



*Taken By The*  
**GRUMPY  
BOSS**

NICOLE LOVE

# *Taken By the Grumpy Boss*

AN AGE-GAP SURPRISE PREGNANCY ROMANCE

NICOLE LOVE



Copyright 2023 by Nicole Love - All rights reserved.

In no way is it legal to reproduce, duplicate, or transmit any part of this document in either electronic means or in printed format. Recording of this publication is strictly prohibited and any storage of this document is not allowed unless with written permission from the publisher.

All rights reserved.

Respective authors own all copyrights not held by the publisher.

# *Mailing List*

Sign up to Nicole Love's mailing list

New subscribers receive a full-length hot heartfelt enemies to lovers romance  
book

**Click this link to join:**

<https://BookHip.com/BDNKLJR>

# *Contents*

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Epilogue

## *Chapter One*

AUBREE

“I hate to have the camera too close to my face.”  
“You what?” I balk.

I didn't think this day could get any worse. But Creamypuff, as she said her name was, is currently proving that it very well can be.

First, the professional model who had been contracted three months ago for this shoot, and who had been trained and ready to have this executed had sent an email last night backing out, hastily directing our complaints and requests for a refund of the first half of her contractual payment to her manager.

The first thing I did as soon as I got the news was scout immediately for an available and ready-to-be-used model. My quest had been met with futile success. The models the company had used in the past were all booked and busy, but I had managed to snag an intermediate model who had mentioned when contacted that she was free for all of six hours.

I informed her that the shoot would be wrapped up within three. She'd agreed, but right now, I am solely regretting that decision. First, the rail-thin model complained that the sunscreen caused her body to itch. And now, this.

“Creamy, Honey,” I say as I make my way toward the now pouting model. “There’s no way we can have this shoot successfully if the camera isn’t brought as close to your face as possible.”

“But I just stated that I hate it,” The fake blonde model says, her eyes now narrowing in a glare.

I’ve dealt with spoilt bratty models for all my career; this will be a piece of cake. Wouldn’t it?

“How about you just close your eyes for this one?” I declare a compromise.

“It’s the same thing. I’ll still hear the shutter sound.”

“Jesus Christ!” I mutter under my breath. Hadn’t she stated that she was an intermediate? Why was she sounding like she had never stood in front of a camera? “Isn’t that how all shoots go? You have the camera shoved in your face? Endure the sounds,” I lightly joke.

The model sighs, her shoulders slumping. In her current posture, she looks less graceful and appears much younger than the 19 years she had stated.

“I am just a commercial model,” Creamypuff confesses in a low tone of voice.

“You’re what?” I ask. “Why didn’t you state this when you were contacted?”

“I thought it’d be easy to pull this off.”

I study her, noting the way her eyes flicker as if she’s having a hard time making eye contact. Suddenly, it dawns on me.

Swallowing the dread that climbs up the back of my throat, I ask, “Have you ever done a professional shoot?”

The younger woman shovels her feet in the heels she had appeared not to walk well in slightly.

“I am a model, aren’t I?”

“You haven’t answered my question,” I snap.



My patience has run thin, and I am seconds away from ripping my hair out and then hers.

Maybe she has begun to sense my anger because she meets my eyes for the first time in the last five minutes and shrugs.

“I practice in front of my mirror.”

“Oh, God!”

“Hey!” She starts when I begin to turn away from her. “My Mom said I was born to walk the runway.”

“Get your things ready, or you’ll be walking your way home.”

My assistant, Marissa, snorts. I shoot her a hard glare.

“Email a modeling agency. And this time, get your hands on a professional model who isn’t going to skip school to waste our time,” I tell my assistant as we begin to make our way toward my car.

While the teenage model scrambles to pack her things, Marissa tsks softly.

“What is it?” I ask in anger.

Her eyes widen.

“Nothing.”

“Out with it,” I say in my no-nonsense tone of voice.

I can tell that she knows something I don’t. Marissa always does.

“I just overheard one of the photographers mention that the old model quit because of Mr. Stark. Well, they’d both erm, you know.”

I shut my eyes in frustration.

*I should have known.*

When the leggy teenager gets into the car, I begin to reverse out of the grassy area. First, I’m going to drop the model off, and then, I’m going to go back to Moonbeam to have a word with my boss, Nicholas Stark.

“I’m really sorry about this,” Creamypuff mutters, looking miserable as I

drive her back.

*You should.*

But then, I sigh.

“It’s alright. This technically isn’t your fault.”

My jaw tightens as I think of Nicholas Stark. I am literally vibrating with things to say to him.

*That arrogant piece of...*

“You can drop me right at that bend,” Creamypuff interrupts my rather colorful thoughts.

I glance at where she’s pointing. It looks a little run down.

“Are you sure?”

I throw a glance at her.

She looks very uncomfortable.

“Uh-huh. My Mom says I should wait in a neutral area, so I don’t risk getting kidnapped,” she says this too quickly. It’s clear she doesn’t want it to be known that she lives in the area.

I roll my eyes.

Creamypuff’s fake life is the least of my problems at the moment. Telling Nicholas the deepest piece of my mind is all I can think about. So, I quickly drop her off and head right back for Moonbeam. Marissa sensibly stays quiet. In no time, I’m at Moonbeam. The adrenaline soaring through me is propelling me forward, and as soon as I get to Nicholas’ office, I knock sharply and rip the door open, not caring to wait for a sound of approval.

Nicholas, who has his nose buried in a file, looks up at me without a flicker of surprise and then back to his computer.

His composure only fuels my feelings of rage. And the fact that a little part of my brain notices how good he looks in that suit makes me want to howl.

However, Nicholas' seventh personal assistant for the year, who looks frightfully hassled, scurries to the door, the relief on his face unmistakable.

"Mr. Stark, I need to have a word with you," I spit.

Nicholas looks up at me, and this time his eyes register slight interest.

*Wait, is he smiling?*

"You are deliberately frustrating the doings of this company, Mr. Stark?"

I cannot help the shrill in my voice.

"Thanks to you, we have lost yet another professional model. At the rate at which you're going, we'd be at loggerheads with all the viable agencies before the year is even over. I am tired and sick of scouting for new models just because the former mysteriously end their contracts."

I pause for a split second with gritted teeth.

"Aren't we all supposed to be learned enough to know when and where to have our-- you know, relationships?"

Nicholas sits back haughtily in his swivel chair and surveys me.

This infuriates me further. The devilishly handsome braggart still has that smirk on his face.

"You really should learn to be more pleasant, Miss Turner," Nicholas states, leisurely, and in response, I bristle.

"Pleasant?" I shriek. "Oh, believe me, Mr. Stark, I have been pleasant. And I very well know the difference between that and fraternity. Believe me when I say you'd be doing this company a world of good if you learned the difference too."

"Are you telling me what to do, Miss Turner?"

I sense the threatening undertone in his voice, but I cannot shut up now. I am too furious to put a brake on my emotions. I mean, how dare he? Creamypuff,

if that even was her real name, had given me a hell of a day. It was only fair to let the steam off of him.

“Well, someone has to. Everyone around is too scared to tell you what they really think. You’re a stuck-up mule that always refuses to listen to reason.”

Nicholas stands from his chair, rounds his desk, and stalks right over to me. I freeze, and my heartbeat begins to hammer. I steel myself as he continues to walk towards me, close enough to touch, close enough to infiltrate my nose with the woody scent of his cologne.

“I’d watch my tongue if I were you, Missy,” he mutters, his voice a dangerous murmur.

I blink, ignoring the way my stomach swoops at his voice. Then, I stare up coolly at him.

“You cannot threaten me, Mr. Stark. I’m not the one who’s not only blurring lines but crossing them. We know who’s at fault here. I refuse to be intimidated by you.”

I try to imitate the coldness with which he had spoken, but even I can tell that I have not pulled it off.

Nicholas steps even closer, the lapels of his suit brushing against the fitted vest I have on. I can’t help but feel like I’m enveloped in him, and a slight shiver chases up and down my spine.

“Why don’t you go ahead and punish me?”

I can tell that he’s taunting, mocking me. He’s my boss, and I could never raise a finger against him, physically or otherwise, which is why I scowled at him. But in a moment of weakness, my eyes drop to those ridiculously gorgeous lips. He sees me do it and chuckles, a low, reverberating sound.

Wrapping his hands around my waist, Nicholas swoops down to catch my lips in a searing kiss, swallowing the first moan that pours through my lips.

I can't believe this is happening. I don't understand why Nicholas is kissing me, but I kiss him back. It's not a soft brushing of lips against the other, but a clash of teeth and tongue, with Nicholas' agile tongue darting in and out of my mouth, sharp teeth biting my bottom lip hard as if to punish me and soothing the stinging flesh with wet kisses.

"This is what you want, isn't it?" Nicholas coos against the shell of my ear, and without waiting for an answer, trailing kisses down my neck, tugging at my earlobes on his descent and giving a low chuckle when I gasp.

"It is, isn't it?"

Another biting kiss against my weak spot gets me weak in the knees, and I reach out my hands to the lapels of his suit to hold myself steady.

The sensations that run amok through me are ones I'm all too familiar with. Nicholas brushes his hands against the sides of my breast, and I whimper. I'm shocked at the veracity of my reaction to his touch and my inability to step away from him. My brain has turned to mush, and the organ between my legs begs for attention.

"Tell me," he whispers fiercely.

I take my bottom lip between my teeth, determined not to show any more weakness than I already have. But Nicholas, as if sensing my restraint, lowers a hand to my ass cheeks and grips hard, pressing me even more against his hard chest and allowing me to feel the evidence of his arousal.

"This is what you want, isn't it? To make the list? You want me to want you, huh?" he whispers as he squeezes the soft flesh, managing to arouse me further with each ministrations.

"Aubree..." he mutters in a warning tone.

"Yes," I finally say in a low voice that sounds sultrier than I expected. "I want you to want me," I continue, boldly taking his hand to my breast, where

my nipples have puckered and are straining against my bra. “I want you to want me,” I say in a low voice tinged with arousal. “I don’t want to make any list,” I add, feeling emboldened by the chemistry that ricochets between us,” I want to be the only one on that list.”

Nicholas’ eyes, already darkened by arousal, go impossibly darker so that I feel sucked into the rich, dark blues. And as his lips cover mine again, it’s with intent, while he positively wraps me in his arms and pushes me against his desk. And, of course, with those lips nuzzling on my neck again, I arch my back and completely surrender to him.

## *Chapter Two*

### AUBREE

Nicholas' hands are everywhere, brandishing me with his touch, so scorching that I bite my lips to keep in my loud moans. My hands naturally wrap around his neck, and my fingers slide through the soft hairs on his nape, luxuriating in them. His kisses travel down my cheeks and jaw, past my neck to my chest, where he begins to nip hard at the slightly exposed cleavage.

"I need you to take this off," he growls.

And when he begins to unbutton, I push my hips upwards to assist him in tugging down the pants I currently have on.

I am a little shocked at how bold I am, doing what I am currently doing. This feels wrong but so good. I cannot believe this is happening, the very thing I had only experienced in my dreams.

Nicholas effortlessly turns me over and directs my hands to his desk so that I am holding it with my back pressed against his front. This is the first time I am going to have sex in this position, and my center burns with anticipation.

But then, he doesn't proceed like I desperately need him to, but he slides his fingers through my folds, massaging my clitoral area expertly. Tiny mewls

spill from my lips, and I rock back against his finger, silently begging for him to feel me.

Nicholas, as if he could sense my request, pushed two fingers into my tight opening and began to pump. I moan loudly because this angle is different; it's a little too intense, building me up.

"Oh..." I sob when he begins to curl his fingers, touching a spot that has me closing one hand over my mouth and screaming into it.

"Holy shit! Yes! Oh, yes. I'm close," I sob, imploring him to go faster.

Nicholas does go faster, and just when my orgasm is about to crash over me, he redraws, and I nearly howl from frustration.

"You won't cum from my fingers," he says, his hand still pressing me against the desk, restricting my movement. Indeed, having my body subject to his command makes what we are doing a thousand times more pleasurable.

I don't know when Nicholas manages to unsnap his belt buckle, but a minute later, his long, hard dick nudges at my center and I part my legs as wide as I can. Nicholas slides into me, and I groan. He tortures me with slow, rhythmic thrusts, enough to make me almost go over the edge but not enough to tip me over.

And when I have tears streaming down the side of my face, Nicholas slams into me, and I fall harder than I ever have, crumbling to the floor, save for Nicholas' hands that cradle me. He holds me close until the last of my shudders ebb.

•••••

Nicholas, who had barely been out of his clothing, rearranges himself and turns away from me to give me the privacy to redress. The office is eerily



quiet as I slide my legs into my dark gray pants, buttoning up the vest that is currently gaping open.

I move in a daze towards the door, but a throat clears behind me. I turn towards the source of the sound. It's Nicholas, looking flawless as always. If I didn't have the slight soreness to show for it, I wouldn't have believed that he had just seconds ago had me against his desk.

His eyes are hard, and his lips pause in what can be described as slight displeasure.

"Your hair, you should do something about it," he mentions casually, rounding his desk once more and taking his place on the throne of his chair.

Nicholas' eyes have gone back to the file, and I can tell that I have been dismissed. I push my fingers through my hair, taming it without a mirror as best as I can.

When I reach for the door handle once more, Nicholas doesn't say anything. So, I allow my legs to carry me down the hallway to my office, where I push the door open and head straight for my desk, ignoring Marissa's questioning stare. But the woman, who's become a close friend over the years, walks into my office and observes me critically.

"How did it go?"

"It went well," I answer curtly, hoping that Marissa will get the hint that I don't want to talk about it and go back to work. But she lingers.

"You look flushed," she observes.

I am more than flushed. My skin continues to burn from where Nicholas had touched. I still feel him all over me. But Marissa doesn't need to know that.

"Are you alright?" she asks.

I look up to find Marissa's brows creased in worry.

"Did he try to throw you out of his office window?" Marissa asks, eyes wide

like she would believe if I answered in the affirmative.

“Nothing of the sort happened. Please, I’ll need you to go to Hilton. I have booked to have one of the models wear one of their fashion labels for the next shoot for our next project.”

Marissa, knowing better than to continue to hound me for details, nods, and steps away to do my bidding. And as soon as the door closes behind her, I lean back against my chair and let out a huge sigh.

I rub my brow as I think about what I’ve just done. I cannot believe I gave in like that to Nicholas. I wonder what he must think of me; coming in with guns blazing to rant about his questionable affiliation with models and ending up...

“Oh, God,” I moan out loud as memories of what had just happened course through me.

I cover my face with my hands and shake my head at myself. I had behaved like a complete hypocrite.

Even though I try to get work done, I find myself unable to concentrate. My mind is completely taken over by the events of this afternoon. So, I abandon the email I’ve been trying to send to a company after I go through it a third time and find it still riddled with errors.

I never thought I was attracted to Nicholas. His good looks and charisma were obvious enough for even the blind to see, but he wasn’t my type, or so I had told myself. I had convinced myself that I wasn’t attracted to the devilishly handsome older man, and that faux conviction had helped me sleep at night.

Confronting him had brought to the surface feelings I had not known existed. *Maybe Nicholas had been aware that I was attracted to him before even I was.*

It was the only way I could explain away how he had been confident enough to kiss me, knowing fully well I'd respond.

*Or, maybe he was cocky enough to know that he could have any woman he wanted.*

I would go with the latter.

He had seen through me like he had seen through the rest of the other women, discovering my attraction to him before I even did. I can't help but wonder how our relationship will go from now on. It was one thing for him to take models who were only on contractual terms with the company, and another thing for him, no, us, to get into this, seeing as we worked in close quarters with each other. And he's also my father's best friend, for crying out loud.

In the past, Nicholas and I had been nothing short of courteous to each other. I had also never made it a secret about my disdain for his flirty lifestyle, though I had never been as vocal as I was today. I wonder how the new development would impact our working relationship.

Thinking back to evenings spent in his company at my father's gives me a light stomachache. I had always admired his dress sense and the way he carried himself. Nicholas was not only physically alluring but also had a brain mighty enough to run the empire he did.

I am a little sad at the fact that, if worse came to worst, I'd have to leave the company. What had just happened could negatively impact our working relationship, and if that happened, I was going to have to kiss this job goodbye.

I allow my head to land on the desk with a thud.

Even if I were to quit working for Nicholas, I would continue to see him at my father's home, where he frequented for dinner. They were best buddies,

and father completely held him in high regard. He'll never know what we had done. Nicholas was smart enough to not tell him. I wasn't also stupid enough to.

Realizing I wasn't as immune to Nicholas as I thought I was is a frightening notion but it was going to remain a one-time thing. I was going to completely obliterate the memory from my mind if it was the last thing I did.

When Marissa returns, I am in better control of my emotions and less flushed. She drops the package very carefully on my desk as if it were some delicate items.

"Molly said we were a little lucky to be granted permission to use this," Marissa tells me as she invites herself to sit on the chair opposite my desk.

I give a slight nod and look down again at the email I have been struggling to compose for the past hour. It is even better that I can look at the screen of my iPad and see the letters.

I am in no mood to talk about anything with Marissa. I'm afraid that I'll get the urge to tell her about what occurred in Nicholas' office. Marissa and I have confided in each other in the past about certain happenstances. But not this, no. She cannot know about me and Nicholas.

"So," Marissa starts again, and I look up at her.

Marissa is a twenty-four-year-old who graduated college a year ago. She had gotten a job here as soon as she did. Young and fresh-faced, she needed guidance and tutelage. Focused and purpose-driven like I was, she had started as mediocre but had begun to get better at her job and was currently the best assistant I'd ever worked with. She has also become a friend, a very dependable one.

I knew that soon Marissa is going to leave in search of something bigger, and I can't wait to see her shine on her own.

“Would you like something to eat? It’s almost 5 p.m., and you’ve refused to have lunch.”

“I wasn’t hungry then.”

Marissa chuckles.

“We don’t eat only when we are hungry. We eat for strength. And you need that strength more than the rest of us here.”

She gives me a long, knowing look, and my heart hammers hard.

*Does she know? Can she tell?*

“What do you mean by that?”

“You stood up to Nicholas. Even the governor knows better than to do that. Either you were drunk on something stronger than alcohol, or you felt too brave for words.”

“Well, someone had to tell him. Nicholas is human. Humans are prone to mistakes and stand to be corrected.”

“You’re right. Let’s see how our big boss behaves from now on.”

And with that, Marissa gets out of the chair and moves towards the door, throwing her arms over her shoulder.

“I’m getting you a chicken salad and a protein shake. And I’m not taking no for an answer,” she tells me as she lets herself out of the door.

## *Chapter Three*

### AUBREE

**W**ith the events of the night before still fresh in my mind, I get out of bed the next morning with reluctance because a meeting scheduled for this morning means that avoiding Nicholas as I'd planned will not work.

*And how is it even possible to avoid him anyway?*

I get into my rainy-day shower and close my eyes, allowing the water to pelt my skin. As I begin to lather up, I think back to the events from before and the vivid dreams I'd had of it.

I sigh when I realize that forgetting what happened will be harder than pulling teeth.

When I step out of the shower, I peruse my clothing options and decide to go for something daring.

Pulling on a white poplin shirt with ruffles at the curves and a high-rise twill pant that molds itself to my curves, I look at my reflection in the mirror, loving the result that pairing a black Tiffany with it gives. I brush out my hair until it shines and then grab my Chanel shoulder bag.

I was born into old money. As a little girl, I had everything easy. Being an only child also meant that I was spoilt rotten. My parents had only me and had never actively tried to have another, even though they'd confessed that they wouldn't have minded if another had come along.

I'd attended the best university in the country and aced all my exams. I had never exactly given my parents trouble and never truly seen any reason to. They'd loved me unconditionally and treated me like a golden child. That's why as soon as I had graduated college, my father had put in a good word for me with Nicholas' company.

I've always loved everything fashion and beauty since I was a little girl. And due to my early exposure to the cosmetic and fashion worlds, it hadn't taken long for me to be promoted from a regular staff member to a creative director.

Nicholas had told me that I was truly talented and had a good eye for things. It is one of the most beautiful compliments I've ever been given, and one I've held onto throughout the years.

When I first started at Moonbeam, I had been thrilled at the prospect of working closely with Nicholas. I'd experienced some sort of hero worship for the successful business mogul. And even though my heart had raced when he was near, I'd chugged it all down to a mild, silly crush that would go away with time.

That crush had gone away quite alright, and in its place, a great dislike for the businessman had taken its place. Nicholas had been unashamed to let the world in on his womanizing ways. Page six had also never failed to gleefully report on his latest conquests, his far too many breakups with women, and how quickly he moved onto the next Hollywood standard of beauty.

I sigh when I realize that I have gotten lost in my head again. This has been

happening since yesterday's incident. Indeed, I am never like this.

I slid into my white Audi and pull out of the parking lot of my apartment. Marissa meets me in the hallway as usual and begins to rattle off my itinerary for the day. I have always loved how she always happens to be a professional assistant at the right time, and a friend when I need that too.

"You have a meeting with Nicholas Stark in an hour."

I roll my eyes at that.

"As if I need reminding," I mutter as Marissa hurries forward, pushes the door to my office open, and follows closely behind me.

"You also have a meeting with our newest modeling agency at 2 p.m." Marissa says, and then pauses before adding, "And oh, I penciled you in for a facial at 4 p.m. with your specialist." And when she looks up at me, her eyes are filled with concern. "You look like you need it."

I drop into my comfortable leather chair with a sigh. The day has barely begun, yet I feel drained already.

"Thank you, Marissa," I say as I begin to turn on my computer, pointedly ignoring her, a clear signal that she's dismissed.

But Marissa lingers, and I feel her gaze boring into my forehead.

I wait. A second passes; another does, and Marissa continues to shift from foot to foot.

"Is there anything else?" I ask the young woman without looking up.

"I just wonder if you are alright. You look a little pale like you didn't have a restful sleep."

I shake my head.

*How is she able to deduce all that?*

"I am quite alright, Marissa," I tell her, using the straightest tone possible so that she gets the hint.



I have been dying with my new secret, and I know that it's what is eating at me. I need someone to tell. I need someone other than myself and Nicholas to know what we did. I also finally need to admit to myself that it was the hottest sex of my life, and a greater part of me was dying for a repeat, but I'm not going to. No one will know that like the rest of the women Nicholas has been with, I want him again, not even Nicholas was ever going to know.

"Alright then. I'd better go get breakfast," Marissa says in a cheerful voice.

I can tell that she's trying to get me to come around. It's something she does all the time. But not this morning; it won't work.

"Is there something you would like?" she asks a little more quietly.

"Whatever you order from my diet plan is fine," I tell her distractedly.

When Marissa lets herself out of the door, I cover my face with my hands again and wish to the high heavens that there was a pillow to scream into.



I walk into the conference room with my head held high. I'm quite on time - a minute early, in fact, but find the rest of the department heads already seated. I take my seat on a chair farther away from Nicholas', and like the rest of the others, wait.

Nicholas walks into the room right on time. The air thickens with his presence, and the low murmurs go dead. He appears to have completely sucked all the air out of the room, or maybe it's just me who's suddenly breathless.

He's in a fitted dress shirt rolled up to expose his sinewy forearm with dress pants that look tailored. His dark brown hair is brushed back, with the white that had recently begun to grow at the front standing out proudly. The white hair had only managed to make Nicholas even more attractive. And that

angular jaw, looking more prominent than ever, gives me the instant urge to want to kiss them.

When Nicholas takes his seat, his eyes quickly scan the room and then land on me. I stare back, knowing that looking away would make things awkward. His expression gives nothing away and then, as if he'd not, yesterday, fucked me harder than I ever have been, starts the meeting without a preamble.

“Thank you all for being here,” he says as he glances down at the pad in front of him and back at me.

This time, I see something that looks like curiosity cross his features and wonder what he could be curious about.

“I hope you've all heard about the newest offering we will be introducing to the public. As you are all aware, we've put in many hours to make this final product a success. I value your hard work and the practical contributions you've made to the project's development to date.”

We all give a nod, and I open my pad, deciding to look down at that instead of Nicholas' gorgeous face. It'll be easier to hear what he's saying if I do this because staring into those attractive green-blue eyes reminds me of things I'd best not remember, at least not here, not right now.

Nicholas begins to explain the latest product with a picture sample passed around. It's face oil for both men and women; an all-in-one oil with several functions and benefits.

“Trust everyone has gotten a good look at the stunning product label,” Nicholas says. “While I am well aware that Bryan and his team can do an outstanding job, I would very much like to throw the floor open to more contributions and constructive criticism. We have to think of several ways we can advertise this and beat the competition.”

“Paid adverts on social media sites like Facebook can make this work,”

Bryan says with a little shrug.

“Newspaper advertisements and a promotional price to hook buyers in,” Bryce from production intones.

Nicholas nods as discussions continue to go around. I quietly listen to the various opinions, taking down little notes.

“Miss Turner,” Nicholas calls out and I look up quickly to find his eyes resting on me, and the twenty-something pair of eyes in the room too. “Did you perhaps want to say something?” he asks.

When I look at him, there’s a glint in his eyes that I cannot quite name. I do not know what game he’s playing, but I refuse to look like a fool in a meeting such as this.

“I do, actually. While I think that the suggestions we have made are largely good, I would also like to point out that, considering our targeted demographic, a higher level of advertising should be considered.”

Nicholas does not look away from me, and the others appear to be soaking up every word.

“I’d love to think that the Millennials and Gen Z are more likely to, as they like to say, eat this up.”

A low chuckle goes around the room, and I smile along with it and then continue.

“Social media applications like Facebook have fewer of these generations, if I may say so. Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok should be the targeted media for this advertisement. And the visuals should convey summer energy.”

When my eyes meet Nicholas’, I find his face tinged with something that can only be described as admiration.

“That’s a really wonderful point, Miss Turner,” Nicholas tells me as we move into the other agendas.

I cannot help but feel pleased by my input and ability to stun Nicholas into silence. If he had been aiming at humiliating me, it's more than obvious that he has failed woefully at it.

An hour later, Nicholas rounds up the meetings and dismisses everyone. And as I get up to make my way out of the room with the rest of the others, Nicholas calls out to me.

"Miss Turner? A word, please."

I linger, making a show of packing my writing materials as slowly as I can. My pulse hammers at the thought of being left completely alone with Nicholas.

When the last attendee walks out of the room and closes the door behind them, Nicholas strolls towards me, and I try to pretend that his presence doesn't affect me and that the scent of his powerful cologne does not remind me of being pressed against that impressive chest.

"We should talk about yesterday," Nicholas starts.

I look up at him and note the tiny frown at the corner of his mouth. Nicholas is just as unready to have this conversation as I am.

"I don't think there's anything to talk about."

I say that because talking about it would mean reliving those moments, and that's the last thing I want.

Nicholas looks relieved at first, but then he narrows his eyes down at me.

"Why do you not want to talk about it?"

"My reasons, Mr. Stark, are mine and mine alone."

Nicholas' perfect features twist into a scowl.

"What do you mean by that? Did you not enjoy it?"

I hold in a low chuckle.

*So, it's his ego he wishes to stroke?*

“I would rather we don’t talk about that. It is past, and we are both professionals,” I say as I begin to make my way toward the door. But I don’t make it out of there when Nicholas closes his hands around my wrist and hurls me back so that I am once again enveloped in his scent, completely surrounded by him.

“Tell me, Aubree,” he speaks in a low tone of voice that causes a pulse to hammer in my throat. I struggle to wrench free but feel like I’ve been cemented into a wall. Nicholas doesn’t budge.

“Did I not make it worth your while? Will I have to redeem myself?”

Those expert fingers that knew where to touch and how to do it to illicit a tight little scream from me sweep up my upper arm, and I bite my lips to suppress a shiver, but I fail.

“It was worth my while,” I say, my voice breathless and scratchy.

Nicholas releases me and steps back like he hadn’t once again tried to seduce me.

I blink up at him, but he merely offers a polite smile and moves towards the door, as if nothing had happened.

Ignoring the low pulse that has started between my legs, I move towards the door and let myself out, but not before cussing the shit out of Nicholas Stark.

## *Chapter Four*

### AUBREE

**O**n my way home, Mom calls. I pick up the call and switch it to a connectable so that I can focus on driving.

“Hello, darling,” Mother croons.

“Hello, Mom,” I say with a smile.

The sound of my mother’s voice manages to calm me, and I temporarily forget that hours earlier Nicholas had teased me yet again, and I had fallen for it.

“I haven’t heard from you in days,” Mother lightly complains.

I chuckle.

“I called you two days ago and the rest of the days before. I had simply been too distracted to make the habitual call yesterday.”

“How are you?” she questions.

While braking at a traffic light, I briefly wonder how she will feel if I tell her how I have been; if I decide to suck it up and tell her what I have done. I cannot imagine what her reaction would be, but even I know she would not receive the news with glee.

“I am good, ma’am,” I tell her as I give a low honk to signal the driver in

front of me to get going.

“Oh, you’re on the road?”

“Yes, I’m just driving home from work.”

“Oh. I’d better allow you to focus on getting home safely,” Mother says, and I can tell she’s preparing to end the call. But seeming to recall something, she says, “Don’t forget that you’re coming for dinner.”

“I’ll be there, Mom.”

“Good. I cannot wait to see you,” Mother tells me, sounding thrilled.

I let out another chuckle. One would think I had joined the Army and was returning home for the first time in years.

“Nicholas Stark will also be joining us.”

“What?” I shriek, braking so hard that my body propels forward.

“Bree? Hello? Are you there? What just happened?” Mother’s voice is high-pitched and panicky.

“Sorry Mom, just a nasty pothole,” I lie through my teeth as I take a deep breath.

*Can’t I just get a break from this damn man?*

“Oh. Thank God. I’d better allow you to concentrate,” Mom says, and before disconnecting, she adds, “Drive carefully.”

Even though Mom does not see me, I give a low nod and drive more carefully towards home.

Nicholas has been a good friend of my father and has sometimes joined us for dinner. Today, however, is the worst time for that to happen. I need to stay away from the older man as much as I can and sitting across from him at my parent’s dinner table won’t cut it.

I shake my head slowly as I park in the garage and make my way toward my unit. And as soon as I have divested myself of my clothing, I uncork a much-

needed bottle of wine and pour myself a healthy amount. I will need it if I plan to get through the evening.

In the past, before Nicholas and I had had sex, we often met at my father's house, and Nicholas had never been anything short of polite. I had also learned to stay in my lane. We had never discussed personal matters while at my father's house, and neither had we ever mentioned the frequent dinner meetups at work. Nicholas was surprisingly really good at staying within boundaries in that regard. It made me wonder what his real drive was for going through women like he did.

I gulp down the glass of wine and rinse the glass off. Then, I begin to prepare to go to dinner, knowing it'll take a little over an hour to get there with my car.

When I step into my walk-in closet, I peruse my casual outfit options and give a slow shake of my head when I realize that there's not one outfit on the hanger that I think will suit the evening.

Determined to choose something without ringing my stylist, I shut my eyes and pull the first outfit my finger lands on. It's a velour maxi mini skirt. Suddenly inspired, I move to the next section to grab fishnet stockings I know will go well with my favorite combat boots. I put on my makeup, making it bolder and more daring than the simple, understated looks I usually go for.

I look at myself in the mirror and give a nod. I've always been confident in my body and know just how to dress to compliment my figure. It's something several magazines have written about me in the past.

When I make my way toward the garage, my phone blares out.

"Hello, Momma," I chuckle when she laughs.

"Glad to know you got home safe," is the first thing she says.



“I’m a careful driver, Mom,” I tell her this because there’s an undertone of mild accusation in her voice.

“Don’t I know that?” Mom replies sarcastically. “Are you on your way yet?”

“About to head out,” I tell her.

A minute later, we said our goodbyes, and I put the car into gear.

I try not to let the nerves eat at me and continue to murmur to myself that dinner with Nicholas isn’t a big deal. But I know that it is. It is a very big deal, having done what we did. And our little moment again in the office. I know that it will be difficult to sit across from him and pretend he hadn’t given me the best sex of my life. But I’m going to have to try.

When I arrive, Mom meets me at the door, arms wide open like she hasn’t seen me in years. I give her a wide grin and step into her arms. And even though I’m several inches taller than her, Mom still manages to wrap her arms securely around my waist. She gives the best hug.

I linger in her arms, breathing in her scent I’ve always found comforting.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” I tell her, pecking her softly on the cheeks.

“Your father and Nicholas are in the study,” Mother informs me, and my heart skips.

I give a wan smile that I hope does not come off as a wince and nod.

“We’d better set the table.”

“Patricia already did that,” Mother mutters as we begin to make our way toward the dining room.

Mother is sort of a full-time housewife, and even though I could never follow in her footsteps, I understand that she’s content with her life, and I don’t begrudge her for that. But being a stay-at-home wife means that nothing interesting ever happens that we get to talk about.

I do try to fill in the silence with talk about work. Mom loves to hear about my job and the little frustrations I encounter from time to time. So, I decided to tell her about Creamypuff. Mom is already laughing halfway into the story. I chuckle along, seeing how funny it is now. There had been nothing funny about that when it had happened.

“She really said that?” Mother asks incredulously.

“Yes. She gave really smart answers to her inadequacies. I recall she said the shoes were too squeaky, not that she couldn’t wear six inches.”

“That must have been very entertaining,” Mother says with a little laugh.

I shake my head.

“It was not funny at the time,” I tell her truthfully.

I glance at the time again and note that it’s nearly 7 p.m. There are low murmurs in the hallway. Father’s voice is a little loud, and I can just about make out what he’s saying. And when they step into the room, Nicholas’ eyes zero in on me immediately, and my heart skips a beat. I hold his stare, squirming a little when he refuses to look away first.

Nicholas’ eyes are entrancing, and when I begin to wonder what it would feel like to draw that exact color and tone on paper, I look quickly away.

*Why in God’s name did I just think about that?*

“Bree!” Father calls out, and I smile as I get up to hug him.

My parents had always been openly affectionate.

“Have you grown taller?” he asks as he approaches me with a little chuckle.

I laugh.

“I think it’s the boots, Dad.”

I turn to Nicholas and give him a polite nod.

“Good evening, Mr. Stark.”

“I’m your father’s friend here, not your boss. Why don’t we keep the

formalities for meetings in conference rooms?”

Nicholas' eyes are more blue than green now, and light with mirth as if I'm sort of a source of entrainment.

“Alright, Nicholas. You'll refer to me as Aubree,” I tell him as I take my seat again. *No way am I going to give him the benefit of calling me, Bree.*

We take our seats, and Mom opens the fancy dinnerware.

My stomach instantly growls as the aroma permeates the air. It's braised chicken legs with grapes and fennel. I take a healthy portion of the meal when it gets to my turn and begins to dig in.

I take several spoonfuls and then a sip from the glass of wine my father has poured and look up to find everyone staring at me with wonder.

“You really were hungry, weren't you?”

“I always am. I need my strength to tackle work problems, you know,” I continue, turning my eyes to Nicholas, who is watching me like models who have been coquetted and ditched. I flash the fakest smile in Nicholas' direction and turn back to my meal.

Mother clears her throat.

“Well, then, you'd better have at it.”

The conversation after that is a little stilted but picks up minutes later.

“How's work, Nicholas?” Mother asks Nicholas, who glances in my direction as if he's suddenly having the same thoughts that I do.

“Work is great. I have competent hands that have made steering the boat quite easy,” Nicholas says, leaning back on his chair in satisfaction.

“Must explain why you've been so... hands-on with, you know, with the whole modeling process,” I make my voice airy.

Nicholas' eyes have begun to darken; he doesn't find my little joke funny.

“I like to stay involved, as you know,” he answers with a little smile that

doesn't reach his eyes.

"Yes, yes. I'm well aware of your involvement. It's quite, erm, spectacular, so to say."

The dinner table has gone eerily quiet. Father looks flummoxed, Mom looks a little scandalized, and a little blush coats her cheeks. Maybe they've picked up on what I'm implying.

Well, of course, they have. They weren't born yesterday. The half-hearted attempt at a smile is completely wiped off Nicholas' face. Those eyes have gone icy cold, and I briefly wonder if I had gone a little too far.

"I'd better ring for dessert," Mom says a little loudly. I wonder if it's an effort to clear the tension in the room.

"Alright. I hate to leave early, but I have a ton of work and an early meeting," Nicholas explains as he begins to get up, turning to Mom. "Dinner was great, and I wish I could stay for dessert."

"Oh. We understand," Mom says as Father follows Nicholas to the door.

As soon as they're out of earshot, my mother turns to me with a look of slight disappointment.

"Is there something I need to know?"

I shake my head.

Mother sighs.

"I didn't imagine the tension between you and your boss."

She turns fully toward me.

"Is he giving you any trouble?"

"Not at all, Mom."

"Then why do you hate him so much?" Father asks from across the room.

"He looks very unhappy. Why did you act like he pissed in your cheerios?"

"I was just fooling around," I tell them as I look away, a little ashamed at the

way I'd acted. "Maybe I'd gone a little overboard."

"You had," Father admits as he takes his seat once more. "Even I could tell that he was unhappy."

"I'll apologize tomorrow," I reveal in a quiet tone of voice.

Father sighs.

"Look, Bree. I am also aware of Nicholas' love for women. But you forget that it's his personal life that we are not mandated to comment on. Feuding with your boss of over two years is a very bad idea. I hope that never happens next time."

"It won't," I promise them as I mentally decide to feud with Nicholas only in the office because I do not think I could ever stomach him being with other women.

## *Chapter Five*

### NICHOLAS

**A**ubree Turner has, for the last two years, been the bane of my existence. She has steadily disliked me and has continued to make that an open secret. But last night, she had crossed a line.

I scrub my hand soberly across my face as I recall the snide remarks she'd made and the thinly veiled accusations.

Aubree's dislike for my love for women has in the past seemed amusing to me. And I have always goaded and taunted her for my entertainment, and the easily baited woman has always risen to it every time.

When a knock sounds on the door, I call my assent. The door is pushed open, and in walks Aubree, dressed smartly as always in a jacket and miniskirt that show off stunning legs that go on for days.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Stark," her voice is cool, calm, and controlled, and she maintains eye contact; her expression is slightly benign.

"Good afternoon, Miss Turner."

"My team and I have been able to find a good modeling agency for our soon-to-be-launched product and would like you to sign off on the first half of the funds."

I stretch my hand to get the file, ensuring that our hands brush. And when Aubree continues to stand, I look up at her with a smile.

“Take a seat, Miss Turner.”

She does as she’s told, hands elegantly placed on her lap. And then, I take my time, allowing the tension in the room to thicken.

“Dinner at your parents’ was quite an affair.”

“It was,” Aubree responds conversationally. “I really enjoyed the chicken dressing.”

“I would like to think that you enjoyed more than just the chicken,” I say, looking the quotation over and signing on the dotted line with a flourish.

Aubree blinks at me, a look of surprise crossing her face. I bet she didn’t know I was going to address her behavior towards me last night, seeing as I never have. She probably thought she could be that insolent and get away with it.

“Didn’t you?” I ask again as I snap the file shut, making no move to hand it over.

Aubree eyes the file longingly and then nods.

“Like I said, dinner was a lovely affair, and I enjoyed the dessert too.”

“Your deliberate attempt at obtuseness is unbecoming,” I tell her this because I’m a little peeved that this is the game she has decided to play.

Aubree takes a deep breath.

“I understand I was a little bit out of it yesterday with my comments. I would like to apologize for that.”

“A little bit?” I chuckle as I get up and move toward the door.

Aubree doesn’t turn around; she remains where she is, with her face still facing forward. And when I turn the lock, I remain there, watching her from

behind. I take in her luscious hair, which I'd buried my fingers in two days ago.

"You thought it was fun to adopt loose lips right at your parent's dinner table? You'd had your fill of fun yesterday. Now it's time to get mine."

Aubree does turn, and when her eyes meet mine, I order her to get up. She does so without another word being uttered.

I stroll languidly towards her, lifting her face so that her eyes meet mine. Her eyes have that restrained desire I have always read off of them. Whatever I'm about to do to Aubree is something she is very much anticipating.

"No one talks to me in such a loathsome manner, Aubree."

Aubree nods as if she completely understands. But I wonder if she even hears a word. Those eyes, already filled with lust, are fastened on my lips. And I bring my hand to her naturally plump lips, sliding my fingers across them. Aubree's eyes flutter, and she sways toward me.

"You have to be punished, Aubree." My voice is low and throaty.

"I do?" she breathes.

I nod, my hands circling her waist. I had not wanted to touch her, but I can't help myself. I feel drawn to her, to her fragrance and the wonderful smell of her shampoo.

"Then do," she tells me boldly.

My eyes widen slightly, but I recover quickly.

"Do you have a safe word?"

"Tomatoes."

As soon as the word flies out of her lips, my hand lands smack on her ass. Aubree's eyes widen, and she tilts her head with a little moan. I raise my hands and allow them to land in the same spot. Her eyes are tightly shut now,



her plump lower lip captured between her teeth to hold in her cries, but little whimpers still escape them.

A third strike has her sliding her hips against me in a silent plea.

“Should I stop?” I ask because even though I enjoy what we’re doing now, I’d hate it if we were not on the same page. I would stop instantly if she wasn’t enjoying this.

“Please, don’t,” she moans. “More...” she demands, her hands circling my neck, gripping me.

I bury my head in her neck and begin to nuzzle there, taking my hands back to her soft cheeks to soothe the flesh, which I know must be red from the imprint of my hands. But our little moment is broken when the telephone rings. I step away from her with a smile and move toward the phone.

“Nicholas Stark’s office.”

I paused to listen to the voice on the other end, my gaze riveted on Aubree, whose face no longer seem flushed.

“Get in touch with my assistant,” I tell the representative. “See if you can book an appointment.”

Dropping the phone onto its cradle and turning back to Aubree, who no longer looks dazed but calm and collected, I begin to move again towards the beautiful woman, who takes a cautious step back. Her action is enough to pause me in my tracks.

“Have I done anything wrong?” I ask, needing to know.

“You flirt with anyone with female genitalia and add notches to your bedpost like it’s some part of a competition you will win a medal for. I hate to break it to you, Mr. Stark, but I am your staff, and it’s utterly wrong for you to continue to try to seduce me.”

Her eyes are flashing with rage, and her fingers shake with the force of it.

“I would please request that you treat me henceforth like the staff I am and not a convenient body you can get off on.”

With that, she moves towards the door and lets herself out.

I’m beyond shocked at her outburst. Aubree has always been snarky and rude when she gets wind of my affiliation with women. But her anger this time cuts deep, and her words sting. I move slowly back to my desk and lower myself onto it, swiveling it towards the window that overlooks a mini park. The sight has always been calming, but not this time. Aubree looked like she truly hated me.

I brushed my hair back, shocked at my reaction to her anger. I usually don’t care what others think of me, especially when it concerns my personal affairs with women. But Aubree looked hurt. Her anger could not be entirely justified, but there was jealousy laced in there somewhere. And, for the first time since two days ago, I regret the sex. I should not have taken her in my arms and kissed her. I was totally wrong, and the consequences of my action were beginning to catch up with me.

I’ve never been able to make very good decisions about my personal life. I know this.

Shame envelopes me, the kind of shame and guilt I have always had to live with. Despair and sadness had almost become second nature. I had never been able to please anyone, not my foster parents or siblings.

“You’re a bad boy. Why did you ride the pony into the fields?”

There’s a giggle.

“It’s because he’s a bad boy, Mommy,” Ryan yells.

“Yes. Nick has always been a bad boy,” the blonde woman replies, her eyes on mine, filled with disappointment.

I blink the memory away.

I've come to learn through the years that my past is one I can never truly get away from. No matter how fast I run, no matter the number of women who want me, the truth continues to haunt me that my biological mother never did. Not even sex with different women could erase that part of me.

Dolores Stark, my foster mother. She had been a full-time stay-at-home wife. Her husband, an architect. They'd been living comfortably; though not enough for weekend pizzas, not enough that would get to me anyway, but they'd managed by.

As I continued to grow, I had begun to see how differently I was treated by Ryan. It had not taken me long to figure out that I wasn't the favorite. My academic results were not praised as much as Ryan's, even though I had always worked the hardest.

My actions were met with criticism. And when it came to me, there were too many rules I'd been taught not to break. I'd grown up longing to do the simple silly things my friends did, like inviting the first girl I had ever dated home. But our interactions had been restricted to cafes and school parking lots.

Ryan got to bring his girlfriend home though. And even though Ryan's first girlfriend opined that Dolores' food tasted like burnt tires, Ryan had only been mildly chastised, and the girl, not at all. And as soon as I got out from under their thumb, I began to live life the way I saw fit. Then, I'd known that I was a foster kid because Ryan had ensured that I never forgot the moment it had gotten out.

I'd had my first sexual experience in college. After reeling from the experience, I'd begun to indulge. Alcohol had been a constant too. Dolores had always only called when she had something to complain about, which would result in her remembering things I'd done wrong as a kid and

complaining about them too. I had begun to dread her phone calls; her husband had never even tried. As soon as I'd turned eighteen, he had simply washed his hands off.

I'd continued with my women. Then, it had been fun to be wanted by so many women; to be given compliments. Everyone thought I was smart and told me so. It had been surreal having to adjust to a different reality than I was used to.

And in the haze of all that, I'd always expected them to snap. I'd expect the lecturer to turn around as soon as I'd been told I was correct to tell me something else I'd done wrong, just like Dolores always had. I had expected the same things from the woman I had dated at the time too. And due to this, I had unintentionally broken her heart by not loving her on the same wavelength she did me. I'd even been sure that she would discover I was not that special, heavily flawed. And she had, but not just in the way I had thought.

Rita had told me that I was incapable of loving. She had been distraught, with tears running down her face as she asked me if I truly loved her. That night, we realized that I never had. I had been too conscious of getting hurt, of giving my heart and watching it trampled upon.

Rita had broken up with me. Several other attempts years later at a relationship had ended the same way, and I had simply stopped trying, content to take women who were willing enough to take a chance at something casual. But even I knew that Aubree was not the type to do casual, which left me with a lingering question.

*Why had I done it? And why had she not stopped me?*

## *Chapter Six*

AUBREE

“**Y**ou look pale. Is everything alright?” Marissa asks worriedly, moving closer to me and slowly placing her hand on my forehead.

She’s acting like a mother right now, and I allow her to fuss over me.

“Should we visit the hospital?” she questions.

I shake my head no.

“We don’t have to. I am alright. Thank you, Marissa.”

Marissa does not look convinced this time.

“You know I am your personal assistant, and I am required to ensure your comfort and safety at all times.”

“You have been doing a great job, Marissa,” I tell her this honestly as I take my seat behind the desk and turn on my computer.

When I shift to get more comfortable, I wince a little. I am still pleasantly sore from where Nicholas’ hands were. I have been making a deliberate attempt not to think about what happened in there, but it’s like forcing myself to try to not breathe. It’s impossible. Nicholas had done something unexpected, strange, and thrilling. And I had loved every second in his arms. I had loved the feel of him and the little punishment he had doled out.

I shake my head.

*Maybe I need to be admitted to a mental hospital. All of these things cannot be real.*

I feel like I am watching my body experience a huge transformation, some sort of transitioning into the person I am currently. And I have never been this swept under a man's influence. I feel like I have become a pawn for Nicholas to play with at his convenience.

The thought of being something for a man as magnificent as Nicholas fills me with excitement. I bury my head in my hands and groan into it.

When I drop my hands, I find Marissa staring at me with mild accusation and slight reproach. She drops onto the chair with a sigh.

"I understand that I am an assistant, but I think that over the years, we have become friends."

Marissa doesn't meet my eyes as she continues.

"I know that you don't know this, but if something ever happened to me, you'd be the first person I'd tell. I trust you and your judgment, as much as I know you're an awesome boss, I consider you a great friend, which is the only reason you're the only one who knows I was a virgin until I was twenty three."

I blink at Marissa, but I know she is right. I have been trying hard to keep these new developments to myself when in the past I have shared everything else with her.

I drop my hands comfortingly on hers, and Marissa drops her free hand on mine and squeezes, a silent message that she is here, and I do not have to carry this new burden all on my own.

I let out a huge sigh.

"We should have an early lunch," I say as I get out of my chair and begin to

move toward the door.

Marissa gets up quickly and follows.

Our walk to the car is silent. I am a little lost in thought, contemplating this decision I am about to make. I understand how cutthroat the industry we are in is. I also understand that what I have done with Nicholas could become some sort of ammunition against us if it gets into the wrong hands at the wrong time.

Over the years, Nicholas had earned Moonbeam lifetime enemies who would gleefully, even to this day, look for ways to poke holes in his company and bring him down.

I drive Marissa to a quaint little restaurant. It's a lovely place that I have always loved to visit on my own.

"I have never been here," Marissa observes as we get out of the car.

"That is because I have never sent you here," I tell her as we make our way toward the door. "Their food is great, and I mostly come here when I want to be away from everyone. When I need to think."

When we get into the restaurant, the smell of freshly brewed coffee hits me, and I take a deep cleansing breath. Marissa and I find a little private corner seat and settle in.

"Wow. This place is amazing," she says as she continues to look around, taking in the low lighting and the piano that plays in the corner.

"Yes, it is. This is literally like my own secret hideout," I tell her as I look her in the eyes. Hers are wide with understanding.

Marissa is smart and is slowly understanding what this little trip means.

Growing up, I'd made friends. My parents had been very accommodating. I'd gone through the motions a typical child would. The sleepovers, the play dates. I had even kissed my childhood best friend for fun.

But the years had passed, and we had all grown up, graduated college, and pursued our different careers. Most of my friends had gotten married and started their families. We are all leading completely different lives and chatting occasionally on social media when we could. That was completely okay.

Marissa and I, on the other hand, had become friends. I guess that was how life went. At different phases of our lives, we meet people we bond with. Those who will want to hold our hands when they feel we need it. Marissa had become that for me, and I was willing to trust her with the details of what happened in Nicholas' office.

When the waiter comes, we both give our orders.

"You would die for their French toast," I say casually.

While I am never in the business of telling people what to order, I can't help but think Marissa is going to enjoy their French toast, as that is what I always order nearly every time.

"Really?" Marissa asks.

I nod.

"Then I'll have that," she tells the waitress with a smile.

When the smartly dressed waitress moves away, Marissa turns back to me.

"Want to hear the latest office gossip?"

I laugh.

"What's the latest?"

"You know Tommy from accounting, right?"

"No, I don't."

I have always found it difficult to memorize people's names and faces. Marissa knows this and it's where she comes in handy.

"You do, actually. Remember the young man who brought you flowers on his



second day on the job?”

My eyes widen as I recall the young man.

Marissa, seeing my look of realization, mutters, “Yes!”

“I remember him now.”

I chuckle, recalling the flowers the young man had handed me and the way he had gone on one knee to ask me out on a date. I’d had to explain to him that it was against company policy and that he was right on his way to being fired if he kept that up. He’d apologized and gone away in embarrassment. But Marissa had witnessed it, and it was the only thing she had talked about for weeks.

“So, what about him?”

Marissa starts to laugh. I can tell it’s going to be good.

“So, Tommy likes this janitor who comes in during his shift to clean. He asked her out, and she said yes. He got introduced to her family and realized they were twins, quite identical, I hear. Now, Tommy says he has to marry them both. He’s developed feelings for his girlfriend’s twin as well and insists that loving another woman who looks just like his current girlfriend is valid.”

I shake my head in amazement.

“That’s the weirdest thing I have ever heard.”

“I hear he’s even out looking for a second job to take care of them both.”

“And these two young, clueless girls have agreed?”

Marissa, who can tell that I am deeply invested, wriggles her eyebrow.

“Maybe if you told me what’s been bothering you, I’d tell you the rest of the story. It’s only going to get juicier, trust me.”

I roll my eyes, look away from Marissa, and chuckle.

“Seriously though,” she says in a low, quiet tone of voice. “I have been

worried about you. And if you're worried that I'd spill, you can make me sign an NDA," she jokingly adds. "I just need to know that you're okay."

"You don't have to sign an NDA, Marissa. I trust you."

Her smile is huge, and her eyes sparkle with tears.

"Thank you so much. You don't understand what that means to me."

"Please, don't be dramatic," I tell her, pausing when the waitress arrives with our order.

Marissa waits until the waitress departs.

"I can tell this is going to be good," she says.

"What's going to be good?"

"The French toast. I have never made one that looked this perfect," she says as she takes the first half and bites into it.

I wait, knowing full well that Marissa is about to entertain me.

"Oh, my fucking God!" Marissa moans.

"I hear that name is not to be used in vain," I mention casually as I bite into mine.

I'd made the same sound the first time I tasted their toast. I could never begrudge Marissa for doing the same thing.

"It's so good, I might die," she says as she takes an even bigger bite.

"You'd better not. I still need you to run errands for me," I say as I take a sip of my coffee and look out the window.

"Yes. I enjoy running errands for you a little too much."

I smile without meeting her eyes. And then, I begin.

"Nicholas and I had sex."

If I had known that Marissa had just taken a sip of her coffee, I would have waited. She has just choked.

"Oh my God."

She coughs, her eyes wide and red.

“Are you alright?” I ask as I move to get up, but she waves to signal that she is fine.

“Oh, my God,” she repeats when her breathing has calmed, and she’s no longer at risk of dying.

“Yes.”

I take another sip of my coffee and then cross one leg over the other.

“I had not, in my wildest imaginings, expected you to say that.”

“People don’t expect me to say and do a lot of things. A lot of people, to this day, assume my success is solely based on my parents and not that I’ve worked really hard to get to where I am.”

Marissa’s eyes narrow.

“That’s a trick to get me to stop thinking about what you just said before that.”

I giggle because she is right.

“Wow,” Marissa breathes as she sits back on her chair. And then, leaning forward again with twinkling eyes, she asks, “How was it?”

“Amazing,” I tell her simply because it really had been.

“Oh my God. You lived everyone’s dream, Aubree.”

“Call me Bree,” I tell her. “...when we aren’t in any official setting. Understood?”

“Of course,” she says and, in the same breath, continues, “Nicholas is rumored to know how to please a woman.”

Marissa’s eyes are fastened on my face. I flush furiously, and she giggles.

“Oh my God. He really rocked your world.”

“He did,” I admit. “But it was ethically wrong for us to have indulged. If word got out, it wouldn’t end well for either of us.”

“Then word will not get out,” Marissa points this out as if it’s the simplest logical reasoning I should be privy to.

“It’s not just that.” I shake my head. “The real problem lies with how I feel about this whole thing; with how I want to feel.”

“You can tell me.”

“I think I’ve always been jealous of the women he’s been with. I don’t think I’ve only frowned at his philandering ways.”

“Oh,” Marissa utters.

“It’s completely stupid, I know,” I say as I begin to look around, needing to distract myself. The conversation has suddenly become overwhelming, and I feel like I have overshared.

“I think you have always had a crush on Nicholas,” Marissa says.

“You could tell?”

“Yes. You would complain about the women that hung off of his arms and how good he looked in a suit.”

I cover my face with my hands to hide my scalding cheeks.

“I think Nicholas was privy to that too,” Marissa states.

“I’m beginning to think so too.”

“I also think that you’re his match. No one has ever challenged him and lived to tell the tale. The fact that he didn’t throttle you that day is a pointer that maybe Nicholas finds you fascinating as well.”

“Have you always been this insightful?” I ask Marissa.

“Well, I wouldn’t be working with a brain box if I was dumb, duh.”

I giggle because talking to someone else about it has made me feel lighter than I have in days.

“Promise me one thing.”

“What?”

“That you’ll let me watch the next time it happens.”

“Marissa!”

## *Chapter Seven*

### NICHOLAS

“**H**e did it!” Ryan shouts.

Mother looks at me, her mouth twisted in the way it does when she’s unhappy with me; an action that happens nearly all the time. I never make Mom happy.

“Did you do it?” Mother asks.

“I didn’t mean to,” I stutter; sweat dampened my underarms.

Ryan smirks like he had not encouraged me to.

“You thought it was okay to scratch that into the car?” Dolores asks, her voice high and shrilly.

Even though I have thought several times that she will hit me, she never has. But she has never failed to let me know what she thinks of me.

“I thought you were having a bad day and thought it would be great to do something nice.”

“Of course, I was having a bad day,” Dolores screams as tears streamed down her face. “I lost Ryan’s baby sister. Another little human would have filled this house with so much joy.”

Dolores drops to her knees and cries.

I inch towards her, just like Ryan does, but she shoos me away.

Ryan glares. My heart breaks.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“She’s not your Mom!” Ryan shouts.

Ryan always does that. Somehow, I’m hard of hearing and need to be spoken to in that manner. But this time, I don’t take it lying down. For once, I want to be held by Dolores. I want to comfort her and be comforted by her. I want to mourn the loss of my little sister, whom I had not even known about until several seconds ago.

“She’s my Mom,” I tell Ryan, returning his glare for the first time.

Just this once, I hope Dolores backs me up. For the first time, I hope that Dolores breaks up our verbal fight without taking sides. But it doesn’t happen. It never did, and at that moment, when she glares at me as hard as Ryan currently is, I discover the truth before it spills from her now parted lips.

“Ryan is right.”

I swallow hard, almost swallowing my tongue in the process. My limbs are suddenly heavy, and my knees weaken. I’d fall to the ground if I didn’t know that it would be met with another frown.

“You’re not my Mom?” I ask Dolores, who looks away, eyes still red-rimmed.

“Of course, I’m not. You’re a foster kid.”

Ryan giggles. His giggle turns and begins to echo, and the thought of them, wrapped around each other, begins to crumble, and I’m left with the words echoing over and over.

*Of course, I’m not your mother! You’re a foster kid! She’s not your mom!  
Foster kid! ...not your mother!*

I jerk awake and look wildly around. I am in my bedroom, and the lights are off. My heart hammers hard, and despite the coolness of the room, I'm soaked in sweat.

I get up Lifting the blanket to one side. I make my way towards my mini bar and pour myself two ounces of whiskey, upending everything at once. My chest burns and I welcome the slightly painful sensation. It's distracting from the nightmare I've just had. I close my eyes as I feel the sweat begin to dry on my skin.

*Of course, I'm not your mother.*

Those words have haunted me for years. And after all these years, with all my accomplishments and the miles I've covered, those six words still manage to bring me down to my knees.

I push my thumbs into my tightly shut eyes to keep the emotions at bay. I cannot afford to break down now, not after I've held it for all these years. I am 47, for crying out loud. I am out of that haze, right?

I shake my head because even I know I'm not that inept. I know better than to delude myself.

I walk back to my large bed and sit on the edge, afraid of going back to sleep. I chuckle bitterly to myself because I know that I am about to do what I always have to do to distract myself from these thoughts, work.

As I move towards my home office, I chuckle to myself because using work as a coping mechanism for my past had paved the way for the success my company was currently experiencing.

When sleep had become an illusion, I buried myself in work. When I felt like I wasn't good enough, I worked. Every negative feeling I had experienced was met with this very reaction. And even though I had managed to build the biggest cosmetic company in the country, there was still something in me that



was still wilting. There was an emptiness that not the longest figures running through my mind could fill. Maybe, as Dolores had said, I was really a lost cause.

I chuckle to myself. I really should see a therapist like Rita has suggested.

As young as we both were, Rita had sensed that there was something off about me, something not quite right. And she had believed that like a spoilt toy owned by a child, I could be fixed. But I don't think so. I don't think months of therapy could heal this wound or my current thought process. It was also great that no one knew anyway.

As soon as my business began to make waves in the state, I was smart enough to seek out my ex-girlfriends. I'd made them sign an NDA. When I reached out to Rita, she told me I didn't have to make her do it. She would take my secrets to the grave with her. She had revealed that she loved me and had never stopped. She just had not thought that a relationship was something I was supposed to go into at that period of my life. And, years later, I was still not healed enough to get into one.

I sometimes wonder what a different me would have been like if I had been raised differently. But I know I'm never going to find out.

I settle into my comfortable ergonomic chair and turn on my laptop. Work gets me for a couple of hours.

When it comes to running a billion-dollar company, there's always something to do. Investors to turn down, interview emails to decline. Audits to look over. And doing all this self-burdening at work always relaxes me.

Going through a proposal Aubree had submitted through email gets me thinking about her and the incident at the office yesterday. I have been in this world long enough to know when a woman is into me, and Aubree appears to just be without realizing it.

Aubree... with her acerbic tongue, light brown eyes, and beautiful auburn hair. Her beauty has never gone unnoticed by me. I had always admired how smart and hyper-focused she was. Her father's wealth had not stopped her from wanting to make her way. And she was quite excellent at it. With her wits, smarts, and drive, it is to be expected.

While Aubree hadn't yet to work for my company, she had always been courteous and politely friendly. But coming to work for me and seeing me for who I truly was had thrown her for a loop. And instead of cowering and shivering in my presence like the rest of my staff, Aubree has questioned some of my decisions, countered the others, and kept me on my toes throughout her tenure as staff.

Unable to help myself, I Google Aubree's name, unsurprised when several pictures of her come up. In several of them, she's dressed in a power suit, her long hair tied in a bun with a catchy cape beneath. She had headlined several magazines, and her innovativeness and sharp wit have impacted Moonbeam.

When she stormed into my office, demanding to know why I had gotten involved with Megan, the last model who had quit, I had been entertained by her. But she had gotten more sharp-mouthed with each second that passed, and I, in needing to intimidate her, had done something completely uncharacteristic of me. But Aubree seemed to enjoy every second of it as much as I did.

My body burns up as I recall the little whimpers she had let out and how completely submissive she had been. Aubree really loved being told what to do, and I enjoyed every second of that interlude.

I go back to her pictures.

Aubree looks like a literal dream, and I realize that I want to have her again. I want her moaning in my arms and demanding more with each minute. I want

Aubree to spread wide for me. I want to taste her skin, not in the confines of my office but right here, where she will not have to close her hands over her mouth. Where her moans, as loud as she can make them, will only spur me on. I want to bend my head between her legs and learn from her until she loses control of her legs. I want to fuck Aubree again.

I am hard. I sigh and pick up my phone. I have always had a private agency that provides me with the best of its escorts. I punch in their numbers and press my phone against my ear. When they pick up, their voice is neutral and straight to the point, just the way I love to conduct business.

“Would you like our services today, Mr. Stark?”

“Yes.”

“Alright,” the voice says, “We have several women we think will suit your taste. I will send pictures right over.”

I nod and disconnect, waiting for the pictures to come. It comes immediately via mail, and I go through it.

A beautiful redhead. I click away. Maybe if her hair was more auburn.

The next is a brunette with hazel eyes covered from head to toe in leather pants. She looks like the type who loves to be in control; her head is cocked to one side, eyes slanting into the camera. I sigh as I click away again. Maybe if her eyes were browner, like the color of coffee. And maybe she had chosen to wear a poplin shirt over a pencil skirt.

The image of Aubree filters into my mind in her poplin shirt and skirt, which are usually worn over pants. Aubree’s beautiful coffee-brown eyes.

I shook my head and pushed the laptop a little away from me at the realization that none of these women cut it for me. There’s only one person who can make my blood boil and sizzle, and that feisty woman is the one I want.

A minute later, my phone rings.

“Nicholas Stark.”

“Mr. Stark. Have you made your choice yet?”

“My preferences did not make the list.”

“If it’s a woman you have met before, we could arrange to have her come over. We can pull her out if she has any pending appointments too,” the voice says, sounding a little patronizing this time. But even I know that I won’t be taking any woman tonight, not even if she were considered the most beautiful on the planet.

“I can’t think of anyone,” I tell them.

“We can send another list over. If you want.”

“I don’t think I do,” I tell them because, for the first time in my life, I only want one woman to satisfy me. And if I can’t have her, I won’t fake it with someone else.

## *Chapter Eight*

### AUBREE

**F**or the second time this morning, I run to the bathroom to hurl the content of my stomach. Seeing as I'd had nothing to eat, all I have is spittle. I roll weakly away from the toilet bowl as I take calming breaths to get past another wave of nausea.

I think back to what I'd eaten the previous day. I'd ordered takeout as I had been too tired to venture into my kitchen. It had been sushi and rice. I'd not surprisingly lost my appetite the moment the scent had hit my nostrils. But I tried to eat as much as I could, figuring I needed it, for strength, as Marissa loved to point out.

I get up and move to the bathroom, but not before glancing at my wristwatch to realize that I'll be late if I do not hurry. Thirty minutes later, I'm back in my restroom again, hands tightly gripping the sides of my bowl as I puke. When I manage to get up this time, I grab my phone and dial Marissa's cell quickly.

"I was just about to call you," Marissa breathes. "Is everything alright? You're never late."

“I don’t think I’m alright, Marissa,” I say in a quiet weak voice. “I doubt I can make it to the office this morning. I’d like you to send a copy of my schedule to my home system. I’ll be working from home till I feel fit enough to come to the office.”

“Okay. I’m on my way,” Marissa says.

There are loud footsteps in the background as if Marissa is hurrying somewhere. She has been to my home several times and can make her way here with her eyes closed.

“Way to?”

“To yours, of course. You need me there.”

“I need you even more at the office to be my eyes and ears. You can sit in on any emergency meeting with the CEO,” I say because I would need all the information.

“I don’t think staying back here is that important. You sound like you’re dying. Have you even had breakfast?”

“I don’t think I could stomach anything,” I tell Marissa as I drop gracefully onto my bed and pull the covers over my body.

“I don’t think you should be left alone. How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been puking my guts out.”

“You’ll need something mild but solid to hold you,” Marissa sensibly points out. “I can get you breakfast and get back to the office right after. How about that?”

When it comes to my welfare, Marissa has always had ways of proposing a compromise until I give in.

“Doesn’t sound awful,” I say.

“Great. I will be there in no time. And Aubree?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t die on me.”

I chuckle, and she disconnects.

I spend the next couple of minutes in bed until the doorbell rings. When I let Marissa in, she looks me over with wide eyes.

“You look like hell.”

I chuckle.

“Thanks, Marissa.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just, I have never seen you like this.”

“Welcome to a new dispensation then.”

“I prefer my put-together boss. But I can’t wait to take care of this version of her,” Marissa says as she follows me to the kitchen.

I point her to the pantry, and she pushes it open to grab a plate, dumping crackers and what appears to be stale bread on it.

“There’s no way I’m eating that plain ass bread,” I say, wrinkling my nose in slight disgust.

“Did you just say ass?” Marissa says, turning towards me with an astonished look.

“I’m twenty seven, Marissa, not fifteen. Of course, I can say ass.”

I sit on the island stool and place my hands on the cool counter.

Marissa giggles and moves towards my large fridge, where she grabs a bottle of water. “You will need this to go with,” she tells me, pushing the plate of crackers toward me.

Avoiding the bland bread like the plague, I reach for the cracker and take a bite. Marissa, who’s gone quiet takes the seat next to mine and drops the bottle of water for me.

“Do you think it’s food poisoning?”

“Might be,” I reveal with a shrug. “I ordered takeout yesterday because I was

too tired to rustle up something.”

“I’m sorry,” Marissa says.

“Thanks.”

After another pause, Marissa blurts, “You have the worst bed hair. But you look the cutest with it.”

I self-consciously pat my hair down and Marissa giggles.

*Maybe, this is how a younger sister would have sounded if I’d had one.*

“You giggle a lot,” I tell Marissa as I take another bite of the saltine cracker. I don’t feel like I need to hurl the contents of my stomach anymore. That’s something.

“How did you know to get me this?” I ask her.

“Didn’t you ever drink in college?”

“I rarely ever,” I tell her honestly.

“Well, I did.”

“You had the ultimate college experience. Nice.”

“I did. My friends and I discovered that the crackers worked.”

“That’s nice. Now, you use your experience to care for my ass.”

“I’d need to record you say ass just for my entertainment. It’s iconic.”

“Sounding just like the millennial you are.”

“Millennial? Momma, I’m Gen Z,” Marissa says, and somehow, her humor makes me chuckle.

“Thank you for coming, Marissa,” I say because her presence has caused me to feel a whole lot better.

“I will always come over in a heartbeat. Just call, and I’ll answer.”

I frown at her.

“Did you drink this morning?”

Marissa looks around.



“I never drink early, as I need my wits to keep up with work every morning. Maybe it’s the setting and the ambiance of your home,” Marissa gushes as she looks around.

“If you weren’t already on the path to becoming a cosmetic chemist, I would have argued that you studied Theater arts in college.”

Marissa giggles.

“I should have. I grew up loving the shit out of Meryl Streep.”

“You’ll excel at it,” I tell her, and Marissa wriggled excitedly in her seat.

I get up and begin to move toward my bedroom.

“I’d better get ready.”

“You’ll still come to the office?”

Marissa’s eyes are wide in disbelief.

“I feel better now. So, I don’t see why not.”

An idea just popped into my head, and I know exactly what I need to do next. With that, I move to my bathroom, where I strip off of my clothes and step underneath the spray.

## Chapter Nine

### AUBREE

**O**n the way to the office, I stop by a pharmacy to get a pregnancy test. When I arrive at my office, I go directly to the bathroom.

My brain goes blind for a few seconds when I see the two lines turning into pink. I shut my eyes and lean against the wall for a moment before heading to my office.

A few minutes later I attempt to carry on with work, trying to push the new development to the back of my mind. But I might as well have been trying to make magic.

When I'm not distracted by thoughts of my pregnancy, I'm experiencing stomach aches or sudden nausea that has me running to the bathroom. And when it happens for the third time this midmorning, I step out of the adjoining bathroom to my office, feeling completely drained of energy.

*Maybe I should have stayed in.*

Marissa is waiting with a plate of bread-and-butter pudding. The sight of it makes me want to hurl again.

“What is that? I don't want it,” I say as I swallow hard, determined to keep it in.

“It’s just pudding. You need it.”

“My stomach doesn’t. I’ll puke it up before it even has the chance to settle.”

Marissa moves closer and settles on the chair opposite mine, moving the meal away from my direct line of sight.

*So thoughtful of her.*

“Do you want to see a doctor?” she asks in a quiet voice. “At least you may find out what is wrong. I don’t think the flu would make you retch as much.”

“Marissa can be too smart for her own good sometimes,” I say casually, settling on the chair as elegantly as I can. “I don’t think it’s the flu, but I don’t think I need to see a doctor now.”

Marissa looks at me; I look back at Merissa. I watch the cogs turn in her head until she realizes what I inadvertently want her to do. Her eyes widen, the size of saucers.

“Oh my!” She breathes.

“Yes,” I reply as I turn back to my computer to respond to emails.

“What-how? who...? You don’t even have a boyfriend,” Marissa gasps. She’s still processing. I give her all the time to do so, quite amused by her theatrics. I arch one eyebrow at her.

“I manage your entire schedule. I’d know if you were seeing someone,” she argues.

“Please get in touch with Mr. Stark’s assistant. Arrange for Nicholas and I to have lunch together today.”

Marissa closes and opens her mouth for several seconds, and then nods. She has made the connection and can tell that I am not ready to talk about what happened between us.

“I will do that right away.”

“Marissa,” I call when she gets to the door. She turns back to me with wide

eyes. “I hope this stays between us.”

“I won’t breathe a word,” she promises, and I believe her.

When she’s out the door, I drop my head into my hands, feeling more stressed than I ever have. Of course, I understand that this baby is going to complicate a lot of things. I’m yet to think about what I will tell my parents. They can’t know that Nicholas is the father. I would not reveal this until I am ready. But then, preparing for the day that happens means informing Nicholas.

I briefly wonder what he would think of the whole situation.

*Will he say that this has been my plan all along? Will he blame me for not protecting my womb against the influx of his seeds like I’ve read so many people do?*

I shake my head as I once again try to concentrate on work, knowing better than to speculate and work myself into a snit. Whatever the outcome of my conversation with Nicholas will be, I am going to keep this baby. He can sign off on parental rights if he has to.

When 2 p.m. rolls around, Marissa confirms lunch with Nicholas, and for the first time, as I make my way to my car, my hands shake with nerves. This isn’t just any meeting where we can talk about unplanned bad publicity or a competitor or a product launch that had gone wrong. It’s one that will determine the trajectory our lives take from now on. Whatever decision we take this afternoon will alter the course of our lives, especially mine.

I get into my car and begin to drive. The morning sickness has completely receded, and I am feeling a little bit like myself again. Marissa had arranged lunch at Nicholas’ favorite restaurant, an uppity Italian one where even their glass of water costs an arm and a leg.

When I get there, the host ushers me to my seat. The assistants had been able

to make reservations on such short notice. It's a little private corner that allows us the privacy to talk without the other patrons overhearing. I can just tell that this has been Marissa's doing. She had known that whatever I needed to talk to Nicholas about needed not to be heard by anyone else.

When the waiter approaches, I order a glass of water and wait for Nicholas, who is, in fact, five minutes late. And I do not peruse the menu, as I have suddenly lost appetite despite the gnawing, I'd felt in my stomach right before I left the office.

Ten minutes later, I look up to find Nicholas striding towards me, looking immaculate as ever in white shirt and slacks, his gaze fixed on mine. I hold his stare, refusing to be the first to look away, not until I feel my skin begin to heat up with awareness.

When Nicholas settles in the chair opposite mine, the outdoorsy scent of summer air wafts into my nose, and I find myself taking a deep breath and wishing that I could drag him against me and bury my nose against the skin of his neck.

*That's not the kind of thought I'm supposed to be having. That's not the kind of thought I really should be having.*

"Hello, Miss Turner."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Stark."

I cross one leg over the other to keep from tapping them nervously. Nicholas looks me over, his eyes are hooded and interested.

"When my assistant told me about your request to have lunch together, I wondered what this could be about," he says as he makes himself more comfortable on the expensive leather chair. His legs are spread apart, and he leans back casually like he owns the whole damn building.

*He may as well does.*

“It is a very important meeting, Mr. Stark,” I begin to say, dragging my eyes away from the picture-perfect image of him. “I wouldn’t have requested your presence otherwise.”

Maybe it’s my tone, or something Nicholas sees in my eyes, but he sits up straighter and nods, his face turning serious. My hands slightly shake with nerves. I know how climactic this conversation we are about to have may be; how everything can change right after now, either for better, or worse, really worse.

Nicholas does not hound me to tell him but waits patiently for me to come around to doing so, which is a gesture I appreciate a lot.

“Would you like to order first?”

“I don’t think I can keep anything in.”

The morning sickness is gone, but in its place are nerves, which are as bad as the damn sickness. I might as well be going through the motions again.

Nicholas studies me, and I try not to wriggle in my seat. His gaze, direct and penetrating, makes me feel a little like I am being picked apart, piece by piece.

“You can order if you want,” I tell him. God forbid that he starved on my account.

Nicholas shakes his head.

“How about we talk about what’s got you looking like you swallowed a pickle?”

“That’s very funny,” I mutter as I take another sip of water as if the tasteless liquid would make this whole interlude go the way I want it.

When Nicholas still says nothing, I know he’s waiting for me to be done with this. And when I look up at him and find his eyes completely devoid of the earlier laughter, I realize that I had not handled this whole thing with finesse.

“How about a glass of wine?” Nicholas sensibly suggests, and I give a nod. He beckons the waiter over and orders a bottle of Dom Perignon. It’s a drink we both favor, so I do not complain.

When the waiter steps away, Nicholas returns his gaze to me.

“Is it going to be this weird?”

His look is a mixture of mild exasperation and curiosity.

“No. It would not.”

I slid my fingers along the slight condensation on the smooth glass as I gather my thoughts.

“I am with child, Nicholas.”

The news lands between us, rock solid and heavy, so heavy Nicholas stays ghostly still for minutes. And when I brave a look up at him, I find his eyes wide and his face paler than I’ve ever seen it.

“You are serious?” he asks with wide eyes.

I give a nod.

“Is this just a feeling, or have you conducted an actual test?”

I scowl at him.

“I wouldn’t go to such great lengths to tell you if I wasn’t sure.”

“You’re right,” Nicholas whispers as he looks around as if he wishes that he were in a fucking circus, and we were just merely clowning about.

“What are we going to do?” Nicholas questions.

For a man who’s always been in control and always confident, he looks completely clueless right now.

“I don’t know about you, but I plan to keep the baby.”

Nicholas frowns slightly, and anger begins deep and low in my belly.

“I know that you are well aware that I do have the capacity to care for a child all on my own. I wouldn’t even need child support; I have enough money for

myself and at least three more kids to last several decades.”

“I wasn’t questioning the state of your bank account, Miss Turner,” Nicholas snaps.

“Could have fooled me.”

“Stop being mulish for a damn second, will you?” Nicholas whispers harshly, eyes flashing hard.

I swallow a retort when the waiter makes his way toward our table. I sit back and watch as he pours the wine into the glasses without spilling a drop. I briefly wonder how many months it took him to perfect the skill.

When the waiter steps away, I reach for my glass, drawing a sharp breath when Nicholas drops calloused hands atop mine.

“You can’t drink that.”

I look at him confusedly.

“Why not?”

“For the safety of the baby,” he whispers in a low tone of voice; this time, he avoids my stare, and I wonder why.

I lean back against my chair, suddenly curious about his subtle change in countenance and how he’d known about the effects of alcohol on pregnancy, but Nicholas does not meet my gaze, choosing to chug his wine in a go. I’m a little envious of him and watch as his Adam’s apple bobs up and down in the most appealing way.

*Why does everything Nicholas does look appealing to me?*

“You should also stop drinking coffee as well as other caffeinated drinks.”

Nicholas drops his glass onto the shiny table with a clank.

“I can’t live without coffee.”

“You’ll have to suffer through the next nine months without it,” Nicholas casually states.



It's the weirdest thing that we are seated here in this uppity restaurant, talking about the baby like we have known for far longer about it. It's weird but better than I had expected; way better than the rejection and shirking of responsibility I had expected to happen. I was going to have to count my blessings in that regard.

"You seem to know a lot about this," I say, pointing a finger toward my stomach.

"You make it sound like I was born by a man. You might as well know I grew up around women too, Miss Turner."

"Aubree, please," I blurt. There's no way I should still be referred to as that when I'm carrying his child.

"Why?" He looks suspicious.

*Because you have been inside me. You have made me scream the hardest I ever have. So, stick those formalities down a rabbit hole.*

I don't say that.

"We will be raising a child together. I don't see why the formalities should continue."

"It helps," Nicholas states icily.

"With?"

"Professional boundaries," he grits.

I chuckle, albeit bitterly, and then give him an unbelievable stare.

"If there was any professional boundary, Mr. Stark, what happened in your office had completely severed it."

"What are you implying?"

"That the line has already been crossed. So, we'd better start playing nice to each other if we want to convince our kid that we do, in fact, not hate each other's guts."

“My God! I’m going to be a father,” Nicholas intones, eyes still wide with disbelief.

“You don’t have to feel coerced into this,” I quickly jump to say.

*God forbid that I raise a child who would grow up not feeling wanted.*

“What do you mean?” Nicholas asks, his eyes narrowing.

I shift from side to side, eyeing the glass of wine in front of me like it’ll slip into my mouth if I do so long enough.

“This has been very unexpected. So, I understand if you feel like you need to take a step back to be free of this responsibility that’s been nearly unwillingly thrust upon you.”

Nicholas has narrowed his eyes to slits. It would have been funny if this were an entirely different setting, and we weren’t talking about a child, if our destinies were not balanced on a single thread.

“I want to be in my child’s life. Don’t you ever mistake that fact.”

“I’d hate it if you felt put upon.”

“I do not feel that way, Miss Turn—Aubree.”

“Are you sure you want to do this? I’m giving you an out. You can even sign off on parental rights if you want, I won’t begrudge you.”

I need to be certain that this is what Nicholas wants. I’ve seen one too many documentaries about fathers who didn’t want to be parents. I’d never let that happen.

“If you say anything again about forced parenting, I’ll cut off those plump lips and feed them to you. I want this. I want our child to know that he or she is loved and wanted.”

Nicholas, for the first time, looks a little red in the face, jabbing his fingers on the table for emphasis.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

*He does want this.*

“Then we’d better begin to make plans then,” I say as I push open my Versace handbag and pull out a writing pad and pen.

## *Chapter Ten*

### NICHOLAS

“Are we going to map out a plan, like this is some sort of business idea?” I ask in disbelief.

Aubree, who doesn't look away from her note, gives a nod.

I chuckle.

“This is insane.”

“I completely agree with you on that,” she says as she thrust the pad toward me. “Since we won't be wasting each other's time in court, we'd better map out how we will handle this.”

“You came prepared,” I say as I grab the note and begin to read.

Aubree, as she does everything else at the office, has meticulously written out several names she thinks will be fitting for the baby.

“Aren't we going a little far with this?” I ask after I've read through.

“We aren't going far enough,” Aubree informs me, her face serious as ever.

I give a low chuckle.

“We will make this work, won't we?” I mutter with a smile.

I am terrified as hell. I had never thought I would be a father now. Yes, it's something I have always longed for. But not what I have ever actively acted

towards.

“Of course, we will,” Aubree assures me, her face looking longingly at the glass of wine I had poured for her. She looks fetching, in a simple yet fashionable collared V-neck loose work blouse in taupe, and a skirt that makes her skin look incredible.

“Your father will not be happy,” I state in a low tone of voice.

I am suddenly swallowed up in guilt. David had trusted me to look after Aubree as if she were my own. Indeed, one of the things he probably never expected to happen was this. And I don’t know how I could ever look him in the eye and tell him that I messed up.

*No, it couldn’t happen.*

“Aubree…” I begin, and she looks up at me, her eyes running over my face in the way they always have.

“Your father cannot know.”

“I know that,” she informs me with a sniffle. “He would be so livid,” she continues, looking away from me and down at the tablecloth, where her hands are playing with the spotless linen on there.

I close my eyes, trying not to imagine the look on David’s face when he eventually realizes what I have done with Aubree because, even though we might try to hide the truth for so long, eventually he’s going to know. The truth will be out in the open, and David will not fail to let me know what a piece of shit he thinks I am.

The thought of my friendship with David coming to an end fills me with an emotion I cannot quite name. I have never really had real friends, just business associates. David had been one of the few.

“So, you will keep the news from them?”

“For as long as I can,” Aubree responds, looking a little sad at the thought.

I feel like a real piece of shit for asking that of her.

“But you do know they’ll eventually find out, right?” Aubree says. Her head is cocked to the side, eyes slanted in my direction. Her posture is perfect, and her stomach, the most I can see from where I’m seated, looks flat as ever. There have yet to be any physical changes in her body.

And suddenly, I am seeing Dolores, who had looked happier than ever when she had been pregnant, something I had not known then because I had not been told. She was still in her first trimester, so her body was still the same, but her happiness had been radiant. I mattered even less to her, and she’d not failed to let me know through little deliberate actions.

It’s the wrong time to think of Dolores and what could have been. What could have been a baby sister, I thought I’d love and cherish, what would have been different if I had not been a foster child?

I am going to love this little one in the best way possible. I am going to be there for him or her in a way I once needed someone to be.

“Nicholas...?” Aubree asks, her face squeezing with worry.

I blink back to the present.

“Sorry, I got lost in my head for a moment.”

Aubree looks at me a little longer, and then those fingers that had been fiddling with the tablecloth inch towards mine. We both watched the movement of her hands. I didn’t realize I had held my breath until she stopped halfway as if she had lost courage. And then I realized how badly I had wanted her to make contact. How I’d longed for that simple touch that had not come.

“When the time comes for the truth to be aired, we will be prepared. But for now, I don’t think I am, and neither are you.”

Aubree shakes her head.

“I’m not at all ready.”

There’s a faraway look in her eyes as she stares out the window.

“I am not in any way moralistic, but I feel it in my gut that this child wants to stay.”

I give a nod because I do understand what she means. Dolores had often said that my biological mother had not wanted me and had tried everything she knew to get rid of me. It was bizarre that I had persistently stayed on. It was a little bit of what Aubree was trying to explain. Our child wanted to stay. And we both wanted him or her to as well. It didn’t matter that we were both not ready to be parents; we were going to make it work.

“I wonder what raising a child with you would feel like,” Aubree muses, and my heart skips.

“I think it will be great. I know how to give piggy rides.”

“You have little time for anything besides work. Will this be a problem? This child will need love, care, and attention. We have to be ready to give all of it.”

“I have so much love in my heart to give, Aubree.”

Aubree looks at me as if she can’t quite believe I just said that. Well, I cannot quite believe I just said that either. I have always prided myself on being able to keep a tight lid on my emotions. But the news of this child has surprisingly made me softer and a little more expressive because, maybe, a part of me wants to convince Aubree of the fact that I’m worthy.

“We know next to nothing about each other except the obvious,” Aubree continues, “Why don’t we use this period to do that? Seeing as we will have to be in each other’s lives until our child is grown?”

I give a nod. I love the sound of getting to know Aubree better.

“So, dinner dates?”

I frown.

“Date?”

“Yes,” the woman responds with a shrug. “Not the romantic kind where you take me home for a nightcap or something. It’s the kind where we get to know each other for the sake of our baby.”

“If you ask me, we don’t need to know each other that well to get along just fine,” I reply.

Aubree chuckles.

“Raising a child, Mr. Stark, is quite different from running a billion-dollar company. Your staff listens to what you say and tries to do it. A child wouldn’t.”

“We will just make them.”

I shrug.

Aubree balks.

“We need those dinner dates, I mean, meetings. Maybe we can attend tutorial classes if need be.”

I cannot keep the irritation out of my voice this time.

“You’re simply pushing it, Aubree.”

For the first time since that morning, Aubree grins and my eyes drop to those lips and the pearly teeth which are arranged naturally to perfection. Those bowed lips I had feasted on once and couldn’t get enough of.

“We will be great parents, won’t we?”

“I mean, why not? We are smart as hell.”

*Telling a little toddler what to do will be a walk in the park, right?*

Aubree nods.

“It will be amazing.”

She seems to have gotten the conviction she needed. More relaxed now, she



looks in the direction of the waiter.

“I think I might be in the mood for food.”

I swallow hard, trying not to imagine her in the mood for something else. I signal the waiter over, and we both give our orders. Even though I know that I am taking up more time than I should with Aubree, I cannot help myself. This is something that has never happened, having lunch with the feisty woman who is now carrying my child, our child.

I am even more fascinated by her, how truly composed she has been in the face of these recent developments. Aubree will be an amazing mother, I can tell. I just hope to the high heavens that I will give our child all the love and care that I can. But one thing remains startlingly clear in my mind, that, come what may, I will never abandon this little one the way I was. Hell will freeze over before I ever do that.

## *Chapter Eleven*

### AUBREE

**T**he first trimester of pregnancy is hell. I have experienced several weird body changes and symptoms that I'd better not divulge. Morning sickness has gotten worse, and there have been days when I'm unable to keep anything in.

Marissa went as far as she could to clear my schedule to make sure I wasn't overworked. She also made sure there was enough food in my system to carry me through the day.

Some days, Marissa puts even her foot down and tells me to go home and rest. Other times she sought the intervention of Nicholas, who has surprisingly been looking out for me more and more.

Nicholas even starts to pay little visits to my office now and then.

Even though I have acted outwardly like the little visits do not mean anything, I find myself soaking up the attention and concern every time. The little visits to the office, where he casually asks about how a photoshoot is going or the advertorial for a certain newly launched product. Somehow, these questions always morph into much more personal ones.

*Have I had breakfast? Was I able to sleep well? Has the stomachache*

*lessened?*

Well, those moments are always my favorite time of the day.

Also, Nicholas has been taking out time to read about pregnancy as much as he can, and that has weirdly endeared him to me. I'd talk about a symptom I was experiencing, and he'd start explaining what it could possibly mean and why I needed to see my gynecologist.

On the other hand, I have been feeling more and more guilty about keeping this from my parents. I know how ecstatic they'd be if they heard they'd get to be grandparents. I know that my notion of marriage and its idealism as well as my feministic tendencies tend to rub them the wrong way sometimes. I have made it very clear in the past that marriage does not define me as a woman. I am well accomplished and can choose whether I want to be strapped down for a long time with one man.

I do want my own family. I want to have kids. I seek companionship. But I shall never be so desperate for it that I settle. More so, I have always been attracted to older men and have been into Nicholas for as long as I can remember. I'd honestly be blind if I wasn't.

There's a light knock on my office door, and then, Marissa pushes it open and steps in with a slight smile on her face. Like me, Marissa has gotten used to the presence of this growing life inside of me and has taken it in stride. We have, as expected, begun to make plans. Marissa has been shopping for baby clothes and other necessary items I would need. She has been very helpful, and sometimes I wonder what I would have done without her.

"Come see who looks radiant today," Marissa says as she settles into the chair opposite mine.

I unsuccessfully try to hide my smile.

"I am in the middle of work, Marissa."

“Which is why I’m here; to interrupt you,” she replies with a grin.

I give her a dark glare.

Marissa throws her hands in the air in surrender.

“Don’t shoot. Doctor’s orders.”

I resist the urge to face-palm. Marissa has in the past joined me for my fortnightly appointment.

“I’m merely two months gone, Marissa. Stop acting like I’ll be in the labor room any second.”

Marissa looks me over with wide, curious eyes.

“Have you ever wondered what you would look like after nine months?”

I’m disgusted at the thought of being bigger than a house and having to waddle instead of strut. Then I’d have to ditch my usual clothes for the maternity dresses Marissa has sensibly begun to shop for.

“I imagine you will feel the same way when you eventually get pregnant too.”

“I don’t want that,” Marissa says with conviction. “I adore babies, and I admire Mothers because they’re literally the strongest and bravest. But I never want to go down that path. I don’t want it. Maybe surrogacy if I ever decide to have a change of heart. But in no way is this little orifice dilating except from arousal.”

“That’s a very dirty thought to put in my head, Marissa.”

“Well, you said I’m like the younger sister you never had.”

“And I’m regretting having said that right about now.”

“And you also told me the other day that you love me.”

“I was writhing in pain, so, of course, I had not said that with my senses intact.”

“But you’d said it still,” Marissa sasses.

I give a low chuckle.

“Was there anything else you wanted to say?” “Yes,” Marissa replies. Her tone has fallen back easily to that of complete professionalism. It’s what I have admired most about her. Her ability to compartmentalize. She’s a lot like me in so many ways, which is the only reason we have gotten along just fine.

“Mr. Stark’s assistant got in touch with me to decide a suitable place and time for dinner.”

My heart skips.

“Dinner?”

“Um, yes,” Marissa says, trying not to act surprised, or that she isn’t curious, but I can see past the facade.

“We compared schedules and figured today was the best time for you both to meet. Mr. Stark will be out of town next week, and you, with the several appointments you would have, might not have the time to go to dinner tomorrow.”

I give a nod.

After lunch, when Nicholas and I had both agreed to get to know each other for the sake of the baby, we had not had another formal meeting except for the three-minute visits to my office.

“Alright,” Marissa quips. “7 p.m. at Mr. Stark’s home today. I’ll set a reminder, so you don’t overstay here.”

*Like you have made a habit of.*

She doesn’t add that, but we both hear it. And then I hear something else. Or, it just dawns on me.

“Did you say Mr. Stark’s home?”

Marissa nods, her expression completely normal.

I begin to shake my head, my traitorous heart beginning an exciting thud at the notion of having dinner in Stark's home.

"Mr. Stark requested that you both meet there," Marissa replies, her expression giving nothing away.

I blink, trying to understand what his motive could be. Why didn't he just invite me to a restaurant? There are obvious reasons, but still, I'm not ready to worry about it.

"Does his assistant know about..." I give Marissa a pointed look and she begins to shake her head, eyes wide.

"He doesn't, and he doesn't suspect. I have made sure to not tell a soul."

I let out a breath I had not realized I had been holding.

"That's great."

"Yes. I know better than to run my mouth. This is a very delicate matter, and I would hate to see you get hurt."

This time, Marissa's stare is full of adoration and care. I will always wonder how she could go from professional to childishly curious, and then to this in minutes. But I guess it's part of the reason I have come to love her so much.

"Thank you, Marissa. And let Nic-- Mr. Stark knows that I shall be there when the clock strikes seven."

I spend the rest of my day in the confines of my office, responding to work emails and scanning through marketing materials. I miss working outdoors with my team. I miss the thrill of directing shoots and the satisfaction that comes with successful experiential marketing. But I also find myself looking forward to dinner with Nicholas and wondering why he even made the arrangement at his place.

I suggested that we get to know each other, but I had not expected him to take it this seriously. I guess I should be thankful that Nicholas is just as invested

in this as I am.

When 5 p.m. rolls around, I finish up the task I'd started for the day and step into my bathroom to freshen up. I call up Marissa, and she confirms that yes, Nicholas and I are still on for dinner. She does send over his address, which I punch into my GPS while trying not to think about the fact that I am going to Nicholas' home for dinner.

I live in an entirely different area but am still in the center of town, Nicholas' home seems to be in the farthest part of town. I am nearly certain that I am going in the wrong direction when I have passed several streets and homes until I come upon the last on the street, far away from the rest.

I drive my Audi through the automatic gates, practically gaping at the stunning mansion. I knew that Nicholas lived largely, but I had not expected a literal mansion. It was the biggest I have ever seen, and I've been to very exotic places. I know Nicholas is always very private about his home life, and never invites people over. I wonder if I should feel a little privileged.

I park my car beside Nicholas's array of cars, trying not to feel intimidated by the imposing house.

When I make my way to the door, I find a butler who gives me a slight bow in greeting.

"Miss Turner?"

I give a nod and a smile. I know that my parents have had dinner in the past with Nicholas, and I wonder why they did not inform me he lived in a home that looked like a literal castle.

When I step into what appears to be a living room, complete with a typical fireplace, I take in a sharp breath. Nicholas' home would be perfect for a shoot. I can already imagine one of the models, body oiled to perfection with

one of the skincare products, wearing a robe and a bikini, looking casually relaxed on the floor beside the fireplace, head thrown back, eyes closed.

When a voice clears behind me, I turn to find Nicholas at the landing of the staircase, eyes fastened on me.

“It’s a pleasure to have you here, Miss Turner.”

I don’t look away from him as I begin to make my way toward him. Nicholas is dressed this evening in a simple t-shirt and Jeans, and I try not to swallow my tongue from how good he looks in it. His hair is brushed back, and the startling white in the center of it falls forward.

My finger aches to hold the soft curl and twirl it around my finger. Nicholas appears younger than his forty-seven years. And those arms he raises in a handshake, ripe with muscles, make me think of very sinful things.

“It’s a pleasure to be here,” I respond a little lamely.

Nicholas’ lips curled up in a smirk.

“I see my fireplace got your attention.”

“It did,” I say as I glance back at the composition of brick and stone, and the last traces of ashes. “I can’t imagine how warm and amazing it is to sit by it during the winter.”

“Maybe I just might invite you over when winter comes.”

I grin.

“That’s three months away from now.”

“Will you be showing by then?” Nicholas asks.

“It depends. Women’s bodies are different. It might not be exactly obvious, but there will be obvious changes.”

“I did read that,” Nicholas says as he takes my hands in his. Shivers course up my arms, and I wonder if he feels them, but he does not give any indication that he does.



Nicholas and I walk down the lavish expanse of his home, down a dimly lit hallway, like we have done this all our lives. Nothing about having my hands in his feels weird. Nothing about the way his broad, hard shoulders brushed against mine feels wrong.

“Would you like a tour?” Nicholas asks and I give a nod. I’d do anything to ensure that we remain this way; that his shoulder continues to gently brush against mine, and I remain in the cocoon of his scent.

## *Chapter Twelve*

### AUBREE

**N**icholas takes me around the large mansion, including the kitchen, where I find recent appliances and a brewer. The interior is decorated with white and black, which makes his kitchen look like something out of Pinterest. The guest rooms and extra rooms are so lavish, I can't help but wonder what his own space looks like. Maybe something made out of fluffy, perfect clouds and winter rain?

Nicholas shows me a game room as well as a specialty bar. A pool house and a jacuzzi. I cannot help but imagine our kid running around here and having the time of his or her life.

For a second, I'm a little sad that I'll never be present to watch them connect and bond. And then I wonder why I am even feeling that way at all. Why am I sad at the notion that I might never get to watch Nicholas bond with our child in this very home?

I shelf that question for later and follow Nicholas into what appears to be the master bedroom.

"The master bedroom," he announces in a slightly gruff voice.

I look around, taking in the large bed and the many pillows on it. I giggle at

the image of Nicholas cuddling one of the pillows to sleep. He looks around the room and back at me. “Something funny?”

“The plethora of pillows,” I let out amidst laughter. “I never imagined you to be the cuddly type.”

“You wouldn’t know that from a distance, Miss Turner.”

Heat suffuses my cheeks at his low-timbre voice and how that low tone seems to wash over my skin. I close my eyes and try my best to ignore the image of Nicholas rolling me over in bed and spooning me from behind.

“I-ah... We’d better see the rest of the house,” I say, already moving away from the tempting sight.

You would think that with the evidence of this baby as a consequence of my loss of self-control, I’d learn. Well, I had seemed to. The logical part of my brain understands how completely wrong it is that I continue to yearn for Nicholas. My treacherous body, however, does not.

When Nicholas and I make our way down the stairs, I finally realize what has made his home seem a little sterile and unfeeling. There are no pictures of his family anyway, which makes me wonder why that is so. And even though Nicholas has always been a close friend of my father’s, he’s never spoken about his family. There’s next to nothing on the internet about his parents, only that he had been raised in Colorado by his parents, Dolores, and Ephraim Stark.

*But how come the pictures of his family aren’t hung anywhere? Is it not just his thing, or is he hiding something?*

When I glance back at Nicholas, I find his gaze on my derriere. When his gaze climbs up to meet mine, I give him a knowing smirk, and then I gulp when those eyes begin to smolder. His strides are long; he catches up with me in seconds.

“Your home is lovely,” I say, not perfunctorily because it really is.

“Thank you.”

“But there are no pictures of your family anywhere. I would love to see what little Nick looked like at five.”

And just like that, Nicholas’ expression goes from serene to stoic blank. I am shocked at the change and wonder if I said something wrong.

“There are no family pictures,” he grits after a lifetime of silence, his teeth grinding hard enough for me to hear.

“Oh. That’s alright,” I placate.

I wonder, as we continue down the stairs, why that’s such a sore subject, but I know better than to ask. He looked like he was seconds away from snapping at me the first time.

Dinner is a tense affair, and the cordial friendliness with which we started the evening is gone. Nicholas appears to be merely tolerating my presence as he continues to spoon a healthy creamed chicken roulade into his mouth. The meal is surprisingly tasty, and I find myself enjoying it more than I thought I would. I pick up the glass of juice and take a sip, frowning lightly at the slightly tangy taste.

“I feel like I’m five,” I say with a frown.

This time, Nicholas does look up.

“Why?”

“The damn juice. The damn fact that I cannot drink my favorite cup of coffee or eat sushi or scallops. The fact that you get to still have them, but I can’t.”

This time, I glare at him hard. Nicholas swallows his food, and I watch his lips twitch as if he’s trying to fight a smile.

“Well, you get to eat and drink all that after seven months,” he points this out sensibly.

I hmphed, and look away, with my nose thrust into the air. This time, Nicholas does chuckle.

“I fear this is one of those many symptoms, isn’t it?”

“You mean the sudden urge to bite your head off?”

Nicholas smirks.

“Sure, it’s only my head you want to bite?”

And just like that, the room temperature of 75 degrees goes to a boiling-hot 210 degrees in Ferenheit.

Nicholas’ powerful arms are against the table, and those eyes, simmering with what can only be described as lust, are riveted on my face.

I chuckle. My voice comes out shaky, and my hands tremble.

“I, um, of course, it’s just your head I want to bite.”

*Is it hot in here?*

“I can’t give that to you. But I can give you anything you want in exchange for something else too.”

“Wow,” I say, blinking the haze of lust away.

*How had we gone from frozen silence to this?*

“I don’t think you have anything I would love to--” I pause and then there’s an awkward cough, “bite.”

“Okay then,” Nicholas says as he goes back to his meal.

I watch him. I watch those deft hands that knew how to touch and just where to send me spiraling.

Nicholas brings the food to his mouth again, and suddenly, I am envious of the damn chicken. I, too, might be going insane. Maybe it’s the baby. I was told my sexual urge would spike. Maybe that’s it. That’s what I’m currently experiencing, right?

When my eyes zero in on Nicholas, I find amusement in the depth of his

voice.

“What?” he asks as he leans slightly closer, an action that causes the muscles on his forearm to flex and bulge.

I look down to gather my thoughts and look back up at him.

“I think the reason for this meeting is to get to know each other better. Gauge how good we can be as parents who will be raising a child in separate homes.”

Nicholas nods and takes a long swig of his wine as if he knows he will need it.

“That’s not what we are doing,” I say; my voice is a low whisper that carries through to him. “We are not learning about each other at all. I know next to nothing about you.” My voice goes higher with every word that flies out of my lips. “I don’t even know what your parents look like. You have kept your life very private, and while I appreciate that, I think you will have to let me in.”

Nicholas doesn’t say anything for minutes but continues to gaze at me as if I had just decreed a third world war.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I continue when Nicholas still stays silent, eyes harder than ice.

“I’ll start first. You know I am an only child. I love spring, faux fur, and the taste of rain. I’d been really good at calculus in high school. And I was a cheerleader, too. I fell off a tree in fifth grade and knocked one of my teeth out. Dad freaked; Mom was glad it wasn’t my permanent.”

Nicholas’ icy exterior melts a little at my last words, and he sighs and looks down at his plate, brows furrowing like the now-cold meal on his plate is made of hard lumps of coal.

“I don’t have a great past.”

“I’d figured that part out.”

“And I don’t think I’m ready to talk about it.”

“That’s alright,” I tell him with an encouraging smile. “I can wait.”

“I don’t think I want you to.”

“Why?”

Nicholas doesn’t look away when he speaks icily.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be.”



Nicholas continues to stay in touch. Planned meetings no longer become a thing. I also do a great job of staying away from home. Mom has been worried and asked why I wouldn’t visit. I’ve been afraid that she would take one look at me and know that I am nearly three months pregnant.

My stomach is as flat as ever. I’ve decided that I do not want to become a mobile home seven months down the line, which is why I have hired a personal trainer. It also explains why I am currently not breathing from my mouth like Marissa is.

“Oh my God,” Marissa is in her pants, bending over to support her trembling hands on her legs.

I hand her my bottle of water, chuckling lowly when she grabs it like it’s a lifeline and chugs it like it’s the last thing to slide down her throat before she tumbles to the other side.

“My God. From the way you’re about to pass out, one would think we went hiking.”

“This can pretty much pass for one,” Marissa says as she straightens back up and looks behind, her hands blocking the ray of the sun.

“We’d better keep at it,” I say as I resume our walk.

“How do you manage this without even breaking a sweat?” Marissa asks as she begins to struggle once more to keep up.

I chuckle.

“Unlike you, I work out.”

“I couldn’t exercise to save my life,” Marissa shrugs.

The models and photographers do not have a problem with the little climb but are a little slower. I had wanted a wonderful shoot in the countryside. And while we’d driven past wheat and corn fields, I’d spotted the perfect place for it. By the time we get to the slightly uphill spot, Marissa is covered in sweat.

“This is your signal to work out,” I tell her when I throw her my handbag and move towards one of the models to show them how to pose and how to hold the sealed product.

This model, Clara, is, fortunately, older than 18 and doesn’t have any problem looking straight at the camera. And while the model continues to pose with our latest versatile moisturizer, Marissa leans in and whispers conspiratorially.

“I haven’t heard anything from the grapevine concerning the new models and younger female staff. Our dear CEO seems to have taken your little talk pretty seriously.”

“Or maybe the pregnancy helped him keep it in his pants,” I whisper back to Marissa, who gives a little giggle.

I straighten up when one of the props guys turns back to stare at us. The shoot goes smoothly, and less than three hours later, we are in the car and headed towards the office.

“I don’t think Nicholas is merely keeping it in his pants,” Marissa tells me as if it’s all she had been thinking about on our drive back. “I think he likes you,” she murmurs as we make our way toward my office.



My heart skips a beat, and I try to snuff out the flicker of excitement I can feel beginning to bloom in my chest.

“I don’t think that’s the case.”

“I think it is,” Marissa says with a little conviction.

“What makes you sound so sure? Heard anything from the grapevine to that effect?”

Marissa grins.

“Joe and I have become close friends, and he tells me Nicholas has, for the first time in years, not asked for a time to be booked with one of the ladies.”

The hope blossoms in my chest and spreads to several other parts of my body so that I do not even feel the slight swelling I had begun to experience in my leg close to the end of the shoot.

“Like I said, maybe the pregnancy has scared him into keeping it in his pants.”

“Maybe he does really like you. It would explain him randomly popping into the office.”

I chuckle low in my throat.

“You don’t like to lose, Marissa.”

“No, I--” Marissa’s voice peters out at the sight of Nicholas leaning casually against my office door. I fix my gaze on him, taking in everything at once. The immaculate, as always, shirt and slacks. The hair; brushed back and cut low at his nape.

His eyes travel over my body, lingering over my stomach, making a slow ascent toward my boobs. A little heat begins low in my belly, and I try not to gasp from the suddenness.

“Mr. Stark,” I start when I’m close enough for civil conversation.

Nicholas straightens up and looks away from me and towards Marissa, who

gives him a nervous little smile and a much too polite greeting. Sometimes, I forget how intimidating Nicholas can be.

“Miss Turner,” he acknowledges.

Marissa pushes open the door, and when I move towards it, Nicholas drops a hand on my forearm.

“I need to speak to you alone in my office,” Nicholas informs me, looking more serious than ever.

I’m a little worried as I follow him down the hallway and towards his office. And when we get there, Nicholas directs me to one of the chairs and settles in his.

“I don’t want you to go out anymore,” he deadpans.

My eyes are wide and startled.

“What do you mean by that?”

“We know how delicate you are right now. You cannot toddle off to the field every chance you get.”

“I have to go out there to ensure they do a great job.”

“You have an assistant who can very well do that for you. From what I hear, she’s quite competent.”

“Marissa is good at her job, but she isn’t me. And you cannot tell me what to do.”

“I very well can,” Nicholas tells me. His eyes were darkening from what can only be described as irritation. “I am your boss, Aubree.”

“You’re not being serious right now,” I mutter in disbelief. “I am just three months pregnant. I’m not even showing, for crying out loud!”

“That’s the whole point. You need to build your strength for months from now.”

Nicholas shifts a little uncomfortably in his chair, and I try not to pounce on

that perfect athletic body in anger.

“I have been building my strength since I could learn to talk. I love going out. I love directing shoots and commercials. I love organizing business events and award ceremonies. Don’t take that from me.”

“I won’t,” Nicholas says, eyes honest and sincere. “You’re one of the best hands we have, and I don’t find you replaceable.”

His gaze holds mine, and I try not to blush from the longing and passion I can see displayed in those stunning blue eyes.

“I can’t stay cooped up in the office. I will expire,” I tell him.

“How about I go with you on these trips? That’s the only compromise. Someone has to look after you.”

“Marissa does a great job. Thanks for asking.”

“Marissa knows about this?” Nicholas asks.

I avoid his eyes and give a nod.

“She won’t tell a soul.”

“Dammit. This was supposed to stay between us for the most part.”

“I trust Marissa with my life,” I say in the quiet office. This time, I do turn to look at Nicholas, who has begun to pace the length of the office.

“I shall be having dinner again soon with your family,” he states, his legs continuing to make strides across the room.

I swallow hard.

“That will be, um, weird.”

“I know.”

Nicholas pauses and rubs his hands over his face.

“That’s why I thought to tell you.”

I look at him, and he stares back at me.

“We can do this, can’t we?” I say to him.

Nicholas nods, and with certainty, this time, gushes, “Yes. We can do this.”

## *Chapter Thirteen*

AUBREE

*I can't believe this is happening.*

I whisper to myself as I make my way toward the door.

Nicholas had requested to come with me to one of my appointments. Usually, I would take Marissa with me, but he'd said he wanted it to be just the two of us.

I should not be this excited that Nicholas has asked to do something with me, but God... I am. And I can't help the feelings that course through me at this knowledge.

"Will you be alright with him?" Marissa asks as she walks me down the elevator.

I give a low chuckle at Marissa's tight frown.

"Of course, I will be."

"I think I have competition then. I get the feeling that Nicholas and I have been trying to outdo each other."

"And I have no reservations about that at all. This baby needs all the coddling he or she can get."

I giggle at the imagery of both Marissa and Nicholas falling over themselves

to do our child's bidding.

"This child is going to have so many of us wrapped around his or her little finger," Marissa coos and sighs.

"It's a fact we are going to have to live with," I say dramatically.

When I step into the car, I have time to smile at Marissa.

"You have been amazing these past couple of weeks. Thank you."

Marissa smiles at me in return, her eyes full of adoration and care.

"I don't know if you've noticed, but I'll walk on flaming coals for you."

I roll my eyes at the exaggeration.

"Goodbye, Marissa."

When I get to the parking lot, I find Nicholas leaning casually against a trendy sports car. He looks like an older model posing for a shot, right leg propped against the side of the car, shirt rolled up to expose perfect sinewy arms and thighs that flex at the slightest of movements.

I will give anything to see what Nicholas looks like without clothes. Our first time had been against his desk, rough and fast and hard and spectacular.

"Aubree," Nicholas mutters when I draw close enough to him.

All I manage is a nod as I struggle to drag my thoughts out of the gutter. Nicholas opens the passenger door, and I slid in. There's nothing strange about this; there's nothing weird about being in the passenger seat of Nicholas' car. It feels instead like I've been doing this for years.

When Nicholas rounds the car and takes his place on the driver's side, my skin burns with awareness. Those powerful thighs in the sports car are a little too close to mine. His scent surrounds me, solid and comforting.

When he turns to me and flashes a smile that is pure and genuine, I wish I could put that smile in a locket and have it with me forever. However, realizing how cheesy I sound in my head, I frown. Maybe this isn't a good

idea; these planned dates and meetings and parental partnership. I'm beginning to see Nicholas as more than just my child's father, and it scares the living daylights out of me.

"How are you feeling?" Nicholas asks.

I shrug.

"I feel absolutely normal. The most normal I can feel in this situation," I correct.

The changes in my body have become obvious. My stomach, for instance, has begun to have a gentle curve to it that I see every time I look at myself in the mirror. I don't know if anyone else has noticed. I guess I have because it's my body, and I've been observing it closely. My boobs have become sensitive, bigger, and more tender.

"You look good, Aubree. The changes have begun to become obvious."

"Maybe it's only because we have been observing keenly?"

"Or maybe our secret is about to be revealed."

Nicholas chuckles, but without mirth.

"We cannot keep the baby a secret for much longer."

"Do we have a plan yet?" I ask because I have missed my parents terribly. Not being able to tell them these things gives me the most gut-wrenching heartaches. I feel like I betrayed my Dad by sleeping with his best friend. And I've always wondered if he will ever forgive me.

"What plan?"

"The one where we divulge this news to my parents without risking having our heads blown off?"

"I don't think I'll ever be ready for that," Nicholas tells me, and if anything, I feel thankful for his honesty.

We both rasp into silence, each lost in our thoughts. And when we get to the

private hospital, Nicholas shuts the car off and turns to me. I watch him struggle to make physical contact, hands twitching as he moves them toward mine. I almost meet him halfway, but he loses courage and stops, and I feel my heart bleed a little. I don't know what is happening, but something is going on between me and Nicholas.

"I know that I have not been very forthcoming with you concerning my personal life-- my family."

His voice is low and tinged with pain, and I realize as I gaze at him that I hate to see Nicholas Stark in pain. I would absorb this despair and deeply seated sorrow I see swirling in the depths of his eyes in a heartbeat if I could

"It's hard for me to share these things. I might eventually get to, but not now. However, this baby means the whole world to me, and I don't ever want you to feel like I didn't even for a second want him or her."

"Oh, Nicholas..." I whisper because suddenly I realize that Nicholas wouldn't have had a great childhood.

I might not know the details, but the clearly displayed anguish in his eyes tells me all I need to know. So, this time, when I reach toward him, I don't stop halfway. I don't lose the courage. I allow my hands to brush against his stubbled jaw, feeling the tingles that travel down my arm at the contact we are having for the first time in months.

Nicholas doesn't look away from me, and those eyes that I have in the past gotten lost in dips to my mouth and I wet them.

"You're going to be a great father. Your past experiences will never determine that. You shook that off and made an empire of your company. If you can do it as CEO, then you can be an excellent father."

Nicholas swallows visibly.

"I don't know how you knew that I needed to hear that. But thank you."



“We are going to be good at this,” I tell him with a wide smile.

Nicholas begins to smile back. At this moment, with his eyes lit with joy and wrinkling at the edges, I realize that I might be falling in love with this stunning enigma. And when he leans forward, my breath catches, and my mouth falls open. I tilt my head and slant it to the side, but what I expect to land on my lips, in fact, lands on my forehead. But then, the feelings that rupture from my belly are the same. Butterflies, lots of them.

When I pop my eyes open, I find Nicholas already out of the car and opening my side for me. His chivalry does not go unnoticed by me, and if anything, it endears him even more, making me acutely aware that I might have already lost my heart to this man.

It'll seem that the staff here have been well trained because they do not even bat an eyelid when Nicholas and I walk through the door.

“Do you think one of them will snitch?” I whisper as I look at the residents and nurses moving in and out of rooms.

“Not unless they want this place to cease to exist,” Nicholas whispers back.

I chuckled, wondering if Dr. Janet Rodney, my gynecologist, had weeded the field before our arrival. It would seem that she had. It's not unheard of for her to do that to ensure secrecy. I would not be surprised if the entire staff had been made to sign an NDA for this visit.

Dr. Rodney, a beautiful blonde woman in her fifties, remains professional despite Nicholas's presence. After the physical examination, where she confirms that the baby is absolutely fine and she hasn't noticed any complications whatsoever, we get back to the office, where Nicholas waits, his crystal blue eyes glassy from worry.

“Is everything alright? The baby?” Nicholas asks, moving towards me to take my hands in his.

“Everything is fine,” I tell him with a beaming smile. We each take our seats, and the doctor, professional as usual, begins to ask questions.

“Have you been resting adequately?” She asks.

I hesitate, and Nicholas clears his throat.

When Dr. Rodney looks up, I squirm a little.

“I rest after work.”

“You should be resting more as you continue to progress on this journey.”

Nicholas turns to give me an ‘I told you so’ look.

“Even your boyfriend seems to agree, Miss Turner.”

My cheeks scald, and I look away from Dr. Rodney.

“Well, he’s not--”

“I’ll ensure she gets as much rest as she needs,” Nicholas cuts in smoothly, and Dr. Rodney gives him a satisfied smile and continues.

“Avoid raw meats, and of course, take your vitamin supplements.”

The meeting drags on because Nicholas suddenly develops a curious mind and wants to know about everything.

“Should she have someone with her at all times? Would it be a good decision if she moved in with me? When can we get an ultrasound to determine the sex of the baby? Is there anything else aside from the standard procedures for her due date that we should take note of?”

When the meeting eventually winds to a close, and we are walking towards the reception, I give him a mocking glare and go.

“Do you think we should organize a tie dye event for the baby? Should we get my private jet ready for any sudden complications if need be?” I say sarcastically.

“That’s very funny,” Nicholas says as he pushes the door open and guides me out with his hands in the middle of my back.

I suppress a shiver.

“It is. I was nearly certain we were going to sleep in that office today.”

“I like to be very thorough and well-prepared. Surely you must know that.”

“I do. But it’s fun to see you look a little bit uncertain. Makes you look more human.”

Nicholas gives me an incredulous stare.

“I’ve not been acting like one?”

“You run the biggest cosmetic company in over thirty-five countries. Of course, it’s okay to think that you might be neurodivergent.”

Nicholas chuckles, “You are hilarious.”

“I’m glad you think that. A nice trait for our kid to take after.”

“And my apparently big brain,” Nicholas mutters.

He grins as we buckle in, and I let out careless laughter.

“And your continent-sized ego, no doubt.” I’m shocked at how easy the energy between us is. How conversation flows smoothly. Nicholas and I are really going to nail this. I know it.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

### AUBREE

**F**our months have passed. Today, I had my ultrasound. I am excited because I found out that I was having a baby boy. During one of Nicholas' random visits to my office, we talked about the sex of the baby and joked about the names we would give depending on what sex it is. Nicholas had not made it explicitly clear, but I had gotten the notion that he wanted a boy. I was fine with whatever the baby turned out to be, and it would seem that Nicholas' secret wishes had been granted.

I think Nicholas and I have become more friends than acquaintances. I have learned a lot more about him these past couple of months than I've ever had since I began working for him three years ago. We have grown accustomed to each other enough to plan visits by ourselves and not through our assistants, which is why I invited Nicholas to dinner today. We had exchanged phone numbers a couple of months ago, and while Nicholas was a little too old school to chat, we had called each other a couple of times to confirm appointments and schedule official meetings.

My stomach has begun to make an appearance in tight dresses and blouses, which means that every morning, I go towards the section of my least

favorite dresses, roomy and a tad too comfortable. But it's a necessity, as we still have not come out publicly. I think fear has a lot to do with Nicholas, and his strong privacy preferences that border on secrecy.

We are afraid of what the public would say and the impact this news would have on the company. Not all bad publicity is good publicity, we both knew that and are avoiding word of this scandal getting out as much as we can.

Marissa has told me that I look a little too good in my present state and has explained how most of the junior staff have been awed by me. That notwithstanding, the truth is, I have been taking it easy.

I have added quite noticeably and in obvious places. My legs have also been fuller, and I have had to ditch stilettos for strappy heels.

I am currently in the kitchen, placing the food I ordered into plates. I couldn't be bothered to cook, and I know Nicholas wouldn't mind in the least.

It's nearly 7 p.m., and my pulse jumps from excitement. Nicholas had been busy these past couple of weeks, so we had not had time to meet privately like this, except for snatches of minutes in offices and run-ins in the hallway. So, when the doorbell sounds, my heart skips, and I find myself wiping my hands against my dress as I make my way to the door. And when I pull it open, I find Nicholas on the other side with a bottle of wine. My eyes widen at the sight, and I find myself reaching for it automatically.

"You brought wine," I grin as I step back for him to enter.

Nicholas steps into my home with a grin that is just as wide as mine.

"Look at the way you're holding that wine," Nicholas laughs.

I giggle, and I look down at the bottle of red. I have missed drinking wine, which was an evening ritual for me. When I had found out that I was pregnant, the first thing I did was empty my minibar. It was painful, holding each bottle and watching the liquid slide through the sink in my kitchen sink.

“I have missed this. And how did you know to get this particular brand? It’s one of my favorites.”

“You forget that I have had dinner with your family for years, and I have always brought my ears to that dinner with me.”

I laugh. Of course, Nicholas had picked up on my likes and dislikes at the meeting.

“Do I get to drink this for being a good girl for months now?” I ask Nicholas. His eyes darken, and he steps closer to me.

“You have been a good girl, right?” He speaks in a low tone that rolls through my body. His suit is hanging off one arm, and his suitcase in the other. He had come here straight from the office.

*Had he been as eager to see me as I have been?*

“Tell me,” Nicholas murmurs as he steps even closer, bringing his hands to my hair and sliding his fingers through my scalp.

*That feels so good.*

I could feel an answering reaction from deep in my belly, and I find myself trying to fight the arousal that quickly engulfs my body. I am almost weak from it.

“Answer me,” Nicholas demands, giving my hair a slight thug.

I moan.

“I have been a good girl. I had stopped drinking wine, eating scallops and sushi, and drinking coffee; just decaf, as you instructed.”

“That’s good. You have been a very good girl, Aubree, and you deserve to be rewarded,” Nicholas says in a low voice and then pushes my body against his.

My stomach, a firm, slight slope, brushes against his belt buckle, and I shiver. I tilt my face towards Nicholas, certain that if his lips do not meet mine right

now, I will combust.

Nicholas appears to be enjoying the state I'm currently in because even though he continues to hold me hostage against his body, he doesn't make a move to go further to kiss my waiting lips or brush his hands against my feverish skin.

"Nicholas," I whimper.

He chuckles low in his throat. And then he bends low to brush his lips against mine. His breath washes over my face, soft and minty. Those lips move to my jaw, and I throw my head back, wrapping one of my hands around him and holding him as close as my slightly enlarged stomach would allow. It's a miracle that I'm still able to hold the bottle of wine with one hand.

Nicholas moves his lips across my jaw and over my neck. I let out another moan, brushing my body even harder against his, trying to communicate my want to him. These past couple of weeks have been hell. My sexual urges have spiked, and I have struggled on several nights with out-of-the-blue arousals. And even though I sometimes give in and pleasure myself, my hands do not compare to Nicholas', neither his lips, his hard body, nor the heat he emanates.

I want Nicholas to take me to bed. I want him to fuck me so hard that my eyes roll to the back of my head. I want him with every fiber of my being.

"Nicholas, please."

"Your reward?" He mouths against the skin of my neck, and I feel my core swell. "Your reward," he begins to say as his hands slid down mine, gripping the bottle of wine in it. "Is this," He steps back smoothly, taking the bottle of red wine from me.

I blink up at him.

He grins.

Is he kidding right now?

“It’s nonalcoholic and won’t cause harm to you or the baby. I took my time to browse several options,” he explains.

I push my hands through my hair, trying to contain my arousal. My body is still stuck in that haze, and I wonder if pushing him down the floor and trying to have my way with him would land me in jail.

Nicholas chuckles as if he can read me like a book.

Having recovered a little, I begin to make my way to the dinner table, expecting Nicholas to follow. He does.

“I will be honest and say that I was expecting a different kind of reward,” I tell him as we settle into the chair. My arousal has emboldened me to say something that I ordinarily wouldn’t.

Nicholas smirks.

“I know that,”

“Well played, Nicholas Stark,” I mutter as I pass him the electric corkscrew.

Nicholas uncorks the wine and pours us each a glass, filling mine to the brim. We settle for a dinner of pasta with chorizo and chickpeas. We lapse into a comfortable silence as we both fill our stomachs.

“How did the doctor’s appointment go?” Nicholas asks.

“It went really well.”

I had not told him that I was going to get the ultrasound done. I intend for it to be a surprise. We talk about our day. Nicholas and I have never talked about work outside of work. It’s like an unspoken rule between us. But with the work conversation out of the way, I realize there’s very little we can talk about.

Talking about my parents makes Nicholas grimace. And so, I settle for telling him hilarious stories Marissa loves to tell me when I am in a prissy mood.



Like when she called the cops because she thought the used tampon in the trash meant someone had been murdered.

Nicholas chuckles at that.

“Do you have a fun childhood memory?” I ask him.

I want to know everything I care about Nicholas. I don't think there wasn't at least one moment in his childhood he was happy to share. But Nicholas' face goes hard, and he drops his spoon onto the plate with a clatter.

“I cannot talk about myself. I didn't come here to talk about my childhood with you.” Those dark blue eyes are now devoid of the earlier mirth.

“What is it about your past that makes you clamp up in this manner each time it is broached?” I ask, my voice higher than I had intended. “Nicholas, we are having a child together. Don't you think I deserve to know at least one fun memory you had as a child?”

“What good will it do? What happens when I tell you?” he asks.

I push away from the table.

“I cannot believe you right now,” I say, as I make my way toward the living room, Nicholas hot on my heels.

“We can have a nice dinner as parents without being nosy,” Nicholas spits.

“Trying to get to know the father of my child isn't being nosy!” I yell.

Nicholas whirls me around, his eyes spitting fire.

“Your need to get to know me is only fueled by curiosity as a result of your need to pick me apart. To demystify me. Admit it.”

My eyes are wide with disbelief. I cannot believe what I am hearing right now.

“I cannot believe you right now,” I whisper. “I thought we had made progress,” I take a step back as I chuckle without humor. “I even thought we were friends. I was wrong. Maybe this whole thing is--”

“Don’t you fucking say that,” Nicholas fumes as he takes another step toward me.

“This whole arrangement is wrong. And I want out!” I bark.

Nicholas snakes his hands around my waist.

“We are in this together. There’s no backing out. You are not a coward.”

“Then why are you proudly owning the title?”

“Because I don’t know how to tell you,” he whispers, his lips moving to my neck once more, biting and nipping.

I arch against him, wanting to get away from him and close to him at the same time. I am torn between pulling him close and pushing him away. I want Nicholas with my entire being. I want him to know that I am here, not to judge, but to listen.

As if he can read my thoughts, he mutters, “I can show you more than I can tell you.”

My hands wound around his neck, and I stand on tiptoe to kiss his cheeks, nuzzling my head against his neck and gasping when he turns his head and captured my lips in his.

“Then show me.”

## *Chapter Fifteen*

### AUBREE

**N**icholas kisses me hard, sliding his tongue into my mouth and stroking it against mine.

I feel weak at the knees as he continues to kiss me, each one more blazing than the last. His hands move to the small of my back, where he strokes down, cupping my ass in his hands and kneading slowly.

Even though Nicholas wants me to feel the evidence of his arousal, brushing his lower body against me as he turns me around, I sense how careful and tender he is.

Nicholas' hands wrap around my throat, and he squeezes softly while I pant hard.

"Nicholas, please," I beg, and then, he picks me up, bridal style, and moves towards my hallway.

"I didn't even give you a tour," I gasp.

Nicholas chuckles.

"That's not my favorite thing to do," he tells me as he bends low to slide his tongue down my slightly exposed cleavage. "This is my favorite thing to do."

“Oh my God,” I pant.

Nicholas is going to kill me.

I point him towards my room, and he kicks the door open, moving me towards the bed and depositing me slowly on it.

Nicholas remains there, hovering over me, taking me in.

“You’re like a literal dream, Aubree. So beautiful. So enchanting.”

I smile, grabbing him and wrapping my hands around him. My center burns hotter than ever, and the insistent throbbing at the apex of my thighs is getting impossible to ignore.

“Please, stop talking.”

Nicholas chuckles and bends low to capture my lips in his.

“So impatient,” he murmurs against my lips as he begins a slow descent, his lips traveling over my heaving chest and towards the valley of my breast.

The moment he uses the flat of his tongue against the valley between my bosom, I let out a low sob, rolling my hips into him and urging him to go faster, but Nicholas does not heed it. He takes his time touching me. He teases me through my clothes until tears of pleasure stream down the side of my face.

When Nicholas finally helps me out of my flowy gown, I’m wet enough to put out a fire in a blazing house.

“Fuck!” Nicholas moans the moment his hands comb through my soft curls.

“You’re completely drenched.”

“It’s all your fault,” I tell him, raising my hips and chasing friction.

Nicholas sits up quickly to shrug out of his clothes. He’s smooth, and within minutes, he’s down to his briefs and crawling back to me.

I sit up and take in the body I have dreamt about for several years. Nicholas looks even better than I had imagined, and for the first time this evening, I

feel a little conscious about the obvious changes in my body.

I don't realize that I have unconsciously begun to close my legs until Nicholas reaches out a hand to my knee, his gaze soft and full of concern.

"Are you alright?"

I give a slow nod, avoiding his eyes.

Nicholas sidles up against me and draws me into his arms. The feel of his body, hard and toned in all the right places and pressed against mine, causes me to let out a soft, helpless moan.

"Is there anything I've done you don't like?" he asks, fear evident in his tone.

I turn my head to meet his eyes, needing to assure him.

"It's not you. It's me," I confess with a slow shake of my head. "My body isn't as it was several months ago when we did this for the first time. Several very obvious changes weren't there."

Nicholas turns me around and gives me a slow kiss.

"You think I would be disappointed about the way your body has changed to accommodate a beautiful child we are more likely to grow up loving than anything else in the world?"

I gave him an embarrassed smile.

"Well, if you put it like that..."

"You know what? I am well aware that you're not perfect. I have been observing your body's changes. Want to know the truth?"

I give a nod.

"I want you now even more than I did the first time. I've been rock-hard since the moment I walked through the door of this penthouse and found you in that flowy gown, grinning up at me like I was Santa."

Nicholas takes my hands in his and moves them between us, past his washboard stomach and down the hard ridge of his sex. The moment my

hands close around his full pulsing length, a helpless moan rips out of my lips. He's unbearably warm and hard, and...

"Fuck, yes!" Nicholas groans, his head thrown back as I continue to move my hands up and down his full length.

He doesn't look away from me, allowing me to witness firsthand the plethora of emotions on his face. He's not in any way prudish and his openness fills me with glee and exhilaration.

"Do you want me to touch you, Aubree?" he asks.

"Yes. Oh yes, please," I tell him, parting my legs as wide as I can.

Nicholas gathers me in his arms, and when his hands begin to run over my body, kneading here and groping there, I realize that I am completely besotted with this man, who ensured that I felt comfortable being with him in this manner before proceeding. And if I scream harder than I ever have when he joins our bodies so that we become one, I don't give a damn.

When our orgasm crashes over us and Nicholas holds me as close as he can, I realize that whatever happens in the future, a part of my heart will always belong to him.

.....

Nicholas and I remain in each other's arms for several minutes; I don't realize how long, and I honestly do not care. He continues to hold me, his hand sliding up and down my back. His breathing, slow and steady against my ear.

"That was incredible," I whisper.

Nicholas gives a little grunt.

"It was," he tells me as he brushes my hair away from my face and kisses me soundly on the lips.

“You’re incredible.”

I smile shyly and cuddle even closer against him.

Nicholas’ hand slide down our bodies and the upper skin of my stomach. He’s hesitant at first, but I glide my hand down and move his hand even more firmly against my stomach.

“I am not made of glass. You can touch me.”

Nicholas looks at me, his face filled with awe.

“You’re so brave for doing this. You’re an icon.”

I giggle.

“Wait until you see what I have done for you,” I tell him.

“What?” He asks curiously but I carefully move to the edge of the bed and push open the drawer to show him a copy of the ultrasound the doctor had done.

At first, Nicholas is a little confused, but when he takes a closer look at the picture, his eyes widen, and he gaps at me.

“This is our baby,” he mouths in disbelief.

“Yes. It’s our baby boy.”

“A boy!” Nicholas roars.

I cackle when Nicholas tackles me to the bed, peppering my face with kisses. His excitement is contagious, and I find myself happier than ever.

“Can I keep this?” He asks when he rolls away from me.

I give him a nod.

“It’s yours now.”

Nicholas leans forward and gives me a slow, soft kiss. I know that something has changed between Nicholas and me, but I can’t quite pinpoint what, but something certainly has. I don’t know what will become of us when the baby arrives. I don’t know if Nicholas will get tired of me and move on to the next

shiny woman. But this moment, I know it's ours. At this moment, I claim Nicholas Stark as mine.

"I don't think my mother even bothered to have this printed," Nicholas whispers. He is hunched over, gazing at the picture in front of him.

I shift closer to him and drop a hand on his shoulder. This is the saddest version of him I've gotten to witness.

Nicholas looks withdrawn, and his eyes speak of insurmountable grief.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I don't think anyone celebrated when they got news of me. I don't think anyone took an ultrasound and decided they were excited to have me."

"Oh, Nicholas," I whisper, wrapping my arms around him and holding him as tight as possible.

For a moment, I wonder what it must have felt like to grow up not feeling wanted. And for the first time since Nicholas and I discovered we were going to be parents, I understand. I finally understand why he hates to talk about his childhood and why there has been no poignant news on the internet about his family.

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to," I assure him. I would hate him reliving those harsh memories by simply retelling his painful past.

"I do want to tell you. I need you to understand why I have always acted the way I do. I grew up with Dolores and Ephraim Stark." He starts. "They had a little son, whom they treated differently than they did me. I didn't understand why I got into fights with Ryan but ended up being the only one punished."

"At first, there was always an excuse flying around. I was older. I was supposed to know better and be wiser. But when we got older, the excuses, like their pretentious love for me petered out. Dolores, when she couldn't conceive, began to resent me. And then, one day, having discovered she had



lost a pregnancy they had kept a secret from me, Ryan revealed that I wasn't his real brother."

"I'd always known I wasn't loved the way Ryan was. But realizing that I was a foster child who wasn't wanted by his biological parents did a number on me."

Nicholas doesn't stop. It's as if something inside of him has been untapped, and the words just flow. I do not interrupt him, but neither do I walk away. My heart bleeds from the pain evident in his voice.

"The bullying began after that," he continues. "I was made fun of, and when I returned home, I'd be unable to tell anyone because I was only going to receive more tongue-lashing. Fortunately, Dolores and Ephraim tolerated me until I was eighteen. I'd worked hard enough to earn myself a scholarship. I was glad that had happened because Dolores and her husband would never have wanted to put me through school. And when I left their home, I didn't look back. They haven't called me to see how I've failed."

"And now?" I ask because I am shocked that there are people out there in the world who do not worship the very ground Nicholas works on. He's a famous billionaire in the country. There's no way his foster parents hadn't heard.

"And now, I am still not wanted," Nicholas manages a careless shrug that belies the raw pain in his eyes.

"You are. I have wanted you from the second I turned nineteen and saw you leaning against your black SUV outside my father's home. You are incredible and good-looking as hell."

Nicholas turns to me with a wan smile.

"I am glad you think so."

"I think half the entire world does," I tell him honestly. "Have you seen the Stan accounts teenagers have created for you on Twitter? You're like a

demigod or something.”

Nicholas chuckles.

“You think I’m Zeus?”

“Now’s not the time to be cocky,” I say as I push away from him and begin to crawl to the center of the bed. He’s begun to feel quite okay.

Nicholas crawls after me and wraps his hands around my waist, pulling it against his naked body, allowing my derriere to brush against his hard length. I gasp from the sudden arousal that surges in me. And then I let out a tight little scream because Nicholas has suddenly impaled me from behind, his fingers gripping my ass cheeks a little tightly. And for the next hour, my body remains under Nicholas’ command to do as he wishes, and when I experience my third orgasm of the night, sleep at last settles over me.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

### AUBREE

**T**he days pass in a blur, and it gets harder and harder for me to keep the pregnancy hidden. People begin to speculate, and I know that it will not be long before the news gets to my parents.

When Marissa, however, steps into the office on a Tuesday morning, her face devoid of color, I know that something has happened.

“What is it?” I ask, resisting the urge to get up from my seat. It has been a real chore to get in and out of seats. Nothing prepared me for this excessive fatigue and the constant urge to want to sleep.

“There’s bad news.”

“Please tell me,” I say in a low voice.

“Page six,” she spits, anger clouding her eyes.

“What about them?” I ask, my heart thudding hard with worry.

“Nicholas was papped leaving your apartment at 11 p.m. a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh, God,” I moan as I cover my face with my hands. This was really bad. It could easily be debunked. I needed to get in touch with Nicholas. But I

needed to speak with my parents first. They shouldn't find out through the internet.

"I didn't think it would be okay to bring a copy of the paper," Marissa says in a low tone. "I didn't think it was going to be worth it."

"Thank you, Marissa. I really appreciate it."

I dismiss Marissa and promptly go to my phone, where I dial the home line. Mother picks up after a short while.

"Hello, Aubree."

"Mother," I breathe, shutting my eyes hard at the sound of her voice. I had missed her terribly.

"I have missed you. It's been months, Aubree. Did your father and I say anything to upset you the last time you visited?"

I am eaten alive by guilt at the apparent pain in her voice.

"Mom, it isn't any of that. I am very sorry that I have not come for the monthly dinner for the past several months. I have just been buried in work."

I lie through my teeth, feeling like a red little devil right after.

"With how hard you have been working, don't you think you deserve some time off?"

"I very well do. I would be leaving early today because I would like to catch dinner with you and Father," I tell her.

"Oh. That's nice. I would really love to see you. I have missed you dearly."

"I have missed you and Dad so much," I confess truthfully.

When we get off the phone, I feel lighter. I didn't realize how heavy carrying this secret around had been. But with the decision to tell my parents, I feel lighter than I have in months.

I get off work early, and I'm a little sad when I realize that Nicholas hasn't popped in to say hello as always. He had made a habit of it, and I had been

looking forward to seeing him.

I do not call him, even though I am tempted to. I am a little afraid that he will talk me out of telling my parents, which would turn out to be even messier in the end. I cannot afford to not let my parents know. They have to.

And with that thought firmly in mind, I make my way to my father's house, mentally preparing for whatever the night will become.



As soon as I park my car in the garage, Mom steps out from behind the door and moves towards my car, hands folded, face creased in worry. Getting out of the car requires several grunts and huffing and puffing. But I do make it out, and with my heart thumping wildly in my chest, I make my way toward my mother, whose mouth has dropped open in shock.

For a second, my steps falter, and I look into her eyes, trying to read the emotions displayed in their depth. There's shock, hurt, and love. No disgust or hatred. I watch my mother's gaze run over my body, and I wait, knowing that I must leave this step for her to take.

And Mom, after several minutes of perusing my body without saying anything, begins to make her way toward me.

"You're pregnant?" she asks, her voice an unbelievable whisper, her eyes wider than saucers as they continue to move between my eyes and stomach.

"Yes," I tell her as things begin to feel a little awkward. We are standing in the garage, which smells faintly of leather, having this conversation that feels a little bizarre.

"Oh, my God," she whispers as she takes another step towards me, her hands moving towards me but stopping halfway.

I give a little laugh as my heart clenches.

“I’m sorry I kept this from you. I couldn’t bear the thought of how much I had disappointed you and Dad.”

“Oh, darling...” Mother breathes, and this time she does wrap me in her arms, hugging me as tightly as possible.

Even though I feel a little painful twitch, I don’t let go but hold onto the sweet-smelling woman for several minutes, for as long as she wants. And when she finally steps back, eyes filled with tears, she gives a watery smile.

“Your Dad and I would never judge you for wanting this.”

“It’s not exactly like it’s something I had wanted,” I quickly correct because, even though the presence of this one had brought such great joy, its arrival had been quite unexpected and unplanned.

“Oh...” Mother says as if suddenly concluding. “Well, that’s still, um, great, Honey.”

I flash her a wan smile as we begin to make our way toward the adjoining door. And when we step into the living room, Father’s eyes, already lit with mirth, morph into those of shock.

“Bree?” he asks as if to be sure that it is me in the flesh.

I shift from one foot to the other, squeezing my mother’s hands that she had placed in mine.

“Your one and only,” I manage a reply. Hoping that the tension that is creeping out of nowhere melts into nothing.

“I didn’t believe the rumors,” Father mutters as he drops a magazine he had been reading onto one of the chairs.

I swallow hard. I should have known that the news would reach my parents, and that I wouldn’t be able to keep the pregnancy a secret forever, not when I had continued to go to work and remain in the public eye.

“It happened,” I finally say when I feel a little suffocated by the silence.

“Well, congratulations,” Father says as he gets up and begins to move toward me. “If this is what you wanted.”

Even though my parents were a little bit of a traditionalist, I am glad that they’re taking this news in stride and trying not to look and sound as disappointed as possible.

“It had not been planned. But as soon as it happened, I knew that I wanted to keep the baby.”

Father looks at me a little aghast but says nothing for what appears to be years. We sit in silence for some time until Father breaks the silence by declaring, “Well, we’d better have dinner so you can tell us all about this boyfriend of yours we know nothing about.”

A chill moves up my spine, and I follow my parents to the dining room. The table is half filled with comprised of many dishes of all sorts, with fruits halved to perfection. I briefly wonder if my parents expected more guests; but seeing as we have been behaving a bit like strangers, I do not ask them. We make ourselves comfortable, with Mom beside me as always, and begin to dig in.

The meal is tasty as always, and I compliment Mom for her good supervision. We carry on with eating; the table is eerily quiet. I watch my father out of the corner of my eyes, noting the way he swallows each spoonful of food and the way he pauses mid-chew to glance my way. I look away very quickly and act very interested in my bowl of green salad. But when he clears his throat, I mentally prepare myself for what’s to come.

“So, this young man,” Father begins. “You both dated?”

I grimace as I recall our first time in Nicholas’ office. Even though we had been well acquainted, we hadn’t even dated. Could I even say that we were even now? Yes, Nicholas had shown so much care and dedication these past

couple of months and had been rumored not to be seen with women, but neither of us had said those magical words. So, could I say that we were actually dating?

“I can’t say we had been out rightly dating,” I began to say, swallowing the last of the lettuce in my mouth. “What had happened had not been planned.”

Now, Father drops his spoon and faces me squarely, and I squirm in my seat because I know that he’s done beating around the bush.

“So, this has been what your millennials call a one-night stand?”

Could I call it that? After all that Nicholas had shared and the bond that had subtly begun to grow between us.

“I don’t know if that’s what it was,” I say.

This time, it’s my mother who arches one perfectly shaped eyebrow at me.

“You mean it happened more than once?”

“Yes. And we both agreed to co-parent,” I add so it sounds less like I completely had my head ripped off my shoulder.

Mother blinks at me and then turns back to her meal, looking completely befuddled.

“This is really a lot to take in,” she admits, and I don’t know whether to appreciate their honesty or feel completely stung by it.

“Would you at least introduce us to this man?” Father asks, all pretense of eating is completely abandoned.

“I will, of course,” I say, guilt trapping me in its claws.

“Well, I guess the blessing in all this is that I get to become a grandmother.”

I grin at my mother’s words.

“You and Father will be grandparents to a cute little boy.”

Mother’s eyes widen, and she smiles widely.

“You went for an ultrasound?”



“A couple of weeks ago,” I nod as we get up and begin to move toward the living room.

Father is silent and looks like he is trying hard not to show his disappointment. I feel a little pang, but do not fault him because I know this is all my fault. I can only hope that he comes around.

Mother and I settle on the sofa, and I do so with a little grunt.

“Buckle up, it’s going to get worse from here,” Mother says with another grin.

I roll my eyes.

“I am just about ready to push this child out of me. Carrying our weight around is exhausting.”

“I know. A first pregnancy is never easy,” Mother says, her voice is going a little quiet. “But I hear the second pregnancy is always easier. I can’t boldly state that it is.”

I drop my hands onto my mother’s soft ones and give her a little squeeze.

Mother had only had me, which means that she had not gotten to experience a second or third pregnancy. And at this moment, I know that Mother has maybe always secretly wanted another child. Being in her mid-forties, I wonder if she is still actively trying to conceive. But I don’t ask her. And then, I am thinking about Nicholas and how we could take this co-parenting to the next level by deciding to have more kids together.

I can’t help but feel a little silly at such thoughts. I chuckle to myself.

“What’s funny?” Mother asks.

I take a deep breath as I prepare to say them. After all, wasn’t that why I had come? To come clean and have them know everything that has occurred before they find out from the media?

“I was just thinking about how the father of my child, and I could decide to

make more babies but be nothing more than co-parents.”

“That’s insane, and I would greatly advise against it.”

I let out another chuckle, a self-deprecating one this time. I then go ahead to reveal that we agreed to co-parent immediately after knowing the baby is on the way. There is silence as my parents continue to gaze at me as if they know that something is going on, something that I am not letting up on. And I can tell that it is now or never. I try to look them both in the eyes without cowering.

“I think it’s important that you know who the father of this child is.”

Mother shifts to the edge of her seat as her gaze, filled with fear and trepidation, do not waver from mine. On the other hand, Father’s look is intense, and it’s a little difficult for me to read the emotions in his eyes.

“Go ahead,” Mother says.

When I lower my eyes to her rounded neck that holds a beautiful gold chain, I swear that I can see her pulse visibly thud.

“Promise that you will not freak out?” I ask as I look between them.

Mother shakes her head at me as she looks helplessly toward Father as if to ask, “Will we?” And when she returns her gaze to me, she says in a voice laced with determination. “We won’t.”

“Nicholas,” I say simply. And as my father’s eyes, which had at first been widened by shock, began to darken in what can only be described as rage, I struggle to remain in my seat.

“Nicholas what?” Father asks, his hazel eyes darkening to a frightening brown.

I gulp hard as I begin to explain.

“We had a moment in the office. Like I mentioned earlier, it wasn’t planned.”

Father gets up, and in the blink of an eye, he’s across the room and reaching

for the telephone. I get up more quickly than I have in weeks and hurry toward him.

“Dad, don’t do that. Don’t call Nicholas. I’ve explained that we had a moment. Emphasis on ‘we’. Nothing about our interlude was forced. I wasn’t even mildly drunk.”

“But he took advantage of you!” Father roared, his eyes spitting fire. “He was supposed to protect you.”

“I don’t need protecting! At least not from him!” I scream, my throat burning, while I continue to gaze at my father, who drops the telephone onto its cradle and begins to move away.

Mother was now standing at the side. I wonder why she hasn’t even approached either of us. Was she afraid that trying to comfort anyone of us was going to show that she was picking sides? I move away without glancing away, but I wish a little that she would come to me, that she would support me.

“I cannot believe that my own best friend will betray me like this,” Father mutters as he begins to move away.

“Nicholas didn’t betray you, Father. As I said, He and I would learn to be good parents, and I might even be falling in love with him, and I’m nearly certain that he feels the same way.”

“Right,” Father intones in a mocking tone of voice. “Suddenly, you are forgetting that the reason you have always despised him in the past is his strange love for women.”

“Nicholas hasn’t taken anyone to bed since we became an item.”

“And you know this how?” Father asks as he turns to pin me with a lethal stare.

“I just know,” I say as I give a little shrug.

I know that I am currently grasping at straws, but I cannot help myself.

Father looks resolutely disappointed as he says, “I shudder to think that you would assume Nicholas to be a good choice.”

“Nicholas really might be. You only have to give him the benefit of doubt,” I tell Father, who resumes his walk out of the living room. I don’t go after him either, but I stare at his retreating back, feeling a little sad at the realization that Father’s relationship with Nicholas might never be the same again.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### NICHOLAS

“**A**re you there, Nick?” Janet, my Public Relation Officer, asks on the phone.

“I am here,” I say to Janet, whose light breathing filters in through the speakers.

“You are currently in the news, and it isn’t looking very good. Just hours after you had been papped leaving Aubree’s apartment, another report of her pregnancy began to circulate, and so did the speculation.”

Janet explained all her office had done to keep it below the surface, but I still felt like it was spreading more than it should. I was worried about my reputation and the public image of my company.

“What else do you think I should do now?” I ask Janet, who seems a little worried for the first time.

I know how delicate a situation this is and how easy it could be to protect my company and reputation but end up losing the only person who has become more important than these two things.

“You just have to stay away from Aubree until this is sorted.”

“I don’t think staying away from her would make this go away,” I say

because I cannot imagine going long periods without seeing Aubree, knowing deep inside that this might be a trying time for her too.

“It won’t get better. The media will jump on this and extract layers upon layers with which to feed the information-hungry public. We can’t give them something to talk about, at least not in that regard.”

“I don’t think I want to stay away from Aubree for that long,” I tell Janet the truth. “I cannot imagine even doing so, not when she needs me now more than ever.”

Janet takes a deep breath.

“We will have to figure something out,” she finally says, and I give a relieved sigh.

When we say our goodbyes, I drop the phone onto its cradle and lean back against my seat, my eyes unblinking and unfocused as I think about the phone call I had received from David. He had sounded really betrayed, and I wish more than anything that I had not ruined our friendship in that manner.

When a knock sounds on my door, I sit up quickly and call them in. The door opens, and the moment my eyes land on those enchanting blues, my heart skips, and I stomp down the sudden urge to get up and move toward her. Aubree’s eyes on mine are filled with longing, and for a moment, I allow myself to think that maybe she wants the same thing I do too. Knowing that it wouldn’t do any good to think along those lines, I make a valiant effort to redirect my thoughts.

Aubree drops onto my chair with a sigh, and as she uses her hand to rub her eyes slowly, I take her in, noting the dark circles underneath her eyes and the tired set of her shoulders.

“Are you alright?” I implore, my heart clenching with worry.

“I should be,” she says in a tired tone of voice. “But I’m not. Have you heard

the news?”

I lean back against my chair. Of course, Aubree had also gotten wind of the news.

“My publicist has recently informed me.”

The room goes silent again, and I find my eyes veering back to Aubree’s stomach. I wonder why I am feeling this intense urge to pet her stomach and assure myself that everything will be alright.

“And my father?” she questions, her eyes snapping open to meet mine. “Has he called?”

I shake my head as I try to figure out where this is going without asking.

*Had she informed her parents of the situation? Or they figured out through the news?*

Aubree shakes her head as she looks out the window.

“I informed my parents about the pregnancy.”

My stomach bottoms out, and I suddenly understand why she needed to know if her father had called. She had also told them that it was I who was responsible.

I shut my eyes tightly and tried not to think about what David said on the phone about me or what he currently thought of me.

“We cannot do this,” I say without meeting Aubree’s eyes.

“Why not?” she questions. “Father understands that we are quite fond of each other and have taken due responsibility. I have told them that you didn’t force me or take advantage of me.”

There’s a pause as her breathing becomes a little louder and fills the room.

“None of that was a lie,” she continues. “I have wanted you for as long as I can remember, and weird as this might sound, I don’t regret our time together.”

“But I do,” I say, and then I watch Aubree flinch like I have just delivered a mean sucker punch. “And only because I feel like I betrayed your father, my friend.”

“He will come around,” Aubree says. “I believe he will.”

Aubree’s eyes are wide and pleading. I get up quickly and move to the window.

“Even if he did, there’s still so much at stake here, Aubree. You have your career to think about. Even if I did manage to get my company out of this current mess, I hate to think that you would be left alone to wallow in it.”

“This pregnancy isn’t a mess,” Aubree says behind me. Her voice is firm, with a slight tone that causes me to stand straighter, but I know better than to turn toward her.

To look into her eyes right now would mean to ditch the plans my publicist and I have tried to put together. To turn towards her would mean approaching this situation less logically than I should.

I shake my head when I realize how deep I already am in this. I prided myself on always having my wits about me and never having a weakness. But for the first time, I witness myself totter, feeling conflicted, scared, and unsure.

“I am trying to protect you from the backlash,” I tell Aubree. “This might get ugly, and I want you to be mentioned less and less in the articles that might begin to appear soon. I have had bad publicity a couple of times in my career, but you’re just too young for that, and I hate that it would happen to you too.”

When the chair scratches on the floor as Aubree gets up, the scent of her perfume wafts into my nostrils as she begins to make her way towards me. I tense up, but Aubree does not touch her body to mine, nor does she drop a hand on my shoulder like I’m almost afraid she would.

“Are you sure that this is all because you want to protect me? Do you



honestly want me to believe that?”

“You should,” I say as I turn myself around, taking in Aubree’s troubled eyes and her luscious lips. I close my eyes and take a sharp breath.

“You should know that I don’t need any protection. My reputation can take a hit, but I’ll survive, and so will my career. But my heart, on the other hand…” she says in a tone that has suddenly gone low. “I don’t think I can handle going back to how things were.”

“If we continue on this path, ignoring all the warning signs and impending self-sabotage, I risk losing more than you will ever know. Maybe this is where I get a little selfish for both our sakes and stand my ground.”

Aubree shakes her head as she takes a step back, taking that enticing scent with her.

“You have always been stubborn.”

“And so have you,” I say.

“So, what are we now?” She asks as she looks around my office as if trying to burn this scene into her memory forever.

“Friends?” I reply.

And then I watch Aubree scoff as she begins to make her way to the door. When she slips out of it with a lot less grace than she has in the past, I allow my shoulders slump and struggle not to slide to the ground from the current ache that sears through me because I can suddenly tell that there’s no way we’re getting out of this without losing something extremely valuable.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

### AUBREE

**F**ather and Mother have been keeping close tabs on me. And with all the wild speculation going around, they're doing all they can to protect me, not like I even would need them to. But I know it gives them a sense of fulfilling parental duties to shield me with their attempts of protection.

"You have to stay away from Nicholas. Come stay with us. Your old room is still as you left it," Mother says on the phone as if her suggestion is the most reasonable thing ever.

I chuckle low in my throat.

Even though Nicholas seemed to have become withdrawn at the first sign of trouble, I am not going to stop working because of the speculations. I will not stop going about my business just because people are trying to get all up in them.

"You know that will not happen, Mom."

Mother gives a defeated sigh.

"I was hoping that you would at least consider it."

"I really am considering it," I say in a tone of voice that reveals the fact that I am not.

“Will you at least visit again?” Mother questions. “There’s something your father and I would like to discuss with you,” she sounds a little sad, and I sit up quickly.

“I can come today,” I tell her.

“Good. We shall tell the chef to plate a third dish.”

“Sounds good.”

I say goodbye and hang up. And just then, someone gives a light knock and walks into the room.

Marissa has been more helpful than I thought possible. She has made sure to get the media’s attention off me as much as possible. Yesterday, she entertained a reporter with evasive answers while I made my great escape from the building. And, of course, she has not only tried to protect me physically but has continued to suggest ways she thinks I could make my life easier, like hiring a publicist, just like Nicholas did.

“Good afternoon, Aubree,” Marissa greets. When I look up, my breath drops from my hands at the obvious slight jutting of her stomach in what appears to be a maternity gown!?

I look Marissa up and down and then back up again. And when she continues to gaze back at me, face as serious as ever, I look away from her and ask.

“What’s going on? Is that a fake baby bump?”

Marissa gives a nod as she mimics the way I grunt before settling into a chair. When she is done with her little class act, I roll my eyes.

“Very funny.”

“I think it is too. But the reporter rightly doesn’t share such sentiments.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Trying to get the attention off of you,” Marissa says with a shrug as if it’s the most normal thing in the world.

I am a little curious to know why she would go to such great lengths.

“Because you have so much hustle and bustle going on right now. You need this rest from the paparazzi.”

“Now I’m wondering what I would do without you,” I say, feeling more indebted to the young woman than ever.

“You could start by telling me how much you love me.”

“I would need to be really high on sedatives for that to happen,” I tell her as I turn the page of the file I’m perusing.

Marissa does not move but continues to sit here and burn a hole in my skull.

“Is there something else you have done? Should I mentally prepare myself for the next bombshell?”

“There would be no need for that,” Marissa tells me as my gaze finally meets hers. “I was only wondering why you haven’t gotten a public relations manager at this point.”

“I don’t think I am big enough for one.”

“The past couple of weeks have in fact proven those words wrong,” Marissa points out. “You have been in the news these past few days more than Obama, and that’s saying something.”

“I wish it was even about something I would have been proud of.”

“Exactly the reason you need a public relations manager more than ever. We need the influx of recent news controlled.”

“I don’t think I would appreciate being completely vulnerable with a manager and opening up certain facets of my life to them,” I tell Marissa truthfully.

“I was just thinking how that would help,” she responds. “but I guess I will continue to do this.”

“They won’t be interested forever. Eventually, they’ll find out the truth. I appreciate all you’ve done for me, Marissa. I wouldn’t want your spotless

glass window to be stained all because of me. So, I'd suggest you learn a little from this. I can protect myself."

Marissa gazes at me and then gets up, this time without the grunts and exaggeratedly harsh breathing.

"I hope you know that sometimes it's okay to need help and to accept it too. There's so much strength that lies in the ability to do so."

And with that, she makes her way out the door.

•••••

When I arrive at my parents' house, no one waits for me in the garage. I park my car and make my way into the house, where I could find my way around with my eyes closed. And when I find my parents on the living room couch, I am hit with a sense of Déjà vu and struggle not to feel weird about the way they both sit, their faces registering neither pleasure nor pain.

"Aubree," Mother says in greeting. I move towards her, bending to her level in my heels to hug her.

My tall stilettos are the only things I have refused to give up, even though my gynecologist has pointed out that I would feel a tad more comfortable in more sensible shoes. It's one of the things that has always boosted my confidence, and I refuse to heed the doctor's slight warning about them.

I let go of Mother and moved towards one of the couches to make myself comfortable on it. I don't move toward Father. He had shown the most rage when I revealed news of Nicholas and me. I don't think he would appreciate a hug as much today. And to be honest, I wouldn't enjoy giving one either.

"How are you?" Mother asks, and I smile at her as my hands move to my baby bump. It's something I have found myself doing over and over,

touching my hands to my stomach, and feeling grounded by the evidenced presence of my child's life.

Despite everything that has happened, the life I currently carry inside of me has become some sort of anchor and has fed my courage and determination more than ever.

"We are okay," I tell her, watching as a smile begins to form on her lips.

"There's something very important that you must know," Father begins without a preamble. I turn towards him.

Father, a few years older than Nicholas, looks every bit like his age; with a belly that has begun to hang out of his belted pants and copper-colored hair that has begun to thin. His eyes, with brows that match the color of his hair, narrow towards me, and I try not to roll mine from exasperation.

"What is it, Father?" I question.

"Nicholas isn't the kind of man you've pegged him out to be. Aside from the way he has betrayed me, Nicholas doesn't see women as keepers. You're no different. You might think you know him, but he only allows you a fleeting glance to see certain aspects of himself that he wishes to let you see."

I shake my head at my father because I know in my gut that he's wrong. He's wrong about the man who had opened about his childhood and had allowed me to see into his past and how it continued to haunt him.

"You're wrong," I tell my father. "Nicholas might be a Casanova, but I don't think you know anything about him or why he has continued to act that way. You don't know about the silent battles he's fought or who he truly is. I do, I love the man. I have seen past the facade he has used to deceive the public."

For the first time, my father looks at me like I have suddenly become a sudden disappointment.

"What has gotten into you?" he asks. "You were never like this."

*Love happened.*

I almost say, but I don't. Instead, I get up without a grunt and begin to sprint as fast as my current weight would allow me toward the door.

"You have to think with your head," my father calls after me. "Sometimes, love isn't enough."

I don't glance back at them but continue to make my way to the car, where I quickly buckle myself in and take deep, calming breaths. It helps, and I become relatively calm, at least enough to drive home without risking any crashes. Playing my favorite music to try to clear my head, I struggle not to think about the conversation I'd had with my father.

Mother had been oddly silent, a bold proof that she had been on her husband's side. I shake my head as I recall the comment about Nicholas. Father knew next to nothing about the man. They might be friends, but it is more than obvious that Nicholas has never shared certain aspects of his life with him.

I shut my eyes as I recalled the last conversation I'd had with Nicholas and his insistence on pure friendship. Even though I had decided to indulge him, it had only been because I knew how afraid he was; I had seen that fear in his eyes and known that he wasn't being rational in his decision to end any romantic relationship between us.

I drive as slowly as possible, so a journey that would have taken twenty minutes takes thirty. And when I get to my penthouse, I park my car and make my way upstairs. Marissa had informed me through text minutes earlier that she had been trailed by the paparazzi. It had been funny and had also made me realize that maybe her theory was correct. The attention had been shifted towards her, and I was allowed moments of peace where I got in and out of my apartment without hassle.

I light my favorite scented candle in my room and take my time to slide the gown I had chosen to wear down my body. As I do so, I can't help but conjure up the image of Nicholas with those blazing eyes that always manage to make me weak in the knees. I pull my hair into a low bun and slide naked beneath the covers. The growing bump makes sleep difficult because it always makes me feel a little hot, even in freezing temperatures.

My mind goes to Nicholas once more and everything he has been through. His last words were about staying friends only. I had thought he had been encouraged, I promised him that the paparazzi would never find out more than what I wanted them to and I was always going to stand by my words.

When my cell phone rings, I give a little groan of frustration but crawl to the dresser and pick it up, a frown creasing my features when I realize that it is in fact my parents.

"Dad?" I ask as I remain in a kneeling position on my bed.

"There's something that might interest you," he says. My pulse jumps.

"What?"

"I'm going to send them straight to your email now," he tells me. When I'm about to disconnect, my father's voice filters in again through the speaker.

"When you see what I want you to, I hope that you don't panic. I want you to understand that these things happen, and your mother and I are never wrong."

I give a nod as we disconnect, and I go straight to my mail, my hands shaking slightly as I click on the new pop-up. The sight that greets my eyes causes my breath to leave me as if someone has completely knocked the wind out of me. I stare in disbelief at the pictures of Nicholas in the arms of a strange woman. It's the sort of picture that should never have made it out of Nicholas' private bedroom.

My heart aches, and I drop my phone to the side as I sink into my bed, tears



clouding my eyes. I don't let them fall, but rather I slip beneath the covers. This time, it feels different. Everything suddenly does. I vaguely hear my phone ring, but this time I don't have the wherewithal to answer.

My eyes remain closed as I struggle to keep the tears at bay. My parents had been right. Why had I ever thought that Nicholas could change? That the presence of this baby in his life, and, of course, what we had to pass through could alter certain things. Why had I even thought that I was that impressive enough to cause that big of a change in his life?

Despite the strong sense of betrayal I feel, I cannot help but assume everything to be my fate. I'd had too much trust in him and had defended him a little too strongly to my parents. I think about the conversation in his office again, a tear slips out this time because suddenly, the photos that had just been sent explained why he had been so insistent on ending this thing between us.

I cry softly into my pillow. I cry for the person I thought Nicholas had been and the painful journey I know I am about to take. Suddenly, it becomes clear how much I have fallen for Nicholas and what he means to me.

Indeed, I have the realization that whatever I see of Nicholas and hear about him will never stop me from loving him. But burying these feelings is what must happen because I must go on in life without thinking of him as the man of my dreams or wondering if one thing had been different, how everything later would have been.

When I pick up my phone again, it's only to text Marissa to get us the first ticket out of Washington because suddenly I know that I want to get away from everything. I know that I need to clear my head and think about the way forward. Knowing that this new way might include never being with

Nicholas, the way I have begun to dream about him, causes pain to slither through me.

It's a miracle that I don't spend the entire night sobbing into my pillow, even though that's the only thing I wish to do. Realizing that I would need to go into the office to tell Nicholas about my sudden need for a vacation fills me with dread. At this point, I would do anything to avoid any form of confrontation with the man.

I am a restless mess the entire night, and when the morning finally comes, I rouse earlier than usual and get my things ready. I don't pack a lot of things, just lingerie, socks, scarves, and beach wear. I am going to be doing a lot of relaxation and less thinking. I do get into my office attire, a shirred print linen Lodi dress that falls below my knees. Today, I dress not for fashion but for comfort. It occurs to me as I slip my sunglasses on, it's a little easier for me to be mistaken for just about anyone else.

I get into the office, my strides long and purposeful, as soon as I push my office door, Marissa pounces.

"Are we really going to Greece?" she questions.

I can tell that she is more than excited but is trying to stifle it. Even though I'm in no mood to indulge her antics this morning, I still give a low chuckle.

"That's what my text read, Marissa. Good morning. Get me my cup of coffee and a fruit bowl for breakfast, please."

"Your coffee is waiting on the table. I had a feeling that you would be in the mood for a scrambled egg-filled tofu and thought to get you one," she says. When I turn to give her a mild glare, she turns quickly around and begins to make her way toward the door. "But I'm going to go back right now to order what you are truly in the mood for."

"You do that," I say as I get in front of my chair.

As soon as I settle on the chair, I pick up my cup of decaf and take a slow sip. Despite how badly off we had started, I can boldly say that I have begun to get quite acquainted with the drink, and my taste buds no longer want to retch the damn thing out as soon as it slides down my throat.

When a light knock sounds on my door, my heart gives a start, but I will it to stop as I try to convince myself that it's Marissa who has returned less than three minutes later with my breakfast. But, in fact, Nicholas is the one who walks through the door when I call him in.

I try to calm my racing mind as I take in the sight of him in his black suit. He looks like he'd recently had his hair cut, and the white lock that had often dropped across his head now appears to be slicked with the rest all the way back. With his jaw as prominent as ever, Nicholas is the perfect picture of disgustingly handsome.

"Good morning, Aubree," he strolls further into the room as his eyes, keen as ever, scan my decor.

"Good morning, Nicholas."

I try not to feel conscious of his presence and wish more than ever that the drink in my hand was heavily caffeinated.

When those eyes that haven't, in the last couple of days, become less enchanting look into mine, I drop my gaze onto the table because when my eyes meet those of Nicholas, it becomes unnervingly easy for me to forget that this is the man who will never shed old skin. A man whose habits die hard.

"How are you?" he asks.

"I'm alright. Thank you for asking," I mutter.

When Nicholas moves close enough to the chair opposite my desk for me to catch the woodsy scent of his cologne, my heart begins to thud, and suddenly,

I hate that he had dropped by my office so unexpectedly like this. I needed time to gather my thoughts and confront him on my terms.

“Your father called me,” Nicholas sighs in a low tone of voice as he finally settles on the chair opposite mine. Seeing him fold himself into the slightly smaller chair is a little distracting. There’s an obvious pain in his eyes that becomes a little bit of a struggle to ignore.

“He knows everything.” I shrug. My eyes have been averted from his, and even though I stare unseeingly at the file on my desk, I can tell that Nicholas hasn’t looked away from me.

“I guess everything is out in the open now.”

“Everything really is,” I say. “I know that you haven’t stopped seeing your harem of women, and I hate that I even began to entertain the notion that you’d let go of such an old habit.”

This time, Nicholas frowns as he continues to gaze at me.

“What do you even mean?”

“I know about your continued involvement with women, Nicholas.”

I drop my gaze onto the table as I wonder if I even have the right to be mad at him. What right do I even have to feel as betrayed as I do?

“I don’t understand what you are getting at,” Nicholas says with a frown, down turning his lips. He looks tensed up now and just about ready to bolt out of his chair.

“After that evening at my apartment,” I watched as the memories of that evening flickered awake, “I had thought that things would be different. I didn’t think that you and I had only made love. I had been convinced that what we had shared that night had been more than that, and I had also assumed that...” I shake my head as I feel conflicted.

“What’s this all about? What brought this on?” he asks. This time he does get

out of the chair and looks like he's struggling to not pace the length of the room.

"You brought this on," I say as I get out of the chair with more grace than I had thought possible. Maybe it's the current anger that continues to sear through me, making me almost blind to everything except Nicholas in the room.

"You're being delusional if you think that I have been with other women after you."

"Then explain this," I say, grabbing my phone off the table and flipping to the message with the pictures. I shoved my screen at his face. "Explain why you were with this woman."

Nicholas becomes instantly quiet as he gazes at the picture and then back at me. His expression registers nothing but shock.

"How did you get this photos?" he questions.

"Does it even matter?"

"The fact that my privacy has been breached sure does!" Nicholas roars.

Even though he looks like he's just about ready to murder - face beet red, hands trembling with what appears to be rage - I realize that I am not afraid of him.

"I was thinking that this could work," I begin to say. The tears that I have been trying to hold back sliding down one cheek. "I have loved you for a long time, I think longer than even I know. Guess what. You just had to go ahead and ruin everything, didn't you?"

"You know nothing about what transpired between that woman and me. And it's quite despicable that you would assume and believe what anyone said."

"This picture says enough," I fire back, as I take one final glance at the image on my screen where Nicholas is holding a curvy woman loosely in his arms

with his shirt half unbuttoned. “While you are here, I would like to mention that I am going on a short vacation to clear my head.”

“You can’t just leave,” Nicholas tells me, his eyes wild and desperate. “You need to be looked after now more than ever. I don’t care what you think I have done, I can’t allow you. I refuse to approve it.”

“To request a leave that is well within my rights?” I ask, one eyebrow perfectly arched. “I have saved more than 2 months of paid leave, and I want to use it now.”

Nicholas closes his eyes.

“I want you here only because I care about you,” he tells me in a low voice. I chuckle bitterly.

“You have a funny way of showing that.”

“Aubree, I’m imploring that you stay here in Washington because of the baby. You can’t just go charging off on your own.”

“I am perfectly capable of looking after myself and this pregnancy. My gynecologist and I will still be in communication. That’s what technology is for.”

With a resigned sigh, Nicholas gets up and makes his way toward the door. He turns at the door to mutter as if his last words will somehow deter me.

“I hope you know what you are doing.”

“I have always been very intentional about every single decision, Mr. Stark,” I say as I drop my gaze back to the file on my desk. My heart breaks when Nicholas wordlessly lets himself out.

Even though I feel that I was a little too harsh, a part of me still feels like he is deserving of it for the current heartache he is putting me through.

As Marissa makes her way into the office again, her face is a mixture of care and curiosity.

I get out of my seat and say, “Get your things ready. Our flight leaves in five hours.”

## *Chapter Nineteen*

### NICHOLAS

I am not sure I have ever in all my life been this distracted. I have been staring at a wall for the past hour. Nothing has made sense, not since I pushed the door to Aubree's office open to find her looking at me with a degree of loathing that had almost stopped me in my tracks. I had wondered what the matter was, and in trying to get to the bottom of it, I realized that my privacy had been breached and several pictures of myself taken with Lilibeth. Lilibeth had once been really special to me. She had not only always given me the sort of satisfaction that I craved but had tried to get me out of my shell. She even suggested a mutually beneficial relationship that transcended the bed that we mostly shared for our most active sexual activities.

She had come over to the penthouse of her own volition, and I had been more than surprised to see her. Even though my pulse had jumped at the sight of that perfectly curvy body, I only needed a mental picture of Aubree to flash through my mind, and that alone had been enough.

Lilibeth had, as always, performed her usual seductive charms, which had almost worked, but I had decided that it wasn't worth it. Sleeping with Lilibeth wasn't going to give me the sort of warmth and comfort I craved, not



the kind that being in Aubree's presence alone did. And so, I told her that we had to stop. I had almost told her that I was having a son, but I held myself back at the last minute as I realized that those words, once uttered, could come back to haunt me. Instead, I had tried to ward Lilibeth off.

As I drop my fountain pen onto the desk, I wonder if she has somehow caught us on videotape. It was the only plausible reason she would have pictures from that night. Having a lot of faith in my security team, I know that security has not been breached. I would have been aware if it had. And the shots that Aubree had waved at me were close enough for me to assume that whoever had taken them had been inside the house and not outside.

I pick up my phone and call my head of security, who picks up on the first ring.

"Mr. Stark," he mutters in that low, scratchy voice of his. Bruce, once revealed that he had been forced to drink boiling water as a form of torture, and that had completely ruined his voice.

"Bruce. I would like to know why personal pictures of myself were taken in my home while you were on duty?"

"I don't think that's possible," Bruce replies. "The alarm had not gone off to signal that anyone had attempted entry. My guys and I had patrolled the entire mansion as always. We had documented the number of night fireflies that had flown to fly past the gate. We would know if a breathing human had tried to go past."

Fully satisfied with his explanation and the conviction in his tone, I disconnect the call and place one at Turner's office.

"David Turner speaking," Dave barks into the phone, and I struggle not to spew the obscenities on the tip of my tongue.

"Why would you try to have me framed, Dave?" I ask in a low tone of voice

that sounds a little sad. Even though I am a little angry at myself that I have shown vulnerability, I cannot help it. I feel completely betrayed.

“Why would you go behind my back to put my only daughter in harm’s way?” Dave barks back. “Didn’t you see other women who could have been charmed by your wiles? I thought that we were friends.”

I shut my eyes. This is not the first confrontation I am having with David. I should know that he isn’t the type to show rage at the first sign of trouble. David has always loved to take his time to plot revenge, and I shudder to think of what he plans to do. Even though I know that I am well capable of beating him at his game, I do realize that wrath for wrath would never make this situation go away.

“How about we settle this score fair and square?” I ask as I get out of my seat. “I can come to you now, and you can do to me anything you wish. How about that?”

“How about you stay the hell away from my family, so as not to stain my hands with your blood?”

I gave a low chuckle at his words.

“You don’t mean that. Plus, I have news about your daughter that I’m sure you would love to hear.”

“You know nothing about Aubree. You have always been a slimy piece of shit who has never been able to keep it in his pants.”

I shake my head as I realize that we are going nowhere with this. I have to talk some sense into David.

“I know that I messed up. But you would want to listen to this, trust me.”

“You lost that trust the moment you went ahead and ruined my daughter’s life,” David yells like he’s suddenly losing control of the emotions he’s managed to keep under tight control.

I drop the phone onto its cradle and get out of my chair, determined to meet David face-to-face and tell him just what has really gone down.

•••••

When I arrived at David's office, the receptionist flashed me the cutest smile as she thrust her chest forward so that her boobs remained on my peripheral as she scrolled through David's schedule.

"I think he will be free in the next hour. He's in the middle of a meeting with investors."

"Well, I'll sit tight in the waiting room until it's over," I tell the woman as I begin to make my way toward the brightly lit hall that leads to David's office. I have been here numerous times to be able to make my way unaided.

I make myself comfortable on one of the waiting area and try not to think about the fact that I have never in the past two decades had to wait for anyone. It has always been the other way around. The thought of losing the only woman who has begun to mean so much to me has me thinking. I would go on both knees if that was the only solution to having her remain in my life. The thought is proof that I do not just care about Aubree, maybe I have begun to fall in love with her.

I sit up, my eyes widening, as it hits me right in the chest, this sudden realization as if scales have fallen off my eyes. This is the very reason I had been able to say no to Lilibeth. The reason why I am here, waiting almost impatiently to see David, to explain myself to him, if only that means that he doesn't build unbreakable walls around his daughter and my son.

My heart clenches at the thought of that little one, a little human I'm yet to see but have fallen so irrevocably in love with. I would do anything for him,

and I hope to high heaven that David ceases this burgeoning feud between us for the sake of my child.

The door to David's office is pushed open, and two middle-aged-looking men step out and stop mid-conversation when their eyes alight on me. They look mildly surprised as recognition registers in the depths of their eyes. David is right behind them, glaring hard enough in hopes that his look will burn me to ashes. However, I give him a mild glare as I get to my feet.

"Nicholas Stark?" one of the men, whose eyes continue to widen as the minutes go by, asks.

"In the flesh," I grin as they shake my hand with both of theirs.

"It's truly an honor to meet you. It really must be our lucky day," he says as he shares a smile with his partner.

After the usual perfunctory exchange of pleasantries and business cards, the men see themselves out of the office. I follow David back into his office. As soon as the door closes behind us, David turns his back on me, his eyes spitting fire.

"How could you? You stabbed me in the back!"

"I did not stab you in the back, David," I respond as calmly as I can, fully accepting that David is only overcome by emotions. "What happened between Aubree and I was consensual."

"You took advantage of her. Surely you don't think I'm dumb enough to believe that you hadn't been aware of her crush on you?"

The stormy rage in the older man's eyes hasn't lessened, and he looks like he would have a grand time knocking me over with his chair.

"I was," I agree with a hard swallow. "But what happened between us was different. Aubree and I have been seeing each other for a while, and we have established a camaraderie between us. I understand that you're her father, and

you want what's best for her, but you should not ruin the gentle rapport we have established or the trust that Aubree has begun to have in me."

"Oh, she's very wrong to trust you." David interjects. "And I will yell that into her ears until she gets it."

"Is that what you were trying to prove to her? When you sent Lilibeth to me and had her take pictures of us?" I ask, taking an imposing step closer to the older man.

"I didn't--"

"You should know that I can see through you and that I know the truth, David," I tell him.

Even though I am several years younger, I understand that there has always been this mutual respect between David and me. There have also been times when David's actions have nearly convinced me that he might be a little afraid of me.

David takes a cautious step back, and then says, "You don't deserve to be anywhere close to my daughter. You have always treated women like oranges to be sucked out and discarded. My daughter will never join your long list of conquests. I'll melt my skin in molten lava before I ever allow that!"

"Aubree isn't a conquest, and I have never seen her as one. You might use my history with women to judge me, but I know what I feel for Aubree," I tell him, my hands placed against my heart.

"Aubree is an amazing, opinionated woman who has always made her voice heard about causes she believes in. Somebody who has never needed the support of anyone to stand up for herself. I know that Aubree is very self-aware, and nothing about what we did was against what she wanted."

"You think you know Aubree."

"Yes, I know Aubree. I know the employee, my creative director, who is

brilliant as hell. I know a wonderful woman who has been genuinely interested in me because she thinks I'm not some sort of fun puzzle to solve and not a game to play to make money. Aubree has always truly cared about me, and I am completely and utterly in love with that woman in all her shades and flavors."

David, whose mouth has fallen open, stares at me as if he does not recognize me at all.

"Aubree is the first woman I have fallen completely in love with," I continue to say because I feel like a tap that has been left open and all the emotions that I had repressed for forty-five-odd years come tumbling out, flooding my entire body, and causing me to tremble from its intensity, putting words in my mouth that I ordinarily haven't ever thought about.

"Don't take this away from me," I whisper as my heart aches at the thought of ever losing Aubree before I could even have her. "I don't want to go back to that dark place I crawled out of. I know that I can make Aubree happy. I know that if I try hard enough, I can be the right for her."

"Jesus, Nicholas," David mutters, scrubbing his hands over his face. "You've said more to me in the past three hours than you have in the past nineteen years."

"If that does not at least convince you that I am telling you the truth, I don't know what will."

David, who has begun to move slowly to his chair, as if he's suddenly too old to remain standing, turns to regard me with eyes that have lost their earlier rage. He looks more resigned than angry now, and I try not to let hope bloom. "You need to promise not to hurt her," he begins to speak and then swallows hard as if overcome once more by emotions. "It's always only been Aubree. She's our sunshine and midnight rain. She's both halves of the same coin.

She's ours. I have done a very good job of shielding her for as long as I have."

David settles on his chair and beckons me forward, and with my heart thudding a little too loudly against my chest, I drop onto the chair opposite him.

"I think it is time to hand the armor to someone just as deserving."

There's a tiny smile on the corner of David's lips as the hope I have been stifling blooms, spreading through my entire body, and making me feel warm.

"Thank you. David."

He shakes his head at me.

"I haven't fully forgiven you yet, and I am still trying to get used to the idea that my daughter would be dating someone more my age than hers. But I think I can try."

## *Chapter Twenty*

### AUBREE

**W**hen the procedural announcement goes off, I shut my eyes and lean my head against the headrest. I had turned off my phone and instructed Marissa to reschedule every pending appointment.

Nicholas had assigned a creative assistant director, George frame, to me two years ago after he had made me creative director. I had gotten in contact with the young man right before we boarded. I had been on a long phone call with him and explained that I was not going to be available for the next couple of days.

Even though I had vowed that I was going to focus on healing from the hurt that falling in love with Nicholas had wrought, I know deep down that I am going to want to be kept in the loop of things. I would need to keep on top of what and how my team was doing. Betrayal or not, I will never ditch work like that.

When I begin to feel Marissa's light trembling beside me, I crack one eye open and gaze at her. She has her eyes tightly shut and her hands tightly gripping the armrest of the seat, like it's some sort of lifeline. Of course, judging from how hard she is currently sweating, maybe it is, for her.



It's a little funny that Marissa, who has always been quite bold and assertive and sometimes almost unafraid of anybody, fears flights. And when the plane begins its slow takeoff, she, whose knuckles have turned white, whimpers slightly and I can't help but be suddenly concerned.

I drop a hand on her arm and ask, "are you alright?"

With her eyes still closed, Marissa says, "I will be as soon as we get off this plane."

Moved with pity for the woman whose lips have begun to tremble, I drop my hands onto hers and instruct in a low tone of voice, "Take deep, calming breaths with me, Marissa."

When she still does not open her eyes, I urge her to.

"You have to open your eyes and watch me breathe so you can do the same thing too."

"Okay," Marissa answers in a small voice. She is completely pale. Her eyes are completely taken over by fear. And when those eyes lock with mine, I give her a reassuring smile.

"Now, inhale slowly," I do as I say, and Marissa, without looking away from me, does the same thing. "That's amazing; you're doing really well," I coo with a smile. "Now exhale slowly," I continue.

Marissa, who has always been good at following instructions does as I say until her color returns and her trembling subsides. When I am sure that she will live, I drop a gentle pat on her hands and relax against my seat. Neither of us says anything for several minutes. I do not say anything solely because I can tell that Marissa is embarrassed. The color has returned to her cheeks and has refused to go away, deepening as the minutes go by. She has had a hard time meeting my eyes.

"Thank you very much for helping me through that."

I give a careless shrug.

“It was nothing. Everyone does it in the movies; that’s where I learned it from.”

Marissa gives a low chuckle.

“You do that a lot,” she says in a low tone of voice. And even though she no longer looks embarrassed, Marissa still appears somber.

“Do what?” I ask, turning slightly towards her to take her in.

“You shrug off kindness. You shrug off a lot of things, actually. Sometimes I don’t know whether it’s a good or bad thing.”

“I don’t see any sense in making a big deal out of what I did,” I tell her honestly. “I just assume that anyone would have done it. You would have wanted to get me through that if the reverse were the case too.”

This time, Marissa does meet my gaze with a smile.

“You’re right. I would have carried you on my lap if that was what it would take to chase your fear.”

I roll my eyes as Marissa begins to giggle.

“You have come back to yourself, I see.”

“Don’t worry,” Marissa says as she smirks. “You won’t have to do that again when we try to land.”

I shake my head as I look out the window, my mind going back again to Nicholas. I feel a painful pang in my chest that I try to shake off.

“Bree?” I hear Marissa’s voice call out, low and tinged slightly with fear.

I turn, giving her my full attention.

“Are you alright?”

I manage a smile I hope looks convincing, though I know it is not from how my cheeks hurt with the maximum effort.

“I am alright.”

Marissa shakes her head, worry clouding her vision.

“What do you want me to say then? That I am a sordid mess and don’t know what to do about the situation with Nicholas?”

Marissa shakes her head again. All signs of laughter were absent from her features.

“You know that I care deeply about you. The same way you care for me. I just want to be sure that...” Marissa’s voice trails off as she looks down at her lap.

“I am fine,” I manage again, hoping that the young girl lets it go. I am wholeheartedly aware that Marissa cares a great deal about me but talking about what transpired between Nicholas and I is something I am not ready for. What I want her to do right now is let it go.

“That wasn’t very convincing. Would you tell me why you and Nicholas fought today?”

Shocked at her words, I turn towards her with wide eyes.

“How do you know that Nicholas and I fought?”

Marissa looks a little apologetic.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

She avoids my incredulous stare by looking down at her lap again.

“Talk, Marissa,” I say, feeling a little betrayed. Can I not trust anyone anymore?

When Marissa meets my eyes again, her expression turns panicky when she catches the expression on mine, and she shakes her head wildly, her red hair tumbling as she does so.

“No, it’s not what you think. I wasn’t listening in. I went to get your breakfast, and when I returned...” Marissa gulps. “There was yelling, and it was just loud enough for me to hear some of what you both said. When I

realized what it was about, I dropped your breakfast on my desk. I left again, affording you the privacy you deserved, because I knew that you wouldn't want me to be there while that happened."

When Marissa looks up at me again, her eyes are pleading and sincere. And suddenly, I find myself believing her. I know she's telling the truth.

I shake my head as I look toward the window again. I had not expected that Nicholas would go back to his old ways. I cannot help but remember the time that Marissa told me about the rumors, one that had filled me with disappointment.

Maybe I had unwittingly held onto that unconfirmed rumor. I firmly believed it because I desperately needed it to be true.

*And why had I done that? Had I been in love with him for far longer than I realized? Had I fallen in love with Nicholas then?*

When a soft hand drop onto mine, I turn to catch sight of Marissa's worried gaze. I give her a small smile.

"I am not afraid of airplanes."

"I know," Marissa says with a little smile of hers. "But you were trembling, and I thought you needed this too."

And as I turn my gaze to Marissa, who hasn't broken contact, I say in a soft, low tone, "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"I have a feeling you would still conquer the world without me," Marissa deadpans and shrugs. "You're one of the strongest women I know. And I am certain that whatever this is, you're going to pull it off."

Marissa's words wash over me. I close my eyes without pulling away from the comforting feel of her, allowing my head to drop against the headrest. This time, I do not feel troubled and restless, but more relaxed and a little at peace.

“We would have done great as sisters,” I say without opening my eyes.

“You would not have wanted to have me as one,” Marissa says with a smile on her face.

“Why do you say so?” I ask, as I turn around, I give her a curious stare.

“Because, have you seen your fucking wardrobe, woman? I would have stolen all your clothes!”

Her cuss makes me a little uncomfortable, but instead of calling her out on it, I decided to let it go. We are having such a great conversation that I do not want to put a premature end to.

“Siblings do that?” I ask, wondering what it would have felt like if I had a sister who stole my clothes. “I would not have had problems with that.”

Growing up, I didn’t have anyone with whom to share my things. The thought of having a younger sibling with whom I would have done so fills me with an emotion I cannot explain.

“Of course,” Marissa begins to say. “I did that a lot, and my sister hated my guts. One day, we were throwing this really cool party with her boyfriend, when our parents were out. Drunk out of his mind, he had nearly kissed me because he had thought I was her.”

“That’s weird.”

Marissa nods.

“Trying to ward off a drunken teenager with alcoholic breath was crazy,” she admits. Then she goes further to tell me a little more about her sister and her parents.

I enjoy listening to Marissa talk and don’t realize I have dozed off until someone gently taps me on the shoulder. Even when I pop my eyes open, I find the flight attendant leaning toward me with a smile.

“We have arrived.”

Marissa, who is beside me, begins to stir. When the flight attendant moves away, Marissa grumbles under her breath.

“I cannot believe we slept the entire flight.”

I blink the last of the sleep away and settle more properly as the plane prepares to land. This time, my hand naturally goes to Marissa, who slides her fingers between mine and grips tightly. I try not to wince from her tight grip and focus rather on my cellphone, where I scroll through pictures from work.

When the plane finally lands and Marissa slides her hand out of mine, I breathe a sigh of relief.

“Sorry,” Marissa apologizes as we get up and begin to make our way toward the exit. “I do that sometimes, and my sister hates it.”

“I see now why she does,” I say as I struggle to get blood to circulate in that part of my body.

“I cannot believe we slept and missed out on the VIP treatment we would have received as first class passengers.”

I had not even thought about that. I consider it good that I had been distracted by my thoughts because I am nearly certain that refusing a glass of champagne would have been a herculean task for me to do.

Marissa leads us to where a car is parked. As soon as I had booked our flight, Marissa had gotten everything else underway, including the driver who was going to be taking us to the hotel.

When I slid into the car seat with Marissa, who hasn't stopped looking around, looking every bit of the tourist she is, my cell begins to ring. And as I glance at the screen and find it to be my father, I slide to reject and shut it off. I am in no mood to entertain my family's drama and have every intention of enjoying my stay in Greece.



“Oh my God,” Marissa gasps when the car glides into the hotel I had her book for our stay.

I turn towards her, entertained by her astonished look and the way her eyes continue to widen the closer we get to the hotel. As the car comes to a slow stop, the driver courteously gets out and opens the car door for us.

Closer to him a little more than is socially allowed, I view the features of his face and was impressed by his chivalry. Our eyes meet, when I realize he isn't that much older than me, with brown hair and a dazzling smile. The driver says, “I can tell that you are tourists, I hope you enjoy your stay in Greece.”

“Oh, thank you. We really do intend to,” Marissa, who had appeared to open her car door, says.

Marissa and the driver do not allow me to carry one single piece of luggage. Hefting a large fashionable suitcase towards the entrance of the hotel, I am left with nothing, with no choice but to follow empty-handed behind them.

When the driver waves goodbye at the entrance, where the hotel staff has taken over rolling my suitcase to my room, Marissa steps closer to me, looking back towards the driver with a glare.

“He looked smitten.”

“Oh, no. He was just being very kind.”

“He was just being kind, my ass.”

*Another cuss?*

“I had thought,” Marisa continue, “at some point that he was going to lick the soles of your shoes or something.”

“Don’t be disgusting,” I tell Marissa as we begin to make our way toward our rooms.

I had Marissa book two rooms. As I slid the keycard to open my room door, an awed look crossed Marissa’s eyes.

“This place is an awesome paradise!”

I chuckle as the staff sets our suitcases down, silently leaving us to our privacy.

“I wonder what it would feel like to live like this.”

“You get used to the luxury. The more you experience wealth and some of the downfalls it brings, the more everything becomes normal, and some of the things you used to luxuriate in begin to lose their magic.”

Marissa turns to me with a slight frown on her face.

“That’s so depressing.”

“It does not matter whether you are, obscenely wealthy or wretchedly poor,”

I say as I drop onto the bed, sliding my hands over the feathery softness of the plush mattress. There are so many things I can teach Marissa about wealth and riches. And I hope that I get the point across in a way which she would understand. “You just have to create your own magic and ensure that you live life to the fullest.”

“I wish that I could see life through your eyes,” Marissa says with a shake of her head. “Our realities are so different. I wasn’t born with a silver spoon stuck in my mouth. We had enough to live by. If I were ever to be blessed with the privileges you experience, I don’t think I would want anything else from life,” Marissa says.

“Point not pass across, I guess.”

I look in Marissa’s direction and shake my head. While I will never understand what it means to live by poor, I know for sure that Marissa’s



current perception of the subject matter will change in time.

“Why don’t you get some rest? Tomorrow, you get to live a little of the good life. And then we’ll see what the results of this one week will have on you,”

“You’re correct,” Marissa says as she stifles a yawn. “I am a little jet-lagged,” she adds as she stretches, looking surprisingly flexible.

“I didn’t know that you have no bones in your body,” I mutter as I continue to watch Marissa stretch. It’s a little eye-opening what time away from the office can do to our relationship. Right now, I don’t see Marissa that much as an assistant but as a friend, a sister. The line between employee and employer has been seriously blurred, and I honestly do not mind in the least.

While I had needed the assistance of someone here in Greece, I had also sought company, and Marissa seems to have been a really good choice for both.

“I guess I’ll see you bright and early tomorrow,” Marissa says as she begins to make her way toward the door.

I watched her leave. I am glad that I decided to come here, away from my family and the recent happenings. When I crawl into the comfortable bed, I feel completely fatigued, so as soon as my head touches the pillow, I fall into a fitful sleep.

## *Chapter Twenty-One*

AUBREE

**W**hat wakes me up the next morning is a call from my Assistant Director George. As the phone continues to blare out, I feel around the bed for it, not ready to let go of the last vestiges of sleep. As my hand drop on the phone and I bring it to my ear, sleep vanishes from my eyes at George's slightly panicky voice.

"Good morning, Miss Turner."

I sit up, wide awake.

"What is it?" I question.

"The studio pictures," the young man begins to say. "of the product don't quite look like--"

"Are they different from what the physical product looks like?" I ask, pushing the large blanket from my body and padding towards the window.

George gives a low sigh.

"They are."

"We cannot have the public try to boycott our product and tag it with that embarrassing term they used for Dolbem's product."

*Something about what one ordered versus the first actual look or feel of said*

*product.*

“We cannot,” George agrees. It sounds like he is completely out of ideas. And for a second, I wonder what he would have done if I were trying to pop out my child this morning.

“But we have to do something, don’t you think?” I ask.

“Of course, we have to,” George states again.

I wait, the room going silent as the only thing that filters through the speakers are George’s loud breathing.

“What do you suppose we do?”

George lets out a strangled laugh like he hadn’t expected me to ask that, which is quite understandable because I haven’t really cared to ask him that before. I have always given quick solutions to last-minute decisions. George has never had to do anything but follow orders. But now, I wish to know and will ensure that he tells me, because I am a little miffed at his slight incompetence.

“What would have happened if you had called me this morning and realized that I’m in fact not able to work as always because I was laying on a hospital bed, screaming my lungs out while trying to bring a child into this world?”

George lets out a weird noise that sounds like a terrified squeak, and I feel a little satisfied that I caused him to experience mild horror.

“If you were indisposed,” George begins to say, taking a long pause like he’s truly thinking hard about it. “I would have done a retake session.”

“Good.”

I’m a little relieved. I would say that he at least knows what he’s doing. Maybe I had coddled him too much in the past; I needed to learn to delegate in order to give clueless employees like George a learning chance.

“And then what?”

“I would call the photographers and have the photos staged,” he continues, sounding a little happy that he has been able to figure it out. “And then, I would make a duplicate of the last shoot!”

I frown, very unimpressed by the tasteless description.

“And the models, what would you have done about them? Seeing as they had completed the contract, done everything we had asked, and they’ve been paid. What would you have done about the cost? For the entire shoot?”

“Oh my God,” George mutters.

I tsk.

“You have not been paying attention and I don’t want you to waste any more of our time. So, I’m going to give you a quick rundown of everything you have to do.”

I move back towards the bed with a painful wince as I feel my legs, which have begun to slightly swell, throb.

“I’m grabbing pen and paper,” George says, sounding a little breathless. “I’m ready.”

“Good. This is what you will do,” I begin. “You make sure that Nicholas is kept in the loop. He’s the one who approves the ad campaign. Everything must go through him, Nicholas can sometimes be quite creative...” As I say this, I recall how helpful he’s been in the past when we have been stuck.

I pause for what seem like a split-second.

“Book the models again, renegotiate contracts. The agencies love attempting to milk us. When you have done that and have had a successful shoot, make sure you follow the touch up process and ensure it isn’t tweaked to the extent that it begins to look quite different from what the actual product is. We thrive on credibility and value delivery, George. Don’t allow your oversight cost us that.”

“Thank you, Miss Turner,” George say, sounding relieved and glad.

“You’re welcome. I will check in with you from time to time,” I reply, pausing when a knock sounds on my door. Certain that it is Marissa, I cover the speakerphone and call her in. As soon as she steps into the room, I say my goodbyes and hang up.

“Hi, sleeping beauty,” Marissa grins as she moves further into the room.

I frown.

“It’s too early for creepiness.”

Marissa’s only response is a wider grin as she looks about, amazement evident in her eyes.

“It’s still really difficult to get over how picture-perfect this lavish hotel is,” she breathes.

“I think that’s why it’s called a seven-star hotel,” I tell Marissa, struggling a bit to get up.

And yes, this has become a lot harder because of the rate with which my stomach continues to grow. It’s now a very pronounced physical curve that I’m now constantly aware of. It’s like the more the baby grows, the harder he wants me to constantly be aware of his presence like he wouldn’t survive if I ever took my attention off him for a second. And I haven’t.

Marissa hurries towards me to help me up, and I glare at her.

“I’m not an invalid,” I grunt as I heft myself up, gasping when the baby moves hard enough for me to feel the sensation.

Marissa, even though she looks a little panicked, does not make another move to assist me. She stands close enough.

“Are you alright? Should I call a doctor?” she asks, her phone already out of her pocket as she begins to dial.

“The baby just moved,” I say, suddenly realizing the slight movement

beneath the skin of my stomach that had caused me pain. My eyes, I'm sure, are filled with wonder.

Marissa nearly drops her phone in shock.

“Are you kidding me? That’s amazing.”

I give a nod, bringing my hands to my stomach to pat it lovingly. For a second, as I gaze down at myself, I think of Nicholas and how special this moment would have been with him. And I am sad at the realization that I might never get to celebrate these little moments with him.

“Does it—I mean, has it moved again?”

I shake my head ‘no’ as I give Marissa an apologetic smile.

“I’ll see our little kicky boy when he comes out of you.”

I shake my head at Marissa.

“What the hell is ‘kicky’?”

“Kicky, as in ‘kick’ as in, the baby just kicked.”

“You lack creativity, woman.”

“But not humor,” Marissa retorts as she pushes her tongue out.

I ignore her and begin to make my way toward the bathroom.

“Get ready,” I call over my shoulder, “we will be having breakfast right away. We’ll leave in five. I feel like I haven’t eaten in weeks.”

•••••

Marissa and I visit a beautiful, quaint restaurant downtown. I enjoy the beautiful scenery and how completely different the bustling town of Corfu is from Washington.

Marissa is a bit chatty with the driver, who continues to eye her from the rearview mirror. I don’t say anything but allow myself to enjoy the open conversation and the town history the driver looks happy to retell.

Soon we arrive at the restaurant, the waiter offers a warm greeting in English. Marissa hastily picks up the menu and begins to peruse it.

“Do you even understand what’s on there?” I ask with a slight chuckle at the way her brows are slightly furrowed as if she can make out the words if she stares hard enough.

“I just read ‘Cheese’, but I can’t make out what the other words are. That would be the--”

“Horiatiki salad with feta cheese,” I cut in smoothly, and the waiter looks in my direction, looking a little impressed.

“It’s delicious,” I say to Marissa.

“How about this one that sounds like a fake private organ?”

I roll my eyes.

“Which one?”

“Strap--”

“Strapatsáda?”

It’s the waiter this time.

Marissa looks up at him and grins.

“Exactly. Like that.”

“Well, it’s local and tastes great,” he answers in a deeply accented tone of voice.

“I’ll have the Horiatiki salad with feta cheese, please.”

The waiter nods and turns toward Marissa.

“Are you ready to order?”

Marissa nods.

“I will simply have what she’s having.”

The waiter nods and moves away. And as he does, I turn towards Marissa, who appears to be quite interested in something on her phone.

“The driver had taken quite a liking to you,” I begin to say in a low, measured tone.

Marissa drops her cell phone on the table and turns to me, studying my face as she responds.

“I didn’t really notice. He was a good conversationalist, and I enjoyed all the stories about the city.”

“He clearly liked you.”

“He was simply being kind. You told me yesterday that the Greeks are very nice people.”

“And some extra nice to win our hearts over.”

Marissa shakes her head.

“Well, if you do decide that you have found love here, I would be more than happy to wave goodbye at the airport and wish you the absolute best with the man of your dreams.”

“You would miss me, my tasteless jokes and sense of humor.”

“I certainly would not miss your tasteless jokes.” I lie.

“Yeah, you love me to pieces.”

This time, Marissa does see through my lie and gives me a cheeky grin.

I roll my eyes.

“You’re insufferable.”

After this, Marissa and I visit various tourist sites. Marissa, ever the millennial, requests that I take snapshots of her as she makes the strangest poses.

We visit Santa Barbara Beach. I do not run headlong into the salty waters like Marissa. Instead, walking the shoreline bask in Marissa’s childlike actions and the way she seems to truly enjoy herself.

When we eventually make our way back to our hotel, I find that I’ve been



wonderfully distracted. I've barely had time to think about Nicholas and my parents. Fatigue hits and I slip beneath the covers of my temporary bed. I decide that I am going to make the most of my stay here. Maybe, just maybe, I will throw caution to the wind, like Marissa did today, and luxuriate in this current break from reality.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

### NICHOLAS

I have been trying unsuccessfully to get through to Aubree and being unable to has nearly driven me out of my mind. I have slept beside my phone for the past couple of days, hoping that she answers my numerous voicemails.

Of course, what has gotten me even more worried is that Aubree has also refused to answer her parent's phone calls. It's as if she is avoiding everyone. I had made some inquiries and found out that her personal assistant, Marissa, has gone missing too, which means that Aubree has taken the woman where she had gone.

On the third day, when I still do not hear from Aubree, I make up my mind to find her. So, when my first few tries land me right where I'd started, I finally have a light bulb moment that makes me reach hastily for my phone, calling in my assistant, who appears in front of me in a minute. Even though Joe stares at me with concern etched on his face, I pay him no mind.

I am well aware that I do not look my best today. My shirt is creased because I had slept in it and had not been bothered to change. I needed to come into

the office as soon as I could. I had not had time to shave and was certain that the stubble had begun to make its presence known.

“Good morning, Mr. Stark,” Joe greets.

“You know Marissa, right?” I question, going straight to the point because I cannot afford to waste precious time.

“Miss Turner’s assistant?”

“Correct. How well do you know her?”

“We are merely business colleagues. I have spoken with her a time or two.”

Even though I can tell that Joe’s lying, I know that there’s no time to hound him for details. Instead, I tell him, “Go to HR and have them give you Marissa’s file. If you do not return here in five minutes, I am going to skin you alive and then have the grandest time auctioning your bones.”

Joe, whose jaw has slackened, nods, and begins to make his way toward the door. Even I can tell that my last words made no sense. Maybe I really am losing my mind.

When Joe returns with the file I need, I grab it and begin to flip through it, giving a little cry of joy when I happen upon the page I need. The one that details a emergency contact information. I punch the number into my phone and press it again against my ear, and then silently shoo Joe away.

When a female voice pours through the speakers, I clear my voice and say, “Am I speaking to Gloria Tomlinson?”

“Yes.”

“You’re Marissa Tomlinson’s sister, correct?”

“That’s also correct.”

“This is Nicholas Stark, her employer.”

“Oh my God!” the woman on the other end gasps. “Wait, you’re really-- oh, God, I cannot believe I am speaking with the-- wait, is this a dream?” With

the same breath, she continues. “Is everything okay?” the woman asks, sounding a little torn between hero worship and concern for her sister.

“Everything is fine,” I reveal. “We need information as to Marissa’s whereabouts.”

There is a pause on the other end.

“Are you sure that you’re Nicholas Stark? Are you impersonating the damn billionaire?”

I gave a little chuckle at the mild accusation.

“Marissa works for Aubree Turner, who is in fact very pregnant at the moment. I am not sure that you are aware of this. Now, just because I sign Marissa’s paycheck does not mean she is a direct report. Her direct boss had taken her on a road trip that is happening without my approval, and I have been trying to track them down.”

“How am I sure that you’re telling the truth? That you’re not just a nosy journalist who wants a scoop?”

“I could simply fire your sister when she returns. That way, you will know that I told the truth,” I tell her, intending to follow through with it.

“You don’t mean it.”

“We will know when she returns, won’t we?”

“If you were really who you say you are, you would not threaten me. You wouldn’t jeopardize my sister’s job in this manner.”

I realize that I won’t get anywhere with this and instead say, “Your sister’s boss, Aubree, is very much pregnant and deserves to be looked after. The only reason I’m making this emergency call is to ensure her safety. If you plan not to divulge their location, then I will be forced to disconnect this call and not waste any more of my time.”

I begin to move the phone away from my ears until I hear the woman’s

distinctive voice.

“Stop! They’re in Corfu, Greece.”

“Thank you,” I breathe.

“I hope this won’t come back to bite me in the ass.”

“I hope so too,” I tell her sarcastically as I move to end the call. And as soon as I do so, I phone David, who picks up on the first ring.

“Get ready; we will be leaving for Greece in the next hour.”

“You have found her then?”

“I know where she is,” I say, beginning to make my way toward the door to have my private jet ready.

“Okay. Good.”



The journey to Greece is filled with silence. I try to busy myself with work, ignoring Mrs. Turner and the cold shoulder she continues to give me. Even though David had come around, his wife had refused to do so. David had told me to give her time and explaining that women processed things a little differently.

I try not to think about everything that has happened, but it’s nearly impossible for me to do so. I think about Aubree every passing second, regretting the way I handled our fight. When we get out of this, I am very certain that I am going to win her over. I cannot afford to lose Aubree. Losing her would mean losing my sanity.

I don’t sleep a wink, even though David and his wife take turns dozing, almost as if they’re a little afraid that they’ll miss one precious moment with their daughter. I continue to respond to work emails and go over files Joe

digitally forwarded to me. Being CEO of a billion-dollar cosmetic company means that I never run out of things to do.

When the jet finally does land, we get into the car that is waiting for us. David turns to me after we are all completely settled and asks, “Now, where to?”

“I don’t know.”

“There are millions of hotels here! How will we know where she has decided to stay?”

“Maybe, could I ask her sister again?” I think out loud. But even I shake my head at the suggestion, almost certain that it will not yield results.

I pull out my cell and begin to go through the city’s hotel listing. I think she would be at **the NV Luxury Residence**, I decide as I lean forward to communicate this to the driver, but David cuts me off.

“Aubree wouldn’t be there. I’m sure she would be at the Corfu Palace. It’s more luxurious. We know her well enough.”

“I think she would be at the Mura Luxury Townhouse. It affords her the kind of privacy she likes,” Aubree’s Mom finally says.

I narrow my eyes at them.

*Is this a competition to see who knows Aubree best now?*

“Are you both failing to see that the hotel I mentioned has those features you’ve mentioned and even more? It’s outstanding and has the kind of ambiance she would love.”

“You don’t know Aubree more than we do,” Mrs. Turner barks, boiling over with anger.

“Here’s what we will do... we will check out the hotel I mentioned first.”

“To waste our time?” David cuts in. “Because we have pretty much made it clear that our little girl is not there.”

Knowing that we won't go anywhere with this, I allow them to issue orders to the driver, who gives a nod, looking relieved to no longer be caught in the crossfire.

I look out the window and try not to think about the fact that I might be wrong and they're right. What right do I even have to assume that I know Aubree more than her parents do?

When we visit the first hotel and find no trace of Aubree's booking with the receptionist, my heart leaps. At that moment, I became certain of the fact that I was not the wrong one. This is my little win.

When we begin to make our way again toward the rental car, David says, "We'll check the Palace Hotel next."

"No no," I say, having just about had enough of their nonsense. "You both can go to the Corgu Palace if that's where you think Aubree is. I am going to where I believe she is at."

With that, I begin a purposeful stroll down the driveway.

"Wait!" David yells after me.

When I turn towards him, he says begrudgingly, "Let's do it your way this time. You'd better be right."

"Don't irritate me. I can knock your teeth off with my knuckles," I told David as I slid into the car.

The sensibly quiet driver proceeds toward my suggested hotel. He has been very professional. I make a mental note to tip him generously.

Feeling like I'm in high school again, trying to check if I have passed or failed a grade, the receptionist confirms that indeed Aubree Turner is in fact here. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding and tried not to preen when Mrs. Turner glanced my way. David and his wife present evidence that

they're the woman's parents. We are ushered by one of the staff members to Aubree's room.

My heart begins to beat harder than it ever has. The staff, after knocking, informs Aubree about her visitors. At first, there's a pause on the other side. My hands turn slightly clammy when she tells the staff to go away because her parents have no idea where she is.

"It's us, Honey."

And just like that, the door is ripped open, and there, in the flesh, stands Aubree. Her hair is slightly mussed, and there are creases on her cheeks from where she had laid her head on the pillow. Her eyes dart from her parents to me. I watch her mouth drop open. I unconsciously take a step toward her.

"Aubree..." I call out, and right there and then, I became tongue-tied. I have no idea what else to say or what to do.

"You're here?" Aubree whispers, her eye barely leaving mine.

I swallow hard, and this time I brave it, closing the distance between us.

"I am here," I answer.

Aubree looks conflicted, like she is torn between running into my arms and staying right where she is. She drags her eyes away and glares at her parents.

"These are the last faces I expected to see."

"Oh Honey," Margaret Turner says as she moves forward and gathers Aubree in her arms. Aubree hugs her back slightly and then pushes away to take a step back.

"You all better come in," she says as she begins to move towards the white stainless couch flanked on one side of the tastefully decorated room. She turns around and looks again at the three of us as if she still cannot believe her eyes. "How did you guys find me?"

David clears his throat, but his wife beats him to it.



“Nicholas did. He somehow knew you would be here and brought us all here.”

“Really?” Aubree asks as she holds her hands and cocks her hip to the side.

“Is he a magician now?”

“I had help,” I admit.

Aubree turns towards me, and our eyes lock and hold. And for a second, I wish that it was just the two of us, that I could go to her and take her in my arms and tell her how much I love her. I wish more than anything that I could let Aubree know how much she means to me, right now. And as if she can read it in my eyes, Aubree’s eyes soften, and she sways as if tempted to come to me.

“Aubree, we’re awfully sorry,” her mother begins to say. “We didn’t handle the news about your involvement with Nicholas the way we should have.”

“It’s fine, Mom. I just needed the time away to think and take a break. I didn’t mean to give you the notion that I was running away.”

“Oh, Dear, it’s alright. You can take all the time you need,” David says as he gets up and moves towards her, dropping a kiss on her cheeks. Aubree smiles lovingly at him. “And you’re forgiven.”

“Now that I know that I am, I wonder if I will be able to sleep well.”

Her Mom moves towards them and encircles them both with a hug. Aubree looks blissful as she wraps her hands around their shoulders and holds onto them. I watch Aubree, wondering how I had been blind to my feelings for so long. At that moment, when her eyes open and drawn right into mine, I suddenly am filled with a plethora of feelings.

Without taking her gaze away from me, Aubree drops her lips against her father’s shoulder and whispers something that causes them to give a nod and then begin to make their way toward the door. I am a little surprised, but the

couple, who don't seem to mind leaving me in alone with their daughter in the room, make a vague excuse about needing to grab something to eat and then make their exit.

Left alone with the woman I have come to cherish more than anything I own, I brave several steps towards her, my heart slamming against my ribcage when she does the same, meeting me halfway.

"I'm sorry," I begin to say. I'm ready to bare my heart to this woman and tell her about all the ways I love her. How I've loved only her. But Aubree lifts one slender finger and presses it against my lips.

"Shh," she whispers.

But needing her to know I say, "I love you, Aubree."

Her smile is soft, and her eyes sparkle.

"I know," that's all she says.

And unable to help myself, I lower my head and take her lips in a slow, meaningful kiss that seems to stop time.

I kissed Aubree painfully slow, allowing her to taste the despair I had felt in her absence, the gut-wrenching pain I had experienced and the silent pledge to love her for eternity. And when she finally breaks the kiss, her lips are plump, shiny, and wet.

"I love you too," she says with a lopsided smile.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

### NICHOLAS

“**H**oney, you’re doing it all wrong,” I try to hold off laughing as Aubree turns towards me with wide eyes.

“I am?” she asks.

Aubree, determined to paint our baby’s room by herself, with a paintbrush in her hand and her hair in a loose bun, in a short simple gown that shows off her stunning looks, has never looked more perfect. Unable to help myself, I begin to move towards her.

Aubree and I had returned to Washington from Greece as completely new people; maybe falling completely and utterly in love did that. I had begun to take Aubree on dates, each one better than the last. We both seemed not to have enough of each other. On one of those nights when she had slept over, I had asked that she move in with me.

I had not expected Aubree to say yes, but she had. And living with Aubree had caused me to realize how utterly bleak and empty my life had been. Sometimes it felt like I had been in this dark hole. Aubree, being the only one who had seen me there, had reached out to me, dragged me out, and then introduced me to sunlight. She had changed so many things around the house

that has me wanting to return home early. Maybe it was her presence that had seems to light me up from the inside out.

“Here,” I whisper as I slide behind her, allowing my body to brush sensually against hers as I take the paintbrush from her hand. “You hold it like this,” I say, demonstrating. “That way, you don’t get any spills on the floor that’ll be difficult to wash off afterward.”

Instead of getting the paintbrush like I expect her to, Aubree turns around and looks deeply into my eyes, her body sliding against mine as she wraps her hands around my neck, eyes dark from arousal.

“You teaser,” she mumbles. I lower my head to her waiting lips and kiss her hungrily.

Falling in love with Aubree has been wondrous, stupendous and spectacular. It felt a lot like a free fall. This need, which I had thought would ebb with time, has only grown in magnitude. I have only continued to desire Aubree more with each passing day.

Aroused and needing her to satiate this deeply seated hunger in me that only she can, I slid my lips down her neck, dropping open-mouthed kisses on her soft neck. Her little moans feed my desire for her causing my arousal to heighten to feverish points.

When Aubree begins to grip my bicep in the way she does when she demands that I take her, I begin to step away, certain that I have killed a few brain cells from the gigantic effort it has taken for me to do so.

“Nicholas...” she whispers, her desire-darkened eyes riveted on mine as she steps closer to me.

“You know we can’t,” I whisper. “The baby,” I begin to say, giving her a look.

“Oh, God,” Aubree breathes as she drops her head against my chest and tries

to regain her breathing. And after a couple of minutes, she speaks, her lips against my chest. “This is torture.”

I chuckle.

“It is.”

Her gynecologist had advised us a month ago to stop until the baby arrived. So, we had not been intimate for a month. Our passion for each other was eating us alive.

When Aubree slides her hands against my straining arousal, I gasp, feeling my now hard length jerk against her touch.

“You’re so warm,” Aubree croons, her voice soaked completely in want.

“Oh, my God, Aubree,” I groan when she begins to stroke me through my jeans.

“I want to use my mouth,” she begins to say, her hands wrestling with the belt buckle.

I kill a couple more brain cells when I clasp her hands in mine and sensibly remind her that her parents will be coming over soon.

“We can... later,” I tell her, even though what I truly want is Aubree’s hands and tongue on me, driving me to completion.

“Promise?” Aubree asks, looking up at me and blinking seductively.

“Woman, you’re going to be the death of me.”

Aubree grins.

“I love you.”

I drop the softest kiss on her forehead.

“I love you more than you know,” I begin to say as I take her hand in mine.

“Living with you for the last two months has been eye-opening. I didn’t think that I was capable of loving, let alone commitment. But you have come into my life solely to prove me wrong.”

Aubree's eyes fill with tears as she stares at me with adoration in her eyes.

"Oh Nic," she breathes. "I love you. And I am the lucky one. You opened up your heart and braved this with me. You ventured into this, a little unsure and afraid. But you have proven to be so amazing. You are the best partner I have ever had..." Her voice fades out when I pull out the ring that I have had with me for the past week, waiting for the perfect moment to pop the question.

I look into Aubree's eyes, which have gone wide with shock; fear pulsing through my veins as I go on one knee without breaking our stare.

"I want to be the only partner you will ever have," I begin to say. I swallow hard when I realize how lame that sound. "Can I spend forever with you?"

"Oh, Nic. Yes, yes, yes. Yes, a million times over."

The tears spill, falling on either side of Aubree's face. Joyous, gorgeous tears of pure bliss as she shows me her hand allowing me to slide the ring on. I get up quickly and gather her in my arms, peppering her face with kisses.

"Are congratulations in order?" someone asks from across the room.

We break away, and Aubree, with joy on her face, hurries towards her mother, giving her an excited hug and showing her the ring.

"It's so beautiful, Mom," she says in her softest voice.

"It's breathtaking. You'll make one beautiful bride, Honey," her mother says. And as she turns towards me, she flashes me a grateful smile.

When Aubree, with excitement, moves towards the door to share the good news with her father, Margaret moves towards me with a smile still on her face.

"I think apologies are in order," she mutters. However, I begin to shake my head. But Mrs. Turner insists. "I wrote you off and thought you incapable of loving my daughter. I was afraid of what her future would be and was angry that you had messed it all up. I was furious that someone closer to my age

wanted her,” she looks at me with slight tears in her eyes. “The age difference was startling, and I had been busy counting the numbers when I should have been counting the times she’d come home looking happier than ever. You’ve made her so happy. I’ve never seen her glow so much.”

“She has made me happy too,” I tell Margaret. “She has made me a better man, and I will never let her go.”

Margaret, hugging me gratefully, says, “Thank you. Welcome to the family.”

## *Epilogue*

AUBREE

“**A**ren’t you the most beautiful bride?” Marissa says as she looks at me.

I smile at her.

“You make the perfect maid of honor,” I tell her.

Marissa blushes.

“Thank you.”

“Is it time?”

“Not yet Honey,” my mother steps into the room with Lucas in her arms. My little one raises his hand in the air as soon as he catches sight of me.

“Momma.”

“My dearest darling,” I say as I take him in my arms and kiss him on the cheeks, staining his cheeks slightly with the shade of my lipstick.

“Momma, momma,” he continues to chant. It’s the only thing he has learned, and every time I hear his voice, I know that I would, in a heartbeat, lay down my life for this little one.

I use my thumb to gently wipe the mess I have made on his cheeks and giggle when he turns his face and tries to take my finger in his mouth.



“Isn’t my little soldier cute? Is he hungry?” I ask in a cheery tone of voice and Lucas continues to giggle hard.

“There’s a bottle, still warm. I can feed it to him,” Mother, who is still beside me, says. And when I reluctantly hand him over, Lucas goes to his grandmother without a fuss. “He looks so much like Nicholas, it’s insane,” Mother says, and I chuckle.

Lucas has taken my hair color. It’s the only thing of me he has. The rest was all Nic.

Marissa, who had stepped out of the room, comes in again with my father in tow. I begin to make my way toward them. When my father reaches me, he gazes at me like I am a rare gem he has discovered all on his own.

“Nicholas is the lucky one,” he says, and I laugh.

Father takes my hands leading me toward the beautiful garden I had grown with Nicholas. I shake my head at how happy I have been for the past year. Nicholas and I still haven’t gotten enough of each other. Each day, he finds new ways to make me happy. I didn’t think I could be delirious about it, but here I am.

I look up as I hear the soft music begin to play. It’s the song Nicholas and I often waltzed to in the privacy of our home. His gaze is fixed on me like he cannot bear to look away. As I step up to him, Nicholas blinks and then lets out a huge breath.

“I know, right?” The priest says, and the little crowd breaks into laughter.

Nicholas flashes me a smile.

“You look like a vision, Bree.”

“You look quite fetching too.”

“Nicholas Gregory Stark,” the priest begins, “Do you take this woman to be your wife, to live together in holy matrimony, to love her, to honor her, to

comfort her, and to keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?”

Nicholas, with his eyes on mine, whispers, “I do.”

“Aubree Marie Turner,” The priest continues, “Do you take this man to be your husband, to live together in holy matrimony, to love him, to honor him, to comfort him, and to keep him in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?”

“I do,” I say with all the conviction I could mutter in my tone.

When the priest calls for special vows, Nicholas takes a step closer to me, his eyes moving slightly, as if he’s dying to take me in his arms.

“Aubree, if I had known what an awesome delight you are, I would have snapped you up a long time ago.”

The crowd let out low laughter, and I laugh too.

“I’m glad that I still get the chance to do so in this lifetime. You, Babe, brightened up my world in the most magical way. I want to spend the rest of my life showing you how happy you make me. It’s me, you, and Lucas,” he says and smiles at the mention of our son. “You both mean the world to me. And I swear to be with you forever.”

Tears fall from my eyes, and I feel Marissa gently slide a Kleenex into my hands.

“I had always thought you were pompous and overbearing. I was convinced that I disliked you, even though I’d spent half the time thinking about you. You’re truly amazing, Nicholas, and I’ve watched you evolve into this stunning man that I get to call mine. I hear the road is never easy, but I need you to know that I’m braced for this long ride. It’s you and me and our son. I’m never, ever going to let go of your hand. I love you.”

The crowd breaks into a great round of applause. Nicholas, eyes shiny with

unshed tears, takes me in his arms and kisses me soundly on the lips.

The reception goes great. Nicholas and I slowly dance to our favorite song with Lucas held between us. It's the most magical and memorable thing I will reminisce on.

Marissa, who was seated next to me at the dinner, gestures towards me.

"Maybe love isn't such a bad thing. I see what you have. Lucas is the cutest baby. I would risk my heart if that meant I got to birth someone as beautiful as him."

I chuckle low in my throat. Marissa has always been entertaining.

"Love will happen for you too. I wish that for you and everyone out there who has yet to experience it."

Marissa gazes at me with tenderness.

"I am so happy that you are happy."

"I am," I tell her.

"This turned out so well in the end, didn't it?" she muses.

I absently reach for Nicholas' hands, sliding my fingers between his.

"It really is better than I expected."

When I turn towards Nicholas again, I can't resist leaning towards him, Nicholas reaches me halfway and drops the softest kiss on my lips in the full view of my family.

"Hello, wife."

"It's Mrs. Aubree Stark," I grin.

"I like the sound of that," Nicholas mutters.

"I love you."

"I love you too; to the very end of time, Bree."

The End!

Did you enjoy this book? Then you'll LOVE **Dad's Grumpy Best Friend:**

**<https://BookHip.com/BDNKLJR>**

A hot full-length enemies to lovers romance with a surprise pregnancy and an abundance of twists and turns to melt your heart.

A quick peek of blurb:

**I never imagined working for my Dad's best friend. Or having his surprise baby.**

Handsome and filthy rich, Lucas is an arrogant prick who only cares about making money.

Because of him, my Dad—his best friend and personal assistant—was absent from my entire life.

When I'm stuck between jobs and way behind on rent, I have no other choice but to accept a short-term job from him.

I know I should stay away from this jerk, but why does the devil have to be so gorgeous?

The sparks between us quickly ignite into a desire I have never experienced before.

And the last thing I want to see is my two test lines turn pink...

**Get this free book and sign up to Nicole Love's mailing list for new releases, updates, and deals exclusively for my readers:**

**Click this link to join:**

**<https://BookHip.com/BDNKLJR>**