



HOT Doctor
BEST FRIEND'S
Little Sister

BILLIONAIRE *Doctors* OF BEVERLY HILLS
LAUREN WOOD

**HOT DOCTOR & BEST FRIEND'S
LITTLE SISTER**

BILLIONAIRE DOCTORS OF BEVERLY HILLS

LAUREN WOOD

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PROLOGUE

EMERY

My stomach turns as I walk up the front steps of the Gray residence and press my finger to the doorbell. I wonder why I'm here right now, other than it's where I go every time I'm not busy with school, studying, or surfing. It's not like Hudson can do much to fix my current predicament, but I figure freaking out with someone is better than freaking out alone.

The door opens, but it's not Hudson standing there or either of his parents. My mouth drops slightly the way it always does when I meet eyes with Nicole Gray.

She's sixteen years old - just two years younger than me, but she already has a body like one of the models in the fashion magazines she's always flipping through. She's tan and petite with sandy blonde hair. Her eyes are the color of the sky in the sense that sometimes they look crystal blue, and other times they're gray or lavender. And *man* do those eyes ever cut through people like a knife. She has an intensity about her that scares people. When she's lit up and smiling, it's contagious. When she's mad, it's unnerving.

Today, thankfully, she's all smiles with those big plump pink lips of hers.

"Hey Dawson, what's up?" Before I can reply, she turns and yells up the stairs, letting Hudson know I'm here.

"Hey, Nicole," I beam.

I know I must look and sound pathetic - all dreamy and hopeless in a puddle at her feet. But I have to get it all out now before Hudson comes down. The moment he sees me, I have to muster up the strength to act like I'm completely indifferent to his sister. Not an easy feat for a hormonal eighteen-year-old guy who's standing inches away from the hottest girl he's

ever laid eyes on.

She ushers me into the foyer while we wait for Hudson.

"So, have you caught any good waves lately?" she asks me.

"A few," I nod. "Are you ever going to come out there and get on a board?"

Her eyes narrow. "That's highly unlikely. I have been thinking of coming out there with my sketchbook though. Maybe you and the guys will inspire me."

I swallow down a hard lump, unable to stop my brain from thinking of all the ways I'd *love* to inspire her - all of which are things that are causing a slight bulge to form in my pants. I suck in a deep breath and try to think of anything else as Hudson comes barreling down the stairs.

Hudson and Nicole bicker a little, like all good siblings do, before he takes me up to his room. I offer her the most discreet and casual wave I can before we walk off.

We're about halfway up the stairs when I'm slapped with the reminder that I'm in big trouble. Nicole is the only thing that actually made me forget about it for a few brief moments. But now she's gone, and my report card is still heavy in my pocket like a bag of rocks.

"How bad is it?" Hud asks me as he follows me into his room, slamming the door shut behind us.

"Huh?"

"Come on, man. I know if your report card was good, you would be so elated and relieved right now that you'd be out surfing. Not over here moping around my house."

I let out a heavy sigh, reach into my pocket, unfold the awful truth, and hand it to him.

"How do you have a 'C' in Chemistry?" he scoffs.

"Because I suck at Chemistry," I admit, shrugging like it's no big deal.

But we both know it's a *very* big deal. Maybe some kids can get by with being below average in their least favorite subject, but not me. Especially not when that least favorite subject is anything science-related. I'm not allowed to be bad in biology, chemistry, or physics because if you're bad at those things - it's going to be harder for you to get into med school. No med school means I won't be a doctor. And for my father, me not being a doctor has never been an option or even a possibility.

"I should have never worked my ass off to get into these AP classes," I

groan. "All I did was learn how to test well. I'm not actually good at any of this stuff, and now they're all kicking my ass. I barely got a 'B' in AP Physics."

"Well, the good news is, your dad will be so distracted by this 'C' that he probably won't even notice the 'B'."

"Oh, trust me. He'll notice anything under an 'A'."

Hud should know this better than anyone because his dad is also a doctor who decided his only son was destined to follow in his footsteps. Our fathers knew we would be doctors because their fathers were doctors. If we dare to have other aspirations for our lives - they're as pointless as anything outside of medicine that our dads might have one day dreamed of doing. No one talks about it, and if we go long enough without talking about it - maybe we'll forget those other things are there.

I keep waiting for the day when I wake up and feel like I actually *want* to be a doctor - for any reason that's not my dad. So far, it hasn't happened. Surfing has made me pretty good at holding my breath for a long time, but even I know better than to attempt and hold my breath until that day comes.

"You have the rest of the semester to fix it," Hud insists in an optimistic tone. "I can help you. We'll study together."

"Thanks, man. But that's not going to change this grade in time for when I have to face my dad tonight. He's going to flip."

Hud begins sorting through his desk, crumpling up old papers and shooting them into his trash can.

"You know when it comes down to it, you have nothing to worry about," he reminds me.

I cross his room to the window overlooking their pool. Nicole is stretched out on one of the lawn chairs in a bikini. One look at her turns my whole brain to mush.

"Huh?"

"We've talked about it," he huffs, shooting one of the wadded-up papers at the back of my head. "I know a fail-proof way to give you my test answers so you can pass no matter what. I told you about that guy who managed to snap pictures of the answer key. I can totally pull it off."

"I don't know, man. It's too risky," I grumble, my eyes still glued on Nicole. "Besides, it'd be just like getting into the AP classes all over again. I can try to con my way into college, but what happens when I get there and I'm too stupid to pass those classes?"

"You're forgetting that I'll be there with you in college too, which is kind of the whole point. The only thing keeping me from stressing out about the next seven years is knowing we're going to go through it together. If that rug gets pulled out from under me, I'm going to lose it. So if that means I have to pass you some answers here and there, then that's what we're going to do. What's the alternative?"

"Getting disowned by my father."

"Which will put me in med school alone, and I'll inevitably buckle from the stress and start failing. Then we'll both be disowned."

For a minute I think it might not be so bad to be disowned. We could surf up and down the coast. Travel, hang out, do nothing. Hell, we could just be kids for once instead of future doctors. The relief of it all feels like a gentle wave lifting me up into the air. I close my eyes for just a second - I feel weightless.

Then I hear my parents' voices and the things they'd say in my head and come crashing back down. By the time I open my eyes again, Hud has already gotten his hands on my report card and is scanning it into his computer.

"What are you doing?"

"Saving you a lecture. If you don't have to listen to your dad scream at you all night, you'll have more time for studying, right?"

After a few clicks and the sound of his printer going off, he walks over and hands me a freshly doctored report card that looks like I'm the straight 'A' honor student of my dad's dreams. And what's messed up is I know we'll get away with it too. My grades aren't up to Dad's standards, but they're good enough that the school isn't going to be making any phone calls about them. If only I could have been born into one of those families where that's all that matters.

"Thanks," I say to Hud, folding the paper up and putting it into my pocket. "I don't know why you keep putting your ass on the line for me like this, but I'd be screwed if you didn't. I'm going to owe you a lot by the time we finish med school."

I turn back toward the window, secretly admiring Nicole a little longer. It's much easier to fully appreciate how good she looks in that bikini now that I don't have to worry about showing my dad my report card tonight. Thanks to Hud, the dark cloud has passed. Or at least it's been skillfully put out of sight.

"I only ask one thing in return," Hud says, joining me by the window.

"Anything."

He stares over my shoulder, down at his little sister. "Don't ever lay a finger on Nicole. Don't even think about her in that way."

His tone is casual as if this is just a safety measure. I don't think I've been caught. But just to be safe, I spin around to study his expression. He doesn't look alarmed, but he's definitely not joking.

"What?" I laugh, hoping maybe I can turn it into a joke.

"I mean, I know you never would anyway," he sighs. "But I know this guy whose best friend dated his little sister, and then somehow when they split up - they both got mad at my friend and stopped talking to him like he was supposed to pick sides or something. I couldn't handle that."

For the first time, I stop and ask myself if I really think I'd ever have a chance with Nicole - as if by determining I might, this would become a difficult thing to respond to. It should be a no-brainer. Hud just offered to help me cheat as many times as it took to make sure I don't let my father down. And here I am hesitating to promise him the one thing he asks for in return?

"Wouldn't dream of it," I assure him finally, hoping he didn't notice how hard I was deliberating.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

NICOLE

Nineteen years later...

I lean back in my patio chair and close my eyes, relishing in the heat of the sun across my body and the sound of the waves crashing across the beach in the distance.

When I open my eyes again, I have to remind myself that I'm not dreaming. I take another sip of my mojito to be sure. I can feel the coolness of it sliding down my throat. *I'm definitely not dreaming.*

But my life is *like a dream*. It's a perfect summer day, filled with salty California air. I love this place so much that I bought a painting of this very spot. I thought it would be the perfect gift for my brother Hudson since he used to like to go surfing here with his friend Emery. Apparently, it didn't fit in with the decor of his house and he gifted it to the hospital where he works. He claims he enjoys looking at it every time he's in the boardroom. I don't believe him. *Oh well. His loss.*

The only thing more perfect than the view from the back of the beach house that we rented for the week is the newest issue of Vogue in my hands. One of *my designs* is featured on the cover, and there is a full spread about me and my work within its pages.

"Could this be any more perfect?" I sigh to Anthony, unable to keep my pure bliss contained to myself any longer.

He sips his drink and takes a look around, thinking about it for a second. "No," he replies thoughtfully. "I really don't think it possibly could. You, Ms. Nicole Gray, literally have it all. You're the hottest designer in the fashion world right now, at the pique of your career. You're young..."

"Not *that* young," I remind him, pointing my finger in the air.

He leans over and slides his sunglasses down his nose, giving me a firm stare to drive his point home. "A hot, *young*, talented woman in her thirties who has an equally hot, young man by her side to share all of this with. The only thing *I'm* talented at is letting you lavish me with delicious cocktails and fancy beach vacays like this one, but I am more than okay with riding on the coattails of your success. When you're enjoying a day like today, it hardly matters which one of us got here anyway."

"And if you were the so-called talented one, you'd do the same for me, right?" I laugh.

He leans back and slides his sunglasses back into place. "Of course I would."

"You wouldn't ditch me for one of those greased-up gym rats you sleep around with?"

"Who says I have to choose?" he argues. "If I was paying for this trip, I would have you *and* one of my boy toys here."

"Awww, Anthony. You could have brought a friend if you wanted to."

"No thank you. This week I just wanted to sit back and relax with you and take a break from all the drama."

Secretly, I'm glad Anthony didn't bring anyone with him. I always smile along when I have to play third wheel to him and one of his so-called boy toys. But truthfully, it's starting to get old. It's not like his relationships with them are anything to be jealous of, but at least he's getting laid. The reminder that I am very single and lacking sex always brings on a jealous sting, no matter how hard I try to hide it.

And just like that, a gray cloud moves over the sun. The color of the sky shifts with my mood. The familiar nagging feeling in the pit of my stomach returns. It's been gnawing at me a lot lately. I just hoped it would somehow stay away for this week, and up until now - it had.

"*How* are you frowning right now?" Anthony snaps, noticing how quickly my mood turned dark by the look on my face. "What happened to this being the perfect day and you having it all?"

I let out a frustrated sigh and shift in my chair. I'm not so sure I should even say anything. I don't want to kill the vibe or be the annoying type to always find something to complain about even when things are so perfect. But I've been holding all these feelings in for a while now. If I can't share them with my best friend on a beach vacation after we've had a few cocktails,

when else would I ever get this off my chest?

"Promise not to make fun of me," I tell him.

He does a weird rendition of the catholic cross gesture over his chest and says, "Scouts honor."

"You've never been a scout of any kind, nor are you catholic and those two things definitely don't go together."

"Jesus, Nic. What do you want? A damn pinky promise? Just spit it out!"

"The thing is," I start slowly. "I hate to even point this out right now... but...I don't exactly have everything, do I?"

His eyes darken over me in the way I knew they would. I can see them through his sunglasses and they make me want to crawl into a hole. I immediately regret even bringing it up.

He reaches over and jerks the issue of Vogue out of my hands and stabs his finger at the cover. "This is your dress! On the cover of Vogue!" He flips wildly through the pages then holds it up again. "And this is *you*. Your picture and a whole article about *you*. In Vogue!" He tosses it back in my direction, then waves his hands across the view. "You brought us to this fabulous beach house to celebrate, and when this week is over, you'll be going back to your equally fabulous manor in Beverly Hills. You're rich, successful, and beautiful. What else could you possibly want!?"

"Forget I even brought it up," I answer quickly.

"No. It's too late for that now. If you don't tell me what's eating at you I'm going to go inside and make myself another mojito and hide the rum to make sure you don't get anymore."

"That's harsh," I smirk. "Fine. I don't have a guy in my life. There. I said it."

He groans and rolls his eyes. "What about me?"

"There's no other man in the world I'd rather have by my side right now. Believe me. But...well, you and I aren't having babies together. I don't mind being single, but lately...I'm just feeling a little sad that I don't have a family of my own to share all of this with, you know? I'm starting to regret that I never found time to become a mother while I was busy building my career."

"Since when do you want babies?" he scoffs as if it's a disgusting unimaginable concept - one too hard to fathom.

"I don't know. I guess my primal reproductive urges finally started kicking in. I keep daydreaming about having a family of my own. I mean, just imagine if there was a little me running around right now, building

sandcastles on the beach. We'd make the best memories here. And Christmas? Oh my god. I would have a field day with Christmas! We'd make gingerbread houses and popcorn garlands and you know we'd have *the most* fabulous Christmas tree."

Anthony grows quiet, and I'm more convinced than ever that it was a mistake to mention any of this. I'm certain I can hear the thick silent judgment just wafting off of him.

"I have to admit...when you paint it - it sounds like a picture I'd want to live in," he says finally. "If only you were a man. Or better yet, if I was born as straight as my mom wishes I was. Then we'd be the perfect couple and she'd be oh so happy for me."

It seems my dark cloud has grown in size, now big enough to hover over us both. Anthony's good mood dissolves away as he slumps down in his chair and takes several long sips of his drink until the glass is empty and the straw is making loud slurping noises.

"Anthony. I'm so sorry," I tell him. "I wish there was something I could do."

"Don't start trying to fix it. I know how you get when you're in fix-it mode, and I don't mind it so much with other things. But not with my life."

"I'm not going to pressure you about coming out to your parents," I assure him. "I know that's not my place. I just wish you didn't have to live two lives. It makes me sad. You're so great, and I wish you could be *all* of you around your own family."

"Don't worry about me," he argues. "Honestly, I'm fine with living two lives. It's worth it not to lose my family. I just want to make my mom happy."

"Being *who you are* should make her happy," I counter. He shoots me a look and I know I've gone too far. I'm not telling him anything he doesn't already know. "Okay, I'll stop."

"It's okay, Nic. If I'm being honest, you're not the only one who's really feeling the ticking of the biological clock lately. I have no interest in settling down with one man. I don't think I can make that kind of commitment. But... having a family would be nice. I want someone to take care of me when I'm old. I just want all of that without giving up my single man's sex life. Is that too much to ask?"

"Is it asking too much for me to have all this and want the perfect husband and family too?"

He shakes his head and stares out over the ocean. "Maybe everyone

always just wants what they don't have. If we had kids right now, we'd probably be reminiscing about our single carefree days. The same ones we're currently moping about."

I sit back and think about it for a moment. It's true that the grass isn't always greener on the other side, but for me - I just don't think anything in my life, even as great as it is, will ever fully fill the void of not being a mother and having my own family. If I don't do something, I'll have to carry the depressing weight of that void with me to my grave.

Anthony told me not to go into fix-it mode, but I can't help it. An idea starts spinning in my head, and once it starts - I'm powerless to stop it.

"No. I refuse to believe that we can't have absolutely everything we want," I declare passionately. "We've made it this far. I got into Vogue for christ's sake. I can't accept that having kids is going to be impossible for me. That's one of the easiest things in the world! People do it all the time! In fact, they have to go through great measures to make sure it doesn't happen by accident!"

"You keep telling yourself that, sister. But the fact of the matter is no man is going to have the kind of arrangement with me that I want. Not with kids in the picture. And your clock is ticking on how much time you have to have a baby. We might just have to accept that these aren't going to happen for us."

"Anthony, think about it. You don't want the relationship, but you want the kids and the family. I'd love to have the relationship, but it doesn't look like that's in the cards for me. I want to be a mother, and if I have to do that without a romantic relationship - so be it."

He stares back at me with a clueless gaze in his eyes. "Why are you stating all of this like it's a solution? Sounds like you're just repeating the problem to me."

"*You and I* can be a family!" I exclaim. "We could have kids together! If you plan on lying to your parents for the rest of your life, a wife and children sure would go a long way in helping you make that happen. I can be your fake wife!"

There's a long pause, then Anthony bursts into wild, cackling laughter. "I think the sun has fried your brain!"

"No, really, Anthony. Think about it. I can't see a single reason why it wouldn't work."

"Uh, okay... for starters, what about when you meet someone? What happens then?"

"You could meet someone too for that matter," I reply.

"Ha! Doubtful!"

"Exactly," I state firmly, crossing my arms. "I feel the same way. If we were going to meet the right people for us, we would have by now. And like you said...the clock is ticking."

He thinks it over some more. "Maybe we *have* met the right people," he admits after a while. "Maybe we're right for each other....in this way."

"Yes! Exactly! Our sex lives are fine. Well, yours is anyway. If I'm not going to be having sex anyway, I might as well ruin my body with childbearing. Kids are the only thing we're missing, which is something we can totally give to each other! It's really so perfect if you think about it!"

"But I don't want to have sex with you," he insists. "Not even as a one-time thing. No offense. I tried that once with a girl in college, and believe me - I will never question my sexuality again."

"I don't want to have sex with you either," I assure him. "But I believe there are clinics that can help with that sort of thing. Oh, just imagine it, Anty! I bet we'd make the cutest babies."

He can't help but smile a little at the thought of it. He knows I'm right.

"It's a lot to think about," he says.

"It sure is," I nod.

I sit back in the patio chair and do just that. I spend the rest of the week being half in the real world and half immersed in the imaginary life we could be having as parents. Sure, it's a little unconventional to have a baby with your gay best friend, but I'm sure it's been done before. And I can't imagine anyone better to raise a family with.

It takes everything in me not to harp on the topic with Anthony. I know if I go on about it too much, he'll be scared off from the idea. So instead I keep all my fantasies to myself and enjoy the rest of our vacation.

By the end of the week, I'm wishing we didn't have to leave. I'm eager to get back home to normal life but so sad to leave this beautiful beach house. But I force myself to pack my bags and carry them down to the foyer anyway. I find Anthony has already done the same and is waiting for me there.

"Maybe I'll buy this place someday," I tell him, leaving out how often I've already imagined us living here in my lets-have-babies-together fantasies.

"Okay, but if you start house shopping, I think I should get a say in it. Seems only fair if I'm going to be living in it part-time and raising a family

with you."

My mouth drops and my heart leaps in my chest. "Anty! What are you saying? You'll do it!?"

"As crazy as it sounds, you were right. I can't think of a single reason not to."

EMERY

There is a big painting of an ocean in the Bardot Hospital board room that I often find myself getting sucked into. Sturgill Bardot, the owner and chief of the board, is rambling on about something that I should be very involved with. But instead, I'm entranced with the ocean view painted in bright broad strokes.

The longer I stare at it, the more I swear I can see the waves moving. I can imagine what it would feel like to be in the middle of it, feeling the hot sun across my skin that's beaded with water. I can taste the salt and feel the rhythm of the ride as I wade out into it with my board in hand.

I don't even remember the last time I went surfing, and that fact depresses me.

"Emery?"

By the time I realize my name is being called, it's loud enough to make me think it took several tries to snap me out of it. I blink and shake my head, adjusting to the blunt transition from being on the beach to suddenly being sucked back into this stuffy old boardroom.

"Sorry. What were you saying?"

The rest of the guys groan and mumble under their breath. Except for Hudson, seated three seats down to my left. He leans over in his chair, at first looking disappointed. Then he studies me in concern.

Sturgill shifts his weight and slides his hands in his pockets with a smarmy smile. "I wasn't saying anything, Mr. Dawson. *You* were. You're supposed to be walking us through the numbers from this quarter."

"Oh, right." I jump to, clearing my throat as I shift through the assortment

of papers in my leather file folder.

My heart starts to pound. *I don't have the numbers for this quarter.* I know I should, but I don't. How could I forget something so crucial? It's my one job, my *only* contribution to the board. Sometimes it feels like spouting off numbers is my only contribution to the entire hospital.

"Was that on the agenda for today?" I stammer. "Sorry, I must have misread something. I thought we weren't set to discuss that until next week."

Sturgill darts his eyes from side to side as if he's looking for someone else to try to put me in my place. Or maybe he's trying to avoid the headache that I'm no doubt giving to everyone right now.

"One agenda was sent out and it was for today," he sighs.

"I'll just need a little time to..."

He holds up his hand. "Fine. Have them ready by next week. Without those, we have nothing left to discuss here, gentleman. You can thank Mr. Dawson for an early adjournment today."

"Thanks, Dawson," a few of the doctors spout off in sarcastic unison.

I've known Sturgill my whole life. He's an old friend of my father's. Even in professional settings like this one, he has no problem addressing me by my first name. He only takes to calling me 'Mr. Dawson' when he's pissed at me.

"Mr. Dawson," he calls out from across the table as the others scramble from the room. "Can you meet me in my office?"

"Sure thing," I reply, deflating in my chair.

I take my time in getting my stuff together, delaying the inevitable for as long as possible. Oddly enough when I'm faced with this kind of scenario and I run all the possible outcomes through my head, I feel incredibly relieved when I imagine the worst-case scenario of getting fired. Dad's old enough now that maybe everyone would do me the favor of playing along and not telling him about it so he could die thinking his son fulfilled his one wish for him.

Hudson stops by my seat on his way out and insists that we grab a beer later. Thanks to me zoning out in this meeting, I've now racked up two oncoming lectures - one from Sturgill now, and one from Hud later.

Finally, I force myself to exit the board room and head across the floor to Sturgill's big corner office. Thankfully all of the artwork on his walls are big abstract paintings. There are no ocean views for me to get distracted by.

"Have a seat," he says as I walk in. "Drink?"

"Yes, please."

He pours two scotches, handing one to me. He carries the other with him as he goes and sits behind his desk.

"I don't think I need to tell you what I called you in for today."

"No, sir. I'm sorry about the meeting. I was unprepared. I guess I'm just feeling a little out of sorts today. I know it's inexcusable."

"You're feeling out of sorts *today*?" he laughs. "Try the whole past month! Really this whole past quarter. Which is why I'm so anxious to see your final report. I can only pray it doesn't reflect the same apathy you've reeked of lately."

"Last I checked, things were looking good," I assure him. "We're within budget in every area."

He nods with a sense of disdain that's boiling over more by the second. "Within budget? Well, that's just great. We'll keep breaking even and I'll keep dumping billions of dollars from our investors into this expensive ship that will sink with all their money on it." He shakes his head with a bitter laugh. "Bardot Hospital of Beverly Hills is a private facility, Dawson. It's a *business*. It has to be profitable or none of us get paid. The whole place shuts down. Not just 'within budget' or 'within projected margins'. We have to push the limits of what we can accomplish here! As our Medical Director, you should be the number one champion for that! You're the bridge between medicine and money around here."

"Yes, sir. Of course. I know."

"So say something, *anything*, to convince me that you'll get your head in the game!" he snaps. "Because lately, I'm getting the feeling that just about anyone else would be doing a better job than you are! I can't keep smiling and lying to your father at parties, telling him his son is doing a fine job when you're clearly not."

This isn't the first time Sturgill has practically begged me to quit or give him permission to fire me. From the moment he hired me, I've done the bare minimum required to prevent that. I think he wishes I'd just walk out or go ahead and screw up so incredibly badly that he has no choice but to let me go.

Every time we find ourselves in this position, I'm wishing for the same thing he is. I want to quit. I want him to fire me. But that always brings on the dreaded nagging question that has plagued my life. The question that stopped me from dropping out of med school or standing up to my father and telling him I didn't want to follow in his footsteps.

What else would I do with my life?

I have no fucking clue. Sure, I like to surf. But I'm too old to go pro, and I never wanted to turn my favorite hobby into a job. I have never landed on a single idea for what else I might do with my life outside of medicine that stood a chance of being any different from this. I could change jobs - but who's to say I wouldn't be just as miserable at it six months down the road?

Like they say, the grass is greener where you water it. I just keep finding my watering bucket empty every day, and I'm clueless about how to fix that. I always have been.

"I can have the numbers for you first thing tomorrow," I state firmly. "And by the next board meeting, I'll have a detailed plan put together for how we'll push profits in the next quarter."

"Alright, son. Good. Good enough for now anyway," he grunts, tossing back the rest of his drink.

I finish my drink as well then suffer through an awkward goodbye. When I'm finally free, I bolt out of the building like it's on fire.

The moment my feet hit the pavement outside, I start walking to nowhere in particular. This has become a new ritual of mine. By the time I leave work at the end of the day, I'm so restless that I just have to walk and walk to get it all out of my system.

I feel a little better by the time I get home. Not long after I get there, Hudson knocks on my door.

"You can come in, but leave your opinions and your judgments out there," I huff.

He walks inside and looks around at the messy state of my house. "What's all this?"

"Woodworking," I reply. "It's something I've been messing around with lately."

"I swear I'm not trying to judge but isn't that what your garage is for?" he asks.

"Oh, yeah. But it's full with all of those bikes."

He laughs. "Ah, yes. Of course. All of those bikes. How is your bicycle repair business coming along anyway?"

He knows damn well I abandoned that bright idea sometime last year, so I only answer him with a burning stare.

We hang out and have a few beers. I know he keeps waiting for the opportunity to talk about what's going on with me, but he manages to stop himself. Maybe because he knows this is just how I am. I've always been

restless and unsatisfied. I jump from one thing to the next, always hoping to find some magical thing that will just click with me. But it never comes.

So much of my time has always been sucked up by the career my father wanted me to have. I often think if I didn't have that looming over me anymore, I could breathe long enough to figure out what I want to do. The only thing that stops me from cutting the cord to my joke of a medical career is...Money.

I get the numbers sent off to Sturgill the next morning as promised, then throw myself into working on the plan for next quarter. I make good progress until my usual fleeting attention span kicks in and suddenly I can't focus anymore.

That's when I get the notification on my phone. It's a random email from a local clinic where I signed up to do some paid medical trials a while back. I thought maybe being a guinea pig for a living wouldn't be so bad until I tried some ointment that made me break out in a rash.

But this email is different. It's a call for sperm donors, and according to it - regular donors who go two to three times a week can make around fifteen hundred dollars a month. That's not enough to pay all of my bills, but it is something. Something that has me deathly curious. Maybe the sperm bank needs an administrative worker in addition to donations?

It'd still be in the medical industry, but maybe it'd be less pressure and more tolerable. Or maybe I'm just so desperate for a change that I'd try just about anything.

NICOLE

For weeks, Anthony teases me and claims he's deaf from the shrill cry I let out when he agreed to start a family with me. I tell him it's good practice for when I'm in labor because I'm sure I'll be screaming like a banshee then. We both agree that his eyes aren't to come anywhere near anything between my legs when that day comes.

The moment we get back home, we start to plan. Anty starts staying in my guest room more often than usual just so we can make certain we won't kill each other while living part-time under one roof. There are a few morning spats over who drank all of the almond milk or who left the air on too high the night before. But it's all before coffee, so we decide none of it counts.

Every chance we get we talk and make plans for our new life together. He will officially move in with me after the baby is born but will have the freedom to go out two to three nights a week to enjoy his single man's sex life. I can go out the other two to three nights if I want to, but I doubt that will happen unless it's for work.

We're both elated and overjoyed, especially after our first appointment at the clinic. That's when it all starts to get so real. Anthony and I have separate examinations that day, to make sure everything is in working order. Our next appointment is booked for a week later to give the labs time to deliver the test results.

As the date gets closer, the days seem to drag by painfully slow. I start to get anxious about how long this whole process will take. It's crazy how I spent my whole life avoiding becoming a mother. And now that I've decided it's time - I can't stand to wait a second longer.

Finally, the day of our appointment arrives. I'm up at the crack of dawn, unable to sleep from the excitement. When Anthony finally wakes up, he finds me in my bedroom - swimming in a sea of clothes.

"What's all this?" he asks, scratching his head as he surveys the mess.

"I want to make sure I wear the right thing. I was thinking of going for a Jackie O look. What do you think? Seems very classy and maternal to me."

"Nic, I know clothes are important to you and all, but we're paying them to inject you with my sperm. It's not adoption. We don't have to convince anyone to let us do this. Your money is all the convincing they need."

"Okay, you're right," I sigh nervously, straightening the wrinkles out of my skirt. "I just want everything to be perfect."

He laughs and shakes his head. "I think the best thing you can do to start preparing yourself for motherhood is to let go of exactly that. Nothing is ever going to be perfect again."

I shoot my eyes over to him and frown. "You haven't changed your mind, have you?"

"Honey, no. Of course not. You know I've come around to wanting this just as much as you do. I'm ready for our perfectly imperfect family. I just hope you don't drive yourself crazy trying to control every little thing."

I look myself over in the mirror with a smile. It's just further proof that Anthony and I's arrangement is so...well, *perfect*. These are the sides to me that weren't well-tolerated by the men I've dated in the past, which is just as well because those same qualities made all of those men equally intolerable to me. But with Anthony - he knows that side of me better than anyone. I don't have to pretend to be something I'm not around him. He embraces me no matter who I am, and I'm happy to do the same for him in return.

"We make a great team," I remind him. "And we're going to be great parents."

"The more you say it, the more I believe it," he grins before shuffling off to get ready.

Two hours later, after suffering through the painfully long and quiet wait at the clinic, we're finally seated across from Dr. Burman. There's a loud clock on his desk that ticks and tocks relentlessly while he looks over our charts. I squirm impatiently in my seat, overanalyzing every micro-expression on the doctor's face.

"Is everything okay?" I ask finally, unable to hold it in anymore.

He shuts both of the files and takes his glasses off, tossing them down on

top of the papers. He leans back in his chair with a sigh and stares back at us with an unreadable expression.

"Anthony, Nicole...I'm afraid I have bad news. We won't be able to move forward with this procedure."

"Oh god," Anthony blurts. "Does one of us have cancer!?"

"No, but unfortunately, your sperm count is very low, and what is there appears to be non-viable. You could always submit another sample, but that rarely ever yields different results when we see numbers like these."

We both deflate in our chairs, unable to move or speak for a moment.

"What are you saying?" Anthony manages to ask after a while.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Anthony. But it appears you are sterile. You and Nicole won't be able to have this baby together. At least not with your sperm. Here are some brochures on male infertility." Dr. Burman slides the pamphlets across his desk.

Anthony throws his head back with a bitter laugh. "Brochures should only be for experiences you *want* to have, like fancy resort hotels or cruises. This is not something I'd ever want a brochure for."

"Dr. Burman," I chime in. "You said Anthony could submit another sample. Sure, it may be rare that the results come back any different, but it's not impossible, right? Isn't it worth it to try? Can he give another sample today?"

Anthony cuts his eyes over to me. "I hate to break it to you, Nic, but I don't think I'm capable of giving a sample right now. I can't just be hit with a bomb like that then go off into the bathroom and jerk off in a cup."

"Fair enough. But you could schedule an appointment to come back tomorrow."

"There are of course some excellent adoption agencies I can refer you to," Dr. Burman tells us. "Or another option you could consider, which we could help you with right here at the clinic, is to use a sperm donor. The baby wouldn't be Anthony's biologically, but you would be able to pick your donor together."

"I think we should wait until his second set of results get back before we jump to any conclusions," I argue.

Dr. Burman and Anthony don't look so hopeful. Deep down, I'm not either. But I got so worked up from the moment he agreed to do this with me. It's like I've been filling up with air ever since and it's hard to believe that in a matter of just seconds, this doctor was able to take a pin to everything I was

so excited for.

I try not to cry as we thank the doctor and show ourselves back out to the waiting room. I refuse to discuss other options until Anthony has the tests run again. He doesn't seem too thrilled about it, and I can tell he's just going along with it for my sake. I love him even more for that.

I'm rushing towards the exit, hoping to make a break for it before tears start streaming down my cheeks. But I only make it halfway through the waiting room when I run smack dab into a wall of hard flesh. My sunglasses and purse go flying across the floor. The man I ran into drops to his knees, scrambling to pick up my stuff. I study what I can see of his face long enough to realize... *I know this man.*

"Emery?"

He looks up at me with his familiar deep blue eyes. "Nicole!?"

He flies to his feet and there's an awkward silence between us. What do we do in this situation? It's not like we're at the grocery store. Neither of us seems to know the appropriate small talk for running into someone you know at the sperm clinic. So we both blurt the first thing that pops into our heads.

"What are you doing here?" we ask each other in unison.

The moment the question spills from our lips, we realize what a stupid thing it is to say. Obviously, we're both here for deeply personal reasons, and neither of us wants to discuss those out loud - not here, like this.

Anthony and I have been keeping our plans a secret. We wanted to wait until I was actually pregnant before announcing our fake engagement. Now with this bump in the road, there's no telling how much longer we'll need to stay in secrecy mode. The last thing I want is for anyone in my family to find out before I'm ready. So of course, luck would have it that I ran into my brother's best friend here of all places.

"Sorry I ran into you like that," he offers, resuming his kneeling position on the floor to help pick up the contents of my purse.

"No, it's okay. I wasn't watching where I was going."

Because I was upset and about to cry...and this situation certainly isn't helping matters any.

I want to snatch up my things, offer a half-hearted polite goodbye, and bolt. But I can't just walk off - not knowing if Emery has the good sense not to mention this to my brother or not. On top of that. Anthony stopped in the bathroom on our way out and he still isn't back yet.

I'm stuck. And somehow I have to figure out how to get Emery to keep

this whole run-in a secret without explaining why I'm here or letting on that anything could be wrong.

"Uh, are you here for work or something?" I ask anxiously.

I can't imagine why a doctor from Bardot Hospital of Beverly Hills would need to come here, but I don't know what else to say.

"Not exactly. It's, uh, kind of a long story." He laughs and runs a hand through his thick wavy hair.

He always had the best hair, even when we were kids. An unbearable amount of time passes before I realize I'm staring. When I finally snap out of it, I blurt out the only thing I can think of to try and fix this.

"Do you want to grab lunch?"

I ask not because I actually want to have lunch with him, but because getting him out of this clinic and into a private booth over some food and a stiff drink is the only way I know how to have this conversation with him.

I'm relieved when he smiles and says, "Sure."

Maybe a very small part of me is also very curious about what he's doing here. If I can find that out, maybe it'll be enough to ensure he keeps my secret.

EMERY

As quickly as I accept Nicole's invitation to lunch, she turns and walks out the door. I follow her out onto the busy, sunny sidewalks as we push our way through the passing people. I don't know where we're going. She's taking the lead, and that's fine by me - because I'm too distracted by the pounding of my heart in my ears.

Nearly twenty years ago I made a promise to my best friend. I promised to never lay a finger on his sister, to never even think about her in that way.

The only thing harder than commanding my thoughts not to go there has always been admitting to my father that I'm not the perfect son he thinks I am. I don't want to be a doctor. I don't want to follow in his footsteps.

Now here we are. I'm a doctor...sort of, barely. I'm a medical director at a leading private facility that makes my father proud. And the only reason I can say that is because Hudson and I made a deal. I let go of all my fantasies about Nicole, and he helped me cheat my way into a seemingly successful career.

How does it all make me feel? Like a coward. I'm a grown man who can't even stand up to his own father. Worse, I'm a grown man who can't even figure out what he wants to do with his life. I'm floating through fleeting interests - woodworking to bikes, medical trials to sperm banks. For what? If it weren't for Hudson, I'd probably be a dirty stoner surfer dude who would have to sleep in his expensive guest house because I couldn't afford my own rent.

The root of it all leads to someone who is nowhere near good enough for Nicole - an award-winning rich and popular fashion designer who was

recently featured in Vogue. The woman who got a standing ovation at Paris Fashion Week. A girl who has secretly held my heart since we were in grade school.

So...no harm no foul in going to lunch with her, right?

The front door to a nearby cafe dings open as Nicole slips inside with me following closely behind. As we take a corner booth in the back, I tell myself I'll text Hudson as soon as we leave and let him know I ran into his sister and we had a friendly catch-up over lunch. We've shared more family gatherings and special occasions over the years than I can count. A casual lunch is no different. The text to Hud will set that in stone.

I have nothing to hide. *This* is nothing.

"First off," Nicole says before the waitress even has a chance to make her way over. "You can't tell my brother we ran into each other today."

The wind is knocked out of me. This is *supposed* to be nothing. It has to be. But if it's a secret...there's no way you could spin it where it wouldn't seem like *something* in Hud's mind.

"What?" I laugh, hoping she's joking. Much like I did twenty years ago when Hud asked me to make that stupid promise in the first place. The Grays sure do know how to ask for what they want. I'll give them that.

"Hudson can't know we saw each other today," she states again - firmly and without doubt. It's not a question or a request. It's a direct order, not up for debate.

I flip open my menu, avoiding her steely eyes. "He doesn't have to know the particulars, but I don't see why I'd--"

"Why were you there today anyway?" she blurts, cutting me off. When I don't immediately answer she keeps prodding. "At the sperm bank. Do you donate sperm? How long have you been doing that for?"

The waitress finally arrives and takes our drink order. I ask for coffee. Nicole goes for a martini. As we're being regaled with the lunch specials, Nicole is on her phone sending a text. The moment the waitress leaves, she smacks her phone down flat on the table and turns her determined and impatient gaze back to me.

My shoulders slump with a sigh. "I haven't donated sperm. Not yet anyway."

"So why were you there?"

"Why were *you* there?" I hammer back.

"I can't tell you that until I know for certain you won't tell Hud. And also

not until I know your own reasons for being there. You know, for insurance purposes."

My brow flickers in amusement as I lean in over our menus. "What makes you so certain my reasons are good enough to be used as blackmail?"

"Because you still haven't shared them with me. You obviously don't want me to know."

I laugh, shaking my head. "We ran into each other. Your stuff scattered all over the floor. In the blink of an eye, you asked me to lunch and now here we are. I haven't had time to think, much less be calculated enough to keep secrets."

The only thing I've been calculating enough to do is determine I have to tell Hud about this. We can't have a seemingly simple secret like this - not when it comes to Nicole. Which is the one thing she is now adamant about denying me.

The waitress brings our drinks and barely spits out the first few syllables of taking our order when Nicole points a finger, cutting her off. "We need a minute. Several actually. I'll flag you down when we're ready."

I almost want to plead with the waitress to come back as she spins on her heels to leave. It feels like I'm being thrown to the wolves.

"You're right," Nicole smiles tightly. "So sorry. I move fast. Too fast for some people. But I'm all ears now. How are you today, Emery? It's been a while. I haven't seen you since...what...last Christmas?"

"Easter Sunday," I answer too quickly. Promise or no promise - I will always know exactly how long it's been since I've last seen her.

"Right. That dinner at our parents'. Did you have a good summer?"

"Sure. I took up sailing. And started learning how to work on boats."

"Really? I was thinking of getting a boat someday maybe. Well, actually, I've had my eye on buying one of the beach houses down by where you and Hud used to go surfing all the time. You remember the spot."

"How could I forget," I reply, clicking my tongue. "Man, I haven't been there in years."

A look of surprise, tinged with sadness, seeps into her eyes. "Really? You don't surf there anymore?"

"No." I clear my throat. "You know, I'm starting to think you had the right idea in ordering that drink."

"Good idea," she snaps quickly, waving the waitress back over.

I suffer through another ten minutes of thinly veiled small talk, which

flows only slightly easier when I have a martini of my own to sip on. Nicole pretends to be interested in my brief adventures in boating, but before long - she switches back into interrogation mode.

"So, you don't surf much these days...or at all. You're single, I take it. You got into sailing and boating for a while but lost interest. Outside of all of that, you're still working with my brother at Bardot," she repeats impatiently. "And all of that brought you to the sperm bank today...why exactly?"

I squint my eyes at her. "What makes you so sure I'm single?"

"Are you not? Well, it's easy enough to guess why a single man would be at a sperm bank. Or a married man. If you're neither of those, I'm even more intrigued."

"Fine, you caught me," I huff. "I am single...not that it's any of your business. I was there today out of curiosity. To see how much a sperm donor gets paid exactly, and maybe to see if the clinic has any other kind of staffing needs. It was a stupid impulsive thing, really. I knew neither would pay enough, and it's not like working in a place like that would be any more exciting than working at Bardot."

She listens carefully and shoots up one brow. "You're unhappy at Bardot?"

"Yes, alright?" I groan, squirming in my seat. "You caught me. I am completely miserable at Bardot and with my career at large. I have no clue what I'm doing. I never have really. But your brother pulled a lot of strings to get me that job, so he can't know any of this."

"Ah-ha!" she jabs. "So I was right all along. If I do tell you why I was there today, you can't tell Hud about our little meeting because if you did I'd have no choice but to rat you out as well."

"I don't think it's such a good idea for me to keep a secret like that from him," I argue.

"I don't think it's such a good idea for people to pretend like they're someone they're not around the people who are closest to them," she chirps with a shrug. "But people do it all the time. You won't admit to your best friend that you don't want the job he got for you. My best friend doesn't want to come out to his family. I don't want everyone to know that while it looks like I have it all, I have zero love life and no good prospects for starting a family of my own."

My mouth drops. I stare into her ocean-blue eyes, searching for anything to explain how this is possible. *How is Nicole Gray, of all people, without a*

love life? She's gorgeous, smart, and talented. A little scary at times - this lunch being the perfect example, but that only makes her more irresistible. It's like the whole world is a piece of clay in her hands, and she always finds a way to mold it into whatever shape she wants. More than that, she has always known exactly what she wants - which is maybe the harder challenge for most. It sure as hell is for me.

The only thing I have ever been certain about wanting is her. Who knows if that would even be possible without that promise I made to Hud. I always assumed she'd settle down with some impossibly perfect guy of her caliber. But I guess it's no surprise to me that finding someone who's truly on her level has proven to be difficult.

"Huh," I murmur finally. "I guess I'm not too shocked by that."

Her brow furrows. "Excuse me?"

"You don't settle for anything less than what you want. You never have. Hud is the same way. And truthfully, I can see how there wouldn't be anyone out there who's good enough for you. So...single it is then."

"You're saying I think I'm too good for everyone?" she scoffs.

"No, I'm saying I *know* you're too good for everyone. Not that you think it, but that it's a fact. But usually, women like you date losers just to have someone. You won't stoop to that level, and I commend you for that."

"Thanks...I think." She softens a little as my words soak in. "So, Emery. You were thinking about being a sperm donor?"

NICOLE

"I don't know," Emery replies, sinking back into the booth as he rakes his hand down his face. "I don't know what I'm doing anymore."

I have to admit, this is a revelation. I barely ever saw Emery and my brother as two separate people. They've always been attached at the hip on the outside, so I wrongly assumed that they were the same on the inside. To find out that Emery isn't as lovingly dedicated to his career as Hud shouldn't be so shocking, but it is.

He reaches for his drink and sucks down the last of it. Right on cue, I motion for the waitress to keep them coming. Call me crazy, but maybe just maybe - there is a solution here for both of us. The liquor will help me figure out what it is.

"So, Nicole," he echoes back to me. "You're thinking of getting a sperm donor to become a mother?"

"Not just thinking about it," I confess. "My mind is made up. But...there was a problem with the original donor I had envisioned. That's why I was there today."

It feels wrong to refer to Anty so coldly, especially when I know he's camping out a few doors down in the coffee shop - waiting on me, per my instructions. He has to be going through hell right now. It can't be easy to be told you're sterile.

Something in me knows it's not safe to divulge so much to Emery. He's present at nearly every holiday and family gathering right alongside us Grays. Sometimes our families all vacation together.

The way I see it...this isn't over yet. I'm not giving up. I made up a

perfect life and family for me and Anthony in my head, and we were supposed to be on our way to making it a reality. I'm not ready to let that go.

But if we're ever going to pull off this picture-perfect family that has everyone convinced we're a happily married straight couple - no one can know the truth but us. I've laid enough on the line with Emery. I'm not giving that up too. It wouldn't be fair to put it all at risk for Anthony like that.

"A problem?" he questions.

"Something went wrong. It's not viable. Now I have to find another donor," I explain, studying him harder.

Another donor. That's all we need. It's so simple really. And like a gift from the gods, Emery was planted so clearly right in front of me at the perfect moment. Maybe running into him at the sperm bank was just as big and important as concocting this family life with Anthony was. I feel the same tingling certainty as the wheels in my head turn.

I don't question my ideas when they come like this. Those ideas have been spun into award-winning designs that have made me millions. If I can design clothes so masterfully, surely I can trust in my ability to do the same with my own life.

The lightbulbs in my eyes glow brighter as I stare back at Emery.

"Another donor," I say again. "Like...maybe...I don't know, *you*?"

He chokes on his drink and has to cover his mouth with a napkin to keep from spraying it all over the table and me.

"What!?" he croaks.

"It's not so absurd," I insist, snatching up a few more napkins to shove in his direction. "You were thinking of being a donor anyway, and I wasn't thrilled about the idea of flipping through a catalog of strangers to choose the father of my child."

I stare off for a moment, saddened that it couldn't be so simple as my best friend being the biological father like we had planned. But if it can't be Anthony, Emery seems like the next best thing. I turn my gaze back to him, even more convinced that this is a great idea.

"I've known you my whole life," I explain. "I trust you. You come from a good family. You're healthy and attractive."

His eyes widen. "You think I'm attractive?"

"I didn't say I was attracted to you. I said you were attractive. That's not as subjective as everyone makes it out to be. You fit the canon of proportions."

"The what?"

"The canon of proportions. Da Vinci. Come on, Emery. Keep up. Don't get caught on these little details. The point is you're better than any stranger I could ever find in those sperm donor books."

"That's sweet, I guess," he puzzles. "Thanks? But there's one huge problem. Actually, there are a lot of problems."

"Lucky for you I'm very good at solving problems," I fire back in a smug tone.

"I told you I have no idea what I was doing in there today. It was just another one of my dumb impulses. I'm not convinced I want to be a sperm donor. I mean, I guess I'm not starting a family of my own any time soon and it'd be nice to help a family in need..."

"Or an aspiring mother in need, like me," I suggest.

"But...well, not to rub it in, but I've got plenty of time to think about it," he goes on. "It's not something I have to rush into. Men are fertile well into their forties."

"Some men are," I grumble. "Lucky you."

"Yes, I know," he barks. "I am very lucky. I'm painfully aware of how lucky I am. My problems aren't real problems. I can be as dissatisfied or unsure or restless as I want to be, and no matter how much it eats me up inside...I know it's not a real problem. Maybe that in itself is my problem. I can have almost anything I want. I have *too many* options. I don't expect anyone to feel sorry for me."

"Good, because I don't," I snip, feeling a little bad after it slips out.

I've never been one for the 'Struggles Olympics' where one person's sadness is deemed more or less important than another's. Especially not in my position which is also very privileged - maybe even more so than Emery's because I actually know what I want to do. I always have. I do it well and I enjoy every moment of it.

I'm not used to being told 'no' either, and now here I am - face to face with the one thing I'm missing: a family. And even my best plans to make that happen are proving to be more difficult than I thought they would be.

"I'm sorry," I offer with a sigh. "We've both been lucky in life. But that's not always enough. Our hearts want what they want."

Something flickers in his eyes. "Yeah, we do," he says in a deep, gravelly voice. "No matter what kinds of promises we try to make."

"Hm? Promises?"

"Nothing," he says, shaking it off. "Look, I appreciate the situation you're in and I'm really sorry. But the other big flaw with your brilliant idea is Hudson. I could never do this without telling him, and even if we did tell him...he'd kill me for even asking."

"*Asking?*" I laugh bitterly. "I don't have to ask my brother who to use as my sperm donor. It's none of his business."

"No, but in this case it's mine. He made me swear to never even look at you in that way, to never lay a finger on you. He's sure as hell not going to be okay with me being the father of your child."

"You won't be the father," I remind him. "Biologically, sure. But no one has to know that but you and me."

"I can't keep a secret like that from my best friend," he says with unwavering certainty.

"Let me get this straight," I bark. "You let Hud bully you into a promise about never getting involved with me, which by the way was completely unnecessary because I've never thought about you in that way."

I try not to falter in my words, even though it's a slight lie. Emery is attractive and he's always been around. Of course he crossed my mind in that way a time or two when I was sixteen and he was two years older with perfect washboard abs, riding the waves of the ocean like a god.

But I never fed into any of that. I had more important things to do - like becoming a world-famous fashion designer. I guess it's that mentality that landed me in this current predicament to begin with. I should have made a little more time along the way for all the Emery's who were right under my nose.

All of that is in the past now, so I keep barreling forward.

"You won't tell Hud you hate your job. You're scared not to tell him if we so much as have lunch together. And now you'd let him be the deciding factor in whether or not you do this for me?"

"He's my best friend," he says again. "He's always done everything he could for me. I wouldn't be where I am today without him."

"Where you are doesn't seem to be so great...according to you."

"Don't you care about friendship and loyalty?"

"More than you know. I just don't think that true friendship requires you to lie or pretend to be something you're not."

"Says the woman who kicked off this lunch with a demand for me to lie about this lunch ever happening at all," he scoffs.

I roll my eyes and stare out the window with anger burning across my face in a twisted grin. I sold my best friend on this beautiful life we could have together, and now I'm going to give it to him. I sold *myself* on that beautiful life, and I'm going to make it real for both of us. We're going to have it all, damnit.

The desperation builds and bursts out of me. "I'll pay you!"

Emery's brow furrows. "Doesn't matter."

"It does if it means you don't have to work at Bardot anymore," I defend. "What's your annual salary?"

"Four hundred thousand," he replies with a smile, as if he knows it's a dealbreaker.

Little does he know, it's all the ammunition I need to make him a deal he can't say no to.

"Fine. I'll pay you a year's salary," I blurt without a moment's hesitation. "That'd buy you a lot of time to figure out what you want to do with your life."

"That sperm bank is paying guys a couple hundred bucks for their sperm. They charge you...what? Two or three thousand bucks? Why the hell would you pay me hundreds of thousands of dollars for it? You could walk into any bar right now and get a man to give it to you the old-fashioned way for free. No, you know what...you could probably find a man right here in this cafe who'd give it to you. Want me to help you find someone?"

"You won't do it?" My face twists in exasperation. "You won't even think about it?"

Our eyes lock together. I stare back at him intently, trying to silently will him to at least give me that much. He *has* to at least think about it.

"Maybe. I'll think about...thinking about it," he mumbles, sliding out of the booth.

He pays the check and says goodbye but stops into the restroom on the way out, leaving me alone in the booth. I text Anthony and tell him to come meet me. He shows up just as Emery is walking out the door. Emery passes right by him without paying any attention, but Anthony stops and checks him out.

"Oooohh, girl. Did you see that man? Why are all the best looking guys straight?"

"That one in particular is also my brother's best friend, and I'm hoping I can convince him to be our sperm donor."

EMERY

Out of all the best and worst-case scenarios I ever imagined playing out with Nicole, her asking me to be her sperm donor was never on my radar.

I leave the cafe and meander through the crowded sidewalks, slowly making my way back to my car. The messed up thing is even with this crazy offer she gave me to think about, as I'm walking all I can think about is her: those sparkling blue eyes, glossy pink lips, her long graceful fingers clutched around her cocktail glass. Her deep honey voice and the way it fills my chest when she speaks.

How in the hell does a woman like that not have a man to start a family with? Maybe it's true that there isn't one on the face of this earth that's good enough for her, but come on. Couldn't she have at least settled for Leonardo DiCaprio or gone for an older man like George Clooney? Hudson managed to bag starlet Madison Levine as his wife. Between that and Nicole's own rise to fame in the design world - I wouldn't be surprised at all if Hollywood's leading men were real options for her.

And yet...today I sat across from her in a cafe and listened to her offer me four hundred thousand dollars to do something she could easily only pay a few thousand for, or better yet get for free. All because she can't find a man.

She has to be crazy, I decide as I get into my car and start the drive home. That's the only explanation for all of this.

I thought I knew her pretty well, but even as well as I know my best friend - I don't know him as well as Madison does. No matter how close you are to someone, there's no telling what they're like behind closed doors when

you're living with them day in and day out.

Something about that mysterious private version of Nicole has to be absolutely intolerable and insane. That's the only reason she would be single and asking *me* - a discontented medical director nobody - to be the biological father of her child.

That explains how she concocted this whole scheme in the first place, and why she thinks it's actually a good idea - not to mention how she's convinced herself that it's okay to keep a secret like this from her own brother, my best friend, or that we could even if we tried.

There are so many red flags on this one that by the time I walk through the front door of my place - I think I've made up my mind that there's no way in hell I can agree to this.

At least my logical brain knows that. The rest of me? It's still reeling with questions and intrigue.

I navigate through the living room graveyard of my abandoned woodworking hobby, making my way to the fridge to pop open a beer. As it cracks open with a hiss, I guzzle down the cold amber liquid and start to unpack it all - just to satisfy my curiosity.

How would this even work? First off, there's a chance it couldn't. My sperm may not even be viable. That happens to guys all the time. I'd have to be tested, and then the clinic would have to inseminate Nicole.

My mind starts drifting to fantasies about giving her what she wants the old-fashioned way, but I quickly try to shake it off. Ever since I was eighteen and Hud made me promise not to think of her that way, it's hard to go there in my brain without him popping up like a guard to protect his sister - even in fantasyland. I still breeze right past him from time to time, but right now - that's not going to help me sort through anything.

Let's say my sperm is worth as much as she's willing to pay for it - then what? I see her at family gatherings and holidays getting more pregnant with each passing month. The whole time never letting on to Hud or anyone that the baby inside of her is actually mine. And after the baby is born, that game would go on for the rest of our lives.

How could I sit across from a child at birthdays and Thanksgivings and pretend not to notice if the kid looks or acts like me? What if he looks *exactly* like me and everyone else sees it too?

By now, I've plopped down on the couch and sucked down half of my beer with my thoughts spinning in circles - every path leading to a new dead

end of how impossible and absurd her whole idea is. I'm in such deep thought that I jump when my phone starts to ring and answer without checking the caller ID. *Big mistake.*

"Hey, man," Hud's voice comes over the line. "I'm just leaving the hospital. Madison and Audrey are at some kids' charity benefit, and she's given me a pass not to go. Want to meet up and grab a beer?"

I know with absolute certainty that I can't face him right now. I'm sweating bullets just talking to him on the phone. If I was sitting across from him, I feel like he'd smell Nicole on me and see her dancing in my eyes.

"Ah, no thanks. You go on without me. I think I'm in for the night," I tell him, hoping that will be the end of it.

"You sure? I can come over there. Maybe we can build something together since you've already converted your house into a workshop."

"I'm pretty tired. If anything, I should work on getting this place cleaned up."

"Hm. Well, I'm down for fucking around with power tools, but housecleaning doesn't sound so appealing. I'll see you around tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you around. Have fun tonight. And behave yourself."

"You know I always do," he replies confidently.

I hang up the phone with a sigh of relief. I'm off the hook, and Hud is right. He'll behave because he always does - because he has always been good at everything. After years of watching him pass med school with flying colors, managing to keep my ass in tow the whole time, then land his dream job and somehow securing one for me too even though I hadn't earned it by a long shot - it's no surprise that he's the perfect husband and father too.

The thing is, family life is something I always thought I could be pretty good at. Sometimes I picture having a house on the beach, teaching my kids to surf, having dinner by the ocean every night with a beautiful wife. Admittedly, my future fantasy wife bears a striking resemblance to Nicole. I always figured if I couldn't have her, I could at least go for someone who looks like her.

But you can't have a family unless you have a job and money to support one. I could raise a family just fine on my salary from Bardot, but I'm always hanging by a thread there - constantly dreaming of being fired or quitting. That'd have to stop if I had a family depending on me. I just know the effort it would take to pretend to be happy in my career would eat me from the inside out and drag my whole family down with me.

Suddenly, I see a small flicker of appeal in Nicole's idea. It's one I know I should ignore. I can't entertain it. But it quickly consumes me anyway.

If I can't be with Nicole, at least I could make a baby with her - even if it's only through a test tube. If I can't get my shit together to be good enough for her, or any woman for that matter, to have the family I dream of - I could at least live vicariously through her as she raises a child that's secretly mine.

I'd know exactly what our baby would look like, and I'd get to see her raise him or her from afar. I have a hunch she'll be a great mom since she's always great at everything she sets her mind to.

As I watched it all play out at parties and across dinner tables, I'd have a very real and vivid glimpse into a life that I dream of - even if I can't touch it or hold it or really have it as my own.

I stare down at the empty beer bottle in my hand, realizing how pathetic I sound.

"Jesus. Get a grip, man," I grumble to myself, shaking my head.

The next day goes by in a blur. I go through the usual motions, but I have to admit - it's nice having something new to occupy my thoughts. I mentally pace back and forth between knowing I can never go along with Nicole's plan and dipping my toes in the dangerous waters of what it would feel like to say yes.

The more I think about it, the more questions I have. Mostly about Nicole and her motives and what makes her crazy enough to think this could work in the first place. This isn't the kind of decision you make impulsively like I do with everything else in my life.

Actually, maybe it would be pretty damn simple if it was anyone other than her who asked. Then I could say no in a heartbeat. But because it is her - it feels like saying no outright is cutting myself from an opportunity that I may never get again.

Because no matter what we agree to...the fact of the matter is that Nicole asked *me* to do this for a reason when she has dozens of cheaper, less complicated options - whether she wants to see it or not. I can't help but feel like somehow...this is a way for me to get closer to her, even if nothing can ever really come of it.

The flicker of appeal I saw the night before starts to grow and outshine everything else. What if after a year of being free from Bardot or any other kind of work, I really could figure out what I want to do with my life? What if I could somehow become something close to the man she deserves during

that time?

And what if... after the baby is born, she starts to think having the biological dad around wouldn't be so bad after all?

Could Hud ever come around to it? Could he free me from my promise?

And with Nicole and a family to show for it - would I finally have the courage to just come out with it and tell my dad I'm not the carbon copy of him he wants me to be?

When the questions get to be too much for me to sift through on my own, I call Nicole and make plans to meet up with her to discuss the idea further. Not to break it to her that obviously my answer is no...but to *discuss it with her*.

If that doesn't prove I've officially lost it, I don't know what does.

NICOLE

I'm sitting at my bedroom vanity getting ready for the day when Emery calls and asks to meet. I try to get more out of him on the phone, but he just keeps saying he has more questions and it'd be easier to discuss it all in person.

I hate meetings where I feel like I don't entirely know what I'm walking into. But he hasn't said no yet. He's still considering it enough to discuss it further. For now, that's as much of a win as I can hope for I guess.

After hanging up, I set my phone down and glance over at the framed photo resting next to my mirror. It shows younger versions of both myself and Anthony. Every time I look at it, I can't help but smile.

We're in a dim-lit bar with hanging lights glowing behind us. Anthony has his arms wrapped around me, squeezing me against his side as he plants a big kiss on my cheek. My face is all scrunched up with laughter.

The photo was taken not long after we met, but we were already best friends. I was in fashion design school and he was working as a lighting engineer apprentice. We met on the set of a photoshoot I was assigned to for a school assignment. I noticed right away that despite Anthony's keen eye for fashion and excellent taste, he had no interest in being in the spotlight. He wanted to be the one *behind* the spotlight.

As I learned more about his family situation, I started to wonder if it had something to do with his discomfort with being the center of attention. If he was lurking in the shadows behind the curtain, he had anonymity and freedom to be himself - to live the life he wanted without any judgment.

But talent is talent whether it's front and center or zipping around

backstage. I knew then that Anthony was going to be great at whatever he ended up doing, and he believed in my dream of becoming one of the greatest designers of our time. Once you reach a certain level of fame and success, it means a lot to have someone who's been by your side when you were no one and had nothing.

In return for his loyalty and unwavering support of me and my dreams, I've always wanted to give Anthony the security and acceptance that his own family only gave on the condition that he never showed him his true colors. Ever since our dream of starting a family together took shape, I've held onto the hope that we could make a home and a life where he could receive even more of that love and acceptance.

Sure, maybe to the outside world - our marriage would be a lie. But in the privacy of our own home, he could have the family he always deserved. And I could finally be a mother.

I set the picture back down and finish doing my hair and makeup before making my way out into the kitchen. I find Anthony sitting at the counter, sipping some orange juice with a magazine flipped open in his lap. I quickly notice there is something else tucked inside the magazine. Anthony is flicking a pencil back and forth across the surface, but he quickly tries to hide it all away when I come in.

"Good morning," I beam, pretending not to notice. "How are you feeling today?"

As much as he swears the news from the doctor didn't bother him, I've noticed how he's been moping around the house far more than usual lately.

"I'm feeling fabulous as always. How are you?"

I lean over the counter, grinning ear to ear. "I am also feeling fabulous. Especially now that I've heard back from Emery."

"Emery as in your brother's hot best friend whose sperm you're trying to hi-jack?"

"It's not hijacking if he gives it to us willingly," I laugh. "Besides, I'll be paying him a pretty penny for it."

Anthony slows, his eyes growing wider. "So he said yes?"

"Well...not exactly. Not yet anyways," I shrug. "I'm meeting him for lunch today. He wants to discuss it further. That's a good sign! He hasn't said 'no' yet."

"I don't know, Nic," he replies, shaking his head. "Don't you think we're making this more complicated than it needs to be? Why can't we just choose

a donor from the clinic? Those guys have already agreed to it. Their sperm is just sitting there in a freezer waiting for some people struck with baby fever like us to come along and use it. And it's a hell of a lot cheaper than that ridiculous offer you made to the hot doctor."

"Come on, Anty. We talked about this. Emery has the perfect genes. He's smart and in good health. He has a good family history..."

"He's insanely hot. And you've had a crush on him since you were a little girl."

"Have not!" I scoff, swatting him on the arm. "He is attractive, so sure I noticed him. He was always hanging around our house and I was a hormonal teenage girl. Maybe I imagined what it would be like to kiss him a time or two, but it stops there. It's ancient history and has absolutely nothing to do with any of this."

"Nic..."

"Come on. It's not cheaper if a donor somehow finds out his sperm went to someone like me and tries to come after us in some frivolous lawsuit to shake us down for money. I've read horror stories about that kind of thing. Not to sound full of myself, but when you're well-known and rich...you have to be creative and think outside the box with things like this. You can't always use the same options the average person would."

"I know, I know." He throws his hands up in surrender. "I guess there's no point in worrying about it until the hottie doctor actually agrees to it anyway."

"He will," I assure him, feigning certainty.

But truthfully, I'm not certain at all. Emery can be a wild card sometimes. I don't know what to expect.

I turn my attention back to whatever it is Anthony has tucked away in his magazine. *What is he hiding from me?*

He doesn't catch me staring as he gets up and goes over to the fridge. When his back is turned, I lift up the corner of the page to sneak a peek at what's inside. I didn't mean for him to know I did it, but when I see the sketch he's working on I can't help but gasp and yank it out to get a closer look.

"Anty! This is beautiful!"

He rushes over and tries to snatch it back, but I swoop out of the way and run to the other side of the kitchen to continue studying it. By the time he catches up to me, I've had enough time looking at it to know it's an amazing design.

"That's nothing," he insists, quickly shoving it into his bag that's hanging from the back of the barstool.

"It sure did look like something to me! Why didn't you tell me you were sketching some of your own ideas? You know I've always thought you should get into design!"

"And you know I've always been flattered by your support," he blushes. "But I also think you have a tendency to be a little biased when it comes to me and my so-called skills."

"Not at all," I defend. "I look at everything you do with a one hundred percent unbiased and purely professional lens. It just so happens that everything you do is great, so I hardly ever have any notes for improvement to give. Except, of course, that you should be doing more of everything...like designing your own line."

"There's only room for one diva designer under this roof, even if we are in a mansion."

"I am not a diva. And there is most certainly room for both of us to be our big beautiful selves. There are no limits."

"Thanks," he mutters with a half-smile.

I walk over and squeeze him to my side - mimicking the way he held me in the photo that sits on my vanity.

"Anty. I mean it. I don't want you to ever feel overshadowed. I fully support anything and everything you ever want to do. Promise me you know that."

"I do," he answers sincerely. "Thank you. But right now, all I want to do is watch you swell up like a watermelon so we can start our family. So shouldn't you be heading off to meet with the hottie doctor?"

I narrow my eyes over him. "I don't know. Are you so sure this place is big enough for all of us? Like you said, only so many divas can fit under one roof and any child of ours is sure to expect the world to revolve around them."

"As they should...because the world *will* revolve around them if I have anything to do with it," he grins.

"Alright," I laugh. "Fair enough. Well then, I'm off. Wish me luck."

I lean in and air-kiss him on both cheeks, then snatch up my bag on the way out the door. My driver is waiting for me out front and soon we're off to the chic and elite Club Haut where I asked Emery to meet me.

The speak-easy style club, reserved only for the biggest names in the

fashion industry, is painted solid black with no signage out front. Emery is pacing back and forth in front of it as we pull up, looking all around and scratching his head in confusion. I ask the driver to slow down and roll down my window, then lean out to whistle at him.

"Is this the right place?" Emery puzzles.

I laugh and point to the side alley. "Meet me over there."

My car pulls around as Emery runs to catch up. I get out and walk up to the unmarked door, pounding my fist to it in the special secret pattern that you'd only know if you're someone who's allowed to go inside *and* if they're expecting you. A slot opens and a man peers out. When he sees me, we can hear the locks sliding open from the other side before the door opens. A tall buff guy in a black suit and sunglasses quickly ushers me in, holding a hand up to block Emery.

"It's okay," I tell him. "He's with me."

"What is this place?" Emery asks as we walk down the long dark hallway. "Some kind of underground goth club?"

"Hardly," I reply.

He sees what I mean when we go through the final door. The painted black walls quickly turn into expensive wallpaper and lighting fixtures. We're greeted by a hostess who takes us to a private VIP room upstairs. The small corner booth has its own door to ensure privacy, just like all the other doors we passed on our way up. Behind each one of those doors is some famous person who is having their own private meeting or just partying in the middle of the day.

The waiter brings us a bottle of champagne, and I notice my hand shaking as I reach for my glass. *What the hell?*

How am *I* the one that's nervous right now while Emery looks as cool as a cucumber? It seems like he should be the one who's anxious about stepping into this world.

But I guess there's far more on the line for me than there is for him. There's four-hundred-thousand dollars just waiting for him. All he has to do is say yes.

If he says no, it's back to the drawing board for me and Anthony. And with each new setback, I worry one of us is more at risk of giving up and changing our minds about this whole thing.

EMERY

Nicole doesn't take her sunglasses off until we're settled into the booth with glasses full of expensive champagne. The private room has its own dim-lit chandelier hanging over our table, and there are candles burning near the ice bucket. Each time a waiter returns, they have to ring a bell and wait for Nicole to buzz them in with a switch on the side of the table.

"I thought I had been to fancy places before, but this takes the cake," I tell her.

"When it's impossible to go anywhere without being hassled by random people, celebrities get very inventive with ways to find a little privacy."

"Does that happen to you a lot? I mean, do you get hassled by random people out on the street?"

She takes a sip of her drink and tilts her head. "I mean, it's nothing like what my sister-in-law, Madison Levine, deals with. No one recognizes me unless they're really into fashion. At least for now. I may be signing on to be a panelist on a design reality show competition that's set to shoot next year. Things may change then. But for now...it's mostly just up-and-coming designers that try to talk to me. Which I really don't mind so much. But sometimes it is nice to get out and just be left alone. Especially when you have something so important and secretive to discuss."

"Right. It's just straight down to business with you I guess," I nod, leaning back against the booth.

"Well, what else would we be doing here today?" she presses, studying me harder. "What's wrong? I can tell something's bugging you."

"A lot is bugging me about this," I admit. "For one, there's everything you just talked about. I mean I know if I agreed to this, I wouldn't have any involvement or say in the child's life. I guess I just worry about what their upbringing will be like. Our fathers may be well-known doctors, but we've never had to worry about going to the grocery store without being harassed by people. We could take family vacations and eat out at restaurants without worrying."

"So...because I'm well-known and successful I shouldn't be allowed to raise a family?" she scoffs.

"No, that's not what I'm saying. But Madison and Hud have to be so careful about every little thing. They have to have security with them everywhere they go. The media are like vultures always swarming around them. I worry about what it does to a kid to be raised in that kind of life."

She nods thoughtfully, then perches her arms on the table and rests her chin on her hands. "What kind of life *are* you envisioning for your kids? If you ever have them?"

"I'd want them to have something sort of like what we did," I reply. "With lots of long hot days spent on the beach and family dinners every night. But of course, I'd always want to be there for those days and nights. I wouldn't want to be working so much that I couldn't even be bothered to see who my kids are...How they might be different from me, what they might want for their own lives. I guess that's something different I'd want them to have."

"That's something you didn't have?" she asks. I shake my head. "Well, maybe in the scenario I'm proposing you personally wouldn't be there for dinner every night, but my child will have a loving family that supports who they really are...Not some ideal I expect them to fit. I want them to be themselves, and I want to be there for every part of it...always letting them know how loved and supported they are. That's important to me."

"And you think you can do all of that? With your career and everything?"

"I know I can," she says confidently. "Why are you so worried about it anyway? You wouldn't have any responsibility in the matter."

"Not on paper. But morally? I'd feel responsible," I explain. "Our families are so close, I'm going to see this kid grow up even if no one knows I'm the biological dad. If they were being passed off to a nanny all the time, it'd eat at me."

"You've seen how Hud and Madison do things. They're very involved parents, even with their busy careers."

"Fair enough."

"So is that your only concern?" she asks.

"No," I laugh. "Not by a long shot."

"Okay." She stiffens and clears her throat, looking impatient and frustrated. "Let's have it then. That's what we're here for. What else is keeping you from saying yes?"

"You say you're going to raise this baby alone, but what happens if that changes? Don't you think the guy will have questions about your baby's father? Can you really sit across from me at holidays and parties and never tell him the truth? What about Hud?"

"Well, I..."

"Furthermore, what if I meet someone? I'm never supposed to mention that I'm the biological father of a kid we see all the time? Seems like a pretty big secret to keep from your significant other."

"In that case, there are..."

"What if someone finds out?" I cut her off again, spitting out all the questions that have been trapped in my brain for days. "And my biggest question of all is...*why me?* With me as your sperm donor, it makes everything ten times more complicated and expensive for you than it'd be if you went with a stranger."

She hesitates for a moment, then smirks. "Are you done?"

"For now. Yeah. I guess."

"In the event that either of us should meet someone and feel obligated to tell them about this arrangement of ours, we could always work out some kind of NDA with my lawyers. We can cross that bridge when we come to it, but I can promise you...I'm not going to meet anyone. And I don't feel bad about keeping this from my brother. You shouldn't either. You have to stop letting other people control your life, Emery."

"Oh, is that what you think I do?" I laugh.

"Yes. Obviously. You let your father's expectations and the ways you feel obligated to my brother control everything about your life. I'm offering you a chance to take a year off from Bardot and figure out what *you* want."

I run my hands down my face then quickly take another drink. I worry one year won't be enough to figure it all out. Maybe I'm too indecisive. And the choices I do make are too impulsive and ultimately fruitless.

"You didn't answer the biggest question," I remind her. "Why me?"

"I may want the baby's father to be anonymous, but I don't want them to

be a complete stranger."

I refill my glass and scratch the back of my head. It's too tempting to agree to this because I'll always feel a natural inclination to do anything Nicole asks of me. She seems so certain and fearless about the whole thing. I want that to be enough, but it doesn't stop all the red flags from signaling in my brain.

"Maybe we need something stronger than champagne," she suggests. "And some food. You can't make a big decision like this on an empty stomach."

"Oh, but making this big of a decision while drunk is perfectly fine?"

"Preferable, I'd say," she grins, reaching under the table to buzz the waiter back in.

An hour later we're both more relaxed with warm booze coursing through our veins and delicious, expensive food digesting in our stomachs. We manage to talk about other things for a while - mostly about our jobs. She lights up as she shares all the things she has in the works, while I divulge more about my relenting dissatisfaction with my own career.

"I always knew you'd make it as a designer," I tell her, smiling wide as I admire how radiant she is when she talks about her passions. "I guess you probably always assumed I'd be a doctor too, but that's different. You just pass the tests and you've made it. You have to have real talent to make it at what you do."

"I think it takes a lot more than a piece of paper to make a real doctor," she argues. "A good one anyways. But actually, I wasn't so convinced you'd become a doctor. I mean I knew you were *supposed to*...but I half-expected you to shock everyone and drop out of med school to surf around the world or something."

"Ha, yeah. Easier said than done, I guess. We're not all as brave as you. Maybe if I had that kind of nerve, I would have..." I stop myself and shake my head, realizing how much I've had to drink and how dangerously close I am to saying something I shouldn't.

"You would have what?"

Her eyes burn into me, and the warm buzz of alcohol keeps building up inside. *God, she's so beautiful.*

"I never would have made that promise to Hud," I continue. "And I would have confessed to you that I had a huge crush on you."

Her lips part and her eyes widen. She looks more shocked than I would

have expected. I thought my feelings were obvious to the point of being pathetic. I assumed she never mentioned it just to be polite and to save me the humiliating rejection.

"You did?" She brushes her hand across her cheek, which I swear is starting to glow pink.

"Come on, you had to have known that," I chuckle in embarrassment.

She stares me down, but doesn't answer at first.

"Come on," she says finally, grabbing her purse and climbing out of the booth.

"Ah, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

"No. It's fine. Come with me," she insists. "I want to show you something."

NICOLE

I tell my driver to take us to the Marina State beach, even though it's almost a half hour away. Emery is quiet and doesn't question my sudden urge to go there. I'm drunk and don't question it either.

The thing is...I never really knew Emery had such a big crush on me when we were teenagers. I certainly never knew it was a big enough deal to make my brother con him into such a stupid promise. I just thought Emery was a nice guy. I never interpreted all his usual kindness and consideration as being clues to him having feelings for me.

It wouldn't have made a difference, I tell myself. I had no desire to get distracted by a serious boyfriend, and I have a feeling that's the only boyfriend Emery knows how to be. Even if he found himself with the wrong woman, I think he'd commit himself to her no matter what it took or how miserable it made him - just like he's done with his family, his friends, and his career.

I point out a small shack on a hill that overlooks the beach. My driver pulls up beside it and I get out, pulling Emery behind me.

"What's this?" he asks as I force my way into the rickety old door that's barely hanging on by nothing more than a few rusty nails.

"This was my favorite place to go when we were younger," I explain.

We step inside and look around. There is a window on the far wall that gives a perfect view of the waves and sand down below. Some of my old sketches are still tacked onto the old walls. The milk crates stacked in the corners used to serve as chairs when I would retreat here for hours on end, hiding away and sketching to my heart's content, pouring through fashion

magazines, drawing inspiration from the sounds of seagulls and the way surfers glided so gracefully along the current.

Surfers...*like Emery.*

I point out the window. "I used to watch you and my brother and all your friends from here."

"So this is where you were hiding all the time?" he asks. "I thought you hated the beach and that's why you stopped coming around to hang with us here."

"No. It was the opposite," I smile. "I loved it so much that I was just bursting with ideas every time I came here. But it was easier to draw in this old shack...in the shade, hidden away from everyone else. There was no wind or salt water or birds to bug me. More importantly, there were no people nosing around in what I was doing."

"Wow," he smirks, smoothing down the hair on the back of his head. "All those times I was staring up at the shore, hoping to catch sight of you hanging out there to watch us..."

"I was in here watching you," I laugh.

"That's a shame. Because if I knew you were around I would have done all of my coolest moves to impress you."

I shake my head and shrug my shoulders. "I don't know. You always looked really cool to me."

His deep blue eyes lock to mine, and I am suddenly painfully aware of how long it's been since I've felt anything for a man. I can't say that I have feelings for Emery. But I do know it's been far too long since a guy has looked at me the way he is now. I come to life under his stare, relishing in how good it is to feel wanted by someone. Not just anyone, but someone who has been so close and familiar for all these years.

"Okay, you made your confession. Now it's only fair that I make mine," I tell him.

He steps closer and brushes a strand of hair away from my face, tucking it behind my ear. "I'm dying to hear it."

"I used to fantasize about you sometimes when I was hiding out in here."

He spikes his brows. "Oh...really? And what exactly happened in these fantasies of yours?"

His eyes are intensely trained on the corners of my lips as they curl up in a bashful smile.

"You really want to know?"

"Nicole, I *have* to know," he replies in a deep, desperate rasp. "You're killing me here. Come on. Put me out of my misery."

"Well...sometimes...I'd imagine turning around and seeing you standing there in the doorway. You'd come inside and ask what I was doing in here."

"And...then what happened?"

"I'd show you my drawings and you'd go on about how good they were... about how talented I was and how I was going to be a famous designer one day. Basically, all the things you always said to me in real life. But in the fantasy, it never stopped there."

"Oh...it didn't?" he asks, his voice tinged with frustration.

"No," I answer softly, shaking my head. "In this fantasy I would get so caught up in what you were saying that I'd slip my hand into yours. You'd pull me in closer to you and say that you'd been secretly in love with me for a long time, but never had the guts to tell me. The thing is, in this fantasy world I already knew that. It was no secret. And that's when you'd kiss me."

Emery pulls me into him in one swift, smooth motion. His warm lips nuzzle against my jawline before trailing down to my neck. His hands are warm and firm, cupping my cheeks, stroking my hair, and running down the length of my arms.

The force of it takes my breath away. It's unlike anyone I've ever kissed before, as scared as I am to admit that to myself. It feels like coming home. It's warm and soft like a favorite blanket and spreads inside of me like honey.

"Yeah," I snicker against his lips. "Just like that. That's how it was I mean...in the fantasies."

"Good. I'd never forgive myself if the real thing wasn't everything you always imagined it would be."

"What about you?" I ask him. "If you had such a big secret crush on me, you had to have fantasized about me too. What kinds of things did we do in yours? Or...do I even want to know what a teenage boy thinks about in those scenarios?"

"Trust me, I was always a perfect gentleman," he smirks. "Even in my fantasies. Of course, I tried to block those out too...as much as I could. Hud told me not to even so much as think about you in that way, remember?"

I press my fingers to his lips, wishing they were on mine again. "Shhh. Let's not talk about him right now."

"Deal. Okay. I guess in my fantasies, we'd find ourselves alone like this. We'd kiss...like what just happened. But we didn't stop. I'd run my hands

under your shirt and feel your hot, soft skin. I'd feel like the luckiest son of a bitch in the world when you didn't stop me."

I wrap my hand around his wrist and guide it under my blouse. "Show me."

"Are you sure?"

I nod and pull his hand up to my breast. He traces the outline of my bra and then slides his fingers beneath the lacy fabric. His thumb runs across my nipple, flicking it and teasing it until it's firm between his fingers. I breathe in deeply, savoring the sensation as it spreads through me and heats my core.

"That feels so good," I say breathlessly. "I've always wanted you to touch me like this."

His eyes lock to mine, and I can see the hunger in them. But there is something else there too. Something softer, more vulnerable. I share his hunger, and it feels like it's devouring me from the inside out. But it's that softness I see in him that ultimately pushes me over the edge so that I'm ready to give myself to him completely.

"Don't stop," I beg in a whisper.

I press myself up against his muscular chest, my tongue exploring every inch of his mouth. His hands travel up my body, cupping my breasts and squeezing them.

"Nicole," he groans, "I know this is probably a terrible idea, but I need to have you. If that can't happen, we need to stop now or I'm going to lose my mind."

"Then take me," I say to him. "I want you too."

"God, you have no idea how many times I've dreamed of hearing you say those words."

He kisses me again and I feel his fingertips working at the button of my jeans. I lean back as he unzips them, tracing my skin with his fingers. He works them down my hips until I'm free and he's passing them off to the side.

He drops down on his knees in front of me as I brace myself against the wall. He kisses down my thighs and quickly tugs my panties out of his way. I shake and moan as his hot tongue rolls across me, spreading across all of my most sensitive nerves. Those few caresses are almost enough to unravel me, but we've wanted this for too long to waste time on anything else. I need to feel him inside of me, and the way he impatiently kisses back up my stomach and chest tells me he needs it too.

As his lips find their way back to mine, he snakes his hand to the wet

place where his tongue was moments ago.

"God, yes," I moan, rocking my hips forward to feel the full pressure of his hand against my folds.

He moves his hand in soft circles and buries his face between my breasts. His free hand reaches around for the clasp of my bra, and soon I feel it falling down to the floor. I lean back against the wall and reach to tug off his shirt. I run my nails down the hard muscles of his arms and across his broad shoulders. These are the same muscles I used to drool over, watching them glisten with sweat and sand and salt water with the hot sun beating down on his deliciously tanned skin.

"You're so beautiful," he tells me, his fingers working me in all the perfect ways.

God, the way he looks at me. It's filled with the kind of longing and desire that feels like it could solve all your worst problems, turning all your bad days into good ones.

"Don't stop," I whisper, my eyes drifting shut.

I hear his zipper lowering, and then I feel him pressing against me. Our eyes lock as he holds me there for a moment, and then he starts to move. I quiver between him and the wall as he slides himself in and out. It's perfection, a revelation. This is what it's supposed to feel like.

He shifts, pulling me away from the wall and holding me tighter against him. The pace quickens, and I feel every inch of him inside of me. With his arms wrapped around me like this, I feel so incredibly safe.

With every thrust, I feel like I'm coming undone. The place where our bodies meet is scorching hot, and I know I won't be able to hold on much longer.

"Come on," he whispers as I dig my nails into his arms. "Let go. It's okay."

I'm so close. I feel the tightness building like a wave, ready to crash down and pull me under, but I don't want to go there alone. I want to feel it with him.

"Please," I whimper, my body throbbing. "Cum with me."

"I'm close," he rasps, driving himself into me harder and deeper.

I shake against him, releasing all of the pleasure I've been holding onto. My fingers dig into his arms as the wave crashes down around me, and I cry out his name. I ride it out until it fades away, and I feel like I'm floating in the wake of an amazing dream.

He thrusts into me a few more times, and then he stills. I can feel him twitching inside me as I ride out the last waves of my orgasm. He moans and whispers my name as he pulls out of me.

He rests his head against my chest, his body slowly catching its breath. I'm also trembling and trying to recover.

We don't speak for a long time. Neither of us seems so sure about what should happen next.

Finally, after we've pulled apart and gotten dressed, he forces himself to break the silence.

"I guess we should get going," he says reluctantly. "Do you think your driver would mind taking me back to my car? Or I can call a cab if it's too much trouble...I mean, if you're busy."

"What if...instead...the car takes us back to your place?" I ask.

He perks up with excitement, and so do I.

This was probably a horrible mistake. I know that. But it's one we've already made by this point, and freaking out about it won't change anything. This mistake is also the first time I've had sex in a very long time, and it felt better than any time before. As long as we're both here, I want to make this last as long as I can.

EMERY

I wake up to the sound of my neighbor's lawn mower starting up, then sputtering out again. By the third attempt, the engine manages to pick up steam and take off, and my eyes slowly open. That's when I come to enough to notice the feeling of warm skin spread across my side.

A flood of memory washes over me. Nicole. The strange secret club. The shack on the beach. One of my biggest fantasies coming true.

It all seems like a dream now - *too good* to be true. But Nicole is still here. I look down and watch her sleep with her cheek pressed against my shoulder.

How is this happening!?

My brain works overtime to try and make sense of it all before she wakes up and I have to face her again. I never in a million years expected our lunch meeting to end like that. I didn't tell her about the secret crush I had been harboring because I actually expected it to go anywhere or be the least bit reciprocated. I told her so she could understand why this whole sperm donor thing is so complicated and such a bad idea for me.

I never would have imagined that she'd whisk us away to that shack on the beach and tell me that she actually used to think about me in that way too, once upon a time. She let me kiss her. My god, she let me touch her and move inside of her. It felt even better than I ever thought it could, even with all the hours I had clocked trying to picture it so vividly.

I can understand how it happened there on the beach. We were all nostalgic and drunk and caught up in teenage memories. But I can't make sense of why Nicole would want to come back to my place...and continue

having hot sex with me for the rest of the night.

Unless...unless she had motives that tied back to her mission to get pregnant. *Of course. How could I have been so stupid?*

I slide out from under her and climb out of bed, rushing to put my pants back on. The panic in my heart pounds and swells with each passing second.

Nicole stirs away and slowly rises up in bed. The sight of the sheets falling down to reveal her perfect bare breasts cuts straight through me, burning and branding me with a mix of regret and a desperate hunger for more.

"Good morning," she chirps, smiling innocently as she stretches in the sunlight that's beaming in through the window behind my bed.

I part my lips, but no words come out. I'm too angry, too confused. She studies me and quickly registers the deep lines of concern burrowing into my face.

Her brows furrow. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" I laugh. "Why don't you tell me, Nicole? Tell me what is wrong about this whole messed up situation."

Her face scrunches up, and she suddenly doesn't seem so comfortable being naked and exposed in front of me. She gathers up the sheets and pulls them up over her chest. I immediately hate myself for doing anything to cause that, but I know it's for the best.

"What are you talking about? What's wrong with you?"

I shake my head and pace the room. "I feel so stupid. I can't believe I fell for it."

"Fell for what!?" she scoffs. "Will you please just slow down and tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Stop acting so naive," I snap. "I'm not buying it. Come on, Nicole. We both know what last night was all about."

"Uh, no, Emery. Apparently, you know something I don't. So why don't you enlighten me."

"You knew I was going to say no to your offer," I reply, humoring her. Even though it's insulting to be made to explain what I am certain she already knows all too well. "You knew I was going to turn you down, and then when I was stupid enough to admit that I had a crush on you when we were younger...you knew you had your solution."

"*Solution!*?" she huffs. "What solution?"

"You had the perfect opportunity to drag me out to the beach and pray on

all of my weaknesses. You brought up all that stuff from when we were kids and used it to seduce me. I could say no to being your sperm donor all day long, but in the end...you got me to sleep with you. You got what you wanted from me, and you didn't even have to pay for it."

She shakes her head in disbelief, dropping her shoulders with an exasperated breath before bolting out of bed with the sheet pulled tight around her.

"Unbelievable," she scowls, racing around to snatch up her clothes. "I wasn't trying to pull off any schemes last night! I thought I could trust you. I felt safe with you. But I guess I was wrong. I never should have...*God*."

Before I can say anything else, she dips into the bathroom and slams the door shut. I sink down onto the edge of the mattress and drag my hands down my face. I can't tell if I'm being an idiot for seeing what seems so obvious now...what should have been crystal clear to me last night, or if I'm being an idiot for suspecting anything at all...for saying all of those things to her.

She emerges from the bathroom a few minutes later, fully dressed and fresh-faced - looking beautiful, as always.

"Look, I'm sorry," I sigh. "I didn't mean to...I just...Is there any truth to what I was saying? Because you have to admit...if you were in my shoes, wouldn't you be at least a little suspicious about the way things went down?"

"I feel stupid for thinking you were so different," she replies. I hate the look in her eyes as she stares back at me. Everything that was there before is gone now, and it's all my fault.

"But you're not different. All you men are the same, which is exactly why I felt like I had to resort to a sperm donor to start a family. It's funny how you're so convinced I'm some manipulative, scheming woman just out to trick you into knocking me up now. But where was all that last night? You sure didn't seem to care then. You only had one thing on your brain. Pathetic."

"You're right. I did only have one thing on my brain." I stand up and go over to her, looking her straight in the eyes. "All I could think about was the fact that the most beautiful woman I've ever known, the one I've wanted since I was a kid, was telling me she felt the same way at one point in time. You looked at me like you wanted me to kiss you, and I forgot about absolutely everything else. You asked me to touch you, and I knew I'd be an absolute idiot to say no. So I did. And from the moment forward, I was putty in your hands."

I turn away and cross the room, unable to look her in the eyes anymore.

"It wasn't sex clouding my judgment, Nicole. It was the feelings I had for you. Oh, who the hell am I kidding? It was the feelings I've *always* had for you....last night and this morning included. The same feelings that I'm sure will be there tomorrow and every day for the rest of my life. No promise to Hud is ever going to make that go away."

I force myself to face her again. "So please tell me you can understand why it would be too hard for me to watch you have my baby and raise our child without me."

Her face softens a little as she crosses her arms, running her hand up and down. She swallows hard. "Okay. I understand. I shouldn't have...I didn't know how you felt when I made you that offer. But Emery...I promise you all I was thinking about last night is what it felt like to be sixteen years old, standing on that beach and lusting after you. And then...you felt so good. To tell you the truth, it's been a long time since I've... I needed that last night. I'm glad it was with you, but...I guess...I'm sorry if you don't feel the same way."

"Of course I'm glad it happened," I admit, dropping my hands to my sides in exasperated defeat. "How could I not be? I've wanted that for so long and...Dammit. I'm sorry I went off on you like that. It's just...we didn't use protection or anything. And I just don't think I can give you what you're wanting. I'm sorry. Now...what if it's too late?"

"I promise you I was just having a good time with you last night," she assures me. "I wasn't trying to do anything more than that. You don't have to worry about anything, okay? I'm not even ovulating right now, so there's no way I got pregnant. That's why I wasn't more worried about using protection."

Great. Now I feel like the world's biggest jerk. It's a good reminder why Nicole deserves so much better than me. I spend my whole life dreaming of a chance to have exactly what we did last night, and then when it finally happens - I completely screw it up.

"God, I'm really sorry," I try to tell her again.

"It's fine. Really. You're right. I probably would have reacted the same way in your position."

"You don't have to be so nice about it. I was being a jerk."

"It wasn't exactly the best wake-up call to get," she admits, laughing lightly.

"Let me make it up to you," I beg. "I can make you breakfast. Or take you

out somewhere."

"No, it's okay. I really should get going. I have a lot of work to do today, and...people will be wondering where I am."

I'm kicking myself inside as she grabs her purse and swings it over her shoulder. It's awkward and tense as she walks towards my front door to leave. I don't want it to end like this. I can't leave things this way.

"Okay, what about later? I can take you to lunch," I offer again, desperate to find a way to fix this. "Or dinner? Anything. You name it."

She spins on her heels and smiles up at me. "Everything's fine, Emery. Really. I understand why you can't accept my offer. But I'm glad last night happened. I had a good time with you...reminiscing."

"Would you ever want to...*reminisce* with me again some time?"

She dips her head and laughs. "No, I think it's better we leave it at this. It was a magical night that we'll always remember. But that's all. You know?"

"Yeah. Sure. Of course."

I kiss her on the forehead, feeling like I'm making the biggest mistake of my life by letting her leave. But if she wants to go, what can I do to stop her? She obviously doesn't think anything more should come out of this. I don't blame her.

I don't think I'll ever have another night as great as that one with her was. Maybe it is better to leave it at that...to quit while we're still ahead, before Hud can find out and come to kill me.

NICOLE

I'm drowning in the memory of that night...the smell of Emery's cologne and the gentle touch of his strong hands. The sounds he drew out of me echo through my ears. There's still a faint trace of the lingering sensations that my body refuses to let go of. They swell up inside of me, sneaking into every spare second I have...and even the seconds I don't have to spare.

"Earth to Nicole! Hello!" I snap out of it as Anthony's hand waves in front of my face.

"Oh. God. Sorry," I murmur, trying to catch my breath as I turn my attention back to the sketch laid out on the drafting table in front of me. "Where was I?"

"Swatches," Anthony barks in an unforgiving tone. "Remember? The ones that came in today? We need to tell them which fabrics we want for next year's summer collection."

"Right. Of course," I reply, swallowing hard.

"What is with you lately? Ever since that hottie doctor turned down your offer, you've been a wreck."

"It's not that," I insist.

"Good. Because I've told you we're better off with a donor from the clinic anyway."

"I know. You're completely right."

"So...when exactly are we going to set our next appointment?" he presses. "You know if you're getting cold feet, you can tell me."

"No, no. It's nothing like that. Call the clinic and set something up."

Anthony leans in and kisses my cheek. "Thank you. I'll go call them now."

As he leaves, I work hard not to let my brain drift right back into sexual fantasy land. I've been nothing but a melted ball of mush, completely lost in the memories of that night with Emery for over a week now. I've barely been able to get anything done, but it has to stop.

They're just hot memories of one night. That's all. Nothing more. I'll focus on my work. Anthony and I will choose a new donor. Everything worked out because it would have been way too complicated to have Emery as the donor. It never would have worked. It's not easy admitting Anthony and Emery were right and that I was wrong. But I can swallow my pride and move past this.

Still...this nagging feeling keeps creeping in. By resigning myself to a sexless life with no hope of ever finding a man to share all of this with, other than Anthony, am I really having it all? Or am I giving up something huge? Emery reminded me of so many feelings I forgot were possible, and it couldn't have happened at a worse time. Now it's harder to imagine going the rest of my life without it.

But I know Anthony and I will make a beautiful family. Plus, I'll still have my nights out if I want to use them. Maybe one day I will meet someone. And if they're not okay with this arrangement we have, then...well, they're not the right guy for me. Just like Emery wasn't the right donor for us.

I shake it off and try to refocus on the sketches for the summer line. I am beyond excited for this collection and I'm proud of the bold silhouettes I've created for it. But now that I'm looking at it with the fabric swatches in hand, something feels off. *It's missing something.*

I stare at it until my eyes hurt, then finally slide down from my stool and begin to pace the room. A sketchbook on a nearby table catches my eye. It's the one Anthony has been scribbling in but refuses to let me look at. The only thing I've seen was the one sketch I managed to steal a peak at in the kitchen last week. It was enough to make me want more.

I look at the book, glance down the empty hall outside the door, then back to the book again. Next thing I know, the book is open in my hands and I'm looking at some of the most exciting designs I've seen in a long time.

"Alright, missy. I've got us booked to go back to the clinic next week at—"

Anthony barges in, then freezes. I almost slam the book shut, but then decide to stand by my decision to snoop. These are too good to keep hidden

away.

"What are you doing?" Anthony scoffs.

"You can be mad at me all you want, but these are amazing and I refuse to pretend like they don't exist," I state firmly. "Please let me do something with these. People need to see them. If you don't want to put them out in my brand, then please let me help you start your own line."

He sighs and shakes his head. "I don't want to start my own line, Nicole. And I'm not just being self-deprecating, okay? I'm ready to be a dad and start this family with you. Only one of us can work full-time unless we want to ship the poor kid off with a nanny all the time. I don't want that. Do you?"

"Fine. You don't have to start your own line right now. But at least do a collection under your own name for my company. We can call it Anthony Dumand for Nicole Gray."

"Ugh, that's a mouthful."

"We can call it whatever you want," I laugh.

"I'll think about it," he says finally.

He's trying to act so careful and cautious, but I can see the smile hiding behind his eyes. He's excited by the idea, and I know he'll come around to it soon.

I barely keep my thoughts about Emery at bay well enough to get through the rest of the week. When the day of our appointment at the clinic finally comes, I'm desperate to flip through that binder of potential donors just so I can think about guys that aren't him.

My phone rings as I'm walking into the clinic. I fish my phone out of my purse and answer, finding a frantic and worried Anthony on the line.

"Anty, I can't hear you. You're breaking up. I'm walking into the clinic now. Where are you?"

I dodge in and out of clusters of people on the sidewalk, holding my phone up in every direction to try and catch a better signal, but only bits and pieces of Anthony's words come through. Finally, he gives up and disconnects the call.

I go on into the clinic and approach the front desk. "Excuse me. I have an appointment. Nicole Gray for twelve o'clock. Someone's supposed to be meeting me here, but I think they're running late."

"Hold on one moment, Ms. Gray," the receptionist replies as the phone on her desk rings.

I lean against the counter and stare around the office as she takes the call.

There are posters on the wall encouraging men to become sperm donors. They feature models that are classically handsome, but I know they're probably not real donors. I'm dying to know what the real ones look like, but I can't stop thinking about all the dating horror stories I've heard about guys turning out to look completely different than they do in their online profiles. Could the same thing happen with a sperm donor?

Looks aren't everything, I remind myself as I let out a slow breath, trying to calm my nerves.

"Ms. Gray?" the receptionist calls to me. "Anthony Dumand just called for you. He apologizes but says he's stuck in traffic on the other side of town and won't be able to make it. He says he trusts you and you're welcome to go on without him if you'd like. Or we can always reschedule."

If I have to go another week wondering what the process of looking through the donors is going to be like, I'm going to lose my mind.

"I guess it can't hurt to go ahead and take a look without him," I reply. "Just to get an idea of who's available."

"Certainly, ma'am. Have a seat and we'll be right with you."

It's only a five-minute wait, but it feels like an eternity. I didn't realize how nervous I was about this until I actually walked through the doors of the clinic. When they finally call me, they show me into a private room that has a big binder opened up in the center of the table. There are some pens and sheets of blank paper for taking notes on my favorite potential donors.

I sit down and slowly start pouring through the pages. But none of these men feel real to me, even with their photos attached. The staff have assured me they vet everyone so carefully, but it just feels so impersonal to do this with a complete stranger - even if I'll never have to meet them, and Anthony will always be the baby's father.

What if they have questions when they grow up? What if they resent me for doing things this way? What if we really are going to be too busy to pull this off?

The questions swarm inside of me, forming a hot lava that rises up my chest and throat until I feel like I'm going to be sick. I fly out of the room, apologizing to the staff the best I can on my way out. Even though I'm in tall heels, I don't stop running after I've escaped the clinic. I'm desperate for the air to rush against my skin, filling my lungs. I jog all the way home, ignoring the blisters that form on my feet.

I burst through the front door of my house and race to my studio. I always

find my center there, even when it's lost on me everywhere else. Unfortunately, the unfinished fabric choices for the summer line are still waiting for me in the center of my drafting table. No matter what I do, something feels off about them and I don't know what to do to fix it.

I close my eyes, my chest still heaving from the run home. Of course, I am hit with the familiar flood of memories from that night with Emery. In between the flashes of his skin, I see the waves of the ocean. I feel the breeze coming in off of them and hear the hissing of the palm trees swaying.

Maybe it was so easy to fall into bed with Emery that night because we allowed ourselves to be transported back to a time when we were younger, when things were simpler. For those long days on the beach, we could forget about everything else just like we did that night as we made those confessions to each other.

That's what summer should feel like, I realize. I rush forward, snatching up Anthony's sketchbook. His latest designs have a flow to them...like the ocean breeze, like waves. Mine are too stiff and rigid, and the purple and orange color palette is all wrong.

I start scribbling and snipping like mad - redoing the whole color palette and melding Anthony's designs with my own. Nothing can touch me now that I'm in the groove. Not even the looming sperm donors that I just ran away from, or the fact that I'll have to tell Anthony I blew it later.

Maybe he'll be so excited about the new collection that he won't care.

NICOLE

The studio is alive and buzzing with creative commotion. The fifteen new looks for the summer collection are displayed on the mannequins in a semi-circle in the center of the floor, but the place is quickly filling up as models arrive one by one to be fitted. My assistants zip back and forth, pinning and sewing and trimming, as we match up each outfit with someone to model it in the upcoming September fashion show.

I'm crouched down in front of one of the looks trying to perfect the way a sheer cover skirt pools on the floor. My mouth appears to have turned into its own pin cushion and my hands are full of fabric when Anthony storms in and towers over me with a look that lets me know I'm in trouble.

He crosses his arms and barks, "Nicole. Can I talk to you for a moment?"

"Sure," I attempt to mumble without sticking my tongue with the pins clutched between my lips.

I try to reset the fabric as quickly as possible, then fumble my way up onto my feet to stick the pins back into a proper cushion. By the time I'm done, Anthony is snapping his fingers at me - impatiently commanding me to follow him out onto the balcony.

"Everything okay?" I ask him as he slams the sliding door shut behind us.

"You tell me," he huffs. "You were the one who said everything was *'fine'*."

I shake my head. "I did? What did I say was fine? With the collection or..."

"No, Nic. Not with the collection. With *our lives* and this monumental very personal decision you and I made together about starting a family.

Weeks ago when I asked you how it went at the clinic, you said everything was fine. So imagine my surprise when I get a call from them today. They wanted to know if we're still moving forward because they haven't heard a word from you since you apparently ran out in the middle of the appointment!"

"Oh, right," I frown. "Did I not mention that I didn't stick around for the whole appointment?"

"No. You did not. You smiled and shrugged and said it was all *fine*."

"Well, yeah...Because it is. I mean, it *was*," I stammer. "I haven't picked a donor yet. It was too much for me to decide on my own, so I wanted to wait until you and I could go back together. But then I got inspired and figured out how to fix the summer collection, thanks to *your* designs...and we've just been so busy ever since that I haven't had a moment to..."

"A moment to talk to me about what happened? Jeez, Nic. We're crammed in this studio working together day in and day out. You couldn't have found a single second to mention it?"

"I was distracted."

"And what's going to happen when we *do* have a baby? Are we going to be so distracted with work that we forget to feed them?"

"Come on, Anty. You know it won't be like that."

He shakes his head and puts his hands on his hips, turning around to face the view of the city spread out down below. "So, what's up with you? Are you having second thoughts? Because once you sold me on this thing, I really did get my hopes up about it. But if you've changed your mind..."

"No! No. Absolutely not. I still want to do this with you. Of course I do. It's just...I don't know," I groan. "That day at the clinic, I got freaked out. That's all. Sure, they tell you every last detail about these men from their blood type to their full family medical history. But somehow...it doesn't seem like enough. They're still just strangers to me."

"The clinic staff said most donors are open to meeting with us to help us decide," he reminds me.

"I know. But...something about it just doesn't feel right. You can't decide to have a baby with someone after one date."

"You're *not* having a baby *with them*. You're having a baby with *me*. Remember me? Your best friend and soon-to-be fake fiance? You have to include me on stuff, Nic. It sucks that you couldn't be bothered to mention that you were feeling this way."

"I'm so sorry, Anthony. It's no excuse, but...you know how I am with my work sometimes. I just got swept up for a minute. I'll work on being better and keeping you in the loop on everything."

He offers a half-smile, but I know he's still bothered.

"So, what now?" he asks with a tinge of exasperation. "Adoption? I was already bummed enough that our baby wouldn't be mine biologically. It really meant a lot to me to know that you would still be the bio-mom."

"I didn't say the sperm donor thing was completely off the table," I defend. "I just need a little more time, okay?"

"How much time?"

"Just until after the collection premiers. That's only two weeks away."

Anthony closes his eyes, then slowly nods. "Okay."

"Okay? Are you sure? So, we're all good?"

"Everything's *fine*," he says sarcastically as he waves his hand in the air, throwing my own words back at me.

Anthony spins on his heels and does his sassy angry walk back inside. I've seen him do that walk many times, but it's usually not directed at me. I feel horrible for not updating him on what happened that day, or how nothing has happened since, but I don't have time to spiral about it right now. We have two weeks to get this collection down the runway. As soon as that's over, we can redirect all of our energy back to this baby and our family.

I go back inside to work, thinking everything is smoothed over and fine. And it really does appear to be until dinner later that night. I emerge from the studio after dark and find Anthony at the dining table with papers spread out all over the place in front of him.

"What's all this?" I ask, snatching up one of the extra boxes of Chinese takeout he ordered for us.

"I worked a few things out with the clinic and ended up with these printable profiles on some of the strongest candidates for us. Look at this one."

He hands one of the sheets to me. The donor's name is Mattheus. He's an Italian sculptor, which I have to admit does sound very appealing.

"He has your eyes!" I marvel, smoothing my thumb over the picture.

We spend the next half-hour scarfing down Chinese food and pouring over every last detail about Mattheus. By the end of it all, our minds appear to be made up. We both agree that if we're going to use a sperm donor, this guy is the one for us.

"We can get an appointment set up for after the fashion show," Anthony suggests. "If you think you'll be ready then. We can always change our minds and cancel it if we need to."

I narrow my eyes over the picture of Mattheus one last time. Before I got so freaked out by other potential donors, but this time it feels different. This time it feels *right*. Maybe all I really needed was to have Anthony by my side for this.

"No. No need to wait that long," I state firmly. "Let's see how soon they can get us in."

Anthony's eyes light up. "Really? You don't want to meet him first?"

"I think it's better if we don't. No, he's perfect. I'm ready to do this."

He jumps to his feet and hugs me, then rushes off to call the clinic. Surprisingly, they have an opening the following afternoon and are happy to squeeze me in. I'm almost relieved that it will happen so fast. It gives my nerves less time to set in.

After dinner, I change into my favorite silk pajamas and climb into bed, but it's hard to fall asleep. All I can do is stare at the ceiling and blink. By this time tomorrow night, I could have the beginnings of a little baby trying to form in my womb.

Work has kept me so busy lately, and the upside to that is it has also kept Emery off my mind. But now that we've picked out a new donor and the time has come, he sneaks his way back into my thoughts. I can't help but wonder what it would have been like to do this with him instead.

I can't help but wonder about how he's doing...if he's thought about me at all...if he still thinks back on that night and kind of wishes it could happen again.

The more I think about him, I start to feel a little nauseous. Heartburn spreads through my chest as I toss and turn. *The damn Chinese food must have given me indigestion...*

Eventually, after a mostly sleepless night, my room fills with sunlight and I give up on trying to sleep. Then, after a hefty breakfast, Anthony and I make our way back to the clinic. I'm surprisingly calm as the nurse shows us into our exam room and conducts the final tests they need to do before the procedure.

"Just sit tight, Ms. Gray. As soon as we have these results in, we'll get started with the insemination. Shouldn't be more than fifteen or twenty minutes."

"Okay, thank you," I nod.

The nurse leaves Anthony and I alone. We squeal a little to ourselves, squirming with excitement.

"I can't believe this is finally happening," Anthony beams. "By the time we leave here today, you could be pregnant!"

"Or well on my way to being pregnant anyways."

"How do you feel?"

"I feel—"

The exam room door flies back open. This time, it's the doctor. I shift on the table, thinking this is it. *It's time to get knocked up.*

"Ms. Gray, I'd like to have a moment alone with you if I could."

Our smiles quickly run away from our faces. I swallow hard and stare back at the doctor towering over me.

"Um, for what?" I rasp. "Anything you want to say to me, you can say in front of Anthony. We're in this together."

The doctor's eyes dart over to Anthony. "Is this your husband?"

"Depends on who's asking," he replies. "And if you're straight or not."

"We're best friends," I explain. "And we're starting a family together. I want him here for anything you have to tell me. Is something wrong?"

"I guess...it depends on how you look at it," the doctor says slowly, pulling up a chair. "In terms of the procedure today, I guess what I have for you is bad news since it means we can't move forward."

"Dammit. Not again," Anthony groans.

"But in terms of getting pregnant and starting a family, then I'd say this could be good news. Because you're already pregnant."

My mouth drops open wide. "I'm sorry. What did...you...just...say?"

"The only reason we can't perform the insemination today is...you're already pregnant. My guess is you're about five weeks along based on your hormone levels, but you'll want to go see an OBGYN for an official test and exam."

Anthony and I turn to face each other in shock. *I'm pregnant.*

The doctor keeps talking, but I can't hear a word he's saying anymore. He seems to vanish down a deep dark tunnel. In fact, it feels like *I'm* vanishing down a deep dark tunnel. A blackness seems to be closing in around me until my eyes are too heavy to keep open at all.

The last thing I hear before it all goes dark is the sound of Anthony calling out my name.

EMERY

As I stare at my computer screen, scanning the list of incoming patients for the morning, my mind wanders off - which it has been doing more than ever before lately. Only now as my thoughts drift, they have a very specific place to land.

My fantasies about Nicole aren't just fantasies anymore. Now they're real, tangible memories filled with the sounds she makes when she's climaxing, the smell of her hair and perfume, and the way her eyes burned into me as I ran my hands across her body.

It's been over a month since the night we spent together, but it all comes back to me like it just happened yesterday.

A knock comes to my door, snapping me out of it. I look up to see the head nurse from obstetrics standing there.

"Yes, Jean. What is it?"

"Um, well...we have a bit of a situation, Mr. Dawson."

"Come in," I wave, nodding for her to shut the door behind her.

She steps inside, closes the door, and opens the chart in her hands. "I've just received a heads up that a high-profile patient is on her way to our facility. Her handler has requested that we treat this with the utmost discretion. They gave very firm instructions that no one can know she's here, but...well, there's just one problem."

I drop my pen down to the desk and lean back in my office chair. "What's the problem?"

"The patient is Nicole Gray. Which just so happens to be...Dr. Gray's sister. They were already on their way so it was too late to warn them about

the conflict of interest. But how are we supposed to keep Dr. Gray from finding out his own sister is being admitted to the wing he's in charge of?"

My lips part, but nothing comes out. Jean's words swirl around in my brain, but I can barely make sense of them.

"Wait. Nicole Gray is coming here?"

"Yes, sir," she nods.

"And she's being admitted into the obstetrics wing?"

"Yes, sir. The doctor from the clinic suspects she's about five weeks along in her pregnancy. The poor thing passed out when she heard the news, and they had to find somewhere that could handle a patient of her status on short notice. Bardot is the closest facility prepped to handle that sort of thing. I don't understand it. Surely they knew it'd be a problem to keep this from Dr. Gray. But they were very clear. No one can know..."

"Yes, yes. I got it. No one can know," I bark, growing frustrated.

There are three sides to me going on high alert, battling it out for my attention. There's me...the guy who slept with Nicole exactly five weeks ago whose worst fears are being confirmed right now at this very moment. Then there's me...the medical director whose job it is to protect Nicole's privacy as if she was any other celebrity patient. And finally, there's me who is best friends with Hudson...Who broke a very big promise and who is about to be exposed.

I jump to my feet and start spouting off instructions. I may not like working in this field, and I certainly don't think of myself as a good doctor by any means. But I have had extensive training in how to stay calm in emergencies. The professional me takes the reins.

"Admit Ms. Gray to one of the private rooms in the ER. Bring her in through the back entrance and put her under a false name. Make a note on her chart that she is not for any reason to be transferred to the obstetrics wing. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'll greet the patient myself," I decide out loud, barreling behind Jean as we rush from my office.

Jean goes off to get everything ready as I make my way to the back alley to wait for Nicole to arrive. It's only then that the real panic starts to set in, but not for the implications of this or the possibility of Hud finding out what happened between me and his sister. As I stand there and watch for the car to pull up, all I can think is that *I hope she's okay*.

Finally, a black car speeds around the corner. Jean and one of the other nurses come running up with a stretcher and I jump in to help them get her out. A hard lump forms in my throat as we lift her unconscious body out of the backseat. I'm so worried for her that I barely notice the tall, skinny, dark-haired man by her side.

"Sir, please step back," I order him, not really giving a shit who he is at this moment or why he's with her. I'll get to that later. Right now I just need him out of our way.

"I'm Anthony Dumand. I'm the one who called to let you know we were coming," he explains, even though no one asked.

"I'm Dr. Dawson. I'm the medical director here at Bardot. Nicole is a personal friend of mine, and I can assure you she's in very good hands. The nurses will lead you to a private waiting room, and someone will come and get you as soon as we have an update for you."

"Hey!" he shouts suddenly. "I know you! You're the hot doctor who..."

I deadpan over to him, praying he'll shut his big mouth. Thankfully he starts to piece it together well enough to take a hint and stop talking. *Did Nicole tell this guy we slept together? Who is he and how does he know who I am?*

"Nurse, can you..."

"Yes, certainly Dr. Dawson. Mr. Dumand, come with me." One of the nurses sweeps in and ushers the guy off inside, but he drags his feet and pulls them to a stop in the doorway.

"Wait! We gave very specific instructions. No one can know she's here. She has a big show in two weeks, and if anyone finds out she's here..."

"Dumand was it?" I ask him, walking over to help the nurse get him inside and out of the way.

"Yes. Anthony Dumand."

"I can understand that this puts us in an awkward situation with me being a close friend of Nicole's and all. But given the choice of me finding out she's here and why, or *her brother* finding out she's here...who need I remind you is the head of obstetrics and should be in charge of admitting her at this very moment...don't you think it's better I handle this?"

This Anthony character looks over at Nicole as if he could ask her what to do. But with her still being unconscious, he has no choice but to trust me.

"Okay," he nods finally.

With that, he goes willingly with the nurse and disappears down the

hallway - leaving me to turn my attention back to getting Nicole inside so we can figure out what's wrong with her.

I give the doctor and nurses space to examine her once she's checked into the private room. The entire time, I pace up and down the hallway outside her door. *I can't believe she's here. I can't believe she's pregnant. Five weeks pregnant. Pregnant with...my baby?*

Punctuating each restless thought is a desperate need for her to be okay. That's all that matters right now.

It feels like an eternity passes before the doctor finally emerges.

"How is she?" I ask immediately.

"She's fine," he assures me. "The doctor at the clinic was right. She's pregnant. Five weeks along. It's not uncommon for women to have fainting spells during their first trimester, especially with their first pregnancy. She's coming to now and should be free to go home tomorrow morning. We'll keep her overnight just to monitor everything and run a few more tests to be safe. I'd recommend bed rest for a week once she's discharged."

"Okay," I sigh with relief. "Thank you."

"Do you want me to update the family or should I?"

"What? No. Her family can't find out about this."

He stares back at me like I'm an idiot, then points to the door down the hall - the one that tall annoying guy is waiting behind. "Her fiance. The one who came in with her."

My heart drops to the pit of my stomach, heavy as a cannonball. "Fiance!?"

"Uh, yeah." He looks at the chart in his hands. "The one who called and came in with her. Anthony Dumand?"

"Fiance," I repeat.

"Maybe...I should go talk to him," the doctor says with a pitying glance, patting me on my shoulder.

"No! No. I can handle it," I bark, stepping in front of him to beat him to the door.

I reach for the handle and suck in a deep breath before walking inside. The Anthony guy leaps to his feet the moment he sees me.

"Oh thank god. I was going insane in here. Is Nicole okay? Is she awake?"

"Yes, she's going to be fine," the professional side of me replies. I repeat the full run down the doctor gave before the real me takes back over.

"Can I go see her now?" he asks.

"You know, Mr. Dumand...It's really supposed to be close family only for visitors in situations like these. Siblings, parents, spouses. Maybe it'd be better for you to come back tomorrow morning when she's being discharged. Then you can take her home. Where is that home exactly? I mean, do you two live together?"

"Yes, of course we do," he answers firmly. "We're engaged."

Something is off about this. I can see it in his eyes.

"Uh-huh. And you wouldn't just be telling me you're engaged because you thought we'd give you less trouble about seeing her then?"

"Does it matter!?" he snaps. "Jesus, have a heart. She's alone and scared and just got the biggest news of her life. I need to be with her right now."

"Right. Sure. Okay," I grumble. "Let me just check on a few things, and then I'll see what I can do."

I turn and storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me. I have to stop again in the hall to try and steady my breath, to try and calm down. My hands are still shaking as I reach for the handle of Nicole's door.

I walk into the quiet room, filled only with the sounds of monitors beeping. I brace myself as Nicole stirs awake. *You have a lot of explaining to do, Nicole Gray.*

NICOLE

My eyes flitter open slowly. It's hard to keep them open though with the big bright light overhead shining straight into them.

I see a hand move in the corner of my eye, and the light fades. *Thank god.* With the bright light gone, I start to rack my brain for the last thing I remember happening before I went down.

Oh, that's right. I'm pregnant. Five weeks pregnant to be exact. That will be a fun one to explain to Emery.

The thought makes my head hurt and forces my eyes to close again. I really was just caught up in the moment and trying to have fun with Emery. I wasn't even ovulating. I didn't think this could happen. But of course he thought I was taking advantage of him and tricking him into getting me pregnant. I can't blame him for suspecting it. But being the good guy that he is, he chose to believe me anyway. *Now this.*

He's never going to believe me now, so I know instantly it's better not to tell him at all. We'll just have to tell him we found another donor or something.

I don't want to think about that right now. I'll talk to Anthony and figure something out before I have to face him again.

Anthony. Where's Anthony?

"Anthony?" I rasp, opening my eyes again. There's no answer at first, so I call out for him a few more times.

"It's me. *I'm here,*" a familiar voice replies, but it's not Anthony's.

I turn my head and jolt up at the sight of who's standing there. *Emery.*

"What are you doing here?" I bark, my chest heaving up and down with

heavy panicked breaths.

"You're at Bardot," he answers.

"No. No, no, no. I can't be here. Hudson..."

"Hudson has no idea you're here," he assures me.

Too bad you don't either, I huff to myself. *I'm so not ready for this yet.*

"Where's Anthony?"

Emery's eyes narrow. "You mean the guy who is calling himself your fiance? Which I have to admit was quite shocking, considering how you went on and on about being single."

"Hudson, I really can't do this right now. It's been a hell of a day. Obviously. I mean, look at me. I just woke up in a hospital bed. Can you give me a break?"

"Sure," he nods, picking up my chart. "Well...I thought you might like to know the baby is completely fine."

I can't stop the tears from welling up in my eyes. "So it's official then? I'm really pregnant?"

"Five weeks," he answers in a bitter tone.

"Wow. I can't believe this," I whisper. "It's really happening."

"I'm pretty shocked myself. All that talk about not ovulating and how impossible it was for you to get pregnant that night. I guess as a doctor I should have known better. Stupid me."

"Enough," I snap, furious that Emery is making this all about him right now. "The baby isn't yours, okay? We found a different sperm donor. Everything I said that morning was true. This is none of your concern. Now will you please send Anthony in? I need to talk to him, and I need to rest. As a *doctor*, surely you understand that."

"Medical director," he corrects. "As in the one who's responsible for ensuring you get in and out without anyone ever finding out why you're here or that you're here at all. Given the need for total confidentiality, I'm not too keen on letting some stranger in here who popped up out of nowhere claiming to be your fiance when just five weeks ago you said you were single."

"It's complicated, okay? And frankly...none of your business. I'm a patient, not a prisoner. You don't get to dictate who I get to see and who I can't. Now send him in before I put in an official complaint about you!"

Emery shakes his head, scowling at me, before finally turning to walk out of the room. I let out a huge gushing breath the moment he's gone. How is it

possible that one of the best days of my life could be happening at the same time as one of the worst days of my life?

When the door opens again and Anthony is standing there, all of the bad fades for a minute. A wide smile spreads across my face and is quickly mirrored on his cheeks as well.

"You're okay," he sighs. "And you're pregnant?"

"I'm pregnant!" I squeal. "We're going to be a family!"

He rushes over and hugs me. We dance around and screech with delight the same way we did when my label first started getting international recognition, and the same way we did when we found out I had made it into Vogue. Only this time seems so much bigger. This baby, I decide, is going to be my biggest masterpiece of all...right along with the home and life Anthony and I are going to create together.

"I hate to bring this up right now...", Anthony says after a while. "

"And yet...you are," I smirk.

"Sorry, but I think you have some tea to spill, missy. Because that hottie doctor of yours seemed major jelly. I didn't think he was going to even let me in here to see you! He does *not* like the idea of me being your fiance, I can tell you that."

"Well, he'll have to get used to it. He's a family friend so we have to tell him the same thing we tell everyone else."

"Can't we just tell your family the truth?" he whines. "I'm starting to worry about this whole fake marriage thing. I don't know if I can handle all the lying. It was so weird telling those nurses and doctors that we're engaged. I could barely keep a straight face! Besides, it's not like *your* family has a problem with me being gay."

"Right, but now our families will have to co-exist," I remind him. "It's much easier for the two of us to keep a story straight to everyone than it is to expect my entire family and all of our friends to keep up the lie around your mom. Anyway, you coming out as bisexual is going to be the biggest shock our social circles have seen in years, and I know you love a good scandal."

He lets out a dramatic sigh. "You're right. I do."

"Between this and our collaboration on this new collection...you are going to have one hell of a spotlight on you, Anty."

"That goes for you too, Mama."

"Ugh, I can't believe it! We're going to be the biggest power couple in the design world!"

"With offspring of superhero proportions!"

I start squealing again. Anthony joins in for a moment, then turns completely blank-faced like he just flipped a switch.

"Nic. Are we going to address the elephant in the room?" I stare back at him cluelessly. He crosses his arms and clears his throat. "How did this happen? The last time you went to the clinic, you freaked out and ran away. Before that, you were trying to talk hottie doctor into being the donor, and you said he turned us down."

"Yeah..."

"Yeah, so...how did you get knocked up? Who's the baby daddy?"

"You are," I grin.

He does not look amused. "You better start talking. And fast."

I groan and roll my eyes. "Fine. Alright. But you can never tell anyone, and after this, I never want to talk about it again. Got it?"

"I can't make any promises until I find out what we're dealing with here, but so far so good."

"Remember that day I went and had lunch with Emery to discuss the whole donor thing?"

Anthony's mouth drops open with a sharp gasp. "And then how you didn't come home that night! Duh, of course I remember. I knew it! You hooked up with him, didn't you? Even though you kept swearing you didn't."

"Not on purpose," I insist. "I wasn't trying to be calculating or...I never... I didn't mean for any of this to happen. It just did."

"And now...he's the father of our baby?" he asks slowly.

I nod in response, swallowing down a hard lump.

"This isn't good, Nic. Does he suspect anything?"

"Of course he does," I groan. "How could he not? It's so painfully obvious. Worse than just suspecting he's the father, he thinks I did all of this on purpose. That I *tricked him* into knocking me up because I knew he was going to turn down my offer."

"But you didn't?" he presses.

"No, not at all," I frown.

"So...you slept with him...just because you wanted to. Which means there's a new elephant in the room. Do you have feelings for your baby daddy? This is messy enough as it is. If you're in love with him on top of that..."

"Anthony, you have nothing to worry about," I assure him. "As far as I

am concerned, *you* are the only father of this baby. I'll take care of everything with Emery. He never has to know. This will just be our little secret."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Feelings," I scoff. "What does that mean anyway? Do you have *feelings* for someone...I have feelings for all sorts of people, in all different kinds of ways. I've known Emery my whole life. We grew up together. Nostalgia got the better of me that night. That's all. Now he's just a close family friend... same as he's always been."

"Well, you better hope that family friend doesn't order a paternity test and try to sue for custody," Anthony snips.

His words nearly knock the air out of my lungs. "No. He wouldn't. He couldn't do that to me." But that doesn't stop the possibility from rolling through my mind over and over again. "He wouldn't because he promised my brother that he'd never lay a hand on me. To prove he's the father, he'd have to tell Hud he broke his promise. He's a grown man who can't even tell his own father what he wants to do with his own life. He's not going to do that. Trust me. We have *nothing* to worry about."

EMERY

This is none of your concern. It's complicated. None of your business.

"None of my business!?" I growl under my breath as I march down the hallway.

How could Nicole think this is none of my business? I mean, even if she did find another donor and this whole thing really is all one big misunderstanding...would it have killed her to call or text and let me know? Just a simple...*Oh, hey, Emery...Just thought you'd like to know that right after we had sex multiple times, I got injected with another man's sperm so if I show up in your hospital pregnant a month from now, you don't have anything to worry about.*

I'm fuming mad when a bigger problem comes waltzing around the corner. I look up to see Hudson charging toward me. *What the hell is he doing down here? And why is he heading straight for Nicole's room?*

"Hud. Hey, what are you..."

"I heard a rumor that my sister is here. Where is she?" he asks in a panic, barely stopping as he passes by.

I step in front of him and try to hold him back. "Slow down. Where did you hear that?"

"Come on. You know no one around here can keep their mouths shut. It's fine. No one outside of the hospital staff knows anything. But I'm her brother! I have to see her."

"Hud, stop. This is Nicole's private matter, and it's my job as Medical Director to keep it that way."

His eyes burn into me, scolding with disbelief. "Are you fucking serious

right now? Emery. Enough. Tell me where she is."

"My ass is on the line with you even being down here at all. Let's just go somewhere quiet and talk this over," I beg.

"The only reason you're even here is because of me!" he barks. "I'm going to see my little sister the easy way or the hard way. Which is it going to be?"

I can't believe the words coming out of his mouth. *What is wrong with this family?*

"Obviously we both know I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you. But that wasn't exactly my choice, now was it?" I fire back.

He stops and clenches his fists. "Don't do this to me now, Emery. I'm family."

"And Nicole will tell you why she's here when she's ready to. You don't own her," I remind him. "Just like you don't own me."

"Please," he rasps, dragging his hands down his face.

"What's going on out here?" a man asks.

We both stop and turn to see that Anthony jerk coming out of Nicole's room. I couldn't be doing a worse job at this whole discretion thing even if I was trying to fuck it up on purpose.

"Who's he?" Hudson asks. "Is that her room? Is Nicole in there?"

"You're Hudson?" Anthony calls out. "Hi. I'm Anthony. I'm...well, I'm a friend of Nicole's. I think we may have met in passing a few times before."

A friend? What happened to "fiance"?

"Yeah," Hud points. "I recognize you."

"Nicole's fine. She thought she heard your voice," Anthony tells him. "Would you like to come in?"

Hud flashes me a smug look and pushes past us down the hall. I don't ask permission to follow him. I need to know whatever web of lies Nicole is going to weave next.

Thankfully, hardly anyone notices as I slip into the room behind Anthony and Hudson. I hang back in the corner and watch as Hudson runs up to hug his little sister.

"Nicole, what are you doing here? What happened?"

"I'm fine," she smiles. "Really, I'm okay." Her eyes dart over his shoulder, landing on me. "Emery and everyone has been taking excellent care of me."

"They said you were unconscious when you came in."

"Just a little fainting spell. They said it's common...for someone *in my condition*."

Hudson slowly straightens, his brow furrowing. He stammers a few times before he finally gets a coherent string of words out. "Your condition? You're...You're..."

"Pregnant!" Nicole squeals. "You're going to be an uncle."

"Oh my god," he breathes, taking a step back to wipe a hand down his face. "Oh my god!" He flies forward and hugs her again. "I'm going to be an uncle! You're going to be a mom! Who else knows about this?"

"No one except for who's in this room right now," she says, flashing me another look...as if she wishes I wasn't one of those people. "I'll tell mom and dad soon. But let's leave the whole fainting mess out of it, okay?"

"I don't understand," Hud shakes his head. "How? Who's the father?"

Anthony sheepishly raises his hand and waves. "That would be me."

I watch Hudson's reaction carefully. Something strange registers on his face, like maybe he can sense something is off about this too. But since he also doesn't seem to be able to put his finger on exactly what it is, he plays it off and goes over to throw his arms around Anthony in a big bear hug.

"How do you like that!? You two have been friends all this time...and now this? What, did you have a marriage pact or something?"

"Something like that," he smirks.

"Maybe now's not the time, but soon you and I are going to have to have a talk about how you're going to take care of my little sister and this baby."

"Oh, Hud, stop it," Nicole chimes in. "There's no need for all of that. Anthony and I are engaged. I plan on announcing that to mom and dad when I tell them about the baby."

"Holy shit. Well, congratulations. Between my wife and our parents...I hope you two are prepared for the chaos that's about to ensue. They're going to insist on the biggest spectacle of an engagement party. Oh god, and then all the wedding planning...I sure don't envy you."

I can't believe I'm hearing any of this. How is this happening? A month ago I was spilling my heart out to Nicole, and she seemed to be reciprocating all of the same feelings. It was her decision to take me to that shack and carry on about how she fantasized about me when we were kids. *She* was the one who came on to *me*. And now we're standing here talking about her wedding with this random ass guy like none of it ever happened?

"Well, there will be press so we'll have to maintain a certain aesthetic," Nicole explains. "But don't worry. I'll have my people take care of all of that."

"And I have some pretty big ideas of my own about the wedding," Anthony grins.

I narrow my eyes over him. Something is *definitely* off about this guy. Men get excited about their wedding days, sure. But the wedding planning? Out of all the buddies I've ever known to get hitched, not a single one of them gave a damn about that side of things. They'd just as soon elope to vegas or take a trip to the courthouse.

"There will be plenty of time for all of that," Hud says. "For now, I just want you to focus on resting up, okay? That's doctor's orders."

Nicole holds her hand up in salute. "Yes sir! Everyone get out and I'll try to do just that."

Anthony walks over to her bedside. "I'll run home and pack you an overnight bag, okay?"

She nods and pulls the sheets up over her as we file out of the room. The moment we're in the hall, Hud pulls Anthony in for another hug.

"Congratulations again, man. This is really something. You should feel proud. My sister has always been very particular about men. I didn't think she was ever going to get married or start a family of her own."

"I don't think she expected to either," Anthony laughs. "Until recently."

"I better get back to work. I have patients waiting on me. Hey, Anthony? Welcome to the family. I look forward to getting to know you better soon."

They shake hands and then Hud turns to wave at me before he marches off down the hall, jumping up to smack the ceiling overhang on his way - just like a giddy teenager all over again.

"He's happier than I expected," Anthony admits.

"You were expecting...what? Him to beat you up?"

"Yeah, maybe. I hear he can be over-protective of Nicole at times."

I can feel my jaw tensing up. Yeah, no kidding Hud can be overprotective. He sure was with me when he made me promise to never even think about Nicole in that way. But this random weird guy can just waltz right in out of nowhere, and Hud acts like it's the greatest thing to ever happen.

"So, you and Nicole have been friends for a while?" I ask him, studying him carefully.

"Yeah. Over a decade actually. We met in college." He stops and smooths a hand down the back of his thick wavy hair. "Listen, Emery...Nicole told me a little about you. I'm assuming maybe she told you some things about me

too."

"Not a word actually," I answer bluntly. "In fact, I didn't even know you existed until today."

"Really?" he puzzles. "Huh. Well, I know she extended an offer to you. You know, the whole sperm donor thing. I know it didn't work out, but I still wanted to thank you for considering it. I know it would have meant a lot to Nicole, but...I'm just glad everything worked out. And I know you were uncomfortable with it all, so now...I guess it's great that you're off the hook, right?"

"So you knew about that?"

"Of course I did," he shrugs. "Nicole tells me everything. It sucks that my sperm was no good, but...like I said, it all worked out. And now here we are."

"Because you found another donor," I say slowly, wondering what other holes I can find in Nicole's stories.

He nods with a weird smile. "That's right. Another donor."

"Because yours was..."

"Not viable. Anyway," he says, sucking in a deep breath. "I really should get going to grab Nicole's things. I guess I'll be seeing you around, huh? Thanks for everything today."

He reaches out and shakes my hand, then vanishes around the same corner Hud did minutes before. I set back to pacing the hallway, wondering if I should go back into Nicole's room and try to get to the bottom of this. But it's so messed up, I don't even know what questions to ask anymore.

EMERY

My stomach turns as I sit on my couch and stare down the awful pieces of expensive paper resting in the middle of my coffee table. I throw back a shot of whiskey and grumble to myself. *Introducing the future Mr. and Mrs. Gray. Please join us for an engagement party honoring Nicole and Anthony.*

Huh, yeah. Some fucking party. And he's taking her name on top of everything?

A stretch limo pulls up in front of my house, followed by the blasting sounds of impatient honking. Hudson pops out of the moonroof and yells out, "Come on, Em! We've got a party to get to!"

I roll my eyes and begrudgingly get up to button up my coat. I don't know why everyone is so happy about this ridiculous charade. There's obviously something wrong here...and it goes way beyond Anthony being infertile. The only reason I am looking forward to the party at all is for the opportunity to try and get down to the bottom of it.

I try to put on a happy face and take a deep breath. "Okay, okay, I'm coming! I'm coming!"

As I step out the front door and walk towards the car, Hudson climbs out with a stupid grin on his face.

"What are you so happy about?" I ask.

"My sister is getting engaged and I'm going to be an uncle!"

I roll my eyes. "Right. Yeah. I mean...you don't think something about all of this is just a little odd? If Nicole and Anthony were just friends for so long, why this all of a sudden? And if it was so carefully planned, how did she end

up pregnant before..."

Hudson laughs as he jokingly punches me in the shoulder. "Come on. Not this bullshit again. You know I have my limits on how much of my sister's sex life I can stand to think about."

"You don't have to think about it too hard to see this is a shotgun wedding," I argue.

"So what? She's happy. And like you said, I don't own her. It's her life, not mine. My only job is to be a good uncle, and the same goes for you. You're basically an honorary uncle. You're a part of the family!"

A part of the family...but not good enough to ever have a chance with Nicole - which now seems to be a belief held by both her and Hudson.

"Whatever," I gripe. "Come on, let's go before we're late."

Madison is waiting for us inside the limo. I should be used to it by now, but it's still crazy to see her hanging around us after years of seeing her face plastered all over magazines and movie screens.

"Good to see you, Madison," I nod.

"Hi, Emery! I'm so glad you could ride with us."

I drop my gaze to Audrey who is all dressed up, clinging to her mommy's side. She flashes me a big smile. *Jesus, even the kid is excited about tonight. Am I the only one who sees straight through it all?*

The party itself is every bit the spectacle we all imagined it would be. They rented out the biggest ballroom in the city, which is saying something for Beverly Hills. The front steps have a red carpet entrance that's swarming with press and flashing cameras. As prominent figures at Bardot who are arriving with the famous Madison Levine, Hud and I have to stop and pose for pictures on the way in. Thankfully, I'm one of the least important people here. So hopefully no one will notice how fake the smile on my face is.

Things are no better inside. Every model, designer, and business mogul in the fashion world is in attendance, in addition to most of the medical community who have all showed up for Hudson and his father. My own parents are here too, but I keep conversation with them to a minimum. I'm here on a mission.

After saying the mandatory hello's and making my first pass through the guests I know, I scan the room for Anthony and Nicole. It's not hard to spot them since the whole room seems to be revolving around them.

"Let's go say hi to the happy couple, shall we?" Hudson says, nudging my arm.

"Absolutely. Can't wait." And for once, I half-way mean it. The more I'm around them, the sooner I can figure out what's going on here.

There's a bit of a line leading up to the two of them. I snag a drink on our way up and toss it back. I notice Anthony doing the same, only he manages to grab two. The other one obviously isn't for Nicole since she can't drink.

Maybe I'm not the only one who's feeling an anxious need to get trashed tonight. I know why *I* have that urge. The question is...why does Anthony? Especially in a room full of important people with all eyes on him.

Finally, it's our turn to greet them. Hudson, Madison, and Audrey step up to give their hugs and congratulations first. Then Nicole turns her attention towards me. Her smile fades the moment she sees me, but she's quick to plaster a fake one back on in its place.

"Emery. So glad you could make it tonight," she nods.

"Hey! It's the hot doctor!" Anthony sings. Nicole jabs her elbow into his side, prompting him to straighten up and clear his throat. "I mean, Dr. Emery Dawson. Good to see you again."

I don't get much time before more people in line behind us are clamoring for their chance to talk to Nicole and Anthony. But even as I'm slowly pushed to the side, I make sure to stay nearby - keeping a close watch on Anthony. I notice he downs a third drink as they're standing there. *Man, this guy is really trying to get plastered tonight.*

There's an announcement telling us all to take our seats for dinner. I'm seated with Hudson and Madison of course, but I keep my eyes glued to Nicole across the room the whole time. She catches me staring a few times, but is always quick to look away. Anthony doesn't seem to notice me or have a care in the world. He just seems drunk, and it looks like Nicole is becoming increasingly annoyed by it.

After dessert, Anthony slides out of his chair and makes a bee line for the terrace. I'm quick to follow with Nicole's eyes burning into me the whole way.

When I catch up to Anthony, he's talking to someone who looks like a member of the wait staff. But I can't hear what they're saying, and the guy walks away before I can make it over.

"Emery!" Anthony beams, quickly turning his head to watch the waiter walk away.

I study his gaze carefully and realize that he's staring at the guy's ass. *Unbelievable.*

I want to ask him if he's always this gay, or if it's something that just happens when he's drunk. But I know it's probably best to take a more subtle approach.

I grab two more drinks from a passing tray and lean against the railing next to him, offering him one of the glasses which he all too gladly accepts.

"Don't you mean hot doctor?" I ask.

"Huh?" he puzzles, guzzling his drink.

"You called me Emery, but it seems like you and Nicole have a different nickname for me. You keep slipping up and calling me the hot doctor."

"Oh, sorry. Just an inside joke. I promise it's a compliment."

"Ah, I see. And, uh, what about that guy?" I nod towards the waiter. "Do you secretly refer to him as the hot waiter?"

Anthony laughs. "Well, I wasn't before but I am now. What's your point?"

"Nothing. I'm just not used to guys being so open about admitting another man is attractive, especially calling them *hot*."

"It sounds like you hang out with too many straight men."

I spike a brow. "And you're not? Straight, I mean?"

Anthony's eyes meet mine, and he slowly seems to realize the mistake he's made. I knew him getting so drunk tonight was going to work in my favor.

"Alright, fine," he huffs. "Come with me."

He leads me over to a dark corner of the terrace, grumbling to himself along the way. At one point I hear him say, "I told Nicole I'd never be able to keep up with all of this lying."

When we're alone and out of earshot of the rest of the guests, he sucks in a deep breath and starts talking.

"I'm only telling you this because you're the only other one who knows we used a sperm donor. So, I guess it doesn't hurt for you to know this too."

"Okay. Go on..."

"Obviously, I'm gay," he blurts.

"I knew it! I knew there was something weird about the two of you and this whole engagement."

"There's nothing weird about it," he defends. "Nicole and I are best friends. Soul mates, actually. And we figured if straight people with a divorce rate of fifty percent or higher can run off and get married and have babies together day in and day out, why shouldn't we be able to? Our friendship has already outlived most of our friends' marriages. And we make a great team."

"But you needed sperm, and yours wasn't viable."

He nods. "Precisely. Just please promise me you'll keep this between us. I'm not exactly out of the closet with my family, which is part of the reason we're doing this whole fake marriage thing to begin with."

"I won't tell a soul," I assure him. "So...when you found out the two of you couldn't have a baby biologically...and then Nicole just so happened to bump into me...that's when she concocted this scheme to try and convince me to be the donor? And when I wasn't going to do it, she seduced me?"

Anthony tenses up. "I don't know, Emery. That's not how I heard it. But it's really none of my business."

"It most certainly is," I bark. "Especially if you're the man who's going to be parading around as my baby's father."

"You should talk to Nicole about all of this. Now if you'll excuse me, I have to get back to the party. Your promise you won't tell anyone about this?"

"I don't have to. Sooner or later, you'll just get drunk and tell everyone yourself, one by one."

He flashes a sarcastic smile. "Ha ha, very funny. Goodnight, Emery. Thanks for coming."

NICOLE

It's clear that the engagement party isn't going as well as I thought it would as I sit at our table alone, wondering where the hell Anthony has wandered off to. Everyone is flashing me funny looks like they can tell something is up between us.

I know Anthony doesn't exactly come across as straight. But if he could fool his mother all these years, I figured with me as his fiance and a baby on the way - no one would question it. The difference I didn't account for was that Anthony's mother sees what she wants to see. The rest of these people are looking for something to gossip about - which I'm afraid means they can see straight through all of this.

When the looks turn to whispers that seem to grow louder and louder, stinging in my ears, I finally excuse myself and run off in search of Anthony. When we're done here tonight, he's free to do whatever he wants. But he has to at least behave for a few more hours. Is that too much to ask?

I search the terrace where I first saw him walk off to, but there is no sign of him. I can't bear to ask the other guests if they've seen him - because that would only fan the flames more. But I do slip into the back and ask a few of the kitchen workers and wait staff if they've spotted him. They all tell me they haven't, but I can't help but notice the strange grins they have on their faces as they say it - as if I'm the butt of some joke everyone knows but me.

The longer I search with no luck, the angrier I get. I'm barreling down one of the corridors, fuming mad, and end up rounding one of the corners so fast that I don't pay attention to where I'm going. I run smack dab into a wall of human flesh. My frustrations of the evening have me seeing red, but all that

seems to fade when I feel those warm hands on me and hear the comforting voice.

"Hey, it's just me. Are you okay?"

Emery. It's *him*. Probably the last person I need to see right now, but that doesn't stop my heart from swelling with relief.

"Hey. Yes. No. I don't know," I answer breathlessly. "Have you seen Anthony?"

"The last I saw him he was out on the terrace." A strange look twists on his face as he stands up straighter and burns his eyes into me. "He was drunk and chasing after some guy on the wait staff he has a crush on."

As soon as he says it, a couple appear around the corner - sending me into high alert. I glare at Emery, silently willing him to shut up. Thankfully he doesn't say another word until they're gone.

"I think we should talk," he whispers.

I nod and grab him by the hand, trying to get him off into a room before anyone else can see us.

"Some engagement party, huh?" I say to him with a bitter laugh once we're alone behind a locked door. "The groom is wasted and hitting on the waiters. The bride is hiding off in a dark room with her brother's best friend."

"Nothing scandalous is happening here though," he offers. "Unless of course you want it to."

"Please, Emery. Not right now."

"Then when?" he barks. "You wouldn't talk to me in the hospital. The only time I see you seems to be moments like this when we're surrounded by Hud and everyone else we know. When exactly is a good time for us to talk?"

"There's nothing to talk about," I insist. "I have bigger things to worry about."

"I'll say," he laughs. "Your fiance is drunk and, apparently...gay."

"Obviously I know that," I huff, rolling my eyes. "I've already explained all of this to you. Maybe I left the gay part out, but the rest of it was true. We're best friends and we make a great team. We wanted a family, and doing so the regular way wasn't an option. So here we are. It may be a shit show when it's under a spotlight like this, but behind closed doors when we can just be ourselves...everything will be perfect and beautiful."

Emery moves in closer, searching my eyes intently and swallowing me up with his warmth. "It doesn't sound so perfect to me. It sounds...lonely."

"There are all different kinds of love," I argue. "We don't all need the

romantic kind."

"Need? No, I guess not. We don't all need it. But that doesn't mean we don't want it."

"Well, I don't," I state firmly, turning my back to him.

"That's not the impression I got that night we spent together." His voice drops down deep, vibrating through my body as he draws closer again. "The woman I saw that night was thirsting for love, for attention. She desperately wanted to be desired, to be touched."

"Emery...Don't..." I beg, but it only comes out as a broken whisper.

He reaches around me from behind, hovering his hands over my body in all the places he would touch if I would just say the word, giving him permission to dive in. Everything in me melts, and it feels too easy to lose myself in this...to give into him and all my desires that he seems to think are so obvious.

"You don't have to hide from me, Nicole," he says, teasing me. "It's okay."

I shake my head and bite my lip to fight from saying the words I know he's waiting for. "I can't" is all I manage to choke out.

"Why not?" he prods. "You're an adult. You can do whatever you want."

"No. I can't. It's too late for that."

"It's never too late," he whispers. "Especially not when it comes to your life and love. Your heart is still young, still open to all the possibilities of life. You just lost hope that you'd ever find it again. But maybe...maybe it's right in front of you."

I'm too tired and angry to fight it anymore. I spin around to face him, finally giving in and letting him kiss me. I've been craving his kiss since that night we spent together over a month ago, and *god* does it ever feel good to taste it again. I feel whole, like a person again. For a moment, it all seems so simple. I can still make this work. There's room to fit it all in. There's room for Anthony and me, this baby and our family. There's room for Emery. There's room for me and my career and...love? Maybe?

He kisses me gently, just enough to make me forget I've ever had any other kind of kiss. It's soft, warm, and full of promise. For a moment I can pretend like I'm with this man, this perfect man who's been right here beside me all along. This whole time.

I unbutton my dress, then push it off my shoulders, allowing it to slip down my body to pool at my feet. He kisses my bare neck, his lips moving

down to the tops of my shoulders while his hands trail up and down my body.

I turn around again, facing him as we kiss. Our bodies press together and the passion builds between us. I can feel his need for me throbbing beneath his pants. Heat rises up through my body and I know he wants me too.

I need him to touch me. Right now. I reach down and grab his hand, pulling it between my legs.

"God, Nicole," he groans as he feels how wet I am, how ready I am for him.

My body aches for him as his fingers move in circles over my folds and then slip inside of me. My legs grow weak as he pushes me over to the wall, pinning me up against it from behind.

His hardness presses against me, teasing me. I writhe against the wall, squirming with impatient need.

"Please, Emery," I beg in a whisper.

He works his fingers harder, making it almost impossible not to cry out so loud that everyone in the whole ballroom could hear it. I bite my lip and buck my hips against him, pleading with him to slip inside of me.

His hand reaches up to my breast, teasing my nipple with his thumb.

I let out a sharp gasp as he lifts up my dress and spreads my legs, teasing me with his tip. I'm burning up with need, and the only way I know to express it is to reach around and dig my nails into the skin of his thighs.

He hisses and slowly pushes himself inside of me, sliding in one slow inch at a time.

"God, you feel so good," he moans.

I push my hips back against him, begging him to go deeper. He works his way inside of me, inch by inch, until he's buried in me completely. I grip the wall and cry out with pleasure.

An explosion of heat radiates through my body as he works his way in and out of me. It's sweet torture, this slow and steady pace he takes. Every thrust brings me closer and closer to the edge.

A few more slow and steady strokes, and we're exploding and crashing together. The intense pleasure fills us both to the point that I feel like my heart is going to burst. I realize he's right. I am so desperate for this...and for him, more than I ever wanted to be.

His head presses against my back as we recover and catch our breath. I don't say it out loud, but I don't want to go back out there. Anthony ran away from all of this, so why can't I?

My heart pounds with all the possibilities Emery wanted me to see. Maybe I gave up too soon, and maybe Anthony and I are making a huge mistake. It's not just about us anymore after all. Our engagement may be fake, but this baby growing inside of me is real.

After Emery re-buttons the back of my dress, I turn around to face him - diving deep into those dark blue eyes of his. The other thing that's very real here is that he is the father of this baby. But the moment he knows that, I could be tied to him forever.

I dip my head and clear my throat, pointing towards the door. "I guess we should probably...People will be wondering where I am."

EMERY

Nicole straightens her dress and wipes her fingers under her eyes, clearing away her smudged makeup. By the time her eyes meet mine again, she has changed. Where, moments ago, I saw vulnerability and hope and possibility...there is now nothing but a need to keep up appearances.

But I know Nicole. And I don't think this has anything to do with all those people out there. She's never cared about what people think enough to let it hold her back from something she wants. No, she's trying to protect something *deeper*.

She's trying to protect herself. But...from what? What is she so afraid of?

I know better than to ask her now that she's already flipped the switch, but still - everything has changed now. We can plaster fake smiles on our face and march back out there like everything is fine, but I know it's not.

I was so convinced she only slept with me to trick me into giving her this baby, especially once I found out Anthony was mixed up in this bright idea to put on a fake marriage, a fake family, a fake *life*.

But this time? There was no ulterior motive. The only reason Nicole would have had to give into me tonight was because...*she wanted to*.

As long as she wants me and it's possible that she's pregnant with my baby, the ending hasn't been written yet. I can still get to her. I can still change this.

"Emery," she says, steadying her voice. "I really have to go."

"I know. Right. I know," I nod, straightening up my suit. "Okay. After you." I turn and wave towards the door.

She marches forward, then pauses and spins around. "I hope it goes without saying...everything that happened tonight...It has to stay between us."

"Refresh my memory," I tease. "Are you referring to the sex we just had? Or the fact that your fiance is secretly into men?"

"I'm serious, Emery," she huffs. "Anthony's family would disown him if he was outed. This isn't just about me...or you. He's my best friend. I have to protect him."

I nod in understanding. "All of your secrets are safe with me."

As I say it, a flicker of anger burns inside. It may not just be about us, but part of it is. More specifically, part of it is about me. She's so eager to protect Anthony, but what about the lies that are hurting me?

"This is all better for you too," she adds, as if she can read my mind. "Like you said, you made that promise to Hud."

"I thought you said that promise was bull shit?"

"It is to me, and it was an unfair thing for him to ask. But you still made the promise, didn't you? You and Hud have been friends for too long for it to be ruined by something silly like this."

I shake my head. "I don't think anything about what's happening between you and me is silly."

She straightens and holds her chin up. "There is nothing happening between us."

The blow is like a knife to my chest, but I know it's all in self-preservation. She's not just lying to me and everyone out in that ballroom. She's lying to *herself*.

Fine, Nicole. I can let you go on believing that for now...If that's how you want to play this.

I think the words, but stop them from rolling off my tongue. She charges out the door with me following behind. I'm so distracted that I don't think enough to do the obvious thing that needs to be done and walk in the opposite direction from her. We both head back toward the ballroom together.

We barely make it a few feet before Hudson appears in front of us. He's smiling at first, but that quickly fades.

"Hey guys, where have you—"

His eyes narrow and drop down to all the places I don't want him to look. Nicole's swollen lips, my crooked tie, our misplaced hair. It seemed like we made ourselves presentable again, but now that we're caught under his

scrutinous eye - I'm paranoid that it's all too painfully obvious. He's going to know what we were just doing.

"Hudson," Nicole squeaks, smiling wide. *Too wide*. "There you are. I was looking for you."

"Were you?" he says slowly. "Because we've all been looking for you and Anthony. Our parents are ready for speeches and toasts and all that."

"Right. Yeah, that's why I was looking for you," she says. "I need your help finding Anthony."

Hudson's eyes are like a magnifying glass as they land on me like they can see absolutely everything. I do my best not to squirm under his burning gaze.

"What's going on here?" he asks slowly.

We shift nervously. We're seconds away from crumbling. I just know it.

It's no longer the Hudson I know today standing in front of me. I'm looking at eighteen year old Hud right now. We're back in his childhood bedroom, and he's making me swear never to lay a hand on Nicole. He's mapping out my entire future and telling me how he'll make sure I pass everything and become a doctor one day. He's promising that I won't have to be disowned by my father - just like what Nicole has promised to Anthony.

"What kind of man goes missing from his own engagement party?" he scoffs.

"He was nervous!" Nicole chirps. "So he had a little too much to drink. But don't worry. As soon as we find him we can get through these speeches and wrap this thing up. Everything's fine."

Hudson shakes his head, unconvinced. But Nicole is already pushing past him to continue with the search party. This is the worst thing she can do, because now I'm left alone with Hud.

Hud who knows me better than almost anyone, and who can always see when something is wrong...and when I'm up to something.

"Crazy night, huh?" I offer, desperate to deflect.

He nods slowly. "I need to ask you something."

I swallow hard. "Can it wait? We should really..."

He ignores my words and wraps his arm around my shoulder, dragging me off to the corner. I'm praying he can't feel how hard my heart is pounding in my chest.

"I need to ask you something," he says quietly, weary of guests as they pass by to and from the bathroom. "And I need you to promise me you'll give

me an honest answer."

The last thing I need right now is to make any more promises to Hudson. But I also made a promise to Nicole - to keep her secrets and protect her, at least for now. At the moment, a brand new promise seems to trump one that I made twenty years ago.

"Of course," I exhale finally.

"What do you think of this Anthony guy?"

I blink, thinking I misheard him. Then the relief rushes in. Maybe Hudson really is completely oblivious to what just happened between me and his sister, behind the door that's only a few feet away from us.

"You know more about him than I do," I lie. "You said they've been friends for a long time, right?"

"Yeah, but even that's weird. First Nicole friend-zones this guy, and now after all this time...she's suddenly pregnant and getting married to him. Do you think it was an accident?"

"No," I answer honestly. "I don't think it was an accident. I think it was all a very deliberate plan."

His brow furrows. "What makes you so sure?"

"Because Nicole always has a plan. That's the way of the Grays, isn't it? You're the same way."

His expression softens a little. "Yeah. I guess so."

"For now, let's help her find the guy. We can tell him off later. Deal?"

"Oh believe me. I plan on having quite the chat with him after this. Preferably bright and early tomorrow morning when he's in the middle of a killer hangover. Serves him right for embarrassing her like this."

I pat him on the shoulder and nudge him down the hall. By the time we make it into the ballroom, Anthony has reappeared. Nicole looks pissed, but forces a smile anyway as they take their seats at the front of the room. Now the charade can go on as planned.

But I'm positive none of this is going to play out the way they thought it would. How could it? When Nicole obviously feels *something* for me. They can't just ignore that, and they certainly can't ignore the fact that I could be the baby's father. "*We found another donor*" my ass.

All of this seems to be haunting Nicole's eyes. Maybe no one else can see it, but for the briefest second after they sit down - I watch her look to the side and take a sip of champagne. She looks tense and unnerved. I can see it so plainly. I do have a chance with her. Maybe I always have, but was too

worried about Hud and what he wanted to even see it.

Maybe *he* saw that too. Maybe that's why he asked me to make that stupid promise in the first place.

But my confidence begins to wane as their parents make their speeches and toasts. Everything that's happened tonight seems to be forgotten in an instant. Anthony seems to have sobered up enough to act right. Him and Nicole smile and laugh and whisper things to each other. I know they're not a real couple, but...*damn*. They look...*happy*.

As soon as the speeches are over, I'm desperate to get out of there. I say a quick goodbye to Hud and let him know that I'll take a cab home. Just before I walk out the door, I stop and look across the room at Nicole. Her eyes meet mine, and she offers a subtle wave.

I'm exhausted by the time I get home, and it doesn't help that I immediately ram my shin into a block of wood that's sitting in the middle of the floor. When I'm done cussing the inanimate object out, I flip on the lightswitch and look around.

"This place is a fucking mess," I grumble.

Then it dawns on me. If Hud only asked me to stay away from his sister because he could see something I couldn't...because he could see that maybe there was something between us - something more than just a teenage boy with an unreciprocated crush...What else could he see about me that scared him? Could it be that he knew I was never meant for med school? That we should have never become doctors together?

If he hadn't insisted on helping me cheat...would I have been better off to just tell my father the truth?

NICOLE

Even before I open my eyes, my nostrils are flooded with the sweetest scent of fresh flowers. I smile and stretch before slowly sitting up in bed.

My legs are pinned underneath the sheets by the most lavish breakfast in bed spread I've ever seen in my life. I can see where the flower smell was coming from. Not only is there a fresh vase on the breakfast tray, but buckets of flowers are piled up on both of the end tables...and in every other corner of the room.

There's a stack of pancakes piled high with strawberries, syrup, and powdered sugar. A bowl of fresh fruit rests next to that, and there's a pitcher of orange juice. Next to the tray is a basket of croissants. In the middle of it all, a card that says - *I'm sorry*.

Anthony appears in the doorway just in time to catch me groaning and rolling my eyes.

"Still not good enough?" he asks sheepishly.

"Anthony, the engagement party was almost a week ago. What's done is done, okay? You can't go back and redo the whole thing. You apologized, I accepted. These grand apologetic gestures have to stop!"

"I just feel so terrible. You've never stayed mad at me for this long before. I hate it."

I almost repeat everything I've already said to him a dozen times, but a burning in my throat stops me. The smell of the flowers, the sugar, the syrup...it's all too much. I'm going to be sick, but my legs are still trapped under the tray he planted on top of me while I was sleeping.

I rush to move it off without breaking anything, but there's no time. I have no choice but to grab the closest vessel I can, which happens to be the pitcher of orange juice, and cup it over my mouth just in time to catch my morning sickness.

"Shit. Nic! I'm so sorry!" Anthony cries, rushing over to help.

"Stop saying you're sorry!" I shout back in between heaving breaths of puking.

The vomiting subsides long enough for him to get everything out of my way so I'm able to escape to the bathroom, locking the door behind me. A half hour later after more puking and brushing my teeth and face, I slowly emerge again. Anthony is seated on the edge of my bed, still waiting for me. The flowers and food are all gone, thank god.

"Every time I try to do something to make this better, I end up making it worse," he tells me.

I let out a heavy sigh then walk over to sit next to him on the bed. "Things are changing, Anty. For me anyways. Pregnancy is shaping up to be every bit as awful and wonderful as everyone always says it is. On top of premiering our new collection, I'm trying to grow a human inside of me and plan a wedding. It's a lot."

He reaches over and grabs my hand. "I know. But this is what I signed up for. I want to be with you through all of that."

"But you weren't the other night at the party," I remind him. "And while you've been busy buying out all the local florists and bakeries and planning these surprise breakfast in bed attacks, I've just been drowning under more stuff that needs to be done. I understand you're sorry, but we don't have time for all of this. This isn't the kind of help I need." I suck in a deep breath, letting another wave of nausea pass. "I guess that's why the other night pissed me off so much, and why it's been hard to let go of. We're supposed to be in this thing together, but...I felt alone. Truthfully, I still do. Like I'm in this alone."

I know it's hard for him to hear because it's a hard thing to say. But...it's the truth.

He inhales and exhales, then squeezes my hand tighter. "Okay. I hear you loud and clear. No more apologies. I'm just going to make sure you don't feel that way anymore moving forward, okay?" He flies to his feet and holds out his hand. "Give me your to-do list for today. I want to take care of everything I can, and I want you to go back to bed for a while."

I smile up at him. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Hand it over."

I do as he asks and pass my massive to do list on to him. As he rushes off into action mode, I stay hidden away in bed in between fits of morning sickness. By noon, I'm able to keep down some toasted bread and water, which gives me the strength to get dressed and head into the studio to see how things are going.

In the coming days, Anthony keeps his promise. He devotes himself entirely to the upcoming show, ensuring I'm able to rest as much as I need to without stressing. Finally, this whole thing starts to feel more like how I always pictured it would be.

Later that week, the premier of our collection is a massive success. The press loves the fact that Anthony and I are engaged, and it appears as though we've put this whole collaboration together in celebration of our upcoming marriage. But even without all of that, I know this collection would have been a hit because it's some of the best work of my career so far.

I took the boldness of my original designs and fused them with the soft silhouettes from Anthony's sketches. I softened the hard lines of the color blocking and reintroduced my signature floral prints. This line is soft and sensual like a breeze coming in from the ocean, like the feeling of the warm sun on your closed eyelids.

This line...*is inspired entirely by Emery*. Of course, I don't tell anyone that. Not even Anthony.

It's not *just* about him. It's about those long days on the beach when we were growing up. It's about the way he secretly made me feel then, and the way he's making me feel again now. It's the spark of a first kiss, the warmth of a first crush.

It all must translate well, because by the end of the show every major store in the country, and some international ones as well, are feuding over exclusive deals to carry it. The offers start flooding in, and Anthony and I breathe easy knowing that our last big collection, before the craziness of the wedding and the baby, is a huge success.

We're relieved when it's all over, but I don't get to relish that feeling for too long. My morning sickness takes a turn for the worse, and is no longer just isolated to the mornings. From sunup to sun down, and several times throughout the night, I find myself running to the toilet. After weeks of barely being able to keep anything down, I schedule an appointment with my doctor

to see if there is anything they can do.

"How did it go?" Anthony asks as I walk into the kitchen and toss my prescription onto the counter.

"These supplements are supposed to help," I reply. "And they gave some advice. They said when pregnancy is hard, sometimes it can overshadow the good feelings we have about the baby that's on the way. They told me I should take time to get excited about being a mother. When I'm not puking anyways."

"Does the excitement not just come naturally?" Anthony puzzles.

"It did before it started to feel like my insides were rotting out," I quip.

"So what are you supposed to do?"

"Shop for baby clothes, ask my friends to plan a baby shower, decorate the nursery..."

"Okay," he nods. "So which of those sounds most exciting to you?"

"Well...I already have a massive trunk full of clothes I've been buying here and there," I tell him.

"Of course you do," he laughs.

"And with all the wedding planning, not to mention the fact that we only just finished planning that huge fashion show...planning a baby shower does not sound the least bit appealing. I guess that leaves the nursery...which, actually, does sound really exciting. Do you want to work on it with me?"

"You know I'm pretty certain I was an interior designer in another life. Yes, of course I want to help."

"The baby's room is all cleared out. We have to pick a paint color and start shopping for the furniture. Are you free this afternoon?"

"Oh, sorry babe," he frowns. "Not this afternoon. I have plans for lunch. But I'll be around this evening."

"Oh. Okay."

His eyes zoom in on me, sensing my disappointment. "Hey. This does not mean you're alone in this, okay? I just already made plans is all. Tonight, I'm all yours."

"No, I know. It's okay," I wave, sliding onto one of the kitchen bar stools. "Ignore me. The pregnancy hormones are setting in. An afternoon of shopping alone sounds nice actually. Why don't I go out and get started on picking out the furniture, and we can start assembling it all tonight?"

"Sounds like a plan," he nods.

It really is a lovely afternoon shopping for furniture. I manage to decide

on a crib, changing table, and dresser, all of which are delivered to the house later that evening. I'm a little worried when Anthony doesn't come home for dinner, but I try not to overthink it. I have a salad while reading over the assembly instructions for the crib.

The more I read, the more anxious I get. Putting a crib together is a lot more complicated than I ever dreamed it would be. I definitely can't do it alone. But by seven o'clock, there's still no sign of Anthony and he's not answering my calls or texts.

I know I could just wait until another night when he's home to put the crib together. But the doctor was right. Giving myself something fun to work on to prepare for the baby really has helped immensely. It's kept my mind off how crappy I feel and brought my attention back to all the things I'm excited for.

I'm not ready to let go of that feeling tonight just because Anthony can't keep his commitments, nor do I want to spend the night alone...*thinking about how Anthony can't keep his commitments.*

I consider hiring someone to put the thing together, but that sounds more awkward than fun. After considering my options for a while, one possibility keeps popping back into my mind.

There is a certain someone who took a recent interest in woodworking and furniture building...Someone I wouldn't mind seeing. Someone who probably wouldn't mind seeing me and helping me build this crib...

At eight o'clock, after one last unanswered call to Anthony, I make up my mind and call Emery.

EMERY

When Nicole answers the door, she looks radiant...and tired. Pregnancy looks good on her, but she told me on the phone that it's not agreeing with her stomach. I'm more interested to know why her best friend Anthony isn't around to help her put this crib together, but I'm more than happy to step up and fill his shoes.

"I know it's kind of early to be doing all of this," she explains as she shows me down the hall to the nursery. "But the doctor says it's good for me to have something other than being sick to focus on. And he was right. It's helping."

"Good. I'm glad. And...I'm happy you called." I hesitate for a moment, unsure if I should mention I'm just not so sure why she called *me*.

At least I'm not sure if her story about going with another donor is true. If I am in fact the father, or if there's even a chance I might be, then it makes perfect sense why she called me.

She walks into the nursery and turns around to face me. She seems nervous and jumpy, like she's hanging by a thread. "Right. So...this is it."

I step inside and take a look around. There are paint swatches taped to the wall, and a big open window with a bench in front of it that overlooks the backyard.

"This is nice," I tell her, walking over to get a look at the view.

"I'm torn about what color to do the walls," she says. "I guess I should wait until I find out the gender in a few weeks. Yellow is a neutral, calming color. But to be honest, I'm not a big fan of yellow."

"No. You're right. Yellow doesn't quite seem to fit."

"What makes you say that?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. It just doesn't feel right."

She chews on her bottom lip and nods. "I know. You're right. Well. Anyway, here's the crib. I tried to start on it myself, but it's really a two person job."

"Yep. Definitely a two person job," I say as I scan the scattered pieces of wood in the middle of the floor. "One person to build and one person to supervise."

I walk over and clear off the rocking chair in the corner, then put my hands on Nicole's shoulders and guide her over to take a seat.

"The other thing we'll need is fuel. Are you hungry?" I ask.

She thinks about it for a moment. "Actually, I think I finally am."

"What are you craving? I'll order anything you want."

A smile spreads across her lips. "Anything?"

"You name it."

"Pizza," she replies. "A big cheesy, greasy pizza. And...a milkshake."

"Pizza and milkshakes. Coming right up," I nod, pulling out my phone.

"Oh! And fries! With extra salt," she exclaims.

"You got it," I laugh.

"And fried pickles if they have them. Healthy pregnancy diet be damned. After puking my guts out non-stop for the past two and a half months, I think I'm finally kicking into pig-out mode."

It takes to-go orders from two different places and a run down to the local drugstore to make her dinner menu happen, but an hour later Nicole has the full spread in front of her as I set to work on the crib.

I watch her as she chows down on all of the food with her feet propped up on an end table. The faintest hint of a baby bump is starting to show, but damn she still looks sexy.

I must have imagined a million different scenarios like this where Nicole and I had some fantasy happy ever after life together. And as we laugh and talk, I can honestly say the real thing is every bit as great and easy as I always thought it could be.

"How are things going at Bardot?" she asks me as I screw in one of the sides of the crib railing. "Do you still hate it there?"

"Yes," I admit. "But...I'm learning to appreciate it for what it is. It's just something for right now...until I can think of something better to do."

"I want to try something," she says, leaning forward to put down her half-

eaten pizza crust and wipe her hands on a napkin. "Close your eyes."

"What?"

"Come on. Just humor me."

"Alright," I sigh, tossing down the screwdriver. I sit back in the middle of the carpet and close my eyes.

"Okay, now...take a few deep breaths...then imagine you're in the middle of a perfect day. Don't think about what you're doing or anything else. Just tell me what the weather is like."

"The weather?" I smirk.

"That's right. The weather."

I suck in a deep breath through my nostrils and blow it out slowly through my mouth. "It's sunny. On the warmer side, but not too hot. There's a little bit of a breeze."

"Where are you?" she asks.

My mind is dark, but I can feel the breeze blowing in my hair. Slowly, the sound of seagulls and gentle waves comes through. "I'm on the beach."

"Pretend you're opening your eyes and taking a look around on the beach. What else do you see?"

"Just the ocean. And an old beach house behind me," I explain as I imagine the sound of a dog barking in the distance. "I have a dog."

"What are you and your dog doing?"

"Walking," I reply. "We're walking up and down the beach. My pants are rolled up and my feet are barefoot, covered in sand. We're collecting things. Seashells maybe. Or...driftwood."

"What do you do with the things you collect?"

"We build things," I answer without hesitation. "And we have a little shop down the road where we sell it all. I can walk there every day. Life is slow and easy."

"Do you see or hear anything else?"

The scene seems so vivid now. I turn and look up at the porch of the beach house where I live. Nicole is standing there in a long, flowing sundress. She's smiling and waving at me. No, not just me. I look to my right and there's a little girl building a sandcastle.

"Emery?"

I snap to, opening my eyes and clearing my throat.

"Did you see anything else?" she asks again.

I want to look away from her, but I can't. I want to tell her it's not just the

yellow color she was picturing for the nursery that isn't right. It's this place. This life she's trying to make up with Anthony. This isn't where she belongs. I can see that. Why can't she?

"That was a good experiment," I say finally, trying to push the rest of it from my mind as I turn my attention back to the crib. "I guess that solves it then. I just need a bunch of money to invest in opening a shop on the beach where I sell a bunch of junk."

"Emery," she scolds softly. "It wouldn't be junk. It's your dream. I think the problem isn't that you don't know what you want to do. You're just too scared to admit what you want and go after it."

"We all get scared, Nicole," I tell her, my tone harsher than I mean for it to be. "But it's easy to look at other people's lives and say what they should or shouldn't do. It feels different when you're actually walking in those shoes every day."

She recoils slightly. "I guess you're right."

Our eyes lock together, lingering too long. But we're interrupted by the sound of a door slamming. Anthony's voice follows as he races through the house looking for her.

"Nic! God, so sorry I'm late!" he calls out down the hall. He freezes when he comes around the corner and sees me. "Oh. Hi, Emery."

"Hey...Anthony." I do my best to hide the disdain dripping from my voice, but it's hard to do. I hate this guy for making a habit out of leaving Nicole high and dry.

Maybe they're not a real romantic couple. But they are supposed to be best friends, and they have committed to this thing together. So far, he doesn't seem to be doing such a good job at holding up his end of things.

Nicole appears to be thinking the same thing. She straightens and purses her lips, not saying a word to him.

"Lunch turned into dinner and that turned into drinks," he explains with a careless smile. "You know how it goes. But I'm here now!"

"It's really late, Anthony," she answers coldly.

He checks his watch. "It's just after ten."

"Which is really late when you're pregnant and you spent half the day puking."

His eyes dart over the wreckage of her dinner - the empty pizza box and milkshake cup, the half-eaten containers of pickles and fries.

"Well, your stomach must be feeling better now," he teases.

Nicole jumps up and storms out of the room, exhaling "Excuse me" on her way out. Anthony quickly follows after her as I stay behind and finish up the last of the crib assembly.

When it's all done and the two of them still haven't come back, I make my way down the hall to wash my hands in the bathroom. As I walk back out, I can hear the two of them arguing in Nicole's bedroom. I walk towards it to knock and tell her I'm heading out, but as I lift my hand to the doorframe - I can't help but stop and listen to what they're saying.

"We agreed I'd still have the freedom to go out a few nights a week. And you said it'd be fine if I met someone. You said we'd figure it out," says Anthony.

"You also said that would never happen!" Nicole shouts. "I certainly didn't think it'd happen so fast, before the baby's even born! Does he know about me and our baby?"

"Yes, actually. And he thinks it's great. He's also fine with an open relationship. God, Nicole. This is shaping up to be everything I ever wanted. Why can't you just be happy for me?"

"Because you barely know him," she hisses. "And so far you're not doing such a great job at balancing your commitments to me and this new relationship."

I force myself to lightly tap on the wall and poke my head in the door. "Sorry to interrupt. The crib's all finished. I should get going."

"I'll walk you out," Nicole insists.

"No, it's okay. I can show myself out."

"Please. It's the least I can do." She looks over at Anthony, her eyes piercing straight through him. "I'm done with this conversation anyway."

She storms past him and shows me to the front door. I'm surprised when she throws her arms around me in a hug. I can't resist running my hands up and down her back and taking in a deep whiff of her hair.

"Thank you, Emery," she whispers, not pulling away but squeezing me tighter.

"I'm always here for you, Nicole. Any time." I pull back and look her in the eyes. "I've always been here for you, and I always will be."

NICOLE

Over the next few weeks, my nausea and sickness gets better, but everything else about my situation gets worse. Anthony is completely consumed by his new boyfriend. His two or three nights out a week turn into four day long night and day stretches of him vanishing - whether we have plans or not.

I'm learning to make the best of it and enjoy the alone time, even if it's not how I imagined things would be. After all, I didn't want to do this whole motherhood thing with a real romantic partner. I wanted to do it by myself, with my best friend in the picture. Maybe I just overestimated what that would feel like.

I've dropped my time in the studio to part-time hours and brought on extra staff to help out until after the baby is born. When I'm not working or planning the wedding, I take long walks up and down the strip - stopping in cafes to satisfy my pregnancy cravings and shopping in the boutiques to buy everything I want my baby to have.

I notice myself referring to the baby more and more as *mine*. Not *ours*.

The other thing I notice is that every time the breeze blows through my hair during one of my long walks, I can't help but close my eyes and remember the vision Emery shared of his perfect day. It's scary to admit that my own perfect day looks a lot like his.

It's even scarier to admit....that perfect day looks vastly different than any of the days in my current life.

One bright and sunny afternoon, after a long walk full of those images of Emery's beach dream dancing through my head, I return home to get ready

for my doctor's appointment. I toss my keys down on the table and look around my giant manor. Lately, it feels too big and it always seems to be echoing with emptiness. Even when I'm not working, I often retreat to the studio just to be in the middle of all those busy people. It brings me more comfort than the stillness of the rest of the place.

Sadly, the room I dread the most is the nursery. I glide my hand along the wall as I walk down the hallway, then slowly step into the middle of the room which is still white and covered in paint swatches. The crib Emery built sits right in the middle, underneath the vaulted ceiling.

My favorite thing about the room is the window seat and all the natural sunlight that beams through it. Sometimes I stand here and pretend I can see the view of the ocean outside, but then I take a step closer and remind myself it's only the garden down below.

Emery was right. Things do look simpler to people from the outside. I run my own fashion label. I call the shots. I have plenty of money. *What's stopping me from buying that beach house I've always wanted?*

I let out a heavy sigh and walk over to the crib, smoothing my hand over the soft gray fitted sheet that's stretched across the mattress. I spread my other hand over my baby bump, which is growing more noticeable every day now.

"Soon I'll know if you're going to be a girl or a boy. Then maybe I can figure out what to do with this room. Either way, I promise you I'm going to make it perfect before it's time for you to arrive."

After making my promise to the baby, I go to the bathroom to freshen up then head out to the car waiting for me out front. It drives me across town to Bardot where Anthony is supposed to be meeting me. He has a habit of missing things lately, but I know he wouldn't miss something so huge. He wouldn't miss us finding out the gender of our baby.

Still, I can't resist the temptation to call him on the way just to be safe. A frown settles deep into the edges of my mouth as it rings and rings with no answer.

He wouldn't miss this. Not this. I have to keep telling myself that over and over again the whole way to the hospital, but it does little to comfort me.

I avoid checking in for as long as I possibly can without being late. I pace the edges of the waiting room near the door, chewing my lip and anxiously watching through the windows for any sign of Anthony.

When it can't wait anymore, I go up to the receptionist and tell her I'm here.

"My fiance seems to be running late," I explain, holding back tears. "Is there any way we can wait for him?"

"I'm sorry Ms. Gray. The ultrasound technicians are pretty booked today. I'm afraid if we can't get you in at your scheduled time, we'll have to reschedule for another time. We could do next week? Will your fiance be available then?"

"I have no idea," I grumble under my breath. The tears start streaming down my face. I can't hold them in any longer.

"I'm sorry? I didn't quite catch—"

I rush out of the waiting room back into the lobby and collapse down on the nearest bench. My chest and cheeks are burning with hot stinging tears. I try to suck in deep breaths, but all the air I get is shallow and ragged.

"Nicole?"

I look up, praying it's not my brother standing there. When I see that it's Emery, I start crying even harder. He rushes over and sits down beside me, pulling me into his arms.

"Shhh, shhh. It's okay. I'm here. What happened?"

"I can't be here like this," I try to explain. "Someone will see me. People will talk. God, even my fake relationships are a disaster!"

"Come on. Come with me."

He wraps his arms around me and whisks me away to a private elevator. A few minutes later we're in his office with the door closed where I can finally take off my sunglasses and breathe a little.

"Thank you. I shouldn't have made such a scene," I sniffle. "I hope that doesn't end up all over the internet tomorrow."

"No unauthorized cameras are allowed in Bardot," he assures me. "We're really strict about that kind of thing. What happened?"

"Fucking Anthony," I growl. "He didn't show up for our ultrasound today. I was so excited to find out the gender of the baby, but I couldn't bring myself to go in there alone. I don't know why. I'm normally not afraid to do anything alone. I'm used to it."

"This guy is really starting to piss me off, Nicole," Emery scoffs, pacing around in front of me. "What kind of friend is he to keep ditching you like this all the time? I mean, are you so sure this arrangement is going to work?"

"I don't know anymore," I sob.

Emery sits with me and lets me cry for a little while. Once I manage to calm down, I just hate myself for letting Anthony ruin this.

"You want to know the gender of your baby now?" Emery asks.

I wipe my eyes with an eager nod, and he bobs his head toward the door. "Then let's go find out."

I don't know how he does it, but fifteen minutes later I'm being ushered into an exam room for an ultrasound. After I change into the paper gown, Emery comes in and stands beside me, taking my hand into his. The technician squirts my belly with freezing cold gel, then slides the wand around as we watch the black and white images swirl on the screen.

"Nicole, you're having a little girl!" she shrieks.

All of the air rushes out of me as happy tears stream down my cheeks. I forget about Anthony and the stupid paint color for the nursery and absolutely everything else. All I can think about is how right this feels.

"I'm going to have a baby girl," I rasp.

I look up at Emery. Even though the room is dark, I swear I see tears welling up in his eyes.

What am I doing? I didn't tell Emery the truth because I made a promise to Anthony. Now Emery is the only one who's here for me as Anthony breaks every promise he's ever made to me.

Emery smiles down at me and squeezes my hand, then looks back up to the ultrasound screen. For a split second, I wish I had done everything differently. I wish that when I ran into Emery that day at the clinic, I could have somehow known then what I know now. I wish I had told Anthony the whole thing was off, and that I never lied to Emery about the baby.

But when the lights come back on and it's time for me to get dressed again, nothing seems so simple.

"I'm just hormonal," I tell myself.

That's the only reason I feel so emotional towards Emery lately. If I was supposed to have the perfect real fiance, I would have found him long before Anthony and I made this arrangement. It wasn't in the cards for me. I don't even want a real husband. And as soon as this baby is here in the world, in my arms, I'll come back to my senses.

Emery is waiting for me when I exit the room. "How are you doing?"

"Much better now," I smile. "Thank you."

"Do you want me to walk you out?"

I start to say yes, but I quickly stop myself. "No. I can walk out alone."

"I know you *can*," he smirks. "The question is...do you really want to?"

My lips part as my eyes settle on his. I don't feel like I know the answer

to that anymore.

"Emery. Nicole," a voice calls out to us.

I turn to see Hudson walking towards us. *Of course*. He always finds us at the worst possible times.

NICOLE

I turn and study myself in the studio mirror, in disbelief that I'm wearing a wedding dress. I'm *pregnant* and wearing a *wedding dress*.

I'm four months pregnant now, and there's no point in trying to hide my baby bump. When I first sketched the sweetheart-top chiffon gown, it seemed perfect. I thought it was the wedding dress of my dreams. But now that it's on...it couldn't feel more wrong.

I glance over my shoulder through the mirror at Anthony, who is distracted by his phone.

"Well. Here it is," I groan, clearing my throat to get his attention.

He finally gets up and comes over to adjust the fabric in a few places. He puts on a smile, but I can tell it's insincere.

"You look beautiful, Nic!"

I narrow my eyes over him, then over the dress. "I don't know, Anty. You don't think it's too...that it just looks like..."

"Too what?"

I shake my head. "It looks like a costume."

"Isn't that what a wedding dress is?" he answers cluelessly. "Especially this one. Come on, Nicole. You know this whole wedding is just a show for my family and for the press."

I feel an ache in my heart, but I can't bring myself to admit to him that while this whole thing may be a show - it is also the only wedding day I'll ever have. And maybe that fact is bothering me more than I expected it to.

"I'm just worried the wedding isn't the only show we're putting on," I grumble.

His shoulders drop with a heavy sigh. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"You've just been so busy with your new boy toy lately. It doesn't feel like we're in this together. Sure, the marriage was supposed to be fake. But our family was supposed to be real, remember?"

"His name is Mark, and he's more than just a boy toy," he defends.

"Okay, so...does that change things?" I press. "Are you having second thoughts?"

"You have to stop asking me that, Nic. I've told you a million times that nothing has changed. Mark knows all about you and our arrangement. He thinks it's great. In fact, he'd like to meet you."

I close my eyes and swallow down a hard lump, trying my best not to show how upset I am by all of this. Of course this would all happen now...*after* I'm knocked up and the wedding invitations have gone out.

The entire time I've known Anthony, he's never been in a serious relationship. Then the minute I get pregnant and we announce our engagement, this boyfriend pops up out of nowhere. I always hated playing third wheel around him and his dates. Now it's starting to feel like I'm stuck. I'll be playing third wheel to him and this Mark guy for the rest of my life, and my baby will be caught up in the middle of it all.

"I'm happy for you, Anty. I really am," I force myself to say, because somewhere deep down - it's true. "The timing is just...complicated. And I'm all hormonal and emotional about everything these days. It feels like I can't catch my balance."

"Maybe if you could just meet Mark, it would put you at ease," he insists. "Why don't we make tomorrow's bachelorette party co-ed? And I can invite him along?"

I can't help but roll my eyes. "The bachelorette party isn't just some excuse to go out and party. It's more of a baby shower anyway since I can't do much partying these days. Remember?" I ask, pointing to my baby bump. "It's all just for show, and it's something my sister-in-law insisted on putting together for me. Hopefully it will placate her and Hud. He's been suspicious as hell lately. You keep missing things, and he does *not* like the fact that Emery is always there in your place."

"That *is* a funny coincidence," he teases in an accusing tone. "He does seem to be around a lot lately. You're not going to tell him he's the father, are you?"

Suddenly, I can't stand to be in this stupid dress a second longer. "Unzip

me, will you?"

Anthony rushes over to help get it off of me, but I still feel like I can't breathe. I can't bring myself to tell him...*It feels like we're making a big mistake.* How can I? When this whole thing was my idea to begin with. I convinced him and myself that everything would be so perfect.

But now that he's spending every spare second with Mark and I'm alone more than ever before, I don't see how we're going to pull this off. What if it comes out that we made this arrangement and it causes a big scandal for my career and my reputation? For Anthony? I want people to follow me for my *work*, not for my love life.

Once I'm back in normal clothes, Anthony is itching to get away - back to his boyfriend. It's like those two can't breathe unless they're in the same room. I'm grossed out by it...and also a little jealous.

But as all of my doubts and fears keep growing, and the days until the wedding are getting fewer, I know if I'm going to confront him about this... It's now or never.

"Anthony, I need to talk to you about something," I exhale, dropping down to a chair by the window.

"Well, can it wait? I'm supposed to be meeting..."

"Mark. I know. But no, it can't wait," I answer firmly.

He nods in understanding and walks over to take the seat across from me.

"I hate to even have to ask you this. I know all of this was my idea. I'm the one who sold you on it. I promised everything would be perfect."

"And I warned you everything would be perfectly *imperfect*," he reminds me.

"Right. I know. But...this is *a lot* more imperfect than I imagined it would be," I confess. "Not just you being gone all the time. But everything. I've known we're having a girl for weeks now, and I still don't know what to do with the nursery. The whole house feels weird to me lately. It...it's like it doesn't feel like home anymore. We still don't have a name picked out. All of our friends and family are throwing us all of these fabulous parties, which I should be so excited about...but I couldn't care less."

I work hard not to cry as I let it all out and lean forward to reach for Anthony's hand. "I need you to remind me why we thought this was such a great idea. Remind me what it looked like to us then. What made you say yes?"

His eyes soften, and he squeezes my hand tight. "You wanted to be a

mother, and I wanted to be a father. We wanted to have a family together. You told me to imagine Christmas." He looks around the studio. "I can still see it. This place all done up in decorations. You in some elegant designer apron, baking cookies with our little girl. Presents under the tree."

"And where are you?" I ask.

"Maybe Mark and I are here together for all of that one day," he suggests. "Would that be so horrible? Maybe you have someone in your life too. It will be different, Nicole. When we're in the privacy of our home, it's not going to look like everyone else's family. But you and I will always have something none of them will ever have."

I wipe a tear away from my eye. "What's that?"

"Each other. And the security of knowing that even if there are no Mark's or hot doctors...even as those people come and go, you and I will always be here for this baby. With divorce rates as high as they are these days, how many kids have that kind of safety blanket? To know their parents will never split up. The ground is never going to fall out beneath them."

A happy laugh escapes me, and for the first time in weeks I feel relieved. "Thank you," I whisper. "You're right."

"Nic, I'm sorry I haven't been around much lately," he offers. "I haven't felt this way about anyone in so long. I guess I just wanted to soak it up as much as possible, and exercise my last months of freedom before the baby comes. But I took it too far. I know. Tell you what. Why don't you and I go spend the rest of the afternoon at the spa? I want you to be *glowing* for your bachelorette party, slash baby shower."

"I thought you had to go meet Mark?"

He shakes his head and smiles. "He can wait. My best friend needs me more right now, and I have lost time to make up for."

"You really do," I huff. "You've had me worried, Anty."

"I'm sorry," he says sincerely.

Anthony keeps his promise and spends the rest of the afternoon with me at the spa. I expect him to run off the moment we get home, but he decides to stick around and have a slumber party movie night with me instead. It's everything I need to feel like we can actually pull this off together.

At least it is until I find myself buried in a pile of baby clothes and other presents the next afternoon at the shower. Madison really does throw a lovely party for me, but another wave of panic about becoming a mother hits me like a tidal wave.

I'm restless by the time everyone leaves. I try to busy myself with putting away baby clothes, but nothing is working to calm me down. I don't want to drag Anthony down into this again. He deserves to have some time with Mark in his last few months of full freedom, like he said.

But what do I want to do with *my* last few months of freedom?

I decide to try my own trick on myself - the same one I tried with Emery that day when he was putting together the crib. I close my eyes and ask myself...if I could be anywhere right now, where would I be?

The trick always works because the answer is always surprisingly simple.
I know who I want to be with right now.

EMERY

I stand in my backyard and enjoy the perfect evening air, admiring the lights I've just finished hanging over the patio. The breeze sends something dancing up around my feet. I kneel down to pick it up and realize it's a flower that's fallen from one of the almond trees. It's strange for one of the blooms to still be intact so late in the year when the almonds are already starting to fall to the ground.

That's when I hear the latch on the gate behind me open. I turn and am surprised to see Nicole standing there. She's just like the bloom in my hand. She's not supposed to be here right now, but there she is. She's beautiful, and I'm glad the breeze blew her my way.

"Nicole. Hey," I smile and laugh a little in shock. "What are you doing here?"

Part of me thinks I may be imagining the whole thing until she starts talking.

"I tried knocking, but no one answered," she replies. "I thought I heard you back here. I'm sorry I just dropped in on you like this."

"I'm not," I admit. "It's...perfect timing actually."

I walk over and slide the almond tree bloom behind her ear and brush my fingers across her cheek. She smiles and melts into my touch.

"Perfect timing for what?" she asks.

"You can see everything I've done to the place. I've been doing a lot of work on the house the past few weeks."

"I can see that," she says, studying the immaculate patio. "I noticed through the front window that the living room doesn't look like a

woodworking shop anymore."

"No, it does not," I chuckle. "I'm staging the place. To put it on the market."

Her eyes widen. "You're selling your house?"

"I am. It's the best decision I've ever made, and I have you to thank for it."

"Me?"

"Mmm-hmm. You helped me realize what I want isn't really so complicated," I explain. "Scary maybe, but actually...very simple."

She smooths her tongue over her bottom lip and swallows hard. "And... what is it that you want?"

"Everything I told you about that day in the nursery. I, uh, talked to my dad today."

"You did? Like...*talk* talked to him?"

"Yeah," I nod, still sighing with relief. "I told him everything. That I tried my best to make it work, but I'm not meant to be a doctor. It's not for me."

"How did he take it?"

I lead her over to the patio chairs and sit down across from her. "He was surprised, but he was proud of me for trying. He said he takes it more seriously now than he probably would have if I said it when I was eighteen."

"That's great I guess, but...all that time you wasted when you could have been following your own dreams from the start."

"No, I think everything turned out just the way it was supposed to," I tell her, not mentioning that it includes this very moment...her sitting across from me. "I'm turning in my resignation at Bardot tomorrow. My dad actually agreed to loan me the money to start my own business."

"Wow. What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going to buy a house on the beach and a little shop down the street from it," I reply.

She lights up. "That's wonderful, Emery. I'm so happy for you." Her smile doesn't fade, but I notice a tear streaming down her cheek as she rasps, "I wish I could be as brave as you."

"Nicole Gray, I've never known you to be afraid of anything."

"It's funny you say that. I guess I finally found the one thing that terrifies me enough to completely paralyze me."

Her eyes turn impossibly blue when she's crying. I get lost there in her ocean, wishing I knew every part of their depths. I want to explore every inch of her, inside and out.

As she stares so intently back at me, I realize what she's saying in abstract terms. What she's terrified of is...*me*. Or maybe it's the prospect of love, of what it could do to her if it doesn't work out. What terrifies her is being here with me right now - leaving herself vulnerable to these feelings between us, which neither of us can deny.

The moment is too perfect to risk ruining it with words or decisions that may not be what I want to hear. I want to beg her to come with me, to run away with me so we can both start over again together. I want to tell her she was there with me in that vision of my perfect day. And this baby girl inside of her, she was there too. Whether the baby is really mine or not, I want that part of the dream even more than the rest of it.

But for now...it feels like enough to take the leap she can't bring herself to take.

I run my hand along the side of her face. Her eyes flutter shut as she leans her cheek against my hand, relishing in the touch. I lean forward and press my lips gently to hers.

I can't get enough of this woman. My breath escapes my lungs in a long, slow exhale as I kiss her. When she tugs her lips from mine and cradles my cheek in her soft hand, I'm not able to take my eyes off her. I marvel at her beauty and the warmth of her touch. I breathe in her flowery scent and feel like I'm inhaling joy.

"I know nothing I'm doing makes any sense to you," she says, her voice sounding different. "It doesn't always make sense to me either."

"I don't need it to," I reply. I run my thumb across her bottom lip and feel her tremble. "I don't need you to explain anything."

"Good. Because I'm so tired of thinking and talking myself into circles. Tonight...I just want to feel you," she whispers.

I take her into my arms and crash my lips against hers again, drowning in her taste. I lay her back against the chair and press my lips to her warm neck. She breathes out a long sigh of pleasure as I trail my tongue along her collarbone. I keep my eyes fixed on her face, watching her expression melt as I kiss a path down the tiny dip between her cleavage. Every time she moans, my hardness pulses in response.

I slide her skirt up and pull her panties aside, spreading her legs wide for me. I run my tongue along her folds, feeling her shiver in my hands.

"Oh, god, Emery," she whispers. "Please..."

I want to give her everything, to show her how deeply she's affected me. I

want to prove to her that I want her, that she's not imagining the way I stare at her. I want to tell her that I couldn't stop thinking about her even if I tried. God, how I've tried. But no promises to her brother or fake marriage arrangements could stop this from happening. Nothing can stop the fact that...I love her. Always have and always will.

I push my tongue deep inside of her, drinking in the wetness of her arousal. My name spills from her lips in panting moans. I slide a finger and tongue in and out of her at the same time, feeling her walls tighten around me. Every time she moans, it makes me pulse harder, until I'm left aching for relief.

I sit up on my knees, unbutton my jeans and pull them down as fast as I can.

"Let me take you upstairs," I urge, my voice thick with wanting her.

"No. Here," she replies, her eyes wild with desire. "Right here."

I can't deny her; not when she's offering herself so freely. I settle between her thighs. She holds onto me tight and urges me forward.

As I slide into her, I swear I feel the breath leave my lungs. Her arms surround me and she kisses me fiercely. She wraps her legs around my waist and rocks her hips against mine, pulling me into her deeper and deeper.

I bury my face in her neck, feeling her pulse throbbing against it.

Her eyes meet mine and the intensity of her gaze makes me swallow hard. She's staring at me with love...or something that feels a hell of a lot like it.

"Emery," she whispers. "Look at me."

I lift my chin to hers and our eyes meet.

She calls out my name and clutches me closer as I feel her orgasm wash over her. Her teeth sink into my shoulder as she cries out, trembling in my arms. I press my lips to her neck, holding her close and riding out her climax, trying to prolong our pleasure as much as possible.

I roll my hips, not sure how much more of this I can take feeling her like this around me. I feel like I'm going to burst apart if I don't let go of it, if I don't let myself feel that release.

When I finally let go, it comes on hard and fast. I call out her name, pumping and thrusting until I can't move anymore. As I come back to myself, my heavy breaths rasp in the silence.

"I'm so glad you came here tonight," I manage to breathe out after a while. "Stay with me. I want to make a few more good memories here before I sell this place."

She thinks it over for a minute, then nods with a smile. "Okay, I'll stay here with you tonight. Just for tonight."

I want to challenge her and ask why it can't be for the rest of our lives. But for now, it's just enough that she's here. As long as she's here, I know some part of her belongs to me.

NICOLE

I don't know why Emery is taking it so easy on me. If I was him, I'd be demanding more answers, more explanations. But what he gives me instead is everything I've been needing.

He makes love to me all night, taking care of me in between. He wraps me up in soft blankets and makes me tea. He offers me ice cream and pancakes for breakfast and tells me to go take a long hot bath in his newly remodeled tub.

It's scary to admit how much harder this is than taking care of myself or expecting Anthony to be there for me. Anthony was right. I'll always have myself, and I'll always have him. But with Emery, there are no guarantees. It won't always be perfect, and it could end at any time. In real relationships, I can't be in total control. It's nothing like my career or this carefully planned life Anthony and I have laid out for ourselves.

"Emery, I have to tell you something," I force myself to say by mid-morning.

I'm bundled up on the couch and he's sitting by the window drinking coffee. He looks up with a smile that fades when he sees how serious I am, then gets up and joins me on the couch.

"Okay. You can tell me anything."

"I know I can," I exhale. "That's why when we met up to discuss my offer to you months ago, I wanted to show you that shack on the beach. I wanted to tell you that you weren't the only one who felt something between us when we were teenagers."

"Nicole, that was one of the greatest nights of my life."

I'm too scared to admit out loud that it was one of mine too. Instead I suck in a deep breath and push forward, staying on the course. Nothing else I have to say matters until he knows the truth.

"I hope you still feel that way when I'm finished," I gulp. "I want you to know that's all it was. I was just trying to tell you how I felt. I wasn't trying to trick you into anything."

"I know," he nods in understanding. "I'm so sorry I ever accused you of that. I was being a jerk."

"No, you weren't. You had every right to jump to that conclusion," I assure him. "I really didn't think it was possible for me to get pregnant that night. I would have never been so careless if I knew..."

His brows furrow. "What are you saying?"

"There was no other donor," I confess, trying with everything in me not to cry for once. "This is your baby, Emery. There was no one else."

He sits back against the couch like he's just been kicked in the chest and drags his hands down his face. "I knew it." His eyes meet mine. "I knew it, and you kept insisting I was wrong. You...you lied to me."

"It was wrong. I shouldn't have tried to keep this from you," I explain in a panic, afraid I'm losing him.

But that's how this ends, doesn't it? *Don't I lose him either way?* The cold hard truth is - love doesn't last. That's why I never bothered investing any time or energy into it...until now.

"Are you going to tell everyone the truth?" he asks.

"I didn't think you'd want me to. Hudson..."

"Oh, fuck Hudson!" he shouts. "And his stupid promises and schemes to force me into staying with him through medical school and now Bardot. All the while, he's moved on. He has a family and a perfect life. What do I have?"

"Emery," I croak. "I can't do that to Anthony. He's counting on me."

"So you're just going to make my old mistakes all over again?" he huffs. "After everything you've said...acting so high and mighty like you'd never let other people control your life like that. What happened to everything you said about how people you love let you be yourself? You're not being yourself, Nicole. And you're not letting anyone else around you be themselves either. You lied to me, and now you're just going to keep on lying to everyone else."

"Maybe this was a mistake," I whisper, jumping up to try and find my things. "I shouldn't have come here, and I shouldn't have said anything. I...I

have to go."

"Alright, Nicole. That's just great. Run away from this."

"What else am I supposed to do!?" I scream.

"Sit down and ride it out," he barks. "That's what you do. That's how this works. You just dropped a huge bomb on me. I have to have time to process it, and after everything...I have a right to be honest with you about how this makes me feel. Then we come out on the other side of it and find a way to be okay again."

"What if we don't? What if there is no other side to it?"

"Of course there is! This is us! We've been dancing around this since we were teens, but it's never gone anywhere. It's just like that spot on the beach we love so much. Storms may blow through, and the tide changes from day to day. But it's still there, isn't it?"

I want to believe this thing between us could be so steady and reliable. But I don't know if it can. And I don't know if I'm ready to face Anthony and tell him I'm starting our perfect family without him being in it anymore. I can't tell Hudson and everyone else that *I* - Nicole Gray, actually have no idea what I'm doing for once. If I admit how clueless and scared I am, it feels like the whole world will unravel around me.

So, I know what I have to do. I have to go back to my home that seemed so perfect up until a few months ago. I have to learn to love it again and paint the nursery and name my baby girl. I have to marry Anthony so we can get on with the rest of our picture perfect lives.

And Emery has to go start his new life alone.



THE NEXT FEW weeks go by in a blur of cake tastings and fittings and floral arrangements. No matter how much that day at Emery's rocked me to my core, I know who I am at heart. I'm a successful fashion designer, and our rule is the show must go on.

So it does go on. All the way up to the big day when I find myself standing in a big ballroom in a daze. All of our friends and family are assembled on either side of the velvet aisle stretched out in front of me. I try not to notice how dizzy I feel when I look at the little flower pedals Audrey has just sprinkled across it.

Anthony is all dressed up in his tux, waiting for me at the other end. I feel a pang in my gut at the sight of him. If my best friend had the wedding of his dreams, he wouldn't have dressed like that. He would have worn something flamboyant and fabulous.

I look down at the awful dress hanging from my body. This isn't the dress I would have worn in my dream wedding either.

I think about how Mark and Emery are probably sitting out there somewhere in the sea of guests. That causes a small crack to form in my heart, threatening to shatter the happy face I've put on for everyone.

But...*the show must go on.*

I slowly put one foot in front of the other and force myself to move towards the altar. When this is all over, our real life can begin - the one we pictured and planned.

The problem is...I'm not so sure it's the life I want anymore. And I'm not so sure it's what's best for Anthony...or for my daughter.

Still I manage to keep walking forward. With every step I take, Emery's words haunt me.

One foot forward. *You don't settle for anything less than what you want. You never have.* And then another. *We're not all as brave as you. Maybe if I had that kind of nerve, I never would have made that promise to Hud. And I would have confessed to you that I had a huge crush on you.*

Another step. *You don't have to hide from me, Nicole.* And another. *This is us. We've been dancing around this since we were teens, but it's never gone anywhere. Storms may blow through, and the tide changes from day to day. But we're still here.*

Each step feels weaker until the one before. The only good thing is my fear of fainting overrides everything that makes me desperate to take off running in the other direction, straight out the front doors, away from all of this.

I can't leave Anthony up there all alone. I can't embarrass him, or myself, like that. And...I don't want to pass out in front of everyone. *Just keep walking.*

Finally, I make it to the altar. Anthony looks even more nervous than I do and he's sweating bullets. But still we both smile and nod to the words from the officiant. Our voices shake when we begin to recite our vows.

"With this ring I, Nicole, take you, Anthony, to be no other than yourself," I repeat dutifully.

Inside I'm screaming. *That's not true. I am taking you and forcing you to be someone you're not in front of everyone we love for the rest of our lives. I'm no better than your mother.*

The words feel just as wrong when he says them back to me.

"If anyone sees any reason why these two should not be wed," the officiant continues. "Let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

I do. I see the reasons why we should not be wed. I've been seeing them for months now. I've been holding my peace. If I can just hold it a little longer, we can save face.

"Me! I have a reason why they can't do this!" a voice calls from the back of the room.

Emery.

Hudson flies to his feet. "Emery? What the hell are you doing?"

"Hud, I'm sorry. You're my best friend and you know I love you. But...sit down," Emery barks. "This is none of your business." He steps out into the aisle and marches towards us. "Nicole Gray, I've loved you since we were kids. I always have and I always will. I'm not going to let you make the mistake of going into this fake marriage when I'm the one who wants to be with you. Because...I think you want to be with me too."

My breath hitches in my throat as Emery keeps charging forward. His lips part as if he has more to say, but just as he passes the row Hudson is seated on - my brother extends his fist and closeline punches him squarely in the face.

The whole crowd gasps in shock as Emery falls out flat on the floor.

EMERY

I knew the world would feel like it was coming apart when I finally spat out my feelings in front of everyone on Nicole's wedding day. I just didn't realize it would literally knock me flat on my ass.

As my eyes slowly open and the pounding pain in my head sets in, I piece it together and remember the last few seconds before it all went dark.

Hudson was the one who knocked me out. But...I guess I should have expected that to happen.

It all seems worth it when her beautiful angelic face appears, hovering over me. The moment her hand brushes my face, all the pain subsides.

"Emery," Nicole smiles. "You're awake."

"I'm sorry," I croak. "I had to. I couldn't let you..."

"I know. It's okay. I'm glad you did."

"I'm not," Anthony groans from the corner. "You two couldn't have had your big romantic moment some time, oh I don't know...yesterday BEFORE we made everyone we know get all dressed up and assembled here for a wedding that was never going to happen!?"

"I mean, it's the most exciting wedding I've ever been to," Madison smirks. "Don't worry. I'll lend you my crisis PR team. They're very good at handling scandals like this." She flashes a wink at Hudson.

Nicole helps me sit up, then slowly stand. She slides her hands into mine and everyone else seems to disappear.

This is everything I've been waiting for since I was a teenager. This is the moment of truth. She either wants to be with me, or she doesn't. All that matters is that she knows the truth...and that it's her decision.

"Nicole, I have to tell you something."

"We already know!" Anthony shouts. "You love her! You told her and everyone else before your buddy here knocked you out."

"No, it's not just that," I say, keeping my eyes glued to hers. "When I told you what my perfect day looked like, you asked me if I saw anything else. And the truth is...I did. I saw you there. And our little girl. She was building sandcastles on the beach."

"Of course," Anthony groans. "It's like you two share a brain."

Nicole turns to him with a tight smile. "Anty, dear. You know I love you and I really am sorry about all of this. But could you do me a favor and butt out?"

He mutters curse words under his breath and stalks off into the back of the church. Nicole turns back to me and sucks in a deep breath.

"There's something I need to tell you too," she says. "Ever since you told me what you saw, I haven't been able to stop thinking about it. I want that life too. Maybe everything I have now was perfect for me before. But...it's time to start something new. And I'd like it to be with you. If you'll have me."

I sweep her into my arms, hugging and kissing her like our lives depend on it. It kind of feels like they do actually.

"God, of course I'll have you," I laugh. "I've always wanted you."

"I was too stubborn to admit it before, but...I've always wanted you too."

I pull back and search her eyes. "We've wasted so much time already. I'm not going to waste another second."

I swallow the lump in my throat. This is what I've been waiting for. What I've been dreaming about for so many years. I can't believe it's finally happening.

Nicole bites her lip and nods.

"I love you," I say.

"I love you too."

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes, I will," she answers without hesitation.

I kiss her again and once more, the pain goes away. The world fades away into nothingness. And it's just her and me. It always was.

"Wait just a goddamn minute," a voice thunders from down the aisle. Hudson charges towards me again.

I don't flinch. "Go on and hit me again if you have to," I tell him, bracing myself. "I know I'm breaking my promise to you. You can tell everyone how

you helped me cheat through med school if you want. It doesn't matter. I've already resigned. And you can beat my ass to a pulp if you want. It's worth it. I love your sister, and I can't ignore that just to..."

"Chill out," he groans, cutting me off. "Nicole told me everything while you were unconscious. I figure knocking you out in front of everyone and giving you a black eye is punishment enough. Besides, the way I see it...you did Nicole a favor. I'd much rather her be with my best friend than get off into some fake marriage and life."

He shakes my hand, then pulls me in for a hug. "You've always been a part of this family. I guess now it will be official. You just have to promise me one thing."

"I don't know," I smirk nervously. "I don't make promises so lightly these days."

"I just don't want anything to become between us as friends," he shrugs.

"Hud, you're as bad as your sister," I laugh. "When will the two of you realize I'm not going anywhere? You can punch my lights out, and I'm still standing here as your friend. If that doesn't prove I'm not going anywhere, I don't know what will."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he says with a grin.

"Come on, you two," Madison says with a grin. "We all need a drink after today. Non-alcoholic cocktails for you, Nicole. And I guess...we'll just have to start planning wedding number two. I hope your heart will be in it this time."

"Oh I don't know," Nicole says, narrowing her eyes over me. "I think the real wedding will be much simpler. I was thinking...on the beach?"

"You read my mind," I smile.

Something in the back of the room catches her attention. She looks over to Anthony, who is waiting for her in the wings.

"Can you excuse me for a second?" she asks me.

"Actually...I'd like to say something to Anthony. If it's okay."

I walk over and am surprised at how fine he looks. Maybe even a little relieved.

"Anthony, I'm sorry for everything," I offer.

"No, I'm the one who owes you an apology. I never should have kept going with this thing. I could tell our girl was falling for you. And if I hadn't been so wrapped up in my own stuff, maybe I could have seen how perfect you two are for each other. She was never meant to have a fake life with me."

She was always meant to have a real one with you."

"I appreciate that," I nod. "I just want you to know...her real life includes you. I know how much you mean to her. I never want to come between that."

He lunges forward and hugs me. When he pulls away, Nicole flashes him a look. The two of them have a lot to talk about.

I lean forward and kiss her on the cheek. "Take all the time you need."

Hud, Madison, and I go on to the planned reception alone, knowing Anthony and Nicole will join us there later for drinks and a good laugh about all of this. The rest of the guests have all gone home, likely in a flurry of excitement over everything they saw today.

Later in the evening, we're all in a warm champagne buzz. Nicole is glowing without even needing a drop of it. We convince the DJ to play a few songs for us even though no one else is here. We're still paying them after all, so they oblige.

A slow song comes on, and I take Nicole by the hands and lead her out into the middle of the dance floor.

"For what it's worth, you look impossibly beautiful today," I tell her.

"Thanks, but...I knew this dress was all wrong. That should have been a sign. I need something more...free-flowing the next time I try to do this."

"Anything you want," I say, kissing her forehead. "You could walk down the aisle in a paper bag and you'd still be the most beautiful bride in the world."

"You promise?" she asks.

"Why don't you just take my word for it?" I laugh.

We dance in slow circles around the room until the others are ready to call it a night.

"I'm tired and ready to go home too," Nicole sighs. "The only problem is...I'm not exactly sure where home is anymore. I told Anthony that him and Mark could stay at my place for a few weeks. I figured it was the least I could offer after backing out of all our other plans. And your place is already on the market, isn't it?"

"Sold, actually," I reply. "It went fast. But don't worry. I hoped we'd find ourselves in this very predicament."

I call a car around and we both climb in back. I make Nicole close her eyes until we're parked at our destination. But it doesn't matter if she can see or not. She can hear the waves in the background.

Still, she humors me as I lead her out of the car with my hands over her

eyes. When I lift them up, she lights up at the sight of the beach house I closed on a few days ago.

"Like I said, I was really hoping things would go this way, and that I'd be able to bring you here tonight. Welcome home, Nicole."

She jumps up and down and hugs me tight. "I love it, Emery. It's absolutely perfect."

A strange look suddenly washes over her face.

"What is it?" I ask.

She smiles wide. "Nothing. It's just...well, it's the strangest thing. I don't even know what the rooms in this house look like yet, but I just saw a vision for the perfect nursery. I know exactly what I want it to look like. It was so hard before, but...just like that. Now it's so easy."

I lean in and kiss her on the lips. "I hope you feel that way about the rest of our lives. You always make everything look so easy, Nicole. It's about time it actually feels that way to you."

"I think with you, it finally will," she whispers.

EPILOGUE

NICOLE

Emery and I were in no hurry to jump into planning another wedding. But one thing we were more than happy to do was throw a big giant housewarming party on the beach. It doubled as a welcome home party for our baby girl, Harlow Dawson-Gray. Harlow being a subtle nod to my brother's name to remind him that we both still love him no matter what. Our relationship will never change that.

The railing along the beach is lined with balloons, and the sand is covered with blankets and umbrellas. The salty air is filled with the delicious scents of grilling food. And if anyone cares to venture a little further down the beach, closer to town, they can catch a sneak peek of Emery's furniture shop - which just opened a couple of months ago. It's already the talk of the town.

It's an absolutely perfect day with crystal blue skies. And this time, there is absolutely nothing sneaking in to cast a dark gray cloud over it all. This time, I really do have it all. Whatever I don't already have at this moment, I can't possibly need.

Well...maybe there is *one little thing* that has me nervous.

Emery comes up beside me and squeezes my clammy hand. "It's going to be fine. He's going to love you."

"I'm partially to blame for you abandoning your career as a doctor," I remind him. "He probably blames me entirely. That's why he took it so easy on you when you told him."

"My father is excited to meet you," he argues.

"You're just saying that to make me feel better."

"Does it matter either way? You're not afraid of anything," he smirks.

"The more you say that, the more things I seem to find that I am actually afraid of."

He nudges me down the walkway to where his father is waiting for us. My heart is pounding with every step we take. Hudson was so convinced that he'd be disowned when he told his father about the kind of life he really wanted. That didn't happen, thank god. And now I just don't want to do anything to mess it up.

Mr. Dawson *Senior* is an older version of Emery. He's handsome and suave, but obviously a bit more stuck up. It's kind of fun to see him and imagine what Emery could look like when we're old and gray.

To my surprise, he greets me with a smile.

"So you're the woman who..."

Destroyed all my dreams for a son and convinced him to abandon his career as a doctor...

"...stole my son's heart," he says, pulling me in for a hug. "Bring it in here. Nice to meet you, Nicole. Though I have to admit, I did my fair share of internet stalking on you before today."

"Oh dear. You didn't find anything too scandalous, I hope."

"Nothing but the legacy of a talented, successful designer," he winks.

I have Madison's crisis PR team to thank for that.

"Oh, there's someone I'd like you to meet," he adds, turning to the man behind him. "Emery, you remember Dr. Ashford from Bardot? He's an old friend of mine."

"Of course. Good to see you again, Joshua," Emery says, reaching to shake his hand.

"Nicole, this is Dr. Joshua Ashford. He's the head of neurology," Emery's dad says, stepping aside to introduce me.

"Lovely to meet you, Dr. Ashford."

"Joshua here actually had something he'd like to run by you, if you don't mind." He turns to Emery. "Son, can I steal you away for a bit while these two get acquainted?"

"Sure thing. We can go inside and check on Harlow," Emery replies. He kisses me on the cheek before heading off with his dad.

"Thanks for agreeing to chat with me," Joshua says. His voice is deep and gravelly, and he has a dark brooding vibe. Smiling does not seem to come easily to him. "I'm sure this is the last thing you want to do in the middle of your big party."

"Oh, don't be so sure. Sometimes the best ideas and collaborations are born at casual parties just like this one."

"Hm," he grins, but it looks more like a grimace - like it pains him. "Well, I hope that turns out to be true for what I'm proposing. When your name came up at Bardot recently, I had an idea for something. I'm familiar with your work because a woman I used to date was obsessed with your clothes. She bought up everything you did that she could get her hands on."

"Oh, how sweet. I'm honored."

"I know a lot of people feel the same way," he continues. "Your clothes seem to appeal to a wide market of people, especially here in California. We're working on some big things in the neurology department at Bardot. Most of it is privately funded, but we're reaching some...obstacles. I wondered if you and I could discuss a potential charity event? Featuring your designs? Maybe an exclusive collection to be auctioned off."

"I'm intrigued," I reply. "And definitely interested. I'm always happy to find new ways that fashion can do some good in the world. Let me give you my card. Call and set up a lunch and we can discuss it all in more detail."

Emery rejoins us as I hand Dr. Ashford my card. But just as soon as he takes it in his hand, he seems suddenly distracted by something in the distance. I follow his gaze to a woman who is just arriving with Kate Langley and Lexie Bardot. Kate is another doctor from Bardot, and Lexie is Sturgill Bardot's daughter. But I don't recognize the third woman - the one who seems to have hypnotized Dr. Ashford. She is beautiful though, with a gorgeous smile and wavy black hair. She has big dark brown eyes that sparkle in the sun.

"What is she doing here?" Dr. Ashford asks. He looks like the wind has been knocked out of him.

"Oh, you know Dr. Lopez?" Emery asks. "She's up for a new position at Bardot. Something in oncology. Hudson could tell you more than me. I'm out of the loop these days."

"No," he replies, almost too quietly for us to hear. He doesn't take his eyes off the woman for one second as he speaks. "No, I don't know her. I did. A long time ago. She used to be...a friend."

Finally, he snaps out of it and looks back to me and Emery. "Forgive me. I think I will go catch up with Hudson and get more details on which position she's up for. Nicole, it was a pleasure to meet you. I'll call to set up that lunch very soon."

"Enjoy the party, Dr. Ashford. Talk soon."

When he's gone, I wrap my arms around Emery and am relieved to see that his eyes are still calm and peaceful. "What was that all about?"

"That thing with Joshua and Dr. Lopez? I have no idea. It was weird though, wasn't it? It's like he had just seen a ghost."

"No, not that. I meant with your dad. What did he want to talk about?"

"Oh. That." He hands his head and laughs. "My dad, who really does mean well, thought a good housewarming gift would be to tell me I don't have to pay back the money he loaned me to open up the shop. He assumes I can't and that this would be some kind of relief."

"That's a generous offer. What did you tell him?"

"That the shop is doing great, and it's not even tourist season yet," he huffs. "By this time next year, I can probably have every penny he gave me paid off."

"I can help you do it faster if you want," I offer. "But also, maybe you could just take this one for the team. Maybe your dad just wants to feel like he's supporting your dreams."

"Maybe," he sighs, staring off at the distant waves.

"Those are worries for another day," I decide, nuzzling against his side. "Let's just enjoy our party. Want to go for a swim?"

"I have a better idea," he winks, nodding his head towards the surfboards propped up beside the house.

"You're on," I smile.

As we grab our boards and head for the water, I notice Anthony standing by with Mark. We both smile and wave, locking eyes for a while. I feel the exact opposite than how I did on our wedding day. This is where we belong, and we're here with the people we belong with. I can't think of a better way two friends can show their love for each other...than to give each other the freedom to be themselves, and to be happy.

Emery and I paddle out to deeper waters, but when we get there, we don't try to catch any waves at first. We just sit on our boards and drift in the water, keeping our hands and lips locked together. I don't have to watch from some dingey old shack and try to imagine what this feels like anymore.

Now we get to spend every single day making all of our teenage fantasies come true.



I hope you enjoyed **“Hot Doctor & Best Friend’s Little Sister”**. If you did, I would love if you could leave a review **HERE** to help other readers find it.

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FILTHY DATING RULES

A CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE SERIES BOXSET

Blurb

Six Full-Length steamy contemporary filthy daddies romance collection....trust me, you won't want to miss it.

Book 1 - His Perfect Woman (A Friends to Lovers Romance)

*“I should be an expert at keeping my feelings for Victoria to myself.
I’ve been doing it for years.
But who would have guessed that making a baby with my best friend,
Would make it so much harder to keep my love a secret?”*

Book 2 - Certified Heartthrob An Enemies to Lovers Romance)

*“I’m determined to stop the internet troll attacking my family’s company...
That is until that troll turns out to be a certified heartthrob.
Why did no one ever warn me that an internet nerd could look so good?
Am I enough to put an end to his vendetta against love,
Or will he just drag me down with him?”*

Book 3 – Picture Perfect Love

(Office Romance)

“Heartstring dating app exec Joshua Meadows is incredibly handsome, no doubt.

Also a wild card playboy party animal...

and for some reason, determined to win me over.

When that one night spirals into a whirlwind romance I never saw coming, Will I be able to keep my head on straight and my heart out of his reach?”

Book 4 – The Hot Mess

(Brother’s Best Friend Romance)

“Jack Landson is off-limits. He’s my brother's best friend and completely unobtainable.

I can fantasize about him all I want, but he barely notices me at all.

I was determined to change my life, inside and out.

But I accidentally caught the attention of Jack in a way.

By changing myself and luring Jack in, will I end up changing him from the inside out too?

Or will I be sent crawling back into my safe shell, lost in my world of books?”

Book 5 – Dating His Brother

(Forbidden Affair Romance)

“My life is lacking a certain something...

Exactly what I’m missing isn’t as clear as my certainty that it is not a man.

At least I was certain until I met Dawson Hayes.

Dawson is determined to prove he is exactly what is missing from my life.

Will I be able to keep my guard up long enough to prove him wrong?

Or am I the one who is actually about to be proven wrong?”

Book 6 – Baby for Sugar Daddy

(A Secret Baby Romance)

“I was fifteen when I first laid eyes on him.

Jordan Ashford. My Dad’s business partner...

And the meat of all my biggest sexual fantasies.

I’m a grown woman now, and I can’t throw it all away...

Not over some cocky sugar daddy in a suit.

*But the consequences...they sting like hell,
And come in the form of two pink lines on a little stick.
We're risking our careers and all ties to my father...
But when it feels this good, is it wrong to say it's worth it?"*

Each book in this collection will leave you satisfied with a steamy happily
ever after sure to keep you reading long into the night.

I leaned back in my office chair with a smug, contented smile, lacing my fingers together behind my head. My old buddy, investor, and advisor— Jack Landson—was due in my office any minute, and I was expecting it to be a celebratory meeting. I had a very expensive, top shelf bottle of imported bourbon just waiting to be uncorked for the occasion.

Staring across the framed mementos and photographs on the wall across from my desk, I felt proud for bringing my family this far. The past five years hadn't been easy by any means, but it all had led to this moment when I could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

Checking my watch and noting that Jack was late—which was unusual for him—I stood and walked over to admire the photograph of my siblings and me at the ribbon cutting for our new headquarters. The very building I stood in right then, still standing and thriving.

There were four of us—each born just a couple of years apart—which would have seemed like a lot had we not grown up in a sprawling mansion. Our father dabbled in a little bit of everything—investment banking, stocks, real estate, business, law...you name it. Any profession that carried a potentially large pay-out, he had a hand in it. I used to think he was a genius.

That was until he passed away from a heart attack and we quickly learned that his many endeavors were little more than a mad scramble to keep his head above water with all of his debts. He'd spend, then borrow money and try to make a quick million to pay it off, but would spend that, too, then borrow more to pay the original debt, which would land him right back where he started from. It was like a game of musical chairs with our financial

security on the line. No wonder he had a heart attack so suddenly.

You can imagine our surprise when we sat down to hear the terms of our trust funds and inheritances only to find that his many lenders were seizing everything, practically leaving us penniless. *Us*. The Meadows family. Completely broke. We thought our mother would have a heart attack, too, right there in front of the family lawyer.

We had a lavish lifestyle and none of us knew a damn thing about working in any area outside of our father's many realms of expertise. Unfortunately, once word got out about his poorly managed funds, no one wanted to work with us. We were blacklisted and shunned by everyone we knew.

I, along with my brother Joshua and our two sisters, Camille and Jada, buckled down and made a plan. We couldn't accept defeat, and we couldn't bear to flip burgers or bag groceries, just barely scraping by. No, we were accustomed to a certain lifestyle, and we decided we would do everything it took to work our way back up to it.

After many brainstorming sessions, I decided the fate of our family. There was one thing in this world that there was an endless market for: love. Every single person wants it, most would do anything to obtain it, and yet, for just as many, it felt like an impossible thing to get their hands on. I developed a formula that would fix that: a matchmaking app with a unique algorithm to bring people together who had the greatest potential of staying together. That's how Heartstring was born.

Jack Landson had used his funds and expertise to help with the start-up, and now here we were...three years after the launch date and business was booming. Heartstring was considered to be one of the top ten dating sites and matchmaking services in the country.

We weren't quite billionaires again...not yet. But we were well on our way, and with our big three-year anniversary coming up, I knew Jack had scheduled this meeting so we could pat ourselves on the back and plan how to market the celebration of our ongoing success.

Finally, my secretary chimed in over the intercom to say she was sending Jack in. I was surprised when I turned and saw the look on his face. He greeted me with pursed lips and a stiff nod. Not exactly the big, cocky smile I was expecting under the circumstances.

"Hey. Please, come in. Have a seat." I returned to the chair behind my desk to face him. "Rough morning?"

“You could say that.” He cleared his throat and unbuttoned his suit jacket, adjusting his tie.

I wrinkled my brows, but let his brooding disposition roll right off my back. I had been waiting for this far too long to let his personal moodiness drag me down.

“Well, the three-year anniversary is coming up,” I began, hoping to shift his mood back to what it should have been. “We’ll need to start discussing the big party and our plan to make our customers in the digital realm feel included. But first...you know what I want to hear. What are the numbers looking like?”

“You know the numbers are good,” he answered tightly. “Profits are still rising. We’ve nearly paid off all the start-up funds. The company just keeps going up, up, and up.”

I nodded, smiling, but he seemed unmoved. Unimpressed. “Something wrong?” I finally ventured to ask.

“Yeah,” he shot back incredulously, pulling out his phone.

“What could be wrong with everything you just said?”

“Because none of that matters if something happens to bring the whole operation down.” He pressed a button on his phone, prompting a ding on my computer screen. A link he had sent. “Don’t you follow your own press?”

“I pay people to do that for me, but I skipped my morning briefing to make space for this meeting,” I explained as I scrolled through the article before me.

Bachelor playboy Lucas Meadows of the Heartstring dating app touts guaranteed formula for love, yet can’t find it for himself. Is he selling false hope to millions of customers?

“What the fuck,” I muttered under my breath as I continued reading.

“There are at least fifty more just like that one plastered all over the internet,” he huffed in frustration. “Not to mention all the social media posts from past, current, and possibly future customers. Or at least they would have been future customers if not for this. It was a bad morning to skip that briefing.”

“Surely there are other CEOs with similar businesses who aren’t married off,” I scoffed, exiting the browser window. I couldn’t stand to read anymore.

“Don’t act like you don’t know how things work, Lucas. Your father and his world should have taught you the basics, this included. People don’t like a CEO of anything who isn’t a happily married man. If you can’t keep up with

a relationship or a family, even if only for appearances, then how the hell can you manage a multi-million-dollar corporation?”

I raked my hands down my face. It was something Dad had lectured me about a time or two, but I’d assumed it was an outdated standard that would be long gone by the time it could matter to me.

“What brought all of this on, anyway?” I groaned. “Why now?”

“I guess a number of your pissed off flings and ex-girlfriends all got together and started blabbing to the media.” He shook his head. “You know better. You should have been spending that time and energy securing a future wife, not getting laid. You don’t have to want it, you just need to appease the public...and potential clients and partners...and your mother. Well, really—everyone.”

I stood and paced in front of the large view of the city that spread out behind my desk. What I should have done didn’t make much of a difference now. The press was having a field day with this, and short of a mail-order bride, I didn’t know where to even begin with the damage control to fix it all.

But what Jack didn’t know was that I had a very big reason for not nailing down the picture-perfect marriage. I think part of me always wanted to remain available...just in case *she* ever wanted to be more than friends.

The one that got away. The only woman I had ever thought of as anything more than a fling or a one-night stand. My high school crush. My “perfect woman.”

It wasn’t just Jack who was clueless about how I’d felt about her back then. How I *still* felt about her, even though I had been keeping my distance ever since we launched Heartstring. My siblings didn’t know either. More importantly, *she* had no idea how I felt. I was too embarrassed to admit that I didn’t have the balls to tell her how I felt, back then or now.

“I’ll fix this,” I decided out loud, knowing that dwelling on that old, hopeless scenario wasn’t going to help me now.

I hadn’t talked to her in months and I hadn’t seen her in two years...maybe longer. Even if we still talked every day, I was no more willing to confess my feelings for her now than I was back in high school or college.

“How?” He gaped, joining me on his feet. He marched over to the bar cart and helped himself to the bourbon I had set out, although the tone and mood for uncorking it was now, suddenly, nothing like what I had anticipated.

“In today’s market, this is the kind of thing that brings a company down,”

he fretted, pouring two glasses. “Everything can be great on paper, but one viral social media scandal and it’s all over. And this one is especially ripe for disaster. People are already looking for any excuse to be skeptical about love and relationships, anything to talk them out of spending the extra money on our service. This is the only push they need to help them make up their minds, and not in our favor.”

“I get it. I said I’ll fix it. I don’t know how yet, but I will. We’ve come too far to let this drag us under.”

He didn’t seem convinced. We sat and sipped our drinks in silence while I tried to wrap my head around the fact that I had run out of time. I couldn’t keep waiting around for her anymore. I had to find a woman to marry to save my business or let my family down—just like my dad had. And for what? So I could pine over some woman it was never going to happen with?

I had humiliated myself enough by falling for someone who didn’t feel the same, and even if she did...I was too much of a coward to find out. I wasn’t going to make things worse by clinging to it, disappointing everyone around me and letting our company go up in flames in sacrifice.

It was time for me to find a wife, and it wasn’t going to be her. *The end.* My new mantra—to be repeated however many times it took to get it through my thick skull.



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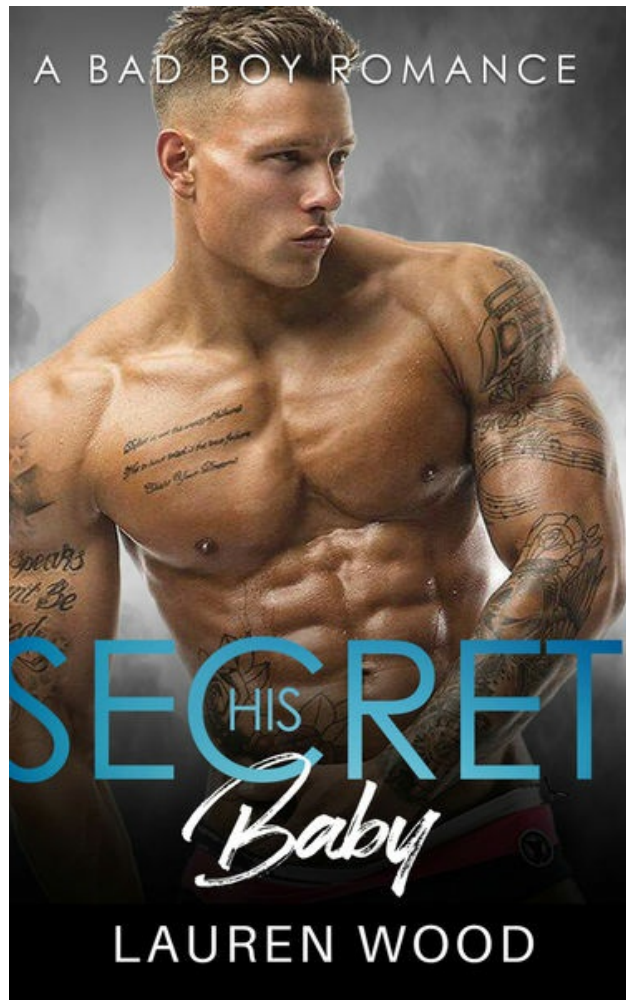
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