

Saving Scotty

Broken Series

Annie Jocoby

SAVING SCOTTY

by

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Books by Annie Jocoby

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Broken and ***Saving Scotty*** are spinoffs of the *Illusions* series, which are available at the links above. The first of the series, *Beautiful Illusions*, is permanently free! If you are interested in Nick, then these other stories are for you, because he was a prominent character in all of these books!

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And now, without further ado….Saving Scotty!!!!!!

Chapter 1
Scotty

I was feeling extremely disoriented. Everything seemed dark and bleak, and I couldn't see a goddamned thing. All that I knew was that there were people all around me, and I was on something soft. I didn't feel cold, though. So, I guessed that this is a good thing.

I didn't remember what happened. How did I get here? *Think, Scotty, think.* What happened? My mind drifted to what happened to me, and then it suddenly dawned on me. I mean, I guess that I was a bit disoriented for a second, then, like a dream, I remembered that Nick was with that woman. That awful woman with the perfect face and body. The woman whom I thought that he hated, or, at least, strongly disliked. Yet, he was with her. They were both naked.

Inside I started screaming upon remembering that vision in my head. Outside, I didn't think that a whole lot was happening.

And then I heard my mother. "Where is my daughter?" she demanded. "I need to see her."

"You will see her when she wakes up. We also contacted her legal guardian. Paul Lucas. Do you know him?"

"Yeah, I know him. But he's nothing to her. I'm her mother. Paul was just her foster father. Her adoptive father, I guess."

Adoptive father? What the hell? He never adopted me, thank god. Did he? Did he manage to adopt me without my even knowing it? He had money, he could probably have done anything at all.

I felt my heart pounding at just the thought of Mr. Lucas being here. *Please, don't let him near me.* Outside, I could hear my heart monitor rapidly picking up pace, so that the beat was staccato and extremely fast. Just the thought of Mr. Lucas coming here was enough to make me panic and send chills up and down my spine.

Then my mother was in the room. I actually was happy to see her, even though we always have had our problems. At least she wasn't Mr. Lucas. My mother was a clueless alcoholic, but she wasn't evil like Mr. Lucas.

She brushed some of my hair out of my eyes, a tender gesture coming from her. "Scotty, what happened, dear?"

"I don't know, mom. I guess I just got kinda careless when I crossed the street in front of my office. I, uh, had a lot on my mind."

“You’re burning yourself out. Taking on too much. You know how I worry.”

I looked at her. Her eyes seemed more in focus than usual, and I didn’t smell the tell-tale scent of vodka on her breath. I wondered if she was actually sober for once in her life.

I took her hand. “Mommy,” I said. “I really need you right now.” My life was falling apart, and I wanted her to keep it together so that she could be a mother to me for once in her life.

She looked interminably sad. “I wish I could be there for you, little Scotty. I’m trying to get a handle on my issues, I really am. I haven’t been the best mother to you, but I’m tryin’ to get sober so that I can change that.”

I nodded my head. I knew that, deep down, there was a wonderful woman that was struggling to break free. At least I hoped so.

“Will you stay with me?” I asked her.

“I’ll be back Scotty. In the mornin’. I need to get some rest. It’s been a long day.”

I felt sad, but nodded my head. I felt like I was clinging to somebody, anybody, who might actually be there for me when I really needed them. Nick *was* going to be that person, and that didn’t work out. Jack had his own life, and it increasingly didn’t involve me. So, I wanted my mother to be that person who would give me love and support during crises like this. I really wanted her just to stay with me that night, like she used to, during her brief sober periods. She would let me sleep in her bed and she would stroke my hair and tell me that I was a good girl. She played dress-up with me, and sometimes brought home stuffed animals from the local thrift stores. Which made the other times, when she would tear up the house looking for her hidden liquor bottles, while screaming at me for allegedly hiding them, so much worse.

My mother left, promising me that she would be back in the morning. There was a fifty-fifty chance that I actually would see her the next day. If she stayed sober, I would imagine she would visit me. If she went home and got drunk, I most certainly wouldn’t see her. I waved as she left, resigned to the fact that it was as likely as not that she wouldn’t be in that hospital tomorrow to see me.

And then, about fifteen minutes later, I heard Mr. Lucas’ unmistakable voice. “Where is my daughter? Somebody called me and said that she was in some kind of an accident. What happened to her?”

“She was hit by a car while she tried to cross the street. She’s resting comfortably now, but she suffered a broken femur. She won’t be ready for release for at least another week.”

The heart monitor was going off the charts now.

Mr. Lucas was here.

Where is Nick? With that awful bimbo Portia, that was where he was at. Fucking asshole.

And then, just like that, Mr. Lucas was in my room. I managed to open my eyes and look at him.

He looked the same, really, even though it had been nine years since I had last seen him. He was now, what, 42? 42 and as handsome as ever. His dark hair, with the greying temples, and hazel eyes, framed by long eyelashes, hid the evil inside that man. The insidious evil. He looked like such a…grown choir-boy? He was anything but, of course.

"Scotty," he said. "I'm so happy you're alright."

I just looked at him and said nothing. I didn't really know what to say, to be honest. What he did to me all those nights was at the forefront of my mind, even if it was years and years in the past. *Do I make a scene?* I was quite sure that he would deny everything. He would probably tell everybody that I was some kind of seductress, or would-be seductress, and he was an innocent man accused by a crazy person. Myself being the crazy person.

I motioned him close to my bed. He came in and leaned down next to me. I could smell whiskey on his breath, as I realized that it was around midnight. He had obviously been at a bar, for he also smelled of smoke. An outdoor patio, I guessed, as smoking indoors had been outlawed here.

I whispered in his ear. "Stay away from me, you fucking pervert. Please leave my room."

He backed up a little, and then smiled. But he made no move to leave. He grabbed my hand, and I heard the heart monitor speed up ever faster. I looked up, and the monitor read 110 bpm, and climbing.

The nurse came back in. Mr. Lucas addressed her. What he said made more chills run all the way through my body. "When Scotty gets released, I would like her to be released into my care."

I looked at the nurse, and just shook my head violently. "No, please. Please don't let this man take me home. Please."

The nurse just looked at me sympathetically, then looked at her chart. "Well, Mr. Lucas, it does seem that you are her next of kin. I'm sure that can be arranged."

"How is this possible? I'm an adult. I'm an adult, I'm 23 years old, I can make my own decisions, and I'm not going anywhere with this man."

Mr. Lucas looked at me with sympathetic eyes. “My daughter seems to be a bit disoriented. In shock. Perhaps she needs a sedative to calm her down some.”

Oh, no. No. I saw my heart rate monitor climb ever higher, as I realized that I probably would end up getting a sedative. And then god-knows-what. All I could think of was that Paul might have some master plan to get me into his care and then I would be absolutely fucked. I had a broken leg. I would be powerless against him again. Like when I was 13.

And, no, I couldn’t count on Nick to help me anymore. He showed his true colors, as I knew that he would. I knew it. I had serious misgivings about him all along, but yet, I still managed to get swept away in the feeling that he was the one. The one. Not just the one who would love me and protect me, but the one. My soul mate. I somehow managed to buy into the fairy tale, against my better judgment, and look where it got me. In a hospital bed with a broken leg and Mr. Lucas at my side.

And feeling more devastated than I ever had in my entire life. All the nights of Mr. Lucas raping me, and the pain that I felt every time it happened, was nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to the pain I felt upon seeing Nick and that awful witch.

How was I so helpless? I mean, I looked at Mr. Lucas’ devious face, and the way that he was putting on a perfect Academy Award-winning act, like he was soooo concerned about my well-being, and I knew. He was a powerful man. I doubted that he would be denied. If he wanted to take me into his care, he was going to find a way to do it.

“There there,” he said, smoothing back my hair. “The nurse will be back with something to calm you down. And then I can see what I can do to arrange for a transfer.”

I would have to calm down. I couldn’t make a scene. If I made a scene, then I would end up sedated and would end up somewhere against my will. With him.

“I’m an adult,” I repeated. “And I don’t want to go anywhere. Not with you. I want to stay right here.”

The nurse came back in. Mr. Lucas addressed her. “I’d like to take my daughter out of this hospital. I have a private plane. I’d like to take her to a private facility where she can get the best care.”

I shook my head violently. “No. I’m staying right here.”

Mr. Lucas addressed the nurse. “Can I speak with you privately? I need to talk to you about my daughter’s best interest.”

The nurse nodded and looked at me. “We’ll be right back, Ms. James.”

I started breathing harder and harder. I tried to fight back my tears, but I felt them hot against my face anyhow. I felt so alone, like nobody would be there to help me fight against this guy. I knew that Nick wouldn't be there for me, so I wasn't surprised that he wasn't there at the hospital. But where was Jack at least?

Then it dawned on me. How would Jack even know that I was here? He probably wasn't at home, and there was nothing on my person that would indicate that Jack would be the one who should be called. Apparently the hospital records only knew about my mother and Mr. Lucas. My birth mother and my apparent legal guardian. How Mr. Lucas was still considered to be my legal guardian, all these years after I ran away from him, was anybody's guess.

I lay there - confused, heart-broken, and terrified, all at once. How did I manage to dive this far, this quickly, after being on Cloud Nine for those weeks with Nick? I tried not to think about all that time I spent with Nick in his loft. We rarely left the loft. Hell, we rarely left his bedroom. It was so magical - being with him, making love with him. Talking with him. Laughing with him. Just feeling his warm body next to mine. It was such a great source of comfort, being with him, and I also had to admit that the love-making was beyond words. He was so tender, so gentle, so loving. There was nothing that he wouldn't do to please me, in bed and out, it seemed.

So why would he do that to me? Why would he take up with that awful Portia? She was like an evil queen. Why would he get into her clutches? And right there at work, too. Like I wouldn't find out about that. Like the whole office wouldn't find out about that.

I felt so defeated. So stupid. I mean, before Nick, I wasn't exactly happy. But I wasn't unhappy. I was content. I was doing well in school, and at an Ivy League school at that. I had the steadfast dream to become a world-class architect, and it seemed that I was on track to do so. Nothing deterred me from pursuing this aspiration. I lived and breathed it.

Then Nick came along, and showed me what I was missing. And I hadn't been the same since. Suddenly, it wasn't enough just to pursue my dreams of being a world-class architect. Suddenly, it was necessary to have love in my life. It became as necessary as breathing to me.

Nick became as necessary as breathing for me.

Now that he was gone, what would become of me? Would I just stop breathing? How could I move on?

Damn Nick. Dammit. I knew that I shouldn't have gotten involved with him. I knew that I would be devastated by him. He was going to end up derailing all

my future plans. Because I felt so unmotivated to continue in school. So unmotivated to continue in life, in general.

The depression overwhelmed me to the extent that I wanted to die.

So, when Mr. Lucas came back into the room about a half hour later, and announced that he was taking me out of the hospital, ostensibly to take me to a private facility, I just lay there and took the news. I had no fight left in me.

The nurse left, and I asked Mr. Lucas how he managed to convince the hospital to move me, over my own objections.

“Scotty. I’m a very powerful man. I always get what I want. And let’s just say that I have some very well-respected friends who are on this hospital board. Any other questions?”

“So, where am I going?”

“To a private facility. It’s all arranged.”

I looked at my heart rate monitor. My heart was still extremely elevated, but I willed myself to calm down. But I was scared, so very scared, and so very alone right at that moment. I looked at my shaking hands and limbs. This man, this evil, evil man, was going to take me away from this hospital, and I had no idea where it was that I was going to end up. And there appeared to be nothing that I could do about it.

Still, I had to try. I buzzed the nurse to come back in.

She appeared in a few minutes. “Nurse, uh, April,” I said, reading her badge. I wanted to call her Nurse Ratched, but I suppose that wouldn’t go over so well, under the circumstances. “I do not want to be moved from this hospital. Please, I’m an adult. I’m 23 years old. I know my legal rights. And I do not want to be moved.”

Nurse April looked at Mr. Lucas, and she just nodded her head. “I understand your wishes. But your foster father believes that it is in your best interest for you to go to a private hospital. It’s already been arranged.”

“I don’t understand how this can be happening. Why won’t anybody listen to me?” I started breathing heavier, remembering how nobody listened to me before, either. When Mr. Lucas was raping me. There was something about that man - maybe it was his money or his connections or his power, probably a combination of the three – that meant that he could get away with anything that he wanted to. “Please don’t make me leave this hospital. Not with him.”

“There, there,” Mr. Lucas said. Then, turning to Nurse April, he said “I told you. She’s had an enormous shock. She’s obviously not in her right mind, so I don’t see how she can make a rational decision in her state.”

Just then, my heart rate shot up. I guess it was the combination of the frustration of not getting my point across, coupled with being so close to the man who had haunted me for a decade, but, all at once, the heart rate monitor zoomed to 170 bpm, and my blood pressure skyrocketed to 190/120.

Nurse April, obviously alarmed at the state of my vital signs, took it upon herself to give me a sedative of some sort. She gave me a pill and some water, but I stubbornly closed my mouth and turned my face away.

“Please, Ms. James, you need to take this. Your vital signs are dangerously high.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t want it!” And then, just like that, my heart rate and blood pressure started to climb even higher.

And, the next thing I know, I was being injected with something. In a few seconds, I started to calm down. In fact, I started to peacefully float.

Nothing mattered anymore. Nothing bothered me.

So, when the nurse came back in later on, and informed me that I was going to be transferred, and that Mr. Lucas would be the one who would be transporting me, on his private plane, I simply said “Sure. Whatever.” They provided me with some kind of paperwork, and I dreamily signed it, without reading it.

And then I fell fast asleep.

Chapter 2
Nick

I woke up in my loft. My head was pounding, absolutely pounding, out of my skull. There was a bucket next to my bed, and it was filled with vomit.

I had no idea how I got here. No earthly idea.

I had to think about what had happened right before I got here. What was the last thing that I remembered?

Hmmmm….Portia. Scotch. And her telling me that I wouldn't be seeing Scotty much longer. *What the hell did that mean?*

Ok, so I had some scotch. So, what happened after that?

I didn't know. I couldn't think. All that I did know was that I had a headache right at that moment which was, by far, the worst headache I had ever had in my entire fucking life. It was like I had a hangover, but it was so much worse than that. So much worse. There was ringing in my ears and I couldn't move, because every time I tried to move, my head started pounding all the more. So, I ended up just laying perfectly still, staring at the ceiling. That was all that I could do, because anything else would have had me screaming in agony.

Ok, Nick, just lay there and don't move. Figure out what happened, and get ahold of Scotty. I needed to see Scotty. I found her very presence calming for me. I had found something in her that I never thought that I actually would find in anybody. And that was a sense of peace, because it was just so right. Right, as nothing had ever been for me. After the life that I had led, finding Scotty had been a godsend. I never imagined that I could feel like that about another person, but somehow, I did.

But, first things first. I had to find out what happened, and what day it was. I put my hands on my head tightly, because that was what allowed me to move without shooting pain, and looked for my phone.

I found it on my nightstand, and the first thing I did was call Scotty.

It went straight to voice-mail. *Huh, that's strange.* I left a message. "Scotty, it's me. I need to talk to you, so call me as soon as you can. I love you. More than I can say."

Then I looked at my call log. The last call was from George. I decided to call him, because he might be able to give me some type of clue as to what happened to me. After all, the last memory I had was in Portia's office, so, obviously, the men at the firm might have some kind of indication on how I got here.

George answered the phone. “George Henderson,” he said.

“Hey,” I said. “It’s Nick. I need to talk to you.”

“Nick. I’m glad you called. I have been trying to call you and check up on you, but you haven’t been answering. I hope you’re feeling okay.”

“I’m not. I’m disoriented and confused. I don’t really know how I got to my loft. Hell, I don’t even know what day it is.”

“You really don’t remember?”

“No. That’s what I just said. I don’t remember. Please fill me in.”

“Well, you and Portia were drinking scotch, and she said that you had way too much. You were passed out on her couch. We couldn’t wake you, so Ralph and I ended up calling Charlie to take you home to sleep it off. I didn’t really want to do that, because I didn’t think that you were in any shape to be alone, but I was overruled.”

I took a deep breath. “And when was this?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

“So, what, I’ve been out for…” I looked at the clock. It read 8:55 AM. “Almost 24 hours?” Then, I remembered that I had a meeting set at 9 AM with the Chase people. “And, geezus, I have a meeting in five minutes time.”

“I called them and asked them to come in tomorrow. They said that wasn’t a problem.”

I groaned. I wasn’t unprofessional like that. Ever. Not only that, but I had to teach in the evening. With this splitting headache. It was my first class of the spring semester, so I had to be there.

Everything was becoming surreal. I had to get my bearings, and I had to see my girl. “Listen, George, I don’t think that I can come in today. I’ll be in tomorrow at 9 to see the Chase team, but, right now, my headache is about a 42 on a scale of one to ten. I need to find some serious painkillers. I’ve never had a headache this bad in my life.”

George was quiet for a few seconds. “Hey, Nick. Uh, don’t do that again. Get drunk like that at work. It doesn’t look good. It might even be in Page Six. I hope not, but a lot of people saw you being carried to your limo. You’re too high profile to be acting like that.”

Acting like what? “George, I had one swig of scotch. One.”

“Okay, Nick. Whatever you say.”

I rolled my eyes. He obviously wasn’t believing me. “I see that you aren’t going to be of much assistance to me about this. I mean-“

Then it hit me. It should’ve hit me way before that, but my headache made it

very difficult to think clearly.

Portia drugged me.

That bitch.

I mean, I knew that she was a bit of a *Fatal Attraction*, but I had no clue that she would go to such lengths to get even with me for rejecting her.

But why would she do that?

"Nick," George was saying. "Are you still there?"

"Yeah," I said. "Listen, George, thanks for your concern. I'll see you tomorrow. I have to go."

And I hung up, after George and I said our goodbyes.

I needed something to dull this headache, pronto. I got up, every step making my head pound thunderously, and went to my medicine cabinet.

All I had in there was standard stuff – Tylenol, Advil, things like that. Headaches were never a problem for me, so I didn't have anything stronger.

Looks like I'll have to go and see my doctor to get a prescription for something stronger. I called my doctor, and talked to his assistant. He happened to have an opening that afternoon, as somebody had cancelled, so I snapped up the appointment.

I called Charlie to come and take me to the doctor, when the time got near, and he did. As I sat in the back of the limo, I tried to call Scotty again. "Scotty, it's me. Please call me back. I need to talk to you. I love you."

I rubbed my temples. It wasn't like Scotty to not answer the phone, and it certainly wasn't like her to not return my message to her.

So, I called George again. "George, it's Nick again," I said.

"Yeah, Nick. What can I do for you?"

"I know that it's not her day to work, but have you seen Scotty?"

"Oh, no. You haven't heard."

My heart started pounding. George's tone did not sound good. "Heard what?" I asked, alarm bells ringing in my ears.

"Scotty was hit by a car when she tried to cross the street."

Hit by a car. My breathing started coming, faster and faster. Abrianna, my beautiful Abrianna, flashed in my brain. *No. No. No. Not Scotty too!!!! No. No. No.* My head started pounding even harder. "Hit by a car. Is she, is she…"

"She was taken to the hospital. I think that she's ok, except for a broken leg. She was lucky."

I breathed a sigh of relief. She wasn't dead. She wasn't well, but not dead. If she had died…I shook my head, not wanting to contemplate that thought. "What

hospital?”

George gave me the name of the hospital, and I immediately started pounding on the window to alert Charlie.

Charlie turned around. “Yes, Mr. O’Hara?”

“Take me to..” And I gave him the address to the hospital that Scotty was taken to.

“Very good, Mr. O’Hara,” Charlie said. And he headed back to the midtown hospital where I hoped that I would be able to find Scotty.

My headache would have to wait. I tried to will away the pain, but nothing was really helping. I probably would end up in the ER of that hospital, after I saw Scotty and made sure that she was okay, so that I could get some prescription painkillers. But only after I saw Scotty. It was suddenly urgent that I knew that she was okay.

I finally arrived at the hospital after what seemed like hours stuck in traffic, and I gingerly stepped out of limo, trying hard not to jar my pounding brain too much.

I got to the front desk.

“May I help you?” the receptionist, whose name was Carly, inquired.

“Yes. I need to know what room Scotty James is in.”

She looked on her roster on the computer. “Ms. James was in Room 222. But, it looks like she has already been checked out.”

I was confused. “Checked out. How is that possible? She was brought in here yesterday, and she has a broken leg.”

Carly looked at her computer screen again. “Yes, well, let’s see. She was released into the custody of her father. The notes say that he is taking her to a private hospital.”

“Her father? I’m sorry?” To my knowledge, Scotty didn’t know her father.

“Oh. Sorry. Legal guardian.”

My heart started pounding, harder and harder. “Does it say a name?”

“Yes. Paul Lucas.”

Chapter 3

Scotty

I was feeling groggy, and I was vaguely aware that I was on a plane. A private plane. I was strapped in, and Mr. Lucas was sitting across from me. Drinking a glass of whiskey. He rattled his ice in his glass and I heard crunching noises. “Ruth,” he said, addressing the sky hostess who was standing right in front of him. “Give me another.”

“Please,” I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

“What?” he asked.

“Give me another, please.”

He gave me a look like he was absolutely pissed. “You always were an insolent bitch. I suggest you show me some respect, considering you’re going to be in my care for the time being.” Then he leaned closer to me. “And I can’t wait to make up for lost time.”

Chills ran up and down my spine. “You won’t get away with this,” I said, trying to sound as defiant as I could under the circumstances. I tried to tamp down the feeling of ice-cold fear that froze my veins.

“Listen, you little bitch. And you listen good. I can and I will get away with it. I got away with it for an entire year. I know you told people. And I know that they all told you that you were delusional. So, yeah, you’re nobody and I own this fucking town. I’ll get away with whatever it is I want.”

Wealth and power. That’s what wealth and power get you – the ability to do whatever you want, to whomever you want, and get away with it. I was but a pawn in his sick game.

Nick was different. Or so I thought. Nick was powerful and wealthy, but so kind to me. So good to me.

I was so naïve for ever thinking that he truly changed his man-whore ways, though. I was still so madly in love with him, like I never thought that I could feel about anybody. But he betrayed me. He betrayed me, and any pain that was going to come from Mr. Lucas paled in comparison to the pain I felt about Nick’s behavior.

Ruth was back, and Paul took the whiskey off her tray without even a thank you. She quickly retreated back into the serving area. Paul looked at me and snarled a little. Then he raised an eyebrow. “So. Tell me what you’ve been doing with your life these past nine years.”

I sat there and said nothing. He didn't need to know. He wasn't privileged to know.

"Tell me, Scotty. Tell me, or the punishment that I'm going to give you is going to be so much worse."

"Punishment. For what? What did I do?"

"For opening your mouth. Telling all those people all those things about me."

"All of what I said was true."

"Be that as it may. It still did a hair of damage to my reputation. Just a hair, though. I mean, I'm sure that 99% of those people felt that everything that was coming out of your mouth was a big, fat lie. But there's always that 1% that wasn't so sure."

I still wasn't going to volunteer any information to him. So, I sat there, and crossed my arms. Deep down, I knew that it was stupid to act that way. After all, I was incapacitated with my broken leg, and at the mercy of Mr. Lucas. I should have probably tried to not antagonize him any more than I had to.

But I hated this man so much that I didn't want to come across as the least bit friendly.

"Ok, then. Be a little contemptuous cunt. You'll get what's coming to you, and I won't be gentle."

My heart raced. I felt tears streaking down my face. I looked at Mr. Lucas, and he was smiling. Then he laughed. "Still with the crocodile tears, Scotty?" He shook his head, and mockingly made a face. "Oh, poor dear. Poor little Scotty. Being raped every night by the big, bad Mr. Lucas." Then he smiled again and laughed. "Raped, my ass. You wanted it. You loved it. You wanted in my pants from the moment you came into the house. Little whore, just like your mama. I was just giving it to you just how you wanted it. And I gave it good."

I blinked my eyes. I was eleven years old when Mr. Lucas first fostered me. Eleven years old. In what world was an eleven-year-old a seductress????

I felt myself retreating into myself. Which was how I managed the first time, when I was young, small and terrified. I willed myself away from the abuse and what was happening to me. It was almost like those stories I read about people with multiple personalities, and one of the personalities took the abuse to protect the person being abused. I mean, it wasn't quite like that – I never went into an altered state – but I did manage to find a way to protect my fragile psyche from what Mr. Lucas was doing to me.

It had been awhile since I had done it, but I knew that I would have to do it again. I would have to will myself away from my own reality. Because I knew

what was coming. I knew what would be happening to me when Mr. Lucas and I landed wherever it was we were going to land.

I knew what was going to happen, and, in my state, I was powerless to stop it.

Chapter 4
Nick

My breath started coming faster and faster, and, suddenly, my headache was forgotten. At least for the time being. Paul Lucas. That was the name of Scotty's foster father. I mean, when she told the story to me about him and what he was doing to her she used an assumed name – Sam Johnson. But she repeatedly slipped up and said the word "Paul," and she also slipped later on and referred to him as "Mr. Lucas."

I took a deep breath, not wanting to completely go off on this poor receptionist who was innocent of any wrong-doing. So, I slowly and deliberately said "Paul Lucas. Could you please let me speak to the physician in charge of this?"

The receptionist looked at her computer screen. "That would be Dr. Bullox. He's doing rounds right now. If you could please take a seat in the waiting room, I'll alert him to come and talk to you as soon as he is free."

"Free. Okay, how long will that be?"

"Probably a couple of hours," she said. "That's typically how long it takes."

I put my hands on my head, willing the head to stop throbbing. I had to think clearly. Scotty was in the clutches of that man, and two hours would be too long to wait to try to track her down.

I nodded my head at the receptionist. I sat down in the waiting room, and tried hard to decompress. Panicking right at that moment wouldn't do anybody any good, so I took several deep breaths and worked on getting a plan together to find Scotty ASAP.

Okay, Nick, just relax. I looked at the clock, realizing that it was already 3 PM. My night class started at 6. I was going to have to find somebody to cover for me, which was completely unprofessional, I knew. But saving Scotty took precedence over anything else, right at that moment.

First things first. I looked on my phone for my roster of other instructors, and called the first three that was on the list. I got voice mail for all of them. But, on the fourth one, Jewell Bass, I struck gold.

"Jewell, this is Nick O'Hara."

"Oh, hello, Nick. How are you?"

"Fine. Listen, I have an emergency. I can't teach tonight. Can you cover?"

"Yes, sure. What is the course?"

"It's a history of architecture course. History of Architecture, Urbanism and

Art, Level II."

"Can teach that in my sleep. Sure, I've got nothing going on tonight. What's the emergency? I mean, do you need me to cover for you on Thursday night too?"

"Oh, god, could you? You don't know how much I would appreciate that."

"I certainly can. What is your Thursday course?"

"Environmental Systems, Level II."

"Not a problem."

"You're a godsend. I owe you."

"Well, if I need a cover, I can count on you, huh?"

"Any time."

I got off the phone, and took another deep breath. I was going to try to get some painkillers from the ER, but that would take too long, and, besides, I didn't need to be doped up. I needed to think clearly. So, getting rid of this headache without taking prescription level painkillers was going to be my next order of business.

I took several deep breaths, and then looked on my phone about how to get rid of a splitting headache without taking drugs. I found an article about pressure points, and tried everything that was suggested. To my relief, these pressure points actually worked, and my headache was reduced to more of a dull roar, as opposed to a raging inferno.

Okay, now Nick, you took care of the really pressing things. It was like what they say about oxygen on airplanes – if you are a parent, you are supposed to give yourself oxygen first, and then attend to your child. In this case, I needed to take care of the immediate problems, so that I could think of the long-term problem.

Which was, essentially, that Scotty was with a man that I didn't know the first thing about. Where he lived, where he worked. Nothing. This was going to be challenging, but I knew that I would rise to it.

I had to. Scotty's well-being, possibly her life, depended upon my thinking clearly and deliberately.

Now that my mind was cleared, and I wasn't worried about leaving a room full of students without an instructor, I was able to continue on with a plan. I needed to find this guy's address. Of course, I knew that there was very little chance that Scotty would actually be at this guy's house, or apartment, because I doubted that he would be that stupid to take her there. But that was the only thing that I had to go on just then.

So, I started with the obvious things. I looked for his Facebook page, and actually found it. He had posted pictures of himself on various beaches, skiing, and places that I recognized from my extensive travels to Europe. And then I looked at his wall, in the hopes that I could glean something from what his friends were saying to him.

What I was really hoping for was some kind of posting from a disgruntled girlfriend or wife, somebody that I could contact to get as much dirt on this guy as I could. That would be ideal. I needed to find out everything about this guy – the homes that he had around the world, his favorite vacation spots, anything at all. Because something told me that he was taking my Scotty to someplace far away. I didn't know why I thought that, but I guess I just figured that would be logical.

One thing was for sure – this Paul guy was not going to take her to another hospital. No, Paul wanted her for his own sadistic purposes. Otherwise, he wouldn't have bothered.

Unfortunately, there were hundreds of posts and even more replies to his posts. *This is going to take awhile.* I read through each post carefully, paying particular attention to the comments that he received when he posted pictures of himself on vacations.

I soon realized that this guy had homes all over the world. There was a home in Greece, one in Italy and one in Saint Croix. At least, that was what I gathered from looking at his page. He was quite the braggart – he had to post any time he was in one of magnificent homes, just so everybody could know just how rich and special he was.

Probably over-compensating for something.

I wrote down a few names of some of the people who commented a lot, and would plan on finding them somehow to pick their brain on this Paul asshole. I had no idea exactly how I would do that. I only knew that it had to be done.

Also, I was able to find out where he worked. He wasn't a trader anymore, but a hedge fund manager for a large investment firm in town.

Too bad he doesn't work at Goldman. Than it would be too easy just to talk to Nate about him.

But, then again, it was a pretty small community when it came to investment managers. Nate might know him, or know somebody who does. So, talking to Nate would be a definite possibility.

Then, suddenly, it hit me. His status was single, not married. I could contact his ex-wife, Elle. Surely she would tell me where he might be. Would it be that

easy? It would be if Elle just happened to have the last name of Lucas. Otherwise, it would be another needle in a haystack. All that Scotty told me about Elle was that she was a lobbyist in Washington, DC, for environmental and human rights causes.

I sighed. There was an off-off-off chance that Elle might be one of Paul's Facebook friends. But, since they were divorced, that was highly unlikely.

I scoured the list of Facebook friends and saw nobody with the first name of Elle in the roster.

So, the best and most logical step, right now, would be to call Nate. That would be where my network would begin to find out more about this guy so that I could get some kind of handle on where he might have taken my beautiful Scotty.

Chapter 5

Scotty

The plane was finally beginning to land, and I felt the ice-cold well of fear coming up through my throat. We had been on this plane for about 8 hours. I had no idea where he was taking me, but I knew that it was someplace that was a long way from New York City.

I wondered if I ever would see Nick again. That was where my mind went to, first. Nick. The man who betrayed me, after he made me fall head over heels in love with him. Yet, I still *was* head over heels in love with him. So, the thought of never seeing him again was devastating to me.

I was going to be with this man, isolated. With nobody to help me. Nobody to hear me scream. With a broken leg.

All I could think was that I would rather die.

Mr. Lucas was staring at me, an amused look on his face. “You know, Scotty, I always dreamed about this reunion with you. And you grew up to be such a hotty. I always knew that you would. Even as a little girl, I always knew that you would grow into a hot and sexy woman. And, you are.” He took another sip of his whiskey, and then threw away the cocktail napkin. “This is going to be fun.”

I raised my chin as defiantly as I could. Inside, I was screaming. Outside, I was shaking uncontrollably, and I also realized that I was crying uncontrollably as well. I could feel the hot tears streaming down my cheeks. They tasted salty on my tongue.

When I felt the wheels hit the runway, and the plane come a halt, I started to panic. I started hyperventilating. I wanted to fight back, so much, but I felt so incapacitated. I know that I was still feeling the effects of the painkillers, because I was a bit hazy. And I once again felt like I was 13, being overpowered by Mr. Lucas.

I cursed the fact that I was so small. I cursed the fact that I had a broken leg.

Most of all, though, I cursed Nick. This was his fault. If he didn’t take up with that witch, none of this would have happened. If he just would’ve left me alone, when I asked him to, none of this would’ve happened. I was in this predicament because I was so upset about Nick that I didn’t pay attention to the street when I was crossing it. Also, I wouldn’t have been in that street, in the first place, if I didn’t walk in on Nick and that woman, both of them stark naked on her couch.

I couldn’t bring myself to say her name, even in my head.

I desperately looked at Ruth, who, as Mr. Lucas' employee, probably would be no help at all. She did look sympathetic, but I could see in her eyes that she wasn't going to help me.

Finally, the door was opened. Mr. Lucas made a move towards me, to put me into a wheelchair to take me off of the plane.

I made one last stand. "Don't, leave me alone, leave me alone, don't!" I screamed, futilely, watching Ruth, who was just standing aside, shaking her head. I started to hit Mr. Lucas and pull his hair, like a wildcat.

But, of course, Mr. Lucas was unfettered by my burst of defiance. He simply carried me onto the wheelchair, without a word, and strapped me in.

He leaned down and whispered "now, now, Scotty, if you keep this up, I'm going to have to give you a sedative. A more powerful one. Then you really will be helpless. But I don't want to do that. It would be so much less fun for me if you're unconscious."

I started to feel that there was nothing that could be done. Once again, I was at his mercy. I couldn't run. I could scream, but nobody would hear me, and the ones who would, wouldn't do anything to help me. They depended upon Mr. Lucas for their livelihood. They were essentially paid to keep their mouths shut.

So, just like I thought on the plane, I would have to go into my alternate reality. I trained myself to do this during many of the years when I was with Mr. Lucas. I simply trained myself to leave my body during those nights when Mr. Lucas was raping me. To go to someplace that was happy for me.

Of course, when I was a young girl, I really didn't have too many happy memories to draw upon. But there were times when I was with my mother that were somewhat happy. There were actually months when she didn't drink at all. I was really young, but I think that she went to meetings and had a sponsor. And she was really wonderful during those times.

I always thought that, every time she got sober, she was finally cured. She wouldn't drink anymore. She would find a job and bake cookies and take me to school and help me with my homework. She wouldn't bring around anymore strange men. She would be a mother for me.

And she did try. I know she did. She taught me how to play the game of *Life*, and also taught me how to play Spades and Hearts. She sang songs to me that she made up, and they always made me laugh. She even baked cookies for me, once in a blue moon. They were always out of a mix, never from scratch, but I didn't care. She was doing normal mom things, for once in her life, and that was good enough for me.

But she didn't read to me, and it wasn't until I was an adult that I knew why – she couldn't read. At all. I never knew that she was illiterate until one day when I was visiting her, and she was completely incoherent. She acted differently than when she was drunk, however, and I soon found out that she was taking meds which were not prescribed to her correctly. I asked her if she had read the pamphlet that came with the drug, and she hung her head.

"No, Scotty, I didn't." She looked very shameful.

"Well, mother, don't you know that you have to read that before you take anything for the first time?"

She started to cry. "I can't read."

I just looked at her. "Well, you probably are having trouble right now, in your state. So, let me read it to you."

"No, Scotty, you don't understand. I can't read. At all. I never learned."

I was stunned. And then I put my arm around her, while she cried. "Mom, it's okay. Really, it's okay. You aren't alone. There are lots of people who never learned to read. I'll help you, mom. I'll help you learn to read."

I was 19 years old, and I never knew that my mother was illiterate.

This revelation was followed by months of my coming over and working with her with rudimentary books. I found some books in the library about teaching adults to read, and I devoured them. She became like my project. I even enrolled her in a night course, after finding out which ones were low or no cost, and went with her as often as I could.

Those times were some of the best times of my life, just because I was hanging out with my mother and she was off the bottle. I was very focused upon school, of course, but I found time for her, because she was trying to do something to really better herself. That warranted my attention.

During those months, we talked like girlfriends and we bonded. I learned more about her and her life during those months than I had ever known before. And she not only seemed to really care about me, but she actually *did* care about me during this time.

Of course, it all went to hell after a little while. She had a glass of wine one night, "to calm her nerves."

"One drink, Scotty, ain't going to hurt nothin'."

I sighed, knowing that it was the beginning of the end. And, of course, I was right. She was right back to where she was before, worse than ever.

She never did learn how to read, either.

So, as I looked at Mr. Lucas, knowing what was going to happen, I thought

about drawing on some of the happy times with my mother as comfort. And some of the happy times with Jack.

I tried not to think about the one that I really wanted to dream about. Nick. I wanted to close my eyes and dream about him, as I was being wheeled from the plane to the waiting Rolls Royce SUV that was parked on the tarmac. I wanted to get lost in the memories of him and me together. We were only together for a short time, really, before I caught him with that woman. But those were, by far, the most magical days of my entire life. I don't think that my feet touched the ground the entire time that we were together as a couple.

But thinking about Nick was just too painful for me, now. I was completely raw thinking about what he did. And I couldn't very well think about the good times without also seeing him and that woman naked on the couch.

So, I would have to draw on other memories to protect my fragile mind.

That night, when I was set up in a glorious bedroom in a gorgeous and sprawling glass home on a sunny beach, far away from New York and everyone I knew there, and Mr. Lucas came into my room and proceeded to undress me, I accessed my happy place. I had to.

When he shoved his manhood inside of me, murmuring about how badly he had wanted this for the past nine years, I was someplace far, far away.

I barely even felt it.

Chapter 6
Nick

I picked up my phone to call Nate. It was in the middle of the day, so I was sure that he was at work, but wanted to try him anyhow. If he didn't pick up for whatever reason, I would go down to his place of business.

"Nate Hitchins, please," I said to the receptionist who answered the phone. I also tried Nate's cell number, but it went straight to voice mail.

"Just a second, please," she said.

I hung on the line, and soon realized that I was holding my breath, waiting for Nate to come to the phone.

My heart sunk when the receptionist came back on to tell me that Nate was in a meeting with some clients, and that he would give me a call back as soon as possible.

Do I tell her it's an emergency? No, I finally decided that I needed to just go down there. So, I left the hospital, found Charlie, who was waiting for me, and asked him to drive me to the Goldman building. Nate was working in the new Goldman building in lower Manhattan, on West Street. So, it was going to take awhile to get there, with the traffic being the typically heavy mid-day slog.

I looked out the window, trying hard to stay calm. I couldn't lose my composure or my cool, because, if I did, I wouldn't be able to think clearly. Right now, I had to have nothing but a clear head.

But I couldn't help it. I started to think about Scotty being virtually kidnapped by that man, although, apparently, the hospital let it happen, and my blood pressure started to skyrocket. I could feel it. I tried not to think about the horrors that my Scotty was going through, being alone with that monster. I tried not to, but my mind went there. I could feel tears coming to my eyes, and I took out some tissue, which was in the limo, and blew my nose.

Come on, now, Nick, you can't fall apart. Scotty needs you to be level-headed and unemotional. You can be as emotional as you want once you find her, but, for right now, you have to keep your wits about you. So, calm down.

And my mind also drifted to Abrianna. I never got over that, and hearing about Scotty being hit by a car brought it all flooding back to me.

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Abrianna was 7 years old. She was really the light of my life, along with my

other two girls, Charlotte and April. Unfortunately for them, the house was full of chaos and instability. My marriage with Rielle was never a stable one. Looking back now, I wondered why I was even married to her at all. Or, rather, why I took up with her in the first place. All that I can think now was that she had an inherent fascination to me, because she was such my polar opposite. Where I was hot, she was cool. But, it turned out that she was too cool, as she was soon shown to be cold. Buttoned up. Kept her emotions completely hidden behind an exterior that was always threatening to break.

Our marriage was marked by infidelity and mistrust. I was completely untamed, and not getting what I needed from her. Emotionally or sexually. We rarely spoke about anything, except for about the children, and I was always gone on one business trip or another.

The day that it happened was the day that Rielle's emotional dam finally burst, and the fight that occurred was one for the ages. I had just gotten back from a month-long trip to China. I was involved in designing some buildings in Beijing for some major clients there. When I got back, Rielle was itching for a fight that had been a long time coming.

"Well, Nick, how was your trip to China?" she asked with a sneer. I had come home with a bag full of souvenirs and goodies for my girls, and had also brought her a saltwater pearl necklace that had set me back a bundle. I guess I was going to try to buy my way out of trouble.

"Great," I said, but I was on the defensive, as I noticed her offensive posture and demeanor. "How are things here?"

"Why do you want to know? You're never around. I don't think that you give a shit."

"Listen, Rielle. You're the one who wants things, all the fucking time. Whatever I give you, it's never enough. I have to work my ass off just to keep you in the manner to which you have been accustomed," I said, sarcastically stressing that last part. "So, if you expect me to provide this mansion and our vacation home in Lake Como, and all the cars, furs and jewelry you seem to demand every time I turn around, I best be working. I seem to remember that it's you who demands that we go to Switzerland every year to ski. It's you who demanded this multi-million dollar home. It's you who demanded that I buy that palace in Italy. It's you who wants all this shit, not me. Yet, when I work to try to provide it, you get all pissed off."

"Oh, no. You're not going to put this on me. I have never asked you to never come home for months at a time. Never. You know that I want you to stay

around here."

"Oh, sure, sure. Sure. I'll just tell my firm that I can't travel anymore. Let's see how well that goes over. Travel is required for my job. You've always known that. If you want a goddamned stay at home husband, then you married the wrong man."

And things just went downhill from there.

"Well, I wouldn't mind as much if it weren't for your extracurricular activities."

Ironically, I wasn't cheating on her at that time. She was cheating on me, though, and I knew this. "Projecting again, are you?" I said. "You wanna tell me about Joe?"

"Fuck you for bringing that up. Fuck you."

"Oh, sorry for bringing up the man you've been fucking while I've been gone. I'm surprised you're so hot on having me here, considering how much fucking you get done while I'm not at home."

During the heated exchange, neither of us was paying much attention to anything around us. Abrianna was home because she was still recovering from the chicken pox. Usually there was a nanny watching her, but, on this day, the nanny was sick. Charlotte and April were at school. Rielle was watching her that day, but, needless to say, she wasn't keeping a careful eye on her at that precise moment. She was too busy tearing into me, and I into her.

Rielle opened her mouth to say something back to me, when we heard the sounds of a car screeching in front of our gates. My old home was set behind a large stone wall with an iron gate, and it sat on several acres of land.

Both of us just looked at each other, our mouths opened, and then we both ran out to see what had happened.

Rielle screamed at the sight of our daughter lying in the street. There was a man who was leaning down next to her, and a woman who was talking on the phone. The woman hung up and announced that the ambulance was on the way.

"What, what, what happened?" I asked the man, as I sat down on the curb and took ahold of my daughter's lifeless hand.

The man just shook his head. "I don't know. I was just driving, and she darted out in front of the car. I couldn't stop. I'm so sorry."

The ambulance was screeching in the distance, but I knew that it was no use. Abrianna, my beautiful little girl with the angelic blond curls, was gone. I bowed my head, and tried to block out the sound of Rielle tearing into the man.

"You bastard! You killed my daughter! You're going to pay for this!"

I stood up and held onto her, trying to stop her from physically striking the man. As she struggled and screamed, I said to her, in a loud voice. “He didn’t do this. We did. We did this.”

And that was how I felt. We weren’t paying attention to her. Abrianna was such a sensitive child. And I knew, as sure as anything I had ever known, why she was running into the street. She was trying to get away from Rielle and me screaming at each other. She was trying to get away from the house, and she was probably trying to get to a horse pasture that was down the street from us. I had taken Abrianna there many times, and she always loved it. I knew that was Abrianna’s favorite place to be.

She was probably running to that horse pasture to get away from our fighting.

I didn’t pick her up. I was still hoping, against hope, that I was wrong about Abrianna already being gone. That maybe there was still a chance for her. So, I didn’t pick her up. I knew enough to know that you are never to move an injured child. I just sat there, next to her, stroking her hair gently. I didn’t say anything, but I couldn’t stop my tears.

Rielle, by that time, was just standing there. A frozen statue. She didn’t cry or scream anymore. She barely blinked.

The ambulance finally got there, and they gently loaded Abrianna through the doors. They let me ride in the back, which actually was a bad sign, because if there was any hope at all for her, they probably wouldn’t have let me do this. They worked on her, while I sat there, staring at her, willing her to take a breath.

I silently prayed for the first time in years. I hadn’t prayed since I had lost my sister some 15 years before. After Michelle passed away, in spite of my constant praying for her to get better, I shunned praying and god. I simply felt that it did no good at all, and I was angry. Angry at god, angry at fate.

Just angry.

The paramedics went through the motions with their chest compressions and blood transfusions, but everybody in that ambulance knew. Including myself.

After the funeral, Rielle went back to her cold self. She no longer screamed at me or harangued me. But she didn’t talk to me much, either. There really was nothing much to say.

The worst part was that we didn’t turn to each other. We turned away, more than we ever had before. I needed her to lean on, but she wasn’t there. So, I turned to others. As did she.

Ironically, though, right before we actually got divorced, I thought that we had turned a corner. Our sex life was back on track, and I felt like I loved her again,

even if I wasn't in love with her. But we were never solid, like a real married couple should be. The final straw was when the story about my relationship with Ryan broke, and Rielle discovered the truth about my bisexuality. Not sure how she never knew it before, or suspected it. I mean, she probably did suspect, but was willfully blind about it.

One thing was for sure, though. I closed myself off, emotionally, after Abrianna's death. I didn't want to feel that sense of devastation and loss, ever again. It almost broke me. Which was why I couldn't form any real emotional attachment with a woman.

Until Scotty.

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So, while I sat in the back of the limo as it drove towards the Goldman building, I thought about Abrianna. I had to keep my mind off of Scotty, and what was happening to her, if I wanted to keep my wits about me. Because if I really allowed my mind to go there, I thought that I would have gone crazy. And that would have helped nobody.

I drummed my fingers restlessly on the arm rest. Inside, I was going out of my mind. At every red light, I thought that I would get out of the car and run the rest of the way. It would've been faster.

Finally, I got to the building. I instructed Charlie to park the car in the Goldman garage, and to pick me up immediately after I called him.

When I got to Nate's department, I told the receptionist that I was there to see him.

"He's still in a meeting," she said.

"Could you please call him and tell him I'm here? Nick O'Hara. I'm here, and I need to speak with him ASAP."

The receptionist was going to protest, but she saw the look in my eye, and she obliged. After she talked to Nate, she hung up the phone and looked at me. "He will be right out," she said.

She flipped through a magazine, and her insouciance almost drove me insane. *Doesn't she know what kind of crisis is going on here?*

Finally, after what seemed like forever, Nate appeared. I hadn't talked to him since I dumped Ava, his friend, so, at first, he looked pissed. But, he took one look at my face, and his pissed look immediately disappeared and was replaced by one of concern.

I stood up. "I'm sorry to bother you Nate, but I wouldn't have come down

here if it weren't important."

"Sure," he said. "I have to get back to my meeting, but what do you need?"

"Can we speak privately?"

Nate nodded. "Follow me," he said.

I followed him back to his enormous office, and he shut the door.

"So, what's going on?" he asked.

"I, uh, need to know if you know somebody. And, if you don't know him personally, whether you know somebody who might."

"Sure," he said. "What's his name?"

"Paul Lucas. He's a hedge fund manager. He used to be a trader."

"Paul Lucas, Paul Lucas…." Nate looked thoughtful. His hand was on his chin, and he looked down at the floor. "Where have I heard that name?"

I told him who Paul worked for, and his face lit up. "Oh, yes, yes. Of course. Of course. Yeah, I've met him a few times at cocktail parties. What do you need to know about him?"

"Hopefully you know something about him. Do you know his ex-wife, Elle?"

"Yeah, I met her a few times. What do you need to know about her?"

"I need to know what her last name is. Is it Lucas or something else? Also, do you happen to remember what firm she works for? She's a lobbyist in DC, and that's all that I know."

"Oh, geez, Nick, I have no idea what her last name is. But I do remember the name of the firm that she works for."

I perked up. My instinct, in calling Nate, was spot-on. I somehow knew that he would have a good piece of information. I tried to hide my absolute excitement. "You do? What was the name of the firm?"

"It's Hollister and Kennedy. I'm almost sure of it."

"How do you remember that?"

"She talked about it the first time I met her. Natalie was with me, and you know how Natalie is about animal rights and that sort of thing. Needless to say, Nat was very taken by Elle."

I wanted to kiss Nate right then. Because I knew that, even if Elle didn't work for Hollister and Kennedy anymore, he gave me an excellent first lead to go on. At least I wasn't entirely looking for a needle in the haystack anymore. "Nate, I can't thank you enough. You're a great friend."

Nate nodded. "You look like hell, buddy, which is the only reason why I'm not busting your chops about Ava. I hope that I helped you."

"You don't know how much," I said. "I owe you."

“Yeah. Just remember that.”

And, at that, I left the office so that I could catch a flight to DC to see Elle at Hollister and Kennedy.

Chapter 7
Scotty

I was at that…place…for an unknown amount of time, and I managed to escape my own reality the entire time. In spite of the pain that Nick had put me through, he was the person that I thought about, night and day. Because, really, those few days with him were the only truly happy times of my entire life.

I simply blocked out the part where he slept with the evil witch, and imagined that he had never betrayed me in the manner that he did.

I still had no idea, whatsoever, where I was. All that I knew was that I was in a sunny climate, and, considering this was in the middle of January, I could only surmise that the house was situated somewhere tropical.

So, I guess that Mr. Lucas got rich somehow. He was always well-off, but I didn't think that he was wealthy enough to afford a place like this. Let alone afford the servants who were manning this home. When I was wheeled into this mansion, I saw has vast it was and how sunny. It was like one of those modern homes with walls of windows, and it was two story. Very minimalist décor. There was a tropical swimming pool on the grounds, that apparently was saltwater, and I was able to look out at it while I laid in my bed. On the horizon, there was blue water and a white sandy beach. It was such a juxtaposition – the glorious beauty of my surroundings, and the absolute horror of what was happening inside that gleaming home.

I tried not to think about the reality of the situation. That I might never see Nick again. That this might be my life. That I might be a captive of this evil man forever. Even when my leg healed, Mr. Lucas might find a way to make sure that I never left.

Of course, that didn't mean that I had to just give up. I had to find a way out of this place, and back to New York, somehow, someway.

Mr. Lucas seemed to read my mind. He was gone, somewhere, most of the day, and, at night, after dinner, it was the same as when I was an adolescent in his home. Mr. Lucas was more brutal than he was before, I guess because I wasn't a child anymore, and he felt that I could handle it. But he definitely was more sadistic than I remembered him being.

He came to visit me one afternoon. I was laying on the bed, immobile as usual. In addition to the humiliation of being repeatedly raped again, there was also the shame of having Mr. Lucas take care of me. He bathed me and had to

help me to the bathroom. I felt like a child again, being so helpless.

"Scotty," he began. "I know that you've been laying in that bed plotting a way to leave after your leg has healed. You can't think about that. If you try to leave, if you think about leaving, then I will literally handcuff you to this bed." His smile got devilish. "Actually, come to think of it, that might be fun."

I just looked at him, my mind a perfect blank. In my mind, I saw Nick standing there. Protecting me. Loving me. Being my person. I didn't see Mr. Lucas. I couldn't possibly see Mr. Lucas there. If I did, I think that I literally would've gone completely crazy. So, his words didn't have the impact that they should've had under the circumstances.

That seemed to make him angry. "And what do you think about that, Scotty? I'm going to keep you here for the rest of your life. You're going to be here for my pleasure."

I still didn't react. I just stared at him, and I would imagine that my face had a blank expression. I knew that there wasn't life behind my eyes, as the vibrancy that I have felt in my being had been completely extinguished.

At that, Mr. Lucas took his hand and crashed it against my face. He pulled my hair savagely, jerking my head back in the process. "Listen, you little cunt. You are going to react to what I say. I'm telling you that you are trapped, forever, with me, and all you can do is give me a blank fucking stare? Fuck you."

I finally just drew a deep breath. I wanted to needle him, so I simply said "Okay. I'll stay here with you forever."

At that, he slapped me again, harder this time. "What the fuck is wrong with you?" He grabbed my upper arm and twisted it, hard, so that it turned completely red. I felt tears threatening, but I willed them away. I wasn't going to give this man the satisfaction of crying or showing how much pain I was in. I could be very willful when I wanted to.

Of course, my enraging him was a huge mistake. He hit me with a closed fist on my face, and I could feel blood rushing out of my nose.

That was the final straw. The tears that were threatening the entire time I had been there with him finally were let loose, and I sobbed from a place that was deep inside my soul. I cried for my lost relationship with Nick. I cried for my hopeless situation with Mr. Lucas. I cried for my shattered dreams of being an architect. I cried for my mother and I cried for my lost childhood and adolescence. Every tragedy, every sad moment, was felt at that moment and the tears felt like they would never stop.

Mr. Lucas was watching me, with a huge smile on his face. He was finally

satisfied, because he obviously felt that he had broken me.

And I did feel beat down. I did. But he didn’t break me.

I might have felt my emotions right at that moment, but I was broken long before that moment in time.

Chapter 8
Nick

As I hurried to the plane that I had to catch for Dulles Airport, I called Ryan. I knew that Ryan was doing work with lobbyists that handled animal rights issues, so I figured that he might know something about the firm that Elle worked for, Hollister and Kennedy. I had already done some research on it in the limo on the way to the plane, and found out that they were involved with a wide range of issues that affected the environment, and animal rights was one of the things that they did.

I had already arranged for George to cover for my meeting with the Chase clients, telling him that I had a family emergency that I had to attend to. He obliged, of course, and wanted to know if everything was okay.

“Yeah,” I said, being intentionally vague. “But I’ll call you when I know something more.”

George didn’t pry, and I told him that I had no idea when I would be back, but hopefully I would be back soon. That really wasn’t a problem, although partners try to clear absences months in advance, if they were going to take a vacation or what-not. I knew that I had projects that were piling up, but I also knew that I could catch up when I got back.

And one thing I knew for sure – I had to get to Scotty, and soon. Any moment I spent not pursuing the goal of finding out where she was taken was another moment that she would be suffering. I couldn’t take that, imagining what that monster was doing to her.

Ryan picked up on the first ring. “Hey buddy, long time no hear. How are things going?”

“Where do I begin?” And I proceeded to tell him about Scotty and how her rapist had virtually abducted her from the hospital, giving the ruse that he was taking her to a private facility to convalesce. Then I told him about I was my way to Washington, DC to hopefully find the monster’s ex-wife.

“Oh, shit,” Ryan said. “Shit.” Then he got really quiet. Something similar had happened to him, with Rochelle, all those years ago, so I would imagine that was what he was thinking about during the silence.

Finally, he recovered. “Buddy, that’s awful to hear. What can I do to help you?”

I felt the feeling of fear welling up in my throat, and I found that I couldn’t

talk. I opened my mouth, and, to my surprise, nothing but a sob came out. *Come on, Nick. You can't crack up now. You have to be strong.*

"Oh, god," he said. "I'll meet you at Dulles."

I said nothing, but continued to cry. I took several deep breaths to compose myself, as I saw the La Guardia airport looming ahead. "Thanks" was all that I managed to croak out.

"Sure, buddy. Anything you need. I'll help you find this Elle person so that hopefully you will get the information you need to find this pervert."

I nodded my head. "Listen, I have to go. I just arrived at La Guardia. I'll see you in DC?"

"Yeah," he said. "You got it. I'll probably be there before you. At any rate, let's meet at Moe's and we can grab a drink and talk about our strategy for getting information from this woman. It might not be as easy as you might think."

"I know. Things are complicated by the fact that he apparently has many houses all over the world. I might end up flying to Italy and Greece and Saint Croix. Hopefully those are the only homes he has."

"Right. Maybe we can glean enough from this woman to pinpoint where he might have taken her."

"I hope you're right. God, I hope you're right. Listen, the limo just pulled up to the curb. I'll see you in DC."

"Yeah, see you there."

"Oh, and Ryan?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"Anytime, buddy. Anytime."

Chapter 9
Scotty

I finally stopped crying after several hours. I hated my tears, because they were making Mr. Lucas so happy. He sat there and smiled at me while I cried, and then he whipped out his penis and started stroking it. I turned my head away, but he savagely positioned my eyes so that I could see everything that he was doing.

“Go on and cry, Scotty. Go on. God, seeing your pain is just such ecstasy for me.”

I tried to cut off my tears. I hated that I was giving him so much pleasure. But it was no use. The dam had been broken, and the torrent could not be stopped. And, of course, the more I cried, the more he got turned-on.

“Yeah, oh yeah,” he said. Then he got into the bed with me and yanked down my pajama bottoms and underwear. “God, you turn me on, especially when you’re in emotional pain,” he said as he jammed himself into me. I tried to struggle some, but, as usual, it was no use. I couldn’t ever fight back, even when I wasn’t incapacitated. That was the problem with being a buck-fifteen on a good day. You could never defend yourself against a big man, and Mr. Lucas was definitely that.

I started to hiccough, and I took several deep breaths. I was determined to go back into my emotional shell. I had to retreat. So, I found myself calming down as I accessed some of my favorite memories of my times with Nick. I imagined myself on Christmas Day, feeling like I had everything that I could have ever wanted. I saw Nick giving me those beautiful diamonds, and I felt his warm skin against my own. I heard his baritone and rich voice, and I smelled his cologne. I tasted the crème brulée and the Osso Bucco that he so lovingly made for me on Christmas Eve.

After a little while, Mr. Lucas finally pulled out and sat down next to the bed. “Now, Scotty, I guess you are wondering how it is that I got all of this wealth.”

I said nothing, but just nodded my head. I *was* curious about that, to tell the truth.

“I became a hedge fund manager. I knew that as a trader, I would never obtain the wealth that I truly desire. And I did obtain this wealth, as you can see.”

“What happened to Elle?” I was wondering this, as I saw no evidence of her around the home. There were no pictures of her or any of her belongings.

His face darkened at the mention of Elle's name. "She divorced me, the cunt. But she got nothing from me. I made sure of that." And then he smiled. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that somehow Elle might be the key to you getting out of here. Well, don't even think that, because that won't happen. She's afraid of me. She knows what I am capable of."

I didn't even think about that angle, to be honest. That Elle might hold the key to my release from this prison. Of course, I had no idea how that would even happen. It wasn't like I had anybody at home who even cared enough to contact her to find out information about Mr. Lucas. My mother couldn't stay sober for long enough to try to figure something like that out. And Jack didn't have the resources to try to find me.

The only person who was smart enough and wealthy enough to try to find me would have been Nick. And I say "would have" because I knew that he didn't care enough. I thought, at one time, that he did care about me. I thought that he even loved me. But he showed his true colors, and he showed them rather quickly. We weren't even together for one month before he took up with the evil witch. That woman. She nauseated me as much as Mr. Lucas did at that point.

I sighed. I felt so hopeless, so defeated. I was in love with a man who could care less about me. I let my guard down and let him in, and now, all I could think about was him. And he was probably with her. Her. That awful woman who went out of her way to make my life a living hell.

I looked out the window again. I couldn't stand to look at Mr. Lucas' evil face for one second more. I also had to hide my tears from him.

I couldn't let him win.

Chapter 10

Nick

The plane landed at Dulles at 10 o'clock. It had been a long day, to say the least, but I was completely wired. I was looking forward to seeing Ryan, because he could help me try to figure out a plan to find out where Scotty was, and he could give me an objective eye on the situation. I was too emotionally involved. I knew that. Ryan was good because he would be able to keep his emotions out of it.

I didn't have any baggage, as I left for Dulles straight from Nate's office, so I skipped the baggage claim and made a beeline to Moe's Bar and Grill. Ryan was already there, waiting for me.

I sat down.

"Buddy," he said. "No offense, but you don't look so good."

"I feel like shit," I said. "I had the worst headache of my life when I woke up this morning, and now I'm under extreme stress just thinking about what is happening to my Scotty."

"What caused your headache in the first place?"

"Long story. But suffice to say, there is a *Fatal Attraction* who works in my office, and I'm 99% sure that she drugged me. Why she would drug me, I don't know. I haven't had the energy to think about that. I've just been focused on saving Scotty. Once I know she's safe, I can concentrate on what happened to me in Portia's office."

"Of course, that has to be your major concern here."

"So, I've been trying to think on the plane about how to approach Elle," I said. "I mean, I can't just go in there and demand to know info about her ex-husband. Can I?"

"Well, you can, but the situation might call for something a bit more subtle. Which isn't your strong suit."

"That's an understatement. What are you thinking about?"

"I can approach her with the ruse of wanting to work with her on Dalilah's Friends. I was doing a bit of research on her firm, myself, and one of their major concerns is animal welfare. And, I even found an Elle who pilots a project that is involved with lobbying senators to enact legislation restricting puppy mills. So, that is perfect."

"What are the odds?" I asked, feeling relieved. I was doing research myself

when I was on the plane, but I found myself distracted and unable to focus. I had to shake off the emotional veil that was clouding my thoughts and brain, but, if I couldn't, it was great having Ryan here to help me out.

The waitress came around and delivered us two beers, and I asked Ryan "So, you go in there as a cold contact with the ruse that you want to work with her on the puppy mill issue. And where do you go from there?"

"Well, here is the sticky part. But, I cleared it all with Iris, so it's good to go. I'm probably going to have to take her to dinner or something, so that we can 'discuss business,'" he said. "And then somehow steer the conversation to Paul. Not sure if that will work, but it's worth a shot."

"At this point, anything is worth a shot. But how are you going to steer the conversation to that?"

"Play it by ear, I guess. Paul is probably a sore subject with her, to say the least, so it's going to be delicate."

I took a deep breath. I really wanted to be in on this entire scenario. But I wasn't at all sure how that would be managed. "Okay," I said, "that sounds like a decent preliminary plan. But I really want to be in on it. Do you think that things might go south if I'm there posing as somebody from Dalilah's Friends as well?"

Ryan looked thoughtful for a second. "That might be risky, but I understand your wanting to be involved." He shrugged. "Why not? The only thing is that she might recognize you. You have been featured in a number of different publications, some of which are those that somebody like her might read. Like the *Wall Street Journal* and *Forbes.*"

"Yeah, I thought about that, too," I said. "I suppose it would be silly if I donned a disguise?"

"Sure, that might work. Dye your hair black and get some thick glasses."

∞

After I went to a hotel room, and donned a pair of glasses and dyed my hair jet black with a temporary coloring gel, Ryan and I made our way to Hollister and Kennedy. The worst that could happen at that point would be that Elle wouldn't be able to see us. After all, we were cold calling. But Ryan had an ace up his sleeve – he would offer to donate $10 million to the politicians that Elle was working with, with the understanding that these donations were coming from her, in hopes of securing favorable legislation. The beauty of this plan was that Ryan probably would have donated this money, anyhow, as this was one of the functions of his foundation.

That this money would really be used to secure Elle's attention was an excellent side-benefit. And, with this plan underway, there was a much better than even chance that Elle would magically be able to make time for us.

Money talks. Always.

We got to the building that housed the Hollister and Kennedy lobbyists, and went to the 22nd Floor of the gleaming new building on I Street that housed this firm and several other ones. It was more of a boutique concern than a large one, so there was a good chance that we might be able to secure her attention.

The receptionist took one look at Ryan and her entire face lit up. He always got that reaction, and I did too, usually. But I was well aware that I looked like a total geek at that point in time.

"May I help you?" she asked, leaning over her station a little so that Ryan could look down her shirt, if he wanted to.

Ryan being Ryan, he had no desire to look down her shirt.

"Yes, my name is Ryan Gallagher," he said, handing her his card. "I'm the CEO of an animal rights foundation that is just getting started. I understand you have an individual on your staff, Elle Parsons, who is involved in some activity concerning puppy mills?"

The receptionist nodded her head. "Yes, Elle Parsons. What is your visit concerning?"

"My foundation is set up to work with lobbyists on animal rights causes. We'd be very interested in setting up some kind of partnership with her, and we would be willing to make donations of $10 million to the politicians that she is working with."

At that, the receptionist's eyes lit up even more. "Just a second, I'll get her on the line," she said. She buzzed Elle's line, and said "A Ryan Gallagher is here to see you." She nodded her head and looked at us, and then said into the phone "I think you want to take this appointment."

She hung up the phone. "Elle will be right out. May I interest you gentleman in a soda or some water?"

"Sure, a bottled water would be great, if you have it," Ryan said. "And one for my assistant."

We got our bottled waters, and waited. I felt anxiety just sitting there. I wanted to get some action going, and soon. Of course, I was well aware that this rigmarole was entirely necessary, but that didn't make things any easier. Scotty was suffering, even as we stood there. I tried not to think about it, but it was always on my mind.

Finally, Elle appeared. She was a petite blonde woman, and very attractive in a Gwen Stefani type of way. Red lipstick, platinum hair, and was wearing a vintage Chanel suit in pink. She had the same reaction to seeing Ryan as did the receptionist, although she tried to hide it just a little bit.

She extended her hand. “Hello,” she said, “I’m Elle Parsons. I understand that you have a business proposition for me?”

“Yes,” Ryan said. “My name is Ryan Gallagher, and this is my assistant, Nico Pirelli. May we meet with you in your office?”

She nodded her head, and led the way.

We headed back to her enormous office, and sat down to talk to her.

She looked at Ryan. “So,” she said, “I confess that I was trying to place your face and name. Then I realized that I read about your foundation in the *PAWS Chicago* magazine. I remember seeing a profile of your new foundation. Very interesting. I’m glad that you got in contact with me.”

I took a breath. This might be easier than I thought.

Ryan looked at me and then looked back at Elle. “Okay,” he said. “I know that this is a sudden, cold call, but I was hoping that maybe we could have dinner and discuss a possible partnership between my foundation and your lobbying concerns.”

Elle fluttered her eyelashes a little and smiled. I looked at Ryan, and he looked vaguely uncomfortable, but, to the untrained eye, he looked unruffled. I knew him so well, though, that I could always see the subtle cues on his face. I knew that he was most likely uncomfortable with this woman, who was so openly flirting with him.

“Certainly. When would you be interested in meeting?”

“Tonight, if possible.”

She nodded her head. “That could certainly be arranged. How about meeting me at *Nora’s* at 7 tonight?”

“That would be great. Do you mind if Nico comes along?”

“No, of course not,” she said, looking at me. Thus far, I hadn’t said a word. This was Ryan’s area, so it was safest if he did all the talking.

We left her office and immediately did a little bit of research on *Nora’s.* It turned out that this was an organic restaurant that had a variety of dishes that were vegan, which was important, as Ryan became a vegan after he got his foundation and sanctuary up and running. And, since I, too, was posing as an animal rights guy, I had to walk the walk as well. So, there were many dishes that we could choose from at this place.

We headed back to the hotel and went to the bar and had a scotch. I had to try to decompress, but it was so difficult. I hated that this was taking so long. Scotty needed me, dammit. Yet, here I was, having drinks with Ryan, as casual as you please. Later on that night, I would be having a delicious dinner. It didn't seem right that I would be wining and dining while Scotty was god-knows-where with that evil, evil man.

Ryan seemed to understand. "Don't worry, Nick. I know that this is frustrating. But it seems that Elle might be our best bet in helping you find her."

"I know that. I know. But I can't stand the thought that she's somewhere, frightened, alone and hopeless. She probably thinks that nobody will be coming for her. And I can't stand thinking what that sub-human is doing to her."

Ryan shuddered a little. "I know how she feels. All too well. I know that it's hard, but try not to think about it. Just think about getting the information we need from Elle, so that we can find Scotty. And we'll find her. I promise you this."

I took a deep breath.

7 PM couldn't come soon enough.

Chapter 11
Scotty

It seemed that I had been in this place forever, but, in reality, I think that it was only a few days. I was still hazy from the painkillers, so this dulled the horror a little bit. That and the fact that I retreated within myself was the only ways that I could have survived what was happening to me.

However, one day, Mr. Lucas actually decided to have a bit of a heart. “You need some fresh air, my little love bird,” he said. “So, I’m going to take you outside.”

I looked at him quizzically. I couldn’t believe that he actually was taking a little bit of sympathy on me. But I said nothing to him. I never said much, if anything, to him. Sometimes this annoyed him, such as the day that he hit me and slapped me. Sometimes he was unfazed by my non-communication.

Today, thank god, was one of the days that he didn’t seem to mind my lack of communication with him.

He picked me up and put me into my wheelchair. “Scotty, we’re going to go to the beach. Imagine that? It’s January, and we’re going to the beach. See, I’m sure that you don’t miss New York anymore, do you?”

I didn’t say anything, nor did I move my head. I didn’t want him to be able to guess at my thoughts, because I was afraid that, if he did, he would torture me even more than he already was.

He put a blanket over my legs, and pushed me out the door.

As we walked along, he was talking. “You know, I’m so happy you’re here. I was devastated when you left our house. Just devastated. I couldn’t understand why you would leave. I thought that we were having fun.”

I felt chilled just hearing him characterize my stay with him as “fun,” so I took the blanket that was on me and pulled it tighter around my shoulders. Was he really that delusional? Did he really believe that I was enjoying what was happening to me all those nights?

He ignored my silence and continued on. “It really was fate that brought you back. Right when Elle left me, too. But you know what they say – God closes a door but opens a window.”

I looked at him with contempt. He was the last person who should be saying anything about “God.” As if he would know anything about God or God’s will or anything like that.

“And now you’re all grown up, Scotty,” he said. “And we can get married.”

I felt my heart racing when he said that. I looked at his face, and he didn’t have the usual cruel expression that he had when he addressed me. Rather, he looked calm and cool.

Finally, I spoke. “You’re serious. You think that I want to marry you?”

“Yes, I do, Princess. I can give you everything that your heart desires.”

I just turned back around in my chair, feeling not only mortified but completely violated. I could never believe that anybody could be that delusional to think that there would be a marriage between us, at any point in time.

“What are you going to do?” he said. “After all, you’re mine from now on. You might as well resign yourself to being with me. I won’t let anything come between us, ever again.”

I took a deep breath. What I wanted to do was turn around and punch him, but, unfortunately, it was impossible to do. After all, I was still in my chair and he was still pushing me along.

He pushed me in silence. I had to admit that this place, wherever it was, was beautiful. He pushed me onto the beach, and I looked at the deep blue water. Parts of the water were actually deep green, instead of blue. It seemed to be, however, one of those touristy places. Meaning, there were many extremely dark-skinned Africans who worked in the shops that lined the streets that were just beyond the white sandy beach. But the visitors were very well-heeled. I saw many luxury cars, such as Bentleys and Lamborghinis, driving the streets, and the men and women were well-groomed and mainly white. I surmised that I was somewhere in the Caribbean, on one of the Afro-Caribbean islands, from the looks of it.

I felt a little bit better. A bit more oriented to space, if not to time.

These touristy Third-World countries always astounded me. The extreme poverty of the locals, contrasted with the glittering wealth of the visitors, was something that never seemed right to me, in any way, shape or form. It was the extreme version of wealth inequality. It always seemed to me that everybody should share in the good fortune of the top hotels and resorts, not just the wealthy people who built them.

Mr. Lucas was still talking to me. “Now, Scotty, I know that you’re worried about your mother and your brother. I could help out with that, if we were married.”

I turned around and looked at him, wondering what he was talking about.

“Your mother needs intensive treatment. In-patient treatment. That’s her only

hope. I know that she doesn't have the money for that, but I do. And, just think, if she got better, then she can take proper care of your brother, and you won't have to worry about that, either."

I just stared at him. "Well, that's true, but I don't trust you. I don't think that you would be as good as your word, even if I married you." I couldn't believe that I was actually thinking about doing that, but, at the same time, if Mr. Lucas would actually take care of my mother, it would be worth it. Deep down, that was what I always wanted – my mother to be well. I wanted to stop worrying about her all the time. I wanted her to be a mother to Aaron, and, of course, a mother to me. Mr. Lucas appeared to be offering this to me.

But I didn't say anything to him. I simply turned back around, and put my head back on the chair. I blocked out what he was saying to me, because I no longer wanted to hear any of it. I felt so hopeless, so helpless, so down at that moment. I couldn't ever imagine spending my life with Mr. Lucas, and I thought that I would kill myself if it ever came to that.

And, just like that, I had an idea.

Chapter 12
Nick

Seven PM had finally arrived, and Ryan and I made our way to *Nora's* to meet with Elle. She was already there, and she stood up to wave us to her table.

She was dressed in something slinky and sexy, unlike earlier today, when she was in a smart suit. Her dress was red and low-cut, and her blonde hair was free-flowing. She was drinking a dirty martini, and she sipped it suggestively.

As we sat down, she handed us two menus to look at. We looked at it, and decided what to get.

I hated these preliminaries. I wanted to get down to it, so that I could get on a plane and find Scotty, wherever she was in the world. Ryan had already told me that we could fly to wherever in his plane, so we'd be able to leave as soon as we got some information.

After we ordered, Ryan got down to business. "So, let's talk about our partnership."

Elle had other things in mind. "Yes, let's. Of course, we don't have to be all business, do we?" she asked, as she took one of her olives and put it in her mouth while staring at Ryan.

Ryan looked uncomfortable. I nudged him under the table. "Uh, I have to use the restroom. I need to wash my hands."

Ryan immediately got my gist. "Oh, me too. Uh, I'll be right back."

Then the two of us got up to make our way to the bathroom. Once we were in there, I gave him a new idea.

"Elle likes you," I said.

"No shit. You brought me in here to tell me something that's obvious for all to see?"

"Ok. But can't we use that to our advantage?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you can use your charm to find out the information that we need to find."

Ryan sighed. "Iris wouldn't like that one bit."

"I realize that. Listen, I'm not asking you to sleep with the woman. Just, you know, use your charm on her. Flirt with her a little bit. Loosen her up."

"That's your area, Nick," Ryan said. "At least, it used to be at one time."

"Well, it's not anymore. Anyhow, it's not me she's digging, it's you."

Ryan gave me a dirty look, but said “Okay. I’ll do it. But Iris better not find out about this.”

“Number one, how can she find out? Number two, extraordinary circumstances call for extraordinary measures. I know that you know how to wrap women around your finger. I’m asking you, as your oldest friend, to do so here.”

Ryan shook his head, but said “okay. You’re right. I’ll work my magic. But it stops at innocent flirting.”

“Goes without saying,” I said.

“Okay, then,” he said, and the two of us walked back to the table.

“Well, Ryan, I hope you don’t mind, but I took the liberty to order us an appetizer. I ordered the Roasted Maitake Mushrooms and Goat Cheese Tart.”

“Mmmm, sounds good,” Ryan said, and gave her a patented come-hither look. Elle looked like she was about to melt.

Dayum, that boy is good, I thought. I almost forgot how good he was. Hell, he’d even give the old me a run for his money.

Ryan leaned in a little further across the table, and put his hand in Elle’s hair. “You have beautiful hair. I like it down. It suits you.”

Elle giggled and blushed, and shifted in her chair. “Do you think? Do you like this color? I thought it was a little much.”

“No, I think that it’s beautiful. You’re beautiful.”

More giggles and she looked down at the table, with her hand over her eyes.

“So, let’s get down to business. Before pleasure, anyhow,” Ryan said.

“Yes, let’s,” she said. “Now you wanted to discuss a partnership between your concern and mine. What did you have in mind?”

“Our foundation has $10 million to spend on efforts to end puppy mills. I need to know what Senators to target for these contributions to help get this legislation enacted. Which is where you come in. You have the contacts I need. I have the cash. Let’s work together.”

“Sounds like a very interesting offer. Very interesting.”

Ryan cleared his throat, and looked at me. “Well let’s work out the details, and then we can get into more personal topics.”

So, for the next half hour, Elle and Ryan hashed out the details on their proposed partnership, while I quietly sipped my scotch. I tried, very hard, to keep my mind off of Scotty, but it was getting more and more impossible to do.

Finally, the two came to an agreement, and Ryan cleared his throat and shifted in his chair. He took a deep breath, and turned his full attention to Elle. “So, Elle.

Uh, I'd like to get to know you on more of a personal level. But I was wondering. I mean, tell me if this question is too intrusive, but….what is your, you know, marital status? Are you seeing anybody right now?"

I cleared my throat and nudged him. "Uh, maybe I should cut out right now and go back to the hotel room."

Ryan gave me a look that could kill, but, again, it was so imperceptible that anybody but myself wouldn't notice it. "No, actually, that won't be necessary." Then he raised his eyebrow in a look that said *you're staying right here.*

Elle looked somewhat uncomfortable, but said "no, not seeing anybody. I, uh, just got out of a messy divorce."

Ryan nodded. "Been there. Trust me." He shook his head. "My ex-wife was a little bit on the cuckoo side. Well, strike that. A lot on the cuckoo side."

I looked at him, hoping that he knew what he was doing. But, at the same time, I knew that I was in good hands. Ryan read people better than anybody I knew, and, if he thought that this was the right path, then it was the right path.

Elle smiled weakly and looked at her glass of wine pensively. "Yes, I know what you mean. My ex, well, he's not exactly playing with a full deck, either."

"Oh?" Ryan said. "What was the issue there?"

"He was a narcissist. Truly. He was also a master manipulator. He was better than anybody that I have ever seen at manipulating people and situations." She drew a deep breath. "I'm really lucky to be out of that situation, to be honest."

"I know what you mean," Ryan said. "Oh, but we did have some good times, though. I mean, we have this amazing beach house in St. Croix. Or we had one, anyhow."

At that, Elle's ears seemed to perk up. "St. Croix? What a coincidence. My ex-husband and I had a house on the beach on that island as well. What part of St. Croix was your home?"

"Cane Bay," he said. "What about you?"

"The same," she said. "What a small world!" She shook her head. "We used to go there every year about this time for a long vacation. That was really the only time that we were happy. I guess because we were able to get away from the big city and all the attendant stresses."

Ryan continued to have a poker face. I, however, felt an enormous smile spread across my face. *We're getting somewhere!*

But Ryan wasn't as convinced as me that this was the absolute key to knowing where to start looking for Scotty. He knew, as did I, that the couple also had homes in Italy and Greece. "Yeah, our times on St. Croix were magical, but, like

you, when we got back, real life got in the way. So, we liked to have multiple vacation homes around the world. We had such a difficult time when we had to face our daily stress that we always needed a place to decompress."

Elle's eyes got wide. "Us, too. That was how we were!" She shook her head. "My husband made a lot of money in the past five years or so, after he switched from being a trader to being a hedge fund manager. So, one of the first things he did was buy vacation homes. At first, I was against it. It just seemed so frivolous and not a good way to spend our money. I know that this is going to sound holier-than-thou, but I really wanted to use our newfound wealth to do some good in the world. But, after we actually started to use these vacation homes, I started to see the wisdom in having them," she said with a laugh.

"Oh, yes. I think that our vacation homes were what kept us together. Let's see, we spent our winter vacations in Gstaad, Switzerland. We both loved to ski. And we really loved to spend our autumns in New Zealand, to enjoy their springtime. What about you? Where else did you and your ex spend your time?"

"Summers in Greece, for sure. That was the best. We had a beach home on Crete, and the beauty of that place can't be underestimated. And we also spent some of our winter times in Italy. We had a ski palace in Piedmont, in the Biella Province."

My heart sunk. Greece could probably be ruled out, if they headed there in the summertime. But it sounded like Italy would be a prospect, too, for where he might have taken her.

The haystack was getting smaller, but it was still a haystack.

But Ryan was unruffled. "Oh? Which months did you like to go to Italy? I mean, were there months where the skiing is better than other months?"

"Yes, yes, of course. We usually headed out there for Christmas. We met some locals out there, who became friends of ours, and we enjoyed spending the holidays with them."

My heart soared again. Italy was looking unlikely. It looked like St. Croix might be our best bet. I felt like ending the dinner, right then and there, and running to Ryan's plane so that we could get the hell out of there.

But Ryan was deliberate and cool. "Christmas. Yes. Staying in a ski town over Christmas is out of this world. My ex and I sometimes spent our Christmases in Gstaad. It was always an amazing adventure during that time. We also went there at other times during the years. What about you? Did you visit Italy during the year, or only at Christmastime?"

"No, only during Christmas. That was our thing."

Bingo. So, now we had the town in St. Croix, and we were reasonably sure that the pervert was there with my Scotty, as opposed to being at one of the other places around the world. *So, now, let's leave.* I was now chomping at the bit.

Ryan wasn't quite ready, though. "So, Italy, Greece and St. Croix. Quite diverse vacation homes. Did you guys go anywhere else?"

"Yes, of course. We adored travel. China, Russia, Australia, Japan, India, Egypt. You name the country, and we probably went there. Unless it was war-torn, of course."

Ryan nodded his head. "But you just went to these places to visit, though, right? Or did you have homes elsewhere as well?"

"Yeah, we just visited these places. Our only homes were in Greece, Italy and St. Croix."

I felt my knee moving a mile a minute under the table. I got out my phone and texted Ryan. "Come on, let's move."

Ryan felt his phone buzz. "Would you excuse me? I didn't want to say anything, but I'm expecting a call. My mother has been sick in the hospital. I need to see if this text has anything to do with that."

"Of course," Elle said, but I could see the disappointment in her eyes.

At that, Ryan got up from the table.

I just looked at Elle through my thick glasses. She smiled warmly at me, but looked around, waiting for Ryan to return.

"So, how long have you been working with Ryan?" she asked politely.

"Uh, not long. About three months. I'm really happy to be able to get the chance to work on animal rights projects though."

"And what do you do?"

"Well, right now, I'm really just in training. But I hope to become the liaison between the foundation and outside funding sources. I mean, our organization doesn't take in the money, but we find people to give it to. Grants and that sort of thing." *I hope that she doesn't ask me much more, because I really don't know what I'm going to say.*

She nodded her head. "Its good work you guys are doing."

"You too," I said.

Then we both looked around the restaurant uncomfortably. I didn't want any more small talk, and neither did Elle, apparently. She smiled at me, again, more plastic this time.

Finally, after what seemed like ages, but probably was only a few minutes, Ryan reappeared. He had a very serious look on his face. "I'm so sorry. My

mother has taken a turn for the worse. I, uh, will have to cut this dinner short. I paid the tab. But, I'll be in touch about our partnership."

Elle nodded. "I'm very sorry to hear that. I hope that your mother gets better."

"Me too," he said. Then he looked at me. "Sorry, Nico. But looks like we have to be getting back to Kansas City ASAP."

I took a deep breath. *Thank you, Ryan.* I stood up. "Elle, it's very nice to have met you. Sorry we couldn't get to know each other better."

"Yes, it was very nice meeting you, too."

Ever the gentleman, Ryan said "Can I escort you back to your car?"

"That would be wonderful."

So, the two of us escorted her back to her car, which was in an underground parking garage. Elle gave both us a hug goodbye, and she looked longingly into Ryan's eyes. "I really hope to see you soon, Ryan," she said. "Maybe on a more personal basis next time?"

Ryan nodded his head but said nothing. "Perhaps. At any rate, we can really make a difference to those puppies by working together, can't we?"

Elle tried to hide her disappointment at the obvious rejection. "Yes, we sure can," she said weakly. Then she blushed, ran her hands through her hair, and got into her car. "I hope you get in touch with me soon."

"I will," Ryan assured her.

Then Ryan and I turned around and called our limousine.

While we waited for Robert, our limousine driver, to come and pick us up, we chatted a bit.

"That was horrible," Ryan said. "I really feel like shit. Dirty, almost."

"Why?"

"I don't like toying with people's emotions. I hate it, in fact. No offense, but I'm not like you."

I sighed. "No offense taken. But I'm not like that anymore. At all. Scotty has tamed me in a way that nobody ever has. Nobody has ever come close."

"Well, that's good. Let's hope that you stay tamed."

"I will. I have no doubt about it."

Ryan shook his head. "I really hope that I'm not bringing the bad juju, lying about my mother like that. I've always been superstitious about that type of thing. You know, if you lie about something like that, it might really happen."

"I know, me too. But, thanks for doing that. And, thanks for everything. You really are a fantastic friend. I can't think of anybody else who would do what you just did to help me out."

“Of course. But, I’m not finished helping you out yet. I’m going to go to St. Croix to help you look for her. The good news is, we have it narrowed down to the Cane Bay area. It’s still going to be difficult to pinpoint just where he is, but we will just have to ask around.” Then he paused. “I’m doing this for you, Nick, but, really, it is a long overdue repayment for how you saved me from Rochelle. If it weren’t for you, god knows what would have happened to me. I probably would literally be dead. So, I’m glad that I have finally been given the chance to help you out for a change.”

“I know, buddy. I’m glad that I was able to help you out when you needed me.”

Ryan smiled. “So, I guess we’re even, then?”

“I guess we are,” I smiled back.

Chapter 13

Scotty

I had spent the last day or so thinking about how I wanted to die. I had no way out. No hope. Everything was shattered for me. The crystal egg that I thought about when I got the call about Aaron was an apt description for how I was feeling right at that moment. And it didn't just threaten to shatter, but it actually did. Along with my psyche.

I wondered how I could actually do some good for the people I loved, though, before I decided to go through with my plan. I wondered if I could actually get Mr. Lucas to marry me, if I stipulated that he had to put about a million or so dollars into trust for my mother, so that she could get treatment and better herself. She really deserved to have a better life than what she had. She was wounded, too, just like me. I didn't know if something happened to her like what had happened to me, but I always had a feeling that it did. I thought that I could die happy if I knew that she would be taken care of. And, by extension, Aaron.

I knew that I was being naïve to think that money would be the answer to her problems. But I thought that she might have a chance if she could get intensive inpatient treatment, just like Mr. Lucas suggested. She might have a chance for a normal life if she could just kick the bottle. That would make me happy, even if I wouldn't be alive to see her transformation.

Then, after the money for my mom was secured, I would meet with a mysterious accident. I didn't quite know what that would be, but I would make sure that it looked like an accident. That way, Mr. Lucas wouldn't be tempted to withdraw the trust for my mother. If I actually committed suicide, and there wasn't question about that, then Mr. Lucas would probably be so angry that I deceived him that he would cut off my mother.

And my death would be for naught.

So, first thing was first. I had to make my proposal to Mr. Lucas, and tell him that I would marry him on the condition that he put several million dollars into a trust fund for my mother, and see what happened from there.

Over dinner that night, I made my proposal. "So, uh, Paul," I began. "I've been thinking about what you said yesterday. About how you would take care of my mother if I married you."

"Yes, Princess. And I meant every word of it."

"Okay, then. If you open up a trust fund for my mother, and make it

conditional upon her staying sober, then I will marry you."

Mr. Lucas clapped his hands together excitedly. "I knew it. I knew it. I knew that there was a kind person under that impetuous bitch exterior. I knew that you loved me."

I felt nauseated just thinking about how Mr. Lucas imagined, in his warped brain, that I somehow loved him. But I continued on. *Look at the big picture, Scotty. Your sacrifice can save your mother and brother.* I tried not to think about Nick. Just thinking about how I would never get a chance to see him again…I wanted to burst into tears just thinking about it.

It didn't seem fair, that my time with Nick would be so short. It wasn't right that something so magical and pure could be taken away from me so cruelly. But that was the way that fate worked. It was often cruel. In this case, I got a chance to see paradise for a fleeting moment, so that, when hell was visited upon me, as it was since I got into the clutches of Mr. Lucas, it would be that much more devastating.

I took a deep breath. It would have to be soon. I didn't want to live much longer. I wanted to put myself out of my own suffering as quickly as I could. "Okay, then. Let's do this tomorrow. Can you get a trust set up between now and then?"

"Of course. I'll call my lawyer about it tomorrow."

"Good. I'd have to have proof, of course, that you did it. But then we can be married."

Mr. Lucas smiled, and got up to stroke my hair from behind. "That would be amazing. I knew that you would see my point of view. I knew it."

I smiled back. I was looking forward to the next few days myself. But not for the reasons that Mr. Lucas was looking forward to them.

I was looking forward to finally being out of my misery.

Chapter 14
Nick

The plane ride to St. Croix was interminable. I couldn't concentrate on anything but finding Scotty. I barely talked to Ryan on the plane, because I was just too lost in my own head. For his part, he used the early time on the plane to review proposals for outfits that were contracting with his animal rights foundation and making phone calls, including a kissy-kissy phone call to Iris.

"Hello there, beautiful," he said. "I miss you and I love you. And I love our beautiful daughter, too."

I tried not to resent him and his solid relationship with Iris. He earned it, and he deserved it. It was just that, with the love of my life missing, and my life with her possibly hanging in the balance, I just didn't want to hear Ryan's protestations of love right at that very moment. I knew that part of the reason why he was so effusive was because he felt guilty for flirting with Elle. He didn't even really get into heavy flirting, but even the little bit of flirting he did was enough to make him feel guilty.

Sometimes Ryan was too nice, I thought. But maybe I just thought that because I was always so different. I wasn't anymore, of course. I was a lot like Ryan now. Love-struck, and would go to the ends of the earth to protect Scotty and ensure her safety.

So, I tried to get some sleep, although it was fitful at best. I kept waking up every twenty minutes or so, because I had nightmares of what was happening to Scotty. I didn't want to think about her being raped, but I knew that was what was occurring. I didn't want to think about her being tortured, but I had a feeling that was happening as well. She never said that Mr. Lucas was physically abusive with her, but I was still so afraid for her physical well-being.

Most of all, though, I had nightmares about how she would be when I found her. She was so fragile anyhow. I had just begun to break through her walls and get to the point where she fully trusted me and could love me with an open heart. But I knew that there was going to be emotional fallout from her experiences now as Mr. Lucas' captive, and it broke my heart into a million pieces.

Every time I tried to sleep, I had these nightmares. I heard her screaming, and I felt her terror and pain. I saw her tears. And I woke up with tears in my own eyes.

Ryan, for his part, looked at me sympathetically after the third time I awoke

with a start. “It’s going to be okay, Nick,” Ryan said. “Whatever happens, everything is going to eventually be okay. It might take some work to get her to where she is recovered from this experience, but with enough patience and love, she’ll get through it with you. I speak from experience, remember?”

I nodded. After all that had happened in Ryan’s life, I knew that the guy had empathy, not just sympathy. Sympathy is where you feel bad for a person who is in distress. Empathy is where you can actually put yourself in that person’s shoes. And Ryan empathized with Scotty. That was what made him so good for this particular job – he not only could keep his cool, and he was the most intelligent man that I had ever known, but he really cared about Scotty and what she was going through. Because he went through something similar in his youth with Rochelle.

“I know,” I said. “But it’s hard. I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know if we can find her before some real damage is done to her psyche. I don’t even know if we can find her at all. I mean, this is an excellent lead. But who’s to know that she’s here? Maybe that Mr. Lucas decided to take her to Italy or Greece after all. Just because he doesn’t head to Italy or Greece in January, typically, doesn’t mean that he didn’t decide to head there right now.”

“Of course. There’s always that risk. But people are creatures of habit. That’s what we have to go on right now. We have to believe that because Mr. Lucas usually goes to St. Croix during the winter months, but not at Christmas, that this is what he’s going to do now. It’s his pattern. Is it a slam dunk that he’s there right now? No, not necessarily. Is there a good chance? Yeah, there’s a better chance of him being there than anyplace else. So, I have a good feeling that we are on the right track here.”

“I do too, to be honest. But what if we’re wrong? What then? Do we head to Biella? I mean, that’s a province that has over 100,000 people. Still a needle in the haystack.”

Ryan sighed. “Yeah, this isn’t going to be easy. I never said that it would be. But we have to start somewhere.”

I nodded my head, and stretched out a little bit on the leather seat. The air hostess came around and I ordered a Blood Mary from her. Sometimes Bloody Marys helped me sleep. Sometimes not. I was afraid that nothing could help me sleep at that point, but I had to try. I had to have as clear of a head as possible for this mission.

Ryan looked at me and said “By the way. I didn’t get a chance to ask this of you. But did you first try to find out where he lived in New York City?”

I shook my head. “I thought about that. But my gut told me that there was no way he would go back to his apartment with her. I figured that if he was devious enough to virtually abduct her from the hospital, then he wouldn’t want to go to a place where he could just be found by anybody who would be looking. From what I understand, the guy is a social animal in New York, so he probably had visitors all the time. It would be difficult to keep Scotty secret. So, I didn’t even bother to find out where he lived in the city. I don’t know, it was just a strong feeling that I had that Mr. Lucas had taken her someplace away from the country.”

Ryan nodded. “Well, you should always listen to your gut. In this case, I hope to god that your gut is correct. It would be pretty bad if we go all the way out to St. Croix, only to find that he and Scotty are hiding in plain sight in New York City.”

“I know. But, my instincts are leading me in this case. And I have a feeling that we’re going in the right direction. I just hope that my instincts are spot-on in this case. Otherwise…” And then I visibly shuddered.

“I know, I know. Just please, try not to think about that. Try not to dwell. I mean, I’m not going to lie. This predator is probably not keeping Scotty in a crystal palace and feeding her peeled grapes. Predators are predators, and they’re going to do what they’re going to do. I’m only saying this, because I know that you’re thinking it yourself. But you have to stay focused on what we’re going to do to help her. That needs to be what your main thoughts are right now. But, easier said than done, I know.”

“You’re telling me. Anyhow, we need to at least try to get a little bit of sleep. It’s already after 3 in the morning.”

So, both of us stretched out with our blankets, and tried to get some shut-eye. After about twenty minutes, I heard Ryan breathing heavily in sleep.

I, however, was still wide awake.

Chapter 15
Scotty

After I had my talk with Mr. Lucas, I felt better about my situation. I knew that I didn't have to put up with it, and that I wasn't going to have to spend years being raped several times a night by him. I wasn't exactly ready to die, but I knew no way out. Nobody was going to come for me, and Mr. Lucas already told me that he was going to literally chain me to the bed, once my leg healed, to keep me from running.

Of course, I did wonder what would happen when Mr. Lucas had to go back to work. But, he explained that he could do his work from the island. He didn't necessarily have to meet clients face to face, as he Skyped them, and he was able to manage his hedge funds from any remote location.

"But you make a good point, Scotty. I can't stay on this island forever. I'll bring you back with me to New York, but, I'm sorry Princess, I'm going to have to chain you when we get back to the city. I can't have you running away from me the way that you did before."

Once he said that, I knew that my plan had to go through. I remember reading stories of women who were captives of depraved men, and they were captives for years and years. They bore children and had to put up with years of sexual and physical abuse. That would be my lot, because I really didn't think that anybody would come and save me.

I had regressed, completely, to the child that I was all those years ago. The helpless child who only wanted love and stability, and thought that she had found it with Elle and Mr. Lucas. The child who, at first, thought that Mr. Lucas was showing his affection and love by his molesting, because that was what he had said. He told me that he was only showing his love for me, and that it was a normal thing for daddies to do that to their daughters. I knew better. I was thirteen, after all, so I, of course, had been through the whole "good touch bad touch" instructions at my schools. But yet, I was almost brainwashed into thinking that Paul really was just showing me his love.

At any rate, I was helpless then. I was tiny and he overpowered me completely. And there was a part of me that craved love so much that I almost believed that what he was doing to me wasn't wrong. I don't really know when it was that I finally had had enough, which was when I ran away. I don't really remember what the turning point was.

But, at that time, I was free to leave. I wasn't injured, like I was now, and Mr. Lucas didn't chain me to the bed, like he was threatening to do now. I was older now, and definitely a bit wiser, but I was still very small, and my crippling injury made me more vulnerable than ever. So, in a way, I was even more helpless than when I was only 13.

I felt sad, though, thinking about my life. Thinking about how I thought that I had come through all my traumas and that I was actually going to make something of myself. About how accomplished I felt in getting into an Ivy League school for my Master's work, after going through City College for my Bachelor's degree. I thought that nothing could stop me. I felt strong and invincible and like I had the whole world by the tail.

I was full of hubris, like a Greek warrior, and, like in those ancient Greek tales, it was only a matter of time before I would get smacked down. Which was exactly what happened, of course. I was smacked down, hard.

The other sad thing was that I had genuinely loved life. I used to have long talks with Jack, where we contemplated what would happen after we died. I always told him that I hoped that I would be reincarnated, because I wanted to literally live forever. That was how I felt – that life was good and life was fun, because I had a basis for comparison. I had lived life in hell, so every day that I was living away from Mr. Lucas was a gift. It was another day that I lived on earth, as opposed to hell.

And then, when Nick entered the picture…I felt like I was on the very pinnacle. That nothing at all could be better. That nobody had a better life than me. Nobody possibly could have a better life, because I not only had the most wonderful man in the world in love with me, but I had everything else as well. A good career ahead of me, filled with work that I loved, and, hopefully, a family with Nick one day.

And now, all I could think of was how it was that I was going to die. I finally figured out that I would "accidentally" drown in Mr. Lucas' enormous bathtub. That would be easy to do, considering my injury. I only hoped that it would look convincingly enough like an accident, so that Mr. Lucas didn't get suspicious about the true nature of my death.

So, when Mr. Lucas came in to show me the papers that he had drawn up, in which he constructed a trust for my mother that would entitle her to $3 million dollars, and told me that I had to keep up my end of the bargain if I wanted the trust to be enacted, I said "sure. When are we going to do this?"

"It's already been arranged."

That night, however, he once again got into one of his darker moods that I had grown to know so well. He seemed to spiral into darkness more often than not, and his lighter side that he had been in for the past day or so was replaced by his sadistic and cruel side.

“So, Scotty, are you excited to become my bride?”

I didn’t say anything at all for a few minutes. So, he became agitated. “Answer me, you stupid little cunt. I asked you a question.”

“Yes,” I said, “I’m very excited to become your bride.”

“Liar. You’re a goddamned liar.” And then he smacked me, hard, against my face. “You don’t love me like I love you. You never have. You’re just a worthless little cunt.” He was pacing the floor, back and forth, back and forth. “I’ve given all this money to your mother, and you just don’t appreciate it. Well, I’ll make you appreciate it. I’ll make you fucking appreciate it.”

At that, he punched me, hard, in my upper right arm, and he kicked me in my bad leg. The pain was white-hot, intense, and shooting throughout my body. I cried out, and he calmed down again. “There, that’s what I wanted to hear. I love the sounds of your pain.”

Then he carried me into the bed and laid me down. He hummed softly. “Tomorrow, you will be my wife. You will be my possession. And life will be complete.”

He stripped off my clothes and his and entered me savagely. My leg was still throbbing from him kicking me, so I tried to concentrate on that pain instead of the pain of him thrusting himself hard into me, over and over again.

I finally just relaxed with the thought that the torment would all be over soon.

Chapter 16
Nick

We landed at the main airport in St. Croix, and disembarked. It had been the longest 36 or so hours of my life. Actually, I had lost count of the number of hours that I had spent in my desperate search for the woman that I loved more than anything in the world.

Ryan arranged for us to get a Rolls Royce to drive, and we got in. We had already talked about a tentative plan that we had to find Mr. Lucas, and it involved the two of us going to the country clubs and yacht clubs on Cane Bay and asking around. Since this was a playground for the rich, there were quite a few places where we could start.

We had already tried the obvious, of course. We googled Paul Lucas to see if there was anything on him that would indicate where he might be staying there on the island. That bore little fruit, however, as we suspected it wouldn't.

Ryan sighed. "You know, I never thought that I would be wishing that my old man was alive. But, this is one time that I do. Benjamin had a way to find anybody, anywhere in the world. I don't have the same connections."

We did, however, find that some of our Harvard buddies had homes on the island. We put in a phone call to all of them, but they had not yet called us back. But we couldn't wait around, of course. Time was precious.

So, we got a room at a pricey resort and changed our clothes. I was anxious, as I was the entire time that Scotty had been missing, and I wanted to get at it. Quickly. Ryan, of course, was attempting to slow me down and be the voice of reason.

"Now, come on, Nick, we can't just go at this like bulls in China shops. First things first. There's a cocktail party at the Carambola Golf and Country Club. That would be an excellent place to start mingling and asking around the upper crust here on the island. No doubt at least one person at that club tonight will know Paul and will know where he lives."

"But how are we going to get that information? We can't just say 'hey, do you know pervert Paul Lucas? Where does he live?'"

He raised one of his eyebrows. "Have you not learned anything about finesse? Look at how I played Elle. That's how you get people to talk. You find common ground with them, you show interest in them and what they're passionate about, and then you meander the conversation to the information that you are trying to

get from them. Works like a charm every time."

I nodded my head, relieved, once again, that I had a guy like Ryan on my team. All of my life, I was blunt. Sarcastic. To the point. I never learned how to schmooze anybody, mainly because I didn't care. I always got what I wanted, no matter what, so I never had to learn the fine art of seduction. Not literal seduction, but seducing people to the point where they will give you what you want.

Ryan was a master at that, so I was very grateful that he was there with me.

"Okay, now," Ryan said. "Here is how we approach this. Now, you know that Paul went to Yale. That means that you and I went to Yale as well. That will give us a way to pursue information about him. We heard that he has a house on the island, and we want to catch up with him. He was a Sigma Chi there at Yale, but we can't really say that we were fraternity brothers. There might be other Sigma Chis at the party who will know that we're frauds. So, we just know him from some of his classes."

"Of course. I was thinking about all of this myself. Paul was a psych major, which is something that you know something about, because that was what you were pursuing as a minor. I, of course, know nothing about psychology except for what I read in some of my electives. So, you would be the one who knows him well, because you guys had some psych courses together. But what are we going to do if they start talking about the instructors and all of that?"

"I'm on it. I need to do some research on who was there during the time that Paul was. I can fake my way through most situations. Don't forget, I've learned how to fake my way through much of my life. When you're a drug addict, pretending to be somebody else comes second nature. So, let me take the lead on this, too."

I took a deep breath.

I honestly had no idea what I would do without this guy.

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So, that night, we pulled up to the Carambola Golf and Country Club, which was a club that was designed by one of the Rockefellers and was the centerpiece of a luxurious resort area. This was a cocktail party, but the people who were at the party were dressed in their golf clothes. Ryan and I pulled up in our rented Rolls Royce. We were wearing golf shirts and long pants. I felt slightly silly, as I was never a golfer myself. Ryan had been known to play a few rounds, but it wasn't generally something that he got into either.

I felt that we had two strikes against us, walking in. One, we didn't really go to Yale. Two, we really weren't golfers. Thank god I had Ryan, who had practice being a chameleon. That was one thing that I never was. What you saw was what you got with me.

Ryan and I got some scotch and had a seat on a leather sofa. I was nervous, and so anxious about finding Scotty. She was so close, I could feel it.

People started to pour in. Men and women. Ryan's first instinct was to approach one of the women who seemed to be unattached, on the assumption that women would be more likely to want to talk to us and get to know us. For obvious reasons.

It wasn't long before at least a few of the women were turning around and eyeing us. They would look in our direction, and then hurriedly look away when we caught their eye. Then they would look again and smile and blush.

Taking a deep breath, Ryan approached one of the women. I hung back, hoping that I wouldn't have to engage in conversation with a stranger. I was in zero mood to be sociable. I had to get out of my head first.

So, when a beautiful dark-headed woman sat down next to me, I had to muster all the old Nick charm that I had left, in order to talk to her.

"Hello, my name is Trina," she said, extending an elegant hand to me. She was dressed in a short tennis skirt and shoes, which showed off her perfectly toned legs well. She was tanned and blue-eyed, and appeared to be around 25.

I took her hand and kissed it gently. "Nick," I said. "Guess you've been playing tennis, huh?"

"Sure. Do you play?"

"Of course." Then I smiled and took another sip of my scotch. Inwardly, I was cursing the entire situation. Here was a beautiful woman, and I had to force myself to flirt with her. I had zero desire to do so. I had almost forgotten how.

But, mainly, I felt awful flirting with a woman, knowing that my Scotty was somewhere on that island, suffering, right at that very moment.

She eyed me. "I haven't seen you around here. Are you new?"

"Yes. My buddy Ryan and I just got in today. What about you?"

"Oh, I've been coming here for years. My parents own a place by the shore here. Then, when I turned 21, they bought me my own place." She sipped her wine. "Where are you from?"

"New York. You?"

"LA."

"Oh? What do you do?"

“Well, I’m a photographer. Perhaps you’ve seen some of my work,” she said, as she reached into her purse for a business card.

I took it and read “Trina Blanchard. Photographer.” The card had a black and white picture on it of a beach setting. I assumed that the picture was taken by her.

I thought that this was a pretty good opening for me to find out where she went to school. “So, how long have you been a photographer?”

“For years. I majored in photography at Yale.”

God, have I been lucky so far. I felt like there was something unseen that was guiding me. Something wanted me to find Scotty. That was all there was to it.

“Yale. What a coincidence. That’s where I went.”

“Not such a coincidence. Almost everybody here went to Yale, Harvard, Brown or Columbia. So, you have a pretty good shot of talking to somebody who went to your school. And what about you? What do you do?”

“I’m an architect.”

“An architect. How interesting! What do you design?”

“Major commercial buildings, mostly, but I do some residential.” Then I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. I hoped that she didn’t recognize me from some of the publications that featured me. For that matter, I hoped the same about Ryan. Since his animal rights foundation, and sanctuary, was gaining steam, and he had been on the publicity circuit for it for several months, there was a decent chance that somebody in that room would know who he was.

And the jig would be up.

She nodded. “Well, it’s good to see a new face around here.” She sipped her wine and looked at me carefully. Then I saw her glance at my left hand. There not being a ring, nor a tan line, she smiled invitingly. “So, what do you do for fun?” she asked with a giggle and a flip of her hair. She bit her lip and raised one of her eyebrows while taking another sip of her drink.

“Tennis, golfing, sailing. I’ve actually been trying to find an old buddy of mine who stays here sometimes. Perhaps you know him?”

“Who would that be?”

“Paul Lucas.” I looked her straight in the eye, and tried not to hold my breath while I waited for her answer.

“Hmmm…name sounds familiar.” Then she shook her head. “But, no, I’m thinking of another Paul that I’ve met. His last name is Dreyser.”

“Maybe it’s the same guy. You know, maybe his last name changed for some reason. Going incognito or something.” I was grasping at straws, and I knew it.

“What does that guy look like?”

“Oh, around 60ish, balding. He’ll probably be here a little bit later.”

My heart sunk, but I didn’t show it. All I could think was that this woman, as beautiful as she was, had outlived her usefulness, and I would have to find somebody else to chat up.

Just then, Ryan came back. He sat on the chair that was adjacent to the sofa that I was on. With him was a willowy blonde woman with the most amazing green eyes that I had ever seen. She sipped her cocktail while eyeing me interestedly.

“This is Eve,” Ryan said. “She knows Paul.”

Chapter 17
Scotty

I had agreed to marry Mr. Lucas, and the event would be happening that evening. Him being exceedingly wealthy, he was able to amass quite a few people to the home to put up decorations for us. Of course, none of his acquaintances would be invited to this ceremony. There would be no way that he could possibly explain any of it.

I did consider the angle that the marriage possibly couldn't be legal, although I didn't necessarily know the laws of the island. After all, Mr. Lucas was still my legal guardian. He claimed that he never filed adoption papers for me, and I knew that he couldn't have adopted me without me being present for the proceedings. So, I was reasonably sure that he was not legally my father. The only reason why he was ever considered to be my "next of kin" was because he was the last legal guardian that I had before I ran away, and, since my mother's parental rights were severed, Mr. Lucas still had some kind of legal tie to me.

To tell the truth, I was still very hazy on all of that. I knew that my case had fallen through the cracks of the child protection agency, but it still surprised me that Mr. Lucas still had some kind of legal relationship with me.

At any rate, with Mr. Lucas still being considered my legal guardian, I didn't know how that would work, as far as us being married. But, then again, it didn't really matter. I was only doing this so that my mother would be taken care of, and, since the stipulation of the trust was that she complete inpatient treatment for six months or more, she might be able to get sober through my sacrifice. Aaron would be placed with an appropriate family while my mother was in treatment. The trust provided for that as well.

Mr. Lucas did bother to go to town to buy me a white dress and veil. The house was decorated with lilies and roses, and tea lights.

I looked towards the evening with dread and fear. But, I knew that what I was doing was right, under the circumstances. That was how very hopeless I felt at that point in time. At that point, my greatest wish was that I could be reincarnated, so that I could have a chance to start all over. Hopefully, in my next life, I would catch more of a break than I did in this one.

I got dressed with the help of Helen, the African maid that Mr. Lucas had employed. She was a stout woman who knew very little English, but she seemed very kind. She put makeup on me, and helped me into my dress. Then she

beamed with pride after helping me get dressed and ready for the ceremony. “Beautiful,” she said, with a clap of her hands. “Like a princess.”

I groaned inwardly. The word “princess” would never sound the same to me, if there was, by some miracle, a way that I could get out of this situation. But, still, I smiled back at her and thanked her politely for helping me.

“Oh, yes, yes. You beautiful girl. Mr. Lucas a very lucky man.”

I tried my hardest to smile back at her. She was so friendly and so helpful. I didn’t want her to feel bad. So, I patted her hand and gave her a hug from my chair. “Thank you,” I said.

And then, I sat down to write a letter to my mother and one to Jack. I hoped that my mother would be able to find somebody who could read my letter to her, because I really wanted her to know how I felt.

To my mother, I wrote:

Mommy,

I’m very sorry that things had to end this way for me. I wanted you to know that I never really blamed you for the life that you gave me. I know that you couldn’t really help yourself. You apparently had your own demons in life, although you never actually told me what they were. At any rate, I know that you were sick, throughout my life, and I hope that you can have the strength to finally get well. I saw glimpses of how you could be, during times that you were able stay sober. Those times were few and far between, but they were some of the happiest times of my life. At any rate, please don’t ever think that I hate you or that I am angry with you. I’ve come to terms, long ago, with your limitations, so I’ve long since made peace with them.

What happened with me was something that had to happen, in order for you to get the treatment that you so desperately need. You will be taken care of through a trust, as long as you stay sober. So, please, please, please complete the treatment that is the stipulation of the trust. Aaron needs you. You can be a beautiful person, if only you can find the strength to help yourself.

I wish you all the love and peace in the world.

Your loving daughter,

Scotty

Then, I sighed as I wrote out a letter to Jack.

Dear Jack,

You are no doubt wondering what happened to me. I need to clear it up, and tell you how much you meant to me. I broke my leg in New York City, and, somehow, Mr. Lucas was the one who showed up at the hospital. He managed to convince the hospital personnel that he, as my “legal guardian” was going to take me away to a private hospital. Of course, there was no private hospital. I was spirited to some island that is a 4 hour plane ride away from home, so I believe that I am somewhere in the Caribbean.

I don’t want to go into what has happened to me since I got here. But, suffice to say, things have picked up where they left off. Which has left me feeling hopeless and alone.

So, please stop wondering about me. By the time you get this, I will have passed away. I had to do it, because I saw no way out of my situation.

I’m writing you this letter to give you closure, but also to tell you how much you have always meant to me. You literally saved my life. If you didn’t find me in that car all those years ago, I don’t know what would have become of me. I certainly wouldn’t have been put on the path that I got on, as far as graduating from high school with honors and eventually getting into Columbia. So, I owe you a ton. And I love you like I would love a brother. You have been my family for the past ten years, and you’ve always been there for me, more than anybody ever has. We had such good times together, and I always imagined that we would have many more years of love and fun between us. So, I’m so sorry that things ended this way.

At any rate, I hope that you finally get that huge Broadway part that you always wanted, and that Wall Street type who will treat you like gold. Because you, of all people, deserve it.

All my love,

Scotty

I took a deep breath, as I thought about writing one more letter. To Nick.

And then I thought better of it. I didn’t think that I could write a letter to him, pouring out my feelings, without experiencing the extreme hurt that I felt when I saw him with the witch. I didn’t think that I could get through it without completely breaking down in tears.

I was still so angry with him. So, even though Nick was the one who I loved

more than anybody in this world, I couldn't bring myself to write him a letter.

He didn't deserve it.

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So, that evening, I was wheeled into the magnificent backyard of the beautiful beach house that held me captive. Helen was behind me, beaming with pride, as she wheeled me in. I had given Helen the letters I wrote earlier that day.

"Helen," I said, giving her the letters. They were properly addressed and stamped. "Please take these to the post office the next time you go."

She nodded her head in understanding. She didn't know a lot of English, but she knew the meaning of letters and mail, because one of her duties was to send correspondence from Mr. Lucas to people on the mainland and back home.

"And, please don't tell Mr. Lucas about these letters."

She frowned, but seemed to understand that request as well.

"Thank you, Helen," I said, patting her hand.

I was wheeled to the altar that was created. Mr. Lucas had managed to find a minister on short notice. Mr. Lucas was dressed in a formal tuxedo, his salt and pepper hair slicked back on his head.

My stomach turned to see him, and I felt like throwing up, right then and there. What made things even worse was his face. He looked so…satisfied. Like he had won.

You haven't won. You will soon find out that I would literally rather die than spend another day with you.

So, I smiled, too. It was a genuine smile, because I knew what my plan was going to be.

The minister began his recital. This was going to be a long one, because, for some odd reason, Mr. Lucas wanted the ceremony to be religious. Which meant that there was going to be a long speech about God and all kinds of other stuff that Mr. Lucas couldn't possibly know the first thing about.

All I could think was that there wasn't a God. If there was, then I wouldn't be put through such hell. I didn't do one thing to deserve any of this, so I concluded that there was no mercy, therefore there was no God.

I sighed as the minister was droning on and on about love and God, and God's love. I was blocking him out, thinking only about how I was going to soon be put out of my misery.

And then, suddenly, there was a commotion. The butler, Javier, was rushing into the backyard. "I'm so sorry, Mr. Lucas, so sorry."

“What?” he asked. “I’m in the middle of something here. How dare you interrupt?”

“So sorry,” Javier repeated. “But he forced his way in.”

“Who? Who forced his way in?”

I turned my head.

There, running towards me at top speed, was Nick.

Chapter 18

Nick

Ryan had brought over Eve, and I felt like kissing her. She was a beautiful woman, of course, but that wasn't why I wanted to kiss her.

She was literally going to be my way of saving Scotty.

But I tried to tamp down my excitement. "Eve, yes," I said, taking her hand and kissing it. "Ryan tells me that you know our good buddy Paul."

"Yes, of course. My ex-husband plays golf with him on Mondays." She emphasized the word "ex" when she said "ex-husband," and looked at Ryan meaningfully.

"Well, then good. I've lost touch with him, but I've heard that he has a place out here."

"He does. It's over on Wallah Street, by the beach. It's a gorgeous place, set on several acres of land. I've been there a few times myself."

My heart started thumping loudly. I looked at Ryan, and he had on his poker face, but I could see a glimmer of glee in his eyes. I looked down at my hands, which were visibly shaking.

"Oh," I said, as casually as I could. "What's the address? I need to pay him a visit while I'm here. He'd kill me if he knew that I was in town without seeing him at least once."

She gave me the address, and sat down on the other chair that was across from Ryan. "So," she said, looking me up and down. "I have to say that you two are the prettiest men I've seen around here in a long time." And then she smiled. "Oops, did I just say that?"

I nodded my head, not paying attention to a single word that she said. I glanced at Ryan, and he knew what I was thinking. *Time to move, and move NOW!*

"Thanks. You aren't so bad yourself," I said. "But, if you'll excuse me. I have something that I need to attend to."

She looked disappointed. "Already? You guys just got here. I was so excited to see two new hot men at this place, I could barely contain myself."

I smiled, and looked at Ryan. She looked at Ryan, too. "Well, hopefully you can stay and have a drink or three, Ryan."

"Eve, would love to, but I gotta move, too. But I'll catch you around."

"Pooh," said Eve. "Just when I thought that the party was finally getting good.

Oh, well. I guess I'll have to make do with talking to all those stuffy preppies around this place."

"Nice to meet you, Eve," I said. Then, I looked at Ryan again. Both of us stood up. Then we walked rapidly out of the party.

We got into the rented Rolls, and I let out my breath. I realized that I was sweating, and my heart was racing wildly. "Hurry, let's Google map this place and get over there ASAP."

But Ryan was already on it. "Okay," he said, and turned on the navigation. "Let's move."

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We drove up to the address that was given to us by Eve. Eve was right – this was a magnificent, modern beach house. The house was all angles and floor to ceiling windows and perfectly manicured lawns. The sun was beginning to set over the ocean. In all, this was a beautiful, tropical, tranquil scene.

And I was about to be over the moon with happiness and joy at seeing my beautiful Scotty. I couldn't believe that so many things had broken our way since we set out on this quest. I was only grateful that they were.

I didn't want to imagine the alternative.

We rang the doorbell.

A dark-skinned man in white came to the door. "May I help you?"

"Yes, sir," Ryan said. "We need to see Paul Lucas."

The man shook his head. "I'm very sorry, but Mr. Lucas is not available right now."

"What do you mean-"I began, but Ryan nudged me hard.

"I'm very sorry," Ryan said, "but do you know when Mr. Lucas will be available?"

"Maybe later on this tonight, but I doubt it. Today is his wedding day."

I felt confused. Was this all a big mistake? Was Scotty not there with him at all? If he was marrying somebody else, how could Scotty still be there with him?

"Wedding," Ryan said. "I'm very sorry, I didn't know that he was engaged to anybody."

At that, the man suddenly realized that he hadn't bothered to ask either of our names. "Well, it was a sudden thing. But I can give him the message that you two gentlemen have called. What names may I give him?"

Ryan and I glanced at each other. We had nothing to lose at that point.

"My name is Ryan Gallagher," Ryan said, "and this is Nick O'Hara."

“My name is Javier,” he said. And then he repeated both of our names. “Can I tell him what this is about?”

“It’s personal,” Ryan said. “But we also would love to give our regards to his lovely bride. What is her name?”

“It’s a young lady who has been staying here. I don’t know what her given name is, but I know that Mr. Lucas calls her Scotty.”

Chapter 19

Scotty! NO! I was screaming to myself. God, no, please, no, anything but this.

"I'm very sorry," I said to Javier. "But I have to get in there right now."

"You can't come in here."

Watch me. "Either you let me in, or I'm going to force my way in there, and you'll wish that you had let me in."

Ryan made no move to hold me back. In fact, he stood, shoulder to shoulder, with me. Both of us were 6'2" and in very good shape. Javier was about 5'6" and very slightly built.

I felt badly for Javier, but I knew that we had to do what we had to do.

I clenched both of my fists and gave him the most menacing look that I could. I glanced over at Ryan, and he was doing the same. *Good to see that Ryan's on the same page. As he always has been.*

Javier looked at the two of us, his dark eyes flashing from one to the other. He obviously saw that we meant business, because he turned around and ran into the home and out a sliding glass door, the two of us following him in hot pursuit.

We got to the end of a long path, and there was Scotty, sitting in a wheelchair in a white dress. A well-dressed man with salt and pepper hair was standing up next to her, and the minister was reading a sermon.

All of them stopped when we got there.

I immediately ran up to Scotty.

She looked at me, and then looked away. There were tears in her eyes, and she was shaking all over.

"Scotty, oh my god," I said. "Oh, my god. I'm so relieved."

The man, who, at first, was looking at me with shock, now had a look of pure anger on his face. "What is the meaning of this, coming in here and interrupting my wedding ceremony?" Then he looked at Javier. "Get the police over here, right now."

Javier nodded at the man, and ran back into the house.

Ryan was in hot pursuit of Javier, I guess because he was going to try to prevent Javier from calling the police.

I stood up, and looked that man in the eye. "Listen, I don't think that you want the police to come here, do you? I know all about you and what you were doing to this beautiful woman, when she was only 13 years old. And what's more, I have proof."

I was bluffing. I had no proof at all, of course. There was no way that I would have proof of anything that had happened between him and Scotty.

He looked at me, his eyes narrowing. He seemed to be sizing me up, wondering if I was telling the truth about the “proof” that I seemed to have about his raping Scotty.

Javier came back out into the yard, with Ryan hot on his heels. “Sir, I couldn’t call the police. This man here, Ryan, wouldn’t let me.”

Mr. Lucas still stared at me, and, not taking his eyes off of me, he said to Javier “just hold off on that for a little bit, okay, Javier?”

“As you wish,” Javier said.

Mr. Lucas looked at Scotty. “I’m very sorry, my little love bird, but this matter will have to be postponed for a later time. I need to talk to this man here.” Then he looked at me. “What did you say that your name is again?”

“Nick,” I said, my eyes trained on Scotty’s face. She looked hopeful, bewildered, ashamed, and just plain pissed, all at the same time.

I could understand most of the emotions that I read on her face. What I didn’t understand was the anger. I had no idea, no clue, on why she would be angry with me, yet, she clearly looked like she was.

“Nick,” Mr. Lucas said. “Well, Nick, why don’t you and I go inside and talk for a little bit?”

“Gladly,” I said. And then I looked at Scotty. “Are you ok? God, I was so worried, you wouldn’t believe it.”

“I’m fine,” she said, her voice cold and clipped. She refused to look me in the eye.

I shook my head. *Why was she acting that way?* I clearly had it in my head that she was going to be as happy to see me as I was to see her, yet she acted like she didn’t want to see me at all.

Chapter 20

Scotty

At first, I had a hard time believing my eyes. There was Nick. Nick! My heart started pounding wildly, and I felt like was dreaming.

Was this the miracle that I was praying for?

And then, just like that, I realized that it *really was* Nick.

And I remembered what he did to me by sleeping with that witch.

My mind was going 100 MPH while I stared at him. So many thoughts were conflicting in my head. The first thought was positive. Nick had come to save me, again, and I had no clue how he finally found me. After all, there wasn't just a way to *Google* Paul and find just where he was living here on this island. So, Nick must have gone out of his way to find where I was.

That means that he loves me.

But, crossing that thought was the memory that was seared in my brain. Of him and her. Naked. On the couch. And she looked so happy and satisfied. She had clearly won. She had fought a battle against me from the moment I set foot in that firm's corridors, and she had finally won. She got Nick, and she wanted me to be the first to know it.

That means that he doesn't love me. People in love don't do that with other women. Especially at work. Especially when you know that the person you love might see you.

Of course, I was also extremely happy. Because I knew that I would have a way out of my awful dilemma. Come what may, Nick was there, and he was going to take me back to where I belonged.

I didn't think that he and I could possibly have a romantic relationship, ever again, but, at the very least, I might have my life back.

It was hard to think about which of my thoughts and emotions took precedence at that point in time. They were jumbled up, so that I felt happy one second, and angry the next, and then back again. Unfortunately, the overarching thought, over everything else that was going through my brain, was anger at him.

After all, *he* was the sole reason why I got into the clutches of Mr. Lucas in the first place. It was seeing him and that witch together, naked, that caused me to run blindly into the street. I couldn't see very well because the tears were coating my eyes, and I couldn't think very well because I was just so devastated. If I had never ran into the street, then I wouldn't have landed in the hospital.

And, if I had never landed in the hospital, I never would have ended up there with Mr. Lucas.

A chain reaction that was started by Nick's betrayal. That was what had landed me back with Mr. Lucas, helpless, alone and vulnerable. That was what caused me to be back where I was when I was thirteen, being repeatedly raped and tortured. That was what caused the serious thoughts about suicide.

Nick. This entire thing was his fault.

So, even though there was a large part of me that was thrilled, beyond measure, to see him, there was a larger part of me that had white-hot hatred for him. And what he did.

Finally, the angry part of me was what won the battle of my emotions. And I turned my head, when he clearly wanted to hold me and love me like he used to. I couldn't stand to look at him. At his blue eyes and handsome face. I couldn't stand to smell the scent of his woodsy cologne that he usually wore. I couldn't stand the memories that were brought up upon seeing him again. They were just too painful for me to face.

Because they would never happen again. There was no way that I would ever, and I mean ever, be able to trust him after what he did. So, it was painful to see him. Painful, because I knew that he was somebody that I loved, but couldn't be with. Ever. And that knowledge ripped out my very soul while I sat there looking at him.

And then I saw Nick and Mr. Lucas leave the premises to go back into the house. I had no idea what was going to happen in there, but I hoped that Nick would prevail. Because, even if I could never be with him, I needed him right at that very moment. I needed him to get me out of this hell, so that I could go home and try to pursue a normal life.

It would be a life without his love, but it still would be infinitely superior to the life that I was living here in this house of horrors.

Ryan hung back, and didn't go into the house to talk to Mr. Lucas.

I smiled at him. Ryan was such a nice, kind person. So genuine. It was so difficult to find somebody like him – beautiful inside and out. I just knew that he was not the kind to get naked with a beautiful blonde woman while he professed his love to somebody else, and I found myself wishing that Nick could be more like him.

He knelt down next to me. "How are you doing?" he asked.

I said nothing, but just nodded my head.

And then I started to cry.

Ryan took my head, and put it on his shoulder. He put his strong hand in my hair. “Shhhh, I know. I know. I’ve been there, sweet Scotty. I know how it is to be forced against your will to do despicable things. But you’ll get through it. With Nick’s love, you will get through it.”

Then I stiffened up. I wiped the tears away from my face and said, “I have no doubt that I’ll get through it. I have before. All I need is to get back home, where I belong, and I will pick up the pieces of my shattered life. But Nick won’t be a part of it. Ever again.”

Ryan looked perplexed. “I’m sorry, Scotty. I don’t understand.”

I took a deep breath. “Nick betrayed me. He had sex with that Portia woman right in her office.”

Ryan looked taken aback, shocked even. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Portia. She called me to come to her office. I was distraught, anyhow, because I got a phone call to my office about my brother, Aaron. But I got to her office and…”

“And what?” Ryan now looked not only concerned, but angry. I saw the look in his eye, and it looked like he was thinking *I knew it. I knew it. I knew my stupid friend couldn’t keep it in his pants for two seconds.* “Go on, Scotty.”

“I got to her office and she was naked. And so was he. And they both were on the couch.” I crossed my arms in front of me. “So, no, Nick and I can never be together again. I didn’t trust him for the longest time, and it turned out that I never should have trusted him after all. My first instinct about him was right.”

Ryan just shook his head and muttered something under his breath. And then he looked towards the house. “Excuse me,” he said. And then he stood up.

But both of us could hear loud arguing coming from inside the house. Both Mr. Lucas and Nick were shouting at one another.

I could hear snippets of what they were saying.

“Listen, you fucking pervert, she’s coming with me. And that’s that.”

“How dare you call me a pervert? She loves me, she has always loved me. As you can see, she’s marrying me this evening. Why would she marry me if she didn’t love me?”

“You must have her brainwashed. Either that, or she’s scared to death of you. But there is no way that she would willingly marry you. That much I know.”

“And who are you to her?”

“I’m the man who she’s going to marry for real.”

I looked at Ryan when Nick said that last thing, and Ryan looked at me as well. It was as if he, himself, was trying to reconcile all of what was happening

in his mind. Here was Nick, telling Mr. Lucas that he was going to marry me. Yet, there was Nick, naked on the couch with Portia, obviously post-coital.

I knew that Ryan had known Nick for a long time, and obviously knew how Nick was. So, the story that I told Ryan about Nick and Portia probably rang true for him.

"I don't know what to say," he said to me. "I don't know what to believe. I mean, I'm not going to lie. I don't think that Nick has ever stayed faithful to anybody in his life. I love the guy like a brother, but to say that he's been a womanizer is severely understating things. But I thought that he had finally changed for you." He shook his head. "I guess that I'm just naïve myself. I always hoped that Nick would finally change his ways, and I thought that he did. But, I have to admit, what you just told me about him and Portia sounds just like him."

I nodded my head. "I'm not making that up. In fact, that was the reason why I ran into the street in the first place. So, Nick is the reason why I ended up here. If it weren't for him, I would be safe in New York right this very minute, studying contentedly and popping popcorn with Jack, my roommate."

Ryan finally sighed. "Oh, for the love of god. Nick. What am I going to do with him?"

I just looked at the house, and listened to the sounds of the fight, which was reaching a fever pitch again.

"Listen, you fucking bastard, either you let me take her from this house willingly, or I'm going to go to the police with all the proof that I have about everything that you did to her all those years ago. Not to mention all that you have been doing to her now."

Mr. Lucas was quiet after that one. Finally, he said "Okay, I'm calling your bluff. I don't think that you have an ounce of proof of anything. Now, I'm going to call the police and have you escorted off of this property. Scotty and I have a ceremony to complete. You'll be taken to jail, and, trust me, you don't want to be in jail on this island. Let's just say that they don't have the same due process laws here that they do in the States."

My heart sunk as I heard this part of the conversation. Mr. Lucas was probably right about that. This was virtually a Third-World country, after all, and I've always heard that the jail accommodations were not exactly as luxurious as the resorts in such a country. If Nick and Ryan ended up in jail, who knew when they could get out? I imagined that Mr. Lucas had some sway with the police force here, as well, and that they probably would be open to a bribe. Mr. Lucas

could probably pay the police to detain Nick and Ryan indefinitely.

But Nick was not to be deterred. “I’ll take my chances. But, just know this. I have my proof back at home, and, when I get out of that jail, the first thing that I’m going to do is release what I have to the media. And you will be ruined. Just think about that. All of your fine friends knowing that you are nothing but a twisted, sadistic, perverted child molester. How many social functions do you think you’ll be invited to after that gets out?”

Mr. Lucas was quiet again, but for a longer period of time. Then he finally said, in a quieter voice, so that Ryan and I could barely hear him “I don’t think you have proof. Now, I’m going to call the police.”

“Maybe I have proof. Maybe I don’t. At any rate, it doesn’t really matter. I’ll start a smear campaign against you. You don’t think that I know the same people that you do? Trust, I know all the same people, and they love a good piece of gossip. And, since when does the media or the social types needs proof of anything salacious like this? Think about it. Do you think Page Six verifies everything they get?”

“If you smear me like that, I’ll sue you.”

“Go right ahead. Get your multi-million dollar verdict against me. Trust, that will be no skin off of my nose, but you’ll still be ruined.”

Mr. Lucas was quiet for much longer this time.

I held my breath. I saw that Ryan was doing the same. We looked at each other worriedly. He put his hand on my shoulder, absent-mindedly, and squeezed the back of my neck.

Finally, Mr. Lucas said, in a voice that was almost imperceptible, from my vantage point, “Okay. You can take her home.”

I let out my breath, and there were tears that came to my eyes. This time, the tears were happy tears. Tears of relief and joy.

But the tears of joy were mixed with tears of sorrow, too. After all, even though Nick had come through for me again, it didn’t change the fact that he and I were completely over. Once we got back to New York, I didn’t want to have a thing to do with him. Which would mean that I would have to quit my internship. I also would have to make sure that I avoided taking any more classes from him.

I would have to cut my ties to him completely, and move on with my life. Which was a shame, because he obviously went through great lengths to save me from my living hell. That showed that he was a good guy. That wasn’t in question. Just because he continued with his man-whore ways didn’t mean that

he was a completely shitty person.

It did mean, however, that I couldn’t trust him.

And, without trust, there could be no relationship.

Chapter 21
Nick

Mr. Lucas couldn't tell, but I was sweating and terrified. I might have come off as cool as a cucumber with my bluff, but inside, I was a pool of Jell-O. I had no proof of anything. If he had thought about it for a few minutes, he probably would have realized this. After all, if there was some kind of proof that Scotty was being raped by him, Scotty herself would have given it to people so that they would have believed her all those years ago.

However, it was my threat about smearing him in all of his social circles that did it. That wasn't a bluff at all. Because I would have done it. I would have found each one of his friends and told them, in great detail, just what kind of person he was. Yeah, he would have sued me for slander, and probably would have won, but who cares? I could have afforded any verdict that was lodged against me, and whatever I would have to pay for allegedly slandering him would be a small, small price, considering what I would be getting in exchange.

Scotty's freedom.

That was priceless to me.

So, when Mr. Lucas told me that I could take her, my heart did somersaults with joy. I could feel the relief in every fiber of my being. Every nerve, every sinew, ever hair, felt the extreme relief and joy.

My Scotty was coming home, where she belonged!

I didn't thank him for allowing Scotty to leave. I hated this man, with the white-hot passion of 10,000 suns. He destroyed Scotty, for years. And, quite possibly, he might have destroyed her again. I didn't know the extent of the damage that he had done to her this time around.

What I did know was that I needed to help her make sure that she felt safe. She couldn't possibly feel safe, knowing that, at any time, Mr. Lucas could just come and get her and do god-knows-what to her. So, I had to get to the bottom of how it was that the hospital allowed her to leave with him, and make sure that it never, ever, happened again.

If I had to get a team of lawyers on that hospital to sue them into the ground, I would do it. And, the hospital had informed me that Mr. Lucas was Scotty's "legal guardian." I would have to make sure that Mr. Lucas would no longer have any legal ties to her.

This scenario could not repeat itself, and that was the bottom line.

After Mr. Lucas told me that I could take Scotty home, I immediately turned on my heel and walked back into the yard. Scotty was there with Ryan, and both of them looked pissed at me.

Undeterred, I kneeled down so that I was eye-level with Scotty, and stroked her hair. She immediately started bawling, and threw her hands around my neck. She cried for what seemed like an eternity, and I just stroked her hair and comforted her the entire time.

“Shhhh, Scotty. I’m here. You’re safe. I’m going to help you get through your trauma. I love you, Scotty. I love you more than anything in this world. I’m sorry that I couldn’t prevent that monster from abducting you, but that will never happen again. I’ll make sure of that. I love you, Scotty. I love you.”

I looked up at Ryan, and he still had a pissed look on his face. He shook his head and looked away.

I was perplexed, to say the very least, about why Ryan was acting as if I had murdered his dogs, but that would have to wait. I was only thinking of Scotty, and how I wanted to get her out of there right at the very second.

“Now, Scotty,” I said. “I’m going to pick you up and carry you to the car we have waiting. Then, we’re going to get on Ryan’s plane and get you off of this island at once. I’ll call Charlie and arrange to have a wheelchair waiting for you when we touch down at La Guardia. And then, I’m going to take you back to my loft. I’m going to take care of you, Scotty. And I’m going to make sure that nobody ever hurts you again.”

Scotty shook her head, but said nothing. She did look desperately at Ryan, while the tears continued to cascade down her cheeks.

Again, Ryan gave me a dirty look and shook his head.

I took a deep breath. Something was going on, and I didn’t like it. But, first things first. Scotty would have to get into Ryan’s car, and we would have to head home.

I gently picked Scotty up. She was so light. I was alarmed when I felt her frail body, because she seemed smaller than ever. I didn’t think that was possible. But it seemed as if she hadn’t eaten in several days.

Mr. Lucas must have been starving her, on top of everything else.

For her part, she clung to my neck, and continued to sob uncontrollably. I kept stroking her hair, and talking quietly to her, and Ryan opened up the gate to the circular driveway. I walked to my rented Rolls and carefully laid her down in the back seat, with her broken leg propped up on the seat. Then I sat in the back seat with her, and gently put her broken leg on my lap.

“Drive carefully, Ryan. We don’t have our seatbelts on.”

As we drove along to catch the plane at the airplane hangar, I stroked Scotty’s leg and looked into her eyes. She had a hurt, pained, haunted look in those beautiful green eyes, and I felt my heart shatter. She refused to look directly at me, however. Rather, she looked past me and out the window.

“Scotty,” I said. “I need to know what to do to help you. You’re going to get through this, with me by your side. I’m going to help you heal not just your leg, but your heart and your soul. But you’re going to have to tell me what I need to do.”

She shook her head, but said nothing. More tears flooded out of her eyes. After a while, she managed to croak out “I don’t need your help. I want you to leave me alone.”

Her words struck me like a dagger. I had no idea why she would say such a thing, but I figured that she was still in shock and was grieving what had happened to her. She had no idea what she was saying, and I doubted that she really meant it.

I decided just to dismiss her words, believing that they were said in the heat of the moment, and that, when we got back to New York, she would feel completely differently.

“Now, Scotty, I can’t do that. You know that. You’re a part of me now. If you hurt, I hurt. If you’re happy, I’m happy. It’s my job to help you when you need help, and protect you when you need protection. I’m just so sorry that I couldn’t protect you at the hospital, but I came too late. I found out, too late, what had happened to you. But I’m going to make damned sure that what happened to you will never happen again.”

Scotty just continued to shake her head. “I don’t want you to protect me. I don’t want you in my life anymore.” And then she started to sob even more. “I love you, Nick, but I can’t be with you anymore. I’m sorry.”

I took a deep breath. *Don’t panic, Nick. She’s just talking like that because she went through some terrible trauma. She probably feels that she can’t be close to you again, because of what she just went through. It will ease with time and patience. Have patience.*

Ryan was glancing back at us through the rear-view mirror. I made a face at him that said “what’s going on?” and he just looked away and shook his head again.

I was going to have to talk to Ryan, and soon. He obviously knew something that I didn’t, and I had to know exactly what that was.

We finally got to Ryan's plane, and I picked up Scotty and carried her on board. I strapped her into the leather lounger, and kneeled beside her. "Now, you try to get some sleep. You look exhausted. When we get back, you're going to come and stay with me, and I'm going to make sure that you get plenty of rest and food. You look like you are in dire need of both things." And she did. I was starting to notice that her cheeks were sunken, and there were enormous bags under her eyes. She was pale, so very pale, and paler than I had ever seen her. Also, her skin felt cold and clammy.

I also noticed that she had fresh bruises. I had a better chance to look at her, and she had contusions on her arms and legs. One of her arms looked like somebody had twisted it violently, and given her what I always referred to as an "Indian burn," although I was quite sure that there was a more politically correct term for it now.

I bit my lip, and tried to contain my anger. It apparently wasn't enough for that monster to sexually violate her. He also, apparently, felt the need to physically abuse her as well. I took a deep breath, and determined that I would go to the police about this. They would do a rape kit on her, and she had plenty of evidence that she had been beaten.

Perhaps Mr. Lucas, the sub-human pervert, would get his just desserts after all.

I smoothed her hair back a little bit, and I noticed that she was already asleep. I kissed her forehead. "That's it, Scotty. Get some sleep. You're going to need all the rest you can get."

And then I walked over to the section where Ryan was. He was sitting in his chair, sipping a glass of scotch. When he saw me coming toward him, he looked away, but motioned to the seat next to him.

I sat down. I didn't beat around the bush. "Ryan," I said, as I poured myself a drink, "do you mind telling me why you've been giving me all of those dirty looks? I have no idea what I did, to be perfectly honest with you."

Ryan just looked at me, and got up to check on Scotty. And then he came back. "Looks like she's asleep. So, I need to talk to you, but let's not raise our voices. We don't want to wake her."

I nodded. "Out with it."

Ryan took a deep breath. "You, Nick. I don't even know where to begin. How could you betray Scotty like that, when you knew how fragile she was? Why, why, why would you get involved with somebody like her if you were just going to continue to be a man-whore? You really need to stick with your classless

bimbos from now on, because you obviously can't keep it in your pants. You devastated that young girl in there."

I just looked at him, my mouth open. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You and Portia. Scotty said that she went to Portia's office and the two of you were naked on her couch."

I blinked my eyes, rapidly. I looked down at the ground. *What was he talking about? What.*…And then it dawned on me.

My hand flew up involuntarily to my mouth. "Oh, shit. Oh.my.god."

Ryan said nothing, but just continued to look at me disapprovingly.

I shook my head. My heart was racing, faster and faster. And then I looked at Ryan. "Ryan, number one. You've known me how long? Since both of us were five years old? We've gone through a lot together. Now, have you ever known me to keep something like that from you? Don't you think for one second that if that had actually happened that I would have told you about it up front?"

"Why would Scotty lie?"

"I'm quite sure that Scotty isn't lying. Which brings me to point number two. When I tell you that I'm a changed man and that I know longer feel the need to stray, you gotta believe me. Again, I have always been up front about my sexual conquests and my attitudes about the women that I have dated. I have never, ever, told you that I was ready to settle down. Until Scotty. Am I right?"

Ryan looked chastened. "Well, true. If there's one thing about you, you have always been unapologetic about your lifestyle. But, again, you haven't answered the original question. Scotty told me what she saw, and I don't think that she would lie. In fact, she said that was the reason why she was hit by the car in the first place. She was so upset by seeing you and Portia together that she ran into the street without looking."

I took another deep breath. I could feel my blood boiling at this whole situation. "Ryan," I began. "Do you remember the other day when I told you that I had the worst headache of my entire life?"

"Sure, but what does that have to do with what Scotty saw?"

"I'm getting to that. Now, do you remember me telling you that I thought that Portia had drugged me? That she was a *Fatal Attraction*, and that I had no idea why she would do that, but that I had a strong suspicion that she did?"

I looked at him, and Ryan had a look that said that he finally understood what I was getting at. "Oh. Oh, shit. You think-"

"Oh, yeah. I think. I think that I'm going to have to have a talk with Ms. Anson, and, after I get through with talking to her, I'm going to have to call an

emergency meeting with the partners in the office. She won't get away with this. And I'm going to find out, once and for all, who has more power in that office. Because I won't work another day there if she's there as well."

"Oh my god," he said. "What a psycho."

"Ya think?" I shook my head. "Poor Scotty. I could just imagine how devastated she was when she walked in to see Portia and me. What happened to her – the broken leg, the abduction by Mr. Lucas – is all directly attributable to Portia's original action in drugging me and making Scotty think that she and I had sex."

"Oh, crap," Ryan said. "I owe you an apology. I immediately assumed the worst."

"You're entitled. I haven't exactly lived the life of a celibate monk. But I am perplexed on why you think that I would suddenly start withholding key pieces of information from you, when you and I have never had any secrets between us."

"I did think that it was odd that you wouldn't tell me, but I figured that you didn't tell me because you thought that maybe I wouldn't help you find Scotty if I knew the truth. Which is nonsense, by the way. I would've helped you find Scotty, regardless, because you're my best friend and I knew that Scotty needed saving. Just as I did, all those years ago."

"Of course. I knew that you would have helped me, even if, god forbid, I would have done something like that. That's the kind of guy you are. And I'm lucky to have you as a friend. I mean that."

We finished our drinks and then I told Ryan that I would be sitting on the same couch as Scotty. She was sleeping, but I felt the need to be close to her anyhow. Ryan nodded his head in understanding.

So, for the rest of the flight, I sat there and just watched Scotty sleep.

And it was the happiest I had felt in days.

Chapter 22

We landed in La Guardia after our four hour flight. Scotty was still fast asleep on the couch, so I gently nudged her. When she still didn't wake up, I knew that she was extremely exhausted, so I just picked her up and put her into a wheelchair that I had called for while I was still on St. Croix.

Then I said my goodbyes to Ryan. We hugged each other and I said "Thanks, again, buddy. I don't think that I could've done it without you."

"I'm quite sure that you could've done it without me. You've always been a man of action. But I was still happy to help."

"Even so, you helped me more than you could know. I mean, I would've eventually found her, but it might have taken considerably longer if you weren't around. And who knows what would've happened." I shuddered to think about that. "So, I owe you."

"No. You saved my life more times than I can count. You owe me nothing."

"Be that as it may, I still appreciate you."

Then, with a smile, Ryan said. "Well, I better get going. My animal foundation and my family are waiting for me. But keep in touch, ok?"

"You know I will."

And, at that, Ryan got on his plane, and I went into the airport so that I could push Scotty to meet Charlie, who was going to come and pick us up.

Charlie came around, and I gently put Scotty into the seat and told him to take us home.

∞

Scotty didn't wake up for the next few hours. When we arrived back at my loft, I laid her down on my bed and sat next to the bed, just watching her. I was watching her both because I couldn't take my eyes off of her, that was how happy I was to have her safe and sound, and also because I was worried about her. I was worried about her bruises, her color, and the amount of weight that she had lost. I was probably going to have to take her to the hospital when she woke up, but I didn't want to take her until she was conscious. I thought that if she woke up in the hospital, it might be a little bit disorienting for her, and it also might scare her, because of what happened the last time she woke up in the hospital.

So, I just sat there, watching her chest heave up and down. Truth be told, I

also was thinking, while I watched her sleep. I was thinking about how I was going to confront Portia, and also how I was going to tell the partners that I was going to walk if she stayed at the firm. I was thinking about how it was that I was going to convince Scotty that what she saw was not accurate.

I also called Jack.

"Hello?" Jack said when I called him.

"Jack. Nick O'Hara."

"Oh, hello handsome. What can I do you for?"

"Uh, I don't know if you know this. But Scotty, uh, went missing for about 72 hours or so."

"Oh, shit. I didn't know that. I just figured that she was staying with you, like she usually does."

"She's staying with me now. But she probably will want to see you. You're like a brother to her, and she's pretty destroyed right now. I was wondering if you could come over and stay over here for a little while."

"Sure," he said. "Do you need me to bring an overnight bag?"

"Yeah. I mean, I hope that I'm not being presumptuous, but she's been through some considerable trauma. She needs a support team, and that would definitely include you. So, yeah, if you could stay over here for a couple of days, or even longer, that would be fantastic."

"Sure, whatever you need."

"I'll send Charlie around to pick you up."

"I'll be looking for him."

Jack arrived within the hour. His eyes got big when he went up to my bedroom and looked at tiny Scotty, laying on the bed and still snoring away. "Oh, my god," he said. "She looks terrible. What happened?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, you probably will have to let Scotty tell you the details, but all that I know is that she spent the past few days as a captive of Mr. Lucas in his home on St. Croix."

"What? I don't understand?"

I stood up and motioned him to come downstairs with me. "We need to talk somewhere else. Scotty's asleep, but she might still be able to hear us, even if it's her subconscious picking it up. I don't want her to stress too much."

"Of course," Jack said.

So, the two of us went downstairs and I made both of us drinks.

"So, start over," Jack said. "What happened to her?"

"Oh, where to begin," I said, but I started at the very beginning, when Scotty

apparently saw Portia and me, and filled him in on all the details that I knew.

"Oh, god," Jack said. "So, Mr. Lucas got ahold of her and that's why she has all those bruises and she looks like she hasn't eaten for days."

"Right. She looks like she hasn't eaten in days because she probably *hasn't* eaten for days. Anyhow, I need to make sure that that monster doesn't see the light of day anymore, outside of a prison cell. I also need to make sure that Scotty is safe at all times. I'm going to call my lawyer in the morning to ensure that Mr. Lucas, the subhuman cretin, is not considered to be legally related to Scotty anymore. And, as soon as Scotty is coherent, I'm taking her to the hospital and I'm going to try to make sure that she presses charges against the bastard."

Jack nodded. "All of that sounds like a pretty good plan to get her back on her feet. What can I do to help?"

"Be there for her. You're her best friend. She'll probably confide in you more than she would me. I'm sure that she's fearful and ashamed of what happened to her on that island, and she might have a difficult time opening up to me, as she always has. So, be her sounding board."

Jack looked at me, with a look of awe on his face.

I looked at him with a quizzical look.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'm just staring at you, because I didn't think that men like you existed in the world. You've so amazing to her."

"Not so amazing. I'm just looking out for her best interest."

"Well, good. It's good to know that somebody is."

Chapter 23

Scotty

I woke up on Nick's bed. I had no idea how I got there. The last thing I remember was that Nick was putting me on Ryan's private plane, and he was laying me down and telling me to sleep. And, I apparently was exhausted, so sleep was exactly what I did.

It was then that I realized that I hadn't really slept in several days. I was under too much stress at Mr. Lucas' house, so I wasn't sleeping like I should have been. So, I was physically exhausted.

I didn't know how tired I was, though, until I woke up at Nick's loft, and it was 7 O'clock in the evening. I think that we were on the plane the previous night at around 9 O'clock, or so, which meant that I was asleep for almost 24 hours.

I heard Nick downstairs talking to Jack. *Jack was here? When did that happen?* I tried to get my bearings and come to terms about everything that had happened to me in the past few days. It was all so surreal, so I thought that maybe I had dreamed it all. It also seemed to happen so fast.

But it all came flooding back to me. And, when I started remembering and processing what Mr. Lucas was doing to me, I started to panic. I felt so dirty and ashamed. So humiliated. It was then, when I was safe in Nick's bed, that I really started to examine what had happened to me on that island. Before, when I actually was with Mr. Lucas, I was only fixated on survival. I couldn't really think about what was happening to me, because, if I did, I would have lost my mind.

And then I started to think about how I was so desperate that I wanted to die.

I involuntarily cried out, and the two men downstairs came rushing to my bedside. "Scotty," Nick said. "Are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

I took a deep breath. "No, Nick, you can't." And then I looked at Jack. "Jack, please, take me home."

"Girl, no offense, but I'm not taking you nowhere. I'm staying here with you, at the loft. You know this is much better accommodations than the shithole we live in." Jack was smiling as he said all of this, so I knew that he was joking.

"Jack, it's not funny." And then I looked at Nick. "Would you excuse us? I have to talk to Jack alone."

Nick nodded, but he gave Jack a look. Jack looked at him and nodded back.

And, just like that, Nick left.

I took a deep breath. “Jack, we have to get out of here. I can’t be here.”

Jack took my hand. “Love, here’s the thing. Nick told me what you thought you saw in Portia’s office.”

“What I thought I saw? What I thought I saw? I did see it, Jack. I saw him and her and their nakedness. I did see it. So, I can’t be here, because I can’t be with him anymore. Please, let’s call a cab and get us out of here.”

“Calm down, love. Just calm down.”

“I can’t calm down. I won’t calm down until I’m out of this loft and into a cab and we’re going home.”

Still, Jack sat there and looked at me, his expression soft.

“What is your problem?” I asked him. “I just told you that Nick had sex with Portia. Why aren’t you threatening to kick his ass? In fact, why aren’t you kicking his ass right now? I mean, Nick’s a big guy and in amazing shape, but I’ve seen you in action in your bitch fights. You know how to fight dirty. You can take him.”

“Scotty, you have to calm down. Otherwise, I’m just going to have to leave the room until you do. Because I have something to tell you, but I know you, and I know that you won’t listen to a word I say unless you’re calm.”

I was trying to listen to what Jack was telling me, but I was completely riled. Jack wasn’t listening to me, just like nobody had ever listened to me. And I was ready to cut a bitch right at that moment.

“Listen, Jack. Either you get me out of here, or I’ll, I’ll…”

“You’ll what?” Jack asked, his eyebrow raised and his patented *bitch, please* look on his face. “Listen, girl, I don’t want to point out the obvious, but you’re like crippled right now. You can’t go anywhere. So, you might as well shut your pie hole and listen to me.”

I said nothing, but just crossed my arms in front of me. I was so angry I couldn’t see straight. So, I pointed at the skywalk that bordered the bedroom loft and said “OUT, NOW! And don’t come back until you’re ready to listen to me and do what I ask you to do!”

Jack just gave me a disgusted smirk and got up and walked out of the room. I heard him walking down the stairs, and I heard him say to Nick “I tried. She’s not ready to hear it yet. I’ll talk to her later.”

“Thanks, Jack. Do you think it’s okay if I go up there?”

“Better not. She needs to stew in her own juices.” That last part was said with a deliberately raised voice, because Jack obviously wanted me to hear it.

“I can hear you, Jack!” I yelled down. “I can hear every word you say! I might be crippled, but I’m not deaf!”

“I know that!” he yelled back. “Why do you think that I’m talking in such a loud voice?”

At that, I lay back down on the bed and put the covers over my head. I wanted to cry out in sheer frustration, but I didn’t want Nick to come running up here and giving me his sympathetic boyfriend act.

I wanted to put as much distance between myself and Nick as possible, so that I could begin the process of rebuilding my shattered life. As long as I was there as Nick’s loft, I couldn’t possibly begin the healing process. Why couldn’t Jack understand that? He was my surrogate big brother. He was supposed to be on my side. Yet, he, for some odd reason, decided to take the side of the man-whore downstairs.

Okay, so that man-whore just literally saved my life.

But, then again, if it weren’t for that man-whore, my life never would have been in danger in the first place.

Jack was right, though. I was stewing in my own juices. But, after the ordeal that I just went through, I had a reason to and a right to. I needed to find a way to overcome this new trauma, and it wasn’t going to be with Nick by my side.

It just wasn’t.

Chapter 24
Nick

Jack had just come back down the stairs after trying to talk to Scotty. I was heartbroken to hear that Scotty wasn't quite ready to hear the truth about Portia and me.

After Jack and Scotty were done with their yelling at each other back and forth, between Jack in the living room and Scotty in the loft bedroom, I motioned to Jack to come with me to the den. Scotty wouldn't be able to hear us there, and I needed to talk to him some more about what was going on.

"Have a seat, Jack," I said. "Let me offer you a drink."

"Ooh, a cocktail. To tell the truth, I haven't had a cocktail in several days. I've been too busy busting my hump trying to find more Broadway work."

"How are things going with Bob's production?"

"Oh, great. But, it's a chorus part. I'm ready for something more big-time. But it's a stepping stone, for sure. Thanks again for helping me get that part."

"Don't mention it."

Both of us sat down on the couch, and I put my drink on the coffee table, on top of a coaster.

"So, I guess that you and Scotty are like brother and sister, huh?" I said to Jack.

"Yeah. As you could hear, we fight like brother and sister. But we love like brother and sister, too, so it's all good. Sorry about her stubbornness. She can be like a mule sometimes."

"Well, she's hurt. Physically and mentally. Which reminds me. Charlie should be here at any moment, with the painkillers that Scotty's doctor prescribed for her. So, be watching for it."

"Of course," he said, sipping his mojito. "So, I guess I need to go back up there at some point, when she's calmed down, and try to talk to her again."

I nodded my head and took a deep breath. "Yeah. But, what if she doesn't believe the truth? You know her, probably better than anybody in the world. I wish that I knew her as well as you do, but, of course, she and I haven't been together that long. Do you think that she's going to believe what really happened in that office?"

"Girlfriend better believe it. God, I was so pissed at her when she gave you such a hard time before. I could tell that you're a good guy and that you're

genuinely in love with her. She just wouldn't believe me, though. So, I finally just gave up. The problem with Scotty is that sometimes she gets in her own way. Not that I can blame her. Poor girl had such a shitty life. But it's frustrating when you see somebody making so many mistakes, and you just can't do anything about it. You just want to shake them sometimes."

"I know what you mean. But, to be fair, Scotty had a reason not to trust me. I have been a bad, bad boy. To tell you the truth, I had all but given up on finding somebody to truly love until I met her. But she doesn't know that. She doesn't know the life that I have led and why I have always been hesitant to get emotionally involved with women."

Jack took a sip of his mojito. "This is delicious, by the way," he said. "You know, I'm curious, though. You've had issues with opening up before. Why now? Why Scotty? I mean, she's a special girl, that's for sure. But what made you decide to give your heart to her?"

"I've asked myself that very question. It's partly that she's so spectacular in so many ways. Strong yet vulnerable. Intelligent yet naïve. Guileless and sweet, but I can tell that she can be a badass if she wants to be. So many contradictions, and so wickedly talented and beautiful, which doesn't hurt."

"She is all of those things. But so are probably a lot of other women. So, why her?"

I sighed. "She's, she's, she's…the one. Sometimes it just comes down to that, you know?"

At that, Jack smiled broadly. "Yeah. The one. Man, I wish I found that myself."

"You will. When you're not looking. I certainly wasn't looking. Hell, I was dating a supermodel when I first noticed Scotty. Supermodels, for me, were safe to date, at least the ones that I met, because they're so into themselves. I'm quite sure that there are supermodels who aren't like that, but the ones who I was attracted to were. When you're dating a narcissist, there's zero chance of falling in love. Which was how I wanted it. Then, somehow, someway, Scotty snuck in, just when I least expected it. And I haven't been the same since."

"Scotty hasn't either. I mean, I know that she gave you a hard time, but, you now what? That girl is deeply in love with you. I mean, head over Pradas. So, don't worry, I'm gonna give her some time and then go up there and talk to her again and try to make her see the truth about what happened between you and the evil queen bitch at your firm. And, we got all the time in the world. With that broken leg, she can't go nowhere."

I smiled, in spite of myself. I felt a little bit uncomfortable that he was being so casual about Scotty's injury, but, then, it made me see how close their relationship was that they can kid each other about such things.

"So," Jack said. "Scotty's the little sister that I never had. You got any siblings yourself?"

I took a deep breath. "No. I mean, I have a best friend that I love like a brother. But, no."

"Oh, an only child, huh? Me, too, technically. But, like you, I feel that I have a sister, 'cause that's what Scotty is."

Another deep breath. "No, I'm not an only child. I, I, I had a sister. Her name was Michelle."

"Oh," Jack said, and looked down at his drink. "I'm very sorry. I didn't know."

"Yeah. She, uh, died of cancer when I was only 12." I swallowed hard, because I could feel a lump coming into my throat. "She was only 14 herself. She, uh, was really somebody special, too. I mean, we fought, like brother and sister do. But she always looked out for me."

Jack was sitting there, and I could see little tears start to form in his eyes. He just silently sipped his drink, and looked like he wanted me to continue.

I laughed a little. "God, I was so mad at her one time. I think I was about 7 years old, and she was 9, and I was kinda a scrawny kid. Anyhow, there was another boy, and I think that I was flirting with his little girlfriend. You know, like you do when you're seven. You pretend that you're getting married to them, and you give them a little Barbie doll or something. I knew that this little girl was 'going with' this other little boy, but I didn't care. She liked me too, and I gave her a little trinket that I got at a swap meet."

Jack looked like he was charmed with this story, because he was smiling a little.

"And that didn't go over too well. So funny. I guess that I was a little womanizer even then. Sorry, a girlalyzer. Ha, I just made a new word. Anyhow. That little boy and I arranged to fight it out at the playground after school hours. But Michelle, she found out what I was going to do, and damned if she didn't show up there too." Then I started really laughing. "So, Michelle, she lectured this little boy about how fighting was wrong, and that she was going to tell his parents and all of this. And I was about ready to punch Michelle instead of Tommy, the little boy." I shook my head. "I was so pissed. She obviously had no idea how boys settled things."

“So, what happened with you and the little girl?”

“Ah, I decided it wasn’t worth the effort, so I moved on to another little girl in class. Pamela, that was her name, hated me so much after that. She dumped Tommy, too.”

Both Jack and I started laughing at the story.

Then I got serious again. “That, uh, that was the story that I told at her funeral. Because she was protecting me just because she loved me and she didn’t want to see me get hurt.” I shook my head. “I closed myself off emotionally after that. You know, you’re a man. You learn pretty early on that crying is for girls, and emotions are for babies. But, you know what? That’s bullshit. I wanted to cry, I wanted to get emotional. I wanted to show how lonely and depressed I got after she died. But I couldn’t. So, I just found a way to push it all down.”

Jack touched my arm. “But you found a way to open up, huh?”

“Well, Ryan, my best friend, helped with that. He came to live with us not long after Michelle passed, and it was such a breath of fresh air. He brought my parents back to life, because they felt that they had another son. And he needed us so much. He was always the one who wore his emotions on his sleeve. I tried to be like him, really, but I went the other way. I just couldn’t open myself up like he always could.”

“But that’s changed, right?”

“Yeah. That’s changed. That changed with that beautiful woman upstairs. My heart is open now, and it feels amazing. I never thought that it would happen, but it did.”

Jack nodded his head. “Well, then, there’s no question. Scotty belongs with you, and you belong with her. She might be hard-headed, but she’s really just trying to protect herself too. God knows she’s earned to right to do so, poor girl. But, don’t worry. She’ll see the light and she’ll understand what happened with you and Portia, and then she’ll let you help her through what happened to her on that island.”

“Right. I mean, I don’t know exactly what did happen to her on that island, but I could just imagine. That man. He’s cruel. You look in his eyes, and you can just sense his depravity. I felt nauseated just being in the same vicinity as him. But as soon as Scotty is strong enough, I’m going to have to work on her to make sure that she goes to the police about this. For that matter, I need to take her to the hospital.”

“She won’t go. She hates hospitals. And, considering she was abducted from one, I doubt that you can get her to step foot in another one without her literally

kicking and screaming."

"I know. I have a feeling that you're right about that. But I wish that she would. I don't want to be indelicate, but there needs to be evidence of what happened to her so that we can nail that bastard to the wall. The longer we wait, the less likely that there's going to be any evidence to be found. But, I don't want to pressure her, either. She's been through enough already."

Jack looked thoughtful. "Well, I can certainly try to talk her about going to a hospital, so that they can do a rape kit on her. But, don't be surprised if she throws me out of the room again."

"Thanks, I would appreciate that immensely."

"Not a problem." Then he took another swig of his mojito and said "well, I'm going in. Wish me luck."

"Luck," I said with a smile.

After he left, I was left with my thoughts. I wanted so badly to go up there and hold her and comfort her. But, at the moment, she wanted zero to do with me.

I silently prayed that Jack could get through to her, so that I could truly help her recover from all that she went through on that island.

Chapter 25

Scotty

I wasn't wanting company. I wanted to be alone. Yet, I stopped hearing voices downstairs, and I wondered if I was alone. And, I suddenly wanted Nick to be right there next to me, by my side.

God, this was frustrating. I wanted, so badly, for that beautiful blue-eyed man to come and lay in the bed with me, and stroke my body and hold me and tell me that everything was going to be alright. I wanted to cry on his shoulder until my tears could come no more, and cling to him like I have never clung to anybody before. I wanted him to be my person, my rock, the person that I could always depend upon to love me and give me the strength and stability that I desperately needed at that time.

I mean, I was literally ready to kill myself on that island. I had a plan. I was going to go through with that plan. To say that I needed somebody there to help me overcome the immense pain that was brought on me by that evil Mr. Lucas was an understatement.

Yet, Nick couldn't be that one. No way. No way. How could I possibly allow somebody who betrayed me so fundamentally be that one?

So, I felt like screaming, I was so frustrated. I was so angry at what had happened to me. Angry at Mr. Lucas and furious at Nick. And, just like that, I stopped wallowing in my pity and started to feel like I was going to get out of that bed, by hook or by crook, and get down there and pummel Nick with my fists. Tell him how rageful I felt toward him, and how I never wanted to see him, ever again. That he better let me leave, or I would call the police. Or something.

Then, I calmed down, and started to think about the good times again. And I felt, once again, the love that I had for him. The protection that I felt coming from him. The feeling that I wanted to spend eternity with him.

I was so messed up at that point. I didn't know which emotion to trust. All that I knew was that I was feeling every emotion to the nth degree, and I was like an exposed nerve. Everything bothered me. The love I felt was just as strong as the anger and the hatred. So, I was confused, to say the least.

At some point, Jack came back upstairs. "Madam," he said, in his best maître d' voice. "Mr. O'Hara would like to know what you would like to eat. On the menu we are featuring roast duck with baby carrots and asparagus with Hollandaise sauce. A baked potato will round out the meal." And then he

shrugged. “Or, you can just have pizza,” he said in his normal voice. “Nick ordered one and it will be here in a half hour.”

In spite of myself, I smiled and then laughed. “Come here, you,” I said, motioning him to the bed.

He sashayed over to the bed, and crawled in next to me. “So, little Scotty,” he said, putting my head on his shoulder. “Are you ready to listen to me finally?”

“No,” I said. “There’s nothing that you can say that will change my mind about Nick. He has to not be in my life. Period.”

Jack sighed. “Well, then, how about another subject. This is going to be touchy, but, it needs to be said. You need to go to the hospital.”

“NO! And if you think for two seconds that I will ever, and I mean ever, step foot in another hospital again, you have another thing coming, sister.”

“Scotty. I love you. I want what’s best for you. But, come on now. You need to have certain tests done. Nick wants to nail Mr. Lucas, but the only way that we can is if you go to the hospital and get, you know, a rape kit done.” When he said the words “rape kit,” he said them so softly that I could barely hear them.

But that didn’t matter. I already knew what he was getting at. And I wanted nothing to do with it. Zero.

“Nope. Sorry. Not doing it. I’m not going to let that hospital put a metal thing in my you know what. I’ve been traumatized enough, thank you very much.”

“Well, then, hang on,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here,” I said sarcastically. “Where am I going to go?”

“True that,” he said with a wink.

He left, and I laid there, staring at the ceiling. I had a feeling that there would be something brewing, something that I didn’t like.

He came back, and my instinct was correct.

“Ok,” he said. “So, you don’t want to go to the hospital. That’s okay. Nick said that he knows a doctor who makes house calls and-“

“NO. No means no. I don’t want anybody near me with any kind of metal anything. Now, leave this room if you can’t comprehend what I want.”

“It’s for your own good,” he said.

“Jack, I swear to god, if that doctor comes near this bed, I will scream so loud that people in New Jersey can hear me. New Jersey, nothing. People in Florida will be able to hear me.”

“Scotty. Now listen to me,” Jack said in a tone of voice that I had never before heard from him. For once, his voice wasn’t playful. It was commanding and intense.

I got quiet. “Okay, Jack, I’m listening.”

He took a deep breath. “Good. Now. That man is a predator. He has haunted you your entire life, and now he has attempted to destroy you again.”

“Tell me something new, or I’ll stop listening.”

“Quiet,” he commanded. “Now, if you don’t allow this doctor to examine you, then you will have made the most selfish decision that you could possibly make.”

“Selfish? What do you mean?”

“Scotty. Do you think that you’re the only one that he has preyed upon? And do you think that there is not going to be another girl whose life will be ruined by him if he continues to walk free?”

I blinked back my tears and shook my head silently.

He continued. “There’s going to be another little girl who’s going to be scared to death of her own shadow and going through life the way that you have, just because that man will have done something to her that you could have prevented. You can prevent that from happening. But you have to let that doctor examine you. Only then can you finally have the evidence to hang that bastard.”

I inhaled my breath and held it. I could feel my hot tears running down my face. I bit my lip, hard. I couldn’t look at Jack for several minutes, so I just stared at the wall. I felt myself taking the pillowcase and twisting it tightly into a knot, over and over again.

Then, I finally exhaled my breath after what seemed like hours.

“Okay. Bring that doctor over.”

Chapter 26

Jack went down to tell Nick to bring the doctor, and I laid in the bed, scared to death. The last thing that I wanted was for somebody to touch me down there, let alone with a metal speculum. I could think of nothing more intrusive than what I was about to be subjected to.

In a half hour, the doctor arrived. A woman. Thank god.

“Hello,” she said. “My name is Dr. Woods.” She was dark-headed and pretty, and wore very little makeup. She took my hand. “I’m very sorry for what happened to you. You’re very brave for doing this,” she said.

“Okay. Just get this over with and be on your way. No offense.”

“None taken,” she said. And then she explained that she would be examining me, which would include taking pictures of my bruises, swabbing my mouth, taking a complete medical history and also that she would have to do a vaginal exam.

“I know,” I said. “I’ve watched *Law and Order SVU*.” I was trying to make a joke, and she did smile politely at the reference.

So, for the next hour or so, I felt like I was violated all over again. Pictures were taken. Samples were given. A metal speculum went into the area that was savagely torn apart by that evil man.

I couldn’t wait for it to be over.

Finally, it was.

“Thank you again,” Dr. Woods said. “You’re – “

“Very brave. I know,” I said.

She nodded and started to leave with her little box full of evidence.

“Uh, Dr. Woods?” I said, before she left.

“Yes?”

“On your way out, if you see Jack, could you ask him to come up here please?”

“I certainly will,” she said.

And Jack came up about five minutes after she left.

I spread my arms, and he came and sat on the bed.

And I cried on his shoulder for what seemed like hours.

And probably actually was hours.

∞

I finally quit crying. Jack was sitting there, stroking my hair and back silently, the entire time.

“Uh, Jack,” I finally said.

“Yes, love?”

“I’m finally ready to listen.”

“Thank god,” he said.

“What were you going to tell me?”

“Okay,” he began while repositioning himself on the bed. “Nick and Portia did not have sex. He would never, ever do something like that to you.”

“I know what I saw.”

“What you saw was a drugged man and a *Fatal Attraction* bitch who was doing everything but boil a bunny to get back at Nick for rejecting her. And that’s the truth.”

“Come again. Start over.”

“Okay. Here’s what Nick told me, and I believe him 150%. He went to Portia’s office to discuss you. He knew that Portia has had it in for you, and that she wasn’t going to stop harassing you until she got you to quit. So, Nick was trying to smooth her over so that she might get off the warpath against you.”

“Okay. Sounds reasonable so far. Go ahead.”

“Well, you and he were hot and heavy, as I’m sure you know. I mean, you were there, right?”

“Yes, of course,” I said. “Go on.”

“He knew that it was a matter of time before the firm knew about the two of you, and he was concerned on how Portia was going to take the news.” He sighed. “Why he thought that he could reason with a crazy person is beyond me, but that’s a straight boy for ya. Anyhoo….Nick went to Portia’s office to talk with her and try to flatter her and encourage her to find her own man to stalk, I mean date.”

“Okay. Continue.”

“They had some scotch. She distracted him briefly, and he took a sip and immediately felt like he was about to pass out. He actually did pass out, and he came to in his loft with a headache that he described as a 42 on a scale of 1 to 10. He had no knowledge of anything that had happened.”

I had a feeling that was both sinking and elated at the same time. Sinking because I felt like a fool to just assume that Portia wasn’t up to some dirty tricks. I should have been smarter than that. And sinking because I had given Nick such a hard time, and he didn’t deserve that at all. At all at all.

But my feeling was also elated. If this story checks out, Nick was in the clear. I loved him more than I ever thought that I could love anybody, and I could be with him without anger or mistrust. That was huge.

I took a deep breath. “So, how does he know exactly what happened?”

“Ryan told him on the plane about how pissed he was at Nick for Nick doing that to you. And Nick was like ‘huh? Whatyou talking about Willis?’” Jack shrugged. “And he put two and two together and came up with four, and he figured it all out. Smart guy, huh?”

“Smart guy.”

“So. Can lover boy please come up here and take my shift? I got pizza downstairs a-calling my name. There’s several slices with your name on it, too, by the way.”

“Of course,” I said. “Have him come up.”

“Thank god,” he said. “Well, toodles. You know I won’t be far.”

“I know.”

A few minutes later, Nick was in the bedroom. He was bearing several slices of pizza on a tray. Also on the tray was a perfect red rose in a vase, a glass of orange juice and a tiny teddy bear that said “be mine” on his tiny little t-shirt.

He smiled as he approached the bed. “I brought you something to eat,” he said. “God knows you need it more than ever now.”

He sat down on the bed, and picked up the pizza and brought it to my mouth. I took a bite. A bite of pure heaven. It was from my all-time favorite pizza place, because this place used the absolute best cheese and lots of it.

I loved him right at that moment, more, perhaps, then I had ever loved him. Not just because he got me pizza from my all-time favorite place, although that certainly was a factor, but also because he was just…Nick. He hadn’t changed on me after all. I thought that he had changed his mind about me and about us, but he hadn’t really, and I loved him with all my heart.

He put his arm around me, and bit into his own piece of pizza. “How is it?” he asked.

“Heavenly. This is the first bit of food that I have had since, well, since I left New York in the first place.”

His eyes darkened. “Why is that? Was that monster starving you?”

“Well, no. I mean, he brought me things to eat, but I simply wasn’t hungry. I felt nauseated just being near him, so I refused to eat. To tell you the truth, I was a little bit afraid to eat.”

“Afraid to eat. What do you mean?”

“Well, in my condition, I can’t get to the bathroom very well, of course. I depended upon Mr. Lucas to get me in and out of the bathroom. He deliberately kept my wheelchair at a place where I couldn’t reach it, and he didn’t give me crutches. So, I was helpless in that way. I felt that if I ate that I would throw up, because I was just so stressed and anxious being there. And I felt that if I had to throw up in the bed that he would severely punish me. That was why I was afraid to eat.”

Nick took a deep breath. “I’m very glad to give you food, Scotty. Sorry it’s only pizza. I’m going to attempt to cook again this evening, but I have to send Jack to the store for some things.”

“No, that’s okay. You don’t have to go all out for me.”

“Of course I do. And making sure that you’re well fed is not exactly going all out. It’s just giving you a basic necessity.”

“Well, I guess what I’m saying is, I appreciate you cooking for me. I really do. But I’d like to help. I’m not an invalid just yet.”

“No, no, I wasn’t thinking that. I just feel the need to take care of you, that’s all.”

I looked into his eyes. “I love that you want to take care of me. That means the world to me.” Then I took an enormous breath. “But I feel that I owe you such a major apology.”

Nick bowed his head slightly and looked at me with those blue, blue eyes of his. “Apology for what?”

“Well, you know what it is that I saw in Portia’s office.”

“Yes, I know.”

“My apology is that I didn’t think things through. I automatically assumed that you were in there having sex with her, and I never should have thought that. I mean, after what we have gone through, just trying to get together, and after all of your reassurances to me that I’m special, I should have immediately thought that Portia was up to no good. Not that you were.”

Nick put his hand in my hair, and looked me right in the eye. “Scotty. I understand why you would think that about me. You haven’t known me long enough to know when I’m dead serious about something. And you don’t know me well enough to know that when I say that I’m not going to cheat, it means just that. I don’t try to snow women and tell them that they’re the only one, when they’re not. I never have been that guy. But I’m telling you, right here and now, that I will never, ever cheat on you. You’re the only one. I don’t say that to anybody, but I’m saying that to you.”

I nodded my head. “I believe you.”

“Thank god,” he said with a smile. “I knew you would come around, sooner or later.”

I smiled back. “Yeah. And, as you can see, I can’t very well run away from you even if I didn’t come around.”

At first he didn’t smile, because he wasn’t quite sure if he should. But I smiled big to show that the topic of my broken leg was something that I could joke about, so he chuckled a little, and then laughed with me. “Truer words were never spoken.”

And then I got more serious. “Nick, uh, I’ve been through a lot these past few days. But I feel that I can and will survive what happened to me with Mr. Lucas on that island. I mean, I lived for two years with that happening to me every night. I’ve gone through my rage and grief about it already. I’m ready to move on and move past that.”

“Okay. How can I help you do that?”

“Well, I’ve had some time to think. That doctor who came over here did a lot of very intrusive things. Asked some very difficult questions. Violated me a second time, almost. I mean, I know that it was something that had to be done, but it didn’t make any of it any easier.”

Nick nodded his head, and gently put my head on his shoulder while he stroked my hair. “Go on, my love.”

“What I’m getting at is that I went through that whole examination, and the humiliation of doing that, so I don’t want that to go for naught. I want to nail Mr. Lucas to the wall.”

Nick’s face lit up. “Oh, thank god. I mean, I know that has to be done, but I was afraid that I was going to have to talk you into it. Jack seemed to think that you probably would be very reticent to do something like that.”

“I was, at first. At first. I mean, when I was a little girl, and I was in the clutches of that pervert in the first place, I was afraid for the longest time. He threatened me, a lot. He told me that he would kill my mother if I told anybody. I believed him. Which is why I went on letting it happen, instead of telling people earlier.”

Nick looked shocked and stunned. “What made you finally decide to tell people?”

“I thought about things logically. I figured that Mr. Lucas was really a coward, which was why he was raping me in the first place – I was small and vulnerable, so him being with me showed how cowardly he was. You know, if he

were not a coward, he would have chosen somebody who wasn't such an easy target. I also knew that his social standing meant more to him than anything else in the world. I figured that he would never do something like kill somebody else, if for no other reason than the fact that he would be a social pariah for doing something like that."

Nick smiled a little bit. "You can't fault that logic, really."

"So, I told people and they all told me that I was nuts. To a person. And I went through so much mental torment because of what he did, and because I was so angry that nobody would believe me. And now, well, I have a chance to rectify all of that. By turning him in. Making him do the perp walk." I smiled. "Wouldn't that be great if they arrested his ass at his office? I should alert the media if I found out when the arrest will be. That would be such just desserts for him."

"It certainly would be," Nick said. "But we have to wait until he comes back to New York. I'm been in touch with my father, who's a prominent attorney himself, and he pretty much told me that extradition from St. Croix might be tricky. Not impossible, but tricky. So, I've been making phone calls to his work, to find out when Mr. Lucas is expected in."

My ears perked up. "And? What did you find out?"

"He's not expected back for the rest of this week. But he has some clients coming in to meet with him on Monday, so…"

"Monday it is," I said.

"Monday it is," Nick said.

I rubbed my hands together with glee. "Oh, I can't wait. I can't wait to see that bastard's face on the evening news, as he's being led away from his building in handcuffs."

And then I put my hand on his leg and stroked it. "Thank, you Nick. Thank you for coming to get me. You saved my life. Literally. I, I, I don't know what I would do without you. Honestly."

Nick got a little closer to me. He stroked my cheek and looked at me longingly. "Of course, I came for you. How could I not? I would have done anything to ensure that you were safe. I just wish that I could have found you sooner."

I blinked a little and put my hand on his upper arm. "You found me soon enough. God, to think, though, what would have happened if you were there even a few minutes later." I shuddered. "I would have been married to that, that, that, thing. That evil incarnate."

Nick looked at me quizzically. “About that. I don’t quite understand why that was about to happen. Why would you have agreed to that?”

I felt ashamed, so I lowered my head. I took a deep breath to stop the tears from coming, but I felt the salt from them anyhow on my tongue. I couldn’t look at him right at that moment.

“Scotty,” Nick said. “You can tell me. You can talk to me about anything. Just tell me what you were thinking.”

“You’re going to be angry.”

“Why? Whatever reason you had for doing that, I’m quite sure that it made sense to you at the time. Was he threatening you? Did he have you brainwashed? Please, help me to understand.”

I took a deep breath. I looked into his eyes, and I couldn’t tell him. I couldn’t tell him that I had a plan to commit suicide and make it look like an accident. I couldn’t tell him that Mr. Lucas had agreed to take care of my mother in return for my marrying him. I couldn’t tell him any of this. I was too ashamed. Too ashamed to admit to him how badly I wanted to die. How hopeless I felt. I didn’t want Nick to think that I was that weak, and that I would have given up so quickly.

I was ready to give up quickly, though. I was. I guess because I felt that I didn’t have a way out of that situation. And the memories of going through years and years with Mr. Lucas raping me…I felt that was going to once again be my lot. Which was why I wanted to nip it in the bud.

But could Nick understand that? Could he? Or would he just hate me for the fact that I came within one day of committing suicide? That, if Nick would have gotten to that island just 24 hours later, I would have already went through with my plan?

I thought that he might understand. But I really didn’t want to admit this to him. It would be admitting such frailty to him. And, somehow, he might interpret it to mean that he didn’t mean anything to me. Because that was what I always thought about people who committed suicide – that the people in their lives didn’t mean anything to them. Suicide was just such a selfish act, with no regard for the survivors.

I never wanted him to think or believe that I felt that way about him – that I would do something like that without regards to him or his feelings. I wanted him to always know how important he was to me.

So, I made a decision. To lie about why I was going to marry Mr. Lucas. “Yes, Nick, he threatened me. He told me that if I didn’t marry him, that he

would continue to rape me. But if I married him, he said that he would leave me alone. He promised me this."

"And you believed him." Nick was incredulous. This was said as a statement, but it was really a question. An *are you fucking crazy?* question.

"Well, Nick, I was desperate enough to believe anything at that time. I'm so sorry. I don't want you to hate me for that. I was just trying to survive."

Nick gave me a look that showed me that, far from hating me, he was totally in love with me. I knew that look anywhere. That look always made me melt. "Scotty. Why would you ever think that I would hate you for anything? If you only knew how nuts I am about you…"

At that, I put my hand on his leg again. "Nick, uh. I've been through a lot of trauma lately. But that doesn't mean that I don't want you to make love to me. In fact, I think that I need that. I think that I need that to wash away the dirtiness and the shame of what happened to me at Mr. Lucas' home. I need something to erase that."

Nick looked like he wasn't quite sure if making love was the right thing at that time. "Oh, Scotty, I would love to make love to you. I have never wanted anything so much in my entire life. But, after you have gone through…"

I put my finger on his lip to silence him. And then I kissed him. At first, he was tentative, but then I felt his soft lips slowly engulfing mine. I felt the stress and depression that came from being held captive at Mr. Lucas' home melt away with every passing moment. He was such an amazing kisser - so full of passion, yet gentle and tender.

He pulled away slightly. "Um, let me put extend the glass barrier between the bedroom and the downstairs. Don't forget, we have company."

At that, he flipped a button, and a glass wall came down off of the ceiling and securely fastened itself on the floor. He flipped another button, and a wall of curtains engulfed the barrier. "There," he said. "Now we can have a little bit of privacy."

Then he got back on the bed. He kissed my neck a little, and put his hand on my belly. "I'm so happy that you're here, Scotty. I couldn't rest until I knew that you were safe and sound. There aren't words to express how anxious I was when you were missing."

"I know, Nick," I said. I put my hand on his thigh, and then onto his crotch. I could feel his enormous hard-on through his loose trousers. "I'm sorry to have put you through all of that."

"Don't be ridiculous. You couldn't help what happened to you."

I felt my breathing coming faster and faster. I unzipped his pants, and put my hand on his raging manhood. I stroked it up and down, up and down, in his boxer-briefs. He groaned a little.

“Scotty,” he said. “This is going to be a little bit challenging right now because of your injury.”

“I know,” I said. “So, be gentle.”

I maneuvered myself so that I was on my side. Since my leg was immobilized, this was difficult to do, but not impossible. I was wearing a loose fitting t-shirt dress, so I lifted it off over my head and laid back down.

Nick was behind me, stroking my back. He kissed the back of my neck, and his hands reached around me from behind. He was still fully clothed, but I could still feel his massive hard-on that was pitching a tent through his pants. He cupped my breasts, and I could feel his hands making their way through my hair.

His scent was something that I was craving. It was something that I thought about all of the time when I was lying in bed at Mr. Lucas’ house. It was not just his scent, but everything about him. The way that his hands were so gentle as they stroked my body. The way that he would whisper in my ear, in his throaty voice full of passion, what he wanted to do to me. It was the words that he would say in that throaty voice. It was the way that his skin tasted on my mouth. Everything about him, the very essence of what made him Nick, was what I missed.

Most of all, I missed the way that he made me feel. That was why it was so devastating to me being away from him. Why it was so very devastating and hurtful to see him and that horrible Portia together. If there was one thing that emanated from him, right from the very beginning, really, was that he was in love with me. That I was somebody special. To think that I wasn’t special anymore was something that I really couldn’t live with.

It dawned on me that perhaps that was the main reason why I wanted to kill myself – seeing Nick and Portia together, and realizing that we would be through. I thought that the reason why I wanted to kill myself was that I felt hopeless in the situation with Mr. Lucas, and that was certainly a major part of it. The psychic pain that was inflicted upon me by that horrible man was immense, for sure.

But, at the same time, seeing Nick and Portia together…that, too, made me want to check out. I hated to admit that, even to myself, because it made me feel so weak and vulnerable. I mean, there was always a good chance that Nick and I might not work out at all. Something might happen and we might end up

breaking up. Would that mean that I would automatically want to do myself in? I didn't want to even think about that. I was better than that. My life was such that it didn't revolve around a man, and that was how it really should be. Nick should be a nice bonus, not my *raison d'etre*. Yet, if I wanted to kill myself mainly because Nick betrayed me…that was a scary thought, indeed.

Now, Nick was behind me, and was leaning into me. His manhood was out of his pants, and he was right at my opening. I could feel the wetness between my legs. The wetness that was completely his. *I* was completely his. 150% his, as Jack would say.

My breathing was coming faster and faster. But my thoughts were not completely positive right at that moment. Nick had pierced all of my walls, and, in the process, he had brought them completely down. Those walls protected me my entire life. My entire life. The walls were what helped me survive my mother, Mr. Lucas, and the stay in the car. They were what helped me to persevere through every odd and get into Columbia for my master's. And now, I was so vulnerable that I was in danger of killing myself just because of a betrayal. That wasn't like me.

Nick was whispering in my ear. "You're a part of me, sweet Scotty. I would do anything for you. I would do anything to keep you safe. I would go to the ends of the earth if that was what it takes to protect you."

Those words made me so happy and so worried at the same time. What if he wasn't around to save me next time? What then? What if I become complacent and weak, and I can't save myself? It was bad enough feeling helpless on the island with Mr. Lucas. At least there was a reason for my helplessness then – I had a broken leg. But what would happen the next time something threatened me? I had to rely on myself. I couldn't just let Nick do all the heavy lifting, while I just waited around like a damsel in the tower.

Yet, I was also indescribably happy about hearing this from him. Because it showed just how much he loved me. There was no better way for a man to show his love than protecting the woman he loves, when she needed it. And that was what Nick was doing for me.

I was so lost in my own thoughts that it was difficult to be in the moment. It was difficult to concentrate on the magical things that Nick was doing to my body. The fear that held me back early on in our relationship was, somehow, rearing its ugly head again. I had to tamp it down, because I so wanted Nick to make love to me. It would make me feel that life had gone back to normal again. That was so what I needed. Normalcy. I had to not think about what just

happened to me. What was going to be in the future, as I would have to be strong enough to take Mr. Lucas down, once and for all. Strong enough to go to work and see Portia's evil face every day. Nick would be by my side, but he couldn't fight my battles for me. I had to do that.

His strong hands left my breasts, and started stroking my waist. His fingers made their way down to my special place, the place that was reserved especially for him. He was still the only person, in my mind, who was entitled to that part of me. He would be the only person, ever, who would have that part of me. No matter who took it from me against my will, Nick would be the only one who would truly have it. Just him.

I finally got out of my head and concentrated on what he was doing to me. On how he was making me feel. He was such an attentive lover. Such a giving person in bed.

I could still feel his massive hard-on pressed against me, just outside my opening. I nodded my head slowly. I wanted him to enter me so badly.

But he didn't right away. He put a finger inside of me, with his other fingers gently massaging my clit. I moaned and reached behind me to stroke his huge shaft. I reached down to my own throbbing opening to get some wetness on my hand, so that I could stroke him more smoothly.

I could feel his manhood pulsating in my hand. His hands were moving from my clit and opening, and was on my butt and exploring inside that part of my body. His fingers were wet from being inside of me, so he was able to easily slip his fingers into the other area. One of his fingers was swirling around inside of me, and his other hand was gently stroking my breasts and circling around my nipples.

I was getting impatient. I wanted him inside of me so badly it hurt. I could feel my clit throbbing, and the blood was rushing to that area. Sometimes Nick made me feel that I could literally pass out, and this was one of those times. My heavy breathing, combined with the touch that made me feel that I was not of this world, combined to make me feel that I was floating in mi-air. I felt soft, like I had no bones and that I was completely flexible.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, he finally put the tip of his engorged manhood just inside of me. I felt my vaginal area expanding in order to accommodate his enormous girth. I groaned as I felt him enter me even further. As he thrust all the way in, I felt the familiar feeling of an exploding orgasm that shook my entire body to its core.

"Don't stop, please don't stop," I said, as he thrust in and out, slowly and

rhythmically. “That feels so amazing.” And it did. With every thrust, every kiss, every caress, Mr. Lucas was fading farther and farther into my psyche. It was as if those three days that I suffered at his hands didn’t even happen. Nothing bad had ever happened to me. Right at that moment, the only thing that I could think about was how awesome it felt to have Nick’s warm skin next to me. To have Nick inside of me.

As orgasm after orgasm cascaded out of my body, I felt like I could touch heaven. Just a slice of it, anyhow. Such a contrast to being in hell, which was where I had just come from.

Then, to my surprise, I felt myself crying. I wasn’t sure why. I think that it was the emotion of the moment, combined with the horrible memories that were brewing just below the surface. It felt like I was a raw nerve that was touched in many different ways, both positive and negative, and it was impossible to tell which of those emotions was paramount.

Nick immediately stopped what he was doing. He gently got on the other side of me, so that he was facing me. He brushed my hair out of my eyes and kissed my forehead gently. “What’s wrong?” he asked, a look of concern on his beautiful face. “Talk to me, Scotty. What’s going through your mind right now?”

I sighed. “I don’t know,” I said, as I took deep breaths in and out. I tried very hard to stem my tears, but it was no use. They cascaded down my face faster than I could possibly control them. “I don’t know,” I repeated, shaking my head. And I really didn’t know. I didn’t know where those tears came from. I didn’t even know if they were happy tears or sad ones. They were probably a mixture of both, just as my emotions in these past few days were always a mixture of profound happiness and even more profound sadness.

Nick threw both of his arms around me, and put his hand in my hair. “That’s okay, Scotty. Just feel what you need to feel. Don’t judge it. Just feel it. I’m right here. I’ll always be right here. I love you, Scotty. I love you.”

Now I was really sobbing hard. I couldn’t stop it. It got to the point where I was feeling like I couldn’t breathe. Like I was asthmatic and had my airways completely constricted. That made me start to feel panicky, as I tried, and failed, to take a breath.

Nick’s eyes got huge, and he shot up out of the bed and came back in a flash with an inhaler in his hand. “Here,” he said. “Put your mouth on this and suck in hard.” I did, as Nick pushed the top of the inhaler. As he did, I felt my lungs fill with air, and this was such a profound relief that I felt my body go limp. I was still sobbing, to the point that I didn’t think that I would ever stop, but at least I

was able to take breaths.

Nick just sat there, not saying a word. He, however, was continually stroking my hair and back comfortingly. There were no words that could be said at that point. Nothing that was said would have made any difference. I simply had to feel my emotions, and there was just no getting around it. It made me scared to know the depths of darkness and despair was lurking just below the surface. Somehow, making love with Nick had accessed these dark feelings. I guessed that he let the dam loose just by bringing down my shield that was protecting me. His lovemaking is what penetrated this armour, and there was no turning back.

From time to time I had to get some more puffs from the inhaler. Other than that, however, I pretty much sobbed non-stop for the rest of the night. Poor Nick didn’t really know what to do, so he just silently let me feel my emotions for the rest of the night.

Chapter 27

The next day, after I spent most of the night bawling in Nick's arms, I felt that it was time to take action. I hoped that I had gotten my emotions out long enough that I could have the strength to face at least some of the things that I needed to face.

Thank god Nick was there. And thank god for Jack, too. Bless his heart, but he was staying with us in Nick's guest bedroom on the first floor. He even said that he had taken some vacation days from his jobs, although he did have to keep going to rehearsal for his play. But, since his part was very small, and he really was just in the chorus, that didn't take up too much of his time.

"I have vacation time coming to me, Scotty," he said. "So, I'm taking these days now."

"Jack. You don't have to waste your vacation days on me."

"I have to waste them somehow," he said. "God knows I don't exactly have the money to travel to Europe. So, I might as well spend them with you."

I was happy about that, actually. I was pestering Nick to go back to work. I knew how important he was to that firm, and I didn't want him to get any more behind than he had to on my account. He reluctantly agreed.

"I don't want to leave you, Scotty," he said. "But I know that you're in good hands here with Jack. But, please, if you need me, call. I'll come home. In fact, I think I might just go into the office just long enough to clear some of my client meetings off my deck, and come home here and work. And, there's also another very important matter that I have to clear up."

I knew what the important matter was. Portia. Nick had explained to me that he wasn't going to work under the safe roof with her anymore. Which made me extremely anxious, as the last thing I wanted was for Nick to lose his prestigious partnership on my account. I had no idea what those partners would do when push came to shove. Nick had won the last showdown, but the stakes then were relatively low. Portia wanted me gone. Nick wanted me to stay. In the end, the partners sided with Nick, but only because Nick was willing to put more on the line to back his position than Portia did. Specifically, he resigned, and that made all of the partners snap to attention.

That particular showdown was much lower stakes than what was happening here. After all, I was just a lowly intern. It was easy for the partners to side with Nick in that scenario. But, here, Nick was serious about getting Portia gone. That

was huge stakes. They both were so important to the firm. I really hoped that Nick knew what he was doing.

At the same time, I knew that it was necessary to have the showdown. He was not only protecting himself, but he was also protecting me. Portia had it out for me, and she would continue to have it out for me as long as she and I were both there. I just didn't see my career thriving as long as she was there.

So, that morning, I watched Nick get dressed in his suit and tie with apprehension. I felt like I was holding my breath, almost, as I watched him.

He came over and sat down on the bed. He took my hand and looked me in the eye. "I'm going back to work, but I'll be back as soon as I can. I'm not going to lie. I have a ton of work to do. I'm really behind on the Chase project now, and I have a bunch of other things coming down the pipeline at me. But most of that stuff I can do right here from home. And that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to work mainly from home. Hopefully, soon, you'll be well enough that you can return to work, too. But, for now, you're here, so I'm going to be joining you as soon as I can."

I nodded my head. I had to get stronger, emotionally. I felt like such a little girl. A little whiny girl who was threatening to fall apart at just any moment. I wanted something different for myself, and that was to stand on my own two feet and face my adversities come what may. So, I simply nodded my head and swallowed hard so that my tears didn't fall again.

"Good luck, Nick. "

He kissed my forehead. "I'll see you soon, love."

And, just like that, he was off.

Then, almost as soon as he left, Jack was up. "So, Scotch Marie, what can I do you for? Any special requests? I suppose it's too early for a cocktail, huh?"

I smiled. "A little," I said. "But you can have one. Feel free. Nick has everything down there that you could possibly want."

Jack just shook his head with a slight grin on his face. "Oh, lord, no. Drinking alone, before 9 AM? People might talk about my scandalous alcoholic ass."

"What people? It's only me here, remember?"

"Well, you and the crazy goony who lives under the bed."

"Ha ha. There's no goonies here. Well, unless you count me."

"I do count you in that, love." And then he got serious. "So, how are you feeling today? Is there anything I can do for you?"

"No," I said. "Nothing, really."

He sat there looking at me. “Well, I didn’t want to say anything. But…I ran into Nick last night when he was getting an inhaler for you. That can only mean one thing. You’re not doing as well as you’re putting on.”

I nodded my head. “Actually, it was damned lucky that Nick had one of those on hand. Did he happen to tell you why he keeps it?”

Jack shrugged. “Something about his parents always advising him to have one in the medicine closet at all times, ready to go. Because you never know when somebody might need it. Now, I think that you probably went all Lauren Bacall on him, crying and carrying on. Not that I blame you. God knows you’re entitled. But I would appreciate it if you would just talk to me about how you feel.”

I sighed. “I don’t know,” I said honestly. “I haven’t quite figured that out yet. There’s just too much confusion going on in my head these days. Too many horrible and wonderful things are fighting for real estate in my head space lately. Sometimes it’s hard to understand exactly how I’m feeling from one moment to the next.”

“Well, that’s natural. I hope that you got it all patched up with loverboy, though.”

I smiled broadly. “Yeah, I did,” I said. “I did.”

Jack looked at me suspiciously. “But…”

“But, I, uh, just started crying hysterically in the middle of it last night. And I literally couldn’t stop. What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing’s wrong with you. You just went through an ordeal. And then, right after that ordeal, you get whipped around and see the man that you’re in love with. You feel so strongly about both things, so I would imagine that your poor little brain is quite confused about how you’re feeling these days. I wouldn’t worry about it, but just allow yourself to feel everything that you need to. That will help you come out of this a happy, healthy Scotty. Which is what everybody wants.”

“Oh, well, then Jack, I hope to get better soon. Because this emotional roller coaster is for the birds. The pigeons at that.”

“The rats with wings?” Jack said with a smile. “Scotty, my dear, you just feel everything that you need to feel. You’ll get better soon, I promise.”

“I hope so, Jack. I hope so.”

But, as I looked at him, I had my doubts. My doubts that I would ever get better, soon or otherwise.

Chapter 28

Nick

As I drove along the usual interminable drive to my office, I wondered if I would have to go back home and paint my face with red lines. Because I felt like a warrior, and I needed war paint to go with it. In the Native American vernacular, I was going to be doing some scalping when I got to the office. And it wasn't going to be pretty.

Portia doing what she did was bad enough. It really was. I would have been supremely pissed off at her, no matter what the situation. But, since her actions were what led to this latest scenario, where my Scotty was terrorized and raped by that predator, I felt like her actions could not go unpunished. She simply could not get away with doing what she did. I was going to make sure of that. If it was the last thing that I did in this world.

Truth be told, that was most of the reason why I decided to go back to work today. I was itching to get in there and roast that Barbie bitch over the coals. Slowly. Put an apple in her mouth and turn her over on the pit. That was my dark fantasy right now.

Not that I could have told Scotty any of this. At that moment, she didn't need that kind of hostility coming from me. She only needed for me to be as positive and supportive as I could have possibly been. So, that was what I concentrated on when I was with her. Making her feel loved and special and like she could count on me to always have her back. She just didn't need any negative juju right at that moment, so I tried to keep everything positive when I was with her.

But, once I left the loft and made my way to my office, my entire mind-set changed completely. It changed from being calm and nurturing to being aggressive and war-like. And I couldn't wait to face Portia down and get her ousted. Not that any of it would be easy. It wouldn't. It would probably involve a ton of litigation, not to mention a buyout of her interest in the firm. None of it was going to be pretty. The firm would probably take a major hit in terms of revenue and reputation with this move.

In other words, this was going to be a very serious matter. I would imagine that the partners of the firm would not take any of it very lightly. Yet, it had to be done.

That much was positive.

I finally arrived at the firm, and I put my briefcase down as I alighted in my

office. I then called my secretary and asked her to hold all of my calls. She obliged, of course. I looked at my new schedule, which was sent over to me by Callie, my secretary, and saw that the Chase meeting was postponed until the end of the week. I groaned, inwardly, knowing that this was yet another fire that needed to be extinguished. I would imagine that they were probably not very happy with me going AWOL like that. I only hoped that George was able to sufficiently cover for me and give them a good excuse for where I was.

And then I took a deep breath and headed down to Portia's office.

I got down there, and her door was ajar. I heard laughter coming from the office, as she was talking and flirting with one of her lackeys in the firm, Fred. Fred was forever trying to score a date from the evil queen, and she was forever keeping him on a string, dangling. She had no interest in him. He was like a mouse, and she was like a cat, toying with him. Always giving him just enough hope to keep him on the line, but not quite enough that he should have actually felt that he had a chance.

I knocked on the open door. Portia looked up and I actually saw a different expression on her beautiful face. If I didn't know her so well, I would have actually thought that I saw…fear. Shame. Guilt. Remorse.

But no. There was no way that this woman was feeling any of those things. She just had a really good way of faking the emotions that normal people have. A *really* good way of doing this.

Fred looked at me from behind his black rimmed Elvis Costello glasses and stood up. "Uh, hello, Nick," he said. "How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," I said, looking right at Portia. "How about you?"

"Uh, fine. I guess I should, uh, get out of here. You obviously have something to talk about with Portia here." And then he eyed Portia longingly. He looked down at the floor. "I'll see you at lunch, huh?"

"Sure," she said flippantly. And then she turned her attention to me. "Hello, Nick. I see that you're feeling better."

I drew a deep breath. "Sit down," I said, as I saw her start to rise from her chair to close the door. "I'll get the door."

I got up and closed the door, and then came back and took my seat across from her.

For several minutes I just stared at her, my arms crossed in front of me. For her part, she just stared right back, her crystalline blue eyes trained on mine. She barely blinked. She was trying hard not to register fear. I knew this. But, yet, I could also sense her fear just below the surface. It showed in her eyes, which

showed glimpses of terror, but only glimpses. I had to admit that she was pretty good at masking what was going on in her head.

Finally, after I sat there and stared at her for several minutes, I cleared my throat. “Portia. I know what you did. And you won’t get away with it.”

“Oh,” she said. “What did I do?”

“You drugged me with something powerful. And toxic, I might add. Anything that’s not toxic wouldn’t cause a blinding headache like I had when I came to in my loft several days ago. Anyhow, whatever it was, I know why you did it. And you won’t get away with it.”

Portia looked at her nails insouciantly. “You have any proof of this nefarious thing that I allegedly did to you?”

Gut-check time. “No, but I don’t think that I need it. Do you? Listen, you and I have been locked in a power struggle ever since I turned you down. You escalated it, and Scotty was the victim in all of that.” I didn’t go into detail, but Portia knew about Scotty’s accident. She had to. Everybody in the office knew about it. Portia didn’t need to know the other horrors that befell Scotty because of what she, Portia, did. That was a personal matter, one that was something that I was going to keep secret, because I thought that Scotty would want it that way.

Portia was still staring at her nails. “Oh, yes. I’m very sorry to hear that Scotty got into an accident on the street outside of this building. She seems rather clumsy, don’t you think?”

“Clumsy. That’s an interesting way to put it.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that you were what caused that accident. You. Your actions. You knew that Scotty was going to get upset when she saw you and me together. You knew that. You played that whole situation like Yo-Yo Ma plays a cello. Masterfully. Well, it backfired. It backfired, and Scotty has a major injury because of it. And I suppose that you don’t feel a single bit of remorse about that, either. Do you?”

“Of course I feel bad,” she said. “I sent flowers to the hospital.”

Flowers. As if that would make up for what she did to Scotty. “Oh, you sent flowers. Well, good for you. That should make up for the damage done.”

“Listen, if I thought that she would have gone that ballistic, I never would have drugged you like that. It was all a lark. You know. A little practical joke. A little bit of fraternity humor to lighten up the day.”

“Bullshit. You expect me to believe that for a half a second? Nobody’s going to believe that. You targeted Scotty in your little ‘prank.’ Awfully suspicious,

considering how you've been trying to get rid of her since day fucking one. Just a little coincidental, don't you think?"

"Well, you know, Scotty obviously cares more than other people do in this office. So, that's why I did it to her. To get more of a rise out of her."

I felt my breath inhale. I was going to keep calm. That was the only way to take her down. Keeping calm.

But what I really wanted was to slap her. Hard. I was just too much of a gentleman to do such a thing, even though she sorely, sorely deserved it.

"Okay. You have to listen to me, you rotten excuse for a human being. You are going down. On my watch. Today, if possible."

"Oh, Nick? And what, pray tell, do you mean by that?"

"I mean that I'm going to get you ousted. Today."

"You can't just get me ousted. I'm a partner."

"Be that as it may. I read the firm's constitution. Any partner may be ousted at any time for 'high misconduct.' I would think that drugging another partner would qualify as that."

The look of fear in her eyes flashed again. But the flash was gone as soon as it came. "Nick. Even if you have proof of what happened, which you don't, but, even if you did, my doing that to you would hardly be considered to be 'high misconduct.' That term generally means embezzlement or some other kind of misdeed that affects the entire firm. Playing an innocent prank like what you think that I did wouldn't qualify as that. So, nice try."

"I understand what you think. But that term is not defined. And, all that I need is a 2/3 majority of the other partners agreement, and you'll be gone."

"2/3 majority?" she said, as if she had never read the constitution herself, and had no idea what it said. "Good luck with that." She laughed. "You'll be lucky to get a single vote for something like that. Sorry to disappoint, but I'm way too valuable to this firm."

"Portia. Do you remember the last time that you attempted to challenge me? In that whole debacle regarding Scotty's ouster for allegedly stealing from the firm?"

"Of course. I stay awake nights thinking about how I could have won that one. I thought that by blindsiding you with it that you would not have the ammunition to fight it. I underestimated you, I admit. But what does that have to do with this situation?"

"Well. If you can recall, all that I had to do was threaten to resign, well, actually tender my resignation, and almost everybody in the firm voted with me.

I say almost, because you had a few loyalists. Very few."

Portia nodded her head. "Don't remind me. God, everybody let me down on that one. But, again, what does that have to do with this? I mean, I guess that what you are getting at is that you're going to threaten to resign unless I was ousted, and you think that everybody will magically fall in line. But it won't happen like that. The stakes on the Scotty situation were much, much different then than they are now. Nobody is going to want to lose me as a partner. Nobody. Except maybe you. So, good luck."

"We'll see," I said. And then immediately felt apprehensive for doing things in this manner. I should have blindsided her, just like she did me. That way, I couldn't have given her a chance to campaign against me and for her, like she surely was going to do. But, at the same time, I felt that seeing her and telling her what I was planning to do was morally right. To stoop to her level would be contemptuous, to say the very least, and I didn't want to be associated with that kind of behavior. My parents raised me to be a gentleman. I didn't always behave in such a fashion, and, more often than I would like to admit, I behaved as something less than a gentleman. But I was better than behaving low and under-handed. I wanted to be above-board.

Portia was staring at me. "So, I guess you want to have a meeting today. I doubt that there are enough partners here to constitute a quorum. It will just have to be another day, and, by then, I will have worked my magic on everybody here. You won't stand a chance."

I didn't waver. "There doesn't have to be that many partners here to constitute a quorum. Just 50 partners have to be present for there to be a quorum. And you know, as well as I do, that there are at least that many partners present on any given day. There might be about 10 missing on any given day, because of traveling schedules or vacation days, but that's it. So, nice try."

Portia looked surprised at that. It was becoming apparent that she had never read the firm's constitution, as she seemed to not even know how many partners have to be present for major decisions to stick.

But she did attempt to bluff her way through. "Well, with something as major as this, you need a 2/3 majority of the majority of the partners. So, 50 won't cut it for something like this."

"Nope. Nice try. I read the firm's constitution when I first got this position, and I re-read it yesterday, cover to cover. 2/3 majority of a quorum is all that is required. That's it. You wanna counter with anything else?"

She shrugged. "No. I'm not worried. At all. These partners here either fear

me or love me. Very few of them feel neutrally about me. So, not worried. You call your little meeting today. Go ahead. You're going to look like a fool. Especially if you decide to pull your 'I'm going to resign' act, and the partners essentially say 'go ahead.' At that point, you're going to look like an idiot when you say 'I didn't really mean it.' And, that means that you will no longer have that threat in your arsenal. Everybody will know that it's empty. Which means that the next meeting, where I propose firing your girlfriend again, you won't have the teeth to fight me. You'll be firing blanks. Is that really what you want?"

I had to admit, she was good. She was playing chess, here. Very strategic chess. And, what she was saying was partially true. I mean, I didn't want to give up this partnership. At all. I loved my work. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. With the body of work that I was getting at that firm, I could very well be considered one of the legends one day. Corbusier, van der Rohe, Wright, and me. Well, not quite in their league, but there wasn't a doubt that I could very well be considered one of the top architects of all time when I retired. *If* I kept on the pace that I was on with this firm. That was important to me. It was important that I get the chance to not only design buildings, but also influence future generations. I wanted to be studied in the top architectural schools.

So, I held my breath. Because Portia was 100% correct about something else as well. And that was that I couldn't threaten to resign if it was an empty threat. I *had* to back it up by actually resigning. And that would leave all my projects in the lurch. The Chase people would be furious, and they very well might blackball me in New York City. I had many, many projects that were coming down the pipeline this year, most of them high-profile, with very well-known clients. All of whom would be apoplectic that I would just leave the firm, and leave them scrambling. I would look foolish and unprofessional.

I had to do another gut-check. But I knew that this was going to be one of my most nerve-wracking moments of my entire life. It was very well possible that today would be my last day at this firm, and that it could very well end my career. I mean, not totally end it. But it would end it as I knew it, and that, after today, I no longer would be considered to be *the* rising star in the architectural world. I doubted that I could get the same caliber of clients without the backing of this firm.

But it was something that I absolutely felt that I had to do. I would pick up the pieces if the partners chose to allow me to resign, as opposed to ousting Portia. I would still have my position at Columbia, and I hoped that I could still get a foothold in the New York City architectural scene. But probably not.

The stakes couldn’t be higher.

Yet, I knew that I was doing the right thing. I knew it as sure as I knew anything in my entire life.

Portia and I could no longer work together. She was dangerous and delusional. Worse than that, she would not rest until she destroyed Scotty. She proved that. So, I had no choice. I had to make a stand, and I had to do it quickly.

Chapter 29

Scotty

I laid in bed that morning, and Jack and I played cards and watched low-brow television. *Real Housewives* was on that day, and we sat there and half watched it and half played cards while we talked. It was about 8 in the morning.

"So, Scotty, do you mind telling me what's going on with you? I mean, really?"

I sighed. "Well, Jack, it's kinda weird. I mean, Mr. Lucas put me through hell. More than he ever did before. He's more sadistic than he has ever been. Even crueler. I think that Elle divorcing him sent him even more over the edge. I never remembered him getting such pleasure out of hurting me before. But he did. He loved to see me writhe in pain and cry." I paused. "But I'm handling it better than I thought that I would. I think because I have already processed his violating me, because it happened so often before. It's horrible that it happened again…but, at the same time, there's not a lot that I haven't raged about regarding him. So, I think that I can psychologically handle it. I think."

Jack nodded his head. "That makes sense. But there's something going on. Something is happening in that pretty little head of yours, and I want to make sure that you're straight with it."

"I know. And I appreciate that. I just hope that Nick is going to be okay. I think that he's forcing the partners to choose between him and Portia, and that makes me nervous, to say the very least. I mean, what happens if the partners just say 'okay, Nick, go ahead and walk. We can't lose Portia?' He's going to be screwed if that happens. Because of me."

Jack gave me his *bitch please* look, and laid down some cards. "Gin. Now, Scotty, how many times do you have to be told that none of this is your fault? That you didn't make that woman the cray-cray bitch that she is? You didn't force her to have the hots for your loverboy. You didn't make Nick the hot, beautiful stud that he is, which means that women are wetting their panties in his presence constantly. None of that was your doing. So, Portia acting the way that she acts has nothing to do with you. If Nick loses his position, it's because of that insane clown posse Portia, not you."

"I know that intellectually. But I'll still feel responsible."

Jack sighed. "Okay, then, let's appeal to logic, shall we? If Nick had never met you, would Portia still be insane?"

“That’s a dumb question. Of course she would.”

“Okay. Now, if Nick had never met you, do you think that Portia would be full of dirty tricks that are designed to hurt Nick?”

I nodded my head.

“Okay, then. Take yourself out of the equation. Nick would have to force a showdown regarding Portia no matter if you’re in the picture or not. So, again, Scotty Marie, IT’S NOT YOUR FAULT!” And then he smiled and said “My deal. What’s your pleasure?”

“Let’s play some hearts.”

At that, Jack started dealing the cards.

I took a deep breath. “Okay, Jack, you make logical sense. It’s not my fault. But how do I stop feeling guilty?”

“I’d say long-term therapy, but god knows you don’t have the money for that. So, if you don’t listen to Dr. Jack here, then maybe you need to read some books on the subject. I’ll find some for you in the library. Anyhow, I do know one thing, because I’ve read about it myself. Sexual abuse survivors tend to feel inappropriate guilt. Not sure how to deal with it, though.”

“Inappropriate guilt. Sounds like the story of my life.”

“Well, you need to just think things through before you start feeling guilty about something that you had nothing to do with. God gave that woman the cray. You can’t feel bad about anything associated with her at all.”

“Okay,” I said, but I felt unconvinced. “There’s my trick,” I said, laying down some cards.

Jack smiled. “Speaking of tricks,” he said, laying down some more cards. “I think I might have a date this Saturday night. And I don’t think that he’s a closet case, either.”

“Oh, do tell? Is he a Wall Street type?”

“No. I’m done with those. I read somewhere that most of those Wall Street types are psycho, you know?”

I smiled. “Yes, I’m aware of that study. There are a high percentage who fit the criteria for having anti-social personality disorder. Which makes sense if you think about it. But, go on. Who’s this new guy?” I didn’t want to refer to the new guy as a “trick,” even though that was probably what he was going to end up being, knowing Jack. “Do tell.”

“Well, let’s see. He’s a model for Burberry, and he’s a skinny little twink with an attitude. So not like my usual burly boys. And he’s way gay. Way gay. Here… let me get a magazine. I’ll show you!”

At that, Jack got up and ran down the stairs and came right back up. He flipped through the *Esquire* magazine interestedly. “Let’s see, here…” And then he came upon a Burberry ad and showed me the picture of an angelic-looking boy who looked to be around 19 years old. The boy had big blue eyes, full pouty lips and a mop of uncombed brown wavy hair. He had the typical look of a Burberry boy –contemptuous yet sexy. With his perfect pale skin, long eyelashes and red lips, he looked like a porcelain doll come to life.

“So, what do you think?”

“I think he’s the prettiest boy I’ve ever seen in my entire life. How old is he?”

“22, so just five years younger than me. What else do you think?”

“He looks….pouty. Pretty and pouty. At any rate, I can’t wait to meet him!”

“Oh, I want you to meet him. He’s very pretty, but he seems like a nice guy. I met him through one of the actors on the musical I’m working on. We haven’t gone out yet, but I’m looking forward to Saturday for sure.”

I nodded my head. It was so difficult to get excited for Jack and his men, just because, well, I had been there so many times before. There was the college football player. And the manager of a Walgreens. And then there was the struggling musician. After that was the waiter/actor/model. That was all before he decided to look for “Wall Street types,” because he was tired of always having to pay his date’s way. Which was getting expensive, and Jack, while he was better off financially then myself, couldn’t afford that. Jack, to his credit, did manage to snag a few of those “Wall Street types,” before deciding that they were either boring or too closeted. And now there was Burberry boy. I hoped that Burberry boy would be something other than a boy who was passing through Jack’s revolving door, but I was not holding my breath on that one.

Jack laid down some more cards. “Now, Scotty, I can read your mind. You think that this one is going to be a temporary trick like all the rest. And, what can I say? You’re probably right. But Babe Ruth once said that every strike brought him closer to his next home run. It would do well for you to remember that.”

I smiled. I had never heard that quote before, but it was a good one. In life, it was always good to remember that every failure brings one closer to success. Kinda like Thomas Edison doing thousands of experiments before inventing the light bulb. He, too, said that every failed experiment brought him one step closer to success. I often wondered what the world would be like if Edison had given up after the 999th try, if the thousandth one was the successful one.

“You’re right,” I said, putting down another trick. “Every new boy brings you

closer to The One."

"Well, we can't all be as lucky as you. Hitting the home run on your first at-bat with Nick."

"Yeah. Lucky, that's me," I said. "Anyhow, let's total up our points and move on to the next hand."

Jack was studying me. "I meant what I said," he said, as he shuffled the cards. "You are lucky. Nick is your very first boyfriend, and what a phenomenal first boyfriend he is. You didn't have to go through all the broken hearts that the rest of us have to."

"No, but I went through years of Mr. Lucas. I think I paid my dues." I was starting to get a little bit irritated with Jack. Usually he wasn't this insensitive. Well, he was, but it was all in good fun and he usually picked up on my non-verbal cues a little bit better. "Now deal. Time's a-wasting."

Jack shook his head at me. "Tut tut. I think little Scotty is getting just a wee bit cranky. I'm only telling you to appreciate the positives in your life, instead of dwelling on the negatives. And I think that not having to go through crappy relationships to get to your prince charming is one of those positives in your life. That's all I was getting at."

I sighed. Jack, as usual, was right. Sometimes I did need to appreciate the things that go right in my life, instead of dwelling on what had gone wrong. Glass half full and all of that. And Nick was definitely something that had gone right. Thus far, anyhow.

"So," I said. "Where are you guys going to go?"

"I think we're going to try that new restaurant in Chelsea. At least, that's what he said. And then, who knows?"

"Well, don't give away the milk for free. See where it gets you to make your boys wait for once."

"Oh, but Scotty. That's my calling card. I'm just that good."

"Well, maybe so, but it's gotten you exactly nowhere so far. I'm just saying to try something different for once. You know, don't give a facial on the first date." And then I felt myself blushing for saying something so crude, even to Jack. "I mean. Well, you know what I mean."

Jack was trying to hold back a smile. "Scotty Marie. What porn movies have you been watching?"

And then I gave him a look, and he immediately looked embarrassed. After all, the only porns I had seen were the ones that Mr. Lucas had forced me to watch for "educational purposes." Which was where I had learned about facials

in the first place. Personally, I found them disgusting, and hoped that Nick never wanted to give me one.

"Sorry about that," Jack said, looking chastened. He sighed. "Sometimes I can be such a boob."

I smiled. "Sometimes?" And then I started cracking up, in spite of myself.

Jack started laughing too. "Touché, little one. Touché."

Then we played another hand in silence. I was concentrating on my hand, and also concentrating on what was going on right at that moment. I looked at the clock, and it read 10 AM. I felt my heart racing as I thought about the possibility that Nick was summoning the partners right at that moment….

Chapter 30
Nick

It was time to retreat to my office. I had to get my war plans ready, just like a general. Look at every possible battle front and see what maneuvering I could do to make things go my way. I brought out the roster of partners to see who I could count on to be solid allies, who were not solid allies but could be persuaded, and who were just plain lost causes. As I chewed on a pencil and examined the list, I determined that there were about 10 lost causes.

Ten people who would not cross Portia, no matter what. They were all considered by everybody in the office to be lackeys and acolytes. She kept them in line by funneling to them choice projects and kissing their asses. At least half of the ten salivated over her, and everybody in the office knew it. Portia always warned me that she would never hesitate to use all of her considerable assets to get what she wanted, and she was as good as her word.

I had only been at the firm for a few months, but I had already gotten the lay of the land as far as the firm politics. That was one thing that I tried to do at every firm – find out the alliances and what tied them together. Sometimes alliances were weak and could be broken. Other times they were strong and there was no use trying to break them. There were always a few mercenaries in every alliance – people who really had no loyalties, but pretty much went where their bread could be buttered the best. They were the ones that would be targeted in any kind of power move like the one that I had planned that afternoon.

So, I went back through the ten, carefully, to make sure that they were each lost causes. I had to make inroads into that little posse, just in case one of the other partners that I thought would be on my side decided to blindside me.

I went through each name and wrote down the person's strengths and weaknesses, and where they might be vulnerable. The first four that I examined were the only four who voted with her in the last showdown – Mark, Gregory, William and Richard. They were obviously the tightest with her, as they were literally the only ones who stayed loyal in the last fight.

I put those four aside, and concentrated on the other six, who I assumed had more of a loose alliance with her. One of those six was Fred, who was obviously in love with Portia. Well, maybe not in love with her, but he definitely had it bad. I felt a little bit sorry for the man – he was one of those nebbish losers who never got the girl and go thrown into lockers in high school. I actually went to bat for

guys like him in high school, because I was very popular and I was able to influence the other kids not to pick on the underdogs. Now, Portia was treating him like the contemptuous queen bee that she was.

No doubt Portia was a mean girl in high school, just like she was at the firm, and she probably would be the one who would pour the bucket of pig's blood on people like Fred as a "joke." After all, she was drop-dead gorgeous and had not a hint of morality in that beautiful body. She probably ate men like Fred for dinner.

I tapped my fingers on the desk nervously. Fred. Was there any way to flip him? I figured that the only way would be to be honest with him about Portia's intentions with myself, and let the chips fall where they may. If he knew that Portia had all but boiled a bunny because she was so obsessed with me, perhaps Fred might change his tune, because it would show that Portia had zero romantic interest in him.

Maybe. But, then again, the love-struck losers in high school who were pining away for the homecoming queens usually never did come to reality. But, at the same time, it was worth a shot.

Fred was a definite maybe.

I went down the line with the other loosely aligned partners, and tried to figure out who was the mercenary in the bunch. Specifically, who was only aligned with Portia because of what she could give him, in terms of projects and prestige. I mulled those men in my mind, and hit upon the name of David. David was, in general, one of those smarmy types. The type that missed his calling as a politician. He definitely was someone who would go to the highest bidder, and was one of the ones who would be vulnerable to being flipped to my side. After all, I had the most prestigious project in the firm. Inviting him on to my design team would be a coup for him, really.

So, David and Fred. Those were two who were tight with Portia, and, at first glance, seemed to be lost causes. But, on second look, they were definitely people who I might have in my pocket by the end of the day.

Not that it really mattered. In looking at the roster of partners, I counted 25 who I thought would be solidly for me. Twenty-five for myself, as opposed to just ten for Portia. It was like looking at an election map, where there are some solid blue and others that were solid red, and a handful of swing states that would lean one way or another. The politicians tried to flip the swing states, which was why they concentrated all of their efforts in these battlegrounds.

Similarly, I would redouble my efforts to win over the persuadables.

But not before I called Callie to find out how many partners were in the

office that day. At that point, I could go to work trying to figure out just who I would need to ensure that I prevailed.

I pressed my button for her. “Callie, it’s Nick. Could you please come into my office?”

“Yes, sir,” she said.

She appeared about two minutes later, a notebook and pen in her hand. She looked apprehensive, and looked even more so when I politely asked her to close the door.

She closed the door and sat down across from me. And then she took a deep breath. “Mr. O’Hara, I know that I was late for work a lot last week. But little Danny has been sick, and I’ve had a really hard time lining up good day care for him because of it. I got somebody to watch him, though, really reliable, so lateness shouldn’t be a problem anymore.”

I stared at her, trying to figure out what her problem was.

And then it dawned on me. I asked her to come into my office and then asked her to shut the door. That only meant one thing in the job world, and that one thing was never good.

So, I smiled. “Relax, Callie. You’re not in trouble. I just needed you to gather some information, and maybe arrange some private meetings for me. Could you do that?”

I saw her let out her breath in relief, and she nervously put her hand to her eyes. “Oh, thank god,” she said. “I’m sorry, Mr. O’Hara, I thought that you wanted to see me because of something else. Yes, of course, I can get some information from you. What do you need to know?”

“I need to know what partners are in house today. Give me a count, and give me a list. And, after you do that, please see me again. I’m going to have you set up some meetings for me today.”

She nodded her head. “I’ll have that for you in a half hour. Is that okay?”

“A half hour would be fine.”

At that point, I figured I should summon my closest ally in the firm, George, and Neil, the oldest member of the firm, who had no love for Portia, mainly because he had no love for drama and bullshit. And, since Portia was nothing but drama and bullshit, Neil couldn’t stand her.

So, I rang George. “George. It’s Nick.”

“Nick. What’s going on? This office is buzzing like I have never seen it.”

The cat’s out the bag. Of course it was. While I was sitting there trying to methodically plot everything out, Portia was going around poisoning the well.

Once again, I questioned my strategy of not blind-siding her, but, then again, if I won dirty like that, then I couldn't live with myself. You win fair or you really have lost.

"Can you spare some time for me in my office? And find Neil?" I hoped that they didn't have important client meetings.

"Sure, I can come and meet with you. I'll round up Neil, too. I don't think that he has anything pressing today. His meetings are all scheduled for the end of the week."

"Good. Just come up here ASAP if you could."

"Sure. It will probably be around a half hour."

I hung up the phone and then looked at my partner roster again. George could certainly help me out with deciding who was going to be on my side and who likely wasn't. Neil would also do an excellent job of that. But, until the two men arrived, I decided to kill the time trying to examine every angle myself.

Callie called to inform me that there were 63 partners in house that day. "And you needed me to give you a list, correct?"

"Yes, please. If you could bring that to me, that would be great."

Callie appeared a few minutes later and handed me the list.

I looked at the roster, thankful that there were at least enough partners there for a quorum. I then calculated in my head how many I would need to oust Portia. Forty-two was 2/3 of 63. So, I would need forty-two partners to vote with me.

Forty-two. Ten of which were pretty solid for her, as all ten of her allies were there that day. The only exception out of the ten were David and Fred, but I didn't know if I had time to flip them or not. So, just say that ten were gone. Which means that I had to hold onto most of the rest, if I had a chance in this.

While I mulled everything over, looking over the roster and trying to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of everybody there, George appeared at my door with Neil.

"Come on in," I told the two men. "Have a seat."

They sat down across from me and George asked. "Okay, Nick. Now, tell me what is going on? I've heard all kinds of rumors flying around here. There's talk of you trying to railroad Portia. I hope to god that's not true."

Just what I didn't want to hear. "George," I began. "I brought you here because I consider you my best friend and closest ally in this firm. And, Neil, I like your straight talk. I think that both of you will be able to listen to my side of the story without judgment and give me some guidance on how to proceed."

Neil nodded his head. “I sure will listen to your side of the story. And, if you have a plan to oust Portia, consider me in already. I can’t stand that plastic hussy.”

I smiled and laughed inwardly. “Okay, then, you’re going to be very helpful.” And then I looked at George. “You look a bit more worried than Neil. So, let me tell you exactly what is going on with your thoughts.”

“Okay,” George said. “I’ll tell you what Portia is out there saying. She’s telling everybody that you want her gone because she turned you down for a romantic relationship, and you can’t stand working for somebody who has bruised your ego in such a way.”

I drew a deep breath. *Calm, Nick, calm. You knew that she would lie to protect herself, so this is par for the course.* “Actually, George, it’s the other way around.” And then I looked at the two men. “Okay. I have to have full disclosure here on all the drama that has been happening behind the scenes. I trust both of you to keep this information close to your vests.”

“Of course,” George said. “That goes without saying.”

Neil nodded, and I knew that what I told him would go into the vault. He was too old to know about “bro codes,” but the man had served in Korea, so he knew about loyalty and valor.

I drew another deep breath. “Okay, here goes. Portia and I had a brief sexual relationship. When I say brief, I mean brief. It happened exactly two times, both times in this very office.”

George said nothing, but looked over at the couch and kinda grimaced. Neil looked amused.

“Well, as much as I can’t stand that woman, she’s quite a looker, so I don’t blame you there,” Neil said with a smile. The twinkle in his eye said *atta boy.*

I smiled back at Neil and looked over at George. He looked uncomfortable, but he nodded at me to go on.

I took another deep breath. *God, this is embarrassing.* Because I had to admit to these two men that I was in love with Scotty and heavily involved in a relationship with her. I could just imagine what George was going to think when I made that particular revelation.

“Okay. Portia and I had relations, and, well, I didn’t want to actually go out with her. In fact, I really didn’t want to sleep with her, but she was very persistent. And…”

I paused and looked at the men. I was hesitant to tell them about Scotty, not because the firm had a policy against it, but because I wanted to shield her from

scrutiny. If I tell these two men, and I told everybody else in the firm, then there would instantly be suspicions and accusations of favoritism. I was going to have to go out of my way to make sure that I treated Scotty exactly like I treated every other intern, and, even if I was careful about that, there still would be whispers about her. I didn't want her to have to face that.

But, at the same time, she and I had talked about it, and she had urged me to come clean. She wanted the entire story out in the open, so that the partners could make an informed decision regarding Portia.

I still wanted to protect her, though. That was always my first instinct. Protecting her.

But, I knew that I had to tell the whole story. It was going to come out, anyhow, sooner or later. I was in love with that woman, and I wanted to spend the rest of my life with her. So, the firm was going to have to know about us at some point, because it wasn't like Scotty was a fling that I could sweep under the rug.

George was looking at me expectantly. "Go on, Nick, with the rest of the story. There's more, I know."

I nodded. "Okay. Well, I am in a relationship with Scotty James. It's very serious, and I, in all honestly, see her as being my wife sometime very soon." I looked at both men, and neither looked surprised. Neil, however, did have a gleam in his eye, as if he was thinking *you old dog*.

George nodded his head. "Actually, Nick, almost everybody here knows about you and Scotty. Nobody has said anything to you, but how you two feel about each other has been obvious for a while, to just about everybody here."

I let out my breath. I didn't know why I was surprised to know that my relationship with Scotty was an open secret at the firm, but, somehow, I was. I guess I thought that I was more discreet than that.

Neil chimed in. "Oh, come on, Nick, the way you look at that woman is like a man who's head over heels in love. You're not fooling nobody and you never did," Neil said with a smile on his craggy face. "But good for you."

"So," George said. "You have a relationship with Scotty, and you turned down Portia. Now, what's the rest of the story?"

"Well, you know the day that I allegedly got completely drunk and had to be carried home?"

"Yes, of course," George said.

Neil also nodded his head. "Didn't sound like something you would do at all. I was surprised about that, to say the least."

“On that day,” I said, “Portia apparently drugged me. Because I had a swig of scotch, and immediately felt that I was going to pass out. Next thing I know, I’m waking up in my loft with a raging headache and no knowledge of how I got there.”

“Why would she do that?” George asked. “You better be careful. You’re making serious allegations. That would be considered to be an assault. She could go to prison for doing something like that.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Which is why I have decided that she has to get gone. I can’t work with a woman who is that psychotic. I fear for my safety, and, quite frankly, I fear, even more, for Scotty’s safety. Portia has had it in for Scotty since day one, and now that Portia has shown that she’s capable of anything, who knows what her next move will be?”

George was staring at me, his hand on his chin. It was as if he was deciding whether to believe this admittedly wild story. Neil, for his part, didn’t look skeptical at all.

“Sounds like something Portia would do,” Neil said. “Not surprised one bit. Over the years she has shown some pretty crazy behavior. None quite as crazy as that, but it’s not like that’s something that would be out of character for her.”

I looked again at George. He was nervously twiddling his fingers like they were butterfly wings, and made other motions that showed that he was nervous. He bit his lip and put his hand in his thinning hair. He wasn’t looking at me, but, rather, was staring at my Kandinsky with a look that was indiscernible.

His face was also beet red.

Finally, he spoke. “Uh, Nick, I wouldn’t pursue this particular action right now.”

I heart sunk. “Why, George? I just told you that I can’t work with her anymore. If she doesn’t go, I’m going to have to. So, tell me what’s on your mind.”

“Well, it won’t be as easy as you might think. Not saying that it’s going to be impossible, but to say that you’re going to have to thread the needle is an understatement. And, I’m so sorry. You know that I always have your back on everything. But I can’t go along with this. I’m going to have to vote ‘no’ on ousting her.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Why, George, would you have to vote against me?”

His face got even more beet red. “Well, since we’re telling secrets here, you might as well know mine. I think I can trust you two not to say anything.”

“Of course,” I said. “That goes without saying. Go ahead.” I looked over at

Neil, and he was nodding his head in clear agreement.

"I'm not going to tell anybody nothing. Not my style to gossip, you know that," Neil said.

George took a huge breath. "Well, I, uh, I belong to an exclusive club in the Village. It's a, uh, fetish club." He looked down at the floor. "I love my wife, but she, uh, doesn't get into the, uh, same things that I do."

I tried hard not to register surprise, but this particular revelation had me secretly floored. George? Mild-mannered milquetoast George? He was the most level-headed and sober man I knew. *It's always the quiet ones.*

I knew where this was going. "And Portia also belongs to this club. Am I right?"

George nodded. "This isn't going to be surprising, but she's a dominatrix there. She goes by the name Mistress Sadie. And she and I have, uh, role played some and well…"

"You're afraid of her blackmailing you with this info. Am I correct?"

"Yes. She almost did the last time when I voted against her in the Scotty situation. She didn't because she didn't want to blow her own cover. But in this case, she'll have nothing to lose."

I groaned inwardly. Just what I needed. George was afraid to cross her.

"George," I said. "Do you not want to cross her because you're afraid of her smearing your reputation, or because you don't want to lose her as a playmate?"

His face got even redder. "Both. Although she does have pictures, so the reputation smearing will be easy for her."

I looked at Neil. "What about you? Are you in?"

"Of course," he said. "As I said, I've got no love for that woman. So, count me in on whatever you want to do."

I looked back at George. "Okay. So, you're a no vote. Is there anybody else who's being blackmailed that you know about?"

"No," he said. "None that I know about, anyhow. But she's pretty well-known at that club. There might be other guys from the firm who, uh, role-play with her."

"Great," I said. "That's just great."

I saw my future flashing before my eyes. I might soon be out of this firm. I would have to make my way on my reputation alone. I'd still be a premier architect, and hopefully an influential one. But it would take a little longer, and I'd have to work my way up on smaller projects again. I hoped that I didn't get blackballed and I hoped that I could get the chance to work on the same level of

high-profile projects as I got in this firm.

Things were looking bleak. If George, my closest friend at the firm, was going to be a no vote, what chance did I have with anybody else? God knew how many other men were being blackmailed. Not to mention how many other men were being bribed, and how many other men wanted her around for eye-candy. How I would muster up 42 votes in that kind of an atmosphere was beyond my comprehension right at that moment.

That said, my mind was made up. I wasn't going to work with her.

So, if I was going to go down, I was going to go down with a fight.

There was no other way.

Chapter 31

I dismissed George and Neil from my office, because I had to retreat to consider my other options. I knew that this whole situation was going to be complicated, but I didn't think that it would be impossible. I still thought that it was possible, but it was looking more and more improbable.

I called Callie.

"Yes, Mr. O'Hara?" she said when I called her.

"Callie, I need you to book the conference room for 4 PM and send out a memo to every partner to be there for an emergency meeting."

"I will do that, Mr. O'Hara," Callie said.

And, when I hung up, I realized that there was no turning back. My destiny, whatever it was, was set in stone. I could try to go around and schmooze every partner in the place, and offer them whatever bribe might keep them happy. Portia was no doubt doing that and more. But I didn't want to make promises that I couldn't keep, and, quite frankly, I didn't want some of those guys to work with me on my projects. Not that they were incompetent, but just that many of them had different aesthetics than I did.

The only thing that I could do would be to take an informal head count and try to pick off the low-hanging fruit. The ones who leaned towards me, but were not solidly for me. And hope and pray that I had no defections other than George.

George stung me, though. That hurt. I mean, I knew why he had to vote no. I respected his reasoning. It was cowardly as shit, but I really didn't blame him.

I was going to have to make my rounds, but I first wanted to hear the one voice that would calm me down at that time.

So I called Scotty.

She picked up on the second ring. "Hello," she said, laughter in her voice. "Quiet, Jack, it's Nick. Stop!" she said giggling. "Sorry, Nick, Jack's tickling me. He's like a child who doesn't want his mother on the phone, so he acts obnoxious. Anyhow, what's up?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to hear your voice."

Scotty immediately got serious when she heard my tone. "Nick. What's going on?"

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to go into my meeting at four. I have no idea, no clue, on what is going to happen there." I didn't want to admit

to her that I was afraid. I was afraid for myself and afraid for her. If I left, then I didn't see her continuing there, either. There would be nobody to stop Portia from destroying her, so she probably would end up leaving the firm as well. I felt sad that Scotty would be losing out on such an opportunity. This position was really something that she needed, both for her confidence and because it provided her with such excellent learning experiences.

The sad thing was that, if I lost the show-down with Portia, I could bounce back. Scotty might not be able to. I had my Pritzker and other awards. Any firm would want me, if I wasn't blackballed by my angry clients. I wouldn't necessarily be working on world-renowned projects, but I still would make an excellent living and I would still thrive. Maybe my star wouldn't be quite as bright as it was before, but I still would be able to find tons of work.

But Scotty? That was going to be considerably trickier. She was at the top of her class and had talent that was out of this world. But I doubted that she could find something as prestigious as working for our firm.

I hated that I was putting both mine and Scotty's futures on the line. A part of me just wanted to cry Uncle and tell all the partners that it was a false alarm.

But my rational brain said that, if I did that, and I let Portia get away with what she did, then I would give her ammunition to escalate. She would know, once and for all, that I had the weaker hand, and there would be no stopping her. She would get Scotty out, for sure. And as for me? She showed that she was capable of absolutely anything to get back at me.

I was between Scylla and Charybdis on this one.

"Nick, uh, is there anything that I can do? Anything at all?"

A part of me wanted to tell her that I wanted to go home to be with her, and make love to her before going into my meeting. That would be the best way that I knew how to feel calmer about what was going to happen.

But I knew that wasn't practical. I needed to spend the next few hours trying to collect the reinforcements that I would need to get through the meeting. I had a lot of head-counting and ass-kissing to do.

So, I did the next best thing. "Yes, Scotty, there is. Come here. I'll call Charlie to pick you up. I'll be waiting for you at the front door."

"I'll be there," she said.

I felt bad having her come here with her broken leg, but she was getting better at getting around on crutches.

I wouldn't have asked her if I didn't really need her at that moment.

But I did. I was actually scared, much more than I would ever let on.

And I really needed her at that moment.

Chapter 32

Scotty

I hung up the phone with Nick.

“Well, Scotch Marie. What did loverboy have to say?” Jack asked me.

“He, uh, wants me to go to his office right now.”

“Now? What time is his meeting going to be?”

“At four. So in six hours.”

“Doesn’t he have things that he needs to do to prepare for that meeting?”

“I’m sure. But, if he says that he wants me there, then I’m going. But you have to help me out of bed.”

“Goes without saying,” he said, as he stooped down and brought me to my feet. He got me my crutches and I put my arms on them and hobbled a bit.

Going down the stairs was going to be tricky, to say the least. But, I was going to have to master them sooner or later.

“Help me into the shower,” I said.

Jack obliged, and I got naked and hobbled a bit into Nick’s enormous marble shower. He had such a gorgeous bathroom. All gold fixtures and black marble. The shower was big enough to fit about five people in there, and it was actually a place where Nick and I had lots of fun before all of this nonsense started happening.

Jack, for his part, helped me into the shower and turned on the water. “I’ll be right here when you get out.”

“Thanks,” I said. I shampooed my hair, which was growing out from the cute haircut that I had before, and soaped up my body. I didn’t take very long in doing all of that, though, and, before I knew it, I was hobbling out and Jack had a large towel ready for me.

Jack wrapped the towel around me, and dried me off like my mother used to when she had her rare moments of sobriety. He rubbed the towel vigorously in my hair. “There you go. Gorgeous as ever. And here are some clothes for you to wear.”

“Thanks,” I said, picking up the skirt and sweater that he laid out. “Help me get dressed, please.”

Jack got down on his knees and put the skirt over my legs and I pulled it up the rest of the way. Then I put on my bra and sweater. “Please help me up,” I asked him, and he did. “Okay, I have to go down and meet Charlie. He’ll be here

any minute now."

"Well, now, Missy, not so fast. I have to help you down those stairs. I might have to carry your skinny ass down them, so fair warning."

"I hope you don't have to, Jack, but I fear that you might be right. At any rate, let me try the stairs on my own, okay?"

Jack nodded, but got behind me when I got to the stairs, his hands on my hips. "Now, Scotty, I will be right here behind you to make sure that you don't fall. So, take the stairs slowly and hold onto the rail. Ready?"

I nodded. I really wasn't ready, but I had to try.

I took the first stair gingerly with my good leg, and then hopped down on my bad one. *Not so bad*. Then the next stair, even more gingerly and hopped again. I did that all the way down, and, to my profound relief, landed on the bottom floor without incident.

Jack clapped his hands. "I knew you could do it. I knew it. See what you can do when you put your mind to it?"

I nodded my head. "Thanks, Jack. What would I do without you?"

"Oh, lord. I don't want to think. Anyhow, let's get you on that elevator and I'll help you to make sure that you meet Charlie on time."

The two of us made our way on the elevator and into the lobby. Me walking as slowly and gingerly as an old lady, and Jack right behind me, walking just as slowly. But I was proud of myself for getting around as well as I was.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, I made my way outside and into Charlie's waiting limo. Jack kissed me on the cheek as I got in. "Toodles. I'll miss you."

I smiled. "Me too. But come on, Jack, I'll be back later."

"I know. I just loved having those few hours of bonding time. Like we used to. Just us girls."

I laughed. "You're staying with us, Jack. I'm quite sure there will be plenty of time for that in the future."

"I know. I'm just messing with ya. I'll see you when you get back."

I nodded. "Bye."

And Charlie drove off towards Nick's office.

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We finally arrived at the firm and I hobbled out of the limo. But Nick was right there on the sidewalk, waiting for me. He put his arm around me and slowly walked with me into the building.

He nuzzled my ear. “I’m so glad that you’re here. I hate to bother you, but I really need to be with you for about an hour. Only an hour, though. I need all the time I can get with these partners to try to change a few hearts and minds to vote with me today.”

I looked into those eyes of his. And, perhaps for the first time, ever, I saw doubt. A bit of fear.

But I also saw determination.

“Are you okay?” I asked him. “What’s going on?”

“I’ll be honest,” Nick said, as we slowly walked to the elevator. “I have no clue on what’s going to happen today. None whatsoever. I thought this morning that I probably had the votes to oust Portia. Now, I’m not so sure.”

“Why?” I asked, alarmed. “What changed your mind?”

“Let’s just say that there is at least one person who I thought had my back, who is now going to defect. And I fear that might be the tip of the iceberg. But, for right now, and for the next hour, I don’t want to think about that. I just want to think about your soft skin being next to mine. Your velvety lips being on mine. That’s all that I want to think about.”

I felt the familiar stirring in my nether regions as he said that, and I realized that I wanted the exact same thing. *Needed* the exact same thing.

The two of us rode up the elevator with a crowd of people. We stood in the very back, and I felt Nick’s body heat radiating off of him. He seemed to glow with warmth.

The elevator took us to our floor, and we got off and went into the doors of the firm.

“Well, hello, Scotty,” Nikki, the receptionist, greeted me. “I didn’t know you would be back so soon. I heard you were going to be gone for a few weeks.”

“I’m, uh, not back yet. But I hope to be soon.”

And then she looked at Nick, whose eyes were trained on me, and seemed to understand. “Oh, okay, then. It was good to see you, though.”

I nodded. And then I looked at Nick. “This is strange. Won’t everybody find out about us now?” I admit that I wasn’t even thinking about that angle on my way over. Now, it was paramount on my mind. I didn’t want to get him into trouble.

“They already know about us,” Nick whispered. “So, not a problem.”

“Oh,” I said. “But, you know, today is D-Day. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.”

“It’s a fine idea,” he said. “Now, let’s get back to my office with a minimum

number of people seeing us, so that we can be alone as soon as possible."

I nodded my head. I wanted nothing more, to be absolutely honest.

We finally made it back to his office, and Nick closed the door.

He helped me to the couch, and I sat down. He sat next to me. "I'm so glad you're here, Scotty. I needed you here to calm me down, to be honest. I don't think that I have ever played this much of a high-stakes game of chicken, and I really hope that the course of both of our lives are not altered after today."

"I hope so too. But they shouldn't be. I know that you're going to win.

"I hope you're right. But, in the meantime, I just need you." And then he put his hand in my hair, and stroked my cheek. His lips were soon on mine. I could feel his need in his kiss. His soft lips, and his breath that smelled like mint, were enveloping mine tenderly yet forcefully.

He put his hand on my bare leg while he kissed me. His hand made its way commandingly up my thigh. Every hair stood on end as he caressed my thigh and then put his hand on top of the elastic of my panties.

I unbuckled his trousers and brought them down. I brought his enormous manhood, and asked him to put it in my mouth.

I laid back as Nick made his way over to my mouth, so that his hard-on was positioned directly above it. And then I opened my lips, and received it. He gently rocked himself forward and backward while I sucked him greedily. My tongue was massaging his shaft, and he started groaning a little.

He pulled out of my mouth suddenly. I was still laying on my back, so he put my good leg up on the side of the couch, so that my lips were spread open wide. He crouched down and gently put his tongue on my genitals and clit. He was soooo good at this. He was commanding, yet gentle, and had a way of finding just the right spot to make me come like I never thought that I would be able to. I had to stop myself from moaning too loud. I was afraid that somebody might hear. There might be somebody who saw us go into his office and they might be right outside the door, snickering with laughter.

But Nick was in no hurry to stop. He continued to tongue me lightly, his tongue darting in and out of my vagina and then he also started to lick the other hole. I loved it when he did this. It felt so intimate and so right. Nothing ever felt as right as when Nick and I were together, making love to one another.

I could feel my breathing coming faster and faster, as Nick stopped giving me oral orgasms and came back up to lay right on top of me. He was very respectful and mindful of my bad leg, of course, but I was able to let him lay on top of me because my good leg was still on the back of the couch.

He put his hands on my breasts gently, and licked them slowly as he entered me. I could feel his fullness inside of me, as he gently pushed himself inside. Inch by inch he thrusted, and, with every thrust, I felt myself burst from the inside. My body was electrified by what he was doing. He was mesmerizing to me in the most magnetic way possible.

He was still kissing me, and I felt him so warm on top of me. I put my hand on his back, and stroked it longingly as he thrust in and out of me rhythmically. He was calm and controlled, and his strong hands were commanding on me. He ran his hands all over my body, as his manhood went deep inside of me, deeper than perhaps it had ever been before.

I cried out. I couldn't help it. What he was doing felt so amazing, so right and so perfect. I could feel his enormous penis deep inside of me, and I felt like nothing had ever been so very right. My legs, underneath him, started shaking and trembling, and I felt the same thing in my arms. I bit his earlobe a little, and then bit his neck a little more. But I was careful not to leave any marks behind.

Finally, I could feel him shaking, his entire body trembling on top of me. He laid down on top of me more, his heart pounding as much as mine. And then, while he was still inside of me, he kissed me again. Long, slow and deep.

He finally pulled out. We laid, side by side, our naked bodies warming one another on his couch. He got up and pulled a blanket down and put it over us. Then he wrapped his arm around me from behind. I could feel his breathing on my neck, and his heart beating on my back.

I took his hand, which was wrapped around my waist, and kissed it. "You're shaking," I said. I felt concerned. If there was one thing that I always sensed from Nick was that he was always in control. And he was always confident, which came from the fact that he was in control. But I got the sense from him that he felt that there were elements that were beyond his control at that point in time, and it unnerved me to say the least.

I guess I never thought that Nick might experience fear, doubt and vulnerability. That he was human after all. But, as I laid there, with Nick right behind me, and I could feel him shaking just a little tiny bit, I knew. Nick was feeling the pressure, and I had the feeling that he was thinking that the odds were long.

I wanted to find out just how long the odds were.

I turned around to face him. He kissed me lightly, his hand on my face. He gently pushed a tendril of my hair aside on my face and kissed my forehead. Then he put his hand on my breast, and he leaned down to put his mouth on my

nipple.

I wanted to talk to him and try to give him words of encouragement, but that wasn't what he wanted at that time. Wasn't what he needed. He just needed me.

So that was what I gave him again, as I felt his hardness begin again.

He was inside of me again, thrusting more urgently this time than before. I felt his need for me, and I could sense that I was feeling the same way about him. We needed each other, and that was something that I had never before sensed. That I was as necessary for him as he was for me. I remember thinking before that Nick was as vital to me as breathing. I felt, perhaps for the first time in that office, that Nick felt that way about me as well. That I was as life-giving to him as he was for me.

And that made me love him more in that moment than I ever thought that I could love anybody.

I wanted to talk to him, but he told me that he only wanted to spend an hour with me. That was all the time that he could spare, because the rest of the day would be spent in private meetings that his secretary was setting up for him with various partners in the firm. And, we spent that entire hour making love, so I didn't get a chance to talk to him about what I wanted to know.

That said, it was worth it. Totally worth it.

The hour was up, and Nick looked at me. Both of us were naked, and neither of us wanted to part. But we knew that we had to.

He sighed mightily. "I love you Scotty. But Charlie will be downstairs in a few minutes, so I guess that you need to get dressed so you can meet him down there." And then he kissed my forehead. "I'll see you when I get home. Don't have too much fun with Jack, okay?" he said with a smile.

"I won't. But I'll be thinking about you," I said. "All day."

Nick nodded, with the look of fear and doubt in his eyes.

We both got dressed, and he saw me downstairs and got me into the limo.

As I was driven away from the office, I looked back and saw Nick still standing there on the sidewalk. His hands were shoved in his pockets, and he had a look on his face that I had never seen before. And hoped never to see again.

He looked lost.

Chapter 33

Nick

Scotty just left, and I was left standing on the street, just watching her leave. I had this awful feeling in the pit of my stomach.

But, as I walked back into the building and got the elevator, I tried to shake it off.

I was going to have to show no fear. That was the only way that I could stay in the game. Show no fear. As corny as it sounded, I felt like I had to have the eye of the tiger.

By the time I got to the firm's corridors, I was feeling more confident and in control. I just had to psyche myself up. I couldn't feel that I already had lost, because then I certainly would.

I got behind my desk and called Callie. "I need you to line up some people for some private meetings."

"Yes, sir," she said.

And I gave her a list of names. "Find any of these people who might have some time to meet with me and send them in," I said.

"Yes, sir," she said.

So, for the rest of the day, I met with one person after another. All them were undecided, and all of them knew what was going on. All of them heard the stories from Portia about me, but they all, to a person, were willing to hear me out.

Unfortunately, I got very few positive reassurances. A lot of "maybes," very few "nos," and, to my dismay, even fewer "yeses."

By the time the meeting rolled around, I had a handful of men that I knew were in my pocket. One of whom was Neil. There were two other guys who gave me their word, Frank and Alex. But that was really it.

Which meant that I was going to have to give the closing argument of my life. I watched my father do it from the time that I was a young boy. I used to go to court and watch him in action. He was mesmerizing, really. Methodical, yet folksy. He understood juries better than anybody I had ever seen before or since. He won a great majority of his cases, even the ones that didn't seem winnable, and his closing arguments were a major reason why.

I was going to have to summon all of what I had learned in watching my father in the courtroom and use this knowledge to give the performance of my

life.

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Finally, it was time. All of the partners gathered in the conference room. Portia was one end of the enormous table. I was on the other.

No fear. I straightened my spine, literally, and looked her right in the eye.

She narrowed her eyes and stared back. The fear that I had seen in her eyes, earlier in the day, was gone. She looked like somebody who knew that she was going to win.

No fear.

After all the partners had assembled in the conference room, I stood up and cleared my throat.

“Okay, I guess that most of you, if not all of you, know why we are all here,” I began. “So, I’m not going to beat around the bush. As you all know, I have decided that I won’t work another day with Portia. I feel that she is a danger to me, and a danger to Scotty James. She drugged me in her office, and then lied to all of you about what had happened. She made all of you believe that I deliberately got terribly drunk and passed out on my own. As I have discussed with many of you, this story is absolutely false. Her actions directly led to Scotty James being hit by a car, because Portia not only drugged me, but she also stripped me naked and she also got naked. Then she made Scotty believe that we had sex. I brought all of you here to see what questions any of you might have, because your concerns should be a matter of public record. As you all know, this move will no doubt lead to litigation, so this meeting will be recorded. So, now is a chance to air any grievances or ask any questions before we take an official vote.”

Richard was the first one to ask a question. Of course. Portia’s henchman would be the first one to lead the charge. “Nick, your story is preposterous. I think that you’ve been watching too many movies. Portia would never do something like what you are charging that she did.”

“And your question is?” I asked.

“What proof do you have that she did this?”

That, of course, was my major weakness. I kicked myself for not checking myself into the ER when I had the chance. They would have done some tests and they would have found the toxic substance that was in my system. That would be proof of what she did. But, I didn’t do that. I had other things that I had to deal with at the time. So, admittedly, I had no proof of anything.

No fear.

"I don't have proof, except that I woke up with the worst headache of my life and I found out that I was carried out of the building. I had one sip of scotch, so I knew that there was something very wrong."

"And that's it?" Richard said dismissively. "You're going to end a woman's career on the basis of the fact that you had a headache?" He snorted. "Nice try, O'Hara, but my vote is no. As is probably everyone's here."

"I think I'll let the others speak for themselves, thank you very much," I said.

Pete surprised me and spoke next. "I believe Nick's story about Portia. Why would Nick put his own career on the line unless it was something serious?"

"Because he's railroading her," Gregory said. "Sorry you can't see that."

I was losing control of the narrative. Time to get it back. "Now, listen everybody. Pete makes a good point. I love this firm. I've only been here for a few months, but I've already raised my profile beyond my wildest dreams. Not to sound crass, but, with the projects that I'm getting here, there's a good chance that I can be influential to many generations of architects to come. I wouldn't force this showdown, and I wouldn't walk away from this firm, unless there is a damned good reason. So, that should be proof enough."

William spoke next. Also Portia's acolyte. "We've all heard the slander. You've been telling people that Portia is some kind of freak who stripped you naked and made Scotty James think that you had sex with her. Aside from hearsay, what proof do you have of that?"

I was at a loss. Hearsay was literally all I had to prove this. I wasn't conscious at the time that it happened, of course, so I couldn't prove it any other way.

William was still looking at me expectantly. "Well, O'Hara? You do know that you're heading for a lawsuit, don't you?"

I opened my mouth to try to divert William and all the other partners away from my lack of proof when Scotty appeared at the door of the conference room.

Every partner turned and looked at her, as she hobbled on crutches to the front of the room.

I was shocked myself, but, as I saw her and her determined face, I decided to have a seat. Scotty had a look on her face that said that she meant business.

"Well, gentleman. And Portia. The story of what happened is no longer hearsay. Because I'm here to let you know exactly what I saw."

George stood up, and pulled up a chair for her. "Please, Scotty, have a seat. And tell the partners your story."

“I’m on these crutches because of Portia. She called me into her office, and I got there and saw her and Nick naked on the couch. This upset me so much that I ran into the street without looking, and the car hit me. It wasn’t until several days later that I found out the truth. That she drugged Nick and made it look like they had slept together. I think that Portia is a dangerous woman who is capable of anything. Any one of you might be next. Think of that.”

Richard stood up to address Scotty. “Ms. James, how do you know that Nick was drugged? I have no doubt that you saw what you saw, but there is no proof, whatsoever, that drugs were what caused this.”

I looked at Scotty. It seemed that she was put into the same box that I was- it was all circumstantial. After all, *she* believed that Portia and I had sex until Jack convinced her otherwise. So, now, what was she going to say about how she knows that I was drugged? Because I said so?

“I believe Nick,” she said. “He’s a good, honest man, and if he says that’s what happened, then that is what happened. You can take that to the bank.”

Richard chuckled. “Says the woman who’s sleeping with Nick. Of course you can take her word for what happened, everybody. Sure, let’s end the career of our biggest rainmaker because Nick told Scotty just what happened.” He shook his head. “This is a kangaroo court, or at least they’re trying to make it that way.”

I groaned. The pitchforks and the torches were out. Things were getting out of control.

And then, out of the blue, the most improbable thing imaginable happened.

Fred stood up and took the floor.

And what he was about to say was something that nobody could have ever foreseen.

Chapter 34

Fred stood up to address the mob, I mean, group. I was watching him, totally prepared for him to lay the hammer down on me like everybody else seemed to want to do. I looked around the room and saw more lackeys just itching to have their say and roast me over the coals.

I looked at George, too, hoping that he would change his mind about voting against me. But, he wasn't looking me in the eye, so I figured that he was still a lost cause.

"Um, I, um, have something to say to the group," Fred said.

I felt kinda sorry for him. He looked like such the stereotypical dweeb, with his slicked-back black hair and trousers that were always slightly too short. I mean, they weren't too short when he was standing up, but, once he sat down, you could see his socks. It was if he was never told what length to get his pants tailored. Assuming that he even had them tailored. His thick black-rimmed glasses, which looked cool on Elvis Costello and Buddy Holly, somehow didn't look so cool on him. They made him look like even more of a nerd.

And his personality was generally that of a geek as well. The best description for the poor guy would be socially awkward. He laughed at things that nobody else laughed at, and he often put *non-sequiturs* into conversation. Like somebody would be talking about last night's episode of *Mad Men*, and he would start talking about Rock Hudson movies. I mean, I can see the connection – Don Draper was kinda like a Rock Hudson - but it was still off the subject, and everybody would look at him and then start talking about *Mad Men* again. As if he hadn't spoken at all.

And that was how the people in the office generally treated him. As if he were invisible. He was annoying to many of the partners there, so they acted as if he didn't exist.

But it wasn't as if the guy was without talent. He had talent in spades. Which was why he was with the firm in the first place, and why he was a senior partner like the rest of us. Just goes to show that one doesn't necessarily have to play well with others to get ahead. If one has talent, one can go far. And Fred certainly did go far, considering his lack of social graces. He just wasn't invited to many parties.

I actually always kinda liked the guy. I tried to invite him to lunch as often as I could. He usually begged off, but sometimes he would come with me, and he

would always act like he was in awe of me somehow. He would be fawning and stammering a lot, which he doesn't usually do, when we had our lunches. He even admitted to me once that he never hung out with anybody who "looked like me," and then got embarrassed for saying that.

As for Portia – he did her bidding, no matter what. She acted sweetly to him because she expected him to be at her beck and call at all times, and he usually was. Then she would talk behind his back. She would call him "the wuss," or "the worm," and do mean imitations of him. To my knowledge, however, Fred didn't know about her cruelty behind his back. At least I assumed he didn't know, considering how up her ass he always was. It was as if the geekiest geek in school got a chance to breathe the same air as the homecoming queen, and Fred seemed star struck by Portia.

So, when Fred asked for permission to take the floor, Portia looked smugly on. She caught my eye, and the look on her face said *pack your bags, O'Hara. You're going down.*

For my part, I had the sinking feeling that she was right.

Fred got up and addressed the group from the front of the room. He didn't just stand up from where he was at the table as did the other guys. I looked at him and he was visibly shaking. He had a piece of paper in his hand, and his hands were trembling.

It seemed odd that he would be so nervous. After all, he was no doubt up there to add to the pile-on. I was mentally preparing myself to leave my office that day for good, and was seeing in my mind all of the packing I was going to have to do. It was going to take several moving men to get me out of there. I always hated moving, too.

Fred cleared his throat several different times. He didn't look at anybody in the room, but, rather, was staring at his piece of paper. His pale face was getting beet red, and he was sweating, even though the room was very temperate.

Finally, after what seemed like hours up there, Fred cleared his throat again and spoke. "Um, I wanted to tell the group what it was that I heard today coming from Portia's office."

My ears perked up. *This is getting interesting after all.*

"Uh, I was in her office this morning when Nick came in to talk to her." He took a deep breath. "I'm very embarrassed to admit that I was right outside the door when she was talking to him, and I could hear what she was saying. I, uh, had my ear pressed to the door."

I looked over at Portia. She no longer had her smug look on her face. If I

didn’t know her better, I would say that she looked like she was just a teensy bit concerned.

William stood up. “And why would you invade Portia’s privacy like that? If she had the door shut when she was talking to Nick, then that would mean that it was a private conversation.”

“I, I, I was curious. I saw Scotty the day that she was hit by the car. She looked pretty devastated. And there was something brewing with Nick this morning. I had never seen him so angry. And, I was, uh, curious about what was going on. I had a feeling that the Nick was angry about something regarding Scotty. I also never believed that he would get that drunk at work, because that just isn’t like him. He’s more professional than that. So, I was curious.”

He looked down at the ground. Poor guy was only human, listening in. Many, many people would do the same under the circumstances. They just wouldn’t admit to it, let alone admit to it to a crowd full of angry men.

He cleared his throat again, and looked at the piece of paper.

I looked at Portia, and her look changed again. Now she looked pissed. She was giving poor Fred the look of death, but he refused to look at her, so he wasn’t aware of this.

“And um, what I heard her say, um, and I wrote it down, um was ‘if I thought that she would have gone that ballistic, I never would have drugged you like that.”

I blinked my eyes rapidly. It barely registered, what he was saying, it was such a surprise. Everybody in the room started buzzing amongst themselves, and William and Richard were getting angry. They rose to their feet.

“That’s hearsay!” William shouted. “Hearsay is no evidence at all.”

And then Pete, who actually finished law school before he decided to become an architect, stood up and said “actually, that’s not hearsay. It came straight from the horse’s mouth. And it’s an admission, so would be valid evidence in court.”

Neil stood up. “Now, everybody be quiet. Fred looks like he has more to say.”

Fred was really shaking now, and Portia was looking like she wanted to burn the poor guy at the stake. But Fred bravely continued. “I also heard her say that ‘Scotty obviously cares more than other people do in this office. So, that’s why I did it to her. To get more of a rise out of her.’ And, later on, she said ‘even if you have proof of what happened…my doing that to you would hardly be considered to be high misconduct.’”

He took a deep breath. “And that’s all. I wrote it all down. So my vote, uh, on

ousting Portia, uh, would be a yes. For that reason alone."

He then took a seat, avoiding everybody's eyes, including mine. Which was too bad, because I desperately tried to make eye contact with him so that I could silently say *thank you*. What he just did was incredibly brave and risky. He was already a social pariah in the office. If Portia still stayed on, then he would be run out of there, or shunned even more. It took real courage to do what he did, and I would be forever grateful to that guy.

I caught Scotty's eye, and she looked thrilled. She obviously thought that Fred's speech was a slam dunk, and that Portia would be through.

I admitted to myself that Fred doing what he did increased my odds, but they were still long.

But, as I looked around the room, it did seem that a corner was turned. Fred's speech definitely changed the atmosphere- guys who were not meeting my eye before, suddenly were. And then Manuel, who was generally a quiet sort, stood up and said "actually, something that Fred said struck me. Because I've thought it as well. Nick is too professional to get stinking drunk at work. I never really believed that story, and this alternative explanation seems to make more sense to me, knowing both Nick and Portia. So, my vote to oust Portia is also a yes."

That seemed to do it. One guy after another stood up and said that the whole story of my being drunk at work didn't seem probable. Most of them said that they were ashamed to have believed the gossip in the first place, and that, come to think of it, drugging me was something that was not out of character for Portia.

I caught Scotty's eye again, and she was beaming. Glowing.

I still felt worried, though. It seemed like things were going our way, but I didn't want to get my hopes up.

Finally, after everybody had their say, the partners took a vote.

George, as usual, was the one who called the vote. "Okay, now, all of those in favor of rescinding Portia's partnership, which, according to the guidelines of this firm's constitution, would entail a buyout of her interest, raise your hand."

I held my breath and raised my hand. There were many others who did so as well. *Are there 42?*

To my surprise, George's hand was raised too. He looked at me and shrugged and smiled. I smiled back. *George isn't so chicken shit after all.*

George counted each hand, and announced "45 are in favor of Nick's motion to rescind Portia's partnership. The ayes have it."

I caught Scotty's eye again. Now she was smiling bigger than I had ever seen

it. She hobbled over to me, and sat down. Then she wrapped her arms around me, and I did the same to her. She was crying hysterically.

To my surprise, I started doing the same.

Chapter 35

I got back to my office with Scotty. All that I wanted to do at that point was hold her and make love to her, like we did earlier. But, I knew that I couldn't do that just yet. There were too many people stopping by to congratulate me.

Pete came by my office. "It's like the scene in the *Wizard of Oz* where the wicked witch was killed and all the mean guards started to celebrate. All of her lackeys are saying that they're really glad that she's gone."

I smiled. I wasn't surprised. Portia had everybody by the balls around here. I would imagine that everybody would be able to breathe easier from that point on.

Others came in to congratulate me, even a few of the guys who voted against me.

"Hope you aren't offended," said Ron, who was one of the "no" votes. "I gave Portia my word, although I really did want to vote with you."

"No offense taken," I said, thinking that the ass-kissing was going to be in full-swing soon from the partners who voted "no." It occurred to me that, now that Portia was leaving, I would be considered to be one of the most prominent members of the firm. Not that I flexed my power in that meeting. No, sir, my feeling was that if it weren't for Fred coming through in the clutch, I might have been gone.

Maybe.

Then again, maybe it would have gone my way no matter what. I would like to think that would have been the case. I would like to have believed that the firm found me important enough to keep, no matter what. But it wasn't looking good earlier today.

George stopped by the office, too. "Hey, Nick, I just wanted you to know. I took an informal head count earlier today for you. While most of the guys around here wouldn't give you a commitment, I still think that you would have won this, even without Fred. Most of the guys were more than willing to give you the benefit of the doubt, and almost everybody believes that you're too valuable to let go. Fred just made it a little bit easier for them to get to yes for you."

"Thanks, George," I said. "And, uh, thanks for your vote."

"Well, I thought about it. And voting no would have just been wrong. You've been a great ally. Eh, Portia's probably going to tell my wife about my dirty little

secret, but I thought about it, and maybe it's for the best that she knows. That way we can deal with it. Everything happens for a reason, you know."

Even Gregory, William and Richard came down, *en masse*, to try to make nice. "Hey, Nick," Gregory said. "No hard feelings, I hope. Portia has always been a part of our tight alliance, so you gotta do what you gotta do, even when it's distasteful. For the record, I believe you about what happened."

William and Richard said in unison "I do too."

Yeah, right, sure you do. "No worries," I said. "I would think that Portia would have had your balls in a glass jar if you would have let her go down in flames." I raised my eyebrow, knowing that I just insulted all of them, but not really caring. They could really kiss my ass with their newfound coming to Jesus.

Finally, Portia herself came by. She had a large box in her hands, and she was ordering, over the phone, some moving men to come by and get her things out of her magnificent office. There was a ton of stuff in there, including many priceless artifacts, so I was surprised that she would just call a moving service to retrieve these things.

She hung up the phone and put the box down on the floor. "Well, Nick, you finally won. I have to hand it to you. Didn't think that you had the cajones to follow through." And then she looked at Scotty. "Scotty, just wanted to let you know. I think you're incredibly talented. Sorry for my bad behavior. Keep your chin up. You're going to go far, I just know it."

And then she turned on her heel and walked away without another word.

I looked at Scotty, and she looked like she had sympathy for Portia. She blinked away some tears. "Oh, why did she have to say that? I was so happy to see her leave, and now I just feel bad," she said.

I walked over to her, and put my arm around her. "Scotty, honey, I think that was probably the reason why she said it. Manipulative people know just how to push buttons. Although I will say that she had privately told me the same thing – that she thinks that you're very talented. But she probably only told you that to your face because she wanted you to feel bad."

Scotty looked unconvinced.

"And," I said. "Whenever you start to feel badly for Portia, just remember Mr. Lucas, and how you never would've ended up on that island if it weren't for Portia's despicable actions."

At that, Scotty nodded. "That's true. Portia is a dangerous woman."

I looked at Scotty longingly. "Stay right here," I said. "I want you more right

now than I ever have. But I need to pay a visit to somebody."

She nodded. "Yes. You do need to see Fred."

I smiled. Scotty was starting to know me so well.

∞

I walked down to Fred's office and knocked on his open door. He was sitting there at his desk, looking over some blueprints, his head in his hands.

He looked up when I got there, and motioned me into his office. "Hi N-Nick," he said. "Come in."

I sat down. "Listen, Fred, I just wanted to thank you for what you did today. That took a lot of balls, and I admire you thoroughly for coming through for me like that."

His face got red, and he seemed uncomfortable, as he usually does with me. But he did seem more at ease than when I first appeared in his office, as his speech was more fluent than it was.

"It's okay, N-nick. Sometimes you have to do what's right, even if it hurts."

I smiled at him. "Well, thank you. Losing Portia hurts you, though, doesn't it?"

He nodded his head. "I never had a chance with her, I know, but a guy can dream." Then he shrugged his shoulders. "But maybe it was for the best after all. Perhaps I could find a real woman now that my fantasy one is gone."

I was looking for a way to show my appreciation, and it struck me on how I could do that. I would find him a woman.

"Hey Fred," I said. "I know of a few women that you might like to meet. You really have a lot to offer somebody, even though I get the feeling you don't think so."

He looked at me with gratitude in his eyes. "Uh, really? You would introduce me to a few women?"

"Sure," I said. "There's a lid for every pot, they say."

He shook his head. "Nobody has ever done something like that for me. I'm too, uh, awkward to meet women on my own. So, thanks."

"Not a problem," I said. "Let me make a phone call or two, and we can go on a double date."

He smiled. "That would be great, uh, Nick. And, really, I've been meaning to say, congratulations on getting somebody like Scotty. She's really somebody special. She's always, uh, been really nice to me. She's one of the few women who talk to me and really seems interested in what I have to say. So, you've got

a good one there.”

I smiled. Scotty going out of her way to be nice to Fred surprised me, but it really didn’t. She was always drawn to the underdogs. She explained that to me by saying that she always felt that she was an underdog herself, so she wanted to make other underdogs feel less shunned.

And one thing was for sure. Fred was absolutely right when he said that I got a good one.

I couldn’t agree more.

Chapter 36

Scotty

I felt like I had once again been put through the emotional wringer, just in the past few hours or so. I didn't feel right when I left Nick's office this morning. He looked so ill at ease, and I had never before seen him look that way. It was almost as if he was very fearful about something, and I knew what that something was.

I thought that he was thinking that he was going to lose today.

So, Charlie brought me back to the building, and I made my way up to Nick's loft, with Jack's help. But I was feeling so bad about seeing Nick like that. I couldn't shake it.

"So," Jack said, as he helped me get from the lobby to the elevator. "How'd it go?"

"Fine," I said. "But I'm really worried about Nick."

"Why, love?"

"He looked scared and doubtful. He's usually so confident and such a bad-ass. But not today. I didn't like the look in his eyes."

Jack waved his hand dismissively. "Scotty, he's got this. If there's one thing that I know about that boy is that he's always in control. Ain't nobody gonna bring him down. So don't worry about it. Let's just go back up to the loft, order a pizza and watch girly movies all day long. Take your mind off of it. And I know the one movie that you watch when you're depressed or upset, and I got it all ready to go."

"Oooh, *The Way We Were?*"

"Bingo. Let's watch the movie and then the movie with the director's commentary. We'll open up a bottle of wine and get under the covers and have a ball today."

That brought my spirits up considerably. Leave it to Jack to remember how much I loved that movie, and how much I watched it when I was depressed. Yeah, the movie itself was kinda depressing, but, yet, there was also something about it that made me think of true love between opposites. Like Nick and me. And the way that Hubbell looked at Katie at the end of the movie – it was heartbreaking, really.

Jack and I popped some popcorn and got the movie out. It would have been perfect if it were raining outside, but, alas, it wasn't. Still, I didn't feel guilty

doing this because my leg was broken. I also hadn't had the chance to start school, even though it began last week. That concerned me, but I was waiting for Nick to take me to campus so that he could talk to my instructors and get my assignments for me that I missed. So, my life was about to begin again in earnest, once I got back to school and working. I felt that this was going to be one of the last truly lazy days for a while.

We watched the movie, but I didn't partake of any wine. I couldn't shake the feeling that Nick needed me. He didn't say as much. But I wondered if he was still trying to protect me when he didn't invite me to the meeting. I also wondered if there was any way that I could help out.

After the movie was over, Jack said "now, let's take a little break before watching it again with the director's commentary."

I nodded my head and said nothing. For some reason, the movie didn't take my mind off of my issues. I was still lost in thought.

"Scotty. Earth to Scotty," Jack said.

"I'm sorry, were you saying something to me?"

"Yes. I said that I wanted to take a break and get something to drink. I don't think that you're in the mood for an adult beverage, so I was going to bring you some orange juice."

I nodded again. "Sure, Jack, bring me some."

Jack stared at me. "Oh, okay. We'll have to do this some other time."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because you're completely checked out. Now, you best be going over to the firm and giving your two cents. Otherwise, you're going to be mad at yourself, and nobody wants to be around Scotty when she's mad at herself."

"Do you really think that I should do that? I mean, Nick didn't ask that of me. Would I be intruding?"

"No, Scotty, you wouldn't be intruding. Anyhow, you probably need to give your story to the partners. Nick certainly can't give his story, because he was passed out when it happened."

My heart started racing, but I knew that Jack was absolutely right. I needed to give my side of the story to the partners, and I needed to do it quickly. The meeting was at 4, and it was already 3:15. It was heavy traffic, so I was afraid that I wouldn't make it on time.

"Okay, then. I need to call Charlie and get my rear end over there."

"Already on it," Jack said, reaching for his phone. He called Charlie and then looked at me. "He'll be downstairs in about five minutes."

“Thanks, Jack. What would I-“

“Do without me? Oh, your life would be so much less colorful, that’s for sure. Now, let’s get you downstairs and into Charlie’s limo and you go and give those boys hell. Show them what for.”

Which was how I ended up at Nick’s firm just in time. He was surprised to see me, of course. I tried to text him when I got in the limo, but he apparently didn’t see it. And, when I got to the conference room, I saw that Nick looked a little bit besieged. I was glad that I could help, but the room seemed hostile.

But when Fred got up and gave his testimony, I knew. Nick didn’t know, but I did. Fred, even though he was somebody who wasn’t very well respected at the firm, was also somebody who was unfailingly honest, and everybody knew that. He wasn’t somebody who would make stuff up, so when he said that he heard Portia saying those things, then he really did hear it. Nobody in that firm doubted it. I looked around the room while Fred was talking, and nobody was looking like they were about to call bullshit.

Still, I felt badly for Fred. He obviously was terrified of being up there, and I could just imagine what Portia was thinking. She did look like she wanted to murder Fred slowly and painfully. But he didn’t waver. Good for him. I always did like that guy. He was socially awkward, but always so nice to me, so I tried to go out of my way to make him feel just a little bit less of a pariah at the firm. And now he was coming through for Nick, so I liked him even more.

I did wonder why Portia was dumb enough to admit to Nick that she did that. I figured that she would deny it all, but, apparently, she thought that there was no way that she would get into trouble for it because it would be impossible to prove. So, she didn’t try to deny it, and Fred heard her admission.

Funny how things go sometimes. Just goes to show that you really can’t plan things that much. You can do all you can to prepare for life’s little adventures, but, in the end, things like this just come down to luck. In this case, Nick and I were damned lucky that Fred was being nosy and that Fred had the courage to actually present his case to the partners. He didn’t have to rise to the occasion, but he did. And I would be forever grateful to him for that.

I was happy that Nick was going to thank Fred personally, which was only the right thing to do.

At some point, Nick came back into the office. He shut the door and sat down on the couch next to me. “So, I have a project now. Find Fred a real woman.”

I couldn’t contain my smile. “Oh, that would be so sweet. He really needs

that. Somebody who treats him better than Portia did."

"You've forgiven Portia, haven't you?"

"Yes. But how did you know?"

"You said her name instead of referring to her as 'that woman.'"

"Yeah. Well, I feel badly for her, actually. She obviously has mental issues."

"The only issues that she has is that she's entitled. She feels that she has to have anybody or anything that she wants, and, if she can't get them legitimately, she has to get them in some other way. I don't feel sorry for her, although I don't think that she's necessarily evil. She's just very misguided. Very misguided."

"And how," I said. "Anyhow, I feel that I'm going to be able to breathe when I come to work. God, how I dreaded working with her. She made me feel incompetent like nobody ever has. Even my mother in her most drunken state didn't say the things to me that Portia did."

Nick smiled. "I love that you're going to be able to thrive here now. Nothing is going to hold you back. Just don't end up schooling me. That would wound my manly ego."

I smiled. "Don't worry about that. I'll never be able to school you. Nobody will be able to. You're going to be a legend one day, you know that."

"One day?" he said with a laugh. "Just kidding. Well, thank you. And, thank you for showing up. I didn't want to involve you, but it does mean the world to me that you cared enough to get involved yourself."

"Of course, I had to get involved. What kind of a girlfriend would I be if I just sat home watching movies with Jack and eating popcorn, while you were here in the lion's den? I had to help out. I mean, look at what you went through to save me from that pervert on the island. If you go through those kinds of lengths for me, the least I can do is help you out when you need me."

At that, Nick wrapped his strong arms around me tightly. I had my head in his chest and could smell his aftershave and cologne. He always smelled so good – freshly showered and slightly woodsy. I could also feel his heart beating.

"Oh, Scotty, what would I do without you? I really don't even remember the time when you weren't in my life, and we've only been together for a matter of weeks. Weird, huh?"

I nodded my head. "I feel the same way. It's like we are linked inextricably together now, so whatever affects the one affects the other."

And then he led me by the hand to the couch. "I know that we just made love a couple of times earlier," he said, "but I want nothing more right now than to be inside of you again. So, wait right here while I go and lock the door."

I got excited as I saw him get up to lock the door. I always anticipated being with him in an intimate way, because it was always so good. I never in a million years thought that I could be with somebody, anybody at all, without fear, after all that had happened in my past. I thought that Mr. Lucas had permanently damaged me to the point that I could never have a normal relationship. Yet, Nick had managed to show me that there are decent and kind men out in the world. Men who could be trusted never to hurt me.

Which was another reason why seeing Nick and Portia together had devastated me beyond measure. It had made me question whether or not there would be a decent man for me. To do something like that after I had opened up completely – that would put me past the point of no return. It was such a relief to find out what had really happened.

Nick made his way back to the couch next to me, and he sat down. He soon was kissing me, and gently feeling his way up my thigh. As I felt his hands on my waist and breast, and his mouth on my privates, I felt the familiar tingle that radiated throughout my entire body. Never in my life did I think that I could feel such powerful orgasms from such simple acts. His tongue was just so commanding and gentle, and he knew just where to touch and caress. I was in awe of how well he knew his way around my body and my privates, considering that we had known one another for such a short time.

He stopped his gentle tongue caresses of my netherworld, and he was entering me slowly and easily. I bit my lower lip to keep from crying out, but it was almost painful to keep from doing so. I was just such brought to the height of ecstasy with every thrust and caress. He was whispering in my ear “you’re so beautiful and sexy. God, sometimes I feel that I could live like this, inside of you all of the time. You don’t know what you do to me.”

I felt sublime. That was the only way to explain how Nick was making me feel. Sublime.

At some length, Nick groaned and then laid down on top of me.

And then he said something that took me completely by surprise.

He was stroking my naked belly, and said “you know, maybe one day we can stop using condoms. I know that you still aren’t using anything, but it would be so nice to have a child with you. Have you ever thought about that?”

I shook my head. I had to admit that the thought had rarely crossed my mind. I never thought that I would get to a place where I had a solid enough relationship that I would be able to raise a child with somebody. And there was one thing that I knew that I didn’t want – and that was to bring a child into a

relationship that wasn't solid. Having been raised in a very dysfunctional setting with my mother and her revolving door of men, I wanted any child of mine to have a permanent father and mother.

"I, I, I have to admit that I haven't really thought about it that much. Are you really interested in that?"

"Of course," he said. "I do think about it all the time with you. I, well, I have two beautiful girls back in Kansas City. Uh, because of the way that I was living my life, the judge decided that they have to live with my ex. I've had lawyers working on it, so that I can get at least half-time custody, but Rielle is fighting it tooth and nail. My dream is that they can come and stay with me some, and that they can have a little brother or sister. It would be so nice to raise a child with somebody that I actually love."

This was more information from Nick than I had ever received about his life before me. It somewhat astounded me to find out that he had children. I guess it didn't occur to me that this was the case, because he never mentioned them before.

"Oh, I'm very sorry to hear about your ex," I said. "It must be so hard for you to be away from your children like that."

Nick looked sad. "Yeah, it is. It really is. They were truly the only good things that came out of my relationship with Rielle. There was just so much bitterness between she and I that the children became casualties of our anger with one another. But I'm looking at getting a house in Connecticut very soon that I can use as a weekend retreat, and my hope is that April and Charlotte can come and visit at least once a month and spend the summers here. We'll see about that."

I just looked at him and smiled. I hadn't entertained the thought of children, but I could see it with him. I could see a lot of things with him that I had never before dreamed to be possible. A solid relationship, stability, love, sex and family – all of these things were now within my reach, where they never were before.

Finally I said "I'd love to have children with you. I mean, it's too soon now, but I definitely could see you as the father of my children. My future children."

He longingly stroked my belly some more. It was as if he really didn't want to wait, but knew that we should. Pragmatically, anyhow, it would be best to wait. We were together right then, and happy. But that could change at any moment. I really wanted to be married and rock-solid before I even thought about something like that.

“Well, you’re right, of course,” he finally said. “I mean, I could see forever with you, but I have to make you see that as well. And you need to finish school and get your career underway before even thinking about bringing a new child into the world.” And then he chuckled. “So funny. At one point, I was seriously thinking about getting a vasectomy. Thank god I didn’t, huh?”

“Why were you thinking about that?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I was just so bitter at that time. I thought about a lot of things. The future didn’t look so good about a year or so ago. And now…well, let’s just say that the future looks considerably different than before. Much better.”

I stroked his arm and looked him in the eyes. There was just so much love and passion in those eyes, that I actually did start to see forever in him, just like he said that he saw in me. And I could see our family in the future. With Uncle Jack hopefully living nearby, of course. I think I would be lost without Jack in my life in some way.

Finally I said “I would like to have children with you, Nick. Not right now, but definitely in the near future. I think that you’d be a great daddy.”

He smiled big when I said those words, and then he whispered “Oh, you made my day,” as he thrust inside of me again.

Chapter 37
Nick

I had brought up the subject of children to Scotty, but I really didn't mean to so soon. The words just came tumbling out of my mouth before I even had the chance to think. Which was like me, because I often spoke without thinking, but not like me at the same time.

It occurred to me that I had never before wanted to have children with a woman. Rielle didn't really count, because our first child together was a total accident. The condom broke and I wasn't aware of the thing called "Plan B." Which was how Rielle and I ended up married in the first place, because I wanted to do the right thing. But Charlotte totally changed my perspective and my life, so I didn't regret it at all. If there was one thing that I knew, and that was that Rielle, no matter how I felt about her, was put into my life for a reason, and that was to bring my girls into the world.

But with Scotty – I really wanted to have children with her. It was crazy how much I wanted that. I was being totally selfish, and I knew that – Scotty had a long way to go before she could get to the point where raising a child would even be practical. She had to finish school, and she was crazily talented, so I hoped that her ambition would take her places, much like my ambition took me places. I mean, I would hire a nanny, of course, to help out, but Scotty's life would be inextricably changed by having children, and I didn't want to derail her career.

So, I had to hold off on that. I didn't want to bring it up to her so soon, but, somehow, I did. The horse was out of the barn, so I only hoped that I wouldn't scare her away by bringing up this subject so soon.

But, as usual, when you make plans, god laughs. And He did laugh again. Because the topic of having children with Scotty took a turn that I didn't anticipate, and couldn't anticipate. And neither could she.

∞

The first issue that cropped up and presented a possible roadblock of my making plans with Scotty to have a child was that there was something that she wasn't telling me. Namely, that she quite possibly would be a mother sooner than she had hoped.

"Uh, Nick, there was something that I didn't tell you that day when we, you

know, talked about having children," she said. We were having dinner together. Jack was out with his new Burberry Boy, which was how Scotty referred to Jack's new fling, Lance, not wanting to call him by his name because then she "might get too attached, and, knowing Jack, he won't be around long."

"What's that, love?" I asked her, taking her plate to the kitchen. I had actually started to like cooking, to my total surprise, and it helped that I had such a willing guinea pig for my culinary experiments. I still burned things from time to time, but I mastered the art better than I had ever hoped. Consequently, Scotty and I actually ate at home most nights, and I didn't even rely on the pizza delivery guy as much as I used to.

Life was starting to get back to normal, and it felt great. Both Scotty and I felt that a 1,000 pound weight was lifted when Portia left. Scotty had gone back to work and school, and I could tell that she felt so much more freedom at work and so much like a dark cloud was gone from there. The change in her mood was wonderful to see.

I had also hired a team of lawyers to ensure that Mr. Lucas was not legally related to Scotty anymore, so that what had happened at that hospital could never happen again. Turns out that it was a matter of paperwork not being filed that should have been, years ago. The paperwork was filed, and that was that. Mr. Lucas had no more legal claim to Scotty. The same team of lawyers was also gearing up to sue the living bejesus out of that damned hospital for negligence, as they clearly should never have let Scotty go with that predator, especially as she had clearly stated her wishes on the matter. So, these were two very positive developments.

Yet there was something wrong with her, I could see. I wasn't quite sure what it was.

"Well, uh, right before I, uh, had my accident, I got an upsetting phone call about my brother, Aaron."

"What phone call was that?"

"From child protective services. They, uh, wanted to talk to me."

My heart started to sink. But, after a moment or so, I started to think that if Scotty got custody of Aaron that it wouldn't be so bad. We'd have to hold off on having a child, but, let's face it, we probably needed to hold off on that anyhow until we were married. Which I was becoming more and more positive was going to happen sometime in the near future.

"Go on," I said. "What did they want?"

"Well, it turned out that they just wanted to talk to me. To prepare me for the

possibility that my mother will, uh, lose Aaron sometime soon. She's being monitored closely. I know that she's trying. She has always tried, but she just can't seem to kick the booze. I, I, I, don't really know what to do about that. I mean – "

"If you have to take Aaron, temporarily or permanently, that won't be a problem," I said. "There is plenty of room here, and that will inspire me to get that house in Connecticut that much sooner."

Her eyes filled with tears. "I don't know what to say," she said. "I thought that you wouldn't want to be with me if you knew that I, you know, might have to take care of my little brother. I mean, I'm not officially living here. I'm just staying here until my leg is fully healed. That was a major concern for me in taking care of Aaron, because I don't have room where I live. But it means the world to me that you would be willing to help me out."

I took her hand. "Scotty, whatever happens, I'm right here. Whatever you need. I want you to eventually move in here, you know. I didn't want to push it, but if you get Aaron, then that means that you will just have to move in that much quicker. Which I don't really mind."

Scotty shook her head. "I love you so much, Nick. But I can't ask that. And I'm worried about Jack. He won't be able to swing that place by himself."

I shrugged my shoulders. "So, I buy Jack a place in this building. I'll charge him whatever he can afford, and that solves that problem right there."

Scotty's eyes got wide. "Really, Nick? I, I, I don't know what to say. You would do that?"

"Sure," I said with a shrug. "Hey, it's an investment, you know? With the way these lofts are always going up in price, it would be a shrewd thing to buy another unit in this building. So, Jack would be doing me a favor by looking after the place." I really didn't care about the fact that buying a loft for Jack would be an investment, although I knew that it would be. I really wanted to make sure that Scotty didn't feel bad for leaving Jack high and dry, if she moved in with me, and I also wanted to make sure that she had him around. Jack made her happy, and I knew that having Jack close by, even if she moved in with me, was something that she would definitely want. Everybody would win in that situation.

Scotty looked dumbfounded. "I, you, uh…" And then she started to cry. "I can't believe that I found somebody like you. I can't believe that somebody like you even exists."

I smiled. "I do exist, Scotty, and I would do anything for you. Anything.

Now, perhaps this is all premature. You might not get Aaron. But I do see us living together, and more, one day. In the near future. But, at the same time, I don't want to rush into things. So, just monitor the situation and let me know. I'm good with anything."

Her entire face lit up, and she hobbled her way over to me and sat on my lap. "I love you, Nick. I never thought that I could ever love somebody as much as I love you."

"Just remember that, my love. And, for the record, I feel the exact same way about you."

So, that was a potential roadblock in my having a family with Scotty.

But there was something that came up that was even more devastating. And quite possibly would affect our life plans even more than the Aaron situation.

Chapter 38

It happened about a month after Scotty had moved in. Her leg was almost healed, and Jack was still staying with us, and also was staying with Lance some of the time. Scotty didn't tell me as much, but I had the feeling that she still wanted Jack to stay with us because she still wasn't entirely over what had happened to her with Mr. Lucas, and she felt that she could tell Jack things that were hard for her to tell me.

For my part, I was happy to still have Jack around. He was a lot of fun, and I was back to work full-swing, along with my teaching. Scotty was also back at school and work, but she was without me in the loft sometimes, and I wanted to make sure that she had company. I worried about her, because she was still having a lot of nightmares. She would talk in her sleep, and wake up screaming sometimes. I tried to do as much as I could to ensure that she was recovering, and that included ensuring that she had the one person who had always been there for her, long before I came on the scene, to talk to when she needed it.

Also, Scotty was afraid to press charges against Mr. Lucas. At first, she wanted to, very badly. But, when I called the firm where the pervert worked, and he was back in the office, which meant that push was going to come to shove, Scotty didn't want to do it. She was terrified.

So, Jack stayed in the loft because he and I were trying to gently coax her into pursuing charges against the man. I was much gentler than Jack was, though. It was good cop, bad cop – I tried to gently encourage her, while Jack was much more pushy and blunt. I needed Jack for that, as well, to try to push Scotty where she clearly didn't want to go. So, all in all, Jack needed to stay, for all of those reasons, and stay was what he did.

And there was plenty of room in my loft, so Jack didn't really get that much in the way.

Anyhow, I also tried to concentrate on my new side project, which was finding a woman for Fred. I didn't really know where to start at first. After all, I knew a lot of women. But they weren't women that I wanted Fred to know. They were my short-termers from before I met Scotty. Penelope and Amber, and other models who I ended up sleeping with, both in three-ways with Penelope and sometimes one on one. I hadn't been in the city for long enough to know many quality women, aside from Ava. And, unfortunately, Ava was clearly out of the question. Nate told me that I devastated poor Ava, and she wasn't in the market

for anybody new.

Which was too bad. Ava might have been a good option for Fred.

But, then again, maybe not. After all, Ava fell in love with me. I was very different from Fred, so Fred probably wasn't her type.

But Nate was probably a good person to ask about finding somebody who would be Fred's type. After all, Nate had lived in the city since college, and he knew a ton of people – both men and women. Natalie did too, and Nat was such a friendly and social person that she probably had an entire roster of women to choose from. So, I decided to start with them.

And, sure enough, Nate knew somebody who was a sister to his racquetball partner, who might be just the right person. Her name was Melissa, and she was an environmental lawyer who also played in a rock band. And, according to Nate, she was really into geeky men.

"And, Nick, she's quite a stunner too. I mean, if you don't mind tattoos. She keeps them covered up in her day job, of course, but when you see her perform, you see that she has more than a little bit of ink on her."

I nodded my head. The entire thing actually made a bit of sense to me. Fred, the shy geek, with Melissa, the wild rock chick who also has a respectable job? Respectable in the sense that Fred would feel less intimidated. I couldn't see him with somebody who was a rocker full-time, but a part-time one who was an attorney by day? I somehow could see that he might be digging that. Hard.

So, I actually made a date for Fred, Melissa, Scotty and me to meet at *Tao*, which was a hip Asian restaurant on Park Ave. I had been there before, and it was very open-air, with an enormous Buddha in the middle of the room. It was expensive, yet casual, and the food there was phenomenal, so I thought that it would be a good place to have Fred meet Melissa. I hoped and prayed that they would hit it off. Ever since Fred saved my bacon, I found that I was almost obsessed with finding him somebody to make him happy. It was my way of paying him back, but, also, I really just thought that a stand-up guy like him shouldn't have to be alone in life.

That night, Scotty and I got dressed up a little to go and meet Fred and Melissa. Fred, for his part, was totally excited about meeting this mystery woman. I told him all about her – about her tattoos and her rock band, and her environmental causes. As I suspected, Fred was all about a woman like Melissa.

And I had also previously met with Melissa, to size her up a little bit. As Nate said, Melissa was quite the looker. She had black hair and hazel eyes, and was about 5'5" and very petite. She was outspoken and brash, and very talkative.

But, she also was clear that she preferred guys like Fred.

"Now, let's review," she said. "This guy is an architect and he's really shy? And socially awkward?"

"Well, uh, yeah," I said. No use lying to her. She was going to meet the guy, and if I told her that he was some kind of loquacious stud, she probably would've gotten completely pissed. "He is. But he's such a nice guy."

"I believe you," she said. "Count me in."

I was surprised. "Really? That was easy."

"Yeah. Listen, there is one thing I have learned over the years. And that's that I don't want somebody like myself. Two ballbreakers together can never work. That's why my most successful relationships have been with guys who are more on the quiet side. And the geek part I really love, because intelligence means more to me than anything else. So, yeah, I'll meet this guy."

So, as Scotty and I made our way to the restaurant to meet these two, she was totally excited. "This is so cool," she said. "I just love double dates. And I love that you went so out of your way to find a woman for Fred. You are just such a phenomenal person."

I smiled. I was actually thinking that I was becoming a better person by the day. I didn't know if it was because Scotty made me want to be a better man, or that, perhaps, I was just ready to become better. All that I knew was that I was a better person than I had ever been before. I was becoming the man that I had always imagined I would be. And that made me happy, and it really made Scotty happy as well.

We got to the restaurant and found that Fred and Melissa were already there. I looked at their body language from afar and was very encouraged. Fred was smiling, big, and Melissa was leaning into him. Melissa took off his glasses and put them on her face, and I saw her touching his arm a lot.

Things are going to go great tonight. Scotty and I approached the two and sat down at the table.

"Hey, you," I said to Fred. "Guess you guys got here a little bit early, didn't ya?"

Fred's face got red. "Yeah. Uh, I took the liberty to call Melissa yesterday and we kinda had it arranged to meet before you guys got here."

"Yeah," said Melissa. "You know, see if we like each other a little bit. Then, if we didn't dig each other, we'd just cut out before the two of you even got here. Saves an awkward meeting."

"Well then," I said. "Guess it's a good sign that you both are still here, huh?"

Fred smiled. “It’s a good sign indeed.”

Melissa was smiling too. “Betcha didn’t know that Fred is into girl punk. He actually has everything that *Slant 6* has ever recorded.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said. “I guess I’m hopelessly square. Who is that?”

And then the two of them launched into exactly who this group was. I gathered that it was a girl punk band who was out of Washington DC, and was considered one of the paragons of the underground punk subculture.

I had to smile at that one. Not much surprised me, but this did somehow.

As the night wore on, I found that the two of them had even more in common than that. They had both been to Comic Con in San Diego for the past ten years, and they spent the evening talking about all the different things that went on there.

Scotty and I were feeling, more and more, like third and fourth wheels. But Scotty didn’t seem to mind. She was having fun listening to their conversation. She kept nudging me under the table, and she whispered a few times “you did good. How did you know that Fred would like this girl so much? Or that she would like him so much?”

I shrugged. “I just had a feeling. A good feeling.”

Finally, it was time to get the check, and Melissa suggested to Fred that they get together the following evening for dinner at her place and maybe check out some live music in the Village. Fred readily agreed to that.

We all got into our respective vehicles, and gave hugs all around.

Fred took me aside. “Thank you,” he said. “I don’t know how to thank you, but thank you.”

“Sure,” I said. “Anytime.” I had to laugh inwardly. Turns out that Fred was so much less socially awkward in the right environment. With the right person. A lid for every pot, so they say. Who knew that Fred’s lid would be so different from what I imagined him to be? But I was thrilled to be helping him out. And I predicted that he would come out of his shell at work, as well. I was counting on it.

On the ride home, Scotty held my hand. “You really did good. I’m just amazed sometimes. You just seem to have a read on people.”

“Nah,” I said. “I just got lucky with this one. I figured that I’d go with somebody who would be off the beaten path, somebody who I wouldn’t necessarily imagine would go for him, and see where it goes. I had no clue that they would hit it off, to be honest, so I’m as surprised as you are, really.”

Scotty laughed. “Well, that was a fun night. That food was so amazing, too.

I'm so full. Of course, it was Asian food, so, you know what they say. We'll probably end up getting McDonald's on the way home."

True that, I thought. True that.

So, it was a good night, overall. I did my good deed in repaying Fred for his courage in helping me to oust Portia, so I was happy about that. Scotty and I were in a great place, overall, even though she was still having night terrors and sometimes had trouble sleeping. But I was supporting her, and making sure that she was getting through all of that.

But I couldn't anticipate what was going to happen next.

Scotty went into the bathroom to get ready for bed. For my part, I plopped down on the bed and proceeded to do some light reading before I hit the sack.

But I was roused out of my smug little world when I suddenly heard Scotty screaming.

I rushed into the bathroom. "What's going on?" I asked her. She was lying on the floor, and tears were streaming down her face.

"Wha-wha-what's happening to me?" she asked. And then I looked at the toilet, and I knew what she was talking about. It was filled with blood, and there was pink fluid that was running down her leg. More blood was coming out of her orifice, and then I saw that there were large clots on the floor next to her.

Don't panic, Nick. Inside, my mind was racing. I had no idea what was causing this, and I hoped and prayed that it wasn't something life-threatening.

Scotty also appeared to be in severe pain. She was holding her abdomen, and wincing.

"Honey, do you need me to call you an ambulance, or do you think that you can manage if I just take you into the hospital right now?" I didn't want to call an ambulance if that wasn't absolutely necessary, because that might scare her more than ever.

She shook her head, her tears streaming down her face. "No, Nick, please just take me in. I hate hospitals, but I'm really scared right now."

"Okay, then. Can I clean you up before you go?"

She nodded her head. "Please do. I'm really embarrassed to go anywhere with all of this blood on me."

I gently picked her up, and put her into the shower. I got out a sponge and made sure that all of the blood on her legs was washed off, and then I carried her out and started to dress her. "Honey, do you have any pads? I don't think that you use them, but I need to ask anyhow." It was then that I cursed myself for not having a First Aid kit at the house. That was something that I was going to have

to invest in for the future, so that I wasn't caught unawares in situations like this.

She shook her head. "No, Nick. I, what am I going to do?"

There was a convenience store on my block which was open all night, but I didn't want to leave Scotty to go to it. She looked terrified. She was shaking and crying and holding her stomach in pain. So, I called Charlie to bring me some pads from the store.

"Yes, Mr. O'Hara," Charlie said.

"I'm so sorry to wake you. But I need something quick. Could you bring me some maxi-pads from that convenience store that is open all night? It's right on my block. And I need that ASAP."

"Of course, I will be there in about ten minutes," he said.

"Thanks." Good ol' Charlie – it was 1 AM, but he didn't blink when I needed something from him. Of course, it helped that I paid him a six-figure salary for being my driver and for being at my beck and call whenever I needed him. So there was that. Bringing maxi pads to me in the middle of the night was just part of his job description.

So, I laid down on the floor next to Scotty. She had on her top, but no bottoms. I put an old towel on the floor, and she was sitting on that. The towel was becoming soaked with blood and clots. She was starting to hyperventilate, so I rubbed her back and then stood up and got out the inhaler that I gave her the last time she had problems breathing because she was so distraught.

She sucked on the inhaler while I pumped it. "There, there," I said. "Shhhhh. Charlie's going to be here any moment with some pads, and then I'm going to take you straight to the closest hospital."

She nodded her head, and clung on to me. "What's happening to me?"

I didn't know. I just sat there with her, feeling helpless, and wishing that I had a clue on what to tell her. Her hemorrhaging had come on so suddenly, so it was just something that was clearly out of my realm of knowledge. But my mind was spinning, hoping and praying that it wasn't some kind of tumor or something like that.

I honestly didn't know how I would deal with something like that. If Scotty were really sick. Of course, I would be there for her and would be her source of strength, but if something happened to her like what had happened to Michelle…

I took a deep breath. I remembered how everybody in the family was affected by what had happened to her. How I had never seen my father cry until the day of the funeral. How my mother seemed to never stop crying for months on end. How I was pushed aside in their grief. There was such a devastation and an

emptiness after Michelle's passing. And I remembered, as I sat on the floor with Scotty, that Michelle's diagnosis came after she started bleeding much like this. The cancer was swiftly moving, and, by the time they found it, there was nothing that they could do.

Calm down, O'Hara. Calm down. Scotty's not sick like Michelle. She's not. She's just not. Would fate be that cruel? Give me somebody like Scotty, and then snatch her away?

By that time, her sobbing had turned to low whimpering. She was still shaking, and still clinging on to me, but there were no more tears. Just the low whimpering, which sounded somewhat like a cat that was in pain.

I felt impotent, so I just sat there on the floor, stroking her hair and her back and whispering comforting words to her. "It's okay, Scotty. It's going to be okay. Shhhh, Charlie's going to be here at any minute, and then I can get you dressed and I'll take you in. I'm sure that there's nothing wrong with you that can't be fixed. The doctors will fix you."

I silently prayed that I wasn't lying to her. That the doctors really would fix her.

Where was Charlie? What was taking him so long? I looked at the clock, and then realized that it had only been around 20 minutes since I had called him. He said that he would be here in about a half hour, so I needed to stop being so impatient.

But I felt like I did when Scotty was missing. Every second dragged on, and every minute seemed like hours. I could do nothing but hold her, and, every so once in a while, I got her back in the shower and rinsed off her legs.

Finally, Charlie was knocking on my door.

"Just a minute, Scotty. I'll be right back."

She said nothing, but just nodded her head. She continued to make the little mewling sounds, and the tears were starting again. But she tried to look brave, and I loved her for that. Poor girl had been through so much, and now this. How much more would she be able to take?

I got back with the pads in my hands. I also had a fresh pair of underwear. I put one of the pads in the underwear and put it on her. And then I helped her put on a skirt, because she didn't want to ruin a pair of pants, and I helped her off the floor. I then got her wheelchair out – usually she used crutches, but, in this case, it would be imperative that I be able to get her to the hospital in a short period of time, so I knew that a wheelchair would be necessary. I picked her up and carried her down the stairs, and then ran back up and carried the wheelchair down. I put

her in her wheelchair, and then put a blanket over her, and wheeled her to the elevator.

While I stood and waited for the elevator, Scotty was clutching her blanket and crying softly. My heart went out to her, and I silently prayed, more than I have ever prayed since Scotty went missing, that she would be okay. That this was something that was fixable. I tried not to let my mind go to the alternative – after all, I didn't think that Scotty had a doctor. She wasn't getting regular check-ups. Something could have been festering for some time, and she was just now showing symptoms.

But I wasn't going to get ahead of myself. Scotty was going to be okay. She was going to be fine. I took a deep breath and repeated that mantra to myself as the elevator arrived and took us down to the lobby floor.

Charlie was still waiting for us, because I asked him to go ahead and take us to the hospital. He opened the door and I helped Scotty in. Then I rode in the backseat with her, all the way to the hospital.

Chapter 39

Scotty

I'm in the back of the limousine with Nick, racing towards the hospital, and all that I can think about is my fear that there is something seriously wrong with me. I had no idea what would cause me to suddenly hemorrhage like I was doing, unless it was something that was serious. Life-threatening. Like a bleeding tumor or something like that.

Nick was being so good, but I could tell that he was upset as well. He tried hard to hide the fear in his eyes, but I was getting to know him pretty well, so I could tell his moods by now. For my part, I was panicking a little, so I was crying and whimpering, but I tried to calm down. For Nick, if nothing else.

Finally, we got to the hospital. Nick gently carried me out of the car and put me in my wheelchair. He pushed me into the ER, and checked me in.

The nurse handed him a chart to fill out.

"We'll fill this chart out later. Right now, the doctor has to see her. She's bleeding and she's scared, and I'm sorry, but neither of us wants to take the time to fill out this chart."

The nurse looked at Nick with a dirty look. She no doubt heard this a hundred times a day. But it was really silly, though. Filling out charts when you're in pain or bleeding or whatever. I had no idea why they couldn't just give me a room to check me out and then let me fill out that damned chart.

"It's procedure," she said.

"You mean that if a person comes in here with a bullet, you're going to make that person fill out a chart before you see him?"

The nurse all but rolled her eyes. "Of course not, but this woman here doesn't look like she has something like a bullet. So, please fill out the chart." Her eyes said *and the faster you fill that goddamned thing out, the faster you're going to see the doctor.*

Nick just shook his head and wheeled me into the waiting room so that we could fill out the chart. He went through and asked me all the questions, and I just shook my head "no" for every one. I was pretty lucky, I guess. I hadn't had hardly any major illnesses, and the accident where my leg was broken was really the first major accident that I had ever had. As far as I knew, no major medical issues ran in my family. Unless you count alcoholism as being a major illness, that is.

Then he handed me all the paperwork to sign, and I did, with a shaking hand. My handwriting was terrible under the best of circumstances. I would imagine that my signature was probably illegible.

He handed the paperwork to the nurse, and she took it and said “okay, thank you. The doctor will see you as soon as possible.”

“As soon as possible better be within the next few minutes. My girlfriend is bleeding here.”

I could feel the blood pool and congeal, and fill up the pad that was in my panties. I felt embarrassed and humiliated just sitting there bleeding, and I didn’t quite know what to do about it. Thankfully, Nick thought to pack a bag with extra pads and underpants, so, if nothing else, I could clean myself up a little bit in the bathroom, if the doctor didn’t take too long.

Nick still stood there, next to the obstinate nurse. I hoped that the nurse wasn’t someone who would make me wait longer just out of spite. She did look annoyed enough to do just that.

I think that he was trying to intimidate her into making sure that I got in to see the doctor quicker, but I hoped that it wouldn’t backfire.

Thankfully, it didn’t appear to backfire, because the nurse called my name about a minute later.

“Scotty James,” she said. And Nick came back to wheel me up to the nurse’s station, where another nurse met me and showed me back to an examination room. Once I got into the exam room, I was given a gown and told to strip naked and put the gown on me, tied in the back. Nick helped me out of my clothes, and helped me into my gown, and then pulled up a chair next to me and held my hand.

I was sitting on a metal table, and there was still blood dripping out of me, although it seemed to not be nearly as bad as before. I took some deep breaths and looked at Nick for comfort.

Nick tried to lighten the mood some. “Boy, Scotty, you sure are a drama queen,” he said with a smile and wink. “If you wanted to get out of the house, you should have just said so.”

I tried to smile, but I felt that it was a weak one. I appreciated him trying to joke with me, but my mind was filled with fear of the unknown.

The doctor arrived after a few minutes. Her name was Dr. Montgall, and she was around 30, not much older than that, and was startlingly attractive, with auburn hair and freckles. She was looking at my chart when she came in.

“Okay, Ms. James, it looks like your medical history is pretty clear. What

seems to be the issue here?"

"I, uh, I'm bleeding. And I have no idea why. I'm also passing large clots. Please tell me what's happening to me."

She handed me a cup. "Could you please give me a urine sample?" she asked. "The first thing that I need to check is if you are pregnant."

Pregnant? I suddenly felt the walls closing in on me. Nick and I always used condoms. My heart started beating out of my chest. To think that there was something inside of me that was put there by that monster…

I looked at Nick, and he looked absolutely shocked. Mortified. Angry. So very angry. I thought that he looked like he wanted to go out and find Mr. Lucas, right then and there, and rip him to shreds.

The tears starting coming again. "I, I, I can't be pregnant," I said.

Dr. Montgall looked at me. "Are you saying that you haven't had sexual relations?"

I just shook my head. "No, it's not possible, I…just can't be pregnant."

Dr. Montgall looked at me, and then looked at Nick. I looked at Nick as well, and I saw his eyes trying to convey something to the doctor. She seemed to understand.

"Well, please give me a urine sample. And, I'm sorry, Mr….I didn't get your name," she said, looking directly at Nick.

"Nick O'Hara," he said, standing up. He extended his hand. "I'm Scotty's significant other."

She nodded her head. "Mr. O'Hara. Do you mind meeting with me in private?"

Nick looked at me and then looked back at the doctor. I nodded my head and Nick reluctantly followed her outside of the curtain that surrounded my room.

I laid there staring at the cup, knowing that I was going to have to be helped into the bathroom so that I could pee in it. I wondered how many more humiliations I was going to have to face. And I prayed that this entire thing was a dream. An awful dream. That there was just no way that I was carrying that monster's child. No way.

Nick came back in after a few minutes. "Scotty, honey, let's get you into that bathroom so that you can give the doctor what she's asking for," he said while he gently stroked my hair. And then he softly said "the doctor thinks that you might be having a miscarriage."

At that, I saw that my arm was shaking wildly, and I felt like I was on the verge of collapse. A miscarriage? My mind couldn't comprehend that. That there

was a child inside of me, and had been for a few months. I mean, it seemed that I had gotten a period since my stay on the island. It never occurred to me that there would be something like that happening inside of me.

A child. Mr. Lucas' child.

And, all at once, I felt that I needed to vomit. "Nick, give me that trash can, please, right now," I said. Which he did, in a flash, and I was immediately puking into the can.

The tears were back, with a vengeance, and, this time, I felt that they weren't going to stop. All of my nightmares that I had been experiencing since getting off that island appeared to be haunting me now in my waking hours. Because this was what it felt like – a nightmare. A waking night terror. There was no way that something like this was real.

Whatever it was that was dead inside of me was alien to me. It wasn't something that was ever going to turn into a human being. It was evil, like Mr. Lucas was. It wanted to destroy me. And I could feel it trying to. I could hear it speaking to me, telling me that I would never get away from what that man did. I could try to deny that it happened, and try to live my life in a normal way, but I would never really get away from it. Ever.

I should have felt relief. I should have felt that it was the best possible thing that this alien being was dead. The alternative would have been unspeakable – to bring the seed of that man into this world, and be reminded at every turn about the horrors that befell me in that room, with that man. But I didn't feel relief. I felt violated again. Just to think that this…thing…was ever inside of me in the first place, made me want to claw at my skin and reach in there and bring it out.

Nick was still right next to me, looking at me with those blue eyes that were now filled with sorrow and rage. Sorrow for me and rage at Mr. Lucas. I wondered, as I looked at him, what he thought about all of this. And I wondered about myself – how I managed to effectively sweep my feelings under the rug about Mr. Lucas raping me on that island. Why I ever thought that I could just attempt to blow past the rage that I truly felt at Mr. Lucas, and go on with life as if it had never happened. It did happen, and it happened many, many times in the span of just those few days. It happened so frequently that I literally was on the edge of suicide. But every time it happened, I went into a place where I imagined that it wasn't happening. That was my way of surviving. And now this thing was inside of me, and trying to get out, and it was proof that all that I had tried to forget was really true. I couldn't really deny it any longer, just like I really couldn't deny my feelings about it any longer either.

I blinked away my hot tears, and, in a quiet voice, I asked Nick to help me into the bathroom so that I could give the urine sample that the doctor needed. It didn't really matter at that point. I knew what the result was going to be. It seemed almost preordained.

Nick gently got me off the table, and, just as gently, wheeled me in the bathroom. "Now, I'm going to give you your privacy now, but I'd like to be with you when the doctor examines you. If you want me there."

I just nodded my head as I was wheeled through the bathroom door. I felt numb at that point. Much like when all of that happened to me with Mr. Lucas. Numb. No feelings. I didn't know if it was shock that was causing me to clam up or something else. I only felt that there was no way that I was going to be able to truly access my feelings about any of this.

I peed into the cup, and came back out. Nick took the cup and said "honey, I think that you're supposed to put that cup in that little door in the bathroom. Here, let me do that for you." And he stood up, the cup in his hand, and put it into the door for me. "Okay, then," he said, "I'm going to take you back into the examination room so that we can wait for the doctor to talk to you." And then he got a pair of underwear and a new pad out of the little leather bag that he brought. "But here. Let me help you change before you go back into that exam room."

He helped me into the fresh panties and pad, and then wheeled me back into the exam room, after disposing of both things.

I felt mortified that Nick had to be privy to all of my humiliations. I felt sorry for him, thinking that he was secretly thinking to himself that I was more trouble than I was worth. He really deserved a girl with fewer issues than myself.

And there was also a thought in my head that I didn't want to have children, ever. I knew that I had told Nick that I wanted to, and I did at that time. I really did. But having this feeling of the alien being occupying my womb was just too much. I felt dirty and shameful and like my womb was tainted. That I didn't want any other child to absorb the negative energy that this thing inside of me was putting out.

It wasn't rational, and I knew that, even at that moment in time. But it was a distinctly negative fantasy, and it felt real to me.

Finally, the doctor came back and told me what I already knew. "The pregnancy test came back positive," she said. "I'm going to admit you to the hospital to monitor you. And I need to schedule you for a D&C. We can do this after the fetus has expunged itself, which might take a day or more."

The fetus. It was such an innocent word for what was implanted inside of me by that evil man.

The doctor looked at me. “And, you have had an unusual amount of bleeding for an early miscarriage. I hate to tell you this, but I strongly suspect that you might be carrying multiples. That has been my experience when a woman comes in with this amount of hemorrhaging. Your boyfriend indicated that you were probably only about ten weeks along. Is that what you estimate as well?”

I nodded my head. Ten weeks. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Yet it also seemed like it happened yesterday. It was just something that seemed like it would be haunting all of my waking hours, as well as continue to haunt me when I slept.

Dr. Montgall did look sympathetically at me. “I’m very sorry for this. I know that this is a distressing time for any woman. But if it’s any consolation, it’s a common occurrence and it happens spontaneously more often than not. I hope that you don’t blame yourself.”

I looked at the woman in horror. My mind couldn’t process that she actually believed that this pregnancy was wanted. But that was the implication in her words. Didn’t she know that this baby was most not welcome? Couldn’t she understand that this thing was planted inside of me by an evil man?

No, of course not. Of course she couldn’t see that. Why would she? I was brought in here by this loving man, and any normal person would assume that this child was a product of our love for one another. To think differently would be to give voice to the unspeakable. She didn’t appear that she wanted to do that, to her credit. She obviously wanted to give the benefit of the doubt.

So, I started to calm down. “Uh, Dr. Montgall, I wanted to tell you the truth about this. Because I don’t want there to be any wrong ideas. This, uh, fetus doesn’t belong to this man right here,” I said, taking Nick’s hand, and looking up at him. He looked down at me with such inestimable sorrow that I couldn’t stand it. “It belongs to somebody else. Somebody who’s…not a nice man. So, I’m not sad or heartbroken to be losing it. I’m not quite sure what emotions I’m feeling, or what emotions I’m supposed to be feeling, but sorrow for losing it is definitely not one of my emotions right now. Perhaps it will be later, because every life is sacred, so they say. But, for now, I don’t feel a bit of sorrow for what’s happening to me.”

Poor Dr. Montgall looked as if she had no idea how she was supposed to react to what I was saying to her. “I’m very sorry to hear that,” she finally said. “If you need counseling to try to handle your emotions, then I can refer you to

somebody who might be able to help."

I nodded my head. "Thank you for that. I might take you up on it." I actually thought that I probably wouldn't. To say that I was scared to think about what a counselor might dredge up inside of my screwed-up brain was an understatement. Some emotions were better off left buried, I thought.

I was ready to bury what had happened to me in Mr. Lucas' house of horrors. I was ready to move past it. Sail on past it and marry Nick, if he asked me, and have beautiful babies with him. I was so ready to do all of that, as if those few days of torment had never happened. But this baby wouldn't let me. This baby was a physical reminder that what had happened wasn't just a horrible nightmare. It was real, realer than anything in my entire life.

"Well," said Dr. Montgall. "If you don't mind getting dressed, I'll get you to your room for the evening."

Nick finally spoke up. "I'm going to be able to stay with her tonight, won't I? And I want her to have a private room. I'll pay top dollar for the best room you have."

"I'm sure that can be arranged," she said. "We have a private room with a larger bed, so that you can sleep in the same bed if you so choose."

I looked at Nick, who was nodding his head. I was relieved about this. Having a private room, and having Nick hold me all night, was something that I so needed at that time, so I was relieved that this was an option.

That night, after I got into a nightgown that was thoughtfully brought to me by Nick, and I laid there in the bed with him, anticipating that tomorrow I would have surgery that would effectively cleanse me of the rest of the thing that was implanted in me, I once again let my emotions out. And the tears that flowed out of me that night were by the far the most tears that I had ever shed for that man. He had once again taken something sacred from me, and that was the ability to say that any child that I had with Nick would be my first. It wouldn't be my first. It would be my second, or even my third, child, if the doctor was correct that I was carrying twins.

And, for some reason, I felt that would be taking away something very special.

And, right at that moment, I finally felt my true feelings towards that man. They were no longer veiled. There was a burning hatred for him, for all that he did and all that he had taken from me.

I finally was ready to fry him. And that was something that I was going to do, if it was the last thing that I did in this world.

Chapter 40

Nick

I was lying in bed with Scotty, and I couldn't tell her how I really felt about what she was going through. I couldn't tell her that my overwhelming feeling, right at that moment, was relief. I was so concerned and worried that her bleeding meant something life-threatening, because that was what had happened to Michelle. That was the first sign that there was something seriously wrong with my sister, and my greatest fear was that Scotty would end up like Michelle. Slowly succumbing to a hideous disease that nobody had any control over. And that I would lose Scotty, the person that I loved most in this world, like I lost Michelle. I wasn't sure that I would be able to recover from something like that.

So, when the doctor informed Scotty that she was having a miscarriage, all I could think about was that Scotty wasn't going to die. That was all that I understood. All that I knew. Just that. Yet, I couldn't express this to Scotty. She obviously was devastated, although I wasn't sure exactly why. I only knew that she was. I was holding her, and I could feel her shaking throughout the night. And I had never seen her crying so much. Not even the first night that she was home with me, and I had to get the inhaler for her. I knew that she wasn't crying for the life that was inside of her, and was now "expunging" itself. She said that she felt no sorrow for it. I could only imagine that this entire issue of her becoming pregnant by that monster was bringing up the raw feelings that she was experiencing after coming off that island.

I wish that I knew how to help her. How to erase all that had happened to her. I hated to feel helpless, and that was exactly how I felt in this situation. It occurred to me that I had never been out of control before, in my adult life. I was able to manipulate and control most situations so that I always got what I wanted. But this was one situation where I couldn't do that. Scotty was going through something horrible. It was hard to imagine that she was so traumatized, these past few months, because she was just so good at hiding what she felt. It had really seemed to me that she was recovering nicely, because she seemed so happy and was really getting back into the routine of work and school so well. Then this happened. And it seemed that Scotty was more shattered than I had ever seen her.

I stroked her hair while I laid behind her. She kept waking up, throughout the night.

“Stop, stop, stop. Don’t touch me!” she would scream out, and then look at me with haunted eyes that seemed to see right past me. She would be breathing heavily and sweating, and would look around the room, frightened. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the hospital, honey. I’m here. I’m right here.”

But she would just stare at me, as if she didn’t recognize me, and would go right back to sleep.

A half hour later, it would start again. “Leave me alone! Why are you doing this to me?” But she wouldn’t even be awake when she would say this. Her eyes were still closed, and then she would start mumbling incoherently.

I even heard her speaking feverishly about a baby. “No, no, no, don’t take her. My baby. Please, please, please don’t take her. No!” And then I looked at her, and her eyes were closed and her head was shaking and tears were streaming down her face. She clutched the pillow and started screaming about them taking her baby away.

I felt confused about that. She told the lady that she felt no sorrow for the life inside of her that was now gone. Yet, her dreaming about it and begging somebody not to take the baby would tell me that he unconscious mind was feeling very differently about all of that. It never occurred to me that she would ever feel conflicted about a life that was never supposed to be there in the first place. It must have been her motherly instinct coming into place. After all, even if this life was not something that she wanted, and was something that occurred through violence and violation, it was still her baby. Being a man, it was difficult for me to comprehend, but I knew that I had to come to terms with the fact that Scotty might feel very differently about losing this baby, or babies, then she had let on.

Which would make this entire recovery process that much more complex. I knew that I had to help her, to save her from her demons, somehow, someway. I just wasn’t clear on how to go about it.

I spent that entire night with Scotty in the hospital bed, sleepless and staring at the ceiling. My arm was wrapped around her the entire time. My mind was turning, all that night, about helping her. She needed counseling, that was clear. And she really needed closure on what had happened to her. I would need to talk to her, a bit more forcefully, about the possibility that she should press charges against that man. That might be able to save her psyche more than anything else. To know that he was locked up and she was safe from him. And that he got his just desserts that he so richly deserved for all that he had done to her.

Finally, the light started streaming in through the windows, and Scotty woke up for real. At first, she looked around the room, and looked frightened. And then I could see the realization dawn on her about what had happened, and she once again looked destroyed.

She blinked back tears as she looked at me. “Is this real? I, I, I had this dream that there was a baby, and they were trying to take her away from me. I, I….is this really happening to me?”

I nodded my head. “Yes. The doctor has to come in here to check up on you again. They, uh, need to see, if the, uh, the fetus has, uh…”

She nodded her head in recognition. “Yes, I remember now. I had nightmares about it all last night. And about him, too. Even more vivid nightmares than I had ever had before. I…” But she didn’t finish that sentence. She started crying again. “Oh, Nick, why? Why do I feel like this? This thing, it belonged to me. It did. I mean, no matter how it got there, it was mine. And now it’s not. I don’t understand why I’m feeling this way now.” She just shook her head, and I held her in my arms while she bawled. “Oh, please, just make it stop. Make the pain go away. I thought that I was over it, but I’m not. I’m not. And I just really want my baby. My baby.”

I felt so impotent as I held her head against my chest and stroked the back of her head. I wanted to tell her that it wasn’t the end of the world, and that she and I would have our own baby soon. But, somehow, I knew that those were not the right words to tell her. Her feelings for the life inside of her, that was now gone, apparently had shifted dramatically since the previous night. She was obviously feeling the grief over what had happened and sorrow for losing it. And I just had to let her feel it. There was nothing else that I could have done in that situation.

So, I just said nothing, and just held her while she cried and clutched at my shirt desperately. “My baby. Why was she taken from me? I don’t understand. Why?”

I had no words, but I had to say something. “Scotty, honey, it wasn’t meant to be. It just wasn’t. Sometimes things happen, and there’s no good explanation, except that fate is cruel. I wish that fate wouldn’t always be so cruel to you, but I’m right here. I hope that I can make things right for you. I just want to make things better.”

She said nothing, but just shook her head. “I’m so sad, but I’m so angry, too. So angry. That man has put me through so much, and now I have to go through this, too. Because of him. I hate him, Nick. I hate him.” She said that she hated him with such force that it seemed as if she was just now realizing how much

she really did despise that man. “I hate him, and I want him to burn in hell for what he did. I do. I won’t rest until that man is behind bars, and I know that he will stay there for the rest of his life.”

I felt encouraged to hear her talk like that. Truth be told, Jack and I had been relentlessly trying to get her to go to the authorities to turn that pervert’s ass in. But, every time, she would say that she wasn’t ready. She was afraid. She thought that nobody would believe her, just like the first time. She felt that he was too wealthy and powerful, and that she couldn’t face him in court.

But, sometimes, she would start to talk like she wanted to turn him in. I would make an appointment with a detective on the police force, only to have her back out at the very last second.

I had never, however, seen the look of solid determination in her eyes like I saw, right at that second. I held my breath, thinking that maybe, just maybe, this time she really would do it. She would really go to the police with the evidence that she had, and press charges against him.

I wasn’t sure why the doctor who examined her hadn’t gone to the authorities yet. I had put in a phone call to her, several different times, and she never called me back. Which angered me, beyond belief. Scotty wasn’t strong enough, just yet, to tackle this all on her own. I didn’t know why Dr. Woods didn’t already contact the necessary people to get the ball rolling. I even went down to her office one day, without telling Scotty, to confront her. Of course, she wasn’t there. She was out of the office that day.

So, since Dr. Woods didn’t do the right thing in going to authorities to turn in the pervert, it was all on Scotty’s shoulders. All on Scotty’s fragile shoulders. Scotty needed to get a different attitude about frying the pervert’s ass. And it sounded like she was finally getting this different attitude. I only hoped that this different attitude was one that would last long enough for her to see it through.

And then, when Mr. Lucas finally got his comeuppance that he so richly deserved, perhaps, just perhaps, Scotty could finally sleep at night.

At least that was my hope.

Chapter 41

Scotty

When I woke up that morning, in the hospital, with Nick, I, at first, thought that everything was a horrible, horrible dream. Once I started to slowly realize that I wasn't having a dream – that I really was impregnated by that horrible man, and I had lost the baby, or babies, I started to think about something else. And that was that I was terribly unhappy and depressed to be losing these children. I had no idea why I started to think that way, because, when I found out about it, all that I could think was that I wanted that life, or lives, out of me. Yesterday.

I was confused by my feelings. I thought that I was coming out of the confusion of my earlier roller-coaster of emotions, and that I was emerging from the fog and depression unscathed. Now, here I was, right back on the roller coaster. Happy that I was having a miscarriage, as opposed to delivering babies who belonged to that horrible man, one moment. The next moment, feeling sad and depressed because the life that was growing inside of me, even though I had no idea, until I was having the miscarriage, that this life was even there, was snuffed out. That was my maternal instinct kicking in, I guess.

I found that I couldn't really talk to Nick about this, because I didn't know how I felt, from one moment to the next. He probably would have thought that I was crazy if I really expressed my feelings to him. I loved him so much, but he was a man, and he probably wouldn't understand ambiguity in this case. He probably would have thought that I should either be happy that I had a miscarriage, instead of having to carry the life to term, or sad about it. I didn't think that he would understand that I was feeling both of these emotions, equally strongly.

I didn't want to think about it, though. All that I could concentrate on, with zero ambiguity, was my absolute hatred of that horrible man. I knew that I was going to be having some kind of procedure that day. A D&C, or something like that. I had no idea what that was, but I knew that the doctor was going to explain it to me soon enough. I also imagined that I would be going home that same day. So, I would be going home, with Nick. And I would have a talk with him about going to the authorities about Mr. Lucas, first thing Monday morning. I hoped that he would be able to go with me, if he didn't have too much to do at work. I literally needed him to hold my hand while I went to talk to whomever it is was

in charge of that particular division.

At some point, Dr. Woods came into my room. She had a very sympathetic look on her face. “How are you doing today?” she asked me.

“Fine,” I said, squeezing Nick’s hand. “It seems that I have stopped bleeding.”

“Good,” she said. “I wanted to tell you a little bit about the procedure that we’re going to do today. A D&C means dilation and curettage. You will be under general anesthesia during the process. Your cervix will be dilated, and then I will use what is called a curette that will gently scrape the surface of your uterus. This is a necessary procedure, because there might still be matter inside of your uterus that will cause problems later on.”

I nodded my head. “Okay, thank you for the education about that. When will this happen?”

“I have you booked for 10 AM. It’s really a simple procedure, and you will be in recovery for a few hours, after which you may go home.”

Nick was standing there, holding my hand, but not really saying anything. I was sure that this was not his comfort zone, and I felt badly for him.

Dr. Woods came over and put her hand on my shoulder. “I’m very sorry about this. But you should know that this procedure, and your miscarriage, should not affect your ability to conceive in the future. I know that many women worry about that, so I wanted to ease your mind.”

“Thank you, Dr. Woods,” I said.

She smiled. “Okay, then, I need to take you down to get prepped for surgery.” She looked at Nick. “You may come with her to the waiting area if you like.”

“Of course,” he said. “That goes without saying.”

I smiled. If Nick was allowed in the room during surgery, he probably would be there. Even though I was quite sure that this procedure was distasteful for all involved.

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The surgery seemed to go well, I guess. I really wanted to stay in that euphoric state that I was in, right before I went under. I counted back from 100, and, by the time that I said “96”, I was floating, and feeling that nothing had touched me. All of the tragedy that had happened to me in the past few weeks didn’t happen, or, at least it felt that way in that split second in time. Then, the next thing I knew, I was waking up in the recovery room. There was a blanket over me, but I was still freezing.

Dr. Woods came over to me, my chart in hand. “Ms. James, your surgery went well. How are you feeling?”

I shook my head. “I’m okay, physically. Emotionally, I’m not so sure. I don’t really understand how I feel. I mean, this was the best possible scenario, under the circumstances. I couldn’t imagine bringing this life to term. That would be horrible. Beyond horrible. But, at the same time…I don’t know, that was my baby.” And then I looked at her. “Was there more than one?”

“Yes,” Dr. Woods said with a nod of her head. “It did seem that there were two fetuses that were miscarried.”

Somehow, knowing that made my heart hurt even more. Now I had to mourn for the loss of two lives, not just one. Two lives that I had no idea existed until I started bleeding on Nick’s bathroom floor. And now they were all that I could think about.

“Well, thank you very much,” I said to her. “Thank you for taking care of me.”

She squeezed my hand. “Of course,” she said. “Again, you have my condolences.”

I had to lay in the recovery room for about another hour, before a nurse came by to let me know that I was free to go. So, I got dressed and hopped down and sat down in my wheelchair and wheeled myself out to the waiting area, where Nick was sitting. He wasn’t doing anything at all. He wasn’t watching television or reading a magazine or anything. He was just staring into nothingness, although he did seem extremely happy to see me.

He got up and started pushing me out the hospital door. “How are you doing, my love? Is there anything that I can do for you?”

I shook my head. I was feeling that I wasn’t able to talk without crying right at that moment, so I just didn’t talk at all. I just wanted to go home. Go home and get into bed and feel my raw emotions for a while. And then I wanted to take action. Call the sex offender division of the NYPD and get the ball rolling. Mr. Lucas was finally going to pay for what he did. I was more afraid than angry before. Now my anger had finally overtaken my fear, and I knew that Mr. Lucas was going down.

Nick then pushed me out the door and helped me into the waiting limo. He was being so good, but he didn’t know what to say, and neither did I. So, we rode in silence to his loft.

When we finally got into his loft, I asked to go upstairs to the bedroom. “I’m sorry, Nick, I’m just really tired. I know that you have to go to work tomorrow,

and I have school, so I need to save my energy for that."

"Of course, honey. Whatever you need," he said.

"Thanks," I said, as Nick carried me up the stairs. He gently laid me down on the bed and laid down beside me.

"I'll just lay here with you until you fall asleep," he said.

"Thank you," I said, but I was drifting off, even as I said it. Within a few minutes, I was out like a light.

Chapter 42

I woke up later on that day, and called down to Nick to help me to get downstairs. I heard Jack in the living area, so I was anxious to tell him about what was going on.

Nick came up and helped me to get downstairs. I got down there, and Jack was sitting on the couch. “Well, hello there, dollface,” he said. “What happened to you?”

I looked at Nick, and he shrugged his shoulders. This told me that he didn’t tell Jack what had happened.

I took a deep breath and said “Oh, where do I begin?” So, I told him about the miscarriage and how I was feeling very ambiguous about it.

Jack sat there with his mouth open. “Oh, my god. That’s so awful. I’m so sorry. Is there anything that I can do?”

I looked at Nick and then again at Jack and said “Yes. There is something that both of you can do for me. And that’s just to sit down and listen to me. Because I’ve made a decision. A firm decision.”

Jack said “Okay. But I have a feeling that this is going to require a cocktail. What would you like?”

“A glass of wine would be good,” I said. “And whatever Nick wants.”

Nick looked at Jack and said “the usual. Scotch rocks,” he said. He was looking at me expectantly. I think that he knew what I was going to say, but, at the same time, wanted me to come right out and say it.

Jack got drinks for all of us, and sat the wine and cocktails down on Nick’s marble coffee table.

“Okay,” Jack said, sitting down. “What decision did you make?”

“I’ve decided that that man. That horrible man. That sick perverted man who has haunted my life. He’s going down. Yesterday.”

Nick’s face lit up, but Jack looked skeptical. “Okay,” Jack said. “Heard it before. How do we know that you’re really going to do this now?”

“Because I’ve reached my tipping point. Having him impregnate me, and then having that life ripped out of me, has finally made me realize how much he has taken from my very soul. How much damage he has done to me. I don’t know, when I found out about those babies, something inside of me cried out that I needed justice. I needed justice for myself, and for everybody else that he might be attacking. And for those poor innocent babies. They never were meant

to be, but that doesn't matter. They did come into existence, and they never would have if it wasn't for that monster." And then I paused. "And I'm going to say something that is going to sound really weird, but please bear with me."

Nick looked at me, compassion in his eyes. "Go on, love. Whatever you say isn't going to be weird, or any weirder than what everybody thinks about at one point or another. So, please go on."

I just looked at Nick and Jack and took a deep breath. "Well, here's the thing. Those two babies had a soul. I really believe that. And, well, I don't know if this was their only chance to live. I'd like to think not. You know, that they'll have another chance at life, with somebody else. But I don't know. Anyhow, if this was their only chance, well, then, it doesn't seem fair that Mr. Lucas would have deprived them of that. Because they never would have come into existence without his despicable actions. I know that what I'm saying doesn't make sense. It doesn't necessarily make a lot of sense to me, either. But I feel that I need to seek justice for them as well."

Jack and Nick were both looking at me like they actually understood what I was saying. Neither had a look on their face that told me that they were befuddled by my existential ramblings.

Nick put his hand on my arm. "That makes perfect sense, Scotty. I mean, nobody really knows, for sure, about all of that. So, your theory about their souls being denied a chance to exist because of Mr. Lucas does make sense."

"Yes," I said. "And so, I have finally decided, once and for all, that Mr. Lucas is going down. I won't rest until I know that he's behind bars for life."

"Okay," Nick said. "Let's do this. Let's do it tomorrow. I don't have any meetings tomorrow, so I'll take some time off of work to take you to see the police department."

"Thanks, Nick," I said. "Thank you so much for doing this for me. For standing by me. I love you so much I can't stand it. I don't know what I would do without you."

He smiled. "Love, you will never have to find out."

Chapter 43

As it turned out, I wasn't able to go and see the detectives the next day. I had to deal with the fallout of something that I had completely forgotten about, in the chaos that was my life ever since my rescue from the house of horrors on that island.

I was not sure why it took so long, but, somehow, someway, my mother got the letter that I wrote her. And she called Jack and left several frantic messages.

So, when I woke up on Monday, eager to get rolling, I, instead, was treated to Jack telling me about the desperate messages.

"Scotty," he said. "Your mother thinks that you're dead. She said that she got a suicide note from you."

My mouth flew open. The letters! I had given Helen those two letters that explained why I was going to kill myself. "Oh, crap," I said. "Crap."

"What?" Jack said. "I don't understand what she's talking about. I thought that it was the *Popov* talking, but is there anything to it?"

"You…have you checked your mail lately?"

"Not since last week," he said. "Why is that important?"

"Uh, well, if my mom got a letter, then you will too. I, uh, sent both of you letters when I was on the island with Mr. Lucas."

"What were the letters about?" Jack asked.

"Uh," I said, and then Nick came into the room. He was in the shower when Jack confronted me about the letters.

"You ready, honey?" he asked me. He had a light jacket for me in his hand. "It's going to be chilly today, so you need to wear this."

"I, uh, uh…you're going to kill me," I said. "But I can't go today."

Nick's eyes flashed anger. "I'm sorry?" he said. "What do you mean you can't go?"

"Well, I, uh…I, I, I need to see my mother. Today. Right now."

"Your mother?" he said. "I don't understand. You promised me that you would go and see the police today. You can't back out like that."

I started to feel a little bit desperate. I needed to see my mother, to let her know that I was alright. I had no idea how she was able to call Jack, because she didn't have a cell phone or a land line anymore. I could only imagine that she found a pay phone somewhere.

But how would I tell Nick that? I would have to admit to my suicidal

ideation, which was something that I had chosen to keep from him. He would be so angry with me.

“There’s something that she believes that isn’t true. I, I, I…”

Nick was looking like he was losing patience with me. Finally, I thought. It was only a matter of time before he lost patience with my wavering butt.

Jack chimed in with Nick. “Scotty, you have to go and see the sexual assault division of the NYPD today. You can’t back out.”

“I’m not going to back out,” I said. “I just need to-“

Jack was standing there, his hands on his hips. “Listen here, Missy, you’re going to see that cop today and that’s that.”

“I can’t, Jack.” And I really couldn’t. All I could think was that my poor mother thought that I was dead. I couldn’t take that. That wasn’t fair to her. She couldn’t go for one more hour thinking that I had killed myself. She was so fragile anyhow. That would surely throw her over the edge.

Jack and Nick were just standing there staring at me. I could see in Nick’s eyes that he was angry, but he didn’t say anything.

Finally Jack piped up. “Is this about that letter to your mother?”

I shot Jack a look. He smirked at me. He obviously had no idea that I hadn’t told Nick about the letters. I felt my face flush scarlet.

Nick looked at me expectantly. “Letter to your mother, Scotty? What’s Jack talking about?”

I took a deep breath. “Uh, well, uh….”

I was intimidated by the two men, who were just staring at me. This was one of the most embarrassing things to talk about, but, more than that, it was an awful admission to make. I had no idea how I could tell the man that I loved how close I really came to killing myself.

Finally, I hung my head. “I didn’t want to tell you about this, Nick. Ever. But I guess that jig is up now.”

Nick’s face went immediately from pissed to concerned. “What? What did you feel that you couldn’t tell me?”

“I, well, uh. When I was on the island, I, well, I felt, well, I was desperate. I really didn’t think that anybody would be able to find me. And I remembered the awful feeling of being in that man’s clutches for years at a time. He, he, he even threatened me. He said that he would keep me chained up in his apartment. I was hopeless, and…”

I felt like I couldn’t continue. That I couldn’t admit to exactly how desperate and hopeless I was. But, Nick was staring at me, clearly wanting me to continue.

Even Jack had finally shut his mouth and was wordlessly watching me. So, I felt that I needed to go on.

"I was hopeless," I continued, "and, well, Mr. Lucas promised me that if I married him that he would take care of my mother. He would make a trust in her name, and the trust would be made conditional on her getting help. And I wanted that more than anything. Because I still love her. She's been a terrible mother, but she's my only mother, and I want nothing more than to see her get better."

Nick looked like he was starting to get it, but he still just looked at me and urged me to "go on."

"I, well, I decided to go through with it. I decided to marry him, and then, well, I decided to kill myself. And make it look like an accident."

I wasn't looking at either Nick or Jack as I was talking. I was just so ashamed that I was willing to give up so easily. I was sure that Nick was thinking about how weak I was.

Nick kneeled down so that I was forced to look at him. "Scotty, I don't know what to say. I can't say that I'm not shocked, because I am. At the same time, I'm extremely upset to know how close I came to losing you permanently. Why would you just want to give up like that? And how could you not have faith that I would try to find you?"

I sighed and looked at Jack. For once, he didn't have a smirk on his face, nor did he have his *bitch, please* look. He looked sad and concerned and more than a little bit bemused.

I turned my attention back to Nick. "Well, I thought that you didn't care. I caught you with Portia, and I thought that you couldn't care less about me. So, I figured that I couldn't count on you. And, no offense, Jack," I said, turning my attention back to Jack, "but I knew that you couldn't afford to go traipsing around the world to try to locate me. And my mother can't afford it, either, nor would she stay sober for long enough to take something like that on. So, yeah, I felt pretty hopeless."

Now Nick was looking more pissed. His face was contorted in a grimace and there was anger flashing in his eyes.

I put my hand on his cheek. "What is it?"

"It's you," he said. "Listen, I didn't want to say anything before, because you had just gone through such an ordeal, and you didn't need me piling on. But now it needs to be said. I don't know what it is that I have to do to show you that I'm absolutely crazy about you. Completely. I mean, you saw Portia and me together, and you immediately assumed the worst about me. Not about her. About me.

Despite the fact that I have always been the one who has had your back and protected you, and she has always been the one who has treated you like shit."

I sat there looking at him, feeling helpless and like there was a sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. He was angry, angrier than I had ever seen him, and, truth be told, Nick's anger was the last thing that I needed on this particular day. Not that I didn't earn his rage, but, still, I started to feel as if I wanted to just crawl somewhere and try to get away.

He started pacing the floor. "So, you somehow thought that, despite the fact that I repeatedly told you that I was in love with you, and that I would never betray you, I betrayed you anyhow by fucking another woman. And not just any other woman. *That* woman. I mean, how stupid are you?"

I tried very hard not to cry, but I felt the tears coming anyhow. I wiped them away, and Jack silently got a Kleenex for me.

Nick was on a roll by then. "So, you get abducted and taken to an island, and you have so little faith in me that you thought that I would just, what, go on my merry way and forget that you ever existed? 'Oh, well, Scotty's gone, what's on TV tonight?'" He shook his head. "Was that really what you thought? What kind of a person do you think I am?"

By then, Jack was trying to intervene a little bit. He put his hands on Nick's shoulders and tried to talk to him. But Nick just brushed him off.

"I just can't believe you, Scotty. You were not just giving up on yourself, but giving up on me, too. I thought that you were stronger than that. More of a fighter. I figured that you would try to give that man hell. Instead, you just make plans to die. You aren't the woman that I thought you were."

"Now, Nick," Jack said, seeing me sitting there with tears streaming down my face, "be fair to her. She was the captive of that horrible man while she had a broken leg. There was only so much hell that she could have given him in that condition. Not to mention the fact that he probably has about 100 lbs on her. I think that you're expecting just a little bit much."

Nick looked at Jack, and, for a moment, looked like he was about to punch him.

But then he looked at me, and, just like that, I saw the anger melt off of his face. He shook his head. "You're right, Jack. Scotty couldn't have possibly given that man a run for his money." And then he went and sat down on the couch and put his head in his hands.

I wheeled myself over to him and put my hand on his arm. I so wanted him to look at me and tell me that he understood why I was going to kill myself. That

he took back all the hurtful things that he said to me just now, about how I wasn't the woman that he thought that I was. That he still loved me as much as he ever did.

Instead, he just said "okay, Scotty, I guess I need to call Charlie to take you to your mother's apartment." He looked at Jack. "Jack, are you okay going with her?"

"Of course," he said. "But I think that Scotty would rather you go with her."

Yes, I was silently pleading. *Please go with me. I can't bear to think that you feel differently about me.*

He took a deep breath. "Okay, then, Scotty. I'll take you to your mother's. But I'll be honest with you. I'm not sure about our future. You need to trust me a lot more than you do, or we won't work in the long-term."

Those words stung me more than anything else ever had. Suddenly, all my tragedies involving Mr. Lucas faded in the background. I was on the precipice of losing the best thing, by far, that had ever happened to me. And I had no idea how to prevent Nick from leaving me. How I could show him that I trusted him.

Or, really, how I could learn to trust him. Because he was absolutely, 100% correct about something – I shouldn't have assumed the worst when I saw him and Portia together. I should have trusted him enough to know that Portia was up to no good. I should have, but I didn't, and that spoke volumes to Nick and to myself. And I should have had more faith that Nick would find me once I was abducted. I shouldn't have given up so quickly.

"I, I, I don't know what to say, Nick," I said. "I love you so much. And I've learned to trust you."

"I don't think that you have," he said. "Not really. I think that you still see me as I was before I met you. And you didn't even know me then. You just heard about how I was. Yet, you seem to think that I'm the same feckless man who cared about nobody but himself. That person, that Nick, probably wouldn't have went through hell to find you. But I'm not that guy, and you can't see that."

I looked into his eyes and saw hurt, not anger, in them. I wounded him deeply by my lack of faith in him.

Finally, he just said in obvious frustration, "well, come on, then. Let's go and see your mother, and then let's go to the police station. I don't want to make any decisions about us right now. I want to have a cooler head."

I started to panic a little. It sounded bad. Like he might break up with me. I felt my heart racing, and I bit my lip to stop the tears from coming.

He called Charlie to meet us downstairs.

“Jack,” I said. “Can you come too?”

“I’d like to, Scotch, but I think that you and Nick need some alone time right now. I’d just be in the way.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” I said, thinking that Nick was so hurt and angry right at that moment that I didn’t think that we’d have quality time together anyhow. “Please come with us.”

Jack looked at Nick, and Nick motioned him to come along. “Yeah, why not, the more the merrier,” he said.

“Okay, then. Let me get my coat. What the hell, it’s been awhile since I’ve been treated to the sight of Loretta in all her glory.”

So, Jack got his things and the three of us made our way into the waiting limo to go and see my mother.

Chapter 44

It was the longest limo ride of my life. My mother lived in Brooklyn, in a run-down tenement that should have been condemned years ago. I dreaded going to see her, because it was always so depressing, knowing how much of a desperate situation she was always in, but that wasn't the reason why I felt severely depressed.

My depression, which was coming down on me like a hammer, had to do with the fact that Nick was staring out the window instead of talking to me. I was so afraid of what he was thinking as he stared out that window. Was he thinking about how he wanted to leave me? About how he wanted somebody who was more mentally together than myself? Somebody tougher?

As Charlie drove us to the home of my mother, I thought back to when I first thought about getting involved with Nick. How I thought that he wouldn't want me because I had too much mental baggage. Yet I thought, or I was starting to think, that perhaps we were going to make things work, in spite of the fact that I still had so many emotional issues, because it seemed that Nick had patience with me. With my problems.

Now I wasn't so sure. Nick appeared to have reached his breaking point when he found out that I had almost killed myself because I didn't have any faith in him finding me. I could see that I hurt him very badly with this lack of belief in him. And I wasn't at all sure that he was going to recover from finding out just how faithless I was.

Finally, after what seemed like hours, we arrived at the tenement. We got on the sidewalk, me in my wheelchair with Jack pushing me. We crunched on broken beer bottles, which were everywhere. On the grass there was a whiskey bottle that was filled with urine, and there were several condoms tossed aside carelessly. We passed by a man who was halfway passed out on one of the stoops, a bottle of cheap rum cradled in his arms. He mumbled something about a woman named Destiny, and how she needed to let him in. And then we heard a woman's voice, presumably belonging to Destiny herself, screaming out the screen door "you just rot in hell, you mother fucker."

The man started sobbing now "let me in. I promise I won't do it again. Please, Destiny, please let me in."

We traveled a little bit further, away from that particular drama, towards my mother's building, which was adjacent to the townhomes where the Destiny soap

opera was taking place. I opened the door to the building, and we walked up the narrow stairway that was filled with the stench of human excrement and curry. Nick was carrying me, and Jack was carrying my wheelchair. The odor in the stairway was a most unpalatable blend, and it always made me want to hurl, thereby adding to the smell.

Once we got to the third floor, we passed by an apartment that was blaring loud rock music, and another apartment where two people were screaming at each other and throwing things. The place right next to my mother had the sounds of potential domestic violence coming through the walls, as a man was screaming and a woman was crying.

Sometimes I forgot just how desperate of a situation my mother was in. I guess I tried to forget, lest I go crazy, but being here brought it all back to me.

Nick, for his part, looked remarkably unperturbed by it all. I was surprised – he was a rich guy, and always was affluent. I wouldn't imagine that he would have ever had occasion to come to a neighborhood like this.

I looked at him questioningly, and he said "my best friend had a serious drug problem in college. I used to come to these kinds of neighborhoods all the time to drag his ass back home."

"Ryan?" I said. I thought about Ryan's gorgeous clean-cut face, and just couldn't picture him being involved in something like that.

"Yeah," he said. "He's pretty open about it, so I don't think that he would mind that I tell you about his problems. They're far, far behind him now. But, trust, I've seen some pretty rough types around him. So, if you think that I'm shocked by all of this, I'm here to tell you that I'm not."

I loved Nick more than ever at that point. He surprised me so many times. *I only hope that he still feels the same way.*

Finally, we arrived at my mother's home. I knocked, but nobody answered. However, I heard a child crying, so I took a deep breath and tried the door.

The door opened, and we walked into the tiny one-bedroom apartment.

My mother was lying on the couch, watching a soap opera, and half snoozing. Aaron was standing up in his play-pen in the middle of the room. There were empty bags of potato chips and empty cans of pop lying all around the room. A huge coffee can, filled with cigarette butts, was on the table in front of the couch. And, of course, there were the empty bottles of booze. Vodka, rum, tequila, wine – the bottles were everywhere. In the trash can, on the floor, in the potted plant that she was trying to care for, yet was clearly dying - everywhere. They were even in the bathtub, which was in the middle of the tiny kitchen. The

tub was filled to the brim with liquor bottles.

I knelt down next to the couch. Nick went to pick up Aaron, and cradled him a little bit. Aaron seemed to take to Nick, as he grabbed his nose and giggled. “Let me down,” Aaron said. “Let me walk.”

Nick looked around the room, wondering where it was that Aaron was supposed to walk. There wasn’t room to begin with, and the floor was so filled with trash that Aaron couldn’t possibly get around without tripping.

“Mom,” I said, brushing a tendril of hair out of her eyes. “It’s me, Scotty.”

She opened her eyes, and said “Scotty? Scotty, it that you? Scotty?”

I nodded my head. “Yes, mom, it’s me. I’m here.”

She started to cry. “I thought you were dead,” she said. “Oh, Scotty, I thought you were dead.” And then she threw her arms around me and stroked my hair. “Oh, my Scotty, I can’t believe it. I just can’t believe it.”

I tried to put my arms around her, but her girth prevented that. She smelled of cigarettes and body odor, and she was dressed in a tent dress that she favored, for obvious reasons.

To my surprise, I was crying too. “Mom, I’m so sorry for worrying you like that. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean for you to get that letter. I’m so sorry, mom.”

Nick and Jack were standing in the tiny kitchen, talking. Nick still had ahold of Aaron, who was playing with Nick’s hair and asking for a bar of chocolate.

Jack nodded his head, and looked at me and my mother.

Nick motioned to me to come and talk to them.

I looked at my mom. “Stay here, mom. Stay right here. I’ll be right back.”

She looked at me desperately, like she was afraid that I was going to somehow vanish into the ether. But she didn’t protest.

I wheeled my way over to Nick and looked up at him. “You wanted to talk to me?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I guess that I didn’t imagine that it would be quite like this. At any rate, we can’t just leave your brother and mother in this state. We’re going to have to take Aaron and your mother to my place, while I line up a rehab center to get her dried out once and for all. I should have done this a long time ago, and I would have if I would have known that her situation was this bad.”

I was confused. Nick had been here before. Hadn’t he?

“You were here, weren’t you? When you came into the bar that one time?”

Nick sighed. “Actually, no. I sent the nanny over, and Charlie gave me back the keys. So, I never actually saw your mom and brother that one time. Charisse, the nanny, did call me to let me know that everything was under control,

though."

"Oh," I said. "That makes sense."

"Well, anyhow, now that I'm seeing for myself how your mother lives, I feel that it's my duty as a human being to not let it go on another day. So, they're coming with us, and I'm going to see how long of a wait it will be to get her into a rehab center in Beverly Hills. I've known, uh, a few people who have gone there and this place is the best there is in dealing with addiction and things like that."

I felt tears coming to my eyes again. "Oh, thank you, but I can't ask-"

"Stop," Nick said. "If you feel somehow that you're putting me out again on your behalf, just stop. I can't turn a blind eye to this child. It has nothing to do with you."

I nodded my head. I was hoping that Nick was going to tell me that he was going to keep me, after all, and that was why he was doing what he was doing. At any rate, it was a phenomenal thing to do, so I was grateful for that. I secretly wished that he was doing it for me, though. As selfish as that sounded.

But then, something wonderful happened.

Nick put his arm around me and said "but, yeah, I'm doing it for you, too. You should have your mother back. That would make you happy. And I love you. I would never leave you. You're a part of me."

The relief that I felt upon hearing those words were beyond measure. I threw my arms around him, and buried my head in his chest.

"Oh, Scotty," he said. "I'm not going to lie. You wounded me with your lack of faith. With your lack of trust. But, with your upbringing and life, it's to be expected that you would have a hard time trusting anybody. But I hope that you've learned your lesson. And never doubt me again. That's all I ask."

I shook my head furiously on his chest. "I won't, Nick. I'll never doubt you again. I promise."

"Good," he said. "Now, let's get your mother and brother loaded up in the limo and let's get out of here. We can probably reschedule your appointment with the police, so that will be the next stop. Jack here said that he would watch Aaron and keep your mother company, so that's all set."

My heart soared. It was hard to believe that there was so much devastation in my life, because, as I looked at Nick's beautiful blue eyes, which were so filled with love and kindness, all the ugliness faded away. Even the ugliness that we were currently surrounded by disappeared. All that I could see, and know, was that this man was with me, and he always would be.

He always would be.
He always would be.

Chapter 45

So, Nick, Jack, my mother and brother, and myself made our way back to Nick's loft. My mother was pretty incoherent, but was more than thrilled to be riding in a limo.

"Scotty, I can't believe this," she said. "I've never even a seen a car like this. Not even on television. What did you say that this was called again?"

"A limousine, mom," I said.

"A limousine?" she said. "I never heard of such a thing."

I felt embarrassed. I honestly thought that everybody in the world knew about limousines, even if they hadn't necessarily ridden in one before. Not my mother. Guess it had something to do with her poverty, and something to do with the fact that she had a tenth-grade education, and barely had even that.

"And there's a driver," she said. "Does your boyfriend hire that driver, or did he come with the limousine?"

"He hired him," I said.

"And what was his name, again?"

"Nick."

Nick was sitting in the front seat, and he turned around and smiled at the two of us, after hearing our conversation.

"Nick," she said, nodding her head. "Sure is a handsome fella, that Nick."

"That he is," I said.

And then she looked more at Jack. "And how you doin', there, John?"

"Jack," Jack said politely. "And I'm good."

I had to stop from rolling my eyes. My mother had met Jack at least on 20 occasions throughout the years, yet she couldn't remember his name.

Hell, I was surprised that she remembered *my* name.

"So, where we goin', Scotty?" my mother asked me.

"To Nick's loft. And then we're going to put you into a treatment facility."

She shook her head. "I don't need no treatment facility. I've been quitting booze on my own."

And how's that been working out for you?

"Mom," I said. "We've been through this 100 million times. Now, Nick actually has the money to get you into a place that is for real. Where they won't throw you out after 48 hours. Someplace where you can stay as long as you need to, and really get dry. For good."

She shook her head, and then started to cry. “Oh, Scotty, that would be so great. I really need help. The state, they want to take away Aaron, and he’s all I got in the world. ‘Cept you. And you don’t want nothin’ to do with me. Not that I blame you. I’m tryin’, Scotty. Really, I am.”

“I know, mom,” I said, as I reached for her to hug her a little bit. “I know you are. But you need help. You can’t do it on your own. I’ll find out a little bit more about this place and then I can tell you what it’s going to be like. But it’s in Beverly Hills, so I think that it’s safe to say that it’s going to be nicer than you can ever imagine.”

“Beverly Hills,” she said. “Like with the Clampetts?”

“Yes,” I said, trying to suppress a smile. “Just like with the Clampetts.” What an apt thing for her to say, I thought, because she’ll fit in when she gets to Beverly Hills about as well as the Clampetts did.

“That does seem like a nice place,” she said. “A real nice place. Too nice for me.”

“Be that as it may,” I said. “You’re going. I’ll even try to come and visit you.”

More tears came to her eyes. “Oh, you’re such a good girl. You’ve always been such a good girl. Why do you want to mess around with an old lady like me?”

She did seem old, which was sad to me, considering she was only 38. She looked more than 50, and I was quite sure that she felt more than 50 as well.

“You’re my mother,” I said. “And you always will be.”

Finally, we got to Nick’s building. Jack helped my mother out, and Nick gently put Aaron on my lap as he pushed me into the front door of his lobby.

My mom’s eyes got huge when she saw the opulence of the lobby. The marble floors and crystal chandeliers, the uniformed doorman with the white gloves, the enormous flowers in gorgeous vases, and the granite fountain in the middle of the room astounded her. “Oh, Scotty, I don’t believe this place. I didn’t think that these types of places existed.”

Aaron was in awe as well. His little eyes got enormous, and he raised his hands up and down excitedly. “Are we going to live here?” he asked. I was kinda amazed at how well he was speaking, as I was afraid that he would be developmentally delayed because of my mother’s alcoholism. That was one thing that she was very lucky about – Aaron and myself turned out seemingly normal, despite her heavy drinking all through all of her pregnancies. I wasn’t sure about her other kids, because I never got the chance to know them. She put

all of them up for adoption when they were first born.

Nick was beaming. “Yes, little tyke, you are. For now.” And he looked at me. I knew that we were going to have to have a serious talk about what was next. I would imagine that the goal would be to get my mother sober and then help her get on her feet so that she would take care of Aaron herself. I wasn’t sure, beyond that, what else Nick had in mind.

We all got on the elevator, and went into Nick’s loft.

And then she got really astounded. “Oh, my god, Scotty. Look at this place.” She looked around the room. “Look at those paintings. And that furniture. And that piano. And that….” she went on and on and on about everything in Nick’s apartment. She walked all around it, pointing at every little thing.

And then she said something that absolutely floored me. “And that Kandinsky. Ooh, boy, that’s worth a mint. Where’d you get that, Nate?”

“It’s Nick,” he said, looking at me weirdly. “And how’d you know that’s a Kandinsky?”

She looked dreamy. “I was always fascinated with art when I was a little girl. I ran away from home all the time, and I would always end up at the Guggenheim.” And then she started to name off all the other artists who were hanging on Nick’s walls. “Bacon’s one of my favorites,” she said. “And so is Klimt. Oh, Nick, you have such wonderful taste.”

Jack walked up to me and whispered “what, is your mother some kind of Rainman? A savant or something? How does she know those paintings, but she never heard of a limousine?”

I shrugged my shoulders. Sometimes people can surprise you. Even I was surprised by her apparent knowledge of modern art, but, then again, she was always a dreamer. Somehow, her spending afternoons at the Guggenheim when she would run away from home made sense to me. Even if it didn’t necessarily make sense that she would actually have a memory for all the names of the artists.

“Thank you, Ms. James,” Nick said politely. He was looking amused at my mother, and seemed surprised as Jack and I about her depth of knowledge about his paintings.

“Loretta,” she said. “Ms. James is my momma.” And then started to laugh, her missing teeth prominently being displayed in her mouth.

“Well, mom,” I said to her. “Uh, I hope you don’t mind staying here with Jack for a little bit. There’s something that Nick and I need to take care of.”

“No, I don’t mind,” she said. “But you’re coming back, aren’t ya? I can’t stay

too long with just John, here." And then she said in a low voice. "I think he's kind of a fruit loop. Not sure if I can trust him with Aaron."

I felt my face burn red hot with embarrassment. Now Nick knows that my mom's a homophobe, one of *those* homophobes who assume that being gay went hand in hand with pedophilia.

Jack, for his part, looked amused. It was obvious that he heard every word she said, and I thought that he was going to burst out laughing. "Oh, yes, Loretta. You know us queer boys. We love 'em young. The younger the better."

"Jack," I said. "Don't joke like that. She's going to take you seriously."

Jack just rolled his eyes. "Loretta, now come on. You've known me for years. You know better than to think something like that."

Loretta just nodded her head. "I guess so," she said. "I mean, I do know you, John, and you don't seem to be like those other fruit loops." I had no idea what "fruit loops" she was referring to, as I thought that Jack was the only gay guy that she knew.

And then she turned to us and said "Anyhow, where you guys goin'?"

I took a deep breath. "We're going to the police station, mom. I'll explain later, but there's something down there that I really need to do."

She looked concerned. "What, Scotty? You ain't in trouble, are ya?"

"No, mom, I'm not in trouble. I'm not in trouble, but there's somebody who soon will be. Somebody who should have been in trouble a long, long, long time ago. Let's just say that somebody is about to get what's coming to him, and it's not going to be pretty. In the least."

And then she blinked her eyes, and surprised me again. "It's that damned Mr. Lucas, ain't it? I never trusted that man. He's a shifty little pervert. Never wanted him to take you in the first place. But those welfare workers, they thought they knew best." And she shook her head. "Well, you go get him, Scotty. You go get him, and you castrate him, just like a bull. With no drugs."

I looked at Nick, and he looked at me and I thought that he was going to burst out laughing. My mother – one just never knew what would be coming out of her mouth next.

"Yes, mother, it's Mr. Lucas. And, you were absolutely right about him, too. He is a shifty little pervert. And he hurt me, mom. He hurt me bad. But he isn't going to get away with it. I'm going to bring him down, and Nick here is going to help me."

She smiled. "Nick. Sure is a handsome fella. I'll see you, Scotty. And, remember – just like a bull. That pervert doesn't deserve to see the light of day

anymore. I'm with ya, Scotty. I know that it doesn't seem like it, but I'm with ya."

"Thank you, mom, I'll see you when I get back."

And, at that, Nick wheeled me out of the door and we waited for the elevator.

He held my hand tightly. He was going to be with me all the way, I knew it.

And one other thing I knew.

Mr. Lucas was going down.

If it was the last thing I did in this world, I was going to make sure of it.

Do you want to find out what happens next? Please sign up for my mailing list at http://goo.gl/MlFMlw I promise not to spam you, but you will be the first to know when new titles are published.

Also, if you want to learn more about Nick, and about Ryan, then be sure and check out my earlier books, the *Illusions* series. These three books go in-depth into Ryan and Iris, the love of his life, and explain more fully the relationship between Ryan and Nick. The links for these series are below.

Beautiful Illusions
goo.gl/IeWpW3
Deeper Illusions
goo.gl/qnDGPg
End of Illusions
goo.gl/xriRbc

About the Author

Well, I'm just a tad nutty in real life. A bit scattered, a bit of a dreamer, never together. I wanted to originally create a character based upon myself, because I felt that people could relate to somebody who is decidedly imperfect. And have her get the dreamboat man, because, let's face it, we all want that, right ladies? That was my inspiration for the story of Iris and Ryan in my Illusions books. Those novels were so well-received, that I just decided to keep on keeping on. Scotty, the current heroine in my *Broken* novels, is so much more together than myself. So it's been fun to write her. And Nick has turned into a revelation – he seems to be a bit of a tough guy who is nothing but a womanizer, but I've found his soft side. I'm a little bit, ok a lot, in love with Nick and Ryan myself, and who wouldn't be? I'm having the time of my life writing these books, and I want to keep on writing them until my fans decide that they've had enough!

So, do you want to know how to get ahold of me? Well, you can like me on Facebook - goo.gl/fWxz2t. Or follow me on Twitter - @anniejocoby. Or contact me through e-mail at anniejocoby@gmail.com. Trust me, I get stoked by every new like and everybody who contacts me through my e-mail. I answer every e-mail as soon as I possibly can.

You can also visit my website – www.anniejocoby.com. I'll be posting content from my upcoming third book in the *Broken* series, so be sure to check out the website if you want a sneak peek on what's coming next!!!!

And, of course, we authors rely on word of mouth. If you love the series, or if you hate it, you should tell the world how you feel. Reviews are the secret sauce to success. I'd be totally jazzed to get reviews on this book and the other books. Even if you only leave a line or two, it makes all the difference in the world.

Thanks, and happy reading!