

## Chapter Thirteen

They turned to see Aubrey and Sarah had returned. Aubrey looked much more collected. In fact her gaze was boring into Lucas like a cat stalking a mouse. He swallowed a lump in his throat feeling himself go cold.

"You and I are going to have a talk later," Aubrey promised. "All I will say now is if you hurt Sarah again I will remove your most precious appendage and feed it to the shes in the bay. Understood?"

Lucas slowly nodded while the others fought back laughter.

"And the rest of you are not off the hook either," Aubrey xed her stare at Julius and Silas. "I know Macey and I will get to know Ava. So you two are on notice. What goes for him also applies to you. We clear?"

Julius and Silas paled. Though they were used to their wives taking charge it was quite the experience to have another woman dress them down so casually. As one they nodded.

"Good," Aubrey seemed sated. "I want no problems. I'm going to say hi to them now."

Sarah bit her lip to keep from laughing as they left the men to join the women. The men shared looks of surprise and trepidation. Did that just happen?

"She's ah..." Julius hesitated.

"...Something else?" Silas offered.

"Yeah, she is," Nicolas stared after her completely smitten.

The others shared a chuckle. There didn't seem to be any reason to worry about the younger man. He would do just ne with his lady fair.

"...So Luke," Julius couldn't help himself. "You haven't said whether Aubrey will be staying in your guest room."

"No," Nicolas said before the other could answer. "Not without me."

Julius and Silas shared a laugh at Lucas's expense. The latter remained silent. He really didn't have a choice in the matter. If Sarah insisted on bringing Aubrey and Jamie home he couldn't say no and he couldn't deny Nicolas the opportunity to be with them. Glancing at the others Lucas saw them smirking and tried to control a scowl. They loved this.

"...Let's see what Sarah and Aubrey want to do and go from there," Lucas nally said.

"Very diplomatic answer," Julius nodded.

"And the only correct one when you think about it," Silas agreed.

The pair chuckled and Lucas shook his head not sure if he wanted to smack them or join them even if the laughter was at his expense. Nicolas looked from one to the other confused by some shared joke he was not yet privy to.

Seeing his confusion Julius patted his shoulder. Nicolas's height rivaled Silas's who was the tallest of the trio meaning Julius was still the shortest but he didn't seem to mind.

"Just remember the golden rule," Julius intoned.

"Which is?" Nicolas asked.

"Whatever the queen says goes," Silas agreed.

Nicolas's brow knit in confusion glancing at Aubrey and the others before looking back at them, "Well, that goes without saying, doesn't it? Whatever she wants is hers."

Julius raised a brow and smiled, "Yeah, you'll do ne."

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"Macey!" Aubrey greeted, kissing her cheeks in a gesture both were familiar with.

"Aubrey! I'm so glad you're here," Macey laughed. "I've missed you. It's been years."

"Well the last time I was in New York you were still in Paris," Aubrey said. "I did take pictures of the show for you. It was my rst ever in New York."

"I know! I'm so upset I wasn't here!" Macey said.

"Oh, so you are an artist?" Ava asked.

"Aubrey, Ava. Ava, Aubrey," Sarah reintroduced. "And yes, she's a painter."

"Technically muralist," Aubrey corrected.

"Muralist?"

"She specializes in murals," Sarah said.

"Oh here," Aubrey took out a phone, calling up her pictures to show her. "This is my work."

Ava paged through the pictures marveling at the sheer size of some of them as they covered whole walls. The subject matter ranged from cityscapes, parks, market places, African-American history, fairytales, Wonderland...the list went on celebrating imagination, diversity and culture.

"These are amazing," Ava said. "You did all of these?"

"Pretty much. Whenever I do schools I like to get the kids involved. I'll sketch out the mural or project it on the wall and have them work on different parts," Aubrey explained. "It's their school so I like them to take pride in it."

"Amazing," Ava hesitated. "You know, Anna Silver, the school my triplets went to, is planning a fundraiser for their music program. We were going to make a donation but how about a mural too?"

"Outside or inside?" Aubrey asked.

"I'm not sure," Ava said. "Which is easier?"

"It's not about being easier," Aubrey said. "It affects the kind of paint, not everything is indoor/outdoor use, and it will also depend on the wall itself: drywall, brick, concrete, whatever. But I love the idea. In fact we could do both: something in the music room and something outside for the whole school. Depends on how big you want to go."

"We should get together with the principal," Ava said at last. "See what the school would like."

"Denitely," Aubrey agreed. "I'll be there with bells on."

Ava laughed.

"Oh you laugh, but she just might," Sarah warned.

"Murals aside, I do work on canvases too," Aubrey said. "They are usually easier to sell."

"She's the one who did the painting in my living room," Sarah agreed.

"I'd love to see more of your work," Ava said. "I have a few of Macey's pieces but I'd like to add something different."

"I got you," Aubrey smiled. "We'll talk."

"So how long are you planning to stay?" Tracy asked glancing at where the men were gathering. "I mean, Nicolas Worthington is a pretty hot commodity. Women have been trying to catch him for years."

"So Sarah mentioned," Aubrey glanced at him as he talked with the others. "Something about a competition?"

Macey rolled her eyes, "Yeah, it's been going on for the last ve years now. Something his father cooked up to get his boys to compete for the top spot. It sounds just so stupid. I mean, Augustus never considered such an idea. He wanted March and Julius to run the company together, work cooperatively, not against each other."

"So it's just for the brothers, not the sisters?" Aubrey asked.

"As I understand it, the girls didn't want to compete," Tracy said. "They all have their own interests they wanted to pursue. But the boys are something else."

"I'll say. Some of the stories I've heard about the Worthingtons aren't very attering," Ava said.

"Are they that bad?" Sarah asked.

"The sisters are ne but the brothers, excluding Nicolas, are arrogant and egotistical. At least that's my impression. Silas doesn't care for any of them. And the competition thing is very stupid especially when he added the clause about getting married and having families before the deadline."

"Did they really run out and get married just to meet the criteria?" Aubrey asked.

"They did," Ava answered. "The oldest was already in a relationship, I think, so I guess he can be given a pass, but the two middle brothers were real players. They used to hang out with Marcus Avery so they didn't have the best reputations. I'm pretty sure the women they married were their preferred eye candy."

Aubrey shook her head already having misgivings about her possible in-laws. Just what was she getting into?

"There is also a rumor that they had to all sign some pretty hefty prenups," Ruth added.

"Prenups?" Aubrey repeated.

"That isn't unusual," Tracy said. "I mean, we are talking about some very rich and powerful families. Stands to reason they'd want to protect the family fortune and reputation. Macey, Ava and Sarah notwithstanding."

The trio shared that was. None of them had been required to sign prenuptials prior to their marriages but that was due to the unusual nature of their matches. Macey was Julius's childhood friend, Ava was Silas's crush and Sarah had agreements with Alice making prenups unnecessary.

"So what exactly is in a prenup?" Aubrey asked.

"It depends on the parties," Tracy said. "Generally speaking, it places restrictions over what circumstances divorces are allowed and especially limits the amount of compensation that can be allotted to the other party. Like I said, it's all about protecting the family's fortune and business interests. I'm not the Worthington's lawyer and even if I was I couldn't tell you specifics. But if rumors are true the prenups limit how much their wives can take away with special allotments concerning any children they have. From what I hear, the mothers lose all custody and parental rights to the kids and are given a certain amount of money as compensation."

"Are you serious?" Aubrey asked. "So if I sign this prenup and it doesn't work out I lose Jamie?"

Tracy nodded.

"You are not going to lose Jamie," Sarah said. "Nicolas would never do that to you."

"She's right," Rose agreed. "When Jude wanted to give Jessica a special gift March told him to go straight to Nicolas's shop and not bother with any of his brothers. He's denitely the pick of the litter. Trust us."

"Or don't and see for yourself," Sarah said knowing Aubrey's aversion to being told what to do. "You haven't signed anything yet so get to know him before you meet his family."

"Which brings us to your sleeping arrangements," Ruth pointed out. "Sarah and I denitely are not letting you stay in a hotel...but given how Nicolas keeps looking over here I don't think he's going to let you out of his sight. It might get crowded at our places. So, what are you going to do?"

Aubrey hesitated sipping her champagne and casting a fugitive glance at Nicolas. What was she going to do?