



PERFECT

Together

CARLY
PHILLIPS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Perfect Together
Serendipity's Finest Series

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Carly Phillips

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Published by CP Publishing

Kindle Edition

Cover Photo: Sara Eirew

Cover Design: Maria @steamydesigns

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Excerpt from Perfect Strangers

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About the Author

Chapter One

SOMETHING ABOUT BEING a Marsden made people think if they asked for a favor, Sam—the younger brother and the *good* cop—would be nice and accommodating. Take how his sister-in-law, Cara, was looking at him with big, pleading eyes, fully expecting him to agree to her beyond-unreasonable request.

“There is no way in hell I’m going on a date with Margie Simpson,” Marsden glared at Cara, a woman he usually also called his best friend across their respective desks at the Serendipity police station.

“Her last name is Stinson, not Simpson, and you know it.” Cara flipped back at him. “Come on, Sam. Her parents are the biggest donors of the Women’s Heart Health fundraiser, and the Serendipity Police Department is a co-sponsor. Do you want to be the one to tell the hospital, who will be the recipient of that shiny new medical equipment, that the Stinsons pulled out of the donation because one of our finest wouldn’t escort their daughter?”

“She’s more like a pit bull,” Sam muttered. “And isn’t there a single cop you can get to take her? What about Hendler?”

“He’s too old.”

“Martini?”

She shook her head. “Too young. Besides, Margie wants to go with me.”

He shuddered. “All the more reason for me to say no. I don’t want to go with her the wrong idea.” Margie was one of those women who assumed that a look implied male interest. Sam didn’t want to go there. No way, no how.

“Are you giving my wife a hard time?” Sam’s brother, Mike, strode over to Cara’s desk and placed a possessive hand on her shoulder.

“More like she’s giving me one. Call her off, will you?” Sam asked.

Mike laughed and shook his head. “I like my life just the way it is, bro. You’re on your own.”

Sam rolled his eyes. Ever since his bachelor brother had fallen—for Sam’s sometime partner, Cara, he was now wrapped around her cute little cowboy boots. When she wasn’t in uniform, that is. Wh

went, Mike followed. Sam was happy for him. The problem was, single friends were dwindling fast. First, Dare Barron, then Mike, and their sister, Erin, had fallen.

Sam wasn't jealous, but he could admit that his life and the routines he always enjoyed were growing stale around him. But that didn't mean he was open to marriage, let alone escorting the female from hell, even for a noble cause.

Cara rolled a pencil between her palms. "Do you already have a date?" she asked.

"Hell, no," Mike said before Sam could answer. "He hasn't dated in longer than I can remember. In fact, the last woman who really interested him—"

No, he would not let his brother go *there*. "Don't you have an office?" Sam asked. "Get back to?" Sam pointed at the police chief's workroom at the back of the station house.

Mike grinned. "Not when this is so much more fun."

Cara elbowed him in the stomach. "Go. I'll have more luck if you stop here poking fun at him and making this worse."

Mike shrugged. "Hey, it's not my fault he's such an easy target."

"Now that you're happily married, you're an even bigger pain in the ass," Sam muttered.

Mike smirked and kissed his wife on the lips, lingering way too long before he finally walked—make that swaggered—away.

"Get a room."

"You too could find true love," Cara said, leaning closer. "We can help that for you."

But Sam didn't want that for himself. He'd tried, come close, and failed in the biggest possible way. As a cop, he trusted his instincts, but what came to women? To relationships? To personal choices? Not so much.

His so-called gut instinct had hurt one good friend, and his gullibility had led to him being betrayed by his fiancée and best friend. His family? Sorry, only some of the reasons he remained wary of trusting his personal instincts and with his siblings settled down, Erin with a husband and a baby, they all turned up the pressure on him.

Cara leveled him with a serious stare. "I'm not asking you to date Margie. Just accompany her to the benefit. Make nice and go home. C

Sam's do that for me? For Mike and the police station? Please?" Cara bat
id even eyelashes over her big blue eyes.

She'd been his best friend long before she became involved with
es he'd and he'd have thought he was immune—except now she was also his
he was and he didn't like turning her down. Besides, as she'd pointed c
a good fundraiser was for a good cause, and he'd be representing the police fo

He blew out a disgusted breath. "You're only doing this because
date?" say no to you," Sam muttered, shuddering at the thought of accomp
the one woman in town who sent fear into any single man's heart.

anyone "Is that a yes?" Cara tapped her pencil against the blotter on the de
motely expression almost gleeful.

"Yeah," he muttered, knowing he would absolutely live to reg
ffice to decision.

κ of the "Yay!" She jumped up and hugged him tight before resettling hers
the chair behind her desk. "This is *perfect*! One huge problem taken ca
knew I could count on you."

u aren't *Yeah, perfect*, Sam thought, hating that word even more than usual
"Hey, I promise Mike and I will stick by you all night. I won't lea
alone with that leech."

he ass," Sam narrowed his gaze. "So now you admit she's a leech."

Cara didn't look up or meet his gaze, but the red flush in her cheek
o longer away. Yeah, he was a patsy for his sister-in-law and a good cause.

"You know," Cara said, peering out from beneath her long fr
lashes, "you could avoid this whole kind of thing if you'd just—"

ill want Find a woman of his own. "Let it go," he said in response to her un
words.

d failed "Okay, but Mike's right. The last woman who interested you was—

when it "Let. It. Go." Sam set his jaw.

"Fine. I won't say her name." Cara buried herself in work at her de
lity had she'd accomplished her mission.

y knew She'd brought up the one female in more than a decade who'd ma
instincts, want to drop his guard and rethink his vow not to get emotionally ir
ey'd all with any woman ever again. But Nicole Farnsworth, the raven-haired
who'd triggered his current state of discontent, had left town months a
o marry she wasn't coming back.

Can you

ted her



1 Mike, NICOLE FARNSWORTH PACKED up her clothing and the last of her things family, to convince herself she was moving, not running away. In fact, she'd put out, the to leave Manhattan since deciding to end her engagement, but now in force. just the excitement of beginning a new life, she felt the dual need to fl

I can't closed her eyes and drew a deep breath. Nothing she could do but get anything away—and do some soul-searching, during which she hoped to find

ask, her even freedom in her hands?

The doorbell rang, and she looked into the peephole, unwilling regret the chances by just opening her door. She stared into the familiar, if unwelcome face of her mother, who, as usual, was perfectly dressed in a Chanel self into and wool slacks.

are of. I Suppressing a groan, she opened the door and let Marian Farr inside.

ive you Before Nicole could say hello, her mother launched into one typical tirades. “No sane woman breaks off her engagement to a handsome extremely wealthy man. One you grew up with, might I remind you? his family are in business with your father. What were you thinking?”

ks gave Nicole walked into the family room and leaned against the nearest knowing not to give her mother an edge by sitting down. “I was thinking of I shouldn't marry a man I don't love.”

spoken Her mother joined her in the room filled with the remaining waiting to be loaded into her car. She folded her arms across her chest pinned Nicole with her disappointed stare. “What does love have to do with anything?”

ask, but Nicole did not want an explanation for that bit of insanity. It meant have to look more deeply than she cared to into her parents' minds.

de Sam Instead, she drew a deep breath and promised herself she'd be on her feet soon.

involved “Nicole, it's insane to think someone like you needs to worry about beauty match.”

ago and She shrugged. “You know as well as I do, sanity doesn't run in my family.”

“Don't talk that way about your sister,” her mother chided,

looking to hide Victoria's mental instability, as if being bipolar carried the stigma Marian couldn't bear to admit to in her family.

, trying The irony was Nicole hadn't been talking about Victoria, merely a planned a not-so-subtle joke.

stead of "Darling, you need to call Tyler and beg him to forgive you."
ee. She Nicole had heard this before. "No." And she had more important things to—getworry about than her mother's reaction to her breaking her engagement clarity.the illegal activities Nicole had overheard her ex-fiancé's father and accountant discussing—and what she was going to do about

Considering, as her mother reminded her, that the partnership of Farr and Stanton Financial Investments affected both families, Nicole welcome, distance to study all the angles.

l jacket Such as, did Nicole's father know that his partner was accepting from mob-connected companies and funneling that money into investmentsworthfrom which they all made millions? Did her ex-fiancé Tyler know?

"Nicole," her mother said, snapping her fingers in front of her of her "You're not listening to me."

idsome, "Because I have things on my mind. Like moving." Not just so she He and get away and think, but so she could forge a new life where people would to know and like Nicole for herself, not her family's connections.

st wall, Her mother's face flushed red at the reminder. It was amazing being that woman could ignore the evidence in front of her: the boxes, packing tape clothing covered by heavy-duty bags. "You have to reconsider. This boxes situation is humiliating in the extreme. Not to mention, you have est and Tyler's mother is running for borough president, and you're her number do with fundraiser. She needs you."

"I gave her notice. My assistant is capable and ready to take over it she'd be fine."

arriage. "You'll cause a rift between the families," her mother pushed on.

ier way Nicole stiffened, not missing the irony. Growing up, she'd sought parents' approval and attention by being good and kind and perfect— t a love success. But now, when she no longer cared what her family thought choices, she'd accomplished her goal. Her mother was here, paying attention in our to her life, begging her to help them.

"The Stantons won't hold my choices against you."

always "Nicole!"

married a “No. Stop it. I told you before. I’m not going back to Tyler. I don’t want to go back to Tyler. I should have realized it long before now.” And the reasons she was making were glaringly obvious in light of her mother’s callous disregard for her daughter’s feelings.

She’d desperately wanted someone to love and approve of her, and unlike her parents, had been kind and caring. He paid attention to her. Like he’d given her everything she’d yearned for in her emotionally deprived childhood. Unfortunately, Nicole had mistaken her gratitude toward him for love. And she’d hurt Tyler in the process.

It had taken her sister’s downward spiral and Nicole’s resulting relationship with a sexy small-town cop to point out to her exactly what she didn’t want. She’d married her then-fiancé. Desire, excitement, the pounding of her heart every time he touched her. Money was near. She’d settled for less every minute of her childhood. She couldn’t bring herself to do it in marriage.

Nicole realized her mother was still staring at her with frustration on her face. Disappointment in her expression.

“It’s better I made the decision now than after the wedding,” Nicole said. She couldn’t hold her.

Marian huffed. “Just when did I teach you that fairy tales come true? You never did.”

Without so much as a word, not *good luck* or even *goodbye*, her mother turned and stormed out the door.

Nicole swallowed the lump in her throat. Her mother hadn’t changed in all of Nicole’s twenty-eight years. But Nicole had. With this move, she wasn’t looking for some improbable happy ending. All she wanted was a life of her own that fulfilled *her* dreams and desires, not her impossible-to-please family.

So she was heading to the one place where she’d found a sense of peace despite the insanity—no pun intended—that had brought her to the small town in Upstate New York. She hoped that once there, she’d figure out the right thing to do about the information she’d stumbled over.

Nicole was ready for Serendipity. She just hoped the perfect Serendipity were ready for her.



One of the things Nicole liked about Serendipity was its old-fashioned charm. Where else could you find a diner-slash-restaurant named The Restaurant? After spending the morning moving into her new apartment

Joe's Bar, she decided to eat dinner out and go food shopping tomorrow. She sat at the counter, happy to just soak in the atmosphere, and finished a delicious plate of meatloaf and mashed potatoes when a red-haired woman approached her from behind the counter.

"Wait. I know you," the woman said, her gaze narrowing.

Nicole met the other woman's concerned stare, well aware of the meaning for the worry in her eyes. The one thing that had concerned Nicole when moving here was being mistaken for her twin. But the pull of the small town she had been strong, and despite Victoria's actions, people here hadn't forgotten Nicole, at least not once she'd tried desperately to help them find her twin.

Nicole wanted to give them the same benefit of the doubt. "Don't believe we've met."

"I'm Macy Donovan. Occasional hostess, server, you name it. My twin owns the restaurant. Aren't you—"

"Nicole Farnsworth," she chimed in quickly.

"So you're not Victoria? The psychopath who—"

"No," Nicole said, cutting her off before she could elaborate on Victoria's crimes. When her sister went off her medication, anything could happen. "She's my twin."

Macy's cheeks turned red in embarrassment. "Sorry, but she hurt me. . . . Never mind."

Nicole winced. "I expected to deal with the fallout if I moved here. . . . No, Macy raised her eyebrows. "Yet you still decided to see about Serendipity?"

"Yes, I did." She squared her shoulders, intending to communicate to Macy Donovan that not only was she sure of her decision but she wasn't about to be bullied because of her sister's illness. Her twin was in a mental health facility, living with the consequences of her actions.

"Listen, I'm blunt but I'm not judging you," the woman said. "Erin Marsden's my best friend, and your sister stalked her for months."

Nicole grimaced at the reminder.

"But Erin told me you helped them find where your sister was hiding, and she said you came to town in the first place to warn her and Cole."

shionedtruce?” Macy held out her hand.

Family Letting out a deep breath, Nicole accepted the other woman’s
nt overoffering. “Thanks.” From inside her purse, her phone chimed, calling
w. attention.

rad just “I’m going to do a few things in the back. I’ll come out again in
a dark-minutes,” Macy said, leaving her alone to take the call.

A quick look told her it was her ex-fiancé, so she blew out a bre
hit Decline. She’d explained everything in person, so there was no re
reasonrehash things. His call only reminded her of what she still needed
e aboutwith, but she wasn’t any closer to a decision. Should she confront he
ill townand ask what he knew of his partner’s accounts? Should she ask Tyler’s

judged She’d stood outside the office of her own father—a man she didn’t
win. all that well, as he certainly never made an effort to spend time with h
I don’tchild—and as she raised her hand to knock on the open door, she’d
There’d been no question that she’d mistaken the spoken words.

family Robert Stanton and the firm accountant had specifically said the
laundering money from the Romanovs, a father and son who were kn
dealers in Los Angeles. *The Russian mob*, she thought, her stomach ch

Their entire business could crumble, not to mention they could all en
ctoria’sprison. Her stomach in knots, she’d turned to run, but Nicole’s father
ppen—up to her at that very moment. He’d called out her name, which, i

brought Robert and Andre, the accountant, out into the hall to greet the
a friend The look Andre had given her chilled her even now. She told he
couldn’t possibly know she’d heard anything. But she had. Which me
.” didn’t need to worry just about her family and the business but also ab
ttle inmen on the other side. Dangerous men.

Should she go to her father with the truth? If he already knew ab
icate topartner’s illegal dealings, she wouldn’t accomplish anything except
wasn’t herself. If Paul Farnsworth was in the dark, he probably wouldn’t beli
riminaldaughter’s word over his longtime partner’s. Nicole’s own mother
remain in useless denial even if confronted, and Tyler’s mother’s main
. “Erinof campaign funds was her husband. No way would she risk usin
money. So she ruled out her being aware. Which left the police—a
wasn’t ready for that yet.

ing out, And what about Tyler? She knew he was honest to a fault. She c
So . . . imagine him allowing illegal dealings to go on any more than she

envision his father involving him. He'd grown up as heir to the pro
s peacethrone—entitled, privileged—and to his credit, he rarely acted the role
for her bestowed on him. She had to assume they'd keep him squeaky clean.

But again, she couldn't rely on assumption. The unknown playe
n a few just too dangerous.

Macy picked up a towel and wiped down the counter. "So what
ath and you to Serendipity?"

ason to *Easy answer*, Nicole thought. "A fresh start."

to deal Macy grinned. "Because you liked it so much your first time aroun
r father Nicole laughed, grateful for this chatty woman and the distract
? provided. "That too. Seriously. Considering the reason I was here, th
't know and the people made an impact."

er as a Macy leaned on the counter. "It just so happens that there's a fur
heard. this weekend to raise money for women's heart health. I'm selling
and you should come!"

y were Nicole hesitated; the thought of walking into a big event all alone
own artsomething she was ready to face. "I don't know. I mean, I'm new in to
urning. "All the more reason to go where you can meet people! Dates
d up inrequired. I'm not going with anyone, so we can hang out. What do you
r strode Nicole figured Macy was right—as far as it being a good way to
in turn, know people—and now that Macy had invited her to join her, she fe
m. comfortable.

rself he Before Nicole could answer, her new friend chimed in once mor
ant shefor a good cause. The police department is co-sponsoring the event, ar
out thethis place is basically like a doughnut shop for Serendipity's Finest, I
to pimp tickets for them. Please?" Macy was nothing if not persistent,
out hisenthusiasm was infectious.

to out So was the fact that the police sponsorship guaranteed Sam M
ieve hiswould be at the event. And she'd like to see him again . . . "Okay."

would "Yay!" Macy's smile dimmed. "But it's expensive since
sourcefundraiser."

ig dirty "How much?"

and she "Seventy-five dollars."

Nicole nodded. She had a plan for her life that included opening h
ouldn'tbake shop, but not right away. She needed to research the area and s
e couldcould sustain what she had in mind. Which meant she needed a job w

verbalplotted her future. In the meantime, she had the trust fund her grand
: they'dhad left her, something that irked her parents to no end since it mea
couldn't control what she or Victoria did.

rs were Nicole didn't plan to blow through the money frivolously, and she
it for her business venture, but it did enable her to rent the apartm
: bringscover the cost of living until she got on her feet. As far as she was con
getting to know people in her new town and supporting a worthwhile
certainly fell under that heading.

d?" "No problem." She met Macy's gaze, and the other woman smiled
ion she "Great! Oh. Another thing."

ie place Nicole leaned forward on her arms and waited. Clearly, she
someone in the know.

idraiser "Cocktail attire."

tickets, "Also not a problem." She'd packed up everything she owned,
thanks to Tyler and his mother's world, included formal and cocktail
was notbut she'd kept out a few favorites.

wn—" "That was easy," Macy said.

s aren't Nicole grinned. "I try."

! say?" "So are you interested in a primer on your new hometown?"

o get to "I'm all ears."

lt more Macy propped a hip on the counter, relaxed and happy to
"Wednesday night is Ladies' Night at Joe's. You should join us—
e. "It'sdepends on who is free because there's been way too many marria
id sincebabies lately, so the ladies and the men are dwindling. But not f
agreedbecause you're new to all the men and they'll all be new to you. So
and hercome to that too?"

Nicole nodded, pleased to have plans. "Absolutely."

!arsden "Great." Macy looked toward the front door and the family
entered. "I have to go seat people. If I don't have time to talk more to
it's aseeyou Wednesday? Seven o'clock."

Nicole smiled as the other woman headed off to do her job.

She liked Macy Donovan, and it seemed like Macy had already a
Nicole. She hoped everyone else in Serendipity felt the same way.

ier own
see if it
hile she



As on a typical Wednesday night, Sam met up with some guys from the station at Joe's Bar. Josh Mercer had bought the current round and the drinks were flowing freely. Mike and Cara walked in, followed by his sister and her husband, Cole.

"Looks like it's family night," Sam said, calling them over. "How did you two get away?"

Erin had had a baby six months ago and rarely left her daughter's side. His sister greeted him with a kiss on the cheek. "Mom showed up and practically shoved us out the door. She said we needed a break, and we needed time with Angel." The hazel eyes she shared with Sam lit up when she mentioned her baby daughter.

Cole slipped an arm around Erin's waist, greeting Sam with a nod. "I've already called home twice to remind your mother about the time of her bottle and what to do if she cries."

"Like she didn't raise three of us?" Sam teased his sister.

"Funny," Erin said to her brother.

Sam still couldn't believe they'd gone from his sister getting pregnant after a one-night stand with Cole Sanders, undercover cop with no intention of remaining in town, to being a happily married couple and concerned parents.

"All my favorite people are here!" Sam turned at the sound of Erin's voice.

Erin spun and gave her best friend a hug.

"How is that adorable goddaughter of mine?" Macy asked.

"Cute as ever." Erin beamed.

"Hon, want to go get a drink?" Cole asked her.

Erin nodded.

"Anyone else want anything?" Cole asked.

"I'm good," Macy said.

"Me too," Sam added.

Erin and Cole walked toward the bar, leaving Sam alone with Macy. Macy was his sister's best friend, so he was used to her being around.

"Hi, Macy. How are you?"

"Hi yourself." Her smile, as usual, was infectious. "I'm good. I'm good. You?"

He shrugged. "Same old."

om the She shook her head, her long dark hair falling over one shoulder. She sighed. “You so need to get laid.”

r, Erin, Sam rolled his eyes, not surprised by her outgoing ways. In addition to her blunt manner, she was beautiful, sort of exotic, her Italian heritage did show through. If she hadn’t been like family, he might have looked at her differently—until she started busting his balls, that is. She wasn’t for him, but not for anyone else. She’d give some guy a run for his money.

up and She glanced around, a frown furrowing her brow. “Where’s Nicole?”
and she Sam whipped his head around to meet her gaze. “Who?” He had never heard of her. That or it could be another Nicole. It was a common name.

“She’s” Macy scanned the crowds before refocusing on Sam. “You probably don’t know her? Nicole Farnsworth, the stalker’s sister? She’s new in town, just moved into the room over Joe’s. I invited her to meet me here tonight.”
She glanced at her watch, and her concerned expression turned to a frown. “It’s a bit late. You haven’t seen her, have you?”

regnant Sam expelled a harsh breath. Nicole had moved here? Months of talk about her and she was now as close as upstairs?

overly “Maybe she’s uncomfortable, not knowing anyone . . . and considering she’s a stalker’s sister, I should go check on her.”
Macy shoved her glass at Sam. “Hold this for me?”

Sam shook his head. “I’ll go.”

Macy narrowed her gaze and stepped into Sam’s direct path. “So you don’t know her?”

He nodded, his heart racing at the thought of seeing her again. No one had ever made him feel so many things in such a short time. Provoked, aroused, attracted . . .

“And you’re interested,” Macy concluded in the wake of his silence.

“No comment. I’m going upstairs. You can hold down the fort here for me.”
time, he handed her his beer bottle.

cy. She Macy watched him, her stare too perceptive for his liking.

“And do not give my sister or brother the wrong impression. I just want to say hi and welcome her to town. Make sure she feels comfortable enough to come down and join us.”

“If you say so, Detective,” she said, using his brand-new moniker.

He still wasn’t used to the title or the promotion, but he’d worked hard

er, and it, and nepotism—his brother being chief—had nothing to do with his position.

He turned and headed for the back entrance of the bar and slipped out the door. As soon as he hit the top of the stairs and stood outside the apartment door, he paused. Everyone he knew had lived here at one time or another, from Faith and Kelly Barron, to his brother, Mike, and then Erin's husband, Cole. The place was a revolving door, a pit stop before people settled in for good.

Now Nicole.

He'd known her for a short time, when she'd been in Serendipity trying to find her missing sister, who it turned out had been stalking Erin. Sam had probably seen her lurking outside Erin's condo, assuming she was her psychotic twin. Nothing about Nicole was unstable . . . and she'd made a profound impression on Macy Sam. From her dark hair to her big beautiful blue eyes, he felt like he'd seen her inside her soul.

During their first meeting, she'd been scared, then defiant, but ultimately she came to admire how she'd handled herself while in that small interrogation room. But the real turning point between them had come when Cole was arrested. She'd immediately turned to Sam, assuming she could trust him more than anyone else. She hadn't been wrong. And not just because he had a reputation for being the *good cop* in any scenario. With Nicole, the protective surveillance he experienced surpassed the normal duties of his job. It made no damn sense to you do him then, and it still didn't now. Hell, her draw scared him as much as she pulled him toward her.

Once her sister had been arrested, Nicole had gone back to the city. She belonged before Sam could act on any stupid sexual or deeper impulse. He hadn't had an emotional connection with any female. Jenna's betrayal, and he wouldn't allow himself to be hurt that way again. But none of that seemed to matter now that *she* was back in town.

Sam couldn't imagine why Nicole had opted to move to Serendipity. There was one way to find out. Raising his hand, he knocked on her door. He wanted to know enough to know.

ward for

it, and nepotism—his brother being chief—had nothing to do with his new position.

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Once her sister had been arrested, Nicole had gone back to the city where she belonged before Sam could act on any stupid sexual or deeper impulse he might have. He hadn't had an emotional connection with any female since Jenna's betrayal, and he wouldn't allow himself to be hurt that way again. But none of that seemed to matter now that *she* was back in town.

Sam couldn't imagine why Nicole had opted to move to Serendipity—but there was one way to find out. Raising his hand, he knocked on her door.

Chapter Two

NICOLE HAD SPENT the past couple of years—oh hell, why not admit it spent her entire life wearing, saying, and doing what was appropriate expected of her. Not wanting to disappoint her parents, she'd always taken the path of least resistance, at least until she'd broken her engagement.

Tonight was the first time she could wear exactly what she wanted true to herself. Yet instead of being downstairs meeting new friends, she stood in front of her closet, unsure of . . . everything.

The good news was, although she'd spent her time in skirts and blouses, Chanel-style jackets, and pearls like her mother, that hadn't stopped her from buying the kind of items she wished she could wear. On her way out of town, she'd dropped off all her Nicole Farnsworth, dutiful-daughter appropriate items at the Manhattan branch of Dress for Success, so that disadvantaged women would now have interview suits and clothing options over.

Now it was Nicole's turn to live for herself. She was just about to step into her closet and pick something when someone knocked on her door. She figured it was Macy, wondering what had happened to her since she was already twenty minutes late.

She cinched the tie on her bathrobe. Used to being extra careful in her Manhattan apartment, she glanced into the peephole of her door.

The unexpected visitor standing on the other side made her breath catch in her throat and her heart begin a steady gallop.

"Sam," she whispered, shocked right down to her toes.

He knocked again, and she fumbled with the lock before opening the door.

He braced one muscular arm on the doorframe and grinned. "Hi."

"Hi," she managed in return, her gaze steady on his.

His smile deepened, revealing dimpled grooves in the sides of his face. "Welcome back."

"Thanks," she said as his husky voice rippled through her.

He hadn't shaved, and with stubble and sexy messed hair, he looked more delicious than she remembered. Her mouth ran dry and she licked her tongue over her dry lips.

"I wasn't expecting you," she said, wincing as the words came out all like she'd intended.

? She'd "Disappointed?"

ate and *Lord no*, she thought and shook her head. "Of course not. Just surprised His heavy-lidded gaze met hers. "So was I when I heard you'd been here."

s taken, "I bet."

and be "Are you going to invite me in?" he asked.

ds, she She clutched her bathrobe lapels together, torn between doing just what she wanted and doing the proper thing. "Umm, I'm not exactly dressed."

nd silk A grin lifted the corners of his mouth. "I don't mind." Those green eyes, green mixed with brown and rimmed by gold, traveled over her bare legs to the short hem of the silk robe, up again to meet her gaze.

stopped her bare legs to the short hem of the silk robe, up again to meet her gaze. Sweet heaven, this man was potent. Unable to resist him, she turned away. "I haven't had a chance to do much with the apartment yet." Since she'd unpacked her clothes, she still needed the accessories and touches to make the place feel like home.

way out, He shrugged, obviously unconcerned. "I'm used to it. My brother was here before you and did nothing to it."

ughter- She raised an eyebrow, surprised. "I didn't know that."

where "Yep. Then he married Cara, bought himself a big house by the lake, and settled down."

to start "Do you like his wife?" she asked, because he didn't sound happy about the settling-down part. His voice had turned grumbly over the words.

o reach "She's great. You remember her, Cara Hartley? The police officer arrested your . . ." His voice trailed off awkwardly.

or. She *Nothing like the memory of Victoria to bring an abrupt end to a conversation*, Nicole thought. "I remember Cara. She was decent to me."

he was Sam openly studied her. "She had no reason not to be. You were her sister."

eful in Nicole drew a deep breath and nodded. "That's why I decided Sereia would be a good place to start over. Nice town, people willing to give you a chance to prove yourself, not jump to conclusions or put you in a little box."

h catch "That's why I decided Sereia would be a good place to start over. Nice town, people willing to give you a chance to prove yourself, not jump to conclusions or put you in a little box."

ing the "That's why I decided Sereia would be a good place to start over. Nice town, people willing to give you a chance to prove yourself, not jump to conclusions or put you in a little box."

mouth. "That's why I decided Sereia would be a good place to start over. Nice town, people willing to give you a chance to prove yourself, not jump to conclusions or put you in a little box."

ed even where they think you ought to be.”

ran her Sam, being as perceptive as she remembered, narrowed his gaze at
She bit the inside of her cheek, realizing she was getting too d
it not at should get dressed and meet you downstairs.”

“I’ll wait.” He headed for the small dining set in the corner tha
with the apartment, hooked one foot around the leg of a chair, and set
rised.” very fine rear end into the seat.

moved He relaxed comfortably, as if he’d been here many times befo
belonged. He had said his brother lived here before, which explain
familiarity—but not the sense of rightness she felt on seeing him
personal space.

ust that Uh-oh. She shook her head to dispel that wayward thought. No
how strong the attraction between them, Nicole had just end
orgeous engagement. She was not interested in anything other than getting
r, from together and on track. No emotional or sexual entanglements nee
e. wanted. No matter that her raging hormones and completely wired bo
stepped otherwise.

Though She quickly grabbed a pair of soft, faded jeans, a fitted hot-pink V
ersonal and closed herself in the bathroom to change.

She dressed quickly. A glance in the mirror showed that her cheel
er lived flushed—*thank you, Sam*—so no need for more blush. She swiped on
peach lip gloss, spritzed on some of her favorite perfume, fluffed h
drew a deep breath, and walked back out to face him.

ke, and His gaze raked over her, and his mouth curled in a genuine s
approval.

y about At his reaction, pleasure of every variety rushed over strategic bod
and given the thin texture of her top and the darkening of those sex
er who eyes, he noticed.

Oh yes, she was in definite trouble.

to any
e.”



i’t your

NO SOONER HAD Sam followed Nicole back down to the bar than Ma
over, hooking her arm through Nicole’s and stealing her away.

ndipity maneuvered her through the crowd, introducing Nicole to people as sh
e you a
tle box Sam told himself he was happy for the separation. It gave him a ch

catch his breath—because Nicole’s impact was even more potent than that. He’d barely taken in the fact that she was here and they’d leep. “Iface-to-face, forcing him to call on a cool he didn’t feel.

He’d have liked to blame his over-the-top reaction on the silk robe it cameworn and clutched to her chest like armor. Still, he’d been unable to feel his wondering if her skin would be as soft as the satiny material looked. It feel soft and supple beneath him.

He groaned, knowing it wasn’t just the robe or the long bare legs that ore and ned his that captivated him. After the surprise of seeing him, the pleasure in her beautiful blue eyes had floored him. Of course, she’d quickly covered herself and tried to hide her reaction. They had that in common, at least matterwariness of their combustible chemistry. He took heart in knowing she ed one uncertain too.

And when she’d returned from getting dressed? Gone were the laced or slacks and silk shirts she’d worn her first time in town, replaced by jeans dy said hugged her shapely ass and a top that accentuated her sweet curves.

he wanted to trace with his hands and taste with his mouth, exploring the V-neck, thoroughly. He wanted that with a desperation he’d never felt before.

But more than sexual attraction intrigued him. When she’d met Mike ks were coming to Serendipity to start over, to prove herself and not have a light-jump to conclusions or put her in a little box—well, then he’d realized her hair, was much more to Nicole’s move here than met the eye, making him think just what she had left behind.

And why did he care? He wished the answer were as simple as hiring a cop and it being second nature to question and to wonder. He knew y parts, He cared and wondered because it was Nicole.

Everything about her aroused his curiosity—among other things. The y hazel between them was mutual. The way her nipples tightened beneath his affirmed the same shocks tripping him up even now when she was on the other side of the damn room.

“That’s interesting.” Mike eased up alongside him, standing shoulder to shoulder as they looked over the crowd.

cy took “What is?” Sam asked.

. Macy “Victoria’s sister’s back in town.” And Mike didn’t sound pleased.

e went. “It’s a free country,” Sam reminded him.

ance to “Just seems odd she’d come back here after what her sister pulled.

second took a long drag of his beer.

“She’s not her sister, and she helped ours. She came here to wait and she gave up her sister’s hideout, remember?”

“Don’t get yourself worked up. I’m just pointing out the truth. Maybe she’s moved here, and I think it’s an odd choice. Unless she found someone she liked.” Mike’s low chuckle was meant to annoy Sam.

He refused to take his brother’s bait. “She said she found the people beneath accepting.”

“You’ve spoken with her already?”

Shit. “Yeah.” He didn’t elaborate.

“Be careful. Her sister’s got mental issues,” Mike warned him.

“And she’s getting treatment while awaiting the disposition of her

Even so, Sam thought. “What do Victoria’s problems have to do with Nicole?” Sam asked, his gaze never leaving the woman in question.

“Depends on what, if anything, you have to do with Nicole,” Curves replied.

Sam’s gaze narrowed both at Mike’s words, as well as at the scene

him. Macy had moved on from the women and was now introducing some of the cops who frequented her restaurant. When Rob Burke, a well-known player, looked her over with a predatory gleam in his eyes, she tensed and pushed herself off the wall.

“Hey.”

Sam turned back to his brother. “What?” *And make it quick*, he thought.

“I meant it when I said be careful. You don’t know anything about her, except for—”

“Her crazy sister? I heard you loud and clear.” But Sam wasn’t listening. He was more concerned with not allowing the single guys at Joe’s to stare at the new girl without him staking some kind of claim first.

He made his way to where Macy had finished her introductions, and the men were eyeing Nicole with interest.

“Hey, Sam,” Macy said with a welcoming smile.

“Macy.” He greeted her with a grin before turning to Nicole. “Come see you again.”

Her gaze warmed, and his entire body sizzled in reaction. “What did he ask?”

“Just meeting the new girl in town,” Rob said, immediately

himself a part of the conversation. "Isn't that right, honey?" He
n Erin, Nicole's hand and kissed her smooth skin.

Sam's fingers curled into a fist, itching to hit his friend. Rob was
cy saystoo smooth with the ladies, and the result went one of two ways. Eith
nethingwere desperate and fell for his fake charm, or they found him over-
ridiculous.

ole here Nicole pulled her hand back quickly, and Sam relaxed.

"Everyone has been very welcoming," she said, not singling out
acknowledging his interest.

"Some more than others," Sam muttered, noticing that his oth
buddies were engaged in a conversation with each other.

r case." "Want to go get a drink?" Sam asked Nicole, eager for time
lo withreacquainted.

"Why don't you go get this round and one of us will grab the nex
" MikeRob not so smoothly suggested.

Sam forced a smile. "Since I can't remember the last time you
e beforeput your hand in your pocket to cover any of us, why don't *you* get thi
Nicolefor the guys? I've got Macy and Nicole covered."

rnett, a Macy raised her eyebrows, and an amused smirk lifted her lips.

s, Sam "I'll go hang with the boys. Go on, Rob. Fetch our drinks," she sa
such a silken laugh that no man in his right mind would deny her.

Flirting and teasing were part of Macy's charm, but no man ever g
ught. her walls, which didn't stop even those who knew her best from wa
out herplease her.

Burnett scowled but realized he'd been caught in his own noose
stening.for everyone?" he bit out.

take in Even the other two guys nodded at that.

"Works for me," Macy said, placing her hand on the other
and theshoulder. "Thanks."

"Yeah," he muttered and stalked off.

Sam shook his head and laughed. "Subtle, Mace."

good to "You're no better."

He did his best not to flush. He knew damn well he'd been prop
's up?"knew how out of character his behavior had been. And he couldn't co
worth a damn.

making Nicole watched his byplay with Macy but remained silent. Sam

she lifted sure if she'd caught on to his intent or if she thought he was just
Burnett a hard time.

always "I got rid of Rob," Macy said, leaning close so she could whisper
er they Sam's ears only. Obviously, *she* hadn't missed a thing. "Now go to
the-top new friend and show her a good time."

No sooner had Macy spoken than Joe grabbed a microphone
announced the start of karaoke night. He hadn't had the theme in a while
Rob obviously thought with the bar full of regulars, it was a good time to start

"Karaoke isn't my thing," Sam muttered.
er cop Nicole met his gaze. "Mine either."

That made up his mind. "Want to get out of here?"
to get She appeared startled at the suggestion but nodded, much to his relief.
A few minutes later, they were outside Joe's.

at one," "Where are we going?" Nicole asked.

"With a little luck? Some place quiet." His fingers itched to touch
actually hand, but the maxim *too much, too soon* ran through his head,
s round refrained.

Nicole fell into step alongside him, and they walked across the sidewalk
the center median, which was covered with colorful flowers.

aid with "These are incredible," she murmured and went on to name a variety
flowers she obviously recognized.

got past He blinked at her knowledge. "Are you a florist?" he asked, realizing
ating to he'd never found out what she did for a living.

She shook her head. "No. But my mother was always very specific
. "Beerflower orders when she planned her dinner parties. Many, many
parties." Her voice droned with the memory.

"Sounds painful."

man's "Very." Her smile packed a punch. "Still, these are beautiful." She
her hand through the air to indicate the panorama of flowers and colors
out before them.

"*Beautiful* is an appropriate word in more ways than one," he
speaking more of her than the flowers.

rietary, Her jet-black hair and Mediterranean coloring must come from
ontrol it mother, he figured, since Farnsworth wasn't an ethnic name. Those blues
stood out against her olive skin like two deep pools beckoning to
wasn't making it difficult for him to follow the thread of their conversation.

giving Somehow he pulled the subject from the back of his mind. “The beautification committee works hard on maintaining this area.”
per for “I’m so used to the city, being able to see so much color and space
ake mya treat.”

And her appreciation of something he passed by every day and t
ne andgranted touched him deeply, prompting him to explain more about
nile andorigins. “There’s a yearly event to raise money to fund this area. It’s
art. formal party at Faith Barron’s house over Labor Day weekend.”

“Who?”

Sam shook his head and laughed. “Right. You’re not a local. I
notice that big house on the hill when you drove into town?”

ief. “How could I not? It resembles my childhood home.”

He let out a whistle. “Nice.” And way out of his league.

She laughed. “No, the mansion here is much grander. It just hap
ake herremind me of my parents’ home. The way it’s set off from real
and heobviously meant to impress, that sort of thing.” She shifted from foot

“But it’s not who I am at all,” she said, as if desperate for him to und
treet toand still accept her.

He nodded in grateful understanding. He didn’t want a spoiled pri
riety ofhis life—and if he had his way, this understated woman would, at t
least, end up in his bed. Still, she was clearly the kind of girl he’d be
ealizinghis time with, and he appreciated that about her.

“So back to the house on the hill,” he said. “Faith and Ethan Barr
c aboutthere now, and they’re nothing like Faith’s parents, who were the p
dinnerowners.”

“That’s unusual,” she murmured.

He nodded. “It is. Yet it’s very right. You and Faith have a
e sweptcommon. She’s down to earth and sweet.” Nicole blushed, but Sam
spreadcontinued. “Now that you’re living here, I’m sure you’ll meet them
point or another.”

ie said, She smiled. “I’ll look forward to it.”

“Want to sit?” Sam pointed at the empty bench beneath the white g
om her She nodded and walked up the few steps, easing down on the v
ue eyesseat. He settled in beside her.

to him, “This is the best part of the summer,” she said, relaxing and leanin;
“What is?”

town's "This time of day. The sun doesn't set until late. When I was young, my sister and I would stay outside until it turned dark." Her lips lifted up in such the memory. "We'd play games and make up stories. Anything to avoid going back into that cold, empty house with people who . . . people I look for parents." She shivered but clammed up, obviously realizing she'd said more than she wanted to.

As far as Sam was concerned, she hadn't said enough.

"Thanks for showing me this place." She stretched her legs out in front of her and let out a blissful sigh.

His cock responded to the sound. "My pleasure. So . . . you told me you chose Serendipity, but why the move in the first place?" He asked a question dogging him since he'd discovered she was here.

She turned to face him, her gaze serious. "Because I was finished with my life for others."

He already knew that meant her parents.

"I liked the town . . . and the people from when I was in town. Despite the horrible situation, I felt a connection here."

She didn't shift her gaze from his, warming him with her steady gaze in which clearly included him.

"I'm here for me." She shrugged. "It was really that simple."

So much . . . and so little revealed, Sam thought, intrigued by her. "What are your plans?"

"Eventually, I want to open a specialty bake shop, but I'll start by working if someone here will hire me while I'm getting my bearings in town. I'll research the area and make sure there's a need for what I'm offering before I invest."

"There was a bakery off Main Street that closed down a while back, but not merely because they couldn't sustain business, but it was too much for the owner who owned it."

"Hmm. I'll have to look into it."

"It's smart that you're not rushing into something. Taking your time to understand whether a business is viable is an intelligent move."

Again, her cheeks flushed a deep shade. "Thank you."

Unable to stop himself, he reached out and twirled a strand of her hair back around his finger. "Would it bother you if I said I couldn't stop thinking about you after you left town?"

ger, my She gazed at him through her thick lashes. “Only if it doesn’t bot
ward atto know I felt the same way.” Her husky voice tripped the lever
o avoidbanked desire.

like my “Good to know.” He tugged on her hair and she leaned in close
d moremouths inches apart.

God, he wanted to taste her, to explore this living, breathing des
shimmered between them. And when her tongue swept out, moisten
front oflips, the unpracticed move broke his control. Covering the distance b
them, he brushed his lips over hers and she welcomed him with a soft
ne whyacceptance. But she held back, waiting for him to take the lead. Hi
ked thepounded as hard as his dick had become.

His body wanted to go fast, but something about Nicole kept hi
l livingimpulses in check. Keeping the kiss under control, he tasted her lips,
his tongue back and forth until she parted and let him inside. His
brushed hers and the taste of her exploded inside him. Her flavor wa
before.than he’d imagined, and her sweet scent went straight to his cock.

Without thinking, he twisted her hair tighter, tilting her head for
tement,access, which she freely granted. His heart knocked against his ch
connection between them deepening along with the kiss. Only his fre
clenched into a tight fist, helped him keep a grasp on reality.

“What Her tongue tangled with his, and the kiss went on, sweeping hin
with her, until he was lost completely. Suddenly, laughter and the
r seeingsound of a group of kids broke into their intimate moment.

want to She jerked back, face flushed, lips damp and curved in a smile.

before I He grinned back just as a pack of teens strode up to the gazebo,
loudly and ribbing each other with insults and innuendo.

ck. Not “Oh, man. It’s taken,” one of them said.

couple Nicole quickly rose to her feet, straightening her shirt, shaking h
over her jeans. “We were just leaving,” she said to the boys.

Sam stood, grateful for the darkness that had begun to surround
time tohiding the obvious evidence of his arousal. “I’ll walk you back,” he s
voice unsteady.

“Okay.” Her lips twitched in a knowing grin.

er dark He placed his hand on the small of her back, and she trembled. G
hinkingleast he wasn’t the only one still being pulled under by the desire
unleashed.

her you Sam couldn't remember the last time he'd made out with a woman on his middle of town, where anyone could see. Not that it mattered where he could think about was this woman—and when he could see her again.



ire that
ing her
etween
sigh of
s pulse
NICOLE SPENT THE next day getting her new apartment into shape. It was once she unpacked some personal photos and knickknacks. She knew, knowing she was settled, that she could look around and feel like she was surrounded by her favorite things.

s baser
sliding
tongue
s better
She had a mental to-do list, and with her personal space in order, she could turn her focus to her career. As for what to do about Tyler's father, she still didn't know. Each option turned her stomach. So she focused on work—which wasn't difficult since she couldn't concentrate on anything but work. Her lips still tingled with pleasure.

deeper
est, the
e hand,
n along
rowdy
When she'd first met him three months ago, after she'd gotten over the fact that he'd arrested her and dragged her down to the police station, the crazy chemistry had taken her by surprise. Although nothing had happened between them, the sizzle she'd experienced was one of the things that had persuaded her to end her engagement. If just looking at Sam Marsden's face, parts of her that had been long dormant, she'd asked herself what the hell she was doing with Tyler Stanton, a man with whom sex was just . . . nice.

talking
er hand
No matter how good and kind Tyler was, intimacy had been pleasant but occasional. It had never been a priority for either one of them. Maybe because they'd grown up together, the expectation of marriage was an underlying thing, and they were comfortable together, but his kisses were uninspired. And that was what she'd thought before Sam Marsden touched hers and the earth shifted beneath her feet.

Yep, it had been that cliché. That awesome.

l them,
aid, his
ood. At
they'd
Which explained why she woke up this morning still off-kilter and confused. She shook her head, trying to clear her mind. She started by reminding herself that she wasn't looking to start something new when she was just getting over something old. But she was getting ahead of herself with her worries. It wasn't like Sam had reached out in the time since she'd seen him at Joe's.

Pushing that thought aside, she showered and dressed, her plan to

n in the drive over to The Family Restaurant. Macy said late mornings were slow all she could spend some time talking. Since her new friend was in the restaurant business, Nicole wanted to discuss her bakery ideas and get insight.

In desperate need of caffeine, she stopped at Cuppa Café, even before she got in her car and headed across town. She'd yet to fill her kitchen cabinet and refrigerator, but even if she had, Nicole liked to treat herself to a fresh cup in the morning.

The shop was nearly empty, with one woman who looked about Nicole's age, give or take a few years, working behind the counter.

"Hi," Nicole said.

"Hi, and welcome." The other woman greeted her with a friendly smile. "Are you new in town?"

Nicole laughed. "That obvious?"

"Only to someone who grew up here. I'm Trisha Lockhart. I own this place."

"Nicole Farnsworth. Are you related to Joe? He's my landlord."

"He's my brother. He pumps the good people in town full of alcohol to sober them up or help their hangover the next day." Her words were lighthearted teasing. "What can I get you?"

"Regular coffee with milk and sugar," Nicole said.

"Coming right up."

As Trisha poured her drink, Nicole stepped back to study the offerings behind the counter. There were prewrapped pastries and assorted other items like name-brand granola bars, but nothing that appeared freshly baked. Nicole always wrinkled her nose at the choices.

"Something wrong?" Trisha placed her cup on the counter.

"Not at all," Nicole rushed to assure her, embarrassed that she'd been caught turning her nose up at the other woman's offerings.

"You looked like you just ate a Sour Patch or something."

Nicole shook her head, mortified. "I'm sorry. I was just looking at the breakfast offerings—"

"Pitiful, I know." Trisha lifted her shoulders in a shrug. "It is what it is. I can't bake and don't have the equipment even if I could."

"Hmm. Well, it just so happens . . ."

"Yes?"

Nicole braced her hands on the counter. "I can bake. And I want to

ow, and I moved here hoping to find a place to do that, or open my own business. She met Trisha's interested gaze. "I have the savings for it, but I'm not ready to dive in alone."

Trisha eyed her speculatively. "I would be interested in bringing some items into the store. I'm certain it would only add business." She smiled. "Why don't you drop off some baked goods for me to try?"

Heartened, Nicole nodded. "I will." She placed money, enough to tip, on the counter and picked up her cup. "It was nice meeting you."

"Same here. I'd say don't be a stranger, but in this town, no one really is." Trisha grinned and turned to refresh the decaffeinated coffee.

Smiling, Nicole spun around and bumped into a hard male body. Coffee sloshed over the lid, burning her hand. "Oh crap," she muttered.

Ignoring the sting, she backed up, then glanced up and into the man's hazel eyes that had starred in her dreams. Sam stood in front of her, shaved, wearing a dark sport jacket, and looking hotter than any man she'd ever seen. "Right to."

"Oh God. I'm sorry. Did I get any coffee on you?" she asked, embarrassed.

"No. I'm fine. Are you okay?" He lifted her burned hand in inspection.

Shocks that had nothing to do with the hot liquid tingled along her skin. A quick look up told her he'd experienced the sensation too.

"I'm okay," she murmured. At least her hand was. The rest of her body was another story. "Where are you going all dressed up?" she asked.

"Work."

She narrowed her gaze. "No uniform?"

"I got a promotion since I saw you last," he explained. "Detective. I ditch the uniform."

"Congratulations!" she said, impressed and happy for him.

"Thanks. So how about you? Where are you headed next?" he asked.

"The Family Restaurant. I was going to brainstorm some things to do. Macy's, but I couldn't wait to get there to get some caffeine into me." She explained.

He laughed. "I hear you. If I don't stop here, I end up starting my day with the sludge at the station."

"Good to know where I can find you," she murmured.

ness.” They stared at each other for a few moments, the air between them crackling with intensity.

“I’ve been thinking about you,” he admitted.

Her heart skipped a beat at that. “Same here.”

“Are you free Friday night? We could go out to dinner.”

She sighed. “I’m going to the movies with Macy.” She paused and looked ahead. “But Saturday night, Macy talked me into going

to the Women’s Heart Health fundraiser. Will you be there?” If she couldn’t make it, she would have to find another date with him this weekend, at least they could spend some time together.

His brows drew close, and he hesitated, his attitude going from open and inviting to downright uncomfortable. “Never mind. I—”

“Listen, I—” They spoke at the same time.

His phone rang and he immediately glanced at the screen.

“Work call,” he explained, shooting her a regretful look. He spoke to a person on the other end and met her gaze as he disconnected. “I have to go, but I—” He shook his head. “No time,” he muttered.

She nodded, understanding the urgency. She’d see him Saturday night. She’d see him Saturday night.

With a last lingering glance, he headed for the door.

She watched him go, her eyes devouring him from behind. The man was built in a way that spoke of working out to maintain his physique but his eyes were the way that screamed gym god. No, he was a fine specimen all on his own.

She wished he’d had a chance to say whatever was on his mind at the fundraiser, but she wouldn’t let herself worry about it. He had asked her first, which indicated interest. And if he really wanted to go out with her, she would get to know where to find her. It was a small town, after all.

She might not be looking for a serious relationship right now, but she would be crazy to deny she wanted something with this man.

Just what remained to be seen.

“I’ll see you with Macy,” she

my day

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She nodded, understanding the urgency. She’d see him Saturday night, or not.

With a last lingering glance, he headed for the door.

She watched him go, her eyes devouring him from behind. The man was built in a way that spoke of working out to maintain his physique but not in a way that screamed gym god. No, he was a fine specimen all on his own.

She wished he’d had a chance to say whatever was on his mind about the fundraiser, but she wouldn’t let herself worry about it. He had asked her out first, which indicated interest. And if he really wanted to go out with her, he knew where to find her. It was a small town, after all.

She might not be looking for a serious relationship right now, but she’d be crazy to deny she wanted something with this man.

Just what remained to be seen.

Chapter Three

SAM FOUND THAT work as a detective was feast or famine in a small town. Now, when he wanted to get in touch with Nicole, a string of burglaries on a residential street kept him busy. He didn't even have time to return his mother's call about their Sunday family dinner. She wanted to make sure he was coming. Of course he was. Not one of his siblings said no. Now that Mike and Erin were married, it was a bigger gathering than ever before. Add Erin's baby . . . and the pressure was *on* for Sam. He could handle his mother, and he'd be there because he knew what was good for him. Besides, he loved his family no matter what.

He ended up spending that Friday night on a stakeout, watching teens breaking into parked cars and vandalizing them for the hell of it. Saturday consisted of viewing hours of video of the same street, courtesy of a paranoid homeowner who'd had cameras installed outside his home. The thing, since they'd caught a glimpse of a lone car coming in from the neighborhood after midnight a week ago when the vandalism had started.

Sam was exhausted and needed a good night's sleep that lasted twelve hours. Unfortunately, he had just enough time to shower, change, and pick up his obligatory date for the fundraiser. His stomach churned, for reasons other than why he'd argued with Cara about it in the first place. He had the chance to explain the situation to Nicole at Cuppa Café, he had her number, he hadn't run into her again, and he had no time to go to her place to talk before he picked up Margie Stinson.

He wasn't looking forward to running into Nicole tonight with another woman on his arm. His throat constricted at the thought, and he shoved his fingers beneath the collar of his tuxedo shirt and tugged, needing air.

Though he and Nicole barely knew each other, that kiss counted for everything for him, and he was sure she wanted to explore things further. They might not have a commitment between them, but Sam wasn't a commitment-phobic dater. Thanks to his mother's and sister's influence, he understood and respected women. As a result, he had a gnawing feeling that tonight

going to be memorable, and not in any way he would have wanted.



WHEN NICOLE MOVED to Serendipity, she hadn't thought she'd need a dress, but having been raised to always be prepared, she'd saved her favorite one and stored it in the back of her closet. She dressed in a sapphire dress with silver shoes, not allowing herself to second-guess or change her mind. Macy had given her the address for the country club where the event was being held, and as she pulled up to the filled parking lot, nerves assailed her. She didn't know anyone here, not really. Despite the urge to turn around and go home, she continued on to the valet and gave them her car.

But as a man took her small Mercedes and drove off, Nicole had no choice but to gather her courage and head inside. She walked in and the first thing she noticed was a table with beautiful red and white flowers—red for the disease, she assumed—and picked up the heart-shaped card with her name on it. Table five. That meant nothing to her since, other than Macy, she didn't have any friends here. Well, there was Sam, but she didn't know what to think about their relationship. Good things between them. She put the place card in her silver clutch and made her way into the lobby area, looking for Macy.

The first familiar face wasn't Macy but Erin, Sam's sister, the one who'd given birth to Nicole's twin and nearly run down with her car. For some reason, and who'd given birth a few months ago, she looked amazing in an emerald green sheath dress. The green brought out her eyes, which were so much like her brother's.

Erin she could handle, but her now-husband Cole? He was another story. Nicole still vividly recalled him bursting into the small interrogation room at the police station, yelling at her and demanding answers. Only another presence had reassured her, and though Cole had eventually come to understand that Nicole only wanted to help, he was still intimidating enough that she'd like to avoid him if she could.

She turned away from the couple and toward the bar, only to hear her name called out.

Okay then. She'd have to deal with them after all.

Straightening her shoulders and tightening her grip on her purse, she turned to find Erin walking up to her.

“I thought it was you,” Erin said, her tone welcoming. “Sam and I said you’d moved to town. Somehow I missed seeing you at Joe’s. I heard you were there.”

Nicole was unable to hold back a smile at Erin’s warm rambling. I formal seem like she held a grudge about her sister. “How have you been?” favorite asked, still wary.

ire-blue “Great. Motherhood is amazing. You have to meet my baby girl.”

At that, Nicole relaxed her muscles and her guard. Erin had been p ent was last time Nicole had seen her. “Congratulations. What’s your da led her name?” she asked.

nd and “Angel. And she is one. Unless she’s crying.” Erin laughed, but t and maternal devotion in her eyes caused an unexpected lump of em choice settle in Nicole’s throat.

st thing “I’m glad things are going well for you,” Nicole said, meaning it.

or heart “Thank you. I’m happier than I thought I could be. Marriage is am ame on she said with a wink.

had no “That I wouldn’t know,” Nicole murmured. She’d broken her enga k about in Manhattan and had every intention of leaving both thoughts and dis ade her about it there. “But I’m happy for you. After everything you went t you deserve smooth sailing.”

woman Erin met her gaze. “So do you. I’m not sure I ever got the chance t omeone you for coming here in the first place to warn me about your siste d-green was . . . brave, and it couldn’t have been easy.”

like her Nicole sighed. The truth was she hadn’t known Erin or any Serendipity when she’d driven here to warn her. Her goals in doing r story been twofold, and she might as well be up front with Erin.

room at “All I wanted was for my sister to get the help she needed, and I

Sam’s want anyone to get hurt.” And she definitely hadn’t wanted her twi believe anything she couldn’t undo or would have to live with for the rest of h it she’d

Erin nodded in understanding.

“I should thank you for advocating for Victoria’s mental health,” ar Erin said to the woman who, at the time of the incident, had also been an a district attorney. As the victim, she hadn’t been in charge of the ca Nicole knew Erin had pushed hard for her sister to get help. “You cou just come down on the side of putting her in jail.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Erin said.

d Macy A low growl behind her told Nicole that Erin's husband didn't agree, but I "Cut it out," Erin said. "It's over and done with. Nicole's living here so let's all play nice."

t didn't Cole wrapped his arms around her waist and nodded at Nicole. "Welcome to town," he said, sounding as if he just might mean it.

"Thank you."

"Hi, all!" Macy brought her bubbly personality, taking the pressure off Nicole of dealing with Cole and talk of Victoria's illness.

"Hi," Erin and Nicole said at once.

"Everyone looks beautiful!" Macy hugged each of them. "Well, I love Sullen, but you are looking handsome." She pulled the gruff man into conversation. "I'll take that as my cue to mingle," Cole muttered, extricating himself from Macy's grip.

Erin rolled her eyes. He patted her cheek and walked away. "You're amazing," she said to Macy.

The other woman laughed. "How's that sweet angel of yours?" she asked. "Get it? Her daughter's name is Angel," she explained to Nicole. The new mother beamed and launched into a description of things through which a new mother would appreciate. Any time Tyler had brought up babies, she would lapse into panic mode. Now she understood why. She had only to thank Erin's beaming face when she looked at her husband to know that he hadn't been the right man for Nicole to start a family with.

"What table are you sitting at?" Nicole asked when they'd finished their conversation.

"We're at three. With my brothers and parents," Erin said.

"Five," Macy said, winking at Nicole. "Don't you worry, I took care of the whole situation. I wouldn't leave you alone. We single women tend to stick together."

Nicole smiled, finally understanding why Macy had been so quick to embrace a friendship with her. It wasn't just that Macy was warm and generous—she was—but there was more to the dynamic going on. Assistant changes in Erin's life meant she and Macy didn't do as many things together, but anymore. Which meant Macy needed Nicole's friendship as much as Nicole had needed Macy's. The knowledge eased a painful knot she'd had in her chest since walking in here feeling out of place.

"So, Nicole, what will you be doing here in town?" Erin asked.

“I’m looking into opening a specialty bakery, but not right away. I want to start small and see how things catch on,” Nicole explained.

“Tell her the rest.” Macy nudged her with her arm.

She’d had time to fill Macy in about her talk with Trisha the morning before.

“Well, I’ve spoken to Trisha at the coffee shop, and she said she was interested in taking in my items and selling them, and Macy said I should approach her father about doing the same at the restaurant.”

“What kind of specialty items?” Erin asked.

“Cupcakes, cookies, pastries . . .”

“Aunt Lulu bakes pies and cakes, not pastries, so I think it would be fine,” Macy immediately chimed in.

Erin narrowed her gaze. “Are you sure about that?”

Nicole blinked. “Is there a problem?”

Macy shook her head. “Nope. I think Aunt Lulu and Nicole’s specialties complement each other perfectly.”

“Well, I love the idea! Where would you work? I hear you’re living in a tiny apartment, and that kitchen is tiny.”

That was the issue Nicole had run up against, at least in her head. She had maybe subconsciously that was the reason she hadn’t filled up the place with food and baking necessities.

“I’m not sure . . . yet. I’m working on it.” She tapped the side of her head. She was thinking it through, but so far she hadn’t come up with any ideas.

“You’ll figure something out.” Macy’s gaze drifted to a point

across the room, and her eyes widened. “Listen, I need to go check in with my manager. She’s looking a little lost, and when Aunt Lulu is at loose ends, she’ll see you at the table,” she said to Nicole, then waved at Erin and walked away.

Erin shook her head and laughed. “They’re both characters, Macy and Aunt Lulu.” She glanced over Nicole’s shoulder, her eyes opening wide. She waved at her brother, indicating he should join them.

Nicole’s stomach immediately spun like she was on a roller coaster. She felt a panicked, *get me off this ride* kind of way, but in a *this is awesome* kind of way. She couldn’t recall when she’d felt so excited about a man. Affected by hearing his brother was psyched to see him, flushed, silly and girly. *This* was why she’d bro-

I want her engagement, because if she and Tyler didn't share this in the beginning, what would be left when the newness wore off?

She pivoted to greet the man who starred in her dreams and found herself only to see he wasn't alone. She blinked, but the fact remained he had a woman by his side. A pretty blonde, her arm hooked through Sam's, could be their light hair and good looks, Nicole had to admit they made a good couple, and more than a few heads turned as they made their way across the room.

Nicole's stomach, along with her hopes, plummeted at the sight, and she now knew what Sam had been about to tell her the other day. She didn't could be shouldered back, determined to get through this with grace and class, but disappointment could come later when she was alone.

Erin hugged her brother. "You two know each other, right?" Erin was oblivious to the undercurrent between them.

Nicole will "Of course. It's good to see you again." Swallowing over an unreasonable hurt and disappointment, Nicole managed a polite nod, but she didn't feel.

Sam's gaze remained steady on hers, but she didn't let herself make contact.

Erin said, "Sam, aren't you going to introduce me?" his date asked.

Nicole forced a smile and waited for the inevitable, telling herself that her head had to do was make it through the introductions, smile, and then she could leave.

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SAM'S STOMACH TWISTED as if he physically *felt* Nicole's discomfort and he wished she would at least look up, see him, and catch on that he wasn't happy about this situation either.

"Margie, you know my sister, Erin, and this is Nicole Farnsworth, new in town. Nicole, this is Margie Stinson. Her parents are big donors tonight's event," he said, hoping she'd have to look at him now.

"It's nice to meet you," Nicole said, her voice sweet, covering obvious hurt Sam knew he'd inflicted. "That's wonderful of your parents, a very worthy cause. In fact, that's how Macy persuaded me to come tonight." She paused and glanced around. "Speaking of Macy, I need to

ginning, find her,” she said, turning fast.

“Nicole—” Erin called her name, obviously sensing something was wrong.

Nicole was already walking away. But Sam had caught the wound. Within her eyes, and he muttered a curse.

His sister glanced at him, clearly confused.

He didn’t have time for Erin’s curiosity or Margie’s arm still entwined with his. With every step Nicole took away from him, Sam felt something slipping away.

“I need to see to something,” he said, tipping his head in the direction where Nicole had gone, shooting his sister a pleading look.

Erin narrowed her eyes, suspicion in her expression.

“Honey? I would love a drink,” Margie said, oblivious to anyone other than herself, as she’d been since he’d picked her up.

Honey?

Erin choked over a laugh.

“A white wine spritzer,” she continued. “No, make that a vodka and cranberry splash of cranberry juice. No, a mimosa.”

Just as on the car ride over, Margie talked to fill up space. Earlier she’d discussed her dress, her shoes, and her shopping, leaving Sam unable to get a word in edgewise. Sam thought she talked just to hear her own voice. She didn’t need much in the way of conversation, only an escort on her arm and an ear for her long-winded stories, which was fine with him. Her mother must have catered to each whim she’d ever had for her to be so self-absorbed.

“Sam, why don’t you go get us all drinks,” Erin said.

“I’ll go with you—” Margie immediately said.

“No, Margie. The line looks long. Stay here and keep me company. I’d hurt. I wasn’t home with a baby and could really use some adult conversation,” he lied smoothly.

Sam shot her a look filled with gratitude. He didn’t miss the moment when she said, “*You owe me one.*” He did and figured babysitting and diaper changing in his future. Well worth it, he thought, as he took off after Nicole.

By now, the bar area as well as the ballroom had filled up, and he was searching for a deep blue dress or glossy, long dark hair. He’d noticed her immediately when he’d walked into the room: her lush curves accentuated by the gown, her beautiful smile a draw, at least for him. He found her

disappearing out the door into the area where the restrooms must be.
ing was He caught up with her in the nearly empty hall. Just a few women
walking out of the ladies' room. Sam waited until they were alone
ed lookstepped up behind her.

"It's not what you think."

She flinched and turned, clearly startled at the sound of his voice.
itwinedoesn't matter what it is. You don't owe me an explanation." She
portunitytoward the restroom.

"Don't. Give me a minute. Please."

ction of With a sigh, she stepped away from the door and led them to
corner of the lobby. With people milling around, they weren't alone
least she was with him. And she was listening.

ie other "Margie's parents are huge donors. Cara's in charge of selling tickets
the station, and she begged me to take Margie. Hell, she basically insisted
that the Stinsons would pull out if I didn't. You weren't living here yet
I agreed, and even then, I did it under duress."

with a Nicole had folded her arms across her chest in a protective
earlier. She didn't uncross them now.

r, she'd His gut churned, and acid flowed in his chest.

to get a "Like I said, you don't owe me an explanation." Her lips twitched
ce. She "But . . ." She drew out the word. "I'm glad you rushed over here to get
arm andone."

parents He released the breath he'd damn well been aware he was holding
sorbed. wanted to tell you at Cuppa Café when you asked me about tonight."

"But you got called away."

He nodded. "And I don't have your number." He pulled out his phone
ny. I'm held it out to her, determined to rectify that right now.

is sister She accepted the device and programmed her information into it
handing it back. "Sam . . ."

outhed, He looked into her eyes, the blue appearing darker tonight, which
ing wereto match her suddenly serious tone. "What is it?"

"This isn't easy to say."

focused He didn't like the sound of that.

ced her She exhaled, and his gaze was drawn to her parted pink lips. He
ated byknew what she tasted like. He knew how soft her mouth was beneath
er now, what kind of little sounds she made in the back of her throat when she

got out of control. No way was she about to walk away.

en were Was she?

ne and “I moved here to start over, leaving a host of complications behind. My eyes glazed with the memory of something that clearly wasn’t good.

ice. “It Sam narrowed his gaze, but before he could respond, she continued. “What I’m trying to say is that I’m not looking for anything serious or complicated now,” she said in a soft, apologetic voice. “But—”

He wasn’t looking for serious or complicated, either. Still, she said something more to say, and he leaned in close. “But?” he asked.

a quiet “I do want something with you.”

, but at He grinned at that, everything in him easing in ways he didn’t completely understand. “Good. Because I definitely want something with you. All right, tonight, there won’t be any more obligations getting in the way.”

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manner MANY PAINFUL HOURS later, Sam drove Margie home from the funeral home. Nicole left earlier, after dancing with more single men than Sam had ever seen. Serendipity possessed, and because he had a date, he couldn’t say anything.

a little. That would end after tonight.

give me Margie still lived in her parents’ home, which shared a property line with Faith and Ethan’s house on the hill, both far from Sam’s family’s home on the opposite side of town. But economics had nothing to do with why he had been ducking her advances for years. He found nothing about her appearance or her personality or her looks from what he could see—and hear—because she hadn’t stopped talking since they left the country club. Luckily, the house was closer to her end of Serendipity, and soon he pulled into her driveway.

before “. . . and I think your sister likes me, don’t you?” Margie asked.

seemed Sam blinked, realizing he’d missed most of the one-sided conversation. “Umm . . . I’m sure she does.” Actually, he figured Erin had a lot more tolerance for Margie as he had.

“Why don’t you come in for a drink?” She turned in the seat to face him, her ample cleavage plumping over her gown.

already ath his, “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

hat kiss She waved away his concern, treating him to a whiff of her perfume.

perfume, which he'd already been informed was Givenchy. "If concerned about appearances, I have my own private entrance around l d." Her Of course she did. Along with her own stipend, which meant she have to work. He wasn't in her social class, and her interest in Sa l. purely sexual, so he didn't feel bad turning her down. She certainly w ious or get her feelings hurt, but that didn't mean he'd deliberately set out to b

He gripped the steering wheel in both hands. "That's not it." he had "Oh, you're shy!" She reached out a perfectly manicured ha stroked his arm. "Good thing I'm not," she whispered in what he su was meant to be a seductive voice.

pletely God. He did not want to hurt her feelings any more than he wa nd afterhave this conversation, but the woman couldn't take a polite hint.

"Margie, I had a nice time tonight, but—"

"Oh, so did I! I always knew if I could persuade you to go out w you'd see the potential." She ran her hand down his arm.

He closed his eyes. "I don't. I mean, I just want to be friends." draiser. "Well, of course, silly. I want that too. Very good friends." She c thought her hand to his thigh, and Sam jumped so high in his seat that his head / or do hit the roof of the car. She made him want to grab for his gun, w always had on him, he thought, laughing to himself. Though he really amused.

ne with He grasped her wrist before she could touch him anywhere else. ome on want to be friends," he clarified. "I'm sorry, but—"

ly he'd "I'm offering you everything . . ." She gestured from her cleav ealing, downward. "And you're turning me down?" she asked, her voice risin ecause my God, you must be gay."

he club He blinked in shock. "I'm not gay." Although at this moment he way. he were. It would make her believe his disinterest. "I'm just not int that way. You're a nice woman, and I'm sure someone out there wi tion. you very happy. It's just not me."

as little "Screw happy. I have everything I want except sex with a h What's wrong with you that you don't want to give me that?"

ce him, Sam stared at her, recognizing that she had more than one screw "Like I said, I'm sure there's someone out there for you."

strong "I've always wanted you," she said, composing herself again. And clearly, she wasn't used to not getting what she wanted. S

you're he'd agreed to this date, she'd assumed they could be together. "But back." want you," he said, deciding her persistence called for extreme measur

e didn't She narrowed her gaze.

am was "I'm sorry," he felt compelled to say again.

ouldn't "Fine. I'm sure Rob Burnett will be interested since you aren't."

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remained silent, and with a huff of annoyance, she flung open the ca
nd and not waiting for him to get out or even react, and flounced—there w
upposed better word for her gait—down the driveway and around back to her
entrance.

nted to Sam shook his head and pulled out of the driveway, glad to ha
night over and Margie Stinson out of his life so he could move on t
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that draped her curves, had all thoughts of any other women evaporati
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he'd agreed to this date, she'd assumed they could be together. "But I don't want you," he said, deciding her persistence called for extreme measures.

She narrowed her gaze.

"I'm sorry," he felt compelled to say again.

"Fine. I'm sure Rob Burnett will be interested since you aren't."

Sam couldn't think of a better fit than Margie and Rob, the player. He remained silent, and with a huff of annoyance, she flung open the car door, not waiting for him to get out or even react, and flounced—there wasn't a better word for her gait—down the driveway and around back to her private entrance.

Sam shook his head and pulled out of the driveway, glad to have this night over and Margie Stinson out of his life so he could move on to what mattered.

Just the thought of Nicole, looking so damn beautiful in that blue dress that draped her curves, had all thoughts of any other women evaporating as if they'd never existed for him at all.

Chapter Four

THE MORNING AFTER the gala, Nicole walked into The Family Restaurant for breakfast. She asked for Macy, only to be told her friend wasn't work that morning, so she settled into a booth and ordered an egg-white omelet and a cup of coffee. A few minutes later, a woman who looked to be in her midsixties made herself at home in the seat across from Nicole.

"Hello," Nicole said, not recognizing the older strawberry blonde with teased hair and wrists covered with bracelets.

"Hi yourself." The woman set her arms on the table and stared at Nicole. "And continued to stare until Nicole became uncomfortable. "Can you help me?"

"Get off my turf."

Nicole blinked. "Excuse me?"

"You're a baker?"

Nicole nodded warily.

"Then what I said stands. Leave and nobody will get hurt." The woman slapped her hand on the table for emphasis, revealing extremely long, fluorescent-orange nails.

Nicole didn't know what to make of this crazy lady. "Look, I don't know who you are, but I'm new in town. I don't know you. I don't even know your business—"

"So let's keep it that way," she said, pinning Nicole with a heated stare.

Nicole grabbed for her purse, tempted to run and to get far away from the lunatic, but ultimately decided to stand her ground.

"Hello, ladies." Macy's familiar voice was a welcome interruption.

Nicole looked up at her new friend. "This . . . this . . . *she* was threatening me."

Macy frowned and plopped herself onto the cushioned bench next to the woman and forcibly shoved her farther into the seat to give herself some room. "Aunt Lulu, I warned you to behave. I told you Nicole was a baker and that you two would have a lot in common."

“This is your aunt?” Nicole pointed at the woman, who was now gazing at her.

“Yes, and you two have so much in common, I just know you’ll get along. Like I told you last night, Aunt Lulu bakes pies and cakes. Nicole said she bakes specialty items, like cupcakes, cookies, and pastries. Aunt Lulu, weren’t you talking about opening up your own bake shop?”

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t and a
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Nicole’s gaze shot to Macy. “You didn’t think to mention this?”

She waved away Nicole’s question. “Because I knew you’d have fantastic partners, but you two needed to meet first. Aunt Lulu’s protected her niche, but trust me, this is a match made in heaven.” She nudged Macy again. “Tell her you’re not threatening her.”

Aunt Lulu let out a loud laugh. “Of course not. I had to make sure I could handle me,” she said, an apology in her voice. “I am sweet, but I am sarcastic, I am a woman.”

Nicole shook her head in confusion.

Aunt Lulu patted her hand. “I was testing you, doll. You passed. You didn’t hit me, you didn’t shriek, and you didn’t run. We’ll get along fine.” The other woman braced her arms back on the table. “Now, ready to talk turkey? Or cakes, pastries, and pies, as the case may be?”

Nicole glanced at Macy. “Are you sure she’s not insane?”

Macy shrugged. “No more than anyone else in my family.”

Nicole couldn’t say she felt any better about that. She thought she’d seen true mental illness behind.

A few minutes later, she reevaluated her feelings on the woman and her mental state. Aunt Lulu had pulled a fully thought-out proposal from her oversized purse. Not only did she have a location for a bake shop in mind, she also had a business plan. Apparently, she’d been working on the idea since she received a settlement from an accident of sorts at a supermarket. But at her age, she wasn’t sure she wanted to go into business alone, so she’d been debating what to do.

Nicole, she’d decided, was fate, or she would be once Macy started selling Nicole’s baked goods. She’d promised to bring some items by as well.

They brainstormed for more than an hour. Nicole added her thoughts to the list. Aunt Lulu—she insisted Nicole call her that too—promised she’d incorporate everything they’d discussed into a more thorough plan. She’d already started scoping out the old bakery Sam had mentioned to her the other day.

rinningsuggested that they each put in the same amount of money and approach bank for a startup loan to cover the other costs and get started.

u'll get Everything about Aunt Lulu's plan was professional, and since, whileDonovan family had been in business for years, Nicole had everastries.confidence in Aunt Lulu and her abilities. Still, Nicole would ask?" town about her reputation . . . just in case.

During their talk, Nicole's phone rang twice. Tyler's name should makeboth times. She winced, knowing she'd have to call him later today and active ofit clear she wasn't going to change her mind about ending their engagement auntShe was not looking forward to the conversation.

After wrapping things up with Aunt Lulu, Nicole headed to the store to purchase shestore for a major food-shopping excursion. Once she arrived back home, she stepped back and eyed the place in dismay. The cabinets were full, and she had to stack things on the counters, cutting into what little working space she'd. Youthere'd been to start with.

ng just As much as she liked her apartment over Joe's—loved that it was ready to center of town and had a month-to-month lease—the tiny space was driving her insane. And she hadn't been there long. Her old apartment in Manhattan hadn't been huge, but it did provide room when she did baking. Here she hadn't even been able to unpack her beloved mixer and she'd left other countertop appliances.

She'd thought she could make do until she decided whether she'd stay in her current job or attempt to open her own bake shop, but she was wrong.

om her She'd need to make another move, and soon. She needed her laptop and a dining table but what was available. Grabbing her bag, she opened the door—and came face-to-face with a vase full of flowers. "What the . . . ?"

a local "Umm . . . surprise?" Sam moved the vase away from his face. "I'm a business didn't give me a chance to knock."

She looked him over, taking in his weekend appearance. A worn-in, faded jeans, a black T-shirt, and stubble gave him a scruffy, appealing look. A sense of pleasure rushed through her at the sight of him.

ts, and "Hi." She smiled, and he grinned at her in return.

orporate "I obviously caught you leaving."

ly been She nodded. "I was going to look online and see what houses or apartments were available to rent. I thought this place was cute when I first found it."

each their's too small. I can't bake anything substantial here, and I'm claustrophobic."

rice the "I can understand."

on more She glanced at his full hands, realizing how rude she was being aroundstepped aside. "I'm sorry. Come on in."

wed up He held out the flowers, and she felt herself blush as she accepted "Thank you. They're beautiful."

d make His gaze met hers.

gement. He didn't say *so are you*, but the way he looked at her, devouring with his eyes as if he could see her inside and out, made her feel all kinds of special.

at the She set the bouquet down on her counter, where she'd have a good Nicole of them from wherever she sat in the apartment, looked at him, and grinned

d she'd "What's that smile for?" he asked.

g space She glanced at the flowers once more. "They're daisies. I love daisies. I'm glad. I wanted to get you something different."

s in the "Why?" she couldn't help but ask.

slowly "Because *you're* different," he said in a deep voice, and her entire face flushed hot.

ve into He glanced around the small apartment. So did she, viewing the kitchen counter and the bed that remained in her peripheral vision.

Yep, it was time.

d get a "Want company on your hunt for a new place to live?" he asked.

p to seeme She raised an eyebrow. "Really? You want to spend your day off hunting for a house or condo?"

ie face- "I want to spend my day off with *you*."

She did a happy dance, at least inside. "Okay, then. Let's go check out some options." She grabbed her purse from the counter and swiped the keys from the hook on the wall.

pair of Hours later, Nicole had discovered that for a small town, a variety of rental options were available and not all offered the same things. From condos to apartments, the one Cara had lived in, to an apartment complex downtown, to a rental in a freestanding home, Nicole had her choice, and she and Sam walked through every one.

condos Her legs ached; she was exhausted and ready to call it quits. "I'll take it, but mean to be so picky, but nothing we saw works for me."

feeling She stretched her legs out in Sam's SUV. He'd insisted on driving
he knew his way around town, and now she was glad she'd agreed.

"It's not picky to want to like where you live." He rested his arm
ing, and the two front seats, his fingers grazing her shoulder.

She suppressed a delightful shiver. "At least you're not annoyed. I
d them. don't understand. Most men in their right minds would have no patience
day like today."

"Are you saying I'm insane?"

ing her She shook her head and laughed. "No, just special."

kinds of He grinned, revealing that dimple in his cheek. "Thank you."

"I guess it's time to head home," she said, discouraged.

od view "Not quite. There's one more place that isn't listed."

nned. She turned toward him, hopes raised. "Really?"

He nodded. "It's in a nice neighborhood, has a backyard with a ba
ies." and a really good-looking next-door neighbor." He winked at her.

Her eyes opened wide at his implication. "Seriously?"

He nodded, and his devilish grin had her wanting to agree to n
re bodysight unseen. "Why didn't you mention this place before?" Unless he
really want her living so close to him but was offering because she'd
he one of options.

vision. "Because I wanted you to see everything else out there. The seller:
older couple who want to test the weather down south for a year. You
making a one-year commitment and—"

helping She leaned in closer. "And?" She urged him to continue.

"It's a whole house. I wasn't sure you'd want such a big responsib
top of the year lease." He shrugged.

eck the "So it wasn't because you didn't want me as your neighbor? Be
off the can understand why you wouldn't. I mean, we could hang out and d
we're not interested in each other. Then we'd be living almost in each
riety of backyard, and that would be awkward."

los like He shook his head, the easygoing grin never leaving his face.
oms for said, I wanted you to see everything else first. That's it. You didn't
am had other options, and I'd have shown you this last even if you had. Be
would love to have you as my neighbor." He paused. "If that's sor
'I don't you'd want."

As if she'd say no. "I'd love to see it."

g since “Good.” He spun and focused on driving, turning the car and I toward his home.

l across “I have to say, I’m surprised you live in a house,” she said.
“Why is that?”

Which I She shrugged. “I guess I expected you to live in a bachelor pad c
ce for asort. An apartment or condo where you don’t have to worry about taki
of things when an association or landlord could do it for you.”

“I always knew I’d stay in Serendipity, so why throw my money a
a rental?”

Why indeed? The man had *hearth and home* written all over him, :
Nicole wonder why he hadn’t settled down with one woman long befo

“So why haven’t these people listed their home?”

“It’s been up for rent for a while, and they live on a fixed incom
rbecue, didn’t want to spend any more money on advertising, so they put u
around town. But they plan on leaving their furniture for whoever rent
left me the key to show potential buyers when they’re gone.”

rove in He turned onto a treelined street with older but appealing-looking
e didn’tThe kind she’d always imagined living in when she was growing up
run outparents’ overly large, too coldly decorated mansion.

“Home sweet home,” he said, pulling into a driveway that appe
s are anhave freshly laid blacktop.

ou’d be “This is your house?” she asked.

“Mine and the bank’s,” he said. “But I’ve been able to pay a littl
on my mortgage each month, and I hope to own it outright sooner rath
ility onlater.” He jumped out of the truck and came to her side just as she’d
up her bag and opened her car door.

cause I “Let’s go inside, and I’ll show you around. Then I’ll call the Brov
liscoverask if it’s a good time for us to come over.”

other’s Excited, she scrambled out of the car, eager to see where and hc
lived.

“Like I
like the
sides, I
nothing



AS SAM LED Nicole into his house, damned if he wasn’t nervous to
reaction. Not something he understood, but he realized her opinion
was important.

reading “The good news is my mother and sister insisted on making this livable, so you won’t find that bachelor pad you mentioned.”

He swung open the door and gestured for her to walk in ahead of him.

This, of course, gave him a good view of her delectable ass in fitted jeans and a denim jacket. Her pink flip-flops with flowers on top smacked against the floor as she entered.

“Sam, I love it,” she said from the den immediately on the right, the way out that overlooked the street.

He shut the front door and headed into his favorite space, the living room, which boasted a large television on the wall above the stone fireplace and plush oversized furniture in brown and cream. But some touches made the place a home, like photos of his family and accent pieces, as Eric had seen in the magazine. They looked good, but Sam didn’t know anything about them.

“Oh, look! A softball trophy.” She bent down and read from the plaque. “Star pitcher.” Straightening, she met his gaze with a full-on grin. “Impressed, Officer Marsden?”

“Detective,” he automatically reminded her.

“Right.” A smile curved her beautiful lips.

“We play two nights a week during the summer,” he said, keeping his eyes on her. “I’ll be there to help you get your brain on track.”

Her eyes lit up. “I’d love to come watch you play.”

“Next game’s tomorrow night at the high school field.” He watched her for a moment more, trying to gauge her expression to see if she was serious or just being polite.

She clapped her hands, her excitement genuine. “I’ll be there.”

“Pizza after?”

She smiled. “It’s a date . . . Detective.”

Their gazes held for a long moment before she broke the connection and continued her inspection of the room.

“I’ll call about the house,” he said before he crossed the small hallway dividing them and did what he wanted, which was to kiss her senseless time without interruption.

Luckily, Charlotte and Henry Brown were home and thrilled to have him bring over a potential renter. A few minutes later, Nicole had touched the house that was but a few short feet from Sam’s, and she’d fallen in love with it. In fact, he’d had a difficult time dragging her out of the kitchen to see the rest of the house. Although the appliances weren’t brand-new, they were clean and

s placewhite, and the countertops were spacious. The layout was perfect for someone who loved to cook. And once she did tour the other rooms, her expression on her face was pure bliss.

and white “I have to admit, I didn’t think about renting an entire house, but this place is perfect. Quaint and homey . . . and me. The kitchen is perfect for me. I spun around, and Sam knew he was looking at his new neighbor.

the room His sexy new *neighbor* that he wanted in his bed as soon as possible.



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MACY HAD JUST finished her shift and was ready to head home. The restaurant was quiet, the evening help had taken over, and she planned to enjoy this night she’d been free for dinner in what felt like ages because she’d been covering for a sick server.

She hung up her apron and grabbed her purse from the back room, then stepped into the main part of the restaurant in time to see a stranger sitting at the counter. His blond hair was cut short and styled well; he wore a suit with a red tie, and he looked as tired as she felt. But despite the weariness in his expression, she couldn’t tear her gaze from his handsome face. His jawline was so chiseled and perfect, she would remember if she’d met him before.

Suddenly, her urge to rush out of the restaurant disappeared. She turned back through the doors and stashed her bag behind the desk. And since she might be late, she stopped in the employee restroom to check the mirror and freshen her makeup a little before heading out front once more.

She intercepted Nell, the server who was about to take his order. “I’ll take this,” Macy said.

Nell glanced over Macy’s shoulder and sighed. “Young, hot, and handsome. Of course you’re staying longer.”

Macy grinned. “Don’t sound so put out,” she said to the older woman. “You’ll go home to your husband tonight.”

“Oh honey, my husband didn’t look like that man even when we were married. I do love him, so go. Take your shot with the stranger.” Nell winked and retreated to the kitchen.

Macy twirled the drink tray in her hand, drew a deep breath, and turned over to the man. “Hi,” she said, placing fresh silverware in front of him at the counter.

ect for “Good evening.” Startling green eyes settled on hers.
ms, the “Hi,” she said again.
An amused smile curled his lips. “Can I get a menu? I’m starving.”
out this She shook her head out of the cloud she’d been lost in. “Of course.” She handed him a large plastic menu. “I recommend the meatloaf. It’s special.”
le. He laid the menu down on the counter. “Meatloaf it is.”
His smile lit up something inside her she didn’t recognize. “I’ll put in your order. Drink?” she asked.
“Cola’s fine.”
staurant She nodded. “Okay.”
he first “Come back? I have a couple of questions maybe you can answer.”
’d been Macy raised her eyebrow. Intrigued, she nodded. “Be right back.”
She turned the order into her uncle, the chef, then filled a glass v
m. She and soda and returned to find the man where she’d left him, staring
it down window onto the street.
a navy “Looking for someone?” She placed the glass and a straw in front of
eariness “As a matter of fact, I am.” He swiveled back around to face her.
A face “It’s a small town. Chances are I know whomever you’re searching for.”
He shrugged. “I’m looking for my fiancée.”
slipped Disappointment filled Macy, but she wasn’t surprised a gorgeous
ly as it like this had a woman in his life.
ror and He let out a sigh. “Actually, she’s my ex-fiancée.”
Macy perked up at that.
I’ve got “I drove here straight from work, over an hour from Manhattan
traffic. I’m looking for Nicole Farnsworth. Know her?”
exy. Of Macy blinked, surprised. “I do.” She came around the counter and
onto the stool beside him.
woman. “Where is she staying?” he asked.
She narrowed her gaze. She didn’t know him, and Nicole
ret. But mentioned a man in her life. “Did you say Nicole was your fiancée?”
l at her “Ex.” His eyes hardened at the word.
“Your idea or hers?” she asked boldly, having her reasons.
walked He pushed back from his seat, surprise in his eyes. “Hers. Now v
him on tell me where she is?” he asked.
Macy might admire his bluntness but that didn’t mean she trusted

She eyed him warily, wondering if the handsome devil was telling truth.

’ “What’s your name?” Macy asked him.

e.” She “Tyler Stanton. Yours?”

today’s “Macy Donovan.”

“I would normally say it’s a pleasure, Ms. Donovan—”

“Macy,” she interjected.

just go He frowned. “But you’re not helping me out. And I thought small were friendly.” His jaw worked in frustration that didn’t make him a sexy.

’ She leaned in close, inhaling the potent scent of his aftershave. Even a full day, he smelled manly and delicious. God, what a traitor she lusting after her new friend’s ex-fiancé.

with ice But no matter how humiliating, she wouldn’t allow her hormones to override her common sense.

of him. a number or hotel information where she can reach you, I’ll give message.”

g for.” “Ms. Donovan.”

“Macy.”

us man He worked that sexy jaw once more. “Macy. Don’t you think I’ve her more than once before I drove all the way upstate?”

She couldn’t contain her grin. “I think she’s obviously not returning calls, which means she doesn’t want to talk to you.”

an with He raised an eyebrow.

settled new friend would I be if I just turned her over to you without making that’s what she wanted?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Fine. Tell her I’m in town, and I hadn’t see her. Now, can you please tell me where I can find the nearest hotel

“Five-star, or is a bed-and-breakfast okay with you?” Macy couldn’t teasing him.

“I’m guessing there are no five-star hotels around here.”

will you She shrugged. “Twenty minutes away. But you look exhausted promise you the Serendipity Inn is clean and the food homemade ed him, pulled out her phone. “I’ll even call ahead and make sure they have

her the available. How's that for friendly?"

"Works for me." he said, obviously relieved.

She made the call and secured him a room. "Tell you what. Eat then go get a good night's sleep. Come back in the morning, breakfast In the meantime, I'll try to reach Nicole."

"Now that's mighty neighborly of you, Ms. Donovan." He winked she were another type of woman, she might have swooned. "You've I townsme reassess my opinion. You're definitely friendly. In fact, if I were ny less I'd be damn glad you had my back."

"That might be the nicest compliment I've ever received."

en after "Macy! Food's up!"

ie was, "Excuse me," she said to her customer. She walked back to the kitc

"Who's the hunk?" Aunt Lulu asked.

ones to Macy narrowed her gaze. "What are you doing here? Isn't it night?"

ave me "I stopped by to pick up the pie I baked for after we play. Now spil

her the Macy loved her aunt, trusted her business sense, and knew she ha heart. But she also loved to gossip, which meant she wasn't giv woman any information. Not until she knew what was going on wit from Nicole herself.

e called "Just a customer." She picked up his order. "Thanks, Dad!" She w her father, the cook in the back. He shared shifts with her uncle.

g those He winked at her and went about his business. He hadn't inheri sister's propensity for talking or gossip.

"Have fun tonight," she said to her aunt and walked back i kind of restaurant with Tyler's food.

ng sure She set his meal in front of him, noting once more the utter perfec his chiseled features, and did her best not to sigh. In a small tov need to Serendipity, Macy had seen all the available men and often despa ?" meeting anyone new. Didn't it figure the one she found drool-worthy n't help new friend's ex. And true friends just didn't go there.

"Enjoy," she said, turning to go.

"Keep me company?" he asked, surprising her.

, and I She wasn't technically scheduled to work anyway . . . "Let me e." She myself something to eat, and I'll be right back," she agreed, knowing a room attraction to this man was a bad thing.

But he hadn't shown any reciprocal interest, and clearly, he was
Nicole. Besides, if Nicole had really ended things with him, he w
dinner, remain in town for long. So Macy decided that keeping him co
on me. wouldn't hurt anyone at all.

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But he hadn't shown any reciprocal interest, and clearly, he was here for Nicole. Besides, if Nicole had really ended things with him, he wouldn't remain in town for long. So Macy decided that keeping him company wouldn't hurt anyone at all.

Chapter Five

AFTER VIEWING THE absolutely perfect house next door to Sam's, immediately agreed to the rental. She and Henry Brown, a nice old man who had shaken hands, and with them moving out for good tomorrow, she would be in this coming weekend. In true small-town fashion, the couple worried about doing a background check because they were happy to believe Sam the cop's word, and he'd vouched for Nicole. Promising to forward lease information tomorrow, they said goodbye, excited to let their neighbors know about the rental.

Nicole had a new home.

Suddenly overwhelmed, she tried not to panic. She had to make a list of things to do—talk to Joe, her landlord, and give notice; pack up her apartment; hire movers . . . or could she do the move in short car trips?

"Are you okay?" Sam asked as they walked back across the lawn.

She nodded. "I think I'm just in shock."

He laughed. "Good shock, I hope."

She thought about the kitchen and the space, the beautiful bedroom and the small chaise lounge giving her a place to curl up and read. "A little bit of shock," she assured him. "I'm going to love living in a house."

"I'm going to love having you next door," he said in a husky voice.

She shivered at the sexual innuendo inherent in his words and his touch. She followed him inside his house and into the kitchen.

Without warning, a yawn hit. She covered her mouth but was unable to stifle the small noise that escaped, and she laughed.

"The day must be catching up with me. I'm exhausted." She turned to Sam. "Would you mind driving me back to town?"

"Yes, I think I would mind." He stepped closer, invading her personal space, not that she cared.

He smelled deliciously male, and her exhaustion disappeared, replaced by something far more pleasurable.

"I spent the whole day apartment hunting, and I worked up an app

kept you company while you did your thing. The least you could do and have dinner with me,” he said in a teasing but self-assured tone.

She was simultaneously amused and pleased with his blatant attempt to keep her around. “Pizza?” she asked hopefully.

“You got it,” he said with a satisfied grin.

Nicole
er man,
e could
wasn't
to take
ard the
children

She guessed he hadn't been sure she'd stay. As if she'd wanted to go anywhere else. These uncertain, awkward moments were normal, but she knew for sure nothing was questionable about what she felt for this man as long as she kept things simple and uncomplicated, she'd be fine.

“Toppings?” he asked, picking up the phone.

“Your choice. I'm easy.”

His eyes darkened at her accidental double entendre. He ordered everything pizza, requested delivery, pulled two beers from the fridge, and offered her one.

a list of
up her

She nodded. “I've always had a weakness for a cold beer. Even in college, other girls liked wine, but I preferred beer. I still do.” But her life hadn't been conducive to brew.

Tyler, his mother, her parents, and their friends all preferred ex- alcohol.

1 with a
vesome

He grabbed the opener from the counter, and as he popped the top, Nicole's gaze fell to his broad biceps and the muscles that flexed and moved. She stifled an appreciative sigh that caught his attention.

His gaze held hers, a wealth of desire in that one look passing between them. He placed the bottles on the counter and extended his arm toward her.

Heart pounding, she placed her palm in his rougher hand.

one.
able to

He pulled her against him, aligning her body with his. She acted on instinct and wrapped her arms around his neck. It felt right. Good.

He felt right.

ned to
ersonal.

His hand came up to cup the back of her head, and he sealed his desire with his lips over hers. They'd been dancing around this moment, building tension and yearning since the last time. The Nicole she knew didn't have such an intensity of any emotions burning in her veins, needing to get out.

aced by

With Sam, she did.

So, apparently, did he.

petite. I

There was no way she could not respond, and she kissed him back with more passion than she'd known she possessed—sliding her lips sensu-

is stayover his, opening and inviting him inside. He kissed her back like a man who was now devouring what he needed and taking more, storing it away as if he'd never have enough. His hands moved from her head to her cheeks, his thumbs smoothing over her skin, causing small electric shocks all over her body. Her heaviness throbbed in her breasts, and a definite pulsing began down between her legs. Unable to stop herself, she inched closer, threading her fingers through his shaggy hair. His masculine groan of appreciation reverberated through the room. Asher. Oh yes, they were in this together, and she liked that as much as he liked him.

His lips swept down her cheek, her neck, and finally landed on the spot near her throat, where he took his time, nuzzling and nipping at her skin. This time, *she* moaned. While he licked and teased her there, his fingers moved up her shirt and soon he cupped her aching breasts in his hard, hot hands. She arched her back, pressing herself against him, and he squeezed her breasts, eliciting another moan. Heat settled between her thighs, and she squirmed, needing his touch there now more than ever.

pensive



SAM COULDN'T MISTAKE her desire, not when she smelled so sweet, and not when she was so pliant in his arms. Her breasts filled his palms, each just slightly larger than his hand, and when she arched into him, the pebbled points of her nipples pricked his skin. His cock throbbed against his jeans, but he ignored it for his own needs, content to test just how sensitive she was and enjoy fulfilling her wants.

He brushed his thumbs over the lace fabric of her bra, turning her into even firmer darts, and she gripped his hair harder, a clear signal to stop. He couldn't if he wanted to. He was lost in this woman, like never before. He'd ever experienced. He didn't want to break the kiss. Hell, as much as he wanted to thrust inside her hot, willing body, he could kiss her lips forever.

And he would have, had her phone not rung, interrupting the moment. He groaned and stepped back, his forehead still touching hers.

"Go ahead. Get it," he said, silently cursing whoever was on the other end.

With a disappointed sigh, she headed for the other room where he was waiting. She closed the door behind her and locked it.

starving was, leaving him feeling the loss. He shook his head, knowing how Craig up assounded. Still, he was enjoying everything about Nicole—and the folks, his she was moving in next door meant all systems were go between them over. A He heard her steps as she came back to the kitchen.

elow. As she entered the room, he glanced at her, noticing she was pale through before and a lot less relaxed.

through “What’s wrong?”

as she “I . . .”

Nerves pricked at his skin. “Just say it,” he told her, recognizing the sweet hesitation meant nothing good.

er skin. “Macy called. I had a visitor at her restaurant. Someone looking for hers slid here in Serendipity.”

ds. She Sam narrowed his gaze. “Okay . . . I’m sure you told people a harder, where you were going, so why would a visitor be a surprise?”

uirmed, “Umm, there’s two parts to that answer,” she said without meeting gaze. “One, I told my parents where I was going, but there’s a good they didn’t actually *hear* me. They aren’t interested in anything more than staying home and not messing up their plans.”

and she “What sort of plans?” he asked, suddenly edgy.

y larger She bit down on her lower lip. The same lower lip he’d been sucking of her minutes before. “I was engaged.”

ignored The word echoed around the room and slammed into his brain.

lfilling “I broke it off before I left Manhattan and moved here to start over,” said, her words coming out in a rush.

nipples Only one word stood out in Sam’s mind. “Engaged,” he repeated.

l not to “Was engaged.”

nothing just who was in town, causing her to panic. “And he’s the one who’s here h as he She nodded, eyes wide. “But it’s over between us. I’ve told him it

ke this I haven’t been taking his calls because I don’t want to give him the impression. So I have no idea why he’d come.” She rubbed her ent. together, her panic and nervousness obvious.

ie other These were weird reactions, if he thought about it, but he couldn’t understand why she’d be so flustered beyond having to confess an awkward omission. Then again, what did he know about the relationship between her and her ex-fiancé? He’d learned long ago not to think h r phone

azy that people—Sam had set up one of his best friends with who he thought act that stand-up guy, only to find out once they were married that he was not the sort.

Sam rubbed a hand over his face, exhaustion and frustration surer than claiming him. He couldn't believe this night had done such a one-eight

But he only had one focus, one part of this story that involved him. "The guy was your fiancé, chances are he had good reason to have the impression that you loved him," he said with bite because he'd been in that ex's shoes that he and he knew what it felt like to have a woman break things off.

In Sam's case, *left at the altar* was an accurate statement, for he understood being blindsided. He didn't want to feel bad for the guy, who was probably here to try to talk Nicole into coming back to him. But had he done the same thing? Right after Jenna ended things, he'd tried to get her to remember the good times and the plans they'd made. He'd tried to understand her when she'd changed her mind—and why he'd been too blind to see it. On that day, he didn't have a clue.

"I thought I loved him," Nicole said, interrupting Sam's mental tour of the past. "And then I realized I didn't," she continued.

He swallowed hard, wondering just how easily she'd walked away from her ex. And how fickle would she become with *him* after a while? He felt uncomfortably, this whole situation too sudden and way too close to home. It had him questioning his judgment regarding Nicole, and he needed to think.

The doorbell rang, giving him a reprieve, and he went to accept the delivery. When he returned, Nicole was looking at him with wary eyes, a cry from the heavy-lidded, desire-filled gaze of earlier.

"Are we okay?" she asked, running her hands up and down her bare arms.

"We're fine," he said, knowing he was lying. He needed to sort through his tangled emotions, which were wrongfully confusing Nicole and bringing up a past he wanted to put behind him. He wasn't sure how to accomplish that feat.

So they ate in awkward silence, and eventually Sam drove Nicole to her apartment over Joe's. When she got out of the car, he didn't mention the planned date tomorrow night after the softball game.

And neither did she. She knew

t was a
hing of



NICOLE PACED HER apartment, not easy considering how small an area it was to walk, but she couldn't sleep. Nerves, anxiousness, and not a little panic raced through her. Not only because she'd clearly messed things up with Sam but also because Tyler was in town. And that made no sense to her. She'd dumped him. Most men's egos would prevent them from texting, or begging for a reconciliation. Initially after the breakup, he was silent, as she'd expected. It wasn't until she'd arrived in Serendipity that he began to call her.

Now he was here. Which raised the question, why the shift? What was he doing here?

Unable to settle her stomach, she still had to try to sleep. She didn't understand, at least, she didn't think she did. She tossed and turned, awakening every few minutes. To this following morning.

After a quick shower, she dressed, her thoughts bouncing from her head to deal with Tyler to Sam's unexpectedly harsh reaction to her past. She didn't understand the extent of his withdrawal. It wasn't like she was engaged to Tyler. She'd been nothing but up front and aboveboard with him as soon as she'd realized she didn't feel the way she should if she was going to marry him. But Sam acted like she'd left Tyler at the same time to something equally cruel.

She'd called Macy last night for more information, and Macy told her Tyler would be at the restaurant this morning. As much as Nicole wanted to forget this meeting over with, she couldn't go anywhere until she had her scheduled phone call with her sister.

Her mind was on everything but Vicky, yet Nicole needed to give Vicky one hundred percent of her attention. She'd never seen Vicky try to control her disorder, work with therapists, take her meds, and truly make amends for her behavior.

At least the gravity of what she'd done had finally sunk in. The incident with Erin had escalated until Victoria had tried to run her over with her car. Only once she'd been medicated and thinking clearly had Vicky's behavior scared her, and Nicole was willing to do anything to help her overcome her past and try to live as close to a normal, healthy life as possible. Someone had to, as their parents considered both girls a loss.

when it came to representing their high standards.

At nine o'clock on the dot, Nicole's phone rang, and she answered settling in the middle of her bed for the conversation. "Hello?"

"Hi," Vicky said, sounding clear and present.

"Hi yourself." Nicole paused, always uncomfortable asking the usual questions up at all. *are you* when her twin was in a mental hospital for the criminally insane, at least the institution where she was housed was filled with minimal-behavior problem inmates. Hopefully, her stay would be temporary, contingent on her good behavior and doctors' reports to the court.

"So tell me what's going on in your life," Vicky said before Nicole could fill in the silence.

Nicole paused, knowing her sister was still too fragile to confide in her own troubles. Vicky's recent behavior meant Nicole couldn't yet trust her to stay on medication and keep a secret about what Tyler's father had done.

And though Vicky knew Nicole had moved to Serendipity, Nicole was hesitant to talk about the town and remind her sister of Cole and her brother just there.

"I recognize that silence . . . you're afraid to talk to me," Vicky continued with her said. "But my therapist said I shouldn't avoid conversation or worry because it triggers while I'm in here. That this is the best place for me to be testing the waters, so to speak. So stop worrying so much and tell me about your life in Serendipity."

"The twin connection at work again?" Nicole asked, figuring that she wanted to know how her sister knew what she'd been thinking.

"No, it's just obvious."

To Nicole's surprise, Vicky giggled, sounding like the little girl she'd once been. The warm sound helped her relax, and she leaned back against the pillows and the wall.

Freed up to talk about Sam, Nicole decided that was as far as she could go with her own situation. "Okay, well—remember the cop who arrested me when he thought I was you? Sam Marsden?"

"The good-looking guy with the shaggy blond hair? How could I forget?"

"Maybe because you've always been drawn more to the dark side of things than your sister types," Nicole said, teasing.

"Are you seeing him?"

Nicole swallowed hard. "I was—I'm supposed to catch up with him."

his softball game tonight, but something happened, and now I'm not so
answered, She went on to tell her sister about the house she'd agreed to lease
night with Sam, kisses included—because who else could she tell
twin—and how things had imploded after Macy's phone call.

ial how “So now I have to head over to the restaurant this morning to de
ane. At Tyler.” Nicole's stomach churned at the thought. “Why can't the man
havior-for an answer?” she asked out loud.

gent on “Because you're special, that's why,” Victoria said.

Nicole opened her mouth, then closed it again. She couldn't rem
e had to the last compliment her twin had given her.

Ever.

n about The older she got, the less Victoria had been interested in Nicole
rust her too self-absorbed to think about anyone but herself. Over time, it had l
d done. hard not to resent her twin, but as an adult and with her sister's dia
was still Nicole had worked hard at overcoming that feeling. Victoria hadn't ch
ehavior be as she was.

“Thanks, but come on. I'm not that special.”

orrectly Vicky snorted. “Really. You're a good person, Nic. You give of y
y about even when others don't give back. Me included. Well, me especially.
e while Tyler's case, he knows how good he had it with you.”

e about Nicole hoped and prayed that was all Tyler thought. She was begin
wonder if maybe he was involved in things with the firm and was
at was persuade her to keep quiet.

Nicole forced her mind onto the conversation with her sister. “But
love him the way I should in order to marry him.”

l she'd “And you'll just have to keep gently driving that point hom
inst the wouldn't want to end up with him stalking you,” Vicky said lightly.

“Don't do that.”

ie'd go “If I can joke about it, you should also be able to.”

ted me Nicole managed a smile. “Who are you, and what have you done v
twin?” She decided to take her sister at her word and not sidestep the
orget?” she was working so hard to overcome. “You sound great. You're foc
-haired things around you, me included. And you haven't once talked about y

So now I'm giving you permission. Tell me how things are really goin

Her sister's sigh gave away more than her perky voice had. “It's
m after here. But let's face it, I'm not in this place to make friends, and I don

sure.” to. So I’m focused on getting better.”

ase, her “That’s a good thing. And I told you I’d come visit.” The institution but her two hours away, but Nicole was more than willing to make the drive.

“No! I don’t want you to see me here.” Vicky’s voice rose in panic.
al with “Whatever you want,” Nicole quickly assured her.

take no It would have to be enough that they were talking weekly. Even
Victoria wasn’t willing to even do that. Their recent phone calls proved
the medication and therapy were working.

member “I have to get going,” Vicky said before Nicole could ask if she’d
contact with their parents.

Nicole already guessed the answer was no. In their eyes, Victoria’s
life, now a public embarrassment, so her parents would ignore her completely.
become at least they were paying for her lawyer and other expenses, hoping
diagnosis, daughter’s recovery would help their public perception, which was
loosen to be cared about.

“You make sure to fix things with the hot cop,” Vicky said. “I’ll
see you next week.”

yourself “Looking forward to it already,” Nicole said.

. But in “Bye.”

“Love you.”

coming to Vicky paused, then whispered, “Goodbye,” before disconnecting the
here to She still found it hard to reach out or say things like *I love you* or *I miss
you*, but today’s call had been the best so far.

I don’t With little things changing, Nicole felt the return of the bond she
sister had shared when they were young. It also felt like a missing piece.
e. You herself was being returned to her—filled up slowly, like sand in an hour.
And Nicole was grateful for each minuscule bit she received. She was
afraid to trust that it would last, having seen Victoria regress more times
she wanted to recall. Still, she reminded herself she’d never seen her
with my low point she’d been at after her arrest, nor had she ever watched her
e issues intently for recovery.

used on Hope, Nicole thought, was a scary, elusive thing—no matter what
yourself, relationship was involved. For someone who’d been consistently rejected
g.” ignored by her parents, the very people she should trust to be there for
; lonely the fear of being hurt or rejected—by Sam especially—remained.

it want Pushing off those thoughts, she refocused on her most pressing problem.

Her ex-fiancé.

ion was



SAM HAD THE day off, so he agreed to meet Cara at The Family Restau
breakfast. He was in a pissed-off mood, and his sister-in-law
immediately.

“Well? Are you going to answer me? What, or should I say who, I
in such a foul mood?”

Sam shoveled a mouthful of scrambled eggs into his mouth, in
Cara’s question for the second time.

“You’re not getting laid? Is that it?”

“Goddamn, you’re persistent. Would you talk about something
besides me?”

“Nope. You’re so much fun to annoy.” She pushed her uneaten b
away. “But I hate to see you so worked up, so talk to me.”

“It’s Nicole,” Macy said, coming up from behind them and squeez
the booth alongside Cara.

“Eavesdropping? Seriously, have you no shame?” Sam asked.

But knowing she’d met the ex last night, Sam was glad to have h
Not that he’d give her the satisfaction of admitting as much.

Macy met Cara’s amused gaze. “No, none.” She glanced from
plate in the center of the table to Cara herself. “What’s wrong with the
she asked.

“Nothing. I’m just not hungry,” Cara said.

Macy frowned. “Can I get you something else?”

Cara shook her head, and even Sam wondered what was wro
usually outate him without worrying about calories. She had a great b
metabolism, not that Sam noticed much because she was his good frie
his brother’s wife.

“I’m fine. Talk to me about Nicole.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “Her ex-fiancé is in town.”

“I didn’t know she had one of those,” Cara said, eyes widening.

“Me neither.” Sam ground his teeth.

“Same,” Macy said. “Although I met him last night and I have
yum yum.”

roblem:

Sam shot her a nasty look.

“Not helping the cause,” Cara reminded her.

Macy blushed. “Oops. But come on. I asked who ended things, said Nicole did. So obviously, you have nothing to worry about when I’m concerned.”

He ignored her and took a drink of his coffee.

“He’s not speaking today. To anyone, apparently,” Cara said.

“Well, he’s listening, so I’ll just mention that I told Tyler—the name—to come here this morning for breakfast. And Nicole called and asked me to save a table in the back so she could talk to him without being interrupted.”

Sam’s stomach twisted hard.

“She said she wanted to make sure he understood she was serious about breaking up.” Macy stared hard at Sam. “Do you hear what I’m saying?”

“His head’s still in the past, isn’t it?” Cara asked. “Now that you know Nicole broke her engagement once, you’re worried she’s just like Jennifer. You can’t trust her or your feelings for her. Am I right?”

Before he could react, Macy reached across the table and slapped the top of his head. “Hey! That’s ridiculous.”

“When you’re the one left stranded the morning of your wedding, talk to me about what’s ridiculous.” He retrieved his wallet and threw

it on the table, enough to cover his and Cara’s breakfast, and rose from his seat. “You’re leaving? Before you see Nicole? Before you offer your sister a job?”

“Before you remind her you’re here for her?”

Sam glared at Macy, annoyed with her intrusiveness.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Go right ahead and leave the door open for Tyler since Nicole already thinks you’re disappointed in her for breaking her engagement.” She waved a hand in dismissal.

With a grumble, Sam lowered himself back into the booth, unwilling to say Macy had a damn good point. He might not be happy about the situation or Nicole’s past, but no way would he step aside. Which meant he’d get over himself and his history—at least enough to admit he still loved Nicole. Which meant they’d have to have an open, honest conversation to make it clear they weren’t talking about a serious relationship between them. Just some feel-good sex while it lasted. He thought they were in agreement, but he’d feel better knowing for sure.

All well and good, Sam thought, knowing that what *he* wanted did
into consideration her ex-fiancé.

and he Which left him the odd man out while they spoke this morning. V
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Hoping for the best.

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All well and good, Sam thought, knowing that what *he* wanted didn't take into consideration her ex-fiancé.

Which left him the odd man out while they spoke this morning. Waiting. Wondering.

Hoping for the best.

Chapter Six

DRAWING A DEEP breath, Nicole walked into the restaurant a few minutes ahead of schedule. She planned to get settled in a booth in the back before Tyler arrived. To help, she'd pulled all the armor around her that she could think of, including dressing like the woman she was in Serendipity that day—the woman she was—period. From her low-rise white jeans to Converse sneakers and a loose, flowing tank top, she was far from the couture-wearing fiancée she'd once been.

She arrived at the restaurant, shocked to find Macy, Cara, and Sam together in one booth. Uncomfortable but not willing to duck and run, she forced herself to meet Sam's gaze. He acknowledged her with his eyes, his stare, giving her no indication of what he was thinking or feeling.

Her insides quivering, she knew she had no choice but to pass them by and head to the booth she'd reserved in the back. "Hi," she said, pausing at the head of their table.

"Hey," Cara said.

"Hi, hon." Macy raised a hand in a wave.

Sam's gaze merely latched and held on to hers.

"I should go wait in my booth," she murmured when she couldn't break the awkward silence any longer.

She turned and made her way to the back of the restaurant, knowing Sam's silence had clearly made his point. He was still angry and upset.

She reached the private booth in the back just as he called her name.

She spun at the sound of Sam's deep voice, finding him so close he bracketed her against the wall, confusing her since his actions were at odds with the emotional distance he'd put between them. "Sam—"

"I'm sorry."

She lowered her jaw. "You're—"

"Sorry I was a jerk. You were honest with me about your past and I reacted based on my own."

She narrowed her gaze, as relieved as she was baffled. "Your past?"

didn't she know?

"Yeah." He ran a hand through his golden hair. "Look, we need How about after the game tonight?"

Before she could reply, a shadow loomed over them. "Nicole." voice held more than a hint of disapproval, no doubt over finding a near-clinch with Sam.

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She waited for Sam to step back so she could make the av introductions, but Sam was in no rush and remained in place, his ha bracketing hers.

"Nicole!" Tyler repeated, obviously upset.

She eyed Sam imploringly.

"I'm just waiting for an answer," he reminded her. "Tonight a game?" He touched her cheek with one hand, obviously staking a claim.

Oh God. Her entire body trembled. "Yeah," she said softly. "Okay."

He grinned, obviously pleased he'd won this round, and eased away her oh, so slowly. By the time he'd removed himself from her persona she was surprised smoke and flames weren't shooting between them.

Tyler cleared his throat. "Aren't you going to introduce us?" he asked.

She shook her head, hoping to clear her mind. "Tyler Stanton, Detective Sam Marsden. Sam, Tyler." She gestured back and forth between the two men, refusing to give either one of them a designation like boyfriend, or ex-anything.

They eyed one another warily, each assessing the competition. was ridiculous, since Sam had none and Tyler had driven all this way reason. But she didn't want to hurt him, and Sam's deliberate claim-hadn't helped toward that goal.

By the time Sam strode away, Nicole was shaking inside, and she her nerves didn't show on the outside.

"Shall we sit?" Tyler asked.

She nodded, aware of her friends at the front of the diner, along with other familiar faces who'd come in since she'd arrived. Serendipity in a small town, and like most, people here enjoyed good gossip. Nicole's fiancé and her new relationship with Detective Sam Marsden would certainly provide this morning's talk and entertainment.

"What



IT TOOK EVERYTHING inside Sam not to turn around and watch Nicole to talk. well-dressed, clearly rich, everything-Sam-was-not ex-fiancé. It took more fortitude for him not to sit back down with Cara and Macy and Tyler's Nicole to finish with her talk. Instead, he strode straight out of the room in a headed for his car, and drove away, deciding he'd be better off doing around the house. At least that way he'd be productive and not pathetic awkward. He hadn't planned to compare, but clearly Nicole had a type. Both had body this Tyler Stanton had light hair and light eyes, his hazel, the other green, but where Sam was more of a guy's guy, Tyler was obviously in the GQ variety. Khaki pants, polo shirt, short hair that wasn't barber's. Which raised the question—what was the classy Nicole Farnsworth after the slumming with a Serendipity cop? And how long would her walk on the side last?

” Knowing he was in a precarious position, Sam asked himself why from hell he was doing. For a man who didn't want to invest emotions or his life space, he seemed to care too damn much.

He'd been blindsided by a woman once before. This time, his eyes were wide open, so if and when Nicole walked away, Sam had known this possibility existed going in.

And he'd have nobody to blame but himself.
friend,



Which NICOLE COULDN'T READ her ex-fiancé because Tyler was still focused on her. For no staking had gone down with Sam. So was Nicole. At least he wasn't angry, had alluded to interesting information about his past. She couldn't believe she hoped to imagine what had happened to him, nor did she have time to think about when Tyler faced her across the table, his expression tight.

“Tyler, why are you here?” Nicole got right to the point. Better she should have said immediately what she was up against.

He folded his hands on the table and took a visible, relaxing breath. “I came for you. I came to see what kind of hold this town has on you and how you felt you had to leave home—and me—to settle down here.”

Nicole expelled the breath she'd been holding, hoping things would be as simple as he claimed. This, she could deal with.

“I already explained why I broke up with you. I don't want to hurt

and her please don't make me say it again." She stared into his green eyes, hat
k even he was putting her in the position of having to rehash the breakup.

wait for "You said we didn't have sizzle. Chemistry. Then I come here a
tauriant, you with that cop."

g work "Detective," she replied, then realized she was echoing Sam and m
2. not to smile.

he and "That detective is the reason you left me."

r guy's "That's ridiculous. I barely knew him when I was here last." But
nore of been the catalyst that made her realize what she had with Tyler
op cut. enough. Still, why tell him and dig at his pride?

1 doing Tyler ran his hand through his closely cropped hair. "I'm not
ie other anywhere, you know. I'm staying until you come to your senses."

Nicole stiffened. Such extreme behavior was not Tyler's normal M
hat thenow she had to wonder—again—whether there was more to him beir
s heart, What did he know? Was he aware of his father's activities, and on wl
of the illegality did he fall? She knew what her heart told her, l
es were couldn't risk her safety by mentioning she knew his firm was
wn the laundering. What if he suddenly turned on her or, worse, called
Russian mob to handle her if he couldn't?

"I don't . . . You can't . . . What?! Why would you stick around?"
finally sputtered.

Completely unruffled, he replied, "Because we belong together
reached across the table in an attempt to place his hand over hers, but s
n what quick enough to shift her shaking hands to her lap.

but he His eyes flickered with disappointment.

egin to "I'm happy here," she told him.

about it He raised an eyebrow in an arrogant expression she knew well. Ty
many things—a gentleman, yes, but also occasionally entitled. "We'll

e know She shook her head. "I'm going to go about my life," she warn
And that meant seeing Sam.

eath. "I "You do that. And I'll be here to remind you of everything y
nd why behind."

Why? Because he thought they were such a love match? This dete
vere as behavior in the face of her rejection was so unlike him, she believed
depths of her soul more was going on than he was saying.

you, so "Go home," she tried once more.

ing that He shook his head and pinned her with a steady, certain, *dete*
glare. "I'm not going anywhere without you. There's too much at stake
nd find



managed THE MORNING CROWD kept Macy busy after her friends left, but not so bu
she didn't notice that Tyler remained behind for a while, obviously t
he had over what had transpired between him and Nicole. Nicole, she'd notic
wasn't looked for Sam when she left, and had been disappointed to find him
gone.

t going *What a tangled mess*, Macy thought. Something the likes of
Serendipity hadn't seen since . . . well, since Jenna left Sam at the a
IO, and Brett, his best friend. Sam had had a rough time then. He'd b
ig here. humiliated and embarrassed, and everyone in town had gossiped abou
at side months. She shook her head, glad Sam was on the winning side of thi
but she time around.

money The rest of the day passed quickly, but Macy was embarrassed to
in the she'd thought of Tyler Stanton more than a few times. He wasn't he
type, too buttoned up for Serendipity, but that didn't seem to matter v
Nicole was so darn sexy. She sighed, wondering how many boundaries sl
crossing by flirting with him. Just a little. Nicole was happily involv
er." He Sam—or wanted to be—so what could it hurt?

she was She was pondering that very question around five o'clock, know
could leave soon to head home and change before the seven o'clock
game.

ler was Tonight, the cops were playing the firefighters. *Hot* didn't b
see." describe the field, she thought with a wry grin. Too bad she'd known a
ed him. guys since they were boys, dated a few, and was interested in none. Sh
her gaze at the same moment *he* strode into the restaurant.

"Hello, Ms. Donovan."

rou left "Macy," she reminded him. "And we've got to stop meeting like th
He shook his head, obviously unsure what to make of her. Whi
rmined fine. Many had that initial reaction. She said what she thought, joked
l to the only she understood, and tried to enjoy life.

"I'd like a seat. Counter or a table is fine," he said.

"Take your pick." She gestured to the line of empty booths.

etermined
e.”
He chose the first table closest to the hostess stand, and she eyed his
pure female appreciation as he took the few steps to sit down. He
wearing the same khaki pants as earlier, and she took in his very fine
accented his lean form.

She handed him the menu.

asy that
hinking
ed, had
already
“I have a feeling I won’t be needing one after a while,” he mutt
himself.

She raised an eyebrow at that. “Planning on sticking around?” she
unable to stop the hope rising in her at the possibility.

which
litar for
een so
ut it for
ngs this
“Looks like it. I think Nicole’s testing the waters, and I want to
when she realizes everything she’s left behind.”

What did it say about her that Macy was pleased? Pathetic, that w
she was. Dimples or no, the man was stuck on another woman.

“What if she’s not just testing?” Macy asked.

He set his jaw. “She is.”

Macy raised her eyebrows. “Are you always so sure of yourself?”

o admit
r usual
hen he
re’d be
ed with
He met her gaze, suddenly looking at her, really studying her as if
her for the first time, and she shivered beneath his steady stare.

“Are you always so blunt?” he asked.

“Yes, and you didn’t answer me.”

“Yes, I’m always that sure. If I want something, I get it.” A
obviously wanted Nicole.

ing she
softball
egin to
ill these
ie lifted
But Macy had been the bystander to many people falling in love c
past few years, and when that particular emotion hit, it hit hard. It also
with dynamic chemistry, and she’d seen explosive heat between S
Nicole. Tyler didn’t have a chance, but then . . . why did he want one
pursue a woman who’d made her lack of interest and intentions not to
him so clear?

Macy liked a good puzzle, and Tyler was that. Especially since he
look all that hurt by his ex-fiancée’s obvious feelings for Sam.

is.”
“So what is there to do in town?” he asked.

ch was
even if
She shrugged. “Depends on the night.”

“Okay, how about . . . say tonight?” An amused smile lifted his
making him even more handsome.

She swallowed hard. She really shouldn’t bring up the softball gam
was playing and he’d mentioned plans afterward with Nicole. But i

him with didn't say anything, and he wandered around town or asked someone. He was he'd find out anyway.

ass that "There's a softball game at the high school, but you don't know here, so I'm sure that would be boring for you."

"Are you going?" he asked.

ered to She nodded.

"And do most people end up there?"

e asked, She inclined her head once more.

"So . . . say Nicole would be there?"

be here "Could be." Macy rocked on her heels, consoling herself that she been the one to offer up the information without him asking first.

as what "Then I guess I'll see you there."

She looked him over, caught the determination in his green eyes. He decided not to argue, just to be there beside him. As a buffer, she turned herself, not because she was determined to turn his focus away from him and onto herself.

seeing "But you really can't go so dressed up," she said.

His eyes opened wide. "These are my casual clothes."

She sighed dramatically. "Jeans are casual clothes. Cargo shorts are casual clothes. Khakis are dress clothes."

And he He shook his head. "Suits are dress clothes."

She bit the inside of her cheek and did her best not to laugh even though she did think he was cute, something she doubted he'd find amusing.

started "If you're hanging around for a while, do you want to stand out? Or do you want to fit in?" she asked him.

e? Why He frowned. "Your tone tells me that question has only one answer."

"Did you bring *more* casual clothes than those?" Assuming he owned a closet full of casual clothes, she didn't think of wardrobe to which she'd referred, which she was beginning to

"I didn't plan on more than a day trip. I can drive home later to pack up some things."

"More of these?" She gestured to his polo shirt, this one a pale green, and his blue polo shirt, this one a pale green. "Never mind, don't answer that. The mall is twenty minutes from here. We can get you a couple of pairs of shorts. Sam jeans, maybe a T-shirt or two, and be back before the game."

f Macy He let out an exasperated sigh. "I'm sure I have a pair of jeans

ne else, closet.”

She clasped her hands behind her back. “Are they pressed?”

anyone He opened his mouth in outrage, then closed it again. “Probably.”

She burst out laughing, enjoying this man way more than she
“Come on. Order dinner and then I’ll take you shopping and show you
the other half lives.”



hadn’t SAM WAS PITCHING at tonight’s game, which meant he had less time to figure
what was going on outside the baseline. But he wasn’t blind, his perception
was just fine, and he could see exactly what he shouldn’t let
him.

Erin and the baby sat on a blanket, a safe distance away from the
and fly balls, with a good view of the field. Nicole had joined them
provided enough of a diversion that Sam was off his game. But by the
inning, when his arm was warmed up and Nicole had settled in to watch
he’d begun pitching better. Until Macy arrived with Tyler Stanton—a
didn’t go to the bleachers. Instead, they pulled up folding chairs and
Sam’s sister—and Nicole.

Instead of letting the other man get to him, Sam gritted his teeth
his anger and frustration into the game.



? Or do

NICOLE HAD RUN into Erin at Cuppa Café, where they’d both had the same
to bring large iced teas with them to Sam’s game. They talked while
waited, and soon, they’d agreed to meet up again on the field and
blanket. Erin, an old pro, knew exactly where to sit so the baby wasn’t
danger of being hit by a foul ball, and Nicole was happy to have someone
talk to. She liked Sam’s sister a lot, and her daughter was the sweetest
smelling, most adorable-looking baby Nicole had ever laid eyes on
helped take her mind off her troubles.

Those troubles revolved around Tyler. Thanks to a phone call from
who had apparently appointed herself Tyler’s escort around town
Nicole’s go-between, Tyler had informed her he’d taken a room
in my

Serendipity Inn for an extended and undetermined period. And Nicole had that awful feeling his presence here was tied to everything she had behind and still hadn't decided how to handle it.

should. She pushed the thought out of her head and focused on the reason she was here tonight. Sam. The man filled out his softball uniform, his thighs and his ass spectacular. Her sex clenched just watching him, a new and electric reaction to just watching a man.

Three innings into the game, Erin realized she'd forgotten diapers in the car and took Angel with her to go get them. Nicole didn't mind being alone, as she was already invested in the game. The cops were up on the field, runs, and she couldn't take her eyes off Sam, his muscular arms flexing and pitching, and the intense concentration on his face holding her transfixed.

"Do you mind company?" a familiar masculine voice asked. Tyler. Nicole stiffened. "Umm, I don't think that would be a good idea." She looked up and was grateful to find Macy standing beside him. His presence took much of the pressure off Nicole. She didn't feel bad about being distracted by him down.

"Come on. You've got the best seats in the house," Tyler said, coming and joining her beside her.

Resigning herself to the unavoidable, she waved her hand. "Have a seat," she reluctantly said, but she refused to let their presence dampen her enthusiasm for the game.

She did her best to ignore Tyler and cheer Sam through an erratic performance period, relaxing when he settled into a rhythm once more. Up at bat, he hit in two runs, and when he hit what looked to be a grand slam, Erin, Macy, and Nicole yelled their loudest as he rounded the bases for home plate.

Nicole was aware of Tyler sitting beside her, a scowl on his face. "You don't have to be here," she reminded him, no longer keeping her tone gentle or worrying about hurting his feelings. She'd made herself clear. He was choosing to ignore her request for him to go home.

"Yes, I do. Until you come home with me, I'm staying." "I *am* home." With each day that passed, she felt more and more confident in her decision to settle in Serendipity.

Tyler grunted in reply. None too soon, the game ended, the cops won, and they all stood, leaving their chairs and blankets. Erin, who had the baby hanging from a sling

Nicole still her chest, managed well, but everyone insisted on helping her carry the heavy bag. She'd left the car.

"Thanks," the auburn-haired woman said with a genuine smile as she was going home. Hopefully, Cole's finished working by now. He was on a tight conference call with a new client and said he'd be a while."

"Exciting. "Drive safe," Nicole said as Erin buckled the baby into the car seat and drove back to the back of her truck.

"Always. Precious cargo in here." She shut the door and turned around to look at them. "It was fun. Let's do it again next week," she said.

"By two. "I'm in," Macy said automatically.

"Same," Nicole added, hoping she wasn't beaming because Erin had extended such an easy invitation.

She thought about her friends at home and the posturing that accompanied each invitation, nothing ever being what it seemed. Either a dinner, a fundraiser where someone wanted to one-up the other with clothing or a date, or an amount donated, or there was behind-the-scenes bickering that turned Nicole's stomach.

So different from the genuinely simple life here. No wonder leaving had been so easy. Her friends hadn't been sincere, but she was finding one better person here. People she liked and who liked her. Serendipity, she was discovering friends and filling empty holes. Except for Tyler.

Tyler had arrived, bringing Nicole's old life here to confront the new one. She didn't know how to make him go away, and even if he left, she was aware that he wouldn't be taking her most pressing problem with her.

Maybe once she and Sam settled things, she could consider confiding in him . . . She immediately shook her head. He was a police officer, sworn to uphold the law. If she told him her father's firm was laundering money, he'd be forced to report the information—and if that was the role she'd decided to take, she certainly wanted time to talk to Tyler and her father.

Assuming she felt comfortable enough to think they weren't in the same boat, she brought her full circle and had her insides cramping again.

"Sure of. "Hey, I'm starving. Let's go get something to eat," Macy suggested.

Tyler nodded, his gaze briefly meeting Macy's before landing on Nicole and lingering.

"Folding. "Umm, you two go. I'm going to wait for Sam." They had a date, but Nicole didn't plan on making it a double.

ings to Tyler ran a hand through his neat hair, and Nicole recognized the frustration. She glanced at Macy. “Show him a good time?” The im e. “I’m please didn’t need to be said out loud.

had a She knew she was imposing further on her new friend, but she this night with Sam, and she’d make it up to Macy. Who, Nicole su it in therealized, was smiling and not looking all that put out by the request.

“I think I can manage to keep him busy,” Macy said. “Come on, b to faceLet’s go get dinner. And maybe dessert.”

“Macy, let’s see what everyone else is doing first.”

“Why, when I know all the good places to eat in this ’burg?”

rin had She hooked her arm through Tyler’s and began pulling him tow car.

usually And Tyler, though he grumbled, went along rather than jerk his ar er therefrom Macy and be rude. The woman was a true dynamo, unique thing, a people Nicole had met. In a good way, unlike some other pushy wome ng thatknown.

Macy led Tyler to her car, and soon they were gone, leaving Nicol ing hadShe was grateful Macy could help her out, but she’d have to make s ut thereother woman knew Tyler wasn’t a simple guy to date—without re her. In everything she knew and involving Macy in her problems. Even if Ty pt nowa free agent, he came with other baggage and expectations. And Macy w. Sheseem the type to bend to someone else’s needs and desires.

all too Nicole caught a glimpse of Tyler’s back and the stiff, obvious denim. The Tyler she knew did not own faded light jeans, which mean ding inhad prodded him into the change. Instead of jealousy, Nicole fe worn toamusement and a sense of hope that Macy could help Tyler see reas money, already had him changing his way of dress, and he’d allowed her to di ute sheaway from the sole reason he’d come to Serendipity.

er first. Despite all the potential problems, Macy could be good for Tyler, rolvedthought. She just wished she knew if Tyler could be good for Macy

he’d take his head out of his parents’ expectations that he’d marry w d. into a connected family long enough to look at the treasure that wa Nicole’s Donovan. They’d just met, which meant it was way too soon to eve that way, but Nicole liked the thought.

ite, and “Hey.” Sam came up to her, looking sexy in his dirt-stained u caused by numerous slides around the field.

sign of ploringthey were alone. “Hey yourself. Great game.” She smiled at him, happy he was her

needed “Thanks. Where’d your friend go?” he asked, his tone turning dark
“Macy took him out to eat.”

uddenly Sam raised an eyebrow. “That bother you?”
“Should it?” she replied.

ig boy. He blew out a long breath. “Not if you’re telling me the truth, no.”
She set her jaw, determined not to get into an argument with him
her ex. But they needed to get one thing straight now. “Either you trust
you don’t. And if you don’t, we call this off right here and now. But
ard thedo? No more digs about truth and honesty, all right?”

He blew out a deep breath before answering. “Fair enough,” he
m backsurprising smile lifting his lips. “I have an important question.”

among “What?” she asked warily.

n she’d “Did you enjoy your pizza the other night?”

She let out a loud laugh. “No, I didn’t. I was too upset.”

e alone. “I thought so, and neither did I. Pop’s really does make the best p
sure theI thought we could head on over there and try again. I think we need
vealingsome things clear between us.”

ler was She nodded, knowing he was right. “I’d like that.”

7 didn’t He hefted a bag higher on his shoulder, and she realized he was
around a lot of weight.

ly new “That looks heavy. Where’s your vehicle?” she asked.

it Macy “There.” He pointed at his SUV a few feet away. They headed th
lt purestored all his gear in the back. He turned to her, sweaty and dirty fr
on. Shegame in the night heat, and he’d never looked better to her. Hotter
rag himsexy.

“I didn’t think this through . . . I’m filthy,” he said. “How about w
Nicoleyour place over Joe’s so I can at least wash up? I keep a change of cl
7. Or ifthe trunk, and then we can walk to Pop’s down the street.”

7ell and She nodded, okay with whatever he suggested.

s Macy Less than an hour later—because who cleaned up faster than a mar
n thinkarrived at Pop’s Pizza. They settled into a booth, and Sam reached ac
table for her hand, causing excited flutters in her belly.

niform “So we both like pepperoni.”

She grinned. “Something in common.”

e—and “Look, since it’s quiet and we can talk, I—”

Before he could finish, the restaurant door opened and Macy and Nicole walked in.

Nicole closed her eyes and groaned.

“What’s wrong?” Sam turned in his seat and stiffened. “Son of a bi

Tyler pulled Macy right over to their table. “Funny running in here.”

n about “Not laughing,” Sam said.

st me or Nicole met Macy’s apologetic gaze. This truly was a coincidence if youknew.

“Tyler, let’s have Chinese next door,” Macy suggested.

said, a “Good idea,” Sam muttered.

He shook his head. “I’m allergic to MSG.”

Nicole would have rolled her eyes, except he was telling the truth.

“Then let’s take a table in the back.” Macy tugged on his arm.

Tyler met Sam’s steely gaze. “We’re all adults, and clearly, this is pizza, so town, so we’ll be running into each other. Might as well get friendly.”

l to get Before he could slide into the booth next to Nicole, Macy walked around him and inserted herself there instead. Tyler eyed the long bench sat on the middle of.

hauling “Hell no,” Sam muttered and shoved himself out of the booth. out.”

Nicole stared at Sam, who was acting in a way she’d never seen before and Obviously responding to the authority in Sam’s voice, Macy immediately scooted out of the seat.

More “Sam, we’ve already ordered, so let’s just eat and then we’ll go,” said, not because she wanted to stay but because it was the polite thing

re go to “Did you order yet?” Sam asked Macy. Obviously, he wasn’t speaking in Tyler.

She shook her head.

“Then enjoy.” He held his hand out to Nicole.

—they Without thought, she placed her hand inside his larger one, savored the feeling of skin against skin as he helped her out of the booth.

“You’re being rather rude,” Tyler said.

Macy glared at him. “Shut up.” She glanced at Nicole. “I’ll talk to you later.”

“Still here,” Tyler muttered. But he didn’t argue anymore about d Tyler and Sam leaving.

Nicole blinked.

She’d never spoken to Tyler that way, and she doubted he’d take it itch.” she had. But this was Macy’s personality. She’d decided to take cha to you and he’d allowed it. Still, she’d done it as if she and Tyler had know other longer than twenty-four hours.

“Amazing how quickly you two became close,” Nicole said, ce, she about this new relationship.

Macy chuckled. “I wouldn’t call us close, but I’m the only almos he’s got in this town.”

“Quit talking about me like I’m not here,” Tyler said, more insist time. “I’m not an idiot. I just believe Nicole and I have too much in c to let things go so easily.”

Nicole narrowed her gaze. Too much at stake. Too much in comm a small he didn’t sound like he meant pepperoni pizza. What was going on?

Sam tugged on her arm.

hipped “I already told you where I stand,” Nicole reminded Tyler. ch Sam leaving.” She nodded to Macy, turned, and let Sam pull her out of th parlor and onto the street.

“Macy,

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Nicole

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o him. I

“Still here,” Tyler muttered. But he didn’t argue anymore about Nicole and Sam leaving.

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She’d never spoken to Tyler that way, and she doubted he’d take it well if she had. But this was Macy’s personality. She’d decided to take charge . . . and he’d allowed it. Still, she’d done it as if she and Tyler had known each other longer than twenty-four hours.

“Amazing how quickly you two became close,” Nicole said, curious about this new relationship.

Macy chuckled. “I wouldn’t call us close, but I’m the only almost-friend he’s got in this town.”

“Quit talking about me like I’m not here,” Tyler said, more insistent this time. “I’m not an idiot. I just believe Nicole and I have too much in common to let things go so easily.”

Nicole narrowed her gaze. Too much at stake. Too much in common, and he didn’t sound like he meant pepperoni pizza. What was going on?

Sam tugged on her arm.

“I already told you where I stand,” Nicole reminded Tyler. “We’re leaving.” She nodded to Macy, turned, and let Sam pull her out of the pizza parlor and onto the street.

Chapter Seven

ANGER AND ANNOYANCE beat through Sam until he reached the sidewalk, putting Nicole's ex behind them. "What the hell?" he asked her.

She stared at him with wide eyes. "I honestly wish I knew. He was that possessive when we were together. All I can think of is that maybe his family is putting pressure on him to fix things with me," she said, her mouth twitching as she spoke.

Sam studied her. "Why?"

"Can we go somewhere and talk? Instead of doing this here?"

He nodded. Her hand was still in his, so he merely tightened his hold and led her back toward Main Street and the gazebo where they'd shared their first kiss.

She waited until they were settled in the seats there before speaking. "My father and Tyler's dad are partners in an investment firm in Manhattan. Our families have known each other forever. In fact, Tyler and I practically grew up together, so when we started dating, it seemed . . . meant to be."

He nodded, processing the fact that they'd had such a long-standing relationship. That they shared a bond. He fucking hated it. A sentiment that went out of bounds when he didn't want more than a casual relationship with no matter how strong the desire.

"So they'd naturally want you two together," he said, pushing down the emotions that rose with her story. Jealousy was okay. Annoyance that his family thought her destined for someone else was not.

She bit down on her lower lip. "That's a part of it," she murmured.

"There's more?"

She looked down at her hands, which now ran up and down her face. "I'm not sure."

"But you think so. Why?"

"It's complicated," she said, still not meeting his gaze.

He'd seen her in an interrogation room, and she'd been at turns feigning fear, scared, but she'd always looked him in the eye. He shook his head,

confused by her words and demeanor. To the cop in him, she was hiding, yet he couldn't deny there was truth in much of what she said. She had just hadn't said everything.

"Can I ask you something?" Now she met his gaze head-on.

"Sure."

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"What did you mean when you said you overreacted when you found out about Tyler because of your past?"

He blinked, startled by the change in subject. He wanted information about her ex but sensed she'd told him the truth when she said she didn't know why Tyler was pushing so hard to get her back. Oh, he doubted she knew more, but that more wouldn't change things between them and he had enough faith in his skills to know he'd get the information eventually. And since Jenna, at least this time he knew better than to put his heart in any woman, but especially one with secrets. And Nicole had plenty.

They didn't need full disclosure to have phenomenal sex and a great relationship together. They just needed enough of an exchange for there to be trust and a sense of comfort, and they could give each other that.

"I was engaged once too," he told her.

She sucked in a surprised breath.

"What? You can't imagine someone wanting to marry me?" he asked, because when discussing this part of his life, which he *never* did, he always found a way to deflect somehow.

"Sam—"

"I'm kidding. But I was engaged to my high school girlfriend. We were together through college, and honest to God, I thought my future was set."

"What happened?" Her blue eyes remained steady on his, filled with compassion and curiosity.

He didn't want pity, but so far, she seemed far from that emotion. "I was dumped. I dumped me for my best friend," he said bluntly. "The morning after the wedding."

Nicole winced.

"And that's why I reacted so harshly to the news that you broke up with Tyler. It's also why I understand where the guy's coming from, because he's a complete pain in the ass," Sam muttered.

She straightened her shoulders defensively. "Tyler and I hadn't se

ing and yet, and I did not and would not cheat.”

id. She “I didn’t say you would.”

“You painted me with that same brush.”

“For a little while,” he allowed. “And I apologized.”

She nodded. “You did. But I sense you’re still holding it against me

und out He shook his head. “No. It’s just that you need to understand what I did to me and my ability to trust—”

l more “Anyone. You won’t let yourself fully trust anyone.”

he said He inserted his hands into his pockets, letting her words speak for him

e didn’t “Okay, now I know.” And she supposed she could understand them, was acting like an ass. She sighed and waited to see what he’d say next

rmation Sam groaned. “I just don’t want any unrealistic expectations between

o invest “What was it I said at the fundraiser? I’m not looking for complicated had serious myself. So . . . tell me your problem again?”

“Put like that, I supposed I don’t have one.”

at time She cocked her head to one side. “Sam? Are you still thinking about things?” she asked, her voice a husky purr as she stepped closer. “E

I’m thinking we’re talked out, thought out, and in agreement about what we want to come next.”



e joked

had to

IT WASN’T LIKE Nicole to be forward or brazen, but she forced herself sensing that any step they took next hinged on her convincing Sam the

stayed on the same page. Not having him was unacceptable. Especially when she knew, from how angrily he’d dragged her away from Tyler, he desired

full of much as she did him.

n. “She True, her experience with men was limited to Tyler and one other, realm of flirting was much broader. She knew how to schmooze a

of the order to get him to loosen his wallet for a good cause. How different it be to get Sam to relax and trust that she wouldn’t push for more than

wanted to give?

e it off She braced a hand against his T-shirt, feeling his heart beat through

even if thin cotton fabric. “Don’t you want to pick up where we left off the night?”

t a date He grasped her wrist with a low growl. The next thing she knew

pulled her against him and sealed his lips over hers. So much simpler than she'd anticipated, Nicole thought, before his tongue darted out, swiping her lips, and she stopped thinking at all.

She already knew Sam was a master kisser, and he didn't disappoint. Taking control of both her and the situation. And she gladly ceded position to him as he devoured her with his mouth and ravished her with his tongue. Their bodies came together, and he rolled his hips against hers, slowly, methodically, and over until flames lit her up from the inside out.

Together they created a raging inferno—there were no other words to describe the heated passion flaring between them. When he lifted his head and she looked into his eyes, they sizzled with the same urgency thrumming through both of them. "Home?" he asked.

She managed a nod, thrilled with the knowledge that she'd been through the last of his reserves. Now she hoped she didn't get crushed to dust when he was through.

Nicole had been packing for her move, and boxes surrounded them because they were at her apartment, but the atmosphere didn't matter. She and Sam had been building up to this moment since they'd laid eyes on each other months ago.

She shut the door behind them, and Sam spun her around, her back coming up against the wall. She didn't know who was more desperate, but her hands went to the hem of his shirt, his to the bottom of her tank. They ended up in piles on the floor.

He cupped her breasts, and she fit perfectly in his palms. She arched her back, pressing her nipples against his flesh, seeking pressure. He grabbed her ass, brushing his thumbs over the turgid peaks. She moaned, and he tightened them harder between his fingers, working both breasts at the same time. Sensation spiked from her nipples to her core.

"You are so much more beautiful than I imagined," he muttered. "I can't see more."

With a fast rip, he tore the flimsy bra from her body, baring her to his gaze.

"Oh, man."

She trembled beneath his yearning stare, so sinful and hot, she almost came from that look alone.

"This is why I ended things with Tyler," she said.

ler than Sam froze.

ng over Her limbs felt heavy, her body already his. “I knew if I felt like t meeting you, I couldn’t marry someone who didn’t give me one-tenth nt now, feeling.”

ver. He With a low growl, he bent down and swung her into his arms, c bodiesher the few paces across the apartment to her bed.

ly, over In her entire life, she’d never felt so desired. She’d never wanted as much as she did Sam. She stared up at his handsome face, his haz for the glittering, his jaw set. He stripped off his jeans, taking his boxer br looked along with them. Freed, his erection stood proudly against his stoma er. she swallowed at his sheer size and beauty.

Her mouth watered and her clit pulsed with desire, her insides cl broken with need. As if in a daze, she reached for him, wrapping her fingers d in the his rigid length, sliding her fingertip over the head and the drop o there.

m once He groaned, his hips jerking forward into her waiting hand.

nd Sam Her hips bucked upward of their own accord. “Sam—”

h other “I’ve got you.” He eased her jeans over her hips, then down h tossing them on the floor. Keeping his promise, he cupped her mou er back thumb brushing over the thin fabric of her damp panties.

ite. Her He had her all right, in more ways than one.

Clothes She jerked beneath his touch, sensation shooting through her, p just out of reach—but he wasn’t. She pushed up on her elbows and hed her his firm erection in her hands once more. Silk and steel, she thought, ti ve it to for his hard shaft inside her building like the rising tide.

weaked He shook his head and jerked away. “If you want me to last, n e time. touching beforehand.”

She laughed. “Then get on with it, Detective,” she said, her voice “I need than she’d ever heard it.

Her underwear went the way of her bra earlier, and as he stared his hot body, she found herself oddly unembarrassed. He slid one finger thro wet folds, and a keening sound escaped her throat. She would hav mortified, but he immediately followed by inserting the same finger e could her and beginning a steady pumping rhythm that built her need. In anc and out, pausing only to make sure she was with him. And oh, she w so was, and when he pressed inside her on a spot no one had found

she cried out. He followed up with his other hand on her clit and his just crescendo had built to epidemic proportions.

"Is this working for you?" he asked.

"Oh yes." Her entire lower body was on fire, but the slow pressure exerted wasn't enough. "And no. More, please." Her hips gyrate in an unanswerable need.

"Like this?" His fingers worked their magic inside and out. He rotated his thumb over her clit, harder and harder, then pressed upward with the tips of his fingers inside her.

She cried out, her body spasming. "Oh God. More. Harder."

He replaced his thumb with the heel of one hand, and her climactic cry echoed in the room. She clung to him, and from a distance, she heard herself chanting. "Oh God, oh God, oh God, Sam, yes. Yes."

Her womb contracted while his finger kept up the delicious pulsing inside her. His whole hand worked her sex, and wave after wave of pure pleasure crashed against her body.

It was the most amazing orgasm she'd ever experienced. On and on, her legs, sensation went until she collapsed, spent, against the mattress.

She heard the crinkling of a condom wrapper, thanked her lucky stars that she was prepared, and then the head of his erection pressed against her wet pussy.

She forced her eyelids open and met his gaze just as he thrust deep inside her. He was pleasure-filled, thick and hard, pausing to give her time to adjust. Time in his arms, she felt him completely, and to her shock, her arousal rose again from the need sensation of him throbbing inside her.

Her eyes opened wide in amazement. She was barely a mini-one-night more girl. From the aftershocks still rocking her body to the new sensations building again, Sam was surpassing anything in her admittedly huskier experience.

He braced his hands on either side of her head and began to move, in and out, his hot gaze never leaving hers. Another thing that was difficult enough for her by looking at her as if he could see into her soul, he increased the heat of the urgency, the intimacy of their joining.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," he ordered.

Knowing her eyes were still wide with wonder, she did as he asked. Suddenly, he was harder and rooted farther in her body. Even better than before, the position provided more friction to her clit, and she began the slow,

and the climb once more.

When he pulled out and pushed back in deep, he hit that place inside he'd ever found. She moaned and clenched around him.

"Damn, you feel so good," he said. "So warm, wet, and tight." Without words, he picked up the perfect movement that synchronized their bodies and drove her higher.

Her hands gripped his shoulders, her nails digging into his skin. He groaned his approval and pumped his hips faster until she saw stars and in front of her eyes, the pleasure so beyond anything in her world. Once again, her orgasm hit without warning.

"That's it, come for me," he said, and the ripples and waves of pleasure continued, finally cresting.

"Sam!"

His name on her lips triggered his release, and he pumped into her twice, and on the third time, his groan vibrated through her body, which was just beginning to come down from her climax.

She held on to him as he came, aware that this wasn't the tepid sex she had before. This was explosive, and it could get addicting. What scared her most of all? So, she feared, could he.

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TYLER PACED THE small room he was renting at the Serendipity Inn, which, in reality, was a large colonial that the owners had remodeled into a breakfast. The floral decor and the warm colors were soothing at a time he didn't feel anything but. Macy had been right when she said he'd be coming here.

Hell, she'd been right about a lot of things, including the fact that what she said and wasn't coming home to him anytime soon should bother him more than it did, but instead of focusing on Nicole, he couldn't stop thinking about Macy.

Something about the dark-haired woman was appealing, and it was she looked a little like Nicole. Macy Donovan was a force of nature, a gorgeous woman who wasn't intimidated by anyone, who said what she thought and did what she wanted. He admired her a lot.

Unfortunately, he was also extremely attracted to her. But he didn't

the luxury of acting on it. Indulging in anything beyond friendship with her was something he could not afford. Even if he had gone to bed with her instead of Nicole, the woman he was trying to win back as his fiancée. He'd been shocked to feel the stirrings of desire for Macy when he lies and so convinced he and Nicole were meant to be. But meeting Macy had him to reevaluate Nicole's breakup words—maybe she had a point. There being no fireworks after all. With Macy, her quick wit, and her behind to force him to do what she wanted, there were sparks aplenty. How had his life gotten so out of control? Tyler ran a hand through his short hair. Not long ago, he'd thought everything was perfect. The pleasure investment firm was doing well, him due to take over when his father retired. And Tyler had been engaged to the woman he'd been with for what felt like forever. It turned out he'd been living in coercion once, denial.

First, Nicole had informed him that what she felt for him wasn't love. It was comfort and expectation born of being used to each other. There were sparks between them, she'd said. Tyler convinced himself his fiancée was just getting cold feet. He figured she'd come to her senses.

Then she up and moved to Serendipity, and he realized she was about starting her life over without him. If that wasn't humiliating and altering enough, his father informed him that Nicole had confidential possession of information that could bring down the entire business. If they got them all in jail, Tyler included. Then Robert Stanton admitted he'd used mob money to help their coffers when the market was bad, and now he was in too deep to ever stop.

He'd ordered Tyler to get himself to Serendipity and return with her, obedient fiancée in tow—or he'd have no choice but to tell his *clients*. There was a chance Nicole had overheard a conversation and knew about the money laundering. And those *clients* weren't the type to leave any loose ends, no matter how uncertain. They would put out a hit on Nicole, and he would be responsible. He wanted to believe his father was bluffing, but he couldn't take that chance.

Nausea and panic threatened to engulf him—still did—but he refused to let that push those feelings away. He couldn't afford to give in to weakness. It was a huge mess he called his life. Tyler was in deep trouble and so was Nicole. He had no choice but to remain here and try to persuade her to reconcile.

h Macypick up where they left off—with her running his mother’s campaign of borough president, him heir to the family financial firm, their marriageée. And he had to persuade her without letting on that he knew about his father’s illegal dealings. Though it would be damn easier to get her to leave home with him out of fear and loyalty, there was still a chance Nicole might know the truth, and his admission would be filling her in. The more people who knew, the greater the risk of someone going to the police. Especially

Nicole, who was now involved with a cop.

ugh his Of course, Tyler considered turning his father in himself. But he had family time to insulate himself, his mother, whose campaign accepted funding from the firm, and Nicole. Tyler also needed Nicole to cooperate. But from the way she looked at Sam Marsden, he didn’t see them separating anytime soon. But that didn’t mean he wouldn’t do everything in his power to try to get if guilt rode him the entire time and he couldn’t stop thinking about a love. It other than his ex-fiancée.

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cée was



serious SAM WOKE IN a strange bed with a warm body wrapped around his. Since he didn’t normally spend the night anywhere but his own place, he came in immediately and realized where he was and who he was with. Instead of relaxing, he tensed even more because no sooner had he realized he was with Nicole than he instinctively pulled her deeper against him, wrapping himself tighter around her smaller body. She fit him perfectly.

Sex last night hadn’t been good; it’d been incredible. And that was what put his radar on high alert. The last time he felt anything remotely like he’d been a naive younger man, duped by his fiancée and best friend. He was enough of an adult now to be able to look back and see that what he felt for Jenna paled compared to the beginnings of what he felt for Nicole. Young love had been just that, he realized now. And if Jenna was able to do that to him, what kind of havoc could Nicole wreak on his heart if he let her?

He wondered if he could extricate himself without waking her. He was just about to roll over when she stirred, easing onto her back and looking at him with big blue eyes.

“Hi there,” she said in a sexy morning voice.

“Morning.”

ign for “A good one, I hope?” she asked, vulnerability shining in her expression. Obviously, she wasn’t used to mornings after, and no way would she get out of bed just because he was running scared. “After last night, how could you do anything but?”

She didn’t The tension in her body fled fast, and her smile shot awareness straight to his cock, which apparently hadn’t gotten the memo about keeping a socially appropriate distance.

Now to work on his tension. As long as he took things slow and gave his emotions and heart time, he’d be fine. Just because they’d had great sex didn’t mean their agreement of nothing serious didn’t still hold. Leaving now was his best bet.

He soon. “Breakfast?” she asked. “I packed up the big stuff for the movie today, but I have enough to whip up an omelet or pancakes.”

woman His stomach rumbled, answering before his brain kicked in.

She laughed, the happy sound making him feel like an ass for his thoughts. “So which will it be?”

“Pancakes, if it’s not too much trouble.” And then, because he couldn’t resist, he leaned over and settled his lips over hers, kissing her until the churning in his stomach and the bout of nerves became a distant memory.

“Mmm,” she said when he broke the kiss. “Better than food.”

He grinned.

“But I need to get up and shower . . . Joe said he’d help me move the car around ten this morning.”

“I have to work, or I’d help. But I’ll carry some down before I head to work. He’d have to stop home and change clothes before going to work.”

“Thanks.” She eased out from beneath the covers. Before he could look at her incredible body, she swiped her robe from a nearby chair and wrapped it around herself. “I’d ask you to join me, but we’d need to move today.” Her eyes twinkled, and he knew he’d accomplished his goal of not making her panic along with him.

She showered, and he jumped in after her while she made breakfast. While he was drying off, the doorbell rang.

He was king up He wondered who it could be. Pulling on his jeans, he stiffened when he heard Tyler Stanton’s voice.

“Morning, sunshine,” he said loudly.

Sam shook his head. Did the man have no shame? He never gave

ession. Well, Sam had every intention of giving him a reason to walk away
he hurt without his dignity intact.

ld it be “Tyler, you shouldn’t have,” Nicole said.

Sam narrowed his gaze.

aight to “I know they’re your favorite,” he said. “I know a lot about
a saferemember? We shared a lot of things before—”

Sam had had it. Without bothering with his shirt and his hair still
guarded he stepped out of the bathroom. Well aware of what this looked like
x didn’t wanted to give Tyler the right impression. “What are you doing,
/ would Stanton?” Sam asked.

Nicole’s gaze lingered appreciatively on Sam before darting to
ve later whose cheeks flushed dark in embarrassment.

“I’m giving Nicole an early-morning delivery.” To his credit, he
ask Sam the same question.

; darker “Thank you.” Nicole accepted the vase of yellow roses.

“She prefers daisies,” Sam muttered. Or did she?

ouldn’t “Tyler, this really isn’t appropriate. I already told you—”

ntil the Sam swallowed back a curse and pushed down on the jealousy. It
ry. like Nicole was leading the man on.

“I know. And I see things between you two are . . . serious.”

Sam immediately stepped up and wrapped an arm around Nicole. “
oxes today damn right. Which means you bringing her flowers isn’t cool.” Nor w
stand for it.
ad out.”



ld get a
air and
ver get
his goal
eakfast.
d as he
ave up.
NICOLE SUCKED IN a startled breath. Yes, she knew the two men
adversaries, and of course, it made sense that Sam would be jealous of
She’d feel the same way about any woman showing him attention, espe
the morning after. But they’d agreed on an affair. Nothing serious,
both said, which meant he didn’t have the right to tell Tyler what he c
couldn’t do. Yet he stood here, his arm around her, telling her ex just t
Sweet pleasure rushed through her at his warm touch and his pos
words. As much as she hated to admit it, she’d woken up in Sam’
wishing for this very thing. Of course she’d immediately chastised
since she’d been a willing party to their agreement last night. And sh

with or new, independent life to lead here in Serendipity. No strings, no ties.

“I think it’s up to Nicole whether she wants the flowers,” Tyler said.

She shook her head. In all the years she’d known him, he’d never been obtuse or dense. “The roses are beautiful, but Sam’s right. We’re in a bind and that means you can’t come around here bringing me flowers.” She held the vase in her hand, unable to return them because that would be like, he

“How involved?” Tyler pressed on. Nicole opened her eyes in shock. “That’s none of your business,” she said.

At the same time, Sam said, “Very,” causing Nicole’s heart to skip a beat. Damn her weak self for liking his words that much. Wanting more didn’t only lead to heartache . . . yet she sensed that more was exactly what she wanted from him after last night.

Sam stepped forward, prodding Tyler out the door. To Nicole’s relief, he went without an argument, and Sam shut the door behind him.

Leaning against the frame, Sam turned to face her. “Well, I hope that wasn’t show persuaded him to back off,” Sam muttered.

Show?

Disappointment welled in Nicole’s chest. She drew a deep breath, refusing to let Sam see that *she’d* nearly bought into his act. She would heal on with her ex-fiancé.

“Nicole? You okay?” he asked.

She forced a smile. “Just fine.”

“Can I help with breakfast?”

“Sure. Just let me straighten up first.” She swung away from him, in a minute that wasn’t beneath his scrutiny.

She headed for the bed and began fluffing pillows and drawing the comforter, cleaning up after them without meeting his gaze. And she returned to the kitchen area to make breakfast until she was certain she had her emotions under control. After growing up in her parents’ household, she thought her protective shell was impenetrable. One look at Sam’s handsome face, dismissing any notion of a serious relationship, and she knew she’d been wrong.

But the last thing she needed was for Sam to think she couldn’t handle an affair she’d so willingly gone into last night. If he saw the signs of a

female, he'd take off running for sure. Which meant she'd just have said toup—and grow up. Oh. And develop thicker skin.



been so
volved,
Yet she SAM AND THE also newly promoted Cara worked a case that took them
rude. weekend. His mood was foul, and since Cara wasn't feeling well, she l
alone, not pressing him for information. Which meant they were both
is," she their own thoughts and that of the case, and the weekend passed
Aware that Nicole was moving into her place, Sam stopped by when
a beat. could to help. He wasn't the only one. For a woman new to town
e could already made friends.
hat she Whenever Sam found time to drive over, a different group of peop
there, from Macy and her aunt Lulu to Erin, Joe, and Annie. And of
elief, he to Sam's frustration, Tyler had shown up and planted himself in her hc
Tyler was doing his best to make himself indispensable, moving
at little unpacking, and just . . . existing. Sam was disgusted. Tyler clearly
want her staying in Serendipity, but he made damn sure to help her s
something Sam hadn't the time to really do. And it drove him insar
calming much Tyler's presence bothered him.
ct right At least Macy was there, keeping Tyler busy and as far from Ni
possible, something Sam appreciated even if her reasons appeared mc
serving. A clear attraction existed between Tyler and Macy, and i
wasn't still pushing for reconciliation with Nicole, Sam would say the
destined to hook up. Tyler and Macy as a couple would only help
eeding cause.
Of course it would be better if Sam helped his own. As a cop and
up the detective, he'd been trained to notice the little things—the twit
e didn't someone's face and the shift in their expression. And the other mornir
had her caught the disappointment in Nicole's face when he expressed his rel
l, she'd Tyler had bought the show Sam had put on for his benefit. Sam
andsome nothing more than to draw her into his arms and reassure her,
v she'd conflicting emotions kept him from doing so. Giving her the
impression of what he was capable of would hurt her even more. So
idle the mood had begun.
linging And it permeated the entire weekend.

to buck While he was at Nicole's, he helped with the heavy lifting and tried to be his cheerful self, but she had erected her own walls of protection around a round robin of people helping her around the house. After a while he wondered if she'd even notice if he hadn't come by at all. He'd have missed her, though, and missed her.

into the On his last trip, he ran into his sister on Nicole's driveway.

left him "Hey!" Erin gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Where are you off to?"
lost in asked.

slowly. "Interview at the station," he said.

ever he "How's it going in there?" Erin tipped her head toward the house.

ly, she'd Sam shrugged. "Looks like Nicole is settling in and everything's unpacked. She sure has enough help to make sure it'll all get done quickly."

ple was "Well, that's good. Moves can be tough. Especially when you do it on a course, in a short time."

use. "I guess. See you tomorrow night at Mom's." Sunday night dinner at Marsden house was a mandatory affair. He turned to go.

boxes, didn't "Whoa. Get back here," his sister said.

ettle in, He shook his head. "Gotta be somewhere."

ie, how "It'll wait five minutes. It's not like they can start without you."

"Oh, but they can."

cole as "Sam, stop being obstinate. What's going on? What's wrong with you?"

re self- You're a grumpy, miserable human, which is more like Mike than you. You couldn't make decisions about Cara, than you. So what gives?"
f Tyler

ey were He shook his head. "There are things a guy doesn't discuss with his sister."
Sam's

"You're kidding. You screwed things up with Nicole already?"

l now a Unable to meet her gaze, he shrugged. "I didn't *do* anything." He was conflicted because he knew Nicole wasn't completely satisfied with the arrangement between them, and he wasn't sure how much he was willing to give in order to change things.

wanted "Maybe you *should* discuss these things with your sister. They wouldn't make colossal mistakes."

but his He rolled his eyes. "Because you and Cole did so well in the beginning, right? Besides, I told you I didn't do anything wrong. It's just complicated."
wrong
his bad

A wide smile took hold. "If ending up like Cole and me is your destination, then you go ahead and screw up now as much as you want."

ed to be He growled at her in a way he hadn't since they were kids. When s
d had a little, she'd run screaming.

ile, he Now? She merely laughed.

realized "What was that for?" she asked.

"You nailed the issue on the head. I don't want to end up in a
relationship."

o?" she "And she does?" Erin studied him with her perceptive hazel eyes,
his own.

"I didn't think so when we started. Now I'm not so sure."

"Huh." Erin sighed. "Well, then, here's what you should do."

getting He leaned in, grateful for any advice that could help him keep N
ckly." his life and not be tied in knots.

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Save everyone the time and aggravation." She shrugged as if the sug
r at them made perfect sense.

The growl that escaped him this time made his sister's eyes open.
"Ah, so it's like that. Fighting yourself, are you?"

Sam clenched his hands, wanting to throttle her as he had so ofte
they were kids. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're a pain in the ass?"

"You. All the time." She rocked forward and treated him to anothe
th you? on the cheek. "Go get to your meeting. Continue in denial. It suits you.

hen he Before he could reply, she waved and strode down the drivew
through the open garage.

with his If Sam's mood was bad before, it was positively brutal now.

was just
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.."

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"It's simple," his sister said. "Just say uncle now and give her up to Tyler. Save everyone the time and aggravation." She shrugged as if the suggestion made perfect sense.

The growl that escaped him this time made his sister's eyes open wide. "Ah, so it's like that. Fighting yourself, are you?"

Sam clenched his hands, wanting to throttle her as he had so often when they were kids. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're a pain in the ass?"

"You. All the time." She rocked forward and treated him to another peck on the cheek. "Go get to your meeting. Continue in denial. It suits you."

Before he could reply, she waved and strode down the driveway and through the open garage.

If Sam's mood was bad before, it was positively brutal now.

Chapter Eight

NICOLE APPROACHED THE Marsden home uncertain what she was doing. Erin had invited her for dinner at her parents' house, insisting she should go because family dinners were weekly events and guests kept them from drifting apart. Somehow, Nicole didn't buy it. In the short time she'd known the Marsdens, Serendipity, she'd heard nothing but glowing praise for each of the Marsdens. From Ella and Simon, whose longtime marriage had withstood crises, even his cancer diagnoses and treatment last year, to the siblings.

The invitation meant a lot to her, and since Erin promised Sam would be working a case and wouldn't be there, she was more comfortable attending. She was still trying to convince herself she could abide by the rules that Erin had set and keep things casual, continue to have sex with no strings, nothing serious.

What had she been thinking? She'd had sex with one person who had lost her virginity to her college boyfriend, and they'd broken up soon after. She'd come home for a school break and reconnected with Tyler, and it had taken them years to get serious, he was her one long-term relationship, and she'd almost married him. What made her think she could do casual sex? She asked herself for the millionth time.

No matter how potent Sam's touch, no matter how much she enjoyed his company, no matter how explosive the attraction, Nicole had spent too much of her life accepting less than she deserved from her family. She'd broken up with a good man because she didn't want him to settle for less, any more than she was willing to. So she admitted to herself now that she needed to step up, at least in little ways—small, basic ways—if she was going to continue to sleep with him.

They needed to agree they would be exclusive.

He needed to be affectionate in public, acknowledge her as his girlfriend. She wasn't asking him to marry her, for God's sake, but she couldn't just be his fuck buddy. If that was all he wanted from her, even after their last conversation together, then she'd have to walk away before she became invested in him more. The thought caused a sharp pain in the region of her heart, but she

prepared to stand up for what she needed.

First, though, dinner with his family. She rang the doorbell and was greeted by a barking ball of white fluff and an older, attractive woman with the similar auburn hair coloring, despite the obvious highlights. To Marsden's hair, to the eyes, to the warm smile, she was obviously Ella, Sam's mother.

"You must be Nicole," she said, opening the door. "Welcome."

"Thank you for having me over, Mrs. Marsden." Nicole handed her a bouquet of wildflowers she'd bought in town.

"I appreciate these. I love flowers, but next time, just bring yourself. Call me Ella."

Her smile was so sweet and genuine, she couldn't help but respond kindly.

"Who's this?" she asked of the dog.

"Meet Kojak."

Smiling, Nicole bent to pet the dog, who was bouncing up and down with excitement. With Kojak at her heels, she followed Ella into the house.

A few minutes later, Nicole had met Simon, the onetime police chief, who had settled in with the family to talk and share a drink before dinner. Cole had brought her to the family room, and to Nicole's surprise, he greeted her with the same kindness for the first time. Obviously, his wife had spoken to him, or he was coming to see that she truly was nothing like her sister. Mike Marsden had been here without his wife, who was working with Sam, and even he had determined to get to know Nicole for herself.

It saddened her to think that many people, Cole and Mike included, probably wouldn't give Victoria a second chance, despite how far she had come. But those thoughts drifted away as she was included in the conversation and joking.

She turned to Erin. "Can I hold that adorable baby of yours?"

Erin handed over the little girl dressed in a pink onesie and swaddled in a white blanket with pink satin trim. The pink brought out the coloring in her skin, making the baby seem even more girly. She smelled like the most delicious baby shampoo and quietly lay in Nicole's arms, making soft noises with her little lips.

Nicole hadn't thought about having kids, but as she held Angel in her arms, a strange feeling of intense longing welled up inside her, catching her off guard.

off guard. “She’s so sweet.”

nd was “You should hear her when she’s hungry at night. Or wet. Or cran
1. From six o’clock—but of course only in our house; in her grandparents’
in Ellashe’s the Angel we call her,” Erin said, laughing. The love in her vo
rin and her expression were obvious.

Cole slid closer on the couch, wrapping an arm around his
shoulder. “Says the woman who sleeps while I get up and take care
d her amid night feedings?” His deep chuckle also belied his words.

These two were clearly in love, and another, distinctly different v
lf. And need swept through Nicole. She swallowed hard and refocused on t
painful feelings.

pond in “Hey, little girl,” Nicole said softly, stroking a hand down the
chubby cheek.

Without warning, the front door opened. “We made it,” Sar
stepping into the house with Cara behind him.

lown in Nicole’s stomach tightened at the sight of the man she couldn’t ge
her head, looking handsome in a sport jacket—obviously he’d been a
ief, and—and his gaze took in the room, settling on her, his surprise evident.

was in She swallowed hard.

genuine “Sam! I didn’t expect you tonight,” Erin said.

he was He shot her a strange look. “I told you I’d get things wrapped u
len was today.”

seemed Mike rose to greet his wife.

Ella clapped her hands, obviously thrilled to have her whole
cluded, together.

r she’d “Come pour yourself a drink,” Simon said to his son.

family And Erin busied herself with a nonexistent thread on her shirt, refu
meet Nicole’s gaze. Erin had obviously lied to get Nicole to come, k
her brother would show up.

led in a Though she wanted to be mad at Erin, she couldn’t be. Erin obviou
g in her brother’s best interest at heart.

ie most Sam said hello to his parents and siblings, kissed his mom and sis
racking slapped Mike and Cole on the back, and Nicole couldn’t help compar
own family’s stilted dinner parties with this one. No jokes or kidding v
l in her others, no hugs or kisses, no genuine concern over how each perso
ing her had gone.

Lost in thought, she didn't hear Sam approach, but she smelled his aftershave and her skin tingled as he kissed her cheek, his lips lingering longer than they had with his relatives.

She trembled at the light touch, acknowledging her body's immediate recognition and desire for a more thorough, more tactile hello.

"This is a surprise," he said to her.

"Same for me." She didn't want him thinking she'd come here expecting to see him. "Erin said you'd be working."

"Now that she's happily married, my sister's a busy little matchmaker." Sam muttered and she couldn't read into his tone. Was he pleased to see her here or was her presence at a family gathering too close for comfort?

"I'm glad you're here," he said, answering that question with a reply she should have given her relief but he'd been wishy-washy about his feelings before.

She tipped her head to one side. "Are you? I don't want to invade your territory. I know we agreed—"

He reached for her hand. "I said I'm glad, and I meant it. As long as you rest . . ."

And she took the ball and ran with it. "I want to talk about it. At least maybe not here and now, but later. I need to clarify a few things between us."

"Dinner," his mother said, interrupting them.

Nicole didn't mind but she raised her chin and glanced at Sam, wanting him to know without words that she wanted to change the rules. A family tradition refused to compromise on what she needed.



NICOLE DISCOVERED ELLA Marsden was a fantastic cook. Her daughter had learned, could barely crack an egg. Cole did most of the cooking in the house, a fact Nicole could barely reconcile, but she found it endearing that the gruff man clearly doted on his wife and child. Sam too knew how to cook for himself in the kitchen, and so could Mike. Since Nicole had a collection of recipes of her own, she and Ella hit it off well and discussed everything from basic cooking to Nicole's favorite subject, desserts.

"Tell Mom about your shop," Erin said. "She already knows you're opening but fill her in on the details."

led his Nicole patted her mouth and placed her napkin on her lap. “Well, I’ll give you a hint—Donovan and I have an appointment at the bank this week to discuss my business loan request,” Nicole said, excited at how quickly things were moving along. “Nick Mancini offered us a very fair rental for the old house next to Consign and Design. Other than aesthetics, the infrastructure is already there. And Faith Barron is going to help us decorate. My expectations are spinning,” Nicole said, laughing.

“When did you make all these decisions?” Sam asked.

“All weekend, while moving in, discussions came up, and Aunt Lucretia was prepared, she’s hard to say no to—she makes so much business sense, she wants what she wants.”

Erin went on to fill everyone in on her new job as an attorney at Barron’s firm. He had flexible work-from-home hours, and she was happier than ever.

“What about you?” Simon asked his younger son. “Case finished?”

“Wrapped it up today, right?” he asked Cara, who Nicole thought was quiet and out of sorts.

She nodded. Her face was paler than before. “Umm . . . excuse me, I need to go to the bathroom.” She said and darted out of the room.

Mike took off after her.

Eyes narrowed, Sam followed their quick departure. “Is she okay?” Ella asked. A semi-smile lit Ella’s gaze, surprising Nicole. “Something to worry about? Everything’s all right.”

Nicole met Sam’s gaze. They shrugged at each other, and soon they returned but Mike insisted they head out so she could get some rest. Nobody argued.

The rest of the meal passed pleasantly enough, and the subject turned to an upcoming art festival, for which Nicole had seen flyers posted all over town.

“I love seeing new artists,” Nicole said.

“Me too. And Tess Barron has a showing there,” Erin said. “She’s sixteen, and she’s an amazing artist.”

“That girl has been through so much. I’m happy for her,” Ella murmured.

Nicole knew there was a story there and figured she’d ask Sam about it some time. “I’d love to go. There’s a place in my new bedroom that I’d like to use for it.”

ll, Lulupicture.”

uss our “Oh, let’s go together, then,” Erin said. “Cole hates those things
s werecan watch Angel.” The baby was sleeping in a crib Ella and Simon had
bakeryin a spare room. “Sam, you can keep Cole company. Maybe change a
ature isor two.”

head is “Or three,” Cole said, offering up the opportunity like it was the ch
win a gold medal.

“I think I’ll leave that to you,” Sam said to his brother-in-law.

ilu is so “Chicken,” Cole muttered.

I don’t Ella laughed and rose to her feet. “On that note, I’ll clean up. Dess
few.”

at Nash Nicole pushed her chair back, prepared to help.

happier “No, no, you’re our guest. Sam, take her out back. The patio furn
all cleaned, and we have citronella candles burning so the mosquitoe
almosteat you alive.”

Nicole heard the definitive tone and knew better than to
seemedApparently, Sam felt the same way because he rose and held out a han

Suddenly nervous, she slipped her palm into his big, warm o
ie,” shefollowed him outside. The bluestone patio reminded her of the glimps
gotten of Sam’s backyard. Four lounge chairs, an outdoor bar wit
stools, a rectangular table and chairs with an umbrella in the center
,
firepit. The surrounding lawn was green and lush, the plantings and
ells meperfectly placed.

Everything about the small Marsden house called to somethin
n Carainside Nicole, the empty space never filled by her cold parents or the
st, andhouse full of expensive things but lacking in warmth and love. In th
time here, she’d felt more welcomed and cared for than she ever had
rned toown family.

around Her chest filled with a heaviness she fought against.

“What’s on your mind?” Sam asked perceptively as he relaxed
recliner and drew her down with him.

’s only She settled in beside him, resisting his attempt to pull her back
him so they could cuddle, her back to his front. She wanted to see h
mured. when they talked, needed him to see hers. To understand.

another “You’re lucky.” She wondered if he knew just how much more he
needs alife.

“How so?”

“Love. You were surrounded by it. Your parents are present in your life, so he set up Not just physically but emotionally.”

Sam heard the catch in her voice and knew tonight’s conversation was important because she was going deep into herself, giving him insight into who she was and why.

“I’m not sure I ever thought about it that way,” he admitted. “Maybe because Simon adopted him.”

“Really?” She leaned in closer.

“Yeah. We’ve always been thought of as the perfect family, but we have our own secrets too. Not so secret, actually. Mom got pregnant by Dad’s father, and when he bailed, Simon stepped up. It turns out he’d been in a relationship with her all along.”

Nicole’s eyes grew wide on hearing the story. “That’s beautiful. They seem so in love now.”

“They’ve been that way for as long as I can remember.”

She made a murmur of acknowledgment. “They’re lucky too, then.”

“What about your parents? I know you said they don’t care much about what you do unless it’s to benefit them, but how do they feel about each other?” Having divulged his parents’ past, he felt comfortable asking; and she answered.

She swallowed hard. “Let’s put it this way. When I told my mom I couldn’t marry Tyler because I wasn’t in love with him, she asked me how deep love had to do with anything, and when that didn’t sway me, she followed me with, *just when did she tell me that fairy tales ever came true?*”

She short

by her



WHAT KIND OF parent disillusioned their daughter? Even Sam, who’d stopped believing in that result, at least for himself, winced at the cruel comment.

He thought of how his parents had boosted Erin’s confidence and convinced her she should at least try to go after what she wanted against his face after she’d gotten pregnant by a man determined to leave her and Sere behind.

The summer breeze blew around them and lifted Nicole’s hair from her shoulders. He met her gaze and wished he could put the stars back in her

and convince her that anything was possible. Maybe it was. Just not
in lives.him.

“So about us,” she said, as if reading his mind.

on was “I take it you don’t want to just pick up where we left off last night
ght into chest hurt at the thought she might actually walk away.

“Actually, I do—with some modifications or qualifications.” She
like did down at the slats on the chair, not meeting his gaze. “It turns out I’m
good at this sex-without-emotion thing after all.”

His breath caught in his throat, but he was determined to hear
ve have One night with her hadn’t been nearly enough, but what happened next
Mike’s depended on what she asked for.

in love “I need us to be exclusive while we’re together.”

He let out the breath he’d been holding. “I can do that.”

l. They She lifted her gaze to his. The vulnerability in her expression
punched him but good. Everything about her hit him in new ways.

Scary ways.

.” “What else?” he asked.

h about She bit down on her full lower lip. “I need to know where you sit
ut each this thing between us just sex? Like, when we’re out in public, are you
g about to pretend we’re just friends? Because I couldn’t handle that.” Her hu
eyes bore into his.

iother I “Hell no! Just because I’m not looking to settle down and get
ie what doesn’t mean I don’t understand what it means to be with someone. I
wed up be with you, to acknowledge it in public and let everyone know
together. And I sure as hell don’t want anyone else with you either.”

Her lips parted in a soft O, and he could not resist leaning forward,
kissing her surprised expression.

The thing he was drawn to most about Nicole—looks and attractive
stopped were a given—was her innate honesty. Her vulnerability tugged at his
nt. making him want to protect her. Be her white knight, as ridiculous
spirits, knew that was.

l. Even He couldn’t help but respond to her and licked her parted lips. She
ndipity into his mouth, and he slipped his tongue inside. She’d had a glass of
with dinner, and he tasted the fruity flavor, but most of all, he tasted
om her didn’t want the moment to end.

er eyes Unfortunately, his brother had other ideas, as he called out from the

ot withoff the kitchen. “Coffee and dessert! Unless you’re already getting s
your own.”

Nicole pulled back and ducked her head with an embarrassed
it?” His “Geez.”

“That’s what brothers are for,” Sam muttered.

looked She laughed. “Sisters aren’t much better.”

not so “True.” He glanced at her flushed cheeks. “Everything okay no
asked.

er out. She didn’t pretend to misunderstand him. “Will you come hon
t? It allme?” she asked. “Christen my new bed?”

Yeah, he thought, everything was just fine.



sucker-

TYLER STEPPED OUT of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist
pulled out clothes for his dinner with Macy, he ignored yet another ca
his father. He couldn’t bring himself to disappoint the man by telling
hadn’t made any inroads in getting Nicole back and bringing her home

tand. Is

The Nicole to whom he’d been engaged had been quiet and
u going persuade to do whatever he needed in pursuit of career or family biddi
ge blue wore designer dresses and suits, not tight jeans or cropped shorts and

married The woman he’d found in Serendipity was not someone he’d have l
want to engaged to, and he had the definite sense she was finding herself n
we’re liking the woman she was becoming. He admired her attempt to break

ard and He glanced at the new blue jeans on the bed and the casual T-sl
frowned. What the hell was he doing, changing who he was in orde
into a place where he had no intention of remaining? The minute he

iveness out how to fix the mess in his family business, he was heading l
s heart, Manhattan. Except this small town was growing on him. And so w
s as he woman in particular.

He grinned as he thought about where he and Macy were going t
sighed Miniature golf. He shuddered at the thought. Yet he’d agreed becaus
of wine anything with Macy was something he knew he’d enjoy.

her. He No sooner had he dressed than he heard a knock on his door. He of
to find the woman who’d been on his mind. Macy stood before him
he door compared to his six-foot frame, wearing patterned shorts, a denim blo

ome of over a white tank, and a pair of white Toms on her feet.

“Hey, all set to go?” she asked. Her gaze slid over him. “What are you wearing?” she asked, her smile turning downward.

He swallowed a laugh at her look of dismay. “My clothes.”

She scowled at him. “But you’re not going to be comfortable out in those pants and that shirt.”

“You mean I’m overdressed for miniature golf?” he asked, unable to suppress a grin at how cute he found her.

“That too. I can wait downstairs while you change.”

He shook his head. “Not happening.”

Lines formed between her brows. “Why? We went shopping for a new set of clothes. Just throw on a pair of cargo shorts, and we’ll be good to go.”

He braced one hand on the doorframe and stared down at her, doing his best to ignore the swell of her breasts above the tank top. “Macy, do you are you embarrassed to be seen with a well-dressed man?”

“No!” she sputtered at him. “If you want to be hot and sweaty all night, be my guest. I was just trying to look out for you.”

“And I decided I’d rather be myself.”

“Fine.” She raised her hands in defeat. “Are you ready to go?”

He nodded and slipped his hand through hers. “Come on, hot stuff.”

He pulled her into the hall, shutting his door behind them, and started up the stairs.

Macy stopped, planting her heels and refusing to walk farther. “Are you going on? Why are you flirting with me?” she asked.

He met her gaze and shrugged. “I’m just acting naturally around you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you saying I bring out the flirt in you?”

He couldn’t contain yet another grin. He’d smiled more in the last few minutes than in the previous six months. “Could be.”

“Well, rein it in. You’re trying to win your ex back, and tonight is just killing time while she’s at Sam’s parents’ house for dinner. It reminded him, turning away so he couldn’t see what he felt sure would be a hurt look on her face.

Even though they both knew what their time together was all about, he appreciated her willingness to hang out with him, something was bothering her. She was petite and beautiful.

Or could be if not for Tyler’s complicated life. At least she was

enough to remember that.

are you Macy was the one who'd told him why he couldn't go out looking into Nicole tonight in the first place. She'd also tried to encourage him back to New York and not set himself up for further hurt. Or embarrassment inshe'd gently added. The last thing he wanted was this woman's pity, couldn't tell her the truth: that he'd already accepted that things were able to between him and Nicole before he'd been coerced into coming up here her back.

If he hadn't been, seeing the new Nicole would have convinced What he didn't understand was why *this* woman, who was even more outspoken than his ex-fiancée, who dressed more provocatively, and was even more comfortable being contrary than the *new* Nicole, revved him being hisdamned much.

onovan, His mother would take one look at Macy and have Tyler commit the while reminding him that his feelings for this woman were inappropriate because she wouldn't fit into his world any more than he, in his khaki polo shirt with long rolled-up sleeves, fit into hers.

"You're right," he told her. "But I just want us to relax and have time. Isn't that what you told me to do while I'm here?"

"Yes. Just don't do it by flirting."

rted for "Fine. I'll try to behave." But it wouldn't be easy because she was adorable and so easy to be around, even when she was giving him a hard time. What's—something people in his real life rarely did. It was refreshing. So refreshing. He was actually looking forward to miniature golf, of all things.

ou." His phone buzzed in his pocket. Setting his jaw, he ignored it. He promised himself he'd focus on this woman who made him feel good and not have to disregard his problems, if just for this one night.



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r," she
l be the
out, and
etween
s smart

SAM AND NICOLE still sat at his parents' dining room table. Throughout the evening, he had a raging erection beneath his napkin and under the tablecloth, spreading through a dessert he didn't taste, and barely paid attention to the conversation surrounding them. Finally, *finally* he and Nicole were the first to say goodbyes.

He sped home, daring one of his own to pull him over, and parked in front of his apartment building.

Nicole's driveway. Once they reached her house, the polite dance they began to undoing around each other ended. She closed the door and was in his arms in an instant.

Assessment, This wasn't the smooth seduction of the first time. He sealed himself against hers and backed her to the nearest wall, dying to be inside her. She threaded her hands through his hair and held on as he devoted himself to *winning* her mouth. He needed her more than he needed air to breathe, and as he grew used to the feeling, he ignored it in favor of the hot sensations that were driving him more pleasurable.

And more She hooked one foot around his leg and pressed her lower body against his. Knowing exactly what she needed, he ground his hips into hers, pushing his cock into the warm vee of her legs.

A low moan escaped her throat and he trailed a wet kiss down her neck, then lapped and sucked on the flesh of her neck, so when she let out another sexy moan, he felt the vibrations against his mouth.

Kisses and She slid her hands beneath his shirt, and the feel of her soft hands trailing over his abdomen made him shudder and grow harder. He let out a good curse, lifted her into his arms, and headed for the bedroom upstairs.

"You like this caveman thing." Nicole laughed, obviously feeling playful.

"If I were a caveman, you'd be over my shoulder."

He was "The carrying thing, then."

Hard time "I like carrying *you*." This routine wasn't something he'd done before, but she was right. With her, he always seemed to be impatient, wanting to be naked and inside her.

It and She grinned, settling her face into the crook of his neck, first kissing his neck and then nuzzling with her nose and mouth, and finally taking a nip at his teeth.

He felt the kick of that bite in his cock.

He tossed her onto the bed, and her eyes opened wide, then glazed over with aching desire. He pulled off his shirt. She took the hint and wiggled out of her own clothes until she lay spread out before him. Instead of rushing to claim her, he decided he wanted to do other things first.

Conversation He braced his hands on her thighs and lowered his head, breathing in her musky scent before sliding his tongue over her sex. Her hips arched in a silent plea for more. Yeah, that he could do, he thought, and he began earnestly work at giving her pleasure. It didn't take long for him to let

'd beenbody and what she liked: long, leisurely laps of his tongue around her
ns in anfolds, and what really sent her over the edge—a nip directly on her clit

He'd never tasted anything sweeter or wanted to give someone
his lipspleasure. He focused solely on Nicole, her short pants of breath, the sc
r again.when she edged closer to coming. He slid one finger deep inside her, a
red hercame apart beneath his hand and mouth, and a deep sense of satis
wasn'tfilled him.

He prolonged the sensations until her muscles relaxed, and then he
his way up her lithe body, ending with her lips, letting her taste herself
againstmouth.

His erection was rock hard against her thigh, and he braced his ar
lifted himself over her. "I need to be inside you."

Her eyes dilated even more. "So what are you waiting for?"

"Not a damn thing." He kissed her deeply as he raised his hips and
deep. She clenched him tight in her hot body, skin to skin, and rea
fingersdawned.

Shit. "Condom." He started to pull out quickly, but her fingerna
into his shoulders, stopping him.

"I'm on the pill, and we—I always used protection."



before,
ting to NICOLE STARED UP at Sam, unwilling to use Tyler's name while she felt
thickness in every part of her body.

He expelled a long breath. "Same. Especially since my sis
ng him, pregnant . . ." He hung his head, drawing an obvious breath, and
with herpregnant . . ." He hung his head, drawing an obvious breath, and
without warning, he pressed his hips against her, filling her even more.

Small pulses of desire electrified her from where their bodies jo
ed overintimately to the farthest reaches of her fingertips and even into her
rked atThe man was so potent, and each time they came together, he b
hing toanother protective wall she'd tried to erect against him.

Without a condom, she had an even more difficult time differ
g in herbetween sensation and emotion. She'd have to sort her head out la
upwardright now, looking into his gorgeous hazel eyes so intent on *her*, she
egan towant to think at all.

And when he began to move inside her, his thick erection spik
arn her

er damparousal, her brain shorted out and pure passion took over. His th
aroused nerve endings she didn't know she had, and her sudden orgasm
e more quickly and fast, taking her by surprise.

oft cries "So responsive," he said as she came back to herself.

and she "Not usually." The words slipped out, and he grinned, obviously pl
satisfaction He pulled out, and despite just having come, she felt empty u
flipped her over. "On your knees," he whispered in her ear.

e kissed Arousal flooded her anew, and she complied. He placed his hand
f on his back, and she lowered her head to the pillow as he slid back into h
more.

ms and "Oh God." He was deeper now, and she couldn't hold back a moan
"You feel amazing."

So did he.

d thrust He eased out and thrust back into her. She closed her eyes, a
lizations smooth strokes ignited her nerve endings, stimulating her everywher
his body cocooned around hers, taking her, grinding into her over an
ils dug she felt consumed. Owned, even. And as he picked up a faster rhythm
began the steady climb from being sated once more.

"I'm close, Nic," he said, his rich voice stroking her body and he
His fingers bit into her sides. "Come with me," he said, his hips sla
hard against hers.

His rough groan of completion set her aflame, and she shattered, h
t Sam's splintering into tiny shards around his. And as she came back togeth
was afraid she'd lost a piece of herself to this very contained man.

ter got He collapsed on top of her, eventually rolling off but never b
d then, contact as he wrapped himself around her. His rapid heartbeat thrumm
against her back, and they lay silent as she caught her breath.

ined so "How come?" he asked, breaking the quiet around them.

throat. "How come what?"

reached "If you're on the pill, how come you used protection with your ex
asked.

ntiating A valid question but not an easy one. Not now, although it had see
ter, but simple at the time she'd decided.

e didn't "Even though it's never been said, I don't think my parents are fai
one another." She'd barely admitted this truth to herself over the year
ing her when her mother asked her what love had to do with anything, Nicole

ickness wanted to face what had always been on the edges of her mind.

She swallowed hard. “I was on the pill before Tyler and I started s
together, and once we did, he didn’t ask about protection, he just used
didn’t offer the information.”

leased. Because she hadn’t trusted him enough, she realized now. “If my
until he weren’t faithful to each other, I didn’t think I should risk it for myself.”

Yet she’d taken that risk with Sam. Nicole was afraid to questio
on her that leap of faith could mean. And from his silence, she took it to m
er once had no interest in finding out either.

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wanted to face what had always been on the edges of her mind.

She swallowed hard. “I was on the pill before Tyler and I started sleeping together, and once we did, he didn’t ask about protection, he just used it, so I didn’t offer the information.”

Because she hadn’t trusted him enough, she realized now. “If my parents weren’t faithful to each other, I didn’t think I should risk it for myself.”

Yet she’d taken that risk with Sam. Nicole was afraid to question what that leap of faith could mean. And from his silence, she took it to mean he had no interest in finding out either.

Chapter Nine

NICOLE SOAKED IN a hot bath in her new claw-footed tub. After her night with Sam, her body ached in the best possible way. She leaned her head back and let her mind drift to the many aspects of the man she was coming to know. He could be tender and sweet one minute, hard and demanding the next. She hoped he'd stick with her long enough for her to learn more.

Her eyes drifted shut, and she thanked her lucky stars she'd married Sam before her wedding and was grateful she'd found the strength to accept his proposal. If not, she wouldn't have spent last night in her bed. With a smile, she sank deeper into the bubbled water.

She trailed the loofah over her calves and her knees and up her thighs before picking up the handheld shower massager to clear the soap. The scent of strawberry soap prickled her senses. And as the water teased her skin, arousal swept through her. With thoughts of Sam on her mind, she set a light spray between her thighs, placing just the right amount of pressure on her sex, creating a delicious friction, before easing one of her fingers between her slick folds.

She moaned at the same time her phone rang, jarring her into awareness. She glanced down and caught sight of Sam's name, and her stomach clenched in awareness and embarrassment. She dried her hand on a towel and swiped a bar across the screen to answer.

"Hey," she said, hoping her tone didn't give her away.

"Hi."

His voice oozed sex and sin, and the heaviness between her legs increased tenfold. She drew her knees up and squeezed tight.

"What are you up to?" he asked.

She looked down at the shower massager, a reminder of how close she'd been to bringing herself pleasure she'd rather he give her. "Umm . . . in the tub."

He expelled a harsh breath. "You shouldn't have told me that."

She grinned, glad she wasn't the only one affected. "Then you should have told me that."

have slipped out before I woke up.” But he’d been a gentleman and a note, which enabled her to fall back to sleep without believing he’d done one-eighty in his thinking or pulled a guy stunt and carelessly skip the morning after.

It almost made her trust that he was capable of more than he was when it came to relationships, but he’d been up front with her. So she thought with a better.

ack and “I promised my father I’d help him around the house. You were out to know. and I didn’t want to wake you.”

xt. She “So what can I do for you now?” she asked.

ret him. He laughed, low and deep. “That’s a loaded question while you’re in the bathtub, sweetheart.”

and her Her breath caught at the easily used endearment.

th Sam. “Actually you can join me for dinner later.”

A flush of happiness rushed through her. “I’d love to.”

thighs “See? I can take you out like a gentleman,” he said, causing her to tighten in her chest. “Dress up.”

e sweet her clit, “Okay.”

tled the “And be good in that bath.”

sure on Her face flushed, and she wondered if he knew just how bad she felt between to be.

areness. The rest of the day passed quickly, with a trip to the grocery store then she spent the better part of the afternoon doing her favorite flipped baking. Nothing made a house feel more like a home than the fresh slid the homemade *anything*, and now that she had her own equipment, this house was beginning to feel like a real home to her.

thighs She settled on macarons, the currently in-vogue French cooking recipe for these cookies was deceptively simple, but in reality, it was and time consuming and took lots of patience, of which she had plenty

For hours, she lost herself in a process she found soothing. She knew how soft to make the peaks of the egg whites before adding the ingredient, then whisking once more. Then came the pastry bag and a painstaking creation of rounds without peaks by bringing the pastry tip to the side.

ouldn’t, She made chocolate ganache and Swiss buttercream filling, so Sam couldn’t have a choice, keeping an eye on the oven as she worked. Another par

d left a process involved a careful watching of time, lowering then raising the temperature for the next batch. A bomb could have gone off in the next second and she wouldn't have noticed, and when she finally lifted her head to look at the clock, she realized she didn't have much time to shower before the thought arrived to pick her up.

She knew. "Dress up, he'd said."

She chose a soft pale-blue skirt and flowing tank top loosely belted at the waist, a pair of metallic sandals. She blow-dried her hair, but parts were still damp and she decided it could air-dry. A hint of blush and lip gloss, a pair of bracelets, a long necklace, and dangling earrings, and she was ready in a matter of minutes to spare.

Then her phone rang. A glance told her it was her sister, who was usually on an unusual and off the set schedule.

"Hello?" Nicole asked, aware she was holding her breath.

"Hi! I have the best news!" Vicky said, sounding more excited than Nicole could remember.

Very *up*, and a prickle of nerves assaulted Nicole.

"What's up?" she asked as she settled onto her bed.

Vicky squealed in excitement. "My doctor said if I keep progressing with this, I can take a day trip out of here. You know, like a test run to see how I handle being back out in the world."

Nicole swallowed hard. It was one thing to think about her sister being better, another to contemplate her being out. "Are you sure you're ready to handle this?"

"I am. I just need someone to agree to be my guardian for the day." Another nervous flutter took up residence in Nicole's stomach, and she shivered.

"... But I'm sure Mom or Dad will agree," Vicky continued, obviously rambling with excitement.

"I just don't want you to set yourself up for disappointment," her sister warned her.

"It's one day. Twelve hours. Less even."

Nicole shook her head at how Vicky tended to hang on to her opinions when it came to their parents, mostly because her mind ran toward the delusional. "We'll see, I guess."

"Oops! Gotta go. My time's up. Bye!" her sister said, and disconnected the call.

ing the Nicole prayed their parents would step up, but she had her doubts.
xt roommeant Vicky would ask to visit Nicole for the day instead, and not
o glanceSerendipity would want to deal with that.

re Sam Especially not the Marsdens.

She closed her eyes, thinking of Sam's family. They'd been kind
about her sister, but that was easy when Vicky was out of sight. Fac
l with aher return? Nicole shuddered at the definite conflict inherent in that sit
l damp, The ringing of her doorbell interrupted her thoughts. She glanced
banglewindow by the door and smiled when she saw Sam in khaki pants
ly withcollared shirt. He oozed male confidence and sex appeal, his scruf
untamed despite obvious efforts.

ch was She let him in, and he greeted her with a warm kiss on the mouth. I
lingered, and she sighed into him.

"Mmm, that's nice," she said, running her tongue over her lips.
ed than She could be so happy here, and she didn't want her sister to ru
she was building in Serendipity, she thought, then immediately felt gu
selfish.

"Just nice?" Sam asked, his brows wrinkled.
ing like "Very nice," she amended, chiding herself to push thoughts of he
e how Iand her problems out of her mind.

She had a hot man waiting for her, and she wasn't about to was
gettingthinking about things that might not happen. There was always the
ly?" that her sister's doctor wouldn't allow her to come to Serendipity at all
,

And if he did?
and she Nicole would stand by her twin. They were blood. She had no choi

viously



NicoleSAM NARROWED HIS gaze. Nicole's preoccupied tone set off warning
that something was up. Especially since he didn't think his kissing sk
gone south since he saw her last. She was barely paying attention
usually she couldn't keep her hands to herself when they were alone.
otimism "What's wrong?" Although she'd definitely dressed for thei
ard the looking hot and sexy, her mind was elsewhere.

nnected And when she glanced at her phone before answering him, she cor
his suspicions.

Which “I just spoke to my sister.”
body in He preferred not to think about her mentally ill twin, but as he’d
brother, they were two different people. “Is everything okay?”
She rolled her shoulders and sighed. “Her doctor says she’s ready
l to herday visit, and she’s hoping my parents will let her come home.”
ed with His gut cramped at the thought of her twin out and about in the
uation. “Why wouldn’t they?”
out the Nicole pinched the bridge of her nose. “You know what? Let’s
s and adiscuss my dysfunctional family.”
fy hair He placed his hands on her shoulders, massaging her tense muscle
hopes of getting her to relax. “You can talk to me,” he said, meaning it
His lips She shook her head. “Nobody should have to handle my load but
appreciate it, though.” She shifted her gaze. “So where are we going
dinner?”
in what He ought to respect her need for privacy and be happy with
ilty andunwillingness to share. The more distance they kept between them, the
She was too easy to fall for. But it bothered him that she wouldn’t confide
him about her problems and feelings. Shit. No feelings. He shook his head
er sisterand forced himself to take her cue and move on to the rest of the evening.
He’d made a reservation at a steak house about twenty-five minutes
ite timeoutside Serendipity. Once there, he’d requested a quiet table in the
chancewhere he held her hand and plied her with good wine, and visibly
l. relaxed. The tightness in her expression eased, and her eyes, which
seemed so troubled earlier, were clearer and focused on him.
ce. Their secluded table consisted of a booth in the back corner, and he
him sit beside her, not across the table. He could lean in and inhale her
scent, watch her enjoy her meal, and shift positions so their thighs
and touched throughout the various courses.
signals They talked about nothing and everything, and Sam learned how
ills had they had in common, from enjoying all the new police procedural shows
1 when television to the occasional raunchy comedy—which surprised her
classic rock tunes. They differed on sports. She hated football, which
r date, made him determined to teach her the workings of the game and change
mind this upcoming season.
rified Finally, she placed her fork and knife down on her plate and let
pleased sigh that went right to his dick. “The best steak ever,” she said

“Worth the trip,” he agreed for more reasons than the food. He’d told her about anything to keep the satisfied smile on her face, not to mention that she looked at him, unable to take her eyes off him for a second. The attraction was mutual.

She finished her second glass of red wine, and the server immediately came around asking if she’d like a refill. “No, thank you.” She covered the top of the glass with her hand.

“It’s not ‘Tipsy?’” he asked.

She smiled. “Pleasantly buzzed.”

He, on the other hand, was perfectly sober and driving them home. She could freely admit to being high on her alone. There’d never been a luau conversation. Everything she talked about, from her plans for the coming year for which she hoped to have the keys to next week, to stories of how she managed to raise big money for Tyler’s mother’s campaign for both state and federal office, both charmed and interested him.

“Enough about me. What makes Sam Marsden tick?” she asked.

“Right now, *you’re* making me tick,” he said, leaning in close and nuzzling his nose into the crook of her neck. He wanted to get inside her head.

“Flatterer.” His hand slid to her thigh and a blush rose to her cheeks as she squeezed her eyes shut. “We’re in public.”

He glanced around the darkened corner of the restaurant. “Umm, nobody’s here. And nobody can see.” Inch by inch, he slid the material of her dress up her legs until his palm touched the bare skin of her thigh.

Leaning in, he whispered, “Relax.” Then he licked at the small patch of skin behind her ear.

She rewarded him with a full-body shudder, and her nipples tightened into buds visible beneath her top.

“You’re a bad boy, Sam,” she said, her voice husky and raw.

“It’s only bad if we get caught. If we don’t, it’s all good.”

She looked up at him through eyes half open. “Why?”

“Because you were stressed and needed some relief.” And because he’d desired her, he couldn’t wait until they got home.

She studied his face, making him wonder what she was looking for. He’d find it. Then to his surprise, she relaxed, the muscles in her legs melting away, and she opened for him. The trust inherent in that one move had

do just him—and truly frightened the young man inside him who'd had his head the way his own trust ripped to shreds one October morning.

feeling The only way he could ignore his rapidly beating heart was to focus on Nicole's pleasure. Around them, he heard the sounds of a busy night in a restaurant. Bussers loading trays, servers checking in at tables, conversations between patrons.

He'd paid and tipped for privacy, and until he asked for a check, he'd been alone. He kept asking himself why he was putting in the extra effort to wine, dine, and seduce her, and all he could come up with was Nicole's name, but he'd been afraid he was in it for sex only, and he wanted to take her out in public and reassure her. Treat her like the lady she was.

bakery, He told himself it didn't have anything to do with her fancy ex-fiancée, but she'd been afraid he wasn't so sure. A part of him figured this was his way of competing for her, that she'd made him feel like Tyler was in the running, but she deserved to be wine and dined.

Pleased.

use and Beneath the tablecloth, he drew her skirt up over her thighs and her skin, her completely, her damp heat pulsating against his palm. Her breath and her eyes opened wide, but she didn't stop him as he pushed aside her flimsy underwear and slid his finger along her slick folds.

Her lips parted, and she sighed.

, no we "Shh," he said, brushing her hair off her cheek. With his hidden hands, he shifted her until his fingertip touched her clit. Her hips jerked in response and he turned her head toward him, sealing his lips over hers.

atch of He kissed her while he stroked the tiny bud, all the while aware of her increasing wetness and building desire, the hushed moans he devoured in his mouth, and the way her smaller hands gripped his sides. He kept increasing the pressure, her feminine juices coating his finger. His dick wanted inside her so badly he could barely breathe, but that meant he had to get her home. She had to come.

ause he He stroked her harder, more insistently. Circled his finger over and over her clit until he silenced her cries with his mouth, thrusting his tongue into her in the same rhythm he used to control her orgasm with his finger.

r and if Soon he gentled the kiss as she came down.

gs gave He touched his forehead to hers. "Okay?" he asked her.

umbled "Sublime."

heart and He tilted his head back and met her hazy gaze. "Beautiful."
Her cheeks were pink, her lips swollen. "Mortified."
focus on He brushed his thumb over her mouth. "Don't be. Nobody knows
right at aAnd now that you've had dessert, it's time for the check."
conversations "Maybe I've had dessert, but you haven't." She smiled at him
"Hurry up so it can be your turn."
they'd In that instant, Sam knew he was falling for this woman, and there
effort to a damn thing he could do to stop it.

She'd
in public



nicé, but AS THE ART festival and the weekend approached, Serendipity grew
ing. Not crowded with people Sam didn't know or recognize. Mike put more
ed to be foot patrol, and Sam was grateful he'd made detective or he'd be v
even longer hours. He hadn't seen Nicole since spending the night
house after their date. He did, however, have enough memories to ke
capped going.

caught They hadn't slept much, and he discovered that despite the occ
side her shyness, she was a match for him in bed as well as out. She'd ma
breakfast, the best egg and cheese omelet he'd ever eaten, and sent him
with cookies she'd obviously baked the day before and had ready t
and, he when it was time for him to head home to shower and go to work.

arked in He'd never slept at a woman's place nor had one stay over at
obvious reasons, yet doing it with Nicole felt right. Despite the fact
of her was feeling uncomfortably domesticated, he couldn't get her out of hi
ed with He called her that day and again during the week, and damn if hear
up the voice didn't add something to his long day. Even when working, he fo
e her so mind drifting, her blue eyes and the sounds she made when he wa
So first inside her staying with him wherever he went.

nd over She and Aunt Lulu had taken a booth at the art festival, and Sam
e inside home to change so he could attend the big event downtown. Norm
wouldn't go near an art festival, but like everything else when it c
Nicole, he was drawn there and planned to be one of her first customer



NICOLE WAS AMAZED at how fast things moved in a small town because everyone was willing to work on faith and trust. The bakery itself was in poor condition, but the equipment was fairly new. Having a partner to share the workload helped. Aunt Lulu had all the information about inspectors and licensing, and she had then agreed to handle the business end of things. Meanwhile, Nicole had called Kelly Barron, a paralegal in town, to discuss having partnership papers drawn up. The bank manager assured them their loan would be approved so soon, and the landlord had allowed them into the shop in advance of the necessary papers being signed.

With a few phone calls, they had the electricity and water turned on. Nicole spent the day Friday baking for Saturday's art festival. She hoped to give the good people of Serendipity a taste of what was to come when the bakery opened. Aunt Lulu would bring pies and cakes to their booth, and they had posted signs around town.

As she readied for what she considered her debut, Nicole was starting to feel like she belonged somewhere. Other than Tyler still hanging around, calling and stopping by, all of which she blatantly ignored, she'd get the message, life was looking up.



TYLER MET MACY at her family's restaurant, and they planned to go to the festival together. He had to admit she was a good sport about being that hesidekick, considering she believed his main goal was to win back his head. What Macy didn't know was that Tyler knew a losing battle when he was signing her one. He understood Nicole was serious about living her own life. He understood that she was involved with another man. Hell, she didn't return his calls as deep as he'd be a fool to think otherwise.

"Earth to Tyler." Macy waved a hand in front of his face. "You alive?"
"Just thinking," he told her.

She hopped onto the stool next to him. "About what?"
He glanced over and met her gaze. Honestly interested blue eyes looked back at him. She was so different looking from Nicole, less exotic, her face making her large eyes stand out. But her genuine concern for him made him feel something different from ever before.

"Have you ever been torn between doing what's right and family

people or expectations?" he asked.

pristine She propped her chin on her hand. "Not the way you probably
orkload Family comes first, but we're all so strong-willed that we always clas
ses and it comes to what we want. Like Aunt Lulu got all upset last year and q
e called to go work for a supermarket. Then she got hurt and my family circ
s drawn wagons and took her back immediately." She shrugged. "But I'm t
metime whatever's bothering you is bigger than that."

e of any "What makes you think something's bothering me?"

She raised her eyebrows. "Do you really think I'm buying this
on, and Nicole-and-I-are-meant-for-each-other thing? One look at you and I
oped to sense that it's killing you to chase after a woman who isn't interested."

en their With her insight, the anxiety that had been riding him since he'd
oth and in town eased somewhat. "You got that, huh?" He leaned in closer.

She didn't pull away.

finally "Yeah, I did. So why are you doing it? What kind of family wou
anging you sacrificing yourself and your dignity?"

praying She was so close, he wanted to lean in and kiss her. More than
wanted to explain his motives, but doing so would put her in danger
already had one woman to look out for. He couldn't drag another i
problems.

the art. "Let's just say that the rich are different, and I don't mean that
ing his insulting way." With regret, he forced himself to straighten up and pul

Nicole. Disappointment flickered in her eyes. "Sucks for you," she said
blunt way, looking at him with pity.

fought And making him feel uncomfortable in his own skin.

ven got She sighed. "I'd rather just make ends meet than suffer with that
lls, and obligation."

ve?" "Me too," he said, surprising himself.

He must have shocked her too, because she smiled at that.

"But I can't," he said.

s stared "Why not?" she asked, still interested, but the light in her ey
dimmed.

ier pale He hated disappointing her, but he knew that he had. "That ob
n made runs pretty deep."

loyalty So deep that he'd sacrifice himself for his father? He asked
outright for the first time. Before now, he'd gone about blindly doing

father asked, but Tyler wanted more for himself than a family business mean.on corruption and lies. More than a woman who didn't love him—and h whenhe couldn't love, if he was responding to Macy this way. So no, he t uit herehe wasn't willing to sacrifice himself for his father.

led the But before he could extricate himself, he needed a plan. H hinkingwondered if talking to Nicole's cop was an option.

"Ready to go?" Macy asked when he didn't elaborate on the situati

"Sure." He pushed the idea of talking to Sam aside, to mull over ; wholedoing anything rash.

get the Macy headed to the back of the restaurant to get her bag. He was ' to know her routine as well as he knew his own, he mused.

arrived As she returned, he couldn't tear his gaze away. Her tanned leg long beneath the cutoff shorts, and on her feet was electric-blue polish. Her white sandals had a heavy fringe. She was dynamite in ld havepackage, and he enjoyed every minute he spent with her.

They arrived downtown, parking and walking from far away. Obv that, hethe festival was a huge draw. Macy liked art and so did he, which gav and herush, thinking finally they had something in common. As they pas into hisvarious artists set out with their canvases and work, Macy's eyes lit she paused at every landscape they saw.

in any And when she homed in on an artist and piece she wanted, she l away. straight past Nicole's food booth, barely waving at her friend.

l in her Although Tyler knew he should stop and talk to Nicole, gauge her and hope maybe she was having trouble with Sam, he focused on Ma was talking to the young man who'd painted the beautiful panoran kind ofsmall town at the base of a mountain range; he was caught up in enthusiasm and excitement.

She'd asked about the price when he caught sight of two r recognized. Both blond, dressed casually so they would blend in w casual tourists, but Tyler knew better. He'd met both men when they c ves hadhis Manhattan office to meet with his father. Tyler had sat in discussion as they were new clients, and he always tried to be aware ligationinvestors.

On the surface, both men, LA art dealers, weren't out of place a himselfshow, where they routinely discovered new talent. If he were to dig g as hishe knew that there were thousands of similar shows across the coun

ss builteven in the Northeast each weekend, and it was no coincidence they'd
l whomthe innocuous town of Serendipity at the same time both he and Nico
hought,here. If Tyler had to guess, his father had gotten tired of waiting and
preemptive move by alerting them to possible trouble with Nicole.
e even Tyler tried not to panic, but he knew he had to alert Nicole to p
danger.

on. "Tyler, what do you think of the price?" Macy asked him. "It's to
beforefor me, but do you think we can get him down?" she asked in a hushed
Shit. He hadn't been paying attention to the conversation. "How m
cominghe say?"

She frowned at him and pulled him aside. "He started at two hur
gs werecan splurge at one fifty. I want to hang it in the hall when you walk i
toenailplace. What do you think?"

a petite He wasn't focusing, that was for sure. "Not too bad," he said, think
the top of his head.

iously, He turned back toward Nicole's booth only to find she was gone.
e himaat where the men were standing told him they'd disappeared as well.

sed the With a muttered curse, he grasped Macy's shoulders in both ha
up, andhave an emergency. Don't do anything until I get back."

Her gaze shot from him to where Nicole had been, and the light
headedeyes dimmed. "Sure. Go on."

Heart in his throat, he left Macy and went in search of Nicole.

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cy. She
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Macy's

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even in the Northeast each weekend, and it was no coincidence they'd chosen the innocuous town of Serendipity at the same time both he and Nicole were here. If Tyler had to guess, his father had gotten tired of waiting and made a preemptive move by alerting them to possible trouble with Nicole.

Tyler tried not to panic, but he knew he had to alert Nicole to potential danger.

"Tyler, what do you think of the price?" Macy asked him. "It's too steep for me, but do you think we can get him down?" she asked in a hushed voice.

Shit. He hadn't been paying attention to the conversation. "How much did he say?"

She frowned at him and pulled him aside. "He started at two hundred. I can splurge at one fifty. I want to hang it in the hall when you walk into my place. What do you think?"

He wasn't focusing, that was for sure. "Not too bad," he said, thinking off the top of his head.

He turned back toward Nicole's booth only to find she was gone. A look at where the men were standing told him they'd disappeared as well.

With a muttered curse, he grasped Macy's shoulders in both hands. "I have an emergency. Don't do anything until I get back."

Her gaze shot from him to where Nicole had been, and the light in her eyes dimmed. "Sure. Go on."

Heart in his throat, he left Macy and went in search of Nicole.

Chapter Ten

SAM SCANNED THE booths at the art fair, looking for Nicole. Of course being Serendipity, he didn't get far before someone in his family spotted him.

"I didn't think you liked art!" Erin nudged him with her hip.

He glanced over to find her holding his niece, dressed in a pink frilly top dress and a floppy hat to protect her fair skin from the sun.

He smiled and held out his hands. "Come to your uncle, baby girl."

Erin handed him her bundle and Sam settled his niece in his arm. "Do you miss your uncle Sam?" he asked, kissing her soft cheek.

He was rewarded with a baby gurgle and blowing bubbles.

"I'll take that as a yes." He shifted Angel in his arms. "So where's the other half?" he asked his sister.

She frowned. "Cole's away for the weekend. An important job," she said. "He tries to assign the out-of-town security installations, but sometimes he requests his help."

He caught the hint of wistfulness in her tone. "Can I take you for dinner?" he asked. "Help pass the time?"

She squeezed his arm. "You're a good brother. But Sunday will be here soon enough. I don't want to put a crimp into your social life."

He rolled his eyes. "I always have time for you. And if I didn't, I'd find time."

Erin smiled. "I'm fine. Go find Nicole."

"How do you know that's who I'm here for?"

Erin merely stared at him, holding out her arms. "Who else would you go to an art show?"

With his cheeks burning at being so obvious, Sam placed his niece in her mother's arms. "Have you seen her?" he asked.

Erin nodded. "Her booth is at the far end of the street." She pointed farther down than he'd gotten so far.

"Thanks. I'll see you later."

He turned and started to work his way through the crowds once when a hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around.

“Hey!” Instinct had Sam reaching for his holster as he came face-with Tyler Stanton. “Jesus Christ. Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to si on a cop?”

se, this “We need to talk,” Tyler said.

stopped Sam was not in the mood to deal with the other man. “Not now.”

“It’s about Nicole.”

Sam stiffened. “When is it not, Stanton?” It was time he got rid asshole once and for all.

lly tank “This time is different.” Stanton stood way too close, his posture s

, his attitude determined. “Look, I’m not here to win her back. I know

s. “Did She’s interested in you, not me. But I need her to come back home own good.”

Sam shook his head, knowing he’d never understand this guy wi detailed road map. “Explain.”

!’s your “Nicole’s in danger.”

he said. With those words, he caught Sam’s attention. Sam eyed the oth warily. “Talk to me.”

ies they Tyler drew a deep breath. “Before I came here, I found out my fat

inner?” been taking money from the Russian mob and running it throu

investment business,” he said, his voice low. “He thinks Nicole ov

him talking to his accountant and knows enough to put him in jail a

be here the feds a good lead on his so-called investors.”

d make big. Sam closed his eyes and swore. He’d never imagined her secrets w

“And I just saw the owner of the biggest art gallery in LA and on

associates standing near Nicole’s booth. He’s one of my father’s I

d bring investors, and I can guarantee you he’s not here to find the newest a

your small town.”

ce back Sam stared at the man standing in front of him, disbelief and rage

him as he put together everything Stanton wasn’t saying. “Your

father sent him after Nicole?”

pointed “I don’t know for sure. But by the time I extricated myself from M

I could find out, he was gone. And so was Nicole.”

Extricated himself. This son of a bitch with his expensive cloth

the more fancy words was going to be the death of him, Sam thought, shoving
away.

to-face “You’d better hope I find her, and when I do? She’d better be
break up piece.”



MAIN STREET IN town had been shut down to traffic, and along the
of this artists had set up stands and easels showcasing their work. Trisha from
Café shared the long booth at the end of the street with Nicole and Au
where she sold iced coffee, sodas, and bottled water. The day was h
straight, they almost always had a line for the drinks as well as the pastries by
r better. and mini cakes by Aunt Lulu.
for her

Nicole had made sure to have a wide variety for people to sample i
ithout a to entice many palates. And she’d kept her audience in mind, in
parents who’d brought their kids for a day outdoors. As a result, some
more popular items included the fried apple fritters and chocolate c
er man doughnut holes. Of course, the churros and cream puffs were big hits t

The morning passed quickly, and Nicole was riding a high fr
her has response to her baked goods. When she added the general welcom
gh our received from just about everyone who stopped by her booth, she
erheard only like she belonged in Serendipity but also optimistic about the suc
nd give their soon-to-be-opened bake shop.

The only thing that could make the day better would be seeing Sar
ere this promised to stop by but had texted her to say he’d been delayed by
from the station and said he’d find her later.

After the long morning on her feet, she took advantage of a lul
e of his crowd and turned things over to Aunt Lulu while she treated hers
Russian much-needed break. It was the first time she’d had a chance to check
artist in art fair, and she found herself impressed with the talent on displa
e filling general look of the fair was similar to the street fairs in Manhattan,
fucking warmer feel because the people were so friendly.

She didn’t want to leave Aunt Lulu alone for much longer, but
lacy so returning to work, she decided to take a quick bathroom trip. Joe’
Annie, had stopped by the booth earlier and told her to feel free to
ies and around back and use the bar’s office restroom.

Stanton Anything to avoid the long lines at the shops, Nicole thought, and
down the alley leading to the back of the stores on Main.

in one She was almost at the back lot when a male voice spoke to her. “
me?”

“Yes?” She turned and looked up at a handsome man with blond hair
and a severe expression.

“Didn’t I see you at the bakery booth earlier?” he asked.

the route, “Yes. I’m running it with my partner, Lulu Donovan. Did you
like a Cuppa something you liked?” she asked hopefully.

at Lulu, So many people had come back for seconds or to inquire whether
the lot, and she be carrying the various items she’d prepared once she opened the store.

Nicole But this man didn’t answer, merely studied her intently.

In the wake of his long silence, she grew increasingly uncomfortable
in order didn’t like being alone in the alleyway with a stranger who’d stopped
including was less than chatty.

the of her “I enjoyed the cream puffs,” he said at last.

caramel “Well, I’ll definitely be making those a staple in our new place.
too. you’ll come try them again. If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to get back
from the booth.”

she’d She’d stepped around him when he spoke again. “You’re
felt not Farnsworth, yes? You used to be engaged to Tyler Stanton.” He didn’t
process of He *knew*.

Every warning instinct Nicole had told her to flee, but he held her
n. He’d with that hard stare.

by a call “You should get back together with your fiancé,” he told her. “If
you’re smart and don’t want—”

l in the “Nicole!”

elf to a Sam’s voice interrupted the man, and she gratefully turned toward
out the sound.

ly. The “I’ve been looking everywhere for you!” He came toward her from
with a direction of the parking lot, reaching her with quick, deliberate strides.

before Her heart was racing so fast her chest hurt. She glanced back to see
the stranger had disappeared.

’s wife, Relieved beyond words, she threw herself into Sam’s arms.

to come As he enfolded her in his strong embrace, she realized she was trembling.
“Who was that guy you were talking to?” Sam asked.

she cut She swallowed hard. “I don’t know. He approached me in the al
first I thought it was about the bakery, but he knew who I was. H
‘Excuseabout Tyler.”

Sam’s hold on her tightened. “Call your ex. Tell him to meet us
air andplace now.”

Nicole pushed out of his arms. “No! I can’t do that. I have to w
booth. Besides, why—” Her voice trailed off as she looked into the
u tasteone very pissed-off man.

“That guy who cornered you? He’s a Russian art dealer,” Sam in
r she’dher.

“Oh my God.” Nicole’s knees went weak, and Sam bolstered her
arm around her waist.

“You and Stanton have pussyfooted around each other long enoug
her butwhatever you two are hiding? I want that information too, or I can’t ke
safe.”

Nicole’s breath caught in her throat. “You know? Tyler knows
I hopecouldn’t begin to process how or why or even when either man hac
k to theout.

“I don’t know nearly enough,” Sam muttered. “But I’m going to f
NicoleNow grab your phone and call him.”

Normally Nicole would balk at taking orders, but her old life was
in on her and at that moment, she accepted that she didn’t have a choic
er there As per Sam’s instructions, Nicole called Aunt Lulu and explained
a family emergency and wouldn’t be able to make it back to the boo
you’rewas riddled with guilt over not being able to help for the rest of the af
or with the cleanup, but Aunt Lulu claimed that was what family was
she’d have plenty of hands to pitch in. She wished Nicole well, and
ard thepromised to keep in touch.

om the



see thatNICOLE DRUMMED HER fingers on her thigh. Sam stewed the entire ride
her place, and she didn’t offer anything in the way of conversation. U
knew how this whole situation happened—how Sam came to be in
nbling. and what exactly Tyler knew about . . . everything, Nicole wasn’t
She still had her own family’s knowledge or lack thereof to worry ab

lley. AtNot to mention what she'd do now that the Russians were definitely in
e knewShe grew dizzy just trying to figure out all the angles and implications.

They finally arrived at her house, and Tyler pulled up in his Po
at yourshort time later.

Sam's scowl deepened. "Could he be any more conspicuou
ork themuttered.

eyes of Nicole knew better than to answer.

They settled in separate corners of the living room, Nicole
formedcharming floral sofa the Browns had left behind, Tyler on a solid crea
chair, while Sam leaned against the wall, arms folded across his chest.

with an "I don't understand what's going on today." Nicole spoke first.

Tyler met Sam's gaze.

gh. And "Tell her," Sam said, issuing a direct order in a tone she'd neve
eep youfrom him until this afternoon.

Her ex-fiancé rose to his feet. "I'm not here to win you back. Well
;?" Shebut not because that's what I wanted."

I found Nicole narrowed her gaze. "It never did make sense to me tha
chase after me after I ended things. And once you saw there was so:
ind out.else . . ." She shook her head. "It made no sense," she repeated.

He shoved his hands into his pants pockets. "When you broke u
closingme, I was floored. I admit I didn't see it coming, but I accepted it."

ie. Sam took in Tyler's words, and Nicole knew he was putting hin
she hadTyler's position because he had been there when his fiancé ended thi
th. Shemorning they were to get married. She hated that either man hac
ternoonthrough this awkward reliving of events.

for, and "Then why come to town?" Nicole asked.

Nicole "The same afternoon you ended things, my father called me to his
He was in a panic. Afraid you'd overheard certain information ab
business dealings and could destroy him if you went to the police."
gaze shifted from Sam—the cop now in the equation—to Nicole. "I
overhear them?"

back to Her breath coming in stuttered spurts that hurt, she managed a nod.

ntil she Sam, meanwhile, stared at the other man. "Let me guess. Daddy s
volved,after Nicole to win her back? Why? Because he didn't think she'd turn
talking,if you two were still engaged?" Sam looked at Tyler with disgust but
out too,was just confused.

volved. Tyler ran a hand over his perfectly cut hair. “Because he thought I should have more control over her if she was still my mother’s campaign nurse and my future wife, and if she was more invested in the family than I am.”

“Why didn’t you just come to me?” he asked. “You could have asked me what I did—or didn’t—know.”

“You could have done the same thing,” Tyler shot back.

Sam held up one hand. “You first.” He turned to Tyler. “Why not tell me what’s going on?”

“I’d think that would be obvious. Because if she didn’t know, putting her in danger by telling her.”

“But I did know. And I’ve been torn up with guilt, wondering how you could let it go on. And if you didn’t, same answer you’d give. The firm partially funds your mother’s campaign. That’s illegal, I was, and would taint her so badly she’d have to step down and not run again.”

“There’s my father. I had to decide what I thought he knew—if I could tell you this firm, his livelihood, and everything that’s important to my parents might not like them much, but they’re my family. And speaking of what about Victoria?” she asked, her voice rising. “Who would pick up with responsibility for her once she gets out if my father ends up in jail?”

Sam turned to Tyler. “Don’t you see? There’s more at stake than just my mother. She needed him to understand.”

And his soft gaze told her he just might.

Sympathy flashed in Tyler’s expression, too. “Well, I just found out. And I have many of the same questions you do.”

“Nice mess,” Sam muttered. “Do you think your father sent those people to the office to hurt Nicole?”

Tyler shook his head, then stopped himself and shrugged. “I hope Tyler wants to believe he intended to make a statement to me, to get me to do things up. I have to believe that hurting Nicole is a line my father won’t cross. Threaten to, maybe, but not cross.”

“What if *they* don’t have any such boundaries?” Sam asked, obviously meaning the Russians.

“I’m hoping they don’t know everything, that they’re just doing me a favor,” Tyler muttered.

Nicole wrapped her arms around her waist, and Tyler swore. “I have

ht he'd home and find out what my father told them," he said.

anager "What about *my* father?" Nicole asked.

ynamic "I'll see what I can uncover," he said.

Sam nodded. "That's the right place to start."

ie? You Tyler inclined his head. "But I have to talk to Macy before I go. just disappear without an explanation," he said, not meeting Nicole's g

She wasn't surprised that Tyler had feelings of some kind for talk to She'd seen Macy's interest and Tyler had quickly fallen in line changing his style of dress to following her around town.

I'd be But he'd been sent here to corral *Nicole* into going home with him, stood to watch his father go to prison while the family business he was if you take over was destroyed by greed.

ou just "Tyler, don't you dare hurt Macy," Nicole said. "You have comm money in New York, and she's not a city girl who can slip into the role of n. Then wife."

destroy "Like you did?" Tyler asked, unable to hide his obvious hurt.

rents. I Nicole's chest hurt, surprising sympathy for him filling her. "I'm family, ended things as soon as I realized I wouldn't be happy. I didn't lead ld take And I just don't want you to set Macy up for a fall by making her beli?" She has a chance with you when all you want or can give her is a fling."

orality." Tyler straightened his shoulders. "Don't take this the wrong way, love life is none of your business. Not anymore."

Nicole nodded, not insulted in the least.

out, as "Before you go, leave me names," Sam instructed Tyler. "I want Mike run a check on these Russian guys. Meanwhile, head home and men to get a handle on things there. I'm taking Nicole out of town for the res weekend. I want the Russians gone and Serendipity back to people e not. I and recognize before we return." He pinned Nicole with his gaze, dar to step to argue with him.

ouldn't She might not like being told what to do but she wasn't stupid,

Having the mob show up in town had scared her. Getting away with S. viously exactly what she intended to do.

y father



re to go SAM WAITED UNTIL Tyler left and he had Nicole alone before chang

focus of the conversation. She sat in the club chair her ex had vacated, her entire body stiff. He wasn't sure if she was upset about the Russians in town today or the fact that he was still vibrating with anger at Ty's family and the entire situation. If she were smart, she'd go with the latter. I can't Although they'd agreed on casual, he was still hurt over the first gaze. she'd kept all this inside her from the minute they'd hooked up. He Macy.cop. Didn't she think he could help her? Protect her? "How—"

3, from "I wanted to tell you," she said, cutting off his question.

and he He flexed his fingers, his tension still high. "Then why didn't you?" She rose from the chair and walked over. He couldn't tear his gaze due to the long legs protruding from her white lace skirt. "You're a cop."

itments you? To help you figure out what to do?" He raised his eyebrows. "My point exactly. Who better to look

society She braced her hands on his waist, and his frustration began to relax at her soft touch. He didn't understand his reaction, but he focused on her and her sincere expression.

sorry. I "Because you're a cop, I assumed you'd have to report whatever you saw about illegal activity. I didn't want to put you in a compromising position. Now you're there anyway." She shook her head and looked "How did you find out?"

but my "You were looking out for *me*?" he asked, addressing the most important part of what was racing through his mind first.

"Don't sound so shocked."

to have She pulled away and walked back toward the fireplace, staring at the photos on the mantel. Sam looked over her shoulder. Pictures of Nicole and her twin through the years. None of her parents. No friends. Obviously, I know she didn't extend herself to others easily. Yet she'd done so with him.

ing her And she'd taken him off guard with her admission. He was so used to looking out for others—by profession and by family code—he wasn't looking out for himself either. Being on the receiving end of someone putting him first. And it humbled him that she'd think of him when her entire life was imploding.

But that didn't change the facts. "Look, you weren't far off," he started to explain to her. "I do have to act on the information but not without you. Not without coordinating with you. We can spend the next few weeks implementing a strategy, but to do that, I need to pull in some people."

ing the "But—"

ted, her He held up one hand. "People I trust. Like my brother, who has c
eing in Manhattan, and my brother-in-law Cole."

ler, her "He hates me," she blurted out.

ter. Sam shook his head. "No, he's just a tough nut to crack. Once you
act that know him better, you'll see what I mean."

e was a "Maybe *hate* is the wrong word. But he equates me with Victoria.
so sure he'll want to go out on a limb to help me."

Sam crossed the space dividing them and pulled her back into hi
" "When it came down to it, you helped Erin. You can be damn sure I'll
ze from Cole of that fact. Not that I think he's forgotten. He's just wary."

"Well, I can understand that." She let out a sigh. "You really tru
out for not to automatically turn my father or Tyler's over to the police?"

He tilted her chin up and brushed his thumb over her cheek. "Tho
cede at I'd trust with my life. And yours." Leaning down, he did what he
er facedying to do since she flung herself away from danger and into his arms

He pressed his lips over hers. He meant for the gesture to comfo
r I told her and himself, but the fire between them sparked immediately. She
omising her tongue over his lips, and his cock jerked in response. He gripp
l away. waist, digging his fingers into the soft indentation, and held on, kiss
like he'd been starving for days.

important And he had. He'd had no time to get together, no nights burying
deep. Just the memory of sliding into her without a condom and losin
bit of sanity he had left.

; at the Then today, Tyler telling him she was in danger and the sight
ole and menacing Russian looming close to her in the dark alley. His finger
sly, she harder into her waist at the thought, and she moaned, shaking his comp

He wanted nothing more than to sink into her body, but his s
used to responsibility made his bigger, more level head prevail, and he forced
used to to push her away.

led him "What?" She looked up at him with desire-filled eyes.

"There'll be plenty of time for that once I get you out of town,"
arted to gruffly. Because it was his turn to look after her.

a plan.

w days

He held up one hand. “People I trust. Like my brother, who has contacts in Manhattan, and my brother-in-law Cole.”

“He hates me,” she blurted out.

Sam shook his head. “No, he’s just a tough nut to crack. Once you get to know him better, you’ll see what I mean.”

“Maybe *hate* is the wrong word. But he equates me with Victoria. I’m not so sure he’ll want to go out on a limb to help me.”

Sam crossed the space dividing them and pulled her back into his arms. “When it came down to it, you helped Erin. You can be damn sure I’ll remind Cole of that fact. Not that I think he’s forgotten. He’s just wary.”

“Well, I can understand that.” She let out a sigh. “You really trust them not to automatically turn my father or Tyler’s over to the police?”

He tilted her chin up and brushed his thumb over her cheek. “Those two? I’d trust with my life. And yours.” Leaning down, he did what he’d been dying to do since she flung herself away from danger and into his arms.

He pressed his lips over hers. He meant for the gesture to comfort both her and himself, but the fire between them sparked immediately. She licked her tongue over his lips, and his cock jerked in response. He gripped her waist, digging his fingers into the soft indentation, and held on, kissing her like he’d been starving for days.

And he had. He’d had no time to get together, no nights burying himself deep. Just the memory of sliding into her without a condom and losing every bit of sanity he had left.

Then today, Tyler telling him she was in danger and the sight of the menacing Russian looming close to her in the dark alley. His fingertips bit harder into her waist at the thought, and she moaned, shaking his composure.

He wanted nothing more than to sink into her body, but his sense of responsibility made his bigger, more level head prevail, and he forced himself to push her away.

“What?” She looked up at him with desire-filled eyes.

“There’ll be plenty of time for that once I get you out of town,” he said gruffly. Because it was his turn to look after her.

Chapter Eleven

THEY DIDN'T HEAD out of town until later that night. Sam said he wanted anonymity and darkness. The timing gave Nicole the chance to do for herself, as well as talk to Aunt Lulu, whom she still felt like she was abandoning for the weekend. Aunt Lulu had no problem with Nicole's sudden trip, understanding family emergencies better than most, she'd

While Nicole packed, Sam headed home to his place to do the same. He also took on the job of arranging for a place for them to stay. The goal, he explained, was to remain gone until they could return home to Serendipity on Monday.

To Nicole, it felt like running away, but he insisted on doing things his way. She let him. She'd been carrying the burden of information along for so long, doing nothing but mulling over what to do, so she was grateful to have someone else in charge for a change.

She'd hoped they could talk about what would happen next while in the car. She was afraid that by involving Mike and Cole, she'd lose any chance to get ahead of this mess, but as soon as they hit the highway, the day's events caught up with her. Nicole fell asleep, dozing for almost the entire ride.

When she woke up, it was pitch black outside and the clock on the dashboard told her she'd been asleep for almost two hours.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

She turned her head toward him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to leave you with your own thoughts the whole trip."

He shrugged. "I can handle it. You needed the rest."

She nodded. "Where are we?"

"Saratoga Springs."

"Oh! Home of the horse races."

"And a casino, and shopping, among other things. Unfortunately, we don't want to be out in public. We're better off lying low. Just in case." She'd thought someone followed them, she thought, but didn't say so. She was just glad to be away with Sam.

Once off the highway, he drove backroads, seeming familiar w route. Eventually, he pulled the car into the driveway of a large hc back on a large chunk of property and parked in one of two extra guest Surprised, Nicole turned toward him. "This isn't a hotel."

"No. It's not." He shut off the motor and climbed out of the vehicle

wanted rganize he was Nicole's said. me. He al, he'd a quiet She followed, stepping out into the dense summer humidity, meeti by the back of his truck. He'd insisted on leaving what he termed he *conspicuous* car in her driveway so no one, the Russians especially, jump to the conclusion that she'd left town.

Sam slid his duffel bag over his shoulder, picked up her suitcase t started up the walkway to a set of double doors.

"Where are we?" she finally asked.

"At an old friend's house."

"Oh. It was nice of him to let us stay over."

Before Sam could reply, one of the large wooden doors opened ngs his attractive blond woman answered the door.

e for so to have "You made it!" She pulled Sam into a long embrace, obviously ex see him. "I'm so glad you're here."

"It's good to see you, Sara." He returned the hug without rese e in the before stepping back and studying her.

ance to ; events . on the Nicole took the opportunity to do the same, struggling with the feelings she didn't recognize as she took in Sam's . . . *friend*. The wore a long, emerald silk robe that covered her appropriately, but obvious she had a long, lithe body in addition to the pretty face.

you to Sam finished with his appraisal and grinned before squeezin forearm. "You look great."

With the compliment, Nicole no longer had any trouble nam emotion eating away at her. Jealousy, green and unwelcome, filled he sight of Sam and this woman.

Unaware of Nicole's thoughts, Sara shifted her gaze away from "You must be Nicole," she said warmly. "I've heard a lot about you."

I don't In case glad to Nicole's face felt frozen as she replied, "I wish I could say the sam Sara shot Sam a chiding look. "When we were in high school, we call him Silent Sam. I see that much hasn't changed."

He merely arched an eyebrow her way. But he didn't meet Nicole's so he obviously knew he'd made a mistake in how he'd handled things

with the “You had a long drive, so come on in,” Sara said, gesturing with her hands.

spots. Nicole stepped into the entryway, and Sam followed. Although the house appeared huge from the outside, and square footage-wise, it probably was immense, the interior offered a more intimate and welcoming appearance. Hardwood floors and a country-styled area rug immediately bespoke a more home.

, would “Your home is beautiful.” Nicole forced a smile despite being blindsided by this woman and her obviously close relationship with Sam. “I appreciate you letting us stay here. Especially on such short notice.”

“Uncle Sam!”

Nicole turned toward the unexpected loud, female shriek that was followed by the sound of feet pounding down the center staircase. A nightgown-clad child, more whirling dervish than little human, flung herself toward Sam.

He caught her easily and swung her around before setting her on his shoulders. “Hey, short stuff!”

Sara looked down at her daughter in Sam’s arms with such love and devotion. Nicole couldn’t help but be affected, softening toward the child who’d been nothing but pleasant to her. As Nicole had never been uneasy receiving end of that kind of look from either parent, Sara immediately pointed to her.

it was “How old is she?” Nicole asked.

The child turned to Nicole and held up one full hand and one finger with her other hand. Her long brown curls hung in disarray around her face as she smiled and said, “I six!”

ing the “You’re a big girl.” Kneeling to her eye level, Nicole met her brown eyes at the gaze. “I’m Nicole. What’s your name?”

The child smiled wider, revealing two dimples. “I Sammy.”

n Sam. Startled, Nicole swung her gaze toward Sam.

“I’m her godfather,” he quickly explained. But from the glances between Sara and Sam, there was more to the story, and Nicole’s stomach clenched uncomfortably as she rose to her feet.

Sara placed a hand on her daughter’s back. “Sammy, I let you stay here tonight. Now it’s back to bed, like we agreed. Say good night to your guests.”

with her “Good night,” she chirped cheerfully, practically vibrating with excitement that her uncle was here, making Nicole doubt the child would be housefalling asleep any time soon.

ly was She was the cutest little girl and those big eyes probably let her get away with a lot more than just staying up late, Nicole thought, amused, despite a cozy questions this visit had caused.

“I’ll show you to your rooms,” Sara said to Nicole and Sam, and Nicole’s stomach pitched in disappointment.

Sam had alluded to picking up where they left off earlier today, but it made it clear they wouldn’t be sharing one bed in her house. Nicole didn’t like the sense that Sara was mean, manipulative, or deliberately keeping Sam and Nicole apart. They were obviously old friends. Good enough friends to be. A Sam was her daughter’s godfather. But where was her husband, and Nicole herself wondered, disliking the jealousy pounding away at her.

Once Sammy ran up the stairs, Sara turned back to face them. “You can share the guest room downstairs,” she said, keeping her voice low. Nicole didn’t want to mention it in front of Sammy.”

Relief swept through Nicole.

Sam nodded. “I know the way, so you can go on upstairs. We’ll continue on tomorrow.” He leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. “Thanks again for taking us in at the last minute.”

She studied Sam intently. “Hey. I owe you, and you know it.”

He shook his head. “You know it’s the other way around.”

Her cheeks flushed, and she looked away. “Mark should be back from his business trip on Sunday.” An obvious subject change. “He’ll be glad to see you here. You don’t visit often enough,” she chided, before turning to Sam. “Make yourself at home. I’m taking Sammy to gymnastics in the morning and we’ll be back around eleven.”

“Thank you,” Nicole murmured.

“My pleasure. Night.” With a wave, Sara turned and headed for the door.

“Ready?” Sam lifted the bags, and Nicole nodded.

All the tight knots inside her had eased at the mention of one-on-one time combined with her husband’s imminent return. But that didn’t mean she wouldn’t have some choice words for Sam, for bringing her here without any explanation or warning about this other important female in his life. She would be alone with Sam in the large bedroom, a pretty room set up for guests,

g withunpacked her suitcase, using the empty dresser drawers for her cloth
ould beplaced her toiletries on the counter in the bathroom. Sam, in typic
fashion, said he'd deal with his things as he needed them.

et away She washed up and changed into a pair of boy shorts and tank top
pite thethen opened the bathroom door and paused in the doorway. Sam had s
down to his boxers and stretched out on the queen-sized mattress.

Nicole's She couldn't help but take in the sight, and her gaze slid over his
muscular legs, up to the bulge in his boxer briefs, and over the flat pl
ut Sarahis stomach. Her nipples tightened and wetness pooled between her
dn't getdesire for him overwhelming everything else she'd been thinking and t

Nicole Yes, she was so weak that despite the unanswered questions, desj
ids thatjealousy over Sara and her exhaustion from the day, he could make he
Nicoleeverything but him. Her only consolation was that he studied her th
way, his hot gaze perusing every inch of her body as he leaned back
ou guysthe pillows, one muscular arm behind his head.

. "I just But she refused to allow attraction to distract her. She wanted to ta
she hoped he'd explain about Sara without her having to ask like the
woman she'd suddenly become.

atch up "There's a big pool out back, so you'll be able to relax tomorro
gain fortold her.

She blinked in surprise. "Seriously? That's what you have to say t
She leaned against the doorframe and folded her arms across her chest.
"As opposed to what?" he asked.

rom his Dense man. "Like why aren't we staying in a hotel, for starters."

. you're He raised his shoulders. "It's racing season. I couldn't get a roo
Nicole.then I realized it made more sense to stay with a friend where we
orning,registered anywhere. No credit card, no trace."

That made sense, she silently acknowledged. "Why didn't you
ahead of time? You've never mentioned Sara before, yet she's obvi
e stairs. very good friend."

His eyes narrowed at her tone and emphasis on that one word. '
e room,We go way back to high school."

Nicole Nicole sighed. Obviously he was going to make her drag it out
without" So just who is she to you? And what's with the *I owe you, no it's th*
e. *Onceway around* stuff?"

Nicole His gaze shuttered. "It's ancient history."

ies, and Hurt worked its way through her at his refusal to share. “Not so ar
cal guy didn’t come up tonight.” Her heart squeezed further at his obvious in
shut her out. “Look, I’m not the type to pry into things you don’t wan
for bed, know, but we’re here with *your* friend who knows about me while
stripped nothing about her.”

Nicole really resented him for putting her in this position. She
tanned, disliked being an outsider, a feeling she suspected would only get w
anes of the weekend wore on. Unless Sam let her in.

thighs, “Come here,” he said in a gruff voice.
feeling. She pushed herself off the wall and strode to the bed, sitting beside
pite her He placed his hand over hers, and warmth traveled through her
r for this touch.

ie same “Sara and I have a deep history. As *friends*. I made a poor judgment
against long time ago that affected her life and I owe her. That’s all.”

That wasn’t all, Nicole thought, looking into eyes that held hidden
alk, and secrets. But it was obviously all he’d reveal tonight. They had
jealous weekend for bigger revelations. She hoped.

“I’m tired,” she said on an exhale, wanting nothing more than to
ow,” he into bed and forget everything that had happened today.

He nodded in agreement. “It’s been a long day.”
o me?” “It has. And it’s my fault. I’ve brought a lot of drama into your li
said, feeling guilty for dragging him into her problems, which had er
showing her just how it felt to be on the periphery of his life.

He tipped her chin upward until she met his gaze. “You bring a lo
om, and life. Period.” Those sometimes green, sometimes brown eyes h
’re not intensity that affected her straight down to her soul.

She couldn’t help but believe him. After all, he’d stood by her to
tell me everything. Even when he hadn’t known if she was any different fr
ously at win, he’d defended her against Cole’s accusations, and Nicole had

Sam to have her back. And he had. Their connection had been that soli
‘She is. But in the present, he fought any emotional bond with Nicole, an
accepted that that was how it had to be. Because being left at the al
of him, scarred him. Yet tonight she’d seen that he shared that kind of bo
ie *other* Sara. Their relationship might not be sexual, but there was a trust
commitment between them, and it hurt Nicole to know he wouldn
himself up that way to her.

cient it She pushed herself away from him and rose from the bed, pulling
ntent tothe covers on her side. He stood and did the same. Soon they were ur
it me tocomforter together, but Nicole wanted the same distance between
I knowphysically that he'd put up emotionally.

“Night.” She grabbed her pillow and curled into a ball, facing awa
e reallyhim.

orse as She heard the click of the lamp and the bed dipped and moved as
comfortable, but he didn't bridge the distance between them. A painfi
formed in her throat, but she forced herself to breathe slowly, and so
him. fell asleep.

body at



it call a

SAM WOKE UP with the same heavy feeling in his chest with which he'd
asleep. He also knew why. He'd botched last night, mishandling eve
l stories with this trip and hurting Nicole in the process. He really thought b
a long her here would be good for them both. An under-the-radar place to sta
o crawl chance to see his goddaughter. Why hadn't he realized all the questio
would come up just by being here?

Because, as his sister Erin often said, he was such a guy.

fe,” she Which meant he'd screwed up and now he owed Nicole an apo
ided up well as an explanation. He could handle the apology better than the oth
that was saying something. He reached out only to find the other side
t to my bed empty. And cold.

ield an With a groan, he swung his legs over the side. He glanced at the c
the nightstand and saw it was 10:30 A.M. Sam couldn't remember
hrough time he'd slept so late. Sara would probably be gone with Sammy to t
om her girl's gymnastics lesson, so if he wanted time alone with Nicole, he ne
trusted hurry.

d. He showered quickly and headed to find her. She wasn't in the l
d she'd although he did manage to grab a peach on his way out the back door
tar had in a few bites. He opened the sliding glass doors and stepped outside,
nd with breath caught—having nothing to do with the damp humid air.

t and a Nicole lay outside in a bikini, displaying a body that made his
't open water. Just because he'd seen her before didn't mean he couldn't ap
the view all over again. He started toward her, reacquainting himself v

g downlong legs, curvy hips, breasts that more than filled his hands, and a f
ider thestayed with him from the moment they'd met. Was it any wonder
n themstruggling with distance?

“You’re blocking my sun.” She pushed herself up to a sitting positi
ay from He inhaled and caught the scent of coconut sunscreen. It was a sce
liked as far back as childhood. He liked it even more now, and hi
; he gotresponded to it in very adult ways.

al lump He sat down on her chaise, taking up her sun and her personal sp
on, shefinished off the peach he’d been working on and rolled the pit into a
on the table before sliding in closer.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I need to talk to you before Sara gets back.”

At the mention of the other woman’s name, Nicole stiffened and
d fallenher back against the chair, away from him.

rything He hung his head. “And that’s why I’m sorry. If I’d told you abo
ringingbefore we came here, if I’d explained, you wouldn’t be so defensive no

y and a “I’m not defensive.” She straightened her shoulders and met hi
ons that“Fine. I am defensive. But do you blame me?”

“Not in the least. So hear me out?” He reached out and tugged or
of her hair. “How else can I apologize?” Being rational and truthful

logy asonly way to get through to her, he thought, waiting for her to come aro
ier, and
e of the



lock onNICOLE SIGHED, FEELING herself softening toward Sam. He was here v
the lastanswers she wanted and the apology she hadn’t expected. “Okay, fin
he littlerelaxed and hugged her knees to her chest, giving him more room
eded tochair.

“First things first. Last night, when you said you were sorry you l
kitchen,so much drama to my life?”

, eating She nodded. “I was serious. We’ve gone from dealing with m
and hisstalking yours to money laundering and threats. I’m the reason we’re
out here for the weekend.”

mouth He braced his hand around her ankle. “I don’t need an excuse to h
preciatewith you, so no apologies. And as for the drama, do you think I ch
with hercareer because I like peace and quiet?” he asked on a laugh.

ace that She smiled. "I didn't know that meant you like it invading your p
he waslife too."

ion. He squeezed her leg tighter. "I like *you* invading my personal life."
"Liar," she said softly.

nt he'd His lips quirked in a grin. "Okay, you've got me there. But I'll let
is bodyanyway. No matter how uncomfortable it makes me." He drew a deep

ace. HeBrett, and Sara."
"Back in high school, there were four of us. Four best friends. Me,

napkin She leaned closer so she could absorb not just the story but his er
about his past as well. "Were Brett and Sara boyfriend and girlfriend to

He shook his head. "Just friends. But after—after Jenna left me f
and they moved out of town, it was just me and Sara. Not in a roman
pushedor even a sexual one. We were really good friends."

She nodded.
And he continued. "Long story short, I went to the academy in

ut Sara "I met this guy, Frank Dalton. He and I became close. He seemed d
ow." and I met his parents. I figured I knew him pretty well. I trusted my instin

s gaze.met his parents. I figured I knew him pretty well. I trusted my instin
introduced him to Sara." He drew another deep breath, his body tremb

l a lock "It's okay. You don't have to relive it." Nicole saw how difficult
was thefor him to talk about his past. It was enough that he was willing.

und. "You need to know," he said, his voice strong.
"Okay." She was grateful. "Okay."

"Frank and Sara hit it off right away. They dated and next thing
they got engaged. He wanted to be a city cop and she was ready t

with theSerendipity, so they moved to Albany."
e." She Nicole had seen the connection between them. "I bet you missed h

on the "A lot. Mostly because we lost touch." His facial features grew tau
Nicole glanced at his tense expression. "Why? That doesn't seem

broughtSara I met. Even two seconds in her presence and I could tell when she
she loves big."

y sister "Yeah. And she was there for me after Jenna left, so I couldn't fig
: hidingwhy she would pull back and disappear from my life. Then one d

ang outcalled me. She was hysterical. She said she needed me so I got in the
drove to Albany."

ose my "What was wrong?"
A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Frank had been in a car accident.

personal driving and he was in a coma.”

“Oh no!” Nicole reached for him, but he shook his head.

“There’s more.”

She could barely breathe, waiting to hear the end of the story. “When you saw Sara again, everything she didn’t want me to know came pouring out of her mouth. From the day they married, Frank had been a controlling son of a bitch. Jenna, when he drank, which was often, he was verbally abusive. He didn’t like me, and he cut her off from me, from anyone who could see the way their life together was really like. I never saw that side of him or I wouldn’t have introduced them.”

“Of course not!”

“But I did. Because my personal judgment sucks, something I’ve done twice over. And you know what they say about the third time.”

“Third time’s a charm?” she asked, trying to lighten the mood.

“More like three strikes and you’re out,” he muttered.

Nicole knew better than to argue with a thinking pattern he’d had to believe in and let stick. “Did Sara blame you?” she asked instead.

Sam shook his head. “No. But she should. The night she told him she was pregnant, he was furious. They hadn’t planned for a kid. He wasn’t ready—he hit her before taking off in their car. She packed, planning to leave, but she got a call that he’d been in an accident. And you know the rest.”

“What happened to her husband?” Nicole asked.

Sam glanced up at the clear blue sky. “He died of his injuries.”

“And she was free of him.”

He nodded.

“But you weren’t. Because you still blame yourself.”

He inclined his head.

It wasn’t hard to understand his thoughts. A man who was raised in a family of cops, who protected others, had felt like he’d failed himself and his best friend.

She met his gaze. “You have to see that Sara has remarried and she has a wonderful life. How can you be so hard on yourself?”

He groaned, running a hand through his hair. “When it comes to decisions for myself or people I care about, my judgment is suspect.”

“Because Jenna betrayed you too? And you didn’t see it happening?”

“Both Jenna and Brett. And then Frank.” He clenched and unclenched

hands.

She placed her hand over his, stilling his movements. “That’s on
The only thing that’s on you is being a good, trusting person.”

When I “Yeah, fucking perfect,” he muttered.
ng out. She blinked in surprise at the vehemence in his tone. She wanted t
tch and into his lap and tell him that to her, he was perfect. He was everythin
ke how and decent, especially compared to her own family, and she felt lucky
æ whathim in her life. But from the tight set of his jaw, she sensed he wouldn
ouldn’t her, let alone believe.

But somehow she had to convince him that not only did she trust h
he could have that same faith in himself. Otherwise this push-pull s
proven was all they’d ever have together. And she already knew it wasn’t
enough.



oo long
she was she’d landed herself one for good, but smart enough not to be taken in
ady and jerks of the world. Until Tyler Stanton. Yes, she knew Tyler had on
ive, but spending time with her while pursuing his agenda with Nicole, but
grown closer. He’d flirted even after he’d promised not to. At the ve
they were friends. And friends didn’t dump each other at an art fair
off looking for another woman.

After getting a ride home from another friend and stewing for a
after that, Macy decided it was time she got some answers from Mi
Stanton. He didn’t answer his phone, so she headed over to the Sere
Inn. She pulled her little Mustang up to the house and parked on the st

ed in a As she walked up the driveway and path to the front door, she w
and his Joanne Rhodes, the owner, who was on her knees, weeding in her
beds.

clearly “Hi, Macy. How are you this fine day?”
“I’m fine, thanks. Did you get over to the art festival?” Macy asked
making Joanne nodded. “This morning. I wanted to spend time with my
this afternoon. Here to see Tyler?” she asked.

?” “Yes. Is he in?” A stupid question because his car was parked in th
hed his spots in the back of the driveway, but she forced herself to make

conversation before she could head in.

n them. “Upstairs. I have to admit, he’s such a nice, polite man. I’m sad
him go.”

Macy stiffened but forced herself not to ask her for details. The
o crawl wanted from Tyler. She didn’t want to think he’d leave without
ig goodgoodbye, but after the way he’d dumped her at the fair, maybe she sh
to havegive him that much credit.

n’t hear She managed a smile. “I’ll go talk to him.”

Gathering her anger as well as her courage, she headed inside and i
im, butto his room. She knocked once and the door swung open.

exually The Tyler who answered the door didn’t look anything li
: nearlycomposed, put-together man she was used to seeing. Instead, his ne
neat hair was messed, having apparently been attacked by his fingers,
eyes were a bit wild, his focus clearly scattered.

“Macy.” To his credit, he sounded happy to see her.

art thathis suitcase open on the end of the bed. Her stomach plummeted at the
i by the She turned to him, folding her arms across her chest, pinning hi

ly beenher most determined glare. “Tell me you’d planned on saying goodbye
they’d

ry least
and run



TYLER STARED AT her, wishing he could give her the answer she want
an hourthe truth was, he’d heard what Nicole had to say about not hurting
r. Tyleralso knew there were people in town watching him. And he hadn’t wa
ndipityput her in any danger. So he’d planned to go home, settle things v
reet. father, then come back here and see what could be—with Macy.

aved to “You. Suck.” She shoved his shoulder, her blue eyes flashing w
flowerand anger.

He grabbed her wrist and met her gaze. “Yeah, I do. And you de
hell of a lot better than getting involved with me.”

l her. She jerked out of his grasp and sat down on the bed. “We’re not in
flowersTyler. Maybe there’s chemistry between us, but I’m not stupid enough
any stock in you. Not while you’re here chasing after another woma
re extraat least thought we were friends.”

e polite “Oh, we’re friends.”

Chin high, she glared at him, but Tyler knew her better by now. Like it or not, they were involved, more than either wanted to be. He'd just wanted to come close to explore it, no baggage holding him back from her.

saying "Friends don't take off on each other without a word. We were together, couldn't look at paintings, no mention of you needing to deal with Nicole. The only thing I know, you're focused on her and leaving me—without a ride home. Not cool."

upstairs No, it wasn't. And he'd been so thrown by the Russian art dealer who hadn't once thought about the fact that he'd abandoned her there. One day they'd been looking at landscapes, and the next his entire life and Normandy flashed before him.

and his "I'm sorry." He drew a deep breath. "Like I said, you deserve better. I have to have to deal with me."

Silence followed and he knew he'd lost her.

to see "I didn't peg you for a coward," she said at last.

sight. If she knew what he was dealing with, she might cut him some slack. He didn't want her pity. "I'm going to ask you for something. Something you don't have no right to ask of you."

"What?" she asked, sounding wary.

Rightly so.

"Wait for me."

ed. But "What?" Her soft lips parted in question.

her. He He took advantage, leaned in, and settled his lips over hers. His intention was to give her something to remember him by. To entice her to hold him, despite having given her every reason not to trust him or want him to return.

ith hurt The result? One taste and she imprinted herself on him for good. She rubbed her tongue against his, and with a groan, he pulled her up, wrapped his arm around her waist, and aligned his body with hers. He allowed himself this moment, holding her, feeling her, giving himself something to look forward toward when dealing with the nightmare back home. She softened toward him, responding in ways he couldn't have imagined. He wanted nothing more than to put her in his bed, to bury himself inside her, but not now.

Not until he was completely free.

He braced his hands on her waist and pulled her away from him.

and he for me,” he said once more.

re both “I don’t understand.” She looked up at him, eyes glazed, co
back to quickly replacing desire.

He touched his forehead to hers. “It’s better that you don’t kno
together, until I’ve put it all behind me.”

e. Next Her gaze narrowed. “You’d better not be playing me,” she warned

home. Which was exactly what he liked about her. He grinned and slid a
down her cheek. “When I’m playing you, you’ll know it.”

lers, he Now, he thought, looking at Macy, he had even more incentive
minute home and fix the mess that was his life.

Nicole’s

ter than

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thing I

intent?
out for
him to

ed. She
trapped
himself
o work
against
ig more

. “Wait

for me,” he said once more.

“I don’t understand.” She looked up at him, eyes glazed, confusion quickly replacing desire.

He touched his forehead to hers. “It’s better that you don’t know. Not until I’ve put it all behind me.”

Her gaze narrowed. “You’d better not be playing me,” she warned him.

Which was exactly what he liked about her. He grinned and slid a finger down her cheek. “When I’m playing you, you’ll know it.”

Now, he thought, looking at Macy, he had even more incentive to head home and fix the mess that was his life.

Chapter Twelve

NICOLE KEPT SARA company in the pool while she watched her daughter in the shallow end. Today was the first day of a heat wave—the temperature was due to hit over one hundred degrees by this afternoon—and the water was good against her heated skin. Sara was warm and friendly, and now that Sam’s revelations had taken the sting out of their relationship, Nicole realized that she liked his high school friend. More, she respected the other woman for surviving and thriving after all she’d suffered.

She glanced around, taking in the high fence and the heavy shade trees behind it, an unnecessary blockade since they obviously owned a large piece of land. No neighbors in sight. Nicole loved the house and the grounds, the lush greenery making everything out here as warm and welcoming as the interior decor and the owner herself. She couldn’t imagine not liking Sara’s house either.

The sound of Sam’s phone ringing cut into the silence. He grabbed his cell, talking from where he lay on a lounge chair, eyes closed, as he read a book. His chest was broad, his abs well defined, his golden skin spattered with freckles. He had the right amount of hair, which tapered into the swim trunks he wore. His muscles in his arms and the obvious strength in his legs made her melt. He looked delectable, but the truth was, the outside was just packaging for the equally spectacular man within.

Every day that passed, she learned more about him. Not just a good-looking man, he was also a decent man, and he’d dedicated himself to her protection the first time since the eavesdropping incident outside her father’s office. She felt safe and protected. Because she trusted Sam.

“You’ve got it bad,” Sara mused.

Nicole cut her gaze away from Sam, her cheeks heating up as she was caught staring. “It’s not like that between us.”

Sara’s eyes twinkled, her expression indicating she knew better. “*Something* because he told me ahead of time you’d be sharing a room with him. I’ve known Sam for many years, and he’s never brought a woman home before.”

Never even mentioned one in passing. Not even when I've pushed for answers."

Nicole studied the pretty blonde, surprised she didn't resent her for so blunt or intrusive. However, she knew now how much Sara cared for Sam.

ter play
perature
ater felt
ow that
e found
man for
Without warning, a huge spray of water hit them both, and Sara
toward her daughter. "Sammy, watch where you splash!" she called out
"Sorry!" The little girl bounced up and down in the water. "When
can I go to Rebecca's?"

rouad of
acres of
he lush
interior
usband,
Sara smiled at her daughter. "We'll go after lunch."
Satisfied with the answer, Sammy retreated back into her own world
play.

"Sorry about that," Sara said, turning back to Nicole.
"Don't worry about it." Nicole liked observing the mother-daughter
relationship between these two.

bed his
relaxed.
with just
re. The
mouth
choking
The whole concept was such an anomaly in her life that watching
caused an ache near her heart, making her acutely aware of everything
lacked growing up. She wondered if she'd get the chance to be a mother
if so, she was determined to do a better job than her own had done.

Sara pushed herself up onto the edge of the pool, and Nicole joined
their legs dangling into the water.

"Now, where were we?" Sara asked. "Oh yes. You said Sam's relationships.
And I beg to differ. He only thinks he doesn't want to be
emotionally involved."

Nicole glanced at the handsome, self-contained man on the lounge
and sighed. "You have to admit he's got good reasons to avoid one,"
said, knowing Sam was afraid of being hurt again.

Sara raised her eyebrows. "So did I." She swept her hand
gesturing to the beautiful home and the little girl babbling to herself
feet away, as if to say, *But look what I have now.*
"It's
m. And
n here.
"You're miraculous," Nicole said, meaning it in every way.
The other woman flushed. "No, I'm just a survivor. So I take it Sara
you about my first husband?"

ed and Nicole nodded. “I hope that’s okay.” She’d hate to get him in trouble by betraying a confidence.

or being Sara met her gaze. “It’s fine. Sam knows I volunteer at the hospital abouttalking to domestic abuse groups, so sharing is what I do.”

Nicole stuck by her view of Sara being an incredible woman, but wouldn’t embarrass her by saying it again. “I’m glad you and Sam are broken close,” she said instead. Because Sara seemed like that rare person trustworthy and loyal—and Sam deserved a friend like her.

turned She smiled. “The feeling’s mutual, and I just want him to be happy. He refused to open himself up to the idea of love. It’s like he shut down, Tommy, be honest, I was beginning to think he’d always be alone. But just the fact that he brought you here tells me he’s changing.”

Nicole shook her head, not wanting Sara to formulate the wrong impression about her and Sam. “I’m only here because I’m in trouble, and we need to get out of town for a few days.” Sam had mentioned that he’d been very honest with Sara about Nicole’s situation when he asked her if they could come stay.

“Well, he could have brought you to a hotel.”

ing them “He tried. It’s racing season.”

g she’d “So why didn’t he choose another location?” Sara smirked, sure she’d reached her conclusions. “Instead, he brought you here, to an old friend who knows her better than anyone. That tells me he’s more invested than even he knows. Nicole’s heart squeezed tight, longing and hope threatening to rise, but she ruthlessly quashed the emotions. Sam had made himself clear. Not how attached she might be getting, and she’d be a fool to deny it to herself. To get she couldn’t set herself up for pain and heartache. They were neighbors when things ended, she’d have to live in his small town and make a living chair friendship work.

Nicole “Sara—” Nicole wanted to stop the speculation and conversation, but another woman was on a roll.

around, “Now, maybe you’re not ready for a relationship, as you said,” Sara said with a frown. “Or maybe that’s an excuse because Sam told you up front that he wasn’t interested in one. I don’t know. But I like you. And I like you with Sara.”

“Thank you,” Nicole said, not knowing what else to say.

am told Sara tipped her head up toward the sun. “I’m just calling it like I see it. Sam’s relaxed around you. He watches you and smiles when he thinks

able for not looking.”

“He does?”

hospital, It took every ounce of Nicole’s self-control for her not to turn around and sneak a peek at the man and see for herself.

but she Sara merely grinned.

are still Which led her to wonder what she’d do if Sam Marsden suddenly came out of the person—he was all in and wanted more. The answer, which she’d never admitted aloud, had her wanting to dive in and submerge herself in the pool.

y. He’s

, and to

the fact



ng idea SAM GLANCED OVER to where Nicole lounged at the edge of the pool, talking to Sara. Water droplets glistened on her sun-drenched skin, her dark hair contrasting to her paler flesh. She simply took his breath away, bringing up emotions he knew he’d have to deal with at some point, but not a direct threat against her was gone.

y could As the women spoke, their conversation broken only by Sara’s reply to her daughter’s splashing, he caught discreet glances coming his way. He didn’t know what, specifically, they were discussing, but he could make an educated guess that he was the general subject.

of her “Women,” he muttered, amused despite himself, as he lay down and closed his eyes against the glare of the sun.

ws him His mind kept replaying last night’s talk with Nicole, the revelation that a discussion of things he’d avoided discussing or thinking about for years had revealed himself to her felt right. And he was forced to admit that talking about his biggest failures in life helped ease the burden he’d been carrying for years.

ce their He might not trust his personal judgment, but Sara had no such problem, even after Frank, and the result was a great marriage to a decent guy. Sara went to work for Stein owned a couple of luxury car dealerships, hence this beautiful pool, and Sara’s ability to be a stay-at-home mom to her daughter couldn’t be happier for her, knowing what she’d gone through to get to this point.

but the His phone rang. At a glance, he saw it was his brother and he answered on the second ring. “Hey, bro. What do you have for me?” He’d given his brother the names of the Russian art dealers Tyler had passed on to him.

I see it, you’re

“I took the names you gave me to Cole, who went to his contact v
feds. They ran them through their database, and this is big for them
and want to set up a sting. Have Nicole wear a wire while talking to
Stanton. Once he confesses to money laundering on tape, they can let
that information and get him to testify against the Romanovs. They want
decided big fish, which will take care of Nicole’s problem.”

Sam swore and glanced out at the pool. Nicole’s laughter rang out
splashed with Sammy in the water. He couldn’t help but grin at the sight
as his stomach churned at the thought of asking her to do as Mike asked

“I don’t like it.”

“And I don’t blame you, but you’ve got no choice.”

He knew that. “I’m not telling her until it’s time. She doesn’t want
worry or panic.”

Mike paused before answering. “That’s your call. But aren’t you
worrying a hell of a lot about this woman? I know you look out for them
can’t do it for themselves. And you’re seeing her, that I know. But
involved are you?”

“It’s none of your business, Mike.”

“That’s enough of an answer. And *I* don’t like it. Look, she’s
woman and all, but given who her sister is, don’t you think that’s going
make Thanksgiving dinners awkward?”

Sam nearly choked on his own saliva. “Dammit, Mike. I’m sleeping
her, not getting married.”

“It always starts in bed,” Mike muttered. “Trust me. I know.”

“It’s not like you and Cara.”

Mike burst out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“That’s what I said when I was fighting myself.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“So I can tell Cole you’ll handle persuading Nicole to wear a wire
Tyler’s old man?” Mike asked, changing the subject.

“Yeah. But not until we’re back in town,” Sam said. “How’s
feeling?”

“Not good. Can you talk to her when you get back? I get the feeling
shutting me out. I don’t understand, but maybe you can get through to
her.”

Sam knew what it took for his brother to ask. “Sure thing. Or

with the home, I'll make it a priority."

1. They "Thanks. I'll be in touch."

Robert Sam disconnected the call and joined the women in the pool, where they spent the next half hour having water fights with a six-year-old and a boy who ran the her around on his shoulders around the pool. More than once, he

Nicole watching him with an expression he'd never seen before at as she beautiful face. He didn't know what to make of it but damn if he didn't want to see it.

d. A little while later, Sara announced it was time for Sammy to take a shower and then she could go to her friend's house for the rest of the afternoon. Dinner.

need to The little girl squealed in excitement, dumped her uncle Sam, and ran out of the house.

it's you "Wait for a towel! You'll drip water everywhere!" Sara took off after her with a towel in her hand.

ut how Nicole laughed, leaning her head back against the chair in which she was sitting. "Oh my God, she's so cute."

"A firecracker," Sam said.

a nice They lay in companionable silence, enjoying the afternoon, and talking to each other. Nicole could put her problems aside. And if she wasn't, at least she was making an effort to enjoy as much as possible. He dreaded the time when they'd have to head back to reality, but that was a while off.

Sara stepped outside to tell them she was leaving and promised to come back. She mentioned she wouldn't be back until Sammy's bedtime at eight.

Good friend, he thought wryly, letting him know he had the all day long which was perfect, because he couldn't keep his hands off Nicole for long.



re with THE SUN BEAT down overhead and beads of perspiration pooled on Nicole's chest. She groaned, knowing that the weatherman's prediction of a hundred-degree temperatures had to have come true.

ig she's "I'm roasting out here," she murmured.

her?" A few seconds later, she squealed at the unexpected cold shot of ice cream trailing over her stomach. She bolted upright, but Sam's firm

pushed her shoulders back down.

“Shh. Let me cool you off.”

here he His husky voice aroused her in an instant, and she did as he
arryingrelaxing back into the chair.

caught He outlined her bikini top with an ice cube, first tracing the band
on herher chest, then moving over the swells of her breasts, taking hi
n’t likeleisurely caressing her skin.

The ice, a stark contrast to her heated flesh, melted on contact,
a bath,droplets of water in its wake, and she arched into the cooling sensation
on andadded texture to his ministrations, brushing his thumbs over her
distended nipples, awakening her nerve endings that begged for a
ran fortouch, but he didn’t linger in any one spot.

Instead, he retrieved another cube from the Lucite bucket and wor
ter her,way down her stomach, her muscles rippling and clenching at the icy
created. He outlined the top of her bikini bottom, sliding the ice al
she sat.lower abdomen, keeping his fingers in the mix, stroking her arouse
everywhere—except where she needed it most. Every touch, every b
his callused fingertips might as well have been directly on her sex b
he wasthe tiny bud throbbed and ached as if he were physically touching h
she wasshe arched her hips, seeking deeper contact.

e when Sam pressed his lips to her stomach, lapping at the water dropl
kissing her skin. She moaned at the intimate touch, unable to hold b
intedlysounds of pleasure.

Forcing her heavy eyelids open, she caught sight of his golden
l clear,hair, his face lost to her, buried against her.

r much “Sam,” she said, his name escaping, the word more a plea.

“Right here.” Which sounded like a promise, and her sex grew wet

He hooked his fingers into the sides of her bikini and slowly :
bathing suit down and off her legs.

Bared in broad daylight beneath the afternoon sun, she ough
Nicole’s embarrassed, but she knew they were alone. And with his green-go
of one-darkened with desire, she didn’t care about anything except the pulsing
of her body and his.

“So damn sexy,” he said, lowering his head to her body once more
f an ice Only this time, he slid his tongue directly over her damp sex and
n hands working her earnestly. No more teasing. His tongue slid over her oute

giving each one thorough, loving treatment before sliding his tongue over her clit.

asked, Her hips jerked, and she gripped his head, centering herself, unhold still as the beautiful sensations built inside her. “Sam, God. Don’t around One long swipe of his tongue was her answer.
s time, Then he grasped her thighs and slid his tongue inside her. She p his hair, thrusting her hips against his eager mouth. He gripped h leaving tighter, playing her body faster, flicking his tongue back and forth o is. Samclit, then easing off long enough for her to catch her breath, only to : already again.

harder He brought her close and pulled back, close and pulled back, u writhed beneath him, a frantic mess of need, every nerve ending in h ked his screaming for the release he deliberately denied her.

trail he Then suddenly, he nipped at her clit and then pressed his tongu ong her hard and flat against her and she shattered, her body imploding in th d fleshmind-blowing orgasm that seemed to go on and on, until she could sw rush of saw bright, colorful stars behind her eyes.

because She’d barely come back to herself when a shadow loomed over h er, and stood before her. He’d shed his swim trunks and his big, beautiful bod poised at her entrance.

ets and He glanced down at her and groaned. “The damn lounge chair is t ack the I need to fuck you, and I can’t do it on that flimsy thing.” Before sh blink, he lifted her into his arms.

ie-brown “Then get us inside,” she said in a husky voice she didn’t recogniz He nodded and headed into the house, her still-throbbing heat i almost painfully against his hard erection as he carried her to thei bedroom.

slid the She pressed her lips against his and wrapped her legs around his w could get used to being carried around naked by you,” she said, nuzzl t to be face into the sweat-slickened skin of his neck, reveling in his masculir ld gaze and heat.

g needs He stiffened at her words, but before she could react, he had her her back, pulled her to the edge of the bed, and thrust home. He w . thick, and she needed him inside her more than she’d realized. He l begantightened around him, pulling him in deeper.

r folds, She opened her eyes just as he slid out and thrust back inside. S

briefly him everywhere, and she moaned her approval. “More,” she said, arching her hips.

able to “You sure?”
stop.” She nodded.

He closed his eyes and took her harder, pounding into her with renewed determination. The muscles corded in his neck, his jaw set tight, and her legs marveled that she made him lose control this way. The very thought of her body reacting, and she welcomed the insistent pleasure that began to start up all over again.

She was lost, and knew the last of her walls had crumbled. She’d known until she knew she could fall hard for him even as she’d agreed to nothing between them. And as he played her body so well, bringing her over the edge once more, she took that final tumble into love.

he down
the most
near she



SAM OPENED HIS eyes and watched Nicole’s face, taking in the soft expression as she came hard, again, for him.

“God, Sam, I’m still coming.” Awe and passion etched her words. She was willing partner in every way.

He held on by a thread but wanted her to finish, to milk every last drop of her pleasure around his cock before he let go.

She arched, her body clamping around him, her inner walls rippling against her gorgeous face open and honest as pleasure consumed her, his hands rubbing her thighs. Her final cry triggered his release, and he poured himself into her, pounding over and over until he was done, spent, gone.

He collapsed on top of her, breathing heavily, until he felt her fingers running through his hair. His heart beat hard in his chest, and he knew it wasn’t just a physical response to phenomenal sex. Although it had been that.

The usual fear of commitment and ultimate rejection threatened to overwhelm him, and he fought it back. For right now, what they shared was solid.

He didn’t mention how much she needed him to stand by her throughout this meeting with Tyler’s father and his business.

He couldn’t predict the future, but if nothing else, he could damn well enjoy the present.

A while later, they’d shared a shower, a repeat of their earlier connection.

ing herbut this time standing up in the small stall. Afterward, Nicole said she
phone call to make, and he'd left her alone, giving her privacy, prom
find them something to eat.

Sam shook his head, unable to remember the last time he'd been
enewedwoman, stayed to shower, planned to eat with her, then headed back to
and shehe wasn't careful, he was afraid he'd be calling what he and Nicole s
had herrelationship.

uilding Shit.

He turned his focus to the fridge in the kitchen. Sara loved to cc
alwaysalways had extra meals in the fridge. Sure enough, he found lasagna
seriousnote to him to heat whatever they wanted. It was easy enough to h
he edgeeven before heading back to let Nicole know they'd be eating in abo
minutes.

He walked down the hallway, pausing outside the bedroom door
sound of Nicole's voice.

ressionVictoria?" A pause, then, "No, it's not our regularly scheduled time,
our birthday—I mean, we're twins. So I wanted to call and—"

rds, his Silence followed while Nicole listened to the other person on the
"Yes, I'll hold for her doctor," Nicole said.

st bit of Sam leaned against the wall, surprised by what he'd heard. The
day had passed, and he hadn't known it was her birthday. Her phone
g. Withrung. Nobody had called to wish her well. He ran his hand through h
s bodyremembering what she'd told him about her parents. How they
nto her,remembered she was around unless they needed something from her.

A painful knot formed in his chest as he thought of his pare
gers siftsiblings, and the birthdays he'd had, both growing up and as ar
't just aNicole's utter isolation gave him a completely new appreciation of fan
the love and caring he'd always taken for granted. He'd had no
) set in,knowing, understood she wouldn't be upset with him, but he dou
Not tobelated *Happy Birthday* would take the sting out of the day and wo
ss withwhat he could do to make it up to her.

nn well "Hi, Dr. Templeton. What's going on?" Nicole asked.

More silence, during which Sam wondered what was happening v
sister.

upling, "I thought . . . I mean, the last time we spoke, Victoria said s

he had a getting better. That you were talking about giving her a day pass, to
singing to Nicole's voice brought Sam out of his introspection, followed by
damning quiet as she listened again, Sam thought.

with a "I see." Voice lowered, Nicole's pain and disappointment filtered to
bed. If to Sam. "Sure. Okay, yes. Thank you for explaining everything
heard a Goodbye."

A loud sob followed, and Sam pushed open the door without knock
Nicole spun around at the sound of his entrance and immediately
looked and her eyes with her hands.

with a "Don't pretend nothing's wrong."

eat the She visibly stilled. "I'm fine."

ut forty He shook his head and stepped closer. "No, you're not. I heard you
of the call. Whatever's wrong with your sister, you don't have to hide
r at them."

"But—"

r sister, "But I'm here for you. End of discussion." He slid his arm around
but it's waist and pulled her against him. Ignoring how his body lit up at
wasn't easy, but she needed more than sex to make her feel better now
phone to me."

Nicole pushed out of his embrace. "My sister isn't getting better
whole fighting the meds, and when she told me she would have permission to
hadn't out on leave? That was her being delusional."

his hair, "I'm sorry."

r rarely "Don't be." She let out a harsh laugh. "It protects your family
having to deal with her any time in the near future."

nts and She spun away, but he caught her arm, halting her emotional
adult. "Hey! Don't run away from me."

nily. Of She turned, her glassy red eyes kicking him in the gut.

way of "I've always dealt with Victoria's issues and problems myself."

ibted a He nodded. After she'd broken off her engagement, she'd been
ondered She'd chosen to move to Serendipity. Alone. And now she'd taken
from her twin, expecting to be—alone.

His heart broke a little more as he realized how solitary her life had
with her He didn't want her to be alone right now. Not when she had him.

"Come back here." He extended his arms.

he was She hesitated a brief second, then launched herself into his embrace.

see—”brought her to the bed and let her cuddle into him, stroking her hair by that cried.

“She’s in a good place,” Sam said of her twin. “You know she’s through help, not out on her own, where she could possibly hurt herself.”

to me. Nicole hiccuped in an attempt to catch her breath, and she made a small laugh. “I know that. I do. I guess—” She trailed off, obviously wanting to explain.

“Come on. Let it out.” His hand cupped the back of her head, urging her to talk to him.

She sighed. “I let myself start to think about the possibility that I would come out whole and healthy, ready to live her life. And maybe then I would have someone there for me always. Like sisters are supposed to be. Like family is supposed to be.”

He heard the hurt and disappointment in her voice and ached for her to get it. “But you’re making solid friends in Serendipity, right?”

She pushed back, turning to face him, propping herself up with one hand in contact with his. “I am. It’s still new, but I feel comfortable and welcomed.”

“Talk about your friends at home?” he asked, curious about her past.

“They’re all caught up in the social scene I grew up in. I know you know that. She’s appearances when I was working for Tyler’s mother’s campaign because she needed their support, but after I broke off the engagement and moved away . . .” She shrugged. “I didn’t keep in touch with them and vice versa.”

He reached out and rolled her on top of him. She was wearing an oversized T-shirt that hiked up on her thighs. And though he had on a cargo shorts and a soft T-shirt, he was suddenly hot and felt claustrophobic in his clothes.

“You’re brave, do you know that?” he asked, focusing on what was important and what she needed from him now, not his body’s aggressive demands.

“If you consider running away brave.”

He brushed her hair off her face. “I consider walking away from a situation that didn’t suit you brave. Same with picking up and starting over in a new place.”

Her eyes warmed at his compliments.

“And holding all your problems inside? That’s pretty—”

“Stupid. Do not say *brave*.” She grinned, and he knew he’d

as she through her sadness.

“Since you had your reasons, I suggest we let that one go.”

getting “Thank you,” she murmured.

“For what?”

aged a “For not letting me get so deep into my own head that I forget
sly not good things in my life. And Sam?”

“Hmm?” With her body bracketing his, her scent teasing his
ing her feminine warmth arousing him, he was finding it harder and had
concentrate.

it she’d “You’re one of those good things.” She tugged at his T-shirt
’d have shifted, helping her yank it over his head.

family is He tossed the garment onto the floor. She pulled at his shorts near
those followed the same path. He removed her shirt too and discovered
her. “Is she was nude beneath it.

“Oh, man,” he muttered, taking her in. Pale breasts stood in con
e hand. the rest of her now-tanned body, and he groaned at the sight.

He reached out and tweaked one nipple, and she responded with
ist life. moan. His cock twitched at the sexy sound. He maneuvered himself
kept up sitting position, intending to suck that tempting peak into his mouth,
cause Iscooted down on him instead.

moved “My turn,” she murmured, and leaned close, swiping the head of h
rsa.” with a lick of her tongue.

ring an He swore. Her pleasuring him was not what he’d had in mind when
pair of out to make her forget her troubles, but from the hazy look in her eye
overly was wholly focused on him and nothing else. So mission accomplished.

thought, falling back against the pillows at the same time she enclo
at was mouth over his aching shaft and sucked him deep.

gressive Buried in the recesses of her mouth, he felt the suction all the way
balls before she released him, licked her way back to the tip and started
over again. He just might die if she kept up the rhythm. He’d never
n a life from zero to sixty so damned fast.

i a new His orgasm threatened, and everything inside him knew it would
most explosive one he’d ever had. Maybe it was the way she focused
task, licking and eating at him like he was the tastiest treat. Or maybe
the way she gave of herself in the process. He’d placed a hand on her
broken and her entire body shook, letting him know she was enjoying this as r

he was. But he had the scary feeling that the only thing that mattered was the fact that it was *Nicole* selflessly giving him all those things, at a time when she should have remained focused on her.

Somehow, he managed to pull himself out of her mouth, flip her over, and pin her on her back before he came.

“What’s wrong?” She lay beneath him, large eyes opened wide, mouth swollen and wet.

“Not a damn thing, except I’m not inside you,” he said. At the same time, he rectified the situation, notching himself at her entrance and thrusting inside.

“Oh, Sam.” His name sounded like the deepest groan in the back of her throat, taking him impossibly higher.

“Look at me,” he said, managing to listen to the voice in his head directing something other than his cock.

She forced her heavy eyelids open.

He eased out of her, deliberately slow, wanting her to feel every lick of his soft tongue.

“Nic?”

He watched as she forced herself to focus. “Hmm?”

“Happy Birthday, sweetheart,” he said before thrusting back inside her.

When he set his eyes on her, she closed her eyes, and he kissed her forehead.

He thrust into her, filling her up, and she arched her back, moaning into his ear.

He pulled her up, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, kissing his cheek. “I love you,” she said, and he kissed her lips.

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He watched as she forced herself to focus. “Hmm?”

“Happy Birthday, sweetheart,” he said before thrusting back inside.

Chapter Thirteen

SAM WALKED INTO the kitchen the next morning, shocked by the exploded baking stuff all over the usually pristine counters: bowls, a mixer, pans, and God knows what else spread across the granite. Sammy sat on her little body leaning over, listening intently to Nicole's explanation.

"So now mix the dough until there are no more lumps. Let me go," she started because the flour's heavy like paste." Nicole took over the task a few seconds until she was satisfied Sammy could handle things. "I'm here." She handed the little girl the wooden spoon. "Take your time, okay?"

"Kay." Sammy began to stir in the contents of the bowl. She bit down on her lip, concentrating on her job, eager to please Nicole. "Is it ready?" she asked after about three or four stirs.

Grinning, Nicole looked down. "Nope. Still lumpy." She dipped her index finger into the mix and placed a dot on Sammy's nose. "Keep going."

Sammy giggled and bent back down to work.

Sam watched in silence, his admiration for Nicole growing. Her ability to relate to his goddaughter, her caring nature, her patience with a little girl who showed him a depth he'd always known was there. How she managed to be this warm, giving woman in the face of all she'd lacked in life astounded him—and his heart opened to her a little more.

Uncomfortable with his thoughts, he cleared his throat. "Morning," he said, making his presence known.

"Uncle Sam! Look at what we're baking!"

Nicole looked up, met his gaze, and blushed. In her face, he saw a replay of last night in her head. He knew exactly what she was feeling but he couldn't look at her and not *want*.

"I see, Pumpkin," he said, using his favorite nickname for his goddaughter.

"We're not bakin' pumpkins, silly! It's gonna be cookies!"

Sam grinned and pulled up a stool, joining the party. "So what's the occasion?"

“Daddy’s coming home today. So we’re baking.” Sammy still mixed the dough, but Sam noticed her movements slowing, her arm obviously tired. And the mixture still had massive lumps in it.

“Hey, I want a turn,” he said, nudging Sammy lightly with his arm.

She looked up at him through big brown eyes. “Mommy says I’m supposed to share.” She pulled the spoon out of the bowl and handed it to him, trailing cookie dough over the counter.

He met Nicole’s amused gaze, not missing the warmth there, his tenderness, just for him.

Unsure what to do with all that emotion, he glanced away and took the spoon from Sammy. He began to stir, making the dough smooth and easier for the little girl to finish the job.

“Okay, look at that,” Nicole said, pointing at the cookie dough. “We’re ready to put them on the pans. My assistants did great jobs.”

“Yay!” Sammy clapped her hands together. “Can I have a taste before you turn ’em into cookies? And can I lick the bowl when we’re done?”

led her



NICOLE SMILED AT the little girl, so charmed and in love with the child. She was so glad she’d woken up early and found her coloring a card for her girl, all return. This had been one of the best baking sessions she’d ever had. Could to be on top of the hottest, most special night she’d ever shared with a man. led him

She shivered at the memory of Sam buried deep inside her.

Birthday, sweetheart. Goose bumps broke out over her skin as she remembered the low timbre of his voice in her head, as she’d been doing over and over again.

She’d awakened early, her body sore, her heart full, and forced herself to get up from bed, all the while reminding herself that by wishing her a happy birthday that way, he was just trying to make up for her pathetic life. Just because she felt so much more every time they were together didn’t mean she should let herself become more emotionally involved. And, further, just because she wanted her heart to go getting any stupid ideas, she reminded herself that if he was falling for her too, he’d made himself perfectly clear. No future in that relationship. No future.

“Nicole, can I lick the bowl?” Sammy asked again, bringing her

ted thethe present.

getting She forced herself to focus on the little girl. “Well, I don’t know
might have to fight your partner there for bowl rights.” She caught
eye, unnerved by the warmth and approval she saw in his expression.

s we’re Sammy’s eyes grew wide. “But . . . but . . . it’s my cookies!” sl
to Sam,panicking at the thought of losing her anticipated treat.

“Relax,” Sam assured her. “I could give up my rights for . . . how
eat andkiss?” he asked Sammy, but his gaze drifted to Nicole’s.

Before either of them could react, Sammy threw her arms aroun
ook theand planted a big kiss on his cheek. The result of her impulse was to
d muchthe dough that was still on her nose across his cheek.

Sammy jumped back to her seat, a satisfied look on her face. “U
almostshe said.

“What’s wrong?” Nicole asked.

fore we “I have to pee. Nobody touch my cookies!” Sammy yelled and ran
the room.

Laughing, Nicole walked over to Sam and ran a hand down his
scooping up the dough. His eyes darkened at her touch. And when s
her finger into her mouth, taking a deliberately long time to suck and
ld. She sweet dough, his big body shuddered.

er dad’s “Cut it out,” he said in a gruff voice.

Coming Feeling playful, she pulled her finger out with a deliberate po
listened for Sammy’s voice or footsteps before leaning close and lick
Happyrest of the dough off Sam’s cheek.

isplayed He let out a low growl, one she was coming to recognize as his *I’
nd overto losing control* sound. She liked that she could do this to such a
normally composed man. He turned his head and caught her lips, hi
self outtaste mingling with the dough she’d been sneaking.

irthday “Break it up, you two,” Sara said, joining them.

use she Nicole ducked, and Sam swiped at the remaining dough on his ch
he wasfew seconds later, Sammy came skidding back into the room.

e didn’t “Didya wait for me to put the cookies on the pan?” she asked.

at even “I did. Let’s get to work.”

ies. No She busied herself teaching Sammy how much dough to scoop and
placement of cookies on the sheet, but her tingling body reminded l
back toSam wouldn’t be easily forgotten.

The rest of the weekend passed quickly, and too soon, Nicole was packed and back in Serendipity in her new home. Sam dropped her off, explaining that he had to meet up with his brother, and promised to remain at home until he knew the status of the Russians.

While she unpacked from the weekend, she reflected on her time

Considering she'd left to escape trouble, she'd enjoyed herself way more than she should have. Nicole had gotten used to living with Sam—making coffee at night, sometimes waking up and doing it again in the morning. He'd let Sam guard with her, and she saw a different side to the man.

He was a doting godfather, a solid friend to Sara, and a guy's guy to her husband, Mark. With Nicole, he'd been attentive, and she'd enjoyed "oh-oh" time alone together and with Sammy, listening to her chatter. When he came home, she was treated to a firsthand look into the married couple's dynamic. They were obviously in love, and their family with Sammy was something out of Nicole envied and knew she'd want to replicate if she ever had the chance to have a husband and child of her own.

Because her own family didn't exist. Her parents? Hadn't called for her birthday. Her twin? Was still psychotic and delusional. Any friends? Were better off in New York City with their fake lives. Nicole's anger swelled, and she pushed back the pain. Pain she ought to be used to.

More she let down her walls with Sam and his friends, the more she broke down. She felt. She hadn't realized just how much she'd shut off those emotions over the years, but here they were, rearing their ugly, unwanted heads.

Especially the ones involving Sam. And that was something she couldn't allow. So as soon as she wrapped up the mess with Tyler's father, she shifted her focus to creating her new life in Serendipity. She had a house of her own, a minty business to start and build, and friends like Macy to cultivate. Sam could be her sex buddy, but she'd be a fool to let down her walls any further, or end up with her heart sliced out of her chest.

week. A



SAM WALKED INTO the police station and headed directly to his brother's office. He knocked once and let himself inside, shutting the door behind him. The man who'd fought the idea of settling down in Serendipity, Mike had done so with seeming ease. The office used to belong to their father, Simon,

le had the pictures on the walls were the same, depicting their hometown o
am had years. But the photographs on the desk belonged to Mike, and those
d she'd himself and Cara. Some were facing inward, but others faced out, an
only had to look at the happy couple to know his brother had changed.
e away. Sam, of all people, knew it hadn't been easy for Mike. F
ore than remembered being one of the people to help his brother see what h
love at have with Cara. Ironic, since Sam didn't believe in the same kind of th
at down himself.

But something had shifted inside him after this weekend with Ni
ly with felt deep and profound, yet Sam couldn't put a name on it. He couldn
ed their himself to examine it too closely.

n Mark "Hey, you called and asked me to stay so we could talk. Are you g
ouple's stand there? Or did you have something on your mind?" Mike
was one breaking into Sam's thoughts.

ance to He'd come directly from dropping off Nicole at home. His own su
were still in the trunk. He'd needed to talk to his brother.

her on "All quiet in town after I left?" Sam asked.

nds she Mike nodded. "The festival ended, and everyone cleared out. Stan
s thro town, as you know. The Russians hadn't checked into any nearby mot
But the were gone by nightfall. I didn't see them around again, and believe m
egan to an eye out."

ns over "Has Stanton been in touch?" Sam had given Tyler Mike's num
told him to fill his brother in on any progress or lack thereof at home.

ouldn't Mike nodded. "He tried to talk his father into coming clean, but
e'd turn man is more afraid of his clients than the cops. He knows the Russian
er own, get to him in jail or out. So he's refusing. Told Tyler if he could get
ould be back home and under his thumb, everything would be fine."

only to Sam let out a low, threatening sound.

"Yeah. We all know that's not happening," Mike said, chucklin
old man's delusional."

Sam nodded.

"I told Stanton the feds want Nicole to wear a wire with his fat
; office, balked. Wants to do it himself."

1. For a Sam raised an eyebrow, feeling a surprising swell of admirat
done so Nicole's ex. Maybe Stanton wasn't such a jerk after all. "I'd rather
and all the risk than Nicole. When do the feds want this to go down?"

ver the “They’re watching Romanov. He headed back to LA, so not for a
were of You’ll be the first to know when I do.”

nd Sam Sam nodded. “Thanks. I’m keeping quiet about all this until Nicol
to know. No use getting her worked up over something that may not c
le also pass.”

e could “That’s your call.” Mike folded his arms across his chest and me
ing for gaze. “Speaking of Nicole, how’s your girl?”

“She’s not . . .” He caught his brother’s raised eyebrows and
Nicole. It disbelief. “Yeah, umm, she’s fine.”

’t bring Mike laughed. “I never thought I’d see this day.”

“You haven’t. It’s just . . . it’s good. For now.”

going to Mike took his suit jacket off the back of his chair and slung it c
asked, shoulder. “Whatever you say, little brother. I’m heading home to Cara.

“I’m meeting up with her for breakfast before work tomorrow.”

uitcases “Good. Maybe you can figure out what’s going on with her. I’
she’s not telling me something, and it makes no sense.”

“And it bugs the hell out of you that you need me to dig
ton left understood his brother’s way of thinking. He wouldn’t like it if he ne
els and find someone else for Nicole to confide in.

e, I had “You can say that again,” Mike muttered.

“I’m on it.” He slapped his brother on the back. “It can’t be a
ber and terrible.” Mike and Cara were solid.

Like Sara and Mark. Erin and Cole.

his old Like Nic . . . Sam shook his head and pushed the thought down d
s could from the light of day.

Nicole



g. “His THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Sam walked into The Family Restaurant whe
was waiting for him. “Long time no see,” he said, settling into the sea
from her.

her. He “I’ve missed hanging out with you.” She smiled, but the emotior
reach her eyes.

ion for “Okay, talk to me. What’s wrong?” He covered her hand with his.

he take It wasn’t just that she’d lost weight or her skin was pale. Dark
shadowed beneath her eyes, and she lacked the vibrancy he

a while associated with Cara. “You still don’t feel well?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No.” She gestured to the tea in a cup in front of her. A decaffeinated wrapper lying beside it.

Sam gestured to the server. “Coffee, please,” he said, before refocusing on Cara.

This illness had been going on too long, reminding him of when he had had a never-ending stomach bug before discovering she was pregnant. He wondered if the problem was that basic.

He leaned in close. “You know, the last woman who didn’t feel like this so long was Erin, and she turned out to be—”

“Don’t say it!” Cara said, cutting him off with a wave of her hand.

Sam narrowed his gaze. “Is that it? Are you pregnant?”

She shrugged. “I’m afraid to find out,” she admitted in a half-whisper.

“That’s not like you. And it makes no sense. You’re married. You’re sure happy. In love, yes?”

She nodded, blue eyes wide . . . but not happy.

Which was crazy. Of all the women he knew, she’d make the most of it. She worked with abused women at a shelter and had a huge heart. Not to mention, Cara faced life and problems head-on.

“What’s going on?” he asked.

She opened and closed her mouth, as if building up the courage to explain. “I’m worried about your brother.”

“What about him? He *loves* you.” Hell, Mike had fallen so hard for her, even Sam had been envious of the intensity between them, knowing he’d never have that for himself. “Not to mention he’s worried about you. He asked me to pump you for information, and that’s wrong. You need to talk to him.”

She sighed, her eyes sad. “But he took so long to come around to the idea of settling in Serendipity—with me—and when we talked about kids in the future. A baby now wasn’t a part of our plan.”

Sam shook his head at her attitude. “*Mike* wasn’t a part of the plan. Life happens. You know that. If you’re pregnant and he’s going to be a father? I’m thrilled because it’s with you.”

“You really think so?” she asked, her hand already cupping her belly in a protective gesture he’d seen with his sister.

“I may not be an expert on love, but I know my brother. It’s going to be of her, okay.”

She swallowed hard, eyes glistening. “You’re right. I don’t know how to focus. I’m so emotional.” She wiped at her damp eyes.

Sam rolled his eyes. “Do you really need me to explain?”
That earned him a smile. “I probably don’t need to take that teenage pregnant. muttered. “But I will. I’ve been carrying two of them around with me for a week.”

He squeezed her hand. “That’s more like the Cara I know. She’s always prepared and ready for anything.”

“Well, I’d better be, right?” She glanced down at her stomach, where she felt beneath baggy sweats, and her expression softened.

“Better?” he asked, hoping he’d helped her come to terms with this.
“Yeah. I’m glad we didn’t lose our friendship when I married my brother.”

“No chance of that happening.”
She smiled, seeming more at peace. “So I think I’m going to go home now. I’ll do this before I lose my nerve,” she said.

He rose as she stood. “Good luck.” He leaned over and kissed her forehead, watching as she made her way to the front door of the restaurant.

Sam headed out after her, arriving at work in time to discover that there had been an assault downtown, and the case took over the rest of his shift. He’d been an assault downtown, and the case took over the rest of his shift for Cara, including most nights. His hours were erratic, which meant he didn’t see her as often as he’d like. He’d called Nicole despite living next door. She hadn’t called him in the time they were together. He’d called her back, and he gave her the distance he assumed they both needed.

The natural separation ought to be a relief, given the intensity of the weekend they’d spent together, but damned if he didn’t miss her. In the short days, he’d grown accustomed to another warm body in his bed. He missed it, it was like waking up to her snaked around him, as if they shared a twin bed instead of a double. He hadn’t even been bothered by her female stuff in the bathroom, and his toothbrush at home looked lonely by itself.

Pathetic.

But true.

Finally in a



ing to be WITH WORK KEEPING Sam busy, he was grateful Mike had taken charge of the situation with Tyler. He had a patrol car doing drive-bys of Nicole's bakery and the bakery, where she was preparing for opening. He didn't mention her. She was wary enough. But with the art show over, Serendipity had returned back to normal, and anyone new would stand out. Tyler stayed in the "st," she catching up on work and taking the opportunity to look for evidence that could implicate his father or, even better, the bigger fish the feds were after. So all was quiet for now.

Always If and when things blew up, Mike would let Sam know to be ready. Sam finally found time for himself late Saturday. Instead of his hidden home, he walked from the station to Nicole's bakery.

The door was unlocked and he let himself in. The smell of fresh bread assaulted him first. A cheery yellow replaced the original gray, and the red and blue trim bordered the white ceiling. Both Lulu's and her welcoming personalities were clear everywhere he looked. They'd accomplished a lot in a short time, and a feeling of pride filled him at the sight.

me and No sooner had the bells rung overhead than Lulu greeted him at the entrance, her long gypsy skirt sweeping the floor as she walked. "Welcome to my cheek, handsome."

He grinned at her lack of formality. "Hello to you too. How are you doing?" he asked.

She smiled wide. "Amazing, as you can see. We're on track for opening in two weeks!"

"Congratulations."

"Thank you."

"I'm thrilled for you."

She reached out and pinched his cheek. "I bet you are. Your girl is down here."

His throat constricted as Lulu used the same words his brother had used all over recently to describe Nicole. "Where is she?" he asked, changing the subject.

"In the back. I was just heading out for the night. I'll lock the door for me."

"Have a good one," he said.

"You too. Don't do anything I wouldn't do," she said, laughing over her parting words.

Sam rolled his eyes. The Donovan family bred them bold and out-

e of the thought.

s house He walked through the back and into a small office and caught s
ion it to Nicole changing her clothing. He glimpsed her long legs and barely-th
ad gone “Hey,” he said, causing her to shriek and pull her miniskirt o
he city, nearly naked body.

ice that “Relax, it’s just me,” he reassured her, wanting to spend time with
e after.



reading NICOLE’S HEART POUNDED a thousand miles an hour in her chest. “Oh m
Aunt Lulu said she was leaving and would lock up behind her. I th
h paint was alone.”

a royal “She sent me back here to you,” Sam said.

coming His hot gaze traveled over her and her body reacted, her
a lot in tightening, her sex contracting.

at the “Well, I’m changing to go to Joe’s.” She waved her hand at hi
l, hello, gesture indicating he should turn around.

things “Oh, come on. I’ve seen you in less.” His sexy grin merely comple
his scruffy look. He hadn’t shaved in a few days and he only looked ho

a grand She rolled her eyes and pulled on her skirt, then added a flowing t
with ruffles at the bottom.

“You look as good in clothes as out.”

“Thank you. So what brings you by?” she asked casually,
anything but. Because she’d missed him. Badly.

He raised an eyebrow. “I came to see you,” he said, as if it were o

But it wasn’t. There’d been a sudden distance between them this
putting reminding her not to get too attached.

He edged closer, and she breathed in. His sheer male scent v
ad used havoc on her hormones.

“It’s been a long week,” he said in a husky voice.

object. Didn’t she know it?

behind She cleared her throat. “It has, and I’ve been busy.” She’d returne
new home and spent the week alternating her time between getting the

ver her in order and decorating her house with her own touches. She didn
much downtime and fell into bed exhausted every night. Already sh

spoken, her life here in Serendipity would be full. But she’d missed him too m

Considering she didn't know if he felt the same, and feeling a little
sight of caused the separation, she wanted him to know she didn't need him
ere top.happy.

ver her "Lulu and I ordered all our supplies; they're due in early next
We're planning a grand opening and I have to tell you, I have a real
her. feeling about this." Not even her worries about them or even the real
daily four o'clock wake-up call brought down her anticipation about su

"I'm glad." He sounded . . . proud. "Tell me something. While you
busy being an entrepreneur, did you find any time to miss me?" He let
y God! her hair off her shoulder, and she trembled at his light touch.

ought I For a woman who'd always considered herself independent, it thr
just how often she'd thought of him. But since he obviously wasn't
over her, she'd decided to keep her own feelings locked up tight.

nipples "I might have thought of you every so often," she murmured.
"Then let me take you out for a nice dinner so we can catch up."

im in a She wished she could say yes, but she'd already made plans with
and wouldn't blow off a girlfriend for a guy. "I can't. I'm meeting M
mented Joe's. I was changing to head over there when you walked in." She'd
otter. it would be easier to switch outfits here and walk down the street than
ank top the time to go home.

"I'm disappointed." He leaned in and kissed her cheek, his lips lin
"But my case didn't wrap up until a little while ago and I had no idea
feeling free."

Her skin tingled where he touched her, and she curled her hands in
bvious. If she reached for him now, they'd christen her small desk, and she re
; week, have to go.

"Come by when you get home." He curled his hand around the l
vreaked her neck, his touch electrifying her all the way to her toes.

"It might be late." Though she doubted it since Macy had to w
next day.

"I'll be awake." He tightened his grip and pulled her in for a real k
d to her His tongue slid into her mouth and tangled with hers. Her legs wen
bakery and she leaned against him for support. Of course that aligned their
't have and awakened her senses, reminding her of just how much she loved h
e knew

Something she'd been deliberately suppressing all week. Someth
ch. wasn't going to let herself revisit now. She curled her fingers i

ke he'd shoulders and pushed back. "I'm going to be late."

n to be Disappointment flickered in his eyes, and after the week
communication, no matter how legitimate, she took satisfaction in the
t week, you later."

ly good She stashed her work clothes in the bag she'd brought and gathe
ity of apurse. "Ready? I need to lock up after us."

ccess. He nodded, eyeing her as if trying to understand what was going on
ou weremind. *Good luck*, she thought. She was still trying to understand it hers
rushed

ew her,
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n Macy
Macy at
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shoulders and pushed back. “I’m going to be late.”

Disappointment flickered in his eyes, and after the week of no communication, no matter how legitimate, she took satisfaction in that. “See you later.”

She stashed her work clothes in the bag she’d brought and gathered her purse. “Ready? I need to lock up after us.”

He nodded, eyeing her as if trying to understand what was going on in her mind. *Good luck*, she thought. She was still trying to understand it herself.

Chapter Fourteen

SOMEHOW NICOLE AND Macy snagged a private table in a corner of the restaurant. Music played on the jukebox, but the murmur of the Saturday night crowd was loud, and Nicole found it hard to process the music over the din.

“I should have eaten something more substantial than a couple of fries for dinner. I’m buzzed from half a beer,” Macy said, eyeing the bar.

“Good thing I’m driving home then.” Nicole took a sip of her soda. “I didn’t eat much either. I had a leftover sandwich in the fridge, but I can’t take more than a few bites.” She’d paused to change clothes and the conversation had interrupted.

“What’s with the sour face?” Macy asked her.

Nicole sighed. “Not sour. Just confused.”

“Let me guess. It’s about a man. Or should I say the man?”

Leave it to Macy to cut right to the point, Nicole thought wryly. Why bother lying? She needed a friend, and she finally had a real one.

Macy shifted in her seat. “No confusion allowed,” she said, waving her hand in dismissal. “He’s into you. I’ve never seen Sam so into a woman before.”

Sara had said something similar. Nicole warmed at the thought but wished things were that simple. “But that doesn’t mean it’ll change the outcome.”

Macy took a long pull of her beer. “You never know. I’ve seen more nuts than Sam crack. Just ask Cara. And Erin.” She grinned.

“I can’t control it, so I’m trying not to worry about it. It’s just not easy.”

Macy’s expression turned sympathetic. “I understand, which is why I have to talk to you about something.” Her gaze darted away . . . an unusual occurrence for a very direct woman.

Nicole leaned in close. “What’s up?”

Macy drew a deep breath, then let it out again. “What’s the story with you and Tyler? The real story.”

Nicole blinked, surprised at the subject. Although she shouldn’t

been. Macy's interest in Tyler had been all too obvious.

"That was real subtle of me." Macy let out a shaky laugh. "I know there are things you can't tell me, and that's okay. I just have to know . . . y Tyler—"

"There is no me and Tyler." Nicole reached out and grasped the hand of Joe's, wanting to reassure her in every way possible. "Not in the crowd sense. I'm . . ." She looked Macy in the eye and prepared to bare her chest. "I'm totally and completely in love with Sam." She shook her head at the crowd.

"And that wasn't hard to say out loud. The point is, I have no hold on french Macey closed her eyes, her obvious embarrassment showing. She suddenly, her gaze focused on Nicole. "So you don't mind if I . . . if w otle. "I Admiring her ability to be direct, Nicole smiled and shook her head. "I didn't be thrilled if he found someone to make him happy. It'd be even be en Sam him if it was you."

Macy exhaled hard and laughed. "Well, that was as awkward and difficult as I thought it would be."

"I can imagine." Nicole leaned back in her seat, suddenly exhaling. "Aren't we a pair?" "It is." Macy nodded and treated herself to another long swallow of beer. "Coming back?" she asked.

"Tyler?"

She nodded.

"He'll be back," Nicole assured her.

"How do you know? Have you spoken with him?"

"No." But they needed to have a private talk when all this was over that put things between them to rest, once and for all.

Macy propped her chin on her hands. "Then how do you know for harder

At that, Nicole couldn't help but grin, thoughts of Tyler's t easy." Serendipity flashing through her mind. "He went shopping. He wore why I And he followed you around town. He'll be back." unusual

Macy grinned. "Here's to getting our men." She raised her glass. Nicole tipped hers, clinking them together, toasting as much to Macy's as to her new friend and her life here in Serendipity.

They spent another half hour talking, then made their way over to with you of people, some Nicole knew, others Macy introduced her to. As much 't have enjoyed herself, she couldn't help thinking that she would rather l

Sam. But she needed to make friends, and she was Macy's ride home. w theredidn't say anything.

you and "I'm beat," Macy said at last. "Do you mind if we head home?"

Nicole shook her head, relieved it wouldn't be a late night. "I'n Macy's when you are."

romantic They walked back to the bakery, where Nicole had parked her car. er soul. they were on their way, Macy pulled off her high heels and sighed. "W herself. invented these things should be shot."

Tyler." Nicole grinned. "I wear them a lot less here than I did back in Nev : sat up and trust me, I do not miss them." On her feet now were a pair of bej e . . ." sandals with less than a quarter-inch heel.

ad. "I'd "Stay straight on this road for a while," Macy said, ob tter for remembering Nicole needed directions.

"Are you working early tomorrow?" Nicole asked her.

and as "Not until lunchtime, thank goodness."

She glanced up at the rearview mirror to check the car behi austed. annoyed by the bright lights reflecting there.

"Something wrong?" Macy asked.

. "Is he "The car behind us is driving too close," Nicole muttered, squint keeping her gaze on the road in front of her.

She came to a complete halt at a four-way stop sign before cont Out of nowhere, another car approached from the right and sped right t the stop sign, plowing into them before Nicole could blink. Her car sq took another hit from the vehicle behind her, which had obviously sta er. One her tail.

Macy screamed. Nicole gritted her teeth and held on to the whee sure?" back of her car skidded into a lamppost with a sickening crunch.

ime in

shorts.



ss, and SAM PACED THROUGH his house, moving idly from one room to the next, s words to sit still or get comfortable. He didn't expect Nicole to be at his be call, but he'd sure hoped she'd want to see him after a long week a group could have gone to Joe's, but that would have been too obvious. He n 1 as she desperate to see her, but she didn't need to know that.

je with Another glance at her dark house told him she hadn't come

, so she although he'd been keeping watch and already knew as much. I already mentally lecturing her about not leaving inside lamps and the lights on. It was safety 101 for anyone, but Nicole wasn't dealing in a normal situation. Just because they thought they knew where all the people were in her situation didn't mean she should be lax with the basics.

Once He glanced at his watch and blew out a long breath. Nine wasn't the time and he needed to chill. He started upstairs when his phone rang.

Pulling it out of his pocket, he glanced down, surprised to see the New York station's main number. "Marsden."

"Hey, Sam. It's Burnett."

"What's up?"

"Just doing you a solid. I thought you'd want to know your girlfriend was in a car accident at the stop sign on Maple. No serious injuries, but they're in pretty bad shape. They're lucky."

Sam narrowed his gaze. "They?"

"She was driving Macy Donovan home. Both women walked away relatively unharmed. A damn miracle if you ask me."

Sam was in his truck by the time he wound up the call. On the show, a myriad of situations ran through his mind. Panic and the need to get her were paramount, but his cop brain also was on alert, thinking about Tyler's old man hiring someone to scare Nicole into heading home.

Sam arrived on the scene to find one side of her car crunched, his stomach twisted painfully. He parked and climbed out of his vehicle.

Burnett met him as he headed for the ambulance. "That was fast."

Sam nodded. "I appreciate the call. What happened?"

"Looks like Mrs. Adler was driving too fast and ran her stop sign. She was driving without a license and wandered off without her driver's license knowing."

Sam winced, knowing that Mrs. Adler was in her midthirties.

Burnett shook his head. "Sad when they get old and lose control like that. Anyway, she slammed into Nicole's passenger-side back door. According to Nicole, the car behind her wasn't giving her much space to begin with. He couldn't stop in time, causing a second impact."

Sam's instincts went on alert. Was it that the actual accident was a coincidence, but the second occurred because Nicole was being followed home,

"Who was the second driver?" Sam waited for a Russian name.

He was “Drunk driver.”
e porch Sam ground his teeth together. “Local?”
with a Burnett shook his head, and Sam’s instincts went haywire. “
playersbooking him, right?”

“Yeah, but he refused the Breathalyzer,” Burnett said, inclining his
hat late, “Make sure you hold him. I want the chief to run a full check on th
In case he had been sent after Nicole, with his inebriated state an inte
e policediversion.

“What’s going on?” Burnett asked.

“No time to explain now. Where are the women?” Sam asked, want
get to Nicole.

and was Burnett tipped his head toward the ambulance. “Being checked ou
ie car’smake sure they’re fine.”

“Thanks again.” Sam shook Burnett’s hand and headed to see Nic
himself.

l away The paramedics had released both Nicole and Macy, and a
approached, they were reminded that should they feel anything unusu
rt driveshould head to the hospital immediately.

l to see Nicole signed the form the paramedic held out for her, then turn
g abouther eyes connected with his. Shaking, he caught her in his arms bef
could collapse.

and his “I’m so glad you’re here,” she murmured.

His heart squeezed at the admission, and he held on tight. Tur
Macy, he extended his other arm for her and helped both women to hi
grateful tonight hadn’t turned out so much worse. And with the way h
gn. Shehad spun out alternative scenarios, he decided he wasn’t letting Nicol
aughterhis sight for a good, long while.



ke that.
ding to AN HOUR LATER, Nicole had showered, and now, wrapped in her favori
ith and she sipped a cup of tea and cuddled next to Sam on the sofa in her
room. After dropping Macy at home, Sam called Mike, at which point
was a realized he believed the drunk driver behind her might have been
ed? intimidate her into running back to Manhattan and Tyler for protection

She had to admit that as the driver hovered on her tail, she’d thou

same thing. But she didn't like Sam being uptight and stressed out, was both.

'You're "How are you feeling?" he asked, obviously worrying about her the way she was about him.

head. "Sore," she admitted.

ie guy." His arm around her tightened and she laid her head against his intentionalinhaling his masculine scent that was both comforting and arousing same time.

"It'll be worse tomorrow," he said, his voice thick as his thumb nting tocomforting circles on her arm.

"I know. The paramedic warned me. I'll take some ibuprofen, and t just tofine." She wasn't looking forward to it, but she'd survive.

He groaned. "Let's go upstairs. You'll be more comfortable in bed cole for She narrowed her gaze and shifted so he could move out from un

She pressed her hands against the sofa, prepared to stand, when he lif is Saminto his arms. "Sam, this is becoming a habit." One she already kn al, theyliked and wanted to get used to.

He met her gaze, his eyes as serious as she'd ever seen them. "I ed, andtake care of you tonight."

ore she She leaned her head against his chest and sighed. Earlier, when turned from the paramedic only to catch sight of Sam, her knees buckled at the sight of him, strong and solid, there for her in her mor ning toneed.

s truck, He was her haven.

is brain And so much more.

e out of He took care of her. He looked out for her. He understood her. H her feel everything.

"You make it too easy to love you," she murmured, deciding it w to let out what was already in her heart. She'd grown up used to hid emotions and feelings, and she hated how she felt when doing it.

te robe, He stiffened but continued his climb up the stairs. "I don't—"

family "Shh." She looked up and placed her finger over his firm lips, rubt Nicolefingertip back and forth over his mouth.

sent to His hazel eyes dilated at her touch.

· He couldn't say it back, and it hurt. So did the fact that he didn't ight thehear it either.

and he “Sam, just because I needed to say it doesn’t mean you need to re
And just because I feel it doesn’t mean you have to.” Although she se
ie samedid.

But he was running from his feelings because of his past and his
being hurt again. Though she had to accept that he might never let him
s chest,beyond those fears, tonight’s accident reminded her that life was sho
g at theso she was willing to fight for both of them and hope she could bri
around.

rubbed



l I’ll be

SUNLIGHT STREAMED THROUGH the window, waking Sam in a painful w
” forced his eyelids open and rolled over to face Nicole, finding her w
der her.him.

fted her “How are you feeling?” he asked.

ew she Her eyes filled with pain. “I can’t move.”

need to Her groan went straight to his heart, memories of the mangled car
back to haunt him.

”My whole body feels like I was slammed into by a semi.”

n she’d “Let me get you something to eat and some painkillers. It should e
almost aches and pains.”

ment of She closed her eyes. “Thank you. Then I’ll try a warm shower and
can get moving.”

Between sleeping and tossing and turning, he’d been fighting a mi
emotions. Fear at the thought of what might have happened to her
e made accident. Rage at the notion that someone might have been sent af
And a healthy dose of both of those feelings over her words last night.

You make it too easy to love you.

as time Damned if she didn’t do the same to him.

ing her He wasn’t sure what threw him more. That she’d said it or that she
pushed him to say it back. Vulnerable yet strong, loyal and so damn go
ing her she took his breath away; yeah, he was probably in love with her.

But the too-rapid pounding of his heart, the sweats and shakes he
if he didn’t have to concentrate on keeping her safe, and the fear of bei
again told him he couldn’t handle it.

want to Thanks to her, he didn’t have to. “Be right back.” He slid out of t

repeat it. went to get the supplies to take care of her. That was something he
used hehandle.

A while later, the painkillers had kicked in, so she was able to
fear of around, although he saw the pain in her tight expression. While she
self get shower, he called his folks to check in, then headed for the kitchen.
rt. And He opened the fridge and studied the contents, trying to decide wh
ng him he could put together for lunch.

“The shower helped a lot,” Nicole said, walking into the room. He
to see that she wore a light summer dress that was easy for her to put o
that was hell on his libido. The white ribbed tank top showed her
perky and bouncy beneath the flimsy and relatively thin material. Th
ay. He blue skirt flowed around her hips and ass, coming to rest at her
atching calves. She’d wrung out her hair, leaving it damp as it air-dried arou
face. Even makeup-free, she affected him on a soul-deep level.

He watched her gingerly move around the kitchen and wanted to
take her pain as his own. Shit. He knew he was in trouble, and the be
coming to do was not to think.

He pulled out his phone and called his brother, walking out of the r
Mike answered on the first ring. “Hey, bro. Any news on the drunk wh
ase the ended Nicole?”

He listened to his brother and was relieved by the answer. “
see if I Thanks.” Mike asked about Nicole. “Yeah, she’s okay. Hurting bu
How’s Cara?”

Mike told him she seemed better and thanked him for talking to h
xture of said goodbye. Sam noted his brother still hadn’t mentioned anythin
in that Cara being pregnant.
ter her.

He wondered if she’d taken the test. Spilled the news. Maybe
decided to wait to tell everyone, Sam thought. But he already knew. V
assumed he knew. Not that he’d ask.

He disconnected the call and turned, finding Nicole watching him
: hadn’t the doorway of the family room.
orgeous

“Well?” She stepped into the family room. “I didn’t mean to eav
’d have but I heard you ask about the drunk who rear-ended me. Was he conne
ing hurt the Russians?”

“No. It was just an accident.” Sam shook his head. “I can’t belie
ed and calling that wreck *just* anything.”

e could She walked over and wrapped her arms around him. "I'm fine."
Reflexively, he squeezed back, wanting to be as close to her as possible.
o move "What else is wrong?" she asked.
went to "Why do you ask?"
"Just a feeling." She shrugged and pulled out of the embrace.
at more He felt the loss immediately. She read him well. "It's a secret," he
She raised her eyebrows. "Well, I'm a good listener and don't blame
e turnedunderstand if you want to keep things to yourself."
on. One Oddly, he didn't. Even more shocking, he trusted her not to spr
breasts,news. "Let's sit," he said, wanting her off her feet.
e light- He lowered himself onto her couch, which he found more comf
shapelythan the one in his house. "Cara thinks she's pregnant," he said wh
und herwere settled in. "I spoke to her when we came back from Sara's, and s
going to take the test and talk to Mike. But he hasn't said anything, s
help, towondering if she worked up the courage."
st thing Confusion crossed Nicole's face. "Does Mike not want kids?"
Sam shrugged. "I'm pretty sure he wants the whole nine yards wit
room asbut apparently, any conversation they had about it involved it hap
to rear-sometime in the future. And they had a rough road getting together,
was worried about how he'd take it."
'Got it. "Umm, I didn't live here, so I don't know what happened."
t okay. "Right." For some reason, he felt so connected to her, it was as
had her in his life much longer. "Mike's father isn't Simon." He'd
er, thentold her the bare-bones story but wanted to tell her more now. "Ultima
g aboutleft town. It was more complicated than that, but I'll save those det
another day. Suffice it to say, Simon had always been in love with M
they'doffered to marry her. We always knew Mike was Simon's adopted son
Vell, henever treated him any differently. Still, Mike had . . . I guess a shrink
call it abandonment issues. He always felt different from us, like he
m fromlive up. Until Dad got cancer last year, Mike was rarely home. Even v
came back as temporary chief, he didn't plan to stay."
esdrop, A soft smile played around Nicole's lips. "Until Cara."
ected to Sam inclined his head. "Until Serendipity got ahold of him, and C
But he fought it the whole way. So she's worried the baby will scare h
eve I'mWhich will not happen."
Nicole leaned against the sofa cushion and pulled her knees to her

her gaze never leaving Sam's. "For two men raised in a loving home, it's a little surprising that you two sure go out of your way not to believe in the notion."

Well, that was a fast turnaround, Sam thought and squirmed, being in the spotlight. But she had a fair point. "I guess it's your own personal experience that defines a person more."

said. "And what about your mom? She married Simon for security. I know. But I fight the whole love thing because she'd been hurt and abandoned by her real father?"

head the Sam's head began to pound. "Not according to the legend of E. E. Simon," he muttered, trying like hell to find a way out of this conversation. "Interesting." Nicole eyed him with curiosity but didn't utter another word.

she was He decided conversation was preferable to this silent scrutiny. "Am I so hungry?"

She laughed and rose to her feet. "Might as well eat. I told Aunt I'd be in this afternoon if I was up to it. But we aren't getting deliveries until Monday, so I should be okay to rest up today."

opening Subject dropped just like that. Damn woman confused and confused so she him. She told him, in so many words, she was in love with him; she asked pointed questions about his family and how he ended up not trusting her notion, and then she left him alone with his thoughts.

if he'd "Crafty," he muttered.

already "What?"

tely, he "Nothing." He followed her to the kitchen, but the doorbell rang, interrupting her chance to eat. Again.

om and "Expecting anyone?" he asked.

, but he She shook her head.

could He made it to the door first and looked out. "Stanton," he muttered, but she didn't let him in.

when he "Tyler! What are you doing here?" Nicole asked, coming up behind him.

Tyler pushed past Sam and headed straight for Nicole. "His brother was asking questions," he said, glancing at Sam. "Mike told me you were involved in the accident, and they needed to rule out foul play."

him off. Nicole took a step back. "I'm okay. You didn't need to drive all the way here to ask me that!"

her chest, "I also needed to come here and tell you that I'm going to wear the

ne, you with my old man. Not you.”

“What wire?” Nicole asked, still in the dark because Sam hadn’t told her yet. It was the right time to tell her yet.

Sam pinched the bridge of his nose and wondered if he’d go to jail. He’d just decked Nicole’s ex. It might just be worth it.

Sam cleared his throat and both Tyler and Nicole turned to face him. “Mike’s had a chance to discuss that yet,” he said pointedly.

“Shit,” Tyler said, realizing he’d spilled those beans.

“Yeah.” *Thanks a lot, asshole*, Sam thought. Though it was his fault, Nicole didn’t know yet.

He’d wanted to spare her the worrying until there was a reason, but the furious look on her face, she didn’t appreciate being left in the dark.

“What’s going on? What do you two know that I don’t?”

“The feds—” Tyler began, but Sam held a hand up, interrupting him.

“I’ve got this,” Sam said.

“Now. You’ve got this now,” Nicole muttered. “But you’ve had plenty of time to tell me . . . what?” She perched her hands on her hips and glared at him.

“When Mike and Cole spoke to the feds, they said they wanted to wear a wire to get information from his father so they could infiltrate Romanov. He’s a major drug dealer and money launderer,” Sam explained. Tyler remained silent.

“And you didn’t think I needed to know about this?” she asked, her voice rising.

Sam set his jaw. “I didn’t think you needed added stress right now, Nicole.” “Tell me you didn’t make that decision for me.” Her eyes grew dark. “I’m sorry, along with his mood, and a beat of silence followed.

They both already knew the answer.

Tyler swore out loud. “I didn’t mean to cause trouble.”

Sam ignored him, drawing a calming breath. “Can we discuss this in private?”

Nicole nodded, but her pain-filled expression told him she wasn’t ready for the news. And he’d known that.

The doorbell rang again, and Nicole threw up her arms, wincing in pain. “What now?” she asked, her voice rising. She glanced through the

before swinging it open wide. “Am I glad to see you,” Nicole said. thought Macy walked in with a cake box in hand. “I was coming to bring get-well present from my family. Then I saw the car in the driveway. My voice darkened as she narrowed her gaze on Tyler, who’d clearly been back in town visiting his ex—before he’d told his current . . . whatever name. “Welcome to him that he’d returned.

Now it was Tyler’s turn to be in the doghouse, Sam thought, taking pleasure in anyone sharing his predicament. Having Nicole made his fault ruined his damn day.

“Might as well come in and join the fun,” Sam said to Macy. She rolled her eyes and handed Nicole the cake. Then she folded her arms across her chest and glared at Tyler, hurt and fury warring for dominance. Even Sam winced at what poor Stanton was in for.

ing his



MACY HAD TAKEN one look at Tyler’s Porsche parked in Nicole’s driveway and wanted to vomit. Of course he’d come *here* before letting her know he was back in town. If he was back. For all Macy knew, he’d plan on leaving again before she even realized he’d returned. But she refused to let him stop her from checking on Nicole and delivering her gift.

Once inside, it took all her willpower to keep her focus on her friend and not the man who’d asked her to wait but couldn’t be bothered to do so without her voice touch.

“Anyway, Aunt Lulu said she can take the deliveries if you aren’t working,” Macy said, ignoring Tyler’s heated gaze.

“I’m not missing any more work because of this mess.” Nicole waved her hand through the air for emphasis. “And what about you? What are you doing out and about? You were in that car with me,” Nicole said.

“What!?” Tyler stepped forward. “Are you okay?” He reached out to touch her but she backed away.

“I’m fine,” she said through clenched teeth. “Nice of you to ask.”

Tyler ran a hand through his hair. “I didn’t know. Mike only told me about Nicole. He didn’t know you and I . . .” He trailed off, obviously unsure of how to characterize their relationship.

Hurt rocked through Macy, but she didn’t want to deal with him

“What mess are you talking about?” she asked, referring to what Nicole said earlier. “What don’t you want to keep you from work?”

“Umm—” Nicole glanced from Sam to Tyler.

“Macy, I’ve been trying to keep you in the dark for your own protection,” Tyler said, stepping closer to her again.

She turned to face him, lost and confused. “My protection? What am I being involved in?”

Sam shook his head and groaned. “Macy Donovan, if you breathe a word of this around town, and I mean one word—”

“Hey! Just because I’m outspoken doesn’t mean I’m a gossip or a careless armstrusted,” she said, annoyed by the implication. “I can keep a secret. Erin,” she said pointedly. She’d kept his sister’s pregnancy a secret last year.

“I know. I’m just trying to tell you how important this is and how dangerous,” Sam said to emphasize the point.

A chill rushed over her skin, and she shivered. “Tell me.”

Tyler reached out and took her hand. He then began to explain how his father was involved with Russian money launderers and that he’d convinced Nicole to protect her. He’d left Serendipity last week to try to talk sense into his father. That or find evidence of guilt so the feds wouldn’t want Nicole to let him wear a wire to get information.

Macy listened in disbelief.

“Then I heard about Nicole’s car accident, and I thought maybe I should send someone after her. To scare her into coming back to Manhattan. I came here to see for myself that she was okay. And to tell her if anyone was going to be wearing a wire, it would be me. Not her,” Tyler summed up last.

Macy bit down on the inside of her cheek. So he wanted to put him on the line. For Nicole. She swallowed hard. Before she could speak, Tyler chimed in.

“And that was the first time I learned about me wearing a wire last year,” Sam thought it was in my best interest to keep me in the dark,” Nicole said in her voice low, angry.

“Just like Tyler thought it was in mine?” Macy asked in a sugary, unsure tone she didn’t mean.

The two women locked gazes, and Nicole stepped up alongside Sam now. “You two. Go away. We need to talk.”

ole had “Give me a break,” Sam muttered. “You can’t be angry because looking out for you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. I can.”

action,” “Macy, I just told you everything about me. We need to talk,” Tyler

“Later,” Macy muttered. “If you’re lucky.”

are you Nicole met her gaze. “We’re taking the kitchen. You two stay here grabbed Macy’s hand and pulled her into the other room, leaving the a wordknow-it-all men alone.

Macy wanted to laugh, but her heart was heavy because she can’t separate what she’d learned about Tyler’s past from his feelings for her. AskAnd unless *he* convinced Macy he didn’t have any feelings for her friendship, she was getting out of this non-relationship before it even started.

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Macy.

“Give me a break,” Sam muttered. “You can’t be angry because I was looking out for you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. I can.”

“Macy, I just told you everything about me. We need to talk,” Tyler said.

“Later,” Macy muttered. “If you’re lucky.”

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Macy wanted to laugh, but her heart was heavy because she couldn’t separate what she’d learned about Tyler’s past from his feelings for Nicole. And unless *he* convinced Macy he didn’t have any feelings beyond friendship, she was getting out of this non-relationship before it ever got started.

Chapter Fifteen

NICOLE AND MACY retreated to the kitchen; Nicole wanted to make her feelings known to Sam that she was not happy with him making decisions about what she should know and when.

They sat at the kitchen table, staring at each other.

Nicole broke the silence first. “The last thing I want to do is fight with Sam, but I can’t believe he kept me in the dark.” They’d spent the weekend getting closer, and all along, he knew what her future held.

“Umm, same?” Macy sighed, propping her head in her hands. “Even if he’s even going to tell me he was back in town?”

Nicole looked at her friend. “Honestly? He was probably going to stay away until this nightmare was over. I mean, why get you involved in something so potentially dangerous? If he cares about you, then he wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

Macy grinned, and Nicole narrowed her gaze. “What’s that smile for?”

“Oh, I just find it amusing that you can justify Tyler’s reasons for leaving, but you’re furious at Sam for doing the same to you with the same reasons.”

Nicole shot her a dirty look. “Fine. Be like that.” She glanced down at her hands, knowing Macy was right. “I’m not apologizing for being angry with you though. Sam has to know he can’t do that stuff to me no matter how good the reasons.” Her parents thought they could control her life and decisions, but she didn’t want anyone trying to pull that on her again.

“So tell him. Talk. Then at least you two can have good makeup. I don’t know what Tyler wants from me.”

Nicole rose from her seat. “Then I suggest you find out.”

“Good idea.” Macy stood too, her expression lighter than before. “I’ll stay here until whatever this situation is, is resolved. I want him free. From the perspective of you and me. No offense intended.”

“None taken.” Nicole understood how her friend felt. She headed into the other room to find Sam and Tyler sitting in uncomfortable

“We’re back.”

Tyler jumped up first. “Macy, can we please go somewhere and talk to her?”
She shook her head. “Not now,” she said sadly, and Nicole’s head bowed for her. “Come to me when you’re free—of everything. Then we can talk to Macy.”
Macy turned and walked away.

“But—”

“Let her go,” Nicole said quietly, placing her hand on his arm. She waited until Macy had disappeared out the door before meeting Tyler’s gaze. “You’ve got to let her go. She has her pride, and this situation is screwed up. She doesn’t deserve it. You’re free of your family mess and yeah, of me, then you go to her. If you two can start from scratch. Get to know each other and see what happens.”

He groaned and nodded. “You’re right. Which means this fuckin’ mess has to end.”

She blinked, surprised at his choice of words. Tyler Stanton never said that.
“I agree. Sam?”

“On it. I’ll go talk to Mike. See if he can make some calls and find out why the feds are stalling on making a move on your old man.”

Tyler paled but nodded.

Sam grasped her hand and pulled her through the house and into the bedroom. “I’m not leaving with you angry.”

She sighed. “I don’t want to fight with you either.”

“Is that what this is? Our first fight?” he asked with an endearing grin.

“Yeah. Because you decided what I should know and when.”

He shook his head. “It won’t happen again.”

“Promise?”

“I’ll do the best I can.”

She rolled her eyes. “That’s such a male answer.”

“Hey, I’m a man and a cop. I just want you safe. What do you expect?”
he asked in a gruff voice.

Having already decided she’d made her point, she leaned in and kissed his cheek. “Great makeup sex?” she asked, deliberately light, trying to make him know it was, in fact, finished.

Unless he pulled crap like that again.

His eyes darkened at the suggestion. “As soon as I get home.”

This time it was she who reacted, her nipples pulling into tight

“Hurry back.”

“k?” He pulled her against him for a hard kiss. He didn’t keep it short, s
art hurthis tongue between her parted lips and giving her a preview of v
n talk.”intended later on.

A little while later, Sam had left, leaving Nicole alone with Tyle
stared at one another, the silence stretching between them, merely wa
waitedbe broken.

e. “She Tyler walked to the bay window, staring outside onto the street.
. Whenused the time to study the man she’d almost married. No doubt he wa
And seelooking . . . in a more refined way than Sam’s gruff, sexy appearance.
e whatquestion he was a good guy. She should never have doubted him.
wasn’t the man for her.

g mess Still, they had history and now they shared something more—the
discovering that their fathers weren’t the people they thought they we
cursed.Nicole, she’d always known her father wasn’t a man she looked up to
never been there for her, not as a little girl, and not as an adult. But
ind outbehavior cross from uninterested, uncaring parent to criminal behavior

If forced to choose, she didn’t think so. At least, she didn’t belie
let anything terrible happen to her.

nto her Tyler, on the other hand, was first coming to the realization ab
parent now. And the knowledge that his father was involved in illegal
and was willing to go to desperate lengths to keep it secret? That had
rin. huge blow.

“Ty?” she said, using her old nickname for him as she walked o
placed her hand on his arm. “I’m sorry about everything.”

He turned to face her. “I don’t blame you for ending things betwee
hurt, but I realize now that you were right. There was no . . . spark. W
comfortable. Good friends. But we wouldn’t have been happy.”

xpect?” She was glad he finally understood. “I don’t suppose Macy has a
to do with that realization?”

ose and He smiled, but it was grim. “She has everything to do with it, a
lettingknow it.”

“I do. And I’m glad. You deserve someone to make you happy.”

He cleared his throat. “So do you. It’s tough to say, but Marsden’s
guy.”

points. Nicole laughed at his reluctance to admit it. “He’s the best.” The

slipped out before she could think them through. “I mean—”
slipping “I know what you mean. If I said Macy was the best, would you
what he offense?”

She laughed again. “No. I guess, it’s just, this is awkward.”
r. They “But we’re going to have to get used to it. Get used to each other
iting to with other people.”

“Because you’re sticking around?” she asked, curious how he planned
Nicole have a relationship with Macy while she was here in Serendipity.
as good He shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “I’ll figure it
And now when I see what’s left of the investment firm in Manhattan when all
But he over.”

“It’ll get easier. But I’m not just sorry about us. I’m sorry about
pain offather. I know it has to be a huge blow, and I want you to know I’m
ere. For you need to talk about it to someone who understands.”

o. He’d “Thanks.” He reached out and squeezed her hand. “I appreciate that
did his but I think you and I have other people to confide in these days.”

? “Yeah. If I can convince Sam that love exists and *relationship* isn’t
ve he’d word.”

Tyler raised an eyebrow in surprise. “You deserve someone
out his certain and sure. Someone who will stick.”

activity Nicole raised her chin. “Yeah, I do. And I plan on doing everything
to be at to make sure I get it.”

Tyler shook his head and laughed. “The guy won’t know what hit him
ver and She grinned. “That’s what I’m hoping. But if not? I’m doing every
can to have the best life possible. With or without Sam Marsden in
in us. It just did her best not to contemplate the *without* alternative.

He were



nothing

SAM STRODE INTO the station and found his brother by the coffee machine
nd you the small break room. Mike poured a cup of coffee, the bright orange
the carafe capturing Sam’s attention.

“What’s up with the decaf?” Sam asked. Mike was a hard-core
a good drinker.

“What are you doing here on your day off?” Mike asked, ignoring
e words question.

Sam waited until Mike had added some milk to his coffee before following his brother back into his office.

Mike slammed the door behind him. “Cara said if she has to get caffeine, so do I,” he muttered, and Sam burst out laughing.

“So it’s definite?” Sam asked, bringing the question dogging him to the open. “Cara’s pregnant?”

Mike placed his coffee on the desk and looked up to meet Sam’s gaze. His brother’s eyes wide with wonder, the grin on his face huge. “That’s what outpersuaded her to talk to me.”

Sam strode over and pulled his brother into a big hug, slapping him on the back hard. “I am so damn happy for you.”

“I’m in shock. I don’t know how—okay, obviously I know how to get here if it wasn’t planned.”

“Yeah. I got that much from Cara.”

“I can’t believe she was afraid of my reaction.” Mike shook his head and lowered himself into his oversized chair.

Sam blew out a long breath and settled on the corner of the desk. “Well, you gave her a good run for her money before coming around, but I know who she is—” Mike started to speak, but Sam held up a hand. “That said, she’s not a bad person. Her childhood, her mother remaining in an abusive situation, having to cut off her emotions in order to protect herself, she was just doing that now. Protecting herself.”

“From me?” Mike asked in disbelief.

“From her own fears. Anyway, it’s over. She came to you, right? She’s good?”

He nodded. “Yeah. It really is.”

Sam chuckled at the goofy grin on his brother’s face. “Just keep doing what you’re doing. She knows you love her. She just needs to be reassured that’s all.”

“Yeah.” Mike tapped a pen against the desk. “Enough about me. Let’s go on with you and Nicole?”

“We’re having fun together. Well, we would be if everything in our lives weren’t so screwed up,” Sam muttered.

Mike raised an eyebrow. “Fun.”

“Yeah. She’s fun. We have a good time.”

“And that’s all.”

before “Can we not do this?” Sam asked.

“Like I didn’t want to do it when you went after me about Cara? Why give up you doing, man? I’ve never seen you so protective over a woman. From the first minute you laid eyes on her, you were different.”

Sam pushed himself off the desk and paced the floor. “She gets to

“So let it happen. What’s the worst result?”

“I get my heart ripped to shreds. Again. I’m humiliated. Again. I’ve already been the laughingstock of this town once. Everyone looked at me with pity for years after Jenna left me at the altar. Do you think I’m going to revisit those days?”

Shit. He’d never admitted that out loud. He barely admitted it to himself. It just But the humiliation of that time had stuck with him.

“Ah, so it’s not just about you not being able to trust your judgment about time you admitted as much,” Mike said, using his *I’m the older brother and I know best* tone.

“I came here to talk about the wire. Nicole wants this thing over with. Okay, I tend to agree. The sooner she’s safe, the sooner everyone can move on with their lives.”

Mike stared at him for a long moment, letting Sam know he wasn’t kidding, her with the subject change. Sam just waited him out. He had nothing to say.

“Fine. I’ll see what I can find out about why they want to wait and move up the timetable. Will it be Stanton or Nicole wearing the wire?”

Sam thought back to the scene earlier. “Still up for debate, but I’m thinking—hell, I’m going to insist on Stanton.”

“Yeah, I’d do the same—if it were the woman I loved.”

“Mike,” Sam said on a low, warning rumble.

“Coming to dinner this week?” Mike asked, wisely changing the subject. “Cara and I are going to tell Mom and Dad the big news.”

With the conversation back on Mike, Sam relaxed. “Wouldn’t miss that.” “Are you bringing Nicole?”

Sam nodded. “Except for work, I’m not letting her out of my sight. Those bastards are behind bars.”

“I’ll keep your schedule light. No reason we can’t cover you.”

“Thanks,” Sam said, deciding not to argue. The more time he could spend after Nicole himself, the better. “Get back to me as soon as you hear from

feds.”

“What are you doing?”

Sam turned to leave.

“Hey, Sam.”

He paused at the door and turned to look at his brother. “Don’t screw with Nicole. It’s harder to get trust back than to win it in the first place.”

Sam strode out of the station with his brother’s words ringing in his ears. He was looking



himself.

NICOLE STOOD ACROSS the street from the bakery, staring at the sign above the door. *Her store.* At the thought, a delightful shiver of excitement ran through her.

The new awning and sign had been delivered and installed. *Lulu’s* and *Nic’s*. Plain and simple. In a small town, everyone would know the products they sold, and all of Serendipity already knew Aunt Lulu from Family Restaurant. Nicole had no problem giving her top billing.

“Looks amazing,” Sam said, walking up to her.

“Well, this is a surprise!” she said.

They hadn’t seen much of each other during the day this past week and Lulu had decided to try a soft opening before next Monday’s big opening. They figured they could test pastries and desserts, see what was preferred, and where the glitches were in service and preparation before the advertised open date.

She arrived at the bakery by four o’clock to start baking for the coffee. She often didn’t come home until late at night. There was much more to her than she’d anticipated, but she was operating on adrenaline and excitement. She wasn’t the least bit tired. Sam insisted on being with her at night, and she wasn’t complaining, even if part of his reasoning was that he wanted to ensure she remained safe.

They fell into a routine whereby they alternated whose place they stayed at. He drove her to work in the morning and picked her up when she called at night. They’d grab dinner in town or one of them would make something light, depending on whose house they ended up in, make love, and fall asleep curled in each other’s arms. So whether or not he wanted to admit his feelings

for her, she was forging a place in his life. If he wanted her out of the situation with Tyler's father and the Russians was resolved, he was going to have to say so.

In the meantime, she enjoyed every day for what it was, hoping she would show up showing him what could be. "Are you ready to head over to my parent's place," asked.

She nodded. "But it seems like such an intimate family moment that she'd know of such a thing. "Maybe you should all be alone with and Mike tell your folks she's pregnant."

He immediately shook his head. "Nobody will mind. It's good news. I want you there."

"Are you sure you don't just want to have an eye on me?" she asked through half teasing.

He met her gaze. "Don't overthink. Just go with the flow."

Apparently, he found the flow a lot easier to handle than she did. she said with forced brightness. "Let's go."

Twenty minutes later, she was welcomed with open arms by Marsden and the yipping dog jumping up and down on his hind legs and feet.

"I'm so glad you could join us! Sunday family dinners are always fun when we have company." She enveloped Nicole in a warm, fragrant hug.

Nicole recognized the perfume because she'd complimented the fragrance and learned the name. If it were her own mother, she'd be on Chanel. This scent warmed her all over.

"I brought you some meringue puffs," Nicole said, handing Sam's a white bakery box with their new Lulu and Nic's logo emblazoned on it. she hoped would become their royal blue and yellow branding.

"Thank you, that's so sweet. I can't wait to hear all about everything's going. I already stopped in, as you know." Ella accepted the box.

"I do, and I appreciate your support."

Ella smiled and turned to Sam, hugging him and kissing his cheek, letting him go.

"Hi, Mom. You look beautiful as usual."

She waved off his compliment. "You just want me to send you home."

hen the extra meals you can freeze.” She laughed. “Come in. Everyone else is joining to living room.”

Nicole joined Sam’s family and accepted their hellos and warm greetings. She was so grateful they welcomed her so easily, even Mike, who she thought was “is’?” She had reservations in the beginning, and especially Erin and now Cora. Her heart had led her to this small town and these wonderful people. Not what happened between her and Sam, she knew she’d made the right decision. Settling here.

But she couldn’t lie to herself. She didn’t just envy the tight family. And she had, she longed for the same thing for herself. Craved it, in fact. Being here today was like a big tease. A tiny sip of water in the middle of a dry desert, only to know it could be snatched away at any moment. She was devastated if she lost this personal connection to his family, she thought, pulling in a shaky breath she hoped no one noticed.

“Fine,”



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SAM HAD GOTTEN to know Nicole pretty well, and although she said those things, deep inside, something was brewing. He sensed her discomfort. He couldn’t understand why she wasn’t perfectly at ease and comfortable with his family. He thought she enjoyed them, aware the feeling was returning to everyone in this room.

“Are you okay?” Sam walked up and placed an arm around her shoulders, pulling her against his warm, hard body.

“I’m great. Why wouldn’t I be?” she asked.

“Do you want to leave as soon as Mike makes the announcement?” she asked quietly. “I can make an excuse, and we can go.”

She shook her head. “No, of course not. I’m really thrilled to be here. She stroked his cheek with her hand, and in that instant, he wanted to take an excuse and disappear so they could be alone. “It’s just . . .”

“What? Tell me.”

“I’ve never experienced a real family celebration. One where everyone is truly happy for everyone else. No ulterior motives, no faking it for one or another. I’m looking forward to seeing everyone’s reactions.”

She looked up at him with blue eyes, so open and honest that she took his breath away. He didn’t know why she affected him so deeply, making

she wanted to give her everything she'd missed out on in her life. "Okay, then stay."

meetings. "We have an announcement to make," Mike said, his voice a welcome intrusion into Sam's musings.

le. Her Without thought, he reached out and clasped Nicole's hand in his matter warmth and presence grounded him.

decision "Michael? What's going on?" Simon asked.

"It's good news," Cara jumped in, nudging her husband in the ribs.

ily unit "Well, come on, then," Simon said, sounding relieved.

. Being Sam stifled a chuckle. After the year of his father's cancer, he had marched updates and problems, he understood why Simon reacted the way he had.

ie'd be "Okay, grandpa times two," Mike said, unable to contain his smile.

hought, A grin split Simon's face. "You're having a baby!"

"I knew it!" Ella said, launching herself at Cara and pulling her into a hug. "Long bouts of nausea, unable to sit at the table and look at food wondering when you would figure it out or at least fill us in."

ie right Cara hugged Ella back. Her relationship with her own mother was difficult because of the woman's unwillingness to leave Cara's father, and he father, so Sam knew how much Ella's love and support meant to her.

around "I should have known you would figure it out before we did. The news spread by keeping secrets from you, is there, Mom?" Mike asked, laughing.

oulder, Erin and Cole stepped up next for congratulations, then Sam, who of course, already knew, and Nicole, who pretended it was her first time hearing the news.

nt?" he Sam watched as she interacted with his brother, who admittedly had been her biggest fan. But Mike had come around, trusting Sam's feelings over his history with her mentally ill sister.

ere." "I'm thrilled for you," she said to Cara. "Are you feeling any better now?"

o make "A little. I think telling people has helped my mental state, at the least." She shot a glance at Mike, who pulled her in for a hug and a kiss that had even Sam wanting to look away.

yone is On the other hand, Nicole watched them, a look of pure longing on her face. A look so wistful, like she knew she was seeing something she'd never have.

ook his Sam's stomach twisted badly, and he glanced away. "Anyone ready for dinner?" he asked, hoping to break the tension building inside him.

en. We The family jumped on the idea of his mom's food, and the meal v
of the happiest and most fun Sam could remember in a long
elcomeConsidering they'd always ribbed each other, joked, and had a goo
that was saying something. Erin wanted to know if Mike and Cara plan
is. Herfinding out the sex of the baby. Either way, she was mentally plannin
playdates. By the time they'd finished coffee and dessert—his mon
smart enough to serve only Nicole's meringue puffs and not anythin
made or bought too—Sam was ready for grown-up time.

Beneath the table, he reached out and placed his hand on Nicole's
ws andThrough her long skirt, he felt the heat of her skin against his palm, or
ad. he imagined he could feel it. His body thought so too, igniting at the
of getting her home and into bed.

He leaned over. "Ready to get going?" he whispered, his hand
r into ahigher.

l. I was "Behave," she whispered back. "I want to help your mom clean up
"Nonsense," Ella said, having heard *that*. "Guests don't clean up."

er was "But . . ."

abusive "Go," Ella insisted.

Sam rose from his seat. "You heard the lady," he said, pullin
re's noNicole's chair.

"Thank you for a delicious meal and a wonderful evening," Nicole

who, of "Our pleasure," Simon said.

hearing Ella actually snorted in reply. "As if he cooked?" She laughed. "I
our pleasure. See you soon." She blew a kiss in their general direction.

hadn't "Congratulations again," Nicole said to Cara and Mike.

ings for "I'll walk you two out," Mike said, taking Sam by surprise.

He followed them to the front door, where Sam paused, turning
r?" his brother, Nicole by his side. "What's going on?"

he very "Change of plans. It turns out the DEA was already watchin
ng kissRomanovs. They have a guy deep undercover and a sting in place. The
us to stand down and stay the hell out of their way."

on her Sam glanced at Nicole. Her eyes opened wide. "But . . . what ab
d nevermoney laundering and my father's firm? Tyler? And me? They're aft
she said, her voice rising.

ady for Sam pulled her tight against him. "You're going to be fine," h
glancing at his brother for reassurance.

was one “Mike?” Nicole asked.

while. He exhaled a harsh breath. “From what I understand, and it’s ske
d time,best, they hope to have the Russians behind bars by tonight. Accor
med onCole’s sources, there’s a huge shipment coming in, and if they can catc
ig babyin the act . . .” He trailed off.

n being “Okay, and the bit players? Like Tyler’s father?” Sam asked.

g she’d “The New York City cops will talk to Tyler about giving gra
testimony and indicting his old man and anyone else involved in lau
s thigh.money.”

at least Nicole sucked in a breath. “I need to go home and talk to my father
thought Sam exchanged glances with Mike. “I’m not sure that’s a good id
less you’re involved, the better.”

trailing “But I am involved. I’m the one who overheard the conversation.”

.” “Which probably can’t be used as evidence anyway,” Mike remind

She sighed. “I still want to talk to him. He deserves a heads-up. I
not have been a dotting parent, but I can’t imagine he’d let anything ha
me. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t warn him before his world
crashing down.”

ing out Sam admired her loyalty to a man who didn’t deserve it, but give
he’d learned of her so far, she was loving and caring and put others
said. herself. “I’ll go with you.”

She swung toward him. “You don’t need to do that.”

3ut it is “Maybe not, but I want to.” He squeezed her shoulder, and she l
head against his arm.

Mike shot Sam a knowing look. “I’ll leave you two to figure o
next step. I don’t have to remind you to be careful,” Mike said before
to faceand walking away.

Nicole looked up at him with trusting eyes. “Will the Russians le
ing thealone?”

ey want “Once the DEA arrests them with drugs in hand, you’ll be off thei
believe me. We can go to the city tomorrow and talk to your father.”

out the She studied him, as if gauging his sincerity in wanting to go
er me!”Without warning, she leaned up and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

ie said, She shrugged. “For making me feel better. Now let’s go home,
make you feel good.”

His cock stiffened in response. The things this woman did to
catch attentionally and physically, defied anything he'd felt before. Grasping her
hand, he said, "Lead the way," and tugged her toward the car.
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His cock stiffened in response. The things this woman did to him, mentally and physically, defied anything he'd felt before. Grasping her hand, he said, "Lead the way," and tugged her toward the car.

Chapter Sixteen

THE NEXT MORNING, Sam found himself driving to New York City. On the ride there, Nicole had been eerily silent and withdrawn into herself, leaving him to his own counsel. Sam guessed she wasn't comfortable bringing him to meet with her father, but he wasn't letting her go through this alone.

He pulled up to an expensive building on Manhattan's East Side. Out of his element, he refused to be intimidated by her parents' wealth. Money was what mattered, not her folks.

"I thought you grew up in a house?" Sam asked, indulging his curiosity. The valet opened her car door.

"I did. On Long Island. My parents still own it, but they also have an apartment in Manhattan, and my father stays here more often than not.

They climbed out of the car, and Sam met her by the large revolving door leading to the building. "Is your mother here too?" He wanted a heads-up or he'd be meeting.

Her sigh answered his question.

He didn't expect her to elaborate and was surprised when she did.

"Mom's at the house on Long Island. A testament to *what does love do with anything*," she said without meeting his gaze.

Sam winced, recalling that she'd told him her mother had used that phrase to try to persuade her to marry Tyler.

"My father is always here on Sunday night, so I figured I'd catch him before he goes into the office this morning," Nicole explained.

"Hence the six o'clock wake-up call," Sam said, covering his yawn with one hand.

She shrugged. "I wanted to get this over with."

Sam grasped Nicole's hand as they walked into the luxury building. Ignoring the mirrors surrounding her, she headed straight for the bank of elevators.

"Still want to do this?" he asked.

She didn't answer right away, waiting until they were in the elevator.

doors closing behind them. “No,” she said, as the elevator took them s to the penthouse. “But I have to. It’s the right thing to do.”

“I admire that about you,” he said.

She leaned against the wall and treated him to a forced smile. you.”

On the The doors opened wide, and her father, dressed in what had t thousand-dollar suit, greeted her in the apartment doorway.

keeping “The doorman called up,” he said, answering her unasked questio to meet what do I owe this early-morning visit?”

Though No hello. No warm welcome. No hug. For the love of—

lth. She “Can we come in?” Nicole asked. “I don’t think you want your ne overhearing what I have to say,” she continued, unperturbed by the g or lack of.

osity as Her father stepped aside, and Sam followed Nicole past him i apartment. A glance revealed that the floors were marble, the wall ave an adorned with thick crown moldings, top and bottom, and the decoi wealth. Sam didn’t like it here worth a damn.

ng door He noted her father hadn’t batted an eyelash at Sam’s presence, i whom he introduced himself. Just because they were wealthy self-righteous didn’t mean he had to be. His mother had raised him better.

“Sam Marsden,” he said, extending his hand toward the other man.

ve have “Sorry.” Nicole blushed, embarrassed. “Paul Farnsworth, this is D Sam Marsden. Sam, this is my father.”

t line to “Nice to meet you, Detective.” The older man took his hand in grip. “So to what do I owe this visit?”

ch him Nicole drew a deep breath. “Is everything okay with your business?”

He narrowed his gaze. “Why would you be asking?”

vn with She pressed her lips together, and he was floored by how diffic obviously found it to shake her father’s world in light of how cold t acted toward her. Didn’t every kid deserve love and affection fro parents?

uilding. She deserved love and affection, Sam thought, and damn if he didr

ank of to be the one to give it to her. It was all he could do not to reach out a

her against him, supporting her completely. The only thing stopping h

the fact that she didn’t need the distraction any show of affection

itor, the provide. So he kept a respectful distance even though it just about kill

kywardas he realized his feelings for her were growing exponentially with
minute that passed.

“Would it surprise you to know that your partner is in bed with
“Thank Russian mob?” Nicole asked her father. “And before you ask how
accuse him of such a thing, you should know I overheard him discuss
to be awith Andre, your accountant.” She went on to explain what she’d overheard
and when, along with the resulting threats to both Tyler and herself.

on. “To Sam kept an eye on her father. His training taught him what to look for
and the older man’s expression never registered shock, surprise, or
anything else he knew she’d expected over her accusations.

ighbors “You already know!” Nicole exclaimed, proving what Sam already
greeting She was smart. Savvy. And one hell of a strong woman to have
raised by this cold, unfeeling man and still come out the warm, sweet
into thehe loved.

ls were *Loved?*

oozed Shit. This was not the time for revelations, he thought, breaking
cold sweat.

nor had “I didn’t know specifics, but I suspected something was wrong
; pricksnoticed the books were off. That and Robert’s been acting strangely,
nervous and hiding things. I hired a forensic accountant to look into it
He straightened his tie. “You said Tyler knows too?”

etective Nicole nodded. “I suggest you talk to him. The police are aware of
and that’s why I’m here. I wanted to give you a heads-up before they put
a firma visit.”

He sent her an appreciative look, which was as much emotion
?” suspected the man was capable of, Sam thought in disgust.

He’d never treat his child like a business associate or inconvenience
ult shewhich was exactly what this man was doing to his daughter. And
he manaccepted it, clearly used to the dynamic. Sam wasn’t, and his stomach
m theirchurned. He wasn’t sure if it was because he’d just thought about the

how he’d handle a kid of his own, something he’d never contemplated
it wantin passing before, or because the notion settled in his heart. And stayed

nd pull “Well, I’m certainly not going to jail because Robert’s gotten rid of
im wasand greedy.” He straightened his tie. “However, I did not know a
wouldabout what you heard or that he’d let those animals loose on you.”

ed him, Sam stiffened at the reminder of the Russians and any danger. He

1 everylike hell the DEA bust and round of arrests had gone down as planned.

“I know that, Dad.”

with the “No, I don’t think you did, or you would have come to me long I couldnow.”

ssing it Guilt flashed across Nicole’s face, which infuriated Sam on her erheard“Maybe if she thought you gave a shit about her, she’d have brou problems to you instead of thinking she had to handle them herself,” l ook for,unable to rein in his anger any longer.

nger, or “Sam—” Nicole placed a warning hand on his arm, but he was f letting anyone treat her with cold dismissiveness.

7 knew. “Excuse me, but I’d say this is between me and my daughter,” he 7e beensaid with an air of authority and entitlement.

woman *Oh hell no*, Sam thought. “Considering I’m the one keeping her s say you’d better include me in the conversation. You’re lucky sh enough to warn you. I wouldn’t have been so generous. Now tell n ; into ayou plan to do to make sure your partner can’t use his connections Nicole.”

when I Paul Farnsworth stepped back and studied Sam, suddenly seeing clearlysomeone worth assessing. “What are your intentions toward my dau hings.”he asked, surprising Sam by turning the conversation to the personal.

“That’s between me and Nicole.” Sam couldn’t help but play this as well,game. He didn’t like him or his smug arrogance, but mostly he did oay youhow he treated Sam’s woman.

He reached out and snagged Nicole’s hand. Let the man take *thc* as Samanswer. As of this moment, Sam was claiming her, at least in his min take the time to sort through what that meant for him later.

nience, For now, he’d deal with the situation at hand. “I asked you a q nd sheabout how you intend to protect your daughter.” He looked the other tomachthe eye without backing down.

idea of

ed even

l there.

reckless NICOLE COULDN’T BELIEVE Sam was engaging her father. For her. She c nything help but wonder what it meant that he would. Until now, Sam was a about not wanting a serious future but here he’d all but claimed her.

e hoped “I’ll call the police myself and cooperate,” her father said, taking



by surprise. “If they have the evidence from Tyler and me to arr partner, that should protect Nicole.” He spoke to Sam as if she weren’ before room, his tone bland, as if he were discussing a business deal, which way he always acted toward her.

behalf. Her father was the iceman. That had been Vicky’s name for him g hgt her up, and she hadn’t been wrong. To have Sam, who came from a he said, family—loving, caring, kind—see her treated like that was both hum and embarrassing.

inished She shuddered and wrapped her arms around herself, unwilli unable to face him.

r father “When this is all over, I’ll talk to Tyler and see what we can businesswise,” her father continued. Because after all, that was what n afe, I’d most to him. Business. Not his daughters.

e cares Finally, he turned his gaze on her. “Now Nicole, I suggest you a ie what friend head back to Serenity—”

to hurt “Serendipity,” Sam muttered, obviously disgusted that the man even know the name of the town where his daughter now lived.

him as Whatever, she thought. She just wanted to get out of here. “Good ghter?” she said to her father.

He inclined his head. “Thank you for the heads-up. And thar s man’s detective, for your help.”

n’t like The men shook hands, and none too soon Sam and Nicole were in and speeding home to Serendipity. She didn’t have anything to say a it as quiet.

d. He’d “That went well,” Sam said into the silence.

She leaned her head back against the seat. “About as I expected.”

question Keeping his gaze on the road, he placed his hand on hers. Altho man in touch usually warmed her, today she was ice cold, inside and out, her behavior having reminded her of her place, not just in his life, but in S.

Passing through. That was all she was to the men in her life. So who wasn’t permanent.

“It’s almost over,” Sam said, and she didn’t know if he referred ouldn’t father’s business mess or to them. Given what he’d just witness damant wouldn’t be surprised if he was ready to bail.

Nicole “Yeah,” she said, keeping her gaze on the passing scenery outside window. “It is.” She wanted nothing more than to get back to Serendip

rest my throw herself into her work.

After her father's performance, Nicole was glad Sam wasn't looking for a serious relationship, because seeing what she knew of his affection, if he had been looking, he'd run far and fast from her now.

growing

perfect



humiliating

SAM COULDN'T REMEMBER the last time he hit up Joe's on a Wednesday without looking to see if Nicole was there or knowing he'd be meeting with her later on. But something between them had changed. He would thought it had to do with their visit to her father, but after the trip, she distant, not gone.

It was Mike's news the following morning—that the DEA bust had been successful, with the Russians picked up en masse while taking possession of a huge drug shipment—that seemed to have caused the shift.

Now that Nicole was safe from their wrath, she no longer needed protection, and she'd pulled away. As if their relationship had been based solely on his need to protect her, and with that need she'd left him, too. Emotionally, at least.

Which made no sense to Sam. One day she'd been warm and loving, the next she'd pulled away. He didn't know what to do, so he'd given her the space she needed. He'd backed off, letting her leave for work at the car wash and drive herself home after dark with no help from him. And before, she wasn't making time for him afterward.

She'd pushed him away. He missed her like crazy and he didn't know what to do. With her grand opening coming up on Monday, he figured he'd regroup and come at her from a different angle.

Since it was still early, Joe's wasn't crowded, and the mood was relaxed. Slow music played on the jukebox and Sam nursed a beer, waiting for his brother to show.

"Problems with Nicole?" Mike asked, joining him at the bar.

Sam shrugged. "You could say that. She wants nothing to do with me."

Mike hauled himself onto the neighboring stool and gestured to Joe. "I'll have what Sam's drinking. And get him another one." Turning to Sam, he said, "You do something stupid?"

Joe slid two bottles their way.

Sam said, "You do something stupid?"

Joe slid two bottles their way.

“Thanks,” Mike said to the bartender.

a man Joe nodded and made his way to another customer at the other end of the bar.

Sam glanced at his brother. “It’s a sad day when you’ve become an expert on women,” he muttered.

Mike raised an eyebrow. “I’ve always been the expert on women. Now that now I’m also the expert on keeping one.”

“Good one.” Sam let out a laugh before sobering. “Something changed last night. I don’t know if it had to do with me meeting her SOB father or her finding out she didn’t need protection anymore, but she froze me out.” He took a pull of his beer, seeking solace in something, even alcohol.

Mike leaned against the old, scarred wooden counter. “When I showed up at a 911 call from a neighbor after Cara’s father abused her mother, she was mortified.” Mike’s scowl reflected just how he felt about the situation.

Sam understood. Cara’s entire life had been shaped by the fact that her mother hadn’t left her husband.

“Cara didn’t want me to know how bad things were, and if it were to go away from her, it would have been worse between us once I found out.”

“How’d you get through to her?” Sam asked.

“That time? I made her sit down with me and talk.”

Sam shook his head and laughed. “That doesn’t sound like you. At that point, you were running away from commitment.”

“You see how well that worked for me. Seems like you’re going to do the same thing. You didn’t want to trust any woman ever again, but when Nicole moved here, you jumped in with both feet.”

If his older brother hadn’t gone through a similar experience, Sam would be embarrassed to admit his feelings. “She’s it for me.”

He shook his head, amazed he was so willing to say it out loud.

And even more amazed that he trusted her in a way he never thought he would let himself trust again.

Sam groaned, deciding to confide in his brother. “Man, you have no idea how bad Nicole had it growing up. Her father barely acknowledged her existence. I always knew we were lucky, but seeing that?” He shuddered, remembering the memory. “I don’t know how she ended up as warm and caring as she is now.”

“Maybe that helps explain her twin?” Mike asked.

“Well, she truly has a mental illness, but having parents who don’t

shit couldn't possibly help her coping abilities. I said as much to her
d of the Sam said.

Mike's eyes opened wide. "How did that go over with Nicole?"
me the Sam shrugged. "Not a clue. She was already withdrawing into h

He vividly recalled Nicole's arms wrapped around her body, staring
It's just truck window, lost to him on the ride home.

"Do you remember what you told me when you showed up
inged. I apartment after I'd left Cara and Serendipity?" Mike asked.

ling out Sam thought back to that day. "Go big or go home?"

a long Mike nodded.

"Not that simple. I think Nicole needs me to build the foundation
wed up haven't given her that," he said, feeling ashamed.

she was Mike's eyes narrowed in understanding. "Only you know what y
needs."

hat her Sam squared his shoulders. "Me. She needs me," he decided, one h
percent certain. "She has no family that truly cares about her well

re up to From what I can see, she's making real friends here for the first time. I
of us has reason not to trust in people, it's her. And I've given her no
to believe in me. In fact, I told her not to from day one." His gut churn
the knowledge that he'd done nothing but push her away.

At that Mike leaned back, his gaze fully on Sam. "As someone who's kno
your whole life, I can say that *I* trust you. Just throw that Marsden fo
throughway and you'll be fine."

as soon "That means a lot coming from you. Thanks." Sam tipped his
against Mike's.

i would "Good luck."

"Thanks." Something told Sam he'd be needing it.

ght he'd



no idea NICOLE WAS BONE-DEEP tired, and she knew it wasn't just from prepar
ges she her grand opening tomorrow. But she and Aunt Lulu had done it. The
d at the ready with exactly the right menu for the morning, they'd hired one pa
s." and one full-time worker, and everything was a GO.

She pulled her rental car into her driveway and dragged herself ou
t give a vehicle, wanting nothing more than a hot shower and hours of sle

father,” sooner had she walked to her front door than she heard her name.

“Nicole.”

She turned to find Sam striding across the lawn, looking relaxed. “I wanted to wish you good luck for tomorrow.” He held out the flowers, an endearing grin on his face.

The walls she’d built up since he’d witnessed her humiliating interaction with her father melted easily. “Thanks,” she said, accepting the gift.

“Just getting home?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Long day.”

“Longer week,” she said, surprising herself by laughing easily with him. She’d missed him more than she thought possible. “Would you like to come inside?”

He stepped closer, and she inhaled his musky cologne, a warm, familiar scent that mocked her attempts at keeping a distance. “I would, but you have a big day tomorrow and have to be up early.”

She nodded, disappointment filling her.

He stepped closer, tilting her chin up with one hand. “I missed you so much last week.”

His minty breath tested her resolve. “I missed you too.”

He slid his lips over hers, once, twice, a third time before settling his mouth over hers. Her eyelids fluttered closed and she sighed into them, knowing she was defeating the need to keep him at a distance because she’d pushed her away first.

His tongue swirled inside her mouth, finding an answering tug in her belly, a pulsing need between her thighs. She raised her hands to hold on as he seduced her with his talented mouth and tongue.

She was about to insist he needed to come inside when the loud honking car horn startled her, and she jumped back. She jerked toward the open door in time to see a large white BMW pull into her driveway.

“Oh my God.”

Sam glanced at the car. “Who is that?”

She swallowed hard, nausea filling her. “My mother.”

He swore under his breath. She knew the feeling.

Nicole watched in disbelief as her mother’s driver stepped out of the vehicle, strode around the back of the car, and opened the door for her.

Farnsworth to climb out. That she'd made the drive to Serendipity hour didn't bode well for Nicole, and she straightened her shoulders and preparation for confrontation.

Good luck "What's she doing here?" Sam asked.

Nicole didn't answer, already rebuilding the walls and distance. Her reaction maintained all week. If Sam thought her father was cold, wait until he witnessed her mother in action.

Marian Farnsworth walked up the driveway, her heels clicking. She approached Nicole and Sam.

"Mother, what are you doing here?" Nicole thought it best to get it over with him, business.

So come Her mother tilted her head, her perfectly blow-dried hair sweeping her shoulder. "I came to ask you the same question. To see what's so unfamiliar about this small town." She glanced at Sam, assessing him and finding I know lacking, all with a single dismissive glance.

Nicole did her best not to react.

"Your father told me you paid him a visit. He appreciated the hours you gave him about his partner's . . . activities. Personally, I think you have kept quiet. Discretion being important."

Nicole raised her eyebrow. "Too late."

Following his "Ah. You think this changes things? That we no longer need you to be the kiss, home and fulfill your role?"

Before he "I can't imagine what good you think me marrying Tyler will do."

"Your father and Tyler will rebuild the firm and our standing in our community with a united front. You, darling, are the glue that will hold our families together."

Nicole felt the weight of Sam's disbelieving stare on both her cheek and the back of another. To his credit, he remained silent, at least so far. But shock temporarily rendering a person mute, Nicole thought.

"Nothing has changed," she informed her mother. "Tyler and I are finished. And my life is here now."

Marian rolled her eyes. "Give me a break. Give your father one. It's time to stop playing games and come home. I'm finished humoring you in this crisis."

One of the "Be blunt, why don't you," Nicole muttered.

Marian "Well, humoring you hasn't helped."

at this Nicole stiffened. “Humoring me.”
ders in “Yes. Letting you come here to this small town, play house, sow y
oats—” Marian flung a careless hand toward Sam, who watched her
impassive expression. “You’ve had your fun. It’s time to come home a
e she’dup to your responsibilities.” Her tone lacked any lightness or warmth.
until he Nicole dug her nails into her hand and latched onto the only im
part of her mother’s statement. “*Letting me?* You think *you* let m
as shehere? I’m an adult. You don’t own me, control me, pay for anything
life, or tell me what to do,” Nicole said, her voice rising. “And con
lown towhat you might think, you haven’t since I turned twenty-one and n
fund kicked in.”

ing her At which point she’d finished paying for her own college educa
tractiveshe could have her independence.

ng him “Can we have this discussion in private?” Her mother
dismissively at Sam.

Nicole would rather not have this discussion at all, but Marian had
eads-upthis far, and when she intended to have her say, nothing short o
shouldphysically restrained would stop her. Normally, she wouldn’t give her
the satisfaction of doing anything she asked, but the thought c
witnessing any more of her family dysfunction turned Nicole’s ahead
o comestomach.

“Let’s go inside my house.”

Her mother turned her nose up, no doubt at the thought of e
in theNicole’s modest, older home. “Fine,” she said, obviously knowing she
old thechoice.

“Not fine,” Sam said, speaking for the first time.

and her Nicole turned a pleading gaze his way. *Please, please, don’t*
nded toagain, she silently begged him. Her mother was just getting warn

Whatever she said to Nicole would be painfully humiliating if she wa
d I arebut she’d survive. If Sam witnessed it, she might not ever be able to fa
again.

t’s time The whole time she’d been speaking with her mother, she’d delit
ur littleshut off the mortification of Sam witnessing her being belittled and
down to, the weight of her unreasonable family expectations, and the f
she was a constant disappointment. Nicole’s parents stood out i
contrast to Sam’s family’s warmth and caring, and she wanted to curl

die, knowing worse was to come. The longer he stood by her, the harder it would be when he was ready for this affair between them to end.

And he'd made it clear that it would.

"Please?" she asked softly.

He shook his head, not speaking but letting her know that no way would he allow her to go through this alone.

Well, that was nice of him, but while dealing with her domineering in my parents, she'd always been alone. She was the child who'd never lived contrary to their hopes and dreams and never would. And if this shame was how they trusted for someone to be by her side, maybe she was better off by herself after all.

"Sam, just go." Hoping he would comply, she turned, gesturing for someone to follow, which she did, judging by the clicking sound of her heels against the walkway.

Nicole was disappointed but not at all surprised when Sam stepped out the house behind her mother, closing the door behind him.

"I believe she asked you to leave," her mother said to Sam.

He merely stared at her mother for a heartbeat before extending his hand. "I'm Sam Marsden. One of the things Nicole finds so attractive about my small town."

Oh, he did not just say that.

Nicole closed her eyes, knowing that if she'd introduced them earlier she could have avoided this, but unlike with her father, when she'd just been entering this time she'd hoped to spare Sam her mother's direct snub.

When her mother merely eyed him warily, Sam, with his hands clasped, explained, "Someone has to be civil."

With a put-out sigh, her mother shook his hand. "Marian Farnham, *do this* Now may I speak to my daughter in private?"

He glanced between the two women. "I'll wait in the den just in case you need me," he said pointedly to Nicole. He headed to the next room, leaving Nicole to wonder if she'd be able to hear every word exchanged.

"What does he think I'm going to do to you?" her mother asked. "He's a completely rude man."

"No, that's you, showing up here uninvited, ordering my business around and making demands. I told you when I was packing to leave that I was serious. It's my life."

Her mother sighed, shifting the chain on her purse to the other shoulder.

order the “You’re a part of a prominent family, Nicole. Your father’s partner arrested this morning. Tyler and Paul are trying to hold things together to keep their important clients. You have an obligation to help us.”

“Why? Because you gave birth to me?”

“Exactly.” Her mother’s lips thinned. “Bloodlines are important.” She eyed her, a determined expression on her face. “And this little rebellion is not going to do anything for you in the long run. Neither will that small-town cop.”

“Just stop!” Nicole’s voice rose, and she realized she was a head taller than she felt away from stamping her feet like a child. She drew a deep breath and gathered herself together. “This isn’t a rebellion. This is my life. You’re standing on my home, insulting me. You’re belittling a place with good people, people you know nothing about. And that small-town cop you’re so disdainful of? I love him.”

“Oh, Nicole.” Her mother’s voice filled with pity and dismay. “I understand that you can’t build a life that’s meaningful or important on love. Love doesn’t support you in the lifestyle you’re accustomed to. And this kind of lifestyle is hand-me-down. It will grow old. Come home and do what’s expected of you now.”

Her head began to pound. “Mother, I’m going to say something once in my life, I want you to listen. To *hear* me. I’m building a good life here. One I’m proud of. I have friends who like me for me, not the money, the name or money. And tomorrow, I’m opening a bakery in town with a lot of help. I admire. I’ll be up at four o’clock preparing my customers’ pastries and baked goods. If our blood ties mean anything, if my being your daughter is important to you, I hope you’ll come and see what I’ve accomplished.”

A myriad set of expressions crossed her mother’s face, none of which Nicole could interpret. It would take too much time and effort for her to read her mother’s face.

She could only hope she’d made some kind of impression on her mother. Her mother’s implacable will to put her status above all else.

where Marian placed a hand on Nicole’s shoulder, surprising her and making her wonder if she’d made some sort of dent after all.

“He’s a doctor. Your sister’s ill. She will never be able to step up and be the daughter we need her to be. But you still can. Think about it,” Marian said.

friend Nicole jerked away. “I don’t need to think. I know who I am. I was looking at her, Mom. So look. Understand. Come tomorrow and see for yourself.” Was she really begging? Nicole bit the inside of her cheek hard.

oulder. “You’re a disappointment to me,” her mother said. “And clearly

er was all this way for nothing.”

her and Nicole shook her head and closed her eyes.

Her mother hadn't heard one word Nicole said. In one ear and other. Her mother had ignored everything important to Nicole, worried Marian came from her heart and soul in a last-ditch attempt to reach the woman who wasn't supposed to be her mother. But a mother's job was to love and protect, and Marian Farnsworth had done none of those things.

When she opened her eyes, she wasn't surprised to find that her heart had pulled away, cementing the fact that they clearly had very different views on what it meant to share blood.

Nicole swiped at her damp eyes, fully aware that Sam was in the room. He hadn't rushed in to save the day. No doubt he was still processing the difference between their families, reassessing what the old you was doing with a woman who'd grown up with vultures, not parents.

Or maybe he was wondering how to extricate himself sooner rather than later. She wouldn't blame him. One thing she knew for sure that little display, *she* wanted nothing more than to be alone.

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You're
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I came

all this way for nothing.”

Nicole shook her head and closed her eyes.

Her mother hadn't heard one word Nicole said. In one ear and out the other. Her mother had ignored everything important to Nicole, words that came from her heart and soul in a last-ditch attempt to reach the woman who was supposed to be her mother. But a mother's job was to love and nurture, and Marian Farnsworth had done none of those things.

When she opened her eyes, she wasn't surprised to find that her mother had gone, cementing the fact that they clearly had very different views on what it meant to share blood.

Nicole swiped at her damp eyes, fully aware that Sam was in the other room. He hadn't rushed in to save the day. No doubt he was still reeling, processing the difference between their families, reassessing what the hell he was doing with a woman who'd grown up with vultures, not parents.

Or maybe he was wondering how to extricate himself sooner rather than he'd planned. She wouldn't blame him. One thing she knew for sure: After that little display, *she* wanted nothing more than to be alone.

Chapter Seventeen

SAM HAD THOUGHT her father was a coldhearted bastard. He sat frozen in his seat, shocked that anyone could treat their own child like a pawn in a game. With those two as parents, Nicole was a fucking miracle.

His miracle.

She'd stood up for him to her mother, declaring her love, proving herself much braver than he'd been with her. He was the big bad cop, and she had put him to shame.

He rose from his seat, sorry that he'd left her alone with her bit of mother. Then again, maybe it was better that Nicole think he hadn't done anything. Less embarrassing for her that way, and he'd do anything to keep her from being hurt anymore than she had been. Which was plenty.

He paused in the entryway, the distraught look on Nicole's face catching his eye. Unable to remain silent, he stepped forward. "Nicole?"

She brushed at her cheeks, and he realized she'd been crying. As if she wanted to hide it from him.

"Hey." He strode up to her and grasped her hands. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

He held on to her wrists and stared into her damp blue eyes. "No, not. Don't pretend with me."

To his surprise, she jerked out of his grasp. "Don't."

He narrowed his gaze. "Don't what? Help you? Be there for you?"

Her face morphed into a cool mask. "Don't make me think I can't take care of you."

"Whoa." He dropped her wrist and raised both hands in a gesture of confusion. "I am here for you. I want to be here."

"Why?"

It was his turn to step up. "You want to know why I want to be there for you when you need me?" He drew on all the courage she'd shown using her bravery to bolster his own. "Because I love you."

Her eyes opened wide, a flash of hope in their depths, before

went . . . blank.

She deliberately shut down her feelings. “No, you don’t. You feel for me.” She wrapped her arms around her shoulders, her fingertips pressing into her skin.

“I don’t—”

“Yes, you do. You heard everything my mother said and you put it in his game. Why else would the man who didn’t want anything to do with relationships and who doesn’t believe in love choose this moment for a declaration?”

Her voice cracked, and his heart squeezed painfully as she deliberately misinterpreted his words.

He’d told Mike he’d prove to her she could count on him. No matter how hard she put herself out there, whether or not she shut him out, he wouldn’t bail.

“I’ll tell you why. Because I’m an idiot who couldn’t get beyond the point of not to see the amazing woman in front of me. But I see you, Nicole. A woman who’s heard everything you’ve ever said about what you want and need in life and I’m trying to protect you.”

“Oh my God, don’t!” Her eyes opened wide, the blue depths filled with disappointment. “Don’t use my own words against me.”

“I’m using them *for* you. For us.” But as he spoke, he recognized the irony. Now that he wanted everything from her, she didn’t trust his words.

She couldn’t because her mother had shown up and demoralized her, destroyed her in an attempt to get what she wanted. And Sam hadn’t corrected his senses in time.

“You’re right. She turned away. “I have to get up early, and I have a lot to do tomorrow.”

“I’ll get my things and be right back. We can stay here.”

She didn’t face him. “That’s okay. I . . . I need to be alone tonight.”

Sam shook his head and swallowed a groan. “Nicole—”

“Sam, please. I can’t do this now. I just had it out with my mother. I don’t want to argue with you too. I’m exhausted,” she said, her voice catching.

“Okay.” He didn’t like it, but he’d respect it. “But set the alarm for me to leave.”

“I will.”

“I’ll pick you up and take you to work tomorrow.”

She shook her head, still not turning around. “There’s no reason for me to be up before dawn just because I have to be.”

He rolled his eyes. If she thought she could get rid of him that easily, she was wrong. "I'm sorry I didn't know him well at all. "I'll be in the driveway at four. With coffee and donuts. You can dig me out then."

Because he loved her. He knew for sure. And in his mind, that counted for everything.

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OPERATING ON AUTOPILOT, Nicole woke up, showered, and dressed for her grand opening. Her head hurt from lack of sleep, and she wasn't feeling the excitement she'd anticipated for today. She blamed her mother as much as she could. "Sam. He was a good guy, trying to make her feel better in the only way he knew how. But she didn't believe he suddenly realized he was in love with her at the very moment he was exposed to yet another ugly side of her and her life."

He came to her door to pick her up, not looking much better than she felt. He hadn't shaved, his eyes were bloodshot, and he seemed to be moving slowly as she was. But he still looked delectable to her, and keeping distance was hard. But she'd gone into self-protection mode. No longer was she willing to expose her heart for people to slice and dice. Even the most meaningful people who told her the way things were going to be up front. Sam.

They drove to town in silence, punctuated by occasional questions and answers. The day ended.

"How did you sleep?" he asked.

"Fine," she lied. She'd tossed and turned in her big empty bed all afternoon.

"Really? Because I didn't sleep at all. I haven't been sleeping all day. I'd gotten used to having you in my bed, and I miss you."

She'd stared straight ahead, not wanting to get into any kind of discussion, and he took the hint and was silent for the rest of the way.

He pulled up in front of the store. The lights weren't on yet, which she'd beat Lulu here, and she could get started on cleaning and setting up before prep and baking began.

Sam turned, slinging one arm across the passenger seat. "I'm very busy today, but I'll come by to check out the line coming out your door," he said with his grin cute and sweet.

ily, she “You don’t have to do that.” She managed a forced smile. “I’ll
ee. Seebusy to be able to talk.”

He studied her, his hazel eyes assessing her in a way he’d never
hanged before. Like he was looking beneath her skin and trying to figure out a
understand this new version of her. Well, she understood herself, and
tried to explain it to him last night: She didn’t want his pity and she c
didn’t want him saying things he didn’t mean because of it.

“Like I said, I’ll be by later to check things out,” he said, ignoring
for her She clutched her bag. “Suit yourself. Thanks for the ride.” She ope
ling the door and hopped out of the car.

well as She let herself into the shop, with the car engine humming behind
way he Sam waited until she was safely inside before taking off.

ve with She brought her hands to her face and groaned. What was she goin
family with him? The good news was, she had no time to worry about it.

She had a business to open.
she felt. Nicole didn’t know what to expect from the day, but based on last
ving as slow build of sales, she had high hopes. Those hopes were exceeded. A
ing her predicted, they had long lines during the prework hours, when people
ger was pick up coffee from Cuppa Café and come by for food.

n well- Her cranberry and hazelnut scones were a hit with the moms, and t
it. Like loved the chocolate chip ones. The cinnamon and cream cheese muffin
treats everyone seemed to enjoy. And people ordered Lulu’s pies fr
s on his weekend barbecues. By the time the day ended, Nicole’s legs ache
being on her feet all day, but her emotions were running high wi
success.

lone. Then there was Sam. True to his word, he stopped by during the d
l week, once or twice but three times, offering moral support and buying fo
didn’t stay to talk or hog her attention, but she felt his warm gaze on l
of deep the duration of his visit. His proud gaze.

And his words from last night came back to her. *You want to know
I meant want to be there for you when you need me? Because I love you.*

nitizing *Could he mean it?* she wondered And more importantly, could s
him, especially after his insistence on not wanting or believ
vorking relationships and love for himself?
he said,



be too *COME TO ME when you're free—of everything. Then we can talk.* Tyler thought the day would come. In fact, up through last night, his father had been refusing to cooperate with the police, proclaiming his innocence by thrusting all the blame on his accountant. Only when Paul Farnsworth had refused to stand by him did Robert Stanton break down and confess. He certainly truly believed that his partner, Nicole's father, would understand the need to bolster the firm during tough economic times, no matter the means.

her. Tyler was still coming to terms with his father's betrayal of even the most moral and right. His mother? He didn't think she'd ever forgive her husband and at this moment, she was meeting with her attorneys. Not to delve into her, as a legal status of her campaign funding, but to file for divorce. That was her mother. No second chances.

ing to do Before he could go talk to Macy, he had to do some legwork. Something he hoped would prove to her that from this moment on, she was his first. Whatever happened between them in the long run, Tyler knew a week's worth wouldn't be for lack of trying.

As Sam
he would



he kids DAISIES. SAM SENT daisies to the store every morning for a week straight. One day, they brightened up the area by the cash register, and when Nicole came in for their order, they lined the windowsill overlooking the street.

nd from "Someone's in love," Aunt Lulu said, turning the lock on the door. She was hanging the *CLOSED* sign from the doorknob.

th their "Are you talking about me? Or Sam?" Nicole asked her partner.

ay. Not Aunt Lulu wagged her eyebrows. "Oh, a little bit of both of you."

ood. He Nicole bit down on the inside of her cheek. "Is love enough?" She asked the question that had been nagging at her day and night.

hers for "Oh, honey. Of course it is." Aunt Lulu placed an arm around her shoulders and led her to a small table in front. "Sit."

why I Not one to argue with this woman, Nicole did as instructed. Aunt Lulu pulled up a seat beside her. "I lost my first love to cancer before we even got married. If I could have him back, just to experience that love again, I believe all would be right in my world." The woman who always seemed so strong together and strong looked suddenly frail and sad.

Nicole reached for her hand. "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

r never Aunt Lulu shrugged. "It's in the past. I can't change it, so I ju
ner hadforward. But I can advise you not to waste one single day." She rose
ice andfeet, obviously finished with sadness and reminiscing. "So aren't you g
rth hadhired people to help with the cleanup?"

s. He'd "More than anything. I don't know if I could handle it," Nicole ac
need tostretching her legs and wiggling her aching feet.

A knock sounded at the door. "Who could that be?" Nicole asked.
rything Aunt Lulu stepped closer and glanced outside. "A very disting
usband,looking gentleman I've never seen before."

into the Wary, Nicole stood and checked the visitor for herself. "Dad!"

was his "That's your father?" Aunt Lulu asked. "Nice-looking man."

"Yes." But Nicole wondered what was inside him. "I guess I shou
ork onout what he wants." She unlocked the door and let him inside. "I
ie camereturning my unexpected visit," she said. "What's the occasion?"

new it "I have news," he said.

"I see. Well, first meet my business partner, Lulu Donovan. Lulu
my father, Paul Farnsworth."

They shook hands, Aunt Lulu lingering too long—more for eff
Nicole had come to learn about her. She liked being noticed.

it. Each But she was also observant and realized that Nicole's father had co
ran outan important reason. "I'll go see to the cleanup," she said, excusing her

major and Nicole waited until Aunt Lulu was in the back room before turnin
father, only to find him wandering around, taking in her bakery w
discerning eye.

"Very nice," he said, surprising her.

She blinked. "Thank you. I take it Mom told you where to find me"
e asked "Your mother told me she paid you a visit. She was . . . upset ab
business and Robert's arrest, and you know how your mother get
ind her things don't go her way."

"Yes. She tries to manipulate them back the way she wants them."

nt Lulu "She does," he agreed.

over got "You've done it a time or two yourself," Nicole pointed out.

I truly His mouth twisted in a wry grin.

med so "It won't work with me. Not anymore. I'm not leaving my life here
"I'm not here to ask you to."

Nicole stepped back, taken off guard. "Then why make the trip her

st pushasked, her heart suddenly racing, and she couldn't figure out why.
e to her He studied her, as if seeing her for the first time. "Something
glad we boyfriend said."

"Sam's not my—"

mitted, Her father burst out laughing, the action and the sound so at odds v
man Nicole knew, she was even more off balance. "What's so funny?
finally asked.

uished- Her father shrugged out of his suit jacket and placed it over the ba
chair. "Whatever you label the man, he cares about you. Enough to
out on 'not giving a shit about you.'"

Nicole's mouth went dry, and she lowered herself into the nearest
ld find "He shouldn't have said that."

'You're Her father took up the chair Aunt Lulu had been in minutes earl
big frame awkward in the smaller seat. "Someone needed to point o
should have been obvious."

, this is Nicole glanced down at her hands. "I don't know what to say." A
was rarely at a complete loss for words.

ect—as He paused, clearly as uncomfortable as she was. "Your mothe
aren't affectionate with each other," he finally said, surprising Nic
ome for again. "It shouldn't be a surprise to me that I didn't know what to c
rself. children. Two girls, no less, and one with a mental disorder. And your
g to her is not exactly the maternal type."

with his "You can say that again." If he could state the truth, Nicole wasn'
to hide her feelings. "She told me I was a disappointment." She ch
the word and averted her gaze, embarrassed to show emotion in front c
?" "I'm sorry. From both of us. I realize that doesn't change anything

out the least you know I'm aware now. And that's why when Robert asked
s when back him up and help him out of this mess, I refused."

"He betrayed your trust and was using the business to launder mo
course you wouldn't help him."

"No. I can't say I'm that honorable. If he'd managed to pull us ou
recession mess we were in without getting caught, I might have tu
blind eye." Her father's cheeks flushed a ruddy color. "But to threat
e—" because of it? Robert crossed a line that's unacceptable. I don't care if
to start over from scratch. I want him to pay."

e?" she Her father had defended *her*? Gone to bat for *her*? Nicole blinke

tears. “I matter to you?” she asked, hating that she sounded like a young girl seeking her daddy’s approval, even if that was exactly what she was.

The child who’d never gotten what she needed. Not when she made the roll every semester. Not when she’d graduated cum laude from college?” she ever.

Until now.

Her father reached out and—awkwardly—placed his hand over her shoulder. “You matter, Nicole. You and Victoria both do.”

She didn’t know how badly she’d needed to hear those words until her father said them. She wiped at the tears with the back of her hand.

“Now I want you to do something for me,” he said, ignoring her sullen expression.

“What’s that?”

“Find a man who deserves you. Someone warm and caring. Someone who’ll love you like me.” His lips turned up again in a self-deprecating way.

She managed a laugh.

“Someone like that detective of yours.”

She blushed, unable to answer.

Her father wasn’t expecting a reply. He rose from his chair, pulled his jacket back onto his shoulders, and started for the door.

He grasped the doorknob and paused. “Nicole?”

“Yes?”

He cleared his throat. “You’ve done a wonderful job with this place.”

She blinked hard. So many surprises from him that she couldn’t talk, but at all in. “I . . . Thank you,” she said to his retreating back as he shut the door behind him.

ney. Of



MACY LIVED IN a garden apartment, a low-rise set of buildings near the Family Restaurant. She loved the location, so close to work, and she liked being surrounded by people. Her neighbors were composed of a mix of people her own age, married couples, and older folks who’d chosen to downsize from their homes. Macy, being Macy, was friendly with them, and today was the day she normally checked on her next-door neighbor.

pathetic Monique Tamm, a recent widow.

hat she Yesterday, Macy had picked up sticky buns, Monique's favorite, could drop by for a cup of tea and a chat. She didn't know why, but she e honorit easy to talk to people of all ages and always had, which was why her ge. No had designated her hostess, not server, from early on.

She and Monique lived on the ground floor, the last two units r end of the hall, which had the same apartment layout. Their kitchen w r hers. overlooked the parking lot, which, despite its nature, was surroun beautiful flowers and trees. The backyard gave them each a view of ntil her made lake.

She brought her bakery box with the brightly colored Lulu and show of insignia and knocked. Monique opened the door. Her dark hair with was pulled back in a sleek bun; she had a warm smile on her face, and was happy to see her looking relaxed and more at peace than she'd be one *not* while.

They settled around the kitchen table a few minutes later, and Ma drinking the most delicious chamomile tea. As usual, the conversation from town gossip to Monique's past. Today, she focused on her early days with her husband.

ling his Macy couldn't imagine losing someone you loved so much, but Monique had had over forty-five years. She wasn't ready to see anyo but she was open to the idea of a companionship of a sort. Other peop Macy's aunt, never got over a loss and compensated in other ways, bu e." suspected her aunt was still lonely and often wished Lulu would find h ce them nice man. But she preferred to be alone.

he door Macy didn't feel the same way. She was getting tired of h company. Her friends were slowly but surely marrying and moving c their lives. And though she'd fallen for Tyler, she knew her feelings ha superficial at best. After all, she hadn't spent all that much time with how well could she really know him?

ar The The problem was, what she did know, she liked a lot. Putt he also distinguished good looks aside, he was loyal to people he cared about, mix of quality even if she was admittedly jealous of the way he looked osen to Nicole. He was funny even when he didn't realize it or mean to be, em all, appreciated a man with a sense of humor. He clearly had a strong s ighbor, right and wrong, if his current situation was anything to go by. And v

focused on her, he looked at her as if there weren't anyplace else in the world so she'd rather be.

The problem was, moments like that were few and far between. The family didn't want to hold his problems against him, or the fact that his ex-girlfriend was entangled in them too. She just wanted to come first with a message. Until that time, she felt she'd had no choice but to send him away.

"My goodness, you're a million miles away this morning," Monique said, snapping her fingers in front of Macy's face at the same time.

She blinked, startled and flushed. "I'm sorry. My mind was elsewhere and that was rude of me."

"Nonsense. You're probably bored by the stories I tell you about Nicole and our courtship."

Macy smiled. "No way. I love to hear you reminisce. Honestly."

"Well, I appreciate the time you give me. Is there anything I can do for you?" Monique asked.

Macy shook her head. She wrapped her hand around the delicate glass, drifting and absorbing its warmth. "No. Maybe." She laughed. "It's just that I met him while dating and I thought we could have something special, but . . . a lot of time passed and I think maybe he's not really interested."

She remembered seeing him at Nicole's, the embarrassment she'd felt when he came to see her, him being in town and not coming to see her. Her face flushed like a rose.

"Well, his loss." Monique patted her hand. "Oh! Are you expecting a delivery?" she asked, her gaze focused out the window over the parking lot.

"No. Why?"

"A gentleman is walking up the path toward our units with a wrapped package. It looks like a painting."

Macy rose and walked to the window over the sink. She looked out at him, so gasped.

"What's wrong?" Monique asked, coming up behind her.

"Not wrong. Very, very right," Macy said, her stomach suddenly tied in a good nervous knot. "That's *him*," she whispered.

"Ah," Monique said, her voice lifting in understanding. "You should go."

Macy turned to her and pulled her into a warm embrace. "Thank you for your understanding."

She ran for the door, making it to the outside walkway just as she reached up and rang her doorbell. “Looking for me?” she asked, breathless. She panted from the short sprint into the hall.

He turned, leveling those green eyes her way. “Hi,” he said.

“Hi yourself. What are you doing here?” She rocked on her feet, nervous and happy at the same time.

He rested the package wrapped in brown paper against the wall.

She took a minute to drink him in. His sandy brown hair was combed everywhere, lightly gelled; he was clean shaven and wore a pair of tan slacks and a blue short-sleeved collared shirt. Typical Tyler; he looked every inch the handsome Charles-groomed and well-styled man she’d fallen hard for. The only thing that was off was the nervous glint in his eyes and the uncertain expression on his handsome face.

“You said not to come back until I was free of everything.”

Clasping her hands behind her back, she merely nodded, waiting.

She wouldn’t have thought she’d want a man to beg for her, but after the way he’d taken off after Nicole, leaving her alone at the art show, she’d realized she needed him to wonder where she stood. To work to win himself to her. For her.

She wouldn’t tell him that he’d won her over by showing up at the show whatever was beneath the wrapping. She had a hunch she already knew which meant despite running after Nicole, he’d paid attention to *her*.

“Well, I am. Free of Nicole, my past, the family business and all the expectations that came with it . . . all of it.”

As he spoke, her heart lightened . . . a lot. So much that she knew that in this moment, her life just might be doing a one-eighty.

He drew a deep breath. “And so I’m here. Bearing gifts.” He grinned. “Should I say a gift?”

Tyler looked into her bright-blue eyes and waited . . . waited . . . and then she gave it to him.

She returned his smile with the first open, honest one he’d seen. “Welcome in,” she said.

He followed her into her home for the first time. He took in the vibrant splash of colors, vibrant and alive, and laughed. “This place suits you.”

“Yeah? You don’t think it’s . . . gaudy?”

She folded her arms across her chest, a defensive gesture he could

s Tyler mistake. “Umm, no. If I thought it was gaudy, I wouldn’t have said
pathless you.” He stepped closer and grasped her shoulders. “You, Macy De
are not gaudy. You’re outspoken, honest, you don’t take crap from a
and you’re real. Added to that, you’re beautiful. You were it for me fr
nervous moment I laid eyes on you.”

Macy’s heart squeezed in her chest. Finally, she thought. It was her



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TYLER MEANT WHAT he’d said. From the second he’d seen Macy, n
woman existed. Unfortunately, the craziness around him still had.

Her eyes opened wide. “But you were still chasing Nicole then.”

He wanted to forget all about Nicole. Hell, he already had. She
friend and nothing more, but he owed it to Macy to explain.

“I think I told you before . . . Nicole and I were always good .

When I look back now, I believed we were doing the right thing by
married. Making everyone happy.”

“Were you? Happy?” she asked.

Honest, he reminded himself. “I thought I was.”

She tipped her head to one side. “But?”

“She broke up with me, and I ran after her, but that wasn’t abou
That was about family. Safety. Obligation. And it’s over. From here
it’s all about you.” He ripped the paper off the landscape; he’d gone t
pains to first find the artist, then acquire it.

A soft sigh escaped her lips. “You really were paying attention to r

“Every minute, even if I did have to run off. Which I handled ba
the way. I’m sorry.”

Her eyes blazed brighter. “I don’t want your apology.”

“You don’t?”

“Nope.”

“Then what do you want?”

She walked toward him, placing her arms around his neck. “I want

“You have me,” he said in a gruff voice he barely recognized.

Then he did what he’d wanted to do since the moment they’d me
he’d only done once, and it wasn’t nearly enough.

He kissed her.

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Chapter Eighteen

WHEN SAM TOLD Mike to go after Cara, he'd been so sure of his advice: *big or go home*. Mike had a point to make: proving to her that he was serious about leaving her-or Serendipity, and most importantly, he'd changed and was ready to put down roots. So Mike had purchased a house and an engagement ring and gotten his girl.

Sam didn't see his situation with Nicole the same way. He was happy because she wasn't going anywhere, and she'd shown him what it meant to fall in love. For Sam, it was simple. Except she didn't believe he loved her, and he didn't know how to convince her he meant what he said.

Frustrated and not in the mood to be alone in his house, wondering what Nicole was doing next door, he drove over to his parents. He found her working outside on her hands and knees in one of the flower beds.

He parked in the driveway and joined her, kneeling by her side. "Hi Mom."

"Sam! I'd hug you, but my gloves are covered with dirt." Her eyes, similar to his, lit up as she met his gaze. "What are you doing here?"

"Can't I just come to visit?"

"I suppose you could." She eyed him warily. "If you didn't have that little-boy expression I remember from . . . the time we don't discuss, said, her voice trailing off.

He shook his head, amazed at how stupidly stubborn he'd been as a young woman and a time long past. "You can talk about Jenna," he told his mother.

She stripped her gloves off her hands. "Help me up."

Sam rose to his feet and helped his mother do the same.

"Let's go sit."

He followed her to the front steps, and they sat down on the top step. It reminded him of when he and his siblings were in elementary school and they would all wait here for the bus to pick them up. His mother had always been there, day in and day out. He doubted Nicole could say the same.

"What's on your mind?" his mother asked him.

He rested his hands between his legs and groaned. “I blew Nicole.”

His mother looked up at him. “It can’t be that bad. What did you do?”

“From the beginning, I told her I didn’t want a serious relationship. She never would. So by the time I took my head out of my . . . you know, I told her I loved her, she didn’t believe me.”

Her eyes took on that sad, disappointed look he hated. “Oh, Sam.”

He looked up at his mother, feeling like a naughty child about to be scolded.

“I could kill that girl for what she did to you. Jenna should have been there, he afterward, I never could figure out how to make you see something wrong with her and not you.”

He lifted his gaze toward the afternoon sun. “You know, I wish I’d come over myself sooner, but there was no reason. No one who affected me to make me want to stop—”

“Feeling sorry for yourself?” his mother asked with a gentle laugh.

His face heated with embarrassment, but she was right. “I can’t go back to the past, but I want to convince Nicole for the future. But she wasn’t by warm, loving parents. She doesn’t have reasons to trust or believe in me.” He shrugged. “And I took so long to come around, I don’t blame myself.”

His mother pulled him into a quick hug. “Gone are the days when hugs and cookies hold all the answers.”

Sam laughed. “I figured maybe you’d have some words of wisdom for me.”

“I’m thinking you might not need any,” she said as a white Mercedes pulled up to the curb.

Nicole’s white Mercedes. He knew she’d gotten the car back from the repair shop, having followed up without telling her.

At the sight, Sam’s breath caught in his throat.

“Something tells me she’s not here to see me.” Ella rose to her feet.

Sam did the same. “I’m going to make myself scarce,” his mother said.

Waving to Nicole as she climbed out of the car, Ella walked down the bluestone path to enter the house through the open garage. When she got on her flowers, she used the mudroom entrance so she didn’t track dirt into the house.

Hands in his shorts pockets, heart pounding, Sam headed to the driveway waiting for Nicole near his car.

it with She strode up to him, wearing a white skirt and soft yellow tights that itched to hold her, to take her in his arms and feel her soft curves again.
o?" and know all was right in his world again.

hip and He didn't know what she was doing here, and he didn't want to spend . . . and by pushing too fast. Her skin was pale from the hours spent inside with her eyes were wary. He hated that look, never wanted her to feel uncomfortable with him.

t to be "Hi," she said softly.

"Hi."

e ended She bit down on her lower lip, her uncertainty showing. "You're looking for a man to track down."

ng was "Not if you know where to look. And obviously you did." He was glad, liking that she'd known how to locate him.

I gotten "Your house, the police station, Joe's . . . this was my final stop."

enough "Well, now that you found me, what can I do for you?"

She drew a deep breath, blowing it out again before beginning. "I want to tell you I'm sorry. I realize I wasn't fair to you. You stood by me, you changed me, you loved me, and I turned my back on you." Her eyes were bright and raised, glassy, self-recrimination obvious in her expression.

what I "Nic—"

her." She shook her head. "I need to say these things, and you need to listen. Please."

He nodded, hurting for her. "Go on."

l." "You never gave me mixed signals. You weren't ready for a relationship, Mercedes, and I knew that. I was the one who changed the rules midway through. I realized I couldn't have sex without getting emotionally involved with a woman from the moment I . . . I fell in love. And even when I told you, I didn't expect you to come back. Of course I wished you had." An embarrassed smile pulled at his lips.

He was dying to end this speech with a kiss, but she needed to hear him out, and say.

own the embarrassed by the things you heard my parents say. My father worked hard enough, he was cold and aloof, but my mother? She belittled me every day inside. I could think about was, why would you want me after hearing all that?"

ive way, His fingers curled into tight fists as he fought with himself to give her the space she'd asked for to say her piece, but he lost the battle and :

ink. He closed, pulling her hard against him. “You don’t need to explain.”
inst him She relaxed, her soft curves molding and curling against him until
was in his arms where she belonged.

ook her “I need to finish this, okay?”

orking; “Okay.” He loosened his hold, and she eased back, looking up
re with with bright shiny eyes.

“I told myself that since you had one foot out the door from
beginning, I should protect myself now because it was only a matter
until you were gone. I thought my mother’s words pushed you the res
a hardway.” She pursed her lips at the memory.

He winced, knowing he’d given her cause to feel that way.
grinned, “I just . . . I was so devastated by my mother’s words that I c
believe you loved me like you said you did. But you didn’t give u
picked me up for my opening, and kept visiting. You sent my favorite
even when I didn’t let myself acknowledge what they meant. And t
wanted father came to visit.”

ou told Sam reared back at that. “If he hurt you again—”

ght and She shook her head. “Just the opposite, in fact. He said he refused
Tyler’s father out because of what he’d done to me. Sending the R
after me.” She drew a deep breath. “And he told me I matter to him.
let me. said it because *you* stood up to him. You essentially told him he was
parent, and in doing that, you told me that *I* matter to *you*.”

She sniffed, wiping at her damp eyes, and laughed at herself. “I’m
onship, But the point is, I should have believed in you way before I finally did.

ough. I “Are you finished?” he asked. “Because I have something to say.”

th you. She smiled, lighting him up inside. “Yeah, I’ll be quiet now.”

o say it He grasped her hand in his. “You didn’t believe in me because I
r lips. give you a reason before. But I swear to you, I’ll never give you c
ave her doubt me again.”



was so

was bad

til all I NICOLE HAD LEARNED a hard lesson, letting her parents and insecurities
, her emotions and what she knew, deep down, to be true. “I’ve been mi

her the without you,” she admitted to Sam. “Even my grand opening lackl
stepped luster it should have had.”

“I missed you too. But I’m so damned proud of what you accomplished until sheHe grinned, and all the remaining tension fled her body.

“I’m pretty proud too. I guess I had a minor glitch in my program she said, embarrassed at how badly her parents had gotten to her. “I’m not getting much from them, but having the man I love witness it” she shuddered.

“It’s over. And if they want to see you after this, they’re on their own. It’s your behavior or they can stay home.”

She brushed her fingers over his cheek. “Because I have my very own cop . . . I mean *detective* to protect me.”

“You’re damned right.” Taking her off guard, he swept her up and held her in his arms, a place she hadn’t been in too long.

She squealed. “What are you doing?” She glanced around, but the flowers were still alone, nobody watching.

“Taking you home with me where you belong. We’ll take this year to enjoy, but afterward? We’ll reevaluate that lease on the house because we’re not keeping separate places longer than I have to.”

She laughed. “I like that you’re doing long-term planning.”

“Baby, with you, I’m planning on forever.”

Her heartbeat thudded hard in her chest, his words giving her the comfort of a shitty and security she’d always craved along with the bonus of love and passion thrown into the mix.

She just had one lingering question. “Sam? Are you sure your family will accept all of me? I mean, Victoria’s locked up for the foreseeable future. . . .”

His eyes took on a determined glint. “She’s your twin. If she gets out, she’ll be healthy and is released, she’s family. Somehow, we’ll make it work for her.”

She closed her eyes, wondering what she’d done to deserve this man. She sighed with happiness and nuzzled her cheek against his. “I love this,” she whispered. “I missed you.”

“I love you, Nicole.” He shifted her, reaching into his pocket so he could grab his keys and unlock his truck. “And now I’m taking you home to tell you how much. We’ll get your car later.”

She laughed as he walked around to the passenger side so she could get in. “I like how you think, Detective. You’re perfect for me.”

“We’re perfect,” he said with a grin. “Perfect together.” He grinned.

lished.” slid his lips over hers in a kiss that teased her with things to come.

A long, happy future of many, many wonderful things.

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Thank you for reading!

eir best Read **Perfect Strangers**, a novella featuring Dr. Alexa Collins, next! (

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PERFECT STRANGERS EXCERPT

ear and

ise I’m **J**OE’S BAR. FAMILIAR stomping grounds for Alexa Collins, yet even about the night felt off. First, the bar’s owner and his new bride were on honeymoon, so Joe wasn’t serving. Alexa’s normally happy friend Hartley, sat morosely stirring her drink, staring into the glass for answer the man who’d caused the problems was nowhere to be found. Alexa couldn’t relate to guy problems, considering she lived a hectic life, spent hours in hospital ER, and had no time for a relationship, let alone hot, stress-reducing sex, though it was something she could definitely use. For the past couple weeks, she’d been suffering from a definite case of the blues, the strain of life beginning to wear on her.

ts well

No wonder she was in a funk.

k.”

The music blasting through the speakers gave her a jolt akin to a special kick, and Alexa perked up at the sound. Rising from her barstool, she missed at her friend.

“I feel like dancing,” Alexa announced.

e could

With a disinterested sigh, Cara shook her head, but Alexa wasn’t showing no for an answer. Cara needed to have fun and forget about Mike Miller, the man who’d broken her heart.

uld get

Alexa jerked her head toward the dance floor. “Dance. Now.”

red and

Cara groaned but complied, standing up on command.

Alexa looked at the third woman in their trio. “Liza?” Liza’s husband, Dare Barron, had joined them for a night out along with friends who mingled around the bar.

Liza swayed her hips in time to the beat of the music. “Why not? Use some letting go.”

An upbeat tune reverberated as they headed to the dance floor near the jukebox and Alexa closed her eyes, allowing herself to get lost in the moment. Her body moved to the beat, her entire being consumed by the tempo and the sounds pulsing around her.

When she opened her eyes, she noticed she wasn’t the only one dancing to the upbeat music. The crowd had grown, everyone on the floor pumping their fists, swiveling their hips, and dancing.

Dare had joined Liza, wrapping himself around his wife in a melting embrace. Alexa looked away to avoid the obvious intimacy between the couple, and her gaze met that of a man who sat alone at a table near the dance floor. A sinfully sexy man with shaggy-blond hair and an unwavering stare.

He watched as she moved, his heavy-lidded scrutiny focused on her, but he sipped at his beer. His demeanor seemed casual, his stare anything but. Thinking of how down she’d been lately and how great this music made her feel now, she was unable to resist the impulse to crook her finger his way.

A glance told her that her best friend wasn’t watching, which was relieving. Considering Cara wouldn’t know what had gotten into Alexa. And she wouldn’t be hard-pressed to explain. All she knew, all she felt, was a bone-deep loneliness that reached into her soul, and this man’s intense and intense stare provided her heart with a jump she hadn’t felt in too long.

A slow smile lifted his lips, and her pulse skyrocketed as he stepped toward her, his swagger indicating self-confidence.

She experienced that same kind of self-assuredness in medical settings, but she normally fell short in other areas of her life. Still, she’d called him over with that attitude when beckoning him over, and she was glad she hadn’t stopped to think it through.

He joined her on the wooden floor, immediately picking up the pace. He danced close enough for her to smell his woody cologne that surrounded and aroused her. As they moved, their bodies spoke for themselves, their synchronicity startling for two people who’d never met. And with

and her music turned sultry, he was all too willing to join her for some dirty dance. He ground his hips against hers, the swell of his erection pressing delicately against her—too intimately for strangers, but too good to deny.

I could So she didn't.

Instead, she let the heat of desire crackle and spark between them as the fire licked at her veins.

Cara eased closer and looked from Alexa to her partner, her eyes raised, a concerned expression on her face. Alexa ignored her. She relished this sense of freedom, the release this man provided. She hadn't realized how attracted she was until now.

Pure enjoyment and fun.

When was the last time she'd allowed herself the luxury?

Her dance partner's hands slid to her waist. She'd worn black lace between a cream cardigan, which she'd unbuttoned to show both cleavage and the barest hint of her lace cami underneath. She reaped the benefit of her choice now and trembled at the rasp of his calloused palms caressing her sensitive skin.

A sexy grin lifted his lips, and he continued the dance along with an erotic assault on her senses. She could have lingered in their embrace all night, but from the corner of her eye, Alexa caught sight of Cara's ex-boyfriend, Mike.

He strode up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She jumped in surprise but soon settled into the embrace. Alexa figured she'd thought it was one of her guy friends joining her for a dance because she'd be interested in whether she would allow Mike that kind of privilege. Not without him doing a serious groveling first. Worried about her friend, Alexa kept an eye on the couple, prepared to step in if needed.

"You okay?" her dance partner asked in a Southern drawl. It was the first time she'd heard him speak, and the sexy voice fit him perfectly.

She nodded and smiled, her gaze roaming over his handsome features. Dimples etched either side of his perfect mouth and full lips, and a faint scar sat above his left eyebrow. But even as she admired the view, she noticed the sight of her friend, knowing Cara would do the same for her.

Mike pressed his front against Cara's back in a more intimate embrace than before. Before Alexa could even wince, Cara whirled on her ex with a surprised gasp and a furious spark in her eyes.

ancing. The music was too loud for Alexa to hear, and she inched cautiously remaining vigilant and on call.

“What are you doing here?” Cara asked, her voice tinged with t
Alexa knew she’d suffered ever since Mike’s abrupt departure.
m, and “I’m back.” His gaze never left Cara’s.

“Good for you,” she said with deliberate sarcasm.
ebrows He appeared as worn and ragged as Cara had earlier, before Ale
neededforced a makeup session on her friend.

ed how Cara perched her hands on her hips. “And you thought you coul
your arms around me and pick up where we left off?” she asked, he
rising.

Oh, go girl! Alexa thought, stopping short of clapping because
eggingswasn’t greeting Mike with open arms. As a cop, Cara could handle he
and theany situation, but as a woman, she was more fragile. Yet she wouldn’t
clothingman, including this one, walk all over her, and Alexa was proud of her
ing her Serendipity, New York was a small town and Mike was the former

chief whose sudden departure had sparked many wagging tongues. *A*
with thenow loud discussion between exes and sure enough, Cara and Mik
ntimateattracting stares from the crowd. Alexa knew they needed closure, b
ight ofdidn’t have to do it in front of an audience. Time to put an end to the
Alexa thought.

st. Cara Figuring she’d buy her friend some time to handle this on her own
d Carashe tapped Cara on the shoulder. “Are you okay?” Alexa asked.

no way “Yeah.” But the hurt in Cara’s blue eyes told another story.

g some “Can we go somewhere and talk?” Mike asked her.

on the “Seriously?” Cara blinked in obvious shock. “Let’s get sor
straight. I don’t know why you’re here or for how long, and I don’t ca
he firstI will not be your booty call every time you come back to town.”

Behind Alexa, she sensed her former dance partner was still
e face.watching the scene unfold, and Alexa spared a moment’s regret for ha
led scarditch him this way. But he was a momentary diversion while
ver lostfriendship was forever. And no self-respecting woman abandoned a fi
need for a man.

move. “Cara—” Mike reached for her, but she pushed him away, shovin
ed, thenshoulder.

“No.” Cara jerked out of his reach.

closer, Alexa moved closer. "I'm going to the ladies' room," she said, tipping her head toward the back of the bar. The silent, do you want to join n he painimplied.

Mike whispered something Alexa couldn't hear in Cara's ear, b shook her head.

Alexa turned, shooting a regretful glance at the man she'd never a Alexa hadmet. "Sorry. Friendship calls." She smiled at him, wishing they'd ha time.

ld wrap He nodded in surprising understanding and gestured with a sweep r voicehand. "It was a pleasure," he said, the words dancing along her endings, similar to the way his touch had branded her skin.

ie Cara She held his stare for a few more precious seconds before break rself incontact and focusing on Cara. "Let's go," she said, and steered them t let anythe crowd toward the restroom, leaving her sexy dance partner behind. friend.

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LUCAS THOMPSON WATCHED the intriguing woman walk off, her hips sw her delectable ass displayed to perfection in her tight black leggings. F what he saw. Hell, he'd liked what he'd felt even more. She was skinny, unlike the NFL groupies who usually followed him around home, her waist felt soft and generous in his hands.

He groaned and headed to the bar, ordering a beer. A cold drink cool him off before he went to his friend's house somewhere in thi Upstate New York town. Luke was here for a visit, but his ex-teammate Sanders, wouldn't show up till later. He was busy getting his father into an assisted living facility. Cole's plan was to stick around, fix dad's house, and put it on the market. Since Luke had planned to Manhattan for meetings with his agent, he'd taken Cole up on his o stay with him instead of in some sterile hotel. As pro football player both had enough of empty rooms when they were on the road. Lucas he'd help Cole out for as long as he was in town.

Luke had seen Joe's Bar and pulled into the parking lot, planning a beer and maybe some wings. Dancing hadn't been on his agenda again, neither was the russet-haired woman who'd captured his at She'd been a surprise in many ways, the most pleasant being that she

ing her recognized him as the tight end of the Texas Titans.

ie, was Either she wasn't a sports fan, or she was more into her hometown, the one to which Cole had recently been traded. Which meant her interest in Carato dance had been based purely on mutual attraction. Even before he picked her up close and taken in those sea-green eyes and the smattering of freckles on her nose, his gut told him the woman was more wholesome than he'd more who'd crossed his path in way too long.

He'd been watching her shake those hips with undisguised interest. When she'd crooked her finger his way and his cock had jumped in delight, the bartender asked as he set Luke's drink on the counter. "Want to keep a running tab?"

He shook his head. "I'll settle now." He'd had a long day of meetings between his agent and the potential sponsors the man had lined up for him to meet, then the hours' drive here, Luke was beat.

Before taking off, he looked around for *his woman*—he hadn't remembered her name, so the term seemed to fit. He found her standing on the other side of the room, deep in conversation with the same guy who'd been hassling her friend earlier. The woman, a pretty brunette, was nowhere in sight. Apparently, Lucas' dance partner was mediating a dispute between the two. Luke shrugged, tamping down the disappointment. At a glance, she struck him as a one-night stand kind of woman, although the way she ground against her on the dance floor, who knew where the night would have ended if they hadn't been interrupted.

Unfortunately, he'd never know. He set a twenty on the counter and waited for the bartender to move away back to his end of the bar, which took a while since the place did not have much business.

Finally, Luke got his change, left a tip, and started for the door. At the same time someone ran inside shouting. "Alexa! Get out back now, she needs a doctor!"

To Luke's surprise, his one-time dance partner turned and bolted for the rear exit.

A doctor. Something about the information made him grin.

Luke couldn't stop the impulse to follow the crowd out back. Alexa knew her name now—knelt by her friend, the woman she'd been protecting. He hadn't

“What happened?” he asked the man next to him.

On team, “Cara was attacked.” The guy, who appeared about the same age as Luke’s thirty-three, suddenly eyed him warily. “You’re not from around here, are you?”

He hailed from a small town himself, where everyone knew everyone else, so this man’s distrust didn’t surprise him.

Luke shook his head. “No, sir. Here to stay with a friend.” He wanted to mention Cole’s name, not wanting to draw any attention to himself as a pro athlete while he was here. “But I was dancing with Alexa and her soda.” Luke said, more to reassure the man he wasn’t a part of whatever had happened down here.

“I see.” The man slowly nodded, seeming to take Luke at his word. “Well, she’s the best doctor we have. She’ll be running University Hospital one day when her father steps down.” Before the man could continue, a siren sounded in the distance, the noise growing closer and making it impossible to continue the conversation.

The paramedics arrived, and things got even more hectic. They lifted Cara onto a stretcher, and Alexa went in the ambulance after insisting her boyfriend meet her there in his car. Alexa had been too preoccupied to realize Luke was in the group of people surrounding them. So the ambulance doors slammed shut, and the vehicle sped away. The crowd slowly dispersed, the fun gone from the night.

Luke climbed into his car and turned on the engine. The directions to Cole’s place were in his GPS, yet instead of turning it on, he picked the southern route on the highway he’d taken here and exited at the sign for the hospital. The same exit he’d passed on his way to Serendipity.

He parked near the Emergency Exit and scratched his head, wondering to himself what the hell he thought he was doing. The woman was a stranger, but she intrigued him on a level no woman ever had. And then she was saying something, considering the smorgasbord of choices laid out for him over the years. He’d enjoyed it when he was younger, but he’d been over it for a month, and he was over the lifestyle that came with the fame. The boys, the women, the occasional bar fight. So. Over. It. His teammates called it a “hard day’s work”—he held man. So be it. Luke knew he could take each one in a fight and still have energy left over. He just knew there was more to life than partying, and he was ready to find it. Whatever it was.

Right now, *it* was Alexa.

He'd first seen her as a sexy woman with haunting green eyes and a body to which Luke was damn attracted. She'd transformed into a friend who'd given up a sure thing—since Luke couldn't see himself leaving her down if she wanted to hook up—to look out for a pal. Then later she morphed again, this time into an in-control doctor, capable of putting her emotions and treating her unconscious friend.

In the span of thirty minutes, Luke discovered Alexa was not only beautiful but multifaceted, and as a result, she'd captivated him completely. He couldn't leave without finding out if her friend was okay and how she was doing after the night's crazy events.

Although, as he walked through the sliding ER doors, Luke had to wonder if he wasn't a little crazy himself for pursuing a perfect stranger who he'd never really met.

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Right now, *it* was Alexa.

He'd first seen her as a sexy woman with haunting green eyes and a hot body to which Luke was damn attracted. She'd transformed into a loyal friend who'd given up a sure thing—since Luke couldn't see himself turning her down if she wanted to hook up—to look out for a pal. Then later, she'd morphed again, this time into an in-control doctor, capable of putting away her emotions and treating her unconscious friend.

In the span of thirty minutes, Luke discovered Alexa was not just beautiful but multifaceted, and as a result, she'd captivated him completely. He couldn't leave without finding out if her friend was okay and how she was doing after the night's crazy events.

Although, as he walked through the sliding ER doors, Luke had to ask himself if he wasn't a little crazy himself for pursuing a perfect stranger he'd never really met.

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[Book 6: Dare to Take \(Tyler & Ella\)](#)

[A Very Dare Christmas – Short Story \(Ian & Riley\)](#)

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* Jason Dare gets together with Faith in the **Sexy Series** (*More Than Sexy*).

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About the Author



NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY, along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.

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NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Junkie Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.