

Chapter One

Grace studies her reflection in the church's full length mirror and smiles. A year of planning and organizing and compromising and arguing and stress has led up to this exact moment.

She smooths her dress' full satin skirt and fingers the intricate beading and ornate embroidering on its strapless bodice. Her heart flutters. *This is it.*

She turns slowly to her left, taking in her long, regal train and runs her gloved hand along the trail of tiny buttons down her back. *This is it.*

She gazes over at the classic bouquet of roses and Baby's Breath lying on the chair beside her and then down at the five carat ring slipped snugly onto her finger.

"This is it," she whispers.

"That's right," a familiar voice startles her from the doorway. "And there ain't no goin' back."

Grace turns to see Malikah standing behind her, a smile spread across her face. She laughs. "God knows it wouldn't be a wedding without my favorite cousin."

"You ain't lyin'," Malikah says smugly.

"What about me?" Trina asks, entering the small dressing room. She and Malikah look like twins in their matching bridesmaid's dresses.

Grace spreads her arms for a hug. Trina slips into her embrace, careful not to get any makeup on her best friend's stunning Vera Wang.

“It wouldn’t be the same without you either,” Grace says.

Malikah grunts, her lips spread into a tight, censorious line. “Naw, it’d be better.”

Trina’s eyebrows furrow. “I’m going to take the high road,” she says, her jaw set. “And let that slide.”

Malikah rolls her eyes. “You couldn’t find a high road if you had a map.”

“Says the cousin with two kids by two different men,” Trina sneers.

Grace tenses as Malikah takes a step closer to Trina, wagging her index finger just inches from Trina’s face. “Watch it,” she warns.

“You’re going to have a hard time carrying your flowers down the aisle with nine fingers,” Trina snaps, slapping Malikah’s hand away.

“Bout as hard a time as you’re gonna have gettin’ down the aisle with my foot up yo-”

“Hey!” Grace says, her tone hushed, but firm. “That is enough.”

Neither of them budes. They continue to glare at each other with clenched fists and heaving chests. Grace hikes up her dress and steps between them. “I said that’s enough!” Her second warning is louder and harsher.

Trina is the first to turn away. She can’t stand Malikah and would love nothing more than to put her in her place, but one glance into Grace’s beseeching eyes and the fight in her wanes. Grace has been so good to her, a better friend, in fact, than Trina can ever hope to be.

This time last year, their tight foursome was completely dismantled. Grace had fled to Detroit, Mike escaped to New York, Ron was too fed up to be bothered and it was all Trina's fault. She never meant to lie. The last thing she ever wanted to do was hurt the three people she loved the most, but she screwed up. She made brash assumptions, said things she had no business saying and before she knew it, all of their lives were unraveling.

Each of them retired to their own corners, angry and hurt, trapped in webs of misunderstanding and deceit; webs that Trina, however unintentionally, had spun. And even though they've all settled into an uneasy *détente* and no one ever mentions what happened, no one's ever really forgiven her for it either. No one that is, except for Grace.

"I'll see you out there," Trina says, not bothering to look up.

Malikah's fiery stare burns holes into Trina's retreating back, and only after Trina's left the room does the tension in Malikah's shoulders ease.

"You said you were going to behave," Grace whines.

"I said I would *try* to behave."

"Don't do this to me," Grace pleads. "I'm supposed to be getting married not refereeing."

Malikah tilts her head to the side. "Yeah, I know," she says softly.

"Good," Grace says with a definitive nod. "Because weddings are traumatic enough without having to make sure your cousin and your best friend aren't choking each other every time you turn your back."

A shadow crosses Malikah's face. "She's not your best friend."

Grace throws her hands up in exasperation.

“Ya know I’m right,” Malikah says, hands on hips. “And I’mma keep sayin’ it till you hear me. She’s like cancer and you gotta cut her outta ya life before she does any more damage.”

Grace shakes her head vehemently. “I don’t want to have this discussion again. Not today. All I want to do today is get married and I want everyone to be a part of it. *Everyone!* I have the rest of my life to sort out the good from the bad, to decide where Trina does and doesn’t fit, but for right now,” Grace says, a deep sigh escaping her lips. “I just want to walk down that aisle and claim my sliver of happiness.”

Malikah can’t help but smile at Grace standing before her, wearing a delicate tiara, long white gloves, a rock the size of Texas and a wedding dress that takes up half of the room. She looks like a princess straight out of a fairy tale.

“What?” Grace whimpers.

Malikah takes Grace’s hand and pulls her close. “You deserve more than a sliver,” she says. “You earned the whole pie.”

There’s a rap at the door. “My, my,” a familiar voice sings. “Look at you.” Grace’s face lights up at the sight of her dad, grandma Doria and grandpa Mearl.

“You clean up good, Girl,” her grandpa says, taking her in with one swift glance.

Her dad nods in agreement. “The most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

“A vision in white,” Malikah adds.

“What do you think, Grandma?” Grace holds her arms out and spins, a bit awkwardly given the dress’ full skirt and heavy train, to give her the full affect.

Tears spill from Doria’s eyes. “Your mother would be so proud,” she says, choking back a sob. “So proud.”

Grace fights the lump rising in her throat. The weeks leading up to the wedding were hectic and exciting and full of the kind of hope that only the promise of new beginnings can bring. Last minute decisions had to be made, details had to be finalized, reservations had to be confirmed and Grace handled it all in stride. But in the evening when the phone stopped ringing and the lights were turned out and everything was still, Grace stopped being a master negotiator. She was no longer an arbitrator, no longer a bride. The fittings and the flowers and the invitations stopped mattering – they stopped being real. The only truth Grace understood, the only truth that made a difference was that her mother was gone.

She wasn’t going to be there to help Grace into her dress or to watch her walk down the aisle. She wouldn’t make a toast or dance the night away. She wouldn’t be in the photos; she wouldn’t be part of the memories, and those realizations haunted Grace.

Each night, she was held captive by the same fierce agony and indescribable grief that sidled its way through her body when her mother first died. It consumed her bit by bit until she was paralyzed, unable to think or pray, unable to breathe.

Those are the times when she turned on her praise music or cracked open her Bible, when she called Mike and sank into his voice or got lost in fantasies of their future together. In fact, that’s how she’s made it *this* far – how she manages to press on when everything in her wants to give up. In the beginning it felt more like surviving than living, but as one day gave way to the next and weeks turned to months, the pain became less intense, less debilitating. She could laugh at a joke or enjoy a sunset without feeling guilty – without feeling as though her mother was fading.

That continues to be her biggest fear; that one day she'll wake up to discover she can't recall her mother's scent or that she's lost the sound of her voice, that someday she'll have to rely on photos to remember what her mother looks like.

But as she peers into her family's beaming faces, she's reassured that today isn't about losing memories, it's about making them.

Grace blinks back tears and nods. "Yeah, she would be."

"Alright that's enough," Mearl barks, swiping at his own tears. "You start cryin' now and you won't have anything left for the wedding."

Malikah laughs. "He's right."

"Go on and get your seats," Grace says giving each of her grandparents a hug before they leave.

"You ready?" Malikah asks, a knowing sparkle in her eyes.

"Of course she is," Grace's dad answers. "She was born for this."

The sound of crooning instruments wafts from the sanctuary as the string quartet begins to play Pachelbel's Cannon in D Major.

"That's my cue," Malikah sings. She gives Grace's hand one last squeeze before she jets out of the room to take her position among the long procession of flower girls, ring bearers, groomsmen and bridesmaids that make up the wedding party.

Grace grabs her bouquet and follows her dad into the church's lobby, where they take their place, arm and arm, at the end of the line up.

Pair by pair the elegantly clad chain of carefully selected friends and family shortens. First to saunter past the rows of packed pews are the three sets of bridesmaids and groomsmen. (Thanks to Malikah and Trina's constant bickering, Grace made the executive decision not to have a Matron or Maid of Honor). They each take their time, stepping in unison, just as they'd rehearsed the night before.

Next, the ring bearers, Malikah's two sons, toddle carefully down the carpeted walkway. They're four and five and absolutely adorable in their miniature tuxedos and cummerbunds. Threatened with the consequences of what would happen if they didn't take their ring carrying responsibilities seriously, they each hold their satin and lace pillow, which cradles a diamond encrusted wedding band, as though it's a nuclear bomb that might explode if dropped.

Finally the flower girls, in their lilac dresses and white Mary Jane's make their way down the aisle, dispersing liberal amounts of red and pink rose petals as they go.

Grace's heart skips a beat as she approaches the arched doorway on her father's arm, and Pachelbel's Canon in D gives way to "Here Comes the Bride." All three hundred guests rise to their feet.

Her stomach churns and for a second she thinks she's going to be sick. For a split second the sight of all those peering eyes makes her hands shake and her feet turn to ice. For just a second, anticipation morphs into anxiety.

But then her eyes lock with Mike's. He's standing in his tuxedo, his small, orderly dreadlocks fall neatly around his chiseled face. His eyes are just as tender, his lips just as soft, his shoulders just as broad, his heart just as golden and his love just as pure as when they first met. He's waiting for her with an unmistakable expression of pride and adoration. Without saying a word, without moving a muscle, he beckons her and just like that, everyone else disappears.

There's no music, no stained glass windows, no flowers, no church or pews, no bishop, no guests. There's only him and her as she processes down the aisle, her smile mirroring his. Their love is all that exists.

This is it! This is it! This is it!