

Embracing the Change

By Kristen Ashley

Teaser Chapters

Prologue

Valentino

Nora

Jamie pulled his lips from mine.

My first thought was to shout, “*No!*”

My second thought was that our kiss was so heated, so desperate, so deep, and it had lasted so...very...*long*, I needed oxygen.

I dragged in a breath.

In that space of time, Jamie took a step from me, meaning my arms were forcibly detached from where they’d been wound around his broad shoulders. Therefore, with nowhere to find purchase, they floated to my sides as I expended grave effort in solidifying my trembling legs beneath me.

I watched as he tore his hand through his dark hair, turned his head and looked at the floor.

My mind wasn’t working properly, considering it was busy dealing with not only allowing me to remain upright, but also the array of pleasant sensations coursing through my body. Sensations I hadn’t felt in so long, I forgot I could feel them.

But when my brain started to click in...

When what I was seeing in the haggard expression in Jamie’s handsome profile started to penetrate...

I felt a tightness start to form in the small of my back.

I was not feeling haggard.

For the first time since I met him all those many years ago, I was feeling hopeful.

And for the first time in years—nay, *decades*—I was feeling truly and completely *alive*.

“Jamie?” I whispered, and I didn’t like the tone of my voice. It was hesitant. Weak.

I was neither hesitant, nor weak.

Ever.

He looked to me, the drawn expression gone, there was a different tightness in his striking features now, and it corresponded with the steely light in his sky-blue eyes.

And his deep voice with that delightful touch of Texas twang he either couldn't or refused to filter out after all his years living in the city was firm when he stated, "That was a mistake."

If he'd slapped me across the face, I wouldn't have been more offended.

This was when I took a step back.

As my feet moved, those beautiful blue eyes framed with a fringe of thick black lashes dropped to my fabulous Valentino red Roserouche sandals, and when he looked at my face again, I was treated to yet another expression from the magnificent Jameson Morgan Oakley.

Chagrin and gentleness.

Though, not only that.

Worst of all (far worse)...understanding.

"Nora," he murmured, beginning to lift a hand my way.

"No," I said coldly.

His hand dropped and his lips thinned before he tried again. "Perhaps we should talk this through."

"I believe in the little you've said already that you've made yourself abundantly clear."

"I disagree," he replied.

"That's a problem for you," I returned.

"Damn it, Nora," he clipped. "Now, after what just happened between us, is not the time for you to get stubborn."

In that moment, I hated he knew me so very well. I *detested* that I'd let him in so thoroughly. I *abhorred* the fact, over the last few years, I'd given him everything he would allow me to give when I knew he had no intention of returning the favor.

Yes, our kiss had given me hope I'd been wrong about that last part.

And then he'd dashed that hope.

"I don't believe we have the kind of relationship where you're at liberty to tell me how I can behave." I paused, but not long enough for him to have the opportunity to speak. "No, wait. You're never at liberty to tell me how I can behave."

“What we have—”

I interrupted him. “We have nothing.”

I felt the arrow I’d nocked in the bow myself pierce my heart at my words—words (in my defense) that were coming from place of deep hurt—because I knew I took things too far even before I watched him flinch so fiercely, his head jerked with the gesture.

“Nothing?” he asked softly.

Not nothing! my mind shouted.

We were friends. We were very good friends. The best.

That had grown recently.

But we’d been something to each other for decades.

Something important.

Something beautiful.

I fumbled to walk that back. “Jamie—”

“No, Nora.” His voice was a sheet of ice forming between us. “Now I believe *you*’ve made yourself perfectly clear.”

Damn it!

He turned to my door and didn’t hesitate to walk to it.

I stood rooted to the spot, experiencing something the likes of which its occurrence in my life I could count on one hand.

A moment of indecision.

I had no earthly idea what to do, at the same time I knew I had to do *something*.

It was agony.

He opened the door but twisted back to me, his wide shoulder in his sublime bespoke suit jacket swinging with that mixture of strength and grace that was so inherently him, something about him (among many others) I found ludicrously attractive.

“Grow up, Ms. Ellington,” he ground out after his eyes fixed on mine. “It was just a fucking kiss.”

I blinked in shock, which was, apparently, what happened when you experienced a spasm of profound pain.

While I was still processing the strength of his blow, the door snicked shut behind him.

Chapter One

Calvin Klein

Nora

A number of years ago...

I sat alone in the ballroom of a notable hotel with a half-consumed martini resting on the table in front of me, watching my husband flirt with another woman.

This was not unusual. Roland was an inveterate flirt, and I wasn't too concerned about it.

Oh, make no mistake, it made me angry. It always made me angry.

So angry, the instant we arrived home, Roland and I would have a huge row, which would end in a sumptuously violent and all-consuming session of lovemaking.

Something to look forward to.

Nevertheless, people saw him doing it, and it never failed to be humiliating.

The only way to respond was to pretend I didn't care, a skill I performed so well, by the end of the evening, Roland would be infuriated, which harkened the volatility in his part of our lovemaking.

Even so, my eyes in a face that had assumed a deceptively entertained expression were resting on him, my fingers to the stem of my martini glass twisting it to and fro.

I was doing both wondering how I should approach Roland in a way he would actually listen to me and discontinue demeaning me in this manner (I could live without the makeup sex—our sex was all-consuming all the time, so, even if post-argument sex was fabulous, it wouldn't be a loss) when I felt someone sidle up to my side.

I turned my head to see a hotel employee bent toward me.

"Mrs. Castellini?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered.

"Your mother has sent me to get you. She says it's urgent."

I felt my brows draw together, but when Mother called, urgent or not, you came.

If it was urgent, you wasted no time doing it.

I abandoned my martini (alas) but grabbed my Judith Leiber and moved with the staff member out of the ballroom and through the hall crowded with the *crème de la crème* of New York glitterati. We were headed to where, in this hotel, which was used to host many a society function, was one of the more remote set of bathrooms.

The ladies being the facilities my mother always used when we were there.

When I saw two suited security guards standing outside, barring the door, my heart skipped a beat.

Was something wrong with Mother?

I hastened my step, and the staff member escorting me waved her hand to the guards at our approach. They each took a step to the side to clear my way to the door, but I didn't even glance at her or either of the guards as I pushed inside.

After I walked through the elegant lounge to where the basins and the stalls were, I stopped dead.

Mother was dumping what appeared to be vomit-covered towels into a basin.

And on her ass on the floor, propped against the back wall, her head with its extraordinary mane of strawberry-blonde hair lolling forward, her simple (but superlative) gold Calvin Klein slip dress askew and stained at the bodice, the skirt having ridden up to her shapely thighs, was the current belle of the hoi polloi.

Belinda Oakley.

I rushed forward, my heels clicking sharply on the tiles, asking, "What on earth?"

"Excellent," Mother said crisply. Having rid herself of the soiled towels, she turned to me. "You're here. Make certain she stays upright." She reached to a stack she'd clearly demanded of hotel staff and handed me a clean towel. "And see what you can do about her dress."

I made a face because contents expelled from a stomach were something I'd long since vowed I'd never deal with, and as such, with an iron will, I hadn't myself heaved in five years, and I'd certainly never been anywhere near someone else who'd done it. For my part, I'd not even done this when I had that horrible flu last winter, and Nanny dealt with my daughter Allegra's spit up.

"I'd say try to get some water in her, but I'm afraid it will come right back up," Mother carried on as I continued to grimace. "However, endeavor to do so. She needs hydration. And...Nora."

She said my name with such flinty inflection, as I'd been trained since cognition was even a glimmer of my existence, I focused entirely on her.

"No one comes into this room, except me and Oakley," she decreed.

With that, she swept out, I knew, to find Jamie Oakley.

Also, with that, I understood what was happening.

Mother liked Jamie Oakley.

Very much.

Further, Mother hated Jamie's father, AJ.

Even more.

I was well aware of the infamous incident that happened between my mother, the erudite, urbane Eleanor Ellington of the Manhattan Ellingtons, her pedigree so pure, there wasn't a big enough blue ribbon to stamp on it, and the rough and rowdy AJ Oakley of relatively new, and brash, and vulgar Texas oil money. Thrown into that inimical mix had been my father.

This incident was so well-known, even after all these years, everyone was aware of it. Including me, and it happened when I was a child.

Mother was...*Mother*.

She was also married at the time, and in their way, my parents were very much in love. Neither would ever stray, because, in Mother's words, "To do such, well..."—while delivering this pearl to me, at this juncture, she'd shivered with revulsion—"it's entirely crass, darling."

Upon reaching adulthood, I'd discovered not everyone, especially the men of our circle, but also quite a few of the women, held this same sentiment.

But as far as I knew, Mother and Dad did.

The story began when, at a party, AJ had slapped Mother's ass, which was inexcusable enough. However, he'd also done it with Dad right there.

He'd then declared loudly, for all to hear, "You get done with her, my man, I'll take that kind of sloppy seconds."

My father, Quincy Harrison Ellington, was a mild-mannered man. In the short years I'd been privileged to have him in them, I'd never so much as heard him raise his voice.

However, after his wife was assaulted in that manner, and then those words were uttered, he'd reportedly punched AJ Oakley with such force, the man was flat on his back on the floor.

My father stepped over his prone body and guided my mother away.

As you could see, quite the incident to make the rounds to the point it became lore.

It was my understanding AJ never set foot in New York City again, which, after such a mortifying debut, was understandable.

It was known widely that Jamie did not get along with his father. It was even hinted they hated each other.

Therefore, obviously, Mother thought Jamie had a good head on his shoulders, and he was one of the very few who, without jumping through hoops to get it, had her respect.

I knew she was off to find him, and doing it clandestinely, so no one would be the wiser about what was happening in that bathroom.

And I was stuck there with Jamie's gorgeous, and outrageously inebriated wife.

I knew another thing.

There was no way to get Belinda out of that bathroom without taking her through a hall crowded with people who would see her in this state, and that would travel like wildfire through the gossip channels of café society.

She'd be ruined.

And that would cling to Jamie.

This was why Mother had barred the door even to staff (because staff talked, and sometimes sold the tidbits that they'd witnessed).

I had to clean Belinda's gown as best I could (Lord help me).

I also had to try to get some water into her.

The first was imperative before it dried and got worse. Fortunately, Mother had tackled the worst of it. It was still unpleasant work.

Once I accomplished that, I went to the door and stuck my head out.

One of the security guards looked to me. "Can I have a carafe of ice water and a glass?" I then added, "Also a very strong cup of coffee."

He nodded.

"Please knock when it arrives," I continued. "I'll come fetch it."

Another nod, and I didn't wait for him to see to my request (I was an Ellington, and now a Castellini, I knew my request would be seen to *tout de suite*).

I headed back to Belinda.

I hadn't officially met her, or Jamie, though I'd seen them at several events since their triumphant arrival in the city.

She was flawless.

He was spectacular.

They were the It Couple: beauty, money, class, and for his part, it was known he was highly intelligent and lethally ambitious.

However, they (as was I, I had to remind myself, even if I didn't feel that way, as I never had) were young.

But this was an event to raise money for childhood leukemia. There were millions, maybe even billions of dollars in jewels and gowns and custom-tailored tuxedos and Italian shoes floating around that hotel.

This wasn't a frat party.

How on earth could she get in this state?

As I had this thought, she attempted to lift her head while slurring, "Jamie? Hun. I'm sho sorry. I promoish. Thish time, *I promish*, never again."

She then let her head fall.

It was the "this time" that got me, and when it did, a chill slid down my spine.

It was my understanding they had a child. An infant. He couldn't be more than one, or if so, not much older.

"Good Lord," I murmured.

The water came before Mother and Jamie did, and I was crouched, attempting to get the second half of the glass I'd poured for her down her throat when they arrived.

I turned my head and looked up at Jamie Oakley.

My husband Roland Castellini was the epitome of swarthy, masculine, sophisticated Italian/American good looks.

Jamie's features were not elegant or refined, but rugged and robust. He was more in line with the Marlboro Man than Armani. Which made all that was him, his tall, muscular frame encased in an impeccably tailored dinner jacket and trousers, incongruous in the most delightful ways.

I had this thought in a flash before the look on his face as he stared down at his wife washed it clean away.

Worry.

Anguish.

Heartbreak.

Oh yes, this wasn't the first time he'd seen his beautiful wife and the mother of his child in this state.

A knock came on the bathroom door, which prompted Jamie to continue his journey to his wife and brought me out of my crouch.

I looked to Mother. "I ordered a cup of coffee as well."

"Excellent idea," Mother replied. "Oakley, can you get her to the lounge?"

She didn't have to ask. As if she weighed as much as her slip dress, he'd already lifted Belinda in his arms, and with wide strides of his long legs, he was moving to the lounge.

I gave mother the glass of water and went to the door to fetch the coffee.

I took the tray from the waiter, which was full service, with a small pitcher of creamer, sugar bowl and a container of selections of sugar substitute, doing so with Mother hovering close so they couldn't see inside, even if I only allowed the door to be open wide enough so I could bring the tray in.

I set the tray down, stepped back, and saw that Jamie was on the couch with Belinda, her propped against his side, and Mother had given him the glass of water. He was doing much better—a practiced hand—at getting the liquid into her.

"I appreciate your time, and discretion, but you don't have to stay with us," Jamie murmured, not shifting his attention from what he was doing.

"I believe we do," Mother denied.

Jamie didn't argue, perhaps because he saw the benefits of having us there should they need anything further from the staff, perhaps because he knew of my mother, and as such, understood resistance was futile.

"How does she take her coffee?" I asked, feeling helpless, and oddly, a great deal more.

This centered around sadness...for him. Indeed, I felt such a depth of sadness for someone who was an absolute stranger, it was vaguely disturbing.

“With cream and three sugars,” he said, then he lifted his astonishing blue eyes to me. They were so astonishing, even in the circumstances, having them aimed at me for the first time, I felt my breath hitch. “But now, after I get another glass of water in her, she’ll take it black.”

I nodded.

As time went by, and liquids went into Belinda, she grew more in control of her body as well as more coherent.

She didn’t meet our eyes.

The pain had left Jamie’s affect, and tightly reined anger had replaced it, so she didn’t meet her husband’s eyes either.

“Would you like me to order another cup of coffee?” I offered.

“No,” he stated shortly. “Another fifteen, twenty minutes, she’ll be fine to walk out of here.”

Indeed, he had practice.

“I think now, we’ll leave you,” Mother announced.

Jamie looked up at us.

Belinda did not.

“Again, I appreciate all you’ve done.” His arm around his wife tightened. “We appreciate it.” He turned his head to Belinda. “Don’t we?”

“Yes, of course,” she murmured. “I’m sorry.” She lifted her gaze to Jamie. “I knew I shouldn’t have eaten those shrimp, hun.”

I knew as one who, against my will, came into close contact with her vomit, that was such a lie, I had to stop myself from rolling my eyes.

I was aided in this endeavor by Jamie assuming a *You are so full of shit* expression as he held her gaze.

She wasn’t so far gone she missed her husband’s expression.

“You know my stomach isn’t good with shellfish,” she said defensively.

“We’ll talk when we get home,” he said resolutely.

Her gaze, still vague, drifted from him.

I knew by the way it did, they’d talk.

She just wasn’t going to listen...or make an effort to change.

The sadness nearly overwhelmed me, making my legs weak.

It was definitely time to leave.

“If you need anything further, just ask the staff to find us,” Mother ordered.

“We’ll be fine,” Jamie told her.

“Of course,” she murmured, wrapped her fingers around my forearm and guided me to the door.

I couldn’t control the urge to look over my shoulder at him as we made our way to the door.

Thank you, he mouthed when I caught his gaze.

I’m so sorry, I mouthed in return.

He shook his head in a defeated manner that made rage—actual *rage*—boil inside of me.

I feared I didn’t hide it, and this fear came from the fact Jamie’s eyes widened in surprise as I experienced it.

Thus, it was fortunate, with Mother’s hand on my arm inexorably guiding my way out of the loo, the door closed between us.

* * * *

Several days later...

I arrived home with my Bergdorf shopping bags, Nanny with me, pushing Allegra in her stroller, only to be confronted by my husband in the foyer.

I stopped dead at witnessing the murderous look on his face.

I felt my cheeks flush with ire when he commanded Nanny, “Take our daughter to the nursery.”

Nanny, not having missed his mood, quickly moved to heed his command.

But I said, “Allegra and I—”

“*You* are coming with me,” Roland decreed.

He then turned on his Italian loafer and stormed out of the foyer.

I glared after him.

My husband and I had a...shall we say, *unusual* relationship.

However, I’d sought that purposefully.

Make no mistake, the quiet, genteel manner in which my mother and father regarded each other with respect, graciousness and only minor and rare gestures of affection was lovely, in its way.

But witnessing that until adulthood, then witnessing my mother losing it upon my father's passing and going on with her life as if my father had never been in it, hiding her grief, even from her children, I didn't want that.

I wanted adventure. I wanted passion. I wanted my lipstick smudging my husband's collar, telling anyone who would see it I couldn't keep my mouth off him. I wanted heated glances across the table that informed everyone around us they were gratuitous to our world, and we couldn't wait to be free of them so we could go at each other.

What I didn't want was every day to be the same. I didn't want the love I had with the man I decided to spend the rest of my life with only to be expressed behind closed doors.

And with the single-minded determination I began to show around the age of two (if the stories about myself I was told were true), I found that.

However, I was also finding there were downsides to getting what you wanted.

Taking in a steadying breath, I followed Roland to our living room.

I barely made it over the threshold before he hurled a large, exquisite crystal vase filled with glorious, long-stemmed yellow roses across the room. The vase hit the wall. The crystal shattered. The water splashed. The roses scattered.

"What the devil?" I demanded.

Roland whirled on me. "Explain to me...*precisely*...why Jamie Oakley is sending you roses?"

My stomach dropped, and it was far from an unpleasant sensation. Sadly, as a married woman—a married woman, I reminded myself, who was in love with her husband, no matter how exasperating he could be—the kind of sensation it was, was not one I should be experiencing.

"And thanking you," Roland continued. "Thanking you for what, Nora?" he asked. "Sucking his hillbilly Texas dick?"

Oh no.

Automatically, my chin lifted.

“You did not just speak those words to me,” I declared, each syllable frosted with a layer of chill.

“*Why is that man sending my wife flowers?*” he bellowed.

“Calm yourself,” I snapped.

“How would you feel if a woman sent me a gift?” he asked acidly.

“Exactly how I feel when you force me to watch you flirt with every blonde with fake breasts in your vicinity,” I retorted.

“And what?” He threw out his hands. “This is some kind of revenge for my harmless flirting, you fucking Jamie Oakley?”

I’d argue the “harmless” part of that, but I decided to do that later.

“I do not know Jamie Oakley,” I sniffed. “There was a situation with his wife having food poisoning at the leukemia gala that Mother and I dealt with, so I met him, of a sort. However, he was so busy seeing to his wife, he barely knew we were there.”

Yes, I was lying to my husband, but you see, when Eleanor Ellington demanded you keep a secret, you did. Even from your husband.

Regardless that Mother demanded it, Roland had a big mouth and a competitive streak. If he held the knowledge that Belinda Oakley had a rather alarming drinking problem, he would find a way to use it.

So...yes.

To wit, I was protecting Jamie, not to mention Belinda, from my husband.

“He knew you were there enough to send you flowers,” Roland pointed out.

“It was an unpleasant situation, and by the way, obviously Belinda also was there, and I’m assuming they speak to each other, so even if he was seeing to her, she could have told him we were the ones who helped her.”

“Belinda Oakley’s name isn’t on the card,” Roland noted.

Oh dear.

That was quite the oversight on Jamie’s part.

And...

How lovely.

I fought my lips curling up.

“And you didn’t tell me this because?” my husband prompted.

“Honestly, it slipped my mind.”

“It slipped your mind,” he repeated disbelievingly.

“I had a doctor’s appointment on Monday, Roland,” I reminded him.

“Yes, and now it’s Tuesday, so it’s been three days since the event when you could have shared with me you assisted Belinda Oakley in some dire food poisoning situation.”

“It wasn’t dire, she was fine. Eventually.”

“You still could have told me.”

Enough of this.

“Roland, I’m pregnant,” I announced.

His body jerked. His eyes blinked.

Then his lips spread in a blinding white smile reminding me just how handsome he was, and the next second, I was in his arms, and he was kissing me, reminding me why I put up with his antics.

Mm.

Yes, this was the good part of getting what you always wanted.

When he finished with the kiss, he whispered, “You drive me crazy.”

“That feeling is often mutual,” I replied.

He grinned at me before he kissed me again.

Crisis averted.

And all was good again with my husband.

My family.

My *growing* family.

For now.

* * * *

It would be several months before I saw Jamie Oakley again.

It was at lunchtime. I was in a restaurant, sitting alone at a table, for once early (rather than my usual late), waiting for a friend who would be joining me, when I noticed out of the side of my eye someone approaching.

I looked that way and up to see it was Jamie.

No, it wasn't the dinner jacket.

He was just... *transcendent*.

I smiled and moved to stand, but stilled when he lifted a hand, palm aimed my way, so I stayed seated while I waited for him to cross the last five feet to me.

When he arrived, he bent to kiss my cheek, and I scented the notes in his cologne were subtle hints of amber, pepper and tobacco.

Very him.

Very delicious.

When he lifted away, I murmured, "Jamie."

"Nora."

"Lovely to see you."

"And you."

"All's well?" I asked.

I knew I shouldn't have when the clouds overtook his eyes, but he smiled through them and lied, "Just fine."

"Good to hear," I lied in return. Then, to take us out of that unpleasantness, I went on to tease, "I must say, the flowers, I could tell, were magnificent. That is, from what I saw of them before my husband threw them against a wall in a jealous rage. You, or your assistant, mistakenly neglected to put Belinda's name on the card, I'm afraid."

"I don't make mistakes, Nora," he returned decisively. "Therefore, perhaps now, since he knows how it feels, he'll stop chasing skirt in front of his beautiful and kindhearted wife."

I couldn't contain my gasp.

And my gasp couldn't contain the warmth his words spread through the entirety of my body.

"I see you're expecting," he continued. "I wish *you* all the best."

You. With emphasis.

Not *you both*.

“Jamie,” I whispered.

“I’m right here,” he replied.

Yes, he very much was.

It took effort, but I finally found myself and grabbed hold.

As such, I informed him, “I’m not kindhearted. Ask anybody.”

Jamie shook his head. “I think you’ve learned by now we all wear masks, Nora. I don’t know what’s behind yours, and unfortunately for the both of us, as things are, I’ll never be in the place to find out.”

After delivering those morsels, morsels that were at the same time poison and ambrosia, he took my hand from the table. He then proceeded to bend over it, lifting it to his lips, where he brushed them against my knuckles. He replaced my hand to the table, completing a debonair act of yesteryear that was highly effective, and “as things were” between us, entirely bittersweet.

He was still bent to me, his eyes holding mine captive, when he murmured, “I hope you’re happy.”

“I am,” I replied quietly, and then to remind the both of us where we stood, I went on, “And Roland is over the moon.”

“He should be,” Jamie shot back, and the depth of meaning behind his statement was not lost on me.

Two could play that game.

“I hope you’re happy,” I repeated his words.

“My son is perfect.”

After saying that, his lips tipped up, and there was a trace of forlorn in his small smile.

I returned it in kind.

And with that, Jamie Oakley straightened and walked away from me.

Sadly, I wouldn’t reconnect with him in any meaningful way for years.

And when I did, we would both pine for the days when there was just a trace of forlorn to be felt.

***Embracing the Change* will be out in all formats September 10, 2024**

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