



The Nanny Series
BOOK ONE

THE
Surrogate
NANNY

A. N. BOYDEN

EM JAY

The
Surrogate
Nanny

A.N. Boyden

Em Jay

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Ebook - ASIN: B0CN5JTKLK

Year: 2023

Published by: Tangled Sheets Publishing

Chapter One

Simone

Ten Months Ago

“Why?” he asked, face still and half shrouded by documents. His eyes roved over the packet in front of him that detailed every piece of me—the good, the bad, and the ugly.

The interview process wasn't too traumatizing, but I was relieved he only had one more question after nearly an hour and a half of interrogation.

I raised a brow. "I'm sorry?"

He glanced up at me, his expression unchanging. "Why? You're young, single, with no family and an average job. Why do you want to do this?"

"I mean... I want to make someone happy. Give them the gift of life." I explained, trying to smile.

"Since you're giving the gift of life, then payment isn't required. Is that what you're telling me?"

My mouth dropped in surprise. "I-I-I-"

"Relax. I'm joking."

I breathed a sigh of relief. The \$60,000.00 Mr. Powell was offering would be enough for me to travel and go back to school.

"I'm sorry. You're difficult to read. I don't know when you're joking or serious."

He nodded. "Don't worry. You'll be compensated well. If our terms are agreeable, I'll need you to sign on the dotted line," he said, sliding the contract to me.

My eyes scanned the paperwork as I twirled the ink pen between my fingers before looking back at him.

“You’re by yourself?” I asked softly.

He looked up at me, going still, almost cold. The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees. “Pardon?”

“You didn’t mention a wife or girlfriend. Do you plan on being a single father?”

He nodded softly with about as much emotion as I had seen from him since I walked through the door. “I do,” he confirmed.

“Why?”

Anthony’s lips tipped with a soft grin. “Because I want to have a child. Why else?”

“Do you have anyone that’ll be able to help you? Family? Friends?”

“My parents are gone, but I have one pestering yet endearing friend with a gaggle of children.”

I smiled softly.

He has more than I have.

“What does he think about this?”

“What Jonathan doesn’t know won’t hurt him. The quicker you sign, the quicker you receive your first installment.”

Present

Push. They want me to push. But I am keeping this baby in.

“Call him again!” I screamed, feeling like I was being ripped from the inside out.

Holy crap, this hurts.

“Simone, we need you to push,” the doctor insisted.

“I’m not pushing anything,” I huffed. “Try him again! He has to pick up! This is his goddamn baby!”

The hospital room felt like an inferno with zero relief. My hair stuck to my forehead, I was drenched in sweat, and alone—save for the doctor and nurses.

One of the nurses fumbled with my phone and held it to my face to unlock it. It took several tries.

Even my phone has trouble recognizing me in the state I’m in.

“Ms. Livingston, we can’t delay anymore. You have to push!” the doctor urged again. I shrieked as the baby began to crown. The pain made my head spin.

“Not...yet,” I whimpered, trying to pull my feet out of the stirrups. The doctor sighed heavily, sick and tired of my antics.

“Take a deep breath. We’re here for you, Simone, but it’s time. If you don’t push, then we’re taking you to an OR for a C-section. It’s your choice.”

The threat of a C-section felt like a bucket of ice water was dumped on my head. I pushed as instructed with my contractions. All I heard was white noise as my body did what it was made to do. It contracted and pushed, forcing the child into the world. The white noise dissipated at the sound of her first tiny cry. I stared at the white tiled ceiling and attempted to catch my breath; my tongue licked at my bottom lip.

“Do you want to hold her?” the doctor asked, smiling and trying to hand her to me. She was a little pink thing—screaming, writhing, and clawing at the air. Her cries were intense—a sign that she was a healthy baby. That was all I could hope for.

I did my job.

I didn’t reach for her as her hands moved and her feet kicked. My mind wandered to those nights when she kept me up, kicking around in there like she had a bone to pick with me.

She did all of that inside of me.

I glanced away and ignored the doctor’s disappointed look before they took her to weigh her and check her vitals.

“Where’s the father?” Nurse Tanya asked, her mouth twisted in a simper.

That’s a good question, actually. Where is he? Where is Anthony?

I reached for my cell phone again. Nothing. No missed calls. No voicemails. No texts, emails, or a sorry-I-left-you-with-my-baby carrier pigeon—nothing.

“How you are feeling, Mom?” another nurse asked.

“I’m not her mom,” I protested weakly. “I mean, I had her, but she’s not mine. I’m just—”

“Do you have a name, Mom?”

My forehead twitched in annoyance as I glanced up from my phone.

Are these people deaf? How many times do I have to tell them I’m not her mother?

“I’m not Mom. I’m...Simone. I’m just the surrogate, and her father should be here soon.”

I redialed the number, putting it to my ear. My eyes cast on the newborn, who’d taken to making small whimpers rather than outright crying. They managed to ease a little cap over her head. The baby looked around curiously, most likely trying to make sense of the already cold world. She was only a few minutes old, and her father had abandoned her.

Her slate-gray eyes connected with mine from the plastic bassinet. She was a beautiful baby with a nose, ten fingers, and ten toes. She deserved a name, but it wasn't my place to give her one.

“You'll need to nurse soon,” a red-headed nurse commented.

I swallowed and glanced at the baby.

Pick up the phone, Anthony!

Something dark and twisted settled in my stomach, leaving a sour taste in my mouth. The man I met was Mr. Responsibility. He talked a good game with his perfectly slicked-back hair, soft, insincere smile that never reached his eyes, and his light southern drawl with a hint of Texas twang. He played the perfect expectant dad—attending all my appointments after the first trimester and calling me daily to see how I was and if I needed anything. For Christ's sakes, the man would leave his house in the middle of the night to bring me iced gingerbread cookies and chocolate milk to satisfy my late-night pregnancy cravings.

Call me day or night. I want to know everything.

What if the man had a breeding kink? What if he got off on impregnating women and then abandoning them?

“H-he told me to call day or night,” I whimpered softly, feeling tears prick behind my eyes. “He said he'd answer, but he's not....”

My eyes were drawn to the baby again. She cried loudly from the transparent plastic crib with no name. While I was distracted, someone taped a pink baby elephant at the foot of the crib with the words “Baby Livingston” scrawled on it with her height and weight.

She’s not a Livingston. She’s a Powell. I can’t get too close. What if I get a whiff of her intoxicating baby scent as I hold her in my arms, only for him to appear and snatch her away from me?

“Are you going to feed her? The baby needs to make skin-to-skin contact soon, to form an attachment—”

“Formula. There’s...formula.” I nodded to the diaper bag that sat abandoned in a nearby chair. It was my gift to the new father. The red-headed nurse shot me a look of pure disdain before preparing the bottle. Her attitude did little to ruffle my feathers. I had fallen into a content bliss while I stared at Baby Powell. I was in awe of how adorable she was in the hospital-provided onesie. It had tiny turtles on it and didn’t quite fit her. She was a little on the smaller side, but they assured me she was still a healthy weight.

I wanted to adjust her cap that slipped down her forehead, and I wondered what color her hair was. I wanted to hold her as I had for nine months, but I couldn’t get attached to a baby that wasn’t mine.

One day lapsed into two without a word from Anthony. Her father had gone AWOL, and the social worker was

planning to put Baby Powell into foster care.

“A beautiful baby deserves a beautiful name, don’t you think?” Nurse Tanya asked with a soft smile. “Are you ready to name her?”

Am I ready? Can I do this?

I gave birth to this baby, expecting to hand her off, but after two days of waiting for him, I realized I was on my own.

I swallowed roughly and eased her out of her plastic crib. She cooed gently in my arms. And why shouldn’t she? I was her home, after all—the only thing she’d known. We only had each other. I smiled and stroked her face.

Am I ready?

“Nori. Nori Livingston. That’s her name,” I whispered. Nori looked into my eyes just as I said her name as if to tell me I was making the right choice.

She’s mine.

Chapter Two

Anthony

“Sir? Sir? Can you hear me?” a voice called out before shaking me gently. My eyes fluttered open before snapping shut again. The lights were too bright, and a searing pain shot through my right leg. Reflexively, I clutched it and quickly released it. “Sir? Can you hear me?”

“Y-” I paused to clear my throat. “Yes...I can hear you,” I rasped.

“Can you open your eyes for me?” I complied and was face-to-face with a cherub-faced nurse. “There are those pretty gray eyes,” she sang as she shined her flashlight pen in each eye.

“Where am I?”

“You’re at West Saint Memorial Hospital.”

“Why? What happened to me?” I asked, starting to panic.

“You were in a pretty nasty accident, Sir. You were t-boned by an 18-wheeler and ejected from the vehicle. It’s a wonder you survived.” I reached for my leg again but thought twice, not wanting to relive the agonizing pain. “How much pain are you in on a scale of 1-10?”

“10 squared.”

“Oh, no, sugar. Don’t worry. I have something that’ll turn that frown upside down.” A moment later, I held a clicker in my hand. “This is your morphine drip. Don’t get trigger-happy with it, if you know what I mean. It’ll be harder to wean you off when it’s time to discharge you. Use it responsibly and as needed.” I tested the waters with one click, then two. I closed my eyes and sighed when the pain began to dull. “Is that better?”

I nodded sluggishly. “Much better.”

“Good. Let me get you some water. You sound like you’ve been swallowing sand.”

The chatty nurse poured water from a pink plastic pitcher into its matching cup and handed it to me. I gulped the cooling liquid down and demanded more. “Can you tell me about my injuries?” I asked, accepting another cup.

“Of course. When you arrived, your jaw was broken, and your face was lacerated from the windshield glass in several places. We set your jaw, and one of our surgeons, who specializes in plastic surgery, expertly sewed your face back together.” My fingers flew to my face. “Don’t worry. The scars

make you seem more dangerous and rugged. I traced a finger along my jaw, where a scar ran from below my ear to my chin. My fingers smoothed a six-inch scar from my lip to my cheek. The others were minor and weren't worth mentioning.

“What about my leg?”

The nurse sighed. “You've had a few surgeries to repair the extensive damage.”

“Extensive damage?”

“More likely than not, you'll rely on assistive devices to ambulate.”

“A wheelchair?” I asked in shock.

“Or a walker or cane,” she rushed out when the beeps of the heart monitor picked up speed. “You have permanent muscle and nerve damage. I wish we could give you a better outlook, but you've been confined to a bed for a year, so we're shooting in the dark here.”

“I'm sorry. What did you say? I've been in bed for how long?”

“You've been in a coma for a year.”

I closed my eyes and attempted to pray away my oncoming headache. Flashes of the past made their presence known.

Past

Knocking at the conference room door interrupted my anxious pacing. “Come in,” I called out. A woman's head popped in through the narrow opening.

“I'm sorry. I'm not sure if I'm in the right place.”

“Are you looking to have a stranger's baby?” I asked bluntly. She nodded. “Then I guess you're in the right place. Please come in so we can start the interview.” I sat at the head of the long mahogany conference table and steeped my fingers together as she shuffled in. At first glance, she appeared young—maybe too young, but she appeared healthy with child-bearing hips, as some would say, that punctuated the end of

her hourglass figure. She chose a seat. Unsurprisingly, it was the furthest from me. Some described me as intimidating, but those who knew me best would say otherwise. “Closer.”

“What?”

“Please sit closer. Unless you prefer shouting,” I said, pushing back the black leather office chair nearest me. I focused on the file I had splayed before me and bit my bottom lip to avoid smirking. She was shaking like a leaf. “Are you always this nervous?” I asked when I flipped a page.

“Only when I’m having a baby for a stranger.”

I grinned. “Bonus points for you. You have a sense of humor.”

I’d spent the next hour and a half grilling the young woman, learning every intimate detail of her past, present, and future. I was surprised at how forthcoming she was. “We’re nearly done. I have one more question for you. Why?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Why become a surrogate? You’re young, single, with no family and an average job. Why do you want to do this?”

“I mean...I want to make someone happy. Give them the gift of life,” she explained, smiling meekly

Lies. No one is that self-sacrificing.

“Since you’re giving the gift of life, then payment isn’t required. Is that what you’re telling me?”

Her mouth popped open in utter disbelief. “I-I-I-”

“Relax. I’m joking.”

“I’m sorry. You’re difficult to read. I don’t know when you’re joking or serious.”

I nodded. “Don’t worry. You’ll be compensated well. If our terms are agreeable, I’ll need you to sign on the dotted line,” I said, sliding the contract to her. She moved slowly to pick up the ink pen. I noticed she had a knack for making the simplest movement unnaturally graceful. *Picking up a pen should not be so enchanting.*

“I have a question,” she announced after thoroughly scanning the documents. “You’re by yourself?”

“Pardon?”

“You didn’t mention a wife or girlfriend. Do you plan on being a single father?”

I nodded. “I do.”

“Why?”

Present

“I have to get out of here!” I shouted, throwing the blanket off me.

“Sir, you have to stay in bed!” the nurse exclaimed, attempting to wrestle me back in bed.

“My daughter. I-I have to get to my daughter.”

“You have a daughter? That’s great news. You came in as John Doe because your identification was lost in the crash. What is your name?”

“Anthony...Anthony Powell.”

“That’s good, Mr. Powell. Can I call your daughter?”

“No...she’s a newborn. I-I was on my way back to Texas from a last-minute business trip, and then everything went black. My surrogate was a few weeks from giving birth. I need to call her. Where is my cell phone?”

“Lost in the crash with your other belongings.”

I ignored the throbbing pain in my leg and snatched the bedside phone into my lap. My fingers sped over the plastic numbers as I dialed Simone. I knew her phone number by heart. I’d called it enough with my daily check-ins and random pregnancy-related questions.

The number you’ve dialed is not in service. Please hang up and try your call again.

“Fuck!” I yelled after trying the number three more times. My next call was to Jonathan.

“This is Jonathan Baker.”

“Jonathan!”

“Anthony? Is that you?” Jonathan gasped.

“Yes.”

“What the hell happened to you? You disappeared off the face of the Earth. I’ve been looking for you!”

“I was in a car accident and woke up today from a year-long coma.”

“My God. Are you okay?”

“No. My face and leg are fucked up, and I missed my daughter’s birth.”

“Your daughter’s birth? Anthony...what the hell are you talking about? What daughter?” I screwed my eyes closed as nausea overwhelmed me. “What daughter, Anthony?” Jonathan demanded.

“I-I didn’t tell you, but...I did it.”

“What did you do?”

“Nearly two years ago, I hired a surrogate.”

The line fell silent. “You have got to be—of all the irresponsible things you could’ve done! First, you hire a surrogate, keeping your best friend, who happens to be a lawyer, out of the loop. Then you go on an emergency last-minute business trip without telling me where you’re going or how long you’ll be gone. Your employer has been giving me the run around for a year, and their legal department is colder than the Arctic Circle. I’ve filed missing person’s reports, called hospitals—”

“I appreciate that, Jonathan. I do, but I need you to find my child.”

Jonathan exhaled loudly from the other end. “What is the mother’s name?”

“Simone Livingston.”

I spent the next few minutes giving Jonathan as many details about Simone as I could remember off the top of my

head.

“I’ll take care of it. Where are you?”

“I’m at West Saint Memorial Hospital.”

“Where the hell is that?”

“Fuck if I know.”

“I’ll make a few calls, and then I’ll be on my way to get you.”

I could hear the disappointment in his voice. I fucked up badly.

“Jon?”

“What?”

“I’m sorry.”

“I know, Ant... I know.”

Chapter Three

Simone

It was spring and the heat was already sweltering. It was the type of heat that not even the shortest shorts and coldest ice cream could combat. I frantically waved a persistent mosquito away as I propped my bare feet on a folding lawn chair beside me.

The sun was setting, and I took a moment to enjoy the enticing sunset with my daughter. It was just the two of us enjoying the heat, as it was meant to be.

Nori sat on a musical playmat in front of me with a pufferfish water toy that squirted water at when squeezed. Her chubby hands motioned the toy to her mouth. I pushed them down gently and stroked her black hair. I didn't know anything about the other half of her—her mother's side—but all I could see was her father when I looked at her. She looked up at me and grinned, putting her beaver teeth on full display. I smiled back and kissed her head as her hands flapped in excitement.

“It was a beautiful day, Nori. Not as beautiful as you, of course, but a close second,” I said, picking her up from the mat. She squirmed excitedly in my arms and patted my face with her cool hands. She giggled, and I wondered if she understood me sometimes. Some suggested that babies her age only understood tone; others would say they knew exactly what you were saying. I wasn't sure about anyone else's baby, but mine hung on to every word. I could tell from the way she looked into my eyes.

“Wanna dance?” I asked, preemptively turning our little boombox we picked up from a thrift store to the R&B station. I smiled widely when she cheered and clapped in my arms when “I'm Goin' Down” by Mary J. Blige played harmoniously from the speaker. The song was just right for dancing as the sun went down and the temperature cooled. I

spun us around with her hand in mine as she laughed gleefully. I admired her. She lived from moment to moment without a care in the world. She didn't care that it might've been a little tacky to dance on the stoop of our apartment as her mother horribly butchered the song. She only cared that it was me that she laughed and danced with. I felt the same—never wanting the moment to end.

It wasn't long before the day, and the ravenous mosquitoes caught up with us.

“Okay, baby. I think it's time for us to go inside,” I said, setting her on her feet. I took her hand and led her into our humble abode. It wasn't much to look at, but it was all I could afford on my measly salary of \$17.00 an hour working at a call center. None of that mattered. It was ours and served us well.

I started to shut the door behind us and paused as a chill seeped into my skin. I had no idea what caused the rolling sensation in my stomach. I peered out the door through narrowed eyes, attempting to determine where the feeling came from. I had an unnerving sense that we were being watched.

I slammed the door quickly and secured it with the deadbolt and chain. I grabbed Nori and checked the backdoor. She protested, but I didn't have time to stop and soothe her. Something felt...off.

The skin on my arms pebbled. A hand touched me, making me jump. I sighed a breath of relief when I realized Nori was the source.

“Mama.”

I smiled and reassured her. “It's okay. It's fine. I'm just paranoid,” I expressed as I set her in her playpen. I rounded the small apartment to check the windows. “This isn't a bad neighborhood. Yeah, it has its issues occasionally, but you're more likely to have your car broken into than be murdered, you know?” I rambled. I glanced back, and Nori was perfectly content eating her hands, giving her blessing for me to continue to revel in my paranoia. “I don't think anyone is watching us. Who could possibly be watching us? There are

no convicted child molesters in the neighborhood. Believe me. I check monthly.” I frowned to myself.

That’s just convicted. What about the ones you don’t know about?

My stomach unsettled even more. Having a child made you fearful of the world. It wasn’t until you had a child that you fully understood the horrors that lie out there.

“Mama!”

I smiled and tucked away my fears. Nori only knew a few words, but Mama was at the top of the list. She made other little sounds, but they weren’t quite words, at least not words I could decipher.

I scooped her out of the playpen. “You’re not worried, are you? Of course, not because you’re a baby.”

I paused and pressed my nose against her head, inhaling her calming scent. I looked into her eyes, those misty pools of trust, and sighed.

They’re getting lighter.

“Do you have to look so much like him?” I murmured. She cocked her head in question, unsure who *him* was. I shook my head. “Never mind, you don’t know him. Good riddance to bad rubbish, right?” Nori squealed. I suspected the word ‘rubbish’ tickled her. “That’s a funny word, huh? Rubbish.” She giggled harder.

I swept her into the bathroom as her giggles died into a deep yawn as we neared her bedtime.

“Are you gonna bite me when I try to brush your teeth?” I inquired. She stared at me somewhat blankly. I nodded. “I figured as much. Let’s get this over with.”

I sat her on the bathroom floor and handed her my phone as I got her water going. Ironically, she couldn’t speak, but somehow, she navigated to the same song repeatedly. I hummed along to the soulful track as I added her strawberry bubble bath.

“I think we should stay in tomorrow. I can take some time off. I can put those big bows in your hair that you conveniently lose, and we can go to the park. What do you think?” I was met with silence. I turned around and picked her up, collecting my phone from her hands. Before she could cry, I stripped her and put her in the pink plastic baby tub. The water settled then excited her while she splashed happily. I let her tucker out until the bubbly tub’s warmth faded.

The sound of rain caught my attention as I lotioned my little diva for bed. It was strange because there wasn’t a cloud in sight earlier. Nori stared at me with hooded eyes as I slipped her arms and legs into a yellow and white striped onesie. She was out before her little body hit the mattress in her crib. I eased the sheer white canopy around her crib closed and left her nursery to perform my evening motherly duties.

First, secure the house.

I padded toward the door and double-checked the locks.

You’re tripping. You triple-locked the house earlier. Get it together, Simone.

As I was about to walk away, someone rapped their fist against the door. My heart seized in my chest as the persistent knocking continued. Against my better judgment, I undid the locks and opened the door to find a familiar shock of wet black hair.

He stared at me with his white shirt translucent and plastered against his chiseled body. It remained quiet as the rain poured behind him. I expected him to yell and demand that I hand my baby over, but he remained silent with his lips pursed. He finally spoke after a minute of deafening silence.

“Terrible weather we’re having.”

Chapter Four

Anthony

“A-Anthony...what are...where have...you have to go!” Simone sputtered, attempting to close the door in my face. I wedged my cane in the door, refusing to leave as she demanded. “You need to leave before I call the police.”

“What are you going to tell them? That you stole a baby from the hospital?”

She wrenched the door open and confronted me, giving me enough room to force myself in.

“No! Get out!” she shouted as she followed me through the apartment. I moved fast with my cane; the constant pain seemed to ebb away the closer I reached my daughter’s nursery. I stopped outside the door that was decorated with a pink and gold glittered wooden ‘N’ hanging from it.

N. I wonder what her name is.

“You forced yourself into my home. I’m calling the police.”

“You do that,” I said, ignoring her empty threat.

I entered the nursery and almost considered turning back around. The room was decorated in soft pinks and lilacs, fitting for a princess. I was drawn to the white crib nestled under a sheer white canopy.

“You can’t just show up after a year and take her away from me after you abandoned her!”

Simone’s accusations didn’t sit well with me. Anger and bitterness roiled inside of me chaotically. I was always present for Simone and my child—every appointment, maternity clothes shopping, the occasional late-night craving, and the

intimate baby shower we had for my daughter—just the two of us.

How dare she.

I whirled around and confronted her. “I did not abandon her!” I seethed angrily. “The driver of an 18-wheeler thought it was a good idea to take a nap behind the wheel and t-boned me. I was in a coma for over a year. That is why I missed her birth, but I swear to you, I made plans to find her as soon as I woke.” My confession softened her hard features as she took in my injuries for the first time. “I don’t have to ask you for permission, but if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to meet my daughter for the first time.”

The soft light from the nightlight illuminated the fresh tears in her eyes. Surely, my presence was unsettling and unexpected. Over the nine months, I’d gotten to know Simone on a personal level. She was kind, sweet, and nurturing—everything a mother should be. I had no doubt that she bonded with my child, and it was clear she took excellent care of her as if she were her own. But...she wasn’t hers...she was mine. Some might say I was cruel and heartless for what I was about to do, but I had no choice.

“Please...take a seat,” she whispered, pointing to a rocking chair in the corner of the room. I responded with a gentle nod and limped to the chair. The sound of my daughter babbling filled the bedroom as Simone gathered her from the crib. My heart swelled and galloped in anticipation. I recalled how nervous but prepared I was as Simone entered the final stretch of her pregnancy. She teased me about my “nesting.” She could be a wise-ass joker sometimes, but it was endearing.

“What is her name?” I asked, clearing the emotion from my throat.

“Nori...Nori Livingston.”

I chuckled ruefully. “Livingston, huh?”

“What else was I supposed to do? I couldn’t put your name on the birth certificate without you being present. It was either that or foster care.”

Simone held Nori close to her chest and buried her nose in a mop of black curls that were similar to mine. She closed her eyes and inhaled, most likely committing the scent to memory. I'd yet to see my daughter's face, but I was already in love. It took everything in me not to make impatient grabby hands at her, but I had waited long enough. Simone kissed her head reverently and handed her to me. My outstretched hands shook nervously but ceased as soon as they made contact with her.

"She's heavier than I thought she'd be," I joked, trying to hold back a sob as I stared into my daughter's gray eyes that mirrored mine. She curiously reached out and patted my face.

"Yeah...she's a good eater."

"What does she like to eat?" I asked, nibbling on a finger Nori shoved in my mouth. She snatched it away and glared at me before rolling her eyes.

I'm making a great first impression.

"Most fruits, but lately, she's discovered the joy of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

That's something we have in common. Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and milk are the best snacks for restless nights.

"She looks like me," I said absentmindedly.

"That she does. You're basically twins."

"Can you tell me more about her?"

The tears finally burst from Simone's eyes as she wrung her hands in the middle of the nursery. "Y-you're going to take my daughter away from me, aren't you?"

"Look...Simone...I appreciate everything you've done for me, from agreeing to being my surrogate and sacrificing your body to carry her and loving and caring for her in my absence, but...we had an agreement. She's my daughter...not yours."

"She is my daughter!" she shouted, startling Nori, who began to cry in distress.

“I know you’re upset, but please lower your tone. You’re upsetting her.”

“Y-you can’t take her away from me. She’s all that I have.”

“Have you stopped to think about me and my situation, Simone? I feel for you. I do, but she’s all that I have. You know how much I wanted her.”

“How about we split custody?” Simone suggested eagerly. I shook my head.

“I don’t think I can do that.”

“What about what’s best for Nori? You don’t think taking her away from me will mess her up?”

“I’m sure she’ll have difficulty adjusting initially, but children are resilient. Please, tell me more about Nori.”

Simone licked the tears away from the prominent cupid’s bow of her lush upper lip before sitting on the fluffy white rug that spanned most of the nursery.

“Nori’s a good baby—the best baby—the baby every first-time mother wishes to have. She makes parenthood seem like a breeze. She rarely cries. I want to think it’s because she’s always content and satisfied, but who really knows. She doesn’t like onesies with the feet because she likes to feel the carpet underneath her toes. She despises socks and will fight you every chance she gets, but she knows I won’t allow her to leave the house without anything covering her feet. She prefers that her back and bottom be rubbed counterclockwise when she goes down for the night. She’s an early riser. Sometimes I call her my little alarm clock.” Simone paused to wipe away her tears with the back of her hand. “N-Nori loves to dance. Sometimes, I’ll turn on music and rearrange the furniture in the living room so we can have a little dance party.”

“What does she like to dance to?”

“R&B,” Simone replied with a chuckle. “Mary J. Blige is her favorite.”

“She gets that from you.”

“Mhm. What else? Strawberry-scented bubbles are her favorite—don’t try to switch it up during bath time because she won’t let it fly. Despite how much she enjoys fruit, she’s not much of a juice drinker. She’s satisfied with water or milk. She loves watching *The Weather Channel* for some odd reason. She’ll sit on the floor with one hand tightly fisting her curls and the other clutching her sippy cup. She gets that from you. Not the sippy cup part, but *The Weather Channel* part.”

“It’s nice white noise to have in the background. What else?” I asked greedily. Simone spent the next hour feeding me every detail of my daughter. It was evident that Nori was her entire world.

“She fell asleep. She should rest in her crib,” I said. I stole a few kisses from the sleeping toddler before returning her to Simone.

“W-what happens next?”

“I’ll be back for my daughter.” Simone shook her head furiously. “You can comply and release her to me, or we’ll have to let a court decide.”

“I guess I’ll see you in court.” I sighed at her persistence and reached for the bulky manila envelope inside my jacket. “What is that?”

“Sixty thousand dollars. Our original agreement was that you’d receive \$30,000.00 after confirmation of pregnancy and another \$30,000.00 after the birth. I added an extra \$30,000.00 for the inconvenience.”

“Inconvenience?” she shrieked.

“Calm down. It was a poor choice of words. I added a bonus for not being able to settle my debt as agreed upon.” A dark look flashed across Simone’s face. I knew she was seconds away from telling me to shove the stack of money up my ass. “Take the money. You’ll need it for a good lawyer.” I was shocked when she accepted without further provocation. “I’ll see myself out. And Simone?” I said, stopping at the door.

“What?” she gritted out.

“Don’t try to disappear. I’ll find you.”

Chapter Five

Simone

How did this happen?

I crossed my arms in the wake of the turmoil, and my eyes wouldn't leave the door Anthony Powell limped out of. Like a zombie, he'd risen from the dead and planned on taking my baby away. His stern warning sent a chill down my spine.

"Don't try to disappear. I'll find you."

Fuck!

I swallowed roughly and began pacing the nursery. I thought it was a dream, but the scent of his cologne lingered, and the imprints he made on the carpet with his cane remained.

He's going to take Nori away.

I slid my cell phone out of my pocket and opened my banking app. The balance was depressing. Even with the cash he provided me, there was a slim chance I could win a court battle against the man who had money at his disposal.

"What will I do?" I whispered.

My feet dragged me to the crib, where my child slept soundly. I peered at her with a smile. "You're the only thing in this world that's mine, Nori."

I was being selfish. He was her father, and he'd probably provide a better life for her than I could. He adored her, even when she was a bundle of cells. I could imagine the two of them walking hand in hand with the same black curls, gray eyes, and crooked smiles. And where would I be in the equation? Would Nori remember me? Would he tell her about me? Would he change her name?

I'd be erased as if I never existed. As if my love for her didn't matter.

I don't think I can survive this.

I slid to the floor and pressed my forehead against my knees as I tried to regulate my breathing. How could I go on

without my heart? Nori had been a part of me for almost two years. I'd forgotten how to be alone.

My throat dried as I faced the uncomfortable facts. I couldn't outrun Anthony—that much was clear. He had more resources and money than I did.

I can't run. I can't hide. All I can do is fight.

I crawled on my knees to the crib and held onto the wooden bars.

“I'm gonna fight, baby. You'll see. Maybe you would... have more...with him: more toys, space, pretty dresses, and a private school education. I'm sorry, but...I love you, Nori, and I know we can be happy. It doesn't take much—just me and you dancing together on the porch.”

I lay on the rug and closed my eyes. I doubted I'd get any rest—too much on my mind.

Why can't we share her? It's only fair, but no, Anthony Powell is a selfish prick.

The night faded into morning without me getting a lick of sleep. Shockingly, Nori hadn't woken yet. Her father's unexpected appearance must've drained her as much as it did me. I paused when I heard knocking at the door.

It's barely 8:00 in the morning. Has he come so soon to take Nori away?

I unlocked the multiple locks, prepared to give Anthony a piece of my mind. Instead of Anthony, I was greeted by a lean, but handsome man in an expensive suit. He pushed his glasses up his nose anxiously and shifted in his spot.

“Hello, Ms. Livingston. I'm Jonathan Baker. I'm representing Mr. Powell. May I come in?”

“Right now is not a good time. I—”

“I insist. I won't take up too much of your time.”

“Fine. Make it quick,” I demanded, standing aside to give him room to enter. “Would you like some coffee?” I asked in

an attempt to be hospitable as he followed me to my cramped kitchen.

“No, thank you.”

I shrugged my shoulders dismissively, and he sat at the kitchen table. I glared vehemently at the nervous attorney who shuffled through papers, trying to get his life in order.

“The contract you signed was very clear,” he stated. He looked up at me before ducking behind the papers. “If you take this to court, you will exhaust your funds and lose.” He shifted and slid a copy of the contract over to me. I didn’t bother looking at it. I knew what it said. “You agreed that you wouldn’t have any parental or visitation rights to the child. Also, Nori isn’t biologically yours. This could be seen as a kidnapping.”

“Kidnapping?” I repeated softly. “I waited two days. I didn’t touch, nurse, or name her. I didn’t even want to look at her. I waited for him to show up. I’m sympathetic, but what happened to him is not my fault. His time was up, and I stepped in.” I picked up the contract. “I took care of her and loved her. As I said, I’m sympathetic and will be happy to let him see his daughter and be in her life, but she’s not just some kid I gave birth to anymore.” I tore the contract in half and pushed the papers across the table. “Nori’s my child, and you’ll have to pry her from my cold, dead hands. I’ll never stop fighting for her.”

Mr. Baker lost his air of nervousness and took his glasses off with a heavy sigh. “This is an extenuating circumstance, Ms. Livingston. Mr. Powell is grateful that you took such good care of Nori. But she was never yours. The time has come, Ms. Livingston. You have to return her to her biological parent. I hope you say your goodbyes.” He stood and gathered his briefcase. “Please excuse me. I’ll see myself out.”

“Do you have any children, Mr. Baker?” I asked.

He glanced back at me. “Yes.”

I smiled. “What would you do if you were me?”

He closed his eyes and turned his back to me. “Good luck, Ms. Livingston.”

I glanced down at the torn copy of the contract.

Simone Livingston will have no parental—

I looked away. I couldn't torture myself further. I abandoned the kitchen for my bed. Nori wasn't gone yet, but there was a hole in me—always had been until Nori—but with her gone, that hole would turn into a crater.

My baby will be taken from me. I want to be optimistic, but optimism isn't realistic right now.

Nori's cries propelled me out of bed. My feet touched the thin beige carpet, but I couldn't move. It was as if my feet were stuck like flypaper. All my energy escaped out of the house with Mr. Baker.

“Come on, Simone. She's still here. You still have to fight,” I encouraged myself. I shuffled to Nori's nursery and found her standing in the bed with her hands around the bars for support. She squealed and bounced up and down upon seeing me.

“Mama, Mama, Mama,” she repeated before blowing a raspberry.

I plastered a fake smile on my face. “Well, good morning to you, too, love bug. Are you hungry?” Her response was more raspberries. I felt her pull up and perked up when she was dry. “Let's go to the potty first,” I said, sweeping her into my arms. We made it just in time. I did the happy potty dance while she smiled and clapped at my antics.

Moments later, she was cleaned up and propped in her highchair.

“You probably don't know my name. My name is Simone, but you'll probably forget,” I sighed as I cut her breakfast fruit in front of her. I watched her little fingers pick up the little bits of strawberries. “Your name is Nori. And...and you like Mary J. Blige and Ms. Rachel on YouTube. I'm your mother. I

always will be.” Nori doesn’t dispute those facts while she eats. I smiled and watched her. “No matter what, I’ll always love you.”

Chapter Six

Anthony

“Anthony...are you sure you want to go through with this?” Jonathan asked cautiously.

“Are you trying to talk me out of this?” I asked, raising an eyebrow at him through the mirror I used to tie my tie.

“Anthony,” he sighed. “There are other options.”

“Like joint custody?”

“Would it be so bad? You can give Nori to Simone every other weekend and have a child-free weekend.”

I clenched my teeth in frustration. “I’ve had enough child-free weekends...thank you.”

“I just...I don’t think you’re being fair. Simone carried your child, birthed her, and cared for her as her own. She could’ve been a heartless bitch and wiped her hands clean of the situation and let them take your daughter into foster care, but she didn’t. Whether you want to acknowledge it or not, Simone is Nori’s mother. You’d be doing your daughter a disservice.”

“The original agreement—”

“After the judge rules in your favor, and you know she will, will you be able to look at yourself in the mirror every morning knowing there’s a woman out there grieving the loss of a child and you’re to blame?”

I swallowed down my retort. Jonathan and I went way back. I met him in college, and he was the closest thing I had to a friend. I’d lost my parents and child. I couldn’t afford any more losses.

“I appreciate your advice as a friend, but I need you in lawyer mode now and do what you get paid the big bucks to do.”

“I’m not even a family lawyer.”

“A lawyer is a lawyer.”

“Okay. It’s a beautiful day, and we have some time to kill. Let’s walk over to the courthouse.”

Beautiful was the last word I’d use to describe the day. My leg chose that morning to torment me. Physical therapy was grueling, but I pushed through it with one goal: to be the father my daughter needed me to be. My doctor insisted on prescribing narcotics for pain management, but I didn’t want to be doped up on pain meds all the time or develop an addiction. I would have to learn to live without them.

Maybe it was a bad omen—a painful reminder that my actions were unethical. Doubt settled in as I perspired under the blazing Texas sun. Jane, my wife, always said that everything happened for a reason. But the skeptic in me didn't see why I had to share my child with another woman I didn't see as a permanent fixture in my life.

We approached the courthouse when my eyes sought out two beaming rays of sunshine named Simone and Nori Livingston. They wore matching pastel yellow dresses, and Nori toddled beside Simone with two big white bows decorating her ponytails. She even had a tiny white purse that hung in the crook of her arm. My mind worked overtime trying to figure out what a one-year-old might carry in a purse.

Snacks? A small toy? A pacifier?

Before I knew it, I was an orbiting planet being pulled by two suns.

“Simone.”

She narrowed her eyes at me.

I'm sure I'm the last person she wants to see.

“Please call me Ms. Livingston.”

She was playing hardball.

“As you wish, Ms. Livingston.” I leaned on my cane in an attempt to relieve the pressure on my leg.

“How can I help you, Mr. Powell?”

“I wanted to say hi to Nori before—”

“Before you take her away from me,” she inserted.

“If that's how you want to put it,” I said before focusing on my daughter. “Hi, Nori. You look beautiful today,” I complimented. I reached out to touch her and recoiled when she tucked herself behind Simone's leg.

“I'm sorry, but she doesn't do well with strangers. Come on, Nori,” Simone said before leading my daughter into the courtroom.

“Do you need aloe vera?” Jonathan asked, sidling next to me.

“Aloe vera? For what?”

“For that burn Ms. Livingston gave you,” he joked.

“I may not be able to move as fast as I used to, but I have 36 inches, and I’m not afraid to use it,” I warned, motioning at him with my cane.

“Violence is never the answer, Anthony. She hired a decent lawyer. The matchy outfits? Gold. Despite their skin color differences, they look like mother and daughter.”

It was my turn to shoot him a glare. “Whose side are you on anyway?”

“Nori’s. Let’s go. Judge Wallen is a stickler for punctuality, and you don’t want to get on her bad side.”

I anxiously tapped my cane against the tile floor and stared at Judge Wallen. Her poker face was top-tier—she didn’t give the slightest hint of emotion as Simone expressed how she should retain parental rights of Nori.

“Judge Wallen, I implore you to do the right thing. It’s regrettable what Mr. Powell went through, but I’ve been Nori’s everything since she was born. While he may be her biological father, he’s still a stranger.”

“Do you have anything else to add before Mr. Powell speaks?”

“I...I’ve loved Nori since I felt her first kick; however, I told myself not to get close to her because of my obligations and duty to Mr. Powell, but all bets were off when we left the hospital. It’s me and Nori against the world, and she’s mine. I’m not heartless, Judge Wallen. I propose joint custody if Mr. Powell is in agreement. It would only be fair.”

“Thank you, Ms. Livingston. Please take your seat. Mr. Powell, will your lawyer speak on your behalf, or would you like to make a statement?”

Jonathan stood, but I quickly indicated for him to sit as I climbed to my feet. “I’d like to make a statement. I’ll be brief.”

“Very well. Please, Mr. Powell, will you tell the court why custody of Baby Nori should be granted to you?”

“Thank you, Judge Wallen. I could stand here and tell you how much I love Nori, but we’d be here all day. Nori was conceived via in vitro fertilization using my deceased wife’s egg and my sperm. While I’ll always be grateful for Ms. Livingston and how she stepped up in my absence, she is not Nori’s biological mother. We wouldn’t be here today if I weren’t a victim of an 18-wheeler accident. Ms. Livingston would’ve birthed Nori and walked away as agreed upon in our surrogacy contract, and I would have my daughter. Ms. Livingston knows that before Nori’s birth, I was always present, not only for my unborn child but for her as well, and I had every intention of being a single father. Ms. Livingston has been a wonderful mother to Nori, but I have concerns if she is left in her care.”

One of Judge Wallen’s eyebrows hitched toward the ceiling. “Concerns?”

“Yes, Your Honor.”

“What kind of concerns?”

“Financial.”

“You have concerns that Ms. Livingston cannot financially support Nori. Is that correct?”

“That is correct.”

“What evidence do you have to substantiate your statement?”

I flipped open the manila folder on the oak table before me. “I have evidence that Ms. Livingston received SNAP and unemployment benefits while Nori was in her care.”

“Wait! I can explain! A few months after Nori was born, the company I worked for closed, and all employees were laid

off. I was only on government assistance for three months while I got back on my feet,” Simone rushed out.

“How about the multiple late rent payments?” I questioned. Simone balled her fists at her sides and bit the inside of her cheek before rebutting.

“Yes, I’ve been late on my rent a few times—”

“Six,” I interrupted.

“I’ve been late on my rent a few times, but only by a couple of days, and I was never at risk of being evicted due to the complex’s grace period.”

“Ms. Livingston, is there a reason you could not pay rent on the first of the month?” Judge Wallen asked.

“D-day care is \$800.00 a month,” Simone gritted out through clenched teeth.

“I see. Mr. Powell has it notated in his documentation that you were provided \$30,000.00 prior to Nori’s birth. How was that money spent?”

“I purchased a reliable vehicle before her birth and had to use the rest to cover my medical expenses after the delivery. My private insurance covered a portion of my delivery, but I had to foot the remainder of the bill because Mr. Powell was indisposed and couldn’t cover my medical bills as agreed upon in the surrogacy contract.”

“I see,” Judge Wallen said. “What is your monthly income after taxes, medical insurance, and 401k?”

“Around \$2,200.00 a month, but that’s without overtime.”

“Do you work overtime often?”

“Whenever it’s available. It’s usually during the holiday season,” Simone answered.

“Remind me how much your rent is?”

“\$900.00 a month.”

Judge Wallen eased her glasses down her pointed nose and stared at Simone in disbelief. “If my math is correct, that

leaves you with \$500.00 a month for the remaining expenses. That's not much to live off as a single adult, let alone a child. There are diapers, wipes, clothing, food, and everything else. How much do you squirrel away for savings a month?"

"Not much. Maybe \$50.00 a pay period."

"Ms. Livingston, it sounds like you're robbing Peter to pay Paul. Mr. Powell, do you have anything to say in closing before we take a recess for me to make my decision?"

"Yes, I do, Your Honor. We must uphold our legal system's core values, including honoring legally binding documents. The agreement that Ms. Livingston signed was that she would carry Nori, birth her, and walk away with zero parental rights or contact. Thank you, Your Honor. That's all."

Chapter Seven

Simone

"I'm sorry," Anthony murmured as he sat beside me on a bench while we waited for the verdict.

Sorry? I scoffed in my head while Nori sat on my lap, playing with a doll.

"About which part? Trying to take my daughter? Refusing to split custody? Or was it bringing up food stamps or the fact I was a day or two late on my rent a few times—"

"Six," he reminded me, setting his cane across his lap.

"You didn't need to clarify," I snapped.

Heartless bastard.

He cleared his throat, and his gaze locked on Nori. "I'm sorry...for all of it. Believe me, Ms. Livingston; it was not supposed to be this way. I didn't want to do this."

I smiled ruefully. "Oh, let me guess...this hurts you more than it hurts me?"

He pursed his lips before allowing his expression to even out. “Perhaps not more, but I’m hurting too.”

“Not even getting hit by a truck hurts more than this.”

His lips turned up softly. “You haven’t been hit by a truck yet.”

“Yet?” I scoffed with a shrug. “You might as well, at this point.” I sighed and looked down at my baby. I pinched her cheeks gently between my fingers and gave them a few squeezes. It was another little game we loved to play that would leave her laughing and drooling.

Anthony’s brows furrowed slightly. “Ms. Livingston—”

“Powell v Livingston? The judge has reached her verdict.”

I left the bench without further provocation. The only thing I wanted to hear from Anthony was that I could remain a fixture in Nori’s life. Anything else was irrelevant.

“The contract was clear,” Judge Wallen said.

My stomach bottomed out.

No...no, this can't be happening.

“Your honor—”

She held up a hand. “I’m sorry, Ms. Livingston, but I must uphold the law. You signed a legally binding contract. You don’t hold any legal rights to the child.”

I swallowed roughly, and my eyes darted down to Nori, who bobbed up and down on the bench, unaware that our time together had ended.

Maybe I can leave the country with her.

“With that being said, I am awarding Mr. Powell full custody...effective immediately.”

“Immediately?” I whispered. The word suddenly became foreign to me. “Wait, I haven’t even—”

Before I knew it, the bailiff wrestled Nori out of my arms. Nori’s face scrunched up, and she wailed in the officer’s arms.

“P-please, she doesn’t like strangers. Just let me hold her, please!” I screamed as my daughter reached for me. I told myself I’d keep my composure if things went south on the way to the courthouse, but all that went out the window as soon as Judge Wallen’s gavel ricocheted. My tears fell despite myself. The bailiff handed Nori to Anthony, but her eyes remained on me. We reached for each other, but there was so much distance between us. Another officer held me back, not allowing me to touch or soothe her, even for a moment.

It’s not right! She doesn’t know Anthony! How can they do this to me?

Anthony stood solemnly with my baby in his arms, ignoring her desperate wriggling to get to me. He limped away without sparing me a passing glance.

“Don’t do this to me! Forget about me! Don’t do this to Nori! It’s cruel!” I yelled after his retreating form.

“Please, try to calm down, ma’am,” the officer murmured as he restrained me. The echo of her cries faded the further she slipped away.

They’re gone.

My knees banged against the cool floor. I stared at my reflection in the gleaming tile. I saw nothing but lifeless eyes. I didn’t react when the judge touched my shoulder gently. It warmed with apologies and compassion, but where was her compassion when I fought for my daughter? Realistically, I couldn’t be angry with her—the law was the law, and right was right. It just...sucked.

“Ms. Livingston, everything will be okay,” she cooed.

“Nothing will ever be okay,” I whispered, wiping away my tears.

“Is there someone I can call for you?”

I looked up at her with bleary eyes and shook my head. “Nori is—was the only thing I had.”

My baby is gone. I've lost her, but she isn't dead. She still exists. I just...can never see or hold her again. It's true. Every moment with your child is precious. Life is unpredictable—here today, gone tomorrow.

Where do I go? Home? Back to the place with her nursery and a reminder of her first dentist appointment on the refrigerator? Somewhere else? A place where a memory of her doesn't exist?

I checked the time on my phone, but my lock screen was of her. I swallowed around the lump in my throat and questioned if I should remove it. The constant reminder of the love lost would be torture.

“Ma’am, you have to leave. We’re locking the courthouse for the evening,” I heard from a gruff voice above me.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, standing to my feet.

“I’ll escort you to your car.”

“That won’t be necessary,” I refused. I left the courthouse and found my sedan in the parking lot looking as lonely as me. My breath caught in my throat when I eyed Nori’s car seat in the back.

She will not be riding home with me tonight...any night.

I sat in the parking lot, gripping the steering wheel until my knuckles lightened.

“Fuck!” I screamed, repeatedly banging a fist against the steering wheel until it hurt. I welcomed the pain. At least I could feel it. Feeling something was better than nothing. It reminded me that I was alive. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I screamed until my throat was raw. I rested my head on the horn. It blared, causing the crows on a nearby power line to flutter away.

I was a fool. I knew I had a .01% chance of winning. I shouldn’t have gotten my hopes up.

I’m sure she’ll be happy. Eventually, she’ll forget who I am and live well.

I scrounged up the last of my resolve, started the car, and drove out of the parking lot. I drove without any real purpose, barely paying attention to the flow of traffic or the honking of horns as my vehicle crawled through the intersections.

I should call Nori's daycare and tell them she's not returning.

“Siri, call Daycare.” The line dialed for a moment, but in the end, I received the voicemail instead. “Hey! This is Nori's mom...um...this is Simone Livingston. Nori won't be returning to the daycare. Things didn't go as planned in court today. She's gone.”

I ended the call, hoping that the worst was over. My hope was short-lived when I remembered I had to break down Nori's nursery. The tears returned. I thought I was all cried out, but the body had an excellent way of surprising you.

I have to move on.

I stopped at a gas station near my apartment and strolled the snack aisles. I needed something sweet, like a cake, something salty, like chips, and something alcoholic, like the \$5.00 bottle of Pinot Grigio tucked at the bottom of the drink cooler. I made my selections and shuffled to the counter with an armful of sugar, sodium, and more sugar. I placed my items on the counter for the clerk to ring up.

“I'll need \$20.00 on pump three, please,” I murmured, placing my cell phone on the counter to wrestle my wallet out of my purse. The screen lit.

“Cute kid,” he complimented, nodding at the screen.

I smiled. “Thanks. She's gone.”

Chapter Eight

Anthony

“Nori, honey. Please settle down,” I whispered, damn near on the verge of crying myself. The child had been crying nonstop since we left the courtroom, and that was hours ago. She’d long ago ripped the white bows out of her head, leaving her ponytails wild and skewed. Her face was red, splotchy, and streaked with tears. I tried feeding her, and she swiped the bowl of spaghetti off the highchair table with a forceful backhand, sending sauce and noodles splattered against her pretty dress and the pristine white walls. She flopped over like a fish in the highchair and cried out the only word I assumed she knew...Mama.

The more I told her to calm down, the worse it got.

“You should give Simone a call. Maybe if Nori heard her voice, then she’ll settle down,” Jonathan suggested.

“No, I got this.”

“I think you were too aggressive. You could’ve done a gentle transition. You know, spend a few months getting to know Nori before taking her from Simone.” I ignored him and pulled a sauced noodle from Nori’s hair.

Most fruits, but lately, she’s discovered the joy of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

“Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches,” I murmured. I hobbled towards the pantry, wincing with each step without my cane. “It’s okay, Nori. I’ll have you right as rain in a few minutes,” I called out as I hastily prepared her sandwich. As a show of goodwill, I even cut it with a star cookie cutter I found in the back of the utensil drawer. I snatched a banana from the fruit bowl on the island and cut it into chunks before placing her meal on her table.

I slumped into a chair when the crying died to sniffles as she eyed her meal.

“Thank God,” Jonathan and I said simultaneously as we watched her curiously tackle the sandwich.

“Can I offer a bit of a suggestion?”

“Can I stop you?”

Jonathan smiled and shook his head.

“Reach out to Simone. Call and check on her.”

I put my thumb to my ear and my pinky to my lips. “Hey, Simone! I know I just took my baby away from you, but how you doing? Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Sounds good. Thanks again for everything! Click. That wasn’t one of your best ideas by a long shot.”

“Only because you sounded like a dick.”

“But you don’t think contacting her would be a little cruel?”

He shrugged. “You may be the last person she’d want to hear from, but she might sleep a little easier tonight.” I shook my head in disagreement and slid Nori’s milk toward her. She

paused picking apart the sandwich to sip from the cup.
“You’ve always been stubborn.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“You need to figure out childcare for Nori.”

“A nanny? That’s a good idea,” I agreed.

“A nanny and daycare.”

“Why would I put her in daycare if I have a nanny?”

“Because Simone had her in daycare, and it’s important for children to socialize with one another. If you want me to, I can interview nannies and find a daycare for you.”

“You’d do that?” I questioned.

“Of course.”

“What’s the catch?” I asked skeptically.

“There is no catch. I’m just trying to help you out. I’ll see myself out. I’ll send you a bill once I’m done.”

“Bill?”

“I’ll be charging you my hourly rate.”

“Of course, you will. You’re nothing but a scam artist and an ambulance chaser on a good day,” I said with a huff.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page. It’s like they always say: you are the company you keep,” he mentioned before leaving the kitchen.

I turned to Nori. “I should keep better company, huh?”

There she goes again, rolling her eyes at me. She’ll give me a run for my money in the future.

It was 4:00 in the morning, and Nori had finally exhausted herself from all the crying and fell asleep. I read to her, rocked her, gave her a bottle and her pacifier, played a cartoon on TV, and bathed her in lavender-scented soothing baby wash—nothing helped. For a moment, while she cried for her Mama, I

considered letting her go. I nearly packed up my daughter and drove her to Simone's place, but I felt that if I did, I'd be admitting defeat and that I was never meant to be a parent if I couldn't handle a night of crying.

I want to be happy with my daughter, but what if I'm hurting her?

I was on the edge of sleep when my eyes focused on the little white purse Nori had earlier carried. It hung from a knob of her white dresser drawers. I had to settle my curiosity. I opened the purse and found two folded letters: one for me and one for Nori.

Anthony,

I was prepared to curse you in this letter as no one has ever been cursed before. I wanted to call you every nasty name in the book. I was also willing to make up some words to get my point across. I wanted to tell you to go to Hell or that I hoped you tripped and impaled yourself on your gaudy cane, but anger and grief never make a good combination. I have a confession to make. When you arrived at my apartment and explained that you were in a coma, for the briefest moment, I wished you had never woken up. I'm ashamed of myself. I'm not one to wish ill on someone, but my life was turned upside down by a knock at my door. I apologize, and I hope you can forgive me.

I'm not an illogical woman. I understand the legality of our unique situation regarding Nori's custody, but what kind of woman would I be if I didn't fight tooth and nail for my child? I went into this custody battle knowing the odds were stacked against me, but I had to try. You understand, right? When it comes to Nori, I'm a selfish woman. I won't apologize for that. Have you ever experienced true love? Has someone ever been your entire universe—the sun, moon, and stars? Nori is that person for me. Everything she does leaves me in awe—her first laugh, when she rolled over and sat up on her own for the first time, her first steps, the twisted look on her face she made

when she leaned down and sampled my dill pickle without permission. She's such a funny baby—a good baby.

I was nervous about bringing her home from the hospital. I wasn't prepared to be a mother and feared messing everything up. I was afraid of being exhausted from constant crying and late-night feedings, but her cries were so soft that I had to turn the volume of the baby monitor to the maximum setting. My feet would hit the floor, and I was shuffling to her nursery in no time flat—eager to soothe her with milk and hums. If you're reading this letter, that means I lost her, but I want you to know that being Nori's mother was the best year of my entire existence. She will be missed but not forgotten. Please...take care of my girl.

Simone

P.S. If you can't get her to sleep, try singing "Be Without You" by Mary J. Blige. It'll knock her right out.

I carefully folded the letter that sliced my heart like a razor blade. I didn't have the strength to read Nori's letter.

Did I make a mistake?

I grabbed my cell phone from the nightstand and dialed Simone's new number. It was early, but I had a feeling she wouldn't mind.

"Hi! You reached Simone. I can't come to the phone right now. Leave a message after the beep, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can!"

The cheerfulness of her voicemail was like a punch to the gut. I could only imagine what misery she was in.

"Hey, Simone. It's me...Anthony. Good news. Day one passed, and Nori's still alive." I winced.

Cracking jokes at a time like this? What the fuck is your problem, Anthony?

I cleared my throat before proceeding. "I'm calling because I know you must be worried sick. She cried...a lot, but I guess that's to be expected. She wasn't a fan of my

spaghetti, but the walls were. She did eat a star-shaped peanut butter and jelly sandwich and half a banana. She just fell asleep a few minutes ago. I read the letter that you left me. I couldn't pull myself to read Nori's letter. I figured whatever you had to say to her was private. Simone...I..."

"Shit," I mumbled when the call ended. I considered calling back but decided to let sleeping dogs lie. I plugged the charger into my phone and unceremoniously dumped it on the nightstand. I stared at the ceiling, unable to fall asleep despite how rundown I felt. I wished I could say it was the excitement of the day that kept me up or the searing pain in my leg, but I'd be lying. My guilt was gnawing at me like a pit bull and a rawhide bone.

Chapter Nine

Simone

The air kicked on, automatically cooling the small apartment to a crisp 68 degrees. I detested the cold, but Nori couldn't sleep if it was too hot. I'd turn the thermostat up; however, I didn't have the energy to move. I'd already called in sick, and my boss warned me that I couldn't take any more days off without penalty. I whispered that I understood and hung up. I was about to toss my phone when I realized I had missed a call from Anthony at 4:18 in the morning. I listened

to his voicemail more times than I cared to admit, trying to decipher if I should hate him more or a smidge less.

I still hate him. Giving me an update on Nori feels like he's taunting me, even if that isn't his intention. Was it really that hard to grant me joint custody? Nori wouldn't be here if it weren't for me. Hell, I would've taken a weekly supervised playdate if that meant I could see my daughter.

I rolled over and realized my mistake when my red and puffy eyes landed on a pink and white 3-in-1 baby walker that doubled as an activity center. Tears welled as I remembered how captivated Nori was by the lights and tinkling melodies. It would at least keep her preoccupied long enough for me to cook dinner.

Unable to stomach the sight of the toy any longer, I kicked the cover off, snatched it up, and stormed out of the bedroom down the short hall. I threw open the front door and tossed the plastic toy. It clattered loudly to the ground and started singing "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" with its plastic wheels spinning in the air. I slammed the door and raced to Nori's nursery room with every intention of tearing it apart, but those nasty, evil thoughts vacated as soon as I laid eyes on her messy crib. I was in a rush to make it to the courthouse that morning, and I hadn't had time to make it.

I'm so pathetic, I told myself as I fixed the sheet and tucked the soft comforter around the mattress. I straightened a stuffed elephant that had fallen onto its side at some point during the night. Nori used to chew on its trunk all the time when she was teething.

I choked on a sob.

I can't breathe. I need her back. I never will hear her say that she loves me. She would've said it eventually...right?

The silence became too loud as memories of Nori sitting in her crib with a smile on her face overwhelmed me. She'd pull herself up with assistance from the bars and call out to me. Her messy bedhead would flop in her face as she excitedly

bounced. I fell to my knees, curled into the fetal position on the floor, and cried myself to sleep.

“You missed two days of work without excuse.”

I blinked and returned my attention to my boss, who pushed her glasses up her nose in discontent.

When did I get here?

“It’s your first day back, and you’ve been hanging up on the customers or putting them on hold. You had one customer on hold for nearly an hour—do you hear me, Simone?”

I felt a presence behind me. It was a security guard.

“I-I’m sorry. I just lost my daughter. I...I’m a little scattered. Can you repeat that?” I shifted in the uncomfortable chair and tried to focus and stay in the present.

“We’re letting you go, Simone. I’m very sorry for your loss, but as you know, hang-ups are cause for immediate dismissal.”

“Immediate dismissal?” I echoed with a whisper.

“Yes. You are being terminated. Effective immediately.”

With that being said, I am awarding Mr. Powell full custody. Effective immediately.

“Mr. Stone will escort you to your desk to gather your belongings. I’m very sorry, Simone, and I wish you the best of luck.”

“You can’t do this to me. Please, I just need—I need some time to get my head straight.”

She pressed her lips in a thin line, letting me know the discussion was over. I wanted to cry. I should’ve cried, but the tears refused to come.

No Nori. No job. Is this a sign? Is this a sign I should give up? Is this the universe telling me that there’s no longer a

place in the world for me? Why is everything being snatched from me?

I looked up and found myself at home. How I got there was a mystery. The seconds, minutes, hours, and days all blurred together in a swirl of confusion, regret, desperation, anger, and grief.

I yanked open the freezer and was greeted by the frigid blast. I tugged a fifth of vodka from the frozen meats and vegetables and poured a hefty glass cut with water.

God...I don't think I've ever felt so alone before.

Like the masochist I was, I gravitated toward my daughter's nursery and collapsed in the rocking chair. I swayed forward and backward as the liquor flamed my throat and belly. Everything had its place—her stuffies, her dresses and tiny shoes that lined the closet, a wooden rocking horse that waited patiently in the corner to be ridden when she was old enough, and the black and white canvas of her hanging over her crib. The only thing out of place was me.

What do I do with myself?

End it.

I scoffed into the glass as I considered the unthinkable. No one would miss me. I no longer had a daughter, was too busy being a mother to focus on friends, had no family, and I certainly didn't have a lover.

I swallowed roughly around the ball in my throat. I could slit my wrists. There were razors in the bathroom. I quickly shook away the dark thought. Something felt wrong about bleeding all over the bathroom where my child played with her rubber ducky every night.

I considered driving off a bridge into the lake. The cool, calming water would welcome me as if I belonged there. Again, it felt wrong. Nori loved the water, and even in death, I couldn't disappoint her that way.

I stood and walked out of the nursery.

Maybe I keep changing my mind because I'm clinging to life. How pathetic. I can't save my baby, and I can't save myself.

It finally came to me.

Take a walk and finish that bottle with a handful of pills. It'll all go away. Yeah, that's a good plan. A damn good plan if you ask me. It's painless...silent...and effective.

I'd forgone the walk and settled for a drive. I paid good money for the car and planned to suck every last dime out of it I could.

I brought Nori home in this car.

Before I realized it, I was on Anthony's side of town. I felt that if I was in the same vicinity of Nori that I'd feel her little spirit telling me that it was okay—that it was okay to let go and that she loved me because I was her Mama, and I gave her the best year of her life.

I passed by a park, and chills came over me. My intuition told me to park. I was horrible at following that bitch, but I did.

“Mama!”

I froze when I heard Nori's voice as clear as day. I squinted and saw Anthony sitting on a bench—leaning on his ostentatious cane as he watched Nori. He looked exhausted.

Serves him right.

Nori was there, sitting on a blanket with a toy in her mouth. She pointed the toy at him and repeated it. “Mama!”

“No, that's a puppy,” he corrected.

“Mama!”

She didn't see me. I know she didn't, but knowing she still thought of me was...comforting.

“You'll get it one day, kid,” he sighed.

The yearning to die suddenly eased, and my breathing became easier as I considered stealing my daughter back. But as suddenly as the thought came to me, it flitted away. We'd be on the run, and Anthony would eventually catch us.

I can't take her being ripped from my arms like that again. Plus, I'm unemployed. I can't provide for her. She's better with him.

“Okay, little one. It's time to go home,” Anthony mumbled as he picked her up. Nori was full of protests, squirming and shouting in his arms. My breath shuddered as he walked away with my life—my baby. “It's getting dark; we'd better hurry home,” he said.

The despair rushed in once they disappeared out of sight.

What am I going to do? I can't go on this way. I just can't. Maybe they'll return? I don't have a job. I can visit the park every day around this time. God...I've really lost it, haven't I? I went from suicidal to stalking.

“I should go home. I've been drinking. That's why I'm so out of it.”

Chapter Ten

Anthony

I squinted behind the LED hands-free magnifying glass as I attached a string around the standing rigging of my latest ship-in-a-bottle project. It wasn't my most complicated build. I'd say the miniature replica of the USS Constitution was for intermediate builders. I was an advanced builder after decades of practice, but I was too distracted by pain and lack of sleep to tackle a more significant project.

It'd been a week since Nori's arrival, and I was barely holding it together. I was averaging two to three hours of sleep a night, and between my leg issues, Nori's cries for her mother, and my guilty conscience, rest was hard to come by. The nanny couldn't arrive soon enough.

Tugging at the leg of my sweats caught my attention.

"Good morning, Nori," I said, stealing a glance at the clock on the wall. It was 4:32 AM. Earlier than her 5:30 wake-up call.

"Ma...Ma...Ma...Ma," she demanded as she yanked away.

"How do you feel about pancakes?"

She stared at me with wide eyes. For a second, I felt she understood what I said, but that was short-lived when she began calling for her Mama. I picked her up and blinked back tears, resolving to the fact that I had to return her to Simone or at least split custody with her.

That's if she's still willing to split custody.

Simone might tell me tough tits and demand full custody of Nori, especially after the stunt I pulled. I was wrong for taking Nori from Simone. I knew it when I materialized into her life that rainy night. I knew it when I tasked Jonathan to dig up any dirt he could on Simone, hoping it would make the judge lean in my favor, and I knew it when I limped out of the courthouse with my child screaming and squirming in my arms. My heart shattered every time I looked at Nori's hopeful face. Her facial features, skin tone, gray eyes, and DNA told

me that she was mine, but none of that mattered. To her, I was a stranger—the evil man who took her from her mother and happiness. She was unhappy. She'd barely been awake for two minutes, and the tears were already cresting her bottom lids. I nearly clutched my chest when she poked her bottom lip out.

I should've listened to Jonathan, but I was bull-headed and took Nori away from Simone just because I knew I could. I was angry and bitter because I felt everything was taken from me—my parents, wife, child, and leg. Why was I meant to suffer? Nori was supposed to be the one thing in this world that belonged to me.

Whoever said life isn't fair wasn't lying.

I smiled ruefully at my child as the tears surged from her eyes. "It's okay, little one. You won't have to cry much longer. Just give me one more day. Can you do that?"

Her cries settled. Again, I wondered if she understood me—if she knew I'd thrown in the towel.

"Mama?"

Clearly, she understands me.

"Yes, Mama," I confirmed with a sigh, switching the magnifying light off. I scooped her up and limped to the kitchen with my cane as she repeated 'mama' on a loop. "Can you say, Dada?"

"Mama!" she squawked.

I chuckled at her forceful response. "What were you thinking, Anthony?"

I buckled Nori in her highchair and butted the contraption beside the kitchen island. I prepared batter for blueberry pancakes while an R&B singer crooned in the background. R&B was never a genre in my repertoire; however, my daughter loved it; therefore, I'd love it long after she was gone.

"What are the chances your mother will share you with me?" I laughed loudly when Nori shook her head furiously.

“You’ll give yourself whiplash if you shake your head any harder. I get it. Pictures? Do you think she’ll give me pictures?” Nori tilted her head to the side as she contemplated my question. She smiled and clapped her hands, but that could’ve been because I dumped a handful of blueberries on her tabletop.

I thought of all the missed opportunities—the tender moments I’d never get back. I missed her birth. I’d never be able to relive Nori taking her first breath or cry. I could barely contain my excitement when Simone entered the final stretch. I stayed up most nights, too keyed up to sleep. Instead, I spent the nights inventorying my baby supplies. I counted the boxes of diapers and wipes stacked in the corner of the nursery, wondering how long my small hoard would last. I researched extensively which nipples and bottles were preferred by babies and couldn’t decide, so I ordered an array of them of all shapes and sizes. Her newborn onesies were washed in baby-friendly laundry detergent and hung in a color-coded row. I had enough clothes to last her until she was three and had them laundered, folded, and stored in plastic storage bins. I had enough stuffed animals to make a carnival jealous and enough pacifiers to wear one on each finger like a ring. Everything was top-of-the-line; car seat, stroller, highchair, crib, rocking chair—you name it. They were the Volvo of baby essentials and worth every penny.

My cheeks heated as I recalled all the parenting classes I took with expectant mothers. I was the only male in attendance, and the mothers assumed I was gay and adopting. I didn’t correct them because I didn’t want their pitied pouts and words of condolences. It was easier that way.

Nori grabbed my attention again when she banged on her tray for more blueberries. I sprinkled a few on the blueberry-stained top and watched them roll on the tray.

“This week has not gone as expected. Truthfully, I don’t know what I expected—a happily ever after that I don’t deserve, I guess. But...I may have been in a coma, and I may have missed your birth and many other firsts, but I’ve always

loved you. Hell, I still have your very first sonogram folded in my wallet. Your mother is a very exceptional woman—no one can convince me otherwise. She carried you for nine months and took you in as her own. What am I saying? Despite the uncanny resemblance, you are hers...more than mine. I think...I believe your mother will share custody with me. I couldn't see her doing to me what I did to her, but on the off chance that she deems I'm unforgivable and that you're better off with her, then I'll have no choice but to oblige. I'm not a parent, maybe in name, but a true parent understands sacrifices and doesn't make the mistake that I did. My selfishness caused you suffering. I apologize, Nori. Whatever happens, I'll always be here for you, your mother included. Neither of you will want for anything. I hope it's enough to right my wrongs."

Chapter Eleven

Simone

I think I'm losing my mind.

My fingers wrapped around the wine bottle's neck as I gazed at my fate—the carefully lined-up pill bottles. I figured I'd take an assortment. I could swallow all of them down with a few gulps of wine. Maybe my actions were drastic. Perhaps I was pitiful, but since Nori left, I felt stuck in one of those thriller movies where the main character relives a horrible day over and over.

I stared at the pills and felt nothing. My heart was empty, but she consumed my mind. I thought I'd be desperately crying and screaming—making one last ditch effort to see her, but shockingly I felt peace—acceptance.

It's finally about to be over. I'm here with pills galore. I'm not happy. I'm not sad. I'm nothing. And nothing will stop me. Nothing can intervene at this moment but me. A part of me is screaming under it all...stay alive. You've only got one life. Things may get better tomorrow. You can win the lottery, or Anthony could be hit by a truck and die for real this time—anything can happen tomorrow, but you have to live to see it.

I sighed and pressed Nori's favorite stuffed elephant to my nose. I closed my eyes and inhaled her sweet baby scent. I fucked up. I shouldn't have gotten attached. I shouldn't have brought her home. I had done my job. I did what I was paid to do—carry her for nine months. If she went to foster care, then that wasn't on me. I shouldn't have gotten attached because I wouldn't be here if I had never loved her.

I'd never been one for attachments. My parents died when I was young, friends never stuck around for long, and the one serious boyfriend I did have kicked me to the curb as soon as I gave him my virginity. Nothing had ever attached me to life until I had Nori. Like a Marine, I had to be the best I could be

for her. When I carried her, I ate right, exercised, caressed her, sang, and read to her. I wanted to live my best for her, even then, even when she wasn't mine. And then she came...and she was mine. I wanted her life to be exemplary. I wanted—no—I needed her life to be better than mine ever was. It had to be filled with beauty, love, and laughter. I wouldn't be satisfied until she had all that and then some.

I think I did well. She seemed...happy.

Why is there no word for what a mother becomes when her child is gone? I'm used to being an orphan, but what is this?

I unscrewed the bottles, dumped out the pills, and mixed them like I was about to play a round of Dominoes. It was 9:00 AM. The birds were chirping, and the sun was shining.

It's 9:00 AM. The birds are chirping, the sun is shining, and I'm going to kill myself.

"It's a beautiful day to die," I said before scooping up a handful of pills and dumping them into my mouth.

Knock!

The sudden intrusion forced me to spit out my concoction.

"Who is it?" I demanded irritably.

"It's Jonathan Baker...Mr. Powell's attorney.

"Go to Hell. You helped take my daughter away from me, you piece of shit!"

"Ms. Livingston, what if I said I could reunite you with Nori?"

Reunite me with Nori?

I ran to the door and edged it open. "What?"

"I'd like to discuss the matter further with you. Preferably out of the sweltering heat. May I come in?"

I glanced back at the pills on the table.

Shit.

“Give me a moment.” I shut the door without waiting for a response and grabbed a towel from the kitchen. I haphazardly swiped the pills into the towel and disposed of them and the wine.

A few moments later, Jonathan Baker, crooked lawyer to baby snatcher Anthony Powell, sat at my kitchen table. He opened his luxury briefcase. My lips turned down as I wondered how much it cost. It was probably worth a few months’ rent.

“Mr. Powell tasked me with finding a nanny for Nori. I think you’re the perfect fit. Obviously, you know everything there is to know about Nori, and she’ll be comforted by your presence.”

I glared at him and tried not to appear too eager. “I don’t know.”

Jonathan’s eyebrows catapulted to the top of his head. “You don’t know? What do you mean, you don’t know? This is a golden opportunity to be reunited with your daughter. Not to mention you’ll be paid!”

“I ended up caring for a child only to have her stolen from me the last time I was offered a contract. How can I trust this won’t backfire?”

His ears reddened. “In my defense, I was not involved with the surrogacy contract.”

“And court?” I pressed, wondering what excuse he would come up with next.

“Ms. Livingston, Mr. Powell is my client—not you. Please don’t hold it against me.”

I scoffed and rolled my eyes. “Anthony denied joint custody. Why would he want me to be around Nori now?”

Mr. Baker offered a strained smile and continued. “Anthony and Nori are having some...adjusting issues. In my opinion, he desperately needs the help, and who better assist him than Nori’s previous caretaker?”

“Mother!” I spat, causing him to flinch.

“I’m sorry. That was a poor choice of words on my part. I didn’t mean to disrespect.”

“Does Anthony know you’re here?”

“Why do you ask?”

“Because I’m starting to get used to your fancy lawyer talk. You know how you seem to tiptoe and carefully word your responses.”

He sat back, removed his glasses, and for a moment, he looked human.

“You asked me what I would do if someone took my children away from me. Do you want to know my answer?” I nodded. “I think I’d put a gun in my mouth and end it all just like you were contemplating.”

“Wha—”

“You missed a few pills on the floor by the trashcan, and you forgot to wash out the wine from the sink after you dumped the glass.” My eyes ticked to the betraying pills. Sure enough, three tablets were scattered by the trashcan. “I’m very good at what I do, Ms. Livingston. Do you want this opportunity or not?” he asked, sliding the contract towards me.

“So, no?”

His eyes widened. “I’m sorry?” he asked in confusion.

“The answer. I asked you if Anthony knew that you were here. It’s a no, correct?”

A sly smile appeared on his face.

“Anthony and I have maintained a friendship for years; if he knows me as well as he should, then he knows I’m here.”

I nod. “Okay. How long does he need a nanny for?”

“The contract is a year but can be renewed.”

“What about custody for Nori?”

“Let’s focus on one thing at a time, shall we?” he asked, sliding the contract closer.

“Will I need to interview for the position?”

“Of course.”

“When?” I asked, giving the contract a preliminary once over.

“As soon as possible.”

I barely heard him after my eyes caught the benefits section.

“Wait...wait...wait...this is a live-in nanny position.”

“That’s right.”

“I—”

“Did you also see the part where you’ll be paid \$1000.00 a week and have full health insurance benefits and a vacation package? Also, I can speak with Anthony about paying delinquent child support.”

“Delinquent child support?”

“Yes. You had to raise Nori all on your own without financial support. He needs to pay what he owes.”

I smirked. “I thought Anthony was your client. Are you sure you should be offering me more money?”

“He is my client and friend, but I wouldn’t be a good friend if I didn’t hold him accountable. Don’t think. Pack a bag and be with your child.”

“But what about after the year?”

He stood to his feet and gathered his briefcase. “Simone, I can call you Simone, right?” I nodded. “A year from now is the least of your concerns. You almost didn’t see tomorrow.”

Chapter Twelve

Anthony

“I don’t think worms squirm as much as you do,” I sighed as I attempted and failed to get Nori to sit still while I brushed her teeth. “Dammit,” I hissed, jerking my finger back when she bit me. “You’re like a little shark. I think I’ll call you that until we leave this afternoon. My little shark. That has a nice ring to it.” I chuckled when Nori bared her beaver teeth at me with toothpaste foaming from her mouth. We rinsed, and it was on to the next task...hair.

She sat somewhat patiently on the counter as I sized her up, trying to figure out what to do with the mop of curls that fell into her eyes. A headband would be sufficient, but I wanted to return my little shark to her mother precisely how I had received her.

Well...minus the red face, snotty nose, and tears. Unless they’re tears of joy.

“Two ponytails it is.”

Twenty minutes of methodical hairstyling produced two ponytails, one higher than the other and one looser than the other, with the white bows slipping before my eyes.

“What is your mother’s secret?” Nori shook her head and pulled out a bow. “Gee... thanks. Headband it is. Let’s go, my little shark. We will enjoy a picnic in the garden, and then I’ll take you to your mother. How does that sound?”

Nori smiled bashfully before leaning into me. I hugged her and tried not to overthink the sudden affection. It wasn’t for me, not truly. It was a hug of relief and gratitude for reuniting her with her mother, but I’d take what I could get.

“I’m glad I decided to remove your dress. You’re a messy eater,” I commented. Nori bounced up and down in her pull-up as she attempted to gnaw at the kernels of the corn on the cob. She grew tired of it and tossed it on the blanket in favor of the watermelon. I lay on my side on the picnic blanket and watched her devour her sweet treat. Red juice dribbled down her chin onto her chest. She picked at a black seed and shook it off her fingertip, not minding that it flew onto my shirt, staining it bright pink where it landed.

Her mouth gaped, and the watermelon slice dropped out of her hand. “Ma...ma.”

“Yes, you’ll see Mama today.”

“Mama!” she screeched, jumping to her feet. She toddled away faster than I’d ever seen. I turned around and was surprised to see Simone standing there, hair blowing in the wind and tears streaming down her face. She dropped to her knees and accepted Nori into her waiting arms. My chest tightened with unbelievable emotion when a loud wail ripped from Simone as she rocked our child back and forth in her arms. She kissed her all over—forehead, cheeks, nose, lips, and sticky fingertips.

“Mama! Mama! Mama! Mama! Mama!”

The two of them clung to each other as if their very lives depended on it.

“Mother and daughter finally reunited as it should be,” Jonathan said with a sly grin on his face. My heart was so broken that my time with Nori had been cut short by a few hours that I hadn’t realized he was hovering above me.

“Yes...as it should be. I planned on returning Nori to Simone this afternoon. I guess this saves me the trouble,” I sighed, standing to my feet. I bit back a painful groan and reached for my cane.

“There is no need because Nori isn’t going anywhere.”

“What do you mean?” I asked curiously.

“Say hello to your new nanny.”

We sat across from each other in the living room while I conducted my “interview,” which so far consisted of Nori babbling loudly and distracting her mother with toys and books. I took the distraction as a time to review the contract Jonathan drew up. I whistled when I made it to the benefits section. He set Simone up nicely with health benefits, vacation, and delinquent child support payments, bringing Simone’s weekly income to \$2,000.00 a week for one year. It was a generous but fair deal; however, I was shocked that Jonathan took such liberties without consulting me first.

“Ms. Livingston?”

“Yes?” she asked, setting Nori on her lap. She kissed her cheek and the back of her head before giving me her attention.

“Have you gone over this contract?”

“I have.”

“And...you find the terms acceptable?”

“I do, but I have questions.”

“You have the floor.”

“Would I have any job duties outside of caring for Nori, like cooking and cleaning?”

“No, not unless you want to.”

“Okay. Am I allowed to take her on extended outings?”

My eyebrows raised at her inquiry. “Extended outings?”

“Like overnight trips. Since I’ll have all this extra money, I’d like to take Nori on a trip, maybe to the beach or something. I think she’d love Disney World.”

“I’ll consider it,” I said uneasily.

“You’ll consider it? Are you afraid I’ll run off with her?” she asked, accusatory eyes narrowing into slits. I didn’t have

to confirm her suspicion. It was written all over my face. She climbed to her feet and dropped Nori on her jutted-out hip.

“You have no reason to be suspicious of me. It is me who should be suspicious of you! I’m not the one who was gleefully tearing apart families!”

“I was never gleeful to take Nori from you,” I argued, my voice elevating a decibel.

“You didn’t have to do it in the first place! Why couldn’t you just stay away?”

I stared at my cane while I twirled it in my hands.

“Put yourself in my shoes, Ms. Simone. What would you have done?”

“To put myself in your shoes requires me to cut off my compassion and empathy for another human being. No, thank you. I do not fault you for wanting to be in Nori’s life. How could you not? But the Anthony Powell that showed up on my doorstep soaking wet in the middle of the night was not the same Anthony Powell before the accident, which is a shame because he was kind, thoughtful, considerate, and more.”

I smiled ruefully. “Perhaps I experienced a prolonged moment of insanity.”

Simone bounced Nori as she averted her eyes from me. It was a good thing she did because I couldn’t stomach the visible pain that swam in her brown eyes—especially knowing I was the culprit.

“Perhaps,” she concluded.

“Let’s not fight. It’s not good for Nori,” I said quietly. She nodded with a heavy sigh and eased back down to the couch.

“Agreed, but to put you at ease. I don’t intend on running off with Nori. You’ve proven you have the means to track me down, and I don’t think I can survive having Nori taken from me twice. What would be my motivation for leaving? I get paid to be a stay-at-home mother. No way will I mess that up to go back to getting paid \$17 an hour to deal with jerks. I just

want to be with my child and give her the life she deserves, and believe it or not, I can't do that without you."

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. I did good. I picked a wonderful mother for my child. A sense of peace washed over me for the first time in a long time. I was optimistic that we could do this—cohabit and co-parent. We both wanted the same thing—to love Nori unconditionally.

"Okay. Do you have any more questions?"

"Just one. If this doesn't work out, will you be willing to split 50/50 custody with me?"

"Yes," I replied instantly.

"Good. I want that in writing, and then I'll sign the contract."

Chapter Thirteen

Simone

Anthony's house could not be called a home—it was too grand. When we met, I remembered him telling me he was in finance, but I didn't think he'd be loaded like this. His wealth intimidated me when I first arrived in the luxury gated community. There was a guard shack with an actual guard in uniform with a firearm operating his post. If Jonathan weren't with me, there would've been no chance that I would've been granted access to the illustrious Emerald Falls. The winding streets, free of potholes and debris, took me through a picturesque community brimming with foliage I didn't think was achievable in our dry Texas climate. The towering homes on large acreage left me speechless, and the community pool and water park excited me like a kid on Christmas. All I could think about was Nori happily splashing and running through the splash pad. My mouth dropped when I approached Anthony's house.

I pulled behind him into the circular driveway, and I was in awe of the three-story cream-colored stucco mansion. The first thing I noticed was how modern it appeared, and without entering the home, I knew it'd be cold and sterile, just like Anthony Powell. The wrought-iron Juliette balcony and the columns were a nice added touch. I stepped inside and realized that my earlier assumptions were just that—assumptions. I immediately fell in love with the high ceilings, warm brown hardwood floors, and open concept. I had to enter the expansive gourmet kitchen with dual islands and a butler's

pantry before arriving in the backyard. I could live and die in that kitchen.

After I accepted employment as Nori's "nanny," Anthony led me on a tour of my new home. I was blown away by the full-home theater, Nori's decked-out playroom, and the luxurious bedroom suites. The property was a stunning oasis in the middle of the city.

"No. Don't fall asleep yet. It's your bath time. You smell like outside, and you're still sticky from your picnic with your dad," I complained as I gathered Nori's bath toys, toothbrush, pull-up, and night clothes. She sucked on her middle and forefinger, looking like she was two seconds away from La La Land. A loud crash and a curse jolted her awake. "What in the world?" Nori stared up at me quizzically, practically urging me to investigate.

Well...I guess I can check on him. Plus, I'm not trying to end up on someone's suspect list if he dies. I have the motive and the most to gain if he passes away.

I dropped the bath items, gathered my baby in my arms, and cautiously approached Anthony's bedroom.

"Fuck!"

Okay, so he's not dead.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, edging closer toward the bathroom door. It swung open, and I wasn't prepared to find Anthony in a low-slung towel, drying his hair. I held Nori close, frozen by the sight. The bathroom billowed steam directly into my face, efficiently masking the heat from my cheeks. My mouth went dry when I noticed the spattering of dark hair disappearing into the towel. My eyes traced back up to his neck, where a drop of water trailed until it vanished into the towel.

"Sorry...I was..." I stuttered and gestured towards Nori.

Anthony raised a dark brow and shrugged. "It's no issue, Simone. You enjoy voyeurism. I'm not one to kink shame."

I sucked my cheeks in with disapproval, ready to give him the business when he cracked a smile that immediately disarmed me and reminded me why I was there.

It's certainly not to ogle the man who made my life a living hell!

“Are you okay? I heard a bump and thought...”

He waved me off nonchalantly. “I’m fine. Do you mind grabbing my cane?”

“Um...sure,” I agreed, picking up the same cane I imagined beating him with several times.

This is the perfect opportunity...

I offered it to him quietly. His eyes flicked down and met mine. I glanced away quickly. There was no way I’d get lost in those gray eyes that were identical to my baby’s. I wouldn’t allow Anthony Powell the privilege.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“It’s no trouble,” I offered, finally backing out of the bathroom. I cleared my throat. “Should I wait for the hot water?”

“Wait for...?” He chuckled and leaned on his cane for a moment. A devilish smirk spread over his lips. “No, Ms. Simone. That won’t be necessary. Or do you still prefer Ms. Livingston? I can’t seem to remember.”

The heat of embarrassment was almost blinding. “Simone is fine...thank you.”

His gaze is warm, but I know his heart is cold. It's just the proximity that has me discombobulated.

“I’m happy you took my offer, Simone,” he murmured, looking down at his cane. “I’m sure Nori will be much happier.”

“I’m glad you kept her name.”

Anthony looked up and grinned. “Of course, I did. It was the name her mother gave her, after all.”

Don't fall for the soft smile, Simone. He doesn't mean it. Don't even bother.

“I should get going. How about that bath, little one?” I asked, walking away.

“Do you mind if I watch?” he asked, suddenly stopping me in my tracks.

“Excuse me?” I asked, looking over my shoulder. He was leaning against the doorway, still in that damn towel.

“It's just that bath time is especially hard for me. She won't sit still, and she cries her head off. It makes me nervous, and I'm afraid I'll drop her one day.”

I unintentionally smiled. I remembered the days of being a brand-new parent. Everything was scary, but as sadistic as it sounded, Anthony's discomfort brought me a semblance of joy.

“Sure. Get dressed and meet me in her bathroom.”

“The key to bath time is playtime. I brought her toys from home. Anything that lights up, makes noises, and leaves me drenched is her favorite,” I explained as I filled the bathtub with warm water, strawberry-scented bubble bath, and her favorite toys. “Once the bathwater is at a safe level, then the baby goes in the tub like so,” I demonstrated. Nori picked up a toy and put it directly in her mouth. I pulled it out, already getting wet from her eager splashing.

“You're a pro.”

I glanced back at him.

What a predicament. My shirt is getting wet and transparent. I'm on my hands and knees while he watches me from above. The arrogant smirk on his face says a million words—that he belongs above me, and I belong on my knees in

front of him. Or...maybe that's my runaway imagination stemming from our earlier encounter and my previous crush on him? I think that's what hurts the most.

I'd fallen for Anthony somewhere along my pregnancy journey. It may have happened between the daily phone calls that sometimes ran late into the evening, the random lunch and shopping outings, or how he'd rub my feet after he satisfied my pregnancy cravings. He made me forget that our time together had an expiration date and I had to hand over the baby and be out of their lives forever. Along the way, I failed to remember our relationship was purely transactional and that Anthony didn't owe me anything beside what was agreed upon in our contract.

I'd been burying my feelings for Anthony since Nori's first breath, yet I'm still digging and still heaping the dirt on top of them. They're still there—those pesky feelings that are trying to claw their way to the surface, and I'd be a fool to acknowledge them.

“Something like that,” I replied with a shrug as I started to wash Nori while trying to keep my thoughts pure, still hung up on being on my knees in front of him.

“You're too modest,” his deep voice rumbled behind me. I squeezed my eyes shut. “You don't care how wet you are. I'd want to be out of those clothes yesterday.”

“You get used to it. Kids are always sticky and wet, and after a while, you expect it. It comes with the territory.”

“What great expectations,” he laughed. “I must say, even though you two don't share a drop of blood, I sense your attitude in her. Sometimes, Nori will give me this look that I'm fairly certain means drop dead.”

“That's my girl,” I whispered, kissing her damp curls.

“Ouch. Everyone gangs up on Daddy, huh?”

I think Nori is clean enough. I can't be in this bathroom with this man for another minute.

Nori was oblivious to the tension and gleefully splashed me with gusto.

“My word, baby. It’s your bath, not *our* bath,” I laughed. She pushed her toy into my face eagerly. “I see it. Can I get under your chin? Thank you.”

“Can you do me a favor, Simone?”

“That depends on the favor.”

“I can’t get through a teeth-brushing session without her biting me.”

I side-eyed him over my shoulder, utterly unimpressed with the two distinct marks on his fingers.

“Welcome to parenthood. You’re a fool if you think I escape this little shark unscathed.”

Anthony’s brilliant smile lit up the bathroom like the beam shooting out of the top of the Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas. “Little Shark...that’s what I’ve been calling her,” he commented.

I shook my head and wrapped Nori in a towel. Seconds later, she sat on the counter and waited patiently for her next victim.

“It’s a two-step process,” I explained. “First, put on Ms. Rachel. Second, brush,” I said, wielding my phone out of my pocket, mesmerizing her instantly. I followed up with the toothbrush with a dot of toothpaste that I snuck under the phone. Anthony watched my technique from the toilet with a wince. I nodded at his knee. “Did you fall?”

He raised a brow. “I...was briefly horizontal, but I’m perfectly fine.”

I bit my bottom lip, attempting not to laugh. “You really are a businessman. Briefly horizontal is a cool way to say you fell.”

“It’s less cool when you explain it.” I caught him smirking with his scarred cheek resting in his palm. His eyes were fixed

on Nori, a small smile lingering on his face. “She’s so good with you.”

I sighed. “I know her,” I admitted softly. “Babies are just tiny people with personalities, likes, and dislikes. It’s a learning curve. You’ll get there one day.” I side-eyed him playfully. “Or maybe not.”

He smirked ruefully. “It was arrogant of me to assume I’d know her so quickly.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “Arrogant is one way to put it.”

“But you have a crueller word in mind?” he mused.

“I always do.”

He laughed. “I’m convinced you’ve tainted her personality. I’ve seen that very same smile right before she bites me.” I rolled my eyes and wiped Nori’s face with a washcloth before kissing it. She smiled up at me and went right back to the phone. “I love her anyway,” Anthony said softly beside me.

His confession was so tender. I couldn’t help but meet his eyes. “She’s just lovable like that,” I admitted, proud of my accomplishment. Nori was my greatest achievement—my purpose in life. Was my way of thinking unhealthy? Absolutely. Did I care? No. We all had something we couldn’t live without, and Nori was that something for me.

Anthony stood and rested on his cane as I lifted Nori from the sink. She yawned and rubbed her face on my shirt. “I’ll put her to bed,” I murmured, ignoring, once again, our proximity as he towered over me. Even slightly hunched over on his cane, I had to crane my neck back to make eye contact.

Just how tall is this man?

“Yes, it is bedtime for the little shark.”

I nodded. “Are you sure you’re okay? That sounded like some fall.”

“I’m fine. A semi-truck t-boned me. I think I’ll be all right.”

“Goodnight, Mr.—”

“Anthony. Please call me Anthony, Simone. It wouldn’t be proper for the mother of my child to be so formal with me.”

I ignored the fluttering in my stomach. It was true. I was the mother of his child, but that didn’t give me the right to feel some type of way about it.

“Goodnight, Anthony.”

“Goodnight, Simone.”

Chapter Fourteen

Anthony

I nursed a snifter of bourbon, attempting to kill three birds with one stone—numb the pain in my leg, ease my guilt, and forget about my feelings for Simone Livingston that increased with each month that her stomach grew. Soon after signing the contract, I found myself looking for every excuse to be in her presence. I even went as far as stopping by her apartment after work one day to make sure her smoke and carbon monoxide detector functioned properly. She had greeted me with a puzzled yet radiant smile, silently wondering what the hell I was there for, but too polite to turn me away. A two-minute detector check turned into a two-hour chat followed by dinner at her favorite Mexican restaurant. I gravitated towards Simone like the cliché moth to a flame, not because she was carrying my child, but because she was the first woman since

my wife who could completely disarm me with a simple smile. My icy exterior that had built up after years of grief and mourning from losing my parents and subsequently my wife started to melt. With Simone around, I smiled a little wider, laughed a little harder, and cried a little less. She was beautiful, kind, funny, positive, rarely cursed, and could give it back to me just as good as I gave it.

At one point, I pictured what life could've been if my daughter had been born and Simone stuck around but had let go of that fantasy as soon as I remembered our contract. Simone was there for the money—nothing else. She dreamed of traveling and going to school to become a social worker—not being tied down with a baby and a sometimes emotionally unavailable man.

I was mid-sip when I heard feet padding down the stairs. I checked my watch and was surprised it had gotten so late. With Simone's arrival, I should have had zero issues falling asleep; however, I was still restless, hence my glass of top-shelf bourbon.

“Simone? Is that you?”

She popped her head into the living room. “It's me.”

“Is everything okay? It's late. Is your room comfortable?”

“Is my room comfortable? I never thought it was possible to sleep on a mattress so soft. It's beyond comfortable. Thanks for asking. I just...new place...I'm finding it difficult to sleep, and I'm thinking about everything I must do to break my lease and settle my apartment.”

I nodded. “Sounds like a hassle. I'll hire movers when you're ready to get the remainder of your belongings.”

“Thank you, but you don't have to do that.”

“Of course, I do. According to your contract, moving expenses were also covered.”

“Right. Well, I won't continue to bother you-”

“You’re not a bother. Come and join me,” I urged, standing to fix her a drink.

“I guess one drink won’t hurt. Plus, we need to discuss baby-proofing the house,” she commented, glancing warily at the fire poker near the fireplace.

“Ah. The dreaded babyproofing where you must wrap everything in bubble wrap and lock all doors and cupboards,” I said, chuckling at the imagery.

“Pretty much,” she agreed, accepting the glass from me before perching on the couch with a leg tucked underneath her.

“Salud,” I said, offering my glass to her in a toast. I laughed when Simone started sputtering and gasping after a single sip. “Are you okay?”

“Absolutely not. This is awful,” she complained with a sour look.

“I apologize. How about a nice dessert wine?”

“I’ve never had dessert wine before,” Simone confessed.

“Prepare to be amazed,” I said, leaving the couch again to fix her beverage. Simone’s face twisted in confusion when I handed her the small glass. “Trust me. This will be sufficient. I suggest taking a tiny sip.” I watched her as she brought the glass to her full lips.

“Oof. That’s sweet. No wonder it’s called a dessert wine. I can substitute this for a piece of cake.”

“Then it has served its purpose.” We sat in companionable silence for several minutes. From how she rubbed the back of her neck and shoulders, I could tell she was uncomfortably deep in thought. “Penny for your thoughts?”

“Can you tell me about your wife?”

My eyes widened in shock. “My wife?”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have brought her up. I’m sure mentioning her brought back painful memories. You never spoke of her before, and she’s half of Nori...so....”

“I see. I’ve come to peace with her death. It was three years ago.”

“How did she pass, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Cancer,” I answered before taking another gulp of my spirit.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

“I remember being so angry at her for a long time. She was such a free spirit. She couldn’t stay planted for long. She was always traveling, whether I was with her or not—she had the spirit of a nomad, but it made her happy, and as long as she was happy, then I was happy. I was ready for kids, but she wasn’t. She still wanted to travel and felt kids would get in the way. She kept reassuring me that we had time, and what’s the rush? So, I let her be. Not soon after, we discovered she had Stage 3 cancer—pancreatic—the worst kind. I wanted her to fight it and undergo chemo and radiation, but she refused. She said she wanted to live the rest of whatever life she had left to travel. She died three months later.”

I paused to wipe away a few stray tears with my thumb. A few escaped, requiring the back of my hand. “I found out at the reading of her will that she gifted me her eggs that she had frozen.”

“Oh, my God. Is that why she didn’t undergo treatment?” Simone gasped.

I cleared my throat. “Yeah...that’s why. She wanted me to have our child or children when I was ready. I felt like a dirtbag for spending all that energy being mad at her, and she sacrificed potentially extending her life to give me what I wanted. That’s why I was willing to do whatever it took to get Nori back. She was mine—a gift to me from my late wife, and I couldn’t let her down.”

“Fuck...I really want to keep hating you,” Simone mumbled.

“I don’t blame you. Take all the time you need.”

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.” With that, she was gone, leaving behind the sugary scent of her body wash or lotion and a snapshot of her ass that jiggled in her night shorts, reminding me that I’d been celibate for over three years. She returned minutes later with a large binder cradled against her chest. “Here. This is for you.”

I was surprised when she handed me the pink photo album that clearly belonged to Nori.

“I...I can keep this?” I asked, accepting the album.

“Hell no!” she snapped, jerking the album back. I smiled.

“Fine. I’ll have to create my own.”

“Yeah...you do that,” she agreed, slowly handing it back over.

“Relax. I’m sure you can outrun me,” I joked, flipping open the book. Simone sat beside me. This time, she was a little closer so that she could narrate Nori’s milestones. “Before we begin, where did the name Nori come from?”

“I wanted to name her Nora but figured it was overdone.”

“So, you name her after seaweed instead?”

Simone rolled her eyes with a smile. “I didn’t think about it at the time. I kinda panicked as I tried to wrap my head around the fact that I was bringing a newborn home.”

“It’s fine. It’s still a beautiful name for a beautiful young lady,” I reassured her. My breath caught when I flipped to the first page where Nori’s hospital birth certificate and bracelet lay beneath the plastic sheet. I ran my fingers over them. “Six pounds even?”

“Yeah. She was a tiny little thing. You wouldn’t know it from looking at her now, but she was.”

“She does enjoy eating,” I laughed, flipping the page. My tears threatened to return with a vengeance when I observed the pictures from her first day of life. She was swaddled in a

blanket, resting peacefully with her lips pursed and a pink hat on her head.

“I almost didn’t get this picture,” she murmured.

“Why not?”

“I didn’t want to get too close to her at the time because I knew she wasn’t mine. I kept my distance as long as I could before my guilty conscience started eating me alive. I thought how tragic it would be if she grew up and wondered why there weren’t any baby pictures of her. I didn’t want Nori to think someone didn’t love her enough to catch the precious moment. Despite my reservations, I went to the nursery and snapped several photos of her. The next thing you know, I fell down the rabbit hole. I couldn’t stay away. I went from not wanting to look at her to skin-to-skin time and breastfeeding. My discharge day was approaching, and even though I was ill-prepared to be a mother, a part of me prayed that you wouldn’t show up.”

“What do you know? Your prayers were answered.”

“Until a year later,” she reminded me, flipping to the next page of Nori finally at home in Simone’s bed wearing a pink onesie with white polka dots, pink mittens to keep her from scratching her face, and a pink cap.

“She had a very nice nursery,” I complimented as I turned the pages.

“Thank you. I spent an entire week hustling, trying to put it together for her. Most of the clothing and furniture were actually donated by some of the nurses at the hospital. They were all sweet, except for that red-headed lady, but that’s neither here nor there.”

I spent the next hour and a half greedily devouring every piece of memory Simone afforded me. Her commentary gave me life, and I thought I would die from laughter at the appalled look on Nori’s face when she bit into a dill pickle. Her cheeks were sucked in, and her lips were puckered from the sudden shock from the sourness. My favorite photo was of Nori sitting

on plastic sheeting in the kitchen on her first birthday. She wore a glittery pink party hat as she smashed her mini birthday cake with her hands. Her smile through the photo was infectious, and my heart filled with love for my daughter and admiration for the women who sacrificed so much to give her to me.

Two mothers...two sacrifices.

“Thank you, Simone.”

“No problem. You can look at it whenever you want.”

“No, well, yes. Thank you for the photo album, but mostly for caring for our daughter. I owe you a tremendous debt and my deepest apologies for what I did to you. Nothing about it was right, and if she could, my wife would come back from the grave and scold me. I’d like to have a clean slate with you, but I’m in no position to ask it.”

She troubled her bottom lip with her teeth and indecision blanketed her face.

I won't take it personally if she never forgives me, but a man can dream, right?

“I’d...I’d like a clean slate. It’s no excuse, but you’ve been through a lot that may have deeply clouded your judgement and from what I understand, you planned on returning Nori to me; however, in order for us to have a clean slate, I think there is something you should know,” she whispered softly.

My leg throbbed as I worried about Simone’s revelation.

“Go ahead,” I urged, unable to take the suspense for much longer.

“I...I almost committed suicide,” she confessed.

The throbbing surged from my leg to my head as I tried to wrap my head around what she said. I massaged my forehead with the heels of my palms.

“I didn’t know what to do. Nori was all that I had, and suddenly she wasn’t there any longer. I’d become severely

depressed and almost swallowed a handful of pills until Jonathan knocked on my door offering me the nanny position.”

My vision blurred as I thought about how if it hadn't been for Jonathan, I would've been too late.

My selfishness almost killed my daughter's birth mother....

“I'm not telling you this because I want to get back at you or something petty like that, but I wanted you to hear it from me. I didn't want Jonathan to spill the beans and you were blindsided. I forgive you, Anthony because you've been sincere and have taken the appropriate steps to make amends with me, including agreeing to 50/50 custody. I'm forgiving you for myself and for Nori because I want her to live in a happy, loving environment, and that can't happen if I hold animosity towards her father. Do you understand?”

I nodded and cleared the emotion from my throat. “I understand. Thank you, Simone, and I'm sorry.”

“You're welcome, Anthony. I forgive you. The slate is clean.”

She gathered the album under her arm and left for the stairs, pausing before she was out of view.

“Thank you for choosing me to be Nori's surrogate.”

“No...thank you.”

“Goodnight, Anthony,” she said before climbing the stairs.

“Goodnight, Simone,” I whispered to an empty room, pouring myself another glass of bourbon. No doubt, it'd be a sleepless night for me.

I woke to the mouthwatering scent of bacon and syrup and the sound of R&B music. I groaned and reached for my leg—my new morning routine since waking from my coma. My mouth was dry, and the scent of bourbon nearly made my unsettled stomach turn from bad to worse. I hoisted myself off

the couch triumphantly and retrieved my cane that had wedged itself under the coffee table. I limped to a guest room on the bottom floor, relieved myself, brushed my teeth, and ran my fingers through my hair, in an attempt to make myself presentable.

I staggered down the hall at a painstaking pace. My leg was giving me hell, and I was reminded of a slew of upcoming doctor appointments I had soon. I doubted I'd attend all of them. They'd all tell me the same thing: your leg is fucked, you'll be in pain for the rest of your life, and here are some pills. It was as simple as that.

I wiped a light sheen of sweat from my forehead with the bottom of my shirt before entering the bustling kitchen. Nori sat on the floor, clapping her hands as she wiggled to the beat while Simone sang the lyrics to the song and flipped a pancake.

Shockingly, overnight, my once dreadfully cold house turned into a home filled with life, love, and celebration.

I bent over to pick up Nori and was surprised when she didn't start hollering for her Mama. What shocked me even more was that she wasn't fighting to escape me. We were making progress, and I believed 100% that Simone's presence had everything to do with it.

Simone finally looked up at me from the island stove.

"Good morning, Anthony. I hope you're hungry."

"I could eat," I answered, avoiding her eyes.

She may have moved on and forgiven me, but I haven't forgiven myself.

"Good. Sit down before your leg gives out."

"My leg is—"

"Not fine," Simone asserted, cutting off my lie. "You came in here looking like Fidget from *The Great Mouse Detective*."

I hid my smile with a kiss to Nori's head.

“I resent being compared to a peg-legged bat in a purple scarf.”

“You’ve seen it?” Simone asked with a surprised look on her face.

“This may come as a shock to you, but I was a kid once.”

Simone smiled and shook her head as she fixed our breakfast plates.

“My bad.”

“What do you have planned for the day? Thank you,” I said once she set my plate before me.

“I was thinking about taking Nori to the zoo.”

“That sounds lovely. Would you mind if I tagged along?” I asked, hoping she wouldn’t reject my company.

“I don’t have a problem with you going, but that’s a lot of walking, Anthony.”

“I’ll be fine. My leg just needs to wake up.” She eyed me skeptically as Nori picked at the pancakes on my plate. “I’m serious. I’ll be fine.”

“If you say so.”

I might have to take my narcotics to get through the day, but there is no way I’m missing the zoo with my daughter... and Simone.

Chapter Fifteen

Simone

My stomach teemed excitedly, even while Nori drenched me during her bath. Her father bathed her last night, but Nori thought giving her hair a yogurt mask treatment was a great idea. I wasn't upset. I was too eager about the zoo. Nothing could ruin my day.

"Today will be your first day at the zoo, and I know you'll love it. You'll see penguins, sea otters, lions, and elephants. There are more animals than that, but those are my favorite," I explained as I washed her face.

Why was I excited? Because for the first time in what felt like forever, I was happy.

Let me be clear: any time away from my child feels like forever.

I spent the next thirty minutes getting Nori ready for the big day. Usually, she rocked two ponytails, but I intended on her wearing a hat the entire day and left it down.

"You're all done. Let's go see if your dad is ready to go. I want to arrive before the heat gets too bad," I said, kissing her cheek before heading downstairs. Halfway down, I caught sight of Anthony trying to fit a small cooler into the bottom of her stroller. I laughed a bit to myself and edged closer.

"I don't think it'll fit."

He looked up at me, and his frustration faded, leaving a large grin behind. "Oh, it'll fit. You two look adorable in your matching outfits. Sky blue looks good on you...on you both," he complimented before returning to his task.

Don't fall for it, Simone.

That was a phrase I'd consistently told myself for the past week. The unexpected rain showers forced us to postpone our zoo excursion, confining us to the house. I dreaded our

involuntary confinement because, despite the 6,000 plus square feet, I couldn't escape Anthony Powell.

My job as Nori's nanny did not meet my expectations. I was fully prepared to be responsible for Nori's day-to-day care and hadn't expected Anthony to be so hands-on. When it came to Nori, Anthony and I did everything together, resulting in the three of us becoming closer. It was confusing, but I'd take our awkward co-parenting friendship over bickering and arguing.

"Do you need any help?" I offered, setting Nori down. She crawled toward him and grabbed onto the hem of his shorts for leverage. She pulled herself up and clung to his leg while he still attempted to fit the cooler into the bottom of the stroller.

"No help is required. I'm almost—got it!" Anthony exclaimed. He lifted Nori and hugged her tightly in celebration. "See! Didn't I say I could do it, Little Shark? Even if it did take me," he glanced back at the stove with a wince, "twenty minutes. That's humiliating."

I chuckled, took his arm, and led him to the couch. I forced him to sit despite his protest.

"It's okay. Everyone struggles with strollers at least once in their lifetime. I'm convinced they're an invention from the devil himself." He shot me a grateful smile while playing with Nori. She slapped her hands on his cheeks, laughing while he made faces at her. "She's never gonna let you stop doing that now."

"I think we can all agree that Daddy deserves a couple of slaps."

I really wish he would stop referring to himself as Daddy. It makes me...

I cleared my throat before launching into a mini lecture.

"Anthony."

"Simone."

I nearly clammed up.

I hate how he says my name. It makes me...

“We’ll be walking a lot today. Please...don’t hesitate to tell me when you need a break. If we have to rest every ten minutes, then we will do that.”

“My leg is fine.”

My eyes ticked down to his hand, massaging his thigh. He snatched it away once he noticed my skeptically raised eyebrow.

“Uh-huh,” I replied, reaching for Nori.

I see I’ll be taking two children to the zoo today.

The zoo was exactly as I imagined: full of excitable children, flustered guardians, laughter, and the slight smell of food and animal feces. Nori cooed with excitement from the energy and squirmed to get out of the stroller.

“Maybe I should’ve rented it out,” Anthony mused with his large hand wrapped around the head of the cane, his steel eyes sweeping the crowd.

“Rent what out?”

“The zoo.”

“Don’t be a rich jerk. Half the fun is the atmosphere, especially for a kid.”

Anthony heaved a burgeoning sigh before shaking his head and smiling. He tapped the side of the stroller with his cane. “The things I do for you, kid,” he remarked with a grin. Nori smiled back at him but was quickly distracted by a lion prowling its enclosure. He tapped me, nodding to the sign.

Do not feed the animals!

“Do you think lions go for little sharks?” he mused.

“Not this one,” I said, grinning back. My eyes widened when I noticed a family leaving a nearby bench. “I think it’s time for a break.”

“I—”

“Your protests are futile, Anthony,” I said somewhat absently as the lion roared. My motherly instinct took over. Suddenly, the enclosure seemed flimsy. I backed us up a bit, taking Anthony by the sleeve. “Set a good example for Nori and be obedient.”

“I don’t have to listen to you.”

I crouched down in front of Nori.

“Nori, I think we should go see the mules next. What do you think?” Nori bounced up and down and clapped her hands. “Do you want to see a stubborn mule?” I turned the stroller around to face her father. “There you go, baby,” I cooed.

“That’s real mature, Simone,” Anthony drawled as he followed me to the bench.

I snickered and sanitized my hands before retrieving my giant salted pretzel from the stroller. I barely had a chance to chew before Nori yelled for my attention. “You’re not even hungry. You just want it because I have it,” I gently chastised as I broke small pieces of pretzel off for her.

“Can you blame her? It looks delicious. I should’ve gotten one.”

“Would you like to try it?”

“If you don’t mind.”

I offered my pretzel to Anthony and gasped in shock when he nearly devoured a quarter of my treat with one bite.

“You son-of-a—”

“Language, Simone. There are children present.”

I watched nervously as Anthony and Nori stood in line for their turn to feed the giraffes. I told Anthony I didn’t want Nori to get too close; however, he overruled me and told me to be ready with the camera.

I cringed when he handed Nori the leaves to give to the giraffe. He guided her hand, and Nori shrieked when the giraffe snatched it from her and buried her face in her father's shirt. I was relieved, to say the least. You couldn't be too careful around wild animals.

"Did you get the picture?" Anthony asked heartily when they returned. I looked down at the phone in my hand.

"Oops."

He rolled his eyes. "Nori, I believe your mother is trying to sabotage my Kodak moments with you."

"Why would I do that?" I snapped.

"Because you don't want my photo album to be better than yours. Let's get out of this heat and see the penguins."

I grabbed Nori's stroller and chased behind him. "My photo album will always be superior to yours."

"We'll see," he challenged.

The penguin exhibit was on the other side of the zoo, but we finally made it an hour later after a carousel ride and a cotton candy break.

"Look at the penguins, baby. You see them?"

"Yeah, I see them."

"I was talking to Nori," I fussed, elbowing him in the gut. He laughed as he clutched his stomach.

"It's highly frowned upon to attack the disabled." I rolled my eyes and focused on Nori, who was actively trying to launch herself out of the stroller. "Let her get down."

"There are too many people around. I don't want her to wander off."

"She'll be fine. We're right here. Let Baby Bird spread her tiny wings."

"I thought she was Little Shark?"

“I mean...pterodactyls were basically shark birds,” Anthony reported. “Are you really going to let our daughter miss this immersive experience? Look at that adorable face and tell her no.”

I leaned into the stroller and firmly said no.

“You’re as cold as this enclosure, Simone,” Anthony chuckled as he removed Nori from the stroller. Nori pointed to the Emperor penguin that toddled in our direction. She flapped her arms in excitement.

“Mama!”

“I see it, baby. It’s a penguin. Can you say penguin?”

She didn’t even try. She just grinned and reached out for it.

An older woman approached us. “I saw the three of you and had to come by and pay my compliments. You’re an adorable little family.”

I looked at Anthony, expecting him to correct her.

Oh, she’s just the nanny. She’s my surrogate and my nanny. It’s actually a complicated story—

“Thank you,” he replied with a sneaky grin.

I glanced away when I felt a flutter in my belly.

Why do I feel this way?

“Why didn’t you correct her?” I asked as we continued our tour of the exhibit.

He raised a brow and looked down at me. “Tell her what?”

I gestured between us wildly. “That we aren’t together.”

“But we are.”

“You know what I mean. That we’re not...like a family.”

He stopped. “We are like a family, Simone. We are... family. You, me, and Nori. You’re my family.”

My cheeks heated. “You know what I meant,” I said, frowning.

He laughed and poked my cheek. “You pout just like your daughter.”

Anthony and Nori walked ahead, and I stood, watching his back as he spoke to her. He stopped and turned around once he noticed my absence. “Coming?”

I caught up with a shake of my head. Anthony Powell was too charming for his own good.

Anthony

The sun relentlessly beat down on us as we continued our zoo tour. For once, since my accident, I wasn't suffering from extreme leg pain due to the narcotics I took that morning; however, that discomfort was exchanged for another affliction—90-degree weather.

“I don't know about y'all, but I'm ready for a break,” Simone said as we approached a small play area. Nori started squirming in my arms and whined to be put down.

“Yeah, I could use one myself,” I admitted, finding a vacant seat under the shade for my family and myself.

My family. Was I presumptuous for calling us that? Did I make Simone uncomfortable?

“Nori, I know you want to play, but I need you to give me a few moments of your time while I reapply your sunscreen. You are tanning something fierce,” Simone complained as she reached into the diaper bag for the children's sunscreen. “You could use some, too, you know?”

“I'm fine.”

“I don't think you are. Your nose is looking a little red.”

“I'm touched that you care about me so much,” I mocked, pulling a bottle of juice and water out of the cooler.

“Care about you?” It's called human decency,” Simone teased as she greased our impatient child down.

“You're vicious,” I chuckled, preparing Nori a juice and water cocktail—more water than juice, as directed by her

mother.

“Ju...ju...ju...ju...,” Nori stuttered, reaching for the sippy cup.

“Are you trying to say juice?” I queried. “I’ll be honest with you. I’ll be offended if you say juice before Daddy.”

“Ju...juuuuice.”

My face slackened in disbelief. I slowly turned to Simone, who was laughing behind her hand. “Did you hear that b.s.?”

“I...I...I’m sorry. I don’t mean to laugh, but it seemed so deliberate on her part.”

“Laugh it up. She’ll be a daddy’s girl in no time.”

“In your dreams, Anthony, but seriously, give it some time. It’s not like I was practicing the word with her when it was just the two of us.”

I handed Nori the pink sippy cup. She sucked some of the juice concoction before handing it back to me and walking towards the little kid’s play area. I wanted to chase after her and hold her hand while she was around other children, but I resisted. Instead, I took a note from Simone’s parenting playbook and allowed Nori to explore independently.

“What did you plan on telling her about me?”

“Excuse me?” Simone asked, eyebrows knitted in confusion. I turned towards her and propped my arm up on the back of the bench.

“When she became old enough to realize that some children come from a two-parent household and asked about where her father was, what did you plan on telling her?”

“The truth.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. How else would I explain it? Nori, your daddy was a soldier, and he went off to war and never came back?”

I grinned at her cheekiness. “That’s one way of telling it.”

“I didn’t want to lie because, deep down, I knew. I knew you’d pop back up in our lives one day...and I was right. I just wasn’t prepared.”

My eyes trailed away from Simone’s to find Nori stumbling behind a butterfly. She fell flat on her face on the rubber playmat. Her wails made my chest tighten, and she struggled to pick herself off the ground. I jumped to my feet, ready to rescue her, when Simone grabbed me by the back of my shirt.

“It’s okay, Anthony. Let her pick herself up if she can. We won’t always be there to pick up the pieces.”

“But she’s hurt,” I protested, somewhat exasperated by Simone’s lack of concern.

“She’s fine. She just wants to be comforted. Relax.”

“How do you know that? She’s crying.”

“Yeah, but kids have different cries, and that’s not an “I’m hurt” cry. You’ll learn the difference soon enough.” I sat and chewed my bottom lip. I waited anxiously for Nori to pick herself up. I released a pent-up sigh when she wobbled in our direction with fat tears rolling down her face. My eyes widened when she came to me instead of her mother. I looked at Simone guiltily. Instead of being annoyed by Nori’s choice, Simone smiled encouragingly. “Don’t be shy. Our daughter wants to be comforted by her father.”

Thank God she’s not jealous.

I picked up Nori and placed her on my shoulder.

“It’s okay, baby. Daddy’s here.”

“We’re...home,” I groaned as I shifted the SUV into the park. “Get out.”

“You first,” Simone challenged as she reclined her seat back.

“Why does it look like you’re prepared to spend the night in the truck?”

“Because I am. I can barely move,” she complained.

“Welcome to my everyday life,” I joked morbidly. I was in so much fucking pain from my leg that I was tempted to limp into the garage and cut the son-of-a-bitch off. I tensed when I felt Simone’s hand on my thigh. Her touch was gentle but unexpected.

“Go inside, Anthony. Grab the Epsom salt from underneath my bathroom sink and pour it into a hot bath. I got Nori.”

“That sounds like too much work,” I huffed. “Can’t we smell like outside for one night?”

Simone delivered her signature side eye that Nori inherited from her. “That’s gross. No one is getting in a bed without bathing tonight.”

“The couches in the living room are leather. We can take a cat nap and shower later. No offense, but you look like you could use a nap. Plus, Nori is down for the count,” I reminded her after checking the rear-view mirror. Nori hadn’t graduated from a rear-facing car seat, so I had to rely on the mirror on the headrest to see her chubby face. “She’ll be so distraught when her face paint is washed off.”

“Face paint or not, she’ll still be a little shark,” Simone replied.

“Thank you, Simone.”

“For what?”

“For allowing me to tag along today. It was...nice.”

She finally found the strength to release her seatbelt and opened the passenger door.

“You don’t have to thank me. It was a family outing, after all,” she mentioned before sliding out of the truck.

There’s that word again...family.

Chapter Sixteen

Simone

One Month Later

“Is that you, Simone?”

I turned in the dairy aisle of Whole Foods to find none other than attorney Jonathan Baker with a basket teeming with food. It was enough to feed a basketball team.

“Jonathan? What are you doing here?”

Anthony emerged from the next aisle. “I found it. We should have everything.” He paused when he finally noticed his friend. “Hey, man. What are you doing here?”

Jonathan nodded at his basket. “The same as you. Just trying to get a few things.”

“A few things?” I asked, snorting at his response. “I think you might need another cart.”

“Let’s hope not. These children are eating me out of the house and home. How’s it going?” he asked, his eyes trailing to Nori in the basket. He waved at her. Unfortunately, it was past her nap time, resulting in a half-hearted flap of her hand.

“Good. Good. We were gonna put a few burgers on the grill tonight and let Nori play in the kiddie pool,” Anthony explained.

“Sounds like a diverting time,” he replied with a grin.

Diverting? This man needs to loosen up.

“It should be. Do you have the kids with you this weekend?”

“No, they’re with their grandparents this weekend.”

“Why don’t you come by?” Anthony suggested. “We’ll be grilling around six. It’s nothing fancy, but you’re more than welcome to join us.”

“Thanks for the invite. I’ll come. If you’ll excuse me, I need to swing by the booze aisle before heading to checkout. It’s unbecoming to arrive to a function empty-handed.”

We said our goodbyes and a sense of anxiety started to overwhelm me.

“Simone? Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why do you ask?”

“You have this weird look on your face.”

“We’re expecting guests. Do we have enough food? There are toys all over the living room, and—”

“Relax, Simone. It’s just Jonathan. The man has three kids and lives off organic chicken nuggets and tater tots. Have you seen his house?” Anthony asked, voice raising an octave.

“Of course not.”

“His house looks like a tornado went through it. We’re good. So what if there are a few toys here and there? You can damn near eat off the floor.”

Anthony's words were reassuring, but still...

"It's just Jonathan," Anthony sighed as he watched me furiously sweep the living room.

"It doesn't matter," I chastised quietly. "Everything must be spic and span for guests. I don't care how much of a train wreck his house is. No one will ever be able to part their lips and call our home a train wreck."

"I'll help you."

"Will you?" I asked, brightening up at his gracious offer.

"No," he answered with a bored look.

I rolled my eyes.

The man is useless and snarky—a real pain in my ass.

The doorbell rang, and I paused to check my watch.

Six o'clock on the dot.

"I'll answer the door. You might want to tend to the grill. It smells like something's burning," I taunted. Anthony sniffed the air before limping towards the backyard.

He can be so gullible sometimes.

I answered the door and found Jonathan standing there with a case of beer in one hand and a bouquet of sunflowers in the other.

"Flowers?"

"It's an apology for being an accessory to kidnapping."

My eyebrows met in confusion. "Kidnapping?"

"You know...for my role in helping Anthony get Nori."

"Oh, that. You were only doing your job," I said, accepting the flowers.

"Wow. A few months ago, you would've told me to shove those flowers where the sun doesn't shine."

I giggled, knowing he was onto something.

“You’re right, but...things are different now, and I like to believe that everything happened for a reason.”

“That’s an optimistic way of viewing things,” he commented, rocking on his heels.

“Come in, Jon. I can call you Jon, right? Jonathan seems so formal. These are beautiful, by the way.”

“Jon is fine. Wow. Did Anthony hire a housekeeper? He’s usually not this tidy.”

I beamed a little with pride. I knew my hard work would pay off.

“No, I like to keep a clean house.”

“Is Anthony making you clean, too? That wasn’t in your contract. If he’s making you clean, then we should renegotiate your contract. He should be paying you more.”

“Thank you for the concern, but Anthony doesn’t force me to cook or clean. Honestly, I have a lot of free time on my hands, and I don’t mind staying busy.”

“Being Nori’s full-time nanny doesn’t keep you busy?” he questioned.

I shook my head. “Not really. Anthony is a very involved father, and when it comes to Nori, we do most things together.”

“I see,” he replied, following me into the backyard.

“Jonathan, you made it,” Anthony called from the patio of his magnificent outdoor kitchen.

It has a pizza oven, for goodness’ sake!

“Are those flowers?”

“They are,” Jonathan answered. Anthony raised his brows and looked between us with a tight smile.

“For me? Whatever for?”

“Well, no, they’re...I actually brought them for Simone.”

Anthony fell silent before forcing his smile wider. “Simone?” He echoed my name with a twinge of suspicion.

“I’ll bring you some next time, buddy,” Jonathan said with a playful grin, seemingly unaware of the weird energy between them.

I cleared my throat to cut the tension. “I think Nori should be up from her nap. Is the kiddie pool ready for her, Anthony?”

“Yep,” he replied without breaking eye contact with Jonathan.

“I’ll be back.”

I entered Nori’s whimsical nursery, which reminded me of a fairy wonderland, and found her rolling around in her crib. She latched onto the bars and pulled herself up as soon as she saw me.

“Mama...juice.”

“Um...let’s get you cleaned up first because I can smell you from here.”

She bent down to pick up her sippy cup. “Mama, juice,” she fussed, banging the cup against the crib.

I don’t look forward to her Terrible Twos. Anthony will have to deal with all of that attitude.

“I’ll get you juice in a minute. Let’s get cleaned up, and then you can go swimming,” I explained, lifting her out and keeping her at arm’s length. Nori babbled and made her demands known as I cleaned and dressed her in a blue shark bathing suit with a pink tutu that her father had purchased her. I filled her sippy cup and entered the backyard, finding the men awkwardly standing with beers in their hands as they stared at the grilling meat. “Look who I found.”

Anthony cracked a genuine smile as Nori reached out for him. “I’d love to hold you, sweetheart, but the grill isn’t safe

for little sharks.”

“Hey, Nori. How’s it going? Hopefully, that nap put you in a better mood,” Jonathan said.

Nori bashfully placed her head on my shoulder.

“Sorry, she’s still shy,” I apologized.

“Don’t apologize. She’ll warm up to me eventually.”

“The food is ready,” Anthony announced, interrupting our conversation.

“Already? Sorry, Little Shark. You’ll have to wait until after dinner to splash around. Anthony, you’ve been on your feet for a minute; take Nori, and I’ll fix your plate.”

“My leg is fine, Simone,” he clipped. I sucked my cheeks in, not impressed with the tone he was taking with me. I only wanted what was best for him. Lately, his pride had convinced him to ditch his cane. I’d find it in various places: in the back of his SUV, under Nori’s crib, in the umbrella stand near the front door, you name it. By nightfall, Anthony was a groaning mess, keeping me up with his loud curses and complaints about his “got damn leg” that traveled through the walls.

Refusing to react to his tantrum, I grabbed a plate and started loading it with food for Nori and me.

“Aht! Aht! Aht!” I chastised when Nori tried to put her fingers in the potato salad. “No, ma’am.”

She motioned at her mouth repeatedly.

“Is she...is she using ASL?” Jonathan asked.

“Anthony thought it was a good idea to start teaching her sign language.”

“Are you making progress?”

“Simone and I have made progress, but sometimes Nori can be a little stubborn,” Anthony interrupted, setting his plate beside me.

“A trait she gets from her father, no doubt,” Jonathan commented with a smirk. “So...Jon,” Anthony started, sliding Nori from my lap. You wouldn’t find me complaining.

Nori can play in his potato salad.

“How is your ex-wife?”

I paused before biting into my burger.

Why would Anthony bring up this man’s ex-wife?

Jonathan’s brows dipped before answering. “She’s...alive. At least she was this morning when she cashed her child support check. We’re not really on speaking terms. But you know this.”

It was quiet for another minute. There was tension between the two, but I didn’t want to pry. I broke the tension again.

“How has work been, Jon?”

“Good. Great, actually. There will never be a shortage of people suing.”

“Speaking of, how are my cases going?” Anthony interrupted.

“You might want to refrain from asking. My hourly rates double on my day off.”

Anthony sighed. “You’re always about the money, Jonathan.”

“Well, as they say, money makes the world go round,” he responded.

“They also say that money is the root of all evil,” Anthony volleyed back.

“To which I’d say people who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.”

“Good thing my exterior is made of stucco.”

These two are having a good old-fashioned pissing match, and I’m not here for it.

I was about to address their behavior when Jonathan changed the subject. “You’ve lived alone for so long, Ant. How are you finding your two new roommates?” he asked, reclining in his chair.

Anthony took a swig of his beer and stared his friend down. “I’d hardly call her a roommate. It’s been fun. I enjoy raising Nori with her. She’s an excellent mother.”

“I see. It must be nice to have a nanny, maid, and chef.”

Anthony narrowed his eyes at him. “Fuck you, Jon.”

“Hey! Language!” I shouted.

“I apologize, Simone,” Anthony said, standing to his feet. “I...I gotta go make a call,” he rushed out before limping into the house.

Silence settled between us until Jonathan brought up a memory I wished to forget.

“How have you been since being reunited with Nori?” he asked, cocking his head to the side with an inquisitive gaze.

“I’m happy...and grateful. I appreciate you showing up when you did. I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for you.”

“Don’t thank me. We can call it for what it was—divine intervention.”

“Divine intervention,” I repeated as I wiped away tears.

“May I confess something to you?”

“Sure.”

Jonathan looked down. “I want you to know I would’ve been heartbroken if anything happened to you, Simone. You’re...you’re an amazing woman.”

“Thank you. You’re a...great lawyer. It’s infuriating, actually.”

His lips turned down slightly. “Sometimes, there are downfalls of being a great lawyer,” he expressed.

“Like what?” I pressed.

“Like screwing over good people.”

“Then why do you do it?”

Jonathan clasped his hands together in his lap. “I’ll tell you what. Go on a date with me on Friday, and I’ll tell you.” My mouth dropped in shock. I wasn’t expecting that...at all. “Is everything okay? Did I cross a line?”

“No, no, no. It’s...just...it was so unexpected. It’s been a while since I’ve been on a date. It’s been years, actually,” I mumbled, bouncing Nori in my lap.

“Really? I find that hard to believe.”

“The last time I went on the date was nearly five years ago. I was focused on other things, and then Nori came along. Dating was the furthest thing from my mind.”

“Now is the perfect time to focus on yourself if you ask me. Anthony is clearly extremely hands-on when it comes to Nori. He can spare you for a night.”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “Did you write my contract in my favor, hoping it’d convince me to date you?”

“No, your contract has nothing to do with this. That was me doing the right thing—righting a wrong and reuniting a child with her mother. Please don’t feel obligated to go out with me because I did the right thing.”

I took a moment to contemplate my response. He seemed sincere, and for once, he wasn’t in business attire giving me matter-of-fact responses or the verbal run around. He even abandoned his glasses for the day, showing off glowing green eyes. He was handsome, well-spoken, and polite, but he was also Anthony’s friend.

But I’m single and haven’t been on a date in nearly five years. What’s the worst that can happen? We find out that we’re not compatible and go our separate ways?

“Sure. I’m free Friday night.”

“Wonderful. I’ll pick you up at 6:30?”

“I’d prefer to drive myself.”

“No problem.”

“You’re going on a date...together?”

I jolted in my seat and turned around to see Anthony standing there.

Damn. I didn’t even hear him.

“Yeah. Are you good to watch Nori on Friday night?”

He cleared his throat before answering. “It’s fine. I can watch her.”

Chapter Seventeen

Anthony

I sucked my teeth when I received Simone’s text asking me which dress she should wear on her date with my best friend.

Neither, was what I wanted to say, but I didn’t want her to think it was because I’d found the dresses unattractive on her. It was the complete opposite. Both dresses were tantalizing—sexy but still modest, something only Simone could pull off. I imagined which dress I would prefer if we went on a date.

Anthony: The black one.

Simone: You must've read my mind. Thanks. How is your appointment going?

Anthony: Still waiting to be seen. If they don't call me back in the next five minutes, then I'm leaving.

Simone: I'd drive you right back.

I snorted and rolled my eyes. She would.

Anthony: How long will you be out?

Simone: Why?

Anthony: I wouldn't be able to sleep knowing you weren't home safe.

Simone: Who says I'm coming home tonight?

My fingers curled around my phone, threatening to shatter it into a million pieces.

Simone: I'm joking. I won't be too late.

"Powell?" a nurse called.

Anthony: They're calling me back now. I'll see you soon.

I slid my phone into the pocket of my loose jogging shorts and followed the nurse to the examination rooms.

"Can you step on the scale for me, please?" My anxiety revved up when her eyebrows knitted together in what I could only imagine was disapproval.

"Is something wrong?"

"You gained 10 pounds since your last appointment. Is everything all right at home? You're not stress eating, are you?"

I bit back a smile. "Everything at home is perfect. My daughter's nanny keeps me well-fed, and I can't really go jogging, can I?"

"I guess not," she mumbled. "But there are other exercises you can do. Please step off and take a seat. I need to check your vitals. Do you have access to a pool, Mr. Powell?"

“I do, but I haven’t used it in forever.”

“My advice to you is to get back to swimming. It’s an excellent way to exercise and have fun,” she insisted as she wrapped a cuff around my arm. The thought of seeing Simone in a bathing suit was all the motivation I needed to set a reminder to call the pool cleaning company. “Your blood pressure is beautiful,” she complimented. “Do you have any questions before Dr. Christy joins you?”

“No.”

“He’ll be right in.”

I didn’t have to wait long for the overly upbeat doctor to enter the sterile room.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Powell. How are we feeling?”

Awful. The woman I have feelings for is going on a date with my best friend.

“In a lot of pain,” I answered candidly.

“Where are you at most days on a scale of 1-10?”

“10.”

“Have you been taking medication for pain management?”

“Not regularly. I don’t want to be addicted to that shit for the rest of my life.”

“Mhm,” Dr. Christy said as he reviewed my charts on his tablet. “You’ve been missing your physical therapy appointments. Have you at least been practicing your exercises at home?”

“Not really.”

“May I take a look?” he asked, setting his tablet on the counter.

“Knock yourself out,” I said, assuming the position as he donned medical gloves.

“Is there a particular time of the day when the pain is intolerable?”

“First thing in the morning,” I replied as he palpitated my leg.

“The muscles in your leg are tight, and because of that tightness, they’re most likely compressing against the nerves, making your pain worse.”

I covered my face with my arm and groaned loudly when Dr. Christy began to massage my thigh, loosening up the muscle.

“This is why you need to go to your physical therapy appointments,” the jovial man sang as he lifted my leg towards my chest.

“Noted,” I clipped.

“Any pain in your lower back?”

“Some, but not as much as my leg.”

I continued to hiss and groan as Dr. Christy continued to work my leg.

“You can sit up now. Any pain relief?”

I paused to evaluate myself. “I’d say I’m down to a 7.”

“That’s good. That was after five minutes, so imagine how much pain relief you’ll have if you’re compliant,” he conveyed, typing notes into the tablet.

“Will I ever be able to ditch this cane?”

“It’s possible, but we won’t know until you really put in the effort. Does your leg pain wake you up at night?”

“Sometimes.”

“How many times a week do you wake up from pain?”

“Maybe three.”

“Do you sleep with a body pillow?”

“No.”

“I recommend purchasing one. It will relieve the pressure in your leg at night and help with lower back pain. Any falls?”

“No,” I lied. The last thing I wanted him to do was freak out.

The next thing I know, he’s telling me I need to use a walker. Fuck...that...shit.

“Good. You also need to stretch and exercise that leg. Your next physical therapy appointment is next Friday. Please make it a priority. Do you have any questions for me?”

“No, Dr. Christy.”

“Perfect. Make an appointment to see me in six months. I’ll walk you to reception.”

I parked my car next to Jonathan’s assigned parking spot and entered the law office. We needed to have a gentleman’s chat.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Powell. I didn’t see you on the appointment book.”

“Good afternoon, Cara. I don’t have an appointment. This is a social call. Is Jonathan busy?”

“He doesn’t have another client for another hour; you can go on back.”

“Thanks, Cara. Have a good day.”

I moved with hurried steps like a man on a mission would. I could barely register the pain, thanks partly to my impromptu physical therapy appointment and anger.

I threw open the door without bothering to knock.

“Anthony, what are you doing here?” he asked, tossing his glasses onto his desk that was strewn with documents and folders.

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I would stop by.”

“That’s nice of you. Have a seat and take a load off that leg.”

“My leg is fine,” I growled stubbornly. Jonathan threw his hands up in resignation.

“Whatever you say, man.”

“Why?” I asked immediately.

“Why what?”

“Why Simone?”

His eyebrows crinkled in confusion. “Are you asking me why I asked Simone out?”

“Yes.”

“Because I’m not fucking blind. I know a good woman when I see one.”

“Explain your ex-wife then.”

He laughed lightheartedly. “With age comes wisdom, but seriously, Simone is a beautiful woman with a heart of gold, and I want to get to know her. Why do you care? I hope it’s not because you’ve fallen for her and you’re jealous because that’ll never fucking happen, especially after what you did to her.”

“What *we* did to her! You don’t get to sit here and pretend you didn’t play a role in taking Nori from her. You told me every way to break her down in court to win. She won’t forget that.”

Jonathan shrugged casually. “She must’ve forgotten if she agreed to go on a date with me. How many dates have you gone on with her?” He paused and allowed his question to linger in the air. “Listen, I know you feel shitty about how you handled things with Nori, but you can’t put that on me. You hired me to do a job, and I did it. I’m not even a family attorney, I’m a personal injury lawyer, but off the record, as your friend, I told you it was a bad fucking idea and urged you to at least seek joint custody, but you didn’t want to do that, and now you’re boohooing about it.” I licked my bottom lip and ran a hand through my already messy hair. “Do you want me to cancel the date? I’ll do it if it means I’ll lose our friendship if I go out with her. I mean, technically, she is the mother of your child, and you’re cohabitating. It was inevitable that you’d fall for her. Tell me what to do, Anthony.”

“You know, there is a little invention called a spoon, right?” I asked, holding out a pink color-changing spoon to my daughter. She accepted it and threw it on the floor.

“No, ma’am,” Simone chastised as she entered the kitchen, her heels clicking against the polished tile. I would’ve laughed at the “oh shit” face Nori made, but I was too mesmerized by Simone’s appearance to react appropriately. She wore a black spaghetti strap dress with a daring split in the front, exposing a thigh. She paired her dress with diamond studs, a matching necklace, and a tennis bracelet. Her strappy black heels gave her a little height, making her calves irresistible.

“Anthony, don’t let Nori get over on you. Don’t be afraid to discipline her. She knows better than that. Remember, her bedtime is at 8:00, and make sure she makes it to her crib.”

“But I like it when she sleeps with me,” I protested, still unable to take my eyes off her as she rushed through the kitchen. She checked the time on the microwave and smacked her lips. “I’m running late and don’t have time to argue with you. Nori needs to sleep in her crib. I’ll be checking the baby monitor. I have to go.”

“Is he here?”

“No, I’m driving myself.”

“Where are you going for dinner?”

“This Italian place on Broadway.”

I nodded. “It’s a great restaurant. If I were you, I’d try the Bella Italia; just a suggestion.”

“Bella Italia...got it. Bye, Nori. Be good for your dad.”

Nori smiled and waved her mother off.

“Wait, wait, wait,” I called out as I snatched Nori out of the highchair, not paying any mind to her fingers covered with mashed potatoes. “Let me give you some money,” I said, catching up to her in the foyer.

“For what?” Simone asked quizzically.

“In case of an emergency.”

“I have my own money, Anthony. I should be back home before 11:00. Take care of our girl.”

I stood helplessly in the doorway as I watched the woman I'd been falling for leave to go on a date with another man. I grabbed Nori's wrist and waved at her mother.

"Tell your mother bye, and you hope she has a horrible time and never wants to see Uncle Jonathan again. Ugh, I sound like a lunatic. Let's finish eating, then lay on the couch and watch Ms. Rachel. We'll pretend that we won't be thinking about what your mother is doing every second. How does that sound?"

"Mama!"

"Wrong. You're supposed to say, Daddy."

"Mama!"

"You'll get it right one of these days, kid."

Chapter Eighteen

Simone

I adjusted my hair again, tucking a stray curl behind my ear as I touched up my lipstick at a red light. The upscale Italian restaurant wasn't far from Anthony's place, and after reading the glowing online reviews, I was ready to eat. The light turned green, and my phone rang. My stomach flopped at the sight of Jonathan's name.

"Hey, Jonathan. I'm about five minutes away."

"I'm sorry, Simone," Jonathan greeted, his deep voice filling my car over the GPS instructions. "My ex brought the kids over at the last minute. It's an emergency—her sister's in the hospital and—"

“Okay, but how long have you known you needed to cancel?”

Jonathan sighed heavily. “Simone, I’m—”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Can we reschedule?” he asked hopefully.

I chewed my bottom lip, buying myself time to formulate my response.

Let him down easy, Simone.

“I’m sorry, but no. My time is valuable, and while I understand life happens, I think I deserve more than a five-minute head’s up that you have to cancel. I wish your sister-in-law a speedy recovery.”

I held my breath and waited for his response.

“That was my bad, but I respect your decision. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, me too,” I replied, making a left at the next light. The restaurant’s sign shimmered under the streetlight. “I’ll see you around,” I said before hanging up and dialing Anthony without much thought.

“Everything okay?” he asked after the first ring. I smiled and rested my head against the headrest.

Why do I feel he’s been sitting by the phone since I left?

“I’m fine, but it looks like I’ll be going on a solo date. Jonathan had to cancel.”

Anthony was quiet for a moment. “Oh...that’s, I’m sorry. That...sucks.”

He does not sound sorry.

“Yeah,” I said casually as I watched satisfied diners filter out the restaurant’s busy entrance.

“You should still enjoy your night out. Don’t forget to try the Bella Italia. You’ll never look at Alfredo the same.”

“Thanks for the recommendation. How’s Nori?”

“Being an absolute terror.”

“Really?”

“Not at all. Little Shark is about to get some warm milk and go down for the count. She’s been fighting it.”

“Oh. Is she doing that thing where she’s tugging on her hair?”

“She’ll be bald by the time you return home.”

“That’s reassuring. Maybe I should come home.”

“No, I got this, Simone. I’m getting off the phone now. Nori says she loves you and goodnight.”

The phone disconnected, and I sighed. Dining alone was an experience I mostly avoided if I could. The pitying looks from other patrons were too depressing. However, a night off was a night off, and I’d make the best of it.

I entered the dimly lit restaurant and was met by the aromatics of dough, fresh herbs, and wine. Soft, soothing jazz music played in the background, adding to the romantic motif. I felt out of place, but the welcoming smile from the hostess propelled me forward.

“Welcome to Rossellini’s. Do you have a reservation?”

“It should be under Baker,” I said confidently.

“Jonathan Baker?”

“Correct, but I’ll be dining alone tonight.”

She smiled gently. “That’s okay. Sometimes we are our best company. Please follow me.”

This place is pretty snazzy. I should’ve accepted Anthony’s offer to pay for my dinner.

Minutes later, I was sipping on a robust pinot noir that was three times my former hourly salary—a recommendation from my server. A trill came from my purse. I retrieved my cell phone and found an apologetic text message from Jonathan. I

was about to return my phone to my bag when I received another notification.

Movement in Nursery.

I tapped the notification, and a smile tugged at the corner of my lips. Anthony held Nori in his arms carefully while rocking her to sleep. His lips turned up into a small, loving smile when Nori patted his face with a hand. I was awestruck when he began singing “Be Without You” to her. His voice was deep but melodious, touching something in my heart.

He played with Nori’s hand while his voice blanketed her, slowing her movements. He looked directly into the camera when he reached the part where Mary J. Blige sang about waiting up until her partner got home. It was as if he knew I was watching.

I want to go home. I just wanna be there...with them...with him.

I flagged my server down, asked for my meal to be boxed to go, and paid the bill. I raced home, not bothering to think more about the strange impulse to be with Anthony Powell.

After what felt like a lifetime, I pulled into the driveway. I grabbed my doggy bag and entered our home.

“Simone? Is that you?” Anthony called from the kitchen.

“Yeah,” I squeaked. I cleared my throat before speaking again. “Yeah, I’m home.”

“Is everything okay?” he asked, strolling into the foyer with his cane.

“Everything...is...it’s fine. I just felt like all eyes were on me.”

“That’s the sucky part about dining alone. The staring makes you feel like a weirdo.”

“Exactly.” His eyes darted to my take-out bag. I lifted it lamely, “Wanna share?”

Anthony smirked. “Did you order the Bella Italia?”

“I did.”

“Well...in that case...there’s a new movie out I wanted to rent. Join me in the media room?”

“Sure. I’m gonna check on Nori first.”

“I swear to God, I’ll never forgive you if you wake her up.”

“You worry too much. I’m just going to pop my head in.”

“You can always check the camera,” he reasoned in a taunting tone.

He definitely knows I was watching.

I rolled my eyes and followed behind him, removing my heels once we entered the mini-movie theater. The screen spanned 120 inches, covering a large portion of the wall. Below it sat a glass entertainment cabinet that held many gaming consoles. I plopped down onto a sofa that comfortably accommodated six people and tucked my legs beneath me. He dimmed the lights and sat beside me. My mouthwatering food was soon forgotten, replaced by his cologne’s fresh, clean scent.

“Are you...smelling me?”

I reeled back in shock.

Apparently, my body has a mind of its own.

“No, I—”

“You know I don’t believe your bullshit story, right?”

“What bullshit story?”

“About how you’re home early because you felt weird eating alone. Tell me why you’re really home,” Anthony challenged.

“You’re not being fair,” I whispered. His lips quirked before returning to the unreadable mask he had perfected throughout his lifetime.

“How am I not being fair?”

“Because I strongly suspect you know why I’m here.”

“I’m not a mind reader, Simone.”

I sucked in a breath before putting my big girl panties on and confessing. “I wanted to spend the night with you.”

“Yeah?” he asked with a crooked grin that was hard to ignore.

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad because I have something to tell you.” He paused and looked at my lips before returning eye contact. “I booked plane tickets.”

I blinked out of my stupor. “Where are you going?” I whispered back. I didn’t understand why we were whispering, but I liked it. It was intimate, and it felt like we were passing secrets only we knew.

“You’re a bad listener, Simone. I said I booked plane tickets.”

“As in more than one?”

“As in three. We’re going to Florida. An extraordinary someone has a birthday coming up.”

My birthday is in a few weeks. He’s talking about me.

Before I knew what I was doing, I leaned forward and pressed my lips against his. They were soft and sweet, better than I imagined.

He stilled, not reciprocating my advance.

Oh, shit. Did I read the room wrong?

I lurched back and looked away in embarrassment. “I am...so sorry. That was so unprofessional of me. I-I got caught up in the moment, and I—” I stood, clamoring nonsensically. I edged away when Anthony’s large hand wrapped around my wrist. He snatched me down into his lap

with unexpected force. He stared into my eyes, cupped my face, and lifted my chin.

“Don’t apologize,” he murmured. “You gave me what I wanted,” he whispered.

Our lips collided desperately. His hand sank from my face to the nape of my neck, forcing me closer than I thought I’d ever be to Anthony Powell.

I felt him beneath me—hot and hard as steel. My heart pounded in my ears when he forced me to straddle him. His grip on me was firm, and his caressing tongue stole my breath. I was pressed close against him, but it was not enough. I needed more. I wanted him deep, filling me, marking me and making me his.

His hands received the message and hiked my dress above my hips. A wanton moan escaped me as he rocked me over his erection.

Suddenly, he pulled away; however, our lips still touched as we caught our breaths. Our chests heaved in cadence.

“If...you want to leave, now’s the time. The last thing on my mind is watching a movie and eating pasta.”

I nodded softly and stood on shaky legs. He watched me with evident desire as I pulled my dress down. My face burned red hot when I noticed a wet spot on the front of his gray sweats. It was from my soaked panties.

Oh, my God.

“That...sounds like a great idea. Goodnight, Anthony.”

He smirked and adjusted himself. “Goodnight, Simone.”

I left the media room on unsteady legs and an indescribable ache between my thighs.

“Damn...I should’ve stayed.”

Chapter Nineteen

Anthony

A moan escaped me when Simone bit my bottom lip with a gentle tug. It'd been so long that I barely recognized the sound. She continued to nibble at my lip as my fingers ghosted her warm parted thighs that straddled my lap. My hips snapped

up fluidly when she sucked my abused flesh into her mouth, releasing it with a loud pop. Her arousal...her sweet juices leaked down my dick into my pubic hair. I reached between us, collected her it, and teased her clit, providing more friction.

“Mmmm, Anthony,” she whispered as she rode me at an unhurried pace—making love to me. Her pleas were tender, wanton, and full of need and desire. I took over and was eternally grateful my leg was behaving. One hand gripped her ass, and the other held the back of her neck, not allowing her to escape from me. Her warm breath from her labored breathing ghosted my face. I inhaled deeply, nearly getting off on her scent—she smelled like us—mother, father, friend, and lover.

What’s happening? Did we wind up in bed together after the kiss we shared last night?

“I love you, Anthony,” she whispered against my lips. My mouth dropped in shock.

“A-are you sure?” I stammered.

“I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life. You’re an amazing father, and you take care of me so well,” she paused to kiss me again. “Come in me.”

“What?” I asked, unsure if I heard her correctly.

“Come in me. I want to have your baby. For real, this time. I can see it—a perfect mix of me and you. I want a boy this time. Can you do that for me, Daddy?”

My dick twitched inside of her. He was certainly on board, and if I was honest...so was I, especially after that heated session last night. Simone was not only a wonderful mother but a wonderful human being. She was genuine, kind, patient, and more forgiving than she should be, but that was what I loved about her.

Love? Do I love Simone? No, that’s not the question. Of course, I love her. She’s the mother of my child. The question is, am I in love with her?

“You want to have my baby?”

“Yes,” Simone whispered.

“How bad?” I asked, quickening my pace. My balls were tightening, warning me of my impending release.

“Real bad.”

My tongue invaded her mouth as my hips snapped. The sound of her ass clapping on my thighs vibrated against the walls. I couldn't get enough of it—the taste of her, the sound of her moans and pleas begging me to go harder and faster, the feel of her sweet nectar drenching my cock—I was addicted.

I came, filling her tight pussy with my seed, praying I didn't disappoint, and gave her what she wanted. A baby boy—the perfect mixture of us.

“Mama!”

I jolted awake, drenched in a cold sweat and other unmentionable bodily fluids. I looked to my right and found Nori grabbing onto the sheet, holding herself up.

What the fuck? Was I dreaming? It felt so fucking real.

“Nori? Where did you go?” I heard Simone call out from the hallway. “Nori?”

“Mama!” she squawked, alerting her mother of her location.

Simone popped her head into my bedroom with a warm but shy smile. “I should've known you'd sneak in here. Good morning, Anthony,” she said, entering the room. She scooped Nori up and kissed her cheeks, making our daughter squeal in delight. “I'm sorry if she woke you up. I was in her nursery, choosing her outfit for the day. I swear I turned around only for a few seconds and—Anthony? Are you okay?”

I clenched the sheet around me tighter and was relieved when my erection deflated.

“Mhm,” I replied, still trying to catch my breath from my orgasmic sex fantasy about putting another baby in her—the

natural way.

“Are you sick? You’re breathing heavily, and you look a little flushed.”

“No, I’m not sick.”

“Did you have a bad dream or something?”

“Y-yeah. Sometimes the car accident comes back to me.”

Simone’s eyebrows furrowed together in concern. “Are you seeing a therapist?”

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked, attempting to distract her from her line of questioning. She grinned wickedly.

“Whatever you decide to cook for us, I suppose.”

There I go sticking my foot in my mouth.

“I guess I should return the favor since you’ve been doing most of the cooking since you moved in. Give me a few minutes, and I’ll meet you downstairs.” Simone smiled triumphantly and breezed out of my bedroom with her long white sundress billowing behind her. “I’m so fucked,” I groaned, falling back against my pillows.

Ice cold water drowned me as I hung my head below the shower head. I’d hoped it would bring me back to reality and wash away all the impure thoughts of filling Simone Livingston with my cum out of my head.

So far, it’s not working.

Knocking on the door interrupted me.

“Anthony?”

“Is everything okay, Simone?” I asked, turning off the shower.

“I’m not sure. Jonathan is here.”

Jonathan’s here? Why?

“Were you expecting him?”

“No. He said he had to go over some legal matters with you. I told him to wait in your office.”

“Okay. I’ll be there soon.”

“I’ll start on breakfast.”

“No. I said I’ll make breakfast, and that’s what I’m going to do.”

“I won’t argue with you. Nori wants French toast, sausage links, and strawberries.”

I smirked and toweled off. “Is that what she told you?” I challenged.

“Yes.”

“I find that very hard to believe, considering the only word she utters is ‘mama.’”

“That’s all she says around *you*,” she taunted through the door.

“I don’t doubt it,” I agreed before opening the door. Simone’s mouth dropped, just as it did the first night when she caught me in a towel. In a flash, my lips crushed against hers. Simone froze, but only for a second. Her fingers threaded through my damp hair as I pushed her toward my bed. It wasn’t until her body bounced against my mattress that she came to her senses. I laughed when she attempted to scramble away from me and caught her by her ankle. She yelped when I pulled her back.

“Ant—”

“Shhhhhhh. I’m not going to do anything to you. We’re stopping here,” I soothed. Simone’s body sagged with relief as she fell against the mattress. “We should talk about...this.”

“What’s this?”

“This physical attraction we have for each other. You do realize this will probably happen again, right? You opened Pandora’s Box when you kissed me.”

“I know,” she whispered. “Just...I’m still trying to wrap my head around it. It doesn’t feel real. We can talk later tonight after we put Nori to bed.”

“Tonight it is, then. Leave before I go for seconds.”

“You’re diabolical, Anthony Powell,” she joked as she scooted off the bed.

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Hey, Jonathan, I wasn’t expecting you. I hope you’re not billing me for these house calls.”

“No, not this time. It’s part business, part social call.”

“Are you staying for breakfast?” I asked, motioning him to follow me to the kitchen.

“No, I won’t be that long,” he commented, carrying Nori to the kitchen. I smirked when my child tried to death roll out of his grasp as she reached for me. “She’s grown quite fond of you in a short time.”

“I know,” I replied, reaching for her. “I think it’s finally sinking in that I’m her father. Now, if I can get her to say daddy, then all will be right in the world. But what brings you to our neck of the woods?” I asked, strapping Nori into her highchair.

“I wanted to discuss your case against your employer and the transportation company. Are you sure you don’t want to discuss this matter somewhere private, like your office?”

“I can step out,” Simone offered.

“No. This is your home. You don’t have to leave. Take a seat,” I said, tilting my chin to one of the stools at the kitchen island. I turned to wash my hands in the sink. “Whatever you have to say, you can say it in front of Simone.”

“Sure,” Jonathan responded in a clipped tone oozing with disapproval. I didn’t have time to worry about his sudden change in tone; my daughter loudly shrieked and slammed her

hands against her highchair table. I opened the refrigerator and located a plastic container of mango puree that Simone had prepared for her, sat it on the tray, and gave her a spoon.

“Don’t forget the bib, please. I want to go shopping for our trip after breakfast, and I don’t feel like bathing and redressing her,” Simone reminded me gently.

“Trip? Where are you going?” Jonathan asked a hint of betrayal in his tone.

“Oh, um, Anthony surprised us with a vacation for my birthday. We’re going to Florida.”

“That sounds like a fun...family vacation,” he responded.

“I’m excited, but I’m a little nervous as well. I’ve never been on a plane before,” Simone confessed.

“You’ll be fine,” I reassured her, pulling the bread out of the bread box. “What’s going on, Jonathan?”

“I’m still working your employer. The negotiations have reached a standstill. They don’t want to pay what you’re asking.”

“I’m not surprised, but they owe me. I was supposed to be on leave when they strong-armed me to go on that trip. I have the texts and emails to prove that it was less of a suggestion and more of a threat. I’m not asking for a lot. I think asking for five years’ salary, including what I would’ve made in bonuses and health benefits coverage for my family is more than reasonable.”

Jonathan shook his head. “They don’t want to shell out upwards of ten million dollars.”

My eyes flicked to Simone when she choked on her water. “I-I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting that. Maybe I should leave,” she said, starting to rise. I pointed back at her chair, and she sat.

“Go back to those bastards and tell them that I want my money, one way or another. Tell them to pay up. They tried to

fucking bury this. You're telling me that no one returned the impound lot's call about *their* company vehicle?"

"I know. Your legal department was giving me the run around when you disappeared. They don't want to be held liable for this."

"No shit. What's the news with the transportation company?"

He smiled for the first time since his arrival. "I have excellent news. As you know, the driver who t-boned you was found liable for the accident for running a red light. They also found that he was under the influence."

"I know that already. Tell me something I don't know," I urged as I whisked the French toast batter.

"Some employees, who wish to remain anonymous, testified that he was caught with drained beer cans in his truck and smelled of alcohol occasionally. He was reported but wasn't let go because he'd been with the company forever and because of the Good Ol' Boy System. He was related to one of the higher-ups and the company had a shortage of drivers. The company was willing to take the risk and in doing so, put you in a coma, leaving you with permanent physical injuries, facial disfigurement, and emotional distress from missing the birth of your child and her first year. They're offering to settle."

"Facial disfigurement...really?" I drawled.

"That would be the only thing you picked up," Jonathan sighed, sliding an envelope in my direction. I snatched it up, eager to see the zeros. I let out a long whistle.

That's a lot of fucking zeroes!

"One hundred fifty million dollars."

"Oh, God. I think I'm going to be sick," Simone whispered as she clutched her stomach.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" I asked with a smirk.

"That's a lot of money."

“Yeah, it is, but don’t be fooled. The ambulance chaser here will take a nice hefty chunk out of it. Won’t you, Jonathan?”

“Oh, it’s gonna be so sweet,” Jonathan chuckled.

“I don’t have to pay taxes and all that bullshit because it’s personal injury compensation, but what are you looking to score?”

“Language,” Simone corrected.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized promptly.

“Sixty million.”

“Leaving me \$90,000,000.00 to net. I like it. Tell them we have a deal.”

“Wonderful. I’ll get on that. I’ll be on my way. Simone, do you mind walking me out?”

My eyes met Simone’s surprised expression.

“Sure.”

“Take care, Jonathan,” I wished him.

“You too.”

I waited until they were a safe distance away before gossiping with Nori. “I bet your entire college fund that he’ll ask her out again.” Nori wagged her spoon at me. “You disagree? You’re on.” Simone returned a few minutes later with a guilty expression. “Is everything okay?”

She sighed. “I feel bad. Jonathan asked me again to reschedule, but I turned him down.”

I bit back my laughter when Nori rolled her eyes at me.

One point, Daddy; zilch, Nori.

Chapter Twenty

Simone

“What is this for?” I asked as I stared at the shiny high-limit credit card.

Scratch that. I bet it doesn't even have a limit.

“Shopping? You wanted to shop for our vacation. Get whatever you want.”

“If you wanted to blow through your settlement, then just say that.” Anthony chuckled as he packed his gym bag for physical therapy. “You need another water bottle,” I insisted, retrieving another from the refrigerator. “I should probably make you a snack, too. You didn't take your multivitamin this morning,” I mumbled, reaching for the cabinet where the first aid kit, vitamins, melatonin gummies, and pain relievers were kept.

I turned around and bumped into him. “I'm—”

His body pinned mine against the counter as his lips gently caressed mine. He tugged my bottom lip with a playful nip. I was so wrapped up in the heated exchange that I hadn't noticed when Anthony reached above me for the vitamins. He pulled away and popped one in his mouth.

“Satisfied?” he asked, walking away and giving me space I hadn't asked for.

Not really. I'll spend the rest of my day thinking about getting fucked against the refrigerator, but that's neither here nor there.

“Are you sure I should be using your credit card? The stores around here are high-end, and I don't want anyone to give me crap when they see that I'm not Anthony Powell.”

“They shouldn't. Do you know how many wives shop with their husbands' credit cards?” I raised my ringless finger to

him. “Is that a hint? You want a ring, Simone?”

I scoffed. “You’re impossible, Anthony. I can’t tell if you’re joking, but I’m trying to say that I’m not a wife, and I’m definitely not like the wives here.”

“You worry too much,” Anthony chastised as he removed Nori’s bib.

“You don’t worry enough,” I mumbled under my breath.

“This is a beautiful dress, Nori,” he praised, stealing a kiss from her before setting her on her feet. “I meant to ask, and trust me, I’m not complaining, but it always seems that Nori is overdressed when you leave the house.”

I smiled and shook my head. Anthony wasn’t ready for that conversation. Because I was Nori’s mother, I always had to make sure Nori was well put together. She couldn’t have a single booger in her nose, stain on her shirt, or hair out of place. It’d happened more than once when some random woman at the park wanted to give me *helpful* advice on how to parent.

“She’s a princess, after all,” I said, trying to redirect.

“She is, but I think the most dressed down I’ve seen her was at the zoo. You should buy her some outfits for our trip as well.”

I smiled tightly. “Of course. You should get going, or you’ll be late. Traffic can be hectic.”

He paused to check his watch. “Shit. I have to go. I’ll see y’all later,” he claimed before limping to the garage with his duffle bag on his shoulder. It wasn’t until the garage door closed that I noticed Nori sitting on the floor with his cane.

“He’s gonna regret that later.”

Everything near Anthony’s house was high-end—restaurants, grocery stores, fast food chains, car dealerships, and shopping malls.

I parked at a bougie shopping center that I'd passed multiple times on our outings. I never felt inclined to patronize the stores, but this trip seemed special, and I wanted to look like....

Like I belong beside Anthony....

Our first stop was a children's clothing store. The store clerk was accommodating when it came to spending Anthony's money. She snatched outfits off the hangers left and right as if she were buying clothes for her own child. It wasn't until I reached the register that the sticker shock hit me. I tried not to balk at the total like a country bumpkin and had to remind myself that Anthony lived very comfortably, and he'd barely bat an eye at the \$2,000.00 I spent.

"Thank you for shopping at Little Darlings. Please come back and see us again."

Not likely is what I wanted to say. Instead, I accepted the receipt and shot her a warm smile before I made my grand escape.

I planned on loading Nori's bags into the car before continuing our shopping excursion when a dress in one of the boutiques caught my attention. It was yellow—my favorite color—and it was drop-dead gorgeous. I had no idea where I'd wear it, but one thing was clear.

I want it.

The door jingled, alerting the staff of my presence. "Welcome to Pearls!" the cashier greeted me. I smiled and pushed Nori along, making a beeline to a color-coded rack. I reached out for a dress, hoping it matched the one in the display window.

"She's so cute!" A woman said from behind me. I didn't pay her much mind. Nori's gray eyes attracted a lot of attention, and it was normal for people to remark on her beauty.

"Thank you," I said absentmindedly as I scanned the price tag.

\$700.00...that's not horrible. Honestly, I was expecting much worse.

I pulled the dress off the rack and moved along. Surprisingly, there were a lot of trendy clothes—many that appeared in fashion magazines that I had never pictured myself wearing, but I was ready to try.

“Are you the nanny?” I heard while examining a black skirt.

I mean...technically...yes, but that's not what you're getting at.

I frowned and finally looked at the woman who followed me to the next rack. She had her straight hair in a severe bun, and I couldn't tell if she was naturally smiling or if the Botox was working a little too well. She didn't have a single piece of clothing in her hand. I narrowed my eyes and refused to answer her question.

I don't know where she blew in from, but I won't give this woman the time of day.

I continued shopping, hoping the woman would get bored and mind her business.

“Does the family live around here?”

She obviously has issues reading social cues, or she simply doesn't give a damn.

My fingers curled tightly around the stroller as I crossed the store, trying to keep my composure. Of course, the hag didn't take the hint and followed me closely.

Okay. I've had enough. It's time to go.

“I'm the owner of this store and I know most families in the area. I've never seen you or this cutie before.”

My eyes blurred with rage—a feeling I hadn't felt since Anthony Powell arrived on my doorstep demanding Nori.

Who does she think she is? She knows most of the—who the hell knows every family in the city?

“Are you new to the neighborho—”

“You know what? Never mind. You don’t deserve my money,” I said, returning the clothes to the rack.

I had finished loading Nori’s shopping bags into the back of the SUV when I was approached by two officers.

“Good afternoon, ma’am,” one of them greeted.

“Good afternoon. Is there a problem?” I asked defensively.

“I hope not. We received a call about a possible kidnapping in progress.”

My breath caught in my throat. One of my worst nightmares was about to play out right before my eyes.

“Whose child is this, ma’am?” the other officer asked.

“She’s my child. I’m her mother.”

The nosy bitch from earlier stood behind the officers with her arms folded across her chest. She commented under her breath about how Nori couldn’t possibly be mine.

“Ma’am, do you have some identification or something proving you’re this child’s mother?”

“Why would I? Do you carry your children’s birth certificates with you when you go shopping?” I challenged.

“No, ma’am. I don’t, but...we must take kidnapping allegations seriously.”

“I agree. Kidnapping allegations should be taken seriously, but let’s be real here. Do you think my black ass would’ve kidnapped a child and come leisurely shopping in this rich-ass area?”

“There’s no need to get aggressive.”

“Yes, there is because y’all are behaving as if the concept of blended families is new. Does this child look like she’s being kidnapped?”

As if Nori understood the severity of the conversation, she held up her sippy cup and said, “Mama, juice.”

“Wow. Look at that. She just called me Mama. Don’t worry, baby. I’ll fix you more juice when we get in the truck.”

I moved to go around the officers when one of them blocked my path.

“We’re gonna need you to come down to the station until we can sort this out.”

I shook my head, unclipped Nori from her stroller, and held her tightly to my chest. “No. As far as I’m concerned, this has already been sorted.”

“We’re gonna need you to come down to the station until we can sort this out. Maybe the father can meet us there? We’ll hold onto the child while we ask you a few questions.”

“Absolutely not!” I exclaimed, pulling out my phone to call Anthony.

“Ma’am—”

“Stop! I’m calling her father,” I explained as my call went to voicemail.

Pick up the phone, Anthony!

I called three more times before they started advancing on me. One of them had his hand on his belt. My stomach lurched as I dialed Jonathan’s number.

“Stop! Don’t touch her!” I cried out when one of them grabbed my arm, and the other attempted to snatch Nori from me. “You can’t take my baby from me!” I yelled as we engaged in tug-o-war over Nori.

“Ma’am, let go of the child, or we’ll have to use force.”

I immediately released her, not wanting Nori to get injured. An officer wrenched my arms behind me and cuffed me.

Not again! How is this happening again?

“My phone. I dropped it. My lawyer is Jonathan Baker, and he can clear everything up.”

The woman's mouth dropped in disbelief, and the color drained from her face.

From her reaction, it's safe to say she knows Jonathan.

All the fight left my body when I was read my rights. I was lowered into the back of the police cruiser, and the door slammed shut. It was like *deja vu*. I was transported back to the day in the courtroom when my world came crashing down and my life was over—back to when unfortunate circumstances, the law, and a cruel man took my child from me.

Tears streamed down my face as Nori cried for me. Even from the back of the squad car, I could see that her face was red from exertion.

Why are they so persistent? She's reaching out and crying for me. Yet, that's not enough. Will it ever be enough? Will I always have to fight this uphill battle where I have to prove to strangers that Nori's mine?

That numb feeling I felt when Nori was taken from me started settling in again. It was different this time around because I could identify that feeling—inadequacy—a failure of a mother to protect her child.

Is it something I did? Is this Karma? Some divine retribution for something I don't remember, or punishment that followed me from my former life? Dear, God. Please...make it stop.

Chapter Twenty-One

Anthony

I lay on my back—panting and sweating from the exertion of my therapy appointment.

“Good job, Anthony. I’m impressed with your progress,” Dr. Doran praised.

“I-I want to lodge a complaint against you.”

“Get in line. As much as I’d love to watch you writhe on the floor in pain, I have other patients to torture—I mean, help,” she teased with a warm smile. I laughed and slowly pulled myself to my feet.

“I need to skip an upcoming appointment.”

“Why? Did something come up?”

“I’m taking my girls on vacation.”

“Your girls? Speaking it into existence, huh?”

“Something like that,” I answered shyly.

“I say good for you, and I hope you and your *girls* have an amazing trip, and I’m sorry again that your appointment ran a little later.”

“It’s no big deal. I’ll let reception know to adjust my appointments.”

I left the gym of my physical therapist's office and retrieved my phone from my gym bag. I worked my ass off and could use a double scoop of cookies and cream ice cream and wanted my girls to join me. Was it presumptuous to refer to Simone as mine? Yes, but I already envisioned a future with her and would clarify my intentions when we talked.

"What the hell?" I whispered when I found 32 missed calls and 19 text messages from Jonathan and Simone. I immediately called Simone.

"Hello?"

"Jonathan? What are you doing with Simone's phone? Are the girls okay?"

"The girls are safe and at home. I'm here with them now."

"What the fuck happened?"

"There was—"

"Anthony?" The distress in Simone's voice was palpable and had me racing to my truck.

"What's going on, Simone?"

"Th-they tried to take Nori away from me." She had barely gotten the words out before she started sobbing.

"W-who tried taking Nori from you? Did someone try to kidnap our child?" Simone's sobs grew further away. "Hello? Simone?"

"Hey, it's Jonathan again. Long story short, Simone was detained earlier while shopping."

"Detained? Why? Was it because she had my credit card?"

"Anthony, I need to tell you something, and you won't like it."

"Jonathan, my patience—"

"Simone was shopping with Nori at Eliza's boutique and Eliza...fuck...um...Eliza accosted Simone."

"Eliza, your ex? That Eliza?"

“Yeah. She was being batshit crazy as usual and approached Simone and started asking her sensitive questions about Nori, specifically who the parents were and if she was the nanny. Simone ignored her and continued shopping. As a result, Eliza went full psycho and called the cops claiming that Simone was kidnapping Nori. Simone was handcuffed and placed in the back of a squad car until I arrived and set the situation straight.”

“I’m gonna kill that fucking bitch, and I mean it, Jonathan. It’s enough that she fucked up your family, but I refuse to allow her to do it to mine! I’m suing her for making a false report and, no doubt, for the emotional distress she inflicted upon Simone and Nori. I want those officers’ badge—”

“I’ve taken care of everything, Anthony. I have all their info—the responding officers’ names, badge numbers, supervisors’ info, and precinct. Eliza was arrested for making a false police report. I will give Simone a mild sedative that I found in your medicine cabinet to calm her nerves. Nori is napping peacefully. I’ll stay with them until you get home, okay?”

I blew out a relieved sigh.

“Can I speak to Simone?”

“Let me see if she wants to speak. She’s a little inconsolable right now.”

He didn’t have to tell me. I could hear her crying in the background. It was haunting, giving me flashbacks of when I was awarded custody of Nori. Simone’s cries stayed with me, blanketing me at night when I attempted to catch a few hours of sleep, reminding me of my cruel selfishness that I may never make amends for.

As I waited, I contemplated what I could do to prevent something like that from happening again. It wasn’t lost on me that my family received curious and sometimes judgmental stares from strangers. It annoyed the shit out of me and made my blood boil. I was tempted to confront them a few times,

but Simone always managed to talk me down. Getting riled up was easy for me, but I had to check my privilege. No one would ever publicly approach Nori and me and question her paternity. Simone didn't have that luxury and would always have to deal with questioning stares or ignorant intrusions and inquiries.

“Hello?” Simone croaked.

“Hey, sweetheart. I know you're a mess, so I won't ask how you're doing, but did they hurt you or Nori?”

“No...physically...we're fine. When are you coming home?”

“Soon. I have to make a pit stop. In the meantime, Jonathan will offer you a sedative, and you should accept it and get some rest.”

“I don't fucking need drugs, Anthony. I just want you to come home,” she snapped. I knew she meant serious business. Simone didn't use foul language often, especially not the f-word.

“I hear you. I'll be home as soon as I can. Okay?”

She deeply inhaled and exhaled. “Okay. Do you need to talk to Jonathan again?”

“Yes.”

“Here he is.”

“Hello?”

“Thank you for being there for my family when I couldn't.”

“No problem. What are friends for? I'll send you an invoice.”

“You piece of—”

“I'm joking,” he laughed before hanging up.

“Does it look like I'm in a joking mood, asshole?” I complained as I pulled out of my parking spot.

I need to get back to my girls.

“Hey. Where are the girls?” I asked when I entered the house.

“They’re resting in your bedroom.”

My heart fluttered. I imagined the three of us in bed, enjoying a lazy Sunday morning of breakfast and cartoons. I wanted that with Simone—the lazy Sundays, the summer barbecues, the family excursions—even the perfect mixture of her and me that I dreamed about.

I’m in love with her.

“Thanks again for showing up and staying with them. What are you going to do about Eliza?”

“I’ll figure it out. Her behavior was irrational and malicious, and she could’ve gotten Simone and Nori hurt, and quite frankly, I don’t want that behavior around the kids.”

“No, shit. The last thing you want is three entitled rich shits running around causing mayhem.”

“Mhm,” he agreed. “What’s in the bag?”

“Something that should prevent this from ever happening again. I trust that you’ll see yourself out?”

“Yeah. Take care, Anthony.”

I nodded and climbed the stairs to my bedroom. I poked my head in and found Simone and Nori snuggled underneath the covers, looking like they belonged there.

They absolutely do.

“Anthony, is that you?” Simone whispered, not bothering to raise her head from my pillow.

“Yeah, it’s me,” I confirmed, slipping into the bedroom. “Is there room for me?” I asked, kicking off my tennis shoes.

“There’s more than enough,” she answered, scooting them over to give me space. I eased into bed behind her and tugged

them close. My arm rested protectively over them.

“Tell me how you’re feeling.”

“I feel like pulling up on Jonathan’s ex and kicking her ass.”

I chuckled and kissed the back of her head. “I share your sentiment, but what else?”

“I feel lucky.”

“Lucky?”

I wasn’t expecting that.

“The situation could’ve gone left, and Nori could’ve gotten hurt. So, yeah, I feel lucky.”

“What else?”

“I don’t feel anything else. I felt a sense of inadequacy as a mother when I was arrested, but I felt differently by the time I laid down. Being in your bed got me thinking straight, I guess. I’m an amazing mother; no one can take that from me or convince me otherwise. But one thing is for certain when it comes to Nori, I’ll never go down without a fight.”

“What happened today will never happen again.”

“How can you be so sure?”

I dangled the gold bracelet in front of her face. She reached for it and pushed herself into a seated position. Tears sprang from her eyes as she held the ID bracelet.

“I went to the jewelry store when we got off the phone. I got you one, too.”

Simone cried as she read the inscription.

“Hi. My name is Nori Livingston. My mother is Simone Livingston, and my father is Anthony Powell.” She paused and wiped away tears and snot from her face. “You even put our phone numbers on here.”

“I would’ve put Jonathan’s info on there, too, if I had enough room,” I confessed, making her laugh.

“This,” she said, holding the gold bracelet in the palm of her hand, “is really thoughtful, but...I think we need to have a conversation about it.”

Shit. Did I screw up?

“Okay,” I replied uneasily.

“This bracelet will not be the cure all nor a guarantee that an incident like this won’t happen again. It’s just...it’s just how the world works.”

“The world is shitty, but I understand, Simone, and perhaps I was a little too optimistic and naïve by claiming this won’t ever happen again, but something’s gotta give. Maybe we can get Nori a passport that you can carry around. I’m sure we’ll need it eventually for international travel. If you’re questioned by law enforcement, you can show them Nori’s passport and your driver’s license since Nori is still a Livingston.”

Simone smiled weakly. “I like that idea.”

“You also need to have Jonathan’s business card in your wallet to show to the officers. Before you call me, call Jonathan.”

“I will.”

“I’m sorry this happened to you, Simone.”

She sighed. “I should be used to it. It’s not the first time I’ve been approached but it never escalated this far. I can understand being genuinely concerned about the well-being of a child, but can’t they see that she’s happy and well cared for?”

“That’s the thing, Simone...they can see it, but they don’t want to see it.”

She nodded receptively. “Thank you,” she said, holding up the ID bracelet again. “This was really sweet of you.”

“You’re welcome,” I said, pulling her back down to the mattress. I kissed her temple before resting her head on my

chest. I thought about her birthday trip as she drifted to sleep. I had to make it a moment she'd never forget.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Simone

“Rise and shine!” Anthony exclaimed, causing me to jolt out of my sleep. My tired eyes checked the time.

3:00 AM? What the hell?

“Why are we waking up so early? Our flight doesn't leave until 8:00,” I whispered.

“Because the early bird gets the worm, and the on-time traveler misses the plane. Chop chop, Simone.”

I rolled my eyes and sat up. “Chop chop? Really? Is Nori still sleeping?” I asked, reaching for the baby monitor beside me. The crib was empty.

“Nori is already put together for the day. I have your driver's license, Nori's birth certificate and the bags are secured and tracked.”

“Tracked?” I asked as I stumbled out of bed towards the bathroom. I wasn't surprised when he followed me, and quite frankly was too tired to care.

If he wants a show, then he'll get a show.

I pulled down my sleeping shorts and sat on the toilet. I chuckled when Anthony whirled around, finally giving me some privacy.

“I put AirTags on our luggage. Luggage goes missing all the time.”

“I never thought you were one of *those* dads,” I teased as I finished my business. He turned to face me once he heard the toilet flush.

“What do you mean by *those* dads?”

“The ones you see on social media that wake the family up at the buttcrack of dawn and make them get to the airport four hours early. It’s ridiculous,” I answered, starting the shower.

“Ridiculous? There’s nothing ridiculous about it. The unexpected always happens, and I would rather be safe than sorry. What if there’s a 30-car pile-up on the highway? What if the security checkpoint line is long? Have you ever tried to get through Security with a baby?”

“No, but neither have you,” I drawled.

“Exactly. We must expect the unexpected. I want our vacation to be smooth sailing.”

“Where is Nori?” I asked, entering my walk-in closet to select my attire for the day. I rolled my eyes when I found a pair of denim shorts, a white tank top, a black cardigan, undergarments, and a pair of slide-on sandals laid out for me on a chair. I backpedaled out of the closet. “My clothes, Anthony. Really?”

“We’re running late.”

“We are not. Where is our child? Never mind, she’s probably in the car seat by the front door with an AirTag attached to her forehead.” I narrowed my eyes at Anthony’s silence. “Anthony!”

“What? Children get lost in airports all the time. Granted, the tag isn’t on her forehead but—”

“Take Nori out of the car seat and remove any and all tracking devices from her.”

“You’re hungry, and you’re not you when you’re hungry. I’m gonna put on a pot of coffee and make breakfast. Make haste, Simone.”

“Anthony!” I called after him as he limped out with his cane.

“I got it! Take her out of the car seat!”

A smile stretched my face as I stripped before entering the shower. Tension had been swelling between us since the shopping incident. It had been thick and saccharine, filled with desire and unspoken words. I tried to ignore it and tamp down my feelings, especially since we hadn’t had “the talk” yet. You know, the talk where we lay everything on the line—our feelings, thoughts, where this was going, and what we envisioned for the future. Something always came up, or the timing was a little off. Did I imagine a future with Anthony? Of becoming Mrs. Powell and making Nori a big sister? I did.

I do. I don't know what Anthony and I have. He refers to us as a family and God it feels real. If it doesn't feel real to him, then he must be living in an alternate universe.

I stared down at the gold identification bracelet on my wrist, and my cheeks heated as I remembered how protected I felt when he fastened the bracelet around my wrist. No, the bracelets weren’t foolproof, and it was shitty that we had to go through such great lengths, but it was the effort on Anthony’s part that I appreciated.

That was the moment I knew I was irrevocably in love with Anthony Powell.

The frenzied pace of the airport was not for me. Travelers hustled and bustled around us, desperately searching for their gate or one of the many restaurants for a quick bite to eat. Large signs with letters and arrows pointing in random directions hung above us as we journeyed to our gate. I gulped

when I caught sight of the monstrous airplanes on the runway. My faith in the man-made machines and pilots was nonexistent.

“What do we do now?” I asked, nearly frantic once we made it to our terminal. Anthony selected seats near the windows with outlets to charge our phones and tablets.

“Now, we wait,” he answered, easing into the seat. “Hand me, Nori.”

Nori had been in and out of sleep since we left the house, and I couldn’t blame her. I’d be sleeping, too, if my anxiety wasn’t through the roof. I sat beside him, and Nori crawled into his lap. Her eyelids fluttered before closing, hiding those beautiful gray eyes from us.

“Are you okay?”

I swallowed roughly. “I think I’m afraid of flying.”

His brows furrowed. “You’re afraid of flying?”

“I’ve never flown before. I assumed it’d be a piece of cake, but now that I’m here...I don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can, and you will. We’ll get on the plane, buckle up and enjoy all the amenities of first class, arrive safely in Florida, and enjoy the week celebrating your birthday and our first family vacation.”

“First?” I questioned.

“That would be all you heard. Yes...our first. I plan on there being many more. Where would you like to go next?”

“Can I pick any destination?”

“Of course.”

“I always wanted to go on a cruise,” I answered immediately. Anthony wasn’t the only one thinking about the future.

“And a cruise you shall enjoy.”

We spent the remaining two hours talking, reviewing Anthony's very descriptive and color-coded itinerary, and planning and booking our cruise.

"Good morning, passengers. We will begin boarding flight #2473, departing San Antonio, Texas, with a final destination in Miami, Florida. We will first start the boarding with our first class-passengers, and immediately following will be parents or guardians with small children," the gate agent announced.

"That's us," Anthony excitedly declared as he stood up. My anxiety revved up again. I was frozen in place. He took one look at me, sighed, and sat back down. "Simone, I know it's frightening, but I'll be with you the whole time. I also brought some Valium if it gets too tough, but I don't think you'll need them. Did I forget to mention that since you're a first class- passenger, you can drink for free?"

"Drink what?"

"Alcohol."

"Anthony, it's not even 8:00 in the morning yet."

He shrugged casually. "Who gives a fuck? We're on vacation. What's it going to be? Are we getting on the flight, or are we going home?"

My fingers nervously twirled the bracelet around my wrist as my teeth worried my bottom lip.

Are you going to let your fears rob you of fun in the sun with your family? My family...if not for myself, I have to do this for my family.

"I guess...a glass or two of wine will be nice."

Anthony grinned, and his warm fingers slid between mine.

"That's the spirit."

Anthony

Nori stood between my legs, and I rocked her gently from side to side, trying to keep her preoccupied. Takeoff was rough

on both of my girls. Nori cried and couldn't be calmed until I placated her with one of her favorite soft shortbread cookies. Simone looked as if her life was flashing before her eyes. Her nails almost pierced through the leather armrest, and for the briefest moment, my mind wandered, wondering how'd it feel for those same nails to be scratching down my back. I shook the dirty thoughts from my head and focused on calming her. I whispered words of encouragement to her, and Nori pitched in by offering her a cookie. I chuckled when the cookie crumbled in Simone's hand, leaving behind dust and crumbs. Simone didn't relax until we reached cruising altitude and had her first glass of wine.

"Mama," Nori said, swatting at her mother, who passed out after her third glass. I used my legs to lean Nori out of the striking zone to her mother. "Mama!"

"Nori, leave your mother alone. Let her rest." My daughter's face slid into a telling pout. She was moments away from throwing a fit. Her eyelids brimmed with fat tears that threatened to crest and fall. "No, baby. It's all—"

"Mama," she cried, reaching over to Simone, who was catching flies with her mouth wide open and a mask over her eyes.

"Nori—"

"Nori Rene...get over here...and hush," Simone mumbled as she opened her blanket.

"Go back to sleep, Simone. I got her."

"Anthony James...."

My mouth dropped in shock at the use of my middle name.

That's not fair. I'm trying to help her out!

I released Nori immediately, not wanting to get on Simone's bad side. Simone used her mama spidey sense, blindly scooped Nori up, and tucked her under the blanket with her. Nori placed her cheek against Simone's chest and grinned at me as she fondled one of her mother's braids. I

couldn't blame her. I had a similar urge when Simone returned from the hair salon with thin braids that tapered at her tailbone. I was attracted to the gold jewelry that wove through her braids like a moth to a flame and nearly made the mistake of touching her hair without permission. I asked and was swiftly denied. Exceptions were obviously made for Nori.

"How much longer do we have until I'm off this flying hunk of metal?"

"Less than an hour."

"Thank God."

"Would you like another glass of wine?"

"Anthony, if I didn't know any better, I'd believe you're trying to keep me drunk."

"I'm trying to keep you comfortable."

"Same difference."

I chuckled and grabbed her hand, pressing it to my lips.

"Thank you, Anthony."

"For what?" I questioned, staring at her blank ring finger.

Too soon, buddy. Way too soon.

"For treating me and Nori so well. Given our history, I was skeptical that this would all work out, but...thank God for Jonathan."

"Thank God for Jonathan," I murmured against her fingers.

"He's a good friend, Anthony."

"Eh, I don't know about him being a *good* friend. He tried to take you away from me."

She cracked a smile. "You're lucky he canceled on me."

"You don't have to remind me."

"Now that the dust has settled, what's the deal with Jonathan and Eliza?"

“I’m not one for idle gossip and drama, but—”

“One of your favorite shows is *Cheaters*. You love drama.”

“Well, hold on. I don’t love the drama; I’m intrigued by the sheer stupidity of it all—the script, the bad acting and choreographed fights, and the crocodile tears.”

“I don’t know, Anthony. Most people don’t spend an hour of their life watching a show they hate.”

“It’s like rubbernecking when you pass by a car accident; you can’t help but look,” Anthony explained.

“If you say so. Tell me what I want to know.”

“What will I get in return?”

Her lips pursed as she considered. “I’ll be on potty-training duty this week.”

“Sold. You’re too easy, Simone. I would’ve accepted a polite thank you.”

“You can’t tell, but I’m rolling my eyes under this mask.”

“Oh, I had a feeling, but I’ll bite. A deal is a deal, after all. Eliza was trouble from the very beginning when we all met in college. Jonathan was a goner, and nothing she said or did could convince him to leave her. He used to be, well, he still is the type of person who sees the good in everyone. The woman was toxic, and despite Jonathan being a shark of a lawyer, she always managed to flip everything on him and make him feel like the bad guy.”

“She sounds emotionally abusive.”

“You don’t know the half of it. I remember when he showed me the engagement ring he purchased her after she kicked him out of their apartment for the umpteenth time. The first thing I asked was if he was on drugs.” Simone chuckled and patted Nori on the bottom. I knew it’d only take a few more pats before Nori was dead to the world. That couldn’t happen because I wanted the nights to be for Simone and me.

We haven't had a lot of alone time together. We've been too busy being parents and tiptoeing around our feelings. We're robbing ourselves of something good, and that has to change.

“Don't let her go to sleep. We should be descending soon.”

“I can't wait for my feet to touch solid ground again,” Simone sighed as she returned her seat to the upright position. She slipped off her mask and wildly bounced Nori on her knee, making her squeal. “Continue with the Eliza and Jonathan drama.”

“Right. Where was I—oh, Jonathan was convinced that Eliza was the love of his life, and he asked me for my support. I told him that I thought he was rushing it, but my warning fell on deaf ears. They married and started popping out kids left and right. She cheated on him with his competitor of all people.”

“His competitor? That's just adding salt to the wound.”

“Tell me about it,” I huffed.

“How is she as a mother?”

I snorted. “She's not you.”

“What does that mean?”

“You're a perfect mother.”

“Let's hold off on the perfect mother label until we're past the Terrible Twos because Nori has been trying me lately,” Simone commented.

“I've noticed that she's been a little defiant lately,” I responded, thinking over the past several weeks and the increase in tantrums. “Do you think we're doing something wrong?”

Simone sighed. “No, I don't think we're doing anything wrong. She's growing up, and she's expressing her frustrations. It's harder for her because she can't verbalize what's bothering her. It's up to us as her parents to teach her how to effectively communicate those frustrations.”

“That makes sense.”

“It also helps if we’re on the same page and *someone* doesn’t let her get away with murder,” Simone said, sending me a sharp side-eye.

“Cut me some slack. I’m new to this parenting thing,” I said, trying to escape judgment.

“You can’t keep playing that new parenting card with me.”

“I think we should consider getting a nanny,” I announced suddenly, completely derailing the conversation.

“What?” Simone asked, eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. “A nanny? Why do we need a nanny? I am Nori’s nanny.”

“You’re fired.”

“Wh—”

“You’ll receive your full yearly salary and benefits, but effective immediately, you’re relieved of your duties.”

“Anthony—”

“You’re not Nori’s nanny; you’re her mother. I’m not suggesting getting a live-in nanny or even a full-time nanny, but someone who can relieve you and me in case we....”

“In case we what?”

I swallowed roughly as the blood rushed to my cheeks. It was now or never. I couldn’t pussyfoot any longer.

“In case we want to spend some alone time together,” I suggested.

“Wait...did you just fire me so that you can date me?” she asked in disbelief.

“Technically? If you want to look at it that way.” I waved my hand in frustration. “Listen, let’s cut the bullshit—”

“Language.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Simone, I have romantic feelings for you and believe you feel the same about me. We have a family together, and I want to exclusively date you if you’ll have me. There, I said it.” Both Simone and our child stared at me blankly, eyes blinking occasionally.

“I-I need to call Jonathan.”

“Why?” I asked, becoming frustrated.

Why is she bringing up Jonathan? Is she considering dating him again?

Her face cracked into a dazzling smile before saying, “I need to file an EEOC complaint against you.”

The tension evacuated my body once I realized she was joking.

“In any other situation, I’d agree with you, but our situation isn’t typical, is it?”

“No...it’s not,” she whispered.

“So...what do you say? Should we give this a shot or continue pining after each other while we live under the same roof?”

“I don’t know...I kinda enjoy the pining. It was exciting,” she teased.

“Why imagine it when you can have the real thing?” I challenged. The smile on her face fell, and that was when I knew she had picked up on the not-so-subtle innuendo.

“A plane is not the best place to have this conversation.”

“I disagree. We’re thousands of feet in the sky, making it impossible for you to run away. Will you put me out of my misery or keep pretending you don’t want to be with me?”

She sighed and kissed Nori on the cheek. “I...I haven’t been in a relationship for years, so I’m a little rusty.”

I smirked. “I’m just as rusty. I understand your hesitancy, but you realize a title will change little between us, right?”

She nodded. “Okay, Anthony. I’ll date you.”

“Thank God because that EEOC settlement I would’ve been liable to pay would’ve screwed me,” I joked.

“It’s not too late for me to change my mind. I could see Nori and me sipping on beverages while laying out on our yacht.”

I snapped my fingers. “I’m glad you mentioned that. I’ve been thinking about buying a yacht. In fact, I’ve been in contact with a broker, and we’re meeting him in Miami. If everything is on the up and up, then I’ll sign on the dotted line and have it sent to Galveston.”

Simone’s mouth dropped. “A yacht? Don’t you think that’s a little...excessive?”

I leaned over and whispered. “I was wired \$90 million this morning. The house and vehicles are paid off. Nori’s college fund is secured. The money is sitting there. Why not indulge and have a little fun? We’re both unemployed.”

“Thank you,” she said spitefully.

“You’re welcome. As I was saying, we’re both unemployed, and Nori’s not in school yet. We can take off on the yacht and travel whenever we want. Live a little, Simone.”

“Jesus,” she whispered. “A year ago, I struggled to pay my rent on time, and now...traveling the world on a yacht. It’s blowing my mind.”

“You deserve it, Simone. *We* deserve it.”

“Will you let me drive the boat?”

“Absolutely not. You just lay there and look pretty while sipping margaritas.”

She chuckled, “I think I can do that.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Simone

“Mmmm. Mama. Mama. Mama,” Nori cooed as she brought her fingers to her lips.

“I know you’re hungry. The food should be here soon,” I said, dressing her in her bathing suit. I slipped pink cage-toed

jellied sandals on her and set her on her feet. “You are officially beach ready, but I’m far from it. Let’s find your dad so I can get ready in peace.”

I left the bedroom suite I shared with Nori to track down her father. Did I want to share a room with Anthony? Yes, but Nori had other plans. Last night consisted of a vicious cycle of me putting her down, tiptoeing out of the bedroom, only to return two minutes later when she popped her head up and started crying. By the fourth time, I waved the white flag and stayed. Either Nori Rene Livingston was blocking, or she was afraid to sleep alone in an unfamiliar place. I decided to give her the benefit of the doubt and settled on the latter.

We walked in on Anthony doing his leg stretches, and Nori didn’t hesitate to try and tackle him to the ground. I rolled my eyes. Anthony was to blame for Nori’s sudden desire to roughhouse.

I laughed when he flopped on the floor dramatically and begged for mercy as she climbed on top of him. She took the “L” when he tickled her, causing her to slip onto the floor into a heap of laughter.

“Are those the swimming trunks you’re going to wear?” I asked, observing his milky thighs and the long red jagged scar that ran the length of his right leg.

His brows raised. “Yes. What’s wrong with them?”

“You’re showing too much skin,” I teased.

“Jealous?” he challenged.

“I might be.”

He snorted.

“You’re one to talk. I watched you unpack, and I didn’t see any conservative one-piece swimsuits, just a lot of string. I didn’t plan on bringing my cane to the beach, but I might need to so I can beat the other men off.”

“That’s very caveman of you.”

He shrugged his shoulders casually. “Ask me if I give a—”
“Language.”

“—dang.”

Before I could retort, Nori grabbed Anthony’s attention and motioned to her mouth.

“You’re hungry. I’m sorry, baby. Let me call to see what’s the holdup. You’d think they’d move a little faster, considering we’re paying an arm and a leg to stay here,” Anthony complained, picking up the cordless phone.

“I told your daddy we should’ve gone to the buffet,” I whispered to Nori.

“Excuse me for wanting to eat breakfast with my family in peace and quiet in front of a million-dollar view,” he huffed, punching at the buttons on the phone.

“The view is to die for,” I mumbled as I led Nori onto the balcony adjacent to Anthony’s room. Nori immediately pressed her forehead and hands against the glass panel. I was a nervous wreck yesterday, but Anthony reassured me there was no way Nori could fall, especially since the glass panels came to my chest.

“Ahhh,” Nori whispered as she peered at the cerulean waves. I couldn’t blame her. I shared the same reaction when we pulled into the luxurious resort. There were palm trees galore, cordoning the beach resort from the rest of the world. We were welcomed to the resort by a helpful valet attendant and a delightful bellhop, who were eager to please after Anthony slipped them discrete tips as if they were conducting an illegal drug transaction. I was pissed. I wouldn’t have subjected myself to mental abuse in a call center if I had known I could get paid \$20.00 just for parking a vehicle.

I held Nori tightly as Anthony led us into the hotel with his hand on the small of my back, and good thing he did. If not for his gentle directing, I would’ve fallen behind several times as I observed the sleek and polished layout of the hotel lobby. Nori also showed her appreciation for the elegance, squealing and

pointing at the gentle-flowing fountain in the middle of the lobby.

I nearly had a heart attack when we checked in, and the kind desk agent referred to me as Mrs. Powell and wished me a happy birthday. I choked on my saliva and suffered a severe coughing fit. Anthony laughed like a villain when I scurried away to compose myself. He caught up to us at the elevators, cheeks pink from laughter. He teased me relentlessly until we reached the two-bedroom presidential suite. Being called Mrs. Powell nearly two hours after agreeing to be in an exclusive relationship was wild.

We spent the remainder of the day settling in and touring the resort's many amenities, including the restaurants, pool, children's splash pad and pool, tennis court, and childcare center. Anthony and I went back and forth over the idea of dropping Nori off while we enjoyed some adult fun at the pool or bar. He claimed the staff was fully vetted and trained, and the reviews online were overwhelmingly positive. I told him I wasn't comfortable with the notion, but I'd consider it, and we left it at that. We spent the evening strolling the South Beach Boardwalk and enjoyed a fresh seafood dinner before returning to our suite.

“Good morning, Mrs. Powell!”

I turned and found a room service attendant wheeling a cart onto the expansive balcony.

“Good morning,” I replied with a gracious smile, not bothering to correct him.

What's the point?

“As I said to Mr. Powell, we apologize for the late arrival of your meal. We included extra snacks for the little one and a bottle of champagne.”

“That's so considerate. We appreciate it,” I said, sitting in one of the chairs. Nori wobbled over as soon as I unrolled my silverware, motioning at her mouth with her fingers. I picked

her up, sat her beside me, and wondered how long she'd stay there before her father snatched her up.

Two minutes. That was how long Nori stayed seated before she was in Anthony's lap, picking off his plate. I encouraged him to let her eat from her own plate, but I was promptly ignored.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Hm?" I asked, taking my attention away from the distant parasailer. It looked like fun, but I preferred my feet on the ground.

"What are you thinking about?"

The corner of my mouth curled into a smile. "How this is the best birthday ever."

"Already? We haven't even gotten to the fun part yet."

"You belong on a calendar on my office wall," Anthony praised, causing me to blush as I attempted to concentrate on building a princess sandcastle for our daughter. He'd been giving me compliments like Halloween candy since I removed my coverup, revealing a black triangle string bikini. Some compliments were tasteful, and others were downright raunchy and had to be whispered in my ear to prevent little ears from overhearing.

If I didn't know before, I know now that I'm getting birthday sex.

I chewed my bottom lip anxiously. I only had sex once, and that was five years ago. I was so out of practice that I might as well be a virgin. Realistically, I knew Anthony didn't expect me to be a porn star in bed. Still, my anxiety was getting the better of me.

Maybe I should tell him how I feel?

"It sounds like you need to take a dip in the ocean to cool off," I said as I eyed Nori suspiciously. She looked oddly

interested in the sand in her hand. My motherly instincts were right when she brought the handful of sand to her mouth. “Nori, put it down!” She stared at me defiantly and inched her hand closer. “Anthony.”

He nudged his sunglasses down his nose and addressed her. “Nori, listen to your mother. Put the sand down.” She frowned before tossing the sand away and returned to shoveling. “Don’t pout, Simone.”

“I’m not pouting,” I grumbled.

“Will you stop pouting if I give you one of your birthday gifts early?”

I perked up at the word ‘gifts.’ I wasn’t accustomed to being on the receiving end of gifts, even in childhood. Money was always tight, and a birthday gift from my parents was a verbal reminder that they gave me life and I had lived to see another year. I looked at Nori and recalled her first birthday—I did it all. I bought the cake from a little bakery around the corner from our apartment. It was a white cake with vanilla buttercream icing decorated with pink and purple frosted flowers. The center spelled, “Happy Birthday, Nori!” in cutesy calligraphy. The dollar store had everything I needed to throw a little party for me and her—streamers, balloons, party hats, and purple and pink saucers and forks for our cake and ice cream. It wasn’t much, and some might’ve called our little party sad, but when Nori looked back on her childhood photos, she’d know I put in the effort. Back then, I couldn’t give her a fairy tale birthday with ponies and a petting zoo like Anthony planned for next year, but I could give her unconditional love.

“I might,” I answered.

“Good. Close your eyes and hold out your hand,” Anthony instructed before reaching into his backpack. I complied and waited impatiently for my gift to be dropped into my palm. I felt something light graze against my hands, and Anthony gave me permission to open my eyes. I stared at the white envelope with my name scrawled across the front in Anthony’s handwriting.

“God, you write terribly. I swear you can be a doctor.”

“I’m better with numbers. Open it.” I tore open the envelope and pulled out my gift. My eyebrows furrowed at the nearly blank check written to a local college I considered enrolling in. The memo line read ‘tuition.’ “You have no excuse to not go, so when you’re ready, the money is there.”

“Oh, Anthony...this is too much,” I whispered, moved by his generosity.

“Nonsense. It’s in your employee contract.”

“Paying my college tuition wasn’t in the contract,” I argued.

“Maybe you didn’t read the fine print.”

I smirked. “The fine print...right,” I drawled, returning the check to the envelope. “You won’t let me turn this down, will you?”

“No.”

“Well, in that case, thank you for investing in me, Anthony. I don’t know how I’ll repay you.”

“I can think of ways,” he said salaciously, standing to his feet. His dick was eye-level, and my tongue darted out and moistened my bottom lip as my thoughts went to bad places. He slid his designer sunglasses on top of his head, pushing his wavy black hair back. His gray eyes were blinding with mischief as he stared down at me. A noticeable shiver rippled through me when his thumb grazed my bottom lip. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I was hoping you’d pay me back by buying me a snow cone.”

He pointed at the snow cone truck in the parking lot, and I nearly melted in the sand from embarrassment.

“I hate you, Anthony Powell,” I exclaimed before scooping Nori up.

“Somehow, I don’t believe you,” he said, limping towards the truck. I shook my head and followed.

I love you, Anthony Powell.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Anthony

“Nori...I finally get you to myself,” I sighed contently. “No Mommy to interrupt father-daughter time. How does that sound?” I was stunned when Nori’s bottom lip started to wobble and her gray eyes turned into wet pools of mercury.

When did she become such a Mama’s Girl?

“Baby, don’t cry. We’ll hit up the splash pad and have lunch together by the poolside. It’ll be amazing.”

“Mama,” she cried, looking around as if she just realized Simone was gone. I’d booked her a morning in the spa and a lunch reservation at one of the hotel restaurants as a birthday gift from Nori. Between me and Nori, Simone rarely had time to herself because we were greedy for her attention.

“I can assure you that Mama is being well taken care of.”

“Mama!” she shrieked, continuing to cry.

“Daddy’s here,” I said, reassuring her as I rubbed her back.

“Mama!”

The suite door swung in, and Simone entered with a glass of champagne in her hand, looking like sheer perfection in her yellow spaghetti strap maxi dress that conformed to her delicious curves. Anything she wore rendered me both breathless and speechless, but yellow was her color. She was as stunning as the sun, and her skin practically glowed from the moisturizing oils applied during her massage.

“Mama has arrived,” she announced loudly before downing the champagne in one shot. Nori’s tears dried up immediately as she made grabby hands at her mother.

“Someone looks like she enjoyed herself at the spa,” I teased gently, handing her Nori in exchange for her glass. “Refill?”

“Please. The spa was amazing. I want to be on vacation all the time,” she declared.

I grinned as I limped to the bar. “I’m glad that you enjoyed it. What was your favorite part besides the booze, of course?”

“The masseuse. Oh, my God. His hands were magic.”

I froze.

I don’t think I heard her correctly.

“I’m sorry, Simone. Can you repeat that?”

“Which part?”

“The masseuse and *his* hands.”

She shrugged and spun in a circle with Nori, forcing a giggle out of her. “It sounds like you heard me correctly. You signed me up for the sensual massage, right?”

“Th-the sen—”

Simone’s snickers soon turned into a full-blown witch cackle as she sank onto the couch. Nori didn’t know what the hell was going on, but she joined in, laughing and clapping while flashing me her beaver teeth.

“Y-you should’ve seen your face. Sensual massage; you’re so gullible, Anthony.”

“Can you blame me? You were pretty convincing.”

“Forgive me for pranking you, but I couldn’t resist. My masseuse was a woman.”

“You’re trouble when you’re tipsy, Simone,” I said, handing her the flute. She might be a bit of a menace, but I loved Topsy Simone. I’d never seen her so carefree and vibrant. Since I’d met her, there seemed to be a raincloud that constantly hovered over her. Granted, that raincloud turned into a thundercloud when I showed up on her doorstep and

reclaimed Nori. However, since living under one roof, I'd noticed the cloud begin to dissipate and the sun shine through.

"Am I too much for you to handle, Anthony?" she purred.

The corner of my mouth twitched.

She's a flirt when she's under the influence...I quite like that.

"A timid thing such as yourself? Never."

A fire blazed in her eyes at the sound of a challenge. She wanted to prove me wrong.

She smirked. "I hope that you and Nori enjoy your father-daughter day."

"Come with us," I said, wanting another chance to see her in a bikini. I couldn't get her out of my head, and like an animal, I jacked off to a photo of Simone taken at the beach last night. I was so desperate for spunk material that I had to crop Nori out of the picture beforehand. I wanted Simone... badly; however, I wasn't sure if she felt the same. Was there enough sexual chemistry between us to set off an explosion? I believed so, but I didn't want to be the one to make the first move. I at least needed some sort of sign from her.

"I'm gonna sit this one out. What time do we have to meet with the yacht broker?" she asked, standing on her feet with Nori on her rounded hip.

"3:00."

"Perfect. I'll have lunch and take a siesta before we leave."

She gave Nori a round of overbearing motherly kisses that made Nori scrunch her face in displeasure.

"I think Nori's had enough."

"Oh, yeah?" Simone challenged. "Well, I haven't had enough. I guess I'll have to get my fill from someone else," she said, setting our daughter to the floor.

I groaned when Simone's lips met mine. Her lips moved aggressively, and my lips parted submissively, letting her have her way with me. Her tongue moved teasingly against mine, forcing me to chase her. My brain nearly short-circuited when she palmed me through my swimming trunks.

"My God, Anthony. I think you might hurt me with this," she whispered against my lips, squeezing my dick harder.

"Maybe just a little bit, but you'll loosen up for me."

"You promise?"

"Fuck, Simone."

"Language, Anthony James," she teased with a warning squeeze. I grabbed her wrist. I couldn't take it any longer.

"Splash pad...I need to go...now."

Simone smirked and stepped away. "I hope you two have a blast. Nori, be good for Daddy."

I huffed. My dick hardened more when she called me Daddy.

It's official. Simone Livingston has given me the green light.

"Mr. Powell?"

"Hm?"

I tore my eyes away from Simone's silhouette and focused on the broker...or...at least I tried. The woman was killing me, and I couldn't help but wonder if her outfit choice was calculated. She wore a white crocheted halter crop top with a matching skirt that stopped mid-thigh and paired her ensemble with white and blue strappy heels.

How nautical of her. Fuck me. I'm a mess. Her skirt inches up just a little every time she walks past, thanks to her generous thighs and ass.

“What are your first impressions of the lovely *Jade Mermaid*?”

“It’s impressive, Mr. Banks,” I replied, wrapping my arm around Simone, settling my hand on her hip. “It’s bigger than I imagined.”

“I can assure you it’s 112 feet of pure luxury. How about you, Mrs. Powell? I’m eager to hear your thoughts.”

Simone shook her head as she searched for the words. I squeezed her hip encouragingly.

“I-I-this is a lot,” she rushed out.

“I can assure you, Mrs. Powell, that the *Jade Mermaid* is priced to sale.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“There is nothing wrong with it. Unfortunately, the owner fell on some difficult times and is looking to unload as soon as possible. There are no mechanical issues. The owner provided us with a certificate of inspection proving no major or minor mechanical issues. Our marine technicians completed an inspection and passed the *Jade Mermaid* with flying colors. How about we go onboard, and I’ll give you a full tour?”

“S-sure.”

She’s going to freak out in three...two...one....

“Anthony, are you sure about this?” Simone hissed as I led her and Nori up the gangway.

“Relax, Simone.”

“Relax? The boat is \$4.7 million.”

“And from my research, it’s worth every penny. You’re sticker shocked; I get that, but everything will be fine. If, for some odd and devastating reason, I have to unload the boat, I’d already make my money back and then some because it’s currently priced below value.” Simone opened her mouth to protest until I interrupted. “Plus, I plan on renting the yacht out

and charging an arm and a leg for it. I'll recoup my money in no time."

"It sounds like you already have your mind made up," she accused.

"I promise you, Simone. It's the third most beautiful thing I've ever laid eyes on."

She rolled her eyes. "Let me guess. Nori is first, and I'm second."

I grinned and bit my bottom lip. "That's mighty presumptuous of you, Simone. I was going to say Nori and then the Grand Canyon." She smacked her lips loudly and followed Mr. Banks. "Have you ever seen the Grand Canyon?"

"Leave me alone, Anthony."

"I'm just joking."

"Mhm. Just so you know, I'm *not* sharing a door with you if the yacht sinks."

"I love you, too," I said, kissing her on the corner of her mouth. I confessed in a playful tone, but I meant every syllable. I was deeply in love with Simone Justine Livingston.

We locked eyes, and I leaned in to claim her lips when we were interrupted by Mr. Banks.

"The *Jade Mermaid* was built in 1999 by Westport but was refitted in 2014. Westport is continually one of the most sought-after models on the market. Their craftsmanship is superb, and all the fits and finishes are of the highest quality."

"What is the hull comprised of?"

"It is a combination of composite and fiberglass."

"And what is it powered by?"

"Twin MTU diesel engines, each producing 1800hp. The *Jade Mermaid* can reach top speeds of 24 knots and cruising speeds of 18 knots."

Simone raised her hand. I was surprised, considering how she was adamantly against the yacht a few minutes ago.

“Yes, Mrs. Powell?”

“How many passengers does the *Jade Mermaid* accommodate?”

He grinned, knowing he had her hook, line, and sinker.

“The *Jade Mermaid* can accommodate eight guests in four staterooms. There is a main suite, a VIP stateroom, a double, and a twin stateroom. There is also a quarter that can accommodate four crew members.”

“Oh...that’s nice.”

“Yes, ma’am, and as you can see here, the interior layout is efficient for seating guests. There is an enormous country-style kitchen that is adjacent to a dining room. Please take a moment to tour the deck, and then I’ll take you to the guestrooms.”

I watched in silence as Simone toured the yacht. I followed her to the aft of the boat. She patted a blue cushion of the outdoor horseshoe seating. Concern laced her features.

“Tell me what you’re feeling, Simone.”

“I’m deeply concerned about safety. Nori could climb on the couch and launch herself right over the edge.”

“We can make some changes to make it safer for Nori.”

“I suppose,” she whispered, staring at the lapping waves.

“What did you think about the living area?”

“It was great. I appreciated how homey it felt. I was afraid everything would be white and modern, and as you know, white furniture and babies don’t mix.”

“Don’t I know it,” I drawled, recalling a rug that had to be sent to the cleaners after it lost a battle with Nori and a sippy cup full of juice and a loose lid. “Let’s go inside and check out the kitchen.”

Simone's mouth dropped once we entered the main suite. "Oh, Ant," she said breathlessly, turning me on without even trying. "This is so...wow."

I stole Nori from her and fell back onto the king-sized bed. She squealed as we played airplane. "Ugh," I complained when baby drool dripped onto my face. My distress only made her laugh and drool harder. "God, you're perfect," I whispered, bringing her to my chest.

"Anthony, there's a jacuzzi tub in here!"

"Uh-huh," I said, patting Nori on the butt.

"There are two shower heads in here," she reported.

"I like the sound of that," I commented, closing my eyes. I opened them again and found Simone staring at me.

"You fell asleep."

"I did? How long was I out?"

"Thirty minutes. That splash pad must've worn you two out."

"You have no idea. So, what do you think? Are we buying a yacht?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

Simone

I moaned when Anthony sucked my tongue as he caressed my thighs. The caresses quickly turned into painful grasps, resulting in his fingertips being buried into my flesh. I didn't mind. I wanted him to mark me and make me his. He pulled away, leaving me breathless, with the sound of my blood rushing in my ears like the waves that slammed against the yacht's hull.

It was finally my birthday, and instead of dining at a high-end restaurant surrounded by strangers, Anthony thought it'd be a good idea to take his new toy, *The Jade Mermaid*, out to sea. He hired a small crew consisting of a captain and first mate, who doubled as an engineer, to take us out a couple of miles from shore. He cooked my favorite meal—creamy tomato blackened salmon and shrimp pasta and paired it with a triple-digit bottle of white wine that I enjoyed more than I cared to admit. He cut me off after two glasses but reassured me he'd keep the wine fridge at home stocked with it. My birthday cake put the biggest smile on my face. It was a round, two-tier pale pink iced cake decorated in edible gold-colored sugar pearls and intricate frosted flowers on top. I thought the flowers were real for a second until Nori swiped at it, pulling away tiny fingers covered in icing. She didn't hesitate to suck her fingers into her mouth and reach for seconds while Anthony sang "Happy Birthday."

Thirty minutes later, Nori suffered a well-timed sugar crash, giving Anthony and me some alone time. The idea of hiring a nanny was becoming more appealing by the second.

“What’s the matter?” I panted, barely recognizing my voice. It was thick, low, and sultry—full of lust and an invitation for Anthony to do his worst. I lay on a large navy-blue deck lounge with the skirt of my yellow satin dress eased to my waist and Anthony wedged between my thighs. He traced my swollen bottom lip with a thumb and smirked when my tongue darted out, stealing a taste of his flesh.

“Forgive me, Simone.”

My brows joined together, unsure of what he needed forgiveness for. “Forgive you? For what? What did you do this time?”

He glanced away, and I could see the blush creep up his neck to his cheeks even in the dim light. “I’m suffering from a little bit of performance anxiety.”

“Performance anxiety? Anthony, you have nothing to worry about. I’m the one who should be nervous.”

“Mmmm, I haven’t had sex in over three years, and I have a bum leg—top that.”

“That’s easy. I’ve only had sex once, five years ago, and it was horrible.”

Anthony’s eyes widened in shock. “You poor soul.”

“It was my first time with my first boyfriend, and he ghosted me afterward. I think I won,” I admitted with a chuckle. I stopped laughing when Anthony began massaging my hips.

“I want to ruin you, but...,” he whispered, tone suddenly becoming dark and threatening, making my panties moisten with unrepentant need.

I was nearly at a loss for words. I thought I’d be the one who needed reassurance when the time came.

I need to get him out of his head.

“How bad?” I asked, rolling my hips, making sure my pussy brushed against his dick, bringing it back to life again.

“How bad, Anthony?”

He smirked and gathered my hands in his. “I’m afraid if you knew, you’d strap on a life preserve and take your chances with the sharks.”

“Try me,” I urged.

He resigned, leaning down and whispering in my ear. My mouth parted, and a strangled moan slipped out. He teased my ear with his teeth, biting into my flesh between making promises I prayed he’d keep.

“Do you want that?” Foolishly, I nodded. “No, baby. That’s not good enough. I need to hear you say it. Do you want it?”

I swallowed roughly, erasing away the saliva pooling in my mouth as Anthony seduced me without trying. “Yes...I want it.”

His lips smashed against mine, and my hands flew to his belt buckle. The belt parted like the Red Sea, and my frantic fingers nimbly did the rest. My pulse ramped up when the sound of his zipper lowering drowned out the Caribbean waves. My hand slipped into his boxers, and my fingers wrapped around his veiny dick that I hoped to be running from soon. I wasn’t joking when I told him he’d hurt me with it. He was considerably bigger than my ex-boyfriend in girth and length, and I had a gut feeling I’d be feeling more pain than pleasure, especially after Anthony’s promise to ruin me.

I gave him a firm tug and smiled when he grunted in my ear. My thumb swiped over the tip, and he was already leaking. A devious side of me that I never knew I possessed came forward.

“Anthony, you’re already making a mess of yourself,” I chastised playfully, showing him the translucent fluid on my thumb. I tugged his bottom lip between my teeth and released him with a harsh suck. “Clean me up,” I demanded, holding my thumb out to him. His brows jumped. I’d obviously taken

him by surprise. Hell, I surprised myself. But like the good sport he was, Anthony obeyed.

He made eye contact with me when the tip of his tongue touched the base of my thumb. He slowly licked the length, refusing to pull those magnetic gray eyes from mine. My breasts heaved when his tongue swirled the tip of my thumb, collecting his pre-cum.

“Good boy,” I whispered.

I yelped when I was suddenly flipped onto my stomach. He covered my back, and his large frame engulfed and trapped me. I noticed how his masculine hands sank into the lounge cushion, but I was quickly drawn away when he began whispering obscenities in my ear. He stole my breath when he demanded I come on his cock, and he refused to give it back when he promised to fuck me like a slut and then love me sweetly.

That settles it. He’s a thief.

Anthony Powell was the worst kind of thief. He was the kind you put your guard up with, warning yourself that he could never be trusted. *Sleep with one eye open and never turn your back to him, lest he robs you blind*, I told myself. But at some point, he wormed his way in with his crooked smile, teasing words, and sweet devotion to our little Nori. And in doing so, he stole more than my breath—he stole my heart.

But did he really steal it, or did I crack the safe and leave the door wide open? Whatever the case, however, it happened, I need to tell him that...

“I love you,” I whimpered.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Anthony

“Tell me again,” I whispered against Simone’s lips as I stumbled inside from the deck with her legs wrapped around me and my hands on her ass.

“I love you,” she moaned as I maneuvered around the furniture to our suite.

“I fucking love you, too,” I proclaimed.

“Language,” she giggled, tapping my shoulder with the two-way baby monitor she held.

“Just a suggestion. You might want to mute us.”

“I’m already one step ahead of you,” she said, grinning once we entered *our* bedroom. She squealed when I tossed her onto the bed. I stared down at her pensively, wondering how I’d gotten so lucky.

I was addicted to Simone Justine Livingston. She was my opium—dulling my senses, bringing forth a euphoric rush that I wanted to feel time and time again. Like an addict, I didn’t care what I had to do to achieve my fix—steal, lie, kill—it was

all fair game. I licked my bottom lip as I fantasized about the many positions I wanted her in, how she'd gasp my name as I left scorching kisses down her body, how the taste of her would linger on my tongue, and how I'd stick to my promise to ruin her.

We both felt it—the intense unquenchable need to become one since the night of her canceled date. I couldn't get the memory out of my head of Simone straddling my lap in the media room. You'd think the graphic sex dream I had of us would hit me harder, but that wasn't real—the media room was.

I still remembered the warmth of her smooth skin, her seductive perfume, and the taste of hints of white wine on her tongue. I loved how she felt in my lap—like she was always meant to be there...with me...with us.

My heart swelled as I stared down at Simone, who gazed up at me with bright eyes that were pools of rich umber. I wanted to make love to her. The kind of lovemaking that made your toes curl and stars explode behind closed lids. The type of lovemaking that left us exchanging passionate kisses and reverent whispers that lasted throughout the night until the sun crested the horizon and, with it, bringing new day and life.

Later, Anthony. You have a promise to keep.

“Any hard limits?” I asked, unbuttoning my navy blue and white striped dress shirt Simone purchased the other day that she claimed would go great with my eyes.

“No,” Simone whispered as I tossed my shirt on the couch.

“Safe word?”

“I'll happily take what you give me.”

“You have a lot of faith in me, Simone,” I warned.

“That's the point,” she answered, reaching up to bring down the strap of her dress. I stopped her. “Don't...just watch.”

I smirked when she sucked in a breath when my dress pants and boxer briefs hit the floor. That little reaction from her had me harder than a steel pipe. I wrapped a hand around my throbbing dick and stroked it leisurely as I watched Simone's response. Her tongue ran across her lip when precum glistened the tip. I wanted her on her knees sucking and drawing more out of me, but that could wait.

"I know you want a taste, Simone, but we'll save that for later. Nod if you understand." I chuckled when she nodded furiously. "Stand up and turn around." She was shaking as she followed my command. Her back was towards me, and I waited for several painstaking seconds to put my hands on her body. "You are the most gorgeous woman that has ever walked this planet, and you're all mine," I whispered in her ear as I lowered the dress's zipper. I rested my chin on her shoulder. "You made a mistake, Simone."

"W-what mistake did I make?"

"You'll see, my love," I replied. I peeled down her dress lazily until it was a puddle around her ankles. "Turn around."

I cupped her cheeks and pulled her in for a kiss. It was different from any other we shared now that we put our feelings out there. Her tongue caressed mine softly as if we had forever, and damn if I didn't want it to last forever. My fingers skimmed her collarbone and, eventually, her perky nipples. My kiss-swollen lips left hers and trailed down her slender neck that felt as smooth as velvet and smelled of luxuriousness.

"Anthony," she whispered when my tongue swiped a sensitive spot at the base of her throat. I didn't stop there. My journey continued down to her supple breasts that weighed heavily in my hands. I kneaded them gently before forcing her to cry out in need when my moist tongue made contact with a nipple. I reciprocated the same attention to the other one before picking her up. Her face sank into the crook of my neck, leaving her own trail of kisses and love bites as her nails tangled in my hair and scratched my scalp.

I laid her gently on the bed and eased between her legs. I rested on my elbows and teased her with my dick, dragging it up and down her slit, wetting us both as I kissed her attentively. I was thirsty and needed her wetter than wet.

Simone

My back arched, and my fingers tightened around the comforter as Anthony's tongue flicked my clit. It was my first time. He'd barely done anything, and my legs were already shaking. My teeth sank into my bottom lip, keeping me from begging for relief.

"Oh, God!" I shouted when his tongue met my entrance.

"Oh, shit, Simone," he groaned, diving back in. "You taste so fucking good, baby." He continued to lap at my pussy like it was the coveted Fountain of Youth. I seized when he licked from my entrance to my clit. He wrapped his lips around it and suckled, bringing me to an entirely different high.

"Anthony...it's too much," I whined, feeling my orgasm creep up.

"Too much? I haven't even put it in yet," he taunted before sucking my labias into his mouth. He released them with loud pops, making them swollen and angry from the abuse.

Anthony slid his hands underneath my ass, and my mouth fell open when he flipped us over in one fluid motion with me on top. He grabbed my hips and motioned me forward and backward over his face. It wasn't long before I took over, rolling my hips as I rode his face.

I came shortly with a loud wail. Anthony made ungodly slurping noises as my pussy gushed over his lips.

"So fucking delicious," Anthony said, forcing me onto my back. I barely had time to think when he surged into me. My eyes widened in shock from the sudden intrusion. He was stretching me to the point where it burned, and no doubt, I would tear if he didn't give me time to adjust. He continued to inch into me, kissing my face between breaks.

“Are you okay?” he asked when he was finally seated as far as he could go.

“Mhm,” I hummed. He whispered his promise to me, and my pussy clenched around him. He laughed into the crook of my neck. “Who would’ve thought you wanted to become a mother again so soon?”

That was his promise to me—give me another baby...the natural way.

Anthony pulled out to the tip and plunged back into me. He delivered slow strokes and calculating kisses as he hit spots I never knew I had before. He pulled my arms from around him and placed them above my head, lacing his fingers through mine. He continued his leisurely pace but put additional force behind his strokes, causing my breasts to jump at each stroke.

“You’re loving this dick. I can see it all over your face. I’ll have you fucking begging for it by the time I’m done with you.” A whimper slipped out of me as he picked up the pace, gliding in and out of me. “I want to go harder, Simone, but I don’t know if you can take it.”

“I can take it,” I rushed out.

He kissed my lips, then grinned. “Okay. Hold on.”

The next thing I knew, Anthony was pounding me into the mattress with several inches of dick. I cried out from pleasure until I couldn’t recognize the sounds coming from my mouth. His thickness was coated in my cream, sliding in and out of me with ease. “You like how I fuck this pussy, don’t you?” he taunted. I raised my hips from the mattress, meeting his violent strokes. “Simone, I need you to trust me to take care of you,” he said, pinning my hips down. I was lost in my own passionate world of sexual desire and continued to thrust upward. “We’re gonna have to do this another way since you’re not being a good listener right now.”

I whimpered when he pulled out but quickly found myself positioned on my stomach. He spread my legs, bending my

right leg for comfortable access, and covered my back with his body. He entered me slowly from behind. I threw my head back and gripped the sheets. His left elbow rested on the bed with his left hand clutching my throat and his right hand gripping my right thigh. He tightened his grip around my throat as he moved with purpose. I had difficulty concentrating on my release with everything he did to my body. The lack of oxygen, the kisses, bites, and licks to my neck and shoulders, his strong hand squeezing my thighs—it was too much. I managed to turn my head around and eagerly accepted his lips. I tried to tear mine away as he increased his speed, but he refused to let me go.

“I want you to come for me. Can you do that, Simone? If you do that for me, I promise I’ll fill you up just like you want.”

I moaned loudly from the combination of his strokes and his fingers that snuck around front to punishingly rub my clit. “Oh, my God, oh my God, oh my God!” I whined, tears springing to my eyes. He rolled us over to our side without missing a beat and tried to fuck my soul out of me. The sound of our skin slapping together filled the air, drowning out the sounds of my desperate wails and his low groans of pleasure. “Baby, I’m gonna—oh, my God!”

My screams penetrated the air as I convulsed in his arms. “Simone, tell me you want it,” he groaned in my ear as his strokes became sloppier. I was open-mouthed, still riding out my climax, and it seemed like basic human communication escaped me. “Simone, do you want my cum?” he growled.

“Yes!”

“Tell me something nasty, baby.”

Another orgasm crept up on me as he locked me in a headlock. “Daddy, fill my tight pussy with your cum!”

“Fuck yeah,” he growled, giving me exactly what I asked for. I lay there in his embrace, boneless and unmoving, as I

recovered from my orgasm. “Are you okay?” he asked a few minutes later.

“I-I don’t know. I’m kinda having difficulty hearing out of my right ear,” I confessed, snapping my fingers by my ear.

Anthony laughed into the back of my neck and held me tighter. “Good thing we’ve been teaching Nori ASL.”

I rolled my eyes when we were interrupted by Nori’s cries. “Where’s the baby monitor?”

We untangled ourselves and searched for the missing monitor. “I got it,” Anthony said, picking it off the floor. “Nori, honey. What’s the matter?” he asked through the monitor after unmuting it.

“Daaaaaaaddy!” she wailed.

Anthony and I looked at each other in astonishment.

“Did...did she say—?”

“Daaaaaaaddy!” she sobbed.

The baby monitor shook in Anthony’s hands as he cried. “She finally said it. God, it feels like my birthday,” he joked, wiping away his tears.

“Hurry up. Your daughter is calling for you,” I urged.

Words couldn’t express how happy I was for Anthony. The man embraced fatherhood like it was his true calling. And although I allowed him to come in me in the heat of the moment, I didn’t regret it.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Anthony

Several Weeks Later

I had my woman pinned against my office wall. I reached between us and felt that she was soaking wet.

Good. I don't have time for foreplay.

I impaled her and grinned. Her legs shook, and her eyes rolled in the back of her head. "Already? We're just getting started," I teased before slamming into her with punishing

strokes. I took it easier than I wanted the night of her birthday. I was aware she hadn't had sex in years and didn't want to go too crazy and make the experience horrible for her.

My tongue plunged into her panting mouth; it was warm and inviting. Usually, I kissed her with such reverence and passion, but we'd gotten into our first fight and were working out our frustration through sex. It was my fault. I'd been keeping Nori close ever since she called me Daddy. Simone had a strict policy about Nori sleeping in her crib, and I continuously undermined that rule by bringing Nori to bed with us most nights. I snapped at her when she corrected me, resulting in Simone sleeping in her bedroom for the past three nights. I apologized and agreed that Nori shouldn't sleep with us because of safety concerns and because we didn't want Nori to develop an aversion to sleeping on her own. We kissed, and now we were making up. There wouldn't be any soft kisses and delicate touches. Simone was getting fucked.

I held her against the wall by her neck and continued to pound into her while I bit harshly at her lips. She tore her lips away.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Oh, fucking shit!" Simone yelled, spurring me to go harder. Her back hit the wall repeatedly, and books from my shelf shifted and fell to the floor.

She's gonna have some nasty bruises.

Her pussy gripped me tight, and if I wasn't careful, I would come soon. I pulled out and crossed the office with her still in my arms. I swiped at the items on my desk and winced when a ship I'd been working on collided on the floor, shattering the bottle into shards of glass.

I'll worry about that later. For now....

I plopped Simone onto the desk. Kissed her once, twice, and filled her pussy.

"Shit...this pussy is too good," I panted as I fucked her. I was transfixed by my dick sliding in and out of her perfect

pussy, and my mouth watered at the sight of her slick arousal coating my dick. I wanted a taste, but we were racing against the clock.

I released Simone's breasts from her tank top and palmed them. "Ant, stop squeezing them so hard—they're sensitive," she complained, propping herself on her elbows to watch me work. I released them before leaning down and kissing along her jawline. I rested my face against hers, listening to the changes in her breathing. The more ragged it became, the closer she got to losing it and creaming all over my dick.

"Ohhhhh, my...."

Simone fell back against the desk when I placed her legs on my shoulders. I wrapped my arms around her thighs for leverage and tugged her toward the edge of the desk.

"Fuck, Ant. Just like that, baby!"

"Are you about to come?"

"I'm about to come!" she confirmed.

"You know what to do, Simone," I said, slapping her on her ass. One of her hands flailed above her head, looking for purchase, while the other gripped the edge of the desk to prevent her from falling. She didn't have to worry because there was no way in Hell I'd drop her.

I felt her climax before I heard her. Her pussy sucked me in, making it clear that it didn't want to let me go. Simone screamed so loud that I was sure she woke Nori from her afternoon nap.

My leg was giving me hell at that point, but I continued to power through, surging into her depths. I came in her so hard that I had to grip the desk for support to prevent falling over. Simone gasped for air with her mouth wide open as my dick jerked and pulsated, and my cum painted her walls.

"Fuck!" I groaned, dropping down into my office chair. I massaged my thigh, attempting to relax the tightened muscles

while I watched a steady stream of my milky cum oozed from between her swollen folds.

“A-are you okay?” Simone asked, righting herself on the desk.

“Don’t...don’t get down, baby. There’s glass everywhere,” I sighed.

“Right. So, we’re good, right?”

“Yeah...we’re good. Nori sleeps in her bed with some exceptions, which include bad dreams, thunderstorms if necessary, and if she’s sick, and we need to keep an eye on her.”

“Wonderful. I need to get cleaned up. Are you joining me in the shower?”

My eyes tracked to the clock on the wall. “I shouldn’t. I have to leave for therapy pretty soon, and if I join you, I—”

“Say less,” Simone replied as she carefully maneuvered around the broken glass. “I’ll clean this up when I get out.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll take care of it. Nori should be waking up from her nap soon. Do you need me to stop at the grocery store on my way home?”

“Yes.”

“Write me a list,” I urged, sliding a sticky notepad and pen in her direction. My eyebrows furrowed as I watched her write out her list. “Is that all?”

“Yep.”

“All right. I love you. I’ll see you later.”

“I love you, too,” Simone called out, leaving my office as naked as the day she was born.

“I’m home,” I called out, entering the house through the garage.

“Thank God. What took you so long?” Simone chastised, bombarding me as soon as I entered the kitchen.

“I stopped and visited my other family,” I replied, with an eye roll.

“I wouldn’t joke like that, Anthony. People have been killed for less.”

“You’re jealous. That’s adorable.”

“It’s not about me being jealous; it’s about respect,” Simone fussed as she tore into a package of iced gingerbread cookies. I was mildly impressed when she screwed the lid off the chocolate milk and began chugging it like a frat boy downing a beer.

“Mama!” Nori shouted from below. She slapped her mother’s leg repeatedly, trying to get her attention. “Mama! Coo coo.”

Simone shoved a soft baked gingerbread in Nori’s direction without missing a beat. Nori’s fingers nearly grasped the cookie when Simone snatched it back, causing Nori to cry out in frustration and flop onto the floor.

“Nori Rene, you have three seconds to get off that floor. I’m trying to help you out. See. You have to break the gingerbread man’s legs off first so he doesn’t run away. Here.”

Nori sniffed and accepted the cookie from her mother.

“That’s a little morbid, don’t you think?” I laughed, wiping away her chocolate milk mustache.

“It’s a fact.”

I kissed her lips and wrapped her in an embrace. “I have a gift for you.”

“A gift? For what?”

“It’s something I’d been working on for a while. I wanted to give it to you for your birthday, but I decided to hold off. Grab your snack and meet us in the living room.”

Nori followed me like a little duckling to the family room, where I hid Simone's gift in the ottoman. I watched intently as Nori attempted to pull herself onto the couch. I wanted to leap in and help her, but lately, I'd been trying to not be a helicopter parent. I wouldn't intercede unless asked.

"Daddy."

That was my cue. I boosted her with my leg and practiced how to sign 'thank you' with her until her mother materialized.

"All right. What did you get me?" Simone asked, dropping onto the couch next to Nori. I sat the black leather album on her lap. "What is this?" she asked skeptically.

"I told you that I was going to make my own."

"No!" she gasped. "I can keep this?"

"Hell no," I replied, giving her a taste of her own medicine. She snickered as she flipped open the cover.

"We've come a long way since then, huh?"

"We did." She fell silent when she noticed the first page. "I'll be honest with you, Simone. Most of the pictures are of you. I didn't have pictures of Nori from the first year of her life, so I decided to start where it all began."

I remained silent as Simone flipped through the photos. She was aware of some of them, like when we received confirmation of pregnancy and when we had our private baby shower—just the three of us. She wasn't aware of others, like when I snapped her chowing down on iced gingerbread cookies that she'd requested when her late-night cravings were hitting hard. Simone continued to flip through photos, finally getting to the pictures of Nori. She found adorable snapshots of the three of us at the zoo and the park and of Nori giving us cuteness overload. Simone gasped when she made it to the last page. A finger traced the diamond ring taped to the center of the page.

"Anthony...what is this?"

“I purchased this ring the same day I purchased the ID bracelets. It wasn’t my intention, but it caught my eye, and I had to have it. I didn’t know when I would propose. I kept telling myself when the time was right or when enough time had passed. But as they say, there’s no time like the present. I’ve never met a more kind, gracious, compassionate, and loving person than you, and I want you...for as long as you’ll have me. We make a great team, and we’re raising a beautiful, growing family together.”

“Growing?” she questioned.

I flipped back to the page where she ate gingerbread cookies and drank chocolate milk with the package resting on her rounded stomach.

“I left the pregnancy test that I bought in the truck. I’m hoping for a boy this time, but I’ll be happy as long as you and the baby are healthy. With that being said, will you marry me, Simone Justine Livingston?”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Simone

I blinked several times as two and two started making sense. My eyes were drawn to the photo of me gorging on iced

gingerbread cookies while pregnant. They were my heroin, and Anthony was my dealer.

I stood to my feet, and the book fell from my hands. Anthony glanced down at it in concern before looking back up at me. “Simone? Are you okay?” I hurriedly left for the garage, dodging Nori and the ottoman. “So? No to my proposal?”

The pregnancy test sat in a white plastic bag on the front passenger seat. I snatched it up and beelined it to the nearest bathroom, darting past Anthony. I shut the door behind me and locked it. My hands fumbled with the pink package that promised to give me accurate readings in five minutes. “Shit!” I yelled when I accidentally dropped the box on the floor.

Anthony knocked on the door. “Simone? Are you okay? Do you need help?”

I picked up the box while simultaneously sliding my shorts down my legs. “I think I can manage peeing by myself,” I rushed out.

“Okay. Well, I’ll be right here.”

“Okay, Nori,” I taunted.

“That was low,” he said, chuckling through the door.

Nori was at that age where I couldn’t have a moment of privacy. She’d often follow me to the bathroom and stand outside beating on the door if I didn’t give her access.

I tore the applicator out of the package, uncapped it, and sat on the toilet. My feet tapped anxiously against the smooth tile as I waited for a stream. “Come on,” I whispered harshly when nothing came thirty seconds later.

“So...about my proposal.”

“Anthony, get away from the door!”

I probably couldn’t go because he was hovering.

“Okay. Okay. I’m leaving.”

“You’re still there, aren’t you?” I asked several seconds later.

“I’m sorry, Simone, but I can’t help it. I’m rooted in excitement.”

“You’re excited?”

“Hell yeah. I might be having another baby with the most amazing woman in the world.”

Anthony’s kind words not only warmed my heart but triggered my pee.

I guess it’s a good thing he didn’t leave after all.

I finished my business and capped the test, laying it flat on the vanity. I washed my hands and did my best to ignore it. Five minutes had passed in a blink of an eye.

“You can do it. It’s either positive or negative. It’s most likely positive because you’ve been letting Anthony come in you without remorse since—”

“I love it when you have personal monologues.”

I snatched the door open and narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re still waiting for an answer to your question. I’d try to be less annoying if I were you.”

“Less annoying?” he questioned, cocking his head to the side. “My dear, I don’t think there’s such a thing.” I snorted and snatched up the test. “What does it say?” he asked eagerly, holding Nori in his arms.

“Give me a second, James.”

“Nori, she used my middle name. That’s a definite no to my proposal.”

“It’s not a no; it’s a ‘let me focus on one major life change at a time.’ Are you ready?”

“I want to say duh sooooo bad, but I won’t.”

“Smart man,” I mumbled, staring at the results. My eyes squinted as my stomach roiled with anxiety and excitement.

That's a line.

“Is that a line?”

That's a line.

“Fuck, Simone. We're pregnant!”

“Language! *I'm* pregnant! We're having a baby. Nori, you're gonna be a big sister,” I exclaimed, exchanging the test for her. I hugged my daughter close and gave her a million cheek kisses. She grinned, oblivious to the situation but not our happiness.

“That didn't take long at all,” Anthony mumbled as he examined the applicator for himself.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, I'll marry you.”

“If the test was negative, you—”

“I would've still said yes. I just needed a moment to process.”

“How does a December wedding sound to you?”

“December works for me.”

I fluffed my pillow, looking forward to my head hitting it. I'd come down from my earlier high and needed to recharge. I climbed into bed with a loud sigh and tucked my arms beneath my pillow. I slipped my left hand from underneath it and stared at my engagement ring. I couldn't help it. Besides Nori, it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. It was a 10-carat oval brilliant diamond nestled in 18k white gold with smaller diamonds wrapped around the band. Initially, I had an aversion to the pricey engagement ring, but it felt right once Anthony slipped it on my finger.

“She went down easy. I think all the excitement tired her out,” Anthony said softly, closing the door behind him. “Now,

we can really get this celebration started,” he commented, grinning as he lost his shirt.

“I’m kinda tired,” I announced. The salacious grin slid off his face, and his shoulders drooped. He looked like a child who was just told he couldn’t keep a puppy he found.

It might be the same pout Nori gives me, but it won’t work on me.

“You need your rest,” he agreed, diving into bed. I shook my head and laughed at his antics. “Can I get my good night kiss?”

“Only one.”

“Only one,” he promised. Anthony leaned in, and his lips fastened to mine with expert precision, sending my body into immediate overdrive. “All right. I had one. It’s time for you to go to—”

He was cut off when I cupped the back of his neck and yanked him down, kissing him with frantic passion. He engulfed me, slipping between my legs. I moaned against his lips when I felt him hard and heavy against me.

He kissed my face and tracked his lips down my body to my pussy, already drenched and aching for him. His lips tugged up after he kissed my stomach. “I thought you were tired, Mrs. Powell?”

“I dug deep and found my second wind.”

He chuckled darkly and lifted my satin nightgown over my hips. He slid his hands under my ass and pulled me roughly toward his mouth. My face heated, and I curled my toes preemptively. His lips pressed against my flesh, and the sensation jolted me upwards, away from the wetness of his lips. He pulled me back roughly and glared at me with those mesmerizing titanium eyes.

“Don’t run,” he growled, pulling me even closer. My head fell back, and I flung my arm over my eyes, unable to watch

him as he devoured me. His fingers pried me open before swallowing me whole.

Overwhelmed, I gripped his hair. His chest rumbled with excitement. “Don’t stop,” I pleaded, soon cresting against the waves of climax. Anthony emerged from between my legs with a satisfied smile.

“Do you want a taste?” he murmured, pressing his lips against mine before I could answer. “You’re so delicious.” I stare at him breathlessly. “Say thank you, Simone.”

“Th-thank you,” I stuttered, feeling him prod against me.

“Good girl. For your reward, you get to set the pace.”

Another strum of pleasure reverberated through me at the thought of dominating him.

I swung a leg over him and settled on his lap. I angled myself and eased down his length, taking my time to enjoy the stretch. My mouth gaped, and my head fell back in pleasure from the sensation of being full. His hands squeezed my hips as I rode him slowly.

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to hold off, Simone. You feel so good.”

I leaned down, capturing his lips with mine. He held me against him, not wanting to be without our heat. I couldn’t blame him. I was exactly where I wanted to be—heart-to-heart.

I started bouncing on his dick, taking him better, making me wetter. I screwed my eyes shut as a ball tightened in my stomach. Pressure built up inside me—a feeling once foreign that became synonymous with his name, touch, and affection.

“Anthony.”

I said his name once, and our warring orgasms erupted simultaneously. He twitched inside of me, flooding me with his cum, and like the greedy woman I was, I drained him until he softened.

We didn't move. Instead, we settled on holding each other as close as possible. He didn't say anything, but the tightness of his grip said everything.

Nori was the first thing I saw when I opened my eyes.

Thank goodness we changed the sheets last night.

“Good morning, baby.”

She smiled and smoothed her fingers over my face until she touched my lips. I kissed them until she was satisfied and pulled them away.

“Oh, you're up,” Anthony said, limping into the bedroom with a tray of food. “It's Sunday. I made breakfast and thought we could eat in bed and watch cartoons. What do you say?” he asked, setting down the tray laden with some of my breakfast favorites. Nori immediately reached for a small bowl of dried cereal.

“Is this our future? Breakfast in bed and morning cartoons?” I asked wistfully.

“Will that be okay?” he asked, slipping into bed after Nori.

I gazed at Anthony as I considered his proposition. Months ago, I would've run him over with my car going at breakneck speed. Some would call me crazy for forgiving him and letting him steal a piece of my heart, but I'd never been one to carry a grudge. Trauma could make even the most sane and levelheaded person lose their mind. But the fact remained that we came together because of our love of Nori, but we'd stay together because of our love for each other.

“That sounds perfect.”

Epilogue

Jonathan

The packed restaurant was filled with idle chatter and bustling servers dancing around one another. My eyes locked on Anthony, who strutted across the restaurant in my direction.

I smiled, happy to see my friend. He looked good—healthy and still surrounded by his summer glow from his vacation. Despite his cane, he walked confidently and purposefully with a crooked smirk—the same one all the ladies swooned over in college.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he joked, sliding into the booth across from me. He picked up his menu and briefly glanced at the selections.

“I love that for you.”

“Love what?” he asked curiously.

“You’ve been a dad for less than six months, and you’re embracing the corny dad jokes. Good for you.” I wiped away an invisible tear. “I’m so proud.”

Anthony rolled his eyes good-naturedly. “Always with the jokes. What are you getting? The steak? It’s been a minute.”

I nod.

Gravy’s was a nice brunch place we used to hang out at back when we were both young and single. Instead of pounding back beers and chowing down on greasy bar food, we decided to be a little classier and have Bro Brunch with mimosas, salmon, and steak. Since starting our careers and

families, Bro Brunch had been placed on the back burner for far too long.

Anthony closed his menu and raised his brows. “So?”

I pushed my glasses up my nose, officially activating Lawyer Mode. “So, your company settled. Expect \$6 million to be wired to you by Friday, once you sign off on the settlement.”

“Six million?”

“Did you forget about my 40% cut?”

Anthony groaned and leaned against the back of the booth. “I fucking hate lawyers.”

“Must I remind you how you never have to work a day in your life because of me?” I challenged.

“Look at the pot calling the kettle black. You can retire if you want.”

“I could, but I love my job too much,” I replied, chuckling when Anthony rolled his eyes.

“How are the kids?” he asked.

“The kids are doing well, but—”

“But?”

“We’re having...slight difficulties—growing pains since I was granted full custody after I took Eliza back to family court.”

“Difficulties?”

“Yeah. The divorce has been hard on the kids, and I think they’re misbehaving because of it. I’ve lost two vases, six plates, and a painting was knocked off the wall.”

“Oh, no. Tell me it wasn’t the Rembrandt.”

I shot him a knowing look. “It was the fucking Rembrandt.”

“You need to hire help. Get a nanny. Simone and I are looking into hiring one ourselves.”

“But Simone is your nanny.”

“I fired her during our vacation.”

“Fired her? For what?”

“So I can date her, duh.”

I chuckled and took a sip of my mimosa. “You know she can fuck you over if she wants to, right?”

“I’m well aware,” Anthony answered confidently. “However, we decided we needed someone reliable to watch Nori when we want to go on dates or vacations. The nanny would accompany us on vacation, of course.”

“Of course,” I remarked. “I’m always happy to help on date nights.”

Anthony smiled weakly. “Thanks, Jon, but it seems you have enough on your plate already. The bags underneath your eyes are so bad that you need a bellhop.”

“Fuck you,” I said, chuckling at his jab.

“I know, buddy. The truth hurts sometimes.”

We paused to give our order to the waiter. He jotted down our usual with a smile and disappeared with our menus.

“A nanny. I do need one, but where would I find one? I have three young kids—three young, energetic kids. I don’t even know where to start.”

“They have agencies for that sort of thing. You’re making this more difficult than it has to be. Finding and hiring a nanny should be a piece of cake.”

I rolled my eyes at his callousness.

Nothing is simply a ‘piece of cake’ when it comes to your children.

“Thank you for the advice. Anything new with you?”

“I have some news, actually.”

“Well...don’t keep me waiting in suspense.”

“I proposed.”

I nod. “What are you proposing?”

Anthony’s face crumpled with annoyance. “Marriage...to Simone. You’re on the slow side today, huh?”

I laughed and rubbed my eyes, trying to clear away the fog. “I’m sorry, Anthony. That’s amazing. I’m happy for you. What did she say?”

He scoffed. “What did she say? I’m not sobbing over the basket of rolls, so...she said yes. We’re getting married. It’s so weird saying that aloud. I never thought I’d get married again, but I’m looking forward to it.”

He smiled shyly like a boy who just experienced his first kiss. Anthony loved Simone so much—it was written all over his face. I smiled ruefully, wondering if there was a time when Eliza and I were like that.

If we were, I can’t remember. It seems so far away—almost nonexistent. Anthony and Simone won’t share the same fate, though. That I’m sure of. What they have is love; what Eliza and I had was a disaster. I wonder if I’ll ever find authentic, real love.

Envy churned in my stomach, but my joy for my friend superseded. Anthony deserved it. He’d been through hell and back.

I’m glad he’s finally getting his happily ever after.

“I’m really happy for you. You deserve it, man.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me, Jonathan. I don’t have many friends—hell, I think you’re the only one, so your opinion matters.”

I looked away bashfully. “Oh, wow. Simone did a number on you, huh? She installed a few emotions. I’m enjoying this software update. I might start calling you Anthony 2.0.”

“Simone would say your elevator doesn’t stop at the top floor.”

“It’s hilarious that you’re quoting her. You’re definitely a goner.”

“Oh, by the way, do I have to adopt my own daughter to change her last name from Livingston to Powell?”

“No, you would need to petition for a name change, just like you petitioned to be added to her birth certificate.”

“Thank God.”

We continued to hurl playful jabs at each other as our food was set before us. We got the same meal every time—steak for me, salmon for Anthony. Although so much changed over the years, our order never did.

Except...

“Don’t you usually get a mimosa?” I remarked, nodding at his water.

“Usually,” he admitted.

“But...?”

Anthony licked his lips, looked around the restaurant, and leaned in closely. “Promise not to say anything?”

“You still have me on retainer, so attorney-client privileges are in effect. Are you in AA? I know you were drinking heavily after—”

He crinkled his nose, and his eyes narrowed. “No! What the hell?”

I shrugged. “I’m sorry. What is it? An ulcer?”

“A baby.” Confused, I looked down at his stomach. “Jesus Christ, man. Curl into the fetal position in the booth and go to sleep.”

“I’m tempted,” I admitted with a heavy sigh.

He nodded. “Okay. Let’s try this again. Simone is pregnant, and I’m not drinking in solidarity since she can’t

drink for a while.”

I blinked for a moment, letting the words wash over me. “Simone’s pregnant?!”

Anthony pressed his lips into a thin disappointed line. “Well, since we’re telling the whole restaurant, yes, she is. I’m gonna be a father again.”

“Hey, man! Congrats! Wow! You’re catching up to me!” I chuckled. “I still got one on you, though.”

“Eh, who knows what the future holds? Maybe I’ll outnumber you,”

“Yeah, tell that to Simone,” I reminded him with a grin. “I’d offer you champagne, but seeing how you’re not drinking, how about brunch on me?”

Anthony beamed. He didn’t use to smile, even before the accident. The most you’d get out of him was a sardonic smirk. That changed when Simone and Nori entered his life. You couldn’t pay Anthony to stop smiling, and I would be forever grateful.

“Thank you, Jon. I’ll never turn down a free meal. In return, I’ll help you with your nanny search because you look like hot shit on a stick. I’ll look up a few agencies.”

I huffed. “You’re too kind. I’m nervous, but I’m sure I’ll find the right someone who would be the perfect fit for my family—someone who will love my kids.”

Anthony nodded his approval. “That’s what I wanna hear. Now, since you’re buying, I will have that mimosa. What Simone doesn’t know won’t kill her, right?”

Sample from “The Widowed Nanny”

Chapter One

Jonathan

I tossed my glasses onto the mountain of manila folders and loose documents and massaged my eyes as I reclined in my home office chair. My eyes ticked to the clock on the bottom right corner of my laptop, and I sighed.

Twelve hours. My God. Where has the day gone?

My cell phone rang urgently. It was only one of two people; if I were honest, I could go without hearing from either of them. A complaint was waiting for me on the other line, and quite frankly, I wasn't in the mood. However, I knew failure to answer would result in future misery. It was better to get it over with now.

“Hello?”

“How much longer are you planning on keeping my fiancée hostage? It's past 8:00, Jonathan.”

“I'm sorry, Anthony. I didn't mean to keep her so late. I lost track of time.”

“That’s been happening a lot.”

“I know, but work has been a little hectic.”

He sighed. “Tell me how these nanny interviews are going.”

A gentle knock at the door interrupted us.

“Hold on,” I said, setting the phone down. “Come in.”

I smiled when my children and Nori came filing in to bid me goodnight.

“Daddy, I don’t want to go to bed,” Casey grumbled as he fell into my open arms. I rolled my eyes, knowing he’d fall asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

“Why not?”

“Because you didn’t play with me today like you promised,” he explained with a pout. I looked away. It was the same pout his mother gave me when she wanted something—usually money. But unlike Eliza, Casey wanted my time, not my money.

Granted, he doesn’t fully grasp the concept of money, but you get it.

“Tomorrow’s Friday. You know what that means?”

“You’re working a half day?” Casey answered hopefully.

“That’s right. I’ll pick you guys up from school, and then we can go to the park.” I whispered goodnight to him, received a kiss, and reached for my eldest.

“Is Mom picking us up tomorrow?” Grant asked.

“That’s the plan.”

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. He was extremely intelligent for five, and getting one over on him was difficult.

It’s like the saying goes, you can’t bullshit a bullshitter.

He knew that more likely than not, Eliza would call last minute with some excuse as to why she couldn’t pick them up

for the weekend.

It's tragic how busy Eliza suddenly became after I was granted full custody of the children, and she no longer receives child support. Funny how that works out.

“What do you want to do this weekend if your mother is busy?” He shrugged. “Oh, well, we’ll think of something. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight. Daisy, you’re up next.”

“Night, night,” my youngest told me, around her sippy cup. I leaned down to hug my daughter and kissed her on a rounded cheek.

“Night, night, Daisy.”

I sighed when Nori took Daisy’s place. Her hair was damp, and she was changed into a pink t-shirt and pajama set, ready for bed.

Jon, it's a bad sign when your best friend's daughter joins your children's nightly bedtime routine. You're taking advantage.

“All right, Nori. We’ve been practicing. How do you say goodnight? Show me goodnight?” Simone and I waited with bated breath as she touched her lips with her fingers and placed her hand in her open palm. “Okay, good. You got the first part. Show me night.” She repeated the motion instead of flipping her palm over her arm. “You were so close, Nori.”

I signed ‘goodnight’ to her repeatedly before stealing a hug and sending her to her mother. It was then that I had finally gotten a good look at Simone. The woman looked dead on her feet, and rightfully so. She’d been caring for my gang of children and Nori throughout the day for weeks while I searched tirelessly for a live-in nanny. So far, I couldn’t find anyone that would fit the bill. The candidates were either too authoritative or too lax. One believed that discipline of all forms was a social construct and abusive and expressed that

children should “free roam” and choose their own path. I found that to be a dangerous rhetoric, and she was dismissed immediately. My children would swing from the chandeliers if you let them.

“I’m gonna tuck the kids in. I fixed their lunches for school already. Is there anything else you need?”

“I’ll tuck the kids in. Thank you for preparing their lunches. Are you okay to drive home?”

Simone sighed and scrubbed her face with her hands.

“I probably shouldn’t, but I don’t want to crash here. Anthony would have a hissy fit.”

“Just relax in the living room, and I’ll have Anthony come pick you up.”

“Thanks. I think I might take you up on that offer,” she said, bending down to pick up Nori. I waited until she left my office to continue my conversation.

“Hey, Anthony. Can—”

“I heard everything. I’m on my way.”

Anthony knocked on the front door twice before letting himself in. His cane thudded heavily against the hardwood floors. He walked like a man with a purpose, a man on a mission to collect the three loves of his life—Simone, Nori, and the little one on the way. Anthony paused in front of Simone, who lay sprawled on my living room sofa with her mouth wide open and an arm thrown over her head. Nori lay on top of her, mimicking her mother perfectly.

“This is unacceptable, Jonathan,” he said brusquely without taking his eyes off his family.

“I know, and—”

“I don’t want to hear your excuses, Jonathan. Simone is pregnant and should not be working so hard that she can’t drive a few minutes down the road. At this rate, I’m

wondering if she's still my fiancée or yours. I haven't had quality time with my family in over a month. When Simone's not working for you, she's sleeping, and while I'm thrilled that Nori gets to spend the day socializing with Daisy, my little partner in crime has been missing in action. Enough is enough, Jonathan. You have one week to find a nanny. One week. Not a week and a day—one week. Do I make myself clear?" My shoulders sagged in defeat. "Do I make myself clear?" he repeated.

"Yeah, Anthony. We're clear."

"Good. Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"No, I don't think so. I have some more interviews lined up next week with the agency you referred me. Hopefully, there'll be a decent candidate in the bunch."

"Do you think you're being too picky?"

"What do you mean?" I asked with furrowed brows.

"Do you think you're being too picky?"

"There's no such thing as too picky when it comes to your children, Anthony. Not all of us are lucky enough to have our children's birth mother care for them."

A pregnant pause lulled between us.

"How has co-parenting with Eliza been?"

"Fucked. That's how it's been. She's only had the kids once since I was awarded full custody. She's supposed to get them tomorrow evening, but I doubt it. She'll come up with some bullshit excuse."

Anthony shook his head and picked up Nori. I knew he wanted to say, "I told you so," but he was too much of a friend to do it. He understood that while Eliza was a shit partner, I didn't regret her because regretting her meant regretting my children. My romantic love for Eliza died long ago—before she cheated, dragged me through a messy divorce and tried to overturn the prenup. I remembered the exact moment when I realized I was no longer in love with Eliza Baker. We were at a

fundraising event, and she spent the evening dragging me around from one influential person to the next. She introduced me as, “This is my husband. He’s a lawyer.” Clearly, my profession was worth more than my identity as a human being. After that, I threw myself into my work, believing that was all I was good for. She cheated—poorly at that. She didn’t respect me enough to even try to cover her tracks.

“Hopefully, she comes around,” Anthony said as he roused Simone from her slumber.

“I doubt it,” I remarked, looking away as the couple shared a tender moment. They whispered a greeting to each other as Anthony caressed her stomach and kissed her lips.

I wasn’t jealous of their relationship, but I was envious. I wanted what they had—a companion, a partner, someone to love me, but finding a woman who’d want to be with a man with three children and guaranteed baby mother drama was a pipe dream.

Jonathan, you should be focusing on being a present father, not dating.

“Thanks again for staying late, Simone. I really appreciate it,” I said once I ushered them to the door.

“It’s no problem. Since it’s a half day tomorrow, I’ll pick up Daisy when Anthony drops me off in the morning, and she can spend the day at our place. Are you okay with that?”

“I’ll pick up Daisy in the morning,” Anthony volunteered.

“I’m fine with that. Have a good night. Drive safe, y’all.”

My phone vibrated in my pocket as soon as they drove out of the gate.

Eliza: Something came up. I can’t get the kids this weekend.

Jonathan: K.

Chapter Two

Kierra

Sixteen lawyers.

I'd been turned down by sixteen lawyers, and with my track record, I'd probably be turned down by Lawyer #17 in a few minutes. They all told me it was impossible, and it wasn't worth it. They all told me that Vance Oil was too big of a giant to take on without a guarantee of pay. If you asked me, they were sixteen pussies who didn't give a damn about a widowed woman getting justice.

I'm tired. So...fucking tired. I don't think I can make it to Lawyer #18. I'm sorry, Rory.

I wiped away a tear, waiting for my name to be called to meet with Jonathan Baker, Esquire. The online reviews were glowing, and he came highly recommended, but anyone with the title 'esquire' could not be trusted. *Was I being judgmental? Yes, but I've been burned so many times by these so-called lawyers that I should be laid up in a burn unit. They're shady con artists, weirdos, and bastards. I doubt my opinion will change.*

I looked down when I felt something on my leg. Kiyah was driving her toy car down my thigh making vroom noises.

"Ms. Houston?" the receptionist called.

"Mrs. Houston," I corrected, using my thumb to spin my wedding ring around my finger.

“I apologize, Mrs. Houston. Thank you for correcting me. Mr. Baker can see you now. You’ll go straight back and to the left. His door is open. Just go right in.”

“Thank you.” I paused to look at the gold nameplate on her desk. “Thank you, Ms. Cara.”

I kneeled to gather Kiyah’s toys that I failed to realize she scattered in the lobby and shoved them into her pink backpack. Being scatterbrained had become the norm lately. I had so much on my mind—grief, lawyers, money, doubt; you name it.

Get it together, Kierra.

I approached Jonathan Baker’s office with trepidation in my heart. I tried to hide my fear behind a practiced mask—the same mask I’d put on when people found out about my situation and told me, “Sorry for your loss” or “I’ll keep you in my prayers.”

My daughter can’t eat your prayers.

I paused and looked towards the ceiling. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. I knew that God answered prayers, but it felt like mine had gotten lost in translation or were put on layaway until I built up enough Karma points. I needed a miracle.

I eventually made it to Jonathan’s office. I raised my fist to knock but caught myself watching him for a few seconds. He glared at the computer screen with his fist supporting his chin and his elbow on his desk. With a look like that, he had to be reviewing my case. He was probably wondering how he’d let me down easy.

I knocked, and the man behind the desk stood, giving me a bright smile.

He has an honest face and a nice smile. Let’s hope I’m right.

He tossed his glasses onto his desk and offered me his hand. “Good morning, Mrs. Houston. Thanks for coming in. I’m Jonathan Baker, and hopefully, I’ll be representing you.”

“Hi...um...thanks for meeting with me.”

I was a little thrown off by his welcoming greeting. The lawyers I'd met in the past hadn't been so hospitable.

I was even more surprised when he crouched to the balls of his feet and greeted Kiyah.

"Hi, I'm Jonathan Baker. Who are you?"

Kiyah looked up at me, silently asking how she should proceed. She was always cautious around strangers.

As she should because there are a lot of freaks out there.

"Go ahead, baby."

"I'm Kiyah," she blurted out.

"It's nice to meet you, Kiyah. Would you like a snack? Well, if it's okay with your mother?" he asked.

"Mommy, can I have a snack?"

I eyed the wicker basket of snacks on a bar that had several kid-friendly options. There was a mini fridge below the bar, and I was surprised to see juice boxes.

"Sure, but just one."

I released her, and she zoomed to the basket, picking out a bag of her favorite cheese crackers.

"Can I have juice?"

"Um—"

"Go for it," Jonathan interrupted, motioning for me to sit on the couch as he gathered some items from his desk. I sat and placed Kiyah's backpack at my feet and helped her with her juice box once she returned to me. "Here is a legal pad and some crayons for Miss Kiyah to keep her busy."

"Thank you. You seem really good with children," I replied absentmindedly, still surprised by his thoughtful consideration.

"I should be. I have three of my own."

“Oh, wow. You and Mrs. Baker must have your hands full.” He flashed his ringless finger as he pulled a chair near the couch I was seated.

“No, it’s just me.”

“I’m sorry for assuming, I—”

“Don’t worry about it. We divorced, but it was for the best. But that’s enough about me; let’s talk about you. I’ve reviewed your file extensively, Mrs. Houston, and—what is this? Are you giving me your car?”

He’d paused to entertain Kiyah, who had brought him a toy.

“Kiyah, leave him alone,” I hissed, trying to corral her back.

“She’s not a bother. You learn how to multitask when you’re a single parent,” he remarked. “As I was saying, I reviewed your file, and I’m not going to lie, this one...well, it’s a doozy.”

“Right,” I huffed, standing to my feet. “Thank you for your time and the snacks, but we’ll be on our way now.”

“Whoa, hold on, Mrs. Houston. Please sit down.”

“I rather not waste both of our time. I’ve heard it all before. I’m sure you’re going to tell me that Vance Oil is too big of a corporation to go up against, and we’ll be tied in court for years for possibly a payout that wouldn’t be worth that much effort.”

“That’s mighty presumptuous of you, Mrs. Houston. Sit,” he said with firm authority, pointing at the couch. Shamefully, I sat. His tone didn’t leave any room for argument.

“I’m sorry. It’s just...I’ve been dealing with Vance Oil, and I’ve gone through 16 lawyers, and I’m a little jaded.”

“A little?” he laughed.

“More than a little.”

“I get it. My business can be cutthroat at times, and we lawyers sometimes get a bad rap, but we’re not all the same, Mrs. Houston. I’m just here to help, but I can’t help you if you run from me.”

I nodded resoundingly. “I’m sorry. Please continue.”

“It is a fact that your case is challenging but not impossible.”

I perked up a little.

Maybe there is hope after all.

“From what I understand, your husband worked for Vance Oil on one of their rigs for six months before his passing?”

“That’s correct.”

“What was his prior profession?”

“He was a mechanic. He loved working on cars and motorcycles.”

“And perhaps Kiyah will follow in his footsteps one day,” he commented, watching her draw a car on the yellow legal notepad.

“I think Rory wanted a boy for that reason, but he learned pretty quickly that gender didn’t matter. She always followed him into the garage as soon as she learned to walk.” I sniffed back the snot that attempted to trickle out of my nose. “Thank you,” I whispered when he handed me some tissue. I blew my nose and wiped before proceeding. “Kiyah can identify most tools in his tool chest. He’d be lying on a creeper under the car and asking her to bring him his tools.”

“Can she do oil changes yet? I think I’m due for one,” he joked.

I snorted. “I think that was one of Rory’s goals. He wanted her to be able to change the oil by the time she was five.”

“That’s remarkable. My five-year-old is just learning how to tie his shoes. I miss velcro,” he sighed.

I grinned and swiped at my nose again with the tissue. Jonathan Baker was a joker. He was probably the class clown when he was younger. I didn't mind. It put me at ease.

"Tell me more about Mr. Houston and what led him to work for Vance Oil."

"We lived up north, and the cost of living was pretty high. He worked at a shop, and I worked part-time on the weekends for damn near scraps. He found an online ad for oil riggers and the pay and decided to jump at the opportunity. He didn't have to convince me much. I was over the cold, and the money was more than enticing. We packed up our lives, moved to Texas, and he began working for Vance Oil almost immediately."

"And he had no previous experience working on rigs?"

"None."

"Interesting," he mused. "What did the company tell you when you were informed of his passing?"

"I can't recall exactly. I heard 'Rory' and 'dead' in the same sentence, and I'd completely shut down."

"Okay. What benefits did Mr. Houston have with Vance Oil?"

"The usual—health, dental, vision, and accidental death."

"How much was the accidental death policy?"

"\$30,000, but I've been getting the runaround from them as well. I provided everything the insurance company asked for, but it's been weeks, and every time I call and check, they tell me that they're still processing my claim."

"Mr. Houston has been deceased six months, correct?"

"Yes."

"That's odd, considering that insurance companies usually pay out between thirty and sixty days."

"They're trying to screw me, too," I proclaimed.

“Sounds like it. I’ll look into it and see if I can light a fire under them. Did Mr. Houston have life insurance?”

I shook my head. “No. The company didn’t offer it as a benefit, and he never followed through with getting a separate policy. I bugged him about it relentlessly, and he told me he’d get it done, but he worked long hours and was gone more than he was with us. So, I guess it slipped his mind.”

“And just so we’re clear, you’re going after Vance Oil for negligence, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And Vance is claiming that Mr. Houston’s death was due to a critical error he made by not following safety protocols, correct?”

“Yes.”

“I’m sorry in advance, Mrs. Houston, but my next question might sound a little insensitive, but what evidence do you have proving that Mr. Houston wasn’t at fault?”

“It’s a gut feeling.”

“I see,” he mumbled.

“I know what it sounds like, but Vance Oil was too quick to put the blame on Rory. I know there are cameras out there, but they refuse to show me the footage of his death. If Rory was in the wrong, wouldn’t they have gladly offered to show me the footage?”

“It’s questionable. Did they offer you any kind of settlement at all?”

“Twenty-five thousand to make me disappear and stop wasting their time.”

“Did you take it?”

“No. Rory was worth more than that.”

“Good because as soon as you accepted the money, it would’ve been all over. They would be clear of any additional

financial responsibility. Are you currently working?”

“No. Kiyah and I had been living off the little savings we’d built up since moving to Texas, but that money ran out pretty quickly. I don’t have a job, but I started looking as soon as I got over my grief well enough to get out of bed and comb my hair. The pickings are slim, and the pay is even slimmer.”

“What about government assistance?”

I chuckled and shook my head. “I’d have to get a job first to qualify, but then I’d have to figure out childcare for Kiyah. The waitlists for those programs are ridiculously long.”

“Any family or friends that can help out?”

“No. I’m estranged from my family. I have been since I met Rory. They didn’t approve of him. Rory was the “bad boy” with the motorcycle and bad attitude. They thought he was a bad influence, and he’d lead me down the wrong path, but I didn’t care. We were in love, and he treated me like I was priceless. He completely changed when we found out we were expecting Kiyah. He matured, started making better choices, and took our future seriously. He was always one of those people who took things one day at a time, but his entire perspective changed when Kiyah came along.”

Mr. Baker heaved a sigh. “Children have a way of doing that. Does Mr. Houston have family?”

I shook my head. “He aged out of foster care.”

“Have you considered moving back home?”

I licked my lips and held back my tears. Returning home with my tail tucked between my legs was the last thing I wanted.

“No, I burned that bridge.”

“I understand. I—” He paused when his cell phone vibrated on the coffee table. “I’m sorry, but do you mind if—”

“Go right ahead.”

“Thank you. I’ll be swift.”

I colored with Kiyah until he returned a minute later. Gone was the bright smile; it was replaced with a deep frown I didn't think he was capable of.

"Is everything okay?" I found myself asking.

He ran a hand through his hair, ruining his perfect coif. "I'm interviewing nannies, and I had a cancellation. You wouldn't be interested in being a live-in nanny to three kids, would you?" he asked off-handedly. I couldn't tell if he was serious or not, but before I could answer, he said, "I'll take your case, Mrs. Houston."

"I'm sorry?"

"I'll take your case."

"Why?"

"Because there's an angle I'm thinking of working, but you might not like it."

"What is it?"

"We'll say that Mr. Houston did make a critical error; however, Vance Oil is still liable."

I jumped to my feet. "Thank you very much for your time, Mr. Baker, but I think our time here is done," I said, gathering Kiyah's toys.

"Just hear me out, Mrs. Houston. Right now, we do not have evidence that Mr. Houston was or wasn't following safety procedures. However, what we do know was that he was unqualified for the position, yet they hired him anyway." I paused and considered what he said. "I took a look at the job posting you sent me, and clear as day, they put that two years' experience was a must. Yet, they hired him anyway. As long as Mr. Houston didn't lie on his job application, then Vance Oil is negligent for hiring your husband."

I draped Kiyah's backpack on my shoulder and considered. "Can't this still backfire on us by admitting that Rory was at fault?"

“Not if I work it right. If anything, they’ll try to settle out of court and offer you significantly more than \$25,000.00.”

“In your experience, how much do you think they would offer me to not take it to court?”

“Conservatively, \$500,000.00.”

I gulped.

That’s a lot of money...life-changing money. I can buy us a house and go to school. I can make a better life for Kiyah.

“Can I think about it?”

“Of course. Can I give you a little advice before you go?”

“Sure.”

“I know it may be difficult to consider going this route because you don’t want to besmirch Rory’s name, but you have to ask yourself what Rory would want. From what you told me, he loved you and Kiyah very much, and he’d want the two of you taken care of no matter what.”

I nodded through my tears. “Um...do you have a business card?”

“Of course.” He grabbed a card from a cardholder on his desk and handed it to me. It reflected him—clean, crisp, straight to the point. “Take all the time you need to consider my offer. In the meantime, I’ll call the insurance company and insist that they cut you a check in the next two to three business days...free of charge.”

“Oh, no. You don’t have to do that. I don’t expect you to work for fr—”

“Please, Mrs. Houston. It’s just a courtesy phone call. It’s the least I can do.”

“That...that would help us out a lot. Thank you.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” he replied before grabbing Kiyah’s attention. “It was nice to meet you, Kiyah. I hope we can see each other again.”

“Bye-bye,” she offered before snatching a bag of cookies from the basket.

“Ki,” I hissed.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Houston, really. My kids are like raccoons when it comes to snacks. If it gets too quiet around the house, then I know they’re in the pantry. Let me walk you two out.”

I left Jonathan Baker’s office, realizing that maybe all lawyers weren’t the same because, for the first time in several months, I had hope.

Rory, tell me what to do.

Note from the Authors

Thank you for reading *The Surrogate Nanny!* The series will continue with *The Widowed Nanny* featuring Jonathan and Kierra and will be released in March 2024. Please follow for more information regarding future releases, including: *Ice Me Out (Hockey Sugar Baby Romance)*, *The Desired Nanny*, *Mail Order Groom IV:*

Tanisha & Owen, Hunt Me, and Baby Swap!

www.amazon.com/author/anboyden

www.instagram.com/anboyden

www.tiktok.com/anboydenbooks

You may also sign up for my newsletter at www.anboydenbooks.com

Want the chapters early to new releases? Sign up for my Patreon account at www.patreon.com/anboyden

If you are interested in joining A. N. Boyden's ARC Team, send me an email at anboydenbooks@yahoo.com