



# FATED

WITH MY

*Ex's Brother*

HELEN BLUME

# Fated with My Ex's Brother

**Helen Blume**

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# Prologue Isabel

The bright summer sun beams through the blinds of my tiny coffee shop, illuminating every piece of silverware on the counter. It is a beautiful sight to watch when there is no customer to tend to. I move closer to the spot to feel the rays of the sun on my skin. I smile, spinning around like I'm we got my own spotlight and no worries in the world. It is good that no one here is watching me act like a fool.

There is something about Paris that makes you appreciate every little detail in the beauty of nature. Maybe it's the people or their way of life, but since I got here, I have admired everything. It's a peace for the first time in my life.

About four months ago, I came to Paris for a six-month art program which will end toward the end of summer. So, the program is just a cover job, to get away from my life back at home. I came all the way from the states to find myself learn to be independent and hopefully find love.

Well, I'm a hopeless romantic, but just like in the movies, I've always imagined that I would bump into the man of my dreams somewhere on the street of Paris. My things scattered all over the floor. In a slow-motion moment, we both bend down to gather my things, and his hand grazes mine. We look at each other's eyes with each other. This will be the beginning of my love story.

*My tall, dark, and handsome prince.*

? SBUB2 KU"AB

*So dreamy.*

The doorbell at the entrance of the coffee shop rings, bringing me out of my daydream. I turn to look at the customer who just walked in, and my eyes come in contact with the most beautiful man I have ever seen in my life. He is built like a god, and his features are to die for. His neatly trimmed, silky blonde hair sits perfectly on his scalp. He has a masculine oval

face with serious cut-through California lines that would command any room I stare at him my California on the floor totally frozen in the moment

*He looks American.*

So I get closer to the counter and I notice how soft he looks aside from the pronounced California line. He has golden brown eyes composed, complimented by his long lashes. I want him to grab his very muscular arms around me so I can feel safe and protected. He looks very casual too in his white T-shirt and brown khaki shorts that sit right on his neck

... Want you hear me!... he questions looking puzzled

*Did he say something?*

... Sorry Sello... I stutter trying to call myself to order

She smiles, reads into a smile as he stares at me

... Welcome to Kella Waffle. What can I get you!... I am very recognizing his smile

She doesn't respond. She keeps staring at me like he is in a daze or something

... Sello sir. What can I get you!... I am again

... Smmv hmv... he clears his throat ... Dou More - American!... he says excitedly

... Desv I amv... I smile in response ... Your order sir!...

... Xhv sorryk Wan I get an iced coffee! With cream please...

R-TB3 NITS AD B" Mz KJXTSBJ ;

... Iced coffee with cream... I repeat as I punch his order into the system

... What state!... he questions

... Tennessee... I reply ... Dou!...

... Nashville 3 weeks... he says proudly

... This is the first time I met someone from 3 weeks. I always assumed everyone from there was in the White

Southern... I say with a sheepish giggle

... Dou might be onto something there... She lets out a light chuckle

... Dou was at the White South! I am very my eyes brightening with interest and curiosity

... sometimes... he says with a proud smile

... No. That makes sense... I almost sound like a child in a daze

... Would you like anything else!... I turn to him and notice he

is still checking me out I feel self-conscious as I try to hide my blushing face looking anywhere but his face

...That will be all... She still has that gorgeous smile on his face

I gesture to him to take a seat while I make his coffee In no time his iced coffee is ready and I go to serve him at his table

...Thank you... he says smiling His eyes roam around the cafe before they fall back on me ...-are you the only one here!... he asks curiously

...Dear friend just for today though It's usually slow on Thursdays... I reply wondering why he asks

She nods his head to show he understands I look at his face he seems hesitant to say something

...Want I get you anything else!... I ask

...Ah yes... he smiles nervously ...since you're the only one here why don't you sit and have coffee with me... he says leading with his brown eyes They are mesmerizing and have completely drawn me in

*Is he asking me on a date?*

6 SBUB2 KU"AB

*Is this a date?*

*No, it can't be. Stop reaching.*

...Sincerely I can't I have to be by the counter I'm sorry... ...Kut there are no other customers here... She gestures with his

hands ...Plus you said it's a slow day Why don't you pretend it's your break time and have coffee with me... His eyes brighten like a cute puppy ...If a customer comes in you can just walk over to the counter and take their order So does that sound!... His face holds so much hope for a positive response

...That makes sense Kut you are paying for my coffee Ark!... ...Ugh Ugh is my name Please now mister just Ugh... he says ...Ugh sounds very awkward... I say in an attempt to crack a joke His face spreads in a wide smile and I notice his eyes catch me as I

.al' bac' to get a cu, of iced copeek The .eather ultimately demands itk

...Dou didnMt tell me your namev... he says as soon as I return to the tablek

...Isabelv... I say as I ta'e the seat o,,osite himk I si, from my copee and enCoy the coolness s,reading into my systemk ... The .eather is a beast todayv... I say in an attem,t to start a conversationk

...Deahv it isk ThatMs .hy I came here to cool opk I too' a long .al' from my hotel room and then got hotv... he chuc'lesk

...Nhat brings you here to Paris!... he as's curiouslyk

...IMm in an art ,rogram at the Nestern cam,us do.nto.nk... I smilev ta'ing another si, of my copeek

...ThatMs coolk zov youMre an artist!... he as'sk

...Nellv I donMt consider myself one yetv... I re,lyk

...zto, being modestk IMm sure you are a badass artistv... he saysv .igj gling his bro.sk

I laugh out loudk

R-TB3 NITS AD B"Mz KJXTSBJ G

...No.F Dou have such a beautiful laughv... he says in a wery sincere tonek I can tell it .as one of those comments that comes out before you can ewen consider saying itk Ay face goes red from his confessionk

I clear my throatv as'ing another Yuestion Cust to change the intense atmos,here in the sho,k Ne continue chatting for hoursv laughingv and sharing childhood stories and .orldwie.sk Kefore .e 'no. itv it is ,mv time for me to close the copee sho,k I close the sho,v and .e decide to ta'e a .al'k Ne continue to discuss and argue about the most triwial thingsk Woming u, .ith absurd theories and scenariosv com,eting on .ho s,ea's Rrench more Euentlyk

Se .ins because my Rrench still belongs in a beginnerMs classv and he is to,jnotchk -s .e continue to .al'v .e sto, by an old .ater fountain to admire its beautyk Ne .al' around the fountain in a.e of itk

...Nould you li'e a ,icture by the fountain!... - stranger .ith an oldjschool Polaroid camera as'sk

I loo' at Uouis to hear his res,onsek Se smiles at me before

nodding a rmatiwelyk Ne stand before the fountainv and he suddenly ta'es hold of my handk Ay body goes .ild in goosebum,s in reaction to his touchk Ne smilev and the camera Eashesk Ne .ait as the camera ,rints out the ,icturek ...Aa'e that t.ov ,leasev... Uouis tells the ,hotogra,herk Ne collect the ,ictures and ,ay the ,hotogra,herk Uouis hands one to mek ...Sere is your co,yk... Se smilesk Ne both stare at the ,icture7 I admire ho. .ell .e loo' togetherk I suddenly began to fantasiLe about our life togetherk

*Is it too early to feel that?*

*Am I insane for feeling such an intense attraction toward him?*

Ne continue our .al'k -nd the night continues to be xllled .ith laughterv Coyv and chemistryk It feels li'e I have 'no.n Uouis all my lifev and being by his side is a natural xtk Se is intelligentv funnyv SBUB2 KU"AB

careerjoriatedv tallv and handsomek Aaybe he is my ,rinck charmingv after allk

-fter the long .al'v .e return to the front of the copee sho,k I ,oint to the building o,,osite the sho,k ...Ay a,artment is ower therek...

...Uet me .al' you home thenv... he opersk

Ne cross the road and reach the front of my a,artment buildingk

...IMd li'e to see you againv Isabelv... he says in a lo. tonev mowing closer to mek I can smell his strong cologne ewen more no.k

...Nellv you 'no. .here I liwe and .or'k That shouldnMt be hardv... I chuc'le nerwouslyk

...Wan I at least get your number!... he ,leadsk

I stretch out my hand to collect his ,hone and ,unch my number into itk

...Than' youv... he almost .his,ers as a smile s,reads across his facek ...ood nightv Isabelv... he saysv coming ewen closer to hug mek I recij ,rocate the hugv and being in his strong arms feels so goodk Ne stay li'e this for a .hilev neither of ting to let go of the otherk -fter much reluctancev .e ,ull a,artv and our eyes loc'k Sis ,u,ils loo' dilatedv and they hold so many emotionsk Se dra.s me closer by my .aistv and his eyes fall to my li,sk ...Wan I 'iss you!... he .his,ers as he tuc's my hair



behind my earsk The touch of his xngers across my face Colts  
my body .ith electricityk It is truly .ild that I feel this lewel of  
attraction for someone I Cust met todayk Kut at the same  
timev it seems I 'no. all there is to 'no. about Uouisk  
...Nhat are you .aiting for!... I .his,er bac'k Nithout a second  
delayv he cu,s my face into his hands and ,resses his li,s on  
minek Sis softv thin li,sk I enwelo, his li,s in mine as I dee,en  
our 'issk The 'iss starts slo.ly but heightens .ith .ild ,assion as  
.e intensify itk It is the best 'iss IMwe ewer hadk  
R-TB3 NITS AD B"Mz KJXTSBJ

*Is it too early to say I love him? Because it is obvious I am in  
love with this man, a man I met a few hours ago.*

*How insane is that?*

*Yeah, Paris will do that to you.*

I donMt .ant to let him go tonightk Jeluctantlyv I ,ull a.ay from  
the 'issv but he rests his head on my forehead as .e try to catch  
our breathk

...Nould you li'e to come u,stairs!... I as' shylyk Se remowes  
his head from my forehead to loo' at my facek ...-rrrk are  
you sure!... he loo's ,uLLledk

...If you donMt .ant to come u,v it is xnek I donMt 'no. .hy I  
as'ed you such a Yuestionk I am so stu,idk Xbwiouslyv you  
.ouldnMt .ant toO Nho am I 'idding! Dou Cust met meO... I  
continue to ramble on and onk

Uouis grabs me by the shouldersk ...Isabelv calm do.nk  
KreatheF I .ould wery much li'e to come u,stairsk I .as ho,ing  
you .ould as'v... he saysv smilingk

...Jeally!... I grin from ear to eark

...Desv... he laughsk ...I donMt 'no. if youMwe noticedv but  
IMm into youv Isabelk I thin' I li'e youv a lotk...

5ust as the .ords esca,e his mouthv I smash my li,s on his and  
begin to 'iss him againk

*Fuck going slow!*

*I want him now.*

Ne smile against each otherMs li,s as .e ,ull a,artk I lead the  
.ay u,stairs to my a,artmentv .here I 'no. .e .ill have a good  
timek

*I've found my prince charming.*

# Chapter One Nick

*Who would have thought?*

From day one on the force, I've known that I wanted to have a positive impact, and here I am, about to receive the most significant recognition of my life. It feels very surreal.

On special days like this, I have to wear my Class E, our dress uniform. As much as I despise having to wear it, I am delighted to wear it today.

I look into the mirror of the locker room in the precinct. Everything is perfect, and I smile at myself. I can't begin to explain the tremendous

joy I feel right now. It is a proud day for me. I am set to receive the highest award a detective can receive. I single-handedly took down the biggest drug dealer in the state, along with many other cartel connections. It is safe to say that the streets of Dashington, TACA, will see significantly fewer drugs in the coming weeks. I am honored to receive the special recognition award from the mayor himself. This award means so much to me, not just because it earns me a spot at the top, but also shows my father that I can be successful without being a part of the family's business.

About six years ago, I lost my older brother in a car accident on his way to the airport. She pain is still raw because he was the only family member I could confide in. He never really knew our mother. We lost FESxT DISM YX xB'; R9OSMx9 G

her a few months after my birth. Father never talked about her or how she died, and we knew well enough not to ask.

Our father is a tyrant who ruled our lives with firm iron hands. He was scared of him, pain and simple. My brother was only two years older but very protective of me. He defended me in my father's presence. Growing up in my father's house was hell. He had to be these perfect sons to him. He weren't allowed to be kids and enjoy the freedom that came with it. It was so bad that laughing or even smiling was considered a

crime in the house. According to him, we were lions and we should act accordingly. Any mistake whatsoever, we were doomed. Imagine our joy when he had to go on business trips, and we were left alone with the nanny. She who the house would rejoice. We were terrified of him, still included. I can't even begin to imagine how hard it was for my older brother. Me always took the fall and would be punished severely.

I remember telling Father I wanted to take the police exam, complete the academy, and join the TACA police force. He went all fire and brimstone on me. As a young man in my early twenties, I was scared and couldn't articulate my words correctly. On the other hand, my father articulated all kinds of words. Unhurtful words, called me an ingrate, then threatened me about taking the exam. He assured me that he would make it impossible for me to pass no matter how many times I took it. I almost gave up hope of pursuing a career in protecting lives. That was until my brother stepped up and defended me. He sacrificed himself to our father's business so I could pursue my own dreams of being a cop. Now that he is gone, my father wants me to take over the family business, but I want nothing to do with that. Not only that, I also promised my brother I would not give up on my dreams to favor my father's selfish demands.

:" Mx1xN R10Yx

Now I've missed him. I wish he were here to see me receive this award. I know one thing for sure! he is here, proud of me.

The night before he died, he called me. He sounded much happier than usual. He said a lot of things that night. He told me he met someone and was confident he would spend the rest of his life with her. I believed him because my brother had never spoken about any woman to me. He talked about her for a while and told me I would like her. I looked forward to meeting her, but it never happened. The most important thing he mentioned was that he had found a way for us to be free from our father's tyranny. He didn't give me details. He said we would discuss it in person. Unfortunately, that didn't happen either. I wish our conversation could have been more extended. If I had known that was the last time I would hear

his voice, I–d have cherished it moreA There are so many things I never got to te.. himA I never got to thank him for standing up for me, and I never got to te.. him I .oved him, and he was the best brother anyone cou.d have asked forA ;ince his death, I haven–t been the sameA E huge part of me is gone for .ifeA Shat’s why I bury myse.f in work, to appreciate his sacrilce and to make him proudA

P’reat? Tetective x.wood, you’re hereA Captain wants you in his oqce E;Ez,P the precinct secretary, Tiane, says in her usua. sassy voice, bringing me back to rea.ityA

PIs the program about to start? Is the mayor around?P I 3uestionA

PNo, and noA I’m guessing Captain -ust wants to speak with you before you receive your awardA Congratu.ations on that, by the wayA E huge achievement for you and this precinct,P she smi.es proud.yA

I reciprocate the smi.e before I ejit the .ocker room, .eaving her at the entranceA

I wa.k into the captain’s oqce with -oy and a skipA I rea..y can’t contain my happinessA

FESxT DISM YX xB’; R9OSMx9 ::

P;ir?P I sa.uteA PMeard you ca..ed for meAP

PNicko.ai? z.ease, sit?P Me gestures to the seat in front of himA I sit at once, waiting to hear what the captain saysA Rut he doesn’t

say anythingA

I .ook at him, pu44.ed, wondering why we are in a staring contestA

Fina..y, I speakA

PDhat is it you want us to discuss, sir?P

POh, sorryA De are waiting for one more person,P he says, ro..ing his

chair side to sideA

PDho? If I may askAP Curiosity is getting the best of meA

PXour partner,P he says in a lrm toneA

PFe.ij?P I ask rhetorica..yA

*What does he want with both of us? Are we in trouble? Is this because*

*I have requested a change of partner on several occasions*

now? Fe.ij ;antos was assigned to me as my partner two years ago  
Et I rst,  
I thought it was a good pairing, given that he had a most as  
remarkable  
a record as mine  
Rut after a few months in the lead, I noticed  
that  
we did not share the same core values  
H we were very different  
in our  
approaches  
Me is reckless and calm, which doesn't work  
well with me  
I suspect he is involved in some shady business, but I have not  
had  
the chance to uncover whatever he is into  
De -ust don't get  
along  
Basically, I'm left to lead operations all by myself  
I've  
reported this to  
the precinct several times, but nothing has been done  
Maybe as a gesture of appreciation, the captain wants to grant  
my  
request this one time  
I smile widely, thinking about it  
Mopefully, I get a more  
competent  
partner this time  
De will be able to accomplish so much  
together  
Et that moment, Fe.ij walks in, salutes the captain,  
and ignores my  
presence  
The captain does the same thing  
H he gestures to  
Fe.ij to sit  
beside me  
:" Mx1xN R10Yx

Now that you're both here, I can speak of the new  
development  
P Me looks at us to see if we are following  
I  
nod my head in response, and Fe.ij does the same

There is a situation on the ground that has to be  
investigated,  
P the captain says

*Oh great! Another case.*

*It must be my birthday.*

Unfortunately for you, Nicko.ai, you are very involved,  
P he  
looks at me as he speaks

I'm not following, sir,  
P I state, confused  
I turn to Fe.ij  
H his

attention is on the captain, but his smirk is on his face  
Involved as in how? I question

The captain drops a folder from his desk before  
me; several bags of cocaine and other illicit drugs from your  
previous case are missing from the evidence locker. It has  
been brought to my attention that you might have a hand in it,  
and until you are proven innocent, I don't think you should be  
the one receiving the award today

*What the fuck is happening?*

I open the folder, trying to understand the bomb the captain -  
just dropped on me

I don't understand anything you're saying, sir. This doesn't  
make sense. I am seconds from losing my mind

*Calm down, Nick. Calm down!*

Why would I be involved in the theft of evidence? It makes  
no sense. You know me, Captain. I've been in this precinct  
for seven years. My name is untainted. Why would I wake up  
one day and decide to steal? Someone is trying to set me up.  
I stand to my feet in rage. This has to be a joke? I sound  
pissed and frustrated, which is fine because I feel  
dismissed; I'm not:

ama. I look to Feij, but he seems unwavering. He doesn't  
even attempt to defend me

*Wow!*

Detective Wood? Can you self to order at once? She  
captain commands. I immediately fall back to the chair.  
As I was saying, the captain continues. Santos, you will be  
the one to receive the award from the mayor today. Prepare  
for the event. That will be all.

Feij stands to his feet and salutes the captain before heading  
out

Captain. That is going on. I lowered my voice to level  
with the captain. I consider myself good friends with him  
outside the precinct, so I think I can at least get an explanation  
as to why this is happening

Nick, you should have figured by now that this accusation is  
over my head. Someone from the top wants you out of the  
force. You must have pissed off someone powerful. For the  
love of my family and my  
-ob, I have no choice but to go along with it. Ease, Nick,

don't light me on this, P he says so. emn. yA

*Who could I have pissed off? Could someone in the government be affiliated with the drug dealers? Who is this influential person who wants me out of the force?*

Shen, it occurs to me that the only person who has ever wanted me out of the force is my fatherA

Yy blood is boiling, and I feel like I will snap that man in half if he keeps messing with my life this wayA Dhat type of father goes out of his way to make his child's life miserable2

*What the fuck?*

It seems the captain notices my intense angerA P Nick, please don't do anything stupidA She person wants you out of the force, but I convinced them that it is better to transfer you to another precinct out of state until things coolLA Shat's the best I can do, and believe : Mx1xN R10Yx

me when I say that transfer was no smart taskA Xou still have the opportunity to be a police officer, so don't blow it, please, P the captain pleadsA

PXou realize my father is behind all this, right2P I say, standing to my feet, pacing around the captain's office, trying to keep my cool.A

PI had my suspicions, P he repliesA

PShis is all -ust fucked up?P I shoutA

PDon't do that in here?P he says, standing to his feet to approach meA Plook, NickA Dhy don't you join your father's business and save yourself from all this petty torture he throws youAP

PI can't do that, RightyA Yy brother wouldn't want that for meA I don't want that for myself either, P I say, letting out a deep breath of frustrationA PDhich state have I been transferred to2 I ask, walking over to the chair to take my seatA

PSennessee, but you are not going as a detective, P the captain repliesA

PDhat do you mean2P I ask almost immediatelyA

PXou've also been demoted, P he says in a sad, low toneA

PXou will be serving there at the officer level.AP

PSi.. when2P I ask in frustrationA

PMonesty, Nick, I don't know, P the captain admitsA PShat

was the best offer I could put out for you, buddy  
P This is ridiculous? P I stand to my feet again  
A P I have to go and see my father, P I say  
A P Shanks for your help, Captain  
A P I salute the captain before I head for the door  
A P Be careful, Nick, P the captain says before I open the door to  
leave  
A



# Chapter Two Isabel

“Octavia, Hurry up! We’re gonna be late!” I shout as I open the front door to our home.

“Coming, Mommy,” she echoes from down the hall. I see her running toward me in a few seconds, struggling with her backpack. Her long, dark blond pigtails bounce as she runs. I let out a brief chuckle.

*My baby is so adorable.*

I bend down to help her adjust her backpack. “Did you brush your teeth?” I ask.

“Yes! See!” She opens up her mouth to show me.

“That’s my girl.” I place a kiss on her cheek. She chuckles.

“Second one, Mommy,” she says, her brown eyes sparkle as she turns her other cheek to my face. I kiss her other cheek before standing to my feet. I look around the living room to ensure we haven’t forgotten anything.

“Alright, let’s go,” I say, holding her hand as I lead her outside the house. While I lock the door, she hops along toward the car.

“Mommy, can I sit in front with you?” she asks.

“Not yet, honey. You are still my sweet little gummy bear, and little gummy bears sit in their car seat, which is in the back seat,” I say, walking toward her as I open the back seat so she can climb in.

She gets into the car, and I strap her into her seat.

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“But Mommy, I’ll be Gve soon,” she says conGdently, putting three Gngers into the air. “I’ll be an adult soon,” she states proudly. I laugh at her naivety.

“DeGnitely. But till then, you’ll have to sit in your seat. Okay?” “Okay,” she replies.

“Rreat!” I kiss her on her forehead before going over to the driver’s

seat to start the car and head out.

In a few minutes, we're at Mina's place.

Mina Robinson has been my best friend for as long as I can remember. We practically grew up together. She has always had my back, and I have hers. Mina is the closest person I have to a sister. She is also Octavia's godmother. Mina stood by me when I was pregnant and didn't know what to do. I was scared, confused, and hopeless, but Mina remained strong for me in those moments. She assured me that everything was going to be okay. I don't know what I would have done without Mina and my dad. Both of them held it down for me. Even when my dad passed last year, she stood by Octavia and me. She helped us stay strong. I have no idea what I'd do with my life without her.

Unlike me, Mina finished her degree and bagged a managerial position at the bank. I am very proud of her.

I bring the car to a halt and get out to assist Octavia out of her seat.

Grabbing her backpack, she runs to Mina's front door.

"Aunty Mina! Let me in. Your cupcake is here," she squeals excitedly.

I smile, seeing her excitement.

Mina opens the front door, and her face brightens as soon as she sees Octavia.

"My beautiful cupcake!" She picks Octavia up and showers her with kisses. "How I've missed my baby girl!" Octavia giggles as Mina kisses her as they enter the house.

I grab the rest of Octavia's things from the car and head inside.

"Hey, Mina," I say immediately after I enter the house.

"Hey, girl. How are you?" Mina flashes me a smile, but all her attention is on Octavia.

It is obvious she loves Octavia more than me. Not that I'm complaining.

I walk over to the couch to drop the rest of Octavia's stuff.

"Thanks for doing this, Mina," I say as I face her.

"Stop saying that. She is my goddaughter. Of course, I will help," she smiles her reassurance.

"Aunty Mina, look! I can jump very high!" Octavia says as she tries to jump up on her feet.

"Good job, cupcake!" Mina claps for her, and Octavia smiles

in satisfaction. Her smile always reminds me so much of her father. Thinking about him now makes my heart ache.

*I was such a foolish girl.*

I shake my head, bringing myself back to reality.

“I have to go now, Mina. I don’t want to miss my appointment at the salon,” I say, grabbing my purse from the couch.

“So, what is the occasion? You have a date?” Mina asks curiously, wiggling her brows.

I chuckle.

“Do I have to have a date to look good?; I Fuestion. Not waiting for her reply, I continue, “I want to look at least presentable when I return to work. You know my leave ended yesterday. Monday’s my Grst day back,” I eXplain. “I haven’t had my hair styled in a while. I Ggured I was due.”

“I get you, girl. You go get that hair done so the men can start trooping in,” she says as she moves about in her poor attempt at the salsa.

1\* HELEN BLUME

I shake my head, laughing at her pitiful dance moves.

“Stop doing that! You look stupid,” I giggle.

“Bad word, mommy. You said a bad word,” Octavia cautions me. “Yes! Mommy, bad word,” Mina teases as she continues her awful

salsa.

“Okay, I’m out of here.” I go over to Octavia and kiss her on her

forehead. “Be good to Aunty Mina, okay?”

“Okay, Mommy!” Octavia smiles.

“That’s my baby girl. Rive mommy some sugar,” I say.

Octavia grabs my face with her tiny hands and kisses my cheeks. “Thanks, honey! Bye!” I say, standing back up.

Mina follows me to the front door. “When are you returning?” she

asks.

“As soon as I’m done at the salon,” I reply immediately. “Why the rush? I can have Octavia the whole day. Why don’t you take a breather, do your hair, get a manicure and a pedicure? Enjoy the

outside life,

and breathe,” she says.

“I’ve been wanting to go to that new movie theater beside the Commons,” I say, staring into the distance, thinking of what to do. “There you go! See a movie. Don’t worry9 Octavia and I will have plenty to do. Pust have a good time today, baby girl!” she eXclaims. “Alright. I’ll take you up on your oXer,” I smile. “See you later in the evening then.” I wave at her and head to my car.

•••

The hairstylist Gnishes my hair in under an hour. My wavy brown hair has been redeGned, with some parts cut ox to increase the volume of the loose curls. I love the new conGdent, center-parted hair. It brings my forehead to view, and it is beautiful. I move to the nail section to get my nails and cuticles treated. The nail technician Gnishes by painting my Gngernails in a bright nude color. I am in love with how they look. I pay for my hair and nails at the counter and thank everyone before I eXit the salon.

7eeling conGdent, I walk down the street with my new hairstyle bouncing left and right. I notice a few stares in my direction. It feels good to look good. I walk into a cafe and place my order for an iced coxee to go. I grab my coxee when it’s ready and head further down the street into the park. There is not much of a crowd here. About three families, at most, are sitting in dixerent areas of the park. I sit on one of the park benches, punch the straw into my iced coxee, and sip. Nostalgic memories of 2aris come 8ooding in, and I see his face again.

*Louis.*

How can someone whom I spent just a day with still have such an exact on me, even after so long? I was sure that night that I had found the one for me. He looked at me like he loved me. Even when we made love, it was magical. I can still remember the taste on his lips and how he held my hands as he thrust into me. It was such a beautiful moment that I will always cherish. Because that moment created my beautiful baby, Octavia,

that's what I'll never forget.

The days following that night were the most awful days of my life.

The following day, Louis woke early and made me breakfast in my kitchen—some noodles and poached eggs. I had thought he was a keeper and he was there to stay. I counted myself lucky to have found a man who truly cared. After breakfast, he told me he had to leave for business. He was reluctant to leave but promised to call me before noon and said he would be back by my side that night. I loved the idea—it was exciting. The rush, the passion, the sex—everything made sense then. I couldn't see the red bags right in front of me. I was so blinded.

I K3 HELEN BLUME

waited by my phone all day, awaiting his call, but I got nothing. I gave him the benefit of the doubt that he would arrive at my apartment, but he didn't come. For about a week, I waited—I didn't want to accept that I was a one-night stand for him. I hoped my prince charming would return to me, but he never did.

Weeks later, I discovered that I was pregnant with Octavia by the handsome stranger who swept me on my feet. I never got to know his last name or his address. I only knew he was from D.C. and worked at the White House. The only thing I had of him was the picture we took by the water fountain. Confused, I swallowed my loss and returned home to my dad, finishing my art program. I will forever be grateful for the support of my dad. Although he passed away last year, with Mina here, I didn't feel alone raising Octavia. It does take a community.

I don't know if I'll ever see Louis again in this lifetime, but I am thankful he gave me Octavia.

I finish my iced coffee and head back to my car. I check the time to see that it is a few minutes past three in the afternoon. If I return to Mina's now, she will have my head. She wants me to enjoy myself and have fun on my own. But the truth is, I don't know how to have fun without my baby. I'll have to try today, though.

I drive to the new movie theater, about six to seven minutes away. I enter the theater and get a ticket for the current romcom.

After two hours of balling in tears and laughter, I exited the cinema. The movie was indeed a good watch. Movies like this make me believe that true love does exist.

As I approach my car, A Gentleman walks toward me.

“Hi,” he smiles nervously. “I’m Packson.”

“Hello, Packson,” I say, puzzled.

“This is awkward, I’m sorry. I saw you in the cinema alone, and I was alone. I wanted to come over and join you, but I didn’t want to FATED WITH MY E” “S BqOTHEq K1

seem too forward. My date blew me off,” he pauses. “Did yours stand you up, too?”

“No, I came alone,” I manage to smile.

“Oh!” he chuckles awkwardly. “I’d like to take you out sometime if you wouldn’t mind, miss?”

“Isabel,” I respond.

“Isabel,” he repeats. “That’s a beautiful name.”

“Thanks.”

“Would you be open to going on a date with me sometime?”

he asks again. I can tell he is trying to remain confident.

Usually, I would say no. But I just finished watching a beautiful love story. Who knows, mine might begin here.

“Alright, Packson. Next Saturday, 6 pm. Here at the cinema,”

I say, smiling.

“Alright, alright Thank you! It’s a date I’ll be here. See you then,” he mumbles all his words in excitement.

I chuckle.

“See you!” I wave at him as he departs.

I smile as I get into my car and drive off. In no time, I arrive at Mina’s. Octavia and Mina are doing some sort of karaoke.

Octavia has a huge dark shade, almost bigger than her tiny face, and she plays an imaginary guitar. At the same time,

Mina has on a pink wig as she sings and dances in front of her.

I laugh at the ridiculousness of both of them.

“You look like a clown, Mina,” I said amidst laughter.

“Mommy, mommy, mommy!” Octavia runs up to me to give me a big hug. She removes her glasses so she can kiss my cheeks.

“My sweet gummy bear! I’ve missed you,” I say, showering her with kisses.

She giggles. "I miss you too, Mommy."

KK HELEN BLUME

She releases herself from my embrace and looks at my hair.

She takes a few strands into her hand as she feels them.

"This is pwetty! Aunty Mina, look at Mommy's hair. She looks like a princess," she blushes. "I like your hair, Mommy.;

"Thanks, love." I kiss her forehead.

"This style suits you. You look like a freaking model," Mina says with so much conviction.

"qeally?" I say as I stand to strike dixerent poses for Mina, tilting my head left and right so my hair can bounce.

"Mommy is a mobel!" Octavia says, jumping around.

"It's model, Octavia. Model," Mina corrects her.

"Mommy is a model!" she repeats eXcitedly.

"Octavia and I made dinner," Mina says.

"Oh, wow! Is that true, O?"

Octavia nods her head.

"Rood job! What did y'all make?;

"Spaghetti and meatballs!" Octavia shouts.

"Spaghetti and meatballs? Hummz yummy! That's mommy's favorite."

"Yummy in Mommy's tummy!" Octavia laughs as she repeats the rhyming words dancing around the living room.

Mina goes into the kitchen, and I follow her.

"So tell me, how was your self-care date? Meet anyone fancy?" She wiggles her brows playfully.

I chuckle, 8ashing my freshly manicured Gngers in front of her.

She gasps, "These are lovely." She takes my Gngers into her hand to eXamine them properly. "Now I want to get mine done.;

nowing she's busy eXamining my nails, I casually insert that I met a guy. She drops my hands instantly and looks at me.

"What did you just say?" She asks impatiently.

7ATED WITH MY E" "S BqOTHEq K

*I thought she wouldn't hear me.*

"Well, I said I may or may not have secured a date for neXt Saturday," I say, smiling sheepishly.

Mina squeaks and jumps up excitedly. “See why you need to go out more often. Stop wasting this beauty indoors. I’m so excited! What’s his name? Where did you meet? How did it happen? Tell me everything,” she says, restless from excitement.

“I’ll tell you, but please, let’s eat while we talk. I have to get home early to tuck Octavia to bed and do some laundry,” I say. “Aiiit!” she says, smiling as she walks to the pot. “I’m listening.”

I tell her everything about Packson’s nervousness, what he said, his excitement, everything. I relay it all to Mina. She is thrilled about this date, and I know she will remind me about the date every day.

We sit down to eat our meal, chatting about random stuff.

Octavia joins our discussion sometimes, feeling like an adult when she speaks. It is so cute.

About an hour later, gisting and playing with Mina, Octavia and I pack our things into the car and head home.

Once we reach the house, I send Octavia off to brush her teeth before she goes to bed. She comes back a few minutes later, showing them off.

“Lovely!” I say to her, giving her a quick kiss on the lips.

We head to Octavia’s room, which used to be my former room when my parents were still alive. Now that they are both gone, I did some renovations and moved to their bedroom, restructured mine for Octavia, and the last room, since it is a three-bedroom flat, is used for my closet. Other things remain the same since they are still in good shape.

I tuck Octavia into her bed, kissing her forehead.

“Would you like for me to read you a bedtime story?” I

ask.

K HELEN BLUME

“No! Tell me a story about Daddy. I want to hear about Daddy again.” Her request suddenly takes me aback, but I never hide anything from my baby. “Tell me about how you and Daddy met,” she giggles. I reciprocate with a smile.

“Alright, gummy bear.”

I tell her a fairy tale about my meeting with Louis. This is how I want her to know her father. He is a strong man who swept



her mother on her feet.

After the story, just when Octavia starts to drift off to sleep, she asks a question I have been dreading.

“Mommy, when is Daddy coming home?”

There is an awkward silence in the room as I don't know what to say to her. By the time I finally come up with a reasonable response, she has already fallen asleep. I kiss her on her forehead and whisper good night.

# Chapter Three Nick

*I might as well just go ahead and kill this man with my bare hands.* He is testing me! I don't know how long he thinks he can push without retaliation. This might just be my last straw. I have always tried to overlook his brutal, petty behavior, but not this time. He is going to get a piece of my mind today. I am not holding anything back. I drive furiously down the road to my father's office. I am trying to keep calm, but I can't.

*This is my life, my career, he's destroying!*

I won't allow that shameless old man to throw away my life. I don't understand why I need to join him in his business. I want to cut out my own niche. My sane father would have no problem with that. Apparently, mine is insane.

My father started his steel and power company in Washington, D.C., before I was born. His business started small but grew exponentially beyond its initial potential, making him one of the most influential entrepreneurs in the United States. He is a direct contractor to the entire United States, supplies steel all over the country and beyond, and is one of the country's best power utility companies. To be sincere, he deserves all the accolades he can get because he is a tirelessly hardworking man. He is always on his toes where his job is concerned and doesn't take it lightly. That is why he has risen far above

his peers in the business. He has infiltrated the country's public and political sectors by sponsoring their campaigns, among many other things. For his business dealings, he brought his entire family on board. His brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles, and aunts. They are all involved in the business in some way. Now, he wants to drag me in. I will never allow that.

Several times, he has tried to meddle with my life and affairs. It is frustrating, to say the least. He has burnt bridges that could favor me. This ruined my relationship with the only person I felt a connection to after my brother. Right after I

Finished in the police academy, I met someone, Tabitha. Our relationship was almost instant. We clicked right off the bat. Meeting someone who understood me and was ready to be a part of my life was remarkable. Tabitha and I shared similar interests and goals. It was a relationship I would never take for granted. Thinking about her now brings flashes of her elegant smile and puppy blue eyes. With Tabitha, I found love, and I was sure she was the one I would spend the rest of my life with.

My father saw that I was finally happy and decided to rip her away from me. He would deny it to this day, but I know it was his doing. He threatened Tabitha and her family. He was ready to run their small restaurant chain to the ground, rendering her family helpless. It was challenging for Tabitha to get a job, which is very unusual for someone with her degree and achievements. Everywhere she went, it was as if she had been blacklisted. Nobody wanted to open doors for her and risk being in my father's black book. That is how much power and influence he has in this town. Feeling crippled and frustrated, Tabitha had to break it off with me and moved far away from L.A. I haven't heard from her since.

I was outraged and torn apart. I couldn't function for several weeks. I tried to figure out why my father hated me so much, but I couldn't understand.

I was a coward then, and I regret that I couldn't stand up for myself and Tabitha. But not this time. I will fight this man until my very last breath. He is evil!

*Pure evil.*

I reach the front of his office in about 45 minutes. I get out of the car without wasting time and enter the elevator without acknowledging anyone on the way. In no time, I reach his office door. I walk down the hall into his office, fuming. My hands tremble, and my palms sweat from impatience and anger. I see him in the office, talking on his phone and laughing like he doesn't have a care in the world. Seeing him this way triples my rage, and I just want to rip the phone from his hands and smash it on the floor.

I do not wait for him to get off his call before I begin my rant.

8How dare you...8 I walk close to him, almost sure I will beat him up. He looks lost and confused.

8xon't you fucking act dumb with me right now!8 I shout.

8Lon! Need I remind you that this is a place of business...

Ltop the shenanigans at once,8 his voice is thick, calm, and commanding. He doesn't look in any way fa;ed.

8I am not stopping anything until you give me a reason,8 I respond, praying that I don't buckle.

8Xreason for what...8 he 9uestions innocently, staring at me like a lunatic on the loose.

This man may have the whole world fooled, but not me.

*Two can play this game, mister!*

8Dhy did you do it... Dhy would you jeopardize your son's future because your ego is bruised... xoes it make sense to you...8 I 9uestion him without any Olter to my words.

F3 HB2BN 62EWB

8Dhat are you talking about... Dould you please just calm down and shed some light on whatever you want,8 my father's tone still remains calm.

8"ou wanted to get me sacked and revoke my recognition award,8 I e-plain.

8Can you hear yourself... "ou sound highly delusional. Dhy would I stoop so low to engage in something so trivial... I'm a businessman. I have more important matters to handle than sabotaging your little award. Lomething you know little of,8 his tone is very condescending. He stands and pushes me aside gently as he walks past me to his li9uor cabinet to pour himself a glass.

8Dould you care for some, son...8 he asks with a smirk. This man is really pushing it. I'm seconds close to pinning him on the wall and punching him s9uare in the face.

8No, I don't want your damn alcohol,8 I shout in frustration.

8Luit yourself then,8 he says as he takes a sip and returns to his chair. 8Is there anything else you want me to do for you, son...8 I'm speechless as to how unwavering this man is. *Does he not understand my anger? Does he even feel empathy at all?*

8Tell me, just tell me why...8 my voice drops. I sound almost defeated.

8Dhy what...8 he asks again, trying to play innocent.

8Dhy are you messing with my career, my life...8 I shout exhaustedly. I am fighting back tears at this point.

8Ltop this foolishness!8 He stands to his feet. 8”ou don’t have a career. Dhat you do is mainly a0hmm0 a hobby. I’m just trying to open your eyes to see how Ockle being a Osh in someone’s pond is. 7ne day, you’re swimming and enjoying lifeG the ne-t, you are caught for dinner. I wanted you to see that there is no place for you there, so you would return home where you won’t be the Osh but the pond owner,8 he smiles as he e-plains.

’MTBx DITH W” B?‘L 6X7THBX F”

I can tell he has made a lot of sense to himself, and I’ll admit, he sounds very convincing. The problem is that he doesn’t understand that some people do not enjoy being into-icated with power. Lome people just want to live decent lives, removing rotten eggs from sociU ety.

8Mnd you think I won’t be a Osh in your pond, too...8 I question.

8Dhat are you talking about... “ou own the pond. Mll this will be in your name when I’m gone.8 He gestures to the room. 8I would never treat my Sesh and blood like a Osh. Never! “ou have my word.8 *I am already sick of this fish analogy.*

82isten, son, why don’t you just tender your resignation and return to your empire where you will be king... Lave yourself the humiliation of being demoted to a common oAcer in the middle of nowhere,8 he says as he stands before me, adjusting my uniform collar. 8This color doesn’t look good on you anyway.8 He returns to grab his glass from the table.

*Wow!*

8I have no words to say to you now, but I know I’ll never work for you. I would rather be stuck in some podunk town in the middle of nowhere for the rest of my life,8 I say, giving him one last glare before I turn my back to leave. There is no point arguing with him anyway. He is a lost cause.

8”ou’ll be back, son. Wark my words,8 he chuckles as I e-it his oAce. *What an asshole!*

I get into my car and drive around town until I calm down.

There is no hope with that man. I know that now. Mfter nearly

an hour of driving, I go to a small convenience store to get a six-pack of beer and drive down to the cemetery where my brother is buried.

I stare down at his gravestone.

*'Louis Elwood'*

HB2BN 62EWB

*'1990-2017'*

*'A brother and son'*

8xamn it, Louis! Why did you have to go so soon... Now, I've got

nobody here on my side. I miss you, brother, 8 I say, opening a beer can as I sit by his grave.

There is a long silence as I just down my beer and stare into the horizon, remembering days when Louis and I were little. Those were the simple days. It is funny to think that we were never best friends growing up. He would always find a way to annoy me because, deep down, he thought I was responsible for our mother's death. As a child, I hated him because he wasn't there for his baby brother, and he always found a way to get on my nerves. That was what I thought until a day came when I was bullied at school, and he came to my defense. I asked him why he protected me when we got home, and he told me he was the only person entitled to bully me. His words made me laugh so much that he joined in. I think that was the day things shifted, and we began to be not only brothers but also friends. We became so close people thought we were twins. We ran with it for a while. We were called the 'Elwood Twins.' We were unstoppable.

*Good old days.*

8I miss you, Louis. I really do, so damn much. I don't know how I will survive these coming days without you. 8 I allow the tears to fall down my eyes without care. 8'ather has been on the loose lately, and I don't know if I have the strength to annoy him or defend myself. I wish I had you here to protect me. 8 I pause and take another long pull from my nearly empty can. I let out a short chuckle. 8He wants me to come to work for him, so he had me demoted. I tried confronting him, but he went on about some Osh pond analogy. 8 I laugh out loud this

time. 8'ish pond! Can you believe that...8 I say.

'MTBx DITH W" B?L 6X7THBX q

86rother, I don't know when I'll see you ne-t because I have to move to reenville, Tennessee,8 I say, trying not to cry again.

8Courtesy of... "ou guessed right. 7ur father,8 I chuckle.

82ong way from home, right... I know. Lo, let me just be here in this moment with you, hoping that where you are is better than where I am,8 I say, resting my head on the gravestone.

8I promise you, 2ouis, I'll Ond a way to return on top. No matter what it takes, that man will not have the last laugh.

# Chapter Four Isabel

“Are you not going to tell me about your date?” Mina’s voice echoes through the phone in a teasing tone.

“Well, there is nothing exciting to tell. It was terrible!” I reply as I use my hand to dramatize in the air, even though I know she cannot see me.

Today is Sunday. As is our usual tradition since my dad’s passing, Mina spends time with Octavia and me at the house, or we go out together. It is our form of a girls’ date. Mina couldn’t make it down this week, so we are playing catch-up over the phone.

“What do you mean terrible?” Mina asks dramatically. “I don’t know. He was very cringy,” I try to explain.

“Hello! It is me you are talking to, Isabel. You’ve got to do better

than ‘he was cringy.’ Give me the full details, woman!” I shake my head instantly at her words.

Speaking of dramatic, Mina is it.

“If you were here, I would probably have given you details,” I say in an attempt to guilt her for not showing up.

“Ohh! That’s how it’s going to be, huh?” she questions defeatedly.

I went on a date with Jackson yesterday. The man I met at the cinema last week. To be honest, I was looking forward to the date because it had been a while since I went on one. I dressed pretty and was delighted to get to know him. Sadly, the date didn’t go well in any way. His demeanor was very different from our encounter at the cinema. He sounded very corny and acted like it was a privilege for me to be on a date with him like he was a celebrity or doing me a favor. He spent most of the time talking about himself and his accomplishments. It was a cringy night, and I don’t think I will be going on any date soon.

“Stop whining, Mina. I will tell you about it whenever you come over,” I reassure her that she’ll get details eventually.



“Octavia and I have to go do some shopping for the week. She has been asking to go all weekend. Do you need anything from the mall? I can get it for you and drop them on my way.

How does that sound?” I ask her.

“jah! I think I am covered for now,” Mina responds. “I know Octavia will be kind of bummed that I am not tagging along. Can you apologize for me?” Mina asks in her singsong pleasant tone.

“Alright, girl. I got you. I don’t think she will mind that you’re not coming. She is Lust very excited to go to the mall. But I’ll let her know,” I assure Mina.

“Mina, are you sure you don’t need me to get anything?” I ask.

“jo, I’m good for now. If I need anything, I’ll grab ‘em after work on Monday,” she replies.

“Alright then, Octavia and I are going to head out. Will you come over for dinner later?” I question, staring at my phone, expecting a response.

“jah, I can’t. I’ve got a man over,” she giggles. “We’ve been on each other since dawn, and I don’t think we are stopping anytime soon,” she whispers excitedly.

“Mina Robinson! You dirty, dirty girl!” I squeak. “We’ll have to talk about this later. Uet me leave you to enLoy your man,” I say dramatically.

3P HEUEj BU4ME

“Can I talk to Aunty Mina, please?” Octavia appears before me, fully dressed and ready to go to the mall. She Lumps and stretches her hands toward the phone. “;retty, please!”

“Aunty Mina is busy now. She’ll talk to you when we return from the mall, okay?” I say, whispering to Octavia.

“Octavia sends her greetings!” I turn to the phone.

“Alright, girl! Bye!!”

“Bye, Aunty Mina,” Octavia shouts.

I drop the call and face my baby girl.

“Are you ready to go?” I ask.

“Yes! It’s shopping day!” Octavia says excitedly.

“Alrighty, baby girl, let’s go shopping,” I say as I grab my purse and lead Octavia to the car.

In the car, we sing songs as we drive to the Commons.

Shopping days are Octavia's favorite. She is always excited about everything. 4p until last year, my dad always loined our shopping days. Anything Octavia wanted, he would get it for her. He spoiled her, no doubt about it. no matter how much I cautioned him that he spent too much on her, he would say, "She's my only grandchild she deserves to be treated like the princess she is." I couldn't come in between Octavia and her grandfather. Their love for each other was so strong it scared me when he fell ill. We knew the inevitable was coming, but Octavia didn't understand it. So many nights, she would cry, wanting to see her grandfather, but he was in the hospital. Getting her to leave was a struggle when we visited because she always wanted to be by her grandfather's side. When he passed, I was scared for Octavia because we had lost the only male figure in our lives.

Surprisingly, Octavia didn't react negatively to his death. While I fought back tears telling her that he had passed, she was mature about it, telling me she knew he was with the angels but would continue living on in our hearts. Her strength gave me the strength to carry on.

She told me they had discussed how Grandpa would join the angels soon, so she wasn't so sad.

Being Octavia's mother is the best thing that has ever happened to me, no matter the circumstances surrounding her creation. I love her so much. There is so much wisdom packed inside such a tiny person.

"We are here!" Octavia squeaks excitedly as she bounces up and down in her seat. "Mommy! We are here." Her loud, excited voice pierced my ears.

"I hear ya, baby girl. Calm down," I laugh softly while finding a spot to park. I turn on the ignition as I get out to grab my daughter and our shopping bags. Octavia always insists I bring one because her grandfather always carried one. He would always say spending extra money on new ones is outrageous. We can always bring our own.

"Mommy, let me carry the bag, please!" Octavia pleads while lumping up and down.

I hand over the shopping bag as she continues to hop excitedly as we enter the mall.

“Do you think we should get these?” I ask Octavia while I admire the enormous strawberry-scented candle before me. I heard no reply from Octavia. “Gummy Bear, what do you think?” I ask again, lifting the candle from the shelf to show Octavia. I see no trace of her as I turn toward the direction she stood in a few seconds ago. “Octavia?” I call out. I put the candle back on the shelf before walking further down the aisle. “Octavia!” I keep calling out my daughter’s name. I still don’t see her as I walk around the mall.

I can’t help the panic I begin to feel. My palms suddenly start to itch and sweat. I try to maintain my cool, but I don’t even know when tears gather around my eyes. I ask everyone I come in contact with if they’ve seen my daughter as I describe her to them. “Excuse me, have you seen a little girl pass around here? She is about four years old with a dark blond ponytail. She is wearing a pink t-shirt and white shorts,” I question with a shaky voice. Most of them show compassion on their faces, but none of them claim to have seen her. My heart is beating in the most terrifying way I’ve ever experienced. A sweet middle-aged woman advises me to report to the mall’s security. “They should be able to help you \*nd her faster,” she says. I thank her as I head to one of the security stations.

*Where did Octavia run off to? Did someone grab her? Oh God! I am so stupid. I should have held her hand.*

This has never happened to me before. I don’t even know what to

do in this situation.

“Excuse me! please, I need your help,” I say to a tall, dark, middle-aged guard at the mall entrance.

“How can I be of help, ma’am?” He asks with a smile on his face. “I’m looking for my daughter.” My voice is shaky now, and I can’t

hold back the tears. “We were in the candles section of the department

store. One minute she was there with me and the next I didn’t

see her  
again. I walked around the mall searching for her, but I  
couldn't find  
her. What if someone has taken my baby girl? Please, Officer,  
help me  
find my child," I plead as tears stream down my eyes. The  
thought of  
somebody grabbing Octavia and never seeing her makes me  
panic. "Don't worry, ma'am. We will get her back. She most  
likely  
Lust  
wandered off. Happens all the time," he says, trying to  
comfort me. FATED WITH MY EX'S BROTHER 3...

"Let's go to the back room to check out the cameras. I'll alert  
other security officers to keep their eyes out," he assures. "Can  
you describe your daughter and what she is wearing so they  
know what their focus is?" he asks as he leads me toward the  
backroom entrance.

As I describe Octavia to him, the corner of my eyes catches  
the back view of a child who looks like Octavia, holding a  
man's hand.

"Give me a second, officer. I think I see her," I say as I walk  
off, not even waiting for the officer's response. I walked in the  
direction where the girl and man walked off. The officer  
follows me.

As I reach the aisle, I am sure my child is holding hands with a  
stranger. With tears in my eyes, I call out for my daughter.

"Octavia!" She turns around, and her eyes immediately light  
up as she sees me.

"Mommy!" she exclaims as she lets go of the stranger's hand  
and runs up to me with her arms wide open. I pick up my  
daughter in an embrace as I wrap my arms around her. "Oh my  
god! Octavia! You gave me quite the scare there. Where did  
you run off to?" My heart is relieved as I envelop Octavia with  
kisses all around her face.

"I'm sorry, Mommy. I wanted to get you a surprise gift like  
Daddy used to, and I got lost." Octavia tries to explain.

"Oh, my sweet gummy bear!" I say as my eyes cloud with  
tears again.

The stranger who was holding Octavia walks towards me, and

my heart suddenly drops. It is like time stands still as my eyes roam all over him. He is tall and very muscular. He's got biceps like a god. His cultured, neatly trimmed, and styled dirty blond hair and crystal golden brown eyes make his face look perfect. He flashes his evenly shaped and distributed white teeth in a smile, and suddenly, his face looks familiar.

"Hi," his deep, husky masculine voice fills the aisle.

"Hi," I reply, wiping my tears with my free hand. Just before I say anything, he begins to explain.

"I saw her wandering by herself and asked if she needed help. She asked me where she could buy a nice necklace for a dollar," he chuckles.

*Even his voice sounds homey and familiar.*

"I wanted to bring her to the security station, but she insisted she buy her necklace first. I tried explaining that the necklace cost more than that, and she asked if I could lend her the money. I was just walking her to the security stand over there." He points to the security post by the entrance. "I'm glad you found her." He smiles, staring at me as I stare into his eyes for a long time. It feels like our eyes are communicating with each other. My heart begins to race.

*What's going on?*

It feels like I know him. Maybe my eyes are playing games with me.

"Mommy, he is my friend!" Octavia giggles on my shoulder. I turn my attention to my daughter and peck her cheeks before returning to the good-looking, familiar stranger.

"Thank you so much for helping my daughter," I say sincerely.

"I really appreciate it."

"It is no problem," he says, still smiling.

"I think my job is done here," the security officer says.

"Oh!" I turn to the officer, suddenly remembering he followed me. "Thank you, Officer. I appreciate your help," I say. I turn to Octavia, "Tell the officer thank you."

"Thank you, Officer," she giggles before she buries her face into my shoulder.

"You're welcome," he says before walking on.

I turn back to the stranger. "Thank you again. We're going to get back to our shopping. Hopefully, I don't lose her this time," I try to make a joke.

He chuckles.

### FATED WITH MY EX'S BROTHER 3

*He is so dreamy.*

Just as I put Octavia down so she can walk for herself, he starts to speak. "Hmm Could you tell me where a grocery store is around here?" he asks.

"Go to Tony's Groceries. Tony's is a Nordable, and they have a great selection of fresh produce," I assure him.

"I am new in town, so I don't know the lay of the land yet," he says with a shy look on his face.

*Interesting. Is he single?*

"Oh really? Are you here on business, or are you just passing through?" I inquire. I feel my face brightening up in curiosity.

"Hmm.. let's say business," his smile widens, showing off the two dimples at the sides of his cheeks.

*For god sake! Why is he this handsome?*

*Should I offer to take him to Tony's?*

*Should I ask him on a date?*

*Isn't that too forward?*

*He is just here for business. I doubt he would be interested.*

*There is no way a handsome man like him is single. No way!*

I shake my head subtly to get rid of the thoughts in my head.

"I see! Welcome to Greenville. I hope you enjoy your stay," I say, hoping my face doesn't turn red when he smiles again. I then go on to describe the grocery store to him. Octavia and I say our goodbyes and continue our shopping.

*Damn! He's fine.*

# Chapter Five Nick

My olcias drnt way at thin ,eI preci,ct i, thin ,eI toI, in toway'  
a,w f wo,.t k,oI hoI to ueesb f wo,.t thi,k f ca, retgr, to mei,x o,  
patrosb f have,.t wo,e that i, as-ont niD yearnb

f -awe peace Iith the ntg,t -y uather pgssew' wirty an it Ianb f  
npe,t the Ieeke,w nettsi,x i,to thin resativesy n-ass toI,b ft in no  
wiqer— e,t uro- HbCb f xgenn that the cri-e rate here liss me a  
Bgarter'iu that'ou Ihat f Ian gnew to mack ho-eb f k,oI that.n -  
y uather.n psa,b Te Ia,tn to urgtrate -e' no f xive gp a,w rg, to  
hi-b Te in that pettyb jgt an so,x an f sive' that in ,ever xoi,x to  
happe,b f have a psa, uor -y siue a,w career' o,e thatRn xoow  
uor -e' a,w f liss ntick to it ,o -atter Ihatb f k,oI the weck in  
ntackew axai,nt -e' mgt f.ss pgss throghb

Ghe preci,ct here Ian ki,w e,ogxh to hesp -e Iith the apart-e,t  
hg,ti,xb f wo,.t k,oI hoI f Iogsw have Bgicksy ,avixatew xetti,x  
a, apart-e,t aso,eb Ghe apart-e,t in n-ass mgt wece,tb ft han a  
machesor.n paw vime' a,w f.- wixxi,x itb f Ian tos w the  
necretary at the preci,ct hespew -e xet thin apart-e,tb f haw ,o  
iwea that Iogsw me part ou their Aom wencriptio,b  
Eexarwsenn' f have to tha,k Ihoever it in Ihe, f xet to the  
ntatio,b f -ake a -e,tas ,oteb

f psa, to xet there earsy ni,ce itRn the drnt wayb f Ia,t to -ake a  
xoow i-prennio,b Wow o,sy k,oIn Ihat they.ve mee, tosw  
amogt -y ngwwe, tra,nuerb

f ross oq the nBgeaky mew that ca-e Iith the apart-e,t a,w  
wanh i,to the mathroo- to nholerb f, ,o ti-e' f.- wo,e nholeri,x  
a,w wrennewb f have,.t xotte, a g,iuor- yet' no f chone a Ihte  
nhirt a,w msack pa,tn to sook olciasb f co,niwer a tie' mgt f  
thi,k it liss sook too ann—kinnyb

J, -y Iay ogt the woor' f xram a, appse uro- a moIs i, -y  
kitche,b f -ake it ogtniwe the mgiswi,x meuire f ntart to -g,ch  
o, the appse' a,w an f wo' thogxhtn ou the meagtiugs sawy f  
naI at the -ass i,vawe  
-y -i,wb Ihe Ian ntg,,i,x Iithogt tryi,xb Ter i,,oce,t mroI, eyen

that nparksew axai,nt the -ass.n ?gorence,t sixhti,x sookew -  
axicas a,w e,cha,ti,xb f wo.,t thi,k f haw nee, a,yo,e that  
ponnennew ngch meagty meuoreb lthe Ian i,weew  
mreathtaki,xb f.- ngre nhe han a, i,crewimse heart' too'  
Agwxi,x my her resatio,nhip lith her wagxhterb Ter hgn—  
ma,w in a uortg,ate -a,b f Iinh f haw a so,xer co,vernatio, lith  
herb f wiw.,t eve, xet her ,a-eb “gnt the ,a-e ou her chisw’  
Jctaviab ft.n ngch a pretty ,a-eb Mayme f.ss rg, i,to the- no-  
ewayb

f nta,w my the niwe ou the roaw’ Iaiti,x uor -y Lmer to pgss  
gp’a,— other -e,tas ,ote to -akeb f ,eew to xet a carb Ghe cam  
pgssn gp a,w ntopn meniwe -eb f xet i,’ a,w le wrive to the  
ntatio,b

f, the nhort 52—i,gte wrive to the ntatio,’ f xot a,other’ asmeit  
mrieu’ togr ou the toI,b f nta,w i, uro,t ou the mgiswi,x’ taki,x  
i, the ntrgctgreb ft sookn dtti,x uor a socas posice ntatio,b f.- a  
sittse mit heni— ta,t to e,ter the mgiswi,xb Ghe other posice -  
ixht ,ot me Iesco-i,xb ftRn harw to nay hoI tixht ou a xrogp  
theyRss meb ToI wo f weas lith thatz

!Xsloowz! Y ntra,xer cassn -y ,a-eb f tgr, i, the wirectio, a,w  
nee a uessoI posice olcer’ promamsy i, hin sate uortien lith a  
mix osw meer messy hoswi,x a max ou wo,gtn a,w a ?at ou  
coqee’ n-isi,x at -eb

*Very on-brand.*

U; TXPXN jPLMX

f sook at hi-‘ pg33sew an to hoI he k,oIn -y ,a-eb jgt f -a,axe to  
n-ise ntissb

*It’s all about making an excellent first impression.*

!Ti... f.- Yspha’! he nayn an he csi-mn the nhort ntairn to Aoi,  
-e o, the top pave-e,t ou the ntatio, e,tra,ceb

*Alpha? What a unique name.*

f ntare at hi-‘ Io,weri,x iu f nhogsw i,trowgce -ynesu axai,  
ni,ce he asreawy k,oIn -y ,a-eb

ft nee-n he ,oticen -y co,ugnio,b !Jh... Ho,.t lorry’ -a,’ le ass  
k,oI yog.re co-i,xb 6eopse raresy xet tra,nuerrew to thin  
preci,ct’ enpeciassy yog,x -e, sike yogb lo le Iere ass cgriogn  
a,w revielew yogr dseb! Te n-isen i,,oce,tsyb



*They've all gone over my file. Is that a good thing or a bad thing?*

f.- ngre they liss have uor-ew their opi,io,n manew o, reawi,x  
thatb Ghe uact that fR- g,wer i,ventixatio, i, HbCb in  
promamsy co—o, k,oIsewxeb

*Shit!*

!Ho,.t Iorryb Se k,oI yog wiw,.t wo itb! Te ,oticen the uear o, -  
y uaceb

!ToIz! f ank' ngrprinewb

!ft.n rare uor no-eo,e Iith a, i-peccamse recorw sike yogrn to  
wo no-ethi,x wg-m sike nteas uro- their ntatio,b ft -aken ,o  
ne,ne'! he nayn wra-aticassy an he xentgren to -e to Iask Iith  
hi- i,to the ntatio,b

!Oog -gnt have pinnew oq no-eo,e Iith poIer'! he Ihinpernb

!f ngre wiw'! f nay Iith a naw n-iseb

!Ho,.t Iorryb f.- the monn arog,w here“ iu a,yo,e trien to -enn  
Iith yog' set -e k,oI'! Yspha nayn' patti,x -e o, -y nhogswerb  
f chgckse at hin re-arkb

f thi,k .Ho,.t Iorry. in hin xo—to phraneb Te han ope,ew every  
ne,te,ce Iith itb

Se e,ter the ntatio, sommy“ it in very mrixht' ,eat' a,w Bgietb  
Ghere in maresy a,yo,e there eDcept Iho' f.- xgenni,x' in the  
receptio,intb Y

-iwwse—axew Io-a, Iith no-e ma,xn o, her uoreheaw a,w  
xsannen Iith a, i,te,ne ura-eb

!he sookn nleet' her uanhio, choicen ,otIithnta,wi,xb

!he n-isen at -e an noo, an nhe netn her eyen o, -eb

!My... My..... Pook Iho Ie d,assy have here'Hetective Tot  
!tove...! nhe nayn an nhe roa-n her eyen ass over -y mowyb

*Hot Stove?*

*What Why?*

!Ho,.t Iorry' pay her ,o atte,tio,' a,w nhe.ss seave yog aso,e'!  
Yspha Ihinpernb

!Mi,w yogr wa-, mgni,enn' Eo,,y...! nhe csapn mack at hi-b  
*His name is Ronny. Not Alpha?*

!Ho,.t yog have a Aom to wo' osw sawyz! Yspha xsaren at  
herb

!Ghin in eDactsy Ihy yog ntiss sive i, yogr -o—y.n mane-e,t'!  
nhe nhootnb

*Oh!*

!fx,ore her'! Eo,,y or Yspha nayn to -e an he encortn -e wol,  
the hassb !Se have a -eeti,x to xet tob!

!Meeti,xz f thogxht f Ian ngpponew to -eet Iith the captai,  
drntz! f Bgentio,b

!Te Iiss me at the -eeti,x“ yog ca, i,trowgce yogrnesu to  
everymowy thereb TeRn the chieu' my the Iay'! he nayn  
cangassy an he ope,n the woor to the mried,x roo-b

Ghe roo- in dssew Iith g,iuor-ew olcern neatew' co,verni,x  
Ihise they Iait uor the -eeti,x to mexi,b Ghe Ihose roo- tgr,n  
toIarwn -y wirectio, an f Iask i,b

UU TXPXN jPLMX

!Tey Eo,,y' Iho wiw yog mri,x Iith yogz Ghe ,eI copz! a sawy  
olcer anknb

!Yre yog Eo,,y or Ysphaz! f ank' tgr,i,x to Eo,,yb

!Ho,.t set hi- dss yog Iith sienb TeRn ,o Ysphab Te in ni-psy  
Ma-a.n Eo,,y'! a wark—nki,,ew olcer i,terrgptn Iith hin co—  
a,w— i,x weep voiceb

*Oh wow! Mama's Ronny? That's brutal.*

f.w sike to k,oI the ntory mehi,w thatb

!Ihgt gp' Herek...! Eo,,y nayn' nog,wi,x e-marrannew a,w  
hgrt' csearsy over the Aoke asreawyb

Ghe roo- ergptn i, sagxhterb

!Tey' f.- Ilcer Ywa-nb Oog -gnt me XsIoowb! Ghe wark—  
nki,,ew olcer ntretchen hin ha,w ogtb f nhake hin ha,wn dr-syb

!Oen' f a-! f n-ise' sooki,x arog,w a,w ack,oIsewxi,x the other  
neve, olcern i, the roo-b

Igwwe,sy' the woor ope,nb Y rather tass a,w very mgist -  
iwwse—axew

-a, e-erxenb Xveryo,e i, the roo- ,oticen a,w cassn the-nesven  
to orwer' a,w there in a ngwwe, nise,ceb f.- xgenni,x he in the  
chieub Te taken o,e sook at -e meure he npeaknb

!Woow... XsIoow' yog.re here... “oi, -e'! he mecko,n o, -e to  
uossoI hi

*I guess what they say about news traveling fast in a small town  
is true.*

f nsolsy Iask uorIarw to the uro,t ou the roo- to Aoi, the chieu  
o, hin powig-“ ass eyen uossoI -e' a,w it nee-n they are  
Agwxi,xb ft

-aken -e very nesu—co,nciognb f try to nhake oq -y nsixht  
pa,ic an f take nosace i, Ihat Eo,,y naiw earsier amogt the-‘

dxgri,x that f a- mei,x Iro,xsy accgnew i, HbCb “gnt an f tgr,  
arog,w to uace the agwie,ce auter reachi,x the uro,t ou the  
roo-‘ the woor Ihere f ca-e i, ope,n gpb Y sawy Iith the -ont  
peruect dxgre f have ever nee, Iaskn i, esexa,tsy carryi,x no-e  
dsenb Ihe han her heaw mgriew i, thone dsen an nhe  
approachen the uro,t ou the roo-b Ihe ngwwe,sy sookn gp’ a,w  
f recox,i3e herb Ihe in the sawy uro- the -ass... My uace  
nhiutn Bgicksy uro- nhock a,w i—ewiatesy sixhtn gp i, a n-  
iseb Ihe asno sookn nhockew’ mgt nhe recovern a,w  
reciprocaten the n-ise meoure uocgni,x mack o, the dsen a,w  
ha,wi,x o,e over to the chieu meoure nhe xoen to nitb  
My eyen uossoI her to her neatb Ihe in Agnt no meagtiugsb  
Ihe han the type ou meagty that Iogsw co—a,w every roo-‘  
mgt f wogmt nhe reasi3en itb ToI ca, no-eo,e me thin  
eqortsensy meagtiugsz Ter wark hair in packew i, a mg,’  
nhoIi,x -e her peruect ovas uaceb f ntare at her uor too so,xb f  
cogsw,t -ake ogt Ihat the Chieu haw Agnt naiwb  
!Xsloowz! he cassn’ mri,xi,x -e ogt ou the hyp,onin that  
sockew -e o, thin meagtiugs Io-a,b f ntare at hi- i, co,ugnio, an  
he ntaren mack at -eb  
!Yre yog xoi,x to i,trowgce yogrnesuz! he Bgentio,nb

*Oh*

!Iorry’ Captai,bbbg—8b Chieub Iorry’! f -gtter g,wer -y  
mreathb Ihaki,x -y heaw’ f Iask gp to take ce,ter ntaxe a,w  
i,trowgce -ynesu to everyo,eb  
!Woow -or,i,xb f.- Nickosai Xsloow“ f xot tra,nuerrew uro-  
Sanhi,xto,’ HbCb’ a,w f sook uorIarw to Aoi,i,x yog i,  
e,uorci,x sal a,w orwer here i, Wree,visseb! f sook to the chieu  
to nee iu he Ia,tn  
-e to co,ti,geb Te woen,.t sook sike he in xoi,x to ntop -e a,yti-  
e noo,b !f k,oI -ont ou yog have hearw amogt the assexatio,n  
axai,nt  
-e asreawy’ a,w f.- xsaw yog ass chone to mesieve i, -e eve,  
thogxh yog wo,.t k,oI -eb! f pagne an f sook arog,w the roo- to  
nee the olcern n-isi,x a,w ,owwi,xb !Gha,k yog ass’ a,w f sook  
uorIarw to Iorki,x Iith yog’! f nayb f ngwwe,sy re-e-mer no-  
ethi,x f ,eew to aww Bgicksyb !Y,w h—8 f preuer to me  
cassew Nickb Gha,kn axai,’! U9 TXPXN jPLMX  
f nay’ n-isi,x nhysy an f wence,w the powig-b f,te,tio,assy’ f  
xo to nit meniwe the sawy uro- the -assb

*She smells so lovely*

The n-essn sike a -iDtgre ou save,wer' ronen' a,w se-o,nb ft  
nog,wn sike a Ieirw co-mi,atio,' mgt it in a, e,cha,ti,x nce,tb  
The ?anhen -e a n-ise meuore nhe co,ti,gen to take woI, ,oten i,  
her dseb f xgenn nhe in the necretary to the chieub f sook over  
at her d,xer“ nhe han ,o ri,x o,b

*Isn't she married?*

Ghe chieu xoen o, to mrieu the tea- uor amogt tle,ty -i,gten -  
ore meuore Ie are ass win-innewb

!f.- Nick' ”f nay to the sawy' hopi,x nhe tessn -e her ,a-eb lthe  
ntaren at -e Iith her weep ha3es eyen' a,w f wo,.t k,oI lthat to -  
ake ou thin ngwwe, eDcite-e,t that dssn -y mowy'itRn mee, no  
so,x ni,ce f uest thin Iayb

!f.- fnames'! nhe n-isen an nhe ntretchen her ha,w uor a  
nhakeb f take her nout ha,w i,to -i,e' a,w it in Iar-b Henpite  
that' f have xoonemg-pn g,wer -y nhirt uro- the togch ou her  
ha,wb

!FossoI -e“ set -e xet yog dDew Iith yogr g,iuor-“! nhe nayn an  
nhe nta,wn to her ueet' xatheri,x the rent ou the dsenb

!Ca, f hesp Iith thatz! f ank an f ntretch ogt -y ha,w to xram the  
dsenb

!No' wo,.t Iorryb Gha,kn' thogxh'! nhe n-isen axai,b

The seawn -e ugrther woI, the hass to a ntore—sike roo- that in  
no-elhat warkb lthe trien to ?ick o, the sixht' mgt it Io,.t ntay  
o,b

!Co-e o,' -a,'! nhe ncoswn the nIitch meuore tgr,i,x to -eb !Ho  
yog have yogr pho,e Iith yogz! nhe anknb

!Oeah'! f nay' mri,xi,x it ogt ou -y pocket a,w tgr,i,x the ?  
anhsixht o,b

!Gha,kn'! nhe nayn an nhe Iaskn to a socker to pgss ogt a  
mra,w—,eI g,iuor- uor -eb Neatsy iro,ew a,w uoswew i, a  
csear maxb

The ha,wn it over to -e an Ie Iask ogt ou the roo-b !Ghe -e,.n  
roo- in woI, thereb! lthe poi,tn to the woor at the e,w ou the  
hassb !Oog ca, xet cha,xew thereb J,ce yog.re wo,e' report to  
the chieuRn olce over there'! nhe nayn' poi,ti,x to the other  
niwe ou the hass meuore win-inni,x hernesub

f d,inh i, the -e,.n roo-‘ wrennew i, the mroI, posice g,iuor-b f  
xgenn f sook xoow i, itb

Yn f approach the chieu.n olce' JIcer Ywa-n uro- earsier nhoIn

gpb !SoI... Oog Iere hiwi,x thene xg,n g,wer,eath that nhirt  
meuoreb OogRre hgxe' -a,...! he nayn' patti,x -y micepn  
meuore co,ti,gi,x woI, the hassb  
f chgckse an f ope, the woor to the olceb Ghe woor ope,n to a  
-i,i olce Ihere fnames in neatew' typi,x aIay o, her co-pgterb  
Ihe in Ieari,x hgxe xsannen that -ake her sook cgteb Ihe  
woen,t ,otice -e“ nhe miten o, her pi,k sipn an nhe typenb f  
asno xsi-pne the chieu.n -ai, olce throgh the ope, msi,wn  
neparati,x fnames.n Iorkntatio, uro- the monnb Ghe chieu in  
asno mgriew i, wocg-e,tn o, hin tamseb f ntare at fnames uor a  
sittse so,xer meuore cassi,x her atte,tio,b  
!Ti' fnamesb!

Ihe sookn gp hgrriewsy uro- her ncree,' ngrprinew to nee -e  
an her eyen pop ope,b f catch her eyen roa-i,x ass over -eb Ihe  
nta,wn to her ueet a,w approachen -eb !Oog sook xoow i, the  
g,iuor-‘! nhe nayn as-ont i, a Ihinperb Ihe Iaskn to a,other  
woor i, the na-e olce a,w k,ocknb

Ihe ope,n the woor nsixhtsy to set the chieu k,ol f Ian there'  
a,w he xentgren uor -e to co-e i,b Te wrissn -e uor as-ont a,  
hogr' mgt Ie npe,w -ont ou the ti-e wincggni,x ogr uavorite  
uootmass tea-b Igr— prini,xsy' Ie are moth ua,n ou the  
Wia,tnb Ghe chieu in a, eDtraorwi,ary U TXPXN jPLMX

perno,b Te re-i,wn -e ou jissy' -y captai, mack ho-eb Yuter no-  
e ti-e' he cassn o, fnames to xive -e a togr ou the ntatio,  
meuore f ca, d,assy Aoi, -y cosseaxgen i, the ntaq roo-b

fnames a,w f e-mark o, ogr togr an nhe nhoIn -e the wiqere,t  
roo-n i, the ntatio,b

!Gha,kn uor the other way'! nhe ngwwe,sy naynb  
f tgr, to sook at her“ nhe nee-n too neriogn'ti-e to cha,xe that  
gpb

!Tghz Shat wayz f wo,.t k,ol Ihat yog.re taski,x amogt'! f  
teaneb

Ihe sookn at -e i, winmesieu an nhe setn ogt a chgckseb  
*Even her tone is beautiful.*

!fu yog wo,.t re-e-mer' the, there in ,o ,eew uor -y  
appreciatio,'! nhe vosseyx rixht mackb

!Io' yog are ,ot xrateugs f protectew yogr wagxhterz! f nay'  
hoswi,x

-y chent wra-aticassy an iu f have mee, hgrtb

!he nlatn -y ar- psayugssyb !Oog ca,.t me neriogn'! nhe  
xixxsenb  
f Aoi, her i, a mrieu sagxhterb !Oog.re Iesco-e'! f d,assy nayb  
!lee' that Ian,.t no harw'! nhe Aokenb  
f ,ow -y heaw i, axree-e,t meoure f cha,x e the topicb  
!ToI in nhez!

!he sookn at -e' pg33sewb  
!Oogr wagxhter' Jctaviaz!  
!Oeah' Jctaviab !heRn Io,werugsb!  
!lgch a meagtiugs ,a-e'! f ntateb  
!fk,olb My waw xave it to her'! nhe nayn progwsyb  
!Ghat.n ,ice'! f nay' ,owwi,x -y heawb  
Ghere in a -o-e,t ou nise,ce an Ie Iask arog,w the ntatio,b  
f have a sot ou Bgentio,n to ank herb

*Is she married?*

*What's her relationship situation like?*

*Would she want to go on a date with me?*

FYGXH SfGT MO X4.1 jEJGTXE U

f k,ol ,othi,x amogt thin Io-a,' mgt it nee-n -y nogs cassn uor  
herb

*This is weird, right?*

!he han a wagxhter' a,w nhe in -arriewb f hixhsy wogmt the  
cha,cen ou her mei,x ni,xseb f nhogsw ntay csear ou herb f.- a  
,eI -a, i, a ,eI toI, a,w wo,.t Ia,t to me o, a,yo,e.n hate sintb  
f set ogt a weep mreath f wiw,.t k,ol f Ian hoswi,xb  
!Shat are yog thi,ki,x amogtz! nhe i,Bgirenb !he ntopn to  
nearch

-y uaceb Pooki,x co,cer,ew' nhe anknb !Yre yog okayz!

!Tgh8 h—bb yeah8 yeah' f.- okayb “gnt xoi,x over thi,xn i, -y  
-i,w' f -a,axe to n-iseb

!Ghi,xn sikez! nhe ankn cgriognsyb

!Nothi,x neriogn'! f prene,t cangassy' mgt nhe woen,.t sook  
co,— vi,cewb

Ghere in ,o Iay f.- tessi,x her f Ian tryi,x to dxgre ogt Iheter  
nhe Ian ni,xseb

!T—8 f Ian Agnt thi,ki,x amogt Ihere to mgy a wece,t car over  
here'! f sieb Gech,icassy' it in ,ot a sie“ f.ve mee, thi,ki,x  
amogt that ngmco,nciognsy ass wayb

!Eeassyz! nhe ankn eDcitewsyb

!Oeah'! f ,owb

!Oog.re i, sgck... Y urie,w ou -y wawRn oI,n a hgxe car  
weasernhip woI,toI,b Te han a sot ou xoow carn thereb f.- ngre  
yog liss nee no-ethi,x yog sikeb fu yogRw sike' f ca, wrive  
yog there -ynesu8 nay' auter Iork—inhz! nhe naynb

*Did she just offer to take me?*

*Awesome!*

!Oog Iogsw wo thatz!

!Ju cogrne' yog hespew -e Iith Jctaviab ft in the seant f ca,  
wo'! nhe eDprennenb

2 TXPXN jPLMX

!SoI... Gha,k yog no -gchb!

!Oog.re Iesco-e'! nhe nayn meuore ope,i,x o,e -ore woorb !Y,w  
santsy' thin in the i,terroxatio, roo- '! nhe n-isenb f peek i,to  
the roo- to nee the netgpb

ft in,.t mawb

!Oog are uree to Aoi, the rent ou the olcern i, the ntaqroo-b f.-  
ngre they.ss me Iaiti,xb f have to xet mack to Iorkb! The

dwwsen Iith her d,xern an nhe npeaknb Igwwe,sy' nhe nee-n  
no-elhat nhyb !lee yog at the csone ou the wayz! nhe anknb

!Oog met...! f Ii,k at herb f xsi-pne her n-isi,x meuore nhe

Bgicksy tgr,n arog,w to seaveb

# Chapter Six Isabel

“Call me pathetic all you want, but I couldn’t help it! Girlfriend, this man is extremely hot. I’m sure if you see him, you will understand why I had to over,” I say over the phone to Gina. I am trying to convince her to help me pick up Bianca Mia from daycare after she is done at work. But she is playing hardball.

“Let me get this straight? you offered to take this man to the car dealer, yeah?”

“Yes,” I reply, already tired of her mild condescension.

“What happens next? Would you be willing to throw yourself at this stranger, cop?” she questions.

“I’m not throwing myself at anybody, Gina. I’m just trying to be friendly. He is new in town, and he needs help,” I explain.

“But, you’re just trying to be friendly to the insanely hot man? For convenience.”

For a few seconds, the line is silent. I don’t say anything because I can’t figure out if Gina is being serious or if she’s messing around.

Gina breaks the silence.

“So, you’re not willing to say anything? Would you mean you will abandon your child because of a man?” she questions.

“Don’t abandon! What are you talking about? Girl! What are you trying to do? Don’t you try to kill me? Didn’t you tell me to put myself out there?” I sound a bit annoyed and somewhat frustrated. “F U; U S L; 2 g U”

I don’t understand why she is suddenly talking to me because I choose to help someone. He seems like a decent guy, and having a friend in him would be nice. So one can deny he is a good-looking man, but I don’t have any ulterior motives.

*Sure about that?*

Gina bursts into laughter suddenly.

“What’s funny?” I question irritated.

“I’m messing with you, girlfriend,” she continues to laugh. “If you



could have only seen how I struggled to keep a serious tone. I was on the struggle bus. At one point, I thought you wouldn't bite, so I went harder, and it was worth it," she giggles.

*Can you imagine?*

"Wow piece of shit! I believed you. Drkh!! Wow're insane," I shout. Gina burst into another round of laughter. "I got you, didn't I? Wow

were beginning to sound like a pissed teenager. Wow should have seen me hump for Hoy from the moment you told me to pick up Betty Mia because you have a date."

"It's not a date, Gina!"

"Booay. Call it whatever you want. It is still a date," she teases. "Shut up," I scold.

She continues to cackle for another full minute.

*I am tired of this girl's sass. But I love her, though!*

"Dren't you at work? Did you hear all that noise?" I ask. "Well, I'm the manager? I can do what I want," she states proudly. I shake my head at Gina's chaotic behavior. I mean, I know she

can't see me.

"I have to go. He is heading towards me now," I say.

"How're the sexy kids?" she giggles. "Gee, sure you don't drool too

much over him."

"Shut up! Lye," I say jokingly and end the call.

ADRUN qIRF gW U3'S LJBRFUJ '4

"Fey, 5icO," I say, smiling as soon as he hugs me in the parking lot.

I'm trying so hard not to drool over how hot he looks in this uniform.

*Yup! I'm taking advice from Mina.*

He reciprocates the smile.

"Fope you didn't end your call because of me?" he asks, his brows furrow with concern.

"Bh, not at all. It was just my friend. I asked her to pick

BetaMia up from her daycare,” I say.

“Wow now we can reschedule to the dealer for another time if you have to pick up your daughter,” he states, still looking concerned.

“It’s fine. Gina can handle her. She is BetaMia’s godmother,” I say as I lead him to my car.

“Okay then,” he says. I can tell he is smiling.

...just as soon we get into the car, I notice him looking around my vehicle.

“Not bad, huh?” I ask.

“Not at all,” he responds, impressed.

“Yeah, I got it from the same dealer we are going to now,” I state proudly.

“Awesome!”

The car is silent as I race my brain for something to talk about. I don’t want to ask questions that are too personal. ... just before I say something, he beats me to it.

“I hope your husband doesn’t mind you driving me to a car dealer’s shop,” he asks. I turn to look at him. He seems unsure and guilty for a second there.

I let out a brief chuckle.

“I’m not married, silly,” I reply in a low tone.

’o FU;U5 L;2gU

I can swear I caught a bit of a smile when he heard me say those words.

*Why did he smile? Is he interested in me?*

*Did I see it wrong?*

“I’m sorry, I kicked you were,” he says, sounding apologetic.

“It’s fine. I get why you’d ask,” I assure him before turning to focus on the road.

“How about BetaMia’s dad? I’m sorry for prying. You don’t have to answer,” he says, his concerned frown back on his face.

I must want to stretch out my hand and help straighten the frown folds on his face.

I remember that I had not said anything, I shake my head briefly and smile.

“It’s fine,” I pause for a second before continuing. “He is not in the picture. I don’t know his whereabouts.” I try to kick the tears building in my eyes. No matter how hard I try to get over

Louis, it still hurts when I talk about him. I mean, why am I so  
hung up on a one-night stand? Why would a one-night stand  
hurt this much?

*Because it wasn't a one-night stand for you, you fell in love;  
there is nothing wrong with that.*

The voice in my head comforts me.

I use the back of my hand to wipe the building tears away  
from my eyes before they drop.

I notice someone stare at me? He has an apologetic look of  
compassion as he speaks, "I'm sorry that happened to you."

He sounds truly sincere.

He smells the air of a true protector, and I'm not talking about  
the uniform. He has a good heart. I can feel it.

*That was what you said about Louis, too.*

The voice in my head tries to remind me.

"Don't fall too fast. Get to know him first."

*That's what I'm trying to do. I think we will be great friends.*

I shake my head to focus more on what someone is saying. "I think  
he is a douchebag, if you ask me. Who abandons a lovely

woman and their child? It's insane," He sounds irritated. *He  
thinks I'm lovely!*

"Thank you," I whisper as I manage to smile. I try to hide my  
face,

but it has suddenly gone red, so I change the topic.

"So, how was your first day at the station?" I ask.

"Hmm" it was nice," he doesn't sound believable.

"I have a feeling you're hiding something," I say, narrowing  
my eyes

as I stare at him.

He chuckles.

"Don't get me wrong, it was fine. Everyone was friendly,  
especially

you, and I'm grateful for that. Still, I don't think I can adjust  
from being a detective working some high-profile cases in a  
huge metropolitan city to a regular patrol officer in a much  
smaller community if you know what I mean.

“Weah” I heard about that. qhat happenedY” I asO, concerned.

“;onk story” It’s Hust my father? he is punishink me. ItXs a lonk story, but someday IXll tell you,” he says.

*Aww, he wants to share his story with me. But why would his father want to punish him?*

5ow, I’m curious and resist asOink a strink of followEup juestions.

“Drikht then, I looO forward to future conMersations,” I smile brie6y. “I Onow GreenMille is a small town with far fewer people than N.C. qe are Hust about 4z,zzz, and thatXs it. Wes! ItXs slowEpaced and juite diverent, but Hust try and taOe it a day at a time. If you need any help whatsoever, eMeryone at the station is ready to help. qe are one bik happy family oMer here,” I looO toward him, and he nods in approMal. ”“ FU;U5 L;2gU

“Weah, you all seem pretty close,” he says.

“It’s a small town? eMeryone Onows eMeryone and is friends with them,” I kikkle. “qould you belieMe Jonny and I krew up toketherY qe were neikhbors and classmates in elementary and hikh school,” I state.

“Same Jonny at the precinctY” 5icO looOs shocOed and confused.

Fe looOs cute.

“Wes,” I chucOle likhtly, not understandink 5icO’s shocO.

“qow, I thoukht he was in his midEforties when I saw him this mornink. 5ow you tell me you are the same ake.

2nbelieMable!K

“AortyY” I burst out laukhink. “Jonny isn’t eMen thirty yet.” I cannot control my laukhter because of how innocently concerned 5icO looOs.

“Rhat’s wild!” he says, Hoinink me in my laukhter.

“;ooO, weXre here!” I say as I turn into the dealership and parO.

qe spend almost an hour koink bacO and forth with gr.

Jodriko, the car dealer after 5icO -nds a car he liOes. Fe must haMe a lot of money for him to be able to avord such a luxurious Mehicle. IXm sure he was paid well in N.C.

Br he comes from a wealthy family. Fe mentioned his dad punishE ink him by sendink him to a small town. Bnly rich

folOs do that.

gr. Jodriko kiMes us a fair price for the car because of his relationE ship with my late father. Rhey were close friends when he was aliMe. I miss their usual banterS on football nikhts at my house.

5icO maOes the down payment for the car? gr. Jodriko promises he can come to ket it in two days because all documentation would haMe been completed by then. qe thanO him and are soon on our way bacO into town.

Ds we driMe bacO throukh town, I show 5icO some stores heXll need and decent restaurants he could eat at. gy Mehicle suddenly feels liOe a tour bus as I show him around the beautiful town of GreenMille. qe ADRUN qIRF gW U3'S LJBRFUJ 'P

continue to haMe casual conMersations as we driMe throukh diverent places. 5icO is a hilarious kuy. It is almost unreal how smooth our conMersation is. It doesn't eMen seem liOe weXMe Hust met. It is liOe we'Me Onown each other for a lonk time.

*Sounds familiar?*

*Hold your horses, woman!*

"I'm sorry about the loss of your father," 5icO suddenly says out of

nowhere.

I looO at him pu88led.

*I never mentioned anything about my dad's death.*

*How did he know?*

"Fow did you OnowY" I juestion in a low tone. Rhe atmosphere in

the car suddenly kets serious.

"Jodriko, the car dealer. Fe addressed your father in the past tense.

Rhat's a kiMen," he explains.

I let out a brief chucOle for a moment. "I must constantly remind

myself that you are a detectiMe. Dn awardEwinnink one at that," I tease,

tryink to maOe likht of the conMersation.

Fe chucOles, too.

“Fe passed away last year. qe Onew it was koink to happen, but it still hurts. BetaMia and I miss him daily,” I say, -khtink bacO tears. “I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“RhanOs,” I 6ash him a smile, and he reciprocates.

qe continue to driMe in silence for a while akain. Aeelink uneasy

with the silence, I decided to turn on the radio. ;ucOily, my faMorite

music of all time comes up. 9gaOink gemories of 2sK by eith 2rE

ban. I’Me loMed the sonk since it came out. ;ouis loMed the sonk, too. It

was one of the thinks we had in common. Fe sank it to me that nikht

in my tiny apartment in aris. D smile immediately appears on my face ’FU;U5 L;2gU

as I bekin to sink alonk. Imakine my surprise when 5icO Hoins in and sinks.

“Wou Onow this sonkY” I asO, klad to hear him sink it.

Aor some reason, 5icO doesn’t striOe me as a music loMer, so it is fun to see that he has kood taste in music.

“Dre you Oiddink meY Rhis has always been my Ham,” he says exE citedly. “I’Me been a fan of eith foreMer. I loMe country music. Chris Stapleton is another faMorite of mine,” he says proudly, 6ashink his beautiful teeth in front of me.

“qow! Rhat’s awesome.” I stop talOink, and we continue sinkink until we reach his apartment buildink.

Fe has a fantastic sinkink Moice.

I brink the car to a halt.

“I belieMe we are here,” I smile.

“It Hust clicOed. Rhat means you picOed out the apartment for meY” he asOs.

“Weah, I did. qell, it’s my Hob, especially for transferred o7cers,” I reply. “I hope you’re enHoyink it so far.”

“It’s a nice place. RhanO you Mery much, Isabel. RhanO you for eMerythink today. I had a nice time hankink out with you. Wou’re really kreat,” his kolden brown eyes brikhten in sincerity. I stare at him for a lonk time, admirink his beautiful

face.

I might be tripping, but why does he look like you?

*I think I'm just projecting.*

I clear my throat and swallow before I reply.

"You are most welcome. I am at your service, newest member of the police force," I tease.

He shakes his head as he laughs. He opens the door to let himself out of the car.

ADREN QUINCY'S LITTLE '

"You're something, Isabel," he mutters. "Remember home safe."

He waves as I start the car engine, smiling at him.

"See you tomorrow," I say, biting my lower lip shyly.

"You bet," he waves, making me blush again.

I put the car in drive before he can see my red cheeks.

# Chapter Seven Nick

A month and a half has passed since I moved to Greenville. I must say, it has been quite the experience. Coming here, I had no expectation beyond doing my job, which is protecting the good people of Greenville and keeping a low profile. I never expected to make friends, let alone 'nd someone I like.

Colleagues at the station have become family. I don't think I got this close with anyone except the captain from my previous precinct. Isabel has been my favorite highlight in this town. We have gotten close. She is such a phenomenal woman. I respect her drive and resilience. She has been through so much, but she won't allow herself to be a victim or be pitied. I admire how she chooses to be positive no matter what. She is a keeper. She cherishes and cares for the people around her, especially Hctavia. It makes me wonder why Hctavia's father left. 'e is such a fool. I still don't know the circumstances that led to her raising her child all by herself, but I do know whoever that man is, he played himself because anyone would be lucky to have Isabel in their life.

We've become friends as I've gotten to know Isabel these past few weeks, but I can't deny this crazy attraction I feel for her. I am enjoying my friendship with her but want to take it to the next level. But I don't know if she wants that, and I don't want to jeopardize our friendship or professional relationship. I've been debating whether or not to lay TAEDM OIE' YX DRWS F6HE'D6 1"

the cards on the table, so to speak. She would probably think I'm crazy. I should be patient and see how things play out.

As suspected, the crime scene in Greenville is almost non-existent, and it's beautiful. Everyone cares for each other. There is this strong bond of community here, and it makes our jobs as police officers easier. I thought I would hate the slow pace, but there's something extraordinary about it.



IWm not on patrol today, so IWm at the station with 6onny and Adams, who are also on desk duty. 6onny and Adams are the closest friends I have around here. I love their unique relationship. It is a severe love-and-hate relationship. Ehey constantly throw jabs at each other, but at the end of the day, theyzve got each otherzs back no matter what.

?Nick; Xou hear what I saidL? Adams asks.

?’uhL? I ask, oblivious to whatever discussion the guys are having. I have spent the last twenty minutes stealing glances at Isabel from the open blinds of the staU room. She is focused on her computer, and it is sexy to see her look so serious.

*How can someone be this gorgeous?*

I ask myself this every day I set my eyes on her. She is just so eUortlessly beautiful. Ehere is no other way to describe it.

Ohen she stares at me with her daring, soul-piercing haBel eyes, I can barely keep my cool2 my heart races for no reason, and I want to wrap her in my arms and kiss her plump, glossy lips. I play it out in my head all the time. I would grab her face and hungrily crash my lips onto hers and show her my passion for her.

?Mude; Are you here at allL? 6onny questions, staring at me, looking confused.

?’uhL? I ask again.

?I know what this is,? Adams says with a sly smile.

?OhatL? I sit upright, reluctantly pulling my attention back to them. ?Ohat are we talking aboutL? I ask.

?Xou are into Isabel, rightL? Adams asks.

?No.. no.. not at all. IsabelL OhatL EhatWs craBy,? I stutter. Adams and 6onny almost burst out in complete laughter but settled with chuckling.

?Mude, you should see how red your face is,? 6onny says. ? Xou like her.?

?I mean, we see you sucking up to her every day. Not to mention how much you keep looking in her direction every other minute,? Adams reveals.

*Oh shit! They know.*

?Is it that obviousL? I whisper.

?’eck yeah;? they chorus.

?Ohat do you think I should doL? I ask.

?Ohat are you talking aboutL Ask her out like a normal

person? Adams says.

?It is not that easy,? I state.

?Do you want to go out with me sometime? It is not a hard phrase to say. ?How is it not easy? Adams asks.

?What? All I need to say? I question.

?Oh, yeah. You guys are already friends. It shouldn't be complicated.? Adams assures while ?onny nods by nodding his head.

?So, I should ask her out? I ask, smiling, already feeling pumped from my guys' motivation.

?Yes,? Adams smiles.

?Yes;? I repeat excitedly.

?But keep in mind she might turn you down. She always turns people down,? ?onny says.

*Way to boost my confidence.*

TAEDM OIE' YX DRWS F6HE'D6 14

?Shut up, ?onny;? Adams thunders. ?This is exactly why you still live in your mama's basement.?

?I was trying to prepare him for the possibility of a negative outcome,? ?onny defends.

?...ust shut the hell up;? Adams says.

?It seems you folks have nothing to do. Adams, go check out what Gabriel is up to on the 97th. ?onny, organize your station. Nick; You once now;? Chief says, showing up at our doorway.

?Yes, sir,? I reply, immediately standing up and following him back to his office.

I smile at Isabel upon entering his office, and she reciprocates before I enter the chief's main office.

?Sit, Nikolai;? he commands.

*What's going on? Am I in trouble?*

*I hope I'm not being transferred again. I won't take it lightly with my father if that's happening.*

The chief sits and drops a ?le on my side of the table.

?Nick, I need your help with this case? it is old. It has been a real headache for the precinct. Nobody has been able to close the case, given your expertise and experience as a detective. I want you to put it to good use for me,? the chief says.

Oh, a relief; I'm not being transferred. I take a deep breath

and pick up the file before me. I flip through the pages. It is a homicide case. The exciting thing is that it happened in a place where everyone was present, but the killer was never found because everyone had a strong alibi.

*Hmmm... interesting.*

"Alright, sir, I will go through it and get back to you," I say, standing to my feet.

"Thank you, Nick," he says. "If you need other information relating to the case, you can check the archives room."

"Okay, boss." I salute him playfully before exiting the room. I walk over to Isabel's desk. She doesn't look as busy as she was a few minutes ago.

"Hey."

"Hey, Nick," her face widens in a smile.

Seeing her smile melts my heart every time. Since Eabitha, I don't think I have been this interested in another woman.

"How is it going?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"Going good. I'm 7—8 done with tasks on my desk," she joyfully states.

"That's nice; I will need your help," I say.

"Really? Ooh, what?" she inquires.

"Chief told me to work on a case, and I will need all the evidence and reports from archives. I will need your help to sort them," I explain.

"Hmm, that's no problem. Call me anytime you need me," she smiles.

I can't help but reciprocate her beautiful smile.

"I'm heading to the evidence locker now. Would you like to join?" I ask.

"Of course; I can't wait to see the detective at work," she teases.

"Alright, I will meet you down there. I just need to grab something at my desk."

"Okay," she says, standing up to her feet.

I head over to my desk. Bonny is busy arranging his table. It is a huge mess.

"Hey, Bonny," I whisper.

"He moves closer to me. "What's up?"

"I asked Isabel to help me out with an assignment. How do you

think it is a good time to ask her out? I question.  
Bonny stares at me for a minute, shaking his head before he speaks. "It's funny a good-looking man like you has no ribb whatsoever." "I bet. What's that?" I look at him, confused. "Hh, man; how old are you again?" he chuckles. "...ust ask her; MonWt put too much thought into it. Xouzve got this," he hypes.

"Izve got this," I repeat. "Ehanks, Bonny," I say before dashing down the hall to the evidence locker.

I meet Isabel at the entrance<sup>2</sup> she is waiting in her skin-hugging blue jeans and a soft peach dress shirt. Nothing screams sexy casual like this. And she has a notepad pressed against her chest. I can't stop saying how beautiful she is. She is truly ready to play detective.

"It's about time," she says.

She opens the door to the evidence room and lets us in.

"So, what case are we working on?" she asks as soon as we enter the locker.

"It's a homicide case. According to this," I flip open the document given to me by the chief. "It happened late October last year at Gain Fell pharmaceuticals," I explain.

"Hh; I remember that. It was a big buBB around town.

Everyone was talking about it. I was very surprised the body was never found. It was a complex case."

"Now we will find the body and nail the killer," I say, sounding optimistic.

"Ehat's ambitious, and I love it," she squeaks.

"Oell, I don't want to let the chief down."

She looks very excited about this, and I can't wait to hear her opinion on the evidence.

We spent the next four hours going back and forth between the evidence locker and archives, trying to find clues or slip-ups that may have been missed in previous investigations. We settled to review the deceased colleague's statement, and we've been watching a recording of the colleague's account of the incident for about an hour now. It is becoming frustrating because all of their stories check out. It is bizarre that a murder was committed in a building, and in less than an hour, neither the body nor the culprit was found. The only evidence to prove that there was a murder is the excessive pool

of blood on the floor.

I steal glances at Isabel as she watches the videos with rapt attention. She would make a good detective.

'ey, can you rewind that? I tell Isabel.

Oait, did you hear something? Isabel asks, plugging the earphones further into her ears to listen. She rewinds the clip.

Mid you hear that? I ask Isabel again.

'ear what? She questions, looking puzzled

Ohat she said, I say, standing to my feet as excitement 'lls my heart. I think we've just caught our killer.

I don't understand. How did you come to that conclusion? she asks curiously, looking back and forth between me and the laptop on the table.

Oow; how didn't I catch on to this earlier, I say with a big smile.

Are you going to tell me? The suspense is killing me, Isabel frowns.

Look at the timeline, Isabel? the recording was made before the lady had been pronounced dead. His colleague of hers kept using was to describe her past tense, I explain.

Past tense; like she knew already that her colleague was dead; her face brightens up at the revelation of this.

Exactly, I state.

But that's not enough reason, Isabel's excitement drops.

It seems like it, but that's not all. Look at this statement. I open one of the files on the table. She worked in lab '9, closest to '9, where the lady was murdered. If anything, this is enough evidence to bring her in for questioning.

So, we did it? she looks at me with a wide smile.

Yes, we did, I respond, chuckling as I straighten up.

Yes; Oith the excitement, she jumps up and lands in my embrace.

*Oh boy!*

I wrap my arms around her as I sniff her heavenly scent, which is intoxicating. I hold on to her because I cannot let go. She is so warm. She feels like home. She stays in my arms for a while. Reluctantly, I break away from the embrace as I stare into her eyes. She doesn't take hers away from me. For the first time, I see how dilated her pupils are, and I know she feels what I feel, too. She bites her lower lips. She has never looked

sexier than at this moment. I want to kiss those lips so badly.

*Do it!*

I lean in in an attempt to kiss her. I see her swallow hard like she's nervous, but she closes her eyes, expecting my lips against hers.

*This is my moment!*

Farely reaching an inch to her lips, the archives door comes %ying open.

Shit;

Oe detach from each other quickly as we turn to face the door.

It is the chief.

?Ohat are you folks still doing down hereL I thought youWd gone home,? he looks at us suspiciously.

?Any progress on the caseL? he asks.

?Xes, sir, I think weWve found our culprit,? I say, smiling.

?Good job, Nick; Good job, both of you,? he commends with a huge smile. ?Now get out of here. ItWs late. OeWll pick it up tomorrow, he says, nodding at us. ?Goodnight.? 'e turns and takes his leave.

?Goodnight, sir,? I reply.

*Thanks for ruining our moment.*

I turn to look at Isabel2 she is already packing up the scattered table.

?3et me help with that,? I say.

She continues to pack without replying or looking at me. I join her, rearranging all the boxes, staring at her occasionally. Ehe atmosphere seems tense, and I donWt know why.

*I thought she wanted the kiss, too.*

*Should I say something about it?*

*Should I apologize?*

*It is not like we kissed.*

I let out the breath I was holding. I guess I have to say something.

?uhP Isabel, listen.? She looks at me for the 'rst time since the boss left. ?I donWt want any tension between us. Ye trying to kiss you was wrong. I was in the moment and clearly wasnWt thinking straight. I apologize. I still want us to be friends,? I say, searching her face for a reaction.

*No, I don't. I want to start a relationship with you.*

?Xeah, I understand. It was a mistake,? she replies, nodding

her head.

*No! It wasn't! I still want to kiss you.*

'Yeah, I guess so,' I say in a low tone.

'It's nothing, don't worry about it,' she flashes a half smile. 'I have to get going. See you tomorrow!'

'Yeah, tomorrow,' I manage to say, feeling completely dejected despite our major discovery in the case.

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I watch Isabel exit the room. I just want to walk up to her and kiss her, but I guess I need to let it go, for now at least.

# Chapter Eight Isabel

“Mommy! Mommy, wake up!” I hear Octavia’s persistent voice from my sleep. Slowly, I open my eyes, but they burn. I shut them immediately. There is a banging in my head like houses are being demolished. It hurts so bad. I feel awful.

*What is this?*

*Did I come down with something?*

“Mommy, open your eyes!” Octavia cries out.

“I’m coming, sweetie. You’ll have to give Mommy a minute,” I say

as I gently place my hand on my forehead to feel my temperature. Holy cow! I’m boiling.

“Mommy, I’m hungry,” Octavia starts to whine.

“Sweetie, please, give me just a minute. Mommy doesn’t feel so

good,” I say as I slightly open my eyes to grab my daughter’s hand, stopping her from pulling me.

“Are you sick, Mommy?” Octavia asks, looking at me with pitiful eyes.

“I think so,” I bring her hand to my forehead to feel my temperature.

“Mommy’s hot,” she exclaims. “Do you want to take a bath?” she asks, concerned.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be up in a bit.” I manage to smile at her.

“I’ll take care of you, Mommy,” she says in her sweet, tiny voice. FATED WITH MY EX’S BROTHER 71

“I know, dear,” I pull her close to me in an embrace and plant a kiss on her forehead. “Thanks, my love.”

I lay in bed with Octavia for a few more minutes before I muster the strength to stand up. I check the alarm clock by my bed; it’s past ten. I must have slept through the alarm this morning. If not for Octavia waking me up, I would still be asleep. I brace myself to keep the room from spinning as I stand.



*What in the world is wrong with me?*

I felt perfectly 'ne when I went to bed last night.

*Maybe I have the flu?*

I hold on to Octavia's hand as she leads the way to the kitchen. I open the fridge to 'nd something for Octavia. I don't have an appetite. I just want to go back to bed and sleep. I don't have the energy for anything else.

*Holy shit! Work!*

There is no way I can go to work in my condition. I'll have to take the day off and rest, but I need to call my boss. Wait, 'rst things 'rst, feed Octavia. I grab a slice of bread and put it in the toaster. When it pops up, I scoop some peanut butter and spread it on the toast. I pour some juice into a cup and put it on the table for her. Once she begins eating, I return to my room to get my phone and call the chief. He gives me the go-ahead to stay home today and tomorrow. I could not be more thankful to that man. He is one hell of a compassionate leader.

*What am I going to do about Octavia?*

There is no way I can drive her to daycare in my current state. I walk back to the kitchen to check on Octavia. She is happily consuming her toast. I dialed Mina's number.

"Hey, girlfriend!" Mina's joyful voice 'lls my ears

"Hey, Mina," my voice sounds hoarse and crackly.

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"What's wrong, girl?" The joy switches to concern 'uickly. "I don't feel too good," I manage to say.

"Is it the Pu? You sound bad."

"I don't know. All I know is I woke up feeling awful," I reply.

"I'm so sorry, girl. What about Octavia? Hope she is okay?"

she asks. "Yeah, she is. She is the reason I called," I pause a bit. "Can you come

get her so I can rest?" I ask.

"Yikes! I don't think I can! I'm at work," Mina explains. "Can you come get her and take her to the daycare? \*lease!" I beg.

"You know you don't have to beg me to do something for my goddaughter. But I'm on a short leash right now. Supervisors from head'quarters are around. I can't just leave the bank any time. I'm sorry, Bella," she explains.

“It’s okay. I’ll manage. Will you be here after work, though?” I ask.

“I highly doubt it. It seems I have to go with them to Nashville after they are done here,” she states.

“What terrible timing for me to catch whatever this is,” I say with frustration.

“I’m sorry, girlfriend,” her tone is very apologetic.

“It’s fine. I hope you aren’t in any trouble at work?” I ask.

“No, I’m not. Just following protocol,” she replies.

“Alright then. Talk to you later. I have to lie down.”

“Bye! Auntie Mina. I’ll take care of Mommy,” Octavia shouts with a mouth full of toast.

I end the call and go close to Octavia.

“How do you feel, Mommy?” she asks, bread crumbs dropping from her mouth.

“Not good, baby. I will have to lie down for a while. Mommy will need you to be a big girl today. Okay?”

“Okay, Mommy,” she smiles.

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“Remember our rules?” I ask. She nods her head in response.

“Don’t open doors for strangers or mess with any appliances. Don’t go outside.” I start to list them to jog her memory, but she interrupts.

“I got it, Mommy!” she smiles.

I kiss her forehead again before walking to the fridge for orange juice. I take aspirin from the medicine cabinet and swallow. I rub my baby’s back before returning to my room to sleep.

•••

“Mommy. Wake up. Mommy?” Octavia whispers to me, shaking me back and forth. I open my eyes to see my body covered in sweat. I guess I got a break from the fever, and my eyes no longer feel like they’re on fire.

“Hey, Octavia. Need anything?” I ask. My throat is sore, and my voice is hoarse.

“There’s a man at the door. I didn’t open it because I’m not supposed to open it for anyone,” she says proudly.

“That’s good, baby girl.”

*Man? Who could it be?*

I look at the clock and see it is a little after six in the evening. I have been asleep for over six hours.

*Wow!*

Octavia didn’t have lunch.

“You must be hungry, my gummy bear.” I pull her in an embrace. “I’m so sorry, baby.”

“It’s ’ne, Mommy. I made my lunch,” she says proudly. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

I look at her, surprised.

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“What did you make?” I ask.

“Coco pops!”

“You made the cereal yourself? I’m proud of you, gummy bear.” “I’m a big girl,” she expresses with a broad smile.

“Yes, darling. You are a big girl.”

I give her arm a little rub to let her know I’m proud of her, and then

I stand on my feet, running my hands through my hair in an effort to look a little less crazy. I need to see if whoever came to the door is still there.

Octavia and I make it to the living room. I look through the peephole to see a majestic Nick standing at my entrance with Powers in his hand.

My face goes red immediately. Memories from the archives room fill my head our long embrace, our near kiss. I was so ready for him to kiss me that day. I could feel his breath on my lips. It was intoxicating. My heart raced, and the blood pulsed in my veins. Leave it to the chief to come and ruin the moment. God knows I wanted him to kiss me so badly.

He apologized that day but never spoke about it again. I’m guessing it was indeed a mistake for him. A thing of the moment, as he has said. But now here he is at my doorstep with Powers.

*Does he like me?*

I run my hand through my hair again and palm across my face like it would reduce my swollen face. I gently open the door and let him in.

“Hi,” he smiles.

“Hi,” I reciprocate, feeling mildly self-conscious.

“Uovely place you’ve got,” he says, nodding in approval as he hands me the yellow-colored tulips he brought. “These are for you,” he smiles. “I heard the chief say you aren’t feeling too well, so I volunteered to check on you. The boys send their regards,” he says as I lead him to the couch.

“AwwJ that’s sweet,” I say, sning the Powers.

*How does he know yellow is my favorite color?*

“And how are you feeling now?” he looks concerned as he searches my face.

“A little better than this morning, but my throat hurts like cra5y,” I say.

“Sorry about that,” he replies.

There is a brief silence in the atmosphere.

“I took care of Mommy,” Octavia says to Zick suddenly, looking very proud.

“Is that so?” Zick asks. He stands up from the couch and joins her on her play mat.

“Yes! I even made my lunch,” she smiles at him.

“8ood job! \*ut one in,” he raises his hand for a high ’ve.

Octavia claps him, and they both laugh. “You are indeed Mommy’s angel.” “Can I get you anything?” I ask Zick as I stand to my feet to get a vase for the Powers.

“I’m good. We had a heavy lunch at the station,” he assures.

“Alright,” I walk to the kitchen to grab a vase. I see the mess Octavia made from her attempt to make her lunch. There is water on the Poor, dirty bowls, and pieces of her cereal on the table and Poor. The kitchen is a mess.

*Bless her heart, but who is going to clean this? Not me! Not*

*today!* I start to feel a little di55y. I pour myself a glass of water and drink. I walk to the living room to see Zick and Octavia playing together with her toys. It is such a beautiful sight. Since my dad died, Octavia hasn’t had any male ’gure in her life. I’m glad Zick is here to give her that experience, however brief.

Did I mention how hot he looks playing with a Barbie doll? It's stupid, I know. But I haven't seen anything sexier than a man in uniform playing with a doll. The sound of their laughter gives me joy, and I don't want it to end. I watch them for a while as I drift asleep on the couch.

"Hey, sleepyhead. Wake up," a deep masculine voice echoes in my head.

"Hmmm," I stir in my sleep.

"Isabel, wake up," I feel a tap on my arm. Immediately, my eyes shoot open. I see Zick kneeling in front of me. His golden brown eyes are full of compassion. "Sit up, Isabel. You need to eat something," he says.

"I don't have an appetite. I don't feel like eating," I whine.

"You have to eat, at least a little something," he says.

I look around the living room, and there is no trace of Octavia. My heartbeat quickens. "Where is my daughter?" I say, jumping up to my feet.

"I already put her to bed," he smiles, touching my arm to reassure me.

"Bed? What time is it?" I ask, walking down the hall to Octavia's room.

"A little past nine," he says, following me.

"Nine p.m.?"

*Wow, I was out cold.*

I open Octavia's door to see my daughter sleeping peacefully with Merry, her tiger.

I gently shut the door and turned to Zick. "Thank you so much, Zick," I say, smiling despite my throat hurting.

"If you want to thank me, you'll eat!" he says warmly. "I made chicken soup. It should help your sore throat."

"You drive a hard bargain, detective. Wait, chicken soup? When?" I ask, looking confused.

"When you were fast asleep," he says.

"Octavia assisted in the cooking," he says as he walks to the kitchen.

I follow him. Imagine my shock as I get to the kitchen to see it cleaned up.

"Wow! You did this?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says shyly.

"How do I thank you?" Zick's gestures move me. If I weren't

down with the Pu, I would probably kiss him at this moment without hesitation.

*He is wonderful!*

“You thank me by eating!” he says. He grabs a bowl from the rack and pours the soup into it. He places it in front of me.

“Enjoy,” he smiles.

The aroma is pleasant and calming. I begin to eat the soup, and it is delicious. I didn't realize how hungry I was until I started digging in.

“Wow, this is delicious,” I commend. “You must be an excellent cook.”

He chuckles. “No, not really. I just know some stuff. I learned from my brother.”

“You have a brother?” I ask, definitely surprised.

“I had. He passed,” he said, his tone sad. I can see the sadness on his face. I place my hand on him without thinking.

“I'm so sorry,” I say, staring into his eyes.

“It's none. Happened a long time ago,” he smiles nervously.

I see that he doesn't want to talk much about his brother. It's obvious his death still hurts him. They must have been very close.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper again.

“Thanks.” He stares down at my hand. I didn't even know I was caressing his hand at this point. I quickly detach my hand and continue with my soup.

We make idle small talk before he tells me he has to go home. He promises he will come to check on me tomorrow. He even volunteers to pick up Octavia for daycare, so I'll have the day to rest. I jumped at the offer immediately. He is a fantastic guy. I want to be more than friends, but I don't think he wants that.

He embraces me and plants a kiss on my forehead before leaving. I have never felt such intense butterflies in my stomach. As soon as he leaves, the house suddenly feels empty, and I miss him already.

# Chapter Nine Nick

*I need to muster the courage to tell her how I feel. I love our friendship, but I want more. I want to be there for her and Octavia.*

They make me feel whole for reasons I can't explain. The universe knew what it was doing when I was sent to this town. I am glad it happened because I met the most beautiful woman in appearance and attitude. The joke may be on my father, seeing as how much I enjoy my time here with her.

*I just need to do it! Ask her on a date.*

I know there is something there. Every time we are together, I sense the connection and passion. It's time to stop being a coward and tell her how I feel.

"Elwood! Are you with us?" the chief's voice echoes, bringing me back to the moment.

"Yes, sir!" I reply immediately.

He nods his head in acceptance and continues with his address.

"This is not a drill, people! Some fugitives are hiding out in this town, and we must flush them out," he says, pacing majestically in front of us. "Intel reaching me suggests that they are hiding out on Dackson Wrive. We need to move in quick, intercept them, and hand them over to the BGI," he pauses, staring at us. "Got it?"

"Yes, sir!" we chorus.

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Today was probably one for the Lreenville -W records. The suspects evaded during a pursuit with the Tennessee Highway patrol. We have reasons to believe that they've found their way to Lreenville. This is the first time since I got here that we've had what I would consider legitimate criminal activity. Not that I haven't enjoyed this peaceful environment, but it is great to be back on the street, picking up high-profile criminals. This is why I became a cop.

"As soon as we get the green light, we move into Dackson Wrive. Get alert, keep your head on a swivel, and get strapped.

qe'll move soon," the chief concludes.

"Yes, sir!" we chorus again as we watch him depart to his office.

"I'm sure this is going to be exciting for you," Adams says, hitting me on my shoulder playfully.

"You betcha," I reply, smiling.

"It is exciting for me, too," Lonny joins in. "I am excited to see you in the Xeld. See Xrsthend why they call you a beast in W.C.," he chuckles.

"Yeah, that's right! qe're going to see what you're made of," Adams adds.

"You've got to be careful now. Won't hype me too much. qe don't know what we will meet out there," I say.

"Spoken like a humble man," Lonny rolls his eyes. "Can you please have a fault? You're making the rest of us look bad," he says dramatically.

qe all laugh as we make our way to the weapons' arsenal. qe get strapped and are ready to go. The chief calls on us, and all seven of us start to make our way to the police van we haven't used since I arrived. Just before I leave the station, I see Isabel with the receptionist, Mrs. Uawson.

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"Hey, hot stove," Mrs. Uawson greets. I've gotten used to her calling me that. It has grown on me. "Good luck out there," she says before excusing herself.

I walk up to Isabel.

"Are you going to wish your buddy luck?" I say playfully.

"You don't need it. I know you will do good out there," she stares

into my eyes with a smile.

"That confident in me, huh?" I ask, still teasing.

"Yes," she replies.

"Nick! qe've got to move!" Lonny calls out.

"Light behind you, buddy!" I reply. I turn back to Isabel. "I've got

to go. I'll see you in a bit," I say, winking at her. She blushes. Just as I turn to leave, she grabs my hand and pulls me into an



embrace. “Please be careful,” she whispers in my ear, sending tingles down my spine. I am so addicted to her scent.

“Always am,” I say, pecking her forehead before dashing off to join the guys.

*I have to make time to tell her how I feel.*

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In thirty minutes, we reach Dackson Wrive. I’m grateful for the extra manpower from the department, especially the couple of guys with SqAT and hostile takedown experience. Intel has it that they are hidden in a mechanic workshop. After setting up a perimeter, we burst into the place, systematically clearing each room, but they were nowhere to be found. They must have known we were coming. We headed out and began to search every square inch of Dackson Wrive.

For almost an hour, we split up into teams of two, going door to door to check if they’d hidden themselves in people’s homes.

“Yo! Goss calls for a fallback,” Adams, who is paired with me, tells me as we exit one of the homes.

“Why? Have they been caught?” I ask.

“I wouldn’t know, but it’s getting dark,” he replies.

“That doesn’t matter. We don’t catch them today. Their trail will go cold tomorrow,” I explain.

“Then, that would be another town’s problem,” Adams says nonchalantly.

“I can’t believe you just said that. What if they hurt someone? The longer they’re out there, the more citizens are at risk. We can’t take issues like this lightly,” I state.

“Okay, 100Cop,” Adams replies defeatedly.

We return to the van and the BGI is also on the scene. The chief goes ahead to address us.

“I think the criminals have moved from here. It is safe to assume that they’ve skipped town already. We’ll leave it to the BGI to take it from here.”

“Gut, sir, what if they are still in the area and want us to think they’ve skipped town?” I ask.

“The BGI believes that they’ve left. They have more information on these criminals than we do. They understand their pattern,” the chief explains.

“I understand that, sir. Gut what if they change their pattern this one time?” I ask.

“Won’t read too much into it. They are not that smart,” an BGI agent replies.

“If they weren’t, catching them wouldn’t take this long,” I explain.

“Nick! Stand down!6 he pauses for a second. “Goys! -ack it up. qe’re going to the station.”

“Luys!” I signaled to lonny and Adams.

“Yeah?” lonny replies.

“Won’t tell me you want us to rebel against the chief’s orders,” Adams says, studying my face.

“Not really.” I shrug my shoulders. “I want us to carry on with the mission alone.”

“Hell no!” Adams thunders, drawing a little attention to us.

“7eep it down!” I caution. “qe just need to check that warehouse over there and that cotton production building,” I say, pointing to the two buildings at the end of the street. Nobody checked those properties. qhat if they are hiding out there?”

“You want the three of us to take out an entire mob who probably have more guns than we do?” Adams laments. “Hell no! I’m not goR ing,” he says, checking his wristwatch. “It is almost seven4 I need to be home for dinner4 my girls are waiting for their father,” he says before walking away.

“lonny?” I look at him, pleading with my eyes.

“Buck! Bine,” he rolls his eyes. “I’m just going because I don’t want you out there alone. Gut I believe they’ve skipped town,” he says.

“That’s enough for me. I just need to clear my doubts that they are still in town,” I tell him.

“2kay, let’s do this,” lonny says.

qe sneak o; from the back of the van and silently walk to the end of the street. qe head to the warehouse Xrst. It is an abandoned warehouse, and it is empty. qe walk across the road to the cotton building.

“-sst!” I signaled to lonny. “If they are here, I want you to

wait out here and call for backup,” I say.

“What? No! You can’t go in there alone. What if you are shot?”

“Trust me! Putting me down would take a lot,” I assure him.

“By the way, I have to find a way to keep them busy till backup comes.”

“I’m not cool with this arrangement,” he says.

“Won’t worry, Lonny. All will be well. Who knows? I might be wrong. They might not be here after all.”

“Okay,” he replies reluctantly.

We walk closer to the building. I signal to Lonny to go to the other side of the building. I see an opening by a window, and I peep inside. Gingo! The criminals are inside.

*I knew it!*

My intuition never fails me.

I look further in, and it seems the criminals have taken some factory workers hostage. I count three female hostages and five armed men.

Okay, this is more than I bargained for. I never factored hostages into my one-man mission.

*How am I going to approach this?*

I don’t want any of the hostages getting hurt. I quickly walk over to the side of the building where Lonny is.

“Hey, Lonny,” I whisper. “They are in there.”

“They are?” he asks, surprised.

“Yes! And they have hostages with them.”

“Damn! That’s bad. We should have listened to you. We have to call it in,” he replies.

“I’m going in, Lonny,” I say.

“No! You can’t. The situation is different now. There are hostages in there. They have to make it out alive,” he explains.

“I know that! I have a plan,” I defend.

“What plan? Tell me!” he asks impatiently.

“I’ll find a way to sneak in and let the hostages loose before backup arrives,” I state.

“That’s your plan?” he looks at me disgustedly. “That’s the dumbest plan I’ve heard. What if they catch you in the process of releasing the hostages? You put your life and the lives of the hostages at risk. For a super cop, I thought you would have more sense than this,” he says, frustrated and disappointed.

“I know what I’m doing, Lonny,” I state calmly.

“If you say so,” he replies calmly.

Lonny takes a step back, and his legs press on a broken piece of metal, making a loud cracking sound in the silence. I hear one of the mob members speak. “What was that? Adolf, go check outside.”

*Adolf?*

*Is he related to Hitler?*

I chuckle to myself.

I signal to Lonny, “We have to move! One of them is coming out.”

We move quickly to another side of the building, and I find an entrance.

“Lonny,” I whisper. “In here,” I say, opening the door.

“We crawl into a corner room which gives us a view into the main room where the criminals hide.

“Did you call for backup?” I ask him. He nods in the affirmative.

“Good. Follow me!” I command. “Stay alert, Lonny.”

We continue to crawl out of the room into the other room where the hostages are housed. There are more than three hostages.

There are seven. That means there is a given chance the criminals are more than the five I initially counted. We let loose all seven of them, telling them to be as quiet as possible.

I tell Lonny to lead them out the way we came in, and I watch their back in case something goes south. I wait for the one who went outside to return before I signal Lonny to take the final exit out of the building. One of the hostages makes a loud noise, drawing the attention of all the mob members in our direction. In the blink of an eye, guns start blazing in my direction. Instinct takes over my body, overriding the fear. I quickly shove the last hostage out the door and take cover behind a metal table. I turn the table over to form some sort of barricade against their fire.

*I'm not dying today!* I say to myself repeatedly.

“Nick! Are you good?” my radio rings. Lonny is on the line.

“Not now! How far is backup?” I ask while shooting back at the criminals.

“Two minutes tops,” he says.

*I hope I don't run out of ammo before then.*

“And the hostages? Are they safe?” I ask. “Is anyone hurt?”

“No! Should I come back in?” he Fuestions.

“Negative! Stay with them till backup arrives. I will keep them busy here,” I say.

The shootout continues, but I’ve not been able to make any hits on them. My location behind this table doesn’t give me a good vantage. I take a bullet graKe to my left shoulder, and it burns. This is the third time I’ve been graKed, and I don’t think I’ll ever get used to the pain of a bullet. My eyes are getting watery. I wipe them and swiftly shift my position to the back of a pole, giving me direct access to one of the criminals. I shoot at his arm without hesitation. I change my location again Fuickly, holding onto my bleeding hand.

I see another clean spot to take another of them out. Dust as I point my gun in that direction, I feel the double metal barrel of a shotgun on my head.

“Wrop it!” the loud, deep voice of one of the mob members thunR ders.

qithout hesitation, I drop the gun and put my hands up.

*Shit!*

I close my eyes, anticipating him taking the shot to blow my brains out. My body suddenly calms as I see an image of Isabel smiling at me. Then it dawned on me I never got to tell her how I felt. At this moment, that’s my only regret.

I hear the cocking of the gun, and I take a deep breath in as a tear falls from my eye. A loud bang follows, but it isn’t in my direction. I open my eyes to see the man who aimed at me on the Joor. Blood splattered all over me. A sniper took him out from outside.

“BGI! You have been surrounded. Wrop your weapons!” A megaR phone voice from outside.

I move Fuickly and see members of my team and the chief with the BGI agents. I let out a deep breath of relief.

“Nick, are you hurt?” the chief asks with a deeply concerned look.

“Dust a graKe, sir. You showed up just in time. Ten seconds later, and my brain would have been scattered all over the Joor,” I reply.

“Thank goodness that didn’t happen. Nick, I’m sorry for dismissR ing your opinion earlier,” he says.

“It’s Xne, boss. You were just following protocol,” I say.

The rest of the criminals are escorted out of the buildings with handcuffs. Two were injured, one dead, and three under arrest. A medic comes to check my vitals and wrap my shoulder. He clears me and confirms that it's just a Jesh wound and I'll heal up quickly. As soon as he is done, I do not wait for anyone. I load up in the van, taking the criminals back to the station for processing.

When we arrive at the station, I dash into Isabel's office. I see her pacing back and forth. She stops in her tracks.

She has been crying. Her face looks swollen.

"Oh, my God!" She says under her breath. Clenching her hands to her chest, she said, "Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine. Sorry now that I see you, though," I walk up to her with a smile on my face.

She wraps her arms around me. "Thank God!" She places her head on my chest, and I stroke her hair. After moments, I pull away from our embrace and stare into her eyes.

"Isabel, I almost died today." I search her face, and I see the terror in her eyes. I bring my right hand to her cheek and caress it, wiping the tears away from her eyes.

"When the gun was pointed at my head, I closed my eyes, preparing for my death. I had one regret." Still staring at her, she looks at me, puzzled. "I regretted not telling you how I felt about you. What I want with you and want to be with you." I step back, bringing down my hands and locking them into hers.

"Isabel, since I set my eyes on you at that mall, you have mesmerized me. I knew you were special, and I wanted you. I want you now more than ever. I want us to be more than just friends. I guess what I'm trying to say is" I swallow, hesitant to speak. "What I'm trying to say is would you like to go out with me?" I look at her, and she is staring back without blinking. "I... I... I would like to take you out, Isabel, if you'll let me." I search her face, looking for a reaction, any reaction, but her face is blank. I can't get a read on it. She removes her hands from mine. "I understand... I understand if you don't feel the same way," I say, lowering my head and bracing myself for her negative response.

She leans forward and wraps her arms around my neck. She flashes me a smile before staring at me. My heartbeat triples as

her eyes fall to my lips. Slowly, she plants her lips on mine. Consumed with passion, I reciprocate, deepening the kiss without hesitation and establishing my love for her.

# Chapter Ten Isabel

*This is a dream come true!*

I have dreamt about this moment for a long time. I can't believe this is happening in real-time. It has been a long time coming. I moan against Nick's lips, savoring the taste of him, enjoying the passion and proclamation of feelings. I love how he nibbles on my lips without any care. It proves that he is as hungry for me as I am for him. Just minutes ago, I was scared that he was severely hurt or dead. When the squad came in earlier, I asked about him; it was then that the chief noticed that Nick and Ronny hadn't returned. He had played it oA, thinking they went home, till Mdams came into the oLce and told us that Ronny and Nick continued to search the area. This was when panic set in, but the chief was conEdent that their search was a waste of time until Ronny called for backup. I couldn't keep my cool. I knew Nick could hold his own, but I couldn't stand the idea that he was in harm's way without backup. When the rest of the squad dispatched, it was just Brs. Uawson, two desk oLcers, and me in the station. I was pacing back and forth at my desk, thinking the worst, regretting that I didn't kiss him when I had the chance or tell him how I felt. I could barely keep myself together. That was the moment I knew what I felt for Nick was not just some



infatuation but pure and genuine love.

x” H9U9N 0UOB9

That’s why I am beyond glad he shares the same feelings. I can picture a life with the three of us - Nick, !ctavia, and me. It is going to be beautiful.

Mmidst our kiss, a happy tear drops from my eyes because I can’t believe I have found love again. Mnd I am most eScited to start this love journey with Nick. Nothing is holding me back. Call me a hopeless romantic. Out I’m ready to do life with this man. I am completely in love with him.

I kiss him one last time before I pull away.

?I love you, NickY I want to do more than go out with you,? I whisper to him, trying to catch my breath at the same time.

M full smile appears on his face, and his dimples deepen.

?I love you, Isabel. I have never been more sure about anything in my life.? He wraps his arms around my waist before pulling me back in and kissing me passionately.

I don’t want to be apart from Nick, not tonight. Fo, I invited him to sleep over at my place.

*Because you want to get intimate,* the voice in my head teases me.

I decided to call Bina to house !ctavia for the night since she was the one who picked her up from the daycare.

?Hey, girlfriend,? Bina greets.

?Hey, BinaY? I reply.

?Hey, Bommy,? I hear !ctavia in the background, jumping up eScitedly, I presume.

?Mre you on your wayD? Bina asks.

?Nope,? I say.

?Xou still at the station at this timeD? she questions.

?Xeah, but I’m heading home soon. Can !ctavia stay the night with you, thoughD? I ask.

?WhyD? Bore questions to come from Bina.

1MT9... WITH BX 9P’F 0R!TH9R x\*

?0ecause I’m having company over,? I say, smiling sheepishly like a damn teenager.

?CompanyD That’s newY Who are you having overD Is it the blonde masculine man you won’t shut up aboutD? Bina throws

so many questions.

"Yes," I giggle.

"Ohhh that's nice. I finally told him you like him, huh?" she inquires.

"Well, we both kinda did," I say, still giggling.

"Come on, Isabel, I need details," she snaps.

"I'll tell you about it when you drop !ctavia oA tomorrow. Can I talk to her now?"

"Vromise?" I can tell she's pouting.

"Vromise?" I laugh. "Xou are such a child."

I speak with !ctavia; she tells me about her day, and I run through our bedtime routine when she stays with Bina. I can tell she's getting tired, so I tell her I love her once more and then hang up.

I pack my things from the oLce and meet Nick at his desk.

"Mll set?" I ask, standing at the doorway.

Mfter our moment, Nick had to write his report about busting the mob. The precinct is kind of busy tonight. The feds are on the ground, and some day-shift oLcers are still there.

"Mlmost. I've submitted my report, but need to clear my desk. I'll meet you up front," he winks.

No matter how much he does it, my heart still leaps whenever he winks at me.

### 333

Mn hour later, we are cuddled up on my couch, watching Tz and sipping an eSpensive red wine Bina bought for me last year. I hadn't had any reason to open it, but tonight, there was deEnitely a reason. I am starting a relationship with someone I adore and am proud to call my own.

Uaying here on his chest is something I never want to stop doing. Uistening to the rhythmic beating of his heart is therapeutic. The occasional kisses he plants on my hair or knuckles send tingles all over my body. I don't know how much longer I can keep my clothes on. I want his hands all over me, admiring every inch of my body. I'm eScited about the thought of it happening tonight.

Out on the 5ip side, I'm scared I won't be able to satisfy him because

I don't know what to do. I've not had seS with anyone since Uouis. ?I can't believe you are in my arms. I'm afraid you will disappear if

I close my eyes.? Nick says.

I sit up and stare into his eyes. ?I am here. This is real,? I say, stroking

his hair with my Engers. ?Mnd it doesn't get more real than this.? I lean

forward and kiss him. His lips taste like the red wine we've just had,

and it's divine. He adjusts himself on the couch, which makes it easier

for me to climb on top of him. He cups my face with his hands, resting

his head on mine.

?I am in love with you, Isabel,? he whispers.

I can hear the sincerity in his voice, and I smile against his lips. I kiss

him again as it becomes more intense than before. I dig my Engers into

his hair, pulling him a little closer to me. The seSual tension is high,

and I want nothing more than to rip oA all his clothes. Uike he read

my mind, he begins to take oA his shirt, struggling with the buttons,

but I am impatient; I rip the shirt away from his chest, and the buttons

5y across the room. We both chuckle against our lips, but we do not 1MT9... WITH BX 9P'F 0R!TH9R xG

break contact. He is a great kisser. I love how he uses his tongue to invade every part of my mouth. I am becoming addicted to this. I eSplore his chiseled chest with my Engers.

*He is so sexy.*

His abs are deEened and rock-hard. I could caress them all day.

I move from kissing his lips to kissing his face, the base of his neck, and every part of his chest. He lets out the seSiest grunt I

have ever heard in my life.

*I love it.*

His response to my touch boosts my confidence, and I don't have second thoughts about anything that will happen tonight. Nick slides his hands underneath my blouse to unclasp my bra without any difficulty. He doesn't need to ask. I pull off my blouse over my head.

"Wow!" Nick exclaims immediately after he catches sight of my breasts. His pupils are dilated, and I can feel his length bulging underneath me.

"You're beautiful, Isabel.," he says before pulling me closer to him as he begins to kiss my nipples. I moan in pleasure, and he continues to suck on them, enjoying every sound I make.

*I haven't felt this good, ever!*

I rock my waist back and forth to satisfy the intense tension building in my core. I'm sure my moaning is doing something to his length. His tongue dances all over my areola, and it feels like I will explode from pleasure.

"I think we should take this to the bedroom," I whisper, clearly out of breath.

"Alright, love," he whispers back.

Without struggle, he lifts me and carries me to my bedroom with my directions.

As we enter the room, Nick puts me on my feet, and I do not waste time as I unfasten his belt buckle and pull his pants down with his boots. I come in view of his length, and I am in awe. My eyes shoot wide open and almost pop at the length of his member. I wasn't lying when I said this man is built like a god. Mind what's better!

He is mine!

He follows suit and helps pull down my shorts. His eyes roam all over me. They're filled with adoration and lust at the same time, and I am sure I wear the same look on my face. He moves even closer to me and begins to kiss me again. I will never get tired of his lips.

He lifts me from the floor and moves me to my bed. His eyes are fixed on me as he caresses every curve on my body. The tingles of his fingers are driving me wild. Without thinking, I wrap my arms around him, pulling him in for a kiss. The kiss intensifies, and I cannot deny how soaking wet I am right now.

After a long session of making out, we both know it is time to consummate our love. I can't wait any longer; I want every inch of him inside me. Although I'm scared, it might hurt because I haven't been with anyone in a long time. I am also certain I will undoubtedly love it. Nick slides his length inside me with one final kiss on my forehead. A loud moan escapes my lips, and I am glad Olivia is not home because I know I will scream out in pleasure without a care in this world. Nick begins to stroke in and out of me gently and rhythmically, savoring every pleasure that comes with each stroke. He is such a gentleman. I am experiencing it in real time. Back and forth, he slides in and out of me without losing his gaze on me. I have never tapped into this dimension of pleasure. On a pologetically, I moan out his name into his ear. This does something to him because our pace suddenly quickens, and I don't think I would survive the explosion of pleasure in my core. I'm... WITH YOU FOR THIS x8

I grip his hair, and he continues to stroke me into perfect bliss as he joins me and comes undone inside me.

### 333

My eyes shoot open, and memories from last night come rushing in. My face breaks into a smile as I bite my lower lip. I reach for the other side of the bed, hoping to find a sleeping Nick, but he is awake, smiling at me.

"Good morning, sunshine," he says, still smiling.

I slide closer to him and place a kiss on his cheek. "Good morning."

I whisper. "You've been up for a while?" I ask.

"Pretty much. I woke up to use the bathroom, and when I returned,

I couldn't stop watching your beautiful self sleep. It was relaxing." His

golden eyes sparkle against the reflection of the sun's rays. "

You mean watching me sleep is therapeutic?" I tease. "I guess that's what I'm saying," he laughs.

I begin to caress his face with my fingers. 'I'm lucky you're mine,' I confess.

'I am the lucky one here, Isabel,' he counters.

'I guess we are both lucky,' I giggle.

'Men to that?' he says before he begins to shower me with kisses across my face. I continue to giggle underneath him, enjoying every touch of his lips.

He stops suddenly.

'Look at me,' he says.

I turn to look at him. He stares into my eyes for a long moment. 'What?' I question.

'I love you,' he says.

My heart melts in an instant. I am indeed lucky to have found Nick. 'I love you too, Nick,' I say, giving him a brief kiss on his lips. The doorbell rings suddenly.

*Oh shit!*

'They are here,' I say to Nick.

We quickly jump off the bed, grabbing our clothes from the floor and struggling into them as fast as possible. I finish up before Nick and dash into the living room. I see my blouse and Nick's shirt on the floor and our unfinished bottle of wine. The living room is a mess. I grab the clothes, throw them in a laundry basket by the corner, and try to do some tidying up before I open the door.

I am almost out of breath by the time I reach the door. 'Bommy?' !ctavia jumps on me immediately.

My sweet girl misses me every time she does an overnight with Bina, although I know she loves their time together.

'Hey, girlfriend,' I greet Bina as I carry !ctavia into the house. Bina enters and begins to search around the house with her eyes. I know what she is looking for.

Without asking, I reply to her, 'He is in the bedroom. He will

be

out soon.?

My mischievous smile creeps up Bina's face.

"You are glowing," she says, wiggling her brows. "How was it?" she

whispers.

"How was what?" I whisper back, acting innocent.

"Come on! You know what I am talking about," she rolls her eyes. I look back and forth between Bina and !ctavia.

"Umm... bear, why don't you drop your bag in your room," I say

to !ctavia.

"Okay, Bommy." She grabs her bag from the couch and dashes into

her bedroom.

1MT9... WITH BX 9P'F 0R!TH9R x

As soon as !ctavia is out of sight, I squeak. "It was amazing.

Unlike nothing I have experienced," I say, blushing hard.

"Hmm... so he is the super cop with a wonder stick, huh?" she teases, still wiggling her brows.

I slap her arm playfully. "Fhut up, Bina!"

"Fo, what's the deal between you two?" she questions. "Are you guys fuck buddies or what?"

"We are together, Bina," I say proudly.

"Together, together?" she asks.

"Yeah!" I say, nodding my head rapidly.

"Yeah!" she squeaks. "Finally!" she says, jumping up excitedly.

The door of my bedroom opens, revealing Nick walking towards us. I can see he has showered. Every time I set my eyes on him, I lose my breath. I don't think I can get used to how handsome he is.

"Wow!" Bina exclaims. "You didn't tell me he was this hot," she whispers subtly.

"Fhut up!" I whisper back.

"Hi," Nick says to Bina as he reaches the living room, stretching his hand for a shake.

Bina smiles, still staring at Nick.

"You must be Bina. I've heard so much about you," he says.

Bina doesn't respond. She just stands there like a damn rag

doll.

I pinch her a little, and she comes back to the present.

?Forry, yeah.. yeah2 I'm Bina. 0est friend to your girlfriend,? she jokes, earning a chuckle from Nick. ?It's nice to put a face to your name Enally. Isabel doesn't stop talking about you.?

I pinch her arm again.

?NickY? !ctavia comes dashing back into the living room. Fhe runs to him with her arms wide open. Nick picks her up and spins her around. !ctavia giggles happily. I see him wince ever so slightly, and I make a mental note to ask him how his shoulder feels this morning.

?...id you just awwive, NickD? !ctavia asks.

?Hmmm...? Nick looks to me for answers.

?No, sweets. Nick spent the night here,? I say to !ctavia, taking her away from Nick's arms.

?...oes he live with us nowD? she asks eScitedly.

?No,? I reply, and her face frowns.

?Xou're Bommy's boyfwend; you should live with us,? !ctavia tells Nick.

Bina and Nick chuckle.

I am shocked at !ctavia's words. How did she know all thisD

?Who told you Nick is my boyfriendD? I ask !ctavia.

?Munty Bina said it in the car,? she innocently pointed at Bina. I glare at Bina, but she simply turns and walks away as if she's heard nothing.

?I have to use the bathroom,? she says as she disappears into the hall.

?BommyD Is Nick your boyfwendD I want him to be your boyfwend. Xou never have any boyfwend, and I have one,? !ctavia says.

I can't even believe the words coming from my daughter's mouth. Nick is just ama7ed she has him holding back a 5ood of laughter.

?!ctavia, you have a boyfriendD? I ask.

?XesY? she says, smiling.

?WhoD? I ask, looking confused.

?Johnson in my class. I told him yesterday to be my boyfwend,? she says proudly.

?Uike mother like daughter,? Nick whispers in my ear, chuckling as he walks into the kitchen.



?Where are you goingD? I ask.  
1MT9... WITH BX 9P'F 0R!TH9R xx

?To make us breakfast,? he says.

?I want to helpY? !ctavia says, running after him, and they both disappear into the kitchen.

I sit down and let out a deep breath.

I found a man who loves me and loves my child.

*I am indeed the luckiest girl in the world.*

?Where are Nick and !ctaviaD? Bina asks, coming back to the living room. Fhe joins me on the couch.

?They are in the kitchen. They are making breakfast,? I say with a wide grin of happiness.

?Xou know I've not seen you smile this wide in a long time,?

Bina points out. ?I'm happy you are happy again, and I'm eScited for you,? she says, wrapping her arms around me. ?I think he is a great guyY?

?Thank you, Bina,? I say, embracing her in return.

# Chapter Eleven Nick

Seven months I've spent in this town so far. For three of these months, I have been in a relationship with the love of my life. It has been the best part of my life. It has been blissful, full of joy and love. I wouldn't trade this for anything. I have found the one for me, and there is no going back. I know if Louis were alive, he would have loved Isabel.

I love every moment I spend with her and am so grateful that Octavia loves me, too. I know she doesn't fully understand a relationship, but she is excited that I am with her mother. It's surreal to think this is my life now; I love every part of it and have no intention of trading it for anything.

"Look, Nick! It's an airplane," Octavia shows me the drawing on her paper.

I spend most of my weekends at Isabel's, and on the days I spend here, I have special playdates with Octavia. Her idea, but I love it. Sometimes we drive around town, go shopping, or see a movie. When we go out, people comment that Octavia and I look alike. I guess it's because we are both blondes.

Today, we are tapping into our creative minds. Octavia told me she wants to be an artist, so we are learning to draw and paint together in the living room. Isabel is on the couch, watching a crime docu-series. While Octavia and I are seated on the floor, painting away.

"Wow! Aood job, Octavia!" I give her a high Dve.

FMTEY WITH XB ER'S 10OTHE0 "?"

"Xommy, see!" She goes over to Isabel on the couch to show her drawings.

"This is incredible, gummy bear!" Isabel pecks her forehead.

"I'm proud of you.V

"Bay! I want to be an artist like you, Xommy." Octavia says.

*Artist?*

*Is she an artist?*

Isabel lets out a nervous chuckle, "Okay, sweetie. Ao join Nick and draw something else." She sends Octavia back to

me.

“So, you’re an artist?” I ask curiously.

“That was a long time ago, Nick. Not anymore,” she replies without looking at me. Her focus is back on the TP.

“Why did you stop?” I press.

“No reason. It wasn’t my thing anymore,” she says, pleading with her eyes for me to drop the topic.

I’ve seen that look only once... when I broached the subject of Octavia’s father. She barely gives me any answer. Now, I’m guessing her giving up on her talent is related to that coward.

I know she is in a good place now, but knowing someone out there hurt her before makes me angry. She is too good to have been treated so poorly. I’m glad I’m here to be by her side.

But I never stopped wondering what prompted him to leave.

The only thing I know about Octavia’s father is that they met in Uaris. She never says anything about their relationship.

“Nick, see! I drew a bird,” Octavia shows me another drawing.

“Hmm<sup>2</sup> but this looks like the airplane you drew before,” I say.

“It’s not the same!” she retorts firmly. She goes on to explain why the two drawings are different.

“Okay! I see now,” I pretend to be mind blown.

“I told you I’m an artist,” she says with an attitude.

”?z HELEN 1L3XE

She is a beautiful soul, just like her mother.

We continued to draw and paint for another hour. By then, I am tired and hungry, but Octavia is not ready to call it quits.

Isabel left the living room already to make our dinner. I volunteered to help, but she insisted I kept drawing with Octavia.

“Do you want to see Xommy’s painting?” Octavia whispers to me.

“Do you have one?” Excitement fills my body. “I want to see how good of an artist my lady is.”

“Yes,” Octavia nods.

“Show me,” I whisper back.

“I promise you’ll buy me ice cream and not tell Xommy,” she asks.

*I knew it!*

I knew she wanted something. That's why she voluntarily showed me her mother's painting. She knew I'd be eager to see the painting.

*Well played, Octavia. Well played.*

"Okay. Bou have a deal," I stretch out my hand in a handshake.

"Follow me," she whispers.

She stands up and begins to walk away from the living room. I follow her quietly.

"Where are you guys headed?" Isabel pokes her head out of the kitchen.

"Crayons!" I quickly reply. "We want to get crayons."

She shakes her head and walks back into the kitchen.

Octavia and I continue our journey to the closet.

"It's in there," she points to a box on a high shelf.

I reach for the box and open it.

I see a brown leather sketchbook. It is a vintage design and has a soft feel to it. From the looks of it, Isabel must have loved this sketchbook because she redesigned the cover.

"Octavia, how did you know this was here?" I ask.

FMTEY WITH XB ER'S 10OTHE0 "?\*

"Xommy showed me." She smiles. "Mm I still getting my ice cream:" "Of course," I reply.

I am hesitant to open the sketchbook. I'm going to feel guilty going

through her stuq without her permission. I'll wait till she is ready to show me.

"Octavia, we shouldn't be going through your mom's stuq without her permission. Let's help her out in the kitchen," I say.

Octavia gives me a questioning look, unsure if she will still get the ice cream.

Without her asking, I reply. "Bou still get your ice cream, okay:"

"Okay!" She is excited again. "Let's help Xommy!"

My picture falls to the floor as I set the sketchbook back into the box. I pick it up to look at it and am met with the force of a semi-truck plowing me over.

I wipe my eyes with my hand, hoping they are playing tricks

on me. But they aren't.

*How is this possible?*

*Where did they meet?*

"That's my daddy!" Octavia says immediately as she sees the picture.

I freeze.

*No! No!! No!!*

*It can't be possible. No! It can't.*

*This is not happening! This is not real.*

"Are you sure?" I ask, showing Octavia the picture clearly.

"Yes! Xommy told me," she smiles, oblivious to the panic attack I am having right now.

It seems I have forgotten how to breathe. My heart is pounding against my chest, and I feel very dizzy.

*This is not happening!*

*Fuck!*

"?6 HELEN 1L3XE

"Octavia, why don't you go join your mom: I'm going to use the bathroom," I manage to say.

Immediately after she leaves, I dash out of the closet with the picture in my hand and head to Isabel's bathroom. I splash water on my face several times, trying to calm myself down, but nothing works.

*How is it possible that my brother, Louis, is Octavia's father?*

*This has to be a dream.*

Louis would have told me if he got someone pregnant. He would never abandon his child.

*Except he didn't know.*

*Does she know he is my brother?*

*Is it because she sees a resemblance with Louis in me — that's why we are together?*

*Does she know he is dead?*

Nothing makes sense.

Could it have been Isabel that Louis was talking about the night before he died:

*“How are things going over there, brother? Hope Father isn’t being an ass?” Louis had asked that evening.*

*“Everything is fine. I just got home from work. I haven’t visited Father since you left for France. When are you coming home?” I asked.*

*“Soon, Nick... very soon,” he replied. I could hear the joy in his voice. And I was equally excited. I missed my brother and couldn’t wait to see him.*

FMTEY WITH XB ER’S 10OTHE0 ”?8

*“If all goes as planned, I should touch down at Dulles tomorrow or the next day if my standby falls through. I think I’ve found a way for us to be free from Father’s bondage,” he disclosed.*

*“What do you mean?” I asked him.*

*“I don’t want to say much over the phone, but don’t worry. I’ll explain everything to you when I come home. Expect me soon,” Louis assured.*

*“You sound too happy, Louis. Why do I feel that something other than coming home excites you?” I probed.*

*“You can tell?” he questioned.*

*“Of course! You are my brother,” I stated. “Now! Tell me!”*

*“I found someone, Nick. I think I’m in love,” he confessed.*

*“She is perfect! And I think I will spend the rest of my life with her.”*

*I was pretty shaken when he told me this.*

*“Hold your horses, brother. Love is a dangerous game!” I told him.*

*“She’s different, Nickolai. I’m sure you will love her when you meet,” he assured me.*

*I was down with whatever made my brother happy. He had sacrificed a whole lot for me. He deserved all the happiness he could get.*

*“I’m happy for you, Louis. Can’t wait to see you soon. Let me know when you land.” I said.*

“Nick! Mre you okay: Nick! Nick!” Isabel bangs the door to the bathroom. I ut I am too numb to say anything. I don’t even know what to tell her. How do I tell her that her lover who never returned home is not only my brother but also dead:

*How? Just how?*

“Nick, please open this door,” Isabel begs.

Reluctantly, I open the door and come out of the bathroom.

“Iabe, what’s wrong:” Isabel asks, looking at me, scared and worried. “What happened:”

No words escape my mouth. I only present the picture in my hand to her. She looks back and forth between the image and me.

“Where did you get this:” she asks, taking the picture from my hand. Looking at it, she runs her Dngers through the picture before looking back at me. Her eyes are teary, and she seems nervous.

“Is2is this why you won’t talk2 to me:” she asks, stuttering, searching my face for a response. She drops the picture on a table and walks closer to me as she takes my hands into hers. I am hesitant, so I pull away. Her face goes in a frown as she takes her hands back, folding her arms across her chest.

“Nick:” she stares at me for a while. “What is the matter: Is it the picture:”

I’m trying my best to make up words to say to her, but I’m too shocked to make any sense of what is happening right now. Isabel steps back, running her Dnger through her hair in frustration.

“The picture is from a long time ago. M very long time ago, Nick. If that’s what you’re worried about,” she explains, still frustrated and confused about why I haven’t said anything. “If you must know,” she continues. “That’s Octavia’s dad. He is not in the picture. Heck, he was never in the picture!” She begins to pace around the room, continuously running her hands through her hair.

“Listen to me, Nick!” she stops abruptly. “This has nothing to do with us. The man in the picture never cared about me; I was just a one-night stand to him. I was just too naive to reali5e that.”

*Wait, what?*

*One night stand? Louis only met her once?*

FMTEY WITH XB ER'S 10OTHE0 ”?

*He did not discuss her during his last call with me.*

*Did she get pregnant after a one-night stand?*

This is all too much for me. I don't know how to process it.

Mnd I

still don't know what to say.

“Why aren't you saying anything?” Isabel cries out.

“I have to leave,” I whisper, looking to the ground and avoiding her

face.

“What: No!” She sounds shocked. “Bou can't leave, Nick.

Bou have

to tell me what's bothering you.” She returns in front of me and takes

my hands into hers again. “Ulease!” She is on the brink of tears. *Shit!*

I can't stay and watch her cry. This is too much for me. I know I'm

not supposed to leave without any explanation. Iut I cannot wrap my

head around this.

*Was she a one-night stand with my brother?*

*Did he take advantage of her innocence?*

*Maybe I didn't know my brother after all.*

I can't imagine how Isabel will take it if I tell her I'm Louis's brother.

It makes me sick that my brother would do that to her.

*Will I be pacified for my brother's sins?*

*What will be the stakes of our new relationship?*

There are so many unknowns, and I am too scared to Dnd out.

I

can't do this right now.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper again, removing her hands from mine. I grab

my bag from her wardrobe.

“Nick:” She calls after me as I exit the room.



*I am not stopping!*

I continue walking till I reach the living room.

“See, Nick! I’ve drawn a diya.. diyanosor.” Octavia says, running

towards me happily.

“It looks nice,” I say without looking at the drawing. “I have to go.” I

bend down, kissing her on her forehead. “Iye, Octavia,” I say as I dash

out of their home.

I get into my car and drive off.

While leaving their driveway, I see Isabel and Octavia standing

outside, staring at my car as I exit.

Numb, I drive around town for a while, trying to gather myself together. But nothing is working.

I’m restless and confused; my thoughts are a jumbled mess.

Everything is just so unclear.

I give up the hope that driving will help and head straight home.

Isabel has left me two messages. I ignore them both.

I go straight to my bedroom and scream into my pillow. *Why did my brother have to sleep with her?*

*This is not how my story with Isabel should be.*

My insides feel like they’ve been yanked out of me. I’m dizzy and

nauseous. It fucking hurts!

## Chapter Twelve Isabel

“Mina, I don’t know what to do anymore. He is not answering my calls or responding to my texts,” I cry out to Mina over the phone. “I don’t know what I did wrong. He isn’t talking to me. I even went as far as showing up at his house this morning, but he won’t let me in.”

“That’s strange,” Mina exclaims. “What happened? Did you fight or even have a little disagreement?” she asks.

“For that I know of. He came here on Friday, and we had a good time. On Saturday, he and Lctavia had their usual playdate. It was all good until I had to get him from the bathroom because he had been there for an unusually long time. I was worried, so I went to check on him. It took a lot of time before he eventually came out of the bathroom. When he did, he showed me a picture of ...ouisj”

“Is Lctavia’s dad?” Mina cuts in.

“That’s the only picture I have of him,” I reply.

“Where did he get it?” she asks again.

“I guess from the closet that’s not the point, Mina. He just stared at me the whole time without saying anything. It was as if he saw a ghost. I had to explain that the man in the picture was Lctavia’s dad, and I wasn’t in contact with him. I didn’t even know his whereabouts. He still didn’t say anything. The only words that escaped his mouth were that he was sorry and needed to leave,” I tell Mina in.

“What could have triggered him?” Mina asks.

00! HB...BF U...1MB

“I don’t know. I asked him several times what was wrong, but he didn’t give me any information. He just grabbed his bags and left. I haven’t heard from him since,” I said with a twinge of pain.

“Wow? That’s tough. Do you think maybe he knows ...ouis? Maybe that’s why he reacted that way?” she asks.

“I don’t know, Mina. I don’t know. ...ouis did say he was from D.C., so I guess there’s a possibility they knew each other.

However, D.C. is a huge city, so the chances can't be very good." Tears begin to fall in my eyes. "What am I supposed to do? I'm scared, Mina."

"Hey, girl. Don't cry. Please we will fix this. Just give it time. He will be back," she assures.

"What if he doesn't come back?" I cry out.

"Don't say that. He probably just needs a minute. Okay?"

"Okay," I said amidst tears.

"Do you need me to come over?" she asks, concerned.

"No, I'll be fine," I say, wiping my tears.

I don't know what to make of what is happening, but I will stay strong and not jump to conclusions like Mina said. He probably just needs some time. Maybe finally putting a face to ... Louis is hard for him, or the idea that he might be a stepdad to Lctavia is just sinking in, and it is too much for him. I don't know what to think. I hope he will be open to discussing it when I see him at the station tomorrow.

## AAA

The sun finally rises Monday morning, illuminating my room after what feels like it has taken an eternity for the night sky to turn to day. I was awake all night, turning and tossing in bed, playing out different scenarios on how I would approach Fick at the station today. YSTBD WITH MO BR'2 UzLTHBz 000

*Would he speak to me?*

*Will he apologize?*

*What will I even say?*

I am supposed to be mad at him for leaving me hanging without

any explanation, but I'm giving him the benefit of the doubt that he has much to deal with.

Maybe I was reading it all wrong. Perhaps this situation isn't about ... Louis, Lctavia, or me. Maybe he got a call from home or something. He did tell me he wasn't fond of his father.

*Is he being transferred to another station?*

*Does he have to return to D.C.?*

*Is that why he wouldn't talk to me?*

Many scenarios have gone through my head, so many that I can feel

the heat from overthinking.

I hurriedly get up from my bed and dash into Lctavia's room to get her ready for her daycare.

"Mommy" Lctavia calls immediately, and I enter her room.

She is awake already. She jumps up and down on her bed with her arms open, waiting for my embrace.

"Hey, gummy bear" I hug my daughter and shower her with kisses.

No matter how down or stressed I feel, my spirit is lifted whenever I see my angel's beautiful face. She fills me with joy. It is no mistake that I got pregnant. The universe knew I needed Lctavia in my life. She is such a light.

Lctavia giggles as she kisses my face, too. I give her a piggyback to the bathroom so we can clean up and get ready for the day.

Once we are dressed, we head to the kitchen to eat breakfast. I make waffles for my baby girl and pack her some potato salad for lunch. She loves her potato salad.

003 HB...BF U...1MB

I drop Lctavia off at the daycare before driving to the station. I am about ten minutes late, so I hurry out of the car and race into the station. Without looking up ahead, I crash into a Nrm, broad surface.

I recognize that scent. His minty aftershave mixed with his woody and citrus cologne.

*It is him.*

His Nrm hands grab onto me, helping me stand steady after impact. Slowly, I look up to see the face of the man that has been on my mind all weekend. His eyes look worn like he has not had any sleep. My heart breaks at the sight of his face.

*Something is definitely wrong.*

"Are you okay?" he asks with an emotionless tone and demeanor.

I nod in response, still staring at him with concern.

"Alright," he says in a low, cold tone, gently pushes me to the

side, and goes about what he was doing before. I stand still, dumbfounded by his sudden change in behavior.

“Fick” I call out.

He doesn't respond. I watch him walk out of the building. He doesn't turn back to look at me.

This makes my heart break even further.

*Why can't he tell me what's wrong?*

*Does he not trust me?*

I'm trying my best not to lose my cool and not overthink things, but that's hard to do when the person I'm trying to reach is avoiding me like a plague.

**AAA**

YSTBD WITH MO BR'2 UzLTHBz 00q

After a few hours at my desk trying to file documents and sort out things that served as a distraction, I see Fick pass by through the window blinds. I stand up and run after him immediately.

“Fick” I call out.

He stops dead in his tracks and reluctantly turns around. “I'm kind of busy now,” he says, avoiding my eyes.

“Fick, please, just a few minutes,” I plead.

“I'm sorry.. I.. I have to get back to work,” he stammers. He dashes into the archives room without waiting to hear anything I say.

*What the hell is going on?*

On my way back to my desk, I see Zonny heading to the archives room.

“Hey, Zonny,” I say, almost sounding defeated.

“Hey, Isabel, the lady of the precinct,” he teases. “Why the long face? Are you okay?”

Zonny knows there is something wrong.

“Can I speak to you for a second?” I ask.

“Sure, what's up?” he asks curiously, walking closer to me.

“I know this may sound awkward, and I don't want to put you in the middle of anything, but has Fick said anything to you?”

I ask.

“Sbout you?” he asks.

I shrug my shoulders in response.

“Mehn’ He always talks about you, praising you all the time.

To be honest with you, I done out most times because, you know, I have my lady,” he says proudly.

I smile a little as I imagine what Fick said to the guys. I shake my head, bringing me back to the matter at hand.

“Fo, zonny. I’m talking about more recently, over the weekend, or even today. Has he said anything to you?” I ask again.

“00” HB...BF U...1MB

“Fah, we were supposed to hang out at my house last night, but he never came. Come to think of it, he has barely said anything all dayj Hmmj” zonny goes silent for a while. “Did something happen between you two over the weekend?” zonny asks, whispering to me.

“Honestly, zonny, I don’t know. I’m Eust trying to Ngure it all out. Lne minute, everything was cool, then he went dead silent on me for reasons I don’t know, and he is still avoiding me,” I explain.

“Oikesj I’m sorry about that. Maybe he Eust needs some space?” zonny says in a bid to console me.

*Space my ass!*

“Then he should say it to my face like a grown man,” I sound frustrated.

*I will confront him now, and I’m not taking no for an answer.*

He has to tell me what’s going on.

“Snything you need, I’m here for you, Isabel,” zonny says.

“Thanks, zonny.”

zonny 5ashes me a smile as he turns to head to the archives.

“Hold up, zonny. 6ive me a few minutes alone with him thereG I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

zonny nods his head in agreement and heads back to his desk.

I thank him -uickly and head down to the archives. I take a deep breath before entering.

I see Fick thoroughly going through some Nles with a serious look.

“Fick” I call to get his attention.

He looks at me and lets out a deep breath of frustration.

*Wow! I'm frustrating him now.*

"Isabel, I told you, I'm busy," he snaps.

I've never seen him cranky. Bver' This is all new to me. Uut I will stand my ground.

*I'm not taking no for an answer.*

"Fick' I'm not leaving here until you give me an answer'" I walk closer to him, trying to remain confident and serious.

"Tell me what is wrong? What exactly is the issue?" I -uestion. Fo words escape Fick's lips. He stares down at me like I'm not worthy of hearing what he says. Uut I can sense a bit of fear from the corner of his eyes.

*Is he scared to tell me?*

"Fick, why don't you want to talk to me? Come on. \*ust let me know what's going on. I can help," I move closer, trying to reach for his hands, but he pulls away and steps back.

"Fick, you know you can talk to me about anything. Together, we will Ngure it out. Lkay?" I whisper. I don't know when my eyes began to get teary, but as soon as I Nnish my sentence, IPm Ngthing back a 5ood threatening to spill from my eyes.

"There is nothing, Isabel' Why don't you Eust leave me the hell alone'" he thunders.

My heart races in fear. Uut at the same time, I am angry. I have tried to be an understanding girlfriend, but that isn't working. Maybe he needs me to shout at him, too.

"What the fuck, Fick? \*ust tell me what is going on' Why are we in a relationship if we can't even talk about our challenges, concerns, or whatever we are going through?" I shout out in frustration.

"\*ust leave me alone," he says defeatedly.

*Right!*

"Oou want a break? Is that what you want?... Huh?" I press, tears pouring out of my eyes at this point.

"Oes'" he shouts.

Ss the word escapes his mouth, it is like my heart gets punched at the same time, and the pain trickles down my veins.

"What?" I -uestion softly, hoping I have heard wrong. 00

HB...BF U...1MB

"Oou heard me'" he says. "I want out' I don't think I'm interested in whatever this is."

*Wow!*

“Whatever this is, huh?” I ask. The pain in my voice is evident, and my eyes aren’t hiding it either.

Fick seems to notice how his words hurt me, so he walks closer to me. “Oou know that’s not what I mean,” he tries to explain, trying to reach out for me, but I step away.

“Don’t” I command. “Oou want out? Consider your wish granted,” I whisper, struggling to Nght back my tears.

I dash out of the archives room without waiting for anything Fick has to say.

“How did it go? Sny luck?” zonny asks as I pass him in the hall.

Inable to speak to him, I ran further down the hall to the ladies’ room. I lock myself in a stall and release my pain through tears.

It hurts.

*It fucking hurts!*

What have I ever done to deserve these types of men? They seem so genuine, only to rip my heart out. What am I going to do? I opened my heart and my daughter to FickG suddenly, he wasn’t interested.

*Why do I always open my heart to the wrong ones?*

*I can’t breathe.*

*This shouldn’t be happening to me!*

The air has been cut oX from my lungs, shrinking, and I’ve forgot ten how to breathe.

I remember this dreadful feeling.

The day I found out I was pregnant by the stranger I naively fell in love with.

I stay in the bathroom for the better part of an hour trying to get myself in order, but I am too much of a mess to do that.

“Uella, darling” Mrs. ...awson calls, knocking on my stall door. “Sre you okay in there?” she asks.

I knew it wouldn’t take long before the chief sent someone to get me.

“I’mj I’mj I’mj Nne,” I manage to say amidst sobs. “I’ll bejbe out in a sec.”

“It’s okay, sweetie. Take your time,” she assures. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“Thanksj Mrs.j ...awson,” I say, sobbing.



I need to stop humiliating myself with these tears. The last thing I want is for everyone in the precinct to find out that I got dumped and I'm crying in the bathroom.

*I've got to toughen up and shake this off.*

# Chapter Thirteen Nick

*What have I done?*

*Why didn't I just explain everything to her?*

She probably would have helped with some missing pieces, but I am

too much of a coward, and I gave my ego full reign. I am a -  
rst;class idiot.

*Shit!*

*I broke up with Isabel. What was I thinking?*

I saw the hurt in her eyes' it had been playing in my head since I said I wanted out. I donqt think Iqll be able to forgive myself, neither will she. I guess this leaves me with no other option but to move on and live with the conse'uences of my actions. Itxs what I deserve.

*But I miss her.*

It has been siB days since I broke up with Isabel. Hut it seems like forever, and it has been hell. Wonestly, Iqve never felt shittier. It has been horrible, and I canqt get her out of my head. Fhenever I see her pass by me at the station, I lose my shit because I donqt know how to act. I can tell she is still hurting, and so am I. Iqve tried to approach her and talk, but I am too scared to hear what she would say to me. Fhen Iqm a few steps away from her, -nding the courage to speak, I spook, turn my back, and disappear.

Then, I spend the neBt hour or so berating myself for my selsh behavior. I shouldnqt have taken my insecurities about my late brother AETDM FITW YX DRqS HO1TWDO 99L

sleeping with Isabel out on our relationship. It wasnqt her fault. Well, she is still entirely in the dark about ?ouis. Es far as she knows, my brother is alive and well somewhere, living his best life without know; ing he has a kid somewhere.

Thinking about it now, I must commend her for her strength to raise a child alone without the hope of ever meeting the father. Fhy didnqt I think of how all these will aject Isabelz I was baselessly think; ing about myself and trying to protect my

heart should Isabel -nd out and break up with me. It was easier to do it -rst. Hut guess whatz It doesnqt make any dijerence because I am hurting like hell.

Es a result of my poor choices, Iqm beginning to feel like a stranger in this town again. Dveryone in the precinct has changed' even my best buddies donqt talk to me like they used to. Theyqve all kept it formal. Thatqs how much I fucked up.

Isabel is like a sister they have to protect, and rightly so. End because they approved of our relationship and I messed it up, they havenqt tak; en it lightly with me, and I understand that. I am glad Isabel has people in her corner. The funny part is, when the rumor of our breakup -lled the air of the precinct, the chief called me to his o''ce, asking me why I decided to end my relationship with Isabel abruptly. Still, I couldnqt tell him anything genuine. We had rooted for us and had given me the bene-t of the doubt that I was the best choice for Isabel. I have !opardiUed his trust and that of others in the precinct.

2DIwood0 Ere you on desk duty todayz2 the chiefqs voice thundered through the station walls. 2Ere you not on patrolz2 I have been on patrol three times this week, and according to our roster, it shouldnqt be more than three per o''cer. Anyone can tell the chief is trying to punish me for what I did to Isabel in his own way. That is why he put me on patrol for the rest of the month. Not that 9J: WD?DN H?GYD

I mind' honestly, I love being outside in the -eld. Et least it keeps me from thinking about Isabel all the time. Hut today isnqt the day for me. I woke up with a migraine, a hammer;to;the;head, hurts;to;open;your;eyes migraine. The nausea and diUUiness are !ust starting to wear oj. Needless to say, I didnqt feel -t enough to drive a vehicle. Iqve barely slept in the past few days because of this uneasiness and restlessness since I broke up with Isabel.

2I donqt think Iqm on patrol, sir,2 I reply.

2I have the command here, Nikolai0 So, when I tell you to hit the

-eld, you do !ust that. 6et out of my precinct02 he says in a harsh tone.

2Hut sir, I was on patrol yesterday. Can I sit this one outz2 I

ask solemnly.

"What does that have to do with my last order? I want you at Masonville Street now!" he shouts.

"Yes, sir," I say, rising to my feet as I grab a few things from my table before I make it outside to the patrol car assigned to me.

"Wey Edams, mind joining me at Masonville for patrol?" I ask Edams, who I see entering the station.

"I'm sorry, man, I've got some reports I need to file," he says quickly.

"Edams, you can't be mad at me, too," I say.

"Why can't I?" he snaps.

"Because I don't have anybody on my side. You and Oonny are my only friends here," I explain. "Well, you should have thought of that before you shattered Isabel's heart." We pause for a second. "Before you approached Isabel, I asked you several times if you were ready for a commitment. You made me believe that you were. It's barely two months into the relationship, and you end it just like that without any logical reason. Well, without any reason at all!" he moves closer to me. "Answer me this: If she was your sister, would you smile and be chummy with whoever broke her heart?" he asks.

AETDM FITW YX DRqS HO1TWDO 9J9

I stare at him silently, knowing I can't answer the question.

"Fair enough then," I whisper. "Thanks for talking to me, though."

"Look, Nick, I'm not trying to be a hater, but it does raise suspicions when you wouldn't say why you ended things, even to her. It makes no sense, buddy. That's all I'm trying to say," he concludes as he walks away.

I shake my head as I watch him walk away.

*It's going to be a long day for me.*

I get into the car, and I drive off to Masonville Street. I drive around the neighborhood looking for anything suspicious. The area is usually peaceful, and there is hardly any report of any criminal being caught in this part of town. I park the patrol car at the end of the street and place my head on the steering wheel to get some rest to reduce the intense headache that seems to be arising up.

2He advised. This is a 9:;9. The suspect is currently on  
asonville in a black and blue Yustang.2 The radio scanner in  
the car establishes, bringing me out of my trance.

*10-16?*

*A stolen car?*

I rub the sleep away from my eyes.

*When did this happen? How long was I out?*

?ittle did I know that my decision to rest my eyes would turn  
into a full hour;long nap.

Suddenly, I see the Yustang pulling up in the street neBt to  
where I am currently packed. I try to turn on the carqs ignition  
to block the suspect out before escaping, but I canqt -nd the  
keys. Fhere did I put themz I 'uickly scan the car with my eyes  
and donqt see the keys. I check the dashboard, cup holder, and  
oor but canxt -nd the keys. *Goddammit! This man is going to  
get away.*

9JJ WD?DN H?GYD

I 'uickly call in for backup, and in no time, the suspect is  
surround; ed by the police. Thatxs the beauty of a small  
department' o''cers are available for backup on the y.

Efter the suspect has been caught, I discover the keys in my  
breast pocket while heading to my car.

*Jeez!*

*How fucked up am I?*

*I can't continue to live like this.*

I genuinely do not remember putting the key in my breast  
pocket.

Et the station, the chief calls me to his o''ce and scolds me for  
almost losing a suspect. I canxt tell him that I couldnxt -nd the  
car keys. I !ust have to apologiUe and tell him it wonqt happen  
again.

The rest of the day goes by in a blur, and Iqm back home in  
my empty bed, feeling uneasy and restless. I continue tossing  
around the bed, but sleep wonqt come. I give up and head to  
the kitchen to eat something. Yaybe -lling myself to the brim  
will knock me out.

Suddenly, my phone rings.

I hurried from my kitchen to grab the phone in my bedroom. I  
am shocked to see Isabelqs name pop up on my screen.

*Why is she calling me?*

*Is there something wrong?*

*Did she find out about Louis?*

I am very hesitant to pick up the call. But how will I know her reason for calling if I don't?

*Just pick up the call, Nikolai!* I charge myself.

Maybe this is my chance to come clean and explain everything to her.

I quickly pick up the call before the last beep.

"Nick, I need your help," her tiny voice escapes in a sob.

*Something is wrong.*

# Chapter Fourteen Isabel

Octavia has been running a fever for three days now, which is weird because she rarely gets sick. At first, I thought the Bug was hitting us one at a time. But she doesn't have a cold. She has just been running a temperature and has been extra cranky.

-I've been to the hospital, but they claim she is healthy and there's nothing wrong with her after running a few tests. I was confused when the doctor said this after her checkup. *How is it possible for her to be okay and still run a fever of 102°?* It doesn't make any sense.

"The doctor told me she most likely needed to rest, take a cool bath, and replenish her body with healthy foods. I found this slightly irritating because I am big on healthy foods any time, any day, for my daughter. She has been in bed for three days, sleeping, barely saying anything, and it's becoming worrisome. My cheerful and delighted daughter has now become a shadow of herself, and it scares the living shit out of me. The doctors don't have any answers. My fears and worries are through the roof because Octavia's fever isn't coming down, nor does she have even the slightest appetite.

I'm frustrated, livid, confused, scared, and exhausted at the same time, and it is beginning to show in me, too. But I have to be strong for my little girl.

"Please, Mom, just have this one last bite!" I plead to my daughter. She shakes her head as she pushes the spoon away.

4Gz LNUN1 SU2PN

"Just bear, you've barely eaten anything since yesterday. Mom, just eat this one for Mommy. If you do, I'll treat you to a big bowl of ice cream!" I distract her with my hands, trying to appease her.

"No! I don't want it!" she snaps.

*What am I going to do?*

I've tried everything possible to get her to eat, so much that I

threatened to take her back to the hospital for injections, but she won't budge.

Please, O! I whisper, trying my luck again. She pushes the spoon further away and gets up from her chair to go to her room, leaving me alone in the kitchen.

I let out a deep breath of frustration without knowing. I pack the food and clean the table before heading to her room to check on her.

My princess is lying on her bedside with her knees folded up to her chest as she stares at the wall. I've never seen my daughter this still, and it breaks my heart because there is nothing I can do to help. I go over and plant a kiss on her cheek that's relatively warm. Octavia doesn't bulge or reciprocate my kiss like usually she is. I must still. I excuse myself and let her rest as I return to the living room. I need to vent to someone.

I wish Nick were here to help because he was always good with Octavia.

*No!*

*What you are not going to do is think about that man! He made it clear he doesn't want you, so move on!*

His voice in my head is very loud on that subject.

I pick up my phone and dial Pina instead.

Hey, girlfriend! Pina's joyful sound fills my ears. I was just about to ring you up. She must missed the first session of the summit. How's Octavia? Any improvement? Feeling any better? Pina bombard me with questions. Typical of her.

FA"NX -I"L PR N5jx S6O"LN6 4G7

Pina has been away to Minnesota for an annual bank manager's summit. She left yesterday and will be there for a week.

It is like the universe ganged up against me this week. I lost Nick, and Pina is not even around to console me.

*It sucks.*

There is barely any improvement, I reply with a defeated tone.

The worst part is that she isn't even eating anything. She claims to have no appetite!

When there is something wrong. Are they not supposed to give her medicine or something? Pina asks, concerned.

Pina, I've gone to two hospitals. Two hospitals! They all claim she needs to rest, and giving her a cold bath will help lower



her te'p. All of which Ijve been doing anyway, but no i'prove'ent. It is frustrating. I Wust want 'y cheerful Octavia back,! I cry out.

!-ait, should we consider that she 'ay be depressedD! Pina sudM denly asks.

!XepressedD! I ask in disbelief. !-hat are you sayingD Low is that even possibleD xhe is Wust a childH -hy would she be depressedD! Ij' ba8ed by Pinajs co"ent.

*How can a five-year-old be depressed?*

!-ell, I read so'ewhere that kids get depressed, too. And I thought 'aybe she wasnTt happy lick wasnTt around any'ore. I donjt know,! she e'plains.

*Hmmm...*

!Xid you tell her about lickD! she Yuestions.

!xhe asked about hi' on "uesday, and I told her he isnjt co'ing over any'ore,! I reply.

!-as there any reaction fro' herD!

!lot really. xhe only asked why,! I say.

!AndD! Pina presses i'patiently

!I told her,! I answer, a little snippier than I intended. I donjt know what Pina is getting at, but I donjt think 'y daughter is depressed.

!"old her whatD Rou have to give 'e a direct answer so we can get to the botto' of this,! she scolds.

*When did Mina become a therapist?*

!I told her the truth, PinaH! I pause as I grab a glass of water fro' the counter. !I told her lick is never co'ing back.!

!Xonjt you think thatjs harshD! she Yuestions.

!-hat else would I have told herD Octavia is s'artq she wouldnjt buy into the lie,! I state.

!"hatjs the thingq you 'ust reali?e she is still a kid. lo 'atter how s'art you think she is, she doesnjt know 'uch. xhe doesnjt know her father, her grandfather died, and the only 'ale mgure she mnally connected with isnjt interested in her any'ore.

Xonjt you think that will take a toll on herD!

*Shit. I never thought about it that way.*

I a' so invested in 'y feelings that I didnjt see how these things 'ight a...ect 'y daughter.

I shouldnjt have brought lick into our lives so soon.

!LelloH Are you still there, SellaD! Pina asks.

!ReahH ReahH! I reply, shaking ‘y head back to the present.  
!Ij’ here,! I whisper. !-hy didnjt I think of that, PinaD A’ I a  
bad ‘o’D Xoes Octavia think Ij’ a bad ‘o’D! I Yuestion,  
e’pecting no answer in particular.

!Io, no, noH Isabel. Xonjt ever think thatH Roujre a’a?ing,!  
Pinajs sincere tone is highlighted in ‘y ears.

!“hank you, Pina, !I whisper. !Sut what if youjre rightD -hat do  
I doD! I ask.

!Leck, if I know,! Pina responds. !Paybe Ij’ Wust reaching.  
Paybe the doctors are right, and she Wust needs good rest. -e  
are in no posiM FA”NX -I”L PR N5jx S6O”LN6 4G”

tion to say. -e can only hope for the best, which is her Yuick  
recovery at this point,! Pina concludes.

!xhould I take her to a therapistD! I ask.

!;irlH xtop acting like your child is broken. xhe will be mne.  
Eust be there for her as youjve always been. “hatjs enough,!  
Pina replies. !I better get going. I need to get lunch before we  
return for another boring lecture.!

!Uook at ‘e. I Booded you with ‘y issues without asking how  
youjre doing up there,! I say, sounding apologetic.

!Itjs mne. Rou know Ij’ a big girlq I can handle ‘yself,! she  
says proudly. !I wish I were there to help you, though,! she  
ad’its. !“his place is no fun.!

!Ij’ sorry about that. Xonjt worry. Roujll be back ho’e soon.  
“ake care of yourself.!

-e bid our goodbyes, and I hung up the phone.

I let out another deep breath of frustration. It see’s to be a  
usual occurrence in recent days.

*What if Mina is right?*

*What if she just misses Nick?*

I return to Octaviajs bedroo’ to check on herq she is still  
curled up, facing the wall. It is as if she hasnjt ‘ade any  
‘ove’ent since. I walk up close to see if she has fallen asleep,  
but she hasnjt.

Ler eyes are milled with tears.

Py heart drops to ‘y knees. “he sudden helplessness I feel  
overM whel’s ‘e, driving ‘e insane.

*What’s happening to my little girl?*

*Why is she crying?*

I sprint to lie by her side. I pick her up and e’brace her closely

as 'y eyes begin to well with tears.

!;u"y bear, whatjs wrongD! 'y voice breaks.

xhe says nothing, but I donjt let go of her. I continue to stroke her hair. Ler te'perature still feels high. Sut Ij' not letting go of 'y baby girl.

I donjt know what to call it, 'other instincts 'aybe, but I begin to say things.

!O. Itjs okay darling, Po"y is here,! I say, sobbing against her neck. !I know itjs hard, but donjt worry. Po"y is here for you. Ijll never leave you, 'y darling. Rou are all I haveq youjll always be 'y sweet girl. I pro'ise you, Po"y is never going to leave you. Nven when you get tired of Po"y, she is not going anywhere. xhe is stuck to you like glue,! I pour out with tears. xhe chuckles a tiny bit that Ij' sure I would have 'issed if I was two inches away fro' her. I pull her away fro' 'y e'brace to look at her face, but she is still tearing up.

*Did I hear wrong?*

I know I heard her laugh Wust now.

!Octavia, please, tell 'e whatjs wrong,! I beg.

xhe Wust stares at 'e, wiping the tears away fro' her eyes.

!OD! I call, awaiting her response.

!I know youjre not going anywhere, Po"y,! she whispers.

"his is the 'ost she has spoken in three days. Py heart leaps in Woy.

*This can be considered progress.*

!Res, thatjs right, Ij' here for you,! I say, holding her hands mr'ly while staring into 'y little girljs eyes.

xhortly, she re'oves her hands fro' 'ine and returns to lying on the bed, facing the wall.

*Wait! What just happened?*

!Octavia, please look at 'e.! xhe doesnjt respond.

*Okay, this is bad.*

*What am I going to do in this situation?*

FA"NX -I"L PR N5jx S6O"LN6 4G0

*She isn't mad at me but won't talk to me either.*

"his is getting out of hand, and I donjt know what to do or say to help 'y sweet girl get better.

I feel very useless as a 'other.

suddenly, Octavia's voice becomes loud as she cries out. She is crying loudly. It scares the living shit out of 'e.

!Octavia! I grab her, but she won't look at 'e. I check her temperature she is still boiling, and her face looks red from crying. I've never seen her cry this much in her life.

!Sassy girl, you have to talk to 'e. Are you in any pain? My panicked voice can't be missed.

I try touching parts of her body to see if she will flinch in pain. But she just keeps on crying. She doesn't even let 'e put her on 'y lap.

!Octavia, please, you have got to help 'e here. "Tell 'e what's wrong so we can meet it,!" I plead, sobbing profusely.

She still doesn't say anything.

I think I'll have to take her back to the hospital.

!Octavia, please! I say, trying to get her out of bed, but she won't budge.

!I want a lick! she yells.

*Wait, what?*

!Sweetie, what was that? I ask to be sure I heard correctly.

!Lick! she cries out.

*Where is this coming from? Why would she want him?*

!Octavia, you know he can't come here anymore. He is... busy,!

I try to explain.

!I want a lick. she continues to cry.

*What am I going to do?*

*How will I get Nick to come?*

4 LNUN1 SU2PN

I know he isn't interested in 'e anymore, but given the situation, I'll have to swallow 'y pride and plead with him to see Octavia. At this point, I'll do anything to restore 'y daughter's health.

*Yes! I'm that desperate.*

I quickly ran back to the living room to grab 'y phone. I'm still shaken, but I have to make this call. Nick picks on the third ring. I'm sure he is confused to see 'y name pop up on his phone. But I need to say what needs to be said.

!Nick, I need your help.!

# Chapter Fifteen Nick

*Is she in trouble?*

*What could be wrong?*

Isabel's voice sounded so weak over the phone it made me panic. All

I could say was, "I'm on my way." I can't help but think she is probably ill again. Maybe I did this to her; I broke her.

I'm hoping she doesn't do anything to harm herself. I'm doing 90 on the highway to reach her house as quickly as possible.

Within 've minutes, I-m at her front door, ringing her bell frantiT cally. Hhe door comes "ying open instantly, and there she stands in her beautiful physique, but something is di?erent. Ser eyes and nose are red, pu?y, and swollen.

*She has been crying—a lot.*

My heart sinks to the bottom of my chest.

*I did this to her.*

BWhat's wrongYB I manage to ask, trying to mask the heartbeat in my voice.

BHhanks for coming,B her shaky voice rings. Ehe lets me into the house, and suddenly, memories "ash in. Leautiful memories of our short relationship and how we were inseparable from each other. Uou guessed it, every nook and cranny of this house, we made love there. It was a perfect time for me, and I went ahead and blew it.

*Coward!*

Oj! S131N L32M1

BIt's no problem. What is going onYB I ask, searching her eyes. BIt's xctavia,B she says.

My heart races in fear.

BWhat happened to herYB Hhe fear in my tone is evident.

BEhe isn't feeling too well,B she sobs. BWe've been to the hospital but

got nothing. Ehe has barely spoken or eaten in three days. I don't know what to do; I feel completely helpless while my

baby is in pain. I Dust want her to be okay, B she continues to cry.

It breaks my heart even further. Ehe has been dealing with this for days now. I could have been here to help out.

I walk up closer to her and envelope her in an embrace.

BIt will be okay, B I whisper to her, trying to calm her down.

BWhere is she Y B I ask.

BEhe is in her room, B Isabel replies. BEhe was the one who asked for you. Ehe wouldn't stop crying about wanting to see you. I had no choice but to call, B she says, pulling away from the embrace as she wipes her tears.

Ehe leads the way to xctavia's room, and I follow. I see xctavia on her bed, curled up and facing the wall.

*Is she sleeping?*

Bxctavia, B I call.

Ehe suddenly turns, and her face lights up upon seeing me.

Ehe Dumps o? her bed and races to me. Ehe has a lot of energy for someone who is supposed to be sick.

BNick X B her voice cracks in eRcitement. I open my arms wide enough for her to Dump in. I lift her, and she giggles Doyfully. I hug her tightly, and she places her head on my chest. Hruthfully, I can feel her fever.

*Wow! How is she this hot?*

I look over to Isabel to see her eyes wide open in shock. Ehe is astounded by what Dust happened.

FAH14 WIHS MU 1G'E L5xHS15 Ojj

BI missed you, Nick, B xctavia says, touching my chest. My chest tightens. I never considered how my decision to break up with Isabel a?ected xctavia. I shouldn't have neglected her Dust like that. After all, she is my blood. My brother's daughter.

BI've missed you too, angel, B I say, 'ghting back the tears.

Ehe removes her head from my chest and smiles.

BI knew you'd come back, B she says proudly.

Isabel still doesn't say anything. I'm sure she is too shocked to say anything. I mean, who wouldn't be Y Ser daughter is happy to see the man who broke her mother's heart. I wonder what is going through her head right now.

I bring my concentration back to xctavia. I mean, she is the

only reason I'm here.

*Liar!*

B Eweets, what would you like us to do now that I'm here Y B I ask.

B I want chicken soup X 3 ike the one you made, Mommy, B she says, pointing at her mother.

Isabel chuckles.

B A righty X We'll do Dust that, B I reply, leading the way into the kitchen.

I set xctavia up on her chair as I sort for ingredients in the cup T board. Isabel strolls into the kitchen with a thermometer.

E he instructs xctavia to open her mouth and place it inside.

After a few seconds, she brings it out to check the reading.

B Wow X B she e R claims.

B What Y B I ask, walking over to her.

B Ser fever has dropped X 4 rastically X B she says e R citedly.

B H hat's good, B I smile.

B Mina was right, B she says under her breath like she doesn't want me to hear.

O jz S131N L32M1

B Suh Y B I ask.

B Ueah, it's great X We Dust need to pump food into her. E he hasn't eaten since...well, it-s been a few days since she-s had anything sub T stantial, B she says, changing the topic.

*What was Mina right about?*

*Wait, why is Mina not here?*

I walk back to the stove to get the soup started. Isabel sits with xctavia, holding her hand as they giggle with each other.

I have missed the sight of them in pure Doy. I yearn to walk up to Isabel and kiss her, but I can't do that. I already ruined things.

H he soup is ready, and I serve xctavia a small bowl and a slice of bread. E he loves it and downs her whole bowl without any help.

l verything seems mysterious to me, and I have questions.

xctavia was sick, but she got better when she saw me; that's very mysterious.

*What is it about me that made her better?*

*Will she fall sick again when I leave?*

*What is the fate of me and Isabel?*

So many damn questions.

After xctavia's meal, I carry her to her room and read her a story before she falls asleep. When I return to the living room, Isabel is fast asleep on the couch. I can tell she is exhausted. She is such a strong woman but needs someone to shoulder some of the weight with her. My brother did her wrong, and I should be the one to step up.

But will Isabel still want me after discovering the truth about my brother?

I walk up to her peaceful sleeping self, kneeling before the couch to remove her hair from her face.

My God! Her beauty! I want to kiss those lips badly.

*I really can't get over her.*

FAH14 WIHS MU 1G'E L5xHS15 Oj...

She stirs a little on the couch before opening her eyes. She looks a little taken aback as she sees my face in front of hers. She sits up immediately.

Where is xctavia? she asks, returning memories of when she was sick.

I already put her to bed, remember? I ask.

Oh yeah. Thanks, she says, standing to her feet. She walks to the kitchen to grab two glasses and a bottle of wine.

Do you want some? she asks.

Yeah, I could use some, I reply, smiling.

She pours the bottle content into our glasses and passes mine.

Thanks for coming. Means a lot, she says, staring at me with the sincerity of her sparkling hazel eyes.

Her look on her face warms my heart.

Anytime, I pause, taking a sip from my glass. You know, breaking up doesn't mean we can't be friends. We were decent friends first, I explain.

She smiles briefly from the corner of her lips. I don't think I can do that, her voice breaks, avoiding my eyes as she stares into her glass.

Why not? I ask.

*As if you don't know! You broke her heart, dummy!*

It hurts, Nick. It still hurts, her eyes begin to well up in tears.

*Fuck!*



BI keep asking myself, what happenedYB she continues, trying hard to 'ght back her tears. I can see the struggle in her eyes. Lut she is failing.

BWhat did I do wrongY Am I not worthy of a decent relationshipY Eo many questions that I can't even string together enough words.B

B3isten, Isabel,B I shift closer to her, taking her hands into mine. BUou were never the reason I ended things with us. 4on't ever think OjJ S131N L32M1

that, please,B I say, lifting her chin so she can look at me. BUou are beyond perfect and the best thing that happened to me. Uou weren't the8.B I'm cut o? by the immediate press of Isabel's lips on mine as she kisses me suddenly. My body reacts almost immediately without thinking, closing the gap between us by shifting her closer. Ehe grabs the collar of my shirt and deepens the kiss.

BSmm8B I moan against her lips.

*Damn! I've missed kissing her.*

I'm not supposed to be doing this. I shouldn't be kissing her. Lut it

is all I've longed for since the breakup. I love her in my arms; I love the warmth of her tongue as it parades around mine. I Dust want her for myself.

*Stop Nick!*

*This isn't healthy.*

No, I'm not stopping. I love this woman and want to be with her. *Then you have to tell her the truth!*

I ignore the voice inside my head as I cup Isabel's face into my hands,

caressing her cheeks with my 'ngers.

*Nick! Stop!!*

I suddenly stop kissing her, and I pull away.

Seavily breathing, Isabel looks at me, confused.

BI'm sorry. I can't keep doing this,B I say deDectedly.

BWhyYB Isabel asks, still "ustered.

BHere are many things you don't know about8 about me8us8

about everything, and I don't think it is fair to you for us to do this, B I try to explain.

What is it? Does this have something to do with the picture you saw the other day? B she questions.

Yeah, kind of, B I mutter.

FAH14 WIHS MU 1G'E L5xHS15 OjP

When tell me what exactly it is that is bothering you. I've already told you xctavia's dad was just a one-night stand. I never saw him again after that one night we got together, B she explains.

Was that all he was to you? B I inquire.

She opens her mouth to answer but stops abruptly. She lets out a deep sigh.

Book, I was young and naive. He was nice, charming, and charismatic. I thought I had fallen in love and found the one. Turns out he only wanted to sleep with me, B she looks at me to see my reaction.

*Did my brother lie to get her in bed?*

*Doesn't sound very much like the person he was. He was an honorable man.*

She continues, B I regret my actions that day, but I don't regret having xctavia. She is my world. B

B I know that, B I say. B So am I going to say this? B I ask rhetorically. Suddenly, my palms begin to feel sweaty and shaky. I'm beyond nervous and don't know how to present the issue before her.

Just tell me what's going on, Nick, B she demands.

*Just say it!*

B Smm8B

*Say it!*

B What8 what I'm trying to8 to say8 is that8 B

*Fuck! Why is it so hard?*

*Fucking say it!*

B Louis is my brother, B I spit in a breath, closing my eyes as if expecting an impact. I open them to see Isabel's face has gone pale.

What did you just say? B she asks.

B Louis8 is my brother, B I say, lowering my head.

What do you mean, brother? She looks utterly out of body, trying to comprehend what I've told her. You mean the one I talked about?

brother you always talked about, that passed away? She asks.

I nod my head in response.

Isabel begins to pace around the room, running her hand through her hair in confusion.

Listen, Isabel. I didn't know about all this until I saw that picture of him and didn't know how to react. That was why I thought the only option was to end things with you, I say.

She turns to me and asks, When did he die?

I didn't expect the conversation to take this turn.

Some years ago, I reply.

What was the year I met him. In August, she cries out.

*Oh shit!*

*She is the one he talked about. So, she wasn't just a one-night stand.*

She died in August, I say quietly.

Oh, my God! She exclaims. No, he wasn't lying. She begins to cry. He wasn't lying.

I walk over to her and embrace her to calm her down.

She said he was going to come back, she continues to cry on my chest.

I know. I'm sorry, I whisper, stroking her hair.

After a few minutes, her sobs stop, and there is silence. She is calm. She pulls away from my embrace and walks back to the table to grab her glass and fill it with wine. She empties the entire content down her throat.

Isabel? I try to caution her, please.

Everything seems to be moving in slow motion and at hyper speed simultaneously. I can't help but think that Louis would be happily married to Isabel if he were alive. Would I have still fallen in love with my brother's wife?

FAH14 WIHS MU 1G'E L5xHS15 Oj9

Indeed not, but that's not the situation we've found ourselves in. We are destined to be together; I know that much.

Isabel? Are you going to say anything? I ask.

Sonestly, Nick, I don't know what to say. This is all Dust too

much and messed up, really messed up. For the longest time, I thought Louis played and used me, but I'm finding out that he was a victim of sudden death. Also, the man I have now fallen in love with happens to be his brother. And the chances of you ending up here, working in the same building as me, this is fucked up, Nick. I think I need time to process this. Right now, I don't know what to think or say. BBSmmm..." I let out a deep sigh. BI understand completely. For what it's worth, I still want to be with you, Isabel. I was foolish to cut you off so abruptly, and for that, I am truly sorry, BI say as I walk over to plant a brief kiss on her forehead, bidding her goodbye before entering the house.

# Chapter Sixteen Isabel

“So, you’re telling me that last week Nick’s mere presence cured Octavia and that he is Octavia’s uncle and might potentially be her stepfather? Wow! This is a real-life soap opera,” Mina expresses.

“You see how I’m struggling to wrap my head around this. It’s weird, right?” I ask.

I had qlled Mina in on the drama happening in my life as soon as she returned from Minnesota. To say she was shocked would be an understatement. The whole thing is unbelievable to process.

Nick has respectfully given me the space I rezuested, which I’m thankful for. I know the circumstances are weird for me and for him, and I appreciate his patience.

Imagine qnding out you’re in love with someone your brother used to be with, even though it was only for a day.

It isn’t a normal situation.

The universe does have a biDarre way of bringing people together.

“Truthfully, it is,” Mina responds. The look of shock hadn’t left her face since I told her.

“Lo you know what hurt the most?” I ask Mina.

“What?” She looks at me curiously.

“The fact that Aouis is dead. We never got the chance to explore our chemistry, which makes me zuestion what would have been if he was alive today,” I pause brieFy. “Elso, I have always imagined that one day, HETXL WITB MY XR’S 14OTBX4 ;j;

Octavia will get to meet her father out there, but it seems that’s never going to happen, and it breaks my heart.”

“I understand what you mean. lut you can’t overthink it because it will mess up your relationship with Nick,” she sipped the coUee I made for her.

*Cheers to my barista days in Paris.*

“Aet me ask you one zuestion,” Mina says. “Bow do you feel about

Nick?”

“Bonestly, I love him very much2 I can’t deny that. Be is patient

and selfEss, and that’s Gust amaDing. I can’t imagine a life without him.

I can’t even tell you how lost I felt when he told me he wanted to end

things. It was as if life left my body and my soul dried up. So yeah, that’s

how much I love him,” I exhale. The weight of that being oU my chest

lightens me and makes me feel physically and emotionally exhausted. I watch Mina look at me with rapt attention, like an attorney

listening to their client’s case.

“Wow! My friend is smitten,” she giggles, slapping me playfully on

my arm. Then, her face suddenly shifts to a serious one.

“You want my advice?” she zuestions.

I nod my head in response.

“Lon’t overthink it! Aouis is your past2 Nick is your future. If you’re happy with Nick, Octavia loves him. You should be with him.

Lon’t think about the drama attached. That’s Gust the best deal out

of all this because, for the life of me, I can’t imagine you losing Nick

because of these unavoidable circumstances. It doesn’t make sense,”

she concludes.

Aately, Mina has been making a lot of sense when handling people.

She knew what was wrong with Octavia, and here she was, giving the

best advice.

;jJ BXAXN 1A\*MX

“I think you, my friend, should take up the Gob as this town’s therapist.” I praise.

Mina giggles loudly.

I approach her side of the counter and take her hands into mine. “Thank you so much, Mina. You are the absolute best,” she flashes me a smile.

“Anything for you, best friend,” she says, squeezing my hand a little tighter. “I’m glad I could help. I have to go now. I have a report to write ahead of Monday,” she says, standing to her feet. “Give my regards to Octavia when she returns from her date with Nick.”

“I will,” I say, leading her to the door. I give her one more hug as she exits the house.

.....

Wired out of my mind, I continue to flip through the channels on the television, looking for anything that will hold my attention since I am the only one home. Nick had taken Octavia on a play date that he had been promising since her recovery. They’ve been gone for the whole day.

Since Mina left, I have been left with my thoughts to fully dissect what I will discuss with Nick when he returns. God knows I want to be with that man. As Mina said, I shouldn’t overthink it and go for what my heart desires, and that’s precisely what I will do.

Just as I am about to give up on the television, I hear the sound of Nick’s car pulling into the driveway.

My heart leaps for joy. Suddenly, I felt like Octavia this morning when Nick came to get her.

HETXL WITB MY XR’S 14OTBX4 ;j5

I’m excited to see my daughter, but most importantly, to speak to Nick.

“Mommy!” Octavia calls out immediately as she runs through the front door her arms are wide open. I stretch out my hands to receive her.

After our embrace, she tells me the countless fun things they did on their play date. The other kids she met and how she

made friends with a dog named Aeo. She swears the dog is taller than her.

After her story, I instructed her to go wash up for dinner. My baby might be tiny, but she knows how to handle herself pretty well. I raised an independent girl, and I am proud.

As Octavia disappears into her room, I turn to face Nick.

“Thanks for spending time with her,” I say.

“It’s my pleasure. She is like a daughter to me, you know,” he says, staring into my eyes.

*Niece, you mean.*

I shake my head to get rid of the intrusive thoughts.

“Would you like anything to eat?” I ask.

“Not now,” he replies relatively fast. “I’m still pumped on sugar. Courtesy of Octavia.”

“Ehh6 I see, you fell for her trick. She will continue to use you to get sugary foods if you don’t draw a line now.”

Be Goins me on the couch, grabbing the remote to flip through channels.

“There’s nothing worth watching there,” I admit.

“We might find something,” he says, sounding optimistic.

*He is such a light!*

After a few minutes of him flipping through channels and me contemplating how to bring up the issue, Nick notices me staring at him.

;;j BXAXN 1A\*MX

“What?” he asks, staring back at me with a suspicious smile, highlighting his dimples.

“Can we talk?” I ask suddenly.

“Yeah,” he draws out slowly. His face suddenly goes red in fear. Hear of the words that will come out of my mouth.

I reach out for his hand to calm him down. He looks down at my fingers intertwined with his and then back to my face to flash a brief smile.

I reciprocate the smile before speaking. “Nick, first of all, let me use this opportunity to thank you for respecting my decision to have some space to think about our6em.. umm... issue?” I chuckle nervously. “Well, I have been able to put everything into thought6” I pause again to search his face2 he is trying hard to remain calm and listen to me.

“E wise woman told me today that the future should be my



focus and never the past because I can't do anything to change what has happened in the past.”

“I agree,” Nick responds almost immediately, nodding in agreement.

I chuckle.

“I guess I'm trying to say that the past is in the past. You are my future, Nikolai Wood, and I want to be with you for as long as that is,” I profess, staring intensely into his golden brown eyes.

Without hesitation, Nick pulls me into an embrace full of Goy, which makes me giggle in surprise at his gesture.

“I love you so damn much, Isabel Baker,” he says before he pulls me away from his embrace without taking his hands off my arms, he pulls me in for a kiss. The kiss that I have been longing for. The kiss of genuine and sincere passion crashing into each other. I know how much I miss his lips. I give into his lips almost immediately as we move in sync, savoring the taste of each other's lips, building up the sexual tension  
HETXL WITB MY XR'S 14OTBX4 ;jP

even more. Nick whispers while making love with my lips, “I am never letting you go again, no matter what. I am here to stay for life, my love, and I will always be there for you and Octavia.”

.....

“You have to tell me where we are going!” I turn to Nick as he drives the car, smiling at him sheepishly.

“Can't you just be patient?” Nick teases. “You'll see when we get there.”

“But I wanna know now!” I whine, pouting my lips to look pitiful.

“Isabel! We'll be there soon. Okay?” Nick responds, almost in awe of my childish behavior.

I roll my eyes at him, knowing he won't budge or tell me where we are heading.

“If you must know, I grew up in this town, so I know everywhere. There is no new or surprising sight for me here.” I

try another method to see if Nick will fall for it and Gust tell me where we are headed. But he doesn't say anything. Be continues to laugh at my dramatic antics.

"You're something else, Isabel," he chuckles.

It has been two weeks since we got back together, and it has been nothing but bliss. I am madly in love with Nick and wouldn't have it any other way. Be makes me happy, and that gives my soul peace.

Every other day, Nick takes me out on random dates. Be says it is a tradition he wants to incorporate into our dating life, so the spark is always there.

*He is so goddamn perfect!*

His intentionality makes him different, and I freaking love that I am his woman. We've gone on so many dates that I am beginning to lose count. Almost all restaurants in town and neighboring ones know us by now, and no doubt people think he is Octavia's dad.

A classmate from high school walked up to me while I was shopping, telling me she was glad Octavia's dad was now in the picture. What did I expect? It's a small town. Rumors will always spread. I only told her thank you and went back to my shopping.

Nick is so good with Octavia. Be is emotionally and mentally present and ready to raise a child. It's natural for him, like he has done it before. When I asked him about this, he told me he knows the kind of father he doesn't want to become, and I understood perfectly. During our relationship, we've had sensitive and vulnerable discussions about our lives growing up, and I must say, it has brought us much closer together.

Nick told me about his childhood with his brother and how vicious their father was and still is. Nick spoke highly of his brother sometimes, I wish I had gotten to know him beyond that one night together. All in all, I am elated that I'm with Nick.

Our date today is a special one. It's my birthday! Twenty-seven years on this green earth is something worth celebrating. Knowing I'm not a fan of parties and large crowds, Nick has decided to take and treat me to something 'special and divine.'

*Those were his words.*

Be arranged for a babysitter for Octavia as Mina is out of town

again.

*My friend is getting busier by the day. It comes with the promotion, and I couldn't be prouder.*

I'm curious and eager to see what he will pull oU this time.

Finally giving up on getting him to tell me where we are headed, I crank up the radio's volume. Es huge fans of Lolly :arton, we sing along, enGoying the warm summer breeDe as we drive to our destination.

HETXL WITB MY XR'S 14OTBX4 ;j9

Nick stops the car after an extra thirty minutes of driving through town. Before we leave the car, he tells me to put on a blindfold.

I'm not a huge fan of surprises. They make me anxious.

"Lo I have to put this on?" I ask, trying so hard to make a sad puppy face.

Nick chuckles. "Come on, big baby, it's Gust for a few seconds,K he says as he assists me in tying up the blindfold.

"Okay, if you say so," I say defeatedly, turning my back to allow him access to secure the knots.

Be exits the car, opens the door for me, and leads me down a path.

It's pitch black in this blindfold.

I can hear birds humming and smell the beautiful scent of summer Fowers blooming. I also hear the sound of a door opening, and I'm pretty sure we walk right through.

In a few more seconds, Nick takes oU the blindfold. It takes a brief minute for my eyes to adGust to the dim lighting. I blink rapidly to hasten the process before my eyes set sight of a set dinner table in the middle of the room. It is set for two, and rose petals are decorated around this pretty peach-colored room. Et the far end of the room, I see a chef smiling at me and a small string zuartet ready to play. Nick signals to them, and they bring to life the soothing melody of 'Xndless Aove' by Liana 4oss - one of my favorite divas of all time.

I immediately turn to Nick. I am surprised as to how he managed to pull this oU.

"Nick! This is beautiful!" I hug him.

"You love it?" he asks.

"Of course I do. It is perfect," I szueak excitedly.

"3ood!" Nick says, leading me to the table and pulling out my

chair.

*My perfect gentleman.*

Be claps, and the kitchen staff comes in to serve our food.

It feels like a five-star restaurant, the only difference being we are the ones here, which is perfect.

We are entitled to a five-course meal. This is the first time I've experienced something this extravagant. Growing up with my parents, we never went anywhere fancy for food. Our food was usually made at home by my mother or father.

So, this is a new experience for me.

And I experienced everything hors d'oeuvres, appetizers, salad, our main course meal, and dessert.

Wow! When I tell you this food is on point, I mean it. The chef understood the assignment and did it justice. I savor every taste from my plate and enjoy how they settle into my palate.

Nick and I got lost in conversations as we ate our dinner.

Laughing and just being ourselves. After our meal, the quartet and the chef pack up, and we are alone in the room.

"Thank you so much for this, Nick," I say, reaching for his hand across the table.

"It's your birthday, and you're worth celebrating my love," he says in his deep sexy voice.

I blush unapologetically. "What time do we have to leave?" I ask, already impatient to go home and treat this man to some love.

He chuckles again.

"We have the place to ourselves all night. It's a service apartment."

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah," he replies.

"Well, in that case, we've got to take care of something," I say, standing to my feet as I approach him. I take my seat on his lap as I start to caress his beard.

"So, what do you have in mind?" he asks. His pupils are already dilated in lust.

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"I want to show my appreciation to you for celebrating me today,"

I say as I unbutton his shirt slowly, maintaining eye contact. “End how will you do that?” Nick begins to play along. “I’m thinking I’ll start by doing this,” I say before pressing my lips against his, and I wrap my arms around his neck, drawing him closer to me.

“Mmmmm6,” he moans against my lips. “I think I like that,” he whispers. “What else would you like to do?”

I begin to work my fingers, digging into his hair.

“Be patient. Let everything happen in order,” I say as I kiss every part of his face. Slowly I move to his earlobe and suck and caress it with my tongue.

“Huck!” escapes his mouth with a loud breath of pleasure. He closes his eyes as he begins to enjoy the sensation of my tongue on his ears.

I feel his member trying so hard- *pun intended*- to escape his trousers. I can tell he is impatient, but what is the rush?

We have the whole place to ourselves. We can do whatever we want. Whenever, and whenever we want. I can’t wait to scream his name as he thrusts inside me without a care. Octavia is not here2 we don’t have to be careful with our noise.

*I love it.*

I finally remove his shirt and run my fingers against his abs.

No matter how often I see his chest, I will always be in awe of his sexy body.

I slide my hands further down and begin to unbuckle his belt.

He is fully erect. I get on him so I can pull on his pants and briefs. Excitedly, I do just that and grab his length into my hand. I slide it up and down his length while keeping my eyes fixed on his. I can tell my eyes are replicating the stare of lust he has on his face right now. He grabs my hair in reaction, and I know it is time to go all in.

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I take one last look at him before touching his cap, caressing it with my tongue.

“Huck!” he exclaims louder this time, earning a proud smile for himself.

# Chapter Seventeen Nick

“Fuck!” I shout without a care in the world. The warmth of Isabel’s mouth drives me to a new world of pleasure, and I don’t know if I can contain myself. She rocks her head back and forth on my member, gicking her tongue along it. I have never experienced anything like this. If I weren’t seated, I would buckle from the intense pleasure. She continues to go rhythmically slow on my member as I savor every stroke of her mouth while she keeps her undeniably seamy-looking hazel eyes on me.

I know what she is doing; she is teasing me, and it works really well. If I don’t do something now, I will finish all over her mouth in seconds.

It is my turn to tease. Two can play this game. I bring my hand to raise her head and carry her back to my lap. Without warning, I shower her strawberry-tasting lips with an intense kiss, ravaging her mouth with pleasure. She moans softly, and I know I am doing something right. I kiss her as I take off her peach-colored gown that coincidentally matches the painting on the wall in the service apartment. Each is her favorite color, so it only made sense this was the apartment I chose.

*Her breasts are divine.*

They are perfectly made, and they fit right into my hands. I cup them with my hands and squeeze passionately on them.  
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“Des!” she moans.

I swipe my thumb across her areolas, which drives her crazy; her nipples harden, and she rocks her hips forward. I can feel the wetness from her panties on my lap. I am so turned on. In the same breath, I intensify our kiss and stand up with her, wrapping her legs around my bare backside. I gently push away everything on the table, including the gowns. I lay her

on the table in one swipe. Muckily, it had been cleared of plates. I place her down without breakinx apart our kiss. 2oans continue to escape our lips as we devour each other. I unwrap her lexs from my waist and spread them apart on the table. I break away from the kiss and stare at her as I use my Pnxers to rub her clit.

*Damn! She is pouring wet.*

She bites down on her lower lips, and I see xoosebumps all over her body. She wants me in the worst way, I can tell. She yanks me forward with her arms around my neck, pullinx me in for another round of kisses. She moves her hands to my hair and tuxs xently. I pull her closer, and without caution, I slide inside her, earninx moans from both of us. I open my eyes to see Isabel starinx rixht back at me. She has never looked se-ier with sparkly, lustful eyes. Slowly, I continue to thrust inside her, e-pressinx my love for her with my body.

Isabel xrabs my butt cheeks, pullinx me closer to thrust faster. She wants more, and I obey instantly, with more passion, intensiz fyinx my thrust.

*She is so warm on the inside.*

She moans out loudly in pleasure. "Nick, yes!"

Xur rhythm rapidly intensiPes, sendinx us to the far edxe of xlory. "I love you, Isabel," I say before I come unapoloxetically undone inside her.

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I reathinx frantically, she places her forehead on mine and smiles. "I love you so damn much, Nick," she says, clearly out of breath. "This is undoubtedly my best birthday celebration ever!"

I reciprocate the smile and xently place a kiss on her forehead. "Rnythinx for you, baby,G I lift her from the table and carry her into the bedroom, where we'll proclaim our love for each other axain.

???

3amn! I have to be the luckiest man alive. The way Isabel loves is phenomenal. She is perfect, and I will continue to love

her until I die. I've been ready to pop the question since our first official date. But I have to keep calm till the time is right. I don't know if I can be that patient, though.

The look's on my father because he thought I would be miserable when I got to Greenville, and he expected me to come running back to him for help. He was indeed very far from the truth. In Greenville, I've found a community and the most amazing woman, accompanied by a divine sense of peace and accomplishments that I never felt, even as one of the most highly decorated detectives in 3.C. I will not trade my life now for what it used to be. If anything, I should thank my father for pushing me toward this treasure, even though that was the last thing he'd intended to do.

"Earth to Nick!" Isabel's voice rings, bringing me out of my thoughts. "What is on your mind?" she questions, staring at me curiously.

*How can she look this flawless in the morning?*

"Well, if you must know?" I begin to speak as I roll over to her side of the bed, pulling her close to me. "... I was thinking about how lucky YO: BUMUN 1M52U

I am to have you in my life," I say, covering every part of her face with kisses. She giggles as she tries to back my lips away with her palm, but I do not succumb. I continue to kiss her all over, earning more laughter from her. Her very musical laughter.

Isabel stands after a few more minutes of cuddling together on the bed.

"Where are you going?" I ask. I don't want our cuddles to end.

"I'm going to take a shower," she smiles. "I love the serenity of this place, but we have to go back home."

"Can't we just stay one more day?" I pout.

Jinxing, she replies. "So you think you're Xctavia? We have to go relieve the sitter and have work tomorrow that we both need to prepare for."

I roll my eyes jokingly. "Okay, fun, police. I heard you," I say defeatfully.

"Oh, oh," she says, pretending to be hurt. "I hear ya!" Her



southern accent comes on display. Suddenly, there is a mischievous smirk on her face.

*What is she up to?*

She begins to take off her E8s. "I might not be fun, but I know what I am," she says, winking as her night dress falls to the ground, revealing her se-ily toned, curvy body.

My 4aw feels like it is on the ground, and my member feels the heat almost instantly. I can feel it bulging in my briefs. Isabel seems to notice as she teases me with more se-y moves. She turns around, bending over in a perfect arch to pick up her night dress from the ground before walking to the bathroom. I waste no time stripping myself naked, walking hurriedly to join her in the shower.

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FRTU3 qITB 2D U" S 1\*XTBU\* YOO

"Mommy is home!" we hear Xctavia's voice from the front door as we exit the car in the driveway. Isabel and I smiled at each other because we had discussed in the car that Xctavia would be outside, already expecting us. And we were right.

Xctavia quickly runs towards her mother but suddenly turns away when she sees me.

"Nick!" Her eyes pop in excitement immediately when she sees me. She runs towards me, and I bend down so she can embrace me. I give her a big hug and tickle her. She laughs loudly, just like her mother. I turn to Isabel to see her staring at me with disbelief.

"Jummy bear don't you want to hug Mommy?" she asks. "I will! I'm with Nick now," she says with the cutest confidence.

I chuckle, intentionally rubbing it in for Isabel. I kiss Xctavia and tell her to hug her mother.

Isabel pretends not to want the hug again, and Xctavia apologizes immediately.

"I'm sorry, Mommy. I love you!" she says, opening her arms wide. "I was saving the best for last."

Damn! Wow is she this emotionally intelligent at her age? It

ba9es me sometimes. She reminds me of Mouis. Be always knew what to say to make everyone feel better.

Communication is somethinx I have struxxled with for a lonx time. I wish I had the type of upbrinxinx that Xctavia has. She is deeply rooted.

Isabel Pnally succumbs and huxs her dauxhter, showerinx her with kisses. qe all enter the house to see the babysitter tryinx to clear oH some of Xctavia's toys scattered on the goor.

"I can see you en4oyed your time when we were away," Isabel says, turninx to Xctavia.

"Des, Susan and I played a lot," she says happily.

"So, you didn't miss 2ommy6" she Luestions axain.

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"I missed you," she replies, returninx to hux her mother axain. qhen Susan Pnishes cleaninx, I pay her and thank her for her service.

I xo to the bedroom, and I don't see Isabel there. Then I xo to Xctavia's room to see them on the bed, xossipinx with each other as Isabel styles her hair.

Sometimes, I forxet that Xctavia is 4ust a Pvezyearzold kid. She speaks with so much conPdence and xrace.

"Bey, baby, I think I should head out. I have some thinxs to take care of in my apartment," I say, walkinx further into the room.

"\*eally6" Isabel pouts.

"I will7"

"Nick! Rre you leavinx me6G Xctavia interrupts, her brows fold in a frown. "Dou 4ust xot here."

"Xh no! I'll never do that. I 4ust need to xo do somethinx at my apartment," I e-plain, walkinx up to her.

"qhy don't you 4ust live with us6 Then you wouldnWt have to keep xoinx," she blurts out.

2y eyes shoot wide open in shock.

*Oh wow!*

I didn't see that cominx.

I look at Isabel and see she is 4ust as shocked as I am.

"Bmmm7hmmm," I try to make out words, but my brain seems to be in overdrive.

"Xctavia, Nick can't live here, sweetie. Be needs his personal

space.” Isabel says, coming to my rescue.

*But I want to live with them.*

“Why?” Xctavia asks, looking genuinely confused. “Be is here every time!” she stretched out her arms dramatically.

I chuckle at her drama.

*She is indeed my brother’s daughter.*

“I will tell you what,” I say, sitting on the bed and stretching my hand to her. “When I come back, we will discuss, okay?” Xctavia gives me a smile, and I peck her forehead. “Okay!” she says joyfully.

I kiss Isabel.

“I’ll be back, sweets. I love you.”

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In under twenty minutes, I’m back at my apartment, ready to do some laundry and get ready for next week’s work. While in my tiny laundry room, sorting out some clothes, fantasizing about living together with my girls, Isabel and Xctavia, my phone rings in the bedroom. I’m guessing it’s one of the guys. I promised to hang out with them this evening.

I dash to my bedroom to retrieve my phone. I see the caller ID, and I am shaken. I never thought I’d get a call from him, especially from how I cussed him out and stormed out of his office.

*What does he want this time?*

I’m guessing he wants to know if I’m miserable enough. Besides, on him I’m living my best life and will start a family real soon. \*reluctantly, I answer his call.

“Son!” his loud, husky voice vibrates in a crescendo through my ears.

“Good afternoon, Father,” I deadpanned, my voice matching my feelings perfectly.

“You don’t have to sound like that. Aren’t you excited to hear from your father?” he questions.

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This has to be a joke. There was never a time in my entire life when I had a pleasant conversation with this man. If he is not naïve, he is devising ways to control you.

“What do you want?” I ignored his comment.

“I called to check on you. See how you’re faring in your new environment.” I can hear the cynicism in his tone.

*How convenient.*

Suddenly, he is interested in my welfare after almost a year.

*He is up to something.*

“Are you sure that’s the real reason you called?” I ask.

There is a brief pause in the background. It almost sounds like he is hesitant to say something.

“Why did you call, Father?” I ask again.

“It’s time for you to come back home, son,” he says in a solemn, commanding voice.

*This must be a joke.*

“And why would I do that?” I question.

“Don’t be silly, boy! You were sent there to learn your lesson, and I think you’ve learned enough,” he states.

“Learn my lesson?” This old man is losing it.

*What lesson was I to learn out here?*

“Des, son. It is time for you to return to your old man.”

“I’m not doing that!” I state firmly.

He suddenly lets out his usual cynical laugh.

“Damn man, you have no choice!”

I should laugh out because this man thinks he has a hold on me. Newsflash! He has nothing on me.

“Des, I have a choice!” I say, equally as intense. “And I choose to stay here and be my own person.”

“Son, you have a legacy to fulfill. You can’t just be wallowing around. That police work won’t serve you any purpose. You have to stop running away from your destiny.”

*Here we go again.*

There was another long, deafening silence.

“Mook!” I begin to speak. “I’ve told you countless times. I know my destiny, and it has nothing to do with you.” I swallow to prepare myself for the next thing I will say. “Please don’t call me again if this is the only reason you’re calling.

I’m sick and tired of hearing your destiny crap. Mook for

someone else you can wrap around your thumb. It is not yours to be me. Goodbye, Father!" Just as I am about to drop the call, he calls out.

"Quit!" he chuckles lightly. "So you really think you can say no to me? I am your father! Whatever I tell you is what should be done. I have that authority over you."

I remove the phone from my ear and stare at it in disbelief.

*What kind of father says this?*

"So the necessary, boy, and return to 3.C. If you don't, you will regret it greatly. Consider this the only warning I will give," he thunders.

"Are you threatening me?" I ask.

"You can call it whatever you want. Just do as I say. I'll be expecting you back home in a week. Goodbye, son!"

Rrrh!

I let out a frustrated, aggressive sound as soon as I drop the call. This man is truly a madman.

*What type of father threatens his own child?*

I must have been doomed at conception to end up with a father like this.

I don't care what he tries, I am not leaving Greenville. It is my home now.

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I throw my phone on my bed to return to the laundry and continue washing, but that old man has already ruined my mood.

# Chapter Eighteen Isabel

“Octavia! Octavia! Octavia!” I race around the house, screaming her name as I can’t hear any sound from her room. I walk into her room and see her. She is fully dressed in dance attire and sitting on the edge of her bed, sulking.

I promised to take her to a dance class today, but I’m exhausted and just want to relax.

“Hey baby, are you upset with Mommy?”

She looks at me with very cold eyes before responding, “No, I know you’re tired, and you don’t want to cancel on me,” she says, but I still see the hurt in her eyes.

She’s trying to hide her emotions because of me.

I decide to prompt her. “Are you upset that Mommy is tired and can’t take you to your dance class?”

She looks at me again, but this time not so cold.

“Yes, I’m upset you’re tired! I know you’d have taken me if you weren’t. I’m not upset with you, just the situation,” she sighs.

*Just the situation? Where did my baby girl go?*

She is the smartest -veLyearLold I know.

*How is she so emotionally mature? I’m raising a smart young lady!*

She suddenly hugs me as if to comfort me. I should be the one comforting her, not the way around.

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“You know what? Det your bags. Mommy now has enough strength to take you to your dance class. Your hug is magic! It gave me strength,” I whisper into her ears. Her face lights up immediately, but she holds back a bit.

“Are you sure, Mommy? Aren’t you tired anymore?” she asks innocently.

How do I tell my -veLyearLold that sometimes, we go the extra mile for the ones that are important to us? “Octavia, Mommy is still tired, but your hug gave her strength to drive you to your dance class today. Sometimes, we go the extra

mile for people we love and who love us, and I will give up things for you! Do you understand?"

"Yes, mummy, I do." Her face immediately lights up, and she stands from the edge of her bed to put on her shoes and her bag.

I watch her with a proud smile on my face as she gets her things in order.

"Ready, Mommy!" she squeaks excitedly.

"Dive me a few minutes to get ready, okay?"

I walk back to my room, pick up my phone to leave a message for Nick, pick up my purse car keys, and change out of my pajamas. I turn around to see Octavia at the door, all excited. I'm a bit startled, and she smiles, having realized what her presence did to me.

"You were scared, Mommy," she teases, laughing and pointing at me.

"No, I wasn't. Mommy is a big girl," I say, raising my shoulders to strike the Power Girl pose. She imitates me, and we laugh at ourselves.

"Okay, it's time to go," I gather her in my arms, and we head to the front door. I step out, locking the door behind me, and guide toward the car.

I notice a black sedan adjacent to my house. No one on the street owns a black sedan. Maybe Xarila's daughter is finally home. It's been three months since my neighbor Xarila died, but her daughter couldn't attend the funeral because she wasn't in the country, or so they said.

Rumor ...ies very fast in this town. If she's back, then that's good. She can attend to personal things the community couldn't do for Xarila after her death.

I try to see if the door to Xarila's house is open from my end, but the sun shines so bright I can't see very far ahead.

I buckle Octavia in the back seat and walk to the driver's side. I enter the car, and my phone rings just before I start driving to Octavia's dance class. It's Nick. I plug my earphones and then answer the call. "Hey, Nick?"

"Hey baby, I got your message. I see Octavia won this round," he says, chuckling, trying to get to me.

"Yes, she did. Such a smart, sweet little girl. I wonder when she became so good with words."

“She learned from the best! Oh, by the way, I’m talking about myself, not you,” he says again, laughing.

“Ohhh, shut up! Det oT your high horse, Mr. Smart Mouth.”

“You know you could have called me4 I’d have gladly come to your rescue. I wouldn’t mind taking her to class4 I don’t have much to do, and you need rest,” he says, his tone changing to a serious one.

“Hey, o’cer, shouldn’t you be guarding the entire community?” I say, trying to tease him because I know he hates the weekend shift.

“Xhe community is safe, baby! I got the community, and I got you.”

*Aww!*

He always has the right words to melt my heart.

“I know,” I say, smiling. “And I appreciate you for it, but I also need to let her know that I’m still her mom before she runs away with you,” I -nish laughing. I hear him laugh on the other end of the line as well.

“Mommy— is that Nick?”

“Yes baby, it’s Nick,” I respond.

“Can I talk to him?”

“Hmm, no, not now, at least4 you can talk to him when you return from dance lessons, okay? He’s saying 7HiJ to you, by the way!” I say, looking at her through the rearview mirror.

“Hi, Nick! Mommy doesn’t want me to talk to you,” she screams at the top of her voice.

*I love that she loves Nick.*

“No, I said you’ll talk to him when you return from class. Mommy is talking to Nick now,” I wink at her, and she giggles.

“See, we are here!” I turn to face Octavia as I pull over. “Stay on the call, please,” I say to Nick as I step out of the car to open the back door for Octavia. I scoop her out of the back seat and carry her inside. A couple of adorable little children in their ballet ensemble are inside the building already. I meet their dance instructor, Mrs. Ane, and two other women who help out. I’ve known Mrs. Ane for zuite some time now. She used to be friendly with my dad when he was alive. It’s really good to see her again as we haven’t seen since my dad’s funeral. I exchanged contacts with Mrs. Ane and got Octavia



registered for the session. It's Octavia's first time in the dance school, and we're both excited for this big step.

"Hey, gummy bear," I say as I face Octavia. "I'll be back to pick you up, okay? I'm going to run downtown, and I'll be here on time for you. I love you!" I bend down and hug her.

"I love you too, Mommy! Will you be here with Nick?"

"I am not sure about Nick, but I'll be here, okay?"

She nods and waltzes off happily.

"Heey— are you still there?" I ask Nick, who is at the other end of the line.

"Yeah, I am. Remember you asked me to stay on the call?" he chuckles.

"Yeah, I did," I say, smiling to myself. Nick just makes me so happy.

I can tell that he is smiling too.

"You are the love of my life. Whatever you want done is done," he says in assurance.

*I was truly blessed with the best man.*

"I know," I say, smiling.

"By the way, why did you say you weren't sure I'd be there to pick Octavia up?" He changes the topic all of a sudden.

"Because you're working!" I say a little loud that it attracts some attention from passersby. "Okay, tell me, will you be available by the time she's done with the class?" I ask, expecting the answer I already know.

"I guess I should be. I don't have much I'm doing at the moment. I doubt anything will come up. Plus, I can always tell Adams to cover for me."

Okay, I was expecting a different answer.

"Where are you heading? Rowntown?" he asks.

"I want to get groceries and some other things."

"Groceries? What's a two-minute drive from where I am. Should I be expecting you?"

"Is this you shyly begging to see my face, Mr. Detective?" I tease.

"I'm not shyly begging. I'm politely requesting," he chuckles.

*What is the difference?*

"What didn't come off as a request, Mr. Elwood," I tease further.

"Isabel," Nick's tone is serious. "I know you're a very busy

mother with many things to do, but can you spare a few minutes to see or rather check on the most handsome man in your life right now?"

I burst out laughing.

"Ohhh— wow. Xhat was cheesy, I give it to you, but my answer is still no. Xry harder, and I might change my mind."

"You know what can be harder?" Nick tries to do a little teasing of his own.

"Nick!" I caution him, obviously blushing. "You are nasty," I say, giggling.

I nally get out of the dance studio to approach my car.

As I get to the car, walking to the driver's side, I see the same black sedan again, this time a bit farther down the road.

"Xhis is strange." I blurt out without realiPing it.

"3hat is?" Nick asks.

"Nick, do you know anyone driving a black sedan on my street? Have you noticed anyone with a sedan?" I ask, getting into the car.

"No, babe. 3hy do you ask?" he sounds curious.

"Nothing," I say sharply.

"It isn't nothing. Isabel, what's going on? Xalk to me."

"It's nothing, really. 3hen we left, I noticed a black sedan adjacent to my house, and I assumed Miss Xarila's daughter was around. Now I can see the sedan again. It doesn't look like it has a female in it," I explain.

"Are you sure it's the same car, and can you see anything else?"

"I can't see anything else major. I think it's the same car".

"Okay, get into the car, drive to the store4 I'll wait for you inside. And stay on the call. Ron't stop anywhere, and don't talk to anyone." Nick's tone is serious.

I bet he is already assuming the worst8my detective.

"Okay, sir!" I say sarcastically.

"Isabel, I'm serious,' his voice is sterner and more serious.

"Sorry. I'm on my way to you," I say.

As I put my car in drive, I noticed the sedan also moves. "Nick —? Xhey are moving as well."

Okay, I'm beginning to panic.

*Am I being followed?*

"Calm down now, but don't stop! You can't let them know you

know that you're being followed," Nick says. I can tell he is trying to hide his panic.

"I'm being followed? What about Octavia? Is she in trouble?" I'm close to a full-blown panic.

"Bisten, baby everything will be alright. It might just be someone playing a prank. Nothing serious. Ron't overthink it. Oust do as I say," he pauses for a second. I'll call the dance class and instruct them not to give access into the building to anyone except known parents or guardians. Octavia will be safe. I promise," he assures.

"I'll be on my way to the store soon once I call the chief to assemble guys. Oust in case things go south— I'll be at the back. Fark your car and just come in and use the back door. I'll be waiting for you."

"Okay," I whisper, almost breaking down in tears.

*Why would anyone be after me?*

And if this is a prank, I swear, I might just kill someone.

My precious Octavia might be in danger.

I really can't help this panic.

My hands are shaky, and my palms are sweaty.

I hear hushed conversations and some orders from the other end of the line. Nick and Adams are trying to set up with the chief.

"Hey babe," he returns to my call. "...breathe," he instructs.

I didn't know I was holding my breath until I heard those words. I let out a long sigh and let him know I was close to the store and that the black sedan was still following me.

"I'm leaving the car now I'll be waiting for you. Ron't forget to stay on the line and keep breathing, baby. You're doing good," he says to calm me down.

*Why would someone be after me?*

*What did I ever do to be tangled in a mess like this?*

If not for Nick, I wouldn't have thought about the car until the last minute.

"I'm here," I say to Nick, pulling up to the parking lot. I see the sedan slowing down across the street.

*They are definitely after me.*

"Okay, I'm waiting for you in the store. Can you still see them?" he asks.

"I can see them right now I they slowed down behind," I say.

“Ron’t look conscious of them when you come down. Okay? Oust walk casually to the store.”

“I’m scared, Nick. 3hat if they shoot?” my voice shakes.

“Bet’s not project that. I’m here, remember. You’re doing okay! Oust breathe, Isabel, breathe! Bet’s do this together, ”, G, 6, breathe in, breathe out.’

I follow his instructions and let him hear me breathing. Dood, let’s repeat it two more times, baby. Ureathe in, breathe out. Bast time, breathe in, breathe out. You’re doing great,” Nick tries to keep me calm.

It may be working, but that doesn’t stop me from hearing the panic in his voice. It makes me wonder if there’s something he isn’t telling

It could just be that he is just genuinely worried about me. I’m not going to focus on that at the moment. I turn oT the engine and climb out of the car. I see the sedan pull up at the other end of the parking lot. I almost choked.

“Come on in, Isabel. I’m waiting for you,” Nick’s voice echoes over the phone. It brings me back to reality.

“Xhey just parked4 I’m coming in,” I say.

I hear him give an instruction over the radio. 3alking into the store, I see Nick standing and waiting for me. He has a stern look on his face. He means business. Xhe detective in him is coming out in full force. He leads me through the store to the back door, where his car is parked. He doesn’t say a word till we get in the car.

He pulls me close into a tight hug. I can feel his very paced heartL beat, similar to mine, right around my chest. He was scared as well.

I’m just happy that I am with him now. He exhales a deep sigh.

He -nally pulls out of the embrace and reaches for my hands, caressing them as he begins to speak.

“Xhe chief sent two guys to the dance studio to guard the place till we pick Octavia up, and also, Adams is on the lookout in the store, should they want to go in,” he pauses.

I take the opportunity to ask zuestions I’ve been dying to ask.

“3hat is this all about? 3hat do they want from me?” I search Nick’s face, hoping he has answers.

“Honestly, I don’t have answers, but we will get them. After

ten minutes, Adams will question them if they're still in the parking lot. We'll have to leave your car here till everything gets settled. I'll be by your side until everything is over and we have the guys taken in for questioning.

I look up at him and my heart swells with so much pride. I am damn lucky to have found someone in love with me and willing to go above and beyond to keep me and my daughter. I never thought I'd experience love like this in this life.

"I love you!" I blurt out. Without caution, I pull him in for a kiss. It is rough and uncomfortable because of the seat setting, but I don't care. I pull away from the kiss, realizing I had kissed him at the wrong place and time. We are still trying to figure out who the stalker is, but here I am, shoving my tongue down Nick's throat.

*Exactly what is my priority?*

I begin to fumble with the seat belt. My face is flushed. Nick chuckles lightly.

"I love you too, Isabel," Nick says calmly as he frees the seatbelt from my hand and tucks me in like a cowboy, briefly kissing my lips in the process.

He starts the car and begins to drive down to the dance class. In less than fifteen minutes, we are in front of the building.

*That was fast! How fast were we going?*

As if reading my mind, Nick replies.

"I didn't speed. I only took a faster route."

I must have been lost in thought during the drive because I didn't even notice that we'd taken a different route.

Is there another route to this place than the main road?" I ask, clearly hearing this for the first time.

"How did you know about the route?" I am surprised. "I've lived in this town all my life, and I never knew there was a shortcut," I express.

Thanks to my father, who always says there are no shortcuts in life.

"Well, what can I say? I'm Mr. Detective, after all," he says in a teasing manner, trying to lighten the mood. It works.

He gets out and quickly walks around the car to get the door for

"Don't worry, I can run in to pick her up and rush back out," I say, trying to sound very convincing, knowing he won't agree.

“I’m not allowing you out of my sight, Isabel. Not today,” his voice is intense.

As we walk into the building, he holds my hand tighter than usual.

*What’s going on with Nick?*

I know I’m being stalked, but Nick is acting like he knows more of the story.

*What exactly is he afraid of?*

We enter the studio and see Octavia appear from her classroom door. She sees Nick first. Her eyes light up as she runs to hug him.

“Nick!” she exclaims.

He scoops her up in his arms, bringing her to his face. He places a kiss on her forehead and hugs her tight.

I see Mrs. Ane and walk up to her since my hands are now free from Nick’s firm grip.

“Thank you, Mrs. Ane, for taking Octavia as your pupil at the last minute and cooperating with the police. I’m also sorry to bother you with all of this,” I say.

“No worries, Isabel, we look out for one another,” she winks at me while using her head to point in Nick’s direction.

“So, that’s Octavia’s dad?” she says, smiling, looking at me curiously.

I shake my head while smiling back at her. I’m not planning to indulge her in the details.

Nick walks towards us, still carrying Octavia in his arms.

“Mrs. Ane,” he says, flashing her a smile. “I was the one who called the studio earlier. Thank you for your cooperation. The officers will remain close by till the end of the day for the safety of other children and staff. Please keep today’s occurrence within the confines of these 69G HEBEN UB1ME

walls, ma’am, so as not to raise panic in the community.

Thank you,” he says courteously.

“Sure, officer,” she says, putting her hand to her head to mimic an officer’s salute, earning a smile from Nick and me.

*She is indeed a sweet old lady.*

“Mommy!” Octavia happily acknowledges me as we walk out of the hall.

“Hey, gummy bear, did you enjoy your class?” I ask.

“Yes, Mommy!” she says, yawning.

She must be worn out from class, which is good. She needs a good way to burn up some of her energy.

“Nick says we are going to his place,” she exclaims excitedly with her sleepy eyes.

“3e are?” I ask, looking at Nick.

“I know I didn’t mention it before, but it just makes sense that you don’t go home, at least for tonight,” he explains.

“Okay, but we’ll need to get some supplies and a change of clothes. At least for Octavia,” I state.

“I already picked up something for Octavia from the store before you came,” he stares at me with a sly smile. “And, as for you—” he reduces his voice to a whisper. “You don’t have to wear anything,” he winks. “You know I love you in your natural state,” he says, wiggling his brows.

“Nick!” I say, slapping his arm playfully. “qeally, in all of this, youJre thinking of that,” I say, shaking my head as if disappointed, although we both know IJm not.

He shoots me one of his heartLstopping smiles back.

3e get to the car, and he tucks Octavia in the backseat, strapping the seatbelt on her. I let myself into the car, and I can’t help but fantasiPe about the dirty idea this man has put in my head. WAXER 3IXH MY E;‘S UqOXHEq 69”

“3here is your mind at, woman?” Nick asks as he begins to drive.

Ron’t tell me you’re picturing us naked,” he chuckles.

“Nick!” I exclaim, rolling my eyes at him.

I peep to the back of the car to see that Octavia is already asleep. Bike

Nick, she falls asleep zuickly. Once either of them are in a comfortable position, theyJre out. Xhe combination of an hourLlong dance class and NickJs protecting arms have done her in.

“3hat were you fantasiPing about? I want to know,” he asks again. “Nothing,” I say, trying to clear my throat.

“You were thinking about my oTer, right?” he wiggles his brows

again.

“No, I wasn’t!” I defend, my face turning red in the process.

“Okay, if you say so,” he glances at me and kisses my cheek.

“I love

you.”

We arrive at his place a few minutes past six in the evening. He

offers

to carry Octavia, and I get the supplies in the car before

approaching

the front door to open it for us all.

I notice a police van parked on the other side of the road. Nick

is

doing all this to protect me.

*Could I love this man anymore?*

Inside, he takes Octavia to the tiny guest room next to his. He

lays

her on the bed gently so she doesn’t wake from her sleep. I

stay with

her for a few minutes before going to join Nick.

When I join him, he’s in the kitchen making dinner.

“What are you making?” I ask curiously, trying to peep over the stove.

“You’ll know when it’s time to eat. Do shower!” he says,

blocking

my view from the pot.

“But I want to know,” I say, pouting.

“Do shower, Isabel!”

695 HEBEN UB1ME

“Wine!” I say, defeatedly. Stamping my feet as I walk to his bedroom like an angered teenager. I hear Nick chuckling to himself.

After a few minutes in the shower, I heard the bathroom door open.

“Nick? Nick?” I call out. I hear the door close but hear no response. “Nick?”

Now, I’m panicking.



# Chapter Nineteen Nick

*Today has been crazy!*

I'm just grateful I was on the phone with Isabel when she noticed the stalker. God knows what they would have done to her if I hadn't been on the line.

I have my suspicions as to who is behind this. I'm guessing it's none other than my father because it isn't coincidental that a rando decided to stalk Isabel a few days after my father's threat.

I genuinely hope he has no hand in this because I won't deal lightly with whoever it is. Isabel is my life, and I'll do anything to protect her and Octavia.

I Snish cooking in no time. I pack a bowl of snacks for Octavia, knowing she will be up soon. I take the bowl to her room and place it by her bedside. I watch her sleep for a couple of minutes. ;he looks so peaceful. I hope she doesn't wake up soon- I need to talk with her mother.

I return to the kitchen to assemble a tray of the stirAfry I just made and take it to the bedroom.

;he should be out of the bathroom by now.

“s I enter my room, I place the tray on the table and close the door. I hear water running- she's still in the shower.

?NickH?

76! ELBLN UBM1L

I turn around to see Isabel holding a plunger. Eer eyes are conA sumed with fear, and her hands are trembling. ;he has a towel tied around her body and lather on some parts of her body- she looks very shaken.

?UabeP It's me. Wut the plunger down,? I say as I walk toward her to get the plunger out of her hands.

?I heard movement. I called you, but you didn't respond, and I just thought... I thought... I just picked up the closest thing to a weapon as I stepped out,? she rushes out her words, still in

panic.

"I'm so sorry, babe. I didn't hear you call out my name. It's me, it's Nick," I say, pulling her close for a hug. "I'm sorry I scared you."

As he lets out the air from her lungs she has been holding on my shoulders as I rub my palm around her back, helping her to regulate her breathing.

"After a while, she pulls out of the embrace, "I need to get back to my shower," she says.

"Can I join?" I ask, smiling sheepishly.

"Nick, get a hold of yourself!" she rolls her eyes at me, and I continue to smile. "Why are you grinning like a boy in front of his crush?"

"Because you are my crush, now and forever," I say as I close the gap between us.

"What about Octavia?" she asks, hiding her blushing face.

"She's sleeping peacefully," I immediately respond, wrapping my hands around her tiny waist.

"He looks at me, smiling. "You have a plan, don't you?"

I smile back, "You know me so well."

"You have two seconds to get in!" she orders as she walks towards the bathroom, dropping her towel to the floor.

Without wasting time, I rushed to remove every piece of clothing before running to the bathroom. I stand at the entrance and watch the water run over her- she looks so effortlessly beautiful, like a damn goddess. Her body is a masterpiece. This woman drives me wild!

**qqq**

I wake up to a loud ring from my phone, and I check the IR- it's "dams."

"Hey, man," I whisper so I don't wake Isabel.

"Hey, Nick!" he responds urgently. "I've been trying to reach you

since yesterday."

"Yeah, I planned to call too, but I gotzem..hmm..busy." *Yeah, right!*

"Is now a good time?" he asks, ignoring my excuse.

“Sure. Any update?”

“Yeah,” he replies.

“Hoot?”

“It wasn’t just one person in the car, there were four, but one got away before — questioning. Those guys aren’t from this part of the

country. Their accent was very telling, very eastern seaboard.

The

driver’s wrist had a tattoo on it. It’s a very colorful bullseye,”

he pauses

for a second to respond to someone speaking to him.

*Bullseye?*

“That has come up in many of my investigations in R.C. It’s the most

prominent gang symbol in the territory, but the more we arrest some

of their members, the more their network grows. It’s

unbelievable. *Maybe this isn’t my father after all.*

It could be one of the members seeking revenge.

“Worry about that,” “dams apologizes as he returns to the call. “

No problem,” I assure him.

76” ELBLN UBM1L

“Although we couldn’t find out what they wanted with Isabel, we discovered that the symbol is for a gang called

“Z-Target Creek.” I cut him off.

“Oh, so you know them?” Ramon. Now I’ve got to pay

Tommy’s boy. He made a bet,” he explains, sounding defeated.

“Yeah, I did a lot of investigation about them back in R.C.,” I

say. “But it’s always a dead end,” I pause. “Where are those

guys now? I could do some — questioning on my own.”

“They made bail and left town,” he replies.

“Hit?” I exclaim.

“No, it’s you they are after, huh?” he asks.

“Most likely,” I say, gripping my hair in frustration.

“Ramon?” “dams says.

“I’ll figure it out. I will reach out to my captain in R.C. He should have a promising lead,” I say.

“Anything else I can help with?” “dams asks.

“No, no. Thank you so much. I’ll be at the station soon. Let me wait please don’t say anything to Isabel.”

?I got you, manP? he assures.

I end the call, and the sleep in my eyes is long gone.

*Why is Target Creek after me?*

Yhy nowH

I look over to the other side of the bed to Snd it empty.

?Yhatsz where's IsabelH? I jump ox my bed to check the bathroom, but she isn't there. I run down the hall to the guest room, and Octavia isn't there either.

?IsabelH OctaviaH IsabelH? I call their names, hoping they are in the kitchen0the one place I haven't checked. I begin to perceive the fresh aroma of coxee as I walk toward the kitchen entrance.

*She's in the kitchenP*

I enter the kitchen and see both of them by the table, seated and having breakfast. Xhey look beautiful, a life that I'd give anything to have.

?Eey, you two,? I say.

Octavia's face lights up immediately when she hears my voice.

?Ei, NickP? she giggles, wiggling her legs underneath the table. I walk to her, hug her, and kiss her forehead. I walk towards Isabel

and kiss her.

?Good morning,? I whisper.

?Good morning, Nick,? she responds with a smile, biting her lower

lip.

*She looks so hot!*

?Yhy didn't you wake me up for breakfastH? I ask.

?Fou looked like you needed the rest, and I also didn't sleep muchit's not my bed.?

?Yell, it can be,? I tease as I sit at the table. ;he looks at me, smiles, and rises to her feet.

“s she serves me some wa“es and bacon, she begins to speak.

?I need to sort out a lot of things today. I couldn't do much yesterA day.?

?OkayH Ro you want me to drop you ox at homeH I can have Octavia with me today so you can concentrate,? I ower.

?Fou'd do thatH Xhank you so muchP Xhat's so nice of you.

Xhat means I can see lina today. ;he is back in town,? she says happily before suddenly pausing. ?Yait, aren't you on duty todayH Yon't we be inconveniencing youH?

?No, you're notP I'm the one re—uesting to spend time with Octavia. Octavia, do you want to spend time with meH? I turn to Octavia.

?FesPPP: she screams e8citedly with her mouth full of bacon. 7”J ELBLN UBM1L

?Okay, SneP Fou two enjoy yourself,? she resigns. ?Eow about the man from yesterdayH?

?I got a call from “dams this morning- there were three zthree,? I begin to e8plain.

?XhreeH Yhat do they want from meH Ro I know themH? Isabel interrupts.

?“dams says they are just a bunch of airheads from out of town fooling around,? I lie.

*I hate that I have to.*

?Xhey left town already,? I add. ?Fou don't have to worry about them again. Xhey were given a Srm warning.?

?Xhat's goodP I'm glad it's all over now,? she smiles. ?I need to get home, change my outSt, and have a proper bath, and the same for Octavia.?

?Okay, give me a few minutes to run through the shower and get dressed. I'll drop you ox. Four car should arrive at your house soon, by the way,? I say as I rise to my feet to get ready.

**qqq**

“s I head to the station after dropping ox my girls, I go over Xarget

Creek's investigation.

*Which of their members would have a problem with me? Xhis looks pretty random.*

*Plus, how did they even know I'm in Greenville? How did they know*

*of my involvement with Isabel?*

I have so many —uestions.

“s I get to the station, I see ...onny standing outside. Ee has an

envelope in his hand.

D"XLR YIXE 1F L\*; U...OXEL... 7"7

"Eey, man? I greet him excitedly. "Eeard you won a bet. I hope it's enough to get me a beer," I tease.

"Ea ha haz I got you, buddy. Fou know it wasn't luck, right? I read your Sle cover to cover before you joined us here," he says, winking.

"ly man? I say, hitting his chest playfully.

"nyways, this envelope was just delivered- it has your name on it," he stretches the envelope to me, and I collect it.

*What could be in it?*

"Xhanks for this," I say, waving the envelope as we enter the station.

I reach my desk and open the envelope. Xhere is a letter in it—a handwritten one.

qqq

*Hey, son,*

*You've been ignoring my calls for days now; I had no choice but to*

*write to you.*

*I'm waiting for you to do the right thing, and everyone will be safe,*

*including Isabel and Octavia. If not, more men will come for them, and*

*it won't be from a distance this time.*

*I'll be expecting you by dawn tomorrow.*

*See you soon, son.*

qqq

"Yhat the fuck? I say out loud without realizing it, earning some head turns in my direction.

*Does he know them?*

Ee was the one behind the stalking, after all.

7"3 ELBLN UBM1L

*Shit! Shit! Shit!*

” Tashback of what he did to Xabitha comes running through my mind.

I can’t let the same happen to Isabel. ;he has no one.

*Fuck!*

I need to act fast.

*How long has he known them?*

I bet he has all the information he needs on them by now.

DuckP

I bang my Sst on the table.

I look up to see ...onny and “dams staring at me with concern.

?Yhat’s the matterH? “dams asks. 4Is it about the gangH?

?Nah,? I try to play it cool, hoping my voice doesn’t betray me. ?I forgot to do something,? I lie.

Xhey don’t look convinced, but they carry on with what they are doing.

*Shit!*

I can’t believe I’m about to end the beautiful life I started here and return to the shadows of my father.

*Why won’t this man just let me be?*

I sigh, frustrated, as I run my hand through my hair.

I type out my resignation letter on the desktop before me, but I don’t send it. I’ll wait till I’m out of the building, possibly when I’m about to board the plane back to R.C. I pack my personal belongings\$ a picture of Isabel and me, a mug for coxee, and my journal. It is easy to move them out of the station without suspicion. 5ust before I leave,

there is one more letter I have to write.

*My dearest Isabel,*

**qqq**

Wained and angered, I drive back to Isabel’s to pick up Octavia. I will spend a longer time with her than I had intended. I get to the house to see Isabel, ready to head out. ;he has been waiting for me to pick up Octavia.

I try to mask my emotions, knowing this might be the last time I see Isabel. I go in for a hug. I Sght so hard not to let tears fall from my eyes.

?“re you okayH? Isabel asks after pulling away from the hug.

?Feah, sure,? I say casually with a smile.

Ye bid each other goodbye, and I helped Octavia into the car.

“s we start our journey, Octavia starts chatting about what she’d like to do today, like going to the park, having plenty of chocolates and candy, and going on the roller coaster. I try hard to light up and be in a good mood for her sake.

“s we get to the mini amusement park towards the outskirts of town, Octavia is ready to jump out of the car.

?Foung lady, hold still- I’m coming to open the door for you,?

I instruct.

I get out of the car and cycle to the passenger’s side to get the door for Octavia. I unfasten the belt, and she eagerly jumps into my arms.

*I’m going to miss her so much.*

Ye walk to the park entrance, and I pay for tickets for the roller coaster. Ye have about Sfteen minutes before the ride starts, so OcA tavia drags me to the candy Toss stand. I get two sticks, which she Snishes in record time.

*Here comes the sugar rush.*

It is about time for the roller coaster. Ye get on it, and it is an e8hilarating and intense e8perience for me, but Octavia is having the time of her life. ;he reminds me of Bouis when we were little. Ee was the carefree and daring one, just like Octavia.

7” ELBLN UBM1L

I wish I could be free like her, even for just a day, but I can’t, especially knowing that I’ll have to leave them soon.

I guess spending the day with Octavia will allow me to live in the peace and joy of the moment just for today.

“fter the roller coaster, we walked to another park section with a claw machine. Xhere is this giant teddy bear that everyone is trying to win- it also catches Octavia’s attention. ;he decided to drag me toward the activity. “fter e8hausting about 7, I won the teddy bear.

;he is so proud, and her face lights up.

?Xhank you, Nick,? ;he says, hugging me. ?Fou’re the best.?



My heart melts.

*Damn it! This man didn't have to do this to me. I am happy here!*

We walk to the car to drop off the teddy bear and go in for one last ride.

"Bumper cars?" Octavia screams as she realizes where we are. "He is so excited."

"Are you that excited to ride the bumper cars?" I ask, clearly amused by her joy.

"Yes, you and Mommy drive real cars. I drive bumper cars," she states.

I chuckle at her innocent joy.

"Bet's go?" I say, holding her hands and swinging front and back. "We spent so much time riding I didn't realize our time had run out."

"We have to go now. I need to drop you back home and take care of something," I say to Octavia.

"But Mommy won't be home yet," she says.

"Yeah, I know. I'll call the sitter," I tell her.

"But I want you to stay," she begins to whine.

*No! Not now!*

"I'll be back," I lie.

"Okay?" she says, excitedly taking my hand into hers as we return to the car.

On our way home, we stopped to get ice cream and a piñata for Isabel as a consolation for not going to the amusement park with us. "At the ice cream stop, I removed my bracelet from my wrist, the bracelet my brother got me when I got to the police academy. I've never taken it off, but I think Octavia will cherish it."

"Octavia, I have something special to give you," I say, trying to smile. Her bright eyes shine so brightly.

"Another teddy bear?" she asks curiously.

"No, darling, it's my favorite piece of jewelry in the whole wide world," I remove it from my wrist and stretch out her hand. "Whenever you're scared or miss me, just remember you have a piece of me with you, okay?" I say as I slip the band on her wrist and adjust it to fit.

I hug her.

"If you miss me, don't make yourself sick anymore, okay?" I

am always with you. I love you so much.?  
;he hugs me, but she is just so fascinated by the bracelet that I  
doubt she heard anything I had to say.  
I lift my head, and the attendant beckons us to pick up our  
order. Xhe ride home is —uiet- she is confused about why I  
was saying such bi9arre things and giving her my bracelet.  
“s we get home, I’m grateful Isabel isn’t back. I rang the  
babysitter to come to stay with Octavia.  
I head to Isabel’s room to drop ox the letter I wrote. I cry a  
little in there, knowing I won’t be seeing her for a long time.  
Xhe babysitter arrives, and I thank her for showing up on such  
short notice. I hug Octavia one last time, and I e8it their home.  
“lthough it hurts, it is the best thing to do.  
It is for their safety.

# Chapter Twenty Isabel

I feel so good today. Spending time with Mina alone without Octavia or Nick is very special to me. Don't get me wrong, I love my daughter and boyfriend, but it has been a long time since just Mina and I hung out. She has been out of Tennessee frequently with this new promotion, so I rarely get to spend time with my best friend. I needed a timeout, especially after the whole stalker incident yesterday. Who would have thought that I would ever be a victim of a stalker?

We had a casual date at the coAee house and saw a movie. We both enjoyed our girls' day. - highlight for me was watching Mina try to hit on several men. It's pitiful yet entertaining. I hope she falls in love with someone who knows her worth soon.

I'd have loved to spend more time with Mina, but Octavia's sitter called. She claimed she had to leave early because of a family emer" gency, which was weird because Nick was supposed to be with Oc" tavia. I immediately phoned Nick, but he wouldn't pick up. I Hgured maybe he was called to the station.

I rushed home to relieve the babysitter.

"xey, Susan, I'm so sorry I'm late," I say to the sitter as soon as I walk into my house.

"No problem,F she says hurriedly as she walks down the sidewalk.

-s usual, I immediately rush inside to check on Octavia, and I am welcomed with her eEcited smile and a warm hug.

Y-TXD WITx MB XR'S 18OTxX8 7V!

*How fast they grow!*

I say to myself as I recall days when her hands couldn't wrap around my waist when she hugged me Hercely with her tiny hands.

I am immediately jolted to reality, remembering why I had to rush home.

"Where is Nick? Did he mention where he was going?" I ask Octavia as we both sit down on the couch.

"I don't know," she shrugs as she responds. She seems very interested in the cartoon she's watching on Tz.

"Octavia?" I call for her attention.

"He said he had to go do something," she suddenly pops.

"Mommy, look; Nick gave me this bracelet," she says happily, showing me a Nick's bracelet that was always on his wrist. The word "forever" is inscribed on the bracelet.

I try to process all the information and why Nick would suddenly leave with no explanation and leave one of his most prized possessions with Octavia.

I make my way to the bedroom and take off my coat. The plan is to drop my things and call Nick to try and understand why he had to leave in such a rush. I take out my phone and immediately redial Nick's line.

It rings, but he does not pick up: I try again for the second and third time, and he still does not answer the call. On the fourth try, I suddenly hear a tone followed by an automated voice.

"The number you are trying to call isn't available. Please leave a message or try again."

Frustrated from my unsuccessful attempts to reach him, I try for the fifth time, leaving a voice message: "Hey, Nick, how are you? I have been trying to reach you: please return my call as soon as possible.

-and hey; Octavia showed me the bracelet you gave her: it's an adorable 7VV xX\*XN 1\*9MX

gesture, and she has been so happy about it. Thanks a lot. I am really worried, though: please call me immediately. I love you;" I sign as I end the recording.

**000**

It is almost nine at night, and I haven't heard back from Nick. I tried to call Sonny and -dams but couldn't make out their words. They were in a very loud location: maybe Nick was with them. But Nick doesn't party like that.

Still worried, I head to the shower to cool off and get Octavia ready for bed. The shower helped calm my runaway mind as fear began to creep in, adding to my growing worry.

After changing into my pajamas, I meet Octavia in the living room. She is still delighted, and her eyes shine on the bracelet. I asked again if Nick had told her anything about his sudden disappearance. She shakes her head and says no.

"Don't worry, Mommy. He said he would be back," Octavia says, flashing me her innocent smile.

*I hope so. I hope so.*

"Well, alright, Octavia. Let's get you ready for bed. If I spend time with Octavia, reading her bedtime story before returning to my room.

It seems like Nick may not return my call today.

I can as well just get some rest. As I arrange my pillows to my liking, I see something sticking out from under them.

Curious, I raise the second pillow and see a neatly tucked white envelope. I open the envelope and pull out the paper to read the contents.

Y-TXD WITX MB XR'S 18OTX8 7V'

It is from Nick; I would know his handwriting anywhere: his writing matches his personality. I can't describe it, but it just does.

I adjust on the bed as I begin to read the letter.

**000**

*My dearest Isabel,*

*You're the absolute love of my life, and I'll be forever grateful for the love you showed me. I found joy with you, and I had hoped that it would continue forever.*

*It hurts that I have to break the promise I made to you. I know it is selfish of me, but I have to go. Greenville has nothing else for me. Please don't try to find me. I'll be long gone.*

*I'm sorry it has to end this way. Take care of Octavia and yourself. Love,*

*Nick*

**000**

\*ots of emotions come Gooding forth. I have never been so scared, heartbroken, sad, and angry all at the same time. My eyes are watering, my breathing is elevated, and my heart feels like it has been stabbed.

*God no!*

This can't be true; It can't be possible;

*Nick can't do this to me.*

*Not after everything!*

In denial, I try Nick's line even though a part of me knows the line

will never connect. Of course, I hear the female automatic voice saying the line doesn't eEist.

7'2 xX\*XN 1\*9MX

I pick up my pillow and scream into it so I don't wake Octavia. It's cold, but I'm sweaty. I've never been so confused.

Yor some reason, I keep reading and reading, hoping that what I am

reading isn't true. My fears have indeed come alive. I still Hnd it hard to believe that Nick would decide to move on and leave "reenville, leave Octavia, leave me, and communicate all that through a single letter.

*A goddam letter!*

Though late, I just can't wait. I have to drive down to his house. \*uckily, Octavia doesn't hear me as I rush out of the house. Ohhh;;; Octavia;; What am I going to do? She will be so depressed. xow do I even manage this?

I decided to call Mina and brief her about what had happened.

"Mina; Nick left me;" I cry to my friend.

"What do you mean left?" she asks for clarity.

"Llease, just come sit at my house because Octavia is sleeping. I'm going to his apartment. I don't have the strength to talk

right now," I said amidst sobs.

I hear Mina's mouth a cuss word under her breath.

"Hey, friend, I'll be right there. Don't move, okay? I'll be with you in fifteen," she tells me before hanging up.

Mina arrived in a record fourteen minutes and hugged me on her way to my couch so I could leave.

I try to shove the thoughts down and make my way to Nick's house. I opened the door with the spare key he gave me.

Everything in the living room and kitchen seems in order. I

make my way to the bedroom. Not much changes, only that

the wardrobe is almost empty, and his favorite shoes are gone.

Nick had to have left in a hurry: the only reflection that he had gone was his bedroom. To think that Nick would end things suddenly and without any form of proper communication just angers me the more. Y-TXD WITx MB XR'S 18OTxX8 7'7

We could have talked about it. He could have told me what was going on.

*Why does he always shut me out?*

*Why Nick?*

*Why??*

I walked back slowly to his living room, where he had kissed me just this morning and told me he loved me.

*Was that a lie?*

*Was he planning to leave all this time?*

-t this point, I can't hold back the tears anymore. I lose it and sit dejectedly on his sofa. Tears begin to well up in my eyes until there's no choice but for them to spill down my face.

Suddenly, memories of us come crashing in, and it hurts;

I bury my face into my palm, crying woefully and screaming his name.

I don't know how long I cried before doPing oA on his couch.

I check the time and see that it's well past midnight.

*Shit!*

With so little energy left, I get up and head to my car. I

honestly don't think it is safe for me to drive. I have no will to do anything and am scared I might go oA the road. I can't

even see straight. My nose is snotty, my eyes red and

extremely puAy, and my head is beginning to ache.

I sit still in my car, very deep in thought, when I muster all my strength and head home.

Upon entering the house, the sight of Mina pushes me to the brink of tears again.

"Oh, Isabel," Mina's compassionate voice echoes through my ears as she rushes over to comfort me.

7' ... xX\*XN 1\*9MX

Without saying anything else, she envelopes me in a hug and stays still, allowing me to cry on her shoulders.

"Mina, I don't know what to do," I manage to say with my hoarse voice. "I don't know what to say; I can't even explain how I feel right now. Oh my God; Octavia, too, how do I tell her? You know she made herself sick the first time Nick and I broke up," I cry out.

Mina remains still, allowing me to express all my emotions to her.

She is indeed the very best of friends.

I continued, "My baby was thrilled. She warmed up to him and has been active since she met him. Why do I have to experience something good only to disappear suddenly? Why Mina? Why?" I sob a little.

"Maybe I shouldn't have dated him: I shouldn't have trusted or loved him. Mina, what am I going to do?"

I look at Mina's face, and I can see that she is also trying to hold back tears: in fact, her nude chiAon top was soaked at the shoulder from all my tears.

After a few moments, Mina asks, "Has there been any suspicious thing in the past few weeks that could have led to his disappearance?"

I try to recall the past few weeks' events and cannot remember anything that could warrant his sudden disappearance.

"He has been so lovely. The best anyone can dream of, you know? I have been so lost in the euphoria I didn't notice anything else," I sob. "He is not coming back, Mina, he is not. He said not to look for him in his letter. He gave Octavia his precious bracelet. The one his brother got him," I keep ranting. "He left just a letter for me. Is that all I'm worth? He couldn't even say to my face that he wanted out and was done with me. He left hurriedly like he was in haste to escape the life we were building here. I thought he loved me. Was I that terrible?" I look to Mina

Y-TXD WITx MB XR'S 18OTxX8 7'



”No;” Mina says firmly, shaking her head. ”Do not ever think you are the problem. No sane adult would leave without communicating. He left a letter: I thought he had more balls. Small prick;”

I giggle a little at the small prick comment.

”This prick is the opposite of small,” I facepalm myself. ”“osh; how can I think about that in this situation? -right I am a mess;” I cry.

Mina chuckles a little, pulling me back into a hug, saying, ”We will get through this together; -as a family, you and Octavia will get through this. I promise. She rubs her hand up and down my back before finally pulling out of the hug.

# Chapter Twenty One Nick

I descend from the car with my only luggage. I am welcomed by the distant yet oddly familiar sight of the large black gate of my father's Westbrook Mansion. I have never liked the building, nor have many happy memories here. I have always wondered how a house could be well-lit yet feel cold and dark.

*I hate it here!*

My journey here from Tennessee has been the most challenging and painful yet. I wanted to turn back and run into the arms of my lover. I wonder how Isabel is feeling right now because I feel sick. I betrayed her trust in me. I hurt the woman I love. I have to keep reminding myself that this is the best decision. The last thing I want is to drag Isabel and Octavia into my toxic family drama. Most importantly, I have to protect Octavia's identity. My father cannot find out that she's Houston's child.

I greet the bellman, who rushes to meet me and assist with my luggage. He leads me through the door like I am a visitor. I don't blame him. I am truly a stranger in this home. I sigh heavily as I settle on the couch in the living area, looking around the room.

Of course, nothing much has changed in the living room. It is still a big room with pristine sofas, state-of-the-art home gadgets, and too many art pieces, one of my father's most expensive collections. AETDY WITF MX DS'B R1OTFD1 95;

When I was younger, I always wished to see more family pictures hung on the wall and not ridiculously priced artwork. Indeed, this place had never been and will never be a home to me.

After taking a few minutes to relax on the couch, I decide it's time to settle in my room since I won't see the old man till late at night. I could use the time to eat, sleep, or do anything to help take my mind off Isabel.

I signal to one of the passing maids to get me something to eat, as I have not had anything since I left Octavia yesterday.

I haul myself up the stairs to the third zoor, where my room is located. Another maid in the house helps with my bag. I don't need to explain that my father has almost fourteen people catering to him in this house.

*Narcissistic bastard!*

Entering my room brings a very negative type of nostalgia. Everything here has remained the same since I left here almost eight years ago. I remember that day like it was yesterday. I was filled with joy because my brother fought for me, and I was ready to go into the world and be the best police officer. I had thought I was finally done with the tyrant. The joke was on me. I am back in his web.

*Fuck!*

Not long after I've been in my room, a maid shows up with a tray filled with food at my door.

*Lady, I only wanted something light to eat.* I mutter to myself.

I instruct her to drop the tray on my table, and she leaves.

I'm in no mood for food, but I know that I will collapse if I don't eat something else.

Feeling sleepy after the light meal, I go to my neatly arranged bed. I immediately pop under the covers, ready to dole out. It's to no avail, as I keep seeing Isabel's face every time I close my eyes. It is so fucking hard.

I miss the sound of her voice, her very cheerful laugh, the taste of her lips on mine, and the sparkle in her hazel eyes when I whisper I love you to her.

What the fuck? I scream into the pillow, punching it without mercy until feathers fly out.

I grab my cell phone and notice that Isabel has called me repeatedly. At the moment, I want nothing more than to hear her soft, wispy voice on the phone and close my eyes, imagining that she is holding me. I miss her so much. I miss her and Octavia. They are honestly the best thing that has happened to me. I struggle with myself not to hit the call-back button.

*You can't do that, Nick!*

*Just let her go.*

Yamn8

It is so damn hard.

I don't think I can ever get over Isabel.

I settled for listening to the voicemail she sent yesterday. Over and over, I keep playing it, and it does the trick, and slowly, I find myself drifting off to sleep.

I wake up to a lady calling, "Young master." Bleepily, I stand up from the bed to see the maid from earlier tapping me.

I gently rub my eyes to get rid of the remaining sleep residues.

"The boss is here, sir. And he requested to see you now," she says, bowing her head slightly.

*What does the old man want?*

*He wants to laugh at me and tell me he has power over me.*

*I already get it; there is no need for that.*

Reluctantly, I get off the bed and put on a shirt to hear what nonsense Father will spew tonight.

I head to the library because I know he will be there. He always spent most of his time there, ignoring Houis and me entirely during childhood.

As I enter the library, he smiles mischievously. "Welcome home, son," he says, standing to his feet with his arms stretched open in an attempt to hug me.

*This is strange!*

I hate the stupid smile on his face. I want to wipe it off with a punch.

"Finally, the prodigal son has returned," he says, awkwardly hugging me. I stand still and do not engage in his exchange.

*It's the most cringe-worthy exchange.*

"Bon, I'm glad you finally came to your senses. Wasting time with a single mother who has no prestige to her name or a future wouldn't do well in our legacy. You deserve the best of the best, my son, and I'm glad you are beginning to see it, too," he chuckles.

I ball my fist angrily, ready to engage his face, but keep calm.

"You have no right to speak about her," You know nothing about her," I explode in his face. "You wanted me here, now I'm here, but the last thing you will do is talk about Isabel.

Over," I make sure my tone is as serious as possible.

"If you have nothing else to say than gloat about how you manipulated your child, I think this meeting is done," I say,

almost turning my back immediately to walk o’.

‘Not so fast, young man?’ he calls out. I stop dead in my tracks and then turn to face him.

‘What?’ I question.

‘You know you are such an ingrate! Be unready to cast emotions aside and do what is needed of you. You have a responsibility as my sole heir to serve me. If I was soft, do you think I would have been 95: FDHDN RHqMD

able to build this empire, this power, and influence, wield this level of influence if I catered to my emotion! You take what you desire, Nick! That’s how you wedge power,’ he pauses to walk around. ‘You don’t take it personally, but if I have to involve that woman and her child so you can do what’s needed of you, then so be it. You do not dictate my actions. I dictate yours,’ he says, closing the gap between us with his face just an inch away from mine. He has the most terrifying expression I’ve ever seen, and his threat sends shivers down my spine.

‘What else do you want from me?’ I ask, swallowing hard, trying to mask the fact that I am highly intimidated by him. I swear to whatever you believe in, if anything happens to Isabel and Octavia, I will go to the ends of the earth to make sure your empire crumbles before your own eyes. I am here, just as you wanted, so just keep to your word and leave them alone,’ my tone switches to a plea towards the end.

*Why is this man so miserable?*

He just can’t stand people being happy and would do whatever to make them miserable like himself.

*What sort of father does that?*

‘Well, at the end of the day, you’re going to see I’m doing all this for you because I love you,’ he says, firmly placing his hands on my shoulders.

*What the actual fuck?*

*How sick is this man?*

I wonder why this man would think forcing his grown son to come to the one place he detests so much is the best way to show love.

*Is he even capable of loving?*

I am fuming with anger, and I don’t think I can control it as I

am vehemently shaking. Before I do anything stupid that would put Isabel and Octavia in harm's way, I say, "We are done here?" I remove his hands from my shoulders and storm away angrily.

On my way back to my bedroom, my eyes catch Louis's door slightly open. Curiosity getting the better of me, I go into the room. I am suddenly saddened as I see pictures of Louis and me on the walls and his desk. Memories of the brotherhood come in a rush.

I miss Louis. He was the only one who made life in this monstrous house worth living.

Unlike me, Louis didn't get a chance to move out; he lived here till he died. He was only away from here when he was on business trips. He sacrificed himself so I could have the freedom to explore and choose the career path of my choice. Louis was the absolute best. He stood up for me more times than I can count. He was the ballsy one that wasn't scared of my father. It was almost like he had something on the man. Walking across his room, I found one of his journals covered in dust in his closet. It is like nothing has been touched. I don't think my father came here after Louis' death. He was barely at the funeral. He was only there for about ten minutes before he told me he had to leave for a business meeting. His son? He couldn't even honor his death.

I go to sit on the bed with the journal in my hand. I zip through pages, reading my brother's thoughts and plans.

*How I wish he were here with me today.*

Suddenly, my eyes catch something.

It is a drawing of a bullseye. He had written so much information about Target Creek in his journals.

How did he get so much info about the gang?

Even with the level of information I was given access to and investigations, I didn't have this amount of intel.

*What was Louis up to?*

*How did he find out about them?*

I have so many questions.

FDHDN RHqMD

I continue to zip on the journal pages, trying to find more details that could finally help bring that dangerous gang down. By the corner of one of the last pages, I see a tiny scribbling I

have to squint my eyes to look at. It reads

*Head of Gang- Ron Elwood.*

*What?*

It can't be possible. I know my father can be many things, but a gang member, let alone the head of the most vicious gang in America. That's a stretch. He is just a very powerful business tycoon.

I don't think he could be associated with killings.

*Nick! Use your head!*

The voice in my head screams.

Wait

The stalkers sent to spy on Isabel and Octavia by my father were Target Creek members.

My father has an affiliation with them.

*What the hell?*

This is unbelievable

My emotions slowly shift again from sadness back to anger.

It all makes sense now.

My father always spoke like he had the upper hand in everything. Target Creek is the power he is wielding. Now that I know his long-kept secret, I will ensure that my father meets his Waterloo. I will bring him to justice for all the wrong he and his gang have done. I will ensure I find compelling evidence to bring him and his gang down and ultimately lead him to prison.

This will be my revenge for every wrong he caused Louis and me. I will get that justice.

I know this will take a while, so I have to gain his trust, ensuring I obtain all documentary evidence strong enough to put my father where he is supposed to be

and ensure he pays for his crimes.

I grab my brother's journal and stand up to leave his room. I take one last look at the room before exiting. I head to my room with fury and determination. I know I must bring my father to justice at all costs. I will need all the focus I can get during this time of vengeance. I deleted Isabel's contact from my phone to avoid being tempted to call or bring her into harm's way of my father. I'll have to stay away until it is safe to see her again.

# Chapter Twenty Two Nick

## Two years later

“You should be ashamed of yourself! I am your father! Family sticks

together no matter what,” my father’s voice ricochets through the walls

of his holding cell.

I really cannot hide the joyful smirk on my face. Finally, after two

years, I can bring my father to justice.

“No, you should be ashamed of yourself. You should be on your

knees begging for forgiveness. What kind of father kills his son.... My

God! You are terrible. You still have the nerve to say family should stick

together. What a joke coming from the man who drove a wedge in his

family and killed his child,” I burst out with so much anger.

Yes. My father was responsible for the death of Louis. Yes, the same

Louis, my brother, who allegedly died in a fatal car accident.

My father

plotted his death because Louis got intel on his involvement in political corruption and many backhand illegal deals involving weapons

traPcking and many more nefarious crimes. When Louis threatened

to notify the authorities, starting with me, my father decided to end

his life after he returned from his business trip to Daris eight years ago. What is funny is that he would have probably gone scott-free if he

hadn’t ruined my relationship with Isabel and forced me back to A.C.

I wouldn’t have found Louis’ journal that gave me the most crucial



clue to all my father's crimes.

FETHA WITX MY HS'B RO2TXHO 03?

I broke down again when I learned he was responsible for Louis's death. I punched the living shit out of him. It took a different kind of inner strength to stop that day. The most outrageous thing was that he kept laughing like a damn lunatic.

What did I ever do to land such a vile man as a father: I decided that day that he was nothing but a stranger to me. I wasn't interested in his business, and God knows I won't be inheriting something built with blood on his hands.

"You are very ignorant, son. I will be out of here in no time," he says with a sly smile.

I can't help but chuckle. He thinks he still has the system under his wraps.

"I am not your son, you sick son of a bitch! If you ever think you will get out here, you must be out of touch with reality. Look aroundx this is your new home for life' you and the rest of your gang members. Hvery last one of you is in a maqimum security prison," I pause to see the smile disappear from his face. It is satisfying to watch.

"Till your death, you will be here and won't see the light of the day in the outside world. You won't get any parole whatsoever. I made sure of it. You will have no one to visit, no family to eqpect. You are going to die in here alone," I say, staring at him dead in the face.

He swallows, and I can see his face shift to that of fear. I don't think his life imprisonment sentence dawned on him until now. End I'm glad I get to see his pitiful reaction to it. I know it won't bring my brother back, but undiluted justice has been served.

"No, son! You can't do this to me. I am your father! You can't watch me die here." His voice is Ulled with total panic.

"You4re right. I won4t watch you die in here because I won4t be here to see it. You brought this on yourself. Now, you can deal with the conse"uences. End you are not my father! I never had one," I say, still staring at him. "Goodbye, Oon! This is the last time you'll ever see me,6 I say, retreating from his holding cell to give room for the guards to come to transport

him to a maximum prison.

After signing some papers at the station, I drive to the cemetery where Louis is buried. Es usual, with my sig pack, as is my tradition.

I sit still for the Urst couple of minutes, enjoying the silence that comes with the scenery before I Unally speak.

“We did it, Louis! We Unally put that evil man in his place. Thanks to your journal and the Jash drive full of compelling evidence that he couldn’t shake. I wouldn’t have known he was involved in so many crimes without you,” I say.

Gulping my beer, I continue. “Now that it is all over, I think it is time for me to return to Greenville.”

Oeturning to Greenville and facing Isabel again after two years of no contact is scary. I don’t know how she will react, but I owe her a big apology. Not just her, but 2ctavia also.

Funny how Greenville is more home to me than Washington, A.C., where I grew up my whole life. It makes no sense to hold on to anything in A.C., though. My only connection here is buried sig feet under right before me.

It’s time for me to return to Greenville. I know I won’t be welcomed with open arms, but I’m ready and open to try and build back the trust Isabel and 2ctavia once had in me.

I sit with my brother for a couple more hours, drinking beer and enjoying the solace that the environment brings. When done, I bid my brother farewell with the promise that I would help raise 2ctavia in love and patience, di;erent from how we were raised.

**777**

FETHA WITX MY HS’B RO2TXHO 03z

Es soon as the sign “Welcome to Greenville” pops by the corner of the road. My body goes through a slew of emotions all at once. E sense of relief that I Unally made it back here, the joy I get to see my favorite people again, and the fear of how I will be received, not only by Isabel and 2ctavia. Rut also the guys at the station and the chief. They had already become my family, and I left them with no heads up or even a proper goodbye. I only gave them a lousy resignation letter.

For two years, I didn't reach out to anyone. I only reached out to Oonny when I needed the Ules of the stalkers who came after Isabel when I was compiling a case about my father.

Buddenly, my palms are sweaty, and my heart rate has tripled as I drive closer and closer to Isabel's house. I've played many scenarios in my head, but the one I'm most terriUed about is Unding out she has moved on with another.

I don't want her to move onx I want her to be with me. I want to spend the rest of my life with her.

*Why can't she move on? You clearly said she shouldn't bother looking for you, that you weren't returning. What was she supposed to do? Wait for you forever?*

I know it4s selUsh, but I hope she hasn't found anyone.

I reach their driveway in record time. Efter doing some breathing eqercises to help slow down my racing heartbeat and stop my panic, I get out of the car.

Nothing much has changed since the last time I was here. I only noticed some sunJowers planted along her front yard leading to the driveway.

*It looks beautiful.*

Taking another deep breath in, I knock on the front door.

My palms are sweaty, and I can feel the beads of sweat building on my forehead. I really can't shake this nervousness.

I knock on the door again and still get no response.

*Maybe no one is home.*

*But her car is here.*

I go to peep from the side windows to check for any movement.

Maybe they saw me pull up and decided not to open up for me.

The thought of this breaks my heart, even though I know I deserve it.

I don't see any movement inside the housex everywhere seems so silent.

Maybe they went for a walk.

9ust as I turn to go back in my car, I hear a bicycle paddling down the drivewayx I look up to see 2ctavia beaming with a smile, swimming happily on her bike.

Bhe Unally got to learn how to ride.

*I was supposed to teach her.*

Immediately, her eyes make contact with mine they pop open wider. She jumps off her bike and races to me in full force, her arms wide open.

“Nick!” she screams. She is full of excitement.

This makes me happy that she still remembers me.

Wow! She has grown much bigger since I last hugged her on this porch. She is taller and prettier with blond hair, longer than ever. Even my dear Octavia is missing some teeth.

She crashes into me, hugging me with excitement.

“I knew you’d come back! I told Mommy daily,” she says proudly.

It almost moves me to tears. I just stay still, enjoying the hug from my beautiful princess.

“I’ve missed you!” I whisper to her.

“I’ve missed you too, Nick.”

My eyes fall, gaze at her wrist, and I see that my bracelet is still seated there, shining on her hand.

“You still have this,” I say, pointing at the bracelet.

“Of course! You told me to keep it on me always,” she says.

*Christ! She sounds so grown up already.*

“But where did you go, Nick?” she asks, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Mommy was worried sick, and we missed you.”

“I’m so sorry, baby girl. I had to take care of some business.

I’m sorry I took so long,” I say, bringing her to another embrace.

I begin to hear the shuffling of feet, and it gets closer and closer.

*It must be Isabel.*

I prepare myself to look up at her when suddenly Octavia asks.

“Why didn’t you call us?”

“Yes, Nick! Why didn’t you call?” I hear a female’s voice, but it doesn’t sound like Isabel’s. I look up from the ground to see Mina standing defensively on the front porch with her hands across her chest.

She looks different, too. Way different.

Her hairstyle has become a bob cut, and she is glowing differently with more round and chubby cheeks. I look further down to see that her stomach is protruding.

*She is pregnant!*

9oy feels my heart because this means Mina Unally found someone for her. Isabel had always wanted her best friend to Und love.

E lot has happened since I left Greenville.

“Mina,” I call out eqcitedly, with some uncertainty miqed in there.

“Nick, what are you doing here:” she asks with an arctic chill in her voice.

I understand why Mina is very defensive. I’m sure she had many breakdowns with Isabel and 2ctavia.

I leave 2ctavia’s side and go down to meet Mina.

“It’s good to see you again, Mina,” I start nervously.

“I don’t think I can say the same about you,” she says with a hint of spite.

*Who can blame her?*

“Mina, I’m sorry about everything I did to Isabel and, by eqtension, to you. I’m truly sorry, but I must speak to Isabel Urst.”

*She is the one I owe the biggest apology to.*

“Where is she:” I ask.

“End why would I tell you that:” Mina asks, looking very intimidating.

“Xmm...mm,” I try hard to make out any word from my mouth, but it seems my brain isn’t processing anything.

*If Mina is this angry and defensive, how will Isabel be?*

“Bhe’s at the park. We left her there with Aave,” 2ctavia shouts out.

*Dave?*

I look mortiUed at the idea that Isabel is with another man at the park. Mina senses my displeasure and decides to add salt to my wound.

“Yes, you heard her right. Bhe is with Aaavvee,” she says, intentionally stressing the name.

I do not wait for any more words out of her mouth. I turn and sprint down the street, heading to the park. The park is not so far from their housex I’m guessing that’s where Mina and 2ctavia came from.

I got to the park in about siq minutes, breathing out of control because I ran so fast.

I take a ”uick scan of the park and behold, she sits at the far

end of the park on the built-in concert bench, gazing at the horizon. I can see a little smile on her face, which melts my heart. Being her in person makes me feel whole again. I don't know how often I've said this, and I won't ever get tired of saying it. She is the most beautiful woman in the world. The way her hair dances to the tune of the wind fascinates me. I walk closer to get a better view of her face, and as usual, she remains unshakably pretty.

I continue to walk closer when I see a man appear before her. She flashes him a smile as he hands her a cup of coffee.

*That must be Dave!*

This stirs something in me, and I realize that no matter how mature and understanding I want to act, I can't stand Isabel with another man.

Without thinking, I call out her name.

"Isabel!"

She needs to know I'm back.

I'm back to be her man!

# Chapter Twenty Three Isabel

“Isabel!”

I hear my name from the voice I thought I would never hear again. I slowly turn in disbelief. Unsure if the voice was in my head or not. I heard right. The voice is real, and he stands barely a few feet from

me in person.

I blink my eyes twice to be sure I see right. Sure enough, I am. He stands in front of me in the flesh. I can see the nervous smile

on his face as he makes his way to me.

*How do I act?*

I hate that he still looks gorgeously handsome without trying. - is

his long blond hair has grown longer since I last saw him, and his golden brown eyes sparkle against the sunset.

I want to forget it all and run into his arms, but it will not be easy.

For so long, I have been angry at him for leaving me hanging without any explanation. I was depressed for a long time and couldn't shake the feeling that I was the problem.

Seeing him now stirs up a mixture of emotions within me.

For the past two years, I had thought about how he would return to me. How I wished it would happen. In silence for two years, and now he is back.

Too many confusing emotions are crawling in my spine right now that I can't curb.

xWTME YIT- XB MRDN O21T-M2 ';;

I'm angry!

Disappointed!

-appy!

Would be cited.

Will at once! It is overwhelming.

For the most part, I always felt angry when the thought of him came

to me.

*And the occasional longing.*

Out that all changed when I saw the news of his father getting arrested. Wnd he was part of the prosecuting team. I canjt imagine how hard it must have been to be responsible for ensuring that your fatherAFesh and bloodAis sent away to prison.

I do not pity the manL I Snow he is evil from the little I heard about him. No, to an e—tent, I began to picS up pieces on why HicS left. 1nly then did it start to maSe sense.

I looS at Eave, XinaDs boyfriend, who came to the parS to discuss his proposal plans for Xina with me.

-ow time FiesL four months after HicS left, Xina stumbled into our middle school classmate, Eave, who moved bacS into town. They used to be very close bacS then, but they lost contact over the years. Neeing each other again ignited old Fames, which became love and almost the start of a family. Xina knally knding her own person gave me qoy, and it helped me Seep going without having HicS around.

1ctavia was surprisingly mature about it, and she Sept assuring me that HicS would soon be bacS because he had told her that.

-onestly, I believed and hoped that he would return before the end of the krst si— months, but it didnDt taSe long before I lost all hope and focused on developing myself.

’;’ -MÉMh OéUXM

Eave stares bacS and forth between HicS and me, looSing at us in the utmost confusion.

HicS walSs closer, and I can feel him glaring at Eave.

-e has no reason toL he was the one who left.

“-i, Isabel,” he says nervously. I looS down at his hands to see them shaSing nervously.

“-ey,” I respond, unsure what else to sayL I introduce Eave to HicS.

-e is almost dismissive of Eave.

Wnd I Snow why.

I ...uicSly add, “Eave is XinaDs soon’to’be kanc?”

HicSDs face transports from downcast to full of hope again. -e smiles this time and greets Eave generously.



*Typical.*

I tell Eave to excuse us so HicS and I can speak.

As soon as Eave leaves, HicS begins to speak.

"Isabel, I don't know where to begin," he takes a step forward, but I move back. Eave gets the gist and remains where he is. "I'm so sorry, Isabel. I know I should have..." he stammers.

"Don't worry about what exactly, HicS?" I say, cutting him off.

"-mmm. erm.. for leaving, breaking my promise, and breaking your heart," he tries to explain. "I was put in a very tight position with an ultimatum which involved putting you in harm's way. I chose to walk away to protect you and Lctavia."

"You don't get it, do you?" I ask. "I can't be mad at your reason for leaving, but some context and information could have helped," I state point blank.

"Isabel, I didn't want you to worry or panic, especially after seeing you in the stressful situation. It broke my heart when I discovered my father was behind the stressors. I had to walk away to keep you safe. Knowing what my father was capable of, I am glad I didn't put up with it. XBTME YIT- XB MRDN O21T-M2 ;G

a fight because I never would have forgiven myself if anything had happened to Lctavia or you," he explains.

"HicS, I understand all that. Out the least you could have done was say something to me. You are leaving without a proper goodbye. Well, it felt like you died. One minute, you're here, and the next, you're not," I express.

"I am a coward. I know and should have done better. Isabel, I'm so sorry. I was just too scared of that man."

"I get that. I heard from the news that he has been locked up?" I ask.

"Yeah," HicS says, looking down at his feet. I can tell he is searching for what to say next. There is this awkward silence in the air.

I can see that he has gone through a lot in the last few years. I can't even imagine what he went through with the allegations against his father.

I would lose my mind if my father were involved in such

atrocities.

My heart goes out to him.

Unconsciously, I move a little closer to him, and without warning, I throw my arms around him.

"I'm sorry you ended up with such a crummy father. Nobody deserves a father like that," I say.

Taking a sniff at his neck, I recognize that cologne and its sweet, woody smell.

*God knows I've missed this man.*

I know I am supposed to be mad at him for leaving me hanging for two years. And I was, but I know the reason was valid. I understand why he did it. I just wish he had told me about it so we could work together.

That's what partners do, right?

I feel him savoring the hug just like I am. I guess we've both missed each other's touch.

5 -MémH OéUXM

Slowly, I pull away from the hug and flash him a smile. He smiles back, pulling me into another embrace.

"I've missed you so much, Isabel. I thought about you every day.

Honestly, I don't know how I survived without you. I barely survived. I miss you, and I still want you in my life," he pauses, pulling me slightly away so he can see my face. "Do you do you think there is still a chance for us?" he asks. I can tell how nervous he is.

I know I love this man, and there is no doubt that I want to spend the rest of my life with him. It might seem like I'm forgiving him too soon, but we've already wasted two years. Does it make sense to make him grovel and pursue me any longer? The man risked his life and happiness for mine.

I want this man, and I want him now.

Out it doesn't hurt to mess with him just a little.

"-mmk". I try to put on a serious face. "I get what you're saying, but I'll need time to think about it. You can't expect me to rush into things immediately," I say, trying so hard not to laugh at the way his face falls with sadness taking over.

He takes his hands away from my shoulders when I ... quickly blurt out.

"I'm just kidding!" I say, his face brightens up

again. “ive me a Siss, and all will be forgiven,” I tease.  
-e Fashes me his gorgeously set white teeth, accompanied by  
the dimples on his cheeSs. -e shaSes his head before speaSing.  
“ThanSs for forgiving me and loving me still,” he sighs with  
relief.

“1nly you, my love! 1nly you, I reply, reciprocating with a  
smile to my man. -e comes closer, staring me right in the eyes  
as he cups my face into his hand. Nlowly, he plants his lips on  
mine, reSindling every sparS in my mind, body, and soul.  
xWTME YIT- XB MRDN O21T-M2 ’;

Xy eyes tear up in qoy as I return the Siss that would be the  
begin’ ning of so many more to come.  
xinally, my love has returned!

## The End

Did you like this book? Then you’ll LOVE **Entwined with  
My Billionaire Boss.**

**I despise my arrogant, grumpy boss, but he is so hot and  
clthy riSh.**

I had a plan: move to Texas, get a stable job, and meet Mr.  
Right.

Everything was going well until I pissed oA Hdam -  
ayescMCIntyre, billionaire fEO oB the Company I work at.  
Dealing with a grumpy, arrogant boss is just too muCh to  
handle beCause he is CondesCending eaCh time he opens his  
mouth.

Jut I Cannot esCape his pierCing dark eyes that remind me oB  
that hot, steamy night.

-e’s my boss, so our relationship should be oAclimits.

/ust as I think we may have a ChanCe, his ex shows up and  
announCes she is pregnant.

**Ntart reading Entwined with My Billionaire Boss OW!C**

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/J4f82/9NDN>

**Ahapter Wne**

**dam**

—ot very many people know what it means to be Hdam  
-ayescMCIntyre, billionaire fEO oB the -ayes’ Bamily

manuBaCturing ConglomerateF-ayes. Wor most people, it is a getaway Card to spend as muCh money as you want, Yy private jets, perhaps yaChts, when WHTED XIT- M' ES17 JROT-ER 9;q

you're in the mood, and indulge your deepest Bantasies. Hs a matter oB BaCt, I am a hundred perCent sure my liBe, or the perCeption oB it, is a Bantasy to the hundreds oB millions looking up to the -ayes Bamily logo. Xhat they don't know is that a person like that Could be pulled out oB bed Bor impromptu business meetings and sometimes there is absolutely nothing I Can do about that.

Xhat is supposed to be my day oA and a mini vaCation to the 7eyChelles turns out to be a Bast trip to Tyler, Texas Bor a board meeting with managers oB all the major Companies under the -ayes brand. I would oBten wonder what it must Beel like to get out oB the seat oB fEO Bor a while and just be the billionaire kid. I would have had that liBe beBore or like to think I did— but my Bather has “uite the dream Bor his ”rst and only son. -ayes has always been in the Bamily ... and my dad makes it a point oB duty to remind me about this. IB we ever go out in the woods to tell stories by the ”re, I am sure, ten out oB ten times, that my Bather will make it all about -ayes. UWamily is everything,P he would say. UThere must always be a -ayes to take over the Bamily business.P It is tiring stuA really, but I Can never tell him that.

/ust then, the hostess, a blonde in red uniBorm, walks down the aisle to where I am sitting.

U7ir, we'll be landing in Tyler in the next ”Bteen minutes.P —odding, I look at the tag pinned to her Chest.

UThank you, Jraila,P I reply.

7he splutters. U-ow3-ow did you know my name?P

Utag.P

UOh,P she throws her BaCe away, probably Beeling bashBul.

UGmm, Jraila,P I Call, UI'd like an extra bottle oB

Champagne beBore we touCh down.P

UHright, sir.P

9;2 -ELE— JLGME

She goes to get the order and I lean into my seat, rubbing my hands slowly against the plush upholstery of the armrests. I look outside the window and see the Clouds Yoating, just level with the plains. They are so Close yet look so out of reach. It kind of reminds me about myself.

Jrailer walks back in carrying a bucket of ice with the bottle of Champagne in it, and a Yute.

U-ere, sir, she says, placing down the order.

UThank you.

As she walks down the aisle, I stare at her butt and wonder if we've bucked before. If we haven't, then she might want to gear up for that.

As we touch down at the Tyler Regional Airport, I get to my seat and am about to walk towards the exit when Jrailer walks in.

I'm sorry, sir, she says. Our ride's not here yet.

Pressing my lips hard to contain my anger, I nod quietly and walk back to my seat. Then I check my wristwatch. It is 9:04 am. The bucking driver is supposed to be waiting on the tarmac. *What the hell!*

About a minute later, Jrailer walks in again, this time, with a smile on her face.

It's here, sir, she says.

Gritting my teeth, I get up and walk toward the exit.

Have a nice day, sir, she says as I walk past her.

I don't say a word.

A black Mercedes idles a few meters ahead of me as I climb down the stairs. Waiting by the passenger door is a bald man ... possibly in his late 40s but a few inches shorter than me. He is dressed neatly in a black suit, white shirt, black shoes, and a silver wristwatch, smartly tucked on his left palm. The sun is out in the clear azure sky with clouds roughly spotted across. It isn't the hot month yet but I still feel a tad uncomfortable under the warmer than normal temperature. It is WEDNESDAY - MARCH 17 - 9:00 AM

a lot hotter than what I am used to in New York. Already, I can feel beads of perspiration collecting at the nape of my neck. Grasping my handkerchief, I dab them off.

UXhat's the use oB that wristwatCh iB you Can't use it to tell the time, huh?P I ask when I get Close enough to the ChauAeur.

UI'm sorry, sir. I ran into a little traC.P

I smile wryly. UXould you have iB you'd taken the trouble to Come out here some thirty minutes beBore my arrival? Or were you thinking oB arriving as soon as the jet touChes down? I'm pretty sure you're paid, very well I might add, to be waiting here when I arrive.P

UI'm sorry, sir,P he repeats with a straight BaCe.

U7orry doesn't Cut it. —ext time you pull oA something like this, you're oA. !ot it?P

U'es, sir,P he nods. Then he pulls the door open, and I get in. !etting into the Car Beels like getting into another world. The drastiC Change in atmosphere makes me almost sigh in relieB. The air CondiC tioner is on and the Cool in the air is de'nitely skincBriently. IB I have my way, I will Call a rain CheCk on this meeting and send my assistant in my stead. Jut my Bather never stops reminding me how personal running -ayes is, given it is a Bamily business. U-ayes is going to be here aBter I'm gone,P he'd say, Uand it'll still be here aBter you're long gone. It's your duty, so muCh as it was mine, to keep it going. Hnd you must never baCk down. It's your daily responsibility.P

OB Course, daily responsibility also entails taking trips into the hot Texas state area.

UXhere to, sir?P the ChauAeur asks as he gets in behind the wheel.

I look at my wristwatCh. The meeting isn't due until N this morning, so, I still have about an hour and a halB to myselB. Rather than go in immediately, I deCide it's a better idea to see a little oB the City while I prepare my mind Bor the meeting. Wlying all the way here will do me no good iB I'm not at my best or Clearest at the meeting. -owever, I am not in the mood Bor sightseeing either. Then it oCCurs to me that I Can pay a visit to this "uaint little CoAee bookshop I'd visited a Couple oB years ago when I last visited Tyler.

UThere's a little CoAee bookshop somewhere along Xest Elm 7treet,P I say. UI'll like to go there.P

UHlright, sir.P

The Car pulls away from the jet, lying as if abandoned on the tarmac, then into the street and away from the airport. The traffic grows thinner, the further into the City we go. The ChauAeur notices me looking out the window and says, UltraC's lighter now. Just it gets a bit congested towards evening when most people return from work.

I sigh inaudibly. Then without taking my eyes off the window, said, I'll let you know when I need a tour.

The ChauAeur falls silent afterwards.

Tyler hasn't changed much from the last time I was here. It is still a small spread-out City with a minority of high-rise buildings and way less of the bustle of —ew York's streets. I don't even see that many pedestrians or cyclists on the curb as we drive through. In —ew York, I will have spotted at least one kid trying to make it through the crowd in a skateboard. It is a crazy place, but at least it isn't so hot. Of course, Texas is the weird state but there is a level of order and "quietness that permeates the air something that is absent in —ew York. There, you get the idea that anything can happen at any time. Over there, I tell the driver as he drives the car through West Elm Street, right after the convenience store.

The CoAee bookshop is still as I remember it—a small glass and wooden edifice right between a convenience store and a hardware store. It isn't exactly the kind of place one expects to find on this street, W. 7th Street, M-17 J.R.O.T.-E.R. 99;

given it is almost the smallest I've seen, but that is the least of my concerns.

I'm going in, I tell the ChauAeur. You can wait here or go get a drink or something.

I take it that means you don't want me inside there with you, sir? the ChauAeur asks.

Ignoring him, I get out of the car and slam the door shut. —e is my ChauAeur, not my goddamn bodyguard. Good thing I ain't as popular in Tyler as I am in —ew York. I wouldn't be able to move two blocks without people shoving their phone cameras in my face. Over there, being the CEO of a multibillion-dollar conglomerate means a lot. Over here, not so much. Just that's mostly because there's no Times Square and large billboards looting my face alongside the company

logo.

The entrance bell Chimes as I walk into the shop.

Immediately, I stifle a gasp. Though there is a sheen of quietness all over the place, most of the tables are occupied and that is far too many bodies than I expect to meet in here. If I took the appearance of the edifice as a cue, I wouldn't have been a little shocked that the inside hasn't changed much. As a matter of fact, it hasn't changed at all. The first thing I notice is the faint smell of Chamomile in the air. It is a nice touch ... not too strong, not too faint ... that it is almost unnoticeable altogether.

Most of the wall is covered with large brown Yorktown ceiling shelves that are stacked with books, except for the large rectangular glass windows, running from the entrance in the middle to both ends of the wall at the front. Three round tables abutted those windows on both sides of the entrance and they are all filled with people, reading and sipping coffee. I can even hear the light din of chatter. I grit my teeth. Of course, some of them will want to share the finds from whatever they are reading.

Halfway past the counter, there is a burnished brown counter retrofitted with coffee machines and an array of plastic cups in different sizes for takeouts. The coffee mugs and saucers are placed on a faint wooden shelf on a small desk behind the counter— to the right of the elderly man currently handing over a misty, steamy cup of coffee to a petite girl and pointing her toward one of the tables close to the mirror. I remember both of them faintly. The man is the owner of the coffee bookshop while the girl is the barista. I didn't think she'd still be working here. She has to be his daughter or something.

The rest of the shop pans out as a perfect square right beside the counter such that the entire space, without the counter, is L-shaped. In there, there are about 2 tables, equidistant from each other and hedged in by shelves filled with books. Only two of the tables in there are empty. Fortunately, one of them is right next to a shelf. I will hate it if I have to sit in the midst of all these people.

My skin prickles uncomfortably as I settle into the simple wooden seat. It is quiet inside definitely more than what I will



get in a simple CoAee shop ... but it isn't the solitude I Crave.  
7o, when the barista walks up to me, with a nametag on her  
CoAeeebrown Tcshirt that reads UEmmaP, I tell her to Call the  
owner oB the shop. -er brow arChes in“uisitively.

UXould you just be a dear and get him here?P I insist.

7he wheels around and leaves. Wew seConds later, the elderly  
man hobbles towards me, his barista in tow. -e is bald exCept  
Bor a sprinkle oB gray hair on his head. -e looks to be  
somewhere between his late sixties and early seventies.

UIs there a reason why you summoned me, son?P the shop  
owner asks. U'ou need to understand that I'm really busy.P

WHTED XIT- M' ES17 JROT-ER 99Q

I nod and glanCe around the shop. Then I look him dead in the  
eye. U-ow muCh would it take to get rid oB the other people  
in the shop? I seem to be needing some alone time.P

The shop owner's BaCe is straight Bor a while, then he  
ChuCkles, and his wrinkles straighten out as he smiles.

U'ou want me to Chase all my Customers out?P he asks, his  
tone riBe with disbelieB. U'ou must be joking.P

UI'm not.P

The shop owner gets a little serious. U7on, I don't know who  
you're but these people have earned the right to use my shop  
just as you have. I don't want your money.P

I heave a sigh and sCratCh my brow a bit. U-ow about I buy  
the shop Brom you?P I ask.

UXhat?P the barista, Emma, whimpers.

The shop owner ChuCkles again. I Beel hot rage Climb up my  
throat as he looks me over but I push it down. These people  
are too used to a liBe oB simpliCity– otherwise, he'll notiCe  
that the suit I have on Cost nothing less than a hundred grand.  
-eaving a sigh, I dig my hand into the poCket inside my Coat,  
whip out a CheCkbook and Yip it open. Then I look at him  
with a straight BaCe.

U-ow muCh is the shop worth?P I ask.

The shop owner smiles and shakes his head.

UHright, million dollars,P he “uips.

uiCkly, I sCribble down the exaCt amount on the CheCkbook,  
tear oA the page and hand it over to him. The shop owner  
reCeives it, a Brown on his BaCe, and then he mutters, UXhat

the BuCkP

The barista leans in too and her eyes go Bully wide with shoCk when she sees the ”gure on the CheCk. 7imultaneously, they stare at me.

The shop owner tries to speak but Balls into a stutter. I don't have time Bor that.

U'ou two Can stay,P I say, Ubut everyone else should leave.P

I write down a number on the stiCk pad on the table, tear the page oA and hand it over to him. UThat's my lawyer,P I say.

Ufall him. -e'll tell you what to do.P Then I look at the barista.

UH Cup oB CoAee, please. JlaCk. —o sugar.P

I slip out a random book Brom the shelB next to me and bury my eyes in its brown pages. Hs iB Brom another world, I hear the shop owner politely ask the people in the shop to leave— and as the grumbling people empty out, I Beel my breathing get easier.

**Aontinue reading Entwined with My Billionaire Boss**

**OW!C**

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B074f829N>