

Chapter Twelve

Nicolas helped Aubrey sit at the table before pulling out a chair for himself. He clutched her hand afraid to let it go less she disappeared again. His gaze drifted over to the other table where their friends remained. Jamie was on the oor with the other kids playing with the excited corgi. The other boys seemed reluctant to let him into the group at rst but they wouldn't risk upsetting Zoe who had ultimate control of the dog.

Nicolas turned his attention back to Aubrey. She seemed nervous and unsure, quite different from her bold self-condence of ve years ago. He hoped it was just nerves at their unexpected reunion and not due to fear he would abandon them.

"...So what happened?" Nicolas asked. "I woke up alone and...I didn't know where you went. Where did you go?"

"Home," Aubrey said after a moment. "I woke up late and had to rush to catch my plane."

"And home is..."

"New Orleans."

Nicolas couldn't suppress his surprise if he tried. New Orleans? Really? Confused he asked, "Why were you even here if you live in New Orleans?"

"...I'm a painter. I came up here for an art exhibit featuring African-American artists. Sarah is my college roommate so when I heard her marriage wasn't going well I knew I had to take her out," Aubrey explained. "That's why we were at the pub in the rst place."

"So that was Sarah..." Nicolas shook his head. "I didn't recognize her at the bar but after you left I saw her at a party...I gured there was no way Sarah Stanton would be at a pub in Noho. So I never...God, she could have told me everything."

Nicolas couldn't believe it. He should have gone with his gut and just asked. Nothing would have stopped him from ying to New Orleans the next day to nd her...them. His gaze went back to Jamie. He would have been able to hold his baby so much sooner.

"So...um...you are from New York?" Aubrey asked.

"Yeah. Actually, my sister was supposed to be here but she had another commitment so she gave me the invite," Nicolas explained. "I almost didn't come...thank god I did. You're here."

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. She blushed as his adoring gaze met hers. Smiling he found it alluring he could affect her with something so simple.

"My goddess," he whispered so low she almost didn't hear. He said it with such reverence and adoration.

"...So what do you do?" Aubrey asked trying to analyze her reaction and needed time to do it.

"Oh...my family is into jewelry."

"My aunt makes jewelry too. What kind do you make?"

"Diamonds mostly, ruby, sapphire, topaz...the usual," Nicolas shrugged. He didn't really care about the family legacy.

"Diamonds?" Aubrey repeated. "Wait...just how much money do you have?"

"Me? Or the whole family?"

Aubrey's jaw dropped. What?

"My family is the Worthingtons," Nicolas almost seemed embarrassed to admit it. "The whole fortune is in diamonds...Aubrey? What's wrong?"

"...I need a moment...bathroom..." Aubrey stood hurriedly departing in a random direction.

Nicolas stood and stared after her. Did he say something wrong?

"Don't worry. I'll get her," Sarah said as she quickly passed him.

Nicolas watched the pair until they disappeared into the bathroom. He wanted to follow but he wasn't sure if he should. A hand gripped his shoulder. Turning he saw Lucas at his side.

"Luke?"

"It'll be ne," Lucas said. "She's just a little shocked. It's not every day you discover your baby's daddy is a billionaire."

"Is it that shocking? She said her aunt was into jewelry too."

"Yeah, but not the kind you're thinking," Lucas said. "Ya-Ya isn't your typical relative. Come on, I'll explain."

Ya-Ya?

* * *

Aubrey felt like the walls were closing in and she needed some air. This whole situation was impossible. It just didn't happen. Suddenly a hand clutched her arm and pulled her toward the bathroom. They ducked into the ladies' room, out of sight. Sarah checked the stalls to make sure they were alone before turning back to her. In all the years they had been friends Sarah had never seen Aubrey like this. Usually it was Aubrey who did the shocking.

"Aubrey, deep breaths."

"He's a frickin' billionaire!" Aubrey exclaimed. "What the Hell! How am I supposed to deal with that?"

"Aubrey, it's not..."

"Not what? I'm a painter from New Orleans! I can't...my baby...I can't..."

"Stop! Just stop!" Sarah dragged her to a cushioned bench and made her sit. "Breathe! Deep breaths in...and out."

Aubrey did as instructed but her hands kept shaking. It just wasn't possible. What the hell was he even doing in that bar?

"Aubrey, I'm going to tell you a story...so don't interrupt until I'm done, okay? Once upon a time there was a rather large family..."

"Sarah..."

"I said don't interrupt."

Aubrey sighed.

"Once upon a time there was a large family. The father, not wanting to play favorites, decided that the best way to choose his successor was to have his sons compete for the title. The winner would be made the ocial heir to the family company and enjoy full and absolute control...the contest had two simple rules..."

"The rst rule was that his sons had to prove themselves in the business so they were given their own branch store to run. The second rule was they had to prove themselves capable of carrying on the family name by marrying and having kids..."

"Three of the four brothers all got married within the year. And the fourth one...has spent all his time looking for you."

Against her will Aubrey calmed down as Sarah told her the story slowly digesting it. When she got to the end Aubrey could only stare as her face warmed. Instead of trying to keep up with the competition he had been looking for her? Really?

"Lucas just told me all about it. I guess it's become something of a running joke: both the competition and Nicolas's obsession with nding you," Sarah said. "Everyone has been making fun of him for years because he has turned down every woman to look for one they all believe never existed."

Aubrey's shock from a moment ago was immediately replaced with outrage. Not only had he been looking for her but others had been ridiculing him for it? Just wait until she got a hold of them.

Sarah chuckled. The surest way to get Aubrey out of any mood was to stir her indignation, "Feel better?"

Aubrey met her gaze and suddenly broke out in a t of laughter. Of course Sarah would purposely tell her that. Shaking her head Aubrey slowly reclaimed control. They sat together for a long moment before Aubrey dared meet Sarah's gaze again.

"Sare-bear...my baby's daddy is a billionaire," Aubrey shuddered feeling the utter disbelief course through her again. "An actual frickin' billionaire!"

Sarah nodded.

"I mean, this doesn't happen to normal people!" Aubrey declared. "It sounds like a plot device from an online book! Like the ones we used to read in college."

Sarah laughed. She remembered. Silently she handed Aubrey a box of tissues and let her collect herself.

"You good?"

"I...just need a moment," Aubrey sighed. "So, you want to explain why you and you ex are so cozy?"

Sarah turned bright red.

"Girl...you knew this conversation was coming."

"Okay, I'll tell you. Just...hear me out."

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Nicolas waited on pins and needles glancing at the bathroom door, waiting for the pair to return. When he wasn't watching the door he was watching his son. He still couldn't believe it. His son. He would never get tired of repeating that phrase.

"How are you doing, Nick?" Julius asked as he and Silas moved closer.

Nicolas couldn't put his feelings into words and instead gestured to Jamie. The others chuckled each one having their own moment when they rst laid eyes on the children they didn't know they fathered. Perhaps they should start a club?

"...I just can't believe it."

"Don't worry, it'll sink in," Silas assured him.

"And we'll be seeing a lot of each other," Lucas said. "Zoe and Jamie were practically raised together so..."

"They do seem really close," Julius agreed. "Wait, raised together?"

"After Sarah left me she went to stay with Aubrey in New Orleans. She didn't move to Vermont until Zoe was one," Lucas explained. "Aubrey and Ya-Ya took care of her through...everything. So I owe them."

"Damn straight you do."