

IT NEVER ENTERED MY MIND

I *t never entered my mind that the world I spent ten years building would come crashing down around me at once*, Hope thought at a time when she should have been basking in the afterglow. She looked over at the red glowing numbers, which illuminated the silhouette of the condom wrapper on the nightstand. The only glimmer of light was from the full moon over the Atlantic Ocean, which peeked through the tiny crevice between the curtain and balcony door of the hotel room. Hope calmly arose from the king-size bed and glanced over her shoulder at the unfamiliar face of the unfamiliar man who slept so peacefully after their encounter. *Typical*. The time was 11:55 p.m. It was only three hours ago that she sat quietly at a table in the hotel lounge nursing her new baby, rum and Diet Coke. She knew he had been watching her from across the room, but she didn't care. Before long she knew he'd serve his only purpose in her life. To try to help heal the wound made by Jason's sudden rejection of her, of their five-year marriage and their relationship, which dated back to freshman year of high school.

I spent my life with Jason, for Jason and this is all the thanks I get, Hope thought as she slipped on her red dress. Night after night, she didn't work the dress. The dress worked her. But like the man she picked up in the hotel lounge this evening, the dress had served its purpose tonight, as it had so many other nights. Only neither tonight, nor the

countless nights in previous weeks had served their purpose—to heal her pain.

She quietly picked up her small clutch from the floor where she haphazardly dropped it when she entered the room. *In like a raging lion and out like a meek lamb* she thought while gentle and careful steps carried her out of the room and into the hallway of the upscale, ocean-front hotel.

Before this recent drama of her life, Hope would have happily spent her midnight in the hotel room indulging in the offerings of the room service menu, but now food didn't matter to her. Nothing mattered, but trying to pick up the broken pieces of her life. It didn't matter to her that she had relegated her last days in Kalamazoo to frequenting clubs and bars armed with rum and Diet Coke, to have careless, yet safe sex with a variety of men in places that never entered Hope's sheltered mind. It didn't matter to her that her friends felt she had a new lease on life.

She had an opportunity to make a fresh start, which was assisted by her new position as Chief Incentive Officer with Vantarca Health System in Virginia Beach, accompanied by a six-figure salary. This position allowed Hope to combine her years of experience as an accountant, with her newly minted Masters of Healthcare Administration. It was what she wanted when she was with Jason, but now that he was no longer in her life and had filed for divorce, it didn't matter.

The decision to go to her room alone faced her. Since Jason packed his belongings and had Hope served with divorce papers, she endured many restless nights. She often spent them questioning her life, questioning her mistakes, and wondering where she went wrong. The temporary solace of a novel sexual experience sometimes lulled her to sleep, but tonight she had too much on her mind.

Instead of pushing the up button for the elevator which would take her to the club level suite known as her temporary home, courtesy of Vantarca Health System, Hope pressed the down button, as it signified how she felt.



IT NEVER ENTERED my mind that I would be calling Patrick six years after our

breakup Rachel thought as she tried to muster up courage once again to pick up the phone and face the truth. Just days earlier, after she finally located the right Patrick Long and had gotten up the nerve to call him, their conversation was deferred by distressing news about two of the most meaningful men in her life—her estranged father and her estranged husband. The appearance of her living room reflected the anxiety that consumed her. A backlog of mail and unfolded laundry covered her sofa and coffee table. Silently, Rachel sat in the corner swirling vodka and orange juice in her glass. “This will take the edge off,” she said as if someone were in the room with her.

With Martin and Malcolm safely tucked into bed, sleeping peacefully, Rachel felt free—if just for a few hours. Her summer respite had been quite eventful—high school reunion, the discovery of her father, and her husband’s tragedy. But her biggest shock came when she and Sina spent a week at the beach. It was then that Rachel shared her memorable breakup with Patrick with her friend. It wasn’t exactly the break-up itself that was memorable. It was that one last kiss which led to one last, well you know, which may have led to Martin. And while Rachel spent the last five years as if Martin were her estranged husband’s son, that curl of his upper lip and left hand catch put too much of a question in her mind.

Rachel careened to the sofa in search of the phone. Amid a stack of bills hid the patriotic airmail envelope postmarked Sydney, Australia. Rachel stared at the postmark, took a swig of her cocktail, and decided to allow her anxiety to grow yet another day.



IT NEVER ENTERED my mind that I would wake up to find the man of my dreams sitting across the aisle from me. Sina smiled, stretched her arm across the aisle, and touched Rodney who slept like a baby. Surely, I must be dreaming.

Sina gently tapped his shoulder. “I hope you were dreaming about me, Sugar Cane.”

Rodney’s smile was so bright it would chase the darkest of storm clouds and the accompanying rain away. “Excuse me, sir,” Rodney said to the gentleman in the seat next to him. “Would you mind

switching seats with this beautiful woman across the aisle from me? I can arrange a pair of courtside seats for you the next time the International Basketball League's Windy City Gale Force plays in Sydney."

"Why certainly, mate." The man gathered his belongings from underneath the seat in front of him as Rodney stepped into the aisle to allow the change. Just then, the flight attendant came down the aisle with Arrival Cards for each passenger to complete for Customs and Quarantine.

"Did you plan to surprise me all along?" Sina asked as she and Rodney completed their Arrival Cards.

"We'll just say I was very determined," emphasis on very. Rodney wrapped his arms around Sina and kissed her intensely. They ate dinner, while sipping Hunter Valley wine, then fell asleep in each other's arms for the duration of the flight.