

### Chapter 3: *One week earlier- Irreconcilable differences*

Brodie Jackson poured another drink with all the skill and finesse of the cocktail waiter he'd once been. Around him, guests joked and laughed. The sultry summer air was perfect for a midnight drinking party. He didn't feel especially drunk but knew he was far from sober and he didn't like his chances of passing a roadside breath test. It wouldn't come to that though, he was the host, and no one's designated driver.

Filling the glass with Bacardi mix he asked Grace, 'More?' She nodded with a serious look as white rum filled the glass, first one finger then two. He paused and asked with a smile, 'Enough? Or do you want to go the full Monty, sweetheart?'

She smiled. The serious business of liquor strength nearly out of the way. 'Why not? I'm feeling up for it tonight.' Pouring carefully, he stopped at three fingers as the bottle was reduced to mere dregs. He put it on a table alongside another three empties lined up like sentry guards and blew his partner, Grace, a kiss. Tonight, she was looking sensational with a plunging split satin dress that showed off her toned and shapely legs. No one could say she didn't have great looking pins, right? No one. One of her best features in fact. It was 1 a.m. and he and his party guests were only getting started. People always said he knew how to have fun and Brodie's aim was to prove them right. It was just after midnight—the night still young—and there was too much fun to be had. There was no need to crash until they saw the morning light. In the background the Eddy Money song, 'Take me home tonight' voiced those very words.

As Brodie fixed a drink for Maggie, his friend Spike's other half, he felt like some mad chemist. One who knew exactly what he was doing, of course. As the triple Bourbon was handed over, he hummed and sang along to the lyrics, 'Take me home tonight, I don't want to let you go until I see the light.'

Looking over his shoulder he called out to his distracted—and possibly flirting—partner, 'Try it now, Grace.' Pulling herself away from a young, smart businessman Damon, she placed the glass to her pursed lips, signalled her approval with a wink, and drained the glass. There were cheers and she turned her back to Brodie once more. Damon, the man who had her full attention, had arrived straight off the tarmac from Heathrow, with his Saville suit and interesting hair style. He was pouring Grace shots of Tequila and, not wanting to appear a spoilsport, Brodie waved his approval. Two could play at that game. Brodie poured himself a drink, also three fingers, and not to be outdone by his hard charging partner, downed it in one gulp. In an instant, there was a rush of Dopamine-boosted blood to the head.

As the warmth of the alcohol flushed through his system, Brodie gravitated towards Spike and Maggie. Close friends, Spike was still nursing the single glass he'd poured himself without any dubious influence from the host. Maggie teetered over the triple shot Brodie had poured her as Spike steadied her with a hand on the small of her back. Someone had to stay sober, right?

Brodie tried to be accommodating; isn't that what good hosts do? 'How's the coffee shop going, Spike? Every time I go there the place is packed.'

'It's been alright, what with the rent and the competition. Sometimes I wish he'd bought that Subway franchise,' Maggie answered for him with a slurred voice.

'Yes, instead of making coffee we'd be making sandwiches all day. As it is we've met some wonderful people.'

'Yeah, like that actor out from Hollywood for a shoot.'

'Who was that?' Grace asked intrigued, her attention drawn back to the conversation.

'I don't remember exactly. But we made a pact not to name drop; it's not what we do.'

'So, we won't see it on Facebook, right?' Grace, now back in Brodie's orbit, said with a blank face and in a tone just this side of interested.

Spike smiled as if proud of his ability to keep a confidence. 'Yes, you got it. If we land a really big fish or even a whale, that will make to social media and the rest I'm sure. Have to protect your clients.'

They chatted as other couples joined them. Celebrity media gossip didn't interest Brodie, but it was safe, neutral, in that they weren't talking about people they knew or that were even in the same room.

Later in the evening after heavier spirits, including some lethal cocktails, Brodie began to see double. That warm, comforting feeling was being hijacked by unpleasant emotions. Just why was Grace spending so much time with the handsome stranger from Brazil?

It was hot and getting hotter even though it was past 2 a.m. now. A thin film of sweat covered Brodie's forehead but it wasn't just the heat that was making him sweat. Grace, his partner of five years, was making noises about leaving and this get-together was another attempt to patch up their relationship. A relationship on track to implode much like an old Church collapsing after an earthquake. Their relationship was propped up by support beams that could crack and fold at any time.

Brodie didn't want to think about losing his best lover yet and he rubbed his forehead as though to banish the thought. Squeezing his eyes again and again his vision began to swim as if he was looking into those crazy funhouse mirrors. Trying to rise from the too-deep cushioned armchair, his sense of balance failed him, and Brodie crashed into a glass side table. Shards of lethal looking glass, jade daggers able to cut to the bone, splashed onto the floor, one piece nicking him near the elbow. The tiny wound flowed with bright blood that found its way onto the carpet. Too drunk to feel it, he watched the red stream with detached bemusement. His friend, Spike, disappeared into the bathroom and came back with a towel to staunch the bleeding.

Grace looked on with a careless smile as if to say, *I knew you'd make a mess of it*. No sympathy or show of emotion there, she was the dispassionate emergency services worker who acted like she'd seen it all. Being a nurse could do that to a person and even though she wasn't in the industry now, he wondered what she would do if he was really hurt, say with a severed artery, then dismissed this train of thought as something close to self-flagellation. It didn't bear thinking about, but then she put her casual cruelty into words.

'Way to go, Brodie. I spent a few hundred on that and that was down from nearly a thousand,' Grace said in a high-pitched American accent that left out mention of his injury. When angry, her rhotic American intonation became more intense; sharpened, like a blade on a grinding stone.

If they were hit by a category 5 cyclone, would she busy herself with the damaged house and the mundane tasks such as follow up calls to the insurers while he lay down with his head sliced open? How would she play the role of the grieving widow?

'Don't you mean 'we' Grace? Don't you mean 'we' spent hundreds on a piece of furniture? It's only a table for Christ's sake. It reminds me of the old saying about knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.'

Maggie rushed to his side with a blanket of paper towels to replace the ruined towel and began to apply them to stem the flow. It worked, at least for now.

'Do you want to go to the surgery or the hospital, Brodie?' but Brodie shook his head. He couldn't leave the field without finishing the battle. He was still breathing, wasn't he?

'I'll be fine. It's not the cut I'm worried about.'

He looked at his totally ravishing partner who appeared unconcerned and could even detect a little smile he that could be gloating. 'I guess you're satisfied now you've drawn blood.'

This got the reaction he was hoping for as Grace stared at him with bulging eyes of flaming rage. He could take blows to the head but being ignored was something Brodie just could not stand. Grace prepared herself like a prosecuting attorney moving in for the kill with a devastating closing argument and with all the hostility she could muster, Grace hurled her drink into his face. With a wide, careless grin Brodie thrust out his tongue as if to take in rain from a cloud burst after a long drought. 'Hmmm tastes great, Grace. You must have an ace bartender. No point in letting it go to waste, this stuff isn't cheap.'

As the ever-caring Maggie rushed to Grace's side, Spike took Brodie by the arm and said, 'Look, we've all had a lot to drink tonight. You two are obviously a bit tired and emotional.'

Looking flustered Brodie said, 'Yeah, maybe it's time to call it a night...'

But as the sob sisters sobbed, Brodie wasn't done yet. 'Hey friend, I'm just getting started.' He pulled away from the unwanted attentions of his friend and staggered towards the makeshift bar. As he did, he crashed into a full-length mirror that fell to the floor but didn't break. Everyone stared at this lucky escape from seven years' bad luck. There was already enough bad luck to go around without the mirror playing into it.

'See!' he said as if it were a revelation. 'I *do* have good luck,' he paused, 'Even if it is of the rampaging bull variety.'

'Oh, so you want to get smart, smartass,' Grace said in her rhotic, heavy on the *R* sound, American accent that always got sharper as she got angrier.

Picking up an almost empty bottle of Scotch, she threw it against the wall and it exploded into a million slivers. Brodie saw his own life in the mess that was trickling down the wall. Fortunately, no one was hurt. Not yet.

'Go on, smash them all,' he said as he yanked a tablecloth from one of the tables. Everything, including plates of finger food and bowls of curry and rice, cascaded to the floor in a shrapnel of molten cheese and onion dip. It was a neat trick that never worked, even if it was in keeping with this sudden outbreak of violence. The party itself was in self-destruct mode. Brodie tried to summon up the energy to care but couldn't do it. While only a few people had left after the first shots of this War of the Roses, this latest exchange brought about an exodus as the remaining guests hurriedly made their apologies until only a clearly very worried Maggie and Spike remained.

Then, something unexpected. The large teakwood dining table began to shake, and dinnerware and glasses rattled. There was silence as the rocking and shaking continued for a brief time before stopping abruptly.

'What was that?' Spike asked in alarm.

Brodie, thankful for a diversion from the embarrassing fight with his soulmate said, 'Probably an earthquake, we've had them before.'

Spike and Maggie nodded at this plausible explanation while Grace glared at him as though ready to resume battle but before she could there was a knock on the door. Spike walked over and opened it to reveal two police officers.

'We have complaints about a disturbance,' said a burly officer as he eyed a living room transformed into a bloody battlefield.