



The Reluctant Billionaire

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Description: Sunfish Island Resort seems like the perfect place for Jace Hunter to recover from a serious illness... as long as nobody figures out his family owns the island. Meeting Nessa, a psychiatrist turned bartender, Jace comes to realize that maybe the society life he's been living isn't where his future happiness lies.

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Chapter One

The warm wind blowing in Jace Hunter's face tasted of salt. Licking it off his lips, he closed his eyes and tilted his face up to soak in the sunlight beaming down on him. The heat felt good on his skin; he almost felt as though he was able to directly absorb the energy, like a plant. A small smile crossed his face at the whimsical thought.

"We're pulling in to the dock now," a voice announced through a speaker right above his head. Startled, his eyes snapped open and he glared at the offending machine. Not that it stopped the voice from continuing, "Welcome to Sunfish Island, folks!"

There were about a dozen other guests on the boat. Jace let them all depart first before pushing himself to his feet and shouldering his duffel bag. A deckhand was unloading suitcases onto the dock; Jace snagged his in passing and handed the young man a ten-dollar bill.

"Thanks, sir." The deckhand looked surprised to be given a tip. "American, are you?"

Jace shook his head. "No, but I've been living there for a while. Got in the habit of tipping. You've earned it, those cases look heavy." He nodded to the stack with his chin. "Have yourself a cold beer on me."

At the end of the dock, the guests were being greeted by resort staff, then directed to the main reception to check in and get their rooms assigned. A tall man looked in Jace's direction, started toward him, paused, and looked him up and down with a puzzled frown.

“Luke?” Jace offered a smile.

“It is you!” Puzzlement gave way to a wide grin. “I didn’t recognize you!” Luke Collyer was Sunfish Island’s general manager, an extremely competent, likable man. Jace had been involved in hiring him two years ago and the two men had taken to each other at once.

Jace shrugged wearily, shaking Luke’s offered hand. “It’s been a rough few weeks.” That was an understatement. He’d been laid low by a nasty bout of the flu, but had tried to work through it, refusing to accept his own physical weakness. It wasn’t until he’d collapsed in the middle of an important meeting, waking up in the hospital on oxygen, that he’d accepted he might not be at peak fitness.

The doctors had diagnosed pneumonia, kept him in hospital for a solid week, and finally let him go with a stern admonition to take a break. He’d fully intended to ignore them and go right back to work... except when Jace had walked in the door of his office on the top floor of Hunter Enterprises’ New York skyscraper, his father had been sitting behind his desk.

John Hunter had built Hunter Enterprises from nothing to a multi-billion-dollar, diversified business empire. His devoted wife Maryann had been at his side the whole way, until her death from cancer five years earlier. Jace was their only son, the heir to everything. Living up to his father’s expectations was something he’d spent his whole life doing, and John Hunter was a workaholic.

So it had come as quite a shock when John had stood up and said, “Get your ass out of this office, and don’t you dare set foot in here again until you have your health back!”

Jace had laughed, but his father was deadly serious. “Your mother ignored her symptoms for too long. I won’t see you sacrifice your health to this business, Jace.

Get out of here. Go and smell the roses for a while.”

His father had bulldozed over every argument Jace had tried to make, and truth to tell, Jace hadn't really tried all that hard. The Hunter Enterprises private jet had been on standby to take him anywhere he'd wanted to go. He hadn't been able to think of anywhere until his father had suggested the family's private villa on Sunfish Island, the resort island on Australia's Great Barrier Reef, which Hunter Enterprises had bought out and redeveloped a few years earlier. Jace had actually designed the villa as his graduation project for his architecture degree, but he'd never had the time to go and see the completed work.

“Your father said you'd been ill, but you look terrible,” Luke said, jerking Jace from his reverie.

“Thanks,” Jace said wryly, but he knew it was true. He'd lost a lot of weight during his illness. The tailored suits he customarily wore hung loosely on his frame; he'd left them behind in New York and brought shorts and T-shirts for his vacation. The dark blond hair he normally kept neatly trimmed had grown out long and shaggy, and he had several days' growth of beard on his face. He was unrecognizable from the high-powered businessman he'd been just a few weeks ago.

Which gave him an idea.

“Luke,” he asked as they came to a parked golf cart and Luke hefted his case into the back, “who knows I'm here?”

Luke shot him a knowing look. “Only me. Your father called and asked me to have the villa opened up for you, but my staff don't know who's expected. You want me to keep it quiet?”

“I think it might be best. I don't particularly want the press getting wind that I'm

here, Hunter Enterprises is privately owned so it's not like there's a stock price to crash, but still..."

"Jace, you don't need to give me a reason. It's all good." Luke handed him a plastic card. "Here."

"What's this?"

"It's a comp card. It means you don't pay for anything, anywhere, at any of the bars and restaurants. You own the place, after all." Luke's grin was cheerful. "It'd be a bit dumb to ask you to pay for anything. This way, you don't have to sign for anything; we're a cashless economy here, you'll recall?"

"Like a cruise ship." Jace nodded. "So, if I use this card, there's no need to use the villa's account, and no need to put my name on anything."

"And nobody to be alerted to your identity." Luke steered the golf cart along a paved path winding among groves of palm trees. "Housekeeping opened the villa up and stocked your kitchen, but I'll advise them that a family friend is using the place. If you want maid service, just let me know and I'll have somebody come in when you're out. Just one question, if I may?"

The sea glinted blue on their left as they ascended a slope, moving away from the main resort; Jace knew they were approaching the non-resort part of the island, where some two dozen exclusive private villas had been built. A couple of them were occupied by permanent residents, but the rest were holiday homes for the mega-rich. He wasn't likely to be afflicted with nosy neighbors.

"What's the question?" he asked, gazing at the glorious view of the sunlit Coral Sea opening up before them as they reached the top of the rise.

“How long are you staying? And do you need medical support while you’re here?”

“That’s two... but I’ll answer. I shouldn’t need any medical attention, no, and I expect to stay a couple of weeks, probably. Dad told me not to show my face at any Hunter Enterprises office again before two weeks is up.”

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“That doesn’t includemyoffice,” Luke said with a grin. “Stop by anytime you want a chat, but I’ll have no compunctions about telling you to butt out of resort business.”

“Deal.” Jace smiled back at Luke as the golf cart drew to a halt, thinking it would be nice to have a friend here he could talk to. Nice to have a friend to talk to at all, if he was being completely honest with himself. The cutthroat world of big business wasn’t exactly conducive to close personal friendships.

Laying on the couch binge-watching Netflix was something he could only do for so long without going a little stir-crazy, Jace discovered after a couple of days. The scorching tropical sun made it unwise to spend too much time outside, though his winter-pale skin was already starting to develop a little golden color.

He’d developed a routine: he swam in the villa’s private pool every morning, lay in the sun for a little while to dry off, then went inside and made breakfast. The villa’s kitchen was as well-stocked as Luke had promised; he had no need to go anywhere.

Bored after the first half-day, he’d tried to log onto his email and do some work... only to find a single message from his father, advising him the IT wizards had locked him out of all company business until further notice. He was restricted to entertaining himself with the villa’s well-stocked supply of books or laying on the couch catching up onHouse Of Cards.

Switching the TV off, Jace got up to pace the room restlessly. His energy levels were starting to return, and the unaccustomed inactivity was beginning to chafe. He should

have put a gym in the villa, he thought grumpily. Not that he was in any fit state for his usual five-mile run on the treadmill.

Well, if he couldn't run, he could at least get outside for some fresh air. He'd go for a walk, and if he found he had the energy, he might go all the way to the main resort building and catch up with Luke.

Decision made, it was only a few minutes before he was outside, hat on his head to shield him from the sun and running shoes on his feet. Someone had left a map of the island on the hall table, with the walking trails clearly marked. He grabbed it on the way out and checked the best route to take. Across the middle of the island into the southern end of the resort, he decided. The map's key indicated it should take about twenty minutes to hike the trail.

Ten minutes later, as he finally reached the top of the trail, he had to stop and lean against a tree for a while to rest. Should have brought water, he reproached himself. Stupid thing to forget. He should have known better, but it had been several years since he'd been on a hike and he'd been too eager to get out of the house.

Jace examined the resort below him. There was a cluster of private cabins at this end and a pool with a bar, one of several restaurants, a little further away. He could get a drink at the pool bar; he'd at least had enough sense to shove the comp card Luke had given him into his pocket. Wiping sweat from his brow with the hem of his shirt and cursing his physical weakness under his breath for the umpteenth time, he started down the slope.

"One dirty martini." Nessa set the drink down in front of her customer, swiped the card through her reader, and offered it for his signature. Over his shoulder, she spied a man emerging from the rarely-used trailhead beyond the pool; he looked hot and sweaty. Shaking her head, she turned to rinse out her cocktail shaker. That guy was sure gonna need a drink.

Turning back just as he sat down on a bar stool, she slid a coaster in front of him and said, “Good afternoon. What can I get you?”

Light blue eyes blinked at her, and the man said, “You’re English!”

“I’m from England. I’m an Australian citizen,” she gave her usual response. “Been here nearly ten years now.”

“I guess the accent never really goes away.”

She smiled tightly, knowing her accent gave her away as being from one of the seedier parts of East London. “Indeed.” Slapping a cocktail menu down before him with perhaps a little more force than actually necessary, she turned away to serve another customer who’d just swum up to the pool side of the bar.

When she returned, the man asked for something long and cooling. Tempted to pour him some iced water, she asked instead, “Virgin?”

Jace blinked in surprise. “It’s been a while, but no, I’m not.”

The bartender threw her head back and laughed. She was pretty, Jace had noticed that right off: her skin a rich dark bronze with black hair falling to her waist in a mass of tiny braids. When she laughed, she was really beautiful, dimples appearing in her cheeks, light amber-brown eyes flashing with mirth.

“I was asking if you want a hard or a soft drink. Alcoholic, or not,” she said through girlish giggles.

“Oh.” Abashed, he felt color coming to his face. “Sorry. Brain fog. I think I’m a bit overheated.”

A tall glass of iced water was set in front of him. “Why don’t you start with that, and then you can decide if you’d like something a bit stronger?” The dimples flashed again as she gave him a warm smile.

“Thank you... Nessa,” he read the name tag on her blouse. “Short for Vanessa?”

“No.”

“How interesting, your dimples disappear when your smile isn’t genuine. Is it something embarrassing, then?”

Nessa’s jaw dropped. “Are you always this direct?”

“I like to cut through the bullshit. Jace.” He offered a hand across the bar. “Not short for anything. My mother just liked the name.” Only after he’d already said it, did he think maybe he should have used a different first name. Jace wasn’t exactly common, after all.

Nessa hesitated a minute, and then she took his hand, leaned forward, and whispered close to his ear, “Tennessee.”

He grinned. “Nessa’s better. Suits you. The other, I think I’d expect you to have a Southern drawl.”

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By now, Jace was the only one sitting at the bar. Nessa turned away from him, plucking a couple of bottles off the shelf. “No Southern drawl. I make a mean Georgia Peach, though.”

She deftly poured peach schnapps, vodka, grenadine, and cranberry juice into a shaker with crushed ice, shook it up swiftly, and poured it into a tall glass, topping it off with lemonade and a maraschino cherry speared on a tiny plastic sword. “Give that a try.”

His water glass was empty, Jace realized as she swept it from in front of him and replaced it with the cocktail. He didn’t even remember draining it.

“Thanks.” He took a sip, sighing with pleasure as the tart but sweet taste exploded over his tongue. “Ohhh. Oh, that’s perfection.”

Nessa smiled, turning to rinse her shaker out. “You’re welcome. Got your card there?”

“Sure.” He fished it out of his pocket, sliding it across the bar as she returned with a card reader.

Nessa swiped the card without looking at it, blinking as the reader immediately gave her a green light. “What--oh, this is a comp card.” She handed it back with a curious look. “Are you staying at the main resort?”

“No, in one of the villas. It belongs to a friend.” Jace took another long drink. “This really is exactly what I wanted. How did you know?”

“I’m psychic. Every good bartender is, don’t ya know.” Nessa flashed him a grin.

“I’ve heard that before. Half the ones I met in New York seemed to be studying psychiatry or psychology; they were pretty good mind-readers.”

Nessa’s smile was rather wry. “Psychiatry. Got my doctorate three years ago.”

“Really?” He blinked at her. “Uh...”

“You’re wondering why I’m still tending bar rather than earning a fortune in practice somewhere, right? I don’t need to be a mind-reader to figure that one out. Almost everyone who knows I’ve got my doctorate has asked me the question at some point.”

“Well, yeah.” She was as sharp as she was beautiful, Jace found himself thinking, propping his elbows on the bar and listening in fascination as she spoke.

“I practiced for a year and realized I’d made a huge mistake.” Nessa shrugged, leaning back against one of the low refrigerators behind her, arms folded over her chest. “Being responsible for other people’s mental health is a massive burden, and one I was never really ready to take on.”

“You lost a patient?” Jace guessed astutely.

“I lost a whole bunch of them. I was the junior staff psychiatrist at Wacol detention center in Brisbane. There was a prison riot.” Nessa’s eyes went dark and distant. “Four dead, all patients I’d seen in the previous month. Five more transferred to maximum security jails elsewhere.”

“I’m sorry,” Jace said quietly, knowing the sentiment was inadequate. Knowing she’d always blame herself, wonder if she could have seen it coming, could have done something to prevent it. “That must have been very difficult.”

“As far as I was concerned, it was career-ending.” Nessa picked up a clean glass and a cloth, and started polishing it unnecessarily. “I could have gone back, but I didn’t want to. I tended bar throughout my degree and honestly I loved it. I went back to it permanently and decided to make it my career for good. Luke headhunted me for the resort about a year ago, and I never want to leave.” She set the glass back into the rack of clean ones with a small smile. “So now I just dispense gentle advice and excellent drinks to people who are usually trying to relax anyway.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Jace lifted his near-empty glass to her, thinking as he did so he almost envied Nessa her confidence, her surety she was now on the right path, even if it might not be the one she’d directed so much of her life to following. “Can I buy you one?” he offered on impulse.

“Thank you, but I don’t drink on duty and I’m comped as much free soda as I can drink.” Nessa shook her head at him with a smile, wondering as she did so why she’d told him so much of her story. She didn’t usually open up to people this way on first meeting. There was something about Jace, though, something in his light blue eyes which made her think he would be a difficult person to lie to. “Another one of those?” She nodded at his glass.

“Better not, I haven’t eaten for a few hours and I haven’t had alcohol in a few weeks. I’ll be all over the place.”

“Drying out?”

“I’ve been ill, actually. Pneumonia.”

Nessa nodded. She’d suspected something of the sort from the way his clothes hung a little on his frame, the gauntness of his cheeks, and the sallow tint to his skin. “Sunfish is a great place for recovery,” she said. “Warm weather, great atmosphere. You staying long?”

Jace didn't detect any nosiness in the question; just natural curiosity. "Couple weeks, probably," he replied. "Maybe I'll see you around again."

"I'll be here." She tossed him a smile. "This is my bar. Eleven 'til seven, every day."

"You don't get any days off?" That didn't seem right. He'd have to speak to Luke about that; the staff needed personal time--

"Of course I do. It varies which ones, though. Depends on when I can get someone to cover."

"I see." He played with his empty glass, picking up the cherry and eating it before some impulse made him say, "Since you finish at seven, would you maybe care to have dinner with me?"

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Nessa paused, her always-busy hands stilling on the glasses she'd been sorting. "Staff members aren't allowed to fraternize with resort guests."

"Fair enough, but I'm not technically a resort guest, am I? I'm staying in one of the villas."

She hesitated, then shook her head. "I have plans with some friends tonight."

Jace smiled, not taking offense. "Maybe another night."

"Maybe." She tipped her head noncommittally.

"It's been nice chatting with you, Nessa." He stood, stretched his arms up toward the sky with a sigh. "Oof, been too long since I did any exercise. I'm stiff just from that walk."

"Are you planning to walk back? Because it's gonna be dark soon, and we're up in the tropics here, we don't really get a twilight period. It goes from full light to pitch dark very fast."

"I've noticed that, watching the sunsets the last couple of days," Jace agreed with a nod.

"You don't want to be out on that trail in the dark. You won't be able to see your footing, might take a nasty fall..."

"You worried about me?" He gave her a cheeky smile. "Don't worry. I was planning

on walking up to the main resort to see a friend who works there. I'll see if I can get him to give me a ride back in one of the golf carts."

"That sounds like a good plan." Nessa found herself watching as Jace stretched again, the hem of his T-shirt riding up to reveal a flat, toned stomach... was that actually a six-pack? He was an attractive man, she thought a little unwillingly, even with shaggy hair and a scruffy beard. She liked her men a little more clean-cut normally, but there was definitely something about Jace. Maybe it was those hypnotic light blue eyes. "See you again sometime."

"I certainly hope so." He gave her another broad smile before turning and heading off toward the main resort.

Nessa watched him until he was out of sight, wondering if she would indeed see him again. She didn't shake herself out of her reverie until a customer sat down at the bar and coughed politely to attract her attention.

Chapter Two

Jace ambled toward the main resort, taking his time to look at the beautiful surroundings, the immaculately tended gardens. The private cabins placed discreetly away from the path looked inviting; he thought he would rather enjoy one of those, maybe more so than the large, empty villa he was rattling around in at the moment. It hadn't exactly been designed for one person.

Smiling at his own foolishness, he strolled on, his mind back on the woman he'd just met. Nessa was an intriguing, beautiful puzzle; he found himself disappointed she'd declined his dinner invitation, and not just because he was lonely for any company. She interested him far more than the women he usually met, glossy, corporate ladder-climbers in New York who seemed more interested in his position and connections than in him as a human. Nessa seemed real; her honesty about her past only made him

curious to know more.

Of course, her beauty didn't hurt either, he acknowledged to himself as he walked up the white marble steps into the main resort. Whatever genetic mixture had produced Nessa, it had gifted her with the kind of traffic-stopping looks which would probably have made her a successful catwalk model if she were about eight inches taller. Her face was imprinted in his memory: those wide, light-amber eyes, high cheekbones and delicately pointed chin, full soft lips curved into a knowing little smile.

"Shake it off," Jace told himself firmly. "She turned you down. She probably gets hit on twenty times a day, with a face like that." He'd stop by another afternoon and say hi, maybe gently repeat the offer, and if she said no again, he'd accept gracefully and shut his mouth. Pursuing a woman who didn't want to be chased was a dick move, and it wasn't like he ever lacked for feminine attention. With his looks and money...

Jace snorted, chuckling at himself. The last thing he wanted Nessa to be was the kind of woman who'd be interested in his money. How would she know he had any, besides? And as for looks... he raised his hand, ruefully running it over his scraggly beard. If he wanted to impress Nessa with those, he was going to need to clean up some.

Entering the main reception, he paused for a moment to admire the glass-domed atrium, the shimmering marble floor, and the huge tank of tropical fish opposite the reception desk. Hunter Enterprises had spent millions of dollars on Sunfish Island, and the money showed. The main building was magnificent, beautiful architecture and artistic design everywhere the eye settled.

Approaching the reception desk, he returned the friendly smile of the young man who greeted him. "I'm looking for Luke Collyer's office?"

"First floor, sir." The man pointed down the marble hall. "Just take the stairs and turn

left at the top.”

“Thank you.” Jace followed the directions and found a glass-walled office with RESORT MANAGEMENT etched on the door. Inside, a young woman was shouldering her bag and heading out.

“Oh, hello!” She blinked in surprise as she almost collided with Jace. “Can I help you?”

“I was looking for Luke, but he probably already finished for the day. Never mind, I guess.”

Blue eyes scanned his face, then the girl smiled. “You must be the friend Luke said might stop by. Jay, wasn’t it? You can go on in. Maybe you can get him to finish work at a reasonable time, for once.”

Jace didn’t bother correcting her, just thanking her as she gestured him toward the inner office. Rapping on the door, he pushed it open and leaned in, grinning.

“Hey, your boss says you’re working too hard.”

Luke looked up from the computer screen he was frowning at, a smile coming to his face. “I was about to say that I’m the boss here, but technically I guess you do outrank me.”

“I know I promised not to interfere in resort business,” Jace said, moving fully into the room, “but it’s come to my attention that my resort manager is working too hard, and you know what they say about someone who’s all work and no play.”

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“You calling me dull?” Luke pushed his chair back, rose to his feet, and grinned broadly. “I’ll show you dull. Come on. Time you sampled some of Sunfish Island’s nightlife!”

“Be gentle with me,” Jace begged laughingly as Luke slung his arm around Jace’s shoulders and steered him out of the office. “I’m an invalid!”

They ended up in the resort’s famous French restaurant. Recently awarded a Michelin star, the food was as good as anything Jace had eaten in the most expensive restaurants in New York. Luke called the sommelier over and ordered a bottle of an Australian white wine Jace hadn’t heard of, which turned out to be so good Jace immediately decided to send his father a case.

“Damn,” Jace said finally, sitting back in his seat and rubbing his stomach. “I don’t think I’ll have much trouble regaining the weight I’ve lost if I eat here regularly.”

Luke chuckled, raising his glass to toast the sentiment. “I go running on the beach every morning to make sure I don’t get tubby. The resort is extremely lucky to have Suzannah Monteil... I need to go through the budget and look at getting her another raise, actually, or she’s gonna get poached from under our noses.”

“I’ll authorize it,” Jace said immediately. “Pay her whatever you think fit. Word is going to get out pretty quickly and people will come to the resort just for the opportunity to eat here.” He looked around the restaurant. He could only see one vacant table, a waitress already clearing and re-setting it to make it ready for occupation again. “It’s already busy, but we could be completely booked out every night. A waiting list. Folks flying in by helicopter just to dine here.”

“You sound like our marketing manager,” Luke said with a grin. “I’ve already heard all this from her. I think she’s got every major restaurant critic in the southern hemisphere lined up to visit us over the next month. That Michelin star has really put us on the map.”

“Which is why you need to keep the chef no matter what.” Jace nodded, his quick mind turning over the issue. “Is there any other incentive you want to offer her? Anything else she’d like?”

“I haven’t really had the chance to sit down and talk with her about it.” Luke shrugged. “Maybe you can meet with her yourself.”

“I’ll think about it, toward the end of my stay. I’d rather not talk to anyone in my official persona before that. Keep it quiet that I’m here, please.”

Luke nodded. “Sure.”

“You have my complete support in offering her whatever the hell she wants to get her to agree to stay, though,” Jace offered. “Up to and including moving into the family villa once I’ve gone, if she’d care for more luxurious living quarters.”

That made Luke laugh. “I’ll keep that card up my sleeve just in case. I very much doubt she’d accept, though. Suzannah is... well, she’s not the sort to be tempted by money or luxuries. Honestly, she’ll probably demand the authority to order loads more exotic ingredients for the restaurant.”

“Fine by me,” Jace said, “she’ll probably earn us another Michelin star with them, so authorize away.” He toasted Luke with the last of the wine before draining it. “Hey, do I need to run the comp card?”

Luke waved him away. “It’s all taken care of, don’t worry. You had enough? Want a

coffee?”

“Honestly, I’m fighting to keep my eyelids open,” Jace confessed. “The rest of that nightlife you promised me might have to wait for another day.”

“It’s all good, mate.” Luke gave him a warm smile. “You look pretty done in. Let me run you back home, eh? Get some rest. I don’t want to be the cause of a relapse; your father would kill me!”

Jace found his head nodding as Luke drove the golf cart back to the villa. “Is it okay if I wander over again tomorrow?” he asked drowsily. “I could stop by and see Nessa again.”

“Oh, you met Nessa?” Luke glanced at him as he pulled the cart to a stop. “She’s something, isn’t she? A real asset for the resort. I ran across her slinging drinks in a bar near the football ground in Brisbane; I’d never seen anyone make cocktails so fast.”

The mental image made Jace smile as he got out of the cart and thanked Luke for the ride and his company at dinner. Luke sped off with a cheerful wave and Jace let himself into the villa, collapsing to lie on the couch. He fell asleep right there, worn out from the unaccustomed exercise, delicious food, and the alcohol he’d consumed.

Jace woke with a dry mouth, a sore head, and a desperate need to visit the bathroom. Attending to the last need first, he found some painkillers in his toiletries bag and washed them down with a large glass of water. A couple of slices of toast and three more glasses of water later, he started to feel a little more human. No more drinking with Luke, he concluded. The aftermath was no fun.

Refilling his glass again, he took it outside and sat by the villa's pool, dangling his feet in the sparkling blue water and gazing out over the pool's infinity edge at the ocean.

"I could live here," he said aloud, startling himself with the revelation. For years, his view had been the New York City skyline from his penthouse apartment; before that it was Sydney. Both cities with spectacular views available to anyone who cared to look. Still, this place had that one thing both places would never have: tranquility.

It was something Jace had never realized was missing from his life, until yesterday. The knowledge the phone wasn't going to ring, that nobody would bother him unless he actively went out and sought company, was eye-opening. For the first time he could remember, there were literally no demands on his time at all.

He'd thought the forced inactivity and solitude would drive him crazy with boredom. Instead, he seemed to have unlocked something which had been stagnant for too long: his creativity. Ideas for designs were beginning to surface in his head, as they hadn't since he gave up his dreams of being a full-time architect and joined Hunter Enterprises at his father's behest.

Nessa's story popped back into his head: the way she'd told him so emphatically she never wanted to leave Sunfish, despite her qualifications for a much more high-powered job. She'd consciously chosen a simpler life and found contentment. Perhaps it was her words which caused his introspection now, making him reconsider his own life choices. Kicking his feet absently in the water and watching the ripples spread out from the movement, Jace sighed. He couldn't walk away from his responsibilities, tempting though the idea seemed. His father had been grooming him for years to take over Hunter Enterprises, and Jace had excelled in every role he'd been given.

Capability did not equal enjoyment, however, and Jace hadn't enjoyed the work in a

while. For the first time, he began to consider alternatives. Maybe he could speak to his father about other options, about looking at someone else being Chief Executive when his father decided to step down, because the idea of being responsible for the whole shebang seemed completely unpalatable.

The sun felt hot on his back, and he didn't have sunscreen on. Pushing himself up, Jace dried his legs off and headed back inside. Maybe he'd check in with his father. Just say hi. A quick calculation told him it was early evening in New York, a pretty good time to call. John would probably still be at the office.

Jace had to convince his own assistant to put him through. Nancy was a dragon, but a wonderful one; she managed every aspect of his life and mothered him unmercifully when he let her get away with it. She flatly refused to put him through to his father until he promised he wouldn't talk business, that it was just a social call.

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“How’s the sun, sea, and sand?” John Hunter boomed down the phone, making Jace grin. His father was always a larger-than-life character.

“I haven’t actually been in the sea yet.”

“Why not? It’s not jellyfish season, is it?”

“No.” Jace chuckled. “I just haven’t got around to it, honestly. The villa’s got almost everything I need, I haven’t wanted to leave. I went over to the resort yesterday, had dinner with Luke. Don’t worry, though, he told me straight up he’d kick me out if I even tried to talk business.”

“I know.”

“Of course you do,” Jace realized. “You’ve been checking up on me.”

“Actually, I called Luke to congratulate him on the restaurant getting a Michelin star. He told me he saw you yesterday, and that you seemed well but still kinda tired.” John’s voice softened, gentled. “And if I was checking up on you, Jace, it’d only be because I’m worried about you. You gave me a damn scare.”

“I know. I’m sorry, Dad.”

“I never wanted you to run yourself into the ground, son. You don’t have to prove anything to me. I’m already proud of you.”

A lump welled in Jace’s throat; he took a moment to clear it before he simply said,

“Thanks.”

“Everything is fine here without you. Frankly, I think Nancy could run the place perfectly well without either of us.”

Jace grinned at that. “I don’t doubt it. Hey,” he said as something occurred to him, “you should take a break here too, Dad. How long is it since you’ve been on vacation?”

“Flew up for Hamilton Race Week last year,” John answered promptly. “Might come up this year too. It’s only a few weeks away now, I’ve got several friends with yachts in the races. Maybe you’ll still be there?”

“I hope not. I’ll go stir-crazy by then with nothing to do!”

John laughed richly. “Go find some pretty girls to flirt with or something.”

Unbidden, Jace’s mind flew to Nessa. “Maybe,” he said unguardedly, then changed the subject before his father could ask any awkward questions.

Hanging up the phone at last, Jace found he felt almost light, as though a weight had been taken off his shoulders. The news Hunter Enterprises was ticking along just fine without him should have been a cause for concern, a worry he was replaceable. Instead, the knowledge was strangely reassuring. Was it a sign, he wondered? A sign maybe his future really didn’t lie in the company’s executive offices?

Well, he didn’t have to make the decision today, or tomorrow, or even next week. He had plenty of time to consider it, and where better than here, in this island paradise, with nothing else to distract the mind? Dropping the phone on the coffee table, he lay back on the couch, putting his feet up, and gazed up at the ceiling. The sunlight reflecting off the pool outside made little ripples of dappled rainbow light on the

white paint. Gazing at them, Jace's eyes slowly drifted closed until he was sound asleep.

Chapter Three

Nessa hadn't expected to see Jace back at her bar, and certainly not so soon, but she was serving lunchtime drinks when he came ambling down off the hiking trail again. He looked a lot better today and better equipped as well, with a small pack slung over his shoulder. She guessed he had a water bottle in it. Too busy to do more than give him a quick nod in greeting as he slid onto a barstool, she took a few minutes to clear the order the waiter had just handed her for a dozen complicated cocktails.

"Hey," she slid a coaster in front of Jace and smiled. "You look better today. Got some color in your cheeks."

He smiled back. "I totally had a grandpa nap after breakfast. It was fantastic."

That made Nessa laugh. "Good for you. What can I get you?"

"Haven't had lunch yet, so I'd better keep it virgin." He cocked his head at her. "Something long and cold. I brought water with me today, but it's still pretty hot walking."

She nodded and reached for a tall glass, shoveling ice into it before mixing orange, mango, and pineapple juices and topping it off with club soda.

"Looks great," Jace said enthusiastically as Nessa placed the glass in front of him with a flourish. He took a long drink, eyes closing with pleasure. "Ohhh. Beautiful."

"You're welcome." She set one of the food menus down beside his glass. "If you want to order lunch, I can put your order through here and the kitchen will send it out

shortly.”

“Oh, you do bar food here?” He picked up the menu and looked through it with interest, seeing a wide variety of dishes, from pizza and sandwiches to Asian dishes and Spanish tapas.

“One of the resort’s restaurants is right over there,” she gestured to a large hedge to one side of the pool. “The kitchen’s just behind the bar. You can go in there for lunch, if you’d prefer.”

“No, I think I’d like to eat here,” Jace said thoughtfully. “Turkey and cheese focaccia with cranberry sauce sounds good, please.”

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Nessa put the order through, poured two more drinks as her waiter returned, and then found herself leaning with her elbows on the bar. “Have you been here on Sunfish long?”

“A few days, but I didn’t really venture out until yesterday.” He smiled at her. “I’m planning to remedy that, though, and do some exploring. This place really is like paradise.”

Nessa smiled as she looked around, at the laughing patrons in the shimmering pool, the beautifully landscaped tropical gardens. “It really is. I get a bit blasé about it sometimes, but then someone like you comes along and makes me look at it through fresh eyes.”

Jace nodded, taking another sip of his drink.

“Do you snorkel, or dive?” Nessa asked then. “If so, you should, while you’re here. We’re right in the middle of the World Heritage part of the Barrier Reef; there’s no better diving anywhere in the world.”

“I haven’t for a long time, but I’d love to.” He hesitated, remembering her quick refusal of his invitation the previous afternoon. “Do you get much chance to?”

“I haven’t been in ages.” She looked a bit wistful. “I really should. It’s still fairly quiet this time of year, I could get a spot on one of the trips easily enough. In the high season, we’re supposed to leave them for paying customers, obviously.”

“Obviously,” Jace agreed, nodding. It was a sensible policy. He fiddled with the

straw in his drink for a moment. Go on, bite the bullet. The worst she can say is no. “I was thinking of maybe going up to the main resort and booking onto one of the trips. If you’ve got a day off coming up, maybe you’d like to come with me?”

He hadn’t felt so shy asking a girl out in years. Nessa’s light amber eyes were serious as she gazed at him, and then her dimpled smile broke out, wide and startlingly white in her brown face.

“I’d really like that. I’ve got the day off tomorrow, actually, if there are any spots available on one of the tours.”

Jace had to suppress an inappropriate urge to punch the sky and whoop with victory. Play it cool. “Any preferences, snorkel or dive?”

“Snorkel. I’ve never been much of a diver, I admit. I get a bit claustrophobic.”

He nodded, perfectly happy with that. “Sounds good. I’ll walk over after lunch and check out what’s available.”

Nessa smiled and turned away to serve another customer. She couldn’t keep her lips from quirking upward, she found; the thought of going snorkeling with Jace had a squirmy, excited feeling building in the pit of her stomach. It’s a date, she thought, giving him a quick sideways glance under her lashes. His sandwich had just been delivered and he was thanking the waitress who’d brought it with a charming smile. The girl looked a bit dazed as she turned away; she caught Nessa’s eye and grinned, miming fanning herself with a backward glance at Jace.

He’s sexy enough to raise any girl’s internal temperature, Nessa thought. Add his physical attractiveness, charm, and money—at least, she assumed he was reasonably well off. Enough to move in the rarefied circles where a friend owned a private villa on Sunfish Island, at any rate. Although she supposed it could be a friend with rich

parents; there weren't many folks Jace's age who had that kind of money.

Everything about Jace added up to the kind of man women threw themselves at. And he'd chosen to ask her out, not once but twice, making a second attempt when she'd turned him down the first time. It was flattering as hell, Nessa acknowledged, glancing at him again, taking in his clean-cut, preppy good looks. He'd shaved since yesterday, removing the scraggly beard, and though he could still use a haircut, he looked even more handsome than she'd originally thought.

She was still busy serving customers when he finished eating and headed off, though he did catch her eye to give her a little wave. Her heart sank unaccountably, but leapt right back up again twenty minutes later when he ambled back to the bar, waving a slip of paper.

"We're booked on the all-day snorkel tour going out at eight-thirty," Jace said cheerfully as Nessa gave him one of her blinding smiles.

"Sounds terrific. I'll meet you at the dock?"

"Sure. They said the boat is equipped with everything we need, so all you need to bring is your beautiful self and your swim gear."

"You'd better wear a T-shirt." She pointed at him. "And we'll slather you in sunscreen, or that pasty skin of yours is gonna go lobster-red."

"Gotcha," Jace agreed. "Well, I'd better head on back. See you in the morning, then!"

"See you," Nessa said, and told herself not to be silly. It was ridiculous to be disappointed he hadn't repeated his dinner invitation. She'd be spending the whole day with him tomorrow. That'd be plenty of time to get to know him better.

Nessa woke early the following morning. Butterflies churned in her stomach. She told herself sternly not to be ridiculous; she was hardly a teenager on her first date with a boy she liked! Still, she couldn't quite tamp down the welling bubble of excitement as she headed to the staff cafeteria to get breakfast.

"Hey!" Her friend Olivia slid into the seat opposite her. "You're up and about early. Don't usually see you in here at this hour."

"I'm going out on a snorkeling trip today," Nessa explained. "Figured I should get in a good breakfast first; I'll need the energy."

Olivia shuddered dramatically. "You don't get seasick? I never dare eat if I'm going out on one of the boats, in case I wind up feeding the fish!"

"...Thanks for that image." Nessa looked down at the stack of waffles she'd selected, having second thoughts.

"Whoops, never mind me!" Olivia laughed, a blush staining her cheeks. "Shouldn't have mentioned it. You just have a good day!" Nessa couldn't keep the goofy grin off her face, and Olivia gave her a narrow-eyed look. "Why do I have the feeling this isn't just a fun day off for you? Wait. You met someone!"

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“What are you, a mind-reader?” Nessa dug back into her waffles. “Yes, I met someone,” she mumbled when Olivia prodded her.

“A resort guest?” Olivia’s eyes widened.

“No! Come on, you know me better than that. He’s staying at one of the private villas. It belongs to a friend of his.”

“Oh, okay.” Olivia nodded. “Is he cute?” Her grin widened cheekily.

“Well, I think so.” Nessa grinned back. “But paws off. You’re taken.” She pointed her fork at Olivia sternly.

“Oh, don’t worry, I’m more than satisfied with my catch.” Olivia looked like a cat licking cream off her whiskers.

“And where is Cory this morning?” she asked, referring to the resort’s activities manager.

“Oh, he’s taking the snorkeling trip out. He already ate and went down to help prep the boat. So don’t tell me, if you don’t want to, but be warned I’ll get all the juicy details out of Cory later. Can’t escape the gossip network, darling.”

Nessa wrinkled her nose with disgust and sighed. “Well, it’s a first date. So there won’t be much to tell.”

“Apart from the fact that your date will no doubt be eating you up with his eyes. Are

you wearing your red bikini? You'll knock his socks off."

She already had it on underneath her light sundress. Living on a tropical island, she owned half a dozen bikinis, but she never considered wearing any of the others when she opened the drawer this morning. The red bikini was a halter-neck, framing and lifting her breasts, the fiery color a great contrast to her dark skin. Ties at the sides of the brief bikini bottoms were a wicked temptation, luring a man's attention to her hips, making him think about tugging on the ties to pull them free.

Nessa wanted that kind of attention from Jace. She'd done a fair bit of soul-searching after impulsively agreeing to go on the snorkeling date with him. She wasn't an impulsive person by nature, but in the end she'd had to conclude her subconscious had already decided. Jace was an attractive man. He wasn't the only one to show interest in her recently, but he was the only one in a long time who'd provoked a matching response from her. She'd spend the day with him and see how things panned out, but at the moment she provisionally intended on taking him back to her place that evening. Or going back to the villa where he was staying, if he invited her. She'd never been in any of the fancy private villas and found herself curious about what they'd be like.

"Earth to Nessa!"

She blinked, startled back to herself. She'd drifted off into a daydream thinking about Jace. About letting him pull the ties on her bikini. He had nice hands, she'd noticed when he was at the bar, with long, capable fingers. She'd had more than a few thoughts about those fingers caressing her skin, finding her most sensitive spots.

"Sorry, I was somewhere else."

"I could see that." Olivia smirked over the rim of her coffee cup. "You'd better get moving, sugar, or you're literally gonna miss that boat."

“Argh!” A quick glance at her watch and Nessa abandoned the remnants of her breakfast, scrabbling under her chair for the beach bag she’d brought with her.

“Have fun!” Olivia called after her as she hurried for the exit. Nessa waved hastily and set off for the boat dock at a fast trot.

Chapter Four

She wasn’t coming. It was eight twenty-eight, and the boathand was preparing to cast off the lines. Jace bit down on his lip, wondering if he could ask them to wait five more minutes.

“We’re one short,” the tall blond man in resort-uniform polo shirt and shorts said, looking at the clipboard in his hand. “You’re Jace Weller, right?”

He’d given his mother’s maiden name as his surname when booking, not wanting anyone to clue in to his real identity. “That’s right.”

“And you booked for two?”

“Yeah, my friend should be here any minute--” He spied a figure hurrying along the path toward the dock. “Here she is now!”

“Hold off on that line, Ben.” The man took a half a step back. “Whoa, Nessa?”

“Hey, Cory,” Nessa grinned at him as she hurried up to the boat. “Hi, Jace.” To his pleased surprise, she went up on tiptoes and brushed a kiss on his cheek.

“I... see.” Cory blinked, looking from one to the other of them. “Okay, well, I guess that makes everyone, then.” He made a final tick on his clipboard. “Take your seats, everyone.”

There were several other guests on board and only a couple of seats vacant. Nessa sat down and Jace joined her; she dropped a bag at their feet and gave him a bright smile.

“You look beautiful,” Jace said impulsively. She was wearing a light cotton sundress in a turquoise blue which looked utterly amazing against her deep brown skin. Her long black braids were hanging loose to her waist, brushing against his arm; he suppressed an inappropriate urge to take one in his fingers and play with it.

“Thank you!” Nessa held his gaze, her smile widening even further. “You’re looking pretty good yourself. Like the threads.” She flicked lightly at the lapel of the loud Hawaiian shirt he was wearing.

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“It’s not mine,” Jace confessed, “I think it belongs to... the owner of the villa. I found it in the closet.” He’d almost said my father then, but bit the words back just in time. He’d told Nessa the villa belonged to a friend. An uncomfortable feeling curled in the pit of his stomach; he didn’t like misleading her. But then, he rationalized, he wanted her to get to know him without knowing who he was, about his wealth, his family name. It was very possible nothing would come of this, that they would go their separate ways in a few days and she would never even need to know.

Still, as he looked into her smiling, carefree face, Jace had the sinking feeling things weren’t going to be quite so simple.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder, making him jump. The boat had started moving, and he twisted around to find Cory had slipped into the seat behind them and was giving him the evil eye.

“Knock it off with the big brother act, Cory,” Nessa said, shoving Cory’s hand off Jace’s shoulder. “I’m a big girl, y’know.”

“Just making sure he knows there are folks looking out for you,” Cory said, his tone perfectly amiable even if his eyes weren’t.

“I had no doubt of it,” Jace said with a friendly smile in return. “I’m sure Nessa’s the kind of person who inspires intense loyalty in her friends.”

Cory nodded, apparently satisfied with his answer. “Good. Well, in that case, have a good day!” He slid out of the seat again and strode up to the front of the boat, easily maintaining his footing against the sway, plucking up a microphone from the side of

the pilot's chair. "G'day folks! Let me tell you about the awesome day we've got in store for you..."

Jace and Nessa both listened with interest as Cory talked, telling the group the itinerary for the day, including snorkeling at three different sites and lunch on the world-famous Whitehaven Beach.

"With any luck we'll see some humpback whales too, since they're passing through the area at the moment on their annual migration," Cory concluded, "so keep your eyes peeled."

The other tourists started chattering excitedly as soon as Cory put the microphone down. Nessa looked at Jace, her eyes shining. "I'm really looking forward to this. Thank you so much for inviting me."

"I'm looking forward to it too. The snorkeling... and your company."

Small fingers curled over his. Startled, Jace looked down at Nessa's hand, then up at her. She was still smiling at him. He turned his hand and laced his fingers with hers, feeling like a boy with his first crush finding out the girl he liked was interested in him, too.

They held hands the whole half-hour it took to get to the first snorkeling site, a secluded cove in the lee of one of the other islands in the chain. Cory informed them the island was completely uninhabited, a wildlife sanctuary, and they weren't permitted to swim ashore.

Jace had shoved his bag under the seat when he'd boarded. He pulled it out now and stripped off his Hawaiian shirt. Catching Nessa eying his chest, he grinned at her. He was picking up some color to his skin after a few days relaxing by the villa's pool, and though he was still thinner than he'd been before his illness, it only threw his

muscles into higher relief.

“I could leave the rash vest off if you want to admire the view,” he offered, the stretchy swim shirt hanging from one hand.

Nessa laughed at him. “Put it on. I don’t want to be distracted from the sights underwater.” She rose to her feet, grasped the hem of her dress, and swept it up and over her head in one graceful movement.

Jace almost swallowed his tongue. “You think you’ll get distracted?”

Nessa grinned, walking past him to scoop up a pair of flippers and a snorkel mask from the stack Cory had spread out on the deck. “Hurry up. No time to waste!”

Jace was all fingers and thumbs trying to get his rash vest on, then grabbing a mask and flippers. Cory laughed at him as he hopped on one foot, trying to wrestle a flipper on.

“She’s right there, man. Wow, you’ve got it bad, huh?”

“Are you dead? Did you see her in that bikini?”

“Not dead, just very happily taken.” Cory grinned at him before reverting to business mode. “Remember, don’t touch any of the coral. You want to climb down the ladder?”

Jace shook his head. “I’m good. I’m a strong swimmer.” Checking nobody was directly beneath him, he fitted his mask and snorkel before diving smoothly off the back of the boat.

Nessa wasn’t far away, floating face-down on the surface of the water in a deadman’s

float position, obviously looking at something beneath the surface. Jace swam up beside her, swishing his flippers gently, peering into the clear blue water to see what she was looking at.

Nessa turned her head slightly to look at him without taking her face out of the water, reaching to touch his wrist lightly before pointing.

It took Jace a moment to see what she was gesturing at; she appeared to be telling him to look at a surprisingly plain patch of sand in the midst of some bright corals. Frowning, he peered closer, but then the sand shifted and he gasped, almost losing the rhythm of his breathing through the snorkel, as a stingray almost as long as he was lifted up out of the sand and sailed majestically off into the blue.

Jace looked at Nessa, eyes wide, sensing rather than seeing her amusement at his shock.

She touched his wrist again before swishing her flippers to move on.

They surfaced for a proper breath a few minutes later and Jace spat to clear his mouth of the salty water. “My God, that was incredible! Did you see the size of that stingray?”

“A spotted eagle ray, I think,” Nessa said, laughing at his excited expression. “You’ll have to meet our marine biologists sometime.”

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Jace nodded. A large part of the reason Hunter Enterprises had been allowed to redevelop Sunfish Island had been the huge marine biology research and education facility they'd agreed to build and permanently fund. One of the finest of its kind in the world, it had a team of four permanent research scientists and half a dozen assistants who came up on funded semester-long assignments from universities across Australia. Parts of the facility were open to the public; he'd been meaning to visit but hadn't had the opportunity yet. "I'd love to."

"I'll take you," Nessa said impulsively. "Laurie, one of the marine biologists, is a friend of mine. She'll take you on a behind-the-scenes tour if you're with me."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her it wasn't necessary, that Luke could arrange things, but he rethought the impulse. Nessa would want to know why Luke would be so willing to accommodate him, and that opened him up to questions he wasn't ready to answer. Besides, Nessa taking him to the facility would definitely be a second date.

"Thanks," he said, "that would be awesome."

"We could go early, before I start work. I'll catch up with her tomorrow and find out what day would suit." Nessa was bubbling with excitement, too. She pulled her snorkel down to her mouth again. "Come on. I want to see if we can spot any clown fish!"

Grinning, Jace popped his mouthpiece back in and dived after her.

The water was warm and buoyant, and in the sheltered cove there was no current to speak of. It was like swimming through a warm bath, relaxing and easy. Everywhere

Jace looked, there was something new and amazing to see: brightly colored corals, invertebrates, and fish. Nessa pointed out a starfish of such an intense blue, even underwater, Jace could hardly believe it was real. He swam on at her side, head turning every which way as he tried to take it all in.

A sharp whistle cut the air as he surfaced briefly to get a deep breath. Surprised, Jace checked his dive watch. Cory had told them they'd have fifty minutes at this stop. Startled to see their time was up, he reached out and tapped Nessa's shoulder, then his watch.

She nodded and pulled her mouthpiece out. "That went quickly!"

"Certainly did," he agreed, as they turned and began swimming back to the boat. They weren't too far away; they'd been careful to reorient themselves on the boat each time they surfaced, swimming tracks parallel to their previous courses.

Cory leaned down to give them both a hand up. Jace waited for Nessa to go first, completely failing to keep his eyes off her beautiful butt as she climbed back aboard the boat. But then, it would have been most ungallant of him to make her wait in the water while he got out, and it would have taken a lot more discipline than he possessed not to look.

She looked over her shoulder at him and laughed.

He shrugged unapologetically. "I'm not dead."

"Good thing, too." Cory offered his hand but Jace waved him off, climbing the ladder back into the boat easily. Sitting back down beside Nessa, he accepted the bottle of water she handed him from the large cooler in the middle of the boat's hull.

"You look a bit pale," she noted, her eyes searching his face. "Are you feeling

alright?”

“Yep.” He was grateful for the chance to sit down and rest, though, while the boat took them to their next location. Cursing the lingering weakness which still plagued his body after his illness, he cracked the top of the water and took a long drink.

“I brought snacks.” Nessa delved into the bag at her feet. “Healthy--” she held up a small bunch of ripe bananas, “--or not so healthy.” She waved a large bar of chocolate at him.

“Both?”

“Both is good. Fruit first?” Splitting a couple of bananas off the bunch, she handed one over. Jace peeled his and ate it with enjoyment, unable to keep his mind out of the gutter as he watched Nessa eat hers, her lips puckering around the fruit in an insanely erotic gesture. She knew exactly what she was doing to him, as well, her laughing eyes holding his as she ate.

Jace was glad his board shorts were loose.

Their second snorkeling location was at a platform anchored on an open-water coral reef. The water here was shallower than at the first site, so they just floated side by side, face down in the water, gazing with wonder at the natural beauties of the reef. Nessa got to see her clown fish and a couple of dozen other species besides.

“Next stop: Whitehaven Beach,” Cory said as they climbed back aboard once again. “You ever been there, Jace?”

He shook his head. “Looking forward to seeing it.”

“It’s one of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Sand so white it looks like snow.” Nessa sounded like a tourist brochure, not that he minded in the slightest. She practically glowed with happiness, her smile wide and white, her dark skin glimmering with salt water.

Tentatively, Jace slipped his arm around her waist as they sat back down, leaning over to kiss the point of her shoulder lightly.

Nessa’s breath drew in softly as she looked at him. He’d been the perfect gentleman so far, gallant and charming, though his eyes had told a different story as he’d watched her. His lips were warm against her skin, his eyes questioning as he lifted his head to look at her.

Leaning in, Nessa put her hand to Jace’s cheek and brought her lips to his. He closed his eyes, she saw in the instant before she closed her own.

The first kiss was light, little more than a gentle press of lips. Jace didn’t push, didn’t try to pull her closer, and his reticence made Nessa want more. She kissed him with greater fervor, her lips parting, tongue flicking between them to trace over the seam of his. Then, at last, he kissed her back properly. His arm tightened around her waist as his tongue danced with hers, and Nessa slid her hand into his damp blond hair, grasping the wet locks.

“Ahem,” Cory’s not-at-all-subtle cough brought them back to awareness of their surroundings.

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Probably a good thing too, Nessa realized ruefully. She'd been just about to climb astride Jace's lap and grab his hands and bring them to her breasts. Her nipples were aching inside her wet bikini top, wanting stimulation. With a reluctant sigh, she pulled back from the kiss, giving Cory a glare.

In response, he flicked his eyes at a couple of giggling teenagers on the other side of the boat.

Cory was right; they didn't need to be getting hot and heavy in public. But Jace's kiss had woken something deep inside of Nessa which she'd kept dormant for a long time. The end of the boat trip seemed very far away, and Nessa hoped she'd be able to hold out until they could finally be alone together.

"We're coming up to Whitehaven Beach now," Cory announced. "You can have a swim or whatever while we're setting up lunch; it'll be ready in about fifteen minutes. We've got an hour and a half total here, so make the most of it!"

Nessa hesitated, then asked Cory quietly, "Do you want any help getting lunch set up?"

He smiled down at her, touching her shoulder. "Nah, hon, you're all good. You're a paying guest today, courtesy of Jace here. You just have fun. I do this three or four times a week, got it down to a fine art."

She gave him a grateful smile.

"Damn, that sand really is white," Jace said in amazement, shielding his eyes from

the sun's reflected glare. "Is it coarse sand, or fine?"

"Incredibly fine, like powdered sugar," Nessa remembered from her previous visit. "It gets everywhere."

"At least we'll be swimming again afterward. And hey, if it gets in your bikini, I'll volunteer to help you get it out." Jace grinned wickedly.

She elbowed him lightly in the ribs, grinning back. "Behave, or our chaperone will be telling us off again."

They were both giggling like kids as they climbed off the back of the boat into the shallow water and walked hand-in-hand to the beach. The fine powdery sand promptly coated their wet legs, as Nessa had warned.

"This looks a nice spot," Nessa said as they reached a secluded section of the beach. "You okay to lie in the sun for a bit?"

"Sure, I'll just put some more sunscreen on."

They both spread out towels and lay down. Nessa pointed at her lower legs, laughing. "Look, my legs are nearly as white as yours!"

"Nessa!" Jace chuckled. "Never say that. Your skin is beautiful."

"Please say you're not going to call me cocoa or chocolate or anything like that?" She rolled to her front, shading her eyes with her hand to look at him.

"Come on! I'm an Aussie but I've been working in New York for five years now. I know how culturally insensitive it is to compare skin tones to food." He gave her a reproving look. "I'm not much for flowery similes as compliments, anyway. Blatant

honesty is more my thing.”

“Blatant honesty?” Nessa crinkled her eyebrows.

“You’re incredibly beautiful. Your skin glows. Your eyes sparkle. I find it very hard to look anywhere else when I’m with you.”

“...Okay, that’s pretty blatant,” Nessa said when she got her breath back. “Wow.”

Jace grinned at her. “Just making sure you know how I feel. I could go on, if you like?”

“My head might get too swollen and explode. You’re very good for my ego, though.”

He reached across the small gap between their towels, fingers curling gently around hers. “I’d like to be good for a lot of things for you, Nessa. Sneaking off into the undergrowth to make out like a pair of horny teenagers is sounding mighty appealing right about now.”

“If it wasn’t for the wildlife, which would no doubt make that into a very dangerous endeavor.” Nessa grinned back at him.

“Come on, I’m an Aussie. Snakes and spiders don’t terrify me.”

“I’m a Brit, and they do bloody well terrify me! Besides, it’s the lizards you’ve got to worry about. Cory told me he saw a five foot long goanna here a couple of weeks ago.”

“They’re not gonna attack you.” Jace chuckled at her expression of horror.

“Thanks, but I’m not prepared to risk my toes for the sake of a make out session with

you. Tempting though that may be. You'll just have to wait until later."

"Later?" His fingers squeezed a little more firmly on hers.

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Nessa smiled. “Later.”

And with that answer, Jace had to be content, as Cory’s sharp whistle called them up the beach for lunch.

Chapter Five

Nessa nudged Jace. “Wake up.”

“Huh!” His eyes snapped open. “Whoa. I was pretty sound asleep, huh?” Yawning and stretching, he rubbed at the back of his head.

“I don’t think the boat engine had even started before you were snoozing on my shoulder.” She smiled at him. “You’re still not fully recovered, huh?”

“Pneumonia really knocks the stuffing out of you,” Jace admitted, “and it’s been a pretty big day. Sorry. Didn’t mean to drop off on you.”

“It’s fine!” She squeezed his hand lightly. “I wouldn’t have woken you up, except we’re almost home.” She nodded forward, and he looked to see they were indeed slowing to move into Sunfish Island’s dock.

“So we are.” He hesitated a moment before saying, “Would you like to come back to the villa with me? I’ve got a fridge full of food, we can easily throw together something for dinner.”

“Sounds lovely,” Nessa said, enthusiasm clear in her tone.

Jace had taken the golf cart stored in the villa's small garage to get to the dock that morning. He gestured to it now as they disembarked and bid farewell to Cory. "I didn't think my legs would be up to walking back after a day spent swimming and snorkeling."

"My legs thank you for the consideration." Nessa tossed her bag into the back and settled into the plush leather passenger seat with a sigh of contentment. "And so does my butt; this is so much more comfy than those hard plastic seats on the boat!"

"Wait until you try out the showers at the villa." Jace grinned, getting in and starting the cart.

"Giant shower roses?"

"Yup, with super-high pressure. Not only that, they have adjustable jets coming at you from every direction."

Nessa moaned. "Drive faster."

"Yes, ma'am," Jace chuckled. "It's just up ahead."

"This one?" Nessa gaped as they approached and Jace pushed a button on the dash to open the garage door. "Wow, this is one of the best locations on the island!"

"Oh?" Jace said, deliberately obtuse.

"I've always loved the design of this house, too. Lucky you, to be friends with the owners," Nessa sighed enviously as they parked inside and got out of the golf cart.

"Well, at least I get to be nosy and look around inside!"

"Poke your nose anywhere you like. I have free run of the place," Jace said, with

absolute honesty.

Nessa gazed around admiringly as they entered the house proper, taking everything in: the high ceilings, the glass doors which slid all the way back to give an unobstructed view over the pool to the ocean, the imported Carrara marble tiles on the floor. Even the furniture looked architecturally designed, though still somehow temptingly comfortable. There were a few books and a laptop lying on the coffee table, but otherwise the place was very tidy and barely looked inhabited. Jace was obviously not a slob, she noted approvingly, as she glanced into the kitchen and saw no dirty dishes on the counter or in the sink.

“All the bedrooms have en suite bathrooms,” Jace said. “There’s one on this level and four upstairs.”

Nessa didn’t hesitate before saying, “Which one are you using?”

“The one on this level... too lazy to walk upstairs when I’m tired.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “You’re welcome to use any of the others.”

“Or I could share yours.” Her eyes held his.

Jace drew a deep breath. “You’re very welcome to share mine. Why don’t you go have a shower while I quickly throw something together for dinner?”

“Sounds good,” Nessa agreed, though she’d been rather hoping Jace might come shower with her. On the other hand, they were both sticky and sandy; a chance to wash up and eat first would be welcome.

“Right in here.” He opened a door and showed her into a stunning bedroom suite, sharing the same magnificent views as the main room. The king-sized bed was made up with what Nessa guessed were silk sheets, in a stunning shade of turquoise blue. A

door on the other side of the room opened into a lavishly appointed bathroom; plush towels in the same shade of turquoise hung on chrome towel racks on the wall. A third door led to a huge walk-in closet, with a few of Jace's things taking up scant space on the hangers and shelves.

“Wow,” Nessa said, mouth open. She'd never seen a bedroom suite like this, and Jace had said the house had four more of them. “I guess this is how the other half live, huh?”

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“Yeah.” This was probably the most cheaply-appointed room Jace had occupied in the last five years; it was certainly nothing compared to his New York penthouse or the spectacular family mansion in Sydney’s exclusive Point Piper. He was hardly going to mention that at the moment, though, so he took a step back. “I’ll leave you to it. Make yourself comfortable.”

She smiled at him as he backed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Blowing out his cheeks, Jace headed for the kitchen. Pumping soap and washing his hands, he wondered what the hell he was doing. He didn’t like misleading Nessa this way, pretending to be something he wasn’t. On the other hand, he had the feeling Nessa would probably take off if she had any idea he took this kind of luxury for granted, that his family owned not only this house but the entire damned island.

With a sigh, he turned to the fridge. When Nessa came out, dressed again in her turquoise sundress, she found him chopping peppers and shallots, wielding an expensive chef’s knife with flashing speed. He’d already grated cheese into a bowl and spread a couple of frozen pastry squares with tomato paste and crushed garlic.

“Pizza? Yum.” She stole a piece of cheese and popped it into her mouth. He smiled without looking up from the chopping.

“I didn’t ask if you have any allergies. And do you eat meat?”

“No and yes. Right now I think I could eat a horse.”

“Haven’t got one of those, sorry. How about some nuts?” He pushed a bowl of

cashews in her direction before heading back to the fridge and pulling out a package of pepperoni. Nessa settled herself on a stool at the breakfast bar and watched him tear up the pepperoni before sprinkling the cheese, meat, and vegetables on the pizza.

“What would you like to drink? We’re not quite as well-stocked as your bar, but there is some very nice wine.”

“Sounds good,” Nessa agreed. “Red, if you’ve got it.”

“Sure.” He pulled a bottle from a small wine cabinet set into the kitchen counter, opened it, and poured into what she was pretty sure was a Riedel crystal wine glass. Accepting the glass gingerly, frightened of breaking something which probably cost nearly as much as she made in a week, Nessa took a sip of the wine.

Her eyebrows flew up. “Please tell me you have permission to open this stuff.”

“Free rein of everything in the house.” Jace shrugged. In truth, the wine he’d opened for her was probably the least expensive one he had on hand. The wine cellar under the house had much more expensive ones stored in a climate-controlled vault.

“In that case, I shall appreciate every drop. Since it’s probably my only chance ever to drink wine this good. It’s Grange, right? What vintage?”

He put the bottle down in front of her silently, kicking himself for not having thought to pick up a cheaper bottle when he was at the resort. She was a professional bartender; of course she knew her wine. “Enjoy. I’m gonna go have a shower while the pizza cooks. It won’t be long.”

* * *

Jace was acting a little odd, Nessa thought as he left her alone. Picking up her

wineglass, she headed over to the open doors leading out to the pool. Maybe he was a little nervous? She was pretty much a sure thing, after their scorching hot kiss earlier. Surely a guy who looked like Jace didn't lack for women throwing themselves at him, especially in New York. She hadn't asked what he did, but he had to be pretty successful if he ran in the same circles as people who could afford to own a holiday house like this.

With a little sigh, she propped one shoulder against the doorframe and sipped her wine, feeling the cool afternoon breeze blowing lightly over her warm skin. She wore nothing beneath her dress, and looked forward to shocking Jace with that fact.

"Hey," Jace's voice was soft as he approached her from behind.

Nessa smiled but didn't turn around, feeling his hands curve gently around her waist as he bent his head to kiss her bare shoulder. One thin spaghetti strap had slipped down onto her upper arm, and his fingers grazed her skin lightly as he lifted it back into place.

"Hey yourself." She set her glass down on the small table just inside the door and turned to look up at him. His shaggy blond hair was still wet, dampening the collar of the crisp white dress shirt he'd put on but not buttoned. A drop of water ran down the center of his muscled chest, and she couldn't resist the impulse to lick it off.

Jace's hands came up, one to cradle the back of her head, the other under her chin to tilt her face up to him. His mouth slanted down over hers and this kiss was even better, even hotter, than the one they'd shared on the boat.

Nessa found herself pressed back against the doorframe, her arms coming up to wrap around Jace and hold him closer. One of his legs thrust between hers and she moaned into his mouth, grinding against his muscled thigh. Her nipples pebbled, pushing at his chest through the thin cotton of her dress. He brought one hand up to palm her

breast, grazing his thumb over the aching bud.

Putting her hands beneath his shirt and stroking at his back, Nessa moaned into Jace's mouth when he pinched her nipple. Lifting one leg, she hooked it around his thigh to try and pull him closer still, not that there was the slightest space in between them. He lifted his mouth from hers only to kiss down her neck, nipping and licking at her throat, his tongue tracing hotly into the delicate hollows of her collarbones.

"Jace." Her voice was a husky rasp, a plea.

He took it for a request to stop, though, and moved back reluctantly, his hands falling away.

Nessa grasped at his shirt. "Take me to bed."

He looked down at her for a moment, a muscle in his jaw bunching and releasing, before nodding. "Let me turn the oven off."

It was a good thing he'd remembered, Nessa thought as he went into the kitchen and flicked a switch before returning to her side and offering his hand, or they'd probably have burned the house down instead of just burning up the sheets. At the very least, they would have stunk the kitchen up with burned pizza. She tangled her fingers with Jace's and let him lead her back to the bedroom, then draw her over to the beautiful bed with its silken sheets.

Nessa's long braids swung around her shoulders as she reached down to grasp the hem of her dress, drawing it up and over her head in one smooth movement, revealing she wore absolutely nothing underneath.

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“Holy moly,” Jace breathed, standing back to take her in. She stood unselfconsciously, comfortable in her nudity, aware of her own feminine power. Her breasts were high and full, tipped with plump nipples which were almost black on her dark brown skin. A narrow waist flared to gloriously curvaceous hips and down to juicy thighs, which he’d been thinking about having wrapped around his neck since he first saw her in her spectacular red bikini early that morning.

“You are stunning,” he said reverently.

She smiled at him, chin lifted high and proud. “Get naked,” she ordered, and he shrugged hastily out of his shirt, fumbled at the button of his shorts, watching lustfully as she turned her back on him and slid onto the bed, sighing luxuriantly as she lay down on the silk sheets. “Ohhh, this bed is even more comfortable than it looks.”

Jace couldn’t get out of his clothes fast enough, almost tripping as he kicked off his shorts. His cock stood up stiffly, leading him toward Nessa’s lush body laid out on his bed, wanting to worship her.

She beckoned to him with a finger, smiling as he moved to the end of the bed and knelt at her feet, reaching to lightly grasp her ankles. “And what are you planning to do down there?” Nessa asked, hoping she already knew.

Jace’s smile was lopsided, his eyes hooded with lust as he looked up the length of her body. “I’m gonna eat you all up, gorgeous.” Slowly, he licked his lips before bending his head and pressing the first of many heated kisses on her leg. “So just lay back and relax.”

Somehow, she didn't think she was going to be able to relax, not with Jace's warm, skilled fingers and his hot mouth working up the inside of her legs, switching from one to the other, nibbling and licking. He started sucking a love bite onto the tender skin of her inner thigh, and the first involuntary moan escaped Nessa's lips.

"If you don't like anything I'm doing, just say so. Or shove me off," Jace lifted his head long enough to say.

"Shut up and carry on," Nessa commanded, her eyes closed.

Jace laughed and obeyed, his fingers sliding further up her thighs. She had strong, muscled legs—he guessed she was on her feet at least eight hours a day in the bar, which required a certain degree of physical fitness even if she did no other exercise. She shivered as he edged higher, goose bumps springing up on her skin; he kissed them, nuzzling at the softness of her inner thighs, tasting her skin. He smelled the salty-sweet tang of her arousal and glimpsed the moisture welling below her neatly-waxed black bush.

As Jace moved higher, Nessa lifted her knees, spreading her thighs wider, giving him tacit permission to do what he liked. His arms slid beneath her thighs, pushing them up onto his shoulders, his hands reaching to grasp her waist.

"You better hold on tight, beautiful." His voice was lower than usual, a sensual rasp which scraped along her nerves, making her shiver in his hold. "I'm about to rock your world."

Nessa's teeth sank into her lower lip. Reaching down, she wrapped her hands around his wrists, holding on as he'd ordered. Jace made a low sound of approval, right before he pressed his tongue firmly against her clit.

Slim fingers clenched on his wrists and Nessa made a hissing noise between her

teeth. Her clit was swollen, wet, under his tongue as he worked it over with slow, steady laps. He listened to her breathing quicken, feeling her thighs begin to tremble as they pressed on his shoulders. Patiently, he kept his pace slow, learning the exact pressure and movements to make her squirm and cry out, make her shudder and say his name in a low, husky voice which drove him wild. Grinding his hips against the bed in an effort to contain his own arousal, Jace kept at his self-appointed task until Nessa made a high, keening noise, her whole body tensing up, her hips lifting off the mattress to push herself harder against his face.

He sucked gently on her clit as she came, listening to her gasping breaths. He brought her down with care until she became too sensitive and let go of his wrist to push on the top of his head.

Leaning back and propping his chin on one hand, Jace grinned up at Nessa. "Feeling good?"

She made a vaguely incoherent noise and beckoned at him. "C'mere. Cuddle."

"Sure." He moved up to lie beside her, pulling her into his arms.

She sighed contentedly and reached to kiss him, not minding the taste of her own juices on his lips. Snuggling against him, she held on tightly for a little while. "You're really good at that," Nessa said finally.

"I aim to please."

She giggled at the tone he affected, planting a kiss on his collarbone. "I feel like there's something pressing I should remember, though."

"Yeah?" Jace laughed too. His cock was indeed pressing hard against her stomach, shoving urgently at her even though he wasn't moving.

She hadn't taken a good look yet, so she moved back a little to eye him up. "Mm, hello." He was long and thick, flushed with arousal, pre-cum beading at the tip. Reaching down to take him in hand, Nessa swiped her thumb over the creamy droplet, rubbed it gently into the head of his cock.

Jace made a hungry, eager little sound in his throat. Nessa looked up to meet his eyes and found them closed, his head thrown back. Blindly, he reached out to cup her breasts in his hands, tweaking her nipples, rubbing them between finger and thumb as she stroked his cock.

His attention to her breasts renewed Nessa's arousal, and she reached her free hand under the pillow to grab the condom she'd stashed there after her shower.

Jace opened his eyes as he heard the rip of the packet, smiling to see what she held. "I like a woman who thinks ahead."

She grinned, rolling the condom down over his straining arousal. "Always prepared, that's me."

"Isn't that the Boy Scouts' motto?"

"It's my motto. Call me a boy again and I won't jump your bones and make you scream my name."

Laughing, Jace rolled to his back, letting Nessa climb atop him, straddling his hips. "Trust me, beautiful, nobody could ever mistake you for a boy." His hands described an hourglass shape, tracing the air an inch away from her breasts and hips.

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“Good.” Grasping the root of his cock in her hand, she lowered herself onto him, guiding him into her wet channel. They both moaned simultaneously as they came together at last, Nessa’s hips rolling to take Jace deep inside her body.

He grasped her hips in his hands, bracing her as she set up a rhythm, lifting up slow and then pushing down hard. Jace watched with something approaching awe as Nessa rode him, her head thrown back, long braids swinging around her, breasts bouncing as her strong thigh muscles worked, her body driving him hard and fast toward orgasm. He could feel it coming, the tingle of heat spreading from the base of his spine. Wanting Nessa to come with him, to share the ecstasy, he put a hand between them to rub his finger over her slippery-wet clit.

“Oh God, yes!” Nessa stuttered briefly in her rhythm, before resuming it again. She leaned forward to kiss Jace, sloppy and desperate as the tremors raced through her body, making her breasts tingle and her thighs shake. He held her close, working over her clit, his other hand cupping and squeezing her ass. Her nipples brushed against his chest, the final stimulation to push her over the edge, and she wailed his name against his lips.

Jace roared wordlessly as Nessa tightened around him, the hot wet clamp of her pussy sucking his climax from him. His eyes closed, his body shuddering as his seed jetted hotly deep inside her clutching, willing body. Stars burst behind his eyelids with the utter bliss of the release.

They clung together for several long minutes, breathing fast, skin damp with exertion. Finally, Nessa pulled back slowly and flopped down on the mattress beside Jace, moving closer to press her cheek against his side as he held an arm out toward her.

He hugged her close, enjoying the way she fit against him.

It had been a long time since he'd felt so relaxed and comfortable. Tired from the day's exertions, he wanted to stay awake, to savor every moment of being with Nessa, but his eyelids felt incredibly heavy. Just a few minutes, he thought as they drifted closed.

Chapter Six

Nessa knew the exact moment Jace fell asleep. Already relaxed, his whole body went limp, his breathing slowing even further. Smiling, she stayed cuddled up to him for a little while, until her stomach rumbled loudly. So loudly, she feared she might wake him up.

Grinning, Nessa eased out from Jace's arm and climbed off the bed. Picking her dress up off the floor, she put it back on and headed for the kitchen to see if she could rescue the pizzas. They weren't fully cooked, so she took them out of the oven and switched it back on again before retrieving the glass of wine she'd abandoned. It was too good to waste. Sipping it as she waited for the oven to heat back up, she looked around the open-plan area with interest. The furniture was minimalist, glass and chrome, but looked expensive. The couch was white leather and a painting hanging above it looked vaguely familiar. Narrowing her eyes, Nessa stared at it for a long moment. It looked like a Georgia O'Keeffe. And she had a sneaking suspicion it was an original.

Well, the house had very clearly been built with no expense spared. The kitchen appliances were top of the line and she was pretty sure the gleaming tiles on the floor were Carrara marble. An O'Keeffe original just fit with everything else. Obviously Jace moved in some pretty exclusive circles.

Sipping her wine and walking around, Nessa peeked through an open door to see a

lavishly equipped office, with three computer monitors on one desk. Stock market feeds scrolled silently across the screens.

She'd never asked what Jace actually did, she realized, but a stockbroker made total sense, all things considered. Some sort of commodities trader, maybe. He'd certainly have wealthy friends in that world and be accustomed to the finer things in life, like expensive wine. No wonder he hadn't blinked at opening a \$500 bottle of Grange. He probably drank pricier wine every night in New York.

A photograph on the far wall caught her attention. She glanced around, feeling a little like an intruder, before taking a step into the office to look more closely. The door was open, she justified to herself.

The photograph was of a woman, slim and fair-haired, smiling into the camera. A baby was held in her arms, as fair and smiling as she was. From the fashion of the woman's clothes and the quality of the image, Nessa thought the picture was maybe thirty years old, but not much more than that. It was taken in Sydney, that much was clear; the distinctive shape of the Opera House was visible in the distance over the woman's left shoulder.

A ping from the kitchen startled her and she hurried back to find the oven was ready. The pizzas would only take a few minutes to finish off, so she figured she should wake Jace. He was tired, but he needed to eat to refill his energy reserves.

"Hey." Sitting on the bed beside him, she shook his shoulder gently. "Wake up, sleepyhead."

"No," he grumbled, an arm snaking around her waist to pull her back down beside him. "Don't wanna."

Laughing, she wiggled to get free, digging her fingertips into his ribs to tickle him.

“Come on! Food’s ready and now I’m really starving.”

He groaned and let her up after stealing a kiss. “Alright, I’m coming!” Yawning, he stumbled after her into the kitchen and found himself pressed to sit down at the dining table while she dished up the food. “Hey, this isn’t right. I invited you to dinner, why are you doing the work?”

“Because you fell asleep on me.” She brushed a kiss against his temple before sitting down beside him and reaching for the salad she’d quickly thrown together.

Jace looked guilty. “Sorry about that...”

“I’m not offended.” Nessa smiled at him to show him she meant it. “It’s obvious you’re not quite up to peak condition yet, Jace. I’d probably have fallen asleep myself after that spectacular sex, except my stomach was rumbling too loudly to let me!”

“You thought it was spectacular?” He looked almost shy, like he was desperate for her approval.

Putting down her fork, Nessa leaned over to kiss him, slow and sensual. “Damn right, and once we’ve eaten I’m fully planning to take you back to bed and find out just how good it can get.”

“I am very much on board with that plan.” Jace smiled at her as she pulled back and picked up her fork again.

“Eat up your vegetables like a good boy then, and I shall think of a suitable treat to give you afterward.”

Shoving a deliberately large mouthful of salad into his mouth, he grinned around it as she laughed at him.

Nessa woke in the morning light, stretching luxuriantly. Every muscle in her body ached, but in the best possible way. Jace lay sprawled on his back beside her, the sheet tangled around his lean hips. A beam of sunlight slipped past the blinds to cross his chest, turning the brown hairs there to burnished gold. Fast asleep, stubble beginning to sprout on his cheeks, he was easily the most beautiful sight Nessa had ever awakened to.

Honestly, she'd like nothing more than to wake him up and carry on where they'd left off late last night, but the angle of the sun told her she'd already slept long past the time she needed to be up and moving. Slipping quietly from the bed without waking Jace, she found her clothes and pulled them on with a wrinkle of her nose; she'd have to move quickly to get back to her room and have a shower before she needed to get to work. Bending down, she brushed a light kiss over Jace's cheek, but he never even stirred. She crept out with a fond smile back at him. No doubt he'd stop by the bar later. Maybe she'd let him take her out to dinner this time.

The pool bar was busy that morning; a large group of new resort guests had arrived the previous day and set up camp. It was a wedding party, Nessa soon discovered, almost thirty young people who were close friends of the bride and groom. They kept her busy serving beer and cocktails from shortly after she opened the bar, too busy to dwell much on the events of the previous day other than feeling the pleasurable ache in her thighs and groin whenever she moved.

It was about two o'clock which she spied Jace arriving; he raised his eyebrows at the crowd around the bar, but found himself a stool at the far end in the shade and waited until she had a moment for him.

"Hey." Nessa dropped a coaster in front of him and smiled. "Sleep well?"

"Better than I have in a long while." Snagging her hand, he dropped a quick kiss on the back of it. "I can see you're busy, angel. Don't worry about me."

"Kay. Get you a drink?"

"I wouldn't say no to a mojito."

She smiled and reached for the fresh mint stored in the cool box below the bar. "Coming right up."

Nessa had served Jace his drink and was busy making a pitcher of margaritas for the bride and her friends when, from the corner of her eye, she spied Luke walking up to

the bar. She wasn't worried about the resort manager dropping by; Luke was a hands-on type and regularly did a walk-around of all the different facilities. She usually saw him at least once a week, and indeed when she was really busy he wasn't averse to rolling up his sleeves and helping serve drinks. He cocked an inquiring brow at her now.

"Need a hand?"

"I'm good, thanks." She gave him a cheerful smile, handing off the pitcher to the drinks waiter. "Get you anything?"

"I could go for a ginger ale," Luke grinned back at her, turning to survey the happy, noisy crowd around the pool as Nessa scooped ice into a glass and topped it off with the amber fluid and a lime wedge.

"Your wish is my command. Hey, I think we need another keg of Carlton Dry; could you do me a favour and have main stores send one down? I've been flat out since opening and I'm worried this one's about tapped out."

"I'll sort it for you." Luke pulled his phone from his pocket and tapped in a message before picking up his drink and toasting her. "Cheers." His gaze slid past her, and a broad grin spread across his face. "Hey, Jace!"

Surprised, Nessa turned to watch as Luke rounded the bar to greet the other man. The expression on Jace's face was oddly panicked.

"I didn't know you knew Luke," she said.

"This guy?" Luke jerked his thumb at Jace's chest. "I hope you've been taking good care of him, Ness. One word from him and even I would be out of a job."

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Jace said weakly.

“Sure, sure, you know you’d never find anyone as good as me to run this place for you. Trust me, you’ll never find a better bartender than Nessa, but since you’re drinking one of her creations, I guess you already figured that out.” Luke chuckled, placing a friendly hand on Jace’s shoulder.

Nessa’s jaw had tightened, her lips thinning as she clamped them together. Obviously not trusting herself to speak, she turned away with a curt nod to pour more drinks as her server returned.

“Fuck.” Jace shut his eyes and groaned.

“Why do I have the feeling that I just completely put my foot in it?” Luke asked, glancing from Jace to Nessa’s turned back and the tightness of her shoulders. “She didn’t know who you were?”

“No...”

“And that’s a problem because...”

“We’ve kind of been seeing each other.”

“Shit, Jace.” Luke blew out his cheeks, shaking his head. “I’m sorry.”

Jace shook his head too. “No, it’s okay. I should have told her who I was. I knew no good was gonna come of keeping the secret, but it was hard to know what to say.”

“Yeah, because ‘I’m a billionaire and my family owns this whole island’ is kind of a big thing to hit people with right off the bat.” Luke’s mouth twisted. “I really am sorry. Nessa—well, clearly you’ve already clued in that she’s special. Would you like

me to speak to her?”

“Oh hell no! I clean up my own messes, Luke. It wasn’t your fault, you had no way to know I’d been misrepresenting myself. No hard feelings.” Jace smiled to show Luke he meant it, but he never took his eyes off Nessa’s turned back, her tightly controlled movements which spoke of her tension and upset. “I think I’d better give her some space.”

“That’s probably a good idea unless you want to get brained with a vodka bottle. Want to come for a walk with me?”

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“Also probably a good idea.” Getting up, Jace cast one more look at Nessa’s turned back before following Luke. “So, where are we going?”

“Marine biology labs. They’ve got a rescued dolphin in the big pool and have been treating cuts on her fins after she tangled with the props on a fishing boat.”

Jace couldn’t help but think of the day before and Nessa telling him she’d like to take him to meet the marine biologists and view the facilities. It was more than possible that would never happen now.

“Sure,” he said finally. “Lead the way.”

Chapter Seven

Nessa tried to ignore Jace, but every fiber of her body was aware of him walking away with Luke, of the way he kept looking back at her until they were lost to sight behind the palm trees.

How in hell had she misread him so badly? How had she not picked up the fact he was hiding such a huge secret? Even more importantly, why was he hiding his real identity?

Thinking back, she realized Jace had never actually told her his surname. He’d never asked hers, either. Could I need any more proof that I’m just a fling? Disgusted with herself, she broke a glass washing it with unnecessary vigor. Swearing under her breath, she carefully cleaned up the shards and dumped them in the trash.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming,” she told the waiter coming back to the bar and waving frantically at her. No time for self-pity now, Nessa. You’ve got a job to do.

The bar was busy until her seven o’clock closing, and she had a lot of work to do to clean up and close down. It was almost eight when she finally got to the staff dining room to find some dinner. Cory and Olivia waved her over to eat with them, but she shook her head, in no mood for company, finding a quiet table for one near the back of the room. She finished eating quickly and headed back to her cabin, just wanting to be alone.

There was a figure sitting on the steps leading up to her small veranda. Nessa stopped in her tracks.

“This is a staff-restricted area,” she said, finally finding her voice. “Although I suppose that doesn’t mean much if you own the entire fucking island.”

Jace winced at the fury in her tone, then got to his feet. “Nessa...”

“You lied to me.” Stepping closer, she jabbed a finger into his chest. “You told me the villa was owned by a friend.”

“Well, technically it is--”

“Yeah, because you and your father are friends, right?” She shook her head. “Don’t pull that on me, Jace. I can understand why you didn’t blurt it out the first moment we met, but once you’d asked me out and I said yes? You should have come clean.”

“I should’ve.”

Nessa blinked, surprised at his calm agreement. “Why didn’t you, then?” she demanded fiercely, still spoiling for a fight.

“Because you treated me like a normal person. Like just another guy who hit on you at the bar, and it was amazing.”

“What? You get off on being shot down or something?”

“No, it’s not that. I’m just... so used to being treated as one of those Hunters, looked at as some kind of meal ticket, that being treated as though I’m just another guy... it was unique, refreshing. As are you. I didn’t want things to change, Nessa, and I knew you’d look at me differently if you knew I was rich.”

“You’re so dumb!” She shook her head at him. “I already knew you were rich; you run in circles with people who own private holiday villas worth tens of millions of dollars. I figured you for a Wall Street guy, the kind who gets seven or eight figure bonuses a couple of times a year. It makes no difference to me if you’re a millionaire or a billionaire; I knew you’d be gone in a few days and I’d still be here, because I’m not the kind of girl who would ever be seen in society on your arm.”

“Why not?” He sounded genuinely confused.

“Because I’m black and I’m from the East End of London, which is the wrong side of the tracks no matter how you cut it, and I don’t want to be some sort of Pygmalion figure! I’m happy being who I am, Jace. I’ve made my choices and built myself a life I like; if I want to have a brief affair with some guy who will be gone in a few days, that’s my choice too. You, though, you’re not just any guy. Word gets out that Jace Hunter is on Sunfish Island dating some black chick and the next thing you know there’ll be paparazzi lurking in the shrubbery outside my room trying to take nude photos through the goddamn window!”

He winced again, and Nessa shook her head. “I didn’t sign up for that, Jace. When were you going to tell me? Were you ever, or were you just planning to leave and never let me know the truth?”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead. I just... fell for you.” He stood still, hands hanging limply by his sides. “I never meant to lie to you. Certainly not to expose you to unwanted attention from the media or anything like that.”

Nessa just stared silently at him for several long moments. “I can’t do this right now,” she said finally. “I’m sorry, Jace. I’m just... not in a place where I can deal with this right now.” Walking past him, she unlocked her door.

“Can we at least talk about it?”

“About what?” Turning to look at him, she shook her head. “About the fact that I would never have said yes to a date with you if I’d known who you were? What the hell were you thinking, asking a girl like me out, anyway?”

“What do you mean, a girl like you?” Jace asked, baffled. “You’re smart, beautiful, sassy; I’d have asked you out if I met you in a bar in New York instead of one here.”

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“Even if I was working behind it?” Nessa asked cynically.

“Yes! God damn it, Nessa, I’m not a snob. I don’t care what background you came from, what matters is the person you are now.”

“A bartender. The billionaire and the bartender, sounds like a Lifetime movie--”

“Stop putting yourself down!” He took two quick steps to stand right in front of her and reached up to grasp her shoulders. “You’re not inferior to anyone, Nessa. Not because of your chosen profession or the color of your skin or any other damn thing. You’d slap me silly if I dared to imply that you were, so stop doing it to yourself, and while you’re at it, don’t treat me differently because of who I am. Money doesn’t make anyone special, regardless of how some people seem to think it does.”

“Don’t be naive! You wouldn’t even be back here if it weren’t for the fact that you own the damn island!”

“I said it doesn’t make me special, not that it doesn’t buy me special treatment. I’m just a man, Nessa. The same man who made love to you last night.”

His words stirred an instinctive reaction from her as her body remembered all the delicious things they’d done to each other the previous night. She looked away, unwilling to meet his eyes.

Jace’s hands dropped from her shoulders. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you the truth,” he said quietly. “I just... liked the way you looked at me. The way you talked to me. I didn’t want that to change.”

“It’s changed now,” she said, and regretted it immediately when he took a step back.

“Yeah. I guess it has.”

There was silence between them for a tense, stinging minute, and then Jace said, “Look, I’m not gonna harass you. You know where to find me. Maybe you can sleep on it and we can talk tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” Nessa said finally. At least he was putting the ball in her court, giving her the choice; she was pretty sure he wouldn’t turn up at her bar.

“Good night, Nessa.” Jace’s voice was soft, tender. She hardened herself against the impulse to tell him not to go, to grab his sleeve and drag him into her room, to her bed.

“Good night.”

* * *

A knock on the villa’s front door at nine o’clock the following evening had Jace falling over his own feet, desperate to get to the door. Yanking it open, he didn’t bother to restrain his groan as he came face to face with Luke.

“Expecting someone else?” Luke asked dryly.

“Hoping. Not really expecting.” Jace stepped back, gesturing for Luke to come inside. “Want some coffee?”

“Sure.” Luke eyed Jace critically. “You look like you’ve been up all night.”

Jace didn’t answer, just leading the way to the kitchen and pouring a cup of coffee for

Luke. “What brings you here?”

Accepting the cup, Luke leaned back against the kitchen counter and took a sip of the aromatic brew, eyeing Jace over the rim. “I had a visitor this morning, waiting for me when I got to my office. If it’s any consolation, I don’t think Nessa got any sleep either.”

That didn’t sound promising. Jace sighed. “She doesn’t want to see me, does she?”

“She asked if she could take some holiday days,” Luke said. “Girl hasn’t taken a vacation since she got here. I said she could go as soon as I could rustle up a cover roster for her bar, which will probably take me until the end of the day. I’d say it’s highly likely she’ll be on the boat to Airlie tomorrow morning, so if you want to talk to her, today’s your chance.”

For a moment, he was tempted; he considered going straight for the door and rushing over to the resort to find Nessa. Reason won out, though.

“She’s doing this to get away from me. Going to find her would be a pretty shitty thing to do when she’s clearly trying to escape.” The words burned like acid in his throat, but he made himself accept the truth. Nessa wanted to get away from him. He wasn’t about to force himself on her, not now and not ever.

Luke studied him in silence for a minute before nodding and setting down his cup. “I’m sorry I dropped you in it,” he said, “but you should have told her the truth from the beginning.”

“I know.”

“Good.” Luke nodded curtly. “You might be my boss, but I can’t have my staff harassed, Jace. Thank you for doing the right thing.”

“No hard feelings,” Jace said honestly. None of this was Luke’s fault; indeed, he respected the other man more now, because Luke had obviously come here willing to stand up to him for Nessa’s sake, even knowing Jace could fire him on a whim. “I’m glad she, and all your other staff, have someone who’s willing to be in their corner.” He offered his hand to shake. “And tell Nessa... well, tell her if she wants a holiday, that’s great, but she doesn’t need to leave because of me. Sunfish Island is her home and I don’t want her to feel uncomfortable here. I’ll stay a day or two longer, but I’m feeling a lot better now. It’s time I got back to work.”

Luke accepted his hand and smiled. “I’ll let her know, but I’m gonna encourage her to take a few days. She could use a break. And let me know before you head out, yeah? It’s been good getting to know you.”

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“You too.” Jace was coming to think of Luke as a friend, he realized; even though Luke had known his identity from the beginning, he’d still treated him as ‘normal’. Would Nessa have done the same, if he’d given her the chance?

He’d never know, now. Bleakly, Jace admitted to himself he’d absolutely blown it, as Luke took his leave and departed, the door closing behind him with a final-sounding thud. Nessa didn’t want to see him, was even making plans to get away from Sunfish in order to avoid him. Whatever dreams he might have been harboring for the two of them were now dead in the water.

Picking up the phone, he made a call, arranging for one of the Hunter Enterprises private jets to pick him up at Hamilton Island Airport the following morning. He might not head back to New York yet, but he was sure he’d find something to do at the Sydney offices to keep his mind off the broken, shattered pieces of his heart.

Chapter Eight

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

Jace looked up in surprise at the yell and smiled at his father. “Working.”

“You’re supposed to be relaxing in the sunshine,” John Hunter said gruffly, crossing the office and reaching to pull his son into a hug as Jace stood up. “You’re still too damned thin, though at least you’ve got some color back in your face. Why’d you leave Sunfish?”

“It was just time, Dad. I hadn’t been to the Sydney offices in a while, figured I’d drop

in and see how things are here.” He smiled through the open door at the anxious PA hovering outside and waved her off before closing the door. While he’d left orders he wasn’t to be disturbed, he hadn’t expected his father to turn up. She could hardly have kept the company CEO from walking in.

“Humph.” John scowled. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because you’d probably have ordered the pilots not to pick me up, and I’d have had to get a commercial flight. Which would be boring.” Jace grinned.

“You’re not too proud to fly commercial.”

“No, but I didn’t want to deal with anyone who recognized me asking why.”

John grunted again, but Jace could tell he was already forgiven. “So talk to me about the island. How did you like it?” John grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator hidden in an antique wooden cabinet and took a seat.

“It’s beautiful,” Jace said, knowing the word was inadequate. “And the setup is magnificent. I met quite a few guests and nobody had a single gripe. The staff are absolutely on top of customer service, going above and beyond to make everybody happy. I was incredibly impressed with Luke Collyer.”

“Good man, that.” John nodded in agreement.

“It was really nice,” Jace said, thinking it through for the first time, “to be in the middle of one of our businesses, for once. On the ground floor, seeing how the service gets delivered to customers. The staff at Sunfish, they’re the heart and soul of that place. They’re the face Hunter Enterprises shows to customers, and I gotta say they’re doing a hell of a job.”

John cocked his head curiously, listening to Jace's impassioned words. "You really liked being there, huh?"

"Yeah." More than liked, he'd loved it. He'd felt comfortable there, for the first time in a long time. The staff on Sunfish were down-to-earth, not afraid to get their hands dirty, hardworking people with a genuine love for what they did. They were far removed from the high-society crowd of New Yorkers who'd been Jace's social circle for the last few years. The mere thought of returning to that sterile, artificial life repulsed him now, and he knew he had to say something.

"Dad—even though I'm feeling better, I don't think I want to go back to the New York office. I... don't think I want to take over Hunter Enterprises from you. Ever."

To his complete astonishment, his father smiled broadly. "Took you long enough to figure that out."

Jace's jaw dropped open. "What?"

"Oh, you could do it, and you'd do it damned well, but you'd hate every minute of it. You're not ruthless enough, son. I love you more than I've ever been able to express, but you've got your mother's heart. God rest her soul."

Jace could hardly believe his ears. He'd always been afraid of disappointing his father, had always striven to be someone John could be proud of. "What will you do with the company?" he asked, almost afraid to hear the answer. "I don't want you to run yourself into the ground with it." It was a large part of the reason he'd worked so hard to be able to step up, knowing John wasn't getting any younger.

"I'm gonna privatize the company. The market's ripe for an IPO, we'll list forty per cent of the stock initially and see how things go. I'll put twenty percent in a trust for you and your heirs; Hunter Enterprises will always look after you, but it was my

dream, not yours.”

Jace was too choked up to speak.

John reached out to grab him into a tight hug. “I’m damned proud of you, son. Always will be. But you gotta find your own dreams to follow.”

Father and son embraced for several long minutes, and John’s voice was husky when he finally pulled back and said, “So what’s your plan?”

“I don’t know, yet.” Except he rather thought he did. “I think I’d like to go back into architecture.”

“You did graduate top of your class when you got your degree, and God knows Hunter Enterprises can always keep you in work even if you don’t take on any other clients.” John smiled a little mistily at him.

“I think I’d like to design houses rather than commercial premises, though.” Spending time in the villa he’d designed as his graduation project had made him think more about the ergonomics of design, about marrying beautiful design with a home that was easy to live in and maintain.

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“The only thing I have to ask you is that you keep everything on the down low until we’ve taken the initial stock offering to market.” John gave him a serious look. “There are a fair number of our senior staff, folks who’ve been with us a long time, who have a stake in the company.”

Jace knew most of the people his father was talking about. He’d grown up around them, called them uncles and aunts, absorbed the business of Hunter Enterprises by learning from their expertise.

“It’s only right to do our best to make those shares worth as much as possible,” Jace agreed. “Of course, Dad. You can count on me.”

“I know.” John clapped a strong hand on his shoulder. “We’re taking Hunter Enterprises straight to the top of the Dow Jones.”

“Just one thing,” Jace said. “That twenty percent share you’re putting into a trust? Could it maybe include complete ownership of Sunfish Island?”

“Of course.” John looked at him curiously. “Sunfish is pretty special to you, eh?”

“It’s a pretty special place.” He wanted to make sure nobody else could ever come in and impose their own wishes on the island, sack staff and change the guest relations policies that gave the resort such a special atmosphere. Wanted to make sure no matter what, that Sunfish would always be Nessa’s refuge.

“It’s yours. Forever. I’ll make sure of it,” John promised, no further questions asked, for which Jace was grateful.

* * *

The news that Hunter Enterprises was going public sent shock waves through the staff at Sunfish Island. They all worried about what it might mean for their jobs, at least until John Hunter phoned Luke personally and told him Sunfish Island was being specifically excluded from the sale.

“Ownership of the island, the resort and everything to do with it has already been transferred into a trust, the sole beneficiary of which is Jace, at the present time, though any heirs of his will also be included at a later date.”

After getting his breath back, Luke had to ask why.

A rich chuckle answered the question. “Seems he fell in love with the place, wanted to make sure no corporate types could come in and ruin it. He has ultimate say over anything that happens on the island now—and he asked me to let you know that he has full confidence in you.” John paused to let that sink in. “You impressed him, Luke. He’ll be in touch soon to let you know that himself, I’m sure, but we’re both up to our eyes at the moment, as I’m sure you can imagine. He’s in London right now.”

Luke was still in a certain degree of shock. “This is so unexpected, Mr. Hunter, but thank you so much for calling to tell me in person. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome. Don’t know what magic you’re working on that island but Jace came back a changed man, determined to follow his own dreams. If it was something you said to him, thank you.”

“I... don’t think it was me.”

“No?” John asked curiously.

Luke said nothing.

There was a brief silence on the line, and then John said, “There was a girl, huh? Jace wouldn’t talk about it, but I read between the lines.”

Luke rubbed his forehead, wondered how much he should say. “He didn’t tell her who he was. I accidentally dropped him in it, and she didn’t take it well.”

“Ahh,” John said. “Well, whoever she is, she made him take a good hard look at himself, and he realized he didn’t like the path he was on. I must ask you to keep this particular tidbit quiet, but after the stock goes to market, Jace is stepping back from his role here. Going back to architecture, and I have to tell you, I couldn’t be happier for him.”

Thanking John, Luke ended the call and sat dumbfounded in his office chair for several minutes, thinking through the implications of what he’d just learned. At last, a broad smile on his face, he pushed himself to his feet. The staff would all be relieved to know their jobs were safe, but there was one person he really should tell first.

Nessa had taken a few days off after she broke up with Jace, but knowing he’d left the island, she found herself returning sooner than she had originally planned. Dropping back into her usual routine, she still sometimes found herself looking at the seat he’d always taken at the end of the bar, wishing he was there, looking at her with those steady ice-blue eyes. She’d asked herself a thousand times if she’d done the right thing in ending their relationship. We were ships that passed in the night, she told herself. Now I’m back in my safe harbor and he’s off across the ocean somewhere.

“Hey.” It was Luke who slid onto the bar stool, smiling at her. “Got some news.”

“You’re not saving it for the staff meeting?” She wiped up a small puddle of spilled soda on the bar with a rag, but couldn’t avoid meeting his eyes. It was quiet today, and she had no customers to tend to.

“Thought you might like to hear it first. Turns out Hunter Enterprises no longer owns Sunfish.”

“What?” Nessa’s jaw dropped. “It’s already been sold—before the share offer? Who’s the new owner?”

“Jace Hunter.”

The cloth she’d been using to wipe the bar fell from nerveless fingers. “Jace?”

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“Got the news from John Hunter himself. Jace apparently wanted to make sure Sunfish was safe from any corporate meddling. I’ve been assured he has complete faith in my ability to run the place... though I’m pretty sure there’s one particular staff member I daren’t fire.”

Nessa found herself clinging to the edge of the bar to hold herself up because her legs felt too shaky to support her. “He did that for me?”

“Pretty sure you’re a fairly large part of his motive, yeah.” Luke eyed her sympathetically. “You know,” he said in an apparent non sequitur, “Olivia still knows a hell of a lot of New York movers and shakers from her days as a marketing guru in the Big Apple.”

Nessa eyed him curiously. “So?”

Luke grinned. “So, I have an idea.”

Chapter Nine

Nessa smoothed her hands over the skirt of her tangerine silk dress once more, before stepping forward and handing the printed invitation she held to one of the PAs manning the door into the massive ballroom. Olivia’s friend had assured her the invitation was completely legit, but Nessa still had the terrible feeling the PA, a beautiful blonde with a snooty expression on her face, would dismiss her as a fraud and probably have her arrested.

“Your name is Tennessee Williams?” The blonde gave her a skeptical look. Nessa

cursed the last-minute rush which had meant Olivia had to email her friend a copy of Nessa's passport in order to get the invite organized in time for the event.

"Blame my mother, and please, please just call me Nessa," Nessa replied.

The blonde actually chuckled. "I know just how you feel. I'm Donna... but my real name is Chardonnay."

They exchanged conspiratorial grins, and Donna found Nessa's name on the list on her tablet and checked it off. "Have a good evening... Nessa."

"Thank you, Donna." Taking a deep breath, she tightened her grip on the fashionable little clutch Olivia's friend had provided, along with the designer dress and heels, before moving through the huge doorway into the ballroom.

Luke's brilliant idea had been for Nessa to fly to New York and use Olivia's old contacts to wrangle herself an invitation to the special Hunter Enterprises post-IPO party. Nessa still wasn't entirely sure how they'd managed to talk her into it, but here she was, wearing a dress worth more than a month's salary and a pair of shoes which probably cost as much as a new car, despite each apparently consisting of little more than a couple of flimsy straps, some rhinestones, and a sharp heel.

There had to be five hundred people here already and more arriving by the minute. How was she ever to even find Jace, never mind get close to him? She'd arrived in New York early that morning and spent the day being pampered in a ridiculously high-class beauty salon before coming here, but she'd taken the time to check the stock market. Wall Street was going crazy over the offering, the stock already soaring to almost five times its initial list price. Everyone here tonight looked to be celebrating pretty hard.

"Nessa?" a voice said behind her and she startled, spinning around and almost

tripping over her heels. A slim Chinese woman in a designer business suit stood there; agelessly beautiful, her eyes told Nessa she wasn't nearly as young as she might be mistaken for.

Who the hell knows I'm here?" "Um, yes, I'm Nessa."

"I thought you might be. I'm Nancy, Jace's assistant."

"He knows I'm here?" Nessa fought the urge to panic.

"Actually, he doesn't." Nancy reached out, giving her a gently reassuring pat on the arm. "Luke Collyer called Mr. Hunter—Mr. John Hunter, that is—and let him know you were coming. John asked me to be on the lookout for you."

"Oh." Nessa's shoulders relaxed a tiny bit.

They tensed right back up when Nancy said, "I can take you to Jace now, if you'd like?"

"I think maybe I need a drink first. Liquid courage and all that," Nessa admitted.

Nancy smiled, beckoning to a nearby waiter. "After the chaos this last week has been, I wouldn't say no myself. Champagne?" She scooped two crystal flutes off the waiter's proffered tray and handed one to Nessa. "Cheers."

"Bottoms up," Nessa said with a smile in return. The champagne was fabulous; Cristal, she was pretty sure, though the glasses were pre-filled and she couldn't see a bottle.

"Don't go anywhere," Nancy warned the waiter before draining her glass, handing back the empty and taking another one. "Come on, Nessa, keep up," she chided.

Laughing, she decided she rather liked Nancy. Nessa followed suit and claimed another glass. On an empty stomach, the bubbles went straight to her head, making her feel floaty and relaxed.

“Okay,” she declared, “I think I can face him now.”

“Marvelous.” Nancy linked her free arm through Nessa’s and drew her through the crowd. She seemed to know almost everyone there, greeting many people by name but forging an inexorable path onward until the last group of people melted aside and Nessa saw Jace.

Wearing a pale gray suit perfectly tailored to his tall, lean form, his brown hair immaculately cut, his jaw clean-shaven, he looked every inch the billionaire.

Right down to the famous supermodel on his arm, laughing as he spoke and leaning in to press a kiss on his cheek, dangerously close to his mouth, leaving a scarlet imprint of her lips behind. A camera flashed to capture the moment and the group surrounding Jace laughed, knowing what picture they’d see in the society pages of the papers tomorrow.

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Nessa froze like a deer in headlights, staring as Jace turned his head to speak to the other woman. His gaze passed over her briefly, unseeingly. But that was enough. She yanked her arm from Nancy's and spun on her heel, rushing through the crowd as fast as she could manage in her narrow-skirted dress and ridiculously high heels, blinded by the tears running down her cheeks.

"Nessa?" It took a moment for Jace's weary brain to process what his eyes had just seen; his gaze snapped back to the woman he'd spotted in the crowd. She'd already pulled loose from Nancy and turned away, running through the crowd, long black braids swinging behind her.

Yanking his own arm free from the woman trying desperately to cling to him, Jace rushed forward. "Was that really Nessa?" he demanded of Nancy, waiting only for her nod before sprinting after Nessa's disappearing back.

She'd come. She'd come to him. Only to arrive just as some fortune-hungry attention-seeker tried to sink her claws into him. He could only imagine what Nessa must have thought of what she'd just seen.

The crowd slowed him down, stockbrokers high on champagne and success trying to catch onto him, shouting their congratulations, demanding to know where he was going in such a rush. He ignored them all.

"Nessa!" he yelled, losing sight of her briefly. Damn, she was quick even in a dress and heels; he pulled loose from the hands grabbing at him and raced after her.

“Nessa!”

By the time he reached the doors, she’d disappeared. He looked frantically around, wondering which way she’d gone.

“Did you see a beautiful black girl in an orange dress run past?” he begged the PAs at the door, all staring at him as though he’d lost his mind.

“Nessa?” Donna, one of his junior assistants, asked. At his nod, she continued, “She went that way.” She pointed to the hotel’s main doors leading out onto Fifth Avenue.

“Bless you!” He followed at a dead run, but reached the exit just in time to see a cab pull away from the curb. “Damn, damn, damn!”

“Mr. Hunter?” Turning, he found Donna behind him, her expression anxious. “Is everything alright?”

He took a deep breath. “No.”

He knew Nancy had trained the girl well when her expression smoothed to steely resolve, her chin lifting.

“Tell me what you need, sir.”

The only good thing about her hasty dash home was when she’d boarded the flight still in her designer dress and heels, the check-in agent had taken one look at her outfit and given her a free first-class upgrade. The plane had been halfway across the Pacific when Nessa finally gave in and cried. A concerned flight attendant promptly descended on her with tissues, chocolate, and alcohol, which at least made the

interminable flight seem to pass a little faster, even though she couldn't sleep.

At last, she stepped off the late afternoon boat from Hamilton Island and headed for her cabin, feet dragging with weariness. Falling face-down onto her bed still in her designer finery, she fell into blissful unconsciousness.

A loud rapping on her door woke her up. Groaning, Nessa pushed herself off the bed and headed for the door to open it.

"Oh. It's you," she said to Luke. Holding up a hand to forestall whatever he was about to say, she told him, "I don't want to talk about it. I just want to get back to work, okay?"

Luke shrugged after staring at her in silence for a moment. "Fine by me. It's nearly ten, though. Are you working today or is Eric covering the pool bar?"

She'd slept for almost sixteen hours! Startled, Nessa nodded. "I'm working." Looking down at herself, realizing she was still wearing the designer gown, she said, "I'll just take a shower and head on down there."

It felt good to step behind her bar again, even if her bottles were all in a muddle, she saw as she unlocked the grille covering them and pulled it back. Shaking her head, she started sorting them out. Why on earth was the Bacardi on the top shelf? She used it every five minutes making cocktails. Putting it back front and center in its usual place on the lowest shelf, and beginning to sort the other bottles, she whirled around as a voice said, "Hey, Nessa."

It couldn't be... but it was, it was indeed Jace, leaning on the edge of the bar, wearing his old T-shirt with the sleeves ripped out, his sunglasses pushed up on top of his

head, a good day's worth of stubble gracing his jaw.

The gin bottle Nessa was holding slid from nerveless fingers and hit the rubber mat at her feet, fortunately not smashing. She stood rooted to the spot, eyes on Jace, unable to believe what she was seeing.

"Don't be throwing the booze around, now." He straightened up and came around the bar, picking up the gin and putting it back on the shelf. Turning back to look down into Nessa's stunned face, he pleaded, "Say something, Nessa."

"What are you doing here?" she asked numbly.

"I'm home."

"What?"

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“This is home, now. The villa is, anyway. I’m no longer working for Hunter Enterprises; I’m starting a private architecture consultancy and design business, based right here.”

She couldn’t make a sound come out, but her lips shaped the word, “Why?” and Jace understood.

“Because of you. You made me see that the life I was living was slowly killing me, that I had to make a change, find what I really wanted and go after it. This is what I really want to do, Nessa, and you,” he lifted a shaking hand, tracing a finger gently down her cheek, “you are who I really want to be with. No high society lifestyle, just you and me and the things that make both of us happy.”

“The girl I saw you with in New York...?”

“I’d just met her and she clamped on like a leech. I couldn’t ditch her fast enough. I still can’t believe you really came.” He was still touching her, his hand curling around the back of her neck to draw her closer. “I barely got a glimpse of you, but you looked amazing.”

Nessa laughed shakily. “I felt a fool. I didn’t fit, there.”

“You fit with me, and that’s all I care about. We were both square pegs in round holes in our old lives, but put two square pegs together and you get... a really nice rectangle... okay, that analogy fell down a bit there.”

“I like rectangles,” she said nonsensically, but Jace’s smile lit up as though she’d said

three quite different words, and maybe in a way she had.

“I like rectangles too,” he agreed, drawing her closer and bending his head until their lips met in a thoroughly satisfying kiss.

~ The End ~