

A woman in a black dress with a large red ribbon is the central focus, surrounded by flowing red fabric. The word "Unwrapped" is written in a white, elegant cursive script across the middle of the image, with small white snowflake icons scattered around it.

Unwrapped

EVELYN SOLA

Table of Contents

<u>TITLE PAGE</u>
<u>COPYRIGHT</u>
<u>BOOKS BY EVELYN SOLA</u>
<u>CHAPTER 1</u>
<u>CHAPTER 2</u>
<u>CHAPTER 3</u>
<u>CHAPTER 4</u>
<u>CHAPTER 5</u>
<u>CHAPTER 6</u>
<u>CHAPTER 7</u>
<u>CHAPTER 8</u>
<u>CHAPTER 9</u>
<u>CHAPTER 10</u>
<u>CHAPTER 11</u>
<u>CHAPTER 12</u>
<u>CHAPTER 13</u>
<u>CHAPTER 14</u>
<u>CHAPTER 15</u>
<u>CHAPTER 16</u>
<u>CHAPTER 17</u>
<u>CHAPTER 18</u>
<u>CHAPTER 19</u>
<u>CHAPTER 20</u>
<u>CHAPTER 21</u>
<u>CHAPTER 22</u>
<u>CHAPTER 23</u>
<u>CHAPTER 24</u>
<u>CHAPTER 25</u>
<u>CHAPTER 26</u>
<u>CHAPTER 27</u>
<u>CHAPTER 28</u>
<u>CHAPTER 29</u>
<u>CHAPTER 30</u>
<u>CHAPTER 31</u>
<u>CHAPTER 32</u>

[CHAPTER 33](#)

[CHAPTER 34](#)

[CHAPTER 35](#)

[CHAPTER 36](#)

[CHAPTER 37](#)

[CHAPTER 38](#)

[FREE PREVIEW](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS](#)

[ABOUT EVELYN](#)

[CONNECT WITH EVELYN](#)

UNWRAPPED

Evelyn Sola

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CHAPTER 1

NICK



The car to my right nearly collides with my Range Rover. Only the blaring sound of my horn causes him to swerve, nearly colliding with the car on the other side of him.

“Sorry, Ben,” I say into my car. “Go on. Nobody can seem to drive today.” Today’s been a complete cluster, and it’s barely ten a.m. The furniture I bought wasn’t delivered on Saturday like it should have been, which meant two extra nights on an air mattress. Then they show up at nine this morning instead of four p.m. like I requested.

Now, I’m late for my second day of work, which has left me unbalanced and unhinged. This is not how I expected this day to go, but this is only temporary, I tell myself. This is a favor for my uncle, and I’ll be back to my life soon, whatever the fuck that will look like in a few months.

The only thing I know for sure is that I’m back in Boston for good. At the very least, it will be my home base while I decide what to do. My time in Chicago is over, but even after leaving the Midwest, the bad memories and my stupid mistake will not let me go. It doesn’t sound like Ben will have good news for me, and the next five minutes of the phone call confirms my suspicions. The shittiest Tuesday in history continues.

“So, what you’re telling me is that she can fuck around on me behind my back, steal fifty thousand dollars from my business, and with all the proof that I have, she gets no jail time. Is that what I’m hearing, Ben?”

Ben, a lawyer and my friend since our days at Northwestern, sighs into

the phone.

“It’s not all bad news, Nick.” His voice is low, and I can hear the contrition. It’s all bad fucking news. Of all the women I could fall for, I fall for a thief.

“Really? I’m not seeing that, though. It sounds like it’s all good news for Paige. What did she do? Flip her blond hair and bat her baby blues at the judge? Did she offer to fuck him too?”

“Yeah, no jail time is shitty, but consider all the other things. She’s a convicted felon. She’s on probation for the next five years, and she has to make restitution. She can’t so much as leave the state while she’s on probation. Her life is fucked.”

All I can do is snort at the absurdity of the statement.

“It’s her first offense, and she’s a nonviolent offender. The state is trying to control its prison population.”

Exhausted and fed up with the situation, I pull into the office parking lot.

“It is what it is. I doubt I’ll get anything back. You can’t squeeze blood out of a stone. I’m the victim, but I’m the one who got fucked by our justice system. Next time you talk to the district attorney, tell him I said to go fuck himself.”

He laughs at my statement, and I can practically see him right now sitting behind his desk with his feet propped on the table. “Thanks for handling this shit show for me, Ben.”

“Well, I did introduce you two. You’re still coming to the wedding, right? I can’t guarantee she won’t attend. She’s Melissa’s cousin, and there are family obligations, but we will seat the two of you on opposite sides of the room, and if she starts any shit, she’s out. I made this clear to Melissa.” Paige, the cousin of Ben’s fiancée, was desperately in need of a job. Ben knew I was considering hiring someone to handle our accounts payables and

receivables. Mary, the sweet woman who had the job, finally decided to retire and move to Florida to be closer to her grandkids, and I was too busy to handle that myself.

“I’m not worried about it. I’m not worried about her, and I don’t blame you or Melissa.” Paige did more than handle the accounts at my former business; she soon became my live-in girlfriend. I was even foolish enough to consider proposing, but someone you love stealing from you has a way of waking you up.

“All right, man. I’ll see you back in Chicago next August. You know you have enough time to find a date.”

If it was anyone else, I’d hang up, but this is my best friend, so I humor him with a fake laugh. “Don’t hold your breath. I think I’ve had my fill of the female population to last me a while.”

“I have faith in you. Gotta go.” He ends the call just as I pull into the office parking lot and pull into my Uncle Joe’s reserved spot.

As I step out of the car, I slam the door with more force than necessary, only to reopen the door again and grab my forgotten coffee.

The coffee slips from my hand and splashes on the sidewalk as I slip on ice. “Fuck!” When I pick the cup up from the ground, some of the spilled liquid drips on my jacket, leaving it stained. “Can this day get any worse?” I ask myself as I throw the cup into the trash. Instead of taking the elevator to the third floor, I take the stairs two at a time to calm myself, but I’m still in a tailspin by the time I arrive on our floor.

My irritation only increases when I notice the receptionist is missing. I don’t miss the miniature pumpkins lined up against the wall. The fact that it’s already ten in the morning on a Tuesday, and there isn’t a living soul in the office only fuels my displeasure.

I count twelve skeletons, four ghosts, and a set of three coffins in a

makeshift cemetery on the short walk to my office. There are cobwebs everywhere, and I know my first order of business will be to yank it all from the ceiling. There will be a strongly worded email about how unprofessional this place looks.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me?” The minute I step into my office, I yank the damn cobwebs hanging above my desk, and take the posters on my windows down. I even take it one step further and rip them all in half before throwing them in the trash. When I notice a skeleton in the corner of my office, with a rage I haven’t felt since I realized Paige’s deception, I yank the damn thing from its spot and break it in half against my knee. I shove it in the trash headfirst, the feet sticking straight up in the air.

If this is how Uncle Joe does business, these people in the office are in for a rude awakening.

I’ve been here for three minutes and have not seen another person. Needing more coffee, I stomp out of my office and head for the kitchen. It’s still a ghost town, but I finally hear voices as I approach the kitchen.

“Glen would be perfect for your daughter, Mona. He’s finishing up at Dartmouth and he’s waiting to hear from several medical schools. Oh, his father is Jamaican, so that should make Nigel happy.” I recognize that voice. It’s the receptionist, Sherry.

I’ve talked to Mona on the phone several times and we’ve exchanged emails, but we have not met yet. I have no interest in hearing about her daughter’s love life or lack thereof. If the poor thing needs her mother to help find her a date, I can only imagine what she looks like.

Everyone is congregated in the small kitchen, dressed inappropriately for the office. Sherry sees me first, and she smiles, but I can’t find it in me to smile back. She’s a tall woman with thick glasses and a pronounced overbite. I cringe when I notice the much too tight nurse’s outfit. The dress rides up

her large thighs as she walks over and offers me her hand, welcoming me.

“It’s our annual ugly Halloween office costume party and cookie contest.” I look around the room and notice all kinds of pastries. “But over the years, we’ve branched out from just cookies. The only rule is that it must be homemade. Did you bring anything? I sent you an email.”

Two deep breaths and counting to ten twice does nothing to calm down the storm brewing inside of me. Then I count to ten again. Instead of telling this woman I have more important things to worry about than baking artery clogging food—things such as dealing with my thieving ex, selling my house back in Chicago, and trying to figure out what the hell I’m doing with the rest of my life when this job ends—I take another deep breath and walk away. I see the smile leave her face as I walk to the coffee machine.

I pay no attention to the whispers behind me. I don’t even have time to feel bad about my rudeness because all I can focus on is that damn coffee machine that I can’t get to work.

The whispering ends, but what happens next is worse. The music starts to play, and if not for my need for coffee, I’d run screaming out of here. Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.” How original.

“Is anyone planning on doing any work today, or is that too much to ask?” You could hear a pin drop after my question.

“Joe never had a problem with us having a little fun in the office.” I’m not sure who said that because my back is turned, but whoever it is does not do a good job of hiding their annoyance. The last thing I fucking need today is an employee with an attitude.

“Does anyone see Joe here?” I ask. The peanut gallery is silent, which only makes the music louder. In three seconds, I imagine a million different ways I can smash the offending iPod against the wall.

“Does anyone know how to use this damn thing?” I ask, frustrated at

every aspect of my life. I finally turn around to face the room, uncaring about the hateful glares aimed at me. That's one of the perks of being the boss.

A woman dressed as Mrs. Claus walks over to me. She's a black woman, probably in her early fifties. She's short and on the plump side, but not plump enough to make a believable Mrs. Claus. She gets an A for effort if the white wig and round glasses are any indication of her dedication to this costume. She even put rouge on her cheeks.

"I'm confused. Is this Halloween or Christmas?" I ask as I look around the room.

"I'm Mona Moore," she says, offering me her hand. I give it a firm shake before dropping it. "I was out yesterday, but we've spoken on the phone a few times." She smiles, but I remain stoic. She's a pretty woman with big brown eyes and smooth brown skin.

"Yes, my uncle talked to me about you." Her smile widens at the mention of Uncle Joe. She opens her mouth to say something, but I talk over her. "You're the one who makes his coffee." The smile disappears from her lips immediately and she pulls her head back as she narrows her eyes at me.

"I do a lot more than make coffee, Mr. Bain."

"Right. You handle the books. Make calls. Pays bills. Chases down clients who are late on payments. The jack of all trades at the office." I don't know why I'm being such an ass to this woman. Uncle Joe speaks so highly of her, you'd think she was his family. When I warned him about trusting someone so deeply, he brushed me off and said he was a much better judge of character than me.

"Yes. I do whatever needs to be done around here. Mr. Bain has always appreciated that about me." She narrows her eyes at me and looks me up and down, clearly displeased by my lack of Halloween costume.

"Great. Can you make me some coffee?"

The room goes silent again, and for a second, I think Mona is going to slam my head against the coffee machine, but she takes a deep breath, stiffens her spine, and makes the coffee. I might not be the best judge of character, but I'm certain of one thing. I've made an enemy in the office today.

Everyone stands behind us, awkwardly watching the scene unfold. Soon enough, the coffee fills a mug, and I pick it up. Feeling like a stranger in my own family business, I look around the room again.

“Who are all of these people?”

“They work in the building. We've been doing the Halloween breakfast for the past ten years. All the offices in the building come together for a few minutes. Joe loves it. In fact, we do this for practically every holiday.” She looks at me directly in the eye when she mentions my uncle. “We really miss him around here. I speak for everyone else when I say we can't wait for him to return where he belongs. There really is no substitute for Joseph Bain.”

Message received.

“Yeah, well, people in hell want ice water. If you can manage to pull yourself away from this fun party, I'll need to see you in my office in ten minutes.” I walk out of the kitchen without giving her a chance to reply, but I can feel her eyes shooting daggers at me the entire time.

CHAPTER 2

MIRANDA



5 weeks later

“I’m so glad my daughter loves me enough to save me the humiliation of going to this Christmas party alone. It’s not as if my husband doesn’t know about it. It’s on the first Saturday of December every single year. There used to be a time when he put forth an effort, but not anymore. This is what happens after you’re married for too many years.”

I tune my mother out as I flip over the most perfectly seared piece of chicken breast. I add my roasted vegetables to the plate, topped with a scoop of my homemade guacamole because guacamole makes everything taste better.

My father tries his best to ignore her too, but he can’t escape. She sits next to him and just as his fork makes it halfway to his mouth, she snatches it from his hand. He simply reaches for her fork, and this time when she tries to snatch it, he knows to dodge her.

“Woman!” he says, deliberately exaggerating his Jamaican accent, making the word sound more like *oohmon*. He calls my mother one of three things, woman, being the most common. To piss her off even more, he starts to laugh right there at the kitchen table. The angrier she gets, the more his body shakes with laughter.

“You see how he treats me, Miranda?” she asks. “Find yourself a man who treats you better than this one treats me.” She jerks her thumb in his

direction, turns back to me, and scowls. “Don’t be like me. And find one soon, baby girl, because I want grandchildren.”

“Don’t worry about that, Mom. You don’t paint a good picture of marriage. Why would I want to get on that train?” I look up and smile at her, happy at my clever retort, but she frowns at me. I look at my dad, expecting him to wink in approval of my comeback, but he only purses his lips and creases his forehead. I shake my head and wave them off as I remind myself never to joke about not giving my parents grandchildren. If there is one thing they agree on, it’s their need for grandchildren. Well, they agree on a lot more than that, but that’s the one they are most united on lately.

“I treat you just fine,” my dad says, thankfully ignoring me. “I just had surgery, and I’m not up to it this year. Have fun with Miranda.” He leans over and kisses my cheek. Then he looks at me and says, “I want grandchildren, too. Listen to your mother.” I roll my eyes at him, but he finally winks. Nigel and Mona Moore may be opposites. They might bicker daily, but they make it a point to mention their desire for grandchildren at every opportunity.

“This is the same man who begged me to go out with him thirty-one years ago,” my mother continues. Dad twists his mouth, but he decides not to argue with her. “Begged me,” she says again. “He’d bring me flowers, and we’d dance to Luther Vandross. He even took me to a concert once. Now, what do I get? He sits around in his robe and underwear all weekend watching ESPN. And he lies. You had your gallbladder removed six months ago. There is no reason why you can’t take me to this party.”

“And please make use of that robe I got you for your birthday, Daddy.”

“I already have you, woman,” my dad says, ignoring my comment about the robe. “What the hell do I need to do all that stuff for? Why pay for flowers when I plant you a garden every spring. I cook dinner for you every

night. Stop complaining because we all know you ain't going nowhere. If I want to relax on the weekend, it's my right. I go to work every damn day, don't I?"

Mom shakes her head at him, but Daddy blows her a kiss before turning back to his food. I'd kill for some of the red beans and rice both of my parents are eating, but unlike my brother, I wasn't blessed with our dad's ability to eat anything and not gain weight. I'm built more like Mom, short, and able to gain weight quickly if I give in to every eating whim.

"I should just find me a new man tomorrow night. You know I work with nothing but hunky construction workers, right, Nigel?" He rolls his eyes, and this time it's me who bursts out laughing.

"Mrs. Good Stuff," he says, leaning over to kiss her on the cheek, but she moves out of his reach. He pulls her closer and kisses her anyway. "You think you're so tough." That's nickname number two. This is the one he uses when trying to defuse a silly argument. "Go ahead and get another man. He'll just bring your ass back because you talk and complain too damn much. And you know what? After I beat him to a pulp, I'll take you back." He picks up her hand and kisses it. She shoos him away and he goes back to eating his dinner. My mother turns her attention to me and starts to discuss the party I'm escorting her to tomorrow night.

Dad's an introvert who listens more than he talks, while Mom never stops talking or misses a party if she can help it. Nor does she ever miss an opportunity to gossip, and the recent talk around the dinner table is her temporary boss, Nick Bain.

The owner of the construction company, Joseph Bain, broke his hip and needed a complete replacement. In the interim, his nephew, my mother's new boss and, according to her, the devil in human form, has taken over.

If you hear my mother tell it, Joe is a saint who gave her a job as the

bookkeeper in his company twenty-seven years ago. He could have hired a CPA, but he took a chance on her. He's a prince among men who is loved and respected by everyone who works for him.

Mom even has a picture of Mr. Bain holding me when he came to visit her in the hospital after having me. He has sent gifts for the family every Christmas and gives her an annual bonus. Joseph Bain can do no wrong. Over the years, my mother's role in the company has grown. She says she does whatever needs to be done.

The flip side is that Nick Bain can do nothing right.

"Miranda, pay attention," she says, jabbing me in my ribs with her elbow. The unexpected movement causes me to jolt. "The man must have been raised by wolves. He comes in the office and doesn't so much as mutter a good morning to any of us. He had the nerve to ask me to get him coffee again the other morning. When he heard me and Sherry talking, do you know what he said? He said this isn't social hour. It's a workplace." She mimics this Nick Bain's voice. I hold in my laughter, unable to imagine the man she's mocking sounding so shrill. "Do you know I had to sit down with him his first week and explain my job. He wanted to see all the account receivables and payables for the past twelve months. And he even hired an outside firm to do an audit. An audit! Who does he think he is? The IRS? He's wasting good money on that nonsense."

I don't bother telling Mom that I already know all of this because she talks about it every chance she gets.

"Woman, you get Joe coffee all the time. You insisted on that complicated machine that no one else understands. The man probably just can't figure it out," my father reminds her. "And so what if he wanted to do an audit. It's not your money. Who cares?" Dad shrugs, which only irritates my mother more.

“And don’t forget what he did to my mug. Not to mention how he destroyed the Halloween decorations in his office. And he didn’t come to our Thanksgiving office potluck. Probably thinks he’s too good. Jerk.”

Neither one of us bothers to tell her the mug incident was an unfortunate accident or that some people just aren’t into holidays. I tune her out because we’ve had this same conversation at least once a week. Truthfully, I’m tired of hearing about Nick Bain. The man sounds like he needs a crash course in people skills if he can’t figure out that Mona Moore needs to feel appreciated and needed at all times. She’s given that company twenty-seven years, and if that fool doesn’t appreciate that, he’s not worthy of her.

“Well, Joe appreciates everything I’ve ever done for him. And with Nick Bain’s fancy education, you’d think he’d be able to operate a damn coffee machine. Idiot.” She mentions his fancy education about once a week too, but I still don’t know where he got this fancy degree from. The only thing I know is that he has some sort of architectural background from some school in Chicago. I know better than to ask. Frankly, I don’t care. He can take his ass back to Chicago for all I care.

Our strategy, my father’s and mine, is to let her talk. If we ask questions, the conversation will never end. “I want all of us to get on our knees tonight and pray. Pray for a speedy recovery and that he comes back to work. Nigel, I want you to make him some of your special jerk chicken and rice and peas. He loves that. I’m going to go visit him at home soon. Maybe seeing someone from work will give him the incentive he needs to get better fast. I swear, that nephew will run the business to the ground. Rumor has it his own business tanked, and he left Chicago with his tail between his legs. I’m not surprised.”

That’s another thing. There’s always some rumor going around the office. The men around there gossip more than the women, and my mother eats it all

up.

“Just let me know when, woman. You’ll get your damn rice and peas. And I doubt very much Joe would let some screw up run his business, nephew or not. Where did you get your information from?” my dad asks. Dad’s the rational one, and Mom runs on emotion.

“The foreman at the Quincy project told me.”

Dad catches my eye and rolls his, forcing me to cover my laugh with my hand.

“The foreman? You mean Darren? That man gossips more than fifteen-year-old girls, and he always gets his information wrong. He should worry about his own damn business. Didn’t his wife almost leave him last year because of his gambling? Maybe he should focus on his own problems before running his mouth about stuff he knows nothing about,” my dad says.

My mom purses her lips. “Well, Sherry told me the same thing.”

Dad grumbles something under his breath but continues eating. He looks at me and twists his mouth. I’d bet five dollars Sherry heard it from Darren, who probably made it up just to give my mother and Sherry something to talk about.

Mom ignores my dad’s sage advice and says, “Darren Jr. is coming to the party. You two have always gotten along, Miranda. Maybe you guys should go see a movie or something.”

“Mom,” I warn, but my dad interrupts.

“Woman, are you out of your damn mind? That boy and our daughter will never be a couple, okay.”

“You don’t know that, Nigel. We’re not getting any younger. I want grandchildren while I’m still young enough to enjoy them.”

I cut a piece of chicken and stick it in my mouth, hoping they’ll quickly move on from this conversation because I am not in the mood tonight.

“Listen to your mother about the grandchildren, gal. I need someone to bounce on my knee before the arthritis takes over completely,” he says.

I contain my laughter because my dad does not have arthritis or anything else wrong with him. “Can I finish college first?” I sass.

“If you must.” He winks at me again before he turns back to my mother. “You know how I know? I know that boy is as gay as an Easter basket, that’s how I know. I also know that his father is in denial about it, and I know you need to open your eyes. If you want to fix junior up, you’re barking up the wrong tree.”

“What? When I mentioned it to Darren, he said it was a great idea.”

“Of course, he did. Not only is he in denial, he’s a homophobe. He’s not about to use our daughter to fuel his denial. Drop it.”

Dad doesn’t give orders often, but when he does, my mother tends to listen. Unfortunately, my mother turns the conversation back to me.

“Forget about junior. Sherry’s nephew Glen will be there too. He’s going to medical school and his father is from Jamaica.” This time, Mom jabs dad’s ribs with her elbow. If she thought Glenn being half Jamaican would get him excited, she’s mistaken.

“Our daughter has her own mind, woman. She can choose her own man. Is that okay with you, Ms. America?” Nickname number three. The one he uses when she gets too sassy. With that, Dad turns back to his food and Mom focuses back on me.

“You have a dress, baby girl?” she asks. “I want you to have a good time and forget about that nonsense with that Brandon. I never thought he was right for you.”

She was planning our wedding six months into my relationship with Brandon, even though I told her it was not that serious. She included him in every family dinner or event until he decided he was too young to settle

down. I was only the second girlfriend he ever had; he wanted some time to play around and not be stuck in a committed relationship.

“I hope you don’t take him back, baby girl,” Mom says.

“Of course, she’s not going to take his sorry ass back, Mona. We raised a sassy gal with self-respect. Why would she want that idiot? Our Miranda is a beauty, and she can do better than that flat-footed fool.” My father’s Jamaican accent gets thicker the more upset he gets, and lately, Brandon is a trigger. According to Nigel Moore, nobody breaks up with his baby girl. Neither of my parents realize that I was never that upset over it.

“Thank you, Daddy.” I put my hand on top of his to calm him down. “It’s been six months, and I’m over it. I was hurt for a few days, but honestly, it’s for the best. Let’s not talk about that flat-footed fool anymore.” I smile at my father. I have no idea what a flat-footed fool is, but he’s seems satisfied with my answer.

“I don’t know what you ever saw in that boy. I don’t know what’s wrong with the young men these days. He shows up here wearing jeans tighter than any man needs to wear. When I ask him where he’s taking you, he says you both have appointments to get manicures. What man needs a manicure? Listen to me, baby girl, if the man’s hands are softer than yours, run.”

My mother nods in agreement, and I choke on my laughter.

“It was a birthday gift, Daddy. You give Mom money for the nail salon all the time.” The fact that Brandon also treated himself to a pedicure is something my father never needs to know.

“I know, but why does he need a manicure, too? And that’s right. I give your mother money, and if I’m in a really good mood, I’ll drop her off and pick her up. I don’t go with her to get my cuticles trimmed. What man does that? If I ever see that Brandon again, I’m going to kill him with my bare hands,” he says.

“And I’ll bury the body,” my mother says.

“You see, baby girl, teamwork. Get someone who’s willing to bury the body for you.” He kisses my cheek one more time before getting up from the table. He takes his plate and goes into the living room, probably to watch the news.

Thankfully, my mom is silent while we finish our dinner.

“Why don’t you go watch TV with Dad? I’ll clean up before I go downstairs.” She nods and leaves the kitchen. As soon as she’s gone, my father comes back. As I’m loading the dishes in the dishwasher, he grabs my wrist and puts something in my hand. I open my palm to find a wad of cash.

“Get your hair done or whatever women do. You’re already perfect, so I don’t think you need anything, but I know it will make you feel good.” He pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head.

“Thanks, Daddy.”

CHAPTER 3

MIRANDA



“You look good, baby,” my mom says to me, looking me up and down. She reaches up and strokes my hair, which I have in loose curls today.

I have a long coat covering my dress, but I feel confident tonight. I did my own hair, and I used some of the money my dad gave me to get my makeup professionally done. My mother caresses my hair as we step inside the Sheraton Boston Hotel, leaving the cold December chill behind.

“There should be plenty of young men there tonight. Forget about Darren junior, there will be plenty of people here. Hopefully, Glen will be here, and you can meet him. I like the idea of having a doctor for a son-in-law.”

I stop suddenly at her words, causing her to stop walking.

“What are you talking about?” I ask, annoyed. “I told you I’m not looking for a relationship right now, Mom. I want to focus on school. Maybe after I graduate, but I’m in no rush.”

“What relationship?” She raises both hands in mock surrender. “I didn’t say anything about a relationship, just that there might be someone here tonight who you might find interesting. This is a family party, after all. Just because your father abandoned us to stay at home and watch ESPN or whatever nonsense doesn’t mean other people won’t be here.”

“He did not abandon us. He hates these kinds of things.” Dad loves nothing more than to host parties or guests at home but dragging him to a company party with strangers would be incredibly painful for him. He’d be miserable, and in the end, my mother would end up being upset at him for

days for not engaging her colleagues. He's doing them both a favor by staying home.

I ignore her as we maneuver our way to the ballroom. Right outside is a coat check. Obviously too impatient to wait, she takes off her coat and hands it to me. "I see Joe. Come find me." She waves at a group of people by the ballroom entrance, and they all hug. Soon, she's disappeared from my sight, and I'm left holding both our coats. I hand them over to the young woman behind the counter and drop a couple of dollars in her tip jar.

Suddenly self-conscious of being left alone, I look around the room before steeling my spine and walking toward the ballroom. I'd much rather be at home with Dad watching TV, but that would be too upsetting to my mother, so here I am.

"Let's get some drinks, Miranda," I say to myself, but for whatever reason, I make no move to walk into the ballroom. I don't know what it is, but I stand right outside and lean on the door, watching the people inside. They're all people Mom has worked with most of my life, people I've met before, but something is keeping me from walking through the door.

A dull ache in the pit of my stomach overtakes me as I look at the scene, and for the first time in months, I feel a sense of loneliness. I don't have much time to think about it as I hear the vibrations of footsteps against the plush carpet. For an unknown reason, I tear myself away from the winter wonderland in front of me and look toward the door.

My breath catches in my throat when I see a tall, broad figure in a long black wool coat crossing the room. He walks in with an air of cold disinterest. It's as if he'd rather be anywhere else, but as if he owns the place all at once. He checks his watch, then when he looks up, our eyes meet. Blue eyes meet mine, and he holds my stare until he walks past me.

No breath leaves my body until he walks past. I turn to watch him as he

hands his coat to the coat check. His body is as gorgeous as his face. His stomach is flat, chest wide and hips narrow. The suit on his body fits so well, I know it was made specifically for that body. He looks up again and catches me looking at him. I don't turn away, and when he misses a step, I know he's affected.

When he gets to the door, his body practically brushes up against mine, despite the wide entrance into the room. The smell of his cologne fills my nostrils, and I almost take a step closer to him, but he glides inside without giving me another look and walks straight to the bar.

He's definitely one I've never seen before. I know most of the people my mom works with, and none of them look like that or carry themselves like this man does.

"Come on." My mom is suddenly standing before me, looking at me with her brows creased, and I almost laugh. Typical Mona Moore. It's like she has some sort of secret knowledge of my moods. Whenever she suspects I'm upset, she appears out of nowhere, ready to fix everything.

I'm breathless and my cheeks are flushed from what just happened, but thankfully my mom is too busy talking with someone to notice.

"How about a drink first? Let me go get one." I point to a server in the corner of the room carrying a tray of wine. Mom waits for me as I walk to get the drinks.

When I return, she takes her drink, we hook our arms together, and enter the ballroom, which is lavishly decorated like Santa's Village. There's fake snow underneath a sled with Santa seated on top. The Christmas tree is so tall, it practically touches the vaulted ceiling. Perfectly wrapped packages overflow from beneath it. There's even a wooden train going around the room. I roll my eyes at the mistletoe hanging in the far corner of the room, though.

“It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?” my mom asks. “Joe’s here and he can’t wait to see you. Come on!” She grabs my hand and practically drags me to where Mr. Bain is standing with the help of a walker. He looks thinner than the last time I saw him, but he’s still handsome in his suit and red tie.

“You look wonderful, Joe, and I was just telling Miranda how great you look. I keep praying for the day you come back.” She pulls back and kisses him on his bony, pale cheek, leaving her bright red lipstick on his skin.

“Mona, we talk twice a week,” he says, patting her hand. “Nick’s been doing a great job.”

My mother straightens. Mr. Bain offers me his hand, which, just like the man, is extremely warm.

“Miranda, it’s been too long. Come here.” He takes me into a hug, and he smells just as I remember, like expensive cologne. “You get prettier each time I see you.” I pull away from him and feel a blush on my cheeks. “Oh, look. Nick finally pulled himself away from the bar.” He waves his hand in my direction.

When I turn, I collide into a strong chest, and when I look up, my eyes find a familiar pair of blue irises. Nick Bain, the bane of my mother’s existence, is the same man I saw just moments ago. The man who appeared out of nowhere and carries an air of indifference. The same man who causes feelings I didn’t know I was capable of with just a look.

In all my mother’s ramblings about the man, and there have been plenty in the past few weeks, she left out one very important detail. Nick Bain is the most gorgeous man on earth.

CHAPTER 4

NICK



I hate Christmas parties, and for that matter, I hate Christmas too. All those happy people planning family dinners and finding the perfect present. It's all a lie. No one is genuine. We only see what people allow us to see. Everyone has a mask to hide their inner ugliness. I thought we were going to build a future together and be one of those sickeningly sweet families who wear matching ugly Christmas sweaters for the annual family portrait, but that too was a lie. Thankfully, the truth was revealed before I did anything stupid.

Unwilling to think about my history with Paige, I shake my head and continue my quest to find the bar. A stiff drink is in order if I'm going to endure any time here. I figure I can show up for an hour before getting the hell out. I pull on my tie, the damn thing like a noose around my neck. Why the fuck this can't be more casual is beyond me, but this is the way it's always been done, and I'm the new kid on the block. The hated new kid if all the icy stares are any indicator. They fail to realize I don't care.

The minute I stepped inside a few minutes ago, my eyes landed on the lonely figure in the long red and black dress leaning against the door. I've never seen her before, but I knew she didn't want to be here either. She's not one who works for us, so I wonder if she's someone's date. If she is, he's a fool for leaving her alone even for a second.

She looks downright gorgeous in that dress. As soon as I saw her, I

envisioned sliding my hand up the long, red skirt and unwrapping the black wrap around top. A simple tug of the sash, and she'd be exposed.

Even seeing only her profile was all it took to take my breath away, but I kept on walking, determined not to take another look for fear of what I'd find. But less than a minute later, I locked eyes with her again and came dangerously close to rubbing against her as I stepped inside the ballroom. She smelled incredible, and her brown skin looked flawless and smooth.

I shake the thought out of my head. I'm not looking for a woman, and even if I was, I sure as fuck would not be looking for one at this party. Besides, that woman, whoever she is, is not my type. With her smooth brown skin, straight nose, and full lips, she's absolutely not for me. She also looks young. Very young. No, my type is white women who don't look like jailbait. Blondes preferred.

The bartender finally hands me a cognac. I down it in one gulp and quickly order another. The drinks help, but unfortunately, time seems to stand still because I've only been at this party for less than five minutes.

The job itself is straightforward. Uncle Joe keeps immaculate records, and I was able to jump right in. With my background as an architect, it was a natural fit for me, and I've gotten Bain Construction approved for three project bids starting next year.

Surprisingly, I've been enjoying the work. What I don't enjoy are the hostile employees, especially one Mona Moore, who seems to hate me more than most. I agree, I was not on my best behavior the morning we met. I arranged breakfast and lunch for the office the next day to make amends for my behavior the day before, but her hostility has not waned an inch.

Whatever I do seems to offend her. She took umbrage when I requested to look at the accounts. When I asked her to explain her job to me, something I did with everyone at the office, she pursed her lips so tight as she stared at

me, I thought she might have misheard what I said. When she finally sat down, I expected her to be combative, but what I got instead was an exercise in patience. Every question I asked was met with a one or two-word answer. After about an hour, she finally left my office, but she left me with a headache.

The next morning, things only got worse. We were both in the kitchen at the same time. She was reaching into the cabinet, grabbing a roll of paper towels. When she turned and saw me in the kitchen, the air turned cold enough to keep a snowman from melting. No words were exchanged. Not a good morning. Not a hello. I continued to the coffee machine only to slip on something. I caught the counter to keep from falling, but when I did, I knocked a mug over, and it shattered on the tile floor upon impact.

Mona's eyes widened, and she came running to me. If I thought she was coming to my aid, I was sorely mistaken. She dropped to the floor, each hand on her head as she let out a loud scream.

"No, no, no, no." She kept muttering the same words as she picked up the broken pieces of the mug. Finally, I stood up and look down at her.

"My son made this for me when he was in the second grade. My son, Mr. Bain! The same son I hardly get to see because he's halfway across the world fighting for your freedom. Fighting for your right to come in here and destroy my property!" She'd huffed as she continued to pick up the pieces. When she stood up, she'd turned to me, her eyes like small slits and her lips formed into a straight line. She then turned her back on me and slammed the broken pieces into the trash, causing a loud crashing sound. Then, she ran out of the kitchen like a teen girl who just got dumped by her boyfriend, her sobbing fading with each second.

My attempts at apologizing fell on deaf ears. Since then, we've only communicated through emails.

The others around the office are better, but not by much. If I step into the kitchen while they are in there, all conversation ceases until I leave, then the whispering starts. Unfortunately for them, I don't give a fuck what they think. I'm here to do a job for my uncle, and that's exactly what I'm doing. Their opinion of me is irrelevant. If I agree to what my uncle is proposing, I'll be part owner instead of temporary boss.

I can already imagine the hate in her eyes being replaced by fear, but Mona knows she's untouchable. For now. She's a great employee. Her records are immaculate, and she knows all our vendors and recruiting companies. She's charming and liked by everyone. Everyone except me.

As I get closer to Uncle Joe, I see a group of employees congregating around him. I don't bother to smile at them when they notice me, and neither do they at me. If I had my way, I would have canceled this damn party and had a catered lunch in the office instead. They know that, too.

I made those sentiments clear to my uncle after I signed off on the final invoice to the hotel, but he told me how much the employees and their families look forward to this. In fact, I think Mona overheard the conversation and ran her mouth to everyone else because they've been even more hostile than before.

I'm not a soft touch like Uncle Joe. I don't waste time with pleasantries. I couldn't give two shits about weekend plans, new additions to families, or the health of the family pet. It's a goddamn workplace, not happy hour at a bar.

I check my phone again, and it's as if time refuses to march on. It might feel like days, but I haven't been in the building ten minutes yet. When I look up from my watch, I find the same perfect ass from a few minutes ago. It's like she's here tonight only to torture me. I could have sworn when I looked at her last, she was walking to the bar, but here she is in front of me again.

I stand back to admire her figure again, this time taking my time. Despite

the high heels on her feet, she's on the short side as she stands close to my uncle, smiling at him. I walk to them, telling myself that it's only because the clock is ticking, not because I need to get closer to her again so that I can hear her voice, or if I'm lucky, feel her touch.

It's not until I'm right next to her that I see Mona standing on the other side of my uncle, holding onto his hand as if it's a life raft while she holds a glass of wine in another. Her smile slips when she sees me, but she catches herself. To mess with her head, I give her the most genuine smile I can muster. As expected, her eyes narrow, not buying my sudden bout of politeness.

"Nicky!" Uncle Joe says. This causes the mystery beauty to turn in my direction. She turns just as I approach, and when she turns, it is directly into me.

A pair of small hands land on my chest as she tries to steady herself. I hear a whoosh sound coming out of her and I feel her warm breath on my skin. I look down and see my hands on the same red dress I saw earlier. Slowly, I look up and almost drown in the most beautiful pair of brown eyes I've ever seen. We both stare at each other, neither of us saying a word or attempting to move away.

I study her face, and she's even younger than I initially thought. Her lips fuller. Her skin smoother. Her smell more intoxicating. Everything about her is better than I thought.

It takes seeing her again for me to realize where I know the face from. No, she does not work for Bain Construction, but her mother does.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Of course, I've seen her face before. I see it every day because she's in a family photo in Mona's small office. I can't remember how anyone else in the photo looks, but she's completely changed since that picture was taken. Gone is the chubby teenager with acne and a mouth full of

metal. The picture is obviously several years old because it's a beautiful woman standing in front of me now, not the awkward teenager in the picture.

Her hands linger on my chest, but then she must catch herself because she mutters, "excuse me," drops them as if I've burned her, and all too soon her touch is gone. I'm in big fucking trouble. She's young. Really young. She's even more beautiful than she was a minute ago as I take note of her long eyelashes surrounding those big, brown eyes. Innocent looking brown eyes.

"Nick, meet Mona's daughter, Miranda. Miranda, this is my nephew, Nick."

Miranda. Like in the *Tempest*, she looks naïve and innocent, but I know there is no way I'll get the chance to find out anything else about her. I can't. I won't.

She blushes and turns to her mother before turning back to look at me. I don't smile. I stare into those brown eyes as I extend my hand. Her hand drowns in mine, and when I press my lips to her warm skin, she exhales loudly. It was fast, and anyone else would have missed it. She snatches her hand from mine and does her best to try to rub my kiss away.

"I was just telling Miranda and Mona what a great job you've been doing, and how lucky we are to have you back in Boston for good. Miranda, dear, are you still working at the call center while you finish school?"

I continue to look down at her, eager to hear her voice.

Mona lets out an unladylike snort.

"That boy she was dating turned out to be—"

Miranda elbows her mother in the ribs as she widens her eyes and mouths something to her. Mona gets the hint and promptly shuts up. I'm disappointed. This is the only time I've ever been eager to hear what Mona has to say.

"No, Mr. Bain. I haven't been there for a while now. I have a seasonal job

at a Victoria's Secret at the South Shore Plaza. I'm hoping to get something permanent when I graduate in the spring." Her voice is soft and feminine. It's perfect.

"Nicky here can always find work for you to do at the office. Why don't you ladies go get some appetizers while Nicky and I greet our guests? Enjoy the party."

The last fucking thing I need is her around the office torturing me every day with that beautiful face. Her voice itself is like a Siren's call. I need her in the office like I need a hole in my head.

Reluctantly, I watch as Miranda walks away, her perfect little ass sashaying in that dress as I stand next to Uncle Joe, greeting the incoming guests. My eyes don't leave her for longer than a few seconds. She looks bored as she talks with a group of women, most likely wives or girlfriends of the crew.

She grabs a glass of wine, sniffs it, makes a face and hands it to her mother. Yeah, she didn't drink the first glass either. I don't know why she thought this one would be any different. Definitely not a wine drinker. I make a mental note of that. She looks around the room, and when her eyes end up in my direction, I make sure that she sees me looking at her.

Just like a cliché in any romance novel or movie, our eyes lock from across the room. She bites her bottom lip and looks down my body before looking up to meet my gaze again. For the first time in a long while, I smile a genuine smile. She quickly looks away as if she's been caught doing something she shouldn't, only to give me another view of her ass as she walks to the bar.

"I thought you were bringing a date, Nicky?" Uncle Joe says.

I twist my face and blow out a breath.

"Why on God's green earth would you think that?"

“You don’t want to end up like me. Alone with a broken hip with only nurses to take care of you. Go mingle, and for the love of God, forget about Paige and find yourself someone new. I think everyone is here. I’m going to go talk to some of the guys.” He walks away before I can object.

I don’t get a chance to tell him he was happily married for thirty-five years until his wife died, or that his son, the investment banker, visits him every weekend with his wife and their daughter. There is no need to tell him I’m completely over Paige, and that losing the money hurt more than losing the woman. That particular woman, at least. That’s telling.

I’m across the room and at the bar in a few quick strides, grabbing a glass of wine along the way. I lean my back against the bar as she faces the counter. Soon, the bartender hands her a red drink in a mason jar. When she lets out a soft moan as she takes a sip, my mind flashes to her underneath me, moaning for a completely different reason. I will my body to remain calm, but it seems to have a mind of its own tonight.

“Are you even old enough to drink?” I ask, finally breaking the silence. She turns her head to look at me as I look down and almost drown in her brown eyes.

“Are you a cop?” she asks. She sticks out her tongue and licks a bead of moisture from her bottom lip. The gesture is fast, and I’d bet my last dollar she did it subconsciously, but my body didn’t get the memo. Those damn pouty lips with the bottom just a little bit wider and plumper than the top. Images of her underneath me, my mouth on hers while she breathes and moans into my mine as I pull her bottom lip between my teeth play through my mind.

“Hardly, but it’s my party and I have to make sure we’re not serving anyone who’s underage.” And I need to find out exactly how old you are, but I don’t tell her that.

“So, you’re a party monitor then? Or maybe a party pooper? I bet you’re the type who hands out apples or toothbrushes to the kids on Halloween.”

Unable to help myself, I laugh. I don’t tell her that on Halloween, I keep my lights off. I’m not going to be responsible for pumping children full of sugar and processed foods. Something tells me she would not approve.

“More of an observer.”

“Observer?” she asks, pretending to mull over the word. “Sounds more like control freak, but I promise you, Mr. Bain, I’m of age. You are not providing alcohol to any underage minors. Have been legally allowed to drink in this country for two years now.” To prove her point, she finishes her drink and orders another one. Then she does the craziest thing. She smiles at me as she playfully bats her eyelashes, not realizing for a second that she’s playing with fire.

Jesus, she’s fucking young. Thirteen years younger than I am. I have no business here. I should walk away and go back to my uncle. I can mingle with our guests and forget all about Miranda Moore, who’s too damn young for a jaded asshole like me, but I don’t do any of that.

There’s a secret part of me that’s relieved to find that she’s not only of age, but that she’s no longer a teenager. When I walked over here, all I cared about was that she was over eighteen. Twenty-three is a pleasant surprise.

“Two whole years above the drinking age, huh? You’re practically a senior citizen.”

She copies my stance and turns to face the room as she leans against the bar. When she puts the straw between her lips, my dirty mind flashes to something else between her lips. Maybe while I’m standing over her in the shower, or while she explores my body underneath my down comforter.

“I’ve heard a lot about you, Mr. Bain,” she says after sipping. She reaches into her purse, and as she politely thanks the bartender for her drink, she

shoves a few dollars in the tip jar.

“From whom?” I ask, already knowing the answer.

“I think you know.” She smirks. “You’re often the main topic of conversation around the dinner table. For a while, I thought you were the villain in the Batman movie.”

I let out a loud laugh. She laughs too, revealing her straight teeth.

“That’s Bane,” I tell her and spell the word out. “It’s spelled differently than my name—Bain.”

“Pity. And you look nothing like Tom Hardy.” She does her best to appear bored with our conversation, but I can tell by the sly glances she keeps giving me she’s anything but bored.

“Is he your type?” I press.

“Nah,” she says, snorting into the drink. She puts the jar down and turns her body toward mine. I do the same, putting us face-to-face. “He doesn’t exactly do it for me, if you get my meaning. He lacks a certain something.” She turns back to the bar, ignoring me.

“Oh, yeah? What’s he lacking? What is it that Miranda Moore has to have that Tom Hardy is missing?”

Instead of walking away, I take a step closer to her. She stills, not even so much as taking a breath.

“Look at me, Mr. Bain.”

“I haven’t been able to stop looking at you since I saw you standing outside of this room, Miranda. But what is it that you want me to see?” I make a point of looking over her entire body before landing on her face. She’s as still as a statue when I get to her eyes.

“Good, then in that case, you’ll notice the stark difference between us. First, blondes don’t do it for me, and let’s just say I like my men a little bit less melanin challenged.”

“We all have our preferences, I suppose, but you know what? I don’t care and neither do you. You don’t think I’ve noticed the way you’ve been looking at me? And luckily for me, I’m not blonde.”

“You’re a little sure of yourself, aren’t you? Have you looked in a mirror lately?”

“I did. In fact, just an hour ago when I tied this tie.” I make a show of pulling at it. “What do you think?” I ask.

She takes the bait and looks at me again. She puts her drink down and reaches for me. My heart rate increases at the unexpected movement, and this time, I’m unable to control the tightening of my pants. She adjusts my tie, which I know was already straight, and glides her hands down to my pecs. All too soon, her touching stops and she goes back to her drink.

“It’s not all that impressive,” she says with a shrug. “You know,” she takes a sip of her drink as she looks at me over the rim of her glass, “all the talking my mother did about you, she left out one tiny, little detail.” She holds up her thumb and index finger.

“I promise you there’s nothing tiny about it.” Her eyes widen at my words, and I see a small smile on her lips.

“So you say,” she says as she arches her eyebrows and waits for me to speak.

Losing complete control of my words, I say, “Care to find out?”

I want to kick myself the minute the words are out of my mouth. Expecting her to recoil in disgust, walk away, and tell her mother what a pig I am; I’m surprised when she inches closer to me, gets on her toes and whispers in my ear, “You couldn’t handle it if I did.” Her warm breath hits the shell of my ear, catching me off guard. I turn to look at her. Her eyes are playful, but they are issuing a challenge.

“I promise you, it’s not me who wouldn’t be able to handle it. I’d

probably end up peeling you off the ceiling.”

She studies me, her eyes boring into mine. After several seconds, she smirks at me and returns to her drink.

“I guess we’ll never know. Pity.”

“Right. Because of my lack of melanin. Listen, Miranda,” I say, liking the sound of her name, “I promise you,” I say as I lean down and whisper in her ear. She shudders at the movement. “You wouldn’t know what to do with yourself. Being with a man for the first time.” She twists her mouth at my words, but before she can counter, and because I know what she’s about to say, I talk first. “The boys who came before me don’t count. Melanin, or the lack thereof, is the least of our problems.”

She puts a hand in her hair and twirls a piece between her fingers.

“We don’t have a problem, Mr. Bain.” She gestures between us. “I’m here with my mother, and after tonight, we won’t ever see each other again. But I admit that our kitchen table talk will be a lot more interesting now that I can put a face to the name. Before tonight, I just imagined Satan. Red face. Crooked and jagged teeth. Horns or however Satan looks.”

She turns back to face the bar, and I close the space between us. I stand next to her, as close as possible without our bodies touching. I wave to the bartender, and he hands me one of the red signature drinks.

“Everything in your life is about to get more interesting, Miranda, not just dinnertime gossip.”

She flares her nostrils, and before she can give me a smart response, Mona comes over, practically dragging a young man behind her. He’s not someone who works for us, but he’s clean-cut and looks closer to Miranda’s age than I do. And according to what she just told me about her preferences, he seems like he’d be perfect for her.

“Miranda, this is Glen. He’s Sherry’s nephew. The one I told you about.

Isn't he handsome?" Mona asks, clearly embarrassing Glen and Miranda. Her eyes widen at her mother, and I do my best not to laugh as she tries to have a conversation just with her eyes. Mona seems oblivious. "He's a bio major and will hopefully start medical school next fall," Mona says with an exaggerated wink.

I can see the irritation in Miranda's eyes and feel the tension radiating off her body, but she smiles politely at Glen and shakes his hand. He looks just as irritated as Miranda. Then, for the first time in weeks, Mona voluntarily speaks to me. "We should let the young kids talk, don't you think, Mr. Bain? Why don't you come and hang out with the folks your own age? Come on. Steve's wife and a few other guests are dying to meet you."

She takes my hand and practically pulls me away from the only interesting person at this party.

"Stay away from my daughter," she hisses as she drags me away. "Let her get to know that boy. You're way too old. She's off-limits."

Now, it's my turn to be irritated at her insinuation. The folks she leads me to are at least twenty years older than I am, and the fake smile plastered on Mona's face does not prevent the hostile looks she throws my way.

I listen with half an ear as the people around me talk about their holiday plans. I'd walk away right now, but Uncle Joe is watching me from across the room, likely smiling in approval at my forced attempts at social interaction, and Mona would likely tackle me to the floor the minute I take a step toward the only person at this party I want to talk to. But my eyes never leave Miranda and that asshole Glen.

Even from across the room, I can see they would make a good-looking couple. They're about the same age, and according to what she just said to me minutes ago, he's her type. Add the seal of approval from her mother, and I should bow out because this is one complication I do not need, but I don't

care.

He's talking to her, and she's listening, but she doesn't look at him the way she looked at me. She doesn't touch him the way she touched me. From their body language, I know they are not exchanging witty repartee. To my relief, she doesn't touch him at all, but she does something with him she didn't do with me. She laughs so hard, she has to use a napkin to dab at her eyes. He laughs too, shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders.

When the bartender hands him a drink, they clink their glasses together, which completely pisses me off.

CHAPTER 5

MIRANDA



“Are you serious?” I ask Glen as I get control of my laughter.

“Do you think I would make up something like that? Sherry totally tricked me into coming to this party. She offered to take me out to dinner for my birthday, which is today. As soon as we got on the highway, she told me the truth, but by then, she had locked me in the car. She stole my phone so I can’t Uber home.”

“I’m sorry,” I say between laughs. “That totally sounds like something my mom would do.”

“She promises to make me my favorite dinner tomorrow night, so I guess I can let it slide. Besides, meeting you makes it worth it.” I blush at his words and look away, but unfortunately, I look right into the eyes of Nick Bain. Even from across the room, I can see the funny and somewhat charming guy I just talked to is gone. His face is tight, and despite standing in a group of people, I know he’s only paying attention to me. He looks at me, then turns his head toward Glen, who is completely oblivious to the death glare he’s getting from across the room. Then Nick looks back at me and mouths “no.”

Taken aback by his audacity, I look away from him and focus on Glen, who is extremely good-looking with an easy smile and deep voice. His brown eyes are warm, and unlike Nick, he lacks that predatory look.

He offers me his arm, which I take, and we walk around the room, exchanging stories about college life while eating appetizers along the way.

Nick Bain watches us the entire time, and I do my best to stay away from him, but every time I look his way, our eyes catch. Even if he's engaged in conversation, our eyes are like magnets whenever I look in his direction. It's almost like he knows when I have the need to look at him.

God, he's sexy as sin in his crisp white shirt and jacket. His hair is styled perfectly, and his blue eyes follow me everywhere. I do my best to ignore him, but every other minute I glance in his direction.

Dinner is served, and I find myself sharing the table with both Bain men, my mother, Sherry, Glen, and a few other people. Nick is sitting directly across from me, making it impossible for me to focus on anything else but him. Glen talks, and as if I'm on autopilot, I nod a lot, answering here and there, but those blue orbs are so probing, it's hard for me to think. Eating is quite the feat because whenever the fork goes into my mouth, his Adam's apple bobs, and his eyes darken as they stare at my lips.

I don't look at him again after that, but I feel his eyes on me. As soon as they open the dance floor, my mother and Sherry suggest that Glen and I dance. Eager to get away from Nick's intense gaze, I readily agree, but I can tell he's not pleased. It's the set of his jaw and the stiffness of his body that gives it away. But when he subtly shakes his head no, I know that I've had enough of him.

Who the hell is he to dictate what I do? I've known the man less than two hours and he's trying to tell me who to spend my time with? These old fucks are too bossy for their own good. To prove my point that no one controls me, I take Glen's hand in mine and lead him as far away from Nick Bain as possible, but no place in this ballroom is far enough away to escape those eyes.

He watches me as we dance to Christmas carols. I feel his presence so much that I excuse myself and go to the bathroom, only to come within an

inch of colliding with him the minute I step out of the ladies' room. I should have known he'd follow me. Maybe I did, and that's why I came here alone.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he leads me down the hallway, away from the party and into a hidden corner.

He pins me against the wall and grabs my face with both hands. I can hear my heart beating out of my chest at his touch.

"You're driving me insane in there. You do know that Glen is nothing more than a boy?"

"Well, stop looking at me then, and I guess everyone is a boy next to you," I shoot back.

"I want to see you again. Meet me tomorrow." It's not a request, it's an order. I shrug out of his touch and take a step away from him.

"Are you crazy? No."

"Why not?" he asks, his eyes more piercing than ever.

"A million reasons. You're my mother's boss, and she hates you, by the way. Why would I go out with someone who's been so awful to my mother? Oh, and you're old. You're my mother's boss," I repeat. "And Glen's already asked me out and about a million other reasons!" I whisper-yell the last part to make sure he gets it.

"The Glen issue is simple. Tell him to fuck off. I have not been awful to your mother. She's been hostile toward me since the day I stepped foot in the office. She has a problem with me because I'm not my uncle. And what other reasons? Are you talking about my melanin deficiency? What the hell century are you living in? You think I care about that? And I want to see you again, not your mother. And thirty-six is hardly old."

"Thirty-six! That's older than I thought. Holy shit!" I yell. "Do you realize when I was thirteen you were already twenty-six?"

"Unless I was asking you out when you were thirteen and I was twenty-

six, I don't see the problem."

I lean against the wall and take off my shoes, feeling immediate relief from the too tight and too high heels.

"Listen, I know old dudes who date younger women do it because they think they can control them. If that's what you think, you're not just old, I'd also diagnose you with dementia." I stand up straight and point a finger at his chest. He stands still, bemused by my tirade. "I'm not in the market for a sugar daddy. I have a job. And I don't have daddy issues, if that's what you're thinking. My daddy is the best. You know what? You're barking up the wrong tree."

He stands there and smirks at me. Actually smirks at my words. Instead of turning tail and walking away, he takes a small step closer to me, and I lean against the wall to keep space between us, but his cologne overtakes my senses completely. I'm not sure what he smells like, but I know it smells good. Good and expensive.

"You're attracted to me," he says, completely ignoring my previous points.

"Oh, get over yourself." I push against him, slide away from the wall, and try to walk past him, but he grabs my elbow and spins me around. "Okay. So what if I am? It doesn't matter. I'm attracted to lots of people. That doesn't make them a good fit for me. We would be too complicated."

I try to pull out of his grasp, but he holds tight and drags me back to the wall. If anyone else was doing this, I'd be scared, but the last thing I feel for Nick is fear.

"Sweetheart, it's already complicated. We're in big fucking trouble." He finally lets go of my elbow and cups my face again. "I want to kiss you," he whispers, getting as close to me as possible without our bodies touching.

"But if I do, I'm afraid I won't be able to stop."

I should push him away and run back to the safety of the party. I should make up an excuse and convince my mother to leave, but all I can do is stare into his eyes. My breathing becomes labored, and each time I inhale, my breasts graze his broad chest.

“Are you some sort of fetishist?” I ask. If logic won’t work on him, I’ll try a new tactic. “Is this an experiment for you? Listen—”

He puts a finger to my lips, silencing me. All the air leaves my body. I can no longer breathe as he looks into my eyes.

“I’ll say it only once. I have no idea what old dudes do because I’m not old. I’m not looking to control you. I’m relieved you don’t have daddy issues, and no, I did not wake up this morning hoping to be somebody’s sugar daddy, but I do have a lot of sugar.” He smiles when he says that, as if he’s amused by his own joke. I’m too breathless to tell him I don’t get it. “You only have to call me daddy if you want to, but I promise I’ll make it so good you’ll forget your own name.” My eyes widen at the implication, and when I open my mouth to give him a stinging rebuke, he presses his finger harder against my lips. “To your last point. You insult yourself, Miranda. I’m wondering how it is that every man out there isn’t fighting for your attention, but they’re fools and I’m not.”

He licks his lips as his eyes roam my face. He runs the back of his hand against my cheek and goosebumps overtake my body. I stop breathing as I wait for his next move, which is almost my undoing. He rubs his thumb across my lower lip, and I close my eyes, waiting for him to press his lips against mine. Only, he doesn’t. He moans softly and I open my eyes and meet his gaze.

The sudden chatter and laughter coming from down the hall snaps me out of my trance. I shove him away and practically run back to the party, thankful that the group of women I just walked past did not seem to notice me.

^^^

“Are you ready to go, Mom?” I ask several minutes later after getting myself a drink of ice water to cool my body down.

“In a minute, baby,” my mom says. “Just catching up with Joe.” Mr. Bain had slowly walked himself over to where my mother and several other people were. “Why don’t you go mingle for a few. Get to know Glen a little bit better. He stepped outside with a group of guys, but he’ll probably be back soon. I’ll come and get you when I’m ready.”

That means she won’t be ready until the party is officially over, which won’t be for another hour.

“Miranda, dear,” Mr. Bain says, likely sensing my uncertainty. “Why don’t you go get some dessert. Or better yet, why don’t you go dance with Nicky.”

Like an apparition, he appears out of nowhere.

“I remember one year, you and your parents came to spend Christmas with us, Nicky. You stripped yourself naked and danced around the Christmas tree to this very song. We all thought it was funny until you peed on the floor.”

The entire group laughs, including my mother. I look at Nick, who has a little color in his cheeks.

“Thanks, Uncle Joe. You ask a pretty girl to dance with me, but then you tell that story. How can any woman not want to dance with me after hearing that?”

“Oh, relax. You were only two. Miranda,” Joe says, turning his attention back to me, “take Nicky on the dance floor. He needs to learn to have some fun. He’s too stiff.”

My mother doesn’t look pleased by the suggestion, but she doesn’t say anything as she looks from me to Nick. He wastes no time as he takes my

hand and drags me to the dance floor.

“Make sure you keep your clothes on this time,” I tell him with a smirk as we dance to “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree.”

Mr. Bain was wrong. Another thing about Nick Bain is that he’s a fantastic dancer and is anything but stiff. He takes my hand, spins me around, and slams my body into his. He quickly puts an arm around my waist, holding me against him as we dance to the music.

“I won’t pee on the floor this time either,” he says, smiling. When the song ends, I attempt to walk away from him, but he holds on to me. “The Most Wonderful Time of the Year” starts to play as we continue to dance.

He holds me closer, and as we move about the dance floor, there’s not an inch of space between us. My eyes widen when I feel a bulge near my abdomen. Instead of pulling away, I lay my head on his chest and let him lead.

“I want to see you tomorrow,” he says, repeating the words he said not too long ago.

I know what I should say. I should tell him no, walk away, and never see him again. I should avoid this dangerous game he wants to play, but I know I don’t want to walk away and not see him again.

“I work until six,” I tell him.

“Come over to my house afterward.”

“Mr. Bain,” I begin.

“Nick,” he corrects.

“Nick, is this a good idea?”

“Probably not. It’s probably the worst idea I ever had, but it’s a better idea than not seeing you again.”

When the song ends, he walks to the bar and I go sit at the table with my mother and her colleagues. Despite carrying on with their conversation, I can

feel my mother's eyes on me as I do my best to appear stoic and bored, relieved that she cannot feel the rapid beating of my heart.

Thankfully, the party ends soon after, and people start to leave. Nick comes over to say goodbye, shaking hands with everyone at the table, starting with me. Our eyes lock when he shakes mine, leaving a small piece of paper in my palm.

It's not until I get home that I realize it's his phone number with instructions to text him the minute I get home.

CHAPTER 6

NICK



An hour later, I walk through my townhouse, pulling the damn tie off my neck. The entire drive home, I kept my phone in the cupholder, waiting for it to vibrate with an incoming message, and nothing. I toss the offensive phone on the bed as I stomp my way into my walk-in closet. I'm out of the suit in record time and change into a set of gray sweats.

There's still no text by the time I walk back and pick my phone off the bed, but just as I'm about to toss it back on the bed, it vibrates in my hand with an incoming text message from a strange number.

I relax, letting out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. Instead of texting back, I call her on FaceTime, holding my breath again until she answers.

It's dark where she is, but I know she's in bed by the sight of her headboard. Her face no longer has any makeup, making her look younger than her twenty-three years. My heart beats faster just at the sight of her.

"Hey," she says, biting her bottom lip as she looks at the screen.

I decide to get right to the point. "Six-thirty tomorrow." It's not a question. I can see the uncertainty in her eyes, and if I pose it as a question, she might decide not to come.

"I don't know, Mr. Bain," she says, biting that damn lip again. "Maybe we shouldn't."

She's absolutely right. We definitely should not, but the pull I feel is too powerful, too strong.

“It’s too late,” I say to her.

“What are you talking about?” She furrows her brows and scratches her head. “We just met tonight and if you add up all the time we actually spent together, it probably only adds up to an hour. I don’t want to upset my mom. She complains about you, but she loves the job.”

“I don’t understand why she would complain about me. I’ve been nothing but pleasant, but this won’t affect her job. This has nothing to do with her. I just want to see you. If, after tomorrow, you never want to see me again, I’ll drop it.”

I already know I won’t, but that means I’ll have one opportunity to make her not want to walk away.

“I get off at six. I’ll be there after, okay?”

“Okay,” I say, relieved.

“I have to be up early, so I’m going to say good night.”

Satisfied with the conversation, I say, “Good night, Miranda.” She doesn’t say anything else, but I feel a void the minute my screen goes black.

I lie on top of my comforter and stare at the ceiling, confused by what happened tonight. How a woman who is just barely over the drinking age can bring me to my knees with nothing but a smile and a handshake. I think back to when I first met Paige. It was over drinks with Ben and Melissa, who was his girlfriend at the time. They told me they were bringing her, and I admit I found her attractive right away, but there was no rush for me to go after her. There was nothing standing in our way of being together. She was a thirty-year-old woman, and she made it more than obvious she was interested that first night.

Miranda is the daughter of one of my employees. Despite this only starting as something temporary, Uncle Joe has not been shy about making this a more permanent arrangement.

She's too young for me, and I'm not on the market for a relationship. It's just one meeting, which will hopefully bring me back to reality. Maybe she's not as beautiful as I remember. Maybe her smile doesn't light up a room, and her laugh doesn't strike me speechless in the middle of a conversation. Maybe it's the red and black dress she wore that caused my eyes to follow her every move from across the room, not the person wearing the dress.

I can't think of anything to explain the possessiveness I felt when she was talking and dancing with Glen. Visions of grabbing him by his collar and physically putting him out of the party flashed through my mind the entire night.

I lie and convince myself that's what tomorrow is about. It's research, because there is no way that a thirty-six-year-old man can fall for a twenty-three-year-old woman in a matter of seconds.

That does not happen.

CHAPTER 7

NICK



My house is four point seven miles from the South Shore Plaza, which houses the Victoria's Secret where Miranda works. Allowing for the holiday traffic, it should not take her more than twenty minutes to get here. She's already ten minutes past the time I expected to hear my doorbell ring.

She never texted me back after I sent her my address, but I know she read the text. I look around the townhouse and for the first time, I wish I had more furniture, but it's only been two months since I moved in. She will be the first guest who is not related to me.

As big as the place is, the lack of furniture only makes it look bigger. For the first time, I wish I had gotten something smaller.

I check my phone and note that another five minutes have passed with no messages. Irritated, I walk around the empty house, giving her five more minutes before I call. When I see headlights outside, I sprint to the huge bay window and peek through the blinds, relieved when I see a small car in my driveway.

The door opens within seconds, and I watch her as she steps out of the car. She stops mid-step when she sees me, turns and looks back at the car, seemingly uncertain. I step out of the house to stop her from leaving, but she turns back to the house and starts to walk to me.

I step aside and wait for her to stride past me. Once she's in, I close the door behind us and help her with her long, black coat. It's a cold December night, and she's wearing a red knit hat decorated with Santa's. It has a giant

pom-pom on top, giving her an even more youthful look.

She's wearing hardly any makeup today, and she's even more beautiful than she was yesterday, so there goes one of my theories about her not being as beautiful as I remembered. She has a small beauty mark underneath her left eye, and I will myself not to run my finger over it. Her full lips are the same shade of red as her hat, and when she looks at me, she smiles, practically bringing me to my knees. Again.

I do the only thing I can do. I walk away from her and hang her coat in the closet, giving my beating heart and my mind a few seconds to calm down. When I turn back to her, I get a sight of her ass as she bends down to remove her black riding boots. She's in tight, black skinny jeans and a plain red button-down shirt, but it's her socks that get the first smile out of me today.

"You're really into the Christmas spirit, aren't you?" I ask, pointing at her socks that have Rudolph kissing a blushing Mrs. Claus.

"I see you're not," she says, looking at my bare first floor. "Where's your Christmas tree?" She sounds disappointed, and at this moment, I'd do anything to take away that disappointment.

I take her hand in mine, loving the contrast of our skin tones. To my surprise, she links our fingers together. I don't tell her that I can't remember the last time I put up a Christmas tree. Paige's idea of celebrating Christmas was flying to a tropical island somewhere and scheduling a deep tissue massage on Christmas morning.

"I'm late this year," I tell her. "Maybe you can help me find a tree and decorations." That gets her attention. She pulls her hand from mine and rubs her hands together as she looks about the room. She runs to a corner right by the window.

"The tree can go right here. You'll need a big one so the lights can be seen through the window. I know! You should get a real tree. We've always

just used the same fake one at home, but I've always wanted a real one."

She walks around the room, probably decorating it in her mind. After she spins around, she catches herself and her smile drops as if she's remembering where she is and who I am.

"Are you hungry?" I ask her. I grab her hand again and lead her to the kitchen.

"A little. I haven't eaten since about noon."

"Help yourself to a drink from the fridge, and I'll get our dinner."

She slides past me and opens my fridge, pulling out two bottles of water before pulling out a stool from the island to take a seat. She doesn't say anything, but I can feel her eyes on my back as I take the food out of the oven and plate our dinner.

Since I moved in here, this is the first time I've used my kitchen for anything other than reheating takeout. Hell, I only have food in the fridge because I went shopping first thing this morning.

"This looks good," she says, eyeing the lemon chicken and roasted potatoes that I put in front of her. I take the stool next to her, intentionally bumping her shoulder with my body. We sit in silence for the next few minutes as I watch while she eats. Each time the fork goes into her mouth, I will myself not to groan.

She finally drops her fork, the metal making a loud clanking noise when it hits her plate. She looks down at my body and goes still. When I look down, I notice my erection through my pants and then look into her eyes wide.

"What?" I ask as she continues to stare.

"You keep moaning," she says, breathless. She takes a piece of her hair and puts it behind her ear. "Every time I try to eat, you moan. And now you have that," she says, gesturing at my crotch.

She grabs her bottle of water and downs half of it in three gulps. When she puts it down, she licks some stray drops of water from her lips, and this time, when I moan, I'm aware of it.

She looks straight ahead, neither one of us breathing. With my food untouched, I get up from my seat. She's still looking straight ahead, and when I look down at her chest, I notice she's not breathing. I offer her my hand, and with no words exchanged between us, she takes it.

I lead her up the stairs and to my bedroom. She doesn't seem surprised when she steps into the room. This is the only space in the house with actual furniture. I walk her to the front of my king-sized, four-poster bed without break eye contact as I pull her shirt out of her pants and unbutton it.

CHAPTER 8

MIRANDA



I can't remember the last time I breathed. All I can focus on are the blue eyes I can't look away from and the throbbing between my legs. It's like certain parts of me are awake for the first time. There was never a time when I felt like this. When I was this ready for what I know is only moments away. Sure, I can count on one finger the number of sexual partners I've had, but even after months of dating and hours of foreplay, I was never this alive.

I stand there, immobile, as he undoes the last button of my shirt. He exhales loudly as he takes the shirt off, revealing my plain, black bra.

I watch as his nostrils flare. He raises both hands up, letting them hover over my bra, waiting for me to either deny or grant him access. He must take my silence as consent because his large palms cover both my breasts.

I finally expel the breath I've been holding as my nipples pebble at just his briefest touch. He takes a step closer to me, and as he continues to slowly rub my breasts through the bra, I raise my own hands and slowly unbutton his plain white shirt, revealing smooth tanned skin.

Eager to see the rest of him, I peel the shirt off his body and toss it to the floor. His white t-shirt goes next, revealing his muscular chest. Emboldened, I reach for his belt and start to fumble with the buckle. He must lose his patience because he lets go of my breasts, pushes my hands aside, and has the belt tossed across the room in seconds. Eager to touch him again, I unbutton and unzip his jeans and pull them down, unintentionally pulling down his boxer briefs as well.

When he kicks them away, I finally break eye contact and look down, amazed at the sight of him. He was right. There is nothing tiny about it. He's longer and thicker than anything I've ever seen as his erection points straight at me. I rub my thumb over the tip of his cock, feeling the slippery moisture on my skin.

He closes his eyes and stills at my touch, but before I can rub him again, he pulls my hands away.

"This will be over before it begins if you keep touching me like that."

It's his turn to fumble with my belt. I help him push my jeans and underwear down.

"You're so beautiful," he says, his voice hoarse. He cups my breasts again briefly before he removes my bra. When I'm completely bare before him, he drops to his knees in front of me. I feel no embarrassment when he presses his face into my pussy, inhaling my scent. He parts my lips, and I almost come undone the minute his tongue touches my clit. My knees buckle, but his hands on my hips keep me steady.

"You taste better than I ever could have imagined," he says, his voice rasping out the words. Having never experienced this before, all I can do is fill his bedroom with my loud moans.

"Oh, shit," I practically yell into the room when I feel his tongue slip inside of me. I know I'll have bruises on my hips from his grasp, but I'm too far gone to care. Ready to protest when he removes his tongue from inside of me, the words die in my throat the minute he starts sucking on my clit.

"Fuck. Jesus!" I yell, sticking both hands in his hair. As steady as he's holding me, this time, my knees do buckle. I let out an unladylike sound when I come on his face. I shudder against him. Despite the heat in the room, my skin is covered in goosebumps.

He still hasn't removed his face from between my legs, and he pulls on

my clit before kissing it. Finally, he stands up, the evidence of what we have done all over his face.

Then he takes my hand and walks me the rest of the way to the bed.

I can feel the slick moisture at the apex of my thighs as I climb on the bed and lie on my back. Before I can fully relax onto his plush mattress, he's on top of me, his big body covering mine completely.

When he sticks his head in my neck and inhales my scent, I almost lose it, but I rein myself in. He kisses my neck, trailing the tip of his tongue against my hot skin. He raises his head and looks down at me, and when he readjusts his body, I feel his heavy cock bob on my abdomen.

Unable to hold myself back any longer, I lift my head off his pillow, stick my hands in his silky hair, and push his head down to meet me halfway. Finally feeling his full lips on mine is my undoing. I open my mouth and welcome his tongue inside as we kiss deep and hard, reveling at tasting myself on his tongue. I run my hands down his back, cupping his toned, firm ass and grind into him. When he lifts his body up a fraction, I spread my legs as wide as possible and grind some more, coating him with my desire.

He moans in my mouth before kissing his way down my body. He stops at my breasts, alternating as he licks and sucks each nipple. I can practically feel my eyes roll to the back of my head as he kisses and touches me. I bend my knees and throw one leg over his body and lose myself to the sensations of his touch.

I no longer care that I'm not only in the home of a man I've known less than twenty-four hours, but that I'm also in his bed, ready to welcome him into my body. The fact that he's my mother's boss no longer matters in this moment. All I can think about is the way his body feels on top of mine, how his lips feel against my skin, and how his mouth felt on my pussy.

"I want you so much, Miranda," he says. Having never heard those words

from a man before, all I can do is whimper and nod. “I want to take my time, but I don’t think I can.” When he leaves my body, I let out a groan of despair, but he’s back in no time after reaching for a condom in the drawer from his nightstand.

He rips the package with his teeth and sheaths himself in no time.

“Okay?” he asks, and I nod. Satisfied with my answer, he climbs back on top, and I spread my legs again. He slides his way home in one, slow stroke, filling me completely and pushing me into the mattress.

“Oh, God,” I moan against his mouth. He kisses me deeply, only giving me a moment to adjust to his large girth. He thrusts slowly at first, but as soon as I wrap both legs around him, he increases his pace.

Wanting to feel all of him, I turn my face and kiss his lips. The kiss starts chaste, but the minute I open my mouth to breathe, the kiss turns wet and desperate.

“Nick,” I moan against his mouth after his deep thrust nearly sends me flying over the edge for the second time tonight. He must like the sound of his name on my lips because he thrusts again, harder this time.

I forget everything but him as the kiss deepens and I feel him pinch one of my nipples between his thumb and forefinger.

“I’m coming, Nick,” I moan as my head falls back against the pillow and I tremble underneath him.

“Miranda,” he says right before he bites my bottom lip. He thrusts one last time before he stills on top of me, letting out one final grunt. I grab his ass and squeeze the taut muscle. Finally, he collapses on top of me, his breath hot against my neck.

Much too soon, he rolls off my body, leaving me exposed. He gets off the bed, and I watch as he walks his muscular body to the master bathroom. While he’s gone, I climb underneath his white down comforter, shielding my

nakedness. I close my eyes as I listen to the water run in the bathroom. He comes back a few seconds after I hear the toilet flush.

He dims the light and climbs in the bed, pulling me into his arms. He kisses my temple and glides his hand to my stomach, where he strokes my skin repeatedly.

“What are you thinking?” he asks, finally breaking the silence.

I turn on my side, and he does the same, putting us face-to-face.

“I’m thinking that I just slept with a man I’ve known less than twenty-four hours. And how that’s the least of it because that man is my mother’s boss. Lastly, I’m thinking I have no business being here, but there’s no place else on earth I’d rather be.”

He closes his eyes and reaches for my face, stroking my bottom lip with his thumb. I can smell myself on his fingers, and that realization is like a light switch, turning my body back on.

“We should talk about all of that,” he says. “But not tonight. Tonight, I only want us to focus on each other.” He kisses me again, and this time, the kiss is gentle and slow. We taste each other, and when he puts his hands on my breasts, I close the remaining space between us, grab one of his hands, and put it between my legs, showing him exactly what he does to me.

CHAPTER 9

NICK



By the time we come back downstairs, our food has turned ice cold, and we're so dehydrated, we both grab fresh bottles of water. I drink all of mine before warming our food. I curse the fact that I don't have any furniture downstairs other than the two stools I keep at the kitchen island because I want nothing more than for Miranda to sit on my lap while she's wearing nothing but my t-shirt and a lacy black thong.

"You're a good cook," she says between bites. I grab a napkin and wipe the side of her mouth. She's playful as she reaches out to my plate and takes one of my potatoes. She surprises me when she doesn't eat it but offers it to me instead. I don't look away as I wrap my lips around her fork and purposely moan as I pull the fork out of my mouth.

"I swear I heard you moan yesterday at the party when you kept watching me as I was eating."

"You probably did. I couldn't keep my eyes off you the entire night. You drove me crazy."

She blushes but remains quiet. I know what's on her mind, and I'm relieved when she doesn't broach the subject.

When we finish eating, I clear our plates and load them in the dishwasher. When I turn around, she's off the stool, but she's back in a few seconds, holding her purse in her hand. She sits back down and pulls out a package of birth control pills, takes a pill out and washes it down with the rest of her water.

Despite having fucked her twice upstairs, seeing her take that pill has reawakened my body. I leave the now clean sink, walk around to where she's sitting, pull her out of the stool, and wrap my arms around her body. She folds herself into me, and when she moans, I know she can feel my erection through my basketball shorts.

"You have a lot of stamina for an old guy," she says.

"I wasn't too old when you were riding my dick thirty minutes ago."

She tries to move out of my arms, but I easily restrain her, spin her around, lean down and kiss her soft lips.

She stands on her tiptoes to kiss me back, but that's not enough. I put my hands under her and lift her. She's weightless in my arms as she wraps her legs around me.

"Spend the night with me," I tell her. "Please."

She acquiesces with only a curt nod. As soon as I set her down, she pulls out her phone and types a text.

"Just letting my mom know I'm spending the night with a friend. I don't want her to worry."

"Come." I pick her up again, loving the feel of her legs wrapped around me, and carry her up the stairs and back to my bedroom. I dump her on the bed, and dive on top of her, laughing at her shriek of surprise.

"You'll pull your back doing that, oldie."

I climb under the sheets with her and quickly pull off her panties. "You won't be needing those," I say as I toss them across the room.

I grab the remote next to my bed and turn on the TV, and because I know she's crazy about Christmas, I turn on Christmas carols, satisfied when she starts humming along to Nat King Cole's version of "The Christmas Song."

"You won't need those either," she says, pulling at the waistband of my shorts.

“Whatever my lady wants,” I say, stripping out of not just my shorts, but my t-shirt as well. She does the same, and soon, she’s naked while I’m holding her in my arms.

My dick hardens as I stroke right below her navel. I move lower, and spread her lips apart, and just like the last two times, she’s hot, wet, and ready. She puts both hands on my chest and pushes me onto my back, but she doesn’t straddle me like before. She kisses her way down my body and slowly licks the tip of my dick. She teases me mercilessly, and when I don’t think I can take it anymore, she surprises me by taking my entire cock into her mouth.

“Damn,” I say as I look at her bob her head up and down on my cock. I get even harder and feel a tingle at the base of my spine, so I pull out of her mouth.

I don’t give her any time to question me as I flip her on her back, quickly getting on top of her.

“I need to have you, Miranda,” I say as I look at her in the eyes.

“Have me, Nick.”

“I want you with no condom. I saw you take the pill, and I’m clean. You’re the first woman I’ve been with in about a year.”

“I’m clean too.”

Relieved, I slide inside with no barrier and almost come just at the first sensation.

“I knew you’d feel good. And taste good,” I say as I suck on the base of her collarbone.

CHAPTER 10

MIRANDA



The morning light brings the full realization of what I've done. I reach over and feel the empty space next to me. I finally look at the clock when I notice that the shower in the bathroom next door is running.

“Shit!” After letting my mother's boss fuck me in his bed, with no condom the last time, I fell asleep and slept for seven hours straight. Still groggy from both the sex and sleep, I sit up in the bed as I come to grips with the events of last night.

I've slept with a man I just met. Not just any man, but the one my mother works for. What if he does this kind of thing all the time? What if I'm just a notch on his belt, and he gets some kind of thrill out of sleeping with young women?

This house is barely furnished. What if this isn't even where he lives, but where he brings his conquests?

“Smart, Miranda. Really fucking smart.” Having no time for a pity party, I run around the room picking up my discarded clothes. After dressing, I look at the messy bed and decide to fix it. I smooth out the crisp white sheets, noting a spot in the middle of the bed, bringing back the memories of our joined bodies just a few hours ago.

My cheeks flush at the thought. I close my eyes briefly and remember every kiss, every touch, every damn sensation. When I hear the water shut off, I put the heavy comforter down and smooth it as much as possible.

Nick walks out of the bathroom, a pillow of white mist behind him before

he shuts the door.

“Good morning,” he says, crossing the room and kissing me on the lips.

“Good morning,” I say, avoiding eye contact as I find my socks.

“I was thinking we could go out for breakfast. I’d cook, but I forgot to get breakfast food when I was at the store yesterday.” He walks into his closet and picks out another white button-down shirt and a pair of gray slacks.

“I can’t,” I say quickly. “I have to be at work at ten, and I need to go home to shower and change. I’ll grab something when I get home, so don’t worry about it. I’m not even hungry right now.”

“I left a toothbrush for you in the bathroom if you want to freshen up.”

“Thank you,” I say wondering how many extra toothbrushes he has.

“Are you sure you don’t want breakfast? I can have something delivered,” he says a few minutes later when I emerge out of the bathroom.

“I can’t. I have to get home.”

He nods, and after putting socks on his feet, he takes my hand and we walk down the stairs together. We’re both quiet as I put on my boots, coat, and hat. He walks me to my car, and after kissing me in the middle of his driveway, he opens the car door for me.

“What time do you get off work?”

“Eight,” I tell him as I start up the car.

“Will you come back tonight?” I look into his blue eyes and shake my head.

“I can’t. I have some family stuff I have to do.”

He nods sadly. “Text me when you get home.” He kisses me one more time and closes the door. He stands in the driveway, finally leaving my sight when I make a left turn onto the main road.

Once I reach a red light at the intersection, I lay my head on the steering wheel, still not believing what happened between me and a man I met just

two nights ago. When I get home twenty minutes later I'm relieved to see both of my parents' cars are gone.

I cannot let what happened last night happen again.

CHAPTER 11

NICK



Two hours after Miranda left my house, she still has not texted. My plan was for us to go out to breakfast and talk about how things between us would work, but she shut me down. She tried to avoid looking at me, but I could see the uncertainty in her eyes. I could tell from her body language she was having second thoughts about our night together.

After finishing my coffee, unable to stop myself, I pull out my phone and send a text.

Me: Did you get home okay? You didn't text me.

I slide the phone in my pocket and continue my search for more coffee almost colliding with Mona Moore on my way to the kitchen. She sidesteps and turns to the coffee machine.

“Mona,” I say. “Good morning. I hope you had a nice Sunday with your family.” She purses her lips and nods, yes. It’s the first attempt I’ve made at informal conversation since the accident involving the mug. Part of me wants to tell her I know her Sunday did not include her daughter since she was with me, naked and spread wide in my bed. The more mature part of me knows I’d never say such a thing, so I try a different tactic.

“Did you have a good time at the party Saturday night? It was nice to see everyone outside of the office.” She looks at me, her eyes sharp as she gives me a once-over, likely trying to figure out why I’m being so talkative.

“I did.” That’s all I get. She turns back to the coffee machine, no longer acknowledging me.

We stand there while the coffee brews, neither one of us looking at the other as I try to think back to our first meeting and how I possibly could have offended this woman.

“Any plans for Christmas?” I ask, trying again.

Before I can think back to my first week here, her phone moves across the counter and the name Miranda flashes across the screen. I almost pick it up, but Mona’s hand snatches it before I can.

“Hey, baby girl. Did you have a good time last night?” The coffee finishes brewing, and I pour myself a mug as I do my best to eavesdrop. I open the fridge and pretend to look for creamer.

“Okay, baby. I’ll meet you at the mall when your shift ends, and we can do some Christmas shopping. I know exactly what I want to get for your father, but I’m going to need your help with your brother’s gift because I have no idea.” She stops talking, and I hold my breath until she speaks again.

“Sounds good. Love you too.” She ends the call and walks out of the kitchen. Like a fool, I check my phone and find nothing. No missed calls. No text messages.

Irritated, I return to my office, close the door, and try to focus on my bid for a construction project that starts this summer, but I can’t concentrate on anything right now.

The only thing I can think about is last night. The sounds she made when I first sank into her. How her brown eyes would roll to the back of her head when she came. The feel of her small hands stroking my hair and gliding down my back.

I knew I should have tried harder to miss out on that fucking party Saturday night. I don’t know what the hell possessed me to go after her like

that, but I don't regret it. If only the circumstances were different.

The hot liquid is bitter in my mouth, and my stomach growls loudly in my office, reminding me that I skipped breakfast. My phone finally buzzes, and when I pull it out of my pocket, I breathe a sigh of relief when the name I've programmed for her flashes across my screen.

"Hey," I say, doing my best to sound calm.

"Hey," she says back.

When she remains quiet, I check the time and say, "Are you on your way to work?"

"Yeah." An awkward silence falls between us, and I feel a sense of dread take over. "Listen," she continues, "last night was really nice, but I can't see you again, Nick."

"Why not?" I ask as my heart rate accelerates.

"Because you're thirteen years older than I am, and you're my mother's boss. I can't continue to lie to her."

"We won't lie. We'll tell her and go public."

"Go public? What exactly does that even mean?" she asks, and for a second, I'm reminded of how young she is, but then I also remind myself that I don't care.

"I never intended for you to be a secret. We'll tell the truth. We met at the party, and now we're dating."

She doesn't speak for a while, but I can hear her breathing into the phone.

"Have you ever dated a black woman before?" she asks, her voice small. I pull the phone from my ear, close my eyes, and count to ten.

"Do you really care about that? Or are you just making excuses? In what reality do you live, Miranda? We're in the twenty-first century. Who gives a shit about that? I don't. Do you?" I lean back in my chair, totally unprepared for her to throw that roadblock at me this morning.

She takes a deep breath and says with a tremor in her voice, “I’m sorry. I can’t. I’ll never forget you or last night, but one night is all it was. I have to go.”

She ends the call before I have a chance to respond.

CHAPTER 12

MIRANDA



He hasn't called or texted in the past two days, but he's all I've thought about. Hours after breaking things off, I found my heart in my throat when I checked my text messages. There were three bubbles indicating he was typing a message. I held my breath and waited, but a message never came through.

I spent the entire first night awake, reliving the night before in my mind, wishing I were back in his bed. Kissing him. Tasting him. Feeling him inside of me. Thankfully, work has been busy. Unfortunately, today is my day off, but I'm hoping they call me and ask me to come in.

When I'm working, I can focus on customers and keeping the store organized, but when I'm home all I do is think of how my life has completely upended in a matter of hours.

I lie in the middle of my bed, which is much smaller than his, and stare at the ceiling. It's almost lunchtime in the middle of the week, and I'm dressed, ready to go to work should I receive the call. I made sure to let my manager know I'd be available, which is why when my phone buzzes on my nightstand, I let out a whoop as I reach for it, only to be disappointed when I see Mom flashing on my screen.

"Hey, Mom," I say, doing my best to sound upbeat.

"Hey, baby girl. Did they call you in for work?"

"Not yet."

"Do your mom a favor. I left my lunch at home, and I don't have time to

go out today. Can you bring it for me? I want to show you the pictures from the Christmas party anyway. You look so pretty in them.”

My stomach drops at the thought of going into the office and possibly seeing him, and I curse the fact that I’m not at work this morning.

“Sure,” I mutter. Desperate for any information about Nick, I ask, “No problem, but how come you won’t have time to go out for lunch?”

“I have a meeting with the boss I need to prepare for. He’s doing a bid, so we need to discuss budgets.”

“You two getting along better?” I ask. “He didn’t seem all that bad at the Christmas party.”

She’s silent for a minute. I can imagine her face now. It’s probably pinched as she thinks about her boss.

“Trust me, he was on his best behavior the other night. The man has the manners of a pack of hyenas. Thank God I barely see him, and the few times I did see him today, he was walking around here like someone kicked his puppy.”

My heart constricts at her words, and my head spins at the thought of being responsible for his sadness.

“Oh,” I say, all emotion gone from my voice. “I’ll be there in about twenty minutes with your food.”

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I inhale and exhale about a million times after parking my car next to my mother’s. In and out. All I need to do is go in, give my mother her lunch, turn around and walk out. That’s what I tell myself as I walk across the parking lot and through the front door.

I tell myself the plan again as I ride up the elevator to the third floor. My heart is in my throat as I cross the threshold and am greeted with a smile from

Sherry. Luckily for me, she's on the phone and can't engage in conversation.

My plan to drop off the food and leave is derailed the moment my mom sees me. She not only takes the food from me, but she grabs my hand and practically pulls me to the kitchen. She points at a wall in the corner while she sticks her food in one of the microwaves. I do my best to pretend to be interested in the pictures, but when I see the photo of all the employees, with Nick and Joe Bain in the middle, I can't look any further. The quick glance doesn't stop me from noticing how handsome he looks, and how it was just a day after that picture was taken that I was naked in his arms.

"Mom, I'm going to go." She takes her food out, but before I get a chance to leave, Sherry runs into the kitchen to tell her she has an important call on hold.

"Shoot! Sorry, baby girl. I've got to go. I'll see you at home." She snatches her food and runs out of the kitchen before I can form a response. I turn and gaze at the picture of Nick one more time. Since the room is empty, I reach for the photo and trace my finger across his lips.

With a heavy sigh and a heavy heart, I walk toward the door only to collide with a muscular chest. I start to fall backward, but a pair of strong arms grab my hips, steadying me.

Even before I lose myself in his blue eyes, I know who those hands belong to. We're both quiet, but when he rubs small circles on my hips with his fingers, I part my lips and inhale. I can feel the heat in my body rise as he looks down at my lips. When he removes his hands from my body, I feel empty, and when he walks back to the door, I become lost.

My heart hammers inside my chest when he sticks his head out the door and looks in both directions. He promptly closes the door, and with two purposeful strides, he's in front of me, his hands cupping my face as his lips capture mine.

It's like water after being lost in the desert. Lost completely with just one kiss, I open my mouth to him and welcome him home. I wrap my arms around his neck and stick my hands in his hair, moaning into his mouth as he deepens the kiss. He tastes of coffee and comfort.

He abruptly ends the kiss, leaving me stumbling and holding on to a table for support. I put both hands on my cheeks to erase the blush that I know has pinkened my skin. We're both panting, desperate for breath as we stare at each other.

"I want you to go to my house and wait for me," he says, his voice rushed and desperate. "Please, wait here for a second." He practically runs out of the kitchen, leaving me time to calm my beating heart by drinking cold water.

He's back in an instant, and I can do nothing but stare at him as he approaches. He grabs my hand and puts a key in it.

"Go. I have a meeting, but that won't take more than an hour. I'll leave right after. Please, Miranda. Say you'll go home and wait for me." He grabs my face again, leans down, and rests his forehead on mine. I let out one shaky breath, and with all the strength I can muster, I step away from him.

Still unable to speak, I nod. He exhales, his shoulders relaxing at my acquiescence. He walks back to the door, and instead of leaving like I expect, he looks outside the door, comes back, and kisses my forehead before finally walking away.

"I'll text you the code for the alarm."

CHAPTER 13

NICK



I hold my breath the entire ten-minute drive to my house, only exhaling when I see her car parked in my driveway. Instead of opening the garage and pulling my Range Rover inside, I decide to park behind Miranda, effectively blocking her in.

Not surprising, with the lack of furniture, the first floor is void of her presence. I toss my bag in the corner, and without even bothering to take my coat or my shoes off, I take the stairs two at a time and sprint to my bedroom only to find her fast asleep under my down comforter. As quietly as possible, I take off my coat and shoes, and slide in beside her. As soon as I put my arm around her, she nestles into my body, fitting me perfectly.

She stirs in my arms and turns. Our eyes lock the minutes she opens hers.

“Hey,” she says, smiling.

“Hey,” I say back as I stroke her cheek. I’ve thought of nothing but her since she left here, and since she ended things on Monday, all I’ve done is envision her in this bed. Finding her in the office today saved me a trip. It was only a matter of time before I tracked her down at her job. Unable to wait any longer, I kiss her again, pulling her closer.

We manage to undress each other, only breaking the kiss for a fraction of time. Once we’re naked, I climb on top of her, desperate for more, desperate for the contact of our skin. In one swift movement, I sink into her wet pussy.

^^^

“You hungry?” I ask about an hour later, having my fill of her for the moment. She lays her head on my chest as I glide my fingertips across her hipbone. She lifts her head and wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“I can go for dessert,” she says as she grabs my dick. It went from soft to semi-hard in an instant, but I grab her hand and move it away. “Something thick and creamy. And sweet.”

“We need to talk first,” I tell her.

“First? I know what we did first, and it didn’t involve talking. Maybe some moaning.”

She reaches for me again, and this time, when her hand wraps around me, I turn to granite. I move her hand away and climb out of the bed and walk to my closet. After putting on some comfortable clothes, I grab a robe for her.

She’s still lying comfortably under the covers with her eyes closed, arms behind her head, and a smile on her lips.

“Let’s go downstairs. I’ll make us a late lunch while we talk.” She gets out of the bed and holds out her hand for my robe. I can’t help but admire her perfect breasts as she covers her body.

I hold my hand out to her, and when she takes it, I lead us down the stairs.

“You know what?” I ask a few minutes later after opening the fridge several times. “I need to go grocery shopping. How do you feel about pizza?” I pull out a menu from the drawer right next to my dishwasher and spread it out in front of her.

After deciding on a large pepperoni and two small side salads, I take the stool next to her. The room goes quiet, and she does her best to avoid my gaze, but I grab her chin and force her to look at me.

“Staying away from each other doesn’t work for me, Miranda.” She opens her mouth to speak, but I put my hand against her lips, silencing her. “I know. I’ve heard all of your concerns. Your mother works for me. The age

difference and my lack of melanin.” I give her a smile to let her know I’m kidding, and she rolls her eyes at me. “Did I get everything?”

“It’s not funny. We have some serious issues, Nick. We only stayed away from each other for two days. Maybe we didn’t give it enough time. We didn’t even know each other a week ago.”

“I gave it as much time as I could. If I didn’t run into you today, I was going to the mall to find you. The issues shouldn’t stop us from being together. A week ago doesn’t matter. I know your main concern is the fact that I’m your mother’s boss, but I meant what I said two days ago. I don’t want this to be a secret. Let’s tell her.”

“Tell her what exactly?” she asks.

“That we’re in a relationship. Look, the way you were upstairs tells me you didn’t like being away from me either.” I brush the hair off her forehead and stroke her cheek. She leans down and kisses my hand before she looks into my eyes. “We have a connection. I know you feel it. I felt it the instant I looked into your eyes. We can figure everything else out. I promise.”

She lays her hand on top of mine as I stroke her cheek. She closes her eyes, and I imagine she’s thinking about what a relationship between us would look like.

“I feel the connection too. I haven’t stopped thinking about you since I left here Monday morning.”

Relief washes over me. I pull her from the stool and place her on my lap, kissing the side of her neck.

“I’m glad to hear that.” I kiss her neck again and feel her shudder against me. I slide my hand inside her robe, giving her small breast a hard squeeze.

“Did you think about me?” she asks.

“Every second.”

“This is crazy, right?” She turns in my arms, stands up, and puts her

forehead on mine. “We just met. We should be able to walk away from each other. When I broke up with my last boyfriend, I just went on with life. I was more upset at losing my old job than him, but when I ended things with you, I was miserable.”

“Let’s just go with it, okay?” I run my hand over her body, and even with the thick robe covering her, I still feel her curves.

“Is that your old man advice? Just go with it.” She runs a hand through my hair at the exact moment I slap her hard on the ass. She lets out a little yelp, and the impact of the slap pushes her closer to me. She starts to say something, but I stand, pick her up, and toss her over my shoulder. She yells and laughs at the same time, and I tease her by spinning around.

I do it several times as I laugh right along with her. The only thing causing me to stop is the ringing doorbell. When I put her down, she’s so dizzy, she has to hold on to the counter.

“Keep calling me old,” I tell her, slapping her butt again before I open the door and grab our food.

CHAPTER 14

NICK



“I need some furniture,” I say between bites of pizza. I reach over and adjust Miranda’s pillow. Once satisfied with it, I grab both of her legs and lay them across my lap.

“I know this floor can’t be good for your old man back.” She wiggles on the hardwood floor to make her point. I tickle one of her feet, catching her off guard and causing her to drop her slice of pizza on her plate. While she’s still distracted, I lift one of her legs and spread her open, getting a great view of her pussy.

“Hey! Perv.” She makes no move to pull her leg from me. In fact, she spreads wider, and I can’t help but run my knuckles over her clit. She sighs at my touch and when I see the lust in her eyes, I drop her leg.

“When’s your next day off?” I ask her.

“Friday, but then I have to work the entire weekend.” She does this adorable pout.

“You and me then. I’ll take the day off and we’ll go furniture shopping.”

Her eyes light up at the thought, and I find myself getting excited right along with her.

“And a Christmas tree and decorations.”

“Deal,” I tell her. “When do you want to tell your mom about us? Tomorrow?”

She stops chewing, her eyes widening at my questions. She drops the half-eaten slice on the plate and reaches for my hand. I prepare myself for

whatever she has to say, knowing I'm not going to like it.

"Let's give it some time before we tell her." She squeezes my hand, but when I don't reply right away, she says, "You might be sick of me in a week."

I pull my hand out of hers, stand up, and take my plate to the kitchen. She follows me, her bare feet tapping against the hardwood.

"I just want us to get to know each other first. If I were dating anyone else, I wouldn't introduce him to my parents just yet. Let's give it a few weeks." She drops her plate on the island and wraps her arm around me, resting her head between my shoulder blades. "Trust me, you'll want to run and hide when she finds out."

"No, I won't. We're both adults, and we're not doing anything wrong." I turn to face her. "I think we should tell her now, but if you want to wait, we'll wait. Not for long, though."

"Okay," she readily agrees. "Not for long. I don't want to hide you either."

"Good." I lean down and kiss her lips. I can feel her relax against me, and with her breasts pressing against my chest, I feel my cock start to stiffen in my sweats.

I pick her up with one hand and run up the stairs, the mess in the kitchen forgotten.

CHAPTER 15

MIRANDA



It was hell leaving Nick last night, but after asking me to spend the night about a dozen times, I told him I had to go home. He reluctantly let me leave, but we've been communicating nonstop since.

After receiving a call from my mother telling me she and my father are going to spend the weekend with my aunt and uncle in Hartford, I knew exactly what I needed to do. I feel slightly guilty for feeling relief that my parents had to go to Connecticut for the weekend, especially considering it's because my uncle had to have emergency surgery, but they've freed me to come and go as I please without the need to explain, or in this case, lie.

"Hey, Mom." I have the phone on speaker as I put some clothes in an overnight bag. "Is Uncle Lee okay?"

"He's going to be fine, baby girl. They got his appendix out and he should be good as new. I've got to run, but I'll see you Sunday. I'll call you tomorrow." Relieved at the news, I go back to my packing and think of how surprised Nick will be when I show up tonight.

The plan is for me to meet him at his house in the morning, but things have changed. My phone vibrates and a text with from Nick pops up.

Nick: Can't wait to see you tomorrow.

Me: Neither can I. Leaving work. Will call you soon.

He sends a kiss emoji, and after freshening my makeup, I throw my duffel bag over my shoulder and practically run to my car.

His driveway is empty when I pull in. Unsurprising, since he tends to

park inside the garage. Just as I turn off my car, my phone vibrates.

Nick: Are you home yet?

I smile wide as I run to his front door and pull out the key he refused to take back yesterday. As expected, the downstairs is dark and empty. I hear his footsteps as I punch in the code to his alarm. By the time he makes it to the bottom step, I'm already across the room, and I jump into his arms, barely having any time to admire his bare chest.

“Surprise!”

He doesn't ask any questions. He simply kisses me as if I've been gone for months instead of one day.

“I thought I wasn't going to see you until tomorrow?” He puts me down, walks over by the front door, picks up my duffel bag, and throws it over his shoulder. He follows me upstairs to his bedroom and puts the bag in his closet. As soon as his hands are empty, I jump into his arms again and wrap my legs around him.

“I thought I'd surprise you.”

“Best surprise.” He kisses me senseless. “But you have on way too many clothes.” He puts me down and helps me undress before he pulls off his sweatpants. I reach for him, and he takes me back into his arms.

He walks backward to the bed and lies on his back, never breaking the kiss the entire time.

“Straddle me,” he says, but he doesn't let me go right away. He kisses me deeply, holding the back of my head, sucking the very air from my lungs. When he finally lets go, I straddle his hips, reaching to grab his hard cock. I lift my hips, ready to slide down on him, but he lifts me, placing me on his face.

“Oh,” I say, exhaling at the unexpected movement and even more unexpected sensation. His tongue circles my lips, and when he sucks on my

clit, I slide off his face and nearly fall off the bed.

“Stay still, sweetness.” He lifts me and places me back, and this time, I hold on to the headboard for support. I close my eyes and throw my head back as he feasts on me. I let out a little shriek when his tongue enters me, but soon he changes tactics and starts sucking on my clit again.

“Oh, Nick. Oh. Don’t stop.” I can feel the build up from my lower belly. It takes over my entire body. I tremble on top of his face, losing complete control of myself. His strong hands on my hips are the only things that keep me steady. When he does one last suck, I scream and shudder. He doesn’t stop, and I’m too lost in ecstasy to focus on my embarrassment. I shudder one last time, and this time, I feel myself blush when a gush of fluid coats his mouth and chin.

Completely spent and out of breath, I collapse on top of him, but he gives me no time to catch my breath. He flips me onto my back and climbs on top of me.

He kisses me deeply, forcing his tongue into my mouth.

“Why do I have the feeling that no one’s ever made you come like that before me?” he asks against my mouth.

“No one’s ever done that to me before you.”

“I’m the only man who’s ever eaten your pussy?”

I nod, not willing to break the kiss again. I suck on his tongue, all embarrassment from earlier gone.

“Spread your legs for me.” I spread as wide as possible, and with no other warning, he plunges his cock inside of me.

CHAPTER 16

NICK



“What about this one?” She sticks my iPad in my face, and I pretend to look at it for a second before waving it off.

“That’s like the millionth sectional you’ve shown me today.”

She mutters something under her breath and continues to flip through photos. Unable to help myself, I reach over and wiggle the glasses on her face.

“You look really sexy in those. How come I’ve never seen you with glasses before?”

“I wear contacts, but I forgot to bring them with me. How about this one?” This time, I don’t bother to look at the iPad. I take it from her and lay it on the nightstand. She crosses her arms, doing her best to look angry, but all I can do is laugh when she gives me her sternest look.

“Really? You’re going to get mad at me while you’re sitting on top of me in nothing but my T-shirt? And no panties.” I whisper the last part, and she rewards me with a blush. I pull her crossed arms apart and pull her on top of my body. She lands on my naked chest with a thud and a squeal.

“Why put on panties when you keep taking them off?” she asks. I run my hand down her spine and cup her bare ass. I know the exact moment she feels my hardening against her stomach because her eyes widen.

“You’re so beautiful,” I say as I pull her to my side and kiss her temple. “The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Stop,” she says.

“It’s true.”

“You might need these.” She takes off her glasses and hands them to me. I grab them and put them on top of the iPad. “Why don’t you tell me why you live in a house that only has furniture in the master bedroom. Where were you living before this?”

“Chicago. I went to Northwestern for college and never came back east permanently. I had made a life there, and then it turned to shit.”

“What happened?” she asks, lifting her head to look at me. She reaches up and pushes hair off my forehead.

“I was in a relationship and it fell apart. I sold my business. I was planning on going to Bali for a year, but then I got the call from Uncle Joe, so here I am. And here we are. I traded Bali for snow and a girl who is obsessed with all things Christmas. Do you think I made the right choice?”

She furrows her brows and nibbles on that luscious bottom lip, deep in thought.

“Travel? But I thought—” She stops talking when her phone vibrates on the nightstand. “Shit! It’s my mom. Let me take this.” She hops off the bed, grabs the phone, and runs into the closet.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

“What’s wrong with Bob’s Discount Furniture?” she asks. I give her a look before turning back to the road. “Not even Jordan’s Furniture? They have the Enchanted Village and the Polar Express ride!”

I shake my head at her again, but I can’t help the laugh that escapes.

“Your Christmas leggings and matching sweater aren’t enough? What about these Christmas carols you’re forcing me to listen to? Now you need Christmas rides on top of everything else?”

“Yes, Nick! Christmas is magical, and it only happens once a year! You

need to get into the Christmas spirit, and stop wearing so much gray.”

“You wear enough red and green for the both of us, but,” I reach over and put my hand between her thighs, “maybe we can sneak away for a night. I know a place in New Hampshire that a Christmas addict like yourself would love.”

“Maybe,” she says, giving me a sly look before glancing away. When she sees where I’m heading, she looks back at me in surprise.

“You’re getting on the turnpike? Where are you taking me?”

I ignore her and skip to the next song. “Not even someone as beautiful as you can get me to listen to the Chipmunks.”

^^^

She’s pure nervous excitement when I pull into the parking lot of Perigold. By the time I walk to her side of the truck, she’s so busy looking at the building, she doesn’t realize that I’ve opened the door for her.

“Madam,” I say, clearing my throat. She looks at me, pulls out her phone, and punches in the name of the store. I quickly snatch it from her and put it in my pocket. “We have an appointment.”

“Appointment? Who makes an appointment at a furniture store?”

“I do.” I unbuckle her seatbelt and lift her out of the car. She’s wearing a pair of tan Uggs, the kind with the fur that comes to the middle of the calves. She looks from the building and back to me, most likely thinking about her next words, but when a few snowflakes suddenly start to fall, she shrieks in awe and spins around with her head lifted toward the sky.

While she’s looking around in wonderment, I lace our fingers together and walk us inside the building, where we are greeted by a middle-aged woman by the name of Nancy.

“And who is this?” Nancy asks, extending her hand to Miranda.

“This is my girlfriend, Miranda,” I say. Instead of taking Nancy’s hand,

Miranda looks at me, opening her eyes wide. I nudge her ribs with my elbow, and she finally snaps out of it and shakes Nancy's hand.

"Miranda," Nancy says. "What a beautiful name, and you are one lucky girl." Nancy wiggles her brows at Miranda and reaches up to pat my face.

"Nancy," I say, "show us your best sectionals."

For the first few minutes, Miranda walks next to me in a daze, her hand firmly in mine. She doesn't say much until Nancy walks us into a room with nothing but sectionals. As soon as we step into the room, she pulls her hand from mine and proceeds to sit on every sectional. She even lies down on the ones she really likes.

Nancy hands us a scanner, telling us to scan whatever we're interested in. For the next hour, Miranda goes on a scanning spree. As long as I nod at something she likes, she scans it. Like a kid in a candy shop, she scans furniture for every room in the house, including my empty office. It's not until we're almost done that something dawns on her.

"Nick," she whispers, "there are no prices on anything." I've noticed she has a nervous tic. Whenever something is bothering her, she bites on one of her thumbnails.

"Did you notice that, too?" I whisper back to her. "Let's go settle up with Nancy so we can go to lunch. And those Christmas decorations aren't going to buy themselves, pretty girl. My house is bare, and you're my last hope."

Nancy comes and escorts us to her office and prints out everything we've scanned. She turns on her computer screen, finds the layout of my house I provided, and arranges everything we've scanned in their respective rooms.

"Wow," Miranda says, clearly impressed.

"I'll take everything, Nancy." Nancy rubs her hands together, smiling like a Cheshire cat at the thought of her commission. She prints out the invoice, laying it on her desk for me to review.

Miranda slides her chair so close to mine, the armrests touch. I know the exact moment she sees the total amount, because she makes a loud choking while covering her mouth with both hands.

I lift slightly to pull my wallet out of my back pocket, and as I pull out my black American Express, I look up to find Nancy rubbing her fingertips together as she waits for the card. As soon as I put it in her hands, she jumps out of her seat and runs out of the room.

I put my arm around Miranda and pull her closer. She looks up at me, her big brown eyes marred with confusion. I lean down and kiss her full lips. As soon as she opens her mouth to me, Nancy returns with something for me to sign.

Once everything is done, she assures me everything will be delivered by Tuesday. She shakes both our hands and offers Miranda her card for any future needs.

Neither one of us speaks. She doesn't bother to stop to admire the falling snow that's now left a soft blanket on the ground. I open the door for her, and she climbs in. By the time I let myself in the car, she's looking straight ahead with that damn fingernail in her mouth.

"What's wrong?" I say as I start the car but make no move to leave the parking lot. "And don't say nothing. Something's obviously wrong."

She finally puts her hands down and turns her body to face me.

"That was a lot of money. I've never even heard of this place."

"I wouldn't have bought it if I couldn't afford it, Miranda. It's not a big deal."

"How can you afford that? Your business tanked and that's why you had to come back here and work for your uncle." I look at her, stunned at her words.

I grab her hands, which are now ice cold, and hold them in mine. I school

my features to appear as somber as possible to deliver my news. She watches me, her eyes wide, waiting for me to speak.

“I didn’t tell you before, but I’m an enforcer for the mob.” I didn’t think it was possible, but her eyes widen even more. Her mouth forms an *O*, she pulls her hands from mine and starts to reach for the door handle.

I grab her elbow and laugh so hard my entire body shakes. She flares her nostrils and playfully punches me in the arm.

“Very funny,” she says.

“You should have seen your face. And where were you going? You think you can run from the mob?” I start to laugh again, and she crosses her arms to look angry, but I can see a smile form on her lips.

“Whatever.”

“Miranda, I have money, okay.”

“What do you mean you have money?”

“And I’m not even going to ask you where you heard my business tanked because I have a pretty good idea. First of all, it did not tank. I sold it for a lot of money.”

“Oh. Okay, whatever.” She asks for her phone back, and when I give it to her, she skims through her apps, and seconds later, Christmas music starts to play.

“Okay. Whatever,” I mimic and still make no move to pull the car out of the parking lot.

“Can we go?” she asks, turning up the volume of the music. I get her attention when I turn the radio off.

“Not until you tell me what the problem is.”

“My problem is that I’m hungry, and you promised lunch.” I stare at her and wait for her to say more. “You want me to drive?”

“You know,” I say, turning my body to face her. “Most women would be

thrilled to find out that their boyfriend is rich.”

“Well, I’m not most women,” she says, turning the music back on, only for me to turn it off again.

“That’s one of the things I like about you, but I really don’t understand the issue here.” I reach over and adjust her hat. It’s the same style as the one she wore the first night she came to my house, but this one is all white. “You were so excited to come with me, and now you’re acting like I did something to upset you.”

“I’m not upset. I didn’t realize the circumstances. You just spent six figures on furniture like it’s six dollars, and I work at the mall making thirteen dollars an hour. I always knew we weren’t equal, but we’re really mismatched. I finally understand what you meant when you told me you have a lot of sugar.”

“You just got that?” Unable to help myself, I laugh, which makes her cross her arms and turn to her window. When I lay a hand on her thigh, she tries to shove it away.

“There’s more, sweets. The money isn’t just from my business. I have family money too. I’m telling you now, so we can move on with the rest of our day. I didn’t think the first time you’d be mad at me would be over something like this.”

“What family money? I thought Joe came from humble beginnings.”

“Yes, he does, but my mother, his sister, married a very rich man. My father was Dustin Jones.” Her eyes widen again.

“The writer?”

“The one and the same. When he died, he left half of everything to me and the other portion to my half-brother, Henry. He divorced my mother when I was a teenager. He was horrible to her. Cheated with anything female, and he rarely paid any attention to me. The final nail in the coffin for us as a

family was when me and my mom walked in on him with a woman in our house. I cut him out of my life the minute I left for college, but he tracked me down about ten years ago. He wanted to make amends and wanted me and Henry to act like brothers.”

She reaches for my hand, lifts it, and kisses my wrist, waiting for me to continue.

“My mother was his third wife, and Henry’s mother was his first. He’s fifteen years older than I am, and until ten years ago, I could count on one hand how many times we’ve ever been in the same room. I told both my father and Henry to fuck off, but when I told my mother and Uncle Joe, they encouraged me to give them a chance.”

“Did you?” she asks, her voice barely a whisper as she looks at me.

“I did. I had a few good years with my father, but he died about two years ago from lung cancer.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.” She unbuckles her seatbelt and practically flies into my arms. She hugs me tight and peppers my face with kisses. “What about your mom and Henry?”

“Henry and I talk about once a week. He lives in Newport with his wife and daughter. I talk to my mom almost every day. She’s remarried and lives in Providence now.” She breathes against me, seemingly relieved at my words.

“How come you don’t go by Jones?”

“I was angry with him. As soon as I was old enough, I took my mother’s maiden name. And Dustin Jones was his pen name. His real name was Nicolai Lupinski. I really wanted nothing to do with him for a long time, but I’m glad we had some years together.”

“Sounds like you and your mom are close.”

“Yeah. She’s going to love you, by the way.”

She looks away, but then I pull her chin so she can look at me again.

“Your dad had all those bestsellers.” I know what she’s getting at.

“Yes, and they made movies out of a bunch of them. One of his series is a television show right now.”

“Okay,” she says, elongating the word

“Okay, what, pretty girl?”

“Tell me about your last relationship,” she says, changing the subject. She slips out of my arms and buckles herself in her seat. Resigned, I reverse the car out of the parking spot and make my way onto the main street.

“Paige and I were together for a couple of years. My best friend and his fiancée introduced us, and she ended up working for me. We were together for three years and were planning a life together. Two months after burying my dad, I find out she was stealing from me and my company. It was one of the lowest points of my life. I ended things, sold the company, moved back east, and met this pretty girl.”

She’s silent for a while. When I get to a red light, I stop the car and look at her.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that. To lose your father and the woman you love all around the same time sounds awful.”

The last thing I fucking want is to talk about Paige. That relationship is as dead as my father. It’s buried and needs to stay there.

“I’m okay. I made peace with my dad, and we had almost a decade together. Paige was a mistake and a nonfactor. What’s really bothering you? Let’s get it out so we can get on with our day.” Just as I’m running my fingers through her hair, the light turns green and I go through the intersection.

“So, you and your brother split the royalties from your father’s work?”

“We do.”

“Honestly, Nick, I feel blindsided. You’re a gazillionaire, who’s much older than I am. I’m still in college, and you have a career. You’ve been around long enough to own and sell a business. I drive an eleven-year-old car and live in my parent’s basement, and I just told you how much I make. I bet Paige was beautiful and sophisticated. I feel like we’re worlds apart in everything. We can never be equal in this relationship.”

I lay my hand on her thigh and rub her leg as I drive.

“Oh, baby, I was blindsided too. I met you and I fell hard. It was like nothing I’ve ever experienced before. I could not keep my eyes off you even for a second, and we already have all these obstacles. Your mom, your age, my lack of melanin.” I throw the last part out to get a laugh, and it works. She punches my arm and blushes at the reminder.

“Most women would be happy to learn their boyfriend is rich,” I repeat.

“You’re my boyfriend now?”

“Yup.” I stop at another red light and look at her. She smiles and visibly relaxes. She reaches for my hand and laces her fingers with mine. “I like you, Miranda. That’s it. This is our relationship, and we’re equals if we say we are. We get to define who we are.”

“I like you too.”

“Then let’s focus on that. Let’s forget the obstacles and all the reasons why we shouldn’t be together and just be together.”

“Okay.” She’s quiet as I drive, then she turns to look at me. “Does that mean I can go crazy with the Christmas decorations? I have all these ideas, and your place is a clean slate.”

“My credit card has no limit. Whatever we can’t find at the store, we’ll order online tonight.” She bounces in her seat. I’m annoyed when she pulls her hand away from mine, but I laugh when she rubs them together in anticipation.

“Does that mean what I think it means? Please say that it does.” She’s looking at me, her bottom lip between her teeth and eyes wide as she waits for me to respond.

“What do you think it means?” I ask, completely confused.

“No budget.” She reaches over and grabs on to my thigh. “Say the words, Nick. Say them.” Her voice is husky as she talks. She squeezes my thigh, getting me hard instantly. At that moment, I’d agree to whatever she wants.

“No,” I say, sneaking a look at her as I drive. She moves her hand from my thigh and puts her palms together in anticipation. “Budget.” Her shriek fills the car, and I put my free hand to my ear.

“You’re about to be a lot less rich, boyfriend!”

I let out a laugh, relieved to have had this discussion. “Unlikely, pretty girl. Highly unlikely.”

“Lunch first. I’m going to need my strength for all the shopping we’re about to do. And take me somewhere fancy. Somewhere that has white tablecloths. I have a sudden taste for shrimp.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

CHAPTER 17

NICK



“I’m coming over right after work on Tuesday. Why is it taking so long, though? We have all this stuff I need to put out. This place is going to look good enough to go on a cover of a magazine.” She jumps off the kitchen counter and comes and stands next to me. She lifts the lid to the saucepan and smells the sauce inside. I look at her, not saying a word, as I cut a tomato for our salad.

I can see the wheels turning in her head, and I wish I could read her mind. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

“Don’t mind what?”

“That I come over right after work on Tuesday. I just declared that I was coming without asking. It’s your place, and I don’t want to assume—”

I cut her off by reaching over for a cucumber slice and putting it into her mouth.

“You have a key for a reason.” I roll my eyes at her, and she rewards me with a slap on the ass.

“When is that food going to be ready? I’m starving.” I feed her a carrot this time, which she happily takes.

“You are so impatient. It will be ready when it’s ready. Now, come closer and give me a kiss.” She takes a final step, closing all the space between us. She puts her arms around me, gets on her tiptoes, and raises her head. I look into her eyes and slowly lean in for a kiss. I do my best to keep the kiss chaste and reluctantly pull away much too soon.

Unwilling to have her walk away from the kitchen, I put my hands on her waist, pick her up, and set her on the counter while I prepare our salad.

“You want me to do something?”

“I want you to stay right next to me.”

She leans back and lets out a sigh of contentment as she reaches over and strokes my hair. No one has ever played with my hair before, and I find that I like it.

“I still can’t believe you had someone come in here and change our sex sheets. I’m so embarrassed.”

I let out a snort and reluctantly walk away to get the salad dressing.

When we arrived home after shopping for what feels like every Christmas ornament and decoration, Miranda was struck speechless—which is no easy feat—when we walked in to find my housekeeper mopping the floor.

When I explained Olga comes every Friday, like a bat out of hell, she ran up the stairs to the bedroom. I watched, confused, as she pulled back the duvet and checked the sheets.

“I’ve already given her a bonus. Stop worrying about it. We’re going to mess up lots of sheets.”

“Other than the sheets scandal, today has been the best day.”

Goosebumps spread throughout my body as she strokes the nape of my neck.

“The sheets scandal? I hope the media doesn’t get wind of it.” I laugh, and when she punches my shoulder, I laugh harder. “You’re adorable, do you know that?”

“I know,” she says, reaching into the salad, but I move the bowl out of her reach. “That’s why all the boys want me.”

I walk away and place the salad on the table. I check my shrimp Alfredo and turn off the burner before I return to her. Stepping in front of her, I spread her legs open and step between them.

“All the boys can want you, but I’m the only *man* who gets you.” I lean in to kiss her, and when she leans forward to meet me halfway, I pull back. I lift her off the counter and slap her on the ass. “Let’s eat.”

^^^

“Oh my God, this is good.” She puts her fork down and looks at me. I hold her stare, anxious to hear what will come out of her mouth next. “I thought you were sexy when I first saw you, but there is absolutely nothing sexier than a man who can cook. Had I known that the first night...” She smirks and returns to her food, but when she picks up her fork, I wrap my hand around her wrist.

She looks at me, surprised at the unexpected movement. Her eyes widen in anticipation, and I know right now that she wants me.

“Nothing sexier than my woman moaning every time the fork goes into her mouth.” She pulls her wrist free, pierces a shrimp with her fork and turns her beautiful brown eyes back to me. She puts the fork in her mouth, closes her eyes, and moans softly as she slowly pulls the fork out.

I take the fork from her hand and set it down while never breaking eye contact. I lift her from her stool and place her on my lap and immediately stick my face in the side of her neck. She shivers in my arms and practically comes apart when I lick the base of her neck.

“Don’t tease me, pretty girl. If I had a table, I’d throw you on top of it and eat you instead of this food. You taste far better.” I bite the skin at her collarbone, causing her to groan.

“Good thing that table will be here in four days.”

“I’m going to have you on every piece of furniture. I’m going to have you on the floor in front of the tree at least a hundred times before Christmas. I plan on being inside of you so much, I won’t know where I end, and you

begin.”

I know she can feel how much I want her when she starts to grind on me. She leans up, her lips parted, and I give her a tap on the lips.

“Let’s eat first. You’ll need your strength.”

CHAPTER 18

MIRANDA



“Girl, I want to know what’s gotten into you. Or should I ask who’s gotten into you? You haven’t stopped smiling all day.” I turn to my friend Marissa and smile even wider. I pretend to ignore her by arranging bras in the drawer for our customers, but she nudges my shoulder with hers, urging me to speak.

I mouth *later*, knowing full well I’ll tell her everything. We’ve been friends since high school, and she’s the manager of this store. In fact, when things ended with Brandon, I had no intentions of quitting my job, but he started dating another employee, and since his mother ran the call center, it got very uncomfortable for me there. When I told Marissa about it, she offered me a job as a sales associate in the store for the holiday season. She’s already told me she plans on keeping me on after the holidays.

“And why have you been keeping shit from me?”

“Because you’ve been dealing with your sick mother-in-law. Let’s just say I met someone, and it’s complicated.”

“Forget my mother-in-law. This was just her latest attempt at getting her son’s attention. That old bitch is much too mean to die.” Marissa grabs my hand and walks me to the back of the store where I tell her everything. Her jaw drops when I tell her my new boyfriend is my mother’s boss.

“She’s going to be pissed, but judging by the smile on your face, it’s totally worth it. And he wanted to tell her right away. Got to respect the man

for that, and I agree with him; the sooner the better.”

Luckily, a throng of people walks into the store, putting an end to our conversation. Marissa goes to help at the cash register and leaves me to my thoughts.

I squeeze my legs together, feeling a tingle of pleasurable pain in the apex of my thighs. I put both hands to my cheeks, but I can feel the flush creeping on my face.

When my mother pressured me to go with her to her company’s Christmas party, I considered it as a favor to her since my dad refused. It was an evening I had to endure to make her happy. I never would have imagined what would come of that one night.

Her boss, the man she described as the devil in human form, was the most gorgeous man I’ve ever seen. But that wasn’t even the best part. He wanted me from the first moment our eyes met. I knew it. I felt it.

When he asked me to come to his house, I had no choice. It was inevitable. *We* were inevitable, like opposite sides of the same coin.

I absentmindedly help two older women, but I’m on autopilot, smiling politely and speaking at the appropriate times, but my thoughts are on Nick Bain, my boyfriend.

I almost giggle at the thought, but I catch myself and continue working the floor of the store. Visions of last night flash through my mind. The way he took control of my body in the middle of his king-sized bed; but what happened after was the best part. Being held tightly in his arms, our legs intertwined, and with my head on his chest, we fell asleep. When I woke up the next morning, dazed and confused, we were still wrapped around each other.

As I straighten a display of silk panties, I become aware of a change in the atmosphere, and when I look up, I find him walking toward me. His eyes

hold mine until he reaches me in the middle of the store.

“Can I help you?” I ask him. I almost explode into a ball of fire when he smiles at me.

“I hope so. I’m looking for something for my girlfriend. Do you think she would like these?” He holds up a lacy red thong.

“I’m not sure. Tell me a little bit about her first.”

“She’s gorgeous. Easily the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” My eyes widen at his words at the same moment my nipples harden. “She’s sexy but sweet and innocent. She drives me crazy, and she doesn’t even know it.”

“Really?” I ask. “How does she do that?”

“Just by being her.”

I start rummaging through the underwear, knowing exactly what I’m looking for.

“Is this a gift for Christmas?”

“No, I wouldn’t get her underwear for Christmas. This is just for tonight.”

“In that case, I think I know just the thing. Is there a budget, sir?”

He cackles at the question, then slowly shakes his head as he mouths the word “no.”

I turn toward the side of the store and find a short, red satin robe. Beneath that is a matching cami set. I also find a black, lace bustier and a matching thong. He smiles when he sees it.

“Do you think these will work, sir?”

“Perfect,” he says. I hand him the items, and he takes them from me, making sure his fingers touch my hand in the process. “Just a few more things for her to keep at my place.”

I follow him and watch as he picks out about half a dozen panties and matching bras.

“Are you sure those are the right size?” I ask.

“Positive.” I grab a bag for him, and he puts everything inside.

“Your girlfriend is a very lucky girl,” I tell him, smiling shyly as I look into his eyes.

“You think so?”

“I know it. I’m sure she knows it too.”

“I hope so. I try to show her. I’m going to go pay. I’m hoping my girlfriend meets me outside of your store in a few minutes for lunch.” He checks his watch and starts walking to the long line at the cash register.

“I’m sure she’ll be there,” I say to him.

I walk to Marissa and tell her I’ll be taking lunch soon. She nods at me, too busy ringing up sales to pay any attention. I return to the floor, and the minute I see him walk out, shopping bag in hand, I go in the break room and clock out.

As soon as I step out of the store and into the crowded mall, I see him. He’s leaning on the wall right across from Victoria’s Secret, watching me. He smiles when he finally sees me, and I nearly skip to where he is. Nick opens his arms, and I fly in. He lifts me off the ground before kissing me softly. I cling to him, smelling his cologne as he holds me close.

“There’s my girl,” he says, kissing my forehead.

“I’ve missed you,” I say to him, realizing the truth of my words. It’s only been a few hours, but he’s all I’ve thought about since I walked out of his house this morning.

“Me too. How long do I get you for?” I wrap my arms around his bicep, and we start walking.

“Forty-five minutes.”

“Let’s eat. I have something to talk to you about.”

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We opted for something light, Cobb salads for both of us, and luckily, we found a table in the middle of the crowded food court.

“Ireland for Christmas, huh? That sounds amazing,” I say to him as I steal a slice of avocado from his bowl.

“So, she feels bad about not spending Christmas with me. I thought I’d invite them over for dinner Friday night and show off the place.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a great idea.” I’m already disappointed he’ll be busy on Friday, and I won’t get to spend time with him.

“Why are you pouting if you think it’s such a great idea?” He bumps my shoulder with his and steals a piece of bacon from me.

“You’ll be busy on Friday and I have to work on Saturday, which means I won’t see you until Saturday night.” I pout dramatically again.

“Well, you won’t have time miss me since you’ll be there for dinner, and you’ll be spending the night.”

I stop mid chew when his words finally sink in.

“You want me to meet your mother and stepfather?”

“Why not?” He shrugs. “This isn’t a secret, Miranda. I’m ready to tell your mother now. I’m only holding off because of you, so, yes. I want you to meet my mother. I already told you she’s going to love you.”

Guilt mixed with another foreign emotion takes hold of me. I reach over and grab both of his hands and look into his deep blue eyes. “I’d love to meet your mother.” He smiles, raises my hand, and kisses it. “Are you sure she’ll like me, or be okay with us?”

“She’ll love you, and why wouldn’t she be okay with us? She was a lot younger than my father too. She’ll probably make a joke that’s the one thing I inherited from him.”

“I wasn’t even thinking about the age thing,” I say, eyes wide as I let go of his hands. “Now, that’s another thing I have to worry about. I was thinking

about the elephant in the room.”

“What elephant? Your mother?”

I burst out laughing. “I’ll be sure to tell Mona Moore you referred to her as an elephant, but no, I meant the interracial thing, Nick.” I roll my eyes at him.

“My mother won’t care about that, but if she did, I’d tell her to fuck off. Is that why you won’t tell your mother about us? Will she have a problem with that?”

“That will be the least of our problems, Bain. You’re more like the bane of her existence.”

He relaxes and pulls me into his arms. “But what am I to you?”

I turn in his arms and look into his eyes. “You’re becoming my world.”

CHAPTER 19

MIRANDA



“There’s our baby girl, Nigel.” Mom pulls me into a tight hug. She holds on to me as if she hasn’t seen me in years. My father pulls her away and takes me into a bear hug.

“How’s Uncle Lee?” I feel a twinge of guilt for not thinking of him at all in the past few days.

I had every intention of coming home Sunday before my parents arrived back from Hartford, but Nick convinced me to stay another night. I felt no guilt about telling them I was spending the night at Marissa’s.

Mom talks about the weekend and my aunt and uncle while I set the table for dinner. The phone in my back pocket vibrates, and as my mother talks and my father finishes dinner, I check my phone.

Nick: I’m lonely.

Me: I’ll be there in less than twenty-four hours. Miss you too.

I send him a kiss emoji.

Nick: What are you doing?

Me: About to have dinner. I’ll call you after. Can’t wait to see you tomorrow.

Nick: Neither can I, pretty girl.

Minutes later, we’re seated at the table, and my stomach growls at the

smell of chicken and white rice.

“So,” my mother begins after loading her plate, “you two won’t believe this.”

“Believe what, woman?” my father asks. “Get on with it.”

“The boss was pleasant all day today. He even smiled on more than one occasion, and for whatever reason, he’s been going out of his way to make conversation with me of all people. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was trying to be friendly toward me.”

“What’s wrong with that, Mom? Maybe it’s time you let go of this grudge.” I try to catch my father’s eye, but he’s looking down at his plate.

“Because I don’t trust him, baby girl. Not one bit. Why on earth would he suddenly want to be nice to me?”

My father lets out a snort. “It’s not what’s gotten inside him, woman. It’s what *he’s* gotten inside, or who.”

I start to cough, and mom absentmindedly taps me on my back. “Which brings me to my next point,” she says.

“Why are we always talking about this man?” my dad asks. “The poor sap’s ears are probably always ringing.”

Mom ignores him and continues. “I was in the kitchen, and his phone rang. He had set it on the table.” She puts a forkful of food in her mouth, most likely for dramatic effect. Daddy looks at me, smiles, and rolls his eyes. Mom notices and tries to pinch him, but he blocks her hand.

As my mother’s words sink in, I start to cough again, because I know who called Nick during lunch.

“Get on with it, woman,” he says.

“The phone vibrates across the counter, and I couldn’t help myself. I had to look.”

“Of course, you did,” Daddy says.

“And the name Pretty Girl flashed across his screen.” She lets out a loud shriek at that announcement. “I don’t know whether to be happy, feel sorry for her, or track her down and warn the poor girl. Instead of answering the phone right away, he looks at me like a deer in headlights. Finally, he picks up the phone and runs out of there like the devil himself was after him, which is impossible since he is, in fact, the devil.”

She leans back in her chair and claps her hands once, as if her statement was a big revelation.

“Why would you feel sorry for this woman?” Daddy asks. “Sounds like the man done lost his damn mind over the woman, whoever she is, if he has her in his phone as Pretty Girl.”

I clear my throat loudly and take several sips of my ice water as I think of a way to change the subject. Just as I’m about to open my mouth and say something, my phone buzzes again.

I tune my mother out and check my texts. I choke on my laughter when I see a picture of Nick doing an exaggerated pout.

Me: My poor, rich baby.

I add a smile emoji at the end.

Nick: I need my pretty girl

Me: You’ll have me tomorrow. Let me make you dinner for a change.

“Maybe I *will* find this woman and warn her.” My mother taps me on the shoulder. “Right, baby girl?”

“Woman,” my father begins, “leave him alone. If the man is getting some, he’ll be happier, and that will make things better for you at work. Leave it be.”

Irritated by my mother’s judgment, I lose my patience.

“What exactly did the man do to you, Mom? I met him and he’s not the

devil you described.”

My father nods in agreement. “Don’t forget that nice Christmas bonus you got. And you just admitted a few minutes ago the man is trying to be nicer, which he doesn’t have to do, Mona. He’s the boss while Joe is out.”

“He offended me on his first day. He was rude and talked down to me. I went out of my way to decorate his office to make him feel welcome, and he destroyed my hard work. How can you all forget?” I try not to roll my eyes, but my dad catches me and winks. “He essentially called me a thief, and he broke the mug my baby boy made for me. I’ve had that mug for over two decades and in a few seconds, he destroys it. I think he did it on purpose.” She taps on the table with two fingers while she nods.

“Mom, he did not. He had the books audited. That’s it. And you have nothing to hide, so what’s the issue? You told us he apologized for the mug incident. It was an accident.”

“You two never take my side.” My dad grunts and shifts in his seat. That’s mom’s typical accusation whenever we don’t agree with her. “I know him better than the two of you. Trust me. He’s the devil, and I will never like that man.”

CHAPTER 20

NICK



“It’s so beautiful,” she says for the millionth time. “It doesn’t even look like the same place.” She stands in the middle of the living room and spins around, looking in awe at the change in the room.

“I’m pretty sure it is. And you said the same thing on Wednesday when you were here.”

I admit, the place was transformed with just the furniture, but a few hours later, Miranda showed up. Like a whirlwind, she came in through the garage and grabbed the bags from our shopping spree. She had so many in her hands, I had to rush over and take them from her before she fell over.

After a kiss that got my blood pumping, I started to lead her to the bedroom only for her to sidestep me. Instead of cooking me dinner like she promised, I offered to cook while she turned my house into her version of a Christmas card.

The tree is lit with white lights and matching ornaments above a beautiful red skirt. The house is fully furnished now and filled with poinsettias. I hadn’t told her, but I hired someone to put Christmas lights outside the house and wreaths on all the front windows. When she arrived, we spent ten minutes outside looking at the lights while I held her in my arms, shielding her as best as I could from the harsh December winds.

My regular dishes were put away and replaced with the Christmas themed ones we bought last Friday, along with the most ostentatious tea set I’ve ever seen. According to Miranda, Queen Elizabeth herself would approve of it.

“Are you going to set the table, sweetness, or are you going to just walk around the house?”

She smiles at me, but she sets the new table. She even goes so far as to pour our water bottles into two large Christmas themed goblets she just had to have.

“I don’t know how I’m ever going to leave this place now that it looks like this.” She wraps her arms around me as I plate our food.

“Who says you have to leave?” I bend down and kiss her nose. She takes the plates from me and puts them on the table. When we’re both seated, I grab her hand underneath the table.

“I’m pretty sure you’ll be sick of me soon.”

“I’m pretty sure that won’t happen.” We eat in silence for a while until I speak again. “How do the Moores celebrate Christmas?”

“My mom is freaking out more than normal. My brother is coming home for Christmas for the first time in I don’t know how many years. He’s a civil engineer in the Army and stationed in South Korea. Mom is making sure everything is perfect, and she’s driving me and Daddy nuts in the process.”

“Are you and your brother close? You’ve never mentioned him before.”

She eats for a bit, probably mulling over her words before she speaks again. She puts down her knife and fork and looks at me.

“Andrew’s six years older than I am. He was out of the house when I was twelve, so no. We’re not particularly close. He had his own friends and interests and didn’t have much time for me. I felt like an only child growing up.” She continues to tell me more about her brother.

I reach over and grab one of her curls and gently pull it.

“I bet you were really cute as a kid.”

She rolls her eyes and laughs. “I was chubby, had acne, wore glasses, and had braces. Plus, I was really, really awkward. My nickname in school was

grandma because the kids said my voice sounded like an old lady's. So, no. I was not cute at all."

"I'm going to need lots of pictures, not just the family picture in your mom's office. Better yet, video," I tell her.

"No way!"

"Tell me more about Christmas with your family."

"So, on Christmas Eve," she says, "we order a ton of Chinese food and the four of us eat, dance to Christmas music, and play games. Some of the neighbors stop by. We open one present each, and then we eat the Christmas guacamole, made by yours truly. My mother insists we go to midnight mass each Christmas Eve. She pretends to be religious, but that's the only time she insists we go. My dad cooks a feast for Christmas Day, and family stops by until late in the evening."

"Tell me more about this Christmas guacamole," I say. "And how come you've never made it for me?" I reach over and kiss her temple.

^^^

"About dinner with my mother on Friday." She looks up at me as she loads the dishwasher and I finish clearing the table. "My brother and his wife are coming. Their daughter might come too."

She visibly swallows, and when she shuts the dishwasher door and turns it on, she looks up at me, clearly nervous. "Okay," she finally says with a shoulder shrug. "I'm not worried about your mom. Moms love me."

"Met a lot of moms, have you?" I ask.

"I've had two boyfriends, and their moms were crazy about me."

I ignore the comment about the moms and focus on the boyfriends. "Two boyfriends. I will find them both, and I will kill them." She's taken aback by my words, but her eyes light up and she laughs.

“Maybe you should challenge them to a duel at dawn. Your generation does that, right?”

“Another joke about my age. I’ll have you know my generation is much smarter than yours. Those boyfriends you had weren’t too smart if they let you get away.”

“What do you need me to do to help, Romeo?”

“Nothing. I’m taking the day off, so I just want you to be here.” I walk up behind her and nuzzle in. “But there is something you can help me with now.” I grab her hand and place it on my hard cock. She turns to look at me, a flush on her cheeks. I lift her, and she wraps her legs around me.

CHAPTER 21

NICK



“You look handsome.” She gets on her toes and gently taps her lips with mine. I smile at her as she wanders around the first floor of the house, touching and adjusting to make sure everything looks perfect.

“Music, Nick! We need music.” A few seconds later, “All I Want for Christmas” starts to play, and all I can do is lean against the wall and watch as she dances to the music. She spins to face me and points at me as she dances, telling me that I’m all she wants for Christmas.

I check on dinner, but I keep one eye on her as she dances around my living room. The room that was empty just a few days ago is now filled with her. How a twenty-three-year-old owns me with nothing more than a look and a smile is something I’ll never understand, but I have no plans to try to understand the how and the why. She’s here, and all I need to do is keep it that way.

“Smells good,” she says as she slams her body into my back. She reaches around me and tries to stick her hand in the platter of lamb chops, but I manage to block her. When I turn to face her, she pouts dramatically. I roll my eyes but smile as I bend down to kiss her.

“What’s with the all black?” I pull back and take in her black pantsuit. “Where’s your Mrs. Claus outfit? I know you must have one.”

She pulls out of my arms and does a twirl in the kitchen.

“This is my meet the mother outfit. I think it makes me look older. What

do you think?” She spins again, and when she stops, I grab her and pull her into my body. When I look down into her brown eyes, I feel something in my belly I’ve never felt before. Not with Paige, who I was willing to marry, or any other girlfriend from the past.

“You’re beautiful, and you don’t need to look older. Just be you. Be yourself, sweetness.” I place a soft kiss on her forehead.

“Are you sure? I want her to take us seriously.” I spin her around, elated at what she just said.

“My mom will love you. Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay. They better be ready for Miranda Moore, the super-sized Christmas edition.” Before I can even ask her what she means, she’s sprinting out of the kitchen and running up the stairs. I shake my head, eager to see what she changes into. If it’s anything like last night’s outfit my family is in for a treat.

I let out a loud chuckle at the memory of her showing up here for dinner yesterday. She was wearing another pantsuit then, too, but this one was green and decorated with Christmas lights. Luckily, it didn’t light up. She also came bearing gifts; matching Christmas pajamas for us, even though we always sleep naked.

A few minutes later, after grabbing a beer, I hear the clicking of heels against the hardwood floor. My phone buzzes inside my pocket, and when I pull it out, there’s a message from my mother. After reading it, I look up to see Miranda standing in front of me, hands on her hips as she waits for my reaction.

I hold my hand out to her, and she takes it. I pull her in to me and dip her dramatically before I kiss her.

“That’s more like it.” I nod approvingly as the red V-neck top that she has tucked into a red skirt. The skirt reaches her knees, but it flares and has white

fur trim around the bottom. On the front of the skirt is a Christmas tree decorated with Christmas lights. Red ankle boots complete the outfit. “This is you.”

She smiles and spins for me. “Business upstairs,” she says, pointing at the red top. “And party downstairs.” This time she points at the skirt.

“Well, I plan on partying on both floors later tonight.” The doorbell rings before she can respond. “But the guests have arrived. My mother just texted saying she has a surprise for me.”

I take her hand, and as we walk to the door, she asks, “What do you think the surprise is?”

“No idea. With my mother, it can be anything.”

“I have a surprise for you too. I want you to have it now, though,” she says, her eyes bright and teasing.

“Now?” I look from her to the door.

“I love you. Surprise!” Just as she says it, the bell rings again. She reaches up and plants a kiss on my mouth. When she pulls away, she smiles as she winks at me. She jumps when I slap her on the ass.

“You minx.”

I drop her hand to open the door, and the surprise is looking at me right in the face. His smile is wide, but when he sees my companion, he tilts his head as if confused.

“Uncle Joe, you’re using your cane.” I open the door so my uncle, mother, and stepfather can walk in. Right behind them is my brother, Henry, and his wife, Gwen, along with their daughter Stephanie.

“I guess the gang’s all here,” I say, ready to make the introductions, but Uncle Joe talks first.

“Nicky, did you invite people from the office here tonight?” He looks around the house, craning his neck to see if anyone else is here.

“Nope.” I pull Miranda to me, who appears to be in shock, and I wrap my arm around her waist. Uncle Joe arches an eyebrow at the gesture, but I see when realization dawns on him. “Uncle Joe, you already know Miranda. Miranda, meet my mother, Allison, and her husband, Becker. This is my brother, Henry, that I told you about and his lovely wife, Gwen. This here is my niece, Stephanie. Everyone, this is my girlfriend, Miranda.”

Uncle Joe beckons me over while everyone hugs Miranda and engages her in conversation. As expected, Becker and Henry make a beeline for the bar while the women talk.

“When I asked you to dance with her, I didn’t mean bring her home. Does her mother know?” He speaks over me without giving me time to answer. “Never mind. You are two reasonable adults. It’s none of my business.” He points a finger at my face. “But Mona is my most loyal employee and a mama bear. A grizzly. Don’t piss her off.”

“I won’t. We’re going to tell her soon.” He gives me a curt nod. There’s more I want to say, but Miranda’s words from a few minutes ago won’t leave my thoughts. I don’t have much time to mull it over because Becker calls everyone into the kitchen for drinks.

“Nicky,” my mother says. “This place is beautiful. Last time I was here, it was empty.”

“Miranda helped, and by helped, I mean she picked out everything. You want a tour?”

Everyone except Uncle Joe jumps at the tour. I look at Miranda again, who is taking big sips of Becker’s mistletoe martini. In fact, she finishes the drink in record time and helps herself to another.

“I’ll stay and keep Joe company,” she volunteers, now halfway through her next drink.

“Okay, sweetness. I’ll go show off your decorating skills.” I bend down

and kiss her temple and discreetly squeeze her ass. “We’re going to talk about what you said as soon as I kick these people out.” She looks at me, her eyes wide, and shrugs.

CHAPTER 22

MIRANDA



“I told Nicky that I’m not going to ask if your mother knows where you are. You’re both adults, but I haven’t seen my nephew this happy in a long time. The entire car ride here, his mother was worried we’d have to eat dinner while seated on the floor, and then we walk into this.” Joe waves his free hand around the place while holding on to his cane with the other. “If I didn’t have this cane for support, I would have fallen over when I saw you.”

I smile at him and reach over to get him one of those delicious drinks that Becker made.

“Come on. I’ll show you around the first floor.” I link my arm with his and we walk down the hall. I show him every nook and cranny down here, including Nick’s office. I leave out the part about Nick laying my naked body on his desk and feasting between my legs for what seemed like hours.

Soon the others come back, and they find us in Nick’s office. He links our fingers together, and we walk back to the kitchen where appetizers are eaten, and more drinks are served.

His family is loud and boisterous as they tell stories from their past. His mother sits next to me, always with a ready smile and a story from her Nicky’s childhood.

“Nicky, this dinner is wonderful,” Allison says. “The student has surpassed the master.” She holds her glass and raises it to him. Everyone at the table agrees.

“You taught him to cook?” I ask. “Thank you! He’s a master in the

kitchen.”

Allison smiles and tells me the story about teaching a teenaged Nicholas to cook.

“He didn’t want to do it. He had quite a mouth on him at thirteen. He told me we had people to cook, and he didn’t understand why he had to learn. Well, let’s just say, for the next week, if he wanted to eat, he had to make it himself. It took only about three days for him to fall in love with cooking. He had no problems helping after that.” She leans over her son, wraps her arm around his bicep, and lays her head on his shoulder. It’s a sweet gesture between mother and son, and I melt when he kisses the top of her head.

“Well,” I say, after mouthing a *thank you* to Becker for handing me another drink, “let me thank you personally. He’s a great cook.” Nick looks at me and winks. “I absolutely love a man who can cook.” I smile innocently at him and bat my eyelashes after elongating the word love.

Everyone starts talking again, and Nick looks at me as I drink. He moves from his mother and comes to sit next to me, wrapping his arm around my waist.

“You think you’re pretty cute, don’t you?” he whispers in my ear. All I do is smile and shrug. “Okay. You are, but I want you to know two things. First, I’m a master in more than the kitchen. You’ll be climbing the walls in the bedroom very soon. And second, you’re so going to pay for teasing me.”

“Tease you about what, Nicky?” I ask. He growls, leans down, and bites my earlobe. “You keep drinking those and you’re going to pay for it in the morning.”

“These taste like juice. I doubt they have much alcohol.” To prove my point, I offer him a sip.

“Keep telling yourself that. You don’t know Becker very well.”

“I’ll have you know, I’m half Jamaican. It takes a lot more than

something like this to get me drunk.” I raise my now empty glass, and right on cue, Becker comes back with a tray full of fresh drinks. I stand up and grab one, unsure why the room seems a little unsteady. We clink our glasses together right before Nick pulls me back onto his lap.

“You’re lucky you didn’t make me spill my drink, Nicky,” I sass.

“Yeah? What would you have done if I did? And I think maybe you left your Jamaican half upstairs when you went to go change because whatever half is here right now is drunk,” he whispers in my ear. “But don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.”

“Yeah, you will,” I say, bumping my nose to his.

“I so need a boyfriend,” Stephanie says while looking at us.

This causes her father, who looks like an older and chunkier version of Nick, to groan and shake his head. “You’re seventeen. The last thing you need is a boyfriend,” Henry says to his daughter.

Neither one of us responds as we gaze into each other’s eyes. I lift my free hand and run it through his hair, intentionally messing it up. When I finally look away, it’s only to find his mother watching us with a smile on her face.

“Tell me more about Nicky when he was younger, Allison. Did he have a lot of girlfriends?”

She leans back in her chair as if she’s deep in thought.

“He had a few. I’m a little biased. He was always so handsome, but I was relieved I didn’t have the type of son who had a different girlfriend every week. Whoever he was with, he was only with that one person. You’re not a mom yet, but when you are, all you will want is for your child to be happy.” She reaches over and grabs my hand, surprising me. “I like the way you look at my son, Miranda.” She kisses the top of my hand before dropping it. I slide it right back in Nick’s hair. I can feel the change in his body as I start to

stroke his scalp. He leans closer to me and I finish my drink before I put my forehead to his.

“He is pretty cute,” I say before I start to laugh. Nick laughs too as he pulls away and takes the empty glass from me. “And I just love—” I stop talking and smirk at Nick. He holds his breath as he looks at me, brows arched as he waits for me to finish. “His eyes. I love his eyes.”

“You’re such a tease, but maybe you’ve had enough, sweets.” He kisses my cheek and then starts to rub the back of my neck. “You’re so going to get it later.”

“No!” My voice is loud even to my own ears. Nick, shocked by my outburst, chuckles at me. “They’re not that strong.” Becker hands me another drink. Nick tries to take it from me, but I move it away. The movement is awkward and part of the drink splashes on my shirt. “Thank you, Becker,” I say, nodding at him.

“You’re welcome, darling.” He winks at me, and I think I try to wink back, but my eye feels heavy, and I leave it closed longer than a wink requires.

“You guys want to know the first thing Nicky asked me the night we met?” Everyone turns to me as they wait for me to speak. “He followed me to the bar and asked me if I’m old enough to drink.” I throw my head back and laugh.

“Smooth, son,” Allison says. “You know, he has his father’s eyes. He looks just like him, but thankfully, his personality is more like mine and Joe’s.”

“He likes younger women just like dear old dad,” Henry says, raising his glass to us. An unexpected laugh escapes my lips and I hiccup. The movement causes my drink to spill again, landing on Nick’s shirt this time. He takes the drink away from me and puts it out of my reach.

“You should have seen her the night of the party. She kept smelling the wine and putting it back,” Nick says as he strokes my hair. “I never stood a chance.”

“Nicky,” I say, putting my forehead to his. “Neither did I.” He plants a kiss to my forehead, and I hear the women in the room swoon.

“Nick, son,” Becker says, slapping him on the back. “You always pick the prettiest girlfriends. I thought Paige was a looker until I saw Miranda. Damn. And unlike Paige, you have a personality, sweetheart.”

The room goes quiet as everyone looks at me, probably waiting for my reaction, but Mr. Bain speaks up before I can say anything.

“Becker, shut up and stop embarrassing the girl. Someone, play some music.”

“Oh, I want to hear more about Paige,” I tell everyone.

“Oh, please, no,” Nick says.

“Well, darling,” Becker says. “She had a real stick up her ass.”

“Stick?” Joe says. “More like a two by four.” Everyone is stunned speechless for a few seconds, then we all burst into laughter at the same time.

“Ice queen bitch,” Stephanie says. “Sorry, Uncle Nick, but she was. Remember when we came to Chicago to visit you? We came by your place and she couldn’t even bother to come out of the bedroom.” Stephanie rolls her eyes at the memory.

“Okay,” I say as I rub the back of Nick’s head. “Thank goodness your taste in women has improved, Nicky.”

“Exponentially,” Allison says, raising her glass.

“Here, here!” Nick says, clinking his glass with his mother’s.

The party continues while Allison serves the dessert she brought.

“I’m sorry, my little drunk,” he says, holding me in his arms. “Sometimes my family speaks before they think, especially if they’ve been drinking. I

don't care about Paige or any other woman. *You* are my pretty girl. Just you."

I pull him close and put my hands around his neck.

"I know you have a past, but guess what, Nicky?" I surprise us both when I get on my tippy toes and rub my nose against his. "I don't care who came before me. Do you know why? Because I'm here now. *You* belong to *me*, so Paige and whoever else will have to deal with it. I'm your pretty girl." He pulls me closer and kisses me.

"Damn right, I do, and you are." When "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" starts to play, he increases the volume.

"Joey," Allison says as she and Becker walk back into the room.

"Remember when Nicky was about two or three and he danced naked to this song. Then he peed on the floor?"

Everyone, including Nick, laughs at the story. He responds by turning the music up higher. Then he takes my hands and we dance around the Christmas tree. Soon, everyone joins in and our first party as a couple continues.

"You know what we need?" I ask after hiccupping again. "Tea! We need tea. I'll be right back!" I leave everyone and head for the kitchen, but Nick follows me, a hand on my hip keeping me steady. While I order him to boil water, I run upstairs and find what I'm looking for hidden in the back of his closet.

I return downstairs to find Nick standing in the kitchen, staring at the tea kettle with his back to me.

"The water will never boil if you stand over it like that." He doesn't turn around until I put my hands on his ass cheeks and squeeze. "I can't wait to bite that later."

I don't think my words about my teeth on his butt register because his eyes widen when he turns around and sees me. Then he bursts into laughter.

"Not only do I never know what the hell will come out of your mouth

next, but I also have no idea what you'll be wearing from one moment to the other." He touches the brim of my wide, floppy hat. His eyes light up when he starts playing with some of the feathers.

"I found this beauty on clearance at the mall. My mom and I like to dress up when Dad watches the Kentucky Derby every May." I show off my find.

"You do realize it's powder blue and your clothes are red and green?"

"What are you saying, Nicky?" I do a dramatic spin while holding on to my hat. "Are you saying you don't like my hat?"

He pulls me flush against his chest and grazes the side of my neck with his nose.

"On the contrary. There isn't a thing about you I don't like." Just as the kettle starts to whistle, his mother walks into the kitchen.

"You kids need help in here?" she asks. I turn to look at her, but Nick doesn't let me go. Her eyes light up at the sight of my hat.

"Oh my God. I love it," she says as she walks over to us. She reaches out to me, takes the hat off my head, and puts it on her own head. "Let's go show everyone else." She takes my hand and pulls me out of Nick's arms.

"Hey!" Nick protests. "Give me back my girlfriend."

"Bring us the tea," Allison orders.

"Yes, bring us the tea, peasant!" I say as Allison pulls me with her.

"So, we're using really bad British accents now?" he yells behind us.

CHAPTER 23

NICK



When I bring the tray holding the kettle and teacups to the family room, I find my family taking turns wearing Miranda's hat and taking pictures while speaking in the worst British accents I've ever heard.

Uncle Joe showing up was a surprise, but I knew my family would like Miranda. What I didn't expect was for this party to be as much fun as it is, and it's all because of her. Even Uncle Joe takes a turn with the hat, and he smiles widely for the camera. He even calls everyone over, and Henry snaps a selfie with all of us with Uncle Joe sitting in the middle.

My favorite picture happens when Miranda puts the hat on me, and someone snaps a picture at the exact moment she kisses my cheek. I'd love to make that one the background picture on my phone but can't risk Mona seeing it until we tell her about our relationship.

"I thought this damn party would never end," I say a few hours later. I wave one last time as everyone backs out of my driveway and close the door. The minute I do, I reach for Miranda, but she giggles and runs from me. Unfortunately for her, all the alcohol she drank combined with her heels slows her down. I reach her in two steps and scoop her into my arms.

She screams until I get us to the sectional. As soon as I sit down, she straddles me and starts to unbutton my shirt.

"Do you know how sexy you are?" she asks as she nibbles on the side of my neck. I'm already hard and if this was any other time, I'd let her have her

way with me, but we need to talk first. I grab her hands and move them away from my shirt.

“Do you know what a tease you are? You say something like that right as I’m opening the door for guests?” She tries to reach for my shirt again, but I hold both of her wrists with just one hand. I grab her face with my free one and force her to look into my eyes. “Say it again.”

I hold her face, not allowing her to look away. She can’t move her face, but she lowers her eyes and shrugs her shoulders.

“I’m scared,” she whispers.

I almost want to laugh at her. She makes this announcement right as I’m opening the door, teases me all night, and now when she should have liquid courage, she’s scared.

“You don’t ever have to be afraid with me. Say it. Please.”

Those big eyes that I love so much find mine again. She bites her lip and stiffens her shoulders.

“Hold on. I’m mentally putting on my big girl panties.” She hiccups.

“I prefer your panties off.” I shock her by slapping her ass. She jostles on my lap and lets out a strangled laugh, hiccupping again.

“Okay. Here goes.” She takes a deep breath that pushes her perfect breasts against my chest. “I love you, Nicholas Bain. I love you. Even though we’re completely mismatched. I mean, you’re old as dirt, my mom works for you and is not your biggest fan. She’ll probably try to murder you with her bare hands when she finds out about us. And I bring nothing to this relationship, but I am head over heels in love with you. Are you happy now?”

I patiently wait to make sure she’s done talking. She stares at me, eyes wider than I’ve ever seen them. She’s breathing so hard, she’s practically panting. When I let go of her wrists, she crosses her arms across her chest as she waits for me to speak.

“That’s quite a declaration. So, despite the fact maybe, if I’m lucky, a month away from the nursing home and my hostile relationship with your mother, I, too, am head over heels in love with you. I fell in love with you the night we met. And sweetness, you know what you bring to this relationship? You bring yourself, and to me, that’s everything. You’re everything I need and everything I want.”

Miranda relaxes at my words and smiles wide. She puts her arms around my neck and looks into my eyes. She leans in and kisses me softly. This time, when she starts to unbutton my shirt, I let her. As she undresses me, I pull the small remote out of my pocket, turn off the lights, and lower the volume of the music.

“Time for my second dessert, Nicky.” She slides off my lap, and after helping me out of my pants, gets on her knees and takes my dick all the way to the back of her throat.

“Oh, fuck,” I croak as Miranda cups my balls. “Baby,” I moan when she swirls her tongue on the tip of my dick. “Let me take off your clothes and sink into you. I want to make love to you.”

Seconds later we’re both naked with nothing but the lights from the Christmas tree providing a soft glow in the house. When “Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas” comes on, I lie on my back while Miranda explores my body with her hands and mouth.

I stick my hand in her hair at the same time she bites my lower abs. She sucks and nips, teasing me with so much promise. I reach down and stroke my dick, which is just begging to get inside of her.

She shoves my hand away from my cock.

“Uh-uh. That belongs to me, Nicky.” She finally moves away from my dick and climbs up my body. She looks down at me, smiles, and captures my lips. Hungry for her, I hold her head as I deepen the kiss, so desperate I’m

willing to swallow her whole. As hungry as the kiss is, she ends it, but instead of straddling me and letting me slide inside of her, she scoots all the way down again. She kisses the tip of my cock before flicking her tongue against the slit.

“You taste so good, Nicky. I think about how good you taste every minute we’re apart.”

CHAPTER 24

MIRANDA



“This is my new favorite place,” I say against his mouth. I kiss him deeply before putting my attention on his neck, a very sensitive spot on his body.

“This house?” he asks. Despite the last few hours of lovemaking, I can feel him harden underneath me.

“Nope.”

“This sectional?”

“As much as I love this sectional and that it’s big enough for us both, it’s not my favorite place. I’m talking about this.” I take both his arms and wrap them around me. I hug him tight as we snuggle underneath our red fleece blanket. “These arms. This chest. You. You’re my favorite place.”

Confident about my declaration and our love, I lift my head and look into his eyes. Despite my lack of clothes, I feel even more exposed with just that look.

I hold his stare, my heart beating rapidly as I wait for him to speak.

“I want to be your only place.” His words are soft but said with so much emotion, I feel tears pool in my eyes.

“You are. It happened fast, but I think we were meant to meet each other. Maybe that’s why my mother kept talking about you every single night.” I feel his laugh vibrate through his chest. When he swats me on the ass, I bite his chest. “Was it always that fast for you with other women?”

“Miranda, I’m here naked with you. Are you really asking me about other

women? Trust me when I tell you I don't want to hear about you and some other guy."

I kiss him in the middle of his chest and tickle him with my hair. I look up at his face before kissing him again.

"I told you I don't care who came first. I'm here now, and I'm not going anywhere. I want to know everything about you, and there were two boyfriends before you. I didn't love either one. That takes care of that."

He lies back down on the couch and plays with my hair with one hand as he caresses my spine with the other. I run my lips across his chest as "White Christmas" plays.

"I've never experienced anything like this. You're special, and I knew that the minute I saw you. I knew I was in big, big trouble as soon as I looked into your eyes."

He stops speaking and I go back to kissing his chest, and I feel his dick hardening underneath me. Before I can give it some attention, he speaks again.

"I felt like a fool after Paige. I was basically starting my life all over again. Uncle Joe made it mandatory for me to go to the Christmas party, and the last thing I wanted to do was be there, but it was the best thing for me." He stops again, and caresses my lower back, right above my buttocks. I hold my breath as I wait for him to speak again. "When things ended with Paige, I remember I was venting to my mom one day. She let me rage, and when I finally quieted down, she said something profound. I didn't think anything of it at the time, but now it makes sense."

"What did she say?" I ask when he stops talking.

"She said that I might be at a low point now, but this could be preparing me for something beautiful. She said sometimes the worst things that happen to us can lead us to the best. She gave me the example of her marriage to my

dad. It was never a good marriage, but she got me out of it, and I was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to her. She said she was sure I was on the cusp of something amazing in my life. I thought it was her way of trying to make me feel better, but she was right. I don't think I ever would have left Chicago if things didn't happen as they did, but guess what? I left and I met this beautiful girl. She's thirteen years younger than I am, and her mother, who hates me, works for me. The universe doesn't make things easy for me, but I wouldn't change a thing."

I look into his eyes, and I tear up at his words before I look away and stick my head in his shoulder.

"Hey, hey," he says as he strokes my hair. "Look at me." I look up and quickly swipe a stray tear. "Why are you crying?"

"Because I just love you. And I'm happy. You're the best Christmas surprise ever."

He wraps his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. "Me too. I love you so much. Ever since I first laid eyes on you, you're the only thing I've thought about."

"We've come a long way in just a few short weeks, haven't we, Nicky?"

"We have."

He kisses my temple and when I look into his eyes again, I remember the night we met. It seems like a million years ago and just yesterday all at once. I've learned so much about this man, yet still don't know enough.

"You know my plan was to give you the stink eye all night for being an ass to my mom. All the times she talked about you, she never mentioned you were hot. I never expected we'd be in a relationship, but my dad always says life will happen whether you expect it or not. I think your mom and my dad think alike. I'm babbling, but I never expected you, but you happened. I never expected to fall in love with you, but I did. And it's crazy because it

happened so fast, but I can't control my heart."

"We're doing this love thing," he says.

"We're definitely doing it, but I don't want to hide it. I'm telling my mom about us on Sunday."

"This is our relationship, so we'll tell her together. About tomorrow. Do you really need to go to work?" She lifts her head and looks at me.

"If I don't go to work, how else am I going to pay for your Christmas present? And remember, I only make thirteen dollars an hour, so manage your expectations. I can't afford any of the high-end stuff you have around here."

I roll my eyes, but I tighten my arms around her, pressing her into my body even more.

"You're my present. And if that's the only reason you need to go to work tomorrow, then don't go and spend the day with me. Let's go into the city, or we can drive up to New Hampshire and see Santa's Village. I want to spend all my time with you."

"You might just get your wish when my mom finds out."

CHAPTER 25

MIRANDA



“I’m working until ten,” I tell him.

I can feel his frustration through the phone. I know how he feels because I feel the same way. I’m basically being held hostage by family obligations this week. Between work, my brother surprising us by showing up days ahead of schedule, and an unexpected visit by my aunt and her kids, I can’t get away for a minute.

All of this makes me so thankful for the extra day I spent with Nick. I took his advice and took a sick day the Saturday after his party, but instead of going to enjoy some Christmas lights somewhere, the heavy rain kept us in the house for most of the day.

As disappointed as I was by the weather, he promised we would go another day. We spent the day wearing matching Christmas pajamas and watching Christmas movies. Having eaten most of the leftovers for lunch, we begrudgingly showered to go out to dinner.

I blush at the thought of us together in his shower. The minute we stepped inside and closed the glass door, something came over him and he ordered me to get on my knees. The minute I did, he was hard and ready, tapping his stiffness against my lips. I did the only thing I could do and let him in, but instead of finishing in my mouth like I hoped he would, he pulled out and ordered me to stand and turn around. As soon as I did, he had me bent over and was sliding into me within seconds. With both hands on my hips, he had me screaming his name in no time. The orgasm ripped through me, surprising

me with its intensity. If not for the strong hands holding me in place, I know I would have fallen. He wasn't far behind me. He let out a growl as he thrust one last time, emptying inside of me.

"Come over afterward," he says. He puts me on hold, and I hear him respond to someone's question. His voice is rougher than normal, and his words are clipped. I know it's this situation that's giving him a short temper. "Sorry, sweetness. No one can seem to do anything right today. I'll prepare us a late supper. You can sit on my lap while I feed you, or we can order in. I miss you."

I can imagine it now. He'll pounce on me the minute I walk through the door. He promised me dinner two nights ago too. It was the last time we saw each other, just two days after declaring our love. It was the first day we'd been apart since the night of his dinner party and had only been away from each other for a few hours. The minute I walked through the door, he kissed me. We didn't make it to the couch this time. We found ourselves naked, writhing on the floor like animals while he fucked me senseless.

"I can't." The words hang heavy between us.

"Because of your guests?" I can hear the disappointment in his voice, and even though I can't see him, I know he's frowning.

"The guests. My brother. We have a house full of people, and I can't get away. Some of the neighbors are coming by tonight too."

"I could come to you if we had come clean to your mother like we talked about Friday night, Miranda." I lean against the wall in my bedroom as I feel the weight of his words.

Talk about the best-laid plans. Sunday was the day we planned on telling my parents, but fate had other plans. First thing Sunday morning, the ringing of my phone woke me up. I was wrapped in Nick's arms, our naked bodies practically intertwined when the phone started going off. I woke up, dazed,

confused, and unwilling to extricate myself from my lover's arms. Relief took over when the phone stopped ringing, but my irritation returned when it started again.

Reluctantly, I reached to the nightstand and picked it up, only to have my mother telling me to come home because my brother just walked through the door. I felt guilty leaving Nick so early. When he walked me to his garage to get my car, he held on to me longer than usual. His kisses were hungrier. It was as if he wanted to savor me until we could be together again.

Mona Moore was an emotional mess when I finally walked through the door, still smelling like Nick. Thankfully, she was too busy holding onto my brother to notice what I looked or smelled like.

I still wanted to tell her the news, but she hadn't seen my brother in person in over two years. Even my father, who is usually stoic, cried at the sight of both of his kids together. Instead of what I had planned, we spent our day talking while my dad cooked Andrew's favorite foods.

I was fine to push the reveal a day, but that same night, just twelve hours after Andrew came home, my dad's youngest sister showed up with my three little cousins because her husband had walked out on her. Again.

"I'm sorry, but I had no idea this is how this week would turn out, Nick. This is not what I want. I thought we would have told them by now and the worst would be behind us, but it's like the universe is conspiring against us."

"This is why I wanted to go public right away. This is our first Christmas together. I'm not going to spend it without you. That's not happening."

My stomach sinks at the thought. With his mother and Becker in Ireland, Joe spending the holidays in Fort Lauderdale with his son's family and his brother out of town with his in-laws, I can't imagine Nick at home alone on Christmas while I'm surrounded by my family.

"You won't. I promise. Can we meet for lunch? I have work at two, but I

miss you so damn much. I can be at your place in twenty minutes.”

He sighs and I imagine him leaning all the way back in his office chair.

“I wish, but I can’t. I’m meeting with a developer about a project in an hour.” I resist the urge to stomp my feet.

“I was really hoping to see my Stinky Nicky.” A snort follows laughter, and for the first time since getting on the phone with him, I feel a sense of relief.

“I’m not stinky.”

It was the morning after the Christmas party. I woke up with a pounding headache. I searched the bed for him, only to find it empty. He showed up a few minutes later. I was still in bed, holding my head in both hands when he handed me a glass of cold water and two Advil. I think I was still drunk when I muttered, “Thank you, Stinky Nicky.” He laughed so hard, he almost dropped the mug of tea he had waiting for me.

“I love you.” I can practically see him smiling through the phone at my words.

“Maybe I can—” Whatever he was going to say gets cut off. He mumbles for me to hold on, but then he comes on and whispers, “Mona’s here with a budget, pretty girl. I’ll call you later. Love you.” He ends the call, and all I feel is rattled and disappointed. Rattled at how closely he works with my mother, and what her reaction to the news will be. Disappointed because I can’t see him today. To make matters worse, we have no set plans as to when we’ll see each other next.

For the rest of the morning, I walk around in a fog. I’m grateful that my brother, aunt, and cousins were out visiting other family members so I can mope in peace. Not even the Christmas carols I put on or the sight of the little Christmas tree he got me for my bedroom cheered me up. All I could do was think of the real tree Nick has at his house, and the tinsel fight we had when

we were decorating it. I don't remember what came over me, but as he was bending down to pick up an ornament, I put silver tinsel on his head. He hadn't realized it until I pointed and laughed at him. From that point on, the tinsel fight was on. He complained about finding tinsel all over the house for days.

A few days later, he caught me going through and shaking the presents under the tree. He didn't say a word, but I noticed his smirk as he shook his head. When I shrugged my shoulders at him, he slapped me on the ass and kissed me senseless.

"How did I get here?" I ask myself a few hours later when I'm leaving for work. I didn't even know this man until a few weeks ago. Now, I can't go a few days without him.

Me: Miss you.

Nick: Me too.

Me: Love you.

Nick: Love you more.

An hour later, I park my car in the building. Even though Nick won't be there, I decided to surprise my mom with lunch. I won't see him, but at least I'll be in his space for a while.

As expected, Mom is thrilled when I show up with takeout. She's all nervous excitement about Christmas, and I listen with half an ear as she prattles on about Andrew.

Something in the atmosphere changes while my mom continues to talk, but I know he's nearby. The door to the break room opens, and he walks in. His eyes find mine immediately, and his steps falter. My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I check him out. Even underneath his long, wool coat, he looks sexy.

“Well, Mom,” I say. She finally stops talking long enough to look at me. “I have to get going. I have some last-minute shopping to do before work.” I stand up and dispose of my trash. My eyes lock with Nick as I walk past him to the trash can. I can feel the heat rolling off his body even from across the room.

“Okay, baby girl. I have lots of calls to make this afternoon. Thanks for bringing me lunch.”

“Mona,” Nick says. “Can you come to my office around three to talk on the Harbor View project? I’m making that bid in about a month and I want to talk numbers with you.”

“Sure,” my mom replies, her voice tight. “I don’t know if you remember my daughter, Miranda. She brought me lunch,” she says, puffing her chest out a little bit.

Nick’s only response is to nod his head at me, but I notice he doesn’t take his eyes off my boobs.

“You want me to see you out, baby girl?” my mom asks.

“Don’t worry about me, Mom. I’m gonna use the bathroom and then go. I’ll see you at home.” I kiss her cheek, but I remain at the sink, washing my hands as slowly as possible. Mom practically skips out of the break room.

“My office. Now. Last door down the hall.” Those are the only words he says before he walks out of the room. I grab my coat and purse, and less than a minute later, I enter his office. He crosses the room, locks the door, and pins me against the wall.

“Mm-hmm,” I say against his mouth. I open mine wider, deepen the kiss and push my hands through his hair. He shudders in my arms as I stroke his scalp.

“I’ve missed you so damn much,” he says. “I want to taste your pussy.”

“You’re crazy, Nicky. If you do that, this entire building will hear my

screams.” I push him away and drop to my knees. “You’re much quieter than I am.” I fumble with his belt, pull his pants down to his ankles and practically swallow him whole.

“When I saw you in the kitchen wearing that tight, red sweater, I wanted to lay you on the table and feast on you.” I cup his balls and take him all the way to the back of throat. He’s trying really hard to be quiet. Every time he pulls on my hair, I suck on him harder.

He throws his head back, moaning softly as he helps guide my head. I lose myself in his taste and smell.

While he’s buried deep inside my throat, someone turns the doorknob, but when they are met with the lock, whoever it is knocks on the door.

“Mr. Bain,” I tense at the sound of my mother’s voice, “I was wondering if you had a few minutes now instead of this afternoon. I was hoping to leave a little early today.”

With his dick still in my mouth, I look up at Nick, panic in my eyes. He runs a shaky hand through his hair while he stares down at me. He remains quiet for so long, she knocks on the door again.

“Uh, give me a few minutes. I’ll come find you, Mona.” Nick’s voice is strained as he looks down at me.

She mutters okay, and I relax when I hear her footsteps fade away.

As soon as the coast clears, I return to my task. It doesn’t take long for him to explode all the way down my throat. After swallowing all of it and wiping him clean, his dick slips out of my mouth with a loud pop.

“Get your pants off and get on my desk.” He pulls me to my feet and when he reaches for the hem of my leggings, I step away.

“No, Nicky. That was for you. We both know I won’t be able to be quiet, and that was a close call. You can return the favor when we’re alone.”

He kisses me hard on the mouth while he holds my face with both hands.

“I love you,” he says against my mouth.

“Love you more.”

“Stay here for two minutes. I’m going to your mom’s office. That should give you time to walk out of here. Go through the back door, okay. Text me when you get to the car.”

He gives me one more kiss before pulling his pants up and fixing himself.

Two minutes later, I slip out of the office with no one the wiser. As soon as I step in the car, I text him to let him know I made it out.

No more texts are exchanged. After doing the last of my Christmas shopping at the mall, I go to work with every intention of focusing, but I’m on autopilot the entire eight hours of my shift. The only thing I can concentrate on is Nick.

CHAPTER 26

NICK



This is completely and utterly ridiculous. I'm a thirty-six-year-old man walking around like a lovesick teenager. I wrongly assumed the worst part would be behind us by now. Not that I expect Mona to hug and welcome me into her family, but I was prepared for her to know. I'm ready for Mona's anger and awkward glances around the office, but we're no closer now than when we first started.

It was another lonely evening without Miranda last night. The brief time we had in my office just was not enough, and the time we spent on FaceTime only made me long for her more.

It would be simple to ask Mona to come into my office and tell her myself, but this is something we need to do together as a team. Even now, I can hear her voice in the office kitchen as she talks to Sherry about her son and her other surprise visitors.

"I haven't had my baby boy home for Christmas in so long." She has her back turned to me. She's so similar to Miranda in a lot of ways. They are both obsessed with Christmas. She's worn holiday themed clothes every day this month. Whereas Miranda sticks to sexy leggings and curve hugging tops, Mona sticks to busy Christmas themed sweaters.

"Good morning, ladies," I say as cheerfully as I can. "Love that sweater, Mona." Despite my daily attempts at conversation, Mona still only gives me the bare minimum. Whatever I do, I can't go back and undo our first meeting or apologize enough for the mug incident. She turns around at the sound of

my voice, purses her lips, and looks down at her sweater.

“Thank you, Mr. Bain.” She runs her hand over the sweater and says, “My daughter got this for me several years ago, so please try not to ruin it like you did my son’s mug.” I ignore the part about her mug, but I can’t help but smile at the mention of her daughter. Miranda is never out of my thoughts, but hearing Mona talk about her in a conversation with me is unsettling.

“Well, she has good taste,” is the only response I can think of. In reality, the sweater is horrible. It’s so busy, I can’t tell what the scene is. All I can focus on is Rudolph’s nose, which I imagine used to light up back when the sweater was new.

“Not so much in the boy department.” This time I do drop the mug in the sink. Thankfully, it doesn’t shatter. Sherry and Mona ignore me and continue with their conversation.

“She hasn’t said anything, Sherry, but I’m so sure she’s seeing a boy. She’s hardly ever home these days. Are you sure it’s not Glen? They make such a cute couple.” They walk out of the kitchen, and I don’t get to hear Sherry’s response; I’d love nothing more than to tell Mona that Miranda is not seeing a boy. She’s in love with a man, and that man is me.

I walk to the kitchen entrance and spot them down the hall.

“Hey, Mona!” I yell. She turns to me, eyes wide like her daughter’s as she waits for me to speak. A thousand things flash through my mind. In two seconds, I imagine telling her in a million different ways. In the end, I know I need to do this with Miranda. “Since your son is home, why don’t you just take Christmas Eve off? We’re only open half a day anyway. We’ll manage without you for a few hours.”

I know I’ve stunned her speechless. Her mouth opens and closes several times. She looks from me to Sherry before she gives me the first real smile

I've ever gotten from her.

"That would be wonderful, Mr. Bain. Thank you."

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"You could be over here right now getting your feet rubbed." She closes her eyes as she smiles. She puts another pillow under her head, bringing her face a little closer to the screen.

"That's what you say, but we both know it's not my feet you'd be rubbing right now."

"You know me well, Ms. Moore. I'd do more than rub it, though. I want to lick it." She gasps at my words. I can see the excitement in her eyes as she bites her lip. "Kiss it. Suck it. Fuck it." She throws her head back on the pillow and groans.

"Soon, Nicky. After Christmas, I want us to isolate ourselves at your place. You and me. Naked."

"I love the sound of that, but that better not mean that I won't see you until after Christmas." She pauses at my words, then rolls her eyes.

"Are you nuts? I'm going crazy after one day. Do you think I can last much longer? I want my man and I want him now."

I hear a noise in her room. Her eyes widen, and she says the names of her cousins. She tells me she'll call me and ends the call.

Frustrated at the abrupt ending of the call, I toss my phone on the coffee table. I wanted to discuss our plans for the holidays and after, but every time we try to lock something down, we get interrupted.

Knowing I'll never be able to sleep, I leave my bedroom and go downstairs to my office to work on some sketches to pitch for the new project. Even the office reminds me of her. At the front of my desk is a miniature sleigh complete with Santa and the reindeer. She even got me a

Frosty the Snowman lamp. I shut it off immediately when it starts to sing the song.

I don't know how long I'm in my office when I hear the front door open. There is only one other person on the planet who can just walk into my house at any time. Excited about seeing her, I run out of my office to find her walking down the hall toward me. We both run to each other. I pick her up and run up the stairs to the bedroom.

"Surprise," she whispers right before I kiss her lips. "I missed my Nicky." She wraps her legs around me, and I spin her around before we both tumble to the bed. "My Stinky Nicky," she says, gently stroking my hair.

"I'm not stinky." I kiss her again and again, leaving both of us breathless. I don't know how, or who made the first move, but within seconds the floor is covered with our scattered clothes. I push her into the middle of the bed and spread her legs wide. The way she's writhing underneath me and moaning my name tells me she's ready for me. Unable to wait another second, I slide into her. She throws her head back as she moans my name. She digs her nails into my back with each thrust.

"Open wider," I order against her mouth. She does, and I sink even further. As I thrust into her to the hilt her mouth falls open underneath mine, so I take the opportunity and slide my tongue in.

She moans loudly as she wraps one leg around me. Her nails dig deeper, her moans get louder, and she explodes, my name a muffled sound against my mouth.

She's still coming when I abruptly pull out of her. I grab my cock, and after two strokes, I cover her breasts with my release. She looks at me, wide-eyed and shocked by my actions. She bites her lower lip, throws her head back, and laughs as she pulls me onto her body, coating both of us with my cum.

“You’re Sticky Nicky now,” she says.

CHAPTER 27

MIRANDA



I quickly slide my phone out of my back pocket and check the time. Another fucking hour and he'll be here. We'll have dinner out so we can talk.

"I just want to be able to come to your house and pick you up. Have dinner with your family or invite them over to my place for a meal." He had whispered those words with me wrapped in his arms after making love. I fell asleep to the beating sound of his heart and the feel of his fingertips sliding against my ribcage.

I woke up a few hours later, still wrapped in his arms. The sun had yet to come up as I quickly dressed. I pressed a kiss to his forehead, and he pulled me back in the bed with him. It took me another ten minutes to finally pull out of his arms and leave the house. It was still dark out when I arrived home, and I got in the house with no one the wiser.

I stand in the back of the store pretending to work while I wait for him to walk in. My stomach growls loudly, and I'm grateful that the sounds in the store hide the noise.

Only a few more minutes and I can leave this place. Luckily, I only have one more day of work and then I'm done until the New Year. I'm not sure how many minutes pass as I think of what Nick said last night. He suggested we go away for a few days after Christmas, and when he suggested somewhere warm, I assumed he meant Florida. To my surprise, he told me his father bought a vacation home in The Bahamas which now belongs to him and Henry.

Lost in my thoughts of frolicking on the beach, and the many ways I'm going to have him in every room in that house, I don't notice he's arrived until he's grabbing my face and kissing me on the lips.

"Excuse me, sir," I say playfully. "I have a boyfriend. Please, keep your lips to yourself."

"He's one lucky fuck." He looks around and quickly kisses me again. "What were you smiling at?"

"I was just thinking about The Bahamas." In my excitement, I clap my hands together. "Can't wait to have you on the beach. Shirtless." I wiggle my eyebrows at the last part. "And a cabana!" I say before he can speak. "I've never had my own cabana before. Does the cabana boy automatically come with the cabana, or is that extra?"

He looks at me for several seconds before he starts laughing. He shakes his head, probably at a loss for how to respond.

"I'm the only *man* you're going to need on this vacation. Are you going to wear these on the beach?" he asks, reaching for the antlers I'd forgotten I have on top of my head. He shakes one, and to mess with him, I take the antlers off, get on my tippy toes and put them on his head.

"No, but I was looking at bikinis online and I'm considering a few. Wait until you see these hips in a string bikini." Not caring that there's a store full of people, I swing my hips from side to side. "Pow," I say, bumping his hip with mine. "That's the sound my hips will make on the beach." To prove my point, I bump him again. "Pow."

"I never know what the hell will come out of your mouth, but don't hurt yourself, sweets. I like the feel of those hips against me, but I don't think they say pow."

"Not pow?"

He shakes his head no.

“What about boom?” I swing my hips from side to side again, bumping him each time. “Boom. Boom. Boom.”

“Nope.” He shakes his head again.

“How about boom chick a boom, boom?” This time, instead of swinging my hips slowly, I do a series of fast moves. When he shakes his head a third time, I pretend to pout. “I guess my hips just don’t talk to you then?”

“Oh, they talk, pretty girl.” He turns me to face him and puts both hands on my hips. He looks down into my eyes and starts to move my hips from side to side. “You want to know what these hips say?” He lowers his voice and says, “They say Nick, Nick, Nick.”

“Nick, Nick, Nick,” I repeat, lost in his eyes.

Right there, in the middle of the busy floor, I let my boyfriend guide my hips from side to side as we both whisper his name. I’m lost in his blue eyes, but someone bumps into him, breaking us out of our trance.

“I’ll be ready in about ten minutes,” I tell him as I step away, my face flushed, and my body awakened and ready.

“I’m going to look for some stuff for my girlfriend while I wait. Not that she needs this stuff.” He picks up a lacy thong and holds it with his index finger. I smile at him, and just as I’m about to say something that would drive him wild, my eyes bug out at what I see in front of me.

“Hey, baby girl!” my mother practically screams in the store. She’s not alone. She has my brother, my aunt, and five-year-old cousin with her. “We’re here to pick you up. We all have some last-minute shopping to do, but we’re going to have dinner first. Your shift is almost done, right?”

My mouth opens like a fish, but no words come out. I look over at Nick, who has now gone still at the sight of our guests. Mom doesn’t notice him at first as she automatically starts looking through a stack of panties at a display in front of her. My brother looks around, but I can tell he’s ready to go when

he checks his watch.

The pair of panties my mom is holding slips out of her hands and lands on the floor. She looks up as she grabs them and finally notices Nick. Presumably shocked by his presence, she loses her balance, and he quickly moves to grab her and keep her from falling.

“Mr. Bain,” she says, confused and a little bit embarrassed, “what are you doing here?” She narrows her eyes and looks from him to me. “You do remember Miranda, don’t you? She came with me to the Christmas party a few weeks ago and had lunch with me at the office recently. This is my son, Andrew, my sister-in-law, Vanessa, and my niece, Tandy. Andrew is the one who got me the mug you destroyed.” She nervously looks around the store and when she looks down to see the racy, lace panties in Nick’s hand, she quickly looks away and clears her throat. She looks back at me, her eyes that are so similar to mine, trying to read me.

“Yes, I remember Miranda, and I’m here for my girlfriend,” he says, clearing his throat loudly as he waves the lacy panties in the air. Like the gentleman that he is, he shakes hands with Andrew and Vanessa. He looks at me, and I know from the look in his eyes, he’s waiting on me to say something. I open my mouth to speak, but nothing comes out.

“Can we go?” Andrew asks. “I’m starving. And Dad’s waiting for us.”

“Wait. You got Dad to come to the mall? My dad is in the mall a few days before Christmas?” I ask.

“Come on, baby,” Mom says. “We have a reservation at Legal’s in twenty minutes. You know that’s Andrew’s favorite place, and I’m sure he’s ready to gnaw at his own arm by now. Your dad can be social when he wants to be.” She looks away from me and back to Nick, who is still holding the panties. “I’m sure Mr. Bain wants to shop in peace.” My mom takes me by the shoulder and pushes me toward the back of the store, toward the cash

registers.

“Mona, wait,” Nick begins. “Listen”

“Mom,” I blurt before Nick can say anything else.

“Can we *please* get the hell out of here?” Andrew says when a group of shoppers come walking by.

“Why don’t you find yourself a girlfriend, Andrew? If you did, you wouldn’t be in such a hurry to leave this place,” my mom says. Andrew throws his hands in the air and tells us he’ll wait for us outside of the store before stomping out. “Go, Miranda. Meet us outside before your brother has a tantrum.” She pushes me toward the back of the store where she follows me and tells me she’ll wait for me by the fragrances.

Like someone being controlled by a remote control, I walk to the cash register, sign out of work for the day, return to the break room, and grab my coat. Still dazed at how close we came to getting caught, I walk out of the room like a zombie.

Nick is still in the store when I return, but Mom grabs my arm and we walk to the door. She waves goodbye to Nick, and when I look back at him, he’s still standing in the same spot, looking at me with the same pair of panties in his hand.

To my shock, my father is waiting patiently for us at the restaurant while sipping on a piña colada. Dinner is lively and fun as we talk about Christmas plans, but all I can think about is Nick and how empty his blue eyes looked when I was walking away from the store.

As discreetly as possible, I check my phone and find no texts or missed calls from him.

Me: I love you. I’m sorry. I didn’t know they were coming.

I check my phone throughout dinner and nothing. After dinner, we do some last-minute shopping at the mall, but Nick doesn’t text back, and he

doesn't call. It's not until after midnight when I crawl back into my bed and call him. His phone rings several times until it goes to voicemail.

I ignore the voice in the back of my head. The little voice telling me that Nick is upset about what happened at the mall. I convince myself that he understands why I left, but I don't think I do a very good job and end up tossing and turning all night, missing the comfort of Nick's strong arms wrapped around me.

CHAPTER 28

NICK



I'm not the least bit surprised when my front door opens and Miranda walks in the next morning. I lean against the kitchen counter, drinking my coffee out of a Christmas mug she left here the other day. The mug is decorated with a drawing of a muscular man wearing a Santa hat with the words Feliz Navidad.

She takes off her coat, dressed like an elf, complete with the hat and pointed ears. The closer we get to Christmas, the more ridiculous her outfits get, it seems. I force myself not to laugh when I notice her green pointed shoes. Where the hell does she find this stuff?

She walks up to me, takes the cup from my hand, sips my coffee, and scrunches her nose at the bitterness.

“You do realize that’s my mug, right? I texted and called you last night. Why didn’t you answer? You should see the shorts I ordered for The Bahamas this morning. That place won’t know what hit it when I get there. I hope I get it before we leave. When are we leaving, by the way?” She leans up and kisses my lips. Despite the feelings raging inside of me, I kiss her back, long and deep, before abruptly ending the kiss.

I can see the confusion in her eyes, but she blinks and looks away. She reaches into the cabinet and pulls out another mug.

“This one is yours.” I look at it and hold back my snort. Where My Ho’s At is written on it. “Just wait until I come back tonight. There’s going to be lots of ho ho hoin’ around here. So much that I don’t know how your old man

heart and back will handle it.” She then puts both hands on her hips and does a series of thrusts.

She reaches for me, her delicate hands caress my chest, paying special attention to my pecs. My lower half reacts automatically.

“I won’t be here tonight.” Those words get her attention, and she looks at me again. She drops her hands, and she studies me for the first time since she walked in. She’s an open book. Always has been. That’s how I knew she wanted me as much as I wanted her since the night we met.

I can feel the nervousness and tension oozing out of her. She takes her thumb and nibbles on the nail.

“Where are you going?” she asks. “I thought I’d come over right after work and make you dinner. I’ve been thinking all last night, and I think maybe it was a good thing our plans to tell my mom got railroaded.”

I lean across the counter and raise my eyebrows, my ears perking up at this sudden change. “Oh, really? Why is that?”

“We have to tell my dad first.”

“Oh, yeah? When? Next week? Next month? Next year? Maybe by next Christmas?” I try to keep the bitterness out of my voice, but I don’t think I succeed.

“Of course not. Tomorrow. He gets home before Mom on Mondays. You’ll come over, and we’ll tell him together. Then, when Mom gets home, we’ll tell her, but we’ll have the support of my dad. It’s perfect. Dad’s rational and calm, and Mom’s emotional. Dad will help calm her down. I don’t know why I didn’t think of this before.”

I put the mug down and cross my arms over my chest. She’s looking at me, eyes wide, probably waiting for me to speak, but I don’t say a word. There’s plenty that I could say. I could remind her that I wanted to tell her mother right away, but she didn’t. I could tell her I was ready and willing to

have this conversation last night at the mall, but I didn't get the chance before she shut me down and walked away from me.

"It's tomorrow, now? Not days ago, like you said?"

"Is something wrong, Nick?" She takes a tentative step to me, but when I don't put my arms down, she starts to bite on her nail again.

"What do you think, Miranda? Yeah, I'd say something is wrong."

Her eyes widen at my sharp tone. In all the time we've spent together, there's never been a reason for me to have such a tone with her. I see her steel her shoulders and take a deep breath.

"If this is about what happened at the store yesterday, I was just as surprised as you. I had no idea my family was going to show up, and to be honest, I was really irritated by it because I wanted to be with you. I've missed you." She closes the space between us, her eyes searching mine. I know what she's waiting for. She wants me to open my arms and let her in, and I want that too, but my anger and hurt from last night just will not leave me.

I step away from her and go stand behind the kitchen island, using it as a barrier between us.

"You were irritated?" I ask in complete disbelief. "I couldn't tell. You know why? Because you left with your family and left me standing in the middle of the store looking like a damn fool. And you walk in here and act as if it's just another regular Sunday morning. As if you didn't treat me as irrelevant a little more than twelve hours ago."

Her shoulders sag and she lowers her gaze, and all I want to do is go to her and take her in my arms and apologize for upsetting her, but I stand my ground.

"That's not fair. It wasn't like that."

"What was it like then?"

She walks around the island, but I take a step back. She gets the hint and stops walking, but all I want to do is go to her and make fun of her outfit.

“We agreed we would wait to tell my mom. What did you want me to do? Tell her about us while I was at work? With my brother, aunt, and the entire store as witnesses? Is that how you wanted her to find out about us?”

“I expected you to act like a damn adult and not walk away from me!”

“I didn’t walk away from you!” she yells back. “And I am an adult. I’m trying my best to handle this for us, with minimal collateral damage. Think about it, Nick! She loves her job. She has worked there all my life, and her daughter is now sleeping with her boss. You wanted me to tell her that in the middle of Victoria’s Secret in front of my boss and coworkers? That would have been the absolute worst place and time.”

The rational Nicholas Bain would understand where she’s coming from. He would concede that her words make sense. It was the wrong time at the wrong place, but rational Nick has left the building. All I can focus on is one thing she said.

“We’re sleeping together?” I ask, my voice low. “Is that all we’re doing? Good to know.” Disgusted, I pour the contents of my mug into the sink and walk out of the kitchen, giving her as wide a berth as possible. I take the stairs two at a time, and she follows me into the bedroom.

“What are you doing? Where are you going?” I don’t answer, but I grab a duffel bag from the closet and start to shove clothes into it.

“I told you I won’t be here tonight. I’m going away for a night. I need some space, and I need time to think. Is that good enough for you, Miranda?”

“Think about what? Us?” She tries to grab my hands, but I pull away from her as if her touch is laced with acid. “And I know we’re not just sleeping together. Why are you twisting my words? I love you. You know that.”

“Do I?”

“Yes! Why are you acting like this? I’m sorry about yesterday, but I didn’t know what else to do!”

“If you loved me, you wouldn’t have acted like I didn’t matter last night.”

“I didn’t do that!” She stomps her feet and her hands ball into fists.

“You’re being unfair. I told you that—”

“You’re waiting for the right time,” I say, interrupting her. “What the fuck would happen anyway? You’re a twenty-three-year-old adult. Would she hit you? Would she kick you out? Would she disown you?”

“No, of course not.” She looks at me as if I’m crazy to even ask such questions. I walk out of the closet and toss the duffel bag on the bed, zipping it up with such force I’m surprised I don’t break the zipper.

“Then what, Miranda, would be so terrible? You’re scared of mommy’s anger? You just admitted that there wouldn’t be any serious consequences, but throughout all of these weeks, you’ve said nothing. You’re acting like a scared little girl, and frankly, that’s a turnoff. I want to be with a woman, not a child.” She rears back as if I slapped her. I can feel her sadness, and I want nothing but to soothe her, but I can’t. Even now, she’s looking around the room, the fear in her eyes evident.

“I’m acting like a scared little girl? Well, how the hell are you acting right now? You knew the situation from the beginning. This is exactly why I was reluctant, but you decided to pursue me. We both agreed to wait and find the best time to tell her.”

I take the bag and throw it over my shoulder. That move causes her to come and stand before me, her stance determined.

“I didn’t agree to shit!” I yell, slamming my hand against the wall. This obviously shocks her because she takes an involuntary step back. I lower my hand from the wall as well as my voice. “Think back, Miranda. I wanted to

tell her right away, remember? The very first night you came here, I told you I wanted to tell her, but what did you do? You ended things. When you came back, I told you I disagreed with waiting. So, no. *We* didn't agree. *You* decided."

"Let's talk, okay. I'm sorry about yesterday but seeing her there was the last thing I was expecting." She reaches for my hands, and this time I don't immediately pull away from her touch. "Maybe I handled it all wrong, but you know I love you."

I pull my hands away and take a step back. "That's what you say, but your actions don't show it. I've opened up my entire world to you. From the very beginning. I've introduced you to my family. You come and go, but I'm your dirty little secret." I take a deep breath and prepare myself for my next words. "Go to work, Miranda. I need some distance, and I need time to think about things."

"Think about what things?" she yells. "Are you thinking of ending things?"

I can't even fathom the thought of ending things, but I know I can't keep going the way things are. "I said I need to think!"

"You're being ridiculous! I came here to make you breakfast and tell you my plans, and you need space to think? You're the one who's acting like a scared little boy because I didn't tell something of this magnitude to my mother in the place where I work. How the hell do you think it would have turned out?" She grabs my hands again and puts them on her face. "Let's talk. I told you I have it all figured out. It's best if my father is there when we tell her, we have to tell him first. Mom is all emotion, but Daddy is logical and pragmatic. We'll tell him, and then when Mom gets home, the three of us will sit down with her and tell her everything. We'll deal with the consequences, okay?"

“Do what you need, Miranda, but I need to go.” I drop her hands and grab my bag. She comes running after me, practically colliding into my back.

“Go where? For how long? Why are you doing this? You’ve been after me to tell her all these weeks, and when I finally figure out a way, you leave town! What the hell is your problem?” She screams the last part as she walks around me, holding out her arms as she blocks my path. I put both hands on her waist, lift her, and set her aside. She’s right behind me as I walk down the steps.

“Answer me!”

“Fine. Stay. I’m leaving.”

I yank open the front hall closet and pull out a coat, but when I look at her, I have to look away when she starts wiping the tears from her face.

“You’re such a jerk, Nicholas Bain! You accuse me of being immature but look at how you’re acting. Fine. Go and think about how you’re punishing me over a situation I didn’t create. This was our problem from the beginning, but I’m here to work it out while you run away. And you call me the immature one.”

She picks up her coat, and without even putting it on, she walks out the front door. I want to pull her back in, tell her to put on her coat, but I hold back. She runs to her car and climbs inside, but she doesn’t drive away immediately. She puts her head on the steering wheel and leaves it there for several seconds. Then, she lifts her head, shakes it, and starts the car.

She backs out of my driveway, never once looking back in my direction again. It takes all my willpower not to jump in my truck and chase her down.

Like an idiot, I sit on my bottom step and put my head in both hands. So much for talking like a rational adult. I don’t know how long I sit there, but my phone vibrates in my pocket sometime later.

Pretty Girl: I never meant to hurt you.

I watch as the three bubbles appear, and I wait for her next message, but it never comes. Eventually, I put the phone back in my pocket and leave the house.

CHAPTER 29

MIRANDA



I do my best to keep a smile on my face. Like on autopilot, I ring up customer after customer, grateful for not having to make much conversation. This I can do. The robotic monotony of using the cash register, putting the items in bags, and handing them to customers, all with a smile I don't feel; I can do that all day.

With less than a week left until Christmas, the store is packed with customers. With a small crane of my neck, I notice that the line is practically at the store entrance. I look around, hoping Nick will walk in, but I know it's not likely to happen. Not with the way he looked at me.

Were we over before we really began? Would he just walk away after telling me he loves me? My shoulders slump at the thought, but I refuse to give up on us.

"Time for a break," Marissa says sometime later. Like a zombie, I log out of the cash register and walk to the small room in the back, take a seat at the small table and look straight ahead.

The scraping sound of a chair and Marissa taking the seat next to me, don't pull me out of my funk. She grabs my arms, and that's the first time I realize they are folded against my chest.

I pull out of her grasp. "Not now, Marissa. Leave me alone."

She sighs and pulls her chair closer.

"This close to Christmas, you're usually walking around like Mrs. Claus on crack. You've barely said a word all day, and you look like you're two

seconds away from crying. What the hell happened? I'm guessing it has something to do with that fine-ass man."

As if I have no control over my body, I start to shake at the exact moment the tears start to fall. Marissa pulls me into a hug and I silently cry on her shoulder. She finally pulls away and wipes my tears.

"Did you two break up? Did that asshole dump you less than a week before Christmas?"

"I don't know." I take a deep breath and tell her everything that happened after I left here the previous day. Thankfully, the tears remain at bay as I speak.

"Oh, Mir." She smooths down my hair and sits back in the chair. "You're my girl, and I'm not excusing him whatsoever. In fact, I'll track him down and kick his sorry ass. Fuck him up real good. But people act out when they're hurt. I understand the position you're in, but I understand his feelings too."

"I know. I understand. I'd be hurt too, but I went there this morning to apologize. I told him I want to tell her tomorrow, but the best way was to tell Dad first, get him on our side, and the three of us could sit Mom down and explain. Now, I don't know what I'm supposed to do, Marissa. I never set out to hurt anyone, but I did and now I'm here acting like a weak bitch, but he's being so unfair."

"Girl, I've been married for two years now. Listen to me. Men are big babies." She stands up, grabs a paper towel, and comes back to wipe my face. "Dry your tears. Crying ain't gonna fix shit. He's somewhere licking his wounds, and when he comes back, and you know he will, you kick his sorry ass. Let's get something to eat, then you are going back to being fabulous. Well, as fabulous as you can be in that elf outfit." She stands up and extends her hand. "Lunch is on me." She hooks her arm through mine and we leave

the break room.

^^^

It takes a certain amount of inner restraint for me not to fling my phone against the wall. The way I'm feeling, it would be as if Hercules himself was doing the throwing. I imagine the phone going through the wall, leaving a gaping hole. In the end, that would only make my life even more miserable, given that it's winter in Massachusetts and I don't have hundreds of dollars for a new phone.

My thoughts are a jumble as I think of what I should have said to Nick this morning when he had his *mantrum*. I should have told him to grow up and stop acting like an entitled brat because I didn't do what he wanted me to do when he wanted it done. What did I do instead? I followed him around the house like a lovesick fool.

Whoever said it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all obviously had never been in love because this shit is for the birds. Tears that I had to keep at bay in front of my parents start to fall in the privacy of my small basement apartment.

How dare he? He pursued me, knowing my mother worked for him. Not once, but twice. I walked away only for him to pull me back in; he got me to fall in love with him only for him to walk away after one mishap.

"Jerk!" I yell to no one. As if he heard me, I see his name flash across my screen with an incoming text.

Nick: I will be back in town tomorrow.

I roll my eyes at the stupid text. Back from where? We hadn't talked in over twelve hours, which hasn't happened since he first saw me at his office and gave me a key to his house. We text constantly.

I know he's waiting for me to respond. This is probably his way of making sure I made it home safely, and there's a part of me that wants to ignore the text like he did to me the night before. Make him sweat. But I can't bring myself to do that.

Me: Okay

I barely have time to breathe before my phone buzzes again.

Nick: Everything good?

Are you fucking kidding me?

Me: Yup

I toss the phone beside me on the bed. Exhausted and defeated, I decide not to let Nick take up any more space in my head. I jump off my bed and run up the stairs to where my parents are.

"Mom! You want to watch the Hallmark Channel with me?"

CHAPTER 30

NICK



“Shit!” I hiss as the hot liquid burns the tip of my tongue. I plop the coffee down a little too forcefully and some of the liquid seeps out of the top and lands on my fingers.

The shitstorm from yesterday continues as I rub my eyes, which feel like someone shoved a fistful of gravel into them.

That’s what happens when you don’t sleep all night because all you can think about is how you miss sleeping next to the woman you love. What did I get instead? Nonstop barking from my mother’s beagle, Sadie.

When my mom called from Ireland, concerned because she was not doing well at the doggie hotel, all I wanted was to take Miranda to Providence for the night. In fact, that was my intention when I went to the mall, only to be rebuffed and left there like an idiot.

But damn, I miss her. I miss her voice, her smile, the way her eyes light up at the most unexpected things, and how I never know what’s going to come out of her mouth next. It’s starting to snow now, and I can imagine how excited she probably is. She’s most likely checking the weather every few minutes, filled to the brim with excitement at the possibility of Christmas snow.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Bain? Did you really have to act like such a fucking asshole?”

Did I really have a temper tantrum because my girlfriend left with her

mother instead of me? The mother who has no idea about us because she works for me. Oh, and she also hates me, so there is that. Did I really think it was a good idea to have that conversation while she was at her job? But I really wanted to go with them to dinner with her and her family.

We haven't texted since last night, and all I want to do is reach out to her, but I have a meeting in a few minutes, and she's headed to work this afternoon. Regardless, I'm going to find her, and I won't leave her side until she forgives me for acting like an ass and until we work out a plan to tell her parents about us.

Maybe you should have listened to her yesterday instead of acting like a five-year-old.

My phone buzzes, and with my heart in my throat, I reach for it. In my haste and hope that the person on the other end is Miranda, I knock the coffee over and most of its contents end up on my lap.

"Fuck!" I jump out of my chair, nearly tripping over my bag. Upon realization that I have no paper towels in my office, I march across the hall into the men's room and scrub off the coffee stain as well as I can. Unfortunately, it leaves a huge wet stain on my crotch.

With only five minutes before my meeting, I run into the kitchen to grab another coffee. Thankfully, there's a fresh pot waiting for me. The downside is that Mona is in the kitchen slathering cream cheese on a bagel.

Seeing her here only makes me think of Miranda more, and how much I miss her. I pour the coffee, eager to get back to my office for a few minutes before it's time to go into the conference room for the meeting, but then Mona sighs and picks up her phone.

"Baby girl," she says. Instead of leaving like I intended, I reach for sugar, which I have no intention of putting in my coffee. "You are not acting like yourself. It's a few days before Christmas and you're acting like someone

died. This is not my daughter.”

She stops speaking, and I hold my breath and take a small step closer.

“Don’t lie to me. You think I didn’t notice you were crying last night? And you didn’t eat a thing.”

She stands still, her hand paused over the bagel.

“Darling, whatever it is, you can tell me. Is it Brandon? Is that who you’ve been spending all your time with?”

Who the fuck is Brandon?

“Good. I’m glad it’s not him, but what is it?”

She listens some more, and this time, she rests a hand on her forehead.

“It’s not like you. You call in sick at work today. You’re not eating. From the look of you this morning, you’re not sleeping either. You were still in the clothes you had on yesterday. I have a meeting, but we will talk when I get home tonight. Your father and I are both worried about you.”

She listens some more, and she finally turns around and sees me standing there. I put down the sugar, and even though I didn’t use it, I stir my coffee to give me more time in the kitchen.

“Okay. I love you, baby.” She sets the phone down and takes a deep breath. She picks up her food, nods at me, and starts to walk away.

“Mona,” I say, unable to help myself.

“Yes?” She stops a few feet away from the door and turns to look at me.

“I couldn’t help but overhear. Is everything okay with Miranda?”

“Something is definitely wrong with my daughter. She’s upset about something, and I’m worried about her.”

I stare at Mona, unsure what to say, and feeling lower than I have since I found out Paige was a thief. Unlike the Paige incident, this one is one hundred percent my fault. Now the woman I love is in agony because I acted like a fool.

“Are you feeling okay, Mr. Bain?” She looks at me up and down but thankfully does not comment on the wet spot on my pants. “No offense, but you look terrible. I don’t know what the hell is wrong with everyone. It’s Christmas! We’re all supposed to be happy!” She doesn’t say anything else to me. She walks out of the kitchen, mumbling to herself.

I can’t concentrate on a thing during the meeting. Thankfully, it’s to discuss the spring projects and who we are subcontracting for parts of the project. I manage to get myself together enough to put together a clear presentation, but the mood in the office is down.

To cheer my employees up, I send an email to Mona telling her to bring in lunch for everyone. Half an hour before lunch is supposed to arrive, after checking one employee’s file, I leave the building because I can’t go another minute without resolving things with Miranda.

I park my Range Rover at the far end of the quiet tree-lined street that leads to her parents’ house. The street is populated by one and two-story houses, a hidden oasis in the middle of the city.

Unsure about ringing the doorbell, I send her a text.

Me: I’m outside. Can you let me in?

Three bubbles immediately pop up, but no message comes through. Just as I’m about to call her, the door to the basement entrance opens. I open the gate and run down the few stairs and step through the door.

Guilt washes over me immediately. She’s a wreck. Her hair is tangled, and her eyes are red and swollen. Even the tip of her perfect little nose is red. As soon as I close the door behind me, she crosses her arms, turns, and gives me her back.

She stiffens when I lay both hands on her shoulders. When I do this, she will usually lean into my body and hold on to my forearms while I wrap my arms around her, but this time, she shrugs out of my touch and steps away

from me, leaving me feeling small and empty.

“Just say what you have to say, Nick. If you came to end it, go ahead.” She turns around to face me. “But you’ll have to say it to my face.”

“I didn’t come here to end things, Miranda. How could you think that?” One more step closer, but she steps back.

“How can I think that?” she yells. “How do you think? You practically kicked me out of your house yesterday. You refused to hear me out and treated me like shit when all I did was come over with a solution.” She wipes at her nose and comes toward me, pushing at my chest. The first shove is unexpected, and I take a step back, but when she shoves me again, I grab her hands. “Don’t touch me. Don’t you touch me.” She tries to pull her hands away, but I pull her to me, slamming her body against my chest.

“I’m sorry,” I say against her temple. “I was an ass.” I pull away so I can look her in the eyes. “I was scared I was going to lose you, so I lashed out. I didn’t want to go through what I went through a year ago. Hell, what I feel for you doesn’t come close to anything I’ve ever felt before, and I couldn’t deal with the idea of you walking away.”

Her eyes softened when I first started speaking, but when I mentioned my last relationship, her eyes darken, and she yanks her hands from mine with a strength I didn’t know she possessed.

“I am *not* Paige. You will not punish me for her sins, Nicholas Bain. I am Miranda!” She takes her index finger and points at herself, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “I’m the one who loves you and wants nothing from you but your time! I’m the one who came to you the other day so we could talk like two rational adults. I’m not going to let you treat me like shit because of what someone else did to you. I’m sorry I hurt you, Nick, but the difference is, I never meant to.”

She turns her back to me, but not before I see the tears fall down her

cheeks. I close the space between us and grab her elbow, turning her to face me. I pick her up and look around the small living room to find a door that's cracked open. I go inside and find her bedroom. It's a small space, with a low ceiling. The shades are drawn, and the bedsheets are rumpled. I sit down and put her on my lap. She tries to get up, but I hold on to her.

"I was an idiot, and when you walked out, I thought that was a sign of what's to come. I thought you would choose your mother and end our relationship to protect her feelings. I lost my mind. I realize now how stupid that sounds." I grab her face and turn her to look at me. "I'm sorry. I hate that I did this to you. I hate that you thought I came here to end things. I'm crazy in love with you, Miranda. I love you more than I thought it was ever possible to love another human being. Forgive me. Please."

Her eyes search mine, and I let out the breath I was holding when she runs a hand through my hair.

"Well, you hurt me too. The way you treated me yesterday. I don't ever want to feel like that again."

"You never will. Not from me. I promise."

She doesn't say anything for several moments. She stares into my eyes as if they have the answers to her question, but I hold her stare.

"You big jerk," she finally says as she puts her forehead against mine.

"Biggest fucking jerk. Can you forgive me?"

"Yes. Can you forgive *me*? And next time we have a fight, can you talk to me instead of shutting me out?"

"I'll forgive you for anything. And yes. I promise never to shut you out again."

"I missed you like crazy. Where the hell did you go?" She lays her head on my shoulder and wraps her arms around me. Suddenly, everything is right with my world again.

“My mom has a dog, and I had to go get her. I stayed at her place. I got no sleep, the dog barked nonstop, and I thought about you all night.”

“Serves you right. All I did was think of you too.”

We’re silent as I hold her in my arms, bending down to kiss her forehead every few seconds. She exhales and strokes my hair. It’s as if she breathed life into my body. I twist her around so she can straddle me. The minute our eyes meet, I reach up and kiss her lips. She grinds on top of me, and I’m lost. I lie down, and she covers my body with hers.

“I need you, pretty girl. Feel what you do to me.” I take her hand and rest it on my hard cock at the same moment that I bite her bottom lip. “Let me make love to you.”

She pulls away from my mouth and lays her head on my shoulder. “I’m a mess, Nick. In case you haven’t noticed, I’m still in the same clothes as yesterday. I need to shower.”

“Yeah, but you’re my mess. Let me love you. Right now. I need you right now.”

I kiss her senseless, not giving her time to think as I slide to the middle of the bed and lay her on top of me. She’s just as eager as I am. She lifts my shirt from my pants, unbuttoning it with so much speed. The instant she’s done, I’m shrugging out of the shirt at the same time she pulls my t-shirt over my head.

She goes crazy on my naked chest, kissing, biting, and sucking the taut skin. We break apart only long enough to get rid of our clothes. Once we’re both naked, I cover her body with mine as I suck on the base of her neck.

She moans when I slide my hand between her legs and stroke her engorged clit. She’s so wet as I slide two fingers in her pussy.

“Ahh,” she says, throwing her head back into the pillow. “Now, Nick. I need you now. We can take our time later.”

She reaches down and grabs my dick and starts to stroke it, but I move her hand away, knowing I won't be able to last for very long if she continues.

I push her legs apart and align myself at her entrance. I'm so lost in her softness, so far gone by the sounds of her moans and the feel of her soft skin, I don't hear anything else. All I know and feel is her.

Unable to wait another second, I slide all the way inside, and she welcomes me home.

"Oh, God," she says right before she lets out a loud moan. I pull out and thrust back in, both of us moaning so loudly that the sounds fill the room. I suck hard on her bottom lip, pulling it between my teeth, relishing in the taste and smell of her. We're both so lost, we don't hear anything else, incognizant of anything other than what we are doing.

"Baby girl? What's that noise? Are you crying again?" I hear the words in what I think is the far distance, and when the door opens, I neither care nor understand what is happening.

All I know is how good she feels as she sheaths me inside of her. When she stiffens underneath me, I assume she's about to come and I prepare to hold her through her shudders.

"Oh, shit. Oh my God," she says. I continue to thrust, not realizing she's trying to push me off.

"Baby girl, I brought you lunch. That devil I work for got everyone lunch, and I know you're not eating so I—"

It's not until her bedroom door swings open, slamming against the wall that I have any understanding of what's going on, but when I hear the screaming, I finally realize the gravity of the situation.

I turn my head, still buried in her daughter, to find Mona standing at the door, screaming as if an ax murderer has her cornered. The plate of food she has in her hand falls to the floor and she puts her hands to her face as she

looks on. She then lifts one hand to cover her eyes, all the while screaming at the top of her lungs.

In my haste to get off Miranda and shield my naked body from her mother's eyes, I roll off the bed too fast and fall on my bare ass, giving her a clear view of my dick and balls. I stand up, using my hands to hide myself from her. Her eyes widen before she quickly squeezes them shut as her screams escalate.

Thankfully, Miranda's brain is functioning properly because the next thing I know, she's off the bed and throwing a blanket around us both.

Another set of heavy footsteps comes running down the stairs. A man carrying a baseball bat comes charging inside the small bedroom. Immediately, I step in front of Miranda with the blanket wrapped around both of us.

"What the hell is going on here, woman?" The man, who I assume is Miranda's father, asks. When he sees us, his eyes nearly pop out of his head, but he lowers the bat, takes a deep breath, and turns to his wife. "Mona, why is there a naked white man in my house?" He lets the bat go and it lands with a thud on the carpet.

"Daddy—" Miranda begins.

"No! You don't get to talk," her mother says, practically hissing the words.

"Mona, she's an adult," her father says. "Let's not embarrass them anymore."

"Nigel, this is my boss! The naked white man in here taking advantage of Miranda is Nick Bain."

He picks up the bat again, and I know I can easily take it from him, but the way the blanket is wrapped around both of us, I can't take a step without both of us falling.

“No one is taking advantage of me, Mom. He’s my boyfriend,” Miranda says as she pokes her head from behind me.

“What?” They both yell at once. “When the hell did this happen?” Mona asks.

“At the Christmas party, Mona. Listen—” I begin, but she interrupts me.

“No, you listen,” she says, walking closer and pointing her finger in my face. “You’ve been taking advantage of her since then.” She paces around the room. “Nigel, this is all your fault! If you had come with me to the party, this never would have happened. Was sitting at home in your underwear watching football or whatever nonsense worth it? Oh my God! I can’t handle this. I can’t.” She grabs her husband’s hand for support. He squeezes her hand briefly, but then he moves his hand to her back and starts rubbing between her shoulder blades.

“Give me the bat. I’m going to make sure that if he makes it out of here, and that’s a big if, he’ll do it limping,” she says. She reaches for it, but Nigel takes it from her and throws it out of the room.

“I love her, Mona,” I say, hoping that will make a difference. “I’d never take advantage of her.”

“We’re in love, Mom,” Miranda says. “Calm down.”

“Don’t tell your mother to calm down,” Nigel says. “You nearly gave her a heart attack, gal.” I can feel Miranda bristle behind me. From the stories she tells about her parents, I can tell she’s not used to her father being angry at her.

“In love?” Mona asks, incredulous. Her eyes widen the same way Miranda’s do. “I’m confused. Did you two know each other before the party? How the hell can you be in love? The party was barely three weeks ago. How the hell do two people fall in love that fast?”

“We did, Mom. You said you fell in love with Daddy right away. Why

can't we?"

"Because your father is not the devil, that's why!"

"Well, neither is Nick!" Miranda screams. Mona bristles, and Nigel gives Miranda a look I can't interpret, but she stops short when he looks at her.

"Watch your tone, gal. You know better than to scream at your mother. As it stands right now, you are in no position to take that tone with anybody."

"But she's being so judgmental and closed-minded, Dad."

"You're standing here, naked with a sheet wrapped around you and your mother's boss. Don't you think she has reason to be concerned? You put yourself in the position to be judged, don't you think?"

I can feel Miranda stiffen behind me at her father's rebuke, but she remains quiet. She moves closer to me, and she puts her hands on my hips for support.

"It's true," I say to them. "You can blame me for the whole thing. I'm the one who went after her, but we're together. We're in a relationship. I'm not taking advantage of her. She's the most important person in my life."

The room goes deathly quiet after my declaration. Mona purses her lips so tight, they practically disappear. Her eyes darken, and she takes a slow step toward me, but her husband grabs her elbow and keeps her in place.

"So, Miranda is Pretty Girl? And today you were eavesdropping on my call so you could sneak over here, weren't you? You even had the nerve to ask me if she was okay when you're obviously the one who upset her. You're the one who upset her so much she woke up in the same clothes she wore yesterday. And you think I'm going to be okay with this? Whatever the hell *this* is. I'll tell you one thing. This ends right now."

"Mom," Miranda says.

"I don't want to hear a word out of your mouth, Miranda," Mona says, pointing a finger at her. "I did not raise a liar. That's why you brought me

lunch the other day, isn't it? You came to see *him*." She says *him* with such disdain, I flinch. "Oh my God!" She puts both hands to her head. "Your damn office door was locked when I went to find you because you were in there together, doing God knows what. I can't even fathom the thought."

Mona yanks her elbow from Nigel and starts to walk toward us, taking slow menacing steps. I can feel Miranda stiffen behind me, but Nigel grabs her elbow again, keeping her in place.

"That's not going to happen, Mona. I know you're angry, but this is not going to end. We're just getting started," I tell her as I look at her straight in the eye.

"That's what you think," she hisses.

"Put on your damn clothes and come upstairs. Five minutes. Don't make me have to come back down here and drag you upstairs," Nigel says as he grabs his wife's elbow again. They walk out of the room, slamming the door behind them.

"Shit!" Miranda takes the blanket and tosses it to a far corner of the room. "This is bad, Nick." She runs across the room, and despite what just happened, I can't help but admire her naked backside as she rummages through a drawer looking for clothes.

She grabs a pair of black leggings and a red sweater, and I turn back to my own clothes.

"It will be okay, sweetness." I pull her to me and hold her against my body.

"We were supposed to talk to Dad first, get him on our side, but this is a fucking disaster. He's pissed at me, and he's never, ever upset with me. Not once. This is a first." All too soon she pulls away and we get dressed.

"Hey," I say, grabbing her hand, "I love you, and the cat's out of the bag now. We'll deal with it."

She looks up at me and smiles. It's a wide smile, showing off her perfect straight teeth, and upon seeing it, I relax.

“Let's go face the music.” With her fingers intertwined with mine, we walk out of the room and up the stairs.

CHAPTER 31

MIRANDA



“Nick,” I murmur, reaching out only to find empty, cold sheets underneath my fingertips. I roll over onto my back and lie in the middle of the giant bed, stare at the ceiling, and wonder how one day can be so damn long. It’s not even seven p.m. yet, and I feel like this day has gone on for two years.

I look through the open door, the light in the upstairs hallway giving the room a soft glow. I hear the front door open, followed by the beeping of the security alarm and Sadie barking, and realize Nick must have been out walking the dog.

Wanting to see him, I reluctantly slide off the comfortable mattress and run to the bathroom. The hot shower that follows does little to clear my mind, but it does wonders for my sore muscles.

After changing into clean yoga pants and one of Nick’s t-shirts, I go downstairs in search of him. I find him in the kitchen putting fresh food and water out for the dog. I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his waist. He leans into me, and I stick my head in the middle of his back and inhale him.

“Hey,” he says. He turns around and holds me in his arms. “You okay? You crashed as soon as we got here.” He takes my hand and leads me to the kitchen table, the very one I picked out, and pulls out a chair for me. “Sit down and I’ll start dinner.”

After sitting down, I grab onto his pants pockets and put my face to his flat stomach. “I was exhausted. And as hungry as I am, I need you. Don’t go.” I wrap my arms around his waist and hold him in place. “You smell good.”

“Come on. Let’s go to our sectional.” He takes my hand, and we walk to the living room. He lies on his back on the couch and beckons me to him. I lie on top of him and cover our bodies with the fleece blanket, shutting out everything else but us.

He rubs his hands up and down my back as I listen to the strong beat of his heart.

“I imagined it a million different ways, but I never considered this would be the way my parents would find out about us,” I whisper as he rubs soothing circles up and down my spine.

“What? You never considered your mother seeing me naked?”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, I start to laugh. He soon joins me, and our laughter fills the downstairs. Even Sadie joins in because she runs to us and barks.

“You’re taking this better than I thought you would, considering.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised at myself, really. I think I’m relieved that the secret’s finally out.”

“And you’re here with me,” he says, kissing my forehead.

“I told you I would be, you big jerk.”

“Listen, sweets. I love you and your parents love you. That’s a whole lot of love. We’re going to fix this, okay?”

I hope so but based on the ugly scene that took place when I went upstairs with Nick, I’m not holding my breath.



Mom paces the living room floor, angrily stomping on the hardwood. The minute we arrive upstairs, she stops and stands still, mouth open and breathing hard as she looks at our linked hands.

“No! No! This cannot happen.” She turns to my father, who’s also looking at us but with less venom in his eyes. “Nigel, stop this.” Then she turns back to Nick. “You,” she says, slowly approaching him, “get out of my house and stay the hell away from my daughter.”

I feel him stiffen next to me at her hostility, but then he pulls me closer and throws his arm protectively around my shoulder.

“I’m sorry for the way you found out, but as long as Miranda wants to be with me, I’m not going to stay away from her, Mona. I love her.”

“Jesus,” Dad mutters. He drops his head in both hands and rubs his face. When he finally looks up, he sits back in his chair and looks at us.

“You love her?” my mother asks, eyes wide and mouth agape.

“I do.”

“And I love him, Mom.”

“Oh, my God,” she says, putting a hand to her forehead. “I can’t hear this. I can’t. You just met. You can’t be in love. No! I won’t allow this to happen.”

“What is the big deal, Mom?”

She turns back to me, eyes wider than before, if that’s even possible, as she takes a few menacing steps toward us. This gets my dad out of his chair. He’s by her side within seconds, but he makes no move to grab her.

“What is the big deal, Miranda?” She points her index finger at me, but she stops her approach. “The big deal is that he is my boss.” She says the

word boss with such disdain that I cringe. “The big deal is that I’ve worked for this company for almost three decades, and now I have to quit. The big deal is that he’s taking advantage of you and you’re too blinded by lust and his pretty face to see it! The big deal is, Miranda, that your bad judgment affects this entire family, not just you! The big deal is that my daughter has been lying to me for weeks. Did you two have a good laugh behind my back? Every time I complained about him, did you run back and tell him so you two could laugh at my expense?”

“Mona,” my father begins.

“No, Nigel! This is not the time for you to go against me. Take my side for once.”

“Woman, I am always on your side. I’m making sure you don’t say something you can’t take back.”

“Mom, this really isn’t about you, and you don’t dictate who I can be with.” When she looks at me again, instead of anger, I see disappointment. She lowers her head and shakes it.

“Is that all you have to say? You’re throwing out the adult card when you’ve been lying and sneaking around? Yeah, you’re a grown-ass adult.”

The words hurt considering the source. It’s not often that my mother is upset with me, but I can deal with her anger more than the disappointment I see in her eyes.

“Mona,” Nick begins. “You do not have to quit. You’re a valued and loyal employee. My relationship with Miranda has nothing to do with your job.”

Mom is not appeased by his statement.

“I don’t want you with my daughter,” she says, pointing at him.

“With all due respect, Mona, that’s not up to you. That’s only up to Miranda, and I already know where she stands.”

“Mona,” Dad warns.

“Mom, I love you, but you don’t decide for me who I’m with. I’m not breaking up with him. You forget that I’m an adult.” My voice wavers at my last sentence, and for the first time since this happened, I find myself fighting tears.

“Adult? What kind of adult sneaks around? If you’re so confident in this relationship, why hide it?” she asks, looking from me to Nick.

“That’s a fair question. I’d like to know the reason myself,” my dad says.

“We were waiting for the right time to tell you,” Nick says as he pulls me closer.

“That was my choice. Nick wanted to tell you right away. He wanted to come over here and tell you we were dating, but I’m the one who wanted to wait. I wanted to find the right time.”

“I guess me seeing his bare ass on top of you was the perfect time.”

“Mom!” I yell, embarrassed at her words. My dad finally reaches for her. Like every time my mom gets upset, Dad rubs between her shoulders to calm her.

“That was unfortunate, and I’m sorry about that, but can we please be rational? We’re together. I love your daughter more than I love anyone or anything on earth. All we ask is that you accept that.” The room goes silent after Nick’s words. He lays a hand on my shoulder and gently squeezes it, and I feel some of the tension leave my body.

“Don’t you call my wife irrational,” Dad says to Nick.

“I did no such thing,” Nick says to my dad.

“I can’t do this.” Mom abruptly pulls away from Dad and takes a step away from us all. “My daughter has betrayed me. How many times did you listen to me complain about him? All this time I was telling you about Pretty Girl, you never said a word. You had so many opportunities to tell me. You

two take me for a fool. How stupid you must think I am. Hell, I caught you two at the mall together and I was too stupid to put it all together. I bet you had a good laugh. You want to be with him? Fine! I'm sure he's the reason you've been crying but go ahead! You," she says, pointing at Nick. "I quit! I want you out of my house."

"Mom, it wasn't like that!" I yell, but she doesn't acknowledge my words. "We don't think you're a fool. Please, don't blame Nick. I'm the one who wanted to wait to tell you."

She walks out of the room, the sound of the front door opening and slamming behind her. We all stand there, stunned at the turn of events.

"Why the hell didn't you come to me with this, gal? We could have come up with a way to avoid this disaster," my dad says as he opens the coat closet and pulls out two winter coats.

"That was the plan, Dad." I run a hand through my mangled hair, fighting back tears. "I don't want to have to choose between my mother and my boyfriend."

"It won't come to that, sweets. I'm going to fix this. I promise." Nick turns me around and kisses my forehead. I open my arms and wrap them around him, taking solace in his embrace.

"I'm going to go after her." That's all my dad says before he too leaves the house, slamming the door with more force than ever before.

"It will be okay. I promise." Nick kisses my forehead, and for a few seconds I believe him. "I'm going to fix it."

"It's not for you to fix. I'll give her a few days before I approach her again, but this might be the first Christmas I don't spend with my family. This is new territory. We've never fought like that before. It's all my fault. We should have told her weeks ago like you wanted. I fucked it all up." For

the first time today, the tears I've been fighting fall.

"It's no one's fault. I understand why you wanted to wait. If we're going to blame anybody, we can blame me. If I didn't act like a child, I wouldn't have had to come to your house. You wouldn't have been upset, and she would not have come home to check on you. It all starts with me." He wipes my tears and when I close my eyes, he kisses me on both eyelids.

"No, it doesn't. I should have known she'd show up. Mom can't handle it when anyone she loves is upset. She's a fixer, and I should have remembered that, but enough about her. There is nothing we can do about it tonight. Let's just be together. Make love to me."

He kisses me and rubs his erection on my pussy, but the sound of my stomach growling interrupts our foreplay. He breaks the kiss and smiles at me.

"Food first."

I wrap my arms around him and hold him tight. "Don't go."

"Okay, pretty girl. Take out it is."

CHAPTER 32

NICK



After nearly freezing my balls off walking Sadie, I slide my now naked body in the bed and pull Miranda's back into my chest. I squeeze her nipple and kiss the back of her neck, but she doesn't so much as stir from the feel of my touch.

I should leave her alone and let her rest but feeling her bare skin has turned me from semi to rock-hard. I grab her hand and put it on my cock. That finally gets me a stir and a moan. Encouraged, I pull down the sheet to find her stiff nipples. My mouth waters at the sight, and just as I'm about to put one in my mouth, her phone vibrates on the nightstand on her side of the bed.

With a disgruntled groan, I reach for it to silence it when I see Best Dad Ever and a picture of her dad flashing on her screen. Instead of sending the call to voicemail like I originally wanted, I decide to answer.

"Mr. Moore," I say, hopping out of the bed and stepping out of the bedroom.

^^^

The phone calls just keep on coming, I think to myself. This time, it's my phone that's the source of my irritation. His call does not come as a surprise, and I refuse to avoid him or anyone else.

"Hey, Uncle Joe. How's Florida?" I ask.

"It was great until I received an email from Mona resigning from the

position she's held for almost thirty years. As you can imagine, that was the last thing I was expecting. I managed to get her on the phone for her to tell me she found you naked in her house, taking advantage of her only daughter. And to add insult to injury, you've now taken that daughter from her two days before Christmas. Her words, not mine. When I told you to handle it, I didn't mean like this, son. I told you not to piss her off."

Sadie barks, and I throw a doggie snack at her, but she follows me all the way to my office. Taking a seat behind the desk, I lean back against the chair. It's only ten in the morning, and this has already been one of the longest days of my life.

"I did not steal her daughter, Uncle Joe. That's absurd. Miranda is an adult. Do you think I want to come between her and her mother?"

He stays quiet, likely waiting for me to say more, but I don't say anything else. There's too much on my mind as I think of the conversation with Nigel Moore a couple of hours ago.

"But the rest is true? She found you naked in her house?"

"Let's just say, we never intended for her to find out the way she did. That situation was unfortunate, but I'm going to fix it."

"Unbelievable. For fuck's sakes, Nicky, you have a huge house to be naked in," I hear him mutter. "Well, I told her I did not accept her resignation, and I told her she could take the next three weeks off. Thank goodness Mona didn't ask me if I knew about you two."

"Okay. I'll take care of the rest. Listen, Uncle Joe, I love Miranda. I didn't set out to. This isn't some ploy for me to annoy Mona. I fell in love with her daughter, and she's going to have to accept that because that won't change."

"I believe you, Nicky. It's not me you need to convince. I want to have you two and the entire family over for dinner when I get back. I like Florida,

but eighty degrees two days before Christmas feels unnatural.” We talk about work for a few more minutes, but he hangs up when his grandkids get his attention.

As soon as I end the call, the source of everything good in my life walks into my office. She’s wearing the silk pajamas and matching robe I bought for her the first time I went to her job. She crosses her arms as she leans against the doorframe. The second I open my arms for her, she’s crossing the room and taking her place on my lap. I engulf her in my arms and squeeze her to me as I lay my chin on her shoulder.

“Good morning, sleepy head. I was just about to come upstairs and wake you.” I kiss her neck and inhale her. She smells of sleep and sex. Images of us from last night flash through my mind. After making love to her on the couch, we had dinner only to end up in the bedroom immediately afterward. I’m not sure if it’s the fact that we’ve been outed, but we were both insatiable well into the early morning hours. Even now she’s slowly grinding on top of my hard dick.

She turns to face me, and she cups my face with both hands and looks into my eyes.

“I love you, Nicky. And I’m sorry I’ve caused so much trouble for you.”

“You didn’t cause any trouble, and even if you did, your love makes it all worth it. And I love you, too.” She smiles and leans in to kiss me, but instead of the passionate kiss I know she craves, I only give her a chaste peck on the lips.

“No time, sweetness. We need to shower. Your father called, and I asked him and your mom here for brunch.” Her eyes bulge and her head jerks back at my words. She tries to stand up, but I hold her on my lap.

“My dad called you?”

“No. He called you, and I answered your phone.”

“Okay.” She raises a hand and runs her fingers through her hair. “Did my mom agree to come too?” I can hear the hopefulness in her voice, and I want nothing more than to tell her yes.

“I don’t know. When I was on the phone with your dad, she had a lot to say in the background about me. None of it good. Apparently, I’m a daughter stealing degenerate, and that was the nicest thing she had to say about me. Your father said he would do his best to get her here.” She exhales, and her shoulders sag at the uncertainty. I pull her closer and put my chin on her shoulder again. “We’re going to fix this, but whatever happens, I’m not letting you go.”

She wraps her arms around my neck and strokes the base of my neck with her hands.

“That was never an option, Stinky Nicky. Now, kiss me.”

“I’m not stinky,” I growl right before our lips touch.

^^^

Of course, they would be early, I think to myself as I walk to the front door. Miranda just ran back upstairs to change after getting sauce on herself. Now I’m left to let her parents in by myself.

The door opens, revealing my two unsmiling guests. I stand to the side to let them in. No words are exchanged as they hand me their coats. I take my time hanging them in the closet, but I notice Mona checking out my house. I’m not sure what I possibly could have done to displease her even more, but her face is pinched in disapproval.

Miranda comes walking down the stairs, holding Sadie in her arms. The minute she puts her down, Sadie saunters over and starts to sniff at Mr. Moore. When Mona sees her daughter, she smiles for the first time. Both women run to each other, both hugging and crying as if they hadn’t just seen

each other yesterday. I look at Mr. Moore, and he rolls his eyes at me, but when he turns back to his daughter and wife, he smiles.

“Baby girl,” Mona says, looking at Miranda up and down, “we’ve come to take you home. Let’s go.” She starts to walk her toward the coat closet, but Miranda shrugs out of her mother’s arms. Her father takes her and hugs her.

“I thought you came for brunch, Mom. Nick spent a lot of time cooking.”

Mona finally looks my way, her face tight and her lips pressing together. Nigel opens his mouth, but Mona speaks over him.

“This is what’s going to happen. You’re coming home, and we’ll forget about this whole thing, and we’ll never have to see his face again.” She speaks rapidly as she reaches for Miranda’s hand, but I don’t miss the dirty look she throws my way.

“Jesus, woman, that’s not what we talked about,” Nigel says.

Miranda yanks her hand from her mother’s and comes to stand next to me. I put my arm around her waist, lean down, and kiss her on the cheek.

“Mom, I love you, but I love Nick too. I’m not going home and forgetting this ever happened. We’re together. I’m sorry you found out the way you did, but that was my fault. He wanted to tell you right away, but I wanted to wait. I regret that, but we’re a couple. I hope you can accept that and get to know him, Mom, because he’s amazing, but that’s up to you. That’s the only thing that’s up to you, though.”

I smile at my girl, so proud of her words. I intertwine our fingers together and lift her hand to my lips.

“You live under our roof,” Mona says. Miranda’s eyes widen as she stares at her mother.

“Are you saying I’m no longer welcome at home if I don’t break up with Nick? You’re putting me out because I fell in love?” she asks, incredulous.

“No, she will do no such thing,” Nigel says, looking at his wife. He looks

at her, his eyes wide until she finally looks away. “Our daughter has always been free to love whoever she wants, and that ain’t about to change, woman,” he says, pointing at his wife.

“Miranda, you never gave Glen a chance.” She’s frantic now as she looks around. I’m two seconds away from kicking her out of my house. “Nigel, Glen is half Jamaican. You’ll like him.”

“Woman, it don’t matter if this Glen is half superman. Our daughter don’t want him. She’s with someone else.”

“I don’t like it!” Mona says. The tone of her voice causes Sadie to growl at her. “After everything I told you about the way he treated me?”

I try really hard not to roll my eyes, and I’m proud of myself when I succeed, but her words still upset me. Before I can say anything, Miranda speaks up.

“How has he treated you? By asking you about your role in the company? Because he broke a mug? You told us he apologized for that, by the way. Or was it because he was rude to you the first day? Do you ever consider that maybe he had a bad morning? Maybe he had things going on in his life that had nothing to do with you, but things that hurt him? No! It’s always about what he’s doing to you, but you never consider he might have his own problems. You know what? Fine! You don’t have to accept us. I was hoping you would, but you’re entitled to your feelings, and I’m not going to beg you to accept my relationship.”

The tears start as soon as she says the last word. She buries her face in my chest, and I kiss the top of her head.

“Don’t cry, sweets. It’s okay, baby. I promised you we’d fix this.” She lets out a tearful sob before pulling away from me and running upstairs.

The three of us stand there, looking at each other. No one saying a word.

“Mona,” I say, my voice calm even though I’m fighting for every ounce

of control. “The morning we met, I had just found out my ex-girlfriend, the woman who stole fifty thousand dollars from my business, would not serve any jail time. So, excuse me for acting like an asshole. And I sold the business, by the way. It did not tank, and I didn’t need my uncle to give me a job. He asked me to take the job as a favor to him. The mug was a damn accident.” I stop speaking long enough to take a deep breath. “I don’t care how you feel about me. Honestly, that doesn’t matter, but I won’t have you upsetting Miranda. She’s done nothing but stress about telling you, but the cat’s out of the bag now. Deal with it or not, that’s up to you.”

She looks at me, her eyes holding mine, and I don’t back down. I hold her stare.

“I won’t have you disrespecting my wife,” Nigel says.

“No disrespect meant, Mr. Moore. I would never disrespect anyone that Miranda loves.” This time I hold Nigel’s hard stare, neither one of us willing to back down.

“She’s my daughter,” Mona says, eyes like slits as she takes a menacing step toward me. I stand my ground and hold her gaze. “For the past twenty-three years, she’s been mine. Don’t think after less than a month of this so-called relationship, you can waltz in here and tell us how things are going to be. You think you can just take her from us?”

This time, it’s me who takes a step closer to her.

“That’s the last thing I want, but whether you like it or not, whether you accept it or not, she loves me.” I point to myself before I continue. “And I love her too. Do you know how much? Sometimes I wake up in the night just to watch her sleep. Whenever her hand brushes against mine, I lose my damn mind. I live for her smile. I’d lay down and die for her if I had to. That’s how much I love her. I’m not going to let her go, Mona, so we have to come to some accord, otherwise Miranda will be stuck between us. She’s the one who

is going to get hurt, and I'm not about to let that happen. I'd like a truce."

Mona doesn't say anything. Her eyes don't soften at all as she shoots daggers at me. I don't look away, refusing to be the one who breaks the stare first.

"Let me speak to my wife alone," Nigel says. I direct him to my office, and he takes Mona's elbow, practically dragging her down the hall. Sadie barks and follows them until I hear the office door open and close.

Several minutes later, I decide to go find Miranda upstairs, but she comes down before my foot hits the first step. The tears are gone, and I can tell she's washed her face. The second I open my arms, she runs into them.

"Did they leave?" she asks against my chest.

"They're in my office." I pull back and look down at her face. "Are you okay? I don't want you upset, so if you want them gone, just say the word and they're out of here. I know I promised I'd fix this, but maybe today is not the day for that."

"Let's see what they say when they come out. I'm over it, actually. I miss our little bubble where it was just us." She wraps her arms around me, and I rest my chin on top of her head. "Let's just leave for The Bahamas tomorrow. I can't believe how my mom is acting."

"What?" We both turn around to find her parents standing in front of us. Sadie is now in Mona's arms as she looks at us, mouth agape. "You're taking her out of the country at Christmas?"

"We were supposed to go after Christmas, Mom, but seeing how tense things are between us, maybe it's best if we don't speak for a few days."

Mona puts the dog down and looks at her husband. They have a conversation with just their eyes. In the end, Nigel nods slightly and points his head toward us. Mona takes a deep breath and a tentative step in our direction.

“Baby girl, I want you home for Christmas. You’re an adult.” She raises both hands in surrender. “I can’t tell you what to do, but you’re still my child and I only want the best for you.” She cuts her eyes at me and forces a fake smile on her face.

“I hope you mean that, Mom.”

“Of course, but it’s just that he’s so much older than you. I’m worried that you’ll end up getting hurt. A man like him has been around the block, if you know what I mean. But I’m your mother and I’ll be here when this blows up in your face. And there’s the added complication of—” She stops talking, leaving the sentence unfinished. She looks me up and down and looks at Miranda and waves her hand at both of us.

“What do you mean by that, Mona?” I ask, offended by her words. “Please, tell *me* about *my* life.” She purses her lips again, but she juts out her chin. Nigel takes a step closer to me, his eyes having an edge to them I didn’t see before.

“Watch it,” he warns me.

“There are only so many insults I’m willing to take in my own home,” I say back to him. “With all due respect, Mona, but you know nothing about me or my life. And the only person making things complicated is you.”

“We wouldn’t be standing here in your house if you—”

“Stop it!” Miranda yells. That gets Mona’s attention because she shuts her damn mouth for once. “Mom, Dad’s ten years older than you are, and you guys met and were married in eight months. Don’t insult Nick or our relationship. He’s right. You know nothing about him outside of work. He’s funny, sweet, patient, and kind. He’s all the things you told me to look for in a man,” Miranda counters. “So, you can just stop, okay. You’re not going to break us up. Was all that talk about you wanting me to fall in love and have a relationship just talk?”

“Of course not, baby girl. It’s just that—” She doesn’t finish her statement. She just stares at me instead, leaving the statement hanging.

“Mona, I love your daughter so much. There’s not another man in the world who will love her more than I do. She loves you both, and I would like for all of us to be friends. Please. That will make things easier for Miranda because I’m not giving her up.”

Nigel can stay, but I’d like nothing more than to kick Mona out of my house and never speak to her again, but I have to remind myself I’m doing this for my girl.

Mona looks around the room, and I think I see the minute she understands that she’s outnumbered. Her shoulders sag in defeat and she looks down at the floor. Sadie must sense it too because she starts to rub her head on Mona’s legs. Mona reaches down and pats the dog’s head.

“Well, then,” she says as she looks around, “I will respect my daughter’s choices.” She clears her throat and looks at her husband again. He nods one time, and she looks back at us. “I know Miranda is behind these decorations. I guess I know why you were suddenly in the Christmas spirit. Can Miranda show me around, Mr. Bain?” She finally looks at me again, this time with no hostility, only resignation.

“It’s Nick. And of course. I hope we can be friends, Mona. I didn’t set out to fall in love with her, but it happened. Call it the universe having a weird sense of humor given the hostility between us, but I met your daughter and lost my mind over her. That’s it. You raised an amazing woman.” I wrap my arm tighter around Miranda. She looks up at me, smiles wide, raises herself on her toes, and gives me a kiss on my cheek.

“Well, it’s Christmas Eve tomorrow, and I want you home, Miranda. We have a house full of guests, and we have our traditions. We have a ton of presents to wrap and you know your father and brother are terrible when it

comes to that.”

“Okay, but I want Nick to come too.”

“I’m sure he has his own family. I wouldn’t want them to be deprived of his presence,” she says, giving me the side eye.

“They’re all out of town this Christmas,” I quickly explain.

“He’s welcome,” her father says, quickly agreeing to Miranda’s demands. “We don’t turn anyone away at Christmas.”

“Do you know how to wrap presents?” For the first time, Mona asks me a question.

“My mother made sure I learned.”

“Good. We can use the help. I received a bunch of toy donations and we need to get everything wrapped and delivered to the church tomorrow.”

“I’m proud of you, Ms. America,” Nigel says, squeezing his wife’s shoulder. She looks at him and blushes. He then takes her in his arms and whispers something in her ear. When he lets her go, she turns to Miranda and they start to walk around the house.

As if this woman hasn’t hated me for months, and she didn’t just try to order my girlfriend to break up with me, she turns into a completely different person. She picks the dog up again and starts to walk around the Christmas tree. Miranda runs across the room, and they start to talk and laugh as if the last twenty-four hours never happened.

“Ms. America?” I ask, looking at Nigel.

“You’ll learn in time that those two are inseparable,” Nigel says to me, ignoring my question.

“Well, I’m close to my mom, so I understand.”

“Good,” he says, tapping me on the shoulder. “Nice place. It looks like Santa threw up in here, which means my daughter is responsible for this.”

I don’t answer. I shrug and he laughs.

“You want a drink?” I ask. “I feel like I need at least three.”

CHAPTER 33

MIRANDA



It takes an act of restraint for me not to jump over the fence and run to Nick's car, but I take my time and open the gate. I slip on the fresh coat of snow underneath my feet, but I catch myself. Even almost falling flat on my ass doesn't slow me down. I run right into his arms and he lifts me off the ground before giving me a kiss hot enough to melt the snow.

I'm so lost in the kiss, it takes me a while to hear the sound of barking. As soon as he sets me down, he takes off his coat and puts it on me.

"Sadie," he says. "I couldn't leave her. I figure at this point it would be easier to ask your mother for forgiveness rather than permission." He reaches inside the car and takes the dog out of the crate and hands her to me. He takes out a small suitcase, and I escort him into the house.

After brunch at his house, I came home with my parents, and Nick said he'd meet me in a few hours.

"It's about time you got here. I missed you." I put an arm around his waist as we walk up the three steps to the front door. It swings open, and my mother gestures for us to come inside. She takes his suitcase and tells us to follow her upstairs to the guestroom she just made up for Nick.

"The bathroom is across the hall. Nigel's cooking dinner. In the meantime, we need to start wrapping some presents." As soon as Mom leaves, I pin him to the door, get on my tippy toes, and continue what we started outside. I deepen the kiss at the same time I stick my hand down his pants and grab his already hard dick. As abruptly as the kiss started, I end it

and get on my knees as I undo his belt and lower his zipper.

“Miranda,” he says. I know he wants to stop me, but I also know he’s already too far gone to offer much resistance. “Sweetness,” he says, his voice hoarse with need. He has no time to say anything else because the minute I see his dick, hard, ready, and waiting, I take the entire thing in my mouth.

“Fuck,” he hisses and puts his hand on my face to help guide my head.

CHAPTER 34

NICK



Luckily, no one notices my wobbly knees a few minutes later when we come downstairs, hand in hand. In fact, no one pays much attention to us at all until Andrew sees me. He comes walking into the dining room, a half-eaten apple in his hand. The room is filled with toys, wrapping paper, and ribbons. As soon as Andrew sees me, he stops mid-chew.

“Mom, did you make your boss come and wrap presents?” he asks while offering me a firm handshake.

“Your mother’s boss is your sister’s boyfriend,” Nigel says casually as he leans against the wall.

Andrew starts to choke on his apple as he laughs. He looks from his mother to Miranda, likely looking for confirmation.

“I don’t think it’s all that funny,” Miranda says, punching him in the arm. Andrew rubs his bicep as he continues to look at us. I throw an arm across Miranda’s shoulders and she puts an arm around my waist. She looks at Andrew, daring him to speak.

“So, when we ran into him at the mall, it wasn’t a coincidence?” He looks around the room and starts to laugh again. “I swear, you can’t make this shit up.” Nigel loudly clears his throat, walks over to Andrew, and slaps him upside the head.

“Watch your mouth, boy, and help your mom in here. I’m going to cook.” And just like that, Andrew, who is at least two inches taller than his father,

shuts up and grabs a roll of wrapping paper. But he chuckles and shakes his head every time he looks at me and his sister.

“You two,” Mona says, pointing at me and Miranda. “Get to work. Plenty to be done. Nick, do you think you can drive me to the church to deliver these toys later?”

She asks casually, but I recognize it for what it is. She’s offering me a truce, one I eagerly take. “Just let me know when.”

Music starts to play, and Nigel brings a huge pitcher of what he calls his world famous rum punch.

“How do you wrap these so perfectly?” Miranda asks about an hour later. I lift up the box and wave it around like a hostess in a game show. Andrew, who has had quite a few drinks, whistles loudly in approval.

“Thank my mom. She taught me this crap. I guess it’s not useless after all.” I polish off my drink, grab Miranda, and start to dance to “All I want for Christmas is You.” Nigel comes back and grabs his wife and spins her around the room.

“Are you ready to eat, Ms. America?” he asks, looking at his wife. “We’ll eat in the kitchen,” Nigel announces. “And Andrew, find a gal. You’re almost thirty. Give me some damn grandchildren before I die.”

CHAPTER 35

NICK



“I’d like to cook breakfast for everyone Christmas morning. Just a thank you for letting me spend Christmas here.” I pick up Miranda’s hand from my lap and kiss it. “I’m having a good time with you guys.”

“Nicky,” Miranda says, looking around the table, “Daddy doesn’t like for anyone messing around in his kitchen.”

“That’s right. I don’t want you three messing around in my kitchen”— Nigel says pointing at his wife and kids— “but Nick made a good meal when we were over there the other day. He knows what he’s doing in the kitchen, unlike you three. Breakfast would be great.”

Nigel Moore has made a decadent meal of red beans and rice and two different chicken dishes. He serves a spicy jerk chicken and one in a rich curry sauce unlike any I’ve ever had before. I greedily eat them both.

Halfway through dinner, the woman who was at the mall with them last week comes walking in with two teenage boys and the same little girl.

“Who’s the guy?” she asks, offering me her hand. I can feel Miranda stiffen beside me. “Isn’t he the one we ran into at the mall? Your boss, Mona?”

“And Miranda’s boyfriend,” Andrew offers.

“Nice to see you again, Vanessa,” I say.

“You go, girl,” Vanessa says, winking at Miranda. “These are my kids,” Vanessa says, introducing me. The little girl, Tandy, smiles shyly at me, then she goes and sits on Mona’s lap.

Mona kisses the top of her head, and everyone else finds a seat at the table.

“I have a question,” I say to the table. “Nigel, why do you call Mona Ms. America?”

Mona blushes, but her kids both groan and sigh dramatically.

“Oh, please, Daddy. Not that story,” Miranda moans.

“Well, he asked, so I’m going to tell him,” Nigel says, smiling wider than I’ve ever seen. He looks at Mona and winks at her before he starts talking. “We met at a Fourth of July barbeque my brother and I were throwing. We had just bought a fixer-upper together and he wanted to have a party. Imagine this fine woman walking into the backyard. She walked wearing the shortest jumper I’ve ever seen, made out of the American flag. The only downside was that she walked in holding hands with some clown. As soon as he stepped away, I approached.”

“The first words he ever said to me were, ‘you want something to drink, Ms. America. You look thirsty.’” Mona practically swoons at the memory.

“You should have seen the way she turned up her nose at me. She left me standing in the middle of the yard holding a bottle of water.”

“He was sweaty and gross,” Mona says, defending herself.

“Anyway,” Nigel continues, “that idiot she came with ended up getting so drunk, he passed out somewhere inside the house. I might have been the one who kept giving him drinks. While he slept, I very graciously offered to take the beautiful lady home. When I got to the front of her house, I kissed her good.” Miranda and Andrew both make faces. “I told her she was with me from now on, and she said—”

“I said, ‘in your dreams, buddy,’ and slammed the car door in his face.” Everyone at the table says the phrase all at once.

“The next day, I picked her up at work. I was waiting for her in the

parking lot when she got out. I offered to take her to dinner. That did the trick because she got in the car.”

“I thought he was taking me out for a burger, but he drove me home to this lavish dinner he cooked.”

“And I’ve been cooking her meals since.”

“Hold on,” I say. “How did you know where she worked?”

“Remember I told you she was dating a clown? Well, he was also a wimp. He was still passed out cold on my couch when I got home from dropping her off. I threw some water on him, grabbed him by the collar and pinned him against the wall. He told me everything I wanted to know. See, Mona. That clown wasn’t worthy of you. He’s lucky I didn’t kick his ass.”

“I don’t even remember his name, Nigel,” Mona says, rolling her eyes.

“His name is Bozo, Mrs. Good Stuff.” He leans over and kisses her on the cheek. “You think you’re so tough.”

“Please, enough with the Mrs. Good Stuff,” Andrew says

“Yeah, well, find your own Mrs. Good Stuff, Andrew,” Nigel tells him.

“On that note, I have an announcement to make. I’m giving you all my Christmas present now,” Andrew says, changing the subject. “I’m coming back stateside next August.” Mona jumps out of her seat and hugs him so hard, he practically falls over.

“That’s our present?” Miranda asks. “That’s so cheap.”

“That’s not all,” Andrew says, giving Miranda the side eye. Once Mona gets back in her seat, he continues. “I really want my family to visit me there before I leave, so I bought you all plane tickets to come for a trip. I’ll be back in May for Miranda’s graduation, and I figure we can all fly there together I’d really love for you to come. Seoul is beautiful and I want to show you guys around.”

“Are you serious, Andrew? I’d love to come.” Miranda gets up and hugs

her brother next.

“Mom,” Andrew says, a playful smile on his lips, “I’m sure your boss will give you the time off.” Even Mona laughs at the joke, and I can’t help my smile either.

“Watch this, Mom,” Andrew says, looking at me, “Nick, you want to come to Seoul, too?”

Before the words are even out of his mouth, I answer him. “I’d love to.” Miranda squeals and leaves a greasy kiss on my cheek.

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“Your mom is a taskmaster,” I whisper when I sneak into Miranda’s room hours later. After dinner, Mona ordered Andrew and Vanessa’s boys to clean the kitchen while the rest of us wrapped presents.

“She’s in her element. You wrapped your ass off, so she’s probably your biggest fan. And you didn’t complain about helping her deliver all that stuff. Progress, baby.” She lowers the sheet for me, revealing her waiting naked body, and I strip right down to my birthday suit. Her eyes drop to my already hard dick, and she bites her lip at the sight.

As soon as I climb on top of the bed, I latch on to one of her nipples.

“Mm-hmm,” I hum as I pull her nipple between my teeth. “It’s been torture to be close to you all night, but not be able to touch you how I want.”

“How do you want to touch me?” she asks, her voice raspy with need. I don’t answer her question. I part her legs with my hand and spread her pussy lips apart. She’s already dripping wet for me. Seconds later, I have two fingers buried deep inside of her. “Like that?” she asks.

“And like this.” I remove my hand and roll off her. I grab her and put her on top of me. She immediately straddles me, and I lift her and watch her slide down my dick. She throws her head back, and I grab both her hips as she rides my dick.

^^^

“That was amazing, sweetness,” I say as I wrap my arms around her. I’m on my back, and she’s on top of me, her back to my chest. She shoves her hair aside, and I kiss the side of her neck. We’re both sweaty, spent, and exhausted, but I can’t bring myself to leave her room. “You’re amazing.”

She leans into me, and I wrap her tighter. She puts her hands on my forearms and sighs. “These arms, Nick. I don’t ever want to be anywhere else.” She falls asleep in my arms immediately with her head in the middle of my chest and her mouth wide open.

I know I need to get up and tiptoe my way back upstairs to that guestroom. The room in the house farthest away from Miranda, but I can’t seem to get out of this bed. To do that, I’d have to move her and possibly wake her from her slumber, and I’d hate to do that. I let out a yawn as the events of the long day finally take a toll on me, and I decide to close my eyes for a few minutes before getting up.

A faint buzzing pulls me out of my sleep. Nothing’s changed. Miranda is still in the same position, sleeping with her mouth open. We’re both still naked under her sheets, but the buzzing continues.

As calmly as possible, I move her off my body, which is now coated with a thin layer of sweat, and lay her on the bed. I climb off the bed, cross the room to my sweatpants, and pull my phone from the pocket. My mother texted me several pictures of her and Becker taken at a bar the night before.

“Shit,” I say when I notice that it’s almost six o’clock in the morning. After giving Mona Christmas Eve off, I took it a step further and closed the office today, giving everyone the day off. I know for a fact Uncle Joe never did that, and if the appreciative emails I received are an indicator, I’ve finally done something to garner some appreciation at the office. Now, I’m relieved I won’t have to go into work on top of everything else I need to do today. I put

my pants back on, pick up my shirt, and slowly climb up the stairs leading to the kitchen.

All I can think about is going upstairs and getting Sadie out for her walk, but the minute I land in the kitchen, Mona's eyes meet mine. I stand there like a deer in headlights, my chest bare as the shirt hangs in my hand. She crosses her arms, arches her eyebrows, and looks at me. Then she whistles and Sadie comes running into the kitchen and dives into her bowl of food. "I've already walked her, seeing as you were unavailable," she says, eyeing me.

"Thank you, Mona."

"I believe we gave you a very nice room upstairs." She pulls out two mugs and fills them with coffee. She walks to the kitchen table, the same one we shared a family meal at last night, and she puts both cups down. "Put on your shirt. I've seen enough of your bare flesh to last me a lifetime. Sit down. We need to have a conversation."

I snap out of my daze, quickly put my t-shirt back on, and take a seat at the table. The coffee is a welcome relief considering the circumstances.

"Are you going to ask me to leave?" I ask.

"And have my daughter leave with you? Right back to that Christmas wonderland you let her decorate? No. I'm not going to ask you to leave, but I do want to know what your intentions are with my daughter." She pulls her chair out and sits, eyeing me the entire time as she sips her coffee. Relieved at not being kicked out, I relax in my seat and eye her right back.

"I love your daughter. I never intended to—"

She holds a hand up, silencing me. "You know, I didn't believe you when you first told me that. I believed Miranda when she said she loved you, but I didn't buy it from you. I figured you saw a young girl and managed to charm her. You're a good-looking guy, and my Miranda might come off as sassy,

but the reality is, she's sheltered."

Offended by her words, I put my mug down and look in her eyes. "I have never played with a woman's emotions, regardless of her age. Please, don't insult your daughter. The Miranda I know wouldn't fall for any man's bullshit." I pick up my coffee again and sip as I wait for her to continue her attack.

"I said I *didn't* believe. Past tense," she says, dragging the word. "After seeing you here yesterday, I can admit that I was wrong. I watched the way you are with her. I'm no fool. I know what love looks like, so I watched you, and you didn't even notice that I had my eyes on you. And that's because you're always watching her. But it's the way you look at her when she's not looking at you that convinced me. Your eyes say it all. And the fact that you are here, spending Christmas with us, wrapping presents, watching Christmas movies says a lot too. So, yes. I believe you love her, but that doesn't answer my question."

"My intentions?" I ask before I sip some of the bitter beverage.

Mona nods and sips her own coffee, never taking her eyes off me.

"It means that one day, hopefully sooner rather than later, I'm going to marry your daughter, Mona. When I told you I want us to be friends, I meant it because if I have it my way, I'm going to be a permanent part of your life, and I don't just mean at work."

She's silent as she studies me, her eyes sharp. I can tell she still has reservations about me and that irritates me.

"Are you planning on moving back to Chicago? My son is halfway across the world, and Miranda is my baby." She leaves the statement hanging.

"No. I'm here for good. I'm not going anywhere."

For the first time this morning, she smiles. "And what about grandchildren. I want them. Christmas is so much better with a house full of

children running around, and you're not getting any younger." She laughs at the dig about my age, and at that moment, she reminds me so much of her daughter.

"I'll give you as many as Miranda wants." She seems happy with that answer by the way she smiles at me. She lifts her mug, and I lift mine. We bring them together and clink.

"Friends?" I ask.

"Since it looks like we'll be spending a lot of time together, including family vacations, friends," she confirms.

"Great. Maybe you can spread that news around the office so people can warm up to me," I joke.

"You got it, and since we're friends now," she says. "I have a bunch of presents for the family I still need to wrap. Let's go get them, and the two of us can get to work."

^^^

Christmas morning finds me alone in my bed in the upstairs corner of the Moore household. I should be exhausted, but I feel refreshed and full of energy this morning. Yesterday was one of the best Christmas Eve's I've ever had. I spent hours with Mona, wrapping presents while everyone else in the house slept. When they woke up, I ordered breakfast for everyone from a local place and had it delivered.

With Christmas carols playing, we shared a meal and talked about Christmases past. The only downside was that Miranda didn't sit on my lap while we ate, but it was great hearing stories about her as a little girl.

"One year," her father says to me, "I think she was about five. I caught her and Andrew under the tree. He was eleven, so he should have known better. I heard him telling her it was okay for her to unwrap a present to see what it was, and that he'd wrap it back for her."

Everyone laughed at the memory, and Nigel even pulled out a picture. It was a young Miranda with chubby cheeks dressed in Christmas themed footie pajamas. Andrew was wearing the same thing and had a guilty look on his face while he handed her a present.

After yesterday's breakfast, Mona and Miranda left for several hours to run errands, which gave me time to run my own errands. By the time I got back to the house, the Chinese food was on its way, and Miranda was in the kitchen baking gingerbread men cookies and slicing avocados to make her Christmas guacamole.

I've had good Christmases with my mom and uncle, but the Moore's house was so alive yesterday. The Chinese food was just the beginning. Neighbors and family members dropped by throughout the night, bringing more food with them. The music never stopped, nor did the drinks, which explains the dull pounding in my head now, but I wouldn't change a second of it. I danced with my girl, kissed her under every mistletoe, was hugged, kissed, and were welcomed by every member of her family, and every neighbor. I don't know how I ever spent a holiday without Miranda Moore.

She's happiness and love. She's the light to my darkness and the balm to everything that ever hurt me. My mother was right. Everything else was preparing me for her.

With a spring in my step I should not feel, I hop out of the bed. After a quick shower, I put on the pajamas Miranda got for me weeks ago and put a small gift in each pocket.

Mona, Nigel, and Miranda are already in the kitchen when I get down there. Miranda, wearing the same pajamas as me, flies into my arms and I welcome her in.

"Merry first Christmas together, baby," I say as I kiss her forehead repeatedly. "The first of many."

“Merry first Christmas, Stinky Nicky.” She presses her face to my chest and inhales.

“Still not stinky.” I pull out her present from my pocket and hand it to her. She squeals and rubs her hands together before taking it from me.

“What is it?” she asks, bouncing on her heels.

“Why don’t you open it to find out, gal?” Nigel says. He shakes his head at us while he looks on. Miranda takes the present from me and rips the package open. She opens the box and finds a pair of dangling ruby earrings, shaped like gift boxes. She shrieks in laughter and hugs me. She puts them on and shows her mother.

“I love those,” Mona says. I walk to where she’s sitting and pull another gift out of my pocket and hand it to her. She looks at me but makes no move to take the gift from me. “Oh, you didn’t have to get me anything. Seeing Miranda so happy is enough.” I shake the gift at her, pick up her hand, and drop it in it. She finally smiles and rips it open to find the exact same pair of earrings as her daughter.

She jumps up and hugs me before putting them on. Mona and Miranda put their heads together and I snap a picture of them with my phone.

“Can we have some breakfast before we open the rest of the presents?” Nigel asks. Soon everyone wakes up, including Vanessa and her kids, but Nigel insists everyone eats first, so I get to work.

“Are you going to help me, sweetness?” I ask. I don’t miss her father’s eye roll followed by a snort.

“If sweetness helps, we’ll never get to eat. She’ll only help you by tasting everything. And with all that kissy face you two do, we won’t eat until New Year’s. Miranda,” he says, pointing at her, “you can get the dishes and set the table in the dining room. I’ll help.”

Miranda seems put out by the decree. She puts her hands on her hips and

says, “I can cook. Nick, tell him about the pot roast I was going to make for you. And you ate most of the guacamole I made last night, Daddy.”

“Guacamole is not cooking. And you want Nick to tell us about the pot roast you were *going* to make?” her father asks, looking at me.

“Yeah, she said she was going to make it and came over with all the ingredients, but I’m not sure what happened. Somehow, I ended up making it.”

Nigel laughs and shakes his head. Miranda huffs, but she kisses me one last time before going to the cabinet and taking out a stack of dishes.

CHAPTER 36

MIRANDA



Wrapping paper is strewn all about, and a few kids are in the middle of the mess, having a paper fight. The sun has gone down on what was a beautiful winter day. Soft music is now playing as I sit on the living room couch, both of my legs laying across Nick's thighs.

"I can literally die after this," I say as I offer him a piece of the death by chocolate cake I picked up from a local bakery the day before.

"I just found you. No talk about dying. Give me some more, though." I give him a small piece, but he snatches the plate from me and feeds me instead.

Christmases at home have always been magical. From the family, to the food, to the presents, but this year is beyond anything I ever could have imagined. After a decadent breakfast cooked by Nick, we went to the living room, and I was rendered speechless by the sight in front of me.

"Why does it look like the Christmas tree blew up?" my father asked. Nick looked at me and winked.



"Did you do all of this shopping yesterday?" I ask.

"On Christmas Eve? No. Those have been at the house all along. I had

them hidden in my secret place. I didn't trust you after I caught you shaking the presents that one time." I narrow my eyes at him, but then Andrew comes running into the living room with our little cousin on his back, and I forget to interrogate Nick about his secret hiding place.

The next hour is hysteria with presents being opened, but the sweetest moment is when my mom gives an ugly Christmas sweater to Nick for our annual family picture.



“Best Christmas ever,” I whisper right before he feeds me the last of the cake.

“I agree, though I ate way too much.” He pats his washboard abs. I reach over and slyly slide my fingers underneath his sweater. “My trainer’s going to kick my ass in the New Year.”

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about. And even if you get fat, I don’t care. I’ll still love you. Just don’t get to the point where I have to help you to the bathroom or have to help you bathe.”

“I don’t know if I should be flattered or horrified by that, but I think I’ll go with flattered. You don’t have to worry about that, though. In my old age, I can’t afford to let myself go. Gotta keep my young, hot girlfriend happy and satisfied.”

“When you first met my mom, did you in a million years ever imagine you’d be spending Christmas at her house? You’re going on night number three here, Nicky.”

“No, but then after I met you, I hoped to spend Christmas with you.”

“You know, you didn’t give me any Christmas nookie yet.” I must catch him off guard with that statement because his laugh gets caught in a cough.

“Come home with me, and I’ll give you all the Christmas nookie you can handle. And I can put out those scary pillowcases you gave me.” He pulls me across the couch to his side. I lean into him, his arm thrown casually over my shoulder as I intertwine our fingers.

“The pillowcases are not scary.”

“You know I think you’re gorgeous, but pillowcases with our faces on them are scary, sweets, yet I love them. What I love the most are the pictures you gave me.” The pillowcases were a gag gift, but the real gift was several framed photos of us over the past few weeks.

“I love you,” I whisper.

“Love you more.”

We’re soon interrupted by my mother, who comes running into the living room with my father chasing behind her. He catches her, and in a rare display of affection, kisses her on the lips before walking away from her and taking a seat on the other end of the couch. My mom, who probably has had too much rum punch, giggles like a schoolgirl.

“When are you two going to that fancy spa Nick arranged?” my dad asks, with a playful glint in his eyes. Nick bought me and my mom spa treatments for Christmas.

“Soon. Before we leave for The Bahamas.”

“So, are you going with them, Nick? Get yourself a manicure before your trip?” my dad asks, his eyes full of mischief as he looks at me and Mom.

“Someone messing around with my hands and putting clear polish on my nails? No, thanks. But since I got you two the bottomless mimosas package, I’ll have to drop you off and pick you. Just call me when you’re done.” He picks up my hand and kisses it. My dad looks at me and nods in approval.

“Nick, you and I will get along just fine. Let’s go out back and smoke a cigar. Mona only lets me smoke one time a year.” Dad gets up, and Nick

follows him, and I sigh in contentment at the most perfect Christmas.

Nick

“It’s my mom and Becker,” I say as I look at my phone. I accept the FaceTime and smile at my mom.

“Nicky! We miss you guys so much. Ireland is great, but I told Becker I don’t want to travel during Christmas anymore.” Sadie must hear my mom’s voice because she jumps on me and starts to bark. “How’s your Christmas, son?”

“Hi, Allison,” Miranda says, smiling at my mom. “Hey, Becks.”

“Darlin’,” Becker says.

“We’re having a great Christmas. I’m here at Miranda’s house.”

“That’s wonderful, Nicky. We want to have you guys over as soon as we get back,” my mom says.

“Bring the hat, darling,” Becker says to Miranda.

“Oh my God! You should see the hats Nick got me for Christmas. Hold on.” Miranda snatches the phone from me and runs to the other room to her stash of Christmas presents. From my seat on the couch, I watch as she makes Andrew hold the phone as she models each of her new hats. She looks utterly ridiculous since she still has on Christmas pajamas.

“What hat are they talking about?” Mona asks, appearing almost out of nowhere. She cranes her neck as she watches Miranda laugh at something my mother says. “I see she’s already met your mother.” She purses her lips and looks at me, her eyes almost accusatory.

“Once. My mom and stepdad love her.” That appeases her a little bit, but she still continues to watch her daughter.

“You know, Mona,” I say, scooting over to her and putting my arm across her shoulders. “We can have an inside joke too. You did see my bare ass, after all.” She stills, and I expect her to shrug out of my touch, but she turns

to me, a genuine smile on her face.

“For the sake of our newfound friendship, please don’t ever mention that again.”

“Deal!”

CHAPTER 37

NICK



Me: I miss having you close by.

Miranda: Patience, Nicky. I'll be there in ten.

It was only a little over a week ago when we finally got away from the cold and spent five days in tropical paradise. Christmas day with the Moore's was something I hadn't experienced in years with my own family. Since leaving for Chicago, I've only spent a handful of Christmases at home. The holiday never meant anything to me. Without Miranda, I would have spent the day with Henry and his family or at home watching movies, but she managed to make it magical.

For the next five minutes, I look over the email Uncle Joe sent me. It's an official proposal that would change the business, but it would mean I would stay on permanently. A few months ago, I would have told him no. Hell, I've told him no before, but now it seems like the perfect solution.

Eager to see Miranda, I decide I'll wait for her by the reception desk. Just as I'm approaching the desk, I stop when I hear my name.

"Mr. Bain looks so tanned. I had no idea he was in The Bahamas. I thought he was down in Florida with Joe, but he walked in here looking refreshed. Did you ever notice how good-looking he is?" I roll my eyes at Sherry's ranting, but I don't move from my spot.

"No, Sherry. I don't look at the boss that way." I can hear the annoyance in Mona's voice as I imagine her rolling her own eyes. "The man is allowed to have a vacation."

“Look at you, defending him. Listen to this. Come closer.” I imagine her waving Mona closer to the desk. “He told me his girlfriend is meeting him for lunch today. That’s why I took my lunch early. I want to see this woman for myself. I bet she’s drop-dead gorgeous. Probably a model. If I were a few years younger and fifty pounds lighter, honey, this girlfriend would have some serious competition.” She lets out a loud laugh as she taps on the desk.

“Sherry, please stop—” Mona starts to say more, but Sherry interrupts her.

“He’s been a lot nicer since he met this girl. You don’t think he gave us Christmas Eve off for our benefit, do you? No, he wanted to spend time with this woman. I should send her some flowers.” She cackles. The elevator door opens, and she shrieks, calling out Miranda’s name.

“Look at you, girl. You look like you got yourself a little tan too. Mona didn’t tell me you went on vacation.” As if everyone is supposed to run their personal time by Sherry. “You’re right on time. The boss’s new girlfriend will be here any minute and we can gossip about them the minute they leave for lunch. By the way, Glen was asking me about you. Give me your phone number so I can give it to him. You two would make beautiful babies.”

This ends now. I make myself known as I clear my throat loudly when I approach the desk. Sherry looks up and smiles.

“Your guest isn’t here yet, Mr. Bain,” she says, her eyes roaming my body.

“She’s here, Sherry,” I say. She looks totally confused, so I turn to Miranda and plant a loud kiss on her lips. The kiss goes on long enough for her to look embarrassed by the time I end it. I’m immediately satisfied when Sherry’s mouth hangs open. “Tell your nephew it’s time he finds someone else, and the Bahamas was great. Miranda and I had a great time. Thanks for asking.” I turn to Miranda. “Ready for lunch, sweets? Hungry?”

“A little bit,” she says, blushing.

“Are you coming, Mona?” I ask.

“Um, no. Someone has to stay here to make sure Sherry doesn’t die of shock.”

That gets a laugh out of everyone but Sherry, who watches us, mouth unhinged until the elevator door closes. As soon as I have Miranda alone, I pin her against the elevator wall. “I’ve missed you.” I try to sniff the side of her neck, but her thick scarf is in the way. “Stupid scarf. I liked it better last week when you were half naked on the beach. I really liked it when you were completely naked in our bed, riding my face.”

“Don’t talk about my scarf. My boyfriend gave it to me for Christmas.” She lifts the ends of the Burberry scarf and holds up her matching gloved hands, then puts them on her head. “Hat and gloves too. He wants to make sure I’m warm at all times.”

“I bet your boyfriend is crazy about you. Probably thinks of no one and nothing but you.”

“Let’s go to your place, and you can feed me this.” She grabs my crotch. “I miss not being able to have this whenever I want.” Images of the five days we spent in paradise flash through my mind. Lying naked on the massive four-poster bed in the master bedroom. Swinging in the hammock as the ocean breeze kissed our skin.

Having her with me all day without the threat of her mother in the background, my girl was as relaxed as I’ve ever seen her.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks as we step out of the elevator

“Our time in the Bahamas.” The minute we step outside, the harsh January wind whips around us. “And how I wish we were there right now, back on our favorite hammock. You wrapped around me.”

She stops in the middle of the parking lot and kisses my cheek. She then

hooks her arm through mine as we continue the short walk to my car.

“Poor Nicky. Does it matter where we are? Can’t you hear it?”

“Hear what?”

“My hips. Doesn’t matter where we are. They still say Nick, Nick, Nick.” She lets go of my arm and starts to walk backward, and despite the long, bulky coat she’s wearing, I can still hear the Siren’s call of her hips. “Nick,” she says, swinging in one direction. “Nick.” She swings in the other. “Nick.” And back again.

By the time she’s done, she’s against the car door and I pin her against it. I grab her hips and bring them to mine. “Nick, Nick, Nick,” I say against her lips as I roll her hips.

“Oh, Nick,” she says against my mouth. “Yes, Nick.” Kiss. “More, Nick.” Kiss. “Deeper, Nick.” She breaks eye contact and looks at my lips. “Your place, Nick.” I bend down and kiss her. Despite the harsh New England winter, the kiss sets my blood on fire. Much too soon, I pull away from her and open the door.

“Can’t go to my place, baby. I have a meeting in a couple of hours, and an hour with you just won’t be enough right now. Besides, there’s something I need to talk to you about, and you know how distracting you are when you’re naked,” I tell her as I start the car.

“Fine.” She sighs. “But since you’re coming over for dinner tonight, that means no nookie until tomorrow.”

“Think about this, sweets. One day soon, my place will be our place and nookie will be available twenty-four seven.” It’s the first time I’ve voiced that thought out loud, but I’ve been thinking about it since our trip. She looks at me, eyebrows raised, and a smile on her lips. “I know. I know. We just celebrated our one-month anniversary, but I’m just looking to the future.” I pick up her hand and kiss it. “You’re my future, but that’s not what I want to

talk about today. Let's get you some food and we'll talk."

CHAPTER 38

MIRANDA



“Not as good as yours,” Nick says with a mouth full of guacamole. He dips a chip in it and offers it to me.

“I was thinking about what you said in the car.”

“Oh? You’re ready to move in this weekend?” I laugh and roll my eyes at him.

“Are you sure you don’t want to move into my little basement apartment? The rent’s cheap. Really cheap in that I don’t pay any.”

“As charming as I find it, I have a much bigger place. A place where I don’t have to worry about your parents catching us, but that’s not what I want to discuss. You do know I want to spend the rest of my life with you, right?” I stop breathing and look from my chip into his eyes.

“I want that, too.”

He visibly relaxes and lays a hand on top of mine. “Good. As you know, Uncle Joe is coming back next week, but only on a part-time basis. We got hired to design and build a community of townhomes. We need someone to decorate the model homes and be a project manager.”

“Oh, okay. Sounds good, Nicky.” The waiter comes with our entrees, shrimp tacos for me and steak for him. I pick up one of my shrimps and offer it to him. He takes it, licking my fingers in the process.

“I was thinking after you graduate, you can come work for Bain and decorate the models when needed, and you can also manage some projects. We’re growing and will need someone to handle that, and I thought of you.”

It takes a few seconds for his words to sink in. Caught mid-chew, I drop my taco on the plate. It opens up, spilling the contents all over the place.

“Um, you know I only decorate as a hobby, right? My degree is in management, but I have no idea how to manage a construction project. And you can’t possibly want to live together and work together too.”

“We’ll hardly be the first couple in history to do that. And so what if it’s just a hobby? Lots of careers start off as hobbies, and I can teach you the other stuff. Just think about it. And I want to do more than live with you. Miranda Bain has a nice ring to it.” He winks at me, and I smile at the thought.

“I agree. It does,” I say, blushing. “I’ll think about the job.”

“That’s all I ask. And think about this. When we have kids, you’ll have all the flexibility you need, and so will I.”

I swallow just as he says the last part, and I start to cough. He reaches over and taps me on the back, but I can see the playful glint in his eyes.

“Kids?” I reach over with shaking hands and drink my ice-cold water. “Did my mother put you up to this?”

“No, but this is what happens when you fall in love with an old man.” He reaches and takes my hand again. “I want everything with you. I’m not saying we need to have kids tomorrow. I think I can wait a couple of years.”

“You’re full of declarations today, Stinky Nicky. You better put a ring on it.” I lift my left hand and wave it around like Beyoncé.

“I’ve got you, baby. Come back to the office. You haven’t said anything about decorating for Valentine’s Day.”

“Are you serious?” I ask as I look at him.

“As a heart attack. This will be the incentive we need to take down the Christmas decorations.”

“Yes!”

EPILOGUE

NICK

FOUR YEARS LATER

She steps into my office, dressed in a red dress with a wide, black belt around it. The dress reaches her knees and has fur trim at the end. Her legs are bare, as are her feet. I lean in my chair, hands behind my head as I watch her approach. She moves a lot slower these days.

It's been four years since the best Christmas surprise of my life. Four years of loving, laughing, fighting, and making up. There hasn't been a day that we've spent apart since we went public with our relationship.

I pull my chair away from my desk to give her space. If this were any other time, I'd grab her and pull her into my lap, but I have to be a lot more careful now. I offer her my hand, and she takes it, slowly walking around me to get on my lap. I pull her to me as I kiss her round stomach. I lay my hand on top, but she grabs it and moves it to the side. I'm unable to stop the laugh that bubbles in my throat at the feel of the kick.

"She's been kicking me all afternoon," she says.

"She? The last time I checked, Mrs. Bain, we decided not to find out the gender."

"Well, Mr. Bain, call it a mother's intuition. I will not be outnumbered in this house."

"And what a house it is. What did your father say last week? The North Pole on crack *and* meth?" She laughs and rests her head on my shoulder. With our growing family, we moved out of the townhouse into a much bigger home less than one mile away.

Right now, the house is decorated for Christmas, and my wife spared no

expense when it came to turning our house into a winter wonderland, fit enough for Santa himself. Her words, not mine.

“Remember our first Christmas together?” she asks.

“How could I forget? We spent the entire time with your family getting drunk off your dad’s rum punch. Your mother finally decided I was useful when she saw my superior gift wrapping skills and dance moves. Do you know that was one of the best Christmases of my life?”

“Mine too.”

She runs her fingers through my hair, and I rub her swollen belly as I think about our years together and how fast things moved with us. It was only a few months after our first Christmas when I went to her father to talk to him about proposing to his daughter. Despite the good relationship I’ve had with Nigel, I was nervous. This was his only daughter and the apple of his eye, but I worried needlessly.



“I’m surprised it took you this long,” he says to me after telling him my plans to propose.

“Yeah, well, I was already on shaky ground. And she’s young, so I wanted to give her a little bit of time.”

Nigel taps me on the shoulder and pulls out a cigar from his secret stash. Whenever Mona isn’t around, he indulges in a cigar.

“I just have to make sure I shower before Mona gets home. The woman has a nose like a bloodhound.” I take the cigar from him, not really liking them, but I know this is one of the ways he bonds with me. Since Andrew’s been back in the states permanently, he’ll have one with us whenever he

visits.

“Don’t worry about the time, son. When you meet the right person, you just know. I knew I wanted to marry Mona two minutes after meeting her. She’s been driving me crazy ever since, but I can’t spend a day without her or I’ll lose my mind.”

“You were always okay with me, despite the way you and Mona found out about us. I thought you would have given me a much harder time, but you didn’t. You helped us, in fact. Why?” Nigel isn’t a talkative man unless he’s having a cigar.

“Well, I believed you when you said you loved her. I’m good at reading people. And Mona will deny this, but her parents didn’t like me at first. They thought I wanted to marry her for a green card, even though I’ve been in this country since I was eleven and was already a citizen when I met Mona. I’ve forgotten more about American history than they’ll ever know. We’re okay now, but I promised myself then that if I was lucky enough to have kids, I would always respect their choices. And you know something else? I think you and I are a lot alike.” He surprises me by throwing his head back and laughing. “My daughter found a man just like her father, and she doesn’t even realize it.”

A few days later, Miranda was wearing my ring and moving into my house, and Mona was planning a destination wedding, all animosity toward me forgotten.

“Are you happy you married me?” she asks.

I pull back to look at her face, sigh loudly, and roll my eyes. “Always fishing for compliments. You know marrying you is the best thing I’ve ever done. And seeing you big with my child inside of you? There aren’t enough words to describe how that makes me feel.”

She smiles at me and mouths *I know* before kissing my lips. “Are you happy you married *me*?”

She shrugs her shoulders and says, “It’s okay so far.” She starts to laugh when I tickle her. “Okay! Okay!” she shrieks. “I’m ecstatic I married you, even though you decided not to cook today. You’re the best husband I’ve ever had.”

The family is coming for brunch soon, but instead of cooking like I normally do, we both slept in. After driving her to the hospital yesterday with what we believed were labor pains, hours later, we returned home. My wife was not in labor yet. Too exhausted to cook such a large meal, I arranged to have the whole thing catered.

At the sound of the doorbell, we both rise from my chair. With my arm securely around her waist, we walk to the front of the house. I try to bring her to the couch, but she shakes her head and points at the door.

I can hear everyone talking at once.

“How do they always manage to arrive at the same time?” I ask. Impatient to see everyone, Miranda opens the door and our entire family is standing on the other side.

“Baby girl,” her mom says. “You’re supposed to be sitting. Nick, why isn’t she sitting somewhere with her feet propped up?”

Neither one of us has a chance to answer when our thirteen-month-old son shoves his way in and runs right to his mom. I intercept and scoop him up.

“My Stinky Nicky two-point-O,” Miranda says, reaching over and kissing our toddler. “I’ve missed you, baby. Did your grandparents spoil you? Dad, please tell me you didn’t let him sleep in the bed with you and Mom again. We can never get him in his crib when you do that.”

Nigel comes over and kisses his daughter on the cheek after shaking my

hand. He reaches for my son and takes him out of my arms.

“He is my grandson to spoil as I see fit, gal. If he tells me he wants to sleep on the roof in the middle of January, I’ll find a way to make it happen. Now, hurry up and give us a second one to spoil.” He kisses her cheek again and walks away with our son.

“Not helpful, Dad!” Miranda yells after her father. I hug my mom briefly, but she turns her attention to my pregnant wife and touches her belly.

Nick junior was the second biggest surprise of my life, his mother being the first. We agreed to be married at least two years before starting a family, but our son had a mind of his own.

We had only been back from our honeymoon six weeks before we found out she was pregnant. I still remember being struck speechless when she told me.

It’s a Friday night in early September. I’ve been in New Hampshire all day touring the site where a building I’ve been hired to design is going to be built. It’s after seven at night by the time I get home, and after rubbing my shoulders and sitting me down at the dinner table, Miranda sits in my lap.

“You smell good, sweets. Let’s head up to bed right after dinner.” I rub my face in the crook of her neck. “If I don’t sink into you soon, I might die.”

“I thought we were going out for ice cream?”

“Woman,” I growl against her neck in my fake Jamaican accent. This causes her to belly laugh.

“I did not marry a man like my dad. I don’t care what you or Nigel Moore say.”

“Mrs. Good Stuff.” I kiss her cheek. “You think you’re so tough.”

“Oh my God! Stop!”

We eat the dinner she prepared and after, we walk to a nearby ice cream

parlor.

“So,” she says over a bowl of cookies and cream, “Remember these?” She waves her arm in my face and shows off a charm bracelet.

“Yeah. I got that for you on our honeymoon. I want to go back for our anniversary next year. I loved Maui.”

“You know what else you got me on our honeymoon, Stinky Nicky?”

“Not stinky, sweets. I know you got laid a lot, but what else did I get you?”

“Pregnant. You got me pregnant.”

The spoon of cookie dough ice cream slips from my hand and lands on my pants as I stare at my wife at a loss for words.

“What did you just say?” Blood is pounding in my ears, and all I can think about is that I hope I heard her right the first time.

“Your sperm is quite potent for an old man. My birth control just wasn’t strong enough. I’m pregnant, baby.” I jump out of my seat and lift her out of hers. Right there in the middle of the small space, I spin her around.

“My wife is pregnant!” I yell. Everyone inside claps and someone lets out a loud whistle.

“Nicky is ours next weekend. Becker’s grandson is turning two and we want to take Nicky to his party,” my mom says to me, pulling me out of my daydream. Between my mom and Becker, and Miranda’s parents, our son is always in demand.

Becker makes drinks for everyone, including a non-alcoholic version for Miranda and our son. A few minutes later, Uncle Joe and Henry arrive. Andrew is right behind them, looking more distracted than I’ve ever seen him.

For the next few hours, our house is filled with family, music, love, and

nonstop chatter as we share a meal and memories of Christmases past.

After brunch, my mom takes control of the music, and of course, everyone laughs at her choice of song.

When I have my wife in my arms, dancing much too slowly for “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree,” she makes a face and looks down as water trickles down her legs.

In record speed, we’re on our way back to the hospital, and five minutes into Christmas, our second son is born.

“You are so outnumbered, sweets,” I say to her hours later as I hold our son in the hospital room. “But we’ll keep trying until we have a girl.”

I gently put the baby down, slide into the bed next to Miranda and pull her in my arms.

“You’re still my favorite Christmas surprise,” I say against her temple.

“And you’re mine.”

The End.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As usual, I want to give a special shoutout to all the people who helped along the way. You all know who you are! Amy, for always listening, reading, giving feedback and being a cheerleader! You rock, girl! Sheree, Suzan, Lizzie and Anna! You women are my own personal village. Thank you for always being available to read and to answer the million questions that I have. KC, girl, you are amazing! You're always just an IM away, and I appreciate that so much.

To the readers, you guys make this happen. Thank you to everyone who has read, reviewed and spread the word about my books.

And to my crazy sister, Kettie, for her excitement and pride about my books.

And to my husband for always listening and being my expert on how men think. Lord knows I couldn't figure that out on my own.

This one was a fun one to write. The characters, especially the side characters, just spoke to me. We all have a Mona, and hopefully a Nigel, in our lives. Nick and Miranda lit up the page, and like with all my books, I was sad to see their story end.

Until next time.

ABOUT EVELYN

A Boston native, wife, mother, and wine enthusiast. If she's not writing, thinking about writing, you will find Evelyn with a book in her hands. While a new publisher, she's been writing for years, and she will continue to write for many years to come.

Evelyn is obsessed with assertive and confident men who will stop at nothing to get their woman. Her stories are filled with love, passion and humor. She currently lives in Washington, DC with her husband and two daughters.

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