

The book cover features a sepia-toned photograph of two muscular men and a woman. The men stand in the background, shirtless, with one wearing white briefs and the other in cargo shorts. The woman is lying on her back in the foreground, wearing a white bikini bottom. The title 'Cat Grant' is at the top, and 'The Arrangement' is in the center. The publisher's name 'LYRICAL PRESS' is at the bottom.

*Cat Grant*

The  
*Arrangement*

LYRICAL PRESS

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

**Lyrical Press, Inc.**

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The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

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The Arrangement

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## **The Arrangement**

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## **Dedication**

To Don, for his unwavering faith and support.

To Gina and Shael, for help, commiseration and lots of  
laughs.

And, lastly, to Renee and Emma—thanks for taking a chance  
on me.

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## **Chapter 1**

### Deception

The apartment served not only as a trysting place, but a place of comfort and refuge. Tonight Eric Courtland found himself sorely in need of all three. Loosening his tie, he rolled his neck in a vain attempt at easing his knotted muscles, then heaved himself from the couch, ambling over to the bar on the far side of the living room to pour himself another double scotch.

He brought the decanter back with him this time, though he'd just resettled on the couch's plush cushions when he heard the door snick open and shut. Eric didn't turn around, merely sipped at his drink and sighed, savoring the slow burn all the way down, relaxation sinking in at last.

"Hey." Nick Thompson sauntered in, tossing his jacket on a nearby chair before leaning down to give Eric a slow, deep kiss. "Sorry I'm late. I was up against a killer deadline."

"Not a problem." His fingers combed through Nick's thick curls, then drifted down to his shoulder for a few loving strokes. "Honestly, I needed the extra few minutes of solitude. It's been a hellacious week."

"No kidding." Nick fell to his knees between Eric's splayed legs, eyes crinkling with concern. "Are you sure you're up for this tonight? You look like you're ready to drop."

"I'll be fine, just give me a couple more minutes. With the stockholders' meeting this week and getting ready for the



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campaign to gear up soon..." Pinching the bridge of his nose, he tried to banish the insistent throb behind his eyes through sheer force of will. "This is the first chance I've had to catch my breath in days."

"I wish you'd called me sooner. You know how much I love helping you relax."

Eric laughed. "If I'd done that, I never would've made it to the stockholders' meeting at all."

"Oh, and that's such a bad thing?" Grinning, Nick slid both hands up Eric's crisp white cotton shirt, pausing to finger his suspenders. "I don't remember you wearing these before."

"You like them?"

"Yeah, actually, I do. They make you look like a sexy professor."

"Do you want me to teach you a lesson?"

Nick just laughed and started unbuttoning Eric's shirt, pressing a kiss to the underside of his jaw. "Damn, Eric, I've missed you."

"Show me how much."

And so he did, with eager fingers and lips soft, moist and full of passion. Eric had to bite back a cry of hard-won relief when Nick's lush mouth finally closed over his cock and swallowed him down. He floated in an agony of bliss while Nick worked him with his lips and tongue, his technique endearingly enthusiastic. Time spun back to the first time they'd ever done this, on that rickety old couch in Nick's loft one memorable weekend in their junior year of college. He'd been so aroused he'd come in Nick's mouth after a few seconds.

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But tonight it seemed that Nick had other plans. Grasping Eric's cock firmly at the root to stave off imminent orgasm, he lifted his head, licking sticky pre-come from the corners of his mouth. "Fuck me, Eric. *Please*."

He remembered the first time Nick had begged him like this, that same day back in the loft. He hadn't resisted then and he certainly wasn't about to now. "Get in the bedroom."

Nick had his shirt off by the time they got there, which gave Eric a tiny pang of disappointment; he'd hoped to coax Nick into doing a slow strip for him. But to hell with that—after a month without plundering Nick's ass, he had no patience left for delayed gratification. He seized Nick by the belt and they kissed with savage abandon, then proceeded to rip each other's clothes off so fast they nearly gave themselves friction burn.

Eric dug the supplies out of the bedside table while Nick settled into his favorite position: on his stomach with a pillow tucked under his hips, his delectable round ass raised invitingly. Eric remembered the first time they'd ever done this, shifting and scrambling to make themselves comfortable on that creaky couch with broken springs poking them everywhere. He remembered the way Nick gasped and trembled the first time he'd breached his hole with a pair of lube-slicked fingers. He remembered Nick's first muffled cry of surprise when he pushed inside him and began thrusting slowly, holding back his own surge of lust until Nick got used to the incredible sensation of being opened, filled and fucked.

But tonight neither of them felt like holding back. They moaned, groaned and fucked like animals, every stroke

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shoving Nick further up the bed, forcing him to grab the headboard with both hands, whimpering and yelping as Eric pounded him. They came within seconds of each other.

Eric slumped against Nick's sweat-soaked back, his vision momentarily murky, finally dredging up the energy to roll away onto a pile of pillows. Running his hand along Nick's well-muscle forearm, he marveled—not for the first time—at how well they complemented each other, despite the obvious contrast of Nick's solidly-built ex-quarterback's body with his own loose-limbed, slender frame.

Slow minutes ticked away, with Nick lying there beside him completely immobile, until a soft, familiar snore alerted Eric to the fact that he'd dropped off. Chuckling, he kissed Nick gently on the shoulder and got up to take a shower.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the bathroom to find Nick stirring groggily, yawning and raking damp, wavy bangs back from his forehead. He looked like a deliciously debauched angel. "Damn," Nick mumbled. "Did I conk out again?"

"Only for a few minutes."

"Sorry, it's just been one deadline after another these last few weeks. I think my editor's trying to kill me."

"Don't worry about it." Eric scooped his shirt from the floor and slipped it back on.

Nick watched him for a few silent seconds, disappointment flickering across his face. "Um, when's Allison coming back?"

"She's in Milan till tomorrow, then she flies to Paris for the weekend. She should be home Monday night."

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"Sounds like fun. Wish I could get an overseas assignment."

Stifling an exasperated grunt, Eric finished dressing as quickly as he could. Leaving was always the worst part of these little encounters. Why did Nick have to make matters more difficult by drawing out the inevitable? "I'll call you if I can get away again before she gets home, all right?"

"Sure you will," Nick snorted, sitting up, giving his pillow a savage punch. "Look, Eric, why don't you just tell her about us? Maybe she won't even care. Barbara didn't."

"Barbara never gave a damn what I did as long as I kept paying her credit card bills. But I think we've both known Allison long enough to know she won't view the situation quite so pragmatically."

"Why not? She's got your name and your money, and your contacts got her that job with CNN. And you only married her because you knew she'd help your senatorial campaign. It's not like you're madly in love with each other."

"True, but I am fond of her, and I wouldn't like to see her hurt," he replied sharply. God, after everything he'd been through this week, now he had to deal with *this*? "And considering your own history with her, I'd think you'd feel the same way."

"That's ancient history."

"We thought the same thing about us until a few months ago." Getting up, he slipped on his jacket and stepped into his shoes, then bent down to cup Nick's face with both hands. "I'll see you soon, all right?"

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Nick nodded. He looked so damned dejected Eric thought his own heart would break. But he wouldn't let it. He couldn't.

He gave Nick a quick kiss and left, barely breathing until he'd climbed into his Jag, heading back to the penthouse. Rolling down the windows, he let the chill night air wash over him and by the time he arrived home he felt like himself again, calm and in control.

Too restless for sleep, he spent the next few hours perusing production reports until his eyelids turned into lead weights. He'd just crawled in bed when the phone rang, Allison's cell number popping up on the caller ID. He sighed and picked up the receiver. "How's Milan?"

"Still standing, but where the hell were you? I've been trying to call you for hours."

He glanced at the answering machine; it was blinking a mile a minute. Damn! "I had a late dinner meeting. So are you enjoying fashion week?"

"Yeah, but it'd be a lot more fun if I didn't have to interview all those air-head models. If I never see another breast implant up close and personal, I'll die happy. Oh, and by the way, I ordered you one of everything from the Prada men's spring line."

That was what he adored about her—no matter how out of sorts he felt, she never failed to make him laugh. "Didn't you get anything for yourself?"

"A couple of things from Versace, but I didn't really see anything else I liked. I have high hopes for Paris, however."

"Try Chanel or Balmain. They're more your style."

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"I'll keep that in mind." A pause followed, accompanied by the sound of rustling bedcovers. "Maybe next year we can do this together."

"I'd like that," he replied. "But right now I should let you go. You didn't need to stay up so late just to talk to me. We'll see each other in a few days."

"No problem, I couldn't sleep anyway. Damn jet lag."

"Good night, Allison."

"Good night," she said softly. "I ... I miss you."

For a split-second, he could've sworn she sounded positively wistful. "I miss you too. Get some sleep."

He hung up and flicked out the light, but despite his exhaustion, sleep didn't come easily. It never did on evenings he spent with Nick. Was it his conscience pricking at him? He'd often thought himself devoid of conscience; a man in his position could ill-afford such a luxury. God knew the heartless bastard lurking in the recesses of his mind had wanted nothing more than to stay at the apartment with Nick, fucking him into next week.

But there yawned a wide gap between what he wanted and what he could allow himself to have. He longed to call Nick and ask him to meet him tomorrow night and the night after that, and every night until Allison got home. But he couldn't. Allowing himself to lose control of the situation even once would make it far too easy to do again. Despite Nick's complaints, Eric knew he understood their need for discretion. They both had too much to lose.

Hence the apartment—and the awful, gnawing ache in his stomach every time he told his wife another lie.

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\* \* \* \*

"Another day, another deadline," Nick muttered, hitting *send* to email his latest story to his editor. For once, he'd actually squeaked by with half an hour to spare. Snagging his jacket, he headed for the elevator. If he dashed, he might even make it to the gym before the usual after-work horde descended.

He'd just punched the down button when he heard an all-too-familiar pair of heels tapping in his direction. "Hey, Thompson, wait up!" Holly Martin yelled, yanking on her coat, brunette ponytail bobbing madly, skidding to a stop beside him with a triumphant grin at the precise same moment the elevator dinged. "Perfect timing, huh?"

Stifling the urge to roll his eyes, Nick let her step in first, then jabbed the button for the lobby. Pals since their days at journalism school, he and Holly worked stories together at the Herald on a fairly regular basis. However, at times Nick found her excessive perkiness a bit hard to take.

Times like now, for instance.

"There's a bunch of us going down to O'Rourke's for karaoke tonight," she added, fumbling in her purse for a lipstick. "Want to come with?"

"I don't think so, Hol." Tapping his foot, he eyeballed the elevator panel as the floor numbers dropped in molasses-slow succession. "I'm not in such a great mood today."

"Yeah, I noticed. That poor kid down in the mailroom almost started blubbing after the way you tore him a new one this morning. What's wrong with you lately?"

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"Nothing, other than the fact that my life sucks."

"Get in line," she chortled.

He'd planned to bolt as soon as they reached the lobby, but when the doors slid open, she snaked her arm through his, steering him towards the Starbuck's on the ground floor of the building. "Guess what? I'm going to let you be a gentleman and buy me a coffee. Make it a half-caf non-fat vanilla latte, easy on the foam. I'll snag us a table." Cutting off his protest, she disappeared into the crowd surrounding the front counter. For a second or two he considered ditching her, if not for the royal earful he knew she'd give him tomorrow. He'd stay a few minutes, then make some lame excuse and duck out.

After ten minutes of waiting for their drinks, he found her ensconced in a relatively quiet corner table near the back of the café. She let him set her coffee down in front of her, took a long, leisurely sip—and nailed him with an icy glare. "So when did you and Eric get back together?"

"Geez!" he gasped, so startled he almost dumped his own piping-hot cup of French roast into his lap. "H-How did you—"

"Oh, c'mon, Nick. After all these years, I know the signs. The two of you go on and off more often than a fridge light. But what the hell possessed you to take up with him again this time?"

"You think I haven't asked myself that question every damn day?"

"Well, at least you're consistent." With a sigh, she pushed away her cup. "Damn it, Nick, I hate seeing you do this to



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yourself. Last year you had a perfect opportunity to put this all behind you for good. I don't know why you didn't take it."

"I thought about it, Hol, I really did. When Laura kept pressing me to set the date, part of me wanted to go through with it. We could've had a nice life, moving back upstate to take over the farm like my folks wanted me to, but..." God, he couldn't believe how pathetic he sounded. "I couldn't do it. I couldn't marry Laura, not feeling the way I do about Eric. I would've ended up making us both miserable."

"So what're you going to do now? Spend the rest of your life sitting at home with cold pizza and the Sports Channel, waiting for Eric to make another booty call?"

"Thanks a lot," he snapped. "As if I didn't feel cheap enough already."

"Nick, c'mon, I didn't mean—"

"Look, I know this relationship's going nowhere, and I know that's not likely to change. But I can't help it, Hol. I love Eric. I've always loved him. I wish I could just switch it off like a light, but I can't."

"Then why don't you stand up for yourself? I don't get why you're so willing to let him shuffle you aside, like you don't even matter."

"Despite what you may think, Eric's life hasn't been all caviar and roses. After the crappy way his father treated him and his mom, I don't think he's got the faintest idea of what a healthy relationship's like." He sighed. "I always knew we'd never have a happily-ever-after, especially after he announced his bid for the Senate. He's got his sights set on the White House, and he needs a wife to get him there, not a

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gay lover. So it's either seeing him for an hour or two every few weeks, or nothing."

Her expression softened—but whether in empathy or pity, he couldn't tell. "I hope Eric's grateful for what he's got. I've never had anyone in my life as loyal as you."

"Now you make me sound like the family dog."

"Well, puppy, you'd best grow some teeth, because you know if Ally gets even a whiff of this, she'll go after it like a pit bull on a pant leg."

A sudden chill swept him. "That's an image I'd rather not think about."

\* \* \* \*

Ally peered out the window as her plane taxied up to the gate at JFK, thankful to be home, yet so tired she had a hard time hauling herself out of her seat. She did a double take when she spied Eric waiting for her at the terminal, a bouquet of her favorite white roses in hand. He hadn't picked her up at the airport himself in ages.

"To what do I owe this honor?" she wondered aloud, accepting the roses along with a soft kiss on the lips, which only enhanced her confusion, since Eric didn't normally do public displays of affection.

"Do I need to have a reason for picking my wife up at the airport—other than the fact that I haven't seen her in nearly a week?"

"You could've just sent the limo like you usually do."

"It's outside, waiting to take us home."

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"Us?" she echoed. "You mean you don't have to go back to the office?"

"Not tonight."

Confusion took a sharp u-turn into downright unease, but she quickly backed off that road. Exhaustion had simply gotten the better of her, clouding her perceptions. After all, what was wrong with her husband lavishing her with a little well-deserved attention? Maybe the last few days apart had made Eric realize how much their marriage had suffered for the sake of his business dealings and political aspirations. Maybe he really had missed her as much as she'd missed him.

She piled gratefully into the limo, leaning her head on his shoulder with a sigh. "Looks like someone had far too much fun," he observed, giving her a gentle kiss on the forehead.

"Hardly. I hit the ground running the second I got to Milan and the treadmill kept on rolling all the way through Paris. Besides, you know I don't sleep that well in hotels."

"So you didn't enjoy yourself at all?"

"Well, I dropped in on the Versace party, mostly to try and snag an interview with Donatella, but I ended up flirting with their models, this gorgeous Brazilian hunk with a thing for petite blondes—and older women," she added with a chuckle. "That last part sort of killed the mood."

Eric laughed. "How old was he, or shouldn't I ask?"

"Oh, twenty or twenty-one, with miles of silky *café au lait* skin, huge brown eyes, gentle hands..."

"Sounds like quite a temptation. You should've indulged yourself."

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She giggled at his apparent joke, though his completely non-joking expression quickly disabused her of that assumption. "Are you serious?"

"I don't see any harm in a one-time casual encounter while you're away on a trip. I certainly didn't expect you to spend your evenings sitting alone in your hotel room."

"That's very sweet, but..." Now wide awake, she sat up straight. "For one thing, we've never discussed having an open relationship, and for another ... Well, for God's sake, we've only been married six months. I'm not ready to start cheating on you yet!"

"I think you're taking this a bit too much to heart," he replied in his most soothing—and most patronizing—tone. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"Well, you did! A little bit, anyway." She slumped back against the seat cushions. "Look, I know you and Barbara had a different kind of marriage, but that's not what I want. And despite what the whole world probably thinks, I didn't marry you to get a closet full of designer clothes and a high-profile job."

"Good to know," he said with a half-teasing smile.

She leaned against his shoulder again, dozing the rest of the way home, her knees nearly buckling when they reached the penthouse door. Eric had a light supper prepared: French onion soup, a mixed-green salad with raspberry vinaigrette dressing, and fresh-baked French bread. Amazingly, the food managed to revive her; she ate an entire bowl of soup and half her salad before pushing her plate away and retiring to the living room with Eric and a cup of delicious Italian roast.

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She sat on the overstuffed couch and promptly zoned out, until Eric drew his fingertips down her arm, gently tugging her back to the here and now. "Something wrong?" he asked. "You've been off in another world since dinner."

"I guess I'm finally getting fed up with things at work. Ten years in the news business and they're still sticking me with the fluff pieces." Tossing back the last of her coffee, she set it down on the table with a distinct clatter. "I busted my butt snagging some great interviews, and the network only aired three out of the ten segments I filmed. Most days I don't know why I even bother showing up."

"If it's any consolation, you should see a turnaround by this time next year. I can't imagine the network passing up a chance to put the wife of a US senator front and center."

"Assuming, of course, that you win."

"Of course I'll win." He grinned. "I always do, don't I?"

She settled back in his arms while he flicked on the TV to the business channel, but after a few minutes, keeping her eyes open proved a bigger challenge than running the Boston marathon. With a smile, Eric gently helped her up from the couch and half-carried her down the hallway to the bedroom.

One glance at the comfy king-sized bed and she flopped down on it like a boned fish, still fully dressed. She had only the dimmest awareness of Eric undressing her, removing first her shoes, followed by her pantyhose, skirt, jacket and blouse, and lastly, her bra and panties. At last he pulled back the covers and helped her slide between them, the cool supima cotton whispering over her naked skin.

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Eric came to bed a few minutes later, spooning up behind her. She felt his lips on her throat and shoulder, his hands reaching around to cup her breasts, teasing and tugging at her nipples. *Oh, God*, she thought, biting back a moan, exhaustion swiftly trumped by arousal.

And if Eric's smug chuckle was any indication, he knew he had her. Rolling her onto her back, he dipped down to kiss her breasts, taking each of her nipples in turn between his teeth, sucking and biting them. He had a hand between her thighs too, parting her folds, rubbing her throbbing clit. Another couple of minutes of this and she'd have a damn river running between her legs.

Which was exactly where he went next, lips fastening on her clit, sucking hard. Pushing two fingers up inside her, he found and worked her g-spot. She came within seconds, arching her back, riding the waves of sensation, crying out when Eric entered her at the exact same moment she hit her pinnacle.

He pounded her mercilessly and she loved it, digging her nails into his back, locking her legs around his hips to urge him on. She lost count of how many times she came, but by the time Eric shot deep inside her, screaming and moaning had torn her voice to shreds. She fell into a coma with him still on top of her and didn't open her eyes again until Eric's alarm went off at seven o'clock.

He fucked her again before he got up to shower, gently this time, with soft caresses and warm, wet kisses so tender she nearly burst into tears. Orgasm eluded her, but it still felt delicious lying beneath him as he moved in her with exquisite

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slowness, his voice a tiny broken cry when he reached his climax.

Afterwards, he stayed inside her, both of them savoring the final few moments of their union. Kissing him sweetly, she reached up to stroke his cheek, startled when her fingers came away wet. "What's wrong?"

For a split-second he had this strange expression on his face—incredibly sad, and incredibly distant. Then, pressing a quick kiss to her fingertips, he rolled off of her and out of bed. "Nothing, I'm fine. Go back to sleep."

She tried, at least until he showered, dressed and came back to give her a goodbye kiss. But as soon as she heard the front door close, she sat straight up, flicking on the light. She couldn't get that expression out of her mind. What did it mean? Did he regret having to leave her? Somehow she doubted it. He'd never looked at her like that on any other morning.

She ran the previous evening back and forth in her memory until the answer popped out in all its obvious glory. When she'd told Eric about her flirtation with the Brazilian model, she'd expected him to react with concern, maybe even a touch of anger. But instead, he'd seemed almost disappointed that she hadn't carried the dalliance out to its logical conclusion. In her experience, that could mean only one thing.

No husband ever encouraged his wife to have an affair—unless, of course, he was having one himself.

\* \* \* \*

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Nick got back from a late lunch to find an email from Eric blinking on his computer. Glancing around to make sure no one else lingered within eyeshot of his screen, he clicked on it and read:

*Need to see you tonight after work. It's important.*

—E.

He stared at it for a few seconds before hitting the delete key. It struck him as odd on more than one level. Eric usually called him on his cell phone when he wanted to get together, and he'd never waited till the last minute like this before. Nick had the instant, gut-churning sensation that something had gone haywire.

His hand drifted over to the phone, fingers poised to dial Eric's private number, until he remembered how angry Eric had been last time he'd called him at the office. Nick wasn't even supposed to send him email except in cases of dire emergency, and a bad feeling hardly qualified.

But what could be so damned important? Was trouble brewing behind closed doors at Courtland Industries? Or maybe Ally had come home from her trip and announced she wanted a divorce. He could just imagine Eric's reaction to that, especially with the election coming up in November. Still, Nick couldn't help feeling a petty little twinge of hope. Eric had a notoriously short attention span with relationships, their own relationship notwithstanding. Nick knew he'd grow bored with Ally eventually.

He danced on needles and pins for the rest of the day, barely concentrating on his work. He filed his last story and bolted from the office by five-thirty, sprinting the four blocks



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to the apartment in record time, his palms so clammy he had a hard time getting the door open.

His stomach plummeted through the floor when he saw Allison sitting there at the bar, casually sipping a drink. "C'mon in, Nick," she sneered, setting down her glass. "We need to have a little chat."

\* \* \* \*

Nick stood in the doorway with his mouth dangling open, looking like she'd just thwapped him in the face with a day-old trout. God, how priceless! If she weren't already so fucking livid, she would've burst out laughing.

"H-How did you—"

"Find out?" Ally prompted. "Oh, c'mon, Nick. I might be a glorified tabloid reporter these days, but I'm still pretty damn good at the investigative stuff. Hacking Eric's email account took me a grand total of five minutes, although I couldn't believe he'd been careless enough to pay the rent on this place out of our joint checking account."

Nick moved like a sleepwalker over to the nearest chair, sitting down heavily. "I'm glad you know. I was tired of all that sneaking around."

"I'll bet," she said acidly. "Well, if this is your way of taking revenge on me for marrying Eric, then bravo. You got me, Nick. You got me good." She tossed back her drink in one gulp and got up, stalking towards him in what she hoped was her most intimidating manner. "But it ends now."

"I think Eric might have something to say about that."

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"No, actually, Eric has nothing to say about it. This is between you and me." Bending down, she grabbed the arms of Nick's chair, skewering him with her most frigid glare. "Either you break it off with him tonight, or tomorrow I start making phone calls, and you'll be lucky to end up writing classified ads for the National fucking Enquirer."

"You'd never do that to me, Ally. I know you."

"Oh, really?" she drawled. "Well, go ahead. Call my bluff."

He looked scared now, truly scared. It gave her a delicious tingling sensation between her thighs. With a satisfied smirk, she sashayed back to the bar and poured herself another drink.

Nick sat there silently for a few minutes, fingertips drumming on the arms of his chair. If the tiny gears in his brain spun any harder, he would've had smoke coming out his ears. At last he got up and made for the door. "For what it's worth, Ally," he murmured, "I'm sorry."

"Somehow I seriously doubt that."

Ally sat at the bar for a long time after he left, sipping Absolut Citron and making silly patterns on the counter with the condensation rings from the bottom of her glass. Even after a couple stiff vodkas, her hands still trembled. She had to call a cab to take her home.

She found Eric waiting for her in the living room. The look on his face reminded her of storm clouds before a hard rain.

"Nick just left."

"Really?" she chirped, all fake brightness. "And how's good ol' Nick doing?"

"Drop it, Allison. I know you talked to him."

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"That I did," she said, throwing her coat and bag on the couch, rounding on Eric with her hands on her hips. She hoped she wasn't still so wobbly that the effect came off as ridiculous rather than righteously outraged. "So did you two lovebirds say your tearful goodbyes?"

"I'm not breaking it off with him. And you're not ruining his career either. Not if I have anything to say about it."

"Stop trying to order me around, Eric. You don't scare me."

"Maybe I should."

"Oh, so what're you planning to do? Crack me over the head with a blunt object and toss my body in the East River? That might raise a few questions, don't you think?"

His lip curled in open disgust. "You're drunk."

"And with good reason. But you know the great thing about booze? It boils thing down to their essentials. I don't think I've ever seen you more clearly than I have tonight." Dropping onto the couch, she studied him for a moment, surprised that he actually looked a bit apprehensive. "Why did you marry me, Eric? I know you don't love me. Do you even care about me at all, or am I just a guaranteed twenty-point boost for your popularity poll?"

"Look, I know I've hurt you terribly," he said softly, sitting down on a nearby ottoman. But when he reached for her hand, she yanked hers away. "Believe me, I never meant for that to happen. And I do care for you. But as for love ... I don't know if I can ever give you that. I don't even know if I'm capable of it."

"Of course you're capable of it. You love Nick."

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"Allison—"

"You've always loved him, Eric. And he's always loved you. That's probably why he and I could never make it work either." She took a deep breath, steeling herself for what she had to ask. "When did you start seeing him again?"

"About a week after we got back from our honeymoon. He showed up at the office asking for an interview about the wedding, and ... nature took its course from there."

She didn't think she could hurt worse than she already did, but now she felt like she'd just been sucker-punched. It took all her strength to keep the shock from doubling her over. "Oh," she managed to squeak.

To his credit, Eric didn't try to smooth it over with false conciliation. She knew he wasn't sorry. He wasn't the type to waste his energies on useless remorse.

"W-We never really had a chance, did we?" she murmured. "I wish you'd told me back when it first happened. We could've gotten an annulment."

"I didn't want an annulment and I don't want a divorce. I want to try and make this work. All three of us."

For a second or two, she thought she hadn't heard him right—but of course she had. "What, you think I'm going to sit idly by and let you fuck Nick on the side, while I play the perfect little wife for the sake of your political campaign? Think again, Eric," she snapped. "I'm not that pathetic."

"That's not what I meant. I don't want to sneak around behind your back anymore, and neither does Nick. I'm proposing that we let Nick move in with us." Sucking in a breath, he forged on before she could interrupt him. "I know

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you still have feelings for him, even after everything that's happened. So maybe we can all learn to ... share each other."

"Y-You can't be serious about this."

"I am, and so is Nick."

"He *agreed* to it?"

"He suggested it."

She tried to reply, but the words wouldn't come. The entire English language had flown right out of her brain. All the alcohol in her system had evaporated too. She suddenly felt one hundred percent, stone cold sober.

And, soberly and silently, she reviewed her choices. She could pack her bags, leave Eric tonight and put a quick, merciful end to it. Of course, it would break her heart, but in time, she'd get over it. Or she could stay and hold off filing for divorce until after the election. It would mean playing the faithful, smiling wife in public for the next few months. Which would just about kill her, but she'd do it, for Eric's sake.

Or she could do what Eric wanted, and try out this arrangement. Maybe it wouldn't work. Maybe Eric would finally get tired of Nick if he had to live with him every day. Maybe the inevitable jealousy would tear them all apart. It all practically screamed "disaster in the making."

But she'd do it. She had to do it. She wasn't ready to stop fighting for her marriage yet.

"All right," she whispered tonelessly. "If this is really what you want, I-I'll ... All right, I will."

She let Eric take her to bed and lay there with bitter tears streaming down her face while he fucked her. Luckily, in the dark, he didn't even notice.

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## Chapter 2

### All Together Now

They agreed to give the arrangement a trial run starting that weekend. Nick arrived promptly after work Friday night. Ally followed him back to the guest bedroom, lurking in the doorway with her arms folded, watching him unpack his overnight bag. She had to suppress a chortle when he dropped his shaving gel on his way to the bathroom. At least she wasn't the only one here with jangled nerves.

When he saw her standing there, he looked as if he expected her to pull out a pistol and shoot him. "Th-Thanks for putting up with me this weekend. I really appreciate it."

"It's not like I had much of a choice," she replied flatly. "And you can drop the shy stammer. It was cute back in college, but you're getting a bit long in the tooth for it now."

When he flinched, she almost wished she could take it back. Almost.

"Look," Nick said, "I know this is a weird situation, but don't you think we could at least try being friends again?"

"Friends don't fuck other friends' husbands behind their backs," she snapped, turning away.

Of course, Eric had insisted on serving all of Nick's favorites for dinner that night: steak, baked potatoes, buttered carrots, green salad, and cherry pie for dessert. Ally picked at her food and drank too much cabernet, welcoming its warm liquid embrace. She'd zoned out so completely, it

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took a few seconds before she realized Eric was speaking to her. "I-I'm sorry. What did you say?"

"Nick and I were discussing ads for my campaign," Eric went on, giving her wine glass a particularly pointed look. "I told him I didn't see much point in investing too much in radio. What do you think?"

She let out a bitter laugh, taking another sip. "I'm sure your very capable and expensive campaign staff doesn't give a rat's ass about my opinion."

"Maybe not, but I do. You're an industry prof—"

"Oh, please! I'm the blonde bimbo who covers fashion shows and Paris Hilton's chihuahuas. Nobody in their right mind would ever call me a *real* newsman."

"I think you're being far too hard on yourself."

"Then it's a good thing nobody asked you, isn't it?"

After a few moments of painfully awkward silence, Eric and Nick resumed their conversation, and Ally poured herself another glass. Only now Nick kept shooting her a disconcerting—and for him, strangely serious—glance. She couldn't tell if he was sizing her up as potential competition, or maybe he just felt sorry for her. It saddened and infuriated her at the same time.

She'd given the household staff the night off, so she ended up clearing the table herself—not that she minded, since it gave her a few minutes of precious alone time in the kitchen. Pouring herself a cup of coffee, she drank it slowly, her fingers so icy she had to clutch it with both hands. She dreaded having to go out to the living room and make more inane small talk. Hell, she dreaded the whole damn weekend;



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she wished she could snap her fingers and turn tonight into Monday morning.

Creeping quietly into the living room, she found Eric and Nick curled up on the couch together, watching something with a lot of loud explosions and car crashes. She'd just settled into her favorite armchair when Nick leaned over and kissed Eric full on the mouth, then looked right at her, his lips curling in a smug grin.

Red-eyed rage swept her, though somehow she managed to hold it in check. Apparently this meant war. Well, if Nick wanted to play childish games, fine. But she wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of knowing he'd gotten to her.

Heading down the hall to her office, she spent the rest of the evening doing online research for a segment on celebrities and their pets she planned to film next week. Near midnight, yawning and droopy eyelids got the better of her. Closing her laptop, she padded down the hall to her room to get ready for bed.

Eric came up behind her while she stood at the bathroom sink, wrapping his arms around her waist. "Nick and I missed you this evening. We'd hoped you'd stay and watch the movie with us."

"I saw it on the plane coming home the other day."

"Hmm." He started nuzzling her neck, apparently oblivious to the fact that he'd interrupted her bedtime routine. "You smell incredible."

"Thanks. Now if you don't mind, I'm not quite done here."

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"Not a problem. I'll wait for you in the bedroom." Kissing her lightly on the lips, he stepped into the doorway. "Do you mind if I ask Nick to join us?"

She froze. Oh, God, she thought, not yet. Not tonight. And apparently she must've looked as distressed as she felt, because now Eric had his arms around her again, rubbing her back, trying to calm her. "I-I'm sorry," she whispered. "I can't. I'm not ready yet."

"It's all right, don't worry about it. I had a feeling tonight might be pushing it." He held her close for a few moments before kissing her so tenderly she almost forgot how to breathe. "Sleep well. I'll see you in the morning."

Without another word, he turned and walked away. A few seconds later, she heard a door open and close down the hallway—the door to the guest bedroom. Nick's room.

She shut the bathroom door and plopped down on the toilet lid, trying to blink away the awful burning sensation behind her eyes. She wasn't going to cry, she just *wasn't*. This was part of the arrangement—she'd known that when she agreed to it. She had no business acting like such a fucking wuss about it now.

Crawling into bed, she yanked the covers up over her head, praying for sleep to claim her quickly. Otherwise she'd lie here all night, trying to ignore the muffled groans and cries from down the hall.

\* \* \* \*

The next day brought more of the same, only worse. This time Ally knew she couldn't solve the situation by hiding from

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it; if she did, she might as well concede defeat to Nick right now. Wars like this weren't decided in a day, or even a week. If she intended to prevail, she'd have to gear up for the long haul.

So she smiled, laughed and tried to pretend nothing bothered her. She chatted and made jokes, though the false cheer in her voice sounded unbelievably hollow even to her own ears. She joined in the dinner conversation, then sat between Nick and Eric on the couch while they watched a DVD, giving Nick a surreptitious elbow in the ribs when he tried to drape an arm around her so he could rub Eric's shoulder. The dirty look he flashed her made her smirk.

Her stomach tightened as the movie's credits started rolling. The moment of truth was fast approaching, and tonight she knew she had to go through with it. She couldn't let Nick ace her out of another round.

Luckily, she had something she hoped would soothe her nerves. Ducking into the kitchen, she popped the Valium she'd stolen from Eric's bathroom stash, washing it down with the last few sips of the chardonnay she'd nursed all evening. She rinsed out her glass and left it to dry in the sink before heading for the bedroom, already feeling marginally calmer.

Nick and Eric weren't there yet, so she stretched out on the bed, still fully dressed. She'd just begun to relax when a sudden wave of nausea and lightheadedness crashed over her, making her groan. Damn! She should've known better than to mix tranquilizers with alcohol.

The room started spinning and she felt the bed dip down, with Nick landing flat on his back on the mattress, close

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enough for her to touch him. Then she saw Eric bending over Nick, capturing his mouth in a long, deep kiss full of promise, need and naked, unbridled hunger.

Eric had never kissed her like that. And she knew now beyond a doubt, with the kind of clarity only achieved through an altered state of consciousness, he never would.

Pain rolled over her, immediate and crushing, forcing the breath from her lungs. It would kill her if she let it, this constant empty ache inside that she'd tried to ignore for so long. She'd fooled herself, thinking she could oust Nick from Eric's heart. This petty little war of theirs had ground to its inevitable messy end—and she'd lost before the first skirmish.

Her stomach lurched as she felt hands on her body, too many hands, followed by lips on her throat. She didn't know which one of them—or maybe it was both of them—was touching and kissing her, but she wanted it to stop. Biting her lip, she stifled a moan of disgust.

She couldn't see anything anymore. The room had gone dark and full of shadows. One large, dark-haired shadow loomed over her, right before the light in her head went out.

\* \* \* \*

Ally woke with her tongue glued to the roof of her mouth and a horde of baby rhinos stampeding through her brain. Her stomach roiled and cramped as she sat up, vomit rising in her throat. She dashed to the bathroom, barely flinging the toilet lid up in time.

She splashed some cold water on her face when she was done, before brushing her teeth and downing three extra-

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strength aspirin. God, she looked like something out of a zombie movie—livid purplish circles under her eyes, hair full of tangles, lips all cracked and dry.

And she hadn't a stitch on either. Strange, but she didn't remember getting undressed.

Truthfully, she didn't remember much of anything past the point where Eric—or had it been Nick?—started kissing and manhandling her. The rest of the evening had faded into a murky haze.

Turning on the shower, she stepped under the warm spray. It helped her feel a bit more alert, but the cobwebs and fog in her memory remained. Suddenly she felt herself begin to tremble uncontrollably. She heard herself sobbing, but it sounded like another person—a totally broken, pathetic person who had her voice. She'd never felt so cheap and dirty.

She shoved a fist in her mouth, pressed her face against the cool tiles and cried it out, hoping with all her heart that Eric hadn't heard her. She couldn't face him or Nick right now. Maybe not ever again.

Throwing on some clothes, she grabbed her bag and dashed for the elevator. Luckily, she didn't run into Eric or Nick along the way. She had no idea where she was going, but she didn't care. She got in her car and drove.

\* \* \* \*

He and Eric had just sat down for lunch when Nick realized he hadn't seen Ally since last night. They searched for her in every room, with no luck.

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They tried her cell phone several times; it rang, but she didn't answer. Eric called her office, but she wasn't there either. He tried a couple of her co-workers, her favorite restaurant, and finally, her father. No one had heard from her.

Nick wracked his brain trying to think of where else she could have gone, his panic level rising by the minute. He and Ally had been snarling at each other like a pair of caged tigers all weekend. True, he'd started it, but only because he'd been pissed at her for slapping aside his proffered olive branch. Now he could've kicked himself for acting like such an ass. If she'd run off and done something desperate because of the way he'd treated her, he'd never forgive himself.

"Dammit!" Slamming down the phone, Eric sprang to his feet and started pacing. "I don't know what's wrong with her. She's never done anything like this before." Suddenly he halted, rounding on Nick, pale blue eyes glittering with icy suspicion. "Did you say anything to her?"

"I didn't need to say a damn thing, Eric. I think our actions spoke for us just fine."

Eric stared at him like he'd started speaking some exotic foreign language. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You know, sometimes I can't tell if you're genuinely obtuse, or if you're gunning for membership in the World's Biggest Asshole Hall of Fame," Nick snapped. "I could tell from the second I got here that Ally hated the whole thing. She only put up with it to make you happy, same as I did."

"Now, wait just a minute. You said—"

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"I know what I said. But I never would've agreed to any of this if I'd known Ally didn't want to do it. For God's sake, Eric, she's your *wife*. Don't you even care how she feels?" He shook his head. "Stupid question. Of course you don't. Why should you? The important thing here is that Eric Courtland always gets his way."

Nick could count on one hand the number of times he'd seen Eric struck speechless, but right now he didn't have time to savor the moment. A light bulb had popped up over his head. Grabbing his jacket and cell phone, he headed for the door. "I think I know where she's gone," he said. "You stay here and wait by the phone in case she calls."

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## Chapter 3

### An Open Marriage

Nick found her exactly where he thought he would—at the apartment, curled up in a ball on the bed with the comforter tugged up to her chin, eyes and nose bright pink from crying. She looked like a ten-year-old in bed with the sniffles.

"Hey," he said softly, perching on the edge of the bed, smoothing back her hair. "I'm glad I found you. You had me and Eric really worried."

"Yeah, I'm sure," she replied hollowly. "Did you both have *fun* last night?"

"Ally, nothing happened—other than you passing out. Eric undressed you and tucked you in bed, and we took turns sitting up with you to make sure you were okay."

Her eyes widened. "After all the awful things I've said to you lately, I'm amazed you didn't jump at the chance to exact a little petty revenge."

Ouch. Still, he couldn't deny that he probably deserved it. "C'mon," he said, rubbing her shoulder, "let's get you home."

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Ally—"

"It's over, Nick. I concede defeat. If you want Eric so damn badly, you can have him. I don't give a fuck anymore."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, why the hell not?" she snapped. "All weekend you've done nothing but try to make me feel like an outsider in my



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own home. And now I'm giving you what you want, and it's *still* not enough?"

"Look, I'm sorry for the way I acted, I really am. But it's in the past now. We both need to get over it."

"I don't understand you," she said slowly. "You're the one who wanted us to have this choreographed orgy, and now that you've finally forced me out—"

"Wait a minute, did Eric tell you this was *my* idea?"

She nodded.

Well, that certainly put a new—and embarrassingly obvious—spin on things. "Jesus," he breathed.

"You mean it wasn't?"

"Only in a bad-joke sense. But naturally, Eric took it and ran with it."

She looked at him for a long time, her anger slowly melting away. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry too," she murmured. "You know, we've had our fair share of fights over the years, but somehow you always end up forgiving me. I've never figured out why."

"Maybe because you're one of those people I can't imagine not having in my life."

She gave him a wan smile. "So what do we do, Nick? How do we make this work?"

"We don't. I'm going to bow out of the picture. I couldn't live with myself knowing I broke up your marriage."

"Sacrifice doesn't solve anything. You know you'll never be happy without Eric. And he'd probably walk barefoot over red-hot coals before he'd admit it, but I know he feels the same way about you. Maybe I should bow out."

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"That puts us right back at square one."

"I never should've married him in the first place. All he wanted was a wife on his arm to help him win the election—and at the time that was fine with me, because he'd offered to help with my career. I knew he'd probably never love me, but I never expected to fall in love with him. I thought I'd learned to shield my heart better than that," she added, chuckling wistfully.

"Well," he said with a crooked half-grin, "I could probably scrounge you up a Kevlar vest, if you think it'll help."

She burst out laughing, grabbed the nearest pillow and whacked him with it. He grabbed one and whacked her right back, and the battle was on.

It ended with Nick flat on his back, Ally straddling him in triumph. To his embarrassment, he realized he had an erection—and from the way Ally smiled playfully down at him, rotating her hips against his crotch, she'd figured it out too. He reached up and kissed her, softly and deeply.

One kiss led to two, then three, and the next thing he knew they'd shed their clothes and he was pushing inside her. They moved together slow and sweet, like he remembered from their all-too-brief fling in college, back when passing finals had been the worst of their worries. Their lives had become so hopelessly complicated since then. And, he realized, they'd just made the situation ten times worse.

\* \* \* \*

"Well, I'll say one thing for us," Ally murmured, her cheek resting against Nick's sweaty chest, "our timing stinks."

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"I'd have to agree with that," came Eric's voice from the doorway.

She blinked, sitting straight up. "Eric, wh-where did you ... H-how did even know we were here?"

"Nick called me when he found your car down in the garage. But apparently that must've slipped his mind." He studied them both, his expression even cooler and more inscrutable than ever. "I'll see you at home, Allison," he added, then turned and left.

The next few days turned into a non-stop merry-go-round of avoidance and screaming nerves. Nick moved out, with Eric taking his place in the guest bedroom. He made polite but distant small talk during meals and went back to spending long hours at the office. But apparently he'd cancelled his lease on the apartment, because a notice to that effect arrived in the mail a few days later.

Ally didn't know what to make of that, but she knew she'd had enough of all the tension and silence. There had to be a way out of this mess that would benefit all three of them—and she was determined to find it.

Some online research, followed by a trip to Barnes and Noble, yielded a possible solution. Luckily, she found Eric lounging on the couch with a drink in his hand when she got home. She marched up and tossed her purchases right in his lap.

His gaze flicked from the two oversized paperbacks, up to Ally, and back again. "What's this?"

"Homework," she replied. "I've sent copies to Nick too."

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He looked them over with a jaundiced eye coupled with a bemused smirk. "*Open Marriage* and *The Ethical Slut*," he read. "Tell me you're joking."

"Sneer all you want, but if we're going to do this thing, let's get it right. Or am I the only one who remembers last weekend as an unmitigated debacle?"

"Allison, you didn't give this a fair chance the first time. What's going to make round two any different?"

"Because this time we'll have ground rules and respect for each other's boundaries. Nick and I have already agreed that there'll be no more backstabbing or unfair jockeying for favor. So if we can expect the same from you, I'd say we've got a shot."

He tossed the books on the coffee table and sat back, sipping his scotch. "Why do you want so badly to do this now, when you didn't before?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, a few days ago you and Nick acted like you hated each other, and now..."

"And now I can't wait to get back in the sack with him?" she retorted. "Well, since you've asked so nicely, I guess it's time for some brutal honesty. I enjoyed fucking Nick the other day. I'd forgotten how good it could be between us. And frankly, after all the crap you've put me through lately, I think I deserved the attention. So get over it. You cheated on me with him practically from day one of our marriage, and I forgave you. So if you can't find it in that Grinch-sized heart of yours to do the same for me, maybe we shouldn't be married."

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He didn't say anything, just stared at the books on the table, a stunned expression on his face. At last he looked up, gesturing for her to come sit next to him.

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry about last weekend," he said softly. "I had no idea it would upset you so much, which I know is an incredibly inadequate excuse, but..." He paused, forcing a rueful smile. "Someone's pointed out to me recently that I've become far too self-absorbed for my own good, or anyone else's—for which I fully intend to make amends, if you'll let me."

Now it was her turn to be stunned. My God, she thought, he apologized. He actually apologized! She pinched herself and she still didn't believe it. "O-Of all the things you could've said, I never expected that."

"So you don't think I'm capable of admitting my mistakes?"

"Eric, I knew what you were like when I married you. I've never expected you to change just for me."

"What better incentive could I have?" he replied. "Look, I know I've never talked much about my family, mostly because I'd prefer to forget the first twenty-odd years of my life. I didn't have a particularly happy childhood." He took another sip of his drink before continuing. "When I was twelve years old, my mother discovered she had a rare heart ailment. Her doctors claimed the condition was treatable, but as soon as she heard the news, she went into an emotional tailspin. And of course, my father couldn't tear himself away from his mistress and his latest corporate merger to be there

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when she needed him. So she simply gave up. A year and a half later, she was gone."

Ally swallowed hard, unable to think of anything to say other than she was sorry, and that just seemed so inane and inadequate. God, how it hurt, hearing the pain in Eric's voice, realizing that he'd kept this from her for all these years out of fear of appearing weak in her eyes. At this precise moment, she knew she'd never loved him more.

"At the funeral, I met some of her relatives and old friends, people who'd known her long before she'd married my father." His voice had taken on a deeper, more melancholy tone. She gave his hand a gentle squeeze, encouraging him to go on. "When they told me about this bright, vivacious woman full of laughter, I didn't know who they were talking about at first. The woman I remember rarely smiled and spent hours alone in her room. Once she found out about her illness, she didn't even bother getting out of bed most mornings. My father's infidelities and neglect broke her heart and crushed her spirit, and I'm convinced that's ultimately what killed her. I could never live with myself if I did that to you."

"I-I don't think you ever could."

"Well, you obviously have more faith in me than I have in myself," he replied. "I suppose I've behaved so abominably because I couldn't bring myself to choose between you and Nick. I never thought I'd find one person I'd want to spend the rest of my life with, much less two. Believe me, I never intended to make you feel like second choice. And I hope you'll give me the chance to prove how much I mean that."

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She looked at him for a very long time, still stunned, trying to absorb it all. He'd never opened up to her like this before. In his own roundabout way, he'd just admitted that he loved her. "I've got a feeling there's a few demons down in hell lobbing snowballs at each other right about now," she said with a smile.

He kissed her with infinite tenderness, then picked up one of the books from the coffee table and started reading. Leaning her head upon his shoulder, she wrapped an arm around his waist and followed along. She'd never put much stock in miracles, but the last few minutes had gone a long way toward making her a true believer.

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## Chapter 4

Eric won the election by a landslide. Of course, Ally knew he would. When Eric put his mind to something, the concept of failure never entered the equation. Standing beside him while he gave his victory speech, she gazed out over the cheering crowd, beaming with pride.

Nick greeted them at the door when they got home, his own eyes bright with his own excitement. Throwing his arms around both of them, he steered them into the living room, where he had a bottle of champagne on ice. They drank a toast and sank gratefully onto the couch with Nick curled on the floor in between them, resting his head on Eric's knee.

"I think I'm even more excited than you are," Nick said, holding up one hand. "See? I chewed my nails to the bone every time they updated the tally."

Eric laughed. "Well, as delighted as I am with the final results, I'm even happier that the campaign's over. Of course, now comes the hard work of actually doing the job."

"And juggling the logistics of how to spend time with each other," Ally added.

"Look, I understand if you don't want me to visit you in Washington," Nick murmured. "I mean, I'm assuming you'll come home once every month or so, right?"

"Of course I want you to visit," Eric insisted. "We'll just have to be discreet about it. In fact, I thought the two of you could trade off visits every other weekend."

Ally smiled. "Sounds good to me."



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"Actually, it sounds like you'll be pretty lonely," Nick pointed out.

"Something tells me I won't have much time to dwell on that. But don't worry—we'll figure it all out, I promise." Smiling, he glanced at both of them in turn. "You have my word on that."

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## Chapter 5

### One Year, Three Lives: Winter

Nick awoke to cold, pale winter light poking through the curtains of his old bedroom. He stretched, yawned and rolled out of bed, then padded to the window to peer outside, discovering the ground blanketed with fresh snow. Throwing on some old clothes, he tramped downstairs to the kitchen, where his father had just beaten him to the first fresh cup of coffee out of the percolator.

"What's a city slicker like you doing out of bed at this hour?" he queried with a playful grin, taking a sip from his favorite mug, an old, chipped thing with brown cows painted on it. Nick had made it for him in third grade.

"Hey, I'll have you know I get up at five every morning!" Nick retorted, grabbing his heavy jacket from a peg by the back door. "You and Mom trained me well."

"Evidently. But where d'you think you're going?"

"Since I'm up, I thought I'd do the morning milking."

"No need, I'll take care of it. You go on back to bed." He reached for his own jacket, brow knitting in consternation when Nick refused to step out of his way. "Your mother and I didn't invite you here just to hit you up for free labor."

Nick laughed. "C'mon, Dad, I've been doing the milking on my own since I was twelve. Go enjoy your coffee and your paper, and tell Mom I'll be back in time for breakfast."

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His father grunted, pushing his glasses up from the end of his nose. "Your old dad's not completely decrepit yet, you know."

"Consider it a Christmas gift," Nick said, ducking out the back door before he could voice another protest.

The sun hung in the winter sky like a giant, hazy eyeball when he came back up the kitchen stairs, stamping his feet to dislodge the ice congealing on the soles of his work boots. He found his mother bustling about in the kitchen, the air filled with the mouth-watering odors of roasting turkey and sausages sizzling in a huge cast-iron skillet.

"Well, finally!" She glanced up from mixing a bowl of pancake batter, liberally dotted with Nick's favorite blueberries. "I was getting ready to send your father out to fetch you."

"I would've been done sooner, but the milking machine gave me all kinds of trouble. And the stalls looked like they hadn't seen the sharp end of a pitchfork in days. If that's the kind of crappy job your part-time guy does, Dad should fire him."

"Oh, Frank took this week off. Went to spend Christmas with his mother in Buffalo."

"I wish you'd called me. I could've come down a couple days earlier and helped out."

"A dirty barn's nothing to get in a twist about. We'll cope, Nick. We always have." Ladling batter into another skillet, she added, "Why don't you go fetch your father? Everything's almost ready here."

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He didn't need to ask where Dad was—the TV blaring out the college football game led Nick to the living room like a siren song. He couldn't figure out how his father managed to sleep through it, but there he sat, mouth hanging half open, snoring loud enough to drown out the announcer. He came awake with a sharp intake of breath at Nick's gentle shaking of his shoulder, his eyes momentarily blurred with disorientation.

Mom had gone whole-hog on breakfast today, like she always did on Christmas, with scrambled eggs and some rather pricey French roast coffee in addition to the pancakes and sausage. Of course, Nick had two helpings of everything—and Dad wasn't that far behind him, though Nick couldn't help noticing that he'd taken much smaller portions than usual and spent more time thumbing through the sports section than eating. He wore thicker reading glasses now than the ones Nick remembered from the previous summer, and his hair had far more salt in it than pepper. Damn. He really did need to try and get home more often.

Afterwards, Dad retreated back to the living room while Nick cleared the table, taking the opportunity to sneak a peek inside the refrigerator. "You made candied yams and the red-and-green ribbon Jello!" he cried, giddy as a five-year-old.

"Of course I did! I know they're your favorites." She dimpled. "Now would you mind setting the table for me? Eric and Allison should be here in a little while."

He fetched the extra leaves for the kitchen table from the hall closet and put them in before spreading out the Christmas tablecloth with pretty embroidered holly leaves

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around the edges. He remembered her sewing it back when he was about seven or so. Of course, he'd spilled cranberry sauce on it the first time they'd used it and he could still see a faint stain, scrubbed out and worn away by time. He let his fingers brush over it lovingly.

Six place settings this year—the three of them, as well as Eric, Ally, and Ally's widowed father Gabe. Up until about a week ago, Eric and Ally had planned to stay in Manhattan for the holidays, but she'd managed to convince him that a quiet Christmas in the country would prove infinitely more relaxing, especially before heading off to the wilds of Washington come January. Nick was happy to have them staying nearby at the house Eric had grown up in, across the lake from their Seneca Falls farm.

Finished with the task at hand, Nick joined his father for the last half of one game and the first few minutes of the next, before an idle swipe of his hand across his face reminded him he hadn't showered or shaved yet. Marching upstairs, he shed his work clothes and hopped under the warm spray, rinsing off the persistent scent of perspiration and cow. He'd just finished dragging a razor over his face when he heard a pair of familiar voices drifting up from the kitchen. Yanking on some clean jeans and a comfy red flannel shirt, he bolted back downstairs.

Eric's eyes caught his, flashing with a special soft, muted fire reserved for public occasions such as these. Nick took the case of wine he'd brought and set it on the center island, then gave him as long a hug as he dared with his mother in the same room with them. Unfortunately, even that brief a

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contact, coupled with the spicy scent of Eric's cologne, left behind an all-too-familiar aftereffect, as Nick's jeans grew suddenly quite snug in the crotch.

Tugging down the tail of his shirt, he grabbed a huge bowl from Ally's arms. "What's this? You planning to poison us with your potato salad again?"

"It's a green salad with all the trimmings. And you should talk, Mr. Salmonella-Burgers!" she retorted, standing on her tiptoes to give him a kiss on the cheek. "Merry Christmas, you dope."

"Merry Christmas," he whispered back with a smile, his gaze flicking from her to Eric and back again.

Eric and Gabe joined George in the living room, while Nick mashed the potatoes and Ally put the finishing touches on her salad. But when Nick went to call them in to dinner, he halted in the doorway, frozen to the spot by the sight of Eric sitting there next to his father, laughing and cheering on the winning team.

"Pinch me," he murmured, doing exactly that—twice.

"What'd you say?" Ally wondered aloud, sidling up beside him.

"Eric's watching football. Or maybe I should say, Eric's *enjoying* watching football."

"Why are you so surprised? He sat through every single one of your games in college. And I ought to know, since he dragged me along with him."

"Yeah, but ... he's watching it with *Dad*."

"You know Eric's always liked your father."

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"Yeah, but Dad's never reciprocated, especially since..." Dropping his voice, he took her arm, steering her into a quiet corner. "I never actually told my folks about Eric and me, but after all the nights I spent at the lake house back in college, it didn't take them long to figure it out. They were pretty damn disappointed that I didn't have the nerve to confide in them. So I swore I'd never keep anything from them again, but now..."

"Now you've got another secret." She sighed. "Well, if it's any consolation, I doubt they can tell just by looking at us. And even if they could..." She gestured toward the living room. "Your folks love you, Nick. Maybe they didn't like your relationship with Eric at first, but they've obviously learned to accept it. Would it really be so bad if they knew about the three of us?"

Dinner went off without a hitch, and by the time everyone retired to the living room for pie and coffee, the butterflies in Nick's stomach had quieted their wild fluttering. Collecting the dessert plates, he carried them into the kitchen, where he found his mother and Ally finishing with the dishes, giggling like a pair of high school girls. He heaved a huge inward sigh, relieved that all his worrying had apparently come to nothing.

The sky outside had deepened to the color of charcoal when their guests shuffled out the door at last. Eric leaned in to give Nick a hug, whispering, "We'll see you later, all right?" Nick darted a quick glance at his parents, who were standing three feet away, and nodded.

He danced on pins and needles for the rest of the evening, waiting for his parents to go to bed. At last he threw on his

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jacket and slipped out the back door to his dad's beat-up old Ford truck. It took him twice as long as it usually did to make the ten-mile drive to the lake house, creeping over icy roads with the truck coughing and sputtering in the bitter cold.

Eric had left a key for him peeking out from under the doormat. Slipping quietly inside, Nick padded past the imposing original Picasso in the foyer down the hallway to the living room, where he found Eric lounging on the plush leather couch, a fire blazing in the fireplace, a snifter of cognac within easy reach on the nearby table. He sat up straight when he saw Nick approaching, shifting to offer him a place beside him.

Instead, Nick slid to the floor, shrugging out of his jacket, resting his head on Eric's knee. "Now I can finally relax," he murmured, smiling dreamily at the feel of Eric's fingers threading through his hair. "Where's Ally?"

"She went straight to bed. I think she might have overindulged a bit on your mother's wonderful cooking."

"Yeah, well, we've both done that more than once."

Eric chuckled and picked up his snifter, swirling the brandy, taking a sip.

They sat together in lazy, companionable silence, until Eric got up and ambled over to the huge, gaily-decorated Christmas tree in the corner, scooping up a small square box tucked beneath it. "I know we agreed not to exchange gifts this year, but I wanted to get you something special."

Nick unwrapped the shiny silver paper with care, discovering a dark blue velvet keepsake box emblazoned with Tiffany's insignia. Nestled inside, he found a ring—a simple,



unadorned platinum band that fit perfectly upon his ring finger. Eric wore an identical one on his own left hand.

"There's an inscription too," Eric pointed out.

And so there was—an *E* with an *A* and an *N* entwined on either side of it in a plain yet elegant filigree script, with the year engraved beneath the initials. "Eric..." he breathed, "I-I don't know what to say."

"Well, from the look on your face, I'm assuming you're pleased?"

"Completely stunned, more like! I wasn't expecting anything like this."

"I've given one to Allison as well. They've replaced our wedding bands."

Nick stared at him, fully aware that his mouth hung open like an idiot's. "Eric, you didn't need to do this, not for me."

"It's not just for you, it's for all three of us. Perhaps we can't marry legally, but in my heart I feel that we *are* married, and Allison's in complete agreement with me. I don't see anything wrong with us having a tangible reminder of our commitment to each other."

Nick didn't believe it possible for his own heart to burst with happiness, but when Eric bent to kiss him, deeply and thoroughly, it nearly did. Laughing, he pushed Eric back on the couch and started unbuttoning his shirt, kissing a hot, wet trail down his chest. He hesitated for a few tantalizing moments at Eric's belt before sliding down, ripping open Eric's fly and burying his face in crisp, springy ginger curls. He loved it all—the texture, the musky fragrance, the soft, helpless moan Eric always made when Nick took the tip of his

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cock between his lips for the first time. Nick lived for moments like these.

And as usual, it flew by far too quickly. He tried to make it last as long as he could, licking, sucking and slowing down, torturing Eric with ecstasy. But when he felt Eric's fingers winding urgently in his hair, and hot, salty-bitter cream spurting onto his tongue, he knew it was over. Another perfect moment gone forever, except for the memory of it, and that familiar old twinge of despair curling in the pit of his stomach.

He saw a light burning in the kitchen window as he tramped up the back porch stairs and found his mother sitting there at the table, sipping a cup of her favorite herbal tea, the morning paper spread out in front of her. "Couldn't sleep?" she asked, her tone the tiniest bit too bright.

Nick shook his head. "I went out to the loft for a while. It's a nice clear night for looking at the stars."

Mary fixed him with a steady gaze, folding the paper slowly and deliberately, setting it aside. "Don't lie to me, Nick. I checked the barn a little while ago and we both know you weren't there."

Nick's stomach plummeted down to his shoes. "M-Mom, I-I can—"

"Sit down, Nick. I have a few things to say to you." Whenever she used that familiar calm, steely tone, he suddenly felt five years old all over again. Sitting down across from her, he sucked in a deep breath and prepared for the worst. "You know, when you got engaged to Laura, I knew you didn't love her the way a man should love the girl he's

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going to marry. But I couldn't help feeling grateful that you'd decided to try for a normal life. I'd hoped it meant that you'd finally gotten Eric out of your system."

"I don't think that's ever going to happen, Mom."

"He's a married man, Nick. It's wrong, what you're doing."

"He's been married before, and that never stopped us."

"He wasn't married to *Allison* before. For heaven's sake, Nick, how could you do this to her?"

"She knows, Mom." He blurted it without thinking, but as soon as he did, he felt curiously relieved. "In fact, I-I'm ... involved with her too."

"Nick!"

"Look, I know how it sounds, but it's not like that," he explained hastily. "It's not some sleazy sex thing. We love each other, all three of us. We didn't plan for it to happen that way, but it did, and I'm glad. For the first time in my life, I'm really, truly happy."

She swallowed hard, closing her eyes for a moment. "How long has it been going on?"

"Six months, give or take."

"Oh, Nick." She shook her head. "I don't know what to think about any of this. Call me an old prude, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't shocked and disappointed. We didn't raise you this way."

"If it's any consolation, it wasn't easy for us at first. We had all kinds of anger and jealousy going on, though mostly we've managed to work it out. But if somebody had told me a year ago that I'd be involved in this kind of relationship, I wouldn't have believed it either."

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"So where do you see it leading?"

"Well, I'll be living at the penthouse with Ally once Eric leaves for Washington, but I'll still keep my apartment for appearance's sake. And Ally and I plan to take turns flying back to visit Eric on alternate weekends."

"But what about a year from now—or five years, or ten? What if Eric and Allison decide to have children? What're you going to tell them once they get old enough to wonder why Uncle Nick sleeps in the same bed with Mommy and Daddy?"

"Then I guess we'll figure it out one way or another when the time comes. But I've already worked too hard to make this relationship work to give up on it because of some hypothetical problem way off down the road. I love Eric and Ally, and they love me. Right now that's all I care about." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I know how hard this must be for you to hear, but I really am happy, Mom. Can't you at least try to be a little bit happy for me?"

"I want to, Nick, I really do. But I think you're making a terrible mistake."

"Mom—"

"I don't see how you can be happy in a relationship you've got no choice but to keep secret. You're the one who stands to lose here, Nick. Eric and Allison hold all the cards, whether you want to see that or not."

"So what am I supposed to do? Marry some nice, sweet girl, settle down here on the farm and start having babies? That's not for me, Mom."

"Nick, please—"

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"If I have to keep a secret so I can be with the only two people in the world besides you and Dad who've ever truly loved me, then I'll do it gladly. I'm not about to throw away the best thing in my life because you don't want to understand."

Marching upstairs to his room, he shut the door firmly behind him. He didn't think she'd come after him, though he heard her pause on the landing outside for a few moments before she finally went back to bed herself.

He shed his clothes and slipped between the covers naked, the warmth of the flannel sheets enveloping him. Flicking off the light, he closed his eyes with a soul-deep sigh. He never should have told her the truth; he knew she wouldn't understand. In fact, he wished he could take back their entire conversation, but for good or ill, the horse was out of the barn now. Sooner or later, she'd have to come to terms with it.

\* \* \* \*

Ally knocked off work early for a change, but coming home to an empty penthouse deflated her sense of good cheer. She felt a bit better after a quick dinner followed by a long soak in the tub, and had just sacked out on the couch for some serious channel surfing when Nick trudged through the front door, looking like he'd been dragged through a knothole backwards.

"Remind me again never to volunteer for an out-of-town assignment," he muttered, flopping down beside her, "especially if it's a casino fire in Atlantic City."

"So location reporting's not nearly as exciting as it looks on TV, huh?"

"Well, you make it look easy." Groaning, he rolled his neck, letting his head drop onto the back of the couch. "It's time I admitted it—I'm a desk jockey, destined to spend my career hiding behind my byline. You can have the spotlight all to yourself."

"Believe me, that's not as exciting as it looks either. Did you get any dinner?"

"Yeah, I scarfed down a sandwich on the train home."

"That's hardly what I'd call a balanced meal. There's a salad and some fresh roast beef in the fridge."

"Nah, that's okay. I don't think I've got the energy to chew anything else."

After a few more minutes of moaning and groaning, he managed to summon up the energy to plod back to his room, returning clad in a pair of comfy old sweats. He pulled her feet into his lap, massaging them absently as they watched TV together.

Ally smiled softly. "You know, we act more like an old married couple than Eric and I do most of the time."

"Is that a complaint?"

"God, no! But considering how you're feeling tonight, maybe I should be the one rubbing *your* feet."

"I'll be okay. All in a day's work, right?"

"Not when you haven't had a day off in over a month. Why don't you come with me to visit Eric tomorrow?"

"I can't. With Holly taking the weekend off, I'm stuck covering the city desk."

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"Well, you know he misses you. Although I should talk, considering how many times I've canceled on him myself."

"I know. Seems like we've both been getting sidetracked a lot lately." Sighing, he rubbed his eyes. "I'll try to figure out something soon."

When Ally's alarm buzzed the next morning at seven, she shut it off quickly before it could wake Nick, though she needn't have worried. He lay there beside her blissfully sawing wood, his face smooshed into a pillow. She showered and dressed before slipping back to the bedroom to give him a goodbye kiss.

His eyelids fluttered open and he gazed up at her with a heartbreakingly sweet, sleepy grin. "You leaving?"

"Afraid so. The limo's waiting downstairs for me."

"Let me get dressed real quick, and I'll ride along with you."

"Oh, Nick, you don't have to do that. You're still exhausted. Go back to sleep."

"Okay, but ... I'll miss you."

"I'll be home Sunday night. The flight number's tacked up on the bulletin board in the kitchen, in case you want to pick me up at the airport."

"I'll be there." He sat up and pulled her close, kissing her deeply. "You can give that to Eric for me."

"I think I'd rather keep it for myself."

"Give him this one, then." Another kiss—this one teasing and playful—and Ally knew that if she didn't get out of the bedroom now, she never would.

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Grabbing her overnight bag and laptop case, she took a quick elevator ride down to the parking garage, piling gratefully into the waiting limo. Fortunately, the morning traffic appeared light and she got through airport security with no trouble, then onto the Courtland Industries private jet. After a mercifully uneventful flight, Eric's own limo driver greeted her at the gate at National, and a short while later she was pulling up in front of Eric's rented condo in Georgetown.

Eric's housekeeper, a stout, round-faced Salvadoran woman with a good, yet strongly-accented, command of English answered the door and led Ally upstairs to the bedroom. A small, square white envelope with her name scrawled on it in Eric's familiar slapdash script sat on the bedside table. She'd guessed what it said before she opened it.

*Sorry I'm not here to greet you, but I've been called into a last-minute committee meeting. I'll try not to be too late. Make yourself comfortable, and I'll see you later.*

—E.

Her heart in the doldrums, she changed into a t-shirt and sweat pants before traipsing back downstairs. It didn't take long to make the grand tour—aside from bedroom and bath, the place consisted of a living room, kitchen and adjoining dining nook, a small office and an even smaller patio looking out on a postage-stamp-sized garden. It'd do for the short term, but if Eric expected her and Nick to spend a significant amount of time here, they'd definitely need a bigger place.



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Grabbing her laptop, she curled up on the couch with a blanket over her, idly net-surfing. The housekeeper—named Angelina, Ally soon learned—brought her hot tea with a wedge of delicious homemade lemon cake and kept checking on her so diligently, all the attention made Ally blush.

Around four o'clock her cell phone rang, with Eric's number popping up on the caller ID. "Hey there. I got your note. I assume your meeting's still going on?"

"Yes, unfortunately," he replied, weariness all too apparent in his tone. "We're taking a short dinner break now."

"Oh, so you won't..." No point in actually saying it. She should've known he'd be tied up all day. "Any idea when I should be expecting you?"

"If I'm not home by ten, go to bed and we'll talk in the morning."

"Oh, to hell with that! I came all the way down here to see you, so you'd damn well better wake me up."

At least that got a chortle out of him. "Well, if you insist. But I can't promise I'll be up for anything."

"Just get your work done and get home, okay?"

"I'll do my best," he said, and hung up.

Bored with web surfing, she shut her laptop and picked out a paperback from a nearby shelf, skimming it until Angelina called her in to dinner. She'd only taken a few tentative bites of her steaming bowl of beef and vegetable stew when her phone rang again, her producer's number flashing madly in the LCD display.

Oh, God. Why the hell was he calling her now, on the first weekend she'd had off since Christmas? For a few seconds,

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she considered blowing him off, for all the good it'd do; he'd keep on calling every ten minutes until she answered. Stifling a groan, she hit the *send* button.

"Hey, Tony," she piped, forcing her most upbeat, can-do tone. "What's going on?"

"Ally! Man, am I glad I caught you! Got a couple minutes?"

"I'm all ears." Except for her stomach, which of course had to choose that precise moment to start grumbling.

"Listen, I just heard from Bob Richardson over in news programming. They're putting together this new Sunday morning political talk show over at the Washington bureau, and your name's on the short list of possible anchors."

"*Wh-what?* When did this happen? Nobody's said a word to me about it."

"Me neither, until a few minutes ago. But apparently with your connections, the network's considering you a prime candidate—that is, if you want the job."

God, like they had to *ask*? She'd gladly commit murder for a job like this! "W-Well, if they're considering me, I'll certainly consider them."

"I'll pass along the word to Bob. He'll probably give you a call next week."

Far too excited to eat now, she nonetheless made herself swallow a few bites of the stew, then spent the rest of the evening flicking channels on the TV and running back and forth to the window, wishing Eric home through sheer force of will. By the time he came through the door around nine p.m., she was bouncing off the walls.

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Throwing her arms around him, she kissed him so hard she nearly knocked them both off their feet. "Looks like someone's anxious to see me," he observed dryly.

"C'mon in the kitchen and have something to eat while I tell you my news," she said, grabbing his hand, tugging him along behind her.

He had a small plate of spinach salad and a glass of white wine while she related what Tony had told her, one eyebrow arched in approval. "Sounds like an impressive step up for your career, if it actually comes to pass."

"I know. And I'm trying not to get my hopes up, but still, can you imagine—me, with my own *show*? And if it's broadcast from DC, I can move here with you full-time."

"I think you're forgetting something—or rather, *someone*."

Now she remembered, and her heart lurched. "Nick."

"Exactly." He swirled the wine in his glass. "As if our relationship wasn't complicated enough."

"Look, there's no reason to be concerned yet, not when I haven't even talked to the people in charge. We can sit down and discuss it seriously, all three of us, once it's a done deal." Her stomach grumbling again, she snaked her hand across the table, stealing a leaf of spinach from his plate. "And now I should probably shut up and let you tell me about your day."

"There's not much to tell. Just another endless picking-apart of the finance committee's latest bill, which we'll vote on and probably pass Monday. Then it'll go to the full Senate, which will either vote it down or send it back to committee for more revisions. And of course, there's always the possibility

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that it could get stalled or killed outright at any point in the process."

"Jesus," she breathed. "If I had to do that every day, I wouldn't have a strand of hair left on my head."

"Believe me, I now know where the phrase 'exercise in futility' comes from."

"And you're not used to that. To not succeeding at everything you do, I mean."

"You're in an observant mood this evening," he said, a hint of irritation creeping into his tone.

"It's an occupational hazard, I'm afraid."

"Just my luck." He sighed. "When I ran Courtland Industries, I made company-wide decisions with the stroke of a pen. If the board of directors gave me any trouble, most of the time I had no problem bringing them around to my way of thinking. I've always worked hard and I've always shown results. But to work so hard now and have nothing to show for it but a few prominently-placed noses I've managed to put out of joint along the way ... Well, it's galling in the extreme."

"Now I can see why you haven't made it home for a visit yet, but honestly, Eric, you can't keep up this pace forever. You only took office two months ago. Nobody expects you to be Superman."

"Not outside the bedroom, anyway," he replied with a smile. "Speaking of which..."

They climbed the stairs hand in hand and fell into the soft bed, kissing slowly and deeply. Letting her hand drift down, she unzipped his fly and reached inside, surprised to discover him only half hard. Stroking him with her fingers didn't help,

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so she tried going down on him, but even her best sucking, licking and tongue flicking failed to give him a lift.

Finally he pushed her away, rolling onto his back, one arm flung over his eyes. "I'm obviously more tired than I thought."

"That's okay. I'll take a rain check for tomorrow morning."

"If you like, I'd be more than happy to give you a sound tongue-lashing."

She laughed. "I'd rather wait. It's more fun when we both come. Although I do have one special request..."

"What's that?"

Snuggling up to him, she whispered, "I've been dying to re-enact our wild wedding night."

"You want me to tie you up?" Lowering his arm, he opened first one eye, then the other. "In that case, it's a good thing you're letting me get some sleep first. Only I don't think I've got the right kind of rope here."

"I brought some along in my suitcase."

Now he laughed. "You certainly came prepared, didn't you?"

"Not yet." She grinned. "But believe me, I will."

\* \* \* \*

Eric strode to the window for the umpteenth time, flicking the curtain back impatiently. Closing in on midnight, and still no sign of Nick. Not that that was much of a surprise, but Nick usually called whenever another one of his unavoidable work emergencies came up—or failing that, asked Allison to call for him. Since they'd now gone close to three months

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without seeing each other, Eric expected the phone to ring any second.

Instead, he heard a soft rap at the door. He rose to answer it, his heart skidding in his chest when he saw Nick standing there on the doorstep, overnight bag in hand, sporting his biggest, toothiest grin. Eric scarcely had time to get the door shut before he found himself enfolded in Nick's strong embrace, followed by the world's most toe-curling kiss.

"I-I was starting to think you weren't going to show again," Eric gasped once they finally broke apart.

"I know I should've called, but I got roped into helping Holly finish one of her stories, so I ended up taking a later flight. I didn't mean for you to worry."

"It's all right, I'm just glad you're here. Did you follow those directions I gave you?"

He nodded. "I had the cab drop me a couple of streets over and walked the rest of the way."

"Good," Eric said, taking Nick's hand, bringing it up to brush against his cheek. "So, are you hungry?"

"You have no idea." Nick grinned, with an evil, predatory light in his eyes that Eric absolutely adored. "Which way's the bedroom?"

They tore upstairs with such abandon Eric thought they must've left skid marks on the carpet, not to mention the bedroom door. Nick shoved him up against it, kissing him so urgently Eric felt as if he had a fever, but it was only the heat generated from Nick shucking his own clothes, then whipping Eric's robe off. More breathless, frenzied kisses, and Eric landed flat on his back on the bed with Nick looming over

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him. Eric yanked him down and hung on tight, craving skin-to-skin contact like an addict yearned for his next fix.

Time froze while they lay there, touching, kissing and memorizing each other's bodies all over again. At last Nick stopped, rolling onto his back with a desperate groan, legs splayed wide in wanton invitation.

Rummaging in his nightstand for a familiar slim white tube, Eric pressed it into Nick's hand, kissing him soundly at the same time. "I want you on top tonight," he whispered, shifting to make himself comfortable on his stomach.

He could feel the amazement rolling off Nick in waves without even looking at him. But luckily, rampant desire had taken his lover firmly in hand. Eric closed his eyes and gave himself over to it, delicious anticipation curling in his belly as Nick slowly, teasingly licked and fingered him, leaving him sobbing with need by the time Nick rolled on a condom, slicked himself and pushed deep inside him. It burned but he welcomed it, and when Nick started thrusting, he thrust back, meeting each stroke with equal force. Nick quickly got the hint and began ramming in earnest, so hard that Eric had to bury his face in the pillow to keep from screaming aloud. He came with a soul-wrenching moan, Nick following soon after, crumpling on top of him, weighing him down into the mattress.

They lay there together, sweaty and trembling with their final delicious aftershocks, until Eric had to give Nick a gentle poke in the ribs, urging him to move before his own limbs started to cramp. He stretched out gratefully, Nick curling at his side with a spent, happy sigh. Eric echoed the sentiment,

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albeit silently; for the first time since Allison's last visit over a month ago, he felt truly relaxed, his mind calm and clear. Stroking Nick's shoulder, he sank back into his pillows and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

A sharp gasp woke him, followed by the bang of the bedroom door slamming shut. Springing up, Eric threw on his robe and stepped out into the hallway just in time to see his housekeeper beating a hasty retreat downstairs. For a split-second he considered going after her, but common sense stopped him. Best not to call any undue attention to the incident. It was his own fault anyway, he realized, since he'd intended to give her the weekend off. Damn!

Nick sat up in bed as he came back in, blinking blearily. "What was that?"

"My housekeeper. I think we just gave her a few new gray hairs."

"Oh." He tensed. "You don't think she'll—"

"No, I don't think she'll tell anyone. She came highly recommended from an agency that prides itself on discretion. And if she does say anything, I'll see to it personally that she never works again." Dropping down heavily on the edge of the bed, he stole a glance at the clock. It was nearly nine. "I'm usually up and about by now even on weekends, or she never would've come in here in the first place."

Nick scooted up behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist. "Hell of a way to start our weekend, huh?"

"Don't worry about it. Let's go get some breakfast."



The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

Eric took Angelina aside and told her to take the next two days off, then put on the coffee and dug some bread and fresh fruit out of the refrigerator. They ate out on the sunny patio, the breeze bringing a bit of spring chill, but nothing a light sweater couldn't handle.

"So what is there to do around here?" Nick wondered, stretching like the world's most satisfied cat. "Aside from the obvious, I mean."

"Well, there's probably a game on TV today, if you want to watch it. If you don't, I've got every cable channel in existence. Or we could sit out here in the sun and read, I suppose."

"Why don't we go out for a walk? I wouldn't mind seeing the neighborhood."

Damn. He'd hoped Nick wouldn't bring this up—at least, not on his first visit. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

"Why not?"

"It's very difficult for someone in my position to go anywhere in this town without being recognized."

Nick's content expression melted away, replaced by hurt and disappointment. "You mean you don't want to anyone to recognize you out in public with me."

"Nick, c'mon, you know we need to be care—"

"Give me a break, Eric! You've sung me this song too many times before, back when you made me meet you at that apartment so Ally wouldn't find out about us. And we all know how long that secret stayed buried." Shoving his chair back with an ear-shattering scrape, he sprang up and marched back indoors.

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

Eric followed him upstairs, arriving in the doorway just in time to watch Nick dump his toilet items back into his overnight bag. "So you're leaving? Just like that?"

"I might as well," Nick replied tightly. "I mean, we've already fucked, so I guess the weekend's not a total loss."

"Oh, for God's sake, will you drop the melodramatics? I've never heard anything so ridiculous."

"Really? You're a public figure now, Eric. Your life's under a microscope every damn day. Do you honestly think the press won't find out about us?"

"Maybe they will, but I'm not about to lead them right to our bedroom door."

He let out a bitter chuckle. "Well, at least you're honest."

"Would you rather have me lie to you?"

"No," he replied. "But that doesn't stop me from wishing the truth didn't hurt so much."

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## Chapter 6

### One Year, Three Lives: Spring

Eric managed to make it home for his and Ally's first anniversary party in April. But of course Nick got held up on a deadline at the Herald and arrived late, finding the gathering already in full swing, guests spilling from the living room out onto the balcony. Fortunately, they all seemed so absorbed in their mingling, Nick didn't have much trouble slipping back to his room unnoticed. Washing up quickly, he put on the tux Ally had rented for him, only to be greeted by a sharp wolf whistle as he finished wrestling his bow tie into submission.

"Not bad, Thompson. You clean up nice," Holly cooed from the doorway. Twirling daintily on one foot, she showed off her own ensemble—a black satin sheath dress and matching patent heels, her dark hair swept elegantly atop her head. Nick had to admit, the look suited her. "Looks like we both scored some new glad rags," she added.

"Well, now I know where you disappeared to at lunch. But somehow I don't remember you mentioning that you were coming tonight."

"Ally invited me at the last minute. Apparently she thought you needed a date."

"I think the word you're looking for is *beard*."

"Beard, schmeard, who cares? I wasn't about to pass up one of the social events of the season!"

The Arrangement  
by Cat Grant

Latching onto his arm, she dragged him out into the crush, snagging a couple glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, shoving one into his hand. He spied Eric holding court near the bar and they exchanged nods, but Eric's expression warned him not to come over. It was just as well; it looked like he was chatting up some political fat-cats, and their conversation always left Nick feeling like he'd wandered into a roomful of people speaking some exotic foreign language. With a sigh, Nick downed his entire glass in one gulp and continued scanning the crowd.

Ally waved to him from the balcony, where she played the gracious hostess, smiling and laughing, working the room in a way Nick found inspirational. He'd always envied her ability to talk to anyone about anything, when most social situations invariably left him tongue-tied. Poised, brilliant, witty and beautiful, she made a perfect wife for Eric. Nick adored her for those exact same qualities.

"So aren't you going to introduce me around?" Holly prompted. "You know more of these people than I do."

"Not really. I think most of them are Eric's campaign supporters and old colleagues from Courtland Industries. Ally's producer Tony's way over there, but he's the only face I recognize."

"What, you mean we're the *only* personal friends they invited?"

"Looks like," he muttered. "Now I wish I'd gone to my apartment tonight instead."

"Aw, c'mon, it's not that bad." She gave his arm a reassuring squeeze. "At least we'll get a nice dinner out of it."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

As if on cue, a tuxedo-clad waiter came out and struck a small gong, beckoning the guests into the dining room. Nick escorted Holly in, discovering to his dismay that her seat was on one side of the long table, his on the other. Ally's producer sat on his right, but he seemed more interested in eyeballing the cleavage of the woman on the other side of him. Half-relieved, half-exasperated, Nick stifled another sigh, stealing a glance at his watch.

Eric and Ally came in last, taking their places at the head of the table. Eric fell into immediate conversation with the man sitting next to him, but Ally flashed Nick a quick wink and a smile before signaling to the wait staff to begin serving the meal.

The food wasn't exactly awful, but it didn't suit Nick's tastes at all. He passed on the soup—he couldn't stand vichyssoise—and only managed a few bites of the fishy-tasting Caesar salad before pushing his plate away. The entrée was filet mignon, but it had some weird kind of cream sauce on it, most of which he managed to scrape off. He liked the garlic mashed potatoes, although he wished he could've asked for seconds. Then came Ally's favorite New York cheesecake for dessert, topped with fresh fruit and washed down with more champagne—or in Nick's case, coffee.

Afterwards, he sat fiddling with his cup and making faces at Holly across the table until Ally's producer started tapping on his water glass with a spoon and stood up, glass of champagne in hand. From the way he weaved back and forth, it looked like he had more than enough booze under his belt already.

The Arrangement  
by Cat Grant

"Allow me to extend my congratulations to the h-happy couple," he slurred. "I've known Ally Taylor-Courtland for her whole career at CNN, and she's always been a real go-getter—even though back when s-she told me who she'd just gotten engaged to, I thought, 'she's gotta be fucking kidding.'" The room buzzed with muted titters and a few embarrassed coughs. Nick's hands doubled into fists under the table, barely resisting the urge to grab the guy by the scruff of his neck and shove him back down in his chair. "S-So let's raise a glass to Eric Courtland, future president of the United States, and his l-lovely wife, the new host of *Washington Insider*!"

For a few seconds, Nick wasn't sure he'd heard him right, but a quick glance at Ally told him his ears hadn't deceived him. She looked mortified, and not because one of her guests had just made a colossal ass of himself. She looked like someone caught in a lie. Or more accurately, someone caught withholding information. At the moment, Nick didn't see much difference.

Throwing his napkin down on the table, he marched out of the dining room. Luckily, by that point half the room—including Holly—was rushing over to congratulate Ally on her latest career coup. He doubted anyone had noticed he'd left.

Back in his room, he peeled off his tux, letting it drop where he stood, then stepped under a cool shower, hoping the water's temperature would have a similar effect on his temper. By the time he toweled off and wrapped himself in his robe, he felt more empty and disappointed than angry,

though he wasn't sure whether to take that as a positive sign or not.

He emerged from the bathroom to find Ally perched on the edge of his bed, smiling nervously.

"I'm surprised you were able to tear yourself away from all your adoring fans," he said dryly, scooping the wrinkled tux up from the floor and putting it back on its hanger.

"Nick, you've got to believe me, I had no idea Tony was going to do that. They only offered me the job today. I haven't even decided if I'm going to take it or not."

"Oh, c'mon, Ally, don't try to kid me. Of course you're going to take it. You've worked your whole career for an opportunity like this."

"Then you're not mad?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "I'll get over it."

Jumping off the bed, she threw her arms around him, hugging him tight. "You know, rescheduling our time together won't be that hard. It's one of those Sunday morning political roundtable-discussion shows, so I only actually have to be in Washington from, say, Thursday through Sunday, and I can fly back here Sunday night, so we—"

"Ally, it's okay. Don't worry about me. Go be with Eric. We both know he's going crazy down in DC all by himself. I'll get down to visit you both whenever I can."

Her expression wavered between disappointment and relief. Relief won. Nick's heart sank a little in response. "Are you sure?"

Forcing a smile, he dipped his head to kiss her. "Yes, definitely."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

He spent the rest of the evening kicking back in bed, idly surfing the net on his laptop. He'd just decided to call it a night when he heard a knock at the door, and Eric strode in. "Allison's told me she's explained the situation to you, and you're okay with it."

Nick nodded, closing the laptop, setting it aside. "What else could I say? If I told her not to go, she'd just resent it. I can't do that to her. I wouldn't like it if either of you did it to me."

"There is another solution," Eric said, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "Quit the Herald and move to Washington with us. Believe me, you won't have a problem finding a new job. DC's crawling with journalists."

"And where exactly would I sleep? The garage? That condo's barely big enough for you."

"I've just made an offer on a place out in Potomac. The house and grounds are huge, everything's very quiet and private ... And there's a guest house too."

"Three guesses as to where I'm going to live."

"Nick, after what happened the last time you visited, we can't be too cautious."

Sitting up, Nick rubbed a hand over his face. He hadn't wanted to bring this up tonight, but now he couldn't see any way around it. "I can't move to DC with you, Eric. In fact, I can't see myself leaving here anytime in the near future. It's my Dad," he murmured. "That weekend last month when Ally went down to visit you, he ended up in the hospital. His heart's giving out on him. The doctors say he might only have till the end of the year, if that."



"God, Nick, I'm sorry," Eric breathed, sliding an arm around Nick's shoulder, pulling him close. "I wish you'd told me sooner."

"It's not like we've had a lot of time together lately. And besides, there's nothing you can do. He's dying, and that's that." He paused, swallowing hard. "I'm taking a leave of absence from the Herald and going home until ... Well, as long as it takes. With Dad sidelined, Mom's going to need help around the farm. She can't run things all by herself anymore."

"Didn't they hire some extra help not too long ago?"

"For the last few months they've had this one guy coming in a couple days a week to help out with the heaviest stuff. It's all they can afford right now. With me there, they can let him go and save the money."

"If there's any way I can help with the financial side of things, just say the word."

"You know my Dad, Eric. He's too proud to take anything from you. But thanks for offering. It means a lot to me, at least." He stretched out on the bed, tugging Eric down next to him. "Do me a favor, and don't tell Ally about my Dad till after she gets settled in Washington. If I tell her now, she'll feel guilty for leaving, and I don't want that. I don't want her sacrificing such a great opportunity on my account either."

"I doubt she'd think of it as a sacrifice."

"Maybe not," Nick replied with a wan smile, "but I would."

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## Chapter 7

### One Year, Three Lives: Summer

Nick had forgotten how much he loved summers on the farm. He loved getting up early enough to meet the sunrise every morning, the air still breezy and cool at that hour, whispering over his skin like a kiss. He enjoyed working out in the fields with the hot sun beating down on his back, taking refuge in the clearness of mind that hard physical labor normally brought him. And today, between mucking out stalls, taking care of the milking, and fixing several broken fence posts, he'd cornered the market on hard work.

He'd just finished nailing a length of wood in place on one of the new posts when he heard his mother calling for him from the kitchen, her tone panicky and urgent.

Dashing back to the house, he burst through the kitchen door to find his father crumpled halfway up the stairs, panting heavily. Mom had hold of his arm, trying to keep him from falling the rest of the rest of the way, but he was quickly slipping from her grasp.

Up the stairs in seconds, Nick looped his father's arm around his neck, shouldering the older man's weight. He felt like a sack of wet concrete. "How'd this happen?"

"He was trying to get upstairs to the bathroom, and he just collapsed," his mother explained. "After last time, I told him—"

"Last time? You mean this has happened before?"

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"A day or two ago. I told him then he should try using that portable commode we keep by the bed, but he wouldn't—"

"I-I'm standing right h-here, you know," Dad interjected testily, still out of breath, "and I-I've got to take a piss something awful."

Biting his lip to hold back his labored grunts, Nick helped his father up the last few steps to the bathroom, but when they reached the door, Dad shoved him away. "You sure you don't need help in there?" Nick asked.

"I'm not so sick that I can't handle my own pecker," he snapped, slamming the door in Nick's face.

He managed to make it downstairs without Nick's help, though he took each step molasses-slow, holding the banister in a death-grip all the way down. Shuffling into the living room, he collapsed on the couch, nodding off a few minutes later.

Nick poured himself a glass of iced tea and joined his mother at the kitchen table. "He's going downhill fast."

She nodded wearily. "I've been trying to make him take it easy, but he fights it. He can feel his strength ebbing a little bit more every day and it makes him so angry."

"Can't blame him. I'd feel the same way."

"He gets disoriented when he wakes up at night too. The other night he thought he'd fallen asleep on the couch and he started wandering around the bedroom, looking for the TV."

"Why don't we make up the sofa bed for him? It's a lot cooler down here during the night. He might sleep better."

"I already suggested that, but he wouldn't listen to me."

"Let me talk to him. I bet he'll do it if I ask him."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

Surprisingly, his father agreed to it without so much as a token protest; Nick had the feeling his last struggle to get upstairs had thrown a genuine scare into him. So from then on they slept in the living room together, Dad on the sofa bed, Nick in Dad's creaky old recliner. Dad had good nights and rougher nights, but at least now they didn't have to worry about him taking a header down the stairs during his less than lucid moments.

Still, those moments grew more frequent as the days passed, with Nick waking up several times a night to help Dad use the portable commode, or simply to calm him down after another panic attack or bout of disorientation. Nick could function fairly well on four or five hours a night, but within a couple of weeks he found himself stumbling around like a zombie, dropping things and tripping over his own feet.

His sole marginal measure of sanity came from staying in contact with Eric and Ally through daily emails, and phone calls once or twice a week. They usually called in the evening, so he'd taken to lingering in the kitchen long after he'd finished washing up the dinner dishes, lunging at the phone on the first ring. He practically dissolved in grateful tears one Wednesday night when he heard Ally's teasing voice on the end of the line. "How're you all doing up there, farm boy?"

"We're maintaining, but that's about all I can say. Every day I find two or three more things Dad's let fall by the wayside. Even back with Frank Medford coming in to help a couple days a week, Dad wasn't able to keep up with anything more than the basics. I'm barely holding my head above water myself."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"I'm sorry. I wish I could do more than just lend an empathetic ear."

"Believe me, that's exactly what I need right now." Then, suppressing a sigh, he added, "Is Eric there?"

"Not tonight, I'm afraid. Another evening voting session takes its toll."

"That sounds tedious."

"Yeah, in more ways than one. But I'm hardly one to talk these days, with all the production meetings for the new show."

"How's that going?"

"It's coming together slowly and surely, although it's still tons more work than I'd anticipated. In fact, I..."

He waited a few seconds for her to go on, but when she didn't, he prompted, "Something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know how you're going to react to this, but I had to come up to the city a couple days ago to nail down some preliminary interviews, and I ran into Laura."

"Oh." Now that he'd heard the news, he wasn't sure how to react to it either. "How's she doing?"

"Amazingly well, I thought. Apparently she's decided to go back to school for her master's."

"Yeah, she talked about that a lot when we were..." He let out a gusty breath. "Well, I guess she's got nothing to keep her from doing it now."

"Maybe you should think about giving her a call."

"Are you kidding? I'm the last person she wants to hear from."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"Well, since she'll probably be leaving New York soon, it might not be such a bad idea to clear the air with her."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

She made this tiny exasperated sound. "Just that I know what it's like being the one who gets cheated on. And that's all I'm saying about it."

So the days plodded on, more hard work followed by more semi-sleepless nights. On the rare occasions when he managed to carve out some free time, he'd retreat to the old couch up in the barn's loft and try to read or tinker with some broken tool, but more often than not he stared off into space, his entire body aching with loneliness.

One morning his mother peered at him over her coffee cup and said, "You look awful. I think you should take a break."

"I'm fine, Mom. Losing a little sleep never killed anybody."

"Maybe not, but it can certainly get you hurt. How many times have you cut yourself or hit your thumb with a hammer lately?"

"Oh, c'mon, I do that all the time. You know I'm just a clumsy stumblebum."

"Don't you dare make light of this!" she snapped. "Your father and I need you, Nick, and we need you awake and alert. You're no good to us falling face-first into your dinner plate."

Well, that woke him up—and shocked him down to his toes. Such brutal bluntness wasn't like Mom at all. "I-I guess this means you don't mind spelling me on the couch for a couple of nights."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"More than that. I think you should get away from here this weekend. Go into the city and see your friends. Forget about all this for a couple of days."

"Going to Manhattan isn't exactly what I'd call a stress reducer. And aside from Holly and ... Well, I don't have too many friends these days."

"I'm sure you'll figure out something. And don't worry about everything going to seed here. I'll call Frank to come in for a couple of days."

Of course, Nick knew exactly where he planned to go. He thought about emailing Eric about it, but decided to make it a surprise. He couldn't wait to see Eric's face when he walked through the door of his new house.

Saturday morning he drove to Syracuse, arriving in time to catch the eight a.m. express train to Manhattan. He'd have to switch trains there to go on to DC, but if they ran true to schedule, he'd arrive by mid-afternoon. Of course, he'd have to repeat the process coming back, which would make it a killer trip even for a weekend, but if he was too tired he could always sleep over at his apartment in the city and catch an early train home in the morning.

Luck smiled on him, with both trains making excellent time. Grabbing a cab at the station, he had it drop him a few streets over from the address Eric had emailed him. Ten minutes later, he trudged up the front steps of Eric's stately colonial-style mansion in Potomac.

The housekeeper ushered him out to the terrace, where he found Eric having a solitary late lunch; he set his newspaper aside at Nick's approach, plainly surprised. But when Nick

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

tried to throw his arms around him, Eric shook his head, raising a hand to stop him. "I wish you'd called," he said in a deliberately low-pitched tone. "I wasn't expecting to see you today."

"Is this a bad time?"

"No, not really, but ... Nick, you can't just drop in here unannounced. In fact, you were lucky to find me at home."

"I-I'm sorry, I thought you'd be glad ... Look, I came a long way. I really need to see you."

The desperation in his voice had obviously raised a red flag, because Eric's demeanor shifted instantly from guarded to concerned. "It's all right," he murmured. "Let's go for a walk."

Eric had described the grounds to him in vivid detail, but they proved even more impressive in person—green, sprawling, and dotted with tall, shady trees, surrounded by thick bushes that obscured the area from prying eyes. Eric took Nick's hand as they strolled along, past the Olympic-sized pool and tennis court, until they reached a cozy-looking bungalow nestled beneath a huge live oak.

Much bigger on the inside than it appeared from the outside, it sported a good-sized living room, full kitchen, and a bedroom that made his room back at the farm look like a glorified broom closet. Nick could see Ally's tasteful hand in the décor, all sturdy, solid wood furniture—some of them even looked like antiques—and plush rugs, with a few landscape paintings to give the place character.



The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

Nick plopped on the edge of the bed, bouncing up and down, testing the mattress. "Looks like you were expecting me after all."

"We were planning to call and invite you down soon. Allison only finished getting the place ready about a week ago."

"It's nice, but you didn't have to go to all this trouble just for me. I doubt I'll be making any extended visits."

"Well, regardless, we want you to be comfortable here."

"I know how you can make me comfortable," he growled, grabbing Eric's hand, dragging him down on the bed.

They tore into each other like a pair of starving men with a banquet spread out in front of them. Nick was frantic with need by the time Eric stopped teasing him with his lips, tongue and fingers and finally took him, fucking him so hard Nick could feel it in his back teeth. He moaned and whined, clutching Eric like a lifeline, begging for more, not caring how pitiful he sounded.

Later, they lay together talking, catching up on their respective lives. But when Nick tried to tell Eric about his father, his composure cracked, all the helplessness and frustration he'd kept bottled up for weeks pouring out of him like water from a broken jug.

"He slips away bit by bit, a little more every day," he whispered sadly. "He forgets things all the time now, and when he realizes it, he gets all embarrassed and angry. He curses a lot now too, which he never did before. The doctors say it's because he's not getting enough oxygen to his brain and that it'll probably get worse."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"How's your mother holding up?"

"The best she can, I guess. We've been snapping at each other a lot lately, mostly because we're both so tired. But I'm still glad I'm there to help out. She keeps saying she's fine, but there's no way she could take care of Dad and run the farm too." He sucked in a breath, blinking back tears. "He's worked himself so damn hard these last few years, something like this was bound to happen. If I'd taken over the place from them like they wanted me to, maybe he wouldn't even be sick."

"Nick, you can't blame yourself. And you can't take back the past. All you can do right now is be a good son, and trust that's enough."

"Strange words, coming from someone who used to beat his head against the wall every time one of his bills got voted down."

"Until a highly-respected senior senator took me aside and gave me some sage advice: 'You can't change the world in five minutes', he said—and he was right. All I was doing was wearing myself out on the small battles, so that by the time the big ones rolled around, I had nothing left to give them. It's evidently a common problem among freshman senators and congressmen."

"So the lesson is, live to fight another day?"

"Exactly."

They fucked again, until the light outside the window darkened from dusk to evening, and Eric got up and started to get dressed.

The Arrangement  
by Cat Grant

"I guess that's my cue to leave," Nick said wearily, tugging his shirt over his head.

"If you'd like to stay here tonight, I'd be happy to have some dinner sent over."

"What, you mean I can't even come back in the main house?"

"You know I don't like this any more than you do, but we have to be discreet. If you'd let me know you're coming next time, I'll make sure to give the household staff the day off."

"But your housekeeper's already seen me!"

"Yes, exactly—for the *second* time. And while I doubt she'd ever spread gossip, I'd rather not tempt fate."

"Okay, fine. In that case, I'd rather head home," Nick snapped, pulling on his jeans. "And don't worry, I can take a hint. Next time I'll be sure to call first."

"Nick, c'mon ... You have to be reasonable—"

"That's just it, Eric. *I'm* always the one who has to be reasonable. I'm the one who gets treated like a guest instead of an equal partner. I'm starting to think Mom was right after all."

Eric stared at him. "You told your *mother*?"

"I didn't plan on it, but when she caught me sneaking back in the house Christmas night, it just sort of happened. And for what it's worth, I'm glad she knows. I need somebody to talk to. At least you've got Ally."

Eric hung his head for a moment, apparently chastened. "I didn't want to tell you until we'd finalized our plans, but Allison and I were planning to spend our month off in August

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

together at the lake house. That is, if you still want us around," he added with a sardonic smirk.

For a few seconds, Nick didn't believe it. When it all sank in, he still couldn't believe it, even with happiness filling him up so full it hurt to breathe. "Really?"

"Yes, really. We were hoping to just show up in town and surprise you, but it sounds like you could use something to look forward to. And frankly, so could I," he said, leaning in for a kiss. "You'll have to forgive me for being so distracted. I've been stuck on my own private treadmill for so long, it never occurred to me how lonely you must be."

"But not for long."

"No," Eric murmured. "Not for long."

\* \* \* \*

Eric called a cab to pick Nick up at the gardener's gate not far from the guest house, then took his time strolling back to the mansion, hands in his pockets, lost in thought. Deepening darkness finally drove him inside, where he found Allison working in her office, tapping furiously on her laptop. She glanced up when he came in, startled and plainly relieved.

"My God, Eric, where have you been?" she demanded. "I got back from the studio and I couldn't find you anywhere. Angelina said she hadn't seen you since lunch."

He hesitated, shutting the door before dropping into one of the chairs in front of her desk. "Nick showed up unexpectedly. I spent the day with him at the guest house."

"Is he okay?"

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"Honestly, I'm not sure. He's had a rough couple of months. His father's gone into a rather rapid decline. Nick seems to be holding up fairly well under the circumstances, but naturally he's upset."

"I can imagine," she said a touch sharply. She still hadn't forgiven him for not telling her about George's ill health until after she'd arrived in Washington. In truth, he could hardly blame her.

"I told him we'd be spending our vacation at the lake house. That seemed to make him happy."

"Fine with me. I wasn't looking forward to muggy Manhattan in August anyway."

"I've got a feeling his father's not going to last much longer, and I'd like to be there for Nick when it happens, if at all possible."

"So would I." She got up and came around the desk, kneeling at Eric's side. "I wish he'd come inside for a few minutes. I would've liked to talk to him."

He'd had a glib excuse rehearsed, but for some reason it stuck in his throat. "Allison—"

"Eric, it's all right. I mean, of course I'm disappointed that I didn't get to see him this time, but I know he only came all the way down here to see you." She sat back on her heels with a thoughtful smile. "When he's hurting, you're the one he always turns to. I've accepted that. You're his first love. Naturally, you have an incredibly strong bond. I'm not threatened by it."

Eric smiled. "It never occurred to me that you were."

"Good," she replied, standing up, holding out her hand.

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

She led him upstairs, jumping him before he could get the bedroom door closed, tearing open his shirt, clawing at him like a wild thing. He wrestled her over to the bed and pinned her down, grinding his rising erection against her. She loved fucking him like this, with Nick's scent still lingering on his skin. It never failed to drive her insane.

He seized a handful of her hair and dragged her to the head of the bed, taking a moment to rummage in the bedside table. They didn't normally use condoms, but considering where he'd last put his cock, he thought she'd appreciate the courtesy. He opened his fly and rolled it on, then yanked down her panties and nylons. She lifted her hips to help him get them off, scooting up to rest her head on a pillow, her arms raised above her head in open, wanton invitation.

He had her favorite rope—long, black and worn to silky-smoothness. The sight of it always made her instantly wet. He put on a deliberate show of looping it through the bars in the headboard, knowing how much she loved every moment of anticipation. Grinning at her audible sigh when he knotted it around first one wrist, then the other, he pulled it just tight enough to keep her right where he wanted her, but not enough to cut off her circulation.

She lay there gazing up at him, panting and trembling. He took a moment to savor her utter helplessness then started unbuttoning her blouse. Her skin felt warm and moist against his fingertips, which he drew across her breasts and belly, inducing more soft, desperate tremors. Fortunately, her bra had a front closure, because he would have torn it off her otherwise—not that she would've minded. Her nipples already

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stood up like hard, tight pebbles; he took his time pulling and rolling them between his fingers until she whimpered like a tortured animal, tossing her head on the pillow. He'd make them good and sore, and give her something to remember him by tomorrow when she sat in her office at the studio, trying to look so cool and professional.

He thrust a hand under her skirt, worrying her clit with his thumb. He'd thought about going down on her, but found her already slick and dripping. Nudging her knees apart, he entered her roughly. She arched her back and wrapped her thighs around his waist, rolling her hips against him. Leaning down, he took her nipple between his teeth again, sucking hard, and started thrusting.

He fucked her until she came, then until she screamed. He fucked her until she couldn't come anymore, and her moans turned raw and hoarse. He fucked her until she lay there with tears pouring down her cheeks, begging him to stop.

He came with a grunt, ears ringing from the sheer intensity of it. With a soft kiss he rolled off, reaching up to yank the rope loose from her wrists. Padding to the bathroom, he disposed of the spent condom and wetted a towel, bringing it back to the bedroom with him. She still trembled as he wiped down her sweaty skin, her face streaked with tears and smeared mascara. She reached up to stroke his cheek, smiling a hazy little half-smile.

He caught her hand and carried it to his lips, kissing each one of her fingertips. "You're amazing," he whispered.

She grinned. "I know."

\* \* \* \*

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Nick's mother drove into town Friday morning to do the weekly grocery shopping and run a few errands, leaving Nick to putter around the house, keeping an eye on his dad. He'd just finished washing up the lunch dishes when he heard the familiar crunch of the truck's tires in the driveway—which was strange, since he wasn't expecting her home for at least another hour. Frowning, he wiped his hands on a towel and tramped out to help unload the car.

His mother caught up with him before he reached the driveway, her expression upset and even a tiny bit scared. "Where's your father?" she barked.

"He's taking a nap on the couch. What's wrong? You look all—"

She shoved a newspaper in his face—the latest edition of the New York Post, sporting the headline, "My Boyfriend Dumped Me—For Eric Courtland!"

Beneath the screaming thirty-six-point type was a photo—a *big* photo—of Laura.

"Why would she do something like this, Nick?" His mother's voice hovered on the knife-edge of tears. "And how did she even find out about you and Eric in the first place? Did you tell her?"

"No, of course not!" He scanned the article quickly, momentarily relieved to see that it didn't identify him by name, but only as "an up-and-coming New York Herald reporter who's kept company with the recently-elected senator for a number of years." Which, frankly, was scant comfort. Everyone who'd attended their anniversary party



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knew which New York Herald reporters Eric Courtland counted among his close personal friends, and Laura clearly wasn't talking about Holly. "Jesus," he muttered.

"Nick, we can't let your father see this."

"So throw it away," he snapped, handing it back to her, "and keep the TV off, in case this shows up on one of those tabloid shows."

"Oh, God, you don't really think she—"

"I don't know," he said grimly. "But I'm going to find out."

He caught the express train into the city, pulling into Penn at the height of rush hour, and hopped the subway across town to Laura's apartment. She answered the door looking sweaty, dirty and tired, dressed in stained sweatpants and a tank top, her dark hair scraped back in a messy ponytail. Her expression hardened the second she saw him. "What do you want?"

"I saw today's Post. I think you owe me an explanation."

"I don't owe you a damn thing, Nick. You're the one who dumped me, remember?"

"Well, if you're trying to convince me that I made a mistake, you're doing a really great job." He pushed past her and stepped inside, shutting the door with a bang. Glancing around, he spied boxes everywhere, the furniture covered with tarps. "Going somewhere?"

"Berkeley. The Post paid me enough to cover my first year's tuition in their graduate English lit program. If I'm lucky, I'll never have to set foot in this crappy city again."

"If all you needed was money, I could've asked Eric to help you out. You didn't have to—"

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She stared at him, bursting out in bitter laughter. "I wouldn't take a dime from him even if I was living on the street, not after what Allison told me last week."

His stomach clenched, as if poised at the top of a hill on a roller coaster. And, remembering his phone conversation with Ally, he knew his next question would send it plunging straight to the bottom. "What did she tell you?"

"To be honest, I don't think she intended to spill the beans. But when the conversation rolled around to our breakup, she started saying how she knew exactly how I must feel, because of how devastated she'd been when she found out you and Eric were fucking each other again a few weeks after their wedding. She thought I'd known about the two of you all along!" she spat acidly. "Apparently someone told her that I'd broken it off with you instead of the other way around, and she assumed Eric was the reason."

He stood there listening numbly, a hot flush of shame creeping up his face. "I'm sorry, Laura, I really am. I didn't mean for you to find out like that. I-I ... thought it'd be less embarrassing for you if I told everybody you'd called it off."

"It would've been less embarrassing if you'd told me the truth yourself. Do you have any idea how pathetic and foolish I felt sitting across that table from her, listening to her babble on about how you fucked around on me *the entire time* we were together?" She sniffed hard, looking for a moment as if she might actually start to cry. "I'll bet you and Eric had a great big horselaugh at my expense—poor, clueless Laura, too stupid to figure out that her fiancé prefers sucking cock!"

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"It wasn't like that, I swear." It broke his heart knowing she thought such awful, ugly things about him, though he knew he'd brought this all on himself. "I wanted to tell you. I just couldn't stand hurting you."

"Well, thanks for nothing." Grabbing a pile of books from a nearby table, she lugged them over to an open box. "At least in California, I won't have to see Eric's picture plastered over every fucking newsstand. That alone will make the trip worth it."

Still reeling, Nick spent the next hour or so walking around aimlessly, trying in vain to clear his head. At last he ducked into a diner for a cup of coffee and pulled out his cell phone, dialing Eric's private number in DC.

To his surprise, the housekeeper answered. Apparently Eric and Ally had left for New York that afternoon. Funny, but Ally hadn't mentioned a damn thing about coming up to the city in any of her recent emails.

He caught the subway uptown, cold rage rising inside him with each passing second. Eric was on the phone in his office when he arrived; he waved Nick to a chair and kept on talking. A few minutes later he hung up, shushing Nick before he'd said a word. "I already know about the Post article, and it's being handled," he rasped brusquely. "I've got my people out canvassing the whole state for every copy they can find."

"Too bad they didn't find them all before my mother saw it."

Eric pinched the bridge of his nose. "Look, I know this isn't particularly pleasant, but I've lived under this kind of public scrutiny my whole life. By this time next week, they'll have

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moved on to the next scandal. Besides, nobody pays attention to that rag anyway."

"Well, I'm glad one of us can afford to be so cavalier about it," Nick retorted. "I just came from seeing Laura. She's devastated. I don't understand how Ally could've been so fucking careless."

"That's enough," Eric snapped. "You're seriously out of line here, Nick. If you hadn't been lying to Laura all along, none of this would—"

"Let it go, Eric," came Ally's voice from the doorway, calm and resigned. "I'm to blame for this as much as Nick."

"Well, at least you've got the nerve to admit it," Nick spat, standing to face her.

"Nick, please, listen to me," Ally pleaded. "I never would've said a thing if I'd known you hadn't told her. For God's sake, you were together for five years! How could you *not* tell her?"

The genuine anguish in her voice tugged at his heart, but didn't melt it. Anger still had too tight a grip on him. "That's a pretty pitiful excuse, especially after all the sacrifices I've made to keep our relationship under wraps. But I guess I'm not the one who matters here, am I?"

Ally went on protesting, but Eric simply sat behind his desk drumming his fingers on the blotter and looking annoyed, as if Nick were some pesky, insignificant bug buzzing around the room.

He couldn't stand it anymore. Storming out, Nick took the stairs two at a time down to the lobby and hailed a cab to take him back to Penn Station. He'd get home late, but he

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didn't care. He didn't want to spend the night at his apartment. Eric and Ally might show up, and he couldn't stomach another confrontation.

The house stood dark when he arrived back at the farm, with the exception of a light over the kitchen sink. Exhaustion replaced adrenaline the second he lumbered through the door, and he would've let himself drop where he stood if not for the acidic roiling in his belly. He microwaved some leftover macaroni and cheese he found in the fridge, shoveling it into his mouth without tasting it. Afterwards, he stared down into his bowl, despair sluicing over him like a tidal wave.

He didn't even hear his mother come up behind him, easing a gentle hand onto his shoulder. "What happened?"

He didn't say anything. He couldn't. He felt dead inside, numb and hollow. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he held on tight, bracing himself for tears that never came.

\* \* \* \*

Allison sat glaring daggers at him across the table for nearly an hour, pushing her food around on her plate, evidently more interested in the wine than the *cassoulet* their chef had prepared. She'd downed two glasses so far. Soon she gave up all pretense of eating and poured herself a third, taking a healthy sip.

Eric set down his fork, his lips tightening in disapproval. "Allison, that's a fine French import, not a can of Pepsi. Show a little respect."

She snorted. "Just like you showed respect for Nick."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

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"Why didn't you go after him?"

"And do what, exactly? Have a screaming match with him down in the lobby?"

"Oh, no, of course not. Can't have him thinking you actually give a shit about him."

"I'm not about to apologize, not when he's the one who barged in here and started yelling at us."

"God, you're fucking incredible," she spat. "You've never been wrong about anything in your entire life, have you?"

He laughed, tossing his napkin onto his plate. "What do you propose we do? Get down on our knees and grovel?"

"I would."

"Now you're being ridiculous."

"You know, we're sitting here talking about making amends to a man we both supposedly love, and yet you're apparently more concerned about your pride than anything else."

"You can't let Nick ride roughshod over you, Allison. If you do, he'll keep on thinking he can show up in DC whenever he likes, and you know how disastrous that could be."

"Oh, so this is really all about protecting your precious political career. Color me stunned."

"It's about protecting your career too. Or are you so anxious to go back to covering fashion shows?"

She tossed back the rest of her wine and got up, wobbling her way to the door, glancing back at him with an expression somewhere in between disgust and utter contempt. "I'll sleep in the guest room tonight."

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Eric swirled the last few sips of cabernet in his own glass, trying to ward off his latest migraine by sheer force of will. He should probably go check on her and take his best stab at mending fences. Instead, he swallowed three Tylenol and went back to his office. He didn't have the patience or the inclination to deal with Allison's moods tonight. He had work to do.

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## Chapter 8

### One Year, Three Lives: Fall

The funeral fell on the last day of September. It dawned clear blue and warm, the sun hammering down like some cruel joke. Half of Seneca Falls filed through the house that afternoon, bearing condolences and covered dishes, the crush of bodies making the air stuffy and close, even with all the windows open.

Nick gritted his teeth and endured it all as best he could, but there was only so much handshaking and somber, earnest nodding he could do before he started throwing things. With his mother's sympathetic nod of approval, he ducked out to the loft. He found the temperature out there only slightly cooler than in the house, but at least he could strip off his jacket and tie and roll up his sleeves. If he stood at the window he thought he could feel the tiniest whisper of an autumn breeze in the air.

He stretched out on the couch and tried to fall asleep, but he couldn't get comfortable. The old wool cushions scratched and it was still too damned hot. Sitting up, he buried his face in his hands. His eyes burned, but he couldn't cry. He hadn't cried at the hospital or the mortuary, not even at the burial. Sometimes he wondered if his tears had dried up for good.

The stairs creaked, and he looked up to see Allison approaching, smiling a small, shaky half-smile. "Hi, Nick. Hope I'm not intruding."



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He didn't particularly want to see her, especially not now, but he didn't see any point in telling her that. He'd had a feeling she'd show up, since he'd heard through the grapevine that she was back in town, although as far as he knew, Eric hadn't come with her. "Thanks for coming," he said, standing up. "I'm sure my mom appreciates it."

He'd meant the remark to sting, and from her expression, he could see that the barb had found its mark. It didn't feel as satisfying as he'd hoped. "H-How have you been?" she asked, wincing as soon as the words left her mouth. "God, what a stupid question."

"Miserable, if you really want to know," he replied tonelessly.

"That makes two of us."

"I would've thought you were too busy to have time to get depressed."

"Not so much anymore." She had that tiny tremor in her voice she usually got when she felt flustered or embarrassed. "The network's cancelled the show, and passed on renewing my contract."

"I'm sorry," he murmured. Strangely enough, he realized he meant it. "I know how much that job meant to you. You worked hard for a long time to get it."

"Yeah, well, you know networks—if you don't get boffo ratings right out of the gate, they lose interest pretty quickly. But I suppose my showing up hung over every other morning didn't help either." She wiped her eyes, forcing a nervous smile. "I fucked up big-time, and I've got no one to blame but

myself. I guess good ol' karma's finally coming around to bite me in the ass."

"Ally, don't—"

"I've been wanting to come out to see you since the day I got back into town, but I was scared to death that you'd take one look at me and drop-kick me all the way back to Washington. And I wouldn't blame you if you did."

"I'm not so proud of myself either," he said quietly. "I'm to blame for what happened with Laura. I never should've asked her to marry me. The only reason I did it was because I had this stupid idea that it'd make Eric realize that he couldn't live without me, and he'd fall to his knees pledging his undying love." He rolled his eyes. "I acted like a fucking idiot, and Laura's the one who paid for it. She'll probably never forgive me."

"Maybe it's enough that we forgive each other."

He smiled at her, surprised at how relieved he felt. "I'd like that."

She wrapped her arms around him, his breath catching when she kissed him sweetly on the cheek. "Well, I-I'm glad that's over," she grinned, blinking back fresh tears.

"Me too. I hate being angry at you, or Eric." He kissed her back, gently and deeply on the lips. "So when's he coming back to town?"

"I wouldn't know. We're separated."

His mouth dropped open. "Wh-When did this happen?"

"It's been brewing from the day I moved to Washington. He's at the Senate till all hours, and even when he's home, he never comes out of his office. It wasn't so bad when I was

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working too, but I got tired of begging for every measly scrap of attention he deigned to toss my way. The job's swallowed him whole, and the scary part is, he's enjoying it. I doubt he's even noticed I'm gone."

"I'd say I'm sorry, but I think I'm starting to sound like a broken record."

She shrugged. "To be honest, I'm amazed the marriage lasted this long. Eric's not the kind of person you can depend on for the long haul. I knew that when he proposed to me. I'm just sorry that I deluded myself into wasting so much time and energy on a relationship that was doomed from the start." Giving his hand a quick squeeze, she moved toward the stairs. "I should get going. Your mom's probably wondering what's keeping you."

"You going to be around for a while?"

"I was thinking about heading back to the city for a day or two, but there's no reason I can't put it off." She smiled. "And if that's your way of asking if it's okay to come over tonight, the answer's yes."

He trudged back to the house, where his mother was bidding the last few mourners goodbye. He helped her straighten up the house and put away all the leftovers before heading upstairs to shower and change into jeans and a t-shirt.

He found her sitting at the kitchen table when he came back down, sipping a glass of iced tea. The back door and all the windows stood wide open, a faint, cool breeze fluttering the curtains. "Say hello to Allison for me," she said softly, catching hold of Nick's hand. "She popped in and out of here

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so quickly this afternoon, I didn't have a chance to talk to her."

Oh, God. Busted again. "M-Mom, I'm not—"

"Yes, you are, and it's fine with me. You've been so desperately unhappy these last few months, I'm not about to begrudge you anything that'll put a smile back on your face. Don't worry about leaving me alone, I'm going to lie down in a few minutes anyway. I'm so tired I can barely hold my head up."

He blushed, gazing sheepishly down at the floor. "I didn't think you'd be glad to see me taking up with her again."

"We don't get many chances at happiness in this life, Nick. And the ones we do get disappear before we know it. I don't know exactly why you and Allison have had such a rough time of it lately, and frankly, I don't want to know. But if you think you can patch it up with her—and Eric too, for that matter—you have my blessing."

"Mom...." He couldn't decide whether to be happy or stunned, so he settled for both. "I-I never thought you'd understand."

"Well, my parents never understood why I married a farmer, and that turned out all right." She smiled. "Go on now. Remember to lock up when you come back in."

\* \* \* \*

Nick showed up on her doorstep with a hot, hungry glint in his eye. Stumbling upstairs, they undressed each other like it was Christmas and both their birthdays rolled into one. He pushed her eagerly back on the bed, kissing and licking her

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all over, making yummy noises, like she was made of ice cream. At last she gave him a gentle shove, rolling him onto his back so she could straddle him. She rode him long and hard, the rapt, desperately horny look on his face making her feel like a goddess.

Later, they lay entwined together in spent, blissful contentment, Nick's hand absently stroking her shoulder. "I have to go in a little bit," he said regretfully.

"S'okay. I wasn't expecting you to spend the night."

Smiling, he leaned over to kiss her. "Thanks for inviting me. I really needed this."

"So did I. I'm just sorry I wasn't around sooner, to help you with everything."

"There's nothing you could've helped with. It happened so fast there at the end, I'm still having a hard time wrapping my mind around it."

"Tell me."

"Last Friday, Mom drove into town for groceries and stuff. I made lunch for Dad and me, and then he went in to take a nap on the couch. I cleaned up and did a few more chores around the house, but later on, when I tried to wake him for dinner, I couldn't." He sighed, closing his eyes. "We called an ambulance to take him to the hospital, but there was nothing they could do. He was already gone."

Her eyes stung, but she blinked back the tears. "At least he went quickly and peacefully."

He nodded. "I know I should be grateful that all his pain's behind him, but it's still hard. Whenever I walk through the back door, I keep expecting to see him standing there in the

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kitchen pouring himself a cup of coffee in that old cow mug. Everywhere I go, it reminds me of him. I can't even look at his truck sitting out in the driveway without wanting to scream. Everything just feels so empty without him."

"What about your mom? Will she be able to run the farm all by herself now?"

"I don't see how. She can't do any of the physical work anymore, and with Dad's medical bills, there's no way she can afford to hire extra help once I leave. She'll probably have to sell the place."

"Oh, Nick, that's awful."

"I told her I'd be happy to quit the Herald and stay to work the place full-time, but she wouldn't listen to me. I don't know what else to do. All I do know is the idea of her spending the rest of her life in some crappy apartment just about kills me." Getting up, he reached for his jeans.

"Honestly, I might end up quitting the Herald anyway. I don't think I can stomach going back to the city."

"Not even if I'm there?"

"I don't know." He pulled on his shirt before sitting down to tie his shoes. "Have you thought about what you're going to do about Eric? I doubt he'll be very happy about the two of us reconnecting."

"We'll probably get a divorce. It's five years till the next election. That's plenty of time for him to get his poll numbers back up."

"Ally!"

"Face it, Nick. His political career's the only thing he gives a damn about anymore—which you should know better than I

do. He's treated you like a leper ever since he left for Washington."

The look on his face turned instantly so forlorn, she could've smacked herself. God, why the hell couldn't she learn to button her damn lip? Before she could form an adequate apology, he gave her a quick kiss, then turned and left. The sound of the bedroom door clicking shut echoed eerily in the stark quiet.

Just a few minutes ago she'd been so happy, and now her heart dragged on the floor. Biting her lip, she hugged a pillow across her chest, trying hard not to think about that bottle of vodka sitting on the bar downstairs. She could've sworn she heard it crooning her name. No, she wouldn't go that route again. It had already cost her far too much. She wasn't about to let it drive away the one good thing she had left, although she seemed to be doing a fine job of that all by herself.

\* \* \* \*

Eric stole a glance at his watch, suppressing an impatient grunt. He'd already chewed out an aide for failing to pull him out of his luncheon meeting in time, and now he had to rush to get back to the Senate chamber for the last session before a two-week recess. This fight over the most recent finance bill would either kill him, or make him a force to be reckoned with within the Senate and his party—but better an honorable death than slinking away from the field of battle with his nose bloodied yet again. But for right now, he'd count it a victory if he managed to stay awake long enough to see the votes tallied.

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Climbing into his waiting limo, he sagged gratefully against the seat cushions. Only he wasn't alone. A balding, pudgy man in a plain dark suit sat across from him, hands folded primly over a brown manila folder on his lap. Eric recognized him as the chief of staff to the ranking Republican on the finance committee, with whom he'd been locking horns ever since he'd arrived in DC. Smarmy and calculating, he wore a permanent half-sneer pasted across his face, as if he were having a non-stop private laugh at someone else's expense. Eric had a sudden, gut-twisting sense of foreboding that he'd just gotten bumped to the front of the line.

He hit the button to lower the privacy screen between the back of the limo and the driver, only to discover the front seat empty. "Your driver's been detained for a few minutes, Senator Courtland," the man—Hines, Eric remembered now, Curtis Hines—said glibly, his thumb worrying the edge of the manila folder. "He'll be back as soon as we've had our chat."

"Look, I'm running late for an important vote. If you'll call my office for an appointment, I'll be glad to see you before I leave for New York tomor—"

"Believe me, Senator, I don't think you want your staff overhearing this conversation." Opening the folder, he pulled out one of the two smaller envelopes tucked inside, handing it across to Eric.

A sheaf of photographs spilled into Eric's lap. Photographs of him and Allison in bed, Allison's wrists tied to the headboard. He stared at them while time froze and his blood began to boil. He wanted to reach over and throttle the smug, smirking little shit sitting across from him, but he knew he



didn't dare. If he blinked, twitched or showed any sign of weakness, he was as good as finished.

"I don't know what you think this proves," he said in his coolest, most bored-sounding tone, "other than the fact that my wife and I have an active sex life."

"That you do, Senator—and apparently not just with your wife," Hines replied, handing him envelope number two.

Eric knew what it contained before he opened it, but he opened it anyway, the impact hitting him like a fist to his solar plexus. Photographs of him and Nick, taken during their afternoon together at the guest house. Nick on his back in the throes of orgasm, Eric's cock in his ass. Eric kneeling in front of Nick, sucking him off. He flipped through them quickly, his vision blurring with rage. Someone on his household staff had obviously helped with this; the photos were of too high a quality to have come from some peeping tom lurking in a closet. Someone had planted cameras inside his home. Someone he trusted had conspired to betray him.

He shoved the photos into their respective envelopes, but didn't hand them back, although he seriously considered throwing them. "What do you want?"

"Drop your opposition to the finance bill, and agree to be ... guided by those more experienced in these matters in the future."

"In other words, vote the way I'm told to vote, and keep my mouth shut?"

"In the interests of conciseness, yes."

Eric laughed. "You'll have to do better than that. I've made my views on this bill quite plain. It's a thinly disguised pork

barrel project with no real merit. If I change my position now, it's bound to arouse suspicion."

"Better a modicum of suspicion than the utter devastation these photos would no doubt visit upon your career. The ones of you with your wife are embarrassing enough, but I shudder to contemplate how your friend Mr. Thompson's employers at the New York Herald would react, should they have a revelation like this shoved under their collective noses."

"Do you honestly think these tactics frighten me, Hines? My father could wipe the floor with you even on a bad day."

"Well, I can see that gentle persuasion will do no good here," Hines replied with a sour little twist of his lips, reaching for the door handle. "Feel free to keep those copies as a souvenir of our conversation. And may I say, I hope the risk you're running is worth it, *Senator*."

Eric sat numbly in the Senate chamber for the rest of the afternoon, paying little attention to the speeches and debates swirling around him. He kept eyeing the agenda, waiting for the finance bill to come up, but as time wore on and other issues took precedence, it kept getting pushed further down the list, until finally the session adjourned, with no vote on it taken. Now at least, he had a little breathing room—two weeks' worth.

Two weeks to discover which person on his household staff had sold him out, though he already had a fairly good idea. Two weeks to figure out how to turn this to his advantage. Two weeks to break the news to Nick and Allison. And if all else failed, prepare them for the worst.

\* \* \* \*

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Eric arrived in Manhattan three days later and headed upstate, breaking all speed records getting there. He drove out to the farm first, finding Nick up in the loft, idly skimming a magazine.

He sprang to his feet the second he saw Eric climbing the stairs, looking like someone had just jabbed him with a needle. "Eric, I didn't ... I mean, Ally didn't tell me she was expecting you."

"You've seen Allison?"

"Yeah, she's staying up at the lake house. She came over for dinner the other night."

"Oh. I see." Well, that put a rather unexpected wrinkle on things, though he'd known for a while that Allison had moved back upstate. Still, the last time he'd seen Nick and Allison in the same room together, they hadn't parted amicably.

"We missed you at the funeral," Nick added.

"After the way we left things, I wasn't sure you'd want me there."

"It's all right. I'm sure you had more important things to do that day."

God, that smarted. And he knew only too well that he had it coming. "I'm sorry about your father, Nick. We didn't always get along as well as you wanted us to, but he was a good man, and I know how much you loved him. I'm sorry you had to go through these last few months alone. I should've been here."

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Nick looked at him for a long moment then smiled, pulling him into a hug. "You don't need to apologize, Eric. I don't blame you for any of it."

"Maybe not, but I've got plenty of things to blame myself for. I've treated you and Allison both shamefully. I just hope I haven't screwed things up so badly I've lost all chance of making it right."

"I think we all screwed up equally. But if you're willing to put it behind us, so am I."

"Done." He kissed Nick gently on the mouth. "And on that note, I should go see how Allison's doing. Hopefully she won't slam the door in my face."

"I doubt it. In fact, the other night she mentioned wanting to give you a call."

He nodded, swept by a curious but welcome sense of relief. "If you have time after dinner, I'd like you to come up to the house. There's something I need to discuss with both of you."

"Sure, but ... Is everything okay?"

"I'll tell you all about it tonight."

Allison not only didn't slam the door in his face, but she took one look at him, poured him a double scotch, and plopped beside him on the couch while she nursed a club soda. It pleased him to see that she'd evidently nipped her drinking problem in the bud, though he didn't mention it. It was enough just to sit here with her in companionable silence, unwinding for the first time in days.

He knew she sensed something amiss, but to her credit, she held her insatiable reporter's curiosity in check until after

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dinner. When Nick arrived, they all retired to Eric's study, where with a heavy heart and no small amount of mortification, he related the whole distasteful story.

They both sat in stunned silence after he'd finished, although naturally Allison found her voice first. "B-But ... How did they get the cameras in the house in the first place? I can't believe our security didn't find them."

"The housekeeper smuggled them in, and then out again as soon as they'd gotten the photos they needed. The cameras were only in place for a few days, at most."

"I don't understand how Angelina could do such a thing. She's a sweet little old lady, for God's sake! Why would she help these scumbags?"

"For what it's worth, she didn't want to. The first time Hines' flunkies approached her, she told them no. A few days later, her grandson was arrested for cocaine possession. She cooperated with them, and suddenly the charges were dropped."

"Oh, my God."

"As far as the finance bill vote goes, I'm banking on this recess to help defuse the situation. By the time the Senate reconvenes, I'm hoping to drum up enough opposition to defeat the bill with or without my vote."

"But what if you can't bring enough votes over to your side? Are you still going to vote it down?"

"I have to, Allison," he replied softly. "If I give these people what they want even once, there'll never be an end to it. They'll hold those photos over my head forever. I can't let that happen."

"Except it's not just *your* head they're holding them over."

"Allison, I know what I'm doing here—"

"No, I don't think you do." She sprang from her chair and stared him down, her face livid white. "It's one thing to refuse to buckle under to their demands, but if they find out you're actively working against them, they'll not only tear out your throat, but Nick's and mine too. They're going to destroy us all, and you're too busy planning your arrogant little power play to see it."

Nick, who'd remained silent during this exchange, suddenly jumped up, bolting for the door. Eric traded an alarmed glance with Allison and ran after him, catching him by the arm before he made it out of the foyer. "Nick, look, I know how bad this all sounds, but we'll get through it."

"And how exactly do you plan to do that? By denying our relationship, pretending I don't exist, just like before? You won't get away with that if those photos see print."

"They won't. These people are a bunch of thugs and bullies. They operate by intimidation. They're counting on me being too afraid not to do what they want."

"You're taking a huge gamble here, Eric. And if it fails, where does that leave me? And what about my mom? How's she supposed to cope with this on top of everything else?"

"You have to trust me. I'm going to handle this."

"So I get no say in it at all, do I? Wow, what a shocker!" Nick spat. "I haven't had any say in this relationship in months."

"Nick, you knew the deal when we got back together. I can't acknowledge you publicly, as much as I want to. Maybe

in a few years, when the time's right to bring up the whole issue of gay marriage, we can—"

"I know I can't marry you, Eric. I'm not asking for that. I just want to be able to walk down the street with you with both our heads held high. But I know that's never going to happen either." He shook his head sadly. "I can't do this, Eric. I won't be your dirty little secret, not anymore." Jerking his arm back, he dashed out the door to the truck before Eric could stop him, spraying gravel as he sped out of the driveway.

He found Allison still waiting for him in the study, a fresh glass of club soda in hand. She nodded at the table, where she'd already poured him another scotch. "Sorry I got so hot under the collar. I suppose it doesn't matter that much," she mused aloud. "It's not like I've got a career to lose now anyway."

They sat in silence, sipping their drinks, the wheels in Eric's mind winding along their familiar well-oiled path.

"What're we going to do, Allison?"

"We?" she echoed. "There's a 'we' now?"

"If we lived in a perfect world, and you could have your life any way you wanted it, how would you want it?"

"You're serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious. Tell me."

"If we lived in a perfect world, I'd ... I'd wish that those rings you gave Nick and me last Christmas were more than just a symbol. I'd wish that I could love you both openly and not have to worry about what other people say or think. I'd wish that I could spend the rest of my life with both of you. In

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a perfect world." She sighed. "But the world's not perfect, Eric. And neither are we."

"I've always rather enjoyed your imperfections."

She smiled sadly, reaching over to stroke his cheek. "Eric, I do love you, but ... I don't think we're going to work out."

"I suppose that's your way of saying you want a divorce?"

"I think it would be for both of us."

It hurt to hear her say it, deeply and profoundly, though he couldn't in all honesty pretend he was surprised. "Would you do one last thing for me?"

"What?"

"Come back to the city with me for a couple of days. I have some things I need to do, and I'd like you there with me."

"What things?"

"Things that will carry much more weight with my wife standing at my side. But if you'd rather not, I understand."

She took a little while to think about it, then nodded. "All right. I suppose we could use one last hurrah for old times' sake."

They finished their drinks and traipsed wearily upstairs. He'd intended to leave her at her bedroom door with a kiss, but she took him by the hand and led him inside. They fucked with a desperate, almost manic passion, crumpling in each other's arms. Once she'd fallen asleep, he tugged the duvet over her and got up, padding down the hall to the guest room. He lay there studying the ceiling for a long time before sleep claimed him, and he dreamed of perfect worlds, and the imperfect people who lived in them.



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\* \* \* \*

Nick had just started mucking out stalls in the barn when his mother appeared in the doorway, her forehead crinkled with obvious concern. "Come back to the house," she said urgently. "Eric's on TV. They're saying he's about to make some kind of announcement."

Ironically, she had the channel turned to CNN, with Eric's image filling the screen. He stood behind a podium with a thick cluster of microphones affixed to it, answering a question about some new bill. Nick saw Ally there too, standing off to Eric's right, looking distinctly nervous. Nick gripped the arm of the couch, his stomach doing queasy flip-flops. What the hell was this all about?

"Ladies and gentlemen of the press, I'll make the rest of this brief, which I'm sure you'll all appreciate." The room responded with a polite laugh. "In actuality, I have a pair of announcements to make. Firstly, as of this morning, I've officially tendered my resignation to the Republican Party. I now consider myself an Independent." He paused, drowned out by the sudden roar of questions, holding up his hand for quiet. "My second announcement is of a more personal nature. In the interests of full disclosure, I realize now that I should have brought this to the public's attention before last year's election. The voters deserve to know, and moreover, it would have spared someone I care for deeply a great deal of heartache." He looked squarely out across the room before continuing. "I'm proud to have my wife standing here beside me today. She's a wise, compassionate woman, and my life

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would be greatly diminished without her. However, I have also been involved in a committed, loving relationship with another man for a number of years."

Nick stared numbly at the TV, nausea now replaced by complete paralysis. He couldn't move or think. Even the air in his lungs had gone deadly still.

Onscreen, an eruption of loud gasps and shouts went up from the assembled reporters, but this time Eric plainly had no hope of quieting them. He stood there, calm and unwavering, waiting for the crowd to grow tired of listening to their own noise. "I'm not ashamed of this relationship. However, I am ashamed of my own reluctance to bring this matter to the public's attention, out of fear of embarrassment or censure. I accept that this revelation may cost me my seat in the Senate. However, I cannot in good conscience continue to deceive my constituents, or deny the man I love the respect and place of honor in my life that he fully deserves. Thank you for your time." And with that, he turned and left the stage, leaving a stunned press corps hurling more questions at the back of his Armani suit.

Mary grabbed the remote, flicking off the TV. "I can't believe he just did that."

"You're not the only one." Relief mingled with happiness and a healthy dose of lingering disbelief set Nick's head spinning, nearly doubling him over. Just to make sure, he pinched himself. "It's not a dream," he said softly, doing it again. Then another, weirder thought occurred. "Maybe I'm dead, and this is heaven."

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"Oh, stop it!" Grinning, she threw her arms around him. "If I ever doubted that Eric loved you, I certainly don't now, and neither should you. Count your blessings, sweetheart."

He walked around in a blissful daze for the rest of the afternoon and when dinnertime rolled around, he chewed his food absently, barely tasting it. He'd just gotten up to clear the table when he heard a soft tap at the back door, and Eric's head poked in. "Sorry to interrupt your dinner."

"It's fine, Eric, we've just finished," Mary said, coming up to embrace him and plant a kiss on his cheek. "You did a very brave thing today. Some people might call it a very rash thing, too. As much as I admire your decision, I hope for your sake and Nick's that you don't end up regretting it."

"I don't see how that's possible," he replied, looking right at Nick. The sudden jolt of arousal down Nick's spine almost made him drop the stack of dishes in his hands.

They stole away to the loft a few minutes later. Nick dragged Eric to the couch and pushed him down, kissing him with persistent, breath-stealing fierceness. Eric had to press a reluctant hand to Nick's chest to get him to slow down.

"Sorry, Nick, but it's been a long day. The spirit's willing, but sadly, the rest of me's not up for more than a few kisses right now."

"S'okay." Nick grinned. "I guess I'm just a little excited."  
Eric smirked. "No kidding."

"So how do you feel? About the press conference, I mean."

"Relieved, mostly. These last few months I've felt as if I had an elephant sitting on my chest, and now it's gone. I've never felt more at ease in my life."

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"I wasn't expecting you to do anything like that. It's going to take me a while to get over the shock."

"You and Allison both. I still don't think she believes it, and she was standing right there."

"But what made you do it? I thought your political career meant more to you than everything else."

"I thought so too," Eric said quietly. "And evidently I was wrong."

"You mean you don't care about running for president anymore? You gave all that up for me?"

"Of course not. I'll be president someday, one way or another. The next senatorial election is five years away. That should be more than enough time for any lingering uproar to die down. And if the voters decide to toss me out on my ear anyway, it doesn't matter. There's more than one path to the White House, and I've got the time and resources to explore them all."

Nick chuckled. "I should've known you'd have a Plan B."

"Truthfully, I didn't, until I realized I was about to lose the only two people in the world who'd ever mattered a damn to me. My whole life, becoming a cold-hearted bully like my father's the only thing I've truly feared. You and Allison help me hold back that darkness. I'd be insane to let the two of you go." He grinned. "And besides, I wasn't about to let that bastard Hines get the drop on me."

"But he could still publish those photos."

"He could, but most of the impact's been drained from them. That still leaves the photos of Allison and I, but even taking the kink factor into account, I doubt most people would

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regard consensual sex between a man and his wife as scandal-worthy. He's really got nothing of any substance to threaten us with now."

"Except my name," Nick reminded him. "You didn't mention it. Neither did that article in the Post."

"I didn't think it my place to out you to a roomful of your own colleagues."

"I hate to break it to you, but you pretty much already did. It won't take them long to put two and two together."

"Would it be so bad, seeing yourself identified as my lover in cold black-and-white?"

"No, of course not, but ... What about Ally? Would I be identified as her lover too?"

"First things first, Nick. It'll be hard enough asking the public to accept that a United States senator's just declared himself an out and proud bisexual. Adding a polyamorous relationship to the mix is pushing it."

"It's bound to come out eventually."

"Then we'll deal with it when it happens," he said, kissing Nick softly. "For now, let's savor whatever small victories we can find."

\* \* \* \*

He found Allison tucked up in an overstuffed chair in the study, reading and sipping an iced tea. Giving her a quick kiss, Eric dropped heavily into the chair next to hers. She reached over and took his hand, entwining their fingers, a tiny smile curling up the corners of her mouth. "I take it Nick was happy to see you?"

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He nodded. "But the question is, are you?"

She held up their clasped hands. "How's this for an answer?"

"No divorce, then?"

"Well, since your life would be so greatly diminished without me..." She grinned. "I guess I wouldn't mind keeping you around for a couple more years."

"A couple?"

"A couple dozen."

He carried her hand to his lips. "I'd call that a deal."

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## Chapter 9

### One Year, Three Lives: Christmas Eve

A huge pine wreath hung on the front door of the lake house, the halls festooned with holly, red and white poinsettias and twinkling lights. An eight-foot tall Christmas tree stood in the far corner of the living room, flocked white and covered with blue and silver ornaments, gaily-wrapped gifts spilling out around it. Nick looked up at it and grinned, then took his mother's arm and led her in to dinner.

It was Nick's favorite type of gathering, small and intimate, with just him, Eric and Ally, along with his mother and Ally's dad. The exact same guest list as last year, minus his own father, Nick thought with a pang of sadness, meeting his mother's gaze. He clasped her hand, giving it a squeeze before they all bowed their heads to say grace.

Good, simple food, fine wine and lively conversation helped ease him out of his momentary funk. Before he knew it, dessert and coffee had arrived, and Ally stood up, tapping on her water glass to get everyone's attention.

"I've got some good news," she chirped, smiling brightly. "I had to wait for the ink to dry on the contract before I told anyone, but it's now official—as of the first week of the New Year, I'm joining the staff of the New York Herald as its new fashion and entertainment columnist."

The table erupted in applause and delighted cries, with Ally's father rushing over to give her a huge bear hug. Nick

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sat stunned for a few moments before glancing down the table at Eric, who flashed him a wink and a smile.

When it came his turn to plant a congratulatory peck on Ally's cheek, he gave her a matching pointed look to go along with it. "You could've said something to me, you know."

"I wasn't even sure the deal was going through until a couple of days ago. Besides, aren't surprises more fun?"

"I'll take that as a rhetorical question," he replied dryly. "But I'm a little surprised you'd accept a job that puts you right back where you were a few months ago."

"It's not the big leagues, but I didn't handle the big leagues all that well when I had the chance. At least it's a job. It'll keep me busy and in the game until something better rolls around. And besides, with you going back to work after the holidays, we can ride into the office together!"

"Oh, great!" he muttered with an exaggerated eye-roll. She punched him on the shoulder then stuck her tongue out at him, both of them dissolving in giggles.

They retired to the living room for more coffee and to exchange gifts. He'd bought Ally a coffee-table book on twentieth-century history, his mother a pretty red wool sweater he'd seen her admiring the last time they'd gone to town together, and Eric a pale lavender silk dress shirt that Ally had helped him pick out, with a striking gold and deep plum striped silk tie to go along with it. He, on the other hand, ended up with a Barnes and Noble gift certificate and a pair of flannel pajamas from his mother, a biography of Edward R. Murrow from Ally and a small, square box from Eric.



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He unwrapped it carefully, finding nothing inside but air. Confused, he shot Eric a look. "Don't I even rate a lump of coal?"

"Wait and see," Eric replied, with his second cryptic wink of the night.

Nick grinned. Apparently there was another surprise in store tonight. Leave it to Eric to play mysterious, even on Christmas Eve.

\* \* \* \*

Allison's father left as soon as they'd finished with the gifts, but when Mary went to get her coat, Eric laid a gentle hand on her arm and steered her into his office.

"I understand you've found a buyer for the farm," he said, sitting down at his desk, gesturing for Mary to take one of the seats in front of it.

"Yes, finally. It's scheduled to close escrow next week, I think."

"Actually, escrow closed yesterday." Reaching into his drawer, he drew out a thick, legal-sized envelope. "I bought the property."

Her mouth dropped open, her shock and surprise painfully obvious. "E-Eric, I-I had no idea. Nick didn't say a word to me."

"That's because Nick didn't know. I didn't want him inadvertently spoiling the surprise," Eric replied, pushing the envelope toward her. "Here's the deed to the house. It's yours, free and clear of all encumbrances. I'm having the

property divided into two separate parcels, with the farmland placed in trust for Nick's children."

"You mean ... Is Allison—"

"No, Allison's not pregnant, but we fully intend to have children someday. Between the three of us, I think we'll raise a fine family." He smiled. "And since neither my mother nor Allison's is with us, I'm afraid you'll have to shoulder all the grandmother duties."

She smiled back, though it did little to mask her concern. "You've chosen a difficult road. I don't envy you."

"I love Nick and Allison, Mrs. Thompson. I can't imagine spending the rest of my life without them. Whatever we have to do to stay together, we'll do, and consider the price well-paid."

"Nick said the same thing to me last Christmas, and I thought him incredibly foolish. Now I can't help but wonder at how foolish I was." She opened the envelope, staring at the deed as if she expected it to disappear in a puff of smoke. "Eric, I don't know what to say, other than thank you. This is incredibly generous."

"On the contrary. I consider you family now, and my own mother taught me the importance of always taking care of family. I wasn't about to stand idly by and see Nick's birthright lost to future generations."

He poured himself a brandy after she left and sat by the fire sipping it, waiting for Nick and Allison to drift back into the living room. Nick gave him a lopsided smile and shook his head, bending down to give him a kiss. "My mom told me what you did. Thank you."

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"It was my pleasure."

"And it'll be mine later."

Eric grinned. "I'm counting on it."

\* \* \* \*

They curled up in front of the fire, all three of them, talking, laughing and nursing their drinks. It had taken Ally a while to get used to the rather bland taste of club soda, but now she actually liked the stuff. It tickled her nose like champagne, only without the miserable, headachy morning after.

Eric reached to the small table behind him, scooping up two small velvet cubes tucked behind a potted poinsettia. "Here's something to fill those boxes I gave you both earlier."

She opened it slowly, her breath hitching at the sight of a dazzling new platinum ring, identical to the ones Eric had given her and Nick last Christmas, with the addition of a flawless two-carat diamond. It had an inscription inside too, the same as last year's, only with this year and last year's date engraved beneath their entwined initials. Her eyes brimmed with tears as she gazed up at her husband and whispered, "Thank you."

Nick slid the old ring off his finger, replacing it with the new one. "So does this mean our jewelry collection's going to keep growing like this every year?" he asked in a playful tone.

Eric laughed. "Well, I don't know about that, but it's only appropriate that we celebrate our milestones. Think of it as a symbol of a new beginning."

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Leaning back against Nick's chest, she held her hand out before her to admire her gift, watching the diamond's facets catch and reflect back the light from the fire. Finally she stretched, yawned and stood up. "Gentlemen, I believe I'm going to bed." Smiling, she glanced from Nick to Eric and back again. "Would you both like to join me?"

Now Nick and Eric traded glances. Eric appeared startled but pleased, while Nick looked as if someone had just dropped a house on him—in the best possible way, of course.

They came eagerly into her outstretched arms, kissing her and then each other. For a long time she'd doubted that they'd ever come together like this, that insecurity and petty jealousy would tear them apart if they tried. But they'd passed through the fires of hell in this past year, and if they could survive that, she knew they had nothing to fear from the future.

"I love you so much," she whispered. "Both of you." And when they echoed her words, all remaining doubt fled from her heart.

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## Chapter 10

### Three Tickets to Paradise:

#### Two Husbands, One Problem

Eric's cell phone chirped like the world's tiniest, most annoying bird not five inches from Ally's ear. With one bleary eye cracked open, she tossed it inside the bedside table drawer. Rolling over with a groan, she reached for her husband, discovering only a warm Eric-shaped indentation in the mattress. Then the soft patter of water running in the shower began its insidious drip-drip through the final layer of her grogginess, and she groaned again.

When Eric emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later, a towel knotted loosely around his hips, she was propped up on her pillows, wide awake. "You're up early," she observed.

"I have a meeting."

"You had a meeting all day yesterday. I thought we'd planned to spend today together."

"And we will," he said, coming over to plant a quick kiss on her forehead. God, she hated it when he did that—as if she needed to feel more like a petulant child than she did already. "This should only take a couple of hours, then we'll have the entire afternoon—"

"That's what you said a month ago and you didn't even make it back in time to drive me to the airport."

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He disappeared into the walk-in closet, acting like he hadn't heard her. Throwing on her robe, she followed as far as the doorway, watching him put on his slacks, button on a fresh dress shirt and knot his tie. "You knew about this when you came home last night, didn't you?" she demanded.

Apparently absorbed in fastening his cuff links, he didn't answer. Well, at least he wasn't insulting her intelligence by pretending to be sorry about it. "Looks like I should've stayed home."

"We're heading into summer recess in another week, Allison. There's a certain amount of business we need to get done before then—"

"Look, I understand you're busy. I know the work you do is important. But I wish you hadn't asked me to come down for a visit if you knew you weren't going to have time to see me. Believe it or not," she added acidly, "I have other things I could be doing."

He shrugged on his jacket, telltale annoyance pulling tightly at the corners of his mouth. "You can work on your column just as easily here as in New York."

"I can do a lot of things in New York. I came here to see *you*."

He tried to brush past her, but she planted her feet and refused to budge. "Ally, be reasonable," he said softly. "I'm sorry our weekend's been ruined, but there'll be others."

"More weekends like this one, where we spend a grand total of three waking hours together? Where we have dinner at ten o'clock because you've been working all day?"

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A look flashed across his face, but whether it was impatience or genuine sadness, she couldn't tell. "I'll see you later," he said, dipping down for a kiss that she drew back from. At last she stepped aside, letting him pass.

She stood listening to the thump of his footsteps on the stairs, the sharper sound of him striding purposefully through the foyer, then the front door's click as it swung shut. She knew he wouldn't have a change of heart and come marching back upstairs, wouldn't call to apologize. Eric never wasted time saying things he didn't feel, and she knew he wasn't sorry.

Well, fuck it. No point hanging around here in the vain hope that Eric would show up just in time to kiss her goodbye and put her on the Courtland Industries jet. She hit the shower and dressed quickly, then called down for a car to take her to the airport.

The plane proved dull and uneventful, but at least it gave her enough time to put the finishing touches on Monday's column. She saved the file as the jet began its descent into LaGuardia, shutting her laptop with a sigh.

The weather in downtown Manhattan matched her mood—gray and gloomy, with a hint of restless warmth lurking underneath. When the limo pulled up to the private elevator in the basement of Courtland Towers, she climbed out gratefully, riding up to the penthouse in silence, accompanied by Dalton, Eric's new chief of security. He'd shadowed her around the city for months now, though Ally thought he took his job a bit too seriously—she saw no need for him to escort her upstairs, especially when only she, Eric and Nick had

access to the private elevator. He even insisted on walking her to the penthouse door, but at that point she politely but firmly sent him back down to his station in the lobby.

She tossed her coat and bag on the couch and strolled over to the huge picture window, stretching her neck and arms to work out the cricks. The clouds had dissolved a bit, a patch of sunny blue peeking out at the edge of the horizon.

A rapid-fire click-clicking drew her down the hallway. She found Nick in his office, pounding away on his laptop, so preoccupied that he jumped when he saw her standing in the doorway. "Geez, warn a guy, will you? You almost gave me a heart attack!"

Giggling, she circled the desk, planting a kiss on his cheek. "How's the book coming, Mr. Great Author?"

"Pretty well, I guess. I'm only a chapter behind schedule now."

Typical Nick, she thought with a chuckle. On the gridiron back in college he'd been one of the fastest quarterbacks around, yet he couldn't seem to beat a deadline or an alarm clock. "Could I tempt you into taking a lunch break?"

He gave her a look that said he knew what she really meant before giving her a grin and a gentle kiss on the lips. "I'd love to, but I really need to get this done."

That deflated her mood a bit, but she managed to force a smile. "Well, can I expect you at dinner, at least?"

"Yeah, I should be done with this part by then. We'll spend the evening together, I promise."

"Try not to break the keyboard." She grinned, heading for the door.



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She killed the better part of the next hour in her own office, checking email, sending off her column and surfing the net until her vision started to blur and she ended up staring numbly out the window. The weather had turned sunny and bright outside; she wanted to get out and enjoy it.

Grabbing the phone, she speed-dialed Holly's number. "It's me. Yeah, I'm home early—long story. Listen, you want to meet me at Montrio for lunch? Okay, see you in a few."

It took her fifteen minutes to wash off her makeup, shed her traveling clothes and throw on a pair of faded jeans, t-shirt and pair of sneakers, topped off with her favorite black corduroy blazer and one of Nick's old baseball caps. She was going to have one precious afternoon without a bodyguard stuck to her like liquid cement, even if it killed her.

Bypassing the elevator, she took the service stairs all the way down to the lower parking level and from there she simply walked up the driveway to the street. The restaurant lay three blocks down and two over, due north.

Elegant and exclusive, Montrio had fast become one of the hottest new restaurants in town. Ally's casual outfit would've earned her a raised eyebrow under normal circumstances, but luckily Eric had standing reservations, so it took only a few minutes before she and Holly found themselves whisked away to the best table in the house. "Thanks for meeting me, Hol," she said, flipping idly through the menu. "I was dying to get some fresh air."

"Like I'd turn down a free meal at a place like this!" Holly crowed, practically rubbing her hands together. "An appetizer

here'd set me back a week's pay. Mind if I get one of everything?"

They ended up ordering bruschetta, Caesar salads, sautéed scampi and a bottle of pinot grigio. To her credit, Holly waited for the waiter to scurry away before starting her interrogation. "So what happened this time?"

"Nothing different from any other time, I just ... I don't know what's wrong with me, Hol. Eric's always been a workaholic—hell, I used to be one too. But lately I've been feeling so damn bored and restless. Maybe what I need is a new challenge."

"The column's not doing it for you anymore?"

"Not really. I mean, at first it was exciting, chronicling the glitz and glamour of Manhattan's social scene, but after months of seeing the same smug, botoxed faces at every fucking event, well ... The novelty's long since worn off." She sighed. "And let's face it—I could write the thing in crayon and I doubt anyone would notice. I've heard people at the office whispering. I know they all think of me as Eric Courtland's dilettante trophy wife, cashing in on my connections for a cushy job. It's humiliating."

"Please don't tell me you're quitting."

"I've thought about it, but then what? After the talk show being cancelled and Eric coming out last year, I was damn lucky to get this job. If I walk away from the Herald now, no reputable paper will touch me."

"Have you considered asking Alan for another assignment?"

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"I'm not sure how much faith Alan has in my abilities these days. At our last meeting he pretty much came out and told me he didn't think my heart was in it anymore."

"Ouch."

Their waiter brought the wine and their appetizers; Ally gave the pinot a cursory taste before holding out her glass for more. She knew she shouldn't drink, but she didn't do it that often anymore, only when she needed a little something to help her unwind. She'd felt like a coiled spring ever since she woke up this morning.

"Well, the kicker is, he's right," Ally admitted. "You know, it's ironic that after all that time you spent stringing for the Post, you end up reporting the hard news, and here I am stuck with the glorified gossip column."

"I could talk to Alan for you if you want. With Nick taking six months off to work on his book, I could use the extra help."

"What, so I'd be doing your legwork for you? Thanks, but no thanks."

"Hey, I do as much legwork as Nick!" Holly snorted. "C'mon, Al, it'll be a blast. We'll work stories together, just like the old days on that crappy supermarket rag."

"Minus the strippers and Batboy."

"As long as they're male strippers, I'm in!"

They giggled and gossiped their way through the salad course and were just about to attack their entrees when Holly peered over Ally's shoulder, her eyes going wide. "Don't look now, but here comes tall, blond and granite-jawed at twelve o'clock!"

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Ally turned around, her heart plummeting—and there stood Dalton, right next to the maître d's podium. How did he even know she'd left the penthouse, when she'd taken such care not to let anyone see her? He must've tracked the GPS sensor in that new cell phone Eric had given her a few weeks ago. God, the man had the instincts of a fucking bird-dog! Still, she supposed she should be grateful he hadn't parked himself right next to their table.

"I'd better go take care of this," she muttered, getting up and marching over to him. "I won't be needing your services this afternoon, Dalton."

"My apologies, ma'am, but Senator Courtland left instructions that I was to accompany you whenever you go out."

"I'm sure Ms. Martin won't mind walking me back to the penthouse once we've finished our lunch."

At least he had the good grace to look uncomfortable. "I'm afraid I will have to stay, ma'am."

Her annoyance level spiked into the red zone, but she bit her lip and counted to ten. "All right, but I'd appreciate it if you'd sit at one of the outside tables. I'll have some coffee sent over."

"That looked awkward," Holly commented as Ally sat back down. She chased one of her scampi around her plate with her fork, finally managing to skewer it. "Although he is pretty cute, in a GI Joe kind of way."

"I'm so fucking tired of this, Hol," Ally said, staring down at the cold remains of her lunch. She'd been hungry when they sat down, but now her stomach had twisted so full of

knots she felt ready to vomit. "I don't go anywhere anymore, except to the Herald, or out to another bullshit social 'do. I can't even browse in a bookstore or take a walk in the park without Dalton trailing me."

"So are you still getting death threats after all this time?"

"That's just it—they stopped months ago! But Eric's still so damn paranoid, I.... "Her eyes smarted; she had to blink hard to keep from embarrassing herself. "I want my life back. I want to go out and do all the things I used to. I want to be a normal person again."

"You're married to the first openly bisexual US senator. That's not something people forget overnight."

Ally nodded, taking a nibble of her scampi. It tasted like cold paste. "At least we've managed to keep Nick's identity under wraps."

"Thank God Eric had that private elevator installed. And Nick's still keeping his apartment, just in case, right?"

"For all the good it'll do. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he hardly spends any time there."

"The way the stalkerazzi follow you and Eric around, they're bound to find out eventually."

"Sometimes I wish everything would come out," Ally confessed. "I wish they'd find out about us and Nick. I wish Eric would quit the Senate and go back to running Courtland Industries. Then the worst would be over, and in a few weeks they'd all move on to the next scandal, and we wouldn't have to be so fucking afraid anymore."

Holly reached across the table, giving Ally's hand a quick squeeze. "Well, until then you know I'm up for beard duty

whenever you guys need to put in an appearance at another bullshit social 'do."

Ally giggled, nearly spraying herself with wine. The mental image of Holly plastered to Nick's arm for an evening never failed to crack her up.

It still had her snickering a few hours later, sitting across the kitchen table from Nick watching him devour his usual two roast beef sandwiches and an entire bag of chips. They fixed their own meals whenever Eric wasn't home, and this was one of her favorite times—calm, quiet and as close to normal as they could get these days.

Nick glanced up from his plate, wiping a smudge of mustard from the corner of his mouth. "Something wrong?"

"No." She grinned. "Not now."

They spent the evening sacked out on the couch watching a DVD, Ally's feet in Nick's lap while he massaged them. She slumped back against the arm of the couch, dissolving in a puddle of blissful goo. The world would be a much happier place, she mused, if every woman had two husbands.

Her eyelids drifted shut and the next thing she knew, Nick had lifted her into his arms, carrying her into the bedroom. She pretended to doze while he began undressing her, but his fingers brushed a ticklish spot on her tummy as he unbuttoned her blouse, and she burst out laughing.

"I knew you were awake," Nick huffed.

"Sure you did." Sitting up, she kissed him deeply, yanking her t-shirt over her head. "C'mon, get naked. I want you."

He had all his clothes off before she'd worked her jeans down to her knees, which left her stifling a disappointed sigh.

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Nick had never quite grasped the concept of the sexy striptease. Still, if it got him into bed with her that much quicker, she wasn't about to complain.

He rolled in beside her and pulled her up against him, his lips worrying at that sensitive spot under her ear that he knew drove her crazy. His fingers slipped between her legs, parting and opening her, getting her good and wet. She went instantly dizzy, her lungs tight and heavy, as if all the air in the room had been sucked out.

She eased onto her back and tugged him on top of her, spreading her thighs for him. He slid inside her with ease, groaning when she wrapped her legs around him, pushing him deeper. "I won't last long if you keep doing that," he gasped.

"Who says I want you to?"

He shot her a mock-exasperated look and shut her up with a kiss, caressing her all over with his huge hands. She'd been riding an emotional tilt-a-whirl since getting up that morning, but Nick's sweet, gentle touch soothed her, quieting the storm inside her skull. She moaned in counterpoint with his thrusts, smiling at his own grunts, groans and gasps. God, she loved hearing how much he enjoyed fucking her.

It hurt a little as he sped up, in that deliciously achy way that told her she was close. Her skin tingled all over, shrinking to the point where it barely contained her. Tightening her legs around him, she hoped he'd take the hint to start pounding her in earnest—and sure enough he did, sliding his hands underneath to cup her ass, holding her in

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place while he fucked her hard and deep, hitting her g-spot with every stroke.

She came so hard she could hear the blood roaring between her ears, drowning out everything else. Next thing she knew, Nick had eased himself off her, leaving her feeling like a giant block of ice, shivering, shaking and gulping air as if she'd just been rescued from drowning.

Nick scooted up to lie next to her, giving her this strange, frightened look. When he reached over to brush something from her cheek, she realized she was sobbing. "God, Ally, I-I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't," she whispered, grateful to feel him hauling the covers up over both of them. "You didn't do anything. It's been a long weekend. I guess it all finally caught up with me."

"Did you and Eric have another argument?"

Now she gave him a look. "He called while I was out with Holly, didn't he?"

He hesitated a second, then nodded.

"Well, thanks for telling me."

"He's worried about you. So am I."

"Look, I've had a rotten day. Let's leave it at that." Rolling over, she curled up into a ball, hoping it would help her warm up more quickly. At first she stiffened when Nick spooned behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist, but after a minute or so she let herself go limp, settling back against him.

Her eyes still burned, so she shut them tightly. She hated breaking down, acting like the stereotypical hysterical



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woman. She shouldn't have had that wine at lunch; alcohol always brought her emotions boiling to the surface, and today she certainly hadn't needed help in that department.

She started to whisper an apology, but a soft kiss pressed to her throat told her she was already forgiven. Lacing her fingers through Nick's, she breathed deeply and let herself drift.

\* \* \* \*

Eric arrived back in Manhattan around nine o'clock on Sunday night. Ally rode along in the limo to the airport; when he climbed in next to her, she was alarmed at how exhausted he looked. The skin around his eyes appeared purplish and paper-thin, and she could've sworn he'd lost five pounds since the previous weekend. Her alarm skyrocketed when he wrapped his arms around her, kissed her urgently and whispered, "I missed you." He'd never been given to such passionate displays of affection, not even in private.

They found Nick waiting for them in the living room when they got back to the penthouse. When he saw Eric, his face lit up like sunrise on a summer morning. Eric grinned back, dropping his briefcase where he stood, stepping forward to cup Nick's face with both hands and kiss him full on the mouth. Ally watched, blinking back joyful tears, especially when Eric turned and held out his hand to her, drawing her into their circle.

"Glad to be home?" Nick murmured.

Eric chuckled ruefully. "You have no idea."

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They went in to dinner, but Eric passed over his favorite hearts of romaine salad in favor of a glass of cabernet, sipping absently at it while he filled them in on the details of his week.

"We pushed like mad trying to clear the most pressing items off the agenda before the recess, but naturally we didn't get to everything." He sighed. "That intelligence bill we slaved over last weekend didn't make it, unfortunately. Although by now I suppose I should be used to these kinds of setbacks."

"But you'll vote on it when you come back," Nick pointed out.

"Providing it hasn't dropped off everyone's radar by then."

"Well, I can't imagine you'll let that happen," Ally said.

"I doubt I'll have to shoulder all the responsibility. I've heard the White House isn't too happy that we adjourned without passing it. Something tells me the majority leader's in for an earful once we reconvene."

When the main course arrived—medium-rare chateaubriand, asparagus tips in butter with slivered almonds and garlic mashed potatoes—Ally was relieved to see Eric's appetite reassert itself, though she couldn't help noticing that he ate relatively small portions of each. He'd done the same thing at dinner with her in Washington last Saturday. Apparently he'd fallen into the habit of dining late, but that didn't mean it agreed with him.

They took their coffee and dessert in the living room, where Eric crumpled on the couch with a grateful groan. Ally sat beside him, while Nick curled up on the floor in between

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them, his head resting on Eric's knee. She felt Eric stroking her hair and caught hold of his fingers, squeezing tightly. She felt so incredibly silly for starting that stupid fight with him last weekend. So what if they only saw each other once a month? A day or two of this made all the other bullshit worth it.

Eric finished his coffee and reached for his briefcase, pulling out an envelope, which he handed to her. It contained a stack of 3x5 color prints of a gorgeous sun-bleached stone villa perched on a hill, surrounded by countryside, olive groves and vineyards bathed in golden summer sun. It looked like something out of a travel magazine. "It's breathtaking. Where is this?" she asked.

"Tuscany," Eric replied. "It's near a little town called Grieve, thirty kilometers outside Florence. The villa belongs to the wife of one of my colleagues. I've rented it for the entire month of July."

She stared at him for several long moments before glancing down at Nick, who looked every bit as clueless as she felt. "Y-You're joking, right?"

"Not at all. The three of us have never gone away together. This villa's comfortable and private, and we'll be within driving distance of some of the finest museums and restaurants in Italy. It's perfect."

"Well, what about work?"

"What about it?"

God, she couldn't believe this! How could he go ahead and make plans without even asking her, then present it as a *fait*

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*accompli*? "Eric, I can't call Alan and tell him I'm taking off for a month without giving any advance notice!"

"Why not?" He had that annoyed look again, tiny lines tugging at his eyes and mouth, just like last Saturday morning. "You've been bored out of your skull with that column for months now. If the Herald can't find any better use for your talent, hand in your resignation. It's not like you need the money."

"Money's not the point. I've never quit a job in my life, and I don't intend to start now." She glanced at Nick, hoping to enlist his support, but he refused to meet her gaze. "This is a very sweet idea, Eric, but there's no way I can go. If you'd bothered to discuss it with me first, I would've told you that."

"Allison, listen—"

Jumping to her feet, she tossed the photos on the coffee table and sprinted for the bedroom, hoping Eric wouldn't follow her. After a couple of minutes it became apparent that he wasn't going to, so she went in to take a shower. She stood trembling under the hot water, emerging unrefreshed and still smarting with anger.

She crawled into bed and lay there staring into the dark, waiting for Eric to join her. An hour later, she was still alone, and starting to realize how stupidly she'd behaved. Most women dreamed of their husbands whisking them off to paradise for a month, yet she'd had the nerve to *complain* about it? She couldn't believe her foolishness.

Tugging on her robe, she peeked into the living room, kitchen, and Nick and Eric's respective offices, finding them all empty—which left only Nick's room. She hovered outside

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for a minute or two, listening for any telltale fucking noises, more than a bit surprised when she didn't hear a thing. Rapping gently, she opened the door a crack, spying Nick stretched out on the bed in his pajama bottoms, reading.

He put his book down when he saw her standing there, and gestured for her to come in. Eric lay beside him, fully clothed and fast asleep. He seemed even more fragile and exhausted than before; in this muted light, the dark circles under his eyes looked like a pair of shiners. Perching on the edge of the bed, she reached over to stroke Eric's shoulder. His breath hitched for a second, but aside from that, he didn't move.

Nick returned her worried look. "What happened?" she asked him.

"One minute we were sitting here talking, and the next, he nodded off. I didn't have the heart to move him."

"God, Nick, I feel like such a fucking idiot. I had no idea he'd been working himself so hard."

"Neither did I, but I guess it shouldn't come as that big of a surprise. We both know he's a classic Type A." He swallowed, a muscle jumping in his jaw. "Look, I have to tell you something. Your little meltdown the other night really freaked me out. So I gave Eric a call and told him we needed to do something about it. I guess that's how he came up with the idea for the trip."

"Oh, Nick, you didn't need to do that. I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You've been exhausted and on edge for months now. You both have." He sighed, brushing a strand of sandy hair from Eric's forehead. "I think we should go, Ally."

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Eric needs to get away, and so do you. Besides," he added with a grin, "Eric told me he's always wanted to take you to Florence for your birthday."

That made her chuckle. With everything else that had been going on, she'd forgotten all about her birthday. "That does sound wonderful."

"I can work on my book just as easily in Italy as I can here. And who knows—maybe the scenery will inspire me to work faster."

She nodded. "Sad to say, I doubt the Herald will have much trouble lasting a month without me." Leaning over, she planted a soft kiss on Eric's cheek. "He'll be pissed when he wakes up with his clothes all wrinkled."

"I'll take care of it."

"Okay," she said, giving Nick a kiss. "Good night."

She padded back to bed, sliding beneath the covers with a relieved yawn. Funny, she mused, but it wasn't so long ago that she would've felt threatened had Eric chosen to spend the night with Nick instead of her. The three of them had come a long way in their two years together. Nick and Eric were the most vital part of her life, but lately it seemed she'd lost sight of that.

Now she had a whole month ahead of her to start seeing the glass half-full instead of half-empty. It was time to get back to essentials. Everything else could wait.

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## **Chapter 11**

### Three Tickets to Paradise:

#### Arrival in Paradise

Eric's photos didn't do the villa justice. It possessed a palpable sense of majesty, towering two stories above a gatehouse, private road and a smaller single-story building for the household staff. When Eric opened the limo door, helped her out and led her up a stone stairway to the terrace, Ally felt as if he'd just swept her away to Never-Never Land.

A lush golden-green valley lay beneath them, olive groves and vineyards stretching to infinity in every direction. It seemed like the last place on earth, serene and peaceful, theirs to enjoy for as long as they wished. Ally smiled, throwing her arms around Eric and kissing him soundly. He'd promised her a fairy-tale vacation, and as usual, he didn't disappoint.

Spacious and cool, the living room sported thick Turkish throw rugs, overstuffed leather chairs and a couch big enough to sink into and never be heard from again. A dining room and two smaller rooms set up as offices lay to the right of the living room, master and guest bedrooms off to the left, both with private baths.

The lower story of the house was devoted to the kitchen, laundry room and a huge pantry. Eric had hired a local woman and her two daughters to do the cooking and

housework, though they wouldn't live on-site. Dalton and two more bodyguards had come along with them, much to Ally's chagrin, though Eric assured her that they would be staying at the staff quarters down by the front gate, with instructions to keep a discreet distance from the house unless an emergency arose.

Which was a good thing, she supposed, with Nick flying in to join them later tonight. She'd been deeply disappointed that he hadn't come along with them on the Courtland Industries jet, but of course they couldn't run the risk of the paparazzi photographing them together.

The bedrooms faced east, missing the worst of the brutal afternoon sun. The master bedroom was only slightly smaller than the one at the penthouse, with the exception of vaulted ceilings and an antique rosewood bed that looked like it could sleep an entire family. Ally kicked off her sandals and flopped back on it with a contented whoosh of breath, pleased to find the mattress suitably firm, with just enough give in all the right places.

"I'm assuming that means the place meets with your approval?" Eric dropped onto the bed next to her, a playful smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

"You assume correctly," she replied, her eyes drooping blissfully shut. "In fact, I might not move from this spot the entire month."

"That's too bad. I'd hoped to ravish you in every room."

One eye popped open. "Um ... How many rooms was that again?"

"Seven or eight on this floor, if we count the bathrooms."



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"In that case," she cooed, "how'd you like to rinse off before dinner?"

"I'd rather get dirty first." Scooting off the bed, he fell to his knees, grabbing hold of her thighs to pull her down to him. He reached under her skirt, yanking off her panties so quickly she cried out in surprise. She expected him to unzip right then and there and fuck her to a fare-thee-well, but instead he shoved open her thighs and planted his face between them, licking and sucking her as if she were his last meal. He knew exactly how she liked it, working a finger up inside her, finding her g-spot while he diddled her clit with the tip of his tongue. Within seconds he had her screaming and moaning her head off, coming right into his mouth.

It took her longer than usual to get her breath back, but she almost lost it again when Eric bent down, kissing her deeply and thoroughly. God, she loved tasting herself on him.

"I've been having fantasies about that for a week," he whispered.

"Only a week?"

"It's been far too long since I've tasted you," he said with such sincerity she could've slapped herself for her flippant reply. She'd gotten used to laughing and joking in bed with Nick, which was plainly the wrong approach here.

Between the afternoon heat and their impromptu romp, she found herself burning up, her clothes plastered to her. Shifting onto her side, she lifted her hair so that Eric could unzip her silk blouse and help her tug it over her head before unbuttoning her skirt, shimmying it down and off her legs, kicking it to the floor. She rolled onto her stomach, raising

herself up on her hands and knees. "Here's what I've been fantasizing about," she purred, wiggling her ass to give him an extra hint.

Not that he needed one, because he was already down at the foot of the bed again, spreading her legs wider with a rough nudge of his knee. Before she knew it, he'd shoved inside her, grabbing hold of her hips with both hands, fucking her hard. She braced herself on the mattress and pushed back, meeting every thrust, glancing over her shoulder to give him a defiant look. He was still fully clothed, except for his cock sticking out of his pants; the sight of it fanned her arousal to a fever pitch. He knew she loved it when he fucked her like this, using her like a whore.

He grabbed her by the neck and pushed her head down, draping himself over her back, slamming into her without mercy. She could feel his breath hot and labored on her skin, his nails digging into her hips, his cock reaming her like a steel bar. With one last tortured grunt, he rammed inside her so deeply her thighs cramped, then he rolled off.

She rolled over too, for fear she'd never move again if she remained on her stomach. Every muscle in her body screamed, especially her clit, throbbing in protest over her missed orgasm. She'd always counted herself lucky that she usually had no problems coming, even during rough sex. Damn. Maybe if she hadn't encouraged him to fuck her so vigorously, he would've stayed in the saddle longer.

He kissed her on the lips before dipping down to lick droplets of sweat off her breasts. His hand drifted southward, seeking out her clit, rubbing it gently as he bit and sucked her

nipples. She was so overly sensitized that it took a minute or two before the pressure of his hand began to feel pleasurable, then she squeezed her thighs around his hand and rode it till she screamed.

She hated floating down from such an incredible high, but when she did she found him still there next to her, stroking her sweaty skin with a bemused smile. "We should probably clean up and get ready for dinner."

"You're making the rather bold assumption that I can walk."

He stood up, reaching for her hand to help her to her feet. "I think you'll perk up when you see what's in the bathroom."

Once more, he didn't disappoint; it was without a doubt the most gorgeous bathroom she'd ever seen, the floor and vanity made from the palest rose marble, with gleaming polished brass fixtures. It had two sinks, a shower big enough for all three of them at once, and....

"Oh. My. God!" she breathed, nearly melting on the spot when she saw it—an old-fashioned claw-foot bathtub. "This is like heaven, only better!"

He laughed. "If I'd known I could get you this excited over a bath, I would've had a Jacuzzi installed at the penthouse."

"Oh, stop teasing!" Grinning like the world's goofiest idiot, she started water running in the tub. She found a wide assortment of bath oils within easy reach on a nearby shelf, but couldn't make up her mind between plain vanilla and attar of rose.

"I'll leave you to relax." He dropped a soft kiss on her shoulder before heading for the door.

"Don't you want a shower?"

"I'll use the one in Nick's room."

The water started out a bit too warm, stinging her skin rather than soothing it, but after a few minutes it cooled to a damn near perfect temperature. She soaped and rinsed her hair, then sank in up to her chin and closed her eyes. Every muscle in her body ached, her folds sore and slightly swollen, both the inevitable, not-unwelcome result of Eric giving her a good pounding. As much as she adored Nick, at times his sweet, gentle lovemaking frustrated the hell out of her. Every now and then she had an absolute *itch* to be held down, dominated and taken, but no matter how much she wheedled and cajoled, Nick always refused. With his huge hands and muscular ex-football player's body, he'd always had this awful—and in her estimation, completely silly—fear that he'd end up crushing the life out of her if he ever let himself cut loose.

After about half an hour the water grew uncomfortably chilly, so with a sigh of regret she climbed out, towel-dried her hair with a soft Egyptian cotton bath sheet, wrapped it around her and padded back to the bedroom. A small table and two comfy-looking armchairs stood beside a huge picture window overlooking the valley, none of which she'd noticed before with the curtains drawn. Eric sat there sipping an iced tea and enjoying the waning sunshine, clad in a crisp white linen suit with a lightweight, pale lilac dress shirt open at the collar.

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He nudged a second glass of tea in her direction as she approached. She sat down across from him, taking a grateful sip. "Well, don't you look fresh as a daisy," she remarked.

"I take it you enjoyed your bath."

"Mmm." She took another, longer sip. "Multiple orgasms and a nice, luxurious soak, all before dinner. I could get used to this."

"That's why they call it a vacation." He smiled. "Not that I particularly want to rush you, but Luciana's informed me that dinner should be ready in about half an hour."

She went to get a fresh dress from her suitcase, but found it already unpacked; her favorite cream-colored cotton sun dress with red and blue flowers on it had been laid out for her on the bed, along with a pair of strappy red sandals she'd bought especially for this trip. "Did you pick this out for me?" she asked, dropping the towel so she could hold the dress up. The fabric felt whisper-light against her skin.

"Why, did you want to wear something else?" he replied, getting up and coming over to her.

"Not necessarily, but I think you've misplaced my bra and panties."

"I thought you might go without them while we're here."

"Oh, that's..." She couldn't help it; she burst out giggling. "Eric, that's a very wonderful—and very *hot*—idea, but my breasts aren't nearly perky enough to go braless. Not unless you want them dangling down to my waist by the time we leave."

"But going without panties doesn't bother you?" Taking the dress from her, he gestured for her to hold up her arms so he

could help her slip it on over her head, his fingers lingering at the spot on her neck where he'd held her down earlier; it felt tender to the touch. "There's a bruise coming in," he remarked with a tinge of concern.

"It'll only last a couple of days." Turning to kiss him, she added, "But to answer your question ... No, it doesn't bother me."

"Good." He kissed her again, deeply this time, with enough urgency that her nipples stood at attention in seconds, brushing tantalizingly against the soft cotton of her dress. "I like knowing that anytime I want to bend you over a chair, you'll be ready."

Despite her soreness, she could feel herself growing wet again. "I-I think—"

"We should go in to dinner." He nodded. "Shall we?"

"Let me put on my shoes and some lip gloss and I'll join you in a minute."

Dashing back into the bathroom, she quickly combed out her hair and pinned it up, using a red clip that matched the flowers on her dress. She dabbed on some clear gloss and considered giving herself a light dusting of blush, but after Eric's teasing, her cheeks were pink enough. She found her lingerie in the top drawer of the huge hand-carved wardrobe in the bedroom and put on her favorite lacy white bra. Despite Eric's suggestion, she didn't think he or Nick would appreciate her prancing around with sagging tits.

She found Eric in the living room with Nick—who, for once in his life, had actually arrived early. "Well, this is

unprecedented," she said, throwing her arms around him. "We weren't expecting you until after dark."

"I decided to catch an earlier flight." He grinned. "So what's for dinner? I'm starving."

Rolling her eyes, she took his arm and followed Eric into the dining room. Some things never changed, thank God!

Their cook had prepared a lovely summer supper—prosciutto with melon, cheese and spinach ravioli so light it practically floated off the plate, and an equally delectable veal picatta. Eric had wine with his meal, but Nick stuck to water, and after a few moments of silent deliberation, so did she. She didn't want alcohol muddying her memories of their first evening together in Tuscany.

Dusk had fallen by the time they finished, leaving it cool enough outside that they took their coffee on the terrace. Ally and Nick stretched out on the double chaise, while Eric pulled over one of the chairs from the small round table in the corner. Ally was so comfortable she started to drop off, until she felt Nick's hand stroking her arm. "I'd ask what's for dessert, but something tells me you two had dessert before dinner," he said.

Laughing, she opened her eyes. "There's no rule against second helpings, is there? But actually," she purred, stretching like a cat in the sunshine, "I believe I'm in the mood to be entertained tonight." Rolling to her feet, she crooked her finger at them. "C'mon, you two."

She doffed her dress and bra as soon as she reached the bedroom, then tugged one of the armchairs closer to the bed and curled up on it, one hand trailing down between her

parted thighs. She couldn't help giggling at the stunned look on Nick's face when he saw how wet she'd become. "You're going to put on a nice little show for me, aren't you?" she murmured.

Nick looked as if he expected her to shout "April fools!" any second, but Eric, of course, took the whole thing in stride. "Any requests?" he smirked, shrugging off his jacket and shirt, moving on to his slacks, unzipping them and letting them drop. Ally wasn't the least bit surprised to discover he wasn't wearing any briefs.

She pondered her choices for a long moment, grinning evilly. "I think I've got something to start with," she said, nodding first to Eric, then Nick. "Your mouth. His cock."

"You heard the lady," Eric growled, licking his lips, grabbing Nick's belt to tug him closer. They kissed urgently, tongues working, while Eric kneaded the front of Nick's jeans until the huge bulge inside practically bored a hole through his zipper. Ally gasped when Eric fell to his knees and yanked Nick's jeans down over his hips, but when he opened his mouth and took half of Nick's impressive length with one long swallow, she felt an acute stab of envy. It was one of her few true regrets that she'd never blown Nick to orgasm. Her damned gag reflex tripped her up every time.

Eric had his face buried in Nick's crotch now, lips stretched wide around the base of his cock, head bobbing up and down while Nick made deliciously hoarse panting sounds. Eric slowed down, then sped up again, driving Nick insane and, from the smug sparkle in his eyes, obviously relishing every tortured moment of it. At last Nick glanced down at him with



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a particularly pained, pleading expression and grabbed Eric's head, holding him still while he gave several short, shuddery thrusts and came with a groan.

Ally let out a breath, so absorbed in Eric and Nick's performance that she not only hadn't realized she was holding it, but that she'd completely forgotten to touch herself, despite the desperate throbbing in her clit. Sliding down in her chair, she let her fingers slip between her thighs again, but now she couldn't find the right angle, and shifting for a better position only caused her more frustration.

Eric stood up with a dangerous, pissed-off expression, wiping the last traces of Nick's come from his lips. Ally knew that look more intimately than she cared to admit; he was definitely not amused by Nick's taking control of the blowjob. Shoving Nick back on the bed, he climbed up behind him, burying his face between Nick's ass cheeks. It seemed as poetic a revenge as any, Ally supposed. If the strangled sounds issuing from Nick's raspy throat were any clue, apparently Eric planned to rim him to death.

This was a far better show than she'd expected, but her boys could still use a bit of direction—and besides, her chair was plainly not designed for serious masturbation. Luckily, Eric had the foresight to stash their supplies in the bedside table when he'd unpacked; she grabbed her bullet vibrator, a tube of lubricant and some condoms then slid onto the bed, parking herself just far enough away to have a prime view of the proceedings.

Eric glanced up in surprise when she tossed him the lube and condoms, but the wicked smile turning up the corners of

his mouth told her he'd already taken the hint. Snagging the lube, he squeezed a generous dollop onto his fingers, working one, then another of them deep inside Nick's hole. He spent the next few minutes fucking Nick slowly with his hand, but only when Nick's moans reached window-rattling intensity did he finally deign to show some mercy. Still, Ally couldn't help noticing how Eric's hands trembled as he ripped open the condom, rolled it on and slicked himself; evidently even his iron-clad control had its limits.

And so did hers. Fumbling in the mussed covers, she found her vibrator, flicked it on and applied it gingerly to her clit, jumping when even the lowest setting proved too much. After a few minutes she gave up; obviously the direct-stimulation approach wasn't working tonight. She really craved something long and thick inside her, rubbing against her g-spot. She'd always had more intense orgasms via penetration.

She had to wonder if she'd suddenly become telepathic, because now Nick moaned even louder, yelping and humping the mattress while Eric pumped frantically, sweat sheening his skin, breath caught in a sharp, broken gasp. Slumping over, he pressed a soft kiss between Nick's shoulder blades before tumbling to the mattress.

For a few seconds, Ally actually considered applauding—but instead, she padded into the bathroom to wet down a towel. Creeping back up from the foot of the bed, she settled in between them and began wiping Eric down gently, starting with his face. Nick lay next to her like the world's biggest lump of lead, already snoring into his pillow.

Eric caught hold of her hand and kissed it. "Did our performance meet your expectations?"

"Well, it was certainly inspired."

"We do our best."

She smiled. "That you do."

He kissed her again, rolling away once she'd finished with his sponge bath, which didn't bother her; Eric had never been much for après-sex cuddling. The windows stood open, letting in a soft breeze, though the room remained warm enough for them to sleep naked on top of the covers without catching a chill.

Scooting over next to Nick, she tucked his arm around her, sinking into welcome sleep with a Cheshire-cat grin. If the rest of the month proved this much fun, she had the feeling she'd be smiling a *lot*.

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## Chapter 12

### Three Tickets to Paradise:

#### Settling In

They didn't leave the villa at all the first week, which suited Ally just fine. She hadn't realized how tired she was until she glanced at the clock one morning and realized she'd averaged ten hours of sleep a night. More often than not she woke to a serenade of ecstatic moans and cries echoing from Nick's room, which invariably had her reaching for her vibrator.

Mornings were casual and low-key, with a breakfast of coffee, *pane uva* and fresh fruit laid out in the dining room for whenever they happened to drift in. They'd agreed that Nick would work on his book weekdays until noon, and of course Eric had to keep his finger on the pulse of Washington; apparently US senators never went completely off the clock. Still, Eric tried his best to keep his working hours to a minimum, and within a day or two she noticed that he was smiling and laughing with much greater ease, the dark circles under his eyes slowly fading.

He'd also shown her more attention than he had since their honeymoon. She'd taken to having a nice leisurely soak in the tub in the afternoons, and on one particular afternoon Eric tapped on the door, poking his head in. "Care for some company?"

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"Please," she replied eagerly, pulling up her legs to make room for him at the opposite end of the tub. "Go ahead, hop in."

"I had something a bit different in mind." Kneeling by the side of the tub, he picked up her favorite shampoo and squeezed some into his hand. "Why don't you wet your hair for me?"

She dunked her head obediently under the water then settled back, resting her head against the edge of the tub as he worked the shampoo through her hair. The heavenly feel of his long, slender fingers massaging her scalp sent hot, tingly tendrils of sensation shooting through her entire body, making a beeline for her clit.

She slid her fingers between her thighs, but Eric reached down, politely but firmly tugging them away. "Wait a few minutes, and I'll give you a better ride than your hand ever could."

"Promises, promises...."

"You know I always deliver."

And so he did, in his own maddening, roundabout way, rinsing her hair before coaxing her from the tub with a nice soft bath sheet. He made her stand in front of the full-length mirror while he dried every inch, fold and crevice of her skin with exceptional delicacy, then rubbed her down with a delicious vanilla-scented body lotion.

She shivered with arousal by the time he finished, and the familiar smoldering glint in his own eyes told her he was barely holding his own in check. Scooping her up in his arms, he carried her to the bedroom, whipped off his clothing and

fell to the mattress beside her, burying his face in her neck, kissing and biting, making awful, wonderful animal sounds.

"God, you smell amazing."

She giggled. "It's that lotion you used."

"Use it every day from now on," he growled, rolling between her splayed legs, entering her in one swift lunge.

He took her with deliberate, infinite patience, making sure she'd come twice before he sped up at last, spending himself with a triumphant cry. Collapsing beside her, he lay there for several minutes, still panting hard.

It didn't usually take him so long to catch his breath. Seized with sudden concern, she sat up, touching his flushed cheek. "I'll go get you a cool rag," she said, starting to get up.

"N-No, it's all right, I'll be fine," he protested. "I just got a little overexcited."

"Well, forgive me if I don't take that as a compliment."

"You worry too much." Closing his eyes, he patted the space beside him. She lay back down and pressed a hand to his chest, drifting off only when she felt his heartbeat return to normal.

\* \* \* \*

She spent less time with Nick during their first few days, but she didn't think he minded—after all, they saw each other every day at home. However, one day he finished his work early and came out to join her on the terrace. She'd decided to use her quiet time in the mornings to sunbathe; for the first time in her life, she was determined to get an absolutely

perfect, all-over tan. Needless to say, Nick got an unexpected eyeful.

She peered at him over her Ray-Bans, giggling at his fire-engine blush. "See something you like?"

"Geez, Ally! Dalton and the other guys are right down in the courtyard—"

"They can't see anything up here, not unless they've got a telescope. C'mon, drop your trunks. You won't get a decent tan with those on."

"I just put on sun block, so what's the point?"

"Well, maybe I want to see you." She made a couple of swipes at his trunks, but he kept scooting out of reach. Finally she grabbed hold of his waistband and yanked—and nearly got smacked in the face by his burgeoning erection. "Hel-lo!" she cooed. "Talk about a toy surprise!"

She didn't think he could get any redder, but somehow he managed it. Actually, she found it rather flattering that after everything they'd done together, she could still get such an innocent reaction out of him. "Y-You're lying there naked! What do you expect?" he sputtered.

"Why don't you stretch out with me, and I'll show you?"

He did, albeit reluctantly, relaxing when she curled up at his side, kissing his shoulder. "What's that for?" he asked.

"Being a good sport." She grinned. "I could never get away with razzing Eric like that."

"In that case, maybe he should give me a few pointers on how to make you more afraid of me."

"Oh, stop! You know you love it."

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*by Cat Grant*

He laughed, kissing the top of her head. "Well, I guess I don't have to ask if you're having a good time."

"Why, did you think I wasn't?"

"I thought you might've been ticked at waking up every morning to find Eric gone."

"He's there when I go to sleep. Besides, I can't very well monopolize all his time. You two haven't had much of a chance to be together lately either."

"That's my own fault. I've let myself get so wrapped up in the book—"

"Nick..." She sat up, giving him a pointed glance. "Look, stop minimizing your own needs. I know you miss him as much as I do, and it's not like I mind sharing him. I had a lot of fun watching the two of you the other night."

He blushed again. "You never asked us to do that before."

"Well, no, but you're my men and I love you both, and you're beautiful when you're fucking each other. Oh, and watching you two together gets me hot. What more reason do I need?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's always so easy with you, isn't it?"

"No, it's not," she said, shaking her head. "You don't know how hard it was for me at first, giving him up to you. But I did it because I love him and because I knew that if I didn't, I'd lose him."

"If it's any consolation, I regret putting you through that. I really do."

She shrugged. "Luckily, it's all worked out for the best. I'm happier with the both of you than I ever imagined I could be."



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"I'm glad," he said, kissing her softly. "You know I love you, right? I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to figure it out. Sometimes I can be a real bonehead."

She stared at him in stunned happiness for several long moments. "That's something I never thought I'd hear you say."

"I've said I loved you before."

"Oh, I know that. I just didn't know *you* knew you were a bonehead."

"Thanks a lot."

Giggling, she cuddled up with him again, resting against his chest. Warm and content, she let her mind wander, finally coming around to something she'd wanted to ask ever since the night of their mini-orgy. "Nick, when you're with Eric ... Are you always on the bottom?"

"That's kind of a strange question."

"Indulge my curiosity."

He thought about it for a minute, brow furrowed in such intense concentration she had to bite back a chortle. "It varies, but ... yeah, most of the time I am. Why is that so interesting?"

"I just find it ironic that you're physically much bigger, yet you choose to submit to him in bed. Has it always been that way with the two of you?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I mean, as far as sex goes, I was the latest late bloomer you ever saw. I'd dated a few girls in high school, but never anybody special. But that first time with Eric, all the bells went off in my head and that was it for me."

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She stared at him, not sure she'd heard him right. "Wait a minute—are you saying you were a *virgin* when you and Eric got together?"

"Technically, yeah, except for a couple of blowjobs."

"You're kidding me! You mean with all those girls throwing themselves at you after every game, you never took advantage?"

"I wasn't interested in girls—not back then, anyway. I had that figured out by the end of my freshman year of college. Took me two more years to convince Eric, and I had to seduce him to do it."

"Why, Nick Thompson, you just keep unfolding like a flower!"

"What, you didn't think I had it in me?"

"No, honestly, I didn't. I'd always assumed Eric was the one who'd initiated your relationship."

"Well, believe me, I gave him enough chances. You don't know how hard it was, seeing him go out with all those other guys and never giving me a second look."

"Or so you thought."

He nodded. "Turns out he'd wanted me all along, but he was afraid adding sex to the mix would ruin our friendship."

"That's actually kind of sweet. Not too many people get to do it for the first time with someone they care so much about. I didn't, that's for sure."

"Well, you know if I'd met you first, I would've been happy to do the honors."

"In that case, I'm glad I didn't meet you freshman year!"

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He laughed. "What can I say? I guess I needed a couple more years to learn some appreciation for the finer things."

"S'okay." She grinned. "You were worth the wait."

\* \* \* \*

"I wouldn't mind taking a tour of the local winery this afternoon," Eric said when they sat down to lunch together. It pleased Ally to see him in such extraordinary good spirits, his exhaustion apparently all but gone. However, she still couldn't get his breathless spell from the other day out of her mind.

"I'd rather wait until this heat dies down a bit. Or maybe we could go Saturday morning, when Nick doesn't have to work," Ally suggested, flashing Nick a guarded look.

"We haven't ventured out the front door in over a week. Aren't you getting restless?"

"No, not really," she admitted. "But obviously you are."

"Well, I didn't come to Italy to stare at the four walls of this villa for a month."

"So go sit out on the terrace. The view's gorgeous."

He laid down his fork and wiped his mouth. "If the two of you don't want to, I'll simply go by myself."

"It's okay," Nick interjected, glancing at Ally. "I'll go. It'll be good to get out and stretch my legs a bit."

Ally sighed inwardly, forcing a smile. Of course Eric had to have his way. "I'll tag along too. Can't let you boys have all the fun."

The afternoon sun beat down on them with blistering intensity, but inside the winery it was peaceful and cool. Eric had arranged for a private tour and he followed the vintner

around with avid interest, asking question after question. Ally lagged behind with Nick, wandering in between huge casks of chianti and sangiovese. As much as she enjoyed drinking wine, she wasn't particularly interested in the long, laborious, absolutely fucking *tedious* process of growing, harvesting, pressing and aging it. Now she wished she'd begged off and let Eric do the tour by himself.

Nick strolled by aimlessly, examining a cask as if it were the most fascinating thing since waxy yellow buildup. Grabbing his hand, she pulled him into a corner for a quick kiss that turned unexpectedly passionate. He pressed her against the wall, already half-hard. Damn! If they were back at the villa, she would've opened her legs and let him ride her right then and there—

"What're you doing?" Eric demanded.

Ally jumped, jolted out of her dreamy sex-haze. How the hell did he creep up on them like that? "Eric, I didn't hear—"

"That's apparent," he snapped. "We're leaving." And with that, he turned on his heel and marched away before either of them could say another word. Ally shot Nick a guilty look, and they both followed.

They climbed into the Mercedes SUV Eric had rented that day, riding back to the villa in stony silence. Eric was royally pissed, his expression dark as storm clouds. And once they'd retreated securely behind closed doors, the downpour commenced.

"I don't believe you two!" he raged. "What, you haven't had enough sex in the last week, so you have to go and practically fuck in public?"

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Ally's jaw dropped in utter shock. It took her a moment or two to recover enough to fire back her own salvo, but Nick's hand on her arm stopped her. "C'mon, Eric, take it easy," he said, forcing a thin smile. "Nobody saw us but you."

"How do you know? That winery's got dozens of employees!"

"I think you're overreacting."

"Really? What if next time there's a photographer lurking around the corner? I don't think you'll be quite so sanguine when it's your picture splashed across the front page of every fucking tabloid in New York!"

"All right, that's enough!" Ally snapped. God, how did this happen? For the past week they'd had such a lovely time, and now it was all ruined. "Nick, back off! Eric...." She took a deep breath. "Look, you need to ease off the damn paranoia. Nobody's bothered us since we got here. The locals don't even know who we are, much less care. So just fucking *relax*, okay?"

"That's an easy thing to say when you don't have a career to lose."

He strode away down the hall, leaving Ally standing there vacillating between numbness, rage and shattered disbelief. But when Nick came up and put his arms around her, she melted, bursting into tears. "I-I can't believe he said that to me."

"Wish I could say the same." Nick sighed. "Ally, you have to learn to pick your battles with Eric. When he gets like this, just let him yell. If you try to challenge him, you'll end up butting heads twenty-four-seven."

"Spoken like one of the walking wounded."

"You don't know the half of it." He took her by the hand and led her to the couch, letting her curl up next to him. "His father taught him that life is war. And Eric tries, he really does, but I don't think he'll ever fully shake off his old man's influence. All we can do is love him and try not to let it hurt too much when his temper gets the better of him."

"I know, but this last week's been so good for us. It seemed like Eric and I had really started to connect again, and then this happens." She sniffed. "I can't stand feeling like he loves me one second, and I'm about to lose him the next."

"Do you realize you're the only woman he's stayed with longer than six months? Believe me, Ally—you're not going to lose him."

"But sometimes I'm sitting right in front of him, and it's like he doesn't even see me."

"He gets preoccupied with his work. You've got to learn how to jolt him out of it."

"Hmm..." She smiled. "Sounds like I should give that new black lace nightgown a whirl."

"Well, don't let him tear it off you before I get a chance to see it."

They stretched out together and dozed off, waking when they heard Luciana's daughter setting out their dinner buffet. But Eric wasn't waiting for them in the dining room. He wasn't on the terrace or in his office either.

She found him in the bedroom with the curtains drawn, lying on the bed fully clothed. Strange, but she'd never known him to sleep this late in the afternoon. The heat really had

worn him out. Sliding onto the edge of the bed, she caressed his cheek, discovering his skin fever-hot, just like after their afternoon romp the other day. Alarm knifing through her, she flicked on the lamp. "Eric, what's wrong?"

He answered with a pained moan and a tiny fluttering of his eyelids. "T-The light hurts," he muttered, throwing up a hand to shield his eyes.

Dashing into the bathroom, she dampened a cloth with cool water and bathed his face with it, then placed it over his eyes. She noticed the pulse in his throat throbbing, his breathing slightly labored. What the hell was wrong with him?

Nick chose that moment to poke his head in. "Ally, dinner's getting—"

Springing up, she grabbed Nick's arm and dragged him back out to the hallway. "He's sick. I don't know what it is, but it happened the other day too."

"Let me take a look." He went in and felt Eric's forehead, then touched the pulse in his throat. After a couple of minutes, he stepped back into the hall. "I don't think it's anything serious, probably just heatstroke or a migraine."

"Oh, God..." she breathed. "I knew we shouldn't have gone out this afternoon."

"He should be okay by tomorrow morning. He was last ti—" He stopped short, eyes wide, obviously realizing too late what he'd just let slip.

"What do you mean, *last time*?" she demanded. "You mean he's had spells like this before the other day?"

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"It happened the last time I visited him in DC," he admitted, looking appropriately abashed. "But that's the only time I know of, I swear."

"I can't believe you didn't tell me!"

"He begged me not to. He didn't want to worry you."

"Well, I'm pretty fucking worried *now*!" God, she could've smacked herself for not seeing this coming. He'd been driving himself too hard for months, and all that stress combined with the awful heat had finally taken its inevitable toll.

Sucking in a deep breath and pasting on a smile, she padded back into the bedroom to find Eric sitting up, propped on a fluffy pillow. "Hey," she murmured, "you feeling any better?"

"A little." He gave her a wan smile. "I suppose this means the Tuscan sun and I aren't meant to be on speaking terms."

"I think it means you should lay off work for the next few days. We're supposed to be on vacation, remember?"

"Point taken," he replied, scooping up her hand to kiss it.

They spent the evening sitting with him, eating their own dinner on trays at the nearby table. She had Nick bring up some juice and fresh fruit from the kitchen while she helped Eric out of his clothes, rubbed him down with a cool, damp towel and made him take some extra-strength aspirin. He didn't have much of an appetite, but he managed to finish an entire glass of juice and half an apple before she tucked the covers over him and flicked off the light.

Nick met her at the door. She took one look at him and walked right into his arms, burying her face against his chest. "You want to take my room, and let me stay with him tonight?" he asked. "I doubt you'll get much sleep otherwise."



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She shook her head. "I'll stay. And you can stay too, if you want."

They undressed and climbed into bed, Nick spooning behind her as he usually did, dropping off within a few minutes. It was, she realized, the first time in months that they'd slept in the same bed without having sex.

Eric rolled towards her, emitting a tiny moan. Her hand found his in the dark, grasping his fingers. To her surprise, he gave hers a tiny squeeze. "I'll be fine," he mumbled. "Don't worry."

"I can't help worrying. I love you."

He kissed her gently on the forehead. "Go to sleep now."

And at last, weighed down by unease and exhaustion, she did.

\* \* \* \*

Eric did indeed feel better in the morning. So much better, in fact, that Ally awoke with his lips on the nape of her neck and something very stiff and welcoming pressed into the small of her back. Coaxing her to full wakefulness with sweet, gentle whispers in her ear, he nudged open her legs and entered her from behind, fucking her with slow, exquisite care until they both came with a sigh.

Once she'd floated back to earth, she noticed full morning light streaming through the half-open window. Apparently she'd slept the night straight through again. "Looks like somebody's back to his frisky old self," she murmured, smiling at the heavenly sensation of his lips trailing down her throat.

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"The heat got to me, that's all," he replied. "From now on, I suppose we should get our sightseeing done earlier in the day."

"No objections here."

"Good. Because I've got a trip in mind that I think you'll enjoy."

"Eric, we shouldn't go anywhere today. You need to rest."

"Not today," he assured her. "But perhaps we could get an early start tomorrow."

Still too soon by her estimation, but she knew if she said anything he'd be even more determined to go, if only to prove he was really all right. "You know, you don't need to keep planning these little excursions on my account. I'm not bored. In fact, I'd be perfectly happy staying here at the villa with you and Nick for the rest of the month."

"So you came all the way to one of the most beautiful countries on earth, but you don't want to see any of it?"

"You haven't even told me where we're going."

"It's a surprise," he said, with a tiny grin that she knew meant trouble. "Think of it as an early birthday gift."

Oh, that was dirty pool. Now he'd made it impossible for her to object without sounding ungrateful. "Oh, all right," she replied with mock exasperation. "But we'll have to square it with Nick first. I'm not sure he can afford to take a day off from his book."

"Actually, this is something I thought you and I could do by ourselves."

She stared at him for a very long moment. "You know, if you hadn't just done it, I'd swear you were trying to seduce me."

"I didn't know I was restricted to once a day."

The rest of the morning plodded along in blissful calm and quiet. Ally retired to the chaise on the terrace for her daily sunbath while Eric sat in the shade nearby, sipping coffee and thumbing through the pile of newspapers he had brought in from Florence every day. He did seem like his old self, though Ally couldn't dismiss her concerns entirely. He had a hard enough time handling the intense, wet-blanket humidity in DC during the summer months, which meant he should've already known to take it easy. But of course, Eric saw that as tantamount to admitting defeat.

Nick was still in his office when she dropped by a few minutes later. "How's Eric doing today?" he asked, closing his laptop.

"Better, I think. But he's insisting on taking me out tomorrow. He won't tell me where."

"You might as well go. At least with you along, he knows he can't get away with pushing himself."

"I'd rather not leave you alone all day."

"Don't worry, it's okay by me. In fact, if I can finish up this latest chapter, I'll be able to lay off for the rest of the week and hang out on the terrace with you."

"Sounds like a plan."

She'd requested a light lunch that day, and Luciana outdid herself, serving up a delicious mixed-green salad, followed by grilled prawns and a dessert of cheese and fruit. Ally still

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managed to eat enough to make herself drowsy, so she spent the next hour or so stretched out on the couch until her lunch settled before retreating to the bathroom for her afternoon soak in the tub.

Later, she drifted back out to the terrace, expecting to see Eric ensconced in his cool, shady spot, instead finding him back in his office, absorbed in a phone conversation until she marched in and planted herself directly in his line of sight.

"That's fine. We'll reconfirm in a day or two," he spoke tersely into the receiver, then hung up.

"I thought we agreed to give work a rest," she said, hating the nagging tone that had crept into her voice.

"Couldn't be helped—the call was already scheduled," he replied, standing up, "I'm yours for the rest of today and tomorrow, however, if that'll help me get out of the doghouse."

She tried her best to stay annoyed with him, but when he gave her that 'I want to ravish you right *now*' look, it was pretty damned impossible. Well, she could play that game too. Stepping in front of the open curtains, she deliberately positioned herself so the warm sunshine shone right through the white cotton eyelet sundress she was wearing—with nothing on underneath. Eric's eyes went obligingly wide.

Giving him a tiny shove, she knocked him back in his chair and climbed on, straddling his lap. "You're not the only one who can do the seducing, you know," she purred.

\* \* \* \*

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When Eric said he wanted to make an early start, he wasn't kidding. He woke her the next morning while it was still dark, pointed her towards the shower and had a king-size travel tumbler of French roast waiting when she stumbled downstairs to the limo. Even so, it didn't take her long to slump against his shoulder and nod off, waking an indeterminate amount of time later when he kissed her sweetly on the forehead and whispered, "We're here."

He'd whisked her away to Milan, and their first stop was the house of Versace. She'd been there before, back when she covered fashion week for CNN a couple years ago, but that hadn't prepared her for the VIP treatment Eric's appearance warranted. He'd arranged for a private showing of their entire fall collection, complete with a champagne brunch catered by the *Trattoria Milanese*.

It was like ten years' worth of Christmases in one day. Ally drooled over every outfit, but when they showed her an absolutely stunning knee-length black-and-white silk halter dress, she came close to hyperventilating. As the approving gleam in Eric's eyes confirmed, it looked even more gorgeous on her. She lost track of how many other outfits she picked out, though she had the feeling they'd need more closet space at the penthouse when the finished clothes arrived in September.

Later in the afternoon, they journeyed on to Prada. Now it was Eric's turn to indulge himself, ordering three new suits, a dozen monogrammed silk shirts and several pairs of shoes. Ally sat there brimming with delight as she watched him try

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things on, tickled to see him deriving such pleasure from laughing and striking poses in front of the three-way mirror.

Afterwards, he took her to Altro, ordering sautéed sea bass so tender it melted the second it touched her tongue. Since she'd already indulged in champagne that morning, she figured a glass or two of wine with her meal wouldn't hurt, but by the time they finished, the combination of alcohol and exhaustion almost made her pass out at the table.

"Did you have fun?" he asked after he'd managed to pour her back into the limo.

"Mmm-hmm." Sighing, she wrapped her arms around him. "It was nice seeing you enjoy yourself for a change."

"The point was for *you* to enjoy yourself."

"I've been enjoying myself for the past week now. Haven't you noticed?" she teased. "I just wish you'd learn to relax."

"What do you call what I did today?"

"A good start. Now you just need to keep it up."

"I can think of something else that might apply to," he whispered, easing her back onto the cushions. She was still drowsy but she didn't protest, especially when he started unbuttoning her blouse and kissing her all over, making love to her so tenderly it felt like a wonderful dream.

\* \* \* \*

She slept till noon the next day, and got up to find Eric sitting in the shade on the terrace again, skimming his newspapers. He glanced up with a smile when he saw her. "Looks like I wore you out yesterday."

"Better me than you," she replied. "No sign of a headache, I hope?"

"I feel fine." Nudging the other chair out with his foot, he set aside the financial section. "But you'd better sit down. I need to tell you something."

She sank into the chair before her instantly wobbly legs could go out from under her. "What is it?"

"Don't worry, it's nothing serious. However, I'm going to need to go back to Washington for a few days."

She gaped at him, thinking for a moment that she needed to clean the wax out of her ears. "You're kidding me."

"I wish I was. But the White House has exerted enough pressure on both houses that they've called an emergency session to vote on the new intelligence bill. And since I co-sponsored it, it would be exceedingly bad form if I didn't show up." He took one last sip of his coffee before rising. "I'd better get packed. The limo's taking me to the airport in an hour."

Following him back to the bedroom, she perched on the edge of a chair, her mind awl with confusion as she watched him stuff socks, underwear and perfectly pressed shirts into his travel bag. "So did this just come up today?" she wondered aloud.

"I knew it was a possibility before we left home, but I figured there wasn't much point bringing it up until it became a certainty."

"And when did that happen?" When he hesitated, she knew she had her answer. No wonder he'd hung up on that phone call so quickly the other day. "You knew about this before you took me to Milan, didn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "And I thought it would be a good idea if we spent the day together before I left."

"You mean, you thought it would be a good idea to butter me up before you told me you were leaving, so I wouldn't hit the roof!"

"Allison, please don't—"

"Stop it!" She shook with rage, trying hard to keep from bursting into tears. "First your headaches and dizzy spells, now this. What else haven't you told me?"

"You're being hysterical."

"Oh, so when I get upset, I'm hysterical. But when you get upset, it's righteous indignation. How fucking convenient."

He put a few more things in his bag before zipping it up. "I need to finish getting ready," he said tightly, disappearing into the bathroom.

She didn't stay to bid him goodbye; if she did, she knew she'd start crying. She went out and sat on the terrace until he left, her stomach doing queasy flip-flops as the limo pulled away, driving out the gate and down the road.

Trudging back to the bathroom for her soak, she sat in the tub staring bleakly into space. The water soon cooled to a temperature that left her shivering, so she climbed out, skidding on a wet patch of floor. Luckily, she grabbed hold of the edge of the vanity just in time to keep from landing on her ass, but not without sending everything on the counter flying—mostly her own makeup and toiletries, except for one item, a prescription vial with Eric's name on it, half-full of ten-milligram tablets of Lisinopril. She'd never seen it before.



Ten minutes later, she marched into Nick's office and plunked the vial right in front of him. "Do you know anything about this?"

He picked it up and examined it. And if that wasn't genuine puzzlement crinkling his brow, he was a better liar than Ally ever gave him credit for. "What is it?"

"High-blood pressure medication, according to Google. So you didn't know he was taking it?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "And I didn't know he was planning to go back to Washington this morning either, if that's your next question."

"Well, he seems to tell you more than he tells me these days."

"Do you want me to call him?"

She gave it a few moments' consideration before shaking her head. "No, he'll be pissed if he thinks I put you up to scolding him. I'll give him a call about this myself before he gets on the plane."

He rose, wrapping his arms around her, kissing her softly. "Meet me down in the kitchen when you're done. I want to show you something."

Sitting down at Nick's desk, she dialed Eric's cell number. It rang four times before he picked up. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you," he said in that familiar guarded tone that told her he was still angry.

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't say goodbye. I wish we hadn't argued."

"I wish that too."

"I-I found your Lisinopril in the bathroom. If you want, I can overnight it to you."

"That's not necessary." He sounded startled, but of course it only took him a moment to recover his unflappable cool. "I have another bottle at the house in DC."

"Oh." God, she'd never felt more foolish in her life. He'd obviously kept this from her for weeks, if not months. "Well, were you ever planning on telling me about this?"

"I'd rather not have this conversation on the phone. I'll be back no later than Saturday. We can talk then."

"Eric—" The line had already clicked off.

She stared miserably at the phone before hanging up and plodding downstairs. She found Nick alone in the kitchen, leaning against the butcher block munching an apple.

"Everything okay?"

"Of course," she answered, forcing her brightest smile. If Eric wanted to act like a manipulative jerk, fine. But she'd be damned if she'd let worrying about him spoil the rest of her day.

"So you ready for an adventure?" he asked, wagging his eyebrows for goofy emphasis.

She giggled. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

"It's a surprise." Pitching his apple core into the trash, he grabbed her hand, leading her out the back door to the waiting Mercedes.

A gravel service road wound around the rear of the villa, down to the sprawling golden-green valley. They drove to the top of the rise and stopped there with the windows rolled

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down, a fresh breeze tickling their skin, holding the promise of a much cooler afternoon.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?" she asked a touch incredulously. "I mean, it's very beautiful, but we've got a better view up on the terrace."

"Just wait and see." Shifting into gear, he flashed her a wide, toothy grin. "Buckle up. We're going for a ride!"

His foot went down hard on the gas, flooring it all the way to the vineyard, bouncing along the rough unpaved road, rocks and dust spraying every which way.

"Woohoo!" he whooped, pounding the wheel with the flat of his palm. "Isn't this fun?"

"You're nuts!" Gripping the dashboard with both hands, she screwed her eyes shut. "What the fuck's wrong with you?"

"Aw, c'mon, get in the spirit! You used to love this stuff!"

Fortunately, he had to slow it down to avoid a huge dip in the road, which gave a moment's respite for her stomach to stop ping-ponging all over the place. When he hit the gas this time, she couldn't help exploding in laughter, hollering and howling along with him until tears streamed down her face and she could scarcely suck in a mouthful of air.

"See, it's good to cut loose for a change, huh?" he yelled over the engine's roar, grinning like an idiot.

"You're still nuts!"

"And you love it."

And she did, she really did. They hadn't had fun like this in ages—wild, silly fun like she remembered from college. She'd always found Nick's inner child captivating, even if at the

moment he behaved like the demented bastard spawn of Danica Patrick and Dennis the Menace.

The gravel road petered out after a couple of miles, turning off onto the main highway and then, after a few more miles, the town of Grieve. A charming little hamlet, it dated back to medieval times, with old stone buildings and a surrounding wall. They walked hand in hand through the cobblestone streets, exploring and peering in shop windows.

Nick tugged her aside when they reached the end of the main street, pulling her into a quiet corner for a kiss. "Not that I'm complaining," she whispered, "but what's gotten into you today?"

"We're on vacation. That means we're supposed to have fun, not mope around the house like somebody just died."

"I am having fun, but with Eric—"

"Look, I know you're worried about him. I am too. But he's not here right now, and I'm tired of seeing you sad. So today I've made it my mission to cheer you up."

She grinned. "Well, you're doing a pretty good job so far."

They strolled on for a little while longer, until they stumbled across an open-air market. Their stomachs growling, they bought cheese, fruit, a loaf of fresh-baked crusty bread, a bottle of mineral water and a small blanket before wandering out to a peaceful spot in the middle of an olive grove, where they spread out the blanket for a picnic.

Afterwards, she and Nick lay together under a tree, kissing and caressing. Ally had forgotten how much fun making-out could be simply for its own sake. Eric was the king of cunnilingus, but now she found herself flushed and panting,

hovering on the delicious precipice of orgasm from only a few minutes of heavy petting with Nick.

"Um.... "He lifted his head, gazing down at her with a distinctly lust-drunk haze in his eyes. "Think we should take this back to the villa?"

"Why? There's nobody else around, and besides..." She nipped at his earlobe, whispering, "I've always had this fantasy about doing it in the great outdoors."

He laughed. "God, you're shameless."

"And aren't you glad?"

In a few more minutes he had her blouse undone, dipping his head to lick and suck her nipples. His weight on top of her felt solid and reassuring, even if he was pressing her so deeply into the ground she could feel every pebble, twig and clump of dirt. Apparently some fantasies were better off staying that way.

She must have winced, because he stopped, his eyes widening in alarm. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." She wanted to add "unfortunately," but considering Nick's carefree mood today, she knew better. But maybe if she coaxed him the right way, she could get him to play a little closer to the edge. Arching her back, she stretched her arms up above her head. "You know what would be really hot?"

"What?"

"Grab my wrists," she breathed, "and hold me down."

His mouth dropped open. "I-I'll leave bruises."

"I don't care."

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"Ally, c'mon, stop fooling around. You know I'm not into that stuff."

Talk about a mood-breaker. Sighing, she sat up, buttoning her blouse. "So much for cutting loose."

"Hey, what's the matter? I thought we were having fun."

She drew her knees up to her chest, closing in on herself like a dying flower. "You know, you and Eric have the same damn problem. You both need to learn how to let yourselves go—and for longer than five minutes at a time."

"What, so you really want me to pin you down and rape you?"

"I wouldn't mind if you tried a little aggression on for size—which doesn't mean I want you to be violent. I want to feel overpowered when you take me. I want to still feel you inside me the morning after we've fucked. You don't have to treat me like some fragile porcelain doll. Believe me, I won't break."

It took him a minute to absorb what she'd said, though from his expression he appeared far from relieved. "Are you trying to tell me that all this time I haven't ... satisfied you?"

"Oh, God, of course not!" She found the notion so absurd, she couldn't help laughing. "Nick, I've never faked anything with you—I never had to. You've always made me very, very happy. But I still think we could benefit by trying something new."

"Okay," he conceded, "I'll think about it."

They drove back to the villa and spent the rest of the afternoon lounging on the terrace, enjoying the relative coolness until dinnertime. That night she slept in Nick's bed

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for the first time since they arrived, and when they made love, it was, to her disappointment, exactly the way they'd always done it—very sweet, very gentle, very vanilla. Afterwards, she lay there listening to Nick's soft snoring while she thought about Eric, trying to convince herself not to worry.

\* \* \* \*

Nick wasn't in bed when she woke up, or in the dining room, though numerous gaping holes in Luciana's lovingly arranged bread and fruit platter told her he'd traipsed through earlier. Pouring herself some coffee, she wandered into his office to find him hunched over his laptop, brows knit with intense concentration.

"Hey," she said, "weren't you planning to take today off?"

"I just popped in to check my email and read the news. There was an earthquake in Greece this morning." Beckoning her over, he swiveled the laptop so that she could see the screen. "It's pretty horrible."

And that appeared a distinct understatement, according to the live footage on CNN's website. Over a dozen small towns had been demolished, leaving thousands of people stranded, starving and without water. The death toll already hovered at ten thousand, with the grim promise of more to come. Ally's brain ached from trying to comprehend such utter devastation.

Nick shot her a hesitant, even apprehensive, look. "Alan called me about half an hour ago, wondering if I could fly over for a few days to cover the story."

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"He doesn't have any other correspondents in the area?"

"Nobody who can get there as quickly as I can. But I told him I'd have to check on logistics and get back to him."

Selfishness pricked at her, but she brushed it aside. She had no business interfering in Nick's work. "Of course you should go. You can't pass up a big story like this."

"You sure? I feel bad leaving you here all by yourself."

"Don't worry, I think I can amuse myself for a few days."

He packed quickly, then put on his light summer suit and combed back his unruly curls. He looked so different in his work clothes, every inch the confident, professional reporter, but she knew it was all just a costume. At heart he'd always be plain old Nick, the sweet, dorky farm-boy-turned-quarterback she'd fallen for back in college.

"I'll get back as soon as I can," he murmured, giving her a kiss.

"Stay as long as you have to. I'll be fine."

He smiled. "Well, I haven't forgotten about Saturday."

Ironically, she had forgotten. And she would've been perfectly happy if he had too. The thought of celebrating her birthday felt distinctly anticlimactic after the last few whirlwind days. "I think I might just stay in bed with the covers yanked over my head."

"Oh, c'mon, you're not *that* old."

She gave him a playful punch on the shoulder, then clasped his proffered hand and walked him down the terrace stairs to the limo. It was another gorgeous day, comfortably warm with a sky carved out of bright blue china. He kissed



her again and climbed into the limo, driving off through the front gate.

She spent the rest of the morning on the terrace, strolling back inside later for lunch and her bath. Afterwards, she sacked out on the couch with a paperback mystery she'd brought with her, so absorbed in the story that she didn't hear Luciana the first time the housekeeper called her in to dinner.

It didn't dawn on her until that evening how quiet the place was without Nick and Eric around. She could hear all the little creaks and groans of the house settling and the household staff bustling about in the kitchen downstairs. But when Luciana and her daughters finished up and left for the night, the stark silence became downright eerie.

The evening turned a touch chilly, so she shut the terrace doors and put on some music before stretching out on the couch to finish her book. Within a couple of hours her eyelids began drooping, so she dragged herself off to bed. But the second she crawled under the covers, she found herself wide awake. She wasn't used to sleeping alone anymore. She wanted Nick's arms around her. She ached for Eric's reassuring presence beside her, close enough to touch and make sure he was all right.

As if on cue, the phone rang. Eric's cell number flashed on the caller ID. "Hey," she piped happily, "I was just thinking about you."

"You have no idea how good it feels to hear that," he answered, fatigue all too evident in his tone. "I'd intended to call sooner, but it's been pandemonium here."

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"Problems with the vote?"

"The bill's been held up in debate ever since I arrived, but I'm hoping it'll get to the floor sometime tomorrow."

"I'll say a prayer for you."

"Say two. We could use the extra credit."

A tiny moment of silence, before she asked, "You're taking your medication, I hope?"

"Of course," he replied, his voice going soft and warm, the way it did when they were alone together. "And I appreciate your concern more than I can say."

"Well, maybe when you come back you can show me," she teased.

"I'll be looking forward to that." With an audible intake of breath, he added, "I should go. I've got a few more hours of work I need to get done before tomorrow."

"Please take it easy," she pleaded. "No bill is worth killing yourself over."

"I'll keep that in mind," he murmured before hanging up.

Sinking back on her pillows, she willed herself to relax. She felt a little better now, but only a little. Still, it was good to know that Eric was fine, and that he'd apparently gotten over his anger with her.

She suddenly realized she'd forgotten to tell him about Nick leaving, but perhaps that was just as well. He didn't need anything else to worry about. He'd find out for himself soon enough anyway, the next time he picked up a copy of the Herald.

The next morning brought more of the same—breakfast, sunbathing, lunch and reading on the couch. She'd left her

own laptop at home in the hopes of weaning herself off her internet addiction, but later in the day she caved, logging onto the desktop in Eric's office to read her email and check up on the news. On the CNN website she saw that the situation in Greece had taken an even more dire turn, with the new death toll now topping twenty thousand. From the way things looked, it'd be a miracle if Nick made it back by Saturday.

Her finger hovered over a link to Amazon, but she bravely fought the urge, choosing instead to log off and shut down the computer. She had a bad habit of surfing from one shopping site to another when she got bored, and while she doubted that blowing a few hundred dollars on frivolous crap would bother Eric, she needed to become a bit more proactive in the self-entertainment department, especially if she was going to spend the next day and a half by herself.

She decided to give the household staff the next couple of days off; it seemed silly to have three people waiting on her alone. Eric had grown up with servants, but even after several years, Ally still wasn't entirely comfortable around them. She disliked asking other people to do things she could easily do for herself—and after what happened last year, she especially hated the idea of strangers being in a position to overhear her private conversations with Nick and Eric.

On Friday morning she bounced out of bed and headed downstairs to make herself coffee and an omelet, which she ate sitting at Eric's shady spot at the table on the terrace. Peering out over the valley, she wistfully recalled her silly,

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romantic afternoon with Nick. Hard to believe that was only a couple of days ago.

Aside from her day trips with Eric and Nick, she really hadn't gotten a whole lot of exercise since she'd arrived. And while she found sitting like a lump on the terrace relaxing, if she kept it up for another two weeks while stuffing herself with Luciana's delectable cooking, she'd have to squeeze herself into her new Versace wardrobe with goose grease and a shoehorn.

She'd wanted to explore the vineyard from the day she got here, and now seemed the perfect time. Putting on her Ray-Bans, sneakers and a jaunty sun-hat, she headed out the back door of the kitchen for a nice long walk.

It felt good to get out and stretch her legs again. The sun felt heavenly, warm and liquid without the slightest hint of the brutal edge that came out in full force most afternoons, though after about half an hour she'd worked up a healthy sweat. It was so peaceful down among the grapes, entirely quiet except for a soft breeze ruffling the leaves and birds winging overhead.

"Mrs. Courtland," came Dalton's voice from behind her, abruptly shattering her sense of calm. He strode toward her with obvious urgency, in slacks and a polo shirt instead of his usual impeccably pressed dark suit, yet somehow still managing to look as crisp and efficient as ever. "I need you to come back to the house."

"What's wrong?" Oh, God—not Eric! She'd had visions of him collapsing on the Senate floor ever since he'd left. Her

heart suddenly felt like a hot fist trying to pound its way out of her chest. "Is Eric all right?"

He gave her a strange, squinty-eyed look. "As far as I know, ma'am, the Senator's fine."

"G-God, you scared the sh—I mean, you had me scared there for a minute!" Relief swept her, nearly buckling her knees. "So why do I need to go back to the villa?"

"The Senator left explicit instructions that you were not to leave the premises unescorted."

Her mouth dropped open. "Well, I-I suppose I should've told you I was going out for a walk, but I doubt anything will happen to me out here."

"I'd be glad to accompany you if you'd like to continue."

"Are you serious?" She gestured all around them. "Dalton, there's no one out here but us and the birds. I'm not in the least bit of danger."

But of course he was serious—deadly serious. She'd never seen him crack a smile in all the time he'd worked for them, and from the resolved, pursed-lipped expression on his face right now, she could see that he intended to dog her every fucking step.

"All right, let's go back to the house," she snapped, already marching in that direction.

She spent the rest of the day stewing, growing more and more angry, and by the time Eric called that night, she was loaded for bear.

Unfortunately for her, so was he. "Why didn't you tell me the other night that Nick had to leave?" he demanded.

"It slipped my mind," she retorted testily. "And I don't understand why you're so upset. It's hardly the first time he's been called away on assignment."

"I don't like the idea of you being left there at the villa unprotected."

"Oh, I'm far from unprotected. Your faithful watchdog Dalton's keeping a close eye on me. I can't even go out for a fucking walk in the vineyard by myself."

"Why do you need to do that? You've got everything you need at the house."

"Well, maybe I just want to get some air! Honestly, Eric, I'm starting to feel like a prisoner here."

"You can go out again when Nick comes back. Until then, I want you to stay put."

For a moment she was so flabbergasted she couldn't speak. "*Wh-What* did you say?"

"Look, I'm only trying to keep you safe."

"Eric, this is absurd. Nothing's going to happen to me!"

He sighed. "I understand your frustration, but for my own peace of mind, I'd appreciate it if you'd stay close to the villa."

She recognized another one of his passive-aggressive tricks, which somehow managed to irk and chasten her at the same time. "So what time do you fly in tomorrow? I thought I'd ride along in the limo to pick you up—if that meets with your approval," she added in a distinctly pointed tone.

"That's actually what I called to tell you. It looks like I'll be stuck here at least until Monday. The bill's still in revisions, but the vote's scheduled for Sunday night."

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"Oh, so you won't be here for..." With a pang, she realized he hadn't even mentioned her birthday. He'd probably forgotten it in the midst of everything else. "Well, I guess I'll see you Monday."

"Take care," he said softly.

The next morning she rolled glumly out of bed and trudged downstairs to make herself some coffee. She thought about having some toast too, but found she had no appetite. Now she wished she'd made good on what she told Nick, and stayed in bed with the covers yanked up over her head.

A knock came at the kitchen door, momentarily jolting her from her pity party. Holden, one of their other security men, handed her a long gold florist's box tied with a red velveteen ribbon. Inside she found a dozen long-stemmed white roses and a card, which read:

*I didn't want you to think I forgot.*

*Love you—Nick.*

Her mood now brightened, she took her usual morning sunbath on the terrace, dozing on the comfy chaise. When her cell phone rang, she lunged for it half bleary eyed, hoping it was Eric.

"Hey, birthday girl!" came Nick's voice, distant and blurred with static. "Did you get the flowers?"

"Y-Yeah, I did," she stammered, blinking hard to try and clear her head. A slight twinge of disappointment had crept into her tone; she hoped Nick hadn't heard it. "They're lovely. I've got them sitting on the table right next to me, in fact."

"Oh, good. I thought I might've screwed up the order. I called it in to the florist in Grieve, but it took ten minutes of

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fighting the language barrier to convince them I didn't want them shipped to me here in Greece."

She laughed. "So any idea when you'll be back?"

"In another day or two, I think. The Red Cross just arrived, so I've shifted to covering the search and rescue."

"Yeah, I saw the news yesterday. Is it as terrible as it looks?"

"God, Ally, it's unimaginable. Every day more people pour in, thousands of children separated from their families..."

Even through their lousy connection, she could hear how grimly wrung out he sounded. Both her men had the habit of driving themselves too damned hard for their own good.

"Alan's got another correspondent coming to take over within the next day or so. Believe me, I can't wait."

"Well, until then, be careful."

"I will," he replied. "Say hi to Eric for me when he gets back."

She drifted back inside the villa, taking her cell phone into the bathroom with her while she had her soak, still hoping for a call from Eric. But by the time she climbed out, the clock read a quarter till noon, and he still hadn't called.

Irrational anger rose within her, though she tried to fight it. So Nick could take time out from a natural disaster to send her flowers, but Eric couldn't even pick up the fucking phone? She knew she shouldn't let something so petty bother her, but dammit, it *hurt*.

She got dressed and wandered back out to the terrace, mostly because she couldn't think of anything else to do. She'd fallen in love with this place when she first arrived, but



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now the thought of another day alone here stretched out ahead of her like a life sentence.

Grabbing the keys to the Mercedes from Nick's desk, she darted back to the bedroom and packed a small bag, then headed down to the kitchen. The back door lay only about a hundred feet from the garage. With luck, she could escape down that service road and be on the highway to Florence before Dalton even realized she'd left.

Apparently the birthday gods were smiling upon her, for within ten minutes she found herself speeding toward the city, her favorite jazz CD bopping along in the background. Guilt pricked at her, but she brushed it aside. She'd only be gone one night. Besides, Eric had promised to take her to Florence for her birthday, so it seemed only apropos that he'd become the catalyst for this little road trip.

She was only about sixty kilometers away, according to OnStar. If she floored it, maybe she could squeeze in a visit to the Uffizi before dinner.

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## Chapter 13

### Three Tickets to Paradise:

#### Complications

Ally arrived in Florence by mid-afternoon. She checked into a suite at the Grand Hotel on the *Via Ognissanti* before taking a leisurely stroll along the Arno until she reached the Uffizi. Finding the crowd surprisingly sparse for a Saturday, she took her time wandering through the various galleries.

However, it didn't take long for her to realize she was simply meandering aimlessly from room to room, scarcely noticing the astounding works of art. She'd so looked forward to coming here with Eric. After growing up in a home filled with his mother's amazing Impressionist and Cubist collection, he'd developed a lifelong love of great art. He'd give her the four-star guided tour here, complete with impassioned mini-lectures on the history of each piece. She'd often thought if he hadn't been born rich, he would've made a superb university professor.

But of course, before she left she had to take in a viewing of Michelangelo's *David*. She'd always heard how breathtaking it was, but now with it standing there before her, she couldn't help feeling oddly disappointed. Even a man chiseled out of stone couldn't hold a candle to Nick's lush male beauty.

She went back to the hotel for an early dinner and sat sipping wine and pushing her salad glumly around her plate.

Now she wished she'd never left the villa. She'd be just as lonely there, but at least she wouldn't have to watch everybody else having a good time. Evidently she'd forgotten how to have fun without Nick and Eric in tow.

Her attention wandering, she took in the rest of the room. A dark-haired, elegantly dressed woman sitting almost directly across from her looked vaguely familiar. Their eyes locked, recognition flickering across the woman's face. To Ally's surprise, she got up and came over.

"How lovely to see you again!" she said with a wide, scarlet-lipped smile.

Ally shook her proffered hand, feeling distinctly like an idiot. "Um ... likewise."

"And I can tell from your expression that you do not remember me." She spoke excellent English, with a strong yet charming accent. "Adrianna Mastelli. We met in Milan when you were covering the Versace collection for CNN."

"Oh!" Now she remembered—they'd sat at the same table at the luncheon preceding the fashion show. "Hello! God, I feel so silly! It wasn't that long ago!"

"Ah, don't apologize. Most of the time, I have an awful memory for faces, but you look exactly the same!"

"I'll take that as a compliment." Gesturing at the empty chair across from her, Ally added, "Since it appears you're alone too, if you'd care to join me..."

"I would love to."

They laughed and chatted for nearly three hours, killing two bottles of pinot grigio in the process. Maybe the wine deserved the lion's share of the credit, but Ally found herself

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growing more relaxed than she'd felt in ages. The only woman friend she had these days was Holly, but Adrianna possessed a poise and sophistication Holly lacked, coupled with a similarly witty, ribald sense of humor that put Ally immediately at ease.

They'd long since finished their meal, so when the maître d' came over and politely asked them to vacate their table, they ambled upstairs to Ally's suite, ordering tiramisu and more wine from room service. The dessert sat on the coffee table untouched, but the wine didn't, and soon Ally flopped back on the couch with another full glass, giggling her head off at another one of Adrianna's wild stories.

"So tell me," Adrianna went on, "what are you doing in Firenze without your husband? You are married to that American senator, no?"

"That's a long story," she replied with a sigh, "but suffice it to say, my husband has a hard time tearing himself away from his work."

"Mine as well. I don't even bother asking him to come away on holiday with me anymore. Of course," she added with a wink, "visiting my lover helps me pass the time quite pleasantly."

Ally almost choked on her wine. She'd never heard anyone mention infidelity in such a casual fashion before. Eric had always told her that the Europeans regarded these things much more pragmatically. "Y-You have a lover here in Florence? So why aren't you with him right now?"

"Well, you see, he is wonderful in bed, but he becomes far too possessive. I have to get away every now and then, or he drives me mad."

"I know the feeling."

"Ah, so you have a possessive lover too?"

"No, Nick's nothing like—" Mortified by what she'd almost said, she stopped short, all but clapping a hand over her mouth. "Um, actually, it's my husband who's the possessive one."

"But you do have a lover, no?" Grabbing the wine bottle, Adrianna poured them both fresh glasses. "I saw you in the Michelangelo gallery at the Uffizi this afternoon. Women always think of their lovers when they look upon *David*. Although from the expression on your face, I don't think your lover suffered by the comparison."

"No, he certainly didn't," Ally murmured, sipping her wine, enjoying the euphoric glow it spread throughout her entire body. "So does your husband know? About your lover, I mean."

"He does, and he does not." Adrianna shrugged. "He is grateful that I have a means of amusing myself, so that I don't disturb him at his work. As long as my affair poses no threat to our marriage, he is content to pretend that it does not exist."

"That's very ... open-minded."

"No, it is sad. I loved my husband very much at one time, you see. Now we merely tolerate each other."

Not merely sad, but tragic, Ally mused—and uncomfortably close to home. Is this what lay in store for her and Eric, co-

existing in the same house for years on end, drifting apart yet not bothering to divorce because of the toll it would take on Eric's career? She couldn't think of anything more empty or pointless. "I sometimes wonder if..."

"If what?" Adrianna prompted.

The words bubbled up inside her, clamoring to get out, things she hadn't even confided to Nick or Holly. Maybe voicing all her fears would finally help her exorcise them. "I sometimes wonder if Eric only keeps me around because he needs a wife to wear on his arm at all his political soirees. Sometimes I think that if he could go out in public with Nick, he'd drop me faster than a hot iron."

"And Nick is...?"

"My lover, and Eric's." There, she'd said it. An amazingly giddy sense of relief swept through her. "He's lived with us for the past two years. Eric and I share time with him."

"So Nick's the man your husband told the press he'd been in love with for several years?"

She nodded, downing the last of her pinot. "They've known each other a long time."

"And you love them both?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then you are a lucky woman."

"Well, lately I haven't felt very lucky. Everything's become so ... complicated."

Adrianna laughed. "I can imagine."

They talked some more, but Ally soon felt herself starting to fade. The next thing she knew, she awoke on the couch

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with a pounding headache and a profoundly fuzzy sensation between her ears. Adrianna was gone.

She could taste the vomit rising in her throat the second she stood up. Rushing to the bathroom, she managed to fling up the toilet lid just in time to avoid splashing last night's dinner all over the floor. Afterwards she turned on the shower full-blast and climbed in, standing under the warm, massaging spray.

Her head still ached when she stepped out, though her mind had cleared enough to keep her stomach roiling. God, how could she be so fucking stupid, spilling every detail of her private life to someone she barely knew? In all likelihood she'd never see Adrianna again, which was no doubt a good thing. Eric would hit the roof if he ever found out.

She got dressed and checked out, heading back to the villa. Nausea still seized her, so much so that she had to pull over twice to vomit. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been this hung over, but she made a silent vow to never let it happen again.

\* \* \* \*

She arrived back at the villa to find it still empty, which left her feeling strangely relieved. All she wanted now was to go back to bed and sleep for a few more hours.

She woke near dinnertime, drawn downstairs by telltale banging and shuffling sounds echoing from the kitchen, and found Nick with his head stuck in the fridge, foraging for sandwich fixings. They came across some rare roast beef, Swiss cheese and a loaf of crusty French bread and made

themselves a huge hoagie. Ally only took a small portion, but after her sick-a-thon that morning, she felt grateful to keep even that much down.

Apparently her greenness around the gills hadn't escaped Nick's attention either. "You okay?" he asked, gnawing off another bite of sandwich. "It's not, um ... that time of the month again, is it?"

"No! God, Nick!" She didn't know whether to laugh or die from shock. Nick didn't usually refer to things like that without blushing. "What makes you think that?"

"I don't know, you've just been acting weird these last few days."

"Thanks a lot."

"I didn't mean it like that! But I've been worried about you ever since that day we went on the picnic. You sort of scared me."

She stared at him. "What, so I ask you to treat me a little more roughly in bed, and that means I'm nuts?"

"No, of course not, but..." He put down his sandwich, choosing his next words with care. "You just seem unhappy, with me and with Eric."

"Gee, ya think?" she snapped. "The two people I love best in the world bring me to this fabulous place for a vacation, then decide they've got better things to do than spend time with me. Why in the world would that make me unhappy?"

"C'mon, Ally, that's not fair. You're the one who told me to go to Greece."

"I know. And I'd tell you the same thing if it happened again right now. But Nick, I won't lie to you. I'm lonely."



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Tears welled up, making her bite her lip to stave them off. "I'm lonely even with you and Eric in the same room with me. Do you realize that you two are the only people I ever talk to anymore, besides Holly? I've got no other friends. My job is a joke. You and Eric have actual purpose to your lives, but what do I have? Nothing."

He looked a little surprised—but only a little. "Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"Because you're busy, and Eric's busy, and I understand that. I don't expect you to spend every waking moment entertaining me. But if I don't find something to do for myself, I'm going to explode."

He invited her to sleep in his room again, but this time she declined. She still felt a bit shaky and weak, and for the first time in recent memory, her sex drive seemed to be missing in action. Hopefully a good night's sleep would have her back to her old, non-bitchy self again tomorrow.

She did feel better when she woke the next day, so much so that she found it easy to convince herself that the last couple of days were simply a foolish mistake. Fortunately, she mused with a sigh, nothing awful had resulted from it. She'd learned her lesson—no more running off half-cocked whenever she got pissed with Eric. And no more drinking with people she didn't know. In fact, no more drinking, period.

Nick still appeared pretty wiped out himself, so they spent the morning together lazily soaking up the sun. They'd just decided to go inside to fix themselves some lunch when they heard the front gate open and close, followed by footsteps on the terrace staircase, and suddenly Eric appeared.

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Ally sprang up to greet him, but skidded to a halt, alarmed by the tight, grim set of his mouth. "Get inside, both of you," he barked, herding them both into the living room, shutting the terrace doors behind them. Opening his briefcase, he yanked out a sheaf of newsprint and threw it on the coffee table. "I leave for a few days, and *this* is what I come home to?"

Ally recognized the pile of cheap tabloids, most of them in Italian or French, photos of her and Nick from their day trip in Grieve splashed across their front pages. One publication even had a picture of them kissing in a doorway. She went immediately heartsick, her stomach twisting into knots just looking at them.

And from the expression on Nick's face, his stomach was doing a few flip-flops of its own. "Eric, we didn't see anyone follow—"

"Why not?" Eric snapped. "You're both supposed to be such hot-shot reporters, but you couldn't tell somebody was trailing you with a fucking digicam?" Reaching back into his briefcase, he pulled out something thicker, slicker and glossier, thrusting it right in their faces. "And here's the *pièce de resistance*."

It was one of the sleaziest of the British scandal sheets, sporting the headline, "When the Senator's away, the wife will play—with *his* boyfriend!" The accompanying article boasted "An exclusive interview with Allison Taylor-Courtland!" Skimming it quickly, Ally felt as if the floor had plummeted ten stories beneath her feet. It quoted everything she'd told Adrianna, word for word.

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"Tell me this isn't true," he demanded, in that familiar deadly tone she knew better than to argue with. "Tell me you didn't expose us all to some tabloid reporter!"

"Eric, I-I'm sorry," she whispered miserably. "I met her for the first time in Milan a couple of years ago. I had no idea she was a report—"

"How could you *not* know? She's married to Eduardo Mastelli, the Rupert Murdoch of Italy! His name's on half the fucking satellite stations you've been watching since we got here!"

"All right, stop it," Nick interjected, stepping in between them. "Let's sit down and discuss this calmly and rationally."

"Oh, I think it's a little late for that. Congratulations, both of you," Eric sneered. "You've managed to destroy everything."

She couldn't take it anymore. Running to the bedroom, she locked the door behind her and flung herself on the bed, sobbing so hard her eyeballs felt like they'd turned into boiled onions. A little while later Nick came by and knocked, but when she didn't answer, he went away.

She lay there for the rest of the afternoon and well into the evening, until she couldn't ignore her stomach's rumbling any longer. Creeping downstairs to the kitchen, she ran into Nick making himself another sandwich. "How's he doing?" she asked.

"Still pretty pissed," Nick replied wearily. "I figured you wouldn't be too unhappy if he slept with me tonight."

She nodded. "Make sure he takes his medication, okay? Getting so upset can't be good for his blood pressure."

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"I will," he said, giving her a gentle kiss. "Get some rest. We'll figure this all out, I promise."

Surprisingly, she not only slept, but she dreamed. In her dream, she and Eric walked along hand in hand down in the vineyard, when suddenly the ground began shuddering and buckling beneath their feet, finally giving way. She found herself perched on the brink of a crumbling chasm, Eric dangling over the edge, one hand flailing madly, trying to grab hers. She caught hold of his fingers, but he proved too heavy and he slipped from her grasp, plunging into nothingness with a horrible scream—

"*Allison!*" Nick loomed over her, shaking her shoulder so hard he nearly dislocated it. "C'mon, wake up! Something's wrong with Eric!"

She rushed to Nick's room to find Eric curled up in a ball on the bed, both arms crossed tightly over his chest. When she knelt beside him, she saw that he was deathly pale, his lips outlined in blue. He tried to speak, but the awful pain contorting his features prevented it.

"It's okay," she whispered, caressing his face, trying to calm him. "I'm here. You're going to be fine." Turning to Nick, she whispered, "Get me a cool rag, and then go get Dalton!"

Nick returned shortly, with Holden, not Dalton, in tow. Luckily, he appeared well-versed in emergency medical procedures, and within a few minutes he had Eric resting flat on his back and breathing more freely, though he still seemed to be in a fair amount of discomfort.

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"I think he's suffered a heart attack, ma'am," Holden informed her. "We should get him to the hospital as quickly as we can."

Her mind froze for a few moments—before sheer terror set in. "B-But ... Shouldn't we call an ambulance?"

"We're fifty miles from the closest hospital," Holden replied. "I doubt they could get an ambulance out here this time of night. I'd recommend that we transport him in the SUV."

"All right, we'll get him ready," Nick cut in. "Bring the car around."

They wrapped Eric in a soft, warm blanket, and between Nick and Holden, they managed to carry him downstairs, laying him gently in the back seat of the SUV. Ally climbed in with him and held his head in her lap, bathing his face with the cool rag as they sailed along the rough country road. His color was better now, his breathing calmer and more even, though she could still feel his heart racing when she touched the pulse in his throat.

"I'll be fine," Eric whispered, taking her hand, pressing a soft kiss to her palm.

Nick cast her a glance from the front passenger's seat, and they exchanged anxious looks. It would take them over an hour to reach the hospital, according to Holden. But Eric was a fighter. Ally had never known anyone with such a strong force of will. She prayed that this time it wouldn't fail him.

\* \* \* \*

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They reached the hospital around three in the morning. The emergency room staff took one look at Eric and rushed him directly inside, telling Ally and Nick to wait in the family lounge. At least, that's what she thought they said—none of the nurses appeared to speak or understand much English.

Holden posted himself outside the emergency room door, and while Ally thought he was taking his duties a bit too seriously, she wasn't inclined to protest. Nick brought her some coffee from the vending machine down the hall, but after one tasteless, lukewarm sip, she set it aside.

"It's not your fault," Nick murmured. "He's been driving himself like a maniac for months. I'm surprised this didn't happen sooner."

"I'm not," she replied darkly. "I should've seen it coming when I found that high-blood pressure medicine. I should've *demand*ed that he skip that emergency session and—"

"And we both know how well that would've worked out." He shook his head. "Stop beating yourself up about it. There's nothing either of us could have done."

She didn't believe that, but it was futile to argue the point. Besides, she had plenty of other things to beat herself up about. "I-I suppose I owe you an apology."

"For what?"

"Oh, c'mon, like you have to ask?" How it hurt remembering that afternoon, especially the awful look of betrayal in Eric's eyes when she'd admitted her idiotic mistake. "Nick, you have to believe me, I didn't know Adrianna was a reporter."

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"God, Allison, that's the last thing I'm worried about right now!"

"I know, but Eric was right. I should've picked up on it. I should've seen the red flags waving a mile off." She sighed. "She knew exactly how to push my buttons. It was fucking uncanny."

"She might've had some help." Lowering his voice, he leaned in closer. "Dalton wasn't there when I went down to the staff quarters tonight. Holden said he took off late Saturday afternoon and he hadn't seen him since."

Just then the emergency room doors swung open, and a tall, dark-haired man in green surgeon's scrubs emerged. He didn't speak much more English than the nurses, but with an animated waving of hands, he ushered Nick and Ally into the emergency room, where Eric lay hooked up to half a dozen monitors and an IV.

He smiled wanly when he saw them, holding his hand out to grasp each of theirs in turn. His eyes had the glassy, unfocused gaze of someone on heavy sedatives. "See, I told you I'd be fine," he rasped.

"I think the jury's still out on that," she muttered to herself, trying to keep from crying again.

"They've stabilized my pulse and blood pressure. In a couple of days they'll transfer me to the American Hospital in Rome and from there I can go home."

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Nick said. "Why don't you try resting now, okay?"

"Good idea," Eric answered, closing his eyes.

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The hospital staff bustled around, adjusting Eric's IV and fiddling with the monitors, shooting them both pointed 'get out of the way' looks. "We'll come back later," Ally whispered, bending down to give him a kiss.

Nick did the same, then followed her out into the hallway. "If we're going to be here a couple of days, maybe I should go back to the villa and pick us up some changes of clothing."

"All right, but be careful. For all we know, there's still someone out there with a camera watching us, and the last thing we need is for them to show up here."

He nodded. "I'll get back as soon as I can."

They moved Eric to a private room on the second floor about an hour later. Ally waited impatiently outside while the staff got all his equipment calibrated before going in to sit with him.

He looked much better now, his breathing slow and even, his color close to normal. She gave him some water from a cup sitting at his bedside, then sat down, clasping his hand. She ran her thumb along the inside of his wrist, relieved to discover that his pulse was indeed stronger and more stable. "Don't you ever scare me like that again," she chided, forcing a tiny smile.

"I'll do my best. And in the interests of that promise, there's something I think you should know." He blinked hard, obviously trying to fight off the more disorienting effects of the painkiller.

"Eric, we don't have to do this now."

"Yes, we do." Swallowing, he licked his lips. "A few months ago, I went in for a routine checkup, and my physician



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ordered some tests. The results didn't come as a complete surprise." He reached for another sip of water, his hands trembling so badly she had to grab the cup before he dropped it. "I've inherited my mother's heart defect. Since I was a teenager, doctors have been telling me I had a fifty-fifty chance of developing it, though I hoped I'd have a few more years before it manifested."

She stared at him, going completely numb. "Y-You mean you've known you were dying for months now, and y-you didn't tell me?"

"Allison, listen to me. I am *not* dying." She nearly burst into hysterical laughter when she heard that, but Eric's calm, insistent tone helped her suppress the urge. "My mother died because her depression defeated her will to fight the disease. As long as I take care of myself, there's no reason I can't live a normal lifespan."

"But you haven't been taking care of yourself."

"That's about to change. This heart attack was my wake-up call. I've been ignoring all the symptoms, hoping the medication alone would fix everything, but it's obviously not enough. So I'm willing to make any lifestyle adjustments necessary to ensure that I live to a ripe old age with you and Nick by my side." He grinned, kissing her hand. "How's that sound?"

"Like something I've waited to hear ever since you moved to Washington."

"Good," he said softly.

\* \* \* \*

They talked until Eric grew drowsy again, and Ally went back down to the lounge to wait for Nick. He arrived a little while later, a small travel bag and his laptop tucked under his arm. "What did you bring the computer for?" she asked.

"Looks like we were right on the money where Dalton's concerned," he said, booting it up. "I searched the staff quarters when I got back. He took most of his stuff with him, but I guess he packed in a pretty big hurry, because he left this behind." Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out a flash drive. "Wait till you see what's on it."

It contained the original digital photos from the various tabloids, and a few more besides—all featuring Ally and Nick cavorting nude on the terrace. Fortunately, they'd been taken from distance, leaving their faces blurry and indistinct. "Jesus," she breathed.

Nick nodded. "After I found this, I checked the phones—and yes, they were bugged. He must've been siphoning Adrianna all the information she needed."

"No wonder she was so good at cuing me. He must've been tracking the GPS in the Mercedes. That's how she found me at the hotel."

"They set us up, big time."

She let out a mirthless laugh. "I suppose that should make me feel better, but it doesn't."

Powering down his laptop, he shut it and set it aside. "You know, when I first saw those tabloids, I didn't know whether to be more shocked or scared. But once that all wore off ... Honestly, I was relieved." He rubbed his mouth, letting out a rueful chuckle. "When Eric came out last year, I thought

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everything would change. But nothing changed, not really. I was still the dirty little secret—only now I had two people who were ashamed to be seen out in public with me."

"Nick, I was never ashamed of you! It's just that Eric wouldn't let me—"

"Since when has that made any difference? You go off and do whatever you want anyway, and then you're amazed when it blows up in your face. We probably wouldn't be sitting here right now if you two would just *talk* to each other."

She stared at him, stunned. "Wh-What brought this on so suddenly?"

"It's not sudden. It's been bothering me for a while now. Every time you and Eric fight, I'm the one who has to step in and play peacemaker. It's not fair to me, Allison. I'm tired of it."

A sharp retort rose to her lips, but the painful realization that he was right quickly quelled it. She'd been so absorbed in her own stupid angst lately, it had never occurred to her to consider the situation from Nick's perspective. "I'm not your enemy here, you know," she said quietly. "But if I've been taking you for granted, I'm sorry."

Sliding closer, he put his arm around her. "Look, I didn't mean to go off on you like that, but this has been tearing me up for weeks. I had to say something." He sighed. "I don't want to be caught in the middle anymore. You and Eric are going to have to learn to settle your differences without me."

\* \* \* \*

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By the next morning, Eric's condition had stabilized to the point that they decided to transfer him to Rome that afternoon. Ally rode along with him in the helicopter, with Nick staying behind to close down the villa. He'd load up the SUV with the rest of their luggage and join her at her hotel later than evening.

He showed up nearly two hours late. When Ally opened the suite door to let him in, he looked like he'd been sucked through an industrial fan. "Heavy traffic?" she asked, grabbing one of her bags from him, then kicking the door shut.

"Geez, when was the last time you looked outside? There are paparazzi all over the front steps!"

She dashed over to the window and peered down, heart sinking at the sight of the sizable throng. "Damn! Somebody at the front desk must've tipped them off."

"Well, it's a good thing I can't understand Italian, or a whole bunch of them would've ended up with black eyes. This one guy almost tore my shirt off!"

"Look, if I'd known they were out there, I would've called to warn you. I'll have Holden escort us out through the basement and garage tomorrow when we go visit Eric. Five-star hotels are used to VIPs taking short cuts through service areas to avoid harassment."

He collapsed on the couch, eyeing her wearily. "You've done this before."

"Yeah, well..." She glanced out the window again, her heart sinking. "Looks like we'd better get used to it."

\* \* \* \*

Eric showed remarkable improvement over the course of the next week. He was already out of bed and pacing the hallways, brimming with restless energy. His new doctor, an ex-military man with a brisk, no-nonsense attitude, told Ally that if his recovery continued at its current pace, he could go home by the end of the following week.

"How long should he convalesce once I get him back to New York?" she asked.

"The usual minimum after a coronary is eight to twelve weeks."

"Well, I doubt I'll be able to keep him housebound for that long."

"I'd advise you to do your best. His attack was a fairly mild one as these things go, but if he returns to work before he's fully recovered, it could—and probably will—have detrimental effects on his future health."

"You mean he could have another attack?"

The doctor nodded. "I've seen it too many times before, especially in patients with your husband's particular ailment. They tell themselves they'll take it easy, but then after a few months they start feeling good as new, and pretty soon they fall back into their old habits, and then—*bam!*" He slammed a fist into his palm for emphasis. "And I can tell you with a fair amount of certainty that most of them don't survive another attack."

"Do you really think that's likely? He's only thirty-five years old!"

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He shrugged. "It could happen again next year, or in ten years, or never. It's all contingent on how committed he is to his recovery. Doctors can only do so much."

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## **Chapter 14**

### Three Tickets to Paradise:

#### Heading Home

Ten days later, they boarded the Courtland Industries jet back to Manhattan. Ally hired a private-duty nurse to make the flight with them, over Eric's vociferous protests. She wasn't about to let a random fluctuation in cabin pressure set him back to where he'd been two weeks ago.

Luckily, their flight proved uneventful, and they arrived at JFK slightly ahead of schedule. She had a wheelchair waiting for Eric at the gate; he fixed it with a baleful glare the moment he saw it, though he climbed into it without saying a word.

A good-sized crowd lay in wait when they came up the ramp into the terminal, screaming and holding up signs with disgusting hate slogans scrawled across them. It was like being slapped in the face by a hundred people at once. Something came hurtling at her from the front of the mob, and Nick darted in front of her, shielding her from it with his body.

Holden and airport security hustled them out of there fairly quickly, ushering them through a maze of corridors to the customs office, and then, after a routine luggage inspection, out to the waiting limo.

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The long flight had caught up with Eric at last, and he nodded off with his head on Ally's shoulder. Nick sat directly across from her, his jaw clenched tightly. "I wasn't expecting anything like that," he said, "not here at home."

"You have too much faith in people, Nick. The vast majority of them are ignorant jerks." Suddenly she sniffed something so acrid and pungent, it set her nostrils burning. "What's that? It smells like a urinal."

Nick held out his sleeve, soaked in a dark, reeking stain. "That's because one of those jerks threw a bottle of piss at us."

"Oh, my God!"

He grunted and spent the rest of the ride staring out the window. He didn't say another word until they reached the penthouse, when he mumbled good night and stomped off to his room, leaving Ally to get Eric ready for bed by herself.

Eric didn't seem to need much help, though he got dizzy whenever he bent over too quickly, so she had him sit down on the edge of the bed to put on his pajama bottoms. "You know, we could just dispense with these altogether," he rasped, flopping back on the bed, momentarily out of breath.

"Then where's the fun of me getting you out of them again?"

His eyes lit up and he couldn't scramble under the covers fast enough. She disappeared into the bathroom to finish her evening ablutions, expecting to find him conked out by the time she got back, but instead he was still wide awake, patting her side of the comforter.



She slid in next to him with a happy giggle. But when he pulled her close and kissed her with passionate fervor, she became distinctly uneasy. "Don't you think it's a little too soon for this?"

"Why not? I feel up to it." And he meant that literally, if the significant bulge pressed against her thigh was any indication. "Don't you?"

God, did she! The past two weeks had blown by in such an exhausting, insane whirlwind she hadn't even had time to pay a visit to Nick's bed. In fact, she'd been so consumed with worry for Eric she'd barely slept. She'd hoped that once she got home, she could finally relax—but not if she caused Eric to have a relapse. "I think we should wait. Remember what your doctor said about avoiding unnecessary exertion?"

He stared down at her. "You think I'm too sick to make love to you."

"Eric, no, that's not what I—"

"Good night," he snapped, turning over and flicking off the light.

Eric dropped off in five minutes, but she lay there staring at the ceiling until the clock read two. At last she gave up and padded into the living room, where she found Nick stretched out on the couch channel-surfing. He glared at her, then scooted over so she could sit down.

"I called my mom tonight," he said. "She's had reporters camped out in her driveway for the past week. She can't even go to the grocery store without them following her."

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If he were trying to make her feel guilty, he'd hit a bull's-eye. "I'm sure Eric wouldn't mind if she stayed at the lake house. No one will bother her there."

"That's not the point! This is *our* mess. It shouldn't have to ruin her life too."

"Oh, for God's sake, Nick! How many times do you expect me to say I'm sorry?" Snatching the remote out of his hand, she clicked off the TV and tossed it on the table. "You know, you keep telling me this isn't my fault and how relieved you are that everything's finally out in the open, but I don't believe you. I think you blame me. And I think that after all the crap that's come down in the last two weeks, you'd be perfectly happy to go back in the closet."

"Bullshit."

Her eyes widened with genuine shock; she could count on one hand the number of times she'd ever heard Nick curse. "Oh, really?" she retorted. "You've got it made here. You've got a nice, cushy room in a luxurious apartment you could never afford on your salary. Hot and cold running sex, a full kitchen—not to mention the protection of one of the most powerful men in the country."

"I never asked for anybody's protection. I can take care of myself."

"Of course you can. You did a really great job handling the situation with Laura."

He let out a bitter laugh. "You should talk—or on second thought, *don't*. We wouldn't even be in this mess if you'd learn to keep your damn mouth shut!"

She leaned in close, nose to nose with him, deliberately invading his space. "You'd love it if I was out of the picture, wouldn't you? You never wanted me around in the first place. You only agreed to this relationship because you knew you'd lose Eric for good if you refused."

He shot her the angriest, most hateful look she'd seen from him since the night he'd first moved into the penthouse, prepared to do battle for Eric's favor. "Bitch."

"Bastard."

Seizing her by the wrists, he flung her down so hard the air whooshed out of her lungs, then started thrusting his tongue down her throat, grinding his crotch into hers. "Is this what you want?" he growled into her ear. "Is this rough enough for you?"

"Fuck you!" she spat.

"My pleasure." He had his pajama pants down and her nightgown up in a second, his cock poking between her legs like a divining rod. One long lunge had him inside her, and God, he felt fucking *massive*.

She gasped as he slammed into her, thrusting faster and faster, friction from the leather couch burning her thighs. She sobbed, sucking in air, hot tears pouring down her face, praying he wouldn't stop.

He had her wrists clamped in his huge paws, but no matter how she wriggled, he wouldn't let go. "C'mon, bitch," he whispered in the hottest, dirtiest tone she'd ever heard him use, "Come all over my cock. You know you want to."

He fucked her like a man possessed, hitting her g-spot like it was the biggest jackpot in Vegas. She let out this awful

keening sound, which he quickly muffled with his mouth over hers, trailing down to plant a hard, stinging bite right below her jaw line. Riding out her spasms, he clutched her around the waist with both hands, shooting deep inside her.

They lay there panting, staring at each other for several long moments before dissolving in laughter. "'Come all over my cock. You know you want to,'" she repeated incredulously. "God, I almost lost it when you said that!"

"Hey, give me a break! I was improvising on the fly here."

"Well, it was certainly different. And not bad at all—for a first try," she added with a wink.

"Thanks," he murmured, kissing her gently. "And just to make things clear, I don't blame you. Although that obviously hasn't stopped me from acting like a grade-A ass for the last couple of weeks."

"I haven't exactly been all sweetness and light myself." She bit her lip. "You didn't believe those horrible things I said, did you?"

"We've had a lot of stress dumped on us lately. I think we both said things we'd rather forget. So let's forget it, okay?"

"Okay." Sitting up, she rubbed her wrists gingerly. "Damn, I really am going to have bruises tomorrow."

"I hope Eric isn't too pissed when he sees them."

She grinned. "I'll wear long sleeves."

\* \* \* \*

The next month flew by in a blur. Between taking care of Eric and trying to get her column in by deadline, Ally felt like she was running a never-ending marathon. Hard to believe

that only a few weeks ago she'd spent her days lazing around on the terrace, soaking up the sun and getting all the rest she needed.

Eric, on the other hand, showed more improvement with each passing day. Since he couldn't venture outside for a walk due to the throng of reporters and photographers staking out the lobby, Ally had a treadmill and stationary bike installed in his office. He started out slowly, following the rehab plan laid out by his physical therapist, but within a short span of weeks he'd worked up to several miles a day on both machines. His blood pressure soon dropped to the point where he could cut back to a half-dosage on his medication.

At his eight-week checkup at the end of September, his EKG came back almost completely normal—which astounded his cardiologist, who nonetheless pronounced him recovered.

Needless to say, Ally practically danced with relief. To celebrate, Eric took her to lunch at Montrieo and sat there beaming at her over their Caesar salads and sparkling water.

"Thank you," he murmured, reaching across to take her hand. "I know I haven't been the easiest person to live with these past few weeks."

"I could quibble with the 'past few weeks' part, but I won't," she quipped.

He laughed. "Point taken. But I do appreciate yours and Nick's tender loving care," he said, his tone and expression suddenly quite serious.

"What, did you think we were going to abandon you when you were sick?"

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"That's what happened with my mother. When she became too ill to be ... available to him, my father didn't waste much time seeking amusement elsewhere."

"You know Nick and I wouldn't do that."

"Of course I do. But I also know you've been sneaking off to his room every night after I fall asleep."

"Oh," she said softly, averting her gaze. To her relief, Eric didn't seem angry about it, though that didn't keep her from feeling mildly ashamed. "And here I thought we were being so discreet."

"My heart attack didn't affect my ears. And believe me, you two aren't exactly quiet." He sighed. "I won't say it didn't hurt, though—especially when you kept telling me we should wait."

"Eric, I was worried about you! I didn't want us to do anything that might bring on another attack."

"Well, there's no need for that anymore. You heard it straight from the doctor's lips—I'm fine now."

"And I'm glad, I really am," she insisted. "But I still think you should take it easy. It's been barely eight weeks, and every doctor we've talked to says that's the minimum—"

"Allison, you know I hardly ever get sick. When's the last time you can remember me having so much as a cold? This is no different."

"There's a pretty damn big difference!" Mortified, she lowered her voice. "Look, no matter how well you feel today, you've had a heart attack—which means you could easily have another one. You shouldn't disregard your doctor's advice because you caught a lucky break this time."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"I have no intention of doing that. I just wanted to let you know you have nothing to worry about." With a grin, he dug back into his salad. "Take it easy, all right? I'll be around for you to argue with for another forty or fifty years."

The usual crush of reporters awaited them outside, so they ducked out to the limo through the kitchen and back alley. Strangely enough, it didn't seem to irritate Eric; he laughed as if they'd just gotten away with the world's biggest practical joke, then kissed Ally passionately, pushed her back on the cushions and went down on her until she came so hard she felt like her entire body had turned to rubber.

\* \* \* \*

She couldn't wait to tell Nick the good news when they got back to the penthouse, but when she saw that his office door was closed, she hesitated. She started to knock, until she heard two voices echoing from inside, Nick's and someone else's, a tinny, distorted buzz coming from the speaker-phone. Best not to disturb him, then—he'd been putting in sixteen-hour days trying to finish the book ever since they'd returned from Italy. She and Eric could tell him tonight at dinner.

She ducked into her own office, hoping to get some work done on her next column, frowning when she saw the message indicator on her machine flashing. She'd had their main phone number changed due to literally hundreds of crank calls and pleas for interviews they'd received since they returned home; now all incoming calls came routed through

the main security desk downstairs. Only a select few friends and colleagues had the direct number.

The message was from her and Nick's editor, Alan Steele. He sounded even more strained than usual, and asked her to call him back as soon as possible.

She hit the speed dial and waited on hold for a few minutes until he picked up. "Hey, Allison. Sorry to keep you waiting. Is this a good time to talk?"

"Yeah, it's fine. What's up?"

"Well, I'm afraid I have some bad news. I just got back from a meeting with the publishers, and they informed me of some staffing changes they'd like to make."

Her heart sank, though it wasn't like she hadn't expected it. "I have a feeling I know what you're about to say."

"Allison, I can't tell you how sorry this makes me, but we're going to have to let you go."

She tried to reply, but suddenly her throat clogged up and all she could do was nod—which was absurd, since he couldn't see her.

"Look, I want you to know I went to bat for you. If it were my decision, this wouldn't be happening. I don't give a crap what my reporters do in their private lives, as long as they turn in good work, and you always have."

"That's not the impression I got from our meeting a few months ago."

"Only because I knew you weren't living up to your potential. I saw what you can really do on that show you hosted last summer, and it's obvious that the column's a waste of your talent. You should be covering hard news." He



paused a moment, his chair creaking as he shifted his weight. "And I did talk to Holly about having you work with her, but the publishers shot that right down. They're pretty upset about the scandal and they want to distance the Herald from it as quickly as they can."

"I guess I can't argue with that."

"Come back in six months or so and we'll see what we can do. I'd love to have you on board again."

She mumbled a hasty good-bye, hung up and spent the next couple of minutes checking her email. Most of it was work-related, so she highlighted it all in one huge block and deleted it. Afterwards, feeling the mother of all headaches coming on, she trudged into the bathroom, knocked back some extra-strength Tylenol and went to lie down.

By the time dinner rolled around, she'd come to her senses at last. Why was she getting depressed over losing a job she'd hated in the first place? Eric had just made an astounding recovery from a life-threatening illness. That was the important thing here. Once the scandal blew over, she'd have no problem lining up something better.

She found Eric in the living room. Smiling with genuine happiness, she took his arm and let him lead her into the dining room. Nick was already waiting for them, but when she saw his glum expression, she had a pretty good idea what had put it there.

"You too, huh?" she said, coming around to give him a hug.

He shrugged. "It's not such a big deal."

"Yeah, well, at least you've got the book gig."

Eric cleared his throat. "Is this a private party, or can anybody crash?"

"The Herald let us both go today," she explained. "Apparently having two of its reporters involved in a sex scandal is bad for business."

"Well, we can fix that easily enough," he said, pulling back a chair for her before sitting down himself. "I've wanted to buy the Herald for years. I'll call my broker tomorrow."

"Oh, c'mon, you're not serious, are you?" Nick asked, exchanging an anxious glance with Ally.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, just don't, okay? I've got enough problems without my colleagues thinking my lover has to buy me a job." He sat down at Eric's right, directly across from Ally. "Besides, you don't need to on my account. My book editor's so happy with what I've shown him so far, he wants to sign me to a contract for two more books. Apparently he thinks the scandal will boost sales—if anybody even remembers it by the time the first book comes out next year."

"Oh, my God—that's amazing!" Ally crowed, bouncing in her seat. "And since we're on the subject of good news, we have some too." She nodded at Eric. "Do you want to tell him, or shall I?"

Eric grinned, folding his hand over Nick's. "My EKG came back normal today. Looks like I'm going to be fine."

Nick looked so incredibly relieved that for a moment Ally thought he might cry. Instead, he fell to his knees beside Eric's chair, cupped his face in his hands and kissed him full on the mouth. "You have no idea how scared I've been."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"It's all right," Eric murmured, stroking Nick's hair. "I'm not going anywhere. Not for a long time."

\* \* \* \*

They had a pleasant meal before retiring to the living room together. Eric put on a Mahler symphony and lay down on the couch with his head in Ally's lap, Nick sitting on the floor in between them. They hadn't had quiet time like this in ages; Eric soon became so relaxed, he actually dropped off.

When the music drew to its sweet yet melancholy close, Ally bent down to brush her husband's forehead with a kiss. "I think somebody should go to bed."

Eric sat up groggily, blinking at his watch. "It's not even nine o'clock yet."

"C'mon, I'll make it worth your while." Rising, she held out her hand to help him up. "Why don't you go take a nice warm shower, and I'll be there in a few minutes?"

"Okay," he said, kissing Nick good night, then heading for the bedroom.

She turned to Nick, giving him a sheepish smile. "I'd invite you to join us, but I think he's too tired."

"Don't worry about it. You two need some private time, and besides, I should put in a couple more hours on the book. I'm still running a little behind."

"Well, don't work too hard. Remember—you've got a couple more to write after this one." Wrapping her arms around him, she whispered, "I'm so damn proud of you."

"Thanks." With a kiss and a smile, he added, "Get to bed now. Somebody's waiting for you."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

She found Eric stepping out of the shower and managed to seize the bath towel before he could get his mitts on it.

"Tonight I want to try something different," she said, gesturing for him to turn around so she could dry his back.

"Different how?"

"Different as in, you're going to relax and let me do what I want for a change."

He gave her a sideways look, a tiny grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "That sounds interesting. Or dangerous, depending on how you look at it."

"Trust me."

And so he did, standing there obediently while she dried off every inch of his bare skin with the soft towel, including the soles of his feet. He was already half-hard by the time she finished, his eyes fairly glowing with barely-leashed desire.

"Go lie down, and I'll join you in a few," she said.

With a reluctant backwards glance, he left her alone. She hopped in the shower, washing away the tensions of the day as fast as she could before toweling off and rubbing herself down with his favorite vanilla-scented body lotion. She remembered the hungry expression on Eric's face the first time she'd used it during their vacation—and it gave her a very wicked idea.

Grabbing the bottle and a towel, she padded back into the bedroom, where Eric waited for her, stroking his now fully-erect cock. She slid onto the edge of the bed beside him with a grin, reaching over to give it a few slow strokes of her own. "Is this for me?" she purred.

"Every inch of it."

The Arrangement  
by Cat Grant

"Well, there are a few other parts of you I'd like to play with first, so just lie back and enjoy, okay?"

He looked like what he really wanted to do was flip her over on her back and take her right then and there, but to her amazement, he closed his eyes and did his best to relax. Pumping some lotion into her hands, she rubbed them together, then began ever-so-slowly massaging it into his feet.

Before long she had him panting and moaning, his hips arching off the mattress as she worked the balls of his feet and in between his toes. Damn! If she'd known his feet were such an erogenous zone, she would've insisted on doing this a lot sooner. "I guess this means you like it, huh?" she teased.

"God, it feels amazing! Ahh!" he gasped when she dug her knuckles deep into the arch of his right foot. "Right there. Right. *There!*"

She went at it more gently now, waiting for his breathing to return to normal before she moved up, working the knots out of his calf muscles. His cock still stood at full-mast, despite the fact that neither of them had touched it for several minutes now. He obviously expected her to give it the same lingering attention she'd paid the rest of the lower half of his body, but instead she flicked the tip of her tongue into his navel before licking upward, taking each of his nipples into her mouth in turn, sucking hard.

"I-I thought you wanted me to live a few more years," he joked weakly.

"Seems like your heart's taking it just fine."

"It's not my heart I'm worried about." Opening his eyes, he gazed up at her with such pure, naked yearning it nearly shattered her own heart. "*Please*, Allison. It's been too fucking long."

He'd never begged her before, not like this. She found it flattering—and amazingly arousing. She'd been wet ever since she'd started touching him, fresh moisture clinging to her inner thighs. She imagined him licking her there the way he had that afternoon and nearly came from the mere thought.

She ached now, deep inside, right where she wanted him. Straddling his hips, she grasped his cock, lifted herself up and sat down on it with exquisite slowness. His mouth fell open, unleashing a full-throated moan.

"I guess you like that too, hmm?" she murmured.

It appeared that he'd lost most of his verbal skills, but his other noises more than made up for it. He grunted, groaned and gasped, pumping his hips to meet her down-thrust, sucking her nipples into his mouth as she stretched above him, grabbing the headboard to steady herself.

She loved riding him like this, moving around until she found the perfect spot, and then—oh, God, right there! He'd found it too, seizing her hips to tilt her at just the right angle, stroking in and out of her faster and faster, biting her nipples. That tiny taste of erotic pain sent her hurtling over the edge, and he followed, catching her when she lost her grip on the headboard and crumpled on top of him.

She rolled off once she'd regained her equilibrium, settling beside him. "So, what did you think?"

"Very nice," he replied with a soft kiss. "I never knew a foot massage could be such an eye-opening experience."

She chuckled. "See, it's fun letting your partner do the work for a change."

"Obviously I had no idea what I was missing."

"You know, you might want to give this sort of thing a try with someone else."

Now he chuckled. "Is that your not-so-subtle way of saying Nick wants to be on top too?"

"I don't think he'd hate it. And I know you wouldn't."

"You know me far too well."

"Oh, I hope not. That'd make the next forty or fifty years pretty boring."

He rolled onto his side, pulling her close. "I doubt I'll ever be bored living with you."

The next week plodded by in their usual routine, with Nick working on his book and Eric stepping up his exercise program. He'd worked up to several miles a day between the treadmill and the stationary bike, with free-weights and the new stair-master Ally had just ordered for him thrown in for good measure.

Of course, now that Eric knew he didn't have to stay confined to the penthouse, he'd become much more restless. But every time they tried to go out, they faced huge mobs. The security desk found itself inundated with requests from the press for interviews and photo ops, which they'd ignored during Eric's convalescence. But one morning Ally walked into his office to see him riffling through the various messages, his brow knit in concentration.

"Don't tell me you're actually considering giving an interview," she said.

"I'm afraid it's a bit late in the day for that. We should've started courting the press back when the story first broke. I doubt they're interested in anything we have to say now. They've long since branded us as freaks and perverts."

"Since when do you care what anybody thinks?"

"Since somehow I need to find a way to pacify the governor and the people of this state if I want to keep my seat in the Senate."

She stared at him. "You're kidding me."

"Do I sound like I'm kidding?"

No, of course he didn't. He never kidded about his political career. "Are you trying to tell me that you intend to go back to a job that almost *killed* you?"

"Allison, how many times do I have to tell you I'm fine? I'm not going to have another attack."

"What, so you're God now? How can you possibly know that?"

He pushed the pile of messages aside and stood up. "I'm not about to throw away years of hard work because of some minor health setback. If I don't resume my duties within a reasonable amount of time, the governor will have to call for a special election to fill my seat. I can't let that happen."

"No wonder you were in such a fucking hurry to recover," she spat.

"Look, if you're so concerned, why don't you come back to Washington with me? Your work's certainly not keeping you here anymore."



The Arrangement  
by Cat Grant

Well, that stung. Which, no doubt, was exactly what he'd intended. "And what would I do in Washington? Sit around waiting for you to come home so we can have dinner at ten o'clock every night?"

"You could redecorate the house. You had fun doing that last time."

First a sting, now a slap in the face. Was he *trying* to insult her intelligence? "Last time was less than six months ago. Even I'm not that bored," she snapped. "What you're really saying is that you want me there to play arm-candy in case you have to make a public appearance."

"It wouldn't hurt to show people you still stand by me. In fact, it might make all the difference."

She took a deep breath, counting to ten before continuing. "Will you just think about this rationally for a minute? Even if you do manage to hold onto your seat, do you honestly think after everything that's happened that you've got a chance in hell of being elected president?"

"I'm not a quitter, Allison. You know that."

"I also know it's classier to leave before they throw you out."

Those tight, tense lines sprang up around his mouth again; her heart raced with worry at the sight of them. "I'm not giving up, and that's final."

"All right," she said quietly, the words bubbling up before she could stop them, "but if you go to Washington, don't expect to find me here when you get back."

"Or me," came Nick's voice from the doorway.

Eric's glance flicked from Ally to Nick and back again.

"What is this, some kind of conspiracy?"

"I don't want to go through a repeat performance of what happened in Italy, Eric," Nick said, coming up to stand behind Ally. "Watching you almost die once was bad enough. I won't do it again. I love you too damn much."

"So do I," Ally agreed. "Run for president if you want, but I won't be First Lady to a corpse."

Eric chortled bitterly. "You should both know me well enough by now to know I don't respond well to ultimatums."

"I'm guessing that means your answer's no?" Nick asked.

"I won't be dictated to in my own home."

"Well, excuse me," Ally retorted, "but it's our home too."

"Not if you leave me it isn't." Sitting down, he turned his attention back to the pile of paperwork on his desk. "As they say in Seneca Falls, 'don't let the door hit you on the ass on your way out.'"

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## **Chapter 15**

### Three Tickets to Paradise:

#### Without Eric

Nick and Ally packed their things and moved into Nick's apartment the next morning. A stale, musty smell smacked them in the face as they came through the door, and she headed straight for the living room window, flinging it open. "God, when were you here last?" she wondered aloud.

"Um ... Christmastime, I think." Stepping over to the kitchen table, he flipped through a stack of old unopened junk mail. "Actually, more like Thanksgiving."

Glancing around the room, it looked like the place had been abandoned for years. The bookshelves stood half empty, moth-eaten holes gaped in the carpet and a heavy coat of dust clung to everything. The kitchen and bedroom hadn't fared much better.

"Good thing you've got all your utilities included with the rent, or we'd be stumbling around in the dark with candles in our hands," she said, shooting Nick a resigned look. "Which doesn't sound so bad, now that I think about it."

"Oh, c'mon, once we break out the vacuum and the lemon Pledge, it'll all shine up good as new."

As usual, Nick's outlook proved a bit too optimistic. Even with their combined elbow grease, it took several hours of intensive cleaning before the apartment appeared livable

again. Ally took a well-deserved shower while Nick ducked out to the little mom-and-pop grocery store on the corner to pick up some food, since they'd found nothing left in the kitchen cupboards but stale soda crackers, a half-empty bag of Starbuck's coffee and a few expired cans of chicken noodle soup.

They made sandwiches and sat at the kitchen table, eating in silence and without much enthusiasm. "I'll start looking for another place in the next day or so," she said at last.

"There's no need for that. You know you can stay here as long as you want."

"Okay. I'll sleep on the couch."

"Why would you want to do that, when I've got a comfortable bed that's big enough for both of us?"

She put down her sandwich and looked at him. "After what's happened, I didn't want to just assume we'd be staying together."

"Ally, I still love you. Breaking up with Eric hasn't changed that."

"Well, I just wanted to be sure." She sighed. "But you know, this place is a bit small for two people. I'm sure Holly wouldn't mind putting me up for a while, until we have time to find something else."

"Let's see how it goes, okay? I'm too tired to think about moving again right now." He finished off his first can of soda, then popped open another. "But I know what you mean about the space issue. I need to clear some room out here for an office so I can get started on the next book. The research

alone is going to be a killer, and I'd sort of hoped I could get you to help me with it."

"Really?" That perked her right up. "Sounds interesting, but I should probably try to get a paying gig so I can contribute something to the rent."

"Oh, I'll pay you. Not a lot, but enough to keep you afloat until you get back on staff with the Herald. And don't worry about the rent. I'm expecting my advance within the next week or so."

They spent the rest of the afternoon doing laundry, putting fresh sheets on the bed and rearranging the bedroom closet to make room for her clothes. They'd just about decided to call it quits and head out for dinner when Holly showed up, lugging two large pepperoni pizzas and a six-pack of St. Pauli Girl. Nick scarfed down a few slices before retiring to the bedroom with his laptop to squeeze in some work, leaving Ally and Holly alone in the living room.

"So how're you holding up?" Holly asked, casting a stink-eyed glance around the apartment. "I guess this is all kind of a comedown after two years of living in the Courtland Towers penthouse."

Ally shrugged. "I'll get used to it. Right now I'm still a little numb."

"I can imagine. I knew Eric could behave like a jerk sometimes, but he always seemed so devoted to you and Nick. I can't believe he threw you both out like that."

"He didn't throw us out. We left."

Holly's eyes widened. "You *what?*"

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"We told him we'd leave if he insisted on going back to Washington, so ... here we are."

She let out a long whistle. "If you don't mind me saying, that's going a bit far to prove a point."

"Well, if I'd stopped to think about it, I probably wouldn't have had the nerve."

"So what are you going to do next?"

"I haven't had a chance to think that far ahead." Sighing, she took another slug of beer. "I guess I'll have to file for divorce."

"If it's any consolation, you should be sitting pretty once you get your settlement."

Ally shook her head. "I signed a prenuptial agreement. If we're not married at least five years, I walk away with nothing."

"Yeah, well, prenups are made to be broken. You could still duke it out in court."

"I don't want to do that. His first wife spent two years dragging him through the courts, trying to suck every last dollar out of him. I'd rather not have him remembering me as one more gold-digger."

"My God," Holly breathed, giving her an incredulous look, "even after everything he's put you through, you're still in love with the guy."

"I am," she whispered, her eyes suddenly burning. "And I can't believe I'm going to spend the rest of my life without him."

They talked until they'd polished off the six-pack, leaving Holly so wobbly on her feet she had to call a cab to take her

home. Ally tossed the empties and staggered to the bathroom to get ready for bed, sticking out her tongue at her fragmented reflection in the cracked vanity mirror.

Nick put aside his laptop, giving her a concerned look when she came in and flopped listlessly down on the bed. "Just how many beers did you have?"

"Too many, or not enough. I'm not sure which."

"You know that stuff's not good for you."

"This was a special occasion. Believe me, it's even more depressing being depressed when you're sober."

He stroked her hair gently for a moment before getting up. Closing her eyes, she lay there listening to the faint, incessant pinging between her ears until he finished using the bathroom and came back to bed, flicking off the light.

The mattress sagged in the middle as he scooted over to spoon behind her. "You okay?"

"No." She could still feel tears burning her eyes, but hadn't the will or the energy to let them flow. It was just as well; she'd done enough crying these last few weeks. "Nick ... did we do the right thing?"

"What else could we have done?"

"Stayed," she replied bleakly. "We could have stayed, and tried our best to convince him he was making a mistake."

"We already tried that, and he wouldn't listen."

"We did it the wrong way. We challenged him."

"Ally, you know he wasn't about to budge. He was bound and determined to go back to Washington, no matter what we did or said. So we took a stand and we stuck to it. That's all we could do."

"So it was all some stupid contest to see which of us could be the most pigheaded? Well, when you figure out who won, let me know."

"Ally, don't—"

"You know, we've both had so many blowups with Eric over the years, but even when things got bad, I always had this glimmer of hope that we'd find our way back from it. But this time ... I'm not sure."

"Maybe he'll come around," Nick murmured. "But he's been obsessed with becoming president for as long as I've known him. It's the one thing in his life that he's had to fight for tooth and nail. I think that's why he wants it so much. It's not something he inherited, or something he can walk into a store and buy. If he wins, he'll know it's because he earned it."

"And that's worth so much to him, he's willing to lose everything else?" Turning over, she wrapped her arms around him with a hollow sigh. "G-God, Nick, it just hurts so much..."

"I know," he whispered. "I know."

\* \* \* \*

Luckily, for the next few weeks, Ally kept herself far too busy to dwell on how miserable she felt. She and Nick set up a small office in the living room and dove head-first into the new book. They slogged through long hours on the initial research, tumbling into bed in the wee hours of the morning most nights, too exhausted to do anything but kiss each other good night and fall into a welcome coma.



The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

They only ventured out once or twice a week to do laundry and pick up groceries, but the press no longer dogged their every step. In fact, to her immense relief, the scandal appeared to have dropped out of the papers and off the airwaves altogether. It was a relief not having to put on a baseball cap and sunglasses every time she needed to go buy tampons or a carton of milk.

It was also a relief living like a normal person again, without a bodyguard following her around everywhere. She'd forgotten the simple pleasure of browsing in a bookstore or taking a leisurely walk down the street. She could dress any way she liked now, without worrying that people would recognize her in her faded jeans and ratty old t-shirt. She'd stopped doing so many things when she'd married Eric, either because she knew they wouldn't interest him, or he wouldn't approve—upholding the Courtland name bore a certain responsibility, after all. She hadn't realized how circumscribed her life had become until she'd had a fresh taste of the freedom she once took for granted.

She met her father for lunch on his birthday at the end of October. He seemed glad to see her, though she had to suppress her shock at how much grayer he looked than when she'd last seen him at Christmas. She could feel tension crackling in the air between them when they sat down and had a sudden sick feeling she knew why.

He didn't say anything until the waiter scurried off to fetch their drinks. "I haven't heard from you in months."

"I know, it's just been insanely busy."

The Arrangement  
*by Cat Grant*

"Too busy to let me know your face was about to be splashed all over the tabloids before I had to see it on every goddamned newsstand in the city?"

It hit her like an iron fist in the gut, though she should have known to expect it. She should have talked to him weeks ago about the scandal and Eric's health problems, although it was probably best not to mention the latter now. "Dad, look, I didn't know about it myself until it had already hit—"

"You have no idea what it's been like for me. My business took a fifty percent drop last month. I had to get my home phone number changed twice because reporters had it ringing off the hook. And every time I tried to call you, your line was busy."

Of course, it would've helped if she'd bothered to give him their new number. "I'm sorry," she whispered miserably. "I really am."

"Are you? I mean, for God's sake, Allison, wasn't being married to one of the richest men in the country enough? You had to go and sleep with Nick too? You *and* Eric?"

"You know how I feel about Nick, Dad. I've loved him since college. But I love Eric too. I couldn't choose between them. And if that makes me a whore in your eyes, so be it."

He flinched. "I would never call you that. You're my daughter, and I'll always love you no matter what you do, but..." He shook his head, making a helpless gesture. "I'm sixty years old, sweetheart. I was raised to believe that marriage meant one man, one woman. And I know love's

complicated, but this isn't something I can wrap my mind around."

"Well, you're right about the complicated part." She forced a pallid smile. "And I guess you should know about this before it hits the headlines too, but ... Eric and I have separated."

"Oh, I'm sorry. When did this happen?"

"About a month ago. And it wasn't because of Nick, even though I'm living with Nick right now."

"You left your husband for another man, but it's not the other man's fault?"

"I didn't leave Eric *for* anybody, except maybe myself." The waiter brought their glasses of iced tea, and she paused to take a thoughtful sip. "Eric has a very forceful personality, and he's used to getting his own way. He bulldozes over everybody, whether he means to or not. It's easy to lose a sense of your own identity when you're around him. I'm only just starting to feel like myself again."

"So you're planning to divorce?"

"Eventually. I suppose we'll talk about it when he gets back from Washington."

"What do you mean, when he gets back from Washington? He's here in the city now—in fact, he's supposed to give a press conference in about half an hour."

She stared at him. "*Wh-What?* Where did you hear that?"

"It's all over the news. Haven't you seen today's paper?"

Not only had she and Nick been too busy to look at the paper, they'd barely had time to turn on the TV or do any

net-surfing unrelated to the new book. God, what a time to bury their heads in the sand!

Jumping up, she planted a kiss on her father's cheek, apologized profusely and promised to call him the next day, then sprinted outside to flag down the nearest cab. Of course it was downtown at the height of lunch hour, so she got caught in horrendous traffic, pulling up in front of Nick's apartment forty-five minutes later. She threw a handful of bills at the cabbie and dashed inside, finding Nick at his desk, pounding away at his laptop.

Seizing the remote, she flicked on the TV and started flipping channel, landing on CNN just in time to see Eric stride offstage, leaving the gathered press in an uproar.

"For those viewers joining us late," intoned the anchorman, "New York Senator Eric Courtland has just announced his resignation, citing a chronic heart ailment. Members of Congress have called for the senator to step down in recent weeks, in response to a high-profile sex scandal involving a young reporter with whom the senator and his wife have had a long-standing extramarital liaison..."

Nick snatched the remote out of her hand and flicked off the TV, looking every bit as stunned as she felt. "D-Did Eric call you about this?"

"No, my father told me. Great week for us to stop reading the papers!"

"God, I hope he's all right."

Her stomach clenched with instant worry. "Do you want to call him, or shall I?"

"You'd better do it. My hands are shaking so bad I don't think I can dial the number."

She padded into the bedroom to use the land line, punching in Eric's cell number, hoping he'd see who was calling and not let it go to voice-mail. After four rings, the line clicked on. "Nick?" came Eric's voice from the other end, scratchy and distant-sounding.

"It's me," she said, relieved to hear him at last, though it didn't stop her heart from racing. "We just saw you on TV. Are you sick again?"

"Hold on a minute, let me get some privacy here." He came back a few seconds later, with much less crackling on the line. "To answer your question ... No, I'm not sick, not in the way you mean. But I've been better."

"I can imagine. But for what it's worth, I'm sorry about you having to resign."

"Are you really?" He made a sound somewhere between a sigh and a chortle. "Look, I've been through hell this past month, and I miss you terribly. You and Nick."

"W-Would you like to come over? We'll be here all evening."

"You're still at Nick's apartment?"

"Yeah. Or we could come to the penthouse, if you'd rather."

"No, I'll come to you. I've been cooped up here for the past two days. It's driving me insane."

"I know the feeling."

He laughed. "God, I can't wait to see you."

"Me too. Seven o'clock?"

"I'll be there."

He arrived at seven on the dot—without a bodyguard in tow, for once—grinning happily when he saw them, gifts in hand. For Nick, he'd brought a new MacBook Pro, and for Ally, a huge, beribboned box containing the black-and-white halter dress she'd ordered in Milan back in July, along with a pair of exquisite matching Manolo Blahnik sling-back pumps.

They sat down in the living room, an awkward silence descending. Ally couldn't help noticing how drained Eric looked beneath the over-bright smile he'd pasted on for their benefit, and suspected his claims of feeling fine were equal parts bravado and nerves.

"So what happened? When you got back to Washington, I mean," she prompted.

"I knew I was in for a tough time of it, but I had no idea how much acrimony they'd stored up for me. People I'd considered my friends not only wouldn't return my phone calls, but walked right past me like I'd suddenly turned invisible. And as far as getting any work done..." He shrugged, rubbing a thumb along his lower lip. "I found it highly ironic the men who shunned me most openly were those whom I know haven't slept with their own wives in years. One of them has had an entire string of mistresses, with children by at least two of them. And yet they all felt perfectly justified judging me."

"But you didn't quit because of that," Nick interjected.

"No. I would've hung in there forever if only to show them they couldn't intimidate me. Then of course, they all started grandstanding, calling for my resignation. But I still wasn't

about to give those sanctimonious hypocrites the satisfaction." His eyes fluttered shut for a moment, letting Ally see how close he hovered to utter collapse. "The governor called me a little over a week ago. He said the public was demanding a recall, and if I didn't resign voluntarily, he'd have no choice but to call for a special election. And considering the current climate, I'd probably be voted out by a landslide."

"I'm sure that must've been quite a blow," Nick said quietly.

"Even then, I wasn't prepared to concede—until your mother called." He had a tremor in his voice now. "She asked me to please take care of myself and told me I'd always have her support, even if we weren't together anymore. Then she said she hoped I'd have the sense to know when the fight was over, because she wouldn't want to see me humiliated. And if my own mother were still alive, no doubt she'd want the same thing. After that, my choice was clear."

For a moment, Nick's expression hovered between delight and mortification. "Eric, you have to believe me, I didn't ask her to call you."

"I know you didn't. But somehow your mother always knows what to say to me, and at exactly the right time."

Ally grasped his hand. "When did you sleep last?"

"I got a couple of hours last night. I was up until around three working on my speech. Maybe now that this circus is over, I can finally unwind."

"We'd invite you to stay, but Nick's bed isn't big enough for all three of us," she said, smiling shakily.

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"I've got a better idea. Why don't you both pack your things and come back to the penthouse with me tonight?"

Two weeks ago, Ally would've jumped at the chance, but now she found herself hesitating. A quick glance at Nick told her he concurred. "Isn't this rather sudden?" she asked.

"Sudden? We've been separated for over a month!"

"I know, and I want to come back, I really do, but..." She took a breath before plunging in. "Things need to change, Eric, and I mean *really* change, before I'll feel comfortable resuming our marriage. It can't go back to the way it was before."

"I agree," Nick said. "For the past couple of years, our relationship's revolved around your political career. How do we go forward now that that's not the case? Ally and I need to feel like equal partners here and we haven't for a long time."

Ally had expected Eric to become angry, but instead he looked merely confused. "I-I had no idea you both felt this way."

"That's probably as much our fault as yours," Ally replied. "We weren't terribly forthcoming in airing our grievances—at least, not without getting into an argument about it."

"Look, I'm willing to do whatever it takes. It's been miserable these last few weeks without the two of you."

Ally looked at Nick, then back at Eric. "We feel the same way."

"All right. So why don't you come up to the penthouse tomorrow for lunch and we can talk about this in greater



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depth, once I have a few more hours of sleep under my belt." He stood slowly, fatigue making him unsteady on his feet.

Nick caught him by the arm. "I'll take the couch tonight. You're in no condition to drive."

Eric nodded wearily, letting Ally lead him back to the bedroom. She helped him undress and pulled down the covers, slipping in beside him. He dropped off immediately, his head pillowed on her shoulder. She stroked his hair, kissed him and followed suit.

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## **Chapter 16**

### Three Tickets to Paradise:

#### Coming to Terms

Ally heard Eric get up around seven, tiptoeing gingerly around the room to avoid waking her. After he kissed her goodbye, she rolled over and went back to sleep, waking again around nine. Padding into the kitchen, she found Nick sitting at the table with his new laptop and a mug of coffee. "So I guess he's gone back to the penthouse already?" she asked.

"Yeah. He said we should show up for lunch around eleven-thirty." He shut the computer, giving her a lopsided smile. "You don't look as overjoyed about this as I thought you would."

"I'm still in shock. I never thought anything would get him to resign, not in a million years."

"Maybe he's finally realized there's more to life than winning."

Nick put on his best dark suit for lunch, and Ally wore her new Versace dress and pumps, with her hair up in a classic chignon. It looked stunning on her, and she hoped it would please Eric to see her wear it. From the way his eyes lit up the second he opened the penthouse door, she knew she'd made the right choice.

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The weather had taken an unseasonably warm turn for late October, so they took their lunch on the balcony. The sky shone clear as glass, their view of the Hudson every bit as breathtaking as the vineyards in Tuscany. They had lobster salad and iced tea followed by a dessert of fresh fruit, and filled each other in on the mundane aspects of their lives over the past month. Eric seemed genuinely happy that she'd found absorbing, worthwhile work, while she felt infinitely relieved to see the tight lines around his mouth and eyes fading, eased by a good night's sleep.

When they'd finished eating, Eric reached into his jacket and pulled out a long white envelope, sliding it across the table to her. "I want you to have this."

She opened it, unfolding the thick sheaf of legal-sized paper inside, all written in Italian. "What is it?"

"The deed to the villa. I bought it last week and put it in your name."

Her mouth dropped open. "B-But we weren't together last week!"

"Look, I thought that if the worst came to pass, you'd need some assets of your own. I didn't want you leaving our marriage penniless."

"I'm prepared to abide by our prenuptial agreement, Eric. You don't owe me a thing." She pushed the papers back to him. "You know, this is exactly the sort of thing I said we needed to talk about. I didn't come here today because I wanted more of your grand gestures or expensive gifts. I came because I still love you and I want to make our marriage work, but now—"

"Will you please just hear me out? Both of you," he cut in pointedly, glancing at them both in turn. "There's a reason I bought the villa, and not only because I want you to have a home that's exclusively yours. For months now you've been urging me to take it easy, but you know me well enough to know I'm not the type to sit at home doing nothing. So I thought I'd take over running the Courtland Industries office in Rome."

Ally glanced at Nick, who glanced back with a mildly baffled expression. "How'd you come up with this idea?" he asked.

"It's the perfect solution for us all. I can telecommute, and fly into the office once every week or so if there's a meeting I have to attend in person. You two can work on Nick's book. We'll have all the privacy and quiet we need. If we want to travel, the whole of Europe is at our doorstep. And of course, we'll come back to the States for Christmas every year."

She sat there for a moment, happily stunned. "Well, it certainly sounds like you've given it plenty of thought."

"That first week we spent in Tuscany was the happiest we've been in the past two years. I want us to feel that way all the time." He smiled. "And I have to admit, I find the idea of living in a country where Nick and I can walk down the street hand in hand without being pelted with rotten fruit especially appealing."

"That does sound wonderful," she said cautiously, "but there are still a few things we need to discuss."

"Like what?"

"Well, first, no more bodyguards."

"Absolutely not. You could be in danger without—"

"Eric, I'm not in any danger. I've been walking around the city by myself for the past month, and nothing's happened to me. You have to let go of this paranoia of yours."

He looked like he wanted to voice another protest, but he stopped himself. "What else?"

"I'd rather not use the limo anymore. It's too big and ostentatious. I won't object if you want to keep it for your own personal use, but I'd like to have my own car."

He thought about it for a moment, then nodded. "All right."

She glanced at Nick with a smile. "Do you want to take this one?"

"Okay," Nick said, sitting up straight. "It's pretty obvious that most of our problems have sprung from us keeping things from each other. That's got to stop. I mean, if there's a problem between two of us, I don't think it's fair to put the third person in the middle. But if an issue arises that concerns all of us, we need to sit down and discuss it, like we're doing right now."

"And no more of one person making decisions that affect all three of us without talking it over first," Ally added.

Eric chuckled. "I guess I don't have to ask which one of us you're talking about."

"Look, we're not trying to gang up on you," Nick explained. "But if we let this stuff simmer, it'll blow up in our faces all over again."

"I know," Eric admitted. "It's just a bit disconcerting to realize how unhappy you've both been all this time."

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"Not that unhappy." She smiled. "We came back, didn't we?"

"So providing I agree to your conditions, I take it you're in favor of making our arrangement permanent again?"

"I'm not so sure," Nick replied. "There are a couple other things we need to work out first—in private."

Well, talk about unexpected, although the playful twinkle in Nick's eye told her exactly what he had in mind. When Eric shot her a look, she feigned her most innocent shrug.

"Sounds serious," she said, trying hard not to smile. "You two better go hash it out on your own."

They disappeared inside, leaving her to enjoy the view. She took her time finishing her iced tea, and then, glancing at her watch, she got up and strolled back inside.

She could hear their ecstatic moans and cries echoing all the way down the hall from Nick's room, the door hanging slightly ajar, just wide enough for her to peer in. Eric lay flat on his back with his legs in the air and Nick in between them, pumping away with abandon. God, they looked so beautiful together like this, passionate and loving—and hot as fucking hell.

She stood there transfixed by lust and rapt fascination as Nick sped up, making Eric moan even louder, both hands gripping the covers, throwing his head back when Nick grasped his cock and jerked him to orgasm. A few more hard thrusts and Nick came too, before landing in a sweaty, exhausted heap at Eric's side.

Eric cast a glance in her direction, and for a second she thought he'd looked right at her. Then he winked. Giggling,

she pushed open the door. "How long did you know I was there?"

Nick rolled his eyes. "I heard you panting all the way over here."

"Hey, watch it! I could make a few choice comments about your snoring!" Eric held out his hand to her and she took it, entwining their fingers, sinking to her knees by his side of the bed. "You looked like you enjoyed that," she murmured.

"Believe me, he did." Nick flashed them both a smug grin. "And so did you, if those pink cheeks are any indication."

"You should've joined us," Eric added.

"Don't worry, there'll be plenty of time for that." Grinning, she glanced at Nick. "Looks like we're moving back in."

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## Chapter 17

### New Home, New Beginning

Ally still loved summer mornings in Tuscany the best. She insisted on spending the few hours between breakfast and lunch lounging on the terrace, soaking up the sunshine. Work could wait until later, when the intense afternoon heat drove her indoors.

She heard the familiar toot of a horn and threw on her cover-up, peering over the edge of the terrace in time to see Eric pull into the courtyard in his new Lamborghini Murciélago. He'd given up the limo the second he'd laid eyes on the candy-apple red roadster during their factory tour a few weeks ago. He loved zooming up through the hills in it at a hundred miles an hour, spraying gravel on the narrow country roads.

Taking the terrace stairs two at a time, he caught her up in his arms, kissing her soundly. "How's Rome?" she asked.

"Noisy and polluted," he replied. "How's everything here?"

"Oh, same old, same old. Beautiful sun, beautiful house, beautiful Nick. Boring, boring, boring!"

"Well, you certainly seem bored," he observed with a touch of gentle sarcasm.

Nick joined them for lunch in the dining room, and they took their time enjoying the delicious angel-hair pasta in olive oil and sweet basil that Luciana had prepared. Ally beamed



over her glass of mineral water at Eric as he filled them in on his latest jaunt to the Eternal City.

"It was mostly an exercise in tedium, but I'm still glad I made the trip," he said. "It's always good to get out there and rattle the troops' cages a bit. Keeps them on their toes."

She laughed. "Well, at least it doesn't tire you out as much as it did a few months ago. You seem a lot stronger and more energetic."

"Remind me of that in another hour or so," he replied with a wink. "So how'd you two keep yourselves busy in my absence?"

"I managed to finish another chapter, with the help of my very efficient research assistant," Nick said, shooting Ally a grin. "At this rate, we'll turn in the manuscript well ahead of deadline."

"And take a couple of weeks off before we start on the next one," Ally added. "Also, my extremely talented partner here's agreed to help me pitch a proposal of my own, once we get the chance to put it all together."

Eric's eyes widened. "I go away for two days and apparently I miss everything. But may I say—bravo!" He raised his glass to each of them in turn. "You certainly deserve it."

She went in to take her usual soak in the tub after lunch and had just settled into the warm, vanilla-scented water when the door swung open, and in sauntered Eric. Stripping off his clothes, he plopped down in opposite end of the tub, sloshing water all over the floor. They both exploded in laughter.

"Well, color me stunned," she purred, running her foot up his smooth, slippery chest. "I've been hinting for you to join me in here ever since we moved in."

"Let's just say you've finally convinced me to embrace the more carefree side of life."

"No complaints here." Easing down until the water lapped gently at her shoulders, she let her eyes drift shut, musing on all the changes in their lives over the past few months. No, it still wasn't perfect; keeping the lines of communication open between the three of them remained a work in progress. But every day they tried, committing themselves anew to staying together. Thus far, it seemed to work well for them.

"You look happy," Eric murmured lazily, letting his head fall back against the rim of the tub.

She smiled. "So do you."

"Of course, I'm sure I'd look even happier after one of your famous foot rubs."

"Oh, I don't know," she teased. "Think your heart can take it?"

He laughed. "Why don't we go in the bedroom and find out?"

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## About Cat Grant

I've been writing off and on ever since I was old enough to hold a pencil. I still remember my very first 'published' story, a Jonny Quest adventure I penned in sixth grade. My teacher liked it so much, she had one of the other students illustrate it. That other student went on to become a Hollywood horror-film director.

I've poked around in many different genres. I've written fan fiction for a number of different TV shows, tried my hand at horror and fantasy, but in the end I came back to what I enjoy most—writing about the intimate relationships between men and women, and how love doesn't always happen the way we expect.

Back in 2004, when I became unable to work outside my home, my incredibly supportive husband suggested that I turn this setback into an opportunity, and pursue my dream of becoming a published author. Several years—and untold buckets of sweat later—that dream's finally coming to fruition.

Cat's website URL: [www.catgrant.com](http://www.catgrant.com)

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**Series Information**

Book I: The Arrangement

Book II: Strictly Business (prequel to The Arrangement)

Book III: By Change (prequel to The Arrangement)

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