



Christmas with
DAD'S BEST FRIEND

BESTSELLING ROMANCE AUTHOR

K. C. CROWNE

**CHRISTMAS WITH DAD'S BEST
FRIEND**

**AN AGE GAP HOLIDAY
ROMANCE**

K.C. CROWNE

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DESCRIPTION

I just kissed my dad's best friend....

And he's really not too happy about it.

Let's just say a life long crush can make a girl do some wild things.

I ran into Nathaniel at my parent's party.

And I couldn't get over my desire for the silver-haired GQ Adonis.

So I excuse myself to the restroom.

And I imagine him there with me as I touch myself.

Then I speak my desire for him as I reach my climax.

KNOCK. KNOCK.

In walks Nathaniel with a stern gaze.

And what appears to be a stiffness in his trousers.

“Whatever this is it NEEDS to stop.”

“You mean this?” I come close to his luscious lips and pause.

Then I finally work up the nerve to kiss him.

I took my chances in the bathroom that fateful night.

But NOTHING could prepare me for the greatest Christmas surprise.

CHAPTER 1



AMELIA

The party was always a fun event for my sisters and me, a chance to get dressed up and take advantage of the open bar and fancy catering while Dad schmoozed and boozed high-profile clients and contacts from the San Diego real estate world.

My dad held the event each October to promote his agency, David Weaver Realty Associates. He always splashed out on the preparations, hiring a trendy DJ and contracting the best high-end caterer in town. My mom would order flowers to fill every room of the house—a Spanish-revival estate with a palatial floorplan perfect for entertaining. The party usually spilled out into the yard and the extensive estate grounds, but tonight, an autumn rainstorm kept the whole event indoors.

Every year, Dad would close several high-dollar deals while mom would get tipsy and flirt with the bartenders, and my sisters would sneak a bottle of something expensive upstairs to the game room to share with me while we laughed ourselves silly.

But now that I was twenty-one, all three of us could officially order our own drinks. So, with a cut-glass tumbler in my hand and slinky gold velvet slip dress hugging my curves, I stood with my older sisters—Melinda and Larissa—surveying the scene, sipping on a glass of smoky-sweet Bourbon.

“Amelia,” Larissa said, elbowing me playfully, “that is one hell of a dress.”

“Yeah,” Melinda added. “Your figure is perfect in that. I’d be falling out of it. No spaghetti straps for me,” she said with a chuckle. Melinda was curvy, with full breasts and a nipped-in waist, and she often joked that her bras were more expensive than her actual clothes.

“Thanks,” I beamed. “I’d say I got it on sale, but I’d be lying. This baby was full price and charged to Daddy’s credit card.” We giggled together. The dress was a late graduation gift from my dad to me, except I had gotten to pick it out myself. Dad was always spoiling us with nice things; he loved us girls more than anything. We were his whole world, along with Mom, who was nowhere to be found while Dad was happily chatting with a group of brokers by the pool.

At least someone is being a good host.

A waiter came by with a tray of hors d’oeuvres and Larissa scarfed down a blini with caviar. I opted for a halved fresh fig. Melinda waved politely, declining the waiter’s offer. She was always watching her figure.

“Sis, you should eat,” I urged Melinda. “That champagne is going to hit you hard unless you get a little snack in you.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “Later.”

“No way,” Larissa replied. She hooked her arm into Melinda’s, smiling. “You and me. Buffet.” Melinda laughed and nodded, acquiescing. Larissa turned back to me. “Are you coming with us?”

“I’m right behind you,” I said, glancing at my dad as he made his way over to where I stood. “I want to thank Dad for my dress.”

My sisters headed toward the buffet, and I could hear their oohs and ahhs as they neared the fancy spread.

Dad approached and put his hands on his hips, sighing. “My baby girl, twenty-one years old, with her very own cocktail at the annual party,” he said with a wistful look in his eye. “Feels like only yesterday you were in pigtails learning how to ride a bike.”

“*Dad...*” I rolled my eyes, blushing.

“You look beautiful, kiddo.” He smiled warmly through his bushy beard, all six feet of him radiating with warmth and affection.

“Thanks, Dad. I love the dress so much.”

“It looks wonderful on you. Very grown-up.” Dad nodded, then scanned the room. “Hey Amelia, have you seen your mother?”

“No, I thought she’d be with you.”

Someone cleared their throat behind my dad. “David Weaver?”

“Bill! It’s been years!” Dad exclaimed, turning around. “Amelia, sweetie, I’ve got to catch up with my old colleague here.”

“Of course,” I said. My dad ambled away, and I was left standing alone when I spotted someone from across the room.

Nathaniel Dean.

My father’s best friend.

He was a couple inches taller than Dad. A few years younger, too. His light brown hair was framed by silver streaks coming in at the temples, and his warm brown eyes had the slightest hint of crow’s feet that formed when he smiled. He was in real estate, like my dad. Suave, successful, confident—cocky, some might say—and rightfully so, since he was the most handsome, most charming, most indescribably hot man I had ever laid eyes on.

And I had laid eyes on him plenty.

I had been crushing on him for years, lusting after him every time I got the chance to see him. It was only a few times a year, but that was enough to fuel my fantasies about him, naughty and taboo as it was.

I was his best friend’s daughter. A virgin. A younger woman. Not some glamorous arm candy Nathaniel Dean would date, let alone sleep with. He would never look at me that way. And I shouldn’t be looking at him.

At all.

But I couldn't help myself. He was a total smoke-show.

Wanting to avoid him, I joined my sisters at the buffet, and helped myself to the open bar again. The three of us danced for a little while near the DJ, giggling at the song choices. My sisters made another trip to the buffet, and I wound up talking to people I barely knew, and wasn't really interested in.

Anything to get my mind off Nathaniel.

After a while, I wandered off on my own, away from the center of the party, and stood at the back of the room near the fireplace. I was tipsy from the alcohol and felt its warmth in my cheeks. My gaze drifted to the firelight, and my mind drifted to Nathaniel. He had looked so good in his slacks and dark blue button-down, with the physique of an Olympic swimmer and the face of a Hollywood actor. I shifted in my stilettos, rubbing my thighs together ever-so-discreetly at the thought of his big body, his strong hands, his plush lips...

There he was again, on the other side of the room.

His eyes met mine this time. He gave me a small smile and nodded. I nodded back, trying to shake the naughty thoughts from my mind, preparing to act like I was a normal person enjoying a party instead of a lust-addled girl with an incurable crush on her dad's best friend.

Then he started walking toward me.

Be cool, be cool.

"Hey, Amelia."

"Hey, Nathaniel."

"That color," his eyes darted down to my dress, "is lovely on you."

"I-oh. Thank you," I said, flustered.

"I owe you congratulations. Your dad mentioned a while back that you completed your program back in May, and already started your career as a radiation therapist. I would've come to your graduation, but I was abroad on a business trip."

I didn't have a response. My brain was stuck on the fact that he said he liked the color of my dress. Not just the color, but the way it looked on me.

Nathaniel had been living rent-free inside my head for years. The idea that he had even noticed me had me blushing furiously, my cheeks hot and my hands suddenly sweaty.

I would live off that one little compliment for weeks.

Dad appeared just then, back from his chat with Bill, and greeted Nathaniel with a hearty clap on the back.

"David," Nathaniel smiled, swinging an arm around my dad's shoulders.

"Has Amelia been behaving herself?"

Oh, God.

Nathaniel's jaw twitched, almost imperceptibly. "I was just telling her how impressive it is that she graduated and found a position in her field so quickly."

"I'm awfully proud of my baby girl," Dad boasted.

I had to get out of there. It was too weird, too much. Nathaniel had a profound physical effect on me, that threatened my composure which was slipping from my control the longer I stood near him.

"If you'll excuse me," I said, and Dad answered with something like *sure, kiddo* as I walked away. Nathaniel's eyes were still on me. I could feel his burning gaze as I turned down the hall, trying not to seem like I was in too big a hurry, yet desperate to get out from under the spotlight of Nathaniel's attention.

I slipped inside the powder room, the tiniest bathroom in the house farthest away from the hubbub of the party. Twin sconces glowed dimly against gilt-on-black art deco wallpaper, but in the mirror, I could still make out the bright red flush on my neck and chest from my encounter with Nathaniel.

I started the sink and ran a washcloth under the cool water. Pressing the wet cloth to the back of my neck, I sat atop the bronze toilet lid and closed my eyes, trying to calm down.

Nathaniel is off-limits.

No touching.

No kissing.

Absolutely *no fucking*.

I chanted the words to myself like a mantra, trying to force some sense into my mind since my body had betrayed me so badly. “No touching no kissing no fucking, no touching no kissing no f–oh *fuck*.”

Who was I kidding? I couldn’t wish away my desire. Nathaniel had me hot and bothered, and I needed relief. I had to do something about it.

Now.

I stood up and reached underneath my dress, slipping a finger past the gusset of my thong and swiping tentatively through my folds, slick with want.

That’s what the thought of Nathaniel did to me. He made me so wet; my core was molten with need.

Bracing my free arm against the wall, resting my forehead in the crook of my elbow, I slipped a finger inside my pussy and let out a little moan. Holding my thumb to my clit, I inserted a second finger and rocked against my hand, whining now, desperate for release.

I closed my eyes and imagined it was Nathaniel who was touching me. That he was here with me in the bathroom—his strong body pressed up against mine, his big hands on me and his thick fingers inside me—and then I was coming, clenching and fluttering to the thought of him, whimpering his name...

Nathaniel, Nathaniel.

Suddenly the bathroom door opened, and the words turned into a gasp.

Nathaniel burst in. His eyes locked with mine right as I yanked my fingers out from under my dress.

Oh no.

He shuffled backwards but the force of his body knocked the door closed behind him, slamming and locking it shut from the push-button on the inside handle.

I was mortified. I wanted to crawl into a hole and disappear. Forever.

But then I noticed his trousers.

Tented, with a bulge that suggested he was not only hard, but huge. His chest was heaving, and his eyes raked up and down my body, landing on my wet, glistening fingers. His pupils were blown out black and wide with desire.

He *wanted* me.

Why else would he have followed me into the bathroom in a hurry, panting like he couldn't get here fast enough?

Alone with Nathaniel in the cramped powder room, only a few short inches away from him, I could feel the heat coming off his torso and enveloping me in his musky, manly scent.

Any questions or hesitations I had were drowned out by an instinctive, visceral need deep inside me.

On impulse, I leaned in and tilted my head up to his.

And then I kissed him.

CHAPTER 2



NATHANIEL

David Weaver's annual party was one of the few events I actually enjoyed during the fall, since the rest of the season would be packed with holiday nonsense I couldn't stand.

It had been weeks since David and I had seen each other at the country club, and even longer since we had played a round of golf. I was looking forward to catching up.

When I arrived at the Weaver house and spotted Amelia, I knew I should never have come.

Something had happened during the past two years. She had grown up, and I couldn't help but notice her in a different way.

She was gorgeous.

I had never thought of Amelia like that before. She was my friend's kid; some teenager I saw a few times a year with her sisters and her mom at events like this.

But she had changed. Matured.

Amelia was a woman now, and a total knockout.

She was standing across a crowded room glowing like golden candlelight, and I realized just how attracted I was to her.

Twenty-one, smart, professional, with a body that looked like it was made for me. I couldn't stop staring at the way her shapely hips sloped out from her slim waist. The way her tits looked like they would fill my large palms perfectly. The way

her wavy brown hair tumbled down to her shoulders, her face dusted with freckles and tanned from the sun, and her green eyes that sparkled when she laughed.

I was a thirty-eight-year-old man. Seventeen years older than Amelia. I shouldn't be noticing my friend's daughter that way. But she wasn't a little girl anymore, and when I first saw her that night, she stole my breath.

She was off-limits. Strictly out of bounds.

When I later found myself chatting with her, David had promptly joined the conversation and Amelia had thankfully hurried away before I could say anything stupid.

I had to go after her though because she might be in danger.

After Amelia ran off to the restroom and David went searching for his wife, I worried that Amelia had broken out in hives. Her cheeks and neck had been turning bright pink right in front of my eyes, and her father didn't seem to notice.

David always ordered a lot of shellfish for these parties. You never know when you might come across a bad mussel.

All I wanted to do was check on her. Just to make sure it was nothing serious.

So, I followed her to the far end of the house, down a long hallway. About halfway toward the end, I realized Amelia was whimpering inside a nearby bathroom. I rushed up to the door, preparing to break it down if necessary in order to help her. But when I got close, I froze in my tracks.

She was whimpering, all right. But it wasn't in distress.

She was whining. Moaning.

In pleasure.

I felt the blood rush away from my head, along with any last shred of coherent thought. Amelia was touching herself, pleasuring herself, on the other side of this door. And she sounded so fucking hot doing it.

I was insanely turned on, lost in the thought of her hand up under the gold fabric of her dress, fingering herself beneath it. That same dress that had been killing me all night.

Her voice went straight to my cock which was straining against my slacks. I didn't dare touch myself for fear that I would lose control and come in my pants like a goddamn teenager.

I knew I should walk away but her whines came closer together, climbed higher in pitch—and then she said it.

My name.

Over and over again, between heavy, erratic, clipped breaths.

She was thinking of me as she climaxed.

Now I was hard as a rock. There was no way I could go back out to the party like this.

I had to get out of sight, fast.

I needed a barrier between me and whoever might come wandering down this hallway.

I needed privacy. Immediately.

In a panic, I opened the door and pushed into the tiny, dimly lit bathroom.

When I got inside, the sight of Amelia made my heart race. Her cheeks and neck were glowing pink from making herself come, and she quickly pulled her hand out from underneath her shimmery dress, fingers wet from her arousal. I stumbled back, accidentally knocking the door shut behind me.

She looked shocked, but her face changed in the seconds she inched toward me. The bathroom was impossibly small, and there was nowhere to move. I hadn't thought this through. It had been a split-second decision to get into a private room, without thinking about the consequences of barging in on Amelia with my dick hard.

Now she was crowding into my space, tilting her chin up with her eyes locked on me, her breath shallow.

What was she doing?

She leaned in, pressed her soft lips to mine, and kissed me. That's when I lost control.

I grabbed her wrist belonging to the hand she had fucked herself with and brought her fingers to my mouth. She pulled away from my lips, watching me intently as I sucked her first finger, and then her second. The sweet, spicy taste of her on my tongue, the thought that those fingers had been in her pretty pussy just moments ago, nearly destroyed me. And the sound she made while she watched...

I dropped her wrist and kissed her again, this time pushing my tongue into her mouth. Amelia whimpered and writhed against my cock as I grabbed her round ass with both hands and squeezed. She was moaning and grasping at my shirt like she couldn't stay upright without it. We were teetering on the edge of something wild and dangerous, and all I wanted was to rip off her dress and take her right then and there, bent over the marble sink, watching her tits bounce and her face screw up in pleasure as I fucked her.

But I couldn't. I shouldn't.

I had to stop myself before this went any further.

"Amelia," I said, breathless, barely able to pry myself away from her. "Amelia."

She clung to me, her eyes darting around my face, a slight furrow forming on her brow.

"Amelia, we have to stop. We can't do this. I can't." I reached behind me and fumbled for the door lock, pushing it and then turning the handle.

Amelia's eyes went wide. She looked embarrassed, but she never said a word. She just pushed past me, ran out of the bathroom, and disappeared down the hallway.

What was I *thinking*?

What was *she* thinking?

We were this close to having sex in the bathroom of her parents' house.

David and Colleen. My best friend and his wife, who I had to face again soon. Socialize with them. Act like nothing had happened just now between me and their precious youngest daughter.

I had to compose myself before going back out there. So, I thought of every disgusting, sad, awful thing I could, willing my hard-on to go away.

It took a while.

When I was finally ready, I left the bathroom and made my way down the hall. I walked back to the party, straight to the bar, and immediately ordered a stiff drink.

After I downed another drink to settle my nerves, I started making my way around the party to say my goodbyes, first to professional contacts, then to Colleen and David. But every time I moved from room to room, I'd pass Amelia. Her face would turn red, and she'd vanish into some other part of the house, only to reappear a few minutes later.

Each time I saw her was a reminder of what had just happened between us.

I couldn't stop thinking about the way she kissed me. About her sweet, hot whimpers, whining my name as she brought herself to climax behind the bathroom door. About how I lost my cool and almost gave in to my lust for her.

Good thing I had finally made the rounds and was ready to leave.

I made my way to the foyer to get my coat and umbrella. It was time to put this whole evening behind me and forget it had ever happened.

CHAPTER 3



AMELIA

I had never been so humiliated in my whole life.

My father's best friend—and my crush for years—had walked in on me masturbating.

To the thought of *him*.

I had been embarrassed when he first walked in, but that all changed when I saw how badly he wanted me.

Then I acted on impulse and kissed him.

And he let me.

He sucked my juices off my fingertips, the most erotic thing that had ever happened to me. Kissed me back so fiercely. Grabbed my body like it belonged to him, like he couldn't resist me, like he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

And then he rejected me.

I was ashamed and confused, sexually frustrated and angry. I just had to get through the rest of this stupid party, go home, and forget any of this ever happened.

The trouble was, I kept seeing Nathaniel everywhere I went.

He seemed to be everywhere I turned, despite the fact that there were two hundred people at the party. He'd be at the bar, getting a cocktail. He'd be standing with a group of real estate brokers and developers, deep in conversation, yet shooting furtive glances over at me. He'd be in the corner of the room

by himself, only to have my mom come up and place a hand on his shoulder, probably asking why he was skulking around on the fringes of the party instead of socializing.

No matter how many times I tried to flit to another room or how much boring conversation I endured listening to my dad's golf buddies, Nathaniel was there.

Finally, I decided enough was enough.

I had to get away from here.

First, I asked my sister Larissa if she'd take me home. We were roommates, along with our friend Trudy, so we had come to the party together. Larissa was the designated driver tonight.

But she wasn't ready to leave. "*Too much good food to stop at two plates,*" she had said. Larissa had the appetite of a triathlete in training... because she was one. She was a total gym rat, into swimming and extreme sports ever since I could remember, and now she was getting into weightlifting, which she was wild about. She burned a lot of calories, so she needed a lot of sustenance. I didn't have the heart to force her away from her beloved buffet table.

I couldn't ask Melinda to drive me home either, because she'd had a few glasses of champagne and had planned on catching a ride with Larissa and me.

I tried hinting to a few friends of my mom and dad that I could use a lift. But everyone was either too tipsy or having too much fun for me to try forcing the matter. I resigned myself to calling a rideshare service, which would be fine, as long as they would get here fast. With the rain tonight, I worried that the wait would end up being unbearably long, and I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible.

Weaving my way through the crowd of waiters and real estate moguls, I made my way into the kitchen where I had hidden away my purse in a locked cupboard. The kitchen was empty since the caterers had their own staging area in tents on the side of the house. I was crouched on the floor, rifling through my bag for my phone when I heard someone walk into

the room. I peered up to find my dad with a quizzical look on his face.

“What are you looking for, sweetie?”

“I’m just getting a little tired. I’m going to call an Uber since Larissa is still taking advantage of the buffet.” I tried not to think about what had happened between Nathaniel and me in the powder room.

“Come with me, kiddo. I’ll make sure you get home safe.” Dad extended his hand out to help me up from the floor. I let him pull me to my feet, swinging my purse strap over my shoulder, and followed him in silence, not wanting to blurt out anything crazy like, *“I almost fucked your best friend twenty minutes ago.”*

My dad walked me out toward the high-ceilinged foyer, and my heart skipped.

No, no, no.

Nathaniel was there, putting on his coat.

“Hey Nate,” my dad said, cheery and oblivious, “you mind taking Amelia home? She’s tuckered out and her sisters want to stay for a while longer.”

Nate’s steely gaze seemed as though it would pierce right through me.

“Of course, David,” he said, nodding dutifully.

“I know you’ll take good care of her.”

“I will.” His eyes flitted back to mine for a fraction of a second, then he grabbed his umbrella and fished in his coat pocket for his car keys.

My dad gave me a peck on the forehead and a little squeeze goodbye.

“Night, honey,” Dad said.

“Night, Dad.” I hugged him back, my head swimming with how uncomfortable this drive was going to be. How mortifying it felt to be forced into sharing a car ride with the

man I had thrown myself at in a dark bathroom at my parents' house.

Dad walked away, back toward the party. He trusted Nathaniel completely.

Nathaniel held the front door open for me and led me out to his car, a silver luxury sedan. I hadn't brought my own umbrella, so he held his over my head as we darted out to the car, dodging puddles. He opened the passenger's side door—making sure I stayed dry, watching as I got buckled in—before collapsing the umbrella and stashing it in the backseat along with his coat. Then he dashed around the front of the car and got into the driver's seat.

His hair and shirt were damp from being out in the rain. His slacks, too. He didn't look over at me as he turned the key in the ignition and steered out of my parents' circular driveway.

Nathaniel didn't speak to me, and I didn't speak to him, until we were leaving my parents' estate on Coronado Island across the water from downtown San Diego.

“Where do you live?” he finally asked in a quiet voice.

“Muir Avenue. Point Loma Heights,” I said, biting my lip.

He didn't respond.

“Is that on your way home?” I asked.

“Yes,” he answered, his jaw tight.

“Where do you live?” I hoped it wasn't out of his way.

“La Jolla.”

Not exactly on the way, but close enough in the general direction.

We drove over the graceful, arresting swoop of the Coronado Bridge toward the glittering lights of downtown. The rain started coming down harder as we reached the other side of the bay, heading onto the 5 Freeway and over to Point Loma. By the time we passed the wetlands, the rain was coming down in sheets. Nathaniel handled every turn smooth

as butter, until he slowed and came to a stop on an empty, secluded street bordering the park near my apartment. He put the car in park and turned off the engine underneath enormous mature trees; dark and private.

“Amelia,” he said, still refusing to look in my direction, avoiding eye contact, “what we did... if your dad ever found out...”

This time, I was the one who couldn't seem to think of anything to say. I had felt rejected and discarded. I was confused and didn't know what to do.

Nathaniel continued. “You're the apple of your father's eye. This thing between you and me, it would only end up hurting David. And you.”

I found my voice. “Hurting me... because you don't want me.”

Nathaniel quickly turned in my direction, shaking his head, gaze serious. “No. I *do* want you. You have no idea. I've never, ever, in my life—it's just... not the right thing to do.” He turned away again, and I realized how conflicted he was.

My tongue felt thick and useless in my mouth, but at this point I might as well tell him how I really felt. How much worse could things get?

“Here's the truth. I think you're the sexiest man I've ever met. I think about you when I'm alone at night, touching myself under the covers, wishing you were there with me. I've never had sex before because I just haven't met the right person. I've always felt that I would know when it was the right time. And I know now. Every time I fantasize about my first time... it's with you.”

Nathaniel took in a sharp breath. His chest rose and fell quickly, breath shallow and labored. He looked like he was in physical pain as he turned to me.

“You shouldn't have said that.”

CHAPTER 4



NATHANIEL

I surged forward to kiss her, leaning across the center console. She opened her pretty mouth for me, and I tasted the skin of her lips, her tongue—salty like the sea and sweet like whiskey.

Amelia unbuckled her seatbelt and then pushed the latch on mine, freeing me from its constraining hold. I took her face into my hands, deepening our kiss while she clawed at my shirt, undoing the buttons impatiently until I helped her.

The rain pelted down onto the car. Everything was a blur of tugging, pushing, pulling—wet lips and frantic touches, tension building to an inevitable peak that loomed over the two of us.

It was wrong.

I knew it.

But I couldn't help myself.

She was letting me take whatever I wanted, giving me everything. I was completely out of control, giving in to my forbidden desire for her, unable to turn back.

“Why?” she asked between kisses, her breath coming shallow and hot against my neck as she nuzzled my jawline.

“Why what?” I was so caught up in the moment, barely understanding what she was asking.

“Why did you—*ohh*”—she whined when I nipped at her ear—“why shouldn't I have told you how much I wanted you?”

I took her chin with my thumb and forefinger and tipped her head upward to make sure she was looking at me. “Because” I said, “of all the things I’m going to do to you now.”

Amelia’s eyes widened. “Like... like what?” Her voice was breathy and hungry, and I knew exactly what she needed.

“Like this.” I kept her chin in my grip and dragged my left hand down her neck, following her delicate tendons with my fingers and feeling her chest heave in anticipation as I swept my thumb along her clavicle. Then I rolled the thin gold strap of her dress off the feminine slope of her shoulder and the top of her dress fell down, exposing her bare breasts.

I lunged down to lick her nipples, pert and pink. She watched me from above, making obscene noises as I sucked and licked at her breasts.

“And this,” I said, running a hand down her supple thigh to the hem of her dress, lifting it until I reached her black lace thong moist with her arousal, brushing a finger along the seam. She moaned at the touch. “And this.” I pressed at the lacy fabric against her entrance, my breath hitching when I discovered how soaked she already was.

She was going to make a mess of the leather seats. I didn’t care.

“Is this all for me?” I asked, awed, imagining what it would feel like to sink my cock into her eager, needy pussy.

“Mm-hmm,” she whimpered. “Need you—I need...” She was babbling, incoherent before I had even gotten her fully undressed.

She was my wildest fantasy come to life. She made me feel like a brute, an animal.

But I had to take things slow, to make sure she was ready for me.

“Soon, baby. Have to get you ready to take me.” She let out a breathy whimper as I pushed aside the gusset and inserted my first finger inside her tight passage. Then, once she adjusted, I added my middle finger. Her pussy gripped me

like a vise, hot and wet. She would feel so fucking good around my cock. “Amelia, you’re so fucking *tight*.”

“Mmm.” She made sexy little noises as I pumped in and out, feeling her walls clench around my fingers which made lewd, squelching sounds as I worked her silky folds.

I was so turned on now, it was hard to stay focused.

All I had wanted to do, all night long, was fuck her. She had driven me crazy by making herself come in the bathroom, whining my name.

Now, I needed to make her come myself.

I needed to watch her fall apart.

I pulled my fingers out to draw slick circles around her clit. “I want you to come for me,” I murmured, my cheek against hers, breathing into her ear. “Can you do that, baby? Can you come for me?”

A gasp escaped her throat, then she nodded. “Yes, yes...” Her cries grew higher as I sped up, then her thighs shook and her hips jerked as she came on my fingers—whimpering, then panting, then moaning long and loud.

“*Fuck, Amelia.*” My cock had been half-hard ever since we got into the car together, but now it was like a solid rock, pushing painfully against the fabric of my slacks, leaking precum.

I was ready to explode.

Amelia strained forward to kiss me, sloppy and sweet and desperate. “More,” she pleaded. “More, please—”

“Put your seat back.”

She did as I instructed. The seat went flat, her body splayed atop it with her dress gathered around her waist.

I reached over her and shifted the seat farther backward so there was more foot room, then climbed over the center console and bent my knees on either side of her with my calves angled down into the footwell.

She was clawing at my chest, running her hands down my abdominal muscles and pulling at my belt, desperately grasping for more of my body.

I kissed her, hard, and her wandering hands bumped the head of my cock beneath my slacks, making me buck forward and hiss from the contact.

This was moving fast, and I knew she wanted me to fuck her. But this was her first time, and I had to be absolutely certain.

“Amelia,” I said, wresting myself away from her lips to look her in the eye. “I need to know that you’re ready, that this is what you really want. We can stop right now, just say the word. But if we keep going... there’s no turning back.”

She looked up at me with her emerald, green eyes through dark, fluttery eyelashes, and nodded. “Yes, I want this. I’ve wanted it for a long time. Wanted *you*.”

I reached back into the glovebox for a condom, but she placed a hand on my arm. “I have an IUD,” she said quietly.

“You’re sure about this?”

“I’m sure.”

I undid my belt buckle and Amelia’s hands flew to my slacks, unbuttoning and unzipping them. Then she pushed my pants down, allowing them to pool around my knees, revealing my black boxer briefs.

Her hands slid up my muscular thighs and I groaned the closer she came to my groin. She reached up and stroked me—*fuck*, her delicate hands looked so good on my cock—then I shoved the briefs down, freeing myself, dick bobbing in the few short inches between our bodies.

Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a little “O” shape.

“You’re so big,” she breathed.

“You can take it,” I reassured, all my muscles tensing as she grasped my naked cock with her soft fingers.

Oh, my God.

“Show me? Please?” she asked, in a way that was both sweet and naughty at the same time. “I need...”

“I know what you need.” I captured her mouth again, fondling one of her breasts and rubbing my thumb across the nipple until she was squirming under me, mewling and babbling *please, please, please*.

I pulled her panties down her thighs and off her trembling legs, making sure the lace didn't catch on her sky-high heels. Then I lined myself up with her entrance and wet my cockhead in her slick folds.

“I know just what you need,” I repeated, barely pressing inside her pussy as she let out a little squeak. Her channel was so slick and perfectly tight; I was hanging on by a thread trying not to lose control.

I pushed in further, meeting some more resistance, watching her face contort as she reacted to the pinch I knew she must be feeling. “Just relax. Breathe.” I modeled long, deep breaths until she did the same, adjusting to having me in her taut, sweet pussy. “You're doing so good, baby. That's it.”

She moaned at my praise, and I pushed the rest of the way until I was fully seated inside her. My mind went blank when I was hilted there, so close to the pleasure I had been craving since I set eyes on her earlier that night, finally about to get the relief I needed.

I pulled back, then rolled forward, and then again, eliciting a surprised yet hungry whine from her each time.

It had taken everything in me not to unleash my lust and fuck her senseless, but now I wasn't sure I could hold on very long.

“So tight, so good,” I said, my breath clipped, and my brain scrambled by the way she took me, like she was designed for me. She whimpered, moving her hips against me, wanting more. I began to rock in and out in long strokes, finding a rhythm, spurred on by the approving sounds she made. “Perfect little pussy, taking me so well.”

She moaned at the compliment, reaching up to rake her fingers through my hair just the way I liked. It was as if she knew me already; knew what turned me on, knew how to touch me.

I was a goner.

“Feels... feels good,” she gasped as I increased my pace.

“That’s it baby. So fucking perfect for me, taking everything I give you...” I couldn’t finish the sentence, getting too close, too fast.

“Nathaniel... *Nathaniel!*” she cried out, clenching my cock, and that’s when I lost any last restraint, letting my hindbrain take over completely. She was so fucking gorgeous with her dress bunched around her waist, writhing as I fucked her on the leather car seat, about to come for me again—I could feel it—and I couldn’t hold out a second longer.

“I’m gonna come baby, gonna come inside you—Amelia, *fuck—*” I bucked faster into her as she pulled my hair taut with her fists, moaning wildly as her pussy tightened and fluttered around me, coming again while I fucked her through it. Then I thrust hard once, twice, spilling inside her with a rough, shaky shout.

We were both breathless, sweating in our half-off, disheveled clothes, panting inside the car with the windows fogged up and the pouring rain hammering the windshield.

It was a minute before I slipped out, watching my cum drip down her thighs and onto the expensive Napa leather.

I’d never be able to look at that car seat again without thinking of Amelia crying out my name while I brought her to climax and filled her with my seed.

Still fighting to catch my breath, I placed soft kisses on her lips, her cheek, her jaw. “Was that what you dreamed of?” I asked, knowing she liked it, but wanting to hear it from her mouth.

“No.”

I pulled back, surprised.

“It was better.”

CHAPTER 5



AMELIA

It had all happened so fast. One minute I was confessing how badly I had wanted Nathaniel, and the next moment he was fucking me in the passenger's side seat of his car.

The next morning, I awoke replaying the night before in my mind, shuffling out of my bedroom and into the kitchen in a daze. Absently spooning cereal into my mouth, I heard the din of conversation coming from the living room.

Trudy and Larissa were chatting about what they had gotten up to last night.

"My date was fun," Trudy said. "We went bowling, of all things. It was a blast. We're going out again next week. How about you, how was your dad's party?"

"Great buffet," Larissa replied. "I've never seen such a good seafood spread. Dad really went all out this year." I could just make out Trudy's chuckle.

Seafood was the last thing I wanted to think about. The only thing on my mind was the night before, with Nathaniel, playing on a loop inside my head. His massive hands on me, his plush lips on mine, his strong body taking care of me and giving me exactly what I needed.

I almost couldn't believe it had really happened. But I had little aches and pains all over my body; sore muscles, tired legs, and a subtle yet somehow delicious tenderness in my private parts—proof that sex with Nathaniel Dean most certainly *did* happen.

I wanted nothing more than for it to happen again.

Nathaniel had driven me home afterward. He helped me out of the car while the rain sheeted down and held the umbrella over me as he walked me up to my apartment building.

“Amelia,” he had said, his brow furrowed, “I need you to promise me something. Your father cannot find out what we just did. It would break his heart, and he’s my best friend. What happened between you and me...” He had leaned into me then and smoothed a few stray hairs away that had fallen in front of my eye. “This was a one-time thing,” he told me, looking like he was trying to convince himself just as much as he was trying to convince me. “A mistake.”

In a way, I knew he was right. Yet it was still a disappointment to hear him say that. Especially when I could tell, deep down, that he didn’t mean it. Not one bit.

“I promise,” I had said. “It’s our secret. I won’t tell a single soul, not even my sisters.” He strolled back to his car after walking me to the door, striding away affecting a casual air, as if nothing had happened between us. As if what we did meant nothing to him.

I knew better.

I felt the patience in how he had guided me, knowing that it was my first time. The way he shuddered and shook when he came inside me. The way he kissed me sweetly afterward, staying close until our breathing steadied. The way he made sure to hold my hand walking me up to my building, careful not to let me slip in any of the puddles collecting from the night’s heavy rains.

It couldn’t be a one-time thing. I needed to be with him again. I wanted more.

Nathaniel wanted more, too. I could feel it.

My daydreams of last night were interrupted as I heard the sound of footsteps shuffling in from the living room.

Larissa wandered into the kitchen where I was staring off into space, startling me when she opened a cabinet to grab the coffee, then slammed it shut.

I jumped in my seat.

“Easy there, sis!” she said, looking curious. “Are you still on planet Earth, here?”

I laughed weakly, shaking my head and brushing it off, digging back into my cereal.

Trudy came in behind Larissa and rooted around the refrigerator for the orange juice.

“You’re awfully quiet this morning,” she said, pouring herself a glass. “Everything okay, Amelia?”

I crunched on a spoonful of cornflakes and muttered, “yeah, I’m fine.”

“You sure?” Larissa prodded, a concerned look on her face as she filled the coffeemaker. “You look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

Trudy and Larissa were only looking out for me. But I couldn’t tell them what had really happened. Not after promising Nathaniel that I wouldn’t say a word to anyone.

“I’m okay,” I told them. “Just a few too many drinks last night, I guess.” It wasn’t really true; I had been tipsy, but not drunk. Still, I needed an excuse for being in such a fog.

Anything to keep them off my case.

Trudy gave me a knowing nod. Larissa squinted, assessing me, but seemed to buy my story in the end.

At least for now.

“Well, why don’t you come with me to the gym?” Larissa suggested. “Sweat it out. Best thing for a hangover. That, and fried eggs with hot sauce.”

I made a gagging noise. “*Yuck*, no.”

Larissa chuckled on her way back to her room.

Trudy patted me comfortingly on the shoulder. “Just make sure to drink plenty of water,” she said with a nurturing smile.

“I will.”

After finishing my breakfast and placing my bowl in the dishwasher, I retreated to my bedroom and shut the door. My body was sore, and I was tired. So, I curled up for a nap, drifting off to thoughts of last night.

It took me a while to fall asleep.

— — —

I had only been in my position as a radiation therapist for six months. It was a good job and a noble vocation administering radiation treatments to cancer patients and people with other illnesses. I had worked hard through a rigorous two-year training program to become certified. After school, I began applying for jobs, and I was proud when my top choice employer hired me.

Working at University Hospital was still new, and I needed to put my best foot forward. That meant planning and prepping everything carefully before the work week, so I could stay focused and give the best care I could possibly deliver to my patients.

Sundays were always meal-prep days. I grilled some chicken and veggies for the week, sorted them into containers to store in the fridge, then got to work on preparing jars full of overnight oats and berries.

On top of meals, I had a list of housework and errands to complete before the week, plus a whole mountain of laundry to finish by the end of the day.

It was eight o'clock before I realized just how behind schedule I was, and it dawned on me the reason why.

Nathaniel.

I couldn't get my mind off him. He was there when I was tossing my clothes into the washing machine, after I found the thong I had worn last night, and realized I barely had the heart to launder it. He was there when I was picking up my room and putting away my expensive stilettos in the closet, remembering how he deftly avoided snagging my panties on the heels.

Everything reminded me of him.

My first, my long-time crush.

How could I get such a mind-blowing experience out of my head? It had been my first time—with my father's best friend—and he made me come twice.

I had plenty of friends who had recounted disappointing experiences their first time having sex, with most being mediocre at best.

Nathaniel, on the other hand, had taken care of me. Made sure I felt good the whole time.

He possessed the experience and, frankly, had the practice to know what to do and how to make it good for both of us.

I realized how lucky I had been.

After that, I might be ruined for any other man.

Yet I didn't want another man. I wanted Nathaniel, again and again. I had been thinking about him all day, distracted while I tried to finish all of my Sunday night tasks.

I had to find a way to see him again.

Alone.

I'd waited for the right person to finally lose my virginity, and now that I had done it, the sex was even better than I had imagined.

Was this what having sex was going to be like? All-consuming? Something I thought about all day, all night, without fail?

Maybe that was just sex with Nathaniel.

All I knew was that I had to find out.

CHAPTER 6



NATHANIEL

My phone rang right as I got out of the shower.

I had never felt nervous to talk to David before, but after what happened with Amelia, something twisted in my gut when I saw his name on the screen.

Still, he was my closest friend. We had a history together.

I had known David for almost ten years. After spending my early twenties working dead-end jobs with little direction, I found a position as a caddy at San Diego's most elite country club when I was twenty-five. I was a capable golfer, a natural athlete, and good with people. It was a decent match for my personality. After a while, I got rotated to working as a server in the lounge and was eventually hired as assistant manager.

The pay was average, and it wasn't especially rewarding work, but at least it was some kind of career path in hospitality. I also didn't mind the exposure to so many beautiful women.

Back then, I had developed a reputation as a ladies' man, and it wasn't exactly undeserved. I had taken my fair share of opportunities to sleep with the glamorous women I would meet at the club, or in San Diego's nightlife scene.

By the time I was twenty-nine, I was looking at becoming General Manager of the lounge. That's when I met David, who had recently joined the country club. We became close friends, and he was there for me when my parents both died of heart disease just a few months apart when I was thirty.

My father went first. Then my mother said she would die of a broken heart. And she did.

David was my confidant, and I confessed to him that I was bored, lost, and unfulfilled working at the club. He took me under his wing and encouraged me to better myself, to do something bigger with my life. Six years older than me, with a wife and family, he felt like the older brother I'd never had. He shepherded me through the process of getting my real estate license and helped introduce me to the right people.

I owed him a debt of gratitude for helping me right my course, and I could never forget that.

“Nate! How are ya, all recovered from the party I hope? I have to thank you again for driving Amelia home. You're one of the only people I trust enough to take care of my little girl.”

If you only knew.

“It was my pleasure.”

“Well, I'm calling about some potential new clients for you, searching for investment property opportunities in San Diego. I met them through a friend who bought a second home from me last year, but they're foreign buyers from Singapore, so it's more in your wheelhouse than mine. It just so happens that they're in town for the night, and I thought we could all sit down together so I can introduce you. Can you meet me at the country club for a working dinner this evening, say around seven o'clock?”

This was typical of David, introducing me to clients, supporting my career. I felt that twinge in my gut again, and almost wanted to come up with an excuse not to meet him, but this could be a promising opportunity, and David was my best friend. I couldn't avoid him forever. “Sure thing. Looking forward to it.”

By the time I arrived at the country club, my nerves had settled. It was David, after all. Everyone loved him, and for good reason. He was easy to be around. Laid-back. He could put anybody at ease.

The business meeting went well. I liked the clients, the clients liked me, and David facilitated our introduction in that friendly, natural way of his. The deal turned out to be a significant one, with the potential for future deals down the road.

I had worked hard to build up my career from the moment David took me under his wing all those years ago.

Once I passed my real estate exam, I set up shop out of my apartment at the time, then after I closed my first few sales, I had made enough money to start advertising in more and more international markets. Soon I was busy as an agent specializing in foreign buyers wanting to acquire property in the San Diego area.

Before long, I was doing multi-million-dollar deals, buying my first six-figure home, and then my second in La Jolla. I started traveling all over the world, working with international clients seeking to snap up investment properties in expensive zip codes across the United States.

I had David to thank for my success. My work ethic got me to the top, but David was the person who pushed me when I needed it most.

His friendship meant the world to me.

After the clients left, David and I stayed at the lounge for a nightcap.

I bought a round of expensive Highland whiskey. “Thanks again for making the introduction, Dave. I have you to thank for the deal. Appreciate the call.”

David smiled warmly. “Business always comes full circle. You know the saying, what goes around comes around? Someday there will be an opportunity you know is a better fit for me. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.”

I grimaced into my sip of Scotch, remembering the way Amelia’s fingernails scratched my scalp on Saturday night while she was moaning my name and coming on my dick.

It was all starting to sink in. I really *had* slept with my best friend’s youngest daughter, and I didn’t know if I’d ever

recover from the guilt I felt.

The problem with guilt, though, is that it's harder to absolve yourself when the thing you feel guilty for is something you still want.

And I wanted Amelia. Badly.

Just as my thoughts turned to her, as if it was a cruel punishment meted down on me from the universe, David brought her up out of the blue.

“You know, I'm so proud of Amelia. She really set her sights on something with that radiation therapy program and saw it through. Even though she's the youngest, she's got that ambition, that drive. Melinda and Larissa... they're still finding their way, figuring out what paths they're going to take. But Amelia has such a good head on her shoulders. Never lets herself stray from the straight and narrow, doesn't get distracted. She's a good girl. She's got a bright future.” David's eyes went a little misty, and he had a far-off look about him. “One day she'll fall in love and start a family of her own. But for now, she's still my baby. They just grow up so fast.”

I felt almost physically ill. I wanted to crawl under the table. To hide and never come out. Hearing David speak so lovingly about Amelia made the guilt weigh even heavier on my spirit. Yet I couldn't deny how strong my attraction had been to her.

It was torture.

“You're right to be proud of her,” I said, putting on my best poker face. “She is a wonderful girl.”

David was a devoted father, and always spoke so lovingly of his daughters. I hadn't known the girls particularly well while they were growing up—family life wasn't for me—but I admired David's dedication to his wife and children.

I, on the other hand, was married to my career. Marriage and family weren't things I thought much about; that ship had sailed a long time ago.

“Well, you’ll get to see her if you join us for Colleen’s birthday party the weekend after next. I know we just entertained for the client party, but I’m contracting a pared down catering package. Something more intimate, but still special. I’ve got a big surprise in store for her this year, and you have to see it, Nate.”

I immediately tried to get out of it. “I’m not sure I can—”

“Oh, have you got a date that night? Client meeting?” David had a twinkle in his eye. I knew that look. He was dead set on convincing me to come to the party. He wouldn’t buy any half-baked excuses.

That drive and persistence David had described in Amelia? She got it from him.

“No,” I said, “it’s just that I have a heavy workload...”

“Then you’ll join us! Great. I’ll text you the details.”

It was no use arguing. Here I was, about to close another major real estate deal and I had David to thank for making the introduction.

Now I had slept with his precious, youngest daughter. He was so proud of her, loved her so much. Meanwhile, I had taken her virginity in the front seat of my car last Saturday night.

The guilt would always be there, I guessed. So would the uncomfortable feeling I already had about seeing Amelia again.

There was more to it, though. I wasn’t only uncomfortable from what had happened between us.

I was uncomfortable because of how much I wanted it to happen again.

My thoughts were a mess. I couldn’t get Amelia out of my mind no matter how hard I tried, no matter how badly I felt about the situation with David. She had been so good for me, so perfect and pliant, so willing to trust me and let me show her how to take me, how to be a good girl.

If only I could stop myself from wanting her, maybe I could get some sense of control back in my life. Some peace.

That would have to wait, at least until after Colleen's party next weekend. One more night of temptation was all I had to get through. After that, I would take some time to get my head straightened out. Maybe I would take a trip somewhere by myself. Clear my mind. Find a distraction or two, preferably far away, in a foreign country.

I had to forget about Amelia.

She was alluring, gorgeous, and the sex had been incredible.

I definitely had my work cut out for me.

CHAPTER 7



AMELIA

The work week was turning out to be insane. It was only Wednesday, but I was exhausted.

Three of the other radiation therapists called out sick on Monday, and the scheduling staff had to scramble to arrange appointments so that each patient had enough time and care from providers. Even still, an influx of new patients was being brought on due to the closure of a nearby facility, meaning that University Hospital was serving thirty percent more patients than normal.

It was hard work, but I enjoyed the chance to have a positive effect on people's lives. Administering radiation therapy meant spending time with patients ranging from young people with optimistic prognoses to older patients who were severely ill, and everyone in between.

My career choice had proven fulfilling, and although it wasn't my lifelong dream, I was glad I had studied so hard during my program so that I was well-prepared for my professional future. The work could be difficult emotionally—especially when caring for sick children—but I had always loved helping people and making others comfortable. Most of my patients knew me by name. Compassion was just in my nature. It made me a suitable personality type for the role.

Dad always said I had a big heart. He told me he was so proud when I graduated, that I was going into a noble line of work—not just a profession, but a calling.

I wasn't sure I'd be doing it forever, but it was extremely rewarding, and I knew it gave my dad peace of mind that I had chosen a stable career with a focus on helping people.

One of those people was my favorite patient, Ed. He was an older man, maybe about seventy, and he came in twice a month for his treatments, always by himself, having taken the bus.

Every time, Ed would have me laughing without fail before he even sat down. A real ham, I always thought.

Today was one of Ed's scheduled visits, and he showed up fifteen minutes early like always. When I found him in the treatment room, he was doing a crossword puzzle with a pen, using a book he'd brought as a flat surface.

"Amelia! How's my favorite healthcare provider this week? Do anything fun over the weekend?"

I tried not to blush. I was a professional, after all. "Oh, I went to a party at my parents' house. Nothing out of the ordinary, really. My dad holds one every year for his real estate clients. How about you, Ed? How are you feeling today?"

Ed was all smiles. "Well, it just so happens that I've got some jokes for you." He set down his crossword and opened up the book, *1,000 Best Tried-and-True Jokes for Every Occasion*. "Ready?"

I chuckled, ready to be amused. Ed seemed to want to make me as comfortable as I wanted to make him. It gave me a warm, fuzzy feeling; people like Ed gave me hope for humanity. "I'm a captive audience, Ed," I teased. "Try me."

"Okay, how's about..." He flipped through the book, then his eyes lit up when he found what he was looking for. "What did the zero say to the eight?"

"I don't know, what?"

"Nice belt!"

Oh my. "Good one, Ed." I laughed. Ed beamed.

“I’ve got another one for you. Want to hear a joke about construction?”

“Sure!”

“I’m still working on it.”

I laughed even harder at that one.

By then I had gotten Ed all settled in for his treatment and was making sure he was comfortable.

“Alright, let’s save some jokes for after you’re all finished. Make sure and stay extra still for me, okay?”

“Anything for you, Amelia,” he said with a sweet smile.

I went into the next room and delivered the radiation remotely from my computer panel. Afterward, I got Ed a cup of apple juice and made sure he was feeling okay before letting him go for the day.

“One more joke,” he said.

“I’m all yours.”

“What do you call an alligator detective specializing in finance?”

“Let’s hear it.”

“An invest-i-gator.”

I cackled at that one. It was so cheesy. “That’s my favorite so far, Ed.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it! I made that one up myself. No book necessary.”

“I know you’ve got lots more where that came from.”

“You better believe it,” he said with a wink.

Ed was a veteran who had served at the local naval base. He had no family, no wife, no children or nearby relatives. So even though he was ill, he had to arrange transportation to and from the hospital for treatment, and then when he got home, he was on his own managing the side effects.

I always called to check on him, to make sure he was getting enough to eat and drink, sleeping enough, and taking good care of himself. Even when I'd call him at home, he would find a way to slip in some jokes and make me chuckle. I was providing him with care that was above and beyond my duties, but I still felt like the lucky one.

I wished that Ed had someone to check up on him in person. If only there were a way to get extra help for people like him who didn't have anyone at home supporting their treatment journey. Every person deserved kindness and dignity, not just in the hospital setting, but throughout every step of their illness.

Ed's appointment was the final booking of the day. After a few administrative tasks and a conversation with my superior, I grabbed my purse and lunch bag, slipped on a comfy cardigan over my scrubs, and headed to the parking garage.

I hopped inside the cute little Mazda Miata that my father bought me for my sixteenth birthday and started to make my way home. I was obsessed with yellow cars back then, so my car was bright yellow, and I was still in love with the stylish interior and sporty handling.

Work had been tiring, but I was feeling uplifted after seeing my favorite patient. As I was merging onto the freeway, my dad called my cell. I answered on speakerphone.

"Hey Dad," I said.

"Hey there, kiddo. How was work?"

"Pretty good considering we're completely understaffed and overbooked."

"I'm sure you did a great job. Hey, listen, Amelia, I'm planning another party for your mother's birthday. Nothing huge, but I'll be using a smaller team from the same caterer and bartending service that worked the party last weekend. Can you come? I know your mom's actual birthday isn't until November, and we've got the holidays coming up with plenty of things on the calendar. But I want to celebrate early, the

Saturday after next. I've got something special planned for her."

I should have been thinking about my mom's upcoming birthday, but my mind instead went straight to the possibility of Nathaniel attending the party. "Yes, I'll be there."

"Great. I'm calling your sisters to make sure they put the date on their calendars, too. Looking forward to seeing you, sweetie."

"You too, Dad."

I'd had a few days to come down from the high of my tryst with Nathaniel, but my mind was still reeling at the thought of seeing him again so soon. Would I be able to hide my attraction to him in front of my family? Would I get a chance to talk with him alone?

Suddenly, the week and a half until Saturday seemed unbearably long.

CHAPTER 8



NATHANIEL

On the Saturday morning of Colleen's birthday party, I went for a jog on the beach. I needed to get any excess energy out of my system so I could stay as calm and collected as possible now that I'd be seeing Amelia for the first time since we slept together.

The invitation had said six o'clock for appetizers and small plates throughout the night, but I waited until the last minute to leave, and arrived at six forty-five. Normally I hated being late to anything, but tonight I had a reason-less face time with David and, most importantly, Amelia. The more I could avoid her, the better off we'd both be.

It was just my luck that Amelia was the first person I saw when I walked into the backyard where the party was being held.

She looked amazing, wearing a tight, long-sleeved black dress that accentuated her waist and stopped halfway down her toned thighs, with a plunging neckline that showed off her delicate collarbone and perfect tits. Her chestnut hair was pulled back loosely, with a few strands framing her face. She had on bright red lipstick and sparkly earrings that lit up her beautiful features, and I nearly had a heart attack when I realized she was wearing the same strappy black stilettos that she'd had on that night in the car.

Fuck, was she trying to kill me?

Amelia was standing near her sisters with a glass of champagne in her hand, resting her elbow on her other arm

which was across her waist. She turned her head and caught my eye, looking startled at first, cheeks going a little pink, but holding her gaze steady.

I shifted in my feet, nodded a polite “*hello*” across the backyard, and she smiled at me.

Gorgeous.

The party was less ostentatious than the previous one, with maybe fifty friends and family rather than the big three-hundred-person bash at David’s client party. It would be difficult to avoid Amelia altogether, especially when she looked at me like *that*. I had an immediate reaction to her, my heart rate shooting up and my mind flooding with the memory of her hot body in my car, her sweet kisses and her soft skin.

David spotted me just then, and I hoped it hadn’t looked like I was ogling his daughter. He hurried over to meet me, all smiles and energy.

“You made it just in time for the surprise, Nate. Come on over, grab a drink before I make the big announcement.”

I followed David over to the small bar that had been set up and ordered a bourbon. David made his way across the slate patio to Colleen, who was sitting with a group of her friends, all wearing copious amounts of jewelry, drinking bright pink martinis of some sort.

David clapped his hands together once and asked if everybody would listen up for just a minute. The DJ cut the music and the various conversations quieted down to a hush. David raised his glass to toast his wife, saying a litany of lovey-dovey things to her—about how sharing each birthday with her through the years was so special—and Colleen smiled placidly through his speech.

Then David pulled out his phone and cast his photo app to one of the outdoor TVs, and a picture of a large Cape Cod-style home with white shingles and blue trim filled the screen. A banner on the bottom of the photo read, “Colleen’s Beach Cottage.”

“Happy Birthday, honey,” David said with an enormous smile. “I know you’ve always wanted a beach house on the ocean, so I bought you a vacation home in Newport Beach.”

Colleen hopped up from her seat, mouth agape, with her hands pressed to her cheeks in glee. Her friends squealed in delight, cheering her on as if she had won a game show. She gave David a little hug and a peck on the cheek, then reached for her glass and lifted it in the direction of her girlfriends while they all lifted theirs, toasting and dancing as the DJ brought the volume up once more.

A photo slideshow started playing, featuring pictures of the beach house and its coastal decor that opened up onto the sandy shoreline. The home was far from a cottage—David must have spent several million dollars on a piece of prime real estate in Newport.

All three of David and Colleen’s daughters’ eyes went wide in excitement, and they started clinking their glasses, too. They’d also be the beneficiaries of such a significant gift, after all. The family would now have a second home in one of the most exclusive beach communities in California.

I couldn’t keep my eyes off Amelia. She looked so happy about the surprise, giggling and smiling with her sisters. She was gorgeous when she smiled. That perfect mouth, those soft, full lips, her bright white teeth framed by sexy red lipstick.

I needed to distract myself from her presence. Fill the time until I could reasonably leave the party. So, I found a colleague I recognized, and walked over to chat. It wasn’t long before more platters of gourmet appetizers were being offered by waiters, and people started to move around, finding small tables to sit and eat. After catching up with my colleague, I busied myself with some canapés and made dull conversation with one of Colleen’s vapid friends.

Colleen made her way over, hair in a bouffant and her skin overly fake-tanned, holding a freshly poured pink-hued martini. She whispered something to her friend, who then walked in the other direction, leaving the two of us alone.

“Happy Birthday, Colleen. Congratulations on the new home.” I was glad to get a chance to greet the birthday girl; I’d be one step closer to leaving for the night.

“Thank you, Nathaniel,” she said, her voice syrupy, obviously tipsy. “You’ll have to come spend some time up in Newport, soon.”

I chuckled.

She wouldn’t be inviting me there if she knew I’d deflowered her daughter a week ago.

“I’m sure you’ll be taking the whole family,” I said.

“Hmm. We’ll see. The girls are usually busy with work and their little friends, so I’ll probably be all alone in that big, empty house most of the time.”

“You must be so proud of them.”

“Who?”

“Your daughters.”

“Oh, I guess so. We’ll see if any of them makes anything of themselves.” Her speech was slurring, just slightly. I had a feeling those pink martinis were a little too strong. She rambled on, as if I was her gossip buddy. “Amelia does have a decent career, I suppose. But Larissa spends all of her time at the gym, even when she’s not meeting with personal training clients. She’s putting on too much muscle if you ask me. It’s not feminine! Although Melinda could take a tip or two from her, frankly.”

At first, I thought I misheard her. Was she suggesting Melinda needed to lose weight? Melinda seemed naturally curvy-built differently than slender Amelia and athletic Larissa—but perfectly healthy and fit. It was an awfully insensitive thing for her mother to be saying behind her back. Colleen and I weren’t close like David and I, but she seemed to be growing more and more superficial over the years.

I cleared my throat, looking away awkwardly.

“Anyway,” she elbowed me, “enough about the girls. Nathaniel, you really do have to come up some evening and

visit me at the new house.”

There was something in Colleen’s tone that didn’t sit right. As if she was insinuating something; like she was flirting with me.

Then again, she was drunk. A lot of folks get flirtatious when they’re drunk.

“I’m afraid I can’t get away from work these days,” I said, deflecting. “Your husband keeps sending eager clients my way. I have to thank him again for the latest introduction. Very motivated buyers.”

Colleen opened her mouth to say something, glassy-eyed and slow to react, but she was interrupted by two of her friends who sidled up to where we were standing.

“Colleen,” said one of the women, “you have a brand new place to decorate, and I know just the interior designer! Let me give you his number...” The two women distracted Colleen enough for me to make a smooth getaway.

Since the party was on the smaller side, it was hard to avoid Amelia. But I managed to do it for the first hour, and I thought I might just make it through the entire night without encountering her.

One more drink, one more hour, then I could head home.

I got in line at the small bar set up on the main patio. The couple in front of me suddenly had a change of heart and left the line, and I stepped forward—only to realize it was Amelia now standing in front of me.

Her vanilla perfume wafted off her tanned, toned skin, like an assault on my senses reminding me of that night in the car. Something inside me had been strained all evening; stretched thin and pulled tight, like a coil.

Now, the coil snapped.

I breathed her scent in deeply. Shamelessly. When she turned around, her sparkling eyes went wide and her cheeks blushed pink.

“Hello, Nathaniel,” she said.

“Hello, Amelia.” A long moment passed. Standing next to Amelia, my mind flashed with images of our night together.

“Are you having a nice time?”

“Yes, thank you,” I answered. “And how about you?”

“I’m pretty excited for the new house,” she said.

“It looks like a wonderful property. I’m sure you and your sisters will enjoy it, too.”

She was doing a decent job of pretending nothing had happened between us. Her tone was neutral, her questions standard small talk. Except I could see right through her; she was as affected by my presence as I was hers.

It was apparent in the slight flush that crept up her chest and neck. The way she leaned in and kept eye contact while I spoke. The subtle, nervous fidgeting movements she made—smoothing her skirt, tucking her loose hairs back, crossing and uncrossing her arms. All signs that she was flustered by me. Attracted to me.

I couldn’t deny the magnetism between us. Amelia’s body language confirmed it. That spark we shared, that raw, rare chemistry that happens so seldom in life, was only going to burn brighter if we tried to suppress it.

Something special had happened between Amelia and me. Something I couldn’t get out of my mind.

“It’s good to see you again, Nathaniel. Really, really good.” There it was. Her eagerness, her interest coming through the measured exterior. She bit her lip, as if she had said something wrong, but she hadn’t. Not to me.

“You too, Amelia.” All the trouble I had gone through to avoid her tonight was flying out the window the longer I stood next to her.

“I’ve thought a lot about the other night,” she said in a quiet voice, blinking up at me with her startling green eyes. “I... haven’t been able to stop thinking about it, actually.”

My collar suddenly felt tight.

I knew I shouldn't give in to my desire for her—God, how I shouldn't—but I needed to get her alone again.

“Would you like to talk somewhere more private?” I asked discreetly.

“Yes,” she said, without hesitation. Her eyes darted around my face, and she nodded, repeating, “yes I would.”

I leaned in and whispered in her ear. “Meet me in the basement. Ten minutes.” Her father had a workout room down there. Nobody would bother us.

Amelia nodded once more, a small smile forming on her face. I touched the back of her upper arm lightly before I left her standing in line and started walking toward the house. Before disappearing inside, I glanced back once to the sight of her lovely, smiling face.

No one seemed to notice me—everyone was busy eating, drinking, chatting. I headed down to the basement, checked my watch, and began counting down the minutes until I would have her in my arms again.

CHAPTER 9



AMELIA

The party could wait. I had a better invitation.

I had never felt so high on adrenaline in my life. The risk factor of meeting Nathaniel in my father's home gym was obscenely high, and the consequences of getting caught could be life-altering, but I had to see him again. It was all I had thought about for a week.

Slipping away from my mother's celebration, I made my way down the stairs. The lights were dim in the hallway and throughout the basement—an energy-saving setting my dad had programmed based on the time of day. When I reached the bottom of the staircase, I could make out Nathaniel's shadowy form behind the glass windows of the gym, pacing between weight machines and ellipticals, unable to see or hear me approach.

Waiting for me.

As I walked down the hallway, my skin tingled with anticipation. Finally, I reached the door and pressed down on the handle, my heartbeat drumming rapidly in my chest. Stepping into the workout room, I shut the door behind me, then locked it.

Nathaniel froze in his tracks. I lingered by the doorway, unsure of what to say, feeling suddenly anxious.

He walked over to me, unhurried and silent. A frisson of excitement made its way up my spine as he approached, and I moved backward a couple of steps until my rear was against the door.

“Amelia,” he rasped, voice low and needful, stopping only an inch away from me. I could feel his body heat, smell his faint cologne and salty skin.

“Nathaniel.” His name came out in a whisper. My body was practically vibrating with excitement—lust, nerves, the thrill of being alone with him again.

He took a single finger and traced it up my arm slowly, up to my shoulder, over my collarbone, up the side of my neck and the shell of my ear. Then he leaned in and murmured, “I’ve been trying to avoid you all night. Because I knew I couldn’t resist you.” His lips hovered above mine, our breaths mingling, growing shallower. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you, Amelia.”

My heart was pounding, and my voice caught in my throat.

“Me too,” I breathed, trembling. “I’ve thought about you nonstop.”

He brought his other hand up to cradle my cheek, tilted my head back to expose my neck to his lips, and softly kissed the skin below my ear. I shivered, arching my back to press into his hard body, but he pulled away, teasing me. Lavishing me with tiny pecks and nibbles down my collarbone, he hunched to follow the low neckline of my dress down to my sternum and nipped gently at the curve of my breasts.

My nipples had hardened underneath my dress. I hadn’t worn a bra, and the texture of the fabric tickled and teased against the sensitive skin as Nathaniel trailed around, exploring.

I planted my palms on the door, dizzy with lust, desperate for something to ground me to the physical world.

“You have no idea how badly I’ve wanted this,” he said, his voice warm and velvety. “Wanted to touch you again. To feel you again”—he straightened up from nuzzling my chest to look me in the eye— “to kiss you again.” His honey-colored irises gleamed dark in the low light of the room, darting around my face. I could hardly breathe I was so turned on.

“Now’s your chance—”

Before I could finish the word, his lips slanted against mine. I melted into the kiss, humming as his torso pressed firmly to my body, feeling his length hardening against me.

I opened my mouth, letting my tongue sweep along his lower lip before delving further, wanting to be as close to him as humanly possible, locking my arms around his shoulders. He stifled a moan, deepening the kiss, hands sweeping down my body to my hips, my ass. I could feel his cock stiffening as it pressed tighter into my abdomen and whimpered at the thought of having him inside me again.

Then, bending slightly, he lifted me up, pinning me to the door. I instinctively crossed my ankles around his back, and our kisses turned ever more urgent, bodies grinding against each other in a rush before we could even get our clothes off.

“Amelia,” he gasped between kisses. “Baby—”

“Nathaniel—” I wanted more. Needed to feel more of him, take more, give more; I wanted everything. “Need you, now. Please.”

“I’m yours,” he said, slowing the feverish pace of his lips as they grazed against mine. “I’ll give you what you need.”

He pulled back slightly, gently letting my legs straighten, holding onto me so I stayed steady when my heels hit the ground. Before I could reach for him again, he dropped to his knees.

“Stay there,” he said, not quite a command but hardly a request. I was letting him lead the way, and I liked it.

He knew what he was doing. I wanted to learn.

Pressing kisses to my thighs, lips climbing higher and higher, he brought his palms to the hem of my dress and pushed it up inch by inch until he reached my panties. I was wearing a red G-string with mesh fabric in front, a tiny ribbon adorning the top of the elastic.

He took in a sharp breath. “Fuck Amelia,” he said, finger tracing along the thin strap at the top of my thigh, giving me

goosebumps. “Did you wear this for me?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Good.”

A whimper escaped my throat, and the heat built between my thighs.

Nathaniel pulled at the elastic, tugging the G-string down my legs until I was bare from the waist down, exposing my apex— wet and aching for him.

He took the panties as I stepped out of them and hung them on a nearby weight rack with a grin on his face.

Then he parted my thighs with his large palms and placed a kiss on my navel before his face disappeared between my legs.

First came his breath, his voice mumbling “*perfect pussy*,” then the soft drag of his longest finger from my belly button down to the small patch of silky curls, and finally the flat of his tongue against my center—*oh, my God*—the tip parting my folds, searching for my clit and swirling hot circles around the sensitive bundle of nerves.

He licked and gently sucked me, pressure mounting in my core, then pulled his lips away, and pushed a finger into my entrance.

A moan slipped from my throat. I laced my fingers through his hair, holding on for dear life. My back was arched, and I was panting, already on the edge, needing more.

Nathaniel knew it.

“So wet,” he said, inserting a second finger. “So soft,” he cooed, sliding his digits in and out of me. “So tight,” he murmured.

Then, the tip of his tongue returned to the pearl of my sex, and I could feel my orgasm just out of reach.

“Faster,” I blurted out, needing more friction. “More.”

Nathaniel groaned into me, flicking his tongue against my clit, curling his fingers forward and finding the tender spot

inside that brought my body over the brink.

My walls clenched around his fingers, pulsing as my climax crashed over me, vision whitening out and mind blanking until the sensation was so intense I had to clamp my thighs shut, forcing Nathaniel to finally pull away.

“You’re so beautiful when you come,” he said looking up at me, awed, his lips glistening and pink from pleasuring me.

Floating down from the high, I released his thick brown hair from my tight grip and tugged gently at him to stand so I could kiss him again. Tasting myself on his lips was a revelation—spicy and sweet, mixed with Nathaniel’s intoxicating flavor.

His fingers fumbled for the hem of my dress, and I lifted my arms so he could pull it over my head.

I was naked now, wearing only my strappy black stilettos. Nathaniel stepped back, his hungry eyes raking up and down my form, broad chest heaving as he feasted on me with his gaze.

Leaning down, he swung an arm underneath my knees, another around my shoulders, and picked me up again, cradling me against his chest with my legs dangling over his forearm. I began tugging at his black shirt, wanting to get him as naked as I was. He carried me over to a weight bench and set me down gently next to it, then set about peeling off his shirt as my fingers flew to the top button of his jeans.

I carefully unzipped him. He grunted as I palmed at his thick, rigid cock beneath his briefs, and I had the sudden urge to make him feel just as good as he had made me feel. So, pulling his jeans down to his ankles, I knelt down on the soft foam exercise mats. He let out a soft gasp when he saw me drop to my knees.

I moved to take off my stilettos.

“Don’t,” he said quietly. “Keep them on? For me?”

I smiled, surprised yet happy to give him what he desired. Pulling down his briefs, I reached for his hard length, eliciting a grunt from him.

“You don’t have to—”

“I want to,” I said, sincere and eager. I had tried this before, fooling around with a college boyfriend, but I had never wanted to do it as much as I did now. The idea of having Nathaniel between my lips, the thought of making him fall apart made my mouth water and my pussy wet all over again.

His breathing was heavy as I brought my lips to his cock and leaned down to lick a stripe up from the base.

He hissed, hands immediately coming to either side of my head, holding gently but fingertips full of tension against my scalp. I placed a kiss on the tip, sucking gently at the bead of fluid leaking out.

Gazing up at him, I found him transfixed, heavy-lidded, murmuring praise as I swirled my tongue around his cockhead and brought a hand around his shaft, pumping slowly.

“Is this good?” I asked.

“So good, baby. Perfect, Amelia, you’re—” His sentence was cut short when I took him into my mouth.

His lips formed the word “*fuck*,” but no sound came out.

I bobbed up and down on his cock as far as I could, unable to fit the length of him inside my mouth. All I could hear were sounds of pleasure—stiff grunts, stifled groans—and his voice had me so turned on, I needed to touch myself.

Bringing a hand down to my folds, slick with want, I moaned around his cock. Soon, I was close to another orgasm from my fingers, from the sexy sounds he was making, from the looming thought of Nathaniel, unraveling, undone by how good I was making him feel.

“Amelia,” he said, voice strained and breath coming fast and erratic, “Amelia sweetheart, are you...”

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed, nodding best I could to let him know how close I was.

I felt his grip tighten, guiding my head to pleasure him slower until he finally held me still. I was waiting for him to show me what he wanted.

When he pulled my mouth off him, it surprised me, but then he knelt down. Wide-eyed, I let out a little squeak as he turned me around briskly, bending me over the weight bench. My elbows landed on the soft padding, and I felt Nathaniel spread my legs, positioning his wet, rock-hard cock against my entrance, his warm, broad chest against my torso.

He leaned into my neck and nipped at my earlobe.

“I need to feel your sweet body,” he murmured, scrambling my circuits, kissing my neck and pressing into me from behind. The angle was deeper than in the car, the friction unbelievable when he started moving, and I whined needily as he reached a hand around my front to bring his fingers to my clit.

I was throbbing with the need for release, on the precipice as he rubbed tight circles around my sensitive sweet spot, rocking his length into me with long strokes.

This was more than I had imagined. Better than I had dreamed. All those nights thinking of Nathaniel, wishing he could be mine—none of my fantasies compared to finally having him for myself.

“I want you to come for me again,” he huffed. “Can you do that, Amelia? Can you be good for me?”

“Yes,” I whimpered, feeling the pleasure and pressure build in my core. “Yes, Nathaniel, yes I’ll be good—so, so good—” Then my orgasm hit me, a shock and a rush, burning through my body and setting all my nerve endings on fire.

“So good for me, coming around my cock, so fucking *perfect*—Amelia—” He bucked into me harder, fucking me through my climax until I saw stars, then came with a shout as he gripped my hips and held me to him tightly, groaning.

It took us a while to catch our breath.

When I finally did, my first instinct was a practical one.

“Good thing there are towels down here.”

— — —

We got dressed, sharing soft laughs and little kisses. I reached for my panties hanging on the weight rack, but Nathaniel stopped me, holding my wrist gently.

“Ah-ah-ah,” he chastised. “This,” he said with a smirk, “is mine now.” Letting go of my wrist, he took the G-string into his hand, and regarded it for a moment before tucking it into his trouser pocket.

Nathaniel left the gym first. I followed a few minutes later, rejoining the party.

He stayed closer to me now, seizing the chance when no one was looking to brush his fingertips along my thigh, place his broad hand on my ass—sans G-string—and give it a light squeeze.

I loved the way he looked at me when no one was watching. The way his eyes lingered on me, twinkling with the little secret we shared.

It was naughty and taboo. But it was also tender.

We made sure to avoid each other once Nathaniel was saying his goodbyes. I remained near my sisters and waved rather than doing what I really wanted—throw myself into his arms for a passionate kiss.

There was something precious here, something worth protecting, and I was beginning to see that he felt that way, too.

CHAPTER 10



NATHANIEL

The week had dragged by. On the Saturday morning after Colleen's party, I awoke to the sound of the surf outside my bedroom window, crashing onto the shore below the cliff.

My thoughts, like every other morning this week, went straight to Amelia. We had given in to our mutual desire, and the chemistry between us was undeniable.

A week was already too long a time without her. I needed to see her again. With an upcoming business trip, that need became even more urgent.

I texted her before getting out of bed and asked if she could meet me a block away from her apartment, figuring that picking her up at the front door during the daylight was too risky. She replied with a simple, "yes," and I bolted up from the sheets and into the shower with the energy of a twenty-year-old.

When I spotted her out of the rearview mirror, she was wearing jeans and a cream-colored sweater in a cable knit, snug around her feminine figure.

Amelia opened the car door and settled into the passenger's seat.

The seat.

"Hi," she said, her big green eyes bright with energy and her face fresh and supple, wearing no makeup. She looked so pretty au naturel. I was enchanted by every freckle, every small beauty mark.

“Hi,” I replied, feeling a little dumbstruck by her loveliness.

Amelia glanced around, looking a little too alert, on the edge of paranoid. She must have been worried that her roommates—one of whom I knew was her sister—might be getting suspicious.

“Hey,” I said, trying to be reassuring, “nobody saw us. We’re fine.”

“Okay,” she replied tentatively, a smile forming on her face.

“I just needed to see you. To touch you.” I ran a hand up her thigh.

She let out a puff of air, moving her leg into my touch. Then she looked down at where my hand rested, and a little giggle escaped her lips as she pulled her thigh away just an inch, batting her eyelashes and playing coy.

“Maybe for once, could we do something together that doesn’t involve taking our clothes off? You know, to see if it’s even possible?” Her sideways grin and her deep dimples made my chest thump.

“And why would I want to do that?” I asked playfully. Her face fell slightly. I might have hurt her feelings; made her feel like I was just using her for sex. “Hey,” I said, voice gentle and conciliatory. “I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that you’re gorgeous and I can’t keep my hands off you.”

She nodded, accepting my explanation, her smile returning.

I had an idea. “How about this,” I proposed. “Why don’t we take a day trip. It’s Saturday, after all. Let’s head up to San Clemente where nobody will recognize us. We can get something to eat, walk along the pier... how does that sound?”

Her eyes lit up. “I would love to.”

The drive up to Orange County was beautiful as the clouds burned off from the morning marine layer. A crisp, bright

November day greeted us when we parked near the little downtown area, boasting a strip of restaurants and shops selling seashells and surf gear.

We stopped at a juice place first, then walked down to the main beach and strolled along the pier. Amelia laughed graciously at my jokes about seagulls, and I put my arm around her shoulders when she shivered from the ocean breeze. Our conversation was all over the map—music, movies, favorite beaches and travel. She told me more about her job as a radiation therapist and I described how I had gotten into surfing once I bought my place in La Jolla.

Amelia was a curious person. She listened to some of the more technical, nerdy things about surfing and asked questions, wanting to understand more. I liked explaining the exciting parts to her, but it was even more fun to watch her wheels turn when I told her about how tranquil and calming it was. How inspiring. I could tell she understood the desire for quiet and oneness with the natural world. The feeling of peace.

There was much more to Amelia than just a hot body. I had known she was smart and capable, but it surprised me just how compatible we were beyond sex.

Even if it was the best sex I had ever had.

When lunchtime rolled around, we were both famished. We stopped at a little restaurant serving fresh, locally caught fish sandwiches, and sat on a picnic bench near the water. Kids played nearby on a grassy area next to the sand, and people tossed Frisbees back and forth with their dogs.

“It would be nice to have a schedule that allowed me to do this during the week,” Amelia said, looking longingly at the water, the families, the fun.

“I guess your job isn’t that flexible,” I said, realizing that the nine-to-five life was something I hadn’t done for ages. Real estate kept me extremely busy, but I had the flexibility to surf when I wanted, travel freely, and make my own hours, even if that meant working late into the night or on some beach halfway across the world.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “It’s rewarding and I love helping people, but if I’m being honest, the whole thing was sort of an attempt to get my dad off my back,” she said, bending her drink straw back and forth. I waited for her to elaborate, and after another moment, she did. “It’s just that he expects a lot from me. My whole life, I’ve been under so much pressure to be perfect. I’ve always been the daughter who has it all together, who has her life sorted out, you know? Even though I’m the youngest. My dad has always told me I’m so hard-working and bright. I don’t want to disappoint him.”

“He loves you,” I said. My own story was much different—my parents never pressured me, and I found my way professionally only after floating around for years, directionless, when they had passed. But I knew David was proud of Amelia, no matter what she did. “He just wants you to be happy, I’m sure of it.”

“I know, I know. He does; he’s the best dad. He cares so much. But choosing a career is so overwhelming, and I really didn’t know what I wanted, so I picked the thing that sounded most practical. I still don’t know what I want.”

“Well,” I said, “if it makes you feel any better, I didn’t have much ambition until I was almost thirty. I worked hard, but it took my parents passing away for me to change my life and make something of myself. That, and your dad’s friendship, of course.”

She smiled, then her expression turned thoughtful. “Yeah, I know not everyone has it figured out at twenty-one. Although, I guess it’s not exactly true, about not knowing what I want. It’s just that what I really want is so out of reach.”

She could do anything she set her mind to. Of that, I was sure. So I pressed her. “Amelia, tell me. What is this mysterious goal of yours?”

“Let’s take a walk,” she said. We got up, started strolling to the pier, and I slipped my hand around hers as she started to tell me about her dreams for the future.

CHAPTER 11



AMELIA

We walked along the sand until we reached the pier, then started down the weather-worn wooden planks with people body surfing and boogie boarding and splashing below us, off to the side on the sand. The morning sunshine that had brightened our drive to San Clemente was obscured again behind clouds. The sky had been growing more overcast lately, with temperatures starting to drop now that November was here.

“So, for a while now, I’ve wanted to start my own non-profit,” I explained.

Nathaniel’s face lit up. “That’s a great idea! What sort of organization?”

“The idea came to me when I first got my job at University Hospital. I had just started working with patients after my training program and was noticing the differences in the types of patients we would work with. Sometimes we see young adults, occasionally children, and quite a lot of middle-aged and elderly adults. Among the older patients, there’s a specific demographic of people I feel are underserved and need help, those who have no family or support systems who come in for treatments. It breaks my heart.”

He tightened his grasp on my hand, a sympathetic gesture. “I can only imagine it must take a toll on you.”

“It does. It’s why I’m happy to be able to do this kind of work because I want to help people. But it’s hard knowing that not everyone has adequate support. I watch the other patients

who have friends and family surrounding them, there to lift them up; people who are committed to being present for them throughout their illness. The long-term outcomes of those patients are much better. It makes a difference in their actual prognosis.”

“I had never thought of it like that, but it rings true,” he said, his face pensive.

“When someone has encouragement, when they have a family member or friend to come to appointments with them, just someone to be *there*, it makes a real impact on their journey. But the people who arrive alone, go home alone, and have no support system to speak of... they seem to be fighting a losing battle.”

Nathaniel nodded, listening intently, still holding my hand as we sat down on a bench at the end of the pier.

I appreciated that he was listening to me, asking questions. Like he was really interested in what I had to say, wanting to know my plans, my goals, my feelings and worries.

Once I started telling him, it all started pouring out.

“Take for instance one of my favorite patients, Ed. He’s a veteran, an older man, and one of the sweetest people I’ve met so far in the job. He always makes me laugh. Always stays upbeat. But I know deep down he feels the absence of any supportive people in his life. I worry for him. What if his cancer recurs, and he needs to start treatment all over again? Who will be there for him?” I let out a great sigh. It felt good to tell someone my feelings. To have someone listen to how emotional my work could be for me. “Sometimes, after appointments with lonely patients, I have to excuse myself to go and cry.”

Nathaniel squeezed my palm again and brought our clasped hands up so he could stroke my cheek with the backs of his fingers. Then he pulled our hands close and kissed the back of my wrist, all while his fingers were laced with mine.

It wasn’t an asking type of touch; not sexual, and not expecting anything back from me. Just showing me that he

cared.

It made my chest flutter.

“Amelia, you’re an amazing woman. Strong, smart, and you have an enormous heart and ability to feel compassion for people. I think your idea for a nonprofit is a wonderful one. Have you looked into the logistics of starting a 501(c)(3)? How would it function, would you arrange home care in addition to rides? Support groups? What would be the optimal place to operate out of? Office space is more affordable in North County...”

I sighed, reminded of how much planning and knowledge would be required to start something so big. “It’s still in the daydreaming phase. It will probably be in that phase forever. I doubt this is something I’ll ever realistically accomplish.”

“Not with that attitude,” he scolded gently. “What about your father? I bet he would support you. He could help you with some initial funding, plus get you started on developing a donor base.”

“But I wouldn’t want to disappoint him.”

“Why wouldn’t he be just as proud of you for something like this as he was when you told him you were pursuing your career in radiation therapy?”

I shrugged, not sure what to say. “I don’t know, exactly. It’s just a feeling I get. My dad has always wanted stability for me. Taking chances with money and trying to start a non-profit from the ground up would be a huge risk, and what if I failed? I’m tired of my father swooping in to save the day. I know how privileged I am; I grew up with a lot of creature comforts. A cute car when I turned sixteen. A graduation trip to Europe after I finished high school. So many nice things have been given to me, but if I want to become the woman I hope to be, if I want to make something of myself all on my own, it needs to be without my dad’s hand-outs and generosity. Even if he would be happy to do it.”

“I think there’s a middle ground here,” Nathaniel said, “and maybe it will take you some time to find it. But I have

faith in you, Amelia. I know you'll figure things out, no matter what it is you want. If you put your mind to it, you'll achieve it. I'm certain of that."

The drive back to San Diego was easy, without as many tourists and pleasure-seekers heading to Mexico as there would be during the summer months. The closer we got to Point Loma, I started dreading the moment that Nathaniel would drop me off and wishing for an excuse to spend some more time with him.

When he pulled the car to a stop around the block from my apartment, I reached to open the door. But Nathaniel put a hand on my left forearm, stopping me.

"Wait right there. Let me." He got out of the car and walked around the front, opened the door for me, and extended his hand like I was a lady exiting a carriage in a Jane Austen novel. Some women might find that patronizing, but I knew Nathaniel didn't mean it that way. He was just being sweet. Thoughtful.

I stepped out of the car and Nathaniel shut the door. As I leaned back against the passenger door, Nathaniel caged me in with his arms on either side of me, his towering frame above me.

"I'm glad we did this," he said. "I had a wonderful day with you."

"So did I," I replied, getting lost in his golden-brown eyes.

"Can I see you again soon? Maybe after my business trip to Vancouver?"

"Yes, I'd like that very much."

"Good. Well, then, I guess this is goodbye for now." He spoke as if the conversation was over, but he didn't move an inch.

"Yes, I guess so," I said, biting my lip.

Nathaniel's eyes darted to my mouth, then he leaned in and pressed his lips to mine, tenderly, softly. Intimate and

romantic. Most of our kisses up to now had been fevered, in the heat of the moment, urgent and full of lust.

But this felt different.

I melted into him, my hands coming to rest on his shoulders as he cradled my cheeks with his palms. Our kiss deepened, but there was no rush. Even though our day together was over, it felt like we had all the time in the world.

When we finally pulled away, it felt like something had changed between us; something wholesome and pure that had been growing along with our explosive sexual chemistry.

I walked around the block to my building knowing he was keeping an eye on me, then climbed the steps up to my apartment with my head—and my heart—full of Nathaniel.

CHAPTER 12



NATHANIEL

“United Airlines Flight 752 is delayed forty-five minutes. We apologize for the inconvenience and appreciate your patience, and we want to thank you for flying with United.”

The voice over the intercom came just as I was settling into a comfortable leather chair, fishing for my laptop as I passed the time in the United Club lounge at San Diego International, waiting for my flight to leave for Vancouver, Canada.

I was headed to a meeting with one of my most demanding, exacting clients—the CEO of a wealth management firm from New York. She wanted to purchase a massive property in North Vancouver, one of the most expensive real estate markets in all of Canada, and she always had a very specific vision for her real estate acquisitions.

I had done plenty of research, and over the next few days I would be showing my client several properties, but there was one home I had a feeling would be perfect for her—a sixteen-million-dollar waterfront estate with its own boat slip, a tennis court and a master bathroom larger than most hotel spas, all finished with top of the line materials and high-end details. Closing this deal would be a decent payday for me, and another luxury property sale to feature on my portfolio, which would attract even more high net-worth clients.

While I was waiting for my flight in the lounge, I figured I might as well get some work done on the computer. So I

opened my laptop and sipped on an afternoon espresso while my phone charged next to me.

Once I was ready to pack up and head to the gate, a text came through from Amelia.

Have a safe journey and a successful close, it read, with the addition of a little red heart emoji.

I smiled ear to ear. This was a completely new experience for me. I had dated women in the past, but not for a long time now, and never someone as special as Amelia. For so many years, I had been preoccupied with work.

After I lost my parents and David helped me as I began focusing on building a real estate career, I dove headlong into my work, burying myself in it. My job became my wife, my hobby, my passion, my everything. Aside from my early morning habit of surfing, I was thinking of sales and deals, 24/7.

Now, I was spending most of my time thinking about David's daughter.

I texted her back, telling her I wanted to see her as soon as I got back to San Diego on Sunday.

My heart skipped at her answer. She replied with a picture of herself. I had gathered that she got off work early, and I expected her to still be wearing her scrubs—but I couldn't be happier to be wrong.

Wearing a pretty, bright white bra with merely a peek of lace, plus matching panties and a tiny gold heart necklace, Amelia posed for me, lips puckered a little, sitting on the edge of her bed.

The message read: *I'll be waiting for you, Nathaniel. Just like this.*

The plane landed at YVR only twenty minutes late, despite the delay in departure. I had been through Vancouver Airport dozens of times, and always traveled with a carry-on, so I deplaned like a pro and navigated through the airport swiftly

to find my pre-booked luxury car service awaiting me right as I exited the terminal.

Before long, I was checking into my hotel, the Fairmont Pacific Rim.

After dropping my bags in my room, I headed down to the lobby bar. It was a huge space, grand in design with modern lighting and a shiny white grand piano in the center of the room.

Already bustling at seven o'clock, there were only a couple of seats empty at the bar. I managed to snag one of them, and ordered a gin and tonic, thinking about whether or not I wanted to grab sushi for dinner with an acquaintance, or if I should just order room service to be brought up to the suite and turn in early.

The group of Russian businessmen sitting in the series of bar stools next to me vacated their seats, leaving a handful of empty spots in the crowded bar. A tall, slender, blonde woman came and took the stool next to me, despite all the other empty seats.

She was wearing a tight leather pencil skirt and a semi-sheer black blouse, with her black lacy bra visible through the fabric. I guessed she was probably about my age, maybe a couple of years older. Her features were striking, and her jewelry, makeup, and hair were all impeccable.

"I can tell you're a man who knows what he wants," she said, voice husky and languid, holding a tumbler of something dark with her ring-clad hand, nails lacquered bright red.

"And how is that?" I asked, curious.

"Because you know how to order a drink." She gestured to my glass as if there was something remarkable about a gin and tonic, but her eyes never left mine for a second.

"Oh, I don't know," I said, glancing away, sensing her angle.

"A man like you?" She looked me up and down. "I think you know what you're doing."

I knew what this was. She was coming on to me. Normally, I would flirt back. See where it went. Maybe even consider inviting her up to my room for the evening.

“What I’m doing is having a drink before I grab a meal.”

She placed a hand on my thigh. “How about a different kind of meal?”

The woman was gorgeous. Classy, fit, and self-confident.

Any other time, I would have been tempted.

I probably would have said yes.

But that was the past.

Before Amelia.

I gently moved the woman’s hand off my thigh. “You seem like a very interesting woman. But I’m afraid I’m seeing someone.”

Her lips formed a pout at first, then her eyes narrowed. “Your loss.”

I tossed back the rest of my drink and left an extra twenty to cover hers.

“I guess we’ll never know,” I said, leaving the bar to find dinner one way or another.

After meeting my friend for a light sushi dinner, I returned to the hotel with excess energy. So I took advantage of the hotel gym and did a quick twenty minutes on the elliptical. It would help me sleep.

That, and the nightcap I was about to pour from the minibar.

Drinking a Scotch on the sofa in the suite, flipping through my phone, I checked emails first, then messages from clients. Finally, I looked at the picture Amelia had sent me earlier.

She looked gorgeous sitting there in her bra and panty set.

Waiting for me.

I needed to get some sleep before the showings I had scheduled tomorrow, but the sight of Amelia had me more alert than I should be. Agitated, even.

A hot shower was what I needed.

I took my Scotch with me into the large, upscale bathroom and set it on the countertop, then started the shower. Stripping off my clothes and hanging them neatly in the closet, I stepped under the warm rain showerhead, feeling the soft water trickling down my neck and body.

The image of Amelia in her underwear wouldn't leave my mind.

She had looked so fucking hot, pursing her lips into a little kiss shape. Reminding me of how good she had been for me. How perfect she was.

I was getting hard just thinking about her sweet, supple body. Her soft lips and hungry kisses. Her round ass and her breasts, covered by my hands.

Palming at my cock, I remembered our first night together in the car. How she had taken me so well, relaxing and stretching to fit me, then coming twice for me. She was so sensitive to my touch, so receptive to having my body inside her.

She was a dream come true.

Now rock hard, I stroked myself to the thought of her long legs, her limber body, her skin that always smelled like vanilla perfume and fresh soap.

I imagined her in the workout room when she fell apart on my tongue. I remembered her lips around my cock, so wet and warm, eager to please me and learn what I liked.

Moving faster up and down my shaft, I braced myself against the tile with my left hand, palm splayed out wide on the shower wall. A bead of precum leaked out of my cockhead, and I pulled it downward with my thumb, shuddering at the thought of how she had been ready to let me finish in her mouth.

It was when I began fantasizing about having her in my bed at home that I started to lose my senses. The idea of Amelia, naked and squirming in my sheets, pussy wet and needful. Amelia, body pressed up against the floor to ceiling windows overlooking the ocean on a moonlit night, me taking her from behind as she cried out in pleasure. Amelia, begging me to fuck her, saying *please*, whining my name.

Fuck.

Two more rough pulls—*Amelia, Amelia*—and I was coming hard, spurts of hot white fluid shooting from my cock to coat the marble tiles as I panted and heaved through my release.

I rarely came so intensely when I was pleasuring myself. It was the mental image of Amelia, the thoughts of all the things we had done and still hadn't tried yet, that pushed me over the edge.

After getting cleaned up and toweling off, I brought my Scotch back to the bedroom with me and got into bed, finally sleepy and sated.

I took a final sip of Scotch to warm my lips. Then, I grimaced, my thoughts wandering back to the last person I had shared a Scotch with.

David.

CHAPTER 13



AMELIA

I had been looking forward to dinner at my parents' house. Both of my sisters would be there, and Larissa and I hadn't seen Melinda since my mom's birthday dinner. I wanted to hear about Melinda's new job at a wellness spa, which had sounded promising when she told us about it a few weeks ago.

All my life, I had been close with my sisters. We used to braid lanyard bracelets, selling them for a buck apiece and calling ourselves The Weaver Sisters—the height of creativity, we thought at the time. When we were in high school, once Melinda was eighteen, we got permission to go camping alone in Joshua Tree National Park. I was afraid of scorpions the entire time, but still had a blast. We had spent every birthday, every holiday together as a group. When I graduated from high school and went backpacking around Europe, Larissa and Melinda were right by my side.

Over the years, we had stayed tight knit, usually talking every couple of days, whether on the phone or text, on top of getting together most weekends and many weeknights.

Except, during the last year, I hadn't seen quite as much of them as I used to.

Melinda had been in a serious relationship that fell apart, and now that she was picking up the pieces, her new position at the spa kept her busy. I went straight from school into my new job, which had me exhausted by the end of the workday, forgoing my usual nights out when we would all usually meet up for margaritas and gossip. Even Larissa, who I shared an apartment with along with her friend Trudy, could be hard to

pin down between her private training of clients and her extreme sports adventures.

Part of me wanted to tell my sisters everything about Nathaniel and me. About how important he was becoming to me, about the sizzling chemistry between us, as if he were just any guy I met while dating... except he wasn't. He was our father's best friend, and as swept up as I was in the feelings I had been developing for him, revealing to anyone in my family that I was dating Nathaniel Dean was completely off limits.

I would need some more time to figure out how to broach that subject... if it ever came up. Besides, it was all so new. This thing between Nathaniel and me had started as a magnetic, animal attraction, and while we had spent some time together outside of the bedroom, we were hardly in an official, long-term relationship.

He didn't seem like he really did long-term relationships, as far as I could tell.

Although I wondered if that would always be the case.

Larissa and I had driven to our parents' house in Mission Valley separately, since she was coming straight from an ironman triathlon training day. I arrived just as she was pulling up in her Jeep, rounding into the circular driveway just behind my Miata. Melinda was already there, talking on her cell phone outside the front door, but she quickly pocketed the phone to give us both a hug and walk inside with us.

When we headed into the house, our mom and dad were busy in the kitchen. So the three of us girls had a chance to chat in the formal sitting room while we waited, comfy on the plush couches but far enough away from the familiar noise of our parents going back and forth.

Unlike the flowery speeches and public shows of affection, Mom and Dad were back to their usual snippy banter. They were bickering and squabbling over petty things, as usual.

Despite the unpleasant atmosphere coming from the other side of the house, I was still glad to be there. It would be nice

to be able to spend some time together as a family. Even if our family wasn't exactly picture perfect.

"So. How's the new gig, Mel?" I asked, trying to ignore the sarcastic, derisive tones coming from the kitchen. I wanted to enjoy this time with my sisters, not focus on mom and dad's strained dynamic. It was getting so old.

"It's been pretty good so far! Awfully fancy. Like something out of the movies."

"How fancy are we talking?" Larissa inquired. "Like, could I get a massage without going into debt?" She winked. "Or better yet, do you have any physical therapists affiliated with the spa?"

Melinda chuckled. "Of course, sis. I'll get you my friends and family discount. We've got great masseuses who do hot stone treatments, too. Plus cave therapies like mineral baths, all that stuff. Low lighting and aromatherapy, soft music that'll relax you the moment you step inside. It's pretty dreamy."

"That sounds amazing!" I said, imagining how nice it would feel to slip into a mineral bath at the end of a grueling work week. My muscles had been feeling a bit more sore lately.

Although, come to think of it, some of that might have been Nathaniel's fault.

"Have you thought any more about going to school for counseling?" Larissa asked.

Melinda shrugged, sighing. "I don't know. It's so... big. It would take a long time. That sort of thing is a huge commitment, and I'm not sure if it's right for me."

"You'll figure it out," I encouraged. "If it takes time to figure out the right thing to do, that's better than jumping into something you're not sure about."

Melinda nodded. "Good point. You're wise beyond your years, kid," she said with a smile.

Just then, all our heads turned at once toward the kitchen. Mom's voice was getting louder. Then, a pan clattered loudly

onto the floor.

“Well,” Melinda quipped, “sounds like Mom’s new vacation property wasn’t enough to make her happy, after all.”

Larissa snorted. I laughed. But all three of us knew that it was more sad than funny.

Then Larissa threw me a curveball. “Oh, by the way, Amelia? Now that we’re all together in the same place... it’s time for you to fess up. I want to know your little secret, and I’m sure Melinda does, too.”

I blinked, taken aback.

Melinda nodded eagerly, eyebrows raised, smiling.

“What secret?” I asked. “I don’t have a secret.” I hoped my cheeks weren’t turning pink. It was my dead giveaway. They all knew it.

“I know you’ve been seeing a guy,” Larissa said, matter-of-factly. “It’s so obvious! You’ve been on cloud nine floating around the apartment, humming under your breath while you do your meal prep, singing off-key in the shower, dancing in your socks across the wood floor. You, my dear little sister, have a crush on someone. So, who is it?”

“Yeah,” Melinda added, “let’s hear about whoever is handsome and charming enough to tempt our sweet, innocent little Amelia.”

Oh, boy.

“Guys...”

“C’mon, sis!” Larissa urged, giving me a little squeeze on the shoulders. “You can tell us!”

It was no use trying to deny it. I just had to buck up and admit it.

“Fine. Yes, I’m seeing someone.” Their eyes went wide, with big grins on their faces. “But” I cautioned, “I’m not ready to say who it is. Things are still too early. It’s very new.”

Melinda made an exaggerated sad face. Larissa pursed her lips and sighed, rolling her eyes.

Then Mom and Dad called us into the dining room.

Phew.

My sisters and I got up from the sofa and made our way over to the dining table.

“Anything we can do to help?” I asked my mom.

“No,” she replied brusquely, sporting an apron that read “*Queen of the Castle*” over her tight pink dress. She wore sky-high heels and her expensive three-carat diamond studs, along with glossy lipstick, newly refreshed eyelash extensions, and a rather intense self-tan shade considering it was November. “The table has been set, girls. Everything is prepared. Will you just take a seat already?”

“Okay, okay,” Melinda said. “Geez, Mom. Relax.”

Our mother shot Melinda an icy glare. Larissa linked arms with Melinda and led her to the dining room, with me following close behind.

High heels? At a casual family dinner? For crying out loud...

“Pass the potatoes, sweetie, will you?” Dad had been eyeing a second helping for a while. Larissa handed him the platter and he gave her a warm wink when he took it from her hands.

“You’ve been pretty carb-focused lately, David,” my mother said, tapping her long acrylic fingernails on the table. “There’s plenty of salad left, too.” Her eyes shot over to Melinda just then.

I caught a glimpse of Melinda’s face as it crumpled, but just as quickly, she plastered on a smile and helped herself to more salad, preempting my mother’s critical comments.

“Dad,” I asked, as he was finishing with the platter, “do you mind passing those potatoes to me next?”

“Sure thing, kiddo,” he smiled. I noticed a couple of gray hairs in his beard I had never seen before. He was forty-four, so I supposed it was normal to have a couple grays by then.

After all, Nathaniel had a few coming in at his temples, and he was only thirty-eight.

On Nathaniel, it was hot. Foxy.

On Dad, I thought it was quite cute. Distinguished.

My mother used her fork to push a pea around her plate, then took a big swig of white wine. “You’ve cut your hair shorter again, I see,” she said to Larissa.

Not one to take flak from anybody, Larissa nabbed the decanter of wine and emptied it into her own large glass, then nodded enthusiastically. “Mm-hmm! Love it. Easy to keep out of my eyes. Helps a ton when I’m lifting.” She took an equally robust sip of wine.

My mother glowered.

My father shifted in his seat.

“Amelia, honey,” he said, trying to change the subject, “tell us about your work. How are things going? How are you settling in after your first six months?”

I knew he was desperate to escape my mother’s foul mood and unkind insinuations about my sisters, on top of the awful way she had been treating him tonight, too.

What was her problem these days? She was being even worse than usual.

I lifted my chin, smiled, and answered my father’s innocent question. “Thanks for asking!” I chirped, feigning a perky attitude in defiance of my mom, who seemed hell-bent on ruining our night together as a family. “I love my work. It’s been wonderful so far,” I said, spearing a cubed lemon potato onto my fork and eating fast. “Have I told you about my favorite patient, Ed? He’s a veteran, a sweet, older man, who...” Something flip-flopped strangely in my stomach. “Who...”

My dad looked at me, concerned. I soldiered on.

“Well, he’s such a funny guy,” I continued. “He always has all of us on staff laughing. There’s never a dull moment when Ed comes in. In fact, there was this one week when...”

Something rumbled around again in my belly. “When he... when—*excuse me!*”

I dropped my fork, the odd feeling in my stomach becoming unbearable.

I was going to retch. I could feel it.

The fork clanged on my plate and my dining chair skidded loudly against the floor as I pushed it out from under me. Then I stood, ran off to the bathroom, and slammed the door shut in a hurry.

CHAPTER 14



NATHANIEL

The next morning, I awoke to a crisp autumn day in Vancouver. Even with the chilly temperature, the sun was shining brightly against the deep blue sky.

Excellent weather for showing properties.

My client, Nancy, was a shrewd businesswoman with expensive taste and an eye for innovative design. She worked long hours in New York advising high net worth individuals on how to plan their estates and grow their wealth, along with her business partner, who also happened to be her husband. I knew Nancy was looking for someplace she could escape to and leave the stress of New York behind—a location with access to pristine open spaces and scenic beauty, but all the creature comforts and excitement of a bustling urban metropolis. Vancouver was the perfect city for her next home.

After a working lunch with Nancy where I showed her a cost analysis of the various properties I had in mind for her, we headed out to look at a couple of upscale homes in North Vancouver. I had managed to swing an early evening viewing of the particular property I had in mind for her, since I knew the listing agent from a sale a couple of years back. We could still look at all the other properties Nancy wanted, but I had a gut feeling that this would be the one. It was spectacular.

We viewed three homes, then headed to the property I was hoping she'd choose.

“Nancy,” I said as we were driving, “I know we’ve got a few more places on the list, but I think this next home is

special.”

“I liked the digital photos,” she nodded, scrolling through her messages, “but I have to feel something major when I walk up to the front door. I want to be wowed.”

“That’s what I’m counting on.” I turned left onto the private road leading up to the house, then pulled into the front driveway just as the sun was beginning to set.

Quickly, I walked around the front of the luxury rental car and opened the door for Nancy, who stepped out and took in the property’s grand facade. The sun had begun to set, and the grounds were lit tastefully, showcasing the home’s many well-tended native trees, bright yellow and orange in their autumn hues.

We stepped up to the front door and I opened it using a code the listing agent had sent me. Nancy’s eyes were busy examining every detail, but she didn’t say a word. I was beginning to have doubts that she would choose this place after all.

Then, when I opened the door, her jaw dropped.

The entryway extended all the way across the home to a massive glass wall that was positioned directly in front of the shoreline. On the other side of the water, Vancouver’s city lights sparkled and glittered like stars, reflecting on the lake as the light in the sky darkened to a purple dusk. The home sported twin staircases on either side of the foyer, and an enormous chandelier hung from the second story, made of wrought iron forged in the shape of elk horns.

Nancy walked the long, narrow entryway until she reached the panels of glass. On either side of us, a formal dining room shined with elegant finishes, and a sumptuous sitting room overlooked the same magnificent view.

“Wowed?” I asked, pleased with the look on her face.

“Wowed,” she said, smiling. “You’ve outdone yourself, Nathaniel.”

My face broke into a wide grin. “Let’s go take a look at the rest of the house.”

It wasn't long before Nancy was imagining how she'd furnish the home, calling her husband in New York to tell him she had found "the one," and giving me a congratulatory hug for finding her dream home.

After speaking with her husband, Nancy told me she wanted to move forward with an offer. I explained that the Vancouver market was just as volatile, if not more so, than New York, so we would have to act quickly. No lowball offers; it needed to be fair.

We agreed on an offer. I drove Nancy back to her hotel and assured her that I would have the offer written up and sent to the seller's realtor by the end of the night.

Once I returned to the Fairmont, I settled into a plush booth tucked into a quieter corner of the bar so no one would disturb me while I nursed a beer and wrote up the offer. Within ten minutes of hitting send, the listing agent called me to negotiate the terms. I closed the deal and called Nancy right away to let her know she was the proud new owner of a waterfront mansion in North Vancouver.

Another successful transaction

I was glad I would be returning to Amelia with a new sale under my belt. Something inside me wanted to make her proud, even though I had done big deals like this hundreds of times over the years. Still, I couldn't help the feeling that her text yesterday had been my lucky charm.

After ordering a celebratory steak for dinner, I realized my next day in Vancouver would be wide open. Without any more showings, I could technically change my flight and head home tomorrow, but Vancouver was a great city, and I might as well spend the day there. Besides, Amelia was busy with work. As much as I looked forward to seeing her when I got home, she wouldn't be free until Thursday.

I decided I would spend the following day exploring. There was great hiking nearby, and an amazing Chinatown with famous noodle shops.

Vancouver also boasted a bustling fashion district. I could find something special for Amelia; something beautiful that would make her smile when I next saw her.

As I closed my laptop and took care of my check at the bar, I was buzzing with excitement at the thought of seeing Amelia soon. Heading up to my room, I kept looking back at her picture. The photo that I had fantasized about last night in the shower.

I slipped the key card into the slot and opened the door to my room, my skin now burning hot with the thought of Amelia's body beneath mine.

Thursday couldn't come soon enough.

CHAPTER 15



AMELIA

I didn't have time to lock the bathroom door. Lunging in the direction of the toilet, sweating profusely, I dropped down on my knees and lost the contents of my stomach.

My father's voice came from the other side of the door.

"Amelia? Honey, can I come in?"

"Yeah," I said, feeling that the worst of it was over. "Come on in."

My dad turned the knob gently and saw me bent over the toilet bowl just as another wave of nausea overcame me, and I heaved again violently.

"Oh, sweetie..." He knelt down next to me and made sure my hair was tucked behind my ears, patted my back lightly, and comforted me. When I stabilized again, he wet a washcloth and pressed the cool compress to my forehead. "Wait here," he said, before returning with a glass of cold water.

"Thanks, Dad," I said, wanting to get up and wash out my mouth, feeling better.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asked, brow furrowed in concern. "Should we call a doctor?"

"No, no..." I shook my head, not wanting anyone to make a fuss. "I'm sure it's just something I ate. I'm fine, Dad. Really."

"Alright, if you're positive..."

“I’m positive. Feeling better already, thanks to you,” I said, giving him a small but hopefully reassuring smile. “I’d like to freshen up a minute on my own before coming back to the dinner table.”

“Of course. Just take it easy there, kiddo. There’s no rush.”

My father patted my shoulder once more, then left and shut the door behind him.

I splashed some more water on my face, then found an extra, unopened toothbrush underneath the sink, which I used to remove the sour taste from my mouth.

Finally, I returned to the table with the water my dad had brought me. My appetite was back, and I got to work on my dinner roll and some butter, which I hadn’t touched yet. Something bland was just what I needed.

Mom’s gaze was distant, looking out the window, glazed over and unfocused. My sisters, however, were both giving me slightly worried looks.

Hadn’t they ever seen someone dealing with a bit of indigestion?

The more I ate of my dinner roll, the less they seemed to worry, and soon their stares were replaced by chit chat and wine glasses being refilled.

Everyone else was nearly finished with their food. Dinner was slowing down, and it would soon be time to leave.

Suddenly, my mother got up from her seat to retrieve another chilled Chardonnay from the wine fridge, then sat down and handed the bottle to my father along with the corkscrew.

“I heard you sent some new clients Nathaniel’s way,” she said, not looking at my dad.

He uncorked the wine and poured my mother a glass, nodding. “Yep. From Singapore. They loved him.”

“He looked so handsome at my birthday party, didn’t he, girls?” She barely gave us a second to register a response

before adding, “David, you should invite him around more often. He’s been a bachelor for far too long, don’t you think? We *have* to set him up with someone.”

My father made a face and shrugged. “Nathaniel is not a domestic man. He lives in the fast lane with work. Travels constantly. He’s very independent; not the settling down type. Having a wife at home isn’t for him. It never has been, for as long as I’ve known him.”

And here I was thinking I had been uncomfortable in the bathroom! Retching? Easy-peasy. This was worse.

My mother shook her head, swirled her glass lazily, then took a drink of wine. “Nonsense. Every great man deserves a good woman to come home to. That includes Nathaniel.” Her wine glass clinked when she set it down on the table. “You know, I’ve been thinking we could fix him up with one of my friends. Patricia? Maybe Carmen! Or Annabelle...” She lifted her glass again and took another sip. “Oh, what about Irene? Yes! They would be perfect together. She’s been single for too long, anyway.”

Oh my God, this is torture.

“If you really want to, dear,” my father said, looking skeptical. “I guess there’s no harm in getting them in the same room together to see if there’s any kind of spark. But I highly doubt that Nathaniel is looking to get into a serious relationship right now. Especially when his career is so busy.”

I had to get out of there. Listening to my parents talk about Nathaniel as if he was someone they could marry off, hearing my mother try to play matchmaker with one of her vacuous friends and set her up with the man I was dating. I couldn’t stand it for even a single second longer.

Melinda had already started scrolling through her phone. She was checked out of dinner, and I saw the perfect opportunity to split.

“Hey, Melinda?” I asked, taking a deep breath and exhaling, trying to remain composed and not wanting to give myself away. “I’m ready to leave when you are.”

“Sure, sis. I’m all done, anyway. Are you ready to go soon too, Larissa?”

“Hang on,” Larissa said, wrinkling her brow. “What about dessert?”

— — —

My sweet tooth won out. I relented, and we stayed a while longer. After sharing some mint chip ice cream together in the kitchen, my sisters and I said goodbye to our parents and headed to the driveway. Larissa would drive us home, since she was always bugging me to get a chance to drive my zippy yellow Miata. We’d drop Melinda off at her place on the way.

“Geez, Mom was awful tonight,” Larissa complained once we were buckled in and on the road.

“No, that was tame,” I said, darkly. Outside, the night sky was clouded over. A fine mist began to fall, and I wondered if it would rain soon.

“Yeah, I agree. I’ve endured much worse from her,” Melinda said, shaking her head.

We drove for a while, chatting about work and talking about our schedules over the upcoming holidays. There would be plenty more nights like this with mom in store for us once the Christmas season got into full swing.

We would just have to live through it, and try to enjoy each other’s company and Dad’s, despite Mom’s atrocious behavior.

Just a few miles before we were to drop Melinda off, Larissa turned the music down and cleared her throat.

“Hey. Amelia. You had us worried there for a minute at dinner.”

“Yeah,” Melinda added, “it’s no fun dealing with an upset stomach. Are you sure you’re feeling all better?”

Larissa didn’t give me a chance to respond. “Amelia, have you been sick more than just tonight?”

Why did her question feel so pointed? It was a single, strange episode.

I was fine. It was nothing.

“No,” I said, annoyed at the interrogation. “I’ve been fine, I swear. I’m positive it was just something I ate. After a few minutes in the bathroom, it passed right away. You even saw me pigging out on dinner rolls and ice cream later!”

Melinda and Larissa shared a look; the kind that they used to give each other when something would happen that I was too young to understand.

I wasn’t sure why they were being so weird, but after that, neither of them said a word. So, I dropped it too, hoping they would stay off my case. We stopped at Melinda’s place to let her out, waving as we watched her walk up the stairs until she was inside, and soon Larissa and I were making our way up to our apartment.

Trudy was bustling around in the kitchen, baking.

“Hey ladies! Wanna watch a movie? I’m baking oatmeal raisin, chocolate chip, and snickerdoodles.”

“For sure!” Larissa exclaimed, never one to turn down a cookie.

After that dinner, and the episode in the bathroom, I didn’t have it in me. I was feeling bone tired. “Not tonight, but thanks,” I said, heading to my room. Within minutes, I was sleeping like a baby.

CHAPTER 16



NATHANIEL

The first thing I thought about once I stepped off the plane in San Diego was how soon I would have Amelia back in my arms. I had a special surprise in store, and I couldn't wait to see her face when I shared it with her.

She was waiting for me at her usual spot a block away from her apartment. Before putting the car in park, my heartbeat quickened at the sight of her. She wore a tight black sweater over skin-tight dark jeans, with black heels dressing up the outfit. Her hair was in loose brown waves and her pink lips were dewy with gloss.

How could she be even more gorgeous than I remembered? It had only been a few days, but I felt like I was seeing her after a lifetime of waiting.

I put the car in park and rushed out of my seat before she could open the passenger's side door. She sidled into the car, but not before kissing me. It was a little risky so close to her apartment, yet there was a thrill to it, too.

After making sure she was settled in, I shut the door and jogged back around to the driver's seat, steering us away from her neighborhood and out of Point Loma.

"You look gorgeous, Amelia. You always do." I could spy the blush on her cheeks out of the corner of my eye.

"It's good to see you, Nathaniel. I missed you."

"I missed you, too."

She placed a hand on my thigh and sighed.

It was going to be a challenge to keep my eyes on the road.

“Did you close the deal?” she asked.

“I did. It was an extremely successful trip. My client is thrilled with the property.”

She leaned over the center console and reached up to kiss me on the cheek while I drove, squeezing my thigh.

“I knew you would,” she said, smiling.

I felt like I was on top of the world.

“So, I had some time off in Vancouver and I did a little shopping. I have something for you.”

“A souvenir? What is it?”

“You’ll see.” Pulling over on a side street, I parked the car and reached into the back seat. I handed Amelia a large, crisp white gift box with a heavy satin ribbon tied with sprigs of silver dollar eucalyptus, professionally wrapped by the saleslady at the exclusive atelier where I bought her gift.

Amelia squeaked in delight. “This is for me?”

“I couldn’t go away on a business trip without bringing something home for you, now could I?”

“It’s too pretty to unwrap...” Slowly, she undid the ribbon and set aside the eucalyptus leaves. When she opened the box, her eyes went wide, and she let out a gasp.

Inside was an ankle-length, dark green dress made of ultra-fine silk from the best designer atelier in Vancouver. Above it was two smaller boxes containing a pair of diamond earrings and a matching tennis necklace of tiny, square-cut diamonds in a neat strand. Wrapped up in delicate paper next to the dress were a pair of tall, gold-hued stilettos with thin straps, a cluster of crystals embellishing the side of each ankle.

Amelia was silent.

“Do you like your gift? If it’s not your color...”

“I love it. This is just... it’s too much, Nathaniel. It’s extravagant.”

“Absolutely not. Nothing is too extravagant for you, baby.”

She blushed. “You’re spoiling me.”

“That’s the idea.”

She leaned in to give me another kiss. “I’m just happy to be with you. I don’t need fancy things.”

“But they can’t hurt,” I said, feeling satisfied with myself for picking out a gift that impressed her so much. “Go ahead, put them on.”

Her brows squiggled into a question. “Here?”

“There’s nobody around. This is a quiet street and I have tinted windows,” I said. “So, yes. Here.”

She let out a little giggle as she started undressing in the passenger’s seat.

“Fine. But you have to close your eyes. No peeking.”

I did as she instructed covering my eyes while I heard her rustling through the tissue paper and slipping into her new clothes and jewelry. It took all the strength I had not to look over at her.

“You sure weren’t shy the last time you had your clothes off in that seat,” I said, unable to resist the joke.

She scoffed in mock outrage and gave me a light punch on the arm.

“Okay,” she said. “I’m ready.”

I moved my hands away from my eyes, and my breath caught in my throat.

She was stunning. The jewelry lit up her features and the green hue of the dress complimented her complexion and accentuated her gorgeous green eyes. She looked unaccountably ravishing, like she had stepped off the red carpet and into my car.

“Green,” I croaked out, bowled over, “is definitely your color.”

“Well, now you have to close your eyes again while I change back into my clothes.”

“No way. I’m taking you somewhere fancy, and you’re staying in that dress. And those heels.”

We drove to a members-only club I was part of in downtown San Diego. It was in an older, brick building about four stories high, with an exclusive restaurant on the rooftop that boasted striking views of the city and the busy harbor.

“I’ve never heard of this club before,” Amelia said as we were seated on the roof, surrounded by artfully arranged tropical plants that obscured our private, leather upholstered booth from any other members. “I had no idea there was even a restaurant up here.”

“That’s the point,” I said, chuckling.

We both ordered seafood. I was partial to their dayboat scallops, while Amelia opted for California spiny lobster in a delicate saffron broth. Our dinners were delicious, the view stunning, the wine perfect. It was the kind of elegant date that Amelia deserved, the kind I wished I had been able to take her on from the beginning.

We talked for a while after dinner was over, still undecided about dessert. I told Amelia about Vancouver and the spectacular scenery, and Amelia vented to me about a difficult family dinner she had attended while I was out of town.

“It’s just that my mother has been getting worse the last few years,” she said, shaking her head. “The critical talk. Overdoing it with wine. This time, she even started going on about you.”

Me?

“Why would I come up at all?” I remembered back to Colleen’s birthday party when she had been drinking and acting a little too familiar with me.

“You’re not going to believe it.” Amelia sighed. “But I should give you a head’s up, anyway. My mom was saying that you needed to find a girlfriend, or wife, or something.

That you needed to finally settle down. She and my dad were talking about fixing you up with one of my mom's friends."

Good luck with that, Colleen.

There was a sour edge to Amelia's voice all of a sudden. "Is that... jealousy I hear?"

"Well—I—"

"Shouldn't I entertain the company of women my own age?" I teased, leaning in close to her.

Amelia's eyes narrowed. "Oh, I see. Well, maybe I should keep an eye out for a man closer to my own age, too," she said, sparring with me, batting her eyelashes.

"You're free to do whatever you want. Just like I am."

"Fine," she played along.

"Fine," I echoed. By now, I had a hand on her thigh, strong and slender underneath the green silk of her dress.

I swept my hand up higher, then around the side of her waist, pulling her close on the curved leather seat. The sky had grown dark by now, and the city lights twinkled all around us. Amelia's cheeks were pink from flirting with me, her dazzling new jewelry glinting from the string lights draped around the intimate rooftop.

"So, what do you think," I asked quietly, "should I indulge your parents? Meet your mom's friend to keep them off my back?" Amelia gave me a knowing look. "Or should I make it known to them that I'm off the market, that I'm seeing someone special now, and they can forget about fixing me up because I've found someone who's important to me?"

She blushed a deep red. "What do you mean, exactly?"

I grinned, feeling a warmth in my chest that I had never experienced before.

"I mean I'm yours."

CHAPTER 17



AMELIA

The car ride to Nathaniel's was the longest twenty minutes of my life. Things had heated up a little too much at the dinner table—Nathaniel's hand on my thigh, my hand on his, kisses that would make our waiter blush if we hadn't already waved off dessert—and now it was time to take our desires somewhere more private.

I had never been to Nathaniel's house before. I knew he lived in upscale La Jolla, and I had heard my father say that his place was a multi-million-dollar property Nathaniel had bought from an architect who had designed it herself.

When he pulled into the driveway and parked, I got out immediately, before Nathaniel could come open my door and perform his usual charming acts of chivalry. I was too hot and bothered, aching for him the whole car ride, and I wanted to get inside the house as soon as possible.

He waited for me as I made my way around the front of the car, then took my hand and walked me up the pathway to the front door of his house. It was a modernist masterpiece sitting at the edge of a cliff overlooking the ocean, with a rocky cove below.

After that interminably long car ride, Nathaniel lost his patience and grabbed me outside the front door, pulling me into a brief, passionate kiss that got my pulse racing and my head buzzing with anticipation at what we were about to do.

"Hurry," I said, reminding him to unlock the door.

“Right.” He reluctantly let go of me, opened the door, and held it for me as I walked inside. Not a moment later, the door was shut, and Nathaniel had me pinned to the wall.

“Amelia, baby...” He kissed my lips, my jaw, down my neck and to my collarbone where I wore my new necklace. I was hanging onto him for dear life, awash in desire, feeling my arousal gathering between my thighs. “I’ve wanted to get you home all night,” he said, gazing at me with his golden-brown eyes, warm and dark and deep. “I missed you so much while I was away.”

His words only made my heart flutter and my core hotter. I rubbed my thighs together, seeking friction. “Missed”—I tried to speak but he kissed me again, hard—“you too.”

“How much?”

“What?”

“Did you touch yourself? While I was gone?”

“Yes,” I said, unbuttoning his shirt and running my hands across his broad, strong chest.

“Did you think of me when you came?”

“Yes,” I breathed, letting out a whine when Nathaniel’s hand came to fondle my breasts, his large palms squeezing me just right.

“Did you wish it was me making you come?”

“Yes, yes, I always wish it was you, always...”

“Fuck. Amelia. You have no idea what you do to me.” He leaned down then and scooped me up, marching me to the other side of the house and carrying me up the staircase to his bedroom.

It was sparse and modern, with a great big king bed in front of a polished headboard made of an exotic wood. The bed was covered in crisp white sheets, minimal and inviting.

Soon, I would be tangled up with Nathaniel in those sheets.

I was so ready for him, craving his touch and his perfect cock inside me, but the brief second that he took to kick off his shoes and slacks gave me a chance to glance over at the floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the rocky cove below.

I wandered over to the glass.

He noticed me admiring the view, dark and illuminated by moonlight. The location of his home was secluded, but there were a few other houses with dim lights dotting the other side of the cliff, across the cove. I didn't see any drapes or window coverings in Nathaniel's bedroom, and I realized that the room was lit from the inside, with soft mood lighting in the corners.

No one could technically watch us; at least, not without serious binoculars and a very specific idea of where to point them. We were too far away from the other homes on the opposite side of the cove.

But the mere idea of it, even though the chance was so slim we'd be seen, gave me a certain electric thrill.

The instant I turned my gaze back to Nathaniel, he rushed up to me. Stripped down to his black briefs that were tented with his hard-on, he was all rippling muscle and manly scent.

"Do you like the idea of someone watching us, Amelia?" He trailed his thumb between my breasts, over the silk fabric of my new dress, and down to my navel.

I nodded, my breath coming shallow. "Yes," I admitted. "It's... only a fantasy. Nothing too extreme, just... the possibility of it."

He stepped forward, crowding me until I backed up into the window.

"If this is your fantasy," he said, voice low and a little bit dangerous, "then I'll make it real."

A shiver shot through my body.

Nathaniel bent down to my ankles and lifted the hem of my dress slowly—agonizingly slow—brushing his fingertips against my skin when he got to my hips, then up my ribcage. Finally, the dress came off and I was standing naked, wearing

only the gold heels he had given me and the gorgeous diamond jewelry.

I hadn't mentioned to him that I'd skipped panties tonight.

He let out a breathy groan when he saw me like that, and it went straight to my center. The idea of having my backside bare against the expansive windows gave me a rush—and the feeling only grew stronger when Nathaniel held my shoulders and nudged my body up against the smooth, cool glass.

I turned my head, peeking out to the dark cove while Nathaniel took off his briefs. A wave of heat zinged through my center. When I turned back, he was naked, his cock heavy and thick as he palmed at it, staring hungrily at my body.

“I need you, Nathaniel,” I breathed, unashamed to ask for what I wanted.

“You’ll get what you need, baby,” he said, dropping a soft kiss on my lips. “But I need something from you, too.”

“Anything, anything...”

“Anything... *sir*.”

A tiny gasp escaped my throat. This was his fantasy? I could work with that.

I trusted him, and I was comfortable with him. He made me feel adventurous. Confident. Safe.

Besides, I kind of liked it.

“Anything for you,” I said, “...*sir*.”

He inhaled sharply, then leaned down to murmur into my ear. “Good girl.”

I whined, blushing at the expression and growing wetter between my legs. My pussy was aching for him. Throbbing.

“I need you, sir. Please, sir.” I grasped his cock, so thick I couldn't fit my fingers around it. Pumping his shaft slowly, I looked up at him.

Nathaniel's dark eyes locked with mine; his pupils blown wide with arousal.

He muttered praise and obscenities as I worked him, and I was enjoying the way he grunted and huffed.

Wrapping his palm around mine, he brought my hand to a stop, kissing me once on the shell of my ear before turning me around so that I was facing out toward the water, looking across the moonlit cove. His body pressed to mine; he nestled his cock between the cheeks of my ass. I let out a whimper when my nipples made contact with the cool glass.

“The glass is safe,” he said. “Don’t worry.”

“I trust you,” I said sincerely. “It feels good.”

He moaned softly, wetting his cockhead in my slick folds, rubbing back and forth.

It was driving me crazy with need. “You’re teasing me,” I protested.

“Maybe if you ask nicely, I’ll give you what you want.”

“I—” He needed to hear me say it. I was happy to satisfy his desire. “Fuck me. Fuck me, sir. I need it. Please, Nathaniel.”

“Such a good girl,” he rasped. Then he bent his knees and positioned himself at my entrance. I gasped when he finally pushed into me, my walls stretching to accommodate his size.

“You feel so fucking good, Amelia. You’re perfect, baby.” Sliding out a couple of inches, he rocked back into me, fucking me slowly against the windows.

My hands were pressed against the glass above my head, and Nathaniel placed his palms on top, lacing his fingers between mine. I gazed out at the dark moonlit ocean and across the cove, panting as Nathaniel increased his pace, pleasure building deep in my core. His length was hitting an angle that made my eyes roll back, and I let my head loll onto his shoulder as he sucked kisses onto my neck, harder and stronger the longer we stood there.

“More, more,” I begged, feeling the pressure mount and my orgasm threaten to overwhelm me.

“More, *what?*” He pistoned into me faster, hitting deep.

“More, sir! Please, sir! Please, harder, Nathaniel!” My breaths were coming short, so close to release that I could hardly see straight.

“Fuck—” He huffed, frantic and wild. “So good for me, letting me fuck you where anyone can see. So everyone knows you’re mine. Are you close, baby? Can you come for me?”

I was on the edge, babbling and incoherent as the pleasure heightened to a peak. “Yes sir, yes sir, *yes—*” My pussy suddenly clenched tightly, swiftly, and I felt my climax reach every nerve ending in my body. I cried out, a high-pitched sound leaving my throat that I couldn’t control, until my legs were shaking, and my knees felt weak.

Nathaniel’s thrusts became erratic as he chased his own release. “Amelia–baby–” He spilled into me, groaning as he came, knuckles white as his fingers tensed between mine until he finally stilled, panting.

— — —

We made our way to the bathroom afterward. Nathaniel’s shower was spacious and lined with smooth, small river rocks. The texture was relaxing underneath the soles of my feet, as if I was walking through a stream barefoot.

I worked some shampoo into his hair, massaging it into a nice lather and smiling contentedly when he made satisfied noises at the way my fingers kneaded his scalp.

When it was my turn for a shampoo, Nathaniel soaped me up and caressed me lovingly. After my hair was rinsed out, I reached for the shower door, but he stopped me, dropping to his knees. He licked my pussy under the hot shower until I came again, softly lapping at my swollen clit until I was giggling from the overload of pleasure. Then he scooped me up and brought me to his bed, his length hardening again, looking at me longingly as I lifted the bedspread and settled into the sheets.

This time, we took everything slower. It was less hurried than at the window; more sensual, but equally erotic.

Afterward, I was exhausted, lying in his arms, the sheets a mess around us both. It wouldn't be wise to sleep here overnight with work tomorrow, but I wanted to stay a little while longer.

Being with Nathaniel was irresistible. Whether we were kissing, or talking, or making love, or just lying in silence.

I stroked his arm while he rubbed my back softly, and we allowed our breathing to steady and slow while listening to the waves crash against the shore.

CHAPTER 18



NATHANIEL

The sound of the surf usually lulled me to sleep, but tonight its ability to calm me was no match for Amelia's power to keep me awake—both when we were indulging in our fantasies, and when we were lying in each other's arms afterward.

Her body was tucked into mine, with my arm wrapped around her back holding her close, and her slender leg draped over my own. We stayed there for a while, sharing soft caresses and quiet hums of contentment.

It was when Amelia started fidgeting that I realized something was on her mind.

“Hey. What is it?” I asked, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her face.

“I have to go home. I don't want to, but—”

“Then don't go. Stay here with me.”

“I wish I could,” she said, kissing my chin, “but I have work early tomorrow morning. There's no way I can stay over; I need to be home in the morning to get ready.”

She rolled out of my bed then, and the sight of her naked body—supple and sexy as hell—had me pulling her by the wrist, right back down in bed with me. She tumbled back into the sheets, giggling.

“Nathaniel,” she chided gently, “I'm serious. I can't. Maybe on the weekend sometime.”

I grunted out a disappointed sigh and watched her stand up again, admiring her curves and her tousled chestnut hair, before dragging myself up to sit on the bed, intending to take her home.

“No, you stay comfortable,” she said, her palm on my shoulder. “I’ll call a cab.”

“Absolutely not,” I replied, bolting upright and finding my slacks.

There was no way I was letting her walk out of my house and get into a taxi. Not after what we had shared. Not ever again.

The drive to Point Loma allowed us to spend a little more time together. I drove left-handed so I could use my right hand to hold hers. Amelia sighed periodically, and at one point she brought her other hand to clutch our clasped hands, rubbing my thumb softly with her fingers.

She had changed back into her sweater and dark jeans and asked if I would keep her new gifts at my place so she wouldn’t arouse any suspicions with her sister Larissa and their other roommate. I agreed, but insisted she keep the earrings on. They were sparkly, sure, but how would a pair of diamond studs raise eyebrows? Everyone had them.

As we got close to her apartment, I decided it was silly to drop her off around the block. It might not be a dangerous neighborhood, but it was still late at night, and I wanted to watch every step she took until she was inside the door so I could make sure she was safe.

I pulled up in front of her building and unbuckled my seatbelt. Before I could open my door to get out, Amelia surged up to press her lips to mine, stealing my breath and setting off my desire yet again.

Clutching my shirt, she kissed me deeply, passionately, until we had our hands on each other again, hungry caresses full of heat and need.

“Can’t let you go,” I breathed, turning to kiss her jaw, under her ear, down her neck.

“I don’t want to go,” she whispered, “but I have to.”

It was Amelia who pulled away finally, her breath shallow and her lips pink and wet, reluctant to leave but ever the responsible, practical woman I knew her to be.

I reached for my door handle again, but she placed a hand on my forearm.

“Let me walk up on my own. Please. I can’t have Larissa and Trudy see us together.”

“It’s late at night, I—”

“It will be fine, I promise,” she said. “Look, my door is just right there.” She pointed to her apartment up the staircase, nodding her reassurance.

“Fine. But I’m not leaving until I see you shut the door behind you.”

“Okay,” she said, nodding.

“Okay.”

I had to restrain myself from kissing her one last time, which would inevitably lead to things heating up again. She pulled the latch on the passenger’s side door and pushed it ajar, then turned back quickly to give me a small kiss on the cheek.

A soft giggle escaped her lips. “Goodnight, Nathaniel.”

“Goodnight, Amelia.”

She pushed the door open the rest of the way and got out of the car, wisecracking about her knees being too wobbly to get up the stairs.

I immediately protested. “I’ll walk you up—”

“Kidding,” she smiled.

I watched her climb all the way up the stairs, and before she shut the door behind her, she blew me a little kiss.

God, what a woman.

I drove home in a daze.

I had wanted so badly for her to stay with me, to spend the night and be able to wake up next to her. It killed me to watch her walk up the stairs when instead she should be lying peacefully in my arms, drifting off to sleep above the calming rumble of the surf.

She should have been there when I woke up the next day, bleary-eyed and tired and beautiful, so I could kiss her first thing in the morning. I could have cooked her breakfast, taken her for a walk on the shore, shown her more of the house while it was daylight outside.

I wanted all those things, and more.

Above all else, I knew I was in trouble now.

This was more than just wild sex. More than just animal instinct. We weren't simply hooking up or playing around.

I had feelings for Amelia.

For my best friend's daughter.

It was the last thing I had expected, but I couldn't help myself.

Maybe she and I should consider telling David the truth. He may be her father, but he was also my friend, and a good, honest, decent man. Maybe he would try to see things from our side, empathize with the story of two people falling for each other, even if it came as a shock at first...

I shook my head, snapping myself out of my pointless wishful thinking.

No, there was no way David would be okay with this.

She was his baby girl, his youngest, the apple of his eye.

I felt a knot forming in my stomach thinking about how it would affect David to learn that his dear daughter was in a relationship with his best friend, seventeen years her senior.

Were Amelia and I making a huge mistake? Should I call this off before it had a chance to go any further?

The thought of letting go of her made me clench the steering wheel, my body signaling a physical resistance to the mere thought of losing her.

Driving back into La Jolla, thinking about just how important Amelia had become to me, my heart felt heavy, and my mind was abuzz with worry and frustration, along with a growing seed of doubt.

CHAPTER 19



AMELIA

I shut the door and peered through the peephole, watching Nathaniel's car leave the tiny circular view. When the sound of his engine had faded away, I turned around, with my back to the inside of the door, and sighed.

What a night.

There was a warm feeling bubbling inside my chest—not only at that moment, but at every moment these days—and I couldn't deny the other warm feelings that Nathaniel's body had left me with...

Between my legs.

Every time we were together, it was the best I had ever felt. Could this kind of feeling go on like this forever?

When I clicked the deadbolt shut, I slipped out of my heels and, carrying them in one hand, began walking to my room, ready to flop down into my fluffy comforter and dream of Nathaniel.

Smiling to myself, I turned out of the entryway and rounded the corner into the living room, then froze in my tracks.

"Hey, Amelia," Melinda said.

"Hey, sis," Larissa echoed.

They were sitting on the couch side by side, with two steaming cups of tea on the coffee table, chamomile—I could smell it from where I was standing, and a small plate of Trudy's cookies, fragrant with vanilla and cinnamon.

“Oh! Hey guys...” Something seemed off with them. I frowned, feeling uneasy about having just come home from Nathaniel’s place. Did I look like I had just emerged from a night of wild, passionate sex? Could I hide the deep blush still lingering on my face, the messy hair, the dreamy look in my eyes? “I didn’t know you were going to be over here,” I blurted out, looking at Melinda.

“Larissa called me. I got here a few hours ago.”

“Oh. It’s getting really late! I hope you weren’t waiting up for me?” I chattered nervously. “Is Trudy already asleep? I’ve been looking forward to trying one of those cookies...”

“She’s asleep,” Larissa nodded, more serious than her usual playful demeanor. “Why don’t you have a seat with us. We were hoping to talk with you.”

My heartbeat picked up, sensing I was in trouble somehow.

“Talk with me? About what?”

Melinda patted the spot next to her. “Here, you can have my tea. I’ll make another.”

I sat and sipped the tea while Melinda started the kettle. Larissa gave me a small smile but didn’t say anything and handed me the plate of cookies. I took one, nibbling on a snickerdoodle while Larissa looked at her phone, until Melinda returned with another cup of tea.

“Amelia,” Melinda said, sitting on the armchair. “We’re worried about you. Something is going on, and as your sisters who care about you, we’re hoping you’ll tell us what it is.”

Larissa put her phone down. “You’ve been so secretive about this new guy. It’s not like you.”

It was true. When I had dated in the past, I had told my sisters everything. Except now that I was with Nathaniel, I had been keeping an explosive secret for over a month. It shouldn’t surprise me that they were onto me, hard as I had tried to keep it from them. Still, it was uncomfortable being called out for seeing someone. I didn’t need their permission. I was an adult, after all.

“I told you guys,” I said, “it’s still really new, that’s all.”

Neither of them looked convinced.

“Why are you so compelled to hide it?” Melinda asked.

Larissa followed her line of thinking. “Does *he* want you to hide it?”

“Is he...” Melinda came and sat on the other side of me, putting a hand on my wrist, tentative but loving. “Is he making you do things you don’t want to do?”

My eyes rolled involuntarily. Nathaniel was the last person in the world who would do something to scare me or force me into anything. What I had with him was pure thrill and excitement, not danger.

“No, no,” I said, shaking my head emphatically. “Not at all. The man I’m seeing would never do anything to hurt me.”

“If he’s your first...” Larissa swallowed, glossing over the part where they even asked me if I had lost my virginity in the first place. I guess it was that obvious. Maybe they were hurt that I hadn’t told them. “It’s easy to overlook things with your first partner, since it’s such a new, exciting thing. Like warning signs, or clues that your limits aren’t being respected.”

“We just want to make sure that some man we don’t know anything about hasn’t put you in a bad position,” Melinda added.

“He’s a good man,” I said, feeling defensive of not only Nathaniel, but myself and my choice to be with him. “He’s a wonderful man, actually.”

“If he’s such a good man, why can’t we know his identity? Why the secrecy?” Larissa’s dark green eyes bored into mine, flustering me and giving me no time to be tactful or diplomatic.

“Hey,” I said, feeling a warmth rise up my neck. “You guys need to back off. I may be younger than you, but you’re not in charge of me. I am still a grown woman, and I can make my own choices. When I’m ready to be open about my new relationship, I will be. Period.”

Melinda and Larissa shared a knowing look.

“Speaking of periods,” Larissa said, “we’ve noticed some unusual stuff with you lately. I heard you throwing up the other morning, and that was after our dinner at Mom and Dad’s. Didn’t you throw up that night too?”

What exactly is she saying?

“Your complexion is brighter. Which is great! But I know that if you’d found a new serum, you would’ve texted me a link,” Melinda said, winking, trying to lighten me up. It wasn’t working. “You’ve been drinking boatloads of water, too. And you’ve always been a diet soda girl.”

What are they getting at?

“Amelia, when was your last period?” Larissa asked, point blank.

A loud scoff made its way out of my throat. “Are you serious?”

Melinda reached into her bag next to the sofa and pulled out a little pink and yellow box—a pregnancy test. “Let’s just be sure, okay?”

“This is ridiculous! I’m not pregnant! I have an IUD, and you both know it! You two went to the appointment with me to have it put in!”

I was furious. This was an invasion of my privacy, and besides, it was nearly impossible.

“IUDs fail, sis,” Larissa said, patting my shoulder, a poor attempt to calm me down. “C’mon. Just take the test. Please?”

She wasn’t unkind. Neither was Melinda. This was just the way they were sometimes, caring, but adamant.

I knew them too well. They weren’t going to drop it.

“Fine,” I said, irritated but wanting to get this over with. I just wanted them to drop the subject and leave me alone. “As long as you quit bugging me about who I’ve been seeing.”

Neither of them responded. 2

I stood up in a huff, went into the bathroom, and took the damn test, setting my phone timer for the result.

Then, my alarm dinged, and my heart dropped.

This can't be happening...

CHAPTER 20



NATHANIEL

I had a standing golf day with David and a few of our other buddies on the second Friday of every month. There was Mike, an investment banker; Steve, a litigator; and Randy, an older, retired man who had made his fortune buying and selling software companies in the 90s.

By the time we got to the ninth hole, the conversation had turned from business, then briefly to politics—but David quickly put the kibosh on that—to the guys talking about their kids and wives and families.

When their attention turned to me, I planned to play it cool. The last thing I wanted was to give away what I was doing last night.

Not just what I was doing.

Who I was doing it *with*.

“Nathaniel,” Randy asked, “when are you going to find a wife and start a family? You’re not getting any younger. By your age, I had five little ones.”

“Oh, you know,” I said, brushing it off, teeing up my golf ball. “Maybe someday. Maybe not.”

“Come on, man,” Steve said in a teasing tone. “I bet you’ve got a few hot side pieces going, all at the same time. A guy like you, with your good looks and charm? Who needs to settle down when you can play the field?”

“Yeah,” Mike said, “let us live vicariously through your bachelor life. Those days are long gone for us, and boy, do we

miss them.”

“Speak for yourself,” Randy corrected. “I can attest to the fact that a happy marriage is possible. You boys ought to invest some time into yours, or you’ll regret it in your old age.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Steve said dismissively. “I’ll invest in my marriage when my wife stops investing in her shoe closet.”

Mike chuckled. “Is it that bad?” Steve sighed, then Mike winked at David. “At least you didn’t have to buy her a whole new house, Steve.”

David squinted, “You’re one to talk, Mike. Those girls’ trips to Tahiti your wife goes on? Airfare halfway across the world doesn’t exactly come cheap.”

“Hey, at least it gets her out of my hair,” Mike retorted. “So come on, Nathaniel. Let’s hear about your latest arm candy. Make us remember what it’s like to feel young and free again.”

I hit a strong, clean shot down the middle of the fairway and sent my ball soaring. “I can’t imagine any way to make all you old fogies feel young. That’s a surgeon’s job,” I joked.

The guys chuckled but the pestering didn’t stop.

“Let’s hear it, Nathaniel,” Steve said. “You’re a handsome guy, there’s got to be someone.”

This was starting to irritate me. I just needed to come up with something to get them off my back.

“Listen, I’m seeing someone, okay? Are you satisfied?”

“Who is it?” Randy asked.

“What does she look like?” Mike inquired.

“Nathaniel, I had no idea! Good for you!” David said.

“Is it serious?” Steve finally asked the question I least wanted to answer.

Yet something inside me was compelled to tell the truth.

“I want it to be,” I admitted. “But things are... complicated. It’s too hard to explain. In fact, I shouldn’t technically be seeing her at all.”

Randy pulled a face. “What on earth is that supposed to mean, is she a nun or something?”

David’s expression was warm and curious. “Who’s the lucky girl? Do any of us know her?”

Oh my God. Do you ever, David.

“Uh... I’m not sure. Probably not. No, definitely not.” I wasn’t one to stumble on my words, but with this line of questioning, I was truly at a loss. Never had a little white lie come in so handy.

“What kind of answer is that?” Steve demanded.

I started losing my patience. “Look, it’s still new, okay? Give me some time. Maybe I’ll tell you if you hit a hole in one, Steve.”

“Pfft, we’ll be waiting till we’re dead, then,” Mike said.

Thankfully, the discussion turned back to golf, and they were off my case.

For now.

We played all eighteen holes, then headed to the club lounge for a boozy lunch. Mike, Steve, and Randy noticed a mutual friend, so they wandered over to chat with him at his table on the other side of the lounge, leaving me alone with David.

“I’m happy for you, Nathaniel,” he said, taking a swig of his beer. “Really, you deserve to be with someone special. I can’t remember the last time you were serious about someone.”

I hoped I could steer this conversation away to a different topic, but he was so sincere and kind. “Thanks, David. That means a lot to me.”

She means a lot to me.

Your daughter.

David sighed, setting down his beer. “I have to admit, I miss the single life sometimes. Things between me and Colleen... they’re just not what they used to be. It’s rockier than ever.”

I had sensed that things were strained between the two of them. In the past, David had confided in me when they were going through rough patches, and he had been there for me during the toughest time in my life. I felt a responsibility to listen and give him support.

“You two have been together for such a long time. You’re bound to have some stretches that feel off, right? Of course, I wouldn’t really know from experience, but it seems even the best marriages can go through phases.” I wasn’t sure if I really believed David’s marriage was among the “best,” but that was another discussion entirely.

“Sure,” he nodded, rotating his beer glass in quarter turns. “We’ve had our ups and downs, raised three daughters to become confident young women, traveled and built a life together. But I’ve felt more and more lonely over the years. We don’t seem to have the same priorities. She wants to go out with her friends, or splash out at the luxury spa, get facials and Botox and spend all her time on preserving her looks. Which I can understand, I guess. There’s a lot of pressure on women to look young forever; I get it. It’s just that I’m so focused on work and making a comfortable living for my family, and she’s out there spending and spending, not to mention partying like she’s twenty-five. Sometimes, I think her daughters are more mature than she is.” David took a deep breath, his eyes drifting away to gaze out at the golf course. “We haven’t shared a bed in ten months, now. That’s been hard, too.”

When he first started talking, I had felt that I was in an uncomfortable position, hearing how David’s gripes about his marriage to Colleen were worse than I had realized. Yet now that he confided in me about their sex life being nonexistent, my own concerns were replaced only with sympathy for my old friend. The state of his marriage was rapidly deteriorating, and I wished that I could help him in some way.

The best way to do that was to listen and offer my support.

“That must be really difficult, David. I hope you know I’m always here for you if you need someone to talk to. Have you two... thought about counseling?”

He shrugged. “I guess that’s the next step. Hey, Nathaniel, thank you for listening. Your friendship means the world to me.”

I nodded, feeling that familiar knot forming in my stomach again.

The rest of the guys made their way back to our table just then and took their seats again. My serious discussion with David was replaced by loud chatter and business talk once more. David slipped effortlessly back into the rhythm of surface-level conversations, and I could tell he was glad to have the distraction.

Zoning out while the rest of them joked and chuckled, I took a long sip of my beer, and my thoughts turned to Amelia. Hearing all the intimate details of David and Colleen’s marriage was a sticky spot for me to be in, but it dawned on me that all this would be even more painful for Amelia to hear. Did she have any idea just how bad things had become between her folks?

I wasn’t sure if I should tell her anything or keep quiet. Where did my loyalties lie? With Amelia, or with my closest, oldest friend?

CHAPTER 21



AMELIA

A *baby.* I had been taken by surprise—blindsided, really—and the shock was powerful. Yet the more I thought about it, the more I noticed new feelings of warmth and excitement bubbling up inside me. I couldn't deny that I felt a tenderness at the thought of having Nathaniel's baby.

Except, I was terrified of what it would mean for my father, and for my whole family. All night, I swung between extremes of elation and devastation. My sisters comforted me, giving me the space I needed to cry and worry, but remaining steadfast in their support. The emotional turbulence had me reeling, and I was grateful they were there with me to process the news.

After a complicated, tearful night, I finally calmed down. Melinda stayed over and we all slept in after having stayed up to such a late hour. It was Friday, but Melinda had the day off, Larissa canceled her personal training clients, and I called in sick to work. Both my sisters told me they'd hang out as long as I wanted them to. Trudy had left early for a family event, so the three of us had the apartment to ourselves.

By noon, Larissa had picked up sandwiches from my favorite Italian deli, but I couldn't touch my food even though I was hungry. My sandwich still sat in the center of the table, its waxy paper wrapper intact.

"Amelia, you need to eat," Larissa said gently when she and Melinda were all done with their sandwiches.

“We know you’re worried, and scared, and in shock. But you still have to take care of yourself,” Melinda said.

I shook my head, my eyes welling up again. After last night, I thought I was all cried out.

I was wrong.

“You don’t understand,” I mumbled, using my fingers to catch the tears gathering.

Larissa sighed, sipping a green juice. “No, you’re right. We can’t fully understand, at least not the part about being pregnant, because neither of us has been through it. But we do understand that you’re scared, and we’re your sisters. We love you, Amelia. You have options, here.”

“And a big family that cares about you. No matter what you decide, we’ll all be here every step of the way,” Melinda added.

I shook my head. “Not *all* of you. Not Mom and Dad. They won’t help me, not now that I’ve screwed up so badly.”

Larissa scoffed. Melinda sighed.

“That’s crazy talk, Amelia,” Larissa said. “Dad would do anything for you.”

“Of course they’ll help you,” Melinda reassured. “They love you so much.”

I wiped my tears and stopped my sniffles. I knew my parents loved me, but I wasn’t convinced everything would somehow be OK. The reality of my situation couldn’t be further from that.

“It’s OK to feel frightened,” Larissa said. “But we’re here for you. Sure, Dad might need some time to wrap his head around the fact that his youngest child is pregnant at twenty-one, but he’ll come around.”

“I bet he’ll be so excited for a grandbaby,” Melinda added, smiling.

She had no idea how much more complicated the situation was beyond me being pregnant. I looked away, ruminating on

the idea of my father becoming a grandfather to his best friend's baby. What would people think? I imagined my father would feel so ashamed, so angry with me, and shuddered at the thought of him finding out.

Larissa took a deep breath. "Who knows, maybe news like this is just the thing Mom and Dad need right now. They've been at each other's throats lately. This could bring them together and help them feel closer."

My eyes filled with tears again. "You really don't understand, do you? The baby isn't the problem," I said, close to sobbing now. "The problem is the baby's father."

Both my sisters' brows creased in concern.

"Amelia, who is this guy?" Larissa asked.

Melinda shook her head. "What does that even mean?"

"It's time to tell us," Larissa said in a gentle tone.

"Larissa is right," Melinda agreed. "If you're this distraught over who the father is, but you won't share that with us, how can we help you through this?"

They were both right. I had kept it from them for too long, anyway. It was killing me hiding the truth from my sisters. I had always been honest with them in the past, and I couldn't keep hanging on to this secret.

Not now, when so much was at stake.

"You have to promise me something. Both of you," I said through sniffles. They exchanged a look, then turned back to me and nodded. "If I tell you who it is, you have to swear that you will not tell a single soul about this."

Melinda kept her hand on my shoulder. "Fine. I won't tell."

"Neither of us will. You have our word," Larissa nodded.

I took a deep breath and braced myself. "The father is Nathaniel Dean."

Their eyes went wide, and they were silent for a few moments. My heart thumped and my mind raced as I waited

for them to respond. What would they think of me? Had they ever suspected it could be him? Would they understand now why I couldn't tell our parents?

Larissa was the one who spoke first. "Oh my God."

Melinda shook her head slightly. "Amelia, how..."

Their shocked expressions were proof that I had done something horribly wrong. But what was going on between Nathaniel and me couldn't be wrong. Not when I cared for him so much, and I knew he felt the same.

Despite my sisters' shock, I felt relief at finally admitting my secret to them. A weight had come off my shoulders. All my life, I had been close to my sisters, and even though I was scared and nervous about how they would take the information, I was glad to say it out loud.

Larissa spoke up again, still looking taken aback. "How long has this been going on?"

"A couple of months now," I said, realizing that ever since we had started seeing each other, I had thought of little else other than Nathaniel. My sisters had suspected something, asking me what was going on when we had dinner at our parents' house. Now, they finally knew the truth. "It started at Dad's client party. We didn't plan it; we just couldn't control our attraction."

They shared another look, and this time, it was loaded with more recognition than confusion.

"Is it a fling?" Melinda asked.

"No," I said, emphatically. "It's not a fling. Nathaniel is... special."

Larissa shifted in her seat. "So you're serious together?"

I considered it, and in spite of all my confusion regarding what to do and how my parents would react, I knew one thing to be true, no matter what. "He's important to me."

"At dinner the other week," Melinda said, her gaze drifting away, thinking. "When Mom had been so annoying about setting Nathaniel up with one of her friends. You wanted to

leave right afterward.” She smiled slightly. “It makes more sense now.”

“Well, now we know why you don’t want Dad to find out,” Larissa said matter-of-factly, slurping the dregs of her juice. “Have you thought about what you’re going to tell him?”

“I don’t know,” I said truthfully. I hadn’t expected any of this and hadn’t had a chance to think that far ahead yet.

“Whatever you decide to do,” Melinda said, “we’re here for you. We’ll support you.”

Larissa nodded, agreeing. “Yes, no matter what, we’ve got your back.”

I managed a weak smile, still worried but grateful for my sisters more than ever before.

Melinda squeezed my shoulder gently. “Amelia, I think the first thing you’ve got to do is tell Nathaniel. If he’s so important to you, if you two have something special together, you can’t keep this from him. He deserves to know he’s going to be a father.”

“I know,” I said, taking a deep breath. “I will. I’ll tell him. Soon.”

“And in the meantime,” Larissa said, pushing my unwrapped sandwich across the kitchen table, “you need to get a little lunch in you.” She winked warmly at me.

I let out a little laugh at how Larissa was so predictable—always wanting to make sure people were fed and healthy. I took the sandwich, unwrapped it, and scarfed it down, amazed at how famished I had been. Skipping breakfast was apparently not a good idea when pregnant.

My sisters were understanding when I told them I wanted another day or so before talking to Nathaniel. I promised again that I would tell him as soon as possible, I just needed some time to process everything that was happening, time to think a little, on my own.

My life was about to change.

In many ways, it already had.

It was a lot to take in, and even more to come to terms with emotionally.

Fortunately for me, I had the best sisters in the world by my side.

CHAPTER 22



NATHANIEL

I had been trying to get a hold of Amelia for a few days, but she was hard to pin down. My texts were answered with “yes” or “no” or “I’m not sure”—always short and to the point, unlike Amelia’s usual warm, friendly way of communicating—and despite knowing she was busy at work, I couldn’t help but worry that something was off with her.

Maybe something had gone wrong. Maybe she’d had a change of heart about what was growing between us.

Maybe she’d end up being the one to put a stop to this relationship, after all.

The doubts that had surfaced in me after our night together at my place had melted away with each passing day, replaced by the warm feeling that had been growing inside me from the start. Even after seeing David and feeling the pangs of guilt fresher than ever, I was hopelessly in Amelia’s thrall. She was irresistible to me, and any reservations I harbored about us were superseded by the feelings I had been developing for her.

Now, the thought of Amelia ending things had me feeling more conflicted than ever.

I wasn’t strong enough to put a stop to this myself; if I had been, I would’ve done it weeks ago. Instead, I spent more and more time thinking about Amelia, spending my nights with her, missing her while I was out of town.

The truth was, I cared about her.

If she wanted to cut things off, it would be brutal, but I would understand. It would hurt more than anything I could imagine, but I cared about her so much that I wouldn't want to make her feel guilty or obligated if she had changed her mind about me. If Amelia ended things between us, I'd let her go, and do my best to find a way out of the inevitable pain her absence would create.

I hoped I was wrong about my worries. Maybe I was being too dramatic, too needy, and overthinking things. If I could just talk to her, have a conversation beyond the short text messages and missed calls, everything would become clearer. I was probably making a mountain out of a molehill, and Amelia was truly swamped at the hospital. We would reconnect once her workload calmed down.

Besides, I needed to focus on work myself. I had wall-to-wall meetings with colleagues and a happy hour chat scheduled with another client tonight. In between teleconferencing out of my home office with brokers and other agents and escrow officers, I called Amelia again, but her phone went straight to voicemail. I left a short message asking if everything was OK and hoped she would call me back.

By the end of the day, I still hadn't heard from her. When I headed out to meet my client for happy hour, I wondered if I'd hear back at all.

The restaurant was in the Gaslamp Quarter of downtown San Diego, so I had to commute from La Jolla during the worst time of day for traffic—a reason to leave early and make sure I could find parking.

I arrived earlier than scheduled. Once I made it into the city and found a secure garage several long blocks away, I started making my way to the restaurant. Happy couples and groups of friends laughed and chatted on the patios of restaurants I passed, their conversations a chaotic background to my quiet mood. While I walked, my thoughts drifted to Amelia, questions filling my mind. When would I see her again? Was she doing OK? How much longer could I bear to wait for her to answer my calls and my texts?

Lost in my thoughts, strolling past a lively patio bar, I was startled when I heard someone call my name.

“Nathaniel! Oh my God!” It was Colleen, wearing a low-cut purple top and flashy gold jewelry, sitting on a barstool with a couple of friends. She hopped down, martini in hand, and walked to the edge of the gated patio where I stood with my hands in my pockets.

“Hi, Colleen,” I said, smiling cordially, taken off guard by running into her. After the uncomfortable encounter at her birthday party, and now that I had learned from David that their marriage had become strained, I was wary of making a social misstep—and wary of Colleen, altogether.

She leaned over the low gate that separated the patio from the sidewalk and gave me a one-armed hug, holding her drink precariously to one side and lingering a bit too long. Her perfume was so strong, I knew instantly that I’d be smelling it on myself hours later. When she let go of me, her hand swept down my arm slowly, grazing my fingers.

I swiftly pulled them away.

“It’s always so nice to see you, Nathaniel. What are you doing down here in the Gaslamp? Have you got a hot date? Or is it still the single life for you?” Her flirtatious behavior was obvious; her voice, her body language, her knowing smirk.

“Oh, no. No dates for me,” I said, shifting on my feet. “I’m just here to meet a client up the street for drinks. The meetings never stop.”

“Interesting, interesting. Well, I’ve been thinking a lot about you lately,” she said, her tone syrupy and her eyes raking down my body.

“Me?” I imagined she might be referring to the conversation Amelia told me about when she’d had dinner at her parents’ place. Something about setting me up with one of Colleen’s insufferable friends.

At least, I hoped that’s all it was.

“Yes, you,” she said, playfully elbowing me. “I’m heading up to Newport Beach to the new vacation property this

weekend with one of my girlfriends. You should totally swing by! It's not far, and it's even less so from La Jolla. You could give me the ins and outs of the real estate market in the area."

"I'm not sure I understand... are you thinking of selling the property already?"

"God, no." She twirled her brown hair hanging just above her bustline, darker than Amelia's and more elaborately styled. "I've been trying to talk David into purchasing another home up there to use as rental income. Maybe even as a special event property, or a place we could lease out to film production companies. But David says one 'one property at a time.' He's no fun."

I didn't know how to respond to that. I certainly wasn't going to agree with her.

"You, on the other hand, *are* fun," she said. I swallowed to mask a grimace. "So, what do you say about coming up this weekend? I'll be sure to make it worth your while."

Her eyelashes fluttered rapidly. She brought a hand up to my arm again, squeezing my bicep lightly and letting her long acrylic nails scrape down to my elbow.

My body wanted to recoil, to back away, but I couldn't exactly pull that off without appearing rude. If I had given in to my instinct, I would have been long gone from that patio by then. Instead, I had to grin and bear it, and try to deftly remove myself from the situation with as little awkwardness as possible.

It was getting more difficult with each passing minute.

"I'm afraid I'm really swamped this weekend. Sorry about that." I reached for my phone in my pocket and checked the time. "Hey, it looks like I need to get going so I'm not late for my client. It was nice bumping into you, Colleen. Please say hello to David for me."

Her face fell for a moment, then she smiled, waving a hand as if to dismiss the importance of my work. "I'm sure you can stay a little while longer. Come grab a quick drink with us." She slipped her free hand into mine.

“I really can’t. But thanks for the offer.” I pulled my hand away.

Her eyes narrowed, but her mouth formed a sideways smile. “Well, don’t forget about Newport. My door”—she tapped my elbow again— “is always open to you.”

It wasn’t lost on me that she referred to it as “her” door rather than “theirs.”

I nodded, smiled with pursed lips, and turned to walk away.

She grabbed my forearm. “You’re not going to leave without a goodbye hug, are you?”

I stifled an exasperated sigh and leaned in slightly, patting her on the shoulder, trying to make as little bodily contact as possible.

Colleen wasn’t having that. She set her martini down on a nearby table, pressed herself into my torso, and gave me a long, lingering hug with her hands sweeping suggestively down my back.

“Goodbye, Colleen. Have a nice evening.”

“Bye, Nathaniel,” she said, her voice lilting and teasing.

Nodding once more, I turned and walked down the sidewalk at a brisk pace, heading in a hurry to the restaurant where I was meeting my client.

Finally, I thought. It had been yet another close call with Colleen, but I had managed to slip out of her talons, albeit not without an inappropriate hug. I sighed, shaking my head as I opened the glass doors to the restaurant.

Seeing Colleen left me with a sick feeling in my gut.

My best friend’s wife. Coming onto me.

Again.

I needed to shake off the uneasiness so I could focus on being pleasant and productive with my client instead of obsessing over the uncomfortable position I was in between David and Colleen.

That was hard to do when I was falling for their daughter.

CHAPTER 23



AMELIA

Work had been grueling lately, and that particular day was especially rough. It didn't help that I was walking around in a daze half the time, distracted and worried about my situation with Nathaniel and the pregnancy.

The hospital's staffing issues were improving, but it was still busy. Or maybe it felt busier than usual because I was so wrapped up in my own concerns. All morning, I was rushing around trying to remember who needed what, vacillating between being completely frazzled and zoning out.

Just as we were about to close the office for the lunch hour, Carol, the nurse practitioner attached to our department, pulled me aside.

"Amelia, is everything OK?"

"Yes," I lied. "I'm just a little out of it, that's all."

"You've made a number of mistakes today. Like forgetting to clock in, forgetting to check on the patient in Room B, and letting that elderly couple go without directing them to the front desk so they could schedule their next appointment. Although these are all minor mistakes, they are very much not like you. We need everyone to be on their A-game." She wasn't angry; she was voicing valid concerns.

Plus, she was right. I had been making careless errors all morning.

"I'm sorry, Carol. I've just got some personal issues that I'm dealing with. It won't happen again."

“You look a little tired, too. Are you getting enough sleep?” Carol was a medical professional, and she could tell there was more to it.

“Yeah, I’m fine. It’s just life stuff,” I reassured, not wanting to give anything away about my situation. “I promise I won’t let it distract me anymore.”

“Hey, everybody has off days. It’s alright. Tell you what, I’ll call in a replacement to fill in for the rest of your shift. Take the rest of the afternoon off and be kind to yourself, OK?”

I nodded, embarrassed but thankful for Carol’s kindness. “OK. Thanks.”

After grabbing my purse and clocking out, I headed to the elevator. Normally I’d take the stairs, but Carol was right. I was a bit tired. I wanted to get home as soon as possible.

When I stepped out of the elevator and into the main lobby, before turning to the corridor leading to the parking garage, I spotted a tall man with a bushy brown beard holding a paper takeout bag.

Dad?

He saw me then, through the big glass doors to the lobby, and came striding energetically inside, grinning widely.

A panic shot through me.

I had just found out I was pregnant with his best friend’s baby, and I hadn’t even told the father yet. I wasn’t prepared to face my own father. It was the last thing I needed.

But this was my dad, my protector, my nurturer, my rock.

“Hey, kiddo!” he said, beaming, holding up the bag and shaking it a little.

“Dad, what are you doing here?” I asked, walking up to give him a hug.

“I figured you’d be starting your lunch break and wanted to spend some quality time with my baby girl. Wow, was that perfect timing, or what?”

“Oh, OK...” I didn’t have the energy to explain to him that I had just been dismissed for the day.

“I brought your favorite, Sunny’s Deli,” he said, wagging his eyebrows. Sunny’s was my favorite smoked meat sandwich place. He used to take me there when I had half days at school, just the two of us before it was time to pick up my sisters. I developed a fondness for pastrami at a young age because that’s what my dad ordered, and I wanted to be like him.

All of a sudden, I was ravenous, my stomach grumbling audibly.

“Wow, thanks, Dad...”

“How about you go grab us one of those picnic tables outside, and I’ll pop a few coins into the machine for some sodas, OK kiddo?”

“OK.”

We sat at a table outdoors next to a grassy area in front of the hospital and inhaled our sandwiches. Hospital staff, patients, and caregivers milled around on the grass, soaking up the sunshine after the recent rains.

There was a small play area that had been recently installed, paid for by an anonymous donor, for families to use when visiting their sick loved ones. Happy children played around on big, colorful boulders. Older couples watched fondly from benches. A new mom used a nursing cover to drape over her infant as she breastfed.

My heart felt like it was being ripped in half, watching the sweet kids giggle nearby, listening to my dad’s innocent questions – *How was your day? How’s work going? Do anything fun lately?* – and finally I just couldn’t take it anymore.

“I’m pregnant.” The words came unbidden, and I gasped after blurting out my secret.

My father’s face fell, and his jaw dropped.

“Pregnant? Amelia...”

“I—”

“What are you talking about?”

I didn’t answer. My dad was shaking his head in disbelief.

“You’re not ready for this. You’re only twenty-one years old; how did this happen? This is going to change everything in your life. You’ve just started your career and you live with two roommates; where is the baby going to sleep? How are you going to do this?” His questions were so rapid-fire, I had no time to answer. Before I could even think of where to start, tears welled up in my eyes. My father’s face carried the weight of his confusion and worry, and finally, he asked the worst question. The question I knew had been coming all along. “Who is the father?”

I began to sob. This was not how I had imagined telling my father I was pregnant, not when I dreamt of marriage and children when I was a young girl. I had always hoped for one of those grand reveals, those touching moments like people post online where loving couples announce to their parents that they’re going to become grandparents, and everyone cries happy tears and hugs each other and celebrates the good news together.

This was not that.

Worst of all, I had disappointed my father. My sweet dad, who had taught me how to ride a bike, who had taken me out on father-daughter dates when I was little, who had come to every school assembly and violin recital and who had pinned every one of my crayon scribbles up on his office wall in a place of honor like it was fine art.

I couldn’t tell him who the father was. It would break his heart.

“Don’t worry,” I said, stifling sobs, trying to look composed again, but probably failing miserably. “It’s fine, I’m fine. I’ll figure everything out on my own. Thanks for visiting me. I have to get back to work.”

“Amelia, wait—”

I heard him call my name as I was running through the glass doors, but I didn't look back. Making my way down the corridor to the parking garage, I raced to my car and buckled in, driving home with my eyes full of tears and my heart in pieces.

CHAPTER 24



NATHANIEL

S pending an hour and a half on the elliptical after work was just about the only thing that blunted the uneasy feeling I had about Amelia. I threw myself into working up a sweat, testing my endurance, letting the heavy, rhythmic glide of the pedals drown out my agitated thoughts.

Easier said than done.

Earlier in the week, I kept hoping she was just busy. Then when she hadn't returned my calls or texts during the past twenty-four hours, the stress kicked into high gear.

Beyond wondering if she was having second thoughts about us, I started to simply worry whether or not she was OK. Was she sick? Did something happen to her phone? Would she ever get back to me, or was I being ghosted by the one woman I had come to care deeply about?

My quads were feeling the burn of the elliptical after ninety-five minutes when my phone rang loudly. I had kept the ringer on instead of turning it to silent like I usually did in case Amelia called. Anxious to answer, I picked it up and looked at the screen.

I hadn't expected David's number to appear.

Huffing, I stopped the machine, stepped off the pedals and took the call, beads of sweat dripping all down my body as I walked outside to answer.

"David," I said, panting. "Just catching my breath... at the gym... what's up?"

There was silence for a moment, and I couldn't tell if David was distracted, the connection was cutting out, or if he was hesitating.

“Nathaniel, I... I don't even know. It's just so...”

Something was very wrong. I had known David for many years now, but I had never heard him this distraught and out of sorts. He was a confident, secure man who was rarely at a loss for words, always putting people at ease, knowing the right thing to say in any situation.

“David, are you OK?”

More silence. Finally, he simply said, “No.”

“Where are you? Do you need help, are you injured?”

“I'm fine, I'm... I'm at home. Nate, can you come by? For a drink. I need someone to talk to. Please.”

A thread of terror pulled tight inside me, suddenly paranoid that David had found out about Amelia and me.

He was my oldest friend. My mentor and my confidante. He had been there for me when I was at my lowest.

“I'll be right there.”

— — —

I pulled into the circular driveway at David's house around nine o'clock, tense but determined to help my friend.

When he greeted me at the door, he looked terrible. His face was pale, and his eyes were glassy, his hair was a mess, and his typically sharp, clean-cut attire was disheveled. He wore his usual Rolex and chinos, but he was barefoot, with his polo shirt half untucked and the collar stretched.

David said nothing as he opened the door and backed up so I could come into the house. He barely made eye contact.

I followed him to the den where he motioned to the sofa. He walked over to a bar cart and picked up a heavy, cut crystal decanter, pouring two stiff whiskeys in glasses I had bought him and Colleen for their twentieth wedding anniversary.

Sitting down on the wingback chair opposite me and handing me a glass, he downed his drink immediately, without waiting for me. Then he got up again to grab the decanter and bring it back to the dark wood coffee table between us, pouring himself a second glass.

I took a long sip of my Scotch. I could tell I was going to need it.

David inhaled a deep breath and sighed roughly, as if he had been put through the ringer and was only just now surfacing.

“We got some news today.”

“What kind of news? Where’s Colleen, is she OK?”

“I put her to bed already. She had a few too many martinis,” David said, shaking his head. “She’ll sleep it off and I’ll have to deal with her again in the morning. For now, at least, I get some peace.” He paused, regarding the amber whiskey in his glass, then said, “Well, not really.”

Something was eating away at him. I had never seen him like this.

“David, what’s going on? What happened? Are you two splitting—”

“Amelia is pregnant.”

My heart sank into my stomach. My breath stopped. My head spun.

What? Amelia? Pregnant?

I was in shock. Couldn’t speak, couldn’t form a coherent thought.

Amelia, *my* Amelia...

Pregnant.

My mind reeled with the sudden, monumental implications of this information, before I could even think straight enough to ask any questions.

“She told me today,” David said, “when I surprised her at work.”

I barely registered David’s statement, instead hearing the words “*Amelia is pregnant*” on a loop inside my head.

It had to be mine. She wouldn’t be sleeping with someone else behind my back. She was mine, and mine *only*.

Which meant that my future child would be my best friend’s grandchild.

“I want to support her, but... she’s my baby girl, Nathaniel. My strong, smart, capable Amelia with a good head on her shoulders. Good judgment. Or at least I thought. I just don’t understand. How could this happen?”

I knew only too well how it happened, and my stomach twisted at the thought of David finding out. All the guilt that had been building up over these last couple of months came crashing down on me now that I knew my best friend’s daughter was going to have my baby.

This was when David needed me to say something reassuring to him, something that would put him at ease and quell his fears for his daughter’s future.

I found it agonizing to try and come up with anything to say to him. Everything would be a lie, anyway. The truth would hurt him too much.

“David, maybe... I’m sure she’s just... is she OK?” I looked away then, not wanting to betray my feelings for her.

“I haven’t spoken to her since earlier today.”

“Neither have—” I stopped myself before I made a terrible mistake. I had let my guard down. Stopped being careful not to reveal our secret.

Shit.

David squinted and shook his head, like he had a thought enter his mind that wasn’t supposed to be there. “Yeah, so, like I said, she’s been out of touch. I don’t know what to do, I—”

“Sorry, I’m so sorry David, for what you’re going through. It must be a terrible shock. But I... have to be back in La Jolla soon. Early morning client meeting. I’ll call you tomorrow, sound good?” I placed an awkward hand on David’s shoulder as I stood to leave.

“But you just got here—”

“Sorry,” I muttered again, already leaving the den and making my way through the foyer. I called back to him as he was standing in the doorway, staring at me. “Talk to you soon.”

I closed the front door behind me and got into my car, racing to Point Loma with my heart drumming strong and insistent in my chest.

CHAPTER 25



AMELIA

The apartment was eerily quiet. Larissa was working a night shift at the gym, and Trudy was staying over at her boyfriend's house. I had been alone since coming home from work early, and I kept trying to find things to do that would distract me from the tears that kept welling up.

Nothing worked.

I had been a weepy mess since seeing my dad and blurting out that I was pregnant.

Never before in my life had I felt this isolated, this scared of the future.

Punctuating the silence, I heard a knock at the door. Three raps, a pause, then two more. It was nearly ten o'clock at night and I wasn't sure who it could be this late. If it was my dad, I wasn't ready to talk to him again.

Making my way through the living room and down the entryway, I walked up to the door and peered through the peephole.

Nathaniel.

My heart skipped and began drumming rapidly in my chest. I had been avoiding him ever since I found out I was pregnant. Even though I had promised my sisters I would tell him, I was anxious about it, and hadn't figured out what exactly to say yet.

I couldn't deny my body's reaction to him—just the thought of Nathaniel showing up to my apartment late at night made a

liquid heat pool low in my belly, remembering what we had done together at his place, memories of the pleasure and the thrill of it all flooding my thoughts.

Yet I wasn't sure I could be with him; not like that, not tonight. Not after finding out I was carrying his baby and feeling terrified for what the future held.

Nathaniel waited patiently outside, hands in his pockets, wearing track pants, a black t-shirt and expensive running shoes. I turned the deadbolt and opened the door.

"Hi," I said, forcing a small smile.

"Hi," he echoed, his voice quiet and sedate. He wasn't smiling but his gaze held me captive, flitting from my eyes to my lips, sweeping softly down my body and back up to my face again, a question written in his expression.

"I didn't expect—" I said, stammering, "I mean, come on in." I held the door open as he walked into the entryway and shut it behind us.

Nathaniel pulled his hands from his pockets and looked as if he was about to embrace me, just for a moment—his arms lurching forward briefly and then coming back to rest at his side.

"Amelia," he said, a moment later, "are you pregnant?"

How did he know?

My heart raced and I felt my bottom lip trembling, biting it to keep myself from immediately bursting into tears.

I nodded. "Yes."

Nathaniel took in a deep breath and let out a shaky exhale.

"How did you know?" I asked. My sisters would never betray my confidence.

"Your father. He called me."

"Did... did you tell him it's yours?"

"No."

I didn't know what to do. What to say. The torment of not throwing myself into Nathaniel's embrace, the agony of waiting for him to react in some way other than silence, was unbearable.

"I'm sorry," I blurted out, my thoughts a maelstrom. Nathaniel looked confused, but I plowed ahead. "I'm sorry you had to find out like that. From my father. You must be furious with me." He shook his head, putting his hands up in the air, but I wouldn't let him try to deny that he was disappointed. "You must think I'm careless, that it's all my fault. I told you that night I had an IUD and you trusted me, but I let you down. My IUD failed, Nathaniel. I couldn't have prevented it. I'm so sorry."

"Why are you apologizing? You didn't do anything wrong, Amelia. Listen—"

"I didn't know how to tell you," I interrupted him, hot tears gathering in my eyes. "But I was going to do it soon, I swear."

"Hey," he said softly, inhaling deeply as if it might inspire me to do the same, "you're going to be OK. *We're* going to be OK."

"No we're not. What's going to happen when my father learns the truth about who the baby's father is? Will he ever speak to you again? Will he even speak to *me* again?" I was shaking, panicking, overwhelmed by stress and fear.

"Slow down, you're OK" he tried to reassure me. "Just take a deep breath and let's talk about this."

I could hardly think straight, let alone talk calmly. My breathing was shallow with anxiety, and I was using every shred of energy I had to keep myself together and not fall apart. I was nearly at a breaking point when Nathaniel suddenly wrapped his arms around me in a tight embrace.

I melted into him, and the tears started pouring out. He held me and soothed me, strong arms and gentle hands cradling my back, my neck, keeping me pressed snugly against him.

“We’ll figure this out. I promise. We’ll make this work together, Amelia. Everything’s going to be alright. I’ll be here for you, whatever it takes, no matter what.”

He was willing to throw away everything for me, but I couldn’t allow him to do it. “I won’t let you ruin your life for me,” I sobbed.

“What are you talking about? Amelia, I want to support you. You can count on me. I promise I will stand by you.”

Though I was thrilled to hear him say the words, I knew I couldn’t let him fall on his sword for me. I took a breath to steel my nerves and spoke.

“I’m going to do this alone.”

“What?” His shock and confusion were clear in his expression.

“We have to end this,” I said, struggling but determined. “It’s the right thing to do.”

Nathaniel looked like I had just shoved a knife into his heart. He shook his head slightly, brows furrowing.

“What are you... why? Amelia...”

“My father can never know about this. We have to end it, now. I can and *will* do this alone. I’ve made up my mind, Nathaniel.” With each word, I felt my heart shatter into a hundred more pieces, but my resolve was stronger than ever knowing this would protect Nathaniel.

“You’d rather raise this baby alone than tell your father about me?”

I took in a deep, shaky breath, and exhaled. “Yes.”

His warm brown eyes were glassy, his eyebrows creased deeply, his expression wounded beyond anything I had ever seen in him before. He shook his head slightly, disbelief washing over his face, and I held back a fresh wave of tears at the sight of Nathaniel experiencing so much confusion and pain. He looked heartbroken, and it was everything I could do not to comfort him.

Yet it was for the best. I had to be strong.

Gently pulling away from him, I stepped back until he released me from his arms. For a moment, he stood there looking like he was about to say something, starting, stopping, reconsidering and changing his mind.

Finally, he seemed to think better of it. There was nothing left to say, anyway. I had put an end to our relationship.

He nodded slightly, turning the door handle, his gaze lingering on mine for a moment until he disappeared down the staircase. I stood in the doorway, emotionally wrecked and shell-shocked, watching him go. Before climbing into his car, he glanced back up at me, only for a moment. I waited until he started the car and drove away to finally step back into my apartment, my back against the door, slumping down to the floor and sobbing my heart out.

CHAPTER 26



NATHANIEL

Amelia had broken my heart. I spent the night restless, tossing and turning in the bed we had shared only days ago. I wanted her there with me. I wanted to hold her, to tell her I would care for her, to share my excitement about the baby.

None of that was possible now.

She was adamant she would raise the baby alone to avoid hurting her father. No one could know it was mine.

In the moment, I hadn't known what to do or say. I left her apartment with an enormous knot in my stomach, every muscle in my body protesting my separation from her as I willed myself to walk away.

It was what she wanted. I had to respect her wishes.

Except she was having my baby. *My baby*, the baby we had made out of passion and electric instinct so strong neither of us could deny it. I wanted to help her, to stay with her and support her, to be a father to our baby, all while she was telling me to forget about it and leave her alone.

I had to find a way to convince her that I could be involved, that me being a father to our child was important and that it would work despite her worries about her father. I wasn't sure how to get her to see that just yet, but I planned to keep trying to find a way.

In the past, I had always been able to count on David when I needed help. In any type of crisis, David had been there for me; when my parents died, he was the one friend I turned to.

The friend who listened while I told him how lonely I felt now that they were gone. The person who sat with me in silence when I had nothing left to explain, when I just needed a friend to be there.

David was the man who had helped me start out on a new path in life, one that would hold enormous success and give me a new sense of purpose and place in the world. He had given me so much, and been there for me whenever I needed him, he'd become the father I lost, the brother I never had, the best friend I could pick up the phone and call whenever I needed guidance or a sympathetic ear.

Now, that was impossible. David was no longer my confidante, and he would soon become the grandfather of my child without knowing it—a child whose life I was being shut out from before it even started.

I was supposed to meet an important client, but I rescheduled. It was the first time I had canceled on a client in almost ten years of working in real estate. I knew I wouldn't be able to focus; hell, I could barely drag myself into the shower when I woke up. Everything looked bleaker and grayer now, and I had no idea how to live in this new reality.

A reality without Amelia.

All day, I resisted the impulse to reach out to her, to ask her to meet with me or just talk on the phone, to beg her to reconsider her plan. Each time I picked up the phone, I hesitated, replaying in my head what she had said to me last night. *I've made up my mind, Nathaniel.*

She hadn't wavered. She was steadfast, resolute in her decision.

When I finally managed to get out of bed, it was already noon. I glanced at a few emails in my home office but couldn't concentrate. Sitting behind my glass desk and staring out at the waves, all I could think about was Amelia and how much she meant to me. How much I would be missing out on, if she went through with this all by herself, without me by her side. Protecting her. Caring for her, and for our baby.

My phone rang, interrupting my sad reverie, and my heart skipped a beat thinking maybe Amelia had changed her mind. Maybe she hadn't been as resolved as I'd thought last night; I could have sworn I sensed a shimmer of doubt in her voice when she had told me her decision.

Instead, it was a number I didn't recognize. I picked up, if for no other reason than I was feeling a little guilty for ignoring my work and canceling on my client.

"Nathaniel Dean," I said, my tone flat and disinterested.

"Nathaniel, it's Melinda Weaver."

I straightened my spine. "Hi, Melinda." I had never spoken to her over the phone before. I really didn't know David's other two girls that well.

"I'd like to meet with you," she said. "If you're open to it."

I expected she wanted to read me the riot act. By now, Amelia had probably told her sisters that she was pregnant, and my best guess was that Melinda had learned I was the father.

Still, if that's what she wanted to do, I would take it. Maybe it would serve as practice for the day when David would inevitably find out about everything, too.

"Yes, of course, I'll meet with you. When and where?"

It took me over an hour to get into downtown San Diego, far longer than it should have, but there was some damned holiday festival jamming up traffic and creating a living nightmare on the freeway. By the time I found a parking spot near the cafe where I was supposed to meet Melinda, I was in danger of being late, but fortunately I arrived before Melinda and took a spot in a quiet corner booth so we could talk without being disturbed.

I ordered a quart of sparkling water and two glasses and waited for her.

When Melinda walked in, she was wearing a sweater and jeans. The weather had turned colder again, with a spell of rain

ahead following the brief sunny stint we had enjoyed the previous week.

Melinda came over and sat next to me. I nodded politely, greeting her, and she responded in kind. She took a deep breath, fidgeting a little with her purse, then taking a sip of her Pellegrino. She seemed flustered, on edge, and I braced myself for what I imagined must be an onslaught of anger at me now that she clearly knew about my relationship with her sister.

“Look,” she said, taking a sharp breath and exhaling heavily. “I’m here for my sister. Not for you. I barely know you; I don’t owe you anything, and I’m also not here to berate you if that’s what you’re expecting.”

“OK...” I wasn’t sure what to think. If she didn’t want to meet me to give me a piece of her mind, what was this about?

“I know Amelia ended things with you, and she’s an adult who can think for herself and make her own decisions. But I also know that this decision is breaking her heart, and it’s not what she truly wants deep down.” Melinda was mature and serious, but she had a kindness to her eyes as she spoke. “I watched her agonize over the news when she learned she was pregnant, and when Larissa and I found out you were the father, we understood why she was so tormented. Her decision to end your relationship and shut you out was her way of trying to keep anyone from getting hurt. Like my father. And you.”

My heart felt lighter, daring to hope. “She loves your father so much,” I said. “It’s obvious why; he’s my best friend, after all. David is a wonderful man and a loving father. I know he’d understand, eventually. Even if he didn’t, I would still support Amelia. I’d give it all up for her.”

“I know you would. I can tell how much she means to you,” she said, folding and unfolding her napkin. “Listen, Amelia wants to be with you, Nathaniel. I know she does. She wants you to be the father of her baby, to be there for her and the child. She has been despondent all day since I got to the apartment, and I know my sister. She’s miserable. She feels awful for choosing to end things with you and I know she

regrets it, but Amelia is in way over her head and doesn't know what to do, and she figures this is the only way forward. I know you care for her. I could tell by the way she talked about you when she told us what was going on."

"I do care for her, more than anything in the world. Melinda, tell me what to do. I'll do anything. Please, just tell me what to do to get her back."

"You need to fight for her," she said. "Fight for your baby. Amelia is so close to our father, and she can't fight for herself right now, not with his disappointment hanging over her. She's terrified of hurting him, but I know that if she sees you're there for her, that you're willing to fight for her and for the family you could become, she'll be able to face our parents. Amelia will be stronger with you by her side. I know it."

"Then that's what I'll do. I'll fight for her, and for the baby. I *will* fight for her, even if it means standing up to your father."

"You're a good person, Nathaniel. I know that your age difference makes some people uncomfortable, but I don't think it's wrong, and neither does Larissa. We know you're a good man. If you weren't, my father wouldn't have befriended you and Amelia wouldn't care for you so deeply. I know you'll support her and be there for her. Otherwise, I wouldn't be here with you right now."

"Your father will come around. I know it will be hard for him, but he will understand eventually. And I want you and Larissa to know that Amelia means everything to me. She deserves the world, and I'll do anything in my power to make her happy."

"I'm glad. She's my little sister. More than anything else, I just want her to be happy. If you make her happy, then I want you to be in her life."

Hearing Melinda speak so lovingly of her sister and so forcefully in support of our relationship heartened me. I had been desperate for even a shred of hope to hang onto, and now I had it.

“Thank you, Melinda. You have no idea how much it means to me that you reached out. I owe you everything, truly.”

She nodded with a small, caring smile.

I paid the tab, and we walked out of the cafe, sharing a brief but warm hug before going our separate ways. Rushing to my car, I headed to Point Loma with a fire in my belly and hope in my heart.

I needed to show Amelia how much I cared for her. I needed to prove to her that I was willing to stand by her, to fight for her, to be there for her and our baby, no matter what. I needed to hold her in my arms and tell her everything would be alright, that we would get through this together and that I would defend her from any disappointment she feared from her parents.

I had to tell her that I loved her.

CHAPTER 27



AMELIA

So, this was what grief felt like.

I had lost my grandparents when I was too little to remember, and I had never experienced the loss of anyone important to me in my life.

Until now.

Letting Nathaniel go had been painful beyond what I had imagined. The sense of emptiness and loneliness was overwhelming. I had been so sure, so determined that it was the right thing to do, but after each passing hour, my doubts grew larger and more numerous.

I tried to distract myself, but it was no use. The most I could do was shower, then I was back in bed, gray light filtering in through the blinds as the morning rolled into afternoon and clouds darkened the sky, threatening rain.

Curled up under my bedspread at dusk, I got a phone call.

Dad.

I couldn't answer. Not right then. I let it go to voicemail, then listened to his message right away.

"Amelia, sweetie, it's Dad. Hey, honey. Just calling to see how you're doing, how you're feeling. And to invite you to dinner tomorrow, just the two of us. Your mother will be in Newport, and I'd, uh... Well, I'd really love to talk with you about this whole baby thing now that I've had a little time to wrap my head around it. I hope you'll say yes, sweetie. Please

call me, or just send me a text and let me know. It would be nice to see you. I love you, kiddo. Always will.”

For the first time all week, I felt hope. My father did love me; I knew that. Maybe there was a chance he could accept the situation if I told him about Nathaniel. Maybe he would eventually come around. It was still scary to imagine confessing who the baby’s father was to him, but my dad might be more understanding than I had expected.

Or maybe he would be devastated at the news.

Either way, I had to find out, and that meant facing him.

I texted him that I would meet him for dinner, and he replied saying he was glad I said yes. Now, I had something to look forward to. Some hope to cling to, even though my life felt like it was coming apart at the seams.

Everything had been weighing down on my heart so heavily. I needed to clear my head. Larissa always suggested a walk whenever I was feeling overwhelmed, so I decided to spend a few minutes outside and circle the block before the rain started.

I pulled a thick blue sweater over my leggings, got my sneakers on, tied my hair in a ponytail and made my way downstairs to the street, starting down the block. When I got to the corner and turned, my feet froze in place.

Nathaniel was running up toward me, stopping just a few feet short of where I stood. He was winded, and I didn’t see his car anywhere; he must have had to park far away since all the nearby spots were taken, then jogged all the way up the hill to my block.

Seeing his face sent me into an emotional tailspin. I didn’t know what to say. I couldn’t keep seeing him like this. It made everything hurt more.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, stunned at his appearance out of nowhere.

He took in a shaky breath, then spoke in a quiet voice. “Amelia, I’m in love with you.”

I blinked, gasping softly.

Love?

My pulse quickened. I couldn't speak. A swirl of emotion made its way up from my chest and got caught in my throat, preventing me from speaking.

Nathaniel stepped one foot closer, this time his voice louder and clearer. "I'm in love with you. Deeply, madly in love with you. Everything about you—your big heart, your compassion and kindness, your selflessness. I love your sense of humor and your quick wit, always keeping me on my toes. Your dreams and your ambitions. I love your beauty, and your grit and determination to do the right thing. Your sweet, soft side. I love you when you're strong, and I love you when you're hesitant, because it means you care. I love you so much, Amelia, and I want to be with you. I choose you as my family. You, and our baby. During these past few months, you've become my everything, and I'll face whatever battle, whatever conflict that comes my way, no matter how difficult, in order to stay by your side. I will fight for you, Amelia. For both of you. For all three of us."

He took in another sharp breath, then exhaled, shuddering, overcome by emotion.

"If you'll have me, of course," he said softly.

I felt like I was dreaming. It was a love confession so sincere, so heartfelt, more romantic and grander than I had ever imagined. How could I turn him down after a speech like that?

I rushed into his waiting arms, and felt his strong embrace circle my body, protective and safe.

"I love you too," I said, nodding, my heart full, a smile growing on my face. The widest I had smiled in days.

Nathaniel's lips opened into a great big grin, his dimples melting my heart and his words soothing my soul. "I'm the luckiest man alive, then."

I laughed, relief and joy flooding through my veins.

This felt right.

Nathaniel felt like home.

I wasn't going to keep punishing myself for loving him. I couldn't stop myself from being with the man of my dreams, not even to protect my father. He would have to come around; he would have to see how much Nathaniel and I loved each other, and that would be all there was to it.

My dad would accept us, eventually. I knew he would.

Nathaniel and I stood there, embracing, as the mist turned to a drizzle. He leaned down and pressed his lips to mine, kissing me softly and tenderly. The rain may have been on its way and the drizzle getting us wet but kissing the man I loved made it feel like the sun had just come out.

"I've got the apartment to myself tonight," I said when we pulled away to breathe. "Let's go upstairs."

"You don't have to tell me twice," he said, a crooked smile forming on his face.

I took his large hand and laced my fingers with his, and we walked down the sidewalk, up the staircase, and into my apartment.

CHAPTER 28



NATHANIEL

Amelia led me inside and down the entryway, kicking off her sneakers. I copied her, leaving my shoes where they landed. She was looking back at me and giggling as I followed her to her bedroom.

The apartment she shared with her sister and roommate was spacious but homey. Amelia's room was the furthest bedroom down the hallway, with a small, private bathroom attached to it.

By the time we got to her bedroom, I was hungrier for her than I had ever been.

Amelia pulled the blinds down, and the room grew even darker, only the twinkling string lights providing anything to see by. I walked up behind her and slipped my arms around her waist, placing soft kisses on the back of her neck, pulling her close. Stray strands of chestnut hair had fallen out of her ponytail, silky soft and curled slightly from the drizzle outside.

She hummed as I kissed and caressed her, squeezing her waist and hips, stroking her body and running my hands underneath her sweater up to her lace bra. Her gorgeous breasts fit perfectly in my hands, and she let out a light moan as my thumbs circled over the lacy fabric covering her nipples.

"Nathaniel," she whined softly, arching her back and pressing her rear into my hardened cock which was straining desperately against my pants.

I shuddered, the round globes of her ass rubbing up and down my dick. She was still wearing all her clothing—thin black leggings, an oversized sweater—and although I relished the way we were grinding into each other, I needed to feel her naked body under my fingers, against my skin, around my cock.

“Let me take this off you, baby,” I said with a kiss under her ear, pulling up her sweater. She lifted her arms as she turned around to face me and the sweater came off, revealing the lacy bra that I had been fondling a moment earlier.

I let out a heavy breath, admiring her beautiful body.

She pulled at the hem of my shirt, and I took it off quickly, eager and ready to please her.

Then she surprised me.

Her eyelids went a little low, lashes fluttering, then she said, “You’re in my bedroom, now. I’m in charge.”

Interesting.

A little smirk overcame her lips, and she pressed a palm against my chest, guiding me to the bed behind me. I backed up, letting her push me down so I was seated, leaning back with my elbows supporting me, pressed into her bedspread. She stood in front of me, looking down at me, deciding.

“I see,” I said, amused at how she was taking control. “So, you want to have your way with me?”

“Maybe,” she said coyly, rolling down her leggings. Her ponytail fell over her shoulder, and I watched her peel the leggings off, revealing smooth white panties. Then she tugged at my waistband, and I lifted my thighs as she pulled my pants and briefs down to my knees.

I was hard as a rock, the tip of my cock weeping already, needing to touch her so badly I could barely stand it.

She reached for my shaft and rubbed her soft palm around the head, making me jerk toward her with need. I lifted a hand from the bed to play with her breast, but she squirmed away, denying me.

“No touching,” she said, playfully. “Not until I say you can.”

“So that’s what you want? To tease me?”

“Maybe. And it’s ma’am to you tonight,” she said wickedly.

“Yes, *ma’am*. You’re in charge.”

She resumed palming at me, letting her fingertips trail down my shaft, sliding down to cup my balls and tug at them gently. I was breathing shallow now, waiting patiently for Amelia to do her bidding, but desperate to be touched more—and to touch her back.

“*Oh*, that’s good,” I said when she started working my cock with both her hands. “*Oh*, fuck,” I whispered when she leaned down to lick the tip. “*Oh*, my God,” I moaned when she braced her palms on either side of my hips and took me into her mouth.

I reached for her hair then, unthinking, and she pulled off me with a sucking sound followed by a lewd pop.

“I said, no touching.”

“OK,” I agreed, needing more and yet feeling a thrill at being denied. She was turning my own sexual habits around on me, and I had to admit, I liked it. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She leaned back up to pull off her panties, leaving her bra on, then climbed onto the bed and straddled me, pushing me down further until I was lying flat.

“Let me make you feel good,” I said, hungry for more touch, more sensation, more of Amelia. “Let me taste you.”

“OK,” she said, scooting forward on her knees so that her pussy was above my mouth, “but remember. No touching until I say.”

Fuck. I wasn’t sure if I could obey her. “I’ll try.”

She lowered herself down, her soft curls tickling my nose as I licked a stripe along her entrance. “You taste so fucking good, baby,” I said, lost in her ambrosia.

She moaned softly, adjusting her body so that I had a better angle, and began rocking against me as I tongued at her clit, her lips, her moist center. She was making herself feel good, using me how she wanted. “Yes, I like that,” she breathed, “feels so good—Nathaniel!”

I felt her legs shaking as I licked at her and couldn’t wait to touch her any longer. Bringing a finger to her sweet, wet passage, I slid it between her walls, adding a second finger and searching for the spot that I knew would make her scream. I felt her tightening, pulsing, edging toward release.

Then I pulled my fingers out.

She looked down at me and made a little noise of indignation. I knew she had been close.

“Still don’t want me to touch you?” I asked, licking softly at her clit again, but not enough to give her what she wanted.

Whimpering, she shook her head, trying to stay in control.

I licked her clit again and made her squirm, then stopped.

“How about now?” I teased.

She huffed a little, brows creasing, shaking her head again.

One more lick.

“Touch me! Touch me please, Nathaniel, please baby, please...”

“Please what?”

“Please, *sir*. Touch me, *sir*.”

“Good girl.”

I sucked her clit and inserted my fingers inside her again, pumping and curling them forward until she was crying out, pussy fluttering against my mouth, coming for me like I knew she would.

“Fuck,” she breathed, shaking as I lapped softly, bringing her down from her orgasm gently.

I needed to be inside her. I had waited long enough.

I grabbed her ass cheek, squeezed it and moved her back a little until I had enough room to sit up against the headboard, peeling my pants off the rest of the way, dick hard and bobbing as I scooted back and pulled Amelia with me. She climbed on top of me, her lace bra tickling and scratching my chest as she settled astride me.

“Now, I want you to ride me, baby. Can you do that? Can you ride my cock and make yourself come again?”

“Yes, sir,” she nodded, lowering herself down to surround me, slowly—too slowly. She was so perfectly tight yet pliant; soft and hot, and I might lose my mind if she moved any slower.

I grabbed her by the hips and pushed her down. She let out a little moan of pleasure and I grunted when I was finally seated deep inside her.

She began to rock—up, then down and back, her tight walls gripping my cock perfectly, making me crazy.

“So wet, your perfect pussy,” I said, holding her waist as she ground against me and peering down at where we were joined. I watched my cock disappear inside her over and over, so close yet trying to keep it together for Amelia. “Look at you, taking me so well. Such a good girl.”

“I want to be good for you, Nathaniel. I love you, want to make you feel so good. Want you to—*oh!*” She let out a little squeal when I pulled the lace of her bra down, exposing her nipples and leaning forward to lick, to tease, to bite lightly, one after the other.

Her breasts were wet from my tongue, her fingertips were digging into my shoulders, and her pussy clenched around my cock when I took her chin into my hand and brought her mouth to mine, kissing her hard and rough, feeling her come around me again.

She pulled back, letting out a high, breathy moan as her orgasm overcame her, and I bucked up into her, fucking her through it, making sure she was satisfied until I finally let go and chased my own release, spilling inside her, groaning.

I was panting, my body sticky with sweat and my groin slick with our juices, holding her against me as we caught our breath.

This was the woman I wanted to spend the rest of my life with. The woman I loved. The woman who could make me feel better than anyone ever had, and she was having my baby.

I finally had everything I wanted, and nothing could tear me away from her.

“I love you so much, Amelia,” I said, still shaky and breathless. “I’ll love you forever.”

She sighed softly in my arms, pressing soft kisses to my chest, and we curled up together in her bed, falling asleep as the rain started coming down hard against the window.

CHAPTER 29



AMELIA

Sunlight streamed in through the blinds. It was early, and I awoke with Nathaniel's arm around my side, my back curved and nestled into his torso. He dotted my neck and shoulders with soft kisses, pulling me closer, snuggling me tenderly.

"Morning, ma'am," he murmured in a scratchy, sleepy voice.

"Morning, sir," I said, turning to see his face and catch his wandering lips with mine. His eyes were tired, his chin a little rough from a light stubble coming in, and his smile was warm and adoring. We shared a long, languid kiss, drowsy but contented, and I turned to face him, cuddling into his chest.

It was bliss. I was head over heels in love with the man of my dreams, we were devoted to each other and to our baby, and I couldn't have been happier.

Nathaniel placed a kiss on my forehead, rubbing my back gently.

"How did you sleep?"

"Better than I have in a while," I replied, grateful to be able to say so. After sleepless nights of stress and anxiety about our relationship, I had finally gotten some decent rest.

"How are you feeling?" He brought a hand to my hip and his eyes darted down to my belly.

"You mean with the baby?" I teased.

"Yeah," he said, laughing softly. "Our baby."

Hearing him say that made my heart flutter. “I’m feeling OK. Better than the past couple of weeks. The morning sickness seems to be getting better.”

“Good,” he said, brushing a stray hair away from my eyes. “Will you have your first doctor’s appointment soon? Or does that come later? I don’t really know about these things.”

I nodded, agreeing. “It’s all pretty new to me, too, honestly. I haven’t scheduled the first appointment yet. But I will. I should be able to get an appointment in the next couple of weeks.”

He paused, blinking, then asked, “Can I come with you?”

A warm feeling filled my chest; a rush, yet not one of thrill or lust. A rush of love.

“Of course you can.” I curled in closer to him, threading my fingers through his hair and kissing the spot under the corner of his eye. “I want you to be there.”

He smiled, hugging me tight.

It was tempting to lie there all morning in Nathaniel’s arms, but I knew my sister and Trudy were stirring. I could hear cupboards opening and shutting from the kitchen through my bedroom door.

“Sounds like we’ve got company,” he said, eyebrows raising at the noise.

“No, *you’re* the company here,” I joked, winking. He chuckled. “Do you want some coffee?” I asked, realizing that going to the kitchen together would be the first time we would be open about our relationship.

“Yes,” he said, his grin growing wider. “I’d love some.”

We got decent and freshened up a bit in the bathroom, then opened the door to walk down the hallway, sharing a little kiss before reaching the kitchen. I poked my head around the corner, and Nathaniel held my hand, standing close.

Larissa and Trudy were both there, starting their day. When Trudy saw us, she froze, a look of surprise registering on her face before busying herself with cracking eggs.

Larissa turned around from the refrigerator and her jaw dropped. She must have been stunned at having our father's best friend emerge from my bedroom. Even though she knew about our relationship, and she supported me, it still had to be startling to see us together as a couple for the first time.

"Morning," I said quietly.

"Morning!" Trudy sang brightly, whisking cream into a bowl.

"Uh, hi! Hey, Nathaniel," Larissa stammered, snapping herself out of her shock and trying to act friendly.

"Hi Larissa," he said, smiling warmly.

"Are you two ready for coffee?" Larissa picked up two mugs and held them up, twisting her wrists in offering.

"I'm sure they're gonna need it," Trudy drawled, smirking, a glint in her eyes.

"Trudy!" I protested, giggling as I sat down on a chair Nathaniel had pulled out for me. He took a seat next to me and chuckled softly.

Apparently he was immune to embarrassment.

Larissa poured steaming coffee into the mugs and placed them in front of us, a knowing smile on her face.

She was happy for me. It showed in her expression.

We sipped our coffee in silence for a moment, but it didn't last long.

"Guess you two are probably *really* hungry, considering you worked up quite an appetite last night," Trudy joked shamelessly. She reveled in this sort of thing.

I shot her another exaggerated glare, yet unable to stop blushing and smiling. I could sense that she just wanted to tease us, but you could never know what Trudy was about to say next. "I have no idea what you mean, Trudy," I said coyly.

"I think you do, Amelia," she countered. "I think the whole neighborhood knows. You and Mr. Handsome here weren't as discreet as you thought you were."

To that, I nearly spit my coffee out.

Nathaniel slung his arm around my shoulder and pulled me close. “Sorry about that,” he said, ever the good sport.

Trudy shrugged, still grinning. “Hey, there’s nothing to be sorry for on account of me. I’m just glad one of my besties is getting what she deserves in the sheets!”

“*Shush!*” I finally said, putting an end to the teasing.

Trudy made a zipping motion above her lips, but the smirk didn’t leave her face.

“So,” Larissa said, in a tone clearly intended to steer the conversation in a more wholesome direction, “what have you two got planned for today? Anything fun?”

“Dad has asked me to have dinner with him, just the two of us, while mom’s up in Newport Beach. But—”

“Oh, I’m glad to hear it, Amelia,” Larissa interrupted, her voice full of relief. “That will be good for you two to have a chance to talk.”

“Actually... I’m bringing Nathaniel. We’re planning to tell Dad about our relationship.” I bit my lip and watched for my sister’s reaction. She raised her eyebrows. I wondered if she’d argue or try to talk me out of it. “I’ve been so worried about it, but we can’t hide this from him forever,” I said, trying to convince her. Or maybe, I was trying to convince myself.

Nathaniel nodded. “We want to raise this baby together.”

Larissa seemed to agree, and said, “That makes sense—”

Trudy’s head quickly snapped up from her eggs. “*Baby?*”

The rest of breakfast was spent chatting and filling Trudy in on the big news, with lots of laughs over mouthfuls of Trudy’s scrambled eggs and really good bacon courtesy of Larissa. As we finished up, Trudy had to leave for work, so Nathaniel, Larissa and I thanked her for the eggs, and remained in the kitchen slowly cleaning up.

“Keep me posted about your dinner with Dad tonight,” Larissa said, loading plates into the dishwasher before she had

to shower and get ready for her day.

“I will,” I agreed, thinking ahead to what I was going to say to him. The longer the morning ticked by, the more I felt my nerves kick in ahead of tonight. I had already run the conversation through in my head dozens of times. I wasn’t sure the mental practice was helping.

He *had* to understand.

He would have to come around, eventually.

I hoped he would take the news in stride, because the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt my father. Nathaniel agreed that it might take Dad some time to get used to the idea, and there would probably be some uncomfortable moments at first. He encouraged and comforted me, reassuring me that we could do this.

I could tell my father the truth.

Both of us could, together, as a couple.

I just wished there was some way to soften the blow.

CHAPTER 30



NATHANIEL

By noon, it was obvious that Amelia needed to get out of the house. We had been spending time at her place all morning, lazing around after breakfast and finding ourselves back in bed once her sister and roommate cleared the apartment. When we had both showered and gotten dressed, I noticed Amelia biting her lip, tapping her foot, looking off into space. I could tell she was anxious about our dinner with her father that evening. So, I suggested we go out for a few hours to take her mind off of things.

I knew it wouldn't be easy for her to confront David—it wouldn't be pleasant for either of us—and it might even go worse than she was imagining, but I also knew it wouldn't help to say any of that to her right then. She needed courage and support, not someone to reinforce her anxiety. Besides, whatever consequences I might face from David, so be it.

I wouldn't give up Amelia or our unborn child for anything. Not even for my best friend.

Amelia seemed less stressed as I drove us down to view a brand new house I was selling on the waterfront. It was a gorgeous construction, and I thought she might like to take a tour since it was full of high-end artwork and sculptures overlooking the ocean.

Any distraction would be better than watching her pace and fidget with worry.

We pulled into the driveway and strolled around the well-kept gardens, admiring the view. I unlocked the house, and we

wandered through the large rooms all built with fine finishes and expensive materials, filled with stylish furnishings and decor.

“This place is amazing,” Amelia said, her eyes roving around the spacious kitchen and open-plan living room with great big windows overlooking the San Diego Bay.

The sight of her coveting the home went straight to my heart. It made me want to take it off the market, buy it from under my client’s nose, and give it to Amelia, right then and there.

“Maybe one day we can live in a place like this with our kid,” I said. “A custom build, with everything to your taste, designed by one of the top architects in town.”

Her face lit up, grinning from ear to ear, and she leaned in to give me a kiss on the cheek. “I would love that,” she said, sighing. Then her eyes drifted away for a moment, and she suddenly added, “My father would take the news better tonight if he knew we were getting married.” She pursed her lips, an expectant look on her face.

I was a little speechless. “Married? Just like that?”

“We’re having a child together,” she explained, hands clasped, pacing in the empty kitchen. “My father... he’s old-fashioned, in some ways. A big believer in family. He loves weddings, too. ‘Nothing brings two people together like a big party with an open bar,’ he always says. If we were getting married, it would prove to him that we’re serious. He wouldn’t be able to get angry. It’s the perfect plan.” She smiled, although I couldn’t help but wonder if she was trying to convince herself, too.

I took a deep breath, considering her argument. She had a point. I wanted to make her happy, and if this made her happy, we could make it work. “Is this what you really want, or is it what you *think* you want?”

“This is our best, most practical option. It will make everything go smoother with my dad if he knows I’ll be a married woman by the time the baby comes. I know him; he’ll

be happier if we're committed to each other not just for the baby, but officially. Legally." She seemed increasingly determined as she spoke; sure of herself, and of her father's reaction.

I let out a sigh. "It's just that I had envisioned doing something special for you, proposing someday in a romantic way. Taking you somewhere exciting; making a big deal out of it. I planned on asking you when our hands wouldn't be forced by circumstance, and we'd be doing it because it felt like the right time."

"I don't care about any grand proposal," she said, a soft smile on her face, shaking her head. "I love you, Nathaniel. I know I want us to be together. Let's make this official." A light flush bloomed on her cheeks, her face glowing from the pregnancy, or the optimism. Or just her.

She was so adamant, and so sweet, how could I say no?

"OK. If that's what you want," I said, wrapping my arms around her, "then that's what we'll do."

I loved Amelia, and I would give her anything, even if it wasn't what I had imagined for us at first.

"It *is* what I want," she confirmed, "I'm sure of it." She lifted her lips to mine and kissed me with that combination of tenderness and passion that drove me wild. I shifted my arms around her back, then surprised her by dipping her down like they did in the movies. She let out a little squeak, giggling and smiling, her hands hooked around my neck for support.

"Then I guess," I planted a peck on her nose, "you and I are getting married."

CHAPTER 31



AMELIA

After taking a detour to Nathaniel's place so he could retrieve some fresh clothes and swinging by my apartment so we could both make ourselves presentable, we were finally on the road to my parents' house.

The closer we got, the more terrified I felt. I couldn't shake the feeling that had been growing stronger all day—my father was going to blow his top.

He wasn't the type to yell or fight or get angry. I had never seen him lose his cool. He was always composed and affable, everybody's favorite guy, a real people-pleaser.

Except he had never learned his daughter was pregnant with his best friend's baby before.

I could only hope that telling him we were getting married would soften the blow, but still I worried. Now that we were on our way to confront him, my plan didn't seem as convincing as it had earlier.

Nervously drumming my fingertips on the door panel of Nathaniel's car, I started voicing my anxiety. "We should just cancel. Let's cancel. I think we're rushing into telling him. Can't it wait? Let's talk about this some more." I felt jittery and couldn't stop talking.

"Amelia," he said in a calm, measured tone, "we have to do this. It's inevitable that your father will find out and putting it off will only make it more difficult to tell him later on. We might as well get it over with now and give him plenty of time to get used to it before the baby comes."

He was right, but I was still on edge. I pouted, huffing, tapping my foot. “I know, I agree with you, it’s just... what if my father *never* gets over this? What if he can’t, what if I lose him and he never speaks to me again? What if he retaliates, and cuts me and our child off? What if our baby ends up not having a grandfather?” The more I catastrophized, the worse the anxiety grew, and the closer I came to crying.

Nathaniel shook his head, keeping his eyes on the road. “Your dad will never leave your side. I know how devoted he is to his family, and he’s not going to abandon you. David might need some time to accept this new reality, and it’s likely to be extremely difficult for him at first, but if anyone is going to be punished, if anyone is going to damage their relationship with David...” he paused, his voice taking on a gloomy quality. “It will be me. Not you.”

My heart clenched at the thought of Nathaniel losing his close friendship with my father. I was nearly in tears, and we were already pulling into the driveway of my parents’ house.

This is all happening too fast.

Panic and doubt filled my mind. “I don’t want him to punish you, either. I don’t want anyone to get hurt. My father loves us both, but he’s not going to handle this well, I can just feel it, Nathaniel. He won’t accept it.” I used my fingers to stop the tears gathering at the corners of my eyes.

“Hey, hey...” Nathaniel soothed. “Let’s give him an opportunity to surprise us, OK?” He put the car in park, turned off the engine, and took my left hand, bringing it to his lips for a soft kiss on my ring finger, and a squeeze. “Maybe your dad will prove us wrong. We have to give him a chance. We both love him; we owe him that.”

I took a deep breath, nodding, drawing strength from Nathaniel’s confidence.

We walked up to the porch and rang the doorbell. The door was covered in a holiday wreath, extra-large and especially fancy, the way my mother liked. I looked over at Nathaniel and gestured with my eyes at the wreath, knowing how much

he hated the holidays. He rolled his eyes and smiled, following my cue to lighten the mood.

Both of us knew that any levity would only last for a little while.

It seemed like an hour passed before we heard footsteps from inside. My heart thumped wildly as I could hear my father approaching.

He swung the door open with a grin on his face, then his expression registered Nathaniel's presence with a look of curiosity.

"Nathaniel! What a nice surprise, come on in!" He backed up and swung an arm out, ushering us inside.

He doesn't realize we're here together.

Nathaniel and I shared a brief glance as we walked into the house. We stood in the entryway with my father, in the same place that he had asked Nathaniel to drive me home the night of the client party. No one said anything right away. We had talked and talked about how things would go, but never planned for the possibility that my dad would think this was all just a coincidence.

"What brings you here tonight, Nate?" Dad asked before giving me a sweet smile. He didn't allow Nathaniel any time to respond before continuing. "Amelia and I were planning a nice dinner together just the two of us, and it's important that we spend some quality time together. It's not really the best night for another guest. Can I catch up with you some other time? Give you a call tomorrow morning, meet up at the country club?" He was smiling, trying to be polite to his friend, but adamant that our dinner was private because he thought I was here just to talk to him about the baby.

I had to say something, now. I had to get it over with.

Lifting my chin and summoning all my courage, I took a deep breath. "I invited Nathaniel."

My father shook his head slightly, his genial smile lingering on his face, silent. When Nathaniel and I didn't immediately start explaining, my dad's expression went from

confused to inquisitive. His eyes darted between the two of us, doing calculations in his head, and his smile slowly faded as it dawned on him that Nathaniel and I were there together.

As a couple.

The change in my father's mood seemed to make the room even quieter. The tension was palpable, the air thick with shock and dread.

His eyes went wide, and his brows furrowed, a red flush of anger creeping up his tanned neck. His chest heaved with shallow, staccato breaths as he opened his mouth to react to the realization that his daughter had been in a relationship with his best friend and was now pregnant with his baby.

I had never seen my father like that before.

He was furious.

CHAPTER 32



NATHANIEL

My instinct was to duck right as David lunged for me, but I let him swing and hit me instead.

Amelia shrieked.

He struck my chin first, and I snapped my head to the side reflexively, my hand coming to the source of the pain.

Then I looked David back in the eye again.

“Fucking fight me, you coward!” he screamed.

I held his gaze. “No.”

He swung a second time, this time landing a punch that knocked my nose and mouth so hard, I tasted blood. The pain shot to the roof of my skull, searing and sharp, and I was unable to stifle a groan.

“*Dad! No! Stop, stop, please stop!*” Amelia cried. I had pushed her away when she tried to put her body between her father and me. David would never strike his daughter, but he was out of his senses right now, and I felt an instinct to protect her from any accidental harm from being in the crossfire. She stood off to the side, hands covering her mouth, shaking.

David swung again, and this time I staggered backward against the wall to avoid his blow.

I wasn’t going to fight back. The rage he felt was justified. I had betrayed him, and I deserved it.

All of it.

“You *traitor*,” he spat. “I thought you were my *friend*, you piece of shit. All this time you had your filthy paws on my *daughter*?”

David charged again, but I moved to the side before he could get his hands on me. Then he turned and vaulted forward, with pure, raw fury burning in his eyes.

I caught his forearms and held him back for a few moments, our strength similarly matched and a stalemate seeming likely. But soon David managed to twist one of my arms, wrenching it until the pain was unbearable, forcing me to release my grip and pull away.

He seized the chance to swing at me again, landing another punch on my jaw that made my ears ring. The next blow was aimed at my stomach, but he missed when I dodged his fist, which slammed hard into the wall instead. He cursed loudly, holding his hand, knuckles split open and starting to bleed.

He was winded now, panting and nearly doubled over. Amelia was sobbing, babbling words of apology, pleading with David to stop, her voice overflowing with pain and heartache.

David rested his hands on his knees, looking down at the floor, chest heaving.

I knew he wanted me out of there. Maybe even Amelia, too. I had to say my piece and then take Amelia away from this place.

“David, I’m sorry. I should have told you. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, and I should have trusted you with the truth. I never wanted it to happen like this.” My voice wobbled, the emotion of it all crashing down on me.

He didn’t look up at me. “It never should have happened in the first place,” he growled, his voice low and simmering with anger, but too tired to shout anymore.

“But it did,” I said, shaking my head, taking a deep breath, trying to steady myself so I could speak my truth. “I can’t help who I fall in love with, David. If I could have fallen in love with someone else, I would have. Hell, I never even thought

I'd settle down. But I fell for Amelia." David lifted his head and met my eyes, his expression storm-like and menacing. "I love her, David."

He didn't respond. He shook his head and scoffed angrily.

"I love her more than anything. She's wise and brave and compassionate. She's a better woman than anyone I've ever met." I wiped the blood trickling down from my nose with my shirtsleeve. "Maybe I should have let her go before things got serious, but I couldn't. And neither could she. We've accepted that, both of us. It was impossible for us not to be together."

David's face was dark with bitterness. "Fuck you."

I exhaled sharply, determined to finish what I had to say. My head was pounding, and my nose and mouth were bleeding by the hand of my best friend, and I had never felt so guilty yet so righteous at the same time.

All for loving Amelia.

"I know you're angry, and you have every right to be," I continued, wanting to ensure he knew I wasn't only seeing this from one side. "I'm angry with myself, too. But Amelia has made me a better man, and I would do anything for her." I glanced over at Amelia, who was crying softly, and my heart clenched at the look of torment in her eyes. I turned back to David, needing to make sure he knew what she meant to me. That I would fight for her, even if it meant losing his friendship. "You can hate me forever, David, but I'll never stop loving her. I swear to you, no matter what, that I'll never abandon your daughter. I'll never leave her, I'll always be there for her. I'm going to do right by her, and by our baby."

David winced.

I let out a heavy breath of relief at telling my friend the truth. He didn't respond right away, and the only sounds in the room were Amelia's quiet sobs a few feet away.

"Get out," he finally said, his words soft, the bile absent from his voice and replaced by something else. Something more vulnerable and fragile.

Sadness.

I shuddered as I inhaled, feeling more affected by the grief and pain in those two simple words than any of the punches David had landed or the insults he had hurled.

I had destroyed his life. I had hurt him beyond repair.

He was in intense pain, and it was my fault.

I stepped back, my eyes welling up as they landed on a frightened and devastated Amelia, sniffing and weeping, looking shell-shocked.

I had to be strong for her.

Wiping the blood off my hand, I gently took her palm into mine.

“Let’s go,” I whispered. She nodded.

We walked out the front door, got into the car, and drove away from the man we both loved, not knowing if he would ever speak to either one of us again.

CHAPTER 33



AMELIA

It had been two weeks since my father fought Nathaniel, and I hadn't heard from either of my parents. I had been right to worry about my father's reaction—and Nathaniel had the bruises to prove it. Watching my father use his fists could only have been worse if Nathaniel had been aggressive back, and I was grateful that he had chosen to take the hits instead of making matters worse by hurting my father.

After the incident, I was shaken to the core. Despite Nathaniel being the one injured, he had been the one to comfort me. I was horrified to see my father lash out like that at the man I loved—Dad had never done anything like that in my life—but Nathaniel calmed and soothed my frayed nerves, reminding me that he trusted my father. That it must have hurt my father profoundly to see us together, and that Nathaniel had known something like this could happen but wanted to face my father anyway. It was his duty, Nathaniel said, not just to my father but to me; he saw no other honorable way to admit to our relationship and wanted to look my father in the eye to tell him that he loved me.

Devastated by the rift with my dad, I went through the motions at work, but I had trouble staying focused when my heart was so heavy. Still, it was my job to show people kindness, so I soldiered on, grateful for Nathaniel's unwavering love, and the support of my sisters.

I tried again and again to text my mother, but she ignored my messages. My father's phone went straight to voicemail.

Tonight, Melinda was joining Larissa and me at our place for dinner. Both of them had been working on our parents, trying to talk some sense into them, and I was eager to hear if either of them had made any progress. It was all I could do to hope my father might feel some sense of remorse toward his friend and understanding toward his daughter.

When Melinda walked through the door, she was holding two big bags of takeout from our favorite Italian restaurant in the Gaslamp. Between bites of pasta and garlic bread, we danced around the subject of my parents, until Larissa lost her patience and asked point blank if Melinda had talked to our dad.

“OK,” she said to Melinda, getting down to brass tacks, “let’s hear it. I know you saw Mom and Dad in person today when you went by the house. I certainly haven’t been making much headway, but you’re more diplomatic than me. Was there any progress, even just a little?”

Melinda sighed sadly, twirling her noodles onto a fork. “They’re both still processing everything. It’s hard for them to digest. But I think they just need more time.”

“Time,” I huffed, looking down at my belly, “is in short supply. This baby is coming whether they like it or not.”

Larissa tore another piece of garlic bread off the loaf. “When I was on the phone with Mom last night, all she did was complain that she was too young to become a grandmother,” she said, rolling her eyes. “And she kept going on and on about Nathaniel, about how she can’t believe the baby is *his*, of all people. It was super weird.”

“She hardly even knows him,” I pointed out. “He told me they’ve never been anything more than cordial. Nathaniel is Dad’s friend, not hers.”

“I don’t know,” Melinda mused. “She used to speak so highly of him, but now she talks about him like he’s betrayed her personally. Like” –she stifled a chuckle– “he’s dog shit on her Jimmy Choos.” Melinda’s gaze drifted away, still thinking out loud. “It’s almost like she felt that she and Nathaniel were closer than that. That he was doing this *to* her.”

I wrinkled my brow, annoyed by the idea that my mother had been focusing on Nathaniel instead of her own daughter. I was pregnant, after all. Shouldn't she be more interested in my health, my well-being? It hurt me to think of how self-centered she could be. Sometimes I just didn't understand her.

"Anyway, enough about Mom and Dad for now," Larissa said, topping off her wine, then Melinda's. "It'll be OK, sis. Don't worry yourself more than you already have. They'll come around eventually. Like Melinda said, they just need some time to take it all in."

"Yeah," Melinda agreed, "let's talk about something else. You need a break from this subject sometimes. What about wedding plans? Have you started brainstorming? Do you want me to book a spa day for you? I can make a Pinterest board—"

"It's too much," I blurted out. "I'm overwhelmed." I had been holding it in all night.

"What do you mean?" Larissa asked through a mouthful of bread.

Melinda tilted her head in concern. "Wait. What? I thought you two wanted to get married?"

"We do. Or at least I did. I don't know..." It was all so overwhelming. My thoughts were a mess; I couldn't find a way to explain how I was feeling.

"Wasn't getting married your idea?" Larissa shook her head, surprised.

"Is it too much before the baby comes?" Melinda's brows furrowed. She was always trying to problem-solve. "Why don't you do it afterwards? When you've adjusted to life with an infant and gotten the hang of it? The planning will be easier, too. Less stress, no pressure—"

I lowered my eyes and stared at my lap, twisting and untwisting my hands. "I want to make Mom and Dad feel proud of their daughter. Not ashamed that she's having a baby before getting married."

"Hey, hey," Melinda soothed. "Everyone has their own timing in life. You don't have to do things just because other

people expect it. Who cares about old traditions? Your life is your own, Amelia.”

“But I had always dreamed of being a bride one day,” I admitted. My sisters knew, of course. They had seen the pictures of glamorous brides I would cut out of magazines and tape up on my wall growing up. “I used to have visions of wearing a beautiful white dress and having my first dance with my husband, looking elegant and grown-up. It was picture perfect in my mind. “By the time we hold the wedding, I’ll barely be able to fit in a dress!”

“Oh, I’ve seen plenty of dresses that would look adorable on you, with or without a baby bump.” Larissa always tried to keep things light, but it wasn’t helping this time. Not now, not with something so important.

“I never planned for it to be like this, I guess.” I willed myself not to cry. I had done more than my fair share of that lately.

“Amelia,” Melinda said, shaking her head, “you don’t have to go through with the wedding like it’s something you just have to check off a list.”

“No, I *do* have to. I need to do this. It was my idea, and I’m going to see it through.” I nodded, resolute. “I *have* to make this wedding happen.”

Melinda and Larissa didn’t understand. My parents weren’t speaking to me, even though I had a baby on the way. All of a sudden, my life was messy now, complicated.

The wedding was the one thing I could control.

“Look,” I said, forcing a small smile. “I’ve just been feeling emotional, that’s all. I didn’t mean what I said about the wedding being overwhelming. It’s fine. Really. I know you both just want what’s best for me, and I’m lucky that the best sisters in the world have my back. But I do want to plan this wedding, and I want to hold it before the baby comes.”

Larissa inhaled deeply and let out a heavy breath. “OK,” she said. “That’s your choice. We’ll support you either way.”

Melinda nodded her agreement, looking less than convinced.

“Hopefully by the time the wedding rolls around, Dad will forgive me so he can walk me down the aisle.” I felt my lower lip wobble, the emotions of pregnancy taking hold when I least needed them to. Larissa reached across the table for my hand, and Melinda leaned over to sling an arm around my shoulder.

“He’ll come around, sis,” Larissa said softly.

“He will,” Melinda agreed.

They could both sense my distress at the prospect of not having my father at my own wedding. If that were to happen...

Well, my heart might never be whole again.

CHAPTER 34



NATHANIEL

“**S**hit—” I hissed after dropping a hammer on my foot. My stomach was growling, my back was hurting, and I was a sweaty mess from working upstairs all day at my house on a surprise for Amelia.

A nursery.

For years, I had used one of the spare bedrooms as an in-home massage room where I had a standing weekly appointment with my favorite mobile masseuse. Now that the baby was on the way, I wanted to convert it into a room for our little one.

I had picked out all the furniture knowing Amelia loved light woods and coordinated each of the accessories to match her favorite color yellow. It had to be gender neutral, since we wanted to be surprised when the baby was born. So, I looked up ideas for decorating a nursery and found a video tutorial that walked me through painting a wall mural I hoped she would like.

I wanted to have it all done before Amelia arrived for the special dinner I was going to prepare for her. I had stopped at the gourmet market on the way home from picking up a plush upholstered rocking chair for the room. Amelia had been craving spicy food, so I found a sweet potato chili recipe online and did all the chopping and prep work before I finished putting together the crib upstairs.

Everything was coming together for a special night in. It had been hard watching Amelia struggle lately. I was hopeful

that making her a homey dinner and surprising her with the nursery would give her a boost.

After the fiasco that had happened with David, we both needed a night where we could just enjoy each other's company. My friendship with David might be on the rocks, and it was possible that our bond would never be the same, but I had made a choice, and my choice was Amelia.

I jumped in a quick shower before she arrived and bounded down the stairs when I heard the doorbell ring. Swinging the door open, my heart skipped when I saw her glowing face, her cheeks rosy and chestnut hair in a loose ponytail, wearing a t-shirt and jeans with the diamond studs I bought her.

"Hi," she said quietly as I pulled her in close.

"Hi." We shared a kiss, long and promising, until Amelia pulled away, inhaling.

"Is that chili?" Her eyes went wide, and her brows shot up to her hairline.

"Homemade." I watched a grin overtake her face as we headed to the kitchen. "I hope you like cornbread," I said, checking the oven as Amelia opened the lid of the pot to peek at dinner.

"Mmm, I'm hungry," she said, then she chuckled. "I'm *always* hungry these days." I watched as she rubbed her belly. A warm feeling bloomed in my chest.

"Come with me." I took her hand and covered the pot, letting it simmer.

"Where?"

"You'll see."

Leading her up the staircase, I told her to close her eyes when we got to the landing. She obeyed, a soft laugh slipping past her lips as she let me guide her by the shoulders down the hallway. When we reached the nursery, I opened the door and lifted her hands off her eyes.

She gasped. “Oh my God, Nathaniel, it’s beautiful!” She walked right in, running her hands over the blonde wood crib, the changing table, looking inside the matching baby dresser and peeking into the closet. “Did you put all this furniture together yourself?”

“I’m a DIY man, now. I even did the mural by hand.” It was a light blue background, with gauzy white clouds brushed on top in a scattered pattern. Amelia’s jaw dropped.

“You painted a whole room like the sky for our baby,” she said softly, turning to face me. “It’s amazing, Nathaniel. Doing it all by hand without hiring someone makes it even more precious to me. I can’t thank you enough.”

I shrugged, relieved to know that she was happy with it. “I just want the baby to have a home here. Someplace made with love.”

“Our baby is so lucky to have you for a daddy,” she said, throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me with eager lips, her fingers threading through my hair and her slender, supple body pressed to mine. I leaned into her, running my hands down along her ribcage, her waist, her hips, squeezing lightly. Amelia wriggled against me, telling me with her body what she wanted.

“Not so fast, ma’am,” I teased, pulling away. “I know you’re insatiable, but let’s get some supper in you first.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Is that all?”

“The rest is up for negotiation.”

I had never seen a bowl of chili disappear so quickly.

“This is,” she took an emergency sip of milk to counteract the spice, “the best chili I’ve ever had.”

“There’s plenty more.” I had been smiling nonstop ever since we sat down at the kitchen table. Having Amelia there, looking so at home, made my chest full with warm notions of family that I hadn’t felt in a long time. Not since my parents died.

“I might have to save room for a late-night snack,” Amelia said, eyeing the extra cornbread. She sighed, smoothing the napkin on her lap. “I love the nursery, Nathaniel. It’s adorable, beyond my wildest dreams, and you thought of *everything*. It must have been so much work! How did you figure it all out in such a short time?”

“All I had to do was imagine what you would like. I know your taste, it’s very—”

“Refined?” She winked.

My lips curled into a sideways smile. “I was going to say—”

“Mature?” She slid her sock-clad foot to my ankle and started inching it up my pant leg playfully.

“Amelia, don’t make me—”

“Seasoned?”

I grabbed her foot and tickled the sole. “Are you calling me old?”

“No!” She giggled.

“Are you sure about that?” I kept up the tickling.

“Yes, I’m sure, I’m sure!” she howled. Yanking her foot back, she stood up and stepped over to my side of the table before confiscating my napkin from my lap and replacing it with herself. I folded my arms around her back, holding her in place, happy to have her in my embrace.

“You’re beautiful when you laugh,” I said, unable to stop myself from feeling sentimental. “You look good in here. In this house.”

“It’s a dream come true being here with you,” she said, her voice tender. “Knowing we’ll have years and years of family dinners ahead of us.”

I pulled her close and kissed the tip of her nose. “Laughing and tickling optional.”

“Pending negotiations.”

We both chuckled.

“I have one more surprise for you. I’ve been playing around with the wording of a proposal for your non-profit idea.”

She shook her head, smiling. “You didn’t need to do that. I don’t need you to do the hard work for me.”

“I’m not doing the hard part, just helping you find a jumping off point. The details you’ll determine on your own—this is just a start.” I kissed her cheek, and she blushed. “I’m your partner now, Amelia. We’re going to be married, and I want to support you in every way I can. I had some free time, so I started poking around, that’s all.”

“I love you,” she sighed, her hand coming up to tug lightly at my shirt. “You know, if you’re wanting to support me and poke around, I’ve got a few ideas...”

CHAPTER 35



AMELIA

Nathaniel said the dishes could wait. Who was I to argue? It was his house, after all.

We held hands walking upstairs together, sharing kisses when we made it to the landing. He peeled off my t-shirt while I undid his belt buckle, each of us fumbling for the other's clothing as we stumbled into the bedroom.

It was a calm night and low tide in the ocean below, the sound of the waves dull and distant. I looked out the glass wall to the tiny lights on the other side of the cove, remembering our first night together in this very same room. A shiver sailed through my core at the memory of being pressed up against the glass while Nathaniel made love to me.

Stepping out of my socks and slipping out of my jeans, I let him undo my bra, shyly peeking at him as he fussed with the hooks. He pulled the straps off my arms, and it dropped to the floor, exposing my sensitive nipples to the cool air of the room.

"You're gorgeous," he whispered, his palm stroking my breast softly, then squeezing my waist. "I miss you when you're not here."

He was different with me now that I was pregnant. A little gentler, a little slower with each movement. Still hungry for me, but more tender than ever.

My tummy and breasts had been hurting like crazy lately, and Nathaniel's soft kisses and careful touches made me feel

so beautiful. He was cherishing me, in awe of my body, worshiping every inch of skin.

When we were both naked, he hoisted me up and laid me on top of his bed, settling over me. I was aching for him, my pussy wet and needy, but he took his time—kissing a line up from my bent knees to my thighs, up to my belly, his expression reverent and his caresses adoring as he lavished my body with love.

With his hand splaying around my hip, he pressed his lips to my abdomen, covering my skin in soft, sweet kisses. He kept mouthing at my belly while he brought his other hand to the soft patch of curls between my thighs, stroking back and forth, relaxing me and exciting me all at once.

“I want to make you feel good,” he murmured, dragging a finger down my center, parting my folds and gathering my juices up to my clit, circling it and eliciting a tiny gasp from my throat. He trailed back down to my entrance and up again, repeating the process until I was slick and writhing for him.

“You already are,” I said truthfully.

“You’re so wet,” he cooed, slipping a single digit inside me. “Is this all for me?”

“All for you,” I whined, my walls tight around his finger, desperate for more.

He brought his tongue to my center and started licking softly at my sensitive bundle of nerves. A wave of pleasure bloomed outward from my core. I fisted the sheets, gripping them tightly, scrabbling for purchase as he brought me higher and higher.

“You taste like heaven, baby,” he mumbled, lapping and sucking, adding a second finger and curling his fingers forward, finding that sweet spot that made me see stars. My thighs tensed, every nerve ending in my body alive with pleasure.

He knew how I liked to be touched, knew exactly how to make me come undone.

“Nathaniel—” I gasped, already falling over the edge, my pussy fluttering against his mouth, my whole body tingling and trembling as each shock of bliss tightened and released.

“You’re so sensitive,” he said, awed. “Coming on my tongue so sweetly like that.”

Floating down from the heights of my orgasm, I laughed softly. Nathaniel pressed wet kisses to my thighs, his lips swollen and glistening, hair mussed.

My body was electric, open and responsive to every touch. I wanted to take everything he had to give, to feel closer to him in every way.

“Please,” I whined. “I need...”

“Tell me,” he said, kissing a trail from my navel to my breasts, “tell me what you need, Amelia.”

“I need to feel you,” I breathed, “I need you inside me.” I reached for his shoulders. He moved up to settle between my legs, bringing his lips to mine as he positioned himself. Tasting my nectar on his mouth, I hummed with a renewed hunger, my body already yearning for more sensation.

He brought his hard length to my entrance and pushed the head in, stretching my walls with a perfect pressure until he was seated deep inside me.

The feeling of being so full sent a shudder through my core. I let my hands fall from his shoulders and grasped at the thick, flexed muscles of his arms.

“Is that OK?” he asked, wanting to make sure I was comfortable, taking extra care.

“Yes, it’s perfect,” I nodded, clutching his arms as he started to move.

“You feel amazing,” he huffed, sliding back and forth in long strokes. “Perfect, baby.”

My back arched into every roll of his hips, our movements syncing and undulating together as a familiar heat built in my center. Nathaniel stayed close, our breaths mingling as he pulled my wrists above my head and held them pinned to the

bed. The sense of surrender was freeing, knowing Nathaniel would take care of me. I was lost in his warm brown eyes, always so intense and full of devotion, and leaned up to capture his mouth.

He moaned as our lips locked. Kissing me deeply, he threaded his fingers through mine, every inch of his body handling me with tenderness and care. I had never felt so close to someone before, so treasured and adored, so intimate with another person.

“I love you,” I breathed between kisses. “I love you, Nathaniel.”

He whispered endearments against the skin under my ear, telling me I was perfect, I was loved, I was *his*.

Warmth pooled low in my belly, and a deeper orgasm built—until I was crying out in pleasure as it washed over me in long waves. He picked up his thrusts, chasing his own release as I trembled through my climax, and he spilled inside me as the aftershocks rumbled deep in my core.

We lay there for a few minutes, catching our breaths. Eventually, Nathaniel flopped down on his back. I settled into his side, nuzzling into the crook of his neck. He pulled the sheets up to cover us, but I was already warm in his embrace.

Feeling his body shift, I heard him open the nightstand with his other arm, and from it he produced a small velvet bag.

“For you,” he said quietly.

He had already given me so much. What more could I possibly want?

I took the bag into my hand and dumped it upside down. A gold-colored key fell into my palm.

Blinking, I peered up at him. “Is this—are you asking me to move in with you?”

“If you want,” he said, stroking my hair with a delicate touch. “When you’re ready. Before the baby, after the baby, next week, next year—whenever you want to come here, you’re welcome. You’re home.”

My heart overflowed with emotion—with love and tenderness, with gratitude that I had found the man of my dreams.

“I’m ready,” I said, nodding. I was sure of it. He was right; I *was* home. I turned the key in my fingers, smiling.

Nathaniel chuckled. “Also, uh, that key isn’t actually for the house. You’ve seen the touchpad. The key is symbolic. We’re all digital here.”

I laughed, reaching out to caress his cheek and kiss his stubbly jaw.

I couldn’t believe my love story had begun at a house party with a man seventeen years older than me, but there I was, more in love than ever, standing at the edge of the biggest life change imaginable.

With Nathaniel by my side.

I wasn’t scared anymore. All the apprehension and anxiety I had felt upon discovering I was pregnant melted away, lying there above the waves with Nathaniel. I could face anything with him by my side.

CHAPTER 36



NATHANIEL

We agreed that Amelia would move in right away. Why bother waiting when we were in love, expecting a child together, and getting married?

Neither of us had ever lived with a partner before. It was yet another new experience that we'd be sharing together for the first time, as a couple, but we were committed to each other.

I showed up at her apartment the following weekend at nine in the morning, holding hot chocolates for us to sip while we packed everything up. Amelia was already busy taping boxes.

"Morning, beautiful," I said, walking into her bedroom where she sat cross-legged with a pencil in her hair and a tape gun in her hand, securing a large box of clothes.

"Morning!" She leapt up to give me a peck on the cheek, thanking me for her hot chocolate. "Did I tell you I got an ultrasound appointment at the last minute? They managed to fit me in on Christmas Eve. You'll come to that one too, won't you?" She had already asked me to go to her first doctor's appointment next week.

"Of course I will. I wouldn't miss it for the world." I was excited to confirm the baby's due date. Excited about everything, really.

By this point in my life, I had started to accept that I would be a bachelor forever; that fatherhood just wasn't in the cards for me, and my chance at that and marriage had long passed.

Amelia's pregnancy changed all that. Falling in love with her was the best blessing I could have been given.

A professional moving company came to do the heavy lifting. They transferred all of Amelia's belongings to their truck, filling the trailer with her furniture and clothing— stuff she had kept in a storage unit for someday when she had a place of her own. We took a few things in the car with us, and I followed behind the movers as they made their way up to my place in La Jolla.

When we arrived, Melinda and Larissa were there to greet us. They had offered to help out with the move and get Amelia settled with all her things.

Larissa was waiting outside in her running gear.

“Hey, sis! Hey, Nathaniel! Nice place you've got here!” Larissa said, gesturing at the house. “There are some great hiking trails in this neighborhood. I managed to get in a good workout.”

“You're welcome to make a pit stop anytime,” I said, glad to be on friendly terms with at least some of the Weavers.

Amelia and I hadn't heard from David and Colleen yet. We were still counting on her sisters to keep working on their parents, although Amelia hadn't mentioned it in the last few days. I got the feeling that she was trying not to think about it because she was tired of feeling disappointed in them for not getting back to her.

Melinda came out of the house and greeted us as we directed the movers to the different rooms where Amelia's things would go.

“Morning, guys.” Melinda said, rolling up her sleeves. “Let's do this.”

We worked for a few hours, first with the movers, then just the four of us after all the unloading was done. There were plenty of items that still needed putting away, but I wanted to make sure to treat Amelia's sisters to lunch. I called and ordered gourmet sandwiches from a local French bakery, and

we all sat at my kitchen table filling our bellies after a full morning's work.

“How's work at the spa, Melinda?” I hadn't seen her since she had called me to meet with her and encouraged me not to give up on Amelia. I would always be grateful to her for that.

“The spa is fine, it's—hang on.” Melinda fished into her pocket and pulled out her ringing phone. “Oh. It's Dad.”

Amelia and Larissa stopped eating. I set down my coffee.

“Are you going to answer it?” Larissa asked.

Melinda picked up, then put the call on speakerphone. “Hi, Dad.”

“Where the hell is Amelia? Where is your sister? What is going on?” He was shouting, sounding more confused than angry. “I came to her apartment to see her, but all her stuff was gone. Trudy wouldn't give me any information. Where is she? Did something happen?”

“Whoa, slow down, Dad. Amelia is with Larissa and me, and she's fine. In fact, she's moving in with Nathaniel today. We're helping them with the move.” Melinda paused for a moment, but her father said nothing in response. “If you want to come over here and talk to them—*not* to punch Nathaniel again—you're more than welcome to drop by. We'll all be here, waiting.”

Amelia's eyes went wide, and she shook her head at Melinda, taken by surprise.

“Dad?” Melinda asked, “are you still there?”

David's voice was lower and more sedate when he finally answered. “I'll see you in twenty minutes.”

The call ended.

Amelia immediately freaked out. “What are you doing? Why did you tell him to come *here* of all places?”

“Hey. Listen.” Melinda put a hand on Amelia's arm. “He went looking for you at your apartment. It means he's trying to reconnect.”

“Still, inviting him here? To Nathaniel’s? I haven’t spoken to Dad in weeks, and all of a sudden he’ll be showing up, in the flesh?”

Larissa squeezed Amelia’s hand. “He misses you. He told me just the other day.”

Melinda nodded. “Let’s give him a chance to apologize and come around. What do you think, Nathaniel?”

I was apprehensive about David coming over, but in truth, I didn’t think he was going to lose his temper again. “Your sisters are right. It’ll be fine. I’ve known your dad for a long time. If he’s made it as far as showing up to your apartment to try and talk, it means he wants to see you. He’ll follow through. David keeps his promises.”

Amelia took a deep breath, steadying herself, preparing. “I hope so.”

CHAPTER 37



AMELIA

I walked to the end of the driveway and then back, pacing as I waited for my father. It had been over half an hour, and I kept checking my watch as if looking at it would allay all my fears and worries.

It didn't.

When my dad finally pulled up to Nathaniel's house, I was shocked. Part of me had thought—or maybe hoped—that he wouldn't show up. That he had reconsidered, and the painful confrontation I feared would be postponed.

Dad climbed out of his car looking drawn and tired, with obvious dark circles underneath his eyes. I had seen that look before when he would return home with jet lag. He must have been losing sleep over this, just like me.

When he walked up to me, I had to fight my instinct to hug him. It was what I would have done any other time, but now, things were different. Awkward. It felt like there was so much space between us now, and I couldn't reach for him the way I used to.

He cleared his throat. "Can we speak privately? I know your sisters and... well, I know everyone's here. But I'd like to talk, just the two of us. If that's alright with you."

"Yes," I said, hoping he couldn't hear the frayed nerves in the tone of my voice. "Nathaniel is inside with Melinda and Larissa. We can stay out here."

He nodded, and looked off to the side, playing with his car keys. Then his gaze returned to me, with a pleading expression

on his face. “Amelia, honey... I owe you an apology. My behavior was abhorrent, and I need to be accountable for that. I lost my temper, but I should never have allowed anger to get the better of me. The violent behavior I displayed was inexcusable.” He inhaled a heavy breath, pursed his lips for a moment, then continued. “And I’m sorry for hurting Nathaniel. But more than anything, I’m sorry for scaring my baby girl.”

My eyes welled up with tears. Hearing him call me that name made my heart thump.

“I miss you, kiddo. Very much. I love you more than anything in the world, and even though I still wish things were different, I don’t want to lose you, or my future grandchild. I want a chance to make things right, to be there for you and to support you. Will you give me that chance, Amelia?”

Relief washed over me, and I nodded up and down emphatically as my chin wobbled and the tears began to trickle down my cheeks. The pain I had been feeling from being estranged from my dad had felt like a heavy weight on my chest, and that oppressive feeling was lifting with every word he spoke.

“Of course!” The hug I had been hesitant to give him before now came second nature. I curled into my dad’s strong embrace, feeling the safety and security a hug from him had always provided. His bushy beard scratched my forehead as he squeezed me tight, comforting me while I cried into his shoulder. I heard him sniffing, too, and realized how seldom I had heard my father cry growing up.

“Dad, where’s Mom?”

He stammered for a moment, before saying, “Your mother still needs some more time. Let’s be patient with her, OK? She’ll get used to the idea soon, I’m sure.”

He didn’t *sound* sure, but I nodded anyway, agreeing to give my mother the space she needed, trusting that my father knew her better than I did.

“Do you want to come inside now?” I asked, looking up at his twinkling eyes framed by the faintest crow’s feet. “That is, if you’re comfortable?”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Yes. For you, I will.”

We walked into the house together to find Melinda, Larissa, and Nathaniel waiting in the living room. My sisters were sitting on the couch, and he was leaning against the back of it, arms folded. When my father and I walked in, Nathaniel stood up straight, uncrossing his arms, locking eyes with my dad.

My father walked up to him. “I’ve apologized to Amelia, and I owe you an apology, too. There was no excuse for what I did. I’m sorry, Nathaniel.”

Nathaniel swallowed, his expression subdued. “It’s forgotten.”

My dad went on. “Look, I’ll be straight with you, not just because of Amelia, but because you’ve been my best friend for years. I am still angry with you. But this is clearly out of my hands, and I’m not going to let my discomfort with the situation cost me my relationship with my daughter. I might not be quite the same as before, but I would like to move forward. If you’re willing to do that too, I’m ready.”

He extended his hand. Nathaniel took it, nodding. Their handshake didn’t look friendly, or pleasant, and it didn’t last long. The tension between them remained, but a tentative peace seemed possible.

When my father pulled his hand away, he stepped to the side and put his hands in his pockets, breaking eye contact. Nathaniel crossed his arms again, keeping them folded while he, too, looked away.

They both looked uncomfortable, but I was feeling more upbeat than I had in weeks. “Thank you, Dad,” I said, stepping up to give him a kiss on the cheek. “I hope you know that I’m happy. Really happy.” I needed my father to see just how important Nathaniel was to me.

“That’s the only thing that matters to me,” he said. “Your happiness.”

I smiled, touched by his earnest expression. “I have more news, too. Nathaniel and I are getting married.” I bit my lower lip in anticipation of his reaction. Part of me was nervous; another part hoped he would still simply be pleased to see me so happy.

Instead, he looked like he had just swallowed a chicken bone, but he managed to speak. “Congratulations,” he said through clenched teeth, still avoiding eye contact with Nathaniel. An uneasy silence settled in.

My sisters had been quiet the whole time, watching everything unfold. Larissa spoke up. “We’re helping Amelia plan the wedding,” she said, wanting to break the silence, looking over at Melinda.

Melinda caught the hint. “She’ll be a beautiful bride, don’t you think?”

Dad fought a grimace, nodding, then he turned to me and changed the subject. “While I’m here, I might as well help out with moving. Do you want to put me to work?”

I grinned widely, heartened to see him making an attempt to be useful. It was his way of showing he cared.

We unpacked some more boxes for the next hour or so, with Nathaniel and Larissa moving furniture around, and Melinda and my father sorting through my belongings with me and putting them away. After a while, Melinda left the two of us alone so she could grab some bottles of water downstairs.

I began loading clothes into a dresser. My dad started breaking down boxes.

“Hey, kiddo,” he said, tearing a large piece of cardboard, “how about we plan a family dinner together? Something to celebrate the baby.” He paused, as if to gauge whether he had said enough. “And your engagement.”

He’s trying so hard.

“I would love that. You mean, including Nathaniel, right?”

He picked up another box—this time the biggest one—and tore it gruffly. “Of course.” He let out a quick sigh. “He’s your fiancé, after all. We’re celebrating you, and you’re going to marry him.” His tone suggested he was still trying to convince himself that this was the new reality, and he was going to have to accept it.

“I would love that, Dad. Celebrating with you would mean the world to me.”

“Well, Christmas is only a couple of weeks away, and you know your mom’s going to be leaving on her girls’ cruise to Puerto Vallarta on Christmas Eve. So, we’ve got to plan something before then. How about we all get together next weekend? I can take the week to convince Mom to come around to the idea.”

I rolled my eyes at the mention of my mother, but Dad caught me. “Baby steps.” He winked, and I felt more hopeful than ever to see my dad’s old, charming self, ever the smooth, reliable liaison between my mother and her daughters.

“Baby steps,” I agreed.

I couldn’t wait to be together as a family for the first time with Nathaniel, my sisters, and my parents. Today had gone so much better than I had anticipated, and I was on cloud nine by the time my sisters and my dad left for the day.

Nothing could shake my optimism now.

CHAPTER 38



NATHANIEL

I had been searching for the Icy Hot for at least fifteen minutes, but everything was in disarray. Despite the long hours spent unpacking yesterday, my place was still filled with moving boxes, yet it felt more like a home to me than it ever had. Having Amelia there gave me a sense of family that I had missed for many years.

She was excited for the holidays, but I wasn't crazy about the season. After my parents died, Christmas didn't feel quite the same to me; I had no siblings, no extended family to speak of. My parents were important to me, and once I was alone, the holidays lost their luster.

Even so, I had been happy to watch Amelia enjoy the trappings of Christmas, and I gladly picked up fancy coffee drinks topped with whipped cream and crushed peppermint candies just to see the smile it would bring to her face. I even let her put up a wreath on the front door—nothing ostentatious, just a simple circle of pine boughs with a little silver bell. It was something that made her happy each time she came home, and if Amelia was happy, I was happy.

David certainly had *not* looked happy when I saw him Saturday morning, but I kept faith that he would adjust over time. After he had attacked me, it was uncomfortable shaking his hand, but he had been a close friend, the man who had basically made me. Knowing him for so many years, I was confident that we could repair our friendship in time. Plus, now, he'd be family. I would be his son-in-law, the father of his grandchild. All those years ago when David took me under

his wing, neither of us could have predicted that one day I would be marrying his daughter. It was strange, but wonderful, that things would come full circle like this.

By the end of the day, we had decided to stop unpacking and settle in for the night. I could tell Amelia was exhausted from the move, and we both needed a break.

“Pepperoni and jalapeño,” she shouted from the bedroom when I called upstairs to ask her what toppings she wanted. I placed the order, tidied up the kitchen, and set the coffee table with plates and napkins—no kitchen table formality for us. Tonight was a night for dinner on the couch. A quiet night in, for a couple in love, expecting a baby.

I had never been happier.

The doorbell rang, and I paid the pizza delivery guy. Amelia hurried downstairs in her socks and sweats, and settled into the leather couch cushions cross-legged, with a big slice on a plate in her lap.

“More red pepper, please,” she said through a mouthful of pizza. I handed her the jar, chuckling at her penchant for extra spice on everything.

“You want some hot sauce, too?” I joked.

“Yes please,” she said, earnestly.

How could I say no? She looked so cute in her sweats, nestled into the couch like she had lived there for years.

She belonged there with me. It felt wholesome and right.

Later, I loaded plates into the dishwasher while Amelia put the leftover pizza into bags in the refrigerator. We soon found ourselves back on the couch, with some reality show on TV in the background, sipping hot cocoa while we scrolled through our phones.

Amelia sighed, setting down her mug and scooting over to me. She rested her head on my shoulder and bent her knees up onto the sofa, leaning into me. I wrapped an arm around her and kissed the top of her head, her silky chestnut hair smelling like shampoo and sweet vanilla perfume.

She let out a soft laugh. “This is what life is going to look like now. You, me, the couch and the TV. Homey and cozy and peaceful.”

“Not to mention a little baby, cooing, crying, pooping, sleeping. You say it’s peaceful now,” I teased, “but let’s wait until the baby is born to make a final assessment.”

“Fine, I guess the future won’t be so peaceful after all. It will be noisy and chaotic—an adventure. But it’ll be us. We’ll be together, with our child. A family.” Her lips stretched into a big-dimpled smile as she said the word *family*, and my heart felt so full that it might burst out of my chest.

“Have you thought any more about your non-profit idea? Anything percolating in there?” I tapped a finger softly on her head. She swatted my hand away playfully, and tickled my ribcage as retaliation, then cuddled in closer.

“I’m still just dreaming about it. I haven’t gotten much deeper than that. Although, maybe a few years down the road, when we’ve found our stride as parents, I could step into that new chapter of my life.”

“I think it would be a pretty cool thing for you to do. You’d be able to share the leadership responsibilities with our child, too. Once they’re older, of course.”

She nodded and told me about her ideas for the organization. She had been wrong before; she’d done much more thinking and planning than she gave herself credit for. I encouraged her but tried not to be too pushy. Amelia would come to this on her own time, and I trusted that she would find the right path for herself.

We headed upstairs, brushed our teeth and got ready for bed. Amelia wore a tank top and tiny cotton shorts that showed off her toned legs before slipping under the covers with me. She curled up into the crook of my arm, and draped her free arm around my torso, snuggling into my side. I was crazy about her—gorgeous, sweet, sexy, kind Amelia—and had the usual feelings of desire stirring inside, being wrapped up so closely with her in bed, but I knew the move had really taken it out of her. She was exhausted, and frankly, so was I.

Turning off the light, I gave her one final kiss goodnight on her forehead, and she quickly drifted off into a peaceful slumber while lying in my arms.

CHAPTER 39



AMELIA

Our first week living together had been amazing. We were happier than ever. Nathaniel came with me to my first doctor's appointment, and we both learned a few things. One was that a mispositioned IUD can fail. Two was the baby's due date.

Having everything confirmed by the doctor, finally it all felt *very* real. More pregnancy symptoms were appearing each day—I had begun to feel fatigued more quickly. My breasts were sore, and my sense of smell was heightened like I had never experienced before. This baby was real, and my body was starting to remind me of it constantly.

Nathaniel had been wonderful. He was in my corner, every step of the way, building me up and making me feel like I was on top of the world. I had never felt so loved and cherished before, and I was touched by how attentive and thoughtful he was.

I couldn't wait to see him as a father. I knew he would be brilliant. If the way he treated me was any indication, our baby would have the most wonderful father in the world.

My sisters had stopped by a couple of times during the week, and we agreed to carpool to our parents' house for the holiday dinner. When we picked them up at my old apartment in Point Loma, Melinda was holding a cupcake carrier filled to the brim with homemade treats she had baked for dessert.

"Those look incredible!" I said as they piled into the car.

“I hope you like them! They’re red velvet. I’m trying a new recipe.”

“*Yum*, my favorite,” Larissa moaned.

An idea came to me.

“Hey Melinda, how do you feel about baking for a crowd?”

“Hmm. Well, I’ve never done it before, but I’ve also never been one to turn down a challenge...”

“Do you want to bake our wedding cake?” I asked.

“Oh, wow! Well, that might be a bigger crowd than I can handle.” She laughed nervously. “I’ll have to think about it. Maybe I’ll look up recipes and watch some tutorials on large-scale baking.”

“No pressure. We’re still looking at venues, but we’ve narrowed it down to three—the vineyard, the beach club, and the cliff top gazebo. We’re also zeroing in on the date, so whoever can schedule us first, we’ll probably take that one. I want to make this happen sooner than later.”

Nathaniel jumped in, eyes still on the road. “Are you sure that doing this right away won’t pile too much on your plate? With work, being pregnant, planning for the baby...”

“Plus,” Larissa interjected, “dealing with Mom and Dad. You’ve only just started to patch things up, and Nathaniel has a point. Do you really want to rush all this important stuff?”

“Yeah, maybe it’s too much for right now,” Melinda agreed.

They were only trying to be nice, but I needed to keep my eye on the ball. This wedding wasn’t going to plan itself. “It’s not too much,” I declared. “It *has* to happen this way. I’m supposed to be married before I have a baby, and I intend to make that happen. I can handle it, you guys.”

The rest of the car ride stayed on the quiet side.

The table was set with red and gold linens, the candles were lit with little pinecones scattered around, and we sat down to a holiday dinner that my father had cooked all by himself. My mother had never been particularly into cooking, so Dad cooked on holidays and special occasions. He had a whole arsenal of family recipes handed down to him by his mom and was an excellent home chef.

It was tense and awkward at first. Even though the food was delicious, my mother barely touched her plate, instead knocking back Chardonnay like it was going out of style. She had been distant all night, and the conversation was minimal. I wanted to break the silence and get people talking again.

“Dad, these potatoes are *so* good,” I said, helping myself to seconds.

“Crispiest you’ve ever gotten them,” Larissa echoed.

“Really impressive, David.” Nathaniel hadn’t spoken much to my dad, but at least they were being cordial.

My Dad pursed his lips when he looked at Nathaniel but nodded an expression of thanks for the compliment. “The trick is,” he explained, “you have to get the outsides fluffy in a colander before you throw them in the roasting tray. It lets more surface area come into contact with the hot oil, so they brown up better.”

“That’s a great idea,” Melinda said. “I might try that on my own roasted potatoes sometime.”

My mother looked up from pushing a perfectly cooked potato around her plate. “These are hardly a dish for a weeknight. Once a year is more than enough considering all the calories in this.” She gave Melinda a long look as she took a hearty sip of wine.

Her wine has plenty of calories, too.

Larissa cleared her throat. “Speaking of calories, I’ve been eating *tons* lately. Swimming really burns a lot, and you have to be a strong swimmer if you want to surf big waves.”

“It’s so cool that you’re trying big waves now,” I said, eager to hear more.

“Yeah,” Melinda agreed, “I love watching when the championships come to town. All those big guys on even bigger boards.” All three of us girls giggled.

“I have a friend who’s a big wave surfer,” Nathaniel piped in. “I can put you in touch with him if you’d like.”

Larissa’s eyes lit up. “That would be great!”

Dad topped off everyone’s red wine and poured some more sparkling grape juice into my stem glass. “Larissa is an excellent athlete,” my dad said, looking at Nathaniel. “Won all sorts of medals in high school for track and soccer.”

“I bet she made you proud.” Nathaniel said, sipping his wine.

“She sure did. All of my girls did. They still do.” Dad smiled warmly at Larissa, then turned his gaze to me, and finally gave Melinda a sweet wink. He had been much better than I expected tonight and talking with Nathaniel casually like this was his way of making a genuine effort to connect.

I only hoped everything would stay on the right track. Our family may not be perfect, but we were a family, and that was the most important thing in the world to me.

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My sisters volunteered to do the dishes so my dad could relax with his wine after cooking. After chatting with Nathaniel and me in the living room for a while, Dad asked if Nathaniel could grab some more bottles. My sisters were going to want to open another one when they were done cleaning, anyway, and my mom was almost finished with her bottle of Chardonnay.

Nathaniel headed down to the wine cellar in the basement, and my dad and I started brewing a pot of coffee for anyone who wanted some. I knew Nathaniel would, since he’d be driving us all home later.

“Dad,” I said, getting a mug from the cabinet and turning it in my hands, “I wanted to thank you. For everything. Having a family dinner like this means the world to me. Thank you so much for having us over.”

He smiled. “I’m glad you’re here. I couldn’t stand the thought of spending the holidays without all of my girls.”

“Just think—next Christmas we’ll have a little baby here for the first time. You’ll be the best grandpa.”

“Grandpa is a term I didn’t think I’d be hearing so soon,” he said, “but I’m happy for you, Amelia. And I am trying. With Nathaniel, that is.”

“I know, I’ve seen you. You *have* been trying with Nathaniel; I’ve noticed it.” It was true. He had pushed himself, and I was grateful. “Dad, I really appreciate that you’re making an effort. I know it can’t be your favorite thing to do right now. But I hope that over time, it’ll get easier.”

My dad set down the coffee bag, hesitating and deliberating before he spoke. “It’s hard to force myself to see Nathaniel differently. I knew him for many years before you two”—he cleared his throat awkwardly— “got together. And I know that man like the back of my hand. I was there during his younger days. Which weren’t exactly—”

“He’s mentioned before that he used to date a lot.” I hoped my father realized that Nathaniel had changed since his early thirties. “I’m aware that he wasn’t always this mature.”

“Date a lot?” He hmped. “That’s one way of putting it. He was a total player, Amelia. I might even go so far as to call him a womanizer. And you are my darling daughter. I want to be supportive of you becoming a mother, and I’m trying to be understanding of your relationship with Nathaniel. But he might not be all that you think he is. There were nights I can remember...” He drifted off, recalling memories that seemed to have grown hazy with time.

“I know about his reputation at the country club. A flirt, a ladies’ man; I’ve heard about it. He told me he went through a couple of wild years while he was working through the grief of losing his parents. We don’t have any secrets between us. But that’s all in the past, Dad. Everything is different now.”

He blew out a heavy sigh. “It’s just hard to watch my daughter fall for someone I know so well. Nathaniel has never

been the domestic type. Starting a family with someone who never planned on settling down? I don't know. Are you sure about this, Amelia?"

"I *am* sure of it. Nathaniel and I have something special together, and he loves me, Dad. And I love him, too. Deeply."

He took a deep breath. "OK."

There was an awkward silence. I wanted my dad to understand how much both he and Nathaniel meant to me, but it was still obvious that he wished I had never gotten involved with Nathaniel. I could only imagine how hard this must be for him, and it broke my heart to think that I had let him down.

I placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know you're disappointed, and I feel terrible about how everything happened, but I *will* make you proud. You can count on that. I love you so much, Dad. Your opinion of me has always meant more than what anyone else thinks."

His eyes took on a softer cast, and his voice grew quieter. "This is still a lot for me. That must be obvious to you, Amelia. Hell, it's the last thing I expected to happen when I met Nathaniel all those years ago. But nothing will ever change how much I love you. You're my baby girl, and you always will be."

My dad pulled me in for a hug. All my life, I had only wanted to make him proud of me. Listening to him tell me how much he loved me, hearing him reassure me that I'd always be his baby... it brought tears to my eyes. I sniffled quietly on his shoulder, and he soothed me, holding me tight.

"Hey," he said softly, "if you're crying, how are we going to play Monopoly? Hmm?"

A chuckle slipped out of my chest and put a halt to my tears. "You mean, so you can cheat?"

"No. So Melinda can cheat. She seems nice until you realize she's got everybody's number. She'll probably wipe the floor with us, as usual."

"You're probably right. But who knows, maybe I'll win this year." I winked, jostling the last tear from my eye.

“Well, Amelia,” he said, handing me a hankie, “you are definitely full of surprises.”

CHAPTER 40



NATHANIEL

I made my way downstairs to the basement, with instructions to bring back an expensive red, plus another Chardonnay for Colleen.

David owned a massive collection of wine. He was always bringing back cases from his client trips to Napa Valley, and he had excellent taste. I would be switching to coffee soon, but I looked forward to having a few more sips of something plummy and rich.

I had many fond memories of wine-soaked nights with David at the club, as well as meeting up at nice restaurants to celebrate our business wins. Even in this very home, after he had put his kids to bed. We would laugh about the colorful characters at the country club and talk shop about real estate deals or get nerdy about golf and look up player stats, arguing over which golfer played the smoothest putting game. I missed those times with David, but tonight had given me even more of a reason to have faith in my old friend; our familiar rapport seemed to be creeping back, even if it wasn't quite the same between us.

He just needed time.

Still, tonight had gone even better than I expected. Being at the dinner table with the Weavers was new for me—I had never spent any real time with David's kids when they were younger, and Colleen was always off shopping or drinking with her friends. Having such a close-knit relationship with his daughters was something David prided himself on, and I could see that tonight in the way he interacted with them. Being a

part of this family, even if things with David were strained, felt right to me. This was where I was meant to be.

Scanning the rows of wine bottles, many with their own hand-written tags detailing the tasting notes, I realized I might need a pair of reading glasses soon. Some of the tags looked like Amelia's handwriting, but the script was awfully tiny, so I couldn't be sure. I put away one of the bottles, giving up on reading the loopy cursive, and grabbed a different one, holding it eighteen inches away from my face, trying to focus my vision.

The sound of footsteps arriving came from behind me on the stairwell.

Must be Amelia.

I was squinting at the label, attempting to make sense of the faded pencil marks. "This is going so well," I called to her behind me without turning around yet still trying to read. "I'm really glad we're being open and transparent like this—"

The scent of heavy perfume suddenly flooded my nose, and before I could turn my neck, I felt a warm breath and heard a whisper in my ear. "You should be with a *real* woman, not a *girl*."

The voice was Colleen's.

Oh my God.

I stumbled back, panicking; horrified and shocked.

Losing my footing, I bumped into the wall. Then, trying to avoid her, I knocked over a rack of wine with at least a dozen bottles on it. Shards of glass littered the floor while inky purple juice sprayed everywhere, including my pants, and Colleen's tight white dress.

Her eyelids were heavy—from liquor or lust; I couldn't tell—and her cheeks and neck were flushed red. She had been wearing heavy mascara at the dinner table, which was slightly smudged now, and her lipstick looked like it had recently been reapplied. Her pouty expression accentuated the metallic magenta sheen on her lips.

She looked startled for a moment, and stood with her hip jutting out, before sauntering in my direction again.

What the fuck is she doing?

Before I could think, she stepped into my space and cornered me, leaning in close, her breath laden with alcohol. Her fingers fumbled for the straps of her dress as I backed up into the wall. I tried to hold her away, but she was impossible, relentless, completely lacking in any self-awareness and throwing herself at me shamelessly.

I shook my head, fighting off her wandering hands. “What is this? Why are you—”

“You should have been mine all along,” she said, her speech slurring. “Come on, Nathaniel. Admit it. You want this.”

Not wanting to hurt her, I placed my hands around her upper arms, attempting to fend her off while keeping her steady on the wet tile floor. “Stop this, Colleen. It’s wrong and you know it. You’re a married woman, and I’m in love with your daughter, and you can’t just—”

“*Shh.*” She managed to bring a finger up to my mouth. I brushed it away, but she wouldn’t stop. “We both know this has been a long time coming. You should have taken me up on my offer to come up to Newport Beach, you know. I would’ve made your weekend *glorious*. But” she giggled, looking around the cellar, “we have plenty of privacy here.”

Was she out of her mind? Before I could open my mouth to speak, she lurched forward and grabbed my collar, smashing her mouth into mine.

CHAPTER 41



AMELIA

Nathaniel had been gone for a while now to retrieve the wine. I wanted to let him know that I would need to call it a night soon.

I was exhausted.

All the stress of getting ready for tonight and not knowing what to expect had caught up with me, and after the talk with my dad, I was emotionally drained and more than ready to go home with my fiancé.

I headed downstairs to the wine cellar to see what was taking him so long. Stepping down the staircase, I made my way along the basement hallway past the gym and around the corner to the cellar.

Then, I froze in my tracks.

My mother was all over Nathaniel.

Touching him. Caressing him.

Kissing him.

My hands flew to my mouth to cover my gasp of horror. My eyes welled up with tears. My heart fell to my stomach at the sight of two people I never expected to hurt me, doing exactly that.

Betraying me. Breaking my heart.

Nathaniel's eyes locked with mine, and he shoved my mother away.

My mother turned around and smiled cruelly, shooting me a prideful, lusty look.

“I see why you let him knock you up.” She ran her fingers suggestively over her lips. “This can be our little secret.” She giggled. I was horrified, shaking my head. “Oh, come on, Amelia. You know how to share your playthings, don’t you?” She smiled and winked. “I just wanted a taste.”

I had never felt so devastated in my entire life. There were no words for how deeply my mother and Nathaniel had wounded me. I would never recover from this.

So I ran.

Hurrying up the staircase while tears flowed down my cheeks, I heard Nathaniel on my heels, shouting my name.

It was too late. There was no excuse for this. No way to explain it away.

Nathaniel, cheating on me with my *mother*? I could hardly see straight, I was so furious. My heart was in shreds; my spirit, shattered.

I never should have trusted him.

Bursting back up through the door to the kitchen, my first sight was my sisters, startled to see me arrive so distraught.

“What’s wrong?” Larissa asked, concerned.

Melinda’s eyes went wide. “Amelia?”

My dad rushed into the room. “Kiddo, is everything all right? I heard glass breaking—” He stopped, then stepped close to me, asking gently, “Are you OK?”

They had no idea what had just happened. How could I explain to them that what I saw had just ruined my life? Not to mention theirs?

“No,” I sobbed. “No, I’m not OK. I saw Nathaniel”—the tears made it hard to speak clearly— “and Mom” —I was bawling, barely able to get it out— “Kissing.”

My sisters both gasped. Larissa’s jaw dropped. Melinda dropped the mug she was drying, a look of horror coming over

her face and the mug's shards forgotten.

Just then, Nathaniel emerged from the door to the stairwell, his collar askew and his pants covered in red wine stains, lips smeared with a faint pink from my mother's lipstick.

"Amelia, wait—" he started to speak, but I wouldn't let him talk his way out of this.

"It's true. My own mother, kissing my fiancé. The father of my unborn child." The tears came hardest then after saying it aloud, in front of him. I was shaking by then, with raw fury and heartbreak, and disappointment for my baby.

My father looked like he had just been punched in the gut. His face went pale, and he stumbled back as if someone had shoved him.

Larissa looked like she wanted to kill someone. "How could you do this?" she demanded, just as my mother walked out of the open doorway and into the kitchen.

Nathaniel lunged away from her, still trying to get my attention. "Amelia, please—"

"Why would you cheat on Dad?" Melinda cried, devastated at the implications for my parents' marriage. "Why would you do this to Amelia?"

My Dad took a step toward Nathaniel, his anger simmering, his voice low and menacing. "Get out of this house," he said quietly, then shot my mother a bitter glare. "Both of you."

"David," Nathaniel said, hands in the air, "let me explain. Please, you don't understand, I didn't—"

"Get out!" My dad wasn't quiet anymore. "Get out, get out!" He was shouting, pointing to the door, his face red with rage. I had only seen my father that furious once before, and it was all too recently. I never thought I would witness him like that again.

Nathaniel shot me a woeful look, his forehead creased, pleading. "Amelia, please. Come home with me, I'm begging

you. I'll explain everything. Let's just go, OK?"

I couldn't think straight. My thoughts blurred into each other, and my emotions overwhelmed me. I stepped over to my father, seeking comfort and safety, and he put his arms around me, holding me tight.

"No," I said firmly. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Ever again."

It hurt me to say those words to the man I loved—the man who I thought loved me. My body felt weak and numb from shock, from sadness, from knowing that I was bringing a baby into a world where this could happen.

A *family* where this could happen.

Nathaniel's face crumpled, and his eyes flitted between my father and me while he stood, chest heaving, wanting to speak. Yet he didn't say another word.

I watched him walk out of the house, dejected and silent, shutting the door behind him.

That was it. The end of Nathaniel and me. My mind went numb, unable to process all that had just occurred, and I felt myself shutting down, closing myself off to the people I loved most.

My mother started yelling, throwing a fit, spouting incoherent nonsense that I couldn't stand to listen to for a second longer. I pulled away from my father's embrace and left my sisters and my parents arguing in the kitchen. Running upstairs, I fled to my childhood room where I sobbed into the pillow.

CHAPTER 42



NATHANIEL

I slammed the car door shut and locked myself in, furious and heartbroken at the same time.

How dare Colleen do this to me?

How dare she do this to Amelia?

What a vile, wicked, heartless woman. A horrible person, an unfaithful wife, and an uncaring mother.

I should have seen this coming, and I blamed myself. She had been coming on to me for a while now, but I had been trying to brush it off as drunk behavior that didn't mean anything, telling myself it was all in my head. That was what I wanted to believe, so I did.

I was wrong.

I should have been strong enough to put a stop to her advances ages ago. To tell her I wasn't born yesterday, and she had better knock it off. I had been in denial, even though deep down I just knew she would seize the chance to go further with me if the opportunity presented itself.

Now look where it got me.

Colleen's behavior had been inexcusable, but it was me paying the consequences for her actions, when I had my own family to worry about. My own future.

With the woman I loved, and our baby.

The future I thought I would never have, until Amelia came along and changed everything.

Colleen had just decimated the lives of her whole family in one fell swoop, while simultaneously ostracizing me from my growing family. After everything had finally begun to click into place, and things with David were looking positive—how could she do this to us?

My eyes were full of tears, my heart thumping rapidly in my chest with the onslaught of emotion that was threatening to boil over.

I loved Amelia. She was my life. Everything that meant something to me had just been ripped away, and I wasn't sure if I could contain the grief and rage inside.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed movement. The front door of the house opened, and Colleen hurried out with an overnight bag on her arm. David was nowhere to be seen, but Melinda and Larissa appeared shortly after Colleen, shouting at her from the portico to leave.

I had to get out of there. Turning the ignition and stepping on the gas, I started steering out of the driveway, but then braked hard when Colleen rushed to my car and threw herself in front of it.

“Hey! Stop, wait!” She shouted, hands in the air, preventing me from moving. “I need a ride, get me out of here!”

What was wrong with her? Hadn't she taken the hint yet? Hadn't she ruined enough people's lives tonight?

I had reached my threshold.

The anger took over, and I yanked the car into park before getting out, leaving the door open, exploding with white hot fury.

“You've done enough, Colleen! Are you out of your mind? I'm not taking you anywhere. I'm not doing a goddamn thing for you, understand? What the fuck were you thinking? I've never been interested in you. I've never even looked at you. I should have told David about all the times you tried to fling yourself at me. I should've told Amelia that her mother was an insane, unhinged bitch!”

Colleen sucked in a gasp, then smiled; an unusual reaction, until I realized that she was embarrassed, and was trying to shrug everything off like it was no big deal. She started in on me again. “Nathaniel, come on,” she said in a pouty voice, making her way around the car. “Admit it. You *want* this. You’re a playboy. Amelia will never—”

“*Don’t* say her name. Do you hear me? Don’t even try to compare yourself to her.” She lunged for me again like she had in the cellar, but I didn’t want to hurt her, as rotten a person as she was. I caught her by the arm, dodging her.

Blood started running down her arm, and suddenly I felt a sharp pain in my hand.

I had sliced my palm in the cellar, failed to notice it in the aftermath, and was now bleeding all over Colleen.

“Nathaniel, you’re hurt, let me see—”

I didn’t care about the blood.

“Get out of my way, Colleen,” I said, my voice lower and full of exhaustion. I felt lightheaded—could be the bleeding, could be the shouting—and Colleen finally backed off, stepping away to the side.

Letting out a dramatic grunt of frustration, she stepped away from the car, giving in. She folded her arms at first, then started fishing frantically through her bag to no avail. “My cell phone...”

The creepy grin on her face returned when a window on the second floor of the house slammed shut.

I reached for my phone in my pocket and called the nearest cab company. “They’ll be here in five minutes,” I said, not bothering to look over at her.

She didn’t respond. That was fine by me.

I climbed into my car, the blood from my hand smearing the steering wheel, and raced away from the worst night of my life.

CHAPTER 43



AMELIA

I heard it all.

The shouting, the insults, the car door slamming. My mother, making an ass of herself. Nathaniel, losing his composure.

I didn't bother going to the window except to close it. I couldn't bear any more drama.

A knock came to the door, and my sisters gently pushed it open.

I had been curled up on the bed since running upstairs. My pillowcase was soaked with tears. and my hair was a mess. I had never felt worse in my life.

"Amelia, honey..." Melinda swooped over and tried to comfort me. Larissa came in behind her, sitting down slowly at the edge of the bed, softly brushing my shoulder with her palm. "You poor thing."

"Pathetic thing, more like," I sniffed.

"Hey now, don't say that." Melinda gave me a nurturing squeeze. "I'm not nearly as glamorous as you when I cry," she winked.

"Yeah, and I'm loud," Larissa added.

My sisters always had a knack for cheering me up, but tonight it wasn't going to work.

"This is a nightmare," I said, sniffing. "I heard everything, you know. With Mom and..." A fresh wave of tears burst

through, interrupting me.

“We watched it happen,” Larissa said, shaking her head. “Mom was terrible. It was ridiculous. And for what it’s worth, we don’t think that what happened in the cellar was Nathaniel’s fault.”

“He was blind-sided, Amelia.” Melinda handed me a tissue. “Mom threw herself at him and he tried to stop it, but he couldn’t. It was all against his will.”

“It doesn’t matter,” I said bitterly. “It’s over now.”

“Why would you say that?” Melinda asked.

Larissa made a confused face. “What are you talking about? We’re saying Nathaniel didn’t do anything wrong.”

I fought to keep the tears from overwhelming me again. “I just can’t do this. It’s too much stress. Whatever happened, or didn’t happen, it doesn’t change reality.”

Melinda disagreed. “What reality is there, other than being with the one you love?”

She didn’t understand. It was all ruined. “I knew that bringing him home to our family would be a burden, especially for Dad. I *knew*, and yet I’m the one who insisted on bringing Nathaniel to my dinner with Dad. It got him punched in the face. I’m the one who pushed so hard for this wedding because I thought it would make the family stronger, even though I was hesitant at first. Can’t you see? After all that, I’ve destroyed the family anyway. I’ve failed. It won’t work between Nathaniel and me. He’ll never fit into our lives.”

Larissa and Melinda shared a sober look. Melinda pursed her lips. Larissa tapped her foot a few times erratically, then stood up.

“OK,” she declared. “I’m going to get you a glass of water.” She walked out of the bedroom, leaving Melinda and me alone.

“Is she... *mad* at me?”

“No, honey,” Melinda said, rubbing my back. “She’s trying to help in the best way she knows how. Now that we know how one-sided Mom’s flirtation was, I think Larissa feels defensive of Nathaniel. Hearing you say that you don’t see a future for our family with Nathaniel in it...” She let out a great sigh. “That’s for you to figure out, Amelia. We can’t tell you what to do. It’s understandable for you to feel like everything has fallen apart, and in a way, it has. But if you’re going to let go of Nathaniel, that’s a decision you have to work out on your own.”

— — —

I awoke in the middle of the night needing water. Slipping out of my old bedroom, I padded downstairs in the dark. The house was dead quiet.

I hadn’t been able to sleep very well. Tossing and turning, crying intermittently—I felt physically ill from heartbreak.

When I rounded the corner at the bottom of the stairs and walked into the kitchen, I found my dad standing there in the dim glow of a nightlight, drinking a bottle of sparkling water.

It seems he copes with heartbreak the same way.

“Hi, sweetie,” he said softly, his deep-set eyes weary and puffy. “Hope I didn’t wake you.”

“No, you didn’t.” I forced a weak smile. “I couldn’t sleep.”

“Do you want some tea? I can make you tea—”

“Water is what I need.” I pulled a glass from the cabinet and turned on the sink.

“I’m glad you came down, Amelia. I want to talk to you.”

“Dad, I think I’m all talked out—”

“Just hear me out, kiddo. Please?”

I couldn’t say no to him.

I nodded. “OK.”

My dad inhaled deeply, staring at the counter as he let out a slow breath, taking his time. “I always knew your mother

was interested in other men. Hell, I knew she was interested in Nathaniel, and had been since she met him, eight years ago. I just never thought she would act on it.”

“You must be so angry with her. I know I am.” I gulped my water, trying to distract myself from the spike of rage in my chest.

My dad shrugged. “Not as angry as you’d think. It’s more of an embarrassment. I feel ashamed.”

“But it’s not your fault,” I protested.

“I know, I know,” he conceded. “But you can’t help what you feel sometimes. Best thing is to let yourself sit with the emotions; it’s the only way you’ll move past them.”

Somehow, my dad could impart wisdom even when he was most vulnerable. “Well, what are you going to do? Will you and Mom get a divorce?”

“I haven’t thought that far ahead yet. But I’m glad I have my baby girl. All of my daughters. You and your sisters are my whole life, Amelia.”

“We love you, Dad. You’ll always have us.”

“I know, sweetie.” His lips formed a wistful smile. “Listen, Amelia, this was all Colleen. I’m positive. Nathaniel wanted no part in it; that much was clear from the way he behaved afterward. I believe your mother threw herself at him, and he couldn’t stop her.”

I examined my fingernails, clicking one under the other. “Larissa and Melinda said the same thing.”

“You should listen to your sisters. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Amelia, what your mother did shouldn’t ruin *your* life. Or Nathaniel’s. Don’t punish him or yourself for something your mother is to blame for. She needs to be accountable. Let her deal with the consequences of what she did, not you and your budding family.”

“But how can we move on after this? How can I hold a wedding with Nathaniel after my mom threw herself at him?”

Do I exclude her? How would I explain that my mother wasn't there to watch her daughter walk down the aisle?"

"I don't know," he said, his gaze drifting away, thinking. "Those are all valid questions, and they're things you'll have to spend time figuring out. But one thing I do know is Nathaniel. He's my best friend; I know him to the core. And I saw something in him tonight. I saw his heart." He put a hand on my shoulder and looked me in the eye. "The man is consumed by his love for you, Amelia. I can tell. I've never seen him like this before, but I recognize true love for what it is. Nathaniel is devoted to you. He would never hurt you, I'm certain of that now. You deserve someone like him, who loves you that deeply. I want that for you. It's what I want for all my girls."

The truth of his words washed over me like a warm rain. He was right. Nathaniel shouldn't pay for my mother's transgressions. Neither should I.

"I'm still anxious," I admitted, worried about how to work up the strength to deal with my mom, unsure of how to proceed with Nathaniel. I couldn't shake the feeling that I had screwed everything up, irreparably.

"It's OK to be anxious."

I nodded, trying to regulate my breathing. "I just need time, I guess. To live with my feelings, like you said."

He placed an arm around my shoulder, protective and strong. "Then take that time. You gave me time after I lost it with Nathaniel; give yourself the same grace. Nathaniel will still be there when you're ready. I know he will."

I thanked my dad and gave him a goodnight kiss on the cheek, then walked back up to my childhood bedroom, and fell asleep much easier than before.

CHAPTER 44



NATHANIEL

The freeway was bumper-to-bumper on the way home from client meetings, and I cursed as I waited in traffic. I'd had to drag myself out of bed yesterday morning and today, without beautiful, sleepy-eyed Amelia lying by my side, and navigate my work as if nothing life-altering had happened over the weekend.

It had been two days since everything exploded at the Weaver estate. I was devastated. Heartbroken. Melinda and Larissa had both texted and called me, explaining that they saw everything with Colleen in the driveway and they knew I wasn't to blame. They asked for me to be patient with Amelia. I knew her well enough to realize her sisters were right, and it took every ounce of willpower I possessed to resist the urge to call her. She needed her space, but it hurt me to give it to her.

After a long commute and a mind-numbing day of work, I pulled into the driveway with a sore back and a sour mood.

The last person I expected to see was waiting for me on my front step.

David.

What was he doing here?

He stood as I walked over from the car. "Can we talk?"

There was no danger about his presence, no threat in his voice. Still, I reverted to dark humor. "Are you going to beat the shit out of me again?"

“No plans to.” He played it totally straight. David could always sell a joke.

“I’m sorry about what happened with Colleen. I swear I never did anything inappropriate.”

“I know. That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.”

I could see that he was beaten down and weary, and not there to berate me or argue. He had come as my friend.

“Come on in.”

We headed inside. I walked straight to the kitchen for a beer and David followed me, taking the beer I offered him without a word.

We didn’t clink bottles before we drank.

“I know it wasn’t your fault,” he said, leaning against the countertop.

I nodded, scratching my neck. “I wish I had been able to stop it.”

“You’re not responsible for her. She’s the one to blame.”

“Does... Colleen know that?”

“I don’t know. She’s out of the house, staying at her friend’s place.” He paused, taking another swig of beer, then gazed out the window at the ocean. “I always knew she wanted more,” he admitted. “She’s been unfaithful before, but I figured I could turn a blind eye as long as no one else ever found out about it. I didn’t want the girls to get hurt. I just wanted to keep our family together. But I waited too long. I can’t ignore it anymore. My family is coming apart at the seams, and I’m responsible because I never dealt with the root cause.”

“Well, now maybe you’ll both have that opportunity, even though the circumstances aren’t ideal.” I realized right when I said it that it might have come off as insensitive, but David spoke before I could backtrack.

“My marriage is over, Nathaniel.” He said it without taking his eyes off the ocean, a bright sunny day at odds with

such a dark statement.

I swallowed, feeling nothing but regret at hearing such sad news, even though I knew it was probably for the best in the long run. “I’m sorry, David. Really sorry.”

He let out a heavy sigh. “It was a long time coming. Still, it’s hard to accept.”

“I can only imagine,” I sympathized, taking another sip of beer. “How are Amelia and her sisters taking all this?”

He turned his gaze back to me. “Amelia is hurting. Furious with her mother, and worried about me. She’s been calling from work and checking on me every day, multiple times a day. Makes me feel terrible. She’s the one who should be relaxing and being checked in on, not me.” He ran a hand through his hair, frustrated.

“Is there anything I can do?” I asked. “Melinda and Larissa said Amelia needs space and I want to respect that, but I want to help everyone, too. Tell me if there’s something *you* need. Food, distractions. Whatever it is, I’ll do it.”

“I’ll be fine. The girls are right; Amelia has needed her space to work through her feelings. I’m sure it’s been hard for you to let her be. But she’s strong, Nathaniel. And she loves you.”

“I love her too, David,” I said truthfully. “So much.”

He nodded his understanding. “Her ultrasound is tomorrow, you know. I offered to go with her, but she said no. You should be at the appointment; I know she would appreciate it.”

“I was thinking of showing up, anyway. Just to see if she wanted me. If she says no, I’ll leave.”

“Go, Nate. Be there for her. Amelia needs you, and you need her.”

CHAPTER 45



AMELIA

The clinic was only ten minutes away from the hospital and my appointment was scheduled for noon before they closed for the holiday.

I had been anxious all morning at work. Sweaty palms, restless foot-taps, nervous and jittery yet excited. The ultrasound felt like a much bigger deal than my initial doctor appointment. I was going to hear the baby's heartbeat for the first time, see their picture on the screen, and find out the due date. Important milestones. It was a lot to wrap my head around.

Nathaniel and I had planned to go to this appointment together, but I hadn't called him yet. I wanted to give everything some time to percolate inside my mind before I decided on my next move. Figuring out how to handle my parents' dissolving marriage, reeling from the aftermath of seeing my mother kiss Nathaniel, I wanted to sort through the emotions I was experiencing before moving forward.

My sisters told me that he had been asking about me, but he wanted to respect my need for space while I dealt with my feelings about what had happened. I was grateful for his distance, yet I still missed him each day we spent apart.

How had things become so complicated?

I arrived at the medical building, parked in the structure, and made my way down to the clinic, opening the heavy doors decorated with silver holiday garland.

My heart skipped when I walked inside.

Nathaniel stood in the waiting room, wearing a blue t-shirt and jeans, hands in his pockets.

My anxiousness transformed into relief, a feeling of gratitude washing over me. All the hesitation and reservations I had felt about our relationship melted away at the sight of his face.

Nathaniel came here despite what happened. He came here because he cared about our baby.

He came because he cared about me.

He shook his palm in an awkward little wave, and I noticed a bandage on his hand.

The wine bottles.

It made me wince to be reminded of that night, and to remember that he had been hurt. I took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and walked up to him.

“Hey,” he said quietly, a soft smile reaching his golden-brown eyes.

“Hey,” I echoed, shyly smiling back.

“I hope it’s OK that I’m here.”

“I’m glad,” I said quickly.

His eyebrows ticked together, and he opened his mouth to speak again, then stared down at his shoes, kicking lightly at the carpet. “I heard from your sisters you’ve been feeling good,” he said, defaulting to a sort of small talk.

“Yes, pretty good the past couple of days,” I told him. “Cross your fingers for me that the morning sickness doesn’t come back.”

He lifted his bandaged palm again and crossed his fingers in the air, then chuckled self-consciously at the cheesy gesture. I laughed with him.

“It’s good to see your face, Amelia,” he said with a soft tone, all earnestness.

“Yours too,” I replied.

It was true. I had missed his smile. His laughs, his hugs and kisses.

He took a deep breath, then spoke like he had been holding something in. “I couldn’t let this appointment pass by without seeing you and making sure you were OK. The plan all along was to do this together, and I still want to be here for you. For both of you,” he added, looking down at my belly. “But I understand if you need to do this alone, and you’d prefer not to have me around. I’ll wait out here instead if that’s what you want.”

I shook my head. “No. I want you in the exam room. You can come in with me.”

A door opened and a nurse appeared with a clipboard in her hand. “Amelia Weaver?”

“That’s me.”

“Come on back,” she said.

I followed her down the hall with Nathaniel trailing just behind me. We waited in the exam room for a few minutes for the tech to arrive, making nervous chit chat, until the tech came in.

Within minutes we were witnessing our baby, a fuzzy gray blob on the screen.

“And there’s your little one,” the tech said, smiling, her eyes going back and forth between Nathaniel and me.

I had never experienced so much love before in my life.

Our baby.

Nathaniel’s, and mine.

It felt surreal. Magical. Nathaniel reached for my hand, and I squeezed his palm, my heart growing ten more sizes for every blurry pixel. I heard a snuffle and glanced over to see him dabbing at the corner of his eye with his wrist.

“Our baby is perfect,” he said, then half-whispered, “Just like their mother.”

Tears gathered in my eyes, and my ear-to-ear smile made them fall down my cheek. Nathaniel used a finger to catch one, smiling and laughing with me as we watched the images of our baby, our hearts filling with joy and hope.

Everything looked as it should. The appointment went perfectly. I felt happiness for the first time since walking into the wine cellar on Saturday night.

After the appointment, we headed to the parking garage together.

As we walked, his fingers grazed mine. I had the instinct to slip my hand into his, but my stomach interrupted me, rumbling audibly.

“Oof,” I said, clutching my belly, for some reason embarrassed. “I’m famished.”

Nathaniel stopped walking, so I stopped, turning around to meet his gaze.

“Can I take you out to lunch?” he asked, his eyes hopeful. “I can’t have you and the baby going hungry on my watch. Besides,” he added, “it’s Christmas Eve.”

“Yes,” I said, feeling a warmth bloom in my chest at the prospect of spending more time with him. “Yes, I’d like that very much.”

CHAPTER 46



NATHANIEL

I took Amelia to her favorite taqueria. We discussed the ultrasound appointment between bites of tacos al pastor and sips of horchata.

“Want some more hot sauce?”

“Mm, yes please,” Amelia replied, dabbing the side of her mouth. “Can you believe the due date is the Fourth of July?” she asked, chuckling.

“We’ll be having an all-American baby if everything goes according to schedule,” I joked.

“The ultrasound tech was so nice,” she said, crumpling her taco wrapper after finishing her last bite. “I hope we get her next time, too.”

“I’m sure we can put in a request.” We had been beating around the bush, chatting casually about the appointment, but I could tell Amelia was just as anxious as I was to talk about the most important topic, us.

The taqueria had started emptying out, and soon it was just the two of us in a quiet corner booth.

“Amelia, I want to apologize.”

“No, I know you didn’t do anything wrong—”

“But I did,” I interrupted her, nodding my insistence. “I should have said something about Colleen’s advances a long time ago. To you, and to your father. She had been acting more and more flirtatious, and it was getting out of hand. She even asked me to come up to Newport with her.”

Amelia scoffed, rolling her eyes. “Typical. Wait until I tell my sisters. They won’t be surprised.”

“I’m so sorry that you saw what you saw. You’ve got to believe me, Amelia; I did *not* kiss her, and I gave her no encouragement. But I panicked instead of taking control of the situation. I hope you understand that I would never betray you like that. Ever.”

She sighed. “I know, Nathaniel,” she said, placing a hand on my forearm. “I believe you. Melinda and Larissa do, too. We all know that my mother has been out of control for years.”

“David came by the house, you know,” I said. “He told me they’re getting a divorce. I was sorry to hear about it. No matter what the circumstance, that’s always hard. Are you and your sisters handling it OK?”

“As best as we can,” she said, shrugging. “We’re dealing with it. We all agree it’s been a long time coming. I think it will be better for my dad, anyway. He’s put up with so much. And, frankly, so have us girls. My mother is a selfish person who has always been envious of all three of us. You wouldn’t believe how unkind she has been.”

“I don’t understand why a mother would treat her children that way.”

“She’s always been like this, but she’s gotten worse lately. She’s found everyone’s weak spots and twisted the knife.”

I hated hearing how cruel their mother had been. “I’m sorry that you and your sisters have been through that with her,” I said, shaking my head, unable to understand how Colleen could be so awful. “A mother’s love should be unconditional. You and your sisters deserve that. And I know our baby will have that. You’ll be a wonderful mother, Amelia.”

“That’s the only thing that matters to me,” she said quietly, peering up at me through dark, fluttery eyelashes. “Our baby will be loved. By both parents, no matter what.” I placed my hand over hers, rubbing my thumb gently across the backs of

her fingers. She scooted in closer and brought a palm to my cheek, brushing her fingers in a soft caress along my jawline. “I’ve missed you, Nathaniel” she whispered.

“Me too,” I echoed, nodding. I took her hand and brought it to my lips, placing a chaste kiss upon her knuckles. “You have no idea how much.”

“I apologize for not letting you explain that night at my parents’ house. I couldn’t think straight. I was just so shocked and hurt by what I saw, so I panicked,” she said. “I wish I hadn’t overreacted, and I’m sorry.”

“You did no such thing,” I protested. “It was a perfectly normal response to what you witnessed. I’m just grateful you know how much I care for you.” I held both her hands in mine, and leaned in close, trying not to let my voice break from the emotion building in my chest. “I love you, Amelia. I always will.”

“I love you too,” she answered, her eyes glassy with tears.

She leaned up to kiss me, and my world was whole again. Hearing those words, feeling her soft lips and tender caresses, everything was set back to right. Things between us were finally locking into place, and no obstacle would stand in our way now.

When she pulled away, she was smiling. She looked angelic—dark brown eyes, a dusting of freckles across glowing skin, and her soft chestnut hair pulled back with loose strands hanging out. I tucked a few tresses behind her ears, and she blushed.

“Does this mean the wedding is back on?” I asked, eager to know if she still wanted to go through with it. Whatever she answered, whatever the future held, I would be ready to face it as long as Amelia was there by my side.

She bit her lip. “Actually, about that... I’d like to put it on hold. Just for the time being.”

Her answer surprised me somewhat, but with it came a sense of relief. When Amelia had first brought up getting married, it felt like we were rushing into things, but her

insistence had won out in the end. Now, she was backtracking, yet I had a feeling her choice was coming from a place of wisdom rather than of impulsivity. “What changed? You were so adamant. I’m not upset, I just want to understand what exactly made you reconsider.”

“Everything happened so fast,” she said, reflecting. “I’ve felt so out of control during the past few months. I thought getting married would give me back that control, and that it would prove to my father that I was doing the right thing. The *adult* thing. But I pushed too hard, too quickly.” She reached for my hand and squeezed it. “I still want to marry you, except I think it should be when we’re both ready for it, when we’ve decided it’s the right time. I don’t want to keep planning a wedding just because I feel like it would appease others and seem better from the outside looking in.” She pursed her lips, and twitched her jaw, waiting for my reaction. “Is that alright?”

I was glad she was in tune with her real wants and desires, and able to express them to me. With every obstacle we had faced, our communication was getting better and better, and I knew we had a strong foundation no matter what came next.

“Of course it’s alright,” I said, kissing her softly on the cheek. She smiled, letting out a gentle sigh of relief. “You’re right,” I continued. “It’s too fast. Just know that I’ll wait for you, Amelia. As long as you want.”

“You won’t have to wait too long,” she said, smiling sweetly. “I promise.”

We cuddled for a while in the taqueria, talking about our excitement for the baby’s arrival and dreaming about our future together, and it dawned on me that this was the first Christmas Eve I had enjoyed in a very long time.

CHAPTER 47



AMELIA

Christmas Day was windy and cool, with a bright blue sky. I had awakened in Nathaniel's arms after spending the night back at home with him, and we drank our coffee upstairs in the bedroom overlooking the whitecaps on the surface of the sea. After cuddling and talking some more about how excited we felt to become new parents, he headed downstairs to make me a special Christmas breakfast before it was time for me to leave.

I was planning to meet up with my sisters today, for an unenviable task—confronting my mother.

She had been staying at the Hotel del Coronado, an expensive and luxurious resort, since my father had kicked her out last week. She had been calling all three of us nonstop, including my dad begging all of us to take her back and forgive her.

No one was quite convinced by her pleading. She offered up a lot of shallow excuses for what happened.

My dad wasn't buying any of it. He made plans to golf on the holiday with his regular group of golf buddies, including Nathaniel. My sisters and I were annoyed with Mom's excuses, but we decided to get together and visit her at the hotel and try to do the mature thing by talking with her as adults.

It was Christmas, after all.

Nathaniel walked outside with me when Melinda and Larissa arrived to pick me up.

“You call me if you need anything, OK? The golf game can wait. I’ll only be a phone call away. I don’t want your mother thinking she can bully you.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said, wanting to ease his worries. “The three of us will stand our ground.” Walking to the driveway where my sisters waited, I squeezed his hand. “See you at the restaurant.” Nathaniel had made reservations at his private club for dinner, where steak and seafood was on the Christmas menu. He arranged for special accommodations to include extra guests—Melinda, Larissa, and my dad—and was treating everyone to a holiday dinner on the rooftop, complete with champagne, city lights... and sparkling cider for me.

We hugged and shared a kiss before I hopped into the car with my sisters and drove toward Coronado Island.

The drive was quiet since none of us had really been looking forward to this. All three of us were a bit on edge, hoping that this visit would somehow go well, despite the circumstances. My goal was to confront my mother, speak my piece, and set some boundaries. I wasn’t going to be pushed around or made to feel small by my mom anymore. She had crossed too many lines in the past—not only with me, but with Melinda and Larissa—and it was high time for her to make some changes or face the consequences.

We found her sunbathing by the pool, tanned legs slathered with oil, wearing a skimpy pink bikini, a floppy straw hat, and dark sunglasses. She was sipping on a large margarita... and surprise-surprise, she had a younger man lounging next to her. When she looked up from her chaise as we were walking up to her, she whispered something to the guy quickly, then pretended not to know him as he made his escape.

My sisters and I shared an exasperated look. *How predictable.*

“Hello, girls! Isn’t this great? A perfect day for working on my tan,” she said in an exaggerated, cheery tone. “Hey, waiter!” She called for one of the cabana boys, and a tall young man with sun-bleached hair came rushing over to take our drink order.

“I’ll have another margarita, and my daughters”—she gave the waiter a look, as if he was supposed to tell her she couldn’t possibly be our mother because she looked too young— “they need drinks, too.”

The man nodded politely, not taking my mother’s hint. Her expression soured.

“I’d like a daiquiri, please,” Melinda said politely.

Larissa glanced at the drink menu, then ordered. “Piña Colada for me, please.”

The waiter nodded and smiled, then looked at me. I was craving spicy food again, so I ordered something I wouldn’t usually drink. “I’ll take a virgin Bloody Mary, please. Extra spicy, if you don’t mind.”

“Coming right up.” The waiter walked briskly away and left the four of us alone.

I took a deep breath, hoping to stay strong and brave in the face of this confrontation. I needed to get things off my chest if for no other reason than to let it go for my own sake.

“Mom,” I said, summoning all my courage, “I’m angry with you for kissing my fiancé. I’d like an apology from you in order to move on.”

My mom scoffed. “It’s a holiday, Amelia,” she said in a condescending tone. “Let’s relax. We can chat about your little boyfriend later.”

I didn’t correct her about him being my fiancé. It wasn’t worth it. She wanted to skirt the issue, but I didn’t care. I hadn’t expected true accountability from her anyway; I just needed to speak my mind.

“I have a lot to look forward to in my life,” I continued on, remaining steady and calm. “So, I’m going to have to limit the amount of time we spend together, especially after the baby comes, because I don’t believe I can trust you. Not unless you take actionable steps to change your ways.”

My mother barked out an acidic laugh as the waiter came back to deliver our drinks. “Oh, Amelia. You’re so dramatic.

This is preposterous! Why are you attacking me? You have no idea what it has been like to be married to your father all these years. Absolutely *miserable*. I deserve to have some fun, just like the rest of you!”

The waiter’s eyes went wide, but he corrected his expression before my mother could notice and hurried away with the empty drink tray.

I sipped my virgin Bloody Mary, trying not to lose my temper.

Larissa spoke up. “Mom, you’re allowed to have fun. No one is stopping you from enjoying your life. And we love you because you’re our mother. But cheating on Dad isn’t something we can just ignore. And having fun doesn’t include throwing yourself at your daughter’s fiancé.”

My mom’s face stayed frozen in an exaggerated expression of indignance.

“Yeah,” Melinda said, finding her courage, bolstered by Larissa’s boldness. “You broke our family, Mom. If you were unhappy, you should have asked for a divorce and walked away to find love somewhere else, instead of betraying the man who has worked his whole life to give you everything you could ever want.”

“You’ve hurt us all, Mom,” I said, feeling a warmth creep up my neck from nerves, but there was another feeling there, too, and it was strong.

Righteousness.

“Oh, you girls are overreacting,” she said, then took a big gulp of her margarita, agitating the ice with a thick straw. “Besides, Nathaniel is a playboy. It’s not like you can actually expect him to turn into a family man overnight.”

My patience was wearing thin. “You’re wrong about him. He’s devoted and faithful, and he’s family to me. He knows how deeply you’ve hurt everyone, and he’s dedicated to this family, even if you’re not.” This wasn’t going anywhere. I turned to Melinda. “I’ve had enough.”

“I agree,” Melinda nodded.

“So have I,” Larissa said, setting down her drink and standing up.

“Wait, girls—” Mom made a half-assed attempt to keep us there, but it was too late. We left the pool and hurried back to the car, bursting into happy tears.

“I’m so proud of you, Amelia,” Melinda said, sniffing. “You too, Larissa.”

Larissa reached for Melinda’s hand. “I’m proud of both of you, too,” she said, wiping her eyes. “It was about time we told her the truth and demanded accountability for her actions.”

“Well,” Larissa said, “I don’t know about the two of you, but confronting Mom made me work up an appetite. It’s Christmas Day, after all. We should enjoy ourselves, and I, for one, am looking forward to dinner at that rooftop joint with Nathaniel and Dad. So...” she used a playful tone and waggled her eyebrows, cheering us up. “Who’s ready for some steak?”

Melinda and I giggled, and Larissa started the car. The three of us headed back to Nathaniel’s house to get ready for our holiday dinner on the town. Our family might not be perfect, but it was ours, and we intended to celebrate that—today, tomorrow, and every day we had the chance.

CHAPTER 48



NATHANIEL

I wanted our New Year's Eve celebration to be special. After all, it would be the first one we spent together, and the last one we'd have alone before the baby was born. So, I found some shiny gold party decorations and balloons, along with confetti, noisemakers, and a couple of goofy paper top hats for us to wear when the clock struck midnight. After ordering Italian from Amelia's favorite place, I stopped by the French bakery to pick up a chocolate torte I knew she'd love.

She'd had a rough week after confronting her mother, so I encouraged her to go shopping with her sisters to buy some maternity clothes. When I handed her my credit card, she tried to refuse, but I insisted. It was *our* money now, I told her, so I urged her to buy whatever she wanted and not to hold back.

I wanted Amelia to feel as beautiful as I knew she was.

When Melinda and Larissa dropped her off in the early evening, I had the whole living room decorated for the holiday. I took the shopping bags from her arms as she surveyed the glitzy, kitschy decor.

"It looks amazing in here! You really outdid yourself, Nathaniel."

"Only the good stuff for my love," I said, setting down the bags and taking a seat on the sofa. "So, how about a fashion show?"

Amelia blushed and smiled. "OK." She disappeared into the downstairs bathroom with a bag, then emerged in a cream-colored sundress made from airy cotton, with a ruffled hem.

“Do you like it? I figure I’ll be most pregnant in the summertime, so I’d better have some summery dresses to show off my baby bump.” She twirled and let the dress billow out to the sides, giggling.

She looked gorgeous—healthy, pink-cheeked, like an angel. “Do I like it?” I asked playfully. “Hmm, I haven’t decided yet. I’ll have to check. Let’s see, here…” I took her hand and pulled her onto the leather sofa with me, unable to resist her in that cute outfit. She sat on my lap straddling me, and I wrapped my arms around her, bringing her close for a kiss.

My lips slotted over hers, parting them with my tongue and tasting her sweetness. She returned my kisses with eagerness, grasping my shoulders and shifting in my lap just enough to make me hard and ready for her.

I moved my mouth down to her jaw, my breath coming heavier with desire, kissing a trail along her neck. “I think I like the dress. Pretty sure. Let me just check one more thing.” She chuckled softly as I slipped a finger underneath a dress strap, letting it fall down over her shoulder, then the other strap, allowing the neckline to dip below to her bust. “So far, so good,” I said, tilting my head down to kiss the tops of her breasts—soft and luscious, and heaving under my touch.

“Nathaniel—” Her voice was breathy and low, turning me on so much I could barely think straight. Her fingers slid down over my shirt from my shoulders to my pecs, slipping down to my abdomen and landing at the waist of my jeans, unzipping me. I helped her along, pulling my jeans down to my knees as Amelia started grinding against me. I could feel her warmth through my boxers—so soft, wet and aching for me. “I need you, Nathaniel. Please. I need you to make love to me.”

It fried my circuits, hearing that. I gathered her dress around her waist and slipped a hand between her legs, only to discover that she wasn’t wearing any underwear.

“Fuck, Amelia.” She let out a mischievous laugh, pleased with herself. I slid my fingers through her folds, making her gasp, then drew her juices up from her entrance to her sensitive spot. Circling her clit softly, I watched her face

slacken with pleasure, her laughter turning to whimpers, then panting, then moans—*Nathaniel, oh Nathaniel*—as I brought her to climax. “You’re so sensitive,” I marveled as she came down from her high. She dropped languid kisses on my cheeks and my jaw, nodding and humming, while I pulled my briefs down.

“Hurry, please,” she breathed, vibrating with need. She was insatiable. “I want you inside me.”

Amelia supported herself on her knees, with her hands on my chest, as she lowered herself down to surround me, inch by exquisite inch. When I was seated to the hilt, she began rocking back and forth slowly, drawing out my pleasure the way only she could, bringing me to the edge—so close, so fast, I had to pinch the base to keep from coming right away.

“You feel so good, baby,” I murmured as she rode me. She increased her pace, letting out little whines with every roll of her hips. Grasping her by the waist, I squeezed gently, encouraging her, relishing in the feel of her supple body in my hands, her smooth skin, the delicate tickle of her hair sweeping along my chest. The bodice of her dress fell down as she rocked back and forth, exposing her breasts—bouncing and full and irresistible. I took each one into my hands, squeezing gently, rubbing her nipples between my thumb and forefinger, eliciting little gasps and squeaks from her as she ground down on my cock. “I love you, Amelia. God, I love you so much,” I breathed, losing myself in the hypnotic rhythm of her body.

“Love you, too,” she said, leaning close to kiss me—rough and sloppy, our breaths mingling as we climbed higher together.

Reaching under her dress to grab the round globes of her ass, I squeezed and bounced her harder, bucking up into her as she spurred me on with high-pitched moans, whining, *yes, sir, yes...*

Her pussy tightened and fluttered around me as I spilled inside her, groaning through my release, shaking and sweating as I held her in my arms.

I never wanted to let her go.

Eventually, Amelia pulled off of me. She placed a couple of soft kisses on my cheek before she went to change in the bathroom, leaving me panting and slack-jawed on the sofa, my mind blank and my body satisfied.

By the time she returned to the sofa, I'd had the decency to pull my pants back up. She curled up next to me, smiling, cuddling into my chest as I stroked her silky hair.

"I hope you're hungry," I said quietly. "I ordered practically everything on the menu."

"Always. I'm always hungry, Nathaniel."

I chuckled, kissing the top of her head. "I've noticed. Hey, it's to be expected; you're eating for two."

She sighed dreamily. "Can you believe it? By this time next year, we'll have a baby. Only six months to go before we get to welcome our child into the world."

I gathered her up into my embrace, holding her close. "I could never have dreamed this is where I'd end up—with the woman of my dreams and a baby on the way. But now? I can't imagine my life any differently. You're the best thing that's ever happened to me, Amelia."

She blinked up at me through her long eyelashes, smiling. "And just think," she said. "Our life together has just begun."

We fell asleep but woke up before midnight to ring in the New Year the best way we knew how.

Together.

EPILOGUE



AMELIA

Six Months Later...

“Nathaniel, wake up!”

He bolted upright in a panic, naked and panting, checking the expression on my face before jumping up out of bed. “OK! OK! Here we go!”

I chuckled at the sight of him; no clothes, hair mussed, grabbing the hospital bag before realizing he should probably put on some pants. It was three in the morning, and we’d had a few false alarms before now, but tonight my water broke. It was the real thing.

This was it.

The big day.

We got dressed, and I insisted on taking a quick shower before heading to the hospital. The contractions weren’t as terrible as I had expected; I had been practicing a lot of breath work. I just had to get through one spasm at a time, and not think about the one coming after that.

I could do this.

Nathaniel, however, was less composed. He drove us white-knuckled to the hospital, moving at an impossibly cautious speed, constantly glancing over at me as I breathed through each contraction.

“Nathaniel,” I said in between spurts of pain, clutching my belly, “the speed limit here is sixty. You’re going thirty-five.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’m just trying to be safe.”

“Do you want the baby to show up before we get to the hospital?”

That made him pick up the pace.

We went inside the hospital and made our way to the check-in counter. Nathaniel filled out the paperwork, but the nurse handed it back to him.

“Sir, just checking—is your wife’s name Nathaniel Dean?” she asked, with a quizzical expression.

“Oh! No. Sorry about that,” he muttered, taking back the clipboard and fixing his careless error. The nurse and I shared a knowing look, and I bit my lip to keep from laughing at how nervous and frazzled he was.

“Hey,” I said calmly, “everything is going to be fine. Don’t worry.”

He nodded rapidly, then checked his watch, then got out his phone. “I’ll text your sisters. They’ll tell your dad. We just have to follow the plan.”

“Ok, you do that.” I gave him a kiss on the cheek as we were ushered out of the waiting area and into the labor and delivery ward.

We made it to our room, and soon there was a flurry of activity, with nurses and doctors coming in and out to take my vitals, get me ready, help me once it was time to push.

Nathaniel stayed by my side throughout the whole delivery. It took a couple of hours, and he let me squeeze his hand and scream curse words at him, unfailingly devoted and praising me every step of the way...

Until we were both holding our darling baby girl.

I had never felt such a deep, indescribable love before. Our baby was perfect—the most beautiful sight I had ever laid eyes on. Watching Nathaniel hold her for the first time was one of the most joyous experiences I’d ever had, and I would cherish the memories of that moment for the rest of my life. We cried and laughed together, cradling our sweet, innocent child.

Nathaniel's adoring gaze darted back and forth between the baby and me, his expression full of awe as we lay together in the hospital room, a little family of three, just beginning our story.

My sisters arrived at seven o'clock, with my dad in tow. Each sister took a turn holding their niece, and my dad's eyes were full of tears as he held his first grandchild.

Gracelyn Melissa Dean.

Nathaniel's mother's name was Grace, and we decided that Melissa was a perfect combination of Melinda and Larissa. I wanted to honor my sisters, and they both said they loved it.

"Good thing you didn't try and name her after me," my dad joked, holding her in his big, bearlike embrace. "Gracelyn is much prettier."

Nathaniel chuckled. My sisters giggled.

"Gracie," I informed my dad. "We're going to call her Gracie for short."

"I like that," Dad said, still gazing affectionately at his granddaughter. "Gracie, I'm your grandpa, and I'm going to spoil you rotten."

"It's a beautiful name, Amelia." Melinda squeezed my shoulder.

"Love it," Larissa agreed. "I can't wait till she's three so I can teach her how to surf."

Nathaniel's eyes shot over to Larissa. "Not so fast—"

"*Kidding*, bro," she said, clapping him on the back. "I'm kidding."

Nathaniel let out a relieved sigh but squinted at her playfully. We all laughed, and the beginning of our new life as parents was spent with the best family anyone could ask for.

Nathaniel was driving too slowly again. "Honey, the speed limit—"

“There is no way I’m driving a mile over thirty,” he said, shaking his head. “Can’t do it. Sorry.”

I chuckled, watching him take every turn and round every curve with utmost care. Turning to our infant daughter, I whispered to her as she slept. “Your dad’s a big old softie, isn’t he?”

My dad and sisters followed us home from the hospital, planning to stay for a few more hours and help out. Once we were settled at home, my family said goodbye for the day, and we finally had a quiet house and plenty of opportunity to rest with tiny Gracie.

A quiet house for now, at least.

Nathaniel helped make sure I was comfortable in bed, and after a successful breastfeeding, the baby fell asleep on my chest. Nathaniel climbed into the bed next to us and curled up close.

“I love my girls so much,” he said, tears gathering in the corners of his eyes.

“Both of your girls love you more than anything in the world,” I smiled, reaching over to caress his cheek.

He slipped a hand into his back pocket and produced a tiny black box. “I bought you a push present.”

I laughed. “Those things are silly! I don’t need a push present. I have everything I could ever need, right here.”

Still, he held out the gift. “Go ahead, open it.”

I gave him a tight-lipped smile and took the box from him, then flipped it open. My jaw dropped as my eyes landed on the contents.

A gorgeous oval-cut engagement ring was tucked into the silky fabric. It was surrounded by a tiny halo of smaller diamonds, and set in buttery yellow gold—dazzling, yet elegant, perfectly to my taste.

“Yes!” I exclaimed, before Nathaniel even had a chance to ask me the big question. “Yes, yes, yes!” I kissed him and melted into his loving embrace, and he slipped the ring on my

finger as I placed my newly bejeweled hand on the baby's back, whispering to her,

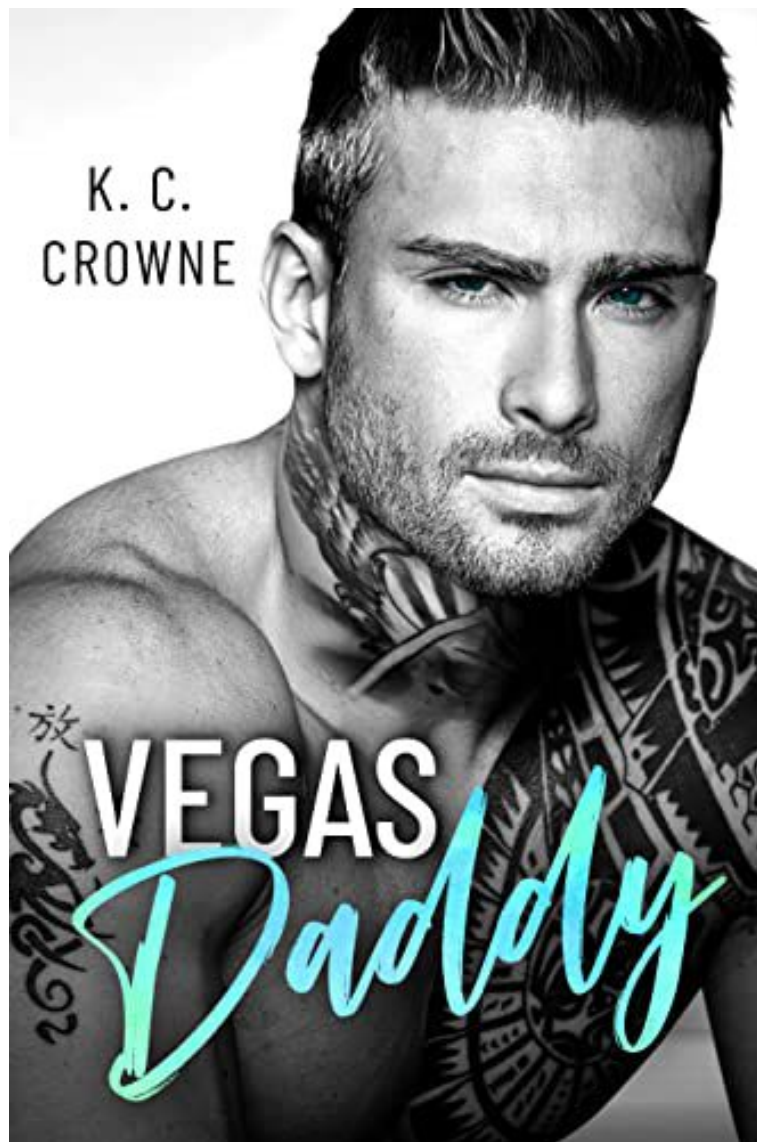
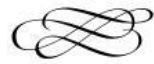
“Baby girl, this is the best day of my life.”

The End

I hope you loved Amelia and Nathaniel's love story. Great new! You can check out there happily ever after one year later [HERE](#).

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VEGAS DADDY (PREVIEW)



Warning - Do Not Spend Your Holiday Drinking in Vegas.

May cause you to wake up married to a domineering single daddy.

It all started with me running away from the altar of h*ll.
And ended with the most incredible night of my life in the city of Sin.

Zane is older. Ex-military. And a HOT single dad.
But our fairytale came to an end - with the cartel on my tail.

Months later we meet again.

My ruthless father just hired bodyguards to watch me like hawks.

In walks the head honcho. And my heart starts to race.

It's Zane!

Now I'm about to tell him three VERY important things...

- 1. I never got over our night of passion.**
- 2. My father sold my hand in marriage to a deadly cartel leader.**
- 3. I'm knocked up and Zane is the daddy.**

A full-length standalone age-gap romance from the Silver Fox series. Each book can be read on its own. All books come with an oh so satisfying happily ever after. No cheating or cliffhanger!

CHAPTER 1



WILLOW

Today will end in either marriage or murder.
My preference is murder.

“It’s bad luck for a bride to cry on her wedding day, you know,” Claire, my cousin three times removed, says with a scowl as she dabs at my running mascara. She’s only making things worse. “You should count yourself lucky. Just think of it, a Christmastime wedding!”

It took the makeup artist almost two hours to get me ready, and an hour still of fighting with Claire as she shoved me into my dress. She scratched me one too many times with those acrylic claws for it to be an accident.

My cousin clicks her tongue for the sixth time in two minutes before sighing in resignation. “This is your duty, Willow. Suck it up.”

I grind my teeth so hard my molars squeak. “You’re not the one being married off to that son of a—”

“Quiet!” she hisses, throwing a frantic look over her shoulder.

One of Esteban’s men stands in the doorway, deliberately putting his hands on his hips so the front of his suit jacket pulls back to reveal the cold, hard metal of the gun in his shoulder holster. He says nothing. He doesn’t have to.

I know besmirching my fiancé’s ‘good’ name is a punishable offense. Maybe that’s why I’m so adamant about pushing him. If I’m lucky, he might put me out of my misery.

“Don’t give me that look,” I grumble at him.

“The ceremony is in twenty minutes,” the guard states flatly, coldly.

I’m convinced the men who follow Esteban’s every word aren’t human. They’re not even dogs, because at least dogs can feel. No, my future husband and head of the Becerra Cartel only hires robots. They comply with his orders without hesitation. They break, they threaten...

They kill.

Claire shoos him away. “She’ll be ready by then. Hurry and pull the car around.”

The guard nods once. “Yes, ma’am.”

“And trip down the stairs while you’re at it!” I shout after him.

My cousin smacks my shoulder. “What’s wrong with you? Do you really want a bullet between your eyes?”

“Yes,” I lie.

My answer couldn’t be further from the truth. I’m just tired of Esteban and my father believing they can step all over me. I’m tired of them controlling every aspect of my life, treating me like a prized possession instead of a human being.

All my life, I’ve dreamed of leaving. Unfortunately, my father has an iron grip on my financial situation. I’ve been forbidden from going to college. I’m not allowed to get a job. Without an education or money of my own, my father ensured my entrapment. Reliant. And in twenty minutes, when I’m forced to walk down the aisle, I’ll inevitably be reliant on Esteban, too.

That’s what they think, anyway.

Because in twenty minutes, I’m going to be long gone.

I gently grasp Claire by the hand and give her fingers a light squeeze. “I’ll fix my own makeup,” I tell her. “Head on down without me. I... need a few moments to collect myself.”

Claire presses her lips into a thin line, squinting as she scrutinizes me from head to toe. “Okay,” she finally mumbles. She doesn’t leave immediately. Instead, she quickly wraps her arms around me in a tight hug and whispers in my ear, “You’re doing the right thing, Willow. Marrying Esteban will absolve all your father’s debts. It’s honorable.”

I force a smile.

Honorable my peachy behind.

I learned a long time ago that my father is a hypocrite. He may be good at controlling my wallet, but he certainly has no control over his own. I won’t pretend to know what sort of business he gets up to for the cartel. All I know is that it’s illegal and incredibly volatile work. The only consistent thing about my father’s dealings is he owes a percentage of it to Esteban Beccerra. Business hasn’t been kind to him in recent years.

Hence getting married against my will.

Taking a deep breath, I rise from my seat and hastily rush over to the vanity mirror. I grab a handful of makeup wipes and start scrubbing at my face like it’s covered in mud. Twenty minutes isn’t a lot of time, but it’s the only window of opportunity I can manage.

Behind me, the door opens softly and shuts quickly after with a soft *click*. In the vanity’s reflection, I watch as Marianne slips into the room with a large backpack and a change of clothes.

“It’s me,” she whispers. “They think I’m bringing you tea. The guards are all waiting downstairs. It’s now or never, Ms. Allegra.”

Marianne is one of the maids. She’s a mousy little thing, with her beady black eyes, pointed nose, and small mouth. But she’s one of the good ones. Discreet.

Right now, discretion is everything.

I wouldn’t describe us as being particularly close, but she’s the only one who has ever shown me an ounce of kindness. In

this prison of a house, she's the closest thing I have to a friend. I'm more than a little aware of how sad that is.

We move silently and swiftly. She unzips the back of my wedding dress and throws me a pair of jeans, a grey shirt, my winter coat, and a pair of sneakers. My heart pounds in my throat, adrenaline tingling in the tips of my fingers and toes. I feel like I'm dying with every passing second. If I mistime my escape, I'm as good as dead.

"It's all in here?" I ask her, grabbing the backpack.

Marianne nods. "I swiped your father's safe combination from his black book last night. I grabbed everything I could. Roughly three thousand in cash."

I let out a shaky breath. It's a miracle my father even has the good sense to keep a squirrel fund considering how in the red his accounts are. If Esteban knew he was holding out on him...

Well, I suppose it doesn't matter now. Three thousand dollars isn't enough to start my life over completely, but it's better than nothing. I reach into my bag, pull out the wad of bills, and count out a thousand. It only leaves me with two thousand, but it's a small price to pay for her silence.

I shove the money into Marianne's hands. "You speak of this to no one."

"W-what if they find out it was me?"

"They won't," I assure her. "Once they realize I'm missing, they'll think I broke into my father's safe. I promise nothing will happen to you."

"I hope you know what you're doing, Ms. Allegra. If they catch you..."

"They won't." I pull the hood of my coat over my head, concealing my ruined up-do. "Stick to the plan. I've only got one shot to make this work."

"Yes, Ms. Allegra."

We get to work trashing the place. I toss over the coffee table while Marianne opens the window as wide as it will go.

My father thought keeping me locked away in my fourth-floor bedroom before the wedding would deter me from jumping—and it totally has. Shattering my legs will probably hinder the running away portion of my plan.

Once I'm convinced my room is properly destroyed, I walk over to Marianne and ruffle up her hair and clothes.

“Slap me for good measure,” she suggests. When I give her a quizzical look, she says, “It'll make it look more convincing.”

I suck in a sharp breath, raising my hand. “I'm so sorry. Please put ice on it later, okay?”

“Yes, yes. Go on! Before I change my mind.”

I bring my hand down and strike her hard across the cheek, my handprint already reddening her skin. Marianne winces, tears in her eyes. I feel awful, but she's totally right. If we're going to sell our act to the guards, I can't afford to do this in halves.

I hide on the other side of my large mahogany wardrobe closest to the door, my back pressed against the wall to keep out of sight. “Okay, I'm ready.”

“Good luck, Ms. Willow,” she whispers. Marianne gives me a supportive nod before she takes in a big, sharp inhale. “GUARDS! Guards, she's escaped! Ms. Willow has escaped!”

Their thunderous stampede echoes up the stairs, low voices barking orders as five armed men rush into my bedroom. Marianne wails, a hand pressed to her swelling cheek as heavy tears stream down her face. She points at the window, frantically trying to talk while hyperventilating.

She would have made a wonderful actress in another life. I know it's fake, but even *I* feel bad for her.

“She attacked me!” Marianne cries. “She attacked me and pushed me down! Then she went out the window and—”

I don't stick around to listen to the rest of her prepared speech. The guards have their backs to me, offering me the perfect opportunity to quietly slip out the way they came.

I hold my breath as I rush down the stairs, careful to keep my footsteps as light as possible. My heart pounds so loud and so hard I'm worried it might burst out of my chest. Every muscle fiber in my body burns with fear and desperation.

There's no time for second guesses, no room for doubt. I keep going until I reach the main floor of the house, sticking to the shadows as I sprint for the back door. There's only one guard on duty here; the rest are up front with the cars or upstairs trying to figure out how on Earth I supposedly managed to jump.

The guard doesn't see me coming, doesn't have time to process what's going on when I throw myself at him. We both go tumbling down, his head smacking against the polished marble floor.

"I'm sorry," I wheeze, meaning every word. I may be the daughter of a cartel lieutenant, but I didn't inherit my father's taste for violence or inflicting pain.

The poor guy is out cold beneath me, but at least he's breathing. He'll likely wake up in a little while with a headache to end all headaches.

I swallow my unease. There's no time to feel sorry for him. I reach beneath his suit jacket and feel around for his holster. They all have the same standard issue Beretta on their person. I take his gun and shove it into the waistband of my jeans behind my back before moving on, not bothering to shut the door as I race outside.

The sky above is an inky black, the moon only a sliver. The cool air soaks into my skin, nipping at the tip of my nose. I'm thankful it probably won't get any colder than this. Los Angeles isn't known for its cold winters, but I'm not abandoning my coat any time soon. There's no telling where I'll end up sleeping tonight, and I'd rather not risk hypothermia.

Behind me, the sound of frantic shouting.

They're looking for me.

I can't stop.

While the guards search the front of the property, I escape by climbing the fence in the backyard. I make my way to the street, walking for about five blocks at a brisk pace. I throw a cautionary glance over my shoulder more than once. Nobody's following me. The coast is clear.

For the moment.

I walk and walk until the arches of my feet are sore. Nobody even blinks an eye when I stride past, but it's a liberating feeling instead of a lonely one. It takes me a minute to figure out where I'm going. I didn't bring my phone with me because my father can easily have it tracked. I'm not worried about getting lost. Anywhere I end up is better than being shackled to that madman Esteban.

It's a little past ten in the evening by the time I wander past a Greyhound bus station terminal. The wedding should have happened by now. I've no doubt thrown a massive wrench in my father's plans, but I don't care. I'm out and free, a world of endless possibilities to discover.

I walk up to the ticket booth, still jittery from my getaway. "Excuse me?" I call to the clerk behind the desk.

The man gives me a disgruntled once over, looking very stupid in his red Santa hat corporate probably forced him to wear. "What can I help you with?" he asks flatly. Buddy *clearly* loves his job.

"I need a ticket."

He huffs, resting his elbow on the counter before jerking a thumb up at the screen above his head. "I'm gonna need to know where, sweetheart."

I study the destinations listed with wide eyes. I've never been allowed outside of my home, let alone Los Angeles, without an escort. Now I'm paralyzed at the thought of going to Phoenix, San Diego, Anaheim, Salt Lake City, or maybe even San Francisco. I could go even further if I wanted to, but...

I only have two thousand dollars to work with. Even then, I won't know how far I need to go to escape the Becerra

Cartel's reach.

The clerk clears his throat. "I don't have all day, toots. Shit or get off the pot."

His vulgarity makes me wince. "What's your cheapest ticket?"

"Vegas. It's thirty bucks one way. Next bus leaves in ten minutes."

The information echoes around inside my skull.

Las Vegas. Everything I know about the city is based on what I've seen in movies. Big, bright, boisterous. Lots of people, plenty of places to stay, easy to get lost in the crowd. The fact that it's only going to cost me thirty dollars out of my remaining two grand is also an attractive bonus. Not to mention that leaving the state might help me escape Esteban's clutches.

"I'll take it," I say, reaching into my backpack to pull out my wad of cash.

The clerk eyes me up and down, no doubt suspicious. In the end, though, he doesn't ask unnecessary questions. He probably doesn't get paid enough to care. Besides, this is a simple exchange. I give him the money; he gives me the ticket. I'm on my merry way.

I board the bus in a hurry, choosing one of the seats in the back. When I sit, the hard outline of the gun tucked away under my shirt startles me. I'd almost forgotten I was carrying it.

Quickly glancing left and right to make sure the coast is clear; I pull it out and shove it into the bottom of my backpack. I consider ditching the thing entirely, but I'd rather play it safe.

It isn't until the bus pulls out of the terminal and hits the road that I finally allow myself to relax. Exhaustion races through me, relief soaking into my bones. Soft Christmas jingles play over the bus speakers, but the rumble of the engine is so loud I can't quite hear. It doesn't really matter.

In another few minutes, I'm fast asleep with the taste of freedom on my tongue.

CHAPTER 2



ZANE

“The buy-in is five thousand dollars, sir,” the blackjack dealer informs us.

Heath claps me on the back with a hearty chuckle. “What do you say, big bro? Feel like losing five K?”

Knox, my youngest brother, rolls his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be saving this money for your honeymoon? Maybe a house? I’m sure Darlene would love a house.”

Heath grasps Knox by the shoulders and shakes him. “We’re in Vegas for my bachelor party, my man! Quit being such a stick in the mud. We’re here to have *fun*. Ever heard of it?”

“I don’t know what Darlene sees in you.”

Heath pouts. “Zane, tell Knox he’s being an ass.”

I don’t say anything. I reach into the inside pocket of my suit jacket and pull out five of the purple casino chips I’ve been carrying around. There’s plenty more where that came from, but I’m silently hoping Heath doesn’t intend to burn all our money in one place.

“Knock yourself out,” I tell him. “But if you lose it all, I’m cutting you off.”

Heath beams, his smile brighter than the sun. “This is why you’re my favorite brother.”

Knox huffs. “You shouldn’t be encouraging this behavior. Blowing that kind of money—in this economy?”

“Relax,” I tell him. “Our first contract starts the day after New Year’s. We’ll be making five grand an hour.”

He shifts his weight from foot to foot, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I still haven’t changed my mind, Zane. This client... I don’t think he’s good news. All my preliminary reports—”

“I know, I know.”

“Do you?”

“Look, we’re not protecting him. Just his wife. Phillips Security will have nothing to do with any of his... *dealings*.”

Knox, ever the worrywart, gives me a pointed look. “You’re really willing to turn a blind eye?”

I set my jaw. Our situation isn’t ideal. After returning home from serving several tours in Afghanistan, my brothers and I have always struggled to readjust to civilian life. I thought I could do it, but it ate away at me. The stillness. The mundanity. It was enough to drive me crazy sometimes. I could tell Heath and Knox were struggling, too.

Our foray into private security made sense. Not as intense as active duty, but certainly better than taking up construction or accounting or whatever it is normal people think good, honest work is.

Heath was the one—in all his hyperactivity and restlessness—who suggested starting up Phillips Security. Knox—the wisest and most cynical of us Phillips brothers—knew how oversaturated the market would be. Everyone and their mother seems to have a security firm these days, but I was determined to see it through.

It took longer than I wanted, but I finally managed to get everything in order. As head of our operation, I secured the appropriate licenses and signed a gazillion different forms. My brothers and I landed our first client not even two nights ago. At the time it felt fortuitous.

Until we dug a little deeper.

“It’s not our job to judge,” Heath argues as he takes a seat at the blackjack table. “Just to keep the woman out of harm’s way. Everyone deserves to feel safe, don’t they?”

Much to my surprise, Knox doesn’t have a response prepared. Instead, he mumbles something about needing a drink before wandering off.

Heath sighs. “I hope he comes back in time to watch me double my money. That way I can really rub it in his face.”

“Maybe the kid has a point,” I state firmly. “They’d probably pay us in blood money.”

The dealer gives me a look, suspicion and wariness in her eyes. It probably isn’t smart to be tossing words around so casually.

“Kid?” Heath chuckles as his cards are dealt. He gets a ten of hearts and a two of diamonds. The dealer only has a queen of clubs showing face. “Knox turned thirty-six this year,” my brother continues. “He’s hardly a kid anymore.”

“He certainly acts like he’s a kid with all his whining and foot stomping.”

“You’re just bitter about pushing forty. You’re no longer a part of the cool crowd.”

I snort. “Shut up and play.”

“Hit me,” he says to the dealer. He draws a four of spades. “Speaking of kids, how’s yours doing? I was kinda gutted that Anna didn’t RSVP.”

The mere mention of my daughter’s name makes me smile. Anna is my pride and joy; currently attending her third year at Princeton studying computer engineering and astrophysics with aspirations of one day joining NASA. Since she was a child, Anna’s dreamed of building spaceships and launching satellites to explore the infinite cosmos.

“Don’t be dramatic,” I tell him. “Your invitation was short notice. Besides, we agreed she’d spend Christmas this year with her mother in Florida.”

“Ah, the witch who shall not be named.”

“Teresa isn’t that bad.”

“She took you for half of everything.”

“I *gave* her half of everything.”

“And I still have no clue why.”

“Because,” I tell him with a firm expression, “we may not be together anymore, but I still respect her. It’s my duty to take care of my daughter and her mother.”

Heath smirks at me. “You know what your problem is? You’re too noble for your own good.”

“I fail to see how that’s a bad thing.”

The dealer clears her throat. “Would you like to hit or stay, sir?”

“Hit me, baby!” He’s dealt a ten of spades.

“Bust,” the dealer announces, gathering up the cards and the chips. He only has four thousand remaining to play with.

Heath waves a hand dismissively. “You know what? Go grab a drink with Knox. You’re throwing off my groove.”

I frown, but there isn’t any real heat behind it. I leave my brother to his fun and venture off in search of my youngest, navigating the rows upon rows of slot machines and tables. It’s surprisingly crowded considering how close to Christmas it is, but I suppose not everyone subscribes to more traditional forms of holiday celebration.

They design these places like mazes with no windows in sight—a deliberate choice to keep casino-goers more or less unaware of the passage of time. They pump fresh oxygen in through the vents to keep guests alert, figuring the longer they remain awake, the more they’ll want to spend their money. The sound of bells and the stimulating flash of lights are constant, giving the people a taste of what it would be like to win a jackpot themselves.

I personally have no need for any of it. I don’t need to rely on Lady Luck to make my dollar. Everything I have comes

from hard work and dedication, not wishful thinking and risky bets.

I spot Knox at the bar, grumpily sipping on his no doubt overpriced beer. At least a dozen different spots are available to grab a refreshment on this floor of the casino alone. I'm about to join him when out of the corner of my eye—

A woman. She anxiously looks over her shoulder at some unknown danger as she walks up to the reception desk. This casino, like many others on the Strip, is also part-hotel. Against the backdrop of all the glitz and glam of Vegas, she stands out like a sore thumb. I normally wouldn't pay any mind. It's not polite to stare, but something about her shifty nature and wide, frightened blue eyes makes me pause.

Curiosity gets the better of me.

I take a few steps in her direction, leaning against one of the many decorative pillars lining the hotel lobby. The ceiling is painted a light blue, accented all around with bright lights to give the illusion of an open-air dome.

"I need a room," she says to the hotel receptionist working the desk. Her voice is shockingly soft, almost angelic. The sound makes my heart drum a little faster.

"For how many nights?"

"Just one. The cheapest one you've got."

The receptionist types quickly into his computer. The entire time, the woman continues to throw cautious looks over her shoulder. She reminds me of a rabbit on the lookout for a fox, ready at a moment's notice to sprint in the opposite direction. She hasn't noticed me, and a part of me doesn't want her to. The last thing I want is for her to spook and run.

I watch her from a few feet away, stunned silent by her beauty.

She's dressed conservatively in a pair of jeans and a baggy coat, so I'm unable to make out her silhouette. Her eyes do me in. Electric blue, so rich and vibrant I can clearly see them from where I stand. The woman has a cute button nose and full lips, her arched brows pulled together into a worried frown.

A strange sensation stirs in my chest.

I want to know what's troubling her. I want to make sure she's safe, but I have no clue why. It's really none of my business, and if she's as scared as she looks, I doubt she'd want help from some random man she's never met. In this day and age, there is no such thing as the kindness of strangers. Though it's obvious that's what she needs—someone to be kind.

“That'll be a hundred and nine dollars,” the desk clerk says. “How would you like to—”

The woman pulls out a thick wad of cash and quickly slides the money over.

A sick feeling churns in the pit of my stomach. Something isn't right. Everything about her radiates *distress*, from her disheveled clothes to her flightiness to the slight quiver of her bottom lip and the quickened pace of her breathing.

“May I trouble you for your name?” the desk clerk asks. “To have on file.”

The woman slides an additional fifty dollars over the counter. “That's for you. To make something up.”

The man is obviously confused at first, but his features quickly melt into a polite smile. “I hope you enjoy your stay, Ms. Doe. Here's your keycard.”

The woman is surprisingly fast considering her small stature. She snaps up the key and immediately heads to the elevators.

As do two men, tailing her a few paces behind.

My body reacts before my brain does. I follow them down the hall, stepping around other guests trying to check in and check out. I arrive just as the elevator doors slide open, the four of us cramming into the elevator car together. The woman presses the button to the top floor, my first clue that she's aware of the danger she's in. A penthouse suite is worth way more than a what she handed over.

She's buying herself time.

Not a single word is spoken, nothing but soft *dings* over the speakers counting every floor we pass. I stand at the back of the car, silently sizing the men up.

They're double her bodyweight and twice her size, dressed in fitted black suits and polished leather shoes. To the untrained eye, they could easily be mistaken for businessmen, but their ugly mugs and visible neck tattoos are a clear indication that they're probably not here for the big pharmaceutical convention on the ground floor.

We pass Floor 28...

Floor 29...

Floor 30...

The doors slide open. There's nobody in sight; just a lonely maid's cart left unattended.

One of the men puts his hand on her shoulder. "Ms. Allegra, you're coming with us."

The woman whips around in an instant, nailing the man square in the groin.

"The fuck I am!" she hisses before barreling out of the elevator.

CHAPTER 3



WILLOW

I knew I was being followed the second I got off the bus. It was just a feeling, the weird tingle of eyes on the back of my neck from afar. When I got to the hotel casino, I spotted them in an instant.

Two of Esteban's guards, both following me to the elevator. They weren't even discreet about it. They made a B-line for me like freaking linebackers.

I have no idea who the third guy is, though. Probably some random casino guest, but it's also very likely that my fiancé decided to bring in the big guns to ensure my safe, albeit unwilling, return.

Because he is—big, that is.

If I weren't in the middle of fleeing for my life, I would have taken the time to admire his handsome features a while longer. Dark chocolate brown hair, an aquiline nose, deep green eyes that remind me of the dense canopy of a tropical jungle.

It doesn't matter how jaw-droppingly sexy he is.

If he really is one of Esteban's men, I'll give him a piece of my mind all the same.

By the time we reach the top floor, I'm hopped up on adrenaline and barely remember to breathe. There's no avoiding it. I'm going to have to fight my way out of this. The elevator doors slide open...

One of the men puts their grubby hands on my shoulder. “Ms. Allegra, you’re coming with us.”

I spin around and drive my knee straight into his balls. “The fuck I am!” I shout before immediately sprinting down the hall.

I chose the top floor on purpose. If they want to drag me out of here, they’ll have to do it while I’m kicking and screaming all the way back down. *Someone* is bound to see or hear me calling for help, and I have the descent of thirty floors to do it.

They’re in hot pursuit and gaining.

I shove an unattended maid’s cart at them as I race forward, sending all manner of toiletries flying. The second guard trips and stumbles, face planting into the burgundy-colored hotel carpet. I can’t spare any sympathy, choosing instead to continue my race toward the stairwell exit.

Vertigo slams into me when I make the mistake of looking down the spiraling stairs. The steps seem to go on forever while the cement walls that support the stairwell close in on me. I don’t know which is more prominent—my fear of plummeting to my death or my claustrophobia.

Behind me, loud and heavy footsteps continue. They’re still after me, but I’ve come too far to give up now. I suck in a sharp breath through clenched teeth and hop the rail, dropping down the center of the stairwell to the next floor.

“Holy shit!” one of the guys shouts. “She jumped!”

“Don’t just stand there! Go after—*Argh!*”

“Who the fuck are—”

I drop from floor to floor to floor until I’ve put roughly five levels between us. The muscles in my forearms burn, and my hands shake like crazy. If I miscalculate or hesitate, I might end up smacking my ribs against the rails—or worse, crack my skull open.

I stop on the twenty-third floor and escape into the hotel hallway, panting hard as my heart drums loudly in my ear.

According to the signs posted on the walls, there's an ice room here. When I reach the door, I run inside and slam it behind me, nothing but the electric hum of the ice machine to keep me company in the dark.

Out in the hall, I can only hear the slow, careful strides of one person. Did they split up to cover more ground?

The footsteps slow just outside the ice room's door, a heavy shadow visible beneath the small gap in the doorframe. I don't move an inch, too afraid to give away my position. I pray that if I'm quiet enough, buddy will move on. If not...

If not, I'm in for the fight of my life.

"You can come out now," a deep voice rumbles just on the other side. "They've been taken care of."

Confusion swirls inside my chest. Taken care of? Who is this guy?

Regardless, I remain hidden and still.

There's a polite knock on the door, three soft raps from the back of someone's knuckles.

"Ms. Doe, right?" he asks. "I don't know what's going on, but you can trust me."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. Was he listening to my conversation with the hotel clerk? Had I really been so careless as to let Esteban's men get that close?

"Damn it," I grumble under my breath before I yank the door open.

I lunge at the man with a vicious cry, digging my nails into him like a feral jungle cat. I kick and I punch, but he's a solid wall—an immovable object to my unstoppable force. The man easily takes hold of both my wrists, pivoting his hips so I stumble over my own feet. He expertly maneuvers me like I'm nothing more than a sack of flour, pinning my body against the wall with his own up against mine.

"*Relax,*" he growls. "I'm not going to hurt you."

“I’m not going back!” I scream in his face. “You can’t make me go back! I swear to God, I’ll kill myself before I’ll ever let that man—”

He cuts me off with a kiss.

It’s so startling and out of nowhere that I gasp. Lips crashing against lips, tongues sliding over tongues. I’m surprised how quickly it goes from being harsh and frantic to tender and slow. A soft moan pulls itself from my lungs as he deepens the kiss—my first ever. Everything about his touch is delicious and divine.

I like the roughness of his stubble, the commanding nature of his lips. He smells woody with a hint of citrus. The hard press of his body against mine awakens something inside me, a wet heat pooling between my legs as I relinquish control.

I know in an instant this isn’t one of Esteban’s men because no one would *dare* touch what he considers his.

So who the hell *is* he?

He pulls away slowly, his face hovering a mere inch away from mine. I can feel my own breath ricochet off his cheeks as he stares deeply into my eyes. Good *Lord*, he’s handsome. Unfortunately, in my experience, I’ve learned the handsome ones’ intentions require the most questioning.

“Who are you?” I whisper, my voice a raspy, foreign sound in my own ears.

“I was about to ask you the same thing.”

“Answer me or I’ll scream.”

The corner of his lip twitches. “I wouldn’t want that.”

“Something amusing?” I reply pointedly.

He shakes his head. “Zane Phillips, at your service. And who might you be?”

I lick my lips, missing the taste of his mouth more than I probably should. “Claire,” I answer.

“Try again,” he says.

My heart skips a beat. “Marianne.”

Zane clicks his tongue. “The truth this time.”

I can’t stop staring at him, equal parts amazed and confused and alarmed at the way he makes me feel. “Willow,” I finally answer, hating how easily I let my walls crumble for him.

“Willow,” he echoes. My name rolls off his tongue like a prayer, the sound of it sending a light shiver up my spine. “Willow, why were those men after you?”

I *almost* tell him. I don’t know what it is about Zane, but I suddenly want to tell him every single secret I’ve been holding onto. My father and his debts. The cartel boss I was promised to. The life I’m trying to run away from—though I’m starting to worry it’s inescapable.

“What did you do to them?” I ask him. “Those men.”

“Took care of them.”

“What’s that even supposed to mean?”

“Knocked them out. Stuffed them down the trash shoot.”

“Are you joking?”

He doesn’t respond.

Shit. I don’t think he’s joking.

Just like that, whatever magical spell he’s used to turn my mind all hazy dissipates. I don’t know who the hell he is or what his intentions are. I don’t care if he helped me or not. For all I know, he could be lying to me to lull me into a false sense of security. What better way to haul me back to Esteban when I’ve made the mistake of allowing myself to trust?

I distract Zane with another kiss. It works like a charm, his eyes fluttering closed.

Then I pull my gun on him, pressing the tip of the barrel to his abdomen. I’ve had it tucked away in my jacket pocket this whole time, having pulled it out of my bag just before I got off the Greyhound. I’m not actually going to shoot him; I just need him to *think* I will if he continues to push his luck.

“Take a step back,” I order.

He does so, a strangely endearing glint of amusement in his eyes.

“Now turn around and get on your knees,” I say sternly.

“That’s supposed to be my line.”

I kick him in the back of the calf. “Shut up,” I grumble, absolutely hating the way my voice quivers and my face suddenly heats by a thousand degrees. I find my resolve and take a deep breath. “If you move a muscle, I’ll shoot you right here, right now.”

Zane chuckles. “I believe you.”

“Stop laughing at me!”

“Go on,” he says, though not unkindly. “Get out of here, *Ms. Doe*.”

I’m off in an instant. This man is dangerous, and I mean that in more ways than one. If he really did take on two of Esteban’s men all by himself, he’s clearly powerful. And the fact that he so easily caught me off guard is another reason to be concerned.

I need to put as much distance between us as possible and ignore whatever this feeling in my chest is telling me to wrap myself around him.



END OF PREVIEW

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

K.C. Crowne is an Amazon Top 10 bestseller.

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