

DARE TO LOVE

by Francis Ray

-an exclusive short story-

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"Dare to Love"

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Dare to Love

She was watching him. Again.

Shane Elliott couldn't figure out why he felt Ruth Grayson's stare as surely as he felt the Mexican Caribbean's warm sun on his face, the white sand beneath his Italian loafers as he stood on the beach front of Blade Navarone's estate on Riviera Maya.

As a member of the Special Forces in the Army Rangers, his life had once depended on his instincts. He might have been a civilian for a long time, but watching Blade's back for the past fifteen years had kept his instincts honed.

At the moment Blade was dancing cheek to cheek with his new bride, Sierra. Both were barefoot, both had their eyes half closed as if savoring each moment. Ruth should have had her attention solely on them and not on Shane.

Ruth Grayson was the kind of mother every child should be blessed with. She fiercely loved her children and would fight anything or anyone to keep them safe and happy. If the talk he'd heard between the Grayson siblings and in-laws was right, Ruth had chosen the wife for each of her four sons. With the help of her sister-in-law, Felicia

Falcon, Ruth had placed in her sons' unwitting paths the woman they had been unable to resist.

On more than one occasion he'd heard Sierra tease her brothers that she had been the only one who had chosen her soul mate. Since her brothers were so obviously in love with their wives, they hadn't seemed to mind the teasing. It was the youngest brother, Pierce, who had pointed out that regardless, she was getting married, just as their mother had wanted.

So, why on what had to be one of the happiest days of her life was Ruth Grayson watching him as if he was a puzzle for which she had yet to find the missing pieces?

And this wasn't the first time.

Shane first noticed her watching him a week after they'd rescued Sierra from the kidnappers. Ruth had flown down to Mexico the day after Sierra arrived at the invitation-only party for those who had placed a deposit for a residence in Navarone Riviera Maya. Sierra hadn't wanted to miss the party or be away from Blade. And he'd felt the same way about her. Her mother had wanted to see Blade's estate where the wedding would be held.

Shane and Rio had been at the airport with Blade and Sierra when Ruth left customs. She'd hugged Sierra, then Blade. Shane had been mildly surprised when she'd reached for him next. He understood Ruth remained grateful that he had helped bring her daughter back safely. He'd quietly accepted the hug and kiss that she'd bestowed on him. Rio's reaction had been vastly different.

Shane's mouth curved into a smile as he recalled the stunned look that flashed briefly across Rio's usually stoic face. Ruth Grayson hadn't seemed to notice that Rio had stood as still as a statue in the embrace, then left the terminal as if his feet were on fire. He hadn't appeared again until Blade's private jet had taken Mrs. Grayson back to Santa Fe the next day.

Rio wasn't the touchy-feely type. Neither was Shane, but he handled social situations better than Rio, who, at the moment was on the outer perimeter of the wedding reception. Too many of the women in the wedding party had come on to him. Since all of the people there were invited guests and sworn to secrecy and therefore didn't pose any threat to Blade or Sierra's safety, Rio had left Shane to stick closest to the newlyweds.

Which brought Shane back to Ruth Grayson.

She knew better than he did that Blade and Sierra were safe, that there was no reason to watch them to ensure that neither he nor Rio let their guard down. They'd learned never to take anything for granted or at face value.

She knew Blade and Sierra were protected, and that the private wedding they wanted had been carefully planned because he'd heard them reassure her that hand-picked guards were posted around the perimeter of the estate.

No one was getting through unless Shane or Rio cleared it first. The guests were hand-picked as well and brought to Navarone Riviera Maya on three yachts belonging to business associates of Blade.

Shane slowly turned his head to find Ruth Grayson with her back to him, sipping from a champagne flute and talking to her sister-in-law, Felicia. He shook his head. Sierra's mother would have made an invaluable special agent. Not once had he been able to catch her watching him.

He imagined raising five children all alone after her husband died had kept her on her toes. Especially, if one was as bold and impulsive as Sierra. She didn't know fear, but if she did, she wouldn't be the woman for Blade.

"You want to dance?"

Shane smiled at the pretty young woman in front of him. Jet back hair flowed past her shoulders. Before the teenager approached him, Shane had seen her with three other young women about the same age, whispering and pointing at him. He idly wondered if she was family or if her parents were friends of the Grayson family. Sierra had had a difficult time paring down her list. Shane knew all of Blade's guests.

He'd bet anything the nervous teenager biting her lower lip was here on a dare. She didn't look over eighteen. There was an N for non-alcoholic beverage dangling from the champagne flute in her right hand. "No, thank you. Perhaps another time."

She swallowed, moistened her lips. "Are you sure?"

Shane's gaze flickered briefly over her shoulder, saw the others trying to watch them obtrusively, but failing miserably. "I'm sure. Would you like for me to get you another drink? I was about to get a mineral water."

Her eyes rounded to the size of saucers. "You would – I mean, yes, thank you."

Shane took her almost empty glass, set it on the sterling tray of a passing waiter, then plucked two flutes from one of the many circling waiters. He handed her one. The gesture afforded him an opportunity to see Blade and Sierra making their way toward Ruth and Felicia. "Here you go. Can I escort you back to your friends?"

She nodded, then flushed and said, "Yes, please."

Taking her arm, Shane took her to her friends. The eyes of the other teenagers grew wide. He stopped, smiled. "Are you ladies enjoying yourselves?"

More heads nodded. "Yes," they chorused.

"Good. Please excuse me." He turned to the young woman who had approached him. "Nice talking to you." Before he had gone five feet he heard the excited squeals and giggles. If only older women were so easily pleased or so easy to read.

Shane's smile disappeared. He'd trusted the wrong woman and paid the price. So he'd walked away and had never looked back. Since then no woman had been able to move him...until three months ago when he'd met a woman he couldn't forget while protecting Blade. She hadn't presented a threat to Blade, but since then she'd certainly played havoc with Shane's peace of mind.

Annoyed with himself for not being able to forget the incident, he scowled, causing the attractive brunette heading straight for him, to pause, then head in another direction. He rubbed the back of his neck.

Why did she keep popping into his head at the most inopportune time? He didn't have an answer to the question and that bothered him most of all. There had never been a situation that he couldn't resolve or a problem he couldn't find the answer to.

Determined to keep his mind on the matter at hand, his gaze moved over the guests. Blade had just finished dancing with Ruth, and was talking to Sierra and Luke. Felicia and her husband were headed toward the small fleet of speed boats used to transport the guests. Apparently they were going back to the yacht.

Shane took a sip of mineral water and watched Ruth circulate through the crowd. Given time, he'd figure it out.

Ruth recognized when a woman had something on her mind. Joann Albright had that look. Everyone might be enjoying themselves, but she was standing several yards away from the festivities. Although Ruth didn't believe in sticking her nose into other

people's business – unless, of course, it was one of her five children – she knew of the woman's painful past and felt sorry for her.

Ruth, with a mother's unwavering love and devotion, could easily understand why lines of worry were etched in Joann's forehead. She had found a child she thought lost to her, but by doing so she stood to lose her other two children.

"Hello, Joann. Thank you for coming."

Startled, Joann swung around from staring out to sea to face Ruth. From the surprised look on her face she hadn't heard Ruth approach and didn't have the faintest idea what she had said.

Ruth smiled to put the other woman at ease. "Thank you for coming and sharing in Blade and Sierra's special day."

A semblance of a smile touched the other woman's lips. "Thank you for allowing me to come." Joann looked toward the guests, lingering on Trent and Dominique, who, along with the other adults was engaged in a dance-off contest with the teenagers. "It was a beautiful wedding. Everyone is having so much fun."

"Except you."

Again Joann appeared startled. Impeccably dressed in an ice blue evening suit, her hand went to the lustrous strand of pearls at her throat. "I---"

Ruth gently touched her arm. "You're part of the family now. I hope you know I wouldn't pry or try to embarrass you, but if there is anything I can do to help, please let me know. You only have to ask."

Joann lowered her hand and studied Ruth for a moment, then glanced at the dancers again. "Your children are so happy."

"Yes." Ruth's gaze followed. Sierra and Blade with Brandon and Faith, were leading the adults in the Electric Slide. "My prayer and fondest wish was for each of them to find their soul mate. I thank the Master of Breath and God for each day that they have."

"You helped," Joann said.

Ruth smiled. "Sometimes children need guidance even when they're adults."

"Yes." Joann bit her lower lip. "What would you do if an unscrupulous person tried to harm one of your children?"

Fury flashed in Ruth's eyes. "Whatever it took to protect them."

Joann nodded. "Trent and Dominique said I could trust you."

"You can."

"It's my daughter, Paige. A man is trying to use her." Joann's hand clenched on her small jeweled purse. "I'm at my wit's end trying to think of a way to protect her from him."

"Daughters can be headstrong," Ruth said, thinking of Sierra who would challenge the devil, and had been the most difficult of her children to raise. "Talking doesn't always help. They have to find out for themselves."

"He'll hurt her." Joann's cultured voice quivered. "She's grown up sheltered. I want her to find the kind of love and happiness Dominique and Trent have found, the kind your children have found. She works with foster children, helping them transition, protecting and guiding them. Now she's in need of a protector."

Ruth's eyes narrowed. She looked back at the group of dancers, then beyond to where Shane stood on the sideline, ever watchful, ever ready to protect. "Please tell me a little bit more about the situation. I might know the perfect person to help."

"How much longer?" Rio asked.

Shane glanced at his second-in-command beside him. Rio's bow tie and tailored tuxedo jacket were gone, his now loose, long hair black lifted slightly in the cool breeze, his chiseled cheekbones were never more evident than now in his clenched jaw. "I guess you're not having fun."

Rio's expression didn't change. His black eyes remained locked on Shane.

"I forgot you don't have a sense of humor," Shane said.

Rio grunted.

Shane shrugged. "Who knows. This is my first wedding reception as well."

Rio hissed under his breath. "If I didn't love Blade like a brother...."

Shane understood and nodded. "You have to admit, Sierra is good for him."

"They can't keep their hands or lips off each other," Rio said, a hint of incredulity in tone.

"You helped them get together," Shane reminded him.

"We both did," Rio told him. "As you said, she's good for him. But I wish this would end."

Shane nodded as his gaze searched the crowd and found Ruth, who made him uneasy. "Have you noticed that Sierra's mother watches us a lot?"

"Yeah. I try to stay clear of her."

Shane grinned. "Afraid of another hug?"

"Since you're so smart you can handle the two women heading this way."

Shane saw the disappointment in the women's faces as Rio slipped away as quietly as he had come. In the Rangers unit they'd nicknamed him "Smoke" for his ability to get in and out of a seemingly impossible situation undetected. He could track anything, as he'd proven by finding Sierra when she'd been lost in the jungle.

Guessing that the women bearing down on him would be more difficult to please and to get away from than the teenager earlier, Shane circled the reception guests. He had gone about twenty feet when he saw Ruth once again.

This time their gaze met. She smiled brilliantly at him as if she'd finally found the piece to the puzzle.

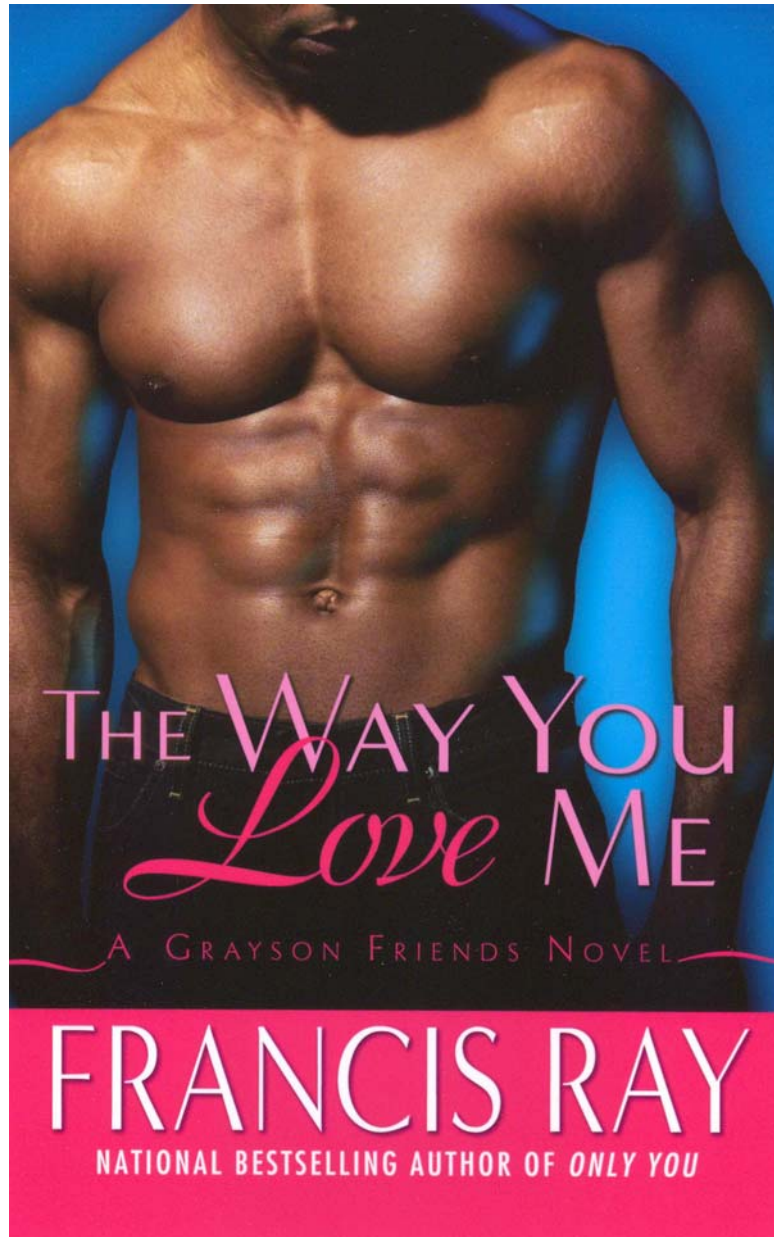
The hairs on the back of Shane's neck prickled. The same thing happened when something wasn't right or he was in danger. He trusted his feelings because they had kept him alive, but he couldn't imagine why Sierra's mother would cause such a reaction. He shrugged it off and continued to circulate.

Ruth Grayson couldn't possibly pose any threat to him or to Rio or be interested in them past their protecting her daughter and new son-in-law.

Could she?

-end-

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