the day. I’m not adding that to the list.”

Tessa turns in her seat, looking at me. “What happened today?”

I sigh. “Steven showed up at my office.”

“No!” she screeches. “He didn’t dare!”

I stare down into my wine glass. “He did. And get this, he wanted to apologize for sleeping with his secretary.” I roll my eyes. I honestly do feel bad for him, which is pathetic, but he looked so hopeful and then dejected when I wouldn’t even go to dinner with him.

Eliza peeps up. “What did he do, trip into her vag?”

Slapping my hand down on the table with more enthusiasm than I mean, I yelp, “That’s what I said!”

“That’s what she said!” Tessa mimes, laughing at her own joke. We all burst out laughing, and I feel the stress of the day fall from my shoulders.

“Okay, ladies, this has been fun, but I have to get up early tomorrow,” Eliza says, looking at her phone. Mallory agrees and they both get their stuff together.

Luna looks at Tessa and me, and then back to the girls. “Ah shit, I should go to. Dinner Saturday night and then the club?” she asks, looking around

the table.

It's so odd being included in plans for a Saturday night. And having those plans involve clubbing. I mean, it's not really clubbing—we aren't eighteen. It's a swanky bar with dancing, but still, it all feels so surreal that this has become my life.

Out for dinner and drinks in the city after work, then walking home to my apartment, coffee on the corner, then doing it all again, day after day. I'd be lying if I didn't say I was kind of loving it. I don't know how I ever lived in the suburbs and in the quiet. The buzz of the city fits me. Or at least the *me* that I am right now.

"I'm down," I say, looking to Tessa who bobs her head in agreement.

We kiss goodbye and Tessa motions to the bar. "Let's grab one more. I'm too restless to go home and I want to hear more about your chat with Steven."

Feeling a bit on edge too, I follow her to the bar. "Grab me a dirty martini," she says to me as we grab seats. "I'm just going to run to the bathroom."

I nod as she walks off and turn to the bartender, giving her our order.

Behind me, I feel him before I hear his voice. The electricity in the air crackles between us, and his gaze sets my skin on fire. "Chair empty?"

I turn, meeting his whiskey eyes, and see the torture they hold. It's like he doesn't want to approach me, but he can't help it. I feel the same.

"All yours," I reply, looking back to the bartender as she slips my drink in front of me.

It is murky and delicious looking, with three blue-cheese olives sitting on top. I lift one of the olives to my mouth and close my eyes as I eat it. The entire time I feel him watching me.

*Speak already*, I just want to yell, but I bite my tongue, waiting for him to say whatever it is he came to say.

“Grace, I’m really sorry for how I acted at dinner.” His voice is strong, and I turn to look at him, surprised by his apology. He runs his teeth over his lips, and I study him, trying to figure out where this is going. Then I remember the women I met with today that are meant to make him happy, and I try to forget how his lips felt against mine, reminding myself that I’ve moved on.

Or I’m moving on. It’s a work in progress.

*I’m* a work in progress.

“Don’t sweat it.” I let out a breath. “I have really put you through the wringer the last week or so. I deserved everything you said.” He eyes me quizzically and then his lip turns up in a smile. “Okay, maybe not everything,” I admit, and he grins wider. “The sloppy seconds dig was a bit harsh.”

He looks down at the bar. “I really am sorry, Grace. You should know that is not who I am. Hanson and I have a history...not a good one,” he grumbles, “and you... you just happen to bring out...” he pauses as he looks back up at me.

“The worst in you,” I finish for him. Cash nods as his eyes don’t leave mine and I can almost feel them as if he’s touching me. “It’s okay. I think I do that to a lot of people,” I admit, my eyes growing wide in a teasing manner. I smile in self-deprecation. It’s a defense mechanism. “The good news is you won’t have to deal with me much longer.”

Cash furrows his brow. “What? Why?”

Ignoring his tone, and the way it sends a flurry of hope to my stupid head, I continue, “I met some wonderful women today. I’ll be sending over

their information tomorrow. Take a look and let me know if any of them interest you.”

Cash looks away from me. “Right. Of course.”

“That is if you haven’t already found someone,” I stupidly say, remembering the photographs of him with the two models. Jealousy makes for a stupid companion, and I deserve the look he gives me when he realizes what I mean.

The dig isn’t lost on him. He knows I’ve seen the article. If he cared, he could shoot down the rumors. Instead he smiles and replies, “Nah, just having a bit of fun. Nothing serious.”

Gnawing on the inside of my mouth, I try not to respond. In my mind I’ve created a fantasy of who Cash is, but that wasn’t real. He’s a hot single bachelor, and he’s out fooling around with women. He’s not pining after me like I am him. We were nothing more than a blip on his radar. I’m sure he’s had dozens of flings like ours before me, and at least one since me. It’s foolish that I thought there was this special pull between us. Unable to stop myself, I quip, “Great, well, after you’ve had all your fun, just let me know and I’ll send you your next *set*.”

Cash shakes his head as he smiles. “Bed’s empty tonight; send them whenever you’re ready. Just make sure they’re actually single.” He tips his head to me as he gets up and walks out, taking the air with him as he goes.



A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted slightly to the right. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif capital letters across the middle of the glass. The background is white.

## CHAPTER 17

### CASH

**A**s CEO, I am acutely aware that there comes a point when you have to cut your losses. It's not as easy to see that something is bleeding you dry though when it's personal. Last night I tried to cut my losses with Grace and start over. I knew I handled everything with Hanson wrong. I owed her an apology. But fuck, did she make it easy to walk away.

She acted like a jealous girlfriend which makes no sense because she's made it clear we are nothing. The thing I liked about Grace when I first met her was that she was straight to the point. Her honesty was a breath of fresh air. But the woman I've seen her be in Boston is nothing like that. I have no interest in drama or the games she plays. I'm moving on.

As I turn into our office, inhaling the wood scent that permeates the floor due to the whiskey barrels we strategically placed throughout, I finally feel my body relax. I have to get my head on straight if I am going to steer this company into the next century.

"Good morning, Mr. James, can I get you a coffee?" my secretary asks as I round the corner into my office.

Lucy was hired by Carter, so she's beautiful, young, and everything I don't need in an employee. Which is shitty of me. Just because I have a hard time controlling myself lately doesn't mean that she should be out of a job. I nod once at her and promise myself to do better.

I immediately regret my thoughts when I walk into my office and spot Cat lounging on my couch reading a magazine. This is precisely the type of thing a secretary should warn you about. Cat looks up from her rag and smiles. "Don't blame Lucy. I snuck in here while she was in the bathroom."

At exactly that moment, Lucy walks in with my coffee and practically falls over when she spots Cat. "Oh, Mr. James, I'm so sorry."

Her eyes go back and forth between us both and I sigh, accepting my coffee and waving to the door. "Hold my calls, please."

I glare at Cat as I sit down in my seat. Just when I thought this day was turning around. "Why are you here?"

Cat pouts like a child. "Is that any way to address your favorite sister?"

I roll my eyes. Her antics are getting old. "Cat, I have a busy day. What's up?"

Cat swings her legs forward and sits up on the couch, putting the magazine down and looking up at me. "Can't a girl just come visit her baby brother?"

I glower at her. "No. Out with it. You are here for a reason."

She huffs. "Fine. I love how you are acting like I'm the one that did something wrong when *you* are the one who was doing *this*."

She walks over and tosses a photograph onto my desk, or more accurately, multiple photographs. I expect to spot the pictures from the weekend with the girls at the club and roll my eyes, not bothering to look down.

“Nothing happened. Just had a little fun with the boys. Can a single man not go out and have a good time?”

“Nothing happened? Seriously? Then why are you making out with a married woman for all of the damn world to see!”

My temper flares and I roll back in my chair. *Another damn married woman? What is wrong with this city!*

Wait, I didn't make out with anyone this weekend. We had a good time in the club, but when we left I dropped everyone at Chase's place and went back to the hotel. I just didn't have it in me to take it any farther. I wasn't interested. Which was unlike me, but I wasn't feeling it.

Finally, my eyes lower to the pictures and I lose my ability to speak. Multiple photographs of Grace and me kissing are spread out on my desk. It's like those comic books that you flip through and the pictures look like they are in motion.

Click, click, click, the photographer got every damn inch of my hand moving up her thigh and her biting down on my lip. It's fucking erotic is what it is.

“Are these in any magazines?” I manage to grit out.

Cat shakes her head. “Not for your benefit though. The one who quashed it was looking out for Grace. What were you thinking, Cash?”

I bite out a breath. “I wasn't. That damn woman takes all reasonable thought from my mind. It's like I see her, and my body controls my every move.”

Cat frowns. “That's not real life, Cash. You need to take responsibility for your actions.”

Frustrated, I grimace. “*I am*. I left that night. And I was a dick about it. Ran into her again last night. Once again, we fought. We can't seem to

make it through a conversation without bringing out the worst in one another.”

Cat narrows her eyes. “Or groping one another, apparently.”

I smirk. “Yeah, that too.”

“I don’t have to tell you that this needs to stop.”

I shake my head. “No, you don’t. I am very aware.”

Cat stands up. “Okay, good. My work here is done. Dinner this weekend?”

“I think I’m going out with the boys again Saturday. Sunday brunch?”

She smiles sheepishly. “Like always, see you then, little brother.” She leans over my chair and kisses me on the cheek before disappearing.

I chuckle to myself at her stupid ability to calm me even after riling me up. Then I see the pictures she left, and my laughter dies. This is the last thing I need to be looking at this morning. And yet I know there is no way I will be parting with these images. I’m as addicted to them as I am to her. And there is absolutely nothing I can do about either of those things.



Chase and Carter appear in my office right as it hits twelve o’clock. There are moments when my breath catches in my throat—especially when Carter appears in the door, reminding me so much of my father I almost can’t breathe.

I wonder if it bothers him that he looks so much like a man we all hate. He towers above us all, and when he sits in the chair in front of me he

appears awkward, his long legs practically smushed in the chair even when he folds them.

“Let’s grab lunch,” Chase says, eyeing his phone and then looking up at both of us. “There’s a restaurant we should be seen at and a waitress I’d like to say hello to.”

Carter laughs and I grin. Chase always has women on the brain. And our image. He wears a royal-blue shirt which brings out the color in his eyes and smirks at us both. “What? I met her at the club Saturday, and unlike you, Cash, I *didn’t* disappoint.”

I hold up my hands in mock defense. “Excuse me for being tired.”

Carter looks at me but says nothing. I go to stand and knock into the papers strewn about on my desk as I grab my keys. All eyes fall to the images which were hidden below the papers, and I freeze.

“What the—?” Carter says, grabbing at them at the same time I do. Unfortunately, his long arms move quicker than mine and he grabs the top one before I can pull it back. I don’t fight him because I don’t want to rip them.

Pathetic. Completely pathetic.

“Please tell me these are personal photos you hired someone to take and are not going to show up in a paper?”

I shake my head. “No one even knows who she is. It wouldn’t matter if they were published.”

Even I know that’s not true. Photographs like this would lead to people digging until they figured out who she was. And that is *not* something we need.

Carter grimaces. “God, you’ve got it bad for this woman. If you don’t see that this isn’t the type of shit we need right now then you’re a bigger idiot

than I am. Come on, Cash, this is why you are taking over and not me. *I do this shit, not you.*”

I raise my eyes to his, asking sincerely, “You screw around with married women?”

He blanches. “No. I get caught by the papers doing stupid shit. But not this stupid. None of us go near married women. Hear me? None of us.”

I’m kind of disappointed to think that out of all of us I’m the biggest screwup right now. But also proud that Carter, although having screwed up many a time, knows his limits. “I told you, she’s not married. She’s getting divorced.”

“But you didn’t know that when you kissed her, did you?”

He’s got me there. I didn’t. I took what wasn’t mine because I thought I could. That I deserved it. Just like Dad. My fists tighten on my desk.

Chase silences us. “Enough. Both of you. We’re going to lunch. Carter, shut the fuck up. Cash, keep it your pants. Are we done here?”

He looks back and forth at the two of us, but we continue staring at one another, breathing heavily, both of us angry and disappointed in me.

Carter blinks first. “Yeah, I think I got my point across.”

I nod. I know the stakes. I can’t be caught in photographs with any women right now. Not in compromising positions like this. Not with my arms wrapped around them walking out of a club. I need to project calm and leadership for the company or our stocks are going to spiral and Sintac will look in another direction. The same direction that I’m worried Grace is looking in—straight at Hanson Liquors.



It's fun walking around the city with my brothers. Something I've missed the last few years since I've mostly been in Nashville. We would meet up a few times a month, but the day-to-day was lost to us.

Carter's legs are so damn long that it takes Chase and me two steps to equal his one, and I know he loves it. Women turn as we walk—hell, men do too—and Chase eats it up. I suppose I don't hate it either. While attention isn't something I seek, it isn't something I mind.

We arrive at the restaurant quickly since it's only down the block, and Chase immediately approaches the hostess, asking for his fated waitress. He smiles as he points to her, and the hostess leads us to a table. The waitress is a petite thing, blonde hair, slim figure, and innocent smile. She'll eat him for breakfast.

“Oh, you are so fucked,” Carter mutters under his breath as she approaches to take our drink orders.

Chase smiles like the besotted fool that he is, and I laugh behind my menu. “Maybe we should have made Chase the CEO of the company; he's ready to settle down now,” I quip under my breath as Chase shoots me a look that tells me exactly where I can go.

After she takes our order and disappears, Carter turns to business. “Sintac is hosting an event next month. It's our chance to get in front of the investors and the board and really sell ourselves.”

I shrug. “Couldn't we do a presentation for them sooner than that? In a professional setting?”

Chase shakes his head. “Carter is right. Business isn’t done in the conference room, Cash. It’s done at social events. It’s all about being in the right place at the right time. You are going to have to make a few trips to Bristol and be seen around there over the next few weeks before the event.”

I visibly tense and Carter watches me. “I know it’s been a long time.” He pauses, likely trying to find his words.

“I don’t know why you are acting like this is only hard for me. When was the last time you went?”

Carter doesn’t respond. That’s what I thought. They expect me to run the company, to make all these sacrifices, but there comes a point where they are asking too much.

Chase interjects, “Hanson doesn’t hesitate going there. While you are here pussyfooting around this, he’s going to be out and about in Bristol, and that means something to Landry. Landry is looking for a local presence in the town he loves so much. A family business that actually intends to help the town he loves so much by investing there. And a family business like ours, with the connections we have in that town, is perfect. He’s a family guy, and we need to show him we are the right family for him to partner with.”

I roll my eyes. “Hanson isn’t from there. We should have the upper hand.”

“*Should*, yes. But when was the last time you showed your face at a town event? Or stepped foot on the estate? No one knows we are a Bristol family because we haven’t been back since...”

Carter holds his hand up to silence Chase. He doesn’t get to say it. It’s not his mother. He wasn’t there and he doesn’t know.



Chase huffs out a breath. “If you can’t even talk about it then we shouldn’t be trying to partner with Landry.” He looks down at his hands. “This is ridiculous. It’s been almost thirty fucking years, guys.”

Carter’s eyes grow as dark as my mood, and I watch him snap. “Shut the fuck up.”

It’s not fair to Chase—I know this—but he also doesn’t know how unfair it is to us.

“Enough,” I say, looking between my two brothers as they stare one another down, both of them breathing tightly.

Chase’s blonde waitress appears at the table with our drinks and a timid smile. No one can miss the tension at this table. It’s as thick as a fog over the bay that we dread returning to. Chase stands and follows her from the table. She looks nervous, but as soon as they are out of earshot, I see that he’s cracking jokes and bringing a smile to her face. It’s amazing how one minute he can be wound tight as a jack-in-the-box and the next he graces people with a goofy smile and a joke. So unlike us. It must be a trait he inherited from his mom.

Turning to Carter, I see that he’s still brooding, not looking after Chase but staring straight into his drink. I didn’t notice he’d ordered a whiskey, and now I wish I had ordered one as well. But unlike him, I have a company to run. “Cut him some slack; he doesn’t have it easy either.”

Carter glares at me. “He doesn’t get to talk about her.”

I turn my head, trying to get through to my brother. “Carter, he doesn’t know better. And he’s right. I have to step up. If not for her then at least for Pa and Grandmother.”

Carter rolls his eyes. “She didn’t care about any of this.”

I shrug my shoulders. “I wouldn’t know. I was two when she died. But the people who raised us, the ones who gave us every opportunity? It matters to them. I’ve made a promise to them. So if you guys think it’s important for me to be seen back at the...” I can’t get myself to say home. It hadn’t ever been my home, or at least I don’t ever remember living there. “Back in Bristol, then that’s what I’ll do. I could use some time in the fresh air anyway.”

Carter sighs. “I can go with you.”

I shake my head. “You don’t have to.”

“But I should.”

I shrug again. “Could be fun.” I smile genuinely. “Maybe we can even get Cat to join us. Make a trip out of it.”

Carter laughs. “Bristol, Rhode Island isn’t exactly a destination, Cash.”

“Tell that to all those people who travel there for the Fourth of July.”

“True. And it would be good to get out in front of this thing. To show Landry we are team players. That we are as invested in that town as he is. Even if it’s not exactly true.”

But it could be. No place has ever felt like home to me. And maybe that’s because I’ve been in the wrong places. Maybe I’m looking for the wrong things, and I just need to start my search back where it all began. Besides, it wouldn’t hurt to visit her grave again. Or maybe it will, but it’s also necessary.



## CHAPTER 18

### GRACE

This is an incredibly stupid idea.

*A naïve, ill-conceived, stupid idea.*

Even as these words twist through my mind, my legs keep moving forward. I hate how we keep doing this to one another. How I keep hurting him.

And myself.

I'm just going to clear the air. Make things right and then set us back into our professional space.

*Or you're going to jump him, my inner hussy teases.*

It's the photo. The one from Friday night. I was all set to send the email to Cash, to remove any emotion from the interaction and just forward him the names, when I spotted the photograph Tessa had shown me of Cash and me kissing.

What is wrong with me? Why did I forward it to myself from her phone? I'm a glutton for punishment.

And an idiot. Because now I'm walking into his office, inhaling the woody smell that reminds me of Cash, and feeling a buzz like I've just

sipped straight from a whiskey bottle. That's what he does to me. He makes me tipsy with emotion.

Breathless, fearless, and stupid.

I lie to the receptionist that he's expecting me and am met by a beautiful young woman who identifies herself as Lucy, his secretary. She looks at both the receptionist and me as if I'm crazy.

"Mr. James doesn't have anyone on the list of appointments today," she tells me, eyeing me distrustfully.

I bite the inside of my lip. "Weird. I saw him last night and told him I'd be by."

That seems to do the trick. The girl smiles. "Oh, you must be the one Cat was going on about this morning."

I blush. Who is Cat and what were they saying about me?

She sighs. "But I still can't let you back there. I got in enough trouble for letting his sister through this morning." Ah, his sister, Cat. Catherine. The assistant looks sideways. "Let me talk to him. What did you say your name was?"

I close my eyes and pray that I'm not making a mistake by showing up here. "Grace Kensington."

She smiles. It's a sweet, endearing smile and I just want to wrap this girl in a hug. She's so innocent looking. I have no idea how she's lasted in a Fortune 100 company like this. You'd think she'd get eaten alive.

Almost as if she can hear my thoughts, she whispers, "It's only my first week. I don't want to lose this job."

I smile. Makes more sense. "Absolutely. Just let him know I'd like to speak to him. If he's busy, I can just leave him the list."

She disappears down the corridor and I wait. Impatiently if I'm honest. My fingers twist in nervousness and I look around the offices, wondering what Cash is like as a boss. The man I'd met in Florida had been so different from the one I'd come to know here.

I suppose the same could be said for me.

I'm surprised when I hear him say my name, not expecting him to come to me. Maybe he doesn't want me in his office. "Grace."

When I turn, I repeat what an idiotic idea this was in my head. He looks delicious and caught off guard. I raise my lips in a nervous smile, holding up the folder in my hand. "I brought the list."

He holds my gaze, not reacting at first. The eyes of both the receptionist and the secretary are on us, and yet I don't move or react. I'm not sure what to do. Or to say. I just know that I want to live in the way he looks at me. And I know when one of us speaks we will ruin it. That's all our words ever seem to do.

Finally, as if she can't stand to watch me squirm, the secretary speaks. "Mr. James, would you like me to bring Ms. Kensington to the conference room so you can meet with her there?"

As if he's just come out of the same trance as me, Cash shakes his head. "No, that's okay. She can follow me back to my office. Come on, Grace." He turns and walks, and I look to the two women who give me a sympathetic nod.

Everyone must feel the same way I do when they look at him. There is an air about him. And it's clear that I've sucked too much of it.

When we reach his office, he gestures for me to enter while he waits at the door. I take the seat across from his desk and fidget uncomfortably, waiting for him to walk into his own office.

When he finally moves, I hear myself exhale. “I didn’t expect to see you,” he admits, taking the seat at his desk. I watch as his hand shuffles some papers on his desk, and he slips something into a folder and stuffs it into a drawer.

Uncertainty tests my every move, and I adjust my glasses and push my hair back out of my face. It’s down and in long waves, and I remember the way it felt when he ran his fingers through it as I laid on his chest in his bed. If he’s remembering the same thing, he seems completely unbothered by it as the mask of professionalism has returned to his face.

“I wanted to apologize and deliver this.” I slide the folder over the desk and wait while he pulls it to him.

“It seems that’s all we do to one another. Apologize, that is,” he replies, as his eyes turn down to the folder.

“Yes, well it seems that I act my worst around you, and I really don’t mean to.” I fold my hands in my lap.

“Why do you think that is?” he asks, curiosity lacing his voice but his face failing to give away his emotions.

Nerves make my hands shake. “Honestly, I think you make me nervous.”

He stares at me intently. “I don’t think that’s what it is.”

My hackles go up, and I feel my defenses ready to bite again. I try to keep my tone even. “Well, what do you think it is then, Mr. James?”

He shakes his head and opens the folder. I wait as he studies each profile that Rachel and I put together.

He’s not going to answer my question. We both know the answer. It’s something that we can’t discuss. We’ve both agreed to keep this professional. We’ve both agreed this is nothing. And yet I’m crushed because I know that I came here with the intention to keep it anything but

professional. The fact that he's unaffected by my presence and I can barely formulate a sentence leaves me desperate to exit his office.

"I'll leave you to it," I nod at the folder. "Call my office to let me know who you'd like to meet."

I push back my chair and stand as Cash nods without looking up. I'm dismissed. As I should be. I shouldn't have come.

My heart beats in my chest as I walk to the door, hoping he'll call out to stop me, or say something. *Anything*. But he doesn't and I keep walking.



Tessa sits across from me on my couch eating lo mein from the container, and I stare down at my own carton like it's made up of fried toads. "Eat," Tessa says, pointing her chopsticks at me.

"I'm not hungry," I mutter, putting the fried rice down and picking up my wine glass.

Tessa moves closer to me, and force feeds noodles into my mouth. "You can't survive on alcohol. You *need* to eat."

I smile begrudgingly at her as I chew. "It was awful," I say sadly, remembering how Cash dismissed me without a glance.

"So you said. Why did you go there anyway?"

I blow out a breath. "I have no idea. I needed to see him. What is wrong with me? I'm obsessed with a man that can't stand me. I'm clearly delusional."

I've never been this woman. I'm legitimately sick to my stomach over how pathetic I've been.

Tessa raises her brow but doesn't refute my claims. "I think I should move in with you."

I laugh. "You just like this apartment."

"I do. This couch is so comfortable, its closer to my job, and you can't be alone without doing stupid things like showing up at millionaires' offices and throwing yourself at them."

I know she's just teasing me but she's not wrong. Maybe I overestimated my ability to live on my own.

"Seriously, how am I going to watch him date these women?"

"Honestly? I have no idea. This just went from bad to worse. Like I thought you had a minor crush, but this isn't *that*." She waves her hand in my pathetic direction. "I think you need to tell Marion what's up and get her to take over this case."

My eyes bug out. "Absolutely not. It's bad enough I have to tell her about Steven's affair. I can't tell her what a colossal mistake I've made when it comes to Cash. She'll absolutely reconsider leaving me the company."

Tessa's shoulders sag and she gives me a perturbed look. "You're annoying like this."

Affronted, I say, "Like what?"

She circles me with her finger. "All whiny and woe is me. I'm sorry but this is just...No."

"Um, in case you forgot, my husband left me for his secretary. I go on vacation, meet a dream man, and then come to find out I can't date him because he's my client. And now he isn't interested in me even after he's found out I'm getting divorced. I think I'm allowed to wallow for a bit. To have some *feelings* about the whole thing."



Tessa doesn't take the bait. "Yes, you are allowed to be sad. But this attitude isn't that. You're a smart woman, Grace. Smart enough to realize when your husband left you that it was a good thing. Marion is a wonderful woman who loves you. Tell her the truth. Lean into her. And move on from Cash." She rolls her eyes in annoyance. "I get that he was the first guy you had sex with after your separation and that maybe puts some unexpected emphasis on this, er, relationship, for lack of a better word. But it wasn't a relationship, Grace. He's someone you spent a weekend with. Not a lifetime. And you're more broken up about how he's treating you than the fact that your marriage is over."

I flinch at the accuracy of her words.

"I just think that maybe you are projecting some of your feelings over your failed marriage onto a situation that honestly wasn't that big of a deal." She breathes out a long breath and looks up at me. "I'm sorry if that's hard to hear, but part of me feels like you're a little naïve since you've been out of the dating scene for so long. I mean me and the girls, we've experienced this plenty of times. *This is dating*. I don't know how else to say it other than—move on."

My lips twist uncomfortably. I can't tell her she's wrong because she's probably right. And for the thousandth time I remind myself that although I thought there was something special, I'm sure Tessa has felt the same thing as well. She's telling me that. So who am I to tell her she's wrong? She's more experienced.

Resigned to the truth, I reply, "I'll talk to Marion in the morning."

Tessa looks up to the ceiling in silent prayer. I can't say I blame her. I just wish I knew what to pray for.



The pit in my stomach doesn't feel any less leaden when I walk through my office door the next morning. Knowing that I will chicken out if I go into my office, I march straight to Marion's. Her eyes rise to meet mine and I stare at her poised frame. With her gray hair perfectly styled and her black glasses on, she looks like she could be running a fashion magazine rather than a matchmaking company. Her smile falters as she meets my eyes, and she slips her glasses off her face, motioning for me to sit. "Grace, you look awful. What's going on?"

Not exactly how I hoped to start the meeting, but I guess it was only a matter of time before she realized that I was falling apart. I slink into the seat and give Marion a half smile. Then I breathe in, close my eyes, and reopen them, gathering the strength to tell her the truth. "Steven and I are getting a divorce."

Marion nods once, then stands and comes to sit in the chair beside me. "Are you okay?" she asks, in such a way that it makes me feel like I can really *not* be okay.

I shake my head. "Not really."

Marion pushes closer and pulls me into a hug. I feel myself break against her shoulder, surprising both of us. Marion's hand traces my back in soothing circles, and she whispers into my ear that it will be all right. I allow the woman who has become such a big part of my life to ground me and then I inhale a breath and pull myself together.

"I'm so ashamed," I say honestly.

Marion nods her head. I appreciate that she doesn't tell me how to feel. She doesn't say that there's nothing to be ashamed of. As an adult, I know that. My brain understands that. But it doesn't change how I feel.

"I am proud of you," she says as she stares at me.

I laugh through my tears. "Why?" I ask incredulously. "I haven't done anything to be proud of."

Marion shakes her head. "That's not true. You know your value. You stood up for yourself. And you didn't accept less than what you deserve." She eyes me, her face saying more than she'll ever put into words.

My mother didn't value herself. My mother never stood up for herself. My mother accepted so much less than what she deserved. And we both paid the price. A miserable relationship. A childhood destroyed. I am sparing myself from that. Sparing Steven from that. And thank God we were smart enough not to bring children into this.

"She's going to be so disappointed in me," I say honestly, wringing my hands together. My mother loves Steven. She'll never understand how I could walk away. She never would.

Marion tuts her cheek. "You leave her to me. You take care of you. Do you need time off? We can go on a trip together. Or shopping. A spa day?"

I laugh at her attempts to spoil me. It's all the things she did every time my mom called begging her to take me for the weekend, so that my mother could work things out with the man in her life. It didn't matter who it was. There were a few. And none of them wanted a bratty middle schooler around who didn't allow them to scream at her mother. I stood up for her. I never understood why she couldn't stand up for herself, let alone for me.

"I'm okay. I just needed to tell you. I took the time I needed in Florida. I'm rested. I'm coming to terms with this new life I'm leading. It's

different—*dating*—seeing the world from this view.”

Marion nods in understanding. “You found Steven so young, you never really had to try.”

“You’d think I’d be better at this given our profession,” I admit meekly.

“It’s so much easier to tell someone what to do, how to feel, to see it from the outside, than it is to experience it.”

That is precisely it. All these feelings are confusing me. I don’t understand them. I can’t categorize them or quantify them or slip them into a chart and make pros and cons as to what’s right, because now it’s my heart that’s involved rather than someone else’s.

“What will our clients think?” I ask honestly. “I mean, how can I give advice on finding the right person if I couldn’t even pick the right one for myself?”

Marion just stares at me. “Don’t you worry about that right now. You have to lick your wounds. And you’ll be busy enough taking over for me. Now is not the time for self-doubt.”

“You still want me to take over?”

Marion smiles. “Oh, my Sweets, yes. You are prepared. It’s your time. And it is *my* time to retire.”

I smile sadly. “I’m going to miss you. I don’t know how to do all of this without you.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Asher is not going anywhere. We will always be your family. And I’ll still be around the office. Maybe giving some tips on couples since that’s really what I prefer to do. Work my magic like I used to. But the business side of things? Grace, it’s your turn. And I have the utmost belief that you will do just fine.”

She reaches out and squeezes my hand as another tear slips down my face. I wipe it away and remind myself to breathe. “Are you sure you don’t want to go shopping?” she asks, with a half smile.

I shake my head. “No, I need to start moving forward. I’ve been drowning my sorrows in alcohol, flirting with the wrong men, and eating too much. It’s time to focus on the day-to-day.”

Marion raises her eyebrows. “One can never go wrong if they are flirting, even if it’s the wrong kind of man. Sometimes, that is precisely what we need to pick ourselves back up.” She winks at me as she stands and rounds back to her side of the desk, and I’m left to wonder what she thinks she knows, and what she thinks of it all.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes is shown in a dynamic, tilted position, with the liquid splashing upwards. The word "CASH" is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the center of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 19" are written in a similar bold, black, sans-serif font.

## CHAPTER 19

### CASH

I couldn't put my finger on what the problem was, but something odd was going on at work. Distributors we'd worked with for decades were looking to change their contracts all at the same time, each citing different reasons and expressing concern for the future. That in and of itself wouldn't be much of an issue since our company had suffered a shake-up. Despite my best efforts to paint this as a planned succession, my grandfather's absence raised alarm bells to distributors that they had the upper hand. On top of that, now a longtime bottling company whose owner had always been loyal to my family was seeking a meeting as well.

I had an uneasy feeling that everything was spiraling out of control. I've been so preoccupied with my feelings for Grace that I haven't been focusing on what really matters—my family's company.

Chase waltzes into my office without knocking, and I'm so worn-out from phone calls that I barely glare at him. "Ever thought to knock?"

"Did you hear anything about Hanson taking meetings with Forester?"

My ears perk up. Forester is our bottling company. I glance down at the emails I'd been exchanging with the owner and consider the multiple

messages I'd left him. "Fuck. That explains why he's dodging my calls."

"I know you have a lot on your plate," Chase starts but I hold up my hand.

"Nothing is more important to me than this company, Chase. Don't start that shit. We knew that things were going to spiral a bit when I took over. I'd hoped Pa would have been able to smooth it over with everyone before I took the helm but with him recovering at home that's not an option. We just have to project that everything is fine, that this was all planned, and eventually it will all shake out."

Chase grinds his teeth as he stares me down, and I feel like I'm going to snap.

"What? Just say it?"

"You can't be caught running around with women right now, Cash. You are at the helm. Grams is right. You need to settle down and show you're the right one to take over."

I slam my fist down on my desk in aggravation. "I *am* the right one to take over. You think you could do this better than I can? Handle the phone calls? Iron out the mess? Settle the fuck down!"

Carter storms in and slams the door shut. "Can the two of you shut the fuck up? You're making everyone around here nervous."

Chase grudgingly sits down. "Well, they should be nervous. We have contractors backing out left and right. I'm telling you; Hanson is behind this."

The office door opens and my last sibling saunters in. "Hanson is behind what?"

Cat plops down on the couch, and we all look at her guiltily. We've never discussed what happened back then. I don't even really know what exactly

happened, I just know what Hanson said happened. What he threatened to do. What Carter did. It makes me sick. I hope Cat never finds out.

“Cat, what are you doing here? You have a job, and it isn’t in this company,” Carter says without much judgment.

Cat takes a nail file out of her Louis Vuitton bag and starts filing as she puts her legs up on the couch, making herself completely comfortable. “Well, I’m starting to think that I should be working here. What are the rumors I’m hearing about Forester?”

Fuck. If it’s making it outside the company walls, we really are fucked. “I’ve got it under control,” I mutter.

Chase glares at me. “No, he doesn’t. Until he agrees to show his face in Bristol and prove that the company is continuing in Gramp’s stead, our suppliers and contractors are going to fear that we’re going under.”

Cat pauses her filing and looks to Carter and me. “You’re thinking of going back to Bristol?”

My eyes soften. “You don’t have to come. But yes, we are going to spend some time there. Landry likes to do business with local companies and while we used to be one, we haven’t made our presence known there in quite some time.”

All of us look at her. As much as we can be tough on one another, we rally around Cat. I know it’s hard to be a son without a mother, but I’d imagine it’s impossible to be a daughter without one. And going back there is a reminder of all that.

Cat sticks out her chin. “If you guys can do it, so can I.”

I stand up from my desk and walk to her, lifting her legs and putting them over me as I move closer to her on the couch. “But you don’t have to, Kit Cat. This isn’t your problem.”



She glares at me. “I’m a James too, ya know. Just because I’m not a man doesn’t mean I can’t be of use in this company.”

“Cat, you’ve never expressed interest in the company. If you want a seat at the table, I’ll grab you a chair. Hell, I’ll build you a bigger table. Whatever you want, it’s yours.” I hold out my hands to show her it’s all available to her. “You tell us what you want, and we’ll go along with it.” I speak for my brothers knowing that I have their blessing.

Cat looks around the room at each of us, and we all nod. She breathes out a sigh. “When?”

Carter pipes up with the details. “The party is in a month. But we should start showing up around there before then. I’ll start next week. Cash, you handle the party since you are who needs to be the face of all of this. Chase can handle another one of the weeks, and, Cat, you just tell us who you want to join.”

She smiles at me, and I know she wants to go when I’m there. I feel lucky that we are as close as we are. “Thanks. I’ll try for the event. Don’t you have a date?” Cat says, looking at her watch. “That’s why I’m here. I wanted to make sure you were dressed appropriately.”

Chase laughs, and Carter hides behind his hand as he holds back his own laughter.

I glare at them all. “I’ve dated women before, Cat. I’m pretty sure I can handle this.”

She smirks. “Yes, it’s not so much *women* that concern me. It’s the *woman* that is arranging the date. I want to make sure she isn’t the one showing up. Ya know, another setup.”

I roll my eyes. “You act like Grace is this conniving person. She’s not like that.” I run my teeth over my lips trying to figure out why I’m still

standing up for her.

Carter leans his head sideways, looking at me. “Well, I did hear she showed up here the other day out of the blue.”

I massage my neck as I look away from them all. “She delivered the list of women. That was all.”

“And she couldn’t do that via email?” Cat asks, looking at me pointedly.

It was exactly my thought. But Grace refuses to admit she has real feelings for me and I’m done playing games. I shake my head. “Listen, I can’t control her actions. I can only control mine. I took the list and she left. I’m moving on. I’m going out with someone new tonight. I know how to date. I think I’m dressed alright.” I motion down to my black shirt and look back to my siblings to see if I’m crazy.

“You look fine,” Chase mutters.

“Okay, well, now that we have resolved the company’s crisis and my dating crisis, can we adjourn this family meeting?” I ask, trying to keep my voice light but straining against the stress. Nothing has been resolved, least of all my feelings for Grace, but I won’t let them know that. The company is in deep shit and until I get to the bottom of the rumors of Hanson moving in on our contractors, I won’t sleep at night.

Chase stands. “Yeah, I’m out. Good luck bro,” he says, before leaving my office.

I breathe out a sigh. “Jeez, that was a close one.”

Carter laughs. “He gets overly worked up. Have fun tonight.” He turns to Cat and offers his arm. “Want to grab dinner, sis?”

Cat throws her arms around my shoulders and gives me a big hug as she whispers in my ear, “I know I’m hard on you about Grace, but I just want you to be happy.”

I kiss the top of her head. “I know. And I am. I’m completely fine. Promise.”

Both of them walk out and I sit in my chair, letting my head fall back against the leather and sigh.



Dating has never taken so much focus in my life. I am actively trying to pay attention to the woman across from me. In every sense of the word, she is beautiful. Green eyes, long brown hair, and an hourglass figure. Not to mention the fact that she’s smart and has a good job. She’s a production manager for the local news. And she isn’t shy about reaching out and touching me, something that I normally love in a date. But no matter what I do, I can feel Grace watching us. This is never going to work.

“Where are you from originally?” I ask, trying to focus.

Vanessa licks her lips as she pauses. She knows exactly what she’s doing. Once again, this should be something that holds my attention, but instead I turn my head to look for Grace. I know she’s here. I can feel her. I just haven’t spotted her yet.

“New Hampshire. Live free or die!” she says like an enthusiastic college student. It’s really not a fair comparison; she’s my sister’s age and hasn’t acted ditzy at all. I’m just not interested. It’s enraging. She shifts herself lower in her chair, leaning her breasts down onto the table as she whispers across from me, “I’m really bad at this. I’m sorry.”

I let out a sigh, feeling like shit, and reach my hand across the table to squeeze hers. “You’re doing great. This is weird, right?” I motion between

us. "I've never gone on a blind date before," I offer, trying to make her feel better.

She shrugs her shoulders and relaxes. "Oh, thank God you're normal. I mean Grace said you were, but she didn't adequately express how hot you are, so I feel like I'm coming off all wrong."

I smirk. "You think I'm hot?"

Flirting I can do. *This* is where I excel.

She grins. "Right, like you need me to stroke your ego. Why are you doing this, anyway?" she asks honestly.

"Same could be said for you. Gorgeous woman, amazing figure, awesome job, good personality, what am I missing? How are *you* still single?"

Vanessa blushes and I know I've turned the night around. "Guess I was just waiting for the right guy," she says coyly.

I know that line is supposed to make me feel excited, make me believe that I'm someone special. But I already know I'm not the guy she's waiting for. Which is ridiculous. How could I already know that? I've spent less than half an hour with her. She could be the woman I've been looking for. I just need to give her a damn chance.

"So tell me, Cash, what do you like to do when you're not working?"

I laugh. "I feel like that's all I do lately."

"Well, when was the last time you relaxed, really took a break, and just did something for you?"

My mind turns to Grace, sitting on the beach, while she read a book and I stared at the ocean. That was the last time I relaxed. The last time I felt genuinely happy and content. I mean, of course the cocktails and the views helped, but I know it wasn't that which brought me joy. It was her.

At that exact moment I spot her, sitting at the bar, her eyes on our table, glasses on her face, a pad in front of her, likely taking notes, and an indiscernible look pinching her lips to the side. We make eye contact and I hold her gaze.

Her damn glasses drive me crazy.

But her eyes—even from far away I can feel the hold she has on me. The same one she had the other day as she stood across from me in my office and when I first saw her on the plane. She looks away first, and I shake my head.

It was one thing when I thought her marriage stood in the way. That we *couldn't* be together. Now I know it's just her. She doesn't want me the same way I want her. She doesn't need me the same way I need her. I *need* to move on.

“Probably with my brothers,” I reply to Vanessa. “We like to go out to eat and get drinks on the weekends. Work hard, play hard.”

She smiles brightly. “My sisters and I too. How many brothers do you have?”

“Two.”

“Oh my gosh! How old are they? I have two sisters! We should all go out!” I smile and she hesitates. “Wow, that was forward. We haven't even made it through cocktails and I'm already planning a family get-together.”

I laugh. “One is older than me and one is younger. How old are your sisters?”

She smiles meekly. “They are both younger. In their twenties. Not that your brothers would mind, I'm sure.”

I nod in agreement. Carter never dates women his age. Maybe this could work. A few women to hang out with, a beautiful one at that, and she seems

kind. I feel myself relaxing and find myself interested. More interested than I expected to be. She's easy to be around. Which is nice.

We order dinner, and I forget we're being watched, losing myself in Vanessa's company. I can feel when Grace is gone though. I look up and see her spot at the bar empty. My shoulders settle even more. I can't imagine it was easy for her. I know I wouldn't have done it. Watched her date another man. It's a fucked situation we're in, and I'm glad the roles aren't reversed.

"So, what do you say? Want to grab an after-dinner drink at the bar?" she asks, as the waitress takes our plates.

I'm surprised when I agree. I stand up and Vanessa leads the way while I place my hand on her back, guiding her to the bar. Her hair smells like lavender, and I inhale, forcing the comparison to Grace's coconut shampoo from my head.

When we reach the bar, she turns her bar stool to mine so that our knees are touching while we talk, and that little bit of affection is a welcome sign.

Unlike other women, she's forward in her attention, but not in an inappropriate way. Just simple touches that let you know she's interested. It keeps my attention and focus precisely where it belongs—all on her.

Vanessa leans in, brushing her hand against my cheek and smiles. Behind her, I spot Grace sitting in a booth, laughing. She's not looking at us. She's not studying or taking notes. She's talking to someone, but I can't make out the other person without moving my head in an obvious manner around Vanessa's. "Hey, you okay?" Vanessa asks, pulling my attention back to her.

"Yeah, I just thought I saw someone I know." I shake my head.

"Can you grab me a cabernet? I'm going to run to the bathroom."

I nod and wait until she's out of sight to look back in Grace's direction. Across from her is Hanson. He's gesturing exaggeratedly, and she laughs so

hard that tears fall down her face. Before I can consider what I'm doing, I stand from the bar and walk to their table.

“What’s so funny?” I hear myself ask.

*Idiot. Complete idiot.*

Grace and Hanson both turn to me, Hanson with pure joy on his face at having me witness him with Grace, and Grace with little emotion whatsoever.

“James, how’s the company?” Hanson says, looking up at me with a smirk. He’s such a slimy motherfucker. I’ll never forgive him for what he did in college to my sister. And it’s clear as day that the rumors of him moving in on my company are true. It’s written all over his damn face.

“Just great. Grace, can I have a moment?” I say tersely, turning to her.

She hesitates, looking at Hanson, then back to me and then over to the bar. “Where’s Vanessa? It looked like you were really hitting it off.”

She doesn’t sound the least bit jealous or concerned. I feel unhinged at the sight of her laughing with Hanson and she’s completely unaffected by my date.

I try to think of a reason why I would need to talk to her. Anything that would sound reasonable and not like I’m a jealous asshole. “She went to the bathroom. I just figured I’d give you a rundown on it. Ya know, for your notes.” I point to her purse where I know she has her notepad, and she looks down and then back to me, nonplussed.

“Sure, okay.” Turning to Hanson, she says, “I’ll be right back.”

He winks at her and my skin crawls. As soon as she slides out of the booth and is within inches of me, I can practically taste the coconut. I try to keep myself from breathing in her smell, willing myself to keep Vanessa’s scent in my nose, but as soon as she moves past me, I inhale.

*Fucking heaven.*

And fucking hell.

“Where do you want to chat?” she asks, looking back at me with confusion in her eyes.

Her damn violet eyes that I could stare into for hours and still discoverer different hues as the light changed.

“Here’s fine,” I say, pointing to a high-top.

She stops at the table, waiting for me to speak. When I don’t, she bites her lip. “Is everything okay?”

Balling my fists, I try to gain control. Try to figure out what I’m even doing here standing across from her. Moments ago, I was on a date, happy, enjoying myself. Now I’m miserable, my heart is pounding, and I’m confused as to what she wants.

“What do you want?” I ask her, begging her to tell me she wants me. Pleading for her to admit that I’m not the only one in this.

Grace’s eyes look between mine, and her head shakes the tiniest bit in confusion. “Cash, I...what?”

I see Vanessa walk out of the bathroom and move to the bar, looking for me. *Fucking hell, I’m running out of time.*

“What do you want?” I grit out again.

“What do I want from what?” she asks, her voice laced with concern.

“From *me*? You came to my office the other day, why?”

Grace looks to the corner and spots Vanessa, then she turns her head back in the direction of Hanson. I almost snap. “Look at me.” I pause, softening, and say, “Please, look at me, Gracie.”

The name seems to grab her attention. Her eyes flick to mine and she stares. Then as if on autopilot she lifts her hand to my cheek, but before she



touches, she pulls it back down. I feel my face turn into the ghost of her touch. “Oh, Whiskey, what do *you* want?”

A flash of a camera reminds me we aren't alone. That I don't have the luxury to go after what I want. That my family's business is on the line and that moments ago she was sitting with the head of the company that is trying to take us down and *laughing*. There's no winning when it comes to our relationship. There are too many obstacles. I sigh in frustration and shake my head as I reply to her question, “Nothing you can give me.”



## CHAPTER 20

### GRACE

The sound of my heels echoes through the halls of Cash's office building. It's Saturday afternoon and Cash has another date this evening. He asked me to pop by beforehand to talk. I wouldn't be surprised if it's to fire me. We can't keep up this push and pull. It's not professional and it's mostly my fault.

I've come prepared with coffees, baked goods, and an apology. I figure one of those things should soften him up a bit and I can offer to have Rachel take over as the liaison to his dates.

Surprisingly, the office is empty for such a high-end business. One would expect he would keep at least a skeleton staff on the weekends, but the only person I've seen so far was the man working security at the door. I was told to come right up because Cash was expecting me. Well, I should hope so; he summoned me here.

As the elevator delivers me to his floor, I suck in a breath and prepare myself. It's show time.

When the door opens, I find him leaning against the receptionist's desk. Dressed in a pair of dark jeans and a white button-down which is rolled up

at the sleeves, highlighting strong forearms that strain as they remain folded against his chest, he looks at ease and yet put together. In control and relaxed. It's perplexing and reminds me of how he was on our weekend away. A time that feels like it was spent between two totally different people. Not the two people who can barely stand each other like we've become. Two people who now can't seem to have a conversation without snapping at one another.

He raises his brow in hello and adjusts himself from his propped position into a tall one. I straighten my back while attempting to balance the coffee and pastries and still maintain my power position. "Mr. James," I say.

"Grace," he replies with a tilt of his head, indicating I should follow him back to his office. He takes the tray of drinks from my hand without asking and leads the way.

We walk in silence. I don't think either of us really know how to address the other. How to act around the other. So silence it is. And as odd as it sounds, it feels eerily familiar and almost comfortable. In fact, it may be the most comfortable I've been around Cash since I left him in his hotel bed.

When we reach his door, he stops and waits for me to walk in. Being this close to him sets tiny pinpricks of desire down my spine, and I try to focus on the smell of coffee to keep from inhaling his woodsy scent.

I fail epically.

His scent is like an aphrodisiac causing my toes to curl in on themselves, and my fingers grip the bag in my hand, willing my slutty, slutty hands to stay off his body.

Cash places the coffee tray on his desk and looks down at me. "You brought treats?"

“The coffee is black, but I have creamers and sugar in the bag if you want,” I offer.

He shakes his head. “I’m going to need something stronger. Up for a drink?”

*To be fired? Yeah, I think a drink will soften the blow.*

I nod.

As Cash walks to the bar in the corner of his office, I take a moment to look around. Every other time I’ve been in this space I’ve been teetering on the edge of a breakdown so I’ve never really explored it properly. The ceilings are ridiculously high, and the windows span the entire length. Where there isn’t window there is brick, and it gives the room character and feels oddly like it was built just for Cash. He fits in here in a way that he doesn’t fit in many other spaces.

“Come here,” he says, interrupting my thoughts. “I want to show you something.”

I release my death grip on the pastry bag and walk to the window where Cash is pointing out into the distance. Unprepared for him to turn, or for him to be holding a glass of whiskey in his hand when he does it, I bump into his arm, and his entire drink splatters on his white shirt. My eyes grow wide in embarrassment, and I immediately start patting at his shirt as if my hands could make the brown stains disappear. “Oh, God, Cash, I’m so sorry.”

Cash’s hands hover above my own as if in hesitation and then he places them on mine, stopping my incessant patting. “It’s okay; I have more shirts.”

“But your date,” I reply, looking up and meeting his eyes.

Without taking his eyes off mine, he begins to unbutton his shirt. First, it's the top one. I try to look away, but my eyes remain trained on the hint of skin that peeks through. Then the next one comes undone, and I feel the breath halt in my throat. Lost in the way his thumb pushes the button forward, the way his fingers press into his shirt, the same way they pressed inside me that night. *Our one night.*

Will that be all we ever have?

“Breathe, Angel,” Cash’s smooth voice washes over me.

Suddenly, I’m squeezing my thighs together as I feel the dampness building between my legs.

“Grace,” he says, his voice scratching at my skin.

“Huh?” I whimper, my eyes finally reaching up to look at him again.

“What are you thinking about?”

I shake my head, refusing to voice my innermost thoughts. My desires. My need to feel those fingers inside me again. To feel his lips pressed against mine. His mouth...

“Fuck, Grace, you’re biting your lip.”

“Hm,” I hum a response.

Cash is suddenly pressing his body up against mine, caging me against the window. His smooth olive skin, the muscles in his chest, all of him, presses against me. He’s so close that I can feel every intake of breath, every beat of his heart, and the sharp bulge below his jeans lets me know his desires mirror my own.

His hand circles my throat, and he forces my eyes to meet his. Whiskey-brown eyes search mine as his breath mingles with my own.

“Did you go home with Hanson last night?”

The shake of my head is constricted by his hand around my neck, by his fingers digging into the flesh of my throat. Not hurting me. *Possessing me.*

He shifts his hips against me, and I moan.

“We shouldn’t,” I warn.

Irritation flashes in his eyes, and I see the war dying inside us both.

“Couldn’t stop if I tried, Grace, and I’m so fucking tired of trying,” he says seconds before his thumb pulls my lip down harshly and his mouth then kisses away the sting.

My body does nothing but sag in relief, in defeat, in acceptance, and I kiss him back. Unable to move from the weight of him against me, I shift my pelvis against him, seeking more.

More Cash, more hardness, more *everything*.

His thumb caresses my chin, and he stops kissing me, holding me hostage with his fingers, his body, and the piercing stare he offers. “What if things were different? If you weren’t my matchmaker and...”

“And what, Cash?” I practically pant, dying to kiss him again.

Cash speaks as if he’s completely unaffected. He’s completely in control, whereas I am ready to melt into the floor in a puddle of need. “If I wasn’t me and you weren’t you...If we were those two people who met on the plane...no husband—”

I cut him off, “Soon to be ex-husband.”

He smiles. “Yes, soon to be ex...What if things had been different...would you have stayed?”

“Stayed?” I ask, almost stupid with lust.

“In bed. Would I have woken up to you beside me, after spending the night by your side? After having what is inarguably the best night of my life...the best sex of my life...”

I close my eyes and am hit with the memory of Cash above me, under me, behind me, inside me. When I open them, I give him a teasing reply, “In this dream are you not the CEO of a Fortune 100 company?”

His eyes don’t give in to the banter. “I’m me and you’re you...without the husband...”

I sigh. “Would I have stayed...and what? Become the next Mrs. James?”

He shakes his head, and his eyes finally leave my own—the spell broken. He backs away, leaving me cold against the glass.

*Why did I say that? Why can’t I ever just say the right thing?*

Unable to handle the loss of his heat, I turn around to look out the window, hoping to find what he’d been pointing at before. But I just see the city I’ve come to love. A place that I used to envision as my freedom that now acts as a cage around us both. We can’t be the two people he wants us to be because there’s eyes everywhere in the city watching his every move.

And yet like he said, I couldn’t stop myself if I tried. Facing away from him, with my fingertips against the window, I sigh. “Yes, I would have stayed. Yes, to everything.”

I spin around to face him, to see if we can figure out how to really make this work, but the room is empty.

My admission echoes inside my head. I really did want it. I really did want him. But as always, the timing was off.



## CHAPTER 21

### GRACE

It's a slow torture watching the man you are not so secretly falling for date other women. No matter what I want, Cash's situation and my baggage make it impossible for us to be together. Not that he's reached out again. It's really for the best. He deserves someone who isn't broken, not someone who can't even figure out the way to properly express herself.

So, I'm back to watching Cash date other women. It's a fun time. The second date for Cash goes off without a hitch. I keep my gaze off Cash and instead focus on his date's reaction to their chemistry. It's nonexistent. That might have made the entire night more palatable if I'm being honest.

The third date...the third date is a bit more difficult. She's gorgeous and it seems that Cash is trying to prove a point because he's all over her. And drunk. I leave before I have to witness a kiss, or God forbid see him go home with her.

Is this situation ideal? No, absolutely not. But I'm a professional; I can *do* this.

What I can't do is act cool, calm, and collected about dinner with my mother. And unfortunately, she showed up thirty minutes before Cash's next



date.

His fourth date. At this point it should be easy to see him with other women. We are going into our third week of working together, and it's been a month since Florida. It's been almost two weeks since he pushed me against the window in his office and offered me everything. I've maintained control since then—I've acted like a professional. And yet the idea of having to control my emotions over Cash while also controlling my emotional reaction to my mother just might put me over the edge. A woman only has so much poise, so much patience, so much *control*.

“Why don't I join you both?” Marion says from the door.

I shake my head to let her know that I haven't told my mother about Steven and then smile and accept her kind offer. “We'd love that, right, Mom?”

My mother turns around and looks back at Marion in faux surprise. They may have been best friends for the last forty or so years, but when it comes to Marion's and my relationship, my mother has a jealous streak a mile long. Not that she cared when I was a kid and she pawned me off on Marion almost every weekend so she could date whoever was in the revolving door of men. Now she acts affronted that Marion and I have a relationship outside of her.

“Of course, Mare. Will Steven be joining us too, Grace?”

Without batting an eye, the lie slips from my tongue. “Nope, he has to work late, and I was supposed to be attending a work thing. He doesn't like watching other people date.”

My mother gives a frustrated sigh. “Well, why would he? So where are we off to tonight? Who's the lucky bachelor?”

Marion interjects, “Cassius James. You know, James Spirits.”

My mother's shoulders stiffen slightly, and she shoots Marion a look I can't quite decipher. *Interesting*. I file my observation away to ask Marion about it later and stand up from my desk. We are going to be late if we don't leave.



“So you just watch them all night?” my mother asks as I glance in Cash's direction. He looks tired. Maybe he had a repeat with one of the other women last night. Or someone I don't know about. He definitely does not look like he got a good night's sleep.

The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up, revealing forearms that leave me clenching.

*How is it that a forearm could make me hot?*

It's probably because I know what it feels like to have *those* specific arms wrapped around me. Those fingers trailing my naked skin in the shower, setting fire to my body.

“Grace, are you listening to me?” my mother asks as she waves her hand in front of my face. Marion purses her lips as she bites back a smile, entertained by my pink cheeks.

“Sorry, Mom. Yes, I monitor for chemistry.”

This time my mother turns her body so that she is watching them in an obvious manner. Marion interjects, “Lily, really, turn around. This is my business we're talking about.”

*Thank you.* At least my mother respects one of us.

My mother turns back around and rolls her eyes. “Just trying to point out that it doesn’t take a degree to determine whether someone has chemistry or not. And they clearly don’t. Marion, if you are allowing Grace to set him up, you should at least be teaching her how to spot a good match. Although, I’m not surprised that she can’t.”

I grind my teeth and breathe deeply.

Before Marion can defend me, my mother continues, “I really hope you aren’t just handing the business over on my account. You know Grace can pave her own way. No one ever gave *me* any handouts.”

“Mom,” I start, but like a real mother, Marion sticks her hand in front of my chest to save me from this car wreck.

“Lily, I assure you, I am not giving any handouts to anyone. Grace is an exceptional matchmaker, and my business could not be in better hands.” She lowers her hand to my leg and squeezes. I close my eyes and nod a thank you.

It shouldn’t be this hard to be around my own mother, but I know that the next hour is going to be continuous digs. It’s just what she does. It’s who she is. I know this and yet somehow it always comes as a shock. Her words bite me in a way that will leave me reeling for the next week. I hate that I allow her to get to me this way.

“Grace, have you stopped by Steven’s office lately? I noticed his secretary was wearing a very low-cut shirt at work today.” My mother gives me a knowing smile.

“First, what were you doing at his office?”

She smiles innocently, although I know there is nothing innocent about her. “Can’t I visit my son-in-law? I wanted to thank him for the generous

birthday gift he sent. I figured you wouldn't let him know that I personally said thank you."

"That's because he had nothing to do with it, Mom. *I* bought you the computer...and the spa certificate. Steven doesn't even buy gifts for his own family. I buy everything." I huff in annoyance. She's unbearable.

"Well Grace, it's with his money so I thought I should say thank you. That isn't the point of this conversation, though. My point is...you aren't doing yourself any favors allowing a secretary as beautiful as he has to work for him. Especially when you're..."

Before she can finish, Marion silences her with a glare. But I need to hear it. Call me a glutton for punishment—a masochist—call me whatever the hell you want but I *need* to hear what my mother was going to say. "Tell me, Mom, what am I?"

My mother shakes her head. "Never mind. My point is...rather than worrying about who that guy over there is dating...you should be concerned about who your husband is dating."

I laugh. If she really thought my husband was "dating" someone else, you'd think she would be affronted for me. Angry. You know, motherly. But no, my mother is somehow going to pin this on me. Not to mention the fact my husband *is* actually dating the someone that she is referring to as gorgeous.

"Enough," Marion says, slamming her glass down, and garnering attention from half the restaurant. When Cash looks up at us, his eyes catch mine and I feel myself unravel.

*No, not now. Please, stupid, weak, emotions, bottle yourself up and look away.*

But I don't. My eyes hold his, and I watch how his face morphs from cold to concerned. His date seems to notice as well, and she grabs his attention back. As soon as his eyes leave mine, I stand up and mutter an "excuse me," needing to get as far away from the table as I can before I crack.

I know what my mother was getting at. I've gained weight. I've let myself go. Yes, I'm aware a woman's worth isn't tied to her waist size, or her hips, or her career, or her friendships...all of those things are just small pieces that make up each one of us. But when all those things seem to be unraveling before my very eyes, I can't help but believe what my mother is saying.

Steven left me because I wasn't enough. Even if *he* wasn't enough for me either, it still stings.

The tears stupidly fall before I make it into the bathroom, and when I push open a door, hoping for privacy, I find that I've walked into a coat closet instead of the bathroom.

Cash's voice breaks through the silence. "What are you doing?"

I groan as I push myself farther into the coats and try to ignore Cash and his concern.

"Grace, what are you doing?" he asks again right before he reaches out and pulls me into his chest, surprising us both.

Tears stream down my face, and my glasses fog. Every cold word he's uttered, every glare he's offered, the indifference Steven showed when I found out about the affair, Steven's attempt at groveling, my mother's words...everything hits me all at once and I break down. "Gracie, baby, please, what can I do?" Cash whispers against my hair as his fingers stroke my back.

For a few treasured moments I allow myself to be held. To lose myself in his familiar scent, to lean upon his strong frame, and pretend for just a moment that I'm not alone in this world and that the one person whose solace I seek can be mine.

Cash lifts my chin between his fingers and forces me to meet his eyes. "Angel, tell me what to do? How can I make this better? *Please*," his eyes plead with me as his mouth whispers promises against my own.

Aggravated that I can't have him, that my baggage makes this entire relationship untenable, that I never can find the right words to express myself, I whisper back a plea, "Pick someone. End this. Pick someone so I don't have to do this anymore."

Cash closes his eyes and clenches his jaw. When he opens them again I see only fury. "You think I don't want to be touching someone else right now? Thinking about someone else? I can't touch anyone else because all I think about is *you*! Last week, the blonde, she was so into me she practically threw herself at me. And she was nice. My family would have loved her. But I couldn't touch her without drinking. You saw me. I was downing drink after drink. Not because I wanted to have a good time. But because I couldn't touch her without thinking about *you*." His voice gets louder the angrier he gets.

Cash grabs my chin and stares at me. "Find me someone I can *touch*. Find me someone who turns me into fucking lava like you do. Please, find me a woman that makes me feel half of what I feel for you, and I swear, Grace, I'll pick her. I'll give you what you want. Your promotion. Your fucking marriage. Whatever you want."

He pulls away, panting, leaving my cheeks cold and my heart pounding. A growl escapes from his mouth as he scrapes his hands through his hair.

“Put me out of my misery, Grace, and find me someone so I can stop looking at a married woman like she’s the only thing I’ll ever want, because you’ve made it abundantly clear that I can’t have you.”

Cash pants as he looks down at me, but I’m rendered speechless. I’ve never had someone *feel* so much. Express themselves so grandly. Care so much that it’s scary.

When I bite my lip to keep from begging him to pick me, he shakes his head. I turn around, unable to return his gaze. I need to get out of here, I need to get away from him...but I can’t make myself walk away.

“Cash,” I whisper, facing the door and trying to keep my voice even. Trying to keep the emotion out of my words.

He moves closer, until I can feel his warm breath against my neck as he says, “Turn around, please.”

I shake my head.

His forehead goes to the back of my neck, and I feel him sigh and then breathe me in. “This isn’t working.”

I nod, keeping myself rigid and trying so hard not to lean into him. How is it that someone I barely know has become the one person who can make everything feel better? Or so much worse.

“*I need you.* Please turn around.” There is something so vulnerable in his voice. In the way he’s leaning against me. I remember his words in Florida about his job—about how it wasn’t his choice—how he didn’t want it. I remember the tortured look in his eyes, the sadness, over having to take over, and I can’t help myself, I turn around to see if the same look plagues his whiskey eyes.

It should be surprising to see so much emotion on his face. It should be impossible to read someone I’ve only known for a little over a month. We

shouldn't be the person that the other is looking to for comfort. But when he looks down at me, and his eyes are pools of hope, and his lip turns up in a half smile, I can't help it. I *want* to be that person for him. I want to be his safe space.

"Please, Grace, tell me what you want."

I want to whisper *I want you*, but my situation hasn't changed.

"It doesn't matter what I want," I reply instead.

He leans his forehead against mine. "It matters to me."

"Your job," I try.

"Screw my job, Grace. Do you care about me? Was it real? Was any of it real? When I was on a date with Vanessa she asked me the last time I was happy, and I knew without a doubt it was with you. It didn't matter what we were doing—snorkeling, eating dinner, dancing beneath the stars...Hell, watching you read a book. I could have done that for days and been happy. When I was with you I felt alive. Just tell me...was it all me? Or did you feel it too? *Do you feel it too?*"

The dam bursts and words fall from my mouth. "Of course, I feel it. How could I not feel it? I can't breathe when we're in the same space, can't think, and certainly can't focus on anything other than you. You're like a sunset after a rainy day—unexpected and so beautiful that it takes a minute to realize that you're real. I want to sit down and enjoy you, but I forgot to bring the wine and cheese."

A chuckle escapes his mouth at my absurdity. "How about I bring the whiskey and we forget the food?"

I laugh and my eyes close in happiness. I never have the right words and yet it's like I'm his favorite book. He gets me in a way no one ever has.



Cash cradles my cheeks, holding me like I'm porcelain, like we are the only two people in the world, like I'm *everything* to him. "Gracie, please," he whispers as he lowers his lips to mine, asking permission, no, *begging for permission*, to kiss me.

Giving in, I move onto my tiptoes and slide my arms around his neck, pulling him to me, and our lips come together. His tongue swipes against my lips and I grant him more access, losing myself completely in this moment. I can't tell you how long we stand there kissing—how long we hold one another and forget the outside world—but every millisecond that I'm with Cash, that I'm in his arms and touching him, breathing him in, escaping from reality, is a stolen moment that I don't want to give back.

Someone opens the closet door and offers a surprised, "Excuse me," then shuts the door in embarrassment. I laugh into his mouth, and he smiles against mine.

I raise my eyes to his and see the lines around his eyes are crinkled, and he wears a look of genuine happiness. The kind of happy I haven't seen on him since we were lying in bed in Florida. It's beautiful, and I hate that I don't get to see that face more often. "Cash, you have to get back to your date."

He sighs and turns his cheek into mine, grazing against it softly, sending a shiver down my spine. "You're the only one I want to date."

"I don't want to be hiding in the shadows with you. I don't want to be hiding in the shadows at all." A tear slips down my cheek. All the feelings from the past hour come rushing forward. My mother's scorching words, watching Cash with another woman, almost losing him completely.

"We don't have to hide."

“Cash, can you honestly say you are ready to deal with a relationship with a woman who is going through a divorce? *A messy divorce*, which will only become messier when the press gets wind that we’re together. You’re *you*.” I motion toward him. “You are the new golden boy, garnishing press and interest, and *criticism* over the handling of your company.”

He flinches at the mention of his company. I move closer to him, hating how I’ve made him feel. Cash’s eyes soften and he opens his arms to me. I move into them and lean my head against his chest. “I’m so sorry, Gracie,” he whispers into my hair.

“Me too,” I reply, but the words get caught in my throat between a hiccupping sob.

He breathes me in and squeezes me tightly. “Just give me time to figure this all out.”

I sigh against his chest. “I’ve got time.”

“And in the meantime, could you try not wearing these glasses out in public?” There’s a hint of teasing in his voice.

“You don’t like them?” I ask, my hand going up to my glasses and taking them off to clear the fog that’s accumulated from our heat.

Cash groans. “They drive me fucking crazy, Grace.”

A smile peeks through my cloudy exterior, and I pinch my lips to the side. “Oh yeah?”

Cash grins. “There’s my girl.” His thumb rubs softly against my chin. “Yeah, your glasses, your skirts, you...you drive me fucking crazy, Angel. I’m infatuated. *Obsessed*. And I hate making you cry.”

His eyes study me seriously, and I lean up to kiss him. Before our lips touch, I whisper, “I’m pretty crazy about you too, Cash.” His dimple pops with his boyish grin, and he moves the extra millimeter to grab me in a kiss.

When his tongue snakes its way into my mouth, warmth floods my body, and within seconds, I'm moaning against him.

*How does he do this to me every time? Make me forget where we are, our circumstances, hell, he makes me forget my own damn name.*

Regrettably, I pull away. "You really do need to get back to your date."

Cash reaches out and touches my cheek, stroking me. "I'm really sorry for how I acted, Grace. I'm going to make this right, and you and me, Gracie, we're going to dance under the moonlight again...outside the shadows."

I close my eyes, remembering our perfect night in the Keys. And picture a future filled with more nights like that. Oh, just maybe...I smile sadly. "Focus on your job, Whiskey. I've got a lot on my plate with the divorce and work. Don't worry about me."

Cash shakes his head as he tips my chin up to gaze at him. "I'm going to figure it all out. My job, the press, and *us*." He leans down and his lips brush against mine again. "Don't give up on me yet."



## CHAPTER 22

### CASH

**T**he problem with having my siblings living so close is that now no matter where I turn one of them is hanging around. Today it's Cat. I thought for sure I'd have a shot of being left alone on the weekend, but when I walk into my office, determined and nervous for a meeting with a PR executive and our legal counsel that I'd purposefully scheduled on a Saturday so that no one would be around, I find Cat lounging on my couch again, a Twizzler hanging from her lip and another magazine in her hands.

"Oh goodie, you're back!" she says as she swings her legs off the couch into a sitting position.

"Cat, I really did believe you had a job somewhere else. Is there something you need to tell me?"

She rolls her eyes. "No. I'm meeting friends for lunch down this way and thought I'd stop in to say hi to my favorite brother."

"Favorite brother? I mean we both know it's true, but I have a feeling you're buttering me up. What do you want?"

She stands up and throws the magazine on my desk, and I find another picture of me on a date. This time it's one with Vanessa from a few weeks

ago. Do the papers have nothing else to publish but my boring dating life? Although, I suppose it's better than news about the company. *That* is far more salacious.

"You went out with Vanessa Simpson. Tell me all the details."

I scrunch my face in confusion. "How do you know her last name?"

"We went to college together. She reached out after the date. Said it went well but that you never called again. Did it go well? I *love* her for you!"

Setting my coffee down on my desk, I ignore her question.

"Cash, I'm talking to you."

I glare at her. "I'm aware, but I have a meeting in like five minutes, and I really don't have time to discuss your hope for my love life."

"So you admit this involves your love life?" She smiles excitedly and claps her hands as she screeches, "EEEE!"

What is it with women and screeching?

"Catherine Hope James, please take it down a notch."

She smiles. "Oh, someone is in a *mood*."

*No, I just don't want to discuss this with you because the minute I tell you that I'm moving forward with Grace, you are going to lose your shit.*

Running my hand through my hair, I shake my head. "I don't have time right now. Can we discuss this tomorrow?"

Her lips are pulled so wide a dentist could see her teeth from outer space. "No. We are going out with the Simpson sisters tonight. I already told Chase and Carter. They're down. I showed them pictures." She raises her brow conspiratorially.

*Fucking A.*

A knock on my door interrupts the insanity before I have the ability to tell her there is no chance of me going out with Vanessa again. She's nice,

beautiful, and she will definitely make someone happy, but I'm taken. Mind, body, and soul. I admit that it sounds ridiculous, but it doesn't matter. No woman stood a chance after I met Grace, and now that I've come to terms with that, I know what I need to do.

"Mr. James, the men are in the conference room," Lucy says quietly as she looks between Cat and me.

"Thank you, Lucy. I'm coming. Kit Cat, it's been fun. I'll call you later."

She winks as if we are in on a secret and bounces out of my office. She's absurd. A thirty-four-year-old woman bouncing. I roll my eyes and laugh as I walk down the hall. If nothing else, it is nice to see my sister so happy.



"By all indications, everyone is still willing to sign a new contract. They just want assurances."

"What kind of assurances?" I ask as my knee bounces under the table.

The man across from me frowns. "The kind that shows that the company isn't changing. That you aren't going to suddenly drop the suppliers you've used forever for some hip younger social media crew."

Huffing in frustration, I throw my hands in front of me. "How have I given any indication that I'm going to do any of that?"

"Your brother—" he starts.

"Chase is not running this company. I am. But he does have good ideas. As does Carter. We aren't going to do things exactly as they have always been done, but we aren't going to abandon our ideals or our long-term

partners either. I am going to respect what my grandfather did and build upon it. Sell them that!”

He smiles. “I can work with that.” He begins to pack up, knowing that I am not one to waste time sitting around and bullshitting, but I hold up my hand to stop him.

“I have another issue.”

“Oh?”

I take a long breath, preparing to stand up for the relationship that I know everyone is going to frown upon. “I’ve met a woman.”

He smiles. “Ah, that kind of situation. Well, congratulations, that’s wonderful.”

I tilt my head. “Not exactly. I mean yes, she’s wonderful, but unfortunately she’s still married.”

His face sours, and I realize that I’m not expressing this properly. “She’s getting a divorce. They were separated before we met.”

“Ah. Okay. I see the problem.”

“You do?”

He chuckles. “Yes. I’m the PR guy, I know how bad this can be turned. But we can handle it.”

I feel my mood lift exponentially. “Really? She keeps telling me that I’m better off staying away until the divorce is finalized, but I don’t know if I can do that.”

He sighs and eyes me closely. “I mean she’s not wrong. But it’s not impossible if we get in front of it. Just...until we figure out a strategy, try to stay out of the public eye with her. For her sake and yours, it would be better if you kept a low profile.”

I nod. “I can do that.”

“That means no late-night club excursions with your brothers. No dating multiple women through the week...” he trails off.

I laugh. “I hear you, and I promise, that was all in reaction to thinking I couldn’t be with her. That’s not me. She’s all that matters. Just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

He stands. “Well, then, it sounds like congratulations really are in order.”

My dimple pops as a smile spreads across my face. “I don’t want to get ahead of myself, but yeah, this is the real thing.”

He holds out his hand, grabbing mine and shaking. “Good for you. I’ll be in touch.”

As he walks out, I can’t help but think how smoothly that went. And how much harder it will be to sell this to my siblings. The press will be a cakewalk in comparison.



I’m dying to talk to Grace. I want to tell her my plan. Let her know that I’ve figured out a way for us to be together. That I’ve got it all figured out.

**Meet me for dinner**, I text her.

The dots dance on the screen and a reply comes almost instantaneously.

**Can’t. I’ve got plans with the girls. Tomorrow?**

I growl down my aggravation. I don’t want to wait until tomorrow. I’ve been waiting almost a month to have her again. To hold her, kiss her, fuck her. But what’s one more night, right?

**Cash: Fine, but tomorrow you’re mine, Gracie. Understood?**

**Grace: Awfully demanding, Mr. James.**



I laugh. She has no idea. The Keys were nothing. After a month without her skin pressed against my body, I'm going to destroy her.

I pocket my phone and walk into the gym. Like every other Saturday, I'm meeting my brothers for a round of boxing. Lucky for them, today I'm not raging with a need to beat the shit out of someone. I'm *happy*.

Chase doesn't even have to ask me if I want to go out; he tells me that he's already booked a limo and called ahead to the club. I'm starting to wonder if he's invested in this place for the amount of money he spends there.

"Cat is coming tonight too," he says, scratching his chin. "She says you met a girl, one of her friends, Vanessa? She's bringing her sisters."

Honestly, I'd rather stay home and get some sleep so I'm ready for my night tomorrow, but I don't like letting my brothers down. So instead, I roll my eyes, and admit defeat. "Yeah, Cat told me. I'm not interested, but by all means take your pick on whatever sister you're interested in. They're all available."

He laughs, but I know he's already planning his night. The kid would take all three sisters if he could figure out a way to get them to agree.



When I arrive at my brother's apartment, I'm not surprised to hear the girls screeching inside. Why did he have to tell them to pregame here? We aren't in college anymore. Who even needs to pregame? I prep myself before walking in and then open the door.

"Cash Money!!!" my sister shouts, launching herself in my direction.

Behind her I spot Vanessa who is wearing a red dress which highlights her long legs and tiny waist. If I was an interested man, I'd also be staring at her breasts which are heaving out of the top. There is something about the way the long sleeves hug her arms and the skirt rides just below her ass that makes the outfit even sexier than if it were strapless.

It's the *not* seeing, combined with all the flesh, and yet it still does nothing for me.

She walks slowly toward me with a knowing smile and pops up on her toes before placing a kiss on my cheek. "It's good to see you again, Cash."

"*I love her for you,*" Cat's words replay in my mind. Yeah, I can't imagine why. She smells of desperation and lavender.

"I'm glad you girls could make it," I reply, pulling her under my arm and waiting for an introduction.

Chase is already glued to one of her younger sisters while his friend chats with the other. Chase has a townhouse with an open floor plan and the music beats loudly. In the corner I see that a few of his friends have set up a card game, and I smile down at Vanessa and beg off to go hang with the guys.

After an hour of cards, where Carter scammed all of us out of a grand without blinking, we're whisked away by limo. I had begged Frank to join us tonight for the festivities—as my friend, not as my driver—but he already had plans. It would have made the night exponentially better, but I couldn't exactly force him to come.

Despite having no interest in spending the night with Vanessa attached to my hip, I'm happy that my sister is enjoying herself. She rarely joins my brothers and me at the club, and if anyone knows how to make a night special, it's my brother Chase. He never does anything half-ass, and tonight

is no exception. An employee escorts us through the dark club to a private area with couches and bottles of every liquor imaginable. A cocktail waitress takes my drink order before I even sit down, and I turn my eyes to the dance floor. Although only a few feet separate us from the rest of the crowd, as well as a few bouncers and black velvet rope, it might as well be a mile because no one is getting up here unless we okay it. This is perfect for me. I don't need any more photographers hanging around and taking pictures.

After this week, I just want to let loose with my brothers. I've earned a break. I throw back a shot of tequila, and Carter shakes his head. "It's going to be one of those nights, eh?"

"Fuck off," I say with a smile, as the alcohol burns down my throat. The beat of the bass thrums in my head, and I feel my entire body loosen.

Carter laughs and shakes his head. "Whatever you say. Check out that firecracker down there." He points in the direction of a short redhead wearing knee-high boots and a short black skirt. Not his type at all. Carter always wants tall skinny women. At six feet three, he says it makes him look better with someone tall on his arm.

"How come?" I ask honestly, although my eyes have already turned to her friend whose hips are swaying to the music as she tips back her head in laughter. The way she moves is so carefree, so light, and so cheerful. When her head turns in our direction, I see her face, and mine breaks out in a grin. Fucking Grace. If I didn't have faith before tonight, I'd convert and begin worshiping at her altar.

As it is I plan on worshiping her body all night.

She's wearing a cream-colored dress which hugs her curves but still seems conservative for this crowd. Her hair is up in a ponytail and curled in

layers above her head. I'm already itching to fist it while she kneels below me. Looks like I won't have to wait until tomorrow after all. Now I just have to ditch my brothers.

I feel Carter's eyes on me, and I turn to him sheepishly, aware he caught me staring at Grace.

"Eyes off her friend. You're going after easy tonight and that woman looks anything but easy," Carter says, slapping my back. He points back to Vanessa. "You've got your hands full with that one."

I grimace as I look behind us. Vanessa and her sisters are dancing for everyone else's enjoyment.

*"You like a challenge."*

The cocktail waitress walks up with another set of shots, and I grab two as I remember Grace's words. Knowing I'll be taking her home, I decide to have a little fun with my brother.

"Hundred bucks says she's easy for me tonight," I say cockily, pointing at Grace.

Carter laughs and shakes my hand before taking the other shot from me. "I'll take that bet. Let's go."

I throw back the shot with Carter and we head down to the dance floor. It's darker down here than it seemed from above. With bodies moving in all directions, it's hard to locate Grace.

I spot the redhead walking to the bar and signal to Carter that his girl is disappearing. Carter takes off, and my eyes look in that direction to see if Grace went with her. A hip bumps into me, and when I turn, I find the cream-colored ass that was shaking from above. She's dancing with another woman, but she still hasn't spotted me. I place my hand on her waist, as I whisper into her ear, "Mind if I join you?"

Her hand goes over mine and she shimmies against me, moving in circles against my growing erection.

I might snap that she's dancing like this with just anyone. My grip tightens on her hips as her friend turns to dance with someone else and I pull her closer, running my hand up and down her leg as she dances on me. Her arm goes over her head, and she pulls on my neck, as she holds me close and grinds against me.

I spin her around, ready to give her a piece of my mind, and she raises her eyes to meet mine, as she swings her arms around my neck and gives me a coy smile. "Surprise."

Little minx. She was toying with me the whole time.

She turns back around, lowering herself down my body and continuing her teasing game. This is not the Grace that I've known for the last few weeks. That woman was shy, demure, guarded. This woman is none of those things. And I'm hooked.

"So that's the game you want to play?" I ask, pulling her up and holding her ass against me as I let her feel exactly how turned on I am. "Did you know it was me? Or is this how you dance with everyone?" I whisper into her ear. There's anger in my voice and only one proper answer.

Grace turns around and pops up on her toes so I can hear her every word. "Oh, Whiskey, I could feel you watching me. Like an itch right between my shoulder blades, your gaze set fire to my skin, and as soon as I turned, I saw you walking this way, searching for me." She pauses as she moves closer to me, raising her eyes to mine as if she really wants me to pay attention. "Your sister is watching us. You should walk away."

"Fuck Cat. Fuck responsibility. Stop protecting me. You're the only thing I want."

Grace's violet eyes are almost black in the dark room, but they shine as they grow bigger, listening to my demands. Her hand moves to my cheek, mimicking my actions, and she pulls me down to kiss her.

In the middle of the club, while others dance around us, I lift Grace up and kiss her like I need her to breathe. Her tongue swipes my own and I pull her closer, unable to get enough of the feel of her body against mine. It's intoxicating, finally having oxygen after what feels like weeks without it. When someone bumps into us, I slip Grace down my body and take her hand, leading her off the dance floor.

"Where are we going?" she asks as she stays close to my arm.

I turn around and look down at her, knowing with certainty this is the right move. She's getting a divorce. She's not with Hanson. She doesn't *belong* to anyone else. So this isn't wrong. My family will just have to deal.

Stopping, I lean down and cup her chin, pulling her lips to mine. "I'm taking you home, Angel."



## CHAPTER 23

### GRACE

**G**ripping Cash’s large hand in mine as he steers us to the curb and into a waiting town car, I don’t give myself even a moment to reconsider what I’m doing.

“Having second thoughts?” Cash murmurs into my hair as he rains kisses down my neck. I smile to myself and lean into his touch as a low moan leaves my throat.

“Nope, but I do need to text my friends, so they aren’t worried about me,” I murmur.

“You going to tell them who you went home with?”

I look at him over the glow of my phone and see the smirk he’s sporting. What he doesn’t realize is that me hooking up with the hottest bachelor in Boston isn’t bad, and certainly not something for me to hide, but him hooking up with a woman who is still married is a problem. “I don’t kiss and tell.”

Cash’s hands move around my waist, and he pulls me onto his lap. His fingers rake through my hair as he stares at me. “We are going to be doing a hell of a lot more than kissing tonight, Gracie.”

The ease of the way the nickname flies off his tongue sends a warmth to my heart. I want this to be all about sex, but it isn't. I've not so slowly fallen for Cash. I didn't believe it was possible that I would fall for the first man who kissed me after my separation, that this connection we had could translate into anything more than a fling, but God was I wrong.

After spending the last few weeks with women who have had years of fun and don't seem at all interested in settling down, I know that I could enjoy their version of Boston and that I may even fit in more with their lifestyle than I ever did with my own. And yet looking at him now, I know I'm a goner. I want Cash and all the mess that entails.

Our tongues tangle together the entire ride, as his hands trace down my arms to my hips and over my ass as if he's memorizing every inch of me. When we finally pull up in front of our destination and come up for a moment's breath, I have no idea where we are.

"A hotel?" I ask, a bit thrown. Does he not want to bring me back to his apartment?

Cash takes my hand and waves the car off. "It's only temporary. Remember I wasn't living here until a few weeks ago and it was all very sudden. I thought I'd be in Nashville long-term. That's where my house is."

My nerves settle. That makes sense.

Cash leads me through the lobby and straight to the elevator. As soon as we are alone again he's on me, pushing me against the metal exterior, lifting the skirt of my dress so he can grip my ass, and then kissing the hell out of me.

When the elevator dings, he walks me backward as we make our way down the hall, not removing my lips from his own, and I giggle as I take a ride on his shoes. "You're very clingy, Mr. James," I tease.



With a smile on his lips, he replies, “Damn right. I’ve been dying to get you all to myself for weeks. Now that you’re mine, I’m not letting you go.”

“Where’s the keycard, Mr. James?” My hands roam into his pockets, and I pull out his wallet as he eyes me with a smirk. When I reach in and a condom falls out, I feign shock. “Mr. James, were you on the prowl tonight?”

“Every time you say that my cocks grows another inch,” he says, as he pushes himself against me so I can feel precisely what he’s talking about.

“Well, then I better stop because we both know that thing is at max capacity.”

He smiles a devilish grin, lets out a low laugh, and leans into my neck before growling, “It’ll fit.”

I yelp as he slaps my ass and I bite my lip, impatient for everything he’s promised.

“We just gonna stand here, Mr. James, or are you gonna finally show it to me?”

Cash pulls out the keycard and presses it against the door, then without warning, he lifts me into his arms, throwing me over his shoulder and slapping my ass again. “Wiseass.”

I laugh as he carries me through a living room area—this is one hell of a hotel room—past an incredible view of the Boston skyline which is lit up as if just for our viewing pleasure, and straight into the bedroom where he throws me onto the white duvet which covers the king-size bed.

Positioning myself on my elbows, I finally take a moment to stare at him. The air crackles between us as the tension of the night snaps. We are finally alone. After a month of toeing the line, of forbidden stares, of denying our feelings, of lashing out, finally it’s just him and me.

“What do you want, Cash?” I ask in an almost pant.

As he watches me, he slowly undoes the buttons at his wrists. He stalks closer to the bed and then one by one unbuttons his shirt. Those simple acts alone have me clenching my thighs, itching to touch him. His hair is mussed from my hands roaming through it in the car, and his whiskey-brown eyes gaze hungrily at me. “I want you in the shower. I want to do all the things I’ve been thinking about doing since I first saw you on the plane. I want to feel how wet you are for me, and I want to taste every inch of your body. I want *all* of you, Grace.”

Cash licks his lips in promise, and a tortured sigh escapes my lips as my hips move involuntarily and I squeeze my legs together, begging for the pressure he’s promising.

“Is that what you want, Grace?”

I clench just from the sound of his voice.

“You want me to fuck you until you understand that you’re mine?” he growls, moving closer and pulling my legs apart so that he can kneel between them.

I’ve never been spoken to this way. I’ve never *wanted* someone to speak to me this way. The demanding, controlling, dirty talking coupled with the way he is looking at me has me moments from coming.

Cash slips the skirt of my dress above my thighs and with two fingers pulls my panties down to my ankles. He lifts one foot up and presses a soft kiss on the inside of my ankle, causing goosebumps to dance up my leg. Then he slides the white lace thong off my other leg before bringing it to his face and inhaling.

“You’re already wet for me,” he whispers before throwing the panties on the floor. A moan moves past my lips as he trails kisses up my left leg. “I

need you naked,” he commands.

I pulse in anticipation.

When he offers me his hand, I take it and sit up on my knees. Then he reaches around my back, pulling me close, and his lips brush soft wet kisses against my neck which have my nipples pebbling and my thighs clenching.

“Perfect,” he whispers, as he brushes my hair to the side, unzips my dress, and slips it off me, revealing only my white bra. When he finally frees me from my bra, I feel a sense of relief as air hits my nipples.

In that moment, Cash doesn’t look down at my breasts. Instead, he meets my eyes and whispers in almost utter astonishment, “You’re so beautiful, Gracie.”

My stomach clenches, and the breath catches in my throat. The gentleness that he exudes with that simple statement, so far from the controlling man he was moments ago, stills me, making me question who I’d rather have here. But I guess that’s the wonderful thing about Cash. He’s both of those people and he’s mine.

For tonight, every perfect inch of him is mine. “Naked, Cash. I need you naked.”

Cash works the zipper and frees himself from his pants as I slip the shirt off his shoulders. His muscles are stiff below my fingers, and I trace each ab in the same way he moved his hands over me in the car.

I’m memorizing him. The way he feels, the way he’ll taste, the way he moves closer to me, and the way the air buzzes between the two of us, keeping us in a constant state of want. Cash’s hand moves between my legs and his finger traces my slit, as he watches my face for reaction. I tilt my head back in ecstasy as he slides one finger in, and he moans as if I’m the one pleasuring him. “So wet, Gracie, so ready for me.”

I snake my hands around his hips and pull down his boxers, freeing his erection and licking my lips. Cash pushes me back onto the bed and opens my legs, and then his hand splays across my thigh, holding me steady as he stares down at me.

“Do you know how many times I’ve gotten off this month just remembering your taste?” He licks his lips as he dips his head, but before his lips meet the sensitive space between my thighs, he raises his eyes and says, “First, I’m going to make you come on my tongue because it’s all I’ve been thinking about, and then I’m going to feel you squeeze my cock. And then we’re going to start again.”

His warm breath tickles as his lips whisper against me. I whimper because I’ve lost my ability to speak while waiting for the ecstasy of his mouth on me. He moves back up my body, his lips trailing kisses up my stomach, then across my nipple, and finally ending at my neck where he sucks the skin hard, causing my pussy to buck up at him, begging for attention. His hand pushes me down and he licks the outer ridge of my mouth until I open my lips for him. Then his tongue moves into my mouth, and he kisses me with promises of ecstasy as he finally moves his fingers between my legs, beginning torturous circles against my clit and inside my pussy that have me grinding against his hand.

When he lifts his finger out of me, I groan, and he smiles at me right before taking his finger into his mouth and closing his eyes. “Just like I remembered, fucking perfect.”

I think I just died.

My eyes roll up to the ceiling as he slips my legs over his shoulders and maneuvers between my legs, pressing his tongue against my throbbing clit. He works me over slowly and then moves quicker until I’m writhing

against the sheets and begging for him to enter me. “Such a good girl,” he murmurs against my pussy, his breath teasing me and sending shivers through my entire body. “Fuck, I’ve been dreaming of this since the last time you dripped on my tongue.” I come at his words, and he licks harder, kissing each pleasurable ounce right out of me.

His steel-hard erection presses against me, and I am wet with desire. “I need to taste you, Cash, come up here.” He looks up at me, surprised, but follows my direction, climbing above my face and holding onto the headboard while I take him in my mouth. My pussy throbs, and the taste of his sex on my tongue has me out of control. I take him deeper and feel powerful when he groans. I’ve never wanted to swallow so bad in my life.

But he doesn’t give me the satisfaction. Within seconds he’s pushing off me and reaching for a condom. “I need you, Grace,” he says, meeting my eyes as he sheaths himself. When he crawls between my legs and nudges against my opening, he stares at me. “This means something to me. *You* mean something to me.”

I nod my head and close my eyes as I wait for him to move forward.

“Look at me,” he begs, and I bite my lip as I feel emotion taking over. I shake my head and he stills. “Grace, look at me.”

I pause a moment, trying to steal a bit of courage, and then slowly open my eyes. Cash leans down close to me, and with his lips grazing mine, he says, “I’m crazy about you.”

My chest hurts as I whisper back, “This means something to me too...It means *everything*, Cash.”

Before I can finish saying his name he pushes into me, stretching me bit by bit, until I fit his size and sigh erotically.

Cash looks down at me, pride evident on his face. “Oh, you take my cock so good, Angel.”

I wrap my legs around him and pull him down, wanting his full weight, wanting him as close as I can have him, and he groans into my lips, likely surprised at my complete surrender. “That’s because your cock is perfect,” I whisper back with a smile. “*You inside me is perfect.*”

And it is. It feels perfect. He feels so perfect inside of me that I almost want to cry.

Heat burns the back of my throat, my chest is tight, and goosebumps ride up and down my arms, all because this man is so much more than a one-night stand.

I can feel it, he knows it, and I’m totally screwed.

How I ever tried to convince myself otherwise is insanity. Who could only do this once?

Sex with Cash is mind-blowing. Even better than the last time. He moves in a way that has him hitting a spot I didn’t even know existed, the mythical area I read about in romance books that has me clenching around him and pushing myself closer to him as he smiles above me, clearly proud that he found it so quickly.

“Oh fuck, Grace, look at how good we are at this. I could fuck you all night and not get enough.” He stares down at our connection, and I watch as he pumps in and out, the beads of sweat coating both our bodies, his abs muscles tensing as he pushes in slowly, his pelvis thrusting and hitting me exactly where I need.

“I thought that was the plan,” I tease back as I whimper against his every move.

He slips his thumb down to my clit, and within seconds I'm crying out, feeling my orgasm from the outside and in, wondering how in the hell I lived without this for the last month.

My pleasure spurs his, and he begins to pulse inside of me, groaning my name. My body tingles, my heart rate skyrockets, and shivers take hold of me as he rides out the last of his orgasm.

We collapse next to one another, legs wrapped together, panting and smiling. "Dammit, Cash, why did we wait so long to do that again?"

Cash's head falls back and he laughs. "Don't even try to pin that one on me!"

I laugh lightly, trying hard to keep reality out of the moment.

"What now?"

Cash kisses down my chin, making his way to my lips, and leans on top of me again. "Now we shower and do that all again." His smirk forces his dimple to pop out, and he hops out of bed to discard the condom and disappears into the bathroom.

I sit for a few moments, feeling the lasting effects of Cash. Before I can give in to the thoughts of what this means, or what happens now, Cash bellows from the other room, "What are you doing out there, woman? I said shower!" I hear the water start and wait a few more seconds for it to warm up before sidling out of the bed to join him.

When I enter the bathroom, I find Cash standing in the shower holding out his arms to me. I press my body against his, soaking up the feel of his chest against my cheek, the way his arms wrap around me and hug me so tightly, like this is what he has been waiting for his whole life.

"I love when you let me hold you, Gracie," Cash says, releasing me as he lifts my chin to look up at him. I laugh as the water hits both of us in the

face, causing us to squint.

“I love when you call me that.”

He kisses me softly. “I hated it when Hanson called you that.”

Rolling my eyes, I turn around so that I can grab the soap and then turn back to him and work the bar across his chest. “I could tell.”

“How long did you date?”

Shrugging, I reply, “I wouldn’t really call it dating.”

Cash’s hands move to my stomach, and he pulls me against him. “You better fucking call it dating, or I’m going to get really angry thinking it was something else.”

I giggle against his chest. “Please, obviously I’ve slept with men besides you.”

Cash leans his head against my own and grunts. “Don’t remind me.”

My marriage hangs between us, and I clear my throat. “It was back in college. Not a big deal.”

“Full disclosure, I hate the guy.”

I laugh. “Yeah, I could tell. And I’m sure you have good reason...I know he can be difficult.”

Cash’s jaw tightens. “It’s more than that. He and Carter...” He pauses as he looks away from me. “He’s not a good guy...and believe me, I know Carter is to blame as well...just...*fuck*...I don’t like him.”

I press myself closer to Cash, hugging him tightly. I don’t know what happened, and it really doesn’t matter. What matters is showing Cash that I’m here with him right now. That we matter. “I’m really sorry, Cash.”

“He wants you. And he won’t hesitate to go after what he wants,” he says evenly, looking down at me.



“I can’t control what he wants, Cash. I only know what I want. And it’s you.” I go up on my toes and kiss his jaw. He leans down and our lips meet, drops of water splashing between us as our kiss lazily grows. I sigh as he presses a kiss against my cheek. “Hanson was never the one for me.”

Cash’s hands grip my ass and he pulls me tightly against him. “That’s because I’m the one for you. The only one.” He rubs himself against me and I close my eyes. How is it possible that I’m already hungry for him again? That he’s already hard and ready for me. Maybe he’s right. Maybe we are meant for each other. Maybe this *can* work. Sure, it’s a logistical nightmare, but I can’t imagine saying goodbye to Cash after tonight.

“You certainly make me want to believe you’re right,” I reply honestly.

“Are you on birth control?” he asks as his erection moves between my legs.

I nod, trusting him completely.

“Is this okay?” he asks as he looks at me, waiting for my consent.

“Please,” I beg, pulling him closer.

Cash moves his lips down to mine and kisses me as he slips inside, and I gasp into his mouth at the intense feelings.

Physically and emotionally.

Completely bare inside of me, with no barrier, I give him a piece of me that I won’t be getting back. He moves slowly, in and out, and I watch in amazement, almost like it’s an out-of-body experience. The way his hips flex and his legs tense, holding him up as he crouches down to adjust himself to my height and again hits the area that makes my body tremble.

As I begin to pulse, he pulls out and I watch as the pleasure pours from him. There’s something so insanely hot watching him hold himself in that

way, completely at my mercy. I have an urge to drop to my knees, to savor every drop. Without thinking, I do just that, and he groans in surprise.

“That might have been the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen…” He pants, out of breath, and stares at me in wonder. “You’re insatiable.”

I look up at him before licking his saltiness once more and then he helps me to my feet. “It’s you. I’ve never wanted a man like I want you.”

A genuine smile spreads across Cash’s face. “Now that *is* the best thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Wash my hair?” I ask, remembering how much he loved to do it in Florida.

Cash moves me below the water and begins massaging my hair, kissing my forehead, then my nose, then my chin, in between lathering each strand. He’s so attentive and caring that he leaves me feeling precious and loved in his care. When he finishes washing, he steps out of the shower and grabs us both towels, holding one out for me to walk into as he hugs me dry.

“You know you’re going to make it very hard to leave you after all this attention?” I tease.

He hugs me tighter. “Then my plan is working.”

I sigh and lean back into his embrace, letting my head fall back against his chest. He kisses my nose again and pushes me forward. “Come on, let’s go get cozy in bed. I want to hold you.”

I shake my head at his sweet demands and do as I am told.

Snuggling in bed with Cash is not better than sex, but it’s a close second. Or maybe third, since having my hair washed by Cash is definitely right behind sex. God, I’m a goner for this man.

I inhale his scent, kiss his chest, and feel his body shake against me as he laughs. “Did you just sniff me, Gracie?” Sheepishly, I slink down, but he

doesn't allow it. "I love that you are as obsessed with me as I am with you. I'm seeing a whole other side of you tonight and it's perfect."

I smile against him. "You're awfully needy, Whiskey."

"Oh, you're dragging that nickname back out again, eh?" I hear the grin in his voice.

"Seriously, though, you must have been the biggest cuddle bug when you were a kid. You're so loving and gentle, I'm guessing you were a real momma's boy."

Tension pulls at Cash's muscles, and immediately I sense I've stumbled upon a sensitive topic.

Dammit, I hadn't seen anything about his mother—or his father for that matter—but since the first day I met Cash I could tell he would benefit from an older woman's touch. He gravitated toward me, leaned into me, and seemed to take great pleasure in pleasing me with comforting acts, washing my hair, holding my hand, cuddling with me. He was looking for that love that he didn't have as a child.

In my heart I think I already know what he is going to tell me, and I brace for the effect it will have on our relationship. "I don't have many memories with my mother actually," Cash says quietly, brushing the hair away from my face in a distracted movement.

"I'm sorry, Cash. We don't have to talk about this."

"No, I want you to know this. To know me. And it's all connected, I guess."

I sit silently, giving him time to collect his thoughts. "My mom got sick when I was two. I don't even remember her, isn't that awful? I mean, I think I remember her sometimes because I've seen pictures of her with my sister, brother, and me. They've told enough stories and I've heard video of her

laughter, but those are all memories made after the fact. I don't have actual memories of those things myself. I don't remember my own mother." He shakes his head in disbelief. "Cat was six and Carter was nine. I'm not sure who had it harder—me, who doesn't remember, or the ones who lived through the excruciating time of loving her and losing her."

"Oh, Cash, I'm so sorry."

I pull him close to me and brush his hair with my hands as his eyes meet mine. "The whole time that she was sick, my father was cheating on her. And she knew it. He did it all the time. Secretaries, women he met at bars. I'm not sure if it was after she got her diagnosis that it began or if he started earlier. Like he was punishing her for dying." Cash's voice is laced with disgust and anger.

"You have another brother though, right?"

He nods. "Chase. Dad found a nanny to watch us...to take care of us after Mom died...and then he started screwing her. She was only *seventeen*. My grandparents stepped in, obtained guardianship of all of us, and sent my dad to rehab. He never forgave them; he believes they stole us from him. And now he believes I stole his right to the company. After all this time, he's come back and thinks that he can run James Spirits." Cash's voice is tense. "Carter won't fight him. He wants nothing to do with him, but he also can't bear to fight with him. Maybe because he remembers Mom. Maybe he understands better since he went through it with Dad. And Cat was never interested in the business, but she'd take my dad down before handing over the company to him, so she asked me to do it. She and my grandparents. It's why I'm the one in charge. I'm sure you were wondering."

It all starts to fall into place. The tremendous pressure he's under, the reason why he's leading the company, and the begrudging interest he's

shown in all of it. “You didn’t want any of this,” I say, not in question.

Cash looks at me, *really looks at me*, as if he’s begging me to take it all away. To bring back his mother, to allow him to be the irresponsible boy, to stay here with him and make it all better. And I want to, but I also know that I can’t.

“So, what is your father’s plan?”

“I’m not sure. That’s why my grandmother wanted me to settle down. We don’t need bad publicity. We need to show the companies we are trying to partner with, the Sintacs of the world, that we are a good bet. My grandparents managed to keep my dad’s misdeeds out of the press. But how long until a juicy story like that sells if he sticks around? I promised my grandfather I wouldn’t let the company end up in Dad’s hands, or worse, end up a victim of the gossip rags and tank our investments. So that’s what I’m trying to do.”

Understanding overwhelms me. He needs stability. He needs someone to guide him through all of this. Someone who isn’t complicated, who doesn’t have that baggage that I do. Cash believes that I’m the one to walk through this storm with him, but I’ll only attract more lightning.

“So, you’re getting a divorce,” Cash says as he rubs his hand up and down my arm in a reassuring manner.

My eyes feel heavy from all the alcohol Tessa and I imbibed today, followed by the hours of dancing and then lovemaking with Cash. But I can’t possibly fall asleep. I will my eyes to stay open so that I can soak up every minute with Cash. I know they’re limited.

“Yes,” I reply, sighing against his chest. Just a few more minutes. That’s all I need is a few more minutes of this fantasy.

Cash kisses my forehead. “What happened?”

I shake my head against his chest. “I’m not what you need right now, Cash. You can pull the plug on the matchmaking thing and decide you don’t want to settle down right now, but it still won’t change that we can’t be together. Not right now. Not when the entire business community is watching your every move.”

Cash tenses below me. “This is my personal life. I don’t give a shit what people think.”

I try hard not to laugh, but it comes out just the same. “That’s incredibly naïve.”

I expect Cash to let go of me. To drop my arm, remove himself from my body, and get angry. But he does just the opposite. He pulls me closer and angles our bodies so we are facing one another, nose to nose. “I know what you’re doing, and it won’t work.”

I stare at him defiantly. “If you know what I’m doing then let me do it. It’s for your own good, Cash.”

“Just like when you lied to me and told me you were in a happy marriage? That was good for me?”

I blow out a breath and pull my hands over my breasts, suddenly feeling as naked as I am. “I never lied to you, Cash. I never told you I was happy. I told you I was married. Which I am. I told you that you knew nothing about my marriage, which you didn’t. And I told you that I was almost happy.”

He scoffs at me. “Right, you’ll be happy when I find a wife. Those were your exact words, I believe.”

Cash’s eyes flash in pain, and the hurt I’m causing is on every inch of his face. I want to kiss away the tension to ease his mind and make him smile like he was earlier when we were in the shower.

Tentatively, I reach out my hand to his face and smooth out the lines around his eyes. He leans into my hand and closes them. “Cash, I told my husband that we needed to fake a happy marriage until this contract was over. Until I found you a wife. So yes, I believed that once you were settled, I would get my promotion and could quietly divorce Steven. I’ll be rid of him and his philandering ways and I can start over. That will genuinely make me happy. Don’t you get that?”

Cash eyes me. “So we find me a fake relationship for a bit, you get your promotion and divorce, and then we ride off into the sunset together.”

The way he says it, with so much hope and sincerity, really shows his age. Nothing is that simple. “Cash, we don’t live in a romance novel. This isn’t some fake dating rom-com that will tie up all the loose strings and turn into a beautiful blanket. This is messy, and with your career you can’t be involved with messy. Can you imagine if the press gets wind that you’re fake dating someone so that I can get a divorce? You’ll be painted as the one who was cheating with the married woman. I’ll be pinned as the woman who slept with her client and couldn’t even set up a real relationship, so I had him fake them. Eventually we’ll hate each other when it all falls apart. I don’t want that for us.” I meet his eyes and try to impress upon him the real-life complications.

Cash rolls his eyes. “So what’s the alternative? I date someone for real. I fall in love with someone else and you get a divorce, and we both wonder for the rest of our lives if we’re with the wrong person? Is that what you want?”

I let out a long sigh. “None of this is what I want. You have to know that. You can’t be with me and save your family’s company. It is one or the other. Right now, I don’t have anything to give you.”

Cash grunts in frustration. “Don’t say that, Grace. We can make this work.”

I bite my lip, scared to get my hopes up. Hope is the most dangerous thing. It costs next to nothing but can cost you everything. But since I met him, Cash has given it to me freely.

Sensing my hesitation, he leans down and kisses me, his tongue snaking its way into my mouth. As if he believes that his touch, or his tongue, could change my mind. That our sex could rewrite the future.

I know better. Even only a few years older, I’ve seen the cruelty of love and the impossibility of working in this city under a microscope. We don’t have a shot, and I’d rather be the woman that slipped through his fingers than the one who tore his world down brick by brick by staying. I won’t be the one who destroys him.





## CHAPTER 24

### CASH

“**D**idn’t expect to wake up with you here,” I say honestly with a smile as I kiss Grace’s forehead. I’m shocked she didn’t sneak out in the middle of the night. Instead, her chestnut hair is splayed on the pillow beside mine, and her legs are curled around my own.

She groans. “I’m surprised I’m here too.”

I lean down to tickle her, wanting to loosen those frown lines, and she squirms beneath me. Last night I didn’t get to lay out my plan. The one that involves us staying together and fuck whatever everyone else thinks. The one the publicist is currently drafting for me. We were a little preoccupied with naked activities, and between my morning wood and her soft naked skin we may have to put the conversation off for another hour.

Just as I’m skating my hand down her stomach, my phone rings. She tenses below me, and I mutter “ignore it,” as I brush a kiss against her neck. My hand moves lower and is millimeters from sinking into her warmth when the ringing starts again. I growl into her neck, and she laughs.

“Get the phone; I’m going to brush my teeth.” She hops out of bed, and my eyes trail her bare ass until the bathroom door shuts. I groan and answer

the phone which is ringing yet again.

I already know it will be Cat before I even look at it. We promised to do brunch every Sunday now that I'm back. It was the one meal my grandfather always made it to after church. Then he'd disappear back to the office. Some families did Sunday dinner but not us, we brunch.

"Morning Kit Cat," I say into the phone as I put it on speaker so I can grab a pair of sweats. Talking to my sister while naked feels weird.

"Morning Cash Money," she retorts, bringing a laugh from my chest. "Where did you disappear to last night? Vanessa was *not* happy."

I sense a bit of judgment in her tone, but I let it slide. "Just wasn't feeling it. Decided to head home early."

"Oh, that's odd because I saw you leave the club with a brunette under your arm. Is she still there?" she whispers into the phone.

"Do you think I would pick up the phone if I had a girl in my bed right now?"

I mean she's in the other room but still.

"First of all, she looked like a woman. Second, I have no idea what you do when you bring a woman home because you rarely do. But now this is two weekends in the past month where you've had women in your bed."

I swallow. Woman. Not Women. I've had one woman in my bed for the last month. She's right. Rubbing my head, I try to think of a reply, but I've got nothing. "Where are we meeting for brunch?"

Cat groans. "Oh, you aren't getting off that easy. Don't change the subject. Please do not tell me you took home the witch."

My pressure skyrockets, and I want to reach through the phone and strangle my sister. I take her off speaker and hiss into the phone, "Do *not* call her that."

“Oh, Cash, please tell me you’re smarter than this. She’s married!”

I lose my temper. “She’s getting a fucking divorce. And it’s none of your business. If you can’t support me—”

Cat sighs. “I’m sorry. Let’s start over. What time are we meeting for brunch?”

I’ve honestly lost my appetite. Grace has been in the bathroom for a while now, and I’m pretty sure it’s not because she needs to be in there. I need to end this phone call and turn this day around. “10:30?” I reply.

“Sounds good. I find it oddly comforting that the restaurant is actually called Brunch,” she says, trying to lighten the mood.

I run my hands through my hair and sigh. “You would, Kit Cat.” Rolling my eyes, I hang up. Seconds later the bathroom door opens and Grace walks out, her eyes looking in every direction but at me.

Not knowing how much of the conversation she heard, I prepare for the worst. “I’m...uh...I’m going to go. I told Tessa I’d meet her for lunch,” she says, still avoiding my eyes.

“Gracie.”

Ignoring my steady gaze, Grace searches the room for her dress which I tossed on the floor last night after ripping it off her. I hate that she has to wear it home. The last thing I want her doing is the walk of shame. There is nothing shameful about what happened between us last night despite how today is turning out.

She slips on the dress, and I say her name again, this time with more force. “Gracie, come here.”

She raises her eyes as she walks over and turns her back to me, waiting for me to zip her up. I take a moment to inhale, breathing in her goodness

and light, and kiss the small of her neck before I close the zipper. When she spins around, her eyes show only defeat. “Your family hates me.”

I shake my head. “I don’t care about them.”

Grace’s eyes fall. “Yes, you do. I’ve never been close with my mom, but you’re close with your siblings. I don’t want to come between you and your family. And I don’t want to cost you your business. It’s time to face the truth. We aren’t good for one another. Not right now at least.”

I couldn’t disagree more, but I know it’s useless to keep pushing. She’s in her dress from last night, her hair is mussed from our sex, and we’re both a bit hung over. I need to lay out my plan, and now is not the time.

“I’ll have my driver take you home.” I grab my phone to text Frank, but Grace’s hand stops me.

“Already called an Uber.”

I flex my jaw. “I’m not giving up on you,” I say as I pull her in for a hug. She sighs against my chest. “I guess we’ll see about that.”



Cat cuts into her waffle and takes a huge bite, acting more like a middle schooler than a demure thirty-four-year-old that works at a fashion magazine.

“I seriously have no idea how you hang around all those models. They must hate you.”

She laughs. “Please, I have curves and cellulite; if anything I disgust them, not that I care. This is just a pit stop until you take the company in the right direction, and I can do something under our name.”

Cat looks dreamy as she talks about what she wants to do. It's what I want for her—for all of us—to be able to keep growing the business. To have divisions, not just alcohol. I know we can do it. I have this vision in my head. I just need to keep my eye on the prize.

“Speaking of the company, let's discuss your recent rise in tabloid gossip. That can't be good for the company.” She points a forkful of waffle in my direction. “What is up with the woman you met in Florida and Jonathan?”

I roll my eyes. “Nothing. They used to date, or something like that,” I grumble, remembering Grace's words last night. My hand shakes as I go to pick up my coffee cup. I really hate Hanson, and I hate that he had his hands anywhere near Grace.

Cat looks at me thoughtfully. “Hm, I never saw Jonathan as the dating type.” I'm not sure why she keeps calling him Jonathan. It's irritating. And it makes me wonder if Hanson actually followed through with his threat years ago.

“Didn't know you knew him on a first-name basis, or would know what type of guy he was when it came to women at all.” I raise my eyes to hers in question and she shoos her fork at me again. If something happened, she gives nothing away, and I feel my spiking heart rate settle a bit. “You're being weird,” she says nonchalantly.

I hold my hand up, pointing it at my chest. “*I'm* being weird?”

“Yes, you're awfully territorial about a girl you hardly know.”

I huff out a breath. “Can we discuss something else?”

“Fine. Have you figured out where you're going to live? You can't stay in the hotel; it's too *Pretty Woman* of you.”

I laugh. “Too what?”

“Ya know, *Pretty Woman*. Richard Gere stays in the hotel for like two weeks, pays Julia Roberts to be his fake girlfriend, although things are a bit more risqué than that since she’s a prostitute.”

“I have no idea why my staying in a hotel reminds you of this movie, but there is something very wrong with that brain of yours.” She laughs knowing she’s already gotten under my skin. “And anyway, I’m not going to stay there. I’m thinking of moving into the apartment above the office.”

“The penthouse?” she practically chokes out. “No one has lived there since Dad.”

I sigh. “I know. But I can do things differently. I won’t be like him.”

Cat rolls her eyes. “You say that, but you’re obsessed with a married woman. It kind of sounds like history repeating itself. That’s who you were with last night, isn’t it?”

I glare at my sister. She’s really getting on my nerves. “She’s getting a divorce.”

“She *lied* to you. Besides, this family doesn’t need the scandal. Especially when you’re just taking over. Pa isn’t here to cover up your shit like he did Dad’s. You don’t have the luxury to go after her, and you have to realize that.”

I rub my hand over my face. “I have a plan. And before you get so judgmental, I’ve already talked it over with Peters, and he agrees he can handle it. I just need to talk to her. Even if we can’t be together right now, I want to make it work. For now, I can focus on work, she can focus on her divorce, and eventually, when it isn’t so ‘scandalous,’ we can be together.”

Cat shakes her head and lets out an exaggerated breath. “What is with you? I mean she lied to you. We don’t do liars.”

“Her husband cheated on her. She found out I was her newest client and she freaked. She knew it would look bad for me taking over the company. *She thought she was helping.* And believe me, I didn’t go easy on her. When I found out the truth, I walked out of the restaurant and didn’t look back.”

Cat sighs. “I want to be happy for you. I want to root for you. But honestly, I think this is a huge mistake.” When I grimace, she softens her voice. “Listen, I get it, she was looking out for you when she lied... If she were dating anyone else, maybe I’d like her. *But you are not someone else.* You are the kindest, greatest, best guy I know, and you deserve everything. I just don’t think she’s it.”

I grind my teeth. “You don’t know her.”

Cat moves her hand over mine, trying to calm me down. “But I do know Vanessa and she’s great. She doesn’t have all the baggage that comes with divorce. I mean you aren’t going to be Grace’s first. Do you even know if she wants to get married again? Have kids? I mean these are important things, Cash.”

Yanking my hand back, I throw it in the air. “*We just met!* Who discusses marriage this early on? Or kids?”

Cat crosses her arms and stares at me. “You are the one who’s obsessed. Not me.”

“Because in order to date her I have to convince her to date me. I mean this is crazy. I can’t even take my time to get to know her unless I know it’s going somewhere because the press will have a field day. It’s like I’m doing everything backwards. All because I want to build something for our family. I mean, Cat, I’m doing this for all of you.”

Cat slumps in her seat. “I know that. Which is why I think you deserve the best. Grace is going through a divorce. They are messy.” Cat reaches across the table and squeezes my hand. “She has to work through all of these big items. Divorce is heavy. It’s not just a breakup; it’s an untwisting of lives. There’s real estate, cars, bank accounts, friends, and let’s not forget all the plans she made in her head about how her life was supposed to look. The way that she thought her life was going to be—it takes a moment to move past all that.”

“That is oddly insightful, Kit Cat.”

She smiles. “I don’t only work for the magazine, I read the articles, too.”

I laugh. “I get it. Really, I do. It’s just being with her puts all sorts of plans in *my* head. I can picture it, Cat. The life we didn’t get to have with Mom. Weekday dinners around a dining table, date nights, Sunday mornings in bed, coaching baseball, family vacations...when I envision my life, I see *her*, and I’ve never had that before. How am I supposed to walk away from that?”

Cat’s eyes grow wide, and she sits quietly.

“What?” I ask defensively.

She shakes her head. “I just don’t want you to get hurt, and you are already in too deep.”

I smile at my sister. “Stop worrying about me. I’ll figure it out.” I laugh. “Who knows if she even wants to see me again. She told me she’s staying away for my own good.” I shrug my shoulders.

Cat rolls her eyes. “She’ll be back.”





## CHAPTER 25

### GRACE

“**S**hit, shit, shit,” I mutter under my breath as I reread the email Tessa just sent. It’s an article in some stupid gossip magazine linking me and Cash. I *knew* this was going to happen.

My phone rings, and I know it’s Tessa before I answer. “This is a disaster,” I say, spinning my office chair away from the computer toward my window. It’s pouring rain outside, and the lightning and dark clouds feel like an ominous warning. “Does anyone have pictures?”

“Nope. Not that I’m aware. But the photo of you guys kissing just went up in price. I was able to kill it last time, but my photog friend isn’t going to keep it under wraps if we don’t pay this time.”

I stare at the photograph in the article; it’s the one from a few weeks ago where I stood next to Jonathan while Cash scowled at the both of us.

*We’ve identified the mystery woman who has stolen Jonathan Hanson’s and Cassius James’s Hearts. Grace Kensington of The Happily Ever After Makers, Boston’s Elite matchmaking company, was seen leaving Club Pearl with James last night. It looks like she’s made her decision. Unfortunately, it*

*also looks like she is already married. This will definitely be an affair to follow.*

“Get me a price and I’ll pay it.”

Tessa exhales. “Grace, that’s nuts. Talk to Marion. You need to do damage control. You can’t keep paying photographers whenever they snap a pic of you and Cash; you’ll go broke.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not going to see Cash, so it won’t be a problem. I’ll kill this story with the truth. That I’m not with Cash, I’m his matchmaker, and that’s why I was pictured with him at dinner.”

“See, you keep saying that you aren’t with Cash, but you keep ending up with him. And now you’ve slept with him.”

Defensively, I quip, “Have not.”

Tessa laughs. “Right. You went home with him and didn’t have sex. Not buying it.”

I get up and close my office door, before hissing, “I didn’t have sex. I had mind-blowing sex.”

Tessa screeches. “I knew it! And I want to hear all the details, but we need to deal with this first. You need to call him.”

Rachel knocks on my door, and I pull the phone away from my ear to talk to her. “What’s up, Rachel?”

Behind her, I spot Cash looking devastatingly handsome in a black suit with his hair just a little unkempt, reminding me of how he looked on Saturday night. His eyes meet mine, and I see the struggle behind them. He’s barely holding back. I nod to Rachel to let him in. “Well, Tessa, doesn’t look like I’ll be calling him,” I whisper into the phone.

“Why?”

“Because he’s here.”

Cash walks toward me, and the muscles in my back tense. This is going to take a tremendous amount of restraint. On the other end of the phone, Tessa screeches.

“I gotta go,” I tell her, hanging up the phone.

“You look beautiful, Gracie,” Cash says as he remains standing. I think he’s trying to decide whether he should kiss me or if he should just sit.

As my stomach somersaults, I can’t really decide what I’d prefer him to do. The air crackles between us as his eyes roam down my body, but the article on my screen distracts me, and I curse under my breath, “*Fuck.*”

He smirks and sits down. “That’s some welcome, Angel.”

I roll my eyes as I laugh at him. “Well, I mean,” I stumble, “yes, I, you do...Oh, God, I’m terrible at this.”

His eyes light up. “And what is *this*?”

I scrunch my nose trying to avoid smiling. “Stop!”

He shrugs as if he’s not doing anything at all. As if he doesn’t know that just having him this close sets my skin on fire. “I missed you.”

I find myself giving him a stupid smile, like a teenage girl talking to the quarterback. “Did you play football, Cash?”

A glorious loud laugh escapes his lips, sending his Adam’s apple bobbing, and he covers his mouth as he starts to cough. “Wow, Grace, you go straight for it, huh?”

I squirm from his gaze.

Cash gives me one of his panty-melting smirks. “Yeah, I was quarterback of my high school team. We won the state championship.”

I roll my eyes. “Of course you did.”

“Always pegging me.”

“It’s my job.”

Our eyes lock.

“About that,” I say, as he interrupts me.

“I saw the article.”

I bite the inside of my lip. “It’s already getting messy, and they don’t even have proof.”

Cash nods. “They did but I bought it.”

I snap to attention. “Bought what?”

Cash reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out photographs, and pushes them toward me. They’re the ones that Tessa’s “friend” gave her. So much for keeping them secret. “Where did you get these?” I ask as I flip through each one.

*God, they’re hot.* My legs clench, and I find myself leaning against my chair. My panties will be soaked by the time he leaves.

“My sister showed them to me a few weeks ago. I guess someone you know decided to do you a solid and not sell them. But after this article came out this morning, I had my lawyer reach out and pay him off. These won’t see the light of day.”

An exhale a mile long leaves my lips. “Thank you, I was going to do the same thing.”

He glares. “Without talking to me?”

Defensively, I reply, “You did it without talking to me.”

*How’s it any different?*

“Right, because I have the resources to do that. And you are the one who walked away, not the other way around.”

“For your benefit!” I whisper-shout. “And what do you mean you have the resources to do it? Do you think I don’t? Because if you think I’m interested in your money, Cash—”

He holds up his hand before I can continue. “I know you aren’t like that.”

Without taking his eyes off me, Cash stands up and walks over to my side of the desk and leans his tall frame against the wood before staring me down. His oaky smell mixed with his cologne suffocates me. I want to sink myself into him and take a nap.

Nervously, I twist my hands together, trying impossibly hard not to touch him. “Why are you here, Cash?”

Leaning down, he takes my chin in his hand, lifting my face up to look at him. “Because I missed you.”

I hold his gaze, trying to read him.

*What does he want? What does he want me to do?*

The things we were concerned about are happening. The press is onto us. They’ve figured out who I am, and if we continue to be seen together it’s only going to get worse. And yet, I don’t want him to go.

Breathing, I lean into his touch. “I missed you too.”

A devilish smile crosses his lips. “There’s my good girl.” He holds out his hand to me, and I stand up and push myself against him, leaning my head against his chest. Cash wraps both of his arms around my waist and presses a soft kiss against my hair. For a few moments we stay just like this, and it feels oddly like home.

“What are we going to do, Cash?” I ask, looking up at him.

He smiles. “I like how you said *we*. Finally, you’re realizing that we *can* do this together.”

I roll my eyes and push against him. “Shh, don’t ruin it by being all cocky.”

His chest vibrates from his chuckles. “I make no promises, but I’ll try to be less cocky.”

My eyes light up. “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“As much as I hate to say that you’re right, I think you are. We can’t announce we’re a couple.”

My heart falls, and I gulp down my frustration. Of course, that is what we need to do. We can’t be together, and allowing myself to believe that we could is just stupidly naïve. I don’t look up at him. “Right. Well, I’m glad you finally see what I’ve known all along.”

I go to pull away, to steal back a bit of my dignity when Cash tightens his grip around me. “No, I didn’t say we can’t be together. I just said we can’t announce it yet.”

A frustrated hiss leaves my throat. “Cash, there’s no reason to announce anything either way. We just met for God’s sake. And I’m still married.”

“Don’t.” He gives me a warning with his eyes, and his jaw clenches. “Don’t pretend that you don’t know that this is the real thing. Don’t give me some shit about your sham of a marriage. I’m not kidding, Grace, if you push me, I will take you right now on this desk until you admit you’re mine.”

My heart rate ticks up, and I run my tongue along my lips just thinking about his words. “You wouldn’t,” I whisper. “Rachel is on the other side of that door.”

Cash spins me around so quickly I don’t have a moment to react, and he lifts me up onto the desk before pushing my legs apart with his knees. Breathless, I stare at him, waiting for his next move. With his right hand, he slips my hair behind my ear while his left hand travels up my leg and under my skirt excruciatingly slow. He leans in, his warm breath tickling my skin, and whispers in my ear, “I don’t care who’s around. I’ll take you whenever I want, because watching you come is my new favorite hobby.”

His fingers slip under the edge of my panty line, and I hiss when his middle finger slips inside me while his thumb works my clit. My hands scrape against his suit as I pull him closer, and a moan slips past my lips.

He hums my name against my skin as he continues to push his middle finger in and out, making me delirious. “That’s right, Gracie, this pussy knows it’s mine; have you caught up yet?”

“Yes,” I mutter, unable to formulate actual sentences when he tilts his finger to the exact right angle, while still circling my clit.

He hisses as I bite his neck and grab his back, my fingers looking for anything to hold on to.

“I can’t get in my shower now without thinking about you. Picturing your hard nipples in my mouth or how tight you squeezed my cock. Or how you got down on your knees for me. You look so fucking good on your knees.”

I bite down on Cash’s shoulder as my orgasm releases, sending waves of pleasure coursing through my body. I barely notice as he slides my panties off and slips them in his pocket. “For the road,” he says with a smile tugging at his lips.

As I struggle to adjust my skirt, I admonish him, “Cash, you can’t take my underwear. I need them.”

He laughs. “Get another pair.” Then without hesitating, he slips the finger he just used to get me off into his mouth and smiles. “Delicious.”

Oh my...I’m not sure what’s more shocking, the fact that he appears to really have enjoyed that or the fact that I’m turned on by his dirtiness.

Cash ignores my shocked expression and continues talking. “Tonight, I’m having you for dinner. My hotel room. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

I try to look put out, but the smile doesn't leave my face. I push my hair back and cross my ankles, trying to make myself respectable again. "Fine. But tomorrow night you have to take Vanessa out."

Cash huffs out a laugh. "That's what you were thinking about while I was getting you off?"

"What can I say; I know how to multitask. Seriously, I'll handle things on my end. Explain that I'm going through a divorce and make it clear we aren't dating. Then I'll be seen out a few times with Hanson, you'll be with Vanessa, and when the time is right—many months from now—we can give it a go."

Cash's jaw clenches and he shakes his head. "There is no way in hell I'm letting you go out with Hanson."

"First of all, Cash, you aren't *letting* me do anything," I say as I cross my arms. "I'm my own person."

"For someone who just moaned my name while you came on my finger, you are very bossy," he says with a smile.

"That's me, deal with it," I tease, leaning forward as I look up at him. It's only now that I realize we haven't even kissed. Cash seems to realize it too as my eyes dart to his lips.

"I don't trust him," he says roughly, his eyes still on my lips.

I press my fingers into his cheek, forcing him to hear me. "Trust *me*."

After a few seconds where it seems he's agonizing over this request, he gives me a singular nod. "I'll make you a deal."

I smile, knowing I've won this argument. "Okay, name your price."

"I'll let you go out with Hanson once this week if you spend the weekend with me."



My lips turn up at his use of the word *let*. He likes pushing my buttons. I don't react though. "I thought you wanted me tonight?" I counter.

"Oh, I'm having you tonight. That's not up for debate. I'm just asking for more."

"You really are very needy, Mr. James."

"Your most needy client?"

I laugh. "Yes, you definitely do demand the most one-on-one attention."

His eyes drop to my lips, and he presses closer so that I can feel his erection pushing into me. I cup his erection in my hand, groaning as I feel how hard he is, and he chuckles. "I better be the only one getting this kind of attention."

I bite his lip and pull away, but he's quicker, moving his arms around my waist and pushing me so my skirt rides all the way up my thighs until he's flush against my bare lady parts. He possesses my mouth as I grind against him, greedy for another orgasm.

A knock on the door has me shoving him back and sliding off my desk in one fell swoop. Cash wipes his lips with a smirk, then he adjusts himself, chuckles, and buttons his suit jacket before moving to the other side of the desk.

"Just a minute," I yell to Rachel, sitting down and trying to wipe the insane smile off my face.

Cash winks and walks to the door. "See you for dinner, Gracie. Seven p.m. And don't you dare go home and change."

I redden. "But then I won't have underwear."

He smiles. "Precisely, I like my dinner hot and bare."

I tease, "I think you mean rare."

He smiles. "That too. Bye, Angel."

I shake my head as I turn away from him, trying to get my emotions under control. “Bye, Whiskey.”



## CHAPTER 26

### GRACE

**T**essa stalks into my office, wet and angry. “Ugh, hello, I’ve been calling you nonstop. Do you ever check your messages?”

How is it that Cash was able to get in and out of my office without looking like a wet mop, and my best friend is literally sopping. “Did you walk here in the rain?”

“That’s beside the point. Answer the question.”

“What question?”

“Your messages, do you ever check them? Because I’ve left you five. My friend sold the pictures, and now I have no idea who has them.”

Oh, right.

“Cash bought them. Do you want me to see if I can get you something to change into?” Her shoes make squishing sounds as she walks into my office and sits in my chair. My velvet beautiful chair that she is now destroying with her wetness. “Let me see what Rachel can find. Take your shoes off and...” Tessa gives me a look that keeps me from asking her to stand up so she doesn’t destroy my chair.

After buzzing Rachel, she brings in paper towels. “Sorry, this was the best I could do,” she replies.

Tessa blots herself with paper towels, and I watch on in confusion. She doesn’t seem the least bit bothered by the fact that she’s dripping wet.

“Well, what did Cash say?” Tessa asks impatiently. I glance toward Rachel and give Tessa an exaggerated look to shut up.

“I’ll close the door. If you need anything just let me know. Do you want a tea or hot coffee, Tessa?”

Tessa shrugs and nods her head. “Yeah, that would be good actually. Thanks, Rachel.”

Rachel appears proud of herself, smiles brightly, and then leaves the room.

“So, what happened?”

A red blush heats my cheeks as I remember my encounter with Cash. “Nothing. He told me he bought the pictures. We both agreed we would see other people. Set everything straight and we went our separate ways.”

I feel so proud of myself for saying that with a straight face. *I can do this.* If I can convince my best friend that nothing is going on, I can convince anyone.

“Yeah, and then he stuck his tongue down your throat and stole your panties.”

My knee jerks forward, sending my chair rolling backwards, and I bang against the wall with a thud. “What?” I say, trying to right myself and cross my legs.

“Oh my God, he actually stole your panties! Grace Rose Kensington, are you panty-less right now?”

“No!” I whisper-shout, with not nearly enough conviction.

Tessa's face bursts into a smile, and she holds her stomach as she leans over in laughter. "Oh, this is just too good! I can't wait for dinner with the girls. They are going to die!"

My temperature rises. "They are not going to die because you are not going to tell them. No one is going to tell anyone anything. They're my panties!"

"Not anymore!" She laughs harder. "Oh, God, I can just picture it. He is so the type of guy to take your panties."

I don't like the insinuation that Cash does this with other girls. That I'm just another pair of panties to add to his collection. That definitely wasn't what just happened. It's real between us. Although, now that we are talking about it, I feel nothing but red-hot shame coursing through my body. This is the epitome of rock bottom.

Knocking before entering, Rachel brings Tessa her coffee. She looks from Tessa to me, probably trying to figure out why Tessa is still overcome with laughter and I look as red as a tomato.

"I think she drank too much at lunch," I explain, pointing at Tessa and tipping back a fake bottle.

Rachel nods knowingly. "Okay, do you need anything else, Grace?"

"No, thank you."

Rachel disappears and I shoot Tessa another look. "You are going to get me fired."

Apparently, finally ceasing to find the entire situation funny beyond her uncontrollable laughter, Tessa sits up with a dirty smile on her lips. "Did you give him head in here? You should really make sure you keep Listerine and toothpaste in the office since you're single now."

She winks like this is a regular occurrence.

“No, I did not give him head,” I say like I’m talking to a child. “You are really ridiculous. Is that what you do in corporate America if you’re single? Does no one just do their job and work? Is everyone banging each other in their offices?”

Tessa tips up her eyebrow and shrugs. “I mean, yeah. At least you’re both single. Most of the time it’s the married ones that are the worst offenders.”

I roll my eyes. “Like I need that reminder.”

“Right, sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. I don’t care about Steven. Sincerely. But I do need to deal with some sort of statement regarding our separation. And it’s not going to go over well since he seems to think that he’s entitled to another few weeks.”

“Whatever. He sucks.”

That just about sums it up.

“So I’m thinking of asking Jonathan to take me out. You know, take the focus off Cash and me. What do you think?”

“I mean, he’ll be thrilled but you should be straight with him what it really means. He may be a playboy, but even playboys have feelings.”

I bite my cheek. I have no intention of hurting anyone else. This whole situation has been a disaster.

“You are right. I’ll call him and explain.”

“Okay, well I have to get back to my office. I ran out of there like a witch on fire. Dinner and drinks tonight?”

I purse my lips. “I can’t.”

She gives a low laugh. “Oh, you going to get seconds tonight? God, I’m jealous.”

I bite back my smile. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

“No, you’ll call me tonight when you get home.”

I smile and roll my eyes. “I doubt I’ll be sleeping at home tonight.”

“Oh, girl you are in so deep.”

Don’t I know it.



## CHAPTER 27

### CASH

The end of the day is always the quietest. The secretaries have gone home, the phones stop ringing, the buzz in the office drops to a whisper, and you can practically hear yourself think. Yet today it's louder than during lunchtime because all my siblings have decided to congregate in my office to discuss their opinions on my life and this company.

“We need to make a statement. Not only with who we arrive with, but with where we stay, what we do, and where we are seen that week.” Chase looks at me in a way that makes me know he's looking for a fight. He wants me to disagree just so he can lay out his plan. I have plans of my own tonight though, so I just nod as if I completely understand.

Unfortunately, Cat loves goading Chase and doesn't just let him say his piece. “What does that even mean? *Where we are seen?* It's Bristol, Rhode Island. Where the hell would one be seen?”

Carter eyes her and Chase with a look of sheer excitement. He doesn't give two shits who wins this fight, but he loves to watch it go down. He'll stir the pot just for his own enjoyment. “Cat, you always underestimate Chase; let the boy lay out his vision.”



Carter winks at me as if I have any interest in continuing this dumpster fire. I have a woman arriving at my hotel without panties any minute now; I don't have time for this shit.

Cat shoots Carter a glare. "Okay, Carter, where should we be seen? Which bar will have paparazzi to catch us walking around?" Her voice drips with sarcasm.

Chase jumps back in. "It's not about the paparazzi. It's about Landry. If we want to expand this business, we need to show we are a family company. Cash, you need to find Cat a spot on the board. Cat, you need to make yourself more visible. A man like Landry wants to know that we are all running this. He loves the family shit. We need to feed it to him."

Finally, I decide to take control. That's what my grandfather wanted me to do. Whether I want to or not.

"It's not shit, Chase. We *are* a family business. And we are seeking out Landry because he runs a company in the town where we were born. A place where we have history. Whether we are ready to deal with it or not. Cat, Chase is right. We need to be seen. This weekend we'll all head back."

Cat looks at me like I've told her she needs to have a tooth extraction.

"We don't have to stay at the house," I say quickly. "We just need to be there. I'll contact the Bristol Harbor Inn if you want."

Cat shakes her head. "We own a house. There is no reason why we can't stay there. I'll call ahead and make sure the house is prepared for our arrival. Chase, how long should we be there?"

It's nice to see Cat looking to Chase for guidance. I know things are hard for him. It's not easy being the product of the affair—being the one who didn't lose his mom. Instead he's part of a dirty secret, something taboo and hidden that no one discusses.

“I think the weekend should be enough. It will make a big difference that we are staying in the house all together. It’s a big deal in itself. I’m...”—he pauses, looking around the room—“I’ve never been there before.”

Carter and Cat look to one another and an entire conversation passes between them. Although I’m closer with Cat, and probably Carter, than either of them are with one another, I am not part of this discussion. This is their own world. One that neither Chase nor I really existed in. I was just a baby when everything happened, and Chase was nonexistent. Carter and Cat had a mom and dad. They have memories that I’m just not privy to, and there is no relationship, no conversation, that can change that.

Moving around my desk, I walk over to Chase and put my arm on his shoulder. “Thank you for helping us figure out what we need to do for the company. I’ll do whatever you suggest,” I say honestly, looking him right in the eye.

A smile crosses Chase’s face that reminds me so much of our father it almost hurts, but I bite back the memory and focus on my brother.

“Thanks, Cash.”

“Want to grab dinner?” Cat asks, looking at us all hopefully.

I steal a breath and turn to her. “Sorry, I have plans tonight.”

Carter interjects. “Another first date?”

Cat makes a face. “I really think you should call Vanessa again. You didn’t give her a fair chance.”

Chase winks. “I can take you out to meet some nice women.”

I shake my head at them all and laugh. “I don’t need any of your help. I’ve got plans, like I said.”

Cat narrows her eyes, and I know she’s wondering if my plans are with Grace. Let her wonder. Eventually she’ll find out the truth. I’m not hiding

my relationship with Grace. Well, right now I might be, but not for long.

“When are we leaving?” I ask, trying to turn everyone’s focus from my love life back to the business.

Chase takes the bait. “Friday after work?”

Carter shakes his head. “I’ll be there as little as I can. See you on Saturday.”

Cat walks over and smacks him. “We are doing this the right way, right, Cash?” she says, turning to me.

I nod. “Carter, you and I can ride together.”

The minute I say it, I regret it, but I know it’s the only way I’m getting him there. I told Grace we are spending the weekend together, and now I’ve got plans with my family. None of it is ideal, but it’s what I have to do. Grace of all people will understand the need to make work a priority.

Carter looks at me, surprised, but then I see a warmth settle in and maybe even pride. In a very un-Carter-like way, he shakes his head and smiles. “Okay, Cash, we can ride together.”

“Great, well as fun as this has all been, like I said before, I have plans.” And as I look at my watch, I see that I’m late. Grabbing my phone, I shoot Grace a text.

**Change of plans. I’m running late. I’m sending my driver to pick you up.**

Next, I message Frank.

“What are you doing?” Cat says, reaching for my phone. I pull it back and slip it into my pocket.

“I have to go. We have all week to discuss plans. We can do lunch tomorrow if you want,” I offer to the three of them.

Carter and Chase nod, but Cat hasn't taken her eyes off me. "Are you going to see her?"

Both my brothers look between Cat and me and neither of us blink. "I'm leaving. I'll see you later."

Cat shakes her head, but I don't stick around to continue the fight. How the hell am I ever going to get my family on board with my new relationship?



## CHAPTER 28

### GRACE

**Y**ou don't need to send a driver. I promise I'll show up.

I laugh to myself as I put down my phone; the man is so bossy. Within seconds it's ringing.

"Mr. James, you do realize I have clients other than you, right?"

"My driver is outside. Get in the car, Grace."

I roll my eyes to the ceiling. "I need to go home first to grab clothes."

Cash's laughter reaches through the phone and grips my heart. "No, sweetheart, you do not need clothes for what I have planned tonight."

"I'm not coming to the hotel panty-less."

"You're not coming to the hotel at all. Frank's bringing you to my new place."

"You have a new place?" He literally told me two days ago he lived in a hotel. Since that time we've spent one night apart. How in the hell did he find the time to move in somewhere new?

"Less talking. Go downstairs, Grace."

I sigh in resignation. "Fine, but you owe me a pair of panties."

He laughs again, and I grip my chair and clench my legs. “Angel, I’ll buy you a drawer full if you’ll just get in the fucking car and get that pretty little pussy over here. I’m starving.”

Well, that about does it. Pretty sure I just came.



The black sedan is parked in front of my office, and the driver must have been given a picture of me because as soon as I open the door, he walks up and introduces himself. “Ms. Kensington?”

Maybe it’s a requirement that all men I interact with lately are good-looking because this guy is hot with a capital H. Broad shoulders, insane green eyes, and chiseled cheekbones leave me wondering if he’s a model or my driver for the night. “You can call me Grace,” I say as I hold out my hand to shake his.

He winks and shakes my hand. “Frank. It’s nice to meet you, Grace. Mr. James is looking forward to your arrival.”

So formal. I smile like a schoolgirl and slip into the car as he opens the door. Being with Cash definitely has its perks.

“So how long have you been working for the James family?” I ask when he settles into the front seat. The car smells new, and I sink back against the cream leather seats.

“Been best friends with Cash since college. When he took over a few weeks ago and his family forced a driver on him, he asked if I’d step in.”

“That’s why the car smells so new.”

He meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “He really likes you.”

My cheeks warm and I relax. “I really like him too.”

“His family won’t make this easy, though. I’m just warning you.”

I bite the inside of my mouth. “So, they don’t like me?”

It’s not that I’m insecure, but I don’t exactly have a family of my own—aside from Marion and Asher—and Cash has a huge one. The idea that I’d be putting any tension on his relationship with them doesn’t sit well.

Frank shakes his head. “They don’t know you. And they can be difficult. His grandmother is very controlling, and Cat is very protective.”

I smile. “So, it’s the women I have to worry about?”

Frank chuckles. “Yeah, I’m sure Carter and Chase will love you. They love all women. Besides, Cash is the head of the family. Even though he’s not the oldest, he’s the one they all rely upon, so in the end what he says goes.”

“I can get behind people looking out for Cash. That’s a good thing.”

“Absolutely. Cash said you’ve been through a lot. Just hang in there, I promise you he’s worth it. I’ve never known a better guy.”

We pull up to the James Spirits building, and I look up at it quizzically. “I thought Cash wanted me to meet him at his new apartment?”

Frank meets my eyes in the mirror. “He did.” He turns around and hands me a keycard. “Tell the front desk you’re going to the penthouse. You’re on the list of approved people. Then in the elevator you just use this, and you’ll go straight up.”

“His apartment is the penthouse?” I look up at the towering building with trepidation. All I see are dollar signs. When I met Cash, I joked that his nickname was appropriate. Now I’m realizing it is even less of a joke and more of an insane coincidence. And not necessarily one that I’m entirely comfortable with.

Frank gets out of the car and opens my door, offering me his hand to help me out. “You’ll get used to it. I know this a lot, and Cash doesn’t carry himself like someone who is worth millions but that’s a good thing. He’ll take care of you. Just breathe and be good to him.” He winks again and stares at me—likely waiting for me to respond, or say goodbye, or walk away. But I’ve only just now met someone who can give me insight into who Cash really is. Someone who knows him.

Not wanting to seem like a total creeper though, I thank Frank and leave him by the car. Time to see where my new man lives.

When I approach the front desk, a woman is already talking to the attendant.

The woman has jet-black hair, amazing curves, and long legs, but I can’t see her face. I’m immediately jealous of her legs.

“Do you happen to know where Cash is off to? I think I left something in his office,” I overhear her saying.

He shakes his head. “Mr. James went up to the penthouse. Want me to buzz him to let him know you’re here?”

I bite my lip. Who is this woman and why is she going to see Cash?

“No, that’s okay. I’ll surprise him.”

The man looks uncertain. “He has a visitor coming.”

The woman leans closer and points at his screen. “What’s her name?”

He tilts his head at her and looks back to me. Without hesitating, I turn around and walk back to the doors, wanting to give them privacy. When I turn around, the woman is walking toward the elevator, and the man is staring at me.

“I take it you’re Ms. Kensington?” he asks me with a knowing stare.



I nod as I walk up to the desk and show the keycard. “Frank told me to show you this.”

He tilts his head toward the elevator. “That’s Catherine James, Cash’s sister. She doesn’t seem like your biggest fan, huh?”

My legs feel heavy, and my throat dries up. *Why does Cash’s sister dislike me so much?* “Why do you say that?”

“When she saw your name she made a face,” he replies evenly.

My breath comes out long and my shoulders fall. “This isn’t exactly how I thought tonight would go. But you aren’t the first person to warn me about how she feels.”

The man seems to take pity on me. “She’ll come around. If Mr. James wants you in his life—and clearly he does because he doesn’t give anyone a key to the office suite let alone to the penthouse—then you’ll be in his life. Don’t worry about it.”

I pinch my nose with my fingers. “Can I just stay down here until she leaves?”

He chuckles. “No. Mr. James won’t be happy if you’re late. Go on up; it’ll be okay. She really is a nice woman—just overly protective. Just like her grandmother.” He gives off a little shiver when he says grandmother, and I can’t help but smile. *How bad can a grandmother be?*

After muttering a few affirmations to myself, I follow the man to the elevator. He presses the button and holds the door open for me, then leans into the elevator and hits the PH button.

*Penthouse.*

*How do I have a boyfriend who lives in a penthouse in Boston? Is Cash my boyfriend?* This whole married-but-not-married thing is getting beyond complicated and weird. If you had told me even two months ago that I’d be

living in Boston, having the best sex of my life with a man who is not my husband, and trying to impress his family, I'd have told you to get the hell out of my home.

My suburban home that I had carefully updated for the last three years.

Honestly, if I'd put half as much energy into my marriage as I did in my master bath, I may not be riding in this elevator right now. This very luxurious elevator that smells like Cash, like an oaky whiskey barrel.

I lean back against the wood which lines the elevator and close my eyes. As nervous as I am to meet Cash's sister, I wouldn't change a thing. If I want him in my life—which I do—then I need to put on my big girl panties and figure out a way to win over his family.

*If only I had panties.*

The elevator dings and opens into brightness. I adjust my eyes and see that I'm in the penthouse. There's no front door to knock and announce my arrival. I peek out of the elevator and don't see Cash or his sister, but I do see wide dark wooden beams, floor-to-ceiling windows which bring a soft glow into the space from the early evening sun, and an oversized black leather couch.

I step farther into the space, afraid to call out and also afraid not to. To my right, I spot a kitchen with black countertops and a large island, and to the left of it is a dining room table surrounded by twelve chairs. The ceilings are at least twenty feet high, and it's clear to see that no expense was spared when designing this space.

There are glass doors leading out to a patio on the side of the building. Just past them I spot Cash and his sister. He's wearing the same suit from this afternoon, looking sexy with his hair mussed from the wind outside. She motions widely with her hands. Leaning against the balcony with his

legs crossed and his arms folded, Cash stares at his sister. He doesn't appear upset with whatever she's saying, but he also doesn't seem happy. He looks every bit the CEO in this moment, taking someone's complaint and giving them the ability to air their grievance without interruption. Unfortunately, the grievance happens to be me.

Cash looks away from his sister, and his eyes meet mine. I watch as his face transforms from smooth to curved, his lips tipping up and his eyes brightening, and then he sighs, and his shoulders relax.

He doesn't glance back at his sister; he just moves to the double doors, opens them, and walks to me, his eyes never leaving mine. I'd like to say I saw how his sister reacted—I imagine it was with sheer annoyance—but my eyes never left Cash's either. His whiskey pools of hope beckoned me and held me in a trance.

“Gracie,” he says on a breath, pulling me right to his chest and squeezing me tight. I feel him inhale me and I do the same. “I missed you.”

For a few moments I hold him, unable to say anything.

The sound of heels crossing the distance into the living room draws me away from him. Cash takes my hand and pulls me close, squeezing three times. What that means, I don't know, but it gives me comfort.

“Cat,” he says, turning to his sister, “this is Grace Kensington. Grace, this is my sister, Catherine.”

To her credit, she manages not to scowl at me, offering me a polite smile. “Hi Grace, it's nice to meet you.”

Unsure if I should hold out my hand, I shift a bit as I address her, “Hi Catherine, it's wonderful to meet you too.”

It's only once I hear Cash chuckling against me do I realize that I curtsied to his sister. I freaking curtsied as if she were the damn queen of England.

Mortification turns my cheeks red, and she looks at me with a bemused smile. “Are you here to discuss Cash’s next round of dates? That’s what you do, right? You match him with *other* women.”

I squirm, wondering how to respond. Cash and I haven’t discussed what we are, let alone whether we are sharing this information with anyone, and now we’ve just embraced like lovers and he’s gripping my waist possessively.

Cash takes a step back, and I immediately miss the warmth of his body and the comfort it provided me. “Cat was just leaving, right, Cat?” he says, walking toward the elevator.

She stares at me for another moment, and I feel my knees shake under her gaze. “Right,” she replies, looking away from me and to her brother. “I’ll see you this weekend, Cash Money.”

She gets in the elevator, and I finally breathe.

“I’m so sorry about that,” Cash says, walking back in my direction as soon as the elevator doors close. He takes my cheek in his hand and gazes down at me. “Are you okay?”

I close my eyes, grounding myself by his touch, and then look up at him. “Yes. Perfect now that I’m with you.”

Cash leans down and brushes his lips against mine, gently at first, just holding our lips together and resetting. When I can’t take the distance any longer, I move my arm around his neck and he moans, pulling me closer, his hands skimming down my body until they reach my ass. He pats me down as if I’m a suspect and then growls when he confirms that I am still without underwear. “Finally, you listen.” His tongue pushes into my mouth, and he kisses me like we haven’t seen each other for days, rather than the

mere hours we had to endure without one another. I giggle against his lips, and he smiles. “Sorry, I get a little carried away when you’re this close.”

“No need to apologize. So now that you’ve got me here, Mr. James, what is it exactly that you wanted me for?”

Cash’s eyes light up. “No, you don’t.”

“No, I don’t what?”

“You and that sexy mouth. You are not going to distract me from my plans this evening.”

My brows rise. “My sexy mouth?”

“Oh, don’t even pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. When you talk to me in that professional tone, I can’t help but want to bend you over my couch.”

My tongue goes to my cheek. “But what would you do with me bent over like that?” I ask in a shocked tone.

Cash chuckles. “Stop! I’m not letting you win this time.” He shakes his head at me and pulls my hand into his as he leads me through his new living space. “I am taking you on a tour. I want to know what you think.”

“Does it end in the bedroom? Or wait, don’t tell me, *the shower?*”

Cash stops walking, and I snap into his embrace. I bite my lip as he stares into my eyes. “I’m going to make you pay for that later.”

“Promise?” I ask, truly begging for whatever he has planned.

Cash closes his eyes as if he’s struggling, and I lean my forehead against his chest. “Sorry, I’ll stop.”

His hands move behind my head, and he looks down at me. “Don’t ever stop, Angel. *Please*. I don’t think I’ve ever been as happy as I am right now in this moment with you.”

Beads of happiness swirl and crash and scream and dance inside me. I know I've never been as happy as I am in this moment either. Right now it feels so easy with Cash. *So right*. It scares the shit out of me. "Show me your new home, Cash."

He leads me through his apartment—excuse me, the top floor of an office building in Boston cannot adequately be described as an apartment. There are rooms upon rooms upon rooms. And that doesn't include the gym equipped with not one but two Pelotons, a screening room with eight massaging chairs to watch movies, and the *pièce de résistance*, the hot tub and lap pool on the roof. As we stand under the stars, looking out over the city, I'm awestruck.

I haven't said two words the entire time; my chin was too close to the floor to lift for words. Finally, I say, "Cash, this place is insane."

He smiles at me. "Do you like it?"

"Like it? What's there not to like?" He hums as he wraps his arms around my waist and slides his head between my neck and shoulder, sending a breath of warm air into my ear and an electric shock between my legs. "Having you here, I already like this place better."

I laugh against his chest, and his arms wrap tighter around me. "Okay, you better tell me your other plans before I destroy them and jump you right here."

Cash's laugh reverberates against my back. "Now that's something I'd like to see." He lowers his lips to my neck and leaves a trail of kisses on my skin.

"Food, Cash, now. We need sustenance first."

He smiles into my skin and bites me. "Fine. But only because you asked nicely. I could think of a few things I would prefer to eat."

I whirl around. “A few?”

He lifts his eyebrows with all sorts of suggestion, and I practically squirm thinking of where else he could stick his tongue.

*God, he’s dirty. Or maybe I am.*



So, it’s both of us. We are both dirty. Which is why we are now sitting in his bathtub—one that is the size of three regular bathtubs—and I’m lying in Cash’s arms as he rubs his soapy fingers up and down my body. With my back to his front, I feel his hard length against me, and his lips keep dropping kisses across my skin, scattering goosebumps all over my body.

“Favorite food?” Cash asks.

We’ve been playing this game for a while. “I want to know everything about you,” he had whispered in my ear, as he washed my hair.

“Pizza,” I reply.

Cash nips at my skin. “See, you are perfect.”

I elbow him. “Don’t get me wrong, I do love a dirty martini and a steak.”

“First meal I ever bought you.”

I close my eyes and lean against him. “What about you?”

“Hot buttered lobster roll from Quitos,” he says smoothly.

“That was oddly very specific. Why’s it so special?”

The bubbles slosh around us as I turn my head to look at him, leaning against his shoulder as he speaks. “Well, you know how my mom died when I was young so we came to live with my grandparents in the city?”

I nod.

“Well, every summer my grandparents would bring us back to Bristol. It’s the town we were born in. We have a house there and we’d spend a few weeks sailing, riding bikes, playing on the playground at Colt State Park, and just being kids. It was the only time that my grandfather ever took off from work, and it felt like we were a real family. We’d have dinners around the table, afternoons spent in the sun or on the water, and on Fridays my grandfather would take turns taking each of us to a restaurant of our choice for alone time with him. I knew he loved lobster rolls, so I always picked *his* favorite restaurant. I think he knew it too because I hated mayonnaise, and normally a lobster roll comes with mayo. That’s how he would get it. He didn’t want to call me out on my obvious attempt at winning him over, so he ordered me a hot lobster roll. The second I tasted the garlic delicacy on my tongue, I was hooked. It was the best thing I’d ever eaten.”

“Sounds incredible.”

“It really is. But even more so, the memories I made with him during those lunches are something I cherish. He would talk to me like I was an adult, explain the business to me, treat me like an equal. It is only in these last few years that I realized he was grooming me even back then. Last year he called me while I was in Tennessee and told me he wanted to go there this spring. I think he planned on asking me to take over while we shared a lobster roll. Unfortunately, he had the stroke, and he didn’t get to do it the way he wanted. Now it’s been forced upon him instead.”

I pull Cash’s arms around my waist and squeeze him tightly. “I’m sorry he didn’t get to do it that way. It sounds like you have a special relationship.”

“We do. And he is going to love you. I want to take you there someday. Hopefully soon.”



I look up at the man I'm slowly falling for and kiss his lips, tasting the bubbles around us and the wine from dinner. "I would love that, Whiskey."

"Speaking of taking you out, when do I get to take my girlfriend on a real date?"

Biting the inside of my cheek, I sneak a look at him behind me. "Girlfriend?"

Cash spins me so that I'm facing him and moves my hips so that they are perfectly aligned with his own. "Yes, girlfriend. Do you have a problem with that, Gracie?"

Rubbing myself against his thick erection, I shake my head as I try to slip him inside my warmth. "Nope. I happen to love it."

The warm water sloshes around us, and Cash's fingers rub slow circles on my legs, hypnotizing me. "Do you want kids, Grace?"

The question doesn't so much as catch me off guard, but I don't know the right answer. It's not that I worry that whatever answer I provide will be a problem, it's that I honestly don't know.

"I've always wanted kids," I admit. The life I imagined always included children, but my life is nothing like I imagined.

*What if I'm too selfish to have a child? What if I turn out to be like my mother?*

As if sensing my hesitancy, Cash stops the movement of my teasing hips and holds me in place. "You've always wanted kids...I'm sensing a *but* in your response."

I look up at him. "Do you? Want kids, I mean. Is that what you want?"

Cash doesn't hesitate. "Yes." He kisses my forehead and tips up my chin so that I'm looking right at him. "Since I met you, I want a lot of things. And kids are just one of them. I don't say this to scare you, Grace, but I'm

making all sorts of plans in my head. And every single one of them centers around you.”

A gasp slips from my lips. It’s like the air has been sucked out of the room and my chest grows tight. What is most concerning is how much this does not scare me. Instead, as he angles himself up so that I’m sliding down onto him, I’m filled with an overwhelming sense of peace. The plans I had for myself may not have worked out as I imagined, but I’m still precisely where I’m meant to be. Straddling a man who is not my husband, handing my heart over, and making plans for a future which surpasses any of my wildest dreams.



## CHAPTER 29

### GRACE

**O**n Wednesday morning, Marion appears in my office with her purse in her hand and a smile on her lips. “Come on, Grace, we are going to breakfast.”

After our bath, Cash and I discussed how to handle work, our relationship, and the press. I convinced him that our best bet was to stay under the radar for the time being. Or at least until my divorce was finalized. Fortunately, it appears his lawyer suggested the same thing so he didn’t put up too much of a fight.

The other part of my plan he didn’t love, though. I’m convinced that the only way forward is for me to be seen out and about with Jonathan. It will take the attention off Cash. I was just getting up the courage to call Jonathan when Marion appeared.

I take her interruption as a sign that I should wait. “Oh, great idea!”

Lunch with Marion used to be a daily occurrence. As were dirty martinis with our meal. Since I had taken on more of a leadership role in the company though, and had more afternoon meetings, we had kept the lunches dry and saved the drinks for after work.

As we sit down at breakfast, I wish I could have a drink for this conversation. Marion is eyeing me like I'm one crack away from falling apart which means she's seen the article about Cash, Jonathan, and me. I can only imagine what she thinks.

When I order a coffee she raises her brow over her menu, purses her lips, and then says to the waiter, "Make it Irish and get me one too."

He has a shaved head, black ink running up his arms and neck, and bulging muscles below his black button-up. He smirks and then shoots Marion a wink before turning away from us.

I can't help but giggle. Even over sixty she garners the type of attention from men that an eighteen-year-old would receive in college. She exudes sex appeal. Or in all honesty, appeal in general. Both women and men flock to her, seeking her approval, her attention, and her commentary.

Including myself.

It is only after I've sipped my Irish coffee that Marion finally speaks. "How are things with Steven?"

"I need to move forward with the divorce. How do you think I should handle it from a PR standpoint? I don't want this to adversely affect the firm."

Marion tilts her head in thought, and then it's like a lightbulb goes off in her head "*Oh, the article.*" The words are said with acknowledgement and understanding. "I must say I was rather enjoying watching Mr. James traipsing around with a mystery woman for the last few weeks."

The whiskey burns my throat and I choke. "Huh?"

"I have alerts set up for all of our clients. Please tell me you do that too?"

I nod with big eyes. *Where is she going with this?*

“I can’t tell you the number of times I was pictured with a client as their mystery woman. It happens, Grace. It’s just unfortunate they’ve now identified you. It can be cleared up with a statement regarding the nature of your relationship. We don’t need to address your divorce.”

The nature of my relationship with Cash. Right.

“About that,” I start. Marion looks at me with an almost smirk and I lose my nerve. “I think it would be good for me to be seen out with Jonathan. Take the heat off Mr. James.”

Marion shrugs. “If you want. Mr. James is quite delicious though, isn’t he?”

I cough as I remember precisely how he tastes. Clearing my throat, I look everywhere but at her. “Sure, yeah, I mean, if that’s your type.”

Marion laughs. “He’s everyone’s type. Tall, gorgeous, and there is something about him, like he’s a lost puppy that you just want to help guide home. Maybe cuddle him. Don’t you think?” she asks pointedly, her heeled foot bouncing in almost glee.

*Or he’s a dirty talker who steals your panties. But sure, we’ll go with lost puppy. I’ve certainly seen that side of him too.*

“He...uh...said he was going to take a break from dating. He’s too busy with work, and the tabloid gossip isn’t good for him.”

Marion frowns. “That’s too bad. I guess Jonathan isn’t a bad option for you then. I just thought...” She doesn’t finish her sentence, and I find myself staring at her, wondering what she was going to say but too afraid to ask. I need to get out of this conversation in one piece with as few half-truths as possible.

“So, PR person?” I redirect.

“Right. If you are going to start dating, we should set the record straight on your divorce. I’ll have Melanie call you.”

I sigh. “Thank you, Marion.”

“Anything for you, Sweets.” The food arrives and I take a moment to peer at the woman who has given me so much. I hope one day she understands why I did what I did, and she isn’t too disappointed in me for going after a client. The truth is I have tried to stay away from Cash, and it’s not possible anymore.

A bubbling excitement forms in my stomach as I remember Cash’s declaration about me being his girlfriend last night. In the end, he’s worth it.

Whatever the cost, I’m willing to pay it.



“How’s the matchmaking going?” Rachel asks when I arrive back in the office. She has a coffee in her hand which I greedily accept. The Irish coffee has just left me tired.

“Mr. James is going to take a break from dating. Time to start working on another client. Who’s up next?”

Rachel smiles. “Gavin Langfield.”

My smile matches hers. Now there’s a bachelor to get excited about. Hopefully, with the attention on the media mogul—who is notorious for never being seen with the same woman twice—Cash will become yesterday’s news. “Oh, that’s a good one.”

“I’ll bring his file into your office in a bit. Just doing some final research on his fetishes.”

I cringe. That was always my least favorite part of the job.

“Did someone say fetishes?” my best friend croons. I turn around to spot Tessa standing behind me with an eager face and two lattes in her hand.

“Is one of those for me?” I ask.

Tessa pulls them closer to her chest. “Only if you tell me what type of kink I have to be into for a shot with Mr. Langfield.”

I shake my head and then nod to my door. “Come on in. I already have a coffee, so I’m not telling you anything.”

She pouts but follows behind. “Come on, help a girl out. Not all of us are having mind-blowing sex with billionaires on the regular.”

I grab Tessa by the arm and pull her into my office. “Shut up,” I whisper between gritted teeth. “I haven’t told anyone else about the…” I trail off as I shut the door behind me, hoping that Rachel didn’t just hear Tessa’s teasing.

“Oh, please, as if she doesn’t know. Your face is practically a billboard for sexual gratification. You can’t hide the hussy.”

I trip over my own two feet. “Excuse *you*.” Whirling around, I glare at my best friend who doesn’t look the least bit sorry.

“Anyway, I’m done talking about you. Let’s talk about me and this Langfield guy.”

I ignore her completely, instead turning on my laptop and reviewing emails while I sip my coffee. Tessa still has the other two cups, and I’m irrationally annoyed because I know she has my favorite latte in her hand. She takes alternating sips between each and smiles at me as she does.

“You’re an ass,” I say, looking away from her.

“Fine, that’s not why I came anyway. We’re going out tonight.”

I sigh. I'm exhausted. Between all the sex, and the drama, and more sex, I really just need a night to decompress. I thought tonight would be that night since Cash told me he had an event he had to go to with his brothers. "Where are we going?"

"There's this new club that's opening. VIP only. Practically impossible to get into."

I stare at her. "And how'd you get an invite?"

Tessa leans closer and slides the latte to me, recognizing that I'm not going to deny her request to go out. I gulp down a big sip as I wait for her to divulge all the details.

"It's called Black Label. The magazine got a few tickets to the grand opening. Although, I'm hearing whispers that there's an even more exclusive part of the club that's by invitation only."

Trying to hide my excitement, I take another sip of coffee.

She points to my face and circles with her finger. "What is going on with your face?"

I hum into my coffee. "What?"

"Grace Kensington, tell me right now!"

I laugh. "Cash might have mentioned that he and his brothers are going to a new club. Just wondering if it's the same spot."

Tessa shimmies her shoulders. "Oh, it totally is. That's it. It's decided, we are going shopping."

I sit back in my chair. "I have work to do, T."

"This *is* work. You are going to an exclusive club filled with rich men. It's like hunting season for you."

I laugh, and I have to admit, I feel the rush of excitement over her observation. "Fine. We'll go shopping. *But later*. I have stuff to do."



“Fine,” she relents, finally standing up and moving to my door. “I’ll meet you at three.”

I roll my eyes and wave her forward. “See you then.”



Reading over Langfield’s profile, I pencil in notes between taking bites of my sandwich. It feels like I’m finally settling into my new position. I am really taking over this business and life is going back to normal. New client, *that I don’t want to date*, working through lunch, and to top it all off, I am now having mind-blowing sex with my perfect boyfriend on the regular.

The intercom beeps, and Rachel’s voice cuts through my thoughts. “Grace, Mr. James is on line one.”

I drop my sandwich, wipe my hands on my napkin, and clean off my mouth as if I’m going to see him, rather than just talk on the phone. “Hey, Whiskey.”

“Angel, how is your day going?”

I stare down at my notes and smile. “Actually pretty well. How ’bout yours?”

Cash groans. “Miserable. Can I take you to lunch?”

“Sorry, I’ve already eaten.”

He groans again. “Fine. I’m canceling my plans tonight and taking you to dinner.”

I laugh. “No, you are not. We’ve spent the last few nights together. Go spend time with your brothers.”

A low growl makes its way through the phone, and I feel my legs clench together. I'm pretty sure having sex regularly makes you hornier because I have never had so much sex and never wanted someone as much as I want this man. "Fine, then tomorrow we are both playing hooky."

My lips perk up as my libido goes crazy. "Sorry, no can do. I have a new client I'm meeting tomorrow."

"A male client?" he asks tersely.

"Just another playboy looking to settle down," I tease.

Cash growls. "He's not interested in his matchmaker, is he?"

I laugh. "Don't know...I haven't met him yet. I'll keep you posted though."

Cash sighs and I laugh harder. "I'm just teasing... even if he was interested, I'm taken. Happily, blissfully taken."

"Damn right you are," he grumbles. "As fun as this has been, I have to finish up something at work because I'm meeting

Tessa at three."

"So you can meet up with her but not me?" he whines.

"Oh, Mr. James, are you feeling neglected?"

"You know what happens when you call me that," he whispers into the phone.

I laugh even as my own mind travels back to his hotel room, and the penthouse, and my desk. I clench my legs together and shake my head. "I really do have to go."

"Fine. Tomorrow?"

I smile, knowing I'll likely be seeing him tonight. "I'll try to squeeze you in after my lunch date."

Cash groans, and I hang up the phone before he can complain. In my computer screen I see the bright smile splayed across my face. God, that man makes me happy.



“Those pants are fuck-me hot,” Tessa stays, staring me down.

“I’m just happy that they fit, unlike my jeans,” I retort. We spent a pretty penny this afternoon on a whole new wardrobe thanks to my ever-expanding waist and thighs. Although even I had to admit that these black leather pants look better with curves.

Tessa slaps my ass, and I let out a yelp. “Shut it. I love this ass. And more to the point, so does your boyfriend.”

I shrug. She’s not wrong. “You don’t think the top is too much?”

“Grace, it’s a sex club. If anything, you are wearing too many clothes.”

I spin around and shoot daggers in her direction. “It’s a *what?*”

I’m not a prude, but I also don’t think I’m on *sex club* level either.

Tessa looks in the mirror and fakes fixing her lipstick. “Didn’t I mention that earlier?”

“No, T, if you’d mentioned a sex club, I’m pretty sure I’d remember that.”

She scratches her neck. “Hm...odd, I could have sworn I said something.”

Liar. And there goes my shot of seeing Cash tonight. I’m almost positive he’s not going to a sex club tonight, and he’s going to be livid when he finds out I did. Shit. “T, I have to call Cash.”

She meets my eyes in the mirror and shrugs. “We aren’t going into the actual sex part of it.”

“What does that even mean?” I say in an exasperated voice. “Are we or are we not going to a sex club?”

“The downstairs is just a high-end club...the area we aren’t going into—the invitation only part—I’ve heard that’s a sex club.”

I sigh dramatically. “You are exhausting. So you have no idea if this place is a sex club?”

She smirks. “I’ve heard enough gossip to know what I know. Now let’s go. I want to get there early enough to see if we can sneak our way upstairs.”

I laugh as I follow her. The last thing I want is to sneak anywhere with my best friend. But somehow I have a feeling she’ll be getting into that reserved space.



“This place is so cool,” Eliza whispers as all of us look around the club. She’s not wrong; this place is incredible. The walls glow red, and gorgeous chandeliers hang from the ceiling in varying heights and sizes. It feels like a speakeasy with the low lights, high fashion, and waitresses walking around wearing tassels and carrying overflowing glasses of champagne.

“How is this legal?” I ask, always the voice of reason.

Tessa gives me an appropriately annoyed look and smacks my ass. “Stop worrying for once in your life and just live in the moment.”

Not for nothing, but I've been doing a lot of living in the moment. But I don't point it out because I don't want to bring attention back to me. Every time I've been out with these women over the last few weeks, it has either been about my divorce, my inability to be with the man I wanted, or my newfound sex life. It's time to focus on them.

"We'll take some of these," Tessa says, grabbing champagne glasses off the waitress's tray and winking as she hands one to each of us.

"Do you think those things hurt?" I ask Eliza as my eyes dart to the tassels again.

The waitress shakes her head. "These ones are soft...now the ones upstairs..." She winks and walks off with a laugh.

"Ha!" Tessa screeches proudly. "I told you there's something going on upstairs!"

Laughter shakes my chest as I sip my champagne and look around the room. He's not here yet. I'm almost positive. Not only because I would be able to feel his presence, but because the James boys don't go anywhere without attracting a crowd. Even in a room like this, so clearly filled with men who are recognizable, or who have wallets that are recognizable, the James brothers will stand out.

There are enough people that the space feels electric but not crowded. There is room to move around, to watch, and plenty of couches and seating to relax. We pick a red velvet one to sit down and sip our champagne while we take in the festivities.

"Do you really think there are people having sex upstairs?" Eliza asks me under her breath, not wanting to draw Tessa's attention. God forbid you doubt our leader.

My shoulders lift ever so slightly in a shrug. "No idea."

An hour later the music is still pumping, the space has become more crowded, and the drinks have switched from champagne to shots. The music pulses through my body, or maybe it's the tequila, but either way, I am buzzed and anxious. I haven't spotted Cash, but I have seen more things than I'd like to admit. Women seem less inhibited, their gazes dipping to the space between my breasts and focusing on the cleavage I'm bearing thanks to the silk halter top Tessa forced me to purchase and wear without a bra. Even Eliza has been more forward, drawing circles against my bare arm as she sits next to me, biting her lip and looking out at the dance floor. I'm pretty sure she's turned on by the belly-dancing waitresses in the center of the room.

In a twist of events even I wouldn't have predicted, I'm turned on too.

Feeling all sorts of strange, I beg off to the bathroom in search of a moment to catch my breath.

In the privacy of the bathroom, I fix my lipstick and take out my phone to shoot Cash a text. Me: **I think I made a big mistake.**

My phone screen lights up almost immediately.

Cash: **Because you chose to go out with your girlfriends rather than spending the night with me and coming on my tongue?**

I squeeze my legs together and look around the bathroom, feeling exposed even though no one can see my screen. The girl next to me gives me an odd look, and I realize she's trying to get to the sink. I move to the corner, sitting down on a black settee, and cross my legs as I plot my reply.

Me: **No. You had plans with your brothers. How's it going?**

Cash: **Oh, it's been entertaining. I've been distracted though by this woman.**

My body heats, and jealousy burns my skin. I can't formulate a response. I stare at the phone, pissed off and confused.

Cash: **Ask me about her.**

*Fuck that.*

Cash: **She's wearing a purple silk top, black leather pants that are making me so hard I almost had to go to the bathroom to take the edge off, and she's been staring at women as if she didn't get off riding my cock last night.**

I bite the inside of my cheek as I hold back a smile. *So he is here. And he's been watching me. So much for my sixth sense of knowing when he's around.*

Cash: **Come out of the bathroom, Grace.**

At this point I'm aching for release. I'm nervous if I walk out of this bathroom I'll do something stupid. Or he'll know that I was turned on by what I was watching.

But I can't hide in the bathroom all night. When the girl who was at the sink gives me another look and then opens the bathroom door to walk out, I spot Cash standing in the hall. He raises his eyes, expecting to see me, but is instead met by the beautiful brunette who makes a show of how attracted she is to him, stopping and smiling and practically salivating as she tries to say hello.

Cash doesn't bat an eye at her, instead looking past her and meeting my gaze. "You all set, Angel?" he says in that voice that turns me into a puddle of want.

I swallow and nod, standing up and slipping my phone into my clutch before walking past the annoyed brunette and crashing against Cash's hard chest. His hands skate through my hair, and he angles my head up to his

own, staring down at me for a moment. There's an undeniable power in our gaze. Our eyes communicate, *hi baby, I missed you*, and then his lips are on mine and I'm pressing my hips against his own, wanting privacy and Cash. *Only Cash.*

"Can we get out of here?" I murmur against his lips.

"I've got a better idea," his gravelly voice replies. "Do you trust me?" he asks softly as he pushes my hair behind my ear, sending a shiver down my neck and making my nipples stand at attention. At this point, I just need to feel him against me.

"Completely."

He smirks and jerks his head to the left, indicating we are on the move. As we come upon a man in front of an elevator, he speaks in a voice too low for me to hear. Then he pulls me into the elevator and tugs me against his chest. The elevator jolts upward as his hands travel down my arms, heating my skin.

"Fuck, Grace, I can't tell you how bad I need to get inside you."

"Feeling's mutual, Whiskey."

With Cash's mouth on my neck and his hands gripping my ass, I feel every inch of his excitement. The hot open-mouthed kisses he alternates between soft bites are likely leaving marks, but I couldn't care less. I want to be branded by this man. I want the entire world to know I'm his. It's a freeing feeling, letting go completely, and I'm drunk on it.

When the elevator stops, we're met by a velvet rope blocking our ability to move off the elevator. The man on the other side takes one look at Cash and lifts the rope. "See or be seen?" he asks, and I try to work out what the question means.

Cash looks down at me and then back at the man. "See."



He nods and motions to the left. Cash grips my hand in his own and moves forward. It's quieter up here, and unlike downstairs there aren't people dancing or milling about. It's just a long hallway and doors. "Oh shit, is this the—"

Cash pushes his hand over my mouth. "Shhh, Gracie, no talking. Get out of that head of yours and just feel."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. He opens a door and pushes me forward. I'm nervous about what I'll find but am pleasantly surprised when I see it's nothing more than a small balcony overlooking the club.

The music below filters upstairs, and Cash's lips on my neck leave me gripping the banister tightly. "Where are we?"

"No fucking clue," he says as his laughter tickles my neck. "Just knew I needed you alone."

The fact that the man simply wants something and can make it happen by snapping his fingers is hot as fuck. I lean against him, pressing my ass against his straining erection, and relish the fact that what he wants right now is me. "Well you got me alone...what do you want now?"

His hands skate up my arms and to my neck, and my skin delights in his touch. I feel a tug and then my top slides down, exposing my breasts to the cool air.

"Cash!" I whisper-shout, my hands flying to cover myself.

His hands replace mine, and he tweaks my nipple as he whispers in my ear, "Relax, no one can see you."

Below us people dance, the belly dancers perform, and bodies move together, more frisky as the alcohol flows, pressing against one another. We stand above it all with me topless for all to see. If they looked up, that is, which they don't.

Fuck, this is hot.

Cash's fingers pull on my nipples again, and my entire body shudders. His hands skate down my hips, and he hooks his thumbs into my leather pants before slowly sliding them down, taking my panties with them. Then he pushes me against the balcony for balance and helps me step out of my pants.

I'm completely nude, aside from my top which sits around my waist, but Cash doesn't let that stay. He pulls it over my head and leaves me completely bare.

I turn into his chest, wanting to hide myself, but Cash turns me back toward the balcony. We're bathed in an almost red light, and I can only imagine how hot we look together right now, him fully dressed and me fully nude. I lean my head against his shoulder, surprising myself with how comfortable I am being completely on display. Against my neck he speaks slowly in his smooth drawl, "Do you know how gorgeous you are, Grace?" His fingers follow the curves of my hips up to my breasts, and I sigh as my entire body shivers in desperation. "You are the most beautiful woman in this room, and you're all mine."

My body heats at his words as his hands stroke up and down my hips. When one of his hands slips between my legs, he mumbles into my ear, "How do you wanna come, baby?"

I whimper a response. He's in control. I can't think when his fingers move so expertly over my clit.

Below us, I spot two women pressed up against the wall in the shadows and watch as one pushes her hand up the other woman's skirt. When they start kissing, I feel myself grow wetter and try to turn away, feeling embarrassed and guilty.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Cash whispers against my neck. “They are both beautiful...just like you. If watching them turns you on...”

It feels wrong and dirty, but I can’t look away.

Cash’s fingers slide in and out of me, fast then slow, all while his thumb continues to put pressure on my clit and he mutters dirty words into the night. “*You’re such a good little slut, I fucking love how your pussy grips my fingers, fuck yes, Grace, squeeze me tighter.*”

With his hands between my legs, his lips against my neck, and my eyes trained on the women, he takes my orgasm and shatters my world. I come so hard I’m still panting and barely hear him unzip his pants. He takes both of my hands and places them on the banister. “Hold tight, Angel,” he whispers before grabbing my hips and pressing his heavy cock against my entrance. I whimper, literally begging for him to fill me. My entire body is buzzing like a live wire and I feel out of my mind with need. When he finally thrusts into me, and I feel the thick slide of heat tear through my body, his cock jolting my stomach forward into the cold metal banister, his hand clamps down on my mouth to cover my cries. “I’m the only one who gets to hear you this way...but if anyone looked up, Grace, they’d know who you belong to.”

I close my eyes and focus on us. On the way he moves in and out of my body, on the feel of his fingers pressed against my hips as he grunts what sounds like my name, over and over again. On the way my fingers feel as they reach back for his neck to pull him closer, and how his hand then finds my breasts as he rolls my nipple between his fingers and tweaks, leaving me squeezing him tighter and him cursing in my ear. On the hotness of his breath against my neck, on the beads of sweat that slide between us. How everything in this moment feels raw and primal and right.

We are literally having sex for the entire club to see, but no one does because we are above them all, in our own private arena, out in the open. To say this is the hottest thing, the dirtiest thing, the most out-of-character thing I've ever done would be an understatement. And yet I've never felt so alive. I've never felt so reckless and crazy and fucking happy in my life.

I grip the metal banister tighter and look down, watching the bodies move together in an almost hypnotic way, as Cash moves in and out of me, grunting and whispering as he leans down and kisses my back, then alternates slapping my ass and thrusting again.

I'm so fucking hot and turned on that another orgasm takes me by surprise and squeezes Cash so tight that I pull his from him as well. I feel the first burst of pleasure as we both pulse, and I lean back into him, relishing being owned by this man as he grunts "*mine*" and loses complete control. He may own me, but I love knowing that in this moment, I own him as well.



## CHAPTER 30

### GRACE

**C**ash: Frank can come by around 5:45 to pick you up. Just text him when you're ready.

I roll my eyes. That man is such a control freak. And while sometimes I love it, like last night when I let him control my entire body and fuck me in public—*what in the hell was I thinking?*—other times his controlling ways leave me wanting to push back.

Also, I don't think I'll ever be comfortable having someone shuttle me around on a regular basis, but for the moment, I let the issue go. I've been delaying my phone call to Jonathan all week, and I need to get this over with.

I pick up the phone and dial his number, waiting two rings until his familiar baritone voice comes over the line. "Gracie, I figured I'd be hearing from you soon. I'm actually surprised it took you so long."

Oh, shoot.

"Sorry. I know I should have called sooner. I'm sure you're not loving the press."

Jonathan's dark chuckle reverberates through the phone. "Being considered one of the men lucky enough to be dating you is not a hardship."

Such a flirt. And full of shit. "Right," I say as a laugh escapes my lips. "You are ridiculous. Anyway, as you can imagine this has caused quite a conundrum because people don't know that I'm getting divorced, so it appears that I'm currently sleeping with both my client and you. Not a great look for me."

"Cash hasn't released something to set everyone straight?" he asks, his voice taking on a perturbed tone.

I bite my lip. "Um, no. I asked him to let me handle this. He's a client of the firm. It's my job."

Jonathan sighs. "He's also the one you are actually dating. He should be protecting you."

I don't know how Jonathan knows this, nor do I want to lie to him. We've been friends for years and I'm about to ask him a big favor. I would feel awful if I didn't lead with the truth. "It's not the right way to go about this. No matter what we say people are going to assume that I cheated since no one knows about Steven's affair, and I really don't want to get into a mudslinging contest. The most important thing is my business. I can't have people thinking I sleep with my clients."

Jonathan is silent on the other end of the phone. I'm not sure if he's upset with me for dating Cash, if he's surprised I admitted it, or if he's just waiting for me to make my big ask. Either way, I know it's my responsibility to keep moving forward.

"I know I'm asking a lot of you, but would you consider going out with me a few times and let the media think it's you I'm dating?" Nervously, I

twist the cord of my phone around my finger.

Jonathan clears his throat on the other end of the line. “Gracie, I would do anything to protect you. If you think this is the right thing to do, I’d be happy to take you out to dinner.”

A long sigh escapes my lips, and I let out a nervous laugh. “Why are you such a good guy? And how are you still single?”

Jonathan laughs. “I’m not that good of a guy, believe me. I actually have an event that I need a date for, and I’d rather bring a professional woman like you, someone who is both beautiful and can wow a crowd *and hopefully my future business partner*, than bringing some social media influencer who will bore me all night.”

Smiling, I reply, “You are seriously the best. Just tell me when and where and I’ll be there with bells on. Oh, and let me know the dress code. I really appreciate this, Jonathan.”

“When I say that sticking it to Steven is sincerely my pleasure, I’m not even being a bit facetious. I’m so angry about what he did to you. I may be a playboy, but I’m not a cheater and I despise those who are. Also, being seen with you on my arm will probably drive Cash a little nuts, and that has its perks too.”

I laugh. “Yeah, let’s not rub it in his face, please.”

“No promises, Gracie, no promises. Have a good night.”

“Night, Jonathan. Thanks again.”

I hang up the phone feeling relieved and also a little giddy. Jonathan has a way where he always makes a woman feel like she’s dipped in gold. In college I ate it up. It’s a dangerous quality because when he turns it off, it can leave you feeling very empty. Since I had been smart enough to never actually fall for his charms, I never got hurt and our friendship remained

intact all these years later. He is the perfect fake boyfriend for the press. He will provide them with fodder for months so that Cash and I can stay under the radar.

I'm just getting ready to text Frank that he can pick me up when my cell phone rings. It shouldn't have surprised me. Certainly, I knew it was coming. I'd so much as told Marion that my mother was going to be beside herself when she found out about the divorce. I just thought I had more time. That I would have Marion with me, preferably in a restaurant of my choosing, when I detailed Steven's affair and our eventual separation. In a restaurant, she couldn't scream and throw a fit. In front of Marion she would never belittle me and treat me like dirt. Or maybe she would, but at least Marion would have stopped her.

But on the phone, in the privacy of her own home, my mother knew how to cut like she had a switchblade in her hand. And she was not afraid to use it.

"You do realize you are a thirty-six-year-old woman, don't you, Grace," my mother hisses into the phone. "Do you know how embarrassing this is for me?"

I spent my life walking on eggshells around my mother. This wasn't my first foray into dealing with her meltdowns and teardowns. "Mom, I'm very sorry that you had to find out the way that you did, but you have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"Oh really! My daughter is having an affair while she's married to a wonderful husband who has provided her with everything I never had. How am I supposed to feel? Nothing is ever good enough for you. I was never good enough for you. You always wanted to be with Marion. TJ was never good enough for you, so you asked Asher to walk you down the aisle. The



high school I attended wasn't good enough for you, so Marion had to take out a mortgage to send you to private school in Boston and have you live with her. You are so spoiled you don't even see all the things you have done that are selfish and embarrassing. And now you cheat on a Kensington! What were you thinking? No one will ever treat you like Steven did."

Finally, we can agree on something. I will never allow myself to be treated the way Steven did. "Mom, I should have told you when you were here. I'll come down this weekend and we can have dinner with Marion and talk."

"Absolutely not. I don't want to hear your sob stories. End this affair with Jonathan; go back to Steven and work it out. I spoke to him this afternoon, you know? He's willing to go to counseling. Says he can forgive you. That you are the one who won't talk to him."

My sanity snaps. "He'll forgive me? Oh, that's rich. Did he tell you he's the one who cheated? I didn't cheat, Mom. I didn't even look at another man. *He* left me. But you know what? I'm happier now than I was for the last few years of my marriage. It was good for a while but we both got complacent, and we want different things."

It feels good to admit the truth. No, I'm not sleeping with Hanson or moving in with him despite the bogus claims in the latest gossip rags, but telling the truth about my marriage and how unhappy I was—that feels freeing.

My mother laughs. I don't know why I thought the truth would end her cruelty. I learned over the years just to placate her. Let her say her piece and then move on. Fighting with her never gets us anywhere. Except with tears.

"He cheated on you because you don't show him affection. Because you're always working. He's willing to forgive that. Do you know how

lucky you are? Do you know how much I would have killed to have a man want to support me and love me? All he's asking in return is for you to be around at night. To have kids. To be a mother. But you're so selfish you couldn't possibly understand how to do that."

Fresh tears hit my eyes as my mother's words cut me. I should have known better than to pick up the phone. The worst part is that I don't disagree with her. I wasn't a good wife to Steven. And I don't know if I'll ever be unselfish enough to put someone else's needs above my own. To not choose work, my career, and my wants over someone else's. I know that I don't want Steven, but I can't help but wonder how the hell I'll make it work with Cash if my mother is right.

A clear glass filled with whiskey and ice cubes, tilted to the right. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 31" are written in the same font.

## CHAPTER 31

### CASH

I slam down the phone, irritated that the third call to my distributor today has been declined. I need to get hold of them and find out what is going on with our contract. When Carter strolls into my office, I sigh in resignation. “I think we are going to have to change the plans for this weekend.”

“Something happen?” he asks as he sits down in the chair.

I blow out a frustrated breath. “I have to get to Nashville. Something is going on.” I’m frustrated for many reasons. It’s not just the fact that I have to cancel on my brother, it’s the idea of being away from Grace for longer than a night. If I’m going to Nashville I should make it a longer trip. Pack up more of my stuff. I wasn’t sure how long this stay in Boston would last, but now that I’ve moved into the penthouse and started dating Grace, it’s safe to say I’m not going to be returning to Nashville on a regular basis anytime soon.

“Still can’t get Daniel on the phone?”

“No. I’m positive he’s avoiding me.”

“Want me to come?” Carter offers.

“Nah, I need you here. See if you can find out if Dad’s behind any of this. Or Hanson. I swear it’s one of them.”

“Speaking of Hanson...what’s going on with him and your married friend?”

Shooting daggers at my brother, I grit out, “She’s getting a divorce. Nothing is going on with her and Hanson.”

Carter chuckles and shakes his head. “You are so easy to rile up...I take it you haven’t seen the latest article then.”

I hear the growl come from my throat as I turn to the computer, my temperature rising as I think about the attention that Grace so clearly doesn’t want. I will fucking kill someone if anyone got pictures of her last night. God, what was I thinking stripping her naked in public? Fuck. “What article?” I grunt as I type in my name.

“The one that cited inside sources saying that Grace and Hanson are moving in together.” The relief I should feel at knowing I’m not about to pull up a naked picture of Grace doesn’t come.

*Why the fuck does the media have to be so focused on her dating Hanson? And why hasn’t he killed the story yet? And why hasn’t she?*

“If there’s nothing else...” I say, looking up at my brother, not wanting to have an audience for my meltdown.

He laughs again. “Message received. Enjoy your trip, Cash. I’ll see you when you get back.”



It's almost eight when I'm able to leave my office. I'm agitated, wound up, and anxious to see Grace. She'd canceled our lunch, and despite the fact that I wanted to just show up at her office and bring her lunch, I had stuff that I had to deal with before leaving for Nashville tomorrow. But I'm not leaving without seeing her and figuring out how we are dealing with this Hanson situation. Frank was supposed to pick her up and bring her to my office after work, but she never texted him like I told her to.

When I glance at my phone again and find no messages, my skin heats.

Lifting the phone to my ear, I listen to it ring. After three rings, she picks up. "Hey Cash, sorry—"

I cut her off. "Where are you?"

"Uh, I'm at my apartment. I'm going to have to reschedule."

"Address?"

"Cash, no, another night."

My patience wanes and I snap, "Give me your address, Grace."

Her voice sounds resigned when she finally replies, giving me the requested information. It's selfish that I don't put any thought into why she canceled, only focusing on my need to be with her. "Open the door when I get there, Grace. I'll be there soon." I hang up before she replies, giving her no opportunity to decline.



Pulling up in front of Grace's address, I'm shocked to find that she lives in a brownstone in a fairly well-to-do area. I got the impression that Grace had

a small apartment that she stayed in when she was in the city. Perhaps I underestimated the amount of money a matchmaker made.

*Or maybe her husband bought it.*

The thought burns in my mind.

*What does he do? Did they buy this together?*

I find myself going down a rabbit hole of doubt that will do neither Grace nor I any favors. It's what Cat had been harping upon—the fact that she had this whole life planned with someone else, the fact that she felt so strongly about someone to agree to marry him—that bothers me.

Will I be okay knowing that she felt that for someone else? I've never been a romantic person who believes in soulmates or your one special person, but somehow I find myself wishing I could have had that with Grace. Even if we can somehow make this work, I'll never be the only person she walked down the aisle toward. Does that matter?

“Want me to wait?” Frank asks, likely sensing my nerves as I stare up at Grace's home.

“No. I'll be a while. If I need to get home I can call a cab.”

Frank spins around in his seat and stares at me. “I'll be around if you need me,” he says, and I know he means it as my best friend, not as an act of obligation. I really fucking appreciate the sentiment.

I get out of the car and take the steps two at a time before hitting the buzzer. I'm a little less overwhelmed when I see that the brownstone is separated into condos. She doesn't own the entire building, just a floor. And maybe she doesn't own it at all. Maybe this is where she came after the divorce. An apartment she escaped to. The idea settles much easier in my throat as I wait for her to buzz me in. After a few seconds, I hear the lock click and assume Grace is letting me up.

When I get to her door, it feels cold. There's no wreath on the outside as I would expect from someone like her. No indication whatsoever that a woman as warm as Grace lives here.

I knock twice and listen for her footsteps as she reaches the door. For a moment, I can practically feel her hesitation. On the other side of this door, she is closing her eyes, breathing, and preparing herself for the connection we have.

I need it too—the preparation, the willpower to handle what so obviously lies between us. It's the reason I can't let her go, no matter the price. My business, my reputation, none of it matters when I compare it to how she makes me feel. There is a pull that exists between us which sets my pulse racing and makes me do stupid things, like demand her address and show up at her door when she obviously doesn't want me here.

When the door opens and Grace comes into view, it's like finally breathing after diving into the cold ocean water. Before her I was living my life—going to restaurants, working, dating, having sex—and I was enjoying myself. I'd have told anyone that I was happy. Now life is more painful, the colors are brighter, and my emotions are constantly on fire. I feel uneasy, anxious, and unsettled because the woman standing across from me makes me feel things that I can't explain, and until I can tell the world she's mine, I don't think I'll be calm.

It's infuriating and exciting.

My eyes hold hers and I see the war raging within her own. I don't know what happened in the last few hours, but something's changed since last night. She hasn't yet accepted the inevitable—that she's mine. I don't have her completely.

With her hair in a ponytail and her face scrubbed free of makeup, I connect with her eyes and see nothing but pure exhaustion. She looks overwhelmed and out of sorts in her black leggings and a gray sweatshirt, but she motions for me to enter.

“You never showed up,” I say, my voice coming out darker than I mean. The things I want to say to her would scare her. The way she makes me feel, the plans I’m making in my head just from entering her space, would send her running in the opposite direction. “You never even called.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” Grace replies, avoiding my anger. I follow her into the kitchen which is just off the living room and watch as she picks up a bottle of open wine and pours it into two glasses. She hands me one of them before gulping down half of her own, then fills it back up and walks to the couch without a word.

I follow her around her apartment feeling out of sorts. I’m still in a full suit, and my entire body buzzes with adrenaline and angst. I want to touch her, to pin her down on the couch and kiss her until she relaxes.

“Were you ever going to show up?” I ask, anger seeping into my tone.

Grace doesn’t look at me. She pulls her leg up onto the couch and takes another gulp of wine.

*Infuriating.*

I wait for her to speak, but she takes another sip. Her eyes seem to catch my clenching fists and she sets her glass down.

“Cash, I’m not what you want.”

“Fuck that,” I grunt, getting angrier by the second.

*How did we get back to this conversation? What the hell happened between last night and today to make her question what we have?*

“Did you call the magazine and set the record straight?” I grit out.



Grace finally turns her violet eyes to mine. “What do you want from me, Cash?”

Confused and aggravated by the unnecessary drama, I find myself shouting, “*Everything!* I want everything with you. *I want everything from you.* I don’t want you to fake date Hanson. I don’t want us to hide. I want to be with you, Grace. If you give me that, I will give you the world. I will figure it all out. Stop playing games, stop this bullshit, and we can work this out together. But if you keep pushing me away, so help me, Grace, you better be prepared to let me go, because I’m not going to keep pushing back.”

My heart hammers in my chest. This is it. If she can’t provide even the slightest fight for us then I can’t keep waiting. There’s only so much one person can do.

Grace sighs, and I prepare myself for her to give up, buttoning my jacket and turning toward the door.

“Cash,” she says, her voice sounding closer in my ear. I look back and find her standing before me, the war in her eyes evident as they dart back and forth, looking over my face. “I don’t want to do it anymore,” she says, her voice desperate, confusing me further. My eyes dip from her own, looking away, and Grace’s hands cradle my face, turning me back to her. “I don’t want to do it alone anymore. If you’ll still have me, I’m yours.”

As she lifts herself to me, pulling my mouth to her own, and our lips meet, I groan and take her in my arms, hungry to feel every inch of her. Her tongue snakes into my mouth, and it’s like I’m being set free.

Cradling her head, I spin and push her back against the bookshelf as her hands make quick work of my jacket, pulling it off and smiling against my lips. Grazing her chin with my teeth, I taste the salt on her skin. I lean her

against the shelf, using my knee to provide her support as I lift her sweatshirt over her head.

As soon as I spot her bare nipples, pink and pebbled, I groan and dip my mouth to one, biting and nipping at it as she writhes against my knee.

I don't dare move her, instead studying her intensely as she continues to grind against me. The way quick breaths fall from her lips as I dig my hands into her hips, or how she bites down on her bottom lip when she gets nervous, or the sounds she makes when I press my cock against her. I want to learn every way to make her come.

“You're wearing too many clothes, Cash.”

Grace works the buttons down my shirt and slips it down my arms, then stares at my chest, her eyes hooded and begging. When she raises her lashes, I'm met by her startlingly beautiful eyes. This woman has me so wrapped around her damn finger; I'm a complete sucker for everything she's giving, and I can't imagine I'll ever be able to walk away.

With her fingers, she traces my chest, circling my skin, and I grow harder as we just stare at one another. I can't look away, the heat bounces between us, and the unspoken conversations leave the moment heavy.

Grace reaches for my belt and works the leather out of the loops, while biting her lip. A glint hits her eyes, and I don't know what she's thinking but I watch as she continues. With her tongue, she traces the same spots on my chest she just circled with her fingers, licking and sucking, as I watch in anticipation. She raises her eyes and smiles. “I'm yours, Whiskey. Tell me what you want.”

Grabbing her head, I pull her mouth to mine, whispering against her lips, “I want you on your knees and my cock in your mouth. I want to watch your eyes water and hear your gags.”

The surprised gasp that falls from her lips and the way her eyes light up lets me know she's dripping just from the way I'm speaking to her. For once I want to do what I've been thinking about since I first saw her. I want to take her ponytail in my hand, I want to control her movements, and I want her to give me every ounce of power as I own her body.

Grace doesn't hesitate. She bites my lip and pulls back, looking at me as she does it, then utters, "As you wish," before dropping to the ground and taking my pants and boxers with her as she goes. She reaches for a pillow from the couch, moving it under her before lifting her chin up and looking at me with excitement. "Is this what you want?"

Her lips move around my cock and my legs tighten as her hot mouth pulls me deeper until I hit the back of her throat, the tip of my cock burning with pleasure, and then she slides me out with a pop of her lips.

Grunting, I try to keep myself still, not wanting to choke her. *Yet*. But it's not enough. I need more. And when I wind my hand around her hair, pulling it lightly, and she moans, I know she can take it.

I use the bookcase to steady myself and she moves quicker, sucking and licking and circling her tongue while my hand controls her every move. I pull her back, watching as her hair strains a bit and her eyes water and then I push her forward so my cock is fully encased in her mouth, hot and wet, as her tongue massages the bottom of my shaft. The sounds of her gags, and the sight of her mascara coating her face almost stop me but when I try to pull back, Grace simply raises her eyes and shakes her head, a small smile pulling on her lips as she takes me deeper into her throat. That dirty smile will replay in my mind for years to come.

"Fuck, Grace, you better be ready to swallow," I warn, but she's relentless, keeping up the pace until I feel the first shot pouring out and

hitting the back of her throat as I curse and praise her.

Panting, I look down at her. She looks awfully proud of herself, smiling brightly up at me. “Was that okay?”

It’s the way she says it, so earnest and sweet, that has me hauling her off her knees and wrapping her in my arms. “Yes.” I laugh as I kiss her hair. “Yes, it was more than fucking okay. Now do me a favor and hold on to the bookshelf and let me return the favor.”

Grace shakes her head. “You don’t have to do that.” But even as she says it, she allows me to pin her against the bookshelf, and her hands grip it tightly.

“Finally, you listen,” I say, lowering myself in front of her and pulling her pants down as I go. “Such a good girl when you want to be. Do you want me to suck this greedy little pussy, Grace?” I ask, as I lift one leg up over my shoulder and settle comfortably in front of her. When she doesn’t say anything in response, instead biting her lip and getting shy on me again, I press my tongue right on her pussy and lick her from bottom to top.

“Tell me how that feels, Grace.”

Her entire body shudders and she shakes her head. In a small voice, she stutters, “Wh-what?”

I lick her again, this time pressing my tongue inside her pussy, twirling it as I squeeze the flesh of her thigh between my fingers. She’s already wet from blowing me, and her sweet taste leaves me hard again.

I slap my hand against her thigh and squeeze tighter. “Tell me, Grace, how does it feel when I stick my tongue in your pussy.”

Her words come out breathy, “Oh, Cash, I don’t think I can take it.”

With my fingers, I rub her clit in slow, torturous circles as I work my tongue from front to back and she moans. “Oh, I think you can. Now tell

me.”

Her head falls back, and I take her other leg over my other shoulder, balancing her completely as my mouth goes to town. Her grip tightens on the shelves as she holds on, and I push her back harder as she moans. “It feels soft...” she whimpers. “And my nipples are hard.”

“What else?” I say between swipes.

“And like my entire body is buzzing, like that first sip of champagne. I’m fucking lost in the way your tongue is playing with my clit.”

My eyes watch her as I continue sucking on her clit, pulling it in between my lips and flicking it with my tongue while she grips the bookcase and her thighs hold me in place.

I drag my thumb from her wet center to her ass and press in, and Grace curses under her breath as she rides my face and loses her words.

“How does that feel, baby?” I tease her slowly, not sure how much she can take, but she’s so wet she takes my finger deep and curses how good it feels.

“Oh fuck, Cash, so much pressure.” Her orgasm is almost instantaneous, and I feel her pulsing as I lick every last drop until she’s begging me to stop.

With her body practically limp, I let one leg down, steadying her before I place her other leg on the ground. Then I kiss up her stomach and stand up, pulling her against me and taking her mouth into mine. Grace moans into my mouth as her arms move around my body, pressing me as close as she can get. “Do you like how you taste?”

She smiles shyly.

“Don’t get shy on me now, Angel.”

“I need more, Cash; I need you inside me.”

I shake my head. "Let's get you cleaned up and then we need to talk."

Grace's face falls. I know she was using sex to distract me. Tightening my arms around her, I give her a squeeze of comfort. "Grace, baby," I say as I bite at her shoulder. She looks up at me and I see her hanging on by a thread. It kills me. I run my hand through her hair. I'm not sure if it's for her comfort or my own. All I know is that I need to have every part of me touching every part of her to ground us to this moment. "What happened today?"

She leans up to kiss me, but I know this is a diversion tactic, and I've already fallen for it once tonight. Now I want to talk.

I rub my nose against hers, stopping her from kissing me. "Talk to me. We can't work through it until you talk to me."

A lone tear escapes her eye and I see the others getting ready to pour down. Wrapping her in my arms, I lift her up. "Point me to the bathroom. Let's get you cleaned up."

Finally relenting, she points to a door on the left. "Through there," she says. I walk through her apartment and enter the room she indicated. It's a large room with a king-size bed, and I wonder briefly if her husband lived here. I don't allow myself to dwell on it though. Moving to the other side of the room where the bathroom is located, I set Grace on the toilet and turn the shower on before giving her a few minutes of privacy.

Standing in her bedroom, I look around and try not to feel out of place. Before I have enough time to spiral, Grace calls for me. When I enter the bathroom, she's already in the shower, so I undress and join her. When she immediately opens her arms for me to hold her, I relax. We're going to be okay.

"I'm sorry I'm making this so hard, Cash," she says in defeat.

“I just want to know you. I want to be with you. But I can’t do that if you won’t let me in. So please, Grace, just let me in.”

She nods and turns around, grabbing the shampoo. When she turns back, she hands it to me. “Wash my hair?”

I love taking care of her. When she relinquishes control and allows me to pleasure her, whether it’s with my tongue or my hands, I’m at my happiest.

I lather the shampoo and run it through her hair, massaging her head as I work through each strand. As the warm water beats down on my back and steam billows around us, the coconut scent of Grace’s shampoo fills the bathroom.

When she turns around, a soapy mess, I kiss her softly, allowing my hands to glide over her slick body. In no time we’re both worked up again and taking pleasure from one another, as if we haven’t just both gotten off only moments earlier. Grace bends over in the shower and smiles back at me, letting me know precisely what she wants. It’s not until I’m smacking her ass and entering her that I realize she did it again. Distracted me from conversation with sex.



## CHAPTER 32

### GRACE

**I**t's not intentional. Every time Cash gets within inches of me, my body temperature rises and my hands take on a mind of their own. Hungry doesn't describe the way I feel for him.

Starved. Ravenous. Insatiable.

As we dry off, he whispers sweet nothings into my skin, telling me how beautiful I am, how cherished, and all the things he wants to do with me. But when we enter my bedroom, and I motion to the bed, I see him hesitate.

"Should we—" He looks to the bed and then at me again.

"What's wrong, Cash?"

There is a fight going on in his head, but I don't know what it's about. "Is this where you and..." He pauses and looks at me, waiting for me to fill in the blank. Unfortunately, I really don't know what he's trying to ask.

"Me and who?"

"Your uh...ex. Is this where you guys lived?"

Realization washes over me, and I take Cash's hand and bring him over to sit on the bed with me. "No. He's never stayed here."

Cash's shoulders sag. "Oh, great."



“Lie down with me,” I say, patting on the pillow next to mine. Cash smiles and slips under the covers, pulling me close before I have a chance to put my head on my own pillow.

“Aren’t I making you cold with my wet hair?”

“I’m fine, Gracie; all I want is you in my arms. Now tell me what happened today.”

I close my eyes and recall my conversation with my mother. My feelings haven’t changed since this afternoon. I still think she’s right. It’s selfish to allow Cash to blow up his entire life for me. And yet I don’t think I could keep him from doing it if I tried. The man is determined to be with me and for once I’m going to stop fighting him and let him take what he wants. “My mother called.”

Cash looks down at me, giving me room to speak and tell my story.

“She and I...we don’t have a great relationship.”

Cash frowns. “I’m sorry about that.”

Guilt burrows deep inside me as I remember that Cash doesn’t even have a mother.

*Selfish, stupid Grace.*

“You shouldn’t be apologizing. We really don’t have to talk about this.”

Cash put his finger to my lips. “Please stop trying to protect me. Stop trying to control everything. Just *talk* to me.”

I sigh. He’s right. “She saw the article and spoke to Steven. She knows about the divorce and his affair and...” I struggle to find the words because I don’t really know how to explain our fight. She doesn’t understand it? She’s angry with me? I mean, who finds out their daughter was cheated on and replies that it’s their daughter’s fault?

*No, seriously, who does that?*

And being related to a woman like that, wouldn't that be concerning? I mean if I were Cash, I'd be running for the hills after hearing how horrible my relationship is with my mother. "She blames me," I finally admit.

Cash's eyes crease in confusion and his eyebrows furrow together. "She blames you for what?"

Rolling my eyes in embarrassment, I finally blurt it all out. "For the affair. The divorce. All of it. She says I'm the reason he cheated. I always put my career first. I was never home. Steven looked elsewhere because I wasn't taking care of his needs."

Cash's jaw clenches, and I see him working through his response. "Grace, you are not to blame for your husband having sex with someone else. You are not to blame for wanting to have a career. And Grace, *please hear me when I say this...* you are more than enough. Anyone that doesn't see that, anyone who doesn't see how strong, beautiful, wonderful, and caring you are, doesn't see *you*. That's not on you, that's on them." He strokes my cheek and tips my chin up to look at him.

I let out a haggard breath. "She doesn't mean any harm. She had a tough life. And I didn't make it easy on her. I think she saw my marriage as her saving grace. I married a Kensington. Steven comes from money. In her mind, me marrying him meant that we'd take care of her. And we have. But it's not Steven's money that does that. It's mine. Not that she'd ever believe any of my success comes from hard work. She believes everything I have has been given to me. By Marion or by Steven."

Cash grinds his teeth. "I'm trying really hard here to remain calm, but I have some choice words for your mother that I'm trying to swallow."

I laugh softly against his chest. "It's fine. I get it. Honestly, after talking to her I just thought you'd be better off without me. I am selfish. I put my

career first. And I'll probably still do that. I'm not going to magically become a better partner just because you aren't Steven. *I'm still me.*"

"Okay, I don't know what the hell kind of person raised you, but you aren't selfish. You pushed me away and allowed me to belittle you, let me believe that you were still married and that you were a cheater, just to keep me from destroying my reputation. There is nothing selfish about that." Cash's thumb moves gently over my lips, as if it's soothing him just to touch me. "Since I met you, I've been swept up into whatever this is. I don't want you to be anyone else. *You* are all I want."

Cash brings his lips to mine, and he kisses me, as if his lips can impress upon me whatever his words did not.

Pulling back, I look up at him. "If I'm being honest here, I'm scared. I'm really scared. These feelings I have for you keep getting stronger, and giving in to you is me handing over the ability for you to crush me. My marriage has barely ended and I'm just getting back on my feet. If we do this, *us*, there is no guarantee that I'll survive it. I mean what happens when it all becomes too much? When we can't pay enough to buy the photographs, or when your family's business suffers from gossip about us. What happens then?"

With a small shake of his head and a ghost of a smile on his face, Cash steals my worries. "First of all, you are underestimating my feelings for you. Believe me, the one who has all the power in this relationship is you. I've been walking around with my heart beating on the outside of my chest trying to get it back since I met you. It's not happening. And believe me, *I've fucking tried.*" He laughs dryly. Then he eyes me. "Second, you are underestimating how much money I have."

He smirks and I laugh louder than I mean to. "You're ridiculous."

His eyes crease in happiness. “Yes, I am. But seriously, Grace, money isn’t an issue. I don’t know who the fucking Kensingtons are, but most people know who the Jameses are. I will take care of you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t *need* you to take care of me, Cash. I have my own money. I have my own *company*.”

He smiles and presses his thumb against my cheek, rubbing softly. “I know that, Gracie, and I’m not trying to say that I think you need me. But I am going to take care of you whether you ask for it or not because it’s the only way I know how to be. I’ll try really hard to stand back, but not when you’re hurting. Not when I can do something to stop it. From here on out, we’re a team. No more hiding, no more trying to fix things on our own.”

“That means you too, Whiskey.”

He chuckles. “Yes. Both of us. I rely on you, and you rely on me. It’s the only way we’ll work. How does that sound?”

I twist my mouth as I consider what he’s asking. *Can we make this work?* So many thoughts rush through my mind. Concerns that have been flooding my every thought since I first tried to push him away. But it hasn’t worked. Cash is right. Whatever this is between us, it’s not going away. I meet his eyes and nod. “Okay.”

Cash’s eyes brighten. “Really?”

I bite back my laugh and smile as I stare up into his eyes. “Yes. From now on we make decisions together. We figure this out together. *We’re together.*”

Cash’s head falls back against the pillow, and he sighs. “And Hanson?” he asks, propping his head up with his elbow as he turns to look at me.

I try to hide my massive eye roll. “What about Hanson?”

“The article.”

“Cash, I told you I was going to get word out that he and I were dating. It was for your benefit.”

His jaw clenches. “You’re the one behind the article?”

I laugh. “Not that one. The last thing I needed was my mother thinking I’d moved in with another man...but the rumors of Hanson and me dating...yeah, that’s me.”

“Grace, you can’t date him.”

“I’m dating *you*. We just discussed this. It’s just a show with him.”

He scrubs a hand over his forehead, and I feel torn for the entire charade. “It’s just until the divorce is official, Cash. Believe me, I want everything you want. I want to have dinner with you in public, I want to walk down the street with you holding hands...I want to dance outside the shadows,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his own.

Cash kisses me softly and his face relaxes. “Come to Nashville with me this weekend.”

“What?” I ask, confused as to the change in topic.

“In Nashville we can just be us. Grace and Cash, not Mr. James and Mrs. Kensington. No one knows you there, and I’m not the billionaire bachelor in Nashville. The media there is used to Taylor Swift and Carrie Underwood; they don’t give a shit about me. Come to Nashville with me and hold my hand.”

“That might be the most romantic thing anyone has ever said.”

Cash’s eyes crease and his smile grows. “Is that a yes?”

“Yeah, Whiskey, I’ll go to Nashville with you.”



## CHAPTER 33

### CASH

**A**s annoyed as I was that Grace forced us to take separate flights, I'm glad she's not here yet. I'm not sure I could have put on a fake smile and entertained her last night after the conversation I had with our supposed partners about the contract. My conversations this morning confirmed that it's not just the threat of someone trying to move in on our distributors. It's already happened.

"Carter, they can't meet our supply. I need you to make some calls..."

Carter lets out an unsurprising curse. "Fuck. Okay, I'll call Warner and see if he can help."

"I'm meeting with Danny tomorrow, but I have a feeling I'm going to hear more of the same. We need to get to the bottom of this. If it's Hanson —"

Carter cuts me off. "I'll fucking kill him."

"But what if it's Dad?" As much as I acted shocked that Grace's mom could be so awful to her, I should know how terrible parents can be. How the fact that someone is your flesh and blood—the person who created you

—doesn't mean shit to certain people. It seems that my father and Grace's mother are built from the same cloth.

Carter groans into the phone. "I'll talk to Frank and have him look into Dad's activities." It's a good idea and one I would have thought of had I not been so focused on convincing Grace to be my girlfriend.

My head falls back against the couch as I berate myself for my latest misstep. I'm letting everyone down lately. "That's a good idea. Sorry, I should have done that already."

Carter sighs. "That's why there are four of us. Lean on us, Cash. You don't have to do everything. It's not *all* on you."

I appreciate the sentiment, but the title does in fact mean that the buck stops with me. It's my responsibility and I'm fucking it up.

"Thanks. I have to go," I say as I watch the notification pop up on my phone letting me know that Grace has landed. Let's not add being late to pick her up to my list of fuckups today.



Despite my best effort, I can't get the sick, nervous feeling to leave my stomach. Not even Grace's radiant smile and the excited glint in her eyes as she points to landmarks as we drive can kick this mood I'm in. It's like I've been living in a bubble for the last few weeks, focused solely on one thing—convincing Grace to be with me—and now that I've finally got her I can't even enjoy her because the cost is so high.

As she rambles on about her flight and asks questions about what she sees, my mind spins trying to make headway on an issue I can't tackle

without being at work. My fingers squeeze the steering wheel, and I find myself checking my messages every time we stop at a red light.

**Any update from Frank?** I text Carter.

He replies immediately. **No indication that Hanson is talking to any of the distributors. He's still with Lawler, and if he's moving in on ours, no one is talking.**

I grit my teeth. If it's not Hanson, it's my father. I'm not sure who I'd rather face. I'd certainly enjoy beating the shit out of Hanson—in business and in reality. It's a long time coming. The light turns green again and I toss the phone down into the cup holder and hit the gas.

“Cash...” Grace says in a soft tone, “is everything okay?”

I chance a glance at her and give a quick nod before turning back to the road.

“It's just that I'm pretty sure you will need a dentist by the time we get back to Boston if you don't start talking.”

I try to bite back the smile, still angry that I let my family down, but when I turn and see Grace's wide one, mine breaks through. “Sorry, Angel, just work shit bothering me. Nothing for you to worry about. I'll snap out of it, I promise.”

Internally, I berate myself for making her feel uncomfortable...for almost ruining this time we have together. I'm still yelling at myself when I feel her warm hand reach over and squeeze my own. I stare down at it and study how her long fingers fold into mine and seem to fit just perfectly. How just her touch calms me almost instantaneously. Shuts down my warring thoughts, and reminds me of what matters. *Grace. Us.*

As we reach the next light my eyes move to hers and I sigh.



“You don’t have to snap out of it for me, Cash. Remember what you told me the other night? We’re together. We figure things out together. Things don’t have to be perfect.” She laughs. “Hell, I wouldn’t recognize perfect if it were standing in front of me. We are a mess, Cash. But I’d rather be the real mess with you than fake perfection with anyone else.”

She reaches up and grazes her thumb against my cheek. “You, Whiskey, just being here, is all I need.”

I close my eyes and accept the kiss she offers. A car honking behind us lets me know the light has turned green, and I pull away from her, but not before giving her hand three tugs of my own. This girl—this woman—means everything to me.

“So whose ass do I have to kick to get you to relax?” she teases.

I laugh and it turns into a sighing groan. “Honestly, just take my mind off work for a few hours. I can’t do anything today anyway. Might as well enjoy ourselves.”

Grace hums beside me. “I’m pretty sure I could figure out a few ways to distract you, Whiskey.”



“Oh my gahhhh!” Grace screams as we dart between a car and another scooter, narrowly becoming one with the road.

I laugh and squeeze her hip which is tucked safely in front of me on the electric scooter we’ve commandeered for the past hour. She said she wanted to see all the sights and I needed to let loose. The scooter seemed like the perfect option. Before we stepped on, Grace gave me her librarian look

again, but I smacked her ass and told her to stop being an old spinster and hop on. As soon as the scooter started to move, and she learned how to sway her body with my own, letting me control our every move, she yelled that this was amazing. She might be regretting that statement now.

“You okay, baby?” I whisper into her hair after I’ve stopped laughing and we’ve gone back to cruising down the street with no cars or scooters close enough to cause harm.

The nudge from her elbow into my abs leaves me laughing again. The girl is fine.

*My girl is fine.*

My hands rest on top of her own, controlling the steering, and we continue forward. With her coconut scent dancing around me and her warm body pressed up against mine, my day has completely turned around. And now I can’t wait for the next part of our day. It’s what I’ve been looking forward to the most.



“Cash, this house is...” Grace walks around my living room and I hold my breath, feeling like everything is falling into place. Seeing Grace in my space, in the spot that I’d envisioned us when she asked me what I wanted for my future, makes this house a home.

It makes me feel like I can actually have it all. The family. The life I missed out on growing up without the warmth of a mother. The life I’ve dreamed of...all because of the woman standing in front of me.

Unable to hold back for another second, I walk to her and pull her close to me. “It’s everything because you’re here. Thank you so much for coming.”

Grace looks shocked by my admission which I can’t quite understand since I’m pretty sure I’m constantly telling her she means the world to me. Her face relaxes, and she presses her hands against my chest. “Thank you for inviting me. So what is our plan tonight?” she asks with a hint of mischief. I’m sure she thinks I’m going to cart her over my shoulder, slap her ass, and christen each room.

And as much as my cock aches to do just that, there is something I want to do more. “We are going to the strip.”

Grace’s face falters. “The strip?”

My lips quirk at the way she says it. Kind of naughty, a dirty inflection, and also a challenge in her tone. “Yes. I want to hold your hand, Grace, *in public.*”

Grace’s smile doubles and she closes her eyes as she leans against my chest. “I’d like that too, Whiskey.”



Grace laughs as we walk out of the art studio. Just the sound of it has my dick growing along with my smile. “What are you laughing at?”

I squeeze her hand three times and she stares down at our connection. We are out in public, walking down a street, holding hands. It feels like heaven. All the money in the world couldn’t buy this moment right here. “Just laughing at the absurdity of the fact that we just sat painting Disney pictures

while sipping wine, and the other night we were at a sex club. Life certainly isn't boring with you."

I surprised Grace with a wine and paint class, and the art of choice was Disney princesses. Grace smiled the entire time and helped me and my terrible art skills by holding my hand most of the class. It was a great night.

"We weren't in a sex club."

Grace throws her head back laughing. "We were so in a sex club."

Okay, maybe we were. But I didn't think she was aware of it. Come to think of it... "What the hell were you doing at a sex club?"

Grace pulls my arm so it's wrapped around her shoulders, and she cuddles into me as we walk down the street. "Tessa."

She acts as if that explains everything. If Tessa is the answer to that burning question, I may have to make sure to keep Tessa on my good side.

"And what did you think of the club?" I ask.

Grace bites her lip as she hesitates, and I wait patiently for her measured response. "It was...different."

"Good different, or...?"

"I mean it felt freeing, if I'm being honest," she says slowly.

I look down at her. "That's all I ever want from you, Grace, your honesty."

She nods. "What did you think?"

"About fucking you in public?"

Grace's fingers move to my lips and she shushes me. "Cash," she reprimands, and yeah, my cock grows another inch. She scolds me like she just found me jacking off in the back of a library.

I shrug. "Honestly, the hottest thing about it was watching you let go. I don't need an audience when I'm with you...I don't need any other women

to entertain me...I just need you giving yourself completely to your pleasure.”

The smile she graces me with makes the entire weekend worth it. Work may not be going the way I hoped, but this relationship, this woman, she’s fucking everything to me.



## CHAPTER 34

### CASH

It's been a week since Grace and I got back from Nashville, and we've spent every night in bed together. I am not even remotely looking forward to spending the weekend without her. Although, I am excited to see my grandfather and to spend some time with Carter.

My brother walks into my office wearing dark jeans and a black T-shirt. Behind him I see Lucy fan herself as she talks to one of the other secretaries. Poor girl doesn't even garner a glance from my brother. He's mostly oblivious to the world around him unless he sets his sights on a girl. Then she becomes his sole focus. Or at least his focus for the twenty-four hours he spends with her. Carter doesn't do relationships any longer than that.

"Almost ready to go?" he asks as he plops down on my couch without even bothering to ask if I'm busy.

"Yeah, I'll let Frank know we're ready."

I grab my phone from my desk and see a message from Grace.

**Grace: Have a great weekend. I'll miss you.**

I can't help the smile that spreads across my face. Over the last week Grace has finally started to open up, but she still isn't normally the one to make the first move. I initiate our dates, I beg her to sleep over, I hold her tight when we are separating. This is the first time she's reached out without my prompting.

**Me: You'll be on my mind all weekend. I'll call you tonight.**

I shoot a text to Frank that we're ready and pocket my phone.

"Why are you grinning like that?" Carter says, pointing at my face.

"Just excited for our weekend. I've been working my ass off to get ready for the event at the end of the month, and I could use a little break."

Carter shakes his head as he follows me out of the office. "Nah, not buying it. But fortunately for you, I don't feel like doing anything but drinking this weekend, so I won't make you tell me whatever it is that's on your mind."

While I welcome the agreement to steer clear of my personal life, I worry about Carter. He buries so much in alcohol and women; I can't help but wonder if he's more fucked up than I thought. He has this persona that screams I don't care but maybe it's just an air. In truth, it's out of my element. Frank or Cat may be better at getting through to him. Like Carter, Frank served overseas, and although they both came back in one piece, I wonder if I can ever understand what they really experienced.

"Hey Bossman," Frank says when he spots us, holding open the door. I glare at him. I've told him repeatedly not to open the door for me and to stop referring to me that way.

Carter laughs. "Oh, this is too good. I can't believe you agreed to work for him."

Frank shrugs. "Health insurance is excellent."

I roll my eyes. At least if I have to be driven around by someone it's my best friend. Although, I could do without the commentary. I get in the front seat and Carter looks put out.

“Seriously? I have to sit in the back by myself? I have longer legs; I should get shotgun.”

Frank ignores us both and pulls out into Boston traffic. The ride to Bristol should take under two hours, but with traffic anything is possible. I flick the radio on and ignore my brother. Under my breath, I mutter, “Did you check in with Grace to make sure she doesn't need you this weekend?”

He nods. “She says she has plans tonight, and the rest of the weekend she's staying in. No need for a driver.”

I nod. I know about her plans tonight. My nerves are shot knowing that in a few hours the gossip magazines will be talking about Grace Kensington's date with Hanson. A publicist has been hired to release a statement about her divorce which will be the only comment that is made to the press. I hate that I can't just take her in my arms and walk around in public with her, but her publicist, her divorce attorney, and my team all advise against it. I'll do anything to make Grace's life easier, so if this is what we need to do for the time being, I'll grit my teeth and bear it. Or I'll get drunk with my brother and ignore the entire situation for the night. That is definitely the more likely result.

The closer we get to Rhode Island, the more I feel myself relax. Unlike the big buildings in the city, here there are bridges and ocean in every direction I look. The unease of going back to the house where we lived with our parents doesn't relax Carter though. His leg is jumping in the backseat, and I can practically hear his thoughts tumbling through his head. I don't have the same memories as him. I was too young.



“Do you want to stop by the grave now?” I ask Carter, peering at him from behind my shoulder.

He’s staring at his phone, his long legs stretched out across the seat. Raising his eyes only enough to glance in my direction, he nods his head.

Frank watches the interaction, looks at me, and acknowledges that he knows where to go. He signals left, and I feel Carter straighten his body behind me, righting himself, perhaps in preparation for the meeting with our mother.

Is it odd that the only real memories I have of talking to my mother involve her headstone? Possibly. I don’t know the sound of her laugh or the way she smelled, but I have memorized every word written on that hard slab of rock.

The air smells of grass, as if the groundskeepers have just mowed the lawn, and flowers line the gravel path. I’m told our mother loved flowers and tending to the garden. For some reason, this makes me think of Grace. I think she would probably like gardening as well. I wonder if she had a garden in the house she shared with her ex. Is that something she misses? Is it something she would want in the future?

Grace never answered my question the other night. Does she want kids? Part of me could feel in her kiss that she felt all the things I was saying. That, like me, she knew we were planning a life together. But it’s too soon to press her on that. She’s not even divorced yet. While I’m traveling at warp speed in my mind, there are many obstacles still standing in our way.

Frank stays back in the car while Carter and I walk along the path in silence. It’s not awkward. We’re both lost in our own thoughts. I don’t know what his are. Maybe he’s remembering our mother’s laugh, or the way she smelled, or a game they used to play. His tortured expression

makes me think maybe I'm glad I don't remember those things. I have no idea what I'm missing. The knife twists a little less when all you have is your imagination and nothing to really compare it to.

"We should have brought flowers," Carter says, looking forlornly at her grave. Beautiful flowers surround the monument. A perk of having her laid to rest on our family's property.

"Do you want a moment alone?" I offer.

In all honesty, I want to talk to her about Grace, and I can't do that in front of Carter. When I was a kid, I would come out here and talk to her during the summers when we'd visit. I'm sure my siblings did the same. But we never did it in front of each other. Maybe because we thought it made us seem crazy.

Talking to stone. Or dirt. Or the sky.

But I don't doubt that each of us did it at least once. And I have a need to do it now. Carter barely looks at me; he just nods and grunts an affirmation.

Our family home sits on the water, overlooking Mount Hope Bay. I walk down the lawn toward the sailboats bobbing in the water. The bay is almost an orange color from the sun setting above.

I sit down on the grass, unbutton my suit jacket, and fold my arms over my knees. Then looking out at the sea, I talk to the woman I barely knew about the woman I've fallen in love with.



## CHAPTER 35

### GRACE

**A**s I sway in the arms of Jonathan to “When A Man Loves a Woman,” I mutter under my breath, “I am going to kill you.”

Jonathan chuckles against my ear, then spins me away from him in some fancy move that only boys who had been raised with money learned. He has more charm and charisma in his pinky than anyone I’ve ever met. He could talk an old man out of his life savings and a woman out of her panties. Right now his eyes are crinkled in pure delight and focused solely on me.

If not for the fact that I’m immune to his charm, I would be putty in his hands. “You’re making me look good, Gracie. Just smile and pretend you’re having a good time.”

If anything, I owe him for taking the heat off Cash and me, so I bat my lashes and look up at him like a woman smitten, likely making every woman surrounding us immensely jealous. “This is your last dance, Jay.”

He raises his blue eyes in a dare. “Then I better make it worth it.” Before I can stop him, he dips me dramatically to the room’s applause. When he rights me onto my feet, he nuzzles his face into my neck.

To an outsider, it would look like he's kissing me, but even though he's a scoundrel, he is also my friend and with me he's a gentleman. He simply breathes me in, whispers a thank you and then with his hand on my back, steers me in the direction of the bar.

"Pretty sure the media got their shot, and your publicist is going to have a busy night tonight," he says as we walk.

We smile and greet people as we continue forward. It's a company event for him, but I recognize a lot of past clients, or people I know just from social settings throughout the years. "Yeah, I'm sure Steven will be less than thrilled."

He laughs and I find myself relaxing. "Good. He deserves it. Bastard."

My smile broadens. "True. So, what's the reason for this event anyway?"

"Trying to woo another company to come on board. Partner with us so that we can take everything up a notch."

I nod. These are all big words that honestly don't mean much. Not that I don't understand them. I've been in the business world and around men and women like Jonathan since I was twenty-two. It's just that I honestly don't care. I want to take my shoes off, curl up on the couch with a glass of wine, and read a book. Ever since Cash and I started dating, I've barely slept a wink and haven't had a moment to myself. As wonderful as sex is, I need a night off.

"Speaking of the merger, the wooing begins now," Jonathan whispers in my ear as he turns to greet someone behind me. "Charles, how are you?"

I spin and see a tall man with gray hair, stocky shoulders, and a broad chin like Jay Leno shaking Jonathan's hand. "I'm good. This is some party."

"Mr. Landry, this is Grace; Grace, this is Mr. Landry. He owns Sintac, a company that we are hoping to partner with this fall to take Hanson Liquors

worldwide.”

He reaches out his hand and when I take it, he pulls it up to his lips and presses a kiss against my own.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Landry.”

“So, you’re the lucky lady who has snagged Jonathan Hanson. I must say, I never believed you would settle down, Jonathan. Family and a happy home life are the most important things to me, so I’m happy to see you’re recognizing that too.”

He looks pointedly at Jonathan, and I feel uncomfortable not correcting him but also don’t want to screw up Jonathan’s business relationship with this man. Clearly, it means a lot to him, and I owe him.

Jonathan’s arm wraps around my waist. “I’ve been trying to win her over. Verdict’s still out though.”

“Well, let’s have a drink and toast to good things in the future for you, Jonathan, hopefully in business and in life.” He smiles widely and Jonathan squeezes me tighter. I’m genuinely happy I can help. This is harmless, and if my good friend is able to benefit as well, it’s all the better.



My phone rings almost as soon as I get into bed. Snuggling down under the soft comforter and stretching out my feet which ache from my shoes, I smile when I see Cash’s face come across on FaceTime. “Hi baby,” he says with a smile. He’s standing outside of a brick building, and I hear voices and music in the background, but his focus is solely on me.

“Hey Whiskey. You out and about with your brother?”

He runs his hand through his hair. “Yeah, trying to avoid the Internet and the real world, but I couldn’t help myself from calling you. How was tonight?”

“It was fine, but I would definitely keep that phone in your pocket for the next few days. No sense in driving yourself mad.”

He sighs and his hand moves over his face. “Was it that bad?” He peeks at me from between his fingers. “No, don’t tell me. I don’t want to know. I’m just going to go underground until this is all over.”

I laugh. “You are ridiculous. He’s my friend. This is all so we can be together eventually.”

“I know, I know. I trust you.”

Those three words fill me because I know I feel the exact same way, and trust is hard to come by in my life. “I trust you, too, Whiskey.”

“So you want to give me a little nip flash?” he cajoles, drawing an exaggerated laugh from my chest.

“You’re ridiculous. I’m going to bed.”

“Oh, come on. Just a little peek. Help a guy out. I’m all by myself for the next few days, starving for you.”

I grin. “You’re absurd.”

“And you’re crazy about me.”

I smile wider. “I am.”

“I’m crazy about you, too, Grace.” His whiskey eyes glow through the phone, and I can practically feel his gaze searing my skin.

“I’m really happy, Cash. Go have fun with your brother.”

“Goodnight, Gracie, I’ll be dreaming of you.”

He disappears from my screen, and I kick my legs under the sheets and screech. This is happiness, and it’s everything I never dreamed of.



Saturday morning, I am startled awake by the sound of someone breaking into my apartment. Before I have the opportunity to even hop out of bed, my bedroom door swings open and Tessa walks through, red in the face and angry as hell. Holding up her phone, she reads from the screen, “*I always had my suspicions, but I trusted my wife implicitly. It looks like that trust was misplaced as I’ve come to find out that she’s been sleeping with Jonathan Hanson since we met. Is this guy fucking for real?*”

Well, I guess the media really ran with the story. Too bad my damn husband is better at this game than I am. It shouldn’t surprise me since he’s a narcissistic asshole.

I grab the pillow next to me and throw it over my face, screaming into it as I do. Why did I marry him? And why is he trying to destroy me? He wanted out. I gave him an out. Why won’t he just take it?

“*Jonathan and Grace dated in college, but he’s always been a player and I never worried that my Gracie would be interested in someone like him for long. She had me completely fooled. Turns out my money wasn’t enough for her.*”

I hold up my hand. “Stop reading. I’ve heard enough.”

“Oh, no. It gets better. *While we couldn’t reach Mrs. Kensington or Mr. Hanson for comment we were able to speak with her mother.*”

I pull the pillow off my face and sit up. “They spoke to my mother?” My stomach sinks, already knowing what she’ll say.

*“My daughter has always been selfish, but this is low even for her. I have always loved Steven like a son, and I only hope he knows that I’ll always be there for him. My daughter did the same thing to me when she was a child. She left me to live with my best friend who had more money and a beautiful apartment in the city. That’s all Grace has ever cared about. Now she’s latched onto Mr. Hanson. He’d be smart to send her back where she came from before she takes all his money and leaves him too.”*

Tessa turns to me with eyes blazing, fury emanating off her. The phone buzzes next to me and I don’t even glance at it. There are so many people it could be.

Cash, Marion, the fucking media. I don’t want to talk to any of them.

My own mother. *My own mother* turned on me.

The phone stops and then starts again. Without thinking, I take it and fling it across the room. My hands shake and my heart pounds. I feel like I’m crawling out of my own skin. A shrill scream tears through my throat. My best friend stares at me with understanding and absolutely no judgment. “Tell me what I can do? Tequila? Cash? Fuck, you want me to go down on you?” She laughs in desperation. “Seriously, Grace, how can I make this better?”

I love her devotion. Lord knows I haven’t had it from the people you’d expect. But I have people who really care which is more than most and I’d rather have that than a bunch of fake relationships with people who so easily toss me aside when it benefits them. A sob escapes and I feel myself spiraling. “Tequila and movies.”

“Name it and you got it, babe. Anything.” She pulls a bottle of Patrón from her purse and a baggie filled with cut up limes. Without effort, I laugh.



And then because it hurts too much, I cry as my best friend climbs into the bed, pulls me to her chest, and holds me until there are no tears left.

A clear glass filled with amber-colored liquid, likely whiskey, is shown in a dynamic, tilted position. The liquid is splashing upwards and outwards from the top of the glass. The word "CASH" is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the center of the glass. Above the glass, the words "CHAPTER 36" are also printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

## CHAPTER 36

### CASH

**T**here was a moment where I wasn't surprised by the result of the media circus. I expected her husband to lash out. I suspected he'd try to turn it all on Grace. What I didn't consider, and I can't even fathom, is how her mother would not only not stand by her but actively dump liquid fire over her head and prance with joy over the charring remains of Grace's reputation.

"If you don't get her on the fucking phone, I am going to lose my goddamn mind," I grit out, dialing her for the sixtieth time today.

Frank looks at me helplessly. "She's not picking up. Her office is closed. I don't know what you want me to do."

"Take me to her. Get me a fucking helicopter so I can be with her now." The idea of driving on a Saturday into Boston is insanity. The ride without traffic will take too long, let alone if we get stuck on the highway. I need to be with her now.

"Cash, the last thing she needs is you storming into her apartment. The media is probably camped out there."

I bang my fist on the table. I've never loved being a James, but I've never despised it as much as I do in this moment. The woman I'm in love with is probably spiraling out of control, and I can't be there for her. I can't even get in touch with her. It's enraging.

Carter paces in the other room. He's speaking with our attorney to see what can be done with Grace. I finally spilled everything to him. Had no choice after I broke every glass in the house I could find when I read her mother's statements. Add into that the pictures of Grace dancing with Jonathan and I pinched a bottle so tight it sliced through my hand.

Frank stands up. "That's it. I'll go to Grace's apartment. If she's there I'll get her on the phone to talk to you. At least you can hear her voice and know she's okay."

"That will take hours!" I say, frustrated.

Frank throws his hands up. "It's the best I can do. Just try to stay calm. Grace is going to need you to be the calm one. Remember, it's *her* life that is falling apart. Not yours."

"Don't I know it. The entire world thinks she's with Hanson. I'm nobody in the equation."

He glares at me. "You're somebody to her. You're the only one to her. Don't be a fucking idiot. Calm down, get yourself cleaned up, and I'll call you as soon as I have her. Okay?"

I grind my teeth. What choice do I have but to agree? "Fine. Go." I motion to the door in aggravation, and he walks off. Before he leaves he stops and mutters something to Carter, who looks back at me and then nods a response to Frank. Fucking babysitting me, most likely.

Carter walks in fifteen minutes later with a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers. "If you break these fucking glasses, I'm gonna be pissed."

I roll my eyes at his attempt at a joke. “I’m going out of my fucking mind.”

He laughs dryly. “Yeah, I can see that. So...the married woman,” he says, giving me an opening.

“Grace,” I grit out. “I told you last time we talked about this, she’s getting a divorce. Hell, it’s all over the media; you don’t need me to point it out.”

“I know. And I don’t mean to make things worse than they already are, but Hanson wasn’t the only guy she was seen with last night.”

My hand slips from the glass, and I push myself back from the table. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He pulls out his phone and tosses it in my direction. I catch it against my stomach and spin it in my fingers before raising it to my eyes and letting out a low groan. “I knew Hanson was up to something.”

“Yeah. So now Landry thinks they are together and what, you are just going to sweep in there and ‘steal’ Hanson’s girl? That won’t look good to Landry.” Carter cocks his brow at me and if I didn’t know he was right I’d want to punch the smug look off his face. But he’s right. Things just went from bad to worse.

I scrub my eyes with my palms. “I don’t know what to do. I’m in love with her. I’m not willing to give her up. None of this is worth it.” I toss the phone back at him.

The work, the stress, the way that my entire family is relying upon me. It’s too much. I never asked for this. And I damn well know that I don’t want it.

“You’ve known her for what—a month? You’ve wanted to run this company your whole life. You were Pa’s choice. You can’t really be telling

me that she's worth giving this all up?"

The truth is I don't even hesitate. There isn't a thing Carter could say to change my mind. "Mark my words, I'm going to marry that woman. I'd give up everything for her."

Carter shakes his head and lets out a stilted laugh. "Then you're a bigger fucking idiot than I thought." He holds up his glass to mine. "Cheers to watching it all burn." A smile crosses his face.

I clink my glass against his. If that's the cost, I'll pay it.



## CHAPTER 37

### GRACE

**I**t's after three in the afternoon, and Tessa and I are curled up in bed after doing shots for lunch. Okay, with lunch. Tessa ordered white queso and tacos from our favorite Mexican place down the street. We poured the spicy white piping-hot cheese onto each of our crunchy tacos and did tequila shots in between bites. She even got the salt out and poured it on my wrist making me take it like a champ.

“Just because we’re sad, doesn’t mean we aren’t classy,” she teased.

Damn right. Now we’re watching Andy Anderson sing “You’re So Vain” to Benjamin Barry. “I could watch *How to Lose A Guy in Ten Days* every night and still not be sick of it.”

“Same,” Tessa replies, nodding at me in a very serious manner. “And I love how their names are alliterations. Andy Anderson,” she sashes the words together and I smile in agreement.

“Benjamin Barry. That sounds nice.” I poke her nose. “I need a name like that. Grace Gracington. Maybe I’ll change my name to that. I’m certainly not going to keep fucking douchebag’s last name. And I sure as hell am not going back to my mother’s name.” I laugh at the ridiculousness of that idea.

And then I laugh harder when I realize that my mother wouldn't want me to have her name. Neither would Steven. "I'm a woman without a name," I say into the abyss.

"Well, Grace Gracington it is!" Tessa says as she pulls out the Patrón and fills our cups again.

I shake my head and cover my mouth. "I think I'm going to puke if I have any more."

Tessa shrugs and does her shot, and I cover my mouth as I throw my head over the side of the bed, trying to force air to move about.

Knocking and shouting sounds from the other room. I startle and fall from the bed, taking the covers with me and getting trapped. Tessa looks down at me and giggles. "Grace Gracington is not so graceful."

I shoot her the middle finger. "Help me up! There's doors at the people."

Tessa laughs again. "You mean people at the door."

"Right. That!"

I stumble out of my room and Tessa shouts after me, "Pants, Grace, you're not wearing pants." I look down and see she is correct. I have on a T-shirt and a thong.

The knocking gets louder.

Oh well, this will have to do. I walk like an elephant to the door, hitting each step hard as I go, and swing it open as Frank goes to pound on it again. He stops his hand right before it hits my face and drops his arm in relief.

"Oh fuck, thank God. I was about to break down your door."

I stare at him blankly, unsure what he's doing here.

"Can I come in?" he asks, looking past me. I motion with my arm widely, and he stalks in. Before I have a moment to say anything, his phone rings and he picks it up. "Yeah, she's right here. I know, Cash. I just...fuck, just

talk to her.” He slings the phone in my face, and I see Cash’s angry mug staring back at me.

“Why the hell haven’t you been answering your phone?”

I’m a bit surprised by his anger. I’ve had a horrible day.

A terrible, no good, very bad day.

I don’t deserve his attitude. I walk away without saying anything, leaving Frank holding the phone with a gobsmacked Cash in his hand.

“What the hell is she wearing?” I hear him scream to Frank.

I don’t stick around to hear the result of the conversation. I sneak back into my bed and under the covers as Tessa watches me. “Who’s here?”

“Cash’s henchman.” I slink under the covers farther, feeling the effects of the alcohol spinning my body in one direction while my head turns in the other. It’s basically how my entire life feels.

Frank looms in the bedroom, and I hear Cash talking. “Put her back on the phone.”

“I can’t. She’s in bed.”

I feel bad for Frank. It’s not his fault that his boss is an ass. Or maybe it is. They are technically best friends. I go to sit up and give them both a piece of my mind, but the alcohol sloshes in my stomach and I decide it’s better to remain lying flat.

Tessa hops out of bed. “And who are you?” she says seductively.

Poor guy doesn’t stand a chance. She is also wearing only underwear. I wish I could see the look on Frank’s face. He’s normally so stoic and tight-lipped. I imagine even he is allowing his eyes to travel over Tessa’s creamy skin which is freckled in all the right areas.

I try to keep my eyes open but feel the heaviness of the day sinking in on me. Voices continue in the background, but I tune them out. I’ve got enough



voices living in my head to carry on my own conversation. But all I want is quiet.



Strong arms wrap around me, and I feel myself being shifted and lifted against someone's chest. The smell is familiar, and I nuzzle my neck into the warmth. Almost as soon as I start to move though, my stomach turns and the world spins around me. Moaning, I try to open my eyes.

“Shhh, Gracie, I got you.”

I close my eyes and fall back to sleep.



Sunlight filters between the blinds, and I blink a few times trying to figure out where I am. As I try to move, an arm pulls me closer, and I have a moment of stark fear. What did I do last night? I'm in bed with someone I don't know, in a room that is not familiar at all.

*Oh fuck.*

Memories from the day before flood me, and I remember every bludgeoning thing that was written in the article.

And then tequila.

*Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

My stomach rolls, my eyes burn, and I feel my throat close up. If I cheated on Cash on top of everything else, I will never forgive myself. I don't even want to turn over. I can't face it.

“How are you feeling, beautiful?”

The tears fall as I hear his voice and feel his lips press against the back of my neck. I sigh out a sob, and Cash flips me so that I’m facing him. His hand holds my face, and he presses his lips against mine softly. This only makes me cry harder.

“Baby, it’s okay, I’ve got you. I’ve got you.” His whispered words of reassurance surround me like a pillow, and I burrow myself deep into his embrace. “We’re facing this together, you hear me. It’s all going to be okay.”

It won’t.

My reputation, everything I’ve worked for, was burned to the ground yesterday. In a city like Boston nothing matters more than your reputation. And in a job where your sole purpose is to create happily ever afters for wealthy clients, the ability to control the narrative, to spin the press in a positive light, and to keep one’s knees shut, is imperative.

I know he means well, and I know he cares about me, but he can’t possibly understand everything I lost yesterday. I’m sure Marion will stand beside me and weather the storm—she’s never given me pause to think that she wouldn’t—but I can’t possibly let her hand over her company to me when my name alone will destroy it.

“Where are we?” I ask, my voice scratchy in my throat.

“Bristol. I had Frank bring you here. You wouldn’t answer your phone yesterday. What happened?”

I try to think back to the day before, but I honestly don’t remember my phone ever ringing. Not after I... “Oh, I think I may have broken it.”

Cash bites back a smile. “Yeah, I broke a few things yesterday too.”

“You did?”

Cash sighs. “Yes, I was going out of my mind for you.”

I shake my head and roll my eyes to stop the tears from pouring down again. I’m a disaster and I genuinely don’t want to be. I want to be the woman he met on the plane—confident, secure, and happy. Or at least that was the woman I was once we shared our first kiss. It’s like Cash thawed my heart. The heart that Steven flash-froze the night he told me about his affair. Just the thought of him makes my heart pound.

How could *he* have the audacity to feign being the victim after the things he said to me that night? After he snuck around for months with another woman. And how do I make it stop? How do I make the spinning stop? I just want to step off the damn carousel and walk off into the sunset with Cash. Right now, it feels like that is such a ridiculous concept. Like it’s a daydream that is so far out of my grasp it’s almost laughable.

Cash takes both my cheeks in his hands and his eyes dart back and forth, trying to get through to me. “Talk to me.”

As I shake against his touch and suck in my top lip, my breath comes out shallow. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Tell me you know we can do this together. Tell me that you believe me when I say I’ve got you and I’m not going to let them destroy you. *Tell me that we’re okay.*”

I close my eyes, trying to distance myself from his words and the desperation in his voice.

I can’t tell him what he wants to hear in this moment, so I change the subject. “How did you get Tessa to let me come here?”

Cash frowns and pulls away from me. Instantly, I miss his touch, but I don’t reach for it.

“You’d have to ask Frank. He can be very persuasive.”

“I should call her. She’s probably freaking out.” I lean over to look at the side table and then remember that I don’t have a phone. “Shoot, my phone is broken. Can I use yours?”

“You don’t need to call her. She’s here.”

I look around the room like an idiot. Obviously, she’s not in this room.

“Here as in Bristol. She rode in the car with you last night,” Cash supplies. The irritation, or perhaps hurt, is evident in his tone.

Unable to face his disappointment on top of my own, I push myself out of bed. “I need to shower. Do you know if they packed me anything?” I keep my eyes on the floor.

“In the corner.”

A duffel bag that I recognize as my own sits near the door. I stare at it and then look back at Cash, but I still don’t have the words. He wants promises that I can’t provide, answers that I don’t have, and love which feels almost impossible for me in this moment.

The hurt I feel from my mother’s betrayal cuts to the bone. I’m empty. The idea of allowing anyone to hurt me like that again, of giving anyone that kind of power by loving them, scares the shit out of me.

Every person that was supposed to love me—that it would seem almost innate for them to—has turned their back on me. My father, my mother, and now my husband.

Time and time again, I’ve given my mother a pass. But this one is too personal and too public. I didn’t only lose a husband through all of this; I lost my mother. And whether she was ever a good one or not, it makes this world seem awfully lonely.

As I walk to the bathroom with my bag, I hear Cash’s soft voice, “I know it all seems like a lot, and you think you’re drowning, but I won’t let you.

Whether you let me in or not, I'm going to be here, Grace. You are *not* alone."

I squeeze my eyes shut, pausing at the door, trying to hear his words and trying to accept them.



When I get out of the shower, I find the bedroom empty. After allowing the water to drown out my sobs, I feel nothing but relief for the quiet.

I want to be ready for him. I want to be ready for this intense, real, relationship that he's offering. And I'm not right now. But I'm too scared to walk away. Somehow, I need to figure out how to get better, how to move past all these issues and reset my business, while also balancing *this*.

It's a big love. He hasn't said it yet, but I can tell it from the way he looks at me. He feels it all so deeply, and I don't want to disappoint him.

Dressing quickly, I don't take time to do my makeup or fix my hair. A low ponytail and my face moisturizer will have to do. I open the door to the bedroom and peek out into the hall. The smell of coffee seeps through the air, tempting me to find the kitchen.

As I tiptoe down the hall quietly, a door to my right slings open and reveals Tessa in all her bare-legged glory in only a T-shirt and sheepish grin. Behind her I spot a lump in the bed. There is hair attached to the lump, but I can't see a face.

"Did you sleep with Frank?" I whisper scream.

Tessa shuts the door behind her and tells me to shush. "No. That's Carter."

My face must have forgotten to move because it's frozen in a circle.  
"Carter as in Cash's brother?"

Tessa smiles demurely. "Yes."

"Is he the older or younger one?"

*Please let him be older.* I'm pretty sure the younger one is in his twenties and that just seems icky. Also, I don't think Cash would be pleased if my best friend seduced his younger brother.

Tessa rolls her eyes. "Older."

"Okay, you are going to have to speak more words. And put on clothes!"

She blushes. My best friend who has never been embarrassed about discussing blow jobs and anal sex is blushing over a man. My boyfriend's brother no less.

I slap my hand over my face. Could these twenty-four hours get any more complicated? I throw my chin forward telling her to hurry it up, and she turns around and runs back into the room. I hear conversation on the other side of the door but can't make out any of what they say. Is this a thing, or did it just happen? I have so many thoughts.

Finally, after several torturous moments, Tessa appears in black leggings and a fake smile. "Do I smell coffee?" she asks sweetly.

"Save it. I want to know everything."

"Fine. But first, coffee. Seriously. There's a reason for that slogan. And the reason is me. And all the tequila we drank yesterday. And all the sex I had last night."

We round the corner and are dropped into an immaculate kitchen. Navy cupboards, white granite countertops, and a beautiful anchor above the oven finish out the kitchen that appears equipped to service a family of twenty. "Holy shit," I mutter.

Tessa squeezes my hand and points to the corner. Cash is in the breakfast nook, drinking a cup of coffee, with his eyes on me. From across the room I can feel his nervousness.

We are in his house, and we've made him feel out of place. *Stupid Grace.*

"Coffee cups are next to the pot, and there are different types of sweeteners and creamers in the fridge, including hazelnut." He motions toward the coffee and my heart hurts. He remembers the way I took my coffee in Florida. And he's too nervous to approach me because of how I acted earlier. I smile and thank him, walking farther into the kitchen to make our coffees.

"If you want privacy, there is a three-season room off the patio where you can both sit and talk. Or I can go out there if you want?"

I shake my head at his generosity. I want to tell him that we'll have coffee with him. I want to slide onto his lap, curl up against his chest, and gossip with Tessa while being coddled by that man. But I can't. And it's annoying. *I'm completely annoyed with myself.* I'm defective or broken in some way because I can't allow a man who cares about me to do just that. "We'll go outside. Thanks, Cash."

Tessa says nothing, but she glares at me as we walk out of the kitchen. "What are you doing? Did you not see that hot, sad guy in the kitchen looking at you like that?"

"Like what?" I feign innocence, wondering if she sees what I see. Is it real or is it all in my head?

"Like half of him is walking out of the room. Like you are the only thing he's ever wanted in his life. Like he's *in love* with you."

Okay, so I didn't make it up. Which means I am properly freaking out now. Rubbing my hand over my face, I groan. "I can't deal with that right now. Tell me what happened with Carter."

She laughs and rolls her eyes as she settles herself down onto a wicker couch. Once again, I'm taken aback by how beautiful this house is. White shiplap lines the walls, a fireplace made of big white stones sits in the corner, and the furniture is navy with red pinstripes. But it's the view that has me speechless. Sailboats sway in the wind in a small bay which overlooks a quaint town. Brick buildings of various sizes fill the other side of the water. It's absolutely idyllic and charmingly New England.

"Where did Cash say we are again?" I ask as I walk to the window and take in the view.

"Isn't it dreamy?" Tessa replies. "Bristol, Rhode Island. Apparently, they were born here. It's like the most patriotic town in the country according to Carter. He wants to take us downtown later for lunch. He says they have red, white, and blue lines in the streets and flags everywhere you look."

I turn back around and look at my friend. Her red hair is down at her shoulders and her face is bare, so her freckles run rampant. She looks like a kid without makeup, and it totally doesn't vibe with her personality. No wonder she's constantly sassing people; she needs to show her power through words since it's not evident from her looks. "Why do you keep talking about Carter as if you know him?"

Tessa looks at me thoughtfully.

"Because I do?" she says in a quirked tone as if she's asking a question rather than answering my own.

"Do you?"



She slumps down into the chair, pulling her legs under her and sips her coffee. “We met a couple of weeks ago. The night you disappeared from the club.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

She nibbles on her lip. “He was all handsy and buying me drinks which you know I love. But when the night ended, I told him I was going to my own bed. I don’t do one-night stands anymore. They are tiring and my number was getting way too high if you know what I mean.” She laughs in self-deprecation.

“Number?” I ask, confused.

“Oh right, you’ve been married all these years, so you don’t have to concern yourself with the problems of us mere mortals who have been having all the sex.”

I laugh. “Okay, so because I was married, I didn’t have all the sex?”

Tessa tilts her head and glares at me. “No, maybe you were but no one was judging you for having all the sex. You had more sex than me probably but because you were doing it with one man you get a free pass. I, on the other hand, am supposed to wait until I find someone to love to get my rocks off.”

“According to society,” I finish for her.

She smiles. “See, now you get it. Anyway, I told him I wasn’t going home with him, and he said fine, he’d just take me home and we could talk for a bit. I didn’t peg him for someone who could keep his word, but he was cute, fucking rich, and interested. So, I agreed. And girl, can that boy talk. I mean, do you know the shit they’ve been through?”

“Uh, yeah, Cash is kind of my boyfriend. I know him,” I say almost aggressively. The truth is I’m jealous that Tessa knows so much, and I don’t

know why. I mean she knows about this town, and I don't. And she and Carter seem to be in a good place whereas Cash and I are barely speaking. How had things flipped on their heads so badly?

Oh right, my mother.

Carter's tall frame appears in the doorway. His brown hair is mussed in different directions, and his eyes crinkle when he looks at Tessa. I turn to see her reaction, and I'm shocked to find her goofily smiling at him. She holds out her hand and he walks into the room, takes the coffee cup from her other hand, takes a sip, and then places it on the coffee table before lifting her up and sitting down in her chair and settling her on his lap.

*What world am I living in?*

Cash stands a few feet back, staring at the entire encounter much like me. Shocked, a little uncomfortable, and disappointed that there is so much distance between the two of us while they make it look easy.

Unlike his brother, Cash's hair sits perfectly on his head, which oddly has my heart hurting for him. For the past few weeks, he'd been mussed and relaxed with me. Now he's wearing dark jeans, a Henley, and a frown. He can't relax.

I motion to him, feeling uncomfortable with the distance I've created.

He gazes at me for a moment and then walks to me, eyes focused, eating me up. He sits on the arm of my chair, and it's not close enough. Nothing is close enough when it comes to him. I put my hand on his leg and lean against his arm. He looks down at me, and I meet his eyes before he brushes his lips against my forehead. "There you are," he whispers as his hand moves to cup my cheek. "My beautiful Gracie."

I close my eyes and breathe, letting a small smile fall on my lips.

Carter yawns and barely adjusts Tessa as he grabs her coffee off the table and sips it before offering it to her. “So, what are we doing today?”

“Where’s Frank?” I ask, suddenly bothered that we’ve coupled off and the man who apparently came to my rescue has been forgotten.

“Went back to the city. He’s driving Cat around today. He’s a busy man,” Cash says as he smiles down at me.

The mention of the sister who hates me does nothing to ease my concerns. I’m sure she’s even less impressed after my mother’s rantings. Cash must sense me tightening against his arm because he rolls his hand over my shoulder and squeezes.

“Are you guys up for lunch downtown?” Cash asks the room but looks at me.

I shrug. What the hell; no one knows me here.

“Give us a few minutes, boys,” Tessa says right before plopping a kiss on Carter’s cheek. The man smiles at her goofily. I look to Cash to see his reaction, but he simply shrugs then leans down and brushes a kiss against my neck.

When they are both gone, I stare at Tessa. “Seriously, what the hell is going on with you two?”

She laughs. “I know. He’s amazing. But I mean, it’s not serious. I think he was just as shocked to see me here. I had no idea he’d be here when Frank told me that Cash would fire him if I didn’t allow him to deliver you to Bristol, and I wouldn’t let you go without me. But I mean, have you seen Frank?” she asks with big eyes. “The muscles, and the green eyes, and the seriousness—I kind of wanted to disobey him just so he’d punish me.”

I laugh. “I thought you’re with Carter!”

She throws her hand in front of her as she crosses her legs. “Oh, please girl. I’m not *with* anyone. But Carter does have a way with his tongue, and he’s kind of adorable in his tall boyishness.”

I totally understand what she’s saying.

“Anyway, enough about me. Let’s talk about you. How are you feeling?” she says in an almost patronizing voice, but I know she means well so I smile.

“Oh, you know, for a girl whose mother said she was a hussy who sleeps her way through men until she can find one with the most money, I’m just dandy.”

“She’s a see you next Tuesday.”

Tessa loves that word but she knows that I don’t, so I appreciate the pun. But in this case, I would have to agree. “Yeah, she’s a cunt,” I say to her surprised laughter.

“We need to call Marion. I’m sure she’s already shown up at your apartment looking for you when you didn’t answer your phone.”

I touch my thighs as if looking for my damn phone again. “Oh, right, I don’t have one. And it’s *her* apartment.”

Tessa glares at me. “No, she deeded it to you so that makes it yours. Just like the company that she’s giving to you.”

Shaking my head, I look down into my coffee. “She can’t do that anymore. Look at the shitshow I’ve created.”

Tessa narrows her eyes. “*You* didn’t create this. God, when are you going to realize that none of this is your fault and all of us have your back? Me, Marion, Cash. And now Frank and Carter. Frank was incredibly protective of you last night and even Carter seemed concerned.”

I smile thinking of my little tribe, then I remember Cash's other sibling. His sister who absolutely hates me. "Yeah, that's until he talks to Cat. The woman hates me, and I'm sure she won't feel any better now that she's heard my mother's lies. I mean honestly, if you didn't know someone and they were dating your brother and you read what my mother said about me, would you trust her?"

Tessa looks away. "Okay, so she likely isn't a fan. Who cares? According to Carter, Cash makes his own decisions, and from what I can tell that man is crazy about you. Stop ruining your chance at happiness. You're a catch and he's trying like hell to reel you in. Let him! That fisherman is hot!"

I shake my head as a loud laugh escapes my chest. "You're absurd."

"Yes. Yes, I am. But you love me."

"You're right. I do. But now it's time to face the music. I need to call Marion, call the lawyer, and then talk to Cash."

Tessa shakes her head. "I'm so glad I'm not a grown-up. I'm going to go have an orgasm. Maybe two." She winks as she walks back to her bedroom, and I can't help but smile.

A clear glass filled with amber-colored liquid, likely whiskey, with ice cubes. The word "CASH" is written in bold, black, sans-serif font across the middle of the glass. The background is white.

## CHAPTER 38

### CASH

Things are getting more and more complicated. Grace sits on the bed talking quietly into the phone. Her first call is to Marion, and I can tell by the loud voice on the other end of the line that she is heated.

“No, don’t come over. I’m not there, Mare,” Grace says, darting a look at me.

I nod for her to tell the woman the truth. It’s time that everything comes out. We can’t keep hiding in the shadows. Things have gotten as bad as they are going to get.

Legitimately the worst-case scenario has happened. Grace’s life has been splashed all over the tabloids, and because of her mother’s commentary on it, the entire story is going viral.

It’s not every day that a mother gaslights her daughter to the media.

Unfortunately, being seen with Hanson backfired. If she had chosen anyone else, her divorce wouldn’t be front page news. But Hanson, who is as much of an eligible bachelor as I am, makes her a target. It burns my chest because the only reason she did this was to protect me. To protect my reputation. We should have just been honest to begin with.

“Put her on speaker,” I say.

Grace shakes her head, but I grab the phone and do it myself. I’m done with her protecting me. “Hi Marion, it’s Cassius James.”

She pauses. “Oh, Mr. James, how are you?”

“I’m good. Grace is with me. I had my driver get her out of the city.”

Grace glares at me and it’s her story to tell, so I stop talking for the moment.

“I’ve got to be honest, I’m a bit surprised she’s not with Jonathan,” the woman says, clearly seeking more information. But then her tone changes, and I swear if I could see her, she’d be smiling. “But I can’t say I’m disappointed that the two of you finally came to your senses.”

Grace eyes the phone in confusion then she grabs it out of my hand. “Um, what?”

“Oh, Grace, put me on FaceTime.”

Grace turns to me, and I shrug. Seconds later Marion appears on the screen with a sly smile on her face. “Before I go any further...Tell me, what is going on with you two?”

Grace nibbles on her thumb as she darts a glance at me and Marion laughs. “That’s what I thought. How long?”

Grace looks squeamish. “Since Florida,” she finally says quietly.

Marion’s face lights up. “Then my plan worked! I knew I still had it.”

Grace and I both take in a shocked breath, but I speak first. “I’m sorry, what plan?”

“Your grandmother reached out to me before the trip. You don’t remember me because you were so young, but I was a good friend of your mother’s.” She meets my eyes through the phone, and I feel a warmth in her gaze.

I've never spoken to anyone who really knew my mother. My grandparents are my father's parents, and her parents died before I was born. I have so many questions, so many things I want to know, but the only thing that comes out of my mouth is, "Really?"

Marion smiles. "Apparently, your grandmother remembered me from your parents' wedding. I was the maid of honor," she says proudly. "She said if anyone could find you a partner—someone as wonderful as your mother—then it would be me." She smiles at Grace. "And I knew immediately a woman that Cash's mother, Hope, would love just as much as I do. She met you, Grace. I'm sure you don't remember it because you were so young but Lily, Hope, and I were friends for years. Hope and I hated how lost Lily was, and whenever we had the opportunity, I would bring you up to visit Hope. You'd play with her children—at the time she only had Carter and Catherine—and we'd discuss how we could get through to Lily, get her to stop dating losers. Unfortunately, your mother got sick, Cash, and Lily never changed. But I don't know, I just had a feeling when your grandmother called me that this is what Hope would want me to do. To introduce the two of you."

Grace swallows, and her face is riddled with confusion. "But I was married."

Marion tilts her head in admonition. "Grace, you were miserable. And it was more than obvious that Steven was cheating. But I knew you needed to figure that out yourself. Or at least I believed that until I heard you crying on the phone."

Grace's eyes grow and she sighs as she remembers what Marion is talking about. "The night of the event."



“Yes. I heard you telling Steven that you’d give him the divorce as soon as you got through your next client. That he owed it to you and then he could be with his new girlfriend. My heart broke, Grace. Don’t you know you could have come to me? There is nothing that would have kept me from handing over my company to you. *You are the daughter I never had. I love you.*”

Tears fall down Grace’s cheeks freely, and I wipe them with my thumb as I kiss her forehead.

“See? That right there is why I knew I was right.” She beams over the phone.

“So, you set us up?” I ask, finally trying to get her back to the original plot.

Marion smirks. “All I did was put you in the same place at the same time. I figured if sparks were meant to fly, they would.”

I look down at Grace to gauge what she’s thinking. I can’t even wrap my mind around this. Grace just shakes her head. “This is too much. I can’t focus right now.”

My patience snaps. I’m trying to be understanding. I know that her world is spinning, but I want to know more. I want to talk to Marion about my mother. I want to call my grandmother and ask her what the hell she was thinking. But mostly, I want Grace to be as blown away by all of this as I am. Our relationship means so much more to me now that I know my mother had a hand in it. That my mother knew Grace. That Grace knew my mother. And all she is focused on is her business. Her reputation. Things that just don’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

Marion sighs. “I know, Sweets. And I’m sorry I kept you in the dark. Listen, I’ll get on the phone with the attorney, and when you get back to the

city we can sit down and figure out a plan.”

Grace nods as my aggravation grows. They say goodbye, and I stand there staring at the blank screen like an idiot.

Before I have the ability to crack, Grace slumps down on the bed and taps on the spot beside her. “Can we just sit for a minute?”

Sitting isn’t really something I’m capable of right now. I need to move. I need to speak to my grandmother. I need to talk to my mom. But Grace looks like she needs me more.

Tentatively, I sit next to her and wait for her to speak. The way she handles these next few minutes feels monumental. No longer is this only about her. My life has been intertwined with hers; we are inexplicably linked and if she doesn’t see that, I don’t know what that means for us.

Grace leans her head against my shoulder and blows out a breath. “That was a lot.”

That is certainly one way of putting it. I can’t wrap my head around words, so I just sit silently.

Grace continues speaking, “I’m sorry Marion meddled in your life. I can imagine you’re feeling like you’ve been set up right now, and I’m honestly just as surprised as you. I swear I had no idea.”

My jaw clenches as I try to stay calm. “I was on the phone. I’m aware you didn’t plan this.”

“Well, you seem angry, and I’m just saying I understand your anger. Obviously, this isn’t the relationship you needed, and Marion should have known that. If she hadn’t meddled, you wouldn’t be sitting here dealing with all of this. Maybe you’d actually be happy”—she pauses, motioning to me—“rather than whatever this is.”

My skin heats as I glare at her. “I’m angry at *you*. I’m upset with you. Not because you were thrust into a scenario that you had no control over, not because you were married to an asshole who is dragging you through the mud, and certainly not because you’re the person Marion set me up with. I’m angry at you because rather than realizing that what we have is special, you choose instead to focus on the negatives. I am trying to understand, Grace, but there comes a point when I’m at a loss as to what to do.”

Grace slumps as if she’s been hit. “I’m only worried about you. And my company. God, do you have any idea how bad this is? I don’t know what Marion was thinking. She should have waited until I was divorced. She should have been honest.”

I lash out, “Like you’ve been all along. Maybe if you’d told her the truth about your marriage you could have had an honest conversation from the start. It seems a little hypocritical to suddenly expect honesty from everyone when you’ve been the one walking around with half-truths.”

Grace stands and paces the room. I expect her to yell, but she doesn’t. “You’re right. I created this mess, and I’ll figure my way out of it.”

I slam my hand down on the bed. “Dammit, Grace, no. That isn’t what I want. You aren’t listening to me. *This*”—I motion between us—“isn’t a mess.”

Feeling restless, I stand and walk to her, caging her against the wall with both my arms on either side of her shoulders. Grace raises her eyes to meet mine and holds her breath. “I’m in *love* with you. Don’t you see that? I’m in love with you and I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

My heart hammers in my chest as I wait for her to respond.

Grace tilts her head as her violet eyes meet mine and they open wider. She lifts her hand and brings it to my hair, running her fingers through it as I breathe heavily.

*Say something, Grace—tell me you feel it too. Love me...too.*

She moves her hand behind my neck and pulls me down to her mouth, opening for me. My arms move around her waist as I groan in relief and tilt her backwards only slightly. Our tongues dance together, and my hands explore her body, owning every inch that I can find.

Grace pulls away, but she continues to hold my face in her hands, her mouth less than a breath from mine. “I love you too, Whiskey. I love you so much that it scares me because everyone that I’ve ever loved has broken my heart, and giving you the pieces left just leaves me more vulnerable. And even worse than that, I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. You have the ability to destroy me.”

My face softens as all my anger dissipates. “I could never, and I will never. You’ve got me. I’m not going anywhere. And Gracie, not everyone has disappeared. You have Marion and Tessa, two people that seem fiercely loyal to you. I know it’s not the same as having your own family, and I can’t imagine what it must be like to have your own mother turn on you the way that she did, but I won’t do that. Angel, loving me isn’t a risk because me not loving you is an impossibility.”

I tip my forehead to hers, and we both stand there resting against one another.

“I’m so sorry for being difficult, Cash. I know you aren’t like them.”

“I’m not. And you aren’t who they make you out to be either. So don’t let their ideas of you alter the truth of who you are because I won’t stand for anyone, including you, talking bad about the woman that I love.”

Grace smiles and her eyes flutter open and closed.

“What?” I ask, biting back a smile.

“I’m just getting used to hearing you say that,” she says coyly.

“What?” I tease.

“That you love me.”

I smile. “Yeah, it feels pretty great to say it, but I wouldn’t mind hearing it again too.”

Grace leans up and moves her head close to my ear, whispering softly, “I love you, Mr. James.” The blood rushes through me, and I lengthen against her. “Oh, you like that, Mr. James?”

Fuck, she’s a tease.

I lift her up and drag her to the bed. “Where are we going, Cash?” she screeches.

“Well, first I’m going to fuck you because you’re being a little shit, and then, because I can, I’m going to make love to you.”



## CHAPTER 39

### GRACE

“**T**his town is literally a Hallmark movie set,” Tessa says as she pops between Cash and me as we walk down the street. She’s not wrong. There are red, white, and blue stripes down the main road, which is adorably called Hope Street. I feel a kinship with this place already. Hope. It’s what I thought when I first saw Cash, and he’s certainly given it to me in spades.

Cash growls at the intrusion. He’s been overly protective ever since we left the house. And I don’t mean safety wise. I mean he hasn’t let go of my hand or stopped staring at me since I told him I love him. It’s like he doesn’t actually believe it’s true. Like he’s worried I’ll suddenly take it back.

To be fair, I have made our relationship as difficult as can be. Every step of the way. I squeeze his hand letting him know I’m still here, and he squeezes mine back three times. Before I can ask him why he always does that, Tessa interrupts me, holding up her phone and talking a million miles a minute about the town’s history. Carter interjects every few minutes when he has something to say. They are in their own world, and it’s pretty

adorable. I've honestly never seen Tessa with a man. Well, other than her best friend Ryan. But never a boyfriend. It's like a whole other side of her. She has a quieter smile when she looks at him. Almost shy. As if she's taken by him.

"What are you staring at?" Cash whispers into my ear, bringing me back to the present. I look around and realize we've arrived at a restaurant.

"Oh, Italian?" I ask in excitement, looking up at the sign which says Roberto's. I could really go for some comfort food.

Cash shakes his head as he laughs and kisses my forehead. "You are so good at ignoring me."

"I'm not ignoring you; I just like food," I tease.

He pulls me closer. "More than me?"

I laugh as I look up to my puppy dog of a man. His eyes droop and his bottom lip sticks out just a bit. I want to bite it. "So freaking needy, Mr. James." Giving in to my desire, I go up on my tiptoes and bite down on his lip.

He growls against my lips. "I fucking need you." His tongue swipes inside my mouth, and he pulls me closer. I hear Tessa trying to interrupt, but I ignore her. My guy needs attention. Always.

Carter finally slaps Cash on the back and we both pull apart, still staring at one another. "As fun as this is, the hostess is ready to bring us back."

Cash ignores him. "Tell me again," he says in his low voice.

I close my eyes and smile. "What exactly do you want to know, Mr. James?"

He grunts. "Grace."

Lifting my hand to his cheek, I cradle it and push close to his ear, whispering, "I love you."

I feel his cheek lift in a smile, and he sighs. “I love you too, Angel.”

In this moment, I don’t feel like a thirty-six-year-old woman. I feel like a damn teenager. Like a girl who doesn’t know better. And I do know better. But this man has made a believer out of an atheist. Only true love can do that for you. It takes away all your truths, all your street smarts, and everything you’ve learned along the way. It makes you feel like a child at Christmas, believing the magic even if you’ve seen behind the curtain, because just maybe you had it wrong. Maybe the big guy really does exist. And in a town like this, a hallmark town as Tessa called it, it’s hard to deny that just maybe a happily ever after really is possible.



The amount of wine we throw back at dinner is almost embarrassing. We walk out of the restaurant laughing, and I groan over how full I am. Of course Tessa ate the rest of each of our desserts because the girl never gets full and it never shows. She’s so tiny you’d think you could actually see the extra food on her bones, but no, all the talking she does must burn the extra calories.

“You guys want to grab a night cap?” Carter asks, pointing to a bar on the water called Thames. It looks like fun—there is music playing on the deck as the sun sets over the bay.

The last forty-eight hours replay in my mind, and exhaustion settles into my bones. “I’m honestly pretty tired,” I admit.

Tessa nods and squeezes me in a hug. “Do you want us to come back with you?”



I look to Cash and know he's all I need right now. "You guys go have fun. We'll see you in the morning."

After saying goodbye, Carter and Tessa head down the street hand in hand, and I feel Cash's arm loop around my waist. I spin my body into his and look up into his eyes.

"I'd like to bring you to meet someone if you're up for it?" Cash looks vulnerable enough in this moment that I ignore my exhaustion and put on a happy face.

When we arrive back at the house, Cash leads me into a garden. "What are we doing here, Cash?"

The moonlight sets his face aglow, and his smile splits my heart open. With his hand held out to me, he asks, "Dance with me, Gracie?"

I look down at his extended hand and then back at him before shaking my head, smiling, and leaning into his embrace. With his head lowered into the crook of my neck, Cash hums a sweet tune in my ear, which vibrates into my soul. I immediately recognize the song, "Just The Way You Look Tonight," as it's a favorite of mine. This man is such a damn romantic.

"Told you we'd dance beneath the stars again, Angel."

I rub my head against his chest and squeeze my eyes shut in utter bliss. "You've kept every one of your promises."

With his fingers, Cash gently lifts my chin and brushes his lips against mine, before speaking as he continues to rock me back and forth in his arms. "I don't have many memories of my mom. She died when I was so young...But one thing I do remember is dancing." He sighs as he seems to sink back into memories. "Maybe it isn't even a memory—it could just be something Carter told me about so much that I think I remember it. But for some reason I can really picture her holding me as she danced, or spinning

Cat around the room, or laughing as Carter tried to dip her. I don't have any memories of her and my father dancing—honestly, if I did it might have ruined it—but my mom, from what I remember, she loved to dance. You asked me the first night if I tried to woo all the girls with dancing..." Cash pauses as he looks down at me, his whiskey eyes growing lighter with his confessions. "I never danced with anyone until you. I've never *wanted* to dance with anyone until you."

A gasp falls from my throat, and I whisper, "Oh, Cash."

He quiets me with another kiss. "I love you, Grace. I brought you here to meet my mom. Although apparently you already have." He shakes his head in wonder, and his eyes sparkle.

Only then do I see the headstone which sits within the garden.

*Cash's mom.*

My heart cracks. I wish I could bring her back for him. I wish my mom wasn't so terrible. I wish life was different. And yet, I'm so grateful for the man beside me. So beyond thankful that Marion played fairy godmother.

For so long I had very few people I could rely upon. Tessa, Marion...and I thought Steven and my mother. That group has gotten smaller. It felt like it had been decimated for a moment, but as always Cash saw my broken pieces and put them back together. He saw me on the plane, truly saw me, in a way I don't think anyone ever has. He's pushed for the past month to get me to open up, to truly let go of the baggage that was holding me back, and he took the cracks in my heart and filled them with his love, fusing us together, so that I can no longer see a life without him.

Cash walks me over to the stone, and we sit quietly for a while, beneath the stars, and spend time with his mother.



## CHAPTER 40

### GRACE

“**Y**ou sure you’ll be okay?” Tessa asks as she and Carter stand by the door. Tessa looks back to Carter and I see her waffling. “I won’t go if you need me, G, you know that.”

Cash squeezes my shoulder. “I’ve got Grace; you need to get to the airport.” I force a smile onto my face. Tessa got a call this morning from her editor—a story is about to break about a congressman and she has a potential lead from one of our college friends. Carter offered to take her to the airport so she can make the next flight to DC.

I pull Tessa into a hug, squeezing her tight. “I’ll be fine. You know me, I bounce,” I say softly into her ear. When I pull away, I sneak a look back to Cash. “And he’s right, I’ve got him.”

The lines on Tessa’s forehead don’t ease. “When I get back I’m going to the burbs and cutting your ex-husband’s dick off...and then I’m feeding it to your mother.”

We all laugh at her absurdity. “Thanks for always having my back.”

She winks and points at Cash. “I expect you to keep that smile on her face, Cash. That means lots of oral.”

I groan. “Out!” I push her toward the door, and she flashes me her saucy smile again.

“You can thank me for all the orgasms later.” I hear her laughter as she walks to the car, and I shut the door. Leaning back against it, I watch as Cash stalks toward me, caging me in.

His mouth goes to my neck, and he inhales me, before trailing hot kisses up to my jaw. “You heard the lady; I’ve got work to do.”

Playfully, I push him back. “As wonderful as that sounds, I need a shower.”

He shrugs. “Fine. I have some work I have to catch up on anyway. And I have a surprise for you in the sunroom. Go take a shower. I’ll get everything set up and meet you in there when you’re done.”

Intrigued, my eyes raise in excitement. I love surprises. “Okay, Whiskey, I’ll be quick.” I drop a kiss on the side of his mouth and move to walk away, but he grabs my arm before I make it past him, pulling me back against his chest.

“Don’t tease me with half kisses, Angel.” His lips crash into mine, and he spins me and pins me against the door again, giving me a kiss that leaves me weak in the knees and breathless. Then he brushes a hand through my hair and gives me a lazy smile. “Much better.”

This time I wait for him to walk away. It’s a good thing the door is behind me, since it’s the only thing holding me up.



I find myself rushing through my shower, wanting to see Cash's surprise, and even more than that, just wanting to spend more time with him. Even though this has been the most devastating weekend, it's also been one of the greatest. And that is solely because of Cash. His love for me, his attentiveness, and the way he works to keep a smile on my face are only some of the reasons he's quickly becoming my favorite person.

Well, tied with Tessa that is. Both of them work pretty hard to keep a smile on my face.

With my hair dry, comfy clothes on, and light makeup applied, I walk through the house in search of my boyfriend. I find him in the sunroom, as promised, standing at the window, staring out at the ocean. He's wearing a pair of gray sweats and a white T-shirt, and his hair is still messy from sleep. From behind, I slip my arms around his waist and snuggle into his back. "I like you like this," I whisper.

He wraps his arm behind him and hugs me tight. "I love you like this," he says before turning and looking down at me. He's so perfectly mine in this moment. His eyes sparkling with adoration and a bit of mischief, his lips lifting into a lazy smile. "But I have a feeling I'm going to love you over there even more," he says, pointing behind me. I turn to see what he's pointing at and find an easel set up with a paint brush and a blank canvas.

Closing my eyes, I memorize the way I feel right now, so completely treasured and understood.

Cash sees me. He *really* sees me. He knows what I need without my asking. He didn't try to use sex to make me feel better, that would be masking my pain. He gave me my peace back, the thing I told him was just for me—my painting. He remembered that little detail I'd told him about so long ago, reminding me that not only was he always paying attention, but

that he cared enough to make it a reality for me. Before I have the opportunity to thank him, he drops a kiss against my shoulder and pushes me toward the easel. “Go paint, Angel. I’ll be in the other room.”

As he prepares to leave, I whisper-shout after him, “Cash, wait.” He raises his eyes to mine and looks at me expectantly. I practically throw myself toward him, hugging him tightly. “Thank you.”

His soft surprised chuckles shake my body. “Anything for you; now go paint.” He taps me on the ass and pushes me back to the easel. I already know exactly what I want to paint.



Hours pass as I immerse myself within the strokes on the canvas. The colors mix together and the vision unfolds before me—the night before, swaying in Cash’s arms, dancing under the stars, listening to the man I love profess his love for me by sharing a piece of his soul.

This is how I will always remember us. Dancing. It’s become as special to me as it is to him. It’s become “our thing” and I want him to know that just as he sees me, just as he pushes to give me what I need, I’ll do the same for him.

We’re in it together. We’re in this *life* together.

I feel his gaze on me before I hear him, the hairs on the back of my neck rise, and a hot shiver runs through me, shooting sparks straight to my fingers as I finish off another star. “How’s it going?” he says from his place by the door, not daring to walk in and intrude.

After dropping the paintbrush into the water jug, I spin around and use my finger to summon him. “Come see; it’s not finished yet,” I say quickly, nervous to show him my work.

His eyes light up as he stares at the painting, and he shakes his head in what appears to be genuine pleasure. “Grace...this is just...is that us?”

I nod nervously as I twist my fingers together, watching him stare at the painting.

“God, when you said you painted, I imagined you’d be good because you’re good at everything...but this...I wasn’t prepared...” his voice breaks off and he keeps his eyes intently focused on the painting, as if he’s studying every swipe.

“I’ve still got some blending to do, and I didn’t quite have the right color...” I stop as he puts his fingers to my lips.

“Can I have this? When you’re done, I mean, can I hang it in the penthouse?”

My shoulders relax and I smile against his finger. “Yeah, Cash. It’s yours, baby.”

He beams at me. “Now come here and dance with me again.”



## CHAPTER 41

### GRACE

A few days away with Cash, Tessa, and Carter were relaxing and rejuvenating, but we can't avoid real life any longer. My meeting with the attorney is scheduled for ten a.m. and my legs are shaking just thinking of facing Marion. I'm not mad at her. Exactly.

I'm lost. Confused. And slightly thankful.

But all of those feelings are mixing together and making me nothing but nervous. Which is ridiculous. The woman practically raised me.

I walk into the office with my head held high and my knees trembling. "Oh my God, Grace! I cannot believe the weekend you had! And that you're here. Oh my gosh, are you okay?" Rachel stares at me with her hands on her hips, completely gobsmacked.

My confidence wavers. "I'm okay. Thanks for asking."

"I mean I knew things were rough with you and Steven, but I never thought he would throw you under the bus like that."

I narrow my eyes. "It's not true what he said, Rachel. I never had an affair."



She nods. “Oh, I know. Jonathan Hanson certainly set him straight with his statement. God, he’s good-looking. I know he says you aren’t dating, but you should. Like you really should.”

What statement? I grab my new phone out of my purse and see that I have multiple missed phone calls and text messages. I go to the one from Tessa because I know she will have sent me the article if there is one. Sure enough, the blue link is highlighted in her message.

**Jonathan Hanson Sets Record Straight: Grace Kensington is a longtime friend and nothing more.**

The article went on to include Jonathan’s direct comment. “Grace Kensington and I have known each other since college. I introduced her to her husband many years ago when I was under the impression that he was a decent human being and friend. That obviously has changed over the years and for that I am terribly sorry to Grace. She has always been an honest woman, a good friend, and most importantly loyal. Grace came to me at a low point in her life when she had found out about her husband’s affair and his interest in a divorce. In friendship, we met for dinner and spent time together. That is the extent of our relationship. The fact that Steven is using my celebrity and Grace’s decency to his advantage is despicable. Grace would never have made this all public, and she likely won’t correct the record because that is not the type of person that she is. But I am. So let me be very clear. Anyone who prints libelous things about my friend and myself will face lawsuits and injunctions. That is all I will say on this topic.”

My mouth hangs open in shock. Marion’s voice interrupts my inability to think. “He did good, huh?”

I look up to find her smirking as she leans against the door.

“What?”

“I’m guessing you just read Jonathan’s statement. I told you I’d take care of it.” She smiles coyly and walks toward me. “Don’t be mad at me, please? I know I stuck my fairy godmother fingers into your life, but I couldn’t help it. Forgive me?”

I pull her close for a hug, resting my head against her shoulder. The smell of her Shalimar perfume reminds me of when I was a child and I used to crawl into her lap.

“I don’t know how to feel about any of it. But honestly, I’m really happy with Cash, so I guess a thank you is in order.”

“Come on, let’s go in my office and talk. Rachel, hold all our calls until Ms. Donley gets here.” I turn to smile at Rachel and find her staring at us with an indiscernible tilt of her head. I wave awkwardly as Marion pulls me under her arm and into her office.

“Can I call Jonathan quickly? I just want to say thank you.” I gesture to my new cell phone as she sits in her chair and motions her hands for me to go right ahead.

Jonathan picks up on the first ring. “Gracie, how are you?”

I let out a breath of relief. “Much better because of you. Thank you so much for that. I’m so sorry that you’ve been dragged into all of this.”

He laughs. “Grace, if it was just about me dating you, I would have let the story stand. But I won’t let them drag you through the mud. I wish that Cash would have handled this, but seeing as how he didn’t, I couldn’t wait to set the record straight.”

I fiddle nervously with my purse. “Right. I appreciate it.”

“I do have a favor to ask of you,” he says in his charming way.

“Anything. Seriously! Need me to wash your clothes for life, done. Walk your dog, you got it. Lunches for the next week, name the place.”

Jonathan’s laughter echoes over the phone. “I mean I wouldn’t hate any of those things, but my request is only for one more night.”

My stomach twists at the mention of a night with Jonathan. That will not go over well with Cash. But my guilt and appreciation for what Jonathan did wins over any concerns. “Sure, just name the night.”

“Saturday. I have another event with Mr. Landry and he requested I bring you. I think he took a liking to you last time, and he has it in his head that I’m more of a family man when you’re around which is good for my prospects. You mind helping a guy out?”

I nibble on my thumb nervously. “He knows we aren’t together. I mean you just put out that statement.”

“Right. This just shows him I’m a good friend. If I show up with a different woman, it will look like I’m the playboy that he’s already concerned about.”

I tease him, “But you are a playboy.”

I hear him smile into the phone as he responds, “Yes, but I don’t need him to know that. What do you say, Gracie? For old times’ sake?”

I smile. “I’d actually say it’s for new times. You’re one of my closest friends as you continue to prove time and again. I’d be happy to help.”

“Great, I’ll send you the details this week and see you then.”

I hang up the phone with a smile still on my face, and Marion raises her eyes in question. “Everything okay?”

“It’s fine. He needs me to attend a work event. As friends,” I emphasize. She nods her head. “Anyway, let’s get back to how we move forward.”

“Yes, let’s.”



Frank picks me up outside my office at five o'clock exactly. He's taking—*no he's delivering*—me to Cash at the penthouse. It makes sense for me to stay there since no one would think to look for me at the penthouse, and although I'm not anywhere near famous, there was a photographer outside my apartment last night when we got back.

"How are you doing this evening?" Frank asks as I walk toward him with a smile. He spots the flash of the camera before I do and pivots me out of the way of the shot and into the vehicle. I'm so shocked by the entire scene that I remain lying down in the car.

When Frank gets in, he drives before saying anything. It's only moments later when we are safely down the road that he looks in the mirror and tells me it's okay to sit up. I hadn't even noticed I was still gripping the seat and practically licking it. "What the hell was that?"

*It's like I was mentally aware that this could happen and yet not at all prepared for it. Why is my dating life so interesting? Or me walking out of my office? What do they think they are going to catch me doing, being picked up by my billionaire boyfriend's driver and swept away for secret sex? Okay, well, they are on point then. I give them props.*

Frank laughs and I realize that I just said that out loud. I shrink back into the seat and cover the side of my face near the window.

"Bossman was in a good mood today," Frank says with a smile.

"Oh my God, please tell me you call him that to his face?" I'm practically giddy from the nickname. *I need it.*

Frank shakes his head with a smirk. “He hates it when I say it, but somehow I have a feeling it will be different for you.”

I raise my brow and wink at Frank. He laughs again. “I must admit, you’re a lot more fun than Bossman. I should ask him to let me drive you around all day.”

I take a faux bow. “Unfortunately, I have a feeling that my billionaire boyfriend is going to make you do just that when he hears about the photogs.”

“You do realize it’s odd to call him that when he actually is, right?”

“Is what?” I tease.

“A billionaire.”

I roll my eyes. “No, he’s not.”

“Okay, glad to see you didn’t check out his stock portfolio before you started dating. But when you do, don’t say I didn’t warn ya.”

I bite my lip. He’s teasing. I know Cash has money, but not that kind of money.

We arrive at the building, and I stare up at it with a new appreciation. He lives in a penthouse on the top of a tower that his family owns. And he’s the CEO.

Maybe he does have that kind of money.

Nervous realization washes over me. Right now, I’m just the suspected cheater of a has-been husband and the press is already nipping at my heels. What would it be like to be married to someone like Cash? As soon as the thought enters my mind, my inner sarcastic ass quips right back at me.

*Why are you thinking about marriage? What makes you think he wants to marry you?*

And then I remember the way Cash looked at me this weekend when he told me he was in love with me. Or weeks ago in the tub when he said he was making plans. It's not so far out of the realm of possibility that I shouldn't at least be wondering what this life would be like. Before we get in too deep, I need to really consider how being with someone with that much money, that much intrigue, would be. And is that a life that I want.

Frank opens the door and walks me inside. "Just making sure I deliver the package," he says with a wink.

His teasing makes me laugh and releases some of the pent-up stress. "Thanks. I'll let Cash know you were an excellent delivery man."

Sal is sitting at the front desk, and he smiles wide when he sees me. "Ms. Kensington, it's good to see you. Mr. James is running a bit behind, but he said to tell you to go right up and make yourself comfortable."

"Thanks Sal. Have a good night, Frank." I smile and head into the elevator. It's odd how comfortable I feel going up to the penthouse, interacting with Cash's friends, his staff, and just in general settling into life with him.

Maybe I could see this life. Maybe it's everything I never dreamed of but so much more than I ever could have hoped for.

When the door opens, I get the same sense of nervous butterflies that I did the first time I came here. Only today I'm not worried about his sister. Which is a relief. I step out of the elevator and slip off my shoes, groaning as freedom from my heels hits my feet. I walk to the kitchen where I spot a note and a bottle of red wine which has already been decanted.

*Running a little behind, beautiful. Have a glass of wine, take a bubble bath, and relax. I love you.*

My heart hammers in my chest. If this is what being with Cash is like, sign me up. Just seeing him so freely write the words *I love you* has me weak in the knees and wet for him.

I slowly start to strip down in the living room, leaving crumbs of clothing leading to the bathroom, like Hansel and Gretel. When I reach Cash's bedroom, I drop my panties and turn music on my phone. Dancing to "What A Man" and turning a brush I find on the dresser into a microphone, I am feeling myself.

The song turns into ringing, and my hips stop swinging as I see Cash appear on my screen. "Hey baby," I say way too happily. I don't actually remember the last time I smiled so wide.

"Angel, are you dancing around my apartment naked?"

My eyes fly to the ceiling in search of a camera. "Cassius James, are you spying on me?"

His beautiful laughter breaks through the phone. "Perk of being the boss."

Oh, the reminder of his nickname sidles through my mind, and I laugh as I wiggle my butt toward the ceiling.

"Oh, Gracie, keep doing that and I'm going to come up there and spank you."

I smile at him. "Come get me, Bossman, I'm waiting for you." I click off the phone before he can respond, knowing he'll be up here soon. And hopefully he keeps his promise.



The elevator dings just as I settle myself down into the steaming hot water. I've filled the bath with a vanilla bubble bath that he left out for me with a note. I'm loving all his notes.

*I can't wait to eat tonight. I'm thinking something sweet for dessert. Enjoy the bath, Gracie.*

Groaning, my muscles practically melt as I slide into the water. *Heaven.* I open my eyes and find Cash leaning in the doorway, his tie partially undone and a wistful smirk on his face. "You look edible, Angel."

I suck in my bottom lip and splash water in his direction. "Come get me, Bossman. I know you're hungry."

His loud laughter echoes in the bathroom as he walks toward me, never taking his eyes off my body. I lift my leg up and run soap down my leg, taunting him right before I kick water at him again.

He slings off his jacket and pulls on his tie, but he can't move fast enough. I continue my assault with the water. "You're gonna clean this up, Gracie," he says, trying to sound serious, but the smile hasn't left his face.

"Make me," I dare. Cash pulls on his top button, and I bite my bottom lip. "You wouldn't."

He raises a brow and with both hands rips the entire shirt open. Buttons fly into the bath, his smooth, rippled skin comes into view, and our laughter fills the bathroom. I sit up on my knees and pull his hips to me, working his belt off quickly, and then undo his pants.

Cash stares down at me with pure adoration and lust, and I already know exactly what I need to do. As soon as he's free of his clothes, I lick my lips and stare at his bruising erection. He wraps his hand around it, and I watch as he strokes languidly back and forth while his eyes remain focused on my breasts which are covered in soapy bubbles.



The space between my legs grows tight and I begin to pulse in anticipation. I need him in my mouth. I need to lick up his shaft, to suck on the head and taste how much he wants me. I lick my lips and Cash groans.

“Not yet, Angel,” he says in his deep voice, commanding my attention.

My eyes snap to his, and I wait for his direction.

“I want you to do everything I say, got that?” His hand rolls over the top of his cock, and I watch as his eyes close quickly, his desire taking over.

“Yes sir,” I reply. A wave of pleasure flashes across Cash’s eyes, and I know I’ve made him happy. This only spurs on my lust.

“Such a good girl,” he praises as his hand continues to stroke his cock. “Now take your nipple between your fingers and pinch it until it hurts.”

On my knees in the bath, with my eyes trained on Cash, I pinch my nipple until my eyes fall shut and a cursing gasp falls from my lips. My legs rub together trying to get a little bit of friction, but nothing is touching how bad I need him to fill me right now.

“Please, Mr. James,” I pant, needing him to give me permission to at least touch myself.

“Fuck,” he curses, “I *love* when you call me that.”

I continue to tweak my nipples as I wait for him to give in. Desperation drips down my legs. “Please,” I beg.

“Open your mouth,” he commands, “and keep your hands away from that pussy—it’s mine.”

My walls clench but I scoot closer, opening my mouth to him.

The hand that was stroking his cock grabs my chin, and he pushes himself into my mouth, cursing as he slides all the way to the back of my throat.

Cash groans and throws his head back. “Fuck, you take my cock so good, Angel. You are a fucking goddess on your knees.”

My legs squeeze tighter as he starts thrusting into my mouth, losing all sense of control. I love that only five minutes ago he was downstairs running a company and now he’s about to come apart in my mouth.

That’s power. That’s control. And this is happiness.

Cash grabs my head and pulls me back by the hair, just rough enough to stop me, but not hard enough to hurt. “I need to be inside of you. Let me in.”

I don’t have to be told twice. My insides are melting waiting for his touch. I move back, and Cash climbs into the big tub, then he holds out his hands for me to climb on top of him. I slide down his hard length, and we both sigh, the feel of him sending a shiver through my entire body, and he grunts in appreciation, grabbing two fistfuls of my ass before kissing me hard. The water sloshes around us as he directs my hips in circles and pushes me up and down, and I love every single minute of it. As I start to clench around him, he curses and bites my lip, thrusting harder until we are both spiraling out of control.

Our cries echo through the bathroom as I feel him get harder right before he pulses inside me. I lean back, and Cash’s lips alternate between kissing and sucking on the hollow of my neck. I groan, completely satisfied and happy.

“Fuck, Gracie, what the hell was that?” Cash laughs as he takes my head in his hand, pulling me close and kissing me again. “If that’s how I come home every night with you here, I’m not letting you leave.”

I smile. Shockingly, that doesn’t scare me anymore. “What if I didn’t?”

“Didn’t what?” Cash asks, his face quizzical.

I almost stop myself from saying it, stop myself from believing I can have it all, but then I remember his words. *He loves me.*

“What if I didn’t go home? What if this,”—I pause, holding his chest, touching his heart, and then meeting his eyes—“what if this was my home?”

Cash’s hands lift to my cheeks, and he looks at me in genuine surprise. “Really? You’d want to live with me?”

I nod, nervous but also excited.

Cash brings our lips together and kisses me. “Angel, I’ve never wanted anything more in my life. You, us, this. Move in with me.”

I laugh. “Are you trying to take credit for my idea?”

He smiles. “Oh, you want credit?”

“Yes! You always say I’m the one holding back. I get credit for being the one to take the big step! Give me my credit, dammit.”

We both laugh and I sink against his chest, content and relaxed as his fingers run circles along my back. Then feeling a little concerned that I just pushed this all upon him, I say quickly, “I’ll still keep my apartment. I’ll just keep some clothes here. That way if you want me here, I can be but certainly if you want space, I can stay at my place.”

Cash looks up at me with amusement in his eyes. “Grace, I live in a ten thousand square foot penthouse. Do you think I couldn’t find space in here?”

I laugh as I look away from him, self-conscious about how he didn’t say, *I won’t need space.* “Right. I could get lost in this place.”

“Grace, look at me,” he says with more force.

I slowly slide my gaze back to his. The water is cooling, and I’m feeling uncomfortably naked and vulnerable, not to mention a bit cold. I lean back

to turn the water on, just to heat us up, but I think Cash senses my spiraling and he pulls me back to him. “I don’t want space from you. In fact, you are currently too far from me, and I’m inside of you.”

Smiling, I glance down between us, only now realizing we never broke our connection. He’s softened, but we’re still attached.

“Don’t give me an out,” he says, pulling my face to his. “I don’t want it and I won’t take it. I want *this*, every night.” He leans in and kisses me, and I relax, hungry for him again as I feel him harden within me.

“Fine,” I say, smiling as if I’m really being put out by this. “I’ll move in next week. If you’re sure.”

He laughs. “You are something else, woman. And why next week? Let’s take care of the move this weekend. Or better yet I can have Frank arrange everything this week.”

I shake my head. “I need to figure out what I’m bringing and not.”

“Everything. You are bringing everything because you are moving in with me. We aren’t doing this half-ass, Grace. It’s you and me. No outs. No fallbacks. No emergency plan.”

It’s so easy for him to say when he’s not the one moving himself twice in less than two months. I just finished packing up my stuff from my house. I’m not ready to give up any semblance of a fallback plan.

A parachute would lessen the blow if things spiral, but no matter what, I know losing Cash would send me full out smattering into the ground, bits and pieces of my heart everywhere.

Having the apartment as a small form of backup seems like something I just can’t risk giving up. Rather than saying all that though, I change the topic. “I can’t this weekend. I have to go to an event with Jonathan.”

Cash scowls. “Seriously? We are still doing this.” He lets out a frustrated breath and pushes back from me, sliding free from our connection.

I close the distance between us and hug him before grabbing a towel and standing up. It’s too cold to continue this conversation in here. Wrapping the towel around myself, I look down at Cash, waiting for him to get out. He grunts and stands up before taking the towel I have for him. I move into his arms and squeeze.

“The media is still watching my every move. We just have to keep our relationship hush-hush for a few more months. Which shouldn’t be hard with our amazing driver, Frank,” I say, winking at him.

Cash grumbles an agreement that Frank is very good at his job.

“And I owe Jonathan,” I emphasize.

Cash scowls. “You don’t owe anyone anything.”

“Mr. James, you love me, which is why you want to protect me. And you get all the sex. Which I think you’ll admit is pretty amazing.”

Cash looks away, trying to keep the smile from crossing his face. “It’s alright, I guess.” On my tiptoes, I crane to grab his lip between my teeth, and Cash moans. “Okay, it’s better than alright.”

I smile widely. “Exactly. Jonathan doesn’t get any of that. He didn’t have to put himself into the press like he did for me. He did that because he’s my friend, and I’m doing him a favor by attending an event because I’m *his* friend. That’s all this is.”

Cash runs his teeth across his lip. “I just don’t like that he gets any pieces of you.”

I lean against his chest. “No one gets the pieces you do, Whiskey. You get all of me. Friendship, love, lust, *roommate*,” I tease.

Cash smiles as he wraps his arms around me. “I’m liking all the new titles we keep adding. Now let’s go have dinner. I’m starving. *Roomie.*”



## CHAPTER 42

### CASH

“**T**here’s an awful lot of throw pillows and candles in here for a bachelor pad,” Carter says, looking at me as he picks up a candle Grace placed there the night before. The majority of her stuff is still at her apartment, but we went shopping yesterday afternoon so she could “cozy up” our new home. I never thought much about throw pillows and candles, but it warms up the entire space, reminding me of our home in Bristol. I wonder for the seventieth time this week what my mother would think about me ending up with Grace. It still blows me away that she knew Grace. The idea that my mother would be happy for me, that she actually met the woman I hope to one day marry, makes me feel closer to my mother. Like I share this special secret with her. Like she actually had something to do with my life—like we share *something*, which for a guy who has no memories of his mother is everything.

Folding my arms over my chest and leaning against the island in the kitchen, I reply, “Grace is moving in. So not a bachelor pad anymore.” I feel pride when I admit it, like I’m doing something that everyone should approve of, and by the smile on Carter’s face, I know he does.

“That’s great, Cash. I really like her. ”

I run my teeth across my lip. “Not loving that tonight she’s going out with Hanson.”

Carter meets my eyes. “What do you mean she’s going out with Hanson?”

I huff out a breath before turning around to grab a bottle of whiskey. Pouring two glasses, I wait for my brother to come over and take it before I continue talking. “She says she owes him, because of the damn statement.” I grit my teeth. “*I should have put out a fucking statement.*”

Carter sips his drink and then puts it down. He starts to say something and then quiets himself, as if he’s trying to figure out how to say it.

“What is it?” I ask, mildly annoyed.

“Cash, don’t freak out, but the event Hanson is going to tonight is the same one we are going to.”

I slam my glass down. “What?”

“Remember how I told you she was at an event with Landry last week? Well, tonight is Landry’s event. Hanson is definitely going to be there. He’s competing for that business just as much as we are. I’m sure that’s where he’s going.”

“But why?” I ask, losing any sense of calm I’d managed to maintain for the last few days over this damn date.

Carter shakes his head. “I don’t follow your question.”

The truth is I don’t even know what I’m asking. I knew Hanson Liquors was courting Sintac just like us. I knew Jonathan and Grace’s event was tonight. How did I not put two and two together?

“Fuck,” I mutter.



Carter scratches his head. “You can’t freak out. You can’t be a jealous ass tonight. You have to be one hundred percent focused on this deal.” I nod in understanding, but I don’t think Carter believes me. “I’m being serious, Cash. I know you love her, or whatever it is you feel for her...”

I cut him off. “I love her.”

“Right. But this is business. This isn’t just for me and you. Cat and Chase are relying on you. Pa is relying on you. You have to stay cool.”

“That motherfucker,” I grit out and Carter laughs.

“Yeah, it now makes so much sense why he put out that statement. He planned this all along. He’s trying to fuck with your head. You can’t let him.”

I should have known better. All Hanson has ever done is use people. But honestly, I thought he’d grown up. I chalked up the way he acted years ago to immaturity and his constant one-upping with my brother. I trusted that he cared about Grace. I never expected him to go this low—to *use* Grace in this way. “Fucking asshole,” I mutter as I take my phone out of my pocket and spin it in my hand, trying to figure out what to do.

Carter watches me with bated breath. “You don’t think she knows, do you?”

I recoil at his insinuation. Grace would never. “She’s not like that.”

He nods. “I’m not saying she is, but seriously, how does she not know he’s our biggest competitor? Have you not talked at all about our plans?”

I sigh as I put the phone down on the counter. Running my hand through my hair, I try to think back to our conversations. Problem is, every time Grace and I start to have a serious conversation, one or both of us gets carried away and I end up inside of her instead. I can’t say we’ve talked as

much as we should have for how close we've become. Or at least not about my business.

I shake my head. "No. There is no way if I had told Grace about tonight that she would knowingly go with Hanson. No matter how much she felt she owed him. That's not who she is."

"So what are you going to do?"

I blow out a breath. "I don't fucking know."



Things go from bad to worse when Cat arrives. Just as I'm walking out of my room in my black tuxedo, yelling to Carter to help me with my bow tie, Cat walks off the elevator wearing a long black dress with Vanessa tailing her. My heart drops knowing my sister is up to something, and I don't have time for this shit.

"I can help you," Vanessa says walking up in her long red dress. It has a sweetheart neckline that dips dangerously low.

I hold up my hand before she can touch me or her scent can infiltrate my space. Everything about tonight is going off the rails, and the last thing I need is to smell like another woman.

Cat struts up to me and grabs my bow tie. "Stop acting like a weirdo and say hello to Vanessa."

Vanessa smiles. "You look really nice, Cash."

I'm being an asshole. It's not Vanessa's fault that my sister is overly involved in my life. "Thank you, Vanessa. You look beautiful. I take it you're coming to the event tonight?"

She looks between Cat and me. “Well, Cat told me you wanted me to be your date.”

Cat looks away and I feel my jaw clench. *Why does she do this? Why does she feel the need to butt into my life? What if Grace had been my date?*

My irritation fires up, but I can’t even say anything because no one other than Carter knows about Grace, and unfortunately my girlfriend would like to keep it that way.

*Fuck, this is going to be a bad night. Hanson and Grace. Me and Vanessa.*

I force a smile onto my face. “Of course. It’s just a business thing, so it’s not really a date. I’m sorry if Cat gave you other ideas.”

Vanessa’s smile evens. “Oh, I’m used to business dinners, Cash. I get it. Don’t worry, I won’t go all PDA in front of other people.” She walks up and straightens the bow tie and says in a low voice, “But that doesn’t mean everything has to remain professional.”

At that exact moment, the elevator opens again, and Carter walks in with Tessa on his arm. I didn’t even know he’d left.

*Why is Tessa here? What is with my siblings not telling me they are bringing people tonight?*

Tessa’s smile falters when she spots Vanessa close to me, and the disappointment is clear in her glare. Carter looks equally appalled. I throw my head back in aggravation. “Thank you for fixing my tie, Vanessa. But like I said, tonight is just business. Enjoy your time with Cat.” I walk off, no longer feeling sorry for her. The only person I owe anything to is Grace, and since she isn’t here, business is my only concern.

In the kitchen, I fix myself another drink. Tessa doesn't waste any time giving me a piece of her mind. "What the hell is she doing here?" she hisses, thumbing behind her toward Vanessa.

I offer her a glass before answering. She takes the drink, and I loosen the bow tie that Cat just tied. "I didn't invite her if that's what you're getting at."

"Does Grace know she's here?" Her tone is as accusing as my own thoughts.

"Does Grace know that we are going to the same event?" I counter.

Tessa's eyes scrunch in confusion. "What are you talking about? She's going out with Jonathan as a favor because *he* had her back last week."

She's awfully defensive for someone who knows precisely how things went down last week. She knows everything I went through to get Grace out of the position she was in. She knows Grace made me keep my mouth shut. Although, if I'm honest, I didn't fight her on it. I didn't want to put my company at risk any more than Grace wanted me to. I was a coward, and now we're all paying for it.

I blow out a breath. "The event she's going to is the same one we are. I've been trying to call her, but she isn't picking up. I've got to be honest; I'm not fucking happy right now." I pull on the back of my neck trying to ease the tension, but it only makes it worse.

As if she doesn't believe me, Tessa pulls out her phone and dials. I listen to the phone ring and ring until Grace's voice comes over the voicemail. "Grace, it's me, call me when you get this. *As soon as you get this.*" She looks at me as she hangs up. "This is a fucking disaster."

I laugh bitterly. "You're telling me. What am I supposed to do? I can't *out* Grace. I can't walk in with Vanessa on my arm, either. I have a business

to worry about, Tessa.” I implore her to come up with an answer. To come up with anything to fix this.

Tessa’s red hair falls in layers over her face. It’s curled to the side, and she shakes it as she rolls her eyes. “Stop being so dramatic. It’s not ideal, but it’s one night. She’s with you. You guys are moving in together, for God’s sake, right?” She looks around the penthouse, and I see her appraising the throw pillows with a small smirk. “Or she’s already moved in, I see.”

I can’t help but smile as I remember Grace’s excitement at placing the pillows. “Right.”

Tessa’s hand goes to my chest, and she forces me to breathe. “It’s going to be fine. Grace is a professional. She can handle this. And so can you. I’ll keep little miss handsy away from you tonight, and you worry about business. We’ve got this.” I laugh as I realize how perfect it is to have my girlfriend’s best friend act as a cockblock. As long as it isn’t when I’m with Grace.

“Thanks, Tessa. I can see why Carter is so fond of you.”

Tessa’s cheeks redden, and we both turn to see Carter across the room talking to Cat. He winks when his and Tessa’s eyes meet. “He’s a good guy. Okay, let’s get this show on the road so we can get this night over.”



The ride to Bristol is raucous with my sister pouring champagne for her, Vanessa, and Tessa like the bottle is going to be stolen. I feel a pang for Grace who should be bonding with my sister. I know it bothers her that Cat

is so indifferent to her, but tonight is something else. It is going to crush Grace when she finds out that Cat tried to set me up with Vanessa again. I've got to tell my sister to knock it off before it really hurts Grace.

Carter leans over and hands me a flask. "Whiskey?"

Gratefully, I take a swig. "So, what's really going on with you and Tessa?"

Carter looks at her and smiles. She's wearing a navy blue dress that hugs her curves. He turns back to me and mutters under his breath, "Couldn't tell you. But I've never had this much fun."

I get that feeling. Or at least it used to be fun. Tonight, I'm not sure seeing the woman I'm in love with on another man's arm will do anything for the fun department.

"You gonna be okay tonight?" Carter asks under his breath.

I look at Chase who is smiling and chatting with the woman he showed up with. *Did no one think to notify me they were bringing dates? And how come Cat thinks she can come stag but I can't?*

"Focusing on the job. As your gorgeous date pointed out, it's one night."

Carter smirks and pulls Tessa closer. He whispers something in her ear, and she falls back laughing and then turns her head for his lips. She's good for him. I've never seen him so relaxed. It's a welcome sight.

We arrive, and my stomach ties in knots. Game time. I look at my phone for the fiftieth time since we left and find it's still blank.

No messages from Grace. No response to my many text messages warning her of the night's change in plans. Nothing.

As I get out of the limo, I check out the venue. It's a beautiful mansion which sits on the water, opposite our home. There is a long gravel circular driveway, and attendants guide us inside. It's immaculate. Green grass runs

the entire property which is covered in weeping willow trees and flowers of all different colors.

Before I can react, Vanessa sidles next to me and sticks her arm in mine and whispers into my ear, “Wow, what is this place?”

I spot the flash of a camera, and out of habit, smile. Vanessa must be used to this as well because she tilts her head toward mine and glances at me with pure adoration.

Picture-perfect for the photographers.

*What the hell is wrong with her?* I’ve honestly given no indication this is a date. Hell, the last time I saw her I left with Grace. While I originally felt bad for that, now I’m just finding her desperation annoying. I turn back to Cat and motion for her to take my other arm. If I have to hang with Vanessa, Cat isn’t going to ditch us. She rolls her eyes before taking my arm.

When the three of us walk into the house, my eyes move to the walls. Beautiful gold designs paper the walls, and I feel like we’ve stepped back into the 1920s.

“This way please,” a man in a white jacket says as he motions to the backyard. We walk out onto the stone patio, and the bay sparkles in pinks and blues before us. If I thought there were pretty flowers up front, I am blown away by this yard. It goes on forever, and the trees and different gardens are a sight to behold. A white tent sits in the side of the yard, and flickering lights give it a soft glow as the fabric blows in the slight breeze and jazz music drifts through the night air.

My eyes scan the space for Grace, but she’s nowhere to be found.

“Let’s grab a drink,” Cat says, moving to the bar. Vanessa looks at me like we can’t be separated, and I turn away from them both. I’m done

playing this damn game. Seemingly taking the hint, they both disappear, and I feel my shoulders sag in relief.

Carter and Tessa walk up, and he hands me a glass. “Got you one, figured you’d need it.” I take a sip, but before I lower the glass from my lips, my eyes find her.

Across the grass, standing with a glass of champagne in her hand, is the woman of my dreams. In a deep purple dress the color of her eyes which has a slit baring far too much skin, Grace is a vision. Her hair is pulled to one side like a Hollywood star, and her eye makeup is smoky.

I’ve never seen Grace like this. I’ve seen her naked. I’ve seen her vulnerable. I’ve seen her panting, begging, and on her knees, but I’ve never seen her like *this*.

It’s not like I prefer one look over another—okay, in my bed and naked is probably my favorite—but this, the way she carries herself, the way she wears that dress, makes me happy that I actually get to see her tonight. Forgetting the aggravation about our situation, I just smile. Because while tonight we have to play this game, tomorrow, and every other day, she’s mine.

And the truth is, even right now, I own her. It’s clear as day as soon as she looks up and sees me. Her mouth opens in shock and then curls into a smile, and her eyes burn as she traces the way my tuxedo hugs my body.

When Hanson wraps his arm around her and whispers in her ear, my blood boils and my fists ball.

“Down boy,” Tessa murmurs. “I’ll take care of this.” She stalks off in their direction leaving me and Carter staring.

“That girl is something else,” I say to him.

He simply nods.



A hand claps around Carter's back and he turns and smiles at the man. They speak to one another and then he turns to me. "You must be Cassius?"

I eye Carter, and he mouths *Landry*. "Yes, Mr. Landry, but you can call me Cash." I take his hand and he shakes it firmly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Your grandfather is a good friend. How is he faring?"

I wince. "He's been better. But he's slowly getting back his strength."

He shakes his head. "That's too bad. As I always say, nothing is more important than family."

I nod. "Couldn't agree more."

"Carter, I saw you walk in with that beautiful redhead. Where did she disappear to?" the man asks.

Carter points toward Tessa and smiles. "She's a doll. Her name is Tessa Sanderson; she works for *Vanity Fair*."

Landry raises his brow. "A reporter? Wouldn't peg you as someone who wanted to mess with the media." He laughs and Carter smiles.

"Sometimes you gotta tangle with the media."

I shake my head and take another sip of my drink. "So, Mr. Landry, I'd love to set up an appointment with you this week. I've been spending more time at my family's property in Bristol."

The man perks up. "Oh, that's just wonderful. I'm sure that makes your grandmother very happy. You have a beautiful home."

I nod, but my attention is drawn to the way Hanson's hand moves in circles on Grace's back as they talk to Tessa and another man I don't know.

"Isn't that right, Cash?" Carter asks, trying to draw me back to the conversation taking place in front of me.

I look back at them but can't shake the image of Hanson on Grace. "I'm sorry," I say, "I just saw someone I need to speak to. Here's my card, Mr. Landry. Please, let's get together for lunch this week."

He nods silently, likely stunned that I'm walking away from my opportunity to occupy his attention at his own party. Carter shoots me a glare, but I ignore him, my eyes moving to Grace.

As if she can feel my eyes on her back, she turns and offers me a small smile. I watch her turn to Hanson, whisper something, and then leave the conversation. He looks toward me and when he spots me his eyes narrow, and he nods his head in greeting. That's about as friendly as we'll get.

Behind Grace the sun is setting over the bay, and she looks ethereal walking toward me, her hair blowing slightly in the wind and her dress hugging her every curve. I'm hungry for her despite the fact that I had her only this morning. It feels like it's been years since I last touched her.

"Whiskey, what are you doing here?" she says in her sexy lilt that has my pants growing tight.

Without stopping, I move closer and hug her as if we are friends who haven't seen each other for a while. As soon as her ear is against my cheek, I inhale the smell of her and whisper, "You look so fucking beautiful tonight it actually hurts."

She leans into me and moans a happy thank you. "You don't look so bad yourself, Mr. James. You clean up quite well."

She pulls away leaving me feeling desperate and bare, but not before she takes my hand in her own and squeezes. I squeeze back three times and feel myself relax when she flashes me one of her brilliant smiles. We don't have a moment to speak before Hanson is behind her and wrapping his arm

around her waist again, leaving my chest heaving against my shirt. Tessa shoots daggers at me and Grace mouths, “I’m yours.”

The words calm me momentarily.

Carter and Landry walk up, and soon I’m drawn into a conversation with all of them. Landry greets Grace with an easy smile. “I see Jonathan has been working hard at his convincing.”

Hanson smiles, Grace blushes, and my anger bubbles. “Working hard at what?” I ask without thinking.

Carter elbows me, but Landry misses it all. “Oh, I met Grace last week at an event with Jonathan. He told me Grace was the one that got away.”

As if perfectly timed, my sister and Vanessa walk up. “Was she now?” Cat says, her jaw tight.

My irritation with my sister’s obvious dislike of Grace hits a nerve. Grace glances up and recognizes my sister and then Vanessa. Then she doubles back to look at me before finally responding. “Jay and I are old college friends. He’s a good man,” she says to Landry, avoiding my gaze.

Hanson leans down and kisses her on the cheek then shoots me a look. “The best of friends. This girl is a gem.”

She blushes again, and I’m so focused on her I don’t register Vanessa’s arm moving into my own. “Hey, Cash, do you want to go sit at our table?” she says far too loudly for her to act like it’s a personal question.

Grace bites her lip and looks between the two of us. There’s no way to get out of this, so I just take the coward’s way out. “Sure, right this way. I’ll see you all later.” I place my hand behind her back and lead her to the tent, feeling Grace’s gaze the entire walk back.



## CHAPTER 43

### GRACE

**J**onathan guides me to our table, but my eyes remain on the Jameses' table the entire way. Tessa's face contorts in regret when she sees me, Vanessa waves, and Cat glares. I don't know what I ever did to that girl, but I'm beginning to get pissed. I don't know her, and she most certainly doesn't know me. Somehow, I know she's behind Vanessa hanging on Cash's every word and limb.

Cash's jaw clenches as we make eye contact, but he breaks it before I do. He has some nerve to act like I'm the villain here. He knew I was coming with Hanson; I had no idea he was bringing Vanessa as his date. Jonathan's whisper against my ear makes me pause. "It's one night, Grace."

I look up into his pleading eyes and nod, plastering a smile onto my face as we sit with his family. I've known the Hanson brothers since college. Garreth and Hayden are twins and incredibly good-looking. They both brought dates, and we settle into easy conversation.

Dinner is served, and Landry walks up as we finish eating, a grin on his face. "What a lovely looking table. Are you enjoying yourselves?"

He looks directly at me, and I smile. “The entire evening has been beautiful. Have you always lived in this town?”

When we drove past the sign welcoming us to Bristol, Rhode Island, this evening, I was absolutely shocked and my stomach just about bottomed out. I searched my clutch for my phone to warn Cash that the event was in Bristol, but came up empty. I’m guessing my phone is back at my apartment where I got ready for the evening. Completely useless to me.

It didn’t take long for me to realize that Cash would be here. He’d mentioned he had an event in Bristol tonight, and I knew he’d be gone all weekend. Suddenly, all the pieces started to fall together in my head. Sintac is the company he’s trying to win over. Hanson and James are competitors. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. I just wanted to make everything up to Jonathan, not destroy Cash’s chances at this business endeavor. Now I’m stuck in this horrible position of wanting to help Jonathan and not wanting to hurt Cash.

“Since I was a boy,” he replies. “Do you like to dance, Grace?”

In the center of the tables is a wooden dance floor, and a band is set up to the side. They are just starting to play after taking a break during dinner. Jonathan answers for me, “Oh, Grace loves to dance.”

“You’ll have to join me for a dance then,” the old man says, holding out his hand. I excuse myself from the table as I follow Mr. Landry to the dance floor.

The chords to “Wonderful Tonight” play, and Mr. Landry takes one of my hands in his own and holds my back. There is more than enough space between our hips, and I appreciate that he is dancing with me like a grandfather rather than a rich old man. You know the difference when you see it and definitely when you feel it. He’s kind and I can see why everyone

is fighting for his attention. “So how come all of the people in this room are vying for your attention?”

He smiles. “See, now I was just going to ask *you* that.”

A blush creeps up my cheeks as I spot Cash’s gaze on us. His eyes crinkle and he’s got a slight curve to his lips. “I think it’s just because I’m dancing with *you*,” I counter.

“They all want my money,” he replies matter-of-factly.

I laugh. “I’m sure it’s not as simple as that. There are plenty of very wealthy men in this room. There must be a reason they want to partner with your company.”

Mr. Landry looks at me, and I get the sense he’s sizing me up. “Jonathan is a lucky man.”

I make sure to speak clearly, “We are *just* friends.”

“And how do you know Cassius James?”

The story slips easily from my lips. “He was a client of mine. But his mother and my godmother were very close, so I suppose we are also old family friends.”

“A client?”

I nod. “I’m a matchmaker. I actually set him up on a date with the woman sitting next to him.”

“Oh, you must be very good at your job then.”

I glance in their direction and see Cash and Vanessa making their way to the dance floor. *What is he doing? I’m trying to handle this the best I can, but he’s just making this worse.* “I try to be,” I reply.

“Is Jonathan a client of yours as well?” he asks earnestly.

I laugh. “Jonathan doesn’t need help in the dating department.”

“Because he’s with you?” he asks again, his penetrating gaze searching mine. I know he wants someone who is settling down. A family company. But I can’t lie. And I can’t hurt Cash’s chances like that either.

I shake my head. “No. Jonathan and I are truly just friends. I’m sure one day he will meet the woman who makes him want to settle down, but that isn’t me. I’m going through a bitter divorce, and I assure you, I am the last person Jonathan would want to date.”

He frowns and shakes his head. “I’d have to disagree.”

Before I can ask him what he means by that, I feel a body looming next to us.

“May I cut in?”

I turn to see Jonathan standing before us. He smiles as Mr. Landry stops dancing and nods. Before walking off though, he leans in and says in a low voice, “You are a lovely woman, Grace. Any man in this room would be lucky to have you. Don’t sell yourself short.”

My cheeks warm at his words and I nod, unable to get my voice to work. Jonathan holds out his hand and I take it. Unlike Mr. Landry, he pulls my body flush against his as he spins us both and whispers into my ear, “You’re doing a fantastic job, Gracie. Thank you.”

I roll my eyes. “Did you know Cash was going to be here?”

His laugh tickles my neck. “I imagined he would.”

I turn my head and meet his eyes. “Jay,” I chastise. “You’ve put me in an impossible situation.”

He tilts his head. “Grace, I keep trying to show you that he’s not who you think he is.” Jonathan spins us so my view is of Vanessa and Cash. They are as close as Jonathan is holding me, and it turns my stomach into twisted knots.

Cash spots me and holds my gaze. His hand holds Vanessa low on the back, and she speaks to him softly, but he doesn't take his eyes off mine. We are with two different people, on a crowded dance floor, and I swear I can feel his touch on my skin, his whisper in my ear, and his promises in my heart.

Jonathan continues speaking low in my ear, "I may not be the man for you, but someone who shows up with another woman on his arm and holds her as close as he's holding that woman, he's not the man for you either. We are made of the same cloth, Cash and me. Neither of us are good enough for you."

I don't listen to his words. My focus remains on Cash—the slight hardening of his jaw and the way his pupils dilate. He's furious and he's running out of patience. Vanessa does nothing to placate his emotions, to bide his time, or to draw his interest. I know I'm running out of rope and soon he'll snap. I lean into Jonathan's arms, lift up onto my tiptoes, and kiss his cheek, before apologizing. "I'm sorry, Jay, but you couldn't be more wrong. Excuse me."

With determined steps, I walk out of the tent.

Lanterns light a path into a garden. The evening stars glitter the sky, and warm air blows around me. I just need a few minutes to myself to gather my thoughts. To figure out my next move. Do I just push through the rest of this night without saying a word? Should I leave and go back to the city? Or should I walk out there and fall into Cash's arms, media and others' opinions be damned?

I find myself surrounded by bamboo stalks which are triple my height. Apparently, I've stumbled into a bamboo garden. I smile in spite of my predicament. This place is enchanting. Tea lights are strategically placed



throughout, creating an illuminating glow, and the smell of flowers perfumes my lungs.

I'm so focused on my own thoughts and the beauty around me that I don't hear the footsteps. "Grace," Cash's voice rumbles, sending a chill straight through me. Spinning around, I walk right into his hard chest. Without hesitating, he wraps his hand behind my neck and pulls my mouth to his, crushing me against him. Owning me, possessing me, and setting me free all at the same time.

He pulls my head back lightly, running his open mouth and teeth against my jaw and down my neck. "That was torture. Pure fucking hell. Watching you with him, seeing him touch you, watching him *dance* with you." His teeth nip at my collarbone, and I whimper against him.

"I'm sorry, I had no idea you would be here tonight," I say huskily, my voice deep with desire.

Cash raises his mouth to mine again and inhales me. He pulls tighter on my hair, and I hate to admit that it drives me wild, completely soaking my panties. I push my hips to meet his own and his eyes glow like liquid gold. "You like that, Gracie?"

His other hand slides down to where my skin is exposed from the slit in my dress. His fingers moves back and forth, slowly, as he stares into my eyes. "Do you know what this does to me?" he asks, gripping my thigh tightly. "Seeing this skin, seeing you look like this? You're a fucking goddess, Grace. I want to bow down and worship you."

My eyes rise to his in a challenge. "What's stopping you?"

The music floats through the air and voices drift close by, but in our bamboo garden we're alone. Cash smiles, and his hand grips my neck as he

pushes me against the bamboo. It moves with us, but I'm also surprised by how sturdy it is. "Can you be quiet?"

"Yes, sir," I say with a slight nod, although I'm not really sure I can. The way I'm feeling right now makes me want to cry out, not silence myself.

He shakes his head as if he knows what I'm thinking and makes quick work of his tie, removing it from his neck and holding it out to me. "Do you trust me?"

Implicitly.

"Of course."

Cash takes the tie and pulls it around my mouth, tightening it behind my head so that it works like a gag. His eyes remain on mine the entire time, and I can feel the fire burning between us both. I've never been gagged, or silenced, and I never thought it would turn me on, but it seems that anything Cash does makes me wet with need. "Now hold on to the bamboo and don't let go."

I try to smile at his instruction, but Cash's tie makes that impossible, so I simply nod and watch as my tuxedoed boyfriend drops to his knees in front of me before he pushes the skirt of my dress over his head. He slides my panties down my legs, helping me step out of them, then pockets them with a smile before sliding one of my legs over his shoulder. "Hold on, Angel," he warns before his breath burns against my sensitive skin.

I grip the bamboo tightly, trying to obey his every command as Cash pulls my lips apart and strokes me with his tongue. The moan remains in my throat as the tie does its job, but my hips don't obey, bucking toward Cash, seeking even more pressure, more pleasure, more Cash. He laughs against me. "Stay still, Angel, I'll get you there."

With heels on it's hard to balance on one foot so I finally lean into him, letting him take my weight, my power, and my orgasm. His fingers slide into me, and he works me over as he continues lavishing me with his tongue. There is something so erotic about hearing people so close, of being practically in public and yet hidden in our own corner, while he goes down on me.

I'm spiraling, focusing on the warmth of his mouth, the powerful flicker of his tongue, and the pulsing of his fingers. But it's his moans that do me in. The way he's enjoying every second of this as if I'm pleasuring him. "You're a fucking delicacy and you're all mine," he mutters in between kisses. He looks up at me and whispers, "I want you to see how much I love doing this Grace. Eyes on me."

I keep my eyes on him as he stares at me and moves his tongue in circles. My leg starts to shake, and I feel the orgasm taking over every limb. Unable to keep my head down any longer, it falls back as I clench around his fingers which continue to move in and out even as my pussy grips him tightly. My eyes close, and darkness takes me to a place where the only thing I feel is Cash.

"Open your eyes, Gracie," he says again as my world spins. Obeying, I open my eyes, but before looking down, my gaze locks with someone who stands just outside the bamboo garden. I blink a few times trying to make out the voyeur, and my stomach drops when I see they belong to Vanessa. She's standing there with her mouth wide open, and suddenly the idea of being watched, or doing this in public, loses its appeal.

I buck against Cash trying to get his attention, but he tightens his grip around me. "Nut huh, I didn't just work that hard to get up now. Your orgasm is mine." He continues to lick, and since I can't speak, I can't warn

him of what's happening. Vanessa watches for a few more seconds, and my eyes plead an apology before she glares and turns on her heels. I have no idea what she's going to do, but I have a feeling it's going to blow my life apart.



## CHAPTER 44

### GRACE

**M**onday morning, I walk into the office completely unsurprised to find Vanessa in my waiting room. Rachel looks back and forth between us nervously. “Morning, Rachel, can you get coffee for Vanessa and me, please?”

Vanessa stands up and walks to my office. No words are necessary to acknowledge that I will make time for her unannounced visit. I didn’t tell Cash what she saw. I didn’t know how to even voice it. When we returned to the tent, Vanessa was gone, and I told Jonathan I was heading home. Cash had Frank pick us up, and we returned to the house in Bristol. I have no idea where his sister and Vanessa stayed.

She’s wearing a black skirt, a white blouse, and black heels. With her dark hair in a low ponytail and her lips painted red, she doesn’t exactly look sinister, but I’m uneasy regardless.

“Let’s just get right to it,” I say, not wanting to mince words. “What can I do for you?”

Vanessa tilts her head as she stares at me, as if she’s measuring my worth. Or my looks. I manage to keep my head held high and my face neutral. My

navy blue boatneck dress is conservative and belted at the waist with a cream snakeskin. I look nothing like a woman who would hide in the shadows while her boyfriend went down on her at an outdoor public event.

“How long have you been with him?”

I don’t bother lying. It would be an insult to her intelligence. “Everything started the night you went to the club with him.”

She doesn’t flinch. “So you continued to set him up on dates after you screwed him?”

I bite back an insulting laugh. “No. After he went on a few dates, we realized what we had was real. I still fought against it for a bit, but Cash is persistent. He knew what he wanted.”

I immediately know that wasn’t the correct response. I’d inadvertently insulted her. Fortunately, Rachel chooses that moment to enter my office and deliver the coffee, giving both of us a second to recover.

“Listen, I know Cat isn’t my biggest fan, and I’m sorry that you got dragged into Saturday night.”

Vanessa leans back in her chair and sips her coffee. I wait for her to respond, but when she doesn’t, I keep talking. “I’m going through a nasty divorce, and we wanted to keep Cash out of the press. He has enough on his plate. The pressure of the business, and family obligations—it’s a lot. I didn’t want to add to that, so we’ve been staying under the radar. We never meant to hurt anyone.”

Vanessa folds her legs and puts her coffee cup down, leaning forward. “I’m not hurt. Annoyed, disgusted, and a tad bit jealous, sure.”

I appreciate her honesty. “I have plenty of clients that I can set you up with. Or you can become my client and I can go on a search for eligible

businessmen. We've never had a woman as our client. It could be fun for you."

As soon as I suggest it, I wonder why we haven't done it from the female side. Why haven't we combed through dating hell for the female businesswomen who don't have time to date? It's freaking brilliant.

But she shakes her head. "I want something else."

I sigh. Of course she does. "Okay, what would you like me to do for you, Vanessa?"

"An interview. My sisters set me up for this thing. Their hope was that I would go on a few dates, get a happily ever after, and do a piece on it for the news. It was going to be my big break."

I frown. "Vanessa, I'm offering you the chance to be the first woman client we've ever had. You can do exactly what you set out to do."

"Maybe," she tilts her head in consideration. "But first I want an interview. To start the process. I already sold it to my boss, and he wants the first segment tonight."

I look at her, perplexed. "Tonight? As in the evening news?"

She nods. "Yes. Well, we tape earlier. It's not live. So, we would have to leave now to head to the studio, do the interview, and give them time to edit."

"What is the story about?"

"Your company. Dating. How the wealthy find one another. It's intriguing for mere mortals, Grace. You must know that. That's why you've been all over the papers lately."

My stomach sinks. This isn't about the dating show. It's about me. I'm currently a topic, and they want to capitalize on that. But truthfully, it would be good for business. And I feel like I owe Vanessa because I never should

have set her up with Cash in the first place. I knew Cash had real feelings for me even back then. Even when he was angry, there was always something simmering below the surface between us.

“My divorce?” I ask.

“Not a topic,” she replies. “This is an opportunity for both of us, Grace. I sold it to my boss when I thought I’d be the one dating Cassius James. But I know a good story when I see it, and I’m not going to allow my personal feelings for Cash to interfere with my career.”

That is certainly something I understand. As women we so often put men, our feelings about them, and our relationship statuses first, but like me, Vanessa is driven and wants to put her career first. I admire it.

“Fine. Send me the address and I’ll be there. What time?”

Vanessa shakes her head. “We need to go now. There are people at the studio who can do your hair and makeup while you and I prep.”

My teeth gnaw on my lip, but I don’t really see a downside. Free advertising for the firm, I help Vanessa out with her career thus easing my guilt, and I can even promote my new idea. It feels like a win-win. But I also have an uneasy feeling. “You realize Cash is not up for discussion?”

That’s my line in the sand. If she thinks she is going to use this to highlight my relationship with him, she is sadly mistaken. I won’t allow him to be dragged into any of this.

Vanessa looks affronted. “Of course not. Do you think I want the world to know he was seeing you while also seeing me?”

I glare at her. “I already told you, that’s not the case.”

She shoots her eyes to the ceiling in annoyance. “Right. Whatever. The point is my viewers already knew that I went out with Cash. It does me no



good to point out that you are together. I promise, that *isn't* what this is about.”

“Fine. You’ve got yourself a deal.”



Five minutes before the interview is set to start, my phone beeps with a text from Cash.

**You’ve completely fucked me.**

My heart jumps. *Is this about the interview?*

**What?** I simply write.

**Cash: Every time my secretary calls me Mr. James my dick jumps thinking of you. I had to tell her to start calling me Cash.**

I laugh out loud and roll my eyes. *We’re fine.*

**Grace: Sorry about that Mr. James. Hope she doesn’t call you sir while you’re in meetings today,** I type out with a huge smile on my face.

**Cash: You better behave Grace.**

**Grace: Well considering I thoroughly enjoy my punishments...**

**Cash: I’m going to fuck you into tomorrow and slap that ass so hard when I get home.**

*Home.* I sigh as a stupid smile crosses my face.

**See you at home, Whiskey. I love you.**

**Love you too, Angel.**

I read his message as one of the techs walks up with headphones on her head and a clipboard in her hand. “Vanessa is ready for you.”

I pocket my phone with a smile. It’s show time.



“So tell me, Grace, what does the love life of a matchmaker look like?”

I knew the question was coming, and I begin my practiced statement about how my main focus is on my clients, when it dawns on me that I want to be honest. For so long I have practiced the right things to say, the right things to do, and where the hell has that gotten me? As I start this next chapter in my life, I want to do it authentically. And more than that, I’m genuinely happy, and that is all because of one man. I want people to know that.

Smiling, I reply, “Honestly, up until a few months ago, it was not that glamorous.”

Vanessa’s eyebrows go to the heavens in shock.

*Yes, I’m really going there*, my smirk seems to say. I’m happy and I want everyone to know it.

“And what changed a few months ago?”

I bite my lip coyly. “I think it’s more about the who, not the what,” I say honestly. “I met a man who set my world on fire. I’ve spotted that kind of chemistry for clients before, but I never felt it myself. I didn’t even realize I hadn’t felt it until this man looked me in the eyes and asked me to dance with him beneath the stars. I was sunk.”

I think back to that night with Cash, the way he held me, his fingers keeping me in place, reminding me with his touch that our bodies belonged that close. I’d barely known him a few hours and my body lit up for him.

“Wow...that’s just...what we all want,” she says in awe.

“Yes, and now that I have it, I want to help other women experience it. It’s why I’m changing my business model. I want to help women find a man who can complement their life, not complete it. Ca—” I catch myself before saying his name. “My boyfriend”—I blush at the ridiculous term—“helped me realize that I can lean on him. That relying on someone else isn’t a weakness. But he also isn’t my entire world. I have dinner with girlfriends, work, family...I have a full life and he adds to it. It’s really...it’s just been eye-opening, for sure.”

“But before this you only helped men, wealthy men if we’re being honest,” she says pointedly.

“Very true. But after meeting my boyfriend, I realize how little money matters. I mean obviously it pays my bills; we don’t do this for free.” I laugh. “As much as I wish I could find everyone a happily ever after, I do need to pay rent.” Vanessa smiles, urging me on. “But if I’ve learned anything through my own experiences, it’s that women deserve the chance to find a man. I mean what does money matter if a man has secrets, or fetishes, or God forbid a criminal background. Or if he cheats. Women deserve to know this ahead of time and that’s what we do. My team and I vet the players and hopefully provide our client with a gambit of suitable men until we find someone that she will have real chemistry with.”

“Sounds amazing. I’m looking forward to being your first client.”

I beam. “I’m looking forward to it as well. I’m excited for this new chapter in my business and in my life...If I’ve learned anything from my past relationships it’s how easy it is for a man to hide things. Hopefully, I’ll be able to use my experience to spot the liars for you and my other clients.”

“Thank you for sitting down with us. And good luck with the new boyfriend. It sounds like everything really has worked out for you.”

I couldn't agree more. Finally, after months of hiding in the shadows, it's time for Cash and me to dance in the sun.



## CHAPTER 45

### CASH

Cat bursts into my office at five o'clock just as I'm standing up to leave for the day. "Did you get Grace pregnant?"

I laugh at the ridiculousness of the question. "What? *No*. What are you talking about?"

Cat huffs and stares down at her phone, her lips pinching together and her brows furrowed. The anger I feel cools instantly when I see the genuine concern and nervousness on her face. "What's wrong, Kit Cat?"

She shakes her head, clear anguish on her face. "I don't even know how to say this. I think I fucked up."

The tension grows. "What did you do to Grace, Cat?" I grit out, trying to keep my voice even.

Her temper flares as she glares at me. "I didn't do anything to that media whore." She flings her phone at me, and I see a message from Vanessa on Cat's phone.

*Your brother really should vet the women he dates first. But I guess it's no surprise, like father like son.*

Below is a link with an image of Grace and Vanessa on it. My stomach drops as I click. As an image of Grace and Vanessa appears on her phone, sitting across from one another chatting, a voice plays over them. “Tonight at Six, Grace Kensington, the new owner of The Happily Ever After Makers matchmaking service, discusses her latest client, Cassius James, and the reason she’s no longer catering to billionaire men.”

Grace’s voice cuts in, “If I’ve learned anything through my own experiences, it’s that women deserve the chance to find a man. I mean what does money matter if a man has secrets, or fetishes, or God forbid a criminal background. Or if he cheats. Women deserve to know this ahead of time and that’s what we do.”

The voice-over continues. “Listen tonight to find out what she learned about the James family and how her interaction with them led her to literally switch sides and represent only women.”

Grace’s voice breaks through again, “I’m excited for this new chapter in my business and in my life...After my divorce, when I was finally single and coming out of an unhappy marriage, well, let’s just say I’ve learned how easy it is for a man to hide things. Hopefully, I’ll be able to use my experience to spot the liars.” She winks at Vanessa and my blood boils.

Cat bites her lip. “It gets worse.”

“How could it get worse, Cat?”

“The tell-all involves the story about our family. But she hinted that it involved a hidden baby. If that’s not yours and Grace’s, whose is it?”

The door to my office swings open and Carter comes flying in. “*Motherfucker!* Motherfucker, motherfucker, motherfucker.”

His face is beet-red, and his hair looks like he’s been raking his hands through it for days. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got a fucking kid! *A fucking kid!* And they’re doing a story about it, as if I’m some deadbeat dad.”

I grind my teeth. “What are you talking about?”

He throws his phone at me, and it bounces off my chest. Bending to pick it up, I see he also has a message, but it’s from a number I don’t recognize. “Who is this?”

“My friend who works at channel eight. She sent me a heads-up. They’re running a tell-all on our family tonight. Apparently, they have inside information on our family and someone we know is going to verify it all on air.”

I shake my head. None of this makes sense. “You don’t have a kid.”

“You’re damn right I don’t. Or at least I don’t know that I do. But according to my friend, they have DNA proof. I have a fucking kid and I had no idea.” He’s pacing the room, and I can barely breathe.

Cat mutters, “Okay, at least it’s not your kid.” She gives me a small smile, and I glare at her.

Chase storms in next with his hands in fists, unable to speak. *What the fuck is going on with my family?*

“Chase, what’s going on?”

“Is it true?” he says, walking straight up to my desk, bracing his two arms on top of it and staring me down.

I pause and try to control my reaction. “Is what true?”

“Did our father take advantage of your nanny who was underage?” His blue eyes pierce me and my heart cracks for him. We tried so hard to keep this hidden. He was never supposed to know.

Cat reaches for him to put her hand on his shoulder. “Chase, why don’t you sit down.”

He pushes her hand off without turning, his eyes remaining focused on me. “You’re the head of this family now. Answer me. Did our father rape my mother?”

My head gives one curt nod, affirming the horrible truth and breaking my brother’s heart. He storms out without another word. “Someone needs to go after him,” I say, knowing it can’t be me. I have to deal with the fallout.

*Fuck.* How could this have happened? No one knew about Chase’s mom. We’d hidden it for twenty-seven fucking years. Why was it coming out now?

I rake my hands over my face as Cat grabs my office phone.

“Who are you calling?”

She shakes her head. “Jay, I need your help.”

I tune her out as I try to figure out how this happened. Who could possibly have sold this information? And why was Grace part of it? None if it makes sense.

And then my mind turns to our night in bed after the club, and I remember my confession.

*“Dad found a nanny to watch us, to take care of us after Mom died, and then he started screwing her. She was only seventeen.”*

My heart drops as I realize that Grace is the leak. She’s the one who has torn my family apart.

“Who are you talking to?” I grit out again.

Cat hangs up the phone and stares at me for a few seconds, as if she’s trying to find a way to spin what she’s going to say.

Carter stands up and moves beside me. “What’s going on, Cat? What did you do?”



Cat swallows and puffs out her chest. “I fixed everything. They’ll kill the story.”

“What? How?” I stutter, feeling both shock and relief in the moment.

“Jay is going to handle it. He owns the building that channel eight leases. He’ll make sure it doesn’t air.”

My irritation spikes. “So you didn’t handle it. You are trying to handle it, but we all know Hanson will benefit from our family being destroyed, so in the end that story will come out.”

She shakes her head, her chin firm. “He won’t.”

“Why, Cat? Why would Hanson suddenly care about covering up our family’s secrets when they’ve been trying to spill them for years?”

She looks to the window and then turns back to us, resolute in her stance. “Because we’re going to be family. Hanson Liquors and James Spirits will be merging.”

“The fuck they will!” Carter screams, and I nod in agreement.

“Jay and I are getting married. Our companies will merge just like our families.”

“Are you nuts?” I say, my voice rising to an alarming level.

This must be a prank. There is no way that Grace did this. There is no way in hell that Hanson is marrying my sister. And there is no fucking way that our companies are merging. “Over my dead body.”

Cat sits down in the chair and crosses her legs calmly. “I did what I had to do. And now you guys will too. We’ll sign the documents, we’ll become family, and we’ll take this company in the right direction.”

I shake my head. “You can’t do this, Cat.”

She meets my eyes with determination. “It’s done.”

I throw the papers on my desk in frustration. “Stop acting like you can decide this.”

She glares at me. “I’m not an idiot, Cash. I can see it written all over your face. You told Grace about Chase, didn’t you? You’re the loose lip. So, don’t fucking tell me what I can and can’t do. I told you to stay away from her, and you didn’t listen, and now we have to clean up this mess. I won’t let this information come to light. It will destroy Chase if this is made public. Let alone Carter’s unidentified child. Jesus Christ, we’re a fucking disaster of a family; it’s pathetic. What will Pa say? I’m doing what has to be done, and you’ll let me because it’s your fucking fault we’re in this mess.”

I say nothing because I have no defense. Standing up, I walk out of my office and don’t look back.



## CHAPTER 46

### GRACE

**B**uzzing with excitement over the interview and ecstatic to finally tell Cash that I'm all in—I'm ready to tell the world we're together—I head straight to the penthouse. I walk in the door and slip off my shoes, massaging the bottom of my foot as I balance against the wall.

Although the lights are off, the evening sunlight pours into the room, illuminating the kitchen. Cash leans over the sink, his back muscles straining his shirt, and I feel my legs clench. I can't believe I get to come home to this every night.

Quickly, I walk to him. "Hey Whiskey, I'm so happy you're home early," I say as I go to put my arms around his waist.

Cash spins and pulls away from me before folding his arms across his chest. As he stares me down, I see tremendous anguish written all over his face. When I attempt to touch him though, he pushes my hand aside and drops his head.

Dread pools in my stomach. "Cash, what's wrong?"

"Don't touch me," he says in a low voice, his head rising and his eyes filled with anger.

I recoil at his words, confused and scared.

“What are you doing here, Grace? You told me you’d destroy me. You warned me. Well, you kept your promise. What, did you come back to gloat?” His voice is low, but the emotion is loud and clear.

“Cash, I have no idea what you’re talking about. Look at me,” I beg as tears well below my lids.

“Look at you? *Look at you!* Are you out of your mind? You destroyed my family, Grace. You and Hanson. Was this his plan all along? Somehow get me to open up and spill all my family secrets so he could take control of my company? God, I fell for it. I fell so damn hard for you. *Fuck!*” he screams and picks up a glass before lobbing it at the wall. The glass cracks and breaks into pieces, flying in all different directions, and I jump back in shock.

Tears break the barrier and flood my face as I try to wipe them away with the back of my hand. “Cash, please, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I didn’t do it. Whatever it is, I didn’t do it.”

For a second, he looks up at me and I think he’s going to believe me. He’s going to stop this insanity, but then he asks in an almost patronizing tone, “Did you do an interview with Vanessa today?”

My stomach sinks and my face must give away my guilt because Cash coughs out a bitter laugh. “Exactly. See, that...”—he points at my face—“*that* tells me everything I need to know. You betrayed me, Grace. You destroyed my family. Destroyed my company. And you trampled on my heart. I thought we had something special. I thought I finally had *it*. A woman who loved me. A real chance at a family.” My lips quiver as I watch a tear fall from his eye. He slaps it away as if he’s angry he allowed me to

see it. “But it was all a lie. *Get out!* Get out of my house. Get out of my life and don’t ever show your face here again.”

Desperate, I grasp his shirt, trying to get him to look at me. “Don’t do this, Cash. Whatever you think I did, I didn’t do it. She twisted my words. I swear to God, Cash, I would never betray you.”

“The minute you talked about my family on the news, *the minute you agreed to sit down with her*, you betrayed me. You put your career first just like you told me you would. And she used your ambition, your need to put yourself above everyone else, *your selfishness*—she used that to destroy me. And you let her because that’s who you are. A selfish woman who cares about nothing but her career. About proving that you deserve to play in the big leagues. That you don’t need a man. The fucking worst part about it though, Grace, is that I knew this about you, and I admired it. You didn’t need to prove your worth to me because I saw you and loved you just the way you were. But you proved us all right. You don’t need a man. You don’t need love. You don’t need anything but yourself, and now that’s all you’ll have. Now get the *fuck* out of my house.”

Cut to the bone from his words, I drop to my knees. I try to gather myself through my sobs but can’t move.

“Fine, if you won’t leave, I will,” he says, looking down at me with disgust. He’s gone before I can look up.

# PRE-ORDER LOVING WHISKEY TODAY!



**All it took was one shot of Whiskey to let myself burn.**

Cash told me loving him wasn't a risk. He promised we would dance in the moonlight. He swore he was nothing like the ones who broke my heart.

And he was right. He was so much worse.

But what do you do with an addiction you can't kick?

Drink in the shadows, take shots in the dark, and savor the buzz knowing the next morning won't be worth it.

Because it's not enough.

**Nothing is ever enough when the person you hate is also the one you love.**

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book was so much fun to write. It took me completely out of my comfort zone and I loved every second of it. I know the “ending” of this book will leave most of you screaming and this book was originally not a duet, but Cash and Grace’s story wasn’t finished. I couldn’t tie it up in a bow. They have too much growing to do. So I promise, you will get your happy ending...but we’ll have to go through a bit of heartache first.

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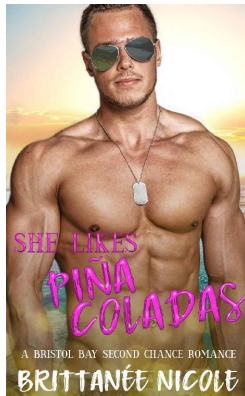
Last but certainly not least, my readers, thank you so much for reading this book. I know you are anxious for Loving Whiskey and I can't wait to hear what you think of this story and the next one. There is nothing better than hearing from each of you how a character affected you, or a storyline made you laugh. I love your reviews, your anecdotes, and the notes you send to me.

If you want to follow along on my writing journey and have sneak peeks into all the characters in Bristol, follow me on [Instagram](#), join my awesome [Facebook group](#), sign-up for my [newsletter](#) and follow me on [TikTok](#).



## ALSO BY BRITTANEE NICOLE

[She Likes Pina Coladas: A Second Chance Romance \(Bristol Bay Book 1\)](#)



### **Wanted: Hot Stranger For Vacation**

It started with a simple message from the man known as Pina Coladas: Message me and Escape. After dumping my apartment-stealing boyfriend and rooming with my best friend's dog, the promise of fruity drinks, dancing in the rain, and maybe even a midnight romp, leaves me singing a familiar tune, excited to travel to the Azores with the stranger who

answered my wanted ad.

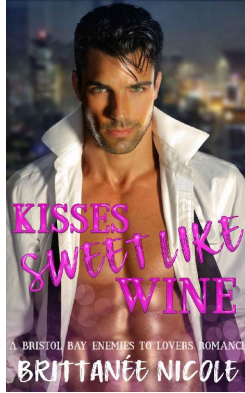
When Jack, aka Mr. Perfect, aka the one who got away, shows up at the airport, I'm left to wonder if this is just another one of life's dirty pranks.

Jack isn't only hot, he's a fighter pilot with a sense of humor and blue eyes that make my butterflies dance. He's saying all the right things and sending sparks in every direction he looks, asking me to take all sorts of risks—like swimming in hot springs, jumping in mysterious pools, and giving *him* a second chance. But he still hasn't told me why he disappeared in the first place.

After a sip, or twenty, of sangria, I'll happily explore the cafés and the beaches and possibly even Jack's calves, but what I absolutely, positively will not do is fall for Jack—*again*.

**Authors Note: *She Likes Pina Coladas* is a full-length, standalone, steamy and humorous contemporary read featuring a second chance at romance.**

**[Kisses Sweet Like Wine : An Enemies to Lovers Office Romantic Comedy \(Bristol Bay Book 2\)](#)**



**She's his boss. He wants her job. But he wants her more.**

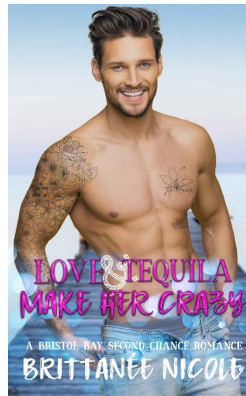
It started with a lie. An innocent, white lie. Okay, it wasn't so innocent. I'd hit rock bottom. No career, no boyfriend, and I had accidentally moved into a fifty-five and up community where my best friend was a short seventy-year-old white haired Italian grandmother with big hips and an even bigger mouth who was constantly trying to set me up with her grandson.

When I was offered a job as a private investigator working with the hottest man I'd ever seen, I may have fibbed a little and told my new boss that I've got the right experience.

Tiny problem. I don't actually know what investigators do. Googling corporate espionage and taking my seventy-year-old neighbor on stings while drunk on Limoncello probably isn't in the job description. Neither is falling for my assistant, the gorgeous Green-Eyed Luca, who is either trying to take me down or take me out. I absolutely, positively cannot date Luca but with sparks flying, how could something so wrong feel so right? And will he still want me once he discovers the truth?

**Authors Note: Kisses Sweet Like Wine is a full length, standalone, enemies to lovers, office romantic comedy in pink high heels, with a book boyfriend that will make you swoon, featuring explosive chemistry and a guaranteed happily ever after.**

**[Love and Tequila Make Her Crazy \(Bristol Bay Book 3\)](#)**



**Nate Pearson was my first *everything*.**

My first friend, first love, and first heartbreak. Now he's just my ex-husband.

It's been three years. It's time to let go of the past. When a man covered in tattoos walks into the bar where I work, with a guitar case slung over his back and a determined swagger, I think I'm finally ready to move on...until I see his guitar. I'd recognize it anywhere. It was the last gift Nate ever received from his father.

The man holding the guitar is different than the one I left behind in Nashville, but one thing remains the same, Nate Pearson will always be the love of my life.

The reasons why I asked for a divorce haven't changed. Only problem is, Nate Pearson says he still loves me, and this time he's playing for keeps.

Authors Note: Love & Tequila Make Her Crazy is a small town, brother's best friend, steamy, full-length, stand-alone, contemporary second-chance romance filled with emotion, that features both Nate and Amelia's past and present.

### [Over the Rainbow \(Bristol Bay Book 4\)](#)



I thought I learned my lesson...going undercover is not for me. But a trip to Positano with my favorite Italian grandmother wouldn't be complete without a stake-out and some prosecco. Now if I could just find my boyfriend and help the real detective locate the missing con artist, I can hopefully salvage this vacation.

Unless it's all just another elaborate scheme of Carmella's to help me get my  
happily ever after.

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