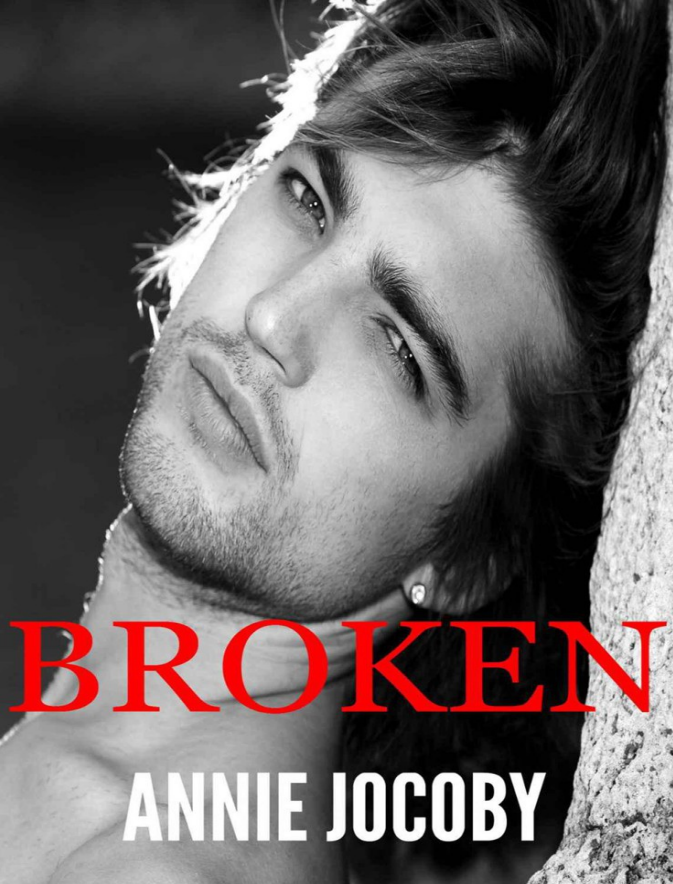




BROKEN

ANNIE JOCOBY

BROKEN

by

Annie Jacoby

Books by Annie Jacoby

Beautiful Illusions

goo.gl/IeWpW3

Deeper Illusions

goo.gl/qnDGPg

End of Illusions

goo.gl/xriRbc

Please note: *Broken* is a spinoff of the above novels, which are all available on Amazon at the links above.

Copyright © 2014 Annie Jacoby
Published by Annie Jacoby

All rights reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise) without the prior written permission of the above author of this book. This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any

resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

Chapter 1

Scotty

“Scotty Marie!” the woman cried in the bar where I worked. She was dressed in a slovenly fashion, her tie-dyed A-Shirt barely covering her 280 lb girth. She was evidently on her 800th vodka tonic of the evening, for her words were slurred and she was swaying. She leaned on the bar, apparently trying to stop herself from falling. “Scotty Marie, I’m talking to you! Don’t ignore me!!!”

Lane, the other bartender on duty that night, gave me a sympathetic look, and motioned to the irate woman. “You better tend to her. You know that she

won't leave on her own.”

I sighed. It was happening more and more frequently these days.

“Mom,” I said to the woman. “You have to leave. I’m working here.”

“You have to come home. I cain’t handle Aaron on my own.”

I rolled my eyes. Aaron was my 2-year-old brother. I was 23-years-old and my mother was 38, and had gotten knocked up by yet another of her one-night stands. She probably never even got this particular trick’s name.

“Mother, I have to work.” I wanted to tell her that she made her bed, she better lie in it, but there was not going to be any reasoning with her right this very minute. Her eyes were blood-shot, and

she reeked, absolutely reeked, of Popov Vodka. Since she drank so much of the stuff, she had to buy the very cheapest there was. Personally, I felt that this particular brand was how I always imagined rubbing alcohol to taste, but it was like water to her by now.

Lane leaned over to me. “Scotty, uh, your mother is here. Where is your brother right now?”

I felt immediately embarrassed. I couldn’t very well tell him that Aaron was probably unattended, right that very minute. Because that would certainly make me look bad for not calling the authorities and getting Aaron taken away from mom. How could I tell him that I was terrified that I would get custody of

the kid? Not that I didn't love him, but I was busy all the time, between going to school and working here, and if I got custody of Aaron, that would be the very end of my dreams for myself. And god knew, I didn't have the resources to care for him.

Of course, Aaron probably would be better off in foster care, then with my mother. Theoretically. However, having been in foster homes, periodically, throughout my childhood, I knew that it was pretty much hit or miss. Sometimes literally hit or miss, because some of those homes involved me missing getting hit only because I ducked. If that makes any sense at all. Other times, I didn't duck fast enough, and, sure enough, I got

hit.

Not to mention the home where I wasn't hit, but was hit on, despite the fact that I was only 13 at the time. And that pervert was a well-respected Wall Street trader.

So, Aaron was pretty much stuck between Scylla and Charybdis right at that moment.

Lane was looking at me. "You gotta go home," he said, having surmised from my silence the situation. "Your two-year-old brother can't be home alone."

I looked at my bleary-eyed mother desperately. No way could I afford to leave. I needed this shift. My checking account was on the verge of becoming overdrawn as it was. I had written some

checks that were going to bounce unless I put the money from my shift into my account ASAP. And, unfortunately, that wouldn't be the first time. Three checks bouncing, \$35 over-draft charges apiece, and, suddenly, I wouldn't be able to make rent.

Living on the edge meant that any minor blip meant that I would become homeless again. And going home to watch Aaron, instead of working the bar on a busy Saturday night, would be one of those blips. I didn't work at the most popular bar in New York City, but I could still count on at least \$400 in tips on a Saturday night, and, without that \$400, the little rock would become an avalanche. I had a roommate, Jack, but

he was pretty much in the same boat as me, and wouldn't be able to spot me when I'm short.

Then I heard a familiar voice. "Ms. James," the voice addressed me. I turned around, startled, then saw who was calling to me. It was Professor O'Hara, the adjunct instructor in two of my architectural design courses at Columbia. He wasn't a full-time professor – I think he just taught a couple of courses. His full-time job was as the newest senior partner of the largest architectural firm in town. I understood that he was new to the city, having come from a large firm in the Midwest somewhere. St. Louis maybe? At any rate, I think that he lived in Missouri

somewhere prior to coming to New York.

My heart quickened. I had a mad, mad, mad crush on this guy, as did virtually everybody else I knew. He was, for lack of a better word, beautiful. And it helped that he was young and hip. Not for him a suit and tie – he taught our classes in casual jeans and button-downs, and he always looked just a little bit like an English rocker. Or a male model. Certainly not a stuffy professor type. And I knew his work, and admired his cutting-edge sensibilities with the buildings that he designs. They were very signature, and his name was associated with many major projects around the world. Plus, from what I

understood, he got his Bachelor's at Harvard, and his PhD at Oxford, so his educational credentials were more than intimidating in and of itself.

“Uh, hi, Professor O'Hara,” I said. “What can I get you?” I peeked with a side-eye to my mother, who was still leaning on the bar, looking like she was about to hurl or hit me. I had no idea which was going to happen, as each of these events had always been so frequent in my life. She narrowed her eyes, and looked to launch into another tirade. I felt like sinking into the floor in embarrassment and shame that my gorgeous professor was going to be privy to my dysfunctional life.

He motioned me closer, and

whispered in my ear. “You need some help?”

I felt myself blushing. “What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t help but overhear. It sounds like there is a bit of a quandary you’re in tonight.”

“Oh, that,” I said, waving my hand towards my mother in a dismissive way. “That’s uh-“

“A big deal. You have a two-year-old that’s unattended in your mother’s house?”

I felt a bit stunned. I didn’t even realize that he was in the bar, let alone that he heard all of what was going on. “Well, yes, uh-“

At that, he was on his phone.

“What’s your mother’s address?””

I hesitantly gave him the address.

He nodded. “Charisse,” he said. “I’ve got a situation. You free to sit tonight?” He paused for a bit, then looked at me and nodded his head. Then he gave her the address. Then, addressing me, after he got off the phone he said “I’ve got it covered.”

I shook my head. “How is she going to get in the place? I’m pretty sure it’s locked up tight.”

“You got keys?” he asked.

At that, I dug in my purse, which was beneath the bar. I handed him the keys to my mother’s house. “Here,” I said. “Uh, I’ll pay you-“

He shook his head, and took the

keys. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll be back with these keys within the hour.”

And, just like that, he was gone.

I was shaking now, with humiliation and rage at my mother. More people were streaming in the door, and crowds of people were starting to form around the bar. In the middle of it all, stood my incoherent mother. She now had her head on the bar, and looked close to passing out. What was I going to do with her?

As if in answer, a man came into the bar, and put his arm around her. “You need to come with me,” he said.

I looked at him. “Who are you?”

“I’m Mr. O’Hara’s driver,” he said. “He asked me to come in here and give your mother a ride home.”

I looked at my mom, hoping against hope that she wasn't going to make a scene and protest. But she was past that by then. She had gone past her loud and screaming stage and into her incoherent stage, so she docilely let him lead her out of the bar.

I shook my head, but didn't have a second to contemplate what just happened, because the bar was now full of people, and I had to start rolling. People were already shouting, and waving their glasses in the air. I felt shaken, but I trudged on, then addressed Lane while the two of us were passing one another to get various glasses and liquors.

“Sorry about that, Lane,” I said.

“That won’t happen again,” I said, as I opened up a carton of cream and poured it into a glass with some vodka and Kahlua for a customer’s White Russian.

“Sure,” he said, scooping some ice into a glass and pouring rum and coke into it. “Let’s hope not. Your mother is a piece of work.”

“Ya think?” Then I turned to another customer and pointed to him. He shouted “Tanqueray and tonic,” and pointed to his glass. I grabbed the Tanqueray and poured it with some tonic, and shot it over to him.

This continued as more and more people rushed in. In the back of my mind, I was really looking forward to seeing Professor O’Hara again, then

shook my head. *Hot for the teacher? Aren't you just a little bit old for that?* Actually, I never liked that particular song. A better song for the situation would be The Police's *Don't Stand So Close to Me*. I started singing softly to myself while I poured another drink - "young teacher, the subject of schoolgirl fantasies..." - then smiled.

I caught my breath about an hour later, when I spotted him again. Then I felt my spirits fall upon seeing that he wasn't alone. He had on his arm a runway model that I recognized from Fashion Week last year, and her face was also plastered on advertisements all over the city and in every magazine you could think of. The woman was at least

six feet tall, so only a couple inches shorter than Professor O'Hara, yet she couldn't weigh more than 130 lbs. With a short blonde bob, cheekbones that could cut glass, enormous blue eyes, legs that a colt would admire, and an impressive rack, she had the kind of physical perfection that was truly wondrous to behold in real life. I bit my lip, knowing that this would be the kind of woman that a guy like Professor O'Hara would date.

I immediately felt embarrassed for fantasizing about him.

He finally was able to make his way to the bar, his arm still around his supermodel. "Your mother and brother are okay," he said. "Your mother is

passed out on her couch, and I called a nanny I know to watch your little brother.”

I nodded. “Thanks,” I said, then shot a look over to a guy who was frantically waving his glass in the air. “I owe you.”

Professor O’Hara just shook his head, then disappeared back into the crowd.

I took a deep breath, and continued my work.

I didn’t see Professor O’Hara for the rest of the night, much as I wanted to. I scanned the crowd several times, but it seemed that he had completely left. *It’s just as well. Like he would ever look at somebody like you. Drunk-ass mother, and you’re a broke student. To say that*

he is out of your league is way overstating the matter.

Of course, I was working on my master's in architecture, so that was something. I was proud of myself for this, as I never got even a modicum support from anybody in my life, with the exception of Jack, my roommate. At one point, I was living in an abandoned car, having sneaked away from the Wall Street trader. Nobody could find me for a year, which meant that I had dropped out of school as well. Still, I was able to make up my missed classes and graduate on time, and at the top of my class at that.

Finally, the 3 AM last call arrived. I leaned against the bar, feeling exhausted

and happy. I knew that I had made enough money to cover my floating checks, so there was a keen sense of relief there. After cleaning up my areas and doing my side work, I headed home, grabbing my ratty winter coat and hat, and headed to the subway station that was three blocks away from the bar.

I finally got home at around 4:30. My roommate, Jack, was still awake. He had one of his boyfriends over, and they were sprawled on the couch and watching a slasher pic.

“Scotch,” he said, calling me by his own special nickname for me. “Would you like a cocktail, love?”

“Oh, god, yes,” I said, even though it was 4:30, and I really needed to be

getting to bed. I was too wound, however, to sleep. “What you watching?” I asked, as Jack paused the movie to get up to make me a rum and seven. I sat on the floor, and Jack’s sometime boyfriend, Rob, affectionately tousled my hair.

“One of the *Final Destination* movies. Not sure which. They all look the same after a little while,” Rob said in his way-gay voice. Jack didn’t usually like the twink, because Jack wasn’t exactly a man’s man himself, and he always said that he wanted his men to balance him out, but apparently he made an exception for this one.

“That they do,” I said, accepting my cocktail from Jack. “So, I guess I get the

couch tonight, huh?” Jack got the bed whenever he had somebody over, which was often, really. Since I never had anybody over, I ended up sleeping on the hide-a-bed more often than not.

“Do you mind?” Jack asked. “I hate to ask that. You’ll get the real bed tomorrow night, I promise.”

I shrugged my shoulders. I lived in a car for a year. Anything beat that.

“Thanks, love. You’re adorbs as ever,” he said.

Then the three of us finished the movie around 6 AM, at which point Jack and Rob finally retired to the bedroom. I pulled out the bed, and fell asleep still fully clothed.

I was able to sleep in a little,

because Jack and Rob, thankfully, did not emerge from the bedroom until around noon. Over breakfast, I told them about my night.

“So my mom comes in drunk off her ass, again. Of course. And you will never guess who came to my rescue.”

“Who?” Jack was interested in this.

“You remember me telling you about my professor?”

“The hot one?”

“The smoking hot one,” I said with a giggle. “Oh, lord, I’m quite sure that he got an eyeful and an earful from dear Ms. James. I sure hope that she wasn’t too much in rare form last night.”

“You know she was,” Jack said. “Bitch don’t know how to act

differently.” Jack poured me another glass of orange juice. “So, how did he come to your rescue?”

“He hired a nanny to go and watch Aaron, and sent a driver to drive her drunk ass back to her hovel.” I shook my head. “What a guy, huh?”

“Uh, huh. Just don’t go fantasizing about Professor O’Dreamboat.”

“I’m not,” I said, then immediately felt embarrassed. I took another sip of orange juice and dug into my French toast. “So, what are you guys doing today?” I hoped that they were going somewhere. I really needed some personal time.

“Catching some movies at the film festival they’re having in midtown. You

wanna come with?”

“No, thanks. I really need to decompress. This is my only day off. Besides, I need to do some studying.” God knew I was way behind on that.

But I didn't end up studying. I ended up watching shows on television and zoning out on the couch. This was usually my reaction to stress, and the entire events of the previous evening had me way stressed. I ended up dozing on the couch.

About 3 PM, however, I heard my door buzz.

“Hello?” I said into the receiver. “May I help you?”

“Ms. James?” a familiar voice questioned me. “This is Professor

O'Hara. Could I come up?"

What the hell? "Uh, yeah, come on up," I said, buzzing him, and then looked around the room. The apartment was neat enough, but I felt even more embarrassment about the size of it. Living in Manhattan was ridiculously expensive, he had to understand that. Even so, I imagined that he might be appalled by my hovel.

He appeared at my door a few minutes later. My breath caught upon looking at him. Dressed in a leather jacket, scarf, white button down and jeans, he looked every bit the part of a male model who somehow managed to become one of the world's premiere architects. His eyes were so blue that I

couldn't stand to look at them for more than two seconds, before I looked away with shyness.

"Uh, come in," I said. "Sit down. Can I fix you a drink?"

"No, I can't stay," he said. "My, uh, girlfriend is in the car downstairs."

"You have a car?" I said. "You're like the only person I know who has a car."

He smiled, showing his dimples. I felt my knees turning to jelly, and I saw that my hand was shaking as I handed him my proffering of water. He drank it politely. "I, uh, just wanted to make sure you're ok. I didn't get to see you much last night. Penelope didn't want to stay."

I felt a little stunned. Nobody had

ever gone out their way to help me like this. “Yes, thanks so much for last night.”

He waved his hand dismissively. “Well, we were in the neighborhood so....” At that, I heard a loud sound of a car honking. He shrugged. “Double parked. I’ll see you tomorrow.” And, just like that, he was gone.

Chapter 2

Nick

I made my way back to my car, after seeing Scotty, my student. I felt badly for her, having seen the effect of dysfunctional parents upon Ryan, my best friend and sometime lover back in the day. Well, not really back in the day, if you count that amazing night I had with him and Iris, which happened right before I decided to high-tail it out of Kansas City. I got out of town in part because I was offered a job here, which would be a definite step up, as I would get the chance to design some of the most high-profile projects in the world. I also had always wanted the chance to help produce future architects, so my part-

time position as an adjunct professor at Columbia was also a good fit.

Mainly, though, I needed to put some distance between myself and Iris. I never knew that I could fall in love like that, and it still stung. I didn't really want her and Ryan to be in my life anymore on a regular basis, and I knew that if I stayed in town, that's exactly what would happen. So, I left. I had to. Otherwise, I don't think that I could have moved on.

I met Penelope at an art gallery opening that I attended when I first go to town. I rolled into the event, she was there, we ended up in bed about two hours later, and she basically never left my Tribeca loft. Not that she moved in, but she soon became a fixture. Yeah, it

was my pattern, and Penelope was like every other woman that I ended up with. But, it was best to be with someone like her. No chance of falling in love, so there was no chance of getting my heart stomped on like what had happened with Iris.

I got into the car. Penelope had a disinterested look on her beautiful face. She raised a single eyebrow. “You see your lackey?” she asked, then brought out a compact mirror and looked into it. “I really need to get more highlights,” she said with a note of disgust. She fluffed her hair up a little, then pursed her lips. She looked like a parakeet flirting with her reflection. The parakeets have an excuse, though- they

think that that their reflection is another bird. Penelope was just a narcissist.

“Yeah, I saw her. She seemed okay.”

Penelope wasn't listening to me, though. She was too busy looking in the mirror. I reached over and grabbed the mirror out of her hand.

She narrowed her eyes, said nothing, and just brought another mirror out of her purse.

I sighed. It wasn't worth fighting about.

“So, I was thinking of asking Scotty if she would like to intern at my office,” I said.

This got Penelope's attention. “Like hell you will.”

I raised both of my eyebrows. “I

wasn't aware that I had to get your permission to do this.”

“Listen, buddy. Don't ever think that I can't snap my fingers and be with anybody in this city. You piss me off, and you'll see what happens.”

At that, I stopped the car in the middle of the busy Manhattan street. “Get out,” I ordered her. “NOW.”

The look on her face was priceless as she stepped out of my car and made her way to the sidewalk. She was immediately on her phone and hailing a cab simultaneously.

I shook my head. Somehow women like Penelope were losing their hold on my attention. It was almost as if Iris broke some kind of fever I had, a fever

that actually drew me to these narcissistic bimbos in the first place. Penelope wasn't even particularly good in bed. Narcissistic people usually weren't. Alexis was the exception, but she really wasn't narcissistic as much she was just plumb crazy.

Iris had managed to penetrate my armor, and I didn't like it one bit. It was time to put my wall up again. So, I backed up the car and motioned to Penelope. "Get in," I ordered. To my surprise, she got back into the car without a word of protest. She looked at me expectantly. "Let's get one thing straight," I said, "if I want to offer Scotty an internship, I'm going to. I won't have you or anybody else dictating anything in

my life. We clear?”

She said nothing, just nodded her head.

“Good. Now let’s go to my home.”

And we headed to my loft in Tribeca, Penelope not saying another word.

Chapter 3

Scotty

Monday evening, after my night design course, Professor O'Hara asked to speak to me.

"Ms. James," he called to me as I was packing up my backpack. I turned my head. I was still so mortified about how he had to help me with my mom, and his short visit to my place didn't dim this mortification one bit. I spent the entire class that evening studiously avoiding his eyes.

"Uh, yes, Professor?"

"I was wondering if you could meet me in my office tomorrow."

"What time?" I asked, thinking that I would have to fit it in between studying,

going to class, and my night shift at the bar tomorrow night, which would start at 4 PM.

“What’s good for you?”

“No later than two,” I said. That would give me time to take the subway home, change and shower and get to the bar on time, assuming that this wasn’t a long meeting.

“Two it is then,” he said.

Which is how I found myself making my way to his office at two o’clock that Tuesday. I had no idea why he wanted to see me. I hoped that the incident with my mom and brother wouldn’t rear its ugly head. I really wanted to put that entire thing behind me.

I took a deep breath as I made my

way to his office. I knocked lightly on the door, which was open.

“Come in,” he said, and I entered his enormous office. I was stunned that he could have such a beautiful place here on campus, considering he was only an adjunct professor. High ceilings, and floor to ceiling windows that looked out on the bustling city. He also had amazing, modern taste. A glass desk wrapped around one of the walls, and a leather sofa with chrome feet was on another wall. His floors were hardwood, with an enormous throw-rug in multiple colors and patterns covered up much of the area. A Kadinsky painting was on one of the walls. I somehow knew this about him, that he preferred

edgy and contemporary, because the buildings that he designed all had a certain contemporary and edgy flair themselves.

My heart was pounding as I made my way to one of his ergonomic chairs. He looked at me, and my heart was pounding even more. Those eyes, those beautiful blue eyes....so bright and so... haunted? Was I interpreting them correctly? I shook my head, shaking off my woman's intuition in the process.

I took a deep breath. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, uh...do you mind if I call you Scotia?" Which was my given name.

I shook my head. "Actually, everybody just calls me Scotty."

He smiled, his dimples reappearing. I wanted to melt after seeing those dimples. His teeth were absolutely perfect, and his smile lit up the entire room.

“Ok, Scotty,” he said. “The reason why I wanted to see you is, well, I was wondering where you wanted to go with your career. You have some real talent, and my firm was actually looking for an intern.”

My mouth dropped open. The top architectural firm in New York City, one of the top ten in the entire world, and I was getting the chance to intern with them?

My mouth ran before my brain could catch up. “Uh, what’s the catch?” Then I

immediately felt embarrassed. “Oh, I mean-“

But Professor O’Hara was smiling. “No catch. I just see some real potential with you, that’s all.”

I wasn’t prepared for this, somehow. And I really didn’t know where I would ever fit it in. Full load of graduate architectural classes, working part-time...I barely had a chance to sleep as it was. And there was, in the back of my mind, the thought that this was possibly a pity offer. Although I don’t quite know how he could have convinced his partners to hire me out of pity.

“Professor O’Hara,” I began.

“Please, call me Nick.”

That didn’t seem right at all, calling

him by his first name. I never called a professor by his first name. But I obliged anyway. “Uh, Nick, uh, that’s such a wonderful offer, but I, I, I don’t have the time in my schedule to fit something like that in.”

He nodded. “Well, there will be pay, of course. In exchange for 20 hours a week at the firm, we can pay you \$40,000 a year.”

\$40,000 a year? That was about what I made working 30 hours a week at the bar. And this position, unlike my bartending position, would actually give me a great deal of professional development.

“Uh,” I began.

He interrupted. “Scotty. I get the

feeling that you don't believe in yourself." He didn't elaborate on this comment, but just sat there, looking at me. His body language and expression was no longer inviting. He looked annoyed, and his arms were crossed in front of him.

"No, it's not that. It's just, well, there are so many other talented students out there. I was just wondering, if, you know, this has something to do with my, uh, home life."

He raised one eyebrow. "What, you think that I would stick my neck out for you because your mother is a drunk and your brother probably needs to be in foster care?" Then he snorted. "Somehow I get the feeling that you not

only don't believe in yourself, but you also don't believe in me."

This conversation was taking a turn for the surreal. I never imagined that I would be having such a talk with my professor. "It's not that," I said, feeling my defensive hackles rising.

"Than what is it?"

I wanted to tell him that I didn't feel that I was worthy. I wanted to be honest. Being a foster kid, off and on, for most of my life instilled a general sense of unworthiness in me, as did my verbally abusive mother, who always told me that I would never amount to anything. But I was too embarrassed to admit to this. So I just said "I don't want to work for your firm. It's not the direction that I want to

go.”

“Really. Not the direction you want to go.” This was not a question, but a very skeptical statement. “Not the direction you want to go.”

“Right. I was thinking more along the lines of a firm that has more of a classical aesthetic.”

“Scotty. I’ve seen your designs. You’re a perfect fit.”

“I just don’t want to,” I said, well aware of how unprofessional I was sounding. “Can I go? I’m going to be late for my shift.” I desperately looked at the clock on the wall. It read 2:30. I was going to be cutting it close as it was.

He said nothing, but just waved his hand dismissively.

He looked pissed.
At that, I left.

Chapter 4

I wiped away my tears as I made my way to the subway. The mid October wind was cutting me like a knife, and I was grateful for my tattered stocking cap on my head. My coat, on the other hand, left much to be desired. *Looks like I need to go back to the thrift store to find something better.* Winters here were brutal, and my thin wool coat would just not cut it anymore.

Once on the subway, I let myself feel my emotions. I knew that I was shooting myself in the foot. I just got, out of the blue, the best offer that I could ever get, and I didn't even have to work for it. Interning for that firm would provide invaluable experience, not to mention

enough money to pay my bills, and might even enable me to start paying back my rather monstrous student loans, which were getting so huge that they threatened to topple me. I could get out of bartending, which didn't exactly boost my resumé for my post-graduate career. I would be given the chance to work on huge international projects.

And I would be close to my fantasy man, the man who had starred in most of my dreams ever since I met him.

That's when it hit me. I didn't want to be close to him. He would be way too distracting, and it was humiliating enough to know how bad I had it for him. Working with him every day would just be too much. Besides, he had that

supermodel girlfriend, and I had to admit that seeing him with her all the time would just be too much as well.

My crush on Nick could possibly end up ruining my career.

I sighed. It was always my pattern to run from anybody that I felt anything for. That was why I had never had a real boyfriend in my entire life. That was why I was still a virgin at the age of 23. Well, technically a virgin. I mean, I had never willingly slept with anybody. I suppose that the Wall Street trader didn't really count, because I was never willing, and I was only 13.

So, it was easier in my mind if I just considered myself a virgin.

And feeling myself so drawn to this

man, who was my professor, and wanted to be my boss, was scary on so many levels it wasn't funny. It was easier if I just avoided any such complications in my life, even if it meant that I would always live only half a life.

So, as I trudged home to shower and get ready for work, I wasn't prepared to answer any questions that Jack had for me.

"Cocktail, honey?" he asked. He perpetually had a cocktail in his hand and perpetually wanted me to be his drinking buddy.

"I have to work, remember?"

"So?"

I rolled my eyes. He might want to go drunk to his job, which was a

bouncer at a gay club, but I certainly didn't. I was way more responsible than that.

"I have to shower and get on the subway pronto. I'll catch up to you when I get home." Which wasn't likely, because I wouldn't be home until around 4 at the earliest, and tomorrow was my early class at 7:30. So, coming home and chatting with Jack after work wasn't going to happen, but I wanted to appease him.

Jack wasn't having it. "Not so fast, missy," he said. "What did O'Dreamboat want from you?"

I had to think fast. I couldn't admit that I just screwed up an opportunity of a lifetime because of my fears. Jack would

rightfully want to kick my ass. “Um, he just wanted to know if there was anything more he could do to help my mom. He’s a nice guy that way.”

“And?”

“And I told him no. Thanks, but no thanks. My mom’s problems are hers to deal with, and mine to a certain extent.”

“Love,” he said. “You can’t deal with that on your own. You need help.”

“Oh my god. I don’t have time for this conversation. I’m late as it is,” I said, as I hastily changed out of my clothes in the bedroom, the door open, and rushed into our tiny bathroom. Jack had seen me naked plenty of times, so I really wasn’t self-conscious about this. I turned on the warm water, and took

about five minutes in total in scrubbing myself down and washing my hair. I then twisted my long brown hair into a chignon on the top of my head and secured it with butterfly clip. I threw on my mini-skirt and low-cut blouse that I always wore, because I tended to make a lot more money with this particular combination than when I wore other clothes that didn't show skin, threw on a minimal amount of makeup, got my purse, and ran out the door.

“Love,” Jack called after me as I waited for the elevator. “We’re going to finish this conversation later!” I simply looked at him as the elevator arrived, and, as I stepped into the elevator car, I let out a sigh of relief.

I was feeling that I couldn't breathe in that apartment, as Jack was pressing me about things that I simply wasn't ready to face just yet.

Chapter 5

Nick

Well, that was an odd reaction. I wasn't prepared for Scotty to not only reject my offer, but to reject it so vehemently. There was something up with that girl, and I was starting to see her vulnerability. It was intoxicating, to tell the truth. And it presented a challenge. And one thing about me, I never backed away from a challenge. I simply would have to approach the offer to her in a different way. Problem was, subtlety had never been my strong point, and subtlety would be exactly what this situation would call for.

While I was lost in thought about Scotty, and wondering how to approach

the situation, Portia, one of the other senior partners at the firm, appeared at my door. If it weren't for the fact that Portia was so accomplished, earning her PhD by the age of 24 from Stanford, she would be exactly my type. Slender and blonde, long legs, gorgeous ass and cleavage, and perpetually dressed in short skirts and fuck-me pumps. Flawless skin, big blue eyes, perfect Barbie-doll face.

She was also unmistakably hot for me.

But when she came into my office, I really wasn't paying too much attention to her. I was lost in thought about Scotty.

"Nick," she said, her voice hoarse and throaty. She shut the door behind her,

then slinked over to my desk. As she sat across me, she leaned forward, showing her lacey bra and her generous cleavage. “What are you doing tonight?”

She smelled like some kind of expensive perfume. *Chanel No. 5* – Rielle always wore it, so I would recognize it anywhere.

“Portia. I think we’ve been over this. I don’t believe in shitting where I sleep. I never have. I don’t have many rules when it comes to fuck-buddies, but that’s one of them.” That was only partially true. Actually, I usually didn’t care about that – I’d had affairs with plenty of people I worked with before, both male and female - but I was determined to turn over a new leaf, at least when it came to

working partners.

The real issue, however, was Scotty. I couldn't get that girl out of my mind.

The problem with Scotty, though, was that she was just the type of girl who might sneak into my heart just when I least expected it. Exactly like Iris did. I'd never wanted that. Women who promised no emotional attachments were the ones that I was always drawn to. So, truth be told, not wanting to fuck Portia confused me, for she held no real interest for me, and she usually was just my type. Aside from the fact that she was wicked smart, that is. With the possible exception of Alexis, most of my women haven't had much in the way of intelligence.

But Portia was a woman who always got what she wanted, and she had made it clear, ever since I arrived, that what she wanted was me. So, when I rebuffed her, she simply went to the door and locked it. Then sat back down across from me. She slinked back behind me, and put her fingers on my neck. “Oooh, so tense. Why so tense?”

I tried to resist her touch, but I *was* tense. And she really had a gentle, yet firm, way of soothing my muscles. This had become almost a daily occurrence with her – coming into my office and rubbing my neck and back muscles. I let her do it, partially out of the desire to actually get a free massage, partially out my desire just to be touched. I

associated touch with warmth and affection, two things which had been missing in my life for far too long. Not that I thought, in my mind, that her touch meant that she was warm and affectionate, so much as she was hot and wanted in my pants. Thus far, I hadn't let her, but this was her way of getting there. I knew that.

She was breathing in my ear now, as her perfectly manicured hands unbuttoned my collar and made their way underneath my shirt and onto my chest. I closed my eyes, trying to imagine somebody who I loved doing this to me. Usually, when I closed my eyes, I started to picture Iris. Lovely Iris who I dismissed until I found out how beautiful

she was. Down to earth Iris who was the wife of my best friend, a best friend who was madly, truly, deeply in love with her. But, for some reason, as Portia's strong and commanding hands made their way down my chest and onto my belly, I couldn't conjure up Iris' face.

Perhaps that was a good sign.

"Portia, don't. Please don't," I said, but I was starting to get hard, in spite of myself.

Oh, what the hell? I stood up, and proceeded to unbutton her blouse. Her gorgeous natural D cups spilled out as I unhooked her bra, which clasped in the front, conveniently enough. I put my hands on her flat stomach and slender hips. Her lips met mine hungrily, her

hands stroking my back. I put her up on my desk, and it wasn't difficult to hike up her mini-skirt. I hadn't seen a professional woman wear a skirt that short since *Ally McBeal*, which was, surprisingly enough, a show I really got into when I was in my late teens.

I tongued her lightly then ordered her to bend over the desk.

She obliged, her perfect ass up the air. I fucked her right then and there. Physically, it felt amazing. As usual. Emotionally, it felt empty. As usual. But she was evidently enjoying herself, as my women usually do. But I felt my mind wandering, even worse than usual. It's like when I used to be banging Alexis while thinking the entire time about Iris.

But I wasn't thinking about Iris as I banged Portia's beautiful body over my desk.

I was thinking about Scotty.

Chapter 6

After it was over, I immediately felt that I had done something wrong. The problem was, Portia wasn't a rando. She was a partner at the firm. This could create a huge mess which might be difficult to contain. Professionally, she wasn't above me – we were on the same level of partnership, as both of us were senior partners. All the same, she could very well make my life hell.

Not my most shining moment, fucking her like that. And I had no idea why I even did. She was more than willing and I was...vulnerable. Somewhere in my soul there was an opening to find love, and that feeling was scary as hell. And, somehow, Scotty's own vulnerability

was piercing my heart, and I wanted to deny that feeling.

There was just something about that girl...

Portia was looking at me, licking her lips, evidently wanting to go again. I had to make an excuse to get out of there. *Looks like I need to leave the scene.*

“Uh, Portia, I need to talk to Peter about the new intern we were talking about, Scotty James. If you will excuse me,” I said, as I zipped up my pants. But Portia wasn’t about to leave. She went over to my couch, and lay down suggestively.

“I’ll be right here when you get back,” she said.

I nodded, and waited until I was

safely outside the office to roll my eyes. *Looks like I'm going to have go home without my briefcase tonight, because I'm not going to go back in my office. She can stay there all night, for all I care.*

I made my way to Peter's office down the hall.

"Knock knock," I said.

Peter turned around. "Nick. Come in."

I approached his desk and sat down. He looked at me. "So, how did it go? When is Ms. James going to start working here?"

"We're still in negotiation," I lied. I didn't tell John that I offered her \$40,000 to work there. I planned to pay

her salary with my own money, as it was this firm's policy that new interns would start out unpaid. But I knew that Scotty would never be able to take an unpaid internship, considering her obvious financial situation, so I had to offer her something. "But I'll let you know when I get something nailed down for sure."

"In negotiation? Since when do you have to negotiate with an intern?" Peter was incredulous. He knew, as did I, that this was a plumb, absolutely cream of the crop internship position, and, thus far, all the students who have been offered a position either jumped at it or had actively sought it in the first place.

"Well, she was taken by surprise by the offer," I offered helpfully. "She

needs to figure out if it fits in her schedule.”

Peter looked skeptical, to say the least. “She doesn’t sound hungry. I say we look for somebody else who is.” The words were unspoken – *who does she think she is, not leaping at the chance to work here on high-profile projects around the globe?*

“I’ll let you know by tomorrow,” I said. Which meant that I had to convince her to take the internship position by then.

I had no idea how I was going to do this.

So I headed down to her bar.

Chapter 7

Scotty

I arrived to my job right at 4:30 on the dot. I prayed that my mom wouldn't make another guest appearance tonight. In the back of my mind, I was desperately worried about Aaron, who was in the sole care of my mother. But I couldn't think about that. Selfish as it sounds, I had to think of myself and my bills and dreams. Nobody asked my mother to get knocked up by one of her tricks. Aaron was an innocent party, of course, but I felt myself irrationally resenting the little boy. I saw my future, and it was as a mother to that kid. If that happened, I might as well kiss my dreams goodbye, and resign myself to

living in poverty for the rest of my life.

It was only a Tuesday evening, therefore the bar wouldn't be wall to wall people. It would be busy, of course, but nothing like it was on the weekends. There wasn't a game on the plasma screens that night, and there also wasn't a drink special. So, I could count on a steady stream of regulars, but I wouldn't be slammed. Really, if it weren't for the fact that I didn't make that much money on such evenings – I typically would go home with only about \$75 to \$100, as opposed to \$500-\$750 on a busy Saturday night – these evenings would be my absolute favorite. And I arrived to find that I was working with my favorite bartender, Ralph, who greeted me as I

arrived in harried fashion.

“Hey, Scotty, my Scotty. The A-Team!” Ralph greeted me, as I rushed into the back to put up my purse, my coat and my hat.

“Hey. Um, sorry I’m late.”

“You’re not. You’re right on time, actually.”

After putting everything up, I took my place at the bar. The only people who were surrounding the bar, so far, were the regulars. When I say regulars, I mean regulars. People who were there every evening, rain or shine, game or no game. But it was cool having them here, because we were literally their family. Sometimes I looked at some of the women regulars and said to myself

there, but for the grace of god, go I. God knew there were moments in my adolescence that I figured that I would end up a barfly. Never would I have imagined that I would be working on a master's in anything, let alone working on a master's in architecture at Columbia.

“Scotty!” Deana was calling me, and motioning to her empty drink. “Another one!”

There was no need for her to tell me what she was drinking and how she wanted it. I automatically knew. Like clockwork, I got out the gin and lime juice, adding just a hint of Frangelico, a hazelnut liqueur. An odd combination, in my opinion, but Deana drank nothing but

this, as far as I knew.

“Thanks,” she slurred. Then she got up and pinched my cheeks, and touched my stomach. “Who’s feeding you? Nobody, apparently.”

She was right. I wasn’t eating that much, because food was turning out to be a luxury that I couldn’t always afford. “Thanks, Dee,” I said. “I think that’s a compliment, coming from you.”

She frowned. “Usually it would be, but honey, you’re starting to look like one of those bone-thin models. You need to come over to my house for a home-cooked meal.”

Larry, another regular, nudged Dee, and said “yeah, but she still got her boobs!” And he started laughing.

I self-consciously put my hands across my chest at that one. My generous rack, which never seemed to shrink no matter how much the rest of my body did, was always a cause for embarrassment. I blamed them for enticing Mr. Lucas, the Wall Street trader, into my bed when I first started sprouting them. After I ran away from that home, finding out that nobody, absolutely nobody, would believe me when I told them what was going on, I went to a plastic surgeon to find out how much it would cost to get them reduced. Finding out that the cheapest surgeon was going to charge me \$20,000 was discouraging, to say the least. From then on, I tried to minimize them by wearing

bras that were so small they smashed the girls against my chest, but they still looked huge, just less so. And it was uncomfortable to boot. Plus, my tips dried up. Finally, pragmatism won out - I realized that the size of my tips were directly proportional to how much cleavage I showed, so I reluctantly decided to display them.

I literally couldn't afford not to.

Dee nudged Larry back, and punched him on the arm. "Stop that. You're embarrassing her."

Larry said nothing, just leered like he usually did and asked for another Jack and Seven. I obliged. He took it, and kept leering at me hungrily. I looked away uncomfortably like I usually did,

and Ralph helpfully stepped in front of me. One thing about Ralph, he was very protective of me, much like a father would be. Or how I would imagine a father would be. Never having had a father, I was left to imagine what one would do.

And, no, I didn't count Mr. Lucas as being like a real father. God forbid.

"What can I do for you, Larry?" Ralph asked. "I suppose you want me to change the channel?"

"You got it. Put it on Fox News."

At that, Dee snorted. "Faux News my ass. Why don't you just get the tooth fairy to deliver your news? She would be so much more credible than Megyn Kelly."

Oh, boy, here we go. “Why don’t we put the television on a cooking channel?” I said, changing it to the *Food Network*. Larry looked annoyed, as he obviously wanted his fill of conservative news, but Dee looked happy.

“Oh, great, they have a rerun on of *Chopped*. I love this show,” Dee said, clapping her hands.

At that, I noticed a few more people streaming in the door. There was Chaz, who was another regular, and he greeted the others warmly. He was with Josh, a good friend of his who was often his buddy there. The four of them all talked amongst themselves as they nursed their rums and cokes, gins and tonics and scotches and waters.

I smiled. Really, these people were more family to me than anybody else had ever been. My earlier stress started to melt away as I engaged the four people and Ralph in bantering conversation.

“So, I signed up for the Affordable Care Act today,” Dee said.

“Sure. Support the pinko Kenyan. Go right ahead. We’ll be living in Nazi Germany before you know it.” Larry.

Chaz and Josh started laughing. “Yup. Giving health care to the masses is totally the same as killing 12 million Jews,” Chaz said.

At that Josh said “You know, I think I did hear something in the news about putting a statue of Stalin in the middle of Times Square, come to think of it.”

“You guys laugh, but just wait. There’s going to be Second Amendment remedies for all of this.” Larry.

I smiled, thinking that I was seeing an argument between Archie and Meathead from *All In the Family*. “Come on, you guys,” I said, “can’t we all just get along?” At that, I saw that Dee was dry, so I prepared another drink and put it in front of her.

As I was putting some popcorn into my mouth, and Ralph was launching into one of tasteless but hilarious jokes, I saw a familiar face coming in.

It was Nick.

My heart quickened, and I saw my hands start to shake as I turned to get another Scotch and soda for Chaz. I tried

to studiously ignore Nick, but he sat down on a barstool and stared at me, saying nothing.

Ralph put a cocktail napkin in front of him. "What can I get you?" he asked Nick.

"Scotch rocks," he said. I could feel his eyes still trained on me.

Ralph looked at me. "Are you alright? Your face is beet red."

That was one thing about me. My face never could hide what I was feeling. I just shook my head as Ralph said "Girl, you're blushing."

I continued to shake my head. "Uh, I have to go use the ladies' room," I said, as I beat a hasty retreat from behind the bar. I practically ran to the bathroom and

splashed some cold water on my face. “Get it together,” I said to my reflection. “He’s your professor. You’ve been seeing him twice a week for over two months. Why are you feeling like this now?”

I really didn’t know the answer to that question. I only knew that I felt weak and shaky.

A woman came out of one of the stalls, and I immediately felt embarrassed for talking to myself. She looked at me and smiled knowingly. “I know what you mean,” she said. “I’ve had a crush on many professors. There’s something about a smart man, huh?”

I smiled back. “Is that what it is? I always just thought that I was always

recreating my first crush, which was on the professor on *Gilligan's Island*.”

“Right? That boy be hot!”

I laughed, feeling better and calmer. She left the bathroom, and I continued to stare at my reflection, willing my heart to go completely back to normal before making my way back out there. In about two minutes, the girl came back in. “Your professor is that guy at the bar?”

I said nothing, just nodded.

“All I can say is wow! I can see why you’d have the hots for him!” She shook her head. “I never had a professor who looked like that. Good god.”

Thanks. Thanks a lot. Now I’m more nervous than ever.

That girl left, and Dee came in.

“Dear, are you doing okay?” she asked me, as she put her arm around me.

“Sure,” I lied. “Why do you ask?”

“You’ve been in here for a long time. There’s a fine young man who wants to talk to you.” She looked at me, and nodded knowingly.

“I know, I know. I’ll be right out.”

“Take your time. I just wanted to make sure you were doing ok.”

Good ol’ Dee. If Ralph was the father I never had, then Dee was the mother I never had.

She left, and I spent another five minutes looking down at the sink, my hands on the edge. I couldn’t figure out why Nick’s presence at the bar was doing this to me, except for the fact that I

was started to feel that there was an attraction that was growing between us. I felt it when I was in his office, truth be told, which was a good part of the reason why I left in such a hurry. Having those feelings was scary, and to think that there was a chance that they would be reciprocated was scarier yet.

Finally, I took a deep breath and made my way out. Nick was still sitting there at the bar, engaging in conversation with Larry. “True story. They served eel at the first Thanksgiving,” Nick was saying, popping a handful of peanuts into his mouth.

Larry made a face. “Not for me. Give me turkey and dressing any day of the week.”

“I actually like eel,” Nick said. “I get it in sushi restaurants all the time.”

“Better you than me, that’s all I have to say.” Larry.

I hurried behind the bar, and Nick stood up when he saw me approach. I turned my back, pretending to clean the area around the beer taps.

“Uh, Scotty,” his deep voice called out to me.

“Oh, hi!” I said, pretending that I just now noticed him. “Professor O’Hara, uh, what a nice surprise!” I still had my bar rag in my hand, so I turned around and proceeded to clean the bar around Nick and the others. I couldn’t meet his eyes.

Ralph put his arm around me.

“Honey, you’re going to scrub a hole in the bar the way that you’re going.”

Nick put his hand on the arm that was still frantically scrubbing the bar. “I need to talk to you.”

I looked at Ralph, and he waved his hand. “Go take a break. It’s not going to get crowded for another hour.”

I took a deep breath, and walked out from behind the bar. Nick gestured to a table, and the two of us sat down.

“I don’t want to beat around the bush,” he said to me after we sat down. “I wanted to find out what the hell happened back there in my office.”

I looked at him, then immediately looked away. He had a way of looking at me with those penetrating eyes of his,

that made me feel like he could see inside my very soul. As corny as that sounds.

“Um....”

He just looked at me, not saying a word. Then, he got up. “Wait right here,” he said. Then he went to the bar, and I saw him talking to Ralph. Ralph was nodding a lot, and looking over at me from time to time. I saw Nick looking at me a few times as well. Then I saw Ralph getting on the phone. Nick slapped Ralph’s back, and made his way back over to me.

“Come with me,” he said, offering his hand.

“What? I have to work.”

“No you don’t. Ralph is calling

somebody to come in for you.”

I shook my head. “You can’t do this. I-I-I can’t afford not to work.”

“Go back and get your coat. I’m going to buy you dinner.”

I looked desperately back at Ralph, but he was looking at me and smiling, and giving me the thumbs up.

My mind started to race. It wasn’t quite life-or-death if I didn’t work my shift that night, at least not like it was last Saturday night. The floating checks were already paid. But I still was living on a razor thin edge, and just one night off could completely throw me.

But I somehow found my way back to get my coat and hat and then walked back to where Nick was standing, which

was by the entrance. I had my coat in my arms, and, before I could put it on, Nick had it in his hands and held it up for me. I reluctantly put my arms into the coat. Then he took my scarf and put it around my neck. He lightly tousled my hair and smiled. “You look cute,” he said, and I lost my breath at the sight of his dimples making a reappearance. Then he put his arm on my shoulder as we made our way out to his car, which he somehow managed to park right in front.

“This is your car?” I said, pointing to the beautiful and sleek Jaguar in candy apple red.

“Yep,” he said, opening the door for me. “Get in.”

I got in, and we were soon off.

Chapter 8

We drove in heavy traffic to Wolfgang's Steakhouse in Times Square. Nick had the car valet parked, and we made our way into the restaurant. It was a beautiful space, with high ceilings, wood paneling and white table cloths. I had actually never been in a restaurant like this, even when I lived with the Wall Street trader and his family. That guy might have been a millionaire, but he was also a cheap bastard.

"Do you like wine?" he asked, as he looked at the menu.

"Sure," I said.

"Good," he said, as the waiter approached. Turning to the waiter, Nick ordered a bottle of *Brunello Di*

Montalcino. I gasped when I saw that this bottle of wine sold for \$450.

“Uh, that’s kinda expensive,” I said.

He just looked at me with a look on his face that made me feel humiliated for making a fuss. Then his expression softened and he smiled. “Don’t worry about it,” he said.

I examined the menu, seeing that most main courses were \$45 and up, and everything else was sold separately.

“So, what are you getting?” he asked me.

“Um, I’m looking at a Caesar Salad.”

“Great. What else are you going to get?”

“I’m not that hungry,” I said. I didn’t

want him to have to spend money on me, so I gravitated towards the least expensive item on the menu.

Nick seemed to understand. “Do you prefer seafood or steak?” he asked me.

“Well, I like fish, but-“

“Good,” he said, looking at the menu. “That’s all I needed to know.”

When the waiter came around, he ordered a filet mignon with mashed potatoes, spinach and Caesar Salad for himself, and ordered a Chilean Sea Bass, Caesar Salad, asparagus and Jumbo Baked Potato for me. I added it up, and quickly calculated that my meal was costing around \$70, as everything was *al a carte*.

\$70 was more than I spent on

groceries in a two-week period.

The bottle of wine came around, and Nick poured me a glass. I nervously brought it to my lips. It was delicious – full-bodied and fruity. I knew very little about wine, but I knew what I liked, and I loved this.

Nick was watching me carefully, while he sipped his wine. Finally, he spoke. “I wanted to take you out here so that you can relax a little. Because we need to talk more about the position that I am still trying to get you to take.”

I felt disappointed. There was a very big part of me that was imagining that this was a date that we were on. But he still was only interested in me as a possible intern. *Stop dreaming.* I felt

like a silly girl, pining away for somebody who was way beyond my reach.

“Professor O’Hara,” I began.

“Nick,” he countered.

“Nick,” I started over. “I would love to take this position, but I don’t feel qualified.”

He just stared at me for a second. “You remind me of somebody,” he said.

“I do? Who?”

“My best friend’s wife. She’s like you. Guileless, a little innocent. She’s kinda a nut, but she’s pretty cool.”

I took another sip. I was really a lightweight, so I was feeling it. Nick was still staring at me, but then he shook his head.

“I’m not giving up on this,” he said. “This is an opportunity of a lifetime for you, and I really think that you need to take it.”

“Why do you want me so much?”

“You’re wickedly talented. Or did you not know that?”

“I guess I didn’t really think about that. I just thought that I was average.”

“No, you’re far above average. You have an unbelievable aesthetic taste, and your designs are some of the most sophisticated I have ever seen in a student. You can really grow with our firm. You need to take this position.”

I shook my head, my mother’s voice ringing in my ears, as she ripped up the rudimentary drawings that I made when I

was a little kid and still living with her. *Scotty Marie, you are a dumbshit. You're a fucking worthless piece of shit. You take after your sperm donor. You think you can draw? A two-year-old can do this well. Better, in fact.* My “sperm donor” was apparently a rando, same as Aaron’s “sperm donor,” same as the other six children who were taken away from her and adopted by other families. I was never able to be adopted. My foster families never wanted me for long. Why, I don’t know. I always figured there was something wrong with me. I stayed with the Wall Street trader and his wife the longest, and, by that point, I was so desperate to stay with a permanent family that I allowed him to

do what he did to me for a year before I started telling people about it.

I was frantic to change the subject. “I heard you talking about liking eel. I never could get into eel too much. Too strong-tasting for me.” I gravitated towards the milder fish, so I knew that the Chilean Sea Bass would be perfect for me.

“Yeah, I like it ok. But you’re avoiding the subject.” He poured me another glass of wine, seeing that I was out. “Tell me what’s really going on.”

I had to think of something fast. I never told people how I really felt inside. It would make me vulnerable, and, worse than that, it would make me feel like an absolute freak.

“I just don’t think that I’m ready, that’s all. Maybe next semester.”

“This offer may not be available next semester. We’re looking for somebody right now.” He sipped his wine and broke some of the bread that had newly arrived on the table. “Now, I’m going to sit here all night with you until you tell me what’s really on your mind.”

How was I going to avoid this? There was a part of me that wanted just to take the position to get out of further questioning. Because there was no way that I could tell him the truth – that I not only didn’t feel worthy, but I was feeling an uncomfortable amount of magnetic attraction to him, and I didn’t want that. I spent my life running from that. I

couldn't tell him that being nightly raped when I was 13 had made me not want to get close to any man, and that I always had to run from my feelings.

So, I decided just to drink some more wine. There was one thing about alcohol – it made me relax and stop overthinking everything. I wanted to relax, but I didn't want to lose control. I never lost control over anything anymore.

Nick apparently felt that pressing me further was doing more harm than good, so he backed off. “So, tell me, Scotty. When did you figure out that you wanted to be an architect?”

“Oh, that's easy. I've always known it. Ever since I've known what an

architect does. Buildings and design have always been fascinating for me. Always. What about you?"

"The same, really," he said, popping a piece of bread in his mouth. "Although I will have to say that seeing the *Notre Dame* in Paris was really a turning point. I think that I was only four. To say that this was the most magnificent building would really be an understatement. I knew then that I wanted to design beautiful buildings like that. And, lucky me, I had the talent to fulfill that dream."

I nodded my head. "Oh, that is a beautiful church. I mean, I have only seen it in books and such, but that would be a great inspiration. For me, I think it

was just the Empire State Building. Same thing.”

He smiled, and broke some bread and buttered it.

“Uh, I know that you uh, lived in the Midwest all your life. What brings you to New York?” I asked him.

“I fell in love with the wrong woman.”

I was a bit stunned that he was so open like that with me. “Why was she the wrong woman?”

“Well, it’s a long story, but suffice to say that she’s married to my best friend.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not what you’re thinking. Nothing happened. But I had to get away from that situation, so I sought out this

job and got it. It's a step up, anyhow. The firm I work for here is more international in scope than my previous firm."

"Wait. Is that the same woman who reminds you of me?"

"The same one." At that, he looked sad. He stared at his wine glass. "It was a mess. I haven't seen either of them since. I've talked to Ryan, though."

I wondered if it was a good thing or a bad thing that I reminded him of this mystery woman.

Dinner arrived, and I put my napkin on my lap. I tried to keep myself from attacking the food, but it was difficult. It had been so long since I'd had an actual meal, I'd forgotten what one looked like.

However, it seemed like I couldn't really hide it too much. Nick was looking at me with a sympathetic look in his eyes as I dug into my potatoes and fish. I could tell that he was very well-bred, because his manners were impeccable.

Mine, not so much, but I was really trying.

As the evening wore on, I somehow felt that he was looking into me, seeing how damaged I was. I didn't know why I was thinking that, but there was something in his eyes that told me that he was seeing me like no other man had ever seen me. And I was also seeing in his eyes some of the same pain that I was carrying around with me.

I wondered if I was accurate about that, or it was just something that I was imagining.

“Uh, Scotty,” he began. “I don’t want to pry, but...”

“But what?”

“Are you doing ok financially?”

“Of course,” I lied. “Why would you ask that?”

“I don’t want you to be offended, but it seems like this is the first good meal that you’ve had in awhile.”

I then became self-conscious that it was so obvious that I was attacking the food like a lioness who hadn’t hunted game in weeks.

“Well, I am kinda living on the edge, and I often have to give money to my

mother. She tries to get by, but...”

“I know. I understand about family dysfunction.” He didn’t elaborate on this, though.

“You do? Do you have a family like mine?”

“No. My parents are great. But my best friend – his family was a piece of work. Poor guy.” He shook his head. “But because we were so close, his problems became mine too. So, trust, whatever is going on with your family, I’ve seen it all and worse.”

I smiled. The waiter was back, and Nick ordered dessert for both of us. I tried to protest, but he silenced me with a look.

“Trust, you could use a dessert,” he

said.

It was then that I realized, perhaps for the first time, that Nick was not inappropriately leering at me like most men did. He wasn't staring at my cleavage like virtually every man, ever, had done. His eyes never even wandered there. So, I started to feel more comfortable. It didn't seem that he would be like the other men, especially Mr. Lucas.

The night wore on, and I drank more and more wine, and found myself relaxing more and more as well. I tried to make sure that I didn't let my guard down, though.

But I found myself having a nice time, perhaps the first good time I have

ever had with a man.

Yet, I still hadn't committed to interning for him.

Finally, it was time to leave. We ended up drinking two entire bottles of wine, and I felt a bit leery about Nick getting behind the wheel.

But it turned out that Nick didn't have to drive. He had called his driver, the one who took my mom home that night, and he picked us up.

The two of us sat in the back seat, and I was tipsy. I could feel the heat between us. I hoped that I wasn't imagining it. My defenses were down, and I was feeling like I wanted him to touch me like I had never been willingly touched by anyone. But even then, I

couldn't come out and say it. I didn't know for sure that he was feeling the same way, but my intuition said that he did. And the alcohol had dimmed the voice in my head that was telling me that a guy like him would never go for a girl like me.

“Uh, Scotty,” he said. “Don't take this the wrong way, but..”

“But yeah? Yeah, yeah, yeah?” I was vaguely aware that I was acting a fool, but, at the same time, I couldn't really help myself.

“I'd like for you to come home with me. I don't want to try anything, but I really don't want this evening to end, either.”

“I want to come home with you,

too,” I said. This was something that I would never, ever say in my sober state, but my inhibitions were way down by then.

So, we ended up in his loft in Tribeca, which was on the top floor of the building. I was stunned by the size and beauty of the place. The ceilings were about 40’ tall, and I had only heard of places that big in the middle of the city. I didn’t think that I would actually be in one. His taste in décor and furniture was as modern as in his office. He had more Kadinsky paintings in here – that apparently was his favorite artist. But I also recognized paintings by Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and Francis Bacon. And there were some gorgeous

and colorful paintings by an artist that I didn't recognize.

He also had a terrace that wrapped around his loft. The terrace was paved in granite, and there were modern art sculptures out there, as well as tables, chairs and a fire pit. A sunken hot tub that would easily seat 10 bubbled in a corner. I walked out, admiring the floor the ceiling walls of windows that looked out onto the terrace, and drank in the breathtaking view of the city.

Then I came back in and looked around, feeling more than a little awed at the place. Even the Wall Street trader, Mr. Lucas, didn't make enough money to afford a place like this. Or, perhaps he did, but his apartment wasn't this lavish,

at any rate. And those paintings! Any one of them was worth millions, some of them hundreds of millions. So, I went around and admired each of them individually.

He saw me looking at one of the paintings. It was a painting by somebody that I didn't recognize, but it showed a rare talent, in my own estimation. It was painted by an artist that evidently was involved in the impressionist movement, so it was different from the other paintings, which favored the surrealists and the abstract artists.

As I was staring at the stunning painting of a woman and her two children on a hotel balcony, Nick came up and said "My best friend painted

this,” he said.

“It’s exquisite,” I said, touching it.
“He’s very talented.”

“That he is. He’s into the impressionists, as you can probably tell.”

“Yes, definitely.”

It was then that I noticed the gorgeous baby grand piano that was on one end of the enormous living area. I went over to it and sat down on the bench, and plinked my fingers over the keys a little. “Do you play?” I asked him.

“Yeah, a little. Do you want to hear some?”

“Of course, silly. Let’s hear you play something.”

At that, he joined me on the bench. “What would you like to hear?” he asked.

I looked out the window. It was still only October but I was looking forward to Christmas all the same. I loved Christmas in New York more than anything in the world. It was always so...magical. Even when I was growing up with my mother, and there was never any money for anything, therefore I didn't get any presents at all, I still loved the season. This was before I started to be removed from the home because of her drunkenness. Of course, with the Wall Street Trader, there were always plenty of presents for me, but I much preferred the present-less

Christmases to the ones with him. For obvious reasons.

But there was something about the bustling of the streets during the busy season, and the enormous Christmas tree outside Rockefeller Center that made me smile. I loved the Christmas specials on television, and the carolers outside on the streets. I loved that we usually always had a white Christmas. *Miracle on 34th Street* was my favorite movie of all time, and I read *A Christmas Carol* about 100 times growing up.

So I knew what I wanted him to play. “*O Holy Night. Play O Holy Night.*”

He smiled, and cracked his knuckles. Then he launched into a gorgeous and nuanced rendition of the song, which

was my all-time favorite. He smiled at me as he sang.

“O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining. It is the night of our dear savior’s birth,” we sang. I knew that my voice was off key, but, at that moment, I really didn’t care. His voice was imperfect as well, but better than mine, and he sang in a deep baritone that was deeper than his actual talking voice.

After that song, he looked at me. “So, you like Christmas music, huh?”

“I do, I do,” I said with a smile. “Don’t you?”

“Sure,” he said, then started playing *The River*, another of my favorite Christmas songs.

“Now, how did you know that I

loved that song?" I asked him.

"I had a feeling," he said. "Do you want to hear Christmas music all night, or do you want to hear something else?"

"Surprise me."

So his next song was *Rhapsody in Blue* by George Gershwin, a familiar standard. I was amazed at how expert he was in playing this piece. There was not a single wrong note, yet he also did a slightly different interpretation from the piece that I knew. Then the next piece was Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor*. He looked at me and smiled.

"Oh, I do love this piece," I said.

"Really. Do you know what it is?"

"Of course. It's the music from *All*

By Myself.” And it was, for Eric Carmen sampled this particular piece in his classic song.

His face immediately fell.

“Just kidding. Rachmaninoff is one of my favorite composers, actually. His Second Piano Concerto is pure genius from start to finish, dontcha think?”

His smile was back.

And there was something else in his eyes at that moment.

I once again felt that his eyes were penetrating my soul, and I thought, for just a moment, that I was starting to see that he was having feelings for me. And this scared me to death. So I immediately started to feel uncomfortable. I got up off the bench and

went to stare at his Kadinsky. It was a mesmerizing mélange of colors and shapes. It was like a dreamscape in a way, or like seeing into the mind of a mad genius. I could stand there and stare at it for hours and see different things the entire time I looked at it.

Nick was soon standing behind me. I felt my heart start to pound. It was almost audible in my ears. “You like?” he asked.

I nodded my head. “Kadinsky is one of my favorites,” I said, as I felt his heat next to me. I could smell his woodsy cologne, and a little bit of Scotch on his breath. His scent really was intoxicating to me, but it made feel horribly uncomfortable as well. Yet he didn’t try

to touch me. He didn't even put his hands on my shoulders, or anything innocent like that. I don't know, my body language probably told him to stay away, and he did. I felt myself stiffening up as I stood there examining the painting. Truth be told, I wasn't just looking at the painting. I was trying to decompress, and trying to feel more human again, and not like such a freak.

But I was a freak. Since Mr. Lucas, I hadn't been able to be close to any guy. The fact that I was there in his apartment was a miracle. Drunk or not, I usually didn't lose control and do something like that.

“What do you like about it?” he asked me.

“It’s just something visceral. Art is visceral with me. I love what I love, and things just speak to me. Art speaks to me. Or it doesn’t. This painting does. This Kadinsky is just...there’s something so magnetic about it. It just draws you in.” I felt a little embarrassed in not giving more of an art appreciation answer. I could talk about colors, light and brush strokes, but what it came down to, for me, was how it made me feel.

I turned around, and his face was incredibly close to me. He was so tall, though, that he was leaning down a little bit. Oh, how I wanted to unbutton his shirt and rub my hands on his no-doubt beautiful body. I could tell that he had an

athletic and toned body just by the way that he carried himself and by the way that he looked in his clothes.

I had a little fantasy in my head that featured me tearing his clothes off and kissing him all over. Then I immediately felt terrified of doing this. So, I moved away from his space again, and went to examine another painting. It was a Francis Bacon. It was typical of the artist – surreal, terrifying, like a nightmare. Yet one that you just couldn't look away from. Almost like a Dali painting, but even more nightmarish. This painting seemed appropriate for me and my mindset at that point. I was in a dreamscape, being with this beautiful, intelligent and magnetic man. Yet it was

more like a nightmare because I just couldn't ever imagine myself letting him, or any man, touch me in an intimate way.

Nick kept his distance from me. He stood about fifteen feet away from me, by the Kadinsky painting that I was just admiring. I was glad for this, because I felt that I could breathe. When he was so close to me, it was almost claustrophobic. The alcohol was wearing off, and I was feeling my vulnerability.

And, just like that, I felt that I had to get out of there.

“Uh, Nick, uh, it's been a great evening. Really great. But I have to get up early for class and everything tomorrow, and it's another long day for

me.” I actually didn’t have to work at the bar the next evening, so there was that, but I still would have to put in my time studying.

“Wait. You haven’t answered me about the original question. When are you going to start interning for our firm?”

I had to think fast. “Next week. Next Monday. No wait, I need to give notice to the bar. Two weeks. Tell the partners two weeks.” I was rambling, and I was searching for my coat and purse. I opened my purse to make sure that I had subway and cab fare, and seeing that I did, I closed my purse and put it on my shoulder. “I’ll call you.”

“Not so fast. Stop. Let me call my

driver to get you home.”

I stood facing the door, feeling tears burning down my cheeks. *Why this reaction? Why now? You were doing so well, Scotty.*

“No, really, I’m ok. I get around the city all the time on my own.”

But Nick was already on the phone. He looked at me. “Charlie will be downstairs to take you home in five minutes.”

“Thanks,” I said, opening the door. “Thanks for everything. Uh, I’ll see you Thursday evening in class.”

Nick didn’t make a move to show me out, and I was grateful for this. But, as I made my way to the elevator and stood there waiting for the car to take me down

to the lobby of the magnificent building, Nick peeked his head out the door. “Scotty. I’m holding you to it. In two weeks you start interning for our firm.”

I nodded my head and said nothing. But, in my mind, I was desperately searching for a way out. For a way out of this building without being even more humiliated, and a way out of interning for Nick’s firm.

Because if there was one thing that I knew at that point.

Nick was getting way too close for comfort.

Chapter 9

Nick

Scotty had just left my apartment, beating another hasty retreat, much like she did in my office when I offered the intern position to her. But it wasn't a turn-off for me. It made me intrigued about her. She was like a cornered animal, really, but if there was one thing that I knew about cornered animals, it's that they react in the way that they do for one reason – fear. Scotty was afraid of me, and I had to know why.

It was in my nature to rise to a challenge. But it was more than that. There was something about her that I found extremely appealing. She was more appealing to me than anybody had

ever been, even Iris. It wasn't just that she was beautiful and intelligent, although she was definitely both of those things. She had no idea how beautiful and intelligent she was, which, of course, made her even more beautiful and intelligent in my eyes. But beyond the surface was something else. Something that compelled me to get to know her better. She was wounded, and it automatically made me feel the need to protect her. Of course, I would be making myself vulnerable, which was scary in and of itself, so I still was very hesitant about pursuing it. But it seemed to be a risk that I would finally be willing to take.

So, I decided to call Ryan and get his

advice about her. I looked at the clock – it was around midnight here in New York, so eleven for him in Kansas City. On a Tuesday evening. It would be kinda rude for me to call him this late, but I really needed to get some advice from my most trusted friend.

He picked up on the third ring. “Hey! What’s going on?” he said enthusiastically.

“Nothing much. What’s up your way?”

“The usual. Settling into my new house with Iris. Dealing with Dalilah. Trying to get the permits for our animal shelter. My daughter is scary intelligent. She’s going to put everyone to shame.”

Hearing Iris’ name gave me the

familiar pang, but it had lessened a great deal with time.

“So,” he said. “It’s pretty late, so I assume that you’re calling for a reason.”

“Yeah,” I said. But then suddenly thought better of it. “No, actually, I just wanted to say hi. See how you guys are doing.”

“Well, buddy, I have to say. I am, by far, the happiest I have ever been in my life. I’m worried about you, though. I want you to be happy, too.”

“Getting there. It’s slow going, more slow for me than it has been for you. But I hope that things are going to turn around any day now.”

There was silence on the line for a bit. “You still with that supermodel?”

“Penelope?” I felt embarrassed to admit to him that I was still seeing her. Of course, I was still having sex with others, like Portia today in my office. But Penelope was still my main one. “Yeah.”

It was then that, just like clockwork, Penelope was calling. I let it to go voice-mail, which was a stupid thing for me to do. There would be hell to pay for my not picking right up. But it was a game that I played with her. I kept her in line by making sure that I kept her on her toes. Which meant that I was never at her beck and call, no matter what. I knew that I was unusual, because men always fell right at her feet, so I supposed that was part of the appeal for her. And I was

the master, the absolute master, at head games. I had perfected the art long before I met Penelope.

I got off the phone with Ryan, after learning that Ryan actually would be in town in a couple of weeks for business, and almost immediately after hanging up with him, Penelope was at my door. “Hey, handsome. Can I crash?”

“Sure,” I said. “Guess your party’s over from tonight, huh?”

“What? No. I just got off of work. Been thinking about you all day. Just wait until I do to you what I want to do to you. What I’ve been fantasizing about today. You wanna hear?”

“Does it involve a third party?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“Where is said third party?”

“Just imagine it. Amber. You remember her?”

“Sure. Call her. Get her here now.”

At that, Penelope called Amber. She addressed me. “She can be here in five minutes.”

Amber lived about a block away, I knew. Convenient.

Sure enough, Amber showed up in less than ten minutes. Which was great, because I was salivating for some girl on girl. I hadn't had that in awhile. Amber was a German model who was even hotter than Penelope, or even Portia, for that matter. On the New York City modeling rung, she was pretty high up there.

“Hello again, Nick,” she said, as she took off her sable coat and carefully placed it on the coat rack. She was dressed from head to toe in a form-fitting black catsuit with boots. Her magnificent body was perfectly outlined in her getup. She didn’t have on a stitch of makeup, because she, too, had just gotten off of work, and, as Penelope explained, since they were always required to wear so much makeup in their photo shoots, they usually went without it in their real lives. But, even without the makeup, she looked perfect. Enormous green eyes, sensuous and full mouth, flawless skin. Physically she was perfect, which was why her face was seen in two-page advertisements in every major magazine

and on enormous, building-sized billboards in Times Square. She was one of the most recognizable faces in New York City, and that was saying a lot, considering that this was the city where models abounded.

“Amber,” I said, feeling myself getting hard just looking at her and getting even harder thinking about the three of us in my king-size bed. “Good to see you.”

“I’ll bet.” Then she walked over to me, threw her arms around me, and kissed me, her tongue exploring and interlocking with mine. She tasted sweet, like cherries. Her firm breasts were planted against my chest. She pulled back, looked at me and smiled. “Feels

like you're ready to go," she said, putting her hand on my crotch.

"Ya think?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah, I think."

At that, Penelope came up to us and she put her hand on Amber's breasts and the two of them started kissing passionately. Then Penelope started kissing me, while Amber reached down to unbuckle my belt and unbutton my trousers. Her fingers were soon pulling down my boxer briefs, and I felt her lips and tongue sliding up and down my shaft. I was unbuttoning Penelope's shirt, and let her breasts spill out into my waiting mouth.

"Let's make our way into the bedroom, shall we?" I said, and the

three of us climbed the stairs into my loft bedroom that was high above the rest of the living space. Once there, I looked at Amber, who was still fully clothed.

Amber giggled, then lay down on the bed.

“Come here, you,” I said, as I unzipped the back of her catsuit. I put my teeth on her g-string underwear playfully, acting like I was a tiger chewing on his prey. Then I brought them down. “Legs up the air,” I commanded, and she laid down and spread her long legs in front of me. I tongued her lightly and slowly while she moaned and writhed. Penelope got naked, and she got underneath me, working on sucking me powerfully while I worked on Amber.

Her fingers were exploring my ass and I started to groan.

“Stop. I’m going to come,” I said. Then I slipped on a condom and flipped Amber over on the bed and spread her lips and thrust inside of her. “And if I’m going to come, it’s going to be inside you, Amber,” I said. She started to moan with intense pleasure. Penelope made her way over to me, and I started kissing her passionately and feeling her breasts and clit as I pumped Amber vigorously. I finally was spent, and as I pulled out, Penelope came over to me.

“My turn next, sexy,” she said. She immediately started to stroke me again, and, although it was sensory overload considering I just fucked Amber, I felt

myself start to grow again. Penelope leaned over the bed, and I slipped on another condom and pumped her while Amber stood behind me, stroking my chest and abs and kissing my back and neck.

“God, you’re such a stud,” Penelope said. “That feels amazing.”

It felt amazing to me, too, although, as with Portia earlier that day, there was zero emotion in it. But, since it was physically so pleasurable, and these women were eye candy to end all eye candy, I got into it.

This all went on for another hour or so, before I finally felt that I couldn’t take anymore. So, the three of us fell asleep in my bed, our naked bodies

entwined with one another.

Chapter 10

The alarm went off at 7 AM, as I had to get up to get to work.

“Hey, Penelope, Amber,” I said, poking and nudging them both awake. “You both gotta get out of here. I’ll call you a cab.”

Then I rushed into the shower. The two women joined me, and soaped me up and soaped up each other. I groaned inwardly, and not in pleasure, but in frustration – I was running late, and I had no time for this. I shampooed my hair, while the two girls made out, running their hands all over each other and giggling.

“Come on. I told you guys that you have to make yourselves scarce. I have a

meeting this morning with an important client.”

“You go on ahead, we’ll lock the door behind you,” Penelope said with a laugh, while she playfully shampooed Amber’s hair. Then they started making out again, their hands running all over each other’s bodies.

Penelope and Amber were having way too much fun.

“No, you’re going to be leaving before I leave.” No way was I going to trust these women in my apartment with all the multi-million dollar paintings on the walls. No fucking way. “Now get out of the shower, get into your clothes and I’ll call you both a cab.”

“What, you’re not going to get your

driver for us?”

“No.” I called my driver for Scotty last night, but Scotty was...different. These two women still were randos to me, even though this was about the fourth time that we did this together in this loft, and Penelope was kinda my girlfriend. As much of a girlfriend as I was willing to have, anyhow.

I hurriedly threw on my slacks, shirt, tie and shoes while the girls dawdled.

Jesus fucking Christ. “Ok, you can stay here. Lock the door behind you.” *And if either of you even thinks of taking one of my paintings, I will haunt you. I know where you both live.*

“Thanks,” Penelope said, as the two girls laid back down on the bed. As I

exited the apartment, I glanced up and saw them going at it again. I rolled my eyes. *Those two are insatiable.*

I battled traffic to my office in midtown Manhattan. I once again realized that I would have to find another loft or apartment closer to where I worked. Tribeca was a great neighborhood, but, even though it was only a few miles from my office, it always seemed to take forever to get there. Not that I would completely give up the Tribeca loft, of course. The vibrancy of that area was something that I craved. But it probably would do me well to get another apartment in midtown where I could stay during the week, so I didn't have to battle this god-awful

traffic every day. On the weekends, I could stay in Tribeca.

Perfect.

And, assuming that I ever would get a chance to see Charlotte and April, my two lovely girls, I probably should look for a house in Connecticut. I hoped against hope that Rielle would eventually let me get them at least once a month, so getting a house in Connecticut would be perfect for those hoped-for weekends. It would do them some good to see the city and really be exposed to international culture. They were so sheltered in Kansas. But, thus far, Rielle had successfully managed to keep them away from me. Of course, that was my fault. Just look at my lifestyle – I had

two women in my bed just last night, and banged Portia in my office earlier that same day. Charlotte and April would be better off not being exposed to my lifestyle, so it was just as well.

At least that was what I told myself.

When I arrived at my office, I saw that I actually was a few minutes early for my meeting. Thank god. This was a client that was a multi-million dollar one. We were designing some new skyscrapers that would be going up in lower Manhattan. So, the meeting could not be more important.

I kicked myself, remembering that I almost was late for this meeting because I couldn't boot those two silly women out of my apartment fast enough. *One of*

these days your lifestyle is going to catch up to you. Of course, it already had, considering that I couldn't see my girls anymore.

But the meeting went well, as we met all afternoon in our enormous conference room that had floor to ceiling windows that looked out on the New York skyline. Our team went over some of the designs that we were working on, and their firm loved all of them, which was a relief. I was going to be taking the lead, even though I was relatively new to the firm, which was flattering, to say the least. I knew that I was considered to be a major talent and asset for the firm. At least that's what everybody said, including all the write-ups in

Architectural Review and the like. There was even a piece in the *Wall Street Journal* about my joining the firm, as well as an article in *Forbes*. So, yeah, my coming to work for this firm was a big fucking deal.

After the meeting, I went to my office, locking the door this time. Really, I needed to re-examine my life, but it wasn't anything that I particularly wanted to do just yet. I fell in love, it didn't work out, and I knew why – Iris was safe. She's married to Ryan, the guy who has had my back since kindergarten. Of course it wouldn't have worked out, because even if she did leave him for me, it would've destroyed my friendship with him, and he is infinitely more

important to me than some woman. Bros before hos, to put it in a crude way. So, no, Iris and I wouldn't have worked, no matter what happened. And, I had to admit, that this was in no small part the reason why I fell in love with her. Because it couldn't have gone anywhere, and that meant that I was safe from forming any kind of real attachment.

Why I didn't want an attachment, however, was the real question. I had my share of losses in my life, that was true. But it was difficult for me to understand why I always felt that I had to stay so far away from true love. I was married to Rielle, and had two kids with her, but I never loved her.

But yet, last night, with Scotty....I

shook my head. What about Scotty? I hardly knew her. Yet, there was a glimmer of feelings for her that were struggling to break out. And these feelings, for the first time, were not entirely unwelcome.

I was brought out of my reverie by a knocking door. I groaned, hoping it wasn't Portia. It was then that I wished that I had a peep-hole so that I could see who was out there before opening up. But, I didn't, so I had to open up the door and hope that it wasn't Portia who would be barging in. *Doesn't she ever have work to do?* God knows I always had tons of work to do, so I had to wonder how she didn't as well.

I opened the door, and, sure enough,

it was Portia. “You’ve been avoiding me,” she accused. “What happened to you yesterday? I thought you were coming back.”

“Portia. Listen, what happened yesterday shouldn’t have. And can’t happen again. Sorry.”

“You’re not sorry.”

“Ok, I’m not. Please, though, Portia, I have work to do. I’m quite sure you do too.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yeah. I got the Penske project. I heard you’re working on the Chase project. That’s a big deal, congratulations. I hear it’s going to be one of the biggest skyscrapers in the city.”

“Yeah. And it’s going to be a lot of

work, so...”

“And I guess that intern is going to be working for you on that project, huh?”

Portia, as one of the managing partners, was in on the hiring decisions. She had tried to veto Scotty, for some reason. No, I knew why he had tried to veto her. She was jealous, plain and simple.

“Yeah. Scotty’s going to start in a couple of weeks.” And, as I said that, I realize that my heart briefly started to race.

“What’s that smile about?” Portia asked, looking at me suspiciously.

I didn’t even realize that I was smiling. “Huh?”

“When you said her name, you

smiled.”

“Sorry. I didn’t know that smiling was a federal crime. I’ll make sure I won’t do it again.”

“Whatever. Anyhow, when are we going to officially start dating?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You and me. Go out. On a date. You know, people do it all the time, even in this city – they go out and get meals together and see Broadway plays. I’m quite sure that the concept of dating was known even in St. Louis.”

“It’s Kansas City,” I said, annoyed. Why did people who didn’t live in the mid-west assume that St. Louis was the only city in Missouri? “And, yes, I’m quite familiar with the concept of dating.

I just didn't think it applied to you and me."

"Right."

I looked at Portia, knowing for sure that no man had ever turned her down before. So, she obviously wasn't going to take no for an answer here, any more than she did before I banged her in my office yesterday.

"So, tonight?" she said. "I'm dying to try that new restaurant in Tribeca. In your neighborhood."

I really had nothing going on that night. I didn't teach again until the next evening, and, as far as I knew, Penelope wouldn't be stopping by. I hoped. But, truth be told, I was looking forward to picking up some Chinese and just

relaxing. What a concept – just being alone without some woman hanging around. Sounded like heaven to me.

Of course, if Scotty wanted to go out, I'd be there in a heartbeat, I thought randomly.

Then wondered how that random thought got in there.

“Portia. I don't want to go out with you. I don't even want to have sex with you again. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Seven o'clock then? I'll make reservations.”

“Portia. Listen to me. I don't want to go out with you. I'm not playing a game here, I'm not playing hard to get. I don't want to go out with you. Ever. Get it through your head.”

She looked unconvinced. Then she went over to my couch and sat down, her beautiful legs crossed. She leaned on the arm of the Italian leather sofa, and put her hand to her face while she studied me. “My god, you are a beautiful man,” she said. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“All my life,” I said, honestly. “Now, please, I have a shit-ton of work to do. This skyscraper isn’t going to design itself.”

“Sure. Well, don’t think that this is the end. We’re going to be going out soon. In the meantime, how about an encore of yesterday’s amazing presentation? I’ve thought of little else since then.”

It was then that I realized that I never even thought twice about that particular encounter.

I sighed. She wasn't going to leave. "If I give you what you want, will you leave me alone to work?" I asked her.

"Yeah," she said, already unbuttoning her blouse.

So, I gave her what she wanted, the two of us fucking right there on the couch. Then, after it was over, I said to her "Ok, you promised to leave me alone. Now, please keep your promise. I'm behind as it is."

"I'm a woman of my word," she said, standing up and putting on her clothes. Then she went into my private bathroom, and came out with her hair

newly combed and her lipstick perfectly reapplied. By the time she came back out, I had all my clothes back on and I was already sitting at my drafting table, working hard on my design plans for the Chase project.

“See ya later, Nick,” she said.

I barely looked up as she walked out the door.

Then sighed with relief.

Free at last.

Chapter 11

Scotty

As I was leaving Nick's apartment, I knew that I wouldn't ride with the driver that he called. Somehow I knew that driving with Charlie, who was Nick's driver, would feel inappropriate for me. I really didn't know why, but it would.

At the same time, cab fare from Tribeca to my place in uptown would be way beyond my means. I wasn't quite sure where the subway station was, though, so I looked on my Samsung Galaxy S3 to find out. I would have to get a cab there, probably, because, even though this was a neighborhood that was extremely wealthy, I was still a young woman alone after dark, and I felt a little

nervous. Too nervous to walk, anyhow.

But I realized that I didn't have enough money for cab fare, even for those few blocks. So, I walked to the nearest bus stop. I made sure that the bus would eventually end up at the subway station, and boarded the bus. I studiously ignored the parked limousine that was evidently supposed to be my ride.

Once I got on the bus, I started to decompress. I leaned my head against the window, and then I immediately started to worry about the fact that I had just committed myself to working for Nick's firm. I had no idea what I would be doing for that firm, but something told me that I would be on Nick's design team.

The thought of working so closely with a man that I found so attractive was terrifying.

At the same time, I felt incredibly stupid and selfish for not wanting this position. I knew that my classmates would kill or die for this internship, every one of them. And here I was, not even wanting to take it.

I arrived at the subway station, got my ticket, then got on the train and put on my iPod, so that nobody would bother me. Not that this was a problem, because New Yorkers pretty much knew better than to try to talk to each other on the subway. However, there occasionally were random men who tried to sit next to me and talk to me. I never wanted that,

even when the man was attractive – especially if the man was attractive – so I always tried to block everybody out. My body language always said “stay away” - at least I hoped that my body language gave those signals out.

Trudging home, I hoped that Jack was awake. I needed somebody to bounce ideas off of. At the same time, I wondered if he would be really jealous about my new opportunity. He was a struggling actor, and he wasn't having much luck. Which was why he was working as a bouncer at a gay club in Chelsea.

Lucky me, he was awake, and alone. Which actually wasn't too surprising, as it was only around 11 O'Clock. He was

reading a book, a rarity for him, his reading glasses perched on the end of his Romanesque nose. He glanced up as I came in the door. “How was work, Scotch and soda? You’re home early. It must not have been too crowded, huh?”

Scotch and soda was yet another nickname he had for me. “Uh, I really wasn’t at work.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, you’ll never guess what happened. Never in a million years.”

He gave me a look. “Something tells me that this news calls for a cocktail. Just a sec, I’ll be right back.”

I started to protest, knowing that it was falling on deaf ears. I had to be in class the next day early, and getting

hammered was the last thing that I wanted to do.

But a gin and tonic soon appeared in my hand. Jack sipped his own Cosmopolitan daintily and crossed his legs. “So, Scotch, tell me, tell me. What do you mean you weren’t at work?”

My heart started to race just thinking about the evening. “Well, uh, Nick actually showed up at the bar to take me to dinner.”

“Dinner. Girl. He’s like the only guy to ever do that.”

That was true. I not only didn’t have sex, I didn’t date, either. Mainly because dating leads to things that I didn’t want to deal with. Like sex.

“Yes. But it wasn’t a date.”

He gave me a look that said *bitch, please*. Then he said it out loud. “Bitch, please. No guy tracks a girl down where she works to take her out to eat if he isn’t interested in the pootang. But good for you.”

I shook my head. “Come on now. Don’t say that. He really was only interested in convincing me to take the internship at his office.”

“Internship? Is that what he wanted when he called you into his office?”

“Yeah. That’s all he wanted. He, uh, sees something in me. In my designs.”

“Of course. As everybody else always has. You’re literally the only one who doesn’t believe in Scotty James.”

“Come on, Jack. That’s like the most

prestigious firm in the largest city in America. This city is the very epicenter of architectural firms, and that firm is the cream of the cream. Why would they be interested in me?”

At that, Jack got up and poured his drink on my head.

“What the hell?” I asked, feeling the liquid running down my face and stinging my eyes. “What did you do that for?”

“Because. You deserve it,” he said. “Girl, you can’t put yourself down like that. You have to look at yourself in the mirror and say that you are just as good as the very best architect in this city, the very best architect in this world. Fake it until you make it. And, this just in,

you've made it, aight?"

At that, I got up to change my clothes, as I had Cosmopolitan all over me. Then I came back out, without bothering to wash the sticky drink out of my hair. "You really think so? You think I can make it in that firm without feeling like a total dork?"

"Scotch Marie. Yes. I believe in you. I've seen your designs, and they're f-ing amazing. Yes. You can work anywhere and succeed. Now, what's the problem?"

I was quiet for a few seconds, sipping my drink and staring into the rim of the glass pensively. Finally, with a deep breath I said "You're my best friend, so I guess I can tell you. I, I, I, like Nick. A lot. A lot a lot."

Jack just looked taken aback for a second. Then he broke into a smile. “Oh.my.god. Scotty Marie. You like a boy. I never thought I would see the day.” Then he got up and gave me a hug. “I knew it. I knew you’d like a boy sooner or later.”

I pushed him away. “Yeah, but Jack. You know what happened to me. You know how often it happened to me. You know how broken I am. How can I work with somebody I have feelings for? I’m going to be forced to be near him all the time. I can’t think of a bigger nightmare.” I shook my head. “But he cornered me. He’s very persistent. He cornered me, and I found myself telling him I would start in two weeks.”

“Wait. Is it an unpaid position?”

“No. He said his firm would pay me \$40,000 a year. So, that’s about what I make at the bar. I guess that means I can afford to quit the bar. Otherwise, I really couldn’t swing it without taking out even more student loans.”

Jack let out a low whistle. “Well, then, there’s no question. You’re going to take that internship position, and that’s that.”

“How am I going to have the strength?”

“I don’t know, but you gotta find it. No way are you going to let this opportunity go. No way.”

I nodded. “Thanks for always supporting me. You’ve always been

there whenever I needed you. I don't know what I would do without you, to be honest."

"Girl. You'd be ok, no matter what, because you are fierce. Fierce, I tell you."

I smiled. "Fierce and fabulous." Although I felt anything but. *Fake it until you make it.*

We clinked glasses.

"So," he said, "we need to go shopping. God knows you don't have anything to wear to a place like that."

Oh, god. Clothes. "What am I going to do? I can't afford a new wardrobe."

"That's why god made the Salvation Army and rummage sales. Besides, with your body, you could wear a potato sack

and show all them bitches up, aight,” he said, snapping his fingers in a z-pattern.

I laughed.

“Is it too late to get on *What Not to Wear*?” I asked him.

“Yeah. That show has ended.” Of course, Jack knew this better than anyone, since that was one of his favorite shows on TV.

“Damn. I really could use \$5,000 worth of clothes, a makeover, and a stylist.”

“Well, that’s okay. I’ll be your own personal Clinton Kelly. Girl, this is going to be fun.”

“Maybe I have some stuff to wear.”

“Let’s go and look.”

So, the two of us went in to look at

the rather meager closet that housed both my clothes and his. All that was hung up there were his clothes, really. My clothes were pretty much in the chest of drawers, as all I really had were jeans, mini-skirts, sweaters, t-shirts and a few button-downs. “No,” I said. “No Versace suits in there. Now what?”

“I told you. Let’s hit thrift stores in a fancy neighborhood and we’ll find you stuff in no time. What’s your budget?”

“Not much if I want to eat this month at all. I mean, I’m not even sure when I’ll be getting paid at this place. They’re going to delay the check, you know. I still don’t know how I’m going to swing this.”

“Girl, we’ll figure it out. We always

do. We'll buy lots of Ramen Noodles and Kraft Macaroni and Cheese and it's done. You're going to take this job, you're going to look as fierce as you are, and you're going to be the best damn architectural designer in the world."

I gave him a big hug. "I need you, you know that? I would be so lost without you."

"Don't ever forget it, love. When you become rich and famous, you can't forget the little people, k?"

"You're not a little person. You're my world."

He hugged me and tousled my hair a little.

"Um, Jack?"

"Yes, love?"

“Can we sleep together tonight?” Jack and I, from time to time, slept together in the bed. Platonically, of course. Sometimes we just needed security, and to have someone there next to us. Sleeping in the bed together was how we managed that.

So, we ended up sleeping together that night, platonically, but I clung to him like one of my stuffed animals that I had for security when I was growing up. I was feeling like I was about to be rudderless, like a sailboat that was let loose without a person guiding it. Riding the violent waves, and getting further from shore.

To say that I was scared to death would be understating it.

Chapter 12

Scotty – Two Weeks Later

“So, how do I look?” I asked Jack. My long brown hair was piled on my head with a butterfly clip, and I actually was wearing a little bit of makeup. I was wearing a cast-off Armani suit that I managed to find after looking in every thrift store in town for three straight days. I picked up other suits, of course, but this was the absolute best suit that I ever hoped to be able to find, so I chose it for my first day.

The fact that this suit was around 10 years old, therefore I still would look out of place at this firm, was something that I had to ignore. It was designer, it fit, and that's all that I needed to know.

As for the shoes, they also came from a thrift store, but they were perfect. It felt amazing that I was able to look at least somewhat presentable for my first day, which would certainly go a long way in helping me to fake it until I made it.

“Fierce. Beautiful. Sexy. Like those bitches won’t know what hit them when Hurricane Scotty makes landfall at that firm.”

I smiled. I felt uncomfortable that he mentioned the word *sexy* though. “Sexy. Uh, I’m not showing cleavage. Is the fit too tight? I don’t want to be inappropriate.”

“No. You look like a nun. You’re just damn sexy no matter how hard you try not to be. Sorry. I calls ‘em as I sees

‘em.”

I went back in to look at the full-length mirror. I had to make sure that I looked professional, and not in the least bit slutty. I wanted them to take me seriously, and I wanted to repel all male attention.

Even Nick’s attention.

Especially Nick’s attention.

The past two weeks had been weird. I still went to Nick’s class, of course, but I refused to meet his eyes. I sat in the back of class, arriving late and making an excuse to leave early, or at least with the other kids. For his part, he didn’t address me in class, and he didn’t ask me to meet with him. The only time he spoke with me was last Thursday night.

“Scotty,” he said, as I tried to push my way out of his class with the other kids. “I’ll be seeing you on Monday, right? I already told the partners to get ready for you.”

“Yes. Yes, Professor O’Hara. I won’t go back on my word.”

He looked relieved and he smiled. “Good. Then I’ll see you. At 10, right?”

I nodded. I had to work this internship around my school schedule, and my classes were over at 10 on Monday, so that was what time I would be starting.

So, that weekend, Jack and I hit every thrift store within a twenty mile radius, it seemed. He took time out of his busy schedule to help me out. I had to

rely on his fashion sense, as I had none. I mean, I was a student and I worked in a bar. What did I know about business attire?

We really had the time of our lives. It was like the scene in *Pretty Woman*, where Vivian came out in different outfits, except we weren't on Rodeo Drive, but, rather, we were in various Salvation Army and Goodwill stores, and every other thrift store that we could find. There were surprisingly great clothes in these shops. I had to really look, but there were true gems.

Of course, I had to have accessories too. I managed to find a Coach purse that was in surprisingly good shape in one of the thrift stores we visited, and I picked

up a battered briefcase for a song in another place. As for jewelry, there wasn't a whole lot in these places, but Jack was kind enough to buy me a string of fake pearls at one of the Target stores we visited that day.

“Aw, that's so sweet,” I said, as Jack presented these pearls for me. “You don't have to do this.”

“It's \$20. I'll survive. Think of it as a congratulations-on-your-kick-ass-job present.”

So, that was how I found myself looking in the full-view mirror that day, staring at myself in my used Armani suit that cost me \$40, and my worn Jimmy Choos that I picked up for \$20. Both of them were incredible finds, and I felt

more confident about myself. But Jack was right – I showed zero skin. My blouse was buttoned all the way to the neck, and my skirt went below the knee. I even managed to minimize my rack by wearing two sports bras that clamped them down as much as they could possibly be. My nails were done with a shellac manicure in a shell pink, and I was wearing foundation, mascara and lip gloss.

All in all, I felt I looked at least presentable. I looked at my backside carefully. Other than my breasts, the only body part that wasn't completely emaciated these days was my butt. It was rounded, and I was as self-conscious about it as I was about my girls. But the

suit managed to minimize this as well.

Taking a deep breath, I walked back out of the room. I kissed Jack on the cheek. “Thanks for everything,” I said. “God, I wish I could take you with me, like Linus’ security blanket.”

“Me too. But I have to let my little girl leave the nest. You’re gonna do great, I know.”

So, I got my briefcase, and hurried to the subway station that would take me to midtown to one of the most prestigious architectural firms in the entire world.

Breathe, Scotty, breathe.

Chapter 13

Nick

Scotty was going to be here in a few minutes, and I was feeling something that I hadn't felt in a long time. Excitement. Nervousness. Elation.

I had no idea why I was feeling these emotions. I only knew that I was. It was like when I was a kid, looking forward to Christmas Day.

I even was nice to Portia that morning. I had been avoiding her since our last encounter, and, because she came onto me repeatedly, still, I had to be downright cruel to get her to leave me alone. But I found myself singing softly as I walked to the office lunch room to get a cup of coffee, and Portia was in

there eating a doughnut.

“Good morning, Portia,” I said. “Would you like me to pour you a cup of coffee?”

“What, you’re out of your cage?” She was referring to the fact that I rarely left my office those days, except to go to meetings. Mainly because I didn’t want to run into her too much.

“Yep. Out of my cage,” I said, humming a Katy Perry tune that I heard on the car stereo that morning on the way to work. “God, I can’t get that song out of my head,” I said, as I poured a cup of coffee for myself and one for her. “There you go,” I said as I handed her a cup of coffee.

“What’s got you so happy this

morning?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“You’re acting like a giddy schoolgirl.”

I shrugged. “Guess I’m just in an unusually good mood.”

“Wait. Today’s the day your intern starts, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. You know, I almost forgot. Huh.”

She narrowed her eyes, and started reading the *New Yorker* magazine that was left in the lunchroom by somebody.

“Forgot, my ass,” she said, not looking up from her magazine.

I said nothing, but just smiled and went back to my office to wait for Scotty to show up.

Which she did, promptly, right at 10. She showed up in my office, and my heart started pounding. I had to literally not get up from my desk, as I immediately had a raging hard-on upon looking at her. Because she looked absolutely stunning. She was obviously trying not to, as she was wearing a shirt that was buttoned to her neck, and her skirt was the length that prairie women used to wear, but she still far outshone all the top models that I had bedded since I arrived in this city. Every one of them faded in my memory as I looked at her standing there in her obviously second-hand Armani suit, Jimmy Choo shoes and battered leather briefcase.

“Hi, uh, what am I supposed to call

you here at the firm? Mr. O'Hara?" she asked shyly.

I shook my head. "Nick. Still Nick." I felt embarrassed that I couldn't stand up to greet her, but there was just no way. I don't think that I had ever been as hard as I was right at that moment. "Um, come on over and sit down."

She hesitated slightly, then tentatively made her way to the chair on the other side of my desk. She looked around my office. "Gorgeous office," she said. "You probably have the best view of the city."

"Yeah, it works. So, anyhow, we're going to start you off kinda slow. Grunt work and all that. But you're eventually going to be on my design team, so, even

though you're just going to be making copies and working on the computer for now, you're eventually going to be on the ground floor of designing some the largest buildings in the world. How do you like that?"

She smiled a shy smile. "You said ground floor. Cute pun." Then she tucked a stray hair behind her ear, and looked down at the floor, obviously embarrassed at her silly joke.

And I was enchanted. That was the only word that came to mind.

Enchanted.

I looked up. George, one of the other senior partners, was at the door with a cup of coffee. "Nick. Is this your new intern?"

“Yeah,” I said, still seated. *Down boy, down.* “Uh, George, this is Scotty. Scotty, George.”

I shot George a look of apology for not getting up. He did look perplexed.

“Good to meet you Scotty,” he said, coming in and shaking her hand. “From what I hear, you’re going to be a great asset to our team.”

“I hope so,” she said. Then she blushed.

God, she’s so cute when she blushes.

What the hell was wrong with me?

George looked at me expectantly. “Well, Nick, are you going to show Scotty around, or are you just going to sit there?”

Oh, bloody hell. “George, why don’t you show her around. I’ll, uh, catch up.”

He shook his head and Scotty looked utterly befuddled. “Come with me,” George said to Scotty. “I’ll show you around.”

Once they were gone, I felt relieved. *You better get it together, O’Hara, or you won’t be able to work with this girl.* I went into my private bathroom and took care of the matter in less than a minute. Then I went outside my office to find George and Scotty and show her around myself.

I found them stopping by Portia’s office. *Uh oh, there’s going to be trouble there.* I got there, and Portia was standing up and extending her hand to

Scotty. “Oh, you’re Nick’s intern. You’re just like I pictured you.” Then she saw me and shot me a look of death.

“Thanks, Ms. Anson,” Scotty said. “I’m really happy for this opportunity.”

“I just bet,” she said. “Well, you’ll find that Nick will be a very hands-on supervisor.” Then she smiled an evil smile and looked at me. “Right Nick?”

I shot Portia a look right back, hoping that neither George nor Scotty picked up on the extreme tension between Portia and me. Scotty probably did, though. She’s a woman, and it had been my experience that women have gut feelings about things like that.

But, so far, she seemed oblivious to the double-entendres and stress between

Portia and me.

Scotty nodded. "I hope Nick is a hands-on supervisor. I really need to learn all I can while I'm here."

Portia just looked at her for a second and laughed. "Oh, you'll learn a lot, I assure you."

Scotty just nodded her head again. "I hope so. That's why I'm here."

I finally decided to take control of the situation. "Uh, Scotty, let me take over from here," I said. "Thanks, George, for stepping in, but I got this."

"No prob," George said. "Well, Scotty, it's great to meet you. You're going to be working on some great projects."

"Thanks, George, great to meet you

too.”

And, at that, George made his way back to his office.

“Ok, now Scotty,” I began, and then started to wish that I could hold her hand while we walked along the corridor between the offices. “Let me take you to the conference room,” I said to her, before realizing that I unconsciously was reaching for her hand. But I saw her start to shake, and put her left hand, which I was reaching for, up to her mouth, as she started to bite her nails.

I casually ignored this, but felt rebuffed and intrigued at the same time. *Oh, well, just as well. If any of the other partners, associates or interns saw me grab her hand, there would be*

hell to pay. Especially from Portia.

We got to the conference room, and her eyes got wide, like a small child on Christmas Day. She rubbed her hand on the marble table, then went to the windows and looked out. Then she looked at me. "This is the most beautiful room I've ever seen," she said, as she walked around and looked at everything. She rubbed her foot on the Oriental Carpet, and brushed her hand on the mahogany bookshelves. She walked up to the Degas painting on the wall, and briefly touched it before recoiling her hand from it, as if it bit her. "I shouldn't touch a priceless painting. It's a bad habit."

I was amused by her awe. "This

better be a beautiful conference room. Our clients are not exactly paupers off the street. They expect luxury, and that's what we provide."

"I'll say." Then she looked down at her clothes, and, when she looked back at me, I saw a look of insecurity and of being completely unsure of herself. But she said nothing, although her demeanor did change.

We left the conference room, and made our way to meet the rest of the partners and associates. Everybody was friendly, of course, and there were plenty of "welcome aboards," "good lucks," and "congratulations!"

Finally, we ended up back at my office. "So, what do you think?" I asked

her, as both of us sat down.

“Uh, I’m overwhelmed a little, but everybody seems really nice.”

“Well, nice isn’t a word I would describe most of these people. Driven, ambitious, talented, creative and a little bit nuts would be better adjectives.”

She said nothing and just nodded her head. And started biting her nails again.

How do I make her comfortable? I got up and sat on the chair right next to her. Then I took her hands. But as soon as I took them, she was shaking again.

I couldn’t help it, though. I felt the need to touch her. Almost involuntarily, I touched a wisp of her hair, tucking it behind her ear. “You’re nervous,” I said. “It’s going to be okay.”

“Thanks,” she said, taking her left hand, which I was still holding, and pulling it away from my touch and up to her neck. “What am I going to be doing?”

“Well, today, you’re pretty much going to be making a lot of copies of documents. We have secretaries, of course, but we don’t want to overwhelm you, so we’re going to start you off with light work. More or less, the first week is just getting used to the place and getting to know everybody.” Then I touched her cheek. “But, eventually, you’re going to be in on the design process. You’ll be working closely with me, because I’m the lead on the biggest project we have right now.”

She nodded. “Uh, Nick, I wanted to say thank you for giving me this opportunity. I’m sorry that I turned you down at first.”

“That’s okay. One of these days, I’m going to get to the bottom of what you’re afraid of, and then I’ll understand why you rejected that offer at first.”

She looked down at the floor. “You’re so sure I am afraid of something?”

“Positive. Hopefully you’ll open up to me one day.”

Then she looked around. “Uh, the stuff I have to copy. Where is it?”

“Well, you remember the copy room. I piled everything up in there for you.”

“Okay, uh thanks. I’ll just get to

work, okay?”

“Sure,” I said, and then she got up and left.

And, after she left, I felt something odd.

I actually missed her.

Chapter 14

Scotty

I couldn't get out of that office fast enough. When Nick touched my hands back there, I felt a jolt of electricity like I had never experienced before. I felt that innocent touch all the way through my body, and I felt like every hair was standing on end. My heart was pounding in my ears, and I felt like I couldn't breathe.

At the same time, I felt the chill of ice-cold fear. I heard Mr. Lucas' voice in my ears. *Scotty, now, this isn't going to hurt*, he had said, as he got under the covers next to me on my tiny twin bed. His hands reached underneath my pajamas, as he rubbed my stomach, and

then his hands made their way to my newly sprouted breasts.

Of course, he lied. It did hurt. A lot. Mentally and physically, it was excruciating. And I never got used to it, even though it happened just about every night for about a year.

So, I ended up running away. I found an abandoned car and lived in it. I told people about Mr. Lucas, finally, but nobody could believe that this rich, handsome man, with a lovely wife, who was a pillar of the community, would do something like that.

But he did.

And nobody would listen to me.

The only good thing was that I met Jack through that entire mess. He

actually was the one who found me living in that car. I was sitting there in the car, minding my own business, when he came up to the window and looked in. He looked quite a bit different back then. He was going through his punk phase – his hair was dyed jet black, with a shock of blonde in the very front. He was wearing a too-tight half-shirt, too-tight pants and high boots.

I was startled, but I took one look at him and knew that he was gay. So, I felt surprisingly comfortable. I knew that he wasn't there to do what Mr. Lucas did to me. I wasn't afraid of being raped again, in other words.

“Hello?” I said tentatively. “Can I help you?”

“Girl. Don’t be alarmed. My name is Jack. I noticed you back at that gas station, and I had this weird feeling there was something wrong. My suspicions were confirmed when I saw you dumpster-diving not five minutes later. So, I followed you. Are you living here?”

He was referring to the gas station that I frequented when I needed something to eat. I collected cans and bottles all day long to pay for the meager hot dogs that I bought at this place every day. That was pretty much what I lived on – convenience store hot dogs. Well, convenience store hot dogs and things that I found in the dumpster. I always found great things in the dumpster,

surprisingly, especially on certain days of the week.

“No, I’m not living here,” I said, but the condition of the car said differently. There was a ton of stuff in that car. Bags of clothing and shoes, an entire library of books that I bought at various used book fairs, pillows and blankets. Hats and coats. The one thing it didn’t have, however, was trash – I was very careful to throw out all my food wrappers and drink cups, because I just couldn’t handle living among trash. But, it was two birds, one stone – I threw stuff out, and dumpster dove while I was there.

Jack gave me his patented *bitch, please* look. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Scotty. Scotty James.”

“Well, Scotty, why are you living here in this abandoned car? I’m surprised you haven’t been put in the pokey pokey by now.”

“Um, I don’t have a place to stay,” I said, feeling comfortable enough to talk to this perfect stranger about some of my problems. “My mother is a drunk, and my foster father...”

“Foster father what?”

“Nothing. He wasn’t anybody I wanted to live with anymore, that’s all.”

“What, was he a perv?”

I didn’t say anything, but my face probably said it all.

“Uh, huh,” he said, doing a neck roll. “Say no more, girlfriend.”

He just stood there and stared at me for about five seconds more, and then said “Well, come on.”

“Come on where?”

“You’re coming to stay with me. I might not have much, but what’s mine is yours.”

“I don’t even know you.”

“Fine. Live in that car. But if you want a nice hide-a-bed to sleep on, an actual stove, fridge and shower, then come with me.”

Which was how I came to live with Jack in his tiny apartment, the place where I still lived. I somehow managed to escape detection of the child protection services people, and my foster family apparently never reported

me missing. Of course, how they managed to get through the status hearings on my case without me being there was beyond me. I would imagine that my case was one of the many that fell through the cracks of the system. I only knew that I was able to enroll in a new school close by the uptown apartment where I moved, and, even though I was behind because of my stay in the car, I was quickly able to catch up, and ended up graduating at the top of my class.

I had to work, of course, even when I first started living with him. Even though I was only fourteen, I still managed to find a job at a drug store, after lying to them and telling them that I was sixteen.

That wasn't hard to believe, as I was certainly built like somebody quite a bit older. Jack was having a hard time managing the apartment bills on his own, so I started chipping in. When I was able to start paying half the rent, we started sharing the bedroom – alternating sleeping on the hide-a-bed and sleeping in the bedroom.

So, Jack literally saved my life.

Now, there was Nick. As a boss, anyhow. Not as a boyfriend. But the feelings I was having, just being close to him, were terrifying and exhilarating all at once. There was the strong feeling that he was liking me as much as I was liking him, and to say that I was confused at that moment would be understating it.

I was lost in thought, making copy after copy of designs, contracts and other documents, when Nick came in to check on me. “How’s it going?” he asked.

I turned around. He was standing in the doorway of the copying room, two glasses of water in his hands. “Here,” he said, giving me one of the glasses of water. “I thought you might be thirsty.”

“Thanks,” I said, taking the water. Then my eyes fell on the Rolex watch that was on his right wrist. I knew that he was left-handed, so it made sense that he wore his watch on his opposite arm. The watch was beautiful and encrusted with diamonds. Probably my entire yearly salary there at this firm would buy a watch like this. Maybe.

I also noticed that his hands were elegant and beautiful. Like the rest of him. Long fingers, perfectly groomed nails. He didn't have a callous on them.

I suddenly felt like a total dork as I realized that he was bemused by my staring at his hands. I looked up, and he was looking at me with a half-smile on his beautiful face. "What are you thinking about, Scotty?"

That you are the most physically perfect specimen of man that I have ever laid eyes on. "Nothing," I said. "I have everything copied."

"That you do. You're nothing if not efficient," he said. "Come on, it's lunchtime. Let's go and grab something." He put his hand on my shoulder, and my

breath caught. “Let’s go get your hat and coat and everything and go to that bistro around the corner for some chow-chow.”

“Thanks,” I said. I went and got my hat, coat and purse, and then looked inside my wallet. Nick was soon joining me. “Uh, Nick, that bistro is kinda out of my budget. Can we get fast food?”

Nick looked stunned for a split second. Then it looked like he was about to burst out laughing. “Scotty, my dear, this lunch is on me, silly girl.” Then he shook his head, and tousled my hair. “You’re adorable.”

“Well, you bought dinner the other night. It should be my turn.”

“You’re adorable,” he repeated. “Come on, let’s go.”

We walked along, and Nick took my hand. My heart started pounding wildly, so I had to mentally talk myself down. *Calm down, Scotty. He's only holding your hand. He's not going to hurt you. He won't hurt you. He won't hurt you. He will not hurt you.*

“Oops,” he said. “I keep involuntarily holding your hand. I don’t even think about it. Weird, huh?” Then he dropped my hand. “Guess I shouldn’t be holding my intern’s hand. People might talk.”

I just nodded my head. I had no words at that moment.

I wish Jack were here. He would know what to say. He'd make me feel fierce. Right now, I just feel like a dork.

We got to the restaurant, and I self-consciously put my napkin on my lap immediately. I already knew that I couldn't attack my food the way that I did before. Which would be harder than ever, because the new clothes cost me so much that I was eating less than ever. Turns out Jack wasn't joking when he said that we could live on Ramen Noodles and Mac and Cheese for awhile.

Once again, I gravitated towards something inexpensive. At this place, thank god, there were less expensive things that I could order without guilt. "I think I'm going to go with the chicken sandwich," I said. "With fries."

He smiled. "Honey, you don't have

to order the least expensive thing every time. Trust, I got this.”

“Oh, it’s not that. I really like chicken sandwiches. Especially if it features avocados.”

“Okay, then,” he said, looking skeptical. So, when the waiter came around, he ordered the *coq au vin* for him and the chicken sandwich for me.

“So,” he said.

“So,” I said.

Then I saw him take a deep breath, and look at me. “Scotty, I hope that you can learn to trust me eventually.”

“I don’t understand?”

“Your body language...you’re scared to death of me. I can’t quite figure out why.”

“Oh, no. It’s not you,” I said, perhaps too quickly, “it’s my first day, so I’m very nervous.”

“You don’t need to be. You’re a star. I hope you come to accept that as well.”

“I hope I do, too.” Then I looked at him, and decided to be bold and ask him a question that was really none of my business. “Um, Nick. Portia. She, uh, really likes you, huh?”

Nick blushed. I wondered why.

“Portia really likes me. You might say that. How did you figure that out?”

“Well, some of the things she said were pretty pointed. I mean, she tried to cover it up by using double entendres, but her tone of voice told me that she’s pretty pissed at you about something. I

figured it was an affair gone wrong.”

“You certainly are perceptive.”

I shrugged. “I’m a woman. I know other women. I mean, it really isn’t my business, so I’m sorry to pry.”

“You aren’t prying. It was something that was pretty stupid of me to embark upon.”

“Well, you know, you aren’t the first to use poor judgment, and I doubt you’ll be the last.”

Then he gave me a look.

If I wasn’t mistaken, it was a look of love.

Chapter 15

Nick

I was sitting across from this woman, and all I could think was that I was falling head over heels for her. There was just no denying it, even to myself. She was probably the most amazing woman I had ever met. Intelligent, unpretentious, beautiful, sweet.

And guileless. So guileless.

Even so, she was as out of my reach as Iris was. Because she was completely closed off. Scared. Terrified, even. I had no idea how to approach her. How to reach her. She was an enigma, to say the very least.

I had to invite her out to dinner with

me when Ryan came into town. He had to meet her, assess her, and tell me how to approach her. There had never been a woman that I needed an owner's manual to figure out, but Scotty would be that woman. I needed an objective eye, and Ryan would be in town the day after tomorrow. Something about interviewing some people for his new animal sanctuary. He was going to be here without Iris, thank god. Seeing Iris would have been the only thing that could have possibly caused me even more confusion about Scotty and my feelings for her.

“Uh, Scotty,” I said. “Are you busy Wednesday evening?”

“No, I don't have special plans. Why

do you ask?”

“You, uh. I’d like you to meet somebody. Somebody who means a lot to me. My best friend from the time I was five years old. I told him about you, about your interning for me, and he wants to meet you.”

“Oh, of course. He just wants to meet me because I’m interning for you?”

She looked disappointed when she said that.

“Yes, because you’re interning for me. Are you interested?”

“Sure.”

So, we made plans to meet on Wednesday at *Nobu*, which was in my neighborhood. I would have my driver pick her up, of course, knowing that it

was somewhat rude to make her go across town, when I only have to walk to the restaurant, but that was the place that Ryan had picked.

I was counting on him to assess her and tell me what to do. Because I honestly didn't know. I knew that this was a woman who was special, and there was definitely potential for the two of us to be much more than what we were. But, at the same time, there was something up with her. Something that she wasn't willing to tell me. Perhaps she would feel more comfortable with Ryan. Everybody always loved that guy, and what was not to love? Super nice guy, even though he has had more of a fucked up life than anybody I had ever

known.

After lunch, I walked her back to the office, trying hard to resist the temptation to hold her hand as we strolled along back to the building. When we got back to the office she went back to work doing her copying and going around and talking to everybody in the firm, most of whom had some kind of grunt work for her to do. I didn't really see her for the rest of the day, but I found myself thinking about her about every five minutes while I worked on my designs for the big project we had. I had to get this done, because there would be another meeting in a week, so they expected to see good progress.

Yet, I couldn't take my mind off of

that girl.

So, there was one thing that I absolutely knew I had to do. Something that I wasn't looking forward to, but was way overdue.

Chapter 15

When I got home that evening, I called Penelope. “Penelope,” I said. “Let’s have dinner tonight at the Tribeca Grill.”

“Sure. Do you want me to bring Amber, Missy, or Lance?”

“None of the above. Come alone.”

So, that evening, we met at the Tribeca Grill. She came in, looking her glorious self, every head in the place turning. She was dressed in thigh-high boots and a tight black mini-dress that she carried off extremely well. She sat down across from me, shedding her coat. “God, I need a cigarette. What a long fucking day. I swear to god, doing photo shoots for Calvin is like the ninth circle

of hell.” She looked at the menu. “I’m gonna go with the New York Strip Steak, pan roasted wild mushrooms and sautéed spinach. A rare seared tuna appetizer. And a dirty martini as big as my head.”

When the waiter came around, I ordered for the two of us, me ordering the Seared Sea Scallops with the parmesan creamed escarole and apple roasted Brussels sprouts, and her getting what she just told me to order. And a scotch rocks for me.

I was going to need it.

“So, how’ve you been?” I asked her.

“I told you. Sometimes I hate what I do. Do you know how hard it is to sit still while people primp over you all

fucking day long?” She shook her head. “We really should be getting hazard pay.”

“Yeah. Because being a top model is a lot like being a cop, a firefighter, or a soldier in a war.”

“I agree,” she said, completely not getting my sarcasm. “So, Amber was wanting to come over tomorrow night. She really has a thing for you. And me. And us.” She giggled. “For that matter, so does Lance.” Lance was a male model, of course, who had joined us in a few three-ways.

I was chomping at the bit to give her my speech, but I wanted to wait until after dinner. No use ruining a perfectly good Seared Sea Scallop.

So, I humored her. “Sure, let’s all get together sometime.”

“Not sometime. Tomorrow night,” she said as the tuna appetizer appeared. She took a tiny little bite, then pushed the plate aside.

“I teach. Remember?”

“Of course. You get off at 9. We do our usual late night.”

“Penelope. I’m working long hours at the office, in addition to my teaching. When do I sleep?”

“You’ll have plenty of time to sleep when you’re dead. In the meantime, you got me and Amber. And Lance. And Caroline. And any number of male and female models who would love to get into your pants and enjoy your beautiful,

beautiful, enormous package.” She brought the olive to her mouth suggestively and licked it, while giving me the seductive look that she practically patented. “Besides, your Bank of America project can wait.”

“Chase.”

“Chase what?”

“I’m working on the new Chase building.”

“Chase, Bank of America. Whatever. Same difference.”

The temptation was strong to cut her loose right that very minute, and not wait until after dinner. At that very moment, she was very ugly to me. Extremely ugly. She resembled one of my Francis Bacon paintings of the hideous creatures,

because her soul was so dark.

Funny how I didn't see it before.

"So," I said. "Ryan's going to be in town in a couple of days."

"Ryan. From the pictures?"

"One and the same."

"Oh my god. That man is beautiful. Jesus fucking Christ, you have to get him to join us."

"He's married, remember? Happily married."

"Married, schmarried. Tell him I'll help him have the time of his fucking life while he's here." She shook her head. "He missed his calling. He could've made a fortune with that face."

"I think he's doing just fine."

"Even so." Then she got out her cell

phone, and I immediately regretted even telling her about Ryan. “Amber. You’ll never guess who’s visiting Nick in a couple of days....Ryan. You remember seeing his pictures in Nick’s apartment?...Yeah....a four-way would not be out of the question.”

At that, I snatched the phone out of her hand. “Amber. This is Nick. Ryan is not interested in any kind of four-way.” And at that, I simply hung up.

Penelope was giving the stink-eye like she never did before. “You’re kind of an asshole, you know that?”

“So I’ve been told.”

I flagged down the waiter. “I need another scotch rocks. Make it a double.”

Penelope was staring at me in shock

and awe. “Asshole. Did you bother to notice that I’m dry over here? Now I have to flag down the waiter for my drink.”

“I did notice. I just didn’t care.”

Her mouth just flew open in shock that I would be talking to her in that way. She was two seconds from making a scene, which would be embarrassing for me, because this was kind of a neighborhood restaurant for me. People knew me here. But, at the same time, bring it on, I thought. It would make what I had to do that much easier.

But she didn’t make a scene. She flagged down the waiter for another martini, and then brought a mirror out of her purse and looked at it, studiously

ignoring me while doing so. Then she brought out her phone and started looking at it, evidently texting somebody. Every so once in awhile, she smiled as she looked down at her phone.

Meanwhile, I just sat there, looking around the restaurant. How I wanted Scotty there sitting across me from instead of this...creature. Penelope wasn't even human. She was some kind of physically-perfect evil cyborg coming back from the future to destroy me.

Finally, after three more scotches for me, and four more dirty martinis for her, our food arrived. Penelope looked at her food with disdain. She took a few bites, which is usually about how much food she can consume in any given meal, and

then put the plate aside. “That’s all I can eat, unless I want to spend the rest of the evening gagging myself.”

I didn’t care. I dug into my food with gusto. I was going to finish my meal before lowering the boom. And lowering the boom was getting easier and easier to do.

Then I got an idea. I ordered from the waiter a Pistachio Crusted Swordfish, whipped potatoes and sautéed spinach to go. I’d get Charlie to drive it over to Scotty.

God knew that girl needed more full meals.

“Who is that for?” Penelope demanded after I placed my order.

“It’s for Scotty. My intern. She needs

to eat more.”

“Since when do you go out of your way to send meals to your interns?”

“Since now.”

Her face softened. “Well, maybe Scotty can join us in one of our romps. What does she look like?”

“She’s beautiful. But she’s not like that. She’s a nice girl.”

“Well, I was going to be jealous of her, but not now. Because god knows you don’t like nice girls.”

“I like this one.”

“What are you saying?”

“Just a second.” I wanted to get that food on its way to Scotty before lowering the boom. All ducks had to be in a row. So, I flagged down the waiter

and I gave him a hundred dollar bill. “That’s for you. Was wondering when that to-go order is going to be coming out.”

“It’ll be right up,” he said. And I knew that he was right about that.

And, sure enough, the food came out in the next two minutes. Then I called Charlie to come in and get the food to take to Scotty. I smiled when I imagined her face upon seeing the meal. Yeah, it was late, but I was quite sure that she would be more than appreciative of the gesture.

I sent Charlie on his way. And it was finally time to tell Penelope what I had been dying to tell her all evening.

“Penelope. We’ve had our fun. But

it's over. Sorry.”

Her mouth flew open and her eyes got wide. She looked like it was the very first time that she had ever been dumped, and, for all I knew, it *was* the first time. “What??” she said, “fuck you.”

“Been there, done that.”

“So, you brought me here to do this. You think that I won't cause a scene because we're in a public restaurant and Page Six will be all over that shit in a heartbeat?”

“Something like that.”

I called her bluff. She sat there, steaming, and giving me the look of death. She obviously was contemplating the possibility of making a scene. But I was betting that she would back down in

the end.

I was right. She just got up and left without a word.

And I immediately felt 1,000 times lighter.

Chapter 16

Scotty

I rode the subway home from my first day at my internship with a song in my heart. I smiled to myself a secret smile while I listened to Bruno Mars, Muse and Eminem on my iPod. Today went extraordinarily well, even though I didn't do much. The fact of the matter was that I got through today without feeling like I was going to fall apart. And I even let Nick touch me. Yeah, it was only my hand, and it was brief, but it was still a touch, and it was more than I had ever willingly let any guy touch me except for Jack. I felt, perhaps for the first time in my life, that I was going to be okay. Normal. At least there was a

chance for me.

When I got home, Jack was waiting for me. He had found some candles somewhere in the apartment and they were lit, and there was even a bouquet of flowers on our tiny card table that served as our dining room eating place. “Scotty Marie!” he said, appearing from our tiny kitchen with an apron on. “Come on in. I made dinner for us both!”

Dinner turned out to be macaroni and cheese, but he made it special by adding baby hot dogs in with it, along with some frozen broccoli florets. “Aw, Jack, look at that. Thanks so much.”

“Well, I wanted to do something special for my little Scotch and Soda,” he said, as I set the table. “Here, I got

some champagne. Martini and Rossi Asti Spumante.” He poured two champagne flutes, and we clinked glasses before digging in.

“So, tell me about your first day. Tell me everything. Don’t leave anything out.”

“Not much to tell. I made a lot of copies and met everybody,” I said as I sipped my champagne and ate the rather delicious mac and cheese deluxe. “There’s a woman there who I think that Nick might have been sleeping with at one point.”

“Uh, huh,” Jack said with a look. “Bet that won’t be happening anymore with you there. Bet that ho doesn’t know what hit her.”

“Yeah, she’s hardly a ho. She has a PhD from Stanford.”

“Piled higher and deeper,” Jack said dismissively. “She’s not better than you, so don’t even think that.”

“I never said she was. Anyhow, Nick doesn’t seem to like her that much, so I don’t think that it’s still going on.”

Jack was looking at me with a suspicious look on his face. “You have it bad for this guy, don’t you Scotty?”

“Who?”

“Nick.”

“Well, he’s gorgeous. Breathtakingly so. Wickedly intelligent.” Then I realized that my heart was racing just thinking about him. “Let’s change the subject,” I said, looking at my shaking

hands. “Actually, it’s kinda on the same subject. I’m supposed to meet his friend from the Midwest.”

“When?”

“Wednesday. At *Nobu*.”

Jack gave me a look. “Girl. He’s got it bad for you, too.”

“Why, why, why do you say that?”

“Who is this guy to him?”

“His best friend from childhood. He said he’s somebody who means a lot to him.”

“His best friend? And he wants you guys to meet?” Jack gave his *bitch, please* look, as he got up to get some more mac and cheese for himself. “You want some more, love, while I’m up?”

“Sure,” I said. “So, what’s the big

deal? They're best friends, I'm his new intern. That's why he wants us to meet."

"Scotty. I love you. But you are very naïve when it comes to the menfolk of this world. There is no way that this man would invite you to meet his best friend unless he's got a thing for you."

"I don't believe you," I said. "He just wants his friend to assess my talent, and to make sure that I'm right for that position. That I won't screw everything up."

"Is his friend an architect?"

"He didn't say, but probably not. Why?"

"Well, if this other guy isn't an architect, then how would he know how to assess you? Besides, Nick has already

assessed your architectural talent, which is why you're there in the first place."

"Well, he wants a second opinion."

"Why are you avoiding this? Why are you lying to yourself?"

I said nothing for several minutes. "I need some more champagne," I said. "And maybe something harder."

"Coming up. What kind of cocktail can I make for you, love?"

"Screwdriver, if we got OJ."

Jack got up and made a couple of screwdrivers, and sat back down. "Now, my Scotty, answer the question. Why are you lying to yourself about this guy?"

I felt tears coming to my eyes. "Because," I said, as the tears flowed even harder, "if I thought for a second

that he likes me, I'm going to run. I can't handle that. You know that. I just can't handle being touched like that. Like Mr. Lucas. I mean, Nick touched my hands, and I thought that I couldn't breathe. Just touching my hands. I'm such a fucking freak."

Jack wrapped his arms around me and let me cry it out. "Scotty, you're not a freak. You're hurt. You had your adolescence stolen from you by that man. You can't let him win, Scotty. If you go through life running from every man who shows interest in you, then you'll never have a family. You'll never be truly happy."

"Yes. I can be happy. You and me. We can live together forever. We can

even adopt a child together.”

“Scotty. I love you. But you know that I’m looking for the perfect guy. I want to get married one day and have a family of my own. I won’t always be there.” Then he hesitated. “That came out wrong. I will always be there. But I won’t always be sharing my day to day life with you. What are you going to do when I find Mr. Right and become a Junior League wife out in Connecticut?”

I started to panic. What he was saying was true. What was I going to do when I didn’t have him as my security blanket? Would I end up like my mother? Drunk all the time and trying to avoid life altogether?

“So, what can I do?”

“You have to try, Scotty. Baby steps. I think that this guy probably likes you as much as you like him. You have to give him a shot, Scotty. Take your shot at happiness.”

“So I guess that inviting you along to meet Nick and his friend is out of the question?” I actually was considering doing just that.

“You have to leave the nest. You have a broken wing, but it’s gonna heal. Broken wing, or no, you have to leave the nest without Jack the momma bird.”

I felt like crying again.

“Come on, Scotty, let’s take our mind off of this. You’re getting overwhelmed. Let’s watch a chick flick and pop some popcorn.”

“In our jammies?”

“Of course.”

“No tricks coming over?”

“No tricks tonight.”

“Cool,” I said. Then I went in to the bedroom to change into my pajamas with the feet, and joined Jack on the couch. He, too, had changed, into his boxer shorts and t-shirt. We popped some popcorn, got out a blanket, and proceeded to find a movie on Netflix, which was our only major luxury.

“Oooh, this one looks good,” I said. “Let’s watch *Dear John*. Isn’t that a Nicholas Sparks?”

“It is,” he said, “Sounds like a winner.”

So, we watched the movie.

But, around 9, the door buzzed.

Jack paused the movie and got up to answer the buzzer. “Yes?” He looked at me, and shrugged. “You expecting anybody, Scotty?”

I shook my head.

“Who? Charlie?”

My heart started to race. “Charlie? That’s Nick’s driver.” Was Nick coming up? “How do I look?” I asked anxiously.

“Beautiful, as usual,” he said, as he buzzed the guy up.

In about two minutes, Charlie was at the door. Jack opened it up, then walked into the hallway. About five minutes later, he came back in with a package.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Not sure.”

“Was Nick out there? Is he going to come up?”

“No, Charlie said that Nick wasn’t with him.”

To my private dismay, I felt really disappointed.

It was then that I realized how much I really needed to see Nick. How much I wanted to be near him.

Jack brought the package to the coffee table, and took out a plastic container that had food in it. “Hmmm. Looks like some fish, potatoes and spinach. And some very tasty bread and butter.”

“Huh. Where did that come from?”

“Duh. Scotty, this food is from Nick. Obviously. You still think that boy

doesn't have it bad for you?"

"He feels sorry for me. He knows that I don't eat a lot."

"He's taking care of you. Like a boyfriend would do. And, I have to say, I'm impressed with this guy already." He looked at me and smirked. "Sure wish I had a boy who cared enough about me to send me food like that."

I was in awe. Nobody had ever done that for me.

"Well, girl," Jack said. "Looks like you got another dinner to eat."

"We do. We're gonna share."

"You need it more than me, god knows. I gotta drop a few pounds if I ever hope to catch me a Wall Street type who's gonna make me a Junior League

wife.”

“Don’t be silly, you look amazeballs. Now, I’m going to get two plates out and split this. It looks scrumptious.”

I got up and got out two plates and split the food evenly between us. “Oh, this is heavenly,” I said, biting into the fish.

Jack looked hurt. “Is it better than the mac and cheese?”

“No, of course not. Close second, though.”

“Shut up,” Jack said playfully. “You’re right, this is delicioso.”

“Hell, yeah it is. This is probably the best meal I’ve had in a long time. Except for your mac and cheese, of course.”

Jack looked at me. “Girl. Your face

is beet red. You're really blushing."

"What? Stop. I am not."

Jack started laughing. "You are too. Scotty, I said it before, I'll say it again. You like a boy."

I threw a piece of bread at him. "Shut up!" I said, but I wasn't serious.

"Scotty and Nick, sitting in a tree. K-i-s-s-i-n-g. First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage."

I couldn't help but start to laugh at him, as he turned around and put his hands behind his neck as he pretended to make out with somebody else. "Quit," I said, laughing so hard there were tears coming down my face. "I can't breathe."

"Well, girl? You still doubt how this

guy is feeling about you?"

"He feels sorry for me. That's all."

"Feels sorry for you, my ass. News flash – men don't do this for just anybody. Looks like you got a good one there."

I got quiet. "Let's finish our movie," I said. "I'm finally full."

"You gonna call him and say thank you?"

"I don't have his cell number. But I'll leave a message for him at the office tomorrow." Tomorrow was a full day of classes for me, so I didn't intern.

"Well, you better. I'm gonna make sure you do."

"I will."

So, I did the dishes, and settled back

in with Jack to finish the movie. Then I went to bed – I got the actual bed that night, and Jack slept on the hide-a-bed.

However, I couldn't sleep. All I could do, all night long, was think about Nick.

Perhaps Jack was right. Baby steps. Assuming that Nick did like me, perhaps I could slowly learn to trust him. But did I need to open up to him, so that he understands why he has to go slow with me? That would probably drive him screaming into the night. He had to understand that I'm different, though. Would he have the patience for me and my special needs?

No. Of course not. He was beautiful, apparently wealthy and extremely

intelligent. He could have anybody. He wouldn't want me, the stray puppy in the back of the cage who was so afraid of everyone that she just cowers and bites anyone who tries to come near. He's going to want the happy and sweet puppy who doesn't have issues.

All night long, I tossed and turned and obsessed. But, the fact that I was obsessing was a good sign, because I never got close enough to anybody to obsess like this.

Maybe I was already making baby steps.

Chapter 17

Wednesday was finally here. Nick's driver would be picking me up at 6:30 to take me to *Nobu* in Tribeca to meet Nick and his friend. I tried on about a hundred different outfits, feeling lost because Jack wasn't there. He was working a new job, which he got to supplement his bouncer's job, at a Jewish bakery down the street. Where he found time to do all that and go to auditions was beyond me. He was a real dynamo.

I looked at every outfit skeptically. Thank god Jack made me buy some more dinnerish outfits when we went thrift store shopping, or else I wouldn't have anything at all in my closet.

But nothing looked right. I definitely

didn't want to show cleavage, so anything plunging was out of the question. I didn't want to show off my legs, so anything short was out of the question. Which left out all my bar outfits, because, in order to get tips, I wore plunging shirts and short skirts. If I didn't, my tips dried up.

I felt like crying. *Jack, where are you when I need you? My own personal Clinton Kelly needs to be here.* I started to feel slightly frantic. Hair up or down? What color of lipstick? How much makeup? The black shirt or the colorful one? Skirt or slacks?

Relax, Scotty, this isn't even a date. It's more of a business dinner. But, if it were a date, it would be my first one,

ever, so maybe that was why I was feeling so out of sorts.

I finally settled on a black sweater, jeans and boots. I hoped that I wasn't under-dressed for this place. But my outfit looked casual enough to make it look like I wasn't trying too hard, and also that I didn't assume that this was a date. I put my hair up, and decided on coral lipstick. I didn't wear mascara, mainly because I didn't really need it, as my eyelashes were dark enough. But I put on some copper eye shadow that I felt accentuated my green eyes. I even wore foundation to even out my slightly ruddy complexion.

The driver, Charlie, came right at 6:30. I had already had a couple of

glasses of wine to calm me down. Because to say that I was nervous understated the matter. I took deep breaths in the back of the limousine as we made our way to Tribeca and *Nobu*. I looked at my phone, looking up the menu for the restaurant, trying to decide what I wanted to order before I got there. I still wanted to not be extravagant in my ordering, as I always felt bad for taking advantage of somebody's kindness in buying me meals, so I looked for something that was somewhat reasonable. I settled on the \$12 shrimp skewers. Everything else looked way too expensive. Maybe get some tempura with it.

Then I arrived at the restaurant. I felt

like I wanted the sidewalk to swallow me up whole, I was so nervous.

I walked in, and there was Nick and a stunningly handsome dark-haired guy who absolutely took my breath away. He was as beautiful as Nick was, and, when the two men stood up, I saw that he was as tall as Nick as well. The guy had dark wavy hair, magnificent green eyes and a smile that would light up the entire city. He also had a very friendly demeanor. I could tell just by looking at him.

Two intimidatingly beautiful men in one restaurant? Boy, did I feel out of place.

I walked up to them, and Nick got up to meet me and take my coat. "Scotty. This is my best buddy from Kansas City.

Ryan.”

I held out my hand to Ryan, but he gave me a hug instead of shaking it. “Glad to meet you,” he said.

I willed myself not to stiffen up when he hugged me, but I felt myself feeling surprisingly relaxed. Maybe I was turning a corner?

We all sat down, and Nick had a bottle of sake for me at the ready. “Hope you don’t mind that I ordered sake for you.”

“No, no, of course not. I love sake.”

“And I went ahead and ordered for you too,” Nick said. “Scallops with spicy garlic sauce.”

That was a \$32 item. I understood why he would order for me. He knew

that I would order the least expensive thing otherwise.

It was a sweet gesture, really.

“Thanks,” I said. Then I addressed Ryan. “So, you’re here in town for how long?”

“Just a few days. I’m starting an animal shelter back home, and I’m interviewing people out here to come and run it. My wife is at home with my daughter.”

“An animal shelter? That’s so amazing! You’re such a good person for doing that.”

“Yeah. It was something that I promised my wife that I would do with her, so I had to make good on it.”

I had a hard time looking at Nick. I

was feeling butterflies just thinking about him, so being in his presence was making me very anxious. So, I had to concentrate on talking to Ryan. I felt comfortable with him because I knew that there wouldn't be anything between the two of us. He represented safety and low stakes.

But Nick didn't allow the conversation to stay just between Ryan and me, and he interjected a lot, so the three of us ended up talking comfortably until our food came. I sensed Ryan studying me carefully while we talked. At the same time, even though he was a very nice and friendly guy, and he seemed really happy, there was something else below the surface. I

recognized it. I could feel it.

Something told me that Ryan and I had something in common.

I wondered if I imagined that I was in the presence of another sexual abuse survivor.

Then I wondered if he saw the same thing about me.

If that was the case, maybe I didn't have to tell Nick my story. Maybe Ryan could sense it in me, and he would tell him. After all, I felt like this entire meeting was set up so that Ryan could give Nick advice about me. I thought for a time that Ryan was supposed to be assessing me for how good I would be at my internship job. Now, I was thinking that there was a different ulterior motive.

Perhaps Jack was right. Maybe Nick really was interested in me.

That reality made me terrified and elated all at once.

The food came, and Ryan said “So, Scotty. How do you like Columbia?”

“What’s not to love? I’m just so happy that I would get into such a prestigious school. I never thought that I could.”

“Why not?” Nick asked, curious.

Because I lived in a car for about a year. “Well, you know, it’s just such an honor. It’s so selective, I’m just lucky.”

“You are hardly lucky,” Nick said. “Wildly talented and intelligent, yes. You wouldn’t be working on your master’s at an Ivy League school if you

weren't. Luck had nothing to do with it."

I felt shy again when he said that.

The night wore on, and I started to relax with every bottle of sake I had. The two guys were keeping up with me and drinking even more. They seemed to be having a great time, and I could tell how much they liked each other. Kinda like me and Jack.

Finally, the restaurant was about to close. I had class in the morning, so I felt that I had to be getting home. It was a fun time, and I was able to relax through drinking alcohol, but I wondered if I could ever relax around Nick without it.

I still wasn't entirely sure that Nick was interested in me romantically. Perhaps I was dreaming when I thought

that maybe Nick and I could be more. I certainly hoped not, because Jack was absolutely correct. I wasn't always going to be able lean on him like I currently did. There would come a time when Jack would have his own life, and I didn't want to feel lost and alone.

That night I went to bed dreaming about the beautiful man that I had dinner with tonight, and fantasized about what it would be like to be with him without fear.

Chapter 18

Nick

Ryan and I made our way back to my loft, where Ryan would be staying in my guest bedroom. This was his first time visiting me here, so he was having a good time looking around the place. “This is a cool place, Nick. It’s very you, much more than that mansion in Mission Hills. That place is beautiful, but a little stuffy.”

“Yeah, well, Rielle was most of the reason why my old place looked the way that it did. If it was up to me, I would’ve had a downtown loft in Kansas City as well.” Rielle got that mansion we owned in Mission Hills, and all of its contents, in our divorce. I got everything else,

including all the cash, the house in Lake Como, and most of the paintings. She also didn't get maintenance. Turned out that they didn't call my attorney "the Miracle Worker" for nothing, considering how much she had been demanding from me.

I had to work the next day, of course, but it had been so long since I had seen the guy, I thought that I could stay up and talk with him. So I made us both some scotches, and we had a seat on the couch.

"Okay," I said. "I want to hear everything about what is going on back in KC, but I have to get this out of the way. What did you think of Scotty?"

"Scotty," he began. "Beautiful girl.

Smart. Seems very down-to-earth. A real sweetie. I mean, you said that you had to order for her, because if you didn't she would consciously try to get something small and inexpensive. So, right there, she's more quality than anybody else you've dated. She doesn't strike me as somebody who wants you for your money. So, yeah, I like her. I like her a lot. A lot."

"Ok. But..."

He took a deep breath. "What do you know about her background?"

"Not much. I know that her mother has problems. I happened to be in her bar on a Saturday night, and her mother was in there, completely sloshed. And she had left a two-year-old boy at home

alone. I took care of that for her. So, I would imagine that her mother has problems. But that's all I really know about her, outside of stuff about her education and design talents." I took another sip of my scotch. "You have reservations, I can tell. What are they?"

"Well, let's see. How do I put this. You've told me that she seems scared of you sometimes?"

"Yeah. All the time, really."

"I see it too. It's in her body language and facial expressions. The girl is terrified."

"Okay. So, what do I do?"

"You're not going to like this."

"Go on."

He took another deep breath. "I don't

want to talk out of turn, but....”

“Come on. Stop beating around the bush. Out with it.”

A deeper breath and a long pause.
“She’s been sexually abused. I’m almost sure of it.”

That stunned me. “What? How do you-“

“We always recognize each other. It has become a part of my DNA, so I can almost always spot it in others.”

Sexually abused. Well, that would explain everything.

“So, how do I....What do I....”

“You’re really interested in this girl?”

I took a deep breath. “I’ve never felt like this about anybody else in my entire

life.”

He nodded. “I’m happy for you. Really happy for you. But you’re going to have tread gently. You remember how I was at her age. How self-destructive I was. How much pain I carried around with me. You know how long it took me to come out of all that. I really only just now did. Just now. I mean, my life is extraordinary, and I have the greatest relationship with Iris and Dalilah. But look at what it took to get there.”

“Well, you guys had special circumstances.” *To say the least.*

“True,” he said. “Of course, I know that you’ve had your own share of devastating losses. Abrianna and Michelle. I suspect that you’re afraid of

being hurt yourself. Just don't close yourself off like you have all this time. You can only be happy if you can let yourself really feel vulnerable. It's scary, but if you can do that, and open yourself up, you can find happiness beyond your wildest dreams. Speaking from experience."

Michelle. My sister. Probably my greatest tragedy of my entire life. Until my daughter Abrianna. Ryan was right - I *was* closed off. I had been ever since I was a teenager, really. Michelle's death really affected me - I loved her so much, and losing her made me want to never make myself vulnerable again. Abrianna's death at the age of 7 cemented for me that vulnerability could

be devastating.

Hence my brick wall.

Leave it to Ryan to figure it all out.

Now here was Scotty. Scotty was going to be a complicated case, if Ryan's hunch was right. Scotty would make me even more vulnerable. Yet, there was an overwhelming need for me to get past my own misgivings about the situation and see where it might lead.

I sighed. "She's going to be a complicated case, then. But I'm up for the challenge. I just need to know how to go about it."

"Well, you remember when Iris was raped, right? For the longest time, I couldn't touch her at all. At all, at all. I'd put my arm around her, and she

would completely stiffen up. She got intensive therapy, and things were ok for awhile. Until the Nat situation, of course. I'd imagine that Scotty probably hasn't been through any therapy, considering her financial situation. So, yeah, it's going to be difficult, but not impossible. If she means something to you, then it will be worth pursuing in the end."

It was then that I realized just how much Scotty did mean to me. I had only known her a short period of time, but I was inexorably drawn to her. She was a complicated woman, but she was also very kind and obviously not money-hungry. She was sexy, beautiful and smart. And her vulnerability was so very

appealing to me.

“She does. She does mean something to me. It’s hard to explain, but I’m crazy about her.”

“Then find a way to make her yours. But you have to go slow, and go with her cues. If you make any sudden movements, she’ll disappear into the night.”

“Well, she sure beats the hell out of Penelope,” I said, shaking my head. “God, that woman put Rielle to shame for being a total beyotch, and Alexis to shame for being just plum crazy. But, it was fun while it lasted.”

We talked for a little while longer about what was going on in his life. Turned out that he felt on top of the

world. And why shouldn't he, after the life he had led, and after everything that had happened to him in the past couple of years? Not to mention all that had happened to poor Iris. Anybody would be cray-cray after being put into a coma by a crazy woman, being raped, then seeing one's husband being shot and almost killed. Yet, Iris seemed to come through it all pretty much no worse for the wear after all was said and done, and I admired that thoroughly.

Ryan got a good one, and he deserved every bit of happiness.

He got his happy ending. Now it was my turn.

Chapter 19

The next day, Ryan left to go and meet his people and see Nat and Nate, and it was time for “Operation Scotty” to begin. Now that I had a pretty good idea of what was going on with her, I needed more guidance on how to go about pursuing her. I could read books about sexual abuse survivors, but I wasn't sure what they would tell me that I didn't already know. Having known Ryan almost my entire life, I was able to see, first-hand, what sexual abuse can do to a person. Scotty, to my knowledge, wasn't into drugs the way that Ryan was, but I was quite sure that her wounds ran deep.

Of course, I had no idea exactly what

had happened to her, only that Ryan was pretty sure that something did. And, one thing about Ryan, he had a keen way to read people, and he was almost always spot-on. So, I trusted his instincts about this.

Did she have a close friend? I didn't even know. That would be the best thing, find a trusted friend of hers and find out more about her. Because I felt like I was flying blind.

I thought about it, then decided to invite Scotty over for dinner, and ask her to bring a friend. Then get to know the friend, and maybe get the friend alone at some point and ask the friend more about her. That would at least give me a road map on where to go and how to

approach the situation.

I would be seeing her that evening in class. That would be when I would ask her to dinner the coming weekend and see what happened. Plus, she was interning at the firm the next day. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays were her days there, and she worked seven hours a day when she was there. So, two opportunities to ask her out.

So, I taught my class and she slinked it at the last second, as she usually did. I found myself catching my breath and could feel my heart pounding every time she walked in the room now. When she came in that evening, I had already started my lecture, and I lost my train of thought for a second. She looked

embarrassed, and I smiled to myself. She was such a sweetie.

“Ok, so Le Corbusier studied the design of cities and.....” I said, then saw Scotty coming in. “Uh, Le Corbusier, uh,” I stammered around before recovering. Losing my train of thought in a Le Corbusier lecture? That would be like a professor of classical philosophy losing his train of thought in a lecture about Aristotle.

After the lecture, I called her name before she could high-tail it out of there. There was one thing about Scotty – she usually tried to sneak in and out of class these days. I had no idea why, but thought that it had something to do with her overall fear of being alone with me.

As much as that hurt, I knew that it was also possibly a good sign. Ryan seemed to think that she was afraid of me because she had feelings for me. I hoped he was right.

“Ms. James,” I said, dashing from behind the podium. Since she sat at the back of the class, catching her attention was difficult.

She turned around, her books held tightly to her chest. She didn’t meet my eyes. She was dressed in baggy clothes, baggier than usual. Her blue sweater was around three sizes too big, and she was wearing large cargo pants that hung off of her tiny frame, along with scuffed Doc Marten combat boots. Her hair was up, and she was wearing glasses. I don’t

think that she had a stitch of makeup on.

She was still the most beautiful woman I had ever seen.

“Uh, Professor O’Hara, I’m so sorry I was late. I missed the subway that would have gotten me here on time. I’ll do better in the future.”

“That’s okay, Ms. James,” I said, addressing her formally because other students were loitering about, some of them wanting to talk to me. “Could you, uh, wait around for about fifteen minutes? I need to talk to you about some of your designs.”

She looked at me and she seemed startled. I surmised that she really thought that I wanted to talk to her about designs, and her naivete made me smile

again.

Everything about her was making me smile these days.

“Sure, uh, sure. I’ll wait for you.”

Then she went into the hallway, and a stream of students came up to talk to me about certain points about the lecture they were unclear about. I always encouraged this, and welcomed it, because it was better that they get things cleared up while they could. So, even though my mind was on Scotty, and hoping that she didn’t leave, I had to make sure that I didn’t lose patience with any one of them.

Finally, after about twenty minutes of fielding questions from the students, I was able to get away. I went out into the

hallway, and Scotty was standing there against a wall, not really doing anything. She was staring into space, biting one of her nails, with her books still held close to her chest.

“Hi, Scotty,” I said, and she jumped. “Sorry to startle you.”

I stood there close to her, breathing in her scent. She smelled of almond shampoo and some kind of inexpensive perfume. It was intoxicating, really, and then I started to feel myself getting hard.

Uh, oh. That was a problem with me. There was never hiding when I was turned on, unfortunately. So, I discreetly put my bag, which held my lesson plans and slides, over the front of my pants.

She smiled. “Sorry. I was lost in

thought. As usual.” She looked at me and took off her glasses and put them into her purse. She self-consciously touched a wisp of her hair and patted it, like she was nervous about how she looked. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes,” I said. “I was wondering, um, if you and a close friend of yours would like to have dinner at my loft this weekend.”

She looked surprised. “Sure. Uh, does it matter who the friend is?”

“No. I just wanted to get to know you better. I mean, we’re working together, and people work better together if they know one another. And, I have the feeling that you aren’t entirely comfortable with me yet, which is why I

want you to bring a friend over too.”

“Well, I think that can be arranged. My roommate, Jack, uh, I’ll see if he’s free. I’m free, I know that. But he works two jobs and auditions for plays and commercials all the time, so I never know when he is going to be able to do stuff.”

“Sure, sure. Well, I hope you two can make it.” Jack. A male roommate. I felt a keen sense of jealousy welling up, and tried to avoid that feeling. I hoped that I didn’t want to kick his ass when I met him.

“I hope so, too, uh, Nick. That would be very nice.”

Nice. An understatement.

I couldn’t stop staring at her. I knew

that I was making her feel self-conscious, but I couldn't help myself. She was so beautiful, so innocent, and so vulnerable. I knew that the word "vulnerable" was constantly on my mind, and it was overused, even in my thoughts. But she was. And I felt myself wishing that I never had to part with her again.

"Well, Scotty, uh..."

"I hate to cut you off. But I have to run." She looked down on the ground, pulling her books ever closer to her chest. She traced her shoe on the floor. "I have to get home. I have a paper that I have to write that is due tomorrow."

"Would you like me to drive you home?"

“That would be great, but I’m like way out of your way. That’s very kind of you to offer, though.”

“It isn’t a problem,” I said, perhaps a tad too anxiously. “I mean, I know that your apartment is out of the way, but it really isn’t a problem.”

“Tell you what. I’ll let you drive me to the subway station if you like.”

I felt disappointed. I wanted to be my usual impatient and demanding self, but that aggressive approach wasn’t called for here. Her little compromise was what I had to accept.

“Okay,” I said, “Well, let’s go and get my car and I’ll drive you to the station.”

“Thanks, Nick,” she said. Then I saw

her take a deep breath, and she held out her hand.

It was my turn to be shy. I tentatively took the hand that she had offered to me. It was warm, but she was shaking wildly. I gripped it tighter, and the two of us walked along and out onto the sidewalk. We soon made it to my car, and I realized that I had no desire to let go of her hand. My own heart was pounding, as I gently touched her cheek, and opened the door for her. She got in, and so did I.

When I got back into the car, I immediately took her hand again, and I held it the entire way to the station.

The car ride was way too short.

We got to the station in just a few

minutes, and she hesitated in the car for a beat.

I looked at her, and I felt an overwhelming, and I mean absolutely overwhelming, need to feel my lips on hers. So, I put my hand on her cheek, and I reached over and gave her a soft kiss. Her lips were smooth as a baby's, and she had a faint taste of cinnamon, like she had been eating cinnamon candies. I tried to will myself not to get a hard-on, because that would not be welcome to either of us at that moment, but I couldn't help it.

I felt that kiss down to my marrow, so I felt myself growing with each passing millisecond.

She kissed me back for a second or

two, and then pulled away. Her face looked stricken, and her entire body was trembling. Her cheeks flushed scarlet, and there were tears in her eyes.

“Uh, Nick, uh, I’ll see you, uh, tomorrow,” she said, as she got out of the car and started walking rapidly towards the station. I sat there and looked at her for a few seconds, and then saw her come back. I got my hopes up that she was coming back to let me give her a ride home, after all, but it wasn’t that.

She rapped on the window, and I let it down.

“I’m so sorry. I was so rude. I forgot to thank you for driving me to the station.”

That gesture touched me, to say the least. Did I finally find a woman who appreciated the small things? Or who appreciated me at all?

With a smile on my face, I said “it was my pleasure. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And she smiled, then turned and walked to the station.

I drove home with the biggest smile on my face ever.

Chapter 20

Scotty

Oh.my.god. Oh my god. Oh my god.
I couldn't breathe. At all. That was my first kiss, my very first kiss, and it was beyond words. There were no words to describe it. I had never felt like that in my entire life. Exhilarated. Terrified. On top of the world, yet like I was falling off a cliff at the same time. I felt all tingly, and I had a strange stirring in places that I never gave consideration to before.

Yet, there was the voice that was speaking loudly in my head, reminding me that it wasn't my first kiss. It was just my first willing kiss. Mr. Lucas kissed me, although I refused to kiss him back.

So it was nothing like what had just happened. But, nonetheless, the kiss with Nick brought up those unwelcome memories, so my exhilaration and elation immediately starting commingling with depression and fear.

Jack was working tonight. Was it at the bakery or the bar? I couldn't remember. I only knew that I had to see him and tell him about what happened. There was just no way that I could go home right then. I knew that I had a paper due, so I had to concentrate on that as much as I could, but only after I talked to Jack.

I finally remembered that his job was at the bakery that night, so I went there to get myself a knish and talk to

him. He was there, working the cash register, and his face lit up when he saw me. “Scotty!” he said. “What a nice surprise!”

“Jack,” I said, nervously, as the line was forming. “I need a knish, and I really need to talk to you,” I whispered. “Can you take a little break?”

“Sure,” he said. “If you can wait a sec, I’ll get somebody to relieve me after this crowd of people get what they ordered.”

I nodded my head, as I got my knish and sat down. I nervously got a newspaper that was there for the patrons to read for free, and tried to read. But I couldn’t read at all. The words were jumbled. I wondered if the entire world

could see me and think that there was something wrong with me. My hands were still shaking like a wild woman.

You need to calm down right now, I told myself. You have a paper to write, and if you don't get that in, there will be hell to pay. Of course, if there were exceptional circumstances, the professor would allow papers to be turned in late, but I hardly thought that getting one's first kiss would qualify as a special circumstance.

Finally, after what seemed like an absolute eternity, Jack was able to free himself and sit down and talk with me. "Scotty Marie, tell me what is going on," he said, looking concerned. "You look really shaken. Did something happen

with your brother or mother?"

I shook my head. "No. There have been no mother eruptions," I said. As for Aaron, I really didn't know. It was a topic that I willfully avoided, as I had to, if I was going to keep my sanity.

"Then what's going on?" he gently asked.

"Um, Nick, he..." I started to wrap my napkin into a knot. "He..."

"He what? He didn't hurt you, did he?" Jack looked like he was going to find Nick and kick his ass. "I'll kill him. I will."

I shook my head. "No, no. The opposite of that. He, uh, he, kissed me."

Jack look briefly stunned, and then looked like he didn't know if he should

be happy or upset about it. “That’s a good thing, right? I mean, you like this guy, so that’s positive?”

I nodded my head. “Yes. It’s just that, well, it was my first real kiss. I liked it. I liked it a lot. A lot a lot.”

Then he broke into a huge smile. “Oh, Scotty, I wish I weren’t at work right now. Because you know I’d be shrieking like a little bitch right now. I’m so happy for you!”

I smiled and laughed a little, but the laughter was mixed with tears. “Oh, Jack, I never thought it could be like that. Kissing somebody. It was so....magical. And terrifying. I felt things that I never thought I could.”

“Stand up,” Jack ordered. I did, and

he hugged me. “Baby steps, remember,” he said, while he hugged me. “This is the greatest thing ever.”

I nodded my head into his chest. “Do you think it’s possible, Jack? That I could have a normal relationship with somebody? That I could allow myself to fall in love?”

“Oh, Scotty,” he said, putting my face in his hands. “Girl, I hate to break it to you. But you already are in love.”

As my heart pounded wildly after he said that, I knew that he was right. I *was* in love with Nick. And, all at once, I was terrified, more terrified than I had ever been.

“What am I going to do, Jack? I, I can’t think about being intimate with

him. He won't want me. He's going to want a woman he can, you know, do things with. Somebody normal."

"Scotty Marie. I need to talk you down. Cart before horse, big time. He kissed you, that's all. Baby steps, Scotty. Baby steps." He kissed my forehead. "Now, are you going to have to talk to him about what happened to you? Probably so. He has to know that you're special, in more ways than one. But if he is a good guy, he'll understand."

I took a deep breath. "That brings me to my next topic. Then I'll let you get back to work. But he wants us both to have dinner at his loft in Tribeca."

"Tribeca? Girl. You didn't tell me he was wealthy."

“You didn’t ask.”

“When?”

“I said I’d let him know which evening you’re free.”

“Saturday night. I actually don’t work Saturday night. I work tomorrow night, though, at the bar.”

“Will you go with me on Saturday night?” I asked, elated beyond words that Jack had a free evening.

“With bells on, baby. With bells on.” Then he clapped his hands. “Ooh, can I give you a makeover?”

“Sure,” I said. “If you’re going with me, you can do anything you want.”

“Oh, I can’t wait. I just can’t wait. We’re going to glam you up, girl. Glam you up.”

“Okay,” I said. “Just not too much. I don’t wear much makeup, anyhow. Maybe he won’t like it.”

He looked disappointed. “Okay, that’s true. I always wanted to get my hands on you, though. Then again, you don’t want to go over there looking like a torted-up drag queen.”

I laughed at the image of me looking like a drag queen. “Yeah, I’m quite sure that he wouldn’t want me looking like somebody in one of your shows.”

He tousled my hair, and hugged me again. “Scotty, I’m so happy for you. You’re going to be normal. You’re going to be normal.”

I nodded. That was all I wanted, really. To be normal.

I prayed that he was right.

Chapter 21

It was Saturday afternoon, and I was feeling anxious already. I had seen Nick at work the previous day, of course, and I told him that Jack and I would be at his loft at 7 PM on Saturday. He arranged to send his driver to pick us up, over my protests.

“That’s really not necessary,” I said. “Jack and I are used to taking the subway everywhere. We actually like it.”

“I insist,” he said, and by the tone of his voice, I knew that there was no argument.

Being at work with him was getting to be difficult. There was no longer any doubt, even in my mind, that Nick and I

were somewhat more than just intern and supervisor, or professor and student. What we were was left to be defined, but that kiss demonstrated to me that there was more to us than what we were in our professional lives. Yet, there was no way that we could show it while we were at the office. That would be way too risky.

And Portia made it a point to make my life difficult there at the firm. I was a floating intern right then, which meant that I went around and found projects to do from every partner in the firm, including Portia. I knew that I eventually would settle down to be an intern only for Nick's team, but, for now, I was floating. Which meant that I did projects

for Portia.

Portia went out of her way to make me feel like my mother did. Like I was incompetent. I had typed up a contract for her, and I somehow got mixed up and typed in the word “their” instead of “there.” She read it, and looked at me accusingly. “You’re a graduate student at Columbia?” she asked me incredulously. “What are they teaching you there? Who doesn’t know the difference between t-h-e-i-r and t-h-e-r-e?” She shook her head. “Incompetent. I’m going to have to send this contract to a secretary to redo your idiotic mistakes.”

Another time, she asked me to submit a rudimentary floor plan for a project she was working on. I did, and she met

with me in her office. I knew that I was in trouble when she closed the door behind her. That was never a good sign.

“Have a seat,” she said, gesturing to the chair.

I obeyed.

“Scotty. I’m not going to beat around the bush here,” she began. “You aren’t good enough for this firm. I strongly suspect that Nick advocated for you to be hired because of your rather glorious rack, and nothing more.”

I crossed my arms, and cursed the size of my breasts again. I was very, very careful not to display them, unlike Portia herself, who favored low cut shirts and high cut skirts.

I tried not to take her other words to

heart. That I wasn't good enough. It was bad enough that I felt that, but it really stung to have a senior partner tell me what I felt about myself anyway.

"I'm very sorry, Ms. Anson. I'll redo that floor plan if you want."

"It's not just the floor plan. It's your work, in general. I've seen it, of course. I was overruled in hiring you. Your work is amateurish and shows zero creativity. This floor plan you gave me is something that a high school student would submit."

I felt my pulse racing. Was this what the other partners thought about me? Was this the reputation that I had around the firm? Did they all suspect that Nick hired me for the size of my breasts and

not my talent? Was I even talented at all?

To say that my confidence was undermined by Portia's talk would be the understatement of the year. It brought back all my old insecurities, stemming from my mother constantly telling me that I was stupid and worthless. Then, when one foster family after another refused to adopt me, that feeling of worthlessness compounded. Mr. Lucas' actions drove it home - I wasn't good for anything but my body. Now, here was Portia, telling me in no uncertain terms that this was the case.

I wasn't smart, and I wasn't talented. I was just a walking set of double Ds.

I willed myself not to cry. Crying was professional suicide, I knew, so I

bit my lip to stop the tears. I looked up, and Portia was still staring at me, a cruel look on her beautiful face. “Re-do the floor plan, from scratch. Give me something that a 16-year-old wouldn’t be able to do. ASAP.” Then she gave the plan back to me.

I had no idea what to do, because I had no idea why the floor plan was wrong. She gave me no advice on how I could fix it. And I was scared, terrified in fact, of asking another senior partner to help me with it. What if it really was terrible? They would know it by looking at it, and then everybody would know that I was incompetent. I would lose my internship, and Nick would lose respect for me. Then I would be too

embarrassed to see him in class, so I would have to drop his classes, which would lead me to not be able to graduate on time. If at all.

The whole thing would land me drunk on the couch like my mother.

I could ask Nick for help, but would he give me an unbiased opinion on it? Besides that, if that floor plan really was at the high school level, he would start to doubt ever having me come to work there.

So, when Nick came and found me for lunch, he could tell that something was wrong.

“Thanks for the offer, Nick, but I’m really not hungry,” I said. When he walked into the room where I was

working, I immediately took my floor plan and put it on my lap. I didn't want him to see my incompetent design.

He sat down, and then got right back up to close the door. Then he sat back down and took my hands. I drew a breath, but I was starting to get used to him at least touching my hands.

Baby steps.

“Scotty, honey, there's something wrong,” he said, touching my cheek. He had a look of concern in those beautiful blue eyes of his. He kissed my forehead gently, and I felt like melting.

I wanted to tell him that this job wasn't right for me. That Portia just confirmed that I wasn't good enough. That I was embarrassed to be working

there, because I didn't belong. That my mother was right after all.

Instead I just said "no, nothing wrong. I, I, I just need to get something into Portia right away."

"Portia," he said, and then his demeanor changed. "That's why you're upset. She's treating you like shit, isn't she?"

"No," I lied. The last thing I wanted to do was cause friction between the partners. That would be the surest way to get gone, if Portia had more allies on the firm than Nick did. Which was highly possible, as Nick had only started working there a few months before, and Portia had been there for years. "No, no. It's just something that I need to re-do

for her, that's all. Not a big deal."

"I know better," he said. "You're really upset." He looked pissed. "I'm going to have to have a talk with her."

"No, please don't. Please. I just started working here. I don't need there to be problems already. I already feel like I'm going to be skating on thin ice because..."

He nodded his head in understanding. "Of course. I don't want to cause problems, either. I need you to succeed here, and the politics of this will be complicated. I'll just have to pull my weight to make sure that you aren't on her service, at all, anymore."

"How are you going to do that? I'm on everybody's service right now."

“I’ll think of something. In the meantime, you need to eat, so you’re coming with me.”

“But Portia-“

“Can wait. Get your coat and hat, and let’s go get some pizza.”

So, on that Saturday afternoon, I felt apprehensive about going over to Nick’s loft. If it weren’t for the fact that Jack was excited to go, overly so, I would’ve tried to cancel.

“Love,” Jack said. “Why aren’t you more excited for tonight? We’re going over to Nick’s loft in Tribeca. Tribeca! Girl, you’ve hit the big time there.”

“I don’t know, Jack. I just don’t think it’s going to work between Nick and me.”

“Oh, what was I thinking. Of course, you’re right. Well, it was good between you guys while it lasted.” He rolled his eyes. “Do I have to do some Scotty ass-kicking?”

“Well, I might have jumped the gun. I mean, he kissed me, but I doubt it meant much to him. I get the feeling that he might be a man-whore.”

“And why, pray-tell, would you think that?”

I didn’t really know. I mean, he had slept with Portia, which was obviously why she had it in for me. My rational brain knew that was why she obviously hated me. My emotional brain thought that her biting, almost savage, insults were true.

But just because he slept with Portia didn't make him a man-whore.

It was probably just an excuse I was making for not getting emotionally involved with him.

"I don't know. I guess he isn't."

"Come on, now, girl. You have to get psyched for this. The man of your dreams is having us for dinner tonight. That's huge! It's huge that you even like somebody. I've never seen you give anybody the time of day before. Now, you've gotten your first kiss from a gorgeous and wealthy man. And, this just in, he seems to be crazy about you. You have to get happy."

I knew that. I had tried so hard to erase my doubts about myself. It was

starting to work. Then, Portia's comments brought back everything that made me doubt myself in the first place. And, just like that, I was back to believing that I could never truly catch the eye of somebody like Nick.

I just hoped that he didn't see me as another notch on his bedpost. That would be absolutely devastating to me. So, I knew that if he had any designs of eventually getting me into bed, he had another thing coming. It would be a long, long time before I could trust enough to do that with somebody.

Even if that somebody had beautiful blue eyes, a perfect face and body, and was, thus far, the kindest man I had ever known.

Chapter 22

So, Jack and I found ourselves in the limousine going to Tribeca. I had let Jack do a slight makeover on me, but made sure that he didn't put too much makeup on my face.

"Well, Scotty, that's just as well," Jack said, as lightly sponged some foundation on my cheeks. Blusher, lipstick and eye shadow were on the table next to me, waiting to be applied. "It's just as well that I don't put a lot of makeup on you, because you're beautiful when you first wake up in the morning. You're beautiful always. So, really, I'm not doing much with this makeover. I just like to play, you know that."

I nodded. I did know that he liked to

play around with makeup, which was why I humored him in this. In fact, before he had the ambition to become a Broadway actor, he had the ambition to be a makeup artist.

My hair was another story. I never knew that to do with it. I badly needed a haircut, but I couldn't afford it. I really didn't want to go to one of the cheapo chop shops, so I pretty much just let it grow.

So, I did what I usually did with it, and put it up, twisting it into a top knot and securing it with a butterfly clip.

I didn't obsess as much about what I would wear as I did the night that I met Ryan. I felt very blue about going that night, so I couldn't get into looking

through my wardrobe for something nice. Jack had to find something that looked somewhat classic, yet somewhat sexy, which was what I wanted.

Portia had taken all the excitement I had about the possibility of being with Nick. Because I saw the future. If I dated him, everybody would know, and Portia would have the long knives out for me then. At the moment, she was tormenting me just because I worked for Nick, and she apparently was jealous about that. I could just imagine how she would act if Nick and I became an item.

But Jack was totally excited for the evening. When Charlie pulled up in the limo, Jack was bouncing off the walls. "Look at that, Scotty, a limo. Fancy,

fancy. Wonder if it has a mini-bar in there?”

“No, it doesn’t. It’s not one of those limos.”

“Well, it’s a limo. Sure beats the hell out of the subway. No chance of somebody urinating on us in a limo.”

“Sure,” I said, without enthusiasm. “It’s a nice limo, too, so, yeah, it sure beats the hell out of the subway.”

We got in the back, and Jack put his arm around me. “Cheer up, Scotty. You have to get happy before you see Mr. Wonderful.”

I nodded. I had to start feeling better about myself, in general. I needed a dose of happiness before going to Nick’s loft. After the life I led, going to a Tribeca

loft in a limo was a surreal experience, and I really was lucky for getting to do this.

We soon arrived at his loft. Nick was standing in the cold, waiting for us in a trench coat, scarf and hat. Jack looked out the window at him, then back at me. “He looks really hot, Scotty. You weren’t exaggerating.”

Charlie opened the door for us, and we got out. Nick came forth to shake Jack’s hand. “Jack, Nick,” he said, introducing himself. Then he looked at me. My heart started doing a little dance again, and, momentarily, Portia’s cruelty was forgotten. “Scotty,” he said, and put his arm around me. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too, Nick,” I said, glancing at Jack. He was giving a look like *hubba hubba*. He nodded, his eyes wide. Jack obviously found Nick as beautiful as everybody else in the world seemed to. Including Portia.

And, at that, we made our way into his building.

Chapter 23

Nick

I was waiting for Scotty and Jack to arrive, and I was ever so slightly nervous. I knew that something happened with Scotty and Portia, but I didn't know what. And I didn't know how to deal with that situation, because I wanted to make sure that Scotty's position was secure. I did get Scotty taken off of Portia's service, but that was tricky. The partners didn't know about Portia and me. So, they really didn't quite understand why it was a problem having Scotty handling some of Portia's projects, and I had to make something up.

“Portia is more of a pragmatist and

business-oriented. Scotty's more of a right-brained type. She would do better sticking to the designers like myself and Robert and Ted," I said to

George, referring to some of the other senior design partners at the firm.

"But Nick," George said, "She needs to work for everyone, so that she gets to know us all. Why would you want to take that away from her?"

Think fast, Nick. Time to possibly throw Portia under the bus. "Actually, I'm just concerned. Portia sometimes sees other women as competition, as opposed to being nurturing for them. Scotty is a rare talent, and I don't want her to feel beat down."

George looked thoughtful at that.

“Come to think of it, Portia doesn’t get along with the other women at this firm. Only the men.” He looked at me. “Well, I suppose it couldn’t hurt. There are plenty of other interns to do her bidding. I understand that you’re looking out for Scotty. She’s lucky to have someone like you in her corner.”

And, just like that, Scotty was off Portia’s service.

I was looking forward to telling her about that this evening. Hell, I was looking forward to seeing her. Dying to see her, in fact. The last time I was dying to see a woman was.....I couldn’t remember when. Maybe never. Scotty had touched my heart like no woman ever had. Even Iris.

So, I made sure that the dinner was special. I didn't cook, of course, but I hired a gourmet chef to come in and prepare wild salmon, baby artichokes, wild rice risotto and a winter squash puree. Dessert would be a chocolate crumble parfait. I made sure that my bar was stocked completely with everything that anybody would want. I got a white table cloth and lit candles. I even built a fire in the fireplace. A vintage bottle of wine was corked and ready.

I really wanted to impress her and her friend, like I never had wanted to impress anybody.

I waited for Charlie to call me from the limo to let me know that they were five minutes away, and I went down to

meet them.

She arrived with her friend, Jack. I shook his hand, and he greeted me, and I inwardly sighed with relief. *Jack is obviously gay, so not a threat.* I showed them up to my loft, and Jack was obviously impressed. Scotty was, too, but she had already been here, so it didn't impress her nearly as much.

"Nick," Jack squealed. "This artwork is amazing. Where did you get these?"

"Various auctions," I said. "Some came from Sotheby's auctions, some from Bonhams, others from Phillips and still others from Christies."

Jack looked at Scotty, and I heard him whisper "You never told me he was

this wealthy.” Scotty shot him a look back, and motioned to me, embarrassed. I smiled. Scotty amused me.

“So, you’re like a collector?” Jack asked. “How much is your collection worth?”

“Jack,” Scotty said, and gave him a look like she was saying *you’re being rude*.

“It’s okay, Scotty. Uh, my art collection is worth around \$750 million in all. I have other art work in my house on Lake Como, and some are on loan to various art museums around the world. Mainly photography in the Lake Como house - Ansel Adams, Dianne Arbus, people like that, but I do have a few Warhols and even a Pollock.”

At that, Jack just mouthed the word “wow” to Scotty.

“Lake Como? So, you’re like neighbors with George Clooney and people like that?” Jack asked.

“I suppose,” I said, not telling them that I had actually met the guy a few times. Nice guy, really.

“And, what, Gwyneth Paltrow and Meryl Streep are your neighbors here?”

I nodded. I was feeling uncomfortable discussing my wealth, because I could see, on Scotty’s face that she wasn’t liking it. “Well, have a seat. I can make you any kind of drink you like,” I said, going behind the bar. Then I smiled at Scotty. “The tables are turned, huh, Scotty? I’m going to be the

bartender tonight.”

She smiled. I could tell that she was feeling more at ease now the focus was shifting away from my wealth. “Yes, I guess it is at that.”

“So, what can I get you?” I asked her. “Martini, scotch, mojito?”

“Uh, I’d like, uh, a seven and seven,” she said. “Jack, what do you want?”

“A Cosmo,” he said.

I smiled and made their drinks, and served them with some cocktail napkins. “Let me check with Adrien, the chef for the night, and see where the food is. In the meantime, I have some apple slices and brie, and some gnocchi.”

“Thank you,” she said, as I went in to the kitchen to check on how the food

was coming. At the same time, I peeked out to see how they were doing. They were sitting on the couch, sipping their drinks and munching on some snacks. Their body language showed me that they were feeling more comfortable, so that made me happy.

The food was almost ready, so I asked Adrien to bring everything out, and he promised he would in five minutes time.

“So,” I said, “the food’s almost ready, so why don’t you guys join me here in the dining room?”

We all sat down around the dining room table. Adrien brought out the food, and we started eating. Scotty again looked like she wanted to attack her

food, but she restrained herself. As she looked down at her plate, I just stared at her, mesmerized. She was so beguiling for me, so intriguing.

It was then that I realized that I was in love with this girl, like I had never been in love with anybody ever before.

And, more importantly, I realized that I had finally allowed myself to fall in love.

I only hoped that she felt the same way about me.

But, tonight wasn't necessarily about Scotty. It was about Jack. I had to befriend him so that I could talk to him about Scotty. About the best way to win her heart. Because, at that moment, I had no idea how to do it.

No clue.

“So, Jack,” I said. “Scotty tells me that you’re involved in the theater.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “If you could call it that. I’ve gone on about a million auditions, and nothing yet.”

“Well, I have a few connections to some Broadway producers. Would you like-“

“Oh, god yes. Yes. If you could pull some strings, I would love you forever.” Jack was evidently getting a little bit drunk. “Hell, I think I could marry you even if you don’t help me out. You’re beautiful, and so nice. So kind to Scotty.”

I smiled. Things were going well, so far, in my next step of Operation Scotty.

Scotty was kicking Jack under the table, though. She apparently wasn't getting nearly as drunk as Jack was. I found myself wishing that she would. All I wanted was for her to relax.

"Well, I'll give them a call first thing Monday morning," I said. "You'll be getting more jobs, I predict."

"Thanks, gorgeous," Jack said, reaching for another glass of wine. Scotty kicked him again, and he looked at her. "What? We're not driving. What's the big deal?"

"So, what kind of plays do you like to do?" I asked him. "Musicals, dramas, comedies?"

"Whoever will hire me. I'm kinda a whore that way. But I'm not that great of

a singer, although I have been in the chorus on a few off-Broadway musicals. Off-off Broadway, really.”

Scotty admonished him at that. “Jack, stop putting yourself down. You’re an excellent singer. And Nick here is an amazing piano player. So, maybe Nick can play later on while you sing along. You can show him your talent.”

Jack just shrugged. “I guess that I’m okay. But obviously not the best in town. If I were, I’d be getting parts, which isn’t the case.”

“Well, then, Scotty has a good idea,” I said. “Why don’t I play for you tonight and you can sing for me? I do need a good idea about your talent before I put in a phone call to Bob.”

“Bob. You mean Bob Terrill? One of the biggest producers in town?” Jack was incredulous.

I nodded my head. “Yeah, actually, I went to Harvard with him. He was on my crew team. So, no problem, I’ll put in a good word for you no matter what. And, if your singing voice impresses me, I’ll definitely be able to vouch for you on some of the musicals he has in the pipeline.”

This was working out well. Very well. I never even considered the possibility that I could use my connections to get on Jack’s good side. Of course, the whole thing reeked of manipulation, but it was for a good cause. Getting to know Jack would help

me win Scotty, and that was all that mattered to me at that moment.

“Oh my god,” Jack said, clapping his hands. “You rowed crew? I can just imagine you in one of those tight little tank tops and shorts they wear. It’s one of my favorite Olympic sports to watch for just that reason.”

“Well, at Harvard, rowing crew wasn’t that big of a deal. Most of my buddies rowed with me.”

Jack was looking at me with stars in his eyes. Scotty wasn’t looking at me at all. She was staring into her full wine glass pensively. I had a feeling I knew what her issue was. She didn’t have to tell me that Portia was cruel to her yesterday. I already surmised as much.

Which complicated the whole situation between Scotty and me all the more. She was no doubt afraid that getting involved with me would result in professional suicide for her, because of Portia's jealousy.

The problem was, she was probably right. Portia had been with the firm for 10 years, compared to my three months, and she was, unfortunately, one of the firm's biggest rainmakers. Of course, I probably still had the upper hand, simply because this firm went through great lengths to bring me aboard, and because of my reputation as a world-renowned architect who gave the firm a certain prestige. Still, I had no idea how a power struggle with Portia would play

out. It wasn't cut and dried, as Portia obviously had some loyalists at the firm. I hadn't had the chance to make quite the same strong connections as she had over the years.

But, one thing was for sure. I would go to bat for Scotty if push came to shove.

I would go to the ends of the earth for this girl.

After dessert, Jack said "well, handsome, why don't you get that cute tush of yours over to that piano and let's make some beautiful music together?"

"Let's go," I said. "But let me warm up." I wanted to show off for Scotty and Jack some. I mean, Scotty knew that I could play, but I really didn't show her

what I could do. So, I decided to “warm up” by playing the most complicated classical piece I knew – Rachmaninoff’s Third Piano Concerto, which was known as one of the most difficult piano pieces in the world. It was the concerto that literally drove David Helfgott crazy, as shown in the movie *Shine*. This was a complex movement, and it took a great deal of skill, as the part I played was in adagio and covered all the keys. But it was one that I had mastered years before.

Jack and Scotty both stood over the piano while I played, and both of them looked at me in awe.

When I was done with my “warm-up” I looked up and met Scotty’s

beautiful green eyes. They were filled with tears. Jack's eyes were just wide, and his mouth was open.

"That's incredible," Scotty said softly, wiping away tears. "I've never heard such a beautiful rendition of that movement."

I shrugged my shoulders. "Well, I usually use this piece to warm up," I said, which was a lie. I usually used much less complex pieces than this to warm up, but I really wanted to impress Scotty. She seemed to know her classical composers and music, so I knew that she would appreciate it.

It seemed that it worked.

"Okay, then," I said to Jack. "What would you like to sing for me?"

“Do you know *Corner of the Sky* from *Pippin*?”

“Hmmm, hang on,” I said. Then I put my television on, finding *You Tube*, and I watched the video of the song once. That was another secret that I had that very few people knew about me, except maybe Ryan – I could literally play music by ear.

So, after watching the video just once, I told Jack I was ready.

“Ready? You watched the video once.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m ready. Are you?”

Jack looked skeptical, but, as I played the opening notes, he was convinced, and started to sing along. He

actually wasn't bad, to my relief. A few bum notes here and there, some sharp, some flat, but, overall, not bad. I wouldn't have too much of a difficult time convincing Bob to give him an audition.

After he was done, I asked him if he wanted me to play *Magic to Do* from *Pippin*. That song was on the same video as *Corner of the Sky*, so I knew that one as well.

"Sure," he said. "I know that one, too. I've been practicing these songs, hoping to get an audition, so I know every song from *Pippin*."

So, I launched into this song and Jack sang along to that one, as well. As with the other song, he did a passable

job. He might have needed a bit more vocal training, but he was definitely not the worst I ever heard.

Then we did the same for a song from *The Book of Mormon* called *I Believe*. I watched a video for that, learned the music for it, and played while Jack sang along. Then I asked if he knew more standard songs, such as *I Dreamed a Dream* from *Les Misérables*. I knew that one by heart, without having to watch a video, so I was happy that he did know that.

I ended up playing songs for about an hour, covering different musicals, including *Hair*, *Miss Saigon*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Rent*. Jack knew all the songs perfectly, which was

impressive in and of itself. It seemed that he was not a dilettante, as I had initially feared.

Finally, it was time to turn my attention to Scotty, who was listening quietly to the two of us. I felt bad that she was left out, but she seemed very happy to hear our music. “You see,” she said to me, “Jack is very talented. He just needs a break.” Then she paused. “Thank you, very much, Nick, for offering to help him.”

Jack gave Scotty a hug. “Love, when I become a big star, we’re going to live on the Upper West Side. Because you’re coming with me, girl, when I make it big.”

Scotty laughed. “I’ll hold you to

that.”

“Now, Scotty, what would you like to hear?”

She looked thoughtful. “Do you know any Joni Mitchell?”

“How about *Big Yellow Taxi*?” I said, and she nodded. I played the music for that while she sang. We got done with that, and I asked her if she had any Beatles requests. I knew most of their songs.

“Yes,” she said. “*Let It Be*.” So, I played that, then ended up playing much of my Beatles repertoire. She and Jack both knew most of the words to these songs, so we all ended up having a great time.

But it was finally time to stop

playing. I really wanted to get to know Jack better, so I got out some brandy and stoked the fire a little bit. The three of us talked until the wee hours of the morning about any and every topic under the sun. I was feeling pretty good that I was getting an “in” with this guy, who obviously meant so much to the woman that I was in love with, so I was feeling more confident that I could find the right way to make her mine.

We all stayed up until about three in the morning talking. I really wanted them both to stay, especially Scotty. But I wanted Scotty to stay with me in my bed. I longed to touch her, to kiss her, to make love to her like I had never made love to anybody before. I knew that this was not

realistic at this point, but this was what I was craving.

I knew that this couldn't happen, but I still wanted her to stay, even if it was just in the guest bedroom.

Truth be told, I wanted her to stay forever.

But it was not to be. They had to leave – Jack had to work at the bakery in the morning. So, I reluctantly called Charlie to come and get them. He would be here in less than ten minutes.

The three of us said our goodbyes. “Thanks for having us,” Jack was saying, as we hugged. “It was a fabulous evening. Probably one of the best I’ve ever had. Sure beats the drag show,” he said with a laugh.

Then Jack looked at the two of us, as our eyes were locking. “Uh, Scotty, I’ll be downstairs. See you in a few?”

Scotty nodded without looking at him. She was still looking at me. I saw emotion in those green eyes of hers, more emotion than I had ever seen in her eyes, and it was making my heart pound out of my chest. She tentatively touched her hand to my chest, and I grabbed ahold of it, and put it up to my cheek. I kissed her forehead, my hand in her hair, and then gently kissed her soft lips.

This kiss lasted longer than the kiss in the car. I could still feel her trembling, but she started to relax. I let my tongue explore leisurely inside her mouth. She was breathing hard, and she wrapped

her arms around me. My heart soared, because this was the most I had been able to be physical with her since I had known her. I couldn't lean into her, though, because the hard-on problem was making itself known again. This woman made me harder than anyone ever had. But the last thing I wanted to do was to scare her, so I leaned away from her while I gently kissed her.

When she pulled away from me, I wanted to tell her that I was in love with her. But I knew that it was too soon. Too soon for her to hear it, not too soon for me to say it. Because I had no doubt how I felt about her. I suddenly knew that she was the one that I always wanted, the one that I had been waiting for.

I hoped that she would know it soon too.

Chapter 24

Scotty

As I made my way back to the car, I felt like my feet were not touching the ground. This was my second kiss, and I was starting to not feel terrified anymore. It was almost as if I could eventually see myself trusting him. Which was huge.

Jack was waiting for me in the limo. I got in, and he gave me big hug. “Scotty, oh my god. That man is divine. Absolutely divine. He’s not just eye-candy, but smart, nice and can play piano like nobody I have ever heard. And, girl, do you know what else?”

“What?”

“He’s not just crazy about you. He’s

in love with you.”

I didn't try to protest, because my female intuition was confirming what Jack was saying. I did feel like he was in love with me. But whether he would stay in love with me was another question. I had to find out more about him. About his personal life. I mean, I knew the basics about this guy – about his professional accomplishments and things like that. But I didn't know enough about him to really let myself go and get swept away.

It didn't really bode well, for instance, that he slept with Portia. And it apparently meant nothing to him. I couldn't imagine doing something like that. I couldn't imagine being intimate

with anybody, ever, and I really couldn't imagine just having sex with somebody that I didn't care anything for. Yet he did.

But Jack was incredibly happy for me. "Scotty, I think he might be the one. The one to finally get you to let your walls down and fall head over heels in love. And being in love is so much fun."

I wanted to be happy. I really did. I wanted, so much, to break down my own walls and let Nick in. More than anything, I wanted that. But that would mean that I would have to let go, release control, and be totally and completely vulnerable. How could I do that if I didn't know how he really was? For all I knew, he was a guy who was in love with being in love. One of those guys

who falls in love everywhere he goes and with every girl he meets, and then moves on to the next one.

But there was a positive sign – I was actually beginning to think along those lines. Of breaking down and letting Nick touch me. It was becoming less and less scary every time I saw him.

Now the only scary thing for me would be if I were vulnerable and let him in, only to see him lose interest and move on. That would be devastating to me. Absolutely devastating. And if he was a man-whore, this was probably what would happen.

So I wasn't yet ready to trust him.

That night, I went to bed thinking about him. I was struggling with my

feelings for him. I was in heavy denial about the fact that I was head over heels in love with him.

I knew what I had to do.

Chapter 25

The next day, Jack had to go to work at the Jewish Bakery, and I was left at home with nothing to do. Well, unless you count studying and doing homework, which was piling up on me like never before. I have always been so good about schoolwork, but I never had something to distract me before. Now, I most certainly did.

My plan was to call Ryan and talk to him directly about Nick. I just couldn't bring myself to talk to Nick about the things that I really wanted to know.

I tried to remember what the name was of Ryan's animal shelter, and then I remembered it. *Dalilah's Friends*. It was named after his daughter. It was

only starting out, but I knew that he at least had it going somewhat. So, I decided to call that shelter and see if I could talk to him. I wanted to find out more about Nick.

I had to find out more about Nick.

I took a deep breath. It was Sunday, so I had no idea if I could reach Ryan there. But I hoped that I could. After all, the shelter was new, so they probably put in seven days a week there. I called the number, after finding it in information.

To my surprise, somebody picked up on the second ring. “Dalilah’s friends, this is Iris, may I help you?”

I was taken aback. It was Ryan’s wife. I didn’t really know what to say at

that point. “Uh, yes, uh, could I please speak with Mr. Gallagher?”

“Just a second,” she said, and, all at once, my heart was in my throat. *He’s there. Now what? What are you going to ask him?* I suddenly started to feel that I was doing the wrong thing, so I contemplated hanging up the phone.

But, before I could, Ryan’s unmistakable baritone came to the phone. “Hello, this is Ryan,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say, so there was dead air for a few seconds. “Hello?” he asked again.

“Yes,” I said, finally. “Yes, uh, hello, Ryan. This is, this is, uh, this is Scotty. Scotty James. I, uh, met you-“

“Of course,” he said. “Hey, Scotty,

how's it going?"

"Fine, fine," I said. "I hate to bother you."

"Not a problem," he said. "You aren't bothering me. What's on your mind?"

"Uh, I, I don't know," I said, suddenly feeling like a complete moron. "I needed to ask you some questions about Nick." The questions would be intrusive, I knew, so I hoped that it didn't backfire. Ryan was sure to talk to Nick about my calling, so this phone call might destroy our fledgling relationship.

"Sure," he said. "Go ahead. I know everything about him."

"Well, I hate to bother you while you're working."

“I do have to get back to work in a bit. But shoot. Go ahead and ask me what you need to ask me.”

Deep breath. “Well, I, I, am starting to. I mean, I like him,” I said, feeling like a teenager. An awkward, gawky, silly teenager. “But I have to know more about him before I, you know, get more involved with him.”

“Uh oh,” he said. “Go ahead. What would you like to know?”

Uh oh? What does that mean?
“Well, you know, there’s this partner at the firm that I guess Nick, uh, slept with.”

Silence on the line for a few seconds. “Yes, I’m aware of Portia.”

Deep breath. “Is that something that

he, uh, does?"

More silence on the line. "Listen, Scotty, I know what you're thinking. But, you're different for him."

That answers my question right there. "Thanks, Ryan. I'm so sorry to bother you. I'm embarrassed, in fact. I shouldn't have put you on the spot like that. Um, thanks again, and take care."

"Wait, Scotty. Please listen to me. I'm not going to lie to you. Nick has been around the block a time or two. But he's crazy about you. He really is."

"Can I trust him?"

Long silence. "Yes," he said weakly. "Yes."

Not exactly a ringing endorsement. "Thanks for taking my call, Ryan. Uh,

happy holidays.”

“Happy holidays,” he said. “Really, Scotty, you’re special. I hope you realize that.”

“Sure, of course,” I said, not convinced at all. “Well, bye.”

“Goodbye. Call me any time you need me.”

“Thanks, I will,” I said, “talk to you later.”

Then I hung up the phone.

What a nice guy, that Ryan. But I read between the lines of his silence and his evasive answers. The evidence was piling up that Nick was a guy who got around. And why wouldn’t he? A guy who looked like that, who was that outgoing, intelligent, accomplished and

wealthy? He was very desirable for any girl.

So, I knew that my brick wall would not be coming down just yet. I was in love with Nick. I couldn't help that. To try to make myself not be in love with him was as useless as trying to make the sun not shine in the morning. But that didn't mean that I would let him in.

Of course, this could all be my way of denying him because I was still afraid of getting to the point where I would be getting intimate with him. Because that was inevitable. So, it was easier to simply not let it go any further with him.

I had to make a decision here. I wouldn't let him get close to me.

Because one thing was for sure.

He had the potential to hurt me far more than Mr. Lucas ever did.

Chapter 26

Nick

Well, that went well, I thought after I woke up that Sunday morning. Better than I could have ever thought it would. I would give Bob a call tomorrow, and then maybe arrange to have lunch with Jack, with the excuse that I wanted to talk to him more about his Broadway ambitions. Then casually launch into the topic of Scotty. I knew what I wanted to find out, and I knew how to get the information.

I was looking forward to it. I was so looking forward to being able to be with Scotty, really be with her, on a more frequent basis. Maybe even a permanent basis. But, I couldn't get ahead of

myself. I first had to find out all the potential landmines that might pop up.

It was just then that my phone started ringing. It was Ryan's ring, and his face popped up on my phone. "Buddy," I said. "What's going on?"

"Hey," Ryan said. "Uh, I need to talk to you about something."

"What?" I asked, feeling somewhat anxious.

"Well, uh, Scotty just called."

I started to feel a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. "Okay."

"She wanted to know, basically, if you, uh, get around."

Now I was alarmed. "Why? What would make her think that?"

"Well, Portia. But, probably, it's just

because she's a woman. She probably just has a gut feeling about you."

Oh, crap. Crap. Crap. Crap crap crappity crap. "What did you tell her?"

"I didn't tell her much. But Nick, I can't lie completely. I did, uh, tell her that you've been around the block a few times."

"You what?" I was incredulous. "Why, pray tell, why would you tell her that?"

"Nick. I was being charitable. If I was being honest, I probably would have told her that Wilt Chamberlain would be impressed with your numbers."

"Thanks. Thanks a lot. Jesus fucking Christ, I was getting somewhere with

this girl, now here you go, fucking everything up. Thanks a fucking lot.”

“Sorry, Nick. That came out wrong. All I said was that you’ve been around the block a time or two, but I emphasized that she was different.”

“And? Did she believe you?”

“I don’t think so. I’m so sorry, she took me completely by surprise. I wasn’t prepared for her to call me, period, and I really wasn’t prepared for her to be so straightforward with her questions.”

“Great. Just great. So, now what? We were on our way. Now, I’m at square one. Probably even less than square one. She probably will never trust me.”

“Well, maybe things will be okay. I mean, of course, it will make things

more complicated, but you aren't completely out of the game here."

"This isn't a game. Not with her. Yes, I have played head games with every other woman in my life. Yes, I was a man-whore. But you don't understand. She really is different. I can't even explain it myself. All I know is that I am love with this woman, like I have never been in love before. I mean, I was in love with Iris, too, but not like this. Not like this."

Long silence. "I know, Nick. I know that you are. If you want, I can call her and try to talk to her again."

"No, no," I said, feeling completely defeated. I was seeing my fantasy of having my own happy ending with the

woman of my dreams slipping away. “That’s okay. I’ll have to figure it out. I’ll have to figure out a way to convince her about my feelings for her. To make her see that she can trust me not to hurt her. I’ll think of something. Anyhow, thanks for the heads-up.”

I hung up. And, for just a few minutes, I despaired. It was totally not like me to despair about anything, because I was a man of action. If there was a problem, I didn’t let it defeat me, ever. I just built a better mousetrap. That was how I was. But my talk with Ryan made me despair. Because Scotty wasn’t one of my “problems to overcome.” She was a human being, with complex emotions, and she was somebody who I

was in love with. And on my way to being head over heels, truly, madly, deeply in love with. I remembered my talk with Iris, right after Ryan was out of surgery, where I marveled that there was a woman that he was so completely in love with that he would literally give his life. I never imagined that I would give my life for any woman.

Now, here was Scotty, and she was a woman that I would gladly take a bullet for. And she probably wanted nothing to do with me. So, yeah, I despaired. But only for a few moments. I wasn't going to wallow. That wasn't my nature. I was going to do something about it, nip it in the bud, and confront the situation. That was the only thing that I thought to do.

I tried calling her, after looking on my student roster for her home phone number. It struck me that she hadn't yet given me her phone number, nor had I given her mine. We just communicated in class and at work. But her phone number was on my student roster, so I called her. When I got her voice-mail, I had no idea what it was that I was going to say, so I didn't leave any message at all.

Okay, she's not picking up. I tried not to think about what that might mean. It probably just meant that she was in the shower or something. Not that she didn't have any interest in talking to me. Anyhow, she wouldn't necessarily recognize my number on the caller ID.

So, the Plan B, which was the plan

that I really should have gone with in the first place, was to get in my car and go over there. Of course, parking would be a bitch. It always was. But hopefully I could find a space within a few blocks of her building. I briefly thought of calling Charlie, but thought better of it. I had no idea how long I would be in her apartment. It could be a few minutes, as I imagined the possibility that she would throw my ass out the second I tried to talk to her. Or, it could be hours.

Or, maybe I just would never leave. It struck me that I would rather live with Scotty in her tiny apartment, than to live in my loft, with nothing but the cold walls and paintings to keep me company. As silly as it sounded, if Scotty told me

tomorrow that she'd have me, and I had to live with her at her place, I would give up my beautiful loft in a heartbeat.

That was when I knew exactly how serious I was about this girl. So, I wasn't going to let anything happen that would keep us apart. I would find a way to make her understand that I have been a man-whore all my life, but I was ready to give it all up, wanted to give it all up, for her.

But convincing her of that was going to be very, very difficult.

Not impossible, though. I just had to make her understand why I was the way that I was.

And make her understand why it was that I felt the need to change.

Chapter 27

So, I found myself in my Jag making my way through heavy New York traffic. As if there was any other kind. I never have had patience for the traffic, but, as I made my way to her apartment uptown, the logjam seemed interminable. I cursed every red light. After all, the longer it took me to get to her, the more likely it would be that she wouldn't be in her apartment anymore. If she was like most New Yorkers, she probably would be doing something on a Sunday afternoon, even if it was freezing outside. Brunch with girlfriends. Shopping. Catching a movie. Hell, she might even make her way to the Columbia library and study, if she was particularly industrious. The

point was, I had to catch her before she made her way to do anything else.

But, I finally made it. I was able to actually park the car within five blocks of her place, which seemed a miracle to me. I walked along the sidewalk to her building, feeling apprehensive and nervous. How would she be? What would she say? How would I convince her that I was willing to change for her? Could I convince her?

One thing was for sure, though. I felt that the time had come to be completely honest with her about my past. I mean, no way would I give her numbers. For one thing, I had lost count a long, long, long time ago. For another, I didn't want to send her running for the hills when she

learned that I was well in the triple digits. And I didn't think that she was quite ready to hear that I was bisexual. That would really freak her out. *But, then again, it's going to come out sooner or later. Better just lay all your cards on the table right now.* And, just the thought of laying myself bare like that, and not knowing how it would be received, was terrifying. Terrifying, and absolutely necessary. Ryan opened the door for having a conversation like this, so maybe it was all for the better.

These were all my thoughts as I made my way to her building. My heart was pounding out of my chest, my knees felt like they were going to buckle, and I was shaking as I pushed the buzzer for

her apartment. *Please, Scotty, be there. Please be there.*

Then her voice. “Hello? May I help you?”

She’s there! But I lost my voice momentarily. Then, I got up the courage to address her through her buzzer. “Hi, Scotty. This is Nick.”

Silence. The pause seemed to last a lifetime as I stood outside in the freezing cold, hoping and praying that she would give me the time of day. Then – “Uh, hi, Nick. I can’t let you come up right now. I’m getting ready to leave.”

Okay, now, O’Hara, it’s time to use whatever you have learned about finesse. You can’t go in there like your usual bull in a china shop. Oh, but, how

I wanted to. I wanted to demand that she let me up and talk to me. That was my usual way of getting things done.

Of course, things had to be done differently here. “Scotty, please, I need to talk to you. I understand if you don’t want to see me, but it’s really important.”

Silence again, but the door buzzed, to my profound relief, and I was able to get in. I dashed up the four flights of stairs, not wanting to wait for the elevator, and knocked on her door.

She opened it, and it was obvious that she had been crying. My heart melted upon seeing her, with her tear-stained face, and hair that was loosely flowing for once. I had never seen her

with her hair down, and I felt even more captivated, if that was possible. She was still in her pajamas, which meant, of course, that she was lying when she said that she was about to go somewhere. I was charmed to see that the pajamas that she wore were Winnie the Pooh bottoms with a matching top in blue. I also noticed that, on her coffee table, there was not only a box of tissues, but also about fifteen crumpled up Kleenexes.

She said nothing, but just turned her back and walked back into the apartment. I followed her, and sat down with her on the couch.

I put my arm around her, and felt her stiffen up upon doing so. I felt daunted, but I had to comfort her. I knew that she

was crying because of me, and that just broke my heart. As the British would say, I was gutted at that moment.

How do I bring this up? I sat there with my arm around her, ignoring her obvious body language about my touching her, trying to decide what to say to her. It was so not like me, not knowing what to say. Not knowing how to address something. But I found myself absolutely tongue-tied, perhaps for the first time in my life.

I finally just decided that I needed to confront the situation head-on, which was how I usually confronted every situation. “Scotty, uh, I know that you talked to Ryan.”

She nodded her head. “Yes. And,

I've spent the last couple of hours just thinking about things." She paused for a few minutes. "Nick, uh, I think that I need to get this out of the way. I'm in love with you."

My heart skipped about a hundred beats upon hearing that. She did feel the same way about me as I did about her! I put my hand her hair, and nuzzled her neck. But she gently pushed me off of her. "I don't think that you understand. I can't get involved with you any further. I can't risk it. I can't risk being vulnerable with somebody, only to have that somebody move on to a newer and shinier object."

At those words, my heart sank. My own words came back to haunt me —

that, one of these days, my lifestyle would catch up to me. And, lo and behold, this moment proved it.

My lifestyle had officially caught up with me.

“Scotty,” I began. “I know what you’re thinking. And, you are right to be thinking that. Absolutely right. I have had my share of random hookups. More than my share. But I want you to know that you are truly, truly, truly special to me. More than anybody has ever been. I’ve thought of little else but you these past few weeks, and I can say, without any reservations whatsoever, that I am madly in love with you.”

I saw a flicker in those green eyes that gave me hope.

But it was a false hope. She shook her head. “No, Nick. I’m sorry. I can’t get involved with somebody who sees sex as something that isn’t special.” Then she took a deep breath. “Perhaps if I tell you what happened to me, you will know why.”

I held my breath. *Was she going to tell me about the abuse?*

She was shaking again, and she reached for another Kleenex. I continued to have my arm around her, and I also continued to stroke her hair. Every tear that she shed was tearing me apart. I felt her despair all the way to my core, and all that I wanted to do was to erase all of her sadness.

Just erase it.

If only I could.

She took a deep breath. “I’m only going to tell you this because I want you to understand where I am coming from. I don’t want you to think that I feel that you’re a bad person, or morally damaged or anything like that. I don’t want you to feel that I am judging you. But I do need you to understand me, and why being with you is so terrifying for me. Like standing on the edge of a cliff, and the slightest wind might come along and knock me over.”

I just sat there, not saying a word for once in my life. “Go on,” I said

Another deep breath, and she looked at her Kleenex in her hands. “Uh, okay,” she began. “My mother, as you probably

know, is a little unstable.”

She got up and got a glass of water for myself and her, and sat back down. I just took the water, and continued to say nothing. But I hoped that I was silently encouraging her to confide in me.

“Go on,” I said.

“Well, ok. She was unstable, and she couldn’t care for me. At all. She left me alone in the apartment almost all the time, even when I was very small. She didn’t work, but had a hellacious alcohol habit to finance, so she turned tricks. Growing up, when she was not leaving me completely alone in the apartment, she was there with some random guy, hooking up so that she could get enough money to buy her booze. And

that was literally where all her money went. Because she certainly wasn't spending the money on food or clothing, for either her or me. If it weren't for food stamps and the church pantry, we both would have starved to death. I had about one pair of jeans growing up, and one top. To say that I was embarrassed when I started school was an understatement."

Okay. So, maybe there wasn't sexual abuse. Perhaps she has a problem with casual sex because her mother and her tricks.

But, no, there was more.

She took another deep breath. "Well, somebody reported her, and I was removed from the home. I went through

one foster home after another, and I also was reunited with my mother periodically, because sometimes she got her act together long enough to convince the court to give her custody of me again. But, she would always go right back to what she was doing, so, eventually, her parental rights were severed.”

I could feel my heart breaking, absolutely breaking, for this beautiful woman. All that she had to endure was simultaneously breaking my heart and making me feel even more in love with her by the second. Her combination of vulnerability and strength were absolutely intoxicating.

She shook her head. “I was eligible to be adopted at the age of 9. And that

was what I wanted. I mean, I really wanted to be with my mother, because I loved her, no matter how awful of a parent she was. But if I couldn't be with her, then I wanted to be with a family that would love me and would treat me like one of their own. I craved that sense of permanence and unconditional love that most everybody else takes for granted."

"Of course," I said softly. "And you deserved that."

She nodded her head. "I know that I did. But I couldn't find it. I went through four different families, all of whom promised me that they would adopt me, and all of whom gave me back after a short time. I have no idea why, to this

day.”

I was incredulous. This sweet, beautiful girl, and these families didn't want to keep her? Especially after telling her that they would? What the hell was wrong with these people???

Another deep breath, and she continued on with her story. “Well, when I was 11, I finally settled in with a family that I hoped to call my own. They were a wealthy family who lived in a lavish apartment on the Upper West Side. The mother was a K-Street lobbyist who commuted between Washington and here, and the father was a Wall Street trader.”

It sounded like this was a good thing, this family, but Scotty's body language

told me otherwise. She started shaking uncontrollably, and I knew that this story held the key to Scotty's fears. Somehow, this family was pivotal to who she was, and I was grateful that I was going to be privy to it. Because it could give me a road map on how to help her heal.

“Go on, Scotty. I'm listening.”

She nodded her head again. “Well, uh, things were great for awhile. They didn't have any children, so I was like their only child, and they really tried to make me feel welcome and at home. I really loved Elle, the mother. She was very sweet, even if she was completely driven in her day job. She was a lobbyist, as I said, but her lobbying was for things that helped the world. She

lobbied for environmental and human rights causes. So, I looked up to her.”

I braced myself for the bombshell to come. Because I could sense that it was right around the corner.

“The father, uh, his name is, well I’ll give him a different name. Let’s say his name is Sam Johnson. Sam was 33 and very successful, and very handsome to boot. The two of them really made a beautiful couple, and they were socialites. Everybody who was anybody knew both of them. They really were the center of a lot of New York scenes.”

Scotty now had body language that showed how anxious she was. She took one of the pillows on her couch, and was hugging it tightly as she shook.

She didn't look me in the eye when she told me what happened next. "Well, uh, when I was 13, I started to look more like a woman. I got my, uh, my breasts that year. And I started to feel uncomfortable sometimes around the house. Paul, I mean Sam, started staring at me like he had never stared at me before. And Elle wasn't always around, because, you know, she stayed in DC a lot."

I suddenly knew where this was going, and I suddenly had the violent urge to find this Sam Johnson and rip his lungs out. Flay him alive, inch by inch.

But I let her continue with her story.

She started crying again as she continued on with her story. "Sam, uh,

came into my bedroom one night a few months after I had my 13th birthday. He crawled into bed with me, and kissed me and felt me up. He told me that I was beautiful and that he could see that I wanted him.”

At this point, I bit my lip, hard, to keep myself from completely losing control. I was going to kill this man, and I was going to do it slowly...

She shook her head. “I didn’t want him. I mean, I was interested in boys, like anybody my age would be. I really didn’t want him at all. But he persisted. Every night, he would come into my room and fondle me.”

Her breathing started coming harder and harder, and the tears were coming

faster as well. “This went on for a few months, him fondling and kissing me. Then, one night, he, uh, he, uh....”

Calm down, Nick. Calm down. You need to be there for her, so calm down. But I felt my own heart racing and realized that I, too, was crying. Which was something that I never did.

“He, uh, he, uh...he-he-he-he r-r-raped me. He promised me that it wouldn’t hurt, but it was excruciating. And, even after he did it to me that first night, and I had never felt pain like that before, he did it to me again that same night.”

To my surprise, she was able to tell her story easier, more fluently, after telling me about the rape. Like she was

past the worst part.

But she did still seem very anxious. “Well, from that point on, for about a year, he came in and raped me every night that his wife wasn’t there. Which was pretty much Monday-Friday. Of course, when she came home on the weekends, and she did come home almost every weekend, thank god, he left me alone. But, when she returned to work on the following Monday, it would start over again. Sometimes two or three times in the same night. I never wanted it, but I didn’t know what to do about it. And I didn’t get pregnant because he forced me to take the pill soon after it all began.”

She was shaking again, and I was

too. I looked down and saw that my hands were visibly shaking, and I imagined that my body was too. I was feeling so many emotions – hatred and rage for this man, sorrow for Scotty, and an overwhelming love and admiration for her. She was so strong to have survived this.

She continued. “Finally, I, uh, started telling people about it. I told my social worker about it, and some of my teachers. It was pretty obvious to me, however, that they didn’t believe me. I mean, this guy was so well-respected. He had tons of friends and admirers, and gave a fortune to charity. There was no way that he could be doing what he was doing.”

Another deep breath for her. “So, finally, I took matters into my own hands. I ran away. Just ran away. I found an abandoned car in a seedy neighborhood, and moved in. I lived in this car for an entire year, eating out of dumpsters, showering at the YMCA when I could, and picking up cans and bottles all day to get the money to feed myself. It was a shitty life, but infinitely better than living with Paul, I mean Sam.”

My admiration for her grew even more, exponentially. Her strength – in taking matters into her own hands, and surviving on her own on the streets – astounded me.

If I wasn't truly, madly, deeply in

love with her before, I was after hearing her story.

And I knew, right at that moment, that this was going to be the woman that I would spend the rest of my life with. If it was the last thing I did, I would make her my wife. And, unlike the first time I was married, I knew that I would be faithful to Scotty. I just knew that.

She took a deep breath. “So, you see, Nick, I was, uh, used by Sam for a year. He saw me as nothing more than a plaything. An outlet. I can’t get involved with somebody who doesn’t see sex as being connected to love. I have had a very difficult time being around any guy except Jack. I, uh, have never been on a date. And, I have never willingly had

sex with anybody. I really don't know if I am capable of being intimate with somebody. I might never be. But it will take a lot for me to learn how to trust. And, I, I, I, don't think that I would be able to trust you."

My heart sank, but only briefly. *Yes, it will be more complicated to get Scotty to trust you enough to give her heart to you.* But I knew that it was what I not only wanted, but needed, to happen. I suddenly couldn't see myself being interested in anybody else but her.

But how would I ever convince her of this? I knew that I had to be perfectly honest with her about my past, and, suddenly, I was the one who was feeling vulnerable and anxious.

“Scotty,” I said. “That story touches my heart. You don’t know how profoundly you have touched me. I wish that there were words that I could express that would make you believe that I won’t be the man that I was to you. If that makes any sense at all. You’ve captivated me as no woman ever has. I haven’t been the greatest guy in the whole world. I’ve slept with way too many people, and I know that I’ve broken more than few hearts along the way. But, you have to believe me, I am ready to give it all up for you.”

She looked doubtful, to say the least. “I wish that I could believe you. But, I think that I’ve gone through enough tragedy in my life. Loving somebody

who is fickle, and who will leave me when he is tired of me, would just devastate me. I'm really sorry, Nick, but I just can't take that chance."

"Scotty, what words can I use to convince you that you're different for me? That I won't treat you callously? That you are special to me, like nobody has ever been?"

She shook her head. "I don't think that you can convince me of that. Maybe it's just me. Maybe I just need an excuse not to get close, because I'm afraid of intimacy, more than you will ever know. I don't know. But I do know that it is just safer for me if you and I keep our relationship strictly professional from now on. It's going to be difficult to do

for me, because I am madly in love with you already. I had a crush on you from the very first day of class, and I think that I fell in love with you with that kiss in the car. And I know that, if there ever came a time when we actually made love, I would be lost. Past the point of no return. If you left me after that happened, I literally don't think that I could survive it. So, please. Please find somebody who isn't as broken as me. Because I don't think that you would have the stomach for somebody like me. Nobody would."

"I'm not going to give up, Scotty. I know it might be sudden, but I know that you're the one for me. And, just for the record, I'm probably as broken as you."

As soon as I said that last part, however, I regretted it. She had just opened up to me, but I somehow couldn't do the same right now with her. I hadn't talked about my feelings about my own tragedies with anybody, not even Ryan. He knew about them, of course, but even he didn't know how much they had affected me.

She looked at me quizzically. "You're broken too?" She was interested in this. "You seem to have it all. How could you be broken too?"

I just got quiet for a few minutes, and then said "Well, sometimes looks can be deceiving. Anyhow, we aren't talking about me. I need to know how I can make you trust me never to hurt you. Tell me what I need to do."

She put her head down, and said “There really isn’t anything. I’m sorry. I might not have much of a life, outside of Jack and my school. But that life is safe for me. You are not. You’re the very antithesis of safe. You have the ability to really send me reeling. It took me a long time to recover from Mr. Johnson. But if I get involved with you, and I turn out just to be another notch in your bedpost...well, I don’t think I would recover from that.”

It was then that I knew that I needed to give her time. I wasn’t going to give up. I just had to do what I could to slowly get her to know that I was in love with her, enough that I knew that I would be faithful. For the first time in my life.

Because she was special. Truly special.

I took a deep breath. “Okay then Scotty. I probably can’t convince you right now. But I’m not giving up. You’ll soon see how I feel about you, and that I will never hurt you. I don’t know how I’m going to convince you of this, but if it takes me the rest of my life, I *will* convince you. I love you, Scotty. I’m in love with you. I don’t say that. Ever. I’ve been married, and I never once told her that I was in love with her, because I wasn’t. I know that you have no reason to believe me when I tell you that this is the first real time that I have ever been in love, but it is.” Of course, I didn’t tell her about Iris. I was in love with her, too, but Iris was so off-limits for me that

it wasn't real. I couldn't really act on my feelings for her, ever.

On the other hand, I could act on my feelings with Scotty. I could spend my life with her, making sure that she was happy every day. That was the reality, and since I could have Scotty, I knew that my feelings for her were genuine.

And I would take my time making sure that she knew it too.

Chapter 28

Scotty

So, Nick had just left my apartment, and I'm feeling so empty and devastated that I can't even stand it. I wished that I had never gotten to know him. It was fine for me when he was the professor that I dreamed about every night before I went to sleep. But, as soon as he became a reality, it all became too terrifying to me. And, after I talked to Ryan, and I could sense that Ryan was trying very hard not to tell me how much Nick got around, I knew for sure. There was simply no way that I would allow myself to get involved with Nick more than I was. A couple of kisses, which was huge for me, would be as far as it went.

I cursed myself and my emotions as I lay on the couch. Schoolwork was piling up. I was always so diligent with it before – studying and researching in my free time, taking great care with my design projects, and just generally being a conscientious student. Now, it seemed that Nick took up all my mental energy, and I could see myself falling behind. Falling behind was something that couldn't happen. If I was going to ever have anything in my life, I had to make sure that I got my master's degree. I could just be happy being a really good architect, and create projects that people love around the world.

I was losing hope that I ever would have a normal relationship with a man,

so my career would be the only thing that would sustain me.

So, in a way, I started to panic a little. I couldn't have Nick, yet my mental energy was so focused upon him that there was a real chance that I would fall behind to the point where my grades would suffer. I always got straight As, and getting straight As was important to me. Yet, I worked hard for my grades. Lately, I hadn't been working very hard at it. I might end up with some Bs and Cs, and that would devastate me even more.

I just had to put Nick out of my mind. I had to put my nose back to the grindstone and power through it. Who knows? Maybe it would help me get

over my feelings for this elusive man.

Which is what I did. I turned off the television and got right to work, and, after a few hours, I was feeling better about myself again. That was, until Jack got home from his job at the bakery.

“Love, so, tell me, tell me. Have you heard from your dream man today?” he asked me as he got into the apartment and put threw his coat and hat on the sofa. “I’ll get that later,” he said, motioning to the garments that he just threw off.

I got up and took his hat and coat and hung up the coat in the coat closet and threw the hat on the rack we had in the closet. “Uh, yeah,” I said, sitting down with him on the couch. “Yeah, he, uh,

came over for awhile.”

“So, tell me. When’s the wedding? And can I be your candlegirl? I’ve always wanted to do something like that.”

“Jack, if I ever got married, you’d be my guy of honor. Or whatever they call men who stand up for women at a wedding. But you would be waiting a long time for something like that to happen.”

Jack looked at my suspiciously. “Why do I get the feeling that you did something really stupid when Nick came over here?”

I said nothing, but just looked down at the coffee table.

“Scotty Marie. Did you cut Mr.

Dreamboat loose? Because, if you did, I swear to god, I'll..."

He didn't finish that sentence, but just raised his eyebrow and got up to make both of us a drink. He came back, and handed me a vodka and water, and said "ok, out with it. What happened?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, I got to thinking about Nick and Portia."

"Portia....De Rossi? What does she have to do with anything?"

"No, Portia from the *Merchant of Venice*." I rolled my eyes. "Please let me finish. Anyhow, Portia is the woman who Nick slept with at the firm. It was obviously casual for him, by the way that he treats her. And, to tell you the truth, when I found out about it, I didn't think

twice. I mean, at that time, I didn't think that Nick was interested in me. Then, with the two kisses, I realized that he was unmistakably interested in me, so I started to think about Portia again."

"Oh good god, I think I know where this is going. But, please, go on with your story."

"So, I called Ryan to ask him a few questions about Nick. And I could tell, I could sense, that Ryan was trying hard not to tell me that Nick, um, sleeps around a lot. And when I asked Ryan if I could trust Nick, he was silent for a long time and then he just barely said the word 'yes.'"

Jack was now looking at me like he wanted to slap me, or pour my drink

over my head like he did before. “Go on, Scotty,” he said, sipping his vodka.

“Well, Nick came over today. I guess he wanted to mitigate the damage, so to speak. And I, um, told him about my history. I wanted to explain why I didn’t want to get involved with somebody who treats sex so casually.”

“Oh, god, you didn’t. You didn’t cut him loose. Please tell me you didn’t. I mean, this guy is so perfect and so into you. He’s the first guy that you have ever let get close to you. And you just threw him overboard like a smelly homeless guy in a crowded lifeboat.” Jack shook his head. “I don’t know what to do with you.”

“I know, Jack. But I had to do it. I

couldn't get in too deep with this guy. He's too...desirable. You know, he gets women flocking all over him all the time. And he doesn't take sex very seriously, apparently." I shook my head. "No, Jack, he's just too risky for me."

Jack said nothing, but just sat there sipping his drink. But I could tell by the way that he was looking at me that he was pissed.

"What?" I asked him.

"Scotty Marie. Don't you think it would be better if he would, you know, actually do something to screw you over before dumping his ass?"

"Pre-emptive strike," I said. "If it got to that point, and he continues with his sleeping around ways, then I would

just be devastated.”

“If ifs and buts were candies and nuts, we’d all have a merry fucking Christmas.”

I just sighed. “Jack, don’t you understand why I had to tell him that we could only be professional from now on? Besides, that Portia has my number as it is. Nick and I become an item, and she will declare out and out war.”

“Excuses, excuses. Now, Scotty, I’ve not said anything to you yet about how you are so closed off and how you’re going to end up alone. But that’s what’s going to happen. This was the best prospect that you have ever had, and you’re dropping him like a bad habit. That’s not right. So what if he has a

sexual past? Most of us do. You know I do, girl, and you know that I'm one of the biggest man-whores around. I've had more tricks than Houdini. But if I found Mr. Right, I'd be settled down and not look at any other guy ever again."

I knew what he was saying was right. That I couldn't judge a guy just by his past. But I couldn't put my heart out there when I knew that there was a good chance that it would break.

I was doing the right thing in not letting Nick in.

At least that was what I told myself.

Chapter 29

Nick

I'm driving back from Scotty's, feeling more confused and heartbroken than I ever have felt before. All my life, I have managed to avoid emotional attachments. Well, my adult life I have. I've felt connected to Ryan throughout my life, and, to a certain extent, my parents. The women in my life, however, have consistently been non-entities, really. I hate to admit that most of them simply didn't matter much to me.

I knew why. I didn't want emotional involvement. But Scotty was truly different for me, and I had yet to figure out exactly why. I think it was because she was really the first woman who

presented herself to me as somebody who could care less about my wealth, which was intoxicating, in and of itself. But also that she was somebody who was so hurt that I felt the need to protect her and to do anything for her to make her happy. And there was something about her that made me think that, underneath it all, we really were the same. Both of us hurt and afraid of emotional commitment. But now I wanted emotional commitment, craved it for the first time in my life, and my past was getting completely in the way.

So, I viewed Scotty's reticence to get involved with me as nothing more than a speed bump. I knew that I would find a way to win her over, and I also

knew that when I did, I would finally give up all the women, and men, who have come in and out of my life for short blips, and then vanish. I simply would no longer have a need for there to be anybody else but her in my life.

Truth be told, commitment to somebody was something that I really had craved for some time. I lied to myself when I told myself that it was something that I didn't want or need, but the fever had been breaking for awhile. Scotty managed to finally get through the armor that I built around myself, so now I knew that I would never be the same again.

I would bide my time. I knew that I would see her every day, really, between

the night classes and her work schedule. So, I would be given ample opportunity to insinuate myself so that she could finally see that she could trust me.



In the meantime, I went to work trying to make things happen for Jack. I promised him that I would put in a good word for him, and I was as good as my word. I still wanted to get an in with him, so that he would say nice things about me to Scotty. It certainly wouldn't hurt and might make Scotty see that I was a good guy.

So, I called Bob on Monday, just as I promised.

“Bob,” I said. “This is Nick

O'Hara."

"Nick! Long time no hear. Although I did know that you were in town. I read it in the paper. Congrats on getting that new partnership, and congrats on getting the lead on the Chase project."

"Hey, thanks. I'm getting settled in here, you know, just feeling my way around. Anyhow, I wanted to call you about this guy I know, Jack Donaldson. He's trying to get an audition for your new musical. Any way that you might be able to see him?"

"Well, sure, but what's he like?"

"He has musical talent. He's about six foot, pretty handsome really. I could send over some photos of him if you like."

“Sure, please do. You can email them to me,” he said, giving me his email address. “But, sure, buddy, anything to help out an old friend. What’s been going on? You still married to that Rielle woman?”

“Uh, no. No. We divorced just recently. She got custody of the kids and the house in Kansas.”

“Oh, sorry to hear that.”

“Don’t be. It was kind of a disastrous marriage, to be perfectly honest.”

“Ah, don’t sweat it. Finding women was never a chore for you, if I can remember rightly.”

I just laughed. “True that. But finding the right woman...ah, now there’s the

rub. Not as easy as it might seem.”

“Don’t I know it. I’m on number three myself. Never thought I would be on number three before I turned 35 years old.”

“Well, at least you keep on trying. I guess that’s something to say.”

“Yeah. Anyhow, I gotta run. But send me the stats on this Jack guy and his pictures, and I’ll certainly give him an audition. Not going to promise a part or anything, but I have to confess that he does have a better chance than all those unknowns who don’t have somebody like you to recommend them to me. And, hey, you’re in town now, so we need to get together more often. Like old times.”

“Sure thing, buddy. I’ll hit you up

sometime and we can do dinner. Shoot the crap like we used to. I'm living in Tribeca, and I know that you're living in Greenwich, so we need to find a way to get together more often."

We said our goodbyes and I felt better already. And I would be seeing Scotty today, so that cheered me up as well.

Maybe I was living in denial, but I still saw a future in her.

Chapter 30

Scotty

Oh, I am sick. But I am just sick over the situation, not physically sick. So, I can't very well call in to my internship today. I just have to face the music, and act professionally. Nick was still my boss, and I was not going to commit professional hari-kari by quitting, just because I couldn't allow myself to be with him on a personal basis.

I reminded myself of my goals and dreams as I made my way to the office on the subway. I had hit a snag of sorts in getting somewhat personally involved with my boss, but that wouldn't keep me from making the best of this rather tense situation.

So, when I got to the office, I took a deep breath and approached Nick's office with trepidation. "Hello, Nick," I said, knocking on his open door. He was sitting at his desk, reading *The Wall Street Journal*, and eating a bowl of cereal and drinking a cup of coffee. His face lit up upon seeing me, and my heart melted and broke at the same time.

"Scotty," he said. "So good to see you. Come in, come in. I need to talk with you anyhow."

I hesitantly approached him. "You do? What about?"

"Well, I forgot to tell you. You won't be working for Portia anymore. You'll still be floating for a week or two more, before you join my design team for good.

But you won't be floating over to Portia any more."

I looked at him, feeling startled. He obviously felt that I couldn't handle her. He was right, of course. Portia was just plain cruel to me. But, at the same time, I worried about how that move would be perceived by the other interns, the other partners, and, especially, Portia. I wondered if Nick had managed to do more damage than good.

Still, his heart was certainly in the right place, so I loved him all the more for doing that for me.

"Uh, Nick, thanks for that. I just hope that it doesn't backfire, though."

He nodded his head. "I know. I hope that I wasn't rash." Then he got up and

stood right behind me. He leaned down and whispered in my ear. "I just felt the need to protect you. I hope that doesn't sound patronizing. I really did it out of love."

His words sent tingles through every centimeter of my body. I felt warm all over, like a favorite blanket was enveloping me. Jack had protected me since I had known him, but, other than Jack, nobody had ever protected me. Quite the opposite. And, once again, I found that I loved Nick all the more.

But I couldn't show my love for him. I had to keep him at arm's length. "Thanks again, Nick. I guess I need to get to work. I have projects to do for George and Roger. They seem to believe

in me, even if Portia doesn't."

Oh, but I soon found out that my initial hunch was correct. Portia was none too happy about not having me to beat up.

She called me into her office.

Oh, lord, here we go. I made my way to her office with great trepidation. I knocked on her door and she answered it. "Scotty," she said. "I need to talk to you."

"Yes, Ms. Anson?"

"Have a seat," she said, gesturing to her chair.

I did.

She looked at me, her hands clasped, her body in an offensive posture. She was ready to go to war. I could see it in

her eyes.

“I don’t know what you told Nick,” she began, “but I certainly don’t appreciate him going over my head to get you off of my service. He obviously has no idea who he is dealing with. But I’m going to make damned sure that you do.”

“I hate to sound disrespectful, but I don’t know why you aren’t talking to Nick about this. I had nothing to do with him getting me off your service. Why are you dealing with me instead of him?”

“Oh, I’ll deal with him. Trust me. But I want you to know something. I’m the backbone of this firm. My grandfather was one of the firm’s founders, and I’m by far the biggest

rainmaker. I bring in about \$20 million annually to this firm, because I'm able to land projects that others aren't. I'm aggressive, and I'm not afraid to use all my assets to get what I want. Nobody in this firm can touch me. Nobody. We have two hundred partners here, fifty of them senior, and our firm does around \$300 million annually. You do the math. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is, don't fuck with me. And if Nick tries to fuck with me, he's going to find that he's going to be out in the cold. Yeah, he's talented and renowned, but, without me, this firm would be hurting."

I nodded my head, knowing exactly where this was going. Where it was all going to end up. It was simply a matter

of time.

I might as well get some experience there while I could, before the inevitability of my being fired.

“I understand.”

“You do? Good. Because I plan on making your life a living hell. Now, I’m working on the Penske project, and I want you go bring me a design of the first floor lobby. I need it in an hour. And, if you bring me another piece of shit design that looks like a kindergartener drew it, I will rip it up and stuff the pieces of paper in your pie hole. You got that?”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, trying hard not to sound sarcastic or condescending.

So, I got to work, going to my

cubicle that the firm just gave me for my drafting projects. I felt intimidated and scared about doing this work for her. I knew that it wouldn't be good enough for her. It could be designed by Frank Lloyd Wright himself, and, if it had my name on it, she would pronounce it amateurish and immature. I knew this going in. Yet, I was going to try my very hardest.

I finished the project within the hour, after doing careful research on the building style and what would be necessary for the lobby. It really wasn't a hard project – floor plans were never the difficult thing. The truly hard parts of designing buildings were the calculations that go into everything an architect does. I was good at the

calculations part, which surprised me, because I never thought that I would excel at math. Calculus and trigonometry came easily to me, though, because my brain was very logical. I also knew that I had the creativity to combine with the logic and the pragmatism, so I felt like I could truly succeed at this profession one day.

I believed in myself. Portia was trying her damndest to undermine this belief, but I had to not take it personally. She has the hots for Nick, she probably sees that Nick has the hots for me, and that was causing her bad behavior.

This knowledge didn't make it any easier, however, to see her literally take a lighter to the lobby plan that I

presented to her after finishing it.

I gave it to her within the hour, just like she asked. She looked at it, said nothing, but brought out a lighter from under her desk and set it on fire. She looked at me while it burned. “You see this. This is what I think about your work. I can’t believe that you continue to work here. You won’t get a permanent position here. You probably won’t even get a good recommendation to carry through to your next prospective employer. So, I don’t know why you want to work for this firm. Especially since you’re not being paid.”

I blinked rapidly, but knew better than to say anything. *Not being paid? What?????*

I started to breathe heavily. I had to ask Nick about that. He told me that I would be paid \$40,000 a year, which would be directly deposited into my account.

I stood up.

“Where are you going, pray tell? I’m not finished with you,” Portia asked, her beautiful blue eyes narrowing.

“I have other partners who need me to do projects for them,” I said. “I’m not supposed to spend more than an hour or two with any one partner while I’m learning.”

“Huh,” she said. “Something tells me that I’ll be able to find you in Nick’s office more often than not.” She crossed her arms. “Stay away from him. He’s a

man-whore, you know. Dates supermodels,” she said, looking at her nails. “Gets into three-ways with them all the time. And not always just with women.”

Now, how does she know this? I just looked at her, and she shrugged. “What? This might be a city of 8 million people, but it’s a small town when it comes to high society gossip.”

“I don’t think that you should be spreading rumors around to interns about other senior partners,” I said.

“Whatever,” she said. “Go on, go do your work for your other partners, but I expect you to be here in this office tomorrow morning first thing.”

At that, I left.

But, as I steadily worked on the projects that other partners gave to me, Portia's words rang in my ears. *Dates supermodels. Gets into three-ways with them all the time. And not always just with women.* The words ran through my mind over and over like a freight train. And I could feel the brick wall, which I put up after talking to Ryan, get strengthened with concrete and steel. Portia was probably full of shit, as she clearly had it in for Nick because of the fact that they slept together and he wanted nothing more to do with her. But what if she was telling the truth? I felt incredibly naïve that I ever thought that Nick was a decent guy who could possibly be the one that I was looking

for. Anybody who looked like that, and who had that kind of money and prestige, was going to either have a blond supermodel wife, or was going to be a man-whore.

Looks like Nick falls into that second category.

And what was up with the fact that I was unpaid? Why would he lie to me like that? I started to panic about that, because no way could I afford to continue to work here if I was unpaid. *I hope that I can get my bartending job back*, I thought miserably.

On and on and on my mind raced, until Nick found me at my cubicle for lunch. “Time for lunch, honey,” he said. “Where would you like to go?” He had

my coat and hat in his arms.

“Oh, thanks, Nick,” I said. “But I brown-bagged it today.” I held up my brown bag as proof. The lunch that I packed consisted of a small tuna salad in a can with crackers and several carrot sticks. I knew that I would end up starving, because I usually did, but I didn’t want to rely on Nick for lunch every day.

“Don’t be silly,” he said. “Let me see that bag.”

I tried to snatch it away, but he grabbed it and looked inside. “Scotty, there’s not enough food in here to sustain a two-year old. Come on, we’re going to lunch.”

I felt nervous that Portia would see

us, which would give her more ammunition, but I grudgingly obliged.

We got outside the building and onto the busy street. “Do you like Thai?” he asked. “There’s a great Thai place a couple of blocks east, on Park.”

I nodded my head. “Yes, but I feel bad you buying me lunch every day.”

He put his arm around me. “It’s the least I can do,” he said, then leaned in and said, in a low voice, “for the woman I love.”

Then he looked behind him, I guess to make sure that there wasn’t anybody from the firm following closely behind us.

I tried, very hard, not to get my hopes up when Nick reiterated that he

loved me. He couldn't chip away at my brick wall, which was reinforced with concrete and steel. I wouldn't let him.

But him having his arm around me made me feel so safe and secure....

Stop, Scotty. Man-whore, man-whore. Don't ever forget that.

Possibly even a bisexual man-whore.

Over lunch, which consisted of Pad Thai with shrimp, which was delicious, by the way, I broached the subject of my not getting paid. I didn't broach the subject of the three-ways with the supermodels, and the possibility of him being bisexual. That so was not my business anymore.

"So, Nick," I said, "Portia let it slip

that this internship was unpaid.”

“Portia. Are you working for her again?”

“Yeah. I think that you’re going to hear an earful from her about trying to get me off her service. But she gave me the earful today. I’m sure it’s your turn soon.”

Nick suddenly looked upset. I couldn’t tell if he was upset because I caught him in a lie, or because I was working for Portia against his wishes. Maybe both.

“So, you didn’t answer my question,” I said to the suddenly silent Nick. “I can’t afford to not get paid. I think that you know this.”

He nodded. “Of course, I know this,”

he said. “Uh, I, uh, didn’t lie. I mean, I really wanted you for our firm, and I knew that you couldn’t afford to work for us. So, I, uh, arranged it so that your salary would, uh, come out of my personal account.”

I felt shocked. And more than a little belittled. And like a cheap whore. Well, no, I didn’t feel like a cheap whore, but I would have if Nick and I had actually started a sexual relationship.

“You’re paying me?” I asked. “Oh my god. I can’t believe this.”

“Listen, Scotty,” Nick said, taking my hands. “I see something in you. Professionally, I mean. I don’t think that it’s right that our firm doesn’t pay the interns. I never did. I guess that they

figure that they have no problems getting top students to intern for free, because everybody wants those choice positions, but that doesn't make it right. So, I did what I could to bring you on board. You aren't a typical Columbia architectural student. You don't come from wealthy parents, and I know that you struggle financially. So, that's why I did it. Please believe me, I had no ulterior motives other than that."

I took a deep breath, and drank from my water. "Have you done that for others?"

"Yes," he said, although I had the feeling that he was lying about that. "When there are top students who would thrive in our firm, but can't afford to

work for free, I pay them out of my salary.”

“But the other partners don’t know about this?”

“No. And I would appreciate it if you would keep it that way.”

I nodded my head. No way would I do something to get him into trouble. “Uh, I hate to ask this, but how can you afford that? I mean, that gets expensive after a little while, doesn’t it?”

His face softened and he took my hands. “Scotty. I’m a very wealthy man.”

Well, I knew that. Property-wise, I knew that, at least in looking at his loft and his artwork. I didn’t know how liquid he was, but I guessed that he probably had a lot of cash as well. But it

still didn't sit right with me that he would be paying me out of his personal account.

He looked like he was holding his breath. "Please don't leave the firm," he said. "I'm sorry for deceiving you, but I had the best of intentions."

I was thinking about the situation while I ate my food. On the one hand, it felt plenty weird to be working for a firm and only getting paid from Nick's account. On the other hand, aside from my run-ins with Portia, I was really enjoying working for this firm. The other partners were so helpful and kind, and I was already acquiring a few mentors who would be glad to help guide my career. I felt myself blossoming there, so

I really didn't want to leave.

And there was the fact that I was madly in love with this blue-eyed man who was looking at me with equal doses panic and love right that very minute. It rankled that he deceived me, but he really did it with a good heart, so I couldn't be angry.

I took a deep breath. "No, Nick, I'm not going to leave. I wish you would have told me, though."

He looked visibly relieved. "I'm sorry, Scotty. I didn't think that you would take the position if you knew. I had a hard enough time convincing you as it is."

"I do have to admit that I feel a little...cheap. But, you're right, I

couldn't afford to work for the firm unpaid, so, at the same time, I'm really grateful to you." I paused. "I owe you a ton."

"You don't owe me a thing," he said. "You're really something special, so I'm glad to do anything for you. And I mean absolutely anything."

"Thanks, but I feel that I do owe you." Then I smiled. "Who knows, maybe one day when I become the next Zaha Hadid, and I make my own millions, I can pay you back."

He smiled too. "You're talented enough to become the next Zaha Hadid, so I don't doubt that you will make your own millions. But you really do not owe me a thing."

We chatted a bit more, and I tried very hard not to ask him about Portia's man-whore comments. I felt myself, once again, getting sucked into the feeling that Nick was the man of my dreams. The one who would protect me and love me and finally give me the sense of permanence and stability that I had craved my entire life.

But I tamped down that feeling as we walked back into the office. I still wasn't ready to let him get too close.

He was way too dangerous.

Chapter 31

Nick

Ok, I thought as I walked along with Scotty back to our building, it's time to take the bull by the horns. No more pussy-footing around with Portia. Scotty doesn't come right out and tell me how Portia is treating her, but I know Portia, and I know that she probably was treating her like crap. And why Portia felt the need to say anything to her about her not getting paid was beyond me.

I also didn't appreciate Portia going over my head and demanding that Scotty work for her. I had no idea why Portia would do this, unless she wanted Scotty to torment. Other interns had refused to work for her before, and it was never a

problem. To my knowledge, she never forced anybody else to work for her. So, she must be forcing Scotty to work for her because she wants to make Scotty's life hell, so that she will quit.

Over my dead fucking body.

After I said my goodbyes to Scotty, I made my way to Portia's office. Her grandfather was one of the founders of this firm, so her name, Anson, was one of the firm names – Anson, White and Stroker. Because she was a huge rainmaker and because she was eye-candy, no doubt about it, the men around here were either afraid to cross her or didn't want to.

I was neither. I won the AIA Gold Medal three times, and the Pritzker once.

The Pritzker is considered to be the Nobel Prize of architecture. Only one other architect at the firm could boast as much. So what if Portia was one of the most important partners, in terms of revenue? I was heavily recruited to this firm, and my coming to work here was a big fucking deal.

I could take her.

I got to her office and knocked on the open door. Her face lit up. “Nick. What a pleasant surprise.” She slinked over to me. “What can I do for you?”

I took a deep breath. “Why do you hate her?”

“Who?”

“Scotty. Why do you hate her?”

She looked disappointed, but said

nothing. She sat back down behind her desk and motioned to the chair in front of it. I sat down, and crossed my arms in front of me.

She looked me right in the eye. “I hate her because you love her.”

What does that supposed to mean?
It never once occurred to me that Portia might actually like me. I figured that I was nothing but a conquest for her.

“Listen, Portia. I’m going to tell you one time. Leave her alone. You didn’t get the hint when I took her off your service. So, I need to make it more clear for you. She’s my intern, I was the one who brought her aboard, and I won’t have you fucking with her. Got that?”

Her body language became as

defensive as mine. “You never addressed my last comment. I see the way that you look at her. You’re banging her, and you’re in love with her.”

“I’m not banging her,” I said, not addressing the second part of her previous statement.

My evasiveness was not lost on her. “I said two things,” she said. “You’re banging her and you’re in love with her. You didn’t address the second thing.”

I drew a breath. “Leave her alone, Portia. I mean it.” I suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable. Claustrophobic, even. My feelings for Scotty were obvious to Portia. Perhaps it was as obvious to the others in the firm? That wouldn’t be good. To say the

least.

But, no, probably not. Men are pretty obtuse when it comes to things like that. Women always had intuitions and gut feelings that turned out to be right, more often than not. And Portia was smarter than most women. Of course she figured it out.

She narrowed her eyes. “Be careful, O’Hara. You don’t want to start a war here. You will lose. I promise you that.”

“Oh, yeah? I don’t think so.” But, even as I said it, I knew that I was only partially bluffing. Yeah, I was important to this firm, but so was she. Who was more important, I really didn’t know.

I only knew that I had to protect Scotty from this woman, no matter the

cost.

We were at an impasse. Both of us just sat there, staring at one another. She was trying to dominate me, apparently, and I was doing the same to her.

Finally Portia spoke. “Well, Nick, we’ll just have to see who prevails here. Between you and me, I do think that Scotty has a lot of talent. I would never tell anybody else that, though. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want her gone, because I do. And I always get what I want. Especially here. Fair warning.”

I tried to find a way out of this trap in my head. I was gambling with Scotty’s future, here, by antagonizing Portia. That wasn’t fair. If Portia wanted her gone, and I clearly wanted her to stay, I had no

idea who the partners would side with. And Scotty was nothing more than a disposable intern to them. Fungible, almost. It would certainly be easy just to throw her overboard simply because Queen Portia wanted them to.

Would I have to resort to kissing Portia's ass in order for Scotty to stay? That wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to bash that beautiful face of hers into the wall. Which was out of the question, of course, but fighting Portia for Scotty wasn't. But it probably wasn't the most prudent course of action. And if my calculation was incorrect, Scotty would be the one who would lose.

Finally, I just took a deep breath. "Ok, Portia, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for

barging in here. Uh, if I could help you out in any way on your Penske project, please let me know.”

She sat back, her posture much more open and less defensive. “Actually, Nick,” she said softly, “I don’t really need any help with my projects. I’ve been trying to figure you out, though. I’ll admit, you’ve been the first man who has rejected me. It hurts and intrigues at the same time. I simply can’t figure out what you want with that waif, when you can have a real woman.”

I looked at her, trying to decide if she was being manipulative or genuine. *I wish I had Ryan’s skill in reading people.* Because she was all but admitting that she had feelings for me

that I never figured would enter into the equation. But if she did have feelings for me, then my love for Scotty just made everything infinitely more complicated here.

My mind was turning on how to respond to her. Finally, I just decided that some flattery was in order. “Portia, you’re a beautiful and desirable woman. Trust, the right guy is out there for you. I don’t believe that I am that right guy, though.”

She looked down and didn’t say anything for a few minutes. Then she looked up. “Do you think that I’m too much of a ballbreaker?”

Oh, Jesus, how do I finesse this?
Getting involved with Scotty was

making me into something that I wasn't, and that was a schmoozer. Before I met Scotty, I pretty much told everybody everything that was on my mind. If they liked it, great. If they didn't, tough shit. So, if Scotty's future wasn't at stake here, I would have come right out and told Portia that she was, in fact, a ballbreaker. But, antagonizing her wasn't a good idea, so I simply said "no, not at all. You're a passionate woman and a hard-charger. If you were a man, you would be revered for those traits." Then I smiled, feeling proud of that answer.

It did seem to work. Portia's ego seemed to be at least somewhat sated. "Yeah, you're right. I'm aggressive, but I'm only considered a bitch because of

my gender.” She nodded. “Well, I feel better now, Nick.”

“Good,” I said. Then I wondered if I should bring up Scotty again. It might raise her hackles some more, or it might clear the air. Again, I didn’t quite know how to handle the situation, but I went with my first instinct. “So, about Scotty. Are we cool, here?”

She looked at me with a bit of a blank look. “Cool in what way?”

“She can continue to work here without you harassing her?”

Portia snorted. “Like hell. No, Nick, I want that girl gone. And I’ll find a way to make that happen. So don’t get too used to having her around.”

I bit my tongue and stopped myself

from doing violence on this woman. I had never laid a hand on a female before, ever, but I had never been more tempted to do so then right at that very moment. “Ok, then, Portia. You leave me no choice. You try to get her fired, and we’ll see who the firm chooses between me and you.” Then I threw her own words back at her. “Fair warning.”

And, at that, I got up and left Portia’s office.

Chapter 32

A week went by, rather quietly, as far as the Portia and Scotty situation. Portia actually backed off and left Scotty alone. How long that truce would last was anybody's guess, but I held my breath and hoped that Portia finally thought better of trying to railroad Scotty out of a job. Probably not. She probably was biding her time like a tiger stalking her prey, but, regardless, this rather peaceful interlude was most welcome.

Thanksgiving was around the corner, next Thursday, and I had been looking for a way to invite Scotty over to my house for Thanksgiving dinner. I had never in my life been shy about anything, especially when it came to pursuing

women, but I found myself increasingly tongue-tied and shy around Scotty. I was actually afraid of her rejecting me, which was strange in and of itself.

So, I found myself actually practicing what I would say to Scotty when I invited her over to my loft for Thanksgiving. I felt like a middle-school boy asking a girl to his first dance. Crazy.

I stood in front of the mirror in my office, as I took a much-needed break from my Chase drafting project. “So, Scotty, you got any plans for Thanksgiving? No? Well, I’m having some food catered in, and was wondering if you’d like to spend Thanksgiving with me.” I was somewhat

embarrassed at always having to have meals catered in, but cooking was never my strong suit. Nor was it Rielle's, my ex-wife. So, the two of us, plus our two children, ended up eating out almost every night.

Oh, god, it occurred to me that I actually wanted to cook Thanksgiving Dinner, if only to impress Scotty.

That was when I realized just how pussy-whipped I really was.

And, the crazy thing was that I didn't mind being pussy-whipped.

I took a deep breath and headed over to Scotty's cubicle. I stood and watched her from afar. Her head was down, and she was concentrating on the design project that she was working on for one

of George's residential buildings. She apparently was lost in the project, because she never looked up at all. I admired how intense she was, how driven. Such a contrast to her somewhat shy and sweet demeanor that she showed to the world. The dichotomy of driven and passionate architect and guileless and simple sweet girl, rolled up in one person, was fascinating for me.

I decided to stand there just to see how long it would take her to notice me there, not ten feet away. I smiled as the minutes ticked by, as she furiously worked her pencil, completely lost in what she was doing.

After about fifteen minutes, she finally took a little break for a stretch. It

was then that she finally noticed me standing there. Her face lit up, and I started feeling nervous again.

I approached her. “Hey, Scotty. How are things going here? I mean, today. How are things?”

She smiled. “Great, Nick. How are things with you?”

“Good. Good.” Then I just stood there like a geek, staring at her.

“Good.” She smiled again.

“Hey, do you mind if I see what you’re working on?”

“No, of course not,” she said, then showed me a design that she working on for a Neo-Classical mansion that would be built in Bridgeport. It was flawless, with precise angles and decorative

features such as friezes, balustrades and Doric columns. I was, once again, impressed at how advanced she was for somebody her age and with her limited experience. I, myself, was always advanced in comparison to my peers, so we had that in common. I had a good ten years on her, of course, but I could foresee a Pritzker of her own in her future.

“That’s a beautiful design,” I said. “George will be more than pleased.”

Then I just stood there, tongue-tied, looking at her. She was staring at me, as well, those green eyes penetrating and searching.

I cleared my throat. *What is your problem, O’Hara? You’ve never, ever*

had problems talking to women before.
Ever. “Uh, Scotty, uh, I was wondering. Well, you know, Thanksgiving is around the corner. I mean, I don’t cook, but I was having some food catered in by Dean and Deluca. Turkey, dressing, the usual. So, I was wondering if you’d like to have a catered meal with me on Thanksgiving?”

She smiled shyly, and it looked like she was trying to suppress a giggle. “Oh, Nick, that’s such a nice offer. But, I, uh, I’m supposed to be at my mother’s at three.”

I felt crushed. Absolutely crushed. But, I tried not to show it. “Oh, of course. I keep forgetting that you have a mother in town. Well, I just wanted to

see if you were busy, but I guess you are, so...”

She smiled again, and it briefly looked like she was going to offer me her hand. “You’re such a sweet guy,” she said. “I wish that things were different. That I was different.”

I nodded my head, and turned to leave.

But her words echoed in my head. *I wish that things were different. That I was different.*

All I could think was *so do I, Scotty. So do I.*

Chapter 33

Scotty

Nick just left, after inviting me over for Thanksgiving. I was amazingly touched by his offer. And I should've taken him up on it. After all, I really didn't have any plans except to get a rotisserie chicken at the deli, with some stuffing and mashed potatoes that Jack had brought home from his Jewish Bakery job. I lied to Nick when I told him that I would be going to my mother's place.

Truth be told, I hadn't really spoken with mom since she humiliated me in the bar and Nick had to save me. I sent her money, like I always did, which was much of the reason why I was always so

broke, but I didn't take her phone calls. She needed to straighten up her life, and not drag me down with her.

I didn't really know why I lied to Nick, except that I was still trying very hard not to let him in. God knows he had tried – he took me to lunch every day, and he constantly hinted that he wanted to go out. So, it was difficult to keep avoiding a personal relationship with him, but it was still something that I felt that I needed to do.

I found myself feeling really guilty for lying to him, and I also felt myself longing to be close to him. Of course, I couldn't tell him that.

And, I wanted to trust him, I really did. I just couldn't bring myself to.

Especially after Portia's remarks about Nick dating supermodels and not just women. He was becoming riskier by the second.

So, I pretty much kept my interactions with Nick to a bare minimum. I saw him here at the firm, and in class, and we went to lunch every day together. Usually just the two of us had lunch, but sometimes we had lunch with other people from the firm as well.

Such as one day when a bunch of us went out for lunch at a bar and grill. Another intern, Shane, was flirting with me shamelessly. Every time I looked at Nick, he was staring at us, and boring holes into Shane. I felt self-conscious. I wasn't flirting back, of course. I don't

think that I even know how to flirt. But Nick made it clear, through his expressions, that he wasn't in the least bit happy with mine and Shane's interactions. He said nothing, of course, but it was clear that he wanted to kick Shane's ass.

Now he wanted to spend Thanksgiving with me. And, oh, how I wanted to. That would be the first really special Thanksgiving of my life, because usually Jack and I spent the holiday with our rotisserie chicken and fixins, and Jack usually had a guy over. The three of us would typically end up wandering the streets and looking at Christmas lights, and maybe playing board games at home. Not that this wasn't a fun time. It was.

Hanging out with Jack always was fun. But I usually felt like a third wheel, and I always longed to have somebody special to spend the holidays with.

Now, here was Nick, who was still trying to insinuate himself into my life, and I just couldn't let him. It was confusing and heartbreaking, but I found myself hoping that Nick could find a woman to be happy with. Somebody who doesn't have my baggage. He deserves that, really, because I believed in the capacity to change.

I just didn't want to take the chance that he couldn't change for me.

I didn't tell Jack, of course, about Nick's offer. Jack had backed off of bugging me about giving Nick a chance.

But it was clear that Jack thought that I was making a huge mistake when it came to Nick.

This was especially true after Jack got an audition for one of Bob Terrill's musicals, soon after Jack and I had dinner with Nick.

"I got an audition for one of the biggest productions in town!" Jack was all excited. "And, I'm quite sure that it was not coincidental that this musical is one of Bob Terrill's."

"That's great!" I said. "A cocktail is in order!"

"Well, let's not get ahead of ourselves. I haven't gotten any parts just yet, but I would be happy just to be in the chorus on this one. A boy has to start

somewhere.” Then he looked at me meaningfully. “Anyhow, it sounds like Nick came through. When are you going to stop being such a bitch to him and give him a chance?”

“What year is this?”

Jack just shook his head. “You are making a big mistake. Huge mistake. Nick is probably one of the most eligible men in town, and you won’t give him the time of day.” He sat down with his cocktail and looked at me disapprovingly. “I’m not going to let this go, Scotty. I think that you and Nick would be perfect together and would make very beautiful little babies.”

I didn’t say anything at first, then I changed the subject. “So, what are you

going to wear for your audition? What are you going to sing?"

"Oh, I don't know. I might go all Rachel Berry and sing something completely off the wall like *Bohemian Rhapsody*. That might get their attention."

"Oh, I think you should! That would be totally cool."

"Uh, huh," Jack said. It was clear that he was still annoyed that I wasn't letting Nick pursue me. "Well, this discussion about Nick is tabled but not forgotten. I'm going to bring it up every day until you relent and let that boy treat you like a proper girlfriend."

"Noted," I said, nodding my head. "Anyhow, I have to study."

So, considering how Jack was reacting to my blowing Nick off, I thought it best not to mention the Thanksgiving invite. That would cause major headaches and fights between Jack and me, and I just wanted a happy holiday.

And that was what Jack and I were going to have. A happy holiday.

Chapter 34

Nick

I was miserable that Scotty wouldn't be coming to my loft for Thanksgiving, but all was not lost. Granted, I couldn't be with the woman I loved on the holiday, but I had an invite by Nate and Nat to spend the holiday with them. Even though this particular option placed a very, very distant second to spending the day with Scotty, it still wasn't a bad offer, so I called Nate to tell him that I would be taking him up on it.

"Hey, that's great, Nick," Nate said when I called him about spending Thanksgiving with them. "I'm glad that you're going to be able to make it. It's been a long time, buddy. Too long. I

mean, you've been in town for about six months now, and I still haven't seen you since you moved here. What's up with that?"

"Well, working 60 hours a week at the firm and teaching six hours of courses at Columbia has taken up most of my time. But it will be good to see you too. And Nat, of course. And Christopher."

"Christopher will be spending the holiday with his grandmother on Long Island. Nat will be around, though."

"Ok, cool. What can I bring?"

"A bottle of wine would be great. You know your wines, so pick up a good one."

Which I did, stopping by a high

dollar wine bar to pick up a bottle of *Egon Muller* Riesling, which retailed for over \$1300. Then I made my way over to Nate's apartment on the Upper West Side.

I got there, and Natalie came out to greet me in her typically effusive way. "Nick! It's so good to see you! Let me take your coat." She took my coat and looked at my bottle of wine. "*Egon Muller*. Very nice, Nick. Very nice."

I walked into the place, which was decorated very festively for the holidays. A 13-foot Christmas tree was in the corner, next to the fireplace, and it was decorated with white lights and hundreds upon hundreds of keepsake ornaments. There were already presents

under the tree, as well, most of them for Christopher, who was just over one year old. The fireplace was strung with Christmas lights as well, and there was an enormous wreath on one of the walls.

“Something smells good,” I said as I walked into the apartment. “What’s cooking? The usual?”

“Yes, of course,” Natalie said. “Although we’re having goose instead of turkey. I hope you don’t mind. I did all the cooking, so I hope you enjoy it.”

“Oh, I’m quite sure I will,” I said. “Can’t remember the last time I had a home-cooked meal.”

Then I walked into the dining room, and stopped short. There was a beautiful brunette woman sitting there, drinking

wine with Nate. She was wearing a white cashmere sweater and tweed pants. With her full lips, high cheekbones and hazel-green eyes, she looked like somebody who would be on a Times Square billboard.

I cocked my head at Nate, who stood up to give me a hug. “Good to see you, Nick. Good to see you. Have a seat.” He led me over to the table, and the brunette woman stood up and smiled. “Uh, Nick, this is Ava. Ava is the lead flautist for the New York City philharmonic. Well, she will be, anyhow, next season. Right now, she’s new in town, so I thought I would invite her to Thanksgiving too.”

I nodded my head at the beautiful woman. She smiled and looked me up

and down. “Nice to meet you Nick,” she said, shaking my hand. “Nate has told me a lot about you.”

I nodded my head and said nothing. *Nate has told me nothing about you. In fact, he neglected to even mention that you would be here.* I looked at Nate. “Hey, Nate, will you come in the kitchen and show me where to put this wine?”

Nate waved his hand dismissively. “You know where to put it. You’ve been here before.”

“Well, maybe you’ve moved your rack,” I said stupidly. “So, please, come in here and help me make sure I put this wine in the right place.”

Nate looked at me, saw my expression, and finally understood. “Oh,

yeah, Nick, you know what, there is a different place that we're keeping our wine. Uh, Ava, let me pour you another glass and Nick and I will be right out."

Once Nate got into the wine storage area, I cornered him. "A setup Nate? Really? And you couldn't tell me?"

"Hey, I wanted to surprise you. Ava is pretty gorgeous, huh? And accomplished. I think that she would be right up your alley."

I shook my head. "Well, your heart's in the right place. But I'm in love with somebody. Thanks for thinking of me, though."

Nate looked at me like I had grown another head. "What? You? In love? Right...."

“I resent your implication. I’m capable of loving somebody, and I’m telling you that I’m in love right now.”

Nate looked skeptical. “And where is this mystery woman?”

“She’s at her mother’s.”

“And you’re not there at her mother’s with her because...”

I didn’t know how to explain to him that I might be in love with Scotty, but we had not yet gone any further than a couple of kisses, and she wasn’t giving me the time of day. Nate would probably think that I was crazy.

“I’m just not. So, please, tell Ava that I’m not interested.”

“I’ll do no such thing. You need to give her a chance. She’s a beautiful and

classy lady, and you both have a love for classical music. She's perfect for you."

I sighed.

This was going to be a long night.

Chapter 35

I found myself having not a bad time with Ava, Nate and Nat, to my surprise. Ava was a stimulating conversationalist and a world traveler. We had a ton of things in common. Like me, she had a home on Lake Como, and both of us spoke fluent Italian, Spanish and French. Both of us graduated from Harvard, although she got her PhD there, while I got my bachelor's there. Both of us had visited every continent at least once, except Antarctica. She had a robust knowledge of architecture, as this was her hobby, and she was pretty funny as well.

So, we had a good time talking, but I told myself that Ava was perfect only on

paper.

Because she wasn't Scotty.

I had no interest in pursuing her romantically, although it became increasingly obvious that Ava was digging me, to say the least.

Nate confirmed this when I went into the kitchen to bring the dessert out to the table. "So, Nick, Ava is perfect, huh? She really likes you. She told me that she would go out with you in a heartbeat. In a heartbeat. I done good, huh?"

"Sure, Nate. She's pretty perfect for me. But I'm still not interested."

"What? Are you crazy?" Nate was shaking his head. "Do you know how hard it was to find a woman to set you up with? You're so damned picky. Ava is

the cousin of a Goldman banker, and when I met her, I instantly knew that I wanted her to meet you.”

Nate looked crushed that I wasn't interested in his “find.”

I put my arm around Nate. “Hey, you're a good friend for trying. But, I'm telling you, there's one woman for me, and her name is Scotty James.”

Nate sighed. “One date with Ava. I kinda promised her that you would take her out on the town. Come on, she's new and doesn't know many people. If you guys spend some time together, you might hit it off. Stranger things have happened.”

As Nate pleaded with me, I was overcome with a strange feeling. That,

even though Scotty and I had never started officially dating, if I took this woman out, I would betraying my relationship with Scotty.

My nonexistent relationship with Scotty.

God, I was sounding like a crazy person in my head.

“Sure, Nate. Sure. Uh, I’ll see what she wants to do.”

Nate almost jumped up and down like a schoolboy. “Oh, good. I knew you would like her. I knew it.”

I rolled my eyes. I had just committed to taking this woman out, even though I had absolutely no desire to. *How do I get roped into these things?* But, I suppose that going out

with a concert flautist who looked like a Victoria's Secret model wouldn't be the worst thing in the entire world.

But she wasn't Scotty.

Nate and I made our way back into the dining room. Natalie and Ava were having a good time talking and laughing. Two beautiful women, one of whom I had and the other of whom clearly wanted to have me. Most men would kill to be in my shoes right now, I reminded myself. *So quit whining.*

"Hey, Nick, we're going to play some Trivial Pursuit," Natalie said. "You and Ava against me and Nate."

This is going to be interesting. Four Ivy-League educated people playing a trivia game. "Cool," I said. "Let's get

started.”

So, we played for the next few hours. I had a good time, but, every time I looked at Ava, I imagined Scotty sitting there with us playing the game. How I wished that Ava was Scotty. I tried to will myself to stop thinking like that. To be present and in the moment, as opposed to trying to be someplace else. To enjoy what's in front of me instead of thinking about the one thing that I couldn't yet have.

But I was going to have her. I knew it. I could feel it. It was just around the corner. Scotty was going to be mine.

In the meantime, though, there was Ava, who was a lot of fun, I had to admit. And she was flirting with me the

entire evening shamelessly.

Finally, the evening ended. Ava left, and I got her number and promised to call her. I still wasn't sold on taking her out, but I had her number just in case.

I stayed around to help clean up and catch up with Nate.

"So," Nate said. "Ava is really digging you. Hard. She wants you bad."

"Uh huh," I said. "And you know this how?"

"Because she told me that she's digging you and wants you bad. Well, not in those words, but I got the gist. So, you promised me that you would give her a chance and take her out. Where are you guys going to go?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe I'll take

her to a show or to a gallery opening.” Two places that I really wanted to take Scotty.

“Cool,” Nate said. “Well, good luck to you. We all want you to be happy, now that I’m happy and Ryan is too. It’s your turn, buddy.”

I nodded my head. “Thanks.” I knew that he meant well with his little set-up with Ava. Nate and I were never as close as Ryan and I, which was why Nate so clearly was trying to force me into something that I just wasn’t into. Ryan never would have done that.

Sometimes I missed that guy so much.

I drove home from Nate’s feeling depressed. I kinda had to take Ava out at

least once, because I kinda promised Nate that I would. But it wasn't something that I looked forward to.

I found myself driving uptown towards Scotty's apartment. What I would do once I was up there, I really didn't know. I only knew that I was compelled to drive up there, almost as if there was a magnetic force bringing me into that neighborhood. I got to her street, and drove around for almost a half hour, looking for a parking spot that was within a couple of miles of her apartment. It was harder than ever, however, to find such a spot, considering this was Thanksgiving.

I finally found a spot, and jogged the whole way to her building, even though I

was wearing dress slacks and dress shoes.

My heart in my throat, I buzzed her place.

Then buzzed again.

Then waited out in the cold for about fifteen minutes before buzzing again.

I finally gave up and went home, feeling bluer than ever.

I was officially pussy-whipped.

Chapter 36

Scotty

Thanksgiving came and went, and I felt a sense of basic emptiness, such that I had never felt before. I was always happy before just hanging out with Jack and his various men. I really didn't want for more. Now that Nick was in the picture, and I felt like I was in love with him, in love for the very first time in my life, I felt that there was a hole in my heart. A hole that was never there before.

So, when Jack, his friend Heath and I went out on Thanksgiving evening, doing our usual tour of neighborhood holiday lights, I had fun but felt that there was something missing.

Jack sensed that there was something wrong.

“Love, you’re so quiet tonight,” he said. “Are you doing ok?”

I nodded my head. “I don’t know, Jack, I’ve been feeling lonely lately. I never did before. I wonder what’s wrong with me?”

He looked at me and said nothing. But I knew what he was thinking, even if he didn’t come right out and say it for fear of causing a fight. He was thinking that I brought the loneliness on by blowing off Nick.

What’s more, I knew that he was right.

It was going to be difficult to keep up the façade that I was happy living

without love and protection. Because that was what I felt when I was with Nick. Loved and protected. We really had known each other for a very short time, yet there was a real connection between us. There was no denying it.

So, yes, I missed him that Thanksgiving evening. Very much. And I wished that I could see him. I imagined that maybe he would stop by and see me on a whim. How wonderful that would be.

But, it was not to be. The holiday came and went and I woke up on that Friday still very much alone.



The following Friday, when I

arrived at the office, I got a most unpleasant surprise. I got called into a meeting with four of the top partners, including Portia. Nick was no place to be seen.

As I made my way into Mark's office, who was there with William, Gregory and Portia, I felt apprehensive to say the least. There was something afoot that I wasn't liking.

My fears were confirmed when Mark shut the door.

"Have a seat, Ms. James," Mark said, motioning to a chair.

I obeyed with trepidation. I suddenly felt extremely small.

Mark cleared his throat. "I suppose you are wondering why we brought you

in here.”

I just looked at the four people, feeling very intimidated. I nodded my head. My hands were shaking. If it weren't for the fact that Portia was there, and Nick was not, I might have possibly thought that this was a positive meeting. But in looking at the partners there, none of whom had been particularly friendly to me, I knew that this meeting had to be bad news.

But the bad news that was brought to bear on me was something that I would have never, in a million years, expected.

William was the next person to speak. “Scotty, it's been brought our attention that there has been some major embezzling from this firm.”

I looked at Portia, who was in tight with the CFO for the firm, I knew. Then I realized that Portia was railroading me after all. She found a way to get me gone, and it involved trumping up some kind of embezzling issue. “Ok,” I said. “And what does that have to do with me?”

“Well,” William said, “we know that you were arrested several times for theft.”

He was referring to the arrests that occurred during the year that I was living on the streets. I got caught stealing three times, but only had to do community service each time. I think that the prosecutors felt sorry for me, as they somehow realized that I was homeless.

Of course, those were juvenile records. Sealed juvenile records.

I wondered who they bribed to get ahold of them.

I nodded. “Yes, I was arrested for stealing. I was homeless and I literally had to steal in order to eat on some days. I was fourteen. What does that have to do with what’s occurring now?”

Portia finally chimed in. “Scotty, we think that you were the one who was embezzling. And we’re going to recommend immediate termination.”

Oh, good god. Is this really all they got? “What proof, pray tell, do you have that it was me?”

I looked at their blank stares and realized that they didn’t have proof.

They probably didn't need it. Portia had a lot of power in that firm, just as she said. She was going to convince the other partners to oust me.

"When are you guys going to have your meeting about this?" I asked.

"Today," Portia said. "We just wanted to tell you that this would be going on."

I just nodded. "Do you need me to keep doing my work today?"

"Hold off on that." Mark.

After that meeting, I felt like this was my last day.

And I didn't even get to finish my projects.

Chapter 37

Nick

I was going to a meeting with the partners, and we were going to discuss a variety of issues. They were usually pretty boring, but necessary for the typical housekeeping duties. All of us had to report to the firm the status of our projects, what kind of support we would be needing in the coming weeks and months, and what projects would be in the pipeline. I didn't mind the meetings, unless I was hot into a design project, and I didn't want to be interrupted. But I was kind of experiencing an easy enough day, so I really didn't mind attending this particular meeting.

Little did I know what was in store

for me.

I took my seat around the long conference table. I helped myself to a cup of coffee and chatted a little bit with some of the other guys, waiting for the meeting to begin.

Finally, George, who usually conducted these meetings, appeared and brought everything to order. “Okay, we need to get statuses on everybody’s projects.”

And, one by one, everybody gave a status on their individual projects.

Towards the end of the meeting, George asked if anybody else had an issue that needed to be brought up.

Portia stood up, and looked right at me. “Yes, there is. Mark, Greg, William

and I are recommending Scotty James for immediate termination.”

I immediately stood up. “Over my dead body,” I blurted out. “What grounds do you have?”

“She’s been stealing from the firm,” Portia said. “There have been large amounts of money missing, according to Richard, and I consulted an accounting firm to prove it. Ms. James has a criminal record, and to my knowledge, she’s the only one here at the firm who does. Do the math.”

“What the hell? What kind of a criminal record does she have?” I asked.

“She was caught stealing several times.” Portia didn’t elaborate on this.

I’d have to ask Scotty about that, but

I was quite sure that she probably was caught stealing food or something during the year that she was homeless. And what kind of bullshit was it that they would be able to obtain those records in the first place?

“And?” I said. “What else you got to prove that it was Scotty who was stealing?”

“That’s enough proof,” Portia said. “Circumstantial evidence can be used to convict in a court of law, and it’s enough for me right now.”

“Oh, no,” I said. “You’re not going to get away with this.”

Portia just smiled. “Well, we’ll see. Let’s take a vote right now on terminating Scotty’s internship.”

I knew then that I was screwed. Portia had been there ten years and had brought millions upon millions worth of business into the firm over the years. And, in a firm that was 90% men, her being eye-candy didn't exactly hurt her cause either. The other partners were not going to want to cross her, especially not in an open vote.

All I could do would be to try to persuade, and, if they voted to terminate her, resign from the firm. They could kiss my ass.

“Listen,” I said, addressing the other partners who were sitting around the table, ready to vote. “This is a woman’s life you are dealing with. She might seem disposable, because she’s a student

and only an intern, but if you do this, it will follow her around for the rest of her life. You've all been interns once before. How would you feel if somebody ousted you on zero evidence? Would any of you be where you are today if that would have happened to you early in your career?"

I then looked at Portia. She was giving me the evil eye like she never had before. *Yeah, I'm in love with Scotty, and now you know for sure, Portia.* I was flipping her off in my mind as I looked at her.

Around the table were the fifty senior partners, most of them men. If twenty-six of them voted to oust Scotty, that would be all she wrote. I mentally

calculated everybody who I knew to be Portia's allies, and realized that the vote was going to be close.

George, who led the meetings, and really liked Scotty, addressed the group. "Does anybody else have anything to say?"

Peter stood up. "I like Scotty. She's hardworking, always on time and has a ton of potential. She's respectful and really wants to learn. And Portia has no evidence whatsoever that she has done a thing wrong."

One by one, partners stood up to make their case for or against her. The ones who were against her had nothing at all to say except that Scotty was a convicted thief who couldn't be trusted.

Nobody could say a word about her work ethic or her talent.

Finally, the partners voted. "Ok," George said. "All in favor of terminating Scotty James' internship raise your hand." George counted. "26 in favor. All those opposed, raise your hands." He counted. "24 opposed. Ok, the motion to terminate Scotty has been upheld." He looked at me. "I'm sorry, Nick. Majority rules."

I just sat there and stared at Portia. "Ok, then," I said, staring right at Portia. "I tender my resignation. Effective immediately."

At that, there was a ton of uproar. Suddenly, all those men who were willing to railroad Scotty out of a job

were all over me.

“You can’t do this, Nick,” Greg said. “You’re too important to this firm. You’re one of only two Pritzker winners here, and we only landed the Chase account because they knew that you would be the one designing it.”

“Well, then, Greg, you should have thought of that when you decided to drink the Koolaid that Portia was giving out. But I will not work with people who have so little spine that they would fire an intern on no evidence of any wrongdoing.”

There were people shouting at each other all around the table. “Now look what you did,” Peter was saying to Richard, who was one of the 26. “We’re

going to lose the most high profile members of our firm.”

“If Portia wants to get rid of her, then that’s enough for me,” countered Mark to another partner who was shouting him down.

I looked at Neil, who, at 80-years-old, was the oldest member of the firm, both in number of years there at the firm and in chronological age. He had been with the firm ever since he graduated from Yale some fifty-five years ago, and he was a guy who took no bullshit.

Neil was trying to say something, but there was so much bedlam around the table that nobody was paying attention to him.

Finally, Neil stood up. “Now wait

just a damned minute,” he said in a loud voice, and everybody immediately got quiet and looked at him. Neil rarely spoke in the meetings, but when he did speak, it was like EF Hutton. Everybody listened.

He addressed Portia directly. “Portia, what kind of fool thing do you think that you’re doing? You want to get rid of that young lady for no other reason than that she’s more attractive than you, and that makes you feel threatened.” He looked around the room at all the other men. “You guys all know it’s true. Every one of you knows that Portia will try to railroad any attractive female who gets a job here. Now, I’m just stating what’s on every one of your minds, so don’t even

try to play dumb here.”

I smiled, big. Good ol’ Neil. Leave it to an old man to tell the truth that nobody else wanted to address.

George stood up. “Portia, Neil’s right. You’ve managed to convince the partners to get rid of any woman who doesn’t physically resemble Yoda. We’ve gotten rid of all of them, mainly because none of them had a strong advocate for them like Scotty has in Nick. We’re lucky we haven’t been sued yet.”

Portia didn’t try to defend herself, mainly because she had no defense. She knew that what we were saying was 100% true.

Matt, who was clearly one of the 24

who voted against terminating Scotty, stood up. "I, for one, am not willing to see the most talented member of our firm leave, so I say that we take another vote. And," he said, looking at every individual member, "you guys better think harder about this vote. That's all I'm saying."

"Ok," George said. "Let's take another vote."

Portia stood up. "That's against our policy. One vote for every major issue. You can't just call another vote to the floor."

"I can do whatever I want," George said. "I lead these meetings. Now sit down, Portia. We need to take another vote, in light of the fact that Nick here

has threatened to resign over the last vote. Now, all those in favor of terminating Scotty, please raise your hand.”

This time, only five people raised their hands, all of them Portia loyalists. Mark, Gregory, William, Portia and Richard raised their hands.

“Ok,” George said. “All those in favor of keeping Scotty on, please raise your hands.”

Everybody else’s hand shot up in the air.

“Well, Portia,” George said, “looks like you’re outnumbered after all.”

Portia shot me a look of death.

The meeting adjourned, and Portia grabbed my arm. “This isn’t over,

O'Hara. Not by a long shot.”

I felt badly for all of Portia's lackeys who now would experience the brunt of her rage. But, at the same time, I didn't care.

Scotty was safe.

That was all that mattered.

Chapter 38

Scotty

I had just gotten out of my meeting with Portia and her evil bunch, and I was sitting at my cubicle just staring at the little walls. I had tacked up pictures of Jack and me all over the cubicle walls, and a few of Aaron. Usually seeing those pictures comforted me, but not today.

Today would, no doubt, be the last day for me at this firm. I wouldn't have any more lunches with Nick to look forward to. No more running into him while I'm going from office to office. I would only be able to see him in class now. But I wouldn't be close to him anymore.

I realized that I craved seeing him. Craved being near him. I was excited, every single day there at work, just because he was there.

Now I wouldn't have that anymore.

That devastated me even more than knowing that losing this internship would certainly mean a black mark on my professional record. I doubted that I could even list the job on my resume any more. I had learned a lot, even in just the short time I was working for the firm. So, the internship wouldn't exactly be all for naught. But, as for it being a feather in my cap, a way to show to the world that I worked for a prestigious firm, therefore I was somebody – eh, not so much.

Now, I would probably have to go back to bartending, at least until I found another internship position. But, no, on the other hand, I couldn't afford another internship position. The only reason why I was able to work *this* internship was because Nick, personally, was paying me. So, assuming that all other internships were the same, or were low-paying, I would have go back to bartending to make ends meet.

My depression, however, wasn't over the sudden knowledge that I was out of a job, and I would therefore be broke and possibly homeless again. It wasn't over the fact that I wouldn't be able to list the firm on my resume.

My depression was over not getting

to see Nick every day anymore.

I sighed. There was nothing that could be done about that. So, I might as well suck it up and call my old job to see if I could get my bartending position back.

I rang them, and Ralph picked up.

“O’Connors Bar, may I help you?”

“Hey, Ralph. This is Scotty.”

“Scotty! How’s it going? We were just talking about you. Here, do you want to talk to Dee? She’s been asking about you.”

“Maybe later,” I said, feeling so down that I didn’t even want to talk to the woman who used to be like a mother to me. “I actually needed to see if you guys are hiring for bartenders.”

“Oh, Scotty, no. I wish you would have called last week. Michael up and quit, but we hired somebody who just started yesterday. So sorry.”

I nodded my head. *And the hits just keep on coming.* “Hey, that’s ok, Ralph.”

“You ok, Scotty? Dee wants to know if you’re eating enough, by the way.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve been eating fine.” Then I started to feel guilty about refusing to talk to Dee on the phone. “Go ahead and put Dee on the line.”

Dee got on. “Scotty? How are you doing? How is that fine young man who likes you so much?”

“What young man is that?”

“That professor of yours. When he came in, it was obvious to all of us that

he liked you.”

I thought back. That was even before I had any inkling, at all, that Nick had a thing for me that went beyond professional. *Was I missing the cues all along?* I felt so naïve, not seeing what everybody else clearly did.

“He’s fine, Dee. I’m fine, too. How are you?”

“Oh, well, you know. The usual. The bursitis has been acting up, and I’ve been nursing one helluva cold. But, other than that, I’m still kicking.”

I smiled. I really did miss those people. I worked at that bar for two years, and everybody there was like family to me. I started to feel guilty about losing touch with them.

Dee and I chatted for about ten minutes more, and she gave Ralph back the phone.

“So, Ralph. Uh, will you call me if something comes up?”

“Sure, Scotty. But I thought you had that big-shot job in Midtown with that high-falutin firm. Why would you want to come back here?”

“Long story. But I do miss you guys.”

“We miss you too. At any rate, don’t be a stranger, alright?”

“I won’t. I’ll come visit sometime, I promise.”

I hung up, and continued to stare at the walls. Every minute was dragging. I couldn’t really leave until I found out my fate. I couldn’t work, either, until I found

out my fate. I was in limbo, and the crushing depression and doubts were threatening to overwhelm me.

Shane came up to me. “Hey,” he said, “I heard what was going on. Pretty much bullshit, huh?”

“Good news does travel fast around here, huh?”

“Yeah. But, if it’s any consolation at all, you aren’t the first that Portia has done this to. Word is that the reason why there are so few women around this firm is because she gets rid of all of the attractive ones. Also, I heard that she’s been diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder, which would explain a lot.”

I giggled in spite of myself. “Yeah,

that would explain a lot, wouldn't it?" I shook my head. "How does this firm let her get away with that nonsense? I mean, she's just one woman. Does she really have everybody else around here by the balls?"

"Something like that. Of course, it helps that she looks like a Victoria's Secret model, but I know what you're saying. She shouldn't be allowed to dictate what happens around here like she's some kind of queen."

"Yeah, well, it looks like I probably won't have to worry about her and her tyrannical ways after today."

"When do you find out about what's going on?"

"They're in a meeting about it right

now.”

“I wish you luck,” he said, taking a sip out of the coffee cup in his hand.

He paused for a little while, just looking at me. Then he took a deep breath. “Anyhow....I was wondering if you’d maybe like to have a drink after work. You know, take the edge off of your stressful day.”

I just looked at him for a moment, contemplating it. Shane wasn’t the first guy to ask me out, of course. Guys had asked me out, constantly, since I was in my teens. I never gave any of them the time of day because of what happened to me with Mr. Lucas. Now, I realized something.

I didn’t want to go out with Shane

not because of Mr. Lucas, but because of Nick.

Still, I guessed it wouldn't hurt. I had no feelings for Shane. I mean, he was a cute boy, and seemed very nice. But I was feeling so strongly for Nick that I couldn't see Shane as anything but a co-worker. So, it might not hurt to go out with him strictly as a friend.

"Uh, sure," I said. "Where would you like to go?"

"How about Mother O'Leary's?"

"Yeah, ok. I mean, it couldn't hurt, right?"

He smiled. "Cool. Uh, I'll come and hit you up before you leave."

"Well, about that. I might be leaving at any moment. So, maybe I should just

meet you there.”

“Ok, meet you there, then.”

Shane went back to his cubicle, and I was left to, once again, stare at the walls sadly. I glanced at the clock. 3:30. They had been in their meeting for an hour and a half.

Finally, about fifteen minutes later, I saw some of the partners who were in the meeting streaming into their offices. I held my breath, waiting for the ax to fall.

Portia came up to me. “Well, Scotty, it looks like you’re going to be here after all. But I’m watching you. Fair warning.”

“I’m sorry? You mean I’m not going to be fired?”

“Nope. Not unless I want to be

witness to a mutiny. You have some powerful friends in this office, I'll tell you that." Then she chuckled and walked away.

A mutiny. What did that mean?

I needed to talk to Nick. So, I made my way to his office, but he wasn't there.

George came up. "You're looking for Nick?"

"Yeah. Do you know where he is?"

"I think he had to leave early for some reason. He mentioned something about having to meet with a student who has been having some issues. Is there a message I can get to him when I see him next?"

I shook my head. "No. I, uh, just

wanted to see what happened in the meeting.”

George put his hand on my shoulder. “You’re going to be working here for the foreseeable future. That’s all you need to know.”

Then he smiled and walked away.

Chapter 39

Nick

I had to leave work before talking to Scotty, because I was running late for a meeting with a student who was having problems and needed to talk to me. I don't usually leave work early, but, when this student, Brent, called me, it sounded pretty urgent. I had already agreed to meet him at 5 PM in my Columbia office, so I had to rush out of the meeting.

Turns out that Brent really needed to talk about the possibility that he would have to drop out of school because of the fact that his mother was sick. I think that he really just needed a shoulder to cry on, so I gave him this. I always have had

a soft spot for my students. I was them once. I always had a ton of self-confidence, but I remember the stress of being a graduate student, so when a student had a serious problem, I tried to meet with them whenever I could.

After the meeting, I thought seriously about stopping by Scotty's apartment.

Then I realized that I would be pushing her into something that she clearly didn't really want from me. I had no idea how it was that I would be so pussy-whipped, when, all my life, I was the one who was in control. I literally always had my pick of women, so I never concerned myself with the ones who gave me a hard time or weren't interested. I could just move onto the

next conquest without looking back.

I never would have seen myself begging for scraps the way that I was with Scotty. And I wasn't liking that part of myself. So, no, I wouldn't show up at her apartment like some whipped puppy who wanted to be loved. Leave that to the Ryans of the world. That was always the way that he was with Iris. Yeah, he's finally happy with her, but, lord, what it took for the two of them to get there!

So, I decided to bite the bullet and actually give Ava a shot. Nate had called me three times over the weekend, wanting to know when I was going to give Ava a call to go out. I put him off every time, not really wanting to do that. But, Ava was interested, and Scotty

wasn't.

Love the one you're with, as the old song goes.

On the way home from Columbia, as I was stuck in traffic, I gave Ava a call.

"Hi, Nick," she said, a little too eagerly, as she picked up the phone. "I was hoping you would call."

"Yeah," I said, not really sure what I was doing. "Um, Ava, I was wondering if you'd like to have dinner with me tomorrow night."

"Sure," she said. "How about *Per Se* at 8?"

Deep breath. "Yeah, ok. I'll see you then."

We hung up. Getting into *Per Se* might be a problem, but I had

connections there, so that was taken care of. What was a problem was that Ava was shaping up to be just like every other woman I had been with – *Per Se* was known for its \$300 prix-fixe menu, which was divine. But I really wanted to be with a woman who was simpler than that. Somebody who I knew wanted me for me, and not for my fat wallet.

Ava suggesting this place did not bode well.

Still, it wasn't like I couldn't afford it. I had done so well with my investments, thanks to my father's shrewd skills when I was young, and his helping me to invest, that I had amassed a fortune that was, the last time I had an accounting, well over a billion dollars.

The paintings and sculptures I owned, alone, almost equaled a billion. Buy low, sell high, and that's what I did. I had made millions in my position as a world-renowned architect as well, but having the skill to invest the millions was what made one a super-rich person.

So, going to one of the most expensive places in town was never a problem. The problem was finding somebody who would be just as happy going to Burger King.

Something tells me that Ava had never set foot in a Burger King in her life.

And I wouldn't be seeing Scotty again until Monday at work. At least I would be seeing her, though, which was

a good thing.



So, that Saturday night, I shined up my shoes, put on my coat and tie and headed over to *Per Se*. I had Charlie drive me there, as I anticipated drinking pretty heavily. I probably would get the wine pairings with the menu, and Ava probably would as well.

Ava was there when I arrived at the restaurant. She was dressed in a sable coat, high heels and a glittery dress with a plunging neckline that showed off her toned and beautiful body. Her face was heavily made-up, even though she didn't need all that makeup, and her hair was put in a chignon.

No doubt about it, Ava was a beautiful woman.

So why was I not feeling in the least bit excited to be with her?

She smiled. “Hello, Nick. I’m so happy you wanted to go out. Nate thought that you might be able to.”

I nodded my head. “Yeah, I had a good time on Thanksgiving with everybody, so I thought, what the hell?”

The maître d’ came over to seat us, and the waiter was there immediately pouring the water and the wine for the first pairing. Both of us chose the Chef’s Tasting *Prix Fixe* menu, which was eight courses of tiny, but delicious, portions of seafood, tomatoes and other vegetables, with a dessert at the end. With each

course there was a wine pairing, which was chosen by the chef as well.

Over our first course, which was oysters and caviar with pearl tapioca, Ava asked me how things were going at work.

“Things are going ok, I guess,” I said. “I had a rather unpleasant meeting yesterday, as everybody was trying to railroad my intern out of a job. But, other than that, things really couldn’t be better.”

Ava narrowed her eyes. “Your intern. What happened there?”

“Well, she was accused of stealing from the firm. Which was total bullshit, pardon my language, and Portia and everybody who was in on the attempted

railroading knew it.” I shook my head and took another swig of wine. “I told them if they wanted to oust Scotty, go right ahead, but I was going to quit too. That shut them up real fast.”

Ava looked a bit pissed. “So, tell me about this intern, Scotty is her name?”

I waved my hand in the air. “What is there to tell? She’s my intern, or she will be soon, and Portia wants her gone just because she’s jealous of her. Anyhow, I don’t want to talk about that tonight.” I took a deep breath, and tried to focus only on Ava, without obsessing over Scotty. “Tell me what’s going on in your world.”

She sipped her wine, then put her perfectly manicured hand on mine. I

thought about Scotty's hand, with her bit nails that she covered up with a pretty shade of pink. Ava's nails were long, red and perfectly sculpted. Just like the rest of her – a beautiful sculpted statue she was, but a little cold.

“I really like you, Nick. I mean, I really like you.” Her suggestive look told me that I could bang her tonight if I was into that. And, really, since when was I not into that with somebody beautiful who wanted in my pants?

Since Scotty, that's when.

I didn't say anything back. I was calculating if I wanted to bed this woman. I was being stupid for not doing it. After all, Scotty was showing that she wanted nothing to do with me outside of

our professional lives. Yeah, Scotty had her reasons. And they were good reasons, too. But I was starting to not be able to stand myself, being so whipped about that girl.

Sleeping with Ava might prove to myself that I was still Nick, as opposed to being this sniveling, love-struck wimp that I was rapidly becoming.

As the night wore on, and more wine was being consumed, I started to see the logic in taking Ava home that night. She was beautiful, and sleeping with her would make me feel more like myself. Of course, if she was like most women who looked like her, the sex wouldn't be very good, but if you knew that going in, there wasn't a problem.

Over dessert, Ava made her move. “So, Nick,” she said, daintily eating her assortment of fruit, ice cream, chocolates and candies that made up the dessert assortment for the evening. Unlike Scotty, this woman’s manners were impeccable. As they should be, considering her mother was a Baroness before coming to America with Ava’s father, who made his billions the old-fashioned way – by inheriting it from a long line of railroad robber-barons. “What do you say we go to your place after this? If you could call your driver right now, we can make it back to your loft before midnight. Nate told me that you live in Tribeca. Very chic.”

Ok, Nick, time to make a decision

on this woman. I had been wavering all night about it. Wavering all night between my desire to feel more like myself again, and my desire to stay devoted to Scotty. Devoted to a woman who wanted nothing more to do with me than be my student and intern.

“Sure, Ava, let’s go back to my place.” After all, I hadn’t been laid since I kicked Penelope out of my life, so I was raring to go in that respect.

Ava smiled, clearly pleased. “You won’t regret it,” she said. “Trust me.”

“I’m quite sure that’s not true,” I said, trying to make a joke, but really stating what I was feeling. “But let’s do it anyhow.”

So, we headed back to my place.

Chapter 40

The sex that night with Ava was just how I imagined it would be. She was as buttoned up in bed as she was in real life, and I was going through the motions. Which really made her no different than most of the other women in my life. All of them, really.

She ended up spending the night. I didn't really show her around the place all that much the night before, as we pretty much got down to it upon alighting into my loft. So, when both of us woke up the next day, she looked around the place.

“Wow, Nick, you have quite the art collection here. Those Klimts are magnificent, and Kadinsky is one of my

favorites.”

I smiled. “Yeah, they’re usually a topic of conversation.” Ava really was a beautiful woman, especially now that she was dressed in one of my dress shirts and nothing else. Get her out of her fur coats and tons of makeup, and she resembled one of my fresh-faced students. An unusually pretty fresh-faced student.

She turned around and looked at me. “Last night was amazing. Really amazing. I thought it would be. You are really a beautiful man.” She ran one long nail over my bare chest. “I’d love to go again,” she said, as she grabbed my crotch.

I took her hand, and pushed it aside,

almost involuntarily. “Uh, I’d love to, Ava, but, I have to be honest. I’m not looking for anything here with you. I mean, you’re a beautiful woman and all, but last night was just sex. I wanted you to know that.”

She looked disappointed. “Oh, ok. I understand. But do you want to go again, anyhow?”

What the hell? I mean, she knew where she stood, and still wanted to go there, so why not?

I was Nick again, being reckless with sex and women, and not giving a good goddamned about it.

It felt liberating and incredibly wrong at the same time.



Ava finally left my apartment around noon, as she had some shopping to do and was going to get a massage and had a hair appointment. Not that I cared. I really wanted her to leave, so I was happy to see her go.

But, as I wandered around the apartment, trying to persuade myself to get into a drafting project that I was putting off for way too long, my mind wandered over to Scotty again. I was battling myself there. I was lurching between wanting to be a good boy and wait for Scotty to come around, and wanting to be the bad boy that I always was before I met her.

Which one was winning? In the story of the two wolves, one who was bad and one good, the one who would prevail would be the one who was fed. Right now, the bad boy was being fed and the good boy was being starved. Not that this was what I wanted. I wanted to be good, because I wanted to be with somebody who I truly loved.

And, for better or worse, I truly loved Scotty.

I had to either cut my feelings for Scotty loose, and move on, or keep trying to win her heart. But her repeatedly rebuffing me was making me question myself. It was the very definition of insanity- doing the same thing, over and over, hoping for a

different result. In this case, I was continually pursuing Scotty, and hoping that one day she might actually say yes to a date.

If somebody would have told me six months ago that I would ever be put in this position, I would have laughed in their face. Now, here I was, pining away for the one that I couldn't have.

So, when Ava called me after her hair appointments and shopping, I asked her to come over again. She readily agreed.

She ended up staying the rest of the weekend. And I tried to focus on her, I really did.

But still, the whole time she was there at the apartment, I couldn't take my

mind off of the elusive Scotty.

Chapter 41

Scotty

So, I wasn't going to be fired after all. Thank god. Thank god. Thank god. I didn't know how that came about, because I wasn't able to talk to Nick about it. I hoped that he said good things about me, though. I would imagine that he did.

Turned out I really did have something to celebrate with Shane after all. It also turned out that I would be able to walk with Shane to the bar that was around the corner, where we would be having a drink.

Ironically enough, I felt comfortable around most men, even though what happened to me with Mr. Lucas would

make it seem that I wouldn't be at ease with the opposite sex. It wasn't a problem hanging out with most guys, though. The only problem was hanging out with guys for whom I had strong feelings. And, for some reason, I felt, right from the start, that I had strong feelings for Nick. That was why I was always so terrified of him.

Shane, on the other hand, held little romantic interest for me. So, I was looking forward to hanging out with him and having a few drinks and relaxing a bit. I knew that Shane probably had designs on me, but I had become an expert on shutting men down. Piece of cake.

Shane came around and picked me

up at my cubicle at exactly five o'clock. "Ready for a little happy hour?" he asked.

"Sure, let me get my coat and stuff," I said.

I reappeared five minutes later with my outerwear on, and Shane and I walked to the bar.

Friday Happy Hour was happening in the bar, and there were wall-to-wall people. We found a table to sit at, and Shane got us both a Bud Light.

"Thanks, Shane," I said. "God, I need this drink after the day I've had. Talk about pins and needles."

"Yeah, a bunch of us were worried that we'd lose you. That would really suck."

“Suck would not be the word for that.”

Shane and I chatted a bit, finding out more about each other.

“You going to the Christmas party?” Shane asked. Our firm was going to be holding its annual party at *Lamb's Club*.

“Sure,” I said. “I was planning on it.” I actually was looking forward to seeing Nick on a more personal basis, so that was the real reason why I was looking forward to the party. But I would never tell Shane that. I was surprised that the other interns didn't pick up on my feelings for Nick as it was. They certainly seemed to know about my almost-being-fired crisis.

Shane took another sip of his beer.

“Maybe we could go together?”

Oh, crap. Nick wouldn't like that at all. At all. “Maybe,” I said non-committally. *Looks like I'm going to have to shut this down.* “Actually, I think I might bring my roommate as my date.”

“Your roommate?”

“Yeah, Jack. He's my gay roommate. I try to drag him along whenever I can. But I'll see you there at any rate, huh?”

“Sure,” he said, obviously seeing that he was being rebuffed.

Then he looked at me shyly. “Are you, uh, seeing anybody right now?”

“Um, no. I don't really date.”

“You don't? How is that possible? You're gorgeous.”

“Well, I really need to focus on my schoolwork and internship projects. I’ve never really had time to date, to tell the truth.”

“Oh, come on, now. You have to have a life. Some fun. All work and no play would make Scotty a very dull girl,” he said, nudging me under the table with his knee. He took a swig of his beer, watching me the entire time. “What do you say we go to the film festival they’re having in Chelsea tomorrow afternoon? They’re screening the films of the French New Wave directors. Truffaut, Godard, Rohmer and Chabrol. You haven’t lived until you’ve seen *Breathless* on the big screen.”

I had to admit, that sounded tempting

and fun. I always loved going to film festivals. There was something about just spending the day watching movies that appealed to me. Like playing hooky from school. But, on the other hand, I didn't really lie when I told Shane that I didn't have time for play. My schoolwork and internship did occupy most of my time. When I wasn't engrossed in one or the other, I was obsessing about Nick.

Perhaps it would do me some good to get out of my head and forget about Nick for awhile. I did have a pile of schoolwork that I had to attend to, so I would just have to hunker down on Sunday to get it done. Shane was a fun guy, and, as long as I gave him my usual

disclaimer about not dating anybody, and make it clear that I was attending the film festival with him just as a friend, it might not be so bad.

Shane was still watching me from behind his swig of beer. It was clear that he was attracted to me, but it was just as clear that I would want nothing, romantically, to do with him.

“Shane,” I began, “I’d love to go with you to the film festival. I’ve always been very interested in French New Wave directors myself. But I have to give you a disclaimer. This won’t be a date. I really am not looking to date anybody, at least until I get my master’s degree and my career underway. I’m very focused and really can’t let

anybody distract me from that. But it sounds like fun, so count me in. If you're still interested, that is."

Shane looked disappointed, but nodded his head. "You wanna meet down there? So it won't seem like a date?"

"Sure, that's a great idea," I said.

We chatted for a few hours more, before I headed home to my empty apartment and empty bed. Jack was working at the bar that night, and he had informed me that he was spending the night with his new guy, Brad.

"And I think he might be the one, Scotty," Jack had said about Brad. "He's a Wall Street type who has a house in Connecticut and a loft in Chelsea. So,

wish me luck!”

“Luck!” I said at the time.

But tonight, after leaving Shane and not getting to talk to Nick before he left work for the weekend, I was feeling very lonely. Jack wasn't there to cheer me up, either.

Jack was right all along. He might not always be there for me. And, if he gets involved with a new guy, and gets a part in the musical that he was called back for, I would be all alone.

I went to sleep feeling more sad and lonely than ever.

I really missed Nick.

Chapter 42

I met Shane at the theatre in Chelsea for the French New Wave film festival right at 11 on Saturday morning. The film festival would be screening *Breathless* by Jean-Luc Godard; *Jules et Jim* by Francois Truffaut; *My Night at Maud's* by Eric Rohmer; and *Les Biches* by Claude Chabrol. *Les Biches* was actually the first film of the morning, and the festival would end with *Breathless*, which was widely known to be one of the pièce de résistance of the French New Wave movement. I had actually never seen any of the movies, so I was eager to take them in.

Shane and I each got a tub of popcorn and a coke. I paid for my own

movies, of course, happy that I had gotten paid, finally, from the firm, I mean Nick, so I had a little bit of spending money for the day. I was actually looking forward to seeing the films.

And I was somewhat looking forward to seeing Shane. But only as a friend. I wished that Shane was gay, like Jack, so that I would feel completely comfortable hanging out with him. Then, I could have a new gay bestie, in case Jack and his main squeeze, Brad, got serious, and I would be left behind. But, unfortunately, Shane was decidedly straight.

So, I constantly had to brush off his arm, which would casually creep on my shoulders throughout the films.

Then, after the films were over, and we went to the Denny's on Nassau, I noticed that Shane was staring at my chest for much of the meal. Never mind the fact that I consciously wore an enormous sweater on this particular outing. He still stared at me like a cat who was salivating over a bird.

I dug in my *Moons Over My Hammy* with gusto, though, as I was feeling famished. I tried to ignore Shane's leering, but it was getting increasingly difficult.

As Shane walked me to the subway, then leaned in for a kiss, at which time I turned my head so that he couldn't plant his lips on mine, I knew that I couldn't accept any more invitations from him or

anybody else who wanted to go out. It seemed that guys couldn't get the hint that a girl really wasn't interested, no matter how much the girl emphasized that she only wanted to be friends.

Shane just looked at me after his aborted attempt to kiss me, and frowned. "You're kind of a tease, you know that?"

I was baffled. I intentionally wore large clothing, I met him for the film festival, as opposed to having him come and pick me up, and I took his arm off of my shoulders every time he put it there throughout the film festival. Yet, I was somehow teasing him?

I shuddered as I remembered that I was accused of being a tease by Mr. Lucas before he started coming into my

room. He leered at me constantly, and would whisper to me, even when Elle was around, that I was teasing him.

Now here was Shane, accusing me of the same thing. And, just like that, my hackles rose.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked him. “How was I teasing you?”

“You just were. You’re so incredibly hot,” he said. “How am I supposed to behave myself around you?”

“This outing wasn’t a good idea,” I said. “I really need to get my train and go home now.”

He put his hands on my shoulders just then. I looked around, and there were hundreds of people waiting for the

subway. Thank god I wasn't alone with him. He leaned down for another kiss, and I slapped him across the face.

"Bitch!" he said, grabbing me more forcefully. He attracted the attention of another guy, who stepped in between the two of us. He was a black guy, about 6'2" and a good 220 lbs. of muscle.

Shane just looked up at the guy. "What do you want?" he asked the guy.

"The lady here doesn't look like she's enjoying your company. I suggest you move along."

Shane said nothing, and just glared at me silently.

The black guy turned around to me. "Miss, I think that's your train," he said, pointing to the train that had just pulled

up.

I nodded my head, and reached out my hand to the guy. “Thank you,” I said. The guy just shook my hand and nodded.

“You better hurry,” he said. “You don’t want your train to leave without you.”

I impulsively hugged the guy before boarding the train for home.

Once safely on the subway, I looked out the window at the black guy, who was clearly lecturing a pissed-off Shane.

Then I slumped in my seat and hugged myself, willing myself not to cry in front of the crowd of people who were in the car with me. But my near-miss with Shane made me think about Mr. Lucas again, and I felt depressed

and agitated at the same time.

And, suddenly, going to work on Monday wasn't looking as inviting as it did before.

Chapter 43

Nick

I got to work on Monday, after making sure that Ava got home ok from my loft. I didn't make the same mistake that I did with Penelope and Amber that one time, as I made sure that I got up early enough to get Ava a cab. And, no, I didn't get Charlie to take her home.

Scotty was still the only woman who was special enough for Charlie.

I waited, with bated breath, for 10 AM, so that I could see Scotty. Spending the weekend with Ava didn't make me want to see Scotty less. It made me want to see her more.

She arrived right at 10, seeing me first thing. She sat down across from me,

and I had a different reaction upon seeing her than usual. I didn't get hard, but I felt a little...melty. That's the best way to describe it. Like I was a pool of jello.

I had never, ever, had the reaction with any other woman before.

"Hi, Scotty," I said with a smile. "How are you doing today?"

"Fine, Nick," she said, also smiling. "I actually wanted to talk with you about the meeting you guys had on Friday."

I started to tell her about what had happened, but George soon appeared at my door. "Nick, I've had an emergency with my wife. She was in an accident."

"Oh, shit," I said. "Is she ok?"

"Yeah, but she's in the hospital and

pretty scared. I had a meeting set up with some of my residential clients. Could you fill in?"

"Sure," I said, and then looked at Scotty. "Let's table this discussion, ok?"

"Of course," she said. "Uh, you can find me later at my usual place."

The meeting with George's clients, unfortunately, went on all morning. I was actually able to discuss their design ideas with them intelligently, as I knew George's style by then and knew quite a bit about neo-classicism, having designed a number of buildings in that very genre myself.

Later on that morning, I heard stories about Shane going out with Scotty. Not from Scotty herself, but from another

intern who happened to see the two of them out together at a film festival on Saturday night. That intern started talking to other interns, and the story filtered to me on that Monday afternoon.

Actually, it didn't filter to me. I just overheard some of them talking about it when I went to see Scotty to take her to lunch.

"That's what I heard," John, a young intern from NYIT was saying to Robin, who was an intern from Columbia. "Shane had his arm around Scotty at the movie theatre."

"I had no idea that they were even going out. When did that get started?" Robin asked.

"Who knows? I thought the girl was

asexual myself. I heard that she doesn't date, at all. Weird. She's so cute, too."

"Yeah, she is. But those clothes she wears. God, talk about out-dated," Robin said, with a giggle.

"Out-dated, maybe, but she sure does those garments justice."

"Men," Robin said. "Even you educated ones are all about the rack. And I don't mean the clothing rack."

I felt my ire rising, hearing them talk about Scotty that way. But, them insulting Scotty about the clothes that she wore took a backseat to my instant hatred of Shane. Suddenly, I was the one who wanted to do the railroading.

Scotty was going out with him? To say that I was jealous was understating

the matter. Scotty would go out with him, but not me?

I shook my head, and retreated back into my office. Scotty apparently was fine having Shane take her out. So, I was more confused than ever. Perhaps she was blowing me off because she just wasn't into me after all. Maybe she just concocted that entire story because she didn't want to have anything to do with me.

On the one hand, I still was in love with that girl. On the other hand, I was angry to think that she possibly lied to me about why she didn't want to get involved. *Why couldn't she just come right out and tell me that she wasn't interested?* Instead, she came up with

this wild story of her being raped by her foster father.

I was starting to have doubts, and was starting to think that maybe she wasn't to be trusted after all.

I found myself wishing, again, that I had Ryan's gift for reading people and intuition. I had no problem bedding women over the course of my life, but reading them was something that I always had difficulty doing. I was as obtuse as anybody when it came to that.

Part of the reason why I never could read women before was because I really didn't want to. I didn't care. Now, for the first time, I really did care, and it was making very anxious.

While I sat at my desk, stewing, I got

a phone call.

“O’Hara,” I said. It was somewhat unusual that I would get a phone call on my private line. Usually the secretary puts the calls through. But this call came in direct.

“Hello,” said a familiar voice. “This is Jack. Scotty’s roommate.”

I brightened up a tad. “Hey, Jack. How are you doing?”

“Great. I just wanted to say a belated thank you for putting in a good word for me with your friend. Don’t tell Scotty yet, because I want this to be a surprise, but I got a part in his next play. And I owe it all to you.”

“Don’t mention it. You got it through your own talent. I just got you the

audition. You did the rest.”

“Be modest all you want. But you’ve helped me a shit-ton, so I’m very grateful to you.”

“Well, ok, then. You’re welcome.” Then I asked him “so, how was your Thanksgiving?”

“Great, great. Scotty and me just did the usual. Played games, saw lights. We had a chicken because we couldn’t afford a turkey. How about you?”

I felt my heart sinking. *She even lied to me about that.* I was distracted as I answered him. “Yes, uh, yes. What was the question again?”

“Just wanted to know how your holiday was.”

“Uh, great. Great. Great. Well,

anyhow, thanks for calling. And congrats. I have to get back to work.”

Then I hung up. I put my head in my hands and tried to fight back tears. Me, crying. Over some woman. *What is this world coming to?*

Just then, Scotty showed up in my office. She tentatively approached the desk, her coat and hat in her hands. “Hey, Nick,” she said. “Uh, I can finally take you to lunch today. I mean, I can’t afford much, but we can go and get a sandwich or something. My treat.”

I looked at her, then got up and shut the door.

“Ms. James, have a seat,” I said, motioning to the chair on the other side of my desk.

She looked at me quizzically, then sat down.

I took my seat across from her, feeling more and more angry just looking at her. *Putting on her innocent act, and lying to me.* To what? Spare my feelings? She's going to play head games with me, the man who invented head games? *She has no idea who she is dealing with...*

I took a deep breath. "Ms. James, I'm very sorry, but I'm not going to be able to take you to lunch anymore. I feel that I've been far too generous with you, and you clearly don't appreciate it. So, you're going to be on your own."

She sat there, looking at me, her mouth open. I saw tears forming in her

eyes. Crocodile tears no doubt. Her roommate might be the one who's now on Broadway, but Scotty was clearly the one who deserved a Tony Award for acting.

"I, I, don't understand." She put her head down, and her hands started shaking. "What did I do wrong?"

I rebuffed her question. "And another thing. You're on your own around here from now on. You're going to sink or swim just like the rest of the interns, without any help from me. I'm goddamned tired of sticking my neck out for you while you play your innocent act. You can play your games with somebody else. From now on, you won't be getting any more social invitations from me.

You're my intern, I'm your boss. That's it. I hope that I make myself clear."

She continued just to stare at me, and now tears were streaming down her cheeks. I made no move to give her a Kleenex, so she took my box of tissues off of my desk and brought out a couple of Kleenexes and blew her nose. "I'm sorry if I've offended you. I don't know why you are suddenly acting like this."

I stood up. She wasn't going to continue with her act. I wouldn't let her. "Well, I have work to do. Please leave." And then I sat down.

She continued to sit there, apparently in shock. She shook her head. "Nick, I, I, I, I, don't understand. Please tell me what I did wrong."

“Perhaps you don’t understand English anymore. Shall I tell you in Spanish or French what I want?”

She shook her head. “No. No. I’ll leave, since that’s what you want.” Her head was down, and her entire body was drooping, like Olive Oyle. “I’m sorry to bother you.”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Out. Now.”

At that, her eyes got wide again, and she reluctantly got up and headed towards my office door.

“Oh, and Ms. James?”

She turned around and looked at me, her eyes red and filled with tears. “Yes, Nick?”

“It’s Mr. O’Hara from now on.

Please address me as such. It's time for you to show me a little respect.”

She said nothing, just nodded. I could hear her sob a little as she opened the door and let herself out.

Then, as soon as she left, I was needing my Kleenex myself.

Because I cried like I hadn't cried since I was a small child.

Truth be told, that was the main reason why I forced her to leave my office in such a hurry.

I didn't want her to see me cry.

Chapter 44

Scotty

I have to find a private place to cry. I cannot cry at my cubicle. Everybody will see me. Fortunately, it was lunchtime, so I made my way out of the office, my head down, my Kleenex in my hand.

“Scotty,” Robin, another intern said. “What are you doing for lunch?”

I just shook my head, and walked faster. If I turned around and talked to her, she would instantly know that I had been crying. Then she would want to know why, and I would have to lie to her about it. I didn’t even know what I would say if she did ask.

Robin was the biggest gossip and the nosiest person I had met at the firm. If

she got wind of anything involving Nick and me, that would be all she wrote.

“Scotty, wait. Where are you going?”

I walked faster, until I hit the door of the office suite and hurried down the stairs. I wasn't going to wait for the elevator, especially since I saw a crowd of people waiting for it, most of whom worked at the firm.

I walked down the 70 flights of stairs, tears streaming down my face. I sobbed loudly, hoping that nobody would be joining me in the stairwell. Sometimes people take the stairs, if they're trying to lose weight, but I felt safe, knowing that nobody would be crazy enough to take the stairs from the 70th floor. So, I was able to bawl as

much as I could. I felt my entire body wracking with sobs, and I felt sick to my stomach.

It took me about 20 minutes, but I finally reached the bottom floor. I walked through the lobby, ignoring the guard who greeted me by name, and got out into the street. I was soon lost in the lunchtime crowd of people, who were bustling to different restaurants.

I had no idea where I could go where I would be sure not to see somebody from the firm. I couldn't go home. Home was too far away, and would take too long. I was determined that I would not miss any work, so taking the rest of the afternoon off was out of the question.

I finally decided just to find an alleyway and sit next to the dumpster, so that people off the street wouldn't be able to see me. And then I bawled. I bawled for the next half hour, and then it was time to head back up to work.

I got back to my cubicle, grateful that I had an entire roster of projects that were assigned to me from various partners, none of them Portia. That meant that I didn't have to actually see any of the partners. I put my head down, and worked through the tears that were constantly threatening throughout the day.

You have to concentrate on these projects. Get through this day, then go home and take a nice hot bath and have a glass of wine. Get a movie on Netflix,

and try to forget about Nick's cruelty.

I took a deep breath. *I got this.* I had been through far, far worse than this in my life. It was but a bump in the road. Yes, I finally found a guy who I was willing to slowly learn to trust, despite my misgivings about him, and his evident proclivity for women. Now that kernel of hope that I could be a normal girl with a normal boyfriend, and maybe, one day, a normal husband, was gone.

So, it was time to refocus and recommit to the one thing in life that I could control. That was my architectural career. Everything that happened to me in my professional life was within my own power. There were no random things that could happen that could throw

me off, like a fickle man. Yes, a life devoted entirely to work would be a lonely one, and maybe even heartbreaking. But there was not the potential to send me reeling, like Nick just did.

Five o'clock finally came, and I dashed out the door and towards the subway. I managed to get through the day without a single person trying to talk to me about anything, so I felt lucky. Because I was not in the sociable mood.

When I got home, I opened up a bottle of wine and got in the tub. I sucked down the wine straight from the bottle, and cried for hours. I ended up getting out of the tub some three hours later, water-logged, exhausted and

completely drunk.

Then got in my jammies and cried myself to sleep.

Chapter 45

A couple of weeks went by. Nick was still very cold to me, and I still was addressing him as “Mr. O’Hara,” and he addressed me, still, as “Ms. James.” I still had no idea, whatsoever, what I did to deserve such treatment. But I was determined to keep my chin up and my head down, as I worked harder than I ever had before.

As for Shane...he pretty much left me alone. I was quite sure that he was embarrassed about his behavior, but he never apologized for it. I was relieved not to have to confront the situation, and I was further happy that he found another intern to pursue — Lisa, who was a student at Pratt.

I isolated myself. I was feeling unhappy, not just because of the Nick implosion, but also because Jack was increasingly not home. He got a part, a small part, in one of Bob Terrill productions on Broadway, so he was busy rehearsing, when he wasn't working his two jobs and trying to spend some time with Brad. He and Brad were becoming increasingly an item, and, since Brad lived in a beautiful loft in Chelsea, with a weekend house in Connecticut and a vacation home in the Hamptons, Jack naturally gravitated towards Brad's home(s) instead of bringing Brad around to hang out with me.

So, I was lonely. Extremely lonely. It

was just like Jack had said – I wouldn't always have him to lean on. Now I was finally finding out what that was like, and I was miserable.

But the Christmas party for the firm was coming up, and I felt obligated to go. All the other interns were going, and so was virtually everybody else in the firm. The firm had rented out the *Lambs Club*, which was an expensive restaurant in midtown, for the entire evening, which, no doubt, cost them a small fortune. The restaurant would be serving dinner and there was an open bar. It was my understanding that this was a time to let your hair down, and most of the partners, interns and associates did just that. Drunken debauchery was not

unheard of at this event, according to Robin.

“I’m so excited to go,” Robin said. “I heard that last year George, Allen and Rob got up and sang a drunken karaoke version of *Somebody that I Used to Know*,” she said, referring to Gotye’s number one hit. “And,” she said with a giggle, “Allen announced, on-stage, that the song was dedicated to his then-wife, Nancy. They were divorced about three months later.”

“Wow,” I said. “Miss Manners definitely would not approve.”

“No, she wouldn’t. So, it’s gonna be fun.” She hesitated. “Are you, uh, bringing anybody?”

I shook my head. I had always

intended to bring Jack, but Jack was busy that night, as usual. He was always busy with something anymore.

“That’s too bad. Well, maybe we can go together. Be each other’s dates,” she said, with a giggle. “I mean, not literally. I don’t swing that way or anything. But it might be fun to have somebody to hang out with and watch all the Bacchanalia unfold.”

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s do that.”

“Cool. You can meet me at my apartment, which is a couple of blocks away from the restaurant, and we can get dolled up together. That will be so much fun!”

“Aces,” I said, trying to be happy. That was what I did – I put on a happy

face for everybody, including Nick, but I really was dying inside. More often than not, I went home to my empty apartment and cried for hours. I felt so abandoned and alone, and heartbroken over the way that Nick had been treating me.

But I was actually looking forward to going over to Robin's and get ready for the Christmas party. I was hungry for a new bestie, and Robin, despite the fact that she was kinda gossipy, was still a lot of fun to hang out with. So, I thought I might actually have a good time that evening.

Chapter 46

Nick

The Christmas party was coming up, and I was bringing Ava as my date. We had actually been seeing one another, on a regular basis, since things blew up with Scotty that one day. Truth be told, I was heartbroken, absolutely devastated, to lose my chance with Scotty. I couldn't understand why she would lie to me about Thanksgiving, and why she would give Shane a chance, but not me. And I hated myself for letting a woman get to me like that. Nobody had ever gotten to me in quite the same way, and I felt like an utter fool for getting so emotionally invested in somebody that I really didn't know that well.

So, Ava was nice and safe. She was also nuts about me. I had her wrapped around my finger. It felt much more comfortable for me, because that was always the way that it was with me and women. They fell in love with me, and I stayed emotionally unattached. That was how I preferred it, because it was too risky the other way – pining away for somebody who wanted nothing to do with me.

Scotty was a liar and a game-player, and I wasn't having it.

I still was going to try, my very hardest, to stop being such a man-whore, so I hadn't slept with anybody but Ava since I met her. This was in spite of the fact that Penelope had been calling

again, and so was Amber, who wanted to start going out with me, and only me, after she found out that Penelope and I had broken up. I blew her off. I had zero desire to date Amber and get that whole mess started up again. I was over it, and really wanted to commit myself to somebody. That somebody was, still, Scotty, but, since that was looking increasingly impossible, that somebody was going to be Ava. I was going to force myself to commit to her and hope that my happiness came later.

One thing was for sure. If I chose to be with Amber, or somebody like her, I'd be sucked right back into the man-whore lifestyle. Since I was going to leave that lifestyle behind, I had to

concentrate on somebody who was at least a little bit wholesome. Or, at the very least, a little bit less of a slut than was Amber, Penelope, and their whole modeling crew.

So, Ava became a fixture around the loft. I was having a great time with her, really. It turned out that she loved to cook, so she made me home-cooked meals, which was something that I was lacking for a long time, due to my own paucity of cooking skills, combined with the fact that the women I dated used their ovens to store their shoes. Literally.

We hung out and went to the movies and dinner and stayed around the loft and sometimes strolled around looking at Christmas lights. We had excellent

conversations about everything under the sun, and the sex was getting better all the time. I felt content, if not entirely happy.

Nate called me a couple of times to congratulate me on things going well with Ava. “Ava called me, buddy, and you’ve really got her hooked. She said that she’s falling hard for you. Maybe it’s finally going to happen for you, Nick. Maybe you’ve finally found the one.”

“The one. That’s just a little bit premature, don’t you think?”

“No, it’s not. I knew when I first saw Natalie. Ryan knew when he first saw Iris. So, no, it’s not premature.”

I had that sinking feeling, talking to Nate. Because, thus far, there was no

indication, whatsoever, that Ava was “the one.” She was a sweet, beautiful and classy woman. But the one? No. Not at all.

I sighed, trying to tamp down the feeling I had in my gut that Scotty was still the one. Despite her apparent duplicity, I was still very much in love with her.

“Well, Nate, Ava and I are certainly having fun. We’ll see where it goes.”

“Ok, but just don’t blow this with her. She’s a class act, and I want to see you happy.”

“Sure, Nate. I understand.” One thing about Nate - his heart was always in the right place.

We hung up, just as Ava was arriving

at my apartment. She had in her arms two bags of groceries. “I’m stocking up,” she said. “Your kitchen is like a bachelor’s.”

“That’s because, you know, I’m a bachelor.”

“Well, maybe not for long,” she said with a wink.

I ignored that comment and looked in her grocery bags. She had bought chicken and eggs and prime rib and all kinds of different organic fruits and vegetables. She also bought about five different kinds of pastas and various flavors of balsamic vinegars.

“Here, taste this vinegar,” she said, putting some on a teaspoon.

I tasted it, and it was unusual, to say

the least. It tasted like coffee, and it was quite delicious, really. “Mmmm. Espresso balsamic. Very good. Where’d you get that?”

“Some little shop that sells different kinds of oils and vinegars. Very eclectic. We should go there together sometime for their samples.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. Anyhow, don’t forget about the firm Christmas party this Saturday night. You don’t want to miss seeing the senior managing partner delivering a stirring rendition of *I Will Survive*, let me tell you. At least, that’s what I heard – that it’s a sight to behold.”

She came up and kissed me full on the lips. “I can’t believe that I’m going

to be your date to the Christmas party. Things are really getting serious, and we haven't known each other two weeks." Then she smiled. "I hope that things keep going this way, Nick. I really like you."

I smiled. "I like you too, Ava." *Like you, not love you. I love somebody else.*

After dinner, we watched some movies, then went up to my bedroom and had sex before falling asleep. Which was getting to be our usual routine.

Chapter 47

Scotty

So, it's the day of the party, and I was supposed to meet Robin at 4 PM at her loft. The party would get started around 7 PM, with dinner being served, and then there would be an open bar and a DJ right there in the restaurant.

Jack had made a rare appearance that afternoon. "Gawd, Scotty, I'm just about wiped out. Just wiped out."

"How's lover boy?"

Jack rolled his eyes and smirked. "He's fine. Just fine. Still in the closet, it turns out. So, he's actually taking a woman to his Christmas party. I really oughta crash that bitch and out him right then and there, in front of God and

everybody.”

I smiled. “I haven’t met this guy. Is he, uh, capable of passing?”

“Yes, Scotch. Yes, he is. He’s 100% man. He even has season tickets to the Giants. So, as it turns out, I’m his little hidden fag on the side.”

I didn’t say anything, as much as I wanted to lecture him on settling. Then again, I was not one to lecture anybody about anything relationship oriented. That was not my forte, to say the very least.

“So, Scotch. Whatever happened to beautiful boy?”

“Nick? I mean, Mr. O’Hara. I guess I haven’t seen you very much, Jack, so you don’t know what all is going on.”

“I have been kinda absent these past few weeks. Sorry about that. Anyhow, answer the question. What’s going on with him?”

I shook my head, knowing that I couldn’t talk about Nick without bawling again. “I, uh, I’ll tell you about that later. At the moment, I’m running late. I have to be at Robin’s at 4. We’re going to do shots and make each other over for the party. She happens to live within a few blocks of the restaurant, so it’s certainly convenient. If I get too hammered, I’ll probably just crash with her.”

Jack didn’t look happy. “Scotch and soda. You need to talk to me. Just because I haven’t seen you in awhile doesn’t mean that you can get out of

answering my questions.”

“I will, I promise. Just not right now.”

“Ok, then,” he said. “Well, I have to get ready for work.”

“How are things going in your new play?”

“Great. I have all of three lines, but it’s a start.” Then he got up and made himself a cocktail. “Well, you take care, little one. I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah. Soon.” I hated that I was keeping things from Jack, but I just couldn’t talk about my feelings about Nick. I was still too raw and hurt, and I didn’t want to breach that dam that held back my tears. I feared that once the dam broke, I wouldn’t stop crying.

And I had to stop crying. I was going to have a good time tonight, goddammit, even if it killed me.

Chapter 48

I got to Robin's right at 4, bringing a bottle of tequila up to her apartment. She was waiting for me to arrive, apparently, and was apparently drunk already. Her apartment was cute, with hardwood floors, picture windows and festive decorations all around. She even had a little fireplace that didn't work, or so she said, and she couldn't use it because the fire codes had long since made it obsolete. All of her furniture was modern and new, but her kitchen was a galley kitchen with original appliances, which meant that the fridge and stove were probably 1930s models.

Still, it was a cute place and a veritable mansion by Manhattan's

standards. I wondered how she could swing a place in Midtown on a non-existent intern's salary.

“Oh, my parents got money,” she explained. “What about you? Who foots the bills for you?”

I couldn't explain to her that I was being paid by Nick, so I just said “student loans. Lots and lots of student loans. And a roommate, Jack. He works two jobs and has a part on Broadway, so that helps.”

“It certainly would. Jack. Do you and he, uh, have benefits?”

“No, no. He's 100% gay. Which is good. I don't think that I could live with a straight guy.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it would be difficult. There might be sexual tension, and I, uh, don’t really welcome that.”

“So I heard,” she said. “Let’s see now, you got tequila. I have some limes and sugar. So, two margaritas are coming up.” Then she went into the kitchen and squeezed the limes with some sugar and poured the tequila into it, then poured the whole concoction into two margarita glasses. “Here, taste this,” she said, handing me a glass.

“Mmmm, good,” I said. “Nothing wrong with having a margarita before going to a party like this.” Then I looked at her, as she motioned me on the couch next to her. “So, what have you heard about me? You said something about me

not wanting sexual tension or something like that.”

“Oh, nothing much. I just heard that you don’t really want to date. Not sure who said that. Which has broken all the boys’ hearts at the firm, let me tell you.”

I felt myself blushing. “Uh, what do you mean?”

Robin said nothing, just raised her eyebrows. “And, I suppose you haven’t looked in the mirror lately. You’re stereotypically gorgeous. Hell, I’d do you if you swung that way. Or if I swung that way. Well, you know what I mean.”

I looked at my drink and said nothing. “Well, thank you. That’s very, uh, flattering. But, you’re right, I, uh, don’t really date.”

“So, why is that?”

“Well, I’m really busy. Very focused on my career and schoolwork. Boys are nothing but a distraction.”

“Uh huh,” she said. “Good story. Now tell me the truth.”

I looked around, and saw that she had curlers and makeup at the ready on a little table. “Maybe later. So, you wanted us to do makeovers. What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I hope that you don’t think I’m too forward. But, if you don’t mind my saying, you have a beautiful body. But your clothes...I just don’t know. I’m not your size. I wish I were a size two with double Ds, but alas, I’m not. So, you can’t wear my clothes. But I did pick up

a dress for you that I think is totally adorbs. Would you like to try it on?"

"Oh, I don't know. I, uh, don't really like to show a lot of skin."

"Oh, please. Please. If I looked like you, I'd show up everywhere naked. Including work. But, the dress isn't too low-cut or anything. I just think that it would look beautiful on you."

I was suspicious. "I don't understand. Why would you go through all that trouble?"

"It was no trouble. I like to shop. And it was on clearance at Nordstrom's. And, well, uh, I'm kinda like...did you ever see the movie *Clueless*?"

"Yes, of course. What self-respecting woman hasn't seen that

movie?”

“Right? Well, anyhow, I’m Cher. I like to help people out when I think that they need it. Some call it intrusive. Others think I’m like a fairy godsister. I hope that you think the latter. I just think that you need to get out there a live a little, and stop hiding your light under a bushel, as my grandmother used to say.”

I was kinda taken aback. I hardly knew this girl, and she was shopping at Nordstrom’s for me. “I, I, I don’t know what to say.”

“Well, don’t say anything until you’ve seen the dress.”

She brought it out, and I literally gasped. It was the most beautiful dress that I had ever seen. It was strapless and

red, and the top was heart-shaped and bejeweled. The bottom of the dress was shaped like roses, and the dress was apparently made of satin. It looked like it would be form-fitting, but I wondered how I could fit into it. My body type was always a problem – because I was so thin everywhere but one place, actually two if you count my rear-end - dresses didn't tend to fit very well.

I blinked. “Do you think it will fit?”

“Well, it might be kinda tight in one place, but try it on and see.”

“This is so very nice. I mean, I brought a dress with me, but this is so much prettier.” I was referring to my dress which was yet another of my thrift-store finds. It was a basic black dress

that had no embellishments and kinda hung on me like a potato sack.

“Go and try it on.”

So, I went into her bedroom and tried the dress on. I was right – it didn’t quite fit in the bust, but it fit better than most dresses did in that area, as the dress was apparently made for women with bodies like mine, and it fit like a glove everywhere else. I wasn’t quite sure how Robin was able to find a dress that would fit me so well, but I had to admit that I felt like a princess in it.

I walked out, and Robin let out a low whistle. “You look beautiful,” she said. “Just like Cinderella at the ball.”

“I feel more like Jessica Rabbit,” I said, but smiled to let her know that I

was just joking. “Um, thank you for this. I’d like to repay you, because I know that this dress was expensive.”

She waved her hand dismissively. “Please. I told you, my parents got money. I got this. It’s repayment enough to see you looking so pretty.”

I still felt suspicious of her motives, then felt bad about being suspicious. Perhaps she was really like Cher on *Clueless*. She saw that I was a fashion disaster, despite my hoping that I looked good because I found designer clothes in the thrift shops I went to, and she decided to remedy that for the one night.

“Now,” she said. “For your hair.”

“Uh, what about my hair?”

“Well, you know. You kinda look

matronly a lot of times because you wear your hair in such tight buns and chignons. So, I booked us both an appointment at *Les Ciseaux*, which is French for ‘scissors,’ and, lucky you, the salon is two blocks away.”

“Oh, thanks for that, but, I can’t afford-“

Robin just rolled her eyes, and brought out a Black credit card. “Do you see this?”

I nodded my head.

“Do you know what this is?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a Black MasterCard. Given to me by my parents. Only wealthy people get this type of card. I could buy a loft on the Upper West Side with this card. A

small loft, mind you, but, still...you get the point. So, please, taking you to get a \$200 haircut is not going to break me.”

And, just like that, I suddenly understood this girl. She was trying to buy my friendship. It made me sad that she felt that she had to do that. I was never somebody who was friends with people because of what they could give me. I just liked Robin because she was always nice to me.

So, I sighed. “Uh, ok, but, from now on, Robin, just know that I’d like to be friends with you, but you don’t have to be extravagant with me. I’m pretty simple, really. I’m kinda a Big Mac on a Saturday night kinda gal. There’s really no need to buy me stuff for me to like

you.”

She just stared at me and said “please don’t tell me that you can look like that and still eat Big Macs. I think I’d have to kill you if that were the case.”

I just shook my head. *In one ear and out the other.*

We ended up at the salon about a half hour later, and both of us got a haircut and style. When it was done, I had to say that I was digging my new look. It was a short and sleek bob with bangs, angled from the back.

“Wow, you look totally different,” Robin said, looking at me in my new sassy haircut. “I love the new look! Now, let’s go back to my loft and we’ll

give each other makeovers. It has to be quick, though, because we're running out of time. It'll take us about 20 minutes to walk to the restaurant."

So, we went back to Robin's place and she made me over. Once again, I felt a little like a torted-up drag queen, but she insisted that the makeup was subtle and brought out my "best features." Still, any makeup felt foreign to me, but I was pleased that she didn't overdo it.

I felt nervous giving her a makeover. She seemed to know what she was doing. I, on the other hand, had no idea what I was doing in that department. I guess I have never been high maintenance or a "girly-girl." Mainly because I never could afford the extra

luxuries that being a “girly-girl” entailed. The mani-pedis, the facials, the monthly haircuts, and the high-dollar makeup from the department store makeup counters were always beyond my reach. So, I relied upon home manicures that never lasted more than three days, the one exception being when I first started working at the firm, and I splurged on a gel manicure that lasted three weeks. I ended up peeling off the color after my nails started growing, and went back to biting my nails off after that manicure was gone. I went for months and months without a haircut, and as for makeup – I just didn’t buy it.

I hoped that I did Robin justice with my makeover. After I was finished, she

brought out a mirror and looked into it. “Very nice,” she said. “You do a good job.” Then she gave me a hug.

I realized that I had been holding my breath as I waited for her to approve or disapprove of my makeover for her. I let my breath out all at once, so it came out as a big sigh.

“Ok, now, for accessories. Fortunately, you do look like you might have the same shoe-size as me, so, come with me and pick something out that will look cute with that dress. And, let me find you some earrings, a necklace and a bracelet that will go with the outfit, too. Mind you, these are only borrows, but you can keep the dress, of course.”

I went into her closet, which was

actually an entire bedroom that was converted into a closet. I was astounded at the amount of clothes, shoes and accessories I saw in there. She was like Carrie Bradshaw, as she must have had 1,000 pairs of designer shoes in that room. Christian Leboutin, Jimmy Choo, Manolo Blahnik, Hermés, Chanel, Kate Spade, Louis Vitton, Prada, Walter Steiger, Alexander McQueen, Gucci – they all were represented in that closet. And they probably were all this season, too. I wondered what she did with her shoes when the new season hit – probably take them to Goodwill, to be snatched up by people like me.

“Pick a shoe, any shoe,” she said, sweeping her hand around the room.

I tentatively walked over to a beautiful pair of Blahnik stilettos, which were satiny red with bejeweled enormous buttons on the toes. I shyly picked them up and presented them to Robin, who nodded her head in approval. “Good choice,” she said. “Now, you can borrow this diamond necklace with matching earrings and bracelet,” she said, presenting these items to me. “Here, let me put that necklace on you.” She got behind me and clasped the diamond choker.

“Now, I have to get dressed too. You can go in the other bedroom. There’s a full-length mirror in there. I’ll be right out.”

I went into the other bedroom and

looked in her full-length mirror, which was antique with a brass frame and on a swivel. I marveled at the way that I looked. I didn't recognize myself, really. But I felt like a princess. And Robin really did seem like a fairy-godmother right at that moment. No, a fairy godsister, which is what she called herself. She couldn't be a fairy-godmother, as I think she was my same age, if not a little younger.

Now, if only my handsome prince would talk to me tonight. Just talk to me. Acknowledge my presence without biting my head off or calling me Ms. James. That's all I asked for.

Chapter 49

Nick

I was getting dressed in my suit and tie, as I prepared to go to the Christmas Party with Ava. The attire was semi-formal, so she was wearing a black cocktail dress that showed off her fit figure, and her hair was swooped up on her head. She was wearing a shit-ton of makeup, too much for my taste, and, to me, it just masked her natural beauty. But that apparently was how she liked it, so I was not going to say a word. Saying things that women take as criticism had always ended poorly for me in the past, and I was not in the mood for a fight.

I wasn't really enthusiastic about going to the party. I wasn't in the mood

for small-talk, and seeing Scotty in a social situation could prove to be difficult, to say the least. I could possibly see her with a date, which would rip my heart out, or even watching her flirting with other guys would make me see red. Not that Scotty flirted. I didn't know if she even knew how to flirt.

I have heard that any kind of romantic entanglement with Scotty and Shane had gone to the wayside, but it still stung that she was willing to give him a chance, but not me. It was humiliating, loving a woman who didn't want me, and I never thought that I would be put into such a situation. I supposed I deserved a comeuppance,

though, after the way that I had led my life, and the way that I had always treated women. To me, women were always fungible and randos. Now, here was Scotty, posing as some kind of karmic payback for the way that I had lived my life.

I decided to have some scotch before getting into the limo with Ava. Ava was eye-candy, and would certainly draw attention at the party tonight. This was something that I usually welcomed, as I always had a hot woman on my arm. But, for some reason, having eye-candy on my arm didn't appeal to me as much as it usually did.

I really just wanted Scotty. Beautiful-without-trying, down-to-earth,

sweet, natural Scotty.

“I can’t wait,” Ava was saying. “I’m going to meet your people tonight. This is kinda a big step for us, really.”

Ava had been saying things like that a lot. Hinting around that she felt that she and I were serious because we were spending so much time together, and now I was taking her to the office Christmas party. I wasn’t feeling the same way, of course. It occurred to me that I was hanging out with Ava because I was trying to force myself to be a good boy and try to commit to somebody, and Ava was perfect on paper. I felt very little for her, though.

But maybe I can try to go through the motions with her and hope that some

kind of real affection occurred with time.

Stranger things had happened.

So, we got into our limo and made our way to the restaurant. I wanted to arrive at least a little bit early so that getting a good table wouldn't be a problem.

We got to the restaurant and took a seat. I got up and got us a couple of drinks, tipping the bartender \$100. The bartender looked more than appreciative of this, and I knew that we would be getting good service that night.

George was already there with his wife, and he motioned Ava and me over to the table. We walked over, and George greeted us. "Hey, Nick. You

going to introduce me to your date?"

"Ava, this is George. George, Ava," I said, taking a sip of my scotch. "Ava is a concert flautist."

Ava held out her hand, and George kissed it. Then he looked at me approvingly and nodded his head. Ava just smiled at George's little non-verbal cues. *I'm quite sure that she's used to the attention.*

The two of us sat down, me sipping my scotch, and Ava sipping her glass of wine that I brought her. We sat and talked and ate our hors d'oeuvres, which consisted of various kinds of cheese, fruits and crackers. I was famished, really, so I dug into these tasty treats like they were New York Strip. Which also

was on the menu for the night, incidentally.

I looked around the room. People were pouring into the room. I held my breath, waiting for Scotty to arrive. *Would she have a date?* I prayed that she wouldn't. That would completely ruin my evening, to tell the truth.

At some point, I saw her....and I couldn't hide my excitement. It was apparent, I knew that. But she was so amazingly...beautiful, sexy, and exciting. I couldn't hide it. She was dressed in a strapless red dress with the bottom composed in rose-shaped tulle and a diamond choker and bracelet. Matching earrings. She also got a haircut that framed her beautiful face and eyes. I

momentarily lost my breath.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

Unfortunately, I wasn't the only man in the room who couldn't take my eyes off of her. Every man in the restaurant, it seemed, collectively lost their breath when she walked into the room. I heard many men whispering "who is that? who is that beautiful woman? she doesn't work for us, does she? no, we don't have a woman who is that gorgeous, do we? Do we? Do we????"

I looked at her, I knew that we did have a woman that gorgeous. I knew when I first saw her. Yes, she was even more beautiful than usual, but, I knew my Scotty when I saw her. She had a new haircut, new shoes, new jewelry, a new

dress, but she was still...my Scotty. My beautiful Scotty.

At some point, Ava noticed my staring. How could she not? I was blatantly looking at Scotty, as if she was the only person in the room. Because, to me, she was just that. The only person in the room. I literally could not quit staring at her, no matter how hard I tried. I mean, I tried to look at George and his wife, and at Ava, and what they were saying, but I inevitably found myself staring at her....Scotty.

For her part, she wasn't looking at me, at all. She came in the room holding hands with Robin, the other intern, and I, at first, thought that Robin might have been her dreaded "date." But, I soon

found that, with Robin flirting with every boy in the place, this was not true. Scotty, unlike myself, appeared not to be bisexual. When Robin made her rounds, Scotty stood to the side, looking awkward for a few minutes, then some guy would make his way over, and she would look even more awkwardly towards him, trying to put on an interested-girl act for him. But I knew better.

I found myself drifting towards her, almost inevitably. I didn't consciously decide to drift towards her, but I found myself being almost pulled towards her, almost like she was like a magnetic field that was pulling me in. I talked to Ralph, then to Thomas and then to Bob, all of

them being closer and closer to her. She was just standing there, in the corner, awkwardly looking at the crowd, while one man after another came up to talk to her. She was polite, I could see that. But that's all she was. She didn't flirt with anybody, in spite of how she looked.

She saw me approaching, and she looked away. But I saw her cheeks flush, and I got more excited. Her actions towards me, in blowing me off, receded in the background, as I stared at her luscious lips, longing to feel my own on them.

Then, just when I was within a few feet of her, Shane intervened. Shane, who apparently dated her, when Scotty had the excuse that she couldn't date me,

because she didn't want to date anybody. Yet, she went out with him. Him. Now, he was at her side, putting his arm around her.

I saw that, and saw that Scotty didn't push him away, and I immediately felt disgusted with myself. Again, pining away for a woman that didn't want me. Who wanted somebody else. I turned my back and headed back to my table.

I got back there, and Ava was talking with George and his wife. She turned to me when I approached the table. "Where did you go off to?" she asked.

"Uh, to the bathroom. I really had to go all of a sudden. Sorry about that."

"Not a problem. George and Paulina and I were just talking about some of the

projects your firm has in the pipeline. Pretty interesting stuff.”

I nodded my head, my eyes still completely trained on Scotty. I literally couldn't take my eyes off of her, while I watched her talking to one man after another.

I thought I saw her looking at me, but then realized I was imagining it.

Chapter 50

Scotty

I took a deep breath as Robin and I approached the restaurant. I didn't feel comfortable, showing so much skin, but I drank a few margaritas at her apartment. This calmed me down considerably.

As we entered the restaurant, Robin grabbed my hand playfully. "Come on, Scotty, let's get people talking," she said with a grin. She was pretty tipsy by then, even more than me.

I scanned the crowd for Nick, and then my heart sank into my shoes as I saw him at George's table with his arm around a beautiful brunette. I tried to blink back my tears and put on a happy face, but it was difficult. So, I decided

that I wouldn't look in his direction. I didn't want to start crying in front of all of these people.

To my dismay, Robin left my side, to go and flirt, the second we hit the restaurant. *So much for her and I sticking together tonight.* I didn't know why I thought that she would stick with me, but that's what I was hoping for. Now I was all alone and feeling awkward.

Even more to my dismay, I found various men coming up and talking to me. Some were interns, others were associates. Even a few partners made their way up to talk to me. I tried to keep a smile on my face, but I was feeling so awkward and alone at that moment, I

couldn't stand it. And I had to make a very purposeful decision not to look in Nick's direction, lest I burst into tears.

A date. He has a date. I sighed. *Of course he has a date. As if somebody who looks like that wouldn't.*

To make matters worse, Portia was in the house, of course. I saw her staring at Nick, then looking over at me suspiciously. She leaned in to whisper to her date for the evening, who was a guy that I recognized, because he played for the Giants. He was kind of a superstar. Then she looked at me again, and over to Nick. She shook her head, then turned her back and started sipping her drink again.

At some point, Shane came up and

talked to me. He put his arm around me and whispered into my ear. “You look beautiful, Scotty. Stunning. Every guy in this room is noticing you.”

I tried to be polite, so I didn’t try to remove his arm from around my shoulder. I had no desire to make a scene. “Thank you, Shane,” I said.

I could smell the distinct odor of whiskey on his breath. He rattled around the ice in his drink, and took a sip and started crunching on some of the ice. “I never apologized for my boorish behavior that night. I’m sorry, Scotty. I don’t know what got into me.”

“Bygones,” I said.

“Well, thanks for that.”

I was extremely uncomfortable with

Shane's arm around my shoulder. I knew that there was a rumor going around that he and I were going out. At least there was. So, I needed to shut that down *tout de suite*. I couldn't have Nick hearing about that.

Just then, it hit me. How obtuse was I? Nick had heard about it! Of course! That was why he was treating me so poorly.

If Nick didn't have a date there that night, I would've gone right over to his table and ask to speak with him in private. Tell him that I went out with Shane because I wanted to go to the film festival, not because I wanted to be with Shane. Perhaps that would make him treat me better, knowing that I didn't

prefer Shane over him at all. Maybe I could tell him that my feelings for him had not dimmed, despite his cruel treatment over these past few weeks. If anything, my feelings for him had only gotten stronger, if that was even possible.

But, as Jack would say, if ifs and buts were candies and nuts, we'd all have a Merry Fucking Christmas. Nick did have a date there that night, and that was that.

Just then, I looked over at Nick, and his beautiful date had her arm around his neck and was whispering in his ear. He smiled and whispered something back.

He doesn't even know that I'm alive anymore.

I was so engrossed with staring at Nick and his date that I didn't even notice that Shane still had his arm around me and was talking to me in a low voice.

“So, what do you say you and I cut out of his place? Go back to my apartment? I mean, I live in SoHo, so we'd have to take a cab there. But I'll spring for the cab.”

I just looked at him. What he was saying was barely registering with me, as I was so upset about Nick. I simply nodded my head. “Uh, I'll be right back. I need to get some air.”

To my dismay, Shane followed me out the door.

I got on the sidewalk and started

walking. Shane was right there next to me. I started to walk a bit faster, and Shane kept up. *Doesn't this guy get the hint?*

Unfortunately, he got *a* hint. It was the wrong one, or he was interpreting it wrong. "Wait up, Scotty, you're walking too fast."

"Uh, on second thought, let's go back to the restaurant," I said. Then I started walking, just as fast, back towards the restaurant.

When I was almost to the restaurant, Shane suddenly grabbed my arm. "Where are you going? I thought we were going to try to hail a cab back to my place."

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

“Gee, I wonder. I guess it’s because you started to leave the party right when I said that I wanted us to get out of there together.”

“I said that I wanted some fresh air. Not that I wanted to leave with you.” I looked down, and his hand was still clutching my arm. “Please let me go.”

“I don’t think so,” he said, and then he pulled me into the alleyway.

Oh, crap. The face of Mr. Lucas instantly sprang into my mind, as Shane was putting his hands all over me and trying to kiss me. I made a face, and turned my head, but Shane straightened my head with his hands, and harshly put his lips on mine.

“God, you’re so fucking hot. You’re

so fuckable in that dress, I just can't stand it."

He ran his hands on my butt, and then one of his hands was on my leg and was making its way to my panties. I wasn't wearing hose with my dress, unfortunately, so I soon felt one of his fingers jamming inside of me, and then his hand was on my naked butt. The entire time, he was kissing me, or trying to.

I felt myself breathing faster and faster, and tears were coming down my cheeks.

And then, in a quick motion, he took his hand off of my genitals, and he was trying to pull my top down. I desperately tried to throw him off of me, but he

almost succeeded in getting his hands onto my naked breasts.

“I want to see them,” he said. “God, you have magnificent titties.”

He was overpowering me. He was a big guy, at six feet and around 200 lbs, and I was 115 lbs soaking wet, and was a good eight inches shorter than him.

I felt tears coming to my eyes. I was helpless to stop him, but I was desperate to do so anyhow.

“Stop, stop, stop!” I was screaming, tears coming down my face. “Please, Shane, please leave me-“

Then, at that, Nick was suddenly there on the sidewalk. He rushed into the alleyway, and immediately pulled Shane off of me. He threw Shane savagely onto

the ground, and started punching him and kicking him. "Leave her alone! She doesn't want to be with you! Can't you see that?"

Shane lay there, crumpled for a few minutes, and then got back up off the ground. He was swaying from being drunk and from being savagely pummeled by Nick. "You," he said. "What's your problem? I mean, you tendered your resignation because they were going to fire Scotty, and now, here you are, coming to her rescue like she's some kind of damsel in distress. Scotty's a big girl and she doesn't need you to keep coming to her defense all the time."

Nick said nothing, but just stood there with his fists clenched. He still had

a threatening look on his face. “Get out of here. NOW!”

Shane just looked at me, then back at Nick, and shook his head. “Alright, man. I’m going, I’m going.” Then he looked at Nick one more time. “Hey, don’t tell the partners about this, alright?”

“Like hell I won’t tell the partners about this. We don’t need a predator in our office. Now get gone.”

For a moment, it looked like Shane was going to punch Nick. I figured that Nick could take Shane, as Nick was in excellent shape and was an inch or two taller than Shane’s six feet. But I didn’t know. And I didn’t want to find out.

But Shane apparently thought better, and he turned around and walked away. I

saw him get to end of the street and hail a cab.

Nick turned to me. "Are you ok?" he asked. Then he saw that I was shivering a little bit, and he took off his jacket and put it on me. I wrapped his jacket tightly around me, covering up my cleavage.

I shook my head. "I was asking for that."

Nick wrapped his arms around me tightly, and I put my head into his chest. He was stroking my hair gently as I cried into his chest. My hands were still clutching his coat, but after a few seconds, I wrapped my arms around him as well. "Scotty, why do you think you were asking for that? Why, honey?"

"I shouldn't show so much skin. It's

just like Mr. Lucas. I shouldn't have shown skin around him, either. I deserved what I got. And I deserved to have Shane attack me, too.”

At that, Nick put my head in his hands. “Scotty, listen to me. And listen to me good. Nobody deserves to be treated like that. Nobody asks for that. I don't care if you came to the party naked, you are not asking to be raped or attacked. And your foster father was just a sick, sick man. You didn't deserve what you got. Ok?”

I nodded my head, and then Nick wrapped his arms around me again. He gently stroked my hair some more. I felt so safe there in his arms, safer than I had ever felt in my life. He was so strong

and so gentle at the same time. I didn't want to ever leave that alleyway.

At some point, I looked into his eyes. His arms were still wrapped around me. "Uh, Nick. You, uh, threatened to resign because of my getting fired?"

"I didn't threaten. I tendered my resignation. That made everybody back down. I'm surprised you haven't heard that story yet. Especially since Robin is your friend."

"No. No, I, I, haven't heard that story." I looked at him. Nobody had ever done something like that for me. "What would you have done if the partners didn't back down, and I was fired?"

"I would've walked," he said without hesitation.

I just stared at him. There were so many things going through my mind, almost instantly. These thoughts overlapped one another, but they didn't seem jumbled. On the contrary, my mind seemed preternaturally clear. One of the thoughts was that Shane was attacking me, and I thought that he was going to rape me, and Nick stepped in to protect me. He protected me, unlike all those people in my life who refused to protect me when Mr. Lucas was doing what he was doing to me. That was huge for me, that he would do that. I suddenly saw him as somebody who would be there for me, who would shield me from harm. Who would fight for me. Another thought was that Nick did fight for me against the

partners. He resigned over my possible firing, and he made it clear that, if they didn't back down, he would have walked away from his prestigious partnership. I believed him about this, too. He looked determined, and he was determined. I owed my job to him, and I owed not being raped by Shane to him as well.

Was he the one who would finally provide me the security and protection that I had been craving my entire life? The stability and comfort? I looked into his blue eyes, and I knew that he would. And, perhaps for the first time since I had met him, I felt....calm. Serene. Like, perhaps, just perhaps, I had found not only the man that I had been looking for,

but the person, in general, who I was searching for, all my life. The person who would have my back, when nobody else would.

It was if I was seeing him for the first time.

Seeing him clearly, anyhow.

I felt that I could finally trust him and tear down my walls.

Then, somehow, I got up on my tiptoes and kissed him. He seemed startled at first, but he soon was kissing me back. His kiss was gentle yet firm, and his tongue tentatively and slowly was exploring inside my mouth. He put my face in his hands, as his kiss became more insistent and passionate. He leaned into me, and I could feel his enormous

hard-on through his pants. I felt my breathing coming harder and faster, as his heart was pounding in timing and rhythm with mine. I felt tingly and warm, and, surprisingly enough, not scared.

But Nick pulled away from me. “Uh, Scotty, I. I can’t be rude to Ava. I mean, I have to get back into the party.” Then he hung his head. “I love you Scotty. I’m in love with you.”

I nodded my head. “I understand. I mean about Ava. I understand.” And I did understand. I truly did. I knew that Nick and I would be together.

I paused. “I’m in love with you, too.”

Then both of us headed back into the restaurant.

Chapter 51

Nick

I walked back into the restaurant with Scotty, feeling like I was walking on air. That kiss with Scotty in that alleyway affected me more deeply than all my kisses with Ava put together. Once again, I felt that kiss to my marrow. Every synapse in my body was standing at rapt attention. I looked at my arm, and saw that my hairs were still standing on end.

I am in love with this girl, I thought, as I looked over at her. And she loves me back.

She loves me back.

She loves me back.

She loves me back.

But I was brought back to reality upon seeing Ava, still sitting at the table with George and Paulina. Two other couples had joined George and the others - Mark and his wife, Gwynn; and Bill and his wife, Leona. Ava was looking around the room, no doubt wondering where I went off to.

I cleared my throat as I approached the table. George stood up. "Nick. Where did you go?"

"I, uh, was feeling kinda warm for some reason, so I stepped out. Then I saw a woman being mugged, and I stepped in to help her."

"Oh, shit," Ava said. "Well, you're certainly more chivalrous than most New Yorkers in helping that lady out."

What happened? Did the guy get away?"

"Yeah, but she's safe." Then I smiled. "As for the comment about my being more chivalrous than most New Yorkers – I'm a transplant from the Midwest, remember? I was brought up to help others in need."

And I sat down, and Ava immediately put her arm around me. "Your kinda a hero, you know that? A studly hero. I could take you right here, right now, in front of everybody." And then she kinda growled, and bit my earlobe.

I felt extremely uncomfortable, knowing that Scotty was probably watching us right now. I gently took Ava's arm from around my neck, and

kissed her hand.

And, just then, our main course arrived. I had chosen the New York Strip with the black trumpet mushrooms, with a side of spaetzle and bacon. Ava chose the Dover sole with a side of Brussels Sprouts.

We all chatted amongst ourselves as we ate our food and drank our alcohol. I hoped that nobody noticed how much I was looking around the room, searching for Scotty in the crowd.

I was going to have to call things off with Ava. But I didn't think that would be as easy as breaking up with Penelope was. Ava was a sweet woman, and she really did nothing wrong. But she wasn't Scotty. So, I was going to have to find a

way to let her down easily.

This night was going to be interminable. I was anxious and impatient to begin my life with Scotty. She was there, across the room, and every time I looked at her, she was glowing and beaming. She no longer looked anxious and awkward. She was like a flower that had wilted, but suddenly got a dose of sunshine and soil. And love.

I couldn't concentrate on anything that anybody was saying around me. I was just too preoccupied and anxious to be with Scotty. Yet, I had to stay with Ava, at least until the party was over. It wouldn't be right, at all, to leave her high and dry. Would it be worth it to me?

Oh, hell, yeah. Every second I was spending away from Scotty was another second wasted. But would it absolutely shitty to Ava? Oh, hell, yeah. She was a sweet woman, and she didn't deserve that.

So, I tried to be as present as possible. I tried to minimize my looking around for Scotty, but I did find myself looking for her the entire evening.

Ava noticed me looking around. "Nick, you should go and mingle a bit. I'll be here. I'm having a great time talking to George and everybody. This is your time to schmooze a bit. I know that you're new to this firm, and you probably don't know everybody. So, get on out there."

God, Ava was making me feel guilty. Did she have to be that understanding and kind? Couldn't she have been a total bitch like Penelope, in which case, it wouldn't be hard at all to break up with her?

“No, Ava, it's ok. I'll just stay here and talk with you. You're my date. I can't just leave you to mingle with everybody.”

“Well, it's just that I see you looking around a lot. I figure that you really are anxious to get out there and meet some of the other members of the firm. It's a large firm, and I'm sure you probably only know about a tenth of the people who work for you guys.”

I inwardly groaned. *Breaking up*

with Ava was going to be harder than I thought. Ironically, being in love with Scotty was making me have a conscience that I hadn't had before. I never thought twice about breaking hearts. Now I was going to have to break Ava's, and it was killing me.

Scotty had already made me a better man, but, because I was a better man, I was going to have an awful time doing to Ava what I was going to be doing. Ironic.

I sipped on my scotch. I wanted a clear head for later, but I also wanted to relax and not overthink everything.

Nick, it has to be done. You have to do it. It won't be painless, as breaking hearts usually is for you, but think

about the reward. Scotty. She's the reward.

George was talking to me, and my mind was so preoccupied with Scotty and Ava that I really wasn't paying much attention. "Isn't that right, Nick?" he was saying.

"Oh, I'm so sorry. What were you saying?"

"We were just talking about some of the projects that we have coming up in the New Year. You're going to be leading some major projects next year. It's going to be exciting."

"Yeah, I can't wait. I know that some will be overseas. I, uh, am hoping that I can bring some of my interns along with me when I have to travel."

“Well, that’s irregular, but, if you want interns with you, then you got it. It has to work around their school schedules, of course.”

I nodded. Then, I suddenly realized that I might have to travel a lot next year, and Scotty still had another year in school before she got her Master’s, so she couldn’t necessarily travel with me. Which meant that I would have to be away from her....I shook my head. *You’ll have to cross that bridge when you come to it.* Anyhow, global projects didn’t necessarily mean that I had to stay on-site the entire time. I mean, I used to stay on-site, for months at a time, but I really didn’t have to. Now, I knew that I would keep my trips as short as possible,

at least until Scotty could get out of school. When she graduates, she could just travel with me. But, at least until she gets out of school, I knew that I would minimize my time away from New York as much as possible.

I was, perhaps for the first time, thinking about something other than myself. About *somebody* other than myself. It felt odd and wonderful at the same time.

“What are you smiling about?” Ava asked me.

Again, I wasn’t even aware that I was smiling. “Oh, I guess I’m just excited about what next year will bring.”

“Oh, I know,” Ava said. “You’ll have to take some time off next year

from work, so that we can go skiing. I have a beautiful chateau in the French Alps. It's right by the town of Annecy, and it's gorgeous out there. I know that you're an avid skier, as am I, so it'll be a divine time. I don't start performing until the fall season of next year, so I'll have lots of time to travel with you before then."

"Well, I, uh, my schedule is pretty tight. But, I'll think about it."

"We'll go during your Columbia breaks. You're a partner at your firm. I'm quite sure that you can manage the time off."

"We'll see." I shifted my weight a bit in the chair, and then looked for Scotty again. I saw her across the room, a huge

smile on her face. She was talking to one of our associates from Germany, Kristof, but I didn't feel in the least bit jealous or threatened. She caught my eye, and her smile got even bigger.

God, they could turn out all the lights in this restaurant, and Scotty would illuminate it.

Just then, I felt Ava's hand on my crotch. She whispered "oooh, I thought so. You're so hard. I can't wait to get you alone. I don't think I've ever felt you this hard before."

No, Ava, you've never seen me this hard before. I've never been this hard before. Scotty had a way of making me stand at attention even more than I usually do with a woman. Just by her

smiling at me.

I was that hard just by looking at her smile.

I could just imagine how hard I would be when I finally made love to her.

Then I felt myself growing even more.

I was scaring even myself.

I gently pushed Ava's hand away.
"Not here," I whispered.

"Oh, who can tell what I'm doing? Besides, everybody here is tipsy. I doubt that they would even care that I'm grabbing your rather enormous, even more enormous than usual, manhood."

"Well, I care," I said.

Ava took her hand off my crotch, and

I could tell that she felt rebuffed. “You never minded that before.”

“Well, I mind now,” I said. “I think you’ve had a few too many drinks.” And then I looked at everybody at the table, and realized that Ava was right. They all looked pretty smashed.

That’s what happens when there’s an open bar.

The night wore on, and I made multiple attempts to leave. But I somehow found myself on stage singing karaoke with some of the other partners. We were singing – what else? *New York, New York*. Everybody was doing the can-can, but my eyes were trained on Scotty. She was in a line of people, also doing the can-can, and I smiled.

George was really getting into it, as he sang the part about “These little town blues, have all melted away...”

I rang in with the next part, trying hard not to crack up laughing. I was feeling so giddy, so on top of the world, that I wanted to announce to the entire room that Scotty was my girl. It took everything I had not to do so when I got the microphone. But I felt that I was going to burst at any second.

“I’m about to make a brand new start of it, right there in old New York...” I sang.

Then me and the other five guys on stage sang the rest of song as a chorus. Everybody was can-canning and laughing and having a great time.

I felt that I was the happiest that I had ever been. I was on stage, looking at the woman that I was madly in love with. Our eyes locked as the crowd cheered.

Life couldn't be better.

Chapter 52

The night was finally over, and the limo was there to pick Ava and me up to take us back to my loft. As soon as we got into the limo, though, Ava started to undress me.

“God, I’ve wanted to do this all night,” she said, as she attempted to unbuckle my belt. “You’re such a beautiful man, and you’ve been on fire all night long. I really see how much you want me.”

I pushed her away. “Ava, don’t, please.”

But she wasn’t taking no for an answer. She was obviously drunk out of her mind, as she had never been this sexually aggressive before. “Why not?”

People have sex in limos all the time. And I've wanted you bad this whole night."

"Ava, please don't. Please."

"Why not?" she asked, her fingers unbuttoning my shirt. She rubbed her long nails on my chest. "God, you're so beautiful. Have I ever told you how beautiful you are? Your body is like the statue of David, it's so perfect. And I love your enormous cock."

"Ava, don't."

"Why?"

"Because I'm in love with somebody else," I blurted out.

She immediately stopped. Then she just looked at me, a stunned expression on her beautiful face. She blinked a few

times. “Wh-wh-what? I-I-I d-d-don’t understand.”

I shook my head, wishing that I was as drunk as she was. “I’m so sorry. I met her a few months ago. We’ve had problems getting it together, but tonight, uh, something happened. And I now know that I’m going to be with her.” I hung my head. “I didn’t mean for it to come out quite like that, though, and for that, I apologize.”

She just looked at me. “It’s that girl in the red dress, isn’t it?”

I nodded my head. *She’s not as obtuse as I thought.* I sighed. “I know that it sounds like such a cliché, but it’s really not you, it’s me. If I didn’t meet her, I have no doubt that you and I could

have been happy together. But it's not fair to you, being with you while being crazy in love with somebody else. I'm so sorry."

"I don't understand. Why wasn't she your date tonight? I...please help me to understand."

I took a deep breath. "She's had some issues that made it difficult for her to trust me. Then, I don't know, something happened, and now I think that she's finally going to give me a chance. Really, I didn't mean for this to happen. Honestly."

She said nothing, but just nodded her head. Then she rapped on the window to talk to Charlie. Charlie opened up the window. "Yes, Ms. Patterson?" he said.

“Uh, Charlie, there’s been a change in plans. I’m not going to Nick’s loft after all, it looks like. I hope that you can go ahead and take me home right now.”

“Certainly,” Charlie said, and he made a U-Turn at the stoplight.

Ava moved over to the window and looked out it in silence. I didn’t know what to say to her. I found myself wishing that she was like all my psycho women who would be tearing me a new asshole right about now. That would make things so much easier.

We finally arrived at Ava’s loft. She turned to me. “I, uh, have my personal things at your loft, of course. I’ll be sending somebody along tomorrow to pick them up.” She was referring to the

clothes, shoes, makeup, jewelry and hair dryer that she was keeping in my loft. “Goodbye Nick,” she said.

Then she got out of the limo and hurried into her building.

I felt relieved and sad all at the same time.

I then rapped on the window to talk to Charlie again. “Uh, Charlie,” I said.

“Yes, Nick?”

“Take me Uptown,” I said, giving him Scotty’s address. I was taking a chance, again, that she wouldn’t be home, but I had to do it.

I didn’t want to spend another second without feeling her in my arms.

Chapter 53

Scotty

I was riding the subway home, and my feet hadn't touched the ground since Nick and I kissed in the alleyway. I felt like I was dreaming it all. I was so afraid that somebody was going to shake me awake and tell me that, like Cinderella, I was back to my mundane life when the clock struck midnight. Just as if nothing had happened.

It was strange, so strange, how it all shook out. From Robin's bizarre desire to make me over from head to toe, to Shane's attempted rape, to Nick showing up to save me from Shane. I never thought that an attack could lead to such a wonderful conclusion, but that's just

what happened.

In my mind, I was thanking Shane. Without him, I doubted that I could have come to the conclusion about Nick - that he was the one that I was searching for my entire life - as quickly as I did. In Nick's gallantry in defending me, I was able to see him more clearly than I ever had before.

After the party, I went back to Robin's to return the shoes and jewels. She had actually left the party about an hour or so before I got to her place, and there was a note on her door telling me not to disturb her, but to leave everything out in the hallway. I hated to do that, because she lent me expensive shoes and jewels, and somebody might steal them,

but I obliged her note. But, as I was walking away from her place, I heard loud banging and groaning, so I knew why she wasn't to be disturbed. She had hooked up with somebody, but I wasn't clear on whom, as she was shamelessly flirting with a multitude of men all night long.

I smiled to myself as I walked from her apartment to the subway station.

Then I floated, absolutely floated, to my apartment from the subway station. I was hoping that Jack was home, because I was dying, positively dying, to tell him my news about Nick. About how I was finally ready to trust Nick not to hurt me. About how Nick not only defended me against Shane, but also against Portia

and her minions. About how I finally was ready to accept that Nick maybe, just maybe, might be the one.

But Jack wasn't home. I felt sad, but I texted him to see where he was.

He texted back with a message that he had been called into work, and he would be home around 4:30 or so. I actually wanted to stay awake so that I could tell him my news the second he got in.

So, I made myself a cup of coffee and got into my jammies and tried to find something on TV to watch. I was too wired to read a book, and way too wired to study or sleep. Watching television was the only thing that I could think of doing to pass the time until Jack got

home. We didn't have the money for cable TV, of course, so it was slim pickings trying to find something, but I finally settled on a rerun of *The Andy Griffith Show*. That was the kind of light humor that I was in the mood for.

Then, around 1 AM, about an hour after I arrived home, my heart stopped. Somebody was buzzing my apartment. I took a deep breath, praying that it was Nick.

I punched the buzzer button. "Hello?"

"Hey," Nick's familiar baritone rang through my ears. "Can I-"

I buzzed him up immediately. He was at my apartment door about three seconds later, having flown up the four

flights of stairs in record time. The second he got to my hallway, he put my face in his hands and kissed me passionately and deeply. I lost my breath momentarily, as our lips and tongues were eagerly exploring inside one another's mouth. I wrapped my arms around the back of his neck, and pulled him into my apartment.

I then pulled him onto my couch, and laid down. He gently laid on top of me, but his lips did not leave mine. He didn't attempt to put his hands anywhere but on my shoulders or in my hair or other places such as that. Safe places. But, as he laid on top of me, I could feel his enormous manhood pressing against me.

I sighed. I was going to have to take

the lead on this, I knew. Nick was trying very hard to respect my boundaries, and I loved him all the more for this.

I nervously started to unbutton his shirt. He smiled at me as I touched his rock hard chest and abdomen. I knew that he had a beautiful body, just by the way that he looked in his clothes, and now, here was proof. He was chiseled like a Greek statue, yet not overly buff and brawny. He had the slender, lean and muscular physique of a runner or a swimmer, but he was strong and solid. I could hear him breathing heavily and I could feel his heart pounding. I touched his arm, and he was shaking.

Then he put his hand on my cheek again, and kissed me some more. I

started to unbuckle his belt and his pants, and I groaned as I felt his manhood through his boxer briefs. Just as I had suspected, he was enormous and rock hard.

Just then, he looked at me. “Scotty, I’m so in love with you. I want to make love to you like have never made love to anybody in my entire life. But I want to make sure that you’re ok with it.”

I nodded my head. I wasn’t sure if I was ok with it, to be honest, but this felt so....right. It couldn’t possibly be wrong. I took a deep breath. Because of his size, and because of the fact that I had not had sex in about 9 years, since I was fourteen, I knew that this was bound to hurt. But I wanted nothing more than

to feel him inside of me right at that moment.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I had my hand on his shaft. He groaned as I gently stroked him, and then I gripped his penis and choked it more insistently. He kissed me some more, but still didn't put his hands anywhere private. It was as if he was afraid to do so.

Then he asked, rather shyly, "do you mind if I touch your breasts?"

I nodded my head. "Yes, please do."

At that, one of his hands gently reached underneath my pajama top and tentatively touched one of my breasts. He groaned as he gently and smoothly cupped it, and then he started to passionately kiss me again. My hand

was still on his rock-hard manhood, as I was gripping it up and down. Then he started kissing my neck, and he tugged on my top. He looked at me, as if he was making sure that I wasn't freaking out, and, seeing the look on my face, which was probably one of absolute ecstasy, he slowly lifted my pajama top off of me.

Now, both of us were topless on the couch, and I still had on my pajama bottoms. Nick still had his pants on, although his pants were unbuttoned and his underwear was pulled down, so that his enormous penis was peeking through. He rearranged himself so that he was more to my side, and he gently fondled my breasts.

“Oh, my god,” he said. “I hope I

don't offend you by saying this, but you have the most beautiful breasts I have ever seen in my life."

I blinked rapidly. He was the only one who has ever seen them close-up unless I counted that...other man. I couldn't think of him right now. I had to be in the moment and concentrate only on Nick, or else I would start to get fearful again and I wouldn't be able to go through with this.

I felt myself blushing. "Thank you," I said. I wanted to return the favor and tell him that his body was beautiful and perfect, but I didn't really have the words.

He was shy again, although his penis was getting harder by the second. "Um,

do you mind if I kiss your breasts?”

I nodded my head, and couldn't help but smile. He was so tender, and so respectful. I never imagined that I would meet a man like him. Yet, here he was, physically perfect and so sweet...I felt, once again, like I was dreaming.

His tongue lightly and slowly circled my nipples, first on one breast and then on the other. I felt my nipples getting hard, and the sensation of his gentle strokes was stirring a powerful feeling in my nether regions. I could feel myself getting wet. My panties were actually soaking at this point.

I was breathing harder and harder, and then I felt something wonderful. It was like a build-up of energy that burst

inside of me, filling me with a pleasurable sensation that I had never felt before in my life. I moaned loudly in pleasure, as Nick slowly and gently continued to tongue both of my nipples, alternating between them for what seemed like hours.

Was that an orgasm? I suddenly knew what all the fuss was about. Because that sensation was so powerful that my entire body was soon quaking with pleasure. I could feel my legs shaking beneath Nick's weight, as the pleasurable sensation started in my nether regions, where it was, by far, the most powerful, and then the sensation made its way to my chest and throughout the rest of my body. I cradled Nick's head in my arms,

as he continued to work on slowly licking and sucking each of my nipples, his tongue making a slow circular motion around each of them.

I could still feel his hardness pressed against me, and I took a deep breath as I whispered to him “do you, uh, have protection?”

He nodded his head. “Yes, Scotty, I do.” Then he stroked my cheek and looked into my eyes. “I want to be sure that you’re ready. I don’t want to hurt you.”

I took a deep breath again. I tried not to hear Mr. Lukas’ voice in my ears, and, to my surprise, I was able to completely shut his voice out. Nick didn’t want to hurt me. Mr. Lukas didn’t care that he

hurt me. Therein lay the difference between the two men.

Then he kissed me, slowly and deeply, and more passionately than ever before. His hands smoothly ran through my hair, and then one of his hands lightly stroked my stomach and ran the length of my torso before settling onto my breast. He stroked my breast gently while he continued to kiss me, his tongue slowly exploring inside my mouth.

Then he stopped kissing me, but his hands were still stroking my hair. "I love you so much, Scotty. I just want to be 100% sure that you are ready for me to make love to you. There's really no hurry. I can be a patient man when I want to be. I'll wait for you."

I blinked my eyes and wondered if I was giving off vibes that told him that I wasn't quite ready for him to make love to me. And I realized that, after he said that he would wait, I really wasn't quite ready. I felt ready. It felt right. But there still was a little bit of fear there.

It touched me, so very deeply that he was willing to wait for me.

I finally took a deep breath. "Thank you, Nick. I, yes, I'd like to wait. I hope you don't mind."

"Not at all," he said, without hesitation. Then he smiled. "But, uh, I'd like to use your bathroom if you don't mind."

I smiled back, knowing why Nick had to use my bathroom. "Sure. Uh, it's

right there in the hallway.”

Nick went to, uh, relieve himself, while I waited for him on the couch. I put my pajama top back on, and Nick was back within a few minutes. He sat down on the couch with me and put his shirt back on. Then he looked at me. “God, Scotty, I can hardly be around you without being turned on. There’s just something about you.”

“I feel the same way,” I said, shyly. “I mean, I’m totally turned on by you. It’s just, well, there still is a tiny bit of fear. But I will say that I trust you not to hurt me. You coming to my rescue like that – it made me see you in a different light. And when I found out how you sacrificed yourself for me in front of

your partners – well, let's just say that nobody has ever done something like that for me. Ever. You don't know what that means to me, to have somebody stick up for me like that. Especially after Paul.”

Nick nodded his head. “Get used to my having your back. I'll always protect you, no matter what. You never have to be afraid again.”

Those words affected me profoundly. To know that I would never be hurt again, and if somebody tried to hurt me, I could count on somebody to be there, meant more to me than anything else in the world.

“By the way,” I said, “how did you know to come outside at just the right

time?”

Nick looked a little bit embarrassed. “I was watching you the whole time. When you left, I saw your expression and you didn’t look happy. So, I followed you out the door. It took me a few minutes to get outside, though, because people kept coming up and talking to me. I wish that I would have gotten out there sooner, because then you wouldn’t have been attacked like that.”

I said nothing, just took his hand and stroked it. He put his hand in my hair, and then stopped. “Oh, god,” he said, blushing profusely. “I’m having a hard time sitting next to you. Literally.”

I looked at his trousers and saw what he meant.

“Um, looks like I’m going to, uh, have to take a cold shower. Do you mind?”

I shook my head and smiled. “Of course not. My shower isn’t the best, though. Not like yours.”

“If there’s running water, then I’m good,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

And, sure enough, about ten minutes later, he emerged, his hair damp and his clothes back on. I caught my breath. He looked so handsome, as usual, but with his hair wet like that, and kinda in his face, he looked totally sexy, yet innocent.

How did I manage to get a guy like that to fall in love with me? I really, really, really hoped that I wasn’t dreaming. If I wake up and find out that

the whole thing was just in my head, that would be devastating.

I stood up. “You know, I’m such a bad hostess. Can I offer you a drink of orange juice or something?”

“Sure,” he said. “Uh, Scotty, is Jack coming home tonight?”

“Yeah. He works late,” I said, getting up to pour two glasses of OJ. I handed him a glass, and he sipped it. “He’ll be home around 4ish.”

Nick took a deep breath. “I really don’t want to leave. Do you mind if I spend the night?”

“I’d love that,” I said. “Jack will have to sleep on the hide-a-bed. He owes me, anyhow, after all the times that I had to sleep on the hide-a-bed because

he had a trick over.”

Nick laughed a little. “So, Jack is a little man-whore, huh?”

I nodded my head, trying to forget the fact that Nick was a man-whore too. But I truly believed that he was reformed.

I hope I wasn't being naïve.

Chapter 54

Nick

I spent the night with Scotty, and I literally had to try to block out how much she turned me on. I didn't want to have a raging hard-on, because I wanted to hold her all night long. Just hold her. Feel her warmth next to me. So, I tried mind-over-matter, and it worked for a little while. But, after feeling my arms around her slender body for about a half hour, I knew that there was no use.

"I'm sorry, Scotty," I whispered to her. "I can't help it. I wish I could."

"It's ok, Nick," she said. "Hopefully, sometime soon, it won't, uh, be as much of a problem."

I couldn't kiss her. That would really

get me going. So, I just laid behind her, feeling her body next to me. There was no better feeling that I could have ever experienced. There was no other place that I would have rather been. I mean, I had literally traveled the world. Been to some amazing places, and did amazing things. I had always had beautiful homes that were appointed in the height of luxury. Always the best of everything – top of the line cars, high dollar furniture, artwork that was worth millions – yet, spending the night with Scotty, in her tiny bed in her tiny bedroom, was my all-time favorite place to be. I would give up every bit of my wealth, if I had to in order to be with her. Every bit of it.

I couldn't sleep, even after I heard

Scotty start to breathe heavily, as she obviously was asleep. I was just too wired, too excited, too on-top-of-the-world.

I was truly in love for the first time in my life.



The next day, Scotty and I woke up, and I could hear Jack rummaging around in the kitchen. I felt a tad embarrassed, but not really.

Jack looked surprised, to say the least. “Well, hello handsome!” Then he looked at Scotty with a huge grin on his face. “Scotty Marie. You little minx.”

Scotty looked embarrassed. “Uh, sorry about last night. I know that it was

your turn to get the bed. I'll make it up to you."

"Oh, no need, no need. God knows I've done it to you about 50,000 times. I was beginning to wonder when you would ever do it back to me, and now you finally have. And you go girl. You go. You're so scandalous!"

I took a deep breath. It was Sunday, and I knew that Scotty was having finals next week. God, how I didn't want to leave that apartment. I never wanted to leave, ever. But, at the same time, I needed to be respectful and understand that Scotty was going to have to study.

"Uh, Scotty, I better leave. I know that you have a ton of studying to do. I'll see you tomorrow at work, though."

She nodded her head. “Tomorrow at work. Uh, last night. Uh, thanks. You don’t know how much what you did meant to me.” Then she motioned for me tilt my head so that she could whisper in my ear. “I love you Nick.”

My heart did about a thousand backflips. “I love you too,” I whispered back. “Like I have never loved anyone.”

And, as I made my way to the limo, as I had called Charlie a half earlier to come and pick me up, I knew that what I was saying to her was true.

Chapter 55

Scotty

Nick just left, and I was, once again, floating on air. I had to study, because finals were coming up for the next few weeks, including my finals in Nick's classes. But it was so difficult to do so. I just couldn't concentrate.

Jack had teased me some more about Nick spending the night, but he said that he was very proud of me for letting something like that happen.

"Well, nothing happened, really," I said. "I mean, there was no, uh, penetration."

"There was everything but, I hope," he said.

"No, not everything but. I mean, he,

uh, kinda took off my top and uh, you know..." I was sure that my face was all kinds of red. "He, he, he, kinda used his tongue..."

"Go on," Jack said with an amused look on his face. "So, he felt you up, and licked you like a cat. Oh, I have to live vicariously through you now that Brad's out of the picture. So, go on. What else?"

"Brad's out of the picture?"

"Yeah. I don't want no closet case, even if he does have a jillion dollars in real estate around the city. But no changing the subject. I have to know about loverboy. Your loverboy. Every juicy detail. Leave nothing out."

"Well, there's not much to tell."

"Did you see his cock?"

“No,” I said weakly. I always was a horrible liar.

“I'm calling bullshit on your scandalous ass. What was it like?”

“It was...nice. Very nice. A little, uh, well, uh, a lot, uh, huge. But nice.”

“I knew it. I knew it. Well, that's it. You just nailed down the world's most perfect man. Damn. I thought that there had to be something wrong with him, and a small dick would be it. God can't be that unfair to give one person so much. Well, ok then. You have to marry this man. Yesterday. As long as I can come in a live in your guest house.”

“What guest house? He has that loft, remember?”

“Well, then, Nick will just have to

buy me the loft next door. Wouldn't that be *tres* fabulous?"

"That would. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Baby steps, remember?"

"Baby steps my ass. Scotty, this man is in love with you. And you're in love with him. Just jump in, head first, and enjoy the ride. And think about all the hos who would give their last pair of Pradas to be in your shoes."

"I'll try not to think about that."

"Whatever. Anyhoo, where are we going right now to celebrate?"

"Oh, Jack, I'd love to go out with you. But I have a shit-ton of studying to do. Just a shit-ton. Yesterday set me back, so I gotta get right on it."

Jack looked disappointed. "Ok, then.

Ok. I mean, I haven't really seen you in like forever. But we'll go out after your finals. When are you done?"

"A week from Friday, although I only have two exams next week. I have the rest of the exams this week. So, I have to hunker down."

"Like Nick is going to give you a shitty grade."

"The exams are anonymous. He doesn't know which papers he is grading."

"Oh. Too bad."

"No, I'm glad about that. No way would I want a grade that I didn't earn just because the instructor, uh, likes me."

"Take it anyway you can get it. And, the instructor doesn't like you. He's head

over heels crazy in love with you. I can see it in his eyes.”

I felt my face turning about a hundred shades of crimson. “If you say so.”

“I say so.”

So, I hunkered down and got to work with my studying and researching for various final projects and papers I was going to have to hand in that week.

After a couple of hours, I stretched and I heard the door buzz. My heart started racing. Nick coming to visit me would be a distraction, but I really wanted to see him.

Jack was at the door. “Hello?”

“Hello,” the disembodied voice said. “I have a delivery for Scotty James.”

Jack pressed the buzzer and looked at me. "A delivery. I wonder what that is?"

A few minutes later, Jack opened the door, and a man was standing there with a dozen roses in a crystal vase. They were beautiful, red, and long-stemmed. I could barely breathe as I took the flowers and looked at the card. "Thinking of you and can't wait to see you tomorrow. Love, Nick."

"Oh my god. These flowers are gorgeous," I said. I never in my life had received anything like this from any man, and I suddenly realized exactly what I had been missing all those years. The feeling of being special to somebody, so special that the man can't take his mind

off of me.

And, perhaps even more importantly, knowing that the feeling was mutual.

Chapter 56

Nick

I was going to invite Scotty over to my place on Christmas Eve and I wanted to have something special for her. So, I was actually going to cook dinner. Which was a challenge for me, to say the very least. I had never in my life cooked much of anything. I mean, in college, I lived on the usual college food - frozen burritos and shit on a shingle - and I had girlfriends who would cook for me, as I had always been very athletic, so I needed to eat properly. I also ate out a ton. Always. And that was how I lived my life with Rielle as well.

Cooking had never been something that I had really aspired to. That was

always Ryan's forte, even during his drug days. Ryan was the gourmet cook. Me, not so much. It was just too much trouble, and cleaning up was a bitch. I had a live-in housekeeper when I lived in Kansas City, but here in New York, there was not a place for Sheila, my live-in housekeeper, to stay, so I had been living very much on my own, and I didn't want to have to clean up a mess in the kitchen. And, since the best way to not have to clean up a mess in the kitchen was not to make a mess in the first place, this was another reason why I pretty much forwent cooking.

Yet, I wanted to cook for Scotty. Which was huge for me. However, since I have had zero experience in doing so, I

decided to practice a bit in the kitchen, to try to get the hang of it. So, I went to the grocer and got some frozen chicken breast. I came home, put my burners on high and put the frozen chicken breast into a frying pan and tried to cook it.

That didn't turn out well at all. The chicken was charred black on the outside, and completely raw on the inside. I scratched my head, looking at the inedible chicken, wondering what I did wrong.

Another time, I damn near set the kitchen on fire with my efforts. I learned a lesson from that – make sure that I had a fire extinguisher at the ready when I cooked. So, in my further cooking endeavors, the fire extinguisher was

right there next to the stove.

Finally, I called Ryan.

“Hey,” he said. “What's going on?”

“Buddy. I'm dying here.”

“Why?” He sounded a bit alarmed.

“I've been trying to practice my cooking skills. I really don't know what I'm doing. I'm afraid that I'm about to burn down my loft.”

Ryan started laughing hysterically.

“Hey,” I said. “It's not funny.” But then, I started laughing too. “Ok, it is funny. But, seriously, I've already started one fire that I had to put out, and I've burned everything I have tried to cook. What do I do?”

“Well, buddy, I have to tell ya. Get *The Joy of Cooking* at Barnes and

Noble, and *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* by Julia Child. Also, DVR some cooking shows on the Food Network. You're a smart guy. You got this."

I sighed. "Ok, but I don't exactly have years of experience like you do."

"Sure. If you spent your time cooking instead of chasing tail, you would be much better off."

"Thanks a lot," I said. "Way to rub it in."

"Just joking," he said. "Really not, but that was kinda mean of me to say."

I just shook my head. "Well, thanks for the advice. I'll find those books and see what I can do."

"This girl. She must really mean a

lot to you for you to go through all this trouble.”

“You have no idea.”

And he didn't.

Chapter 57

Scotty

The two finals weeks went by like a whirlwind. I didn't see Nick that much during those two weeks, aside from seeing him at work, because I didn't have his classes that week, and he had a proctor come in to administer his exams. Finally, on the 20th, I had my last paper to hand in, and I was able to take a breather. Those two weeks were tough, between working my job and drafting ever more demanding projects there and trying to get every last bit of studying, researching and writing in, so I had to admit that it was quite a relief to get it all behind me.

It was also a relief that Shane was summarily fired. Nick made sure of it, although he didn't tell the partners exactly why. No questions were asked, though. They pretty much just fired Shane because Nick wanted them to. Nick was that powerful in the firm.

Finally, my head was able to think of something other than designs and researching. So, when I got to work that day, I made sure that Nick knew that it was time for me to let loose a little bit.

“Well, Scotty, I'm glad that you let me know that you're free. Actually, though, I was wondering if you don't mind waiting for us to be alone until Christmas Eve. I'd love to have you over at my loft and we can make things

special.”

“Sure,” I said. Actually, that was ok, because Jack was chomping at the bit to go out that weekend, so I didn't mind that I wouldn't be seeing Nick until Christmas Eve.

So, Jack and I went out drinking that weekend, and, on Christmas Eve, Nick came to pick me up to take me to his loft.

“Now that you're my girl, I really don't want cold, impersonal limo rides to my place,” he explained as he opened the passenger door of his Jag. “And I have a surprise for you.”

I got into the warm leather seat, and Nick immediately put his hand in my hair and kissed me passionately. “God, I've missed you. I mean, we've seen each

other at work, but I've been dying to get you alone. Just you and me.”

I felt butterflies when he said that. About a million butterflies. I looked at my hands, and saw how much they were shaking. Yet, at the same time, I felt calm. Serene. Like I was right where I was supposed to be. It was right with Nick. I could just feel it.

I hadn't had the money to really buy Nick much for Christmas, so I actually knitted something for him in my spare time. It was a scarf and hat, and I was able to get it done the previous Sunday, as I didn't see Nick and my finals and everything was over by then. I hoped that he understood that this gift was meaningful.

When I got to the loft, I smelled something cooking. Nick's loft was decorated beautifully, with an enormous Christmas tree that was in the corner of the room, and the tree had about a million lights and ornaments. I looked out the window, and snow had just begun to fall. There was soft Christmas music on in the background.

“And what is your surprise?” I asked.

“Uh, actually, the surprise is that I made dinner tonight. Probably for the first time in my life.”

I looked at him, and then felt like I was going to burst out laughing. He looked so sweet, and so much like a little boy who was dying to please me. I

felt like his making dinner was a big deal, because he obviously felt like it was.

“That's very sweet,” I said. “What did you make?”

“Veal *Osso Bucco*,” he said. “You don't understand, Scotty. I don't do this for anyone. Not ever. I've actually been practicing my cooking skills the past week or so. I burned quite a few things along the way. I even had to call Ryan several times to get pointers, because that guy is a mean cook, let me tell you.”

That was when I knew how much I meant to him, and his cooking for me touched me like nothing else possibly could. So, I went up to him, and wrapped my arms around him. “Thank

you, Nick. That's probably the nicest thing that anybody has ever done for me."

Then we kissed, lightly, gently. He wrapped his strong arms around me, then started gently stroking my hair as our kiss became ever more passionate and urgent. I could immediately feel his hardness again as he leaned into me.

"Uh, let's quit for now," he said. "Or we might not make it past dinner, and I've worked too hard on this meal to pass it up."

"I agree," I said. "I can't wait to taste it!"

Nick got out a bottle of wine and poured me a glass and also one for himself. He brought out the salad, which

was a simple Caesar salad, and proudly announced that he made the dressing himself. “Egg yolk, olive oil, anchovies, Parmesan cheese and garlic,” he said. “And a little lemon and Worcestershire.”

I smiled and bit into the salad. “Very nice, Nick,” I said. “Probably the best Caesar salad I’ve had.”

“Right,” he said. “You don’t have to blow smoke up my ass. I’m already in love with you. But thanks.”

“No, really. It’s very good.” And it was. It was almost perfect.

Then the main course, Veal *Osso Bucco*. This seemed to be an amazingly difficult dish for an amateur cook. It involved a lot of fresh herbs and fresh vegetables and a Dutch Oven. He served

it with a side of potato gnocchi, and a broccoli casserole.

It actually was delicious. I smiled, because I was apprehensive about Nick's ability to pull something like this off. "This is a ten," I said, digging in. "This is really, really excellent."

"You're not just saying that?"

"No. I'm being totally serious. It's really good."

"So, do you think I should quit my day job and open up a restaurant?" he asked with a smile.

"Well, the architectural world would be losing a genius if you did that, so no."

At that, he got up out of his seat and kissed my forehead. "And now, for the dessert."

He brought out a crème brulee, lighting the top of it with a lighter. This, too, was delicious, and seemed to have a level of difficulty beyond that of somebody who had never before cooked.

“This has all been amazing,” I said. “How did you learn all this?”

“It wasn't a problem,” he said. “I just didn't let it defeat me. I never let things defeat me.”

“That's an admirable trait,” I said.

Then he got up again and gave me his hand. “Dance with me,” he said.

We got up and danced slowly around the room to *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* and other songs. He sang softly in my ear, and then

whispered "I'm so happy you're here. This is going to be the best Christmas ever."

"Oh, I agree," I said, although it would be difficult for this Christmas with him to not be the best Christmas ever. After all, prior to this, I've had nothing. Nothing special for Christmas. No presents, except for when I lived with Mr. Lucas, and I couldn't enjoy the presents then. No special person. Nothing.

Now, I seemed to have it all. A special guy who loved me. I couldn't ask for more.

At some point, Nick started kissing me, slowly, while we danced. I caught my breath, wanting to savor this moment.

He tasted of crème brulee, and his lips were so very gentle. He was actually a great kisser. A magnetic kisser. I felt everything in my body stand at attention – everything seemed tingly to me.

My heart was pounding out of my chest, as I realized that, quite possibly, tonight would be the night. The night when I would make love for the very first time. Make love, not be raped. There was a world of difference to me, so I felt that I would be losing my virginity.

I was very nervous, to put it mildly, but also very excited.

“Scotty,” he whispered. “What are you thinking?”

“Just that, I, uh, very much want you

to make love to me tonight.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I've thought of little else these past few weeks. I didn't think that I'd be ready for something like that for a long time. But I realized that you would do anything for me, and that you are in my life to protect me, not to hurt me. I realized that when you saved me from Shane and from losing my job. So, I'm very nervous. Don't get me wrong. But I think that I'm ready.”

Nick nodded. “This isn't very romantic, but needs to be said. I got checked out this week. I'm in the clear. But I'm sure that we still need to use condoms anyhow, because I would imagine that you, uh, are not using

anything.”

“No, I'm not,” I said. “To be honest, I never thought that I would ever have a need for that. Until recently.”

“Ok,” he said. “We'll go slow. I don't want to hurt you.”

At that, he went to his couch and motioned for me to join him. Once again, I could hear my heartbeat in my ears, almost, I was so nervous. I sat down next to him, and he gently put his hand in my hair and kissed me. Then he said “I'm not going to make any moves without asking first. And you need to tell me if you're feeling uncomfortable. Remember, I can be a very patient man when I want to be. So, don't feel pressured.”

“I don't,” I said. “I feel that this is right, like I have never thought anything was right in my life.”

Nick took a deep breath. Then he started kissing me again and gently put his hand on my stomach. “Is it ok if I touch your breasts?” he asked. He had before, the first time that we made out, but apparently he had to make sure that I was still ok with it. I nodded my head, and he gently lifted up my top and unhooked my bra. He slowly ran his hand over my breasts, and then unbuttoned his own shirt. I gulped, and put my hands on his magnificent torso. He was so smooth and so toned and taut, like he spent his lifetime running and lifting weights. *Sheer perfection.*

We ran our hands over each other's chest areas for awhile. My hands were wandering around his firm pecs and onto his even firmer back. I ran my hands over his muscular arms, and kissed his neck. He was doing the same – running his hands over my back, waist and breasts, and then he gently ran his hand through my hair, and, every so once in awhile, he would rub my cheek with the back of his hand while looking into my eyes.

After a little while, I decided to get friskier with him. I unbuttoned my pants and slipped them down. Then I grabbed ahold of his belt and unbuckled it, before unzipping his pants and taking them off of him. I laid down on the couch, and

Nick's hands ran from my calves to my thighs. Then he started to gently massage my legs, and whispered "I'd like to explore your thighs with my tongue."

I nodded my head, as he firmly and gently ran his tongue on my inner thigh. I could feel his lips sucking on my skin just a little, and he bit me tenderly as well. His hands were working on the outside of my legs, while he licked and sucked the inside of my thighs. I put my legs around his neck, and then I could feel his mouth making its way further up.

"Sweetie," he said. "Please let me know if anything I'm doing is making you uncomfortable. I'd like to take your panties off now and explore, if you let me."

By then, I would have let him do anything at all. I was so engrossed with how I was feeling about him kissing and licking my thighs, and the way that his commanding hands were caressing my legs, that he could do anything to me. I was feeling things that I had never felt before. There were tingles and electricity that was flowing through my body. I started to moan, as Nick removed my panties.

Then his tongue was on my clitoris, and it was probably the most amazing sensation that I had ever felt in my entire life. He took his time, as his tongue was slowly circling my clitoris, then he started to lick and suck inside of me. My breathing started coming harder and

harder, and I could feel my legs start to shake. Nick was still gently, yet firmly, concentrating on allowing his tongue to explore my clitoris and vagina, and then his hands gently lifted up my butt off of the couch, and he gently put his fingers inside my rear. He pressed down, and then put one of his fingers on his other hand inside of my vagina.

I felt the energy that I felt before, but stronger this time, build from my vagina area and spread throughout my body. I felt like my entire body was tingling with pleasure, and I started moaning and breathing heavier and heavier. I briefly felt like I would lose consciousness, because I was so completely engrossed and feeling a sense of extreme joy. Also,

my breathing was so heavy, I was almost hyperventilating.

Then, my heart really started to race as Nick gently whispered in my ear “are you ready for me, Scotty? Please tell me if you aren't. We can stop.”

“No, Nick,” I said. “I want you to make love to me.”

I heard him sigh heavily, and then he unwrapped a condom and slipped it on. And then I could feel his enormous manhood at my opening. I let out my breath so that I could relax, but, it was painful at first. Very painful. I was completely wet, though, so the pain lasted only briefly. As he slowly and gently slipped his penis in and out, he started kissing me passionately, and I

had an even more powerful orgasm than the last one. This orgasm lasted for what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few minutes, but this feeling was still unlike any other I had felt before. Nick's hands were on my breasts and moved to my waist and then he was running his hands through my hair.

Nick took his time. He was slow and patient and very tender. He rhythmically moved inside of me, but never really picked up speed. He said to me in a low voice “are you ok? Are you feeling comfortable? Please tell me if I'm hurting you.”

I just shook my head. It was amazing to me that I was so relaxed and felt so free. I never thought that I could let a

man make love to me, after all that I had been through, but I trusted Nick so implicitly that I let myself go. “No, you aren't hurting me. That feels incredible,” I said as he slipped in and out of me in a slow but rhythmic manner. “Please, please keep going.”

He continued to make love to me, slowly and patiently for the better part of an hour. Then I heard him groan and shake, and then he laid down on top of me. He was breathing extremely heavily, and so was I by that point. And then he kissed me tenderly and brushed a tendril of my hair to the side. He kissed my forehead. “God, you are so beautiful,” he said. “Do you know how beautiful you are?”

I shook my head. Truth be told, I had heard that all my life by various men, but I figured that each of them wanted in my pants, so I never paid them any mind. But, somehow, Nick telling me that made me actually feel, well, beautiful. I looked at him and smiled. His eyes were so blue that I had a hard time looking at him for any period of time, and I honestly thought that I had never seen a face as handsome as his was right at that moment.

He continued to stroke my face and kiss my cheek and forehead lightly. Then he was kissing my lips again, more insistent this time than before. His hand reached down on my breast again, and his lips were on my nipples, biting and

sucking them gently yet firmly. But he sighed and moved off of me. "I want to make love to you again, but I think that you've probably had enough for the night. We have the rest of our lives to explore each other and make love to one another, so there's no need to go there again tonight."

He was probably right. He was huge and I hadn't had sex in so long that it did hurt, and I was sore. But, at the same time, feeling him inside me was a feeling that I never thought that I could ever have. As if somehow I was complete for the first time. I never thought that a part of me was missing, but now I realized that I did have something missing. When Nick made love to me, it felt like that

part of me was melded to my soul, so that I felt perfect and whole.

So, I casually but insistently let him know that I was ready to go again. I put my hand on his erect penis, and stroked it. Then I nervously put my lips on the head of his manhood and licked it lightly. He groaned as I continued down his shaft. I tried not to remember all the times that I was forced to do this to Mr. Lucas, and how he instructed me on how to do it right. How he made me watch porn movies with him, so that I could learn how it was done. Those thoughts briefly entered my mind, but I willed them away. This was a different thing. Nick loved me and I loved him. He was not overpowering me, or taking

advantage of my smallness, youth and fear. He wasn't threatening me the way that Mr. Lucas did. Everything that Mr. Lucas was, Nick was the opposite, so I sucked him without apprehension.

Nick stroked the back of my neck, and then said "I want to make love to you again. Are you ok if I do that?"

I nodded my head and said nothing. So Nick moved on top of me and entered me again. This time, there was no pain, so there was only pleasure. And I came almost immediately when he started to thrust his manhood rhythmically inside of me. He made love to me more forcefully this time, but he still had an overall level of tenderness. But there was definitely more passion the second

time around, as I was less a girl who was losing her virginity and more a woman who was ready to lose herself in utter abandon.

After we made love the second time, Nick said “will you spend the night with me in my bed?”

“Of course,” I said, thinking that if I was going to spend the night in Nick's bed, I might never want to leave.

That night, neither of us got much sleep. We explored each other's bodies in a very leisurely and longing fashion. When we climbed the stairs and I laid down on his glorious California king, Nick immediately started kissing me everywhere. He started with my toes and feet and worked his way up. “I want to

make sure that I cover every inch of you with my tongue,” he said, and he did. I did the same to him. We made love again and again that night, and, every time was better.

We simply could not keep each our hands off of one another that night.

Chapter 58

The next day was Christmas, and I nervously anticipated presenting Nick with my gifts. We had spent the previous night making love, so both of us were exhausted, but I still was also excited that I would be spending Christmas Day with him.

Nick made French Toast and orange juice with turkey bacon. "Cooking for the second time," he said with a smile. "If this doesn't show you how whipped I am about you, I don't know what will."

I smiled back and took a sip of my juice. Nick had a dreamy look on his face, his eyes half closed in a lazy grin. His hair was askew and he was dressed only in his boxer shorts. I just stared at

his torso longingly. It was the first time that I was able to truly appraise him and his beautiful body, and just take him in. Every muscle in his chest and abs were defined and ripped. His arms were muscular and strong. His chest tapered into his narrow waist and well-toned legs. I studied him and my eyes made their way to his chiseled face. His full, rose-bud lips and strong jawline. His blue eyes, which were looking at me with absolute depths of love right at the moment.

I sighed. I was officially on top of the world right at that moment. I felt my past recede into the background. All the pain that I had endured in my life felt like it was erased by Nick's tenderness

and love for me. It was like I suddenly had a protective shield around me that nobody would be able to penetrate. And I never would be hurt again. Nick wouldn't let that happen to me anymore.

“What are you thinking about, my love?” he asked me.

I shook my head, hesitant to tell him my thoughts. “Nothing. I'm just so happy right now. I didn't think that this level of happiness was even possible for me. I mean, I haven't been unhappy in awhile, but there definitely has always been something missing. And now I've found it. I feel like I have everything now.”

He put his hand in my hair and kissed my forehead. “I feel the same way about you,” he said. “I never thought that

I could feel this strongly about another person. This connected. I didn't think it was possible, to be honest with you.”

Then he kissed me again, from across the table. His lips were so soft on mine. He put my face in his hands, and then he stroked my arm. I got goosebumps as his hands lightly ran over my wrist and up to my shoulder. We both stood up and made our way to his couch. I laid down and he laid right behind me. I took off my clothes, as did he, and he kissed me while his hands played with my breasts. “I don't want to make love right now,” he said. “I just want to enjoy being near you. Feeling your warmth next to me. Your heat. Your soft skin. I just want to take everything in for a little

while. And then I want to make love to you again.”

So, we lay on the couch for a few hours, just feeling each other's body warmth. He kissed me and played with my body while we lay there, but we also talked to each other about different things. We talked about silly things, such as when Nick said “You know, last year, when I had nobody in my life, I actually bought a Festivus pole. I just wasn't in the mood for celebrating.”

I started laughing. “Oh, god, that was one of my favorite episodes of *Seinfeld*. What a tradition – to tell everybody in your life how they disappointed you in the past year!”

“Yeah. I wish I had my ex-wife at my

Festivus celebration. I would've given her an earful.”

I giggled. “I guess I could have done the same with my mom.”

We also talked about more deep topics. “I never thought that I would be so happy on Christmas. And I never thought that I could let a man touch me after what Mr. Lucas did to me. I thought that I would be too scared.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Like that entire episode in my life never happened. Being with you kinda hit the reset button for me. I feel reborn, like I can live my life like a normal woman who doesn't have to always be afraid. I feel like I have the courage of 10 women now. It's just so important to

have somebody who you know will catch you when you fall, and will help you ward off the dark thoughts and demons in the night.”

It was then that I told him how much I had been plagued throughout my life with constant nightmares. “I dreamed of Mr. Lucas almost every night. I couldn't get away from it. From him. What he did. The violation. The humiliation. The shame. Always the shame. Shame was what defined my entire life and existence. But you know what? I didn't have those dreams last night. I only dreamed of you. You've managed to chase away the darkness, so I have hope for the first time in my entire life.”

He said nothing, but kissed me again.

Then he said “that means so much to me that you say that. That I earned your trust, and you have learned to look past the man that I was and can see the man that I'm going to be for you. I don't know what I did in my life to deserve a woman like you. I am only grateful that you were brought into my life.”

We talked like that all afternoon, while laying naked on the couch together. And we also kissed passionately while taking breaks from talking. And, even while we were talking, we were casually running our hands all over each other's body. This was almost better than making love, because this was true intimacy.

Intimacy laced with white-hot

passion.

Finally, after laying around like this for most of the morning and afternoon, Nick made love to me again. “I don't want to eat or sleep or do anything anymore except for be inside of you all afternoon,” he said. I groaned as I felt him enter me for perhaps the tenth time since I alighted in this loft last night. I never thought that two people could be so consumed with one another, but I was wrong. Because that was the best way to describe our heat and our passion – it was all-consuming. Neither of us wanted to do anything except be with each other, our bodies entwined and touching and feeling.

We ended up in his bed again, and

after we made love again, Nick told me to wait in the bed, because he was going to be right back.

He was, but his hands were behind his back. “Close your eyes, Scotty,” he said. I did as I was told. “You’ve given me the best Christmas present ever, just by being here. But don’t think that I had forgotten to get you something.”

I smiled as he handed me a small, gift-wrapped box. My heart thundered in my ears as I took the box with shaking hands. “Oh, my god,” I said. “What did you get me?”

“Open it, love,” he said.

I did, and, in that Tiffany box was the most beautiful diamond earrings and choker combination I had ever seen. The

diamonds were perfect in cut, clarity and color. My hands were shaking, as I asked him to put the choker on my neck. I fastened the gorgeous earrings in my ears. Then Nick brought me a mirror and I looked in it. "I don't know what to say," I told him. "These are...there are no words. I...wow."

I stood there looking at my reflection, my mouth agape. I didn't recognize myself, almost. Who was that girl in the mirror? The one with the smile that was completely genuine and wasn't used to cover up hurt and shame? It was as if I was seeing her for the first time. "Hello, gorgeous," I said, doing my best Fanny Brice. "It's nice to see you." I fluttered my eyelashes and

giggled. I was acting like a girly-girl for once, and it felt wonderful.

Nick was standing there watching me, a huge grin on his beautiful face. “Seeing you light up like that is probably the best present that anybody has ever given me.”

I blushed. “Well, I have something for you, too. I mean, it's not much, but I made it myself. It's the thought that counts.”

“I'm quite sure that I will love it,” he said.

So, I handed him my little box that had the hat and scarf in it. Nick opened it, and genuinely looked delighted. “This is beautiful, Scotty. You made this?”

“Yeah. I had to learn to knit years

ago, because I wanted to have affordable winter things. Plus, knitting genuinely relaxes me.”

He beamed as he tried on the navy blue scarf and hat. “How do I look?”

“Gorgeous, as usual,” I said. “I’m, uh, glad that you like it.”

“I love it. Truly, I do. Because it came from the heart. Plus, it’s my color.”

“It sure is,” I said.

Then he kissed me passionately. “Oh, Scotty, I just can’t get enough of you. I want you to stay here with me forever.”

As we made love again, I thought to myself *I want to stay here forever too.*

Chapter 59

Nick

It had been several weeks since Scotty spent the holidays with me in my loft, and things were going great. Better than great. I didn't want to tell her this, but I was, more and more, seeing her as somebody whom I could be married to for the rest of my life. And, unlike my first disastrous marriage, which was a shot-gun marriage, really, I was thinking that Scotty and I could actually make things work. Even after the initial passion wears off.

And the passion between us was white hot. I wanted to make love all the time, and we did, as much as was humanly possible. But we also truly got

each other, and I was finding that I was comfortable with her and could talk to her about anything at all. So, we had the best friends things down pat as well. Best friends with tons of benefits – that would describe the ideal relationship, and that was what we had.

The only thing that nagged at me was that I had never brought up to her the subject of my bisexuality. Not that it was relevant anymore, as I honestly couldn't see myself straying from Scotty, ever. But, at the same time, it was something that was known in certain circles, and I didn't want her to be blind-sided by the revelation.

Plus, there was the issue of Portia. Portia, being a very intelligent woman,

almost immediately picked up on the fact that Scotty and I were together. And she wasn't in the least bit happy.

She called me into her office one day. I arrived and sat down.

“So, Nick, you still want to tell me that you're not banging that waif?” she said after the holiday break.

“Nope, not banging her,” I said. And, technically, that was true, as I didn't consider myself to be “banging” Scotty. Rather, Scotty was, in my mind, my significant other. Therefore, I didn't consider myself to be “banging” her at all.

“I'm calling bullshit.”

“Whatever. Listen, Portia, even if Scotty and I were together, and we're

not, but, if we were, what's the problem? This firm doesn't have a policy about things like that.”

To my surprise, Portia's face became sad. It looked like she might start crying. “Nick. I know what you think of me. That I'm this automaton who has no feelings whatsoever. But you couldn't be more wrong. I genuinely like you, Nick. I genuinely think that you and I could have a good time together.”

I sighed. “What about that superstar Giants player that you're dating?”

Portia shook her head. “I'm getting tired of that lunkhead, to tell the truth. I mean, he gets me into some fabulous parties, but that's as useful as he gets. All he wants to talk about is football,

protein shakes and working out. The guy has never even heard of Frank Lloyd Wright, let alone van der Rhoe. How can I have a conversation with somebody like that?"

"I don't know. It's not like he's the only guy in town. Find somebody who you have more in common with."

"That's just it. There are so few hot men out there who are interesting and have the same focus that I do. You're like the perfect combination of brilliant and beautiful, and that's hard to find. I fantasize about you all the time. And not about us having sex, but actually being together."

I was a bit stunned. I wasn't expecting this at all. At all at all. I took a

deep breath. This was getting trickier by the second to navigate. “Portia. You have to stop thinking about me in that way. I’m not interested. You’re not my type. I’m really looking for somebody simple and sweet.”

“Like the waif.”

“Well, I guess. But, I’m sorry to tell you something that you don’t want to hear. You are not simple, and, I’m sorry, you aren’t sweet. It’s nothing against you, though. It’s just a matter of taste. I’m quite sure that there are plenty of men who are looking for a dominant woman who looks like a Victoria Secret model.”

She sighed. “Ok, then, Nick. Well, thanks for your honesty. In the meantime, would you like to have a drink with me?”

I have some amazing double barrel scotch that's fifty years old.”

I started salivating when she said that. I was always a sucker for some good aged scotch.

Portia brought out the bottle. She certainly did know her scotch. A Glenfiddich 50-year-old double barrel scotch was the best there was.

I was hesitant to have a drink with her, but only did so because I figured that I could possibly get her off of Scotty's case if she and I were friendly.

“Okay,” I said. “One drink. And then I have to get back to work.”

At that, she poured a glass for her and me. She raised her glass, and I raised mine. And then she looked at the

door.

I looked at the door, too, instinctively. I wanted to see what she was looking at. I had nothing to hide, but I didn't want Scotty seeing Portia and me. She might get the wrong impression.

I turned back around. "What were you looking at?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing. I just thought that I heard somebody approaching, that's all. In the meantime, bottoms up."

I smiled and took a sip of the scotch. As I drank the whiskey, I just looked at Portia, realizing that I didn't have much to say to her, really.

I started to open my mouth to say something, but nothing came out. I was

feeling weird and woozy.

Portia was saying something to me, but it sounded like she was at the end of a long, long tunnel. “You must think I'm a fool, Nick. You're banging that waif, but you won't be for long, I predict. You won't be for long.”

I was confused on what she was saying and why she was saying it. All that I knew was that I was feeling like I was about to pass out.

And then, all at once, everything went black.

Chapter 60

Scotty

I was at work, feeling like I was on top of the world. I was so in love with Nick, and he was with me. We were spending every spare minute together, and our lives were full of passion and fun. Every moment was a revelation between us.

There was nothing that could shake my happiness.

Or, so I thought.

The first intrusion into the happiness bubble came in the form of a phone call from the child protective services people.

“Ms. James?” the woman said.
“This is Chantal Washington calling

from the Office of Children and Family Services.”

My heart sank. I had tried so hard to avoid this. Why did I think that I could run from it forever? “Yes,” I said. “Can I help you?”

“I need for you to meet with me in my office at your earliest possible convenience.”

I sighed. Suddenly, my future looked very different. I no doubt would have to take custody of Aaron. And there was no way that I could maintain my full load of classes and job while caring for a two-year-old.

It finally caught up to me.

My heart in my throat, I said “I can probably make it today after work. How

long are you going to be in your office?"

"I can stay as long as you need me to. But I really need to speak with you about your brother, Aaron."

"Of course," I said. "I can make it to your office at 8 tonight."

"Very good," she said. "I'll see you then."

I hung up and put my head in my hands. I could see my dreams being shattered after that phone call. It was as if my goals were a crystal egg that was extremely fragile, and the egg was thrown to the ground and shattered in a million pieces.

My dreams were going to be shattered in a million pieces.

Oh, well, it's just as well. Aaron

does need protection. It's time for me to be less selfish and think of him. Yes, I probably would have to drop out of school, and drop this internship as well, I thought. I could see no way out of it.

I took a deep breath. I needed to see Nick and talk to him. See if he had any ideas about what to do.

Just then, I got a phone call. From Portia.

“Scotty, this is Portia. I need to see you in my office right now.”

Just what I need. More flagellation.

“Sure, Portia, I'll be right there,” I said.

I trudged to her office, planning to find Nick after talking to her. I knocked on the door.

“Come in!” she called.

I opened the door. And almost passed out upon seeing what I was seeing in that office.

Portia and Nick were lying on the couch, completely naked. Portia's disturbingly perfect body was lying on top of Nick's completely nude form. She was stroking his hair and smiling at me like the cat who had just eaten the canary.

I immediately turned around and ran down the hallway and into the bathroom. I hurried into one of the stalls and crouched down to the porcelain bowl and threw up.

I was shaking all over. I laid down next to the bowl and sobbed. *Stupid Scotty. Stupid, stupid, stupid. Leopards*

don't change their spots. Idiot. How could you have trusted him? Once a man-whore, always a man-whore.

At some point I got up off the floor and made my way out of the office suite. Once again, I took the stairs down to the lobby, my tears flowing more than they ever had before.

I had been through so much in my life. At times, my depression threatened to overwhelm me.

But nothing was as painful, in my life, as what I just saw in Portia's office. Never in my life had I felt that I wanted to die.

At that moment, that was exactly what I felt. That I wanted to die.

In an absolute daze, I walked onto

the sidewalk. I started to cross the street. A car was coming around the corner, too fast.

And that was the last thing that I remember.

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.

Look for the next edition of Nick's story around April, 2014.

Extra Extra

Want to know what happens next? Sure you do! To get updates on upcoming books, please subscribe to my newsletter at <http://eepurl.com/Ej2sL>. I promise not to spam you, but I want to keep you in the loop.

In the meantime, you can like me on Facebook - goo.gl/fWxz2t. 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.

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!

