

Ivy's  
*Twisted  
Vine*



*Latrivia S. Nelson*



Ivy's Twisted Vine

by

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*is book is printed on acid-free paper.* For Jordan,  
Tierra, and my dearest Adam David Nelson My life is a  
gift wrapped in blessings and favor.



## A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

Th

is project has been extremely enlightening. I'd like to fi  
rst thank Jesus for the strength to see this process  
through. While I'm sure that He would not condone a

great deal of the actions the characters take in this book, I know that He knows my heart. My passion for writing didn't begin with *Ivy's Twisted Vine*. It started with short stories written as a young girl as early as kindergarten. So for everyone who sat in the audience of my youthful performances, thank you for giving me confidence and critiques, especially my mom, grandparents, and aunts Sheronda and Sandra, who had to listen to hundreds of invisible board meetings with my teddy bears and short story presentations in the den. I'd also like to thank some of the senior class of 1998 from Horn Lake High, who read my first attempt at a novella in the study hall. Go Eagles!

I'd like to thank my mom, Linda Artis, for giving me life and love. You have watched me from seed to blossom. I appreciate your love and all that you've done. Th

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the push to write what I wanted. You are truly special and truly beautiful.

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ank you for being who you are and for

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John Gillion, it has been a long time coming! I'm glad to have you in my life. And glad that you brought

Jerome with you. We have so many years to catch up on and so much to do. I'm happy to have you as my father, and Jerome, I'm so happy to have you as my brother.

One of my friends believed in my book so much that she actually bought me a beautiful wooden secretary to write this book on as my graduation present from LeMoyne-Owen College. She has been a great friend since middle school and has been with me through a crazy pregnancy, a very elaborate wedding, and a horrible divorce. Clairkeatha Pruitt, you'll always be my girl. Th

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Jae Henderson, thanks for the many conversations about life, liberty, and the pursuit of a dream career. Just Jae productions will soar to the heavens. Your beauty both inside and out precedes you wherever you

go.

Beverly and Howard Robertson, thank you for introducing me into a world of business adventures. Under your wing, I have dined in the company of presidents of countries, world leaders, civil activists, and amazing entertainers. You have been true role models and great inspirations. TRUST Marketing is still my home. Plus, I'd like to be a principal one day. I just want to formally put that out there!

Michael Washington, you've known me since I was just a kick in my mother's stomach. You've been a wonderful godfather and a gracious gentleman. Th

ank you for being an outstanding leader,

fraternity brother, and friend. Your keen eye on this book and your constructive criticism made me stronger both on paper and in person.

A few other people have read this book front to back and over again to give me creative and instructive feedback: Chris Nelson, Kcbena Cash, Pete Richards, Laura and Timothy Sitterson, and Mark Devereaux. You all don't know how much you truly mean to me.

Th

ere are people who always serve as inspiration behind any book. Sometimes it's their actions that make a



white sheet of paper light up with colorful and provocative thoughts. A few people have inspired this book, and some of them don't even know it: Linda Artis, John Gillion, Jordan A. H. Nelson, Adam Nelson, Nyse Collins, Kcbena Cash, Francis Th

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well, you few know the rest.

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I hope that you all enjoy this entertaining tale of love and passion. My purpose for writing is to take people from their daily grind and give them something else to focus on for just a moment. I hope that it makes you laugh, makes you cry, and makes you think.

Thank you al .



## Author's Note

Th

is is a work of fiction. All events and characters in this story are solely the product of the author's imagination; any similarities between any characters and situations presented in this book to any individuals living or dead or actual places and situations are purely coincidental.

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**Pr o l o g u e**

**South Memphis**

**Late September**

**9:15 p.m.**

Th

e midnight air rushed fiercely in Lt. Nicola Agosto's face as he opened the unmarked squad car and hit the ground running, half-stunned by the extreme intensity of the weather. Sprinting through the snowy slush, he tried to ignore his aching knees and brain-wrenching migraine.

Under no circumstances could he let this perp get away. He was the only lead they had in the Caesar Dominguez case, a sixweek operation that had been the cause of too many sleepless nights following seventeen gang-related deaths. Pushing past the pressure on his lungs, he gasped for a second wind. Plunging through large puddles of water and trying to avoid the shards of broken glass that lined his path down the dark alleyway, he felt for his gun as he watched for any possible threat of an ambush. Hearing the constant barking of dogs all around him, he wasn't sure what danger he was running towards. If his college football coach could have seen him right then, he would have shit bricks. Even at nearly thirty, Nicola was still xv

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quite agile. Th

ere was no cop on Truitt Street faster and no perp anywhere in Memphis smarter than he was, *or at least he liked to think s o.*

Stretching his legs out a little longer to close the gap between him and his prey, Nicola's strides became more powerful as they went searing through the gusty wind. He smiled inwardly, feeling invincible as he caught a glimpse of his shadow under the streetlights. He hoped that he would walk away victorious from the chase and go safely home to a cold empty bed and a strong lonely drink.

Hearing his partner, Brooks, somewhere behind him, Nicola jumped an old wooden fence and felt a sharp splinter rip into his skin. Ahh! Almost invincible.

Landing in a puddle of muddy half-frozen water that completely drenched his body, Nicola saw the young drug dealer run into a vacant dilapidated house. Wiping the grit from his eyes and posting up, he ran to the side of the door and looked in quickly. Nothing. Damn it.

Seeing Brooks follow over the fence, Nicola signaled into the house. Taking a deep breath, he burst through the door with his gun pointed and ready to fi re. His adrenaline was pumping, and his gear was offi

cially irritating. Tugging at the top of his bulletproof vest

with his index finger, he prepared to clear all of the downstairs rooms with his partner.

Th

e perp-catching process, as he had termed it, was executed with total precision and extreme prejudice. After all, he had been chasing off enders for nearly a decade now. It was simple enough to him...don't move too quickly because the runner will always lead you to where he is headed; don't move too slowly because you might lose him, and don't move without your partner because there is nothing like being caught in the jungle alone. It used to make him livid, but he didn't even get angry anymore. He understood the game now. It was their job to duck, hide, and run. It was his job to run, dive, and catch.

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Th

e old house reeked of a damp odor left by the homeless crackheads that had used it for shelter. Cockroaches climbed the walls, and hoards of rats hid in the corners, peeping out past the shadows. Cold winds ripped through the dark, empty, gaping hallways and rattled the old portraits hanging vainly down the corridors.

Slowly, Nicola peered in every entry under nasty, discolored, dusty furniture and listened past the creaking sounds of the wind and rain for a clue as to where the young man was hiding. Finally, as he focused in, he could hear the kid moving slowly about upstairs. *Junkies and dealers alike were so stupid. Why would you go upstairs in a rickety old house? Anyone downstairs would be able to track you,* he thought to himself as he put his infrared on the ceiling. He could end it all right then. All he had to do was shoot above him. He was almost certain that he wouldn't miss. But the point was to extract useful intel, not to use the perp as target practice.

"Why don't you do us both a favor and just come on down and let me take you downtown? At least you'll get out of here alive. If I don't kill you, the rats will," Nicola said as he and Brooks took their position at the base of the staircase leading up to the second level of the house.

"I ain't goin' back to juvy," the young man screamed in a midadolescent voice from the upstairs hallway.

"You know, there are a lot worse things than juvy," Nicola said, putting on his night-vision goggles.

"Yeah, like what?" the teenager asked, feeling himself losing control of the situation.

"Great, a kid," Brooks said, shaking his head. They hated

chasing teens worst of all.

"Th

e night just keeps getting better and better." Nicola tugged at his vest again.

Nicola instantly thought back to his last teenage chase. It went from a car chase to a foot pursuit. Th

ey ended up cornering the

baseheads in an alleyway. Th

e teens were trapped, too scared to

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jump the fence where three bulldogs salivated and barked wildly at the prospect of fresh meat. When he snatched up what he thought was two boys, he discovered that he had two fifteen-year-old parochial schoolgirls that had been in *the hood* scrounging for crack cocaine.

"Stall him," Brooks said calmly, bringing Nicola back to the task at hand.



"Look, if you don't come down, then we have to come up after you," Nicola screamed tauntingly as he watched his partner pull the tear gas from his vest.

"Come on then!" the scared young man screamed again, this time sending several shots down the stairs to greet the cold and frustrated pair. "I ain't never scared," the boy screamed, holding his gun closely to him.

"Obviously," Nicola said under his breath.

"Don't worry, we'll snatch a knot in his ass after we catch our breath," Brooks said as he leaned against the wall. "Man, I'm tired."

"You're tired? I left you with the squad car. I'm the one out here running like a guard dog after this kid. I swear I don't feel like doing this shit tonight."

"You know what...I ran last night. So I don't feel sorry for you," Brooks panted.

"You ran, but did we catch him?" Nicola asked, looking up the stairs.

"Th

at was your fault," Brooks said, remembering the task at hand. "Are we going to do this, or are we going to sit

down here and bitch at each other while the little prick shoots rounds at us?"

"Alright, Alright." Nicola got into position. "On the count of three."

"We've wasted enough time already...three," Brooks said, launching the tear gas up the stairs.

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"Where did you get tear gas?" Nicola looked in amazement at Brooks. He might as well take off his goggles. It was obvious that he needed his gas mask instead, which he didn't have.

"I got it from a friend." As usual, Brooks didn't see the big deal about Nicola being ticked off .

"What are you doing just walking around with tear gas on you, man? Th

at makes no damned sense." Nicola never would understand his best friend.

"Well, neither does going upstairs after him not knowing what type of fi re power he has," Brooks said, looking up the stairs. "He's already tried to shoot your ass off once tonight. Isn't that good enough?" He

looked over at Nicola, who rolled his eyes. Anxiously, they waited downstairs in position for the perp to come barreling down, choking and blinded. Finally, Nicola leaned against the stairwell out of tactical position.

"I don't think that he's coming down," Nicola said condescendingly.

"*Just...* wait a minute," Brooks said, irritated and still stooping down.

Soon after, they heard glass break and footsteps out front on the ledge of the house. Running to the front door, Nicola saw a tall slender figure land on the ground, accidentally dropping his gun.

"Go, go, go," Brooks yelled.

"Meet me with the car," Nicola said, making his way to the front of the house.

"Th

ree minutes," Brooks said, tapping the face of his watch. Busting through the door, Nicola screamed, half-dazed,

"Freeze!" He had a good shot, but he decided against taking it. Th

ere was no visible threat, and he had a thing against

killing kids, regardless of how stupid they were.

Ignoring Nicola's plea, the young man decided against trying to retrieve the gun and ran through a bush in the yard next door into the street. Stopping to pick up the discarded weapon, Nicola again ran after him, this time ready for the chase to end. xix

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Running down another garbage-filled alley, through a small apartment complex, and back out on to Wellington, Nicola could finally feel the fatigue of the weary battle overcoming him. Refusing to give up, Nicola pushed himself further, running full speed several blocks into the busy Crump and Danny Thomas

intersection past the MAPCO gas station, where several fellow offi

cers were too busy flirting with the cashiers to notice him. Th

e young man looked over his own shoulder, fighting fatigue, to see Nicola closing in with every step.

One pace, two paces, three paces, and then a launch. In midair, Nicola opened his arms, dove, and landed on the perp in the middle of the street, causing both of them to barely miss oncoming cars.

Hitting the ground, Nicola felt his arm make contact with the cold concrete and a tearing deep into his flesh. *Another gash that would leave another scar from another chase*, he thought immediately as he grunted in frustration. Pulling the boy up, he kicked him in the stomach. Hard. Th

at was for shooting at him.

"Get up," Nicola said, pulling the boy by his torn collar. "And don't clown with me, or I'll take you back to that house and finish what *you* started."

Of course Nicola was bluffi

ng, but he liked seeing fear on

their faces. It paralyzed them from making more dumb decisions. Seeing his partner and the squad car turn the corner, Nicola slapped the cuffs on the young man, took a deep breath, and looked at his watch. Two minutes and fifteen seconds. Like he said before ...Invincible!

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**Downtown Memphis**

**Wendell's Restaurant**

**Late September**

**9:30 p.m.**

Sitting across the table from her boss, Ivy looked at the contract and smiled. Th

e document was everything that she had hoped for, and now all that was required was her signature to

make a once vivid dream her own reality. Inhaling deeply, she signed her name, gracefully stroking the paper with her pen and savoring the sight of the binding agreement. Sliding the paper back across the table, she took the crystal glass of full-bodied wine and sipped it, anticipating a response.

"You won't be sorry, Ivy," her boss, Joseph Steinberger, said, putting the contract away. "Yveson and Letehwich is the best marketing firm in the southeastern region. I believe you know that our track record speaks for itself. Your talents will be best put to use here."

"I'm sure," Ivy said in a hushed tone.

"And we are sure as well." Joseph always appreciated her humbleness, which is why their working relationship had turned into a professional friendship. "Since you've been with us, we've xxi

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come to build an entirely new program for our African American collegiate market. You've built long-lasting relationships with nearly twenty different organizations and have designed a five-year plan for our Clivestone project. You're definitely a keeper."

"My main concern is that I'll get out of the loop leaving until graduation. I mean, most of my contacts work with me because I've maintained a very close and personal

relationship with them on an ongoing basis.” Ivy set down her wine glass and took a quick moment to glance at her breathtaking diamond engagement ring.

“Well, that was our concern as well, which is why we have hired an intern to work for you. She’ll be in charge of attending the meetings and reporting back to you on a biweekly basis.” Joseph passed Ivy her new intern’s resume.

Ivy’s mouth instantly dropped. An intern with an intern?

Who would believe her? “Th

is is unbelievable.” Ivy needed a more

defined explanation.

“Well, you’ve earned it. And we recognize that you need to finish these last months at school before returning to the firm. We pride ourselves on the fact that in the last three years, we have only recruited magna and summa cum laude scholars from various colleges, and we expect the same caliber of academic excellence from you. We hope that you will use this time to seal your previous endeavors and come out in the spring ready to begin a new life with Yveson and Letehwich.”

“I don’t know what to say, but that I am truly honored.”



And honored Ivy was. It was nearly unheard of for a company to offer so much for an undergraduate, but alas, she had pulled it off. Yveson and Letehwich had offered her a great manager's position as soon as they had heard that four other Memphis-based firms and three Nashville-based firms were interested. She had of course made her decision according to the bottom line. Loyalty started with self.

Wrapping the scarf around her neck, Ivy waited outside the restaurant for the valet to pull her car around after the meeting, xxii

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recapping the biggest event in her life. Almost about to explode, she couldn't wait to get inside her car and call her mother. She was offi

cially the senior project manager of African American collegiate marketing for Yveson and Letehwich, the number one marketing firm in Memphis, or should she say "the southeastern region."

All of her hard work had paid off, literally. After signing the contract, Joseph slipped her an envelope with a hefty incentive package to help her during her final year in school and a briefcase full of information about her new job expectations. It had taken everything in her to keep from bursting into tears of joy and laughter. She giggled even now standing in the freezing rain.

She was on her way to the top, and nothing would stop her. xxiii

# Book One

“Don’t plant seeds in your life that you don’t want to harvest.”

– Linda Artis

Chapter One:

Someone Old



Chapter 1

"Oh Grey, I love you so much," Ivy said, panting heavily as her fiancé lifted her off the ground and carried her to the twin mahogany wood sleigh bed in the corner of the dorm room.

"Yeah. Yeah, me too," Grey said shortly, laying Ivy carefully on the little bed. He really wished they had gone to his place. Ivy's little room made him feel claustrophobic.

"Don't forget the condom," Ivy reminded him hastily as she unbuttoned her soft pink Brooks Brothers Oxford and revealed the black lace bra that invitingly propped up her ample breasts.

"I've already got it on," Grey said, pulling off her wool trousers and relishing the beauty of her caramel temple. Looking down in shock, Ivy confirmed his readiness and for a second tried to recall when Grey would have had time to slip on the contraceptive. Reminded of the little time that they had as she saw his tie and shirt hit the ground, she reached out for him and held his beautiful, brown, clean-shaven face in her hands. It had been five days since they were last intimate, which was unusual for the oversexed pair. Nearly at the four-month mark of their engagement, tension had been running high between them 3

over the last few weeks. Ivy could only attribute such an untimely funk to Grey's new promotion at the firm and his heavy load in graduate school. But now they were finally alone, and what had started out as an argument was about to end in the heated pleasure of two young adults releasing all earthly frustration in a thirtyminute session of tantric, erotic, and somewhat distasteful sex. She kissed him affectionately on his full lips and smiled.

"Wait," Grey said suddenly.

"What?" Ivy's high was instantly interrupted.

"I think the condom just broke." He checked. "Yep, it did."

Standing up, Grey walked over slowly to the green satin lounge chair and retrieved his pants. "And I don't have another one with me."

"But you didn't even touch me." Ivy pulled the covers over her exposed body and tried to reclaim her composure. "Wow. Well, do you have another one? You always carry two."

"Not this time." Disappointed, he slipped on his trousers.

"Sorry baby."

“Oh, it’s not your fault,” she said in a pouty voice as she pulled her long locks up into a ponytail.

“You know we could, just this once...” He gave her *the look* and hoped that she could read between the lines.

“Baby, you know that I want to, but we’ve done so well for so long. We can’t just throw it all away now.” She knew that she had to be the strong one when he was at his weakest, although she wanted him just as badly.

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*is is a situation that could be easily solved if you only had a few condoms yourself*, Grey thought to himself as he smiled sardonically. *And she was supposed to be such a modern woman.* Now Grey was even more frustrated and ready to leave unless Ivy was willing to give him a little substitution. Watching her jump up and immediately began to dress, he knew that whatever he had hoped for was out as well.

“One time won’t kill us,” Grey said, deciding to push the subject a little further. No sense giving up without a fight. 4

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“How long have we been together?” Ivy asked as she looked at his reflection in her standing mahogany

mirror. Grey sighed heavily. "Th

at's beside the point." Lord in heaven

knew that he didn't care to hear another lecture from her at that moment about safe sex. If she got any safer, she would be abstinent.

"Five years," Ivy answered for him as she turned around to face him. "And in fi ve years, we have never gone without protection of some sort."

"OK, bravo." He clapped his hands emphatically. "It's not like I want to get you pregnant. In fact, I can almost guarantee you 100 percent that I wouldn't. But even still, in the worst case scenario, you act like pregnancy with me is the end of the world."

He knew that his comments would ensure an argument, but he couldn't help himself. He was Grey Henderson! It wasn't like she was scraping the bottom of the barrel.

"Look, you know I possibly would if I was still on birth control, but until the doctor puts me back on it, we have to be careful. I mean, I'm just now getting into my fi eld. I don't want to throw it away." Ivy could feel a headache coming, and she could see that Grey was trying to pick at her.

"Why do you always take things to the next level?

We're talking about not using a condom once. I would pull out. God, it's not the end of the world," Grey said as he slipped on his Louis Vuitton loafers and stood up. It wasn't worth it to sit and fight with her about something that he could get elsewhere.

"I'm not taking things to the next level, Grey. I just..."  
*Men seemed to never take women and their careers seriously.* Ivy sighed, feeling that she had more than lost the battle.

"Please, I don't want the drama this early in the day," Grey said, clasping his hands together as a gesture of peace. "I've got to go anyway." He hurriedly put on his shirt and tie and grabbed his suit jacket.

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"Why do we always have to ruin things?" Ivy crossed her arms and stood bewildered. How had the situation escalated so quickly?

"We ruin things? Since when have we been the problem?" Grey sighed. He didn't mean to let his frustration slip out. He was sure that there would be other times, but he was extremely agitated just the same. "Look, I'm gonna go on and head out of here, OK?"



You've got class in less than an hour, and I've got a hundred things to do before I get back to the offi

ce. Let's not do this before the

start of a perfectly long day." He looked down at his watch. "I'll call you tonight." Kissing Ivy on her forehead, he turned on his heels and headed out of the door, leaving her speechless. u

Dr. Peterson was a stickler for tardiness even in the unheard-of September snow that was falling heavily under the dismal silver skies. Less than one hour after Grey had left, barely missing his door close and saving herself the embarrassment of interrupting Dr. Peterson's lecture, Ivy sat down beside her best friend, Trina, and unwrapped her scarf to begin yet another boring lecture about business ethics. She could tell that today was going to be a long, long day.

"Did you type up your essay last night?" Trina whispered to Ivy as Dr. Peterson closed the door.

"Yeah, did you?" Ivy said, pulling her work from her brown leather satchel and placing it confidently on her desk.

"I forgot," Trina said, taking Ivy's essay and sliding it under her desk. "Don't remind him. He may have forgotten too."

"Good morning, class. Please take out your essays," Dr. Peterson said, smiling at Trina. "I hope that you all remembered that this counts as 20 percent of your semester grade."

"I hate him," Trina said under her breath as she smiled back at Dr. Peterson.

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Class passed quickly, and within an hour Ivy and Trina found themselves at their favorite eatery, Abundant Creations Bistro, in the Cooper-Young district having a light lunch and warm lemon tea in the confines of the beautiful little corner restaurant watching the busy midtown traffic

pass by in the window. It was a once-a-week trip they made to relax and enjoy the afternoon away from the campus.

"You're gonna fail," Ivy said disapprovingly to Trina, who only lifted her eyebrow in response to the statement.

"Quit being so damned dramatic. I ain't gonna fail; I just won't graduate with a thousand honors. Everyone can't

be a 4.0 student, you know," Trina teased her concerned friend.

"I just know that you're better than average," Ivy said, ignoring Trina and the second accusation of the day that she was a drama queen.

"Yes, mother," Trina said mockingly. "What's bothering you today?"

"Grey," Ivy said, looking down at the green-checkered tablecloth. "Sometimes, he seems so unreasonable. And I just don't understand why." She tried to smile. "And sometimes, I feel like maybe it's all me being way too uptight."

"Probably a little bit of both." Trina touched her hand.

"Planning a wedding during your senior year of college is a lot of responsibility."

"I know. We're both stressed out. Maybe I should just take it easy for a little while; you know, not bother him so much and be a little more relaxed about certain *issues*."

"Issues like what?" Trina pried. Grey was known for asking far too much of Ivy for his own selfish aspirations.

"Sex without a condom," Ivy said in a near whisper.

"Oh," Trina said, wiping her mouth with the napkin. "I thought he asked a little bit more of you than that...like anal or something."

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Ivy laughed. Leave it to Trina to think of the most out-of-control scenario. "No," Ivy said, shaking her head. Suddenly, his request didn't seem so bad compared to Trina's guess.

"But at least you can't get pregnant through the back door,"

Trina said, picking up her half-eaten sandwich.

"But I still wouldn't," she said, interjecting with that small piece of vital information before she took a bite. "I would never,"

she said as a horrible afterthought, shaking her head violently.

"I know *you* wouldn't," Trina said chuckling.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Ivy put her sandwich down again.

"Girl, please. You've got on a button-down Oxford,

sweater vest, slacks, and loafers in the middle of the school week. You've got a Blackberry with a list of things to accomplish everyday. You've got a five-year plan, a ten-year plan, and a backup plan for your entire professional career. Ever since Grey got hold of you, you've changed. You've become...him in a skirt." Trina laughed.

"Now that isn't a bad thing, but you're too conservative to be anything but."

"I can be wild," Ivy said, outraged, in a high-pitched voice, as if to convince Trina. "It's just that Grey always has somewhere he wants me to go with him and his family, and they are so politically correct. I just stay prepared. But I have jeans and t-shirts. And I don't always carry my Blackberry." She looked down into her Coach bag to see it at the top of the contents of her purse and sighed.

"Well, I think that you're perfect just the way you are, if this is who you really are," Trina said looking at Ivy's sweater. "Because that outfit is still banging and probably more expensive than the equivalent of everything in my closet." She smiled. "It's just so...uptight."

"Well, I'm not uptight," Ivy said reassuringly. "I pull this look off with fun and flare." She searched her mind for the right words.

"I still know how to relax though."

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"Uh huh, I know." Trina smiled. "In all the years that I've known you, you've always been true to yourself...even if it took you a while to figure out who you were...are."

"Well, I know who I am. I'm a woman in charge of her destiny. I've focused in on what I want, and I plan to go for it," she said, squinting her eyes. "And Grey is only a small part of that, just like this outfit is only a small part of me. If he left me today, I would still be the same person."

"I doubt that," Trina said, bucking her eyes. "In fact, you've been sculpted into what he and your family want you to be for so long that if that were to change, you would change dramatically."

"Th

is is who I am, Trina."

"And I love you for it," Trina said, realizing that she would never prove her point.

For a minute, Ivy went into a reactive daze. To herself, she was as happy as any young woman her age could

be within reason. She had been dating Grey for five beautiful years, and this last summer, he had proposed over a candlelit dinner *after three bottles of champagne*. Everyone in both families knew that the proposal was coming soon. It was the next thing to do when a couple reached *that level*. Plus, she had a little more than one semester of college left and a job lined up and waiting for her. Her life was near perfection.

u

"Life couldn't be worse," Grey said, exhaling deeply as he lay back on his friend's black leather couch and closed his eyes.

"You know, I charge for these sessions," Mattock said, sitting behind his desk. "Free consultations aren't my *forte*."

"To hell with your *forte*. Besides, I don't need a shrink. I need a pall bearer." Grey shifted around and looked up at the ceiling.

"Why? Are you about to die?" Mattock asked, biting down into a juicy green apple as he looked over the downtown Memphis skyline through his corner-offi

ce window.

"Yeah, you didn't know. My fiancée is planning my funeral now." Grey sat up. "But she likes to call it a wedding."

"I don't understand. If you didn't want to get married, then why did you propose to her? It wasn't like she was twisting your arm for it." After being friends with Grey many years, Mattock still did not understand Grey's need to lead such a promiscuous lifestyle. From what he could tell, Ivy was a great girl and any man in his right mind could see it.

Grey pondered the thought. "It was time, according to my father's standards and Ivy's. My father thinks that we can't win this election if I don't have a more concrete image in the community. Plus, Ivy has always hinted at marriage after college. It was a perfect match. Th

is election means an opportunity to go for it. All the local blogs, polls, and political leaders say that Memphis needs a family man in my uncle's position. Plus, at first glance I did want to get married. Our relationship was going great, both of us had promising futures, both of us had the same ambitions, and to top it all off, she was all mine."

"Nothing has changed from that standpoint." Mattock still did not understand.



“You know Ivy was a virgin when I started dating her?”  
To Grey that was one of the most important facts to point out.

“You’ve mentioned it,” Mattock said, actively listening.  
“But she was only a senior in high school. Th

at’s pretty common. You

were a junior in college. It’s a different league.”

“I just remember seeing her with her family at one of my father’s dinners, and I fell head over heels for her. I had no idea how young she was.” Grey’s thoughts exhausted him, and he lay back down and gazed at the ceiling again. “Since the day we started dating, I knew that I would marry her. My family approved of her, my friends approved her, and Memphis will approve of us.”

“So why are you so torn about marrying this perfect woman, by your own standards?” Mattock waited patiently.

“I don’t know. But I did know that if I let her get out there after college with no strings attached, going to meetings, traveling, 10

*Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

meeting new people, and discovering new things, I

wouldn't seem so fascinating, and marriage to me wouldn't be either."

"So let me get this straight, you asked her to marry you to keep her off the market and you in the race for Congress?" Mattock asked.

"Basically," Grey replied reluctantly. He sat up. "But as crude as it sounds, it is not unheard of, you know. I'm marrying for purpose."

"You don't think that you could swing the seat without being married?" Mattock was always surprised by his best friend's constant antics over love and lust.

"Hey, I'm no expert. But the experts tell me that I can't. So if I have to marry, then I might as well marry Ivy." Grey's forehead wrinkled as he tried to make sense of it all. "Do you see where I'm going with this?"

"Yes, I see where you're headed, but the question is, do you?

More important, you still haven't answered one important question." Mattock shook his head. Grey was amazingly confused to be such an intelligent man.

"What question haven't I answered?" Grey asked, curious about his friend's apparent infinite wisdom on the subject.

"Do you love her?" Mattock sat down his apple and picked up his writing pad.

"Yes, I love her, but I know what's out there. I didn't even start to think about cheating on her until I graduated from undergrad. Th

en it was like all of these successful beautiful women came out of the woodwork, offering to do whatever I wanted." He smiled proudly even in the midst of his dilemma. "They couldn't get

enough of me."

"And you couldn't get enough of them." Mattock scribbled down something on his pad and reached for a small book on his table.

"My point is that just like I was turned out before I could get my degree good, I would've been if I hadn't stepped in first."

11

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Grey sighed heavily. Mattock was stressing him out further instead of helping him.

"So you asked her to marry you," Mattock said, astonished.

“What can I say? You had it all figured out, except one part.”

“What’s that?” Grey asked.

“You’re not ready for marriage even if Ivy is ready. You’re still going to cheat on her and lie to her and misuse her. Only now you’ll be doing it in the sacred covenant of marriage. And eventually, Ivy is still going to be exposed and possibly turned out, as you call it. Plus, you could marry this girl and still lose the election, heaven forbid, for Ivy’s sake. Nothing is promised.”

“So what do you think that I should do, Doc?” Grey looked at his watch. It was time to head to city hall for his father’s press conference.

Mattock set his book down. “Well, I think you should search your heart for some real answers before you ruin this girl’s life trying to have your cake and eat it too.”

u

Grey pondered his friend’s suggestions as he drove recklessly through the bad weather in his silver BMW Z4 M Roadster to get downtown to his father’s offi

ce. It never sounded good to have

a friend tell him that it was apparent that he *used* the

woman that would one day be the mother of his children. But in hindsight, it was the truth. Plus, Mattock's point about possibly still losing the election hit him hardest.

Passing the long line of wrecks on the interstate, Grey drew his attention back to the weather. Something wasn't right in Memphis. Something wasn't right in the world. For as many years as he could remember, there had never been such severe weather. Normally, it wasn't even cold yet. Now, fender benders lined the streets, because drivers weren't used to the roads being slick. The

shelters were full of displaced veterans and other homeless people; the government had to give emergency funds to clear out stormbeaten communities, and his father had to be on top of his game 12

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

to make Memphians feel safe. Juggling unpredictable situations was supposed to be the Henderson family's strongest trait. Now, only time would tell.

u

"Looks like hell finally froze over, boys," Mayor Henderson said as he walked briskly in front of his large entourage out to the iced-over front steps of City

Hall, where an eager group of reporters waited impatiently in the snow. As the doors swung open, his million-dollar smile appeared and his political face was on. Politicking was such a fickle business, but he was consistent and unchangeable. Th

ey had labeled him Hard-Ass Henderson, and he had stayed true to his name for eighteen years. Standing behind the podium in front of the masses and below the American and Tennessee flags, Mayor Henderson cleared his throat and began in a powerful baritone voice, "Thank you for

coming this afternoon. Today is the new beginning of a new era for the citizens of Memphis. We have fought long and hard in this city for equality and justice. We have been victims of prejudice and hatred. But we have in the past and will continue in the future...to prevail. It is our conviction to achieve greatness not only as individuals but as a cohesive city, state, and country, which will make us an awesome force."

Mayor Henderson took a deep breath and continued. "This

cohesiveness will once again prove to be a weapon against unjust actions. I have not come before you today to celebrate a winning basketball team, a new architectural muse, or even a new business venture. I have come before you today to announce that Memphis will once again be free from the strong hold

of sadistic bloodsucking drug dealers and able to see a brighter day with a better purpose very soon.”

Henderson’s gallant voice faded for a moment while he made sure to pose where the cameras would get his good side. “If it is the last thing that I do as your mayor, I have taken on the charge to rid Memphis of drug infestation with the sincerest of passion, and 13

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I will make it happen.” Th

e crowd behind the reporters cheered

briefl y, interrupting his speech and allowing a few good shots with the other major players present for the press conference.

“Today, Director Billings, Major Hamilton, Lt. Agosto of the Special Units-Narcotics Division, Lt. Brooks of the COBRA SWAT Unit, and I concluded the last of eight meetings that have taken place over the last two weeks. Th

e fruits of our labor will

be evident in the new specialized unit that has already hit the streets of Memphis to fi ght head-on the war on drugs. We have taken twenty-three of our fi nest narcotics and SWAT offi cers and

combined them into one unit with the skill, expertise, and intel that will send a message nationwide. The

citizens of Memphis want

drugs, drug dealers, and drug abusers the hell out of Memphis. And so this is the final warning for those who mean to disrupt the lives of Memphis further with drugs. Twenty-three expertly trained offi

cers of high rank specializing in everything from highrisk search and seizure to lie detection, along with the entire Memphis Police Department at their beck and call, are ready, with the backing of an \$18.5 million budget allocated through taxpayers; and the seizure of drug dealer's undeserved wealth has equipped us in a manner that has never been seen in the city of Memphis. We are taking back our streets one house, one corner, and one person at a time through a citywide effort called Operation Checkbook. The

reason that this operation has been

dubbed checkbook is because each drug dealer has written a check in this city that has cost us our children, mothers, fathers, brothers, wives, best friends, teachers, preachers, and leaders. And it's time to cash in on what you owe us."

As Mayor Henderson ended his powerful speech, he



felt an overwhelming calm in his heart. Yes, he had been politicking for a long time, but this was something different. This would bring

real change. Turning around, he caught a glimpse of the pride in his son Grey, who nodded approvingly.

Standing behind his father, Grey smiled into the cameras as he listened to both lieutenants and the director of the Memphis 14

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Police Department give praise to his father and his administration for their hard work and due diligence. This

is was just the kind of

exposure his father needed in his fourth term. And this new unit would be just the vehicle to drive their family into a new arena of political monopoly, as he prepared for his own race in the approaching midterm election.

u

It was almost ten thirty that night before Ivy was finished at the library with her report for class and her research for a client. Determined not to be out of the loop too much at the office, she

volunteered to take on smaller projects from home. It was pride that made her push herself to new heights. Not the pride in herself, but the pride of having a wonderful job and a loving family. Her mother had always said to her, "To whom much is given, much is expected." So it was obvious that her family expected a lot. Drudging through the ice and snow that had accumulated on the well-manicured lawn of her little campus, Ivy held on tightly to her black wool sailor coat and made her way anxiously to the dorms, kicking herself with every stride for leaving her car parked inside the parking lot. It felt like hours of torture by the time she had finished her ten-minute hike and quickly entered her dorm to shake off the excess snow and peel off her clothes, which seemed to be frozen to her body.

Awakened by the turn of the doorknob, Trina sat up in her bed. "Ivy, is that you?" she asked, turning on her lamp.

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you," Ivy said, taking her pajamas out of her drawer.

"It's cool. Grey called you. He said to call him back as soon as you got in. It sounded urgent." Trina sniffed slightly.

"Yeah, I forgot my cell phone earlier. I figured he had called by now." Silence. "Why are you in the bed so early?" Ivy asked, noticing Trina's red eyes.

"Kylan and I got into a fight, and I guess I just cried myself to sleep."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"What are y'all into it over now?" They

had only been dating

one month and this had been their fourth argument at least.

"He was at the Mu mixer all over some other girl tonight. I thought that he and I were starting to get serious, especially after the other day at his place. You should have heard him going on about how fine I was then. But all he was trying to do was get in my pants, and I was too blind to see it." Tears started to form in the sides of Trina's eyes again.

"Oh, T. Don't cry over him. He isn't worth it, and you know it." Ivy grabbed a napkin from her dresser and passed it to Trina.

"Easy for you to say...I slept with him that night at his house,"

Trina said, interrupting. She was sure that the news

would stun Ivy since she had lied earlier in the week and said that she had turned him down cold.

Ivy paused. "Well, I see what all the tears are for." She sat down on the side of Trina's bed to try to comfort her. "It'll be OK though. You just have to learn from this and move on." In actuality she wanted to scold her friend for being so careless with her body, but she knew that this wasn't the time. Besides, who was she to judge?

"I feel so stupid," Trina said, crying. "Truthfully, I wanted ...

no, I needed to hear the things he was saying the other night. Looking in his eyes, you would have sworn that he was sincere, but tonight, he was all over that freshman. I was so pissed off , girl. I just went over and threw punch all over him."

Ivy laughed. "He deserved it, and you deserve better. But I don't have to tell you that, do I?" Th

ere was a brief awkward  
silence.

"No, you don't have to tell me." Trina tried to smile for her friend. "Go and call Grey. I'll be fi ne. I just realized that I really want to be back with Brooks. When we were together things were diff erent." Trina wiped her

eyes.

"Brooks? You hated him. If you two weren't fighting, you were about to." Ivy liked Brooks as a person, but as a couple the two hadn't made a good match.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Say what you will, but I was happy," Trina was content with her decision and had already made plans to reunite with her old flame.

"Alright. If you like it, then I love it." Ivy picked up her phone.

"I'm going to go and call Grey." She wondered if her advice had only made things worse.

Th

The phone rang several times before Grey finally answered in a deep somber voice. "Hello," he said, looking down at his caller ID to see Ivy's number.

"Hey, Trina said that you called earlier. I didn't have my phone with me. What's up?" Ivy said sitting back down on the couch in the common area.

"A lot." He sighed heavily into the phone. "I really need

to talk to you.” Grey tried to choose his words carefully. “I was hoping maybe that you could come over tonight. I know that it’s late, so if you don’t feel up to it, I’ll come to you.”

“What’s wrong?” Ivy sat up.

“What I need to say doesn’t need to be said over the phone.”

Ivy could sense the stress in his voice and stopped her questions.

“OK, I’ll be right over,” she said, hanging up the phone.  
u

Half an hour later, Ivy pulled up to River Estates Luxury Condo Community and buzzed Grey. Hundreds of thoughts flooded her mind as she drove to his place. Now she was about to get closure. Th

e gates opened, and she drove silently through the streets until she arrived at his driveway. Hesitantly parking her car, she tried to fight the fatigue that overwhelmed her. Grey came to the front door and turned on his porch light, signaling for her to come inside.

“God, what’s going on?” she said softly.

Ivy crossed the threshold of Grey’s home. Without

thought, she allowed him to take her coat as she walked into the foyer. She looked around in awe as always. Grey's home had been decorated by a friend, who was a professional interior decorator out of 17

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Houston, Texas. Th

e entire home had been lavishly decorated in black Armani Casa designs. It was modern and masculine. Every piece of furniture was an architectural art piece reminiscent of the Art Deco era of the 1930s. Even his foyer screamed aesthetic harmony with its clean lines, ultra-elegant designs, and attention to detail.

As Grey put her coat away, Ivy made her way to the living room where she noticed a single shot glass of tequila and a nearly empty bottle of Gran Centenario on the table. Th is was extremely

alarming to Ivy, because Grey was a light, social drinker. Ivy sat down on the couch and took a deep breath. Normally, she was ever the optimist, but her gut feeling told her to prepare for the worst. So whatever he was about to tell her, she wouldn't cry. She wouldn't curse or hit him. She wouldn't scream. She wouldn't... Grey sat beside her on the couch and interrupted her in deep thought. His smile had gone, and worry laced his face. Ivy stared at Grey for a moment in his black cashmere turtleneck and lightly starched chinos. She

loved his smooth brown chocolate skin clear of any blemish, his strong sculpted jaw line, his adorable dimple that seem to be planted like a star in his left cheek, his smooth black eyebrows, deep dark eyes, and his broad shoulders that sprouted out like wings.

"You want to tell me what this is about?" Ivy asked, looking at the glass on the table.

"How rude of me. Would you like something to drink?" Grey offered politely.

"I think that I would prefer to stay sober."

Grey sighed. Th

ere was no need to prolong this moment any longer.

"Look, I know it's late, and you're tired. But I wouldn't have called you over here if it could have waited until tomorrow."

"It," Ivy said quietly. Grey's words frightened Ivy, but she sat patiently, attentively listening.

Grey continued, "It's just that you know we've been going in circles for a couple of weeks now, and when you come over, it seems like I have an attitude with you." Silence. "It seems like I 18

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don't want you here or that I'm being shady. I mean, just the other day, you told me that it seemed like I was acting funny with you."

He touched her leg as he tried to explain. She looked down and back up at him in total confusion.

"Go on," Ivy said trying to get to the point. Grey continued, "Damn, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I do acknowledge the fact that something hasn't been right around here. And I acknowledge the fact that the problem has been me."

He thought taking the blame would lighten the tension, but he was sorely mistaken. Ivy still had a blank look on her face. "It's just that I am going through something right now. I know you don't understand, but it's like this wedding is taking me on a roller coaster ride." He took a long deep breath. "When we're together all we ever do is talk about the wedding. What colors might we use?"

How many bridesmaids should we use? Where is the reception going to be? It makes me wonder if I am truly ready for this."

His voice trembled. "Th

en I feel trapped after you're gone. I feel depressed, you know...like you're taking over my life."

Th

ere was a long quiet scream in the room that was accompanied by an occasional crackle of the fire to replace. Inside, Grey was too confused to say what he really felt. After all, his friend had only hours earlier revealed to him that he was marrying this wonderful creature for all the wrong reasons. Breaking up with her was definitely the right...no the moral thing to do.

"So you said all that to say what, Grey?" Ivy asked, interrupting with her voice trembling. She had heard enough of his babbling. What did he want to do ...elope?

"I said all that to say that I'm sorry, but we can't go on. It's best that we just call it quits now." Grey tried to avoid making eye contact.

"Because I wouldn't have unprotected sex with you today?"

Ivy's eyes bucked.

"What?" Grey said, appalled. "No."

Th

en what brought all of this on? Why now?" Was she hyperventilating? *Oh, God! I can't breathe*, Ivy thought to herself 19

as the room began to swim around her. She stood up and walked over to the fi replace. She needed some room.

“Why not now? Would you prefer that I tell you the day of the wedding? Or better yet, marry you and serve you with divorce papers before our fi rst anniversary?” Grey could also feel the conversation escalating. *Calm down*, he said to himself. *Just calm down and breathe. You can get through this*, he coached himself in his mind as he took another shot of the tequila.

“No, I’d prefer you be a damned man about the situation and tell me what’s really going on here, because I don’t believe that it’s all about the wedding planning or taking over your life. What about counseling? We haven’t even begun to try to hold this relationship together.” Ivy wiped the tears away as quickly as they fell.

“Ivy,” Grey said, trying to plead with her, seeing that she was losing her composure.

“You know, I’m just not ready for this conversation,” she said, trembling. “I’m not ready to hear that you just wasted fi ve years of my life!” she screamed.

“I never said that I didn’t love you. I’m just confused

right now.” Grey tried to reason with her. Standing up, he debated whether to go to her or not.

“Th

en get unconfused!” Ivy snapped as she turned back toward the fi replace.

“I wish that you would see that there is a bigger picture here.”

Grey walked over to her. It was killing him to end what they had so abruptly, but what else could he do? He had messed up enough.

“Oh, I see the bigger picture, Grey!” Her voice rose again, and she realized that she had broken yet another promise to herself.

“You don’t love me.” She looked into his eyes as she watched his temper overcome him.

“I do love you. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t take the time. Don’t you see that? Just try to hear what I’m saying to you. Try to see what I’m trying to do.” His voice was strained.

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*Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

"I see that you've broken my heart all because you're scared that you'll never get laid by another woman again. I see that you went to my father and asked for my hand in marriage without making sure that you actually wanted it." Ivy raised her hand dramatically.

"I see that I have spent time and money on a wedding that will never take place. And most of all, I see that you are not the man that I thought you were. Th

at is what I can see, Grey." Her voice cracked and mellowed to a broken whisper.

"Ivy, I have realized that I was moving too fast with this. Before it's too late, I have to stop this wedding...this relationship."

Grey looked at her for a moment and realized that she was just too emotional to follow him. As horrible as the entire situation was, he had to be direct with her in order for her to understand what he was truly trying to say. "No matter how I try to explain it, when it comes down to it, I don't want to be with you anymore. I'm sorry, but I just want my life back."

"I didn't ask you for your life in the fi rst place." Ivy's heart was broken. She could barely make eye contact with him. Who was this person? Where was Grey?

Now that the hard part had been said, Grey felt it easier to play off ense. He pushed his point home. "At

least you'll have more time to focus on you."

"I can't believe that you are doing this to me," Ivy said with her eyes closed to push back the tears.

"Don't play the victim here, Ivy. You've been plotting to get me to yourself for years. Now you want to act like I chased you when you know that it was the other way around." Grey let the words slip from his tongue before he had time to think about what he was saying. Whoops... Th

ey both stood, stunned for a moment

and unable to speak or barely breathe.

Why was he doing this to her? She didn't deserve this. Not this!

Ivy simply could not understand, and in his drunken haze neither could Grey for a minute.

"It's not enough for you to break off our engagement, is it? No, you have to go and break off our friendship too," Ivy said, realizing 21

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that she had nothing else to say to him. She straightened up her face and regained her composure.

*Why can't she see that I'm doing her a favor? Grey reasoned with his conscious quietly. Just let go. Just let go!*

Outraged, Ivy turned on her heels and headed for the door, trembling in disbelief. "Alright, Grey. I'll give you what you want. Goodbye," she said trying to hold back the storm of tears she felt welling up in her eyes.

"Wait, Ivy!" Grey said, trying to stop her. He didn't mean to say it like that! He didn't want to hurt her any more than he had to. He felt all of it, but he didn't want to hurt her like this. God!

What was he thinking? He was so damned perplexed by his own feelings, he could barely think of hers.

As Grey grabbed her arm, he felt Ivy swing around and with her open sweaty palm slap him across his left eye. Stunned, he stopped. Th

at had never happened before. But who was he kidding?

She had every reason in the world to be angry. Ivy had broken her only remaining promise and now found herself weak with disappointment. Besides the tears that she could no longer control, she also felt incredibly betrayed. Forgetting her coat, she barged out of his house into the cold night air and got into her car. Before Grey could make it to her, she pulled off into the

streets at top speed.

"I'm so sorry, Ivy," Grey whispered, exhausted by their argument as he leaned against his doorway. He only hoped that he had done the right thing by her, finally.

22

Chapter Two:

Someone New



**Chapter 2**



## **SOME ONE NEW**

"For the last time, I am not engaged anymore," Ivy screamed to Trina as she stepped out of the shower. "So I wish that you would stop telling everyone that I'm getting married. The wedding is

off." She heard herself say the words, but she could hardly believe them.

"Girl, y'all are going to get back together. It's just a lover's quarrel. Everyone has them," Trina said, self-assured. It had been three weeks since Ivy and Grey had spoken. Ivy had marked each day on her calendar like she was counting down some dreadful sentencing. She had received no phone calls, emails, or letters. And she had not tried to contact him in any way either. It was now painfully obvious that Grey's outcry to be free had been genuine and that their engagement had been broken, but there was something she was holding onto that just couldn't be let go so easily. Hope!

However, Ivy dared not be too devastated around Trina, because it wouldn't help things if Grey did come crawling back. No doubt she would take him back. Besides, she hadn't told her family it was off, and she hadn't told the bridesmaids they had 25

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wasted their deposits on dresses they would never

wear. So as far as she was concerned she and Grey had just run into a few minor problems.

For mental reassurance, Ivy had retired her ring to its original box in the back of her underwear drawer to guarantee that if Grey didn't return to her, she wouldn't be forced to take it off in a fit of rage and launch it down the street. It seemed to be a recurring thought lately when she was in rare form, but when she returned to her sanity she would always remember that it was a perfect diamond worth over twenty thousand dollars. Obviously, it was not the type of thing to just throw away. When she was alone, she would pull out the ring and slip it on her finger. Still in awe of its brilliance and, more important, its meaning, she still couldn't believe that everything had ended so abruptly. It was all so terribly confusing, but she was hopelessly determined to believe that it wasn't her fault.

Opening the door to the bathroom, Ivy stepped out, wrapped in her towel drenched in water. "What are you doing tonight?

Oh, let me guess. You're going to Brooks' place," she said condescendingly.

"Yes, I am. He is having some friends over tonight for drinks and a card game to end their seven-day stretch. He goes to Sunday and Monday off -days after this." She paused to catch a breath.

"You know, you should come too. You don't have any thing else to do." Trina wanted Ivy to get out and stop sulking over Grey. She knew that time would bring them back together. They just

needed a breather.

"No thank you. You two argue too much for me. One minute you fight each other, and the next thing you know, you two are back together." Ivy laughed. "I think I'll stay here."

"And do what... mope? Whatever. You are coming with me tonight. They

will be some cute guys there tonight from other specialized units. Just remember that all the guys wearing the EMT-style cargo pants are with specialized units. They make more

money." Trina winked.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"OK, I'm not a police bunny. I'm not looking to hook up with anyone."

"I know. But this will be a good time for you to get your mind off of your fiancé."

"He is not my..." Ivy hated hearing her say that, although she wished that it were still true.

"He *is* your fi ancé. Both of you just need time to yourself to accept who you are to each other. Better for it to happen now than after you two are married." Trina pushed Ivy into the bedroom.

"Now Brooks got off duty at ten, so get dressed."

u

Trucks, drop-tops, squad cars, and even a few Hummers lined the quiet subdivision cove, and a line of off -duty offi cers stood

outside the two-story brick home that had to belong to the one and only heart throb...K. C. Brooks.

For music blasting in the middle of the night and loud, halfnaked women parading up and down the streets to their cars, other neighbors would have quickly been reprimanded, but Brooks seemed not to adhere to such community rules. It was normal for there to be large crowds of people hanging out at his home on any given day. And Brooks' charm kept the neighbors patient and understanding of his hectic lifestyle.

K. C. Brooks was one of the most well-known police offi cers

in the region and one of the most sought-after single beaus in Memphis. He had been on the cover of *Premier* magazine as one of Memphis's top 20 sexiest men and was a highly respected, decorated offi

cer. All the attention that he had gotten over the years might have gone to his head if it wasn't for his father, who was a well-known reverend and an equally high-profile retired top cop. Plus there was his best friend Nicola, who enjoyed the limelight with him.

Th

is was one more reason that Trina was more than happy to be back with Brooks. He was all that her heart had ever wanted. He was financially independent, educated, beautiful, and a very 27

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skilled lover. Th

e only negative thing about Brooks was his inability in the past to commit. But before they had reunited officially this

time, Trina had made him swear to a completely monogamous relationship, and hesitantly Brooks had agreed. Ivy looked over at Trina as they pulled up to Brooks' home and shook her head. "A few friends,

huh?" Ivy checked her makeup.

"Th

is looks more like a few hundred friends."

"Well, he is popular," Trina said, anxious to get into the house and see her *man*.

Stepping out of the car, excited and somewhat nervous, Ivy felt the cold air greet her. Shivering, she dashed to the front door where a huddle of men stood drinking beers and laughing, visibly guarding the even-larger group gathered inside the home.

"Hey Trina," one of the men said, instantly identifying her as she made her way through the small crowd.

"Who's your friend?"

"Ivy," Trina said, pulling Ivy through the half-drunken mob.

"Where's Brooks?"

"Inside waiting for you." Th

ere was a tense silence. "I'm Lee,"

the tall young Asian man said, extending his hand to greet Ivy and slowing down the two women while another officer slipped inside

the house to let Brooks know that his main squeeze had arrived.

"Hello," Ivy said offering her hand. He was cute enough.

"Lee's married," Trina said, moving towards the door. "Say hello to Rena and the kids tonight when you get home, Lee."

"I will, Trina," Lee said, taking a swig of his Bud Light. As they entered the oak and stained-glass double doorway of Brooks' home, Ivy took off her coat and passed it to Trina to hang up in the coatroom.

"I swear Lee is such a dog." Trina smiled at Ivy. "But he's cute, isn't he?"

"I guess," Ivy said, looking back outside at Lee one last time.

"Whatever. You know that he's fine."

Ivy followed Trina through the long corridor and another small crowd to the kitchen, where Brooks was talking on his cell 28

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

phone and stirring a large pot of spaghetti. He looked up and smiled, revealing his large dimples.

*"Hey baby,"* Brooks said, taking off his apron. "I'm surprised to see you so early." Th

e offi

cer that had informed Brooks of Trina's

arrival laughed slyly as he excused himself from the room.

"You know that I had to come see you," Trina said, kissing him on his full rose-colored lips.

lvy admired the two for a moment. Trina was always happiest with Brooks. He had stolen her heart when she was only a sophomore in college and put her through hell for a long time, having already gone through the college experience and moved on to larger more-complex circles. In the past, Trina had caught Brooks in lies and with other women, but she was determined to stay with him. She felt that since she was the only one that he had ever brought home to meet his mother, she would be the one he would eventually marry.

Now after many apartments and roommates, Brooks was buying his first home at age twenty-eight. It boasted four bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms, a pool, a dog name Rico, and a brand new all-black, leather interior Tahoe truck that was parked in the garage. For Brooks, it was just the beginning, but for



Trina it was the end to a very long chase. She was extremely proud of Brooks and all his accomplishments and was more than ready to control his entire life. Oddly enough, it seemed that Brooks didn't mind her ambitions to tame him.

Trina and Brooks embraced joyfully, acting as though they had been soulmates from birth. Ivy sighed to herself. She knew that they would be arguing before the night was over. It was strange, though; arguing didn't seem to affect their willingness to forgive and forget. And that was something that she admired about them too.

"Ivy, what's up girl?" Brooks said finally, after making Trina feel overly welcomed.

"Nothing much. I just thought I would come out and enjoy your party for a while." Ivy smiled.

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"Well, it's good to have you. *Mi casa es tu casa.*" Brooks grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and passed it to a lady officer who was

hugging Trina. "I heard about what your fiancé did. That was

messed up, but don't worry. He'll come back. We all do."

"Brooks!" Trina snapped. "Why did you have to bring that up? She's trying to have a good time here, not be reminded of the man."

"Girl, mind your business. Th

is conversation is between Ivy

and me. Besides, bringing her here won't make her forget about him. Am I right?" Brooks turned to Ivy, but she had already walked back into the crowded den.

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. You probably ran her off," Trina said, shaking her head.

Ivy had to admit that Brooks had great taste. There was a

beautiful bronze sculpture in the living room that resembled Trina, and a black art piece above the fireplace of a man holding up a woman on his shoulders. It appeared to be an original of the local African artist, Yrene. The

entire downstairs had been tiled

in mauve marble and accented with large area rugs

and oversized contemporary furniture.

"Care to dance?" a voice said behind her. Ivy turned around to see a tall dark young man still in his uniform bottoms and a white undershirt holding a small tumbler of Jack and coke.

"Sure," Ivy said, taking his hand as he led her back down into the den where the rest of the guests were dancing. Th

rowing her purse on the table, Ivy began to move from left to right, following his body. He couldn't stay on beat well, but he was great to look at going back in his dance repertoire to the butterfly. Oh God! Ivy thought to herself as he went down to the ground and came back up again, gaining more momentum as the crowd cheered for him. She just moved to the beat, afraid to do any more considering he was cutting a rug all by himself. Grabbing her by the waist, he gyrated uncontrollably, causing Ivy to laugh aloud. He looked ridiculous, but she was having a ball! She danced nearly three straight songs with him before she 30

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

retired to the kitchen to grab something to drink where Brooks and several other offi

cers were engaged in a heated spades game.

"Where have you been?" Trina asked, putting down her drink.

"Dancing," Ivy said, wiping the sweat from her brow.  
"Brooks, where is your restroom?"

"There is one connected to the den, but you can go upstairs to the one in the hallway. I'm sure no one's using it."

"Thanks," Ivy said, grabbing a bottle of water from his refrigerator.

"Hey Brooks. Who is that?" Nicola asked, watching Ivy as she walked out of the kitchen.

"Ivy. Trina's best friend." Brooks winked at Nicola suggestively.

"Ivy could definitely be my best friend," Nicola said, playing a card.

"She's engaged," Trina said, sitting back down beside Brooks.

"Sorry. You'll have to find someone else to be your prey."

“Yeah? Well if she’s married, then where’s the ring?” Nicola asked, taking a sip of his beer.

“Th

ey broke up,” Brooks said, looking at Trina. “She’s a free agent now. I’ll introduce you when she comes back down, Nicola. Trina can’t run everybody.” He kissed her playfully on her cheek.

When Ivy walked out of the bathroom, Trina met her at the stairwell with a small plate of spaghetti and a strange look in her eyes. Giving the plate to Ivy, she whispered in her friend’s ear.

“Brooks is about to introduce you to his partner, Nicola. Brace yourself for this one. He thinks that he’s smooth, but trust me. He ain’t shit.”

“Why does he want to meet me?” Ivy asked, tasting the food. She didn’t realize how hungry she was until right then.

“He wants to add you to his collection, probably. Brooks told him you and Grey had broken up. Just smile, be cautious, and 31

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

brush him off afterwards. *Do not* take him seriously. Now come on before they get suspicious. Th

ey're alone in the living room."

"Damn, they have it all planned out, don't they?" Ivy said, chuckling.

"Girl, you just don't know. Just remember what I said."

"Yeah...yeah. *He's not worth shit.* Well, let's play the game,"

Ivy said throwing her hair off her shoulder. She might as well do something interesting; there was nothing else exciting in her life at the moment.

As the two entered the empty living room, Ivy was expecting to see a less than outstanding, cocky offi

cer waiting for her to

arrive like some co-ed call girl, but instead they were greeted by only Brooks, who was counting the money he had won only moments earlier in a shady game of spades.

"Where's Nicola?" Trina asked as she sat beside Brooks on the couch.

"Oh, he had to run to the restroom, too," he said motioning at the loveseat for Ivy. "Have a seat, Ivy. He'll be in here in a minute."

"How much did you make?" Trina eyed the wad of money as he put it away.

"Enough." He looked at her for a brief moment. "What I want to know is who told you to put on that short dress?"

"You like it?" Trina smiled cunningly.

"Yes, I like it, but some things are meant for the bedroom."

"So let's take this to the bedroom." Trina bit Brooks' bottom lip.

"We'll talk about this in a minute," Brooks said, pinching her side.

"Th

ank you," Ivy said, sighing. She really didn't feel like seeing them carry on all night, and why did she have to get stuck on the love seat with Shaft?

"Boy, I was wondering what was keeping you so long in that bathroom," Brooks said, smiling at Nicola. Brooks knew that 32

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Trina hated every minute of his matchmaking,

especially with Nicola, whom Trina loathed most of all.

“Th

is is Ivy, Trina’s friend. Ivy this is Nicola, my best friend and the head gangster of the Memphis NARC/TACT Special Ops team.”

“Hi,” Nicola said, extending his large masculine hand to Ivy.

“Hello.” Ivy looked up, stunned. A shy smile crept across her lips as she took his hand and made immediate eye contact. “Nice to meet you,” she said, trying not to stare too hard into his hazel brown eyes that hid flirtatiously under his long curling eyelashes. Oh, how she loved men with big brown eyes!

“Th

e pleasure’s all mine,” Nicola said, sitting down beside her on the love seat. “Man, Brooks. If I had known we were going to be in the presence of such beautiful women, I would have definitely been more presentable tonight.” He looked at Ivy again and smiled. “You ladies will have to excuse me for still being in work clothes.”

“No need to blow smoke up our ass so early in the evening,”

Trina said, attacking Nicola.



"Damn, baby," Brooks said, trying to hold back his laughter. Trina did hate Nicola in a genuine, unmistakable way.

"You're excused," Ivy said to Nicola, laughing and trying to avoid his eyes again.

As Nicola grabbed a beer out of the cooler that sat across from him, Ivy had a chance to look at his muscular legs bulging in his cargo-style black uniform pants and black SWAT lace-up boots. Trina was right about their uniform, and he did wear it well. He had an amazing physique, huge sculpted arms, a chiseled chest, and a wide back adorned with a black cotton t-shirt that read

"Cobra." She could see now why Trina had taken the time to warn her. He could potentially be trouble.

Nicola had mastered the art of detection many years ago and could tell that Ivy was looking at him. But he allowed her to sweep his body, quickly assessing all of his assets in hopes of her full approval. Th

e shy grin that she tried hard to control confirmed her

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

attraction to him. He liked her already, and she had barely spoken. He opened his beer and smiled again,

baring the dimples in his cheeks and the deep one in his chin.

"Would you like a beer?" Nicola said, turning closer towards Ivy. Just how far would she let him get by the end of the night?

"No, thank you," Ivy said awkwardly. She wasn't a big drinker. Was he?

"You just look hot in that turtleneck," he said, observing her rather large and perky breasts. Th

at statement had two potential

meanings.

"I'm fine." Her eyebrow rose slightly.

Yes, *you are*, Nicola thought inwardly as he watched her closely. Nearly every woman in Brooks' place tonight was in a low-cut blouse and a high-cut skirt showing everything they had and wanted to share. But this one was in a turtleneck and jeans. To him, that was a delightful tease in itself. No matter what she wore, though, there was no hiding her heart-shaped ass or that adorably small waist. And her hair was so...

"Nicola, pass me a beer, man," Brooks said, interrupting Nicola's thoughts.

*Just what is he anyway?* Ivy thought to herself quietly. Nicola had awfully dark olive coloring to be a through and through white boy, but he was far too fair to be black. Was he Mediterranean, Hispanic, what? He had beautiful black hair that had small natural curls throughout it. His face was chiseled with a strong jaw line, a perfectly constructed nose, a dimple in his chin, wide, full, rosecolored lips that were shaped like a heart, and a clean-shaven face bearing a hard-working tan. He had beautiful coal-black eyebrows that were naturally arched, and his curling eyelashes hid hazel brown eyes that felt like they burned through her.

“So, Ivy what do you do?” Nicola asked, placing his hand on her leg playfully.

“I’m a graduating senior at Bryton-Ritz University and the senior manager of African American collegiate marketing at Yveson and Letehwich.” Her response sounded scripted for an 34

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

interview, and she looked away, embarrassed, as she heard Trina giggle. She knew that she would hear about that later.

“Sounds like you’re a very busy young woman.” Within minutes Nicola had already analyzed her enough to know she was uptight and conservative. Republican?

"Yeah, you could say that," Ivy said, taking another sip of her water. She was beginning to really tense up. Maybe she needed something stronger to drink than water. If she didn't calm down soon, she would begin to sweat under her arms. It was a horrible nervous reaction that she could neither control nor conceal. Realizing that Ivy was uncomfortable, Nicola turned to her.

"Relax," he said putting his hand on her balled up fist.

"I don't know why I'm so nervous," Ivy said, looking down at her fists. It was yet another nervous habit of hers when she became uncomfortable. "I guess I just wasn't expecting there to be such an intimate setting tonight." She looked at Trina.

"Th

is isn't intimate." Nicola chuckled at her remark and looked at Brooks. *Where had they found this girl?*

"For someone that's been in a relationship for five years with the same guy and not gone on absolutely one outside date this is very intimate." Ivy smiled, nearly breathless from her outpour. Nicola laughed, silently shaking his head in amazement at Ivy. She was a real piece of work. Green as money and probably as tight as grandma's grip.

"Five years?" Nicola said as he looked down in his

empty bottle. "Damn, Brooks, do we know anyone down at the precinct that's not married that's been in a relationship for five years?" He tried to slip out a sly burp.

"Hell no," Brooks said, getting up out of his chair and grabbing Trina by the hand. "My own parents weren't married for five years." It was clear exaggeration, but he would go along with his partner for face sake.

"Where are we going?" Trina asked, grabbing Brooks' hand and giving him a mischievous look.

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"I need to show you something." Brooks kissed Trina's neck.

"We'll be back. You two can keep each other company." He pointed at Ivy and Nicola.

Ivy looked up, alarmed. She did not want to be left alone with this...Neanderthal, but alas her cares were in vain. Trina did not even look Ivy's way. Too involved in what Brooks was whispering in her ear, she walked out of the room with his arms wrapped around her waist. "Ivy, grab a beer," Brooks said, pointing at Nicola.

"So, it looks like they left us in each other's care,"

Nicola said, trying to break the ice with Ivy at Brooks' cue. Finally able to direct his full attention to her, he stared at her for a long moment before setting down his now-finished beer.

"How many of those have you had?" Ivy asked, trying to ignore the strong vibe of sexual attraction coming from him.

"A twenty-four pack maybe. Don't worry. I'm alright." Nicola grabbed her hand softly and caressed it. She didn't even know that he was looking at her nails. He hated to see women with chopped up, brittle nails. Most men had a physical pet peeve that they harbored for women. Nails were his. A woman who couldn't even keep her hands up didn't usually hold his attention for too long, but Ivy passed the test.

"Don't try to put the moves on me just because your partner is in there about to get *some*, and you feel left out." Ivy pulled her hand away and hoped that her response would break Nicola's concentration on whatever he was thinking about.

"Did I ask you for *some*? No, I did not. Someone is a little too presumptuous." He smiled impishly. Maybe she wasn't as green as she appeared.

"In the last five minutes, you have put your hand on my leg once, caressed my hands, and looked at my breast at least ten times. I hardly think that *presumptuous* is

the word I would use. No, I think the best word would be *precautious*."

"Tell me about it." Nicola took a long breath and looked around the room. She definitely was no bimbo, which was bad 36

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

for the mood he was trying to set. How in the hell was he going to get laid debating adjectives? He looked at her and smiled, and casually she smiled back. He was almost unsure of how to come at her now that she had just given her sexual harassment speech.

"So, you're on the new NARC/TACT squad," Ivy said, changing the subject. She had evidently scared him. He was beginning to turn red.

"Yeah. I'm a Special Ops lieutenant. Why? Are you interesting in going out for the MPD? If so, let me know so that I can fill all vacancies in my department right now." He yawned and looked at his watch. The

evening was getting away from him. He needed to make a move on this girl or get into some of the other action in the den.

Ivy laughed aloud for the first time since she had met him. Maybe she was being a little too uptight. "I'm sorry," she said trying to relax. "I wasn't trying to be

mean before. Can we start over?" Taking his hand, she put it back on her knee. Nicola smiled. "Th

at's more like it," he said playfully. Moving his hand away, he tried to regain his composure, and at the same time mellow out on trying to push up on her. Besides, slow and steady could win the race.

"Back in the day, I graduated from Memphis State before it was University of Memphis. I majored in marketing." He would play on her turf a little and impress her with something that she didn't know. "Then I went back and got my MBA a few years later."

"Really?" Ivy's face lit up. "Why didn't you pursue it?"

"Well, I was torn at first. I had debated going back into the family business. But I loved law enforcement more. So I pursued that." He could see that she was impressed. That was all that he

needed. *She is an intellectual type, attracted to brain of a man.* OK. Cool, he thought to himself. Now he knew her angle. It was smooth sailing the rest of the way.

"It's best to go for your passion when trying to identify a career. You can do that kind of work for free." She was unknowingly eating out of the palm of his hand.



*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Nicola looked down at his watch. "Yeah, I agree...small talk is always hard for me. So you'll have to excuse me if I'm not the best at it."

"No, I understand. I'm not really used to it either."

"Obviously. You're nearly married."

"No," Ivy said, shaking her head. "I'm not." Nicola had hit a nerve, and it hurt.

"But Trina said that you were engaged." Nicola knew perfectly well that she and her fi ancé had broken up, but he just wanted to hear her confess it with her own lips before he moved any further.

"I *was* engaged. Th

ings just didn't turn out the way I planned. I don't even have a boyfriend anymore." Ivy looked down at her fi ngers. Word traveled fast in Memphis.

*Bingo*, Nicola thought to himself as he tried to repress a small grin. "You two must have had a big fi ght to just break up after fi ve years." He would encourage her as much as possible to talk about it. Open up. Feel the need to be consoled. Th e usual drill.

"You could say that." She slumped down in the seat for a moment. Her mood instantly changed.

Seeing her sudden melancholy, Nicola decided that he needed to make a move before it got too out of control.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring you down. We can change the subject, OK?" He sat at the end of his seat. "What's your favorite subject in school?"

"God, I'm not a child," Ivy said, exasperated and appalled.

"Don't patronize me."

"I'm not trying to patronize you." He was. "I just want to get your mind off of this guy we've been talking about ...nonstop for the last few minutes." Th

e situation was becoming somewhat awkward again. He had to pull in the reigns on her. *Whoa horsey!*

"Well, find another way to do it then," Ivy said, quickly snapping.

"If you insist..." Nicola said, equally as quick. 38

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Grabbing her by the small waist, Nicola pulled Ivy's body to him and looked her in her eyes. "Why are you so feisty?" he asked as they sat face-to-face.

Speechless, Ivy shrugged her shoulders. Staring at her full lips, he caressed her body with his fingertips and felt her instantly relax. It was then that he advanced before she had time to protest. He would taste her if it was the last thing that he did.

Involuntarily, Ivy closed her eyes and parted her lips. As she felt him move closer to her, his lips pressed against hers lightly, and she could feel their warm wet flesh mingling together. His cologne was like an intoxicating elixir that made her drunk with desire, and his touch was so soft and sensual that she began to respond back with movements of her own. Her breathing became heavy as his huge masculine hands moved up her back into her soft flowing locks of hair while he pulled her down demandingly onto his lap. With each passing minute, their kiss became more and more passionate.

Finally realizing that she had straddled the stranger on Brooks'

couch amidst Gerald Levert singing *Made to Love You* and the dancing candlelight, Ivy let out a small moan and tried to separate herself from him.

"Don't stop," Nicola whispered in between their long heated kisses and passionate embrace. He could feel her awakening more and more by the minute. He wanted her right then. *Damn, she smells good. And*

*her lips are soft as rose petals. No. Softer.*

"Wait," Ivy said, tasting his lips again. "Please," she said as she pulled away, trying desperately to ignore the all-too-familiar milk that moistened her hidden flower. Th

is was crazy! But it was hard

to control herself. *Oh God. It feels so good to be wanted again*, she thought inwardly.

Climbing off of Nicola's large, excited body, Ivy cleared her voice and straightened her clothes. *Who in the hell was this guy?* She stared at him for a moment in total dismay. Th at had

never happened before. Disoriented and teased by her first erotic experience outside of her once coveted relationship, Ivy sat back on 39

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

the couch and tried to regain her senses. But she could smell his cologne all over her and she could taste his lips on her mouth. Nicola licked his lips and stretched, trying to make his erection go down now that the mood had changed. Amazed by the weakness his body experienced from what felt like all of her emotions pouring into him through her full warm mouth, he stared off across the room in amazement. Ivy caught a

glimpse of his confusion and was reassured of her own feelings. Whatever had caused them to connect almost instantly, he had also felt. Spellbound, Nicola pulled her close to him again. "Come here," he said in a whisper.

Now sure that most barriers had been broken, Ivy felt relaxed enough to put her head on his chest. It was strange, but in only a few moments she had made a connection with another individual so strong that she wished she could have stayed there forever. To afraid to speak and ruin the moment, she waited for him to say something.

"Are you OK?" Nicola asked, rubbing through her soft, cotton hair. Th

ere was no need to say anything else that he didn't want to. She was his.

"No. I'm far from OK." Ivy was lost for words, but she smiled, carefree.

"Good." He kissed her forehead.

"You know, I actually enjoyed that." She looked up at him and pulled at his dimpled chin like she had known him for years.

"So did I," Nicola looked in her eyes again, trying to read the young black siren that had enchanted him so quickly.

"Honestly though, I am definitely not the type to just go kissing every guy that I'm attracted to. This was just one of those...

*peculiar situations.*" Ivy hoped that he believed her.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me." He nudged her side.

"I am sorry to hear that you're having such a hard time though. Sounds to me like the guy is a dumb ass, but at least you found out before he put the brass shackle around your finger."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Brass shackle?" she repeated. Normally she would take offense at a white man even mentioning shackles in a joke around her, but with him she felt comfortable and free of intimidation.

"I'm not into commitment. Can't you tell? Weddings and marriage have always sounded too much like a life sentence without the possibility of parole." His analogy made it clear why he was not married and probably not in a serious relationship.

"Well, whenever you get married give my condolences to your wife. Sounds like she's in for a treat." She

looked down at his ring finger just to make sure that there were no traces of a wedding ring. He passed the test.

"Yeah well, maybe by then I will have found a woman capable of handling me. Mrs. Agosto will have to be some lady." His words drifted off for a moment, and he went into deep thought.

"Th

inking about the one you let slip away?" Ivy asked, bringing him back to reality.

"No, thinking of all the Ms. Wrongs I've been with." His honesty intrigued her almost as *all the Ms. Wrongs*. It was weird meeting a real playboy.

"Anyway, let's get off our sad stories. Tell me something that will make me smile. You see the way I behave when I get depressed and lonely."

Nicola recalled their kiss with her reminder. "I suggest that you stay in the house until you get over him then. Otherwise, you might find yourself in some pretty compromising situations being so *depressed and lonely*," he said mockingly.

"Believe me, this is as compromised as I'll be." She laid her head back down on his chest and rubbed his side.

"Were we gone that long? Damn, ya'll under each other like you're in love," Trina said, walking back into the living room with Brooks. She had told Ivy to watch herself.

"Evidently so. Look at them all cuddled up together like some old married couple." Brooks winked at Nicola.  
*Damn that boy was good.*

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Th

e sudden attention made the two uncomfortable, and Ivy sat back up in her original position, only this time a lot more relaxed. Nicola didn't budge, but he did give Trina a dirty look. Confused and in total disapproval of her friend's actions, Trina raised her eyebrows at Ivy. "Are you hot? Need something to drink?" Trina said, pulling another Smirnoff Ice out of the cooler.

"No, I'm fine," Ivy said, ignoring her friend's body language.

"Considering I have to drive back to the dorm, I need to be sober."

"You live in the dormitory?" Nicola asked, sitting up, a



little uncomfortable himself.

"Yes, Trina and I are roommates." Ivy could sense something was wrong.

"How old are you, if you don't mind me asking?" Nicola said, recalling his actions and now inwardly wondering if he had moved too quickly. Th

at should have been the question to ask nearly an hour before. Ivy looked at least in her mid-twenties, but maybe her looks had deceived him. He prayed she was at least twenty-one.

"I'm twenty-one." Her smile faded. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine." Nicola turned his attention to his empty bottle, trying not to show his relief at her legal status but disapproving of the age gap. He had dated a girl around her age a couple of months ago. She was slightly airheaded and extremely hard to manage. She was always bouncing around his place when he was trying to sleep, calling him every hour on the hour when they were apart, and nagging him for money to go shopping with her sorority sisters. It was a total nightmare. "I'll be thirty in two months." He smiled politely at her. Ivy didn't seem that type though. Sensing the new conflict about their age difference, Trina tried to make light of the situation despite her dislike for Nicola. "Eight years is not a lot in age difference these days." She nodded at Ivy in approval. "I once dated a

guy who was thirteen years older than me, but he acted like he was my age or younger. I guess that as 42

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

long as you're legal, nothing matters but how mature or immature you behave."

"When did you date someone thirteen years older than you?"

Brooks asked frowning. "Hell, I've been on an off with you for three years. You're only twenty-three."

"He came during one of our off periods," Trina said defensively.

"Alright, you'd better explain yourself," Brooks said, taking his arm from around her.

"Don't get no attitude now, Brooks," Trina said, pulling his arm back.

"Don't tell me. Go tell your senior citizen friend." Brooks laughed as he took another sip of his beer.

"You know what? Forget you. Ivy, are you ready to go?" Trina grabbed her purse off the ground. "It is getting late."

"Yeah, whenever you're ready." Looking over at Nicola

once more, Ivy stood up. "Well, it was nice meeting you, Nicola." She extended her hand.

Accepting it, Nicola stood up and shook her hand and kissed her on her cheek. "Please call me Nicky. It was nice meeting you too, Ivy...What's your last name?"

"Winters."

"OK, Ms. Ivy Winters. It was nice meeting you, too. I'm sure the next time we meet, you and your guy friend will have worked everything out, and you'll be on your way to being *Mrs. Somebody*."

"I doubt that very seriously." Ivy laughed. "You said it, but I forgot. What is your last name again?"

"Agosto," he said proudly. "It's Italian." Black women loved Italians. It was common knowledge on the force.

"Th

e Italian lover!" Brooks stretched and tapped Trina on her behind. "Ladies, hold on to your panties!"

"Don't pay any attention to him. He's a hater." Nicola blushed slightly.

"No, I believe him," Ivy said softly. "Th

anks for keeping me

company though, *Italian lover*."

"You're quite welcome," Nicola said, wishing that they had more time to spend together. "Like I said, the pleasure was all mine." He had to play the gentleman long enough to see her out of the door. Th

en he would go back into the party and wreak havoc on all the women who wished that they could have been having a private moment with him and Brooks.

"We'll walk ya'll out," Brooks said, motioning at Nicola.

"No. We can fi nd our own way out," Trina said, kissing Brooks on the cheek.

"You sure?" Brooks asked.

"Positive," Trina said, smiling. She loved when he behaved like a gentleman.

"Alright then. Give me a call and let me know when you make it home. Don't forget," Brooks said, pulling another bottle of beer out of his cooler. He was ready for them to leave as well. Trina was messing up his action by constantly hugging and kissing him around the other prospects.

"I will." Trina pulled Ivy by the arm.

"Bye," Ivy said, looking one last time at Nicola before they walked out the door.

"*Arrivederci*," Nicola said, watching Ivy walk hesitantly out of the door. He bit his lip at the thought of her warm mouth.

"What the hell was that?" Brooks asked, sitting down on the couch once the girls were out of sight.

"Th

at was perfect timing, *mi amico*." Nicola wiped his lips. He had a distinct feeling that he had just begun the biggest chase of his life. It was a good thing that he had on his running shoes. 44

Chapter Three:

Someone Borrowed



## Chapter 3

### SOMEONE BORROWED

*I should have given him my number.*

Th

e recurring thought made Ivy sit up in bed. It had been two days since her encounter with Nicola, but all she could do was think about the next possible time she would see him. She would give anything to just say, "Call me sometime." Unbelievably, Nicola had struck a

chord in her heart that she didn't know existed. Curiosity was a feeling that Ivy had never experienced for anyone except Grey, until now. She wondered a hundred things about this mysterious man with a great kiss and godlike body. Was he really single? Did he have kids? What did he like to do? What was his middle name? Where was he from? What was he like in bed? Oh no! She shook her head. Th

e thought had crossed her

mind several times. Every time she let her mind roam, she found herself recalling his touch and the warm sensation it sent down into the depths of her soul.

Ivy laid her head back down on her pillow and looked at the phone. Too bad she hadn't slipped her number to him before she left. Agitated by her own shyness, she rolled over and stared at the wall. She heard the voice of sanity creep into her head. 47

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

*Just go back to sleep. Th*

*ink about how you're going to mend your relationship with Grey.* Closing her eyes and taking a deep breath, she tried to concentrate. In her last attempt to keep from thinking of Nicola, she got out of bed and kneeled. She would simply pray until she fell asleep.

"Lord..." Interrupting her last line of defense, the phone rang. Ugh!

"Hello?" Trina said, looking at her caller ID. "Hey," Listening.

"Yeah, she's here." Listening. "No, she's awake. I don't know why, but she's up. Hold on." Trina turned on her lamp and shook her head at Ivy. "It's Nicola," she smirked. "He wants to talk to you. Both of you are getting on my nerves."

"Nicola?" Ivy whispered with her hands still clasped together. Trying to control herself, she took a deep breath before answering the phone. "Hello?" She turned quickly away from Trina's glaring eyes.

"Ivy?" Nicola said, unsure of how she would receive his call.

"Hi," Ivy said, overjoyed.

"I hope that I didn't wake you."

"No," her response was too quick, but she didn't care.

"Good. Look, I'm sorry for calling so late, but to be honest I just had to talk to you again. You left so suddenly the other night; I didn't get a chance to get your number or anything. Brooks gave me Trina's number and said I could reach you here. I hope that you



don't mind." Unable to see him face-to-face, Ivy couldn't detect Nicola's nervousness.

"No, it's fine. You wouldn't believe it, but I was just sitting here thinking about you." *Why did she let that slip out?*

"Really?" Nicola smiled. *So I did leave a good impression.*

"Yeah," her voice softened.

"Well, I was thinking about you, too. Actually, I've been thinking about you since you left." His voice became more confident, and he was suddenly glad that he called. "I would love to see you again."

48

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I would love to see you, too." She was glad that he had finally asked.

"How about tomorrow night?" Ivy's fiancé crossed Nicola's mind. He prayed his persistence would not scare her away, but he had to take a chance. After five years, he was sure that this man would not stay out of the picture too long without trying to mend the relationship.

"Tomorrow sounds great." She was surprised but pleased by his aggression. If he had asked to see her tonight, she doubted if she could have denied him.

"Good. Well then, I'll see you tomorrow at eight." Nicola couldn't believe that it had been so easy to persuade her to see him again.

"Goodnight then," Ivy said, finally feeling like she could get some rest.

"Goodnight," he said, hanging up the phone. Nicola was pleased that she didn't want to prolong their conversation. Anticipation was the key to any good date, but most women wanted to go through the *get to know you* session before the date, which made everything less exciting.

"I can't believe that you just made a date with that man,"

Trina said, eavesdropping. "What about Grey? If he should come over tomorrow, then what?" She didn't want Ivy caught up in a lot of confusion, but she could see it coming with Nicola in the picture.

"Look, Grey is on some old bullshit, OK? I didn't deserve to be treated the way he treated me. So what if he comes over tomorrow and I am not here. Well, I guess I just won't be here." Ivy was tired of Trina taking Grey's side.

"Yes, Grey was dead wrong for what he did. But mark my words, you're running to this man at the wrong time in your life. If you know what's best for you, you'll cancel on him and call Grey." Trina turned off the light and left Ivy in the dark to think about what she had said. Sometimes being a true friend meant choosing to not agree.

49

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

u

"So what did she say?" Brooks asked as Nicola closed his cell phone.

"She said yes," a small proud grin came across Nicola's face.

"I told you that she would. Ivy's cool people." Brooks took a ten-dollar bill out of his wallet. "Hey bartender, bring my man here a *feel-good drink*. He finally landed himself a quality date."

"Quality? You talk like I have dated barrel rats." Nicola recalled his fine selection of the past.

"No, don't get me wrong. You've dated some dime pieces in your day. It's just that...well, you'll see. Once

you go black, I'll be damned if your ass ever will want to go back."

"How do you know that I've never dated a black woman?" He had not.

"It's in your walk, man. Latino women, yes. White women, of course. Asian women, maybe. Black women, hell no." Brooks laughed. "Am I right, or am I right?"

"Cocky bastard," Nicola said, laughing. Th

ere was no need to

confi rm.

"Th

at's what I thought. Forget it. Th

at's what I know!" Brooks

passed Nicola a drink. "Welcome to the other side."

u

Sending the last of her emails, Ivy closed her laptop and nibbled on her celery stick. Trina sat across the dorm in her bed watching television and reading her homework assignment trying to ignore Ivy's taunting stares. In a last resort, Ivy grabbed the remote and

turned off the television.

"Really Trina, what do you know about him?" Ivy asked demanding. "I have a date with this man in less than three hours." She pulled her hair behind her ear and rolled her eyes. Why would Trina hold out on her?

"Why does it matter what I know about him? You've already kissed him and set up your first date. You should have been asking 50

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

me that first. I told you that he was a no-good-ass dog. That should

have been more than enough."

"Oh, don't be like that, Trina. Yes, I may have moved too fast, but this is important. Just tell me something about him," Ivy pouted. "Please," she said making her puppy-dog face.

"Like what?" Trina put down her book and protested with heavy sighs.

"Like does he have a girlfriend for starters?"

"I don't know. All I really know about him is that he's Brooks'

partner. He's from South Beach. He's Italian and supposedly single. Oh, and he's a dog. He's a dog. He's a damn dog."

"You mean to tell me that Brooks never talks about him," Ivy said, ignoring Trina's last statement.

"Look, we just got back together. We don't spend our time talking about Nicola."

"I just don't want to get out here tonight and find out he's a crazed rapist or something."

"So cancel."

"Th

at's what you want me to do, right?"

"If you must know, yes. And it's not that I don't approve of Nicola. I just don't approve of the timing. Hey, you asked my opinion. So I'm gonna tell you," Trina said, folding her arms.

"OK, I'm listening," Ivy could see Trina visibly climbing on her soapbox.

"I'm sure that the man is not a lunatic or rapist; it's just that right now you're very vulnerable. You should be at home recovering from Grey and not out with this lover boy. All he wants to do is take advantage of you."

"I've been home recovering from Grey for a freaking month. I'm ready to have some fun."

"Unless you call a one-night stand fun, I don't think that you're barking up the right tree with Nicola Agosto," Trina said at the end of her very long rope.

51

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"If you know so little about him, then why do you know that's all that he wants from me?" Ivy asked before she turned on the television back on and threw the remote at Trina.

"He's one of the most well-known cops in Memphis. And word does get around. It's not about what he wants from you; it's about what he wants from every woman that he meets." Trina said ending their conversation.

u

In less than forty minutes, Ivy was fully dressed and putting the finishing touches on her hair. Staring at herself in her full mirror, she wondered what Nicola's reaction would be to her floorlength Calvin Klein cashmere body dress. It seemed to highlight every curve of her body, leaving to the imagination what was underneath. Th

e low-cut front revealed her ample brown breasts, and her long auburn tendrils flowed down her back and softly caressed her shoulders. She pulled up her dress to examine the black leather stiletto knee boots once more to make sure that she would be able to walk and look comfortable.

"How do I look?" Ivy asked, spraying her Ralph Lauren Romance cologne.

"Alright," Trina said, trying to continue to show total disapproval.

"Just alright?" Ivy asked, hoping for a more colorful opinion.

"OK, you look good." Trina finally cracked a smile.

"Not great?"

"Close."

"I'll take it." Ivy smiled.

"Oh! Th

ere's the door. Th

at must be the asshole. Are you

ready?" Trina passed Ivy a small bottle of mace.



"What's this for?"

"Just in case he isn't as gentle as he seems. Now put it in your purse. We don't want you walking out with a bottle of mace in your hand. I'll go to the door. You just follow shortly after, and if 52

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Grey comes by I'll just tell him that...well, I just won't answer the door. Be careful. And do not sleep with him, Ivy." Trina wrapped her arms around her friend and closed her eyes. She wished that Ivy only knew what she was getting into by seeing this man.

"I'll be fine. And I'm no hoochie. I'm not going to sleep with him. Give me some credit." Ivy pushed Trina out of the bedroom.

"Go. He's been waiting long enough."

"Th

at's his problem. He's never been made to wait long enough,"

Trina said leaving the room.

Ivy grabbed her coat and scarf out of her closet and stopped to take a deep breath. Everything had happened so suddenly that she was not able to think

her actions through. Now it was too late. Hearing the sound of his deep baritone voice in the next room instantly made her heart skip a beat. Her fingers began to sweat again as she walked out of the bedroom. OK, she thought as she walked out the room ...Lights. Camera. Action!

Stunned by her entrance, Nicola stopped in mid-conversation and admired Ivy as she came out to greet him. Her smile made him melt. Trying to exude the confidence that he was now surely lacking, he extended his arms to hug her. As she wrapped her arms around his back, he caught a whiff of her cologne. It would be nearly impossible to behave like a total gentleman tonight, which is why he prayed that she did not want to behave like a total lady.

"You look great," Nicola said, unable to find words to describe what he was thinking at that moment, and maybe that was best.

"Th

ank you," Ivy said modestly. "You look *great* too." She was extremely impressed with Nicola's choice of clothing. Coincidentally, he wore a gray cashmere turtleneck and a black leather jacket with black wool slacks that fit his large muscle bowlegs and a great pair of Kenneth Cole black leather loafers.

Wow, Ivy thought inwardly. He was far more attractive

tonight than he was when she first met him, which was very hard to top. As Nicola helped Ivy put on her coat, he was able to examine her long slender body closer. "Are you ready?"

53

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Yes." Ivy opened the door. "Trina, I'll see you later." She could read in his eyes that he was pleased with her already.

"Be sweet," Trina said, rolling her eyes at Nicola as she closed the door.

"So where are we going?" Ivy asked walking closely to Nicola.

"I made reservations at Café Society for seven, and then I thought we would catch a movie afterwards over at the Paradiso."

*Did she have a curfew?*

Th

ere was a long silence as Ivy thought about his restaurant selection. True, it was a Saturday night and his plans sounded perfect, but Café Society was a known hangout for Grey's friends and his father's

colleagues. She knew that going there would cause conflict.

"Nicola, can I be honest?" Ivy had to say something now before it was too late.

"Sure." He prepared himself for what seemed to be a letdown judging by the tone in her voice.

"Your dinner reservations sound great, but my ex-fiancé and his friends go there a lot. I really wouldn't..." she was interrupted.

"It's cool. Memphis isn't that small. We can find somewhere else to have dinner." Nicola was glad that her request had been small. It also gave him a better option. One that he dare not suggest at first.

"Th

anks for being understanding," Ivy said feeling the lump in her chest go away.

"Look, I know that you don't know me well, but if you would like to keep all the confusion down we could rent a movie and go to my place. I cook the best lobster in town, and I promise not to do anything that would make you feel uncomfortable."

He was sure that she could read between the lines well enough to understand what he meant.

"I trust you; it's just that it wouldn't look right." Silence. "I wouldn't feel right," Ivy's words fumbled out as she tried to find a way to politely decline.

54

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Th

at's cool. Whatever you want to do is fine with me." He didn't want her to make this date more difficult than it had to be.

So he would let her make her own decision. It really didn't matter to him, anyway.

"You know what?" Ivy said, shedding her shyness suddenly.

"What?" his eyebrow raised in anticipation of her next comment.

"Who cares about how it looks. Let's go to your place. To hell with Grey."

"Yeah, fuck 'em," Nicola said, tired of this Grey already. "Th is is

me," he said walking up to a black Cadillac Escalade and opening the door for her.

“Is this your babe-mobile?” Ivy asked with a sinister smile on her face.

“Yeah,” Nicola said grinning. Evidently, Trina had been talking already.

u

Hours later Nicola placed a garnished plate of lobster, rice pilaf, and Caesar salad on Ivy’s lap as she sat in front of his fireplace. The

warm cushions of his couch made her want to snuggle up with a blanket and fall asleep listening to the jazz that he played in the background. The

sea of scented candles danced about her head making her feel dizzy. She had already had five full glasses of champagne and was starting on her sixth. She smiled involuntarily as he sat down beside her.

“You don’t cease to impress me,” Ivy said looking down at the plate with her vision slightly blurred.

“Taste it first.” Nicola smiled as he took the glass out of her hand. “I think you’ve had enough of this.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t make up my mind at Blockbuster. I just really was not in the mood to watch anything once I got there.”

She giggled a little.

"Hey, it's fine. To tell you the truth, this is what I had in mind the entire time." He placed her silverware on the table. 55

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Th

is is what I had in mind, too. I should have just worn a pair of jeans." Her smile disappeared.

"Uh oh, what's wrong?" Nicola instantly noticed a change in her mood.

"I just really needed to get away from everything and everybody. Th

is week has been hell. I keep dodging my parents, because I don't want to tell them that the wedding is off and..." Her words faded away as tears formed in the sides of her eyes. "And I keep hoping that he'll call and apologize or something." She tried to smile.

Unprepared for yet another discussion about Grey, Nicola set his plate on the table and wiped her eyes. "It's OK, kiddo," he said, unsure of how to handle her.

ly put her hand on his and smiled. "I'm sorry," she said, embarrassed. "I was supposed to leave this at home. I

know that this ruins everything, but I can't seem to help it. I'm in a mess right now." Her hands trembled.

"Relax, Ivy. It's just the champagne. It does that to some people." He wiped her tears again. "I hate to see you being put through this. You're too young to have drama like this. You should be happy right now. Th

ere are so many great things going on your life."

"I know, but nothing makes up for the way I feel." Her tears begin to dry. "I've tried to just push it to the back of mind and focus, but I can't. You just don't know how badly I am hurting inside." Her eyes met his briefly.

Her words reminded him of a more complicated time in his life when the woman he loved sat across from him baring her soul and telling him how badly he had hurt her. It also made him see how foolish he was to let her just walk out of his life the way that Grey was allowing Ivy to do.

"I didn't realize how foolish I had been with someone I used to love until just now." Unsure if he should have said his feelings aloud, Nicola moved closer to her. "I want you to listen to someone 56

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

with more experience under his belt then you will probably have in your entire innocent existence."



"Alright," Ivy said, listening carefully and hanging on to his every word.

"Grey doesn't realize how badly he's hurt you. In fact, I bet you that nine times out of ten most men don't realize what they have done to a woman until well after she has packed up and left. Please, just give him a chance to realize his wrongs, and in time he will make them right. Don't rush him to that point though. Allow him to make it up to you on his own time and on his own terms."

"I'm glad that you have faith in him, because I don't." She cleared her throat. She could see a shame in his eyes that was not evident before. "Have you treated a lot of really good women really wrong? Is that where all this wisdom comes from?" She hated to pry, but she might as well considering that he was in her business.

"Yeah. I've treated a few really good women really badly and a few really bad women even worse." He felt no ties to Ivy and was able to be truthful without fear of rejection. "I'm what you call a...dog." Th

ey both laughed. "No, really I am."

"I don't think you are." Ivy was sincere in her observation but lacked the experience to identify his true intentions.

"I know you don't. Th

at's why I'm telling you, so that I can

protect us both. I'm one of those guys that will say whatever I can to get you in bed, and then do whatever I can to get you out of my life." He looked her in her eyes although the discomfort of his truth made her nervous. "And I can't believe that I just said that aloud." He smiled and sighed simultaneously.

"No. I can't believe that you're that type of man," she said in a near whisper, avoiding eye contact.

"Believe it." He took a sip of champagne and sat back on his couch. "Women like you that have been faithful and loving and devoted for years though, make me realize how much damage can be done from trying to feel that insatiable appetite we as men have. 57

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

It's like we need real love to survive, but we will settle for sex to get by. I've been getting by a long time."

Th

at was the first time he had ever heard himself admit to his wrongs. Before he had always made excuses for his lack of interest after sex or blamed the woman for their problems. Now, suddenly a burden seemed to be

instantly lifted off of his shoulders just by telling a woman the truth. Ivy was just so easy for him to talk to tonight.

“One day you’ll meet someone capable of helping you survive, and you won’t need to get by anymore.” She patted him on the back and sat back in the couch sighing with some relief. His blatant honesty was very refreshing.

“If I ever meet a woman like you...beautiful, smart, and ambitious, I am sure that I will be happy. I just hope that she comes when I’m near sixty and ready to settle down.” He winked at her.

“Lover boy,” Ivy said, blushing.

Th

e evening had taken a sudden change. Nicola’s plan was to wine and dine her right out of her clothes, but her honesty and sincerity made him ashamed of his intentions. Instead, he opted for real conversation with what he had found to be a real woman. Although her beauty mesmerized him and her sensuality aroused him, he would respect her and the man to whom she invisibly belonged.

“So what do two people do for fi ve years?” Nicola tasted the lobster on his plate midway through their conversation. He hadn’t eaten all day, and his stomach

had tightened with nervousness as the night progressed.

“You get to know each other. You take trips, fight, make love, help each other solve problems, and help each other avoid problems. You grow together...” Th

e thoughts made her homesick

for Grey.

“I bet he knows you inside out. I know after five years I would.”

He could almost see himself with her for the rest of his life for a moment as the candlelight brightened her face. 58

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

“He knows me pretty well. He would probably freak out if he knew what I was doing right now.” She smiled devilishly.

“What? You aren’t doing anything.” He looked around the room dramatically. It was amazing just how sheltered Ivy had been.

“Th

is is something.” Ivy giggled. “You don’t indulge in

candlelight dinners with total strangers when you're engaged. Well, we're not technically engaged anymore, but you know what I mean. If we were..."

"But I'm not a total stranger. And you do engage in candlelight dinners, and dancing, and everything else that makes you happy before you marry. It's not like you can do it after you're married. Right?" Nicola said playing the devil's advocate.

"Wrong, it's cheating," Ivy said sincerely, her angelic wings flapping behind her.

"It's living." He tugged at her side. "You're allowed to experience...experiment before you marry. Th

at's the whole

purpose of dating."

"Please," she said, shaking her head. He was being preposterous.

"To me you are nearly a total stranger. I don't even know your middle name."

Nicola didn't understand how such a question would even matter. "Michael," he said in a matter of fact tone. "My name is Nicola Michael Agosto. Now, tell me how that makes me any less of a stranger."

My thought for a moment. He was battling her intellect so she had to give an intelligent response. She bit her lip. "Now you've gone from a total stranger to at least an associate. I know where you work, where you live, your full name, and your ethnic background. By the way, what does Agosto mean in Italian?"

"August. Part of my father's family is from Sicily and some are from Italy. Actually, they are from a little town in western Sicily called Poggioreale. Some time ago, like over a hundred years actually, my family owned a lot of land there. They were farmers.

I think that some of them still are. When my father's family came 59

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

over they changed their surnames from Agostino to just Agosto. I don't know why." Noticing she had a small piece of lobster on her lips he wiped them gently. It caused an awkward moment of sexual tension that they both sensed but ignored.

"I don't know much about where we originated from. The line

got all mixed up when they arrived in New Orleans." Suddenly it sounded funny to say. She giggled. Th

e champagne had not worn

off yet. "My mother is black, and my father is black. So I'm black. But I'm sure that you figured that out."

"You're beautiful; that's about all that I've noticed."

"Daddy's Creole. His entire family still lives in Louisiana. Mom's family is from Nashville. Th

ey met at TSU." Ivy tried to

fight the buzz of the champagne. "What about religion? Do you have any?" Her words fumbled out, and she laughed when Nicola lifted his eyebrow.

"Yes, I have some religion." He laughed. She was too cute. "I'm a lapsed-ass Catholic. And you?"

"Umm. Well, I'm sort of lapsed. Although I lie to my mom and tell her that I go. But I don't." She smiled, embarrassed. "We were raised Catholic, too. Emerald and I went to Catholic schools all of our lives. But my mom is C.O.G.I.C."

"Oh, you mean those people that wear all those really nice clothes and big hats and do cartwheels during mass."

"It's called service, not mass," Ivy said, laughing. "And they don't do cartwheels. Th

ey just are filled with the Holy Ghost. It's no different

than going to the club and dancing. Only they...”

she caught herself lecturing him and paused. Amazingly, he was actually listening attentively and trying to draw an accurate picture in his mind.

“Th

ey what?” he asked wondering why she had stopped.

“You really want to hear this?”

“Yeah,” he said, urging her to finish her statement.

“Oh, OK. Well, it’s their way of dancing for Christ ...praising his name.” She wondered if he followed her.  
60

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“I get it.” He said finally. “Brooks is Baptist. I’ve gone with him to church on a few occasions when his dad invited me for Men’s Day. Th

ey are *something* alike I think.”

“Something,” Ivy said, glad that talking about God didn’t make him nervous. She knew that Grey would try to avoid the conversation with her at all costs.

Trying to keep his promise to himself, Nicola looked over quickly for the remote, averting his eyes from hers



to the table trying to avoid looking directly at her body. *Tempting, Lord. So tempting.* "What kind of music do you like? I have it all." *Down boy*, he commanded to himself quietly as he got up from the couch.

"Do you have Ron Isley?" she asked playfully. The Isley Brothers

were her favorite group when she was growing up. It was all that her mother and father played on Saturday mornings.

"Of course," he said, pulling out his favorite album. "Mr. Big era or old school?" He caught Ivy staring at him. "What do you like?" The

question had more than one meaning.

"Everything." Her eyes raced over his body. The

thought made him smile. "I bet you do." Was she playing with him? "Your food is getting cold," he said, trying to reroute his attention from her ample breasts. If she was playing with him, it was working.

The

food really is great," she said placing her plate beside his on the table.

The

anks.” He was unaware of Ivy’s own intentions. “I learned how to cook when I came to Memphis.” He put on *Atlantis* and sat back down on the couch beside her.

“You’re from Florida, right?” she asked picking back up her champagne.

“Yeah, South Beach. I don’t recall telling you that though.”

“You didn’t. I asked Trina.”

“Checking on me, huh?” Nicola nudged her soft side.

“Well, I had to know who I was going to dinner with. You could have been a psychopath.”

61

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“And knowing where I’m from, where I work, and my full name tells you that I’m not a psychopath, right?” He loved how protective she tried to be. It was a constant turn-on.

“It made me feel better about you.”

“Well then, I am eternally grateful to Trina. Although I also know she told you that I’m a certified dog.” Nicola

raised his brow suggestively.

Ivy laughed. "She did mention it a few thousand times."

For Ivy, their conversation had gone on long enough. She had made up her mind to sleep with him only seconds after he had made up his mind not to sleep with her. Th

ey sat silently beside

each other listening to the music and cuddled up on the couch trying to get past the awkwardness that seemed to still plague them.

"Ivy, I'm very happy to have met you. Grey is a lucky man,"

Nicola said, sipping his champagne. As Ivy turned towards him, he caught a whiff of the perfume in her hair. He loved the jasmine and lilac aroma it gave off . She smiled a lazy smile at him.

"I wish someone would tell him that," she said placing her foot under her to get more comfortable. "You know, you are special, too."

"Well, thank you." He blushed slightly, showing his boyish grin. He wasn't expecting that considering he had just admitted to being the *enemy*.

"You're welcome." She hoped that he could feel her attraction towards him. "Nicky, aren't you going to kiss me some time tonight?" Her lips were pouty and inviting. He wasn't expecting that either. Th

ere was a long silence before

he replied. "I had planned on waiting until I dropped you off back at your place." She was making a move on him! He couldn't believe it.

"Why don't you kiss me now?" Ivy asked, moving over towards him slightly.

"Because I know I won't be able to stop." His smile disappeared as he began to recognize the look in her eyes. Lust. He knew that 62

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

look better than any look in the world. He just didn't expect to see it in her eyes tonight. It was much too early for a girl like Ivy.

"Any more questions?" he asked, clearly mystified.

"Yes, just one."

"I'm all ears," he said in a whisper, looking at her moist lips. She stuttered slightly. "Since you won't kiss me yet, will you at least make love to me before I go?"

Th

ere was a long desperate silence as Nicola debated what his answer would be. Damn, he thought quietly. She looked great and smelled great. It was a hard decision, because his body said hell yes, but his mind said back off .

“Why would you ask something like that of me right after you have given me a conscience? Did you not hear what I said? I’m the type you avoid at all costs.” Nicola was like a werewolf under a clear full moon. He could already feel the stir in his pants at just the thought of taking her, but he tried frantically to control himself.

“Believe me when I say that it’s definitely out of character for me, but it’s really what I want to do right now.” Ivy refused to back off .

“Now, you want to do this, but *later* you’ll regret it. Believe me.”

“No, I won’t.” Ivy took his hand. “I’m asking because I feel something for you that I haven’t felt for a man ever. I know that I will not regret it. I don’t care about what happened with you and some other woman yesterday or ten years ago. I want you, because I see something special now. Something that maybe only I see.”

She touched the side of his face affectionately. Nicola was at a loss for words. Th

is was a fi rst. He told her

that he was a dog, and she wanted him more. Women  
...go fi gure.

“Don’t get me wrong, Ivy. I really want to be with you more than you could possibly imagine, but if we do this you can’t go back.”

He hoped she understood what he was saying.

“I can’t go back to Grey?” She was extremely confused. 63

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Nicola sighed. Obviously, she didn’t understand. “No, you can’t go back to this...being innocent. As you gain more experience in anything, you begin to see the world diff erently. It either becomes more beautiful or more grotesque. In my opinion, it becomes more grotesque.” He shook his head in disbelief. Here he was being the philosopher when he could be naked. What was wrong with him?

“Nicola, some things are meant to be experienced.”

“And some are not.” He paused abruptly while trying to fi nd the perfect words to say to her. Her eyes were fi xed on his. He looked away from her fi rst but found the

strength to face her. "I know that you're hurting right now. I can see it. You can't hide it. And normally that would be my cue to jump in and do what I do best. But Ivy, I think more of you after only knowing you a few days than I have thought of most of the women I've known for years. So, I can't be who I normally am. I...I want to be your friend."

Ivy was silent, moved by his sincerity. She looked down at him holding her hands tightly, stuttering over himself to reach her.

"You want to be my friend?" she asked in a near whisper.

"Yes, I do. Right now, you see me as the guy that will make everything better. But I could be the guy who makes everything worse."

"Do you have an incurable sexually transmitted disease or the innate desire to choke women during sex?" Ivy lifted her brow.

"No and hell no!" he laughed. Th

is girl was crazy.

Ivy's voiced lowered. "Th

en you couldn't possibly make my

life worse."

"Baby, you're just so...innocent." Running his fingers down her shoulder, he watched goose bumps pop up on her body.

"Is that what all of this is about? You think that I'm too innocent for you?" Her brown almond eyes shined at him, awaiting an answer.

"Oh, I know you are innocent. I can literally smell it on you."

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"I may have only been with one man, but that doesn't make me the sacrificial lamb. It makes me choosy. Now I have chosen you," she said, pleading her case as she touched his chest. "Choose me back. Let's make love on our own terms with no games. You don't have to trick me, lie to me, or commit. God forbid. You just have to please me. Is that so hard?" She smiled softly. She could see him finally cracking under her pressure.

"Harder than you know," Nicola said barely above a whisper.

"I won't ask again. If you don't want to then I'll respect



your decision.” Ivy moved away from him, giving him room to think.

“You realize that this won’t make you get over Grey,” Nicola said, reminding her of her self-expressed true love. Trying not to rip her clothes off her body that very moment, he shifted on the couch. Brooks would kill him if he knew that he was actually running from this woman.

“No one said that I’m over Grey,” she said softly. “Th is isn’t even about him.”

“Th en what is it about?” he asked, nearly at wits’ end. Th e sweat was already starting to form at the back of his neck.

“Th is is about us and what’s going on at this very moment. I know that you feel it, too. Otherwise you wouldn’t be running from me. And you’re starting to sweat.” Smiling, she kissed the dimple in his chin. It was such a wonderful feeling to be in complete control of a situation. She instantly understood Nicola’s addiction to this sort of playful banter.

Nicola thought intensely for a brief moment. He might not get this chance ever again. He was just in the right place at the right time. In a time like this, any woman would consider running to another man for comfort.

"I don't want to do anything to you that you'll regret in the morning." Nicola stated again how all of this could be ruined if what she was saying was not totally true. It was important for her to know what she was asking for before he touched her.

"I'm sure about what I'm asking," she said confidently. "I just want to be loved by you. Is that really so terrible, Nicola?"

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He touched her face softly. "No, but there are other ways I could love you." He couldn't believe that he was actually saying this to her.

"I'm sure that there are other ways, but I want you to make love to me."

Nicola was blown away by her request but excited and gratified in the same skipped breath. She was so close to him. So close to who he actually was. Yet she was so far away from belonging to him. Th

e thought made him realize that he should treasure every second he had with her.

"Alright," Nicola said, nodding his head. Normally, he would have had something very clever to say, but tonight he was speechless.

In a silent bid of approval, Ivy smiled shyly. He was such a gentleman.

Taking her by the hand, Nicola decided not to waste another moment. He led her out of the living room into the foyer, where she followed him up the long spiral staircase to his master bedroom. Opening the door, he escorted her inside the dimly lit bedroom and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'll be right back," Nicola said, leaving her all by herself.

"OK," Ivy said, admiring her surroundings.

One could tell a lot about a person by their house and the things that they chose to put in it. Based on this one room, Ivy could honestly say that Nicola had extremely expensive and classic taste. Th

e most noticeable feature of the room was that everything was eggshell white...the walls, the comforter on the bed, the molding on the walls.

In isolation on a wall hanging above the fire replace was a massive mahogany oak-framed painting of a small white boat on a dark blue sea that gave the room a much-needed splash of color. On the wall facing the bed there was a sixty-inch flat-screen plasma television and a custom built-in entertainment armoire. Across from the bed was a wall-to-wall window facing the backyard that was draped with what appeared to be eggshell white

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silk crepe curtains pulled back by velvet blue rope attached to brass handles.

The

king-sized oak sleigh bed was regal yet simple. It was covered in an eggshell white velvet comforter that appeared to have satin on the inside. The

bed pillows were overstuffed and accented by little velvet blue and gold pillows. The

floor was covered in an

eggshell carpet that was so thick she couldn't wait to allow her feet to sink into the cushion.

It seemed that under the romantic lights that cast only a small glow around the room, the most attractive

element in his sacred domicile was his bed. Realizing this she smiled slyly, feeling as though she had revealed a deep secret about him. A woman of impeccable taste had obviously designed this room. Th

e question was who was the woman? Ivy thought for a moment about all the other women who had been in the same room, at the same hour. She suddenly became acutely aware of her position.

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Nicola checked the front door to make sure that it was locked, turned on the alarm, and stopped at the coffee table to finish the glass of champagne sitting by the lamp. Looking at his watch, he realized that it was already 3:00 a.m. He had to be down at headquarters by eight the next morning, and he hadn't slept all day. Oh, well, he thought, smiling to himself as he peeled out of his sweater.

Grabbing the bottle of champagne, he headed back upstairs where Ivy awaited his return. As he approached the room, surprisingly he heard soft music. Apparently she had already turned on his CD player. How did she know that Sade was his favorite singer?

Opening the door, he saw her standing by the window looking out over the pool. He couldn't wait to see what

she really looked like under that long dress. Closing the door behind him, he smiled a devilish smile.

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"You have a beautiful home," she said, turning around from the dream-like view of the Mississippi River.

"Th

ank you," Nicola said, setting down the bottle of champagne by the bed. "Come here," he demanded softly. Ivy walked over to the bed nervously. *Oh God*, she thought, *this is actually about to happen!* She felt her heart flutter as he turned her around carefully, moved her hair off of her shoulders, and gently kissed the nape of her long swanlike neck while allowing his other hand to run up and down her frame, committing the curves of her body to his memory through his fingers. She opened her wet lips, letting out an exasperated gasp. Hearing it, he pulled her closer and bit her ear. Closing her eyes, she felt him unzip the back of her dress and allow it fall to the carpet. He stood behind her, breathing down on her shoulders, rubbing her soft arms, and watching the goose bumps form on her delicate skin. Now, in only her satin chemise, she stood shaking with desire and fear. Th

ere was no warning of Nicola's intentions and no delay

in his actions. His warm hands grabbed her waist and turned her around to face him, and for the first time Ivy saw him in and out of his element. She was just about to speak when he kissed her lips and picked her up off of the ground, silencing her with his passionate embrace. She allowed him to search her mouth with his hungry kiss. Breathing heavily, she wrapped her arms around his neck as he cupped her bottom and pulled her into his erection. In one demanding swoop, he picked her up off the ground and laid her in the bed against the soft pillows and incredibly soft goose-down comforter. She felt as though she was disappearing in its comfort. But no matter where she went, she was certain that he would find her.

Was he as skilled a lover as he seemed? Would he be gentle?

As he stood over her, his face seemed to change. He no longer resembled the harmless man that she had enjoyed talking to downstairs in the living room. Now his eyes were hooded and lustful, his lips were wet with the taste of her mouth, and his demeanor was more forceful and demanding. The thought of what

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was to come excited her, and she rubbed her aching nipples as they hardened while he watched.

She studied him as he peeled out of his clothes beside the bed and revealed his statuesque frame, much to her delight. His body was as muscular as it felt: His chest and back were broad and sculpted; his stomach was rock hard; and his small waist and bowlegs were cut to absolute perfection. His skin was tanned dark olive, and his body smelled of Ralph Lauren Black cologne. Seeing his erection fully now, it occurred to her that what she had asked for was actually about to happen. And finally she was afraid. Nicola came to her quickly, not delaying with talk or theatrics. He pulled her arms up in the air and removed her chemise. Kissing her fingertips, he made his way down to her folds of her arms. Feeling as though she was floating, she watched as he removed her underwear and parted her legs carefully. He didn't look up for her approval. Instead he concentrated on the secret that she tried desperately to hide in between her thighs. She watched the crown of his head and rubbed his neck in total disbelief. Her back arched involuntarily as she sank deep into the comforter. Her eyes rolled, and she bit her lips trying to control the earthquake-like shocks running through her body.

Feeling icy shiver, Nicola crawled over her and kissed her lips.

"I won't hurt you," he said softly as he smiled at her, revealing his dimples. "You know that, don't you?" he



asked, still fondling her.

"Yes," she said, gasping for breath. She was far too enthralled in ecstasy to smile, but she nodded approvingly. When Nicola was sure she was confident in him, he moved back down between her thighs. Feeling his hands around her waist pushing her down on him, he moved her around, exploring the petals of her flower and feeling her blossom into a twice-experienced woman.

"Oh Nicky," Ivy whimpered.

Rubbing through Ivy's hair and taking in the sweet smell of her perfume, Nicola watched as she submitted. Her long, voluptuous

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caramel body was like a muse from a Greek love story. Her full breasts were erect and sensitive to his every touch. Her shapely legs were strong yet soft and pleasing. And her back arched into perfect form. Th

e way that she moved around, nimble and flirtatious as he touched her, aroused him beyond control, but the startled looks she gave him indicated he was showing her something very new. Her long hair brushed over him smelling like lilac, and her brown eyes glared innocently into his as he touched her in places that made her flutter and sometimes giggle. He knew how

beautiful and precious she was, and he was proud to be with her, even if it was for just one night.

Never wanting the moment to end, Ivy sat on top of Nicola, kissing his neck and feeling him massage her back. Moving back and forward, she felt the tip of him accidentally slip inside of her. Startled, Nicola moved back and reached over to the nightstand where he retrieved a condom to protect her. Coming back to her after he had dressed himself properly for their encounter, he was still and silent for just a moment, rubbing her body and kissing every inch of her caramel-colored temple.

"I guess the foreplay is over," Ivy whispered as she watched him hover over her.

"If you want it to be," Nicola said softly. This was the first time

in nearly a decade that he had actually taken the time to make love to a woman instead of simply having sex, but Ivy deserved nothing less than the best that he could give. Considering that he was only the second man that she had been with in her entire life, he was going to make sure that the experience was worthwhile.

"I'm ready," Ivy said in a whisper.

However careful he was with her, Nicola was

exceedingly ready to enter her, even though he was also afraid of the effect that it would have on both of them later. He had never wanted a woman as badly as he wanted her right then. He had never desired to please a woman the way that he sought to please her. The surge of

emotions was almost alarming to him.

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Nicola ran his fingers over Ivy's shapely wet lips as he watched her undulate erotically under him on his silk sheets. He relished the contrast in their skin color and the sweet smell of her body until he could no longer fight his urge. He pulled her close and sucked on her breasts, making her open her legs wide, and wrapped them around his back.

Slowly and carefully, he lifted his large bow hips and pushed through her body, feeling the walls of her flower shake in desperation of a new lover. Her mouth parted in both the despair of his large member and the surprise of its forceful yet wonderful entry. She was so beautiful and so warm until the moans that he tried to suppress became impossible to control. Ivy was overtaken by his power and weak with the pressure of his long strokes that seemed to shatter every notion that she had ever had about him. As he circled her wet

lips with his fingers, he finally slipped his index finger in her mouth and she sucked it softly, creating a tense and warm feeling throughout his body. Pulling her to him, he kissed her passionately. She held onto his massive body as he willed her to his every desire and killed all the innocence that she once possessed. He was on top of her, behind her, around her, and inside of her, pleasing her to no end. His movements dizzied her and left her weak, but still Nicola made her give more.

Nicola watched Ivy carefully, making sure not to hurt her. Seeing that she was ready to reach the pinnacle of ecstasy under him as he thrust himself constantly into her, he rubbed the sweat from her forehead and kissed her gently. Feeling that she had been pleased, his thrusts became more powerful, his buttocks tightened, and he pushed deep inside of her. Kissing and sucking on her breast and her full, bruised mouth, he felt himself passing the point of control and not far from a very familiar apex. Disoriented under him, Ivy's legs quivered as she felt a sudden surge of heat and a wave of shocks that caused her to scream aloud, paralyzed with sheer pleasure. Going limp under him, she breathed heavily, heart pounding painfully, and stared at him in 71

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awe as his body tensed and then thrust widely into her. Gazing into her wide brown eyes, he released himself

with a surge of power so strong his vision blurred. He caught his breath with his eyes still fixed on her and kissed her softly.

Nicola was far too heavy a man to lie on top of her. Falling beside her, he threw his large arm around her, cocked one leg up, and yawned. It took a moment for Ivy to get her bearing. She looked over at him, confused and exhausted but finally managing a smile. Th

eir eyes met, and he lifted her chin to kiss her again, thanking her for giving herself to him. She felt the warmth of his tongue inside of her mouth and was astonished that it still caused a stir inside of her. Th

ey kissed slowly, basking in the comfort of his bed and their passionate embrace.

"I'm so tired," she said, nearly hoarse.

"Well, you'd better get some energy from somewhere, because I'm not finished with you yet," he nudged her side and pulled her little body closer to him. "Are you happy?" He nuzzled his nose in her hair, smelling the familiar lilac aroma. Ivy spooned under him, feeling safe and happy, and closed her eyes. "Very," she said, sliding under his covers. "Are you?" Her lazy eyes lifted to him, hoping that she had satisfied him.

"More than I've ever been." He kissed her lips gently

and rubbed through her tangled hair.

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Morning came quickly for Nicola. He found himself under Ivy, who lay on his chest sleeping quietly in the nude under his comforter. Looking over at the clock on his nightstand, he was amazed that it was nearly 7:30. He carefully pulled her off of him and reached for his phone. Dialing Brooks, he yawned and stretched, trying to drag himself to the bathroom.

"Yeah," Brooks said, pouring a cup of coffee at the precinct.

"You're already at work?" Nicola closed the bathroom door, ran his fingers over the light switch, and turned the water on in the sink.

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"It is 7:30." Brooks tasted his coffee. "Ugh, too sweet. Where are you?"

Nicola yawned again, throwing a towel under the hot water.

"I'm at home. Look, I won't be coming in today. So, pass that on, and I'll get back with you later."

“Wait! Superman isn’t coming to work?” Brooks chuckled. “Is Ivy there?”

Nicola caught himself remembering that Ivy was not just another girl. “No, man. She left early last night. Believe me, it was totally uneventful. I’m just not feeling good. I think that food last night made me sick.” He lowered his voice to a near whisper as he lied.

“Oh,” Brooks said, disappointed that there were no juicy details. “Well, I’ll pass it on. Get better. I’ll holler at you after work.”

“Alright,” Nicola said, wiping his face. Hanging up, he realized that he hadn’t called in sick to work in over three years. “I need a break,” he said aloud, looking at his tired face in the mirror. He opened the bathroom door quietly, turned off the light, and decided to crawl back into bed before Ivy woke up. There was no reason to ruin the morning.

Near noon, Ivy awoke from her peaceful slumber. Nicola was sitting up in bed watching television and rubbing her hair. He had gotten up and slipped on a pair of pajama bottoms and made himself a sandwich while she was sleeping. He chomped away, watching ESPN and gulping down a can of Dr. Pepper. In the middle of an intriguing thought he paused mid-bite and realized that she was watching him. He smiled, revealing his dimples, swallowed hard, and pulled her

from under the covers. He was happy that Ivy was finally up; he had longed for hours to talk to her.

"Good morning," she said, realizing that she was still in the nude. Pulling the sheet over her exposed breasts, she stretched.

"You've nearly missed it," Nicola said, offering her his sandwich.

"Some?"

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"No," she said, waving it away. "Well, maybe just a little,"

she said, recognizing that she was starving. Taking a big bite, she laughed as mustard fell on his chest.

"Damn, girl," he said laughing. "Now, you have to kiss it off,"

he said pulling at her head.

"You're so freaky," she licked the condiment off his chest with her tongue. "Th

ere, is that better?"



Nicola looked at Ivy for a moment as she sat before him gleefully disheveled. Her long flowing locks graced her bare shoulders and back. Her wide brown eyes stared through him, causing a stir not only in his silk jammies but also in his heart. He touched her chin and then straddled her long, shapely body on top of him. He could watch her all day if she let him. Embarrassed, she finally spoke, trying to ease the sexual tension.

"How many times did we make love last night?" she asked, leaning forward on his chest.

"I lost count," he said in a husky whisper. "Why, nymph? Do you need more?" He put his hand on her bare bottom to discover it was still as soft as a baby's.

Ivy laughed and then kissed his heart-shaped lips. She needn't say a word. She could feel him coming to life under her. He traced her face with his fingers, quietly looking at her, making sure that he had committed every mole, scar, curve, inch to memory. Rolling over on top of her suddenly, she smiled as he lifted his hips.

"Aren't you going to help me?" he asked kissing on her neck.

"Nope," she whispered. "If you want it bad enough, you'll figure a way to get it."

As if challenging him, Ivy put her hands behind her

back. Nicola raised both brows at her, enjoying how much she had come out of her shell. Pulling his pants off, he threw them across the room and returned to her, grinning like a Cheshire cat. She giggled again, feeling as though she could float away in happiness. He tore the covers off of her, leaving her naked, and pulled her long legs to him. She tried to cover herself, belting a heavy laugh as he bit her sides. She screamed, wiggled her nose at him, and 74

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tried to clamp her legs tight. He held her hands down against the bed, now naked on top of her, and kissed her slowly. Then, for no

reason at all, he stopped.

"What's wrong?" she asked, only inches from his face.

"Nothing is wrong. It's just that I'm...I think I'm..." he thought about what he was about to say "...going to need a condom." Too afraid to dare speak his feelings aloud, he settled for reaching for the drawer of the nightstand.

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### Chapter Four:

### Someone's Blues



## Chapter 4

### SOMEONE'S BLUES

***"I think that I've been a fool,"*** Grey said, staring at himself blankly in his bathroom mirror still sweating from his late-night sex session. Running water into his black marble sink, he grabbed a large terry-cloth towel and covered his naked body. It had been over a month since he had spoken to Ivy and nearly a month and a half since he had held her in his arms. At first, he thought it was the right thing to do...break up and

move on. His bachelor friends who were now at home with their girlfriends making love on this unusually cold autumn night had frequently shared this advice with him. Now he was alone. The very thought

infuriated him.

*Where is Ivy right now?* He began to feel jealously overtaking him. What if there was someone else in the picture? It had been a while, and their last words to each other would have made anyone seek love in other places. What was he thinking when he said that shit to her? His father had always told him to never let his sexual indiscretions get in the way of true progression, and that was exactly what had happened. He had been a damned fool. 79

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"Grey, I'm about to head out of here," a woman said, zipping up her skirt. "Are you alright?" She noticed the troubled look on his face through his reflection in the mirror.

"I'm fine." He turned around and smiled at her reassuringly.

"Thanks for your company tonight. I enjoyed you."

"Are you sure you're OK? You seem different all of a sudden."

"Honestly, I'm not OK, but don't worry. It's not because of anything that you did. I'm just feeling a little guilty right now." In his heart, he knew that there was no better word than guilt. The

guilt that he deserved. He was sure that those were not the words that she needed to hear, but it was all that he could say.

"*Guilty?* Oh. Well, don't you think that it's a little late for that?" Her eyebrow raised in contempt.

"Better late than never," Grey said, leaning against his sink and feeling a little light-headed.

"Grey, I have known you since you were in diapers, and the one thing that has remained ever constant about you is that you are indecisive. One minute you do and the next minute...you just don't." Th

e older woman smiled at him and turned around. "Now come snap me up in the back."

"Sure," he said coming to her side. "I thought that I was doing the right thing by pushing Ivy away, because of the way that I am...the way that I've been. But it kills me to know that she's alone." He paused for a minute. "She doesn't deserve to be." As Grey snapped her

corset, he kissed the older woman's shoulder.

"Th

ere you go."

"Th

ank you, honey. Who said that she was alone? As pretty as that little girl is, you can bet that if she is alone, it's only for a moment."

"Ivy would never sleep with someone else this quick." Grey shrugged off the idiotic notion and walked away from the silly woman. *What did she know about Ivy? What did she know about anything?*

"Take my advice. If you left her in the state that you said that you did, she isn't alone."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Everyone doesn't give in so quickly, Elaine," Grey said condescendingly.

"Well with the swift kick in the ass you gave her over a month ago, I think that hardly qualifies as quickly or easily for that matter." Grabbing her black clutch purse off of Grey's bed, Elaine headed out of the room a little

miffed by his quick temper.

"Wait, Elaine." Grey didn't want her to leave upset. Walking up to the short, perfectly shaped woman, he took her aging hand. He wouldn't allow her to bolt out of his door like Ivy had done.

"I didn't mean to offend you." He rubbed through her graying, perfectly cut bobbed hair. "I'm sorry."

Elaine smiled at the young man, feeling sympathy for his immature state of mind. "Look, I knew what I was coming over here for and so did you. Anyway, I'm going to give you a bit of advice that most people wouldn't. And you aren't going to like the way that it's said, but if you're smart, you'll listen." Taking Grey's face in her hands, she smiled at the clueless young man. "Stop thinking with your dick. It's not the brightest head on you. You've been using it for too long, and it's done you no good."

Grey was taken aback by her blatant honesty and acid sharp tongue. He was used to Ivy, who was always a far more gentle creature and quite careful with her words and mindful of his feelings. But that was one of the luxuries of being with a woman that came from a *proper stock*.

"Speak your mind then," he said letting go of her hand. *What a bitch!*

"I will, but only because you need to hear from someone who has nothing to gain or lose from your situation. You've been running around here planning this wedding with this girl for months now. She's been nothing but good to you, and then all of a sudden just because you get scared, you break off the wedding. Th

at's wrong, and you know it. Now you feel bad, but it's your fault entirely. Just go back to her before it's too late, because I guarantee that she won't be on the market for too long. Guys like 81

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you, however, stay on the market, because you're so full of shit real women can see straight through you."

"Well, if I'm so full of shit then why did you break your neck to be with me?" Grey sat on the bed in his towel, revealing his large chocolate thighs.

"Are you kidding? Look at you. You're a young virile man full of vigor and surprise, and even if for just one evening, you wanted to be with me. Although we both know it's only because I'm your boss and capable of giving you that much-needed raise. Don't think that I don't know how your mind works. But I don't mind, because I got what I wanted. Besides that you've got one of the longest tongues I have ever seen."

Laughing, she tapped Grey on his head. She thought her little crack was funny, but Grey didn't seem the



least amused.

Elaine became serious with him again. "It's OK to make a mistake as long as you intend to rectify it immediately. We are all fallible, but it comes to a point when *I'm sorry* just isn't enough. Now, has it come to that point for you and Ivy? I don't know. You'll just have to see for yourself, if you're man enough."

"Man enough for what?"

"For her."

"Most of me understands that, but still a part of me doesn't want to be tied down." Grey tried desperately to reason with his own feelings. His mind told him that Ivy was a good woman, but his body begged to be free of inhibition and able to seek out all of those things that seemed hidden and so fascinating to him.

"Is being in a relationship really being tied down?" She lifted his chin and stared him in his wide almond eyes. It was a thought that lingered on her mind daily now that she was ready to be married. Not to mention that her biological clock was definitely ticking, and she had nearly missed all hope of having her own children.

"I don't know." Grey went into deep thought.

"I didn't think that you did, which is why you should call her, apologize, and try to make things right." Smiling,

she turned 82

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and walked out the door, leaving Grey standing confused in his bedroom.

"You're a smart boy. I'm sure that you'll figure it out. Now, I'll see you tomorrow at the office,

and make sure that you have that

report on my desk by ten. I need to look over it before I submit it to the board." Elaine sighed.

"Will do," Grey said, noting her request.

With Elaine, it was always about work. She was one of the finest women that he had ever seen. In fact, he had had a crush on her since he was a preteen, but so did every prepubescent and grown man in Memphis. She was a diva in the truest sense of the word. She was gorgeous, smart, and successful and had been so for over twenty years. Now at forty something, she was still like a fine wine and yet unattainable by any man in Memphis. Most people said it was because she was like most men in Memphis...strictly about business.

After seeing Elaine out, Grey sat down on his living room sofa and planted his face in his hands. What was he going to do?

Ivy really wouldn't be on the market long. Suddenly, being a free man did not sound very liberating at all. In fact, being a free man sounded more like a trap. Was that what he had done, voluntarily trapped himself out of his own happiness?

"I have to get Ivy back," he said aloud, recalling Elaine's advice as he smelled her perfume on his body.

Picking up the phone, Grey contemplated what he would say to Ivy after all of the time he had spent torturing her with agonizing silence. Maybe he should just grovel his way back into her heart?

Considering that he was so stubborn, she would probably enjoy watching him wallow in his self-pity. He could also just put his foot down and demand that she give him one more chance, but based on the way that she slapped him when they argued, he would do better groveling.

Th

e phone rang several times and then Ivy's voice mail picked up. Damn it! Where was she? Hanging the phone up, he tried to remember her work schedule. She was off today. Th ere were

one hundred places she could be! Pacing the room, he called her cell phone. What if he had waited too long? What if she had told her parents! Her father had already warned him in advance.

"Don't fuck this up, boy." Th

ose were her crazy ass dad's exact

words. Th

inking about the middle-aged Marine who indulged his daughter's every wish, Grey felt his heart palpitate. u

"Oh my God! I can't believe I missed his call," Ivy said, looking at her cell phone in total surprise.

Ivy had been in the shower nearly twenty minutes, thinking about Nicola as the steam crowded around her like a thick translucent cloud. Now it was a total shock to see that Grey had finally called. It only took a month for him to come to his senses, well after she had lost all of hers. His stubbornness baffled her.

Dropping her towel on the ground, she lay nude on her bed and closed her eyes.

Th

ree days had gone by since Ivy had been with Nicola, but she still felt sore and tired from the long hours of intense lovemaking. She thought by now she would feel some guilt for her actions, but still there was absolutely nothing but amazement. She smiled as she recalled portions of the longest night of her life. Th is would

be her special little secret. And when the days ahead became too much to bear, she would think back to Nicola's brown eyes and gentle touch and feel alive the way she did with him that night.

"I'll probably never see him again," she said as she shifted to her side in the bed and pulled the covers around her body. Th

e thought actually comforted Ivy. Nicola had been more than a one-night stand; yet, he hadn't. She would never forget his name. She would never forget his face. She would never forget his touch or smell. She would never forget his advice or his confessions. And she would never forget the tears that she felt on her shoulder as he embraced her in the darkness of his room. Nicola had given Ivy the gift of resolve. She knew the next evening when he dropped her off that she would be able to return 84

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

to Grey with open arms and maybe save him from becoming another Nicola. God save him. One day

when he settled down, he would make a woman very happy.

u

Grey slipped on a pair of jeans and a comfortable pullover and jumped into his car. He was determined to find Ivy tonight and make her realize that he was truly worthy of a relationship with her. It was strange how just a few hours ago, he was so sure that he wanted to be alone. And after only a short conversation with Elaine, he was quite sure of the opposite. All he could do was remember the stream of tears flowing down Ivy's precious cheeks as she ran from his place over a month ago. He knew that he had caused her a great deal of pain, and for everything that he had done, he was now truly sorry.

Grey's thoughts were scattered to the wind. Too scattered. He needed to confide in someone who could help him pinpoint the right things to say to her. Then

it came to him. He would call his

square peg of a friend, Mattock. He would know what he should say to get Ivy back.

Checking the time, he stopped at the corner of his street and speed-dialed his friend on his cell phone.

"Hello," Mattock said sounding preoccupied.

“Mattock, it’s Grey.”

“What’s up with you? I didn’t see you at the lodge meeting the other night.”

“I was in Chicago on business. Look, I’m trying to find Ivy. Listening to that bull you said the other day has gotten me in a serious bind. You had me all messed up in the head, feeling like my only release was sending her on her own. And now look at me. Among other things, I’ve slept with a woman old enough to be my mother and possibly risked pissing off Ivy’s psychotic father; and God only knows what else has happened that I don’t know about.” Grey exhaled.

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“Stop whining. You get what you pay for, my friend,” Mattock said, cutting Grey off. “Anyway, I never told you to break up with Ivy. I told you that you couldn’t have your cake and eat it too, meaning that you were going to have to give up Ivy or the late-night flings. You decided on Ivy. Th

at’s your poor choice, my friend.”

“You could have been more specific in what you were

saying. I haven't been right since the other day," Grey felt a headache coming.

"You keep saying the other day. Th

at was a month ago that I

told you to stop leading that girl on," Mattock said, recalling their meeting. "Please don't tell me that you've been festering over this for a month."

"What can I say? I'm a late bloomer."

"No, you're a self-indulged asshole, but that's a whole different story."

"Yeah well. What do you think? Am I making the right decision?"

"Are you sure that you want her? Wait, let me rephrase that. Are you sure that you want *only* her?" Mattock asked with clarification on the matter.

"Yes, I'm sure that I want her and only her," Grey said with some conviction.

"Th

en in my opinion, Grey, you should have never let her out of your sight in the first place. Yes, you are definitely doing the right thing. I just hope that it's not too



late.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” Th

e thought bothered

him more and more as he dwelled on it. After fi ve years, there was no way that she had already moved on to another man.

“Use your head. She’s a good catch.” Realizing that Grey’s epiphany was defi nitely becoming a strain on his only weekly indulgence, Mattock cut their conversation short. Th ere was

nothing left for him to say to his friend now, anyway.

“Well, head off on your mission. I’m going to get back to my massage before my hour is up.”

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“Wait. Would should I say to get back into her good graces?”

“For a change, tell her the truth.”

“Th

e truth?” Grey thought for a moment. What was that?

"Alright. I'll do my best. Say hello to Dr. Dana for me," Grey said feeling even more confident in his decision now that he had spoken with the one man in Memphis that he knew seriously believed in monogamy.

"Will do," Mattock said, looking over at his girlfriend of three years.

u

While Grey was looking all over town for Ivy, she lay in bed back in her quiet little dorm room tranquil in her thoughts. There

wasn't much to do in the unseasonable weather but lie around and relax. Besides, she didn't feel up to doing anything anyway. Too lazy to even dress, she lay under her comforter nude listening to her Robin Th

icke CD.

Hours later, after circling Ivy's mother's house, Ivy's office, all

three major malls, and the major libraries, Grey pulled up to the dorm in his last attempt to locate her. Exhausted by his search but pleased that he was successful, he got out the car and headed to the dorm. It was then that he suddenly realized that he didn't bring cards, candy, diamonds, or flowers. Any one of her favorites would have done fine to help along with his

groveling. As Grey approached Ivy's door, his heart skipped a beat. What if she said that she didn't want him back? Everything in his being prayed that she would forgive him for nearly making the biggest mistake of his life. Startled by the solemn knock, Ivy sat up in her bed with her comforter barely covering her body. As she watched the doorknob twist, she jumped up out of the bed and held the door.

"Who is it?" she asked, grabbing the cordless phone.  
*Grey?*

*Nicola?*

"It's me," Grey said, leaning against the door. "Ivy, let me in. I need to talk to you."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"I'm not dressed," she said, pulling the covers around her entire body.

"I don't mind."

"Well I do. You can't just show up at my door after a month and expect me to let you in." She was too tired to scream and fight.

"Please Ivy, just let me in for a minute. I promise not to

take too much of your time.” Th

e tone of his voice made her calm

enough to let go of the knob.

“Fine. I’ll let you in for just a minute, and then you have to go,” she said, backing away from the door entry.

Grey entered the room hesitantly. He cast a long gaze on her as she stood away from him. Her body had a beautiful radiant glow, and her long auburn mane danced about her bare shoulders. Th

e room smelled of the lilac she wore in her hair, and she stood gracefully out of reach, strong and exotic. He could barely bring himself to speak when he looked at her.

“Hi,” he said, finally forcing himself to utter something.

“Hello.” Looking around the small room, Ivy grabbed a pink robe hanging from her vanity. “I’ll be back in a moment. I just need to slip on something.”

“Please don’t.” Grabbing her arm, Grey pulled her body to him and held her close.

Unsure of what to do, Ivy hugged him carefully, trying not to drop her cover. “Grey, you’re making me uncomfortable,” she said pulling away.

"I don't mean it, baby. I'm just glad to see you." He looked in her eyes and kissed her forehead. "You look so beautiful." His voice trembled.

"No, I don't." Ivy tried to avoid eye contact. "Get to the point of why you are here," she said sitting down on her bed.

"I'm here because I want you back. I want you to forgive me for being stupid and selfish." Seeing that her anger grew stronger by the moment, he grabbed her hand and noticed that for the first 88

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

time since he had placed it on her finger her engagement ring was gone.

"Forgive you or take you back? Last time I checked there was a big difference," Ivy said viciously. "How am I to ever truly trust you again, anyway? How am I to know that you just won't walk out the next time things aren't going your way? Quite frankly, the last few weeks have given me a chance to really look at our pathetic situation, and I have realized that you have had the upper hand for far too long."

Th

is was a side of Ivy he was not used to seeing. She was a naturally submissive creature full of humility and

forgiveness, but now she was stern, adamant, and definitely unmoved. She looked at him with a downcast stare that burned through his heart and his thoughts. She was untouchable, sitting on her self-righteous pedestal of blame. Only she could will herself to love him at this point. He had no more power over her. Th

e sheer thought of the

situation turned him on so, he had to direct his eyes from her wet body clinging to the sheets.

“What do you want, baby? Do you want me to cry?” As he looked up at her, tears ran down Grey’s cheeks. He would play a different card and grovel for this new creature; find a more conniving way to make her submit. “Do you want me to beg? I will. If it will bring you back to me, I will. You can have the upper hand, because I don’t care about it. All I want is a chance to be with you again.”

Ivy swallowed hard. Th

is wasn’t the same man that had broken

her heart. Seeing a more compassionate side of Grey made Ivy forget her indifferent exterior. *He really loves me*, she thought to herself as she tried to maintain her stoic expression. Reasoning past his previous decision to leave her and break off their engagement, Ivy broke down her wall of doubt and smiled softly.

Taking her hand, he kissed the dampness of her skin. He had to go in for the kill now, or it would possibly be too late. "I know that I messed up, but I'll do whatever it takes to make you happy."

Even for what she didn't know, he begged for forgiveness. He was 89

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

sure that he could never tell her what he had done, but to hear her say that she forgave him made him know that he could bring closure to the last month.

"Forgive me first," Ivy said, recalling her own actions. She felt a small tinge of guilt now that she was eye to eye with Grey. She would do anything to let sleeping dogs lay.

"You didn't do anything wrong." He couldn't read her now for some reason.

"I shouldn't have just run out. We could have talked about it and saved ourselves a month of misery and confusion." Ivy caught herself immediately. What he did not know would not hurt either of them.

"Well then, of course I forgive you," Grey said, wiping the tears from Ivy's eyes. "How could I not forgive you?"

"Grey, I love you. You have to know that by now," she

said tenderly. "But I can't allow you to hurt me anymore."

"I know it, baby. I was just being stupid, which I expect is no excuse, but believe me when I say I take all the blame. And I am willing to do whatever it takes to get you back in my life where you belong. And once I have you there, I won't ever do this again."

"All you have to do is ask," she said, holding his hand, "and mean it."

"Take me back," Grey said, touching her face. "Let me back into your life."

"Promise me that you won't desert me ever again."

Grey thought about her words for a moment, wanting to be totally sincere in his promises. Yes, he had deserted her. He had left her alone to figure things out that she couldn't possibly understand.

"I promise to you and to God that no matter what we face in the future, I will never desert you again." Grey meant it more than he meant anything that he had ever said to her.

"Well then, I'm all yours," she said, forgetting her anger. As she reached to put her other hand on his face, her sheet fell down on the floor.



*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I want you so bad," Grey said, looking at her body. Even after being with a woman only hours before, he still longed to be with Ivy. It was something about the pleasure of being with her that drove him insane with lust. She was his little playground, unseen and untouched by the outside world.

"I don't think that we should *rush* things." Quickly, Ivy pulled the cover back over her body. She wasn't sure what to do. Her eyes darted in desperation. Although she wanted Grey as much as he wanted her, she had just been with Nicola three days earlier. She was sure that he would detect it. Th

ere were small scratches on

her back and her hips, passion marks on her inner thighs and the odorous smell of unfaithfulness on her spirit. Who wouldn't see it? It was obvious to the world.

"We won't rush," Grey said, pulling her body closer to him. He would take her tonight if it was the last thing that he did.

"No," Ivy whispered, wincing away from his touch. "We shouldn't."

"Say that you'll marry me, Ivy." Grey held her softly by her moist waist. "Say that you'll forgive me just this once, and let me make this up to you." His words made Ivy forget Nicola, and she lay back in the bed as he moved closer to her.

"And if I do say it, then what?" Now face-to-face with Grey and breathing heavily, Ivy listened closely to him, inwardly begging for the right reply.

"Th

en I'll try my best to make you the happiest woman in the world." Grey kissed her soft hands.

Ivy stopped Grey and gazed at the anxious young man for a brief moment, looking past his physical features for the first time in many years to the soul of him hiding behind his bright brown eyes and lusty thoughts. It was there that she saw his sincerity lingering, lonely and waiting for her to discover it. It was also there that she found her answer and decided to allow him back into her life.

"I'll marry you," Ivy said, kissing Grey's lips softly. "I'll be yours forever."

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And as quickly as Ivy had spoken the words of acceptance, she felt the terrible burden of pain and anger lifted from her heart and replaced by the comforting overflow of tranquility. She also felt the penetration of Grey, unprotected and exposed, push through her body with an undeniable force. Her thoughts cascaded through the five years they had been together, highlighting every reason her decision had been a wise one. Every kiss, hug, smile, gift, dream, tear, failure, and success had been to arrive at this particular point. She embraced him tightly, smiling as she planted her chin in his shoulder gripping his firm muscles and savoring the smell of his virile cologne. At last, her knight in shining armor had arrived to save her from the truths and cold realities of a single-woman's world.

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Chapter Five:

Nicola's Silence



## Chapter 5

### NICOLA'S SILENCE

**“What’s wrong with you, man?”** Brooks asked Nicola as he placed his department-issued weapon on the countertop of his kitchen table. “You’ve been acting strange since your date with old girl.”

Nicola looked over and snapped, “Who said that anything was wrong?” He couldn’t bring himself to openly discuss with Brooks all the emotions competing in him since he had been with Ivy.

"You didn't have to say anything. You're my boy. Plus, I've just been watching you. It's like you've been in another world or something." It wasn't like Brooks to have to pry into Nicola's relationships. Normally, Nicola would just come out and tell him everything, which was why he was so suspicious now.

"If I've been in another world, it's only because this whole new NARC/TACT team is getting on my nerves. I'm used to running my own unit with my own guys. Now I have to worry about *hotheads* from other divisions disobeying my orders, because they don't feel like I'm in charge," Nicola said in a matter-of-fact tone. He cracked a cynical smile.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Oh, well, actually, I thought it had a little more to do with a woman, considering your job has never bothered you before. Besides, the only other person that you really have to deal with is me. I'm Cobra TACT, and you're NARC; and we've been best friends for too many damned years. So how do our teams make your life any harder?" Brooks smiled mischievously. "You can blame us if you want to, but if you ask me your only problem is Ivy."

"Why would Ivy be bothering me?" Nicola opened a

beer and took a swig as he waited for his food to cook.

"I don't know. Maybe she was a little more than you expected?"

You do have the tendency to underestimate. And I'll tell you, like my momma told me some years back when she found out I was out dipping in high school. She said that every time you lay with a woman, spiritually you have to give something to her, and she has to give something to you."

"What are you talking about now?" Nicola asked, preparing himself for one of his friend's outlandish spiritual elucidations.

"No, this is real. For every woman that you've laid with you have to give her some part of you, and she has to give you some part of her." Brooks smiled. "Maybe what she gave you was a conscience."

Nicola chuckled. "You need help. I hope that you don't really believe that, man. Do you know how ridiculous that sounds?"

Nicola continued to argue his point. "First of all, to even try to count the number of women either one of us has been with would take a hell of a lot of time. Secondly, with that many women, you can't give something to them all, unless you have an STD. And I'm super straight in that area, because I always use protection,

and I get tested every six months for every disease known to man,”

Nicola said, shaking his head.

“You’re not listening to me, though,” Brooks said, passing Nicola another Bud Light. “You’re not passing something physically. It’s spiritual. And that messes you up a lot more than some STD.”

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

Nicola opened his beer and took a sip. “I don’t know why I even bother listening to you, man.”

“Just ask my momma then,” Brooks said defensively.

“I’m not going to call your mom! Don’t you see that she just told you that so you would keep your little rocket launcher in your pants?” He chuckled.

“Th

ere’s nothing little about my Kentucky General, and my momma would never lie.” Brooks sat down on the couch and grabbed the remote.

“Kentucky General?” Nicola shook his head in disgust. “I don’t *ever* want to hear you say that again.”

"So what about Ivy? What happened with you two that's got you twisted?" Brooks could see straight through Nicola's game.

"She's a great girl. We had a good time." Gulping down his beer, he looked at Brooks. "End of story. There is nothing to be

twisted about." Nicola belched and sat back.

"I'm just watching how moody you've been. Shit, you act like you got *some* the other night, and I know that Ivy ain't dropping off a damn thing," Brooks said as he waited for a response, but seeing that Nicola would not respond, he continued. "Did she?"

"No, she didn't drop anything off." Nicola respected her too much to tell the truth. "The

truth is that she was just too damned

goody-goody for me. I'm not into trying that hard to get into a woman's pants. All she wanted to do all night was talk." He lied with little hesitation. And instantly, he thought back to when he had held her in his arms.

"What can I say? She's not my type of girl," Nicola said as an obvious afterthought.

"Oh, I don't buy that shit." Brooks surfed through channels and rubbed the ears of his fifty-pound boxer.



"You act like I give a damn about what you *buy*." Nicola paused for a moment. "Hell, did you get some, while you're all up in my business?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did. Trina came over right after you left." Brooks laughed. "And you did too. You can say what you want to, but no man in his right mind is just going to come 97

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from being with a beautiful woman like that and have absolutely nothing to say."

"I had a good time, but we just didn't click." Nicola wanted to tell Brooks about his encounter more than he wanted anything else in the world, but it would have only comprised Ivy's integrity.

"Now can we change the subject, please? You're acting like a little schoolgirl."

"And to think that I used to tell you everything. Not anymore though." Brooks tried to search his friend's face for clues, but there were none.

Looking at his partner's obvious irritation, he concluded that nothing had happened and was forced to retire the subject. The

truth would come out eventually.

"If you really are worried about the team, don't be. This is new

initiative is only supposed to last three years, and then we get a divorce. By then, you'll be on to bigger and better things, and I'll be closer to retiring." Brooks stretched.

"Man, you're never going to retire. You love this job too damned much," Nicola said, picking through his food.

"Speaking of which, has the recruiter called you back yet with your test results?"

"No, not yet. I think that I did well enough to get into the program though."

"I just can't see you as a fed, man. You're too unorthodox."

Nicola laughed. "I could see myself as a fed, but I could never see your wild ass in a suit."

"And you won't. This

is the only blue suit I'll wear, and I look damned good in it, too. Oh by the way, I meant to tell you, we have a new lead on the McNair case. Carson picked up a new perp just this afternoon. He's willing to talk in exchange for a get out of jail free card."

"What's his name?"

"Larry Prichard. Ring a bell?"

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Nope, but I'll head back down there and see what he's talking about after I finish eating." Nicola belched loudly. "Eww, excuse me."

"Head back down there? We just left from a sixteen-hour shift. Why don't you just talk to him in the morning?" Brooks had learned early in their friendship that Nicola was a hard worker, but sometimes he had to remind him that there was more to life than just his job.

"What are we holding him on?" Nicola really didn't feel like going back down to the precinct and interrogating someone at eleven o'clock at night, but he would if it meant getting a good inside tip on the case.

"Well, there was a raid this evening on a crack house off of South Parkway. Th

ey picked about twenty people up on possession, but this particular guy also got a weapons charge, and he was already on probation."

"If he wants a free ride out, he should be talking to the

DA or his lawyer, not me. I can't do anything for him."

"Yeah, well, he asked for you specifically...said that he had something that would blow your skirt up."

"And you're just now telling me?" Nicola would never understand Brooks.

"Let it wait until tomorrow. Trust me; you'll just be aggravated if you head back down there tonight. Let him sweat a little and put the pressure on him in the morning when you have enough energy to stand up straight." Brooks yawned again involuntarily.

"I'm not tired." Nicola reached over for another beer. Brooks looked for fatigue in Nicola's face but only saw the same arrogant and alert prick. "Yeah, I believe you. You didn't get an ounce the other night." Rubbing his bloodshot eyes, Brooks stretched and got up from the table. "You can crash here tonight if you want, but I'm going to bed."

"No. I'm going to head home," Nicola said, debating whether or not to take his friend's advice and wait until the morning to go back down to the jailhouse. "I'll see you later."

On the drive home, Nicola recalled his evening with Ivy for the hundredth time. He had tried to block her out of his thoughts and get on with his life, but every woman he had passed that day, black or white, had reminded him of her in some way. Th

eir one night together had been perfect. Nicola was able to be himself and laugh at someone else's jokes. He didn't have to play the intellect or the athlete. He was just a regular guy with regular interests, and someone appreciated him for being just that. What still astonished Nicola was how calm Ivy had been and how levelheaded she seemed when they parted. She leaned over and kissed him gently on his cheek and whispered "Goodbye." He had wished over and over that she had said goodnight. Goodnight meant that there was a possibility of them talking or seeing one another again. Goodbye was so final, so *nice knowing you*. Pulling into his driveway, Nicola picked up the phone and began to dial Ivy's number. 2-4-0... He hesitated, realizing that he couldn't bring himself to hear her voice. He quickly put his cell phone away and got out of his car. What if she had really meant goodbye? He was a big boy. He was supposed to be able to read between the lines.

For once, Nicola was left feeling vulnerable, and by a woman who had never experienced anyone but her

soon-to-be husband. How ironic. Th

inking about how pathetically frenzied he had become, he laughed at himself. "Man up," he mumbled, tired of wrestling with his thoughts. *Maybe a drink will calm me*, he thought, instantly thinking of a strong Jack and Coke. Pulling his tired body out of his truck, Nicola grabbed his backpack and walked sluggishly to his front door. Noticing that one of the floodlights in his garden was out, he sighed heavily and reminded himself to change it in the morning before heading downtown. As he entered his quiet, empty home, he closed the door softly and peeled off his heavy black steel-toed SWAT boots and sweaty white gym socks.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Leaving his shoes at the front door, Nicola dropped his backpack in the coat closet and yawned as he made his way to the kitchen. Looking into his refrigerator he discovered that there was nothing inside except one beer. Damn it, he had forgotten to go grocery shopping again. Grabbing the lonely beer, he closed the refrigerator door and grabbed a bag of potato chips off the counter.

Nicola walked quietly through his home, observing it in the dark with only small nightlights to guide him in his perfectly organized abode. It was a shame to have

such a nice place and no one to bring *home* to it. Climbing his stairs with his bag of potato chips clutched tightly to him, he tried to fight his exhaustion. When he got to his bedroom, he pulled off his uniform quickly and dropped it on the floor beside him. Turning on the television, he laid his head back on the soft goose-down pillows and breathed in heavily, feeling his body finally relax. As he closed his eyes, without any intention or focus, the familiar trace of Ivy's body came to mind.

"Ivy Winters," Nicola said under his voice as he felt a strain in the small of his back. He would definitely never forget her, but one thing was for sure. He had to move on and quickly, and there was no better time than to start right then. Picking up his phone, Nicola ignored the beeping signal indicating that he had messages. Who could he call at this time of night? Most of the women that he knew had to be in the offi

ce early in the morning. Kate? No. Liz? No. Kelly? No. Layla?

Maybe. He dialed her number. Hearing her voice mail pick up, he hung up. It was probably best she didn't answer. She liked to stay up after sex talking about absolutely nothing for hours. Lifting his tired head, Nicola turned up the volume to television. "What's on tonight?" he asked aloud while he surfed through the channels.

Suddenly his cell phone rang. Looking at his caller ID, he saw that it is was Layla returning his call. He smiled deviously. He 101

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might as well get up and take a shower, because it appeared he would be up all night talking about nothing after all. 102

Chapter Six:

Ivy's Truth





## Chapter 6

### IVY'S TRUTH

*We're finally back on track...*

Ivy relished the thought. Feeling accomplished in her relationship, she counted the days down faithfully now that Grey was back in her life. It had been a long month of exile, but the makeup had been absolutely scrumptious. Grey had been extremely understanding lately and incredibly helpful with the planning of their wedding. He seemed eager to marry her, the way that he did when they first became engaged.

"I can't believe we have less than six months before our wedding," Ivy said, crossing another day off of her calendar.

"Good, that means I only have six more months to put up with you," Trina said, printing off the last of her report for Dr. Peterson's class.

"Now you know that you're going to miss me," Ivy said, disregarding Trina's tone.

"Hardly."

"Whatever. If I'm not around, who is going to be here to make sure that you do your homework?"

“No one; that’s the whole point.”

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Anyway, I’m about to head out. I’m already late. Call me on my cell if you need me.”

“Alright. Say hello to Madison for me.” Trina put her report in its presentation binder.

“Will do.”

Grabbing her purse, Ivy headed out of the house to meet her father for lunch. He called the night before and asked her to meet him at Mischa’s restaurant so that he could give her the check to pay for her wedding dress. Happily, she agreed, considering that it had been nearly a month since she had last spoken with him. Plus, she really missed his face.

Lieutenant Colonel Madison Winters was the only man she had ever truly loved *more than* Grey. He put on his military face around others, but around her he was just a Creole boy from Louisiana who liked to fish off of riverbanks and drink moonshine out of a pitcher when no one was looking. He had been her best friend for many years and her personal confidant. In fact, two weeks before Grey proposed, Madison asked Ivy if she was ready for marriage, because he thought

that Grey would ask at any moment. And one week before she and Grey broke up he had asked if everything was going well in their relationship. Although she was clueless as to how her father knew so much about her life, she only hoped that he wouldn't pick up on Nicola. She didn't see how he could, but somehow Madison always surprised her with his ability to acquire "sensitive intel."

Walking into the dimly lit restaurant, she was greeted by her father, who stood at the bar with a glass of beer in his hand watching ESPN and talking to the bartender. As he turned to see her approaching him, he opened his arms with total approval and hugged his only daughter warmly.

"Little sister," he said, throwing a five-dollar bill on the bar.

"So good to see you." Madison had always called Ivy little sister, because she had always been so mature for someone her age, and he had always been so immature for a man of his. 106

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Hello, Madison," she said, kissing him on his cheek. She had never called him Daddy a day in her life. She observed her aging father. He stood a towering six feet five inches tall with freckles and light-brown eyes. His complexion was fair and his sandy brown hair now

carried accents of gray. Still in very good shape with a well-built physique, he wore his usual khakis, navy blue polo, and brown loafers. She had always thought that his clothes never really matched his playful manner.

"I figured while I was visiting Memphis, I would stop here and get some of the best beer in the world," Madison said, smiling. Th

ey both knew that he would find any reason possible to have a drink.

"I'm sure." Ivy smiled cunningly at him as he escorted her to their seats.

"I've been here for a while, but not by my own volition. Your mother insisted that I leave the house this morning. Her *boyfriend* was coming for brunch. I guess that having me around would put a cramp in their little social." Madison and Sadie had been divorced for nearly ten years, but every time he came to Memphis, he crashed at her place.

"She's dating a lawyer now," Ivy said, giving him the update he was asking for in his own way.

"A lawyer? Now see, that is what I'm talking about." Madison shook his head. "She picks the weirdest men to associate with. You know that everything that they say about lawyers is true." He lifted his brow as if to let his daughter in on a well-kept secret.

“Is everything true that they say about Marines?” Ivy smiled.

“What do they say about Marines? Nobody talks about Marines. Everyone loves them.” Madison took a sip of his beer and grinned at Ivy. “Have you met him yet?” he asked, reverting back to his interrogation.

“Yes. Don’t worry. He won’t be around long.” Ivy liked the idea that her father was still in love with her mother and therefore extremely jealous of any suitors. “It’s your fault, though. She never would have left you if you had just been around more,” Ivy said to 107

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her father in a very matter-of-fact tone. She didn’t hold a grudge against Madison, but every now and then she would remind him of his one big mistake.

“Th

e story of my life.” Madison lifted his glass to her. “When you’re older, you’ll discover that hindsight is 20/20.”

“Anyway, I have missed you.” Ivy’s words warmed his heart as only a daughter could.

“And I have missed you,” he said, touching her hand.

"How is that soon-to-be son-in-law of mine? He isn't messing up, is he? I already told him that I would break his back in four places if he ever made you cry." He liked Grey alright, but if he needed to, he would make him disappear over his only daughter.

"He's just fine, Madison. And the planning is going well."

Some things were better left unsaid, and Ivy knew it.

"You won't tell the truth though, will you girl?" His eyes were fixed on her engagement ring. "You're still blinded by the glimmer of that damned ring." A smile crossed his face. "I can remember the day I slid that one-carat rock on your mother's finger. Her eyes watered like she was cutting onions. We were college kids then. Yeah, she was blinded, too. It literally cost me one semester of school. She was worth it though. She was sure worth it. And you're worth it, too. Which is why if he starts to treat you like you're not worth it, you'd do better leaving him. Don't sell yourself short, sweet pea. You only get one life, and it's as short as an illiterate man's novel."

"Don't worry, Madison. I know that Grey is the right one. I mean, sure he makes mistakes, but he is as perfect as I would hope for him to be." Her voice reassured her troubled father, and a smile crossed his lips.

"Well, with that said, let's have lunch," Madison said,

holding his daughter's hand.

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Hours later, after a long lunch and running a few errands, Ivy returned faithfully to her midterm papers and study notes. It 108

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

was a seasonal ritual to spend hours on end preparing for some of the most grueling analytic thinking that her young mind had ever experienced. She sat curled up on the couch under her greatgrandmother's purple and pink quilt with a mountain of books around her and intentions of burning the midnight oil until first dawn.

Trina joined Ivy in the common area of their little dorm and brought her devoted friend a cup of hot chocolate. Turning down Ivy's radio, she sat across the room from her and opened her accounting book.

"Doesn't this music put you to sleep?" Trina asked, nuzzling her head against the back of the couch.

"Yeah, but anything with words messes with my concentration."

Ivy paused. "Is there still a bottle of No-Doz in the kitchen cabinet?"

"Last time I checked." Getting back up, Trina let out a tired sigh.

"Don't get up, Trina. I'll get it," Ivy said, feeling guilty for bothering her.

"No, I don't mind." Looking through the crowded cabinet, Trina finally found the small bottle of over-the-counter stimulant.

"Are you sure that you want to take one of these things? You'll be up until sunrise."

"Th

at's the plan. I have to finish reading this case so that I can write my analysis. If I don't, Professor Hughes is going to give me hell. I shouldn't have stayed out all afternoon with Madison and then run around all evening trying to finalize my wedding dress arrangements."

"Here you go," Trina said, launching the small white bottle across the room.

Catching it, Ivy immediately opened the bottle and took half a pill with her cocoa. Hoping that it would revitalize her enough to finish her work, she quickly returned, red-eyed and yawning, to the task at hand.



Minutes later, Ivy felt her hands moistening. She rubbed them together and noticed that her heart was palpitating. Suddenly she felt jittery, and sweat beads began popping up on her forehead. Worried, she looked at the bottle again and then questioned its contents. No-Doz wasn't supposed to feel like speed, and although she had never indulged in the illegal drug, she had a feeling that it felt like what she was experiencing.

Trina noticed the startled look on Ivy's face and stopped in her tracks. What the hell was going on? Th

ere was a long silence in the

room before Ivy spoke, and when she did her voice was weak.

"Something's wrong, Trina," Ivy said, holding onto the side of the couch.

"What?"

"I don't know, but I feel like I'm going to faint. Are you sure that there was No-Doz in that bottle?"

Trina quickly took the bottle and emptied the contents onto the counter to better examine the tablets. Each one was an exact replica of the other. Th

inking to check the back of the container, she read through the warning labels and found no reason that Ivy should have been sweating and shaking.

"All it says is that women pregnant or nursing should consult a doctor before using their product," Trina said without thought.

"Do you think that you need to go to the emergency room?"

"Wait! What did you just say?" Th

e words stung Ivy's ears,

making her think clearly for a moment.

"It said if you are pregnant or...." Trina looked over at Ivy as her words registered. "Oh, damn, Ivy! You can't be pregnant." Sitting back down in the small chair across the room, Trina dropped the bottle on the ground and sighed. She needn't ask to know. Women knew the look upon discovering their small fragile secret.

"Oh God." Ivy grabbed her heart. "I am late!" Normally, she would not worry, but she had been with Nicola last month too.

"Are you sure? You have been under a lot of stress. It could be coming. When was your last cycle?" Trina

tried to reason more with herself than with Ivy.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Th

e 28th of September." Silently, Ivy sat on the end of her couch with her hands clasped together. "So much has been going on, I just didn't think about it."

"Ivy, it's November. Well, let's not waste any time. Grab your shoes and let's run up to Walgreen's to get a pregnancy test."

"I'm almost too scared to, Trina. What if it's positive?"

"Th

at's what we're gonna find out," Trina said, slipping on her shoes.

u

Th

ere was nothing more profound to Ivy than watching her life go down the toilet with the upheaval of her lunch and the discovery of a bastard child preparing patiently to expose its brilliant head. Sitting up on her bathroom toilet in complete silence, Ivy looked at the results

again for the tenth time. Positive. Too shocked to cry, she reached out for Trina's hand. One of her worst nightmares had come true, and she didn't know what in the world to do about it.

"Don't worry, honey. I'm sure that Grey will be very supportive,"

Trina said, trying to smile.

"Maybe, but will Nicola?" Th

e thought sent chills down Ivy's

spine.

"Are you telling me that you slept with him?" Th e thought

seemed inconceivable to Trina, who had known her friend and all of her actions to be sensible until that very moment.

"No, I'm telling you that I'm the Virgin Mary. Don't be naive, Trina. Yes, I slept with him, but only once...only to say goodbye."

"Somehow, I don't think you two will be saying goodbye yet."

Trina sat down on the edge of the bathtub and

scratched her head.

"I told you not to let him get you in bed. The man is a certifiable

dog. Well, you've always got a choice." With a raised brow, Trina insinuated abortion.

"You know how I feel about that." Ivy would not even allow the conversation to take place. Her tired eyes were filled with tears. 111

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Damn it. How could I have been so stupid? Only six months away from my wedding, graduation, a new job, a new life, and I go and get pregnant." Ivy wiped the tears from her eyes. "This is

so messed up."

"Yeah, it is." Trina was for once lost for words.

"What am I going to do?" Ivy asked rhetorically as she hit her leg with her closed fist.

"You're going to have to tell him." It was Trina's best advice under the circumstances. "Th

at way both of you can come up

with a solution."

"Him? Which *him* would you be referring to? Or have you forgotten that I don't know myself?" Ivy clasped her hands together.

"You didn't use protection with a man you barely knew?" Trina was disgusted for reasons unapparent to Ivy.

"Yes, we used protection, but I don't remember how many times." Ivy shook her head in disbelief. "I was sort of drunk, and I just don't remember. Anything could have happened that night. I know that morning we used protection, but I just don't remember everything that happened the night before."

"Well, what about Grey?"

"I slept with Nicola around the 12th of October. I slept with Grey shortly after. Th

e day we got back together, he didn't use anything." Ivy sighed. "It could literally be either one of them."

"Not if you used protection with Nicola..." Trina begged for it not to be so. "Ugh, I can't believe you let him touch you," Trina could not get the thought out of her mind.

"Trina! OK, I get that you're a little disappointed, but could you get off my ass, please?" Ivy wiped the tears from her cheek.

"I'm sorry," Trina said getting focused. "OK, we can figure this out together. How far apart did you sleep with them?"

"Three days."

"So you were ovulating when you slept with both of them."

"That wasn't good news."

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Yeah." Ivy closed her eyes at the thought of it. "That is a potential disaster."

"You'll have to tell both of them the truth. As hard as it seems now, believe me, it will be for the best." Trina knew that such a delicate situation called for not only sensitivity but also sensibility. Right now more than ever Ivy needed a true friend who wasn't willing to cut corners with her.

"I guess it's not one of those situations you can easily

lie about for too long anyway, huh?" Silence. "Shit! I've never been unfaithful, and the one time I do...the one time I do, I get pregnant. I just don't understand life. I don't understand the purpose." She began to cry. "I've tried too hard to just fail." Sniff . "To just go home with my tail tucked between my legs and let my family take care of me." Sniff ! "What I am I going to do?" Ivy put her hands over her mouth and began to cry hysterically.

"Technically, you didn't cheat on Grey, because you two weren't even together. Please stop crying, Ivy. You'll only make things worse for yourself." Trina put her arm around her gently.

"I couldn't possibly make things any worse!"

"Look, you're crying like the world has come to an end, and it hasn't. It is just a baby. And I know that you say *just a baby*. How can an issue like that be just anything? But it is. You still have your job off er, your fiancé, and your credits to graduate. Nothing has changed except your state of mind."

"You wouldn't be so clearheaded if it had happened to you. Trust me."

"Oh, but it has happened to me." Trina looked away. "And I chose to have an abortion." It was a secret that Trina had kept to herself for quite some time, but she felt now was the time to reveal her secret in order to help Ivy through a very difficult situation.



“What?” Ivy said following her out of the cramped space of the restroom. “Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Why tell someone you’re pregnant when you know that you won’t be for long? Anyway, it was the best decision that I could have ever made under the circumstances. You know that my family has 113

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

never been as stable as yours. There was really no one to run home to with my tail tucked. That’s something that I am absolutely sure of.” There

was little if any guilt in Trina’s eyes.

“It was Brooks’ baby?” There the plot thickened, and for a moment Ivy forgot about her own problems.

“No. He has no clue that I was even pregnant. I really had no other options, Ivy. Believe me.”

"Oh, Trina. I'm so sorry." Ivy sat down on the bed intrigued by Trina's story."

"Look, I know that it sounds selfish and silly to you, but for me it was the right thing to do. For you, there are surely other options." Trina was disgusted with herself again as she rehashed old feelings.

Ivy's thoughts wondered. "In Madison's eyes, I am perfect. I made good grades, won almost everything that I've ever competed in, and never have let my family down. Now, I'm going to wobble across the stage of opportunity with a bastard child and no future."

"Don't be silly. You have a future, but it will be what you make of it. And you have options too, but they will be what you choose them to be. Besides, don't be surprised if that little *bastard* doesn't help you to put your life into perspective."

"How could a child possibly put my life into perspective? My life was in perspective." Ivy moved her hair behind her ear and continued in a strained voice. "I had set goals, and I was going after them. There is basically nothing left to say."

"Well listen to what you just told me. For twenty-one years you have lived for other people and met other people's expectations of you. Now you have to live for yourself and for that baby." Trina's words provoked an

argument.

"I have not lived for other people. I have always lived for myself." Ivy's voice shrieked with defiance.

"Case in point—your mother was Miss Tennessee State when she was a junior in college, so last year you ran and won the title of Ms. Bryton-Ritz. Your father pledged to a fraternity so you

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

pledged to his sister sorority. Your grandfather attended BrytonRitz, so you now attend. Your fi ancé complimented a girl in a red convertible the fi rst day of your freshman year, so you went out and bought a convertible. Your grandmother worked two jobs her senior year of college to bring in a dowry, *if you will* , to the marriage, and you now hold the same damned ambition. Have I said enough yet?" Trina smiled at her now-furious roommate.

"Oh, you're way off ," Ivy said, grabbing her books.

"No, I believe I'm right on point, which is why I just thought that you should know that this will be the fi rst thing that you've ever done that was not expected or requested of you by another human being. You should be happy." Trina smiled sarcastically and dodged the pillow Ivy threw at her.

Rolling her eyes, Ivy left the room. What did Trina know?

How could anyone see inside of her soul to tell whether or not she lived for other people? She opened the refrigerator door and stared blankly off into space. Grabbing a bowl of salad prepared the night before, she slammed the door and plopped down on the couch. Trina's words echoed in her mind. Turning on the television, Ivy let out a great sigh. She had been in charge of her life for years. Hadn't she? She tapped her fingers on the side of the couch. Had she?

"Lived for other people, my ass," she said aloud as she flipped through the channels. She had come to Bryton-Ritz out of tradition. She had bought her car because she loved the attention it got. So what if she had pledged to please her daddy? It didn't matter, she loved her sisterhood now. She had gotten two jobs to...

She had run for Ms. Bryton-Ritz because... Shit. She hated when Trina was right.

Ivy was incensed. How could being pregnant be a positive in her life right now? She was a freaking statistic! She was a menace to a health society. Oh God! What if it was a boy? A woman could not raise a man! Her father had said it over and over a hundred times when she was growing up. What if it was girl? What if 115

she had twins or triplets even? What if the baby was retarded...she wouldn't even think it.

Closing her eyes to push the thought out of her mind, Ivy pulled the blanket over her legs. What if Grey was the baby's father after all and she confessed prematurely? She would have done all of this for nothing and lost everything. But then again what if it was Nicola's child? It would surely come out bearing the complexion of an interracial child. If that happened, she would really be screwed.

"Ivy, it's Grey on the phone," Trina said, sticking her head out of the bedroom door.

"Tell him that I will call him back," Ivy said, too afraid to hear his voice. She could not bear to speak to him now. She didn't know if she could ever bear it.

"He says that he's pulling up outside, so get your things."

Laying her head back on the couch, Ivy took a deep breath. With all the sudden commotion, she had forgotten that he was picking her up to spend the night. If there was ever a night that she needed to be alone, it was tonight. However, Grey wouldn't understand if she cancelled, especially since it had been her idea to

spend more time together.

Grabbing her bags from her bedroom and her books from the common area, she pulled a coat over her now-shivering body and headed out into the snow to Grey's car. Whatever she did tonight, she wouldn't tell him, not until she had time to think things through and come up with a plan.

Greeting Grey with a kiss, Ivy closed the door to his car and tried to hide her new distractions, but automatically he noticed the hint of melancholy and worry in her face.

"Something wrong?" he asked, pulling out of the parking lot into the streets.

"No, I'm just tired. I've been with Madison all day."

"He's here?" Grey asked, concerned. Th

e very mention of that

man's name sent chills down his spine. He would never tell Ivy, 116

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

but he thought Madison was a raving psychotic with a chokehold on Ivy's life.

"Yeah, he's here, but he's leaving tomorrow."

"Oh well, I guess I won't get a chance to see him. I have a hundred things to do tomorrow. Pity." Grey automatically knew that would get a rise out of Ivy.

"It's OK," Ivy said, totally unconcerned as she looked out the window.

"Are you sure that you're OK? You don't seem yourself."

"I'm fine, baby," Ivy said, turning and giving him a reassuring smile.

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Later that evening after Ivy had taken a shower and crawled into the bed overly exhausted and unusually quiet, Grey finished his *Wall Street Journal* and turned off the lights. Like an old married couple, they cuddled in the darkness, seemingly relaxed and at ease.

Reflecting on their relationship, Grey was somewhat at peace. For the moment, his sexual inhibitions had subsided, leaving him sober enough to focus on Ivy. And he had to admit that he had seen a dramatic change in her behavior since they had gotten back together. She was going out of the way to make him happy and yet still giving him space to breathe.

It was odd, but when Ivy felt good about them, he somehow was able to get more work done at the offi

ce and in the classroom.

Finishing his MBA wasn't an easy task, especially when he had such a high-maintenance relationship and career, but with a little more than a semester left before graduation, he had no complaints. It was now clear to Grey what he had to do in order to keep control over the situation with Ivy. Th

e issue wasn't so much that

he had to choose between temporary pleasure with other women or the long-term benefits of his fiancée. Rather, he simply had to keep them miles apart from each other and still at only arms'

length from him.

117

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Men had cheap thrills from time to time, and some men like him had them often. However, Grey had seen over the last month that every man did not have an exceptional young woman willing to stand by his side through thick and thin. He now realized what made Ivy different and special, and he was not about to lose her again. As his father once told him, "Only bring your wife home to your house; leave your whore at the hotel."



Th

ere were a few times when Grey had gone against better judgment and brought someone home with him, because the encounter was going to be so quick it didn't require a hotel room, or because she could be trusted never to return afterwards. But mostly he followed the rules. No house calls. No unprotected sex. No intimate words of endearment. No virgins. No gifts. No voice messages or written correspondence, and absolutely no calls the next day. He had always made it clear that he was a taken man just bowing down to his temptations. Th

e sad thing was that women

accepted his pathetic excuses and allowed him to use them, but that was not his fault.

"Oh well," he said aloud as he pondered his thoughts while Ivy lay on his chest, resting. He looked down at her angelic face, serene and unconcerned, and felt a welcomed calm. Life was good. 118

Chapter Seven:

Happy Birthday



## Chapter 7

### HAPPY BIRTH DAY!

**“One month and not one word from Ivy?”** Brooks asked, probing Nicola for the hundredth time about his elusive evening. After not being able to get the information he was looking for from Trina, he decided to continue to hound Nicola in hopes that eventually he would break.

“When are you ever going to give up?” Nicola asked while setting down the eighty-pound free weights to

rest on an empty bench. "We didn't exactly hit it off . So we went our separate ways."

He wiped the sweat from his eyes with his hand towel.

"I'm going to keep asking until I get the right answer, or are you forgetting that's what I do for a living?"

"I'm not a perp, Brooks. I'm your best friend, and as your best friend, I'm telling you to back off of the subject. Ivy is a dead issue."

By now, Brooks had come to conclusion that something had happened between Nicola and Ivy, because for nearly a month after their date, his partner always seemed occupied in deep thought and very often in a bad mood. Only a woman could have that type of effect on a man.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"It's just that I even give one-night stands a callback after two months. You know...try to rekindle an old flame. Maybe you should just give her a call. Who knows, you might be able to keep it up this time." Watching Nicola's face redden with frustration, Brooks retired his questions for the time being. "Dead issue, my ass," he said tauntingly before returning to his workout. Nicola would break sooner or later; there was

no doubting that. Pretending to watch the flat-screen television mounted on the wall across the gym, Nicola thought back to Ivy and wished for a moment that he could have called her and asked all the questions that filled his mind. Did she get back with Grey? Did she move on? Did she think of him? Th

ere was so much left unsaid between

them, and yet he didn't feel in his heart that it was over. Nicola had often daydreamed about running into Ivy on the street and inviting her to go out for a cup of coffee or lunch. In his dreams, she would be happy to see him and spend hours explaining why she couldn't call. She would smile while they talked, holding his hand and laughing at his jokes as only she could, and then they would make arrangements to meet again, this time with the promise of more to come after the morning after. But that was just a silly daydream that he drifted off into when no one was around. She was his little secret; someone he could not have simply because she did not choose to have him.

"Snap out of your daze, lover boy," Brooks said, snapping his fingers. "And check out the bird on the treadmill."

"Where?" Nicola said, returning to his old self, a dog on the prowl. After all, a daydream alone didn't satisfy his unquenchable appetite for sex or the prospect thereof.

“Old girl in the blue short-shorts,” Brooks pointed her out.

“All you can see is her ass,” Nicola said only slightly interested.

“What if she turns around and looks like...”

Finishing her session, the young woman stepped off the treadmill and threw her towel over her left shoulder. Turning around, she made eye contact with Nicola and smiled.

“Damn,” Nicola said, forgetting to finish his sentence.

122

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

“Told you,” Brooks said, laughing. “You’re not going to find an ass like that on an ugly woman. Believe me, I know.”

“Let you tell it...you know everything.”

“I do know everything,” Brooks said condescendingly.

“Th

en what’s her name?”

“It doesn’t matter. You won’t remember it the next

morning anyway.” Th

ey both watched quietly as she walked past them with her eyes still on Nicola.

“You’d better make a move while you still can,” Brooks said, shaking his head.

“I’m already on her.” Wiping his face with his towel again, Nicola quickly followed the small busty Asian woman to the front desk.

“Excuse, me. Could I bother you for just a minute?” He asked gently, grabbing her by the arm.

“Do I know you?” she asked in a thick French accent.

“No, but I’d like for you to. My name is Nicola. And you are?”

He offered his hand.

“Leaving,” she said, turning around to head out the door. Nicola looked down at his denied hand and smiled. *OK, it’s like that*, he thought to himself as he jumped in front of her and held her shoulder lightly.

“Wait. You mean to tell me you eyeballed me that hard just to play hard to get once I chased you down? You evidently don’t know the rules to the game.”

“And what game are we playing?” She smiled cleverly.

"When I was a little tyke, we used to call it, *catch a girl get a girl*." He offered his hand again.

"My name is Kit." She shook his hand this time, acknowledging the attraction between them.

"Well, it is very, very nice to meet you, Kit. You know today is my birthday, and I think I just found my present." Nicola knew that any woman in her right mind would have walked off immediately, totally disgusted with his cheap antics, but he could tell that Kit would stay. She was *that* type of girl.

"Today is really your birthday?"

123

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Honest," he said crossing his heart. "And I would love for you to go out with me tonight." He watched her carefully now, reading all of her body language. She would definitely say yes.

"I'm sorry, but I can't, birthday boy. I'm working tonight."

Visibly pouting, he smiled, revealing his undeniable dimples.

"Oh well, I guess it's my loss." Inside, he knew that she would reschedule.

"But," she said moving closer to his chest. "You can come and see me at work tonight if you like, and we can celebrate your birthday afterwards."

"Sounds like a plan. Where do you work?" It was pathetic that he was so good at this pitiful game of cat and mouse, but someone had to play it.

"I work at the Black Tie Gentlemen's Club. Have you ever heard of it?" She watched his face light up as men usually did when she told them about her profession.

"Have I heard of it? Miss Kitty, I am a preferred VIP customer."

His chest stuck out a little. "But I don't recall seeing you there."

"Th

ey call me Masquerade," she said proudly. "Now do you remember me?"

"Oh yeah, you're amazing in that little *kinky* green costume. I hardly recognize you without your Mardi Gras mask," he said, picturing what she looked like on stage.

"No, you just don't recognize me with clothes on."

"Th



at too,” Nicola said, amused. “But I have to tell you, I don’t think it’s fair that I’ve seen what you can do, but you haven’t seen what I can do.” Was she a smart enough girl to read between the lines?

“Well tonight we’ll just have to do something about that. Won’t we?” Touching his lips with her index finger, she blew him a kiss and walked away. Th

ere was no need to turn back. She knew

that he was watching her closely now, analyzing her small waist, large bust, and shapely legs. He had struck gold, and they both knew it.

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*Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

Returning back into the gym with the ego of Zeus, Nicola smiled at Brooks, proudly preparing to boast of his good fortune.

“Good looking out. It appears that I’m going to spending my birthday with Masquerade.” He leaned against the treadmill and looked at his watch.

“Masquerade? You mean the girl from the Black Tie?” Brooks was a regular as well, and he prided himself on knowing each exotic dancer by stage name and all

equivalent aliases.

“Th

at’s exactly the one,” Nicola said, returning to his weights.

“Ain’t that some shit.” Brooks was at a loss for words. He should have gone over and talked to her on his own instead of worrying about Nicola.

“She wants me to meet her down at the Black Tie tonight. You feel like going?”

“When do I not feel like going to the Black Tie, man? But I’ve got to get some rest. Tomorrow is Th

anksgiving. My folks are

going to want me and Trina at their place early.”

“Well, I’m going to head down at about ten. So meet me down there.”

“Why don’t we just ride down there together?” Brooks could always use a designated driver.

“Because I won’t be going home alone,” Nicola said, winking at Brooks. “Ms. Kitty is defi nitely going to have to call a chiropractor in the morning.”

“Whatever you say, man. Are you fi nished making a

fool out of yourself over here on these weights?"

Brooks asked, getting off of his treadmill.

"Yeah. I think it's time to head out. Where are we eating today?"

"Let's go to that new Chinese buffet out on Perkins. I heard they have 202 different items on the menu." This was Brooks'

favorite part of their workout.

"Sounds good, *but* do they have beer?" It was the most important part of Nicola's well-balanced meal. 125

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Alright. Applebee's it is." Brooks said, forgetting the Chinese food. "I don't know why we even bother to work out, if we're going to have a beer right after."

"You don't have to have a beer. I'll drink it for you," Nicola said, already beginning to enjoy his birthday. "You know, today could be a good day."

An hour later, Nicola and Brooks walked into the Union Avenue Applebee's, showered, hungry, and seeking refuge from the sleet and snow. Taking seats at the bar, they ordered a couple of beers and settled down to watch the highlights of the Tennessee Titans game they had missed the night before. As Nicola was about to

get up and walk to the restroom, he caught a glimpse of a woman in a booth who closely resembled Ivy. Hitting Brooks on the arm, he pointed her way.

"Isn't that Ivy?" he asked sitting back down.

"Where?" Brooks turned hesitantly from his beer.

"Th

ere. Right there in that last booth." His heart began to pound like a schoolgirl's.

"Yep. Th

at's her." Brooks smiled. "Why don't you go over and say hello?"

"You think I should?"

"Better than standing over here gawking at her all day. Go on over there," he said, nudging Nicola in the arm. "Get your scary ass up and go." He had never seen his partner like this over a woman before.

"I'm not scary," Nicola said, taking a deep breath.

"Come on, man. I'll go over with you and speak to Trina."

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It had already been a long day for Ivy. Even though she didn't appear pregnant on the outside, she felt nine-months pregnant on the inside. Almost every food and drink that she used to love she now could not bear to smell. Her prenatal vitamins gave her monstrous gas, and her dizzy spells came and went throughout the day, complicating her already tenuous life. 126

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

To make Ivy feel better, Trina suggested that they step out for a bite at Applebee's, which was her favorite hangout and only minutes from the dorms. Th

e only torturous part of it all was that

Ivy couldn't order a house margarita, and Trina had already sucked hers down and ordered another. Still sulky, but feeling better, Ivy sat in the booth looking through her menu.

"You know what you want to get yet?" Trina asked, putting her purse in the far corner of the booth.

"No. I guess that I'll stick with something safe like soup and a salad."

"Well, just make sure that you take your prenatal vitamin after you eat. You didn't take it this morning."

"OK, momma," Ivy said cynically. "You know I hate

those things. I'm going to ask the doctor to give me a different kind...

something with Phenegran."

As Nicola approached, Ivy looked up at him and stopped her conversation in mid-sentence. Feeling her stomach tighten and little beads of sweat form on her forehead, she kicked Trina under the table and bucked her eyes.

"Nicola's here," Ivy said, smiling fretfully.

"Nicola's where?"

"Right here," Nicola replied as he walked over and kissed Ivy on the cheek. "So good to see you."

"Good to see you, too." Ivy moved over in her booth to make room for Nicola. "Please have a seat."

"We don't want to interrupt your lunch. We were just stopping to say hello," Nicola said, declining her offer to join them.

"Yeah, but since you offered, I think that we should join you."

Brooks sat down beside Trina. Th

ere was no way he was going to

let Nicola back out of this.

"Please, it's no trouble," Ivy said, patting the seat for Nicola to sit down. She smiled gently at him.

"Did you order food already?" Trina asked, kissing Brooks on the cheek.

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"Yeah, at the bar. Why?" Brooks felt Trina pinching his side with her free hand.

"Because we should go down there and get it." Trina pushed Brooks out of the seat. "We'll be back."

Ivy looked up in disapproval. Again she was left alone with Nicola. Th

is time they were more than familiar with one another, yet the discomfort seemed almost too much to stomach.

"You look great," Nicola said, acknowledging the strange but vibrant glow that Ivy had gained since he last saw her.

"Yeah, I get a little heavy during the winter months. I don't look fat, do I?" she asked, looking at her swollen

finger. He was surely to detect that there was something wrong with her, like the fact that she was knocked up.

"No, you look radiant, perfect...you know, all the good words,"

Nicola said, remembering their time together. She also still looked engaged, judging by the huge diamond that she sported on her left ring finger. Grey was evidently still in the picture.

"You look good too," she said, trying not to break out in a cold sweat.

For Nicola, this chance meeting was a perfect time to confront all of the things that he had been battling. He looked through her with his penetrating eyes and smiled bashfully, causing Ivy to swallow hard and feel a tight knot in the middle of her throat. *Why must he be so beautiful?* Ivy thought as she tried not to smell his cologne...tried not to focus on the fact that he was sitting so close to her. But she couldn't ignore his undeniable presence. She exhaled heavily, feeling nearly deflated. What was it about this man that she could not fight?

Nicola was far too engulfed in his own feelings to detect what his mere existence was doing to Ivy. As he tried to gather his thoughts, he looked around to make sure that Brooks was out of earshot for what he was



about to confess. Then he took her hand

and turned to her.

"You...never called." He felt himself trembling but continued,

"And I really wanted you to...call."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I know," Ivy said, sighing. If she gave into Nicola again, she would surely lose Grey. It was better for everyone that she keep her distance, although everything in her wanted to reach out for him. "Really, I am truly sorry, but I just didn't see a need to call once Grey and I got back together." She looked down at her engagement ring.

"You didn't?" Her words fell on his ears like hot needles. He was almost 100 percent sure that she had felt something that night, but at this very moment he wasn't sure.

"No," Ivy said, trying to be strong. If she could just be spiteful enough at that very moment, she could force him away forever. He would never have to know about the baby. He would never have to know that she had thought of him a thousand times since the moment he was last out of her sight.

"You're lying," he said, searching her face. "You mean to tell me that all of that was just an act?" He saw right through her.

"No, it wasn't an act. I'm not a slut, Nicola. I just realized when I left there that I was better off with Grey than trying to have something with you," she said, looking away from him. "After I made up my mind about it, there was nothing left to say. We had our moment, and then it was over. Please tell me that you didn't think it was anything more than that." It was the most painful thing that Ivy had ever made herself say, but feeling the need to push one of the men out of her life, she knew it was her only option. "You were a great release. You helped me clear some things up in my head." She smiled at him crossly. "It was fun though, right?"

"Right." Nicola had heard enough. Her hand was now cold, and he let go with sudden disgust. "Well, if you don't mind. I am going to go and finish my lunch at the bar." He stood up. "It wasn't nice seeing you." He turned and walked away. Ivy tried in a frantic desperation to hold her tears back as he turned his back to her. She felt herself collapsing inside. The

wounded look in his eyes, accompanied by the impairment in his voice, was enough to make her heart stop. And for a moment, it 129

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

did. She gathered herself and managed to get to the bathroom before her emotional nausea overtook her.

Storming into the stall, Ivy leaned against the wall and began to cry. She had done what she set out to do. She had driven him far away, but the absence of his love was tearing through her heart so fiercely that she became weak at the knees. It was true. He did care. She could see it in his eyes. Only there was nothing she could do. Nothing. She held her aching stomach and cried aloud, holding her hands over her mouth to muffle

the moans that leaped from her throat.

“Man, I’ve got to get out of here,” Nicola said, interrupting Trina and Brooks at the bar as he threw a twenty-dollar bill by his untouched food.

“Are you alright?” Brooks asked, concerned.

“No. I’m not,” Nicola said, walking off. “I’ll meet you at the truck.”

“Well, I guess she told him,” Trina said, eating one of Nicola’s French fries.

“Guess so. What a birthday present, huh?” Brooks said, kissing her on the cheek. “Eat this for me, will

you? I'll grab a little something later."

"First, I'd better go and check on Ivy," Trina said, seeing the empty booth where Ivy was supposed to be sitting.

"Alright. I'll see you tomorrow morning."

Searching for Ivy, Trina walked into the restroom where she found her kneeling over the toilet in the back stall throwing up the little food she had managed to keep down that day.

"You finally told him?" Trina asked, rubbing Ivy's back sympathetically.

"No. I couldn't. I just wanted to push him away for good," Ivy said, wiping her mouth.

"Why would you want to do something so stupid?"

"I told him that he was just a release and that night didn't mean anything to me." Propping herself up on the toilet seat, she wiped her mouth and cheeks. "But it did, Trina. It meant 130

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

something to both of us. I could see it in his...his face." She began to cry again.

"But no mention of the baby?" Th

at was all Trina cared  
about.

"No, absolutely no mention of the baby."

"What! What the hell are you thinking?"

"I don't want to be tied to that man strictly out of obligation. If the child is not Grey's, then I will raise it alone," Ivy said, still sobbing.

"What about the child? Doesn't it deserve to have a father?"

Trina instantly recalled growing up without a stable male figure.

"Yes. But it will just have to accept what I can offer. That will

have to be enough."

"You don't have that right!" Trina said, stepping out of the stall.

"At this point, I don't have a choice," Ivy said, flushing the toilet. "It's already been done. Plus, it could very well be Grey's baby. All of this could just be a very hard lesson."

"For that baby's sake, I pray that you're right," Trina said, handing her a baby wipe from her purse. "Come on. We better get you somewhere where you can lie down."

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Slamming his door as he got out of his truck at the precinct, Nicola hit the alarm on his key ring, taking all his frustration out on the small button. For over a month, he had thought about Ivy day and night, just to find out that he had only been a one-night stand to her. All that talk was just a way to get him into bed. Hell, she probably had been with plenty of men and was just lying about Grey being the only one. What a fool he had been!

"You alright, man?" Brooks asked, watching his partner have a silent fit.

"I don't want to talk about it," Nicola replied crossly. 131

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"Well look, I'll see you tonight at the Black Tie, if you're still going," Brooks said, hitting him on the shoulder. It was best that he just leave him alone to think.

"Why wouldn't I go tonight?" Nicola asked, looking at his watch.

"Same thing I said," Brooks shrugged. "See you later, man. Call me if you need to talk."

u

Th

e moon cast a beautiful glow on the snowy streets of East Memphis as Nicola drove to the Black Tie. He was completely tormented in his thoughts but hopeful that a night with Kit would take the edge off of a perfectly shitty birthday. Pulling into the Black Tie parking lot, he pulled up to the valet and popped out, looking for Brook's truck. He spotted it, sitting faithfully across the way, and continued into the club.

Only the best-built, sexiest women worked at the Black Tie. From what Nicola had heard, the club only had an opening call for new girls once a year. It was suppose to be the land of milk and honey for exotic dancers, where the bouncers actually did their jobs, the men were respectable, and the money was damned good. For Nicola, it was just a place to get away and enjoy a good drink and the company of beautiful women, without the strain of being interested in a long-term relationship.

"Bring me a Jack and Coke," Nicola said to the waitress as he sat back in a private booth across from Brooks. He had already had four shots of scotch and a

shot of whiskey straight before he left his house, but he aimed to get so drunk that maybe he could forget about Ivy all together.

"What's up, man?" Brooks asked, sipping on a glass of Crown Royal.

"Not a damned thing," Nicola said, giving a leisurely smile.

"Just came to see Kit and kick it."

"I'm glad that you could make it." Brooks cleared his voice.

"Look, I know you said that you don't want to talk about it..."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"And I still don't," Nicola said, putting a single dollar bill in the g-string of the girl dancing in front of Brooks.

"But the truth of the matter is that you have to face it at some point," Brooks said, watching the young blonde take off her top and plant her oversized well-tanned breasts in his face.

"What is there to face? I thought she was someone that



she was not. She's just a college girl looking to play with a grown man's mind. And I personally just don't have time for that type of shit. I've got a hard enough time dealing with grown women. I'm not trying to recruit from the junior league, too," Nicola said, taking his drink from the waitress. "Th

ank you," he said, giving

the waitress a tip. "Keep me full, baby."

"Ivy's definitely a grown woman, Nicola. I mean, after all, she chose life despite what it's going to cost her." Brooks became off ended. "She's just scared. Hell, can you blame her?"

"Scared. No. No. She's not scared. She's manipulative. You should have heard her that night, acting like she really understood me. Like she really wanted to be with me. Hell, she sounded like me trying to get in some woman's pants. And my dumb ass was falling for it, too. I wouldn't even tell you that we slept together; that is just how much I respected her. Th

en today, she just dropped

the bomb on me and acted like I didn't mean shit to her." Nicola gulped down his drink.

"Look, I was shocked when Trina finally broke the news today to me, too. And I admit that is a lot for a

man to handle when he barely knows a woman, but you still have a responsibility regardless of how you feel about her.”

“After what she said to me today, I don’t see how I owe her anything,” Nicola choked as he guzzled down a small shot of tequila.

“Not to her, to whoever is coming.” Brooks looked over at Nicola. “You better quit mixing all of that shit before you make yourself sick.”

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Wait. Who is coming? Brooks what the hell are you talking about?” Nicola asked, taking another shot of tequila. “I don’t believe that we are on the same page here.”

“I don’t know. What the hell are *you* talking about?” Brooks asked curiously.

“Happy birthday, Nicola,” a well-built redhead said, wrapping her nearly naked body around his back, hugging him warmly and interrupting his and Brooks’ train of thought. Nicola turned around, half-dazed, and smiled. “Ana! Where have you been, girl?”

“Well, I went home to Columbia to visit family for a

while. I just made it back last night." She stood a towering six feet two inches without heels. Her long fiery hair nestled around her waist.

"Well, you still look stunning," he said, touching her thigh. He was no longer shocked by the boldness of the women at the Black Tie and was hardly ever aroused to embarrassment.

"Well, don't forget to let me give you a private dance for your birthday before you leave," she said, holding his hand. "It's on me."

"OK then," he said, watching her walk away.

"Looks like she had a boob job," Brooks said, sipping on his beer.

"Really? I didn't notice." Nicola sank back down in the seat. Damn Ivy, she was screwing up his concentration.

"Back to your nemesis." Brooks set his bottle down.

"Oh, yeah. She said I was a release. A damn release," Nicola repeated angrily. "Hell, I would have still screwed her if she had told me the truth. She didn't have to lie and give me this good girl fucking sad story." Nicola's vision became blurry. "What did you think that I was talking about?"

A crooked smile came across Brooks' face as he

began. It was wrong of him to enjoy what he was about to say, but he did. "I thought you were talking about the fact that Ivy is pregnant, and that the baby could be yours," Brooks said as he watched 134

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Nicola's eyes bulge and his throat tighten, revealing the veins in his forehead.

"What!" Nicola roared in total shock.

"Th

ank you, honey." Brooks rubbed the waitress's thighs as she bought him his drink. Pulling a twenty-dollar bill out of his front pocket, he put it in the woman's g-string beside Nicola's dollar bill and pinched her side. "Stay close. Th

ere's a lot more where that

came from."

"How do you know this?" Nicola tried to focus but still slurred his words.

"How do you think? Trina told me."

"Well, I'm glad that someone's keeping me in the loop," Nicola said sarcastically. He pulled the cigar from his

jacket pocket.

"Sorry man, I thought Ivy told you." Brooks directed his full attention to his friend now that they were alone.

"Hell no, she didn't *tell* me," Nicola said, feeling his heart in his throat. Th

e room began to spin. He was going to be sick.

"I can see that." Brooks watched Nicola for a moment in sheer amazement. Could his boy finally be falling in love after all these years of philandering?

"When did you find out?" Nicola lit his cigar and tried to calm down.

"Today while you two were up there chatting. I thought that was why you were so pissed off. Now I'm curious. What did she say to you to make you that damned mad?"

"Weren't you listening to one damned word coming out of my mouth? She called me a release." Nicola shrugged the entire conversation with Ivy off. Now, none of that mattered. "Damn. Why didn't she tell me?" Nicola said, feeling guilty for his previous remarks and more angered by what she was trying to conceal.

"I told you...she's scared. Trina said that she plans to keep it and raise it on her own if she has to," Brooks

said, giving Nicola a glass of water.

"She doesn't have to," Nicola said, off ended. "Not if it's mine,"

he added as a prerequisite. "I mean, she'll have my support."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"I know what you meant," Brooks said, sipping slowly on his drink. "Do you think that it's yours?"

Nicola blew the cigar smoke out of his mouth and sank down into the chair. "It's possible," he said, looking at the cigar. "It's really possible."

"So the man who lives and dies by Trojan Magnum condoms didn't use any?" Brooks probed curiously.

"We used them, but a few times we didn't. I was too damned lazy to get up later that night. But that morning we used some."

Nicola sighed. "Hell, I don't know."

"Did you want to get her pregnant?" Brooks couldn't believe that he had actually gotten the truth from Nicola after all this time.

"No," Nicola said quickly. "No." He repeated himself softly and sat up. "I don't know what I was thinking." He looked over at Brooks. "You believe me?"

"Yeah, man. I believe that you used a condom a few times and a few times you didn't use a condom. But your biological clock is ticking. Sometimes our unconscious desires get caught up in our conscious decisions."

"Get on with that shit," Nicola said, standing up. "The point is

that I might be the father. It could be mine or her fiancé's kid."

"I don't know. I wasn't there. Just prepare for the worst." There

was no advice that Brooks could think of to give to his distressed partner. "One thing is for sure, you should talk with her about this truthfully."

"You're right," Nicola said, looking at his watch. "As a matter of fact, I'm gonna go talk to her ass right now and find out what in the hell is going on." He puffed on his cigar.

"I was actually thinking of you going to her tomorrow, when you're sober." Since Nicola wasn't drinking the water, Brooks took it back and sipped on it.

“Th

e news that you have just laid on me has totally messed up my buzz, man. I'll be just fi ne.” Th

rowing another twenty-dollar

bill on the table, he shook his head. Nicola's words slurred, “You 136

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

know, I couldn't fi gure out for the life of me why all of sudden she was being so cold hearted. Now, it all makes since. She was going to ditch me and run with my kid.”

“No one's sure whose *kid* it is. Remember that. Look, she's just not thinking straight right now. Give her time. Don't go over there screaming and shit this late at night. Go over there and sit down and talk to her. Try to make some sense out of this without getting arrested.” Brooks could see the menace in Nicola's eyes.

“I'm not going to scream at her, but I am going to get to the bottom of this. If she is pregnant then it won't be a secret for one more day.” Th

e thought of him being a father crossed his mind for the fi rst time. “Damn, man. Look at me. I'm not ready to be someone's daddy.”



"You think that she's ready to be someone's mother? Hey, it's your bed. You made it; you lie in it."

Th

e thought made Nicola calm down. "You're right. Look, I'll talk to you tomorrow. Tell Kit that I had to go, and I'll call her or something."

"Damn, you're still chasing ass after that news? I would keep it in my pants if I were you," Brooks said, laughing.

"Look, I'm not about to marry this girl just because she may be pregnant by me. I don't even know her." Nicola instantly got defensive.

"Alright. Whatever. I'm going to stay here and get a lap dance. You know, pay some girl's college tuition," Brooks said, sipping on his drink. "You go and talk to your baby's momma."

"Don't say that shit, man," Nicola said, waving his finger at Brooks. "Like you said, we don't know if it's mine or not."

"We? I don't need to know. Hell, I didn't sleep with the girl. Take your drunk ass on." Brooks laughed. "Oh and Nico..."

"Yeah," Nicola said, turning around.

"Happy Birthday," Brooks said, cracking up.

"Shut up," Nicola said, turning around with a half-crooked smile.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

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Speeding down the highway with his cigar hanging out of the side of his mouth and his vision slightly blurred, Nicola blasted his radio and tried to think of ways to say how he felt to Ivy. Th e

thought of walking through the door and shaking her until she couldn't see straight had crossed his mind several times, but of course it was the wrong thing to do.

Pulling into the dormitory parking lot, Nicola turned off his ignition switch and sat back in his seat. For the first time in nearly an hour, he actually breathed comfortably, causing a small pain to shoot through his back. Th

e compression of stress on his chest

made him feel like he had just bench-pressed a mid-sized car, and the aching pain of his newly acquired headache made him feel as though crushed glass was being rubbed into his temples. Rubbing his forehead, Nicola closed his eyes and began to doze off . He just needed to relax for a moment. He already knew that there would be tears, anger, fear, and possibly a little cursing involved in the confrontation. Watching small flakes of snow hit the hood, he grunted as he stepped out the oversized truck and hit the alarm. Mother Nature seemed to be rushing him to get on with the business laid before him.

Nicola knocked on Ivy's front door and looked around the quiet bricked complex for any sign of life, but all the windows were dark, all the doors closed, and only security watched from across the street, monitoring his every movement. Opening the door slowly, Ivy looked at Nicola in surprise. Standing in her pajamas she stepped aside and let him inside out of the cold.

"What are you doing here this late? Aren't you supposed to be on duty or something?" Ivy closed the door.

"You're a smart girl. Why do you think?" Nicola took his jacket off .

"I think that you're probably gonna want to keep that on. You won't be here long," Ivy said shortly.

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Why be Billy Bad Ass tonight?" Nicola asked, sitting down on the couch. "I'm here because you're pregnant." His voice raised in irritation.

"Lower your voice." Her heart skipped a beat. "Who told you that?" Th

is was not the way she had planned on him fi nding out.

"A little birdie." Nicola smiled sarcastically. "Anyway, who told me really isn't the bigger issue here, is it?" Planting his face in his hands, he looked down at the fl oor and yawned. "I'm tired, and I'm pissed. I'm not here to play games with you. So tell me, why did you not bother to tell me that you are pregnant?" He looked over at her standing with her hands crossed.

"Because I don't know who the father of the child is, and I don't want any unneeded confusion right now." Ivy rolled her eyes as she sat down in the chair across from him. Although she was in the wrong, she couldn't help but be defensive.

"*Unneeded?*" Nicola mocked her. "You'll have confusion until the day of the DNA test. And I think that you already know that, so I'm going to ask you one more time. Why did you not tell me?"

"Because..." Ivy's eyes watered. "Because I knew that you were just a playboy. Someone I fell for...someone any woman would have fallen for under the present situation. And truthfully, I knew that you are not ready for a child. You're not one for commitment, and that's what I need right now. I don't need someone to bring all of his insecurities to the table and just dump them on me. So I've been keeping the pregnancy to myself. Besides, we used protection, which changes the probability when you really look at it."

"First of all, I think that you need to let me determine whether or not I'm ready for a child. Secondly, sooner or later someone will notice and there won't be an ounce of stability in your life. Th ird,

no one wants to dump anything on you. Hell, I don't even know you well enough to dump anything on you. Besides that, yes, we used protection, but we made love so many times, I lost count. Neither you nor I can remember if we were truly careful enough 139

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

to be in the clear. Anything is possible, especially when it comes to *that night*." Nicola was shocked at her perception of him and mildly embarrassed.

"Th

at's why I've come up with a plan."

"A plan? What are you going to do, get married and hope he doesn't notice that his kid is half white?"

"No, I wouldn't try to trick him like that." Ivy tried to stop crying. "I had planned to leave right after graduation. Go across country, get a job, and start a new life." Inside she knew that her plan was ridiculous, but she told him anyway. Nicola laughed at her. "Don't be foolish. Running won't save you or that child. You're just going to have to tell him. If he loves you as much as you evidently love him, then he'll forgive you, and you'll still get married." Nicola only prayed that he was right, because he wasn't ready to take on all of this right now.

"And what if he doesn't forgive me? What if he rejects me completely?"

"Then fuck him," Nicola said, passing her his handkerchief. His buzz was officially dead.

"Thank you." She blew her nose.

"I meant for you to wipe your eyes, but don't mention it."

He sighed again. *What a birthday.*

"Why do you smell drunk?" she asked, finally noticing his condition.

"Because I am. It's my birthday."

"Well, I guess that's a reason, then," Ivy said sarcastically. She didn't feel sorry for him at all. "What about us? What about if it's yours?" She had been waiting for that answer for too long.

"Oh," Nicola rubbed his fingers through his chocolate curls.

"If it's mine, then I'll be here. I'm a grown man. I know what sex can lead to."

"But you don't want to...be there?" She needed to know the truth.

"No, Ivy. I don't. I know that it sounds cruel, but it's the truth. I don't want either one of us to be this situation, but we are. And it 140

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

is our fault. So now we deal with it." He met her eyes accidentally and immediately looked down at the ground.

"God, you can't even look at me," Ivy said, feeling the tears stream back down her cheeks.

"It's not that. I just feel guilty. Hell, what man wouldn't feel guilty? I was only with you once, and it's very possible that I knocked you up." He searched for a calmer tone in his hysteria.

"I mean...got you pregnant. But most importantly, I'm worried about you. And to be honest, I do feel like you need to tell this guy of yours ASAP or you may end up losing him, too. I mean, I can't even tell you how pissed I was, and I'm nobody in all of this."

"Th

at's the thing. I don't know how to tell him that I've done this." Ivy stood up and walked over to sit beside Nicola.

"Just tell him," Nicola said, holding her hand. "Tell him everything, and let him make a decision. It's not like you did this alone. And you two were broken up. Besides, it could very well be his. Th

is could be a false alarm. You know?"

And there it was again — that twinkle in Nicola's eye that made butterflies erupt in Ivy's stomach. It was then that her compassion returned for him, and she began to feel guilty for the way that she had behaved earlier.



"I only said those things today to make it easier for you to leave me. I did want to call you after that night we spent together," Ivy said, changing the subject. She knew that it was important that he hear the truth.

"Th

en why didn't you? Because you know I called you. And I waited a long time to hear your voice. So now it doesn't sit right that I have to hear it like this. I have to see you out of obligation. Do you understand what I'm saying?" Nicola was shocked at her confession but relieved. Somehow hearing those words healed his wounded ego.

"I was afraid that if I called and you acted as if nothing had happened, I wouldn't be able to handle it." Ivy sighed heavily, wiping tears.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Huh." He thought for a moment. He could see how that would hurt her. "What...what do you feel about that night?" Now was the time to ask.

"Well." Ivy sat back on the couch. "I don't regret it at all." She looked over at him. "In fact, I'm thankful for what we shared. It's very special to me, but at the same time, I feel like eventually after everything comes out, I

will regret it. Mostly because I will probably end up losing Grey."

"Ivy, I hope you don't lose him. And if there is anything I can say or do for you to help you, I will." He had lied to a lot of women, but she would never be one of them. He had made that up in his mind the first time that he kissed her.

"Th

anks, but just knowing that you are prepared to be the father is more than enough."

Hugging him tightly, Ivy let out a few more tears brought on by the extreme anxiety she felt. Nicola held her tightly and smelled the lilac in her hair. "Don't worry. Everything is going to be OK."

"Do you really believe that?" Ivy asked, holding him just as tight.

"Yeah, baby. I do."

"Th

anks for your vote of confidence." She looked up at him and smiled.

"Don't mention it," he said, touching her chin. What an end to a day.

For Nicola, there was the reality of being on pins and needles for the next seven months waiting to see if the baby she carried was his. For Ivy, there was the reality of telling Grey that she had been unfaithful to their relationship by not telling him that she had been with someone else during their breakup, along with a child on the way and a possible wedding that would never take place. But somehow amidst all that they would face in the next several months, they knew that they would get through it together. 142

Chapter Eight:

Grey's

Christmas Gift



## Chapter 8

### GREY'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

**“On the count of three, everyone say cheese,”** the small balding Jewish photographer said, angling in on the large group as they lined the long elaborate spiral alabaster staircase and circled the gigantic fifteen-foot perfectly decorated Christmas tree twinkling under a huge crystal chandelier.

“One, two, three,” the photographer said, finally getting the picture just right.

“Cheese!” the group yelled cheerfully in unison. After the photo session, Ivy retired to the corner of the magnificent grand ballroom and carefully watched her soon-to-be family as they carried on in merry conversation. It was Christmas Eve at the Henderson’s mansion, a time for joyous laughter and celebration for one of the most powerful families in Memphis. All the Henderson men had returned from their various posts around the country to dote on their lovely mothers, sisters, and wives, to bring gifts of prestige to their colleagues, to brag about their tremendous accomplishments, and to seek approval from the three heads of the family, Mayor Henderson, Congressman Henderson, and Senator Henderson. 145

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All four of Grey’s brothers were home. Th

ere was the eldest

son, Bishop Henderson, the lawyer, home from Houston where he had just made partner at the prestigious law firm, Ingle, Davison, Mergein, and Claroborne, and who aspired to one day to be a Supreme Court justice. He was the only true family man, married to a beautiful doctor with two kids. Th ere was the next

to oldest son, Emerson Henderson, home from

Quintano where he had just become an intelligence agent for the FBI, and whose aspirations seemed unknown. Th

ere was Benjamin Henderson,

the all-too-familiar anchor of Channel 4 news in Atlanta, who aspired to be the next Ed Bradley and was already one of the most notorious whoremongers in the state of Georgia. Th ere was

Bradley Henderson, the musician, who aspired to teach and be the most humble of the haughty brothers in hopes of hiding his unmistakable homosexuality. And then there was Grey Henderson, the relentless businessman who aspired to take his uncle's place as congressman in the upcoming election.

Ivy paused for a second as she watched Grey engaging a small audience of men that had collected in the opposite corner of the room by the oversized fi replace in a small debate. Grey was the meat of the family. He was the only son who chose to stay in Memphis to help maintain the political image of the family. He was his father's right-hand man. He was the investor, the banker, the bean counter, the CFO of the Henderson family. In him, she found very little fault but a great deal of pride, dignity, and respect.

As Ivy went over in her mind all of her fi ancé's accomplishments throughout the last few years, she

also revisited Grey's discomfort with choosing to marry her. Maybe all of his hesitation was due to the heavy load that he was carrying. He was such a deserving young man and commanded by so many tasks in so many areas. It was stupid of her to think that his reasons for leaving had anything to do with other women. Sure, she had heard the many rumors, but he had denied them with great conviction and tried hard over 146

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foot to prove to her that his fidelity was the last thing that she should ever question.

*I don't deserve you*, Ivy thought to herself of Grey as she rubbed her stomach. Although the pregnancy was a secret to everyone except Nicola, she felt as though everyone knew. Her fingers were puffing, her stomach puffed slightly, and her very aura reeked of malice and deception. It was in her pity party that she caught Grey staring across the room at her sitting alone. Excusing himself from his following, Grey strolled across the floor to his beautiful socialite sitting gracefully in the corner in her crimson velvet Ralph Lauren gown.

"And how is the lady tonight?" Grey asked, flirting with Ivy as he offered her a glass of champagne.

"Fine, thank you." She took the glass and set it on the

table beside her.

“Uh huh,” Grey looked at the glass. “You know, as long as we have been together, I have never seen you turn down a glass of champagne. You’ve been a sucker for it since you were a teeny bopper.”

“Th

ings change.” Ivy tried to smile.

“Th

ey do, don’t they?” Grey kneeled down and looked carefully in Ivy’s eyes. “You have something you need to tell me?” Taking the champagne off the table, Grey finished the contents and offered Ivy his hand. “Let’s take a walk.”

“Where to?” Ivy instantly became suspicious. He never liked leaving the crowd in fear that he would no longer be the center of attention. Was it possible that he knew? “If you want to go off and fool around, the answer is no. What would your mother say if she caught us?” Ivy tried desperately to act as though nothing was wrong just in case Grey was privy to her new developments.

“I don’t want to mess around; I just want to talk with you

...



spend a little private time away from everybody for a minute. Can't we do that?" Th

ere was a menace in his eyes that Ivy instantly detected.

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"I don't think I want to," she said, lifting her eyebrow.  
"What are you up to?"

"Figuring out what you're up to." Grey offered his hand again.

"Come on. I think that I already know anyway."

"Oh, alright." Ivy didn't want Grey to make a scene, especially if he did in fact know that she was pregnant. So, she went quietly and quickly.

It was a crisp, clear night. Th

e moon was out finally after six

straight days of snow and ice, but Grey insisted that they take a walk in the back yard. He loved his mother's elaborate garden even during the dead of winter with its beautiful statues and elegant landscaping. It had been the envy of Central Gardens

since its conception during the post-Civil War era.

Th

e Henderson mansion was purchased in the early 1930s by Jefferson Henderson, the son of a freedman from Michigan who had done well with the lumber trade. He purchased it from direct descendents of very wealthy slave owners who could no longer maintain the treasure during the Great Depression. The

two-story antebellum home was on the national registry as a historic landmark and was the pride of the community, much to the Henderson's delight.

"Why are we out here in the freezing cold?" Ivy asked, shivering under her waist-length silver mink coat.

"Well, I wanted to talk to you about something that has really been on my mind." Grey looked at Ivy to read her very obvious body language. "You've been distant for a few weeks now. And I wonder if it is because of the baby or because you don't want to have it."

For a moment there was complete silence and all that could be heard was the snow under their feet as they walked.

"How did you know, Grey? Did Trina tell you?" Tears began to form in the corners of her eyes.

"No, I've just been watching you. You normally call me when your cycle comes to congratulate me on a job well done," he said, jokingly. "Plus, you've been under the weather and *moody*. And 148

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tonight when you wouldn't take the champagne, I just ...knew." He looked at her and noticed there was more behind her discomfort than just him knowing that she was pregnant.

"I never meant for this to happen." She stopped walking and took his hand. "I never meant for...you to have to find out this way." She wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Baby, it's OK. I'm cool with it." He kissed her gloved hands and smiled. "People have babies every day. Why should we be any different? What are you so worried about? You know that I will take care of us."

"Th

ings just aren't what they seem," she said, in a faint whisper.

Grey searched Ivy's beautiful face in the moonlight. There

was a distress in her eyes he could not understand. Th

is made his

stomach knot up in nervousness. What was he missing? Taking a deep breath, he stepped away.

"Ivy, what is it?" he asked quietly.

"I don't think that we should talk about it here." Ivy looked away. "I was hoping we could talk after the holidays."

"No, we're going to talk right now. I'm not willing to wait."

Grey grabbed Ivy's hand. "Now, tell me what's going on?"

Ivy stood silently for a moment in disbelief that she was about to confess such a dirty little secret to the man that she loved and wanted desperately to marry. Stuttering, she tried to keep her balance in the three-inch snow that chilled her ankles under her leather boots.

"I slept with someone while we were apart," Ivy said, shivering in fear. "I thought that when you left me, it was over for good. When you came back, I didn't know how to tell you. I'm so sorry."

She began to cry as she watched Grey's face turn cold and stoic. Looking through her or past her, he stood

silent for a moment, blocking out the sound of her painful sobs.

“So you’re crying because you cheated on me?” The very

thought was preposterous to him. “Or are you crying because you’re pregnant?” Surely it couldn’t be both.  
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“Grey, I’m so sorry,” she said, reaching for his hand.

“Are you crying because you’re pregnant or because you cheated on me?” He backed away.

“Because I don’t know who the father of this child is and I’m already through my first trimester.” A final tear fell to her cheek as she tried to stand tall. Her very act was revolting enough; there was no room for self-pity, but she overflowed with it. *Bitch!!!* Grey thought to himself as he wiped the tears from his face. He turned away and looked up the moon glaring down on him, laughing at him. He could no longer feel the bone-wrenching cold winds. He could no longer hear his fiancée sobbing. All he could do was allow the tears to fall. He wanted to double over and die. He wanted to scream and shout and...he wanted to kill the bastard who had touched her! He tried to stop the tears as they flowed freely down his cheeks. Sniff

ing, he turned around to try

and tolerate the sight of this woman in front of him.  
Who was she, and what had she done with his Ivy?

It was far too much for Ivy to bear. Th

e sheer weight of her

burden caused her to crumble down into the snow at  
the base of his feet. Her hair glimmered like black silk.  
Trying to hide her face, she held on to his leg.

Coming back to the present situation from the distant  
thoughts in the back of his mind, Grey looked down at  
Ivy and felt a surge of both anger and empathy.

"Get up," he said, picking her up out of the snow.

"Please. Please forgive me," Ivy said, holding onto  
Grey's jacket.

"I'm so sorry."

"Just answer me this. How can you smile in my face,  
be with my family, make love to me, knowing that you  
had betrayed my trust?" His voice was distant and  
solemn.

"I didn't think in a million years that this would ever  
happen."

She looked down in the snow, again unable to make eye contact with him.

"I can't believe you." Grey turned away and took a deep breath. He was starting to get a migraine.

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"Grey..."

"Don't say another word to me," Grey said, turning back around. "Not one more word." His soft brown lips curved around his demand.

Instantly obeying, Ivy silenced her pleas and proceeded out of the garden to the back porch. Grey followed her distantly with his fists balled tightly down in his coat pockets. Getting to the door, Ivy stopped and turned around. She couldn't just go back in to the house. Th

ere would be too many questions, too many stares.

"Could you please just take me home?" Ivy asked in a near whisper.

"We're going to finish this conversation inside," he said, finally realizing how cold Ivy must have been. "Then, I'll take

you wherever the hell you want to go.”

Th

ey entered through the back door into the kitchen and took off their coats. Ivy sat at one end of the kitchen table and Grey sat at the other. For a moment, she wondered if the distance would be too much to keep other guests in near by rooms or in the hallway from hearing their conversation, but then she also knew the distance would be just enough to keep Grey from her while he was at one of his angriest points.

“Let’s talk about this guy,” Grey said, placing both of his elbows on the table and clasping his hands together.

“Why do we have to talk about him tonight?” Ivy wished the entire situation had been put on hold until after the holidays. After this, she would never see Christmas quite the same.

“*Him?* Who is he?” Grey slowly took off his black leather gloves. “Wait. Let me guess, a college friend of yours. One of your little fraternity friends maybe?”  
Sarcasm laced Grey’s voice.

“No,” Ivy said, glad that at least her selection was not obvious.



"He's a police offi

cer."

"What? A cop? You went and got knocked up by a city employee?" His manner was turning facetious. "I don't believe this shit. And where did you meet him, on a routine traffi c stop

or at Starbucks?" Grey smirked.

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Ivy stared at him for a moment and became sickened. He was in no position to treat her like she was the enemy. The entire

situation came along because of his insecurities.

"No, I didn't meet him on a routine traffi

c stop or at Starbucks.

And he's not some bum. He's a really a successful and determined man. We met at a party with Trina." Ivy stared into his eyes.

"Oh, it gets even better! Now your cheap, slutty-ass roommate is involved." Grey hated Trina more than any of Ivy's friends. "Go on...tell me the story."

"She's not a slut," Ivy insisted.

"Well, forget I said that, OK?" Grey forfeited his early statements. "Let's focus on the steak and not the peas. Pretend that I am one of your girlfriends. Tell me what you would tell them about how you ended up in bed with Shaft."

"Grey!" she begged, distressed.

"Enough with the theatrics. Just tell me." Grey's voice rose slightly.

"We met at a party that her boyfriend was throwing. He called me a few days later. We went out on a date and ended up back at his place. Before long, things got out of control. Alright?"

"*Alright?* No, it's not alright! Th

ose aren't specifics. I want to

know from beginning to end what happened. I want to understand how this man ended up between your legs."

Ivy looked at Grey all tongue in cheek. He had only one intention and that was to make her feel as guilty and dirty as possible. But he needn't help her much. She already felt a world of shame. Besides, he didn't really

care to hear the details. No man did. Th

ey would always demand to hear everything and accept nothing. No, she wouldn't allow that game to be played.

"I won't tell you specifics, Grey. It isn't right. I will tell you, though, that it was a one-time thing. And I am truly sorry that I did not tell you before."

"What is his name?" Grey said, ignoring her temperament. "I want to know his name." He hit the table.

"Nicola," Ivy sighed.

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"Nicola? Did his mother feel sympathetic to another culture?"

Grey asked restructuring the picture of the mystery man that lingered in the back of his mind.

"Well, he's not black, if that's what you mean." Ivy didn't see the point.

Nothing could have surprised Grey more. He sat stupefied and gazing blankly at the woman that he had

proclaimed to love and realized that he just might not know her at all.

“Th

en what is he, if he isn't black?” Th

e name kept ringing

over and over again in Grey's head. Where did he know this name from?

“He's Italian.”

“You went and found an Italian cop to fuck.” He shook his head. “You are just full of surprises.” Outwardly, he laughed at her, trying to make her feel as small as he did. Inwardly, he wanted to peel out of his own skin.

“I don't see what his race has to do with anything. In fact, I don't see where this is going. What I want to know is where does this situation put us? What now?” Ivy folded her arms and shook her head. She wasn't about to beg him anymore. He didn't deserve it. And the more she thought about it, the more the entire situation infuriated her.

“I don't know what's next. I'm too focused on you and your lover boy right now.” Grey thought back to all the women that he could have gotten pregnant on a common one-night stand and instantly felt compelled to

ease up on his judgment of Ivy. “If this is his child, am I supposed to just step in and clean up his mess, raise his seed like the faithful fi eld slave tending to the master’s house nigga?”

Ivy could barely stomach his insolence. How dare he! “No, you’re not left to do anything. It was me who made every decision that has led me to this point, and it will be me who will stand responsible for every action and reaction. I don’t expect or want anything from you! And I can’t say that enough.”

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“I hope like hell you don’t want anything from me!” Grey tried to get his bearing.

Ivy replied with a nasty snarl.

Grey ignored her. “And then the other question is if it’s mine?

What am I to do? Allow you to walk around with a bastard child and a child-support check? Is that supposed to be enough?”

Where would this put him during election time? Th e polls would

be against him. He couldn't allow that to happen.

"Th

at would be enough. I am more than capable of raising this child on my own," she said, grinding her teeth.

"Could you please act your age for two seconds? Of course it is not enough." His voice rose slightly, but not enough to be heard for fear that it might bring too much attention from the guests in the house. He thought carefully for a moment, weighing every option and occasionally thanking God that the shoe was not on the other foot. Th

en in a deep solemn voice he spoke, glaring into her wide eyes with new control.

"Is it really over with this guy?"

"Yes." Ivy looked up from her headache and stared him in his eyes.

"Do you still have feelings for him?" For Grey, it was the million-dollar question.

"I never had feelings for him," Ivy lied, but she saw no reason to tell him the truth about something that didn't matter. "I was lonely and desperate...a feeling I hope that you never experience."

ere was some comfort in Grey's mind now. He could believe that her cop friend meant nothing as long as she believed that he had never been unfaithful. It still gave him the upper hand, a better one in fact. And he planned to use it for as long as possible.

"As much as I would like to deny that I have any feelings for you, I still love you very much. And I wish that all of this had never happened. But this does change things dramatically. Th ere

is so much to clean up behind a scandal like this. I don't know where to begin." But he did. He would start with his own dirty conscious.

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"We should just call off the wedding," Ivy said, wiping the tears from her tired eyes.

"Why? Are you fi nished with me?" Grey didn't want her to begin to fi ght back now. He wanted her to submit fully to his entire plan. It was the only way he was sure that it would work.

"No, I'm not *fi nished* with you. But this is just too much."

"You let me worry about the specifics. Just focus on finishing school and maintaining your sanity around town. Unless we find out for certain that this child is his, we will act as though this never happened. I mean, there is no sense in making me look like a fool for no reason."

"Damn it, Grey. No one is trying to make you look like a fool!

Everything isn't about you!" She forgot herself in the middle of her emotions.

"Like it or not, when you took me back, you made it about me. And lower your damned voice in this house. Do not disrespect my family."

"I'm sorry," she said, sobbing lightly. "But don't you disrespect me either."

"If the child is mine then we have nothing more to worry about. We will write it off as a simple but very stupid mistake. And if it is his, whoever he is, I will accept his child as my own only if he steps back completely. I won't go into my marriage with my wife bound to another man by a child or anything else. He will have to cut all his ties." Now Grey could prove to everyone that Ivy wasn't perfect and shift some of the guilt of infidelity off of his shoulders.



"What if he doesn't want to?" Ivy asked, appalled at his demands.

"Somehow, I don't think that he'll mind," Grey said, rolling his eyes.

"I didn't go out and sleep with the first asshole that would have me. He's not the type to just shove his responsibilities off on you. Besides, you speak as though I am asking or even begging for you 155

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to marry me." Th

ere was little if any room for misinterpretation.

"Well, I'm not."

"Oh, I know that you are not. You're as stubborn as I am, but I still am laying down my side of the agreement. Take it or leave it, Ivy, because like it or not you were dead wrong." His thoughts drifted back to his recent affairs.

"Yes, I was wrong. I will admit that, but the truth of the matter is that so were you for dropping me like a bad habit. I didn't cheat. We weren't together, or did you forget? I just failed to inform you as to what I had done during our breakup..."

"Which," Grey interrupted, "could have killed me if the man had had HIV or some other godforsaken disease." There was a

silence in the room. "Th

ank God he only left you with his possible seed and a stained name." He stood up from his chair and walked briskly past her. "Get your things; we're leaving. You don't deserve to be here."

"I am not stained," Ivy said, shaking her head emphatically.

"Aren't you?" he turned around to meet her face to face. "You were as pure as any man could hope for, and then like a fool you let him touch you. Unprotected! What in the hell were you thinking?"

"I didn't let him. We used protection. It must have slipped or something." She turned away from him in shame.

"Protection? If you were really interested in protecting yourself, you wouldn't have thrown your legs open and invited him in. Don't try to justify this bullshit, and don't ever bring up how you may have gotten pregnant by him again. I'm quite sure that I know how these things happen. Now grab your things. I want you out of my family's house." Turning away, Grey walked out of the kitchen door and left her standing in sheer humiliation.



# Book Two

Chapter Nine:

Happy New  
Year!



**Chapter 9**

**HAPPY NEW YEAR!**

*I've got to do this on my own.*

Ivy had decided the day after Grey's Christmas party that she needed to get her own place, and within days she signed a lease with an apartment complex in Cordova not far from her mother's home. Th

is would be a counter move just in case she didn't marry Grey in the summer. Plus, she still needed a place for the baby once he or she arrived. As a favor to Ivy's current state, Trina moved also to provide support both fi nancially and mentally. Much to her surprise, Ivy had not spoken to Grey in nearly a week. He had text messaged her to make sure that she was physically well, but he refused to speak with her personally for fear that *his anger might overcome him*.

Nicola had been missing in action, too. He had not called once since he left her dorm room the morning after his discovery of the child. She wasn't sure if the lack of communication from the men was good or bad, but she used the time to prepare herself for the next hurdle of her life, which was telling her parents. Th

ere was, however, a small sentiment of pride that she was moving forward without approval. Moving out of the dorm into 161

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an apartment was a decision that she had made on her own, using her own resources. For once, she was

taking charge of her life and leaving little room for suggestions.

As Ivy pulled into the Registry at Cordova apartment complex, her cell phone vibrated on her hip. Debating whether or not to answer it, she looked at the caller ID. It was Nicola of all people. Without explanation, her heart began to flutter.

"Hello?" Ivy said, turning down her radio.

"Hey. Happy New Year," Nicola said in reasonably good spirits.

"Happy New Year to you, too," Ivy said, ecstatic to hear his voice.

"Uh, I was just calling to see how you were. I know that it's been a minute since you've heard from me."

"Yeah." Ivy pulled into her parking spot and turned off her car. "I'm fine. Just in the process of moving." She was proud of her accomplishment and couldn't wait to share the news with him.

"What have you been up to?"

"Nothing much. I'm just leaving a bust in South Memphis and...moving? Where to?" His first guess was her father's house. Such a decision would surely make it more difficult for their

already overly complicated situation.

“Trina and I have our own place in Cordova now. It’s at the Registry.”

“Huh.” He was impressed with her selection. “Yeah, that’s a nice place. Congratulations.”

“Th

anks,” she said, smiling. “It’s not exactly the most exciting New Year’s Eve plans, but I’m happy. I’m surprised that Brooks didn’t tell you.”

“He tends to forget anything that isn’t about him. Well, do you need some help? I know with the *baby* you can’t do a lot of moving.” Th

ere was a strange and awkward silence as Nicola tried to move past his first recognition of the pregnancy as a form of life.

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“No. Th

anks though. For the most part, the movers took care of everything yesterday. Trina is going to take care of everything else.” Ivy tensed up as well when she

thought about the word *baby*. She was actually going to be a mother. Oh, God.

"Alright." Even as long as Nicola had waited to call he had absolutely nothing to say to Ivy. Th

ere was always an awkwardness

about their situation he could not get over. He wasn't ready for fatherhood. He wasn't ready for responsibility. He wasn't ready for Ivy!

"Hello?" Ivy said, hoping that she had not lost her signal.

"I'm here. Um, you can call me at any time day or night if you need me," Nicola said, taking a long, deep breath and trying to calm his silent panic attack.

"Th

anks again," Ivy said, hearing his familiar voice of concern.

"Alright then." Nicola felt as though he had said more than enough. "I'd better get back to doing what it is that I do."

"Alright. Talk with you later," Ivy said softly as she hung up the phone.



"Who was that?" Trina asked, standing at the car door while Ivy finished her conversation.

"Nicola. He just wanted to know how *the baby* and I were doing." Ivy got out of the car and smiled.

"Alright now," Trina said, shaking her head. "Don't forget your bargain with Grey."

"I didn't agree," Ivy frowned profusely. "I won't separate Nicola from this child if it is his just because of Grey's insecurities."

"It's not the child Grey's trying to keep from Nicola," Trina said, grabbing a box from Ivy's back seat. "It's you."

"My God, Trina. You act like the guy is a blood-sucking vampire," Ivy said defensively. She didn't want anyone to spoil the fact that Nicola had taken time to call her. u

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Across town in the historic Central Gardens estates, Grey sat quietly in his father's study watching his father smoke an Ashton cigar. As the smoke billowed up to the ceiling, Grey poured another glass of scotch and sipped it lightly, savoring the taste and contemplating a

plan of action for Ivy and Nicola.

"You want to tell me what's wrong with you, boy?" Mayor Henderson asked, putting down his newspaper. "You've been here two hours and haven't said one full sentence."

"Here's one for you. *Ivy is pregnant*," Grey blurted out, unconcerned with his father's approval.

"Oh," his father said, taking the cigar out his mouth. "Well, that explains the face." Looking back at the newspaper, his father tried to let the news settle before he began his interrogation.

"Go ahead. Ask your questions. I've been preparing myself all day," Grey said, feeling his father's eyes glaring at him.

"Alright." Mayor Henderson sat up in his chair. "How does this affect the family?"

"Negatively. Th

e child could possibly belong to someone else,"

Grey said, irritated. "Some cop." Grey gulped down the potent contents in his glass and set it down angrily on the end table.

"Not Ivy!" Mayor Henderson folded his newspaper and

pondered for a moment. "Well, I'll be damned."

"Same thing I said." Grey poured another glass of scotch.

"Easy on that, boy. It won't help. Believe me, I know."

"Yeah, I'm sure Mom's stepped out on you and gotten pregnant a few times," Grey said sarcastically. Mayor Henderson shot back a brutal look that made him remember his place. "Anyway, the only thing that will help is an abortion. The problem with that is

that even if I could bring myself to ask her to have one, I'm sure that she would not." The

thought sickened him.

"Abortion is legal, not moral. The

Henderson men have been

fighting abortion for thirty years. It's a politician's cash cow. More lobbyists pay to fight against that than pay to fight for clean air or education; just ask your uncle."

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"Well, when I run for Congress next term, I'll remember that."

Grey sighed heavily, exhaling the trapped air in his lungs. "Right now my issues include a pregnant fiancée, a bastard child, and a postponed wedding."

"How far are you planning to push the wedding back?" It was already hard enough to keep Grey's many indiscretions out of the hands of the wrong people, but it would be even harder to keep such a scandalous incident out of gossip columns. All of Memphis would be buzzing.

"She's not due until July 29th. Th

e wedding was set for the

end of May, so we'll have to push it back until the middle of September."

"Why so late?"

"I can't bring myself to marry a pregnant woman. If we're going to get married, I want to at least know what I'm up against. Besides that I'm not going to have some overexaggerated wedding and not enjoy the honeymoon. You know how irritating pregnant women can be."

"Do you really think that she will leave that child right after she has given birth?"

“Th

e child will be six weeks old. Mom can watch it, or Ivy's mom or a sitter. Hell, I really don't care.” Grey hadn't given much thought to babysitting before and refused to do so now.

“Your mother may watch the baby if the baby is yours. If the baby is not yours, someone else will have to babysit. Look into hiring a good nanny, now. And stop saying *it*. There is no *it*

involved here. There

is a child involved. Don't be caught referring to a child as an *it*. You get quoted, and you'll never live it down.”

“Something else to remember.” Grey sighed. “There has been

more than a notion.”

“I can only imagine. I love your mother, but I can tell you now that she won't be a damned bit tolerant with this situation.”

With Mayor Henderson, everything translated into approval or disapproval of his lovely wife, Maple.

Grey looked up surprised but in agreement. "You're right. I'll look into some reputable nannies later in the pregnancy." His mother's wrath worried him more than the situation.

"Always remember to plan ahead." Grey's father smiled as he put his cigar back in his mouth. "And meet this man as soon as possible."

"Why would I want to meet this guy?" Grey didn't want to lay eyes on him. He hated him already and didn't even know him.

"Don't you want to know who this remarkable fellow is? After fi ve years, he steps in and in a matter of moments...steals your fi ancée. Now I don't know about you, but I would want to know who the son of a bitch was that was so damned cunning. Plus, you need to evaluate who could possibly be in your life for the rest of your life, and decide if it's worth it. Ivy's a nice girl, but you should cut your ties now. It's not like everyone won't understand."

"I gave Ivy an ultimatum. If we marry, even if the baby is his, he can't be connected to it."

"Did she accept?" Grey's father looked surprised.

"No. Not yet."

"She won't, either. Take my advice. Just go and meet the man face-to-face. Come to some type of agreement. Believe me, he won't just go away." Grey's father picked his newspaper back up.

"Besides that, don't be so hard on her. If I recall correctly, you had a scare, what, two years ago now? Th

e doctor from the abortion

clinic that you were seeing on the side thought she was pregnant. You could have easily been in the same situation." It was important not to let his son forget that he was no angel.

"I wish that it was me. Maybe I'd be able to take it better. Every time I think of another man touching Ivy, I swear to God I feel like killing someone." Grey could feel his veins bulging out the side of his neck.

"Well, let me ask this...why are you marrying her at all, if this is going to be such a big issue for you?"

"Well, for one, I love her. And I think if the shoe was on the other foot, she would still marry me. Second, I can't run for offi ce

next term with a bastard child in the limelight. The media will eat

it up, especially the Republicans here. They

have been looking for

a way to hang our asses since we moved into this house." He knew that his father already knew that answer to the question, but Grey voiced it just to give him ease.

"I just wish that you would have listened well to my advice,"

Mayor Henderson said, sighing.

"What's that?" Grey rolled his eyes again. He was in no mood to hear one of his father's long drawn-out speeches, but considering he was sitting face-to-face with him in his house, he had no choice.

"Don't let a woman wrap your personal life and career around her finger," Mayor Henderson said with a slighting tone in his voice.

"So how do you explain Mom having you by the balls?" Grey asked, frustrated. He had had enough of playing the role of the man. It was time to actually stand up and



be one. Mayor Henderson lifted an eyebrow as his only response and finished his cigar.

Inwardly Grey knew the cardinal rule of the Henderson men had been broken. It had been the one thing that they did not do. Th

ey never allowed a woman to absolutely control them under any circumstance, but Grey had failed. He would be the first of nearly three generations of well-respected, well-educated young bachelors in his family to allow the birth of a child out of wedlock to actually happen. However, times had changed. He knew what it would take to win the seat, and he could do it as long as he kept a cool head, a clear vision, and strong game plan that included keeping Ivy as close and quiet as possible.

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Chapter Ten:

The Meeting



## Chapter 10

### THE MEETING

**"I need to meet this Nicola,"** Grey said, pulling a roasted duck out of his oven and setting it on the stove. He hated that he had waited until he and Ivy were about to sit down to a quiet dinner after a long day at work to discuss such a complicated matter, but that was the way the cards were dealt. Grey had finally thought through the entire situation and agreed that his father was right. As long as Nicola remained

“successful and determined” in Ivy’s eyes, as she had described him that night at his father’s house, then he remained a threat. He had to somehow find out what Nicola’s real story was and make his flaws apparent to Ivy before he found himself married to someone else’s wife.

“Why do you need to meet him?” Ivy asked, shocked at his outlandish request.

“Why?” Grey appeared calm on the outside even though inside he was reduced to rubble. “Because there is a 50-percent chance that this child is his. And I have no idea what this guy is like or what his background is. All these are things that are important when raising a child...especially another man’s child. It’s sort of 171

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like when people adopt—they want to know what the biological parents’ backgrounds are to make sure that the kid isn’t certifiably psycho.”

“So you still won’t hear me on not separating him from his responsibility if he is the father.” Ivy sighed and leaned against the kitchen table.

“No, I won’t hear you,” Grey said, grinding his teeth. He thought they had closed that subject.

"Why must you be so unreasonable?"

"What?" Grey clinched his fists. Wanting to call her ungrateful, considering that he was marrying her at all after her little escapade, he quickly bit his lip and put down the carving knife. "How sensible is it to allow him into our lives knowing that he would only ruin our marriage before we could get started?"

"We don't know that," Ivy said, tired of the subject.

"I know it!" Grey screamed. "You know it, too. Use your head, Ivy!"

"Listen to me. You should meet him, and I will arrange it soon. But it's not your place, *although I know that you want it to be*, to play God and decide who should be the father. For the sake of the baby, don't interfere with that part of the child's life. Besides, the entire situation is hypothetical at this point. There is still a great

chance that this baby is yours. And for the small chance that the baby is not yours, heaven forbid, the baby can love you and love his or her biological father as well. But if you try to interfere and damage that relationship, it will backfire. Mark my words, Grey." Ivy turned away and finished setting the table, although the candlelit dinner had definitely been ruined.

"Look, I don't mean any harm to you right now, because I know that you must be going through a lot. But I am at

wits'

end with this entire situation. I need some type of control in this in order for me to go on. He's already taken a piece of you that I will never be able to get back. I've got to make sure that I'm not running a losing race against this guy." Grey's anger faded into the dismal depression that was slowly taking over his spirit. 172

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"You will never lose..." Ivy turned around to find Grey overwhelmingly disgusted. "Oh baby," she said, walking over to him. "You'll never lose me. I will always belong to you as long as you'll have me. What happened was a mistake, but God put this child here, and it's my responsibility to make sure that he or she is not only born safely but raised safely." She took his hand and kissed it softly. "Be confident in us, please. Meet him; talk to him; do whatever makes you feel better about the situation, and then let it go." Her eyes met his as he rubbed through her long locks of hair.

"Well, that's a tall order," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "I just don't know if I can do it."

"Grey," she said with tears in her eyes. "I know that I don't deserve you. And I'm so sorry for this entire mess. I know that you would never put me through this or do anything like this in a million years, but please

don't leave me."

*How can she be so clueless?* Grey thought to himself as he looked into her eyes.

u u

After Grey had dropped her off later that evening, Ivy sat across from her telephone staring into space and pondering Grey's uncomfortable disposition at dinner. Even though she felt totally free of guilt when she first returned to Grey, she felt a surge of guilt overwhelming her now that made her feel utterly and totally ashamed.

*Have I really been so bad? Was it possible that Grey had never once cheated on me, and that all the little signs of infidelity had been imagined? Have I been the only one in our relationship to step outside of my boundaries?* Suddenly, as Ivy thought back to the tears in Grey's eyes, she felt it to be so. After all the years that she had tried so desperately to be faithful to their relationship and to him, she messed up. Picking up her telephone, she sighed heavily and dialed Nicola.

"Hello," Nicola said, looking at the clock on his nightstand. 173

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"Hi, it's Ivy." Staring at the clock, the time finally dawned on her. It was almost eleven.

"Hey. What's wrong?" he said, hearing a peculiar sound in her voice.

"Who said that anything was wrong?"

"No one." Sitting up in his bed, Nicola rubbed his eyes and picked up his watch.

"Actually, the reason I was calling is to ask you a big favor."

Silence. "Grey, my fi ancé, wants to meet you. It sounds ridiculous, but he's concerned about what type of person you might be."

"Why does it matter? Th

is guy isn't marrying me." Th

e last

thing Nicola wanted to do was get involved with her family any deeper before he knew whether or not the baby was actually his.

"We fi nally had a talk about how we plan to handle this situation, and of course, the possibility of the child being yours came up in the discussion. So, he wants to meet you for the sake of the child. He wants...to know who he's dealing with now."

Ivy couldn't find a better way to explain it and instantly felt uncomfortable for asking.

"Look, you know that I want your relationship to work with your fiancé, but I'm not going to be jumping through hoops for you two either. Th

is is a problem that you two have to solve internally. I don't want to...get more involved than I have to at this point." Nicola wasn't in the mood to get agitated, but Ivy was slowly helping him to it anyway.

"Just do this for me," Ivy said softly. "Please, I won't ask you for anything like this again," she added, grinding her teeth. "It would really help, Nicola."

After a long silence, he finally responded reluctantly. "Fine, but it's not for him. I'm going to set things straight face-to-face, because I don't have time for this kind of drama."

"OK." Ivy just wanted to be out of it. "Is tomorrow around twelve good for you? He wants to meet you for lunch downtown at the Piazza Club. He'll be in the VIP booths in the back of the 174

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

restaurant. He's reserved a table for you two to talk and have lunch."



"So, you want me to go on a date with your fiancé?" Nicola asked, yawning. He was getting tired of both Grey and Ivy at this point and regretted the entire situation.

"Please?"

"Alright. But I'll only do this once."

"I understand. Th

anks. Really."

Th

ere was a long silence on the phone.

"Well, I'll let you go." She was beginning to feel nauseous all over again.

"Alright," he said, hanging up the phone.

Getting out of bed, Kit looked over at Nicola and smiled. "I didn't know that you had a child," she said, lighting her cigarette.

"You don't look like the type."

"I'm not the type. I don't even know if I'm the father yet,"

Nicola said, pulling the comforter from his legs and sitting on the side of the bed. "Hey, put that out, will

you? I don't want that smell in my fucking bedroom.”  
*Women*, he thought to himself as she stood up naked and walked to the bathroom.

“Don’t get mad at me, because you’re suffering from baby’s momma drama,” Kit said, slipping on her jeans.

“What do you know about baby momma drama?”  
Nicola asked, laughing as he stood over the toilet. Looking at himself in the mirror, he decided that he desperately needed to shave.

“Let’s just say that I had my tubes tied after my first son, Nathaniel.” She said, struggling with her French accent.

“You have a son?” Nicola asked, wiggling his leg and flushing the toilet.

“Yeah. He stays with his father in Atlanta.” Kit pulled a picture of her son from her purse and handed to him as he walked out of the bathroom. “He will be five this February.” She smiled proudly.

“Damn, he’s black,” Nicola said, shocked that there was very little resemblance between Kit and her son.

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“You know what they say,” she said, putting the picture

back in her purse. "Once you go..."

"Believe me, I already know the saying," he said, tired of hearing the same tired-ass cliché.

u u

Noon came early for Nicola the next day. Pulling into the parking garage of the Redbirds baseball stadium, he slipped on his shades and ran his fingers through his hair. As he walked into the Toyota Center that housed the Piatza Club, the receptionist pointed him to elevator where he was escorted to the second floor. Sounds of soft jazz and low chatter greeted him as the doors of the elevator opened. He was quickly taken to the VIP booths by a chipper Mexican hostess.

Grey sipped an afternoon Mimosa and looked around the restaurant through the glass walls of the VIP area that was set elevated, hoping to spot his opponent. He had come early and prepared mental notes. He was ready to unleash boundary rules and make his territory known. He was prepared to be Grey Henderson. His confidence was soaring when he made eye contact with a cop that he had met briefly at his dad's meetings at city hall. He nodded first at him and then almost choked on his drink. Could it be? No. Hell no. Maybe Agosto would simply walk to another table and await a friend to meet him for lunch. But the guy kept approaching him as though he was going to sit at his table. Almost in shock, as Nicola approached the

table, Grey put down his glass and stood up. Were there not even six degrees of separation in Memphis? Lieutenant N. M. Agosto of the NARC/

TACT Unit, as in Nicola Mutherfucking Agosto? Th is was Ivy's

Nicola! Th

e name made sense now; although before he had never known or cared to know Agosto's name, he knew it now! In the back of his mind, he could even hear Ivy screaming it. Slowly, Grey calmed himself. Th

ere was no need to shit a brick now. Th

e harm

had been done. Th

ere was also no need for formal introductions either. Th

ey both knew each other quite well.

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"How are you, Lt. Agosto?" Grey said, offering his hand when Nicola was brought to the booth. It was the only sensible thing to do. Shake his hand. Be a man.

"Please, we're not at work—call me Nicola," Nicola said, shaking Grey's hand and instantly recalling Grey from the many late night meetings at city hall. Ivy failed to mention that she was engaged to the mayor's son.

"Alright. Well, call me Grey," Grey said, noticing the platinum Rolex on Nicola's wrist. How could a cop in Memphis afford something like that on his salary? "I see we share the same taste in jewelry." Grey extended his arm to reveal the same Rolex on his left arm.

"And women," Nicola said, adjusting himself as he took a seat.

Th

ere was a silence at the table as the waitress handed Nicola a menu. Grey fumbled with his glass while Nicola fumbled with his coat. Each was shocked by the other's involvement, both expecting something other than what they had discovered. Tired of the obvious tension, Nicola spoke.

"So I'm told that you wanted to meet me." Nicola's eyes were fixed on Grey.

"Yes." Grey made eye contact and locked his vision on Nicola.

"I figured that we should meet and come to an

agreement on some things concerning the child and Ivy."

"Yeah. Th

at's what baffl

es me. How can we come to an

agreement about an issue that is yet to be an issue?  
She's still pregnant."

Grey's arrogance flared in the midst of him trying to put in words his newest frustrations. "You already know without me telling you that this is a very complicated situation," he said forcefully. "Ivy is going to marry me, and yet she may very well be having your child."

Th

e returning waitress interrupted Nicola. "Could I have vodka tonic, please? Heavy on the vodka," he said, giving her the menu. "Th

anks."

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"Either way, I am here to ask you to relinquish your rights as the father should the child actually be yours."

Grey saw no reason to beat around the bush. Besides, he wasn't even sure if Nicola was interested in retaining his rights.

"Uh huh," Nicola said, sipping his water. "What in the world would make you think that I would do something like that? I'm not some teenager and neither is Ivy."

"I realize that, but you two also are not together."

Nicola saw where this was going. Nowhere. He leaned forward.

"You didn't come in here to be my daddy did you?"

"Excuse me?"

"My daddy... You didn't come in here to delegate, dictate shit to me?"

"No." Grey looked him square in his eyes. "I'm not your fucking daddy. But I am Ivy's fi ancé, and no matter what you have done, that won't change. So I'm here to talk to you like a grown man face-to-face about what's gonna go down. You have a say in this," Grey said, turning on his political charm. "I just want to make sure that we're both clear about where we stand." He sat back for a moment and neutralized the situation. They were in a

public place. Th

ere was no need for barbaric theatrics.

Nicola calmed down and followed suit. He could see that Grey had an angle. Now he had to figure out what it was. "You want me to back down and let you lead a normal life...no outside interference." Nicola was impressed with his aggression, and he respected his request, but he couldn't grant it. "Is that about right?"

"Basically." Grey saw no intimidation in Nicola's eyes and was glad to meet a worthy opponent. His blood rushed, but the challenge excited him. "Relinquishing your rights will give you the green light to return to your normal life...no Ivy...no baby...no drama."

"Well, I can't do that." Nicola shifted in his seat. "If the child is mine, I will have an active role, and if not then I will leave both of you the hell alone. In fact, it will be all my pleasure."

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"I see that you're not open to discussions about this," Grey said, nodding at the waitress as she set his grilled salmon in front of him.

"Not at all," Nicola said, smiling. "What are you so nervous about anyway? She loves you."



"Mr. Agosto, do I look nervous to you? If so, please look again, because I'm not. It's just that I want us to have, *as you said before*, a normal life. Ivy may have been a one-night stand to you, but to me she's a hell of a lot more than a two-minute pump. Besides, third wheels aren't considered normal, and I think we both know that right now that's what you are right now."

"Well, it's a good thing that I'm not looking to tag along for the ride." Nicola looked around the room. Who was this guy supposed to be?

"Th

at is very good to know, because you are not invited." Grey sipped on his drink again and crossed his legs. "What is going to take? Money? A promotion? What? I'm sure that it is obvious to you by now that I have an abundance of resources at my disposal. Th

is is the opportunity for you to write your own ticket in this city. Just name your price."

"Look, I don't know what Ivy has told you about me, but I'm not the kind of man that backs down from his responsibility at the *simple request* of another man. And I really don't have time to play mediator in your and Ivy's juvenile love games. So, I won't be cooperating with either of you, unless I'm getting what I want. Besides, I don't recall when this became all about you. And as far as your resources...I've been

writing my own ticket for a while now. So unless you've got a tight little pussy under those pants, you can't do a damned thing for me."

Grey was at a loss for words for a moment. For one thing, he couldn't believe that Ivy had placed him in such a pitiful situation all because she had neglected her responsibility as an adult to use a fucking condom. Secondly, this man had just asked him in a public place if he had a tight pussy. He wanted to laugh, laugh at himself for being so blind. Ivy had wanted aggression their 179

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entire relationship. She had wanted him to be this man. Grey's outrage was unmistakable, showing on his face and in his heart. He remembered himself and quickly returned to his task.

"No, Nicola, I don't have a tight pussy for you, and the one I had you obviously took full advantage of. So, please control your locker room antics for the duration of this meeting."

"I think you know where I stand, so what do you want now?"

"Utter discretion until we know for sure whose this child is."

Th

e waitress returned to the table with Nicola's drink and extra glass of water as the two men sat quietly through the thick tension, thinking where and how they would come to terms.

"So what is it that you want from us that makes you unable to step out of the picture now? Please help me understand, since it is apparent that I don't," Grey asked, surveying the room to make sure that no one important was witnessing their heated discussion.

"I don't want to miss out on this pregnancy. We have six months before we know which one of us is the father. During that time, Ivy will need a lot of help. Th

ere are doctor's appointments,

classes, baby crap to buy, and other arrangements to be made. I mean, I've never had a kid, but I'm sure it takes a lot of preparation. And I don't want to leave her to do it all alone. After all, she didn't make it alone. Besides, I'm not convinced that this baby isn't mine. If I was convinced, I wouldn't be here."

"Are those the only reasons that you want in on it?" Grey asked, perplexed by the stranger's devotion to *his* fiancée.

"I am in on it," Nicola said, gulping down his vodka.

"For that matter, so are you. My reasons are crystal clear. No love involved. No future involved with Ivy. I just want to make sure that this kid isn't mine. Plus, she isn't a bad girl. Why would I leave her to do all of this alone?"

"She isn't alone. Why do you think that I'm here?"

"Unlike Ivy, I can't put my trust in you. I have to take care of my own shit."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Just the kid?" Grey asked, irritated.

"What the hell else is there? We split the responsibility fifty-fifty. You go to half of the doctor's appointments, and I go to the other half. Anything that she needs concerning that child, we should both be responsible for, and any decisions made about the child, we should both be privy to." Nicola was sure that Grey would agree; he was much too self-centered not to.

"Well obviously, I would benefit from it." Grey analyzed the situation further. "But what's in it for you?"

"If it's mine, then I just did what I was supposed to do, and if it's not mine then I've just spent six months making up for one long ass night that I assured you

involved more than a *few quick pumps*," Nicola said quickly.

Th

eir eyes met.

"Fine. We will put up with each other until Ivy has the baby, using complete discretion to protect Ivy's interests and image, but immediately afterwards if the baby is not yours *genetically*...you're totally out of the picture," Grey said, finishing his Mimosa.

"Sounds good to me. Besides, I'm sure you know that I have no problem finding a woman, but for that matter neither do you. You're as much a dog in heat as I am." Nicola sat back in his seat and sighed. He didn't need to miss sleep for this bullshit. They

could have easily done this over the phone.

"Yes. I know of your reputation. And I'm sure that you know of mine. But you still have no idea how precious Ivy is," Grey said, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "The only reason why

I'm agreeing to any of this is because of what she means to me." It was apparent that Nicola's presence was an irritating reminder of Ivy's secret indiscretion.

"Believe me, man. I know how special she is, and my

reasons are similar if not the same.” Nicola said, thinking back to the night he had held Ivy’s body in his arms.

Nicola’s comments seemed to have been just enough to rob Grey of his cool. “I’ve been with that woman almost longer than you’ve been on the job. You can’t possibly share the same reasons 181

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for standing beside her as me.” Grey threw down his napkin. Nicola’s arrogance enraged him further. “Two more things, just so we’re clear...Ivy is mine, and this town is mine. If you get in my way, I will fucking crush you.”

“Or you’ll die trying,” Nicola said, smiling. “And I can just about guarantee it will be the latter. I’m not one of your little political friends. If you’ve got a real problem with me you just name the place and time. We can handle this the old-fashioned way. Enough with all this panty-waist bullshit!”

Th

e room became quiet. All the patrons stared, whispering and snickering. Grey had to neutralize this quickly.

“Th

anks for coming out," Grey stood and offered his hand with the same smug smile. Regardless of Nicola's rebuttal, he had made his point. It was time for the games to begin. Nicola stood up and looked at Grey's hand. "You can go fuck yourself. Give Ivy my *regards*, if you can." He was sure that Grey would read between the lines. And secretly, at that moment Nicola enjoyed the thought that Ivy might very well be carrying his child. In fact, he hoped that she was...just for Grey's sake. He walked away, poised and pissed in the same breath. Watching Nicola stride confidently out of the restaurant as cool as he had come in dark blue jeans and black shirt demanding the attention of all the women with his brilliant looks, Grey felt a sudden desire to kill...not just anyone, specifically him. He had touched her, felt her, known Ivy in ways that no other man should have been allowed.

Looking down at his half-eaten meal, Grey thought about all the women that he had gone through during his time with Ivy. She was totally clueless as to how physically unfaithful he had been; yet mentally he loved only her. His feelings were a human reaction and totally uncontrollable. And even though he had wronged her for years, at that very moment he was the one who felt betrayed. Had he messed up so badly that Ivy would resort to seeing a white man? Or was race really the issue at all? He had been with white women, Mexican and Asian women, and others as well. 182

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Maybe the issue really was love. Did that man love her? Did she love him? What would make a man like Nicola want to spend six months apologizing for one night besides love? Grey's questions were endless.

"Excuse me," Grey said, finally to the waitress as she passed by, "Could you bring me the check?"

u u

Nicola pulled into the precinct and parked beside Brooks, who was in his truck arguing with Trina on the phone. Getting into Brooks' Yukon, Nicola laid his head back on the peanut butter leather seat and closed his eyes. He couldn't believe that he was getting a migraine so early in the day.

"Baby, I'm gonna have to call you back," Brooks said, hanging up the phone before Trina could reply. "Damn, that girl gets on my nerves!"

Usually, Nicola had something smart to say about Brooks'

arguments with Trina, but today he sat quietly.

"What's wrong with you?" Brooks asked, yawning.

"I just had a meeting with Ivy's fi ancé," Nicola said,



popping his shades over his tired eyes.

"What?" Brooks laughed. "Did you two hook up the shooting range and have a duel?"

"Might as well have," Nicola said, half laughing. "Guess whose son this asshole is?"

"Grey Henderson, Mayor Henderson?" Brooks said, putting his phone in his coat.

"You knew?"

"You didn't?"

"No, I didn't, evidently."

"Why does it matter? You would have still slept with her if you did know, maybe even enjoyed it more. Hell, you've never liked his ass." Brooks looked over. Was the truth finally about to come out about how Nicola really felt about Ivy?

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"He's the son of a politician; he's a politician in the making. He wants to keep this quiet for some reason, and I intend to find out why."

"Maybe he just doesn't want everyone to know that she

stepped out with a white boy from Miami,” Brooks said, patting Nicola on the shoulder. “Th

is is still the South, man. You know how ignorant people can be on both sides of the fence.”

“No. Th

is isn’t about race. It’s something else. Something more valuable to him.”

“It’s called a relationship.” Brooks laughed. “You’ve heard of one of those things before, right?”

“Once or twice. Th

ey’re supposed to be something like cancer; the end result is that it sucks the life out of you. But still, I’m not stupid. Something else is going on.”

“Do yourself a favor. Don’t get caught up between their families. Ivy’s family is well known, and so is Grey’s family, *obviously*. Memphis socialites make your life a living hell. I know. I’ve banged more than a few. Stick to girls with a quiet life. Th e

only way they get attention is if they come up missing.”

“So, if you were in my situation, you would just worry about the baby?”

"What the hell else is there for you to worry about? Ivy doesn't want to be with you, and you don't want to be with her. You're both too different. Remember? Just wait until the timer goes off, and check the oven to see if the kid is yours or not."

"Spoken like a true romantic," Nicola said, looking at his watch and instantly thinking of Grey. He almost wanted to get a different Rolex.

"No, I'm speaking from experience."

"Really? And what socialite have you knocked up lately?"

"You can be a smart ass if you want to, but you'll see," Brooks said, cutting off his truck. "Come on man; let's go before we're late for briefing. We've been talking about your baby's momma long enough." Brooks cut a sly grin and opened his door. 184

Chapter Eleven:

Family Reunion



## Chapter 11

### FAMILY REUNION

**“Momma, I need to talk to you,”** Ivy said, feeling her stomach in her throat. Far too much time had lapsed, and Ivy had to tell her family about the baby.

“Sure, why don’t come over today and spend the evening with me. I haven’t talked to you for more than five minutes at a time in nearly a month. Plus, every time I call you, I hardly ever get an answer. I was beginning to get worried.” Ivy’s mother, Sadie, had a knack for

knowing that while Ivy could take care of herself, she only stayed away when something was wrong. Ivy had always been afraid of failure and never wanted to acknowledge when she had fallen short on her glorious climb to success. Now, at three months pregnant, Ivy was showing slightly. Luckily, it was the dead of winter, and she could hide her bulge with large designer sweaters, leather jackets, and long-sleeved shirts. She had to admit that she was keeping her secret well from the world, but there still was a longing to have the support of her family.

For Ivy, it was horrible visiting the doctor's office by herself and

watching as other young mothers came supported by their loved ones.

*Latricia S. Nelson*

ones. She needed someone to tell her everything was going to be OK. She needed someone to tell her about pregnancy and how to deal with all the emotional and physical stress that came with it.

"OK, I'll be over later," Ivy said, knowing that the news would nearly kill her mother. "Well, I have to run now." Her mid-morning nausea had arrived.

"Are you OK? You don't sound like yourself," Sadie asked, suspicious.

"Oh, I'm fine. I just have a hundred things to do before I head that way." Ivy felt her mouth begin to water.

"Alright, I'll see you in a minute." Sadie wasn't convinced, but she let her daughter go anyway.

"Alright," Ivy said, hanging up the phone. She was already sitting in the restroom on the floor waiting to bid farewell to her breakfast.

Pulling her hair back from her face and kneeling over the bowl just in time, she hit the lever and flushed the toilet as she felt the violent surge from her belly. Damn all men! Wiping her mouth, she stood up and ran water into her sink.

"Girl, you throw up like clockwork," Trina said, sticking her head through the door. "I'm headed to class and then work. Call me if you need me."

"I may today. I'm going to tell Momma about the baby," Ivy said, brushing her teeth.

"It's about time. I thought that you were going to wait until the christening."

"I started to," Ivy said, laughing. However, inwardly she knew that this was no laughing matter.

Later that morning after Ivy had forced another light breakfast to stay down on her stomach, she headed to her mother's Germantown home tucked comfortably away in Auburn Hills, where all the retired, divorced, and moderately wealthy women of Memphis were flocking.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

As Ivy pulled into the circular drive, she noticed that her mother was not home. With a sigh of relief, she was about to pull back out into the street when she saw her mother pull into the drive behind her and blow her horn.

Putting her car in park, Ivy took out her frustration on her ignition as she turned the key. Th

is was a mistake. Her mother

was going to kill her dead as stone...baby or not. Ivy's heart began to race when she made eye contact with her carefree mother bouncing out of her pearl white Volvo convertible. Grabbing a paper bag out of her car, Sadie walked over to Ivy and kissed her cheek. As usual, although Ivy dreaded telling her mother her drastic news, she was glad to see her and nearly began to cry when she smelled her perfume and felt her soft cheek against her own.

Get a hold of yourself, Ivy commanded herself quietly.

"How are you?" Sadie asked, giving Ivy the bag. "I've got one more in the back seat. You can take this one inside for me."

"I'm fine," Ivy said, trying to pull her jacket in front of her belly.

"Well, you look great. A little bulky, but a little weight never killed anyone."

"You look good, too. What are the roses for?" Ivy quickly noticed the two-dozen red roses in Sadie's passenger seat.

"I'm having a friend over for dinner tonight." She winked her eye.

"The lawyer."

"Oh, God no. The

is just a friend from college. We ran into each other the other day and decided that we should catch up."

"Oh," Ivy smirked. As she had told her father months earlier, she knew that the lawyer wouldn't last long. Her mother dated infrequently and carefully with always the judgmental and suspicious eye. Plus, no one would



ever measure up to Madison Winters...not even Madison Winters.

"Damn that boy," Sadie said, slamming her keys on the counter as they came into the kitchen.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Sadie looked at the three-month-late Chase credit card bill that was still in her name but belonged to her only son, Emerald. She had forgotten about that credit card when she took her name off of everything else his senior year of college. Muck runner. Th at was

his name because that was all he had ever done...run amuck.

"Tell me, why can't your brother be as responsible as you?"

Sadie asked, throwing her junk mail in the garbage can.

"He is just a free spirit," Ivy said, taking up for her older, yet less mature sibling.

"*Free spirit* my ass. Do you know that he's been in Hawaii going on six months now? He said that he would not come home until he found himself. You and I

both know that could take him a lifetime. He's just down there following up behind that little island girl ...Cake walk."

"Kakeline," Ivy said, correcting her.

"Whatever. Th

at boy just ruins my nerves."

"Momma, he's just in love. Leave him alone." Ivy never took up for Emerald, but it seemed appropriate now.

"Well, aren't we sympathetic today? What's going on with you?

I thought that you couldn't stand you brother's wandering ways."

Sadie could see straight through Ivy at this point. Something was up, and she would get down to the bottom of it.

"I'm starting to see that everyone makes mistakes." Ivy flipped her hair and smiled. Th

e truth was about to come out. She had to prepare herself some sort of cushion.

"It only took twenty-one years for you to find out that you're not perfect." Sadie laughed mockingly as she stared at Ivy down her gold wire-rimmed glasses.

Young people.

"I guess." Ivy sighed as she began to pull out the skeletons from her own closet. "I know, because I've made my share of mistakes, too." She looked down at her pudgy fingers and smiled. "You want to hear something funny." Her voice cracked.

"Not really," Sadie's crooked smile disappeared. Sadie took a seat at her island bar and prepared herself for a classic Emerald moment.

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Well, you're going to hear it anyway. Last semester, I did something really stupid." Ivy fought her tears.

"OK..." Sadie's heart fl uttered.

"Grey broke up with me. I still don't know why. He just did. So, I went to a house party with Trina, and I ended up meeting this cop named Nicola. He invited me on a date, and I went. But we ended up at his place." Tears came out of Ivy's eyes. She wiped them away quickly and tried to continue.

"Ivy, did he rape you?" Sadie got up off of her seat and walked over to Ivy, trembling. "Oh God. I'll have your father kill him!"

Sadie begged for a mother's worst nightmare to be coming not true.

"Momma, he didn't rape me, but I did sleep with him." She tried to avoid eye contact.

"Sit down, Ivy." Sadie gave Ivy the napkin. "Was this your first experience outside of Grey?"

"Yes," Ivy said, trying to catch her breath. "And now I'm pregnant and I don't know who that daddy is." Ivy leaned against the counter and buried her head in her face. For a moment, Sadie wasn't sure what to say. She prayed that she had heard Ivy wrong. Surely her only daughter did not just tell her that she was still in college, pregnant, and unsure of who the father of her child was. She took a deep breath, feeling herself beginning to hyperventilate.

"Ivy, could you say that again? You mother is getting old. I seem to be hearing all the wrong shit these days." She gave a little laugh.

"I got...pregnant," she said slowly. Ivy wouldn't dare remove her eyes from the table placement in fear of meeting her mother's eyes. "And I don't know if the father is Grey or Nicola."

Th

ere was a long silence as Sadie tried to pull her thoughts together.

"You want a drink? Because I need a drink," Sadie said, standing up.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"I can't drink. Didn't you just hear what I said? I'm pregnant."

"Oh, I heard what you said. I just..." Sadie leaned against the countertop. "I just can't believe it."

"I can't either," Ivy said softly. "I was thinking that maybe I should sit out and get things straight."

"Straight? Ivy, you aren't thinking of having an abortion, are you? Regardless of the father, you are still that child's mother. And I am still that child's grandmother."

"I'm three months pregnant. And although I've thought about it a hundred times, I don't think that's what I want. I really want to keep it."

Sadie let out a sigh of relief. "Good. Good." Sadie wiped her tears away, trying to hold back all the wrong words to say.

"I know that I've let you down. And I'm so sorry, but I'm prepared to be the woman that I know that I can be for this baby and myself."

"So if you're prepared, you don't need to take any time off. You need to finish what you started and graduate. You have a job waiting on you...and what about the wedding?"

"Grey and I are continuing. He knows what happened and why."

"And what did he say about all of this?"

"He's prepared to still be the same man to me as before."

"I'm not sure that's good enough considering the man before broke up with you. You know having a child doesn't necessarily mean that you have to have a husband. It's better to have a two-parent household. But when one parent doesn't want to be there..."

Ivy began to cry again. Her tears were filled with agony. It had been this easy the whole time. Her mother hadn't said one cross word. She had been closing herself off from the world, and for what? Ivy's emotions became uncontrollable. She cried aloud, "It's been so hard to hold this all in." Her eyes were red and puffy. 192

## *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"But baby, you didn't have to keep this from me. I'm your mother. I love you regardless of what happens to you in world."

"I know. I know, Momma." Ivy let go of soft sobs. Sadie held her close, rubbing her daughter's head and kissing her cheek. "It will be OK. You hear me. You can make it through this. We'll do it together. We'll do it together, baby."

u u

Madison placed his keys on his sofa table and walked into his den where his Doberman Pincher lay on his cranberry leather sectional watching television. It had been an exhausting day, and all he planned on doing was jumping in the shower and resting the entire night without interruption. Pouring a tall glass of orange juice, he stared out of his kitchen window at the full moon and cloudless sky over the Atlantic Ocean. It was on peaceful nights like this off the coast of Emerald Isle that he dreamed of being back in Memphis with Sadie and Ivy and even Emerald with his wild ass. Taking a sip of his juice, he frowned at its bitterness. Adding the remainder of the vodka sitting faithfully by the flour jar on his counter, he tasted his drink again in approval. Surveying the room, Madison was pleased to see that his dwelling was spotless. "Kept the place well for me, did you, General?" Madison said, rubbing his dog

behind the ears. Lately, General had been his only companion. He had no time to date. And when he did find someone he thought would make a good mate, he always had some indelibly large flaw in her. Hitting the answering machine on the end table, Madison listened to his messages. First, his son Emerald asked for five hundred dollars, *as a loan of course*. Second, Dish Network was having a special on satellite systems. Third,

Sadie called to tell him

that Ivy was pregnant. Wait! Replaying the message he listened carefully, praying that he heard a faint snicker in the background. It had to be a joke.

*"Madison. Hello, it's Sadie. I am calling about our daughter. Just as plain as I can tell you...It seems that Ivy is pregnant...three months* 193

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*pregnant to be exact, and she doesn't know who the father is. She also has moved out of her dorm into her own apartment. I don't foresee this getting any better. Call home, I mean, call me when you get a chance... at my house. You know the number. By the way, your son has run up a five-hundred-dollar credit card bill that he needs to pay. You'll probably hear from him before I do. Get in his ass and tell him to send me a money order ASAP or else. Thanks.*



*Take care. Bye. ”*

*Damn, this was no joke.* Turning off the television, he grabbed his cordless phone and pushed the dog off the couch. He dialed Sadie’s number and felt the familiar sensation of fear race through his heart. Just the thought of little sister carrying some overgrown bastard’s baby enraged him. He would kill *him*, who ever he was. Kill him dead as a...

“Hello,” Sadie said, watering her houseplants.

“Sadie, it’s Madison.”

“I know. I figured you be calling soon. Just got the message, huh?” Sadie was over her initial shock, and now it was time to help him.

“Yeah. What the hell is going on down there? I told you that those kids should have moved with me.”

“So, what...she could get pregnant by some jarhead?”

“Is she there?” Madison wanted to speak with Ivy, not the Grinch who stole every holiday.

“No, she’s headed back to her place.”

“Well, what’s the story? Who is the other guy?”

“A policeman. Th

at is about all that I can tell you. She wouldn't elaborate much more than that. And I didn't want to push too hard. You could tell it was pretty painful for her to come out with it. But she was trying to be strong."

"Th

ere you go giving me half the story and trying to reassure me that everything is fine so I'll leave you two alone. Not this time. I want to be a part of whatever type of shit storm is headed that way. As a matter of fact, I'm headed there for a while in just a second. I'm taking my leave." He was determined to be a part 194

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

of Ivy's life during her pregnancy, and he wasn't about to let Sadie get in his way.

"No one is trying to keep you out. Just like always, you're making this about you. Leave it to know-it-all, ladies-man Maddy."

"Madison," he said, correcting her about his name.

"Maddy. You've been Maddy for over twenty-eight years and you're going to stay Maddy until the day I die."

"I can arrange that, you know." He hated despising and loving the same woman at the same time.

"*Anyway*, when are you headed this way, so that I can make arrangements for you?" She almost looked forward to playing petty games with her ex-husband. It was their way of rekindling old flames.

"I don't know for sure. I'll find out. Within the month though. I'll call you, but I'm gonna call her now. So I'll talk with you later."

"That's fine."

"Bye," he said, yawning.

"Bye," Ms. Winters said, hanging up the phone. This was going

to be a long six months.

uu

Ivy had expected her mother to react totally differently than she had about her pregnancy. She knew that at first she would blow up and that eventually Madison would receive a call, but she hadn't expected the advice that her mother had given or the love and comfort that came after the opening confusion and disappointment.

Tucking her pillow comfortably behind her back, Ivy

read her essay paper over for the third time to ensure that there were no grammatical errors. Even in the middle of morning sickness, a new apartment, new bills, and family drama she had still managed to stay on top of her studies.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Interrupted by the phone ringing, she looked at the caller ID

to see the name *Madison Winters*. Her mother must have talked with him.

"Hello Madison," Ivy said, sitting up in the bed.

"You know that I'm mad at you, right?" Madison asked, pouring General's dog food in his pail.

"Yeah, I know. But in my defense, I didn't even know about the baby until after our lunch date. Cut me some slack." Ivy was sure that her father would not be too dramatic about the situation.

"Sadie called. You know she gets a kick out of finding out about things with you two first. I never get the first call. I'm always the last to know. Your mother likes it that way. I wish that just once you would call me before calling her. Let me break news to her about something

drastic. She'd probably have a heart attack, but just the same, I wish once...just once." He finally took a breath. He didn't even seem angry about the news of the baby.

"I'll keep that in mind the next time something horrible happens in my life," she said, sarcastically.

"Wait now. Th

is isn't horrible. It's untimely and definitely unplanned, I hope. But new life is always precious. You'll learn about that after your baby is born. You'll see. The minute you two

meet face-to-face, no one else in this world will matter more."

"Did you feel that way about me?" Ivy loved to hear her father talk about when she and Emerald were kids.

"Oh yeah." Th

ere was a brief silence. "Emerald stole my heart and you stole my soul. I don't believe I was ever the same after that. I loved...love you guys." He never had a problem expressing himself to his only daughter; it was only with his son that he struggled.

"We love you, too," she said, sensing his loneliness. She always could.

“So tell me about this man I have to kill. Who is this cop?”

Shaft in training?” It was time to get the information his ex-wife wouldn’t give him.

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“No, he’s not exactly Shaft in training. Truthfully, I don’t know a lot about his character. He’s responsible, from what I can tell, and honest. He seems to have no problem with confrontation.”

She tried to find words to describe him truthfully.

“Wait, something sounds funny. You sound funny, like when you’re failing to tell me something really important.”

“Like what, Madison?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“He’s not military, which I know is one of your prerequisites of a perfect man.”

“Is he educated?”

“Yes. He has his MBA.”

“Where’s he from?”

“Miami.”

“What is he doing up here?”

“He came here in college to play football.”

“What’s his last name? Any children? Ever been married?”

“Agosto. No. And no.”

“Agosto?” Madison scratched his head. “Is he a Caucasian?”

He hadn’t heard anything else.

“Yeah. Well his father is Italian and his mother is Irish.”

“Th

at’s what I said: white.”

“Whatever. Don’t tell me that you’re prejudice, Madison.”

“Far from it. I’m just a little shocked.” He didn’t want to admit that he had some color issues, at least not now.

“Shocked. Whatever happened to freedom of choice? Please, you actually are going to sit here and tell me

that you've never been with a white woman?"

"What I do is my business, and I'm a brigadier general in the U.S. Marine Corp, so of course I believe in freedom...the freedom to pick any woman in the world besides my daughter."

"You know, I always pegged you wrong. I figured that white women were right up your alley. I mean, Mom is high yellow; the woman you saw after the divorce was high yellow. I just figured you liked women with a *fair* complexion."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Well, all of my girlfriends from college and high school were extremely light-complexioned women, but I guess it was a coincidence." His daughter was much too observant.

"Or maybe you were just brain washed. Th

ey say that black

men back then only dated light-skinned women. It was a sign of status." She could hear his aggravation even in his silence.

"Bull. My biggest crush was on the blackest thing at



TSU.”

Madison laughed. “Th

at was back in the day. You teeny boppers don’t know anything about that.”

“Madison, do you really care that he’s white?”

“Nope. Some of my best friends are white.” Madison laughed.

“But I do care about what his intentions are towards you.”

“I don’t know what his intentions are. So far, he’s been understanding, but who’s to say that won’t change.”

“I know, and you should keep that attitude about both of them.” He worried for her now. “Regardless of what they do, I’ll be there soon. You won’t have to go through this alone, I promise, princess.”

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Chapter Twelve:

Kitty Kat



## Chapter 12

### KITTYKAT

**“So, is the wedding still on?”** Mayor Henderson asked, driving his golf ball across the Southwind golf course. It had been nearly a month and a half since his and Grey’s last conversation about the wedding and Ivy’s pregnancy. He was starting to become nervous.

“Yeah, that I know of, it is.” Grey teed up and took swing. Making contact, he watched the small ball soar through the air.

“As soon as the baby gets here, we’ll get married.” He watched the ball land in satisfaction.

“What if the baby happens to belong to the cop?” his father asked with concern for the future of the family. He knew that he had inquired more than once, but he had to make sure that his son was sure of his decision.

“Th

en it does. I just can’t afford to lose Ivy at this point. And I know this sounds crazy, but I don’t know if I don’t want to lose her because I love her, or if it’s because I can’t stand to see her with someone else.” Wiping the sweat from his brow, Grey looked across the course. “I just never thought that life could become 201

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

so complicated in such a short period of time. I’m losing myself, because I’m losing her.”

“I know that it’s a hard pill to swallow, but what you’re feeling is natural, son. You could be a father soon, or a stepfather...”

Mayor Henderson shook his head. “Th

is is not exactly how I

pictured you starting a family.”

"Me either. Th

is is some messy shit that I've gotten myself into."

"Yeah. I agree with you on that. But even still, you need to keep this under wraps. Don't let the public know we have a *family issue*. Th

ey really eat this stuff up. And you could possibly suffer at the polls on election day."

"Don't worry. I'm not about to let this leak out." Grey understood politics more than he understood anything else in his life. "And Ivy's been tight-lipped about it, too. She's very embarrassed, of course."

"Of course..." Mayor Henderson rolled his eyes. "Did you meet with the other young man like I told you to?"

"Yeah, over a month ago." Grey hesitated. "You know him."

"I know him?" Mayor Henderson's interest was piqued.

"He's your lead guy on the NARC/TACT team."

"Agosto?" Surely, it couldn't be him.

"Yep, that's the bastard." Leaning on the golf club, Grey looked at his watch. "I had lunch with him at the Piatza

Club the other day, *per your request*. When I saw him come through the door, I almost fell out of my fucking seat. I couldn't believe it. You know, I never even knew that she looked at other men, especially other races. He's a problem for me, and he knows it."

"Th

is entire situation is a problem. Did she know that you two knew each other?" Mayor Henderson could not grasp the understanding behind Ivy's choice.

Grey looked over at his father awkwardly. "Does it matter?"

"I just wonder if it is possible that Ivy found out about your little indiscretions and took it upon herself to get you where it would hurt."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"She would never intentionally get pregnant, though. It wouldn't have even mattered to me if it has just been a one-night stand, but most days I feel like it's something else between those two. But no...I don't think that there was any sinister plot behind it. It was just a coincidence."

"Or karma." Mayor Henderson smirked. "Everything in

life has a way of making a full circle, boy. Let that be a lesson to you."

"Whatever." Grey didn't feel like hearing one of his father's lessons on life. "What do you know about this guy? I mean, I'm trying to gather dirt on him as we speak, but if you know some people on the force that could dish some dirt or some angle that I could use just in case, it would be helpful."

"Well, we had an issue with a drug dealer that was peddling meth in the East Memphis school district a few years back. Nicola helped nip in the bud that entire operation in less than two months. It was some pretty heavy cop work, but he pulled it off. Actually, it made the Memphis political machine look stronger during our initial *No Drugs* campaign. Come to think of it, he's had a lock on the drug problem since he came into that division. So you will have a hard time trying to find dirt, especially since you're not a cop."

"I'm glad to know that you approve of him," Grey added, frustrated.

"No, son. I don't approve of your situation, but I know the young man. And considering that he is a high-profile officer, this

could get really hairy. Did you all come to some type of quiet agreement?"

"Yeah. We both will keep this as quiet as possible until the baby arrives. Th

en, if he is the father, all hell will come out. I gotta tell you, he's been a real pain in my ass."

"I'm sure," his father said sympathetically. He was sure that it would be better to revisit the subject at a later date to give Grey sometime to get used to everything. "So I know that I'm prying, but I have to ask." Grey's father put his club back in the bag and 203

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

took a sip of his bottled water. "What are you doing for sex these days?" He knew of his son's promiscuous ways, and he wondered if they had subsided under the present circumstances.

"I haven't had time for it, truthfully. Right after Valentine's Day, I met this girl named Felicia. Man, she was bad." Grey sighed. "I just couldn't bring myself to do it though."

"Did she off er, or did you?" Mayor Henderson knew that it was all in the details.

"She off ered. She was standing there in a pink teddy at her place just begging for it. But I couldn't do it." Grey put his nineiron away. "I started thinking about Ivy and the baby. Suddenly she didn't look so good, and I

remembered that I forgot to pick up the carpet cleaner for my den." He sighed.

"Maybe you are ready to get married?" Grey's father questioned his earlier doubts.

"Th

at's what I said. Needless to say, Felicia was pissed. She accused me of being gay and escorted me out of her place. I was sick to my stomach. Normally, I would have turned her everywhere but loose."

"Th

at's a good thing, boy. Sex is not what makes life worth living; love is."

"Yeah, well sex keeps you from fi ring your secretary because she got saved and started wearing long skirts and turtlenecks instead of short skirts and tank tops."

"You fi red Angie?"

"Yeah. I didn't tell her that I was fi ring her because of that. She thinks it's because she mixed up the Banckman fi le with the Ezarer fi le and sent the wrong information to both offi ces causing

us to nearly lose both accounts. But it was because she wouldn't show me any leg anymore."



"I thought I raised you better than that." Mayor Henderson laughed. "She did have some good-looking legs though."

"Yeah, I know. I replaced her with this little vixen named Carol," Grey said, as an obvious afterthought. "But anyway, about Ivy, I don't feel right asking her to put out."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Don't worry. She'll tell you whether or not she's up to it, but more than likely as she gets farther in the pregnancy, she'll want it more than you will."

Grey laughed. "She was a freak before she got pregnant. I can only imagine what she'll be like now."

Mayor Henderson's grin turned to a scowl. "Seems like to me the both of you would have your fill of sex considering the situation." Grey's father shook his head in dismay. His wife should have taken the boy to church more.

u u

Near dusk, Grey pulled into his driveway. Instantly, he thought of Ivy. He hadn't talk to her all day. He dropped his golf bag at the front door and headed to his offi

ce. Checking his answering

machine, he was relieved there was no pressing business to address. He sat down on his couch and admired the setting sun bowing out gracefully behind a colorful hue of blue skies and white clouds in the horizon.

It had been an absolutely beautiful day of golfing. *There has to*

*be something I can do tonight to complement such a nice afternoon*, Grey thought to himself. He leaned back against his couch and exhaled. *Th*

*e* Waterford crystal clock ticked in the distance as the sun finally set. For a while, he sat quietly staring at the ceiling and basking in the silence of his home. *Th*

*ink. Th*

*ink. Th*

en finally, after

some time in the dark, the Black Tie came to mind. Grey dialed Ivy in hopes that she was occupied for the evening. He could never really enjoy his time away when she was hoping to spend the evening with him. It always made him feel the need to rush through his

plans.

"Hey, you," Ivy said, sounding preoccupied.

"Hey look, what are you doing this evening?"

"Umm, I'm going to the movies with Trina and a couple of girls from school."

"Good. I had plans for later, and I just wanted to make sure that you were straight."

205

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"I'm good," Ivy said, glad that he had considered her.

"Where are you going?"

"Out to see some old friends." Th

ere was no need to elaborate.

She would never understand, and he didn't feel like lying.

"Oh...OK. Well, call me on my cell when you get back."

"You know I will," he said, content with their very short but productive conversation. Hanging up the phone, he jumped up. He had about two hours to shower, eat, and get to the club before Kit came on stage.

Grey had intentionally poured his heart out earlier with his father. He had to make his father feel better about the upcoming election and his appetite for women. Th

e truth was that he had

torn Felicia apart and left her apartment in time to meet Ivy for dinner. Yep, there was no stopping him now that he knew that Ivy had played ball.

u u

Th

e Black Tie was packed as usual with all the most elite men in Memphis. Th

e old New Orleans-themed strip club was known exclusively for its Creole women, Cajun food, jazz band, private champagne rooms, gaudy chandeliers, and never-ending scented candles that danced on old Victorian-style candelabras burning dimly throughout the building.

Some still in their business suits, the men sat in anticipation of Masquerade. She was the headliner at the club, known for her beautiful, short, and voluptuous body. Every man in the room had grown to adore her, and some had even had the pleasure of being with her. In that, Grey was no exception.

Giving his coat to the hostess at the front door, Grey was escorted to his normal booth, where he ordered a small shot of scotch. Kit would surely recognize him. She always did. He didn't have to do anything special. He would just make eye contact with her and hold up his glass to salute her. Shortly after the show, she would come by to say hello, and they would retire back to his 206

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

place, where she would give him her famous full body massage, among other things.

Kit's story was nothing extraordinary. She was an implant to the city by way of Paris. Her company had relocated her to Memphis over ten years ago, but when they went out of business, the college grad had no one in Paris to return to. So, down on her luck, she opted to use her physical assets to make a good living for herself.

Grey had always been smitten with Kit. She was beautiful, intelligent, and bold. Her accent and insatiable sexual appetite made her his own little erotic treat. Although he was extremely attracted to her and grateful for her choice to be an exotic dancer, he often wondered why she didn't exercise more of her intellect. Th

ey had found themselves in numerous conversations over the years where she was well informed of issues even beyond his understanding. However, he never urged her to pursue jobs in better fields. To lose her as a late-night *booty call* would be a crime and a shame.

Excited that he had not missed the show, Grey sat back in the booth, crossed his legs comfortably, and sipped on his drink, debating whether or not to take Kit home tonight. It was never her decision, because she never said no to anything. It was, however, his decision, and it was now weighing heavily on him. With Ivy pregnant, he did not have anyone to fulfill his most ambitious needs, but he questioned his choices. As the lights dimmed and the DJ announced to the gentlemen to prepare themselves for the entertainment extravaganza of the evening, Grey put his worries to rest. After all, he didn't have to make a decision right away. Th

e entire room became silent, and the lovely Kit walked out on stage in her wintergreen velvet knee boots and matching cat suit boldly cut to expose her ample breast and buttocks. Her body swayed like a dexterous feline as she walked down the catwalk, and as she made contact with each man in the room, her light green contacts sparkled. Smiling, she kicked her leg up to cue the music, fell down into a Chinese split, and rocked erotically on the floor. 207

Letting her hair fall down to her waist, she waited until she heard the men scream like lust-driven cavemen before she lifted her head and began to move around, erotically teasing her audience. Kit stood up and danced over to the clear, illuminated center pole, where she quickly wrapped her legs around the cold acrylic beam and spun around, allowing the phallic symbol to rest tightly between her legs. Holding on tightly to balance her body, she licked her lips and shook her breasts, watching the crowd go wild. As her foot hit the ground, she looked across the room to where Grey was sitting in his usual booth. Smiling slyly, she tore off her suit and revealed her wintergreen thong and shiny green tassels. Grey laughed. He loved that she was so excited by the audience. Lifting his glass to salute her, Grey whistled at the young nimble vixen as she picked up a bottle of baby oil. She always gave a damned good show.

u u

Nearly fully dressed, Kit joined Grey at this booth almost an hour later, where he had already ordered her favorite drink. Hugging him before she sat down, she took her drink and quickly gulped it down.

"Hello, Mr. Wonderful. I wasn't expecting to see you here this evening," she said, lighting her cigarette.

"I had a little free time." He wished that she didn't smoke. It was the one thing that made her imperfect. He struggled to breathe between her drags.

"Well, it's good that you did come. Tonight is my last night,"

she said, proudly exhaling another puff of her cigarette in his direction. She knew that he didn't like the smoke, but she enjoyed watching him squirm.

"What?" Grey was surprised at her decision. He thought that she loved her job. "Are you going to another club?"

"No. No one else in Memphis can afford me. My son is getting older, and I know that pretty soon he's going to figure out what I do, if someone doesn't tell him first. His father has been holding 208

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

my job over my head for years now. So, I'm quitting and moving closer to him in Atlanta. I have enough saved to start fresh. Maybe I'll open a small business or something." She felt close enough to Grey to give him a thorough explanation. "I'm out of the exotic dancing business. Besides, I'm nearly a millionaire." She wiggled her nose at him and put out her cigarette.

"Well, what can I say? I'm proud of you." He looked



down for a brief moment. "I'll miss you, but I am proud."

"Oh," she said, taking his face in her hand, "I'll miss you, too."

"So how do you plan to celebrate your last night as an exotic dancer?" He had made his decision.

"I don't know. Why? Do you have any suggestions?" She already knew what he was talking about. She lifted her higharched brow at him and smiled.

"I have a few things in mind," he said, rubbing her leg softly.

"You sure that you want to do this?" She looked down at his hand on her thigh.

"Why would you say that?" Grey became suspicious. Kit never questioned him.

"You haven't been around for a while. I thought that maybe you and Ivy had gotten it together. I'd hate to be the reason that you relapse."

Grey removed his hand and sat back in the booth. Casually, he put his arm behind her. "Ivy's pregnant."

"Pregnant?" Th

en news came as a shock to Kit, and at that very moment she was very happy to be leaving Grey

Henderson behind her.

"Yes, pregnant. So right now, I'm playing Mr. Nice Guy and trying to be there for her as well as planning for a wedding and making this new merger at the offi

ce happen. Plus, I've got

graduation in a few months." He ran his fi nger down her arm. "I need to release some pressure." He moved closer and gave a sly smile. "You're the only woman capable of making that happen."

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"Uh huh," Kit said, lighting another cigarette. "You mean that I'm the only woman available." She had a thought and grinned.

"Damn, you're the second guy I know who is dealing with pregnancy issues. Something must be in the water." Laughing, she put her hand on his shoulder to comfort him.

"Well, you can guarantee that I won't be drinking any more of it," he said, looking at her. "What do you say, Kit? Do you want to be with a soon-to-be married father on your last night?"

Temptation had taken over.

“*Oui*, I think I do,” she said, taking his hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

Grabbing his keys, Grey followed closely behind her as they walked towards the coatroom. While he opened the door for Kit, Nicola walked in with Brooks and several off-duty police officers.

Surprised, Nicola looked up in the middle of laughing and choked at the sight of the two.

“Damn. What are you up to, Grey?” Nicola asked, smiling at Kit. “Hey, Ms. Kitty,” he said, instantly making the connection. Either they really did have the same taste in women or there was a serious shortage of the opposite sex in Memphis.

“Hello, Nicola,” she said, flirting with the prospect of coming back to the club after she left Grey to say a goodbye to him as well.

“You two know each other?” Grey asked without taking his eyes off of Kit.

“Yeah, we know each other,” Kit said, unconcerned with the situation. She didn’t see what the big deal was, yet. Grey had always known that she indulged in multiple lovers. Why should this one be any different?

"Grey, how's Ivy?" Nicola asked, taking off his coat. "How's the baby? You know, she and I have that doctor's appointment in the morning." He left little room for response but an endless gap for interpretation. Nicola blew smoke from his cigar and looked over at Brooks.

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"Ivy is fine. Good of you to run my errand in the morning. As you can see, it will be a long night. I can't be expected to be up at the crack of dawn," Grey said sarcastically. He felt anger in him unlike any he had ever felt before.

"For all we know, it isn't your errand to run in the first place,"

Nicola said, hearing Brooks laughing behind him.

"Well, now that we know that everyone is doing fine, we should be going now," Kit said, grabbing Grey by the arm. "Nicola, it was nice seeing you again." She wasn't sure if Grey was aware that Nicola was a police officer

but the look in their eyes reflected a harmful malice that would soon be unleashed if they did not go their separate ways.

"Have fun," Nicola said condescendingly as he walked off .

"I plan to," Grey said, walking out of the door. u u

Scuffl

ing through the winter darkness and the sleet and snow, Grey and Kit drove silently listening to 101.1 FM soft jams on the radio. Allowing his mind to race, he tried to picture how Nicola and Ivy had gotten together. For the first time, he could see the two in a passionate embrace and her calling out *his* name. He could see her lips moist with his kiss...Nicola's body pushing into Ivy's in a violent synchronic motion. He could see her smile in ecstasy as Nicola emptied himself into her. Pressing his foot down on the accelerator, Grey felt his stomach twist into knots. *Th*

*e bastard probably got Ivy pregnant on purpose*, he thought as he pulled off the expressway onto his exit. There

were only two men in the entire world that had tasted the sweet nectar of Ivy's embrace, and he hated like hell that Nicola was the other.

Pulling into his driveway, Grey stepped out of his car and slammed the door as hard as he could. Kit opened her door softly, stepped out, and leaned

against the car.

"Was this a bad idea?" Kit asked softly. By now she had put together the pieces of Grey's disturbed little puzzle and decided 211

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that Ivy's was the face that had launched a thousand ships. A little Helen in the making. She was glad to be leaving before the gates of Troy fell.

"No," he said quickly. "Th

e last thing I want right now is to be

alone." He looked at her for a moment and then walked to his side door to turn off the alarm. "Come on. I'll fix you a nice drink and we can keep each other company," he said, trying to remove the frustration from his voice. He reached out for her little hand and pulled her gently into the house. He dare not ruin his chances for sex tonight. It was the one thing that might relax him. Kit took off her coat, set it on the counter, and kicked off her stilettos, falling back to the earth's gravitational pull at a petite four feet ten inches tall. She yawned a little as she observed her surroundings for the hundredth time. Th

e dimly lit kitchen was

warm and cozy, illuminated by nightlights and perfumed with the smell of cinnamon. A picture of Ivy on a picnic blanket sat under a magnet on the stainless steel refrigerator, haunting the room and Kit's presence. How she hated to be reminded constantly that she was the other woman, especially with Grey. He was so powerful and so dominating. *It must be nice to be his real woman*, she thought as she turned towards him.

"You do love...cinnamon," she said, only inches from his chest and looked up at him.

"Can I fix you that drink later?" he asked, quietly pulling off her blouse and holding her so close she could feel the heat of his body through his clothes.

"You can fix it in the morning," Kit said, kissing his lips. She felt him unsnap her bra.

"How do you know Nicola?" Grey pulled away for a moment, thinking again of Ivy's deceit.

"How do you think?" Kit raised her brow. Her arms were still around his slumping wide body. "Since when did my love life become important to you as long as I use a condom?"

"*Love life?* Do you love him?" Grey asked, hoping that she did. She could then be pawn in his game.

## *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Don't be silly. Of course not." Kit smiled. "Is Nicola Ivy's friend? Is that what all of this is about?" Her eyes narrowed. She couldn't ever recall seeing Grey jealous of anyone the entire time that she had known him.

"Yes." Th

e thought infuriated Grey further.

"Every woman is allowed one mistake, you know." She rubbed Grey's back. "Maybe you should excuse her for this one, considering..."

"Come here." Grey pulled her to him again and rubbed through her black mane. "Tonight, I'm going to take all of my frustrations out on you, since you feel so much pity for Ivy." He pulled her by her hair angrily and bit at her neck.

"Good. Remind me to thank her later." Kit kissed his chocolate mouth deeply, trying to commit his every taste to memory. Picking the little woman up, Grey carried Kit up to his bedroom with visions of Nicola carrying Ivy. Pissed off, Grey threw her on his bed and tore off the rest of her clothes.

"You want me to be your bad little girl?" she asked, sucking on her bottom lip and completely turned on by



his wrath.

“Yes.”

“Th

en...hit me,” Kit insisted as she scratched his back.

“What?” Grey was confused. Abruptly, he stopped. The pain

of her razor sharp nails ran through him.

“I know that you want to do it; I can see it in your eyes. Besides, I like it. Hit me,” she said, naked and breathing heavily as she played with herself.

With only his slacks on, Grey regained his composure and stood back. “Kit, I’m not into that,” he said, denying the urge to follow her bizarre instruction. Besides the very grotesque reality of voluntarily assaulting a woman, he knew he was far too angry for that type of foreplay.

“A little pain goes a long way, but if you are afraid, let’s try something else,” she turned around on her knees. “Let’s do something really...unspeakable,” she said, pulling a condom from his nightstand drawer.

"Like what?" Grey said, still aroused by her body as he watched her tease him. "You sure as hell can't hit me." He grinned slyly.

"I'm sure Ivy doesn't allow you to do *everything* you would like to do to her." She knew that he would read between the lines.

"No," Grey took the condom from her. "She doesn't allow me to do half of things I would like to do to her."

Kit's smile was gone. She wanted him so badly, not be with him one night, but to be with him forever. It was the only reason that she never said no to his requests. She could not deny him only because she loved him so. "If she really loved you, she'd do anything to keep you happy. I know that I do. And don't say that you don't want to do this. You've joked about it far too often. It has to be your fantasy."

"Gentlemen don't necessarily ask such a thing of the woman he plans to marry. But...I am also an opportunist, and when a good thing is offered..." His voice was low and eyes were full of mad lust.

"Well, Mr. Henderson. I am offering *it* to you. So what do you say?"

"OK, Kit." He put the condom on carefully. "I take it that

this won't be your first ride?"

"No, not at all, but I know it's your first time. And I want to be the one that turns...you...out. Even Ivy can't take that away from me." Kit licked her lips.

"Does that excite you?" he asked, turning her face away from him. He ran his finger down the small of her back and down into her buttocks. "Now I get it. You want to be Ivy."

"No. I want to be Mrs. Henderson." Kit could say how she felt now that she was leaving, but she couldn't bring herself to look at him so she fixed her eyes on his headboard. Such a preposterous thing was absolutely hilarious to Grey, but he dared not laugh in Kit's face now...so very close to enjoying something so vile and depraved. Th

e truth of the matter was that

he had as much feeling for Kit as he did for the condom he was 214

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going to use to penetrate her, but he would not tell her so until she was of no use to him.

Grey pondered for a moment how absolutely distasteful the entire act was before he finally

dismissed his restraint. He would give Kit the pleasure of knowing that she was about to pop his cherry. And she would give him pleasure...period. As he aimed for her buttocks, she held on to his hand and looked back at him.

"Make it hurt," she said, in a heavy accent. "You'll like it more." Th

is time she did not smile when she looked at him, and for the first time he noticed the darkness in her eyes. After this, he would be thankful that she would be going away.

"Alright," Grey said, wishing for a brief moment that Ivy could be there to witness it. "Tonight, you will be my little wife. And in the morning, you will wish that you never asked for such a thing."

As Grey felt himself push through Kit, he thought of how Ivy would die if she only knew. Th

e thought brought him comfort

as he heard Kit scream. Unaware and unconcerned if she was in pleasure or pain, he grabbed her long black mane again, slapped her buttocks, leaving a red bruise mark, and ripped violently into her.

u u

Across town hours later, morning came soon for Nicola. The

sun crept through his blinds and shined across his bedroom, creating a luminous glow. Opening his eyes, he stared at the ceiling and instantly thought of Ivy. He would have called her last night and told her to stop by Grey's house, but if something had happened to her in the dangerous winter weather, he would have felt totally responsible. So regretfully, he held his secret in hopes of revealing it and Grey at a later time. Even now, he smiled at the thought.

Removing his arm from the young woman snuggled comfortably under him, Nicola got out of bed and stretched his long body. It was only seven thirty in the morning, but he felt as though he was 215

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getting a late start. Stepping in the shower, he grabbed a small washcloth and allowed the steaming hot water to splash across his chest. Ten minutes later, he walked out of the bathroom with his towel around his waist and his black hair curled in wet locks at the nape of his long neck. He sat on the very edge of the bed by a sleeping woman, picked up his phone, and dialed Ivy.

"Hello," Ivy said, answering on the second ring.

"Are you already awake?" Nicola pictured her as being a chronic late sleeper.

"Th

e baby wakes me up at around four thirty or fi ve every morning," she said, throwing her last load of clothes in the dryer.

"Damn." He could see her kneeling sickly over the bathroom toilet. "Well, I was calling to see what time you were going to be ready."

"Umm, the doctor's appointment is at eleven thirty. So, I'll be ready whenever you get here." She was nervous about them going to the doctor together, but she was also ready for it to be fi nished.

"I'll head over there in a little while," he said, making eye contact with the young blue-eyed blonde as she rolled over in his bed nude.

"Alright. Hey, are you hungry? I fi xed breakfast already, and I have enough for one more." She didn't want to just invite him to breakfast outright. What if he declined?

"Sure, fi x me a plate, and I'll head on now before it gets cold."

Th

e small proposal excited him almost as much as the woman waking from her peaceful slumber.

u u

At nine o'clock, Nicola pulled into Ivy's apartment complex. His face-off with Grey the night before was still fresh on his mind, and he struggled with the prospect of telling Ivy about it all. It wasn't so much that he wanted her for himself; it was that he didn't want her with Grey. Ivy was a nice girl, not like the many women

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that both of them bedded. Looking at his watch, he picked up his cell phone and dialed her house phone.

"Hello," Ivy said, putting the blueberry pancakes on his plate.

"Hey, I'm out front." Nicola got out of his truck and closed the door.

"OK." Her heart skipped a beat. Why did it do that every time he was near her?

Quickly, she grabbed the air freshener and sprayed it widely in the air, ran past the mirror to check her lipstick, and brushed her hair. Opening the door as he was about to knock, she greeted him with a smile,

trying not to pant visibly. He reached into the door and hugged her warmly. She felt his chiseled hands softly touch her body and realized that goose bumps were forming.

"Hey, lady. How are you?" he asked, tugging at her denim overalls and green cashmere turtleneck. He couldn't help but notice her long brown locks shimmering brightly in the sunlight and her caramel skin glowing with pure radiance. She was definitely a timeless beauty.

"I'm fine." Ivy closed the door. "Just tired." She admired his face for a moment before leading him to the kitchen table where their food sat neatly prepared on her finest dishware.

"Man, you went all out," he said, placing his leather coat on the back of the kitchen chair. "I haven't had a home-cooked breakfast in... years."

"Talk about pressure. I really hope that you like it," she said, sitting down beside him.

Tasting the sweet strawberries and Delta syrup on his pancakes, he thought back to early mornings at his home back in Miami when he was growing up. The

only other woman he had ever had

breakfast with was his mother many, many years ago.



Looking up at Ivy, who now enjoyed her meal quietly, he felt a warm and comforting sentiment in his heart.

"Why did you stop eating?" she asked, curiously looking up at him with an innocent smile. "Do you need something?"

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"No," he said softly, his voice barely carrying enough sound to whisper. He cleared his voice and continued. "Your place is nice."

Looking out of the window, he saw a bird perch on the tree. "You live in a little fairy tale over here, don't you? Your birds even chirp in the morning."

"All birds chirp in the morning," she said, filling his glass with orange juice.

"My birds don't chirp. Th

ey usually have a hangover in the

morning." He stretched again, fighting a nagging hangover.

"Probably from partying with the likes of you." They made

eye contact.

At that very moment, Nicola wished that she could have looked beyond his macho exterior to see the type of man that he really was.

"You think that I'm out of control, don't you?" he asked, regretfully.

"No... I know that you are," Ivy said, convinced. Sipping on his juice, Nicola sat quietly for a moment. Now would be a great time to tell her about Grey and Kit, he thought devilishly. But as he looked back up into her eyes, he knew that in order to hurt Grey, he would have to hurt her.

"I'm a pretty serious guy once you get to know me," he said, countering her cold observation.

"Oh, I know you quite well Mr. Nicola Michael Agosto." She knew that referring to his full name would make him think of their night together. And although she knew that it was improper to do so, she loved the rush it gave her to flirt with him.

"Th

ere is always an opportunity to know me better." Without a smile, he stared right back at her, giving her a taste of her own medicine.

Th

She thought of another night with Nicola made Ivy choke. She covered her mouth and tried to catch her breath, which was leaving her with each cough. "Excuse me," she said, clearing her throat.

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"You OK?" He got up out of his seat and rubbed her back gently.

"Yeah, just that damned pulp." She had to change the subject quickly. "I'm supposed to have my first ultrasound today," she said, dappling her shiny lips with a napkin.

"Wait. You mean you'll find out if it's mine or Grey's?" He thought that happened after the baby was born.

"No, I just get a first glimpse," she said, giggling. "They don't

tell you what sex the baby is until the sixth month."

"Oh. Didn't Grey want to be with you for this?"

"I didn't tell him. I figured whoever's turn it was to take me would see the baby with me." Th

e thought depressed her. "I

wanted to be fair."

"For what it's worth, I'm sorry that I have a hand in this."

"It's OK. I've come to grips with it now. Besides, if I recall, I asked you for it and not the other way around."

"You make me feel good, Ivy." Nicola felt his stomach in his throat. "Like it would be OK for the baby to be mine."

Ivy smiled but did not respond to his statement. *What was there to say?* "At first, I was worried about names and all sorts of cosmetic stuff , but now I just want the baby to come here healthy."

"Yeah, me too." Picking his fork back up, he smiled and looked down at his food. Now he wondered if she thought it would be OK

to have his child considering that she said nothing in reply. u u

Nicola tried to follow the doctor as she explained what Ivy could expect during her second trimester, which she had already entered a month ago. Feeling as though he was in a commercial, sitting beside Ivy liked the overjoyed husband, he looked at his watch and yawned. He had seen more than what he had

bargained for during their offi

ce visit, and he was now ready to go home and take a long nap. Th

e poking and probing and giddy nurses and pink walls and teddy bears and thermometers were making him feel as though he was the one who was pregnant. 219

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“Well, do you want to know the results from the ultrasound?”

Dr. Karkera asked, smiling at Nicola, who was, of course, clueless at that point.

“I asked her to tell you herself, so that you wouldn’t think I was lying,” Ivy said, clasping her hands together to suppress her excitement. Nicola had to walk down to the car to get his wallet earlier to pay for the offi

ce visit and had missed the ultrasound.

“Sure,” Nicola said, nervous. What could a fi rst glimpse tell him?

“Well, you have twins. But we can’t pinpoint the sex until about the twenty-third week,” the doctor said, shocked at how Ivy had gotten both men to participate in her visits. She defi nitely wanted to be there when Ivy

found out just who was the father.

"Twins?" Nicola asked, in shock. His face turned from a dark unreadable frown to a bright smile as he looked over at Ivy, who was as thrilled as he was and even more frightened, although she did well to hide it. "How about that," he said, sitting up in the seat.

"And they're healthy?" Now he knew why Ivy was not concerned with the cosmetics. Th

e basics were so much more important.

"From what we can tell at this point," Dr. Karkera said, passing him the ultrasound picture of the twins. "Th is is the fi rst picture

of your new little family."

"Can I keep this?" he asked, forgetting that Ivy might want to have it.

"If it's alright with Ivy," the doctor said, shaking her head.

"Th

ey are always excited when they fi nd out that they have twins."

Her attention now turned to Ivy. "If you all need anything please give me a call." Standing up, she offered her

hand to Nicola.

“Congratulations.”

“Th

anks,” Nicola said, standing and shaking her hand.

“See you next month,” Ivy said, shaking the doctor’s hand as well.

“Alright. Just remember to take your vitamins and eat more protein,” the doctor said, seeing them out of the office.

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Helping Ivy with her new bags of baby goodies, Nicola walked out of the doctor’s office

with a new perspective on life. In just a few minutes, he had totally forgotten about anything that had ever mattered to him before. All he could think of was how there was a 50 percent chance that those twins might belong to him. Opening the door of his truck for Ivy, he nearly picked her up and put her in her seat.

“Can you believe it?” Ivy asked, seeing the new urgency in his intense eyes.

“Slowly.” Nicola paused. “Twins run in your family?”

“We have a couple of sets,” Ivy said, thinking back.

“What about you?”

“A few,” Nicola said evasively.

“Are you OK?” Ivy tried to read him.

“I’m fine,” Nicola said, closing the door. As he walked to the other side of the truck, he stopped and took out his cell phone. He couldn’t wait another minute to call Brooks.

“Yeah,” Brooks said, coughing as he answered the phone.

“Man, you haven’t gotten rid of that damned cold yet?” Nicola asked, looking up at the clear blue skies.

“No.” Cough. “Why the hell are you so damned happy?”

“I just left the doctor’s offi

ce with Ivy. Well, I’m still in the

parking lot actually, but I just left the doctor.”

“And?” Brooks didn’t seem to see why being in a parking lot was such a big deal, but he was sure that Nicola would tell him.



"She's having twins," he said, hitting the truck.

"Get out of here," Brooks said, laughing. "Damn, man, congratulations! Are you happy?"

"Yeah, I think am," Nicola said, looking at the ultrasound picture again.

"Th

at's good, man. *I think.*" Brooks was even confused at what Nicola wanted at that point.

"Th

e possibility just blows my mind. Obviously, you can understand why."

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"Yeah...shit. You need to move out of town now, before it's too late. Child support in Shelby County is a bitch." Brooks laughed. Th

ey were on two totally different pages. "No, I'm just messing with you, man. Well, twins...that makes the possibility of them being yours a lot greater."

"I know. I don't want to say anything to Ivy about all that yet. It could just be a coincidence. Th

ey run in her family, too.” Nicola

said, tucking away his new picture in his wallet.

“You sound real excited for a man uninterested in a family,”

Brooks mocked Nicola.

“Maybe, but I just had to let someone know the good news. I don’t know. Th

is morning when I woke up, all I could think about was how I didn’t want to be here, but now, I’m really glad that I came.” He was somewhat embarrassed by his new excitement.

“Just promise me one thing, man.” Brooks blew his sore nose and sighed.

“What?” He really didn’t want to hear what Brooks had to say, but he listened attentively. Resentfully.

“Promise me that you won’t lose sight of the fact that Ivy is another man’s fiancée and that there is always the possibility that those twins, *regardless of the coincidence*, are another man’s children. I don’t want you to wind up getting hurt in the end.”

Nicola lowered his voice. He really didn’t want Ivy to

hear what he was about to say. "It's not the girl that I'm here for, Brooks. I just really want to be a part of this experience, just in case the kids are mine." He could feel his spirits coming down. "Like I told you the other night, what Ivy and I had was temporary. I'm not even interested in her, especially now. I just want to do what's right by her, because I did sleep with her."

"Alright, that's commendable," Brooks said, hearing frustration in his friend's voice. "I don't mean to bring you down, but it's my place as your friend to try to keep you grounded."

"I'm not going to get hurt. Damn, you act like I'm in love or something." He breathed heavily and looked at his watch. "Look, I'll be down at the precinct by three. Call me if you need me."

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Chapter Thirteen:

Comparisons



## Chapter 13

### COMPARISONS

**“I’ve decided not to hide my pregnancy anymore,”** Ivy explained to her mother as they walked through the Wolfchase mall.

At first, Ivy was concerned about the contempt that others would have for her pregnancy. She was after all the former Ms. Bryton-Ritz College, a title that carried great weight at her school and in her community. She was a new employee at Yveson and Letehwich, which

required a great deal of time and effort. But more importantly, her own self-image did not reflect that of a young, *possibly* single mother. She had always pictured herself conquering the world and then eventually settling down to have children. Now she had to both at the same time. In dealing with her new reality, Ivy tried feverishly to hide her secret. And as much as possible, she avoided anyone outside of her family and Trina. But the more she bonded with the small beings resting in her womb, the more she refused to give in to the great expectations others had placed on her and that she had placed on herself. She was starting to realize that she could recreate herself to be a stronger, more aggressive creature. 225

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"Do your professors know about the situation?" Sadie asked. Although Sadie had been extremely worried at first, now she relished the thought of beautiful grandchildren to dote on and love unconditionally. She missed having children in the house and the pitter-patter of little feet.

"No. I just tell them that I have to go to my doctor's appointment or that I'm not feeling well. I didn't want them running back telling everyone on campus. But now, I really don't care."

"Pretty soon, they'll notice anyway." Sadie stopped to

look at the Ann Taylor window display. She definitely needed new clothes now that Madison was coming to stay for a while. "It's high time for you to embrace this pregnancy and forget other people."

"You're probably right. But I'll cross that road when I get to it," Ivy said, rubbing her stomach.

u u

Later that evening after Ivy had put away all of her new clothes, she sat in the floor of her closet crying softly. *Get a grip on yourself*, Ivy commanded herself to listen. Wiping her eyes, she took a deep breath. It was nights like this when she was alone in the quietness of her room that her past came back to haunt her. She could hear Nicola's voice whispering in her ear and feel his hands at the base of her back. She could see his dark brown eyes staring her in her face and his body hovering over hers in the silence of his bedroom. And when she tried to close Nicola out of her mind, she would see Grey begging her back, holding her close, putting that ring back on her finger, and claiming her once more as his own. There was

no escaping either one of them now.

Ivy was carrying twins by one of two men who were constant forces in her life, and she seemed to have little control over the situation. Every day she worried that Grey would grow tired of their arrangement and

leave her alone and denied. In his eyes, she had cheated on him, and in her eyes, well...she just didn't know anymore.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Ivy, are you in here?" Trina asked, knocking on Ivy's bedroom door.

"Yeah." Ivy wiped her eyes once more and hurried to her feet.

"Grey is on the phone." Trina automatically knew that Ivy was crying again but refused to acknowledge it. Cutting her misery session short, Ivy made her way to the chaise lounge by her bed. Grabbing the phone, she lay down on the comfortable cushion and let out a great sigh.

"Hello," Ivy said, clearing her voice.

"Hey. I was calling to see how you were doing." Grey still felt extremely guilty for his vulgar, tasteless actions with Kit only a week prior, but he also felt vindicated now by Ivy's own poor judgment.

"I was going to call you when I thought that you were at home. I'm fine. I went shopping today with Momma, and we just got home about two hours ago." Running

her hands through her hair, she held the phone in a long silence. "Are you still mad at me, honey?" she asked, finally.

"For God's sake, would you please quit bringing it up! No, I'm not mad at you, but you make me crazy constantly apologizing."

He was still very much upset, but he didn't want to admit it. However, stating that fact would only start an argument, or should he say *another* argument.

"I just wanted to be fair with the two of you. I said that whoever's turn it was to take me would get the first glimpse of the baby."

"*Babies*," Grey said, correcting her. He rolled his eyes. "I just think that it's messed up that you didn't think enough of me to make that type of decision with *me*." He couldn't seem to let it go either. "I am still your fiancé, you know."

"You just don't know how difficult it is to be fair to both of you right now."

"You wouldn't have to worry about that if you had just never told him you were pregnant. Besides, there is no need to be fair 227



with him. It's me you should be concerned with. His ass will be gone when all of this is over...back out chasing skirts." His voice raised in irritation. "Damn, I hate him."

"You shouldn't hate him. It's all my fault. You should hate me,"

Ivy said, feeling guilty all over again.

"I should, shouldn't I?" Grey said, letting his anger get the best of him. "You talk about how hard all of this is for you, but what about me? Hell, I have to raise these children. If they are mine, I don't have a problem doing that, but if those babies are that son of a bitch's I don't know what in the hell to do." He could hear Ivy crying faintly.

"You shouldn't marry me if you can't accept these children,"

she said, trying not to wimp out. "We should just call this off , right now." Ivy knew that she didn't mean it.

"Don't tempt me, Ivy. No man in his right mind would sign up for this job. I love you. I do, but..." Grey stood up behind his desk and stared out the window at the skyline of downtown Memphis. He didn't really want to hurt her. So he backed off . "Look, I'll talk to you later, alright? Just... get some rest."

"You always do this!" Ivy said, screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Do what?" Grey said, on the defensive. "Calm down. Think of your health."

"You always say all of this mean shit and then run off the phone." She blew her nose in her handkerchief.

"Are you serious? Ivy, what in the hell do you want from me?"

"I'm trying like hell to hold onto you...trying to make this work. But you need to take responsibility for your own shit. You know that I wanted to be there with you yesterday. Don't play stupid with me."

"I was just trying to be fair. I made a mistake."

"Yeah, well lately, you've been making too many."

Slamming the phone down in her face, Grey immediately regretted his words. Who was he kidding? He didn't want to call it off. In fact, he wanted her more now than ever, because for 228

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once, she depended on him. She needed him to be there for her. It sort of made him feel good, better than before when she was so damned independent.

Ivy moved to her bed and put her hands over her face. She was so tired of arguing with him! He was more emotional than her, and she was pregnant. She hit her pillow as hard she could. Damn him! She closed her eyes and tried to block out her frustration. Th

is entire situation was driving her insane. She needed to talk to someone. Anyone who understood her. In the same frustrated breath, she thought of Nicola. He always understood her, and he never seemed to have a bad word to say about anything. She huffed. Feeling vindictive herself, she picked up the phone and dialed Nicola's house phone. She would just talk to him until she fell off to sleep. To hell with Grey and his spiraling antics.

"Hello?" A woman said, answering Nicola's phone.

"Umm." Th

ere was immediate hesitation. "Hello, may I speak with Nicola?" Ivy asked, startled. If she didn't think that he had caller ID, she would have just hung up the phone.

"No, you may not. He's busy right now," the woman said, hanging up the phone quickly.

Ivy stared at the phone in shock for a moment before she put down the receiver. *Who was this bitch?* She thought about what Grey had said about Nicola only minutes before. Maybe all he did was chase skirts after all? Or maybe he had one particular skirt that meant more to him than her. Was *she* the woman who had designed his home? Had *she* picked out the comforter on his bed, the paintings on his wall? Had *she* picked out the clothes on back?

Maybe *she* was just out of town the night that they had gotten together? Ivy stopped herself.

"Why am I so angry that Nicola has a friend, when I have a fi ancé? Silly little girl," Ivy said out loud before crawling into bed.

u u

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Did my phone just ring?" Nicola asked, walking back into his bedroom.

"Yeah, but I told whoever *she* was that you were busy," Layla said, sitting up in the bed.

"But I wasn't *busy*," Nicola said, walking over to his caller ID to fi nd that it was Ivy who had called. "Shit."

Picking up the phone, he rolled his eyes at the young blonde, who ignored his pouts. "Did she sound like something was wrong?"

"I don't know," she said, rolling her eyes back at him and throwing the cover off of her legs. "You know, I'm getting pretty fucking tired of every time I come over, you running to the phone. Th

e other morning you got up and called some girl at the crack of dawn to meet for breakfast. I mean, I was still in your bed. It would have been nice for you to at least wait until I was gone."

"I'm only going to tell you this once...don't answer my damn phone."

"Who is she, Nicola?"

"Do I question what you do? Do I care? No."

"She means that much to you, huh?" Layla's eyes begin to water.

"You don't understand the situation. And I don't expect you to either, but I'm telling you this..." he said, getting Ivy's answering machine. "You had better hope that she didn't need anything serious." He hung up the phone before the machine could record his voice.

"Whoever this bitch is, she is not your fucking

girlfriend," she said, finally standing up nude beside his bed. As long as she had been seeing Nicola, he'd never been worried about anyone but himself.

"Layla, neither are you," he said, enjoying pissing her off. At least she was feeling the way that he felt at that moment...totally annoyed. "And don't ever call her a bitch again. You have such a dirty mouth."

"You like my dirty mouth when it's on your dick!"

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Well it's not on there now, so do me a favor and clean your language up. No one likes a woman with a potty mouth." He paused for a moment and looked at her completely enamored with him. A pointless pursuit. "Layla, maybe you're just wasting your time here. Go home."

"Go home? My God, Nicola. We have been seeing each other for years. And all you can tell me to do after all of this time is to go home. You are such an asshole! I mean, eventually I thought you would at least learn to like me, but it's the same old *get in and get out* with you." She dressed quickly.

"I'm just not in a position to give you what you want. I have told you that a hundred times over."

"News flash, *Nic*. You'll never be in a position to give me what I want, because you're too busy using people. You're just a bitter, thirty-year-old childish boy that's playing cop. And when you take off your badge, your gun, and your uniform, you know what you're left with?" she asked, pulling her long blonde hair up in a ponytail.

"No. But I'm sure that you'll tell me," Nicola said with a derisive smirk. He was so ready for her to leave.

"You're left with nothing! Because you are a shell, Nicola. You don't have a life. You don't have a heart. You don't have a purpose. I mean, I've never once heard you talk about family or heard of them visiting. They're probably as sick of you as I am."

She fumbled with her jeans as she put them on. "You don't have shit, because you're a nothing...a fucking nobody!" Storming past him, she pulled her keys out of her purse.

"Th

en why do you constantly come back to bother me?" he asked, walking behind her, trying to make sure that she didn't break anything on her way out of the house.

"Because you're just little better fuck than my forty-dollar dildo." Opening his front door, she looked back

one last time.

"By the way, lose my number, jerkoff," she said, throwing him the finger sign.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Psycho," Nicola said, shaking his head as he watched her slam his door. He was glad that she had finally gone and left him to rest. He had planned for her to leave right after they had sex, but she had to cuddle under him, talking about absolutely nothing for a whole damn hour. Before he knew it, she had taken up his entire night. If Ivy hadn't called, she probably would have been content to spend the night, which he was hoping wouldn't happen. *Thank*

*God for small favors*, he thought to himself. Pulling the sheets off of his bed, Nicola looked at the ultrasound picture again for the hundredth time. He couldn't wait to find out if those little babies were actually his. Balling the sheets up and taking them to the washroom, he grabbed the framed ultrasound and took it with him. With care, he took the picture out of the frame and placed it under his Hooters refrigerator magnet; he leaned against the kitchen counter. *What did Ivy want so late at night? Maybe she just wanted to talk to me?*

"Maybe," he said aloud, smiling as he ran his



dishwater. u u

Finished. Finally. Turning off his computer and throwing his report by the stack of papers on his desk, Grey picked up his keys and grabbed his briefcase. It had been a long day, and all he really cared to do was get some sleep. Gliding his fi ngers over the switch, he walked out of his offi

ce with his suit coat over his arm

and his tie loosely hanging around his unbuttoned Brooks Brother Oxford.

“Carol, do you want to walk out with me?” he asked his new assistant. She looked up from putting the last of her fi les in the drawer.

“Yeah.” Carol closed the fi le drawer and stood up. Grey watched, amazed at her height. Six feet exactly. “I’ll only be a minute.”

“Take your time.” Grey yawned as he put his coat on.

“I hate walking out alone.” Her short curly red hair bounced with life as she slipped on her coat. Smiling at him, she slipped 232

*Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

on her gold wire-rimmed glasses. “I can’t see at night,”

she said, winking at him with her bright green eyes.

"I'm not the best driver at night myself," Grey said, smiling in his gentle, playful manner.

Grey had noticed Carol around the offi

ce. In fact, he had hired

a white woman on purpose and often played with the thought of having an affair with her just to calm his nerves about Nicola. He was not fascinated anymore by color. He had experienced more than his share of all types of women, but still Carol's demeanor entertained him mildly.

Recommended by a good friend with the alumni association at his alma mater, Carol was fresh out of college with a hundred ideas and endless energy. Grey liked that she always wore sleek, smart little outfits that accented her long slender figure. And occasionally she would tease him with low-cut blouses that revealed her milky white breasts. She was nice eye candy for the clients, and she was intelligent. Not a bad mix of assets to go far in the firm, but he was sure that his mother would disapprove of his not hiring a sister. She was constantly on him about helping shatter the corporate glass ceiling.

"So what are you getting into tonight?" Carol asked as they entered the elevator.

"I just want to go home and get some rest," Grey said, looking at his watch again.

"Me too." She bit her lip. "My family is a big supporter of your father."

"Really." Grey wondered where that came from.

"Yep. Th

ey even worked the polls in his last election." She became more confident, finally turning toward him. "I personally think that the Henderson men are a true asset to Memphis...

especially you."

Grey realized that he was in a compact elevator with a woman he didn't know in the middle of the night. Maybe he should use some caution, just in case he wasn't reading her right. "Well, thanks. Th

at is really nice."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Th

is job is a great way for me to get some experience in

my field, and I'm great with numbers."

"I know. I reviewed your transcript. It was impressive."  
The

elevator opened, but Carol stepped in front of him.

"But...the plus was having a chance to work with you."

Grey stalled in his response. "Well, Carol. I don't know what to say. Th

anks."

"I'm sorry. I know that this is forward." She laughed nervously.

"But I had to let you know that I'm very intrigued with you, *to say the least*." She pulled her hair behind her ear. "And I would love to spend more time with you outside of the office."

Carol moved closer to his wool dress coat and smelled his cologne, but Grey was stiff as a board. He watched her with a stoic look on his face. He looked her straight in her eyes without so much as a blink. It was very disconcerting for Carol, who desired more than anything to know if he was the least bit interested in her.

"I don't think that would be a good idea, Carol." He fi

nally broke his silence after much internal debate.

"You probably have a girlfriend, huh?" Biting her lip, she began to show signs of embarrassment. She could have sworn that since day one, he was interested.

"A fi ancée actually." Th

e thought even disturbed him now.

"But if I didn't..." He let his words drift off, hoping that she would get the point. He hated to embarrass her.

"Well, the invitation is always there," she said, getting off the elevator when the door-ajar alarm started to sound. "Goodnight, Mr. Henderson."

"Goodnight," Grey said, walking to his car. Watching to make sure that she got in her car and out of the basement safely, he followed behind Carol's blue Volkswagen Jetta out into the busy streets of downtown, allowing the calming sounds of Coltrane to ease his mind.

With very little effort, Grey redirected his thoughts from what he could have been doing with Carol to his pregnant fi ancée asleep 234

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safely in her apartment. Carol's offer had made all of

the fantasies seem unreal and unconventional now. He was definitely one who loved to chase but not to be chased. He felt cheated out of his birthright as a man to pursue the prey.

Ivy would have never approached a man with such a precarious offer. She would have made the man come to her, and when he did finally come to her...he would still have to fight like hell to win her. It was because of all of those things that he loved her so much and that he found her so desirable. She continued to be the ultimate chase.

Getting onto the expressway, Grey picked up his cell phone and dialed Ivy at home. After a few rings, her voice mail answered. So he decided to pay her a surprise visit. He would spend the night with her and hold her in his arms. He would embrace her warmly and feel what he hoped to be his children kicking in the night. For once, he would forget about their shortcomings and enjoy a peaceful evening with the woman he truly loved. u u

Nearly a half an hour later, Grey pulled into her apartment complex and walked to the door. He had a key, so there was no need to knock, but he did so out of respect for Trina. He was greeted by Ivy, who opened the door in her pink pajamas with her stomach slightly revealed.

"Hey," Grey said, wrapping his arms around her.

"Hey," Ivy said, glad that he had come to visit her.

"I just...I wanted to be with you tonight," he said, closing the door behind him.

"I want to be with you too," she said in a whisper. "I'll go and set out your pajamas. Th

ere is some dinner still left from earlier in the microwave. You can heat it up while I run you some bath water." She always did take good care of him.

"Don't go through all of that, baby. I'll do it," he said, grabbing her by her arm. "God, I miss you." Th

e sincerity in his voice

alarmed her slightly.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"I miss you too," she said, amazed at his mood change. No one would have believed that only hours earlier they had argued.

"No, I mean the Ivy I knew before the pregnancy. I miss you being happy." He rubbed her face.

"I miss being happy." Ivy fought tears.

“Let’s just go to bed.”

Entering her quiet little bedroom, Grey noticed the picture of him on her nightstand in its silver frame. Her room was in perfect order, with only the small nightlight to illuminate her bedside. The

blinds were slightly opened to allow in the moonlight, and the oak canopy bed set was inviting with its plush soft pink comforter and gold-embroidered sheet set. Dozens of pink silk and satin pillows with hand-stitched flowers lined her bed. To him, her room was a reflection of Ivy. Soft. Beautiful. Feminine. Pulling the comforter to the side, Ivy tapped the bed and smiled. “Come to bed, baby.”

“Let me get undressed,” Grey said, glad that he had chosen to come to her. “I’ll only be a moment.” Crawling into the warmth of her arms, he kissed her cheeks. “You feel like making love, baby?” he asked, kissing her neck.

“I always feel like making love to you, Grey,” her eyes were crystal clear and wide with excitement.





## Chapter 14

### I DO LOVE YOU

**“I’ve had enough of the bullshit. I’m through with all these women. I’m swearing off sex. Hell, I can do without it,”** Nicola proclaimed as he slowed down around the curve of the track, feeling his lungs nearly cave in from the compression of such a hard run. Bending down to catch his breath, he wiped the sweat from his forehead. “And when is this cold-ass weather going to finally go away? It’s March, for Christ’s sake!”

Nicola vented now after he and Brooks had run an exhausting six miles straight in complete silence with only their thoughts to keep them company.

“Sign of the times, man,” Brooks said, bending down beside him. “Anyway, the fact that you are giving up women must mean that the world is coming to an abrupt and final end.” He stretched his hamstrings.

“I’m serious. Layla got on my last nerve. She answered my phone, hung up on Ivy, compared me to a dildo, flipped me off, and then slammed my door.” Standing up straight, he caught a glimpse of Brooks laughing. “What’s so funny?”

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Where in the hell do you meet these crazy-ass women?” He laughed aloud.

“Th

e same place you meet them. Th

e only thing is that you

have Trina to go home to on a permanent basis, and she’s stable. So it balances out your life, *somewhat*.” Sometimes, Nicola envied Brooks for his relationship

with Trina, but he never envied Trina's relationship with Brooks.

"Yeah, it's just that I don't constantly go back to the same retarded-ass women." Brooks couldn't help but laugh at Nicola again. "You and Layla have been on and off for a couple of years. I bet she thinks that she's the *one*," Brooks said, shaking his head. To Brooks and Nicola, the *one* was the woman that would eventually carry their last name and have their children.

"She did. I told her last night though that she wasn't the *one*, right before she gave me her *you're a big nothing* speech." Nicola stopped his watch. "She'll be back next week, begging me to knock her back out." Th

ey had obviously been through the entire

scenario before.

"And of course you will oblige her."

"Not this time, man. Until Ivy gives birth, I am a celibate man. No sex for the next three months." He had made up his mind the night before as he tossed and turned in the bed thinking about Ivy, but he would never admit that to Brooks.

"Tell that shit to someone else," Brooks said, grabbing his shirt off the ground. "Th

ree months...man, you couldn't stop having sex for three days."

"Well, I'm going to give it a good fight." Nicola stopped laughing and looked at Brooks seriously, nodding his head as if to give more emphasis to what he was professing.

"Th

is wouldn't have to do with Ivy...not the babies but the mother?" Brooks asked.

"I'm just saying, what if she not only wants me to be the father, but she also wants me to be...you know...with her." It was logical enough for Nicola, although he could see that his long-time friend was not buying it.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"What?" Brooks had never heard such nonsense in his life.

"Do you recall Ivy ever saying once that she wanted you to be the father of her children? No. And you won't hear it, because it would mess up things with her fiancé, or have you forgotten about him? Take my advice," Brooks said, not allowing Nicola to say a word. "Th

is woman is better off with Grey.” He absolutely hated wishful thinking.

“So you don’t think I’m good enough?” Nicola asked, off ended and extremely discouraged.

“Oh no. It’s not that. I just don’t think that you’re ready for what Ivy needs. I’m telling you that you’re barking up the wrong tree. You’re not ready for all the crap that comes with her.” He shook off the entire ridiculous notion.

Th

e thought made Nicola stutter. “Hhh...how do you know what I’m ready for?” he said, picking up his phone.

“Damn, Taylor called,” he said, regretting that he has missed hearing his phone ring. For a moment, he lost concentration.

“Look, I know you, man. Believe me, it’s just possible fatherhood talking right now. When the kids get here, you’ll go back to your regular self, especially if they are Grey’s. You’ll see that Ivy is better off with Grey, and you are better off with your entourage of women.”

“I don’t have an entourage,” Nicola said in denial. They were

more like a small village of concubines.

"You don't have a steady woman either." Brooks wanted his friend to see exactly what he was asking for. "Just take my advice and leave that girl alone."

u u

Grey ushered the movers through his house to the guest bedroom quickly, where he was secretly redecorating for the twins'

arrival. He had spent an ungodly amount of money on a local interior decorator who assured him that everything would be ready by next Sunday to surprise Ivy after church. With all the negative things that had transpired over the last few months, Grey felt the 241

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

need to do something nice for Ivy and something that would ease his conscious about Kit.

He had only four months to prepare for what was to be two new additions to his family. And he had a gut feeling that those children belonged solely to him. Nicola was just a reminder of how close he had come to losing Ivy, which was all the more reason to make an extra effort to be there for her now. Watching the painters pull the error tape from the wall basing, Grey was in total approval of the newly painted powder-yellow bedroom. Yellow was neutral and calming.

Proudly, he pulled one of the bears out of the Macy's shopping bag and set it on the floor by the closet. He was excited now about the prospect of a family. And although he still fought with the rebellious spirit of a bachelor, he was starting to grow anxious about a new lifestyle with the twins and Ivy. u u

Across town, too sick to get out of the bed, Ivy lay in between her mass of pillows reading over her homework and sipping on chicken broth. It had been nearly three hours since her first attempt to get up and head to class, but she still felt dizzy and nauseous. Setting down her book, she grabbed her remote and turned down her radio to hear a knock at the door. Looking over at the clock, she became a little alarmed. She wasn't expecting company this morning.

She found her robe quickly, dressed, and slid out of bed. Looking out of the peephole of her front door, she discovered her brother Emerald standing anxiously peering back at her under a yellow Hawaiian baseball cap. With utter excitement, she opened the door and screamed.

"Emerald!" Ivy said, opening her arms wide.

"Ivy!" Emerald said, picking her up off of the ground and spinning her around in her hallway. "Look at you." As he set Ivy back down, his emerald green eyes were fixed on her stomach. 242

## *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Yeah, I know. I'm pregnant," she said, rubbing the top of her stomach. "Four and half months to be exact."

"You look so beautiful," he said, in awe as he moved her hair from her shoulders. He adored his baby sister more than she would ever know, and to see her in such a state was both exciting and painful.

"Th

ank you," she said, finally noticing he had company. "Who is this with you?" She closed her robe.

"Oh, this is Kakeline, my fiancé," he said, moving out of the way to reveal a tall olive-skinned girl with huge almond-shaped eyes, full lips, and long flowing black hair.

"She's so pretty," Ivy said, shaking Kakeline's hand and quietly observing the one-carat solitaire that was showcased on her ring finger. "Hi. I've heard so many wonderful things about you. My goodness, Emerald! I can't believe that you're engaged." Ivy tried to close her mouth, knowing that it was wide open now. Her brother had been a wild, carefree guy for as long as she could remember. Now he was settling down. What had the world come to?

"Honestly, we actually are married. We just haven't told



anyone. So, mum's the word until after the baby, OK?" He put his arm around his wife and kissed the side of her head.

"Sure, but why are you keeping it a secret?" She was confused about why he would want to hide such a thing. Their mother

would be glad to see the endless bounced checks, charged-up credit cards, and personal loans paid off.

"It happened just night before last. I got a call from Madison, and I was headed back this way. Kakeline didn't want me to leave, but she didn't want to follow me to the mainland without knowing we had something ...concrete." Kakeline blushed as Emerald tried to explain.

"Well, there is nothing more concrete than marriage. I understand," Ivy said, taking Kakeline's hand. "I wouldn't have followed him either," she said, laughing.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Anyway, we're staying at Mom's house for about two weeks. Their

at should be suffi

cient time for me to find an apartment and for us to find jobs.”

“What about your family?” Ivy asked Kakeline.

“Th

ey do not know yet. We just up and left,” Kakeline said softly. “We plan to return in a month or two and get their blessings the right way. For now, they think that I’m off on another island at school.”

“So you took the semester off ?” Ivy asked, concerned.

“Yes. I felt it was best.” Kakeline showed signs of disappointment.

“Well, regardless of all that, welcome to the family.” Ivy wrapped her arms around her and hugged her affectionately. She was glad that Emerald had finally found someone he could love.

“I’m going to take Kakeline back to Mom’s house and let her get settled. We just drove from the rental lot directly to you. So I’ll be back in a little while,” Emerald said, kissing Ivy on the cheek.

“OK, don’t be long,” she said, holding the door as Emerald walked out. “It was nice meeting you, Kakeline.”

"You too," Kakeline said, waving.

Exhausted from the brief but emotional reunion, Ivy returned to her bed to rest. Who would have thought that her big brother would return home married? He had gone to Hawaii to find himself after he graduated from college. During this trip, he spent thousands of dollars on women, booze, and lodging. One night while at a college party with some of his friends, he met Kakeline, and what was supposed to be a one-to two-month vacation became a six-month stay. In reality, it was probably inevitable that he would marry. Ivy just never thought that he would do so before her. Emerald was never marriage material. He was talk, dark, wild, extremely handsome, and smart. He had modeled since his freshman year of college and had even been in some top men's fitness magazines. Everyone thought that his future would be in the fashion industry until he went to Hawaii and discovered he had a better talent...business management. To pay for his stay, he

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

started to work for the resort owner in his nightclub and ended up yielding a 25 percent increase in profit over only five months. Now that he was home, God only knew what he would do for work. Excited that she had a new sister-in-law, Ivy nestled back down in her comforter and began to look over her work again.

Halfway down the page the phone rang. Groaning, she picked it up.

"Hello," she said, impatiently.

"Ivy, it's Nicola."

"Oh. Hi." She was surprised to hear from him.

"I saw that you called the other night, and I never got a chance to see what you wanted. How are you?" He truthfully just wanted to hear her voice.

"Not doing too hot. Th

e babies have had me up all morning,

but I can't seem to get going. I feel so nauseous. All I've been eating is broth and crackers."

"Um, I know that you called me the other night and you had a run-in with a friend of mine. I've been meaning to call you and apologize for that," he stuttered. "I've just been really busy with work."

"Yeah, about that. I didn't want anything. I was just calling to talk." Ivy felt uncomfortable even discussing the rude woman.

"Well, maybe I can make up that situation to you. Have you eaten today?"

"I've been too sick to get out of the bed really. So no."

"Good. I mean, not good. But it just so happens that I'll be in your area in just a little while. You need something solid on your stomach," he said, closing the door to his office. *So, she really did*

*just want to talk with me the other night.* His instincts about her were starting to be really good. "I could stop by and bring you something."

"You don't have to go out of your way." Deciding she would never finish her work, she set the papers down on her nightstand.

"Believe me. It's no problem. Really." He anxiously awaited her reply.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"OK." Ivy paused for a moment. What was she doing? Grey would have died if he had found out that Nicola was bringing her anything. Th

eir agreement was that she would only see Nicola when it was his turn to take her to the doctor, but if she didn't eat, she would end up in the emergency room.

"Great. I'll bring you something by, and we can sit and

talk for a while.” It had been three weeks since he had seen her face, and he missed her terribly.

“OK,” she said, seeing nothing wrong with his kind proposition as long as Grey didn’t show up. And that was highly unusual, considering he was so busy with work these days. Hanging up the phone, Nicola slid across his office floor in

excitement. He was like a schoolboy again, feeling his heart skip a beat when Ivy smiled and smelling her perfume when he thought of her late at night. If just for a moment, he was alive again. As he turned around smiling, Brooks threw a ball of wadded-up paper at him and bounced it off of his forehead. “What are you so happy about?”

“I thought I closed the door,” Nicola said calmly. It was time to put on the façade. He picked the paper up and threw it in the trashcan.

“You did, but you know I’m nosy, and I wanted to know who you were talking to all sweet and *quiet like* on the phone,” Brooks said, closing the door behind him.

“I was talking to Ivy.” But Nicola was sure that Brooks already knew that. Th

ere was brief silence in the room as they made eye contact.

"About..." Brooks wished Nicola would take his advice and leave Ivy alone.

"Lunch. I'm taking her some over there in just a minute. She's not feeling well." Grabbing his coat, he walked past Brooks, who was leaning on Nicola's desk looking through his paperwork.

"When you get back, we've got to review this new intel on Caesar," Brooks said, yawning. Th

e subject quickly changed, but

only for a brief moment.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Cool." Ivy crossed Nicola's mind. He needed to go ...now.

"Look man, I'll be back in about two hours. Call me if you need me."

"Lunch is only one hour," Brooks said playfully as he followed Nicola out of the offi

ce. "Don't let me have to report your ass."

"Go right ahead. Just remember, I have some good shit on you, too," Nicola said, closing and locking his

door behind them.

"What happened to you being finished with the *women folk*?"

Th

e thought suddenly dawned upon Brooks. "Is Ivy not included?"

And what about Grey? How does he feel about you going to her house?"

"To hell with Grey." Nicola tried to shrug off his nagging mother-like friend.

"Don't you think he would consider this cheating? I would."

"No. Now, what we did a few months back would be considered cheating. Taking a sick mother food is ...charity."

"Yeah, her husband will charitably kick your ass if he finds you at that woman's house."

"I'm on the clock, and if I recall correctly I took an oath to protect and serve. Besides, she is not married yet."

"She's close enough," Brooks said, shaking his head. "Don't go over there and get your ass handed to you."



Th ey both chuckled as

Nicola headed out of the precinct fl ipping Brooks the fi nger. u u

If Ivy had had more energy, she probably would have gotten out of bed and dressed, but it seemed the more she wanted to get up, the more her body would not allow her. Evidently, she had used all her extra energy on getting up to see Emerald. Turning on the television, she fl uff ed her pillows behind her back and sprayed the air freshener beside her. At least the apartment was presentable, even if she was not.

After watching a game show and fl ipping through the novel on her nightstand, she fi nally heard someone at her door. "I'm in 247

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here," Ivy said, brushing through her hair frantically. She didn't want to look too messy.

Walking through the corridor, Nicola got a chance to see Ivy's bedroom for the fi rst time. Shyly, he smiled as he walked through her doorway. It was everything that he had imagined about Ivy's personality.

"Hey," Nicola said, standing in the doorway.

"Hi," Ivy said, sitting up and smiling. Wow, he looked

great. He was like a breath of fresh air in his faded denim jeans and University of Memphis blue pullover.

"Still not feeling well?" he asked, shocked that Ivy was still in her nightgown.

"Not my best, but not my worst either." She didn't want to appear sicklier than she actually was. "You can put those bags in the kitchen," she said, noticing he was still carrying the groceries.

"I hope you don't plan for me to eat all of that for lunch."

"Actually, I was hoping that you'd share. I stopped at this Chinese place by the precinct. Th

ey fix the best pepper steak in the world."

"Well, what else do you have in there?" Ivy asked, getting out of the bed.

"Don't get up," he said, alarmed. "I'll fix your plate and bring it to you."

"I feel good enough to get up," Ivy said, sitting back down. Inwardly, she liked the attention from him even when she despised it from other people.

"No, you're not well enough now, but you will be when I'm finished. I have just the right stuff to get you going

again.”

“What got into you?” Ivy asked, amazed by his concern.

“I just wanted to make sure that you were...OK.”

Turning around, he headed for the kitchen.

A few minutes later, Nicola returned with a full plate of food and two glasses of orange juice for Ivy. Now shining with lip-gloss and a small pink bow that tied back her ponytail, Ivy sat at the end of the bed in her robe, dangling her feet off the side. 248

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

“Th

at didn't take long,” she said, reaching out for the plate.

“I hope I put enough food on here,” he said, setting her glasses on the table.

“Th

is is more than enough. What are you trying to do, make me fat?” Giggling, she tasted her lunch. “Umm, this is good. I'm really starving.”

Still astounded after all this time at her beauty, Nicola stood across from her in silence. Making eye contact with him, Ivy blushed. She was starting to recognize his

looks and could almost tell exactly what he was thinking.

Too afraid to bare his true feelings for her, Nicola sat on the bed beside her and began to massage her shoulders as she ate. Nervously, she shied away for a moment, causing him to stop. Nicola was stunned. He didn't mean to make her nervous. He had gotten too comfortable with her. Unsure of how to react to her, he put his hands down.

"I'm sorry," Ivy said, touching his thigh. "Don't stop." Feeling his embarrassment she put his hand back on her shoulder. "Please,"

she said, softly. As awkward as that brief moment had been, she wanted to move past it without it being such a big deal.

"So, have you been handling the pregnancy well?" Nicola searched for something to say to her as he rubbed her shoulders.

"Pretty well," she said, closing her eyes and relaxing. Nicola coached himself quietly. Why was he so nervous? This

was just a woman, like all the others! *Maybe not just alike*, but not so different that he had to feel like this inside.

"I was reading in one of those pregnancy books that massages are good for you," Nicola said, needing a massage too.

"Massages are good at anytime." She laughed. "Nicky, I never thanked you for being here, did I?"

"Th

e lunch was nothing."

"No." She touched his hand. "I mean, thank you for being here period. I can't tell you how much I've needed it. I know with your hectic work schedule and your personal life, it can't be easy to deal with me, too. But you do it. So thanks."

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"I don't have a lot going on in my personal life." Nicola reflected on his emptiness.

"Come on, *Italian lover*. Keeping the ladies pleased must be a full-time job."

"Trina must be talking about me again."

"Actually, no. She hasn't said anything lately. But I can tell that you aren't practicing celibacy." Ivy smiled.

"Why should I be?" Nicola stopped massaging her shoulders and made her turn towards him.

Ivy searched for the right words. "Well, sometimes celibacy clears the mind. And if you're waiting for the right woman, you can see her better if you're not caught up in the motions." She smiled. "I'm not trying to lecture you. You're a good man. It's just my opinion that good things come to those who wait."

"Maybe the thing that I've wanted for a while came and went without my control."

Ivy tried to respond, but her mouth wouldn't move.

"But I get your point. It's a coincidence, really. Just this morning, I swore off women and sex *for a while*."

"You?" Ivy giggled.

"What?" Nicola smiled. "You don't think that I can do it?"

He laughed.

"I think that you can do anything you set your mind to."

"What if I've set my mind to proving myself to you?" He didn't smile.

Again, Ivy was silent. "You don't owe me anything,

Nicola.”

She looked down at her shaking hands realizing that she and Nicola were actually in her bed having a conversation. She became acutely aware of her position at the same time that she became acutely aware of Nicola.

“I want you to love me, Ivy.” Nicola couldn’t believe that he was allowing himself to say the words that he had kept in the back of his mind for months. He tried to catch them before they slipped deceitfully from his tongue, but they leaped forth with such intensity that he had to submit to his unconscious will. 250

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“I do...love you.” Ivy looked up from the bed, holding onto her engagement ring.

“You do?” He was startled and elated by her response.

“Yes, but...”

“No,” Nicola put his index finger on her lips. He wouldn’t allow her to ruin this moment with their crude reality. “No stipulations. No clarifications.” He shook his head. “You love me.” He smiled at her, and she smiled back.

“Ivy?” a man’s voice said as the front door closed,

interrupting the tense moment.

"In here," Ivy said, blushing at Nicola. Emerald had perfect timing. She needed someone to save her from making a total fool of herself. "Th

at's just my big brother."

"Great," Nicola said, frustrated. He took a deep breath on the brink of an explosion.

"Sorry it took so...long." Emerald stopped at the doorway of Ivy's bedroom. What in the hell had he interrupted?

"Emerald, this is Nicola, my friend," Ivy stood up beside the bed. "Nicola, this is my brother Emerald." She could see Emerald's confusion.

Getting up off the bed, Nicola went over to the doorway and shook Emerald's hand.

"Nice to meet you, man," Emerald said, grinning slyly. So he wasn't the only one that had been involved in an interracial relationship. Strangely enough, he would have never guessed it for Ivy. In fact, he would have never guessed anyone for Ivy except her beloved Grey. He was glad for the change.

"Likewise," Nicola said, picking up on Emerald's smirky grin.



“So you’re the cop that our family has been buzzing about.”

Emerald instantly liked Nicola. He seemed sure of himself. Maybe he could be good for Ivy.

“Th

at would be me,” Nicola said, leaning on Ivy’s entertainment center. He was still relaxed and unconcerned, for the moment 251

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basking inwardly at the possibility of what may have happened if they were not sorely interrupted.

“Yeah, my fi ancé Kakeline used to be the talk of the family. It’s good to fi nally meet someone who can take her place in the spotlight.” Emerald smiled at Ivy.

“I’m sure that I won’t be in the spotlight for long. Once the babies get here and the wedding takes place,” Nicola stopped to look at Ivy, “there will be a lot more to talk about than little old me.” Th

ere was no sense blowing his cover.

“Babies?” Emerald had not yet heard the news. “Th ere is more

than one?"

"*She's* having twins. I won't know if I'm having twins until after they get here."

"And we won't know until the test," Grey interjected, standing at the door listening with a keen ear. No one had heard him come in only a second before; so he sat quietly listening to the conversation awaiting a slipup and a perfect time to surprise them.

"Grey!" Emerald said, trying to take the instant tension out of the room. "How are you doing, man?" Walking over to Grey as he emerged out of the hallway, he hugged him warmly. Emerald laughed. "Shit, it's been what...two years?"

"Almost that long," Grey said, smiling. "And man, a lot has changed, huh? You look great. Did you go over to Hawaii and get buff ed?"

"I tried." Emerald flexed playfully, but inwardly he knew that this was not a laughing matter. Ivy had developed some serious issues while he was away.

"How long have you been lurking over in the corner?" Ivy asked, off ended by his prowess.

"Just a moment...not long enough, I'm afraid." Grey kissed Ivy on the cheek and looked over at Nicola in total disapproval.

"Well, I'd better go," Nicola said, looking at Ivy. "Call me if you need me for anything." His eyes searched hers for the fervor he had seen only minutes before, but it was gone. Now only a cool 252

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

calm was present. It was then he knew just how strong a hold Grey had on her feelings.

"I will," Ivy said as her heart skipped a beat. She was sure that an argument would soon ensue between her and Grey once everyone had left. Recalling Nicola's words, she smiled again. It would be worth it.

"I'm here. I don't think that she'll need you." Grey's smiled disappeared as he heard Nicola's offer. How dare this bastard be so cocky? If it weren't for Emerald being there as a witness, he would have surely lashed out at them both the way that he really wanted. But there was also their interaction at the Black Tie to consider. No, he should wait. A better time would present itself soon enough.

"Hey, you never know," Nicola said, walking past Grey, their eyes planted on each other. "Nice to me you, Emerald. I'm sure I'll be seeing you again. Ivy, see you later."

"Yeah, nice to meet you too," Emerald said, picking up

on the hatred between the two men. He was glad he had been there to keep peace. Otherwise, he could only imagine what would have happened.

“Grey, get some rest,” Nicola said, laughing. Grey’s little antics barely bothered him now. With a last look at Ivy, he turned and headed back to the precinct. Th

e race was on now, and he was

offi

cially in the lead.

“Well, little sister,” Emerald said as Nicola closed the front door behind him. “What are we getting into today?”

“I’m too sick to really go out,” Ivy said, wishing that both Emerald and Grey had stayed away.

“You weren’t too sick to have company though,” Grey said, walking to the kitchen to relieve some of the tension that had overcome her bedroom like a thick fog.

“Well then, I guess we’ll have to stay in together and play catch up,” Emerald said, sitting on the bed beside her. He was not about to leave Grey alone with Ivy for one minute after that. 253

"You should plan to spend the night if you plan to get all the way caught up on what's been going on here," Ivy said softly as she crawled back into the bed and pulled the covers over her body. Patting the bed, she motioned for her brother. "Come watch television with me."

"Oh, I'm not leaving your side," Emerald said, kicking his shoes off and diving in her bed. It was good to be home. He could see perfectly that he had come at the most needed time. Ivy was in no shape to fight this battle alone, but he could add balance. And he would.

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Chapter Fifteen:

Strategy



## Chapter 15

### STRATEGY

**“You should have been there the other day,”**

Emerald said, whispering on the phone to his father. “I came in after Nicola, and Grey came in after me. I truly believe that if I had not been there, they would have tried to kill each other.”

“Damn, I always miss the good stuff,” Madison said, whirling around in his offi

ce chair like a mischievous child. He wouldn't have cared if they had killed each other over what they were doing to his daughter. "So how is Ivy?" He hated to think of his darling little girl losing her perfect shape and dealing with motherhood alone.

"She seems to be fine...nothing to worry about. So when are you coming this way?"

"In another few months or so. I sent Ivy a little something to help her until I get there though."

"Care to send me anything?" Emerald asked, jokingly. He had not yet told his father or anyone else except Ivy about his marriage to Kakeline.

"You're a grown-ass man with only your mouth to feed. I'm not sending you anything. Hell, you need to be trying to send me

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

something. Speaking of which, you did pay your mother back that five hundred dollars, didn't you?"

"Yeah, yeah," Emerald said, dismissing the beginning of another of his father's tirades. "Look, remind me to tell you something after you get here. Not that I'll likely forget." He was bursting to tell Madison, but he didn't want the spotlight to be taken from his little sister in her time of need.

If no one knew that he and Kakeline were married, there was no reason to be upset about lack of attention. However, if everyone knew and no one seemed to care, he feared it would sour the entire experience.

"Why can't you tell me now?" Madison hoped Emerald had not gone and done something stupid.

"It's a surprise."

"Are you still on my phone talking long distance?" Sadie asked, walking into the den where Emerald was sitting on the couch. This

was his cue to cut the conversation short.

"It's Dad," Emerald explained, hoping it would cause a change in Sadie's mood.

"All the more reason to say goodbye. Ask him if he can read and if he can then email him." She always got a kick out of insulting her ex-husband.

"No, she didn't just ask if I could read?" Madison asked, hearing her remark. "If you weren't my son, I'd tell you to tell her something."

"What did he say?" Sadie asked, standing over Emerald and cutting her eyes.



"He said, if...if you only knew how he loved you, you wouldn't say those type of things." Emerald wanted them back together as badly as Ivy did, but they were a lost cause.

"Liar," Madison said, doodling on his notepad. "Tell her I said to buzz off."

"Tell him that if he loved me so much, he would send for you and Key Lime Pie permanently." Pushing his feet off her coffee table, Sadie walked off. She couldn't stand talking to both of the

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

men in her life at the same time. Th

ey both were too much of an

annoyance.

"What's with her?" Madison could sense an unusual tone in her voice.

"Probably the change. Plus, I brought Kakeline home with me, and she thinks we're shacking up. She gave her Ivy's old room and insisted that we come back and visit some time again."

"You guys really need to get a hotel."

"Not you, too. OK. I'll look into it today." Emerald recalled his mother's attitude. "Somehow I think things would be different if you were here."

"Somehow, I think they would be worse." Receiving a message for another call holding, Madison ended their conversation. "Can we pick this up later?" He loved to talk with his son, but never seemed to find the time.

"Yeah, we need to get out of here and take care of a few things anyway," Emerald said, standing up and stretching.

"Just call me later *collect*, and tell your mother to cool out."

"You tell her," Emerald said jokingly. No one told Sadie what to do.

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Sadie simply couldn't understand all the turmoil that had come into her family over the last few months. She had been praying and steadfast. She and Madison had sent the children to good schools. Th

ey had grown up in better social circles than most. Th

ey both had received a hand up in life, and yet here they were both spinning their wheels. Ivy was a single, pregnant college girl, and Emerald was shacking up in

her house with an islander. She shook her head in despair and tried to fight back the tears. Somehow, she was sure that all of this was Madison's fault in some way.

Hearing the doorbell, Sadie walked into the foyer, where she found Ivy and Grey with several bags of clothes. 259

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"What a surprise," Sadie said, kissing her soon-to-be son-inlaw on the cheek.

"We've been out at the malls shopping," Ivy said, setting her bags down. "Th

e bigger I get the more I need."

"Well you only have a few months to go, and then you'll be back to your regular size," Sadie said, kissing her on the cheek.

"Where are you going looking like GQ Smooth?" Grey asked, noticing Emerald as he came out of the back room.

"I've got a little job interview in an hour. I need to get moving now that I'm back home." Emerald looked over at his mother.

"Well, we've got always got a position open if you're interested."

Grey knew that Emerald would appreciate the offer, plus this would give him the opportunity to win him over again. He saw how Emerald had warmed up to Nicola the other day at Ivy's place. And the last thing he needed was her family thinking good of *the Italian*.

"I'd be more than interested," Emerald said, setting his briefcase down. Maybe he needed to look no further. "When are you available to talk?"

"How about tomorrow afternoon? We can meet for lunch."

"Sounds good to me," Emerald said, knowing what Grey had in mind. He had been around the block more than enough times to see that Grey was trying to win him over, but he wasn't about to stop him.

"Alright, I'll call you later with the specifics," Grey said, grinning to himself as he caught a glimpse of the proud look on Sadie's face. *Nicola didn't have a chance.*

"Th

anks, baby," Ivy said, impressed with Grey's kind gesture. u u

Down at City Hall in the mayor's offi

ce, Nicola and Brooks sat

with their team quietly as Mayor Henderson reviewed their report. Looking around the oval table, Nicola was extremely relieved to see that his nemesis, Grey, had not been invited or had declined the invitation to attend.

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Focusing back on the meeting, Nicola squirmed in his seat as Mayor Henderson put down the report and buzzed the secretary for more coffee. Th

ere had been a dramatic increase in gang-related and drug-related arrests since the new Special Forces team had been developed. Under the team's constant watching eye, the streets of Memphis were starting to rest easier at night. But Nicola questioned whether or not his team would be fairly judged considering his relationship with Ivy.

"Well, men..." Mayor Henderson said, nodding at the director of the Police Department and old-time friend. "These are the kind

of results that I am looking for in our police department." He smiled reassuringly at Brooks and Nicola.

Relieved, the men exhaled. “Th

ank you, sir,” Nicola said,

trying to keep his composure.

“So, my biggest question is, are we ready for the next step?”

Mayor Henderson asked, pulling his seat away from oval table.

“Absolutely,” Director Billings said, looking at Brooks and Nicola. “We have the most capable men and women this department has to off er working on phase two as we speak.”

“Well, then, I look forward to seeing the results on my next report and all over the news,” Mayor Henderson said, standing up to take his leave. “Gentlemen, well done.” Shaking the director’s hand, Mayor Henderson looked over at Nicola for a brief moment.

“As professionals, I’m glad to see that all of you are maintaining control of this situation. We must remember that we are fi rst servants of the city of Memphis. All other things come second, as far as I’m concerned.”

Nicola was glad that Mayor Henderson had given him

some kind of indication as to where he stood. If the mayor stayed impartial to the department and more importantly to his team, then the growing animosity between him and Grey would be controllable. He simply could not afford for this thing with Ivy to affect his men or his ability to do his job. u u

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After dropping Ivy off at her mother's house, Grey headed to his four o'clock appointment on the other side of town. He hadn't seen his old flame Tracy in nearly a year. After the pregnancy scare he had with her, she had become quite distant in their communication, or maybe he was the distant one. It didn't matter to him one way or the other.

In Grey's quest to find dirt on Nicola, however, he and Tracy had crossed paths again. It seemed that a nurse at Dr. Tracy's abortion clinic could help him out tremendously. The doc had

set up a cloak-and-dagger meeting at her house as a favor to him. And to his surprise, the woman wanted nothing in return for her cooperation. It seemed that her animosity for Nicola grew out of his inability to call the morning after. He laughed at the circumstances. Nothing was worse than a woman's scorn, which is why he sought to keep his women happy at all times.

Grey pulled up to her home with minutes to spare and was led to her office

by the maid. He entered with a smile on his face. The

two women sat on the couch drinking wine and talking under their breath. Tracy turned to him and smiled. She was a beautiful woman. Tall and statuesque. She bore a great resemblance to Ivy. Since the last time that he'd seen her, she had cut her hair off and sported a chic little do that brought out her prominent cheekbones and long swanlike neck. He liked that on her and planned to tell her later. But for now there was business to handle. Tracy stood up and leisurely went to him. He hugged her amicably and looked over at the nurse, who sat nervously awaiting his arrival.

"So good to see you again, Grey," Tracy said, putting down her glass. "This

is Amber. She's the nurse in my office

who I spoke with

you about over the phone."

"Yes. Amber, it is nice to meet you," Grey said, offering his hand.

"Nice to meet you too," she said, in a soft, whispery



voice. 262

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Before we begin, let's just make this clear that you never heard any of this information from us," Tracy said, with her hands on her hips.

"You have my word on it," Grey said, crossing his heart. "And I think you've got enough on me to know that I'm good for my word."

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Chapter Sixteen:

Cornered



## **Chapter 16**

### **CORNERED**

**“So, we’ve finally got enough on Caesar to bust his ass,”**

Brooks said, grinning as he raised his arm weight. He had been dreaming of getting Caesar off of the streets and placing him in a jail cell since they began their campaign, but every time they got something they thought was solid, Caesar got away clean. Th is

time, however, they had gone to extreme lengths to ensure that there would be no one to save him.

“Yep, as soon as we get the information about the shipment,”

Nicola said, rejoicing at the thought as well. Looking at himself in the mirror, Brooks watched his muscles bulge as he lifted the sixty-five-pound free weights. His long wide physique narrowed at the waist and expanded at the hips like a professional weight lifter. His dark brown skin seemed shiny and unblemished and his bald head and coal-black facial hair made him look strong and invincible. *At least he thought he was sexy.* He smiled vainly at himself as he caught Nicola smirking at him.

“What?” Brooks asked, defensively.

“You’re doing it again,” Nicola said, gulping down his creatine shake.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Doing what?” Brooks already knew.

“Gloating.” Nicola belched and laughed. He always caught Brooks staring at himself in the mirrors or doing “mirror checks”

to make sure every stitch of clothing was in place. For him to be a cop, he was always very well dressed. It was the main reason that Nicola started to be more aware of the way he looked. Being best friends with a runway model was heavy on the ego.

“Look, I’m a Psi man. We are pretty.” His confidence gleamed like the sweat on his forehead. “It wouldn’t matter if I was the garbage man, I would still look good.”

Nicola laughed. “Well, you are full of shit.”

“But I can back it up,” Brooks said, turning his attention back to his workout.

“I just don’t get what kind of man would want to call himself *pretty*.” Nicola had argued the point a hundred times before, but each time seemed valid.

“A confident man. Someone who knows that *he* is irresistible. But don’t worry. I don’t expect you to understand.”

“Let me guess. It’s because I’m not pretty.” Nicola had heard this before.

“Exactly.”

“But the ladies like me. I believe the word they use is “sexy.”

“Sexy is not the same thing as pretty. Cigarette smoke in a dark candlelit room can be sexy. Are you going to compare yourself to cigarette smoke?”

“You know what I mean. Sexy is more masculine than *pretty*. I mean, when I think of a pretty man...”

“I just think that you’re hatin’,” Brooks interjected, returning to his weights. “But looking at me, who wouldn’t be?” He grunted.

“I need to check and see what type of paperwork I need to put in for the twins to be put on my insurance once they’re born,”

Nicola said, staring into space.

“Whoa, where did that come from?” Brooks asked, confused by the sudden change of conversation.

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“Well, the time is coming quickly. Th

ey’ll be here in less than

three months. Just in case they are mine, they’re going to need insurance.”

"You're kidding, right?" Brooks was fed up with Ivy being the most popular topic of conversation.

"Kidding about what?" Before Nicola could even ask, he could look in his partner's eyes and see that he was about to correct him for his concern. More and more lately Brooks had shown signs of jealousy for all of the time that he spent with Ivy and preparing for the twins.

"Look man, we've been friends for a long time, and you know that I wouldn't ever tell you anything wrong on purpose. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I've got to tell you. You're setting yourself up for a big fall with Ivy and these kids. First of all, you don't know if they're yours or not. Second of all, she's still engaged to another man. Th

ird, she is not your wife. You'd better move on and discover life after conception, or you're not going to be able to handle it when she does the same."

"I'm not worried about Ivy. I was just thinking aloud."

"You think that because they're twins, they could be yours?"

Brooks looked concerned.

"Don't you think that's a little too coincidental?"

"I've seen something in you lately, man. You're all wrapped up in this girl. Th

ank God it hasn't affected your work, but your personal life is totally screwed over. You've been celibate for over a month now, ever since you took that stupid vow on the track field. You're becoming a hermit, never going anywhere." Brooks sighed. "What if Ivy really wants Grey? How are you going to recover from that?"

"I didn't stop having sex because of Ivy. I stopped because of what happened with Ivy." Nicola sat down on the bench. "And I needed more clarification in my life."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Clarification my ass...you sound sprung to me; something I thought that you would never live to be."

"I'm not sprung," Nicola said, off ended. "You wouldn't understand though. You've been running like hell from responsibility. Look, as much as Trina does for you, you still fuck off on her."

"You of all people understand why."

"No, man. I don't understand why. If I had a woman who cared as much for me as that girl cares for you, I'd be a lot more careful with her."

"You mean like you were careful with Ivy? Don't fool yourself. You and I both know that before this one, you didn't give a damn about women. Shit. Just six months ago you were ducking and dodging a serious relationship, too. Now you want to act like some kind of saint, because you think you have a chance with the one girl in the Memphis who sees straight through your ass."

"No one can see straight through me."

"You really want to believe that, don't you?" Brooks sighed.

"You're my boy, but I have to tell you that this is one race you aren't going to win. She's faster and stronger than you'll ever be, and right now she's just leading you two around on the same leash until she figures out which one of you she's going to put to sleep. I just hate that I can't save you, man. I'm telling you this isn't going to turn out good for you."

"Look, you're not going to get a rise out of me, Brooks. You're not. Ivy and I have an understanding. I'm not there for her; I'm there for them." Nicola looked Brooks in the eye. "Believe me I know what I'm doing."



"So do I." Brooks put down his weights and grabbed the towel.

"You're falling in love."

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Relaxing out on the balcony of his riverfront condo, Nicola sipped on a now nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels and stared blankly out at the sun setting over Mud Island as it reflected off 270

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

the Mississippi. When life was supposed to be most peaceful, it was always chaotic for him. He could have been just taking in the beauty of the scenery and enjoying his life as a bachelor. Instead, he was pondering madly Brooks' advice and dissecting his actions over the last six months with Ivy.

*Sprung* as Brooks had put it, was a bad choice of words, but right on the money. As absurd as it sounded, Nicola had fallen in love with a square. He laughed a little at the thought of it all and shifted uncomfortably in his hammock.

So what was he going to do about it? Th

ere were two obvious

choices. He could pursue by full force and possibly end up making a fool of himself, or he could stick to the business of being *Nicola*. Th

e second choice was much less complex and required little or no new effort. But if he was actually able to pull off the first choice, the reward could be bliss and maybe he could find some comfort in his hectic life.

“Ugh!” he finally screamed allowed. Th

is wasn't him! He

struggled with himself. Here he was sitting on his balcony trying to figure out where a six-months-pregnant, engaged, twenty-one-year-old college girl fit into his life. Getting up and leaving his beer on the ground, he shrugged off the entire notion. All of this had gotten too far out of control, and it was time that he stopped it. u u

Looking over the financial reports for his department, Grey squinted past the blurry vision and dozing nods to finish making his projections for the next quarter. No matter what, he would get his work done before he left the offi

ce. He sat back warily in his

seat and closed his eyes for a moment. Already working well into the fourteenth hour of his sixth day, he

had nearly forgotten what his home looked like.

"My job is never done," he said absently as he regained his composure and focused back on the work before him.

"Mr. Henderson, I'm back with the food," Carol said, knocking on the door with Th

ai takeout.

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"OK," he yawned. "Come on in. I need a break." Setting down his paperwork, he moved over to the round meeting table and turned on the television. "Did you get a receipt?" he asked, helping her set out the food on disposable plates.

"Of course," Carol said, passing him the receipt and his company credit card. "I was wondering if you had time to look over my proposal for the Bedley account."

"Umm, yeah I did," Grey stuttered. "Could you go out and look on top of the common frig and get that unopened bottle of Shiraz?" He stopped in mid-sentence, refusing to elaborate on the account.

"Sure," Carol said, walking out of the office.

Grey sat back in the black offi

ce chair and closed his eyes for

a moment while Larry King interviewed some newly  
acclaimed mystery author. Carol came back into the  
offi ce with the bottle

opened and set it beside him with a glass.

“Th

ere you go.” She laid down the corkscrew and turned  
around to head back to her desk.

“Wait.” Grey sat up in his seat. “Eat in here with me and  
bring another glass. We have some celebrating to do.”

“Celebrating?” Carol had a twinkle of hope in her eyes.

“Elaine and I liked your ideas, and we were thoroughly  
impressed with your background knowledge. We want  
you to take this project on, and if you’re successful, we  
want you to consider an entry-level management  
position.” Grey poured the Shiraz into his glass. “So,  
like I said, we have some celebrating to do.”

“Oh my goodness,” Carol was elated by the news. With  
her hands over her mouth, she turned around and went  
to get another glass.

About fifteen minutes into dinner, Carol found her way off the subject of the Bedley account and onto the subject of Grey's private life. She had watched him around the office, intense in all

of his affairs. He was extremely focused and well received by all of his peers and subordinates. His social life boiled over in the break room with stories of wild parties, rich and famous friends, 272

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and his ever-present family ties. He was a local celebrity in every sense of the word, and yet he was right here with her discussing the business of the day. She had long admired his style and his poise, but she longed to know him better.

"So how is your fiancée?" Carol finally asked.

"Fine," Grey said, a little taken back. Where had that come from? He set down his glass of wine and looked down at this unfinished meal.

"I notice that you don't talk about her much."

"I don't like to mix work and personal business. It's not a good combination." Before the lie could leave his lips, he thought of his mentor, boss, and ex-lover, Elaine.

"I understand." Carol smiled cleverly. "It's just that you don't seem like the marrying type or the fatherly type. All the stories I hear around here baffl

e me."

Grey was now very curious. He had always wondered who was responsible for his gossip. Maybe now he could fi nd out. "Tell me something. Who is most known for telling stories about me around here?"

"Well, there are a few, but I think that your most notable PR

agent is little Melissa Daniels." Carol shook her head, confi rming Grey's surprise.

"Th

e little short girl who never has anything to say who works for Bob?" Grey couldn't believe it.

"She never has anything to say to upper management, but she's a real chatterbox during the lunch hour." They both laughed.

Suddenly Grey's direct line rang. He looked back at it and down at his watch. "You'll realize how dangerous those kinds of stories can be when you're in my position," he said, excusing himself from the table. Just in time, he hit the speakerphone button. "Henderson."

“Grey!” Ivy gasped, holding on to her stomach.

“Yeah,” Grey said, picking up the phone. “What’s wrong?”

“Honey, I just fell in the shower. At first I didn’t think that it was too bad, but now I’m having these shooting pains in my 273

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stomach. Plus, my vision is sort of blurry. I can’t seem to get in touch with Trina, Mom, or Emerald. Can you please come and get me?” She whimpered in pain.

“Baby, I’m on my way,” Grey grabbed his coat. “Just hold on. I’ll be right there.” Hanging up the phone, Grey patted his pants for his keys and ran out of his offi

ce.

u u

Nicola had made it across town before he realized that he had forgotten to call Ivy to let her know that he was coming over. In a whirlwind of confusion, he had suddenly decided to confront his problem face-to-face. He had to get more clarification from her. What did she mean that day over a month ago about “I love you, but...”

Speeding down I-240, he dialed Ivy's number, hoping that she would pick up. It was too late at night for her to be gone anywhere, and it was a weeknight, which meant Grey was nowhere to be found. Grey was always working, or so he said. And that was another issue! Why should he give a damn about what Grey was doing? It wasn't going to affect him one way or another. It seemed that every day he became more and more displaced. Maybe it was the fact that he hadn't had sex in over a month. Maybe it was because he felt empty inside. Maybe it was because he was in love.

Nicola turned down the radio when he heard her voice mail.

"Hey, it's me, Nicola." His words rushed from his diaphragm, causing him to almost lose his breath. "Look, I'm coming over to talk to you. It's urgent, and I know it's late, but I can't wait."

Going against his better judgment, he tried to explain his situation to her telephone.

"I know we aren't dating or even serious with one another, but I need some serious clarification. All this baby business is about to drive me mad. No. No." Nicola rethought his words. "All of this teasing and playing with each others' emotions is driving me crazy. It has absolutely nothing to do with the twins. It's us." He paused 274



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for a brief moment and wished that he could have retracted his last statement. "I know that you're there. Please, pick up. I need to explain myself." Giving her a moment to respond, he held his breath. "Alright. Well, I'm on my way over anyway. So, like it or not, we have to talk."

u u

Ivy lay across the room on the floor listening to Nicola talk in total dismay. She was in the middle of what might very well be a miscarriage, and he was finally reaching out, only it was to her answering machine. What a night!

Feeling a sudden pain her lower abdomen, Ivy forgot about Nicola for just a moment and focused. Sweat beads formed on her forehead and trickled down the sides of her face. Praying to God to protect her children, she promised never to take a shower again as long as she lived if she could just make it through this unharmed.

What was taking Grey so long? She glanced at the clock for a moment and tried to think back to the exact time that she talked to him. If he didn't hurry, she would just call the paramedics. She had tried her mom five times, but no one would pick up the phone, and Trina

would be at work and unreachable for another two hours.

Hearing the doorbell, she stood up quickly and became extremely dizzy. As she grabbed for the end of the couch, she toppled the lamp over on the floor and broke a vase on the end table.

Nicola heard the loud bang while he rang the doorbell. He looked over and saw her car and instantly knew that something was urgently wrong. After several more rings and no reply, he tried twisting the doorknob. Starting to panic, he looked through the living room window where he could see her body lying limp on the floor.

"Oh, shit!" Nicola said, feeling his heart in his throat.

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Kicking in the door, Nicola pulled out his gun and checked the apartment just in case she wasn't alone. Finally realizing that she was in no immediate danger from an outsider, he quickly went to her aid. He checked her vitals and was relieved to find her still breathing, but he still didn't know the cause for blackout, concussion, or whatever was wrong with her. At first Nicola started to call the paramedics, but then he opted to take her himself. Picking her up off the ground carefully, he carried her to his truck. It was a

good thing that she had given him an emergency insurance card only weeks before. u u

“Baby, are you OK?” Grey asked, storming into the house only minutes after Ivy had been taken away by Nicola. Seeing the smashed door, Grey quickly realized someone had beaten him to her.

Walking through the house carefully, he tried to figure out who could have come so quickly. Somewhat perplexed and fighting anger, he sat on the couch for a moment to clear his head. Who else would have come for Ivy? Who? Calming down, it became painfully obvious—Nicola. Who else would have kicked in the damned door? Pissed off, Grey picked up the crystal lead vase over her fireplace and threw it across the room, smashing it against the wall. His fury overtook him and he found himself on the verge of a panic attack. After he found out if Ivy was all right, he would deal with Nicola once and for all. It couldn't wait one more day, and he had finally gotten all the ammunition to get rid of him for good.

u u

After Nicola called Brooks to see if he could get in touch with Trina, he grabbed a magazine off the rack and sat alone in the waiting room of the hospital awaiting a doctor to come out and give some comforting words about Ivy and the babies. He breathed

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in deeply, opened the magazine, and stared blankly at the pictures, trying to calm down.

Nicola was much too engulfed in his worries to notice Grey walk through the doors of the waiting room and set his jacket on the chair.

"Has the doctor come out yet with any word?" Grey asked, looking at his watch.

"No," Nicola said without looking up from his magazine.

"Th

en we have a moment to talk. Do you mind stepping outside?"

Popping his knuckles, Grey motioned towards the door. He had prepared himself the entire ride over to the hospital for whatever might come from the conversation he was about to engage in with Nicola.

"Something tells me that you're just going to piss me off if I go outside. And I don't feel like being pissed off today, OK? So why don't you just leave me the hell alone." Nicola sighed heavily, tiring of the constant drama.

"We can talk outside, or we talk in here. Either way, I've got something on my mind, and you're going to hear it." Without flinching, Grey stood shoulders squared and unbothered by Nicola's cocky exterior.

"Are you sure that you want to do this?"

"Are you sure that you don't?"

"Fine," Nicola said, throwing down the magazine.

"We'll talk."

Leading the way, Grey walked outside in the midnight air and stopped in the alleyway of the building. Turning around, he stared at Nicola for a moment. What could he say to drive the point home with this guy? How could he make him see that he had no place in their lives?

"Are we going to talk or what?" Nicola asked, looking around.

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"Yeah. Let's start with tonight. How in the hell did you end up at Ivy's house?" Grey asked, taking off his Tiff any cufflinks and

placing them in his pockets.

"If we're going to talk, then it's going to be about you and me, because I don't owe you an explanation about who, what, when, or where with Ivy." Nicola yawned.

"Do you really think that I'm here for an explanation?" Grey asked, close to shedding his civility. "I've tried exceptionally hard not to get down on your level. But trying to reason with you is like trying to talk to that brick wall."

"*My level?*" Nicola smirked. "You act like you're the Prince of Wales or some shit."

"I may not be the Prince of Wales, but I'm the closest thing to it in this city. And you fucking know it. That's why you went after

her. She's certainly a step up from what you're used to."

"Do you honestly believe that bullshit?" Nicola rolled his eyes.

"I had no idea who you were nor did I care when I slept with Ivy. Evidently, she didn't care either. Did it ever occur to you that maybe Ivy wanted revenge?"

"You keep her out of this," Grey snapped angrily.

"Make up your mind. Do you want to talk about it or don't you?"

"I'll tell you what I want...I want you out of our lives!"

"Like that is going to fucking happen..." Nicola shook his head.

"You and I both know that the only way you got your hands on her is because she was vulnerable. I don't even understand why you're still here. She doesn't love you. Do you think if she hadn't gotten pregnant, she would have ever wanted to see you again?"

You were a one-night stand. At most, you were revenge against me. Get over it and move on."

Nicola looked Grey square in the eyes. "I know your type..."

uptight, cynical, and hypocritical. You're not mad that Ivy fucked off on you. You're mad because she fucked off on you with me."

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"You're damned right," Grey said, at wits' end. "You're not good enough to be in the same ranks with me."

"I would hardly call Kit high class." Nicola laughed as he turned away. "Look, whatever I am in your eyes, Ivy

liked me enough to have my kids. Don't you think its odd that she never got pregnant before she met me? Give this quizzical shit a rest. You and I both know who she really belongs to."

"Don't turn your back on me," Grey said, screaming. "Face me like a man, you piece of shit!"

"Or what, you're going to banish me? Get the fuck out of here..."

Nicola turned around and walked back up to Grey. Now eyeto-eye with virtually no breathing room between them, both men stood with shoulders squared and tempers flaring. It was apparent that if one of them did not back down, they would eventually come to blows, but neither felt the sense of reason that may have allowed them to walk away.

"I'll only tell you this once," Grey said, balling up his fist. "Stay away from Ivy."

"Save your breath," Nicola said, feeling his chest swell with an unbearable rage.

"She never wanted you," Grey said, cutting him off. "You don't mean shit to her. You were a cheap, drunk-ass, second-choice screw. And every day she regrets that she ever let you touch her, whether she says it or not."



"I'm sure that figment of your imagination is the only thing that keeps you sane, so I'll let you go with it. But I assure you that the first time that she gets angry with you, she'll come to me."

Nicola smiled deviously. "She always will."

"While Ivy is not run of the mill, you are. There is nothing

that she sees in you that she can't get from a hundred men out here. By the time I'm finished painting the sordid picture of your abortion-paying, drunken, whore-screwing ass, she'll just be glad that she didn't catch VD." Grey returned the smile. "Don't play with me. You'll be up way past your bedtime."

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"Save the veiled threats. I know a few things about you, too. Ivy and Kit aren't the only women that we have in common. So unless you want me to play the same game that you're attempting to play, I suggest you keep my past to yourself." Nicola wondered if Grey would call his bluff.

"She would never believe you."

"I slept with her the first night we went out. I'm in her

head, Grey. Of course she'll believe me." Nicola was tired of talking. Turning around, he started towards the opening of the alleyway.

"Well," Grey said, breathing heavily as he built momentum for the ultimate blow, one he had been waiting to swing all night. He calmed his breathing and spoke slowly and clearly to ensure not only clarity but also utter defeat. "Will she believe me when I tell her about Trina? About the abortion? How do you think Ivy and Brooks will feel when they find out just what type of man you really are? I know all about you and that cheap cunt Ivy calls a best friend. Don't you think that this would be the perfect time to destroy you both?" Grey smirked confidently, knowing that he had Nicola right where he wanted him. "Just give me one more reason, and I'll tear your life apart."

It was at that very moment that Nicola felt his body react without control. In a horrid rage, he turned and grabbed Grey by his shirt collar and pushed him violently into the brick wall. He wanted to kill him; he hated him so much! But Grey was not afraid. In fact, he carried the same rage and was happy to release it now.

"I'll fucking kill you," Nicola said, choking Grey.

"Not before I kill you first," Grey gurgled, enraged. Pushing back, Grey grabbed Nicola by his coat and slung him into the opposite wall. He charged furiously

into him, trying to knock the wind from his body, but Nicola caught him and slammed him back to ground with such power it rattled Grey's teeth.

From side to side in the tight alleyway, they fought without so much as a single onlooker. Falling into a puddle of water, they 280

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both gasped as the cold slush drenched their bodies. Punching Nicola in the rib cage, Grey felt Nicola's cold hands around his neck as sat on top of him, choking him again, and cutting off his circulation. He gasped for air and spit blood. As Nicola dealt another horrifying blow to Grey, he managed to push Nicola off of his body. Back on their feet, they charged each other again. Grey's glasses fell to the ground as he felt the last blow to his face before he hit the ground again. He was dizzy and beaten but unable to give up. Nicola gave him room, standing like a gladiator above him. Grey stood back up with his fists up. He charged Nicola again, letting out a great scream. Making contact with Nicola's body, Grey felt his angry force carry both of them a few feet before they both fell again. He punched Nicola angrily, but each blow was returned by Nicola's own extreme frustration. Nicola again threw excruciating punches that made contact with Grey's body. One to his kidney, two to his face and then a violent shove.

Neither of the two men was willing to give up. It was as if the man who retreated forfeited his right to care about Ivy. And so, if it meant killing each other, they would do it, but fairly. And that was the only reason that the department-issued pistol stayed in Nicola's holster.

Nicola ducked a punch and came back swinging and making contact with Grey's kidney again. Th

en Grey swung and caught

him in the lip. Spitting blood, Nicola smiled. It would take more than that, a hell of a lot more than that.

"What the hell are you two out here doing?" Brooks ran up to the men and broke the two up, pushing each to an opposite wall of the small space. "Break this shit up!" he commanded.

"Well, isn't this convenient," Grey panted, trying to get his breath, blood covering his face and clothes. He smirked at Nicola as he wiped blood from his brow. "We were just talking about you, Brooks." He straightened his clothes, checked his pocket for his cuffl

inks and spit from his aching mouth.

"I really don't give a damn what you two were talking about. Th

is conversation is over," Brooks said quickly.

"Well, Nicola. I'll give you some time to think about my little off er." Grey pulled his cuffl

inks out of his pocket. "Back off and

no one has to know *anything* about *anything*. Stay close, and I'll go blow for blow with you in more than just this alleyway."

Brooks shook his head in total disbelief. "What the hell is wrong with you two? Th

at girl could be in there possibly losing those babies or her own life, and yawl's stupid asses are out here fi ghting over her. Wake up! She may not want either one of you after this."

"You sure that you want to get involved in this, Brooks?" Grey asked, still seething.

"Look, don't test me," Brooks said, pointing at Grey. "You'd better calm that shit down. I don't care who your daddy is, I'll stump a mud hole in your ass or should I say another one."

"I'm sure," Grey said, unconcerned with Brooks.

“Th

is is far from over,” Nicola continued.

“Well, it’s over for tonight,” Brooks finished.

“Just for tonight...good night to you gentlemen,” Grey said, leaving the alleyway, walking just as cocky as he had entered it.

“Why don’t you come back here and finish this ass kicking?”

Nicola retorted.

“Calm down, man,” Brooks said, ignoring Grey. “You’re feeding in...”

“Th

is is beginning to be some messy shit,” Nicola said, checking his watch.

“Beginning to be?” Brooks sighed. “You’re in way above your head. I told you just lay low until the paternity test. But no...you’re out here fighting GQ’s Man of the Year.”

“Maybe you’re right. And I’m not saying that because of a little altercation. I just don’t know if this gets me anywhere with Ivy.”

Nicola couldn't risk losing his best friend for an engaged woman who couldn't even say how she felt about him. Plus, if his secret 282

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leaked out on the force, he would never regain his respect. "Have you already been inside the hospital?" he asked, calmly.

"Yeah, there's no word yet," Brooks said, checking his sidearm.

"I want to kill him right now."

"Hell, I see that, but he isn't worth it," Brooks said, patting Nicola on the back. "Besides, from the looks of him, you've already won."

"Believe me. Th

is is far from over."

u u

Hours later, the doctor announced that Ivy and the babies were in stable condition and had been moved to a room for the night. If she checked out well in the morning, she would be able to leave the next afternoon. Hearing the news, everyone left for the night except for

Sadie. Grey offered, but she insisted that he go home and get some rest. It was apparent when Sadie arrived at the hospital that both Grey and Nicola had experienced some type of disagreement, and she wanted both of them as far away from her daughter right now as possible.

As Ivy lay asleep in the hospital bed, Sadie rubbed her hair. Taking a hand-woven blanket from her bag, she pulled it over Ivy's body and tucked her pillows under her softly, trying not to wake her. With the pregnancy, there was little to be done about the pain and discomfort that Ivy was experiencing; so sleep was the only remedy. Sitting down beside her, she took the Bible off of the countertop beside the bed and began to read. Someone had to pray for their family and pray hard.

u u

When Ivy opened her eyes the next morning, she felt a sharp pain race through her back, causing her to grip the rails of the bed. Th

e sun shined over her forehead, blinding her, and the air conditioner was up much too high, freezing her through the thin white sheet and her favorite blanket. She pulled the sheet from her 283

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body as she saw a monitor connected to her stomach; she began to panic. She pressed the button for the nurse, and a petite black woman with blue teddy-bear scrubs and her hair in a bun marched through the door.

"Are you alright, honey?" the nurse asked, walking over the bed.

"I don't know." Ivy held her stomach. "Are they alright?" She could better answer the woman's question if she only knew that.

"Th

ey're fine," she said with a bright smile.

"Well then, I'm alright." Sitting back in the bed Ivy laid her head on the pillow. Where was everyone? What time was it?

"I'll bring you breakfast in a moment, and the doctor will be in to see you in about an hour." Pulling the blanket back over Ivy's legs, the woman passed her the remote and left the room. Shortly after the nurse left, Madison and Sadie came walking through the door with breakfast. Madison had arrived in Memphis only hours earlier, and Sadie had stayed awake by Ivy's bedside all night. Yawning, she took a seat on the couch and took off her sweater.

"Hey," Ivy said, smiling at her father.

"Hi." Madison stood over her rubbing her hair. "You took a dirty lick yesterday, little boot." His hazel eyes were fixed on her bandages.

"It looks worse than it feels." She lied. She didn't want them to worry more than they had. As she shifted in the bed, the babies kicked, causing her hospital gown to move. "Well, at least I know they're up." She smiled and rubbed her stomach affectionately.

"I just can't believe that I'm going to be a grandfather."

"Well, believe it." Sadie took a sip of her coffee and took her daughter's hand. "You talked in your sleep the entire night."

"What did I say?" Her silky brown eyebrows lifted in curiosity.

"Nicola this and Grey that." Sadie wouldn't spill the details with Madison in the room. "Mostly Nicola though."

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"I've got to meet this guy," Madison said, sitting down across the room.

"He seems like a nice boy, really. I met him yesterday."

Sadie winked at Ivy. "He was very concerned about Ivy, not to mention handsome."

"Spare me." Opening up his newspaper, Madison closed the blinds. "Th

is is going to be a long three months. I can see that right now."

u u

While everyone was at the hospital checking on Ivy, Nicola managed to pull himself out of bed and get to her apartment. It was urgent that he speak with Trina about their exposed secret. Still in the clothes from the previous day, Nicola hid his tired eyes behind his Rayban shades and a cool disposition. Ringing the doorbell madly, he was greeted by Trina, still in her pajamas.

"Nic, what are you doing here?" Trina asked, looking out past him to see if anyone was with him. "Ivy's still at the hospital. Th ey

haven't let her go yet."

"I'm not here for Ivy," Nicola said, walking past her.

"Are you OK?" Trina asked, closing the door.

"Is anyone here?"

"No." Trina heart dropped. Something was wrong.

"Grey knows." Nicola said, sitting down on the couch and sighing heavily.

"Please don't tell me that." Trina felt her heart constrict.

"Th

e question is how he knows. I sure in hell didn't tell him. Did you?"

"No," Trina quickly said, as she sat down on the leather ottoman.

"Have you told anyone at all?"

"Not a soul. What is he going to do?" Her fingers trembled.

"Nothing as long as I stay away from Ivy. So that's what I'm going to do."

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"What if the twins are yours?" Trina wiped the tears from her eyes.

"Well, let's hope that they are not." Nicola looked over at Trina who was now in tears. "How have you been?"

“Better.” Trina shook her head. “I told her to stay away from you. I told you the same...”

“Who knew that all of this shit would happen?”

“Nic, I think that she’s in love with you.”

“Really?” He sat quietly for a minute. “Well, she’s not the only one in love.” Nicola said, looking up at Trina. He could tell her. She would never spill a word. Plus, she could never judge him for it.

Trina shook her head. “Th

is is so screwed up, isn’t it? It’s all my fault.”

“Please. It’s no more your fault than my own. Don’t worry. I’ll figure something out. For now, just keep cool. Don’t go confessing to Ivy. And don’t start to act all funny. Be yourself.”

“Th

at’s pretty hard to do.”

“Well, when it starts to get hard, think of the alternative. We could always fess up to Brooks.”

“Yeah, right. He’d leave me, but he’d kill you.” She

rolled her eyes.

“Th

is news would kill him.”

“I just don’t want to lose Brooks again. I love him so much. If he ever found out...”

“He won’t.” Nicola gave Trina an assuring nod, turned, and left her in the room alone.

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Chapter Seventeen:

Change of Heart



## Chapter 17

### CHANGE OF HEART

**“Share the cover,”** Brooks said, struggling with Trina, who hogged the chenille throw as they lay opposite each other on Brooks’ den couch.

“Get your own,” Trina said, laughing and ignoring the overly agitated Brooks.

Th

ey had spent the entire day cuddled up in the house together cooking, eating, watching movies, pampering one another, and making love. It was Brooks' recipe for reconciliation with Trina whenever they had a fallout. Now in an extra pair of Brooks'

pajamas, Trina sat on his den couch with her hair in large pink foam rollers and her face hard as rock from a Mary Kay facial mask.

Brooks sat opposite her, holding onto the remote and flipping violently through the channels. "Th

ere is nothing on any of these

worthless-ass channels. We should rent a movie."

"Whatever, baby. You want some cookies?" Trina asked in her deep southern drawl.

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"Homemade?" Brooks asked. Her country slang made him smile. She was such a down-home sister who knew all the ways to make him content.

She was oblivious to his observations and wrapped up in her own thoughts. "No," she said, touching her face. "Th ere's some



Pillsbury cookie dough in the freezer, though.”

“Chocolate chip?” Brooks took his eyes off the television for a brief moment.

“Yep,” Trina smiled. “Is your mask ready yet?”

“Feels like it.” Brooks touched his face. “I don’t know how you got me to put a damned facial mask on in the first place.”

“Baby, you need to exfoliate your skin more.” Trina crawled over to Brooks and rested on his chest. She searched his face. “Do you love me?” Her eyes were bright with anticipation.

“Yes,” he said, staring her in eyes. “If I didn’t love you, do you think I’d let you put mud on my face?”

Trina smiled. “No,” she rubbed through his bald head. “Brooks, I love you so much.” She hoped that he believed her. And he did. Brooks rubbed her face and kissed her forehead. She was really a wonderful and patient woman. He appreciated those qualities in her and felt sometimes extremely guilty for his many indiscretions.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Trina asked curiously.

“Looking at you like what?”

"Like you're just now noticing that I'm here." Trina shrugged her shoulders. "Like I haven't always been here."

Brooks stammered. "I don't think I have noticed you for a long time."

Th

is was news to Trina, who always thought that she was the apple of his eye, unmistakable in his view. She grabbed the remote and turned off the television, getting rid of any distraction. "Go on," she said, seeing that he needed to get something off of his chest.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Watching Nicola deal with the possibility of having twins with Ivy has really made me look at our situation. He tries to front like he doesn't love her, but I see the change in him. He does love her." Brooks rubbed through Trina's hair.

"Really?" Th

e mention of Nicola's name made Trina extremely nervous.

"Yeah. I think having children does that for people who

really need to fill a void in their lives. I mean, you get up and do this job day in and day out for other people. But sometimes, you want to believe that you're doing it for yourself. Having a child to live for...well." Brooks sighed. "Th

at changes things for a man."

"But I thought that you said that Nicola didn't think the twins were his?"

"Oh, he wants them to be. Why else would he have sworn off sex?" Brooks chuckled.

"Nicola swore off what?" Trina was baffl

ed by the thought.

"Th

is is the longest I've ever seen him go without it in my entire life. He says that he needs clarity."

"What do you think?"

"I think that he needs Ivy," Brooks said simply. "But this conversation doesn't go any further than these four walls. If he wants her to know how he feels, he'll tell her. Th at is once he

figures it out for himself."

"What does all of this have to do with us?" Trina rubbed his chest.

"You're going to think I'm crazy." Brooks hesitated.

"No, I won't. Tell me." She held her breath.

"OK. I...I want to start a family."

"Don't play with me," Trina said, pushing his hand away. She dismissed his request as an ill-formed joke.

"I'm not playing," Brooks said, finally at peace with his decision.

"I want to start a family with you. I want to marry you."  
After many months of haggling with Nicola, Brooks realized that he had simply been fighting with his own desires. And here he was in his prime giving in after all these years to KaTrina Leona Cooper. 291

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"Brooks, you shouldn't be asking me this if you haven't thought it through. It's not fair. You know how you get. One minute you want to be in a serious relationship and the next thing you know, I'm hearing about you and some girl at the Black Tie." She smacked her lips and rolled her eyes. "I mean, is this really what you want?" She had to make a full circle back to the question. After all, it was what she really wanted.

"You know me. Serious relationship...yes. But me bringing up wanting to marry you...no. I've never, ever...ever done that, have I?" He touched her masked face. "It's what I want." Brooks shrugged his shoulders. "Th

e question is, is this what you want?"

"Yes," she said quickly. Trina couldn't believe her ears, but she welcomed the invitation openly. "You know I want to marry you!"

She smiled excessively. "I've wanted it for so long."

"OK. Great. Th

at's great news, baby." Brooks hugged her tightly.

"I can't believe that this is happening." Trina felt sheer happiness and utter nervousness in the same skipped breath.

"Well, it is." Brooks smiled. "We can go and pick you out a ring tomorrow. So you can play the '*ohh, girl game*' with your friends."

"Th

e what?" Trina asked, dying laughing at Brooks.

"*Ohh, girl. It's so pretty. Howmuch did it cost? How*

*did he propose?*” Brooks mocked Trina’s friends in a girly, high, soprano voice. “You know what I mean. You know what ya’ll do.”

Trina laughed but still had tears of joy in her eyes. “You’ve made me so happy today, baby.” She kissed his lips tenderly.

“I know,” Brooks said, equally as pleased. “You know I got you, boo.”

u u

Nicola wanted a drink bad. He had been fighting his urge since the early hours of the morning, and as the day progressed so did his thirst. To counter what was turning into a dreadful day, 292

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

he decided to head to the track field to get some fresh air and do some much needed training.

As he arrived at the East High School track field, he parked his truck on the school parking lot and grabbed his MP3 player and shades. If he couldn’t fight the thirst, he would run from it. At the starting line, Nicola half-stretched and proceeded with his signature long-stride mile run. As he took in the fresh air, he began feeling at peace. Somehow, the clear blue skies, fresh-cut grass, and empty track gave him the strength to

push past his demons.

Too busy running to see that he was not alone, Nicola overlooked the little woman sitting quietly under a tree by the playground just a few yards from the track. Eating a finger sandwich and reading her book club book of the month, Sadie watched Nicola in curiosity.

In all the years that Sadie had watched her only daughter follow Grey aimlessly, she never imagined her straying. Ivy was a faithful girl totally clueless to infidelity. In fact, when she was little, Madison would occasionally call Ivy *Little Semper Fi*, because once she attached herself to any project or friend, she was hopelessly faithful. And so considering that Sadie knew her daughter better than any of the headstrong men that surrounded her, she had decided that Ivy's choice was due to some misuse of her trust by Grey.

However, the selection itself amused Sadie. Why Nicola?

She had to admit that when she first met him she thought that he was exceptionally charming and attractive. Nevertheless Ivy had never been a superficial woman, so there had to be more. Now an opportunity presented itself where Sadie could probe into the situation further by way of an unplanned conversation. She watched Nicola run vigorously, tiring out his young body with every stride, and when he was finished, she stood up and approached him as he

grabbed his keys off the tarp.

"Excuse me, young man," Sadie said, approaching him. 293

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Bending down on the ground to catch his breath, Nicola looked up, shocked to see Ivy's mother walking towards him. He stood up and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Mrs. Winters," Nicola said, extending his hand to shake hers.

"How is Ivy?"

"She's recovering well, thanks to you."

"Well, I've been staying away to try to keep the confusion down, if you know what I mean." Nicola sighed. "Who would have thought that you'd be here today? Memphis is such a small place."

"Isn't it? Actually, I had a meeting earlier today over at the library with my women's group. Afterwards, I figured that I'd take a break out here at the park." Sadie looked at Nicola panting and tired, but there was something that only a mother would sense running amuck in his normally pleasant demeanor. "So how is your day coming along?" she asked, offering him a fi



nger sandwich.

"Shitty." Nicola paused. Wrong choice of words for the wrong audience. "I'm sorry." He was embarrassed by his slip.

"Th

at's alright." Sadie smiled. "Why is your day... *shitty*?"

Nicola thought about his response this time, gauging the possible outcomes of being honest at this particular juncture in his day. Finally, he decided to answer. "I want a drink, but I'm trying to fi ght it."

"Is this an often urge?" Sadie asked, concerned.

"Did I just reveal my Achilles heel?" Nicola wiped his face. Did he really care what these people thought of him anyway? Th ey

were in love with Grey.

"No." Sadie walked with him. "When I was much younger and Ivy's father and I were still together, I used to fi nd myself attached to the bottle as a way to deal with my husband never being home."

She stopped and looked at him. "Th

ankfully, I caught it before

the kids were born.”

“How did you quit?” Nicola was intrigued by her candor. 294

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

“Madison saw me through it, but it was my conscious decision to stop. To this day the kids don’t know. It was one of our many secrets.” Sadie thought back to her husband at one of the most diffi

cult times in her life.

“Sounds like a good man.” Nicola took the finger sandwich from Sadie.

“Well, the Winters family has a way of growing on you.” She nibbled on her sandwich.

“Th

anks,” Nicola said softly. “I’ll be OK. I’m sure of it.”

“Well, if you ever need anyone to talk to, I’m here,” Sadie said, sincerely. “I was a psychiatrist for over twenty years. I retired only last year, and to tell you the truth I really miss it.”

“Don’t be surprised if I take you up on it.” Nicola stopped and smiled gently at the older image of Ivy.

"I look forward to it," Sadie said, bidding him farewell to allow him to go on with his day.

Nicola watched Sadie for a moment, glad that she had come over to talk with him. Who would have ever thought that Ivy's mother had an addiction? Who would have ever thought that he would know something about Ivy's mother that Ivy didn't know?

He smiled for a moment. Grey didn't know either. He liked that. It soothed his mind to know that everyone wasn't against him. Walking to his truck, he took in the fresh air and decided against having a drink that afternoon.

As Sadie grabbed her things off the ground and headed to her car, she thought again about Nicola. He had shown his Achilles heel, but she tried to present a more positive spin on his situation. He could come through it if he wanted to come through it. Evidently, he was consciously fighting; otherwise he wouldn't have been out there running. He would have been a bar getting loaded. Still, Ivy had chosen to put herself into an awkward situation if he was unsuccessful in his fight and the kids were his. However, there was something about Nicola that gave her confidence in him. She only hoped that her instincts about his character were right. 295

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It was nearly midnight when Brooks finally awoke from a much-needed rest after making love to Trina for many hours. Looking at her sleep peacefully beside him, he rolled over and checked his alarm clock. She would never know if he snuck out for a few hours, and even if she did wake up, she would be so satisfied with his earlier performance that she wouldn't make a fuss about him being gone.

Slipping out of bed, Brooks pushed past his boxer, Rico, who lay on the floor guarding him loyally. After taking a quick shower, Brooks slipped on a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans and headed anxiously downstairs with his phone already on speed dial to Nicola.

"Yeah," Nicola said, answering finally after a few rings.

"Hey, man. Where are you?"

"Ordering something to eat at the East Way Grill," Nicola said, sitting at the bar watching a few women across the room shoot pool.

"How long are you going to be there?"

"Uhh," Nicola groaned and looked at his watch. "At least another hour. I've been here with Gremier and Big Baby for going on two. Hold on; I'll let you talk to him."

Nicola passed Gremier the phone.

Taurus Gremier was an ex-cop, turned professor of African American studies at a small midwestern college. Th ought to

be a militant brother because of his long dreads and abundant knowledge of all things African, Gremier was a well-missed character on the Memphis SWAT team. Home to see family for the weekend, Gremier hooked up with Nicola accidentally when they both ended up at the Black Tie.

Big Baby Mike was a local lieutenant who had seen more than a few days on the streets of South Memphis and was now a mouthpiece for offi

cers who used a less attractive but more useful approach to apprehend suspects, often referred to as “excessive 296

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

force.” He too had met his old friends accidentally in the wellknown bar.

“Brooks, get your punk ass down here,” Gremier said, pulling back his locks.

“I’m on my way. Hell, ya’ll could have called a brother and let him know that you were in town.” Brooks

jumped into his truck and pulled eagerly out of his garage.

"Well, Nicola said that you were *spending time* tonight. So we didn't want to interrupt you and the Nubian Queen." Gremier laughed. "You're still kicking it with Trina, huh? She's still taking your shit."

"Yeah, man. But she finally got me. I proposed tonight. No ring. No speech. I just came out with the shit." Brooks couldn't help but be proud of his news.

"What?" Gremier was impressed. "Looks like it's all coming together for you. Well look, bring your ass, and we'll see you when you get here. Alright." Hanging up Nicola's cell phone, Gremier chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Nicola asked, hands clasped as he leaned back in the booth.

"Brooks just said that he proposed to Trina." Gremier passed Nicola back his phone.

"What?" Nicola was in complete shock. "When did this happen?" He took the phone and sat up.

"Tonight, I guess." Gremier shook his head and ordered another drink.

"He's on his way down?" Nicola asked, taking his hot plate.

“Yeah,” Gremier said, noticing the troubled look on Nicola’s face. “What? You’re not happy for him?”

“Fucking ecstatic,” Nicola said sarcastically as he got up and made his way to the restroom. “Watch my food. I’ll be right back.”

u u

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Across town, while Brooks celebrated his engagement with Nicola and the boys, Caesar and his men piled bags of unmarked money into the back of a black, late-model Yukon Denali to make their monthly exchange for drugs from their largest distributor, Miguel Guerra.

Caesar had proven his reliability over the years and had grown to be trusted by Guerra, the South’s most notorious drug trafficker.

Th

he cocaine had just made it through customs compliments of a rogue agent who took a nice cut from every shipment and was waiting to be picked up off a local delivery truck near a warehouse in an industrial district on the edge of town.

"Alright, Hector," Caesar said, handing his little brother the keys. "Don't make one mistake on this."

"I won't," Hector said, grabbing the keys and jumping into the driver's seat of the truck.

"Do you remember everything that I told you?" Caesar asked, feeling his gut reject the idea of letting his little brother take the lead on the drop.

"How many times do we have to go over this? You're my blood! I'm not going to let you down. Trust me." Hector patted his brother on his shoulder.

"Guerra isn't someone to have to answer to about his coke. After you make the exchange, call me immediately. I need to know for sure that everything went cool. Alright?"

"Alright," Hector said, listening. "We've been over this, man. Look, if you don't trust me, then why don't you do it?"

"I do trust you." Caesar sighed. "I have to keep my face off the streets because Agosto and his boys have their foot so far up my ass, I can't breathe. I'm suffering too many losses. No one knows about you. You're my secret weapon. Agosto and Brooks have no idea you even exist. Th

ey'll never suspect you. Just drive safely and slowly.



Keep your glasses on, your music down, and your hat to the front." He tapped his brother's University of Memphis baseball cap. "You look like a college kid."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I am a college kid," Hector said, looking over at his schoolbooks on the passenger seat. "Speaking of which, I have to hurry up and get back, so I can study."

"With as much money as you are gonna make off this one drop, you can buy a college professor," Caesar said, proud of his brother. Hector would be the first to ever graduate from college in their entire family. "Look, no one's gonna give you shit. But Antonio and the boys won't be far behind you. So if you run into some trouble, they've got your back. We've done this a million times with Guerra. You'll be fine."

Anxious to get on with the job, Hector pulled out in the dark streets of Memphis with his payload, and Caesar's crew followed closely behind him. For Hector, this drop would prove to his brother that he was capable of being in business with him. At school, he never received much attention, couldn't get a girlfriend, and hated his 1985 Buick Century. Maybe he could buy himself a new lifestyle equipped with a place off campus, a new truck like the one that he was driving now, and some new clothes? Then

there was always Tasha, the girl in his physics class that he had had a crush on since his freshman year. If he could just impress her, all of this would be worth it.

Caesar's right-hand man, Antonio, drove behind Hector with his crew locked and loaded. He had been quiet the entire day, pissed that Hector had been chosen over him to perform the drop. What did Hector know about the streets? Everything that Caesar had ever gotten in Memphis was because of him, *not Hector*. Trying not to appear too frustrated in front of his crew, Antonio leaned back in the seat half-high off marijuana and listened to the radio. He almost prayed for something to go wrong. Half an hour later, Hector pulled into the empty warehouse and picked up his cell phone. So far so good. Turning off his lights as previously instructed by Caesar, he pulled into the unmarked dock. Quickly, he got out of the car and walked to the back of the truck. Flashed by a black BMW parked in the darkness across from him, Hector popped his trunk and grabbed the black duffel

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bag full of unmarked large bills. Nervous, he closed the trunk and raised the bag and then proceeded to approach the car. Guerra's point man got out of the BMW smoking a large cigar. Hector was stunned to

see that the guy was a villain straight out of Hollywood, with his all-black attire and slicked-back jet-black hair. Hector could feel his heart begin to pound heavily as he approached the man. He needed to be cool, the way his brother would be. Th

at was it...he would pretend he was Caesar.

"Hola," Hector said, showing the bag.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," the villain said in a raspy voice, walking up to Hector. He frisked him quickly for guns or wires. He nodded at Hector approvingly and led him to the back of the warehouse alone.

Hector walked quietly beside the villain, hoping that he could not hear his heart pounding. He looked back for Antonio, but he was nowhere to be found. With haste, the two walked up the stairs of the dock into a small opening that lead down an alleyway to the back of the dock where the delivery truck sat awaiting them. Hector was both happy and scared to see the truck. So far he had not been set up, but he prayed that all the money was in the bag. Th

ese people looked like they would not accept an IOU. Gripping the bag, he tried to walk with confidence but felt himself stumble as he approached the back of the truck. Two very large Hispanic armed men sat at the back of the delivery truck, both wearing black and confi

ringing the theme for the night. One of the oversized men approached Hector, reeking of loud cheap cologne, and patted him down again, while the smaller man took the bag of money and passed it inside the delivery van to be counted. Hector unconsciously bit his lip as the villain talked on his cell phone to someone he was sure was Guerra.

"It's all here," a thin gaunt Hispanic woman said as she stuck her head out of the delivery truck.

"Give him his work," the villain commanded to one of the muscular bodyguards as he smiled sinisterly at Hector. "And say hello to your brother for me."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Will do," Hector said, adjusting his glasses and most happy to be leaving.

"Th

ese men will see you to your car with your goods," the villain said, motioning to the men to follow Hector with three large silver briefcases.

Hector turned nervously and walked back to the truck. As he popped his trunk for the men, he waved at Antonio, proud that he had completed his mission

without grave error. Antonio and his crew watched carefully. Th

ey were supposed to

get out of the car and accompany Hector after the drop was made. It was Caesar's crew that was supposed to ensure that everything went smoothly, but because of their dislike for Hector, they had not. Antonio had ordered everyone to stay in the car and wait for the inevitable to happen. A screw up. And now Antonio watched angrily with the proverbial pie in his face, pissed that everything had gone as planned even without his help.

"Th

e shit bag actually did it," Antonio said as he motioned for the point man to start the truck.

"I actually did it," Hector said to himself as he watched the men load the truck and walk away.

As instructed previously by Caesar, Hector got into the car and watched the villain drive off . When he was alone in the parking lot with only Antonio and his men across the way, he started his truck. He was about to dial Caesar's number to let him know that everything had gone as planned when he was suddenly fl ashed by a bright light that did not to appear to be coming from Antonio. His heart stopped when he realized that

it was a police car's spotlight.

On the loud speaker, a loud and commanding voice demanded that he and Antonio turn off their trucks and put their hands in the air. Hector could hear his heart beating and large sweat beads forming on his forehead. Following their instructions, Hector tried not to look as suspicious as he actually was. Th

e offi

cer, although very new to the area, realized that the situation would call for backup. Getting on his radio, he called in 301

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Hector's tags and the request for an additional vehicle. Looking for the least-threatening car, he spotted Hector, visibly nervous and alone, and decided that he would approach him first. Getting out of his squad car with his hand on his gun, he walked towards Hector's car. He called in the license plates and proceeded to the driver's side. Still with his hands up in the air, Hector tried to ignore the sweat running down his forehead.

"Sir, turn off your vehicle and carefully step out of your truck and give me your license and registration," the offi cer said with a

tighter grip on his sidearm.

"Yes, sir," Hector said, turning off of the truck. Getting out of the car, Hector passed the offi

cer his license and looked over at

Antonio's truck.

"Hey, don't look up at them," the offi

cer demanded, peering

through his glasses at the young preppy Latino, his fi  
nger pointed.

"Turn around and place your hands on the truck."  
Patting Hector down, the offi

cer was relieved to fi nd no concealed weapons or  
drugs.

"Is there a problem, offi

cer?" Hector asked, trying to ignore

his fi rst panic attack.

"What's your purpose for being out here this late?" he  
asked, reading Hector's body language.

"I got lost," Hector said, visibly nervous.

“Lost?” Th

e offi

cer looked through Hector’s wallet. “What were you trying to fi nd with your truck full of *homies* over there?”

“I was looking for a friend’s place,” he stuttered.

“On a warehouse lot?”

“Like I said, I got lost, sir,” Hector said, wishing that he had collaborated with Antonio on a just-in-case story.

“Oh, I’m sure,” the offi

cer said, wondering where his backup

was and looking over at Antonio’s truck.

“Really offi

cer, this is all a big misunderstanding. Me and my friends were...” Hector was violently interrupted by a loud gunshot and blood splatter across his face. He screamed and hit 302

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the ground. Ducking beside the truck, he looked over to see the offi



cer bleeding on the ground.

“Shots fi red! Offi

cer down!” Th

e offi

cer struggled as he tried

to pull his gun from his holster. “I’m hit. Do you hear me, I’m...”

With the fading of life from his eyes, the offi cer swallowed one

last bloody gulp before Antonio walked up and shot him in the head.

“Oh my God! Why did you do that?” Hector shrieked in tears.

“Why would you fucking shoot him?” Shaking in his now urinesoaked pants, he instantly wished that he had not volunteered to help his brother.

“Shut up with all that damned whining,” Antonio said, pointing his gun at Hector.

“Th

is is not happening!” Hector wiped the tears and blood

from his eyes. Th

ere was something new in Antonio's eyes. "Antonio, I need to call Caesar!"

"No, you *need* to stay here," Antonio said, shooting Hector in his chest. Pulling the young man from the side of the truck, Antonio jumped in the Yukon and pulled off with the other men following shortly behind.

For a moment, as Hector watched himself drown in a bloody pool beside the now already-dead police officer, he thought about

how stupid this entire situation had been. Why did he volunteer to do this? To throw his life away! He cried and kicked. Th e pain

shot through his body, and he gasped for fl eeting air. Hector held onto his last breaths debating what good thing he could do. He didn't have the strength to call his brother and say goodbye. And in his last hour, he was angry at him for exposing him to this. Having no chance to receive his last rights, having no one to hear his last confessions, he reached over for the officer's radio.

"Hello," he said, hoping someone on the other end would hear him.

"Dispatcher 1-5-0. May I ask who this is? Please respond."

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"My name is Hector...Hector Dominguez. I'm Caesar Dominguez's brother. Umm...Th

e drop went bad; Antonio

Martinez shot me up pretty bad and left me here to die." He coughed blood. "I am dying." He began to cry, wheezing to breath in between the painful inhalations.

"Th

ere is help on the way. Where is the offi cer that owns this

radio? Please respond."

"Dead." Hector looked over at him. "But I didn't kill him ...

Antonio Perez did. Now we don't have a priest for our last rights."

"Someone is on the way. Please hold on. Give me your exact location. Please respond."

"I see lights," Hector said, seeing five police cars approaching speedily with their lights and sirens. "But it's too late."

"Hold on," the female dispatcher said, hearing his voice fade.

"Caesar Dominguez is at 124 Clearborne. He's at the old Clearborne apartments...building 202...apartment 4. That's his

headquarters. That

is where he is. Tell him that I sent you. Tell him it's from little bear to big bear." Hector said, laying his head on the offi

cer's chest as he took his last breath.

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Chapter Eighteen:

Caesar's

Last Stand



## Chapter 18

### CAESAR'S LAST STAND

**“Let’s round it up again,”** Brooks said, drinking a cup of coffee to stay awake. It was four o’clock in the morning, and the entire NARC/TACT Unit had been activated to respond to the offi

cer killed only hours before in an abandoned warehouse lot. Nicola and Brooks had come directly to the headquarters from the East Way Grill, still very much intoxicated. The entire team

was in awe as they pulled up to discover that Mayor Henderson was there in his pajamas along with his entire staff as well as the director and deputy director of the Police Department. Nicola knew that this was going to be the biggest bust of the new unit's history. All the news stations in town were covering the story and demanding immediate action. Finally, the day had come for the unit to serve its primary purpose. And Director Billings shared the same demand, considering that the officer killed was

his only nephew.

As the team gathered around him, Nicola took a long breath.

"Th

e boy found at the scene was identified as Hector Dominguez. He is Caesar Dominguez's baby brother. Evidently, he was left at the scene after Antonio Perez shot him. Now I know that at least 307

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two these are household names for you boys, so I won't give you a history lesson. What I will say is that Caesar's little brother left a sweet little parting gift for us...the address to the hideout of Caesar's operation."

Nicola continued, "Everyone knows that this guy had been moving like a gypsy through the city for months. So pinpointing him has been our main problem. Th

is should unlock some very big

doors for us. We want arrests. We want drugs and money. We want good clean kills if they become necessary, and we want *no civilian casualties*. Now Brooks has gone over in detail with us the tactical assault procedure that we will take according to the blueprints of the Clearborne Apartment building. We're going to take them by total surprise early this morning while they still sleep. We've got a muzzle on the news stations to keep them from giving away too much information about what we know. We've got surveillance set up around the perimeter of the apartment. Now I can tell you this, Clearborne is an old dope spot. Th

ere are only a few tenants in this

hell hole, and most of them are probably involved the movement of his drugs in some way. More than anything, we need to try to take Caesar and Antonio Perez alive. Remember, we're looking to get the bigger fi sh, Guerra, if possible. Th is is going to be our

biggest bust. Th

e entire city of Memphis is looking on for this one. No

mistakes will be tolerated. Every action must be methodical, because every reaction will be. So let's do this right the first time. Brooks, anything to add?" Nicola asked as he looked out at his team circled around the NARC/TACT strategy table.

"Just one thing...watch your six. All the training pays off today." Brooks said, looking around the room. u u

Wiping visible tears from his eyes, Caesar sat on an old wornout black leather couch staring blankly at the 57" television across the room. Having just received the news that his brother was gunned down by a police officer

from Antonio only hours before,

he tried to control the anger and guilt that overwhelmed him. 308

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I should have gone myself," Caesar said, with his head in his hands. "My baby brother is dead because of me." He stared blankly at the news, which was giving vague details of the bloody shooting.

"We just have to retaliate against these pig bastards," Antonio said, eyeing his crew to back him up. "I shot the white boy that shot him, but I knew I couldn't save Hector. So, we had to leave him there."



"No, I understand, Antonio. You did what you had to. I'm thankful that you got revenge for my brother, and you brought back the work. But I promise on my mother's soul that there will be no rest for the Memphis Police Department after this night."

Snorting a long line of cocaine on the glass table in front of him, he sat back and watched the room spin. "We're going to war."

"What do you want us to do?" Antonio asked, sitting beside Caesar on the couch with an attentive ear.

"Find out where Nicola Agosto and K. C. Brooks live, find out where their families live, and then get back with me. We're going to hit them at home the way they hit us." Caesar felt the room begin to spin.

"Why would we go after them specifically? They weren't

responsible for this." Antonio knew the very mention of those two would create more trouble than he bargained for.

"Tonio, you shot a fucking cop. They

are coming for us. Who

do you think the MPD is going to send to clean up this shit?

Th

em...Agosto and Brooks. So we have to hit them first. And hit them today.”

“Right now, when they don’t know that it was even us there last night? Why would we give ourselves up?”

“Eventually, they will link Hector to me. And it will be no question about who did what. Right now, they’re not scared of us. No one thinks that we can carry our own, but it’s time to show them that we can. So we start right at the top and take out their best fucking guys.” Caesar snorted another row of cocaine and laid his head back on the couch.

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Antonio rolled his eyes. Caesar had lost his mind if he thought that he was going to be involved in this shit. He had done enough. He had protected their interests when he shot the cop and brought back the blow. Now, Caesar wanted to start a war with the NARC/

TACT Unit? *No way in hell.* But for now, Antonio would play along, until the time was right, and then he’d off Caesar too.

"Fine. I'll find out where they live today, and we can hit them tonight."

"Today?" Caesar sat up and wiped the coke from his nose.

"Yeah. You said you wanted it today."

"No. Now, Antonio," Caesar said, picking up his gun and waving it. "Go and get the information now."

"It's five in the morning." Antonio yawned, tired from being up all night. "I need some sleep."

"You've got until dawn to get your ass out on the streets and bring back an address for both of these mother fuckers," Caesar said, pointing the gun. "Hey, don't forget who's the fucking boss here."

Antonio raised his hands in the air and backed out of the room. "You are, Caesar. I'm going right now."

u u

As dawn broke over the horizon, the NARC/TACT unit took its position around the perimeter of the Clearborne apartments. Nicola was sitting out in the surveillance van communicating with Brooks, who had taken a position under the steps leading up to Caesar's apartment.

Nicola's stomach was in knots thinking about what could happen. He checked out all of the cameras before giving the order to raid. He heard Brooks give the signal to the team, and from about 100 yards away, he and Captain Richards watched as they proceeded quietly up the stairs.

u u

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Yo, let's bounce. Caesar said we had to be out of here by dawn,"

Antonio said, slipping his glock down in its holster. Yawning, he kicked the side of the couch where four other men sat half sleeping.

"Didn't I just say move your ass? Who's the fucking boss here?"

Restlessly, the men got up and holstered their weapons, tired of running errands and listening to Antonio's crap. Antonio slipped on his shades and opened the door. Hearing a noise on the stairs, he looked over the rail to see men all in black with assault weapons coming at him.

"It's the fucking pigs!" Antonio screamed, slamming the

door.

“Red one to Tiger, our position has been compromised,”

Brooks said, quietly.

“Tiger, you’ve got clearance up the stairwell. They went back into

the apartment. I repeat. They

went back into the apartment.”

Brooks knew that the small window of opportunity they had to surprise Caesar had closed. Gaining momentum, they ran up the stairwell before the men could come out and open fire on them.

u u

Caesar jumped up immediately when he heard the word “pigs”

come out of Antonio’s mouth. He grabbed the twelve-gauge pump under his couch and felt for his .44 on his hip. High as a kite, he rushed into the back room of the apartment with his crew quickly following behind.

“What are we going to do?” Antonio asked, posted up against the wall of the bedroom.”

"Hold them off as long as possible and try to move the back way," Caesar said, planning his escape route. He had no intention of trying to worry about Antonio or any of the men in the room. Just then, they heard the door to the living room being stormed by offi

cers. Antonio turned around and with his twelve-gauge opened up a round into the wall, penetrating straight through into one of the offi

cer's vests. Th

e shot was so powerful, it knocked

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Offi

cer Landing off his feet, and he slid into the corner. Offi cer

Poliver grabbed Landing and pulled him out of the house just as the other offi

cers opened fi re back into the wall.

Nicola listened from the van as long as he could before he grabbed his gear.

"Where are you going?" Captain Richards scowled.

“We’ve got one down already, sir. I’m going in with my men.”

In full gear, he ran across the street and up the hill with his fi re arm in his hand and pointed down to the ground. He swiftly hit the stairs and found himself barely missing a bullet that whizzed past his head.

“How’s Landing?” he asked, hearing screams from the nextdoor neighbors scared for their lives.

“He’ll make it!” Offi

cer Poliver screamed as he pulled Landing down the stairs.

“I’ll take your position. You go and tell Captain Richards what it really looks like up here. We’re going to need some fucking backup.”

u u

All seven men holed up in the apartment were down on ammo except Caesar, who was still returning fi re like a mad man. As he reloaded his weapon, three men in an opposite corner behind old wooden furniture were shot.

“Fuck this,” Caesar said, rushing to the closet.

"Why is he going into the closet?" one of Antonio's cronies asked, scared to death.

"It's not a closet!" Antonio said, shooting back. "It's an entryway into the other apartment."

"I'm going too," one of the man said, standing up to run. Just as he stood up completely, Brooks got a clear shot and took it. Within seconds, the man was on his back, dead. Antonio knew that the only way that he would make it out alive was to surrender. He would simply hold them off long enough 312

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

to get Caesar out. He would need someone to pay for his lawyer when all of this shit went down.

Caesar pulled the floor out of the closet and scaled the makeshift ladder down into the bottom apartment. He could hear cops inside the apartment. Evidently, they had secured the apartment and safely escorted the people living in it out. All except one. He looked over at a small child in the corner crying softly.

"Shh," Caesar said, putting his index finger to his lips. He pulled the floor board out of the closet and slid down into the homemade tunnel he had prepared months earlier. The child

watched quietly, not making a sound.



Upstairs, Brooks and Nicola had taken out all but Antonio and one other shooter hiding behind a mattress and tables. They

were still returning fire under heavy tear gas, but not seeming to be aiming directly at them; Brooks finally realized that they had to be covering for someone.

"We need to get in that room, now," Brooks said to Nicola. Nodding, Nicola pulled out his last gas grenade and threw it into the room. Following Brooks, they stormed the room with gunfire. The

man beside Brooks hit the wall, and blood splattered across Antonio's face.

"Shit!" Antonio said, visibly afraid. The

rowing down his gun,

he put his hands up as Nicola and Brooks stood above him with their guns pointed into his face.

After apprehending Antonio, Nicola surveyed the room and realized that Caesar was nowhere in sight.

"Where's Caesar?"

Nicola asked, pushing Antonio's face into the wall.

"I don't know. He wasn't here. It was just us!"

“Bullshit,” Nicola said, looking around the room.  
“Where did he go? Where did he fucking go?” He put the gun to Antonio’s head.

“Whoa,” Brooks said, remembering the surveillance on the house. “Captain Richards is outside watching all of this. Don’t blow this. We’ll find his ass.”

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Th

e building has been secured, sir,” one of the officers said.

“We found a child downstairs in the closet. We think Caesar went under the floorboards and got out.”

“What?” Brooks said, turning away. “How in the hell did he get away? You mean to tell me that there are 200 fucking cops outside not doing a damn thing but securing this place, and you couldn’t even do that right?”

Antonio smiled at Nicola. “I guess he was here.”

“Oh this shit is funny to you, huh?” Nicola said, walking back up to Antonio. “We’ll see if you’re laughing when the DA gives you the death penalty for shooting a cop

and Caesar's brother."

Antonio stopped laughing. How did they know that he had shot them? He wiped the blood from his face.

"Look, I didn't do shit. You got me mixed up with somebody else."

"We'll see." Brooks laughed. "Caesar is going to have your ass slaughtered once he finds out. And uh...he will find out."

"Yeah, we'll make sure of it," Nicola snapped.

"Get his ass out of here." Brooks surveyed the room.

"You should have shot him yourself when you still had the opportunity," Nicola said, giving the men the signal to take him away.

Antonio struggled with the thought of what Caesar would do to him as Nicola and Brooks turned. And he knew that Caesar would find out. Suddenly, the room began to spin. He could feel heat under this collar. What would happen to his family, to his little girl? Caesar would kill her or worse!

A uniformed offi

cer grabbed Antonio by the arm and escorted him out of the small, ramshackled bedroom. In a sudden rage, Antonio pulled away, turned fast, and snatched the offi

cer's sidearm

from his holster. Th

e offi

cer screamed "Gun!" and tried to get the

weapon away from Antonio, but before he could,  
Antonio pulled the trigger and unleashed one bullet.

It was all in slow motion for Nicola. He turned to see  
Antonio with a gun; he heard the offi

cer. But there was not even a second

to react. All that he saw was Brooks turn around to  
catch a bullet 314

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in his neck and fall to the ground. Th

e blood spray painted the

already bloody room.

Nicola and several other offi

cers returned fi re. Th

ey all shot

Antonio, propelling his oversized body out of the vertical coffin

into the living room. He landed on the floor, happy with himself. Caesar would never believe them now. He had stood by Caesar until the end. His family would be safe. He took a few short breaths and stared blankly into ceiling before he finally faded away, smiling.

Th

the muzzle was still hot when Nicola dropped his gun and tried with several other offi

cers to stop the bleeding. Nicola wiped

Brooks' blood from his eyes and tried to put pressure on Brooks'

neck. But there was no hope. Brooks had a shocked, angry look on his face. Blood oozed from his mouth. And he held onto Nicola's hand for a moment. Th

en, without any words, he looked over at

the wall and was silent.

Th

the EMTs on site tried to get to Brooks before it was too late. But within only seconds he had bled out. They

rushed from

injured offi

cers as fast as they could. But silently, he passed. Nicola looked up from his friend, lying limp on the floor, and felt himself burning with fire. What in the hell had just happened? He had just blinked. It all happened to fast. He stood up with blood still covering his body and moved out of the way so the EMTs could load Brooks up and get him to the hospital. 315

Chapter Nineteen:

Lights Out



## Chapter 19

### LIGHTS OUT

**“I’m outta here,”** Nicola said after midnight as he walked out of the precinct. His aching, bloody body was minor compared with the anger that he carried in his heart. With all that had happened in the last eighteen hours, he still could not manage to accept that Brooks was dead.

Pulling himself into his truck, he closed the door and laid his head on his steering wheel. He wanted to cry,

to let out the loud moans of a man robbed of his truest brother. But his body and his mind would not allow him. He wasn't sure why he couldn't release. He had watched Brooks' entire family fall apart only hours before. Trina nearly died in the waiting room of the hospital. Ivy was at her side, still beautiful, but so distant. She looked over at him and tried to approach him, but at that moment, he wanted her to be farther away than she was.

He left the hospital and all of its visitors and went back to the precinct, where he worked for hours on a plan to recover Caesar. Th

e DA, the FBI, the MPD...they all wanted him alive. But Nicola wanted him dead.

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When he arrived home, he looked at his watch and sighed. Everything in life looked so different suddenly. He held onto the steering wheel, gripping it tightly and replaying back the day's events and grinding his teeth together. Minutes had passed before he realized that he should get out of his truck and go inside. He did so slowly.

He walked without observing his surroundings. He didn't care what was in place or what was out of place.



He didn't care who had called or who had not called. He wasn't hungry or thirsty. With his gun and boots still on, he landed in the bed and rolled over to look blankly at the ceiling. His pool below gave a wavy reflection to the room, and the darkness and silence of the room engulfed him. Could he cry now, where no one would see?

No. Still he could not let it out.

Th

en, in the darkness of the room, Nicola realized that he was not alone. He heard the breathing of someone. Yes. Someone was there in the same room with him, watching him. He kept his eyes on the ceiling but slowly felt for his sidearm.

"Don't do that," Caesar said, walking out of the shadows.

"Don't do what?" Nicola asked, moving slowly up in the bed.

"You know what. Th

row your gun on the floor," Caesar said, waving his gun at Nicola.

"Th

is is a real bitch move,” Nicola said, throwing the gun. “I just want you to know that.”

“Yeah. Sure. I heard about Brooks.” He smacked his lips. “Pity. I would have loved to be there for the show.” His voice was laced with venom. He was a snake in the grass and enjoyed the crawl.

“I would have loved for you to be there to take one with your flunky,” Nicola said, feeling the fury overwhelm him.

“I bet that you never thought that you would find me here, right under your nose.”

“Actually, I’m really glad that you saved me the trouble of having to look for your ass.” Nicola saw Caesar outlined in the darkness by the window.

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“Well, you and I have had our dealings for a while now. I figured that before I left Memphis for good, I’d pay you one last visit.” Caesar gripped his gun.

“Th

e only way that you’re leaving Memphis is in a body bag.”

“Th

is is coming from a mother fucker who's about to die in his own bed,” Caesar said, cocking his gun to shoot.

Th

e adrenaline rushed madly through his veins as Nicola rolled off of the bed quickly and pulled his fi rearm. He heard the shots whiz past his head. It was the same silent and deadly wind that had passed him only hours earlier. He returned fi re, aiming directly at Caesar, but missed by only inches because of the black darkness of the room. He was about to shoot again, but realized that he was out of bullets. In a fi t, he launched across the bed at Caesar and they both fell into the window, cracking it. Th e glass cut both of

them, and they fell to the ground, disoriented. Nicola looked down and realized that the gun was on the fl oor across the room. In a full rage, he screamed and gripped Caesar's neck tightly with one hand and hammered a staggering punch to his stomach with the other. Caesar tried to punch Nicola in the ribs, but could feel the air being cut off from his body. He fi nally kicked Nicola in the groin, causing him to roll over for a moment. Caesar eyed the gun and tried to get to it, but Nicola was on his feet and kicked Caesar in the face with this steel-toed boot. Blood sprayed across his white room as he made contact and felt Caesar's jaw crumble. Nicola breathed heavily as he pulled Caesar

up.

“You want to come into my fucking house and disrespect me, you piece of shit! You had better be prepared to pay.” Nicola spit blood, balled his fist up, and punched him again. Caesar wasn’t new to fighting. He would hold Nicola off until he could get to the gun, and then he would end it all. But every time he got close to the gun, Nicola punched him again, sending him across the room with a bloody mouth and swollen eyes. Caesar gave his best and charged Nicola. They fell into the

entertainment center one last time, sending the plasma television 321

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to the ground. Stumbling on top of it, hearing it crumble under their feet, they struggled. Nicola was on top of him punching his face in past the point of recognition when Caesar finally pulled the gun from beside the bed and aimed it at Nicola. When Nicola saw the gun, he reached over towards the entryway of the bedroom, grabbed the other gun, and emptied it into Caesar. He was still pulling the trigger long after he had emptied the last of the bullets into Caesar’s body. Caesar had grabbed the wrong gun. And Nicola had gotten lucky. He stood up breathing hard, trying to squint past a migraine, and reached for the phone and dialed 911. Still in a fit of rage, he stood over the dead body

feeling completely empty. Brooks was still gone, and they had no leads on the distributor.

"It was all a fucking waste," he said, looking into Caesar's lifeless eyes.

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Chapter Twenty:

Goodbye



**Chapter 20**

## GOODBYE

Lieutenant K. C. Brooks was made an instant Memphis legend in less than a week. Every television station in town had done a huge story on him by the time the funeral came around. Radio stations focused entire shows around the newly established NARC/TACT Unit but had reached out unsuccessfully for Nicola to come onto their shows. Mayor Henderson used the spotlight daily to talk about Operation Checkbook, and Grey used his father's reputation for his upcoming campaign. Th

e entire Memphis Police Department mourned Brooks' passing and spoke his name with the highest regard in every home, pub, and gym across the town. Money had been raised and sent to his family. Church services had been dedicated to his memory. But nothing soothed the anger and pain of his loss for those closest to him.

As it turned out, all leads had not been lost with the killing of Caesar and Antonio. Nicola and his team, along with other special units on the Memphis Police Department, had thoroughly searched all of Caesar's old hideouts and found extensive records on the money laundering, betting, prostitution, and most of all

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the drug-traffic

king investigation. Th

ey had recovered enough

information on Guerra to prosecute over twenty additional people and begin to shut down one of the most lucrative drug rings in Memphis. Th

e additional information was passed on to the Feds, who were exceedingly happy to press additional charges across state lines. It had not been a waste after all. In fact, it had been a major victory for the city of Memphis and Brooks. Nicola had been missing in action until today. It was time to pay his respects for the last time at the funeral. In full formal dress blues, he sat in his disheveled living room finishing a bottle of Hennessy at 8:30 in the morning. He tried to pull himself together, but after a two-day drinking binge from hell, he could barely remember his own name.

Brooks' family had asked him to say a few words, and he agreed, but he would only say just a few. Their friendship was too

personal to go blabbing on like all the other politicians that had requested a spot on the *K. C. Brooks Show*. He smiled for a moment, knowing that Brooks would

have been impressed with all the attention he was getting. He was going out in a style fit for a *Psi man*.

After a while, Nicola downed the rest of the potent contents in his liquor bottle and grabbed his car keys. He heard one of his fellow offi

cers outside of his front door, ready to pick him up and take him down to the church. He took a deep breath, sprayed a little cologne to cover the stench of alcohol, and hurried off, a little disoriented but at least numb.

u u

Ivy helped Trina dress. To no one's surprise, her weak body was still drained from the long days of crying. This had been a

tedious and dreadful week, but Ivy and Emerald had helped Trina through it. Ivy spent all of her days with her friend. Emerald had stayed up every night with Trina while Ivy slept, talking to her, reading to her, and allowing her to work through her feelings. He'd practically moved in to help Ivy tend to her best friend and 326

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

dragged Kakeline along whenever she was willing. Somehow, Ivy knew that today would bring some closure to Brooks' sudden death, and Trina would be



left to finally begin to heal. Putting on a black silk dress, Trina stared in the mirror blankly. Her eyes had dark rings under them, and her voice was quiet and somber. Ivy kissed Trina on the shoulder and held her arms.

"I love you, sis," Ivy said, wiping a tear from her cheek.

"I love you, too," Trina said, touching Ivy's hand. "Thank you

for everything."

"Hey, you've been here for me. Now, it's time to be here for you."

"I just can't believe that he's gone," Trina said, feeling the tears welling up in the sides of her eyes again.

u u

Grey had gone over his father's speech for the funeral twice that morning and decided that it was now perfect. Taking a moment to sip his coffee, he sat on the marble countertop of his father's kitchen and watched his mother prepare their breakfast.

"Did you know Brooks?" Grey's mother asked, pouring their orange juice.

"Barely. He was Ivy's friend." He sighed. "It's still sad

though.”

“For more than one reason,” Mayor Henderson said, walking into the room fully dressed, with a folded newspaper. “I’ve got to find a replacement for that task force and try to keep Agosto here in Memphis. After all that has happened, I’m not sure that he’ll stay.”

“And I’m not sure that’s a bad thing,” Grey said, under his voice. “Well, this puts the entire city’s focus on *your* new unit.” He said, trying to see a bright side or just be a jerk. Even he could not decide. “At least they can’t say that you aren’t trying.”

“Careful with the sarcasm, child of mine,” Mayor Henderson said, raising his brow. “For now, regardless of what has been done in the past, this man is one of the city’s lost sons. We are going 327

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to behave as though nothing else matters. Today, there will be no discussion of anything to the media but our desire to reach out the Brooks family. Th

en tomorrow, we can pick up on our war

on drugs.” Sitting down at the kitchen table, he motioned for his wife to sit beside him.

“Well, I am sad, but not for obvious reasons,” Grey

said, getting down off the countertop to join his family at the dinner table. "I had other plans for Brooks that are now apparently ruined."

"Enough with your plans...the both of you should just enjoy this breakfast that I've cooked for you and discuss politics later,"

Mrs. Henderson said, bowing her head for grace. u u

Renewed Faith Baptist Church was filled to capacity as Reverend Brooks preached to the congregation about loss, sorrow, and his son K. C. Brooks, who lay below in a silver casket dressed in his uniform blues. Evelyn Brooks sat on the front pew with their entire family as she sobbed softly at the loss of her son. Nicola sat in the pew directly behind her in a drunken haze, dreading his part of the program. It seemed that the entire Memphis political machine had been packed into the first few rows behind Nicola, and Mayor Henderson sat in the pulpit beside Deacon Jenkins, nodding at every few words that the reverend spoke. Ivy sat on the pew behind Nicola with Trina, the Henderson family, a host of political figures, members from Brooks' fraternity, and his Masonic lodge members. Grey's arm was wrapped tightly around her, serving as an protective shield. She had wanted several times to reach out to Nicola, who was at arms' length, but she was afraid of what the repercussions would be on Grey and his political aspirations,

considering that every media source in town was present and silently buzzing over Ivy's bulging stomach. As Reverend Brooks concluded, the choir stood to sing, and Nicola made his way to the pulpit to speak about the good side of K. C. Brooks. Ivy followed him with her teary eyes as he made his way hesitantly to shake Reverend Brooks' hand. 328

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Hello," Nicola said, feeling a great nervousness attack him as he looked out at the hundreds of people listening and staring attentively at him. He cleared his voice. "My name is Nicola Agosto and I'm the lieutenant and leading offi

cer over the NARC/TACT

Unit. I'm supposed to say some great things about my best friend and my colleague K. C. Brooks. I'm supposed to tell you what a great guy he was and ...how courageous he was." Nicola voice faded as he looked over at Reverend Brooks, who sat curiously listening.

"But I feel like maybe before I speak about what he was...

maybe I should speak about what he still is." Nicola wiped a tear from his face. "Brooks is still a reminder to me of the passionate people we need in our

community. He is still a constant voice in my head that leads me to want to do the right thing.” His voice cracked. “He is still a symbol for the men of the Memphis Police NARC/TACT Unit...” Nicola looked out over the crowd. “As for what he was not...he was not a quitter. He would rather give his life, risk his life, than give up or stand down.” His eyes began to water, but he fought them back again. “He gave his all to his job, to his family, to his fiancée Trina, who misses him probably as much as his wonderful mother does. We’re all left a little less than ourselves without our friend, our brother, our son. But if we are to remember his memory properly, we must continue to fight injustice and...” Nicola looked over at Ivy. “To not give up when it is most convenient or the easy way out. K. C. Brooks was a man’s man. My right hand...and for a guy like me with little else outside of his friends...a rock. And I’ll miss him.”

Tears welled in the side of Ivy’s eyes as she looked up at Nicola. Was he not going to give up her? Was he going to ask for her?

Closing her eyes, she wiped her cheeks and sighed. Making eye contact with him as he sat down, she mouthed hello. Too upset and hung-over to say anything, he looked at Grey once and sat down without acknowledging Ivy. Sinking back down in the seat, Ivy rubbed her stomach and looked at Grey. What was that? What 329

was going on? What about the speech? Maybe the speech was about Trina? Maybe Nicola had given up on her?

u u

After the funeral, Nicola sat in the den of Brooks' mother's mid-town home sipping on a small glass of water and listening to the other policemen that surrounded him holding various conversations about Brooks' endless valor and unmatched dedication to the force. It amazed him how everyone had only wonderful things to say about Brooks now that he was dead. When he was alive, Brooks was respected but not nearly as loved as others had made him out to be that morning. Maybe this was an idea of what it would be like when he passed. People would spend a week celebrating his death, and then the next week he would be forgotten. Some new drug dealer would take over the old guy's corner. Some new cop would be assigned. And the world would continue to turn. Dazed and numb from drinking for days, he looked into the television, blankly tapping on the armrest. Feeling a hand on his shoulder, Nicola looked up to see Trina. He stood up and offered her a seat, but she declined.

"I'm cool, Nicola," she said, sitting across from him on the black leather sectional.

"How are you?" Nicola instantly noticed her puffy red eyes. He only wished that he could have done something to help her through all that she was going through. Regardless of what Brooks had done on the side, he felt as though his friend loved Trina dearly. He just didn't know how to show it.

"I could be better," Trina smiled at an officer who raised his

cup at her from across the room. "But I'm more worried about you. You...look like shit," she said under her breath.

"Th

anks," Nicola said, smiling. "I try."

Trina took Nicola's hand in hers and held it tightly.

"Whatever happened has happened, and there is no going back. It is not your fault that he got killed, and it is not your place to mourn him

'til it kills you. Plus, you got Caesar. I'm sure that Brooks would 330

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

have wanted that most." Holding up his chin, she looked at his discolored face. "I bet you haven't had a decent meal since Brooks hit the ground."

“Not a bite.” Nicola stared down at the ground, ashamed.

“You can’t continue to do this to yourself, you know.” Trina sighed.

“I’m on leave now, since we finally broke one of Caesar’s captains for the information we needed...it’s director’s orders. I’m on a flight back home to Miami first thing in the morning. I figured seeing my family would do me some good.” Nicola’s stomach growled.

“Well, what about Ivy? Have you talked to her?” Trina already knew that he had not, but she wanted to make a point of reminding him to do so.

“In the state that I’ve been in, it’s a good thing that I haven’t. She probably wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with me.”

Nicola cleared his voice

“Well, she’s been worried sick.” Trina stood up as Brooks’

mother walked into the room. “I’m going to talk to Mrs. Brooks. You just make sure that you call her before you get on that plane.”

“I will. And I’ll leave my number so that if you need anything...”



Nicola said, trying to think of Trina. God only knew the way that she must be feeling.

“Yeah, thanks,” Trina said, rubbing his hand. Watching as Trina walked away, some of Nicola’s bitterness disappeared. He admired how strong she seemed to be and how devoted she was to Ivy even in her crisis. However, he was a different story. He had proven to be weak and breakable at a time when his family and friends needed him most. He had neglected the living for the dead and seemed to be digging his own early grave. He ran his fingers through his oily, unwashed hair and straightened his uniform as he made his way out of the den to the restroom.

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Waiting for the restroom door to open, he sat on a small chair in the hallway, looking at the portraits of Brooks and his sisters that decorated the wall. They

were all perfectly aligned in golden

frames and served as a backdrop to a dusty rose-colored paint that matched the rose-colored carpet and white borders and trim. It almost reminded him of something he had seen as a child in his cousin’s dollhouse.

After a moment, the bathroom door opened, and Ivy walked out of the door clutching her purse. Stunned, she stopped in the entrance as her eyes met Nicola's. He stood up. Shocked. Embarrassed. Pulling at his suit, he lifted his head and gave his best leisurely smile.

Ivy walked up to him and stood silently only inches from his body, eyeing him carefully and sniffi

ng the stench of the young

drunk before she wrapped her arms around him warmly and hugged him. It had been the first hug anyone had given him throughout the entire ordeal, and he hoped it would be his last. It was utterly agonizing to bear, leaving him weak and vulnerable. Wanting to finally cry, he substituted tears for a small, bottled-up sigh.

Nicola stepped back finally and was able to get a good look at Ivy with her protruding stomach and long flowing locks pulled back in a soft ponytail. Th

e small tendrils of hair that she left

dangling on her sides flirted with her collarbone and the arm of her silk black sundress. Her soft lips were slightly glossed, her high cheek bones rosy, her caramel skin bare and resilient, her eyes shining

bright, and her long swan-shaped neck decorated with a beautiful one-carat diamond necklace set at the base of her throat.

"Oh, Nicola. How are you?" she asked, looking around the corner for Grey. It was shame she had to watch the way she behaved with Nicola at a time like this when she was sure that he needed her most.

"I'm fine. You look great." He touched her face slightly.  
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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Th

anks." She started in on him. "I called a hundred times to see if you needed anything. I couldn't reach you. I've been so worried. I heard about the guy showing up at your house." Tears formed in her eyes. "I just...I'm so glad that you're not hurt."

"I'm fine. Really. And I apologize for avoiding you, but I just wasn't up to seeing anyone." He scratched the top of his head nervously and squinted his eyes, trying to keep his emotions under control.

"No. I totally understand. If anything were ever to happen to Trina..." She stopped the thought. "Heaven forbid it." She shook off her thoughts and tried to focus on one thing at time. "Anyway, what's next for you?"

“Actually, I’m headed to Miami...tomorrow.” He watched her face for a response. “Do you need anything before I go?” It was obviously another afterthought.

Disappointment seemed to cover Ivy’s face to Nicola’s approval. Her face frowned uncontrollably. “Why do you have to go there?”

She felt her heart skip a beat. *Please don’t go so far away*, she pleaded to him silently.

“Th

at’s my home. Remember?” he said, seeing the urgency in her eyes. He grinned happy to see her concern. He needed that. He needed to know that she still cared. “Ivy, I’m just going to regroup.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “I’ll be back.”

“Oh. Yeah of course.” She tried to act nonchalantly. “Well, don’t forget to call me,” she said with a sigh of relief.

“I doubt that I’ll forget.” Nicola felt his head spinning. “I’ll call and give you all of my numbers there. And you can call me whenever you feel like it.” He was sure that she would not take him up on his proposition as badly as he wanted her to do so.

"I will," she said, letting go of their moment together. "Well, I'll talk to you later. Take care." Her arm slightly brushed his as she walked past him through the hall where Grey stood talking to one of the policemen, but inwardly watching her every move. u u

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Crawling into bed later that night, Trina wiped her cheeks again and tried to massage the tear ducts of her eyes. She had cried so long and so hard that she began to feel terminally ill. It had been hard for her to pretend to be so strong the entire day when she wanted to throw herself on the casket as they were burying it. Launching her high heels across the room, she laid her head on the soft goose-down pillow and sniff

ed.

Looking at her alarm clock as the minutes slowly passed, she began to drift off, feeling the tears dampen her pillow and wet her cheek. Unable to rid herself of the tight ball in her stomach and the constant flinching whenever she thought of Brooks' body in a cold, dark coffin

Now, she rose up in her bed and sighed. *Damn it, he had just proposed to her...asked her to spend the rest of*

*her life with him, and then he went away...forever!*

With all that was inside of her, she just wanted it all to end. She had contemplated how to rid herself of her burdens. Maybe she should do something drastic. Join the military? Become a police offi

cer in remembrance of his death? Suicide? No. No. She looked over at the Bible that lay demandingly on top of the pile of books on her study table and decided absolutely not. She had to will herself to sleep. Grabbing her unfinished novel that she began reading six months ago, she turned to her marked page and began to read. *...her lips quivered with passion as she held him closely.*

"Trina?" a voice said from the other side of her door.

"Yeah," Trina said, putting down her book and wiping her eyes.

"It's me, Emerald. Can I come in?"

"Sure, it's open."

Emerald had become a source of strength for Trina over the last few days. She almost envied Kakeline for having him. He was so beautiful and so bright. She loved the way that he smiled at her with his mossy green eyes and wide perfect smile. But he had not once flirted. Instead, late in the evenings, he would

come and talk with her, keep her company...ultimately giving her hope. She didn't know why he had taken such an interest in her, but she was 334

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thankful. It was like Brooks had sent someone in his absence to help her through the most diffi

cult point in her life.

"Hey you," Emerald said, coming to sit at her bedside still in his black suit pants and white button-down shirt.

"Hey," Trina said, scooting over. "Th

anks for coming to the

funeral today."

"No problem. Kakeline and I were way in the back, but we left early to beat the traffi

c."

"It's OK. I understand. What are you up to tonight?"

"Nothing much. I just checked on Ivy. She's gone to bed. Grey's out doing whatever that boy does." He nodded in disapproval. "I just wanted to make sure that you were handling this OK."

"As well as can be expected." She smiled.

"You want to be cheered up?" His thick, black, naturally arched eyebrow lifted.

"What did you have in mind?"

"Well, I brought rocky road ice cream and *Shaft*. Not the old movie, but Samuel L. Jackson."

"Not the king of *muthafuckas*." Trina smiled.

"Th

e very same." Emerald pulled the DVD from his coat pocket.

"Pop it in," Trina said, grabbing her remote. "Hey, where is your wife?"

"At home." Emerald sighed. "She said she wanted to be left alone."

"Well, I surely don't." Trina looked into his eyes. *Just what was going on here?*

"I'll go and fi x the ice cream," Emerald said quietly.

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Chapter Twenty-One:

Welcome to Miami





## Chapter 21

### WELCOME TO MIAMI

**“We are now boarding all first-class passengers.”**

The flight

attendant smiled as she watched the anxious passengers form a quiet single line. After a two-hour wait, Nicola boarded the plane with a pregnancy book, a pair of shades, and a desire to sleep for two hours and twenty-one minutes uninterrupted. Taking a

window seat, he peered out across the Memphis airstrip and felt a small stir of relief. He was glad to be leaving for a while. It had been too long since he had pulled away from work, and his trip home was well overdue.

Sliding his shades over his eyes after sipping on a cold strong Sprite, Nicola adjusted his pillows and tried to rest. His thoughts began to race immediately. It happened wherever he was. He questioned every step of the day that Brooks was killed. He went over every strategic and spontaneous move. He blamed himself continuously. *I should have reacted quicker. I should have pushed him out of the way. I should have taken the bullet.*

"Please buckle your safety belt, sir," a flight attendant said, hovering over him. He made eye contact with her. His thoughts must have been showing on his face. She looked away, stunned 339

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by his stone glare. He looked away, too, embarrassed by his sheer rage. Buckling his seat belt, he cracked his knuckles and anxiously awaited the opportunity to order a drink.

Nearly three hours later after a long nap and virtually turbulence-free flying, Nicola was on a taxi headed to his parents'

house. He knew that he had made it back home when turned off of MacArthur Causeway to the Bridge Road. As he entered into the private community down Star Island Drive, Nicola looked around at the familiar upscale mansions with well-manicured lawns, luxurious cars, and beautiful landscapes and recalled a simple time in his life as child.

Only two homes down from the entrance of the community sat a familiar three-story villa lined with incredibly well-kept shrubbery, an immaculate lawn, tall healthy palm trees, marble lions at the entrance of the wrought-iron gated driveway, and his mother's silver Jaguar parked at the front door. Pulling his bags out of the car, Nicola passed the driver a hundred-dollar bill and took a deep breath.

Home. It was the same as the day he had left. Statuesque and marvelous, its dominant beauty and skillful architecture was a testament to his father's many years of prosperous hard work and sacrifice.

Walking through the grass, he saw his mother standing in front of black wrought-iron doors in a yellow silk Chanel suit and yellow alligator pumps. Her long fiery red hair was pulled away from her face in a bun, and her grandmother's pearls sat on her neck like the crown jewels of England.

Excited beyond her own expectations, she ran down

the steps, grabbed Nicola in her arms, and kissed him on his cheek. Dropping his bags on the ground, he picked her up and whirled her around. Her blue eyes stared through his own as if she was searching through his soul, and her long nails rushed through his hair.

“Th

ank God you are finally home, Nico.” Her smile was luminous and yet fragile.

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“Ma, I’ve missed you so much,” he said, beholding her beauty once again, even noticing small lines in her face that he swore were not there before and the awesome streaks of bold silver in her hair. Was it possible for his elegant mother to be aging?

“Oh, I’ve missed you, too. Come on. Let’s get you into the house and out of this heat.” Grabbing one of his bags, she turned on her heels and headed for the house

“Ma, I’ve got that.” Nicola tried to take the bag away.

“Nonsense.” She pulled away. “I’m not made of glass.” Climbing the stairs, she was met at the door by Delmin, the family butler.

“How are you doing Mr. Del?” Nicola asked, greeting his old friend with a big hug and a smile.

“Good, Nico, and yourself?” Delmin asked, taking his bags.

“Oh, I will be better now.”

“Well, I will leave you to get reacquainted. Do you need anything at all, sir?”

“No, I’m great.” Looking around the large marble entryway, Nicola realized that absolutely nothing had changed since he had gone away. “So where is everyone?”

“Honey, we are old now. Th

ere is no *everyone*...just your father and I. And he is away on business. He won’t arrive from Paris until later this evening.”

“He’s still running like a race horse, huh?” Since Nicola was a boy, the most vivid memories he had of his father were of him working tirelessly around the clock.

“I don’t know. As he gets older, he talks more and more of Italy. If I didn’t know any better, I would say that he wants to move back there before it is all over. You know, my mother missed Ireland that way.” She drifted off in her thoughts for a moment and then sighed. “Until

the day she died, she always talked about it.”

Walking beside his mother through the long foyer embellished with stained-glass windows, beautiful Victorian art, and black marble floors, he suddenly wished for a more simple life again.

“It’s good to be home, Ma.” His voice was somber again. 341

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“It’s good to have you home,” she said, holding his hand. She was well aware of his sadness. It was a natural instinct that mothers possessed. Changing the subject as they entered the family room, she tried to revive his spirits. “So, is there a special woman anywhere around?” She always longed for her son to fall in love again.

“It would be just up your alley if there was,” Nicola said, playfully. “Yeah, I think there is someone special, but she is just a friend.”

“Do I finally smell a relationship in the air?”

“We don’t have a *relationship*, Ma. We have more of an understanding.”

“What is there to understand if she is special? Besides, friends make the best wives. I was your

father's friend for several months before we began to court. Now, nearly forty years later, look at us. We are still in love." She smiled at the thought of her husband.

"Th

at's old-world love. Th

ings are different now. Besides that,

I doubt if I'll be marrying her."

"Why is that?"

Nicola thought about what he was about to say for a moment. Did he really want to tell all to his mother? She was such a delicate soul. Besides, she was the only woman in his life that still regarded him as an innocent. Why would he ruin such a wonderful feeling by revealing the real Nicola, a man of many women and secrets?

"Well, she would have to want to marry me." He smiled at her.

"Any woman in her right mind would want to marry you. You're beautiful, smart, and rich. You're what they call the perfect catch, Nicola."

"Ma, I'm not rich." Nicola sat down in his favorite brown leather recliner and relaxed. "You and dad are rich. I'm

a working man. A cop for goodness' sake." He chuckled. "On that type of salary, I'll never be rich."

"But one day, we'll die, and you'll inherit our entire fortune. *Well, you and your brother.* And you boys couldn't spend that much money in two lifetimes. And what about the Christmas and 342

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birthday package we give to you and your brother every year?" His mother was extremely proud of their fortune and how well her husband had done as a poor immigrant in the United States.

"Well for now, I am a working man. And I am in no rush to have you or Pop die so that you can leave me anything. Th anks,

but no thanks. Now as for the package twice a year ...keep' em coming," he said, smiling at her as she grinned back at him. As Liz sprayed her ivy vine growing across the room above the wall-to-wall glass doors, she looked back at her son once more.

"You haven't asked about your brother yet." She could see that bringing up the subject made Nicola jittery.

"Yeah, I know. So, how is your *darling Santo*?" Nicola asked, looking away from his mother so she could not see the repugnance in his face.



“He is well, but you should go and see him while you are here, yes?”

Th

ere was a long silence before Nicola could no longer bear his mother’s stare. “Look, I’m gonna go upstairs and take a bath and get out of these traveling clothes, and maybe take a nap. I’ll be back down later.”

“OK, honey,” Liz said, dismissing all notions that her son had changed. Nicola was still stubborn and unwilling to compromise, much like all the Agosto men.

u u

When Nicola awoke later that night it was nearly eleven o’clock. He had to adjust for a moment to remember where he was. It had been ages since he had awakened in someone else’s house. Wrapped in his satin goose-down comforter in his king-sized oak sleigh bed, he looked across the room in its darkness at his senior prom picture with Arin Antonelli, the captain of the cheerleading squad. His life was so different back then. He was a carefree teen engulfed in social activities and adolescent politics. All that mattered then was his red Mustang convertible, his letterman jacket, his wardrobe, and football. He had prided himself on being 343

the perfect gentleman in school. All the girls wanted him, and he only cared for one. Arin.

Wanting to get away from Florida and his coveted circle of friends after a horrible breakup with Arin, he took a football scholarship to Memphis State University in hopes of blossoming into his manhood and returning home afterward a full-grown, intelligent young bachelor ready to help his father in the family business and rub Arin's nose in her all-time biggest mistake. However, Nicola never returned home to his protected lifestyle or his loving family. Instead, in an attempt to break away and form his own identity his senior year in college, he signed up for the Memphis Police Academy. Th

us he brought about a new man with

new eyes for a new and more grotesque world of beaten women, dead victims, starving children, poverty-stricken communities, and so many drug users and drug dealers that he couldn't lock them all up if they voluntarily lined up outside of the jailhouse. Now he was a bitter, oversexed drunk with a gun that he often thought of using on himself.

He paused for a minute. History on hold, he rolled over in bed and felt his aching ribs and painful bruises. He stared at the wall and felt a pain in the back of his head. It had been happening often since he killed

Caesar in his house. Panic attacks. He tried to slow it. He breathed in and out trying to calm himself, but the pain in his chest wouldn't stay at bay.

Getting up, he sat up on the side of the bed and grabbed his chest. Sweat pouring from his forehead; he tried to stand. He needed to make it to the restroom, but the room was spinning. He kept seeing flashbacks of Brooks' body laying on the floor and shooting Caesar in the head. He kept hearing Ivy's voice and seeing the ultrasound pictures. He tried to stop his out-of-control thoughts, but they cascaded through his mind without any way to block them.

"I've got to stop this shit," he said, holding his head in his hands. "I've got to..."

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Tears formed at the sides of his eyes, and finally without a fight he let them fall to his cheeks. And there in the middle of the night, back in the place where his life story began, Nicola let go and cried.

In a quiet hysteria, Nicola wiped the large warm tears from his eyes and tried to hide his moans with his massive hands. He buried his face and sighed, feeling his body tremble with pain. Interrupting his breakdown or breakthrough, his cell phone rang. Startled, he

reached over and grabbed the phone. Ivy. He cleared his throat.

"Hello."

"Nicola?"

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry to call you so late. I just couldn't sleep."

"It's OK." He tried to keep from crying.

"I just...I wanted to make sure that you were OK. I've had the awful feeling in my gut...like something is wrong."

"No. I'm OK." He wiped his eyes. "I was just...um...  
resting."

"Well, I'll let you go. I just wanted to tell you that I'm here for you. I know that all of this has been extremely hard for you."

"I know, baby. Th

anks." He pulled himself together. "How are you and the babies?"

"We're fine."

“Good. I’m glad.” Th

e phone was silent for a moment.

“Well, I’d better let you get some rest. I just wanted to call, as promised.”

“Th

anks.”

“Goodnight, Nicola.”

“Goodnight, Ivy.”

And just like that she had saved him. His heart stopped rushing. His thoughts dissolved, and he wanted more than anything to be back in Memphis with Ivy. Only Ivy was with Grey. He shook his head in disbelief. Ivy was with Grey. He had to accept that. 345

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Finally pulling himself out of his pity party, Nicola decided to go down to his father’s bar and have a drink. He stood up naked and sweating. He stretched his long, tired limbs and sighed. Searching in the darkness for his briefs, he pulled them on, wiped his tired face, and slipped down the back staircase through the den to the famous Agosto home bar.

It was like something out of a movie. Ever since he was a little boy, Nicola had adored the family bar. Housing every type of clear and dark liquor that he had ever tasted, the fifteen-foot, eight-shelf, wall-to-wall unit was a work of art. An Irish carpenter had custom designed it to replicate a bar his father had frequented in Mexico before he had a fortune. Since before he was of age, Nicola had gone down to the bar, poured himself a hefty helping of spirits, and sat in the corner drinking when no one was around. At first it started as a dare from his brother Santo, but as he got older it became a necessity.

Hitting the lights, the bar lit up and Nicola made his way around it to make a nice stiff drink. Grabbing a cigar out of the humidor under the cabinet, he lit the large Cohiba and took a drag.

"Ahh," he said aloud after an exasperated sigh. To smoke a nice cigar, have a good shot of Cognac, and release himself was all that he needed to get back on track. Grabbing the remote, he turned on the sixty-inch plasma television across the room, searched for ESPN, and sat down on a leather-top barstool. He took in the strong drink, thankful for its potent contents, and relished the burning sensation it gave down his dry throat. He had poured another quickly and taken a long drag off his cigar when he noticed waves out in the

pool. Downing the second double shot, he walked to the glass doors and flicked on the floodlights.

"Dad?" He opened the doors to a clear, midnight sky and soft pre-summer breeze.

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"Ciao, Nico," he father said, pulling himself out of the pool.

"Good evening to you, old man," he said, proud that his father was taking an interest in self-preservation at such an old age.

"When did you get back?"

"Just," his father said, grabbing a white terry-cloth robe. "I figured that a nice swim would relax me before I went up to your mother. You should have a go at it...it's heated."

"Th

e one thing besides the upgrade in televisions that has changed in this place." Nicola smiled. "I'll try it tomorrow, maybe."

Walking up to his father in his briefs, Nicola and his

only role model stood face-to-face. His father was a large man, standing six feet six inches tall. His build was wide and solid. His tan was perfect with his chiseled features, just as he had given his son. He boasted healthy curly silver hair, intense brown almond eyes, naturally arched eyebrows, perfect heart-shaped lips, and the signature dimples in both cheeks and chin. His skin was still firm, and his stance still strong. He was the head of the proud Agosto famiglia. Adamo Agosto.

“Look at you,” Adamo said, reaching out for his son.

“Hi ya, Pop.” Nicola allowed his father to kiss him on both cheeks.

“It’s good to have you home.” Adamo smiled. “Are you here for long?”

“Not long enough to wear out my welcome, but long enough to say hello. A few weeks at most.”

“Good.” His father said, in approval. “Let’s go inside, and you can pour your father one of those drinks you were just having.”

“You saw that, huh?”

“My boy, in my house, I see everything.”



Th

e Monday morning sun was hidden behind thick dark clouds rumbling with the fierce sound of angry thunder and great bolts of lightning racing through the skies. Staring out of Grey's 347

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kitchen window, Ivy sipped on a cup of green tea and listened to her fiancé talk to his best man on the phone in the next room. It seemed that Lawrence, Grey's fraternity brother and old roommate from college, would not be able to make it to the wedding. He would be stuck in Okinawa on duty and unable to leave the base. In less than an hour of discussion, Grey had already offered to fly him over, pay for his time off of work, and speak with his general, none of which was possible. Finally, rejected and disappointed, he hung up the phone and joined Ivy in the kitchen.

"With the date change, he can't make it," he said, opening the refrigerator and looking blankly into the box.

"I heard." Seeing his sudden mood change, she walked over, wrapped her arms around his waist, and laid her head on his back.

"It'll be OK."

“Th

is is getting to be such a hassle.” He finally closed the refrigerator door and turned around to look at Ivy, glowing as usual with morning glory. “I’m just ready to get this over with.”

He hugged her gently, feeling the babies kicking in her stomach.

“Well, I’m ready to get these grown men out of me.” She pulled away and pulled up her shirt. “Look, you can see one of them moving around.”

Grey bent down and looked, marveling at the miracle of life.

“Ain’t that something?” For a moment Nicola crossed his mind, and he again wondered if the children Ivy was carrying were actually his. “Don’t you want to crawl back into bed and watch the idiotic underprivileged tell the entire world on *Jerry Springer* who they’ve slept with? I’m still in my pjs.” He tried to shake off his early morning melancholy. After all, Nicola had gone away and everything seemed to be back to normal. Plus, he had been the one with Ivy when they found out the sex of the twins.

“I thought you had to go to work.”

“Nope. I’m yours all day.” Sliding his fingers over the

phone, Grey turned off the ringer.

"Good." A weak smile appeared. "I am sort of tired still. I didn't sleep much at all last night. We can watch *Jerry Springer*, 348

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order pizza from Papa John's, and sleep in." She loved the time that they spent together away from the world, because it was then that she saw Grey's true good nature.

"Pizza this early in the morning?"

"It's 10:30. Th

ey're open." Walking out of the kitchen, she led Grey behind her up the stairs to the bedroom. "Come on, old man. Let me have my way for a while."

"When have you ever stopped getting your way?"

Nicola had been gone nearly a week, and slowly Ivy was able to redirect her attention to her reunited family, her wedding, and most of all herself. Although late nights were spent thinking about how he must be doing, days were spent picking out last-minute decorations for the wedding, talking with the caterer, and sending out invitations. With less than three months to go before she was Mrs. Ivy Henderson, there

were so many plans to finalize along with finishing school.

Being at home with Grey, the entire week had been a relief. Th

ey had not argued once, and on occasion Grey would do something special like bring home her favorite movie and cook dinner or whisper something special in her ear. Just the night before, he had washed her hair and given her a warm milk bath filled with red rose petals. Th

en he gave her a full body massage,

which instantly put her to sleep.

Even as willing as Grey was to please her during her pregnancy, he was still ever distant sexually. Th

ey hadn't been together in over

a month, and he had given no indication that that he would touch her any time soon. When they discussed his issues, he always said that he didn't want to hurt her, but Ivy knew that he was not attracted to her the way he used to be. And it hurt her deep inside. Nevertheless, Grey still confessed his undying love for her and swore that he was always faithful. Th

is reassurance pacified her for

the moment, and she was left to cope with being alone.  
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## Chapter Twenty-One:

### I Miss You



## Chapter 21

### I MISS YOU

Sitting on the dock with his white linen pants rolled up,  
his shirt off , and his feet kicking in the warm water,

Nicola allowed the sun to beat down on his body, giving him a soft golden tan. His eyes were fixed on the small fish that swam past him, but his mind was fixed on Ivy and the indelibly defined image of her graceful body stretched out across his bed laughing infectiously as he kissed her all over.

He had awakened nearly an hour before sunrise and driven down to see his father's new yacht, only to discover that it was not at the dock. Wasting away time, he sat down to test the water with his feet as he did as child and couldn't seem to get up for nearly four hours except to walk back down the gravel road to his car to retrieve a six pack of beer out of the cooler in the trunk. Several minutes later, he noticed his father's yacht docking and a couple locked hand-in-hand headed his way. He stood up and dusted himself off .

"Santo, is that you?" Nicola asked, taking off his shades.

"Who else would it be?" the young man asked, hugging his only brother.

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"How are you, Santo?" Nicola never looked at the woman, who stood attentively awaiting some type of greeting.

"Fine, how are you?" Santo's eyes met his brother's for a moment before he returned his attention to the woman. "Arin, aren't you going to say hello to Nico?"

"Yes," Arin said, extending her hand. "How are you, Nicola?"

Her blue eyes sparkled and yet twitched with nervousness at the sight of her old boyfriend.

"Fine." Nicola shook Arin's hand lightly and pulled away, putting his fists in his pockets. "I was just wondering where Pop's floating home was. I was going to take a look at it."

"It's all yours." Santo instantly sensed the old grudge resurfacing and stepped a few steps back to give Nicola breathing room.

"Well, I've got to run." Arin pulled a strand of her long blonde hair out of her face and smiled at Santo. "I'll be home later."

"Yeah, Hun." Santo pecked her on her freckled cheek before she walked away waving shyly at Nicola, who looked away, pretending he did not see her.

After nearly seven years, Nicola still could not understand how his twin brother could marry his high-school sweetheart. It seemed that in his quest to return

back to Miami a better man, he had lost touch with what was going on back at home. While away at Memphis State University one afternoon before football practice, Nicola checked his mailbox and discovered a letter from his brother saying that he was getting married. Excitement overtook him; he was proud that Santo had found someone to spend his life with. It was only after he realized that the someone was Arin that the room started to spin and he found himself sitting on the floor tearing the letter to shreds. Th

e next spring before graduation, Nicola signed up for the Memphis Police Academy. Six months after graduation, he was a cop, and two months after that Arin was his sister-in-law. Needless to say he didn't make it to the wedding, nor did he call. Instead, he sent a small black card in response to his brother that simply said, "*et tu Brute.*"

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Now face-to-face with his Roman politician and the knife still buried deeply in his back, the situation didn't seem so crucial anymore. Nicola still had resentment towards both of them, equally, but his mind was on larger issues. Ivy. Th

e twins. Brooks.



Looking at his brother, Nicola confirmed his quiet suspicions that the babies absolutely had to be his. He was carrying the dominant trait for twins. He was a twin. Brooks had known the entire time but had kept his secret at his request. And now it was too late in the game to tell Ivy.

"You still hate me, brother?" Santo squinted in the sun. He had to ask in hopes that years of separation had brought his other half some resolve.

"Not hardly." Nicola turned away from his brother and looked at the boat.

"I still hate you," Santo said, looking at Nicola's even dark tan.

"Get over it." Nicola looked across the dock at the water.

"I'm kidding, man." Santo hit Nicola on the back. "No, really, I just...miss you. You don't call. You don't write. You don't email. It's been six long years since I've even heard your voice or seen your face."

"I know. Deep wounds don't heal quickly."

"Especially wounds as deep as the ones that I've caused you."

Santo still carried guilt in his heart.

"Well, life has opened to my eyes to this thing called *forgiveness*. And if I can possibly have forgiveness for all the shit that I've done, I can't deny you the same." Nicola put his hand on Santo's shoulder.

"You don't know how much that means to me, Nico."

"Th

e last time we spoke...even after all this time, I can't believe that I said those things to you. A lot has been going on in my life, but I've thought about you and the family often." He was sure that his brother knew everything, leaving him no reason to elaborate.

"Yeah, well, I'm sorry, too." Santo looked out across the water as well, avoiding eye contact. "I never wanted to lose my only 355

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brother. And I'm sorry about what happened to your partner. I'm sure he was a good man."

"I appreciate it." Nicola took his eyes off the boat for a moment and looked at Santo. "So, I've got to ask. Why haven't you and Arin had some little crumb snatchers?"

"She...we...hell, I'm sure Mom told you."

Nicola became curious. "Told me what?"

“Arin can’t have kids.” Santo’s eyes met the ground.  
“We’ve been trying for five years now. Nothing, still.”

“Wow,” Nicola shook his head.

Suddenly the envy that Nicola had felt in his heart for many years instantly vanished. His brother, who he always thought looked younger than him, now stood before him with age on his shoulders. He no longer looked like the youthful, arrogant, yet intelligent sibling that he used to know. All of his features were still sculpted and molded like a Greek god, his hair as black as coal, his body well defined and upright, and his demeanor as distinguished as all Agosto men in his family.

However, Nicola could see that his brother’s luster had diminished. Th

ere were silver streaks in his hair. His eyes had small bags under them. And his demeanor was no longer as dominant and overbearing as it was when they were young men. Now, Santo was mellow and humble, and for a moment Nicola felt sorry for him. Th

e average outsider would never detect the deterioration of Santo’s ambition and boyish good looks, but to Nicola it was painfully obvious.

“I’m sorry, Santo. I really am.” Nicola placed his arm on

his brother's shoulder. Th

at kind of news was never easy to give or to receive.

"Th

anks." Hugging him, he felt tears welling at the sides of his eyes and pulled away. It was good to have his brother home. "How long do you plan to be here?"

"I've been here nearly a week. So I'd say a few more days, and then I have to get back. I need to get back to work."

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"I'd be busting my ass to get out of that place after the showdown you had. You are definitely a man on a mission." Santo smiled with confidence.

"Well, there's a lot of work still left, and I owe it to myself and Brooks to see it done," Nicola said, sighing. "Man, I forgot how beautiful this place was. It's so peaceful."

"Well, you want to get reacquainted? We could go and grab a beer at this great little place over in the art deco district, and then who knows. Th

e women will eat us up. Two hot-looking twin Italian brothers with money at our disposal. You could very well be my ticket to a little fun this week.” Santo said, looking at his watch.

“Sounds good to me.”

Jumping in the silver, drop-top Mercedes Benz, the twins were off in the afternoon sun. Driving through the streets of Miami Beach, smoking Cohiba cigars and blaring Afro-Cuban Jazz, Nicola and Santo enjoyed each other’s company for the first time in years.

In a small café across town with old green linoleum floors, small suspended ceiling fans, and a vintage juke box playing salsa music packed with Miami natives, Nicola and Santo sat in dark corner booth enjoying classic mojitos and filling each other in on the gaps of their lives they had missed.

Taking a small bowl of chips from the waitress, Nicola sprinkled more salt over his food. “She’s an amazing girl, though,” Nicola said, laughing and referring to Ivy.

“Sounds like it.” Santo took out his cell phone and looked through his missed calls.

“So how do you like being the CFO of Agosto Corporation?”

Th

e thought readily came to Nicola that he could be doing something else with his life besides playing cops and robbers.

"I feel like jumping out of a window most days. Pop is always so uptight and political about his money. *Don't fool with him, he's an uptight Republican. Don't fool with him, he's a fake Democrat. Don't venture with them, they're not backed by our people. Don't spend our* 357

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*money there, they don't accept MasterCard."* Santo laughed. "He's a hell of a man to work for. I have envied you many a day."

"Me?" Nicola choked on his drink.

"Your job is so fulfilling. You make a difference. You kick ass, and I know the girls go crazy over you."

"You make a killing."

"Yeah." Th

at was something Santo could not complain about.

"So, when you go back to Memphis are you going to have a relationship with your Ivy?"

"We already have a relationship. If you mean, am I going to try to steal her away from Grey...no." He rushed his fingers through his hair and chuckled. "There is too much at risk."

"But now you can't lose your friend. Now's the time to go after her."

"It's not my ass that I'm trying to cover. Trina has been through enough. She has already lost Brooks. I don't want her to lose Ivy."

"Yeah, you may be right, but that leaves you screwed. And good guys never finish first."

"Believe me, I know. After all that has gone down over the last few months, I just want a meaningful relationship. I know it sounds...goofy coming from a guy like me, but I do."

"*A guy like you?*" Santo didn't understand. "What kind of guy are you now?"

"I'm not the kind of guy that deserves Ivy." Nicola cracked a smile. "But I want to be."

"Well, I don't know what the guys are like in Memphis, but in Miami we have our ups and downs with fidelity. The wife of a

good friend of mine, Vick Donnici, sued him for half of his money in a divorce last month. On top of that, he still has child support and alimony to pay. All of it was due to a phone number he forgot to erase from his cell phone.”

“Well, I’m not married. In fact, I’m far from it.”

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“Well, I am married. Th

at’s why I’m always careful, because

Arin is always looking for signs. She thinks that I’m gonna go out somewhere and get some girl pregnant on purpose.”

“And will you?” Nicola knew his brother well enough to know that he was capable of such a thing.

“Did you not hear what I said? Half! Th

e woman took half of

his money!” He grabbed Nicola by the arm jokingly. “There isn’t

a piece of *grilla* in the world worth half of my money. I don’t care if when the *donna* opened her legs the



angels began to sing and gold silk poured from her body. It still wouldn't be worth half of my money!"

"Gold silk?" Nicola sipped his drink.

"24-karat gold silk..." He looked at Nicola and they both gave a hearty laugh.

"So, you've stepped out on her?"

"Look, I'm still in love with Arin, but yeah...I step out from time to time. Maybe that's why I can't have a kid. It's sort of like a punishment."

"I doubt it. If that were the case, I'd never have a kid. Besides, there's always adoption."

"In time, we'll figure something out. At least you don't have to worry about it though, right? You've got two on the way possibly. You just don't know. I would give anything to be able to say that about Arin."

"I would give anything to be able to say that in confidence about Ivy."

u u

Trina was lying on the couch watching old reruns of *Momma's Family* when the doorbell rang. Getting up from her comforter and dry Cap'n Crunch cereal, she dragged to the front door in her flannel pajama

bottoms. Amazingly, Emerald was on the other side. Th

ere was a curious little fl utter in her stomach as she opened the door.

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“Hey,” she said, motioning for him to come in. “Don’t you have a key or something that Ivy gave you?”

“Yeah, but I don’t use it when I know that you’re home,”

Emerald said, stopping in the entranceway. “I came to see how you were doing.”

“Did you?” Trina lifted her brow. “Or did you come so that I can cook for you *again*.”

“Both.” Emerald cracked a smile. “Come on, Trina. You cook as well as Momma. And I’m starving. Plus, Kakeline won’t talk to me. She wants to be left alone to take the world’s longest nap. Ivy and Grey are at his place. Mom is not the type of person to just sit around with me when she’s in one of her moods, and you don’t have any other friends.”

Trina laughed. “I do, too.”

“Really?” Emerald said, looking around. “Where are

they?"

"Th

is is the third time this week that I've cooked for you, Emerald," Trina said, going back to the couch. "Why don't you cook for me?"

"Why don't you get dressed? We can go down to Fresh Market and get all the ingredients that we need for a feast fit for kings, and then we can hang out here."

"Why don't you order a pizza and rub my feet," Trina said, wrapping herself in her comforter.

With a huff, Emerald gave in to her plea. "OK. But I get to drink beer."

"Only if it's Corona...my favorite," Trina said, smiling from under her bundle.

Th

ere was something running amuck with Emerald, and Trina meant to find out what. Over the last three weeks, he had spent a considerable amount of time at her place, even when Ivy was nowhere to be found. However, he was always a total gentleman, only pining after her friendly attention and talking to her about everything under the sun. Like little children they sat in

front of the television for hours swapping stories and quizzing each other on trivial facts about life. To her surprise, Emerald was 360

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

far more intelligent than Ivy had ever given him credit for. He was well versed in business matters and had a secret interest in surfing. Th

e attention that he had showered on her had helped tremendously during her time of mourning, and his ability to keep things nonsexual allowed her to continue to indulge in his company free from guilt.

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### Chapter Twenty-Two:

#### A Parting Gift



## Chapter 22

### APARTING GIFT

**“Could I have your attention please?”** Adamo stood up at the head of the formally decorated table.

Adamo decided have a huge family dinner at the yacht club to give his son a proper farewell. It had been a short and impatient two weeks, and he longed for Nicola to stay for a few more weeks, if not a lifetime. With only the boys, Arin, Liz, and Delmin in an intimate room in the back of the club with a great view of the

many masterful yachts, the full moon, and clear starlit sky, he lifted his glass to his closest companions.

"I'd like to propose a toast to my oldest son *by seven minutes*, Nicola Michael Agosto," Adamo said in his heavy Italian accent.

"We know who the guy is," Santo said playfully. "Get on with it, Pop."

Holding up his crystal champagne glass, he looked over at Nicola and smiled. "To a wonderful son that we are so glad to have home after many years. We pray for your safe return to Memphis. We pray for your continued success on the Memphis Police Department, and most of all, we pray for you to return soon to visit. Let's not have years that we do not allow ourselves to 365

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embrace one another. As I grow old in my age, I see you boys, and I think to myself that I am proud to be who and where I am. My only wish is that you two continue to build on the new relationship that you've developed since you've come home... Salute."

"Salute," Nicola said with the rest of the family as they lifted their glasses.

"And I would like to propose a toast to the possibility of

new additions to the Agosto family," Liz said, unable to keep her peace. After hearing that Nicola could very well be the father of Ivy's children, she hadn't had a moment's rest. She had long prayed for grandchildren and wanted Ivy to be carrying her blessing more than even Nicola did.

"Alright, let's eat," Adamo said, sitting down. u u

As the other members of his family laughed and huddled around the table talking later that evening, Nicola stepped outside in the night air to take in the beautiful view and gather his thoughts about Ivy. Arin came out moments later behind him with a full glass of champagne. Smiling, she inched up beside him and leaned on the rail of the deck.

"You still won't really acknowledge me, will you?" Arin asked, smiling at him, revealing her deep dimples.

"Of course I acknowledge you, Mrs. Agosto. How could I not?" Nicola gave her a smug grin and then turned to look up at the moon.

"Well, you've ignored me for seven long years."

"Why stop a good thing now?" He smiled. He had lost his desire to hate either of them over time.

"You know, when you left, Santo was here for me. He loved me. He looked after me. He was a reminder of

you without being you...Mr. Stubborn for lack of a better word." She took a deep breath. "He went on for months fighting with the possibility of losing you to gain me. And finally it was me who convinced him 366

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

that he would not. Needless to say, I was wrong. And he has been lost without you ever since."

"So you say," Nicola said, trying to hide his surprise.

"I came out here to ask you for your forgiveness for both of us, Nico." She touched his hand lightly. "The way that Santo

and I broke our news to you was wrong, but after so many years, Nico..." Her voice drifted away. "Your brother needs you. You are all that he has. Surely you realize that."

Nicola turned to face Arin standing tall and proud in a silk white dress that hung off her soft golden-bronze shoulders. Her yellow silk wrap fell into the folds of her arms, and her blonde hair flowed in the wind.

"You are still so beautiful, Arin," he said, taking her hand. "And I'm happy that you chose my brother instead of me. He's given you all that he could for many years. I only hope that someday I can find that happiness. And as far as forgiveness, maybe I should



be asking you two for that.” He laughed, thinking about Trina.

“Of course, I forgive you.” He said it to Arin, but in his mind he wished to hear it from Brooks.

Arin was taken aback by his soft tone and sincere manner. His brown eyes looked through her, causing an old stir in her stomach. She looked away as she pulled at her shawl. That was what she

missed. That

overpowering masculinity that he possessed. That

power of his undeniable touch. She smiled at him as she recovered herself. “You have our forgiveness, Nico. You have it.”

“Well, that only took seven years.” Nicola laughed.

“Awe, the old Agosto curse,” Arin blushed and put her index finger in his dimple.

Hugging her, Nico smiled back at his family, who had stopped talking and watched them from the wall-to-wall windows. At last, their family was starting to complete itself. Santo raised his glass with tears in his eyes for his brother. Liz grabbed Adamo’s hand, crying tears of joy. At last her boys had made amends. 367

## Chapter Twenty-Three:

What's Mine

Is Mine



## Chapter 23

### WHAT'S MINE IS MINE

**“Momma, what are you doing?”** Emerald took Kakeline’s diaphragm out of Sadie’s hand and gave it back to his wife, who stood petrified in her short

Victoria's Secret lace baby doll nightgown.

"I will not condone premarital sex in this house," Sadie said in her deepest and loudest maternal voice.

"It's not premarital if you're married," Kakeline said, staring at Emerald. She could no longer keep their secret. His family was about to drive her mad. "Go ahead and tell her, because I'm sick of this shit!"

"Tell me what?" Sadie asked, whirling around at Emerald.

"And do not curse at me under my own roof." She cut her eyes at Kakeline.

"We're married," Emerald said as he took his eyes off of his mother to see Madison walk out of the guest bedroom. In his pajamas and robe, aggravated with the late-night confusion, Madison marched into the hallway.

"What is going on?" He asked, still yawning. 371

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"Moon Pie's baby blocker fell out of her hand as she was walking to the bathroom. When I picked it up, I knew that I had had enough. At least until a second ago. Now, Emerald has concocted some silly story about them being married."

“It’s not silly,” Madison said, with a big grin on his face. He finally knew something before Sadie and intended to rub it in her face for as long as he could. “They are married. Th

ey’ve

been married for nearly two months. Th

ey came here married.

Kakeline’s not the kind of woman to travel across the country with some undependable stray.” Madison smiled proudly at the young woman now red with contempt. “It was supposed to be a surprise, but now you’ve gone and *ruined* it being nosy and mean.”

“I wouldn’t have been *mean* if you had told me.” She was more appalled at being the last to know than at their being married, and Madison knew it.

“We were trying to wait until this whole thing with Ivy blew over.” Emerald rolled his eyes and folded his arms.

“We do move next week,” Kakeline added, still bitter. “There

was no need to explain.”

“What kind of backward logic made you keep it to

yourself?"

"We wanted to wait until after Ivy's wedding so that you would have the same type of excitement for us." For a moment sibling jealousy was detected in Emerald's tone.

"Th

at is the most ridiculous thing..." Sadie was interrupted.

"Come back to bed, Sadie." Madison pulled at her satin pink robe.

"After all these years, here we are still with the sibling rivalry?

We'll talk in the morning," Sadie said, admonishing Emerald. "I do apologize, Kakeline." Th

at was the hardest thing in the world

for Sadie to do. Gulping down a large helping of pride, she excused herself from the bedroom and went down the hall with Madison, grumbling under her voice.

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As Kakeline heard Sadie's bedroom door close down

the hall, she closed the bedroom door and hit Emerald in the chest with her fist as hard as she could.

"Don't you dare touch me!" Kakeline screamed at Emerald. Going to the drawer, she pulled out a pair of pajama pants and slipped them on quickly.

"What did I do?" Rubbing his chest, Emerald smiled. He was determined to have her naked on the bed by one o'clock. It was already twelve fifty.

"You have put me through hell! That is what you have done.

My family wants to know when I'm coming home. They don't

know I'm married. That

is had been a piss-poor honeymoon, and I

have had enough!"

"Kay." He walked up to her and kissed her on the forehead.

"I'm sorry."

"Bullshit," she said, wiping away his kiss. "Emerald, I'm leaving you. I made my mind up today. Tonight was just a goodbye..."

thing.”

“Leaving me?” He could tell by her tone that it was best that he take her seriously. “I don’t understand. When did you decide this, during one of your marathon naps?”

“I just explained. Th

is is not good enough,” she said, pointing at the bed.

“I’m living like I don’t have a home to go to or money of my own. Well, I’m sick of it. And I’m sick of you. Th is was such

a mistake. I mean, you don’t really love me do you? Well?” When she did not get a reply she continued.

“Well, this trip out here has made me realize that I don’t love you!”

“Oh.” Emerald could not respond. “I brought you here, because you wanted to come to the states.”

“Yeah, like L.A., Miami, New York. I didn’t want to come to Memphis, not really.”

“I told you we were coming to Memphis before we left Hawaii.”

Emerald calmed his voice. “What else do you want from me, Kay?”

“Nothing, Emerald. I just want out. Th

at will be enough.”

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“Fine,” Emerald said, dismissing the need for further pleas.

“You never answered,” Kakeline said with her hands on her hips.

“What?” Emerald asked, lost in her tantrum.

“Do you love me?” She crossed her arms.

“What happened to the submissive little...” Emerald shrugged.

“Th

e sweet little woman I brought home with me?”

“Your mother rubbed off on me,” Kakeline said, rolling her eyes. “She’s right. I need to think for myself and not let you do it. Just look at where your own thinking has landed you...right back in your mother’s house.”

“Ouch,” Emerald said, holding his heart. “Th at hurts.”



"Answer me," Kakeline said.

"OK." Emerald moved back a step. "Th

is time back at home

has made me realize that while I do have feelings for you, we did move too fast. But I had good intentions, Kay. You have to believe that."

"Th

e road to hell is paved with good intentions, Emerald," she said, opening the door to his bedroom. "I'll be leaving first thing in the morning. My brother sent money and a plane ticket before my father started to ask too many questions."

"I could have at least bought your ticket," Emerald said, off ended. "But you didn't think to include me in on your little escape plan."

"Don't worry. You have over ten payments left on this ring, and I'm keeping it," she said, pushing him out of the door.

"Goodnight."

u u

"Wake up," Kakeline said, hovering over Emerald in the guest bedroom, blocking the morning sun from his

face.

“What?” Th

e slits of his eyes opened slightly. *Was it already morning?* He felt as though he had just laid his head down. 374

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“I’m leaving, that’s what.” She sat down on the bed beside him.

“I wanted to say goodbye to you one last time.” Her voice was softer than the night before.

“Are you sure that you want to do this?” He wasn’t much for arguing, and even though he was sad to see her leave, he agreed that their marriage had been a mistake.

“No. I’m not sure of anything...except that I cannot stand your mother.”

“You don’t like my mom?” It was as if she had cursed his blood.

“No.” Kakeline folded her arms. “Is that all that matters to you?”

“I’m sorry.” Sitting up in the bed, he took her in his arms

and kissed her lips, softly holding her face to his and rubbing her arms softly, making her sink down on his chest. "Aren't you going to miss that?" he asked, moving her long mass of hair from her shoulders.

"Yes." Her eyes opened, and she looked at him for a long moment before she regained her composure. "But that is all I will miss." Standing up, she straightened her clothes. "I have to go now. My cab is waiting on me."

"OK," Emerald said, standing up and hugging her. "Do you need anything? Money? Can I at least walk you out to the cab?"

"No. I want to go out alone." Her eyes moved across his room once more before she grabbed her backpack and walked out.

"Goodbye, Mr. Winters. I'll send you the uncontested divorce papers FedEx. Promise me that you'll send them back immediately."

She looked at her watch.

"I promise." He was shocked that she was leaving, but somehow he knew that it would be wise not to stop her. Emerald watched from his upstairs window as his wife pulled away from the house in the yellow taxi and felt a pain in his stomach. It was amazing how a person's life could just change overnight. Closing the curtain, he returned to bed unable to fight the sudden depression

he felt. He was certain that it was just a 375

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bruised ego. Kakeline was the first person to ever break up with him. She had led him around by his nose the entire time they had dated. Even in their marriage, she ran the relationship behind closed doors. All she had to say was that she wanted something, and he was off to get it. As he drifted off under the comforter, Sadie walked in with a bottle of vitamins.

"Emerald, get up and run this over to Ivy's." Her voice was as usual, demanding and dominating.

"Mom, I'm not in the mood." He tried to wipe his tears on his pillow.

"I don't care. Get up." Leaving the vitamins on his nightstand, she walked out, closing the door softly. Suddenly Emerald could understand why Kakeline didn't like her.

As he slipped on his jogging suit, he felt in his pocket for the keys and realized that they were in Kakeline's purse. Shit! Kicking the garbage can over, he grunted. Th

is Saturday was going to be  
one long day.

After a shower, Emerald went down to the kitchen. Sadie and Madison were sitting at the table, serene and undisturbed. Suddenly his complacent attitude vanished. He wasn't sure if they already knew that Kakeline had left or not so he decided to announce it over his coffee.

"*Key Lime Pie* is gone," he said, mocking his mother. Leaning on the counter, he sipped the hot coffee quietly waiting for the questions to start rolling, but there was only a silence in the room.

"She left me for good, *Mom*. I hope that you're happy." He had to say something to spark a conversation. So, he decided to pick a harmless little fight with his mother.

"Happy?" Sadie turned slightly in her seat to face Emerald.

"Yes, *happy*. You know that you didn't like her."

Madison sat silently with a grin on his face. Sadie was such a sucker.

"I didn't know her, and as long as she was in my house, she never made an effort to get to know me," she huffed. "When I first married your father, I had to make constant trips down to New 376

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Orleans just to visit with his mother to break the ice. Eventually, she began to like me, but it didn't happen overnight. Plus, if I'm the reason that your relationship didn't work, then it wasn't much of a relationship."

"Mom liked you from the start," Madison said, defending his mother, God rest her soul. In silence, Sadie looked up against his head and rolled her eyes. Th

irty years later and Madison still took up for the wicked witch of New Orleans.

"Yeah, Grandma liked everyone." Emerald instantly jumped on Madison's side.

"You don't know that," Sadie said, snapping at Emerald.

"Speaking of which, did you even meet that girl's parents?"

"No. It wasn't like I was marrying them." Emerald set the coffee cup down.

"You *were* marrying them," Sadie said, looking at Madison for support.

"It doesn't matter now. She's gone," Emerald said, more than ready to end the conversation. "Th

e point is that my keys are in

her purse, and she's headed to the airport. So I need to borrow your car to go to Ivy's house and give her these vitamins and pick up my spare keys."

"Why would you leave your spare keys with Ivy?" Sadie was tired of being the only one that was talking. She was ready for Madison to jump in at any time.

"I just did." Emerald walked over and kissed her on the cheek. Taking her keys off the table, he opened the door. "Bye, nosy. I'll be back in a little while. And thanks for your sympathy."

"You don't need sympathy. You need a job," Sadie said in a matter-of-fact tone.

u u

Finishing the last of her work for Professor Emanuel, Ivy sat at her laptop computer biting down on her number two pencil thinking about all the horrible things that could have happened to Nicola. It had been a week since he had gotten back into town; yet 377

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he hadn't called her once. She thought that he had seemed nicer during their last conversation, but still he had not called.

"Look, you have enough time to meet me, and give me my keys," Emerald said, walking in and pecking Ivy on the cheek while on his cell phone with Kakeline. "You're being stupid right now, and I just want to be the first to tell you."

Ivy closed the door and smirked. Men sure had a way with words. Taking the bottle of vitamins that he handed her to the kitchen, she brought Emerald back one of her cookies that she had baked for Trina to cheer him up.

"Th

ank you," Emerald said, putting his phone away.

"What's wrong with you two?"

"She left me. She's going back home."

"Oh no." She rubbed Emerald's back. "Are you really that sad?" Ivy knew her brother. His ego was the only thing that was really hurting.

"I'm pissed." Looking around, he didn't see any signs of Trina.



"Where's your girl?"

"At work. She just left about ten minutes ago." An idea hit her and she threw up her hands. Grabbing the cordless phone, she turned to Emerald.

"Will you do me a favor?"

"What?" He was far from being in the mood for favors.

"Call the precinct, and ask for Nicola. He won't answer his cell phone or home phone, and they know my voice from me calling so much."

"Why are you stalking him? Shouldn't it be the other way around?"

"It should." Ivy whined like a schoolgirl. "But I'm really worried, and I don't care how it looks. Now, will you call him or not?" she pleaded.

"All right. What's the number?" Emerald sighed. At least someone was making an effort in their relationship. Kakeline sure wasn't.

"5-5-5, um, 9-2-0-1." She bit her lip anxiously. 378

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"Yes, is Lieutenant Nicola Agosto available?" Emerald shook his head at Ivy as she clasped her hands

together. "Oh." Listening.

"Well, this is Emerald Winters. I'm a friend." Listening.

"Alright, will do. Th

anks." Hanging up the phone, he touched Ivy's shoulder.

"Th

ey said that he doesn't want to talk to anyone with the last name Winters or Henderson."

Ivy's eyes bucked and her mouth fell. "What?"

"I'm just kidding," Emerald laughed. "I needed that. You should really see the look on your face for a woman who barely cares. Th

ey said that he was still on leave. He's probably at home, Ivy. Just call him there." Handing her the phone, he sat down the couch and grabbed the remote. "You don't mind if I crash here for a while do you?"

"No, I don't care," Ivy said, grabbing her keys. "I'm tired of calling. Something could be wrong." She tapped her foot impatiently. "I'll be back."

"Where are you going?" He already knew.

"Don't tell anyone." Grabbing her cell phone and purse, Ivy dashed out the front door.

u u

Ivy had only been to Nicola's place once over eight months ago in the dark. So, she struggled through the luxury neighborhood looking for a black Cadillac Escalade in hopes of finding him. Nearly ready to give up, she turned down a somewhat familiar street where she saw his truck. Pulling into his driveway, she turned off her car and sat contemplating what her next move would be. What if she knocked on the door and another woman opened it? What would she say?  
*Hello. I'm his baby's mother possibly.* Th

e thought nearly made her want to pull out of the driveway and hightail it back to Cordova, but it was too late now. Opening the door to her car, Ivy took a deep breath and turned off her cell phone. Th

ere would be no interruptions, if she could help it. As she walked up his driveway to his front door another thought came to mind. What if Caesar's men had come back to 379

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finish the job? What if they were in there right now with a gun to his head? What if he had committed suicide and all that was left was a rotting carcass and a foul-smelling house? No. She shook off her vivid imagination.

Ivy rang the doorbell and looked around the quiet cove as two children sat playing in their front yard several homes down. When there was no answer she rang the doorbell a second time and looked over at his Escalade again. God only knew why she tested the door to see if it was unlocked, but nevertheless it was, and she let herself inside, hoping that Nicola wouldn't mind too much. Closing the door behind her, Ivy was met by a living room cluttered with newspapers and unopened mail on the couch. Beer bottles lined the floor, and the television was blaring. She turned off the television and walked through the house past the dreadfully dirty kitchen and up the back stairwell to his bedroom, where he lay on the bed unconscious. It was odd to Ivy that he was in his uniform for work complete with black work boots and guns. He was, after all, still on leave.

Cautiously, Ivy walked over to Nicola and checked his pulse. Oh thank God. He was still alive. She looked around his huge bedroom admiring how nice it looked the night she visited him and how awful it looked now.

All of the electronics that were ruined during his fight with Caesar had been replaced, shelves had been repaired and replaced, and there was new darker carpet to replace the blood-stained white plush carpet. But the room also was extremely chaotic. Clothes were everywhere. Bottles of beer covered the room. At least

five guns were on the bed. A phone book of numbers had been torn apart and left on the floor. She shook her head. His mess confirmed that he was still having a hard time. Ivy opened the newly replaced windows of his bedroom to let fresh air in, looked at how inviting the pool looked beneath them, and set her purse down on the floor. She could just leave him uninterrupted now that she knew that he was physically OK. But she wanted to stay. She wanted to help him. She thought for 380

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

a moment about just how to do that, and finally decided that she should start with cleaning up his mess. A clean house always made her feel better. Th

en maybe she could fix him a sobering dinner and get him cleaned up. Yes, that was enough. The rest would be

up to him.

Clasping her hands together, she surveyed the room again. It would probably take her the entire day to do what was needed. Looking back over at Nicola, still lying motionless, she rolled back her sleeves and began to pick his clothes up off the floor. Hours later, while the sun was preparing to set on the horizon, Ivy took out the last load of Nicola's clothes from the dryer and folded them perfectly. Setting them in the basket,

she picked them up and carried them to Nicola's room, where he still lay in the same place, sleeping heavily under the ceiling fan. Going to the restroom, she turned off his bath water and ran back to the kitchen, where she was preparing a meal for the two of them, to retrieve his bath towels that she left on the counter. Satisfied, she turned off the oven, sprayed the room with air freshener, and turned down the stereo playing soft jazz.

Now, it was time for the big show. Prepared to wake him, she stood over him with a cold pitcher of water, staring at his limp body. She nudged him first and then slapped him on the cheek. He still did not move. As a last resort, she splashed the ice-cold water on his face. Jumping up, he looked confused and upset just out of reach of his gun.

"It's just me," Ivy said, trying to relieve the fire she saw in his eyes. But Nicola did not speak. He pulled his large tired body up as much as he could, dazed and aggravated.

Assisting him, Ivy grabbed his arm and made him sit up. She stood in between his long legs perched on the rail of the bed. Pulling his shirt off, she rubbed his face softly and wiped the water from his eyes. Moving into him, she unbuckled his pants. He looked at her peculiarly, surprised that she was there. He lay back in the bed and allowed her to pull off his pants. Then, she

grabbed his arm and led him to the bathtub. 381

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Take your underwear off when you get in the tub,” she said, leading him to the large garden-style, oversized black marble tub.

Nicola stepped in the warm water and instantly awoke from his long sleep. Sitting down, he let out a moan. His body ached almost as bad as his head did. Covered in bubbles, he lay back in the tub while Ivy sat behind him on the back of tub with her feet inside the tub. Snuggling in between her legs, he laid his head back on her large stomach and rubbed her bubble-soaked legs. He closed his eyes as he felt one of the babies kick at the back of his head. “Why are you here, Ivy?” His voice was low and scratchy.

“Why are you so damned drunk, Nicola?” She rubbed his arms with a soft scrub.

“I don’t want you to see me like this.” Pulling his arm away he pulled off his underwear and threw them across the bathroom.

“Well, if you don’t want me to see you like this, then don’t get like this.” She pulled his arm back forcefully and washed his chest.

He frowned. “You just don’t know what I’m going

through right now.” He was more than prepared to invite her to his pity party, but it seemed that she did not want to attend. Ivy let out a sigh. “I have to say that I am disappointed in you. I thought you were more of a man than this... getting piss-poor drunk like some college kid. You know better. Besides, what does this help? What?”

He turned his head to look at her, but she never looked up from scrubbing his chest.

“Believe me. I already know...I’m sorry,” he said in his most sincere tone. Normally, he would have told any other woman to go to hell, but with Ivy he only felt embarrassment. The feeling

was quite like a mother scolding her young. Ivy tried to continue on with her stern contempt, but as she looked at him sitting vulnerable in her care, her heart warmed. “I know you’re sorry.” Her voice softened as she allowed her fingers

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

to rub his tense shoulders. He looked up at her, and they made eye contact for a brief moment.

“Damn, I feel like shit,” Nicola said with his vision still blurry.

“Th



e truth of the matter is that I was worried sick. I know how you must feel. Trina has been dragging around the house like you wouldn't believe. Th

e only thing is that she hasn't gone to drinking yet," she said softly. "Do you want me to wash your hair?"

"Yes," Nicola said, enjoying being pampered by the woman he loved.

ly continued. "Th

is whole thing has been so sudden. So

unreal. But you have to continue on, Nicola. You can't just ball up and give up."

"I haven't given up. I just got drunk, Ivy," Nicola said, equally as soft.

"Well, this isn't healthy." Ivy paused. "Do you hear me?"

"Yeah, baby. I hear you." Nicola said, raising his head slightly before she drenched him with warm water.

"You'll have to shave yourself. If I do it, I'll probably kill you."

"In that case, I'll get to it." He slouched down in the water.

"Can we just sit here for a minute...just sit here?" He pulled her legs up over his shoulders and let them rest on his chest. Ivy pulled her long sundress up above her thighs. Comfortable, he rested between her legs, feeling the heat from her womb.

"I'm having boys," Ivy said softly as she rubbed through his curly locks. She knew that he was dying to find out and couldn't wait any longer to tell him.

"Boys? Really?" His eyes opened and he looked up at the ceiling. "Can I ask you a question?" His massive arms lay across her legs.

"Yes," Ivy said, yawning and looking at the dark curly hair on his arm against the contrast of his wet skin.

"Do you think that they're mine? The babies?"

"I have no idea," Ivy said slowly.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Do you want them to be mine?"

"I have no idea." Ivy rubbed her stomach. "I'm nearly eight months pregnant. My only want is for them to

arrive on time and healthy." She tried to avoid revealing too much of herself to a man who had repeatedly denied her the attention or explanations that she so desired. But she had to ask, "Do you want them to be yours?" Her voice was laced with curiosity. With a smile, Nicola rubbed her soft legs and kissed the inside of her knee. "Ivy...they are mine," he said, self-assured. Ivy didn't argue with his statement for fear of exposing the way that she felt for him. Nicola didn't push his feelings for her, because of his fear of being exposed by Grey. Instead, they sat in silence and fear, thinking of all the things that they should have been saying at that time but weren't.

After a while, when the water began to cool and their bodies began to wrinkle, Nicola awoke from his peaceful slumber and realized that Ivy had fallen asleep behind him, leaning back against the marble wall. Standing up, he grabbed a towel and wrapped his waist. In the process, Ivy awoke and caught a glimpse of his all-too-familiar sculpted temple. She looked away before he could catch her. Smiling, he grabbed another towel and dried her legs.

"Feeling like your old self?" she asked, stretching.

"A little bit," Nicola said, helping her out of the tub.

"Well, I've got dinner downstairs. If you're hungry..." Ivy tried to ignore how beautiful he looked with his huge black locks of hair wet and curly around the nape of his

neck.

"I'm starving," he said, going to the sink to shave.

"What's for dinner?"

"I was actually shocked when I looked in your refrigerator. Th

ere were all the ingredients for Cold Duck and Mango Salad."

She smiled, proud of herself.

"Did you see the wine in the rack? We could chill something."

"No alcohol, Nico," Ivy said, infuriated that he had even suggested it.

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I've been drinking wine with my dinner since I was six."

"Well, tonight we're going to have Coke or water." She smiled.

"*Si, signora.* You better be glad that I went grocery shopping. I normally have an empty cupboard," Nicola said, spraying himself with Ralph Lauren Polo cologne.

“Where do you shop?”

“Miss Cordelia’s Grocery.”

“I love that store.” Ivy paused. “Is that the Black by Ralph Lauren?” she asked, looking at his cologne bottle.

“Yeah.” He smiled. “You like it?”

“I love it,” Ivy said, walking up and sniffing his chest.

“Hey,” Nicola said, lifting her chin. “I’m only human. Don’t tempt me.”

“Tempt you to what? I didn’t think that men liked pregnant women.” She looked him directly in his brown eyes.

“I think that you are more beautiful than you’ve ever been right now. And if you weren’t with Grey, you’d be in my bed right now.” Rubbing her back, he kissed her cheek and went to his walk-in closet to pick something comfortable to throw on. Ivy was left on cloud nine. He did find her attractive still. Th

her thought made her happy, but hearing him say it made her feel like a woman. She tried hard not to lose her composure, but it was a hard task. “Your closet is more like another bedroom,”

she said, peering inside his wall-to-wall, wooden closet space with mahogany wooden hangers, oak dressers, and large oversized golden mirrors.

"It's one of the reasons I bought the place." Putting on some white tube socks, he grabbed a pair of long, white jersey shorts and took off his towel.

"I'm going to go down and check on the food," Ivy said, remembering herself.

"OK," Nicola said, jumping into his white Nike shorts. "I'll be down in a few." Shaking off his dizziness and nausea, he collected his thoughts.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"OK," Ivy said, drifting off. She could feel the heat rising around her neck. His beautiful body never ceased to amaze her. To set the mood from the earlier somber feel to a more lively beat, Nicola put on his favorite Ibrahim Ferrer CD and opened all the patio doors to let the late evening breeze in the house. He pulled the dark drapes to allow in the moonlight. Ivy finished setting the table and grabbed two cokes from the refrigerator. Sitting comfortably in the dining room, they lit two candles and sat quietly enjoying the meal.

"So how do you feel about having two boys?" Nicola

asked.

"Truthfully, I always had the feeling that they were boys."

"Really?" Nicola tasted the food. Absolutely delicious.

"Why did you think that?"

"Well, I've always had a really good connection with my brother and my father. So, I figured that this would be no different."

"You don't have a good relationship with your mother?"

"Oh, yeah. She's always been my rock."

"So is my mom. She has always kept my family together."

"You rarely talk about your family. Are you all close?"

"Well, this time away has made me appreciate them a lot more. And you know," Nicola cleared his throat and wiped his mouth.

"Th

e whole thing with Caesar in my house...that really has made me realize that you have to embrace each day, because the next one is not promised to you."

"Th

at's true. Did you live with your folks growing up?"

"Yeah. My dad was always gone, but when he was home, he was a great guy...a real family man. My mom was always there. She always put us first on the list ...still does. You know that she still sends me birthday and Christmas packages?"

"Wow," Ivy laughed. "I wish that my folks did that. Well, they still do a lot."

"Did you grow up with both parents?"

"Uh huh. My mom and dad divorced when I was in high school. Th

ey said that it was due to my dad's work."

"Which is?"

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"He ran a battalion for a while, but now I don't know what he does." She laughed. "He's constantly on the phone with us."

"Sounds like a good man. No really. Th

ey did a great job with



you.”

“Th

anks,” Ivy said, happy. “I think so, too.”

Ivy and Nicola talked for hours about their childhood, adolescence, and growing adulthood, exposing personal thoughts and interests that no one had cared to know before. For the first time, Nicola found himself enjoying reminiscing about life, and Ivy found herself intrigued by more than just a man’s ambition but about his entire life story.

u u

Trina came in from a long haul at work and peeled out of her sweaty uniform at the front door, kicked off her steel-toed black boots in the dining room, and walked into the kitchen in her underwear to scavenge through the leftovers in the refrigerator. Turning on the stereo on top of the counter, she wiggled around in the middle of the floor as she drank the last of the milk right out of the carton. Pulling her long black hair out of a tangled ponytail, she let her mane down and moaned as she scratched the crown of her head.

“Well, aren’t we relaxed,” Emerald said, coming out of Ivy’s room.

“Emerald!” Trina screamed ducking behind the

counter.

"Hey," Emerald said, turning around. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"Well, *I am* in my underwear." She looked across the counter and saw her uniform.

"Could you throw me my clothes? They are in the dining room."

"It's no different from seeing you in a swim suit. Besides, you should be proud that you have a freakin' six pack," Emerald said, picking up her uniform top. "You want the bottoms too?"

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Yes," Trina said, blushing. "You would be embarrassed too, if I had seen you damned near naked." Her southern drawl emerged in a thick accent.

"Well that can be arranged," Emerald said, peeling out of his jogging pants.

"Boy, what are you doing?" Trina asked, laughing as he stripped down to his boxers.

"I'm making you comfortable," he said, rocking to the beat of the song on the radio. "Turn that up." In a convulsing fit, he danced around the room doing the snake and the robot in his white tube socks and gym shoes.

"God, you can't hold a beat," she said, watching him dance around in his white boxers. "OK. OK," she said, standing up and feeling a little better about being in her underwear.

"OK," Emerald said, laughing as he passed her the sweaty uniform she'd thrown on the floor.

For a moment, they stood staring at each other in complete silence as the music played. Emerald had a devilish grin on his face, and Trina stood compelled to kiss him for his ability to utterly humiliate himself for her pleasure. Realizing that she was ogling him, she came to her senses.

"I'm going to go and get dressed. You can put your clothes back on," Trina said with her clothes balled up in her arms. *I have to fight this. I'm just horny*, she thought to herself as she rushed out of the room, leaving Emerald alone.

"I may get dressed. I don't know. I sort of like being free,"

Emerald taunted Trina and picked up his clothes as he watched her walk down to her bedroom. He was glad that he had made her smile, but there so much more that he wanted to do for her. 388

## Chapter Twenty-Four:

### Graduation Day



## Chapter 24

### GRADUATION DAY

**“Ivy Marie Winters, Summa Cum Laude with Honors and Distinction and Valedictorian,”** the dean of students read aloud over the microphone in front of the packed auditorium. Walking across the stage, Ivy heard the screaming and shouting of her name, her sorority sisters screaming their call, flashing lights, and cameras watching her every step. Taking her degree and shaking the college president’s hand, she let a small tear fall onto her cheek.

Th

e day had been perfect. She gave a remarkable speech and received a standing ovation earlier. Her entire family was present and proud, and Grey had rewarded her for her wonderful success with a real pearl necklace from Tiffany’s. Trina had walked only moments before her and stood on the side waiting to give her a congratulatory hug. Emerald waited patiently with two dozen pink tea roses, and her father gave her a debit card that was linked to a banking account filled with rewards.

As she took her picture with the president of the college, Ivy felt his arm around her waist and heard him whisper, “Job well done, Ms. Winters.”

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Th

is was a coming-out party of sorts for Ivy. During her speech, she had revealed to the world that she was an expecting mother who would not fall down and wallow as a failed statistic, but would rise and lead her children into a bright new world full of limitless opportunities. Tears filled her eyes even now at how proud she was to finally acknowledge her children and forget what the world would say about it.

"I now present to you our newest graduated class of BrytonRitz College," the dean said as the students stood up and threw up their caps. Ivy and Trina screamed at the top of their lungs with huge joyful teardrops staining their gowns.

"I love you," Trina said, kissing Ivy on the cheek.

"I love you, too," Ivy said, reaching inside of her gown. "Here, I have something for you." Pulling out a gold charm bracelet with their initials on a dangling heart, she gave one to Trina and put one on for herself. "To celebrate our lives together."

Th

at evening after a long celebration and dinner with family, Ivy hung her degree on her wall and stared at it for hours as she sat in her bed curled up with her pillow and cup of tea. She had not given up or given in to the

obstacles that seemed to have crowded her life all of a sudden. She had managed to also keep her fi ancé

despite her relationship and circumstance with Nicola. She had a job awaiting her after her honeymoon and a beautiful wedding coming up in less than two months. She had God to thank for everything, and yet she deserved nothing.

Th

en he crossed Ivy's mind, and she had to stop thinking of her accomplishments and focus on the man who could be classified as her one big failure. Nicola. She wondered if he had been at the graduation somewhere. Had he thought of her special day? She knew inwardly that all of this affected him. She knew inwardly that he loved her, and she loved him. But she hated the distance between them. She had tried for months to understand why he had pulled away, but there was no logical explanation. When she looked in his eyes, she still saw it. When he did things for her, she still saw it. When she closed her eyes and thought of him late at 392

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

night, she still felt it. Love. So what was keeping him so far from her reach?

"Hey, lady," Emerald said, knocking on the door.

"Hey, come in," Ivy said, sitting up in bed. "What are you still doing here?" she asked, yawning.

"I just wanted to tuck you in since your knight in shining armor isn't here to do it." Emerald sat on the bed. "I like that guy less and less."

"Grey's just busy. His work and school take up a lot of his time. I have to be willing to..."

"Save it, Ivy," Emerald said, tucking the covers around her bulging body. "My nephews need to hurry up." He touched her stomach. "Wow. You are getting huge."

"Tell me about it." She looked at the clock. "Well, I'm going to call it a night."

"Alright," Emerald said, rubbing her hair. "Sleep well." Closing the door to her bedroom, he turned off her light. u u

"Is she asleep in there? Trina asked, as she sat curled up on the couch with a bag of potato chips.

"Yep, it's been a long day for Ivy," Emerald said, sitting beside her. "Do you want a sip?" Emerald asked, offering his glass of peach schnapps.

"No, I can't." Trina said, looking twice at the glass.

"Are you sure? It's your graduation night." He sat down



beside her and allowed her to put her head on his shoulder. He yawned.

"When I graduated, I don't believe I turned down a drink."

"I found out something day before yesterday." Trina said, turning to Emerald.

"What? You're allergic to peach schnapps?" He put his hand in her bag of potato chips.

"No, I'm pregnant." Trina smiled as she rubbed her stomach.

"And I'm scared as hell."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Damn," Emerald said, looking at his glass. "I must really be messed up, because I could have sworn that you just said, that you were...."

"Pregnant? I did." She lifted her head.

"Trina, how can you be pregnant?" Emerald sighed.  
"I'm lost."

"Brooks and I celebrated our engagement a little too hard the night before he was killed, I guess." She

sighed. "You know, my whole life up until this point has been about me, but I'm not going to make the same decision that I did before. I refuse to have another abortion. It's just that I never wanted to raise a child alone. Brooks promised me that I would never have to, and I trusted him. And even though it's not his fault, look where I am right now."

"You can't feel bad that you two were planning to have a family. You can't blame yourself for his death. That's crazy. You

have to put in God's hands." He placed his hands over hers. "As strong as you are, you will be fine."

"You sound like my mom. That

thanks for having more confidence

in me than I have in myself." She patted his hand.

"I want to kiss you right now," Emerald said, touching her chin.

That

the mood had changed suddenly without Trina even noticing.

"Don't. You don't even know the half of it." Trina thought of Nicola.

"Why...?" he frowned. "What's wrong with me? Does my breath stink?"

"It's not you, Emerald." Trina felt that she could trust Emerald, and her heart ached to tell someone the secret that was keeping Nicola out of Ivy's life and her only inches from being kicked out of her apartment. "Can you keep a hideous secret?"

Emerald looked around and whispered. "Yeah." He smiled mischievously. "No, seriously, what is it?"

"Some years ago when Ivy and I were just sophomores in college, and she was really into Grey *and no one else*, I was brand new in my relationship with Brooks. Well, I found out that he 394

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

was cheating on me with a girl from U of M. So I got really, really drunk at one of his parties he was throwing and went to his extra bedroom to lie down. Now, I didn't realize that there was a hard body passed out cold in the darkness beside me until I rolled over. But I thought that it was a perfect way to get back at Brooks. I didn't know who it was, and I didn't care. I just assumed that it was a cop, because that's all that Brooks hung out with. Well, I climbed on top of the guy in my stupidity, and he woke up. We had our way with each other. He never said a word the entire time. I heard him groan a

few times, and I felt the softness of his hair. But I never ...When he got up to go to the restroom and turned on the restroom light, I realized that it was Brooks' best friend...Nicola." Trina watched Emerald's eyes for outrage. When she saw there was none, she continued.

"He was so hammered that he passed back out while trying to wash his face in the restroom. I left him there on the floor, got in my car, and went home in total shock. Brooks never suspected that I had been with Nicola. A month later, I found out that I was pregnant. It could have been either one of them. But I wasn't sure. Needless to say, he didn't even remember sleeping with me, but on my word, he took me and paid for an abortion. I don't know how Grey knows, but he does. And he's been holding it over Nicola's head to keep him out of Ivy's life." She paused for a moment. "I never wanted them to hook up, because of what I did." She began to cry. "Th

is is all my fault, for real."

"Shh," Emerald said, putting his fingers on her lips. "It's OK. We all make mistakes. Maybe not always that big, but it's understandable."

"Promise me that you won't tell Ivy," she begged frantically.

"I would never do that. She would definitely kill the

messenger on this one," Emerald said, understandingly. "But I still don't understand why you won't let me kiss you."

"Isn't what I told you just now enough reason?" She sat, stupefied.

"No," Emerald said softly.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Aren't you still married?" Trina asked, thinking about Kakeline.

"Not really. I sent the divorce papers back two weeks ago. I'm good. In two more weeks, I'll be legally a free man." He pulled her to him.

"I don't think that this is a good idea," she said, feeling her strength wane in his strong arms.

"Liar." He could see how badly she wanted to be with him.

"Don't call me a liar." She shifted in her seat.

"So you're not lonely?" He knew that was the million-dollar question.

"Damn right, I'm lonely." What was he getting at?

“So what are you waiting for? You need to move on with your life. You’re so young.”

“I’m not finished grieving.” She still didn’t know how to feel about Brooks’ sudden death.

“So when will you be finished? I’ll make an appointment.” He took her hand.

“Stop playing with me.” She pulled away.

“Who said I was playing?” His voice rose slightly as he moved closer to her. He could tell that she was about to give in to him, because her bottom lip quivered.

“I can see it in your eyes.” Trina rolled her eyes as a defense mechanism.

“What?”

“Lust and bullshit.” She threw him off guard.

“So, you looked right over the love and admiration to see lust and bullshit?” Emerald was stunned.

“How could you be in love with me in only a few months?”

“I don’t know how; I just am.”

“OK. I’ll let you prove it.” Trina put her hand on his

shoulder.

“Go ahead and kiss me right now.”

“With what understanding?” Now, Emerald was confused.

“I can always detect love in a kiss. No fooling. So, yeah. Kiss me.” She puckered her lips and closed her eyes. 396

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

“Alright. Here goes.”

Emerald's strong arms wrapped around Trina and pulled her close to him. Pleased with the warmth of her body, he grabbed Trina by the back of her head with one hand and wrapped the other around her waist. Moving her down in the couch, he lay on top of her kissing her softly and then firmly searching her mouth for all the sweet spots that lay hidden behind her sharp tongue. His passion seemed to suffocate her, and she found herself breathing heavily under him and taking in the smell of his cologne. When he let go of her, she slapped him.

“OK, I've been told that I was a bad kisser, but this is a bit much.” He sat up, confused and still tasting her sweetness on his lips. “Really, what was that for?”

“For waiting so long to tell me.” She smiled. “Now, do it again.”

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Chapter Twenty-Five:

Surprise



**Chapter 25**

**SURPRISE!**



**"Well, Ms. Winters, you and the children are very healthy,"**

the doctor said, going over her notes with Ivy and Grey. "All that I can tell you is to pack a nice little bag and keep it with you at all times, because your due date isn't far."

"Before we finish here, I have a question," said Grey, who sat listening and watching attentively the entire visit as he normally did.

"Yes, Mr. Henderson." Dr. Karkera loved to entertain the concerned fathers.

"Before she goes into labor, will there be any signs to let me know that it's time? Because I will be in and out of the city on several business trips that could not be cancelled." He looked at Ivy lovingly. "I just don't want to leave her unattended at such a critical time."

"And you shouldn't," Dr. Karkera said, leaning forward in her chair. "Someone should be with her or not far from her at all times. My best advice is to have a family member or friend on speed dial until your children arrive."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Well, we'll surely keep that in mind," Grey said, uncrossing his long legs and standing. "As usual, thank you for all of your help," he said, offering his hand.

"It's always a pleasure, Mr. Henderson. How are the plans for the wedding coming?"

"Great," Ivy said, jumping in on the conversation. She loved Grey's enthusiasm, but sometimes she felt invisible when he was around.

"I do expect an invitation."

"You're at the top of the list, doctor," Grey said, opening the door for Ivy. "We'll see you in two weeks."

"I'm hungry," Ivy said, rubbing her stomach as they walked out of the doctor's office.

ce.

"Me, too. Let's grab a bite downtown."

u u

After they were seated at their favorite lunch spot, Buckley's, located in the heart of downtown on busy Union Avenue, they ordered their lunch and nestled into the dimly lit booth to enjoy the smooth sounds of Nat King Cole and great food. Known for its wonderful steaks but noted for its elegant and eclectic

atmosphere, Buckley's had been a long-time favorite for the couple. It was where they had their first date and their first kiss.

"So are you ready for everything that is about to happen?"

Grey asked, sipping his wine.

"I think so." Ivy smiled at him. "Are you?"

"God, no," Grey said, laughing. "Truthfully, baby, I'm scared to death." He took her hand. "But I'm happy." He nodded across the room leisurely to Councilman Deters, a friend of his father.

"Me, too."

"You know, I hate to spring this on you like this, but I was thinking about something that can't be put off anymore." Grey's voice lowered with his hand still on Ivy's.

"What?" Ivy leaned forward.

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I've decided to run for the my uncle's seat in the House. I'm more than qualified and have his backing. I

will make a formal announcement the day after we're married. That will be almost

a year to the date before the primary election and, only months after that, the general election. We've located a great spot for the headquarters, a team of professionals, financial backers...the whole nine."

"I'd heard rumors." Ivy dabbed her mouth. "But since you hadn't spoken to me about it in depth, I figured they were just that...rumors."

"Well, baby, they are not rumors. I have the opportunity to do this, and I don't want to miss it. Plus, my family has been grooming me for this position for years."

"Yeah. I know." She smiled. "I want to support you on this 100 percent."

"Good, because I'm going to need it. That

is has to be a team

effort from both of us." He touched her shoulder.

"What can I do to help you?" Ivy knew that was her cue.

"Well, my father is hosting a private dinner with my uncle for us to discuss what our specific roles will be as a political couple. Informally, there is a great deal of foundation already laid. Formally, we have to come out

the day after the wedding with a concrete image and sound game plan.”

“Will this affect my job?”

Grey smiled. “No, your job is a plus *right now*. It strengthens our image. Th

ere are a great deal more working mothers than stay-at-home moms your age.” Grey guarded the fact that if he won the election, she would be forced to quit in order to commute from Memphis to D.C. If he brought it up now, he knew that it wouldn’t play to his advantage. However, if they were married, she would do what was best for them and not just for herself. He averted his eyes to the background while he tried to prepare his pitch.

“Th

ink of what wonderful opportunities there will be for the children.” He smiled convincingly. “Th

ink of what type of

403

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

wonderful example you’ll be setting for young aspiring women of our district. We could set the pace as a

couple for the citizens of Memphis.”

“It all sounds so exciting,” Ivy said, captivated by his vision. “I don’t know what it say, except that I’m up for it.”

Grey nodded in approval. “This is the best news that I’ve heard all day.”

“Now for the hard question. What about the twins? What if they belong to Nicola?” Ivy instantly thought back to Nicola’s confirmation of the children’s paternity in his home only weeks before. What if he knew something that she didn’t? She had to take heed of his warning, especially now.

“Well, we will need to keep him at arm’s length,” he said, taking a sip of his wine. “We should let it be known that we are like many of the nontraditional families in America today. We should also let it be known that while he is the father of the children, *should that be the case*, that he’s just that. There is no other relationship between you two.” He smiled. “It could very well bring in more votes. There’s the sympathy vote from single

mothers and the understanding vote from growing constituency of interracial couples and so many others.” He looked over at Ivy, who seemed uncomfortable dissecting her life for others.

“I see that you’ve thought this through.”

“Yes, I have.” Grey bit his lip. He would be easy on his aggression for now.

“OK then.” Ivy sat up and asserted some sign of authority in her own life. “I’ll do it.”

*I know you will, if you want to be with me* , Grey thought to himself. “Great. I’m glad to hear it,” he said aloud, leaning over to kiss her on her forehead endearingly. “Now, let’s eat.”

u u

After lunch downtown and afternoon shopping at Oak Hall, Grey took Ivy back to her apartment to drop her off before he headed to a meeting across town for an HIV-awareness program 404

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

to be implemented by the Greenlaw community. It had been a wonderful day, full of laughter and planning, and Grey had enjoyed Ivy’s company and input immensely. She seemed to be more than willing to be his social

butterfly, clay in his hands to mold into the perfect wife for his needy public. Just in time for Ivy's nap, they pulled up to her apartment.

"Let me help you with those bags," Grey said, turning off his car.

"No, I've got them. I don't want you to be late for your meeting."

"Are you kidding? Th

e doctor said no heavy lifting. I'm not in that much of a rush."

"OK, I won't argue. Let's just hurry up and get out of the heat."

Opening the front door, Ivy heard what sounded like a scream coming from the Trina's room. Dropping her keys, Ivy looked startled at Grey, who pulled her back out of the house.

"Was anyone supposed to be here with Trina?" Grey asked, looking into the apartment.

"No," Ivy whispered, wiping the sweat from her forehead.

"Just stay out here. I'm gonna go see what's going on. If I'm not out in two or three minutes, use your cell phone



to call the police.”

“Why don’t we just call the police right now? And you can stay out here with me,” Ivy whispered to Grey.

“I’ll be right back.”

Closing the door behind him, leaving Ivy safely outside, Grey threw his suit coat down on the floor and walked carefully down the hall to Trina’s room, where he could hear what sounded like a muffled

ed moan. Hundreds of things went through his head as he stood at her door preparing to bust in and hopefully save her from what sounded like torture. It was probably someone sent by the bastard who killed Brooks. Oh God, he wasn’t ready for this type of drama. Quickly, he burst through her bedroom door and dove on top of a man standing naked by the bed.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Get away from her!” Grey commanded tussling with the sweaty figure.

“What in the hell,” Emerald said, pushing Grey off of him.

“What is your deal, man?”

"Grey, what are you doing?" Trina asked, covering up.

"Emerald? God, I'm so sorry." Grey said, closing his eyes completely and utterly mortified. "I'll just...step outside."

"Do that," Trina said, throwing a pillow at the door.  
"Ugh!"

Absolutely embarrassed, Grey opened the front door for Ivy and stuck his head out. Watching her facial expressions tense with anticipation, he grinned sheepishly and pulled her inside.

"So, is everything OK?" she asked, looking around, terrorstricken and drenched in summer sweat.

"Fine. Th

at disturbing noise we heard was your brother and roommate in the middle of um..." he lifted his eyebrow,

"having sex." He wiped the sweat from her head with his silk handkerchief.

"What?" Ivy looked down the hall with her hands covering her mouth. "No, I don't believe it." She grinned at the delicious prospect.

"Believe it, honey. You're *hot-tail* little friend is at it

again.”

“Grey,” Ivy said, hitting Grey in the chest. “Don’t say things like that.”

Emerald was the first to come out of the room, now fully dressed and also red with humiliation. Sliding his baseball cap on, he leaned against the hallway opening and looked at Grey, shaking his head.

“You are some piece of work, man,” Emerald said, shaking his head at Grey.

“My bad, man. I thought someone was attacking her. We left her here alone, and she hasn’t been seeing anyone. With all that’s happened...”

“Yeah, I understand.” Emerald looked at Ivy. “She didn’t tell you?”

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“No, I didn’t,” Trina said, walking out of her bedroom fully dressed. “I’ve kept everything a secret up until now.”

“Everything like what?” Ivy said, suspicious. “What else don’t I know about?”

"Well," Trina looked to Emerald for support. "I'm almost two months pregnant with Brooks' baby. I found out for a while ago, and I'm in love with your brother."

"What?" Ivy said, squinting at the awkward couple.

"When did all of this happen?"

"Somewhere in between graduation and the world choosing to stop revolving around you," Emerald said nonchalantly. "Don't act so surprised. Th

ese things happen every day."

"And so they do," Grey said, feeling trapped in the small apartment. Looking at his watch, he kissed Ivy on the cheek and nodded his head at the new couple.

"Well look, it's been great, but I have to go. Ivy I'll call you later. Emerald and Trina....whatever."

Opening the door, he didn't bother to look back as he felt all three of them staring at the back of his head.

*Hadn't any of these people ever heard of condoms?*

Grey thought to himself as he slipped on his shades and closed the door. 407

# Chapter Twenty-Six

Think Fast



## Chapter 26

### THINK FAST

**“Dad, can I talk to you?”** Emerald asked, disrupting his father from his reading by Sadie’s pool under the late evening backdrop of a beautiful sunset. Th

e jazz played relaxingly in the

background, and a merciful wind swept through the grounds. It was just the kind of day to be trouble free. Too bad that Emerald hadn't gotten the memo.

Without turning, Madison knew the voice of a troubled son. He instantly put down his *New York Times* and turned this attention to Emerald, who was standing behind him with a small box in his hand. He stared at the box first and then at Emerald.

"Sure," Madison said, ready to give out more advice. "Why don't you park it right here by me?" He motioned at the unoccupied lawn chair.

"You know how you're always telling me that I make bad decisions?" Emerald took off his baseball cap and scratched his curly hair, an obvious indication that he was preparing to make yet another one.

"Yes?"

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Well, I'm in love with Trina." Emerald paused for a minute and watched Madison be pulled more into the conversation.

"But she's pregnant. And she's so scared. And..." He

fumbled pathetically with his words. "I want to be there for her...not like with Kakeline. I really want her to have someone to depend on. I mean, she's wonderful." His eyes were bright. "And she's everything that I never knew that I wanted in a woman."

"Sounds heavy," Madison said, delightfully confused. "So what's the problem?"

"I don't know if she'll have me the way that I want her to have me. And I don't know if I'm the man for the job." There, he had

said it. He sighed, relieved that he coughed up his confession. "But I want to ask her to marry me. And I don't want some big to-do. I thought that I did, but watching Ivy has made me want to vomit. I want a small, courthouse wedding." He looked at Madison, who listened attentively.

"When are you proposing to pop the question?" Madison took the box out of Emerald's hand and opened it. "Umm, nice rock. Where did you get the cash?"

"Kakeline sent the ring back with the papers. So I hocked it and bought one for Trina. Plus, I landed a job on my own. And I start in two weeks." Emerald could instantly see the pride in Madison's eyes. "I want to ask her tonight over dinner. And I want us to get married this weekend, before my job really gets going."

“Why are you rushing?”

“I don’t know.” Emerald sunk down into the lawn chair. “I can’t help myself.”

“Where will you live?”

“Trina’s got a place. We’re going to take it over when Ivy moves out.”

“Not what I’d do, but it’s a plan.” Madison rubbed his forehead.

“Taking on a new baby and a new wife isn’t easy. You’re going to need some heavy marriage counseling.”

412

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“I know, but I really want to do it. I wanna marry Trina.” He took back the box and placed it carefully in his pocket. “Do you think that I’m crazy?”

“No.” Madison reassured Emerald. “You’re a grown man. You know when it’s time and when it’s right. Just make sure that you understand that it’s for the long haul, for better and worse.” He backtracked. “Have you asked her father yet?”



"She doesn't know where he is."

"Oh," Madison shook his head. "Are you sure that this is what you want?"

"Dad, I've never been more sure, and that's what scares the hell out of me."

"Shit. Me too. But, you'll do fine. Go for it." Madison hit Emerald on the back. "Boy, I think that your balls may have finally dropped."

"Man, there you go with that again." Emerald laughed but appreciated his father's support.

u u

Nicola had only been back on the job for a few days, but he was starting to feel his groove again. During his time in Miami, he had time to think of proactive measures that could be taken in future sting operations. He also had dissected the last raid and discovered over twenty things that they could have done differently...better. Th

e team seemed to receive his ideas well at his initial briefings and welcomed him back by giving all they could. After a long fourteen-hour day, he headed out of the precinct into the early evening traffi

c with the intention of enjoying a quiet night alone

watching reruns of *Law and Order: SVU*.

Miami had been nice, but he was glad to be back home. Even though he had missed his beloved Memphis in May celebrations, the city was still alive with activities and people. He had watched a concert in Tom Lee Park only nights before over the rail of his balcony. And although he didn't come out of his house much except to work, he enjoyed the hustle and bustle of the living downtown 413

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

and watching others as they ventured out. It was difficult to get

used to not hanging out with Brooks and grabbing a beer after work, but he knew that it was a mandatory adjustment. After a quick stop at Backyard Burger for two Black and Bleu Angus beef hamburgers, he pulled onto his street with relief. Another day was over, and he could relax. He was about to get into full relax mode when he noticed a car in his driveway. *What in the hell did I move into a gated community for if anyone can just show up unannounced?* He cringed when he saw that it was Layla. *Great, the psycho was back.*

"Here we go," he said aloud. Pulling into his drive beside her car, he got out with his dinner in one hand and his gear on his shoulder.

Layla hadn't been around since their fallout over Ivy. It was a small favor from God in his opinion. But for some odd reason, like a genital wart, she had resurfaced. She sat on his front doorstep now in full stalker mode, chewing her fingernails and text messaging someone on her cell phone. When she saw him, she stood up off of the stoop and wiped off her jeans.

"Layla, people normally call me before they come and visit,"

Nicola said, walking past her to unlock his door.

"I know. Sorry about that. It's just that I haven't been able to get in touch with you since Brooks' accident. So, I figured that I would just stop by and check on you." She followed him into the house.

"I changed my number." He laid down his belt and gun on the table in the foyer.

"You changed all your numbers," she said, confirming that she had called him on both his cell phone and home phone.

"Yeah, that's what I said." He greeted Rico, who came running happily from the laundry room.

"You got a dog?"

"It's Brooks'." Nicola turned to Layla, aggravated that she was still there. "Look, it's been a long day. I just want to get some rest. I appreciate you stopping by, but today is not a good day." *I don't* 414

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

*know if there will ever be a good day to see you* ,  
Nicola thought to himself.

"I know that I said some messed-up stuff the last time that we were together," Layla said, moving closer to him. "But I didn't mean it. And I really miss you." She touched his chest suggestively.

"Don't you miss me?"

Nicola stood quietly looking into Layla's baby blues. She really was a beautiful girl, but she also was a wacko. He thought about her earlier tantrum and his desire to stay celibate. "No, I don't miss you," he said, moving back. "A lot has changed since the last time we were together. So..." He motioned over at the door. "We should just let sleeping dogs lay."

Layla could feel her ears starting to burn with contempt. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Nicola took a deep breath. "It means get the hell out of my house and under no circumstances cause a scene, because I'm not in the mood for that shit. I didn't call

you, because I didn't want to call you. So don't show up on my step like a psycho again, or I'll press charges." Without raising his voice an octave, he grabbed her firmly by the arm and escorted her to the front door. "Goodnight."

His voice was stern and unmistakably agitated.

"Goodnight," Layla said, sensing that she had better follow his direction.

He slammed the door in her face, locked it, and watched from his living room as she pulled out of his driveway. Tomorrow he would call the security hut and bar her from the community for good. Tonight, however, he planned to hurry up and get in the shower before his marathon came on TNT.

u u

"I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride," the justice of the peace said to Emerald and Trina standing face-to-face in white linen suits on a beautiful Friday evening. Grabbing her in his arms, Emerald kissed his blushing new bride softly, savoring the smell of her perfume and anxiously 415

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

awaiting their wedding night. "I love you," he said, holding her to him.

"I love you, too," Trina said with tears of joy in her eyes. Before she could say another word, she was bombarded by hugs and kisses from her family. Clapping emphatically, Ivy wiped the tears from her eyes and pinched Grey. All of this seemed so surreal to her. Grey also stood flabbergasted. All he could wonder was how in the hell his soon-to-be brother-in-law managed to get married two times before he could get married once. With a fake smile, he congratulated Trina, realizing that she was nearly completely out his grasp.

"Is this one going to have to grow on you, too?" Emerald asked, kissing Sadie.

"No, this one I've liked from the start." Sadie grabbed Trina again and kissed her.

Watching them rush off in their limo, Ivy stood on the steps of the courthouse with her hands clasped and Grey's arm wrapped around her. She couldn't have been happier at that moment if it were she and Grey in the car. She let out a sigh of contentment. Trina had always wanted an elaborate wedding in a crowded church on spring Saturday afternoon, but under the circumstances, she had found the perfect man on the cusp of summer with no wish to be bothered with all of the unnecessary business. Needless to say, she quickly accepted his proposal and quickly altered her desires.

Th

e wedding had come as a total shock to everyone in the family, save Madison. Emerald had proposed at a lunchtime picnic at Shelby Farms Park by the lake on Wednesday. Trina said yes before he could get the question out. And the family had been called together and told to meet for the ceremony on Thursday.

Sadie had made the honeymoon arrangements only the night before. And Ivy had helped Trina find the perfect dress at the Muse, a boutique downtown, that Friday morning. 416

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"At least someone around here is going to be getting some tonight." Grey nudged Ivy. "Are you ready to drop that load or what?"

"Th

e doctor said that they should be no longer than a week now." She hated that all Grey thought about was sex, but she also hated that when she offered to make love to him, he shied away like she was offering him the plague. "Th

e doctor also said we

should make love. It would help induce the labor."

"No," Grey said, kissing her forehead. "It's so awkward now."

"Whatever," Ivy said, moody. What about her needs? She needed it even if the pregnancy didn't.

"Well, keep your cell phone with you at all times. I don't want you to go into labor without me knowing about it." Looking at his watch, he kissed her on the cheek. "I got to go. Are you still riding with your folks?"

"Yes." Ivy rolled her eyes. "Why do you have to leave?" She always hated for him to leave her on special days. Even graduation night, she had wished that he'd spent the night with her instead of leaving her alone with Emerald and Trina.

"A man doesn't work, he doesn't eat."

"Fine." Ivy tried to lighten her mood. She couldn't argue with him about his obligations, especially now that he was actively trying to prepare to run for the House. "Will I see you tonight?"

"Late, but yes. I'll be there to tuck you in." Scurrying off, Grey waved goodbye to her and her family, glad to be leaving. u u

Grey pulled into the airport parking lot and jumped out of his car hurriedly headed for the Delta terminal only



thirty minutes after he left Ivy. He was already seven minutes late and counting, and he knew that if he didn't catch her, she would grab a cab and leave without him. If only the wedding had not taken so long, he wouldn't have to scuttle. Spotting her walking through the security checkpoint with her bags already in hand, he straightened his jacket and put his shades on his head.

417

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Kit!" He opened his arms to welcome her with a huge hug.

"How are you?"

"Tired, baby." Giving him her bags, she sifted through her purse for her cigarette case. "I need a smoke and a hot bath." Th e

gusty winds blew up her sundress, showing her bare shapely legs, causing a small stir in Grey's pants. Smiling at him, she lit her cigarette and took a long drag. Blowing the smoke up in the air, she blew him a kiss.

"I'm sure I can help you relax. I've booked us a suite at the Madison Hotel. We'll be all alone with no interruptions." Kissing her on the cheek, he extended his arm to escort her across the street. He couldn't wait

to get her out of that dress.

“Th

ank you.” Taking his arm, she stepped off into the street.

“Where’s your pregnant little pumpkin?”

“At home.” Just the reference to Ivy made Grey tense up. “Do me one small favor. It will probably be one of the only ones that I ask of you while you’re here.”

She lifted her eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Don’t mention *her* again.” Deactivating his alarm, he popped the trunk and placed Kit’s things away. “What do you have in mind for lunch?”

“Room service.” Her voice was husky and seductive. u  
u

Madison closed the door behind him and placed the bags of groceries on the table while Sadie ran to the restroom. Grabbing a cold corked bottle of champagne from the refrigerator, he poured a glass and took a seat. Th

e past month had been the most eventful

for the Winters family in years, and it seemed to have

taken a toll on him.

He looked around the clean, well-decorated kitchen and thought of his place. Th

at was definitely one thing he could say about Sadie: She loved a cleaned house as much or more than he did. He surveyed the kitchen again for a moment. Why couldn't his kitchen and her kitchen be the same? Why instead of taking 418

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

out his garbage, couldn't he simply take out theirs? Why... Sadie walked into the kitchen and began to sort through the bags.

"Well, we have both of them grown and nearly married." She smiled at him sitting looking at her with his champagne glass to his mouth drooling like a teenage boy.

Madison figured that if his son had the balls to marry twice in less than three months, he need not be afraid of a woman he was married to for most of his life. He sat up in his seat. "Yeah. All of this business between the kids really has had me thinking."

"Th  
inking about what?" Sadie put the eggs in the

refrigerator and closed the door. "Speak up."

"Well, I was thinking that maybe we could try to get back together," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"What? You can't be serious?" She prayed to God that he was!

"Why can't I be?" He put down the glass and stood up. "Th ere

has never really been anyone for me but you. And watching my babies just grow up and begin to start their own families so quickly is really causing me to want my own again. I mean, General is a great companion, but he's horrible in bed."

Sadie laughed. "Yeah, so are you." She blushed as he walked up to her face-to-face, only inches from her mouth.

"You never complained." He took her hand. "What do you say? Can we start over?" He searched her eyes for the glimmer of hope.

"I don't know." She pinched his cheek. "How do I know that you'll have time for me this go-around?" Her words made him know she had thought about them being together again as well.

"Because this time around I'll have retired. We're not

kids anymore. If you give me another chance, I'm finished with the Marine Corps. In three months, I can take my terminal leave, and we can sail the seven seas." His voice was filled with anxiousness.

419

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"I don't know, Madison." Doubt began to set in where hope was holding on by mere threads, pouncing on their only chance for true happiness again.

"I do." He looked down at her wedding band. "Why else would you still wear the ring if you didn't believe that we would somehow end up back together?" He kissed her soft aging hands.

"Because it keeps away unneeded trouble to say that you're married to a jar head."

"Why lie? Be able to tell the truth again."

"And what exactly is the truth, Madison?"

"Th

at you still love me and still want to be with me."

"And what about you? Do you feel the same about me?" She searched his eyes this time, hoping to see no

hesitation.

"Can't you see it all over me? Hell, I never got over you, Sadie. What man in his right man would?"

"I'm not jumping back into marriage again so quickly. We have to start all over. Th

at means dating fi rst."

"But marriage isn't totally out?" He wanted to hear something solid.

She thought for a moment. "It's not completely out, no."

"Well then I don't mind starting all over again." His heart skipped a beat as he reveled at her beauty. She was the mother of his children and the lover who held his heart unconditionally.

"No shacking up, either. I could handle you being here when I didn't want anything to do with you, but after the wedding, off you go."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, saluting her.

"General is not going to like this."

"He'll be strong," Madison said, putting down his glass and kissing her softly. "Let's take this conversation to the back, Mrs. Winters. It is alright if I call you that, isn't it?" He pinched her side. It had been years since he

could enjoy the true fruits of a good marriage, and he had no problem starting again prematurely.

“Yes, sir,” she said as he picked her up and carried her to her bedroom.

420

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

u u

Emerald took his new bride’s bags out of the trunk and followed her inside the Madison Hotel entrance to the concierge desk, where two older women sat listening to the Creole band that was playing about forty feet away on the stage. Taking out her purse, Trina pulled out a credit card and proceeded to pay for their room.

“Wait, what are you doing?” Emerald said, taking her card away from her. “Mom already took care of everything. We’re just here to check in.” Putting down the bags, he kissed her on the cheek. “Th

anks for off ering, though.” He smiled at the desk attendant. “Th

is is my new wife,” he said, grabbing her by her waist.

“Congratulations.” Th

e middle-aged heavyset black woman

said, looking at her computer. "Who may I ask is the suite's name in?"

"Um...Winters." He scratched his ear.

"OK, Mr. and Mrs. Winters, you are in Suite 241B. The bellboy

will bring up your bags, and should you need anything else during your stay..." she said, handing him a small printout and a key,

"please give us a call." She smiled approvingly at Trina.

"Th

anks." Trina turned her attention to the band. "This is so

cool."

"Well, we'll come down in a little while and listen to them and maybe grab a bite to eat." Emerald was ready to get into a nice warm bubble bath and start to celebrate the evening.

"Th

at sounds good," Trina slipped her arm around his and



walked to the elevator. "I appreciate you being so understanding about me not wanting to leave the city with Ivy so close to having the babies." She met his eyes as they stood in front of the elevator door.

"Please," he said, smirking. "She's my sister, too." He gave her a quick kiss. "I just can't believe that we're married."

421

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"I only hope we last more than one month." She couldn't take her eyes off his enchanting face. It seemed more wonderful now that it belonged only to her.

"We'll last more than one lifetime." His smiled left him. "Th is

won't be your last child. I can tell you that."

"Really?" She wrapped her arms around his waist and looked up at him.

"I want at least fi ve kids. Boys or girls. It doesn't matter to me."

"Five!" Trina exclaimed laughing. "Boy, please..." She looked up in total shock.

As the elevator doors opened, Emerald made eye contact with Grey, who was standing in the elevator with his arm wrapped around Kit's waist, smiling as he whispered something in her ear. Nearly falling back as he realized that Ivy's brother stood before him, he quickly removed his hand and stepped out of the elevator, straightening his wrinkled suite.

Emerald did not move. His eyes were fixed on Grey with his jaw clenched tight. Eyes squinting, his lips pierced, and his body now upright and rigid, Emerald stood opposite his soon-to-be brother-in-law, infuriated. His suspicions now confirmed, he had a bone to pick with Grey.

"Honey, why don't you go on upstairs, and I'll meet you in a moment," Emerald said, giving Trina a look so uncompromising she could not help but obey his first command of their relationship. Taking the slide key out of Emerald's hand, Trina stepped onto the elevator as Kit stepped out. "Bitch," Trina said, wishing that she hadn't been pregnant, because at the moment she would have beat both of their asses.

"I'll meet you at the car, Kit." Grey's eyes danced around while he fumbled around in his coat pockets for the keys. He finally gave them to Kit, and she looked oddly at him and briskly walked off, switching down the corridor to the sound of the music. An old work habit.

## *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Is this the meeting you had to rush off to?" Emerald wasted no time with small talk. He had been around the block enough times to know what he had just seen.

"I was taking my friend to dinner. She just flew in, and room service doesn't have anything that she wants." Grey prepared himself for the battle.

"Dinner after or before you bone her?"

"I do believe that is my business." Grey tried to lower his voice.

"You have no right to assume that I slept with that woman." He looked around to make sure that they were not causing a scene.

"I have no right to assume that you didn't either." Irritated silence. "And I know that you did, you low-life son of bitch."

Grey was ready to level with him. "OK, man to man, I took her upstairs and knocked a fucking hole through her back." He paced the hall. "I'm tired of playing the perfect guy. I am horny, and my fiancée is pregnant. Sorry to tell you, but jacking off doesn't do it for me." He waited for a reply.

"You're a poor excuse for a man, and pretty soon, Ivy's gonna see it and leave your ass for good. When she does, I'll be there to make sure that she never gives you another chance. In fact, the only reason that I'm not on the phone with her right now is because you're going to tell her." Th

e look in his hooded intensely

green eyes was menacing and suggestive.

"Am I? And what gave you that idea?" He put his hands in his pants pockets.

"Because if I have to call her, it will be to tell her everything, including about your attempt to blackmail Trina over Nicola."

Emerald sucked his teeth. "And just so we're clear, I've never thought for one minute that you were good enough for my sister."

"Well, it's a good thing that our marriage isn't contingent upon your opinion," Grey huffed. "OK. OK, I'll play along. I'll explain my side to Ivy tonight. Although, I've got to tell you, I don't think that it'll make much difference."

"Why is that?" Emerald's curiosity was exposed. 423

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“You have no idea what type of situation this has been. I know that you want to side with your dear sister, but nine months ago she was doing the same thing. So fuck the threats. I’ll tell her, but I can guarantee that she won’t leave me. She’ll understand. She always does. Th

is is my first offense. You always get a second chance on a first offense.”

“You may think that you’re a good businessman, Grey. And there is no doubt in my mind that you’re a fucking politician. But you don’t know shit about being a real man.” Refusing to get too emotional, Emerald left Grey standing in the hallway alone and took the stairs up to his room. He needed the time to think through this and to get rid of his growing frustration. Closing the door to his room, Emerald groaned as he heard Trina on the phone screaming into the receiver. He was too late. Trina apparently threw everything on the bed and got straight on the phone with her sister-in-law, who was now on the other end of the receiver crying in disbelief and preparing to end Grey’s existence, as he knew it.

“Here is Emerald now, girl,” Trina said, handing Emerald the phone. She looked at him wide-eyed, wondering what had happened downstairs.

“Hello,” he said, giving Trina one of his looks. He wasn’t ready to talk to his sister just yet.

"Emerald, what did he say to you?" Wiping her eyes, she picked up the glass she had broken when she first heard the news.

"Some bullshit." Silence. "Ivy, he believes that your relationship with Nicola justifies what he's doing."

"What?" Ivy was appalled. "What would ever give him the..."

Her sobs choked her. "...the idea that I would defend him acting a damned fool." She wiped the tears from her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Ivy. But you don't have to go through this. End it now." He sat on the bed. "You would do fine by yourself."

"I will be fine by myself."

So, she wouldn't stand by him on a first offense. Oddly enough, the thought comforted Emerald. Ivy still had a backbone. 424

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Ivy, I'm telling you that this guy is no good for you. I never wanted to say it before...I guess, because I wanted you to see it for yourself. Th

is guy has something up his sleeve."

"I'm starting to see it, Emerald. I am." Tears ran down Ivy's cheek. She tried hard to control the pain in her stomach. "I've got to go, OK?"

"Just call me later. Call me if you need to talk."

"Are you kidding? It's your freaking honeymoon. Just have fun with Trina and try to forget that this ever happened."

"No. I won't. And you shouldn't forget either. This guy is bad

news."

"I've gotta go."

"OK." Emerald's heart sank. "I love you, Ivy."

"I love you, too," Ivy said, hanging up the phone. Erupting after she put the phone down, Ivy screamed and snatched the cord out of the wall. "Bastard!" she screamed as she pictured Grey and the Asian woman Trina had described. How could she be so stupid?

Knowing that Grey would act fast, Ivy ran to her car with her purse in one hand and an extra pair of keys in the other. She took a quick look in her rearview mirror and belted out of the parking lot at top speed, blasting her revenge music and contemplating her next move. In only a few minutes, she was on the expressway

headed for his house with nothing in mind but to call off the wedding. What was normally a thirty-minute drive was a short seven-minute drive, and, unprepared, she found herself at his doorstep. Good. She had beaten him home. Bad. She didn't know what she was going to do next.

Unlocking the door, Ivy looked around curiously at the all-too-familiar surroundings of Grey's home and began to feel anger building up inside of her like a volcano preparing to erupt. Suddenly, the room began to close in on her and small sweat beads appeared on her forehead. A refreshing gust of air blew from the central air unit, cooling her body and calming her nerves, and she was finally able to see what she thought was the bigger picture. 425

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Grey was with another woman when he was supposed to be at work. He had looked her in her face and lied to her with a smile so big, bright, and innocent that one would have easily mistaken it for one of an angel. Her body temperature began to rise again. As usual, if that type of behavior were something new, she would have been able to detect something different...something wrong. But he acted as if it was just another day. That had to mean that

this wasn't the first time, and possibly that Asian woman he was caught with wasn't the first one.



With her hands clasped and her body doubled over on the couch, Ivy tried to think. Th

en it hit her. Possibly if he had done

something wrong, there would be signs of it in his condo, if not concrete proof. So she had to do something that she had never done. Snoop. Getting up and kneeling over his couch, she pulled his pillows out and threw them on the floor. She would start in his living room and search every inch of his house until she found answer.

Ivy searched and searched. Hours later, she sat on Grey's bed over stacks of clothes and paper empty-handed and tired, with sweat running down her forehead and an empty stomach growling to be fed. Guilt visited her in the darkness of the room, and slowly self-pity overtook her. With not a light on to shine on her face, she cried softly, confused and embarrassed. In all her searching, the only thing that she was able to find was that he had kept even the smallest things that she had given him down through the years, like the red rose she gave to him four years ago for Valentine's Day, the get-well-soon card she gave him when he had his tonsils taken out over five years ago, and pictures of her being crowned as Ms. Bryton-Ritz.

Hearing his front door close, she stood up and wiped her face. Th

e last thing that she wanted to do was give him the perception that she was unable to hold her own ground. Hearing her moving around in his bedroom, Grey walked up the stairs slowly. Quietly. He was sure that Trina or Emerald had already called Ivy and told her exactly what they had seen and what they thought, which is 426

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

why he had spent the last two hours at his office trying to think

of a way to explain the situation to her without losing her in the process.

As he walked through the doorway of the bedroom, he seemed unsurprised at the disheveled room. Not bothering to move his clothes, he sat in a chair across the room and took off his jacket.

"Hello," he said in a scratchy low voice, quietly watching her carefully.

"Don't you dare try to be civil with me! What in the hell is going on?" Ivy screamed with her lips twisted and fists balled up tightly into two small knots.

"What have you already heard?" He looked up at her and saw that she had been crying. Great. He had

already lost the argument.

"I've already heard everything about you and your little whore."

"So why are you asking me what's going on?" He wished instantly that he could have taken his words back. He was messing everything up for himself. He had to stick to being humble. It was his best bet out of this.

"Don't you dare try to be smug with me!" her voice screeched as she launched the photo album sitting beside her on the table.

"Why are you cheating on me?" Her voice cracked, and solemn bitter tears ran down her cheeks again.

"I'm sorry." He kept his voice calm. "It was the most stupid thing that I could have ever done, and if Emerald hadn't caught me, maybe I would have gone through with it." He tried to avoid her eyes. "In nearly eight months, haven't you missed my touch at all, the intimacy that we used to share?" There was no reply.

"Well I did. I missed you, but I was too damned afraid to touch you regardless as to what the doctors said."

"Don't give me that bullshit," she said, enraged by his excuse.

"I've begged for you to come to me, but you always flinch away..."

like I'm a leper." She backtracked. "Wait. Are you saying you didn't actually have sex with that woman?"

427

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"No, " he said, playing on her naiveté. "Don't tell me they told you that I had already touched her?"

"Th

ey didn't say one way or the other. Th

ey did make it known

that whatever you were doing was totally inappropriate." She could feel herself breaking. *Hold! Hold!* She pleaded with herself.

"I just felt rejected," Grey said, deciding that the best course of action would be to try to make her feel as though it was her fault.

"Rejected! I've never once rejected you, even when I should have! I've given you 100 percent when you deserved nothing. Now, you sit here wanting to blame me for your mistakes. You bastard!"

Stunned by her anger, he looked up at her as she stood trembling with fear and rage. *Wrong move.* He retraced his steps. "Th ere is

no excuse. I know that now," he said, letting his head rest in his hands. He dare not look at her again. Her eyes were like hot poker on his skin. "And you're right, it's my fault."

Th

ere was a long silence before either of the two could continue.

"You're damned right it's your fault. So every time that I'm not there you're just going to cheat on me?" Ivy asked, feeling the blood rushing straight to her head, making her dizzy and nauseated.

"No, of course not," Grey said, trying to sound as pitiful as possible.

Ivy had an epiphany. "How many times have you cheated on me?" She breathed heavily and stared at him, confounded. Even though he tried hard to deny his infidelity, Ivy was sure that it had been there a while.

"Once." He looked down at the ground hiding his lying eyes.

"You fucking liar!" She walked up to him, pulled his chin

up, digging her nails into his skin, and made him look at her. "How many times?"

"It's irrelevant." He pulled away. "Th

e point is that I will not

do it anymore. It's not worth losing you."

428

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"You can't even count how many times!" She paced the room, enraged. "Oh my God! I have been in hell since the day I let that man touch me, and you and I weren't even together when it happened!" She gathered her thoughts. "All these months, I've been stricken with grief and plagued with depression because I thought I had wronged you. And by accident it finally comes out that you've been wronging me for God only knows how long." Her tears dried. For some reason, she no longer felt pity for herself or for him.

"What do you want me to say?" Grey finally stood up and tried to calm her down. As she pulled away from him, he grabbed her firmly, nearly crossing the lines of abuse. "Listen to me." He looked in her eyes. "I have been very lonely. It's not easy going from making love with one woman every night to months without any physical contact, regardless of why." He prepared

himself to lie. "Th

is was the only time, and it will never happen again. You must believe me. Give me that much credit." He felt guilt in his stomach, but he knew that it was best to just keep the past in the past. Not to mention that he was treading in new water with Ivy. He had never seen her so damned uncontrollable and inconsolable.

"You don't deserve any credit," Ivy cried. "And let go of me!"

Pulling away again, Ivy looked at the disheveled man in his wrinkled gray suit and tired eyes. Suddenly, he didn't appear to be the man of her dreams. He was just a man, *if that*. His promises carried no weight, and his tongue carried no truth. She could see in his eyes and hear in his voice that whoever that woman was, she was not the only one that he had been with during their relationship. Yet she couldn't tell whether he was being honest about her being the last. She had torn up his house and snoopied through his things only to find that all the evidence that she needed was in his face.

"If this ever happens again, there won't be any room for excuses or excusing you. It will be over," she said, turning to walk away. 429

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Wait," he said, seeing a worried sickness all over her

tired, perplexed face.

"Don't pacify me," she said, without turning around.  
"I've had my share of you for tonight. I don't even want to look at you."

Grabbing her keys off the table by the door, she headed slowly down the steps, trying to repress her tears. "Regardless of what was done in the past, this makes us even, Grey. Square." She left him standing in the middle of the floor.

*A first offense always deserves a second chance.*

Grey thought about what he had told Ivy's brother earlier. Emerald wouldn't believe it when he showed up for Sunday dinner next week. Grey smiled at the thought when he heard his front door slam. He had lost the battle, but he was still winning the war. 430



# Book Three

**“So what if you look like a fool to the world; the person you’re in love with sees the genius in your good intentions.”**

**-Anonymous**

Chapter Twenty-Seven:

The Arrival



### THE ARRIVAL

**“God, help me!”** Ivy screamed as she lay on her bed holding her stomach. She had never experienced such a flesh-tearing, agonizing, heart-stopping pain as she was experiencing at that very moment.

Even amidst the pain, Ivy was astonished at how sudden it had come and how marvelously unbearable it was becoming. She wasn’t even supposed to be at her apartment alone. She had come to pick up a pair of curlers only two hours before but stopped to watch some stupid talk show. Then

all of sudden her water broke, flooding her bed and drenching her jumpsuit. She dialed her mother quickly, hoping someone was home.

“Hello,” Sadie said, taking off her garden gloves.

“Mom! Then

ank God!” Ivy took a deep breath. “I’m in labor. My water just broke...”

“What!” Sadie grabbed her keys off the kitchen island.

“Where are you?”

“At my apartment. Could you please....” She clenched her teeth.

435

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“I’m on my way, baby. I’m going to call you on my cell phone when I get in the car, OK?” Sadie looked over at Madison urgently.

“Hurry!” Ivy gasped for air.

“OK,” Sadie said, hurrying off the phone.

“Is it time?” Madison asked, wrinkling his forehead as he frowned.

“Yes! Grab Ivy’s overnight bag, and I’ll grab my purse,” Sadie said, scurrying through the house. “She’s having the babies!”

u u u

An hour later at the Baptist Memorial Women’s Hospital, Ivy lay in stirrups in a small delivery room, breathing, sweating, and panting the way she had only seen in movies. Holding her mother’s hand, she thought about Grey and Nicola for the first time. This

was what everyone was waiting for. Contraction! She

rolled her eyes and grinded her teeth together to block the pain.

"OK, we can see the head. So take a deep breath and push hard for ten seconds. Th

e fi rst one's almost here."

"OK," Ivy said, grinding her teeth.

"OK, and ten, nine, eight, seven..."

Th  
e doctor counted and Ivy pushed. Th

e doctor counted again

and Ivy pushed harder. Knees in the air, held by tired sweaty hands, feeling wet cleanser down below as the doctor prepared for the crown of the head to reveal a full body, Ivy fi nally felt the pressure release and sterilized stirrups pulled a little baby from her womb. Ivy gasped, unable to look up or down; she closed her eyes. Deep breaths. She could hear her mother exclaiming loudly. Declaring the newborn was perfect. Beautiful! But she couldn't look. Her heart wouldn't let her. And then, she felt that feeling again. Another one in place, ready to meet the world literally head on.

Ivy took a deep breath, felt her mother wipe her face,

and she pushed again. Th

e doctor was already at the base of the bed coaching her again. She knew that she only had a little strength.  
436

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Just a little more. And then she would have nothing else to give. She heard him count. And she pushed. Count. Push! Push! Push! She had to push again, breaking their rhythmic method. She grunted and pushed hard, felt a rip and pain. And then the last child was finally out of her body. She collapsed. Exhausted, she finally opened her eyes and looked over as they cleaned the children. Her eyes watered. Th

ey were beautiful.

u u u

Trina sat down on the couch watching Emerald fix a sandwich in the kitchenette of the hotel and started to feel guilty. Everything in her told her that marrying him was the right thing to do. She didn't need to trick him or lie to him. She didn't have to worry about him being trapped or fooled. He had chosen to be with her voluntarily. He had asked, her out of the blue. He had made the first move and helped her to see that there was still life after death for the living. But somehow she still felt as though she had possibly married him

because she was more scared than in love. However, there were moments like right then watching him prepare his sandwich ever so carefully, humming happily and occasionally looking over at her with his killer eyes, that assured her that she was truly in love. Emerald was attentive, creative, and passionate. Something she had only experienced with Brooks in ration. In only his basketball shorts, Emerald strolled across the room to her and laid his head across her lap. "You sure that you're not hungry?" he asked, taking a massive bite out of his sandwich.

"No, baby. I'm fine." Rubbing through his curly black hair, she flipped through the channels, looking for something to watch.

"What are we going to do today?"

"I don't know." He yawned as he nuzzled his head in her lap.

"What do you want to do?" The

phone rang and Emerald sat up.

"Hold on a minute. Hello." He said, gulping down his sandwich, the lump stuck in his throat.

"Ivy's having the babies," Madison said quickly, almost forgetting to speak at all.

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"You know, I knew it was going to happen before the week was out,"

"Good for you. Now, haul your ass down to Baptist Memorial Women's Hospital. How's Trina?"

"She's fine." He smiled over at her. "We're on our way."

u u u

Nicola's heart fluttered and his stomach tightened as he drove down the interstate, whizzing past other cars like they were sitting still. Th

e last nine months felt like at least five years. Now, it was actually happening. Either today he would get his walking papers, or he would find out that he was bound to live for the rest of his natural life. Nearly a year ago, such a thought would have resulted in heavy drinking and a binge of reckless sex, but today he was sober and totally in control.

Pulling into the parking lot of the hospital, he jumped out in his workout clothes and pulled off his sweaty t-shirt. He grabbed a clean white t-shirt from his back seat and pulled on his University of Memphis baseball

cap. With little time to spare, he dashed to the maternity ward.

Before Nicola was ready, he

was let off of the elevators onto his destination. He took a deep breath and peered through the windows of the waiting room. He saw Grey sitting with his legs crossed reading a newspaper; and an unfamiliar man who bore a close resemblance to Emerald sat across the room looking at the television. Reluctantly, he walked into the waiting room, letting the door slam behind him. Both men looked up. A curious stare was shared, and then the tension dispersed.

Wanting to be mature in the presence of Ivy's father, Grey stood up. It was still all about the show for him. Who knew if someone was watching or not. He had to always be the bigger man in front of others.

"Hi, man," Grey said, relaxed and giving his most carefree smile.

438

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Um, hey." Nicola stopped, completely stunned. "Is Ivy OK?" he asked, looking around for Sadie. He nodded his head at Madison.



"Yeah, she's alright," Grey said, looking over at Madison to make sure that he saw him cooperating.

Madison stood up and extended his hand with an uneasy smile. So this was Nicola? He sized the young man up as he looked him in the eyes. "Madison Winters," he said, giving Nicola a firm handshake.

"Nicola Agosto," Nicola said. "Nice to finally meet you, sir."

Guiding him over to the seat beside him, Madison offered Nicola a cup of coffee as they sat down. Nicola took the cup although he was not in the mood for coffee as a kind gesture. He wanted to make a good impression on this man for some reason. He wanted him to know that he wasn't just some guy that had possibly knocked up Ivy. As he looked up, he caught Grey cutting his eyes at them both.

"Grey, you come over here, too," Madison directed as he sat down in the middle chair.

"Yes, sir," Grey said, following his orders and sitting down quickly. *Th*

*is is madness*, he thought inwardly.

"I guess all three of us will be walking on pins until we find out what the hell is going on in there, huh?" Madison looked at the door. He wished that Sadie would come

out with some news. "So, we might as well get along, call a truce...do what adults do." He looked over at Grey and then Nicola. "Today is about Ivy. She's in a very diffi

cult place right now. She's bringing life into this world, *no matter how controversial the situation is*, and she needs both of your support."

"Well, she's got mine," Nicola said, leaning back in the seat to relieve his aching back.

"Mine too," Grey said, looking away from Nicola.

"Good," Madison said, hoping that he had made himself perfectly clear.

439

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

For the first time in nearly a month, Nicola missed Brooks. If he had been there, the pressure would not have been so great. He would have calmed him down, filled him in on what he was missing out on in the delivery room, and cracked a joke to ease the tension. Now that he was flying solo, however, he didn't know how to handle the situation. Here he was in the room with Ivy's fiancé and father with nothing to say and nothing to do but wait. And he had all the time in the world to ask the question that he had been asking for

so long...what if? He had a fifty-fifty chance that those boys would be his, and more than anything, he wanted them to be.

Emerald and Trina walked through the door moments later, both in khaki pants and polo shirts wringing wet from a sudden downpour. Nicola looked up, confused. *Who were they supposed to be? A couple?* He could detect instant discomfort in Trina's eyes when she saw him. Letting go of Emerald, she clasped her hands together.

Nicola stood up, went to them both, and shook Emerald's hand. He had always respected Ivy's brother. He was so honest and forward. He carried the same characteristics that Madison did. Th

ey were honorable men. He didn't know either very well, but he could definitely sense that about them. Suddenly, however, he sensed something new. Th

is was a development that evidently

happened while he was away. Trina had moved on even before he had.

"How are you, man?" Emerald looked back at Trina and realized Nicola didn't know about them.

"Fine. And you?"

e bottom finally broke out of the sky just as we were about to get out of the car."

"Yeah, I see," Nicola looked at Trina again. Which one of them was actually going to tell him? "How are you, Trina? You look...different."

440

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Fine. How are you?" She walked over and hugged him. Letting go, she cleared her voice, pulled her hair behind her ear, and continued. "It's good to see you."

"Yeah." Nicola looked into her eyes. "What have you been up to?" It was his way of asking for a damned explanation!

"I got married." She lifted her ring finger in confirmation.

"You did what?" Nicola didn't know whether to be disappointed or happy. "When did this happen?" He grabbed her hand and looked at her wedding ring ...nice rock. Bucking his eyes, he closed his gaping mouth. "Wow. When did this happen?"

"Last week." Emerald stepped in the conversation.

"And we're expecting." Lovingly, he put his hand on her stomach and smiled proudly, dually protecting his vulnerable wife. He couldn't allow Trina to do this alone.

"It's Brooks' baby?" Nicola asked the question directly to Trina.

"Yeah." Trina said, not elaborating. "It's a little K. C. Brooks."

Holding onto Emerald's hand, she smiled to hold back her selfconsciousness.

"Well," Nicola shook his head in disbelief. "I'm...so happy for you." He nodded on after his statement. "No, I mean it. I really am." Taking Trina in his arms, he hugged her warmly and released a thunderous laughter vibrating against her chest. *Life was trip!*

*Damn.* A lot had gone on while he was in Miami!

"Th

at's cool," Emerald said, speechless but pleased with the happy reunion.

"Th

ank you," Trina said, feeling his approval. "Th anks so much." She needed that. She needed to know that the

one man on earth who was closest to Brooks would understand, because if he did, then she knew that Brooks would have too. Nicola could see Trina's pain, and he truly sympathized. It was apparent that the only stone left unturned in all of this was his. He had to give her his approval, or she would always feel as though she had done something wrong. He looked at Emerald. 441

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Congratulations, man. You have a very beautiful bride. You're a lucky man." Nicola extended his hand again, but Emerald hugged him. Th

ey all laughed while Grey watched jealously from a distance. And Madison observed instantly recognizing what Ivy had seen in Nicola.

u u u

Sadie walked into the waiting room, where her family sat patiently. At the sight of her, everyone stood up with eyes bright and curious. She stood in the middle of the waiting room, emotionally drained and physically shaken. Her poor daughter had gone through so much. Madison walked over and hugged her. Sadie let out a soft sob on his shoulder and gripped his shoulders tight. Th

eir poor Ivy.

“Oh, God. What’s wrong?” Trina said, holding on to Emerald.

“How is she...they?” Madison lifted Sadie’s chin with care. He needed to know.

Sadie tried to give a smile. “She’s great. They’re great. Everyone

is healthy and recovering.” Her eyes were red, and her fair mocha skin was flushed. She kissed him on the cheek, glad he was there. Taking a deep breath, she looked over at Grey.

“Grey, honey could you please follow me. Ivy wants to see you now,” she said, glancing over at Nicola, who stood with a blank expression on his face.

*Just what the hell is going on,* Nicola said, to himself.

“Is she alright?” Grey asked, looking back at Nicola. He fumbled with his coat as he rushed up to Sadie.

“Ivy’s fine. She just wants to see you,” Sadie said, motioning through the doors. “She’s in room four.” She patted Grey on the back. “She’s fine.”

u u u

Ivy looked up as he walked into the room. Grey. Her selfproclaimed knight in shining armor. She tried to sit

## *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

smile. He laid down his coat on the end of the bed and walked over to her. Lovingly, he kissed her forehead and rubbed through her hair.

"Hi," she said, hoarsely, trying to keep her tired eyes open.

"Hi. How are you guys doing?" He looked across the room and saw two basinetts and nurses caring over them.

"Fine. Sorry, I didn't let you come in for the birth. It was just best for the..."

"Shh," Grey said, putting his finger over her soft, chapped mouth. "I understand."

"I'm lucky to have you," she said as he bent down and kissed her lips.

"I know." He smiled. "Now, can I see them?" he asked, as he tried to see what color they were.

"Of course," she breathed slowly taking in soothing breaths.

"But before you do..." She lifted her hand and took it



hesitantly.

“Th

ere is something I have to tell you.”

“OK,” Grey said, feeling a knot in his stomach.

“I love you.” Tears ran down her face. “And...I want to marry you.”

“And I want to marry you, too.” He looked into her eyes.

“What is it?”

“Th

e doctor has already taken blood from them. She says that after she gets your blood and Nicola's, she'll know by tomorrow. But from what I can see with my own two naked eyes, they look like they belong to Nicola.” Tears fell down her burning hot cheeks. “I'm so...sorry.”

“What?” Grey left her side and walked over to lay eyes on the people who had caused so much drama in his life. Th e nurses

excused themselves, hearing the confl ict.

“Grey,” Ivy said, wiping her eyes. It was inevitable that he had to see them. Th

e world had to see them.

Grey stood over them, looking mystified and betrayed.  
The

twin wonders lay wrapped in soft, baby-blue blankets  
and head warmers, quietly marveling at their new  
world. Their skin was

443

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

fairer than Nicola's. The

their eyes were barely open, one with green eyes and  
the other with blue. The

their lips were the color of rose

petals, and dimples were visible in each of their chins.  
Curly black hair lay slicked to their heads under the  
sides of their hats. They

looked more Caucasian than black to Grey. In fact, if  
he had not known that Ivy had given birth, he would  
have assumed them to have a different mother. Wow.  
He took it all in. Exasperated. Nearly defeated.

Grey smiled, admiring their beauty and yet in pain.  
Touching one of them carefully, he looked back at Ivy

and shook his head in approval. She had done a good job. He allowed tears to fall. He wanted them to be his. But he had known all along somewhere in the deep darkness of his thoughts that they were not. He felt it in the pit of his stomach every time they kicked in Ivy's stomach. Grey left them in silence and undisturbed. Going back to Ivy's side, he wiped his face. He deserved this. For all the times he had cheated and lied, he deserved to be stripped of his dream. It was his fault. He was the liar. He was the con artist, not Ivy. But thank God that he still had her.

"It's OK," he finally said, trying to smile at Ivy who looked at him worried. "We're still going to be a family."

u u u

Nicola looked at Emerald, who sat across from him whispering to Trina and finally stood up to leave. Why was he here? It was evident that Grey was the father. Grabbing his jacket, he smiled at Madison. He didn't need to say anything, he was sure. When he was angry or unsure of himself it always showed, and he was sure everyone in that emergency room could see it now. Disappointment.

"I'm going to go on and head out of here," Nicola said, waving uncomfortably.

Sadie looked up quickly. "Wait!" She felt all eyes on her. "You can't go yet."

“Why?” Nicola said, dropping his jacket.

444

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

“Well, Ivy wanted to see you, too.” She looked at Madison, who she had quietly told while the others weren’t looking.

“Why?” Nicola needed to hear Sadie say it. “What’s going on?”

He looked at Madison.

“Son, you’re the father,” Madison said, smiling. He could see the excitement in Nicola’s face.

“I am?” Nicola sat down, feeling as though he was going to faint. “How do you know?”

“It’s obvious.” Sadie said, going to him. “Does anyone in your family have blue eyes?”

“Yeah, my mom,” Nicola said, looking up at her, still stupefied.

“Well one of the children has blue eyes, and the other has green eyes. Madison’s side of the family carries that trait.” She sighed.

"We won't know for sure until you both give blood, but those children look like you, Nicola." She smiled at Emerald, who held Trina tightly. "I've decided to let you help her name them."

"Really," he said, arching both of his dark brown eyes in disbelief. He put his hand over his mouth and shook his head. Trina stood up and went over to Nicola, seeing that he needed a more familiar face. Touching his shoulder, she knelt in front of him. He hugged her tightly like she was all that he had in this world. Th

ey both had gone through so much. Th

ey were the

beginning of this all. She patted his back.

"I wish that Brooks was here," he said, fighting tears.

"He is," Trina said, shaking her head and crying. "He is."

Just then, Grey entered the waiting room visibly distraught. He looked over at Nicola hugging Trina and cleared his voice. Grey figured that Sadie had already told Nicola, but he wanted to confirm the news for himself.

"Congratulations," Grey said, grabbing his coat.

“Th

anks,” Nicola said, feeling no need to fight with Grey any longer.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

But Grey felt utter disgust. He did not stop to bid Ivy's parents a good night. He did not go on with his normal pleasantries. He gracefully bowed out of the waiting room with no explanation of where he was going and no concern for leaving Ivy's side.

“Where is he going?” Sadie asked Madison as Grey walked out.

“Th

e boy needs to get some air,” Madison said, rubbing Sadie's back. “Let him walk it off .”

u u u

Ivy sat in the bed patiently awaiting Nicola's entrance. She somehow could feel him near her the entire time that she was having her sons. Amazingly, before she ever looked at her children she knew to whom they belonged. Too tired to fix her hair or even smile after her exhausting confrontation with Grey, she gazed at

the door as it opened slowly. Hesitantly. Th

en Nicola's face appeared

with a nervous smile, blush red and curious. His chestnut eyes swept the room; he spotted them on the far side of the room with the nurses, who had returned with small bottles of milk.

"Hey, lady," he said, smiling. "I heard that I'm a daddy."

"Hi. Yes you are," she said, weary. "Who didn't keep their trap closed?" She tried to sit up.

Nicola quickly moved to her, adjusting the pillows behind her back. "Be careful," he said, tending to her. "Your mom told me."

He looked into her eyes. "Are you OK?" He kissed her forehead.

"I'm fi ne," she said, glad that it was all over. "I have stitches, but nothing that won't heal in time." She moved, uncomfortably shifting slowly and trying not to awake the pain. He frowned. "Stitches?" He'd rather not know. He made his way over to the babies.

Th

e nurses looked at each other in amazement. Dismissing themselves again, they wondered whether

any other possible fathers be in to see the new additions. Giving Nicola the babies'

milk bottles, they closed the doors and smirked. 446

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Oh my God," Nicola exclaimed, standing over them.

"They

look just like me!" He reached out to pick up one of the children. Th

e baby with the blue eyes stared at him. "Can I pick them up?"

he asked, remembering himself.

"Do you know how to hold a baby?" Ivy asked, alarmed.

"Yes," Nicola said, picking up the green-eyed twin and holding him close in his arms. "Hey, little fella," he said, cooing at the baby. "Hey, I'm your daddy and yours..." he said, looking at the other baby, who lay quietly, awaiting his father's embrace.

"What are you thinking right now?" Ivy asked, watching him melt.

"I'm thinking that I have a reason to live," he said in



nearly a whisper.

"I'm thinking the same," Ivy said softly.

He put one baby down and picked up the other. "I want to hold them all day." His tears fell on the baby's skin. Ivy smiled as she watched him. She had never seen him like this before. Glowing. Radiant. Proud. He rocked the baby carefully, who snuggled comfortably in his large, muscular nest of arms. When Nicola had doted enough over his children, he returned to Ivy, this time more grateful. In the pupils of her eyes, he could see it lingering, quietly unable to show its face for fear of losing Grey. Love. Th

eir hearts seemed to beat at the same pace, and their eyes spoke without their lips mouthing one word. Th e warmth of

their bodies roped around them reminding them of the one night that they lay together intertwined as one and free from pain, engulfed in exhausting pleasure. It was if their destiny was to be there together, bringing new life into a confused and disheveled world.

Nicola breathed in, intoxicated by the fragrance of lilac in her hair and the sweet smell of soft cologne on her body. Grey could have her for the rest of his life, but there would always be a part of Ivy that would indefinitely belong solely to him.

“Th

ank you,” Nicola whispered as he kissed her fi ngers.

“No. Th

ank you,” Ivy whispered back.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

“Th

ere is so much that I want and need to say to you, but now is hardly the time.”

Ivy nodded. “No, *now* is not the time.” She looked into his eyes. “We’ll talk soon when no one is around to take what we have to say the wrong way. Perception means so much right now.” Her words were just above a whisper.

“What do you *perceive* about the way that I feel about you?”

Nicola asked, looking at her long slim hand in his own.

“I believe that you will help me be strong and focus on my duties as a mother to your children and soon as a wife to Grey.”

She looked away. "Neither job will be easy if we don't have an understanding."

"I know," Nicola said, wishing that she would just let him in.

"I'll do my part. I promise. I'll support you and Grey as much as possible as long as you give me my boys."

"How could I ever take them away?" She looked back at him.

"Th

ey are yours for the rest of your life. Last names and all."

"Speaking of which, what are you going to name them?"

"Well, I can't give you a namesake," she said, trying to explain.

"Oh, I know." He smiled at her. "Calm down." He could see the immediate urgency in her eyes.

"But I do want to name them something that is significant for both of us."

"We could name them after our fathers," Nicola said, looking back over at the children.

"Would you like that?"

"I really would."

"What's your father's name?"

"Adamo. Th

at's Italian for Adam."

"Ovviamente." Ivy said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not that slow."

"*Ovviamente?*" Nicola said, laughing at her correct translation of "of course" in Italian.

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"My father would love one of them to be named after him. Plus, it's neutral territory." She looked over at the children. "When do they start to cry a lot?"

"I don't know." He walked over to the children. "So Adamo and Madison Agosto, it is. Which one will receive which name?"

"Adam has blue eyes and Madison has green eyes." Ivy motioned to him. "Bring me one of them. I want to feel them in my arms."

Picking up Madison, Nicola walked over and gently laid the baby in her arms. "Here you go," he said, going back to pick up Adamo. "Th

ey are so...gorgeous."

"And you are so vain," Ivy said, kissing the baby on the head.

"Oh. Oh, look at you." She cooed at the baby. "But you're right. Th

ey are gorgeous." She rocked the baby. "Madison's middle name will be Ivory, and Adamo's middle name will be...Michael." She looked over at Nicola approvingly.

"I couldn't ask for much more," Nicola said, kissing his son's forehead.

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Chapter Twenty-Eight:

Paternity



## Chapter 28

### PATERNITY

**“Hey, Ma. I’m a father,”** Nicola said, lying in his bed for the first time in more than twenty-four hours. He relished its softness and kicked off his gym shoes. His body ached in places he wasn’t sure that it should, and his head pounded, but he was exceedingly happy.

“What?” Mrs. Agosto sat up in the bed and turned on her lamp. “Did I hear you right? Th

ey are actually yours?"

"Yep. I just got the results from the doctor." His mouth was sore from smiling, but he could no longer contain himself. "Yesterday afternoon, July 5th at 4:23 pm. Two huge boys. Madison and Adamo."

"Oh, Adamo, wake up!" Liz commanded, nudging her husband, who was lying in a peaceful slumber.

"Nicola's a father. Th

e children are ours!"

Nicola chuckled under his breath at his mother's joy.

"Well, I just wanted to call and let you guys know. I know it's late."

He yawned. "And I'm really tired. I've got to be up in about three hours." He took off his watch and placed it carefully on his nightstand.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Hold on. Your father wants to speak with you," she said, handing Adamo the phone.

"Hi, Pop," Nicola said, yawning again. His mother was so dramatic. He just wanted to go to bed.

"Hey," Adamo said, wiping his tired eyes. "Calm down, Liz. I can't hear him."

"Mom is trying to tell you that I'm a father. I just wanted to call and let you know."

"Well, that is good news, right?" His father smiled. He finally had grandchildren. Grandsons! "Th

is is what you wanted, yes?"

"Yeah, it is. It was obvious when we first saw them, but we had a blood test to confirm it. Th

ey're beautiful, too. I can't wait for

you to see them. Two new Agosto men." The

invitation had been

offi

cially given.

"Your brother and I are closing on an important deal. But as soon as I'm finished here, we'll be there."

"Great. I'll make the arrangements," Nicola said, pulling off his pants.

"Tell him to send me pictures," Liz said, giggling.



"Tell Mom that I will. Bye." Hanging up the phone, he looked at the pictures he had taken of his brand new sons and closed his eyes. He wanted to burn their images in the back of his head and leave them there for all eternity.

u u u

On the other side of town, in a less festive mood, Grey lit his cigar and took a long drag before nestling down in his chair and sipping his brandy slowly, while he watched his father pace around the dark moonlit study screaming into his cell phone. Normally, such a sight would have caused him to show some type of concern, but now it only made him laugh. He snickered under his breath, watching the old man occasionally look over at him and clench his jaws. Taking another long drag, he made small smoke circles in the air. Nothing mattered anymore. Th

e media had gotten wind

of the entire incident and had reportedly already made breaking 454

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

news about the young man's unfaithful fiancée and her new little twins, who lay quietly resting in the hospital.

"You put a lid on this shit," Mr. Henderson said, finally

closing his phone and hurling down in the couch. He looked at his son awkwardly for a moment, unsure if he should speak on the current matters or not. Grey did look like he was close to a nervous breakdown.

"You should just calm down," Grey said, gulping down the last of his spirits. "It's not you that they are after."

"Th

en who is it?" Mr. Henderson said, handing Grey an ashtray.

"Me." He was drunk and unconcerned. "We could just use this opportunity to voice our opinion on our pro-life concept." His eyes rolled. "Join with the fucking..." Hiccup. "...anti-abortion fanatics on this one and make a killing." Hiccup. "Shit. We are so close to making it offi

cial that I'm running for Uncle Ted's seat in the House of Representatives. We might as well begin with the bullshit lies and cover-ups, right?" Words slurred. "Th at's all

a sensible man can do in a situation like this." He looked at his father under his heavy eyes.

"Go to sleep, boy. You're a mess," Mr. Henderson said sympathetically.

However, Grey had a point. Even now, he could count on his devoted son to think of a way to cover his tracks and protect the family name. He felt terribly for the young man and his love for a compromised woman, but at least he was levelheaded enough not to make such a big deal about it out in the streets. He preferred for him to come home and deal with his problems away from the public eye.

To Mayor Henderson, Grey's only flaw was his fetish for women, which often led him to the den of the Black Tie. However, most of the influential men of Memphis where regularly seen there, and to report on such a touchy subject by any media figure would surely be frowned upon in very important circles. 455

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Passing Grey a pillow, he took the cigar out of his hand and picked up the crystal glass from the floor. The smell of alcohol

lingered on his breath, and the stains of tears covered his collar. Helping him to his feet, he led him to the brown leather couch, where Grey lay down and finally rested for the first time in many hours.

"Stay in here. I don't want your mother to see you like this,"

Mayor Henderson said, pulling Grey's shoes off his

tired feet. "In the morning, we'll figure something out." He gazed at his son one last time before leaving him to sleep. "I love you, boy," he whispered quietly as he turned off the lights. u u u

Ivy sat quietly, observing her father across the hospital room humming a little tune to his grandsons while he cradled them. Her mother brushed her hair softly and oiled her scalp. And Emerald and Trina cuddled on the couch and watched television beside them. It was a wonderful sight for Ivy to behold. Her entire family was coming closer together, all because of her children. Her entire pregnancy, she had felt as though she was being punished as well as punishing the ones that she loved. It was only after the birth of children that she realized that her worries and fears had been in vain.

It may have been her hormones raging or simply the thought of what could have been that made Ivy cry, but she let the tears flow down her cheeks freely. Her heart was starting to mend from the broken state of a turbulent pregnancy. She could feel the warm trickles burn her cheeks, but she didn't bother to wipe them. Her thoughts went to Grey and where he could be at that very moment. His pain was too great to stay. And for this, she could sincerely sympathize. He had left only a few minutes after she had the children and had not returned. More than anything, she prayed that he had not retreated to yet another woman's arms. She hoped that his promise to stay with her had been true

and that his fidelity would not be tested again. Then, without effort, her

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

thoughts went to Nicola. She exhaled at the thought of him. She knew that he was home, tired and resting. He had only recently left her side. Even though it had to be uncomfortable for him, he had stayed and marveled over his children. He had made everyone accept early that he had a place in their lives regardless of how inconvenient it was.

Her mother passed her a napkin and pulled her out of her deep thoughts. Gratefully, she wiped her eyes

"Th

ey are absolutely perfect," Madison said without looking up from the children. "Are you happy?"

"Extremely," Ivy said, putting her napkin away.

"Is that why you're crying?" Madison carried the small wonders to their bassinets.

"I think so. I'm grateful...if not happy."

"You know, I think that you're more than capable of

making your own decisions, but I have to say that this must change things for you in some way.” He put the children down carefully and turned to her with tired eyes.

“Now might not be the time, Madison,” Sadie said, interrupting protectively.

“It’s OK.” Ivy put her hand over her mothers. “What are you saying, Madison?”

Madison went to her side and looked at Sadie for support. Where were the proper words when you needed them? He leaned against the rail and yawned, trying to find the energy to continue.

“I’m an old man *by your standards*, but I am a grown man by the world’s. And I’ve seen a lot of things in my lifetime. I know that you’ve been torn since the day that you found out about these children, if not earlier. All I want you to do is use this time to decide if you really want to be with Grey. No one here would feel love lost if you didn’t want to be, especially now that you know that these boys don’t belong to him. Now that you see ...how he deals with pressure.”

“Madison,” Sadie warned.

"No...now, Sadie. Where is the boy? He ran out of here like he had hot coals in his ass yesterday. And he hasn't been back. Hell, he knew that there was a possibility of them not being his a long time ago. He should have stayed by her side during this."

"Well, try to understand his side too," Ivy said, feeling the need to take up for Grey.

"His side of what? Th

is is one of the most important times of

your life, and you know who was here? Nicola."  
Madison rested his case.

"Nicola would have left the same way if those children were not his," Sadie said, feeling as though Ivy could not carry the conversation on her own.

"Yes, this is true. *But* who is she engaged to?"  
Madison took Ivy's hand. "Use this time to think about it, Little Sis. Th at is all

that I ask."

"OK," Ivy said, giving in to his pleas. "I will." *I already am*, she thought to herself.



## **Chapter 29**

### **MATERNITY**

For Ivy, since the twins were born it seemed that the world had begun to rotate backwards on its axis. Nearly four weeks had passed, and dramatic life changes had taken place, leaving her wondering where this new world of baby diapers, late-night crying,



babysitting, and life juggling would take her. In just two weeks, she would be Mrs. Henderson. She was already back at work full-time at the firm. With a great deal of frustration to work through, she spent several hours a night at the gym, which had caused her to quickly get back to her old size. However, something else was happening to Ivy. Something more spiritual than physical. The

world was beginning to have

new meaning. Suddenly, Grey's priorities were not so important. His quest to become the state's next congressman was no more significant than her firm's next client. Madison and Adamo were now most important. And her needs seemed to be more pertinent and her feelings more sensitive. She was a wreck, but slowly she felt herself gaining a new control over her life. Coming out of her daze, Ivy sat on the long black leather couch looking across at her therapist, who scribbled notes in a notepad. 461

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Madison had suggested that she see a shrink after the realization that she had given birth to Nicola's children and still planned to marry Grey. He thought that she needed *professional help* on the matter, protesting that such a thing was not normal and needed to be further analyzed before she moved forward. For once,

Ivy thought Madison was crazy and blew the entire notion off altogether until her mother had agreed with him. Th

is was a first! Th

*ey both thought that she was crazy?* OK, maybe she did need to see someone. And so Grey had his good friend Mattock refer her to his fiancée, Dana McMillan, a well-respected psychologist who focused on women's studies. Ivy's lunch hour was nearly up, and the entire session had been centered on her irritation with Grey. He had gone to great extremes to avoid a sexual relationship through the pregnancy but wanted so much to ravage her now. As more and more weight dropped off, his passion increased, but she kept him away with the excuse of waiting for her six-week check-up. The truth was that, for

some reason, she partially resented him. He didn't want her when she needed him most. Why should she give him what he wanted now, when she barely needed him at all?

"Well, we're done for today, Ivy," Dr. Dana said, crossing her legs and giving a leisurely smile. "I want you to focus on telling Grey how you really feel this week. Try not to focus on his feelings but on your own."

"Easier said than done, Doc." Ivy stood up and grabbed her purse.

“I realize that for you, Ivy, it is hard. But if you don’t begin to put your needs first now...you never will.” She stood up and handed Ivy a small book. “Th

is is for you. It’s a great little read

by Dr. Normandy Pierce called *Putting Yourself First*. I think it’s perfect for you.”

“Th

anks,” Ivy said, glancing down at the small blue book.

“Should I have read it before I return?”

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*Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“As much as you can. We’ll talk about how it relates to the problems you’re having when we meet again next week. And Ivy, for what it’s worth, I think we’ve made excellent progress.”

Ivy smiled at the prospect. Was she really doing better? “Th anks

again,” she said, placing the little book in her purse. “Until next week.”

u u u

Nicola walked the Wolfchase Mall quietly in his Gap jeans and comfy white t-shirt. His curly tendrils were hidden under an Italian Flag baseball cap, and he sported a dark pair of shades covering his tired, red eyes. Madison and Adamo had cried all night, and now they napped in their double-seat stroller while their exhausted father pushed them along, gazing through the windows and occasionally yawning.

"What did I come in here to buy?" Nicola asked himself aloud. Th

en it hit him. He needed to get them new jackets. It was nearly September again, and soon fall would set in and the temperature would change. His mother had warned of colds during their first year, and he knew how unseasonably cold last fall had been. Plus, Ivy didn't breastfeed, so they were missing out on great antibodies that she carried naturally. It was weird to say aloud, but inwardly he knew that he had gone completely soft.

Turning into the Baby Gap, Nicola watched the normal reaction of women when the Agosto men entered a room. They

turned and looked first at Daddy, who normally would have used the opportunity to get phone numbers but now was just trying to stay awake. And then they looked at the twins, fair enough to be his but dark

enough to be Ivy's. Their  
faces had changed  
dramatically over the last weeks. Their  
eyes were bright and wide,  
their features so striking that they amazed even Nicola.  
They  
took on Nicola's masculinity and Ivy's beauty. The  
combination  
left most people awestruck. Then  
the women would croon over  
all three, normally wanting to pick one or both of his  
boys up. But he would always deny them the chance to  
touch and kiss. Ivy 463

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

had warned him that she didn't like that. Ivy...he  
laughed at the thought of her. She was so protective  
over their boys. She was so proud of them. *So in love.*

Nicola stopped for a moment in the infant section,  
scanning the clothes for things that looked more like  
him. He dressed his children like he dressed...no  
funny animals or animations. He liked them to look

pressed and polished, but their mother loved Winnie the Pooh. Ugh! Confidently, he picked out an assortment of jeans, coats, jackets, sweaters, and hats. When he'd filled both arms, he made his way to the counter. Barely looking up from the sleeping boys, keeping his watchful eye on them at all times, he waited for the total.

"Are they yours?" A voice beside him asked.

"Yeah," Nicola said, turning to be startled by a stunning redhead in a navy blue business suit.

"Th

ey are gorgeous," she said, kneeling down to take a closer look at the sleeping pair. "What are their names?" She looked back up at him with brilliant blue eyes. Refreshingly, she reminded him of his mother.

"Th

at's Madison and that's Adamo." He smiled as he looked at his sons. Th

e boys had pulled in a winner! "What's your name?"

"Rachel," she stood back up straightening her tailored suit.

"I'm shopping for nephews."

"You don't have any?" Nicola asked, ignoring the saleswoman. She could wait.

"No. Always the bridesmaid...never the bride." She gave a wide smile that made Nicola smile. Her full lips were extremely tempting for a man on a *no-sex diet*.

"Well, I'm not married either. In fact, I've never been invited to a wedding that I was willing to go to." Nicola flashed his ring finger to confirm. It was a common misperception now that he was married.

Th

e saleswoman cleared her throat and smacked her lips. "Sir, that will be \$325.75."

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Oh, yeah," Nicola said, pulling out his debit card. "Here you go."

"Debit or credit?" She rolled her eyes.

"Debit," he said, looking back at Rachel, who had gotten back in line.

"Please, sign here," the saleswoman said, shaking her head and giving him the pen.

Nicola signed the receipt, took his bags, and headed out of the store with his head down, barely looking behind him. As he got to the entrance of the store, he stopped.

Rachel was in the other direction. Behind him. Beautiful. Fresh. He took a deep breath. *What would the harm be?* Turning around, he approached Rachel as she paid for her items. She turned to see him standing there with his stroller of rug rats and instantly smiled.

u u u

Grey had been in meetings all week with his uncle's old campaign team. Th

e team had been handpicked by the family

to ensure his chances of winning the primary. He could nearly taste victory when he heard that the Republican in Memphis, Joe Sniber, would not be running because of health issues. Th e seat

was his. And he would make a formal statement of his intentions the day after the wedding.

Looking down at his watch, he realized the hour and concluded the meeting. He was scheduled for dinner across town with his father and the Black Doctor's Association in only a few hours. Th



ere were so many people to meet with in such little time. As the small group dispersed from his offi

ce, he sat down behind his desk

and took a deep breath. Long, long day. Unrolling the arms of his Oxford, he slid on his jacket and dialed his assistant.

“Hey, Carol?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Could you get Ivy on the phone?”

“Of course,” she said, hanging up.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Since Grey received his MBA from the University of Memphis, the doors at his firm had opened wider than ever. He had received another promotion and salary increase and was ranked number two in Memphis' most powerful young leaders. All of his dreams were coming to fruition, minus the small detail of Nicola's brats. At first the buzz around Memphis about Ivy having Nicola's twins had made Grey look like a fool, but his initial thoughts of the public opinion finally

came to the forefront. Single mothers loved him for sticking by Ivy. Family men understand his commitment, and the church parishioners praised him for being so forgiving. Overnight, his slate was washed clean. Suddenly people didn't remember his many one-night stands, his long stays at the Black Tie, and his many late-night indiscretions with some of the most prominent women in Memphis.

"She's on line four," Carol buzzed in.

"Th

anks." Grey lifted the receiver of the phone. "Hey, baby."

"Hey," Ivy said, looking over paperwork in her office.

"What's

up?"

"Dinner tonight at seven at Dad's."

"Oh, I'd almost forgotten. Let me see if Mom will watch the babies."

"We need to get a sitter." Grey breathed, heavily agitated at the constant juggling.

"Well, we don't have one, yet. So, I need to call Mom," Ivy said in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Yeah, I know. Th

at’s just a note for the very, very near future.”

Grey looked at his watch. “Should I pick you up or do you want to meet me there?”

“I’ll meet you. I have to pick them up from Nicola’s house.”

“Don’t be late.” Grey said, hanging up before she could hear how pissed he was. Nicola. Always something to do with that damned man.

u u u

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

Ivy wrapped up her work and headed out. Looking around the perfectly designed corner offi

ce before she locked the door, she felt

a sense of calm. She knew her work so well that she hadn’t skipped a beat since she’d returned. Everyone loved her fresh ideas and praised her constantly for her early return from maternity leave to focus on the Ellis account. Th

ings were finally starting to go her

way. Locking the door, she bid her administrative assistant a good night and disappeared behind the golden doors of the elevator with her self-help book tucked tightly under her arm. Within an hour, as the sun set on the city, leaving a beautiful golden-rose hue on the horizon, Ivy was pulling into Nicola's driveway in her new silver Audi A4 with the top down blasting Mary J. Blige.

Without thinking, she walked to Nicola's door and opened it. Like always it was unlocked just for her. She entered, set down her purse, kicked off her shoes, and threw her keys by his on the stand. She found Nicola at the kitchen table with Adamo in his arms feeding him a bottle and reading the newspaper. He looked up from his gold, wire-rimmed reading glasses and smiled at Ivy.

"Hey," he said, looking over at Madison lying in the play pen napping.

"Hey," she said, walking over to the stove. "What'd you cook?"

Something smells good."

"Chicken cacciatore. Want some?" He stood up with the baby still tucked safely in his embrace.

"Don't get up," she shoed him back to the table. "I'll fix it."

"OK," Nicola said, sitting back down.

"I can't stay long. I've got to get the kids to Momma's house and then get to dinner at Grey's folks house with the Black Doctors Association."

"Are they any different from the White Doctors Association?"

Nicola snickered.

Ivy rolled her eyes and stuck her fork in the pan. "Smart ass."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Why don't you just leave them here?" he asked, burping Adamo.

"Would you mind?"

"Why would I mind? They

are my kids," Nicola said, kissing

the crown of Adamo's head. "They

at's a good boy."

Th

e sight warmed Ivy's heart. She turned to keep from staring at him. "OK. Great. Well, I'll pick them up after."

"No need. You can pick them up tomorrow after work. I don't have to be at work until day after tomorrow."

Nicola left her in the kitchen alone to check on Madison.

"Th

is is really good." Ivy licked her fingers.

"What can I say, I'm a bad man." Nicola yelled from his living room.

u u u

As Ivy drove back home to shower and dress for dinner, she thought about Nicola and how wonderful he was with their children. He never hesitated when it came to them or her. He was always there, proudly taking charge and taking care. She appreciated him so much. Th

ings could be so different. So much

worse. But he had kept his promise. Th

ey were his, and he was

being a good father.

Plus there were those feelings she fought so hard to repress. He looked absolutely amazing in his reading glasses! The way he

carried her sons in his arms made her want to crawl up in them herself. And she could have called him to ask if he would watch them, but she had made the special trip over not only to see the boys but also to see him.

u u u

Friday came quickly, and Ivy found herself running around again like crazy. Sadie had gone back to the base with Madison for a few days. Emerald and Trina were closing on a house, and she was due at a huge fundraiser with Grey in two hours. The

babysitter Grey had hired called in sick just minutes before, and 468

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she was forced yet again to call on Nicola. This time, she felt that

she was pushing her luck, but she dialed him anyway.

"Hello," he said, grabbing his remote to turn down his stereo.

"Hey, I need a really big favor." Her voice pitch heightened in nervousness.

"OK," Nicola said, lighting the candles at his dinner table.

"I have to be at a fundraiser at the Canon Center in two hours. I don't have a babysitter. I'm really in a rut. Can you watch the kids tonight? I'll owe you," she whined.

"Well, I did have plans." He looked at his clock. "But..."

"Please." Ivy clasped her hands together.

"Alright. Bring them over. I'll figure something out." Nicola sighed.

"Th

anks," Ivy said, kissing the phone. "I owe you. We'll be there in one hour."

u u u

Exactly one hour later, Grey and Ivy pulled up to Nicola's house in formal attire ready for the untimely gala. Th under bounced

off the rooftops and heavy clouds hid the moon. It was



all very dreary to Ivy. She sighed, disgusted at the weather, and felt for her umbrella. Th

ey might as well get a move on considering that they were running a half-hour late.

Grey sat quietly in his seat, visibly perturbed by Nicola. Even after over two months of reality beating at him day in and out, he could not get used to the children belonging to that man. However, he was determined to suppress his resentment. He just wished that there was some sign of Nicola moving on in his life. If there was a steady love interest, he was certain that he could be more comfortable with Ivy around him.

"Should I call him and have him come out to the car?" Ivy asked, looking back at the children.

"No, we can take them to him," he said, listening to the wipers graze over his windshield. "You grab Adamo, and I'll grab 469

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Madison," he said, taking a deep breath. He never held Adamo, although he couldn't figure out why and was constantly thankful that no one had noticed.

As they got to the door, Nicola opened it attentively and turned on the porch light. Greeting Ivy with his usual schoolboy smile, he took Adamo in his covered car

seat and invited them into his home as a couple for the first time.

"How are you, man?" Nicola asked, extending his hand to Grey, although he still felt the residue of old opposition. Grey shook Nicola's hand hesitantly. "Hi, fine. You've got a nice place here," he said, noticing Nicola had company. "I didn't know you had a guest." Grey smiled inwardly as he watched Ivy's reaction.

"Yeah, *Rachel* this is Ivy Winters and Grey Henderson. They'll

actually be Mr. and Mrs. Henderson in what...a few short weeks?"

"Hi," Rachel said, standing up and walking over to shake Ivy's hand first. She made her way over gracefully, giving everyone time to admire her in a pair of low-rider distressed jeans and a pink cotton low-cut cotton tee. Her ensemble complemented her fair, milky-white skin and bouncing red mane. She smiled brightly with her deep-blue eyes sparkling brightly. Her presence was absolutely breathtaking.

"Hi." Ivy's voice was high pitched. "Nice to meet you," Ivy said, so shocked that she could barely smile.

"It most certainly is," Grey said, shaking her hand. God had answered his prayers with one of his own angels. Rachel was top drawer. "Nicola, the kids won't put you

out too much will they?"

Grey lightly brushed Ivy to bring her back from dreamland.

"If not, we can just take them with us," Ivy said, absently.

"No, we're just going to relax and watch a couple of movies with the boys. I didn't have a chance to change my plans on such short notice," Nicola said, putting the babies in the play pen.

"Well, they're almost ready for their bedtime," Ivy said, avoiding Nicola's eyes.

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"And I won't be here long," Rachel said, sensing Ivy's jealousy. She turned and looked at Nicola, trying to avoid Ivy's burning stare.

"Nonsense," Grey said, ready to explode in laughter.

"The boys

are no trouble. They

will be asleep in less than an hour like clockwork, and you two will have the entire night to have *fun*." He could see Ivy cringing in his peripheral vision. "Besides, we

all need a little adult time.”

“You’ve got that right,” Nicola said, glad that Grey seemed so personable now.

“Well, call us if you have any trouble,” Ivy said, ready to leave immediately.

“Really, we’ll be fine,” Nicola said, sensing the discomfort in Ivy’s voice.

“Well on that note, we’re going to head out of here. We’re already running really late,” Grey said as they walked back out into the rain. “And thanks again.”

“Bye.” Rachel waved, flicking her beautiful red locks that lay invitingly on her sculptured shoulders.

“She’s pretty,” Grey said, looking at Ivy before he opened up the umbrella to cover her pouting face from the storm.

“I noticed.” Ivy finally swallowed.

Pretty or not, Rachel had no place at Nicola’s house as far as Ivy was concerned. *How is he going to entertain her and watch the kids? Why couldn’t he just cancel?* She dropped down in the seat and slammed the door unknowingly as she went over and over in her head what Nicola and his little bimbo would be doing while she was gone. So engulfed in her own selfishness,

she barely noticed that Grey was watching her every move, taking mental notes to retract at a later time.

"For someone who's getting married in a few weeks, you sure are jealous of another woman's man." He started the car and pulled out of the driveway. He could drag this on just as long as she would let him.

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"It's not that," she said, realizing her behavior. "I just don't want a strange woman around my children. I could care less about his *little* date, but he could have moved it to another time." She tried hard to change her disposition for Grey's sake.

"Well, do you want to go back in there and get them?" He tried hard to repress his smile. *Rachel was fi ne as hell, and she was wearing those damned jeans.* "I'm sure that we're imposing on him a lot more than Rachel is imposing on you." He adjusted his rearview mirror and snickered. "I could see why you would be jealous. She's...defi nitely an attention getter."

"I'm not jealous," Ivy snapped. "Th

is is not about Nicola. I

could care less about him."

“You’ve already said that,” Grey reminded her.

“So you know that it’s the truth,” she breathed heavily through her nose and sank deeper down in the seat. “I just want to go and have a good time with the family.”

“Well, act like it then. We’ve got a full night to have as much *fun* as we want.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. Maybe we should just wait until our wedding night. We’ve waited all this time. The six weeks

will be up only days before the wedding.”

“Why do you want to wait?”

“Just the excitement of it, really. It’ll only make it better.” She lied.

“Well, we’ve waiting all this time. I don’t see how a few more weeks will matter,” he said, unconcerned. He had been getting it from somewhere all this time. Why should he stop now?

u u u

Rachel sat beside Nicola as he held Madison in his arms. He was totally different than he appeared. She thought a single cop with great looks and no real ties had to be a completely selfindulged, but Nicola was

just the opposite. His conversation was light and playful, and his eyes stayed concentrated on hers with only occasional complimentary glimpses at her breasts, which she 472

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had worn on display just for him. He was a total gentleman, and everything about him made her want him more.

"Sorry for the sudden change of plans." He offered her a glass of wine. "I just couldn't say no."

"Sure, no problem. Look, they are already falling asleep." She rubbed through Madison's curly black hair. "Wow, they are just so beautiful."

"Th

anks. Would you excuse me for a minute? I'd better put them in their beds."

"Ivy seemed a little upset," Rachel observed, waiting for his reply.

"I noticed." At first, the thought was exhilarating to him. Finally, Ivy would see how he felt every time he saw her and Grey together. But after she had gone he felt guilty. It was obvious to everyone in the room that she was more than slightly bothered by his having company.

“Are you over her?” she asked, now more confident about prying in this strange man’s life.

“It was never like that in the first place. Ivy and I moved way too fast from the beginning. She got pregnant the first time. The

only time.” He hoped that he was making himself clear.

“Oh, it was a one-night stand.” She was relieved.

“You could say that,” he said, sort of offended not by her statement but by the truth.

“Well, you’re a good man to stick around. Most men wouldn’t have.”

“I made a promise...” Tiring of the subject, he excused himself.

“I’ll be right back.”

“OK,” she said, totally oblivious to his sudden mood change. u u u

Early morning came quickly for Ivy, who lay in the bed wide awake thinking about Nicola. Grey was still snoring comfortably beside her as if he had no cares in the world, which was unusual for him. It seemed that last night had pleased him more than 473



anyone. But last night had nearly killed her. Only she dared not admit why.

Even though Grey had done some horrible things, he was a good man, and he loved her. He was willing to marry her and overlook her shortcomings and spend the rest of his natural life with her. He was successful and beautiful and even at times brilliant. Any woman in Memphis would have died to be in her place, and here she was being ungrateful. Besides, she still loved Grey unconditionally, just not the way that she used to before all that had happened between them. Grabbing the book her shrink had given, she read another chapter. She needed to try to figure out how to put herself first.

u u u

By noon, Grey had scurried off into the Saturday heat. He had warned her in advance that she wouldn't see him the rest of the day. "Baby, I'm going to the golf course at three and dinner with one of my frat brothers at seven, not to mention that I have a hundred errands to run. So, if you need me, call me on my cell; otherwise I'll call and check on you tonight and see you for church first thing in the morning," he had said before he pecked her on her cheek and dashed out the door leaving her to her alone to make her own plans.

Now all that she had to do was wait for Nicola to drop

off the boys, which would be no later than three. After a long hot shower and rigorous body treatment, she stepped into a comfortable pair of Baby Phat jeans and a white t-shirt and a pair of comfortable wedge-heel open-toe sandals. Pulling her hair up into a ponytail, she stood in front of the mirror, carefully placing on her Saturday face. Just enough blush on the cheeks to seem rosy and just enough gloss on the lips to seem full and defined. Taking a long look at herself, she admired how her body had changed since the pregnancy. Sure, she had a small pouch now, but Grey seemed to find it irresistible. Overall her breasts were fuller, her hips were more curvaceous, and her skin was more

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resilient. Not to mention that her hair had grown two full inches in length.

However, past the looks and deep in her soul, Ivy felt lost. What had she given up to be a married mother? What opportunities had she just let slip out of her hand in rushing into love? Those

thoughts were always on her mind, but her mother had assured her that no matter how old you were when you married, those questions would come. *"You just have to meet them with the right answer, which is entirely up to you,"* Sadie had said, trying to support her

daughter.

Still, for Ivy certain parties were out now, and coming home when she felt like it was out now. Dating was out now. Hanging out at her favorite nightspots was out now. "Damn," she said, looking deeper at herself in the mirror. What was in? Those thoughts had

been previously crowded out of her mind when she was pregnant. She was more interested in finding out who the babies' daddy was, and how she would make it through nine months of pregnancy and her senior year of college. Now that she had control of her body and life again, new issues were starting to come up and frequently. Maybe this was part of her change, and maybe this was what Grey had been going through the entire time. By three that afternoon, Ivy had done all of her chores and was sitting at the computer answering emails from her intern at the offi

ce. Every few minutes she would glance over at the clock to see what time it was in hopes that Nicola would not be too long in returning her sons. She has spent most of the day in the house and planned to get out before dusk for just a little while. Hearing the doorbell, she pulled away from her computer and put away her glasses. As usual her heart skipped a beat as she walked to the door. It was amazing how nervous she still was around Nicola. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door to see him with both hands full and

two bags beside his feet.

“Th

ese two are a handful,” he said, passing her one of the boys.

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“You don’t have to tell me,” she said, helping him inside.

“Until they begin to walk, everywhere you go, you’re gonna have both hands and arms full,” he said, thinking towards their future.

“It’s not so bad. You just haven’t gotten used to it yet.”

“And you have?”

“You carried them in your arms for a couple of hours. I carried them in my stomach for nine months.”

“Point taken.” As usual he watched her walk in front of him, admiring her long and shapely body as he tried to remind himself of his plan to stay far, far away. “I’ve already fed them, and I think they’re ready for a nap.”

“OK,” Ivy said, going to her bedroom. “So how was your evening?” she asked, unable to keep her curiosity

to herself.

"It was nice," he said, reminded of her jealousy the night before.

"Th

at's good," she said, laying Madison in the baby bed.

"And yours?" he asked, laying Adamo in his bed.

"Nice," she said, taken aback by his lack of interest in their conversation. She paused for a moment and looked him in his eyes. Had she really lost him?

"Look, I've gotta go. I just wanted to drop them off on time so that I wouldn't hold you up." He looked at his watch and then down the corridor.

"Th

anks again," she said, bidding him a good evening.

"Yeah. See you later," he said, starting out of the room awkwardly.

Walking out the front door, Nicola felt the nervousness inside of him disappear. His plan was still unfolding and without error. He had discovered his mistake with Ivy and intended to fix it immediately. He had revealed himself early in their relationship and left himself

vulnerable the entire pregnancy, which was why he was so uneasy around her now. He felt like she could read him like a book because he had allowed himself to become absolutely predictable. He wasn't a bad boy anymore. She had changed that 476

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with those children. *Hell, sometimes I have to check to see if I still have balls*, he thought inwardly . But all of that was about to change. It was time to live and open up to the world again. The past was

finally behind him, and he was ready to shed his old skin. 477

### Chapter Thirty:

### Famiglia



## Chapter 30

### FAMIGLIA

**“Welcome to Memphis,”** Nicola said, hugging his mother as they walked through the security checkpoint of the airport. With an undeniable anticipation, he greeted his family with hugs and kisses. Th

is was the fi rst time that they had come as a family with Santo to see him the entire time that he had lived in Memphis. While it promised to be exciting, he knew that it would also be interesting, considering that Ivy

was getting married at the end of the week.

"Let's get your baggage and get you guys out of this stuff y airport," Nicola said, leading his family to the baggage claim area.

"You have to show us around Memphis this time, Nicola. Last time, we were here for only a couple of days, and the most we saw was Graceland from the street in passing. Th is time we're here

for a couple of weeks. We want to visit Beale Street, grab some barbeque, visit some museums, and the whole nine," Adamo said, following behind his son.

"Sure thing, Pop. Hey, Santo, where's the wife?"

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"At home. She said she didn't want to tag along this time."

Santo was glad that he had time to himself to enjoy the southern hospitality he had heard so much about in Memphis.

"More time for us to do the male thing." Nicola got on the escalator in front of his family.



"Where are my grandsons?" Liz asked, impatiently.

"With their *other* grandparents. Ivy's gone to make some lastminute changes to her wedding gown with her bridesmaids."

Nicola wanted very much to sound unconcerned with Ivy and her whereabouts, but his mother could see through the facade.

"So, she's going to marry the other gentleman?" Liz was very disappointed.

"Ma, it's what we all want." Nicola gripped the rail with aggravation. "Ivy and I are just friends. We have an ongoing relationship because we have children together. Past that, she's in love with Grey, and I'm in love with life."

It was a harsh statement to make, but inside, Nicola needed to hear himself say it. Ivy was in love with Grey, and he was out of the equation. Reality gave him the strength to push on and live on without looking back or asking *what if*. Plus, there were Madison and Adamo to think of. Grey had given him no trouble about seeing his children as much as he wanted as long as he stayed away from Ivy. For now, that was a very good reason to stay away.

"We made reservations at the Peabody Hotel," his father said, looking at his watch. "We had better get

there and check in first before we go to dinner.”

“Yeah, I was just about to remind you guys,” Santo said, looking at his watch as well.

“You weren’t planning on staying at the Peabody too?” Nicola asked Santo.

“Yeah, I didn’t want to impose on you.” Santo read his brother’s eyes. Could that be freedom?

“It would be no imposition. You’re more than welcome to come and stay with me anytime.” Nicola invited happily. 482

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“What about your company? I wouldn’t want to get in the way.” Santo knew about his brother’s promiscuous ways.

“My guests are few and far between now, and then only with an appointment. Come on, it’ll be fun.”

“Sure, why not.” Yes! Santo thought to himself. Girls! Girls!

Girls!

“Well, why didn’t you invite your father and me to stay?” Liz asked, meddling with her son as she slid on her

Armani glasses.

"Because I figured you two would want a little quality time together." Nicola winked at his father.

"Please, your father and I spend quality time no matter where we are," Liz scoffed.

"It's what keeps the magic in the marriage," his father said, nudging Santo.

"Honestly, Pop, we don't want to know," Santo said, shaking off the thought of his parents having sex. "The things people tell

their kids."

u u u

After lunch, Nicola dropped his parents back off at the hotel to get some rest and took his brother to his place to settle in for his stay. As usual they had hundreds of things to talk about, including Nicola's new love interest, Rachel. He didn't have pictures of her yet, but he had arranged for her to meet Santo later in the week. It occurred to Nicola as he pulled up in front of his home that his brother had never seen where he lived and had no idea of how he lived. So it was up to him to give the right first impression. For once, Nicola felt inferior. His brother lived in a mansion in South Beach, and here he was comfortable in a three-

bedroom condo with barely enough room for him and his new sons. Opening the door, he took a deep breath and smiled. *Grin and bear it*, he thought to himself.

"Welcome to casa de Agosto," Nicola said, turning off his alarm. "I'll show you around, and then you can make yourself comfortable in the guest bedroom."

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"Sure." Santo put down his bags. "Well, it looks nice from what I've seen so far."

"Please, this is a bachelor's pad and probably the wash room of your house."

"Like you couldn't have the same," he said, half grinning. "You still have an interest in marketing?"

"No. I follow it from time to time through *Ad Week* magazine and some other stuff, but mostly I'm too caught up in work."

"And you didn't get a degree in criminal justice?"

"Nope. I guess at one point, I really thought that I would return home, even after I had told Pop that my place was here."

"Well, he still thinks that your place is in Miami, but he respects what you do here. For that matter, we all do."

"Yeah, well, enough about me. Come on; let me give you a tour, so I can wrap up being the thoughtful host." Although it gratified Nicola to hear such distinct approval from his brother, it made him feel a little uncomfortable to have the spotlight shining on him.

"So what does a single man like yourself do on a Saturday night?" Santo asked, hinting to his brother that he hadn't planned on being penned up his entire stay.

"Um, there are a few clubs I frequent. Then, there is the

Peabody place, which is great to catch a movie, and Beale street of course. We can go to Tacky Jack's Taco Shack on Poplar. If you like martinis, we can go downtown to Swig. Just tell me what you want to do."

"What about gentlemen's clubs? Even in Miami, they talk about this place here called the Black Tie." Santo licked his lips.

"I'm here to have a *good* time. I don't give a damn about movies and dance clubs."

"Yeah, it's famous worldwide. I go there too from time

to time.” Nicola didn’t want to lead on about the Black Tie being his second residence.

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### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

“Well, let’s go tonight. I feel like shelling out a couple of dollars to see a few nice young women get extremely friendly.” Santo rubbed his hands together. Girls! Girls! Girls!

“What time is it?” Nicola asked, looking down at his watch.

“Almost fi ve. Why?”

“I’ve got to call and make reservations for us.”

“You mean you have to have reservations to go to a strip club?”

“Th

e strip club in Memphis, man. Every Saturday night it’s packed to capacity.”

“Damn, are the women that fi ne?”

“Well, let’s just say that your fi rst experience at the Black Tie will defi nitely be like no other.”

“Good, I can’t wait. You just don’t know how long it’s been since I had a little extracurricular activity in my life.”

“You mean, you came all the way to Memphis to have a fling. Hell, you could have gotten that in Miami.” Nicola laughed and grabbed his brother’s bag to show him his bedroom. “Wait. Scratch that last statement. You can only get Memphis women in Memphis.”

u u u

Grey sat quietly across from Ivy, watching her enjoy her dinner at their favorite little hangout, the Side Street Grill. Sitting out in the open air, they both enjoyed the breeze and company of other professionals having cocktails and smoking cigars. Inside, a great band was playing and a few people frolicked happily on the dance floor.

Ivy had made plans to spend the evening with Grey after she was fitted for her dress with her bridesmaids, but he had made plans to be alone. It was a clear, hot Saturday night, and he still had the urge to be with his friends and enjoy a good weekend of carefree fun. However, the closer they got to the wedding, the less time he had to himself, which pissed him off more than Ivy would ever know.

"Why aren't you saying anything?" Ivy asked, trying to talk over the band.

"I don't know. I just don't have anything to say." He looked away, visibly annoyed.

"Well you're acting like something is wrong," she said, recalling his attitude all evening.

Grey rolled his eyes and looked down at watch before he replied. "Well, it's not." He knew that his response would hurl Ivy into a fit, and it would only be minutes before they were forced into a heated argument.

"Bullshit," Ivy said, wiping her mouth with her napkin and throwing it in her lap. "If you didn't want to be with me tonight, then you could have just said so."

"Look, I don't want to argue with you, OK?" But in actuality, he did. He wanted her to get so upset that they would be forced to leave the restaurant. Maybe then he could convince her that she was just being emotional and after all of their needless arguing she should just go home. Th

en, he could make it to the Black Tie

before they canceled his reservations.



"You're so predictable," Ivy said, waving her hand at the waiter.

"I beg your pardon," he said, looking a little confused.

"Don't ' *I beg your pardon* ' me," she said as the waiter approached.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" the waiter asked cordially.

"Yes, I'd like the check now, please," Ivy said demandingly.

"Yes, ma'am," the waiter said, looking at Grey. "Right away."

"What are you doing, Ivy?" Grey asked while Ivy looked through her purse.

"I'm making this a little less painful for us."

"What do you mean?" Grey's frown crinkled his eyebrows.

"Do you have other plans, Grey?" Ivy squinted at him, wiggling her nose.

"What?"

“*Other plans?* Have you made other plans with someone else for tonight?” She was tired of playing games with him and intended to end this little charade immediately.

“Well honestly, yes. But they are for much later. They won’t

affect us.” His words fumbled out, as he was unprepared for her sudden outburst.

“You’re right, because our time just ended. Next time, you should try just being honest instead of pouting like a little girl.”

She threw a twenty on the table.

“Look, we don’t have to...”

“Save it,” Ivy said, throwing her hand up in his face.

“Well at least let me give you a ride home,” he said, uncrossing his legs.

“I’m not going home.” Ivy watched his mouth drop in shock, which made her feel on top of the world. A woman that was predictable was expendable. “If you need me, I’ll be on Beale *with my friends*. So you can go on and do whatever you had originally planned to do without disrupting my life.” She waved him off ,

pushed her seat back, and waltzed off , leaving him alone. Without looking back once, Ivy disappeared in the parking lot across the street. And for a moment, Grey was seriously taken aback. Had he just witnessed a transformation in the woman he was about to blindly marry? Had she really just seen clear through all of his relentless bullshit? For a moment, he wanted to run after her and apologize, but he knew this game. It would just feed her ego. Instead, he paid the check and headed in the opposite direction, confused and a little intimidated, but ultimately glad that he would still be able to go out as planned. u u u

Beale Street was packed to capacity with crowds of people screaming, singing, dancing, and drinking. It had often been referred to as a little French Quarter, with the jazz, blues, rock, and R & B music floating out of the clubs onto the sidewalks. It was the only place in Memphis where color, creed, religion, and 487

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sex didn't matter. Everyone came together under a drunken haze to let loose and have fun enjoying the world's best barbeque and the city's best entertainment. Police offi

cers on horses patrolled

the area, and religious fanatics protested on the corners with their signs and bullhorns. Drunken women

fell over off the side of the street, exposing their bare bottoms. Th

ugs hung out on the east

end of Beale Street and preps hung out on the western end. Visitors intermingled between both groups, taking pictures and buying roses from vendors.

Taking in the sights, Ivy inhaled the smoke of the freshly cooked meat and sounds of the world that she had left behind nearly a year ago to transform herself into a mother and soon-to-be wife. Walking freely through the crowds in her black silk strapless dress and black strap-up sandals, she drew attention as she held on tightly to her cocktail purse. With her hair swinging freely down her back and her face made up, she almost felt out of place with the masses in jeans and t-shirts. But she was determined to have a good time. Walking up past the line of people waiting to get into one of the more popular clubs on Beale, Club 152, Ivy hugged the bouncer and proceeded in with a VIP stamp.

"Hey, Ivy, over here," one of her bridesmaids screamed as she walked past the bar.

"Hey, girl," Ivy said, nearly exhausted from the crowd.

"Hey, we didn't think that you were going to make it."

"Well, there was a slight change in plans."

"Either way, we're glad that you're here. "

"Where is Trina?" she asked, sitting down on at the small black booth with the rest of her friends.

"Trina is on her way. It must have been a while since you got the chance to go out," her friend said, examining Ivy's outfit. Without further explanation of why she was so overdressed, Ivy just looked up in agreement. "Yeah, it's been a while."

"Well, we are definitely going to give you a wonderful homecoming tonight," her friend said, wrapping her arm around Ivy. "Tonight, it's about you!"

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"Tell me about it," Ivy said, laughing as she took a shot of vodka.

u u u

On the other side of town, Grey pulled into the crowded lot of the Black Tie and looked at his watch. His friends had already taken their seats and were probably already watching the show. Taking the handful of twenty-dollar bills from his wallet and placing them in

his glove compartment for fear of naked pickpockets, he sprayed his cologne and headed inside. He could hear the music coming from inside as he walked down the red carpet to the VIP

line and showed his platinum card to the bouncer.

"Good to see you again, Mr. Henderson," a petite black woman in a sequined black dress said as she opened the door for him.

"Th

ank you, Miriam. It's good to be back."

As Grey walked through the coat check, a woman took his sports coat and gave him a ticket. Opening another the door into the main hall, he inhaled the familiar aroma of thick cigar and cigarette smoke mingling with many perfumes and natural female odor that was a signature scent at the Black Tie. Home, he thought to himself while admiring a naked vixen dancing on top of the bar. He was surprised to find, however, that only two of the six men that were supposed to meet tonight were at their reserved table.

"I hope I'm not too late," he said, sitting down in the leathersecluded booth.

"Not at all. Nobody showed up," Mattock said, turning up his small shot of peppermint schnapps.

“Why not?”

“Well, John said that his wife wanted to spend a little quality time with him before he left for Panama. Robert is making up with his girlfriend from that last fight they had about him hanging out at the Black Tie. LeGarius was too tired to come out, and Frank said he still owed one of these girls three hundred dollars from last Saturday night,” Mattock said sympathetically. 489

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Grey's other friend, Mark, answered before he looked at his watch. “And I have to leave in about thirty minutes.”

“What about you, Mattock?” Grey asked, disappointed.

“Oh, I plan to stay for a little while but not too long. I'm supposed to meet Dana for a nightcap.”

“A nightcap?” Grey looked at Mark. “Is that what they're calling it now?”

“Mattock reminds me of some old English professor,” Mark pulled at Mattock's blue bow tie and laughed.

“Tell me about it. Damn, do you know anything at all about the black experience?” Grey waved at a waitress. “You make me need a drink.”

"Well, quiet honestly, I've always been extremely comfortable with my blackness." Mattock became annoyed. "I just don't wear Fubu, eat fried chicken, and drive a customized Cadillac like you would suggest."

"You should try it," Mark suggested hastily. "Your dick may grow."

"Yeah, well you should try reading a book. You may develop more than one brain cell." Mattock flipped Mark the bird. While Grey listened to his friends make fun of each other, he became extremely depressed. Mattock was going to meet his lady friend, his four other friends refused to leave their lady friends, and the only reason Mark wasn't at home was because he didn't have a lady friend but was probably going to hook up with someone from the Black Tie tonight.

As Grey took his drink from the waitress, he thought back over the evening and remembered Ivy leaving him at the table. It was a stupid move to push her away, but not just tonight. It was stupid to push her away so long ago. Th

ere was a time when she

would have stayed and tolerated him until the end. It was all that she knew to do. She loved him that much then. Looking down into the glass, Grey felt a great sorrow overwhelm him. He would never get her back now. Th



e innocent young girl

she used to be was gone, and a remarkable yet mysterious woman 490

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

had formed in her place; a woman who looked for love instead of letting it find her, who went to other men when the one she was with could not provide, who demanded love or loneliness. But Ivy was his creation. God had given him an angel, pure and pristine, but he was too blind to see it. It was the curse of man to search for something that he had already found. It was in his very nature to ignore the obvious for fear that the hidden would be clearer in its truths.

“Are you alright?” Mattock asked, concerned.

“I’m fine,” Grey said, looking up. He finally realized that his silence was the loudest sound in the building. “Get out of here and go visit Dana,” he said, touching Mattock’s shoulder. “Don’t make her wait on you for our sake.”

“Are you sure that you’re OK?” Mark said, choking on his drink.

“He’s just fine.” Mattock smiled at Grey proudly. “I think I will get out here. After all, these women don’t want me,

because I don't plan on spending one red cent on them."

Grey laughed. "We are definitely sitting with the smartest man in the Black Tie tonight, gentlemen."

"Well, they can have all of my money," Mark said, throwing a twenty-dollar bill at a woman as she walked past.

"Do you want a private dance, baby?" she asked, stopping in her tracks to bend over and pick up the money.

"Yes, ma'am. I want everything you're willing to allow me to pay for," Mark said, rubbing her leg. "And I do mean everything."

"Well, come right this way," she said, offering her hand.

"Grey, Mattock, I'll see ya'll later," Mark said, taking his drink with him.

"He has no restraint," Mattock said, shaking his head. "Look, I'll call you tomorrow."

"Alright," Grey said, relieved that Mattock was leaving.

"You sure that you'll be OK?"

"I'll be fine. I'm just going to have a drink," Grey said,

pushing Mattock. “Now get out of here.”

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Chapter Thirty-One:

Opportunity

Knocks



**Chapter 31**

**OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS**

**“Welcome to the Black Tie,” Miriam said, kissing the gentlemen as they entered the sexual sanctuary.** It was most amazing thing that Santo had ever laid eyes on in his entire life. It was an investor’s dream and a freak’s playhouse. Th

e Black Tie. His mouth dropped to the ground as the woman took his coat and kissed him on the cheek. New customers always received special treatment, and they were recognizable by the Black Tie pin the doorkeeper placed on them. He had only made it through coat check when he discovered that there wasn’t a place like the Black Tie on the earth. Opening the door he found a dark room filled with hanging crystal chandeliers, hundreds of scented candles, wine-colored walls draped in velvet, and so many scantily dressed and naked women he couldn’t begin to count. Th

e music blasted in Santo’s ears; the darkness made it hard to see; the smoke nearly choked him; the perfume intoxicated him; and the women vexed him. Hitting his brother’s arm, his eyes were wide and wild with unspeakable thoughts. He was already fighting an erection and a curious desire to have sex in this exotic and erotic palace.

“Th

is is unbelievable,” Santo screamed as a young topless blonde in a black leather thong and black leather stiletto boots escorted them to Nicola’s usual seat.

“Calm down, man. Th

e night hasn’t even begun. You’ve still

got the midnight show and the kitty call.”

“What’s that?” he asked, still watching the woman’s behind.

“What?”

“Th

e kitty call?” He could barely hear himself over the music.

“You’ll see,” Nicola said, smiling at a few of the women he knew better than the rest.

“I see why you won’t leave Memphis,” Santo screamed, sitting down in Nicola’s booth.

“What would you gentlemen like to drink tonight?” the waitress asked, walking over as soon as they were

seated.

"Jack and Coke," Nicola said, pulling out his platinum VIP

card. "Charge it to my account."

"Yes, sir. And for your cute twin?" she asked, smiling deviously at Santo.

"I'll have you," Santo said slyly.

"And to drink," she said, leaning over the table so that he could examine her ample breast more closely.

"Scotch...on the rocks," Santo made a quick sweep of the room.

As the waitress walked off, Nicola hit his brother on the back of the head, "Shop before you buy, Santo. If that excites you, then you're probably going to have a heart attack before the night is over."

"Th

ey get better?"

"Th

at is a nickel. Th

e dimes don't come out for another halfhour," Nicola

said as a group of women approached his booth.

"Speaking of which, here comes some warm-up girls."

"Yeah, I need to warm up," Santo said, pulling his wallet out.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"What are you doing? Put that up. No money before service. Keep your wallet put up until you get exactly what you want. Make them work for it." Nicola had played the game a million times, but tonight he was just a host to his horny brother. He had no desire to be toyed with or even fulfilled.

"Hey Nicola," a redhead in an overly exaggerated cheerleading skirt said as she sat on his lap. "We've missed you. Where have you been?" She rubbed through his hair.

"Hey, Carmen. I've been busy," he said, shifting her off of his penis. "Ladies, this is of course my twin brother, Santo. He's here from Miami. I thought you all could show him a good time while he is visiting our fair city. You know, give him a little real *southern hospitality*."

"I love that there are two of you," another redhead said, sitting on Santo's lap. "Can we have you both?" She

giggled infectiously as she felt Santo's erection.

"Oh, you know I don't get down like that," Nicola said. "But I'm sure that Santo would be really obliged to have you all to himself."

"OK," a third girl said, rubbing Santo's hair. "Well, follow us, and we'll get started," she said, looking at the redhead who was on Nicola's lap.

"Are you sure that you don't want to come?" Carmen asked one last time as she shifted back over on Nicola, looking for some signs of excitement and finding none.

"I'm sure. Can't you tell?" he asked, moving her once more.

"OK," she said, bouncing down. "Who should we charge this little warm-up to?"

"My platinum card will cover the fee. He'll cover the extras,"

Nicola said, giving Santo his card. "Don't lose this." He looked at his brother sternly. "Keep your eyes on these lovely ladies at all times. Some of them have very sticky fingers."

"Oh, I will," Santo said, pulling away from the girl biting on his ear.



*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"We'll be back," Carmen said, looking at Nicola as she pulled on Santo.

"I'm sure," Nicola said, sipping on his Jack and Coke.  
u u u

It was into Nicola's fifth drink that he realized that Grey was across the room in his own booth visibly drunk and staring off into space. Nicola sat there for a moment watching Grey. The sight was

comforting and yet disappointing. He wanted so much more for Ivy than that...than him. At most Grey was over his head with Ivy. He didn't know how to treat a real woman. Anger started to rise in the bottom of Nicola's stomach, but he was forced to suppress it when he thought of his sons.

Maybe Grey wasn't so bad. After all, he had allowed him to maintain contact with the most important people in his life. He could hear what Brooks would have said, in the back of his mind.

"What if the shoe was on the other foot, and you were Grey?

How many times would you have let Grey see his sons

before you skipped town with your family and never looked back?" Nicola's answer was simple. Grey would have never seen the boys or Ivy again. Yep, he thought as he belched. Grey wasn't so bad at all.

"We've got to come back here before I leave," Santo said, sitting down in the booth.

"You're finally back, huh?" Nicola hit Santo on the back. "Did you have fun?"

"Too much. Has the show started?"

"You've got about ten minutes," Nicola said, looking down at his watch.

"Good, I didn't want to miss anything." Santo wiggled around in his seat like a happy child.

Just as Nicola was settling in to watch the kitty call with his brother, out of the corner of his eye he saw Grey stand up and fall down, knocking down bottles of beer on the ground. Nicola stood stunned, watching a few waitresses run over to aid him. He 498

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

wanted to turn around and ignore him, but something would not let him.

"I'll be back," Nicola said to Santo, excusing himself

quietly. As Nicola walked up to Grey, their eyes met and a shock of discomfort struck through both of them, causing them to hesitate in their steps. But Nicola continued. Taking a deep breath, he stopped in front of Grey and smiled.

"How you doing tonight, Grey?" he asked, observing Grey up close now and absolutely sure that he didn't need to drive home.

"I'm doing pretty good." Grey's words were slurred and lightly coated with a hint of venom. "I'm having a *great* pre-bachelor party." He stumbled a little as he began to walk.

"Well, are you headed home?"

"Yeah. It's getting late, and it's nothing that we haven't seen here, right?" He hit Nicola's arm.

"You're going home to Ivy like this?" Grey's state concerned Nicola more now.

"No. I'm going home to an empty house *like this*. Ivy is out having a grand ole time without me." Grey mumbled untranslatable words under his breath. "What happened to her, to the woman that she used to be? Huh? Do you know? Because I don't know what the hell we've created." He looked confused at Nicola, begging for some understanding.

"I don't know who she used to be," Nicola said, seeing sadness in Grey that made it hard for him to hate him.

"I knew her. She used to need me," Grey said, wiping his mouth, sulking in his drunken pity. "She used to hang on to my every word. But not anymore." He shook his head furiously and smacked his lips. "You took everything from me, Agooostooo."

"You have her back now, Grey. You won," Nicola said, sitting beside him.

"No, Nicola. You won. Don't you see? You have the children. So you'll always have ties to the mother. And she'll always have ties to you." Grey sat up, disoriented, vision blurred, words slurred. 499

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Nope. I don't have my Ivy anymore. I've got your Ivy, and I'm not sure that I even want her...one week from the wedding."

"You're just drunk. Tomorrow you'll feel better, and," Nicola sighed, "it'll all be better."

"Where are my keys?" Grey asked, hitting his pants pockets as he stood up, wobbling from side to side. "I'm going to go on and get out of here."

"You don't look like you need to be driving." Nicola

Instantly recognized the inebriated state that Grey was in from his own many late nights at the Black Tie.

"Look, damn it. I'm fine," Grey said, spinning around and falling to the ground in a drunken haze. Hitting his head on the table, he touched his head and leaned against the booth.

"Is he alright?" an onlooker asked curiously.

"He's fine," Nicola said, picking him up. "He's just had a little too much to drink."

Th

is was a moment of truth for Nicola. If he wanted Ivy and his children all to himself without the competition, he could allow this man to stumble to his car and in the morning put his black suit in the cleaners for what was promising to be a very emotional social event. But if he wanted to truly see Ivy happy, he would either call a cab or take Grey home himself, insuring his safety for another day.

Putting Grey's arm around his shoulder, Nicola helped Grey up and decided that selfishness had its paybacks and selflessness had its rewards. It was time to give her up. It was time to let the bitterness go and move on for real this time. Setting Grey at a booth closer to the door, he left for a moment and went back to his brother.

"Hey Santo," he said, pulling out his keys.

"Yeah," Santo said, barely taking his eyes off of the catwalk.

"You gotta love these girls."

"Look, I've got to cut out of here for a moment. You don't mind, do you?"

"Why? What's wrong?"

500

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"A guy I know needs some help getting home."

"Sure." Santo hesitated. "Are you sure you aren't leaving with a woman?" A sly smile crossed his face. "Getting a little kitty before the kitty call?"

"Positive." Nicola laughed. "Do you remember how to get home?"

"Yeah. It's basically a straight shot, right? I go Mt. Moriah to I-240 and that will lead me downtown."

"Yeah. Just call me on my cell if you get lost or too drunk."

"Oh, you know I've never been a heavy drinker. Besides, I don't want to miss one minute of this."

"Alright," Nicola said, feeling a little better about leaving his brother alone his first night in Memphis.

Returning to Grey, Nicola got their jackets from the coat check and headed out to Grey's car. It wasn't until Nicola started the car that he realized that he might have been too drunk as well to make it to Grey's home. Turning on a little music and letting down the windows, he looked in Grey's wallet one more time to memorize his address and headed out into the streets. Grey was unconscious the entire time, occasionally moving around in the passenger seat. Driving quietly, Nicola had time to think, but not about Grey or Ivy. It was himself he was dwelling on. When he looked at Grey, he saw himself. He saw the drunk he used to be and sometimes still was. He asked himself now, why did he do it? What was it every time that made him go too far? He didn't want his boys to grow up thinking that it was OK to drink their problems away, because the truth was they never went away until he solved them. *How many problems have you solved?* he asked himself. Th

at was good question. Th

ere was also a shame inside

of him for the way that he had behaved. He still

remembered how Ivy had nursed him back, disgusted with his appearance but concerned for his health. To that very day, he knew that she had done her selfless deed out of love. Th

at one act validated every  
reason he had for helping Grey now.

501

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

One half-hour later, he arrived at Grey's house. Pulling into the driveway, he pondered for a moment his actions and then released his thought to the future actions needed to get the drunken young man from the car to his house. Struggling, Nicola threw Grey's arm over him and helped him to place his feet on the ground.

"Where are we?" Grey asked, finally focusing his eyes on the manicured lawn.

"Shit, I hope we're in front of your house," Nicola said, yawning.

"Oh, yeah," Grey laughed and fell down on the ground, where he heaved up his dinner.

Watching with sheer disgust and a hint of queasiness



in his own stomach, Nicola helped Grey once more up and to the door. Looking through Grey keys, he found what seemed to be the door key and opened the front door, allowing Grey to fumble through the hall to the alarm system.

"You can stay here tonight if you'd like," Grey said, leaving Nicola in the kitchen.

"No, I'm just gonna call a cab." He yawned again.

"Well at least allow me to pay the fare," Grey screamed from the bathroom.

"No, I'm fine. Th

anks, though." Nicola looked around Grey's condo for a moment, amazed at the similarities in their homes and the distinct differences. Where Grey had a picture of an African tribesman over the fireplace, Nicola had Old Italian artifacts he had gotten on his first trip to Sicily. Similar but different. Grey came out of the bathroom a little more alert but still extremely under the influence. Feeling disoriented, he walked slowly to the staircase and bid Nicola farewell until a new day.

"If you choose to leave, there's a cookie jar full of money on the right-side countertop." Turning quietly, he disappeared up the stairs to his room where he fell on his bed, unconscious and unconcerned.

Picking up the phone to dial the cab company, Nicola sat down on the couch and stared at a picture of Ivy standing gracefully with 502

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Grey at some formal function wrapped in his embrace and shining for the camera. Even in the picture, her eyes glittered like virgin diamonds. As his fingers glided over the phone dials, he heard the kitchen door open and close. Standing up, he looked curiously around the corner to find Ivy standing at the countertop taking off her shoes.

"I see you're still awake," she said, feeling someone in the room even with her back turned.

"Not for long," Nicola said, leaning against the door transfixed by her presence.

Turning suddenly, she looked frightened. "Nicola? What are you doing here?" she asked, looking around past him to the living room for Grey.

"I dropped Grey off. He was pretty drunk."

"*You* dropped him off?" Ivy asked, confused. "Did you two go out?"

"No. I saw him at the Black Tie. He was in no shape to drive home." Nicola felt awkward now that he saw

distrust in Ivy's eyes. What did she think he was doing there?

"Where is he now?" She inched towards the doorway.

"Upstairs," he said, moving out of the doorway. "You can go see if you like."

"OK," she said, walking slowly around him. "Don't go anywhere. I'll be right back."

"Alright," he said, laughing. She had to be kidding. Running up the stairs, Ivy could see Grey's door open and his bathroom light illuminating the bedroom. Walking closer to the door, she could see his feet hanging off the edge of the bed. Her heart stopped for a moment. What if he was dead? Sticking her head through the door, she turned the light on to find Grey snoring loudly and reeking of vomit and alcohol. He wasn't dead, but he was definitely drunk.

As she closed the door to his room, Ivy felt awful for the way that she had behaved with Nicola. She shook her head in disbelief of the situation. She would have never pegged Nicola for the

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

Good Samaritan when it came to Grey, but evidently she had judged wrongly. She held her stomach, feeling the pit of it ball into knots.

"I told you he was alright," Nicola said as she came back down the stairs.

"Yeah, you did," she said, looking at Grey's grandfather clock.

"God, it's late. You must be exhausted." Her manners came back to her slowly.

"Actually, I was just about to call a cab," he said, yawning again and leaning against the doorway.

"A cab? I don't think so. Come on. I'll take you home." She brushed past him as she went into the kitchen.

"You think that's a good idea?" he asked, unsure of her offer.

"Just a minute ago you thought I could be Jack the Ripper."

"I know. I'm sorry. Yes, I'm sure," she said, grabbing her purse and putting on her shoes. "Now come on. Grey won't miss me. He's too drunk, and believe me, you don't want to spend the night. He won't be the same person in the morning. "

"I hadn't planned on it," Nicola said, setting down Grey's keys.

"Let's go."

It was a long and quiet drive to Nicola's condo on the river. He slept most of the way, and Ivy listened to R. Kelly sing the blues about yet another woman that he had treated badly and was begging to forgive him.

Once or twice, Ivy looked over at Nicola sleeping peacefully and smiled. She had seen another side of him tonight, and honestly it had taken her by total surprise. His large, muscular arm hung over the armrest, and his hand touched her thigh slightly, causing a small arousal that she tried to repress by thinking of her sons. Th

at's how she had gotten in their predicament the first time. When she pulled up to his house, she moved his arm and watched the slits of eyes open to their full almond propensity. Gleaming at her now, he yawned again and looked at her radio clock. It was offi

cially four thirty, and Santo wasn't home yet. 504

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Can I invite you in for cup of coffee?" Nicola asked as he sat up.

"I don't think so," she said, hesitantly wiping her red eyes. She turned down the radio and turned to him.

"Well it's either that or you're forced to spend the night,

because you're too tired to make it home right now." He nudged her side.

"Come on. I promise not to bite."

"Alright," she said, feeling the tiredness overwhelm her. "But I only plan to stay a minute."

"Fine by me," Nicola said, opening his door. "I won't be up much longer anyway."

Ivy followed behind him quietly, hearing crickets chirp and feeling the dew on the grass as they cut across the lawn up to his front door. Th

e streetlights gleamed down on them as he fumbled with his keys. Finally opening the door, he hit his alarm and escorted her inside. She was greeted by the familiar smell of fresh linen and Ralph Lauren Cologne. Th

e cold air blasting from the

air conditioner, the dimmed lights, the perfectly cleaned house, and the picturesque bachelor pad were all things that she loved about his place. He closed the door behind her, threw his keys on the table, and watched her walk into his kitchen.

"Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right back," he said and headed up the back stairwell to his bedroom.

Sitting in the kitchen, Ivy noticed that Nicola had gotten rid of all the alcohol he used to store in such abundance. There were

pictures of the twins under magnets on his refrigerator along with their first ultrasound. There

the kitchen was fully stocked, *very unlike him*. In all, she was proud of the visible changes that she saw him making, slowly coming around to parenthood.

"I'm back," he said, bouncing around the corner in a pair of navy blue basketball shorts and a white t-shirt.

"There

it was quick," Ivy said, getting up to tend to the brewing coffee. "Would you like a cup, too?"

"Yeah," he said, walking back into the kitchen more rejuvenated.

505

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"You probably have as many pictures of the boys as I do,"

she said, looking at the refrigerator. Handing him a cup, she felt his fingers rub over hers, causing them

both to hesitate for just a moment. Ivy looked away.

"Th

anks," he said, sitting down at the table.

"You're welcome," she said, trying to control her rapidly beating heart. Until now she thought that she was well over Nicola's boyish good looks and charm, but she was clearly mistaken.

"So, is everything ready for the wedding?" he asked, trying to change the obvious subject they both dwelled on in silence.

"Nearly." Her voice streaked. Clearing it, she began again.

"Nearly, it is next week." She sat down across from him and sipped on her coffee.

"It doesn't seem like our kids have been here six weeks," he smiled at her.

"I know. I was just thinking that tonight." Their eyes met

again before she looked back down at her coffee. She wished that he would find something else to look at besides her. "How's Rachel?"

"She fine," Nicola said, looking down at his coffee. Touchy subject.



"She seemed...nice," Ivy said, running out of things to say. Suddenly, coffee didn't sound like such a good idea.

"So, this is what you really want?" Nicola finally asked. Enough about Rachel and idle chat about their children. For Nicola, he needed to know where Ivy's heart was.

"Yes, Nicola. I think so."

"Well, I really think that you should be sure before you do this." His nervousness began to show in his trembling voice.

"You should...make sure that he is the man that will make you happy."

"Everyone keeps telling me that, as if I don't already know."

She looked up and sighed.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Do you know?" His felt his nerve nearly leaving him with every word. "I mean, do you know that he's the one?" His eyes darted, unable to make eye contact for

fear of being found out.

“At times.” And finally her nerve had left her. “It’s hard to explain, especially at nearly five in the morning.” She wiped her tired eyes, trying to fight unneeded agitation.

“Point taken,” he said, sipping his coffee.

“Th

anks for tonight, though,” she said, setting down her cup.

“What you did...well, it was extremely thoughtful.”

“I just remember when someone did something like that for me once.” He didn’t look up.

“It was out of the same humanity that came from you tonight.”

“I thought what you did came out of love,” he said, catching her off guard. “But you’re right; tonight was out of humanity and respect.”

“Respect for him?”

“No, respect for you.”

“Right. Well, I’d better go.” Pulling away from table, she stood up and stretched.

"OK," Nicola's voice faded. He didn't want her to go.

"Well, thanks for bringing me home."

"No problem." She couldn't bring herself to look him in his eyes.

Walking to the door, Ivy felt Nicola watching her body as he walked behind her. Th

e thought made her nearly stumble. She

turned around slowly, scared to face him.

"I'll see you later," she said, hugging him softly, weakly.

"Alright, take care," he said, hugging and at the same time releasing her.

As Ivy opened the door to leave, she felt Nicola's fingers around her again. She turned to see his eyes free of the hooded sexual look she had once seen but full of a new needy look that matched that of a lonely soul. She hugged him once more, understanding it was  
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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

hard for him to let go. What he didn't know was that it was hard for her to let go also.

"Ivy," Nicola said, pulling her to him. "What am I

suppose to do without you?"

"Don't do this to now, please." She finally looked at him, through him and began to feel repressed emotions pumping through her veins. She could feel his breath on her shoulders. He rubbed her arms softly and kept his eyes on hers. Like a deer in headlights, she stopped.

"Why do you think that all of this happened?" he asked, feeling his emotions boil over. "Why do you think that you had my children, that I feel all of these things for you when we only spent one night together?" He searched his heart for the right words.

"I don't know," Ivy said, faintly. "I ask the same questions all the time."

"Tell me that you don't want me," Nicola said as he held her body up against the wall. "Maybe if you were to tell me that, I would stop feeling like I feel every day of my life." He looked at her body as she breathed heavily. Finally, he looked back up at her. "Ivy, something has happened to me. I'm not the same man anymore."

"Well, I'm not the same woman, either." Ivy tried to slow her breathing.

"Baby, I need you," Nicola protested.

"You don't need me. You don't need anybody," Ivy said,

envying Nicola's strength.

Nicola looked at her, perplexed. "Let me have you one last time," he asked, in husky whisper. He pushed his body up against hers and lifted her up into his arms. "Before you go and ruin both of our lives by marrying this guy..."

"Shh," Ivy said, putting her fingers over his lips. "Don't say that."

Ivy's thoughts tumbled over the last few months. She thought about Grey's constant physical rejection. She thought of his 508

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

many late-night meetings and business trips. Her heart ached with heaviness. She leaned into Nicola and let tears fall from her eyes. She held onto him tightly, smelling his cologne and rubbing through his beautiful chocolate locks. Was it possible that he could hurt inside the way that she did now? Was it possible for anyone to feel the utter confusion and loneliness that she endured daily?

She cried as she held on to his muscular body.

"It's OK, baby. I feel it, too. Just let it out," Nicola said, holding her tightly. "It's OK."

"No, it's not OK. I'm not OK," Ivy said in a frantic state. "God, I'm so confused, Nicola!" Her head was still spinning around from the drinks earlier.

"Well, I'm not." Nicola pulled her face to him. "I know exactly what I want."

Ivy sniffed

and said, "What is that you want? Do you just want to fuck me ...use me up and..."

Nicola was shocked. *Fuck me?* Ivy was on edge. He tried to find a way to comfort her. "Whoa, Ivy. No, I don't want use you. I want to be with you. I want to ...love you."

"You want to love me?" Her lips were covered with tears.

"Yes."

"Or do you want to make love to me?" The

elbow strap of her dress

fell over, revealing her bare shoulder and a portion of her aroused breast.

"Both. One more than the other." Nicola looked at her. The

bare skin pushed him to insanity. His mouth watered.

“And if I can’t allow you to do the more risky of the two, would you settle for just my body?” Her brown eyes glared at him both angry and lovingly.

“No. I won’t settle. I’m going to have all of you.”

Tears flowed from her soft eyes. “It’s not that easy, Nicola. I’m with another man.”

Infuriated, Nicola pulled her to him and tore her dress from her body. With her dress in one hand and her body in the other he kissed her, forced her to give herself to him. At first it was 509

*Latrivia S. Nelson*

hard for Ivy to respond to Nicola for fear of what would happen, but the softness of his own full lips forced her lips open, and the intensely sweet taste of his kiss injected the intoxicating venom he had used on her nearly a year ago. Her eyes closed. In one motion, Nicola picked her up, carried her to the couch, and crawled over her body, shielding her from sight.

He could feel his body tensing up as he hovered over her, kissing her lips so passionately it brought tears to his eyes. They

fell on to her lips, warm and salty.

"We shouldn't," Ivy whispered as he sucked her breast through her red lace bra.

"Why?" He kissed her lips again. "Why?" he asked once more when she didn't respond.

"Because...it's wrong. I'm getting married next week." She looked at his muscles bulging and felt his body pushing against hers. "Because it won't help the situation. It'll just make everything worse."

"How could anything be worse than allowing what we have to just be thrown away?"

"But I'm getting married next week," Ivy said, aching to have him inside of her.

"End this bullshit engagement! Be with me," Nicola demanded as he kissed her long warm neck softly, tasting her flesh with his tongue; his hands massaged her back and his hot body pushed softly against hers.

"Be with you? Nicola, you want a girlfriend. I want a husband,"

Ivy groaned and closed her eyes involuntarily, shuddering under him.

Nicola stopped abruptly. He couldn't reply to that, not that. His emotions attacked him. Ivy opened her eyes and looked at him with his skin flushed and his red lips



wet with her kiss. Perfectly still, he whispered. "I never said that I didn't want a wife."

"You never said that you did either. It doesn't really matter right now, does it? We only have one night." Ivy looked back at 510

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

him, more mature than she had ever been, so in tune with her feelings that she was commanding in her tone.

"How can I say no? How can I say anything?"

"You don't have to say anything, Nicola. It's OK. I understand."

Ivy's perfume numbed Nicola's senses, and her moans awoke the vitality he had lost somewhere in the last year. Slowly, she felt his strong hands remove her underwear. Tears fell on her neck as he kissed it softly, savoring every second with her. Suddenly, it occurred to Nicola that Ivy had stolen a piece of him and kept it locked in the bosom of her heart. He intended to take it back now as he felt her grip his back, insinuating that the thoughts in the back of her mind would take form in action. Feeling the warm and moist arousal ripen between her warm thighs, he watched her body lose all tenseness and submit willingly again. Ivy started to respond, to open as she did so long ago; he kissed her lips.

“Nicola,” Ivy whispered, holding onto Nicola’s head and rubbing through his soft, curly hair.

“Yeah?”

“I haven’t been with Grey since before I had the children.”

“Really?” Nicola was dumbfounded but extremely pleased.

“Well, I haven’t been with anyone for nearly five months.”

“Why?” Ivy’s mind raced. She thought he had been a playboy this entire time.

“I was waiting.” He rose up and looked her in her eyes.

“For me?” Tears formed in the corners of her eyes. Nicola nodded. “Of course for you. I keep saying it, and yet you don’t seem to hear me. I love you.”

“I’ve been through so much; it’s just hard to comprehend what that word means anymore.” Tears continued to fall.

“Why do you say this shit to me?” His skin was on fire. “Ivy, I do love you.”

“I don’t know that.”

“You do know that.”

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Still there was a look of uncertainty on Ivy’s face, even after Nicola confessed his love. Th

e anger in his heart for Grey and the

love and desire he had in his heart for Ivy erupted. He reached for her and pulled her down on the couch and kissed her passionately. Pulling her warm thighs open and with his large hands gripping her hips down on the couch, he thrust deep into her body. Nicola let out virile sounds of ecstasy. Th

e power of his dominance caused

Ivy to scream out so loud it nearly scared her. How wonderful this feeling was to her! He was like a perfect key unlocking all of the fantasies hidden in her mind. With powerful motions into her abyss, he held her closely, breathing in her ear and trying hard to focus on something other than the glorious smell of her perfume. To Ivy, he had never been more of a reminder of how joyous losing control could be. It was his passion, his embrace that made her realize how it could feel to be loved and to be desired. She tried desperately to fi ght

him, but she could not. She wanted to anger him, to make him feel the way that she had felt since the day he had kissed her.

Nicola caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror across the room totally ravaging the woman he loved. He realized that he was out of control. He slowed down, loosened the grip on the ball of her hair he had in his fist, and released his other hand from her neck.

"I'm sorry," he said, panting and sweating. He wiped his face.

"Did I hurt you?" He could see his handprint around her neck.

"No." Catching her breath, Ivy looked up at him wide-eyed. He leaned over and kissed her softly this time, more lovingly.

"Baby, we should go up to my bedroom. I don't want to make love to you like this." Still inside of her, Nicola realized where he was. On the couch, pinned down, and on the verge of an eruption. *Not like this*, he thought. From him, she deserved more. He had to lay her down properly, somewhere they could explore each other with more room and the ability to move around. There was

so much that he wanted to do to her all night and even into the next morning.

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"In just a minute," she whispered, not wanting him to move.

"You feel so good." Her eyes were lazy again, already becoming drained from his very masterful vengeance.

Nicola smiled back at her, slowly moving between her thighs.

"You are so beautiful," he said, rubbing the hair from her face. Ivy couldn't believe that she had allowed herself to get caught in the same situation again. Here she was less than a week from marrying Grey, and Nicola was making love to her again! She had tried to fight him, but looking at his well-sculpted olive-toned body, the smell of his cologne, the shape of his heart-shaped lips, the feel of his powerful thrust, it was obvious to her that her feelings for him were far more powerful than she had first known. Maybe this was a sign. Maybe Grey was the wrong one. Her thoughts and his thrusts consumed her.

"Nico, are you in here, man?" Santo asked, busting through the front door with a wide grin on his face, lipstick on his collar, and visible hickies on his neck. "Nico?" Santo yelled.

“Who is that?” Ivy whispered, surprised and somewhat afraid.

“Wait a minute, Santo. I’ve got company.” Nicola quickly grabbed her clothes and dressed her.

“Damn, Ivy, I’m sorry,” Nicola said, finally. He sat up on the couch, wanting to kill his brother for the disturbance. Sitting up to see the voice hidden across the room, Ivy looked over, stunned at Santo’s appearance. Pulling her strap up, she cleared her voice and looked to Nicola for an explanation. Why were there two of him standing in his living room?

“Nicola?” Ivy asked, confused. “What is...going on?” She held her mouth, dumbfounded.

“Oh, I’m sorry, man,” Santo said, caught off guard. He stumbled over his own feet.

“Ivy, this *stunnad* is my twin brother, Santo. He’s staying with me while he and my family are vacationing here in Memphis. Th

ey came to see our kids.” Nicola looked sternly at Santo after 513

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he pulled on his shorts. “Santo, this is Ivy Winters, the mother of my children.”

Santo stood stupefied by his clumsy interruption and Ivy's beauty, not to mention the presence of an otherwise engaged woman in the intimate embrace of his brother. Beet red with embarrassment, he closed the front door and smiled, sure that Nicola would kill him later.

"And it is nice to meet you, ma'am," he said, giving a weak wave. He knew better than to walk too close to the couch. "I've heard such wonderful things about you." Words slurred, he gave a big Agosto smile, revealing their signature dimples.

"Well, I wish that I could say the same, but I'm afraid I didn't know you even existed until now," Ivy said, pushing Nicola away from her. She grabbed her slingbacks and purse and walked towards the door still barefoot. "What else have you *failed* to tell me, Nicola?" she asked, furiously.

"Wait, Ivy," Nicola said, wiping her lipstick off of his face, hating the mood change.

"I'm out of here," she said, with her face in a scowl. Her voice drifted off. "Santo, it was nice meeting you and to find out that *you* exist."

"Nice to meet you too, Ivy," Santo said, sitting down on the accent chair dizzy and drunk.

"I'll see you out," Nicola said, rolling his eyes at Santo before he followed Ivy to the door.

"How thoughtful of you," Ivy said condescendingly. Opening the door for Ivy, Nicola tried to move closer to her again, but Ivy pushed past him, elbowing him in the chest. Turning around, frustrated, she sighed.

"You're such a fake," she said, shaking her head. "Really, how long has it been for you, Nicola? Did you get you a little tonight at the Black Tie? How about the other night with Rachel?"

Nicola huff ed. "Why would I lie about something like that?

You would have slept with me regardless."

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*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Oh really?" Ivy snarled. "Just who in the hell do you think that you are?"

"Th

e exact same man that was making love to you a second ago. So do we go on like none of this matters?" Nicola asked, leaning against the door while she stood on the porch, looking away in frustration.



"No, it matters, Nicola," she said, rolling her eyes.  
"More than you possibly know."

"Why are you marrying him, Ivy?" Nicola retorted.

"Because I love him, Nicola. No." She threw her index finger up in protest of Santo's existence. "*Because I know him*. Is it not obvious that I don't know you, after that little show in there? I didn't even know that you had a twin brother!" She gasped. "Th at

information may have been helpful during the pregnancy." Pulling a strand of hair from her face, she placed her hand on her hip, visibly agitated.

"What is it that you want me to say? I didn't know you very well when we discovered that you were having twins...and it could have been sheer coincidence that I had a twin brother." He walked towards her, lowering his voice. "I didn't want to tell you and have you thinking the children were mine prematurely. But that's beside the point. How can you say that you love him when three minutes ago, I was inside of you? For that matter, how can you marry him when I'm still inside your heart?" Nicola instantly felt cheesy for exposing himself, but he had to try to win her over. Ivy stopped on her heels and whirled around. "I slipped. Sue me!" Beginning to walk away again, she heard Nicola behind her, still following closely.

“Slip, my ass. You didn’t slip!” Nicola exclaimed, starting to raise his voice again. “You love me, and you know it! And I know that I love you! And you would rather marry this guy to save face than be with me, because I’m not some big shit *want-to-be* politician!”  
Th

e neighbors’ lights came on as a few onlookers peered from behind their blinds at the raging couple. He pulled her arm to him.

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Snatching it away, Ivy shook her head emphatically. “If you think that is the only reason that I’m marrying Grey, then you’re terribly confused about me and this entire situation!” Ivy shouted.

“I’ve put myself on Front Street this entire time for you, Ivy. I don’t know how in the hell to reach you. What does it take?

Please tell me for the love of God.” Nicola’s voice was laced with sarcasm.

“Reach me? Reach me?” Ivy’s voice streaked. “When have you ever even asked for me? How do I know that getting to me isn’t really about getting to Grey? How do I know anything about you, Nicola? Every time I think

we're getting close, you pull away. And what reason do you have? Why are you so distant?"

"I'm not distant."

"Yes, you are, Nicola," Ivy protested. "I know that you are an aggressive man about life, about your work and your friends, but not about me. Not about my heart ...just my body." Ivy drew a deep breath. "I'm tired of being treated like a pawn in a chess game. I want it to be over already. I want to rest!"

"Th

ere you go, blaming this entire situation on me! It's not all my fucking fault! What about the little games that you play with me and with Grey? You know, you can't always have the both of us, Ivy. Eventually, you're going to have to give one of us up completely. I mean, you act as though you don't want to see me with anyone, but yet, you don't want me yourself. What am I suppose to think? What am I suppose to do? You say that you're a woman. Th

en make *grown-woman* choices. You know that you don't love that man anymore than I love Rachel..."

"I do love him," Ivy snapped, wiping crocodile tears from her eyes.

"But you're not in love with him." Nicola snapped back.

"What are you worried about...what other people might say if you leave him this late in the game? Fuck that." He grabbed her in his arms, ready to kiss her open mouth again.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Easy for you to say. You've never had one meaningful relationship in your entire life." She seethed with anger. She stared into his eyes, instantly seeing the hurt.

"You're right. I've had two." Still holding her, Nicola loosened his grip. "But I'm tired of chasing you, Ivy. You know how I feel about you, but you never really say how you feel about me. Even in there, I confessed that I love you, but you held onto your feelings. And that's just being selfish. Why should I tell you everything, destroy myself and everyone that I care about simply to be rejected again? I need some kind of wall to survive in this shit that I've gotten into with you." He released her reluctantly, inwardly still wanting her badly.

"I don't *know* you. Tonight was a perfect example of how little I know about Nicola Michael Agosto. And that scares me. Everyone is always worried about their feelings...how this affects them. What about what I want...huh? Does anyone give a damn about that?" She touched her head, feeling a headache coming. "I'm tired of the being the bone that you and Grey fight

over. I'm tired of my kids being subjected to it." She wiped her tears. "*Grown-woman decisions*, huh? OK. How about I stick with what I know. It's safe. It's simple. It's real."

"It's the easy way out, Ivy. You don't have to think for yourself. Around him you're all prim and proper, but that isn't you. Sometimes, you just want to be yourself, let go, say what's on your mind, and not worry about it being in the gossip columns in the morning. You need room and time to be yourself, just like anyone else."

"Th

is is who I am!" Ivy screamed.

"Yes, right now. But look who's here. Me! I bring the truth, the passion out of you. How many times do you actually scream when it hurts, laugh because it's really funny, and cry because it's really screwed up? How many times does a man grab you by the hair and give you what you really need!"

"What do you think that I really need, Nicola?"

"You don't want to hear what I think that you need."

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"No, I want to hear it."

"You need a real man."

"And is that man you? You think that just because you keep me in the dark better than he does that makes it all better?"

"Hey, I'll admit that I did back off , but I had my reasons, and they weren't selfi sh ones."

"Another excuse!"

"You're just pissed off , because I actually see you, Ivy."

"And you're pissed off , because I really see you."

"But I'm the only one here that's OK with that, and that's the damn problem."

"I'm glad that this entire situation is so easy for you to dissect all the way from the nose-bleed section."

"You mean to tell me that you're actually going to sit here and tell me that I haven't done more than my part in this shit?" Nicola shook his head and turned to walk away.

Ivy felt instant guilt, but too angry to give up, she continued,

"Don't you dare throw that guilt trip on me, Nicola! Turn

around and face me!" She darted in front of him.

"Wait." She tried to gather her thoughts. "I want you to see this from my side. Why should I play the fool again, when there is so much for me to lose? You and Grey could leave and be fine. No babies. No responsibilities. It would all fall on me."

"So you're staying with Grey because you're scared to be alone."

"No! Are you listening to me?"

"Yeah. You're telling me that I'm a bigger gamble than Grey."

"But do you understand why?" she asked him softly. Nicola looked her in her eyes for a moment silently. His brown eyes burned through her. "I'm a bigger gamble, because I really want to be with you, and there is no ulterior motive involved."

"You just think that you want me, Nicola. But want me how, as your friend, your girlfriend? I bet you can't even think of me as your wife. You say that you love me, but you admit to being with other women."

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Nicola stood looking at her for a moment and then

cracked a twisted little smile. "Are you serious?" He started to laugh aloud. He laid his large hand on her little shoulder. "I've had a few women since you and I hooked up. Yes. But here's the thing, so has Grey."

"Oh, you just love throwing that in my face."

"It's the truth. Th

is is the man you're about to marry. And even though he's been cheating on you and doing his thing, you're still with him. You've been with him the entire time. But all this finger pointing includes you too, because I still have your scent on me. And I know it didn't get there by itself."

"How dare you," she cut her eyes at him.

"You've got to search your heart to find what you want in all of this. I know what I want. And I was telling the truth about waiting. I have. Grey knows what he wants too... *I'm not sure you two have the same reason for this marriage thing.* But it's your choice. I won't push you anymore."

"I want Grey," Ivy said, in a low whisper.

Nicola looked away from her, trying not to let her see that she had just knocked the wind out of him. Finally, seeing that his reasoning with her had gone nowhere, he rested. Lifting her chin, he kissed her lips softly and



rubbed her cool shoulders.

"You keep telling yourself that and maybe you'll be happy with him, being his fucking Pinocchio." His voiced cracked, ached for understanding.

Trying to fight tears, she gathered herself. "Go to hell, Nicola, if you aren't already there," she said, walking off quietly. Nicola stood in his front yard watching her drive off into the sunrise, with her drop-top down and hair flowing into the wind, running from him. Feeling the dew under his feet, he picked up his newspaper and dragged himself back inside of his house. *What a fucking night.*

He was so close to breaking through Ivy's defenses; he could finally feel them waning. So what had happened? Santo wasn't really the reason for her anger. Something else was driving her 519

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away. But he was so tired of fighting to figure it all out. After all, he had the love of his children. She had given more than her share to him. Ivy was right; it was time for her to be happy. Besides, Grey was still holding Trina over his head, even after Brooks' death. It had been a stretch to ask for her tonight. If Ivy had chosen to be with him for good, he would have surely cost Trina her marriage to Emerald and her friendship to Ivy, and more than likely he would have still lost her.

Slamming the door behind him, he walked past Santo, who had passed out on the couch, and went up to his room.

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Chapter Thirty-Two:

Wake Up!



**Chapter 32**

**WAKE UP!**

Th

**he early morning sun blasted into Grey's room as he woke from a comfortable slumber. Rolling over, he felt for the warmth of Ivy's body. Eyes opened, he realized that he was alone.**

*Why would she be here*, Grey thought to himself as he tried to sit up and fight what seemed to be a hellacious hangover. Pulling himself to the end of the bed, his feet snuggled into his plush carpet, allowing him to hold onto the nightstand and pull himself up from the bed.

He stood over the sink, watching the hot water cascade over the black marble, and yawned profusely. Washing his face, Grey thought back to the previous night and debated whether or not Nicola had truly driven him home. Th

e whole notion was sort of

hard to swallow. Th

e guy he hated more than anyone else in this world was slowly gaining some of his respect. Maybe he could trust him. Maybe he was wrong about his intentions. *OK, that wasn't happening, but it was a square gesture all the same.* Peeling his clothes off of his body, he stepped into the shower to think further

about the situation before church. He couldn't 523

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miss service this Sunday. Today was Men's Day at Tennessee Boulevard Pentecostal Church, and he had to be there to support his father, who was a guest speaker, at eleven o'clock. After a thorough cleansing, a hot breakfast, and a little television, Grey headed out of his house clean-shaven and dressed immaculately in a black tailor-made Jones New York suit with white dress shirt and tie and his favorite black Ralph Lauren dress shoes shining to perfection.

By memory, Grey drove through the quiet streets of Harbor Town, trying desperately to remember how Ivy had gotten him to Nicola's house the week prior. He didn't call first or even think through his decision to visit him on such short notice. If he had thought it through, he may have changed his mind. Spotting Nicola's truck, he pulled into the drive and looked down at his watch. It was still only eight o'clock in the morning. Nicola was surely still asleep.

Walking to the front door, Grey could feel his heart moving slowly up into his throat. He had every reason to be nervous and every reason to feel stupid, but it was too late to walk away. Pushing himself to get past his emotions, Grey quickly rang the doorbell and stood back, anxiously awaiting a reply. Minutes later the door opened slowly and a man in black silk boxers and a

black tank top opened the door.

“Can I help you?” Santo asked, peering at Grey through his blood-shot eyes.

“Yeah, I just wanted to come by and talk to you for a minute. I hope it’s not too early.”

“What time is?” Santo looked down at his watch. “It’s already eight?” He was stunned that he had slept that long.

“Yeah, it’s eight,” Grey said, confused by Santo’s strange reaction to him.

“Well, come in. You must want Nicola. I’ll get him for you,”

he said, opening the door wider.

Grey walked in and looked back at Santo. “You’re not Nicola?”

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“No, I’m his twin brother Santo.” Santo offered his hand. “And you are?”

“I’m Grey Henderson...Ivy’s fi ancé.” Grey instantly

thought of the children. Th

is is just one more secret that Ivy has kept from me, he said to himself.

"Oh," Santo said, shocked. "OK." He stared for a long minute before excusing himself to get Nicola. "Well, isn't that something?"

he said, recalling Ivy's disposition the previous night. It was a good thing that he had interrupted Nicola the night before or Ivy may have still been there on the couch with his brother. "I'll be right back," he said to Grey, trying to repress a huge grin. Opening the door to this brother's room, Santo looked back once more before he went in and closed the door. Th is was more

action he had seen on the home front since his big decision to marry his brother's ex-girlfriend nearly ten years ago. Walking over to the bed where Nicola lay snoring lightly, he nudged his leg.

"Nicola, wake up," he whispered. "Nico."

"What?" Nicola said without opening his eyes. "What the hell do you want this early in the morning?"

"You know, you really aren't a morning person," Santo said, watching the slits of his brother's eyes finally open, his coal-black eyebrows arched in frustration.

"I'm just in a bad mood. Can't you tell?" Nicola shifted slightly.

"Well, that's been going on for thirty years." Santo sighed.

"Look, I told you that I was sorry about last night, but you did tell me that you weren't going home with a woman."

"Yeah. Did you wake me up to tell me this or what?"

"No. Actually, you have a visitor." Santo sat down on the bed.

"Ivy?" Nicola sat up quickly.

"Close but no cigar. It's Grey." Santo tried to repress his smile and the overwhelming need to laugh.

"What the hell does he want?" Nicola laid his head back on his pillow and rubbed his aching temples.

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"To talk to you. Evidently. Hey, maybe he wants to duke it with you. Maybe he knows about last night." Santo chuckled.

"You are really enjoying this, aren't you?" Nicola asked,

looking over at Santo, excited as a five-year-old boy on Christmas morning.

"I'm just watching in total fucking awe," Santo said, yawning.

"Man, I miss being a bachelor."

"Oh, it's just great," Nicola said sarcastically as he threw his pillow at his brother.

Still half asleep, Nicola walked into the living room unsure of what Grey wanted. Did he know about Ivy's little trip to his house last night? Did he know what they had nearly done? Going straight to the kitchen to put on a pot of coffee, Nicola looked at Grey for a moment before speaking.

"What's wrong?" Nicola finally said.

"Nothing. Look, I know that it's early, but I need to talk to you."

"Sure. Would you like some coffee?" he asked, holding up the pot.

"No thanks."

"Well, I'm gonna have some. Come on in and have a seat,"



Nicola said, pointing at the kitchen table.

“Th

anks.” Grey walked over and sat down at the table.

“You look a lot better than last night,” Nicola said, retrieving a cup from his cabinet.

“I feel a lot better, too. Actually, last night is the reason that I’m here. I wanted to thank you for what you did. I know that you and I haven’t been on good terms from day one, but we both know that under *other* circumstances we wouldn’t have had any problem with each other.”

“Yeah, I know,” Nicola said, pouring the coffee. *What was he getting at?*

“But what you did last night was really ...commendable.” Grey searched for the proper thing to say. “And I appreciate it.”

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“No problem, man. I’ve been there,” Nicola said, sitting down at the table. *Th*

*is guy came all the way over here to tell me this,*

Nicola thought inwardly.

"Yeah, well it seems like lately I'm always *there*." There was a

brief silence.

"So, is that it? Nothing else?" Nicola waited for an explosion.

"One more thing. I want to invite you, Rachel, and your brother and whatever other family you have here to the wedding and festivities. I want to go into this marriage with good blood between us. It'll be good for all of our families. Good for the children. So what do you say?" Grey paused. Nicola felt short of breath and set down his coffee. As he looked away, he could see Santo out of the corner of his eye standing in the living room stupefied, mirroring the same look of bafflement

that he had on his face. *So there is a catch*, Nicola thought.

"Look, I don't think that's a good idea," Nicola said, stretching. He didn't want to mislead Grey, as easy as it was to do. He knew that he still had feelings for Ivy even if she had rejected him. Plus, this was asking too much of any sane man.

"Well, we've all moved on. Th

is is the way to put it all behind

us. I want to end this war, including that crap about Trina. It was weak of me to threaten you with that. I was just in a difficult place,

pinned in a corner really." Grey reasoned with Nicola without pleading, trying to be the bigger man.

"What about Ivy? Does she feel the same way?" Nicola thought of their fight the night before.

"I wouldn't be here if she didn't," Grey said, lying. "In fact, it was sort of her idea as well...a united front. She just wants to be happy, you know. And nothing would make her happier than having you and your family at the wedding to close this chapter of our lives." He crossed his legs as he tried to close the deal.

"I see," Nicola said, pouring his coffee. Thinking back to the

night before, it all made sense to him now. Ivy wanted him to see for himself that she was moving on and leaving whatever they 527

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had behind. "Well, if that is what she wants, then I'll do it." *I'll show her.*

"Great," Grey said, feeling accomplished. "Well, I'll send over a schedule of the activities and your invitations."

"Alright." Nicola peered at him untrustingly.

"OK. Well, I had better go." Grey stood up and straightened his suit.

"Yeah," Nicola said, standing up as well.

"Nice meeting you, Santo," Grey said, before he headed out of the door.

"Likewise, Grey," Santo said, smiling at Nicola. As Grey closed the door behind him, Nicola sat back down in the chair and sighed. "Ain't that something," Nicola said, sipping his coffee. "I wonder why Ivy didn't just tell me herself."

"After last night, maybe she felt guilty," Santo reasoned. "Man, could you imagine the chaos this morning if I hadn't disturbed you and Ivy, and Grey showed up this morning. He would have...hell, I don't know what the man might have done if he pulled up and saw his fiancée's car in the driveway at the crack of dawn."

"Everything happens for a reason." Nicola wiped his tired eyes.

"I'm just ready for it all to be over, man."

“Even still, are you sure that you just want to hand her over to Grey?”

“Hand Ivy over?” Nicola chuckled. “Ivy’s the one with all the control. Besides that she’s pissed at me for not telling her about you.”

“Women get over being pissed. Believe me, I know. I’ve been married for ten years to a woman with constant irrational mood swings.” Santo yawned.

“Look at us. We aren’t kids anymore. And I’m tired of the rat race. I want a real relationship, Santo. I want what you have, what my father has. I want to joke at the possibility of cheating on my wife, but not mean it.” He sipped his coffee. “The strip clubs, the

random women, and the games don’t do it for me anymore. I’ve

### *Ivy’s Twisted Vine*

done it long enough...too long. But now that I’ve changed who I am inside, it’s like I still can’t find happiness.”

Santo ignored Nicola’s sincere pleas in his hung-over state. “I wish that I had a little...variety. You’ve got a legal whorehouse of beautiful women at your discretion. You’ve got Ivy, who is *hot*. I didn’t believe how hot until I saw her, but...wow. Then, I’m sure

that Rachel is just as beautiful. What else could a man want?"

"Peace," Nicola said, softly. "Peace."

u u u

It was as though Grey had slapped Ivy with a wet rag across her face when he told her the news of the Agosto family's attendance at her wedding festivities. She stood holding one of the babies and trying to grasp a breath of her own to reply. Blinking every once in a while she watched him explain his reasoning. She couldn't raise her voice because they were at his parent's house, hardly the place for a harsh word against Mrs. Henderson's wonderful youngest son. But she thought the words in her mind. Clinching her teeth as a guest walked between them through the hall, she finally spoke.

"Why would you invite this man to our wedding?" she asked as she realized that the baby was sucking on an empty bottle.

"What is going on in your head?" She removed the bottle abruptly and shoved it into Grey's chest.

"Th

is wedding is a perfect opportunity to squash this

quarrel between us.” Grey looked around to make sure that no one could hear them. “You know what...let’s go into the study.”

“So people won’t hear me scream at you?” Her eyes narrowed.

“So people won’t be in our business.” He ushered her in to the room quietly.

Walking into the dim study that hid itself away from the afternoon sun with its dark, heavy, burgundy velvet drapes, Grey closed the door behind him. He leaned against the doors and 529

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propped his foot up leisurely. Placing his perfectly manicured hands on her bare shoulders he looked her in her eyes.

“I think that it’s a good decision. Will you just back me on this?” he said in a clear crisp whisper. “To change our minds now, after inviting him, would show great signs of weakness.”

“What would make you think that it’s a good decision?” she asked, in an equally low tone, searching his eyes for just one clue. *Had the man gone insane? Did he know about last night?*

"People need to see that we have an understanding and that you and I are going into this marriage without outside interference."

"Was this one of your father's political schemes?" she said, looking around the room.

"Of course not. Th

is was all my idea." He spoke proudly of

his decision. "Th

e family doesn't even know yet, but I'm sure that everyone will love it. I wish you would see how this new position places us in the public eye. Right now, we are a laughing stock. Everyone knows about the baby *and Nicola*, but if we use this to make a statement, there will be nothing to laugh at and no one to talk about." His voice became firm as he looked across the room at the portrait of his family. "I make a formal statement of intention to run for Congress the day after we marry. This union will secure

my seat. People need to know that I have my home in order."

"So this is about your campaign?"

Grey's voice rose. "No, this is about my entire life." He saw that his tone startled her. Calming down, he began



again. "I love you, but you made a stupid decision with this guy, and *everyone* that has worked so hard to get me...us here shouldn't have to take the fall for it." He walked across the room to gain distance as he became agitated. "Ivy, you have to see how this looks."

"I do," she finally said, feeling lowly, unaware that this was Grey's design for her.

"Th

en you agree with me that we need to take some action together," he said, preparing to close the deal.

"If you feel like we should..." Her voice trembled as she tried to keep from crying.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Good." He turned and smiled at her. "I knew that I could count on you for this."

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## Chapter Thirty-Three:

### Decisions



## **Chapter 33**

### **DECISIONS**

**“They’ve all lost their minds,” Sadie said to Madison, who drove silently up to the entrance of the Peabody Hotel.**

**“I couldn’t agree with you more, Sadie, but we have to think of Ivy.” Madison kept his opinion brief in hopes of neutralizing the volatile situation.**

"I thought we raised her better than this. She's just running up behind Grey like a little lost puppy. I told her last night what I'm starting to think of him, and she already knows what I think of his parents. Th

e amazing thing is that Nicola is going through with all this, too." Sadie took a breather.

"Well, it's obvious that Nicola loves her. He's just doing what's best for his children." He placed his free hand over Sadie's. "Try to put your feelings to the side for her sake. I know, with you, it's not easy. But just for tonight..."

"You would walk through hot coals for that girl," Sadie said as the valet opened her door.

"And you wouldn't?" Madison said, giving an exhausted sigh.

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"Not when there is a better option for the both of us." Sadie concluded her rant with a roll of her eyes and got out of the car. u u u

After Grey told his father of his plans to make peace with Nicola, they decided to have a formal gathering at

the Peabody Hotel to bring the Henderson, Winters, and Agosto families together for dinner. Th

e Agosto family accepted to support Nicola and meet the opposing team. And no one in the Winters family took the news well, but they accepted it, as they had to support Ivy during her time of desperate need.

Emerald tried to back out of the dinner at first, but Trina's persistence made him change his mind. Th

ey had arrived just

moments before Sadie and Madison and had been escorted to the small dining hall where everyone was waiting. With a bit of a tug and a few hard stares, Trina had gotten Emerald to be sociable while in public. He, however, still had a great deal of hate towards his soon-to-be brother-in-law and a lot of anger towards Ivy for taking him back.

"You know, regardless of how you feel about Grey, you need to be on your best behavior tonight," Trina whispered softly in Emerald's ear.

"I am already being as nice as possible," Emerald said, smiling.

"It's bordering on ass-kissing."

"Just remember that this was Grey's idea and not his

whole family's."

"Th

at's what Ivy told you, but you don't actually believe her, do you?"

"Yes, I do. Ivy is my best friend. She wouldn't lie to me." Trina rubbed her stomach.

"Are you alright?" He held her arm gently, realizing that he had upset her.

"I'm fine," she said, looking sternly at him. "Just please, behave tonight for her sake. Believe it or not, she's been through a lot."

"Alright," Emerald said, giving in to his new wife's pleas. 536

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Mayor and Mrs. Henderson stood outside of the ballroom with the Shelby County mayor discussing the upcoming NAACP gala that was supposed to be the opportunity for Senator Henderson to formally endorse Grey for the seat in the House of Representatives. It had been perfectly strategized for nearly a year by his local heavy monetary supporters and backed by all of the top Democrats in the region. Senator Henderson had a proven track record, and his support of Grey

would push him into the seat with little opposition.

To Mayor Henderson, this wedding was a perfect time to get his name back in the newspapers and get his son out of the strip clubs. To Mrs. Henderson, however, this wedding was the worst thing that could have ever happened to her youngest child, and she had made occasion to tell him so several times. Clearly marriage would prove to the public that he was a stable figure, but his choice was key. Ivy Winters wasn't exactly the woman that she had in mind for Grey. Th

ere were hundreds of other women his age more socially recognized with more under their belt and more to offer the family. She just never thought that the two would make it this far, especially after Ivy's latest stunt.

Now, she had to reshape Ivy and make her more presentable after she was offi

cially a Henderson. Image was very important in this next election, and she had worked too hard on her family to allow them to just wither into another has-been political pillar in the Memphis community. Her mother had married into politics, along with her mother's mother, and God willing, Ivy would contribute yet another daughter to the cause. Ivy and Grey stepped out of his BMW and walked into the hotel side-by-side, smiling at the relatively familiar faces that had long discussed their relationship and their recent problems.

To Ivy this night was more important than her wedding night, because she would meet Nicola's entire family. Plus, she would have to face Rachel again and this time pretend to be happy to see her. Quietly, she entered the elevator on Grey's arm, trembling inside but giving a gilded bright smile to soothe her family and friends. 537

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Grey hadn't spoken much the entire ride. From time to time, he had started a conversation with Ivy but had failed to maintain long interaction. He too needed time to meditate. If his plan worked, he would be rid of Nicola for good after this wedding, and on with preparing for the House of Representatives. If his planned failed, he could cost his family everything. All eyes were on Ivy and Grey, who cosmetically were a perfect pair. However, the anticipated arrival was that of the Agosto family. Grey had asked them to arrive early in order to be able to introduce them to everyone before the dinner began, but in actuality he wanted Ivy and him to make the last grand entrance. His plan had not rolled out with perfect execution. Nicola and his family were running late.

Looking around anxiously, Grey saw the small room packed with the entire Henderson family, the entire Winters family, and not one sign of his experiment. As he escorted Ivy to his seat, he stepped over the side

and spoke with his father.

"Any sign of them?" Grey asked, looking at his watch.

"Walking through the door right now," Mayor Henderson said, looking away from his wife.

Mr. and Mrs. Agosto walked in first arm-in-arm in classic black suits, hesitantly awaiting the families that had suffocated their son for nine months. Santo entered alone in a simple black tailor-made Gucci suit, and at last Nicola entered with Rachel on his arm, both gracing the small audience's presence in simple but elegant black attire.

"Are they in mourning?" Mrs. Henderson asked smugly.

"Th

is is an absolute farce," Sadie said under her breath.

"What is it that they do, exactly?" Mayor Henderson asked Madison.

"Th

ey own a conglomerate of very successful businesses from what Ivy tells me...a freight line, a law office, commercial real estate, and some other stuff," Madison said, rubbing it in to his uptight counterparts.



## *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I didn't realize that Nicola's family was wealthy," Mrs. Henderson said with his eyes wide. *Were they Democrats?*

"I'm sure it was Nicola's idea not to mention it. He's quite modest," Sadie said as Mrs. Agosto approached. She was already growing tired of the Henderson's family relentless pursuit of riches and power. "You must be Liz; I'm Sadie."

"Oh, I've heard wonderful things about you," Liz said, instantly liking Sadie's cool demeanor. Th

ey embraced each other

for a moment, while Madison and Adamo shook hands and then turned to Mrs. Henderson.

"Allow me to introduce you to Grey's mother and father, Mayor and Mrs. Henderson," Sadie said, stepping away.

"Please allow me," Grey said, walking over calmly.

"Mrs. Agosto, I'm Grey Henderson."

"Oh," Mrs. Agosto said, smiling.

"Well, it is very nice to fi nally put a face with a name,"

Adamo said, carefully guarding his words for Nicola's sake. To him all of this was the most chaotic display he had ever seen, but his son had explained to him that this was closure, and after seeing his grandsons for the first time, he too would do whatever it took to keep them close to him.

Ivy had not taken her eyes off Nicola the entire time while he stood with Rachel, whispering in her ear and laughing behind his family. All she could see was him only a few days before crying over her, pleading with her. What if Santo had not come in that night? Would she be here tonight? Would he? She felt Trina nudge her several times before she turned her attention to her father, who walked over from the large crowd and touched her shoulder.

"Are you alright, little sis?" Madison asked, concerned.

"No, Madison," Ivy said, smiling softly. "But I will be as soon as all of this is over."

"You don't have to go through this," he said, looking at Grey.

"Th

ere are better men out there."

"I know," she said, looking back at Nicola. "But I want him."

She wasn't even sure which one she meant.

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"Th

en support him," Madison eyes narrowed, unsure of her true desires. "Go over and properly welcome your other guests. Allow them to see how much of diamond you truly are," he said, rubbing through her hair.

Understanding her father's request, Ivy smiled and stood up obediently. He was right. She had to shine for her own sake. Th

rowing her hair off of her shoulder and remembering her old charms, she walked gracefully over to Nicola's family and hugged his father first, breaking Nicola's attention. Th en she hugged his

mother, warming his heart. Th

en she kissed Santo, drawing out his

fi re further. Nicola stood stiff as a board, watching her, wanting her.

After Ivy had gained all the momentum that she needed, she swayed in one beautiful motion over to

the happy couple, feeling Nicola watch her every move. He looked at her tantalizing breasts sway in her fitted soft pink chiffon Chanel dress that stopped modestly at her calves and her matching pink strappy sandals that displayed her manicured feet. Her bare caramel-toned arms were decorated with only the princess-cut diamond solitaire engagement ring that Grey had given her. Her hair was pulled carefully to the back in feathered curls, bringing great attention to her beautiful bone structure, her soft, delicate chin, her glittering brown eyes, her full rose-glossed lips, and her long swanlike neck. Her eyes spoke for her as she looked up in the same hooded look that Nicola had given her the first time nearly a year ago, causing his heart to stop, and then she gave a wide suggestive smile.

"Rachel, how good to see you," Ivy said, offering her long dainty left hand so that Rachel could better analyze her engagement ring and perfectly manicured nails.

"Great to see you, too. You look...marvelous," Rachel said, feeling underdressed and over-accessorized.

"Th

ank you," Ivy said, turning her attention to Nicola. "And Nicola, it's so nice of you to bring everyone." Her eyes burned through him. "We're really glad that you came."

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Nicola cleared his throat as he finally realized what she was doing. "Th

anks," he said, softly. "Like Rachel said, you look great."

He averted his eyes from hers after a moment.

"Th

ank you. Well, allow me to show you to your seats before we get started." She looked over at Grey, who watched carefully, and smiled. "We've got you right here by Emerald and Trina."

"Nicola, how are you doing?" Emerald said, standing up from the table.

"Fine," Nicola said, shaking his hand. "Th

is is my friend,

Rachel Danning."

As the dinner began, Ivy relaxed back down in her seat and smiled at Trina, who watched, confused, along with Emerald, who watched, pissed that she was pleased with her little circus show. *If I could just get through tonight*, Ivy thought to herself as she picked up her fork

and stabbed her Caesar salad. Tonight may have had hope if Nicola wasn't here to remind her of the past. She would have enjoyed everyone being here together before she and Grey were married to celebrate. *Would have.* In a way, she could blame all of this on Grey. *What did he have up his sleeve anyway?*

He and his father had been whispering about something the entire night. And then there was Nicola. She couldn't say enough about him. Sure his family was nice, but he knew that he had no place here. She hated him now more than ever. He had deliberately ruined this for her!

u u u

"Two more days and you can stop the fake-bitch routine,"

Trina said, rubbing Ivy's back as they stood outside the ballroom on the mezzanine level hugging each other after the dinner.

"Tell me about it. Th

ank you for being here, Trina. You've

been great," Ivy said, trying to hold back her tears.

"Th

at's what friends are for, but I have to admit that tonight was straight up weird." She looked over at Grey, who was talking to Mr. Agosto.

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"Politics," Ivy said, assured that the one-word explanation was enough.

"Well, you might as well get used to being a politician's wife,"

she said, shaking her head.

"I know." Ivy sighed, speechless.

"When does he make this formal announcement that you were telling me about?"

"Th

the day after the wedding," Ivy said, looking at Grey's brothers circling around like sharks and talking under their breath.

"If you need to talk, we can. You know that I'm here for you."

Trina let go of Ivy. "I had better go and get Emerald. If I leave him to his own devices too long, there'll be

trouble.”

“He’s still not talking to me.” Ivy massaged her temples.  
“I imagine that he has every reason not to.”

“Well, I’ll make sure that his mind is right for the wedding. He can’t go around acting like a little baby.”

“Just let him come around on his own.” Ivy watched as Nicola and Rachel came out of the doors before she turned around. “Ooh!

I don’t even want to look at him. Th

e nerve he had to come here

tonight.” Her mouth pouted.

“He’s just playing the game that you and your fi ancé recruited him for.”

“Don’t take up for him. Plus, I had nothing to do with this charade,” Ivy snapped.

“Well, if you didn’t have anything to do with it, what makes you think that he did?”

“I’ll have to tell you all about that tomorrow night.” Ivy bit her lip.

“Uh, well let me go. I’ll call you tomorrow.”



"OK, girl," Ivy said, kissing Trina on the cheek before she entered the elevator and disappeared behind the golden doors. Nicola wanted to go over and talk to her. He wanted to explain his reasoning, but there was not one opportunity. He could see anger in her eyes, and it was nearly impossible to hide the defeat 542

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

in his. However, he was angry with her, too. He had a reason for doing this. What reason did she have?

"Ivy looks great," Santo said with a cocktail still in his hand from dinner.

"I think that she already knows that," Nicola said, looking over at Rachel, who stood with his family. "Do you think that I should go over and talk to Ivy?"

"Yeah, I would." Santo sipped in between his advice. "While you're talking to her, why don't you tell her that you're holding back a terrible secret and that's the only reason that you won't propose yourself?"

"I can't tell her about that," Nicola scoff ed.

"Why not? Th

is is the perfect time. It's high drama in this place tonight. Top it off . Tell her about Grey and his plot to blackmail you and about banging Trina while you were

blacked out. It'll be great. Grey couldn't top that if he tried." His words were slightly slurred.

"How about I just go over there and wish her the best?" Nicola said, realizing that his brother was drunk.

"You need to grow some balls, my brother," Santo said, gulping down the last of the contents in his glass. "Th at woman is as in

love with you as you are with her, but you've got to put it all on the line. Stop trying to be...protective. Just let it all hang out."

"Santo, go have some coff ee," Nicola said, excusing himself from his brother.

"Where are you going?" Santo asked in a raised voice.

"To talk with Ivy. I'll be right back."

Ivy stood alone, waiting for Nicola to come over and talk to her. She was sure that he would. But what would he say? She turned and saw him walking over in his normal confi dent, halfcocky stride. He had such sex appeal. She took a deep breath to prepare herself. She couldn't seem anxious, and yet she was.

"Ivy," he said, getting her attention. "Can I talk to you?"

"Sure," she said, rolling her eyes.

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"I get the feeling that something isn't going your way; you're visibly pouting again."

"I'm not pouting," Ivy said, sticking her lip back in. She looked over at Rachel. "Did you enjoy yourself?" She flipped her hair and turned where no one could read her lips or her facial expressions.

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what? Grey told me that this was what you wanted."

He searched her face. "Is this what you want, for us both to put our families on Front Street so that your fiancé looks better for the polls."

Ivy wanted to say no, but she thought back to her father's advice. It wouldn't help things to tell Nicola that they had both been bamboozled by the infamous Grey Henderson. "Yes, this is what we want." Her eyes narrowed.

"Well, at least you know what you want now. And I know what I want, too. I want to stop running after you, chasing something I can't have and having it constantly dangled in my freaking face. In fact, I refuse. I promise

after this wedding you'll only see me or talk to me when it's about my sons. No more late-night drop-offs or close calls. I'll stay away from you and *out of you*. I promise."

He crossed his heart.

Ivy was lost for words. She wasn't sure if she wanted that, but she understood. Her eyes darted as she began to feel herself soften around the edges. "Who am I kidding, Nicola? I feel just horrible about the other night," Ivy said in a low whisper. "Nothing came out right." She hesitated. "It's like there is some big wedge between us that makes it impossible for us to communicate. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Nicola said understandingly. *Th*

*e wedge is the fact that I slept with your best friend and paid for an abortion for her.* He put his hands on her shoulders and sighed.

"I just came over to wish you well, and to let you know that if I hadn't done some things in my life, I would be fighting for you."

"Th

ings like what?" Ivy asked curiously. *What does he continue to hide from me?*

*Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Let's hope to never have that conversation," Nicola said, looking over at his family, who waited across the mezzanine.

"Look, I'd better go."

u u u

Rachel sat quietly thinking as Nicola drove her back to her home across town after dinner. She didn't have much to say after she saw the way that Nicola had looked at Ivy the entire night. *Th*

*en, there was that private conversation that looked to be extremely heated.* He had tried to keep his attention diverted to her, saying sweet things about the way that she looked, flirting with her during dinner, and even holding her hand. However, she knew that it was all just a front. He had never looked at her the way that he looked at Ivy, even when he just had simple things to say. Knowing that it could not continue on, she decided that she would support him through tonight. But then she planned to leave him alone to deal with his feelings for Ivy.

"You're awfully quiet," Nicola said, turning down the

radio.

"Are you alright?"

"Oh, I'm fine," Rachel said, giving Nicola a weak smile. She ran her hands down the black leather and looked around his truck. It would be nice to have a man so successful as Nicola for a boyfriend. Maybe he would come back after he had straightened his life out. She stared at him as he drove. He was so strong and so beautiful. His eyes had a natural kindness about them, and he was always so thoughtful. She began to feel the urge to lean over and kiss him. Turning to say something, he caught her gazing at him.

"OK, what is it?" he asked, smiling at her.

"I don't think that you're quite over Ivy," Rachel said, looking back out the window. "I'm the next street."

"I know where you are," Nicola said awkwardly. "Why do you think that I'm not over Ivy?" He turned at her street and slowed his driving.

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"For one, we haven't made love yet." Rachel looked down at her fingers. "It's been long enough...nearly a month and a half. At first I thought that you were doing

it for my sake, but tonight I realized that it was for your own. Secondly, I saw the way that you looked at her tonight. Something is still going on between you two.”

“Rachel, I haven’t made love to you, because I didn’t want to rush things...I always rush things.” He tried to explain. “I’m very attracted to you. You’re a beautiful woman...” Nicola avoided the discussion of his feelings for Ivy altogether.

“I know that I’m beautiful, Nicola,” Rachel said, cutting him off. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” Nicola said, pulling into her driveway. He turned his truck off and turned to her giving her his full attention.

“When was the last time that you were intimate...with Ivy?”

Nicola looked away and sighed. Why not, “*When was the last time that you were intimate with anyone?*” That would have been a

hell of a lot better. What was it with women? She would have never been asking these questions if he had just slept with her the first night and never called her again. “What difference does it make?”

he asked, staring her dead in her eyes. Inwardly, he knew exactly what difference it made, but he tried to

buy himself time.

"When?" Rachel stared back at him.

"Recently," Nicola said, refusing to tell her that it was not even a week ago that he was in the middle of making love to Ivy when Santo busted in on them both.

"Since we've been seeing each other?" She clinched her keys. Nicola debated whether or not to lie to her.

"No." He didn't change his expression at all. He would tell her what she wanted to hear.

"Good." Rachel said, relieved. "Because I'd like you to spend the night tonight." Her blue eyes were wide and unopened to rejection. She willed him to say yes.

"Alright," Nicola said, unlocking the doors. Nicola followed Rachel inside her little three-bedroom, redbrick home buried quietly in the mid-town Memphis neighborhood 546

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

of Cooper and Young. She unlocked her door and motioned him inside.

Nicola looked around, impressed at the cozy little sanctuary decorated in art deco motif. Pulling off her shawl, she turned around and wrapped her hands around his neck. Purring like a cat, she felt him grab



her by the waist and lift her up to him. Kissing her lips softly, he carried her over to her couch. She moaned. He tasted and smelled so good. As she lay back, he ran his fingers over the curve of her breast and thought of Ivy. Suddenly, he stopped.

"Wait. I can't do this," he said, realizing that he was in between Rachel's thighs.

"What?" Rachel asked, confused. Her intense eyes burned through him.

"I can't have sex with you tonight. And I can't lie and tell you that I was with Ivy before we met. I was with her a few nights ago."

He fought with the thought visibly.

"I see," Rachel said, sitting up, disappointed.

"I just don't have my shit together right now. And that's no reason to drag you down with me." He stood up over the couch and looked over at the door. *Th*

*is is embarrassing*, he thought

inwardly. *What in the hell was wrong with me? Rachel is prime cut and I am about to leave hungry.* Alas, Ivy had completely stolen his mojo. "I'm really sorry about all of this," Nicola said, looking back at her.

“Yeah,” Rachel said, unable to look at him. “I’m sure you are.”

She straightened her clothes up and sat up on the couch. “Look, you’re a very nice guy, Nicola. I hope that it works out for you two.”

“Somehow, I just don’t think that it will,” Nicola said, breathing heavily. He leaned over on the couch and kissed her forehead. Quietly, he saw himself out.

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Chapter Thirty-Four:

Exposed



## Chapter 34

### EXPOSED

**“Ivy, I can’t believe that your ass got caught up again,”**

**Trina said with her hand over her mouth in total disbelief.** It was the night before the wedding, and Ivy sat in her hotel bed talking with Trina. Th

e bachelorette party had been a huge

success, and now they had to get some rest before the big day. Th

e bridesmaids had settled in for the night in their hotel rooms adjacent to Ivy's at the Madison Hotel. Sadie and Liz had gone hours earlier after the striptease show by Th under, a stripper with

a lisp, a massive body, and an undeniable crush on Sadie. Now the girls had the opportunity to spend some quality time together before the ceremony.

"Yeah, I know," Ivy said, sighing. "I couldn't believe that we did it, but I also couldn't believe that he had a twin." Ivy shook her head. "He's so damned secretive. Th

at is why I just don't trust

him. With Nicola, he wants to know your whole life story, yet he can't tell you one thing about himself."

"Even I didn't know that he had a twin brother," Trina said, rolling her hair. "But you shouldn't be so angry with him about not being an open book."

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

"What does he have to hide? I didn't even know who the father of my children was. I cannot judge anyone."

Ivy sighed. "I mean, who could he possibly be protecting?"

Trina paused for a minute, scared. Finally she released it, the chain on her soul. "Me," Trina said solemnly. "He's trying to protect me, Ivy."

Ivy lifted her eyebrows, confused. "Why? From what?"

Trina turned on bended knee in the bed and set down her rollers. "Emerald has been begging me to talk with you. He said that you would understand, but I know us. And I know how we are about our men...even though technically, you and Nicola aren't together." Trina stopped to gauge Ivy's openness to the conversation.

"What about Nicola?" Ivy stopped smiling, sensing that whatever Trina had to say was critical.

"Ivy, I've been carrying around a huge secret. But it can't wait any longer. All I can do is ask for your forgiveness for waiting until now with this." Trina took Ivy's hands.

"Trina, you're really scaring me right now," Ivy said with her eyes watering.

"Earlier, you said that Nicola hasn't asked for you, but I know that it hasn't been because he didn't want to. It was because he couldn't." She sighed heavily, afraid of the words that were about to come out of her mouth. "It

was because Grey was holding something over his head about me.”

Ivy sat and listened carefully, shocked to find out that Nicola and Trina had been together years before and even more shocked to find out that Grey had known for so long. The news was both

disturbing and painful. With her hands over her mouth and wiping a steady flow of tears, she took in the news, angry that Trina had not confided in her before now, but also understanding of how complicated the entire situation was for all of them. Her mouth quivered as she tried to speak.

“Please tell me that’s all,” Ivy said, not wanting there to be any more to the twisted story.

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“Th

at’s all,” Trina said, wiping her tears. “Ivy, I don’t want us to stop being friends, but it would be worth it for you to find true happiness. You’ve given me so much, and I feel as though I owe you this. I’m just sorry that I wasn’t strong enough to tell you before.”

“I can understand,” Ivy said, taking Trina by the hand.

"Telling Grey about Nicola nearly killed me. Telling my family that I had gotten pregnant..." she gasped. "It was the worst experience of my entire life."

"I wouldn't have said anything if I thought that Nicola was just a one-night stand, but I've seen you two fall head over heels in love with each other over these past months. I don't want you to miss something great because of me. It's only fair that you find true love. Look at me. After Brooks died, I don't know what I would have done without Emerald." Trina's bottom lip quivered, expecting the worse.

"Th

is is too much," Ivy said, feeling like she was in some surreal state. She rubbed her temples. "I don't know what in the hell is going on in my own life." She laughed, dismayed by her current situation, and wiping tears from her eyes. "And all this time, I thought it was because he didn't care." She looked at Trina.

"But he does care."

"Yeah, I know."

"Trina," Ivy reached over for her hand. "Thank you so much

for telling me this."

"Do you forgive me?"

"It was well before my time. Of course I forgive you." Ivy sighed.

u u u

Th

e full moon shone down on Nicola as he sat by his pool looking up at the cloudless night and sipping on a bottle of Heineken. Th

ere was a quiet peace in his home tonight. Th e twins

were fast asleep in their beds, his brother was upstairs watching television, and his parents were out enjoying Memphis. Th oughts

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*Latrivia S. Nelson*

of Ivy cascaded through his mind and consumed him as he tried to prepare himself for tomorrow's fi asco. Alone in his sorrow, he waded his bare legs in the warm water and listened to the stereo playing Incubus' song, *Wish You Were Here*. And he did wish that she was there. He allowed his imagination to run, and before long came thoughts of Ivy in a beautiful flowing wedding gown, marrying Grey instead of him, raising



his sons without him. In his silence, he suffered without her touch. For thirty years, he had avoided the sting of true love. Arin had been hard enough, and she was only puppy love. But Ivy was something else, something more painful and real. She was in his heart like no other woman had ever been. He felt the love every time he woke and rolled over. Th

ere was a heaviness in his heart.

He ached inside, cried inwardly. Th

is was what he had dreaded.

Th

ere was a dismal longing to be with her, and her denial of him was an ever-present reality.

Santo had watched Nicola sulk for nearly an hour out of the upstairs bedroom window. He had never seen his brother so in love with a woman, even more so than Arin. Th e thought was

comforting, because it meant that his brother had moved on. However, the thought was also deeply troubling, because it meant that yet again a woman that Nicola loved had chosen to marry another. Santo wanted to go down to him and lend a shoulder to the cause, maybe encourage him to get some rest. Th ere was

nothing worst than sulking. Deciding to act on his thoughts, he headed down to the pool but was interrupted by the doorbell.

"Please, God don't let it be more drama," he said, making the sign of the cross.

Going to the door hesitantly, Santo peered through the peephole to find Ivy on the other side of the door in her pajamas. *How interesting*, Santo thought to himself as he opened the door.

"Hi, Santo," Ivy said, pulling at her hair nervously.

"Hi. You can tell us apart?"

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"Of course," Ivy said, stepping in out of the darkness. "I came to see, Nicola. Is he in? *Is he alone?*" She allowed the words to fall clumsily out of her mouth.

"He is in, and *he is alone*," Santo said, closing the door. He thought Ivy was exceedingly charming and the best match for his twin brother.

"He's asleep?" Ivy asked, looking around.

"No. He's out by the pool," Santo said, lifting his

eyebrow. "Do you want to surprise him?"

"Yes," Ivy said, walking towards the den. "I know how to get there."

Ivy stepped down into the den and pulled the black linen curtains away from the wall-to-wall glass windows. She examined Nicola's body language for a moment, still sitting by the pool, his form slumped over. She could have stayed there and gazed at him all night, but she had to prepare for a wedding the next day. So, moving along, she opened the doors and went out to him. Nicola didn't turn at first, assuming it was just Santo coming out to join him. He instead gulped down the last of his beer and pulled his shirt off for a swim.

"Is this what you call babysitting?" Ivy asked playfully, standing behind him.

Turning quickly, Nicola's mouth dropped, stunned at Ivy's presence. He stood up, darting his eyes around and trying to find something clever to say, but regrettably he was only left with his sincerest of emotions. "Th

ey have enough sense to be asleep at this hour." Rubbing his hand through his large chocolate curls, he pulled his shirt back on.

Ivy smiled at his dishevelment. It pleased her to see

that she was not the only one that couldn't sleep. She walked up to him and hugged him tightly, feeling his heart beat against her own. He kissed the crown of her head and released her.

"I'm afraid to ask why you're here," Nicola said, taking her by the arm and leading her back into the house out of the night air. 555

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"I had to say something to you that couldn't be said over the phone and couldn't wait until tomorrow." Ivy turned and stared into his eyes. "You look so flushed," she touched his red cheeks.

"I'm fine. What is it?" Nicola said, trying to stop his racing mind. He took her hand in his own.

Ivy caught her breath as it tried to leap from her body. "Trina told me everything," she said, watching the air deflate from his chest. "She told me about the night you two slept together, the abortion, about Grey and his threats. She told me everything." Her arms trembled. She heard Santo's feet shuffle

across the floor and up the back stairwell. Nicola needed to sit down. Releasing Ivy, he reached for a chair but settled for the corner of his end table. The room began to spin

around and little sweat beads popped on his forehead. *She has come to kick me in the balls*, Nicola thought to himself. He looked up at her, realizing that his betrayal was total. He tried to beg her forgiveness.

"I swear that I've tried to keep this from you." Nicola struggled.

"I wanted to protect you and Trina." He reached out for her.

"Protect us from what?" Ivy asked, walking closer to him.

"From the truth," Nicola said softly. He worried, because he was unable to read her. "I didn't want you to lose Trina. And I didn't want to lose Brooks. And I knew if you knew the truth, you'd never see me the same way again. So, I just stayed away. The messed-up

thing is that until this very day, I still don't remember being with Trina. But I know that she wouldn't lie about something like that."

He sighed heavily, feeling his heart in his stomach.

"Look, I know that you think the worst of me, and you've seen the worst of me. In fact, since you've met me, I've caused you nothing but pain. But all that I can do at this point is ask for your understanding. I'm not a good man, Ivy. I know that, but I don't believe that I am a bad

man either. I'm just...somewhere in between."

"So all of this time, you stayed away because of Grey's threats?"

It was all starting to make perfect sense to Ivy. 556

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"I wish that I could say that but no, not always," Nicola said, reluctantly. "But when I realized that I wanted to be with you, I was forced away."

"*When you wanted to be with me?*" Ivy held on to his words.

"When was this?"

"I can't pinpoint an exact date. I just know that when I wanted to reach out, it was too late. And that isn't all Grey's fault. It's mine, too."

"So, what now? Now that I know, how does this change things for us?" Ivy wanted him to continue, to say the right words. She moved closer in anticipation. *Say it Nicola*, she said, to herself. Nicola was on the verge of spilling all of his deepest desires, but he had to know one thing first. "Are you still going to marry Grey tomorrow...now that you know?"

Ivy's eyes met Nicola's, and for a moment she was

caught like a deer in headlights. Her voice cracked.

"Yes," she said, hesitantly. She looked down at him and shook her head. "Is there any reason that I should not?"

"I don't know. You tell me," Nicola said, tired of his thoughts.

"What would make you want to marry a man that would do what Grey has done?"

"Th

e same thing that would make me want to marry you," she said, pulling away. "You and Grey are really not very different. I guess women are attracted over and over to the same type of man. Besides, I can no more forgive one of you than both of you."

"It's never too late, Ivy," Nicola said, trying to keep the wanton feeling at bay. "What I feel for you...it's not just some unquenchable lust. I thought that it was at first, because I've never felt like this about anyone. I've fallen in love with you. How many times do I have to say it in order to make you believe me?" He stood up, towering over her with strength and a commanding presence. He allowed his hand to touch her soft exposed shoulders, and she shuddered visibly. He gripped her firmly.

*Why won't you just ask for me*, Ivy thought to herself as she listened to Nicola. *Ask me to marry you, Nicola!*

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with both excitement and nervousness. Would he do it? Would he at least lean over and kiss her? Would he take her? *What will you do, my dearest Nicola?* She became impatient as her thoughts raced. Telling her that he loved her was a big step, but it still was not enough at this point. He had to go for broke. No more protecting his feelings. He had to proclaim his love for her and ask for her on his own. She sighed, exhausted by the urge for him. She searched his eyes but did not see the sign of good things to come. *You won't do it, will you?*

Seeing that he would restrain himself tonight like never before, Ivy caved. "I should go," she said, mouth quivering, wanting to cry like a baby. "Maybe it wasn't the smartest thing for me to come here."

Nicola's blood had begun to flow backwards in front of Ivy, and she didn't even know it. She couldn't even recognize that she caused such a thing in him every time she was near. He fought with himself, trying hard not to reach out for her. He wanted to grab her now and tear the clothes from her body. He wanted to violently rip the engagement ring from her hand and launch it in the sky, hoping that some night creature would catch it and take far away forever. He wanted to carry her in his



arms to his bed and make her submit in such away that she would never dare to look back! His was mad for her, rabid for her love, and foaming at the heart for her to choose him. How could he make her understand it all?

Nicola shook his head, unable to find words suitable for the moment. His hormones were raging, and atoms in his body split with agony. Th

ere was something of insurmountable magnitude blocking him from her, and the sands of time would not stop for him to grasp a better understanding. He grabbed her by the hand, trembling inside, and in a calm voice looked into her eyes. "You're right. You shouldn't be here right now. Come on, I'll walk you to your car."

u u u

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Grey lay between two naked strippers who had fallen asleep shortly after their long sex session nearly an hour before, thinking of Ivy and his wedding scheduled to take place the next afternoon. He sipped his cognac slowly, allowing the burn to rush down into his stomach and ease his troubled thoughts. Even in his deliberate drunken haze, he could not fight his overwhelming

melancholy and urge to flee all that he knew, especially Ivy Marie Winters. Without intending to, in between his friends giving him the most memorable bachelor party ever and meeting young, desirable women with no inhibitions, Grey realized that he wasn't quite ready to give up his coveted playboy lifestyle. His father had pounded in his head for many years that he needed to be married to pursue a safer life in politics, but other men had done it successfully without a wife before him. Surely, he could too. Marrying Ivy would mean that life as he knew it would be over. Every woman that he brought to his bed would be an adulteress and he an adulterer. *And although that would be just fine for him*, the public would have him kicked out of the House of Representatives for his lack of control. Grey's final conclusion was that he was making a very large, insurmountable mistake by marrying his little college princess, but his word was his bond. And he had promised Ivy that he would never leave her alone again. Now, he was forced to eat his words, and as he choked on the huge promises in the wake of his political career, he realized the enormity of his shortcomings. Th

ere in the dark was a long-legged, dark-skinned black woman lying naked beside him staring up at him wide-eyed. It was minutes before Grey realized that she had been watching him for quite some time. Her silent stare stirred his loins as he looked down at her, peering at him under long black lashes and almond-

shaped eyes. She lifted a brow and smiled lazily, revealing pearly white teeth under red shining lips. Grey looked at her for a moment, spellbound by the length of her seventies-style afro, the contrast of dark skin against the gold belly ring, and the muscular build of her brick-house body.

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"How long have you been up?" he asked, shifting slightly towards her to whisper.

"Just a minute," she said, resting on her pillow. "Why do you look so sad?"

"Because I am," Grey said, rubbing her bare waist.

"What's your name again?"

"Loni," she whispered.

"Loni, can you make me feel better?" Grey's boyish luster returned. He would milk this cow for whatever it was worth.

"Of course," Loni said, laughing as she crawled over on his chest and dug her acrylic nails into his bare skin.

u u u

ly didn't sleep all night. She sat in the window seat of

her suite looking down over the Mississippi River and rocking herself slowly. Now, dawn was at her hills, and still she was submerged in deep thought about her soon-to-be nuptials and why she was really marrying Grey. During the course of the night, she had managed to finish the book that her therapist had given her and decided that she still was not living for herself, even after defying the family's wishes for her life. Plus, Nicola was heavy on her heart. She saw something last night in him that she had never seen before. And yet he was at his house with their children, and she was here. Regardless of the ever-changing emotions trapped in her body, Ivy truly loved Grey. But it wasn't the knock-down, drag-out love that she used to know. She wasn't quite sure if that type of love even existed for her anymore. Now she was left with a shell of love, quietly hidden behind proper conversation and pleasantries designed to take away the sting of obligation and the constant pain of settling. It was the perfect disposition for a pseudo-wife in a public marriage designed to gain votes. However, it was a miserable existence for a young, warm-blooded romantic, who wanted to be desired as a woman and more importantly as a wife. 560

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

*It is my birthright to be loved and treasured, Ivy*  
thought to herself as she held her own arms, still crying  
from a never-ending well of tears flowing from the pit

of her stomach. With red eyes and tear-stained cheeks, Ivy watched the sunrise as she sat wrapped in a thirty-year-old quilt that had been passed down to her by her mother's mother. Th

e sun's brilliant hues of

gold cascaded around her embellished room and awoke some strange strength in her, causing her to rise from her unsettled slumber and prepare for her future.

However, there was a mystic calling in her that named her lover in a soft whisper that rang in her ears. Nicola. Nicola. Nicola. But to respond to such a name would call for drastic measures, not only by her but him.

Ivy peeled out of her pajamas and stepped into the gilded golden shower. Her fingers caressed and then grasped the crystal knobs, releasing hot fire pellets that singed through her haze. As the hot water from the shower beat down on her soft limbs, she washed away old, cumbersome thoughts. She reached out in the water, arms stretched to the sky, and tried to release her pain symbolically, praying in her silence, mumbling words to God in hopes that he might hear her. Her long brown curly hair covered her face, shoulders, and back, wrapping her like a blanket from the outside world.

She sighed heavily, crying out in the empty room and

shaking from the powerful and exhausting emotions pulling at her like strings on a chord. Finally, she leaned forward, placing open palms on the shower tiles, and allowed the water to rush down her back. As she looked down at the drain, she could see her tears falling down into the tub and marveled at how she knew the difference between the her pain-filled drops that fell like rain and the cascading river of rejuvenation coming from the showerhead. She only wished that her decision would be so clear, but it would not be clear.

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Chapter Thirty-Five:

He Loves Me,

He Loves Me Not



## **Chapter 35**

### **HE LOVES ME, HE LOVES ME NOT**

**“Gentlemen, could I have your attention, please,”** Grey demanded, taking up his champagne glass as the groomsmen quieted down in the back of the stretch Hummer limo. “I’d like to propose a toast.” Grey cleared his throat and smiled, visibly tipsy and enjoying the last minutes with his friends and brothers.

“Well, by all means, let me get a glass,” Mattock said in a cheerful tone.

"Matt, has anyone ever told you that you act like a black Frazier?" one of the groomsmen asked, laughing as they raised their glasses. Everyone laughed, even Mattock, who would only tolerate the jokes because of the special time for Grey.

"Now, let's get serious for a minute," Grey said, straightening his tuxedo. "I'd like to propose a toast." The car became silent.

"To my last hour as a free, resilient man with the best men a guy could have as friends and family. As I embark on this...venture, I prepare myself to be strengthened politically by obtaining a ready-made family for the sole purpose of winning the seventeenth district of Tennessee's seat for the House of Representatives." With 565

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melancholy in his eyes, Grey lifted his glass and smiled at his big brother, who stared disturbingly at him from his seat.

"I won't drink to that," Grey's eldest brother Bishop said, putting down his glass.

"Neither will I," Mattock said, glad that there was more than one voice of reason in the car.



"Well, I will," Grey said, turning his glass upwards. Th

ere was a long silence. Th

e men road along uncomfortably,

everyone wanting to say something, and no one having the courage to say anything. It had been evident during the entire celebration that Grey was troubled, and now it was painfully apparent: He was only marrying Ivy for the seat. Bishop knocked on the glass and had the chauffeur pull the limo over.

"Grey, can we step out of the car and talk for a minute?"

Bishop asked.

"Why?" Grey asked, looking around at his friends.

"Whatever you have to say can be said in front of my boys."

"Alright then," Bishop said, looking at Mattock, who he was sure agreed with him. "You don't need to marry this woman today. You don't have to marry her today," he said, assuring Grey. He looked around for support on the matter, and his other brothers chimed in.

"He's right, Grey." Emerson, one of his older brothers, said, shaking his head. "No one thinks that it's worth it. When you marry, you marry for love and not for offi

ce, especially to be a

congressman. No one really wants you to do this anyway. It's a bad move. Mom thinks so. We think so. Tell him, Bishop."

"It is wrong," Bishop said, piggybacking. "I wouldn't say anything before, because I felt you may really love her, but this confession proves that you don't."

"Are you hearing what you are saying?" Grey asked, appalled.

"It's one hour." He looked down at his watch. "It's one hour before my fucking wedding. And you're telling me not to marry Ivy, because I don't love her."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"You may love her, but you're not in love with her," Mattock quickly interjected, wanting Grey to hear their reasoning.

"Oh, now you're going to take their side," Grey said, snapping at Mattock. He looked around, feeling betrayed. "How many other people in the car feel as though I'm making a mistake?" A few other hands raised, but no one said anything. "And when were you going to say something?" Grey asked, snarling. As the

limo pulled over, Grey pushed his way out of the car and stood in a daze at the Exxon gas station. Bishop got out with his brothers and Mattock. Th

is was a cold shower for a hot mess.

Th

ey circled Grey, trying to get him to listen to reason. Th  
is was

the fi nal hour. If they didn't say something now, they  
never could. Th

e adrenaline pumped through the small crowd of family  
and friends.

"No one's trying to put you down, Grey. You were doing  
an honorable thing. You stayed with her, even after she  
had twin boys by another man. You've been good to  
her. But you don't owe her this," Bishop said, putting  
his hand on Grey's back.

"It's one hour before my wedding," Grey said, again  
wanting to give in to his brother's pleas. "Do you  
realize how this makes me look?"

"Yeah. You actually look like a smart man to most  
people,"

Emerson said, sympathetically. "Be honest with

yourself, man. Do you really want this? Do you think that this is the only way that you can win the seat? Why is *she* such a guarantee to you?" The

questions were infinite.

"It's not her," Grey said, finally. "It's the principle of it. I made a promise to her, not to leave her alone *again*. Plus, I didn't want to lose her. She's a wonderful person, but now that I've got her..." He looked up at his eldest brother, who stood by him supportively.

"You don't want her," Bishop said, finishing Grey's sentence.

"It's evident to all of us, and eventually it will be just as evident to her and the rest of the world. If you're really thinking about your political future, do the right thing."

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"An hour is an awfully long time to apologize," Mattock said, realizing they had to stop this wedding for Ivy's sake. "In time, she'll appreciate you for it."

"Shit!" Grey said, upset that he had put himself in this situation.

"I don't want to do this to her."

“It’ll be OK,” Bishop said, hugging his brother. “You don’t want to do this for her either. Don’t worry. We’ll back you 200

percent.”

u u u

Nicola looked at his watch. It was four o’clock, with only one hour before the wedding. Helping his mother out of his truck, he gazed up at the large church and was awed by its beauty. Today was supposed to be a celebration, but for him it was a funeral. Still, there was something pushing him to see it through. Tending to his children, Nicola walked with his entire family to the beautiful sanctuary and was met at the entrance by Sadie, who looked on, anxious for their arrival. She had made arrangements for the Agosto family to sit in the Winters’ pew. She and Madison had discussed it the night before and decided that although this entire fiasco was Grey’s design, he would have no control over their side of the family.

Sadie met Liz with a warm hug. Liz was equally glad to see her new friend and embraced her happily. “You look absolutely breathtaking,” Liz said, admiring Sadie’s champagne satin spaghetti-strapped floor-length gown with matching bolero jacket. Her hair was pinned ever so carefully with small delicate tendrils around her face. She wore a perfect strand of baroque

Tahitian pearls that were given to her by Madison on their tenth anniversary and matching pearl earrings. Nicola smiled too when he saw her, thinking that she had a genuine regal quality, much like his mother, a coincidence that he quietly appreciated. Sadie hugged Adamo and Santo and then greeted Nicola with an equally warm embrace. She felt the worst for Nicola. Over a short period of time, she and Nicola had come to a 568

### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

wonderful understanding of each other, and their bond had only strengthened through these incredibly difficult times. For Sadie,

it was interesting that Nicola played along with her daughter's antics. She could clearly see a love between them, but she ached for more than just love for them. In fact, she silently urged marriage. Maybe he would surprise them all today and do some...anything to get Ivy back.

"How are you, Sadie?" he asked softly, his baritone voice barely above a whisper.

"No, Nicola. Th

e question is how are you," Sadie asked,

ushering her group inside the sanctuary.

"I'm fine. Where is your daughter?" Nicola asked, taking in his surroundings.

"Just finished dressing. She's in the bride's chambers with her bridesmaids." Sadie motioned down the long corridor of the church.

Opening the beautifully embellished wooden doors of the main sanctuary, they were met by elegant decorations of soft white burning candles, ivy vine, and beautiful white calla lilies. Th

e symphony was already rehearsing, and the mood was that of a wonderful dream. Nicola looked around in admiration and then looked sadly at his father. While Nicola sat his children down, his father nodded at his mother and pulled Nicola to the side.

"Are you sure that you want to be here for this, Nico?" Adamo asked quietly.

"I need to see this thing through," Nicola said, avoiding eye contact.

"Well, you know that this family is behind you in whatever you decide to do. And as strange as all of this is, I think that I understand your reasoning. However, I also want you to think about this...if there are things that you need to confess to Ivy, now is the time to do it. Once she is married, she will have no ear

for your words. And if I know you, you've held back your true feelings. It may be late in the eleventh hour, but better late than never."

Adamo placed his hand on his slouching son's shoulder. "If she 569

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feels for you as you do for her, then you are doing her a favor by going to her and telling her now. Th

en she can make an informed

decision before rushing into this marriage with another man."

"I told her that I love her, Pop. It wasn't enough for her."

"Yes, but did you ask for her? Did you?"

Nicola thought back on all of his requests of Ivy. "No, I don't think that I did."

"When you ask a woman to give up everything that she knows, you have to offer her more than that in return. If you love her, go to her and tell her, but also offer her more than just your love...

offer her your life, Nicola. It is the only thing Grey has respectfully offered that you have not. She does not



need a boyfriend, a man friend, a lover. She needs a husband. If you want her, you have to make the ultimate sacrifice; otherwise your love is just a word and not a real action."

"Dad, you're telling me this at 4:15. She's not going to want to hear this now."

"She needs to hear this now," Adamo said, reassuringly. "And she needs to hear it from you."

"But what if she rejects me?"

"But what if she does not?" Adamo asked.

Nicola was confused. Was it not too late? Wasn't this now past the eleventh hour? His brow crinkled as he tried to understand his father, who stood before him wise in his years. But Adamo didn't elaborate; he simply turned Nicola around and urged him towards the door. And with that and a nod from Madison, who stood within an earshot of the two, Nicola excused himself from the small crowd in the sanctuary and headed to Ivy's chambers. u u u

Ivy stood looking at her reflection in the gold, full-length mirror as her mother placed her veil on her head. Sadie had informed her only seconds before that Nicola had arrived, and she had watched Ivy bite her bottom lip in sheer anticipation. Finally, Ivy stopped. She stood in the mirror looking totally disgusted. 570

## *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

"What is it, little girl?" Sadie asked affectionately.

"All of this beauty around me doesn't seem to compensate for my pain," Ivy said absently. "None of it seems to matter right now."

"Why not?" Sadie asked. She needed to hear it. A true confession.

"Last night, I found out why Nicola hasn't been as *forthcoming* about his feelings as he should have been." Ivy looked over at Trina and decided not to expound.

"Why has he been holding out?" Sadie asked, urging her daughter to continue.

"Th

at isn't important," Ivy said, darting her eyes away from Trina. "Th

e point is that as long as there is a possibility of him wanting me, I'll never truly be able to be happy with someone else." She turned from the mirror. She couldn't bear to look at herself one more second.

"Well, that is a very bold statement to make," Sadie said with her hands on her hips.

“Momma, I just can’t do this,” Ivy said, sobbing. “God forgive me for waiting so long to say it.”

“Say what, child? You haven’t said anything, yet.”

“I’m in love with Nicola!” Ivy blurted it out. The ruckus in the

room stopped. Bridesmaids whirled around in utter shock. Ivy swallowed hard.

Sadie was lost for words but so ecstatic that she could not suppress her bright smile. She grabbed her daughter and held her close as Ivy let out a great cry. She knew that Ivy was afraid and embarrassed, but if Ivy was woman enough to stand for herself, then she would stand with her, protecting her as best she could.

“Th

at’s the best news I’ve heard all day,” Sadie said, wiping the tears from her daughter’s eyes. Th

e room was silent. Shocked, the

bridesmaids watched, lost for words. “Ladies, could you excuse us for a minute?” Th

e women quietly left the room in a buzz, anxious to see what would come of the confession.

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Ivy found a small wooden bench across the room and sat down carefully. Her Vera Wang wedding gown danced about her. Pulling the veil off her head, she wiped the tears from her eyes and sighed. She looked up at the ceiling, trying to keep the tears from completely ruining her makeup.

"Well, what do you need me to do?" Sadie asked, closing the door behind the women.

"I don't know. We're supposed to go through with this farce in forty-five minutes. Everyone is filling the seats outside. And now, like some kind of sick cliché movie, I have to go out and break off this wedding with Memphis' most eligible bachelor for a man that may not even want me anymore. Plus, I've spent ungodly amounts of Dad's and your money on this wedding." Ivy laughed at the thought. "Th

is is crazy."

"Please child, don't you dare worry about the money. I'm more than happy to pay for this wedding *not* to take place. I can't even stomach the idea of having to see Maple Henderson for the rest of my life." Sadie sat down beside her daughter and kicked off pumps.

"And as far as your other love interest...I think he's more than interested. It's just a pity that you can't see that. The man was out

there practically sulking a minute ago like someone had died."

"Really?" Ivy blew her nose in her handkerchief.

"Momma, I've got to figure out a way to tell Nicola before it's too late."

"Now you're coming to your senses. Face this head on," Sadie said, happy about her daughter's decision.

"As a matter of fact, I'll go and get him for you."

"And bring him in here?" Ivy asked, eyes wide.

"Yes, now is the time to discuss it," Sadie said, with her hand already around the knob of the door. "Oh, give me my shoes." She slid on her pumps. "Now, I'll be right back."

"Oh...OK." Ivy deflated at the thought of what she would say to him.

"Ivy, don't worry. You're making the right choice. And I'm very proud of you." Sadie knew that Ivy needed to hear her approval.

"Th

anks, Ma."

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Sadie walked out of the chambers and closed the door carefully behind her. As she looked up, she saw Nicola walking slowly down the corridor with a nervous frown on his face. Apparently, he was coming to tell Ivy the same thing that she was about to tell him. For Sadie, it was the most wonderful sight that her eyes could behold. She wouldn't have to walk so far in her pain-causing pumps.

"Nicola," Sadie said, beckoning him quickly to the bench as she sat down to kick her shoes off again.

"Yeah," Nicola said, approaching her. "Is Ivy in there? I need to talk to her before..."

Sadie nodded. "She was just sending me to come and get you."

Rubbing her feet, she motioned towards the door.

"She was?" Nicola looked confused. "I don't know how to ask her what I need to ask her. I can't say that it just came to me, but it was just made apparent to me that if I don't ask now, it will be too late."

Sadie read between his words and his fingering fingers. She looked down at her own hands and smiled. "You know, Ivy and I wear the same size rings. It's like God gave her my hands." She wiped proud tears from her eyes. "And now I know why." She slid her wedding ring off her finger. "Th

is was supposed to be passed

down to the next generation anyway."

"I..." Nicola took the ring from Sadie and looked over at Ivy's door. "I'm scared." He clasped the diamond ring in his hand. "I'm proposing to her on her wedding day."

"I know. Good luck, boy," Sadie said, hugging him tightly and kissing him on his cheek.

"Th

ank you. I'm going to need it."

Nicola knocked on the door, and Sadie scurried down the hall in her stockings to inform Madison of the recent changes in the day's events. Hearing Ivy's voice, Nicola opened the door and walked inside the room, where Ivy stood by the window, visibly torn. She gave a weak smile as he closed the door behind him. 573

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“Hi,” Nicola said, in awe at her beauty. She looked more beautiful than he had ever imagined.

“Hi,” Ivy said, glad to see his face. She walked up to him quickly and wrapped her arms around him. He held her close and hugged her tight. Th

en he pulled her away.

“Nicola, I love you,” Ivy said, simply. “I’m sorry that I’ve put you in this position, but I need you. I...” Her soft rose-colored lips trembled.

“I need you, too,” Nicola said, in nearly a whisper. “Will you forgive me...for...shit, for everything?”

“Yes,” Ivy said, rubbing his face. “Will you forgive me?”

“Yes,” Nicola said, feeling his heart in his throat. Tears came out of Nicola’s eyes as he tried desperately to find the right words for the moment. He felt himself getting dizzy, but he pushed out his emotions, all of them, for the first time. “Since the first time that I laid eyes on you, I’ve wanted you for my own. I’ve never regretted giving you my children. I’ve never regretted loving you. Ivy, we were made to be together. And everything in our lives has happened to build up to this point.”

“Oh, Nicky,” Ivy whispered and wiped his tears as her own flowed down her cheeks.



"Do you love me enough not to marry Grey?" Nicola asked with bated breath.

"Yes," Ivy said, finally shedding all of her fears.

"Good," Nicola said, bending down on one knee. "Do you love me enough to marry me?" He opened his palm with Sadie's wedding ring and looked up at her. "Please, Ivy Marie Winters be my wife."

"Yes," Ivy said, nearly ready to faint. "Yes," she said again. She allowed him take off her engagement ring and place his ring on her finger. Weak with all of her emotions, she fell to her knees in front of him. Unable to control his desire, Nicola pulled her near him and kissed her softly, lovingly, allowing himself to be as he had never in his life been.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Just then, there was a knock on the door. Ivy looked up, realizing where she was. She looked at Nicola, who helped her to her feet. Ivy knew without knowing that it was Grey on the other side of the door. She took Nicola's hand.

"I have to do this alone," she said, asking him to excuse her for just a moment.

“Are you sure? Because I would love to handle this.”

“I know that you would.” Ivy glowed. “But really, I should do this.”

Nicola understood and kissed Ivy one last time before he went to the door and unlocked it. As Nicola opened the door, Grey looked on, confused. His mouth dropped to the floor. Even as he was about to tear through Ivy’s heart with his own dagger of truth, it was in him to question why Nicola was there with lipstick on his mouth. But Nicola looked at peace, and he excused himself with only a nod to Grey. Too shocked to even say one word, he moved out of the way and let Nicola pass.

“Ivy?” Grey said, walking in.

“Grey, we have to talk,” Ivy said, standing in the middle of the floor, transfixed by the ring on her finger.

“No shit. What is going on here?”

“I’m leaving you. Th

at’s what’s going on here. I finally found out about your little scheme. Who do you think that you are?”

“What nonsense are you talking about now?” Grey’s calm exterior still intact, he walked over to her.

"Why do you blackmail Trina and Nicola?"

"Oh, that nonsense." *Cover blown*, Grey thought to himself. In a way, he was actually glad to be found out.

"You lying, no good..."

"Before you start to judge me, I think you should think about the fact that we are in a church and I did it to keep you."

"To win votes." Ivy seethed. "To play games! And don't lecture me about being in a church. God knows that I'm pissed at you!"

"Well, obviously the plan didn't work out too well, did it?"

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Ivy calmed herself and remembered what she had to do. "No. It worked out great. It gave me time to see that Nicola wasn't the man I thought he was. He is better. And you are far worse."

"Yeah. Ivy, maybe I am. But at least I know what I want in this life, and I go and get it."

"It's over, Grey."

“Th

at’s what I came to tell you, Ivy.” He took a deep breath and calmed down. “But I didn’t want to do it this way. Pissed off or not, I just wanted to apologize. I’m sorry, but there isn’t going to be a wedding today.”

Ivy smiled, feeling accomplished that she knew something that he did not. Today, she was control of the situation. “Yes, there is going to be a wedding today,” Ivy said, walking up to Grey. Taking his hand, she gave him back his ring and smiled. “Nicola and I are getting married.”

“What did you just say?” Grey asked, confused.

“You came here to break it off with me, didn’t you?” Ivy asked.

“Yeah,” Grey fumbled.

Nicola listened on by the door outside. Grey wasn’t the only one shocked. When he had asked Ivy to marry him, he didn’t exactly mean today. But the thought excited him. It was perfect. Both families were there, and they were already dressed. Hell, why not? He rubbed his hand against the door and shook his head in total approval. He was getting married today! Turning from Ivy and Grey’s heated conversation, he headed to the sanctuary to prepare everyone.

"Say something," Ivy demanded with her hands on her hips.

"OK...good luck. Wish you well. Sorry that I screwed you over." Grey couldn't stop his smirky grin. "Th is is crazy, but if

anyone can pull it off , you can. You two already have the kids. And I'm not in love with you, and you're not in love with me." He managed to shrug off his smugness for a moment.

"I already know," Ivy said, smiling. "You and I both know that this is the right thing to do. You were only marrying me for your 576

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reasons, and I was only marrying you for mine. I thank you for standing by me as long as you did, but it's time for both of us to move on with our lives. I have my sons to think of and you have your career. Two different paths really." She hugged him lightly and patted his back reassuringly.

"You don't have any idea how hard I thought that this was going to be. My brothers attacked me before I got here. I've been on the phone with my mother for like twenty minutes," Grey laughed.

"I'm sure that she's happy that we're breaking this off ,"

Ivy said, aware that his mother never liked her.

"Yeah, she was pretty excited. You have my total support, but right now, I've got to go and do some serious damage control,"

Grey said, touching her chin. He looked at her seriously. "You have my blessing."

"Th

at is very good to know, Grey." Ivy had new strength. "Well, if you don't mind. I need to get myself ready to get married."

"Alright. I'll go and tell everyone who doesn't already know."

"Th

anks," Ivy said, watching him leave.

Grey stopped at the door and turned around. "Hey, Ivy? What we went through...it was worth it. I mean, it wasn't a total loss. Right?"

Ivy thought hard about what he was saying for a moment and then grinned. "No, Grey. It wasn't a total loss at all," Ivy said, adjusting her veil.

"Yeah," Grey said, turning around. "Take care of yourself."

"You too," Ivy said, bidding Grey farewell. u u u

Nearly an hour and a half later, the guests stood as Ivy and Madison entered into the sanctuary. She tried to keep from stumbling under the heavy weight of her reality. Her father held her up, strong in his grip. She had spent more than an hour in the chambers with Nicola planning the fastest engagement in the history of Memphis and making phone calls to get a marriage  
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license on the following Monday. Shortly following, Sadie, Liz, and Trina came back in to prepare her makeup and finally touches.

Now, Ivy was about to face the man that she truly wanted. She eyed Nicola down the aisle, standing at the altar looking statuesque and proud. She couldn't wait to have him in her arms once more. She couldn't wait to be Mrs. Nicola Michael Agosto. Most of the guests were dumbfounded by the rumor of the wedding changes, anxious to see if it was really going to happen. News had spread beyond the church that Ivy was to marry Lt. Nicola Agosto today instead of Grey Henderson, and in necessary response, the Henderson brothers had locked the doors of the church to keep the news media from bombarding the holy event. All three families felt as though they were in a

surreal state; but for all that was lost, there was twice more gained. Grey and his family watched on, enjoying the prospect of new freedom and new possibilities for his future. Sadie and her family sat watching proudly knowing that Ivy stood as woman and not as the young girl that she was when she started this journey. And Liz and Adamo sat in tears, content in the knowledge that their son had finally found love.

Nicola watched as Ivy approached him on her father's arm. Her brilliant glow cast a spell on him from under her veil as her eyes glistened with tears of joy. He could feel the tears welling at the sides of his own eyes. He was about to marry the mother of his children, the woman of his dreams. He was about to put to an end the life he had known for the life he had always wanted.

"Who gives this woman away?" the pastor asked, breaking Nicola's trance.

"I do. Madison Lawson Winters," Madison said, proudly wiping a tear from his eye. Madison released Ivy reluctantly, but he knew that she would be just fine in Nicola's care.

"I love you," he whispered as she grabbed Nicola's hand and looked back.

"I love you, Daddy," Ivy said, with tears in her eyes. 578



Lifting her veil, Nicola's heart skipped a beat. He smiled at her and held both of her hands as Santo stood behind him patting his back. He looked over and nearly laughed at his mother crying like a little baby and holding his children tightly. Was this actually happening? He pinched Ivy softly, and she giggled, mirroring his dismay.

At 6:30 p.m. on September 30th, Ivy and Nicola were finally married, only days away from the anniversary date when they had first met. With over 500 onlookers, the two leaned forward into each others' arms and kissed before God and man. The passion

was unmistakable, creating a wondrous applause throughout the sanctuary. As everyone stood on their feet and continued to applaud, Ivy and Nicola turned and faced everyone, complete in their design, and made their first walk as husband and wife down the aisle of Immaculate Conception Church. With the bells ringing above and the world abuzz below, Ivy finally felt as though she was floating somewhere in between.

# Epilogue



## Epilogue

### ONE YEAR LATER

Th

e sun had finally set over midtown Memphis. Ivy set the table outside on the patio while Nicola cooked the last of the hamburgers on the grill. Emerald ran around in the backyard chasing Adamo and Madison, while Trina

and their daughter Brook watched from the swing set.

Sadie and Madison were running late but were only a few minutes away. Everything was in order. Ivy stopped for a moment and looked around; it was early November and the weather was absolutely gorgeous. With not a cloud in the sky, the breeze from the night air was pleasant, and the full moon served as a wonderful backdrop for a late-evening meal.

Th

e young couple was still getting settled into their new home. Ivy had convinced Nicola to sell his luxury condo for the beautiful single-family dwelling of her dreams off of Peabody Avenue in the historic Central Gardens community. He had agreed when he saw how spacious the five-bedroom home would be for their family, and there was always the possibility of new additions in the future. Th

e red-brick, two-story three-car-garage home was 583

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absolutely dreamlike with all of its many amenities. Plus, they could easily afford it.

At the firm, Ivy was soaring by leaps and bounds. Everyone was impressed with her attention to detail and continual ability to shine under pressure. She had

even been listed in the *Memphis Business Journal* as one of Memphis' 50 Brightest New Leaders and was looking into the MBA program at the University of Memphis. Nicola had decided not to leave the Memphis Police Department and had been tapped by the director to continue on with now permanent NARC/TACT unit. He was implementing new and better programs for the safety of Memphis' future as well as securing a better future for his children.

"Baby, it's on," Nicola hollered to Ivy while he set the burgers on the table.

"OK," Ivy said, opening the door for her mother and father.

"We stopped to pick up some potato salad," Sadie said, kissing Ivy on the cheek.

"Well, it's on. Come on. We don't want to miss it," Ivy said, ushering Madison and Sadie through the house. Th

ey all rushed out to the patio to the television and grabbed a seat as Channel Th

ree news announced that Grey Henderson had won his seat by a landslide. Happily, everyone gave him a cheer as they tuned into the Peabody Hotel, where he was making his acceptance speech. So Grey had proven that he could win without being married after all.

His family stood in his background supporting him proudly.

"Well, in honor of his success, let's have a toast." Madison lifted his glass.

"OK, to bright futures," Nicola said, standing up before the family with this glass of lemonade. "Salute."

"Salute," everyone said, lifting their glasses and laughing, with smoke billowing up from the grill and the children playing and laughing.

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### *Ivy's Twisted Vine*

Ivy snuggled under Nicola's huge embrace as he nuzzled his chin into her hair. "Truth be told, I feel like I won the most,"

Nicola said, kissing her softly.

"So do I, baby," Ivy said, kissing him back. The End

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**Ab out t he Aut hor**

Latrivia S. Nelson is native Memphian and a graduate of LeMoyne-Owen College. During her years in undergrad,

she wrote Ivy's Twisted Vine to express some of her many adventures as college queen, sorority president and marketing intern to some of the biggest nonprofits in the city. However, she did not finish the project until she finished her MBA.

She is now a fundraiser on the coast of North Carolina, married to her husband Adam (USMC), the mother of two beautiful children and working on her Ph.D. She is currently working on her second book due out in 2009. [www.latrivianelson.com](http://www.latrivianelson.com) or [www.myspace.com/ivystwistedvine](http://www.myspace.com/ivystwistedvine) 587